



Welcome and Introduction by Orlaith McBride, Director of NAYD.

You are all very welcome here this morning to the seminar and the launch of Centre Stage +10, which is a report of research conducted by NAYD between November 2007 and June 2008. It has been a huge piece of work and we are delighted to come to this stage in its development. This research was undertaken by Rhona Dunnett, our Research and Development Officer, who put her heart and soul into it over the last year. It was undertaken by NAYD to generate a detailed picture of what youth theatre in Ireland looks like today and answer questions such as who is involved in it, where is it happening? (It is happening in all counties except one which will remain nameless.) What does it look like? What does the artistic practice look like? How is it being funded and who are the local drivers who are involved in it.

We now have a strong evidence base to support what we have all known for a very long time; that youth theatre is a very strong and vibrant sector, that it contributes enormously to the Arts in Ireland, and particularly to theatre, that it is vital to the young people involved in it and it is a crucial and necessary part of the Arts infrastructure in Ireland.

There are a couple of headlines that I have picked out of it that I think really set the research in context:

43.5% of young people involved in youth theatre are the first in their family to show an active interest in the Arts;

80% of youth theatres in Ireland are outside of cities and urban areas. This is primarily because of the number of youth theatres that have developed due to Local Authority initiatives over the last number of years, but also because of the large network of venues that have developed in more rural areas over the past ten years;

43% of youth theatre directors or leaders were youth theatre members as young people. For us this is about a coming of age really because we say that young people becoming leaders is good practice in youth theatre, so that statistic really

shows us the professionalisation and illustrates that people can now make viable careers out of youth theatre in Ireland.

Ten years ago, NAYD conducted the first research into youth theatre in Ireland and it was conducted by Marieva Coughlan. Paddy O'Dwyer, who is here today, was the Chair of NAYD at that time and it was those visionary people, involved in NAYD at the time, who said we need to conduct this research and, in the morning that is in it, we should also think of Eilis Mullan, the former Director of NAYD, who was a champion of research and evidence. The director of the Arts Council, Mary Cloake, will officially open the seminar and Mary has always been a great advocate of youth theatre over the years and continues to be a good friend to NAYD.

I am finally just going to say one thing, there are 2,632 young people involved in 58 youth theatres in Ireland. The research covers 45 youth theatres but because youth theatres are growing and developing the whole time, we know have 58. In the afternoon, you will hear presentations from some of those young people involved in youth theatre. Most young people are in school or preparing for exams so I thought we should start with one of their voices, to read a quote from a young person so they are present all the time as we discuss youth theatre in Ireland:

In my first year in DYT and... so I was about 14 and it was the first play I'd done. I think it was my first year one-act and it was the feeling of how close you get to the people, particularly in that performance I did. It was like, a dark... we did "4:48 Psychosis" by Sarah Kane which is like, a really dark play. And I was only a baby and we got, like, really close to the people, like, in the cast. And a lot of them were older than me. They were, like 18, 19 and I was only 14 and I don't know why it affected me so much but I just... cause we were friends, we weren't just in a cast together, like we were buddies. I remember having a dream when we went home and I was flying in my dream and I'd never had a dream about flying before and I knew it was because I was just so happy at that time, just being in that performance, you know what I mean? And like obviously then in most performances at the end, when it's over you feel so sad, you actually nearly cry, like. Because you know you're never going to have that time again, you know what I mean?

I would like to ask Mary Cloake if she would like to say a few words. Thank you.

Opening Address Centre Stage +10 Seminar

Speaker: Mary Cloake, Director, the Arts Council

I'm delighted to be here and I know there is a busy day ahead and people want to get on with the business of looking at the substantive issues around youth theatre, but I think it is important to mark where we are and what we are doing and indeed what the youth theatre movement has achieved. I think we deserve this moment of reflection.

I was just amazed that ten years had passed since the first report, and just looking back to what has happened in youth theatre over the past ten years, I thought it is as if you imagine being ten years old ten years ago, and all the qualities around a ten year old. You are a human being and very much in the world but you still need to be cared for by your parents and looked after a bit. You enjoy things and you have lots of activities you like doing and you are well into the world but you don't really reflect. What you do at the age of ten is a little bit unconscious. If you look at the human being at the age of 20, it is very different to a 10 year old. You are in the world and confident, very much an adult. You are about taking responsibility for your life, flying the nest. You are thinking a bit about life. You have, what was described by the philosopher Seneca, as 'the reflective life'. That is really what struck me when I saw the Centre Stage +10 report as an enormous shift in the maturity of the youth theatre movement. It is a real pleasure to be here today among some of the people who were stalwarts of youth theatre in the early days. When we go into the work today, I want us to remember what we have achieved and how far we have come.

I want so say a couple of things. Firstly, the approach that NAYD has taken to this research, which I think is exemplary. I really like the idea of building on research that was carried out ten years ago and people often knock research and say its just something else for the shelf, but what really makes a difference is if you can say this is where we were ten years ago, say ten years ago at the age of ten, and this is where we are now. It gives absolute evidence of where there has been progression and development; all that hard work, getting up early in the morning, opening up the venues, putting on the heater etc. All that hard work pays off.

Look at those statistics that Orlaith showed. Over 2000 people in 58 youth theatres, its unbelievable. So I think we deserve a collective pat on the back for that. I just want to say something about the methodology. I know that Rhona is going to talk about it in a lot more detail. But I really liked the interviews, the questionnaires, the census logging. I really liked some of those research ideas and I hope to steal a few, free of charge, for the Arts Council. What I really liked were the workshops that were held for the youth theatre members because they really stand out as inventive, and inventive is a word I think we can use about many of the ways of working in youth theatre. Sometimes in research it is easier to go with the answers that you know how to get, but having the young people's input into the consultative process and having it very carefully managed is something that I would like to point to here, because I don't think we can underestimate how difficult that can be but how important it is. Young theatre makers around the country are used to critically engaging with the Arts at a very high level and the research tapped into the level of creative engagement. It wasn't an easy option approach. It was go for the quality, go for the depth and go to a bit of trouble and I really think that you see that in the publication.

Statistics are impressive but one of the things that hearten me is the potential and ability of the young artists who wont now let the economic downturn cloud creative ambitions. Thanks to these innovative approaches, these young people have not just informed the research, they have not just gave their input but they have formed it, in a way that goes beyond ticking boxes or filling forms but through active engagement with each other and the research leaders. They have shared their ideas and opinions and these in turn will help to develop the practice, to inform the actions of youth theatre groups and practitioners and allow those groups and practitioners to do more with less and to lay the ground for expansion in more auspicious circumstances.

In fact we were so impressed in the Arts Council that we decided to tap into this expertise that is emerging in NAYD, in how to get good ideas from people and our Young People, Children and Education team invited Dave Kelly of NAYD to facilitate a feedback session for us, looking at our Young Ensembles Scheme last October and I am delighted to say that was a huge success for us and I can't emphasise how difficult that is, as a policy maker at national level to get this kind of feedback. Just as important, he suggested to us approaches and methods that the participating groups might use to gather feedback again in a mutually relevant way. In other words it is

not just about the findings but it is about disseminating this really exemplary methodology that this research has shown us how to use.

Apart from this report, I would like to say that this way of working is a characteristic of youth theatre and youth arts generally, and helps maintain the constant renewal of the artistic life of Ireland. It is about reflecting, getting new ideas, asking people and then acting on those ideas. This vibrancy, we always talk about the vibrancy of the arts in Ireland and they are vibrant, I think as a nation, we don't always appreciate just how vibrant they are. Despite being an island of just five million inhabitants, we punch well above our weight internationally, (Eurovision notwithstanding), in the arts. Our reputation abroad is well above the reputation of other small countries and is based solely on the reputation of our artists. At a time when the reputation in banking and finance and investment has come in for quite a drubbing internationally, almost bordering on racism in some cases, it is a reputation of which we can be very very proud. We can say of our artists they have never let us down and that is something we should never forget. In the Arts Council, we can never forget that this vibrancy is based on other people coming through, the young generation coming up and new ideas invigorating our artistic life.

