

Johns, Stephanie

Theatre, education, and public history. Teaching history at the Stratford Festival

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Tim Zumhof
Nicholas K. Johnson
(eds.)

Show, Don't Tell

Education and Historical Representations
on Stage and Screen in Germany and the USA

Zumhof/Johnson
Show, Don't Tell

**Studien zur Deutsch-Amerikanischen
Bildungsgeschichte**

**Studies in German-American
Educational History**

General Editor Jürgen Overhoff

Tim Zumhof
Nicholas K. Johnson
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Show, Don't Tell

Education and Historical Representations on
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Stephanie Johns

Theatre, Education, and Public History: Teaching History at the Stratford Festival

This article will explore the various ways in which the Stratford Festival and its Education Department create spaces for discovery and learning through the plays performed each season and the programming the Education Department creates and connects to those plays. In order to understand how the Stratford Festival is able to accomplish this, a brief history of the Stratford Festival and its humble beginnings will lead into the exploration of the various programs offered. This will lay the groundwork to explore the Stratford Festival's method of engaging those of all ages in learning through drama and the importance and effectiveness of teaching history through theatre.

An interview with Luisa Appolloni, Education Associate (Enrichment Focus), distilled how I feel about history education: "Dramatizing historical events offers us a glimpse into our humanity. It removes the impersonality of dates and times, giving us a much more personal experience."¹ Teaching history through drama is a powerful and distinct way of sharing a particular aspect of history with a broader audience. Public history allows historians to widen their educational net to allow more people to engage with history in a less threatening or overwhelming way. An audience member does not need a history degree to understand the relationships, the feelings, or emotions portrayed on stage. They are entering a space where they will collectively understand and feel emotions with a group of people that they will never experience something with in the same way again. As a teacher of history, theatre is dynamic and allows for a more fluid exchange of understanding, rather than statically reading a book or listening to a podcast and passively allowing facts to enter one's brain. An audience member will absorb and process the action on stage as well as the experiences of those around them in the theatre. They may hear gasps, audible words, or they may hear nothing at all. These sounds are clues to the audience members as to what they are experiencing or understanding as a community. These sounds are also cues for the actors on stage, allowing them to enhance a certain moment if they can tell that this particular audience understands the information they are receiving, or it is a chance for the actors to switch gears because the audience is not grasping the gravity of the situation that is developing on stage.

1 Luisa Appolloni, Education Associate (Enrichment Focus), interview with author, March 27, 2019.

A Brief History of the Stratford Festival and our Philosophy

I do not consider that going to Canada to play in a theatre-in-the-round not yet built, in a town of 18,000, in a program quite impossible to present commercially in the west end, is entirely unadventurous. The possibilities of disaster are quite formidable!²

Alec Guinness, 1953

In 1953, the Stratford Shakespearean Festival began in a tent on the same grounds that the current theatre building stands on today. The town of Stratford, Ontario needed a business that was going to be profitable in the years following the Second World War. It was odd that they chose a theatre as the most profitable option for the area since, as most people know, the arts are not the most lucrative business option. Nevertheless, the Stratford Festival was able to forge ahead and bring well-known British actors to Canada to perform Shakespeare's plays. There are still patrons today who attended productions in the original tent sixty-six years ago.

The Stratford Festival opened its first season on 13 July 1953 with a production of Shakespeare's *Richard III*, with British actor Alec Guinness at the helm.³ The Stratford Festival's focus was, and still is, classical theatre, including Shakespeare's canon of thirty-seven plays.⁴ The more popular Shakespeare plays, including *Hamlet*, *Romeo & Juliet*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are rotated on approximately a five year basis, while the lesser-known Shakespeare plays are rotated on a more sporadic basis. These more obscure plays are chosen based on a variety of factors, including the actors returning next season, directors that may have an interesting take on a specific play, and the current political and social climate we live in. Typically, the more popular Shakespeare plays are taught in elementary and secondary schools, and featuring these plays regularly enables students to attend live productions of the plays they are studying. In Southwestern Ontario, a high school English class trip to Stratford to see a Shakespeare play is a common memory among people of all ages. My high school English teacher included a trip to Stratford every year in his English curriculum; when we engaged with the material, we were up on our feet exploring the text in our classroom.

The Stratford Festival produces twelve to fourteen plays each season and is able to create those worlds with the help of highly skilled artisans. From wig making,

2 Adelaide Leitch. *Floodtides of Fortune: The Story of Stratford* (Stratford: The Corporation of the City of Stratford, 1980), 193.

