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LYRIC THEATER BRINGS *SONGS FOR A NEW WORLD* TO HOUGHTON

ERNEST LIPSCOMB '28

Houghton University Lyric Theater is presenting their fall musical, S*ongs for a New World*, this weekend. This show is unique, consisting of a series of independent songs connected by a common thematic focus. This production has been months in the making and is the culmination of many hours of dedication.

Songs for a New World explores the idea of a moment of change in people's lives, each song presenting a different character in a unique moment. Amanda Cox, Lyric Theater director, said that she was "drawn to the show's exploration of what it means to face the unknown," a theme that "we can all relate to, regardless of our age or circumstances."



One of the casts of *Songs for a New World* performing during dress rehearsal. COURTESY OF ANNABELLE ROOT

These focal moments of change range from a mother choosing to hold onto hope as she waits for her son to return from war to a young man deciding that he will make a name for himself as a basketball player to escape a bleak future. While the situations the characters face are sometimes clear, some songs are ambiguous about what is leading the singer to the point of change. Cast member Miriam Brooks '29, said that audience members should come "open to your own interpretation" of many scenes.

While much of the show is open to a variety of interpretations, its theme connects each song and unifies the show. "The show doesn't shy away from the difficult and sometimes painful realities of being human, but I think there's a beautiful thread of possibility running through it," Cox said, telling audiences to "listen for the hope."

Even with each song presenting different situations and characters, "There's a lot of cool emotional moments with characters interacting with each other and learning things about themselves. It's a very relational show," said Lily Worden '28, another cast member. Cox said to "pay attention to the moments of connection between the characters, even when their stories seem completely unrelated," as they provide different perspectives on similar moments on the brink of something new.

With such a unique show, the cast has faced unique challenges. "Trying to get into character when there's no discernable plot is a little bit more difficult," said Brooks. Cox also mentioned

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School Closures Across America

JESSE SHARPE

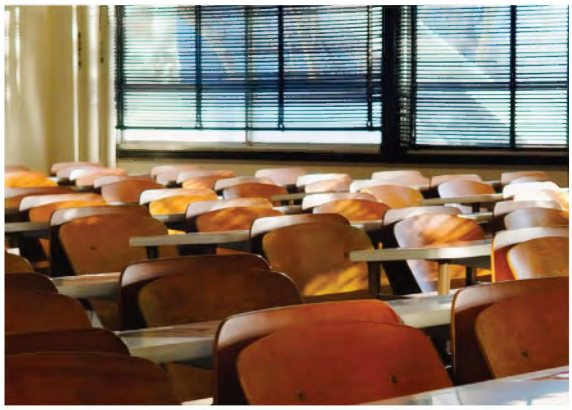
In the past year, over 1,156 schools closed in the United States (US). Though school closures are nothing new, this recent quantity is particularly alarming and a report from Annenberg EdExchange (AE) has found that the rate of closures may continue to increase. AE discovered that enrollment rates are falling faster than schools are being closed. A study from the Hechinger Report in collaboration with the Associated Press (AP) and Big Local News out of Stanford University (SU) have found that this acceleration of school closures is due to multiple factors, including a fall in birth rates, changes in schooling as a result of COVID-19 and the crackdown on immigration in the US.

Birth rates in the US have been in decline for decades. These declines are increasingly being felt in the elementary and secondary schools. Additionally, these studies indicate that this could be a prolonged drop rather than a short-term change.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also had a lasting effect on public school attendance. During lockdown, many families turned to homeschooling to get through the crisis. After lockdown, not all of the students returned to their public schools. In fact, the AE report found that "One in four public schools currently has enrollment at least 15 percent below its pre-pandemic baseline." Many families chose to continue homeschooling or enroll their children in private schools in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Finally, the AP found that the crackdown on immigration has also been felt in public school numbers. With fewer people moving to the US, there are fewer new families feeding into school districts and helping to keep schools fully enrolled.

The impact of all of these factors has meant that many communities are finding they have more schools than required for their populations. In order to save on costs associated with schooling, many communities have taken to closing or combining schools. However, a separate study from SU found that school closures do not always save money. An analysis of the financial costs of school closures in California from 2011-2019 discovered that savings in school closures were often offset by enrollment declines and the need to maintain unused buildings. These findings challenge the belief that school closures help the financial standing of the communities in which they occur.



