

The Significance of Community Theatre in California on Individual Participants

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Introduction

California Community Theatre (CACT) is an online resource for organizations and individuals involved with Community and Civic Theatre in the state of California. CACT currently has over 80 member organizations from all parts of the State.

The Significance of Community Theatre in California was a survey for any member of California Community Theatre to discover the specific and overall impact of community theatre in the State on its participants. The purpose of conducting the survey is to better understand the time, energy, and resources individuals devote to community theatre, and share what those efforts result in—physically, emotionally, and mentally. While there are several documents and studies on the impact of theatre and the performing arts, the intent here is to focus on the significance of community (non-professional) theatre, because of the unique scenario the practice involves, wherein most participants are involved as a hobby or a side-activity, rather than as paid professionals. Further, while there do exist many examples of publications on regional or commercial theatre, there is not a great deal of written material focusing specifically on the involvement of community theatre.

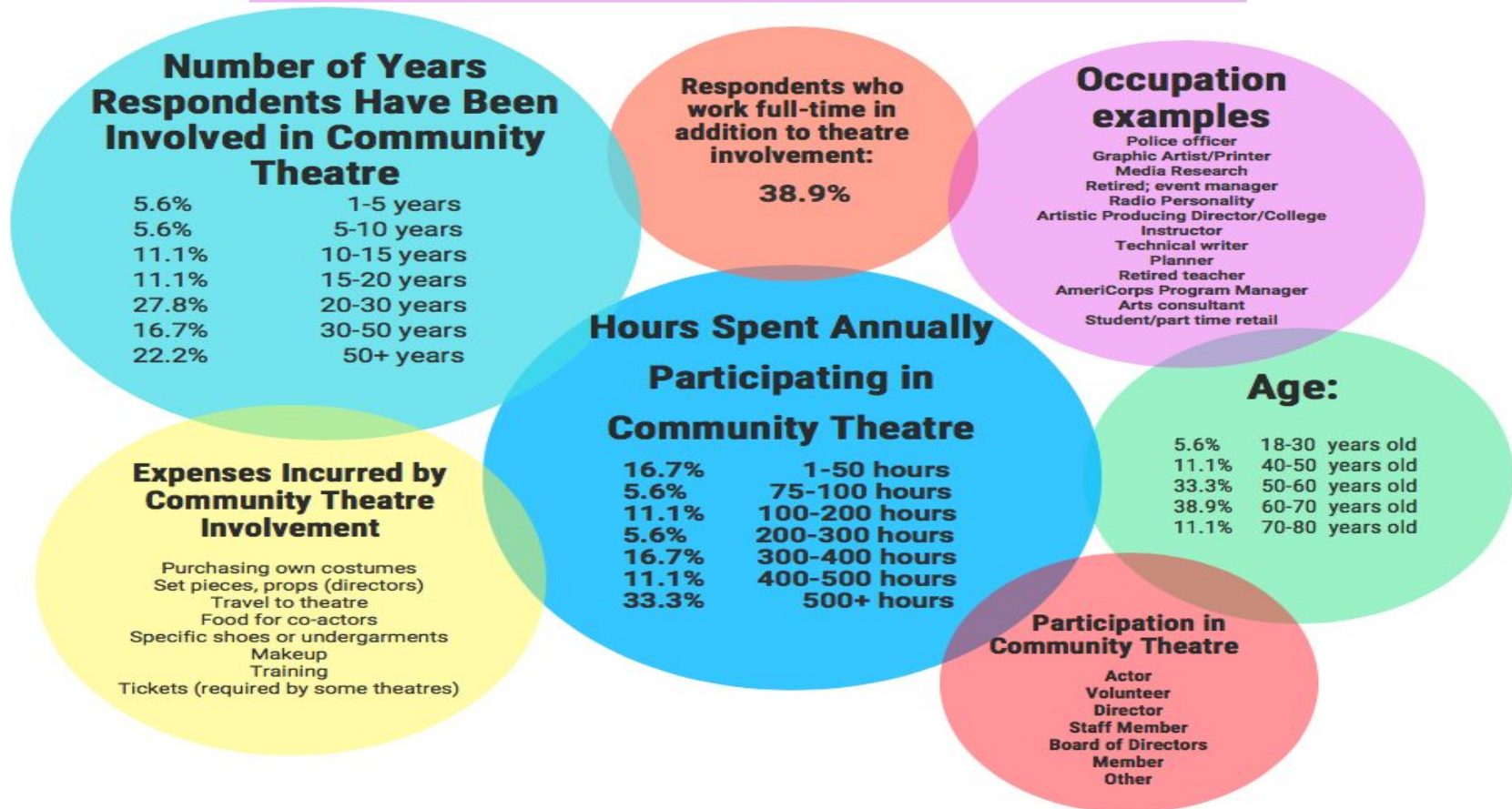
Because community theatre might not be a common cultural aspect of communities, or because of the unknown information about the dedication of its participants, it is important to have a document with citable facts and data regarding the impact of community theatre. This is particularly true as communities and towns evolve, land development changes, and funding options for venues and facilities remains unpredictable; and, additionally, as the arts in general continue to face competition with the growth of many other cultural and entertainment options. Another goal of the survey is to offer the chance for participants to access the results and utilize them in support of funding or sponsorship requests. Results are available to CACT members.

