

Our world is riven through with division and divisiveness. Around us on every side are leaders and strategies seeking to turn people against one another, on the basis of race, language, culture, economic status, gender, sexual orientation, loyalty to an idea, belonging or not belonging... Almost every aspect of our humanity has been used by someone to bring greater division and to build higher walls of suspicion and hatred. As a result, we seem to have turned our backs on Ubuntu, the African philosophy that says “I am because you are” and “a person is a person through relationships with other people.”

How can we work to undo this great wrong we are doing to our children and indeed, to ourselves?

Children need to be able to enjoy moments in community where they are reminded of what we share, and where they are able to appreciate the multiple realities of what it means to be human. They need spaces in which to explore new ways of thinking that challenge these divisive narratives, in which they feel empathy for those most unlike themselves. They need concrete experiences of communion in community to remind them of the joy and beauty that the world has to offer.

ASSITEJ believes that theatre provides multiple doorways into feeling a greater sense of connectedness with others, and – importantly – with ourselves.

Recently The New Victory Theater in New York released the results of a five year study into the benefits of theatre for children and young people. One of the key unexpected findings was that exposure to the theatre gave these children greater hope for the future. These results were contrasted with a control group, where those who were not exposed to theatre performances and workshops over the same period, experienced a diminishing sense of their future possibilities in terms of study and work opportunities.

Why is hope so important? Hope creates positive energy which translates into self-assurance, willpower, resilience and finally into concrete actions to make a difference in one’s own life and in the lives of others. Every child needs to have hope.

So let us all commit to taking a child or young person to the theatre today and to rallying the support necessary to ensure that every child has access to the arts and to theatre, regardless of their personal or social circumstances. And for those of us working in the profession, let us commit to providing quality experiences that will make the difference in how the younger generation perceives the world – for the sake of both today and tomorrow.

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