

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Why bring students to the theatre? An exploration of the value of professional theatre for children

Introduction

The purpose of this research was to learn why teachers bring their students to live theatre, specifically at Young People's Theatre (YPT), Canada's oldest and largest professional theatre for young audiences (TYA). This research supports existing scholarship on the educative value of the live theatre experience, including its potential to enhance both academic and social learning outcomes, such as greater creativity, critical thinking, and communication skills, as well as improved knowledge of the theatrical medium. This project suggests that teachers use a fieldtrip to YPT as a unique pedagogical tool and a special way of engaging their students in learning. Examining the educative value of the theatrical event has resulted in many discoveries, including the following key findings, which will be shared in greater detail in this summary. These new insights add to the body of research on arts-based education and set the stage for further inquiry into teaching and learning through theatre.

- The Disruptive Nature of the Space and Medium of Theatre is Central to its Educative Power
- The Value and Challenge of Bringing School Audiences into an Aesthetic Space
- The Theatrical Experience as a Practice of Hope
- The Need for Additional Research

The Disruptive Nature of the Space and Medium of Theatre is Central to its Educative Power

This project highlights the importance of designated aesthetic spaces, such as professional theatres, in drama education and demonstrates the high level of engagement required of the audience in the theatrical event. It is important to note that it is not simply being somewhere else that affords students and teachers an educative opportunity, but entering together into the professional theatre experience. Aesthetic engagement fosters learning because it allows us to enter into and immerse ourselves in a different world. The aesthetic experience allowed by the professional space and medium of the theatre enhances the pedagogic values of theatre.

In particular, this research suggests that this engagement is fostered through the aesthetic experience and the simultaneous personal and collective practice of imagination required. It suggests that it is the active audience that grants theatre its pedagogical power. The live performance gives students the opportunity to learn experientially how to communicate with friends, teachers, strangers, and neighbours alike. Teachers believe students are pushed to engage more actively and deeply in a live performance than they do with recorded or digital media because of the recognition and power they feel as audience members. The learning opportunities provided by live theatre are of particular importance today, as the audiences who attend YPT are now, more than ever, immersed in recorded or digital media technologies. They are accustomed to film and television where everything is fast-moving. They are also used to feeling like they have control over what they consume, whereas in the theatre, they cannot stop, repeat or rewind the performance; theatre audiences cannot choose when and what they see and hear. Unlike their everyday, usually private, control with digital technologies, the theatrical event is a public interaction and one that requires collective engagement, rather than individual control. Therein lies the possibility for learning.

Within the space of a single performance, audiences are offered simultaneous access to a multiplicity of perspectives and sensory experiences. The material and spatial limitations of theatre push

students to take part in the creation. The medium of theatre allows for a close relationship to develop between its participants. Theatre is made through a shared experience and is utterly dependent on its participants' engagement with their own and each others' imaginations. Good theatre encourages its audiences to surrender, but this release of power is not passive: it is an active giving up of the self in favour of contributing to something larger. Audience members must willingly become part of the performance, otherwise it will not work, and it is the job of playwrights, technicians, actors, directors, set designers, etcetera to push the audience to enter into the playworld and take part. A professional theatre space bolsters the audience's ability to use their imaginations in this way. Thanks to the full complement of technical theatre elements and the skill of designers and technicians who work at professional theatres such as YPT, entering into the world of the play becomes an even more powerful experience. The professional production helps the audience to engage with the story on multiple levels. It takes them "somewhere else".

This research also reveals the possibility that attending live theatre, as it is enacted at YPT, fosters an understanding, not only of the fact that arts and entertainment are humanly created, but also, and perhaps most importantly, of how this occurs. Entering into the darkness of the theatre together not only helps to give audience members an engaging sensory experience and to direct them toward a common focus, but it also separates, to some extent, the actual world from the one of fiction that is created on stage. While theatre of the high quality that teachers interviewed in this study suggest is created at YPT will draw the audience into the imaginary world, the light and configuration of the theatre, offers a constant reminder that the two worlds, though connected, are separate. Students who attend YPT are given the opportunity to speak with those who work at the theatre and to learn how a play is constructed, with a focus on both form and content. They are pushed to recognize their participation in this, to question what they see and hear, and to consider the ways in which this connects to the making of the actual world.

