

INTERNATIONAL PROFILE: MAKING CONTACT

Combining experiment in theatre with participation in theatre, and involving young people in the discussion at every point along the way, Contact is an award-winning theatre space in Manchester, which is dedicated to bringing theatre to new and diverse audiences. **Willie White** talks to **John McGrath**, Artistic Director of Contact.

The interview begins by placing Contact in the context of Manchester as a large post-industrial city in the north of England. John McGrath describes how Contact's catchment area works at three levels: local - working with young people from culturally diverse districts in the immediate area; greater Manchester area – as a resource and meeting place for artists; international – working with international artists and companies around shared interests.

J: What Contact does is **combine experiment in theatre with participation in theatre**. In doing that, we put ourselves as part of a very international network: we have a very high percentage of international artists and companies visiting the theatre and that's to do with shared interests around those kinds of work.

Contact is one of a handful of building-based theatres in a middle-sized city in the UK: there's the Royal Exchange that does the Shakespeares and the Noel Cowards, and there's the Library Theatre that does the Tom Stoppards, and there's the Green Room that does the live art, and then there's Contact that does new theatre and participation and young people. But actually, I don't think that's a really relevant way of looking at things anymore. That's about looking at a range provision for a very stable population; I don't think that's what we deal with now. **I think the more appropriate way is to think is: "What's the community that your theatre is engaged in creating?"** That can be the kids around the corner and it can be companies that we're collaborating with in Mumbai, Zambia, Rio, New Zealand. They can all be part of the dynamic community of a theatre space.

W: That's very interesting, the idea of actually deciding to constitute a community rather than just relying on what you find on your doorstep or what a funder tells you that you've got to agree is important.

J: Contact has had a huge success in creating a genuinely culturally diverse audience – but the largest part of our audiences is young, white people, while a significant number are young, black people

and young people of other backgrounds. People tend to see the difference more than they see the same, so there is often quite a strong association with the diversity element. In fact, a bit over a third of our audiences are Black and Asian – and the proportion of participants involved in workshops and projects is closer to 50% coming from diverse communities, so it's slightly higher in participants than in our audiences.

W: Interestingly, you frame them also in terms of an age range, between 13 and 30.

J: Contact always had a history of being a theatre with a particular brief to reach young people, but that meant a variety of things, including a lot of children's shows. At the reopening in '99, the decision was made - and I was then brought in to fulfill this decision - to make it focus specifically on young adults, and the working definition of that was 13 to 30. That doesn't mean that all audience members should be under 30 - in fact a third of our audience members are over 35 and I like that - but two thirds of them are under 35, which I also like. It was really about focusing on young adults as opposed to children because most theatre is either older people or children (or youth theatre, which is usually a workshop, a group, a performance that young people do.) [Our aim was] to create a building that was particularly amenable to young adults, that was young adult focused in its ambience, ways of running, etc.

W: What does that mean, practically, to be focused in terms of one's ambience and young adults?

J: For example, there's always music playing at Contact, from before you enter the front door, so there isn't this slightly reverential hush. The music you play and the range of music that you play is important. Then, we hire young people from local communities to be the ushers and they look like the audience that is coming in. Young people get involved with the various departments from marketing through programming. They have representation at board meetings. So at every level you're talking about ways to engage young people. All staff are expected to interact with young people. In a lot of public buildings, a lot of public spaces, young people are seen as a threat or as dangerous, they're really marginalised...

W: I think it's just about having the right kind of contract - I don't

want to sound too formal – but it has happened in Project before, prior to me, where there was a desire to have young people involved but they were just let run riot and there were no boundaries so it just didn't work out and it was perceived to have been a bad idea. Whereas, without even thinking about it, I've had young people in. It just needs to be structured in some kind of way.

J: We bring our expertise as theatre practitioners, as directors in buildings, etc. and young people bring their expertise about what they're interested in, what their cultural connections are, and **you can combine those expertises in a successful organisation for young people**, with a respect on both sides for that expertise. That's the combination you need.

