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# Playing the Wild Card

**A Survey of Community Drama and  
Smaller-scale Theatre from a  
Community Relations Perspective**

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***A Report on the  
Current State of  
Community Drama  
& Smaller-Scale  
Professional Theatre  
in Northern Ireland  
commissioned by the  
Cultural Diversity Programme  
of the  
Community Relations Council***

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# Preliminary Considerations

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## The Brief of the Report

- (a) To assess the current state of community drama in Northern Ireland, including the work of small professional drama companies, with special reference to its development needs.
- (b) To assess the relevance of the projects undertaken, and the potential, in relation to community relations issues.

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## Methodology

This report has been researched mainly through interviews with individuals involved directly or indirectly with either community drama or smaller-scale professional theatre.

I have spoken to a wide cross-section of those professionally involved in community relations work in Northern Ireland, notably Community Relations Officers employed by the various Local Authorities.

I have been grateful for access to a wide range of existing reports including materials held in the library of the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust and at the Arts Council of Northern Ireland.

During this research, I have also been actively involved in a cross-community drama project with Neighbourhood Open Workshop - an experience which has informed the practical conclusions of the study.

I would record here my gratitude to the very many people who have helped me in the preparation of this report, in particular to Jan Branch for her constructive comments on the first draft.

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### *Note on the Layout of the Report*

I have been struck during my research by the high degree of cross-fertilisation that exists within and between each aspect of this study. To better emphasise this, references to organisations that have their own entry in the report appear in **bold type**.

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## General Observations

This has proved to be a very diverse field of study. It is, however, that very diversity that makes the fields of Community Drama and Smaller-Scale Professional Theatre so rich in possibilities in the pursuit of improved community relations.

The main benefits of drama work (whether professional or community-based) seem widely agreed to be these:

- It provides a non-competitive opportunity for personal interaction, which in the context of a full production can be of quite a profound kind.
- It is a good vehicle for the exploration of sensitive or difficult ideas.
- Of necessity, it engages participants in a process that encourages them (either actively as performers, or more passively as members of an audience) to challenge and question these ideas.

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## *Background*

A survey<sup>1</sup>, commissioned by the Arts Council and published in October 1991 confirms what most of us would probably have suspected - that the arts is a minority interest in Northern Ireland. Although approximately one in four people interviewed had attended an cultural event in the previous year, most of these had been either to a popular music concert or to the cinema (by far the biggest category). Only 9% had been to a professional theatre production. The figure for amateur drama was slightly higher at 12%.

The reason for quoting these statistics is not to question the value of theatre (assuming the sample is representative, 9% of the total population is still a substantial number of seats per year filled, underlining the achievement of the Arts Council to date in developing a wider interest in the arts), but to show its enormous potential for development. Most of those not attending arts events gave "lack of interest" as their main reason. This seems to throw down a colossal challenge to everyone working in the field of theatre to widen the constituency for their work.

It is not suggested that theatre should aspire overnight to a mass following. What is needed, however, is a systematic approach to the underlying causes of this indifference, to address in time a more acceptable proportion of the community. We may be spurred on in this aim by the knowledge that the arts in general, and theatre in particular, can fulfil more than a purely aesthetic role. They can have an important utilitarian function. Nowhere is this more true than in Northern Ireland and in the context of improved community relations.

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## *The Philosophical Question*

The growing community of theatre workers in Northern Ireland need to address a crucial philosophical question. Should their work be *artist-led* (that is, arising exclusively from the interests of the artist), *market-led* (tailored to the tastes of a particular audience), or *policy-led* (responding to the needs of a wider agenda)?

The first agenda of theatre must always be artistic, but that does not diminish the value or validity of a secondary agenda. In Northern Ireland, the cause of improving community relations must always be high on the list. The relationship

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<sup>1</sup> Survey of Public Attitudes towards the Arts in Northern Ireland, October 1991 (Marketing Research Consultancy)

between these two motivations, however, is fraught with difficulty and will form the basis of much of the discussion in this report.

The other constant dilemma for theatre workers is the in-built contradiction between two of their chief preoccupations - the urge to explore new forms and the desire to attract a new audience. This dilemma is exemplified by the policy document of one of the theatre companies considered in the report (**Scarecrow Theatre Company**). They aim "to experiment with new styles of performance and to make the work available to as wide an audience as possible."<sup>2</sup> Sadly, audience interest does not necessarily follow from artistic conviction.

**Lawrence Price**, a founder member of the 'Derry-based **4D Theatre Company** would differ with this view. Their main aim has been to make a real contact with the community in which they live and work. To this end they have increasingly found themselves moving away from theatre towards a more loosely defined idea of performance. This has been motivated by their desire to make their work more accessible and yet it has led them in a more experimental direction. The crucial difference in this case, however, is that experimental discoveries have followed from the desire to reach out to an audience. More usually, the motivation to experiment is primarily artistic and this can often leave audiences behind.

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## *Priorities in Arts Policy*

At the root of the debate lies the question of priorities. The general case for broadly-based arts provision is relatively uncontroversial. Problems arise when shortage of resources requires priorities to be set. It is here that the social and economic arguments that are often marshalled in support of a more egalitarian arts policy tend to muddy the real issues. A strong argument for what has tended to be called "community arts" has been that it encourages economic or social development in disadvantaged areas. This has often been taken to connote a lack of artistic standards.

The reality is that quality and social utility are quite separate issues. Extremely good work (artistically speaking) can take place in a community context, just as poor work can be found in the "centres of excellence". (The reverse can, of course, also be true). This leads into a double trap. On one hand, it can be seen as an excuse for poor standards at the community level. It can also fuel the arguments of those who want to concentrate the limited resources available at the centre.

For this reason, it is important to be able to define "quality" in community drama, since different criteria may seem to apply than in the conventional theatre. In fact, the test should be the same - "In its own context, is it *effective* theatre?".<sup>3</sup>

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## *Community Drama and Smaller-Scale Professional Theatre*

It is appropriate at this point to distinguish between the two quite separate aspects of this report. While there is a high degree of overlap in personnel between the two categories of Community Drama and Smaller-scale Professional Theatre, they raise wholly different questions in community relations terms. They are, therefore, dealt with separately through most of this report. One thing that they have in common, however, is the low priority accorded them for the purposes of Arts Council funding.

The pursuit of excellence is rightly a deep-rooted concern of the Arts Council, but it is too often confused with support for "centres of excellence" (the main theatrical institutions) in a way that is for the large part seldom critically

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<sup>2</sup> Submission by Scarecrow Theatre Company, 30/6/93

<sup>3</sup> Chrissie Poulter

reviewed. Running alongside this acceptance of precedent, is the fact that arts policy has been governed historically by a predominantly middle-class and middle-aged aesthetic. These values have their place, but they should form only part of the complete policy equation.

According to the Arts Council's own Public Attitudes Survey, young people in the 16-25 age-group are conspicuously under-represented at arts events. And during my research I have come across many examples of individuals feeling excluded from arts activities because they feel that the arts are only for the "well-to do".

