

How did we get here? 50 Years of TYA



Paul Harman started as an actor at Belgrade Theatre, Coventry in 1962. Founder Artistic Director of Merseyside Young People's Theatre (1978-89). AD of CTC, now Theatre Hullabaloo (1994-2008). Executive Committee of ASSITEJ International 1989-1993 & 2008-2011. Editor with Vicky Ireland of 50 Best Plays for Young Audiences (Aurora Metro) 2016

I am 77 years old. I think people make theatre in response to the social and political culture which surrounds them. Some may ignore or oppose. Others may accept, compromise with or exploit those conditions.

Professional theatre made specifically for young audiences has a history back to the 1920's in some countries but since the mid-1960's an extraordinary growth and development has been seen worldwide. An International Association, ASSITEJ, was founded in 1965 and now has members in 100 countries. In the UK there has been a move from working with teachers and in schools to a more commercial model of offering performances at venues.

Four dates to remember: 1944, 1965, 1968 & 1979.

I'll start in the middle.

1968.

If you can remember the '60's you weren't there – goes the riff. Certainly, in political terms, 1968 never happened in Britain. In Paris, Berlin and elsewhere in the Western world in 1968 there was an explosion of political frustration among students. When the tear gas cleared, many young people formed theatre co-operatives and collectives to make theatre for the working classes, old and young. To continue the struggle. But as outsiders, 'on the edge', perhaps. Outside the establishment theatre which reinforced respect for literary tradition, conservative values and the assumptions of those already in positions of power and influence.

By the early 1970's, when David Johnston formed Perspectives with his colleagues, he had a popular – and officially sanctioned - UK model to work on. TiE.

1965

Theatre in Education was a blend of theatre structure and participatory drama techniques, working in partnership with teachers and delivered free of charge in schools. It began in 1965 in Coventry when the Education Committee decided to fund a team of actors and teachers at the city's own Belgrade Theatre.

Many new companies were formed very quickly as the fashion spread to other cities. Vicky Ireland and I were in the Belgrade TiE company in 1966 together with Stuart Bennett, Roger Chapman, Cora Williams and others who went on to form our own TiE or TYA companies in Leeds, Liverpool or London.

1944

But TiE could only exist because of very radical, child centred and democratic values embodied in the UK's 1944 Education Act, passed in the last year of World War Two. Within the new curriculum, the practice of the arts, music, dance and drama and visual arts, were recognised as an essential element in the education of the whole child. Since 1979 there has been a gradual erosion of that principle.

Things were different in other parts of Europe recovering from the Second World War. From Moscow to Paris there was, and often still is, an axis of belief that children and young people should be introduced to their cultural heritage through art-works and educational practices that compromise as little as possible with how children and young people actually experience the world and learn to engage with it. If the artist is king, then an actor is a prince and a theatre director is an emperor! Children sit in the dark in seats too big for them in rows facing a raised stage. They watch and listen.

In the USSR, theatre showed children how a Soviet citizen should behave. In France, schools did not like to engage with life outside a narrow academic curriculum – no religious education and no organised sport, for example.

By contrast, from 1944 to 1979 in the UK, most schools were open to the arts and to the wider world. Educational practice was greatly influenced by academic research in child development. In short, Britain in the 1960's, as far as theatre for young audiences goes, was already open to new proposals. The generation of teachers trained after 1945 enjoyed the arts and were happy to collaborate with theatre people on projects that encouraged self expression, learning through experience and often with a celebration of working class history and culture as the content.

In Germany theatre is funded heavily by the State, nationally, regionally and by big city authorities. German Culture is heavily influenced by a long tradition of royal patronage and aristocratic display. Artists have great respect but are supposed to follow rules set by the authorities. Independent, or 'Free' theatre companies are rare. There is an assumption that every civilised city will have an opera house and a producing theatre for drama, with large permanent ensembles employed as public servants. At the very least, the big house has a programme of plays for Children and Youth in a smaller venue. Many Young People's Theatre Companies, especially in the East, have their own house. In Dresden today, the Theatre of the Young Generation has THREE purpose-built stages on which to present its large repertoire of shows.

Volker Ludwig was a young writer when in 1969 he founded GRIPS Theater in West Berlin. He looked to other, more radical traditions in German theatre: the political cabaret and agitprop forms that had influenced Brecht. GRIPS work was theatre of empowerment – showing kids poking fun at and creating alternatives to the fixed ideas of older generations. The business model required highly skilled performers able to learn fast, sing well and carry a repertoire of twenty shows a season, banged out ten times a week – not TiE pieces that took a whole day with one class. GRIPS plays soon conquered the world because they were bouncy, sharp, unsophisticated and punchy. *Stronger than Superman*, written for Grips in 1980 by English writer Roy Kift, is an excellent play about disabled people coping with an un-adapted society. But GRIPS is not 'alternative' or 'hippy' – it has a huge public subsidy (3 million Euro plus one million

in ticket sales) and its own house in a converted cinema over an U-Bahn station. This is ideal for young teenagers to travel to on their own. And they do. There is a permanent acting company of 13 and a total of 84 staff.

In Denmark, while schools were willing to accept theatre for children the big theatres and drama conservatoires were not. The young '68ers there very quickly created an amazingly large number of independent touring companies – over 50 for a country no larger than Scotland, where at last count there were less than ten. Luckily, they had for many years a strongly social democratic political environment which favoured 'arts for all the people' and provided a good subsidy regime where Government matches performance fees – 50:50.