Interview Methodology:

*A comprehensive survey was sent out to members of California Community Theatre several times throughout the first part of 2018, via eblasts, inclusion in a monthly newsletter, and on Facebook posts. Member theatres were encouraged to forward the survey to their individual theatre participants. Members of American Association of Community Theatre who are located in California were also emailed the survey and asked to participate. Eighteen individuals participated, representing fourteen community theatres in California.

*A note on theatre vs theater: California Community Theatre uses the word ‘theatre’ to describe the practice of the art; individual quotes describe the responder’s preference for the word as it applies to the practice and/or the actual name of their company. No quotes utilizing the word were modified.

Survey Facts About Respondents



Connection to Others/Balancing Life: Community Theatre Realities and General Impact of Community Theatre Participation

(direct quotes from respondents)

Ended a marriage, but brought me a wonderful girlfriend.

I own my theater, and I'm mostly a "one man show" (literally) behind the scenes. I can't miss a rehearsal or performance, and in between I am building sets, directing, doing the marketing, etc.

Just over half my current circle of friends is now through community theatre and the others are long time friend or through other volunteer efforts.

It has dramatically (no pun intended) increased my circle of friends and activities.

Many of my theatre friends are close personal friends. Four of us are members of a book group with six other people and many of us meet each week for a potluck and movie night. They are a second family upon who I can rely.

In the 50+ years I have been involved in Community theater, I have developed a "Theater Family" that knows and respects the art and the artists.

When I was getting my graduate degree in directing my college... had great relationships with the local community theatres. My classmates and I directed many productions in the community, which was a great resource for the theatres and a fantastic laboratory for us as we honed our skills. I was married on the stage of (my community theatre) after a performance of the first show I ever directed. And as I type this, I am watching a brush up rehearsal for our revival of NUNSENSE with cast members that did the show with me 26 years ago. Yea, the relationships are lasting!!

Getting involved with local theatre has grounded me in this community, to which I moved 14 years ago knowing no-one. Theatre people here are super-welcoming (even before I started reviewing them!).

Too much work and not enough sleep affects the quality and quantity of my time with my spouse.

Although I met friends and loved ones through community theater, ultimately doing theater for free rather than having it be my job took away too much time from family. Community theater should be a training ground and a gateway towards theater jobs. Too many people willing to keep giving away their artistic talents for free keeps professional opportunities at a minimum.

I've made great friends. But when I'm in a show I have no time for anything except work and theater.

There is no time to think about anything like a significant other.

I have developed many acquaintances in theater community which has enriched my life here. Not good friends, though.

I would estimate that 90% of my friends on Facebook who aren't related to me I met through theater. My whole family became involved in various capacities and my dad is auditioning for a show right now. I am not involved right now because my significant other is not a theater person, so doing productions would take time away from that as well as school and work being demanding. I really want to get back into it after I get done with school.

First Involvement in Community Theatre

Children's summer workshop 1966

Auditioned for a show **Worked stage crew**

As a child actor Was recruited

Helping my children participate

Usher

Volunteer Clients - nonprofit management

Through a friend I worked for a very involved member who introduced me to the theatre.

Interesting Findings:

The large number of positive impacts, specifically related to positive changes in an individual's point of view of broad subject matters after participation in community theatre is worth noting. While one can assume skills such as public speaking will improve, the study showed a deep emotional and positive well-being impact. Overall, participants in community theatre in California indicate an ongoing commitment to community theatre despite the negative impact and personal (and sometimes financial or professional) sacrifices involved.

