ACHIEVING CATHARSIS:
THE IMPACT OF THEATRE ON LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, AND TRANSGENDERED YOUTH

A Thesis
Presented to
The Graduate Faculty of The University of Akron

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Mary Suzanne Conway
May 2011
ACHIEVING CATHARSIS:
THE IMPACT OF THEATRE ON LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, AND TRANSGENDERED YOUTH

Mary Suzanne Conway

Thesis

Approved: ______________________________

Advisor
Mr. Durand L. Pope

Accepted: ______________________________

School Director
Mr. Neil Sapienza

Committee Member
Ms. Kathleen Kelly

Committee Member
Mr. James Slowiak

Dean of College
Dr. Chand K. Midha

Dean of Graduate School
Dr. George Newkome

Date

ii
DEDICATION

This manuscript is dedicated in loving memory to my grandmothers,

Helen Callaghan Conway, who encouraged my writing and thoughtful expression from a very young age,

and Rita Catherine Hudec, who inspired me to always fight for those who cannot fight for themselves.

And to my parents, who have ensured that I never grew up a single day without love, support, and the belief in my own abilities.
AKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend thanks to the following individuals who were instrumental in inspiring and guiding me through this process:

- My advisor, Randy Pope, for his wisdom, and for making me a better writer.

- My classmates at the University of Akron, particularly Tricia Ostertag and Brian Marshall, for pushing me along and offering constant support.

- Rosemary Houston, for providing me with elite access to documents within the Chicago School of Professional Psychology, and for being a wonderful study partner.

- Nicholas Bazo, Director of True Colors: OUT Youth Theatre, without whose help I would not have had a thesis to present.

- My thesis committee members, Kit Kelly and James Slowiak, for their eagerness and insight into this project.

- The brave young men of St. Xavier High School’s Theatre Department from 1995-1998, who inspired me to research this topic, and who provided support and fond memories throughout the process.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES ............................................................................................................. vi

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................ 1

II. RISK FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, AND TRANSGENDERED ADOLESCENCE ............................................................... 4

Causes for Emotional Stress on LGBT Adolescents .................................................. 6

   Family ...................................................................................................................... 6
   Religion .................................................................................................................. 7
   School ................................................................................................................... 8
   Society ................................................................................................................... 10
   Their Own Ethnic Groups ..................................................................................... 10
   Psychiatric Professionals and the Justice System ................................................ 11

Effects of Emotional Stress of LGBT Adolescents .................................................. 13

   Drug and Alcohol Abuse ..................................................................................... 14
   Social Isolation and Poor Relationships ............................................................. 15
   Poor School Performance .................................................................................... 16
   Homelessness, Prostitution, and Disease ............................................................ 17
   Chronic Depression and Suicide ........................................................................ 18

III. PROVEN METHODS OF IMPROVING THE DEVELOPMENT OF
ADOLESCENTS .......................................................................................................................... 20

Organized Youth Programs .................................................................................................. 21

Support Groups .................................................................................................................. 22

Positive Adult Role Models ............................................................................................... 23

Theatre and the Performing Arts .......................................................................................... 25

  The Social Work with Groups and the Performing Arts Model ..................................... 26

  Larson and Brown ........................................................................................................... 28

  Philip Zwerling and Augusto Boal .................................................................................. 30

  The Albany Park Theater Project .................................................................................... 35

IV. LGBT YOUTH THEATRE PROGRAMS ......................................................................... 40

  True Colors: OUT! Youth Theater .................................................................................. 41

  About Face Youth Theatre ............................................................................................... 48

  Pride Players ..................................................................................................................... 51

  Proud Theater ................................................................................................................ 52

  QSpeak .............................................................................................................................. 53

V. CONCLUSION .................................................................................................................. 56

BIBLIOGRAPHY ............................................................................................................... 60
## LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Statistics of At-Risk Adolescents vs. At-Risk Adolescents Involved in Theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>True Colors Social Impact Indicator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>About Face Youth Theatre Story Themes and Prompts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The crisis facing lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) adolescents today is overwhelming. With greater amounts of research becoming available to the public, and with current models of how the performing arts are proven to aid in the development of adolescents, there could be a direct correlation between theatre and reducing the risk factors associated with LGBT youth. The purpose of this study is to provide a persuasive argument in favor of theatre programming for LGBT youth.

Throughout the second chapter of this study, I intend to examine the risk factors associated with LGBT adolescence in an effort to prove demonstrable need for LGBT Youth-centered programming. A combination of factors contributes to the high risk factors associated with LGBT adolescents. Rejection and lack of support from families, religious groups, and society enhance the adolescent’s isolation and belief that there is “something wrong” with them. Constant pressures at school, including verbal and physical harassment and assaults, lack of supportive peers, and teachers who either do not have the training or desire to guide them, make their daily education an agonizing experience. These challenges, along with further stress
created by their own ethnic groups, psychiatric professionals, and the justice system, all combine to place LGBT students at alarmingly high risk for behaviors and consequences such as drug and alcohol abuse, social isolation, poor relationships, homelessness, prostitution, disease, chronic depression, and suicide. Without assistance, they may never make it through adolescence to adulthood, and if they do, they may have difficulties adjusting and becoming successful, contributing members of society.

Chapter III will discuss and assess different methods recommended to decrease at-risk behavior in both LGBT adolescents and adolescents in general. My intent is to prove that theatre encompasses all these methods, and can theoretically be a means of assisting the development of LGBT youth. Research proves that organized youth programs, support groups, and the existence of positive role models are highly beneficial in the positive development of both heterosexual and LGBT youth. Further research strongly indicates that the performing arts are a highly effective means of aiding in the positive development of youth, particularly those considered at-risk. For at-risk youth, theatre provides a unique opportunity for them to have a voice and express themselves in a supportive environment, thus providing an experience of catharsis.

Continuing this theory, Chapter IV will study five theatre programs in the United States whose sole purpose is to aid and support LGBT youth. These theaters utilize narrative-based storytelling and supportive environments to help students achieve a cathartic experience, thus improving their development and readying
them for adulthood. Through my studies of True Colors: OUT Youth Theater, About Face Youth Theatre, Pride Players, Proud Theater, and QSpeak, I will demonstrate that LGBT youth theatre is filling a need, both for the students that participate, and within the community.

By the end of this thesis I intend to have formed a persuasive argument in favor of continued LGBT youth theatre programming, along with my suggestions for the future. Through this argument I hope to make a case that further funding and research would not only be beneficial to existing and future theatres, but essential to the community, and especially to the students.
CHAPTER II

RISK FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, AND TRANSGENDERED ADOLESCENCE

Research shows that LGBT youth face extensive adversity and overwhelming risk factors as they make their way toward adulthood. Adolescence itself “is a difficult and complex period of development filled with anxiety and few clear guidelines for helping youth resolve the problems they face” (Remafedi 18). An LGBT youth, however, must navigate the already difficult challenges of adolescence with added stress brought upon by a society that often does not support who they are. Adding to these pressures, LGBT adolescents, unlike most other adolescents, often attempt to cope with these challenges without family or peer support. “Gay youth are the only group of adolescents with no peer group to identify with or receive support from” (Remafedi, 20). States Remafedi,

“Lesbian and gay youth are the most invisible and outcast group of young people with whom you will come into contact. If open about who they are, they may feel some sense of security within themselves but face tremendous external conflicts with family and peers. If closed about who they are, they may be able to “pass” as “straight” in their communities while facing a tremendous internal struggle to understand and accept themselves. Many gay youth choose to maintain a façade and hide their true feelings and
identity, leading a double life, rather than confront situations too painful for them. They live in constant fear of being found out and recognized as gay. The reasons for their silence are good ones” (20).

Until the 1990s the reality of emotional stress on the LGBT community and the risks associated were relatively unknown. Few studies existed, and those that did only provided a link to sexual orientation and emotional stress as it related to adult gay men. Remafedi contends that this is primarily for two reasons: the lack of government support, and technical challenges associated with sexual orientation (8-9).

The US Government has, until recently (and even somewhat today), been reluctant to pursue the study of the risks facing LGBT adolescence. States Remafedi, “Government agencies have not adequately supported the study of suicide in homosexual populations. Given the events surrounding the federally commissioned Report of the Secretary’s Task Force on Youth Suicide (1989), it appears that political forces were at work to suppress the collection or publication of information which has been perceived to benefit homosexual communities. The report’s controversial chapter on gay and lesbian youth...almost led to a rejection of the whole volume. After considerable debate, the report ultimately was accepted in its entirety, but published only in limited edition” (8).

The government maintains a strong hold on what types of sciences are studied, and therefore funded, and, as Remafedi states, “Important but unfundable topics have a way of never becoming ‘serious’ science” (8). With the evolution of the Gay Rights Movement, however, new studies are being conducted, information is becoming
available, and scholars and professionals now have greater opportunity and funding to explore the reasons for emotional stress on LGBT youth.

