

Who would miss us?

Questioning Youth Theatre, Declan Gorman

Why does youth theatre exist?

Youth theatre exists because a substantial number of young people and an important body of visionary youth leaders want it to exist. Fundamentally it exists to allow young people between the ages of 12 and 21 - allowing for the great differences of social and intellectual development within that span - to express themselves creatively through the medium of drama. "Expressing themselves creatively" takes several different forms and has several different spin-offs. Most importantly, in my view, this expression allows young people to:

- Dream, create, re-create and describe worlds from the individual and collective imagination. This is done through improvisation, workshop activity, study of text, movement and voice training and so on - and especially through the process of preparing and presenting public performances. This is the artistic heart of youth theatre.
- Collaborate with their peers and with intelligently disposed adults on collective creative processes. This is "character-forming", in that it encourages mutual respect, discipline as a meaningful quality (rather than an imposed requirement of adults) and shared visioning - essential qualities not just in good theatre-making but in a sustainable society.
- Learn and train in a holistic, humanised way. Again this applies in the narrow sense of training in technical theatre skills - how to act, how to dance, how to project and so on - but also in the wider sense of learning by accepting responsibility - learning your own strengths and potential, learning values by understanding them rather being told about them and so on.

Who would miss youth theatre?

Mainly those already benefiting from it by being in it - but that is not to say it does not have value far beyond its own membership base. Firstly, that base is expanding and more and more young people are enjoying the benefit of a locally based youth theatre (not to mention many more who benefit from having youth drama activity built-in to a wider club, educational or training programme that is not arts-exclusive). If living culture is a mosaic that includes a great range of endeavour and custom, from sport to street corner activity to art - youth theatre is a small, but growing and significant element in the youth culture mosaic. Society might not implode if youth theatre was to vanish, but it would be the poorer for losing a platform for young people to reflect, socialise, create, imagine and learn.

What (and who) does youth theatre need to survive and to flourish?

I would tend to concur with the findings of the NAYD survey of 1995 that was elaborated upon in Views of Theatre in Ireland - 1995-96 Theatre Review

(Arts Council 1995). This listed a range of factors, combinations of which were essential if a youth theatre was to survive beyond the initial rush of founders' enthusiasm. From my own observations, and not necessarily in this order, the critical local factors would be:

- a committed adult or young adult leader (who should be replaceable in theory at least by another motivated leader!);
- a direct, well-managed relationship with an existing arts organisation - preferable a theatre venue;
- long-term, sustainable access to a workshop/rehearsal space;
- the intellectual and financial support of a local authority (enormously helpful but not essential);
- a fund-raising capacity or grant basis that allows it to mount at least one public event per annum and sustain weekly activity form several months each year;
- commitment from older members to the aims and objectives, that translates into mentoring and peer support for new members coming through.

My personal view is that the leader should be retained on a modest part-time salary, if at all possible. This is not to negate the value of voluntary input or to downgrade voluntary back-up to a professional leader. It is just in recognition of the reality of artists' and arts workers' lives. Sustained, motivational arts work at local should be valued.

Moving from local to national/global provision - youth theatre will not thrive without consistent provision at national level. Whether through local authorities, Arts Council, Dept or Education or whatever means - consistency (policy-led) is the key. Lastly, networks and residentials with other groups are critical, be they regional or international - it is vital that groups look outward as well as inward.

Who can help us, and how?

Local arts companies, arts officers, the Arts Council and so on. But also, exercises in sensible politicising of members might be of value. Potential first time voters might be mobilised and trained to make connections between the distant process of politics and the cosy Saturday morning world of drama. In a year of a local election, letters from youth theatres and from their members to councillors reminding them of the civic value of the theatre and the need for local authority supports in cash, housing the arts and promoting the arts would not go amiss.

How should youth theatre go about telling others it's important?

As well as the political process, there is a wider process of informing the society. Obviously the annual or seasonal performance is a major advocacy tool as well as an arts event and celebration unto itself. My question back to youth theatre, however, is who do want to tell? Who exactly do you want to persuade that youth theatre is A Good Thing? If there is one criticism of youth drama (not everywhere, but not uncommon) it might be that it is more of a middle-class preoccupation than a society-wide activity. This is in spite of the

best intentions of open-door recruitment policies and so on. This is something that each club needs to be wary of - how do you realistically open out to a social mix of young people? How do you offer a hospitable space for new immigrant communities? And so on. These are challenges, because they can often force operational change - systems that have yielded good art and good responsible young citizens and all the rest of it for ten years, may need to be radically revised to allow for new cultural winds to blow through the local groups and through youth theatre as a whole. The more inclusive Youth Theatre becomes, the more evident its "importance" will be to the wider public.

How can youth theatre turn this process into financial support?

Again, I would stress the value of a co-ordinated national lobby and awareness campaign to increase global funding to youth drama. But there are other means. If youth theatre can honestly claim to add value to a fragmented society, by offering positive action outlets for adolescents, by holding an imaginative mirror up to a society groaning under consumer stress, by being truly inclusive - then its moral power to raise funds through local activities is considerable. In Drogheda, the youth theatre ran a simple flag-day type event at Hallowe'en - with members costumed up. It yielded a few hundred euro - enough to make it worth while. Had they had additional display boards with blown-up images of their recent project work with asylum-seekers, inter-generational performances with older citizens and so on, they might have doubled the take. While shaking a box may seem a bit unsavoury as a means of arts funding (and it should never, never be allowed to replace the imperative of state support) it in fact confronts the community with questions about the place of culture, arts and young people within the struggle for cohesion and stability in a time of great change and uncertainty in our society.

Declan Gorman is Artistic Director of Upstate Theatre Company.

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