

Who would miss us?

Questioning Youth Theatre, edited by Ali FitzGibbon

Who would miss us? We've all asked this. On the dark day when the grant hasn't come (again), or the scheme has been lost (again), or the room has been double-booked (again), or somebody who doesn't know better has dismissed all our work and imagination as "just for the kiddies" or "not really proper theatre" (again and again). We ask it when we want to throw our hands up and walk away but don't. But have we ever answered it – honestly questioned who would notice if youth theatre ceased to exist? If we don't ask ourselves these difficult questions how can we articulate our responses (as organisations and as a sector) to the people we need to survive? And do we know who to talk to? And are we prepared for the answers?

Commercial businesses have been using internal analysis as part of strategic development for years. This hard-nosed approach may appear to sit at odds with the passion and personal investment that fuels the arts but increasingly theatre practitioners are using these processes. In an economic climate (North and South) increasingly dominated by targets and priorities, it is time youth theatre began to translate its vitality and strength into a coherent survival campaign.

The questions below were sent to a range of contributors including youth theatre leaders, theatre practitioners, funders, local authority officers, business people and politicians. They were asked to provide honest responses, both positive and negative, and the results have been edited to give an unscientific snapshot of how youth theatre is viewed from inside and out.

For speed, we have referred to Youth Theatre throughout as YT. The term "professional theatre" is one used to describe mainstage theatre distinct from youth/amateur theatre (not to suggest those working in youth theatre aren't equally professional). Ten organisations contributed, split between those involved in youth theatre and those with an arm's length relationship (see list). Of note is the absence of business people and politicians, whose inclusion was sought, but did not in the end prove possible.

With special thanks to the following contributors for their time and energy:

- Ben Barnes, Artistic Director, Abbey Theatre
- Ollie Breslin, Artistic Director, Waterford Youth Drama
- Tania Carlisle, Learning & Performance Manager, Arts & Business (NI)
- Andrew Flynn, Artistic Director, Galway Youth Theatre
- Marilyn Gaughan, Galway County Arts Officer
- Declan Gorman, Artistic Director, Upstate Theatre Project
- David Grant, Head of Drama Studies, Queen's University Belfast
- Peter Hussey, Artistic Director, Kildare Youth Theatre @ Crooked House
- Margo Kenny, Arts Officer, National Youth Council of Ireland
- Gaye Tanham, Youth Programmes Manager, The Arts Council

1 WHY DOES YOUTH THEATRE EXIST?

From mission statements to personal histories, key comments were its role in development and learning, its creative opportunity (and the absence of this elsewhere); and its contribution to talent/career development, and 'transferable skills', ie. lateral thinking, communication skills, problem-solving, team work.

"...they [YT members] are accessing – in a very unique way – their imagination, which makes them creators rather than consumers." PH

One contributor noted YT's different origins as a largely policy-led (top-down) initiative North of the border while predominantly a grass-roots movement (bottom-up) in the Republic. Most with YT experience cited the importance of a 'key individual adult' to both start and sustain any group.

"Ultimately, YT exists where there is a determined will for it to exist." DGR

Opinions, however, differed as to its primary role and how this should dictate funding – personal versus artistic development.

"... I do feel there is a lack of clarity within the YT sector as to when this [personal development] is the main focus/output ... as opposed to other instances where the main objective is to find the cream of young emerging talent and encourage them towards a career in performing arts. The latter objective should surely be the raison d'être for YT in receipt of arts funding." TC

2 WHO WOULD MISS YOUTH THEATRE?

In brief: young people, parents, guardians, families, friends, teachers, schools, youth workers, YT leaders (professional and voluntary), local communities, colleges, theatre and film practitioners, funders, employers, 'the citizens of Ireland'. To be missed so much shows the deep penetration of YT into our cultural and social framework. But could this be said of other arts or youth activities, eg. youth sports? How unique is YT and its impact on our society, our economy and our people?