3 The Stratford Festival. "Our Timeline," URL: <https://www.stratfordfestival.ca/AboutUs/OurHistory/Timeline> (accessed March 15, 2019).

4 Thirty-seven plays is widely accepted as the number of plays Shakespeare wrote during his lifetime. Research exists that poses discrepancies ranging from 36 to more than 40 plays but for our purposes, I will not be delving into the origins of Shakespeare's plays. This is simply a reference point to explain the artistic focus of the Stratford Festival.

millinery, costume design, dyeing, and sewing, to set building, scenic painting, and much more, the Stratford Festival can do it all. At the height of the season, there are over one thousand employees working to make the theatre a success. As a full-time employee, I work year-round preparing for the upcoming season whilst running the current season's programming. We are always thinking one or two years in advance to ensure we have the resources to accommodate our choices for upcoming seasons. However, we also have to be adaptable in order to program plays that are relevant to the current local, national and global political climate. Art and theatre are nothing if they are not a commentary on the human condition and political world, so we need to ensure that what we are presenting on our stages for our audiences is a reflection of what they may be experiencing in real life or seeing every day on the news.

Since we are a repertory theatre, we also have the opportunity to produce contemporary plays, musicals, and brand new plays.⁵ The 2018 season was a great example of this, as we produced two brand new plays: *Paradise Lost*, an adaptation of the Milton poem by playwright Erin Shields, and *Brontë: The World Without*, based on the lives of the Brontë sisters by playwright Jordi Mand. In 2018, we produced four Shakespeare plays, including *The Tempest*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *Coriolanus*, and *Julius Caesar*. These plays all relate to the overarching theme of Free Will. In the press release for the 2018 season announcement, the Artistic Director Antoni Cimolino wrote:

We long for liberty, - but with it comes a heavy burden of responsibility. Often we agonize over making tough decisions. Occasionally we try to force our wills on others. Too seldom do we take responsibility for our actions. And there's a fascinating paradox at the heart of this theme. When Christopher Hitchens was asked if he believed in free will, he replied: 'I have no choice.'⁶

Mr. Cimolino's quotation relates to our current political climate in the US and Canada, and connects on many levels with every play we produced in 2018, in particular *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Pulitzer-prize winning novelist Harper Lee. Director Nigel Shawn Williams directed the adaptation dramatized by Christopher Segel. Every character in the play makes a choice about whether or not to believe Mayella Ewell's accusations against Tom Robinson, but the only people

5 A repertory theatre is a theatre that produces more than one play at a time with the same, or some of the same, actors performing in multiple plays. Typically, an actor is cast in two early openers that rehearse at the same time up until opening week, and then while they are performing the first two shows, they will rehearse for their late opener that will open in August. From August until the end of the season, these actors will perform in three different productions. This is true at the Stratford Festival, but not all repertory theatres operate in this manner.

6 The Stratford Festival. "2018 Media Release," URL: <https://www.stratfordfestival.ca/Media/News-Releases/2017-08-22/2018-playbill> (accessed March 15, 2019).

who truly have free will in the story are the white, educated adults. Even Atticus Finch, the so-called hero, is stuck between doing what he feels is right as Tom Robinson's lawyer and what the community he lives in believes he should do. In the 2018 production, Atticus Finch's young daughter, Scout, is central to the play. The audience is seeing and hearing what Scout remembers, since this adaptation uses the adult Scout as a narrator who drops in on moments from her past. The Reference Guide for Teachers includes the following passage:

Author Harper Lee set her novel at a time of intensifying class and racial tensions in the United States. During the Great Depression, the failing economy hit the South very hard, and the black population, already poor, felt the effects more than anyone. Segregation was normal, as were hunger, unemployment and deprivation. Organizations such as the racist Ku Klux Klan had enormous influence on both local politics and the consequences of judicial procedures. Mob justice – including lynching – was frequent and vicious.⁷

The low social status of the Southern black population during this time period is directly related to the end of slavery and the introduction of the Jim Crow laws, whose influence can be seen today in the news when another young black man minding his own business is shot and killed because a white person felt uncomfortable.⁸ Both the play and the novel are often criticized for placing Atticus, the white lawyer, on a pedestal as the savior for the black characters in the story. The director of the 2018 production was Nigel Shawn Williams, who is of Jamaican and Canadian descent. Having a black director able to direct this story, acknowledge the shortcomings of the story itself, and then find ways to address the shortcomings with strong responses in the silences of the production is immensely powerful to watch on stage. The free will of the characters in this story is constantly challenged through questions from young Scout, cross-examination in the court scenes, and the retelling of what happened on the night that Tom Robinson allegedly sexually assaulted Mayella Ewell.