The answer must lie partly in ensuring readier access to arts events and activities. But there is also a need to rethink and widen the prevailing definition of "the arts" in general, and theatre and drama in particular.

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## *Community Relations & Community Development*

It is tempting to see community relations as synonymous with community development and in some areas of Northern Ireland life the latter is a prerequisite of the other. This should not blind us, however, to the direct effect of community drama in many circumstances in community relations terms. This is even more true because the beneficial effects of drama and theatre operate on an individual rather than a collective basis.

# Community Drama

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## How is “Community Drama” generally defined?

The usual wisdom when faced with this question is that we may not be able to distinguish community drama from other sorts of drama by a formal definition, but that we know what it is when we see it. While accepting the danger of becoming bogged down in definitions (a process compared by one observer to “slitting the skylarks throat to see what makes him sing”<sup>4</sup>) a few broad guidelines can usefully be offered from the criteria adopted by various funding bodies and the comments of other observers.

- Community Drama must be rooted in the local community.
- It must tend toward the benefit of that community.
- It must actively involve the participation of local people.
- It must reflect local themes and experience.
- Professional involvement should be aimed at leaving skills in the community<sup>5</sup>.
- Community Drama places more emphasis on process than on product.<sup>6</sup>

Judged from the majority of examples in this report, Community Drama in Northern Ireland could be defined as non-professional theatre with professional support in disadvantaged areas of Belfast and 'Derry.

At its widest, Community Drama could be construed as the residual category once the “Centres of Excellence” (the main building based theatre companies) have been considered - that is, all areas of real development.

A working definition must lie somewhere between these two extremes.

One leading practitioner<sup>7</sup> argues strongly that the definition be construed more widely than is usually the case. “Community drama does not have to be located in

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<sup>4</sup> Dr. Maurice Hayes, “Playing Our Part” (NIVT, 1990)

<sup>5</sup> Tom Magill

<sup>6</sup> Fintan Brady (though some practitioners such as Martin Lynch would argue for equal emphasis)

a defined geographical area. There are other communities, e.g. the disabled, women, one-parent families, gay, homeless etc.”

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## *Disadvantaged Areas?*

The association between community arts and disadvantage is an understandable one. One of its major goals is to widen the cultural franchise. In Martin Lynch's terms, "Community Drama at its very centre is a class issue". In his experience, middle class people deliberately avoid using drama to address their own lives. But while accepting the political motivation behind many existing community drama initiatives, this very association can be an inhibiting factor when it comes to developing a community arts policy in less socially segregated areas such as smaller towns and rural communities.

In view of the emphasis in the **Priestley Report**<sup>8</sup> on addressing a "new constituency" of "arts consumers" the need to extend access to the arts cannot be limited to social or geographical considerations. Priestley is right in identifying age and physical handicap as important additional factors, and there are others. Social divisions in Northern Ireland continue to be defined at least as much by class and gender and, of course, by "cultural tradition".

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## *A purely city phenomenon?*

The prevalence of existing Community Drama projects in Belfast and (to a lesser extent) in Derry is largely due to that being the extent of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland's community arts brief. While the impact of the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust's **Community Arts Awards Scheme** has done something to help extend provision further afield, the small grants awarded under this scheme are necessarily less effective where the general community arts infrastructure is poorly developed.

In theory, Local Authorities outside Belfast have been free to support community arts activity in their own areas. In practice, the necessary motivation and expertise have been lacking. A notable exception was the **Fair Day** project in Warrenpoint which received support and encouragement from Newry and Mourne District Council and was partly initiated by the Council's Arts Officer, **John Keyes**. There is also the example of the Flowerfield Arts Centre in Portstewart. This has proved a valuable resource for the encouragement of hands-on involvement in the visual arts, and provided a base for the emergence of **Big Telly Theatre Company**.

In addition to this, the Arts Council's Youth Drama Scheme has been active for more than a decade in many areas of the province.

The fact remains, however, that the development of community drama has tended to be concentrated in the main urban centres. This gives rise to the erroneous impression that community drama does not belong in smaller centres. A comparison with the situation south of the border casts doubt on this conclusion. An astonishing number of drama initiatives in quite small towns in the Republic have not only flourished at community level, but have led on to the establishment of professional theatre companies.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Martin Lynch

<sup>8</sup> *Structures and Arrangements for Funding the Arts in Northern Ireland*, July 1992, page 55

<sup>9</sup> See **Theatre Companies**

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## *Is Northern Ireland a special case?*

Because of the special political and social conditions in Northern Ireland, it might be thought that community drama would have developed differently here than elsewhere in the British Isles. Indeed, the brief of this report serves to reinforce that view. If, however, community drama in Northern Ireland is distinctive, this can be seen to have come about in spite of rather than because of the Troubles.

The main influence of the political situation on the development of community drama has been in the extent it has proved an incentive for government funding. This has been a developing process. When the Arts Council of Northern Ireland recognised Community Arts as a discrete area for funding in 1978 Lord Melchett, the Northern Ireland Education Minister in the then Labour government identified two main aims:

1. to encourage existing activity, exhibitions of the visual arts, concerts, plays and so on to expand into the more deprived and isolated areas of Northern Ireland, where they would not be normally available and to do so in a way that encourages people who would not normally go to see or listen to start doing so.
2. to encourage the artistic efforts of people living in deprived areas, particularly when the artistic activity, whatever it is, is especially relevant or linked to the lives and experience of local people.<sup>10</sup>

Fifteen years' hindsight allows us to view the first of these aims as patronising. It is also encouraging to see how far the second has become a reality. But this emphasis on practical participation in the arts is hardly unique to Northern Ireland. It represents the majority experience in the development of the community arts throughout the British Isles.

One aspect of the Troubles which has influenced policy thinking in the arts has been the passage of time. In 1978, we were not as resigned to the prospect of their seeming interminability. The high cost of long-term solutions seemed less attractive. The implications of this for community drama are that community drama projects are now perceived as less transitory and long-term development seems more desirable.

One thing which might seem to set community drama in Northern Ireland apart is the territoriality of its urban communities. Most people here define their worlds very narrowly - by estate or even by street. But the situation in Dublin is similar, with many people reluctant to leave their own area to attend events.<sup>11</sup> For most purposes, it would be a mistake to give excessive emphasis to the uniqueness of Northern Ireland as an environment for the development of community drama.

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## *Community & Professional*

From the perspective of a theatre company, the label "community" can often be seen as an excuse to justify underfunding<sup>12</sup>, but the marked development of both smaller-scale theatre and of community drama in recent years has made such duplicity less common.

On the other hand, the line between community theatre and professional theatre remains less clear in a small community such as Northern Ireland and one

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<sup>10</sup>Quoted in *Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust Community Arts Awards Scheme 1985-1988* - a Review by Mark Robinson

<sup>11</sup> Peter Sheridan

<sup>12</sup>Eleanor Methven, Charabanc Theatre Company

leading figure in the development of community drama in Northern Ireland<sup>13</sup> has commented on the greater fluidity of employment theatre professionals here enjoy compared with their counterparts in Great Britain where there is a much more rigid distinction between community, youth, amateur and professional theatre than in either part of Ireland. While this allows here for a much readier sharing of professional skills across all these categories, it also means that defining each category continues to be difficult.