Empty desks in a sunlit classroom. COURTESY OF ZHU YI ON PEXELS

Furthermore, all of these studies found that as schools close, the communities they served suffer. Many families move out of the area or choose alternative forms of education. The Hechinger Report describes this as a "downward spiral" for the areas as families flee for neighborhoods with healthier school enrollment num-

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"What Does That Office Do?"

JEAN ELWELL '29

Many students at Houghton University (HU) do not know what the Office of Career and Calling actually is. Located in the Center for Student Success, the Office of Career and Calling (formerly known as Vocation and Calling) "can give you the tools and direction to prepare you for a meaningful career," says the HU website. Patrick Hager (formerly the head coach of cross country/track and field) now serves as the Director of Career and Calling. Hager defines the office's purpose as "professional development" for students and "equipping students to be prepared for the next step, whatever it is."

Hager can help you edit your resume, practice interview skills and research post-graduate programs and opportunities. He is invested in each student that comes into his office: "If you come see me, I'll go to bat for you." When asked what he would like HU students to know about the office, he said, "It's really important to get another set of eyes on things," and "Why not? It's a free service to go use. The worst thing that happens is that you meet with me and go, 'Oh, he's cuckoo.'"

Raychel Yost '27 made an appointment with Hager regarding her resume. Yost said that he had lots of resources and examples to help her. Hager asked her questions about her experience to best organize and edit her resume. Overall, Yost feels more prepared in writing resumes, and she feels she's "set up for success."

Ethan Howell '28 more recently attended the college visit to Buffalo General Hospital. Howell is majoring in exercise science with hopes to work as a physical therapist, possibly at a hospital. Howell enjoyed the visit, calling it an "awesome opportunity." However, he found "it didn't really apply to me all that much" because they ran out of time to speak to a physical therapist, as he had requested. However, "people from other professions [came] down and talk[ed] to the students with the more applicable majors." This includes a health executive, whom Howell got to speak to.

The Office of Career and Calling helps students learn how to get ahead in the job market and succeed when trying to get hired. Hager aims for HU student resumes to "stand out" when hiring managers review them. The Office of Career and Calling can help you discover which field you want to pursue. Hager admits he "doesn't have all the answers," so he is grateful for HU's faculty to guide students and answer their industry-specific questions. Hager is further grateful for his extensive alum connections, who are excited to help students wherever they can.

Before knowing Hager as the Director of Career and Calling, Liam Gilroy '29 knew Hager as the coach of cross country/track and field. Gilroy explains, "Freshman year was very hard for me. It was great to have someone on my side…It was great for someone to reach out to me." Gilroy said that Coach Hager let him do homework in his athletic office. "He really cares about his students…not just limited to his…athletes. He wants to help people. He's a joy to be with." Gilroy attests to Hager's character. He can help you with any career questions and endeavors. You can make appointments to discuss such things with Director Hager on Handshake.

"It's a free service, and it's there for you." – Patrick Hager ★

SCHOOLS *from page #1*

bers. This then harms future population growth and taxes paid into the communities left behind.

These school closures are not being felt equally across the country. AE found that, "Where closures did occur, they were more common among schools in lower-income neighborhoods, those serving higher concentrations of Black students and charter schools." The closures of schools in lower-income neighborhoods can exacerbate financial strains as families that may be able to help the areas move elsewhere for educational opportunities.

These changes indicate that many communities in America may be at a point of transition. What the long-term results will be is unknown, but if this trend continues, as it appears will be the case, many cities and communities in this country could be greatly transformed. ★

LYRIC THEATER *from page #1*

characterization being a challenge, and said that each cast member has to "be able to step into a character's story very quickly and invite the audience to invest in that person's experience, sometimes in just a few minutes." The cast has risen to the challenge, however, and Cox said that she was "incredibly proud" and that each performer has "brought so much heart, creativity and commitment to it. I can't wait for people to experience what we've been working on!"

Performances will be held in the Center for the Arts Recital Hall on Nov. 19th and 20th at 7:30pm, and on the 21st at 2pm and 7:30pm. Tickets are available online via the events page on the Houghton Campus Groups Hub. ★

Alumni Advice



As I look back on my time at Houghton and reflect on the experiences and lessons learned throughout my career so far, there are three things I would share as words of advice: be yourself, be willing to step outside of your comfort zone and trust that God's plans are better than your own.