Wallonia, francophone Belgium, followed a Danish model with a flowering of imaginative touring companies which worked collaboratively together, negotiated with Government successfully for funding and promoted themselves actively abroad. While today Bronks, Kopergieterij, Victoria and other Flemish companies have an outrageous reputation for extremes of theatrical experiment, especially in creating shows in which children and young people perform alongside adults in some very edgy material, they began much more slowly than the Walloons.

In the 60's & 70's UK TiE practitioners were professionally trained teachers or actors, employed by established theatres with local authority funding while many of the most innovative TYA people in mainland Europe were self-taught members of collectives who struggled to survive while learning on the job.

By the 80's, however, most of those committed to TYA here and in Europe had settled down and accepted the constraints of the cultures within which they worked.

Established, regularly funded companies moved from collective devising of work to the performance of scripts by professional writers.

In Germany, with 300 TYA companies, there is a need for scores of new scripts a year and so lots of work for writers. In the UK, a smaller number of writers are prominent in the creative teams as devising became too costly. David Johnston at Theatre Centre encouraged many good writers with sympathy for young audiences, a fact that has been well documented and celebrated.

In 1978, Theatre Centre was long established but new companies, like mine in Liverpool, were being set up at a time when public money was getting much tighter.

1979

The new Conservative Government immediately cut funding already promised to arts organisations. Orchestras, theatres and many public services were in trouble.

However, the Arts Council of Great Britain, as it then was, generously supported new writing and in 1981 I was able to tempt Willy Russell to pull an idea out his drawer and deliver it to me as *The Blood Brothers*. My 70-minute version was a tight five-hander played in the round in secondary schools. It is about how class background determines your life chances.

I also translated plays from the Russian and German repertoire, and presented texts from Greece, Bulgaria and Austria as well as exploiting other 'exotic' talents such as Chris Hawes, Geoff Bullen, Noel Greig and Sophocles.

Frankly, without the challenge of influences from both UK and overseas original writing, I might well have stuck to home-made adaptations of popular stories or struggled to make under-funded TiE programmes that had little impact.

A smaller, poorly funded provincial company like mine, Merseyside Young People's Theatre Company in Liverpool, needed to draw on work created by others. My first two shows were by Vicky Ireland, an established writer. The next was a Grips play I had seen at Unicorn, *Things That Go Bump in the Night* or *Max Und Milli* in the original. Later I was able to benefit from David Johnston's - and Theatre Centre's - investment in the new socially committed writing. DJ himself wrote for me an Inuit-inspired show called '*Atuk's Return*' which looked at changes to the lives of indigenous peoples caused by colonialism and what we would now call 'globalisation'. The other David, Holman, wrote two plays for me on historical themes, *The Flier*, *the Rocket* and *the Rainhill Trials* and *Passage to America* to reflect Liverpool's importance as a world city at the peak of Britain's power. And of course we also toured *Drink the Mercury*, *Frankies Friends* and *Peacemaker*.

After our apprenticeships and experiments in the 1970's, David Johnston and my generation grew more confident and began to form and lead collective institutions like SCYPT (Standing Conference of Young People's Theatre) or ASSITEJ.

In the 1980s we began to open to the world and I fondly remember travelling to Lyon in 1981 for the World Festival and Congress of ASSITEJ, the International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People, in a Ford Fiesta driven by two Davids, David Johnston and David Holman, with Sean Hennessy our UK Representative on the ASSITEJ Executive Committee, and David Pammenter and me in the back. Much larger UK delegations went to Assitej Congresses in Moscow in '84, Adelaide in '87, Stockholm in 1990 and Havana in '93.

David Johnston usually in the metaphorical front seat, and me in the back, listening hard. So to speak...

Today no-one, in any country, has it easy. In many countries political censorship can be subtle or harsh. Austerity grips most of Europe. At a recent meeting in Germany TYA people working in city theatres deplored that fact that they cannot reach the majority of young people in their regions because they live in small towns far away from the city. UK companies cannot get schools to book in the same numbers as before, so only those children whose parents are already aware are taken to see theatre.

In every country and culture there are things that you cannot say to children – or at all if you want to stay an accepted member of that society. When I started work as a professional actor in 1962 The Queen's Lord Chamberlain could censor any play text so Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* could only be staged in private, at the Arts Theatre Club – later the home of Unicorn.

In every country there are rules. In some, powerful people forbid, for example, positive mention of gay people, discussion of politics or religion, or reference to any historical event not officially celebrated. In Scotland, the current people in charge of public funding for the arts, Creative Scotland, decided in January 2018 that the only two funded TYA companies in Scotland, Visible Fictions and Catherine Wheels, should lose all their funding. They had "New Priorities"! The decision caused an outcry and was reversed after a few days. Maybe next time it will be a different reason but one that sticks. A decade ago, half the TYA companies in Wales had all their funding cut.

But one positive factor in the recent development of TYA worldwide has been the growing opportunity – and economic necessity - to present one's work beyond a local audience, in other towns and cities and at national and international festivals. Being seen alongside others and being judged by one's peers is a tough but essential discipline.

In 1987 David Johnston created a TYA Festival, Takeoff, as an international platform for exchange and challenge. I ran it from 1990 to 2008. In 2017 Takeoff was 30 years old and is another of David Johnston's gifts to me and, I hope, to future generations.

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