

2018 Canadian Message for World Day of Theatre for Children and Young People

By Pablo Felices-Luna

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The reason I love creating theatre for young people is that the audience is our inspiration. I believe work for young audiences cannot be created in the absence of young people. Think about it: we are the only discipline that defines itself by its audience. It is exhilarating to know who you are creating theatre for, to find the form and content that speaks to each segment of that audience, to know when you are challenging them and when they are leading you.

Over the course of my career, I have moved away from leading them and allowed them to lead me. Yes, we do challenge them, but we only do so from a place of understanding of who they are, what they need and what they think they need.

So, in the spirit of that, I want to share three stories about **the lessons that audiences have taught me:**

1. “We Should Get Our Guns and Kill Them”

We were about to premiere a work about friendship in times of war for 5 to 8 year olds. The night before opening, my 5 year old daughter came home and told me she had learnt everything about the War of 1812 at school. When I asked her what she knew, she said that if the Americans came to Canada, we should get our guns and kill them. Turns out the Grade 8 students had put on a play about the war and had not tracked through the impact of what they were showing their peers. Even a theatre-savvy kindergarten kid left thinking that the war was still going on.

To quote Stephen Sondheim: Careful the things you say, children will listen.

2. “Shoot the Puck”

At the climatic point of a play about a 12 year old who feels pressured by his father to excel as a hockey player, there is a moment when he has the chance to score a key goal. As he is about to shoot the puck, he freezes time and reveals what he is feeling through an inner monologue. I had warned the actor not to indulge too much in the feeling of the moment, but in one particular performance, I saw him having some deep but private feelings about his struggle. As he was about to speak, 300 children in the audience started screaming “Shoot! Shoot the puck!” Needless to say, the text of that speech went largely unheard.

Never let them get ahead of you.

3. “Kids Love Rap”

This is less of a story and more of a reflection. In my first year as an artistic director, I worked on three plays, all of which involved an undeserved rap break, because... well, “kids love rap.” This is a phrase I now use with artists about making unfounded assumptions about the audience. I have seen hip-hop used to great effect in our work; when researched, created and used properly, when it fulfills an informed artistic intent, it is as effective as the other theatrical tools we may use in our work. But you have to know whether the audience will receive it the way you think it will be received.

You know what they say about assumptions, right?

While these (and many more) lessons inform my own work, I would like to ask you, the artist, the practitioner, the theatre-lover: don't you think that they should extend to any theatre we may want to create? Shouldn't we all be creating work with an awareness of our responsibility to our audiences? Shouldn't we all try to stay ahead of them? Shouldn't we all have a genuine understanding of who the work is for? I know that is the work that inspired me and continues to inspire me each and every day.

Pablo Felices-Luna is Artistic Director of Manitoba Theatre for Young People.