Technical challenges regarding sexual orientation also inhibit the study of emotional stress on LGBT youth. LGBT adolescents often hide their sexual orientation in an effort to live a “normal” life (Remafedi 9). This has provided scholars with sizeable limitations within their investigations, and only in the past twenty years or so have suitable subjects volunteered for participation in such studies (Remafedi 9).

Causes for Emotional Stress on LGBT Adolescents

In the recent studies performed on LGBT adolescents, several theories have emerged as chief causes for the emotional stress and risk factors plaguing LGBT youth. Among them are family, school, society, religion, psychiatric professionals, and struggles within their own ethnic groups.

Family

One of the most resonant causes of emotional stress on LGBT youth is the rejection and isolation from their families. “Gay youth are the only group of adolescents that face total rejection from their family unit with the prospect of no ongoing support” (Remafedi 19). According to Youth Pride, “50% of lesbian and gay
youth report parental rejection because of their sexual orientation” (3). Approval from their families is something all adolescents need, and a sense of being cared for and belonging within a family unit is crucial in the development of an adolescent. Often this rejection leads to the youth willingly or being forced to leave home. “For gay and lesbian youth forced to leave home, the loss of parental love and support remains a critical issue for them” (Remafedi 44). For those LGBT adolescents from violent or dysfunctional families, the risks can be far greater, as violence often occurs due to the adolescent’s sexuality (Remafedi 44).

Religion

An extension to the challenges within the family dynamic for LGBT youth often comes in the form of religion. Many religious faiths are not only intolerant of homosexuality, but actively condemn the LGBT community in the name of their faiths. “Homosexuality has been referred to as ‘the crime not to be named among Christians’ and as ‘a disgrace to human nature’” (Herdt 160-161). Religious groups target adolescents as well as adults, and for adolescents who are in the very early stages of their development, this has a profound effect on their sense of self.

“Many traditional and fundamentalist faiths still portray homosexuality as morally wrong or evil. Family religious beliefs can be a primary reason for parents forcing youth to leave home if a homosexual orientation is seen as incompatible with church teachings. These beliefs can also create unresolvable internal conflicts for gay youth who adhere to their faith but believe they will not change their sexual orientation. They may feel wicked
and condemned to hell and attempt suicide in despair of ever obtaining redemption” (Remafedi 45).

Whether the adolescent firmly adheres to his/her faith, or whether that faith is simply an extension of his/her family, the conflict of religion and homosexuality can have a traumatizing effect on an LGBT adolescent.

School

LGBT youth face greater adversity at school than their heterosexual classmates, often without the means to make their situations better. “Many gay and lesbian youth feel trapped in school settings because of a compulsory obligation to attend and the inability to defend themselves against verbal and physical assaults” (Remafedi 45). With the advance of the Gay Rights Movement, and the increase of openly gay students, there has also been an increase in violence against those students either known or thought to be LGBT. “Verbal and physical attacks against gay youth have increased in recent years as students become increasingly threatened by the presence and openness of peers with a lesbian or gay orientation” (Remafedi 45). A 2009 National School Climate Survey of 7,261 middle and high school students performed by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) posted the following statistics:

-84.6% of students reported being verbally harassed at school because of their sexual orientation
-40.1% of students reported being physically harassed at school because of their sexual orientation

-18.8% of students reported being physically assaulted at school because of their sexual orientation

-72.4% heard homophobic remarks (i.e. “faggot” or “dyke”) frequently or often at school

-Nearly two-thirds of students reported that they felt unsafe in school because of their sexual orientation, and more than a third felt unsafe because of their gender expression

LGBT students are victims of false perception among many of their classmates as well, particularly in relation to sexism and societal norms of how men and women should behave.

“Anti-gay harassment finds much of its basis in sexism. Often attacks on lesbians are based on the false perception that lesbians ‘want to be like men’ and must ‘be put back in their place as women.’ On the other hand, gay men are attacked to punish them for not being ‘sufficiently’ masculine. Peer harassment and violence against LGBT youth is often sexualized. According to a survey in the journal *Pediatrics*, 33% of LGBT youth reported sexual contact against their will, compared to 9% of straight youth” (Kiejewski 1).

LGBT students often find little assistance from teachers and school administrators due to lack of training and/or unwillingness to get involved.

“Schools do not adequately protect gay youth, with teachers often reluctant to stop harassment or rebut homophobic remarks for fear of being seen as undesirable role models” (Remafedi 45). The 2001 Massachusetts High School Students and Sexual Orientation Youth Risk Behavior Survey found that “4 out of 5 students in high
school don’t know 1 supportive adult in their school environment” (Youth Pride). Harassment and violence at school, and the lack of support from adult role models there often has disastrous results for LGBT students.

Society

LGBT youth face challenges attempting to navigate through a society that often does not understand them, or considers them unequal. Most states do not recognize the rights of LGBT citizens to marry, and the US Government has had very little involvement thus far in the quest for equal rights for homosexuals and transgendered (Remafedi 42). This governmental response has permeated a society that is more or less comfortable denying the rights and privileges of its LGBT citizens. “It is the response of our society as a whole to homosexuality that pose[s] the greatest risk to gay and lesbian youth” (Remafedi 42). States Remafedi:

“Homosexuals are not allowed to legally marry and form “legitimate” long-term relationships. The vast majority of States and municipalities still discriminate against lesbians and gay men in housing, employment, and other areas. Gay and lesbian youth see this and take it to heart.”

If society tells them that who they are is intrinsically wrong, adolescents have a much harder time formulating a positive view of themselves, and thus may become ashamed of who they are.
Their Own Ethnic Groups

Ethnic minority youth who identify as LGBT face additional challenges stemming from within their own ethnic groups. As members of two minority groups, the pain of growing up LGBT for ethnic minorities is often exacerbated by rejection from within their own ethnic group.

“Ethnic minority gay youth have tremendous fears of losing their extended family and being alone in the world. This fear is made greater by the isolation they already face in our society as people of color. These ethnic minority gay youth who are rejected by families are at risk of suicide because of the tremendous pressures they face being gay and a person of color in a white homophobic society” (Remafedi 38).

States Remafedi, “Ethnic minority gay youth are seen as an “embarrassment to their cultural group. There is more concern for daily survival issues than an increased understanding of homosexuality” (37). The pain of being rejected by their families and their ethnic group, and this fight for survival often causes the adolescent to engage in a variety of very risky behaviors (Remafedi 37).

Psychiatric Professionals, Foster Care, and the Justice System

LGBT youth face additional stress when dealing with psychiatric professionals and the justice system. LGBT youth often seek the help of psychiatric professionals who are ill equipped to treat them.
“Several studies have found that a majority of gay youth received professional help for conflicts usually related to their sexual identity. These interventions often worsen conditions for these youth because the therapist or social worker is unwilling to acknowledge or support an adolescent’s homosexual identity. Many gay and lesbian youth are still encouraged to ‘change’ their identities while being forced into therapy and mental hospitals under the guise of ‘treatment’” (Remafedi 21).

Rather than helping the youth that seek them out, many psychiatric professionals inflict further suffering upon them under the guise of help, in an effort to prevent the “spread” of homosexuality (Remafedi 48). According to Youth Pride:

“A 2002 study of recent participants in an ‘ex-gay’ conversion program [run by psychologists] reported that, out of 202 participants, only 8 reported being completely ‘cured.’ Out of those 8, seven were employed by the program as counselors, four of whom were paid. 176 of the participants were classified as ‘failures,’ and of these, 155 reported significant long-term harm, including depression and suicidal thoughts, complete loss of religious faith, and deteriorating relationships with family and friends. 18 of the participants were forced to undergo shock therapy and induced vomiting.”

Poor experiences with psychiatric professionals leave LGBT youth with unresolved inner conflicts, and the continued belief that there is something “wrong” with them. These experiences deepen the lack of trust they have in adults, and leave them with little to no support systems with which to turn.

The justice system and social services, likewise, add to the turmoil of LGBT youth, due in large part to the lack of assistance from federal and local governments (Remafedi 20). “Many programs are unable to address the concerns or affirm the
identity of a gay adolescent. They can be subjected to verbal, physical, and even sexual abuse with little recourse” (Remafedi 20).

As more and more families abandon LGBT youth, the justice system has been inadequate in finding suitable placements for them because many foster homes refuse to take in adolescents of LGBT orientation (Remafedi 20). Studies show that “gay youth stay in detention longer than other youth awaiting [foster] placement because of a lack of appropriate program resources. A New York City study found that 100% of LGBT adolescents in the foster care system faced verbal harassment due to their sexuality, and 70% endured physical assault (National Center for Lesbian Rights). "This abuse is perpetrated not only by youth peers, but also by facility staff and social workers. When the abuse is between peers, it either is condoned by facility staff or goes unchallenged" (National Center for Lesbian Rights).

