

Performing arts are the best form of self-expression – Alice Bennett

Many people in this room think that the performing arts industry is cringe, unnecessary, and disregard it.

As a keen performer and avid lover of musicals, I could not disagree more. I want to make people who are not so well informed about theatre aware of how important it is for self-discovery and self-expression. Although it may seem cringe from an outsider's perspective, that could not be further from the truth.

In the closing decades of the 20th century, performing arts critics became increasingly despondent about the longevity of theatre, as many believed that the performing arts would gradually become obsolete, thanks to the rise of television, and of the early Internet. People tended to spend more time watching their televisions rather than travelling to the theatre to watch a production, which I can agree is understandable. However, the feeling of being in the same room and atmosphere as the performers is something that cannot be experienced when sat in your living room. Professional critics stated that the arts, particularly musical theatre, would become as relevant to 21st-century society as string quartets were to their own time, and believed that gradually, the performing arts world would become unfashionable and eventually shut out by society. Despite these prophets of doom, musical theatre has not diminished as expected, and instead it has been continuing to attract new talent and expertise.

From the very beginnings of the performing arts colleges in London and Paris, the importance of self-expression to artists was emphasised, in order to set themselves apart from other people in the industry. Musical theatre teaches people how to express themselves effectively and can also be a tool through which people with disabilities can communicate. Many performing arts students suffer from shyness when they start attending classes and gradually become more confident as they find ways to communicate. I first attended performing arts when I was a shy, awkward 10-year-old, and it helped to increase my confidence massively, and it has shaped me into the person I am today. Without it I would not have the confidence to stand here and perform this speech. In addition to teaching self-expression, musical theatre helps society in self-knowledge and understanding. Theatre and the performing arts teach society about itself, hoping to point out the attitudes and mindsets of current society. It can be a tool used to educate people about their current conditions. For example, musicals such as Les Misérables and Hamilton are enjoyable to watch, as well as being based on true events, which helps to educate their audiences in a creative, exciting manner.

Linking to plays that talk about historical events, one of the reasons why there are so many performing arts colleges in London and Paris (often seen as important educational centres for theatre and dance) is that the performing arts teach us about our history and educate us in other ways. Classic theatre, such as Shakespeare, and Moliere, helps us to understand the people around us and how they might be expected to react in certain situations. Even works by Sheridan, such as the School for Scandal, teaches us about ourselves and was regarded as risqué political commentary when it was first performed. The fact that governments regularly attempt to close theatres and other performing arts centres when there is a revolution, or a military coup demonstrates the importance theatre has to maintain the history and understanding of a country's citizens. Currently today, more than almost any other sector, the arts have been clobbered by Covid; theatres have not been opened for almost a year, with a brief opening in the middle of last year. After a faltering start, the government came forward with a generous rescue package. Aside from the national schemes like furlough, bounce-back loans, and self-employed income support, some £1.57bn has been found specifically for the arts and released in tranches to support hundreds of institutions. Many organisations that had never received public subsidies before, such as music venues, have been helped for the first time, thanks to support from the public and their similar love for theatre.

Although this seems like a lot of money to help support, there is still lots to be done to help recognise the importance of the performing arts, and maintain its popularity, since they lost out on a year of necessary funding from the public. If you want to make a difference, simply watch a musical on Netflix! There are plenty of options to choose from. It may engender a new love for theatre, and make you want to see it live as soon as possible. There are also a variety of petitions to sign to help make the government recognise how important the arts are to many, many people across the globe. Thank you for listening.