

BORDERS YOUTH THEATRE : ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 2013

CHAIRPERSON ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2012



Introduction

This report covers the period from our last AGM in February 2012.

Borders Youth Theatre work covers three main areas:
weekly workshops in a variety of centres across the region
longer holiday projects leading public performances
specific work linked to partnerships with other groups.

Each year, it is important to continue this core work while still looking to extend into new areas. To help this, the Trustees spent some time developing a three-year plan. This has been very helpful in providing a focus for our activities.

Workshops

Workshops have continued to be popular. We have been keen to try to extend the workshops to other centres. Despite a number of attempts, we have been unable to get a group established in Hawick. However, the group in Peebles has continued to grow slowly which is encouraging. This means we have groups operating in seven centres across the week. Some of the groups are quite big and contain a number of young people who have been involved with BYT for many years. We are investigating the possibility of a 'central' group for more experienced members. At times, our workshop leaders are a little stretched, especially when illness and other events and training crop up. Although not easy, it would be useful to try to identify other professionals on whom we could call in such circumstances.

There is still scope to extend workshops, perhaps to Eyemouth, and that is something we will continue to explore.

Main Projects

Each year, we try to identify a series of projects which will stimulate and stretch the young people. The Easter junior project is well established. In Easter 2012, the production was Mr Toad's Mad Adventures and this proved very successful with 42 young people taking part. The venue was Earlston Primary School which suits us very well. We are increasingly trying to find opportunities for our older participants to assist with production, shadow professionals and take some responsibility and, once more, we had some seniors acting as 'trainees'.

In addition, at the request of seniors, we ran a very successful 4 days of 'Get to Know Shakespeare' workshops with Raymond Short.

Summer 2012 saw a series of Make a Play in 2 Days workshops across the region for juniors. Where possible, they were led by BYT seniors or ex seniors and proved popular. They are also a useful way to attract young people to regular workshops.

For Seniors in the summer we saw what I personally think was one of the most exiting projects we have ever done - the BYT Street Olympiad. It was actually a difficult project to put together involving a variety of outdoor locations and dreadful weather during rehearsals and initial performances. However, the Olympic theme worked very well and the performances caught the imagination and attention of the audiences on the streets. The project also greatly raised the profile of BYT. It always surprises (and frustrates) me that, after 24 years, many people have not heard of the work of BYT.

The quality continued in October with Two Tales of Shakespeare - a series of performances based on abridged versions of two of Shakespeare's plays - one of his best known - Macbeth - and one of his least - Cymbeline. This was based in Earlston High School but then toured a variety of locations during October - again, a very tricky operation but hugely rewarding for performers, professionals and audience alike. October 2012 also saw the first Imaginarium Festival based at Eastgate Theatre. BYT's ran a Play in 3 Days project which attracted 17 young people and was a major contributor to the Festival.

The Shakespeare theme was certainly to the fore during 2012. Following a collaboration with andante Chamber Choir for our Right Royal Wedding spoof in May 2011, the two organisations came together again for Borderin' on Shakespeare. This was a mix of Shakespeare's 'best bits' performed by 4 senior BYTers and themed music performed by the choir. The project was led by John Stone and Arthur Parsons and ended with two very successful performances at Smailholm and Kirknewtown. BYT provided suitably Elizabethan refreshments.

In addition to these main projects, we also mounted our annual production at The Wynd Theatre, this time with Kelso Seniors. This was a cleverly staged production of The Heights which was well received by good audiences. We are delighted to continue the links with The Wynd which we have had since its opening and are grateful for their continued help.

We also built a good relationship with the trustees of The Haining in Selkirk and, in December, Selkirk Seniors offered to the public some 'Creepy Tours'. These were great fun and worth the freezing conditions during rehearsals.

Another link we made was with LGBT Borders with whom we developed a piece called Don't Judge Me which was performed to S3 pupils at Earlston and Selkirk High and again at the Rainbow Kilts Festival in Hawick in August.

During Summer 2012, SBC and Melrose Community Council organised entertainment in Melrose Square each Saturday afternoon and we were able to reprise our Street Olympiad. The scheme was very successful and might be tried in other towns next year. BYT will hope to be involved.

Through the year we offered, where we could, support or workshops to schools. This included work during Health Week at Jedburgh Grammar School. As part of the October project, we offered workshops to all secondary schools in the region. For a variety of reasons, most were unable to take up the offer. They were offered instead to senior primaries and more than a dozen were organised.

We, deliberately, have no specific base and are aware that it is important to try to use a variety of locations across the region. We have been very successful doing this during 2012 with workshops from Eyemouth to West Linton and performances from Coldingham to Walkerburn. However, we need to try to do more. Our main projects tend to be based around the Melrose/Earlston area. This is generally fairly convenient for travel by participants and the venues suit. Usually, we do not have funding in place sufficiently early to book venues such as Heart of Hawick or Eastgate. One of the aims of the three-year plan is to allow this to happen.

