

Who would miss us?

Questioning Youth Theatre, David Grant

Why does youth theatre exist?

The first 'youth theatre' I am aware of was the National Youth Theatre of Great Britain founded by Michael Croft in 1956. His career as a schoolmaster prompted him to create a specialist theatre organisation free from the restrictions imposed by the long-established traditions of the school play. Youth theatre in Ireland began in the late 1970s with the creation of the Dublin Youth Theatre and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland's Youth Drama scheme. Each of these initiatives depended on the commitment of a small number of adult enthusiasts, but whereas in Northern Ireland there was the backing of an official agency, the Dublin Youth Theatre depended entirely on voluntary action. While official support was very welcome in the north, the voluntary basis for youth theatre in the south has in the longer term proved more durable, attracting over time a degree of subvention that would have been unimaginable 25 years ago. As Paddy O'Dwyer, a founder member of the Dublin Youth Theatre, has memorably put it, "when we began the Arts Council referred us to the Youth Council and *vice versa*. Now the Arts Council has a youth officer and the Youth Council has an arts officer". The National Association for Youth Drama has now become a major lobbying and co-ordinating force. Its sister organisation, the Ulster Association of Youth Drama, has found it harder to establish a clear role. A movement founded on direct intervention by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland has proved less resilient than its almost exclusively voluntary equivalent in the Republic.

Ultimately, youth theatre exists where there is a determined will for it to exist. Usually this depends on a key individual adult who is prepared to bring a quite unreasonable level of fanaticism to bear on it and to sustain that in the face of all the practical obstacles that running a youth theatre has to continually overcome. But what motivates those key individuals? Usually some profound experience in their own lives which has shown them the transforming power of drama for young people. Youth theatre in Ireland could not have begun were it not for the pervasive importance of amateur theatre from where most youth drama leaders have come from. More recently, youth theatre itself has been instrumental in bringing on the next generation of youth leaders, but the trend for young people to move on and away to university and the emphasis placed within youth theatre on cultivating successful performers and directors rather than future facilitators mitigate against this tendency.

Who would miss youth theatre?

In Ireland, the perhaps surprising answer is that ultimately audiences for professional theatre would be the main group to miss youth theatre. This is because of the large number of professional actors who owe their enthusiasm and confidence to early experiences in youth theatre. Youth theatre has not only compensated for the under-developed nature of actor training in Ireland, but it has also provided a steady stream of recruits for the few formal training opportunities that do exist. And the majority of youth theatre members who do

not pursue the theatre professionally, will be a key component of future theatre audiences themselves. Next then come, arts centre managers and other arts professionals (not least emerging directors, many of whom gain valuable early experience working with youth theatres). The huge investment in theatre buildings, in both parts of Ireland, cannot be matched by equivalent resources to fill them with professional product. Even if this were to become possible the audiences would simply not be there. Youth theatre has the double benefit of providing adventurous and often very high quality performances with an audience built-in. And what's more, a high proportion of the audience are the very people whom the venues are most eager to attract. It is less easy to argue that young people themselves would miss youth theatre, since without experiencing it, it is hard to know how they could know the extraordinarily positive impact it could have had on their lives. For this reason, it is vital that those who do understand this are tireless in making sure that these opportunities continue to exist.

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

Without committed and imaginative leadership youth theatre can neither survive nor flourish. Sometimes this comes from young people themselves, but this tends not to be sustainable as these young people invariably move on after a few years. The voluntary adult leader continues to be the mainstay of youth theatre and needs support and encouragement. This can partly be achieved through umbrella organisations such as NAYD and UAYD providing opportunities for exchanges, skill-sharing and guest workshop tutors. There also need to be highly visible opportunities for youth theatre members to progress to maintain their interest once they have exhausted the scope of their local group. In the past, this has been best achieved through the promotion of professionally resourced summer youth theatre productions.

The role of the professional youth theatre leader is also growing in importance, supported through programmes such as *ArtsTrain*. But serious thought needs to be given to the career trajectory of such committed individuals. It is not enough to train professional facilitators. There needs to be employment available for them in the long term. The livelihoods of youth theatre leaders apart, unusually money is dominant consideration. Youth theatre is extremely cost-effective. Nevertheless, it is ironic that the small grants that used to be available in Northern Ireland to help defray basic costs such as room hire are now no longer available, and the 'Awards for All' Lottery scheme that was expected to replace them has proved prohibitively bureaucratic for many potential applicants. Meanwhile, new money has been found to employ full-time arts specialists in Northern Ireland's Education and Library Boards as part of an extensive Youth Arts initiative. This has been done against the advice of the professional youth arts sector. It is money that could have transformed the work of existing youth arts work in the region. The rationale is to spread the 'jam' as widely as possible, but this makes no allowance for the specialist nature of youth arts and the urgent need to nurture the finite human resources that underpin it. It is especially irritating for those who have subsisted on hand to mouth grants for years to see new posts created with all of the benefits associated with public service employment while their own commitment remains largely acknowledged. This reflects a

pattern of attitudes throughout Ireland where arts workers are deemed to merit less than professional treatment. Levels of pay are invariably very low and benefits such as pension schemes are almost unheard of. To treat professional youth theatre workers with due respect would be an important step forward.

Who can help us and how?

Ourselves, (i.e. those who have a commitment to the youth theatre), By refusing any more to accept these attitudes and lobbying hard with funding agencies and elected representatives.

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

When I recently suggested that research be undertaken by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland to establish the positive impact of youth theatre, I was told this was unnecessary as this was self-evident. Despite this, and the regular appearance of youth arts in funding priority lists, little seems to change. Our most important constituency consists of former youth members. These should provide the core of our lobby. After 25 years, many must be in positions of influence (at a national, local or neighbourhood level). We need to establish who these people are.

How can youth theatre turn this process into financial support?

By making a coherent case for what the money would be spent on. The voluntary foundation of youth theatre is likely to continue to be the mainstay of its sustainability in Ireland. All investment needs to be seen to be feeding back into this core resource.

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