

# Roseneath Theatre

Touring World-Class Plays to Schools and Theatres since 1983

Q2Q Conference – Vancouver, July 2016

## Theatre for Young Audiences Tackling GSAs and Homophobia

Andrew Lamb, Artistic Director – Roseneath Theatre

Paul Dunn, Playwright – Outside

*Outside* by Paul Dunn is a play for middle school and high school students (grades 7-12) that follows the story of Daniel, a teen who triumphs over homophobic bullying, depression and suicide. Roseneath Theatre originally premiered this production in the spring of 2015, when it received Dora Mavor Moore Award nominations for Outstanding New Play and Outstanding Individual Performance for the lead actor. This production was also recently remounted for another spring school tour that was launched with a Gala performance at The 519 Centre in Toronto's gay village. Over the course of our two school tours this production was performed for over 30,000 young people across the GTA and throughout the province of Ontario.

**About the Play:** *Outside* is the story of Daniel, a teen who triumphs over homophobic bullying, depression and suicide. At his new school he shares his story at a meeting of the Gay-Straight Alliance. Meanwhile, at his old school, struggling to come to terms with what happened, his friends Krystina and Jeremy attempt to start their own GSA. Through flashbacks, we travel through Daniel's harrowing experience with bullying that began with a taunt and a text message and eventually led to a serious physical assault. Three friends, two high schools, one lunch hour.

Themes: Homophobia, Bullying, Teen Mental Health, Gay Straight Alliances

Curriculum Connections: Social Sciences & Humanities, Health & Physical Education, Drama, Equity and Inclusive Education

**Teaser Trailer:** <https://youtu.be/41pHzaySJbs>

**Outside Show Page:** <http://roseneath.ca/outside/>

**Study Guide:** <http://roseneath.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Outside-2016-Study-Guide.pdf>

Roseneath's production of *Outside* addresses homophobia within the context of the Gay-Straight Alliance movement happening in schools across Canada. Our first tour was sold out months before it began and was extended by a week due to popular demand. For this tour we also collaborated with Toronto PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbian and Gays) as well as Buddies in Bad Times Theatre who hosted a reading of the play with educators and the community.

In October 2015, Roseneath and the RBC Foundation received the artsVest Outstanding Partnership Award for our work together on *Outside* as part of the Canadian Arts and Business Awards presented by Business for the Arts. In November 2015 we also had the opportunity to showcase our full production *Outside* at the CAPACOA Conference in Ottawa to presenters and presenting networks from across the country and are currently putting together a national tour for our 2017-18 season. Playwrights Canada Press will be publishing this play next year.

**Roseneath Theatre** is the largest professional touring company in Ontario, reaching approximately 100,000 students per season. Considered one of Canada's leading producers of high-quality theatre for children and their families, our plays address issues that resonate with today's youth, encouraging them to reflect on themselves and their place within the community. The company's extraordinary commitment to excellence has earned many accolades, including 43 Dora Mavor Moore Award Nominations and a total of 14 Awards. For more information please visit: [www.roseneath.ca](http://www.roseneath.ca)

## Paul Dunn – Artist Statement

I met my best friend, Rosemary Rowe, at the Citadel Theatre's drama class for teens, in Edmonton, Alberta in 1988. A few years after that, in 1995, we came out to each other, late one summer night. I was smoking and we were nursing slurpees from 7-11. The conversation turned to the future, and to the possibility of marriage and kids. "Sure," I said, "I might want that... if I thought I was straight." There was a pause, after which Rose replied, "me too." Flash-forward 20 years. Rose and I are sitting together in the main office of a Kitsilano high school, waiting to be escorted to the Art Room for a lunchtime meeting with the school's Queer-Straight Alliance. We are the guest speakers, and our topic is the play we are developing for Toronto's Roseneath Theatre. It's a play about homophobia, bullying and mental health, called *Outside*. Rosemary is my dramaturge, and I've come to Vancouver from Toronto for a week to work with her, and produce a first draft of the script.

