

Theatre of Debate goes to the Cinema

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Abstract

This non-academic paper provides an introduction to the work of Y Touring Theatre Company and an insight in to the Theatre of Debate model as a methodology for engaging audiences in informed debate around Science and Society. It illuminates the methodology by outlining the development of *Stunted Trees and Broken Bridges* Y Touring's 14th Theatre of Debate production (a film of which will be screened at the conference) and discusses the use of the screening of films of live performances as a tool to increase and broaden audience engagement and reach.

Introduction

Y Touring's work is very important because it tackle issues of national importance in a way that makes serious moral questions accessible to young people and engages a new generation in decisions about their future. This is a vital activity that educates and listens to young people. As a judge for the Academy's Ingenious Awards, I have seen several hundred proposals for public engagement activities; none of them achieve close to the level of engagement that you routinely do. Y Touring's work is exceptional in many ways: in the number of people that it reaches with each play you develop; in the depth of engagement that you create through your discussions and debates; in the richness of the resources that you give teachers so that the impact is magnified and continued; in the training in public engagement that Y Touring's development process provides to the engineers and scientists who advise you, and in the professionalism that you bring to everything that you do.

Prof Martyn Thomas RAE. Vice President External Affairs Royal Academy of Engineers Y Touring is Central YMCA's award-winning professional theatre company, established in 1989. In 1995 we introduced the Theatre of Debate concept. Our mission is to engage our audiences, predominantly young people, in an informed debate about the key issues in relation to Science and Society.

Between 1995 and 2011 Y Touring Theatre Company commissioned and produced UK-wide tours of 12 Theatre of Debate plays exploring scientific advances, supported by the Wellcome Trust and others, including The Nuffield Council on Bioethics, The British Heart Foundation, The British Neuroscience Association, The John Innes Centre, European DANA Alliance for the Brain, Association of Medical Research Charities, Department of Trade and Industry, Medical Research Council, Department of Health, University of Ulster, Royal Albert Hall, the National Institute for Health Research, and the National Theatre.

Wellcome Strategic Award 2011

In January 2011, Y Touring was chosen to receive almost £1 million in a Wellcome Trust Strategic Award to support a five-year theatrical project on biomedical research and its implications for human health. The award will allow us to develop and

produce one new Theatre of Debate® project annually for five years. Each project will stimulate conversation about a different facet of biomedical research and its effects on individuals and society through the use of theatre, debate and digital media.

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At the time of writing this paper - we have just completed a 10 week tour of *Hungry* our 15th Theatre of Debate production. 25 years ago this year Y Touring Theatre company produced its first production *The Inner Circle* by Patricia Loughery, it was a response to what at the time was known as the Aids epidemic - we toured that play to audiences of young people for 7 years. 25 years later Y Touring, supported by the Wellcome Trust and Central YMCA, is creatively responding to arguably an even greater challenge - food and behaviour change. The UK current tour of *Hungry* has engaged over 10,000 young people and adults in informed debates about obesity, type 2 diabetes, sugary drinks, the rich/poor divide, behaviour change and policy. Given the recent comments of the British Chief Medical Officer (27th March 2014) stating that “being overweight is becoming normal as the majority of the UK adult population are overweight or obese” and the recently launched sugar campaign, *Hungry* couldn't be more relevant. In addition, to tackling the aforementioned issues directly, the project also has the potential to engage it's audiences in wider discussions about food security and climate change.

Theatre of Debate

Each Theatre of Debate production consists of a performance of a specially commissioned play (60 minutes) by a leading playwright, followed by a facilitated debate (60 minutes) featuring the actors in character and the use of an electronic voting system. The performance and debate are supported by online resources including filmed scenes from the play and films of presentations from scientists and experts. Participating schools are also provided with teacher preparatory packs.

Methodology

Our creative process (method) has two key features each project involves;

- Working in partnership with academic and research partners
- A creative collaboration between Artists (theatre practitioners), Scientists and members of the target audience

The development of ‘*Stunted Trees and Broken Bridges*’

The original idea for ‘*Stunted Trees and Broken Bridges*’, Y Touring’s 14th Theatre of debate project (the film of which will be screened at this conference) came from Professor Steven Rose: Emeritus Professor of Neurobiology, Department of Life, Health and Chemical Sciences, Open University and Emeritus Professor, Genetics and Society, Gresham College, London. Steven who had been involved as an expert in the development of ‘*Mind the Gap*’ a previous Theatre of Debate production suggested that our next project should be developed in response to The Royal Society's *Brainwaves* Report and the Nuffield Council on Bioethics working party on Novel Neurotechnologies. On Steven's recommendation, we approached as partners the British Neuroscience Association, The Nuffield Council on Bioethics and the Association of Medical Research Charities.