7 Stratford Festival. "About the play, Stratford Short To Kill a Mockingbird," URL: https://cdscloud.stratfordfestival.ca/uploadedFiles/Learn/Teachers/Teaching_Resources/Content/9415%20-%202017%20Stratford%20Shorts-MKB.pdf (accessed June 1, 2018).

8 Jim Crow laws encompass any laws that were enacted to enforce racial segregation in the American South between the end of the Reconstruction era and the beginning of the civil rights movement in the 1950s. The term "separate but equal" is used to describe these laws despite the stark inequality of the facilities provided for whites and blacks. For more information: See Constitutional Rights Foundation. "A Brief History of Jim Crow," URL: <http://www.crf-usa.org/black-history-month/a-brief-history-of-jim-crow> (accessed September 10, 2019).

The Education Department

The Education department consists of five people. The team consists of three certified teachers, an administrator, and a teaching artist and practitioner. We provide varied programming that targets audiences young and old throughout the season and into the winter months. In the next section, I am going to focus on the specific programs that we use to teach history through theatre.

First, we offer post-show chats with our artists following performances. These events allow people of all ages to meet in a small group setting with the actors that brought the story to life on stage. The chats last for thirty minutes and are available for anyone to add onto their trip. Post-show chats give the patrons an opportunity to ask questions that immediately came to mind while watching the play, rather than writing to the actor on social media or in an email. For example, these chats are safe spaces for students to ask questions that they may have been too nervous to ask their teachers. They are able to find out behind the scenes information about the rehearsal process of a piece of theatre that deals with distressing and/or complicated history, and how the people in the rehearsal room were able to support each other through rehearsals and performances. These post-show chats also provide the opportunity for students who may not have seen themselves on stage or in movies before to talk with the actors about how it feels to be represented as an artist. These chats can be incredibly fulfilling experiences that may or may not relate directly with the play they are seeing. Post-show chats inspire, engage, and encourage students and adults alike each time they participate in this type of programming.

We offer workshops on site and in schools for elementary and secondary students. These workshops can be on any topic, but when it comes to teaching and exploring difficult subject matter such as the Holocaust and the lasting effects of slavery and segregation in the southern United States, it is important to provide students with the chance to ask questions, to uncover difficult answers, and to explore source material before the students are exposed to a theatrical production on the topic. Preparing youth to see difficult situations on stage is integral to that student understanding. No student should feel like they are being bombarded with images, themes, or topics that they were not prepared for or warned about in advance. Students typically respond to things they do not understand with laughter, even if they know what they are seeing is not funny. When we are able to help prepare the students with background information and an understanding of what they are about to see, students are able to let down their metaphorical armour and feel comfortable watching the play with their peers, thus minimizing awkward laughter during death scenes and similar moments. Wanting to make students comfortable and prepared to see something that may be shocking is not the same as wanting them to only be exposed to happy plays with obvious moral

lessons. Students *should* feel uncomfortable when confronted with how people have been treated in the past because of their background, race, religion, sex, age, and disability. The uncomfortable moments are the moments where the most interesting and challenging questions and thoughts emerge. That lack of comfort can push those students to make change in their school, home, community and wider world in the future.

The Education department also offers two teacher professional development programs in the summer, the Teaching Shakespeare Program (TSP) and the Teaching Musical Theatre Program (TMTP). These programs immerse teachers in two days of focused study on the Shakespeare plays or musicals that are on the current playbill. Teachers learn how the themes and motifs are relevant to today's students and satisfy curriculum connections from the Ontario education system. Both Shakespeare and Musical Theatre can be used to teach complicated stories. From *The Merchant of Venice* and *Julius Caesar* to *Hamilton* and *South Pacific*, each play and musical presents themes that students and teachers can begin to unpack together before, during, and after seeing a production. When it comes to teaching history, theatre is not static (like a printed book). It is fluid and changes depending on the production and the actors chosen to embody the characters. Theatre provides a lens through which to explore race relations, government overthrows, the history of different countries, the idea of the "other," revenge, intolerance, love, and relationships. During the TSP and TMTP, teachers are challenged and questioned through participation in exercises that take the text of the plays off the page and get the teachers on their feet and speaking the text. Teachers cannot expect to ask their students to take risks, like speaking in iambic pentameter in front of their peers, if they themselves do not model the behavior first. Teachers work together in groups and independently to come to new understandings of pieces of theatre, come to a greater understanding of how their students may view the play or musical, and learn how to use the provided tools to ensure all of their students are supported in the study of the play or musical. Teachers have the opportunity to see the productions they are studying while participating in the professional development workshops, which prepares them to see the production with their students in the following months. It also provides them with a better understanding of the main ideas, themes, and motifs on which this particular production and creative team focused during the rehearsal process. This allows teachers to preview the performance and flag topics that they may need to explore more deeply with their students when they are teaching the play or musical in their classroom. In addition to the professional development workshops, teachers receive a teaching artist partner who visits their classroom before and after the class field trip to the Stratford Festival to see their chosen production. In these workshops, the teacher and artist collaborate to create lesson plans that challenge students to think critically and explore the story more deeply than studying the play or historical topic in