LGBT youth are also approximately twelve times more likely to face sexual assault in juvenile detention (Casella and Ridgeway 1). Guards and detention staff are often unlikely to stop or report these assaults, believing that the adolescent “was asking for it” (Casella and Ridgeway 1). LGBT youth often find themselves in solitary confinement when their fears of interacting with other youth in facilities prevents them from attending school or other detention programming, further increasing their sense of isolation and desperation (Casella and Ridgeway 1). As detention itself is a source of massive stress due to all forms of abuse inflicted upon
them, many LGBT youth resign themselves to living on the street and fending for themselves (Remafedi 20).

Effects of Emotional Stress on LGBT Adolescents

The causes for emotional stress on LGBT adolescents lead to a variety of effects and risk factors that ultimately culminates in a staggeringly high suicide rate. LGBT adolescents are at high risk of drug and alcohol abuse, social isolation, poor relationships, poor school performance, disease, homelessness, prostitution, chronic depression, and suicide (Youth Pride). Unfortunately the Gay Rights Movement and the increase of openly LGBT adolescents have caused statistics affected by these risk factors to jump as well (Remafedi 45). With the government, families, society, and schools slow to adapt to this growing demographic, more and more LGBT adolescents are finding themselves without support, and turning to dangerous alternatives to ease their stress (Remafedi 45).

Drug and Alcohol Abuse

One of the major ways an LGBT adolescent attempts to cope with his/her stress is through alcohol and drug use (Remafedi 21). Unfortunately because of these attempts to cope, LGBT adolescents are at a much higher risk of abuse and addiction than their heterosexual counterparts (Remafedi 21). Youth Pride reports
that 68% of adolescent gay males and 83% of adolescent lesbians use alcohol, while 44% of adolescent gay males and 56% of lesbians use other drugs. According to Remafedi, approximately 30% of all lesbians and gay men experience alcoholism during their lifetimes (21). States Remafedi:

“Substance abuse often begins in early adolescence when youth first experience conflicts around their sexual orientation. It initially serves the functional purposes of (1) reducing the pain and anxiety of external conflicts and (2) reducing the internal inhibitions of homosexual feelings and behavior. Prolonged substance abuse, however, only contributes to the youth’s problems.”

In addition to the already high risks of substance abuse for LGBT adolescents, Youth Pride reports that LGBT youth who are victims of at-school violence run an even higher risk of alcohol and drug abuse. Unfortunately for LGBT adolescents, if they acquire substance abuse problems they are at a much higher risk of other problems, such as chronic depression and suicide (Remafedi 21).

Social Isolation and Poor Relationships

Because of a lack of family and peer support, many LGBT youth are prone to social isolation and poor relationships. According to Grossman and Kerner, “They have no one to talk to and feel alone in many social contexts. These experiences often lead to having a limited number of friends and feelings of loneliness” (28). In fact, a Hetrick-Martin institute survey concluded that “80% of gay and bisexual youth report severe problems with cognitive, social, or emotional isolation” (Youth
Pride). Additionally, for adolescents in rural areas where there is little visibility of LGBT communities, feelings of isolation are often far greater (Remafedi 165).

These feelings of isolation and the desperation to find someone with whom they can relate often leads LGBT adolescents to form delusional and unhealthy relationships within their own peerage (Remafedi 50).

“Gay and lesbian youth develop intimate relationships at a later age than other youth and are unable to develop relationship skills in the manner of other adolescents. Their first romances are an emotionally turbulent trial-and-error process that resembles a second adolescence. Gay youth bring to these relationships extreme dependency needs resulting from the deprivation experienced in their relationships with family or peers. They also are still in the process of forming their identity and have unresolved issues of guilt and poor self-esteem. When conflicts arise in homosexual relationships, there are few social supports available to assist them. This is compounded for gay youth by their frequent need for secrecy and the fact that they may not be open about their identity with family and friends” (Remafedi 51).

The need for LGBT youth to discover in others the affection and acceptance that they do not receive from family and friends leads to delusional and unhealthy relationships and deeply unhealthy responses to the ending of these relationships (Remafedi 51). The loss of relationships compounds their already strong feelings of isolation and depression, and adds to suicidal thoughts and actions (Remafedi 51).
Poor School Performance

Due to the threat of verbal and physical harassment and the lack of supportive teachers and adults at school, LGBT students are prone to poor academic performance and attendance (GLSEN). GLSEN found that LGBT students who report being harassed in school have grade point averages nearly half a grade lower than other students (2.7 vs. 3.1). 30.0% of students report missing class once per month out of concerns for their own safety, over three times that of their heterosexual counterparts (GLSEN). In addition, 13.4% of students who report being harassed at school based on their sexual orientation say they do not intend to attend college (Youth Pride). The poor academic statistics exhibited by LGBT students negatively affect their future goals and development into adulthood (Youth Pride).

Homelessness, Prostitution, and Disease

LGBT youth are at a much greater risk of homelessness, prostitution, and disease than their heterosexual counterparts (Herdt 135-191; Remafedi 22, 53; Youth Pride).

“Gay male, lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual youth comprise as many as 25 percent of all youth living on the streets in this country. Without an adequate education or vocational training, many are forced to become involved in prostitution in order to survive. They face physical and sexual assaults on a daily basis and constant exposure to sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS” (Remafedi 22).
With 26% of LGBT youth forced to leave their homes because of rejection or conflicts within their families (Youth Pride), and with very few options available to them within the foster home placement system, LGBT youth often find themselves living on the street and engaging in prostitution in order to survive (Remafedi 22).

Herdt reports that the average age at which gay male adolescents begin prostituting themselves is fourteen, and that most begin because of traumatic situations at home (134-135). They become involved in prostitution both as a means of finding comfort and security in another human being, and to acquire their survival needs (Herdt 136). “Their relationships are transitory and untrustworthy,” states Remafedi (22). These situations offer little to no support for LGBT youth, and they can become attached to individuals who either do not care about them, or will cause them harm (Remafedi 22).

Prostitution among LGBT youth, particularly gay males, puts them at a far higher risk of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and AIDS, whether due to lack of knowledge about safe sex practices, or because they simply do not care (Remafedi 53). Remafedi reports that 45% of adolescent gay males he interviewed had a history of STDs.

“Those who are at greatest risk may be those who simply do not care whether they are exposed to the virus. They are more prone to a self-destructive behavior because of the severity of the problems they have experienced throughout their lives and specifically in relation to their sexual orientation. Contracting AIDS becomes for them the fulfillment of a life of pain and suffering they no longer want to cope with. They feel that they deserve to die” (Remafedi 53).
Whether they are forced out of their homes, or whether they choose to leave because of conflicts related to their sexual orientation, homelessness poses extremely harmful and potentially fatal consequences for LGBT adolescents, particularly in relation to prostitution and disease (Remafedi 53).

Chronic Depression and Suicide

The vast numbers of causes and effects of stress on LGBT adolescents often leads to chronic depression and thoughts of suicide, with significant numbers of these adolescents actually attempting suicide (Remafedi 15). LGBT youth are four to five times more likely to suffer from depression than their heterosexual counterparts (Youth Pride), and a Youth Pride survey in 1998 found that 83% of all LGBT youth considered themselves to be depressed (Youth Pride).

This depression often manifests itself in thoughts of suicide, and often in suicide attempts (Remafedi 15). Studies show the following statistics:

- LGBT youth are 2 to 3 times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual counterparts (Youth Pride).
- “As many as 1 in 3 gay and lesbian youth have attempted suicide” (Youth Pride).
- “Suicide is the leading cause of death among gay male, lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual youth” (Remafedi 16).
- LGBT youth comprise approximately 30% of annual youth suicides (Remafedi 13).
These suicidal feelings have a reciprocal relationship with the other above listed risk factors, and until recently there was little to no effort put into funding or programming to prevent suicide or other risk factors for LGBT adolescents (Remafedi, 13).
CHAPTER III

PROVEN METHODS TO IMPROVE THE DEVELOPMENT OF ADOLESCENTS

While little information exists regarding proven methods of combating stress on LGBT youth, there is research detailing the methods proven to alleviate stress on adolescents in general. Much of this research supports the theory that the arts can have a positive effect on the lives of adolescents. These effects include collaboration with and understanding of peers, forming support groups, setting and achieving goals, and finding and relating to adult role models. Theatre also provides students with positive means of dealing with and healing from frustrations and disappointments through expression, experiencing pride in accomplishments, and learning about and celebrating one’s own culture (Larson and Brown 1083-1089; Marsiglia, Francisco, and Witt 1-8). Research that does exist as to how to combat stress in specifically LGBT youth point to support groups, finding peers with whom to relate, and the presence of supportive adult role models (Grossman and Kerner 27-44, Remafedi 13). An LGBT adolescent who is fortunate to find these support groups, peers, and positive adult role models can often prosper despite the risks associated with their demographic.
Organized Youth Programs

Studies have shown that adolescents who engage in group activities report higher levels of emotional development, formation and achievement of goals, self-affirmation, psychological engagement, and connections with peers and adults. According to Dawes and Larson, “Organized youth programs, including community programs and school-based extracurricular activities, are contexts that can provide important developmental benefits for adolescents” (1). When an adolescent is involved with a meaningful activity, sets goals, and works hard to achieve them, he/she experiences a high level of self-affirmation, which in turn motivates them to pursue new challenges in the future. States Dawes and Larson, “Many of the diverse developmental benefits that youth programs afford come not from the products of their work but from the learning that occurs from the challenges and outcomes of their projects” (9).