We also contend in the Arts Council, and this is where I want to ask for some support from the youth theatre sector, we contend that investment of funding in the Arts is actually a key to economic recovery. The arts can play an integral role as part of the solution as to how we can kick start economic activity again. The arts help us to place things in perspective, to think outside the box and to seek new opportunities for growth. That can happen in the areas of entrepreneurship, in the areas of the creative industries and in the areas of just being solution focused. The arts are a sector in themselves, and actually 50,000 people are working full-time in the sector. If you compare that with the technology sector, the people working in the Arts are nearly as many as in Information Technology and that puts it in perspective because we hear a lot of rhetoric about how technology drove the boom but, if the arts are nearly as big, maybe we can look to the arts for the next boom. I'd like to say that the message about investment in the arts and public spending, is not about waste, not an area that we need to tighten our belts because everyone here knows that the arts are run as a really tight ship, everything is focused in terms of expenditure. Sometimes that is not visible. The impact of the arts and the value for money that the

Irish people get out of the arts sector is not as valuable as it might be. I am really asking people to remember, especially coming up to this local election time, to remind people when they come to the doors that the cultural tourism industry is worth 5.1 billion. And the cultural tourism industry in Ireland is based largely on all the people that work in the arts. So if politicians come to the door and asks what are the issues and if everyone here in the room, 60 people, said to 60 politicians, don't forget that the arts are really worth the investment. They are really worth it because, even in reductive economic terms, they contribute to the 5.1 billion cultural tourism sector. The message will go out, it will become part of the ether and it will help promote the value of the arts and that is what we would like you to help us with.

All this vibrancy, the whole edifice of cultural tourism industry, wouldn't work if there wasn't a vibrant sector there in the first place and where does the vibrancy come from? The history of the arts will show that innovation and energy always comes from the quirky, the awkward, always comes from the margins and most importantly always comes from the new generation. I think those characteristics sum up the youth theatre movement in the best way.

This exemplary movement is under the custodianship of the National Association For Youth Drama and it has set the highest of standards as a resource organisation. From its very beginning, what we could look to NAYD for is really the very best of examples. The initial Centre Stage research was carried out by Marieva Coughlan and Eilis Mullan. I think that it would be very nice to remember Eilis today. She was personally a very big influence and inspiration to me in the arts at a very early stage. The initial research was really a very comprehensive picture of youth theatre in the country, at a time when we weren't really reflecting; none of us were that twenty-year-old human being. We were all at that ten year old, energetic but needing to be minded stage. Eilis and Marieva did that very early work and it did really help us to look at what was happening. Now, we can say with the current Centre Stage +10, we have an up-to-date resource that will be of great value to youth theatre when it comes to looking at where that practice, that fundamental practice fits, into the national context.

It will be of great value to us who work in the Arts Council, and all of us who advocate and provide for quality arts experience for young people, as it provides a quality evidence base. This base is always looked for, for by the mandarins in finance. Paddy O'Dwyer, who Orlaith mentioned earlier, will know what the mandarins in finance are like. They are very tight with money and if you want to make a case for public spending, you have to have evidence and this is a very very important document in that case-making exercise. And it includes young people's voices, which gives it that authenticity and that sincerity that will make it ring through. We have two very important qualities there; evidence and sincerity, and I think that will make the case very strong for the policies to be funded both from the Arts Council and from the Department of Finance.

I would like to conclude with one last remark. The philosopher Seneca said there were two qualities that made life worth living: the company of friends and a reflective life. I think in Centre Stage +10 we have the reflective life and I know today you will enjoy the company of friends.

Thank you very much.

Research Methodologies

Speaker Rhona Dunnett:

Later on today we will talk about the key findings that have emerged from the report, so I am going to just look at the methodologies and the approach that was taken. Centre Stage +10 was undertaken by NAYD to generate a detailed picture of youth theatre activity in Ireland and to determine the key priorities for the future development of youth theatre at local, regional and national level. The research process aimed to examine the state of current Irish youth theatre under 4 general headings:

- Youth Theatre Structures, Funding and Resources;
- Youth Theatre Practice and Programming;
- Youth Theatre Participants;
- Impact of Youth Theatre on Participants.

NAYD promotes critical thinking and research in the area of youth drama and theatre and as such NAYD has a remit to investigate youth theatre practice and explore its impact on the personal and social development of the young person. NAYD also appreciates the importance of having a strong evidence base pertaining to youth theatre in Ireland and to this end undertakes an on-going programme of research.

We mentioned earlier today that Centre Stage +10 is the second national study undertaken by NAYD. The first Centre Stage was carried out in 1997/98 and that was the first major study of youth theatre in Ireland. The evolving nature of youth theatre necessitated a fresh study to explore and analyse the developments that have taken place in the last ten years. A key criterion in drawing up the questionnaires, interview templates and census week forms was to allow comparisons with the findings of that study. While retaining a core of similar questions methodologies, Centre Stage +10 has evolved to include new questions to reflect new developments in structure and practice, as well as changes in the profile and participation of leaders and members.

The study was undertaken between November 2007 and May 2008. It is important to recognise that youth theatre is constantly evolving and developing so the situation of many individual youth theatres have changed considerably since the research was carried out. The findings, contained in the report, relate solely to the research period.

The first stage of the research was a consultation with NAYD staff, board members and youth theatre stakeholders to investigate the scope of the study and the principal areas of investigation. We structured the whole research around the following methods:

Youth theatre census week: 24-30 November 2007. All youth theatres were asked to audit their activities and that involved logging the type and number of activities that took place including details of members, leaders and venues. The dates were chosen to match the initial census week from the earlier research.

Research workshops with youth theatre members. The members were consulted through the workshop and they were designed to initiate discussion and debate concerning those key research areas. The workshops were designed by NAYD staff to allow for group exploration of key issues through games, activities and group discussions. We had eight member workshops that took place throughout the country: in Cavan, Cork, Dublin, Portlaoise, Roscommon and in Waterford.

Interviews with leaders and stakeholders. Then I had great fun going around the country doing face-to-face interviews with lots of leaders and those face-to-face interviews really provided an opportunity for in-depth discussion. The interviews were based around a questionnaire developed by NAYD staff and were designed to derive the personal impressions and opinions of the leaders as well as detailed information the running and the history of their youth theatre. Interviews were carried out as well with NAYD staff and board members to take into account their understanding and experience of current youth theatre activity in Ireland. A small number of key youth theatre stakeholders, that is people from the theatre sector, from youth work or youth arts sectors were also interviewed.

Questionnaires. Questionnaires were disseminated to all youth theatres to gather information regarding the profile and experiences of members and leaders. We had separate questionnaires designed for the 12 and over category and the under 12-age group.

50 youth theatres were invited to take part in Centre Stage +10. Most were affiliated to NAYD at the time but some youth theatres took part that were not affiliated. In all 45 youth theatres took part.

I would just like to finish by thanking everyone in the room there today who took part; all of the members, leaders and stakeholders. Also the people who aren't in the room today who took part; so the 45 youth theatres, the 112 young people who took part in members workshops, the 700 young people and 56 leaders who completed questionnaires and all the stakeholders and leaders who took part in 67 interviews. Thank you very much.

Feedback from Parallel Sessions

The County Driver: Local Authority Youth Theatres and the challenge of sustainability

Facilitated by Rosaleen Molloy, Arts Officer, Wexford County Council

Rapporteur: Anna Galligan

Some of the main points raised were:

- Co Sligo Youth Theatre's journey from an Arts Office led initiative to becoming an autonomous organisation was discussed. It was noted that the Arts Office continues to fund the youth theatre. It was recognised that funding through the Local Authorities allows youth theatres to exist without compromising their ethos e.g. inclusion, not for profit etc. It was felt that Co. Sligo Youth Theatre would be better able to weather changes of staff, policies and priorities in the County Council as an autonomous organisation. One question asked was how an Arts Office chooses the best model of governance.
- It was also acknowledged that Arts Offices provide funding in kind to youth theatre such as space and admin support. In addition to funding, the Arts Office provides expertise and experience. They provide advice, links to other practitioners, arts programmes etc. It was acknowledged that the involvement of the Arts Office can encourage good practice, high standards and professional attitudes in the youth theatre.
- Resourcing expertise to run youth theatres from within counties was raised as an issue. This was very much dependent on geography and the existing arts and theatre context in a county. Some suggestions were made around sourcing and developing local expertise such as mentoring, supporting older members to become leaders, offering training, accessing training opportunities through NAYD. It was felt that localised training would be the best way forward. It was, however, acknowledged that this is a difficult challenge if expertise is not already in the county.
- The question was raised about how do Local Authorities support or work with youth theatres that are not Arts Office initiatives? And in those that are Arts

Office initiatives, the question was raised, on boundaries between the roles and responsibilities of the Arts Office and the Leader/Facilitator of the youth theatre?

- It was questioned whether Irish youth theatre is predominantly a white middle class activity? This seemed to again depend on the location and general demographics of an area. Co. Wexford Youth Theatre made the point of targeting a wide mix of young people and do not make where people come from an issue when the groups come together. This has encouraged inclusion and given the youth theatre a healthy diverse group.
- There was acknowledgement of the support and advice given by NAYD especially during the set-up period.

