

ENGLISH: *COSI*

The opera transforms people's lives. Discuss.

In Louis Nowra's *Cosi*, the production of a play that was intended to bring the patients of the mental asylum "out of their shell" ends up being a vehicle for change, transforming the lives of not only the patients but also the director, Lewis. Through the production of the play, it provides the patients for a form of artistic expression and deeply affecting those involved, through a change in their values, ideals and the way they interact with others and wider society.

The opera manages to transform the values of Lewis, making a major impact on the ideals he previously held before starting at the institution. Lewis starts off the play with the same views and prejudices of the mentally ill, as wider society, who ostracised those who were deemed to have some sort of mental illness. He is extremely apprehensive about directing the opera and even struggles to deal: "they're mad, it's madness". Only through the process of participating in the opera does he form an attachment to the patients and understand the patients as people first. The play allows him to break down the prejudices he once held against the mentally ill, the prejudice ingrained in wider society. As Justin, the social worker tells him at the beginning of the play, the patients are "ordinary people, who have thought extraordinary things, thought extraordinary thoughts". He only comes to understand this through being able to personally relate to the patients, not through labelling them or stereotyping them as mentally ill, but through understanding them as "ordinary people" with views, opinions and beliefs. Lewis does this through being able to relate to the patients through his grandmother who had a mental illness, "I liked my grandmother...I knew she had gone mad but she was still my grandmother". Through his experiences he is able to realise the patients are just "ordinary people". This is in contrast to the beliefs of society, as represented through Nick and Lucy who believe the patients are "loonies" in a "funny farm". Lewis previously had shared these same ideas of the mentally ill but through having the opportunity to direct the opera he is able to breakdown the stigma attached with mental illness and get to know and empathise with the patients as normal people not unlike him.

The opera also manages to shape and alter Lewis' views on love, changing the beliefs he held at the beginning of the play. Lewis' previous belief the "love is not so important nowadays" was challenged by the patients of the mental institution. The opera's central theme of love and fidelity are able to raise these topics among the patients involved in the opera. Lewis' shared beliefs with his friend and girlfriend Nick and Lucy about love and fidelity are transformed through issues raised by the opera, as he is able to see the different perspective, opinions and beliefs held by the patients, which in turn influence what he thinks about these issues. The main transformative experience that shapes the way Lewis views love is through the conversation with Julie about the way love is portrayed in the opera. It is only this time that Lewis is able to separate from the ideals of his girlfriend Lucy who believes that "love is the last grasp of bourgeois romanticism" and "an emotional indulgence for the privileged few". Through his experiences working on the play and the meaningfulness of love to the patients Lewis is able to accept the importance of love, changing the beliefs about it that he previously held. The change of Lewis' ideals is highlighted through his argument with Lucy where she claims: "working with these people has changed you." Due to the issues raised by the opera, Lewis' beliefs about love transform from what he previously held at the beginning of the play to his belief in the importance of love at the end.

Not only does the opera transform the lives and Beliefs of Lewis but it has a massive affect on the patients of the mental institution. While for some patients the opera has a short-term effect on their lives. The opera is able to fulfil its interaction of bringing the patients "out of their shells". The opera gives the patients an opportunity to escape the unhappiness of the institution and to artistically express themselves, for instance Henry: this play gives you the opportunity to do something in your dismal life". The opera also gives Julie something to "look forward to". The patients are able to "blossom", letting go of some of the things that previously held them back, such as in Henry's case,

his stutter and seemingly paralysed arm and in Ruth's case, her ability to cope with illusion and reality. While for some they revert back to their old ways, such as Julie dying from a drug overdose at the end, for others their lives are changed forever. Ruth is able to establish herself as a time and motion expert. If it were not for the opera, the change, even if it was short-lived would not have occurred in their lives.

The opera is a transformative experience, not only for the patients but also for Lewis, whose personal beliefs and opinions change. The opera also is able to bring the patients out of their shells and transform their lives giving them an opportunity to escape from the mental institution, changing their lives.