Larson and Brown also state that youth programs are beneficial to youth because they provide for peer collaboration and positive adult leadership (1085). “Youth programs may provide a collaborative context in which youth learn about managing the dynamics of emotions at the levels of self, other, and group” (Larson and Brown 1085). The role of adults in organized youth programs can also have a positive impact on adolescents.

“In youth programs, the adult leaders help shape the program culture in ways that may influence adolescents’ emotional development. Leaders
may also influence youth development through modeling, coaching, and providing support” (Larson and Brown 1085).

**Support Groups**

Research studies suggest that support groups have a positive effect on combating the stress LGBT adolescents feel due to their sexual orientation. One of the major struggles that afflict LGBT adolescents is the feeling of isolation and a lack of friendships (Grossman and Kerner 28). States Grossman and Kerner,

“Gay male and lesbian youth need connect with peers to reassure them that they will not be alone and alienated and that they can enjoy their sexuality; and this will help them to develop a positive feeling about being gay or lesbian” (42).

Support groups provide safe places for LGBT youth to vent frustrations and explore their sexuality in a context that does not demean who they are. They give LGBT youth the opportunity to connect with other adolescents who are experiencing the same problems and face the same risks (Grossman and Kerner 43).

Support groups of LGBT adolescents also offer the opportunity for honesty that they do not often get within other family and social contexts. “It appears that the strongest social support occurs when an open and honest relationship exists between gay and lesbian young people and the members of their support networks” (Grossman and Kerner 44).
Additionally, support groups often offer the guidance and sense of belonging LGBT youth are missing from their families and teachers. “These groups and friends give youth people a sense of belonging, and opportunities to explore emerging identities and to share decision-making related to their personal affairs in the absence of adults” (Grossman and Kerner 44).

Unfortunately few LGBT support groups exist in schools at this time, and students often do not know where to look outside of their schools for support networks (Remafedi 165). States one teen,

“I think if I was made more aware of support groups for young gay and lesbian people—I really had no idea at all of any support groups—and if people were a lot more compassionate, then I think that things may have been different, and perhaps I could have led a more normal life” (qtd. in Remafedi 167).

If support networks can be found, however, they can profoundly alter the experience of adolescence for LGBT youth, while also decreasing the risk factors associated with their demographic. “Referring gay male and lesbian youth to support groups for friendships may have a place in the prevention of problems” (Grossman and Kerner 43).
Positive Adult Role Models

Crucial to positive development in LGBT youth are the presence of positive adult role models who allow them to grow in a supportive atmosphere. The lack of support LGBT adolescents often find from parents and teachers leaves an emotional void that hinders their development and leads to prominent risk factors (Remafedi 172). Organized youth programs, supportive teachers, and support groups can provide LGBT youth with an alternative adult role model to offer support and guidance (Larson and Brown 1083-1099, Remafedi 172). States one student about his experience with a supportive school advisor:

“I was constantly denying the feelings I had for other guys. In the process of hiding these feelings, I repressed all emotions. Concord Academy changed all this. It was the first place I encountered that was even slightly gay-positive. When I arrived, an openly gay faculty member was assigned to be my advisor. Through him, I learned that being gay is not the horrible and disgusting thing society makes it out to be, but instead, a normal and natural part of me” (qtd. in Remafedi 173).

Openness and communication are key components of a positive relationship between adult role models and LGBT youth, and can benefit the emotional development of adolescents. While discussing their 2007 study of a high school theatre program, Larson and Brown state:

“We suspect that adults rarely communicate with adolescents on this kind of open and equal basis, and that [reports] of emotional learning stemmed from the adults creating conditions in which strong feelings were acknowledged,
expressed, and made part of the daily vernacular. [The adults] cultivated a culture that provided tools—ways of thinking, feeling, and acting—that youth drew on to learn from emotional experiences. They helped shape a predictable environment, a matrix of experiences, in which youth could see that positive emotions were helpful and negative emotions can be dealt with in constructive ways” (1095).

Adults are essential to an adolescent’s understanding of who they are. Through adults, adolescents learn what types of behavior, attitudes, and conduct are acceptable, and experiences with positive role models who are supportive of LGBT youth highly impact the way they see themselves and the way they manage their stress (Remafedi 172).

Theatre and the Performing Arts

Studies show that the performing arts can be highly beneficial to the positive development of adolescents. Performing arts give adolescents the opportunity to reconnect and gain trust within themselves, and with their peers, and adults (Marsiglia, Francisco, and Witt 1). They also provide adolescents with an opportunity to understand and control their emotions in a positive way, while experiencing the joy of artistic expression, and finding productive means of dealing with disappointment (Larson and Brown 1083-1099). Additionally, the performing arts provide youth with a means of expressing the trauma of adolescence, achieving catharsis, and encouraging them to find healthy alternatives to drugs, alcohol, and other destructive coping mechanisms (Trust: Second Acts in Young Lives). Lastly,
the performing arts give adolescents the opportunity to engage in their communities
and be part of social impact, instilling in them pride and the idea that what they do
is an important part of the greater good (Trust: Second Acts in Young Lives). For
many adolescents, the performing arts can be the difference between a life of
disappointment and isolation and the possibilities for a better future.

The Social Work with Groups and the Performing Arts Model

Marsiglia, Francisco, and Witt created the Social Work with Groups and the
Performing Arts in Schools (SWGPA) in an effort to “provide children and youths
with opportunities to constructively connect or reconnect with themselves, their
peers, and their elders” (1).

“Students realize that they have some ownership over their lives and that
they can together work toward creating a new reality for themselves.
Interventions guided by this approach assist students in becoming better
dreamers. To learn to dream better and to create better realities strengthens
the student’s sense of self. The performing arts are a tool for individual and
collective discovery and celebration” (Marsiglia, Francisco, and Witt 1-2).

Using this tool, a medium of performing arts is introduced as a way to communicate
and express emotions, fears, disappointments, and hopes. The SWGPA model
“exposed the student to movement, exploration, and problem-solving situations”
(Marsiglia, Francisco, and Witt 2).
The SWGPA model also assists adolescents in forming relationships and trust within group situations. “Students can interact in the group using means of self-expression that go beyond verbal communication” (Marsiglia, Francisco, and Witt 2). Using modern dance as a medium, for example, students who have negative experiences in school are encouraged to share their experiences with the group, where they can be used to form new choreography. Youth are thereby encouraged to take control of these negative experiences and work through them within a group (Marsiglia, Francisco, and Witt 2).

This encouragement through the performing arts allows students to heal from unpleasant experiences in ways they had not previously attempted. Through the creation and performance of art, and by learning from a group of supportive peers, students are free to express their innermost disappointments, and to explore different ways of overcoming them (Marsiglia, Francisco, and Witt 4).

“Performing art forms were used to inspire, motivate, and heal. Students began to express emotionally laden topics, which they often acted out in negative ways, in a different form and forum. The students created their own stage where they processed situations and issues that were of real significance to them. They gained from each other by building on each other’s experiences, problems, points of view, strengths, and weaknesses ... The group workers used knowledge, skills, and self-awareness to help each other” (Marsiglia, Francisco, and Witt 2).

The SWGPA model also offered students the chance to experience joy and exhilaration through the achievements of their own individual and group goals. The study points to the experiences of a young African American student who was
overweight and had behavior problems in school. After joining a dance group, he practiced for six months, which resulted in a standing ovation at a school talent show. Dance lessened the feelings of isolation he experienced, and he began to accept himself and make friends more easily (Marsiglia, Francisco, and Witt 6).