First, be yourself. It can be tempting to compare yourself to others, try to fit in or become who you think others expect you to be. Resist that temptation. God created you with unique gifts, talents and passions. Embrace who you are, be confident in the person God is shaping you to become and don't feel the need to follow someone else's path.

Second, be willing to step outside your comfort zone. Some of life's greatest opportunities come when we're willing to take a chance, try something new or say yes to an opportunity that initially feels uncomfortable. Get involved, build relationships, pursue new experiences and don't be afraid to take a few risks. Growth rarely happens when we stay where we are comfortable.

Finally, trust that God's plans are better than yours. You may have a very clear picture of where you want to go and what you want your future to look like, but life doesn't always follow our plans. Some of the greatest blessings and opportunities come from unexpected directions. Trust God's timing. Remain faithful and be open to where he leads.

Your time at Houghton is about more than earning a degree. It's an opportunity to build relationships, discover who God created you to be, grow in your faith and prepare for the journey ahead. Make the most of it! ★

Stetson Knight, Class of '99

SPEAK OUT!

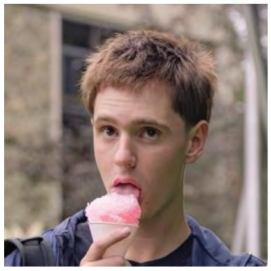
Letters to the editor should be less than 600 words

SUBMIT TO **star@houghton.edu**

Christian Nationalism is Pagan



BEATRICE BROOKS '27



JOEL ROCHA '29

In last week's opinion piece, "I Am a Christian Nationalist," Jacob Schick and Zach Lynet quoted John Adams' words, arguing that the American Constitution only works for a moral and religious people — namely, Christians.

However, the call of Jesus isn't simply a "moral" or "religious" call, as Schick and Lynet claimed. It is a call to a different kind of life. Christ calls us out of what the pagan powers of the world consider to be normal and into a new kind of life altogether.

The Apostle Paul describes our new Christian life as one in which we are "crucified with Christ" (Gal. 2:19). This means that our lives are shaped by service and sacrifice for others, just as Jesus' life and death was for us. We might call this a "cruciform" or "cross-shaped" life. It is a life shaped by love for those who don't deserve it, care for the least of these (Mt. 25:20) and humble servant leadership rather than tyrannical control (Mk. 10:43–45).

Christianity is, in fact, the reversal of all pagan power structures that seek to control others through tyranny, discrimination, hatred and even violence.

Christian nationalism, on the other hand, is explicitly pagan. It perverts the gospel of Christ into a means of political power and dominance, stripping people of their human dignity and God-given autonomy. It worships the pagan gods of power, money, racism, hatred and misogyny instead of the God of the Bible, whose power is made perfect in weakness (ahem, the cross) and whose Kingdom is exemplified by diversity and love.

Don't hear what I'm not saying. Christians should vote for whatever party seems best to them, red or blue, according to thoughtful research, biblical study and the fellowship of a community of believers working through the challenges of twenty-first-century politics together.

I really do agree that it is the Christian duty to vote with Christian values. But it is not the Christian duty to perpetuate a rhetoric of exclusion, fear, racism and male supremacy, as Christian nationalism so often does. This is the true Christian nationalist agenda: a pagan agenda.

Not only is Schick and Lynet's argument based on a pagan understanding of the gospel, but it also draws from a well of poor historical and political understanding of America. The foundation of the United States was certainly influenced by a form of Christianity, albeit very different from modern American Christianity. However, Schick and Lynet are under the false assumption that, because of this, it was our founders' intention to create a Christian nation. It was not.

To understand this, it is important to understand that the Constitution is not a religious document; it is a political document. The founders did not intend to write a religious document. Rather, they wrote a political document that defends the freedoms of its people, including the freedom of religion. This can be seen primarily in the First Amendment, which prohibits Congress from establishing a national religion and protects the free exercise of religion and also in Article VI, which explicitly prohibits religious tests as qualifications for federal public office. There is no "myth" of the separation of church and state; the concept of separation is literally baked into our Constitution. That is why it allows for us to be led by non-Christian leaders. It is un-American and undermines freedom — a core American value — to argue for a national religion.