Together with our partners - we invited a group of scientists and academics to collaborate with us on the creation of our new project. The scientists and experts included:

- Dr Sophie Petit-Zeman: Consultant, biomedical science communications and strategy
- Professor Steven Rose
- Professor Sophie Scott: Wellcome Senior Research Fellow in Basic Biomedical Science and Professor of Cognitive Neuroscience
- Professor Jenny Kitinger: Professor of Communications Research, Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, Cardiff University
- Professor Vincent Walsh: Professor of Human Brain Research, Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience, University College London
- Dr Iilina Singh: Reader in Bioethics and Society in the Department for Social

Science, Health and Medicine at King's College London

Once the Scientists were confirmed we invited playwright Ben Musgrave to write the new play. Ben had written an earlier theatre of debate project *Breathing Country*.

The Creative Journey

Every TOD project starts with an interactive workshop. On the 22nd June 2012, members of the expert group, along with young people from two schools (one inner city and one rural) and playwright Ben Musgrave, participated in an interactive workshop exploring what they think, know and feel about Novel Neurotechnologies, listening to presentations by the experts and exploring ideas for narrative lines for a play. Three weeks after the workshop, the playwright submitted two synopses. *Stunted Trees and Broken Bridges* was the synopsis Y Touring chose to commission in consultation with the Expert group.

Here is a short version of the chosen synopsis:

Stunted Trees and Broken Bridges

Beginning in the year 2017, the story revolves around a young man, 17 year old Emerson, who experiences volatile episodes after the death of his mother. He is expelled from school after a violent outburst and then seriously assaults a rival when provoked. Despite Emerson's increasingly erratic behaviour and hostility, his girlfriend, Hayley, and sympathetic friend, 17 year old Miles, continue to offer their support, encouraging him to seek help. Facing trial and becoming increasingly concerned about his inability to control his behaviour, Emerson reluctantly agrees to undergo a brain scan. This scan will determine if he has a brain abnormality and can therefore plead diminished responsibility in court. The outcome of the scan will govern his future, but how reliable is this new technology, and what are the consequences of using it in this way?

As with previous TOD projects, the expert group continued to support and engage at key stages of the creative process including –

- reading each draft of the script
- Assess and comment on the Learning objectives for the production

- attending a public rehearsed reading
- the development of the debate that takes place after the play
- attending rehearsals and supporting the actors where appropriate
- attending dress rehearsals and preview performances
- the expert group also participate in the debates when we do public non school performances

Selection of the Creative team

The challenges for actors in this field, the skills required of them, and indeed the institutional obligations upon them are immense
Tony Jackson , Emeritus Professor of Educational Theatre, Manchester University

Actors who work with Y Touring are often faced with a multiple set of requirements- not only must they perform characters in a staged narrative and sustain audience interest and entertain in the process, but they must also at another level inform, educate and frequently challenge preconceptions their audiences may have and further in the Debate elements of the programme pivotal to Y Touring's work, they have to engage directly with the audience in dialogue about the issues raised which in turn requires of them detailed knowledge of the subject matter and it's wider social implications. They must moreover deal with young audiences many of whom have little experience of conventional theatre let alone of the deployment of theatrical means for direct educational purposes.

Selection of the performers

Y Touring demands excellence not only from the playwright but from the actors too, without a good performance the audience won't engage emotionally and there will be a very limited debate. Whereas the challenge of finding the right actor/s for a more traditional production for a theatre going audience is always a considerable one , actors who appear in a Y Touring production are faced with a multiple set of additional requirements - not only must they perform characters in a staged narrative, sustain audience interest and entertain in the process , but they must also at another level inform,

educate and frequently challenge preconceptions their audiences may have and further in the Debate elements of the programme pivotal to Y Touring's work, they have to engage directly with the audience in dialogue about the issues raised which in turn requires of them detailed knowledge of the subject matter and it's wider social implications. They must moreover deal with young audiences many of whom have little experience of conventional theatre let alone of the deployment of theatrical means for direct educational purposes.

Y Touring's first performance of the day often starts before 9 am, which means the actors have to be at the venue as early as 7 am in order to transport the set into the school and set up. Add to the early starts the fact that the performing environment is often less than perfect, with poor acoustics, no lighting and the disturbances and interruptions that are common in any school i.e. end of period bells, noise from the kitchens as lunch is cooked and I sometimes wonder why anyone would want to perform our work. That said the majority of our actors who range from inexperienced 16 year olds to very experienced over fifty year olds have said that what gives them enormous satisfaction is the proximity of the audience, the immediate feedback that they wouldn't get in a traditional theatre setting and the sense of achievement from using their art form to engage audiences in meaningful debate about subjects that wouldn't normally be on the average 14 year olds agenda or theirs. Being cast in a Y Touring production confronts many actors preconceptions and previous lack of interest in science, and it can engender an ongoing interest in the subject matter/issue as the actor immerses themselves in the necessary research to play a character who is let's say a geneticist . On several occasions when the company performs for an audience of scientists and researchers – the audience have found it difficult to believe the level of knowledge and understanding that an actor in character as a scientist reveals in the debates. For all these reasons we operate a rigorous open ended casting process and choose to work with an experienced Casting Director.