isolation. They also receive a free Prologue before seeing the matinee performance of their chosen show.

The 2018 Prologue Series included all of the Shakespeare plays on our playbill and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The Education department selects the productions students are most likely to attend and will need the most context in order to engage with the material. Prologues are one-hour long workshops in one of our theatres, where up to five hundred students can engage with three actors and their peers before the play even begins. The Prologues take place on the stage where the play will be performed just three hours later, immediately allowing students to buy into the idea of seeing a performance that afternoon. Even if students are not particularly excited to see a play, they understand the incredible opportunity they have when asked to volunteer to read text on stage and work with real actors for a few minutes. Most of the actors in the company have never stepped foot on the Festival theatre stage until they are employed as an actor, so having this opportunity is unique. Select students are invited on stage to participate in exercises that relate to the characters, themes, and story of the play. Our Prologues include activities which engage up to 500 students at once and allow for individual reflection. A typical Prologue begins with welcoming the students to the space, a land acknowledgement, and a short physical and vocal warm-up, because most of the students have been travelling on a bus for over an hour.⁹ Then the actors begin by asking the students a series of questions which relate directly or indirectly to the play they are going to see later that day. An actor might ask students to stand up if they have ever disagreed with their parents. This question directly links a student's world with those of the characters Romeo and Juliet, who went against their parents' wishes throughout Shakespeare's play. The actors will ask a few questions to get the students thinking about how theatre, regardless of your circumstances, can connect you with the characters or events in the play or to the other people experiencing the play with you in the audience. Next, the actors will gauge the audience's knowledge level. In most cases, the students know some information about the play they are going to see that afternoon. Their teachers may have started reading the play with them in class (or the students were asked to read a synopsis online), but often, the teachers have not prepared the students at all. This is why the Prologues are crucial to student understanding and behavior in the matinee. A student who has not been suitably prepared to see a live performance may behave inappropriately. Preparation in terms of theatre etiquette and the basic premise of the play is necessary for students to be fully engaged and open to what they are

9 A Land Acknowledgement is a formal statement that recognizes the unique and enduring relationship that exists between Indigenous Peoples and their traditional territories. Land Acknowledgements occur prior to Stratford Festival events and before events at other institutions in Canada. For more information visit: <http://www.lspirg.org/knowtheland> and <https://www.sapiens.org/culture/land-acknowledgment/> (accessed March 15, 2019).

going to see. Depending on the students' knowledge base, the actors will provide a brief synopsis, covering details that were not otherwise explored at their schools or at home. Then the actors will ask for volunteers to join them on stage to participate in drama activities directly related to the play. These participatory activities include the use of tableaux images to create a visual representation of a specific part of the story or pairing lines of text with the characters that speak them in the play. Following these activities, the actors ask the students a series of directed questions that relate to the play and the world that we live in. The actors work with the students in a very short amount of time to create a safe and open environment where students have the opportunity to share their opinion on a variety of subjects without fear of repercussions from their teachers or peers. During these directed question sessions, students provide incredible answers to hard-hitting questions about the society we live in and how the play they are seeing fits within it. Typically, students who were not comfortable getting up on stage to participate will provide answers during this time as they feel less vulnerable sitting amongst their peers. Once the group has had a chance to tackle the difficult questions, the students are invited to ask the actors questions about acting and working at the Stratford Festival. This is a very special time which solidifies the bond between the students and actors. During the afternoon matinee, students are better behaved and are enthralled while watching the performance. They become excited when they see their new actor friends on stage and always provide a massive standing ovation during the curtain call.

This type of theatre education changes children's lives through active discussions with their peers and empathizing with the characters they are going to see later in the matinee. During the Prologues, students are given a chance to speak and be heard. Sometimes students feel as though they have no voice in their classrooms or in their communities, which is why Prologues can be such a valuable experience for them. They arrive on our stages and explore the text or theme with actors in front of their peers and are able to make connections that were escaping them while studying the text on a page. Getting students up on their feet and using the text as a tool provides another way into the story. Students are often made to sit in their chairs and watch a video, then complete a true or false quiz. That type of learning is not engaging nor is it effective.