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## *Why Community?*

As someone experienced in both community and arts work has pointed out<sup>14</sup>, many groups adopted the term “community” simply because it was one with which they were familiar, by analogy with existing “community associations”.

The word “neighbourhood” as used in the name of **Neighbourhood Open Workshop** gives a more precise impression of the territory of community drama.

This also has interesting implications for our understanding of the term “cross-community”. As David Boyd of the Bridge Community Centre has pointed out, this can often mean bringing people (even of the *same* religion) together from adjacent streets.

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## *Process and Product*

The distinction between process and product comes up frequently in the following pages. In conventional theatre, the process (the writing of a script and the rehearsal of actors) is focused on performance. The process is a means to that end. In community drama, the process is at least as, if not more important than the end-product. This is because the involvement of the participants is the end being served by the project. The resulting production is a shared celebration of the work done together.

In practice, such productions can be very good theatre. But this tends to be because of and not in spite of the emphasis being placed on the process that achieves it.

The emphasis on process can also help counter the current vogue for applying marketing terminology to the arts<sup>15</sup>. Fintan Brady of the **Belfast Youth and Community Drama** group is concerned about this consumer mentality. He points to the failure of the European popular theatre movement to engage with its audience, describing them as “cultural parachutists”, imposing theatre on a popular audience rather than sharing it with them. Brady argues that the onus is on community theatre to develop its own artistic authority in order to challenge the dominance of the mainstream theatre. It must not allow itself to be marginalised.

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## *The Benefits of Community Drama*

Drama is liberating (“It’s not me, is it?”<sup>16</sup>). Drama allows for a sense of shared recognition (the “That’s me, factor”<sup>17</sup>). From the perspective of both performer

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<sup>13</sup>Chrissie Poulter

<sup>14</sup>Marie Abbott, Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust

<sup>15</sup> cf the reference to “arts consumers” in the above extract from the Priestley Report

<sup>16</sup>Chrissie Poulter

<sup>17</sup>Marie Jones

and audience drama creates an avenue for addressing difficult ideas, and a means of celebrating common experiences.

“The whole thing is about confidence and self-esteem at both a neighbourhood and individual level.”<sup>18</sup>

“Drama promotes teamwork and requires extraordinary generosity between people working on the same show”<sup>19</sup>

“Drama work develops group confidence and stresses the rights of each individual within the group.”<sup>20</sup>

“1% of people in Dublin 1 go on to third level education compared to 40% in Dublin 4 (a predominantly middle-class area). The arts allow opportunities to the less academic”.<sup>21</sup>

“Participation in community drama is not so much a question of training as one of confidence.”<sup>22</sup>

“An important and often neglected aspect of community drama is all the ancillary skills involved in the production of a play - making, design and technical skills. Too often, excessive emphasis is placed on performance.”<sup>23</sup>

It is important to differentiate between different levels of benefit:

- **Short-term benefit** - the experience of being involved in community drama while it is happening
- **Medium-term benefit** - the development of one project directly into another.
- **Long-term benefit** - the spin-off projects that often arise long after an individual project is completed. This process is evident from the high degree of cross-fertilisation of key personnel. It is important to note that these spin-offs are not necessarily drama-related.

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## *Difficulties associated with Community Drama*

One community arts worker has commented that drama is a relatively difficult art-form to introduce into a community context<sup>24</sup>, the skill-base required for the effective use of drama being wide.

Another points to the enormity of Community Drama's task in attempting to bring down barriers<sup>25</sup> -

- You have to build confidence
- You have to motivate people
- People have to want to stay where they are.

“If in the North of Ireland drama is to provide the foundations for dialogue between two communities that are killing each other you are necessarily involved

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<sup>18</sup>Tom Magill

<sup>19</sup>Janice Kennedy

<sup>20</sup>James King

<sup>21</sup> Peter Sheridan

<sup>22</sup> Pat Mulkean

<sup>23</sup> Fergal Pettigrew

<sup>24</sup> Lenny Mullan, Neighbourhood Open Workshops

<sup>25</sup> Dan Baron Cohen

in a very dangerous area.”<sup>26</sup> He cites the example of Protestant women involved in an oral history project in 'Derry whose lives have been threatened because of their participation<sup>27</sup>.

Several interviews for this project have included accounts of paramilitary interference in community arts projects.

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### *“Drama” or “Theatre”*

**James King** draws a strong distinction between community drama and community theatre. This can perhaps best be explained by reference to his own work which encompasses drama therapy. He would emphasise the therapeutic as well as the social value of community arts activity and favours participatory projects that lay emphasis on process without the necessity for formal product. An example of this would be a music event in Donegal where people were free to bring instruments along and participate spontaneously. He would contrast this with the substantial commitment required of those involved in 'Derry's Siege Pageant (1990). Here, the amount of rehearsal required seemed to him to put excessive stress on voluntary performers who had an array of competing commitments from family to jobs.

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### *Playback Theatre and the work of Augusto Boal*

James King makes considerable use of Playback Theatre in his work, where actors re-enact real events in the lives of individuals. This is essentially a form of drama therapy. A related technique is that of Forum Theatre developed by the Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal. Here, real problems are given a theatrical form, and members of the audience (“spectactors”) are given the chance to illustrate possible solutions by acting them out.

Boal gave a workshop in 'Derry towards the end of 1992, and a Forum Theatre group has started working there regularly. There is increasing interest in this work throughout Ireland, partly stimulated by its advocacy by Chrissie Poulter and Tom Magill. After a workshop with them, Sean Hollywood initiated a Forum Theatre project in Newry through which school children addressed the issue of bullying. It proved an extremely effective way of opening up discussion of the problem during its subsequent tour of schools.

Boal has also pioneered more introspective techniques based on his experience of working in northern Europe. But some community arts workers question their relevance here. “What use is (a technique called) *The Cop in the Head* when you have a cop in the front room?”<sup>28</sup>

Nevertheless, these less formal manifestations of community drama offer a valuable half way house between casual workshops and full production.

Boal has also evolved a form called “Invisible Theatre”, where actors present improvisations in public places without alerting by-standers to the fact that it is theatre. The reason for this is that once people know something is “theatre” they can dismiss it as such. If it seems real, they are obliged to confront whatever issue is being raised.

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<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> See Frontline

<sup>28</sup> Dan Baron Cohen

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## *The Question of Commitment*

The degree of commitment required of participants provides one basis for differentiating the wide range of projects that fall under the general Community Drama umbrella (where this is interpreted to include both product-oriented “theatre” and process oriented “drama”). The following categories can be identified:

- **One-off Workshops:** these can take different forms. They can be tasters (introductory sessions intended to whet the appetite for further such work). They can also be training sessions designed to develop skills. In “Playback” theatre or “Forum theatre” they can even have therapeutic and problem-solving potential.
- **Workshop Series:** this requires commitment to a number of sessions, and allows for the development of group awareness, personal confidence and skill development - aims which would be unrealistic in a single session. Very often the outcome of a series of workshops will be a desire in the group to move on to production work.
- **Product-Oriented Voluntary Drama:** this area of work requires participants to have a certain level of skill and confidence. It also requires a clear acceptance in advance of the level of commitment involved. Development into this area carries with it a responsibility to a future audience. The extent of that responsibility depends on the scale of the project, but the same level of commitment applies whether or not the project is professionally led. Where leadership of the project is also on a voluntary basis this can impose significant extra pressure on key participants.
- **Professional Theatre:** obviously where participants depend on theatre for their livelihood (whether within the context of fully professional theatre or as facilitators of non-professional projects) commitment must be unqualified.