W: So, it's about being more ambitious simply than a youth theatre annual play, or a workshop - to actually have something that throughout the year is focused on engaging with young people in different ways?

J: Throughout every day, every hour of every day, and I think that goes back to the point about creating a community: **what's the purpose, what's the vision of your company, of your building, of your venue? and what's the community that needs to be there in order to fulfill that ambition?** And then, how do you go about the detail, day by day, creating that community, as one inhabits the building? **The danger of most youth projects and most young community projects is that they're this thing that is *being done* to the youth or the community by the building, the venue, the company.** To me, that's never ever going to work.

W: I'm the artistic director of a youth theatre here, and frankly this is an opportunity to indoctrinate them in some more worthwhile artistic practices than the wordy stuff that they get. But it's hard to strike a balance between the limits of their experience and trying to get them to do something contemporary. So it's about how you actually enable or facilitate them to do that.

J: It's a long journey. Take our group The Young Actors' Company, which young people who've been involved in other projects can audition into and get a one year place. (They don't pay and they are not paid, although usually they go on to get paid work with us.) It's year round, three evenings a week: two spent rehearsing

and one seeing a show - this is really important because we have a lot of companies coming through, from the Forced Entertainments to the Kali Theatres to The National Theatre through to live artists, so we get them to see that range of work as part of their development. They're aged 15 to 25, and there's usually about twenty-five of them or so in the company.

W: Year round, twenty-five people from 15 to 25 commit three nights a week to it. Wow!

J: When we started in '99, a lot of the work was maybe what you would expect out of a youth theatre: tales of life and you know what, incorporating contemporary music and movement, gritty stories, etc. But even though the company changes - even though you only get in the company for one year - it started to grow in terms of its artistic ambition. There are a number of reasons for that: one is that the young people were in a building where they were being exposed to lots of different kinds of work; second was they'd some time to see the work that the company had done previously - even if they hadn't been in it, they'd seen it and they'd experienced it, and there were other opportunities in smaller projects etc. to get that early stuff out of their system. So the work that the company makes now is artistically quite unusual and, I think, very unusual for young actors. But I would say it took about three or four years for it to really start to make that shift to where it was work that felt honest to the young performers but also felt artistically really challenging and interesting. **I don't think you can drum it up just by putting a good, exciting, experimental artist with a group of young people for a six week project, I think it has to take much longer.**

W: I should maybe be mindful of the fact that this is something that can happen in a large population centre where you've got a venue with lots of stuff on in a large catchment area. Youth theatres in Ireland are dispersed all around the country, so maybe we could talk more in principle about ways to engage with young people, how to empower and to involve them. How does Contact involve young people in the decisions and planning?

J: We're working on a relatively large scale for this kind of work, so we have various departments that we encourage young people to get involved in as volunteers - but not 'doing the photocopying' volunteers. There is usually a programming group and a young

marketing team that develop projects, and then there are all the young people that do the various workshops, etc.

We also have a core group, The Young Creative Leaders Project, a group of young people who want to make a more intense commitment but on an organisational level or opinion-giving level as opposed to the 'making a show' level. They get more involved with me as artistic director, they send representatives to board meetings, and they also train up as facilitators. For example, when we were doing our new 3-year plan and we had a series of away days for the board, staff, artists and young people, all those away days were run by three young people who'd come through our programme. So you had three young people running an away day for board members, some of whom are in their sixties, to explore where Contact should be going. That kind of flip in power is really important. And the board did a much better away day than if they'd had the standard consultant coming in running things, because they were opened up by who was leading the session.

Those kind of things are as easy to implement on a small level as on a big level - in some ways, they're easier to implement on a small level, because it's actually about how we share power, how we share the decision making, and that can happen in a youth theatre run by one person. It's not simply going, "Oh, Johnny'll direct the show this season as opposed to Fred, who usually runs the youth theatre." It's about thinking about how we all share our expertise in new, different and interesting ways and how we involve everybody.

