

The Silent Boy

On Friday, January 30th, The Palace Theater in Waterbury held an education series matinee production of *The Silent Boy* for Connecticut grade school children. Based on a novella by Lois Lowry, *The Silent Boy* is the touching tale of a blossoming friendship between a young girl named Katy and an autistic boy named Jacob. Set in the early 20th century, a time when autism and other disabilities were not well understood, Jacob is rejected by society as an “imbecile” who is incapable of learning. As the title implies, Jacob doesn’t speak; he can only make sounds to express his thoughts and feelings. Katy’s father and role model sends a revolutionary message to his daughter about acceptance and tolerance of others by befriending Jacob. However, the story takes a tragic turn when Jacob is falsely accused of causing the death of his sister’s newborn baby. Jacob is sent away to an asylum where no one, not even his family, has contact with him again.

The production left many of the young children somber and sad about the ending to Jacob’s story. Hopefully, they were able to learn just as Katy had, about not only accepting those with disabilities, but embracing the differences in everyone. In the opening scene of *The Silent Boy*, Katy’s father is adjusting the lens of a camera. As he looks through the viewfinder he addresses his daughter Katy and the audience saying, “...you just have to adjust the lens to change the way you see things...” His statement summarizes the overall theme of the production perfectly.

The Palace’s educational series shows are designed to introduce children to live theater. Ideally, teachers use the opportunity to cross-reference theater and literature within the classroom, supplementing student’s education with the arts. In addition to teaching children valuable theater etiquette, these productions also offer a chance for the young audience to interact with the cast by asking post-show questions. Through the use of limited props and set, live theater invites viewers to use their imagination in ways television and films don’t. This theatrical creativity enhances the audience’s experience. Hundreds of Connecticut students benefit from participating in these daytime performances offered by The Palace Theater.

Nicole Leroy
High School Homeschooled

The Silent Boy

What do you hear in the word Waterbury? (Water) Like many buildings in Waterbury a river flows under the Palace Theater. To put the new orchestra pit in the theater they had to divert, or move, the river so it flows out to the side street. The water then meets the original river behind the theater. The Palace is the coolest place ever!!

"The Silent Boy" is a play about a boy named Jacob who is autistic. Katy is a young girl who lives on a farm in Pennsylvania in 1910. Her father is the local doctor. Katy wants to be a doctor just like her father. She travels with her father to visit patients in their homes, at the mill, and the nearby asylum. When Peggy comes to work for the Thatchers, Katy learns more about Jacob, Peggy's brother. Nobody in town understands Jacob because he is silent. The town's people call Jacob "stupid" and "crazy."

No one thinks Jacob can learn, but Katy believes that she can teach him. Katy reads to Jacob and teaches him to count to four. Katy also learned that Jacob has a way with animals. Jacob begins to trust Katy. Jacob gets accused of something, and Katy understands the actions of what Jacob did, but in 1910 the people don't understand autism. The town's people took Jacob away, and put him in the asylum. But when they finally burned the asylum down, there were no records of Jacob. Katy still became a doctor to help people like Jacob.

When I interviewed the actors I asked if they felt confident about their characters. Many were in the play for a second or third time because they felt strongly about their characters. They came back because they were not "done with their characters." The performers said that they get energy from the audience, and when the audience is paying attention it helps the actors and actresses feel the magic of the theater. The performers hoped that the audience would love and respect all kids that are different in any way.

David who played Jacob said, "It really wasn't hard to act the part of somebody who has autism, but it was hard not to say anything." He would describe his character as "misunderstood" and a "dreamer."

Dr. Thatcher would say his character is "tolerant and kind." Katy would say her character is "deceptively naïve." Peggy would say her character is "maternal."

"The Silent Boy" is a play that teaches you that you do not have to believe what everybody says about any one person. Also, this play teaches you to not give up on somebody, and to work with him or her until he or she succeeds.

**By Caitlin Gobstein
Middlebury Elementary School, Grade 5**

Audience Reaction on "The Silent Boy"

Middle school students were excited to see the palace production "The Silent Boy" the moment they knew what it was about. When Stephanie of West Side School heard that the play would be about an autistic child, she replied "I think it will be creative." A few students from Dag Hammarskjold School had learned about autism before coming to see the show. They were hoping the play would help them see from an autistic child's view. All these expectations were easily met by "The Silent Boy".

Right from the start of the show the audience was entranced. When a character in the play told of how Jacob, the silent boy, changed her life you could hear quiet "awes" from the audience. Through the often serious tone of the play erupted some very comical parts that left the audience openly laughing. Almost no one could stop themselves from chuckling when a character in the play claimed that babies came from vegetable gardens. When it was told of how Jacob had to drown unwanted kittens, the theater encased pin-drop silence. The superb acting and deep storyline conjured a range of reactions from the audience.

The show ended with an uproar of applause coupled with quite a few screams. The story affected many students, proving that the show was successful in relating the idea of autism and being out of the norm. The sixth-grader Tess from WAMS was sad that Jacob "had to go to the asylum because he was different". Emily from eighth grade stated "It would be nice to see again".

If for some unfathomable reason someone did not enjoy the play they only had to look up to be amazed. One student, Colleen, could not help commenting on how "Beautiful!" the Palace Theater is. Sixth-grader Tymani noticed how intricate the Palace ceiling is and rightfully commented "looks like it took a long time to make." Sarah from WAMS noticed even the "seats are comfy". The ultimate proof of success is the many students announced they wanted to come again.

