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The Business of Theatre: How Creativity, Communication, and Collaboration Infiltrate ‘The Real World’

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Abstract

Too often ridiculed as a “dying art,” theatre endures a ceaseless struggle for validity among educators, employers, and citizens alike. However, the skills garnered by performers, technicians, and designers through theatrical education span far beyond the final curtain, and are significantly more relevant and impactful than we think.

A theatre education means learning about the human condition, communication, gaining self-confidence, expressing creativity, problem solving, and thinking on your feet. In addition, drama techniques have been enormously effective in improving self-esteem and building community. A theatre education is a highly successful catalyst for the development of a “soft skill set.” Our education system is largely geared towards fostering a career path, so it becomes crucial that soft skills are developed alongside hard skills.

While there’s nothing wrong with the quantitative, strategic, and analytical skills traditionally taught at business schools, those alone do not guarantee success in business, where things tend to be messier and more fluid, and where success often rests on the ability to form winning coalitions that will back a good idea. Ultimately, considering theatre teaching into the education system benefits an individual beginning in their formative years, and proves highly advantageous in fostering a career path. Moreover, the cornerstone of theatre teaching obtain remarkable applicability in multiple fields.

Methodology

My thesis illuminates the ways in which theatre education can be used in a business setting, and largely focuses on the industry of Second City Works: the business-to-business side of the Second City, the world’s leading comedy theatre and school of improvisation. Not only is the Second City at the forefront of comedy education, but Second City Works excellently emphasizes the often overlooked benefits of utilizing theatre in business.

Statistics

A theatre education means learning about the human condition, communication, gaining self-confidence, expressing creativity, problem solving, and thinking on your feet. Coupled with a well-rounded academic curriculum, it is no surprise that these skills are complementary in the classroom.

The American Alliance for Theatre & Education notes that students engaged in drama performance coursework or experience outscored non-arts students on the 2005 SAT by an average of 65 points in the verbal component and 34 points in the math component. This statistic comes as no surprise considering drama activities have been known to increase reading comprehension, as well as both verbal and non-verbal communication skills.

Theatre education has also proved to be effective in academic life overall. It helps to improve school attendance and reduce high school dropout rates, can advance skills and academic performance in children and youth with learning disabilities, and those involved in drama typically stay more engaged in school than their non-arts counterparts.

In addition, drama techniques have been enormously effective in improving self-esteem and building community. A study published in Chambers of Change (1999) cites theatre arts, including performance, classes, and participation in a drama club, as a source for “gains in reading proficiency, gains in self-concept and motivation, and higher levels of empathy and tolerance towards others.”

Introduction

Why is this so necessary in our modern educational system? Because a theatre education is a highly successful catalyst for the development of a “soft skill set.” Our education system is largely geared towards fostering a career path, so it becomes crucial that soft skills are developed alongside hard skills.

For the last thirty years, Second City Works has taught the same theatrical principles of their comedy school to thousands of corporate clients, showing leaders exactly how to implement the tools of improvisation in order to solve common business challenges. This is accomplished by creating a specialized theatre training session that caters to the specific goals set by each company. Second City Works has collaborated with an impressive variety of clientele, from local business to large corporations such as Nissan, Secret Deodorant, McDonald’s, Google, Old Spice, Motorola, and Nike. The cornerstone of my thesis research is centered around the book “Yes, And.” How Improvisation Reverses “No, But” Thinking and Improves Creativity and Collaboration. This book was published in response to an overwhelming increase in interest in Second City Works’ program in the last few years, which has seen a phenomenal amount of success. I have compiled numerous examples from specific case studies to illustrate how and why their work is so lucrative in today’s market.

My findings will be paired with commentary from various project leaders at Second City Works’ flagship office in Chicago, Illinois, and I will provide examples of the exercises and programs that are developed for each company’s goals. I will prove and demonstrate the benefits of improvisation and theatre education for the crucial development of the “soft” skill set, and its vital role in the office. It is my hope that readers can begin to understand the function that theatre plays in our day-to-day life, and perhaps even how he or she can implement these tried-and-tested practices in the conference room.

Significance

Second City Works, at its most basic level, synthesizes education with entertainment in a revolutionary and personalized way. This “make ‘em laugh, make ‘em think” approach is a winning formula for the millions of professionals who have spent time working in running a business, you know that a new idea is a win, and that they are one of the only people who can come up with that idea.

When leaders and employees learn how to apply the pillars of theatre education, we can foster creativity, collaboration, and communication in leaders and employees alike, and apply these skills to the strongest, best possible workforce.

Methodology

My thesis illuminates the ways in which theatre education can be used in a business setting, and largely focuses on the industry of Second City Works: the business-to-business side of the Second City, the world’s leading comedy theatre and school of improvisation. Not only is the Second City at the forefront of comedy education, but Second City Works excellently emphasizes the often overlooked benefits of utilizing theatre in business.

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