"My conservatism has undergone a complete overhaul. The chance to meet so many different people in theatre from so many different walks of life has made me realize that we are all just human and deserving of a bit of happiness."
- Survey Respondent

Many respondents indicate expenses incurred by paying out of pocket for various aspects of participating in community theatre, and making sacrifices related to health, time and personal relationships, particularly when heavily involved or when participation increases due to the opening or preparation of a show.

"There are no real negatives. It (community theatre) is just part of my life." - Survey Respondent

By and large, the positive impacts of participation in community theatre in California outweigh negative impacts. There are many direct and indirect correlations to an improvement in personal and professional life from respondent's involvement in theatre. Community theatre has contributed to respondents' changing points of view and attitudes toward other humans, allowing them to become more empathetic people. Skills such as public speaking, team management, and communication, are all credited to improving due to community theatre. These are just a few general examples.

Community Theatre Involvement

Positive Impacts-Direct Responses:

My public speaking skills have improved with the many speeches, presentations, and curtain speeches that I've given over the last 14 years.

I did a lot of public and corporate speaking in the past, but I have been better able to speak "off the cuff" to groups with more confidence. I often speak to community organizations like Kiwanis, Rotary and the like on behalf of an educational non-profit, and I am better able to do so.

I get better all the time at working as a team (volunteers, parents, actors, directors, and patrons) - my communication skills, confidence, and management skills are all better because of our Community Theatre.

It is challenging to be president of a volunteer group with members of various goals, personalities, needs, etc. and keep everyone happy and productive. I have learned to "herd cats."

The skills I learned as a performer gave me the background I needed to transition into being a radio personality.

Realizing you have a talent to offer entertainment to an audience, is a self esteem builder. You become confident...

Directing a play, in my case mostly big musicals, makes you look at the big picture. I have to present my vision of a show in a manner which inspires the performers and crew to want to do their best for me.

I am proud to be part of an organization that gives so much to our community. As president, I am often required to step up and resolve problems that I am not sure I am qualified to solve. But we work things out and that is very satisfying.

Community Theatre Involvement

Negative Impacts-Direct Responses:

60 to 70 hour work weeks at the theater doesn't leave much time for relationships. And relationships "IN" the theater can backfire badly! Luckily I have some very close friends who love theater and also love to just hang and NOT talk about theater if need be...

I admit, I don't eat as well when I am on the run to rehearsal.

I tend to work later and sleep later resulting in me and my dogs getting less exercise or going for walks.

There are only so many hours in the day.

I feel that a sensible amount of expenses can be incurred by actors but our theater company will always assist those who cannot afford it. In smaller theaters, I have purchased my own costumes at times. I never expected a theater to pay for my haircut...it's part of the commitment I made by auditioning and taking a part.

I have no qualms. I often have paid for things, set pieces and other things that I simply never turned in the receipts for reimbursement. That is my choice and a part of my contribution as a director, producer, volunteer or actor. If I can I do. If I can't I turn in a receipt. I have purchased many things like molding or paint, paint brushes, screws or tape or whatever. Cases of water for the cast and food but we all do that.

Since I am the owner -- paying out of my own pocket to make sure bills are paid.

Providing food for co-cast members, free time taken up by performances, time spent in travel to theater...

As a producer, I often find I am paying for food for rehearsals, gifts for the directors, and supplies, etc.

The expenses I have incurred have been my welcome contribution to the effort.

Beliefs of Perceptions of Community Theatre Participation:

Overall, respondents noted more negative than positive associations by their family, friends and peers about their involvement in community theatre. However, despite the respondent's awareness of these negative perceptions, they still participate and try to re-direct and re-educate audience/community members. The most consistent opinion is that respondents' family and friends are unaware of the true time commitment to community theatre.

Direct Responses from Survey Respondents:

They don't understand the time commitment.

I think they have no idea how life changing it can be. So many great friendships and life changing moments have happened around me in the last 20 years of theater.

Most people do not understand the complexity of a production, nor the commitment required.

We live in a very conservative and rural area and unfortunately, I don't think many give it much thought. In fact, many have an aggressive and negative attitude towards us. To give you an example regarding all the arts, and we do have a very active arts community here in spite of others. I was at a local grocery store and we were selling tickets to a local car wash for our educational non-profit. A man asked me, "what... does STEAM mean?". I explained that it is STEM with the arts added. His response was something like, "those ... arts people gotta get involved in everything". I quickly explained that I ... was one of the two founders of the AST, Arts, Science and Technology Corporation and that it is the creative thinking that drives our brains to develop such great and fantastic new breakthroughs in ALL areas of science. This attitude though prevails for many and includes all the arts.