It is also important to understand that Christians' national identity comes after their religious identity. We are Christians who happen to be American, not Americans forced to be Christian because of our citizenship or residency. As Christians who happen to be American, we should live as Jesus would have lived, welcoming those from other religions as children of God and doing our best to guide them toward the Christian faith. That is our Great Commission: to make disciples in gentleness, not to force our beliefs onto others.

Christian Nationalists present a God that is unwelcoming of those who do not fit our conception of Christianity. Their "gospel" claims that we are to reject those who differ from us religiously and not love them. That is not Christianity. Jesus loved and lived with the misguided, the rich, the poor, those who were welcomed by society and those who were not. That is how we are to live. We should not try to make a purely Christian nation. Instead, we should try to make a Christian world, and we prevent the possibility of that by not allowing for religious freedom and individual choice in our own country.

We should not try to make a purely Christian nation.

Some people use their individual freedoms to follow violent, extremist religions and I'm certainly not arguing in favor of this. However, a religion like Islam, which Christian Nationalists most commonly refer to as one such violent religion, is far more nuanced than just the extremists. We prevent America from being as free as it could be, and we prevent Christians from reaching those whom they need to when we judge one vast religion by the actions of minority extremist sects. By not allowing for religious freedom, we become un-American; by prioritizing our nation first above our duty to God, we also become un-Christian.

It is clear that Christian Nationalism misrepresents both the fundamental principles of the American project, and of the Christian faith. Christ's very teachings and sacrificial death condemn the mission of Christian Nationalism. Rather than exercising power over others, Jesus demonstrates weakness by becoming human (1 Cor. 1:18 and Phil. 2:6–11), accepting people who had once been excluded or demeaned (Rom. 11) and offering himself as a sacrifice for the undeserving (Lk. 9:23). Likewise, we are taught to lay ourselves down for other people rather than to domineer. We are obligated to work for the good of everyone who lives in America. And we must love all — even the people society tells us to deport or to silence. ★

Beatrice is a senior studying Bible & Theology and History, with plans to be a pastor in the Wesleyan-Methodist tradition. She enjoys granny hobbies, preaching, and studying feminism and theology.

Joel is a sophomore double majoring in Political Science & Philosophy and English, and a minor in Theology. He enjoys running, camping, and reading about various topics.

The mission of the Houghton STAR is to preserve and promote the values of dialogue, transparency and integrity that have been the ideals of Houghton University since its inception. This is done by serving as a medium for the expression of student thought and as a quality publication of significant campus news, Houghton area news, and events.

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Movie Review

Unpopular Opinion: Dead Poets Society is a beautiful, seductive lie

DR. SUSAN BRUXVOORT LIPSCOMB

Consider a scenario. A new teacher at an elite boys' school creates a cult following among his students, encouraging them in minor acts of vandalism, violations of school rules and general defiance of the ethos of the institution. He encourages them to follow their adolescent impulses, tacitly endorsing their use of tobacco and pornography.

One of his students, following the teacher's instruction to "seize the day," realizes that his desires conflict with those of his parents. When he turns to the charismatic teacher to discuss the problem, the teacher encourages his belief that sacrificing his desires would be a tragic compromise of authenticity.

Feeling trapped, the student takes his own life. The teacher is blamed for the suicide and loses his job. The boys he has indoctrinated mourn his departure and salute him as a hero.

This is the plot of Dead Poets Society, a beautiful film that nonetheless tells dangerous lies about charismatic adults, adolescent emotion and personal autonomy.

Dead Poets Society is easy to love. It has beautiful cinematography, a compelling script and strong acting. Robin Williams (in the middle of his career) and Ethan Hawke (at the beginning of his), give moving performances.

Last November, the Star ran a review of Dead Poets Society, which concluded: "The muted autumn hues of New England, the haunting soundtrack and the quiet intensity of the performances create a reflective atmosphere. Every frame feels intentional, enhancing the film's emotional depth."

I agree that these elements engage viewers' emotions and make the film easy to enjoy. But they also seduce the viewer into believing several lies.

Lie #1. Thinking for yourself goes hand in hand with defying authority and breaking rules.

The teacher, Mr. Keating, teaches his students that the method of poetry promoted in their textbook (a mathematical analysis) is not only unproductive but stupid. He orders the students to tear the relevant pages out of their textbooks. He hasn't taught them to think for themselves about this approach to poetry. He's led them in an act of vandalism based on his own perspective.