Challenges ahead:

- Sourcing and maintaining adequate funding
- Resourcing youth theatres especially if they are to be county wide
- Sourcing and maintaining local expertise to run the youth theatre from within the county

The Professional Parent

The Professional Arts Organisation and Youth Theatre –a mutually beneficial relationship.

Facilitated by Philip Hardy, Artistic Director of Barnstorm Theatre Company, Kilkenny.

Rapporteur: David Kelly, NAYD

Some of the main points about the benefits for a professional company and a youth theatre in setting up a youth theatre and outreach programmes are:

- The professional company is funded by public money. Access is a priority it also helps to keep the cost of running a space down.
- Having a youth theatre and an outreach programme has allowed Barnstorm Theatre Company to employ a full time Outreach Officer.
- The venue is not used exclusively used by the professional company. Having a youth theatre and an outreach programme allows for maximum use of the venue. The relationship between all parties strengthens the connection with the wider community.
- The different strands from the professional company, the youth theatre and outreach programme encourages cross-pollination. e.g. having an adults' programme as part of the outreach programme helps develop the training of leaders for the future. They are encouraged to become volunteer leaders with the youth theatre.
- Ex-members of the youth theatre may come back to work with the professional company, the outreach programme, and the youth theatre.
- The youth theatre members are encouraged to shadow the technical team when the professional company stages shows in the home venue.
- Providing a shared space is very important for the youth theatre to learn about creativity and the making of theatre. It's a home shared with community groups and the professional company.
- Having a youth theatre and community outreach programme within the professional company makes the theatre accessible to a non-theatre going public. This can help in demystifying the work in the building and encourage a new audience.
- It is important to develop a strong relationship with the local arts officer and the arts office. This will help and strengthen the work and possible funding for projects.

- Not all professional companies would want to set up a youth theatre or would have the capacity to do so. However, this does not and should not discourage youth theatres and professional companies from developing a relationship. Even if it is a tentative request to borrow lights, props etc.

The Stand Alone Model : *Autonomous Youth Theatres and their struggle for survival*

Facilitator: Anne O’Gorman, Senior Project Officer, Youth Arts

Rapporteur: Rhona Dunnett, NAYD

What are the challenges that the autonomous model is most likely to experience on an on-going basis within their youth theatre?

- basic survival is the biggest challenge
- finding regular and sustainable funding
- finding enough time to allocate to fundraising and related administration

Participants in the session were also keen to highlight the advantages of being an autonomous youth theatre:

- the youth theatre has an independent identity – it is not an addition, an education or youth ‘wing’ of another organisation
- the youth theatre has an independent philosophy and ethos
- the youth theatre can make its own decisions

What are the supports (other than funding) that would allow these youth theatres more opportunities for growth and development?

- regular funding is the most important support
- the energy and commitment of young people – young people are the sustaining force of the youth theatre
- having an active and supportive committee where a leader can delegate tasks to others

- supportive parents (for publicity, front of house, or as the second adult in a workshop environment)
- senior members who can take on extra responsibilities and tasks
- local / national development or resource organisations (for assistance with policy development and opportunities to engage other young people and leaders)
- Relationships and partnerships with other youth theatres and groups – learning from their experiences, spending time with other leaders and understanding that you are not alone

Are there specific challenges locally that impact on the development of an autonomous youth theatre?

- local politics and personalities can be a challenge (although they can equally be a strong support!)
- lack of a local theatre / performance space
- lack of a suitable and affordable workshop space to rent
- recruitment of youth theatre members (the popularity of stage schools in some areas was seen as a challenge)
- marketing and publicising the youth theatre at a local level

What are they key milestones in the survival of an autonomous youth theatre?

- employment of staff (being able to pay facilitators and hire part-time or full-time staff)
- developments in workshop, performance and office space
- development of committees
- the membership cycle – when members become youth theatre leaders
- the development of young people and the sense of community / family within the youth theatre
public performances and events – as a culmination and validation of the young peoples' work.

The Welcome Returnee:

The Youth Service Youth Theatre makes a welcome return to the sector.

Facilitated by Lorraine O'Brien - Youth Arts Officer - Dun Laoghaire Youth Services

Rapporteur: John Taite

The session was attended by individuals with The Arts Council, NYCI, ArtsTrain trainees, youth workers, youth theatre leaders and the VEC.

Some of the main points raised were

- In the past a group would have to be based in a disadvantaged area to gain funding from the youth service, with only young people from disadvantaged backgrounds attending. This led to exclusion of young people from other areas and was not part of the youth drama/youth theatre ethos. It was noted that a mix of social background was vital.
- It was said that this policy had now shifted to a more open door policy, however more visionary personalities in leadership positions within the Youth Services was vital to this continuing.
- The issue of premises was key and a major advantage to sustainability. Having a place that young people can access and identify with was important. It was noted that partnerships between different groups and youth services could be beneficial.
- Training was identified as another key issue. The importance of the Arts not understood by a lot of youth workers. Training is needed from the highest management levels down to fully understand the potential of the Arts. Those youth workers who do use the arts are not as confident as they would like.
- Theatre is perceived by some as one of the least accessible of the art forms.

- Filmmaking has become huge for youth services groups and this has led to an increased interest in drama.
- Youth theatres are only now starting to emerge again from the youth services but that it is growing and going in the right direction however a lot more work needs to be done

Emelie Fitzgibbon – Introduction to Centre Stage +10 Report Launch

First let's listen to the direct voice of Youth Theatre In answer to the question, 'What does Youth Theatre mean to you?' one Youth Theatre member said:

[To me] Youth Theatre means ... drama workshops, first class theatre, a social group, a source of inspiration and entertainment, a place to express yourself, a crowd of lunatics, a stepping stone to greater things, a great thing in its own right.

This is the voice of the primacy of making, the creative joy of discovery, the love of social and personal exploration. As we gather to celebrate Centre Stage + 10, a wonderful work of intensive research, we will keep this voice at the centre because it roots our research, grounding theoretical analysis in observed and documented evidence. And in this remark from a YT member are all the elements of the practice we wished to research: the art form, the education (with a small 'e'), the self-development, the nature of group creativity, and the shaping of the experience by those trained to work with a light touch to unselfishly foster the growth of young practitioners of drama and theatre.

As a specialist sector within the art form, NAYD is unusually prolific in documenting practice, publishing creative work, analytic and practical resources and this is especially valuable in an arts world which is slightly suspicious of theoretical analysis. This organisation vigorously takes on the old academic joke question: 'That's all very well in practice but does it work in theory?' and answers 'Well, yes, it does'. And our research provides a valuable model of not simply using theory to express practice but also using practice to interrogate theory, keeping a valuable equilibrium, using one to balance and inform the other. Even in days of economic stringency, research is vital and valuable: it tells us where we are, where we should be going, what our aspirations and dreams could be and how we might position

ourselves for another 10 years. Research isn't abstract 'stuff'; it's the stuff of dreams and of practical dream making.

For example, the first *Centre Stage* 10 years ago, initiated by the late Eilis Mullan, alerted NAYD to the growth of youth theatres in the 10 to 14 age group and caused us to investigate practice, methodologies and management of a particular group that was outside our previous experience. Our response extended access to many more young people and fuelled new dreams. This current document, *Centre Stage + 10*, has already alerted the organisation to new matters in the practice of Youth Theatre and made us aware of issues we must address in the future. For example, one of the briefs of this research was to identify and classify models of youth theatre, seeing who was organising and supporting this particular arts practice and allowing us to analyse whether different models needed different types of support. The models that emerged were:

- autonomous youth theatres - youth theatres which have their own management structures
- youth theatres attached to professional arts organisations
- those facilitated by Local Authority Arts Offices
- those under the brief of the Youth Services
- a small number attached to educational institutions.

The research, based on the substantial sample of 45 youth theatres, clarified the strength, range and depth of youth theatre in Ireland and also brought to light some concerns, which the organisation might address. It would appear, for example, that sustainability in youth theatres attached to Local Authorities emerges as a clear area for analysis and action. Certainly, many youth theatres in this model are very strong and have resources considerably in excess of other models, but in a field where sustainability and continuity are vital to dreaming and making one wonders what mechanisms can be put in place to ensure that commitment can be sustained beyond the tenure of particular personnel. A specific research project, perhaps! Whatever model they are, however, there is no denying the truly national nature of the youth theatre sector, its strength and its diversity.

