

Theatres shed light on Otherness

Karen Minty - September 2019

I'm a corporate trainer by day and a freelance writer by night. In my first role, I'm often asked to give presentations and workshops on otherness. Otherness? Well, more popularly known as Sensitivity, Diversity, and Inclusion. AKA Otherness.

I love people's reaction when I call it Otherness. I think it more accurately defines the problem: we look at those people as others. Different from ourselves. So different that they can't possibly be one of us.

In a corporate training environment, it's hard to point out to people that they may be racist, sexist, or homophobic. They rarely see it in themselves. Sometimes the best you can do is tell stories that provide examples and hope people can see themselves in the story's characters. That's exactly what three local plays have sought to do recently.

I've had the pleasure of seeing three thought-provoking plays this year: *Girls Like That* at the Imperial Theatre, *The Cake* at Theatre 42, and *The New Canadian Curling Club* at the Victoria Playhouse Petrolia. All of them left me wondering how many people in the audience saw themselves in the plays' characters?

Not only did these plays aim to entertain and educate, they also aimed to give society an accurate reflection of itself. We ARE those characters. In *Girls Like That*, we're the mean girls who shame their lifelong friend and brand her a slut when a nude photo of her goes viral. In *The Cake*, we're Della, the bakery owner who struggles with baking her best friend's lesbian daughter's wedding cake because she's homophobic. And we're Stu, from *The New Canadian Curling Club*, the racist curling coach hurling racist slurs at his team in the form of a joke. We're also the shamed girl, the lesbian couple, and the new immigrants and every other character that those plays brought to life.

Even the best of us hold some sort of beliefs that we are somehow better or superior to certain others. It's inevitable. Either your parents, your culture or your Bible taught you to be. You believe that your beliefs are somehow 'more right' than someone else's and it shows up as not considering any other factor than their differences or otherness.

These plays excelled at "othering" people. The term "othering" refers to the division of people into different groups: one group's identity is considered normal and is valued, while the other is defined by their faults and differences and is devalued. This establishes that the other group has fundamental differences that could be deemed a threat to the rest of society, making them extremely susceptible to discrimination. Othering can reinforce positions of power, domination and subordination.

So why do we do it? Because othering can reinforce positions of power, domination and subordination. We fear change. We fear the threat that someone is going to change the status quo that we feel so comfortable in. If I include you, I may have to change my long-time beliefs and behaviours... and well, they're my beliefs, I'm emotionally attached to them.

So how do we change it? In a corporate training environment, I would tell you to become more sensitive to other's feelings, embrace diversity as a good thing, and work hard to include everyone. You need to ask yourself WHY you believe what you believe about others.

But realistically, the quickest, easiest, and most effective way to accept people different from yourself is to simply stop looking at their differences and start looking at their similarities. If you are both mothers or fathers, like baseball, have a college degree, love cooking or have a dog, start there. Getting to know someone is really the only way you can change your beliefs about them. You'll find you have more in common than you thought, and you'll start to see them as a person instead of part of a group called others.

When Stu from *The New Canadian Curling Club* learns more about his team's families, jobs, struggles and achievements, he comes to see them as more human and less "other." And Della from *The Cake* realizes that she won't actually burn in hell by making a cake for someone she has loved her whole life.

I applaud these three plays for bringing such serious issues and questions to our attention in a light and entertaining way. I hope all three theatre venues continue to seek out such provocative and diverse plays, so that maybe, some of us can see ourselves in their characters and decide to be more accepting of people's otherness. Kudos to Imperial Theatre, Theatre 42 and Victoria Playhouse Petrolia!