One of the first things I said to the group of young people assembled in that Art Room was that what they were doing blew my mind. I told them that I couldn't imagine the high school I went to having a GSA, or anything even close to it, when I was there. Nor could I say with any confidence that a 15-year-old me would have had the awareness and courage to attend such a meeting as this, even if such a thing did exist. In the 20 years since I was a closeted and in-denial student at a Catholic High School in Alberta, it seems that a lot has changed. On the other hand, it seems that little has changed. When I was preparing to write *Outside*, some of the stories I read filled me with awe: here were teens and pre-teens already identifying themselves along the queer spectrum, and demanding a voice and a space in their school's culture - whether it was fighting to take their romantic partner to the prom, or starting a GSA in their school. Other stories saddened and frustrated me: here were students who were enduring years of bullying and harassment based on their sexual orientation or perceived sexual orientation, school cultures that were hostile to LGBTQ youth, and school administrators who were obtuse, stubborn and woefully unhelpful to youth who were suffering. In the year prior to my beginning to write *Outside*, cases of young gay people in the U.S. committing suicide after enduring bullying and harassment sparked Dan Savage to start the "It Gets Better" campaign. In Canada, the story of Ottawa teen Jamie Hubley made national headlines, and started a conversation around homophobia within our school system. In a controversial "rant" on his show, Rick Mercer demanded that adult gays make themselves more visible within their schools and communities, for the sake of our queer youth. I wanted to do something with my grief and anger. I wanted to reach out to young people directly and offer them comfort and encouragement. I wanted to tell them, also, to take care of themselves and each other. I am grateful that I am a playwright, and found my way to writing *Outside*.

*Outside* takes place in two separate high schools, over the course of the same lunch hour. In one school, Daniel is speaking to us, his fellow queer students and allies, at a QSA meeting. He tells us how he was transferred from his previous school because he was not safe there. He takes us through his three-year journey of daily bullying and harassment over his perceived sexual orientation (which he later owns as his sexual orientation), that began with a taunt and a texting game, and culminated in a physical assault and public humiliation. He shares about his downward spiral into depression, the well-meaning but inadequate attempts at intervention from family and staff, and his arrival at a place of utter hopelessness. After surviving a suicide attempt, he has been transferred to this safer school, where he is now speaking with us. The other school we see is Daniel's old school, where his friends, Krystina and Jeremy, are attempting to start a GSA, in reaction to what happened to Daniel. Neither Krystina or Jeremy identify as queer themselves, and they grapple with the best way to go about being allies, and attract membership. Through flashbacks, we see the three friends together, as they relive and re-examine the events of the previous year. The play depicts two schools on opposite ends of the queer-friendly spectrum, in order that each school audience can locate themselves somewhere between the two. By casting the student audience in the default position of allies (the fellow members

of Daniel's QSA at his new, affirming school), I'm provoking students to consider why they may or may not be comfortable in that position. Each character in *Outside* is designed as a "way in" for a different section of the student population: Krystina is confident in her role as ally. Jeremy slowly comes to an awareness, moving from bystander to ally and struggling along the way. These two offer us examples of students who are doing their best in a difficult situation. They don't have all the answers, and they show us that it's okay for us to be unsure of the best way to help. Those students who are suffering from bullying and harassment of any sort may relate to Daniel, learn from him that they are not alone, and take from the experience of the play an opportunity to seek help.

Early on in the play, Daniel jokes to his fellow QSA-ers, saying: *And I know it's not like... "hey, this is the club where we sit around and talk about our GAY PAIN", 'cause who'd wanna go to that, really...* However, in writing *Outside*, that's precisely what I did. I began by revisiting my own experiences of confusion, isolation and self-loathing. And because I was bullied, I have an understanding of how that works. I know how bullying and harassment can be much more than overt name calling and being shoved in the hallway. It can be like a game, and it can be complex in its cruelty. In *Outside*, I was able to create a portrait of homophobic bullying that rings true for our student audiences. Again, it was a gift to have Rosemary working with me: someone who knew me then, and knows me now. My lesbian best friend gave me the courage to look at that painful gay-teen stuff, now that I was safely on the other side.

The Artistic Director of Roseneath Theatre, Andrew Lamb, has been the champion of this piece since its inception. He provided opportunities for development through workshops in a variety of middle and high schools. We tested the content and script on the young people who were the intended audience of *Outside*. I kept asking them, "Does this seem real to you guys?" and "Is this how you talk?" Interacting with them, I was able to reconnect with the perspective I had when I was in high school - the feelings, the confusion, the size of a teenager's world. It turns out that those things haven't changed: Teens are still prone to try solving problems on their own, way past the point where they should reach out for help; Teens assume that what's happening to them is somehow their fault. We had public readings at Buddies in Bad Times, which brought together members of PFLAG, EGALÉ, the teaching community and the queer community, and we received and incorporated their feedback. I spent a day in a Toronto high school with Spencer Harrison, the openly gay Artist-in-Residence who was running the school's fledgling GSA. I learned how one school's climate towards its LGBTQ youth can be completely different from a school just down the block. I learned that teachers and staff struggle with homophobia within their schools as well.

