

21 Years a Growin'

2001 saw the 21st birthday of the National Association for Youth Drama. From survival to growth to the present consolidation, it's taken time, money and patience to rear us. There have been growing pains and exasperation - but also some very good times. Here, some of those who took part in the journey tell of their experiences. (interviews: Ophelia Byrne).

1980

The first meeting to found NAYD is held. Amongst those attending is Gaye Tanham, who became NAYD's first Administrator, a post she held from 1984 to 1990.

I had been living and working in Tokyo, Japan and when I came home in '79 began giving movement workshops with Dublin Youth Theatre, amongst others. It was a time of development, youth theatres were beginning to emerge throughout the country, the notion of a 'national voice' for youth theatre was mooted and, in the tradition of all great causes, a meeting was held! A group met, which included Paddy O'Dwyer, Martin Drury, Aileen Ward and Ger O'Donoghue. It was a Sunday, Athlone was selected as a central meeting point and we had tea and talked. A consensus emerged that an umbrella organisation should happen, and soon afterwards a funding application was put together to get things going. Funding was secured under the combined Arts Council/Gulbenkian ACE programme, and I was appointed part-time NAYD Administrator in 1984. The post was shared with DYT, becoming three-way for a time, when it also included an administrative function for the Dance Council of Ireland.



The first NAYD office was on the landing of 23 Upper Gardiner Street (Dublin Youth Theatre's headquarters) it was about the size of a matchbox! Over time Madeleine Boughton and Emer McGowan (employed by the Dance Council and Dublin Youth Theatre respectively) came on board, and we all moved to the larger basement office. The three organisations shared the one phone, photocopier, fax, etc. - and the three staff members. None of the organisations were rich so a shared economy made sense. The three of us worked well together and it really taught me the value of effective teamwork. NAYD always had a strong and committed board, which became a hallmark of the organisation's success. In 1990, when the three organisations had grown to the point that separation became necessary, I left youth theatre and went into dance (my own specialism) full-time.

NAYD gave me an excellent grounding in the field of arts administration. It was my first introduction to the workings of public arts funding, and I made good international contacts through it. I also found life-long friends. I still stay in touch, although my involvement is no longer hands on. I can easily recall the tremendous energy generated by the ensemble drama of youth theatre. The invention and world view expressed in the theatre of this age group continues to enliven my own engagement with the arts, and life.

Gaye Tanham is Dance and Opera Officer with the Arts Council of Ireland

1984

Our Town, directed by Ben Barnes, becomes the first National Youth Theatre production in Ireland. Barnes also directs the 1987 NYT production, The Crucible.

I approached the NYT productions with exactly the same standards as I would a professional production. I felt it would have been deeply patronizing to the young people involved to do anything else. If anything, I think I probably demanded more from them than I would a cast of professional actors. The productions had a nationwide impact, and their impact lingered for a long time afterwards. They raised the profile of the NYT. They were flagships.

I know that's not the only function of a National Youth Theatre, and that there is also a whole side to it which is developmental, about social elements. I think everyone concerned also had a great experience, myself included. After my first NYT, I personally turned down a Field Day production to do the second, The Crucible. I certainly have very fond memories of the productions, and had a wonderful time working on them. Many of the participants went on to become professional actors, and I made my first contact with some really good actors, people who displayed a real desire to work in theatre, who were really passionate about it.

A springboard of this nature at the time was important. It galvinised people, it affected them. A great deal of credit for this is due to the vision of Eithne Healy, the then Chair of the NYT. She's now on the Abbey Board, but I met her first at the NYT. To me, these achievements are her legacy.



Ben Barnes is the Artistic Director of the National Theatre.

1987

The Crucible is the 1987 National Youth Theatre production, and the first NYT to go on tour. Cathy Belton played Mrs. Puttenham.

I'd class it as my first experience of working at a professional level. We treated it very much in that way, took it very seriously. There was a high level of commitment, a real desire to make it something good. That attitude came from ourselves, and from those we were working with. Director Ben Barnes worked in exactly the same way with us as I now work as a professional: readings at audition, ten-to-five days, rehearsals for four weeks. I found it absolutely brilliant. NYT was a real taste of the profession, and helped me make an informed decision to become an actor.



That summer was very special. There was a feeling of independence, it was the summer of the Leaving Cert results for most of us, things were happening. We were put up in houses with families, lots of whom were connected with DYT, and socially it was brilliant. These were young people with whom you had so much common ground, and they became friends.

The production itself was a hit. After a run at the Samuel Beckett Centre, TCD it went on to tour to the Belltable Arts Centre in Limerick and then came back to play the Olympia. I'll never forget the buzz of that Olympia opening night, the excitement. Afterwards, the NYT proved of pragmatic use. I'd gotten to know people, made contacts, been seen, worked with professionals.

I'm still aware of youth theatre because so many people in the profession have been associated with it. It's part of the structure.

Cathy Belton recently appeared in Tartuffe at the Abbey, and has featured regularly in Glenroe.

1991

NAYD hosts the first-ever European Youth Theatre Encounter to come to Ireland. Jean O'Dwyer participated.

Twelve of us were selected to be the Irish representatives in this incredible international EYTE environment. People were there from all over Europe, extending as far as Russia, and it seemed an entire world. I was 16, and to me it seemed massive. Everyone was different, unusual, speaking different languages. For two weeks, we all lived together in a campus environment at St. Patrick's Teacher Training College, Drumcondra, and it was an intense experience. Meeting so many people with the same kinds of interest as you was a blast. Ten years on, I'm still in touch with a couple of them. At the end, we did a parade through Dublin along the quays, and then each group performed. We worked with an Israeli woman on the theme of the sea, and I vividly recall workshops involving loads of blue sheets and rolling around on the floor.



Youth theatre allows you to operate in an adult world in a very equal way. Whatever you want to do can be made possible, whether that's becoming an actor or getting skills which mean someday you'll talk in a boardroom. In the big picture, I think people are almost fascinated by youth theatre, this hive of activity in the world of the arts with little resources but tremendous excitement and high standards.

I'm now working in the same field, so youth theatre formed me enormously. In my professional capacity, I'll be the first to put my hand up to work with youth theatre. Once involved, you'll always have a connection. It gets in your blood.

Jean O'Dwyer is Programmes Officer with the Outreach/Education Department of the National Theatre.