

Secret teacher



I am not a great fan of musicals. However, the joy that they bring to others, including my wife and children is undeniable.

As a head teacher of a boys' secondary school I see on a daily basis the enormous benefits that participants and audience gain from engaging in all aspects of performing arts. Drama is at the very core of our recent success as a school. It gives students of all abilities a creative outlet, a sense of pride and of self-worth. I have always been conscious of the threat of hyper-masculinity in my school and the performing arts are the perfect vehicle for young men to express emotion, develop a sense of belonging and to learn how to support a wider team.

It does therefore frustrate me that participation in the performing arts is falling in some schools when even a 'bah humbug' type character such as myself can see the enormous benefits. Issues around the Ebacc and school funding are well documented, but I would want to cast my aspersions further afield to parents and even performing arts staff.

I once taught a student who won a televised national drama competition. Her parents' response was to change schools for fear of her being encouraged to become an actor rather than a doctor. With no consideration for the life skills and joy that will be developed, a mercenary approach from parents is resulting in a generation of young people not being exposed to as broad a curriculum as their parents.

Time and again I see students who have sacrificed large amounts of their time to rehearse and perform, unsupported by their parents. Most heartbreaking is those students who for the first time in their lives commit to something of their own initiative, rehearse and perfect performances, only for no one to turn up on the night to celebrate their achievement. I recognise that this is not possible for all parents, but I know my students and I know for whom it *is* possible.

And we teachers... How often do we allow our middle-class prejudices to raise barriers for children from disadvantaged backgrounds? How often do we rely on those students who take music and drama lessons beyond school to form the basis of what we do in-school? How welcoming and inclusive are we to those who have not been exposed to a wide range of cultural opportunities? It starts young! How often do we see the September born, middle class children dominate the primary school nativity play?

The arts transform lives, challenge prejudices and create a positive culture, if they are allowed to grow. Very simply, the larger the number of people involved, the more wonderful it becomes.

While there are many pressures and hurdles to achieving this goal there are also many things that we can do to ensure that what we do is more inclusive. There will be occasions when the final product is not as perfect as we would like, but as when I watch a musical with my own children, the pleasure is in seeing the joy that it brings to others.

Do you have views you'd like to express anonymously? Get in touch with the editor at sarah.lambie@markallengroup.com and ask if you can contribute a Secret Teacher column. We'd love to hear from you!

Opinion

The Oberammergau Phenomenon

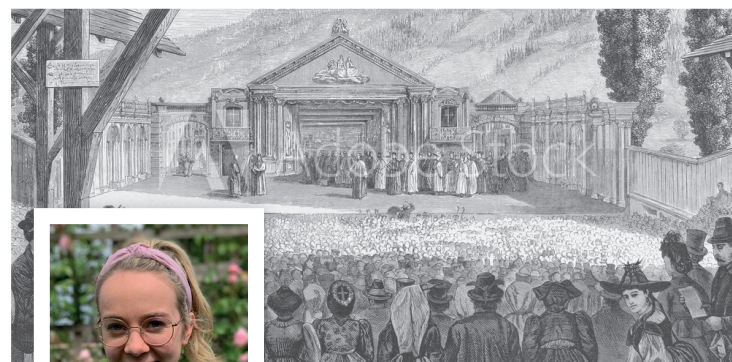
by Harriet Clifford

Arriving in Oberammergau, a small, quiet Bavarian town of 5,000 inhabitants in southern Germany, it seems impossible that every ten years, 4,700 international visitors come each afternoon to watch the world-renowned Passion Play. Even more unbelievable is that the Passion Play, which has been taking place since 1634, is performed, directed, accompanied and designed entirely by those who have lived in Oberammergau for at least 20 years.

The Passion Play is a major operation, not least because each performance lasts 5 hours. As well as the cast, which was announced in October 2019, there is a pool of 110 musicians and singers respectively, from which a 64-strong choir and a 55-seat orchestra are selected for each performance. Overall, there are over 2,000 participants in the play. Out of this number, the only people who do not have to have lived in the town for 20 years are the children, who are brought by their schools and encouraged to take to the stage waving palm leaves as Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey.

How does one town become so saturated with talent? Speaking to some of the actors, it is clear that acting – and artistic expression in general – is something nurtured in children from a young age. The commitment to theatrical and musical education in the intervening years is high, with numerous choirs and plenty of acting opportunities for all ages, some of which make use of the otherwise empty Passion Play theatre (although with slightly reduced capacity). Many of the inhabitants have paved their way in theatrical and artistic careers, paths inspired by involvement in the Passion Play as children, or a family history of participation.

It can't solely be about providing resources and opportunities, as most school children in the UK have plenty of those, yet it seems unlikely that our average town of 5,000 people could produce something worthy of international attention. Instead, I think it's about the cultural attitude towards the theatre and the aims that society instils in students. We can throw as much money at the Arts as we like, but without young people who grow up believing that the theatre is as worthwhile and legitimate as, say, banking, law, or medicine, the cultural perspective will not shift. Clearly, this country is not short of incredible talent, but I wonder how many individuals come up against resistance along the way?



Harriet Clifford is the Assistant Editor at Choir & Organ