

MAGIC & MAYHEM

Paul Mercier on the mission to put youth theatre where it belongs and to give the youth of this country a chance to take part in a wonderful adventure.

The forces of youth theatre are gathered here today; a body of talent, expertise and experience that has created something that constitutes a phenomenon in Irish life. And what you have achieved to date is undervalued. What you do is under-funded. And your vision for the future is not being given the priority treatment it demands and deserves. Yet you are makers of a small cultural revolution.

Look at what youth drama offers: personal development, self-esteem, self-reliance, self-worth, confidence, responsibility, heightened awareness, deeper consciousness, better and broader social skills, tolerance, understanding, friendship, romance, community development, group dynamic, cross-cultural exchange, collective identity, transformation, transcendentalism... an enhanced vocabulary, with lots of clapping; artistic expression and dishwashing, acting, dancing, singing, and floor-sweeping, set-building and carpet painting, lighting design and ceiling reconstruction, public disorder and general mayhem, and last but not least, playwriting.

Youth theatre does all this in lorry-loads and has the capacity to deliver more. And it works. Youth theatre works. Youth theatre delivers.

Given the increase in drinking among young people, the dependence on drugs for recreation, the level of mental breakdown, the rate of suicide, the rise in mindless violence, the prospectus that youth theatre offers is needed more than ever.

Given the points race that is forcing our education system to compete rather than teach, forcing our schools to look after the best rather than cater for all, forcing the humanities and the arts into transition year or into a corner as though they were a bloody inconvenience, is there not a greater need for youth theatre?

Given the degree of alienation and computerization, and the reality that young people do not go to the theatre of their own free will, is there not a greater need than ever for youth theatre? Given that our youth are becoming consumers rather than creators. Given that our youth are more targeted than ever, with greater spending power than ever before in the history of mankind, is youth theatre not essential?

In this era of plenty, youth theatre still forces you to make-do. In this the age of the accessory and the ready made, youth theatre still insists that you make-do, and in doing so empowers you. Youth theatre makes you understand and feel what it means to make-do. Making-do is the essence of theatre. And there are people here today who have made miracles out of make-do.

It is vital that young people learn to make their own magic rather than becoming the passive receivers of pre-packaged escapism and conventional wisdom. But it is wrong to expect the movement to make-do because of limited funding or no funding at all. It is shameful to leave this movement to make-do simply because it can. It is also about giving everyone a chance. It is about access in meaning and deed. It is about developing theatre as an active life interest instead of this emphasis on profession and career – because it isn't going to give you the work, folks. We can't all be stars. But what we can be is unique. We can all be special.

I would love to drive home this evening through all those satellite towns, dormitory villages, valleys and hills, midland hubs and gateways, and feel there's a youth

theatre in that hall there or that container, maybe a bit of magic going on in the conference room of the local hotel once a week rather than this inescapable feeling that there's nothing, that everything is in Dublin or the nearest fancy urban centre, or pub, or that everyone is watching the box or off to the Omniplex or once in a blue moon to the theatre in the local arts centre that boasts a coffee shop and bar.

I would rather have a youth theatre club near me than a cultural centre. I believe that my life, and everybody else's, would be the richer for it and that the future would hold greater promise if there were more drama facilitators working in the field, transforming the lives of people in their own communities.

This address was first delivered as part of the abbeyonehundred and NAYD day to celebrate youth theatre in Ireland, which took place at the Peacock Theatre Dublin on 20th November 2004

Paul Mercier is a playwright and director. He is a founder member and artistic director of Passion Machine Theatre Company. He sits on the board of The Abbey Theatre. His plays have received numerous awards such as the Harvey's Irish Theatre Award for Best New Irish Work, The Sunday Independent Arts Award, The Sunday Tribune Arts Award, The Rooney Prize for Irish Literature and an Edinburgh Fringe First Award. His 1998 Dublin Trilogy received the Evening Herald/Dublin Theatre Festival Award for Best Irish Production and The Irish Times/ESB Irish Theatre Award for Best Production. He has written and directed two award winning short films, 'Before I Sleep' and 'Lipservice'. He wrote the screenplay and directed 'Studs', a film based on his own stage play.