

Introduction and Summary

Centre Stage

The Place of Youth Theatre in Ireland 1997-1999

**A Report of a Review and Research Project Conducted by
The National Association for Youth Drama**

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NAYD wishes to thank all the people who generously contributed to the review and research process during 1997-98. In particular, special thanks are due to:

- Marieva Coughlan, who facilitated all phases of the review process, was responsible for the design and execution of the research and produced the final document, which forms the basis of this report. Her enthusiasm, as well as her skill, expertise and commitment formed the backbone of the whole process.
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INTRODUCTION

The National Association for Youth Drama (NAYD) is proud to launch this important document. As an association, NAYD will be twenty years old in 2000. The mere fact of undertaking this study and, indeed, its important findings represent the major advances made by NAYD since 1980. From an *ad hoc* group to a fully constituted and democratic organisation with committed membership, the record speaks for itself.

The 1990s have seen both expansion and consolidation of the role of NAYD. The findings confirm and validate this fact and present us with the challenges that NAYD must meet. The findings of the research and the outcomes of the review process leave us in no doubt as to the scale of the challenges. The organisation must cope with the need for a clearer emphasis on areas designated as disadvantaged, it must continue to insist on quality in every aspect of the work, it must look to a more regional focus and it must begin to establish Ireland as a significant country internationally in the field of youth drama, to name some of those challenges.

NAYD will rise to the challenges presented with the help and support of the funding agencies in the field of youth and the arts. Those agencies can be certain of a positive and productive approach by NAYD as exemplified by the rigour of this research.

A word of thanks is due to all who participated in every stage of the process. Marieva Coughlan brought her considerable expertise to this research, as we have come to expect from her involvement in NAYD. Allied to her expertise and scientific detachment, Marieva brings a commitment and real passion for the subject of her investigation – youth theatre in Ireland.

Paddy O'Dwyer,
Chair,
National Association for Youth Drama.

SUMMARY**Youth Theatre in Ireland - Overview**

- The National Association for Youth Drama comes of age with this report on the status of youth theatre in Ireland. For the first time, a comprehensive, nation-wide profile of the youth theatre movement has been formulated, the result of a census commissioned in NAYD in 1997. This census gained an insight into youth theatre structures, founders, members and the leaders who constantly maintain and develop the philosophy of youth theatre in this country.
- Based on the information gathered from the overall research and review process, NAYD has drawn up a youth theatre policy document, which will inform the development of youth theatre practice in future. The NAYD mandate focuses on all aspects of youth theatre practice.
- The census week was the last phase of the review and research programme for NAYD. It was held during the last week of November 1997. Census week questionnaire packs were sent to 50 youth theatres throughout Ireland.
- There was a 66% response rate from youth theatres (i.e. 33 out of a total of 50 youth theatres), with a 63% personal response rate from members (i.e. 969 members out of a reported total of 1530 members in 33 youth theatres).
- Eighty-nine key youth theatre leaders completed questionnaires about their own involvement in youth theatre.
- The census traces the history of youth theatres over the last twenty years. It offers an insight into the identity of youth theatres, their establishment and their evolution over two decades.
- The first Irish youth theatre was set up in 1977. Most youth theatres had small, *ad hoc* beginnings and were usually the vision of just one person. Some developed quite rapidly from small-scale projects, some drifted from project to project, and others remained small and intimate but steady over many years. Most developed in partnership with support agencies in their communities and many are now significant local resources for youth and community arts.
- The adult-to-young-person ratio is exceptionally low and can be presumed to contribute positively to the quality of members' learning and personal development.
- Workshops and rehearsals form the core activities of the youth theatre programme. Many youth theatre members take part in several activities throughout the week.
- Over half of the participating youth theatre members had travelled with their youth theatre, mostly within Ireland.

- Thirty-nine of all youth theatre productions were devised from members' improvisational work. Thirteen plays had been scripted by young people.
- Most youth theatre activities were in places which were not designated arts or youth arts centres.
- Between them, 33 youth theatres reported a membership of 1530 young people, an average of 46 each.
- Youth theatre members can experience all aspects of drama and theatre within their first year of membership. However, activities in the first year of membership focus predominately on drama workshops, performance and theatre visits.
- One third of the groups had members' committees. A total of 111 young people were involved in these committees.
- More established, high-profile youth theatres included a higher proportion of members with a family background in the arts. Two thirds (i.e. 66% of members) reported having at least one family member who was actively involved in or supportive of the arts.