Prologues allow students to explore difficult topics that may be impossible to explore during regular class time. This could be due to differing abilities in their classroom or time constraints. The Prologue series workshops last for one hour, and in that time, students are able to learn from actors who have been living in the world of the play and from their peers. Students learn from each other's life experiences and learn how to make connections between what they are reading in their classrooms and what they are going to see depicted on stage. For example, in the *To Kill a Mockingbird* prologue, we discussed race, discrimination, misogyny,

and sexual assault. Many teachers will not explore these topics with their students because of fear and not having the tools to talk about them in a meaningful way. Prologues do not only teach information about specific historical events, they also allow students to explore these topics separate from themselves – maybe they have been discriminated against or called the N-word by their peers, but they never had an outlet to talk about it. During the prologues for *To Kill a Mockingbird*, they are able to share (in a safe space) what they truly felt. Students were asked difficult questions and provided raw answers, which was unexpected early in the season. Students constantly surprised the Education team and actors by sharing their opinions with great depth, complexity, and clarity. Early on, I was not sure that the students would open up about personal experiences to a room of strangers, but as the season progressed, it became clear that students have voices and opinions on these difficult topics and need to be heard. The prologues were safe spaces for the students to finally share how they were feeling about our world. Every student who volunteered an answer was working toward changing the world as we know it, and they were happy to talk about what they were doing currently to achieve their goals and how they will continue to do so in the future.

Why is Historical Theatre Important?

Historical theatre provides a space for inquiry, understanding, exploration of themes in current and historical periods, and provides context for those students who have difficulty learning about abstract ideas and concepts in books and other mainstream educational mediums. Making connections is important when studying the past, and theatre based in the past or based on past events is crucial to helping students understand what came before them. Even if a piece of historical theatre is simply based on a true story, the piece can spark an interest in that historical era and cause a student to seek out more information. This promotes critical thinking about the piece and helps students navigate the true and imagined sections of a play through further research as part of an assignment or even personal interest on their own time.

Case Study 1: *To Kill a Mockingbird*

In the Prologues for *To Kill a Mockingbird*, elementary and secondary students were constantly challenged to think about their own situation and the situations of the people around them. Even if a particular student is Caucasian, it does not mean they cannot listen without judgement and think critically about the African-American experiences that are portrayed by the other students in the room and the actors on stage. “Taboos on the discussion of interracial issues eliminate

valuable opportunities for expression and healing.”¹⁰ Dismissing talking about difficult subjects is counterproductive, which is why tackling these issues through drama and theatre can remove some of the gravity of the conversations and allow all to feel comfortable offering their thoughts and feelings.

The *To Kill a Mockingbird* Prologue consisted of the following activities: a vocal and physical warm-up, questioning the audience to gauge knowledge and to start exploring themes from the play by asking broad questions that are open for interpretation, such as “put your hand up if you believe children need to be shielded from learning about the injustices of the world” or “put your hand up if you believe racism is learned, therefore it can be unlearned.”

Following the question and answer period, students were invited onstage to engage in drama activities that linked the world of the play to the characters. The first activity asked students to create tableau images to help understand three characters in the play: Tom Robinson, Scout Finch, and Boo Radley. Asking students to create images with their bodies opens their minds to think critically about the information they have been given and then apply their understanding to create a frozen image that translates to their peers in the audience. The actors were able to act as guides to direct the students to a particular focus, but the final images were student driven. Tableaux can also remove the anxiety of being required to act or perform in terms of speaking lines of text and provide a chance for everyone to participate in a performance without the use of voice, which can often be more powerful than adding words to the performance. Next, the students were asked if they were familiar with Jim Crow laws. More often than not, the students had heard of the term, but could not define it. An actor would then provide the students with a prepared explanation of the Jim Crow laws and their history. Then students would then be invited onstage again to participate in a matching activity. Using lines and situations from the play, students were asked to pair up the situation with a specific Jim Crow law that was enforced in the American South. This activity stimulated conversation and a tangible understanding of how the Jim Crow laws impacted the everyday life of black Americans. Next, we played a game that seemed pedestrian on the surface, but clearly demonstrated how privilege is often thought of as success or luck when in reality, privilege or lack of privilege is deeply rooted in someone’s prior success. In this game, three teachers were asked to join the actors on stage. Each teacher was given an item: a ball, a stuffed squirrel, and an artificial flower. The teachers lined up side by side and tried to throw their item into a bucket held by one of the participating actors. Each person got their item into the bucket the first try. Then the person with the ball was asked to step closer to the bucket. The person with the squirrel was asked to take a small