The Value and Challenge of Bringing School Audiences into an Aesthetic Space

This research reveals the value of having students experience theatre in a professional, aesthetic space, as well as the importance of having both students and teachers move outside of their usual environment. At the same time, this project brings to light the variety of challenges involved in undertaking a fieldtrip to YPT and the fact that this is, for many school communities, a rare experience.

It seems it takes a courageous teacher to incorporate a fieldtrip to a theatre in their educational repertoire. In choosing to visit YPT, teachers face many roadblocks. In addition to the variety of financial and scheduling issues they must consider, teachers must also prove the educational worth of theatre-going and demonstrate the benefit of taking students out of their regular environment. This research suggests that teachers attend YPT specifically, in part due to its understanding of how schools operate and its expertise in catering to this audience. Support for the arts, particularly Drama, and funding for fieldtrips vary greatly from school to school. Simply leaving the school is a huge hurdle in itself.

This insular school culture is at odds with the value of learning outside of one's usual environment and experiencing theatre in a professional, aesthetic space. By leaving their usual environment, teachers interrupt the everyday and help their students to define their communities, not by the walls of the school, but by their connections to the world beyond the classroom. This also

encourages students to develop a more fluid understanding of education and an appreciation that learning is a continuous process that occurs both inside and outside of school.

Yet, YPT mirrors insular school practices, while at the same time working against them. For example, students enter into the space of YPT, separated by school and usually two by two. They are then brought into the theatre and ushered to their seats. Several teachers in this project expressed aggravation at having to wait outside of the theatre upon arrival and of the highly regimented manner in which they are brought into and monitored in the theatre. Students are not granted the opportunity to explore or navigate the space independently in their own time, despite the fact that it is explicitly designed for them. While these stringent procedures may be one way to address the needs and limitations of the school audience, such as the time constraints of the school day and the challenge of seating large groups of people quickly and all at once, they contradict what teachers believe to be the purpose of going to live theatre and affect the audience's engagement with the experience as a whole. These practices are incongruent with the energizing and unconstrained aesthetic experience students and teachers are granted within the space of the performance. If YPT were to offer students and teachers a similar kind of experience in the rest of the space as they are granted within the theatre itself, this particular fieldtrip could help to challenge the restrictive school culture, as well as the ways in which, youth especially, are limited in their access to and within public space. Furthermore, it would bolster the special attention YPT pays to welcoming young people and first-time theatre-goers, something teachers in this research already believe the theatre does very well.

YPT is unique in the ways in which it provides an accessible theatrical experience. While the vast majority of teachers who bring their students to YPT have seen a play before, many of their students are participating in a cultural experience they may not otherwise have. Teachers in this study expressed the fact that for many of their students coming to see a show as part of their school program is one of the only ways they will gain entrance into the theatre. It is important to note that teachers are often speculating about their students' lives and that these assumptions do not always correspond to reality. One assumes that socioeconomic status is always a barrier to theatre-going, or that those in lower SES categories are culturally bereft; while it is true that real financial hurdles do exist, we must question and guard against such sweeping generalizations. That said, going to most live theatre in Toronto requires of its audiences not only a certain luxury of time and money, but also level of cultural literacy with regard to the expectations and norms of theatre-going that most students, at a young age, have yet to develop, even if they have the opportunity to visit the theatre outside of school. While teachers are in a position to offer their students this experience and guide them through it, what demands further consideration is how the perception of theatre as culturally elitist might be changed, so as to make theatre-going more accessible.

YPT helps to accomplish this goal of greater accessibility, not simply in terms of granting access, but also with regard to how young people are treated upon entrance to this particular place in comparison to other theatres. There is a vested interest on the part of the theatre of opening up new audiences to learn how to take part in the aesthetic experience. Much of why teachers choose to come specifically to YPT has to do with the marginalization of youth at other theatres. With regard to socioeconomic status, culture, ability, age, and level of education, the school audiences at YPT are generally much more diverse than those who patronize other professional theatres in the city. Teachers also see value in having their students surrounded by other children, rather than lost in a sea of adults, because they believe this fosters a sense of ownership and belonging among audience members.

