
OPEN SPACE TECHNOLOGY MEETING

Purpose: Reach for the Stars: Theatre for Young Audiences in Ireland Today

Facilitator: Veronica Coburn

Venue: The Ark

Date: 3rd October 2013

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Agenda: Early Years Theatre

Convener: Cliodhna Noonan

It was mentioned that although some work still needs to be done in researching and accepting exactly what this age group needs and represents as an audience, in fact theatre for young audiences in general is to the fore in placing the audience at the centre of the theatre experience. In some ways they are the focus of the whole experience.

With regard to the issue of quality for children, it was decided that this is highly subjective but that artists wishing to create work for young audiences aspire to produce the best work possible. Regular exposure is essential and artists can look at the engagement of their audience in terms of the length of the performance.

The question was raised that if we look at our national institutions programming we need to look at how much of the early years and child population is served by the arts at present?

We decided that word of mouth is still a wonderful way to engage a local community with events at a venue and that this is particularly effective within the early years networks.

In order to develop the skills of actors practicing in the sector, particularly early years, it was suggested that the artists' bursary is a good option for individuals working in the sector.

Finally, there has to be value for the adults also who attend the early year's events in particular with their young children. Our goal is to look for a return visit!

Agenda: Opportunities and Reasons for Mentorship

Convener: Dan Colley (Dan@dancolley.com, 087 2032522)

Maria referred to a programme called 'Next Generation!' run by ASSIETEJ Irish practitioners apply through TYAI.

Branar run a theatre resource sharing scheme with three companies in Galway.

The arts council and local authorities support Artist in Residence schemes.

Phil: The Abbey are trying to set up a scheme similar scheme to Tony Reekie in Imagination

The Ark run a number of informal mentorships (as do the Abbey) including workshops, wondered if it would be better for artists if they formalised (not discussed).

There is a TYAI newsletter. The Ark's and The Abbey both have mailing lists.

Branar are running a "Tiny Plays" series in Jan 2014, three weekends of development and sharing, by open application.

Niall: speaking as an artist, may not want to commit to formal mentorship but would value having an outside eye.

Dan shared a positive experience of writing to artists you admire, and saying so, asking if you can come and play. Marc shared similar experience with Theatre Reflection in Denmark. Maria shared similar experience with PunchDrunk.

Sarah is a beneficiary of mentorships through assisting experienced artists. She wanted to encourage us all to be open to mentors.

Theatre Forum are trying to set up a scheme to train mentors on the model of the Federation of Scottish Theatre.

Phil: Create have been trying to set up a similar scheme and said they may have done some investigation into the “what is a mentor?” question

Seona suggested artists look at the Travel and Training Allowance as a good way of putting yourself in the way of mentorship. It was disputed whether this funding was still available.

Stephen asked: what’s the best way of looking for mentorship? To pick up the phone?

Marc: He’s opening up application to Assistant Director his Christmas show.

Sarah’s experience was that it is best to ask for it and say something about their work.

Seona asked the broader question of ‘how do artists keep developing?’ but we were out of time.

Recommendations

Maria: suggested an open day at The Ark for artists to come and benefit from expertise. Stressed it wouldn’t be instead of, but as well as, their informal resource sharing. This suggestion was met positively.

Sarah suggested a “peer mentorship” scheme in the form of a “skills directory” which Maria said TYAI could set up. Suggestion was met positively.

Agenda: How to encourage families to move out of their comfort zone to attend less conventional theatre?

How do we overcome the barriers to access for schools attending venues?

Convener: Linda (The Riverbank) and Emer (Draoicht)

Attendees: Liz – Arts Council, Linda – Riverbank, Emer – Draoicht, Eina – The Ark, Joanne – Branar, Siobhan, Marc – Branar, Clíodhna – Theatre practitioner, Eric – Actor, Lauren – Imaginosity

1.1 Draoicht, despite having a designated Theatre Youth Officer it has experienced difficulty with selling shows to schools.

1.2 Riverbank has experienced the same difficulty.

1.3 Problems stated from the group were bus costs, teacher's connection with the arts.

1.4 Concern expressed from Emer that we are denying a whole generation of children the right to experience theatre and the arts.

2.1 General consensus is that making the theatre experience more multi-disciplinary (i.e. providing a visual arts response workshop after production) helps to encourage the parent/teacher to bring their children.

2.2 Suggestion made from the floor that the theatre companies engaging in a pre or post show workshop within the school would also make the experience more attractive.

2.3 Budgets and resources are problems with the above suggestion.

2.4 Other suggested solution to the problem of attracting audiences is the marketing/content of the venue's programme. Joanne from Branar used the example of Branar's Christmas show "Twas the night before Christmas" selling out many venues by October this year. Capturing the imagination, tapping into the needs and wants of the audience, WITHOUT compromising the quality of the work.