And our greatest strength, as ever, are the Youth Theatre members. As well as involvement in the regular workshops which are at the heart of our practice, in the past several years youth theatre members have taken to the national stage of the Abbey in the National Youth Theatre's of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* and *A Midsummer's Night's Dream*, they have held Festivals, written and performed new works of Irish Theatre and been part of many international events, including the European Children's Theatre Encounter in Cork 2005. In the last 20 to 25 years we have seen the professional arts sector considerably enriched by practitioners who emerged from youth theatre, bringing the skills and standards of youth theatre's truthfulness and integrity to bear on the wider form.

Professional theatre practice is not our only goal, however. As this excellent report integrates theory with practice, so too does it show that youth theatre's unique practice integrates and is embodied in the values of personal growth and development. Time and time again in this report the voices of youth theatre members comment on the development of confidence and growth of self-esteem. The emergence from a chrysalis through vibrant arts practice is shown very strongly in this story from one youth theatre member:

I suppose before I did Lightbulb youth theatre, I was actually very shy. I was actually that kid who just did not exist in the class, you know? I used to skip school and everything and people did not notice because people didn't notice I was there in the classroom. It was so bad my mum went to a parent teacher meeting and this was the first day the teacher was introduced to me. He was like "Who's XXX?"

And the main reason was because the classroom I was in had such strong characters that I just, you know, just went into this phase... But over time...(In the YT) because I had confidence and I built my own character I began to stick out more. Until one day when I skipped school people noticed and they were like "Where's XXX?" And someone said "Oh, he's sick" And I suppose after that then, you know, things changed.

The practice, which caused such a sea change to XXX, is something which happens quietly and consistently in 58 Youth Theatres around Ireland every Saturday morning. Workshop - the development of drama skills, personal skills, group skills - is central to quality practice. Youth theatre is not a training ground in the Gradgrind model of education but it is the development of the whole person through drama and

theatre, allowing experiment, trial and error, exploration of ideas, styles, laughter and seriousness, truth and fantasy to blend into a place where it is safe to 'try'. As one youth theatre member put it:

This youth theatre lets me express myself through art and to be around people who are open minded and accept anyone.

Shaping this accepting practice are the dedicated youth theatre leaders and facilitators, growing with the growth of the sector. This research indicates that the sector has become more professional in its management and structures over the last 10 years, but crucially without a loss of the vital spark of creativity, commitment and joy which impels people into the field in the first place.

The publication of *Centre Stage + 10* is a timely reminder - if we need it - of the need to keep researching and evaluating our practice, of the need to use the findings of research to advocate for the rights of young people to participate in quality arts practice and to have access to that quality provision in their local community.

As one survey participant put it:

I do think that there are some people who just look at theatre and know it's going to be their life. That's it. End of story.

Benefits of Participation

Chair: Gaye Tanham

Speakers: Aubrey Walsh, Stephanie Hudson, Grainne Hallihan.

Introduction: Orlaith McBride

One will look at the benefits of participation; the next will look at the artistic practice of youth theatre; the third presentation will look at reaching the young people-inclusion and recruitment and participant profiles and then the final session will look at the landmarks for survival of a youth theatre and the development of a youth theatre. And just to say that all of the speakers were asked...they were all in

advance sent various different chapters pertaining to the area that they're going to talk about today, and they were asked to reflect on, based on their own experience, what they were reading, so they're not presenting findings from the research...that's fair to say, although they will have reflected on the findings in terms of presenting their own presentation. We have asked Gaye Tanham, who is the head of Children, Young People and Education in the Arts Council to chair this specific section of the day...and just to say that Gaye then will chair a questions and answers at the end.

Gaye Tanham:

Well, as Orlaith said, we're going to get some personal accounts and personal perspectives and rather than speaking about the chapters, I think the speakers are going to mould them to their own experience and tell us about their views and their encounters with youth theatre matters. So, to kick off, we have three young theatre makers. They will introduce themselves in terms of the youth theatres, who's work they've been involved in, but the first speaker to talk to us is Aubrey Walsh...

Aubrey Walsh:

As you said, my name is Aubrey and I'm part of Celbridge Youth Drama. I'm going to start with how I first got into drama and basically, the secondary school I was in, they were staging a musical with the other local secondary schools, so me and the lads thought it would be good craic to go up and see if we could get any auditions and we did and I ended up getting a part in it.

Then, unfortunately, rugby got in the way- in the form of a back injury, so I ended up having to drop out of that, which I was kind of disappointed about, but the director of the musical was the leader of CYD and she said to come down and see what I thought about it and if I wanted to, I could take part. So, me and the lads, we went down and we ended up joining permanently and pretty much all of us still go, which is kind of good, I suppose.

One of the best experiences about it is just...the first time I went on stage it was a play called *Matter of Honour*, and it was my first play and I had one of the leads in it

and I was extremely nervous and there waiting at the side of the stage and just hoping that I didn't mess up too many lines and all this sort of stuff, and then, you're kind of contemplating the fire-exits and where you can leg it out if anything goes wrong! And then the curtains go up and the lights go on and you realise there's no escape, no matter what happens and then you just complete your first scene and you come off and the buzz when you come back off-there's a mixture of adrenaline and just, you're glad that you actually didn't mess up that many lines! And that's pretty much the first time you go on stage!

I think one of the main things that I've gotten about drama is just- one of the main skills I learned is patience, just because when you're practicing for a play...the amount of times you have to go over the same scene...over and over and over...and then, "You did that movement wrong!" So, you have to go down past the last ten minutes of it and you have to just keep going and going and going. But you learn to develop some sort of patience anyway, even though you're frustrated the whole way through...you have to kind of develop it.

What else? One of the good things is the amount of people that you meet. Even just going to different festivals...you're used to acting with your people in your own youth drama group. You do improvs and you get to know them well, or how they act in improv and all that sort of stuff. But then when you go to a workshop in a festival, you find that you're thrown into a class or a workshop with no one you really know and you're given five minutes to come up with an improv about scuba-diving and a picture of a cow on the wall and you have to try and make some kind of improv on it with people that you don't know. So basically, they're relying on you, you're relying on them and you're going to act off each other and you do develop very good communication skills and the amount of people you meet is also a plus.

One aspect of it is...I don't do drama outside of youth theatre... I don't study it in college, I study science, so the love I have of drama would be different to the love of people that do study drama or that even study English in college just because I haven't actually really studied drama properly in a couple of years now... One thing is it taught me how to be more self-confident in a lot of ways because before, I used to take part in rugby and that was all about teamwork and that...but before drama, I didn't have that much self-confidence or I would have been that last person that

would want to get up and do a talk like today and all that sort of stuff. But, it does teach you...because you have to develop a character...you have to first embrace a character and then develop it and then when you go on stage...every person in the audience is a critic and you're worried about what they're going to think- not of you, but of the character that you developed, and even if you are kind of...if you mistakes or whatever, it's not your mistakes that they're judging, they're judging the character that you've made- and that's kind of a good thing about drama.

I guess the most important thing about drama that I've learned is that drama gives you tools to use in every day life...if you're in work or whatever...the skills you learn in drama can...if you're in a very crappy mood and you go to work, you're not going to show that you're in a crappy mood, you have to show that you're all polite and that and then you get tools from stuff like drama that you can use to do all that sort of stuff.

Gaye: Thanks, Aubrey! They next young theatre maker that is going to talk to us is Stephanie Hudson.

Hi. How are you? My name is Stephanie. I'm a past member of Roscommon County Youth Theatre. I have gone on to study in a different area...I'm studying midwifery, but I'm going to talk a bit today about what I got, personally from youth theatre.

I suppose, one of the first things that comes to mind is that when I started youth theatre, I was not much of a social animal, to put it mildly. I was shy and didn't like new situations, really, but when I started youth theatre, you were accepted into the fold straight away and everyone was friendly and you just got in and you didn't have time to think about being shy or standing out on the sides...you just got on with it and got in with the craic, you know and the work in youth theatre...you weren't given much time, you had to think on your feet a lot of the time, so you just jumped in with it. So, I suppose, along the way, subtly I got more confident and my self-esteem came up and I got less shy and suddenly I found that I wanted to be the first out on the floor instead of everyone else. But, I suppose in my...how youth theatre has helped me in my life now- and in my current studies- I've got the skills to...I've no fear of new situations now, or standing up and talking to people or in a group and in

college now, we're given these presentations to give every so often and I see the girls and they're standing there with the flashcards and they're completely freaking out at having to stand up and do this and it's a complete improvisation most of the time for me...I just get up and whatever comes out, comes out and I haven't failed yet!