Educators who work with particular groups of young people, such as youth of colour, young people living in poverty or students with developmental disabilities, spoke about the fact that despite the fact that they can provide their students entrance into a space, they can still be made to feel as if they do not belong, but at YPT, they have the security of knowing their students will be made to feel a welcome part of a community.

The Theatrical Experience as a Practice of Hope

This research not only demonstrates the unique value of leaving the school in order to learn about theatre, but also the opportunity it provides students to learn about the world and the fact that it is changeable, unfixed and full of possibility. By collectively engaging in a live performance at YPT, teachers reported that their students are granted a freeing experience full of possibility. This connects to theatre's potential to cultivate hope, which is in this project defined as an outlook toward what might be, rather than an acceptance of convention and an awareness that we can change and be changed by each other.

This starts with the educative value of meeting with strangers. When students and teachers come to YPT, they are not only transplanted out of their regular environment, but they are ushered into a new space as a group and meet with others, usually people they don't know, to become audience members and to share a performance together. Many teachers suggests that interrupting the ordinary, venturing out and experiencing the unknown and the unusual together, serves to build community among their students and also makes it possible for them to change patterns of behaviour and the ways in which they normally relate to one another at school. Entering a new space destabilizes the norms of school and makes strange the familiar, broadening students' perceptions of the world and helps them to connect their own experiences to those of others.

Drama, in particular, is an intensely social and cooperative art form, not only in its presentation, but also in process. When students engage in theatre as audience members, they have the opportunity to practice hope by seeing new visions of the world in which they live, reimagining it and helping to recreate it into something new. Immersion in the world of the play, it seems, may help the audience to listen and to participate in the piece, even if what they are met with elicits feelings of discomfort or disagreement. This, the research suggests, helps teachers and students to disrupt what they already know or believe in order to move toward creating new knowledge. Performance is particularly valuable to cultivating this sense of possibility, because of the physical and sensory immersion into another world it allows. The world of theatre is created through a physically shared experience. It is literally about the creation of another world. Theatre has the potential to demonstrate that the world is humanly created and thus can be recreated by our actions. YPT, it seems, is a place where students see and experience the possibility that places and the ways in which we interact within them are changeable.

As audience members, we are able, not only to think about what could be, but to actually discover what this new world would sound, look and feel like. Students, when they visit YPT, are taken out of themselves and offered a vision of what might be. While this may be something they have felt or experienced individually, it is brought to light in a public domain and it is in connecting their own experience to that of others that they are better able to imagine possibility. Experiences in education, such as those provided at YPT, help students to understand knowledge as imagination, as a way toward seeing things anew and thus, making things differently.

The Need for Additional Research

As the first research of its kind to be undertaken at YPT, there is evidently more work to be done. This project is a starting point from which further inquiry can develop. Of particular value would be exploration of the following:

- Many teachers expressed the fact that they felt constrained by the physical limitations of their schools in their ability to teach Drama. This research illustrates how coming to YPT helped them break out of these restrictions, but research about how they resisted or expanded these constraints within their schools and whether or not Drama helped them to do this is still required.
- This research does not delve deeply enough into the reasons why teachers choose to bring theatre to their students, nor does it consider the challenges and opportunities of those who live outside of the city or who do not have access to YPT. The limited scope of this project demands further research focused on the perceptions of teachers who do not have access to YPT and of those who work at neighbouring theatre companies, particularly those whose main purpose is touring to schools and communities within and beyond the city.
- Learning about students' experiences first-hand was not within the scope of this research. This project reveals much about teachers' insights into their students' experiences, but a project that privileges the student perspective on this subject and focuses on research done by and with young people themselves is of the utmost importance.
- This project demonstrates the immense value to teachers and students of experiencing live theatre in a professional, aesthetic venue. Research specifically about the roadblocks teachers face in planning fieldtrips for their students is required. It is also vital to learn more about why trips, particularly to the theatre, are often unfeasible and which students have the least access to these experiences. Quantitative inquiry on the subject of accessibility might spark new insights and, most importantly, might be one way to point to how experiences such as these can be made available to all students.

To access the full text of this research project, please click here:

[https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/30062/3/Adamson Lois EW 201111 MA thesis.pdf](https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/30062/3/Adamson%20Lois%20EW%20201111%20MA%20thesis.pdf)

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