

Out and Proud – LGBTQ+ Themed Plays to Know When Talking to Teens

When it comes to LGBTQ+ themes in theatre, the list of relevant plays is endless. Although the stereotype of theatre actors being LGBTQ+ (particularly gay men) certainly rings a bell in most people's minds, the history of theatre is rife with censorship, particularly with respect to homosexuality. Queer elements have been found in theatrical works as far back as Shakespeare's cross-dressing protagonists (or further), but Victorian-era morality made it difficult to be openly queer, either as a playwright or as a character within a play (Thompson & Brooks, 2021). The 20th century featured more and more queer themes in theatre; as society has gradually become more open-minded towards this community, LGBTQ+ actors and writers have been increasingly vocal in expressing their best selves through their work. Although there's always more work to do, this post appreciates some of the amazing (and amazingly queer) theatre out there.

Read on for a brief primer on some culturally important plays and musicals that you should know about if you want to talk about LGBTQ+ themes in theatre with the teens at your library or in your life.



https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_rocky_horror_picture_show.svg

The Rocky Horror Picture Show (1975)

As impossible to describe as it is central to queer cinematic and theatre history, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* embraces sexual liberation and androgyny in a way that was revolutionary at the time of its release. To this day, it remains a cult classic that is particularly popular among the queer community and increases its visibility and acceptability wherever one

sees fabulous fishnet-stockinged androgyny. Screenings universally attract cross-dressing individuals of all ages bedecked in fun costumes and heavy makeup, and if you've never seen it before, be prepared to be stamped (lovingly) as a "virgin" as you're initiated to this bizarre tribute to bad sci-fi/horror movies.



<http://fringearts.com/event/zanna-dont-a-musical-fairytale/>

Zanna, Don't! (2003)

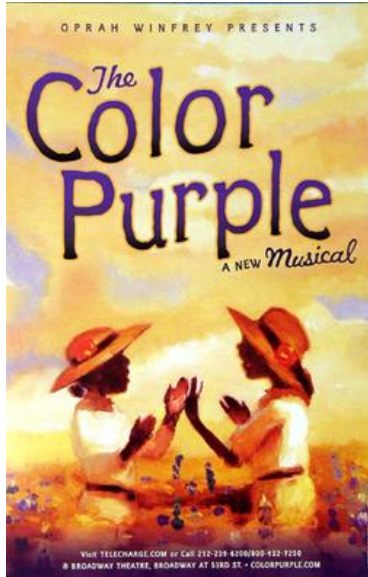
Zanna, Don't! is a musical written by Tim Acito whose setting is a high school in a world that is like ours, but with a few notable swapped stereotypes, such as homosexuality being the accepted norm and football players being the losers of high school social life. Zanna, the local magic-powers holding matchmaker, connects Kate (a high-achiever at school) with Roberta (a waitress at the local diner) and pairs Steve (a lonely quarterback) with Mike (a chess champion), only for Steve and Kate to fall in love and leave the school in a tizzy. Although never a mainstream success compared to others on this list, *Zanna, Don't!* is charming and catchy, and might give viewers a new perspective on societal norms.



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rent_\(musical\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rent_(musical))

Rent (1996)

Also adapted into a 2005 film directed by Chris Columbus, *Rent* is a Broadway rock musical by Jonathan Larson that follows a group of poor young artists and musicians living in the unconventional so-called Alphabet City (in New York City's East Village). The musical includes themes of poverty, homelessness, queer life in the late 20th century, love, personal integrity, and the ravage of HIV/AIDS on LGBTQ+ communities. This description can hardly do the musical justice—if you haven't seen it before, go watch it immediately so that you can debate with teens and colleagues alike about who the biggest jerks really are in the story (Benny? Mark? Maureen? Everyone?) and sing a (possibly off-key) rendition of *La Vie Bohème* with the best of them.



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Color_Purple_\(musical\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Color_Purple_(musical))

The Color Purple (2005)

Based on Alice Walker's 1982 novel (which also had a 1985 film adaptation accused of lesbian erasure for its toning down of the protagonist's positive sexual encounters), *The Color Purple* is a musical about a Black woman named Celie living in the American South in the early 20th century who suffers extensively at the hands of first her father then her husband, but ultimately finds love in her relationship with a woman named Shug. This musical marks a modern remake of a story that has long been essential to both Black and queer culture, and which centers Black women's experiences, self-worth, healing love, and sexuality without shying away from the reality of their experiences of misogyny, racism, and abuse.



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kinky_Boots_\(musical\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kinky_Boots_(musical))

Kinky Boots (2012)

Inspired by true events, *Kinky Boots* is a musical about the inheritor of a shoe factory who, faced with a failing business, partners with a drag queen cabaret performer named Lola to create a line of high-heeled boots intended to suit the needs of drag queens. Through a lot of glamour, glitter, and some drama, the protagonists find common ground, grow through their friendship, and ultimately unite in their efforts to save the shoe factory. With music written by Cindy Lauper, this show is a multiple-award winning hit, and popular for good reason.



[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Elizabeth_Rex_-_2013_\(9307479425\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Elizabeth_Rex_-_2013_(9307479425).jpg)

Elizabeth Rex (2000)

Elizabeth Rex is a British historical fiction play that challenges societal notions of gender through its portrayal of the protagonists' complex relationships with their own gender presentation. On the one hand is Queen Elizabeth I, who has always known she must act like a man as well as push any romantic feelings deep within herself to be a successful ruler, and on the other is a gay male actor who always performs the female roles in the Shakespeare plays that are his bread and butter. The two connect and have the chance to learn from each other in this play that recounts the Queen's attempt, the night before the execution of the Earl of Essex, to divert her thoughts by watching a theatrical performance.



<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/feb/17/the-high-table-review-coming-out-and-coming-together-in-tender-debut>

The High Table (2020)

In a well-reviewed debut by playwright Temi Wilkey, *The High Table* delves deep into questions of love, family, and acceptance when Tara's Nigerian parents refuse to attend her wedding to out-and-proud Leah. Tara's ancestors alternate between watching and intervening from heaven while the drama unfolds (but not without its comedic moments). A beautiful celebration of Black queer women everywhere, this play is a key story to know about in the theatre world, and a nice taste of more to come in the world of queer theatre.

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