- 3.1 Another suggestion from the group was to encourage a connection between children and theatre venues perhaps through live streaming of performances within the classroom.
- 3.2 Liz commented that there is a new move towards arts in education due to the publishing of The Arts in Education charter. Although there is a fear that this will be very much a "ticking of the boxes" for teachers it is hopefully a move in the right direction. In this vein, Lauren commented on the DPSM programme and the Green Schools programme which awards schools for engaging children with Science, Maths and Environment. This also includes attending a centre for the above disciplines – hopefully a similar programme can be developed for theatre in schools.
- 3.3 Marc from Branar also mentioned the Southbank Theatre's schools initiative in which they endeavor to break down barriers that may exist between schools/children and the theatre, by inviting teachers to conduct their lessons within the theatre – not necessarily drama or theatre classes but possibly math's, history etc.
- 4.1 No solutions or conclusions were made to this problem but a will and desire to overcome the issue was expressed by ALL!

Agenda: How can technology/new technology be used as an invitation for all children, with various abilities, to experience theatre?

Convener: Siobhan Breen (gorm.cs@gmail.com, 087 600780)

Attendees: Liz Colman, Dan Colley

Venue/Production companies creating an App. Should it be used as a marketing tool or for entertainment use?

Fibin – Production company based in Connemara have created an App which is worth looking at. Seems to be created from a playful point of view.

The creation of Apps being developed abroad in various companies are becoming popular alongside websites, Facebook and Twitter.

The development of an app to map Theatre and also various youth entertainment i.e.: Dance, Music etc. all across Ireland, all counties.

Technologists, do they exist in Ireland? Discussion had on the concept of technologists being employed in venues/production companies to professionally bring technology into the Theatre business.

What are the costs of creating different apps is a big question to be researched – From informative ones to adding in the sale of tickets to entertainment/playful Apps.

The idea of going to universities/colleges to put it to tech students, Computer Engineers about developing Apps was discussed. An idea of putting it to students to competitively create an App and if chosen get the contract.

The Gate Theatre's App. Is it used as an informative, marketing and sales, interactive or entertainment tool?

Should a production company/venue/arts app generate income or be free?

Should they be interactive/have a game included for children/young people?

To date, European App economy generates over 10 billion in revenue in an economy that didn't exist 5 years ago.

Discussion had on the fear people from the theatre business have with incorporating technology and how apps can be used as an "invitation" to children to come to the Theatre.

Agreed it was an interesting discussion.

Agenda: How can we develop supports to enrich the theatre experience by developing supports for parents and teachers?

Convener: Anna Galligan-Barnstorm (0868717875 anna@barnstorm.ie)

Attendees: Siobhan Breen

How can inclusivity be brought to a theatre experience?

This is not a discussion about pre and post workshops or teachers packs. It is not about 'learning' from the play. It is about capturing the experience that the child has.

Simple ideas – child-centered posters/questions/statements placed at eye level for children in the environs of the space – What did you see? What was it like? How do you feel? It may include some play inspired quotes etc.

The child can take home a 'feeling' card of how they found the experience – could be visual expressions rather than words. This would be a nice thing but would also allow a 'memory of experience' to go home with them.

Can we develop programmes that explore aesthetics in the wider sense? We're sure we can. Needs further thought.

Agenda: The lack of provision for teenagers as audience members in Ireland

Convener: Anna Galligan (anna@barnstorm.ie, 0868717875)

Attendee: Emily Fitzgibbon-Grafitti

It is outrageous that Ireland cannot support original writing or work for teenagers. Youth theatre is wonderful but it cannot be seen as a substitute for works made by professional theatre companies.

Why do we speak of children's theatre and adult theatre and yet no theatre exists for the 13-18 (proximately) age bracket. What is so difficult about teenagers that they are not catered for? Do they not qualify for the right to access cultural experiences in theatre, beyond curriculum based theatre?

There needs to be a coordinated approach and dialogue between the Arts Council and Dept. of Education to rectify this situation. Traditional demarcation lines only hamper this. The Arts Council are responsible for artistic standards being held up and the Dept. of Education need to recognise the cultural right of a large demographic of Ireland's cultural right.

Agenda: How do we get better at what we do?

Convener: Marc Mac Lochlainn (086 8546616)

Production values

Generally, it was felt that accepted standards of production value in the sector as a whole is low.

It was suggested that we should aspire to higher values.

Companies need to look at their production as a whole and not skimp on the aesthetic or the production standards

Suggested: it seems that companies have decided not to invest in set, costume and design.

The argument was made that this is a resource issue for a lot of smaller unfunded companies.

Also it was suggested that there are certain evolutionary stages that new companies need to move through and learn their craft in this way.

This led to the point that maybe there is a case to be made for getting advice from more established professionals on how the set/design budget is spent to achieve the most from whatever investment is made.

Mentorships

It was felt by some professionals in the group that they felt that they would benefit most from the opportunity to dip-in/dip-out of mentoring opportunities.

There is a case for a formal mentorship framework.

There is evidence that local enterprise boards offer a very affordable mentorship programme and that in general every effort is made to match you with someone who has experience in the creative industries.

There was a suggestion that there is a case for allowing individuals to avail of mentoring in multiple aspects of the industry.

Critical response

There is a need for critical analysis of our practice as a sector.

The Liz Lerman Critical response process was mentioned as a way in which the sector has attempted to address this issue.

The group felt that while the methodology has merit it has failings when cultural factors and language were taken into account i.e. the method relies on American idioms and turn of phrase that don't necessarily translate to an Irish context.