"If living culture is a mosaic that includes a great range of endeavour and custom, from sport to street corner activity to art – YT is a small, but growing and significant element in the youth culture mosaic." DGO

"Society might not implode if YT was to vanish, but it would be the poorer for losing a platform for young people to reflect, socialise, create, imagine and learn." OB

There was a sense that professional theatre was reaping rewards from YT's importance as a 'vital training ground' and as new audiences, but reciprocal benefits were not forthcoming.

“...a high proportion of the audience [for YT] are the very people whom the venues are most eager to attract.” DGR

“The Irish theatre community would miss youth theatre. It has become, over the years the seeding ground for young acting, directing and in recent years, design talent.” BB

While there appeared to be a clear sense across the board that YT plays an important role in society, some cautioned that this should not be taken for granted.

“It is less easy to argue that young people themselves would miss youth theatre, since without experiencing it, it is hard to know how they could know the extraordinary positive impact it could have had on their lives.” DGR

3 WHAT (AND WHO) DOES YOUTH THEATRE NEED TO SURVIVE AND TO FLOURISH?

Again briefly: recognition, money, the commitment of YT members and leaders, and then more. There was a great diversity of opinions, covering practical issues of accommodation, accredited training and usable funding arrangements, to YT's relationship to national policy and international practice.

“Immediately it needs a Youth Arts Policy from the Arts Council.” OB

“YT need dedicated facilitators, they need ongoing support and funding ... Local Authorities, the Arts Council, VEC, Youth Services and the Theatre Sector all have a key role to play to ensure sustainability.” MG

“Practically it needs suitable space and decent grant aid. It also needs the support of people who have come through the movement to come back to it as professionals.” BB

“Cultural recognition that participation in youth theatre is valuable.” GT

Many felt that exploration, reinvention and operational change were vital to keep the sector relevant.

“YT should move outside the traditional realm of a theatre ... create new spaces to play and this in itself presents new challenges...” AF

“...how do you realistically open out to a social mix of young people? How do you offer a hospitable space for new immigrant communities?” DGO

Contributors returned to YT leaders (professional and voluntary) and their needs. A plea went up for sustainable long-term development at all levels to mirror their long-term investment.

“The role of the professional YT leader is also growing in importance ... serious thought needs to be given to the career trajectory of committed

individuals. It is not enough to train professional facilitators. There needs to be employment available for them in the long term. ... Levels of pay are invariably very low and benefits such as pension schemes are almost unheard of. To treat professional YT workers with due respect would be an important step forward.” DGR

Some identified a need to connect with education at all levels, without compromising YT's role as 'not-school'. One proposed that YT should examine the move in Adult Education from the 1980s to today from voluntary and low-status to a highly resourced infrastructure of local and national importance.

“We have to take what our culture sees as important and find a way to show how YT helps that important thing.” PH

Many expressed a need for collaboration with businesses, particularly for sponsorship. One contributor offered practical examples of mutually beneficial relationships.

4 WHO CAN HELP US, AND HOW?

Contributors cited agencies and funders who could help simply by more useful policies and funding systems. Again the business community was mentioned. Arts in schools and the Department of Education appeared a critical issue for YT's future. All proposed that we are our best help.

“Ourselves... by refusing any more to accept these attitudes and lobbying hard with funding agencies and elected representatives.” DGR

“Look at what you already have. How can you build on it? Are you making the best possible use of your resource? What can you improve?” MG

“The YT sector itself needs to identify how it can more effectively lobby as one voice as opposed to the disparate group of voices it seems to be at present. It needs to find champions for YT in all sections of society – an Arts Council officer who themselves came up through the ranks of YT ... a recognisable media personality... an influential business person with a background in YT ... If YT wants to flourish, it needs to take a professional approach to stakeholder management at all levels.” TC

Professional theatre and the media appeared a number of times.

“Why is it so difficult to have shows (or the work on the ground) covered by national newspapers? The professional sector, eg. theatre festivals should provide a wider platform for us to showcase our work.” AF

“All of the venues ... by dedicating unconditional space to YTs – so that workshops happen on the stage.” PH

5 HOW SHOULD YOUTH THEATRE GO ABOUT TELLING OTHERS IT'S IMPORTANT?

All identified the need for strategic lobbying at all levels. The need for increased and targeted promotion was clear as well as how YT uses its members and leaders, past and present, and its events to promote 'the big YT picture'. Many said hard-data and 'industry' standards (eg. pay and conditions) were crucial.