- W: In your view, what are those principles and values that underpin good quality engagement with young people and good quality of artistic outputs for those?
- J: The first principle is that of sharing knowledge and sharing expertise. Any group of people in a room comes with expertise, so what is that expertise and how do we share it with each other to make the work? If I'm working with people who know a whole bunch of things about contemporary youth culture, about the experience of being young British-Asian, something that I know relatively little about, and I know certain things about how theatre is structured, [the task is] how do we create a piece of work that's built out of sharing those expertises, questioning each other and challenging each other? That would be a key principle - but part of the expertise that I would bring is how to lead a group, how to direct a show. It's not about devolving into some insane

dysfunctional democracy!.

The second thing is the developmental aspect: how do you give people opportunities to develop in what you're doing? A big thing at Contact is training people up in workshop skills, so that young people who've come through the projects become expert in delivering workshops to their peers, to the generation three years younger than them, and so on down the generations.

The third thing that we do is start taking them seriously as artists: if and when they start to develop their own ideas as artists, we support them in that - things that they then take a lead in. As well as the participatory elements and all the shows that we put on and invite in, we always have a strong emerging artists programme. So there's a bridge between those two places, between youth and professional; it's that emerging level.

People can dip into all three of those levels: you can be in a workshop, you can end up being cast in a professional production, you can be trying to develop your first solo piece.

W: How do you recognise value incorporated in people's immediate experience, yet encourage them beyond that? How do you encourage them to have wider horizons, to develop beyond the obvious and the immediate?

J: I think it's as simple as saying, "Well, we did that, we've just done that, so where can we go that's different and what about this?" Also, I think **it's really important as a practitioner to put your own creative interests on the table**, and then look at that particular way of making a piece and ask how to incorporate the expertise that [the young people] bring into the room.

I did a piece with [The Young Actors' Company] in spring called "Close-Up", which is a series of one to one performances across little desks with the audience. I said to them, "This is what I want to do. I want to make a piece with you where you will perform only one to one with the audience members." I thought they would hate the idea and I'd have to persuade them to do it, but I'd already decided they were going to do it, so it wasn't a democratic decision, it was a creatively led decision (and because I thought that would be an exciting kind of performance for them to learn.)

W: Certainly, for most youth theatres in Ireland, the ethos is not necessarily around the training of the next generation of theatre practitioners, it's more around young people's personal and social development. Here it's about quality of process, quality of

outcome – not everybody is going on to be the next generation of artists, how do you include those?

J: A lot of young people *do* go on from Contact to become artists, including some that we never expected to, but we don't consider ourselves a training place. [However] the possibility of professional development has to be there. **If you're engaging young people in creative work, you need to provide that possibility and that choice because otherwise you're making an assumption at the first point** that they're not going to be working in the arts in the long term, and I don't think you can make that choice for them. It has to be there as an option - but it doesn't have to be the only option. It is also completely valid for people to go off and do other things and many of the young people who come through Contact do go off and do other things in ways that might be more confident or creative than if they hadn't been there.

W: And is the fact that you learn social skills as well just the collateral damage sometimes?

J: I don't believe any young person in the world gets involved in a creative project in order to learn social skills, improve their group behaviour and become whatever it is. They don't do it for that.

W: Sometimes other people take the decision on their behalf with that expectation.

J: Well, we have absolutely no right to make that decision for them. You know, we all become better people by what we do, if we do it well.

W: But often youth theatre is seen as diversionary tactic: keep them off the streets at least on a Saturday morning, give them something to do. It's not important that it's good quality, they can hang around with each other and there's a bit of art to put a gloss on it, you know?

J: Yes and a lot of theatre edifices are built by Lord Mayors or by politicians because they're pompous. It doesn't mean that the work that goes on in those buildings has to be bad work, and **it doesn't mean that the work that goes on in those youth theatres has to be bad work just because they've been set up by politicians for the wrong reasons.** The question that we

should be asking ourselves is not “why was this set up by a bunch of politicians who set up all sorts of stupid things for all sorts of stupid reasons?” but: what are we doing? why are we doing it? and are we being honest with the people that we’re working with? If you can’t look a young person in the eye and tell them why you’re there in the room with them and what it is that you’re hoping to achieve from it, if you feel embarrassed at what the reason is (for example, “I’m doing it so that you won’t steal mobile phones on a Saturday morning”) then you shouldn’t be there.