Lie #2. As a young person, following your desires is the most important thing you can do. If your ability to follow your desires is restricted, this is tragic.

Keating's student Neil Perry (portrayed by Robert Sean Leonard) discovers that he is passionate about theater and wants to become an actor. His parents, especially his father, do not want him to do this; they want him to go to Harvard Medical School. When Neil gets a role in a local production of A Midsummer Night's Dream (forging his father's name on a permission form), his father is enraged and commands him, the day before the performance, to drop out of the play.

At this point, Neil goes to Mr. Keating and asks his advice. Mr. Keating's response is unhelpful: he says, "Have you ever told your father about your passion for acting? Have you ever showed him that?"

Keating tells Neil that he is not being true to himself, that he is putting on an act for his father, "playing the part of the dutiful son." Mr. Keating's recommendation to Neil is to double down on his pursuit of authenticity. He says, "You have to show him who you are, what your heart is…You prove it to him by your conviction and your passion. You show him that."

Neil sees the truth: "I'm trapped," he says. He understands that Mr. Keating has put him in an impossible situation, that avowing his love of acting will not move his father.

Later, Neil lies to Mr. Keating, telling him that he talked with his father and that his father gave him the go-ahead to appear in the play. Neil cannot be the hero of self-expression Keating pushed him to be, so he lies to save face with his mentor.

This sets the stage for the climactic tragedy of the movie. When his father sees Neil in the play, he tells Neil that he is enrolling him in a military academy. This prompts Neil to commit suicide.

The script writers constructed this scenario, of course, to appeal to the emotions of viewers. It teaches us more about our yearning for simple fables than about the world. Neil's father is so cruel and unfeeling. He puts Neil in such an awful position. Mr. Keating, the teacher, is so warm and understanding. He's the only one who "gets" Neil.

But what if Mr. Keating had made a phone call to the director of the play and checked to see if there was an understudy to take the part? It's not unprecedented that a teenager can't act in a high school play. What if Mr. Keating had said: "Neil, I know that not being able to act in this play is a terrible disappointment, but you're going to have other opportunities. I'm sure that Harvard has great theater clubs. You can go along with your father's wishes for the moment. There will be time to act later if this is something that's really important to you."

That intervention or that conversation would have made a less-heartrending film. But they would be healthier ways for an influential teacher to interact with a vulnerable young man.

Lie #3. The best teachers are the charismatic ones who say pithy things that students quote to one another and who win their students' adoration by their surprising and entertaining classroom manner.

Mr. Keating is the kind of teacher whom students describe as "amazing" in course evaluations. He stands on his desk, takes students outside on impromptu field trips and fosters an emotional response to the world.

His students find out that, when Mr. Keating was a student, he was part of a secret group called "The Dead Poets Society." The students want to be just like Keating. So they recreate this society, which mainly involves going to a cave at night, smoking, looking at dirty pictures and reading some poetry out loud. These behaviors are pretty typical for immature adolescents—probably things (other than the poetry reading) that these boys would have been inclined to do already. Shouldn't a teacher inspire them to grow beyond their adolescent impulses?

Mr. Keating also tells his students that they need to look at the world from a different perspective (climbing on top of his desk) and march to their own beat (taking them for a walk in the courtyard of the school). But in neither of these lessons do the students gain analytical tools that might help them form independent judgements; they are led to see the world exactly as Mr. Keating sees it. They each hop up on the desk exactly as he has done and end up marching around the courtyard, not to their own beat, but exactly in sync with Mr. Keating and with each other.

Mr. Keating doesn't model independent thinking. He teaches conformity to one particular way of thinking: the Romantic expressivism that transformed American culture in the 1960s.

I loved this movie when I saw it in a theater at 14. It appealed to my emotions and gave me clear heroes (Mr. Keating, Neil Perry) and villains (the headmaster, Neil's father).

As I've had more experiences with schools and with adolescents (as a professor and a mother) and as I've reflected more about how adults should guide young people, I've come to believe that this movie does not present a healthy model of teaching or mentorship.

I encourage you to watch Dead Poets Society. But don't let the messages of the film wash over you. Talk about the movie with friends and parents and teachers. What true things does this movie tell you? But also: what does it get wrong? ★