10 Philip Seitz. “What happens when African Americans confront their past.” *The Public Historian* 38.2 (2016): 14.

step back and the person with the artificial flower was asked to take a step back and turn around. The teachers were asked again to toss their item into the bucket. As imagined, the teachers who were facing the bucket were still able to get their item into the bucket, while the teacher throwing the artificial flower was unable to do so. The students instantly understood why they were asked to play this simple yet effective game. It demonstrates how the privileges you are granted in life in terms of skills, location, socio-economic status, background, and beliefs play a role in how and if you will succeed. Then the actors asked the students questions and engaged in dialogue that would impress university professors. These (mostly) high school students from the United States and Canada were debating racism, discrimination, and how everyone needs to do better. The adults in the room have things to learn from the deeply-invested students they are lucky to be teaching. In order to engage the students following the prologue, I introduced the *To Kill a Mockingbird* Engagement chalkboard. It consists of a chalkboard set up in the theatre lobby with chalkboard markers for patrons to use to answer the following question posed by the director Nigel Shawn Williams:

The degradation of a human life is happening all around us. It's happening in our own neighborhoods. It happens in our schools, in our offices, in our grocery stores and on the busses. Sometimes it's loud, but most of the time it's silent. After the play, will anyone speak up when they witness discrimination? After the play, will more people stand up and speak up against racism, class discrimination and misogyny?¹¹

I added “How are you going to change the world for the future?” to the end of the quotation to provide a call to action, to ask students to share their big ideas for the world we live in and to provide tangible opportunities for students to participate in pushing for change.

We then asked the students to turn to the person beside them and talk with them about the question. Then, myself or one of the actors asked the students to share their thoughts with the rest of the group – typically 20 hands shot up. We usually allow a few students to share their answers and then direct them to the chalkboard in the lobby. This pushes engagement into the lobby, where we hope conversations, brainstorming, and critical thinking continue with other students and patrons. We have had overwhelming participation in this part of the project, and I have been taking photos of the board after each prologue before erasing some to make more room for future patrons. Two great examples that came out of the engagement board are: “The same way Atticus did, he made the townspeople of Maycomb think! If we all encourage members of society to think and act on issues

11 The Stratford Festival. “To Kill a Mockingbird Study Guide,” URL: <https://www.stratfordfestival.ca/learn/studyguides/2018/to-kill-a-mockingbird-study-guide> (accessed March 15, 2019).

(currently) we can ultimately live in a better world!” and “Stop being passive in conversation when someone says something offensive. Change isn’t polite!”

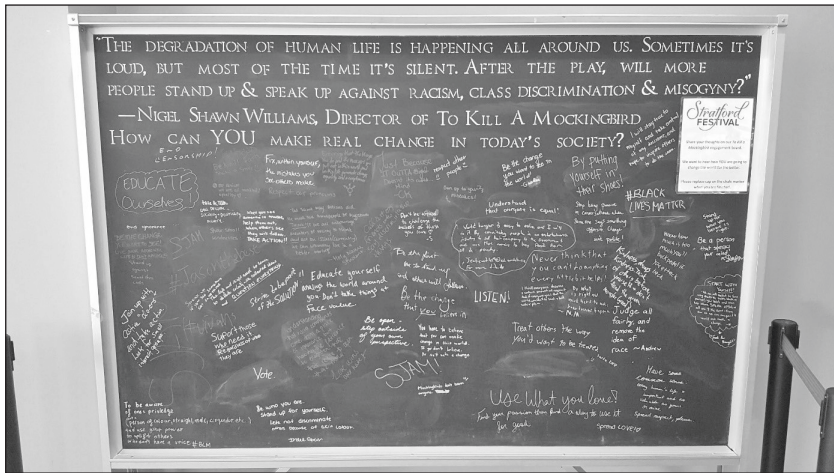


Fig. 7: *To Kill a Mockingbird* engagement board in the Festival Theatre lobby following a student Prologue workshop during the 2018 season (© Stephanie Johns).

Case Study 2: *The Diary of Anne Frank*

The Stratford Festival has produced two iterations of *The Diary of Anne Frank* throughout its 66-year history.¹² I will be focusing on the 2015 production, directed by Jillian Keiley. The Stratford Festival used the 1997 Wendy Kesselman adaptation of *The Diary of Anne Frank* for this production.

