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Drama in the Docklands

Drama in the Dockland

Smashing Times Theatre Company Ltd
Article by Mary Moynihan, Artistic Director

Stand back Superman, Batman and Spiderman!
There's a new kid in town!
He goes by the name of...

MISSED IT BY A MINUTE MAN
... And he's not your average hero!

MISSED IT BY A MINUTE MAN is the title of an original script written and directed by Aoife Reilly for Smashing Times Theatre Company and performed by the wonderfully talented fifth class students of City Quay National School, City Quay and St Joseph's National School, East Wall on Thursday June 2nd last at the Samuel Beckett Centre, Trinity College.

The show was the culmination of a year-long programme of drama workshops and rehearsals conducted with both schools as part of Drama in the Docklands – a unique drama programme that promotes creativity and access to theatre skills in the docklands area of Dublin. The programme is designed and delivered by Smashing Times Theatre Company and is a Dublin Docklands Development Authority Social Regeneration Initiative. Drama in the Docklands has been running for four years now, bringing drama into two classrooms, one from City Quay National School and one from St Joseph's National School, East Wall, working with the same children from second to fifth class. The work has proved highly successful and of enormous benefit to the children as verified in the yearly evaluation reports.

... this programme is hugely successful and should be introduced to 2nd and continue with 5th class... Parents/guardians/children 'sing its praises' all year long. Long may it continue.

Evaluation on Drama in the Docklands

As part of the programme, Smashing Times have developed cross border links with two primary schools from Belfast, St Mathews Primary School, Seaford Street, Belfast and Beechfield Primary School, Beechfield Street, Belfast and children from both schools attended the recent performance of MISSED IT BY A MINUTE MAN in the Samuel Beckett Theatre. The day was a wonderful occasion and the children presented an outstanding performance that was enjoyed by all.

Because of the success of the work to date, City Quay National School and St Joseph's National School, East Wall, have requested that Smashing Times continue to work with the schools and to expand the programme into the other classes. Plans for the next four years include a development of cross-border links and establishing new links with schools in Canada, introducing specialized workshops in different areas of the performing arts and an expansion of our cultural diversity work with the children and the development of a video animation project.

How the programme is organised:

Preplanning for each year consists of meetings with both schools and the Dublin Docklands Development Authority to identify aims and objectives and format/structures for the coming year. Smashing Times firmly believes that real access and a genuine transfer of skills can only take place if the work is long-term and to this end, the project consists of weekly drama workshops conducted with both schools running from September to June.

The company also organizes insurance, health and safety, space, and evaluation and documentation procedures. Detailed planning is carried out in relation to scheduling dates and times of workshops, organizing specialized workshops, identifying and planning theatre visits and carrying out preparations for the year-end show including the booking of the theatre space and hiring the production team.

Each year commences with weekly drama workshops to develop drama and theatre skills, developing areas such as the imagination, a confidence in vocal projection and the strength of stage presence as well as building confidence and teambuilding. The on-going workshops during the past year aimed to further develop and focus directly on these talents through the art of mime, movement to music and improvisation. The children also have specialized workshops in areas such as voice, movement and clowning.

The emphasis for the remainder of the year is on the preparation of an original year-end show performed by the children. The children also take part in joint workshops (bringing both schools together) and in joint rehearsals as the year-end show is always a fully integrated joint performance by both schools. During these schools trips, the students showcase their work for each other, rekindle friendships and have fun.

The children also join up to view professional theatre performances at venues such as The Ark of The Helix. Finally two newsletters are distributed to the children and parents during the course of the year and post-show award ceremonies and cross-border links are also organized.

On-going planning and monitoring is conducted throughout the year, quarterly reports are prepared and Smashing Times liaises on a regular basis with the schools. Documentation procedures include recording aims and objectives, schedules, contracts and agreements, minutes of meetings, keeping correspondence, documenting codes of practice and evaluation procedures and organizing photographs of workshops, activities and performances and videos of the actual performances. Finally a year-end evaluation is conducted with both schools at the end of each year.



How the workshops work:

By Aoife Reilly, drama facilitator on *Drama in the Docklands*

The following contains examples of just some of the exercises and activities that the students have participated in during the early stages of their rehearsal process. The framework of these class plans was in no way a rigid one, but rather one that was open to exploration and experimentation.

Getting to know you – to begin the first initial rehearsal class I would perform a series of 'getting to know you' exercises. They consist of the following –

- Everyone makes a circle. Each participant one by one, enters their name and performs an action, for example jumps or claps. Everyone within the circle repeats that person's name and performs their action. The exercise is not only fun but also insures that each member of the group knows each other's name.
- I would then move on to a more energetic game entitled 'Bomb as a Ball'. I mime setting fire to an imaginary bomb. I then throw that imaginary bomb to someone else while saying their name. If they take too long in deciding whom to throw it too or if they get a name wrong they are out and must sit down. This is an excellent exercise for boosting energy levels and for promoting spontaneity.
- The last exercise that we would carry out is one entitled 'Popcorn'. The group forms a circle. One of the students begins by jumping up into the air while simultaneously clapping their hands above their heads. Everyone at one stage during the game's duration must perform this action at least twice. If however two or more people jump and clap at the same time, they are out of the game and must sit down. This exercise encourages the students to make eye contact with one another and helps establish their ability to read off one another.

