

## Handing Over the Archives: The Ulster Youth Theatre

by Imelda Foley

In 1978 the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, in collaboration with Education and Library Boards, initiated a Youth Drama Scheme for Northern Ireland. With the exception of the school play, there was no access to participatory developmental work, and no forum within which young people could meet to progress a common interest. A Youth Drama Scheme was devised which would provide regional access for young people, and train leaders in skills which were not abundant in Northern Ireland in the seventies. Denis Smyth, previously director of Interplay and a trained teacher, was appointed Youth Drama Director. In many ways, the Youth Drama Scheme introduced the language and practice which is currently forming the backbone of arts strategy and policy. The concepts of personal development, education, the promotion of intellectual and social awareness, pluralism and an appreciation of cultural diversity, through the skills of theatre, have always been central. So too has been the concentration on creativity and quality of artistic experience and presentation.

Lucie McAnespie in the Ulster Youth Theatre's 1998 production of the *Caucasian Chalk Circle* by B.Brecht. Photo: Lesley Doyle

With the increase in independent youth drama and theatre groups during the 1990s, however, it no longer proved equitable for the Arts Council of Northern Ireland to directly manage some youth drama groups, or to directly promote the public face, Ulster Youth Theatre. In 1997 we appointed a steering group to address the future of youth drama in Northern Ireland. This was chaired by Quintin Oliver, then Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action, with whom UYT has shared Kenneth Branagh's patronage. Jan Branch was appointed as facilitator/ researcher, and steering group members all had direct experience in the field of youth drama and represented a geographical spread. Responsibility has now been devolved to a new body, the Ulster Association of Youth Drama.



Change of whatever nature, and this was a deliberately slow and consultative process, seems to strike horror at the heart of our community. I have heard rumours of "the demise of the Ulster Youth Theatre", of the end of youth drama, and even that the Arts Council has withdrawn funding. Please note that there is a funding scheme, and that the new independent Association, the UAYD, has much more scope for accessing other funding.

### *Handing Over*

As I hand over the archives, I am allowed an unusual indulgence in personal reminiscence of a decade's high points. I will deeply miss direct involvement, the sheer pleasure of watching young people grow and develop through drama.

### *Romeo and Juliet*

One of my fondest and sharpest memories relates to my first UYT outing in 1987. There was no venue in which to follow up Michael Poynor's exceptional production of *West Side Story* (1986). I risked re-shaping the Ulster Youth Theatre within a period of three, as opposed to a thirteen, month time scale. With a totally new production team, led by Nick Philippou and David Grant, a completely new grouping of young people, and a new venue, we risked our lives. *Romeo and Juliet* was a critical and popular hit.

At the end of a two-week sell-out run, we invited regional youth drama groups to a workshop which was based on a speed run of the play, lasting 15 minutes. Watching that conveyed the distance which had been travelled by young people within such a short period of time. They demonstrated transformations of previous selves. They shone with confidence without showing off. They had acquired a host of new theatre and social skills by having worked with the best professionals in the field. For me, all the values of youth drama and theatre were exemplified.

### *The Last Ferry*

There is a huge crane at Pollock Dock, along the working docks and in an otherwise no-man's land on the edge of Belfast. I pass it a couple of times a month, coming into Belfast from the M2. That crane and the stockpile of cargo crates alongside, recall memories of balmy summer nights in August 1991 when, as darkness fell, 10 fire swingers trained by Mike Moloney were perched high up on the crane's cross-bar, two bands belted out original music on a specially constructed stage (30m x 20m), 200 young performers danced and a sculpture of 15 wrecked cars rose out of Belfast Lough. It burst into flames over the heads of hundreds of an audience who had just enjoyed an interval drink in a bar specially created to incorporate the stone heads from the old Gallaher's factory down the road.

Spectacle would understate the scale and enterprise of an event which had taken two years in planning, involved a host of sponsors and funding bodies, and over 250 young people in performance, technical back-up and administration. A local community theatre company provided stewarding and a local scaffolding firm constructed 14 stages and trained young people in the business. On the final night, when the St. Patrick's Training School mini-bus arrived at 11.30, it was no surprise that one of their students was missing. He was found hiding under one of the stages in the warehouse. "I don't want to leave this", he said. I'm glad he did because the 18-hour get-out, which left Pollock Dock as deserted as we had found it, would have been too painful.

### *Wintry Nights*

In comparison, the wintry nights of visiting youth drama groups around Northern Ireland have testified to the quality and dedication of on-going and largely unseen participatory work. To witness 25 young people, devising under the tuition of Eamonn Bradley of the Ardhoven theatre for a joint performance with the Ardhoven Youth Dance group, has been another kind of experience, as enjoyable, and indeed, a relief, from the administrative and artistic nightmares of the *Last Ferry* production at Pollock Dock. So too, Janice Kennedy's sterling work with an all-girl group in Downpatrick brings them into performance alongside the all-boy bands for a rave in the Arts Centre. In Derry, Sinéad McSheffrey works towards European collaborations and exchanges. Other leaders across Northern Ireland work tirelessly on summer productions; Zoe Seaton's work at the Riverside Theatre in Coleraine, for example, is hallmarked by a sense of humour which epitomises the best in devised youth drama.

### *To the Present*

But it is in September, post-Ulster Youth Theatre and during the negotiation of a new youth drama year, that the most stunning of underplayed events has occurred. The late Sean Holywood worked through the summers with young people in Newry to produce shows of distinction. Always modest, he would phone to say, "well, it's not quite ready and some of mine are just awful". In the event, it was always a surprise of scale and skill. The 'not quite ready awfulness' presented itself on the stage of Newry Town Hall, complete with pit orchestra and full house, to perform an outstanding show.

In the middle of his production preparation, Sean always got the bus to Belfast for the press launch of UYT, came up during the residential period to treat his Newry contingent to a meal, and was never absent from a UYT first night. Eamonn Bradley, manager of the Ardhowen Theatre and youth drama leader since the scheme's inception, is Enniskillen's equivalent to Sean, both producing quality work and inspiring young people. Between them, they hold the record for the largest number of young people, outside Belfast, continuing into professional theatre.

I thank the hundreds of young people who have achieved accolades for youth drama and theatre in Northern Ireland: Ghetto, directed by David Grant, winner of the first Belfast Arts Award in 1996; Stations, nominated Best Theatre Production in 1991 alongside Dancing at Lughnasa in the RTE and Bank of Ireland Awards; those who represented the best in UK youth theatre at the National Theatre, London, in 1989. I also thank our patron, Kenneth Branagh, whose genuine commitment has been matched by his fundraising events. Central to the work has been the commitment and achievement of all the leaders over the years and all the trainers, artistic directors, Michael Poyner, Nick Philippou, David Grant and their teams. Sponsor Coca-Cola has also stayed with us.

No doubt, the new body representing the work will set about re-inventing wheels. That is inevitable. I wish them the very best of luck and hope that the experience is as satisfying and edifying as it has been for me personally and professionally. "Parting is such sweet sorrow", but take note of Friar Laurence: "Wisely and slow, they stumble that run fast".

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