So, that was one aspect of it. I suppose the other thing for me was that I was always a creative person, but I hadn't really tapped into it as such until I joined youth theatre. I used to look forward so much to a Sunday morning because you felt really refreshed and alive coming back out of it and I realised that that was the creative side of me that I hadn't tapped into before and now I always have to have something. I always have to be involved in doing drama in some sense, or music, or something creative, you know...just to keep that life going in me and it's just very important for me and youth theatre was where that began, and I realise that.

Youth theatre has also given me an awful lot of opportunities for meeting people and going outside of youth theatre even...I was involved in the National Youth Theatre 2007, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, and that broadened again the people I was meeting and the experiences of drama...it was an amazing experience for me. I also got opportunities to go to Limerick for Drama League of Ireland, where I met more people and you know...helping out...assistant facilitating workshops and loads of experience, and I kept growing in drama all the time. I suppose, mixing with people who have the love of theatre and drama...it's a comfortable space...you find it very comfortable because you're mixing with like-minded people all the time. So, I suppose, overall, I would say my experience of youth theatre was a great period of personal growth for me, of being included socially in so many different areas and different things and just feeling comfortable and more relaxed with that. And a quote that...when Rhona came down to us for our evaluation, when she was doing this study...she put our pictures on the floor and we had to pick a picture up that we felt explained our experience of youth theatre. And the first thing that jumped out at me was a dove and I picked up the dove and we had to give a short sentence to explain why we picked this picture and my explanation was that, "Youth theatre gave me wings and helped me fly, free as a bird." Thank you.

Gaye:

Thank you, Stephanie. The final speaker on this particular theme is Gráinne Hallahan.

My name is Gráinne Hallahan. I'm 21 years of age and I'm from Dublin Youth Theatre, and I've been in Dublin youth Theatre since I was 14, so that's a third of my life! It's a long time to be in a youth theatre and obviously I've stayed in the youth theatre for a good reason...I've not just been wasting my time. When I started, when I was 14, to the person I am now is a huge difference and the youth theatre has been a massive part of that, definitely. When I went initially, I had an interest in drama...I'm studying Drama and Theatre Studies now in Trinity College, and definitely having gone to youth theatre solidified in my mind what I wanted to do and really taught me the skills I needed to go on, and hopefully to make a good career for myself now, in it, but that's not why I loved it so much...that's not why I loved being in youth theatre. I was in different stage schools through the 7 years, but I left them all because there was no comparison between youth theatre and a stage school. Any stage school I went to, I always found that it was...very much business orientated and it wasn't about developing people or making friends or growing up or talking about issues that were important to young people, which is very much what youth theatre is about. In our workshops we were always encouraged to improvise on issues that were important to us, which is very important for people who...like, sometimes youth theatre can be an escape from home or school or situations in your life, as a young person that you've no control over, but are not nice situations to be in and it's nice to go somewhere that you can express about those things without feeling that you'll be criticised for it or judged for it, so I think it's kind of almost like a form of therapy on a weekend! Because you're allowed give your points and they're encouraged and that's very much what youth theatre was for me because...I wasn't shy...I've never been- as you might have guessed- but I was the sort of student in school that the teachers probably liked but hated to teach because I wouldn't shut up talking in class and that sort of thing and they kind of suppress your ideas, because there was more students in the class than you, obviously and they have to learn

too...that sort of thing. But when you go to youth theatre then, you're given the chance to, you know...to be the centre of attention and not like to be *the centre of attention*, but to actually be listened to and that you're not just told, "Okay, be quiet, we're here for a reason," so that is a huge benefit of youth theatre.

The other huge point, and I think this is different to any other kind of organisation that you can be in...like, in youth theatre, you meet people from every social background...I certainly found that, anyway, and when you're younger, generally you go to school around an area that you're already from, whereas if you go to youth theatre you meet people from all different backgrounds, different religions, different cultures and that's definitely shaped me as a person and has had an impact on how I look at the world and what's important to me, because of what I've experienced in DYT and learning about issues that I never would have learned about from people who I've made friends with, who I wouldn't have been exposed to- that's that wrong word- but, who I wouldn't have met or had contact with had I not been in DYT. And that's hugely important, like the Minister said, for making good people, rounded people...that's so important, not to have set ideas because generally when you come out of school or home, you're taught certain ideas, so youth theatre gives you the space to form your own opinions, not just to use opinions that other people have ingrained in you, which I suppose, is when you become your own person...you make your own ideas.

For me, definitely, youth theatre has set me up for my career...as I said, I had that interest in doing it before I actually went along- I was brought along to the audition by a friend- and because I was interested in drama, that's why I joined. But as I say, that's not why I stayed, but luckily I've learned...well, I've been lucky to be taught great skills in youth theatre to go on and use and definitely, I don't think I would have got into the course if I hadn't have had such a wealth of knowledge from the different people I've been lucky to work with and who've taught me and stuff.

In terms of personal development, then, definitely...like when I went...it was really strange for me because I had always been confident in school and very outgoing and not afraid of any situation and then when I went, to begin with I found that I was really nervous and I couldn't understand why I was nervous because I wasn't used to being nervous in situations, but I think that was because I was so used to the surroundings

that I had been in, that to go to a new surrounding was all of a sudden, a challenge that I had never...I didn't even realise...that I had never actually come up against. SO, I did actually grow myself and like, for the first year or so I was really quiet and nervous and I didn't want to breathe or say anything, which is totally not who I am at all, and I think...someone was saying...Orlaith read out my comment earlier...that I said that after my first year one-act, I had this dream when I went home and I was just so...I was flying in my dream...I think it was the first time I ever had a dream about flying and it was as a direct result of how happy I felt that I'd overcome this challenge to fit in, in a new place that was so outside of my norm in life, that it had a huge impact...I felt like I'd grown, you know, and that I actually dreamt about it!

Other things...definitely, so that is confidence and that was an extra confidence for me and to feel maybe that it's okay to not feel comfortable in situations, which I had done before and definitely confidence...there's umpteen people come through...there's a new spurt of people every year and you see the difference in people from when they come in, in first year, and you see them...they come in and it's like first years in school and they're so shy and timid, and you can tell people even, who you know have probably been bullied in school and have never had the opportunity to fit in somewhere, or have never felt like they did. And then you come back a year later and they're like, really chatty and confident in themselves and not afraid of other people who my actually criticise them. They realise that they're their own person, and definitely, that is because of youth theatre- 100%. Another thing that is a huge issue, I think, among teenagers and is something that would be dealt with- and quite poignant, probably- throughout youth theatres all over the country, I'd imagine, is sexual orientation- and in terms of being a teenager, that's an issue that's very poignant with teenagers and it's a really difficult issue for teenagers. Like, sometimes teenagers aren't sure what their sexual orientation is, especially when they're quite young, and I think that it's...I'm not saying that there's a lot of sex-I'm not saying that at all! I just want to be clear about that...it's a PG kind of place! I'm just saying that in improvisations, or in plays, or in MOAF's- Festivals that the young people actually write themselves, it's often an issue that's brought up, and I think, like I said about the whole therapy thing, the youth theatre surroundings and the comfortable accepting, supportive surroundings that a youth theatre gives often...some people find it difficult to find themselves in that particular way, and it gives them a helping hand to do that more smoothly, whereas it can be quite difficult to do that in the outside world, where people can be very critical and suppressing

sometimes. And I'll just say one final thing...it's a place outside of home that you can go to, and some people don't have- not necessarily just at home- but some people have different issues and they need a nice place to go to sometimes and youth theatre can be that place. Thank you very much.

GT: Okay, well I'm delighted to hear that DYT's PG rated. Thanks to the three speakers on that theme. They all assured me that they were dying to get up there and talk to you...not! And in fact, we think ensemble when we think of youth theatre because youth theatre does ensemble really, really well the collective approach really, really well. However, in any ensemble, the skill of the ensemble is to be able to extract the person's story...and these stories are a testament to that. Next up...Veronica Coburn is going to talk about her understanding and her experience in the artistic practice side of the work.

Veronica Coburn: The Artistic Practice of Youth Theatre

Hello. I would like to talk today about 'That which is indefinable'. This report- and I have a copy of it here- *Centre Stage+10* is a really well executed and necessary piece of work. It will, in conjunction with its predecessor provide a quantitative and qualitative data that will argue the case for youth theatre in these difficult economic times. It will provide the proof that state bodies require to justify their continued support for the sector, and it will inform the development of future policies that will affect all youth theatres in the years to come. There is no doubt that this is an important piece of work.