Feel left out due to time commitments.

They assume a lower level of professionalism and ability.

Appreciate the end result, unaware of the work involved.

Summary & Acknowledgements:

- Overall, participation in community theatre creates a positive impact in participants by increasing confidence, and skills, including teamwork, time management, and public speaking.
- Overall, skills gained and enhanced by community theatre positively impact participants' professional experiences.
- Overall, participation in community theatre creates a broader viewpoint on the experiences of others, and empathy toward individual differences.

"I was beaten up by the corporate world before I began to act and have over the last several years gained back that confidence and self-belief that I had lost. I credit this to community theatre and getting back in front of people."

- Survey Respondent

Quotes from Survey Respondents, General:

"When you work (in community theatre) with so many people from so many kinds of backgrounds, you open your mind to different points of view, that in turn help your understand where others are coming from." - Survey Respondent

Direct Quotes on Overall Impact of Community Theatre Involvement:

I would say it has allowed me a creative outlet and opened me up to discover more and enjoy more adventures.

Made life-long friends.

In Orange County, I have become familiar with many of the local Community Theatre owners. Most of them are such terrific people and are so willing to help each other without ego or pettiness. The common bond of performing arts is about everyone winning - not us or them. I am glad to know them and thrilled when ever I can contribute in any way for their benefit also!

(Community Theatre) ... allowed me to return to one of my earliest passions, after raising a family and while pursuing a time-consuming career.

It gives me great personal passion and purpose.

"CT has been there for me in my youth, though good and bad times. The camaraderie I had in my 20's is still there in my 50's. Its a bonding experience to work with like minded people when we all bare our souls to do what we do."

- Survey Respondent

Direct Quotes on Overall Impact of Community Theatre Involvement (cont'd):

More than 30 years ago I had the pleasure of working with a wonderful local actor at several community theatres when I was learning to direct. She was really talented, but more importantly to my life she was really generous and taught me a lot including how to have a family and do theatre. She often brought her young children along and they developed an interest, and pretty quickly I was directing both mother and daughters. Now, that actor (Bonnie Halverson) is performing in a very successful production here at FRT and her daughter (Sara Bareilles) is killing it on Broadway with "Waitress". Yea, community theatre has an impact.

I'm most interested in writing. Theatre has also given me opportunity to delve deeper into scripts. The acting experience is giving me great insight into what makes a good script.

My life is better because of community theater.

"When we get to tech week - my life comes to a standstill with only theatre focus. I enjoy the theatre so much - that I do tend to prioritize it over my day job." - Survey Respondent

I was able to work closely with my daughter for many years in this theater. We bonded in so many great ways.

My husband was never part of CT. When I opened (my community theatre), he agreed to be part of it but helping with managing the house. Since then, we have enjoyed many years of attending shows (other than our own). Prior to me, theatre wasn't part of his life.

Community theatre has contributed to my education and overall growth as a human being. It has enlightened me to the struggles of others, made me even more empathetic and caring.

Producing, acting, and directing gives me positive purpose in making a difference in the lives of others. From patrons, to fellow actors, to youth participating/learning in our productions - you see how performing arts makes a positive difference in their lives - and you feel rewarded!

Direct Quotes on Overall Impact of Community Theatre Involvement (cont'd):

My daughter also majored in theater in college, and my husband knew nothing about theater before we married. He now attends regularly and helps out occasionally at the theater.

My wife got tired of being a "Theater Widow" in 2009 while I was directing Musicals. She tried out and was cast for a show. Now she is actively performing and spending time with working with me at the Theater.

My youngest child was able to explore all aspects of theatre throughout her youth because of our involvement in community theatre. She currently is studying lighting design at Southern Oregon University and hopes to make a life in the theatre.

I seem to have made it my life's mission to get more people out of their houses and into live theatre productions!

I am a transgender man who is new to (my city) and new to living as my gender identity. Transition has involved significant anxiety. Theatre has provided an opportunity to work with identity and visibility issues in a deeper way for me than just talking about it.

"I came to my current gig as costume designer...when I had finished my chemotherapy. The theater welcome to me and gave me a place to be with people who were healthy." - Survey Respondent

I participated in community theater and used the skills from that as well as my education and other theater training to become a professional actor.

Participating in theatre with my children was a great experience for all of us.

