

Committee Clerk
Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay, CF99 1NA.

27th February 2012

Dear Sir or Madam

Inquiry into Participation in the Arts

In response to the above I'm sending a document from the Torch Theatre in Milford Haven.

Our response is a summary of what we feel we are able to do to increase participation and what we plan to do in the future.

I hope it will help the committee in their inquiry. Should you require any further information please don't hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely



Peter Doran

About our Organisation

The Torch Theatre is the major theatre producing venue in West Wales, offering an excellent programme of distinctive, relevant and accessible arts activity that has a loyal and growing audience.

The Torch Theatre Company has a strong reputation for its in-house presentations of plays from the modern repertoire and for its Christmas productions. Indeed, it is the key factor that differentiates the Torch from its competitors and generates overwhelming brand loyalty from its audiences.

Alongside some of the warmest and most actor-friendly auditoria in Wales, there is evidence that audiences appreciate the close, informal connection with the companies of actors that have frequented the Torch over the years.

Although in house production has dwindled over recent years to just three productions, the Torch retains a loyal audience and by using a group of core actors, it manages to retain the ensemble feel; there are not many theatres in Wales that could programme a three week run of a show and consistently hit its targets.

Participation

The Torch has had a longstanding tradition of engaging directly with young people through its youth theatre and summer schools, as well as active engagement with the wider community through a policy of accessibility and inclusivity.

BREAKOUT! Continuing the success of this dance workshop for young people two years ago, the 2011 scheme attracted 24 young people - 12 in the 7-11 years and 12 in the 11 years and over. There was a generous discount for families on a low income.

The Torch's education programme in schools is highly regarded and always in great demand. From feedback, we know that development of the curriculum is very much focused on vocational, work-related and health promotion issues, often through TIE work produced by companies from outside the county. In the absence of a local TIE company, our Education Officer bridges the gap delivering high quality workshops to meet a range of curriculum needs at primary level and providing workshops to support secondary school set texts, such as *A View from the Bridge* in 2009 and *An Inspector Calls* in 2010. Workshops on Epic theatre were delivered in 2011 directly linked to our own production of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*. Workshops in schools hosted by Earthfall Dance and National Dance Company Wales are now a regular feature in the schools calendar as are workshops on the theatre stage by Ballet Wales and Joon Dance.

Both the Artistic Director and Education Officer engage with institutions of higher education such as Pembrokeshire College, Coleg Syr Gar and Trinity St David's University. In the case of Trinity both are integral to the delivery of the BA acting course based in Carmarthen.

During the Spring and Summer terms, 60 Youth theatre workshop sessions took place with approximately 150 students participating and ten Saturday workshops for Primary School pupils with nearly 200 children aged between 7 and 11 taking part. We also ran 26 free workshops in story-telling through drama for pupils in Year 4 with over 300 children participating.

One week's Youth theatre work experience was also offered to 8 pupils from Sir Thomas Picton and Ysgol Bro Dewi School participating in devising workshops, improvisation etc.

The three week Summer Theatre School took place in the studio theatre during July and August. The Summer school was a huge success with more than 300 people attending our production of *My Militant Sisters*.

During the Autumn term the Education Officer commenced workshops either covering World War Two – the Home Front or The Tudors in schools throughout the County with 30 sessions of Youth Theatre workshops also planned.

Looking to 2012, in addition to continuing the workshops and Summer school the intention is to also provide additional workshops for Secondary Schools to support our production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

We have also provided our facilities at no cost for one Community First school to present the animated films they made with Film Agency Wales. This was mainly with the Gypsy community in Monkton; we've done this for several years.

For three years running we've worked with the Princes Trust giving music workshops to the long term unemployed. These are weeklong courses culminating in a concert for their parents and friends in our studio theatre. Our facilities are provided free and tutors paid by the Princes Trust.

Workshops and Added Value Events – often free of charge or offered at extremely low cost, the Torch is keen to add value to theatre visits as often as possible. Take up is erratic, depending upon the event, although a huge success in November 2011 was an after show Q & A following a performance of *The Wizard, The Goat and the Man Who Won the War* – where 80 of the audience of 96 booked.

The Torch has been successful at encouraging increased frequency of attendance with the help of regular emailed newsletters, and figures continue on an upward trend with repeat bookers forming a healthy 36% of our audience last year – this figure increases year on year, having risen from 30% in 2009/10.

In our bid to attract younger audiences and families, and break down barriers, a member of the Marketing team has made inroads by personally visiting schools, toddler groups and clinics – to survey their response to Parent and Baby film screenings which is being launched in late November 2011. As part of her remit she has also made valuable contact with many other school and community groups who have already made use of the Theatre either by visiting an event as a group, hired the theatre, or used the Café as a meeting venue. 43 groups have attended events at the Theatre since April 2011.

Have cuts made a difference

We are able to continue as we have been for the last three years, offering similar facilities and opportunities for participation. However what we're finding is that at times of economic hardship those who participate are slowly withdrawing as they in turn have to tighten their belts. In an ideal world we would like to subsidise our work further but cuts or lack of increase in funding means that this is not possible. Partners in projects are also beginning to drift away, sponsorship is almost non-existent these days, certainly outside of the major cities; we have just lost £10,000 per year sponsorship from the local port authority.

The voluntary Arts Network used to have a stronger presence and may need to be revitalized with more stature regionally. Local Authorities should maybe lead the way with a clear arts strategy including a robust one for participation.

The Arts Council of Wales new strategy *Creating an Agenda for Change* is a good document with some inspiring initiatives as is the *Young Creators* document. We are told that money will be available to create spaces for young people to participate in arts activity and funding to assist in community and participatory arts in local communities. These are positive initiatives, I only hope that we don't have to jump through endless hoops to draw down money – we need to get on with the work. To be fair the Arts Council of Wales they are putting pressure on their revenue clients to address participation as well as child poverty issues.