Youth Theatre Practice and Programmes

- A typical week in the life of an Irish youth theatre goes something as follows:
At least one drama workshop is held and is probably run on Saturday. Two in-house leaders facilitate the workshop and about 23 members take part. It lasts about two hours. If the group is not preparing for a production, this might be the only activity of the week apart from perhaps a trip to the theatre or a social event. These will probably take place on Friday or Saturday. If rehearsals for a production are in progress, the youth theatre will hold activities most days of the week. These will be co-ordinated and led by a small group of leaders who put in marathon hours over several weeks. In fact, Sunday activities are only scheduled when preparing for a production. Small groups of people with a low adult-to-young-person ratio will be busy preparing costumes, set etc.
- Nearly half (45%) of all youth theatre productions were devised from members' improvisational work and were directed by adult leaders from the professional theatre sector as well as by voluntary leaders. Performances mostly took place in a variety of spaces including professional theatre venues and local centres.
- The majority of youth theatres rent or lease premises. Youth theatres rent and lease space from a variety of sources including arts centres and local community centres. In general, most youth theatres were content with the spaces even though they were not purpose built. An audit of premises/spaces used by youth theatres is recommended.

Funding and Resources

- Most youth theatres currently exist in partnership with other organisations. Funding sources are often the original partner, e.g. local authority, VEC or youth service. Benefit-in-kind support is an important type of assistance and usually relates to use of premises and administrative support.
- Salaries and fees account for the largest area of expenditure. However, voluntary support accounts for much of the work conducted in youth theatres in every area of operation. The workshop programme accounts for the smallest area of expenditure.
- The annual expenditure on salaries and fees for almost two-thirds of youth theatres in Ireland totals approximately £184,000.
- Including NAYD's expenditure on salaries and artistic fees, it can be concluded that at least 187 people earned money as a result of their contribution to youth theatre activity in Ireland.
- Of the figures offered, salaries, wages, and fees accounted for 68% of annual youth theatre expenditure
- Most of the money spent in renting or leasing spaces for youth theatre activity went to the non-arts and non-youth-work sectors.

Participants in Youth Theatre in Ireland

Profile of Youth Theatre Leaders

- The typical youth theatre leader is a woman aged 26 or over. She lives locally and plans to be involved with her youth theatre on a long-term basis. She is an experienced drama practitioner and probably also has some experience in the teaching, caring or youth work areas. Her most likely role is as workshop facilitator with 50:50 odds that she also directs theatre productions. She has probably completed formal training in a relevant area. There is a one in four chance that she was herself a member of a youth theatre or that she has contributed as a leader to other youth theatres or youth theatre events. She enjoys working with young people and believes that drama can contribute significantly to their growth, development and empowerment.
- The female to male ratio of leaders was 2:1.
- Leaders indicated a background in at least one area of the arts or of the caring, education or youth-work fields.
- Leaders have learned their skills from a combination of formal training and practical experience. The value of experience within the theatre sector both on a professional and amateur basis was cited most frequently.
- According to the census there was a total of 273 adults involved in youth theatre activity during census week, an average of between nine/ten per youth theatre. The greatest proportion of adult involvement came from the voluntary sector. 5% of the leaders were full-time employees as artistic director, administrator or outreach worker. Some had jobs that included their work for the youth theatre among other duties for a parent organisation.
- The skills used by leaders in their youth theatres draw mainly on their training and experience in theatre practice. But the young person's growth, development and empowerment are their focus and reasons for continuing.
- Most leaders indicated that they carry out multiple roles within their youth theatres. Three-quarters of them regarded themselves as 'in-house' leaders.
- Leaders may be attracted into youth theatre work because of financial or career development needs. However the satisfaction of being involved with a group of young people while they grow and develop through drama work becomes their reason for staying and pledging significant future personal commitment. At a personal level, they value opportunities to develop their own creativity, to learn from the youth members and to belong to a creative community.

