

Outstanding Voices

David Armstrong

Executive Producer and Artistic Director of The 5th Avenue Theatre



David Armstrong came to Seattle's 5th Avenue Theatre in 2000 and turned a bright spotlight on the city and its theatrical talent. Under his leadership as artistic director and executive producer, The 5th has gained acclaim for its development and production of new works. Since 2001, the Seattle-based company has produced 17 new musicals. To date, nine of those have moved on to Broadway premieres, earning a combined 15 Tony Awards, including two for Best Musical – "Hairspray" and "Memphis."

Tell us about a challenge you've faced as an LGBTQ executive and how you overcame it. I am blessed to work in an industry that has for nearly 100 years included LGBTQ men and women in all levels of the business, including at the highest levels of leadership. Over the decades those individuals have performed their roles with various levels of openness regarding their sexual orientation, however. At least within the industry, their presence and influence have been understood and acknowledged throughout. The only challenges have sometimes been with new employees who come from outside the profession and have been surprised to enter a work culture that is so very inclusive and open. Helping them to feel comfortable in a space that is sometimes opposite of their usual work environment is the task that is needed.

What can the region's arts organizations do to advance LGBTQ causes and shape the conversation about equal rights? Our role as arts organizations is to reflect our society, our culture, and our values back to the audience. Playgoers should be able to see themselves in the work that we produce on our stages. By holding this "mirror up to nature" as Shakespeare put it, we understand ourselves better and create empathy and compassion for one another. I am happy to say that the principal subject of the musical theater has been "liberation," most often illustrated through stories of struggles against prejudice of all kinds. Experiencing this art makes us more willing to open our hearts and minds.

What works of art do you think best express some of the challenges and triumphs members of the LGBTQ community have experienced? Musicals have often dramatized the stories of LGBTQ people, and because of their sometimes immense popularity these shows have had a profound impact on both the LGBTQ community, and society at large. "A Chorus Line" was one of the first shows to depict the struggles of gay men to come to a feeling of pride in regard to their sexuality. It would be followed by "La Cage Aux Folles," "Falsettos," "The Full Monty," "Rent," "Hedwig (and the Angry Inch)," "The Color Purple," "Kinky Boots," and the current hit "Fun Home." However, it is the silly and campy "The Rocky Horror Show" that in my opinion has played the largest role in breaking down homophobia in our society.

Who inspires you and why? I am inspired by the amazingly talented actors, singers, dancers, directors choreographers, designers, musicians and technicians that I have the privilege of working with every day.

DAVID ARMSTRONG

Title: Executive Producer and Artistic Director

Company: The 5th Avenue Theatre

Age: 57

Hometown: Cincinnati, Ohio

Live now: Seattle

Previous jobs: 20 years as a freelance director, choreographer, playwright, and producer based in New York City.