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The Importance of Our Performing Arts

Abstract

This essay is titled "The Importance of Our Performing Arts" and it was written in February 2022. I was taking an argumentative writing class at the time where we have free range to choose a topic to write about, so naturally, I choose something I am passionate about, the impact of youth theatre on our adolescents. The prompt was to identify a driving question or phenomenon related to the arts to investigate and develop a complex thesis you could argue in the paper through the use of rhetorical strategies, I decided on the discussion between funding in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields and the arts and humanities, specifically youth theatre, and how the imbalance impacts adolescent development.

I incorporate theory revolving around aesthetics theory in Philosophy to better explain why not only the performing arts but art, in general, is a driving force for personal growth and self-discovery. I was able to deepen my understanding of just how important art is to the human condition and although holding no utility, society would be lost without it.

Keywords

Art, Art education, Theatre, Youth, Adolescents, Children, Funding

Publication Statement

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The Importance of Our Performing Arts

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"Art is truth setting itself to work." – Heidegger

Art is one of the driving forces of humanity, humility, and inspiration in our society. Although quickly declining, the values that art teaches us have supported our foundations and understanding for centuries. With an increase in focus on STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields and the desire for technical workers, schools have begun stripping their arts programs from their curriculum in hope of sparking more STEM interests in adolescents and teens, while neglecting the fields of the arts and humanities. While STEM fields have taken a large portion of both funding and focal points in the education system, "nearly 1.5 million elementary students are without music, nearly 4 million are without the visual arts, and almost 100% of them, more than 23 million, are educated without dance and theatre"¹. The arts and humanities are the key values that teach us how humanity has evolved and capture aspects of our past. Specifically, in modern society, art has become more and more scarce due to the heavy focus on technology and societal advancements. If something does not have a utility, then it is of no use to us. This is the main argument found in Aesthetics Theory, or why art is so important to humanity. Aesthetic Theory aims to develop an understanding of how and why specific aesthetic experiences occur, as well as the importance of art in our lives. This paper seeks to break down the importance of the performing arts and how and why art can teach us defining lessons.

STEM plays an important part in any common curriculum across the nation. From mathematics to natural and social sciences, STEM fields have held the advancement in technology for decades. According to Institutional Research conducted by the University of Wisconsin-Madison, two federal organizations, the National Science Foundation and the National Endowment for Humanities gave STEM programs \$500 million in funding for research between 2013 and 2014. Meanwhile, arts and humanities funding and research have received just \$37 million in grants over the last 50 years. The data illustrated the differences between these fields, but what is the long-lasting impact?

Rather than pinning the fields against each other, the

conversation should be guided to discuss the importance of the integration of each field with one another. When an emphasis is placed solely on STEM education, often students will find themselves with enough knowledge to advance in further STEM education and work but without the social, ethical, and emotional abilities needed to create strong relationships both with themselves and other people. Due to the focus mainly being on the memorization and formulation of information from textbooks, social and emotional skills are often placed on the back burner. When speaking in terms of technological evolution, the arts and humanities help us better understand the impact these new inventions could have on our society; "developments in artificial intelligence, for example, have significant ethical, philosophical, and economic implications. We must study those implications from outside the field as well as inside it"². To better understand the long-lasting implications of our advancing technology, research to support the arts and humanities, as well as funding, must be emphasized. The implication of both the arts and humanities and STEM curriculum has proven incredibly important to the development of adolescents, and together can advance our studies in both fields, all while providing the backbone to the youth's education and social development.

When speaking in terms of Aesthetics Theory, arguments surrounding art's lack of purpose while still being purposeful arise. In truth, art has no real utility to us, but we still enjoy the consumption of different media to learn and evolve with our society. Theatre and the performing arts have represented raw human emotions, reactions, and experiences since the beginning of time, not only benefiting our knowledge of history but also the significant personal impacts shared through this medium. Concerning personal and social development in adolescents, the performing arts define relevant skills, qualities, capacities, and resources to help young people make successful transitions into adulthood, leading to healthy, confident, and independent lives³. With a highlighted exposure to art, one can grasp the significance of independence and gain an appreci-

ation for self-expression. Aesthetics Theory helps us understand how the performing arts are so crucial to our personal growth, or, in other words, how we learn through storytelling. Lessons are more impactful at a younger age, hence the importance of exposure early on. The encouragement placed in the environment of the performing arts often allows students to acquire creative problem-solving abilities as well as interpersonal skills. As Hughes and Wilson state, "You work it out yourself, you use your own imagination. Youth theatre helps young people develop a range of personal skills and resources... The creative processes of youth theatre utilize and develop initiative and imagination by providing freedom for young people to plan and carry out their own ideas and intentions." By demonstrating the ability to put ideas into action, theatre builds a type of outlet for adolescents to explore and create in many ways, such as making bold character choices or trying a new type of dance routine. These social skills can ensure the success of someone in their adult life, allowing the benefits of creative thinking, self-expression, and inspiration for change to push them further in life.