There is not necessarily a correlation between the level of commitment given and the benefit derived by the participant. In the area of therapeutic drama, for instance, the whole emphasis is on personal benefit. In more conventional community drama work, however, the greater the commitment the greater the growth in confidence in both group- and self-esteem that is likely to result. Only those who know the exhilaration of having participated in a well-received theatre performance can truly appreciate the qualitative worth of this experience. But the fact that successful theatre productions so often give rise to others is a powerful indication of the ameliorating potential of drama work of this kind.

There can also be a mixture of commitment levels within a single project, or this might emerge as the project develops. One example of this would be the **Neighbourhood Open Workshop** production of *Shadowland*. The script for this production was devised over an eighteen-month period by members of the Lynx project<sup>29</sup> and some of their parents. The play speaks with biting clarity of their combined experiences, and the original intention was for at least some of the parts in the play to be taken by those who had devised it. In the event, the commitment of some young people involved proved unpredictable, and most roles were cast from among a variety of community drama groups. This ensured that the original group's story was told to maximum effect, and involved a wider number of individuals in an understanding of the complexities of the situation these families found themselves in. A flexible approach to structuring such projects can thus be seen to be advantageous.

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<sup>29</sup>An independent community initiative working with young people at risk - specifically in connection with “joy-riding”.

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## *Responsibility of Facilitators*

Many interviews laid stress on the responsibility of those who initiate community drama projects. "You have to know before you begin that there has to be an afterwards".<sup>30</sup> It is clearly important to avoid what has been described as the "Magnificent Seven factor" - the sense of heroic arts workers coming to the aid of beleaguered villagers. "The community drama worker must go into a community to serve the people there, not to pathologise the Troubles."<sup>31</sup>

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## *Responsibility to Facilitators*

On the other hand, there is an equally clear need to nurture and support the tiny group of community drama practitioners who work with such dedication in this area and with so little security of employment.

Professional input into Community drama is hard work. It is also highly specialised. Very often, because of the general lack of resources in this area, it requires individual workers to take on a multiplicity of roles - as director, producer, writer, administrator.

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## *Community & Amateur*

As is clear from the Arts Council's Public Attitudes Survey, amateur drama is immensely strong in Northern Ireland. The vocal amateur drama lobby often questions the substantial public investment in community drama, when support for their own work is limited to specific training opportunities.

In fact, there is no reason amateur drama cannot also be community drama. Newpoint Players in Newry is a good example, where (except for their cosmopolitan choice of material) all the above criteria would apply.

Some observers have difficulty with the competitive nature of much amateur drama, but there can be no doubt that that adds considerably to its popular appeal.

The middle-class dominance of amateur drama is often pointed to as another limiting factor, but community relations work should be as available to the middle classes as to the rest of the population. The working class has no monopoly on prejudice<sup>32</sup>.

Given the prevailing definitions of community theatre, however, the general area of amateur theatre must be deemed to fall outside the scope of this report (except insofar as it has been used expressly in a community relations context<sup>33</sup>). It is an area, however, that merits further study, particularly in the context of developing community drama outside Belfast and 'Derry.

The **Workhouse Players** in the Waterside area of Londonderry provide just one interesting example of amateur theatre taking on a clear community relations role. Initiated by the Waterside Churches Committee for Community Needs in association with the WEA, the group's first full production was of Frank McGuinness' *The Factory Girls*. This was selected mainly because the age-range of its predominantly female cast suited the membership of the group. But with its setting just across the border in Donegal it is also a play with clear local

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<sup>30</sup> Chrissie Poulter

<sup>31</sup> Dan Baron Cohen

<sup>32</sup> cf Murna Crozier's paper, Galway 1992.

<sup>33</sup> cf Derg Players

relevance. The group now appear to have set up independently, but no further information was available at the time of writing.

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### *Is Community Drama Parochial?*

One drawback of an emphasis on themes reflecting the history of the local community, and on personal histories is the way in which it focuses the community in on itself. **Fintan Brady** suggests that this trap can be avoided by using issues as a starting point rather than personal experiences. He feels the present emphasis of community theatre tends to de-radicalise it.

His feelings are echoed by **Dan Baron Cohen** of 'Derry's **Frontline**, who is uncomfortable with the way in which drama is increasingly being treated as an extension of social policy.

“To my mind, most of the EMU and other Cultural Relations work is perceived by the working class communities as alien, imposed and utterly incompatible to the needs of the people it's deposited on. Middle-class observers tend to reduce the conflict in the North to a kind of pathological working class consequence of ignorance. The origins of the struggle shouldn't be mystified as subjective emotions. Just because people feel strongly, it doesn't mean there isn't a cause. Middle-class culture shies away from strong feelings.”<sup>34</sup>

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### *Potential for Growth*

In the opinion of **Martin Lynch**, the growth of Community Drama fits into the historical development of the working class in this century. He argues that whereas only a decade or so ago the only authority figures in working class catholic areas were “the priest and the hard man”<sup>35</sup>, professional status is now an increasingly realistic aspiration for young people in those areas. The greater numbers of working-class people in education (university, college, night-classes etc.) reflects their thirst for education and a greater say in the running of their lives. He sees the development of community theatre as an extension of that thirst.

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<sup>34</sup> cf. Dan Baron Cohen: the Manchester City Council's involvement in *Struggle for Freedom* (page ?) “They were prepared to acknowledge the strong feelings that existed in the communities that were involved in the play. But they would not confront the logical consequences of giving those a feelings a platform”.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Martin Lynch

# Examples

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## Community Drama Organisations with full-time personnel

### *Dock Ward Community Drama Project*

#### **Origins**

Towards the end of 1990 a group of local people from the New Lodge/Carrick Hill area of Belfast came together with the help and advice of playwright **Martin Lynch** and agreed to stage a community play. They wanted to trace the history of the old "Dock Ward" area of the city. They were inspired in part by the *Stone Chair* production at the Grand Opera House. They were also aware of the benefit of having a suitable venue, the new Saint Kevin's Hall in their own area.

#### **Current Work**

The Producer of the project, **Paddy McCoey**, engaged the services of **Chrissie Poulter** and **Tom Magill** in the devising process, the artist **Rita Duffy** to work on the design and the experienced community theatre director, **Gerri Moriarty**. Rehearsals began in September 1991. The production opened at Saint Kevin's Hall on Tuesday 16 November as part of the Belfast Festival at Queen's and played to capacity houses throughout its week-long run.