The empty space – We would then break away from our structure of the circle and find our own personal space in the room. During the following exercises the students will work within the empty space and will learn how one uses it, they will explore ways on how to charge this space with energy, and will begin to realise it's endless potential.

- I would first ask the students to walk freely around the room while trying to fill the whole space. I would then ask them to freeze. I would then ask them to look around the space and find places that have not been filled.

One person from the group must take the initiative to move into that space. This exercise will be repeated until the students grasp how to use the space to it's fullest.

- When the spaces have been filled, I would ask the students to 'freeze'. They must stay frozen to the spot. I would then ask them to turn their heads and try to make eye contact with someone in the room. They must stay looking at that person for at least five seconds. I would then repeat this exercise until the students have learned to overcome any inhibitions they may have had in the beginning.

At this point in the workshop the students have woken and warmed their bodies up and they have charged the working space with energy. They are now ready to begin working and relating with each other.

- The next exercise demands physical contact and the already established, eye contact. I would have the students walk around the room. When I call shake they must walk around but must also shake hands with, and say 'Good Morning' to every one of the students they meet along the way.
- When I call 'freeze' they must freeze on the spot. If they are not shaking hands with at least one person, they are out of the game. This is good for getting rid of any physical barriers that may exist.

Filling the Space – When one realises the potential of the space one can begin, as a group, to fill it with real contact by employing movement, character and mood.

- The students will continue to walk around the room and I will inform them to follow my instructions. They will now not just have to shake hands with others, but also they must shake hands in a particular way.
- I will ask them to shake hands with the next person they meet as if that person is a long lost friend, is your worst enemy, owes you money, is a stranger you are wary of, is your idol, is suffering from a contagious flu, etc. No words are spoken throughout this exercise. I would constantly remind them to be aware of expressions on their faces, the positioning of their bodies and the feelings they are feeling. The whole purpose of this exercise is to explore how we relate and respond to people in accordance to how we feel about them. Later on in the rehearsal process the children will repeat this exercise and shake hands with each other as their characters.

I would then ask the students to walk around the room as if they were feeling sad, angry, pain, etc. I would always remind them to be aware of how differently they are walking now, to notice what way their shoulders are, to be conscious of their facial expressions and most importantly to observe how their hands lie and how differently they look when we are pretending to feel differing emotions.

- A volunteer will then be called on. This volunteer will be asked to think of an emotion, preferably one that has not already been dealt with. The

volunteer will stand in front of the class with his/ her face covered with a blindfold. He/she must try to communicate their emotion through movements in his/her hands. They will be asked not to use any other part of their body while portraying their feeling. The audience must guess how the volunteer is feeling by observing his/her hands.

These types of exercises will then be repeated in the later stages of the rehearsal when the students have been given the characters that they are playing in the performance. They will be asked to walk like their characters and relate to others as their characters would.

At the end of each session there will be a five-minute class discussion on how the exercises performed in each lesson helped the students with their understanding of drama.

Benefits of Drama in the Docklands:

Benefits to the children include: genuine access to a quality arts practice, increased confidence and self-esteem, focus and concentration, developing team building, developing creativity and a positive attitude towards the performing arts, an understanding of cultural diversity, the development of communication skills, of improvisational skills, of oral language skills, the ability to speak clearly and audibly and confidently in public, developing critical faculties, and most importantly, having fun while experiencing drama and theatre.



Drama
in the
Dockland

Quotes from year-end evaluations on the work to date:

... (the teacher) felt the children had grown so much in confidence throughout the year... with the assistance of the drama workshops she has watched (the shy) children grow more and more in confidence and by the end of the year were happy to take part in all class activities... the children find it easier to express themselves which shows in their oral language development.

... drama has also complemented the SPHE curriculum by developing team work skills, by encouraging them (the children) to work together, expressing themselves and taking responsibility for different roles/jobs. It has also helped them develop better skills in terms of interacting with each other... (the teacher) would love to see the drama continue with this class and possibly expand to include other classes.

... the children love being a part of the drama programme and have been asking if they will be involved again next year. Aoife O'Reilly the facilitator is an excellent drama teacher who interacted really well with the children with great control over the class.

... the children involved in the Drama Programme run by Smashing Times have the ability to move from a fun situation to a work situation with ease (and) have displayed a greater ability to play and interact sensibly and constructively with each other.

... in terms of continuing the programme... the confidence these children now exhibit is the main reason to continue. 'To have a child who has a stammer and yet is able to stand in front of the whole school at an assembly and read flawlessly is for me reason enough'.

... (the teacher) has seen increased confidence and improved self-esteem in addition to a increased interest in the whole area of drama generally... as a result of the drama workshops the children in her class feel good about themselves.

... the main benefit that (the principal of St Joseph's National School) observed in the children was that they had developed better communication skills and were able to speak up for themselves... the class worked better as a team and drama has provided a forum through which children that are perceived as different due to ethnic origin or weaker social skills are accepted by the larger group.

... it was really enjoyable for both the children and myself. Just hope I'm (teacher) involved with the next one!