A forum within which companies can present work that is in progress. Where the work can be viewed for what it is and in the context of the lifecycle of the show.

Skill Swap

It was suggested that a skill swap network should be set up where people can find the people they need to help them with their needs.

Be that – Performing skills

- Production skills
- Touring information

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- Networking opportunities

The example of the mutant space model was cited. In which skills are offered in trade for other skills.

The sector is not as established as the adult sector – how do we do it?

- Do find a international model of practice to emulate
- To we speak about our work/sector with greater conviction.

Should we ask the more established Irish companies for help?

It was generally agreed that we need to be exposed to as much high quality international work as possible.

This work can be accessed internationally at festivals but also at Irish festivals such as the DTF family programme and Baboró in Galway.

Companies should be given help from within the sector to improve their application writing skills and also how they describe their work.

There are not enough TYA companies having success in the project grant applications.

We should take responsibility as a sector to increase the number of successful applicants. This will help to resource the sector and increase the amount of work available for children.

It was felt that we should engage more with Theatre Forum and make our sector relevant. Through having greater visibility within the wider theatre family.

Consultation with our audience do we do it or do we do enough of it?

There are different motivations depending on the organization. A company could consult with their audience within a developmental process or post performance

A venue could consult with them as to their experience of what is on offer to them and what would they like to see in the future.

The role of the venue /presenter in the development of the sector

- By and large we are lucky that venues and festivals have a commitment to the sector and the presentation of work for children and families.
- From a developmental point of view these presenters have a lot to offer companies by way of information and advice as regards work. These individuals see a huge amount of work and this knowledge is an untapped resource directly available to us.
- The venue can also play a role early in the development of new work with regard to marketing, design and sales. To allow the company to get the most value from their show.

Artists should take responsibility to talk to venues and understand the lifecycle of a venue and plan well in advance when they can offer work

We need to put a value on seeing work

There is a case for finding a mechanism whereby a venue can be allowed to offer free tickets to artists. This removes the monetary barrier to seeing work also it will increase the critical mass of artists that will see work of varying quality and style.

YPCE bursary

- Is a viable option for an artist to develop their practice and also to see other work?
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Agenda: Making Theatre That Sells

Convener: Sean McDonagh

1. The difficulty with attracting schools is the fact that they are looking for theatre that has an education basis primarily, curriculum based or with a very definite educational element, for example a strong workshop. But in big theatre spaces there isn't always space to do workshops simultaneously with the audience, which could be 250 people.

2. If you design stuff based on what the teachers want it will sell. But it's very hard to start from the point of here's a great play now you guys come and see it for the value you will get from seeing a great play.

3. Seeing great theatre has huge educational benefit. The critical skills involved are a central part of new curriculum developments but the theatres need to offer the support materials to back up the educational element. Sometimes venues can't guarantee that every show is going to be good. They don't get many chances if schools see a bad play once. They won't come back.

Agenda: How to sustain youth drama groups in general and particularly in a youth service.

Convener: Shane Smyth (shane@swanyouthservice.org, 0879496501)

Attendees: Sean McDonagh, Anna Galligan, Emma Lowe, Caroline Harvey

One of the topics discussed was funding e.g. Arts Council Grants

Funding was discussed and various options mentioned including:

Taxback.com,

Arts Council grants

If using Irish language Forais na Gaeilge

VEC

Irish Youth Foundation

Build a strong network of support for adults i.e. a board perhaps teachers, parents, etc.

Angela Sheehan from Mallow Youth Theatre has a strong group of volunteers perhaps contact her for advice.

Link to other services in the area for support.

Agenda: Sharing Inspiration Across Sectors

Convener: Phil Kingston

**Attendees: Seona, Maeve, Emma, Maria, Emilie, Sarah, Veronica, Anna,
 Marc.**

There was a general consensus that a divide exists between the sectors (adult theatre and theatre for younger audiences). It was felt that there needed to be more conversation between the sectors and perhaps more training opportunities in the area.

Some questions were raised in response:

If practitioners in adult theatre took more of an interest in work for younger audiences would this help bridge the gap and alter perceptions?

Why does this gap exist between the sectors and what can we do to narrow it?

While most people felt that work with younger audiences informed adult work some felt that they had trained as an adult for adults. Many actors begin their careers in theatre for younger audiences but tend not to return to it as their careers mature. It was suggested that more connections with theatre training colleges e.g. LIR should be established in order to strengthen knowledge and encourage interest. It was also suggested that open invitations could be sent out to adult practitioners to view work. This could help stimulate conversation and create awareness of the quality of work that exists for younger audiences.

There was discussion around reviews of theatre for young audiences. It was suggested that advocating or campaigning for quality coverage in the media might be necessary. A recent example of a very considered approach was Sarah Keating's review of 'Little Steps' at The Ark. Perhaps more attentive reviews could alter perceptions of the sector.

In relation to children's needs, do companies know better than parents?

Theatre Lovett's new production 'Feast of Bones' was mentioned. Those who had seen the performance felt that the children in the audience understood the complexity of the narrative and were able to respond to the piece on many levels.