Marsiglia, Francisco, and Witt maintain that the SWGPA model is an effective way for students to manage stress inflicted upon their lives (1-8). Through performing arts, students are able to assess problems, work through them in a supportive group setting, and heal and let go of problems. Students are then capable of experiencing joy and setting future goals (Marsiglia, Francisco, and Witt 6).

Larson and Brown

Further promoting the use of performing arts in adolescent development is a study done by Reed W. Larson and Jane R. Brown, which sought to research the effects of a high school theater program on the emotional development of its participants. State Larson and Brown, "Adolescents experience wide fluctuations in their daily emotional states, and learning to manage these emotions is vital to their eventual effectiveness and well-being in adult work, and other roles" (1083). The study maintains that the structure of an organized youth program, and the "expressive nature of drama" can assist youth in setting and achieving goals, managing negative emotions, working as a group, relating to adults, experiencing the satisfaction of achievement, and giving back to the community (Larson and Brown 1085-1087).
Larson and Brown found that the platform of high school theatre promoted group openness and goal orientation, similar to that of a family to a young child. “This culture of high expectations, openness to emotions, and support resembles the features of families that facilitate positive emotional development in young children” (Larson and Brown 1088). As youth are encouraged to be open and honest with themselves, so they become open and honest with their peers, and an atmosphere of acceptance ensues (Larson and Brown 1088).

The nature of a high school theater also provide students with the opportunity to experience negative emotions in a supportive setting, and to work through them for the betterment of the group. As students auditioned for roles and did not receive the roles they had hoped, students are encouraged by their teacher to explore their feelings of disappointment, and to express them if they chose, and then to focus on the production as a whole (Larson and Brown 1089). Students began to engage in the roles they were given, and feelings of disappointment began to dissipate (Larson and Brown 1089). In this way, students learn that disappointments are often part of life, but that they are manageable with perspective, and should not effect how they live their lives in totality.

Students in the high school theater program also learned that negative emotions were often as important as positive ones when reflecting on a process or experience (Larson and Brown 1091). Once their goals had been achieved, students could reflect on their experience as a whole, and realize that the negative emotions provided a further sense of “look how far we’ve come” (Larson and Brown 1091).
Students were then able to turn their negative emotions into positive learning experiences, which heightened their confidence (Larson and Brown 1091).

Finally, the study of high school theater led Larson and Brown to strongly advocate the presence of an understanding, supportive adult role model who allows students to express emotions, negative or positive, and to learn from them while setting and achieving goals (1095-1097). The presence of this type of adult role model in the theater program allowed for maximum learning, achievement, and development.

“The ethos cultivated by the leaders ... and shared by youth helped ensure that positive emotions were encouraged, anger was diffused, and egotistical pride contained, thus creating an emotionally positive and safe environment, conditions ... important for favorable emotional learning” (Larson and Brown 1096).

Adult role models in the high school theater program were essential to providing an optimum developmental experience for students. This theory promotes the idea that an adult role model in adolescent theatre needs to be more than that of “director”. Adults in this capacity must be seen as they were in Larson and Brown’s study, as supporters and educators. “They promoted high standards for the youth’s work, they modeled positive emotional management and coached the students in care, respect, and openness to emotions in themselves and each other “ (Larson and Brown 1097).
Philip Zwerling and Augusto Boal

In his 2008 book, “After-School Theatre Programs For At-Risk Teenagers,” Philip Zwerling examines the Augusto Boal model of “Theatre of the Oppressed,” and how it can positively effect the development of at-risk adolescents. Augusto Boal (1931-2009) was a Brazilian theatre director who sought to bring theatre to oppressed people during South American revolutions, and to use it to help them process and heal from their oppression (Zwerling 72). He created a unique theatrical style called “Theatre of the Oppressed,” which revolutionized the relationship between actors and spectators in an effort to achieve catharsis for participants (Zwerling 77). Zwerling then used this model to form an argument in favor of using theatre to achieve catharsis within at-risk teenagers (Zwerling 165).

In his work “The Republic,” the Greek philosopher Plato stated that theatre should be banned from an ideal society because it stimulated dangerous and powerful emotions within the audience (Zwerling 155). Aristotle, his student, agreed that theatre inspired emotions within the audience, but believed that it also promoted social harmony (Zwerling 155). He believed that by allowing the audience to experience them, the emotions are then eradicated from the audience, and he/she is left with a sense of peace (Zwerling 155). Author Bertold Brecht later condemned this thinking, believing it to be an attempt to quiet the “disenfranchised” (Zwerling 155). Regardless of the thought, the idea that theatre inspires catharsis has been around since Ancient Greece.
Boal’s model was to rotate the roles of actors and spectators into what he refers to as “spect/actors” (Zwerling 163). Spectators are invited to take part in a dramatic production, becoming actors, and changing the outcome of the work in an effort to reach catharsis both within the work, and then later in his/her own life (Zwerling 163). Spect/actors could play a meaningful role in shaping work on stage that affected their lives off stage (Zwerling 163). For instance, a woman who is considering leaving her family could take part in a dramatic interpretation of this scenario, and could examine different actions of the character in the play, thus influencing her decision in real life.

“The old model of catharsis rested upon the idea that actors on stage did something to the emotions of the spectators and that this affect moved in one direction, from stage to audience, only. Boal felt this monologue was oppressive and needed to be replaced with a dialogue of equals. And so actors become spectators, spectators become actors, and all shared equally and democratically in making the drama and solving the problem” (Zwerling 163).

Zwerling’s research of Boal led him to believe that this model could positively affect at-risk teenagers as it had other oppressed groups. States Zwerling, “Teens have a highly developed sense of themselves as oppressed. Their very psycho-emotional developmental stage defines them as rebels pushing against the limits placed upon them” (165). Adults, fearing the outcomes of the rebelliousness of teenagers, often react by imposing stricter rules and harsher penalties, which is often ineffective, and can lead many teenagers to rebel even further (Zwerling 165). “Boal, with his emphasis upon freedom rather than repression, dialogue rather than
monologue, and a method that is both means and goal, has a program that works where others have failed” (Zwerling 165).

Zwerling states that theatre is a highly effective means of positively shaping the development of adolescents because it evokes transformative learning, rather than mimetic (166). In school, students are subjected to mimetic learning, where they are expected to learn memorized material from a professor, and where the professor has all the power and the student has none (Zwerling 166). “Education becomes limitation and the highest value becomes conformity” (Zwerling 166). Fewer than five minutes of class time on average involves discussion, and less than 1% of questions asked by teachers require more than a memorized answer (Zwerling 174). Theatre, on the other hand, and Theatre of the Oppressed in particular, promotes transformative learning. This process allows the student to choose the type of learning that works best for him/her, and to become an active participant in the shaping of his/her education (Zwerling 166).

Further promoting his theory, Zwerling cites theatre historian, Nellie McCaslin: “Of all the arts, drama is the most inclusive, for it involves the participant mentally, emotionally, physically, verbally, and socially” (169). Zwerling notes that this is hugely important to adolescents, who “have been rendered passive spectators by [technology], and treated as passive consumers of education by the school system” (169).
Through his study of three theatre programs aimed at at-risk teenagers, Zwerling found that there is a statistical correlation between theatre and the decrease of destructive behaviors associated with at-risk youth, as noted in the following figure:

Table 3.1
Risk Factors of At-Risk Theater Students vs. Non-Theater Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk Factor</th>
<th>National Average</th>
<th>Theatre Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sexually Active</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pregnancy Rate</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drinking Alcohol</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Illegal Drugs</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Suspension Rate</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Dropout Rate</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involved in some form of violence over the past 6 months</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gang Membership</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Provided by Zwerling (152)

Zwerling’s statistics show evidence that students involved in theatre are less likely to engage in every risk factor listed. In particular, Zwerling believes that theatre is “so far the only proven effective strategy for lessening teen violence” (171).
Zwerling believes that theatre is a medium in which students can act out and role-play situations and frustrations in their own lives, experience freedoms from their struggles, and formulate ways of acting out the scenes within their real lives, thereby achieving catharsis (Zwerling 171). Through the methods of Augusto Boal, theatre “creates an environment where teens are empowered to share, consider, and solve their own real-life problems and where cathartic changes of attitude and behavior can occur” (Zwerling 174).

The Albany Park Theater Project

In a 2010 documentary film Trust: Second Acts in Young Lives, director Nancy Kelly explores the inner workings of the Albany Park Theater Project (APTP), a theater devoted to assisting the development of underserved adolescents ages 13-19 in Chicago, Illinois. Artistic Director and Co-Founder, David Feiner, works with a group of adolescents, writing and producing plays based on the lives of the students, in an effort to help them gain skills to manage and heal wounds inflicted upon them (Trust: Second Acts in Young Lives). The film focuses primarily on the experiences of Marlin, an 18-year old immigrant from Honduras, and her quest to achieve catharsis through the telling of her story.

