

# “STAGE THE CHANGE: THE ARTS AS A SOCIAL VOICE” NOW MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER!

BY ELISE MAY



Olivia Harris brings down the house with her song POWER

Bullying, teen suicide, drug overdoses and the overall stress of being a teen in these trying times makes us realize the necessity of strengthening the ability of young people to communicate their fears, emotions and dreams. Theatre, dance, and film, are avenues through the arts that enable teens to express their cares and concerns looking toward making the world a place they want to live in.

*Stage the Change – The Arts as a Social Voice* had their 5th annual conference at Tilles Center for the Performing Arts at LIU Post on November 3rd, where over 650 students, teachers

and administrators came together to learn how to use their art to create the change they want to see in the world.

“The day was electric!” Executive Director Ruthie Pincus shared. “The students were ripe to make change. In our current climate of people beginning to engage and trans-



STC Executive Director Ruthie Pincus

form - we had students who were claiming their right to ‘take a risk’ through their ‘arts voices’ and devise art to make a difference in their world.”

After LIU’s Dean of the College of Arts, Communication and Design, Steven Breese, rallied the audience by saying, “The world needs you now more than ever!” we watched an exhibition of juried, socially mindful student work exceed by arts advocate and NYS Regent, Roger Tilles. It is truly amazing what students can create with the freedom to do so and the guidance of their caring teachers.

*Suspicious Refugees* is a deeply moving piece about two immigration workers who are tripped up as the new intern reevaluates their vetting process. This introspective piece searches how we view others who are different than ourselves.

*Stand Up* is a skit showing two NFL announcers furious in the wake of Colin Kaepernick kneeling for the national anthem, pointing out how our society and the NFL ignores the almost daily transgressions of sports heroes and celebrities and yet

to overcome her battle with mental illness.

*I Matter* is a powerful performance that mixes singing, poetry and spoken word sharing the depth of oppression and its effect on generations of people of color.



Dancers face obstacles and *Rise*

*RISE* was a beautifully intense dance created to focus on the uneasy world we live in from the events of 9/11 to the hurricane in Haiti, the Pulse night club shooting to the Manchester bombing, where too many civilian lives are being lost. The piece inspires and reminds us that we can overcome any obstacle and rise above it all.

when Kaepernick expresses an opinion in an appropriate, non-threatening way, the NFL unravels.

*DON'T* is a mesmerizing dance revealing the battle of insecurities in the mind of a person who struggles with body dysmorphia. In this piece, five dancers display the thoughts in the mind of one dancer as she struggles

Next, we moved on to workshops. With so many wonderful presenters to choose from with specialties in theatre, dance and video, fortunately everyone got to participate in two. Some of the choices were:

Writing an Original Play or Musical With a Social Voice (*Jim Hoare: Theatrical Rights Worldwide and playwright J.*

*Julian Christopher*), Making Films to Make a Difference (*Roger Sherman: Florentine Films*), Comedy Video as a Platform for Activism (*Dan Ferrara and Kelly Harper*), Dancing for Every Body (*Chanon Judson: Urban Bush Women*), Exploring Diaspora (*Theara Ward: Dance Theatre of Harlem*), Prevention through the Arts (*Elizabeth Bojsza: Stony Brook University*) and so many more.

Terence McNally and Tom Kirdahy graced our 5th annual conference as keynote speakers. The inspiring writer-and-producer duo shared personal stories about their lives and their love of theatre. McNally spoke of his utmost admiration for his high school English teacher who

“made me fall in love with the English language and Shakespeare.” This led him to write groundbreaking (and Tony award-winning) theatre. His *Mothers and Sons* was the first play to include a gay married couple. He shared personal stories of the impact his work has had in the LGBTQ community. Kirdahy clarified, “You don’t have to be on a Broadway stage to make change.” Both stressed the importance and value of community theatre in staging a change at the local level.

At the end of the day, the Songwriter’s Orchestra and Broadway Advocacy Coalition wowed everyone with performances by Brinae Ali and Olivia Harris. The Songwriter’s Orchestra is a genre-defying

ensemble that pairs singer/songwriters with a group of twelve orchestral musicians to present brand new musical arrangements of original songs. They have focused on making activism a key part of their mission, harnessing the power of sharing personal narratives through music. This inspiring performance featured Brinae Ali, a tap dancer who appeared on Broadway in *Shuffle Along*, and Olivia Harris, an up-and-coming singer/songwriter who frequently writes about social and racial justice issues. The Broadway Advocacy Coalition is a group of young Broadway artists that formed a collective with Columbia Law School students and professors to fuse policy conversations with artistic



Battling body dysmorphia in *Don't*



Brinae Ali of the Broadway Advocacy Coalition sings with The Songwriter's Orchestra

voice. The finale, *Power* by Ms. Harris, had everyone on their feet! No one wanted this fabulous day to end.

This conference is a powerful and moving day for all involved. Schools participating come from all over Long Island and the NY metropolitan area to experience the transformative empowerment of students using their arts voices to take a stand, make a social statement and bring something back to their communities to share. They learn the world won't change if we stand back and watch – they have to be part of the solution. This conference gives

them the tools they need to do just that.

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For more information and to learn how you can help your students stage a change, please go to

[WWW.STAGETHECHANGE.ORG](http://WWW.STAGETHECHANGE.ORG)



**Elise May**, a Stage the Change board member, focuses on Community Outreach and Sponsorship. She is also a socially conscious, entrepreneurial Teaching Artist who uses theater to enhance vocal empowerment and communication skills through her original, award-winning educational programs for mainstream, Special Education and ESL students of all ages. [www.expressive-elocution.com](http://www.expressive-elocution.com)