

Scottish Exchange

Imagine's Autumn Exchange was a full house in a superbly people friendly theatre, the Byre in St Andrews. This new building has glass windows in all foyers allowing views on to gardens and courtyards in this mostly 17th century cathedral city. The sea is minutes away and quiet streets and walking routes thread through the University buildings. An atmosphere highly conducive to reflection and exchange is therefore encouraged. 60 mainly Scottish practitioners watched a dozen performances or works in progress of development.

My principal interest was in the considerable amount of work for Under Fives. In their different ways, the explorations all demonstrated some confusion between the roles of a teacher, guiding play or developing drama games, with that of a theatre performer. Or perhaps there is a lack of confidence in the value of performance which encourages artists to believe that children must lead the encounter. One example may serve for all.

Working with only 8 children and their two teachers, *Lickety Spit* first established two performers as themselves, then in role as comic travellers and subsequently as creatures met on a journey. The children were invited to join in the 'imagined' journey. The level of complication increased when children were encouraged to 'imagine' they were under water, climbing a mountain or fishing with rods and were instructed how to express this imagined experience. Add in a large quantity of props, costumes and materials used to represent both qualities and concrete objects and the event became a demanding test of children's ability to follow a complex series of instructions. In my view, the company failed to distinguish clearly between the different kinds of engagement required by watching a performance or taking part in an imaginative drama.

The purpose of Autumn Exchange is to support the development of new Scottish theatre by giving companies and artists the chance to show work and have it discussed by presenters and artists – and especially the unique Scottish network of Cultural Coordinators. Sadly, this network of agents setting up relationships between artists, companies, schools and teachers, promoting the use of cultural activity in raising levels of achievement in young people, is about to be deprived of central government funding. At a time when Creative Partnerships in England is changing to just such a model of a network of 'Cultural Agents' – the last hurrah perhaps of New Labour initiatives in education and culture - the parallel Scottish experience will be lost.

Stephanie Hall flew up from London to make a presentation on Find Your Talent. She was frank about the successive failure of governments to remember previous initiatives and evaluate their success before starting another, perhaps similar approach. The sum of £25million allocated seems big. It represents a spending of just £25 per child involved in the pilot scheme – which aims to ensure access to 5 hours of cultural activity for three years. The ten pilot projects have been selected to provide a range of learning opportunities for those leading the project. None of these ministers or officials may be in positions of power or influence or in the same departments when the project ends in 2011.

Imagine represents a kind of agency which will not go away or lose its identity or change its approach – unless all funding is completely withdrawn overnight. Imagine staff through events like Autumn Exchange and participation in schemes such as Young Audiences Scotland are doing their best to build collaboration and exploration, development and promotion into the everyday life of the wider TYA community in Scotland.

The 60 keen artists, local authority promoters, cultural coordinators and others who attended the event know fine well that they are very fortunate to have a strong team organising such events for them. The race is on to build an infrastructure of development, cooperation and mutual support which is sustainable without fickle Government support.

PH 2 October 2008.