Marlin is a young Honduran immigrant who has been sexually assaulted several times in her life by those closest to her. Marlin turns to alcohol and drugs to dull the pain inflicted upon her by those closest to her, and eventually begins
mutilating herself. When she finally seeks the help of a psychiatric professional, the psychiatrist recommends that she be placed in a mental hospital, and Marlin spends the next years of her life in an out of hospitals, further damaging her sense of self and her trust in those around her. Marlin finally attends a rehabilitation facility, where a counselor refers her to APTP, believing that telling her story might help her to heal (Trust: Second Acts in Young Lives).

Marlin finds at APTP a community where she fits in, and adults who care for her. “For the first time I really felt like somebody cared about me” (qtd. in Trust: Second Acts in Young Lives). APTP provided Marlin, and hundreds of other adolescents, with a safe place where she could be supported and begin to heal. The students’ pain is acknowledged, and they understand that the APTP staff wants to help them in any way they can (Trust: Second Acts in Young Lives).

APTP’s primary means of helping their students is by providing them with a community, and by helping them achieve the goal of mounting new plays based on their own lives. “Since 1997, APTP has created over fifty plays based on the lives of company members and people in Chicago,” states Feiner (qtd. in Trust: Second Acts in Young Lives). Through exercises that encourage the students to explore who they are in a supportive group setting, they begin to open up and tell stories about who they are and where they have come from (Trust: Second Acts in Young Lives). This program, whether consciously or unconsciously, is reminiscent of Boal’s Theatre for the Oppressed, and the quest for catharsis for its spect/actors. Through APTP,
Marlin’s story was discovered, and with her permission, mounted as a play performed by her peers (Trust: Second Acts in Young Lives).

The act of Marlin telling her story and allowing it to be used as a play performed by her peers was an exercise in trust for all of the students. For Marlin, she was trusting that the students would not use her life as a subject for jokes and ridicule (Trust: Second Acts in Young Lives).

“Did I do the right thing? I don’t know whether to trust them or not. But this is real. This is my life. Why should I be scared of telling it? If I can help people who are the same way as me why not do it? So I just did it and I felt so much better” (qt. in Trust: Second Acts in Young Lives).

Marlin discovered that the act of telling her story and trusting her peers benefited her rather than hurting her, which in turn inspired other students. Said Stephany, who was cast as “Nelly,” Marlin’s onscreen persona, “It made me feel good, too, that she trusted us to tell her story” (qtd. in Trust: Second Acts in Young Lives). “The factor of how successful this is, is how open people are willing to be,” said Feiner (qtd. in Trust: Second Acts in Young Lives). Students felt not only trust from Marlin, but a responsibility to bring her story to the world in a way that could shed light on the problems faced by Marlin and others like her (Trust: Second Acts in Young Lives).

When casting the play, the staff at APTP never cast the students who the stories are based on as themselves. They do not want the student to have to relive the events again onstage, and instead feel that by purging him/her of the events, and
by giving it over to the work, they do not have to carry it around as much, and can more easily heal (Trust: Second Acts in Young Lives). Marlin is thus cast as a friend of “Nelly,” and can concentrate more on her role and the play as a whole, rather than being focused on reliving the events of her past (Trust: Second Acts in Young Lives).

Feiner and his staff believe that through performing the plays of their peers, students begin to address issues in their own lives, and formulate positive ways of dealing with them (Trust: Second Acts in Young Lives). Said APTP student, Jacilin, “I've been through some of the stuff [Marlin’s] been through, so when I hear it out loud it gets to me,” (Trust: Second Acts in Young Lives). Jacilin is encouraged to work through her own issues within the group and onstage, and can begin to heal herself. Jose, who is cast as “Nelly’s” brother, and must symbolically assault her onstage, faces the rape of his sister for the first time. Being a big brother in real life, he must process the idea that his sister was hurt in the same way that “Nelly” was hurt, and can discuss in a supportive setting how difficult this is for him (Trust: Second Acts in Young Lives). Feiner rewards his exploration and openness by instilling trust in Jose, and by giving Jose the confidence he needs to perform the role (Trust: Second Acts in Young Lives). By participating in the telling of Marlin’s story, each of the students is able to achieve catharsis within their own lives.

Regardless of the story being told, students at APTP experience positive results due to their involvement. Stephany noted that after seeing her performance, her parents, who usually pay her little attention and give her no understanding, looked at her in a different, more positive way (Trust: Second Acts in Young Lives).
APTP students often find that daily tasks and responsibilities are more manageable, and that because of it their lives have more purpose and hope. Says Jose, “I used to be a lousy student. I didn’t like school. But now I’m like, you can do this. You can graduate. You can be whatever you want” (qtd. in Trust: Second Acts in Young Lives).

For Marlin, the experience of APTP benefitted her life in nearly every way. She was able to find solace in a home without abuse, stay clean and sober, stop mutilating her body, achieve catharsis, and connect with peers and adults who cared about her as a person, and who did not see her as simply a victim (Trust: Second Acts in Young Lives). “All my whole life I’ve felt like I don’t fit in. And this is a way of starting a new life. And a healthy way, with kids who see you as, like, a role model. But underneath I’m just one of them. Another kid playing around” (Trust: Second Acts in Young Lives). Marlin stopped seeing herself as “Nelly,” and began to learn that there is more to her than her past, and she began exploring the things she liked about herself.

Through the encouragement and support provided by the adults at APTP, students find positive ways of managing the difficulties and trauma they face in their everyday lives. They find peers with whom they can connect, and alternatives to isolation, loneliness, and destructive behavior. Mostly they experience a sense of control in the events of their lives, and work towards a more positive future for themselves (Trust: Second Acts in Young Lives).
CHAPTER IV

LGBT YOUTH THEATRE PROGRAMS

Throughout my research I discovered several programs whose sole mission is to foster the development of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered adolescents. True Colors: Out Youth Theater in Boston, Massachusetts; About Face Youth Theatre in Chicago, Illinois; Pride Players in Omaha, Nebraska; Proud Theater in Madison, Wisconsin; and QSpeak in Phoenix, Arizona are LGBT-centered youth theatre programs dedicated to the betterment of the lives of their participants. As with the Albany Park Theater Project, each of these theatre programs utilizes a Boal-esque approach towards achieving catharsis for their participants. The students are the authors of the works the groups perform, with each of the groups reporting that the act of expressing their thoughts and feelings aids in positive development for the students.

Each of the theatre programs also allow their students to play an active role in the leadership process of the organization, with little to no hierarchy placed on them by adults. The idea is to allow students to take responsibility for their work, and to be active participants in the success of the organization. Students in each
organization are encouraged to be open and honest about their experiences, both in the program and in their daily lives.

Regardless of the methods used, each organization reports the need for their students to find positive ways to express their emotions and frustrations, and to work out constructive ways to react to them. Providing leadership opportunities, setting expectations, achieving goals, and allowing them to see the possibilities in their futures, are also key similarities of each organization. Adult leaders of each program recognize the need for LGBT students to have a voice within their community, and to impact change on a social level, thus making them more active and socially conscious adults.

True Colors: OUT Youth Theater

True Colors: OUT Youth Theater is the youth education and outreach arm of The Theater Offensive, an LGBT theater in Boston, Massachusetts. It began when Massachusetts Governor, William Weld, established the Safe Schools program in 1993 (Bazo 14-15). The program was instituted to combat suicide and violence against LGBT youth, distributing state funding to schools and programming for the purposes of training and forming support groups (Bazo 14-15). The Theatre Offensive was approached by Jeff Perrotti, the director of Safe Schools, who felt that an artistic component might be valuable to the program (Bazo 15-16). Thus, True Colors was born. Today, True Colors still receives funding from the Safe Schools
program, with additional funds received from private grants, individual contributions, and income from touring productions and ticket sales (Social Innovator). States their website:

“True Colors leverages the power of theater to eradicate isolation and fear caused by bigotry and discrimination. True Colors creates a safe haven where lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth and their straight allies are supported and challenged to engage fully in their own personal, social, and artistic development” (True Colors).

It was important to The Theatre Offensive that, rather than using the program to educate adults, the program be primarily centered on LGBT youth (Bazo 16). For this reason, True Colors began using stories written by their student participants as the works they performed, the process that is still used today (Bazo 16). They also sought to create a “safe space” for students to exist, while discovering their identities, forming relationships within their own peer group, and gaining a sense of responsibility (Bazo 17).