The 2015 production was performed at the Avon Theatre, one of the Stratford Festival’s four theatres. This theatre boasts a proscenium arch stage, reminiscent of movie theatres from the early 1900s.¹³ The 2015 season was my first season at the Stratford Festival, and because I started in May, I did not have the opportunity to contribute to the education materials that year. However, I was able to facilitate play-specific programming, including the Prologue series for *The Diary of Anne Frank*. We offered teacher professional development, post-show chats, workshops, Prologues, and various Forum events to expand our patrons’ understanding and experience of the play itself. In addition to the work the Stratford Festival did, the Stratford Perth Museum was able to partner with the Anne Frank House in Am-

12 The Stratford Festival. “Stratford Festival Past Productions,” URL: <https://www.stratfordfestival.ca/AboutUs/OurHistory/PastProductions> (accessed September 10, 2019).

13 A proscenium arch stage has an arch framing the opening between the stage itself and patron seating. It creates a sense of distance from the actors and the patrons and provides a very clear fourth wall between the two.

sterdam to bring a travelling exhibit about Anne Frank to Stratford. The Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre loaned artifacts to the Stratford Perth Museum to add to the patron experience.¹⁴

The 2015 production of *The Diary of Anne Frank* was a unique examination of the play, the story, and the history behind it. The lead actress Sara Farb¹⁵ is a descendant of a Stutthof concentration camp survivor.¹⁶ Director Jillian Keiley asked the cast to remember a specific event, thought, idea, and/or feeling they had when they were thirteen years old and at the beginning of each performance, the entire cast would come out on stage and stand in a line across the front facing the audience. This immediately broke down the ever-present fourth wall. Each cast member would tell the audience their name and the character they were playing and would then tell a story they remember from when they were thirteen years old, Anne's age was when she went into hiding in the Secret Annex. Some of the stories were funny, some of them were heartbreaking, but all of them resonated with the audience because their sharing immediately gave the audience permission to relate the themes, ideas, and hardships of the characters to their own lives. The actors had first been given that permission in the rehearsal hall, and later, in front of an auditorium of over 1,200 people, the patrons were included. These few minutes at the beginning of the play forced the audience to remember that Anne was a little girl with thoughts, feelings, and dreams, just like each person in the audience. Humanizing characters within a play is a true success of any stage production and should always be a central goal when producing one. Canadian theatre critic J. Kelly Nestruck reviewed the production, noting that "this prologue provokes laughter and tears, but most of all it forges an intense connection between the actors and the audience. An atmosphere of shared ritual is created – and makes the storytelling that follows incredibly powerful."¹⁷ This shared ritual is exactly what theatre brings to the world of history and history education. How can we reminisce about something that happened in the past without a shared agreement on what happened? The introduction provided by the actors provides space for the audience to deeply engage with the material and erases the fear of being required

14 Laura Cudworth. "Stratford Perth Museum exhibit coincides with play," June 2, 2015, URL: <https://lfpres.com/2015/06/02/stratford-perth-museum-exhibit-coincides-with-play/wc-m/66538d0e-8e7d-beb3-f96d-57c938fa1a7c> (accessed December 13, 2018).

15 About the Artists. "Sara Farb," URL: <http://www.abouttheartists.com/artists/321022-sara-farb> (accessed March 15, 2019).

16 J. Kelly Nestruck. "Stratford's Diary of Anne Frank is hard-hitting and deeply enriching," *The Globe & Mail*, May 29, 2015, URL: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/theatre-and-performance/theatre-reviews/stratfords-diary-of-anne-frank-is-hard-hitting-and-deeply-enriching/article24699375/> (accessed March 24, 2019).

17 Nestruck. "Stratford's Diary of Anne Frank is hard-hitting and deeply enriching."

to abide by theatre etiquette. This introduction graciously gave the audience the opportunity to feel without fear and to engage without repercussions.

The Stratford Festival runs the Meighan Forum, which consists of over 200 events throughout the season including lectures, panels, mock trials, workshops, play readings, and performances. In 2015, the Festival hosted a Forum event with Sara Farb and her grandmother, Helen Yermus, who shared her memories of the Stutthof concentration camp. The Canadian Jewish News interviewed Farb about the Meighan Forum event and reiterated, “it is important to expose everybody to as many survivors as possible.”¹⁸ As those survivors disappear, so does our collective memory of the Holocaust. It is crucial to give young and old the opportunity to hear firsthand accounts of the good and the bad that have occurred in human history. The Meighan Forum events are often livestreamed on the Stratford Festival YouTube and Facebook pages and archived for those unable to attend the event. Ensuring that the Stratford Festival is recording this type of history is essentially democratizing the past and sharing knowledge and experience with those who otherwise would not get the same opportunity. Allowing those near and far to engage, learn, and think critically about what has come before is the true meaning of public history.