Y Touring goes to the cinema

At the time that we received our 5 year strategic award from the Wellcome Trust - we were exploring ways in which we could produce a legacy for each project and at the

same time use digital technology to both increase our audiences and reach new audiences. In 2009 the Royal National Theatre had filmed and screened their first *National Theatre Live* production - Phaedra. We approached David Sabel Head of *National Theatre Live* to explore how filming and screening live performances could work for us.

While filming our productions as live theatre provides us with a number of positive opportunities, at the same time it posed a number of challenges. An essential component of the live performance model is the use of the facilitated debate which follows directly after the play with the actors in character. This has to date proved logistically too difficult to replicate in Theatre of Debate on the big screen. Currently we are piloting/experimenting with these alternative models.

Model One

In cinemas, each screening is introduced by a science communicator trained by Y Touring, after the screening the facilitator invites the audience to join in a conversation about the issues and the science explored in the drama with one or more guest scientists/experts.

Model Two

Working with a University Widening Participation team (Manchester University) we are currently piloting a scheme whereby we train a mixed group of drama and science students to visit schools and work with a school year group. After the school students have viewed the film, the university students lead an interactive workshop providing an opportunity for the school students to engage with the themes, issues and the science explored in the drama.

On our current tour *Hungry* we worked with *I'm a Scientist* – an organization that offers free online events where school students get to meet and interact with scientists. Y Touring and I'm a Scientist worked together to provide school students who had experienced a theatre of debate performance with the option of brainstorming questions relating to the science and then participating in an online forum where the school students can directly pose their questions to specially selected scientists. We have also piloted using the I'm a Scientist model after a cinema screening where the facilitator takes

questions from the audience and using a laptop poses the questions directly to the online scientist relaying the answers directly back to the audience.

We also feature scenes from the films on our Y Touring resource cloud for teachers and students to use as discussion/debate triggers - initial responses suggest that this opportunity works equally well for students who have experienced a live production and the teacher wants to refresh the debate and for students who haven't seen the live production and the teacher wants to introduce them to the debate before watching the film.

We are also exploring:

- Featuring selected scenes from the films on the Y Touring resource cloud for teachers and students to use as discussion/debate triggers - initial responses suggest that this opportunity works equally well for students who have experienced a live production and the teacher wants to refresh and extend the debate and for students who haven't seen the live production and the teacher wants to introduce them to the debate before watching the film.
- Making our films available for screening through our Y Touring Resource cloud website for individual and group viewings.
- Hiring an inflatable cinema dome and touring it to rural and hard to reach communities and screening our films.

Currently in the UK there is considerable debate about the future and the effectiveness of screening live performances from both the UK theatre and the film communities -

- Is filmed theatre a new art form in itself?
- Is it just a fad?
- Should a production be broadcast live, or as live?
- Is seeing a play in a cinema, or on your laptop, or even your iPhone a good or bad thing?

The debate will no doubt continue for a long time to come but we have found that using filmed live performances offer us the following advantages

- **Increasing the quality of the audience experience.** Live performances in schools can be highly variable. We are unable to use lighting because of the lack

of black out facilities and the get in and get out times, added to which we often find ourselves performing in very unfriendly environments, i.e. a school dining hall or a gym - with very poor acoustics and without raked seating. As a result sight lines can be compromised no matter how clever the design and the staging are. Filming and screening provides every student with the best seat in the house with the added benefit of enhanced sound.

- **Increasing our existing audiences and reaching new audiences** - Our latest tour of *Hungry* ran for 10 weeks and reached over 10,000 young people, however the combination of a live performance not only ensures higher audience figures over time but it potentially broadens our audience. In pilot screenings, people over 60 and older have proved to be an enthusiastic audience as have Home teachers who have welcomed an opportunity to bring their children to screenings. We are currently exploring with the NIHR Oxford Biomedical Research Centre filming *Starfish* a Theatre of Debate production about clinical trials to be screened for patient groups.

There are potentially many other benefits including costs and legacy but the full evaluation of outcomes and impacts will not be available until 2015 when the final evaluation of the five year strategic programme supported by the Wellcome Trust is published

Y Touring has above all demonstrated a commitment to a theatre that can generate debate precisely because it stimulates the need for such debate through not despite the theatre. And the company's constant exploration over 25 years of ways to renew and progress such theatrical forms and to open up productive links with digital media, stands as something of a beacon in an educational landscape all too lacking in experimentation and that willingness to work with uncertainty

Tony Jackson, Emeritus Professor of Educational Theatre, Manchester University



A still from the trailer for Stunted Trees and Broken bridges

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Youtube Films

Mind the gap Flm trailer (10 minutes)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rDSyr-B-lg0>

Dayglo film Trailer (2 minutes 37 seconds)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dk99NUfL9aQ&feature=share&list=PLC50B622ABD896C4E&index=1>

Y Touring Impact (2 minutes 34 seconds)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJd-_jPIIJ0&list=PLAC8AD26DDC73A931