My father died when I was in early teens and I started doing theatre that summer; also it was discovered that I had a significant orthopedic issue about the same time and had to undergo a couple of major surgeries and several years of therapy, living in a wheelchair. Theatre was a part of my rehabilitation.

Direct Quotes on Overall Impact of Community Theatre Involvement (cont'd):

Being in the theater has given me confidence in myself as I present at community training events. Being in many plays has developed a dimension in me that makes me a more well-rounded person which contributes to my primary relationship. Friends who don't normally attend community theater have developed a liking to it by coming to see me in a show. In general being in plays has healthily challenged me to confront fears, help me develop confidence and be great fun and very moving at times. A peak acting moment is a feeling to behold!

...It is because of community theater that I am the person I am today. I grew up with it, and I cannot even begin to count the number of ways it has helped me. I am confident in my body and my abilities, I can work well with others in stressful times, I can handle extreme stress, I can quickly solve problems. Community theater has taught me to be a better communicator and a better leader and friend. I am confident that community theater has positively impacted my whole life and personality. I also got my family into it and I think it really helped my father.

Specifically, I have learned more about painting and lighting and how colors can blend and affect the mood of the setting or production. I believe setting the tone comes first and then actors then adapt to it. For instance, have you ever noticed in a dark room lit only with candles people become more introspective and talk about feelings etc? But in a brightly lit room, we tend to talk about things far away or foreign, set "away" from where we are. The same can happen and does with great lighting and colors on the stage, it transfers to the whole of the theatre and the patrons. It is magic.

I had always been involved in the administrative side of the theatre. Since my retirement I added producing to my duties. This is a great way to learn to manage time and organize people.

The most important thing I have learned is to pay attention to details.

I learned to budget, I learned to adapt how I communicate to who I am communicating to.

Acting is amazing opportunity to utilize brain and body at the same time!

Even though I'm older, my memorizing skills have gotten better out of practice.

Direct Quotes on Overall Impact of Community Theatre Involvement (cont'd):

My grandmother made costumes for my grandfather who was in vaudeville; her daughter (my mother) made costumes for her brother's theatre; I was not happy with costumes I was given to wear, so I learned to sew and design so I would have some control over at least that aspect of plays I was in or producing.

Time management has always been an issue for me but community theater has really helped me learn to do the most required work with the most minimal effort in the smallest time. I also have learned to dance and my body and coordination have been much worse since stopping community theater.

I think the biggest part of feeling creative has come to me when I direct. Balancing little nuances is very fulfilling when the actor, and ultimately the audience "gets it".

I need to learn something every day and community theatre helps me achieve that goal. I have learned so much about the craft of theatre and for that I am very appreciative.

I make a difference in those I work with, those I support, and those I meet.

The successful production of a show verifies my passion.

Community theatre folk will show up for you when you need to move your eight- bedroom house, when you need someone to help you learn lines, when life is great and when life is really challenging. If you show up, contribute, problem solve and keep yourself from taking up all the oxygen in the room community theatre folk will thank you, honor you, and give you some wonderful ways to express who you are and what you love.

It's part of my creativity and self expression. It is fulfilling personally to experience the process of being in a play from the beginning to see the magic of a show coming together as a finished project although ever evolving. It does give me purpose to give myself to a show and be committed as a cast member to do my best for the team and present a satisfying production. It is magic and the creation is individual and as a team.

Direct Quotes on What Respondents Feel Their Involvement in Community Theatre Signifies:

(I've)... gained a new level of involvement with local arts community.

I love my community theater family and I love being involved in productions. I love the excitement and the feeling of success after a well run performance. I love being part of the little things that make a show run well.

For me, it's a career. Taking the financial and personal risk of starting a community non-profit theater was a huge step. Along the way we've presented our shows for over 160,000 patrons, tutoring countless numbers of youth actors and helped out many budding artists and other non-profits.

Theatre productions are perhaps one of the most collaborative projects I have been involved.

When you can offer an audience a variety of reasons that make it worthwhile for them: comedy, hope, thoughtfulness, introspection, epiphany, appreciation, and just plain fun.

Feel part of a larger community and contribute to it, enjoy performing.

My main role is to keep everything on track so those involved have a positive and enjoyable experience in our theatre.

The transformational experience of the adults and children involved.

I know that I am providing a place for lots of people in my community to enrich their lives, in many different ways.

A sense of fulfilment and engagement with my community.

My connection to people and community.

Developing skills to become a professional.

