

Theatre opens door to LGBTQ discussions

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Mina James, left, and Youness Aladdin in the 2015 Roseneath Theatre production of *Outside* by playwright Paul Dunn.

John Packman

As the director of citizenship at The York School in Toronto, Sarah Charley spends much of her time identifying educational opportunities for students at the independent school.

A big part of that is finding effective vehicles to kick-start classroom conversations for the 475 students at the co-educational school, addressing topics such as relationships, careers, and drugs and alcohol in age-appropriate classes.

Happily, when it came to starting the dialogue around lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer or questioning issues, Ms. Charley happened upon a play called *Outside*, aimed at Grades 7 to 12. It tells the story of Daniel, a teenager who overcomes homophobic bullying,

depression and suicide, sharing his struggles within a meeting of a gay-straight alliance at his new school.

For Ms. Charley, the performance, which is produced by Toronto's Roseneath Theatre and has toured schools around Ontario and in the United States since 2015, proved extremely eye-opening for her students.

As a school without a gay-straight alliance at the time, the students at The York School, which offers instruction from kindergarten to Grade 12, took note.

"The setting of that show is at a meeting of the gay-straight alliance organization at [Daniel's] school and then our kids saw the deficit in their own community and said, 'Why don't we have that?'"

Consequently, the students created what they called a Prism Club, a supportive space for LGBTQ and straight youth to get together and discuss their sexual orientation and gender-identity issues.

The school has also recently changed its student government language from "head boy" and "head girl" to "chairs of the student council," as well as installing gender-neutral washrooms in one of its newly renovated buildings.

While there are numerous movies that the school could have shown to open up the LGBTQ debate, the impact of a live performance presents its own unique opportunity, Ms. Charley says.

"Because it's real people and they can relate to the characters, I think it provokes a sense of empathy that maybe you wouldn't get if you were watching it on film," she adds. "You connect in a very different way with live theatre."

Paul Dunn, the Ontario playwright of *Outside*, says that while his initial impulse for writing the play was to speak to late middle school and high-school students about homophobic bullying, he adds that bringing the play into the school itself has a notable impact.

That is particularly true for students who might feel isolated in their experiences of being bullied based on their perceived sexual orientation or gender identity.

"For them to see it amongst their peers, my hope was that it would be able to reach out to them in a way that would let them know that they weren't alone, bypassing their peers and the staff at the school," he says.

Another play produced by Roseneath, entitled *Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls*, aimed at Grades 4 to 8, tells the story of Fiona, a nine-year-old who comes out as a boy and wants to be called Fin.

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Written by Dave Deveau, the 2018 Roseneath Theatre production of *Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls* featured Samson Brown, left, Athena Kaitlin Trinh and Matthew Finlan.
John Packman

Much like *Outside*, the play broaches a difficult topic of conversation and brings it out into the open. For Dave Deveau, the Vancouver-based author, the real impact isn't so much during the performance, but what happens afterward.

It's the resulting discussion, which starts with a Q&A with the actors, and continues on in the classroom, at home or on the playground with friends.

"It's in moments like that [when] I remember why live theatre can matter as much as it can," he says. "It's that act of spring-boarding young people into starting to formulate their opinions about things."

At Mississauga's Bronte College, a private day and boarding school for Grades 9 to 12, plays such as *Outside* were brought into the curriculum to help teach queer theory, breaking down stereotypes around gender and sexuality, as well as addressing the issue of bullying.

Sarah Schumann Johns, the school's head of English as a second language, has used a number of texts to examine those subjects, including *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, which is a play spun off from the main Harry Potter books. That text, Ms. Schumann Johns

says, enabled a discussion around whether the chief protagonists, Albus Potter and Scorpius Malfoy, are “potentially having a queer relationship.”

She adds that at Bronte, which has a large contingent of international students, those kinds of discussions touched on new ground for many of them.

In particular, she says the school has a number of students from Nigeria, where a 2014 law has made homosexuality illegal with penalties of up to 14 years in jail. While the reaction to the play, which was compulsory for students, was mixed, Ms. Schumann Johns says it was important for them to understand the message behind it.

“They enjoyed the play and learned a lot and they can make a lot of connections between topics like homophobia and bullying, queer theory [and] the need for support groups,” she says.

Mr. Deveau seconds that opinion, adding that theatre for young people can carry a powerful message, one that is especially true when it comes to addressing LGBTQ subjects.

While he feels his play can help with starting conversations, his real hope is that it becomes “that entry-level piece that is able to cut through a sort of a veil of silence surrounding identity and gender in young people.”