The success of the production inspired a second play, *Connors Story*, also about the history of the local area.

Both productions have contributed significantly to the morale of the area, which covers an area of roughly two square miles, with a population of 15,000 in 3,500 homes.

The group stress an openness to all comers as key to their policy. The group's ideal is that the process of research, devising, writing, rehearsing and performing is carried out by everyone.

## Development Needs

The group aspire to work towards a cross-community dimension for their work, but realise that this is a long term process. The existing group is predominantly Catholic and they have made tentative contacts with a community centre in the mainly Protestant Tiger's Bay area, but they do not anticipate finding performers from that source in the near future. They are considering the possibility of approaching an existing Protestant community drama group such as that in **Ballybeen** to take part with them. But they are also interested in the process of discovery involved in Catholics playing Protestants and the research that this will require.

The group is also planning a New Writing Project on the theme of "Women in Conflict". The aim of the project is to challenge the apparent invisibility of women in Northern Irish society.

The group have been very successful in raising funds from a wide variety of public and private sources. They face the problem, however, of needing concentrated amounts of financial support over a relatively short period of time compared with more conventional voluntary organisations whose spending needs are spread more evenly throughout the year. This aspect of performance-oriented is one that is only slowly becoming understood by some funders more used to supporting general community-based initiatives.

Dock Ward has been closely associated with the setting up of the **Community Arts Forum**.

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## *Frontline*

### Origins

Frontline in 'Derry grew out of the work of its sister company in Manchester which operated from 1986 until 1992. **Dan Baron Cohen**, a leading member of Manchester Frontline who is now working with the group in 'Derry, describes their work as a process of "community dialogue" rather than as cross-community.

Inspired by the stabbing of an Asian youth in 1986, Manchester Frontline produced *Struggle for Freedom*, a play which explored common experiences in the Asian, Irish and Afro-Caribbean communities, and toured Ireland, including the Foyle Arts Centre in 1987. The local authority commissioned the performance, but subsequently required the company to remove one key scene. The company reluctantly agreed to this requirement in consultation with the project's one hundred and twenty participants (all of whom came from the ethnic groups represented in the play) rather than abandon the project altogether. The scene was reinstated, however, on the recommendation of the McDonald Inquiry into Racial Violence in Schools, who had requested to see it in camera after hearing about the controversy.

### Current Work

In early 1988, Dan Baron Cohen came to 'Derry and started work on a 'Derry-Manchester collaboration - a play that addressed the contradictions within Irish Nationalist culture.

This play was followed in 1989 by another - *Time Will Tell* which looked at Nationalist culture through the eyes of a Protestant 'Derry exile, a first step, the company hopes, towards future community dialogue. The play toured to 'Derry and Belfast in 1990.

### "Threshold"

The group's most recent production is *Threshold*. Centred on the lives of two women (one Protestant, the other Catholic) whose lives cross in 1981 and 1991,

the play looked at the impact of the Hunger Strikes on each community. It began as a three-month project and ended up taking three years. It involved (in Dan Baron Cohen's words) "an extraordinary educational process." The work began with a story-telling workshop, which provided the starting-point for oral history interviews. Then came a process of improvisation and experiment. The next stage was a workshop-based education course involving sessions on liberation theology, sexuality, and culture, Protestantism, morality and Irish history with ten workshops on each theme. From that sprang a series of exchanges with groups in Belfast (Conway Mill), Dublin (the Lourdes Youth and Community Service) and Liverpool (Kirby Unemployed Centre).

At each stage new work was produced to articulate the issues that were emerging from the process. This took various forms - e.g. murals, short acted scenes, invisible theatre<sup>36</sup>. The play was rehearsed between September and October 1992 and performed in the **Playhouse**, which is perceived as a neutral venue. All the group's work up to then had taken place in Pilot's Row Community Centre in the Bogside. Many of the group's core following were very uneasy about coming so close to the Protestant Fountain area of the city and security had to be mounted on every staircase. Some members of the company wore bullet-proof vests. Thirty-six hours before the opening night the group's office was raided by the police and their administrator was imprisoned for three days. All their recordings, notes and cheque books were impounded. Every person in the building which is shared with the Bloody Sunday Initiative was arrested and held.<sup>37</sup>

During the *Threshold* project the group launched/participated in three new projects:

- **A Women's Living History Circle** - a project that aims to gather and exhibit the history of working class Catholic and Protestant women living in 'Derry.
- **The Parenting and Young People's Workshop** - established initially to provide a crèche for young/single parents involved in the Threshold Project, this evolved into a development project to establish new models of non-authoritarian parenting inside working-class communities.
- **"The Walls" Project** - a collaboration between teachers from two mixed and one Catholic school in 'Derry and **Jim Keys** and **Carol Deehan** of Frontline. This collaboration arose from an invitation from teacher and EMU project co-ordinator **Cora King** who recognised in Derry Frontline a common interest in the use of drama as an essential tool for progressive education. Though King and Keys brought contrasting interpretations of Boal techniques to the workshops, King's interest in archetypal drama and Keys' interest in counselling blended into participant-centred improvisations which culminated in the stage production of a devised allegorical drama "The Walls".

Between forty and sixty people are regularly involved with Frontline, and there are five main co-ordinators. Many of the members (including two of the co-ordinators) come from mixed families.

## Development Needs

The group have now spent five years working within the Catholic community in 'Derry. Their long-term aim is to spend an equivalent period of consistent work in the city's Protestant community while maintaining the momentum of their existing work. They are aware of the difficulties created by the strong identification of their work with one community. They want to help identify other forms of identity than nationalism. They want to help foster a real sense of cultural identity, the lack of which they believe leads to nationalistic tendencies. They want an opportunity to celebrate points of communality between the Protestant and Catholic communities of the city.

This work is of a highly intensive nature. Frontline works ideally in ratios of 4:1, participants to facilitators. All the facilitators are on the dole, and yet there has been a high degree of continuity of personnel throughout the company's history. The company are now at a crisis point, however. They do not believe that the work can continue beyond September 1993 unless they receive realistic funding.

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<sup>36</sup> See under **Preliminary Considerations**

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Dan Baron Cohen

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## *Neighbourhood Open Workshop*

### **Origins**

This long-established community arts organisation dates from 1978 when a number of people who had been working together in VSB (Voluntary Service Belfast) summer play schemes decided to continue to work together throughout the year. The impetus of that decision has lasted nearly fifteen years, but the group's history can be seen in two parts. In the first ten years of its existence N.O.W. operated on a fluid co-operative basis with members taking on different roles depending on the project they were currently engaged in. Different members had different areas of expertise but would help, for instance, with the administration of a project they were not artistically directly involved in. The word "neighbourhood" in their title suggested the broad approach of their work, which was to focus on specific areas with a variety of projects and to build up a contacts and confidence in a particular locality.

Two members had special interest in the performing arts - Mary Brady who specialised in dance and Mo Bates who evolved a highly individual approach to theatre. This reached its most developed form in the inter-active theatre piece, "Work", a theatre model which involved the audience in a symbolic simulation of the workplace using materials at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum.