**By Maggie Johnsen
Waterbury Arts Magnet School, Grade 8**

Palace Report

The middle school students from Waterbury Arts Magnet School attended the production of *The Silent Boy* at the Palace Theater. Many other students from other schools in Waterbury and the surrounding towns, such as Carrington, St. Mary's, Dag Hammarskjöld and Alcott School, joined them. This production was based on a book by Lois Lowry called The Silent Boy. This book is about an autistic boy who can not talk. The story is told from pictures. The whole set behind the actors was about ten pictures, and each of them was acted out. Everything in the pictures came to life. To make this so real, the actors used sound effects through out the performance. It felt like you were actually a part of the story. This show taught many lessons and it was a great success.

Gabby Fernandes
Waterbury Arts Magnet School, Grade 8

The Silent Boy

The Silent Boy performed by David Beck, Ashleigh Catsos, Andrew Dawson, and Mary McLellan at the Palace Theater was breath taking. The actors moved the audience to tears. This story was about a boy living with autism. Jacob, the boy, was portrayed convincingly by David Beck. His innocent face and curious eyes could make your heart melt. I wanted to go on the stage and tell him that everything was going to be okay. Each time he pulled up his shoulders or smiled I had to remind myself that he was just acting the part. Jacob became fast friends wit the narrator Katy, portrayed by Ashleigh Catsos. She too was very believable. With each line she drew her audience in deeper and deeper into those difficult times. She brought each and every one of the viewers back in time with her to watch Jacob's life. Katy's father, played by Andrew Dawson, was a pro on stage. His father-daughter chemistry with Catsos was remarkable. Mary McLellan was the other female lead and she took on two completely different roles successfully. She played a neighbor and Katy's house worker. I loved her performance, along with numerous other impressed audience members. Her smile lit up the stage. This story about "a boy in a time and place that never understood him" would be nothing without the jaw dropping talent on that stage. As you can see these actors deserve nothing but compliments. I strongly recommend seeing this production that had the quality of a Broadway show.

By Jillian Wipfler
Waterbury Arts Magnet School, Grade 8

"The Silent Boy"

Fun, different, excited, and nervous, are the words that describe how I felt during my journalism experience. I honestly thought the play, "Silent Boy", was entertaining, but touching at the same time. The play was about a girl named Katy, and she wanted to become a doctor one day. Then she met a boy named Jacob who didn't talk much because he had autism (but no one really knew why because it was in the 1910's and they just thought he was different). He felt shy around every one and it was like the cap he wore gave him protection. Jessie, Katy's friend told her that the boy who was Peggy's (she comes to do housework for the Thatchet family) and Nelly's (who does housework for the neighbors next door) brother. She said Jacob was crazy, scary, or dangerous. But after Katy gets to know the "silent boy" he begins to trust her and lets her teach him how to count. When Peggy finds out she's so happy she starts to cry. Later on in the play Katy's mother has a baby girl and names it Mary. The reason they gave Mary her name was because an eleven year old girl named Mary Goldstein was burned alive in a fire in a factory with many others who didn't get to finish their lives. In the play Nelly gives birth too, but she didn't want the baby. Even earlier in the story Peggy was saying how Jacob had a way with animals and if they had too many kittens on the farm they would have Jacob drown the kittens. When every one is trying to find somewhere for the unwanted child to go Jacob takes the child and runs away. The whole town is looking for him because they think Jacob has killed the child because it was not wanted. But they find Jacob and the baby all right, they bring him to the asylum, a place of protection for people who are assumed to be crazy or scary or dangerous like Jacob. The baby died eventually because it was born two months early. Katy become a doctor like she wanted, but she never saw Jacob again.

Now I'm going on to the history of the theater where this fantastic play took place. The two organs located on the left and right of the theater aren't real! The pipes are just for decoration now, but when the Palace was new there was a great organ. In 1987, the Palace Theater was just a building with no use, but after 18 years and a financial investment by the State of Connecticut, the Palace was back in business with stand-up comedy acts, well known performers, and family fun entertainment. In the main lobby when first walk in there are two big cracks in the floor – that is where a river flows underneath the floor! The Palace Theater in Waterbury is one of the last Poli theaters standing today that is fully operational and has undergone renovation. Those are a few things about the history and knowledge of the theater.

The interview with the cast was great! I loved how the actors could really connect with us. The characters/actors names are David Beck (Jacob), Ashleigh Catsos (Katy), Andrew Dawson (Dr. Thatchet), Mary C. McLellan (Peggy and Jessie) and the stage manager Shelby Taylor Love. A question to the actors was "What was your favorite part of the play?" Answers: Mary liked finding out that Jacob could count. David, actually liked communicating with the other characters with out talking. Ashleigh said she enjoyed communicating with Jacob. Andrew (the doctor) like communicating about babies with his daughter. A different question asked was "If you could choose two words to describe your character what would they be?" Answers: Mary thought Peggy was able and determined. David thought his character was misunderstood and a dreamer. Ashleigh said her character Katy was deceptively naïve (young learning, etc.) Andrew thought the doctor was kind and tolerant. "Do you do anything special before every show?" Answers: Ashleigh likes to get the feel of wearing the costume and her youth, Mary stretches to loosen up. David warms up his voice while Andrew relaxes to get in the moment. Those are a few things from the interview!

My experience at the Palatial News was fantastic! The experience was the best, it can't get any better! The best parts were getting to watch the play and meet the performers. I for one would definitely recommend this News experience to other students in my school. One of the best parts is having my work published in a book! A thing I alone would like to do is become a theater critic. This first time that I was part of an interview I felt comfortable because the actors were so friendly. I'm actually a lot more interested in the theater because of this experience. On a scale from one to ten I feel this experience with the Palatial News has me floating on a fifteen about right now. It was that much fun!!

Madison Jensen
Hop Brook School, Grade 5, Naugatuck