In order to fully support teachers in their teaching of the book *The Diary of Anne Frank*, the Education Department held professional development days aimed at elementary and secondary teachers. Education Associate (Enrichment Focus) Luisa Appolloni discussed the reasons teachers choose other plays or books for their classrooms. “All too often teachers are hesitant to teach some of the more difficult subjects, such as the Holocaust, in part because they felt ill-prepared to do so and they fear that the issue, if not handled properly, may be too traumatic for some students.”¹⁹ The fear of not knowing enough can be crippling for many teachers who would rather avoid the subject than do the required heavy lifting to help their students understand the issues. Luisa goes on to explain how the Stratford Festival Education Department was able to address these worries: “To help ease their concerns, we provided them with background information resources and useful lesson plans to develop their awareness of social justice issues.”²⁰ In addition to the professional development days, we offered *The Diary of Anne Frank* Prologue series, which allowed hundreds of students to connect with actors playing the difficult characters who they would see on stage that afternoon. Inviting the students into the conversation through activities on stage with real actors allowed the students to engage in the subject matter in a way that was impossible in their own

18 Jordan Adler. “Actress says playing Anne Frank is ‘a rite of passage,’” *The Canadian Jewish News*, May 24, 2015, URL: <https://www.cjnews.com/culture/entertainment/actress-says-playing-anne-frank-rite-passage> (accessed June 12, 2019).

19 Appolloni, interview with author.

20 Appolloni, interview with author.

classroom. Students were able to hear how the actors grappled with the subject matter and how they still do not have all of the answers but are more informed than they were before rehearsals began. Teaching historical theatre is not a matter of being right, it is a matter of opening the patron's minds to other possibilities and viewpoints that the patron or student may not have previously considered. During the Prologues for *The Diary of Anne Frank*, we included an activity where a number of students were handed different-colored cards. Then the students held onto them for the duration of the prologue. Once the prologue was nearing the end, the actors asked the students with cards to stand up. The standing students represented the people who were taken to concentration and death camps during the Second World War. This number directly related to how many students were actually in the prologue. This visual exercise was a reality check for the students and teachers alike.

Conclusion

We believe that theatre education is a vital part of a students' development. Through initiatives at the Stratford Festival, we believe we are changing student's lives through our educational programming, which we often pair with historically relevant plays. The Stratford Festival has been committed to offering students affordable tickets to our plays since the early days of its history. "In 1958, began the highly successful school performances, in spring and fall, with matinees at reduced prices and with a member of the cast coming back for questioning afterwards. The millionth student arrived October 9, 1977, to see *The Tempest*, was given a lifetime pass."²¹

We can use theatre to teach the past effectively as long as we engage students in meaningful ways and share in the experience. Without the engagement of actors, influential adults, and teachers, students will have a more difficult time buying into an exercise. Students will absorb more information and come up with questions when exposed to historical theatre than they will by simply reading a textbook or answering some true or false questions on a quiz. Students can learn facts and names of historical figures by learning about history through theatre, but they also learn about empathy and relationships. What they learn informs their own lives and how they approach relationships in the future. History cannot be taught in isolation if we want our students to grow into empathetic, caring, informed change-makers of the future. Krista McCracken discusses David Dean's article²²

21 Leitch, *Floodtides of Fortune*, 202.

22 See David Dean. "Theatre: A Neglected Site of Public History?" *The Public Historian* 34.3 (2012): 21-39.

on theatre as a neglected site of Public History and suggests that “[t]heatrical productions can be dynamic, emotional, and historically accurate means of engaging a larger audience.”²³ Through my experience at the Stratford Festival as a patron and as an employee, I know this to be true. My experience as Education Coordinator, sharing in the learning experience with students from grade four to post-secondary, has been one that reinforces the strength and importance of historical theatre, and theatre in general, in forcing students to examine their beliefs, think about their actions critically, and begin to question the world around them. The proof is in every Prologue experience, where students and teachers leave reenergized and excited to see the play in the afternoon. The proof is when students enthusiastically throw their hands in the air to answer a challenging question offered by an actor at the end of a Prologue. It is shown when students and teachers post on social media about how the Education programming and the play itself have changed their perceptions and made them question their previous assumptions and ideas. Theatre can change lives and can teach complicated histories when it is paired with critical exploration in the classroom, led by the teacher and activities and programs provided by the Stratford Festival.

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