But...it is also a dangerous piece of work because its function is to capture...to encapsulate...to fence in all that there is to know about youth theatre: what youth theatre is; what youth theatre does; and how youth theatre goes about doing it, and in the process things become defined, and definitions are sometimes about limitation. It is 'this' and no more. I was involved in Dublin Youth Theatre as a voluntary leader for 14 years and during those years; the organisation went through the process of formalisation. Probably not the first process of formalisation, but certainly a major process of formalisation. Structures were put in place with the intention of protecting

what was vital about the organisation. They were intended to protect what was great about DYT and allow for future growth, those structures were necessary, those structures *are* necessary, but I always felt that there was something lacking in this formal thing that we had built. I always felt that there was something very precious at the heart of DYT that was hard to articulate and that we failed to pin down, and I couldn't help but think that we all had a sense that if we ever did manage to isolate this thing, to surround it, so that we could look at it long enough to describe it, that we might, in the process, kill it. It was something to do with an organic balance, a mix of influences and the ability of the organisation to make brave decisions on behalf of its member and by grave, I mean, visionary, sometimes foolhardy leaps of faith.

This precious thing at the heart of Dublin Youth Theatre, to me, seemed to exist in the spaces between things. The ongoing fight for supremacy between art and youth practice, the teeter between care and censorship, the mix of dedicated volunteer and interested theatre professional, the comfort of the familiar and the excitement of the new and the inevitable cycle of experience back to inexperience with each new intake of members.

The tug of war that is the debate about which is more important; the art that the young people create or their experience in creating it is the backbone of the youth theatre movement. Throughout my years as a leader of DYT I consistently argued the toss on that one with all the other voluntary leaders. I was always on the 51% art to 49% youth practice side. There were others who, wrongly, thought otherwise. The truth is, of course, that both are vital...the ratio of 50:50 comes to mind, but I suspect that there is something terribly important in the live debate. Our passion, our interest is kept alive in it. There is a great quote from the leader of Sligo Youth Theatre in the report, where he or she- I don't know, it's not identified- where they talk of this philosophical divide, and it is:

“What I've found through my experience in youth theatre is that sometimes one of these is used as an excuse for bad practice in the other. I feel here that those two systems complement each other very well and that the only way you can run a good youth theatre is by saying, “We're not going to slip on either of those things.””

They are wise words. Of course, the reason for my insistence over all those years that it be 51% art is obvious. Art is my thing. It's what I do. My father-in-law doesn't believe in art. He doesn't think that there should be public subsidy for the Arts. He thinks those kidney machines are far more valuable. I don't agree. It is in our art that we express who we are. That we show what we've done. That we imagine what we might be. It is in art that we test the world that we live in. That we seek answers for that which we do not understand. That we grapple with ideas, with realities, with humanity. And youth theatre is one of the very few places where young people get to be artists.

Martin Drury, in the early days of the Ark in response to the suggestion that the purpose of theatre for young people was to develop adult audiences would declare that an 8-year-old was not a quarter of a 32-year-old. The 8-year-old was an audience member in their own right, with 8-year-old needs, 8-year-old concerns, and 8-year-old desires. In a similar vein, I believe that the need to engage in art is not something that begins with the right to vote, but in our society, art for art's sake is by and large not available to young people. Art always comes with a compromise: education, outreach. I truly believe that young people have the capacity and the need and the desire to make art and youth theatre is that rare place where young people can do so, unequivocally. And that space, a space unbound by censorship, in which young people can create the art they want and need and desire is precious. Of course, there is a duty of care for young people. And there is a need for responsible programming, but there is also a need for courage. I fear censorship that comes in the form of words like *suitability* and *appropriate*. I do not for a minute suggest that bad youth practice be engaged in or that young people be put in any danger, but young people are robust and part of our duty of care is to ensure the sanctity of their artistic territory.

We want all the possibilities of the art form of theatre available to our young practitioners. Not just material that is 'suitable'. What identifies material as being suitable for young theatre artists? I've known of people who hold the opinion that young actors should only play characters their own age. In the report, there are conflicting opinions about plays written specifically for young performers...some welcome them and others feel patronised by them. As with many art forms, sexual content is more likely to raise eyebrows than content that is violent. Language? Is bad language unnecessary, indulgent, offensive, or does it legitimately reflect

popular usage as it is today? Surely, as in all matters of censorship, what is deemed suitable or not is a matter of opinion, taste and tolerance.

I am not fond of absolutes. There is, no doubt, material that is not suitable for a particular group, at a particular time, because of their age or their make up. But I would be loathe to mark any piece of work as being universally unsuited to all youth theatre groups. The territory between care and censorship is fraught with ambiguity. Here's an example: if a group of young people making a piece of theatre wanted to include some element of nudity, it is my opinion that that impulse should be considered possible. If the young people involved are 12, it would be shocking if the request was approved. However, if they are 17 and 18 years of age, it would be shocking if they were denied. Yet, as a writer of plays for youth theatre, I would not dream of writing a nude scene for young actors. I couldn't write it, but I could allow it, if it was truly of them, in the pursuit of their art.

One of my favourite youth theatre shows of all time was also one of the most controversial. Dublin Youth Theatre's production of *Timebomb* was inspired by the Larry Clarke film, *Kids*, a film that carried an over-18's certificate...many of the cast were not over 18. The show was conceived and directed by London-based Irish artists, Desperate Optimists, and used text from the film to deconstruct perceptions of youth culture. I remember sitting in the audience as the young performers embarked on a performance sections, which saw individuals questioned about their sexuality. The audience were led to believe that they answered truthfully, as themselves. I don't know if this was the case, it appeared to be. What I do remember is that it was electric. I remember thinking that I hadn't seen anything like this before and that the material would have lost all credibility if it had been performed by adult actors. I felt I was witnessing art. Created by people younger than me. Articulating a voice that was new to me. That show divided opinion like no other. Within the youth theatre, it divided the audience. It was also critically acclaimed.

Art is not polite. It is not neat. It doesn't always come in the form you expected it to arrive in, or within the parameters that have been articulated. Youth theatre differs from drama for young people in any other context, because youth theatre members

can be part of work, can imagine work, can make work that they couldn't dream of in any other place. And the work that young people are capable of imagining, given the opportunity, has the capacity to surprise us, amaze us and confound us in its form, its scale and its depth. It is an artistic voice that we can help to be heard. Of course, not everything has to happen at the edge. Not everything has to push the boundaries. The comfort of the familiar, in terms of weekly workshops and steady programming, with regular leaders provides the secure base and the skills needed to encounter new territory. There is a valuable balance between regular leaders and visiting facilitators. Too much of either is not a good thing. Outside influence is a necessary provocation for members and leaders alike. And too much outside influence results in little progress, as each workshop becomes a beginning and nothing is brought beyond the level of introduction. Youth theatres are seasonal, but the seasons cannot be anticipated. Spring comes every so often in the form of new members. Sometimes the seasons roll quickly from one to the other as waves of members come, engage and leave again, and every so often there is an alignment in the stars that sees the membership gel for a particular period of time. And suddenly there is a particularly talented and dedicated bunch of young people, with whom great things can be achieved and then they leave and it is time to start again. Whenever people talk of the development of their youth theatre, it is always in the form of expansion. Future development. Increased productivity. Bigger equating with better. Sometimes I think the answer is in maintaining what is wonderful about what is already there. Maintaining a structure that ebbs and flows with each new generation of young people. Maintaining the good will and interest of the saintly volunteers. Maintaining a space where young people can become better versions of themselves, whilst taking part in weekly workshops and sporadic productions. Maintaining a space where young people, once in a while, when the stars align, can surprise us all by producing theatre art that is unique and challenging and profound.

I worry sometimes that we will all get lost in policies...policies and strategies and objectives and aims. I know these things are necessary. I know it is good to articulate what we are and why we are and how we will do what we set out to do. But art is a live thing, and as soon as you write something down, it is potentially outdated, no longer relevant, maybe even a dead thing. This report is a good thing...but may already be- and I'm sort of reluctant to say it-but just might already be a dead thing. The beating heart of youth theatre is to be found elsewhere. In the workshop room, in the rehearsal room, in the hangout room over cups of bad coffee

and cheap biscuits. Let not the possibilities of youth theatre be limited by *anything*, including that which presents and represents-us. Thank you.

Reaching the Young People – Inclusion, Recruitment and Participant Profiles

Speaker : Ollie Breslin

I thought it was lovely what Veronica said and I hope it is circulated for others to hear. Something that struck me in what the young people said and that was patience. I am involved in this whole thing for the last 25 years. I find it hard to believe that I am the old fogey. But that whole thing of patience, I remember young people who sit around at a conference of leaders, be it at an exchange or whatever and people trying to convince me to throw out a particular young person because they were not ready for this, they were just trouble and they were this or that. But just staying with that young person and seeing them coming out the other end is really rewarding for me. I can see a young lad who is now in stage management training in Dublin and is now going to come back and do our stage management for different shows. That is really rewarding.

