

**The following presentation was delivered by Ollie Breslin, Artistic Director, Waterford Youth Arts (WYA) at *Which way from here? A Youth Theatre Symposium* on Friday November 22<sup>nd</sup> 2019 at University College Cork.**

This was one of the *Stories from the Sector*, to coincide with the launch of Centre Stage +20. Centre Stage + 20 is the third national study of youth theatre undertaken by Youth Theatre Ireland. It updates findings from Centre Stage (1998) and Centre Stage + 10 (2009).

### **About Waterford Youth Arts**

Waterford Youth Arts is a youth and community arts resource which enables young people to participate in creative activity as a means of self-expression and development in a safe, professional and enjoyable environment.

WYA is recognised nationally as one of the country's leading youth arts organisations, and each week over 400 young people take part in its activities.

Established in August 1985, WYA has grown from the voluntary efforts of two individuals and 25 young people to a fully-structured youth arts organisation with a paid staff.

Waterford Youth Arts provides a comprehensive quality response to the creative aspirations and developmental needs of young people in the Southeast.

### **WYA- some lessons along the way:**

#### **Deciding on a structure**

The big question facing drama tutors or any creative facilitator is whether to remain as a freelance artist or make a step into a formal structure. Staying independent has advantages and works up to a certain level but if you want your work to continue and develop then you need to start thinking about getting a structure and some supports in place

#### **Getting Organised**

Quite early on we realised we couldn't stay as an adhoc pair of drama tutors – it felt that we could only survive on the door takings and subs but if you have bigger ambitions for your work then you need to think about the next step. A good practical way that we did was that we undertook a major local survey of stakeholders. So we asked local teachers, youth workers, arts workers, parents etc. – anybody that had any dealings with us for feedback. We asked for praise as well as constructive feedback. The survey was asking people honestly what they thought of our work and how we could improve etc.

One of the main recommendations from this Survey was that we should become formalised and that we needed a Board / Management Committee in order to help steer the project

#### **A Working Group**

And so from this survey we asked some of these people who responded would they agree to be on a working group to help us get to the next stage of our development. A Working Group with a limited timeframe is very useful as people don't mind going onto a committee that has a specific aim and timeframe.

#### **Management Committee**

They agreed and met and talked and eventually they decided that what we needed was a Management committee and they gradually went from being a Working Group to being our first Management Committee. When this happened some people left the WG and new people were asked on to compliment the team. This new MC saw themselves as there to support the development of a Youth Theatre and they took their role very seriously So in the early stages they took a lot of the Admin and Development role – chasing funding agencies, Arts Officers, Youth Development people etc.

Funding Agencies, Arts Officers and ETB's all prefer to deal with organisations that are structured and that have a group of people voluntarily running the organisation.

### **Structure – An Autonomous Youth Theatre (Arts Organisation)**

We decided to keep it as a youth oriented organisation and not let it get subsumed into a bigger organisation e.g. the local arts centre or the local professional theatre company as their education wing. This was tempting at the time but in the long run we felt it was wiser to stay youth focused and independent.

### **Getting Support**

Obviously you will be seeking to become a member of YTI and enjoying all the supports involved – YTI have been organised for 40 years so they have lots of skills and resources to learn from

### **Getting Paid**

Early on we insisted that arts workers need to be paid for their work – in the early 80's it was common for arts workers to be asked to help out and it was seen as a voluntary activity in the community. We went against this in Waterford and insisted that arts workers should be paid as they do valuable work. This took many years but eventually it became the norm. Eventually organisations began to realise the worth of this work and now quite a lot of freelance arts people make a living in Waterford and they don't have to go to Cork, Dublin, London etc. for employment – which then makes it easier for us when it comes to hiring skilled people for projects etc.

The MC is very important as they have helped steer us through many stages of our development. One lesson we learned about MC's is how important it is to have the right mix on the Committee – we therefore have arts people, youth related people e.g. teachers, youth workers of ex-youtharts people. But we also felt that it was invaluable to have some business people and a local politician on our MC.

Business people know a lot about premises, sales, what Companies can give sponsorship etc. but they are also not frightened of expansion and spending money as many of us in the arts are. They see that it is necessary to spend and invest in order to get a return.

