

**THE STRUGGLE OF ART AND MENTAL WELLNESS:
A Look into the Stigma of Mental Health Issues amongst Theatre Artists**

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The world of theatre is often just as strenuous as it is extraordinary. Based on information collected by Entertainment Assist, the average theatre artist is 10 times more likely to experience anxiety and stress than the average working adult; they are also 5 times more likely to experience depression.¹ Considering the duress of show work, be it in tech or performance, the issue of mental wellness amongst theatre artists has become nearly universal in recent years. However, the issue also tends to lurk in the wings while other, more pressing issues, such as blocking or first dress, take center stage. This mindset has only helped propagate theatre artists' evasion of addressing their mental wellness. It is thus left to management, or leadership – i.e. artistic directors, managing directors, and workers of that ilk – to establish mental wellness as a primary issue amongst theatre artists so that artist themselves can find comfort within their issues and work to achieve mental peace while also channeling their nuanced perspective in their work. In order to accomplish this task, there are two categories of mental wellness awareness that need to be addressed. On the macro side, the stigma of mental illness must be broken. On the micro side, structural aids to further the mental wellness of theatre artists are needed to actively support artists on a needs-based system. These two sides, when looked at with an understanding of the severity of the issue, present an effective leader's response to a very un-talked about issue in our industry.

In order to understand the various methods in which leaders must respond to the mental wellness issue facing current artists, the nature of said issues must first be defined and clarified. It should come as no surprise that the bulk of theatre artists work often and work hard. Many undergo longer work hours than usual, especially at the peak of a show – tech week. Naturally, stress

¹Julie van den Eynde, Adrian Fisher, Christopher Sonn. "Working in the Australian Entertainment Industry". Entertainment Assist. 2016
https://static1.squarespace.com/static/584a0c86cd0f68ddbffdcea/t/587ed93e3e00be6f0d145fe0/1486006488652/Working+in+the+Australian+Entertainment+Industry_Final+Report_Oct16.pdf

accompanies said work. An article published by the *Evening Standard* quotes Cal Strode from the Mental Health Foundation, noting that “conditions in the arts and entertainment industry can often undermine workers’ mental health and wellbeing. [...] Maintaining a healthy sense of self can be difficult if your work, passion and skills are consistently devalued in this way.”² Further research has compounded and validated these comments. In Australia, Entertainment Assist has undertaken some intensive research to corroborate the relationship between mental duress and the arts. Within their first executive summary, authors Julie van den Eynde, Adrian Fisher, and Christopher Sonn found “Indicators of anxiety and depression symptomology are well over the general population norms; suicide ideation is 6 times greater, suicide planning is more than 4 times greater, and suicide attempts are more than double the general population.”³ They connect said issues to artists passion and creativity, noting that the level of mental fixation is far higher than that of average works outside of the arts.

The research mentioned above focuses on work primarily outside the US, however, further studies have been conducted in the US that contain much of the same correlation. Arnold Ludwig’s study “Methods and Madness in the Arts and Sciences” concludes that careers entailing more logical, objective, and formal forms of thinking lend to more emotionally stable workers than careers in the arts.⁴ It’s research examines a variety of studies of different scales, coming to the supposition that “These results show that regardless of scale, the same pattern exists between mental disturbances and creative expression.”⁵ Based on this research, there no longer can be any

² Jessie Thompson. “Mental health in the arts: Are we talking about it enough?” *London Evening Standard*. 2017. <https://www.standard.co.uk/go/london/arts/mental-health-in-the-arts-are-we-talking-about-it-enough-a3344721.html>

³ Eynde, Fisher, Sonn. “Working in the Australian Entertainment Industry”. 1

⁴ Arnold M. Ludwig Method and Madness in the Arts and Sciences. *Creativity Research Journal*. (2010: 11:2, 93-101) DOI: 10.1207/s15326934crj1102_1

⁵ Ibid.

doubt that there's a distinctive relationship between mental wellness issues and the creative arts. With this established, one must turn to addressing the problem on both micro and macro levels.