There is another guy who works with me as a youth theatre leader and I remember, when he came in first, he came in with a duffle coat and he wouldn't take it off and he sat in the corner and he wouldn't come out of the corner. He didn't come back the next week. People probably didn't notice him being gone. In those days we used to have 50 people in a workshop and so it is very easy to lose someone. One of the leaders met him outside of a church on Sunday and convinced him to come back and he came back. He still kept the coat on and the hood up and now he is a youth theatre leader. As you get older, you become more aware of the whole cycle and you see people become leaders. They are the next generation. Sometimes it is those people who got so much out of it that will give something back. The people who see it as an opportunity for you to look at them and think 'Amn't I great' and go off and become actors or something else. They don't really come back. It is the people who really get something out of it who come back. I was reminded about the whole thing of being real. How important it is in the workshop that we create a space that is safe where real things can happen in a room and I think it is really special, to be there when something happens.

First of all I want to say well done to Rhona. I had the privilege of looking at it in advance and I found it overwhelming to be honest because there was so much in it. I emailed Orlaith and I said could you send me the recommendations? It was too much.

I think it is ok to have something that is too much and I think it is ok that we will dip into it. I know that in our own structure in Waterford, that what we are going to do with the youth theatre leaders, and other people, is that we are going to give people a chapter to read and we are going to go back and discuss it. That is useful. I would like to see that maybe in the autumn, we come back together again, after we have had time to look at it and think about it and have a proper kind of debate among ourselves. I think there is an awful lot in it. I was on the board of NAYD for quite a number of years, and I think it is fair to say, that I would be one of NAYD's greatest critics. I think that within this report, there is a lot of stuff that NAYD needs to take on Board and a lot of stuff that we need to take on board. I think that is really healthy that you can have that debate and learn from it.

I personally think that we are still in a mickey-mouse place. I think youth arts in Ireland is still way down there. Despite the fact we have Martin Cullen here today and Mary Cloake and Gaye [Tanham] chairing, I still think it is in the ha'penny place. I would like to see in ten years time that basically we could be talking as an equal in the arts world. I asked questions last year about the funding of the arts and I know we can debate it. In terms of direct funding from the Arts Council, we are still only getting 5% for Children and Young People and the population is still something like 45% in our age bracket. I think that is total discrimination and I want to see us becoming a little bit more aggressive and a little bit more vocal about that. I don't think that we should be reliant all the time on volunteers. I don't think we should be in a situation where people are getting burnt out all the time and taken for granted and listening to "Don't you love the young people, aren't you great". It is a professional job that needs to be done. Youth arts is as important as The Abbey or the Museum of Modern Art, whatever it is. Our work is as important. In fact it is probably more important and I would even challenge Martin Cullen about sport. I believe what we do is more important than sport. I think sport is far too competitive and I think what we have is very important. Ok we do have auditions sometimes. Most of the time, we really do believe in the idea that it is for everybody and the least person in the room is the one we keep an eye on. The person who is least able is the person we are

keeping an eye on. The person who is least able to do the Improv is the one we keep an eye on and that is how we work. I think that often in sport that is not the case. That person is gone from the team. I think that is why we need to bang the table and say we are much more important than sport. It is more important than getting the young person to play under 12s or whatever it is.

I was asked to talk about reaching young people, recruitment, inclusion and participation. I think that in a way I believe that if I start talking about that I would just bore you because you are all experts at this. In the report there are a lot of good ideas from youth theatres, who are trying this and trying that. There are a lot of different ways of grabbing young people. It is in the report. If you have a safe place and young people believe it is a fun environment, that this is their place. If they feel they own this place whatever it may be, I think word will get out that it is a good place.

One of the other things that came up today that I heard people talking about was the whole thing about 'working class'; I say that because I am from way back. We have always had a strong belief that working class kids should be involved in the arts and the arts are there for all. That is a very strong thing down in Waterford. It was interesting what Gráinne said about meeting other types of people and how important that is. It is important to keep prices down. Our workshop term would be €20 or around that figure but we keep it very accessible. We always have bursaries and there is no problem getting free places. I think that is really important. I think you always need to talk about the people who have the least, the parents who will not support their young people. That is what we should keep an eye on. I know that is easy to say when we are getting grants and some of you are not getting grants but I think that you have to have an open door where people can come in, where there are regularly people coming in. Where there is new blood and there are ways to do that. Recently I saw something about October being children's month. The children's festival are doing this thing where people will be told nationally that there are all these different festivals for children. Maybe some of these ideas we can take and rob and use. The more things we can bring in to help us, the better.

We are talking about things like personal development and a therapy session and that kind of stuff. I think it is important that the word is out there that we are not an

issue-based organisation. We are a fun theatre-based organisation. We have to do a bit of juggling here because, of course, we will look at issues and of course that is part of our work but if the word gets out there that we are looking at issues, young people will go 'oh don't do that'. I think that is one of the reasons an awful lot of young people are getting turned off more conventional youth work because of that. It seems too serious and issue based. I think that is the beauty of what we have in that it is not seen that way. I think we have to be very careful. As Veronica said, it is a juggling act. What we put out there is one thing. When young people come in they get that, but they get lots of things. I know a lot of parents would send kids to us for reasons such as the child lacks confidence or whatever or don't have many friends. But we don't say that, we don't advertise that. We say this is a great place etc. These other things happen.

The other thing too that was mentioned in the report is that we had a lot of male leaders and I think that is helpful from the point of view of getting in young men. I think that is a good model in the sense that if lads come in and see male leaders acting the idiot, making a fool of themselves, and all that kind of stuff, it helps and it makes it a safe place. That is really important when it comes to volunteers and leaders.

Just to say a few final things. One of them is about changes in participation. Ireland is very different now and I think it is important that we, like all of the other youth services, that we look at that, that we keep an eye on that. We need to make sure that we do get kids in from Eastern European backgrounds and African backgrounds because that does break down a lot of barriers. Same with things like wheelchair access. We have always had a thing to try and have workshops in spaces that are wheelchair accessible. It just becomes normal that there is someone in the room in a wheelchair and that is ok. People just see that as normal. I remember years ago in Garter Lane, a father used to come down every Monday night to the workshop and carry his daughter up the steps. This is a teenager and she is being carried up the steps into the workshop. It was just very humiliating. These practical things are really important, that we keep an eye on.

Finally, just to say that there is a lot of good stuff in the report and I would like once again to emphasise that we should come back and look at it and argue about it.

Maybe we would learn a lot of stuff and take on a lot of stuff from each other and also we would help NAYD in their future direction. I do believe that NAYD should be much more of a lobbying organisation and I think today was a very good example of that. I think it is really important that people can make a living out of this area because I think it is really important work. Thank you.

The Landmarks for the Survival and Development of a Youth Theatre

Speaker Leish Burke

I am specifically going to talk about the landmarks in Griese Youth Theatre and the name Griese comes from the local river, it has nothing to do with the musical. We operate from the Quaker Meeting house in a small little village called Ballitore. Just to fill you in a little bit about Ballitore; in 1790, the poet and writer Mary Shakleton

Ledbetter wrote *Then come my friends and see once more the beauties of sweet Ballitore*. For any of you who have visited Ballitore, you will know that that bears very little resemblance to the home of Griese Youth Theatre. It is a tiny village, it is quaint but it is also a designated disadvantaged area with little to do in terms of recreation and no history of theatre. The first landmark was to actually set up a youth theatre in a village like Ballitore in 1999. At that time I was working as a drama facilitator in a number of schools in Co. Kildare. I was approached by the local librarian and asked to run a weeklong drama workshop and the library at that stage was housed in the Quaker Meeting House. I put a proposal to Kildare Arts Service and Action South Kildare to run this workshop with a visual artist and we got a target group of 36 children, a number of whom came on the recommendation of the school principal, because he believed that these children could benefit greatly from this kind of complementary activity.

