

Belfast Children's Festival 2010

Paul Harman was there as Chair of TYA-UK Centre of ASSITEJ

Belfast is blooming. Good new buildings for Culture are everywhere. A brand new Arts Centre, Lyric Theatre and Opera House refurbished and glossy Waterfront Centre sit proudly alongside refurbished gems from the era of 19th century manufacturing and commercial wealth. The shopping heart of the city is being pedestrianised – as everywhere – but there is still a huge inventory of older property where a small creative business can find a place with specialist shops, cosy cafes and trendy bars. Like Liverpool or Glasgow, the city has good bones but feels like it needs fleshing out a bit more. They hope Culture will lead the way.



Theatre was once a highly popular entertainment form in the days of Music Halls. Sadly, one legacy of the Troubles is that going out at night to the city centre is only now recovering its appeal and many adults have lost the theatregoing habit. So the few established institutions, Young at Art, Replay Theatre and Cahoots NI, have a lot of work to do in putting the arts back at the centre of young people's lives. Ironically, the schools are probably more supportive of the arts than in England, where the curriculum has been focused for so many years on 'the basics'.

Quality Theatre

Ali Fitzgibbon, director of Young at Art and festival programmer, has excellent taste. At least her choice of international shows is a match for any top quality festival. In fact, two of the best individual performers in the world, Peter Rinderknecht from Switzerland and Shona Reppe from Scotland in [Minor Matters](#) and [Olga Volt the Electric Fairy](#) gave performances which should be seen by everyone who wants to programme or make TYA.

Minor Matters (Nebensache) is a hyper-realistic performance in which the audience is engaged in a conversation with a homeless man. Rinderknecht has a rhetorical style of interrogating the audience to tell his character's story, drawing out responses in a humorous way, getting us to answer all the questions we want to ask about why and how a successful farmer with inherited land and a family could end up with all his possessions packed into a small crate on a trolley. Modest objects, like cast off toys, illustrate the tale.



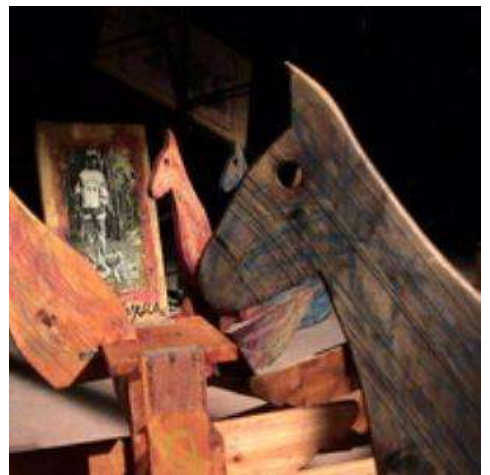
Shona Reppe is by origin a puppeteer but in *Olga Volt The Electric Fairy* she presents rather than manipulates a huge number of objects to build an extraordinary – indeed a fantasy – family tree. The hilarious exploration of genealogical ‘evidence’, in photos and objects, constructions and shadow theatre, celebrates family and heritage, background and history. The heavy Russian accent and eccentric persona she adopts is framed within a fairground show.

Since I first saw both shows some years ago, they have developed in confidence and clarity. In conversation during the *Making Space* seminar organised by the University of Ulster Peter and Shona both asserted that, while others may erect complex systems for preparing, trying out, previewing and evaluating shows, they rely on refining their performance during the first 30 performances. Since each show can expect to live for hundreds of performances over many years, this organic investment in the growth of one’s artistic powers seems a long way away from the predominant UK model based on quick rehearsal and a short life.

Mixed Media

[Teatro all'improvviso](#) from Mantua and [Mala Scena](#) from Zagreb also offered shows based on a similar investment over years in a practice and approach, which grows organically from experience and core performance and dramaturgical skills. ASSITEJ Secretary General Ivica Simic gives a delightful performance of Roberto Frabetti’s *Story of a Cloud* for two year olds, based on animating tiny images of desert, jungle, sea and arctic.

The Seasons of Pallina is a partnership between a dancer (Cristina Cazzola) and a painter (Dario Moretti) in which illustrations painted live are captured by a video camera and projected on a screen. The dance expresses the emotional tone of the events which unfold under the artists brush. The story is about a little red ball which transforms into a fish, a flower, a chick and other things and creatures. This genre of theatre has been very popular in France, Italy and some other countries in recent years. (cf *The Queen of Colours*) The basis in visual rather than verbal or literal experience and communication is a welcome counterbalance to the social realism of so much North European theatre for young people. The quality of the images and the warmth and humour of the presentation are excellent in this show.



Made in Belfast

I saw [Replay](#)'s latest show for younger children, *Mickey and Lionel* by Vicky Ireland, at an Irish language medium school, Bunscoil Mhic Reachtain, which has the warm and informal atmosphere of the best small primary schools. The show was deftly performed and carefully crafted to open up discussion on friendship. When the headteacher asks what is the most important word in the school they all cry 'meas', meaning respect for others. Two boys starting at primary school feel insecure with older more confident children and build a relationship based on mutual support and overcoming their fears. The classic tale of the mouse who releases the lion from a trap is woven into the action which combines elements of realism and fantasy. Not a standard tract on bullying – more a gentle and humorous exploration of weakness and strength.



An example of excellent new approaches by younger artists is *Once Upon a Time* by [Patrick Sanders](#), produced by Young at Art. He illustrates the fantasy stories which children spin from nowhere in an elegant white painted storytelling room, PS2 in a Donegall Street shopfront. An intimate but visually interesting and carefully framed experience which could go further in its theatricality.



Making Space

This seminar framing the shows for a small group of academics, students and makers from UK and Ireland was marked by a stark contrast between presentations by the individual artists which lifted the spirits and those by companies driven by social and educational agendas which did not convince me that good theatre would result.

UK and Ireland relationships continue to burgeon. The successful annual *Gathering* initiated south of the border will be held in Belfast in 2010 if an application to ACNI is accepted. The collaborative project to celebrate more together the TYA experience of the *Islands at the Edge of the World* is taking its first steps.

Young at Arts are to be congratulated in raising the game with the academic community, among a new generation of keen young artists and with a supportive wider public of parents and children.



[Belfast Children's Festival](#): 21-30 May 2010