

Life after Charisma

by Emelie FitzGibbon

The establishment of any theatre company is usually heavily dependent on **charisma and energy** but the survival of that same company relies on **structures**.

This applies in Youth Theatre as much as in any main stage or specialist theatre company: it is years two and three which are the most difficult, the ones which take much hard work and steely determination. Generally speaking, a theatre company is the brain-child of one person or a small group of people who have a vision of what their company might be, what they can offer that is different, what significant contribution they can make.

This is necessary: it is an enclosed and enclosing period of incubation in which enthusiasm and experimentation leads to an identity. There is an exhilarating sense of 'us against the world', a common surge of adrenaline which overcomes the lack of funding, the cold rehearsal rooms, the small audiences.

But it is important in that first year if the individuals or group wish the company to go on beyond the first or second production that structures of survival are put in place which will ensure that company functions are not dependent on individuals so that the company will survive when the adrenaline is used up and the cold of the rehearsal rooms becomes palpable.

It is instructive to look at models of Youth Theatre which seem to have the best potential for survival. In one way or another the survivors all have a structure which links them in some way to professional expertise: they either have an **administration** which functions continuously and thus can attract both funding and partners, or they are **linked into the Youth service, Arts centres, professional companies, VECs or theatres**, all of which can again supply some continuity and facilities - be these advice, administration, premises or even photocopying.

The crucial element is a link to some structure outside the Youth Theatre company which will help to sustain it on a long-term basis and will help it to put its own structures for survival into place. The model of swift intervention by a professional who sets up a company, embraces it with energy and vision and then leaves for another contract seems not to work as a sustained development, whereas the slow and indigenous growth of a company linked, for example, to a Youth Service does.

It may be that there are Youth Theatre companies, like other theatre companies, which come together for one or two productions and then have had enough. That's fine. If that's what the company wants then there should be no sense of failure; the company achieved what it wanted. Similarly, there need be no sense of failure if a company has simply run its course, come to the end of its natural life: full professional companies frequently have an exciting life span at a particular period but in extending beyond their natural span become tired and dull and wish they had ceased at the height of their energies.

There is another type of company, however, which sees it has potential to be there for a long time and it is these who must look to their structures and their sustaining partnerships which will help the survival of the company beyond the founding individuals.

The life of Youth Theatre is in its members, their talents, energies, enthusiasm, highs and lows; it is in their dedication to the particular art form they practice, their exploration of its forms and styles, their risk-taking.

To emphasise the need for adequate and sustained structures to underpin this might seem boring and even churlish. However, just as in Drama we need trust and a safe environment in order to promote 'safe' risk-taking so in youth theatre we need these - often invisible - structures to protect, sustain and release the art-form and the participants.

Charisma is necessary, but possibly brief: **structures** are vital and sustainable.

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