

Kilkenny Gathering 2011

Katie Boon of Paper Balloon Theatre, London is a member of the Board of TYA-UK.

This year TYA Ireland presented The Gathering 2011 in Kilkenny hosted by Barnstorm Theatre.

The main objectives of the conference were to offer those working in Theatre for Young Audiences a **'unique opportunity to examine practice, the need for future sustainability of the work and the long-term development of the sector'**. Co- Artistic Directors of emerging theatre company, Paper Balloon, Alex Kanefsky and Katie Boon attended the festival.

During the festival, The Gathering presented four new shows, *Egg* by Cahoots Theatre, *A Murder of Crows* by Barnstorm, *Wobble* by Replay Theatre/Assault Events and *Walking Man* by Graffiti and two works-in-progress *Pinocchio* by Moonfish Theatre Company and *Tic Teac Tic Teac* by Puca Puppets.

The festival programme was accompanied by a series of three seminars which interrogated and explored themes surrounding theatre for young audiences in Ireland and how to critically respond to work. The Key note speaker was John Borstel, co-author alongside Liz Lerman of the 'Critical Response Process: A method for getting useful feedback on anything you make from Dance to Dessert'. This was followed up with a practical workshop and opportunities to explore the process.

Performance

The overall quality of work on display was of an extremely high standard. Of particular note were Barnstorm Theatre's *A Murder of Crows* and Cahoots NI's *Egg*. Both performances (for age groups at the opposite ends of the TYA spectrum) utilised excellent ensemble physicality, combining beautifully with other elements including music, illusion, light and sound and an integral design ethic. Interestingly for us, at the heart of each production was an extremely strong sense of story and narrative.

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A murder of crows based on the fairy tale classic *Hansel and Gretel* was a hauntingly beautiful work. As adult members of the audience, the complexity of characters written by Mike Kenny were meaty and challenging. Preconceived ideas about the character's choices in the original *Hansel and Gretel* were challenged. We felt that any comments directed at the execution of the performance itself are purely personal taste and therefore redundant in this forum. With limited experience working with this age group, it would have been nice to see this performed to the intended audience to see how it is received.

Egg was an impressive, delightful piece. The physicality of the actors was subtle and superb whilst it communicated a deep sense of empathy to the audience. The illusion was delightful and we too, alongside the younger members of the audience were trying to figure out how they did it. The most interesting point that we noticed about *Egg* was that, as adults we didn't warm to the bird puppet or 'Disney-esque' song used several times throughout the piece (the only verbal moment), but the kids, quite clearly, loved it. For us, this song affected the quality but for the kids, it enhanced it.

Through this personal response to this particular aspect of the performance, and the focus on the festival of 'critical response', we started to question taste vs. artistic quality. How can one be defined over the other? At what point do you consider the audience over 'artistic quality'. There is a standard we all strive towards, which we feel is vital to all creative's work – but who are we making the work for? For example, the tastes of a child (or a collection of children in an audience) may not translate into 'artistic quality'. The reaction to this particular element of *Egg* highlighted these thoughts.

Also of note was Replay's piece *Wobble, a dance piece for ages 2-4*. Whilst it was engaging choreography and flawless performances which delighted the majority of the audience, the work done in the research and development stages within a nursery did communicate and was evident within the piece but didn't relate as strongly as we would had hoped. It also lacked a definite ending, which confused the children as well as the adult contingent in the audience.

This led to a secondary question: 'How can you maintain 'adult' quality but still stay true to the actual content and audience you are trying to engage with?'

Critical Response Process

TYA Ireland had invited John Borstel of Liz Lerman Dance Exchange to talk about and demonstrate his *Critical Response Process* (CRP) – an intensive method for receiving feedback on a production.

This process was of particular interest to us. As developing practitioners we are aware of the importance of sharing and receiving a response about our work but we've found feedback sessions both within the company and to invited audiences challenging at times. As a result, we welcomed the opportunity to explore with John.

Even though the name *Critical Response Process* sounds like you are racing towards A & E for a dire emergency, the technique itself is not 'life threatening' as it were, but in fact, very valuable. John shared with us a clean and engaging process that not only cushioned the artists and audience alike, but allowed them the room to fully share and receive suggestions/ideas surrounding the work.

However, what we found the most useful was the process for being an audience member in this situation. We were given a gentle reminder before the workshop began and that was of entering into the room with an open mind wanting the piece to succeed. This should be a default setting for us all as peers, however not always the case. The reminder was welcomed. The process stopped the observer from jumping to conclusions or forming off-hand judgement and allowed the space for the intention of the piece/decision to be unearthed first, before a rash comment was made. Great care was given to all involved – which admittedly proved tedious at times – but can be adapted to suit individuals working style.

The CRP itself stimulated lots of interesting debate about the need for feedback as a whole within the creative process. Of particular interest was how the CRP fared in relation to stronger and weaker performances. After seeing a strong piece in the development stage, everyone left with a fairly rosy feeling. However a weaker piece with several problematic issues

provoked a lot of discussion after the CRP with many responders feeling constrained by the process and unable to explain to the artists what they truly thought about the work.

Overall we felt that the CRP provided an excellent framework through which to approach feedback within ongoing work. But – we concluded that it should be used as a guideline rather than a rulebook, and applied only where appropriate.

The Festival as a whole

From a position of having attended a few festivals in a number of different contexts, Katie's overall feeling surrounding the festival was very high. 'The festival was small and therefore personable, the work was strong, there was a definite through line of exploration and I gained professional development as an artist. For these reasons, it was one of the best festivals I have attended. It felt like a cohesive, holistic festival with a solid storyline and narrative. I found this very accessible.'

As Alex's first experience of such festivals, he felt The Gathering provided a really useful opportunity as mentioned to meet important figures and people with a wealth of experience. 'Contact was made with other heads of theatre companies, discussions were had about process and roles within organisations as well as generally feeling part of an exciting dynamic industry. The organisers' efforts to achieve this feeling are to be praised, the event was really well organised and allowed space to meet and discuss with people, including "speed dating" session and the dinner and lunches'.

Paper Balloon felt welcomed throughout and as a foreign emerging company with little knowledge of the Irish industry it provided a fantastically warm introduction.

Networking event

Most people groaned at the thought of 'speed' dating networking (Barnstorm's 'Barndance' networking event) and why wouldn't you? The idea of talking to strangers under a time limit, with a bell and an agenda is, well, terrifying. For Paper Balloon, after the initial relief that we didn't actually

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have to dance, we were happy to go with it and it proved a useful exercise. It allowed us to place names with faces and art forms very quickly and this provided a list of people we wanted to pursue a conversation with. It also helped identify who had work on and what and the company they were attached to. Much more useful than a 'wine and nibbles' evening as we felt supported the whole way through this (often daunting) experience of 'networking'.

Overall

Overall the festival provided a fantastic introduction to the larger TYA industry for Paper Balloon, as well as serving as a great opportunity for mentorship, making contacts and being inspired by high-quality work for young audiences.

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Links:

[TYA Ireland](#) (ASSITEJ Ireland)

[Barnstorm Theatre](#)

[Paper Balloon Theatre Company](#)