"No. 1 priority should be academicisation, the training of YT facilitators ... And (in this economy) we have to begin to show how being an artist is a job, a career choice, income generator ... Don't underestimate the power of universities to confer status on sectors." PH

"- With facts and reasoned, concise argument to back up the case. Never ever only with a 'we're really worthy and you have to support us' argument – you have to positively prove what you deliver and how your activities bring about (measured) positive outcomes. - With case studies – it's an exciting and dynamic medium that speaks for itself - With 'celebrity' and VIP alumni fronting a strategic and sustained campaign - Always with a positive tone – no whinging, no whining!" TC

"Through the evidence that many young theatre professionals come up through the youth theatre movement. Through its productions. Having directed two NYT productions in the 1980's I am a fan of this flagship annual production as a powerful tool in raising the media profile of youth theatre nationally." BB

6 HOW CAN YOUTH THEATRE TURN THIS PROCESS INTO FINANCIAL SUPPORT?

Frequently used phrases were 'make coherent' and 'backed up by', evidence that as organisations and as a sector, we need to be documenting, publicising, planning, and disseminating good practice.

"By saying [why YT is important] to appropriate people but with statistical and anecdotal support...by disseminating findings...by networking." GT

"If the right argument is made, then the £ will follow." TC

"With status in society, money is what you get. That's how you know you have status!" PH

"When I recently suggested that research be undertaken by the ACNI to establish the positive impact of YT, I was told this was unnecessary as this was self-evident. Despite this, and the regular appearance of youth arts in funding priority lists, little seems to change." DGR

"I would like to see an audit/report/evaluation of Irish Youth Theatre ... Its

outcomes may be surprising, and could form the basis for a comprehensive approach to a sustainable YT sector. In order to turn something into good financial support we, as funders, very often need to see qualitative and quantitative data.” MG

And so we complete our snapshot with a guide to the things most likely to guarantee if not world domination, at least survival. There is frustration that policies are not being matched by equivalent resources but there is also frustration that the sector is unable to articulate its value to those whose support it needs. Underneath we seem to know a lot of people who might be able to help. Maybe by pooling all our opinions together we can arrive at individual and sector-wide action plans. Do we have the time?

TOP TIPS FOR STRATEGIC SURVIVAL

Be as good as you can be. Youth Theatre is about exploration, invention and enjoyment but to keep it going, try to be as well-run as possible – with plans, standards and policies.

Plan, plan, plan. The more coherent and long term your planning and vision – artistic and otherwise – the greater the confidence it inspires. Good simple planning helps you move forward and gives everyone a measurement of your development, and the factors that contribute to success or failure.

Evaluate, evaluate, evaluate. Be honest about what does and doesn't work. Explore different evaluation methods, particularly built-in ones. Use data to produce reports and publicity.

Write it all down. Document everything. If you write a proposal or 3-year plan, copy and disseminate it to those you want to influence. Disseminate your reports. Gather and record hard figures. Video and photograph your work. Track your members/ex-members via databases.

Stand on your soapbox. Get a web-page that lets you upload documents. Work on small and relevant mailing lists. Write letters. Issue press releases for important milestones as well as shows (better still get a funder to do it for you). Make events work to promote the whole organisation. Work with local traders for free signage/advertising. NB: Agree brief common messages with the whole group. This reduces contradiction – political parties do it...usually...

Recruit local expertise. Involve local businesses, residents and politicians as committee members, staff or volunteers, to advise on things like PR, planning or advocacy.

Know your allies. Brainstorm all the people/agencies who might be useful and plan how to approach them. Get existing supporters to work with you, arrange meetings, etc.

Know your competitors. Brainstorm all the organisations/activities (arts and non-arts) who compete with you for time, money, volunteers, coverage, etc. Work out why you are different, promote that. Then make them your allies.

Be positive. Most people switch off to complaining. Listen to your voice. Examine your body language. Focus on the positive. Offer practical solutions and present what you want clearly and non-confrontationally.

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