A politician is extremely important as what happens at Council level is that a whole lot of funding decisions happen at Council meetings and you can find your funding slashed unless there is someone at the table saying NO – this project is important. So what happens is that many Councillors make sure that their particular projects get the funds and develop.

### **Admin Support**

Also for a young arts organisation it is so important to have a good admin person employed. An admin person can be more important than an artistic person – it is harder to find a good admin

person willing to work for low money but maybe if they have view that this imitative is important and that money isn't everything? This person's role is ultimately to find the resources to pay the wages.

### **Relationship with key local Agencies and workers**

In each County there are key people and especially when they have an interest in youth arts. In Waterford at that time it was the local youth development officer who believed in youth arts as an exciting way for youthwork to develop. But it can also be the local Arts Officer, local LCYP worker etc. etc.

### **Find Precedents**

Find out what other's have achieved in their Counties and when you are ready ask the local people why can't we have such a support in our County?

All civil servants need to find precedents for initiatives as they don't want to go out on a limb so it is very important to always find out what is happening elsewhere in Ireland and then use this information locally – so that your committee can ask the questions “how come in Waterford they have ....and we can't have the same here for our young people”?

### **Getting grants**

There is no point wasting time applying for lots of things that you have no interest in doing – it is best to focus on what you can do and what you want to achieve. The Arts Council's Young Ensemble Project is a good possibility but remember it is once off – however do a great project with this fund and you could impress the local arts officer to come on board for the following year?

Our first grant aid came from the local Arts Centre – they set us a challenge – they gave us a credit note for €1K but on the condition that we get two other organisations to come on board with the same amount – so they set us a challenge to get started and take ourselves seriously. So we went to the local Arts Officer and asked could they come on board as if they do we could have free rent at Arts Centre. Then we went to a local Builder Providers who had a birthday year coming up and we asked them the same question and they said yes and again gave us a credit note. ( getting a credit note is much easier than asking for cash) .

### **Look at other Models of Youth Arts work**

Also on this point it is always a good idea to look at other models elsewhere – It is always a good idea to get to youth arts symposiums, conferences etc. or search online and find out about other models in Ireland / Europe and the world.

Go Visit – generally people who work in this sector are underappreciated and maybe a bit isolated so why not go on a study visit? Many years ago I got a small grant that enabled me to travel through the UK and visit various types of YT's and YA's examples which was very useful. Also seeing examples that you don't like is equally useful as it reminds you of what values are important and what type of youth organisation you want to achieve. So I started in London and travelled to Manchester, Glasgow and Edinburgh. More recently we got a small grant from the local Arts Officer and we travelled to London and Oxford to look at Youth arts organisations and their Buildings

### **WYA Model**

The model that we have evolved is a three-way partnership between the ETB as we are a UBU youth

work funded organisation / the Arts Council who recognise that we provide employment for artists and enable young people to create exciting work / and the local City and County Council who give us quite a small grant BUT they provide us with our own building which is great. We have a turnover of around €150K per year

Our work was initially as a youth theatre but it evolved into Creative writing, Dance, Film, Visual Art and more recently music. Hence we changed our name and the membership knew that all creative avenues were equal but of course some are more equal depending on where we can find money to do projects / productions / exhibitions / publications etc.

Weekly we have 3 drama workshops / 2 dance workshops / 5 visual art / 3 film workshops / three creative writing workshops.

Alongside this our main work we have also had a continued relationship with the local services working with Adults with an intellectual disability. Also by accident we fell into a community arts project aimed at older people and since then we have created 11 social history films on the area around Waterford and about 540 individual interviews with older people now all up on you tube.

In all our work we aim to be as youth led as possible and we have a very active older Members Committee (aged 14 – 19 years) and particular committees for various projects incl. The Lit team who run their own youth arts festival, the Member Committee also run an Open Mic Night each month throughout the year.

So where are we now after nearly 40 years and what words of wisdom do I have – Well we believe the model of youth arts organisation that WYA is could very easily be replicated in any other town or city in Ireland. The beauty of this model is that in each other place it would be different depending on the interests of local young people and also the skills that exist in the locality

If you would like more information or call down to meet us you are welcome

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