Firstly, on the macro side, a leader could ensure their programming does not enforce mental health stereotypes as a method of breaking the mental health stigma. This is done primarily through conscious and effective selection of shows (be it plays or musicals) with more diverse outlooks on mental health. For example, during its early years, creator Brian Yorkey undertook considerable research, "to deepen this understanding. [...] The *N2N (Next to Normal)* team consulted with a psychiatrist, a psychologist and a pediatrician who read each draft of the show as it was workshopped, helping to create a story that, while fictional, was still authentic and sensitive."⁶ Establishing relatable empathy for those who suffer with mental health disorders also furthers the de-stigmatization. In her honors thesis, Greta Hoffman describes the following:

Diverging from the violent mentally ill character is a way theatre separates itself from mass media. Theatre, in general, takes subjects that are "a little difficult to digest" and eats them up. Many successful shows in theatre accept any possible state existing in another person's life experience and make the audience sympathetic to that possibility. Raising awareness and encouraging education is an incredibly beneficial way to make a difference in societal views and beliefs.⁷

By analyzing plays like *The Father* and *Blue/Orange*, Hoffman manages to showcase the method in which shows have been able to deconstruct mental health problems and place them in a position in which audiences will be understanding. She concludes, "Raising awareness through representation is where it starts. Theatre is one of the few mediums that gives mental illness an appropriately positive voice"⁸ This indicates that programming is, in its own way, a form of

⁶ Kieron Cindric "How Musical Theatre Exposes the Truth on Mental Illness" *Playbill*. 2016. <http://www.playbill.com/article/why-the-musical-theatre-is-the-fitting-medium-to-tell-stories-of-internal-struggle>

⁷ Greta Hoffman. "Mental Illness through the Lens of Theatre" *University of Tennessee Honors Thesis Projects*. 2016. http://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_chanhonoproj/2033

⁸ *Ibid.*

community building. Through a theatre's programming, stigmatization can be put into question. Diversity is already a pressing issue in modern leadership – one that most professional theatres seek to address. Honing in on the mental health stigma is a way to further diversify and enlighten theatre's audiences. Programming, however, is simply one method in which leaders can take to challenging the mental health sigma in the arts. Additional methods fall more in line on the micro side of action, not because they are in any way inferior to the macro form of addressing the issue, but rather because they are focused on the individuals' health – namely those in the theatre - rather than the educating the masses.

On the micro side of the issue, leaders need to put in place structural aids, including support for further artistic expression, to strengthen the mental wellness of theatre artists. As an artform, theatre has established itself as a cathartic experience that does, in some fashion, act as therapy for its artists. *Expressive Therapies*, an edited collection by Cathy A. Malchiodi, mentions this when saying “drama is also related with healing.”⁹ Further studies, such as the one conducted by Tina Pyman and Sue Rugg, result in much of the same consensus. In their study, Pyman and Rugg conclude “those who took part [in a community theatre show] saw their experience as one of myriad opportunities, developing their knowledge, skills and attitudes, and enriching their lives.”¹⁰ This shows that the very act of doing theatre is beneficial. Yet we still see statistics indicating that there is a very real problem concerning mental health issues found in theatre artists.

We, as artists, understand the payoff of either performing or successfully enhancing a performance. However, we also understand that expression needs to exist outside the production process. That is why additional outside resources need to be provided to address the mental health

⁹ Cathy A. Malchiodi (ed). *Expressive Therapies*. (New York, NY: Guilford Publications, 2013) 91

¹⁰ Tina Pyman and Sue Rugg. "Participating in a community theatre production: A dramatherapeutic perspective." *International Journal of Therapy & Rehabilitation* 13, no. 12 (2006): 562-571.

issues facing theatre artists. There have been several successful uses of further performance therapy to better one's mental health – such as the study conducted by Goldingay, et al. where the authors “explored and reflected analytically upon a range of imaginative, embodied and contextual processes. Played games like ‘Grandmother’s footsteps’, did exercises like slow-motion races and framed improvisations where we associated words and built unexpected narratives.”¹¹ However, the exact aids needed must be addressed more on a place to place, person to person basis, making it crystal clear that this particular topic is underdeveloped. This beckons for leadership initiative. As this issue is clearly ongoing, empirical research is needed to assess how leaders of the future, specifically theatre leaders, can address the situation. That is what makes this issue currently relevant to modern performing arts leaders – they need to do more.

As a topic, mental wellness in the arts is something to which leaders simultaneously remain conscious and oblivious. As described above, there is a clear percentage of how many people in the performing arts suffer with their mental wellness -one far larger than a majority of professions outside the arts. This further propagates the mental health stigma and places our artists under duress. When it comes to breaking the stigma of mental illness, theatre is ahead of the curb. However, when it comes to addressing the needs of the artists breaking the stigma, theatre has a lot to learn. Through research, it has become apparent that this topic touches upon so many concepts of leadership – from community building to leadership initiative, all the way to supporting diversity. It has also become apparent that the situation is worse than one initially thought. Therefore, the only logical place to stop the buck would be with modern theatre leaders. If initiative is taken, the issue might begin to dissipate.

¹¹ S. Goldingay, et al. "(Re)acting medicine: applying theatre in order to develop a whole-systems approach to understanding the healing response." *Research In Drama Education* 19, no. 3 (2014): 272-279

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