

Task and Finish Group on Participation in the Arts

Response from National Theatre Wales

Introduction

National Theatre Wales encourages everyone who is willing to commit the time and energy the opportunity to get involved in our work. We also outreach widely to introduce new people to theatre and the possibilities it offers for self-expression and confidence-building. Our production 'The Passion' in Port Talbot involved 2000 volunteers, our Assembly project has given young unemployed people from Caernarfon and amateur dramatic groups from Prestatyn, among many others all over Wales, the chance to create and perform, and our TEAM programme currently supports a diverse range of groups and individuals in a number of creative activities ranging from spoken word nights to a youth video club. Our online community, which currently has over 3,000 members, offers opportunities to participate not only in our work but also with an array of other artists and groups, through debates, blogging and reviewing.

The Assembly

Our Assembly project gives communities the chance to co-create a performance/debate event around issues that are important to them. In our launch year 12 Assemblies were created in the following locations:

Blaengarw, Swansea, Cardiff (X2), Barmouth, Prestatyn, Bridgend, Milford Haven, Aberystwyth, Newport, Caernarfon and Brecon. They were held in various locations - bus station, cafes, pubs and empty shops.

Each Assembly involved performance & debate around a question which came directly from the communities where we were based. These questions included 'Is Butetown ready to cross the tracks?' (Cardiff, Butetown), 'What is Milford's energy?' (Milford Haven), and 'What is a Cofi Xmas?' (Caernarfon). Four guest speakers were invited to each event to discuss the subject. These included community activists, local councilors, college lecturers, farmers, and representatives from a number of voluntary groups.

Our approach to engagement focuses on building long-term relationships, we often try to go beyond 'gate keepers' and we actively encourage involvement by people who have had no experience of theatre or the arts.

One important feature of our Assemblies was that they should be the catalyst for further activity within a community. Through TEAM (see below) we have provided support to organisations and individuals to create their own projects.

The Assembly has now developed into a new model: a series of democratically elected projects, which will take place across Wales over the coming year.

Eight creative projects will be developed over 18 months with two each in south, mid, north and west Wales. Local people, groups and organisations are invited to submit proposals of which 3 are shortlisted. The public are then invited to vote for their preferred project online.

The NTW Creative Associate, along with a team of creative and production staff, will work with the winning group over the space of a month to create each Assembly event.

For the first round three projects were shortlisted from a total of seven. These were from Bryncynon & Abercynon, Barry and Adamsdown & Splott. Over 3,000 votes were cast, with the project from Splott, which explores perceptions of anti-social behaviour and how it affects the local community, winning first place. The first Assembly will take place at the end of March 2012.

NTW Productions

All NTW productions have given people the chance to participate with NTW staff and our creative & production teams. Our current production, 'A Provincial Life' includes a 12 strong community ensemble, and a volunteer marketing team. Further examples are given below.

A Good Night Out in The Valleys (South Wales Valleys, March 2010)

Performed in a number of venues including working mans clubs and arts centres, this was based on stories gathered through workshops with the communities around which the production was performed. Our Assembly took place in one of

the venues, on a bingo night and involved local artists and community organisations. We held open rehearsals where people could give us their feedback & we also offered opportunities to work with us on activities surrounding the productions – front of house, marketing etc.

The Beach (Prestatyn, July 2010)

Local people made up the majority of the cast in this production where they worked alongside professional actors. They also helped us test ideas for the show, having an input towards how it developed.

Love Steals Us From Loneliness (Bridgend, October 2010)

As well as a number of open rehearsals and drama sessions delivered to young people in the area when developing the show, we also developed an online project, ourbridgend.com, in collaboration with local young people. As part of this project, we held digital storytelling workshops. The production took place in a nightclub in Bridgend, and young people were also given the chance to perform as part of the show and developed marketing ideas with us.

The Soul Exchange (Cardiff, January 2011)

For this project we worked closely with the Butetown community of Cardiff – a large part was The Soul Exchange included a taxi ride around Butetown. Activities included the creation of a community choir and a series of workshops where people could tell us their stories. Local people were also cast in the show. This project was also the start of our work with a group of young Somali men, developing their skills as poets and performers. This group are now working with us on an NTW production for 2013.

The Passion (Port Talbot, April 2011)

Involving over 2000 community volunteers and co-directed by Michael Sheen, this was a 3 day event with its finale attracting a crowd of 12,000 people. The creation of port-talbot.com allowed people to record and follow the story of The Passion online through videos, photos, writing and comments. The piece has had an enormous impact on the town, which will be recognised in a ‘memory event’ to be held at Easter 2012, featuring a wide range of artwork that local people have produced in response to the production.

NTW TEAM

NTW TEAM encourages participation at every level of NTW. It is a network of people across Wales who work with us to spread the word about NTW in their

community. They have taken a lead role in the development of NTW and work with us across all aspects of the organisation. Our feedback suggests that their involvement has made an impact on them & their communities by increasing confidence, knowledge, opportunities and developing new skills. It has also shown that the core 250 TEAM members have reached approximately 6000 people through their networks to help promote the arts.

NTW TEAM develops long-term relationships with individuals and communities through activities such as providing support, advice and training, chances to perform in NTW productions, and networking opportunities.

We have helped individuals, groups and organisations across Wales set up their own creative projects. Working with many 'hard to reach' groups we offer an environment of encouragement and support.

Examples are given below:

Barmouth Live (Barmouth)

This grew out of an idea generated from our Barmouth Assembly 'What's Left After The Summer Tides?' in July 2010. Here we have worked with Barmouth Communities First, local musicians, DJ's, and CB radio enthusiasts to set up an online radio & TV station. Supported through our TEAM network, this group has now secured funding to start building the station.

Word4Word (Cardiff)

Word4Word is a spoken word event run by three TEAM members. It provides a platform for local talent to perform alongside more established artists – special guests have included Patrick Jones and Rhian Edwards. TEAM supports the organisers through training & advice, and peer support. It also helps develop the artists and provides opportunities for them to perform at other NTW events.

Scala Film TEAM (Prestatyn)

Here we have supported, in partnership with Scala Prestatyn, a TEAM member to run a filmmaking club with young people aged between 8-15. Other TEAM members, from around Wales, with filmmaking and drama skills have also run workshops for this group. The group has approximately 20 young people involved, three of which recently won prizes at the PICS 2012 Film Festival awards.

De Gabay (Cardiff)

De Gabay (the song) is a project that was conceived by four young Somali poets, who initially got involved through with NTW through our Assembly in Butetown. It was this idea that won NTW the Calouste Gulbenkian performance grant.

As well as offering opportunities to perform and work with internationally renowned artists, it aims to develop creative leaders who can take a lead on future activity. An important part of De Gabay is 'Ideas Exchange', which is a series of events that gives the residents of Butetown the opportunity to create, perform and explore issues. Collaborators for Ideas Exchange have included Welsh National Opera and the Wales Millennium Centre.

Conclusion

To be engaged is one of our core values; everyone can be part of NTW. Engagement runs through every strand of our work and participation is key to our success. We will continue to build on the opportunities we have developed, and will create an environment where the widest possible range of individuals can influence how we plan, think and operate.