

## The Scene: Art & Activism Come Together

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**The Wooster Voice — Arts & Entertainment**

The definition of an activist is not easy to write, but the image of one is easier to visualize. We commonly see these people plastered over the television advocating and screaming for human rights, equal representation, recognition of a cause or preservation of the environment. But how often are we exposed to activists who are also artists, trying to broadcast a message to the public?

For theater, activism has taken direct and indirect approaches to reach an audience. Theater is not just for entertainment, it has the capability to make us think. On the surface, the musical “Wicked” is an extravagant musical, but there is an underlying message about how we interpret history.

Some forms of activism can creep into productions, whether it is highlighting a larger problem in society or bringing to focus and attention to a disenfranchised group of people. Not all productions are calling for radical change, but asking or allowing the audience to think about what is happening on stage can lead to some form of it.

“A Doll’s House,” by Henrik Ibsen, is considered today to be a feminist play, but truthfully, that is not the case at all. Yes, Nora did leave her husband, Torvald, to escape his oppressive nature and unfair treatment — she was standing up for herself. In reality, Ibsen was attempting to highlight the bigger problem: what happens when patriarchy and capitalism rule the world. If this play was written from a feminist perspective, Nora would have heavily criticized her husband’s actions as a patriarchal figure, attacking him head on rather than resisting and stepping away from his tight grip of control. Plus, this play was written and produced in the late 1800s, well before the world fully experienced the waves of feminist thought and activism. By giving the audience the opportunity to think about the events that unfolded in the story, Ibsen established a platform for theater to act as a reflective point for people to observe and analyze what happens in their culture.

Many thespians may overlook this point, but musical theater has an activist bone too. The famous rock-opera musical “RENT” by Jonathan Larson constantly shouts a particular line throughout the story: “Act up, fight AIDS!” Why this message? Larson was in New York City during the ’80s and ’90s and was witnessing first-hand how the disease was wreaking havoc on all walks of life. So, he wrote the libretto, music and lyrics and formed a piece of art creatively punching through how everyone, whether they were gay, straight, white, African American, Hispanic, rich or poor was being affected by the AIDS crisis. Unfortunately for Larson, he died the night before the show’s debut. This 1996 Tony award-winning production captured the minds and hearts of many people, helping carry along a momentum to call for change at all levels. What we see on stage can amaze and inspire us. However, we should never forget that a performance on stage has true potential to make us think about what we see and question our surroundings. Either way, the activist in the artist is sometimes hidden purposefully in order to allow their cause or message to transcend theatrically through a production.