By the end of the 1980s most of the original members had moved on, and a new generation emerged to continue the work.

### **Premises**

Members of N.O.W. enjoyed use of their own premises in Belfast's "Holy Land" in the mid-1980s, including a purpose-built dance studio/rehearsal space which helped the development of their performance work. Unfortunately, they lost use of this building after only a few years. They were, however, with the visual arts group Art & Research Exchange, among the first arts groups to use the then semi-derelict Old Museum Building in College Square North. Following the refurbishment of that building they made their base there until the growth in their own work and the anticipated growth in the needs of the developing **Old Museum Arts Centre** were seen to be incompatible. They now have offices and a small rehearsal studio in Belfast's Academy Street.

### **Current Work**

The present work of N.O.W. centres on the initiative of its two key workers, **Lenny Mullan** and **David Calvert**. The following are their main recent projects.

#### **Black Taxi**

This arose out of two separate workshop programmes - one led by David Calvert with young women in the Protestant Tiger's Bay area, the other led by Lenny Mullan with young men in the Catholic New Lodge area. The general age-range of participants was 16-30. Once each group had become established in its own right, joint workshops were held to allow the groups to get to know each other. At a party afterwards the two groups agreed to work together. Two productions arose from this process - *Alternative Belfast* and *Deathtrap*. At its largest extent, there were thirty-two young people involved, several of whom continue to work with N.O.W. These include **Jim Corry**, an actor in *Shadowland*, and **Stevie Arthurs** who now provides N.O.W. with valuable technical assistance.

#### ***The Stone Chair* and City-Wide**

Although not a N.O.W. project, *The Stone Chair* made some use of N.O.W. personnel and led to a further partnership between **Lenny Mullan** and **Martin Lynch**. The production was intended to be the first part of a three-year programme, the second year of which was to be a project based in the Shankill

Road area, leading towards a cross-community event in the third year. For a variety of reasons, the Shankill project did not materialise<sup>38</sup>, and the third year of the project involved a cross-community group recruited from various parts of the city by general advertisement. This became the **Citywide** project which offered a full year's training to participants culminating in the production of *Moths*, a historical perspective on life in Belfast, developed by the actors and scripted by **Martin Lynch**. This was performed in the Autumn of 1992 and toured to Glasgow as part of the Tron Theatre's Irish Theatre Season.

Set in a Belfast graveyard, the play explored differing perspectives on the changing and yet constant history of the city through the testimonies of individuals who lay buried there. The twenty five participants contributed to the writing of the play, addressing difficult issues such as sectarianism and violence. The project incorporated an extensive training dimension and five of the participants have gone on to work further in theatre. Another has joined a rock band.

### **Half a Bap Theatre Company**

During this time, Lenny Mullan was also meeting regularly with the Monday Club, a group of young people based at Giro's in Donegall Street. They discussed, partly through the medium of drama, matters of concern to them, including drugs-related issues. This group became the basis for Mullan's latest project - *Oedipus Retold*, a version of the Oedipus story updated to address a drugs theme. This was performed in the Art College (University of Ulster at Belfast) and the Crescent Arts Centre in early 1993 under the banner of the Half a Bap Theatre Company. It is due to be revived at the Old Museum Arts Centre in August 1993.

The play used a challenging variety of forms, and attracted an audience other than that normally seen at conventional theatre events. Unfortunately, the press and representatives of key funding agencies were poorly represented, making it difficult for the group effectively to exploit the initial work put in on the project. A continuing irony of process-based work is the need to demonstrate the work to interested parties who can rarely monitor the underlying process directly. This problem is compounded when key decision-makers do not attend performances.

### **BT17/11**

David Calvert is currently principally engaged with the BT17/11 programme, a long-term community arts strategy for the Poleglass, Twinbrook, Lenadoon and Suffolk areas of Belfast. The programme aims:

- to address disadvantage
- to involve marginalised groups like the Protestant community in Suffolk.
- to offer organisational models and help to develop structures and mechanisms underlying the arts work.

Although it encompasses other disciplines, there is a strong drama element in this work. The main theatrical arm of the BT17/11 programme was the play *Shadowland*. Scripted by David Calvert, this arose from a long-term collaboration between N.O.W., **The Lynx Project** (an independent community initiative working with young people at risk), and the **Turas Parent Support Group**. Working also with the rock band Harmonyland, David Calvert has succeeded in *Shadowland* in opening up an array of powerful personal stories to wider understanding. It is a telling testament to the potential of this kind of work to open the minds of performers, devisors and audience alike. It is a significant achievement.

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<sup>38</sup> See under **Community Relations**

Another aspect of the programme is the **Barricades** project<sup>39</sup> which began with a video allowing a group of girls from the Protestant Suffolk area to explore their relationship with girls living in neighbouring Catholic estates. The second stage was to involve a group of girls from the Catholic Poleglass estate to join the project. Together they then devised a short play. Considerable care was taken to integrate the two groups, including the involvement of an experienced youth worker working alongside a theatre director. In the event, the group worked readily together, and found a common bond in their alienation at the middle-class ethos of the Lyric Theatre when taken on a theatre visit there. Although they greatly enjoyed the show (a dance piece from Canada specifically aimed at a teenage audience) they clearly felt uncomfortable in the theatre building itself.

## Development Needs

While N.O.W. has found adequate if not ideal premises for their work in the Academy Street studio there is a pressing need for them to develop the infrastructure of the organisation. In particular, there is a need for full-time administration. Both workers generate projects that entail a substantial amount of organisational support. At present, this need is met either by short-term expedients (temporary staff who tend to move on when they are trained), or by spreading the time and energies of the key workers unacceptably thinly. In practice, David Calvert, for example, will spend the equivalent of a normal working week on actual arts-related work, and another on administration - both within the same calendar week! Quite apart from the enervating effect of this kind of workload, it is also a waste of his specialist expertise as an arts worker. David's case is not atypical in the field of community drama, although not all arts workers would share his administrative acumen.

The premises themselves at a rental of £6,500 p.a. are also a substantial burden. Individual projects have to contribute their share of the rental, adding enormously to the overheads of each.

In specific terms, there is a clear need for secure funding to allow the further development of existing programmes. It is a nonsense to talk about the systematic progression of community drama work, when funding is hand to mouth.

David Calvert has a strong vision of how he would like to develop his work in West Belfast. Lenny Mullan is determined to have another go at establishing a project in the Shankill area. It is above all this determination to overcome the seemingly endless obstacles that fall in their way that make individuals of the expertise and calibre of Lenny and David such a precious resource. It is a resource that we must not lightly squander.

Whether the existing structure of Neighbourhood Open Workshop is the best means achieving this, however, is open to question. The priority must be to maintain the active involvement of key individual workers and to sustain the momentum of current projects. The structures necessary to provide administrative and other forms of support should be related to other developments in the community arts, such as the Community Arts Forum. It may be that an effective support organisation would free up time presently spent by David Calvert and Lenny Mullan on administration. But this could only work so long as they retained their autonomy in matters of artistic policy.