Involving both visual and musical storytelling, theatre can share stories in one of the most unique ways offered in our society, capturing every aspect of the human condition and portraying it in ways beyond language. Whether it be a Shakespearean tragedy, modern comedy, or classical melodrama, performing arts illustrate experiences one may never have put thought to due to their lifestyle, thus broadening one's ability to hold empathy for others. Any play or performance will engage the audience with ideas of love, betrayal, and sin while teaching them how to grapple with those issues. The key to impacting one's audience through theatre lies within the multi-perspective view of the same conflict or story, a view often found in melodramas.

The dual perspective of impact on different characters not only allows the audience to view the changes and effects of conflicts but also to understand how different types of people could deal with the same situation, illustrating that nothing is just black and white. Hughes and Wilson explain the multi-faceted ways acting and engaging in theatre can impact a young person's life: "Playing a part in a play can bring young people face to face with personal, moral, political and social issues and dilemmas—helping them refine personal opinions, develop empathy for other people and explore new issues and experiences from a variety of perspectives... Many young people welcome opportunities to explore a wide range of subject matter and confront difficult, sensitive, controversial issues through theater"³. Hard lessons can be portrayed through acting, singing, and dancing, opening the audience's minds to different stories, reactions, and emotions. When placed into this world, teens can create an open-minded way of thinking and

form their own opinions regarding issues in our world, thereby creating a call-to-action type of attitude when portraying these different stories. A desire for change begins to spark, only to be fed through the changes and realizations that occur during one's youth.

Having the confidence to be vulnerable on top of a stage while spotlights beat down is incredibly anxiety-inducing. The constant push that theatre requires forces people away from their comfort zone. Youth theatre can drive adolescents to grow their self-confidence through performing. In their case study "surrounding the key takeaways from the youth theatre community," Hughes and Wilson found that "the most frequently mentioned impacts reported by young people... were... improved confidence," "improved ability to be" themselves, and "greater open-mindedness"³. With an increase in confidence, other social skills and abilities increase as well, such as self-expression and self-reflection.

Theatre can also demonstrate the harsh feeling of being embarrassed and wanting to improve skills to achieve a personal goal or to improve the outcome of the company. The risk of making different artistic choices when acting, singing, or dancing can drastically impact a person's drive and confidence. This also ties into youth art theory, which "suggests that young people benefit from opportunities to assert their independence and to take risks and responsibility" because these opportunities offer transferable skills inside and outside of performing³. Risk-taking is often overlooked in the professional world when involving self-advocacy, but it can build the stepping stones to rewarding adult life.

One of the most beneficial aspects of art is that it is endless. There will always be new paintings, sculptures, and stories to relay to a developing society. As discussed earlier in the essay, the performing arts allow the youth to be able to express emotions in ways larger than just language. With new societal and social injustice issues coming to light in our community, art is one of the most impactful forms of protest and speaking out. Specifically, the performing arts can inspire youth to create change with new pieces of art. Hughes and Wilson explain just how impactful advocating skills become through "Developing a more reflexive self-ability to reflect on others and their interpretations of us helps us negotiate social relationships and contexts. Role theorists emphasize an ability to 'take the role of the other' as a crucial skill of coping and becoming competent in social interaction"³. In other words, theatre showcases the development of empathy. The emblematic concept of putting yourself in someone else's shoes provides adolescents with a foundation of care and a drive for equality. One of the most interesting theories surrounding this is the idea of liminal and liminoid space as written by Victor Turner, a Performance Theorist⁴. Liminal space is "the part of the ritual within which

participants experience or play out an experiment with different ways of behaving” and “investigate alternative possibilities during a period of inversion of normal roles and settings”⁴. Exploring these emotions is similar to the idea of the sublime in Aesthetics Theory, or a powerful feeling that washes over one when creating or observing art. Creating this space allows adolescents to further their empathy and understanding of a different perspective and raise a drive for advocacy.

Art will change as time drags on, evolving with the human experience along the way. This is one of the most impactful aspects of art: There will always be more to create. Our society will continue to advance, make mistakes, and learn from them for as long as the human mind can comprehend stories. The impact that the performing arts have on the youth goes far beyond acting and singing skills. It also includes the abilities of self-expression, confidence, risk-taking, advocacy, and self-mindedness. With a shifting focus on the common curriculum of many schools across the nation, funding and emphasis have been stripped from many of the arts programs. The push to engage the youth in strictly STEM fields has limited society’s advancements in emotional intelligence and personal skills that can make adult life more admirable. Although the need for STEM technology is increasingly important, it should not trump the importance of the arts and humanities in the education of our youth. Aesthetic theory helps explain the utter importance of art to the human race; though holding no physical utility, art allows the human soul to capture lessons created by those that lived centuries of years before us. We observe the earliest depictions of human civilization, emotions, and reactions through hundreds of different art mediums. Specifically, the performing arts are able to not only impact the observer’s thoughts and mindset but the minds of the performers as well. With advanced social skills, confidence, and the ability for total self-expression, performing arts can teach and transform the youth into emotionally developed adults for the professional world. It provides a safe space for exploration, friendship, and mentorship that, in turn, will catapult our youth into successful adult lives. Art is the key to our humanity, and we cannot let technological advancements blind us from that truth.

1 EDITOR’S NOTES

This article was peer-reviewed.

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