In his graduate thesis, Nicholas Bazo studied True Colors: OUT Youth Theater in its Fall 2008 program, and has since been named its Director. True Colors is an auditioned, paid group of students, aged 14-22, who participate in three sessions (Fall, Spring, and Summer), creating original work that is toured and performed in local schools and for other organizations, culminating in a final staged production for the public. Its 2008 fall session featured fourteen troupe members from many different ethnic backgrounds (Bazo 39). They represented members who identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and genderqueer (those who do not
specifically identify with either gender). They were comprised of youth who had been involved with True Colors before, and new members, many of whom had no theatre experience (Bazo 39). Many of True Colors’ participants are either homeless or in foster care, and several are affiliated with the Department of Social Services, and/or the Department of Mental Health (The Theater Offensive).

The Director and two interns oversee and collaborate with students during the entire process. True Colors is a collaborative program, where youth are encouraged to play an active part in the daily structuring of activities, and the process of selecting and writing work to be performed (Bazo 36). The belief is that this will engage youth more in the program, and deepen their sense of achievement and responsibility (Bazo 36). Two peer leaders are selected from the troupe, and are given added responsibilities to assist in the touring process (Bazo 35). Because True Colors does not have a social worker on staff, when issues are brought to the attention of adults that might require further counseling, adults provide proper assistance in finding professionals who are equipped to help the students with their needs (Bazo 43).

The program begins with team-building and sharing exercises to build a sense of trust and openness within the group (Bazo 41-42). The Director and interns participate in these exercises so that youth feel they are seen as equals, and also to represent positive adult LGBT role models for students to emulate (Bazo 49). Students are encouraged to view these exercises as safe places to vent the emotions, frustrations, and situations that they may not be able to share anywhere else (Bazo
50). Students with personal issues can vent them to peers and supportive adults, and seek out ways of dealing with them in a positive way.

Within these sharing exercises, and in the writing sessions that follow, students begin to formulate stories and scenes that they can submit for scene selection. “Because the final performance typically comprises itself of an assortment of scenes and monologues connected by a specific scene, the youth know that there is space to include individual work” (Bazo 57). Bazo tells the story of TC, who utilized these sessions to form an individual monologue about his HIV status, something he was very wary about sharing with an audience. With the support and encouragement of his peers, TC agreed to submit his monologue, which was chosen, and became a central part of the final performance (Bazo 109). “From a perspective of mental well-being, personal storytelling assists in strengthening the state of mind because of self-reflection and personal revelation” (Bazo 61). The process of storytelling offers students the opportunity to heal from their trauma by giving voice to their feelings, and by allowing them to be heard in a supportive, non-judgmental atmosphere.

Once scenes are submitted and selected, troupe members begin creating staging for the scenes. Improvisation is heavily used during this process, both as a means of constructing the scenes, and as a way of training the actors, many of whom have received no prior training (Bazo 64). The scenes are then structured, and developed into a cohesive production (Bazo 68). This process evokes Zwerling and Boal, in that it allows students to be both actor and spectator (spect/actor) in an
effort to work through situations within the scenes, and then in their own lives, thus achieving catharsis. “They see themselves as agents of change” (Bazo 71). For instance, one student expressed frustration that he was treated poorly by store workers when he wanted to try on women’s clothing. The students constructed a scene around this frustration, and then acted out several outcomes, finally settling on the one they found most effective. The frustrated student then had a better understanding of how he could manage this scenario in real life (Bazo 71).

Once a production is put together, the majority of True Colors’ performances take place on tour, either in area high schools or other community venues (Bazo 98). Youth are entrusted by the Director to arrive on time to all meeting places, and to conduct themselves professionally at all venues (Bazo 99). If students drop out of True Colors at all, it is usually during this period, as teachers and family members often will not support the student and the time commitments involved. The Director will do his/her best to diffuse this situation, but during Bazo’s study unfortunately four students were forced to drop out (Bazo 100).

The high schools and organizations True Colors tour most often contact the True Colors office to arrange a performance. Of the organizations visited, The Department of Children and Families (DCF) is a frequent stop. This is in part because many of True Colors’ troupe members fall under DCF guardianship, as well as many other LGBT adolescents (Bazo 108). Through the performance and the talkback following, it is hoped that DCF workers will gain a better understanding of
the plight of LGBT youth, and will know more about how to work with them in the future (Bazo 108).

The majority of sites visited by the True Colors troupe are high schools, however, whether they perform for an assembly or a particular group (Bazo 111). Troupe members often face challenges within these performances and talkbacks, particularly from other students. They see it as a way to reach a multitude of demographics, however, and to affect social change at the high school level (Bazo 116). It is also one of the few times in a high school setting where the students can be open and honest about who they are without fear, and most find it a liberating and cathartic situation (Bazo 116).

A final performance for family, friends, and the public closes the season, after which reflective sessions and evaluations take place. Students are encouraged, both in private sessions and as a group, to be open and honest about their experiences, and to express goals for the future (Bazo 123). Adults assist them in exploring ways to achieve these goals, whether it is finding acting classes for those who wish to pursue acting, or writing recommendations and helping to find scholarships for those who wish to attend college (Bazo 125). In this way, students remain convinced that their wellbeing is important to the staff, regardless of whether they remain at True Colors.

True Colors has created an effective model for enriching the lives of LGBT youth, and for achieving positive results in their development. In figure 4.1, True
Colors presents the results of evaluations measuring the social impact on participants from 2005-2008.

Table 4.1
Assessment of Participant Evaluations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Impact Indicator</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Improved public speaking skills</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved leadership skills</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased desire for social justice</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continued participation in the arts</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased community involvement</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With the exception of two percentages in 2006, True Colors’ has increased the social impact of its participants every year in every category. While there is no data to suggest True Colors has decreased the risk factors associated with LGBT adolescence, it is clear that it has made sizable change in the social impact of its participants.

Using techniques described by Boal and Zwerling, True Colors provides LGBT youth with a unique opportunity to set and achieve group goals within a network of supportive peers and adults, discover a profound sense of identity, and to work towards affecting social change. They are allowed to give voice to their frustrations and disappointments, discover and explore ways of managing their stress and
situations, and thus find catharsis within the process of creating and performing their own stories.

About Face Youth Theatre

About Face Youth Theatre (AFYT) is a program for LGBT youth and their straight allies, ages 14-20, in Chicago, Illinois. Like True Colors, it is the youth education and outreach program for a theatre company that traditionally focuses on LGBT work, in this case the About Face Theatre (About Face Theatre). According to their website:

“About Face Youth Theatre was created as a safe space for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning young people to tell their stories and create community. The exclusion of queer history and dialogue from schools, and the consistent discrimination and violence suffered by queer youth in our school system are the most immediate problems About Face Youth Theatre addresses with our multi-tiered programming.”

AFYT's programming includes their “Saturday Queer Theatre Ensemble,” which are six-week workshops throughout the school year, and their Summer Intensive Workshop, both of which allow students to form and perform skits and full productions based on their own stories (About Face Theatre). AFYT also tours three productions to local high schools and organizations aimed at affecting change within the community (About Face Theatre).
In a 2005 article, Erica Rosenfeld Halverson studied the relationship between theatre and the development of the LGBT adolescents at AFYT. She particularly studied the workshops offered by AFYT, and the results of the storytelling and performing on the students.

Halverson found that the process of writing stories “demonstrate[s] the ways that youth address the psychological, personal, and social dimensions into a coherent presentation of self” (75). Story prompts allow students to address the challenges they face as LGBT youth, and to form internal and external ideas of who they are as individuals. By examining the way they are viewed by others, students gain a broader knowledge of how they view themselves, and can thus identify many of the problems they have not been able to face previously (Halverson 78). An example of the story prompts utilized is shown in the following table:
Table 4.2

About Face Youth Theatre Story Prompt Exercise

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Tell A Story of a Time When...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination</td>
<td>You felt discriminated against within a community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiding</td>
<td>You or someone you know had to hide part of your/their identity to participate in a group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>HIV/AIDS or STDs intersected with your life and became real</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>Someone misunderstood who you are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening to stories</td>
<td>You realized you were different</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freeform</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Provided by Halverson (76)

Halverson also discovered that by giving voice to their frustrations, and by being allowed to act out these scenes, they are given the opportunity to let go of the frustrations, and to create new outcomes (82). This is reminiscent of Boal’s “Theatre of the Oppressed,” and its means of achieving catharsis in one’s own life through theatre. It also patterns Zwerling’s belief that “Theatre of the Oppressed” can be useful in achieving catharsis for at-risk teenagers.

In her work with AFYT, Halverson found that a massive cause of frustration for the students is the “expectation of behavior” they receive from society (83). When they are assumed to be straight they are expected to behave a certain way, and then when they come out of the closet they are expected to behave in an entirely different way (Halverson 83). AFYT helps to ease these frustrations by
allowing them to assume multiple identities within the span of the production, without having to actually assume any of them in their real lives (Halverson 85).