Direct Quotes on What Respondents Feel Their Involvement in Community Theatre Signifies (cont'd):

The feeling of community among everyone. It's truly lovely.

I have no family left, I'm the last of my line. For a short while I felt as if I belonged somewhere.

The coming together of a show with a committed cast.

Chance to renew old skills.

I'll tell you about the time we did *Spring Awakening*. The director who started it passed away about 3 weeks into the rehearsal schedule. He had been a community theater director in this area for over 15 years and was well loved and respected in the community. Our assistant director took over. Spring awakening is an emotional show to begin with, and people cried real tears every night on stage. I was assistant stage manager. It was a rough show not only because of our directors death but also because of cast drama and our director's inexperience directing a show. Despite that, I have never been more emotionally connected to a group of people than I was for the run of that show. Closing night was powerful. As a cast, we were closing out the wonderful career of a man who is still deeply missed in the community. I am so honored that I was able to be a part of his last show and the feelings of deep sorrow and intense joy that I felt during the run will stick with me forever.

Direct Quotes on What Respondents Feel About the Role Of Community Theatre in Our Culture:

It brings culture to many who are not able to travel to experience it. In my small city, they never did drama until we came along. It opens the minds of smaller areas in America. Expands their experience. It creates a safe place to have emotions. One of the most touching things ever said to me was from a man in his 70's, who attended a show with his wife. The show (a comedy with heart) was about a gay male couple. He said he never thought about gay people having some of the same anxieties about meeting the parents for the first time. It made him think and realize same sex couples are not that much different than he and his wife. Then he hugged me. Best feeling ever.

I think that the role of community theater is to provide entertainment but also to provide a sense of "community" for the locale that they perform in. Whether you are seeing friends or family onstage or just attending a show, you are part of the patrons who have come together at that point in life. The performance is live and will never be the same again. It happens only on that one night and you, as a community theater patron, are a part of that experience.

Plays and theatre have always been pure entertainment, but they have also always been forms of communication about social ills and successes. Since playwrights have been observers of society they have written what they know about, what they see, what they feel and what they are passionate about. Plays are sometimes attempts to spread awareness about problems like racism, sexism, homophobia, and other types of persecution. But they can also be about how big and generous the human spirit can be. Theatre is a powerful medium for exposing problems because those who understand it know how real and active theatre is in the world. They can educate us, lift a society, be an escape for an individual or society or help us to discover ourselves. If one is involved within the theatre troupe one can improve their motivation and drive for goals because we are always working to improve ourselves.

It's a place where we can use stories to make a statement, reach across isles, demonstrate our similarities, and celebrate our differences.

providing low-cost access to classic drama.

The role of community theatre is to provide a local, more personal space for theatre that provokes reflection on society and our lives.

Direct Quotes on What Respondents Feel About the Role Of Community Theatre in Our Culture (cont'd):

My philosophy is, "We are not training performers, We are training audiences. When a child goes through the audition, rehearsal, and performance cycles, that child then appreciates the effort and experiences in putting on a show. That child now understands the live arts and will attend theatrical productions for the rest of their lives."

To provide quality live theatre which will educate, stimulate, challenge and excite our patrons, theatre artisans and performers.

Theatre is social activism...

Essentially, to do what TV/Movies cannot do. To be together with each other in the same space at the same time. To extend connections beyond unilateral performance to passive audience, but learn to co-create new realities in imagination. An opportunity for EXPERIENCE deeply.

Entertainment and education. A voice for the people.

To help audiences to understand the lives, experiences and feelings of other human beings showing them that they are not alone. It gives people the theater experience that would not have it other wise on either side of the stage. It gives voice to many cultures and issues in our communities. For me it takes me to a rarefied environment for some months as an actor and for a few hours as an audience member.

Provides important connections to the human experience.

...I sometimes am overcome by a feeling of confusion watching my friends pretending to be someone else in front of a blank audience and a half finished background. But once it is all out together, it is magical. Community theater, like professional theater, provides a space to tell stories, and

communicate information and ideas to an audience in creative ways. Unlike professional theater, it gives community members, regular people with regular jobs, a chance to express their creativity and connect with their community. Just like your local community members who play in a band on the side, or go to knitting groups to work on new patterns, or take photos of nature when taking their dogs for a walk. Like any art form, it gives people a chance to be creative, and like any volunteer opportunity, it gives people a chance to work with others to make something and make a difference in the community. Like both of those things, it makes people smile. Community theater has a positive influence on both members of the production, and the audience.