The week was a huge success and ended with two performances in the local Crookstown Hall with a performance by the children aged 6-12, the older group did a play based on the life of Joan of Arc and the younger group did *The Frog Prince*. It was a great success story and that was the end of the workshop. It would have ended there, if it were not that the next week the kids were coming into the library asking when was the next drama camp going to happen and basically that there was nothing else to do in the place and no real way out of the village either. Action South

Kildare came on board at this stage and Kildare County Council and that was a real landmark in that it provided funding for the continuation of the activities, but limited activities, and we began to run weekly drama workshops with the kids. The activities that took place that September in 1999 – July 2000, are the activities that formed the core of the drama group's activities. They were weekly drama workshops, art workshops, stage productions, Halloween parades and, since 2000, we decided in a moment of madness to revive *Hunting the Wren* on St. Stephens' Day. All the proceeds from this go to local charities and usually children's charities in the area. These types of activities were landmarks in themselves in that they brought us out of the Meeting House and into the street where we were considered even more of an oddity than we were when we set up the drama group. Since then we have gone on, in the last three years, to participate the St. Patrick's Day parade in Dublin, which has been great. In 2001, we had a minor landmark when there was an outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease in the country and that meant the Meeting House was out of bounds for a number of months. This set back could have meant the demise of the group but the enthusiasm of the kids, what they wanted was something to be happening in the Meeting House. Also on my own part, I had a sense that I had unlocked a lot of creativity in people who had not had a chance to express it and weren't doing well in school and I couldn't really walk away from it.

After that we got some funding from Action South Kildare and small subscriptions from members and the support of Kildare County Council was important, in that the building was owned by the Council and we were allowed use it, which was of great benefit to us. At that time the library transferred from the Meeting House to the newly opened Ledbetter House and we became the sole occupants of the Meeting House mainly because it is too cold for anyone else to use! It gave us great freedom to reschedule classes, to increase numbers and to get on with even more work. Having ventured out of the Meeting House and on to the streets, we began to get more confident and we went to Dunamase Arts Centre, which was another big milestone for the group and that was an outreach programme ran by Big Telly Outreach programme and this was hugely exciting for everyone because these were 'real' actors and it was really special and they did a workshop with the kids as well. Since then we have gone on to perform, ever year since 2003, in the Kildare Festival of Youth Drama in the Riverbank Arts Centre, directed by Peter Hussey.

All this outreach stuff had a huge effect on the confidence of the group because we were going from the Meeting House on to the streets to the Dunamais, to Newbridge and the group were building confidence all the time. The members were gaining ownership of their group as well. Also in The Riverbank, there were guest facilitators doing all aspects of theatre so they were improving their communication skills, their artistic skills and their general confidence. Alongside that, over the years, we had outside facilitators like Max Hafler and Cindy Cummins, from the NAYD Skills Support Programme, coming as guest facilitators to our space and that made our space really important.

After that the group had expanded in number to 68 from the initial 26 and we would still get grants from Kildare County Council and Action South Kildare. In 2004, we had a completely new development. I think in youth theatre you have to have very innovative moments of madness, which are a bit risky, but if you don't do them you can stagnate a little bit. We ventured into film-making and we got in touch with a guy called Eamon Little from the Galway Flying Film Squad and, because we had hardly any money we filmed in December and January outdoors which was freezing but it was a big landmark for the group because we got loads of local involvement with people giving locations, food and stuff like that. Words like 'in the can' and 'it's a wrap' became bandied around and felt really really important! That was our first contact with the actor Gabriel Byrne who continued contact with the group by mail and in person.

With all of this activity, we were moving more and more into the wider community and that was bringing its own little risks with it. We went to the Galway Junior Film Fleadh to see our first short film, *All My Love* and around this time the end of 2004/2005, while we were away on that trip, the Meeting House was seriously vandalised. All the windows broke. It was a listed building, and even though we weren't there, we felt responsible. This was really upsetting for the members because they believed that the culprits to be acquaintances of theirs and there was a distinct feeling that this vandalism was directly related to some of the local kids' involvement in the group as well. It became really important to try to involve some of the young people who were hanging around the Meeting House and who were really on the periphery of the group. Some of the lads who were in the group, we had quite a few males at that stage, but those lads just wanted to be in the Meeting House at that stage. That's all they really wanted was just somewhere to hang out. In 2005 KELT and the Leader

Plus programme gave us an award and we had the first Ballitore Short Film Festival. This was a huge landmark, a very big project for the group. We produced a documentary on village life, a music video and we made a really good short film called *Are We Ready*, which was set around the time of the war of independence, and being in Ballitore sets and props were perfect because it hasn't changed that much! It was really exciting. It was seven days of cameras and the whole village was absolutely buzzing with this. There was a group called Blind Ditch that came from Leader plus in the UK. I had spotted this group of potential window breakers and they came up to the Meeting House and the Blind Ditch team worked with them and they produced their own film, *Thin Air*, but they also did stuff with the drama group and workshops to get them into the whole thing when making the film. These young people, nine males and one female, joined the group and most of them remained in it for a number of years. I don't think they would have joined the drama group at that stage, we had been trying to get them in, but for some reason they wouldn't have thought that drama was cool but film was cool. Once you got them in, and you got the fun out of doing the drama, they were in and that worked really well. Some of them are still involved in the group and some of them have moved but still have respect for the work of the youth theatre.

We had a film premiere then in an old cinema in the village and that was a really exciting occasion with limos and tuxedos etc. The screening was broadcast into three pubs in the village, for the locals who couldn't go around the corner to the cinema! To actually see the young people they saw everyday walking down the street on screen, and see how disciplined and talented these people were. Before that people would say what are they doing up there in the Meeting House, playing games or something.

They didn't really know what we did. So from that point of view, the film was very important. Throughout 2006-2008, we did loads of stuff. We had participation in the Connections play cycle, with a performance in the Everyman Theatre in Cork and we had a second film festival which was entirely filmed locally and we built a small stage in the Meeting House and got some lighting equipment. That made the Meeting House viable as a performance space to which to bring people, because they won't travel five miles out of the village really. Then there was more and more networking with other youth theatres and participating in RTE's Hidden History series. In addition, we had a trip to London to edit a film based on one of the Connection plays *Baby Girl*.

As you can imagine all these activities involved a huge amount of community interaction and we did receive a lot of support from a large part of the community. A significant landmark for the group arose when we had to deal with a challenge from the outside community. I think that anybody working in a small rural area will come up with challenges when you know everyone as well. Personal politics can impinge on the group. This challenge had a big effect on the confidence of the older group members as indeed it did have on myself, as their director, and on a sense of trust, I suppose, in terms of a small selection of people. At that stage it could have spelt the end of the youth theatre and we spent a lot of time toing and froing about this, but I think the main landmark for the group was how we dealt with it. We decided to stay put and go back to our artistic roots i.e. the drama stuff, and to raise the whole artistic standard of the group's work. Out of this we realised that the activities had become too wide and too unwieldy and the structures had got a bit too loose. From that we formed a parents' committee, which we now have, and also a committee to oversee the running of the Meeting House. That has worked really well. It leaves the facilitators free to facilitate and be creative, they don't need to be running raffles or anything like that and they are also a sounding board for me as a director of the group. In an autonomous youth theatre, no matter how much energy you have, the main landmark you need to discover is that you are only one person and that is a landmark in itself. You need to delegate and get as much help as you can from people.

Throughout this challenge and this difficulty that we faced, the support of Anna Galligan, Development Officer with NAYD, who was available all the time in an advisory listening capacity was very important for us. As we approach our tenth anniversary, some of our members have completed a Leargas Youth Initiative and they have produced a documentary on the history of the youth theatre, 'Where the Griese Flows: Home to Griese Youth Theatre 1999 - 2009'. We have also just finished the NAYD New Stage work as well with Veronica Coburn's *Understanding Marcus*, which involved a fantastic trip down to Cork. I think the actual trip is as important as the play half the time.

Our last real landmark, of this whole cycle, has been the original members moving on and this all happened during this Youth Initiative and we had serious separation

issues, well I had. It was worse than leaving home. I suppose once you realise that, with the next group, you are not going to invest all that emotional stuff in them. Most of them are now back in some capacity or an ad hoc kind of basis. Some of them are going on different training courses and some of them are studying drama in college and a lot of them stay in touch, even if it is only to say 'Hello, How are you getting

on?' That is a really big landmark for a group, when the first bunch move on, and I think that is so vital to the lifeblood of the youth theatre that that keeps happening.

Our summer production is a stage performance; an original script with original music. It is a Kildare County Council Arts project and it is based on the life of Joan of Arc. I don't know where she came out of ten years ago but we just seem to be stuck with her! It includes themes relevant to young people today.

Finally I'd like to agree with Grainne about the whole business of being involved in a youth theatre. If I had been involved in a youth theatre when I was young, I would have behaved myself a bit better because I would have been busier, and I think you get that sense of yourself at a much earlier age, if you are involved in youth theatre.

Thank you.