Halverson also sees the benefit of narrative storytelling as a way for students to “see their story outside of themselves as an independent piece of work, rather than a deeply personal event” (85). By “giving up” their stories, students can look at them from an outsider’s point of view, and discover new meanings from them (Halverson 86). It allows students to “detach” from a story, and move forward with a clean slate (Halverson 87).

By using Boal’s model of Theatre for the Oppressed in narrative storytelling form, About Face Youth Theatre promotes healthy identity development and catharsis in its workshops and Summer Intensive programming. Students are given the opportunity to be honest and open in a supportive environment, and to form relationships with like-minded peers. By allowing their students to grow and develop within the theatre, and by sharing their unique programming with other organizations in the Chicago area, About Face Youth Theatre is also promoting social change and the betterment of society for LGBT youth.

**Pride Players**

Pride Players is a theater program for LGBT youth based out of The Rose Theater for Children’s Performing Arts in Omaha, Nebraska. It serves approximately 20-25 students, ages 14-18 in a six-week program (Bazo 133). Like
True Colors and AFYT, Pride Players uses narrative storytelling by students to create scenes that are added to a full production (Bazo 134). Pride players employs a director and playwright in-residence, Brian Guering, to work with students to create stories based on their own experiences (The Rose).

Like True Colors, Pride Players is entirely “youth driven,” with students creating the scripts, making artistic decisions, and performing the pieces, with Guering providing guidance and support (Bazo 134). Unlike True Colors and AFYT, however, Pride Players’ scripts are never written down, and allow for the performers to change them within a performance so that they can explore different outcomes (Bazo 134). This is entirely reminiscent of Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed, where spect/actors are encouraged to engage in productions by changing scenes based on their own emotions.

Pride Players also typically utilizes humorous rather than dramatic content, which sets it apart from the other LGBT theatre programs I researched (Bazo 134). Two reasons for this choice are 1) the location of “conservative Nebraska” makes dramatic work more challenging, and 2) students involved in Pride Players are quite young and have little to no theatrical training, and thus dramatic work is considered to be a bit too difficult (Bazo 144). Guering explains that through the laughter of the audience, performers are empowered and thus their confidence is boosted (Bazo 134).
Pride Players allows students to express themselves through storytelling, and to experience empowerment and activism through their performances. Through their experiences at Pride Players, students go on to affect social change within their communities, and are confident about raising awareness for LGBT issues (Bazo 135). In 2006, Pride Players were awarded a National Education Association Human and Civil Rights Award (The Rose).

**Proud Theater**

Proud Theater is a volunteer-based LGBT youth theater in Madison, Wisconsin, and was founded by Sol Kelley-Jones and Callen Harty (Proud Theater). It is an “award-winning, exciting and innovative youth theater program designed to foster self-expression and self-empowerment for youth ages 13-18 interested in changing the world through the power of theater” (Proud Theater). Proud Theater is the only theater I researched that is not affiliated with a parent theatre company, though it is currently affiliated with Outreach, Inc., the LGBT resource center in Madison (Proud Theater).

The process of Proud Theater is similar to the other programs, in that it uses narrative-based storytelling to create original works performed by the students (Bazo 136). The performance is then toured to schools and other community organizations in the hope of fostering social change (Bazo 136).
Proud Theater, like the other theaters, utilizes a collaborative process between adults and students. “Adults mentor and guide the youth, providing them with the tools they need. But the teens dictate many of the decisions through leadership roles within the troop [sic]” (qtd. in Bazo 136).

Proud Theater promotes empowerment and activism through the development of leadership skills, group interaction, and the telling of their own stories (Bazo 137).

“Our youth engage and are less afraid of their community. Many use the tools they learn here to become leaders in other organizations or go onto college. They also help to ignite activism in their audiences by raising awareness of sensitive issues. If we can empower, inform, or move at least one person, we have done our job” (qtd. in Bazo 138).

QSpeak

QSpeak is an LGBT-centered theatre program in Phoenix, Arizona. It is part of Phoenix Theatre’s educational programming, though it was founded in 2005 as a stand-alone operation (Phoenix Theatre). Its mission states that “QSpeak Theatre provides a safe space for queer youth and their straight allies to engage in community dialogue and affect positive change through story telling and performance in order to bring awareness to their own lives and experiences” (Phoenix Theatre).

QSpeak is almost entirely driven by its students. Founder and Director, A. Beck, ensures that, while she is available for guidance and support, all processes and
responsibilities are in the hands of the students, and thus any mistakes they make they must correct on their own (Bazo 139). Beck believes that this structure, or lack-there-of, empowers students to take responsibility for their own work and actions, and to learn from their mistakes (Bazo 139). There is no hierarchy at QSpeak, and any student that wishes to step up and be part of the decision-making process, or perform certain roles, is allowed to do so (QSpeak).

QSpeak is also very much a social work-centered program. Beck believes that this is important due to the lack of organizations “filling the social needs of the LGBTQ youth” (Bazo 140). States Beck,

“I always question how I can sustain this as an artistic endeavor but understand that it is also social work ... it makes sense to be part of a social work organization because they need the resources. A theater that does this work without the aid of social services might be dangerous” (qtd. in Bazo 140).

QSpeak uses a student-driven process to aid students in the development of social needs and responsibility. With the aid of social services, QSpeak ensures that the individual needs of students are being met within a supportive environment (Bazo 139-140).
Statistics on the risk factors associated with being an LGBT adolescent show an overwhelming need for programming that addresses and meets their needs. Societal fears and misunderstanding of the LGBT community have limited the research and programming necessary to support these needs, and with more and more adolescents becoming visible members of the LGBT community in schools and at home, the need is greater than ever. Studies have proven that there is a direct correlation between the arts and the positive development of adolescents, particularly those considered at-risk. In addition, theatre provides adolescents with many of the methods proven to improve the development of LGBT youth, including providing an organized youth program, the presence of a peer-driven support group, and positive adult role models with whom they can relate and form honest relationships.

The work done by True Colors, About Face Youth Theatre, Pride Players, Proud Theater, and QSpeak provides a foundation for other organizations to model similar programming. Oddly, while each of the five organizations utilize a narrative
storytelling-based format, similar to the Theatre of the Oppressed model created by Augusto Boal, none of the organizations appear to have based their processes off of one another. In my opinion, this is evidence that the model has been tried and found to work well to fulfill the needs of students. It is clear that by telling their own stories and offering them to the group for performance use, and by actively participating in the performing of these stories, students achieve the catharsis needed to move forward into new phases in their lives. The fact that this process is done in a supportive environment with peers who understand them, and with adults who listen and encourage honesty, only benefits the student more. Further, the student is challenged to set and achieve goals, gain a sense of responsibility, and be an active participant in affecting social change, all of which increases the student’s sense of empowerment and confidence.

Despite my belief that this is a model that is working, there are several concerns I have, particularly with regard to the reach of this programming. First, other than the figures I listed in this text, there is no statistical evidence that shows that theatre decreases the risk factors of LGBT youth. I suspect this is because none of these programs existed before the 1990s, and until just prior to that, no studies existed regarding LGBT adolescents at all. Homosexuality is still unaccepted by a large portion of the country, including many members of the US Government, and therefore it is not a foregone conclusion to many people that this research needs to take place. Without proper statistical information, however, it will be hard to make a case for the funding of these programs. True Colors is very fortunate that the state
of Massachusetts recognizes the need for this programming, and financially supports it. This is certainly not the case in every state, or in the federal government. In my opinion, further study is essential to measuring the impact theatre programs actually have on decreasing risk factors, and on promoting change within the high schools where the troupes perform. The latter, at least, could be easily measured by troupes conducting surveys of the students in the high schools they visit, though I found no such data.

Second, while each of the five programs has made significant progress within their own communities, I found no resources available to adolescents in rural areas. As I discovered in my research, rural LGBT adolescents often face greater feelings of isolation and depression due to the lack of a visible LGBT community in their areas. I believe that more work needs to be done to reach this demographic, and could be done within their own school theater programs.

Last, I found only five programs throughout the entire country that are engaging in this type of programming. This demonstrates to me that more needs to be done within the LGBT and theatre communities in other cities to find funding and organize programming. If theatre really is a powerful way to impact the lives of LGBT youth, who face enormous risks, then as an artistic community we have an obligation to assist in affecting this change.

Through their dedication to empowering and improving the lives of the students they serve, I believe True Colors: OUT Youth Theater, About Face Youth
Theatre, Pride Players, Proud Theater, and QSpeak are successfully impacting LGBT youth. If funding continues to help these programs thrive, other communities should see them as a model for assisting a demographic that desperately needs them.


Larson, Reed W., and Jane R. Brown. "Emotional Development in Adolescence: What Can Be Learned From a High School Theater Program?" *Child Development*