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<sup>39</sup> See under **Community Relations**

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# Community-based Groups

## working without full-time support

### *Ballybeen Community Theatre*

#### Origins

Ballybeen is a large housing estate in Dundonald with more than 2,800 houses. The Ballybeen Community Theatre began originally in the Longstone area of the estate but now draws members from throughout the area. The idea to set up the group in 1991 had several sources:

- *The Stone Chair* production at the Grand Opera House raised the question why Ballybeen couldn't have its own group.
- The visit by the **Ulster Theatre Group** to the estate, one of whose members (Davy McBlain) came from the estate.
- **Marie Jones** was known to people living in the estate and agreed to give an initial workshop.

The group recruited by leafleting as many houses in the estate as possible.

They were surprised to learn at a meeting of the **Community Arts Forum** that they are at present the only group of their kind in a Protestant area of Northern Ireland.

#### Current Work

The group is about to embark on its third production - a new play by **Gary Mitchell**, to be directed by **Liz Kennedy**. (Their last production which they consider to have been their breakthrough project was directed by **Simon Magill**). They are clear about the need to perform in their own area rather than a city centre venue like the Group Theatre. The local community centre where they rehearse and perform is far from ideal as a performance space. It is in heavy demand by other groups. But they feel that there is still a substantial number of local residents who would be reluctant to go into the city centre to see a show.

The group has shown conspicuous resourcefulness in identifying sources of funding and support in kind. Besides support from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust, the group have received funding from Castlereagh Borough Council. They also secured a grant from BP Communicare and a matching grant from the local BAT team towards the purchase of their own lighting equipment. Furthermore, a local business (Mercury) allows them to store the equipment on its premises - an impressive example of community interaction.

#### Development Needs

A high priority is to secure their own space for rehearsal and performance purposes. There is also the need to develop their audience within the area. They refer to the widespread impression that "theatre is just for the well-to-do". They are aware that people need to be made comfortable gradually with the idea of going to the theatre.

They would like eventually to take the Protestant people as a theme but they see this as a long-term goal. They believe they have to woo their audience first with less contentious material.

The group would like to be able to cater for the interest in drama among children in the area. They would like to acquire the skills to do this themselves, although they realise that that might require identifying someone else to carry out the administration of the group. This presently falls on a core group of members, in

particular, **Patricia Anderson** and **Denise Green**. Denise Green is also on the Board of the local Economic Community Development project, and is actively lobbying for a space within a planned development that could serve as a theatre.

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## *Lettuce Hill*

### **Origins**

Based in the Hamill Street area of Belfast, this group was set up by several local residents. One of them (**Brian Steenson**) had been involved with two large-scale theatre projects organised at Saint Peter's Cathedral in the neighbouring Divis area in 1988 and 1989<sup>40</sup>. The existence of the Hamill Street Community Centre has been important in the emergence of the group, as has the proximity of the **Old Museum Arts Centre** where much of its work has been presented. The group acknowledge the support and advice of Old Museum Staff, in particular **Elaine Gaston**, the O.M.A.C. Development Officer.

### **Current Work**

The group presented a programme of sketches at the Old Museum in June 1992, following this up with "No Hope Here" a new play by **Vivian Brennan** who also lives in the vicinity. This was performed at the Old Museum Arts Centre and subsequently at the Group Theatre. They have been invited to revive the show for the 1993 West Belfast Festival and are currently working on a pantomime (also by Vivian Brennan).

A drama group for young children is associated with the company. This arose partly from the involvement of local youngsters in the Old Museum's Christmas Show, *Brownlee and the Beanstalk*, part of the *Belfast 1991* celebrations.

### **Development Needs**

Although the connection with the O.M.A.C. and the Hamill Street Community Centre are valuable to the group, (in common with many groups in this category) they would like to identify a permanent base with appropriate rehearsal space which would be readily available to them.

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## *People's Theatre*

### **Origins**

The People's Theatre is the longest-established community-based drama group in Northern Ireland. Since the early 1970s they have consistently written, produced and presented their own work, chiefly to their own community.

### **Current Work**

After twenty years of activity, the group have their own performance space at Conway Mill in the Lower Falls area and are still producing work regularly. They are currently preparing a programme of satirical sketches written by **Des Wilson** for the West Belfast Festival. Several members of the group performed in Neighbourhood Open Workshop's production of *Shadowland*, and long-time member, **Theresa Donnelly** recently had her play, *Put Out That Light*, produced by the Lyric Theatre. The Group also promoted the successful Sunday Night at the Mill series, but Arts Council funding for this was stopped in 1990 at the insistence of the Department of Education.

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<sup>40</sup> See: *Those Three Days & Broken Nails*

## Development Needs

Although the group have their own space, they are eager to refurbish it. The withdrawal of Arts Council funding has curtailed the breadth of their work. But there is a sense also that after twenty years the original energy that fuelled the group has been channelled in other directions.

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## *Stone Chair*

### Origins

This community drama group is based in the Short Strand area of Belfast. It arose out of the *Stone Chair* production produced at the Grand Opera House in 1990 and based in and on the Short Strand area, a Catholic enclave in a predominantly Protestant area. **Martin Lynch** who wrote and initiated the play that gave the group its name was familiar with the area, and selected it as the base for his pilot community drama project.

### Current Work

One of the participants in the original production, **Rosemary Magill**, has now written three new plays for the group tailored to its needs and membership. It is, above all, her work that gives this group its distinctive character. The group rehearse in the local parish hall, and usually bring in a professional director, funded by the Arts Council. They perform at the Group Theatre.

### Development Needs

The group is already firmly established with a consistent membership of nearly twenty. There is a slight preponderance of women to men. Their performance skills are growing with every production, but interaction with other groups would be beneficial in allowing them a broader context for their work. The group is a member of the **Community Arts Forum**.

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## *Tongue in Cheek*

### Origins

Tongue in Cheek grew out of the first Arts Council Community Drama initiative through which founder members of the group, **Kate Muldoon** and **Marie McKee** first met drama tutor **Donal McKendry**. Both had been involved in a keep-fit class and had been asked if they would like to take part in a drama workshop. That workshop led on to a small-scale production, and subsequently to *Eddie's Girls*, a full-length play. Tongue in Cheek has had up to forty members over the years with a reliable core of about fourteen. Most members have been women.

### Current Work

Now in their ninth year, Tongue in Cheek have been cited by one prominent community drama worker<sup>41</sup> as a good example of a group who have remained true to the ideals of community drama in always developing their own material (usually in the form of comedy sketches) and by making that material relevant to their own lives. Donal McKendry points out the importance of this having been the initial assumption that underlay his early work with the group. He also stresses the value of his having been able to work with the group over a prolonged period, at the end of which they were in a better position to operate autonomously. He points out that this had organisational as well as artistic

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<sup>41</sup>Paddy McCoe

implications, notably in helping them to establish a strong relationship with their chief funders, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland.

## Development Needs

The group are increasingly aware of the need for premises of their own. They have performed in the Golden Threads Theatre on the Crumlin Road, but have found the financial burden of theatre rentals quite severe. They want to take their work further afield, and have been developing links with other community drama groups such as the Stone Chair Group in Short Strand. They have also been forging links with the amateur drama circuit in the Republic.

