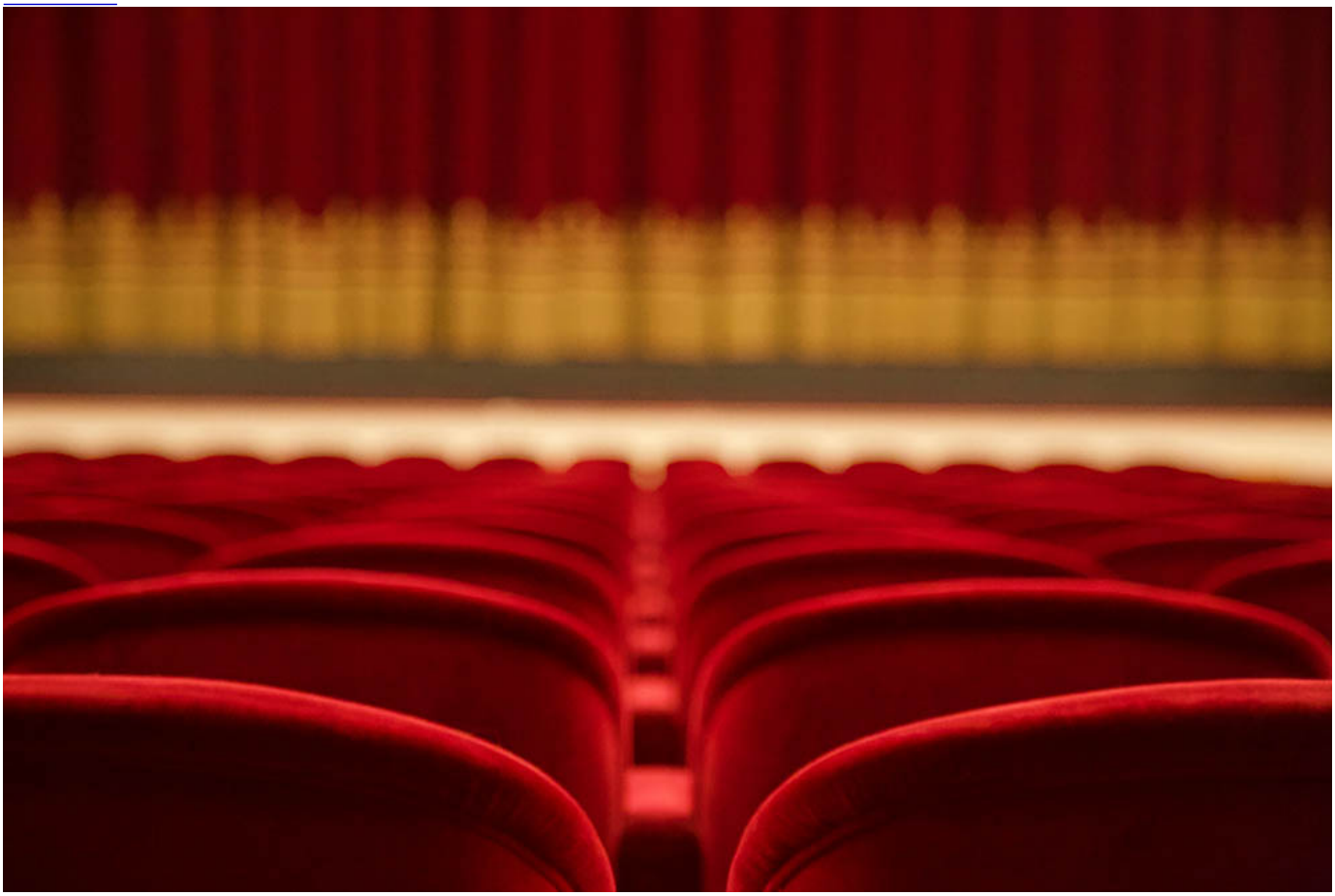
Culture



(Unsplash/Paolo Chiabrando)



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As the curtain fell on the Houston Grand Opera's performance of "La Bohème," I found my eyes welling with tears. "La Bohème" is based on Henry Murger's book Scènes de la vie de bohème ("Scenes of bohemian life") and was the source material for the musical "Rent."

Both "La Bohème" and "Rent" examine lifestyles that exist outside of societal conventions. In "La Bohème," the seamstress Mimi has contracted tuberculosis due to the harrowing conditions of poverty suffered in 19th century Paris. "Rent" follows a similar storyline of love and friendship, but examines the experience of living with drug addiction and HIV in the late 1980s in the East Village of New York City.

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Both performances emphasize the power of community and love, and therein inspires an understanding of experiences outside of conventional society. That is the power of art: to encourage the audience to consider someone else's story while discovering within it a connection with your own. The plot points of poverty in 19th century Paris, or the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s may be outside the audience's scope of experience, but the threads of grief, heartache, liberation and community are all aspects to which we can connect deeply.

We see this power of connection, both in original work and adaptations, in literature as well. In *Demon Copperhead*, Barbara Kingsolver masterfully weaves the storyline of Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* into a brutal depiction of a young boy's life while growing up in Appalachia in the 1990s. Dickens sheds light on the rampant exploitation and abuse of children in Victorian times, while Kingsolver mirrors this societal exposé for the people of Appalachia and the addiction crisis.



Poster for the 1896 production for Puccini's "La bohème" by Adolf Hohenstein (Wikimedia Commons/Ricordi & Co)

Both stories examine exploitation, the role of caregivers and the evils of society in their respective times. The storylines are both crafted to inspire compassion and draw the reader to see aspects of themselves in the characters. Through art, we can understand aspects of poverty, desperation and addiction that may have been formerly unimaginable to us.

The exposition of the bridge between classes has characterized some of our greatest art. Shakespeare masterfully wrote both to the masses and the high society of his time. Works such as *Romeo and Juliet* fed the insatiable hunger for drama and love stories, while also acknowledging the folly of the feuds between families. This message was pertinent to the Elizabethan time, with its societal emphasis placed on familial loyalty and the frequency of bloody conflicts between warring families.

One of *Romeo and Juliet*'s more famous adaptations, "West Side Story," emphasized the damage caused by gang rivalries in the 1950s, adding the complexities of race to the story as well. When artists alchemize universal human emotions with societal issues, the art transforms the audience and raises the performance from mere entertainment to crucial commentary.

Today, our society desperately needs to engage with great art; art that opens our eyes to the experiences of others, that develops in our hearts a compassion for those who appear different from us, art which speaks to our shared experiences and humanity. Our world relies on art to grow in empathy, and the ripples of reimagined adaptations continue to develop and inspire compassion in new generations.