W: To what extent are you involved in and funded for reasons of instrumentalism? Is that a factor for you at all? What pressure comes with your funding?

J: At Contact we’re relatively fortunate in that historically our funding is of a theatre venue, so we’re funded to make theatre. Again, we had a sort of historical commitment to making theatre with or for younger people, at least as part of the remit. And we made a commitment to start to question how we did that and to do that in more radical ways.

W: What was prompting that question?

J: Quite simply the fact that our building had been closed, rebuilt and reopened. That’s a moment where people go, “Actually, what are we doing and how do we do it?” And there was a wider context of an aging theatre audience, and that the youth theatre might be vibrant but is the youth theatre coming to see the shows? The opportunity of reopening in a renewed building gave space to think about it. So, historically, we’re in that 'to make theatre' tradition in terms of our core funding, which is fortunate. I think there are issues that come when money is coming from youth justice or more instrumental sources.

W: Do you bid for that money?

J: Usually it’s done on a time-scale and in a way that we can make sense of in terms of our bigger picture. But there have been moneys that we’ve deliberately not gone for or not accepted. Very specifically, a few years ago in the UK there was an initiative called Splash or Summer Splash (it kept changing name) which was pure diversion money and very short term: “Do some arts projects with some young people this summer, mobile phone

theft numbers will go down, and the government will hit a target." Now that we wouldn't go for. But I absolutely accept that there are other companies living much more hand to mouth that need to get their money where they can, and I just think it's about being clear about what you're trying to do and what your bottom line is, and then saying: "This is how we work. If you want us to deliver this, it needs to be done in this way and it needs to be on this time scale." A certain degree of confidence and boldness may lose you one or two grand, but it will start to work for you.

W: Is there a recent youth project that exemplifies all the things that you've been talking about and that people should think about if they're creating projects here?

J: One of my favourites at the moment - an urban music project - is called Freestyle Mondays and it embodies a number of important things. It was started by two young men, and then a group of about four or five, now in their late teens / early twenties, who've been through various projects at Contact and who all had a background in MC and spoken word. One of the projects they did was with an artist from New York called Baba Israel - he does Playback Theatre and he's also an MC, so it's a combination of freestyling his theatre and freestyling his rap skills - who had talked to them about a project in New York called Freestyle Mondays, which is an evening drop-in where people come along and freestyle. They decided to set up their own version, but they wanted to do it really hard core and keeping it super-real. So they didn't even tell me that they were doing it, and they started on a Monday night, meeting around the back of the building where the bins are, initially about five of them but with these two lads as the real driving force, just getting together and freestyling. About a year and a half later, there are around forty young people each Monday evening, gathering around the bins behind Contact -

W: Spinning rhymes -

J: Spinning rhymes, yeah. Obviously they've been talking to us about the project but it's run by them, it's their project. They did it outside because of the associations with doing that sort of 'freestyle' is safer outside - but also because it's a transitional space; some of the young people who come along are reasonably hardcore, so they don't have to make that step even through our relatively welcoming doors.

So they set up that project and then they asked for workshop

and rehearsal space to do a Friday evening project, where they pull some of those in to do more serious workshopping of their stuff. They also started creating their own rules around what would be a conscious rap and what wouldn't, because these guys were coming from all over and some of the stuff was pretty raw... The Friday workshops, to which only twelve or fifteen come along, is a sort of next level and that's within Contact; we put in a project worker to support them.

W: So the idea is they get it off the ground and then they bring it to you...

J: ...and we're sort of helping them to run it. Now they are running a quarterly club night where they invite other artists and that's on our foyer cabaret stage.

