

Culture Care through Storytelling, Children, and Theater | QCommons-Lancaster

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“How do we advance Good in our local community?”

One way I have answered this question in my life has been through the telling of good stories from the Stage. I believe if we teach good stories to our children—and if our children perform these good stories in front of an audience—then our children will have deeper and richer imaginations, and these stories we told together will nurture our culture.

Aside from a forgettable role in my high school’s production of *Pinocchio*, I have never had a great passion for being involved in the performing arts. Rather, I was swept up into the world of props, lights, entrances, and exits through a love of good stories and a hope to put them into our community.

My first entry into theater work as an adult was a play I produced in collaboration with The Trust’s executive director Dr. Robert Bigley and his family. I believed that the children in our community needed to interact with Shakespeare in a more up-close and personal way. The Bigleys and the Bustards joined together in this idea, and we called ourselves “The West End Shakespeare Company.” We brought together students of various ages to present *Much Ado About Nothing*.

The night of the performance people from all over Lancaster County filled the seats—kids sat on the floor and teenagers sat on windowsills. It was *packed*. Everyone followed the story and we cheered and laughed all night. We had so much fun that we staged *Twelfth Night* the following summer. My hope to see the good stories of Shakespeare come alive for the people in our community, especially our children, had happened.

I was later invited by The Lancaster Academy for the Performing Arts to lead their theater department and produce their shows. I am now moving into my third year with The Lancaster Academy for the Performing Arts. I was joined in this venture by Bonnie Bosso—“Miss Bonnie,” as our actors call her—our lead teacher and show director. We work together, combining vision, skill and joy, to give our children and their families excellent experiences throughout the year. I bring a passion for good story telling and a vision for equipping our theater students with skill and knowledge. Thankfully, Bonnie has the same desires, but she also has the talent and teaching gifts to make it happen. Together, with our actors, we have staged *A Mid-Summer’s*

Night Dream, Pride and Prejudice, Anne of Green Gables: The Musical, and an excerpt from *The Man Born to Be King*, as well as held acting classes for beginners on through to a mastery level.

But why emphasize telling good stories through plays and musicals? Because we are a storied people and stories form our imaginations and our identities. Stories also shape the soul of our communities and culture. We all tell stories and receive stories throughout our lives. As Christians, we are rooted in a Kingdom story—and epic tale, full of many other stories, including our own—written by God.

In the book *It Was Good: Making Art to the Glory of God* Charlie Peacock wrote: “. . . the Christian artist must imitate his Lord in story telling. . . the storyteller of good imagination seeks to leave the world and its inhabitants tangibly better than they were before the storyteller arrived on earth.” Working with a script, wrestling with how to present it, collaborating with the cast, finding connection with characters, and sharing it with an audience are tangible ways of telling a story. With a good play or musical, the audience experiences the story, and then takes it with them out into their everyday lives.

Today’s culture—what we see, hear, read, and do—is a mixed bag of the beautiful and the good jumbled in with the mediocre and the profane. Many storytellers today leave the earth tangibly worse than when they arrived. Children can easily grow up on a diet of consumer marketing, shallow songs, and anemic stories. Many TV shows and movies are very visually appealing, yet cancerous ideas are laced throughout them, shaping our children’s imaginations and ideas about life. And then add to this the over-sexualization of our culture, and the overindulgent use of smart phones, and we are left in the garden of life, working against a growing wasteland.

At the heart of it all, we are what we love. And what influences what we love? Not just knowing a vast amount of facts and theories. What feeds our hearts is a combination of knowing and being, which is shaped by whatever has molded our imagination. What feeds our imagination? Our relationships with people, stories, music, poetry, art, knowledge, and nature. As James K. A. Smith says in *Desiring the Kingdom*: “Our ultimate love/desire is shaped by practices, not ideas that are merely communicated to us.” I would say that the practice of storytelling (and for this conversation, the work of storytelling on the stage) shapes our loves.

As I approached the task of leading the theater department of The Lancaster Academy for the Performing Arts I combined a commitment for good stories with ideas

gleaned from a book by artist Makoto Fujimura to solidify my vision. In his book *Culture Care*, Mako paints the arts as part of a larger picture of cultural stewardship—something akin to environmental stewardship. He laments the toxicity that has seeped into our culture: art commodified, beauty dismissed, and lives fragmented. He would say that much of today's culture is not life giving and it is not sustainable. He calls people to live and create in a way that is generative (or one might say, fruitful). He sees a fruitful contribution to the culture as including genesis moments, that is, acts that inspire and lead to creativity in other people, generosity, and generational activity. And I'm thankful to say that in the theater department of The Lancaster Academy for the Performing Arts we have seen all these three elements of generative art making in action.

Here are a few examples:

- This past year, when we staged *Anne of Green Gables: The Musical*, several students were given leads who had never been leads before. By offering these parts to these students, we saw them grow, excel, and move into other areas of their own creativity with confidence and energy.
- Following the performance of *Pride & Prejudice* two of our actors were asked to be narrators of a ballet based on Jane Austin's stories. Drawing upon their growing skills, they were equipped to explore these new experiences.
- During this summer's musical *Alice in Wonderland* we had an autistic child join us. This was her first experience doing an activity without a parent accompanying her. Although quiet at first and shy, she too, thrived, taking part in many of the scenes, and making connections with the other performers. Her parents said it was life changing for her. And now this fall she is taking classes with us.

These are just some examples of the genesis moments our students have had.

The whole work of our theater department is based on generosity, beginning with Bonnie Bosso's teaching and loving our actors. So many of our students flourish and grow under her direction. Volunteers' generous sharing of their time and skills—from sewing costumes and building sets to collecting props and serving meals. And students work behind the scenes. And what is sweet in this giving of time and skill is that it has been given with love and delight.

This summer we had the privilege of seeing the good work of storytelling get passed on to the next generation. Our director, musical director, stage manager, and co-pro-

ducer were all graduates of The Lancaster Academy for the Performing Arts. Most had worked with Miss Bonnie and had already been directed in doing the creative work of storytelling and loving. They offered our students rich experiences while rehearsing and staging *Alice in Wonderland*. It was a joy to see them give genesis moments and to work generously with the young students as they themselves had received such moments from The Lancaster Academy for the Performing Arts. Goodness happens through the years when it is passed on through the generations. It is a slow work, and it can seem ordinary. But it can happen.

Each one involved in our theater department is being exposed to, and working with, good stories, rich plots and fine language. They are being given life affirming ideas, while learning how to connect their everyday lives to these stories. Seeds are being planted in their imaginations of what is good, honorable and true. They are being equipped to act well and with confidence on the stage.

My hope is that they will go into the future and out into the community with their imaginations enriched and their lives generative.

In the meantime, my belief is that while we work together telling stories from the stage, we are doing the work of caring for culture. This is one way Good can be advanced in our community.