Funding

As always, funding remains the main limiting factor in what we are able to do. We have kept workshop fees unchanged (and, indeed, payments to staff have remained the same for 4 years). We are well aware that family budgets are under severe pressure. We have always tried to support individuals and families where necessary and include in our budget planning a sum to do this. However, the number of requests for help with fees is increasing. There are also likely to be others unwilling to ask for help. We have tried to make clear the support available and will continue to do so.

We have been reasonably successful in obtaining funding from a variety of trusts, funding bodies etc. - certainly sufficiently successful to maintain our ambitious programme. However, this is very time-consuming and, in the present financial climate, increasingly difficult. We were able to secure sufficient funding to make some projects free to participants. The numbers rose. To help partly offset this, we asked for contributions towards fees as participants and families felt able. We were unable to sustain this but this is a model which works well.

We continue to be very grateful for the support, both in grant and in kind from Arts Development at Scottish Borders Council. In particular, they have been willing to agree a three year partnership with BYT which has made a huge difference to our ability to seek other funding and plan ahead.

Since we have no specific 'base', it is not easy to organise fund-raising events. However, as well as the successful Borderin' on Shakespeare, we had a Summer Fair in Melrose which helped funds. Some individual young people have shown great initiative to raise funds through their own projects. It would be great to see more of this.

We carry out extensive evaluation throughout the year through written and verbal feedback. The results of this are reassuringly positive. Indeed, it is clear that, for many young people, BYT is a major source of stability and motivation in their lives. However, the feedback also helps identify areas for development and improvement which we can incorporate into our planning.

Organisation

Although we contract experienced, high quality staff for workshops and projects, BYT is a charity run by volunteers. A group of Trustees is ultimately responsible for all BYT activities. The Trustees agree the main objectives and policy of BYT. They meet 4 times each year (plus the AGM). Trustees are often parents of BYT participants but this need not be so. Indeed, it is useful to have trustees with as wide a range of backgrounds and interests as possible. At present, the number of Trustees is at the lower limit of what is necessary and, at least one, is stepping down after having served for a number of years. It is therefore quite urgent that we 'recruit' another 2 or 3 for the coming year to ensure that we can maintain and extend the valuable work which BYT does. We have been advertising widely and hope that we can be successful in our quest.

Like many organisations, BYT relies on the help and goodwill of a range of volunteers. Ideally, we would have a sufficient number of volunteers willing to organise groups overseeing different aspects of our work - workshops, fundraising, publicity etc. The reality is that it is people, especially those with children, have very busy lives and are unable or unwilling to offer the time needed. Many, however, are willing to help with specific tasks during projects - programme selling, raffle sales, transport etc. Their contribution is invaluable and we continue to be grateful for all help.

We employ a part-time administrator to help with day-to-day paperwork, registers, banking etc and are very lucky to have her enthusiasm and expertise.

The reality is that, over the years, the main organisation of BYT falls to one willing (or not so willing) individual. This has never been satisfactory. However, there is a difficult balance between trying to provide sufficient organisational support and ensuring that as much of the scarce funding goes directly to work with young people. It is a key aim of our three-year plan that we continue to try to find sufficient resources to employ a Production Co-ordinator and this remains a priority for the coming year.

Looking Ahead/

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The Easter projects are almost underway.

Juniors will rehearse and perform a version of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.

Seniors will devise a piece to perform at the end of the week.

Both projects take place at Earlston Primary School.

We are hoping that John Haswell will be able to join us for our summer project. We are having some difficulty finding a venue for this but there is still plenty time.

Beyond that, everything will depend on the funding we can secure. It looks as if we have been successful in a funding bid for a group of projects but we are still awaiting details.

Our recent publicity has included the following message:

'Bringing theatre to young people and communities : Bringing young people and communities to theatre'

Looking ahead, we can be sure that BYT will continue to make a difference to the lives of hundreds of young people in the Borders. Whether that difference is small or life changing, I would urge everyone connected with BYT to continue to support in every way possible so that BYT can continue to do what it does well.

On behalf of BYT, I would like to thank everyone who has supported our work over the past year: workshop leaders, project staff, funders, parents, helpers and anyone else involved. On behalf of our leaders and staff, I would like to thank the fantastic young people for their enthusiasm and willingness to try new things.

Personally, I would like to thank the Trustees, particularly Primrose Scott, our Treasurer, for their support and Judy Collins for all her help. Finally, thank you to BYT for allowing me to be part of this fantastic organisation.

David J Bisset
March 2013