I feel privileged to have been given a direct line of communication to middle and high school students with *Outside*. Ultimately, my message to the students is to consider empathy, and the consequences of even their smallest actions. For those students and staff who want to make their schools better for themselves and their LGBTQ peers, this play reminds them that there are resources and support out there, waiting for them. For students who have started GSAs or QSAs and yet struggle to keep them going, or get resistance from their peers or school administrations, this play validates their existence, and encourages their efforts.

Watching a performance of *Outside*, sitting in a high-school auditorium, surrounded by hundreds of teenagers, is a surreal and almost out-of-body experience for me. I never would have predicted that writing this play would be a part of my story as a theatre artist. Certainly that 19-year-old, cigarette-smoking, slurpee-drinking gay boy would not be able to fathom that 20 years from then his play on homophobia in schools would be reaching over 30,000 kids, and counting.

'Outside' by Paul Dunn  
Produced by Roseneath Theatre  
**Selected Feedback from 2015 and 2016 school tours**

"Our school really benefited from this production. It may take some time to see the effects on our students in our building, but it has promoted so many positive messages about inclusion and responsibility for our own actions that we will probably never see the many ways this will ripple into our students' (and staff's) lives."

"I think we need more of this rich and meaningful theatre to come to our schools in Toronto so our students can understand, appreciate and respect differences in our society without putting labels on anyone."

"The students were attentive and interested. I think everyone in the audience, adults included, could see themselves as one or more of those characters. I think they were excited to have the opportunity to learn and think about this issue openly."

-- K. Fraser, Teacher, Holy Trinity Catholic High School, Simcoe Muskoka Catholic District School Board

"Students expressed how much they enjoyed the play and learned about social justice issues and character education. In a post-play discussion the students demonstrated a deeper understanding of how bullying affects the victim and how harmful it is to have a lack of understanding between peers."

"Many students were saying how everyone should be able to decide who they want to be and how to live their lives. They felt that everyone has the right make their own decisions and we should support them. They were genuinely upset about how Daniel was getting bullied."

-- Miki Fisher, Teacher, Valley Park Middle School, Toronto District School Board

"My kids said they are never going to talk insensitively about what people choose to be in their life and they would show respect for all."

"I have never seen my kids so engaged and the questions they had for me when they came back to class were very meaningful and deep."

-- Jyoti Bakshi, Teacher, Valley Park Middle School, Toronto District School Board (TDSB)

"I asked a great number of kids how they felt about the production and the response was terrific. One girl said "Miss, this play said to the boys/people who are negative, the thing we have tried to say to them for a long time. It rang hauntingly clear to many of the students and woke up those who let things like this (phobic behaviour of all natures) go unchallenged. When asked to scale the production 1-10.....they all said 8,9,and 10."

-- D. Love-McClelland, Teacher, Sir Wilfrid Laurier Collegiate Institute, TDSB

"The professionalism & passion of the actors along with the outstanding set design keep the students focused and engaged. Their attentiveness to the play allowed them to really think about the issues and gave them the confidence to discuss them."

-- Nick Stefanoff, Principal, Valley Park Middle School, TDSB

"One student said that she could connect with the character that represented the bystander - sometimes you don't want to say anything because you're afraid of becoming the target. Hopefully seeing the bystander's journey in the play will help give her courage to separate herself from the crowd." -- Samara Nicholds, Teacher, Valley Park Middle School, TDSB

"The students responded well to the show. I think it helped to provide perspective and build tolerance and I hope that they will have the courage to say no to bullying."

"It was great for social justice and character education. Middle School is a hard time for students socially where fitting in seems to go hand-in-hand with pushing out. Students seem to know all the right things to say about stopping bullying, but we constantly see contrary evidence and I think lectures and lessons aren't really getting through to them. I think plays engage them and help to develop empathy so I think it's a better vehicle to get the point across."

"This is what our kids need! Lecturing them on rules and issues in the abstract has little impact -- but this play made the issues real. In that hour, our audience invested in three new friends in the characters on stage, and then experienced their struggles with them. It was powerful. I wish we could have this production back every two years."