What I like about [this project] is that they would never have done it without all the input from the artists that they'd had inside Contact, but then they stepped outside to try and reach their peers, built up this thing in a sort of transition space, and then stepped back inside. We had to be quite careful and attentive about how much support to give and when: when to say, "You know, you need a bit of support here from us"; when to say, "What support do you need?"; and when to let them run with it.

W: That's a skill because you might see something taking shape and say, "Right, now, let's petrify it at this point." Our current Minister for Arts is currently banging on about access - as if people in the Arts didn't want, naturally, intrinsically to make the Arts accessible. In his case, because he's formerly the Minister for Social Affairs, he thinks it's about access to communities of socio-economic disadvantage. What does access to the arts mean for you and how do you practise it at Contact?

J: Well, we practise it through trying to build a creative community and by trying to listen to everyone, trying to have those exchanges. I do think that a vast number of arts organisations, including mainstream organisations, are deeply inaccessible. **Everything from their physical structure to the attitude of the people who work in them is often about discouraging people who are not similar to the people who are already there from attempting or being part of it.** What often happens then is that those organisations set up crap outreach projects that then become what people think of as 'access'. So the very place where there's the problem with access is trying to create a

solution, doing it badly, and everybody then reacts against it.

I think that a lot of more mainstream venues genuinely want to reach out to more people, they want to have more diversities, but they are not ready to do what it takes in order to achieve that.

They are blocked because all creative and significant decisions are usually made by a maximum of three people and everything else is about the implementation of that. As long as that is your basic structure...

And also because people want to live in a nice and comfortable world and the best way to live in a nice and comfortable world is to surround yourself with people who are very much like you; if you invite difference, you invite conflict.

W: Challenge maybe, rather than conflict?

J: Sometimes challenge - but sometimes conflict. However, conflict, as every dramaturg will teach you, is essential to good art. So, actually having things go wrong sometimes, having people argue with each other, having a bit of mess, that creates exciting work.

W: Not every person who's been involved will be creative in the sense of a practitioner, but presumably they have access to creativity as audience members - not necessarily in a passive sense, they practice audience behaviour. So, you're also building a community of people who participate as audience members...

J: **That's a really, really important thing: the concept of the live audience and the lively audience, and creating a lively audience; creating new kinds of audience behaviour, and what happens when you bring audiences into a space.**

Some of the touring work that comes to us encounters a very different audience at Contact to what they might have encountered at previous gigs-

W: I remember I was stopped and they effectively said, "You're not bringing a beer into the auditorium?" I said, "No. Why?" It's almost like you have to bring a beer into the auditorium-

J: It's compulsory! And that wouldn't be the right kind of audience for every venue, but it is for our venue. [Our audience is] more likely to talk back - but they have, hopefully, come with the work that they've seen, a surprising range of work.

One of the ways that we've tweaked that, and forced it along a little bit, is by employing young people as what we call 'hosts' - as

ushers - so you get an 18-year old from Longside, who has seen the complete recent works of Forced Entertainment as well as Then She Reads Hip Hop Theatre, as well as Nitro's touring shows... The ushers see it all and they also have to do the audience surveys at the end to ask the audience what they thought. So you get the 18-year old lads in the audience discussing whether or not it's overly influenced by the work of Forced Entertainment! - and this is the same lad who's maybe doing the freestyle thing on Monday evenings. So yes, **it's absolutely about creating your audience - and having those vocabularies work through them...**

W: My dogma with DYT is to address the young people as people living here and now, and to try to enable them, with whatever skills they have and can acquire, to make sense of what's going on around them. The extension of my dogma is: no young people playing old people and no young people playing babies, just young people playing young people. It's quite simple. I think first of all, they don't have the skills. Playing a 60-year old in a Martin McDonagh play, what's the point of that? Unless there's a good reason for it-

J: They could play babies and old people in the sense that Forced Entertainment might play babies and old people.

W: **It's exactly those things that you're talking about. It has to be credible; don't patronise people; don't set it up as a diversion tactic; empower, enable, entrust young people - it's all of those things.**

Willie White is Artistic Director of the Project Arts Centre. He is Artistic Director of Dublin Youth Theatre in 2007 and 2008.

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