Profile of Youth Theatre Members

- The typical youth theatre member is female, aged between 13 and 17 and has been a member for between one and two years. Chances are that members of her family are active in the arts, although she does not aspire to a career in theatre or the arts. In her youth theatre, she has participated in drama workshops, performed in plays, attended theatre productions and she has tried other areas of theatre and the arts. She has made good friends, feels happier and more confident and is perhaps more aware of her own rights and those of others. Her interest in theatre and the arts has increased substantially.
- The ratio of female to male members was 2:1.
- Although small in number (71), the over-18s represented a highly motivated and dedicated subset of youth theatre members.
- About 30% of the older members aspired to a career in the theatre with about 13% expressing an interest in an arts career.
- Even for those members with previous experience of active drama involvement, the census shows that membership of their youth theatre had introduced them to new areas of interest in drama and/or had increased their interest in the subject. This result strongly affirms the role youth theatres play in developing members' interest and involvement in theatre.
- More than one in four young men (27%) and more than one in eight young women (14%) had developed an interest in writing since joining their youth theatre.
- About 80% of youth theatre members had been actively involved in the arts prior to joining their youth theatre. The most popular previous involvement was in activities relevant to the performing arts. There was a bias among about half the membership to structured involvement in the arts before joining.
- The most notable area of increased interest since joining a youth theatre was active involvement in drama, with more than 90% indicating a change in this area.
- Participation and involvement in youth theatre can be a catalyst in stimulating and engaging young people in cultural activities. Overall, 78% of members reported becoming interested in something new as a result of joining their youth theatre.
- More than 40% indicated an increased interest in active involvement in other art forms, an increased interest in dance being the most salient at 50% for over-13s and 56% for over-18s. (The level of interest in dance among male members had increased by 25% since joining their youth theatre). This result affirms the role youth theatres play in developing the involvement of their members in other areas of the performing arts and the arts generally.
- More than one in four members (26%), regardless of gender, had developed an interest in the visual arts since joining their youth theatre.

Cultural & Social Impact of Participation in Youth Theatre

- Some information sought in the census was designed to generate results that could be compared with those of Francois Matarasso's 1997 UK study *Use or Ornament – The Social Impact of Participation in the Arts*. The range of social benefits and the proportions with which they were reported by Irish youth theatre members were markedly similar to those described in Matarasso's study. The results of the census indicate that almost all youth theatre members experienced positive social benefits from their first involvement with youth theatre. More than two thirds of members who responded indicated that they felt happier and more confident, had tried something new and had developed new skills. The frequencies with which each area of social benefit was reported increased with length of membership.

- Over three-quarters of members reported gaining a new interest and developing skills as a result of their being a member of a youth theatre. The census showed that youth theatres offer all aspects of drama and theatre experience to their members. The most commonly reported experience was participation in drama workshops; the second most commonly reported experience was performing in plays. Visits to the theatre also featured highly with more than half of all members stating that they had attended youth theatre productions with their own youth theatre.

- Membership of youth theatres:
 - Reduces isolation by helping people to make friends
 - Increases people's confidence and sense of self worth
 - Has a positive impact on how people feel
 - Helps to build new skills
 - Can promote tolerance by providing a forum for intercultural understanding and friendship
 - Promotes intercultural contact and communication
 - Can provide a forum to explore personal rights and responsibilities

Outcomes and Recommendations

- In addition to this report, the outcomes of the review and research process included the articulation of agreed definitions and a policy statement on youth theatre, and key stages in a youth theatre's development. (6.1)
 1. To survive the early stages of development, a youth theatre needs at least one adult leader who lives locally and has the necessary skills, vision and commitment. It is equally important that a youth theatre, in its early stages of development, has the encouragement and support from at least one of the following local resources: youth service, professional or amateur drama community, local authority.
 2. The next critical stage of a youth theatre's development involves an increasing level of independent identity. Milestones in this process include: moving from borrowed or shared space to having one's own address, *as well as* accessing increased funding and assuming responsibility for one's own budget.
 3. Financial and accommodation independence allows the youth theatre to bridge this significant moment in its development, which is characterised by the expansion of its programme and the ability to employ professional support.
- An established youth theatre is a focus and resource for the development of youth and community arts in its locality in which older and former members assume leadership and artistic roles.
- A number of areas emerged that require either further study or action to be taken. Recommendations have been made under the following headings: Structure of NAYD, Standards, Regional Development, Training, Youth Theatre Premises, Children's Theatre and International. (6.2)

YOUTH THEATRE MEMBERS' INTEREST AND INVOLVEMENT IN ARTS ACTIVITIES

Writing

- 40% Increased interest and involvement
- 1 in 4 Young Men: New interest
- 1 in 8 Young Women: New interest



Dance

- 50%+ Increased interest and involvement
- 25% of male members developed a new interest. 1 in 4 young men: new interest

Drama

- 90%+ : Increased interest and involvement
- 40% acquired interest in youth theatre
2 in 5 : new interest



Visual Arts

- 40% Increased interest and involvement
- 25% acquired interest in youth theatre
1 in 4 : new interest