-- Darcy McLenaghan, Teacher, Valley Park Middle School, TDSB

"The issue of suicide and depression is one that we have come to know very personally in our community. I thought that the difficult subject of suicide and bullying was handled in a realistic and yet sensitive, compassionate way"

"Your actors are astonishing in their ability to respond to young people in a meaningful and respectful way. The dialogue was outstanding from both audience and actors."

-- Mariam Racko, Teacher, Glenview Senior Public School, TDSB

"The performances were excellent. The script did a good job of talking about issues without being 'preachy' or too heavy-handed. I especially liked the element of the bystander character, who expressed what I think a lot of students feel about bullying – they aren't participating, but they aren't exactly stopping it either."

-- Sally Panavas, Teacher, Scarlett Heights Entrepreneurial Academy, TDSB

"Last year, I taught a student who transitioned to identifying as gender neutral and this play sparked many more questions, particularly about sexual orientation and how to be an ally."

"It was at once heart-wrenching and hilarious with a powerful message. Very well done!"

-- Miryam Morris, Teacher, Don Mills Middle School, TDSB

"I believe the show had a great impact on my students. My Gr. 10 Drama class was in attendance and one of the first questions they asked me was if our school had a GSA. I informed them that one has been in place for about 3 months. They wanted to know if they could attend meetings. I told them that they were more than welcome! We've now made a plan to attend their next meeting as a class and to bring pizza!!!"

-- Felicia Brennan, Teacher, Northview Heights S.S., TDSB

"Already, kids are approaching me and saying how much they liked the play and unexpected students are initiating respectful dialogue about the content."

-- Joanne Coniam, Teacher, L'Amoreaux C.I., TDSB

"The students really felt the importance of a GSA in high school. They didn't find it "cliche". Some of them thought it really made them think more about the impact of their actions."

"The students appreciated that the performance "was real". These events, as portrayed in the play, could happen in any school. The language used by the actors was organic and authentic."

"While the students are already interested in issues of social justice, this play helped us to start a dialogue around the difference between thinking and feeling versus taking action. In our school students are generally accepting of one another but not necessarily celebratory. The Rainbow Alliance does not have many members who identify as straight allies who are not already friends with members of the club. The play is helping the students to think about this concept and what it means to take action to end homophobic discrimination - also to help them think about the links between the various anti-discrimination groups - that there could be more links between them. And that was just in the 10 minutes after the play. Bravo! and thank you!"

"Poignant, timely, well done, brings the idea of being gay or transgender into the limelight, helps to show students who are not gay that gay people face very real and serious troubles when trying to get along in a high school environment if they are not supported. The play also shows compassion, caring, friendship and understanding."

"As an openly gay educator, I am so incredibly grateful for your show. Although our students are living in a safer world for homosexuals, there is still way too many derogatory comments made by kids. Thank you, thank you thank you."

- Monica Ramakers, Teacher

"For some students they felt comfortable coming forward to discuss their feelings. Several students were upset after the performance and were surrounded by their friends and classmates hugging for support. So the modelling of how to support and be an ally really worked!"

"Definitely made the students introspective and thoughtful. The feedback I received was very positive and many said how much they enjoyed it and how important they felt the message was."

"It especially moved the students who belong to our GSD (Gender & Sexual Diversity) group. They felt that their personal experiences were represented in the play. It gave a positive voice to their struggles and helped create awareness around the issues of Gender and Sexual diversity."

"One colleague told me she spent her entire class after the play discussing what students can do starting today to be a more positive voice for others. Apparently each student took a turn sharing one idea with the class."

"Our GSA was very proud that we presented LGBTQ+ issues to our school community. Many teachers and students gave good feedback about the show. It certainly has opened up discussion about these issues and how we could better support students that are affected by them."

"Outside is a hard-hitting, insightful and engrossing piece of theatre that looks at the ways in which young people who are "different" are bullied in today's context of social media and cell phones. It demands that we consider the impact of our actions and refuses to settle for easy solutions. It never speaks down to young people. It is honest. It empowers young people with a sense of responsibility. It is simply one of the best pieces of theatre for young audiences that I have encountered in recent memory."

-- Brendan Healey, Former Artistic Director, Buddies in Bad Times Theatre

"Every young person deserves to feel safe at school. Sadly, this is not always the case for our LGBTQ youth, many of whom endure hateful comments and abuse. Outside uses the power of theatre to illustrate the devastating impact of homophobic bullying. Every student and teacher should see it."

-- Jill Holroyd, Toronto PFLAG board member