

STAGING CHANGE

Non-profit theatre company, 5 & Dime, stirs the pot with innovative productions

By Amber Lake | Contributor

Theatre and activism make excellent bedfellows. Almost from its roots in Ancient Greece, theatre has been pushing society's collective buttons and poking holes in the fabric of our institutions. History has long appreciated the medium for its ability to articulate a community's concerns while challenging the status quo with tongue-in-cheek rhetoric. After all, if you're going to stir the pot, sometimes it's best to say afterward it was all just an "act."

Jacksonville's nonprofit theatre, The 5 & Dime, has been setting the stage for change in the community since its inception seven years ago. Starting as a "nomadic" theatre group that showcased in venues like CoRK, The Downtown Library and the Church of the Good Shepherd, it has evolved into an essential element in Jacksonville's performing arts scene. Currently, The 5 & Dime has made a permanent home for itself off Adams Street in the city's urban core.

In June, The 5 & Dime presented the acclaimed documentary style play, "The Laramie Project." Controversial since its opening show in 2000, "The Laramie Project" tells the story of the 1998 murder of gay University of Wyoming student, Matthew Shepard. The play has since been used as an academic tool to teach about prejudice and its hailed as one of the most important works of contemporary theatre. In Jacksonville, each of the nine performances of the play put on by The 5 & Dime sold out.

Lee Hamby, managing director of The 5 & Dime, says the theatre has a unique ability to render emotion as an artistic medium, making it an excellent gateway to opening dialogue on social issues.

"After the show, people that did not know each other were getting out of their seats and hugging. [Theatre] creates comradery. It creates *family*. It makes you think about things that you might have never thought about. Theatre can be so much. It's cathartic."

Hamby credits some of the theatre's success to its ability to bring in talent. Considering it's a non-profit, all the actors, directors and staff are volunteers. Yet, he says, because of The 5 & Dime's mission, the theatre draws some of the best talent from Northeast Florida.

"That's why here we get the good quality of people we get. It's because they are doing the harder work. They do challenging

work. It's not [always] just song and dance. We really have an extraordinary cast."

However, actress Isabella Martinez says the importance of inclusion doesn't begin and end with the shows. It can also involve presenting classics with a "new perspective."

"In April, I was a part of The Five & Dime's production of [Stephen Sondheim's] 'Company.' The story isn't race specific, and yet three people of color were cast. I don't think audience members really thought twice about it, but I know what it meant to me. Growing up watching all white casts of Sondheim shows felt limiting. I felt like I'd never have a chance at any of those kinds of roles. But The Five & Dime doesn't discriminate, they cast whoever is best in the role."

That said, Martinez believes there is always more that can be done to encourage diversity every season, like being sure to include original works by local writers of color. She believes not only does diversity influence the message of the art, but opens the theatre to appeal to more diverse audiences.

One way the theatre works to recruit new audiences is its Pay What You Can opening shows. The first Monday run of every show, The 5 & Dime offers a donation-driven cost for the night. Rather than having a set fee, they ask for audience members to pay what they can afford in an effort to reach out to people who might want to attend, but are unsure or on a tight budget.

Hamby says these nights are great opportunities to not only gain a fanbase, but to reach out to people in the community who might otherwise be unaware of an issue. Or, people who might find relief in seeing someone like them portrayed on stage.

"We want theatre to be accessible to anybody. We want to see all people, doesn't matter: shape, size, color, creed, religion. It doesn't matter. It's about telling that tried-and-true story that people can relate to. People want to know that there is somebody else in the world like them. We just want to reach that one person."

Fall shows:

Main Stage:

"Buyer & Seller" - Oct. 5-21

"Cock" - Nov. 30-Dec. 16

Reader's Theatre:

"Samuel Beckett's 'Endgame'" - Nov. 9-11