The group believe they could in time provide real employment, especially in the area of stage management. **Michael Poynor** has already trained a member of the group in stage management skills, but they are aware of their continuing dependence on outside expertise in other technical areas such as lighting.

There is a heavy demand for drama sessions for the 12-16 age-group in their area. But the group feel that they cannot service this need themselves without compromising their commitment to their own work. They would welcome funding for an external drama tutor.

Kate Muldoon who writes much of the company's material would also like to develop her writing work. She has an idea for a play incorporating street games of the '50s which would have the advantage of providing an obvious role for younger cast members. But this project would also take the group out of its usual performance pattern. The group are not confident about how they would approach a more ambitious project of this kind.

They are founder members of the **Community Arts Forum** and look forward to the greater degree of co-operation and cross-fertilisation between community drama groups they hope it will facilitate.

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## Outside Belfast and 'Derry

There are very few examples of professionally-led community drama projects outside Belfast and 'Derry, chiefly because that has been the ambit of the Arts Council's community arts brief. It is clear, however, that a quite different strategy is required to establish this area of work in smaller centres. In particular, the role of existing amateur groups as a starting point needs to be given close attention. In this respect, the Derg Players in Castlederg, although unadventurous in its selection of material, provides an interesting example of a specifically community relations drama project in a largely rural area.

The Strabane area has also been selected as for an experimental Arts Council initiative which extends their involvement in community drama beyond its hitherto accepted boundaries. *The Hiring Fair* is planned as a large-scale community drama event and (as with *The Fair Day* in Warrenpoint) has arisen largely as a result of local initiative. Such examples are an encouraging indication of what is possible when local people look beyond the perception of the arts that tends to have been handed down to them through the spoon-feeding of successive Arts Council promotions. While such events may certainly over the years have helped to create an appetite for more arts activity, it is important now that the specific needs and expectations of local areas are encouraged to emerge.

The Brownlow area of Craigavon<sup>42</sup> is another where local initiative is strongly in evidence, both through the individual approach to arts development exemplified by Rosaleen McMullan and in the work of a group like **The Dolly Mixtures**.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>See also under: **Community Relations**

<sup>43</sup>See below

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## *The Dolly Mixtures*

### **Origins**

The Dolly Mixtures is mainly a group of women writers, who have recently begun to explore the possibility of extending the scope of their work into drama. The group came into being when founder-member **Philomena Gallagher** was studying for the Certificate of Women's Studies at the University of Ulster. As part of her course she sought out the work of women writers in the Brownlow area and quickly discovered more than forty of them. This led to regular meetings and the publication of two books of original work. Among the published work was a play by Philomena herself and this led to the idea of the group becoming involved in drama. Philomena acknowledges the help of **Pam Brighton** in the development of the group, and notes that although many of the women had been members of a pre-existing WEA writers' group, there was a general that the presence of men inhibited their freedom of expression.

It is interesting to trace the origins of this exciting initiative in terms of opportunities made available to women in the Brownlow area. Philomena Gallagher who has been the driving force behind the group is adamant that it would never have come about but for a series of courses she was able to take advantage of. Crucial in this process was a six-week course on assertiveness run for women by the Lurgan College of Further Education and held at Pinebank Community Centre in the Brownlow area itself. Philomena is careful to stress the importance of this having been available in her own vicinity. She does not believe that she would have travelled to Lurgan for such a course, although she has since furthered her studies both at Coleraine and at Queen's University.

### **Current Work**

While the main activity of the group continues to be new writing, their first play "Sham City" is nearing completion. It deals with the reaction of local farmers' wives and their response to the compulsory purchase orders that preceded the development of Brownlow as a new town. They have already given a reading of the first part of the play and were encouraged by the interest of their largely young audience who seemed surprised to discover that their "new town" had a history at all. They hope to present a full production in early 1994 in the Brownlow area itself (possibly in the Civic Centre).

### **Development Needs**

The group are fortunate in having use of a new women's centre for their meetings. They were represented at the first meeting of the **Community Arts Forum** and found it of great value. They look forward to help from that quarter with technical advice and would also expect other member groups of CAF to come and see their production.

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## *The Derg Players*

### **Origins**

The group arose through the initiative of Jeanette Thompson, a Community Relations Officer with Strabane District Council.

Being active in amateur drama herself, she believed strongly in its potential for cross-community development. She was aware, however, of two things:

1. the difficulty of identifying an existing group which did not have a clear association with one community or the other, rehearsal and performance facilities being usually associated with churches.
2. the danger of a new independent being seen to compete with existing groups.

Castledearg offered an opportunity to establish a new group where none existed already. The town has a mixed population of approximately 3,000, including the surrounding hinterland.

The project was initiated with an advertisement in the local paper for a preliminary meeting in the local leisure centre. There was a good response to the meeting from both sides of the community. A committee was formed, the help of an experienced producer from Omagh was enlisted, and the group produced their first play, *Basinful of the Briny*, a three-act comedy by Leslie Sands. There were thirty-two people involved in the show.

### Current Work

Considerable thought went into the performance schedule. There was one performance in Castledearg High School (partly with the intention of involving the school with the group), two at Saint Patrick's Hall, Castledearg, and one at Agharrn G.A.A. Centre. They also toured to Strabane and the Balor Theatre in Ballybofey (County Donegal). An invitation to perform in the Presbyterian Hall in Ardstraw came later and was taken up as a fund-raiser in support of a visit abroad by the local scouts. Audiences were as follows:

Venue	Evening	Audience
Castledearg H.S.	Friday	175
Saint Patrick's Hall	Friday	225
Saint Patrick's Hall	Sunday	225
G.A.A., Agharrn	Sunday	300
Saint Patrick's, Strabane		120
Ardstraw Fund-raiser	Wednesday	300
Balor Theatre		70

The group have discussed the production at length, and are aware that there were some people in the Protestant community that did not attend because performances were given on a Sunday. (This appears to have been a point of principle, which prevented them attending on other evenings also.) The group are keen to address this problem with the scheduling of their next production.

The creation of the Derg Players has also resulted in the revival of the Agharrn Players which had been dormant for eight years, and the setting up of a pantomime group consisting of several people who were not cast in the Derg Players first production.

### Development Needs

The group strongly feel the need of a neutral venue. They do not believe that the Leisure Centre is suitable for performance. They are aware of other independent community theatres, such as that run by the Bardic Players in Dungannon. There is also the example of the Balor Theatre across the border. They are also keen to involve more young people with the group.

### Balor Theatre

Not only is the Balor Theatre fully equipped performance space with a dominant location in the town's main street. It has also supported several S.E.S. schemes (youth training scheme) which have resulted in several younger members going on to full-time drama training in Dublin at both the Gaiety School of Acting and the Samuel Beckett Centre at Trinity College.

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## Training-based groups

In the absence of a drama school in Northern Ireland several groups have emerged over the last decade with training as their main purpose. The importance of these groups will be clear from the number of individuals now working professionally in theatre who have benefited from one or other of them.<sup>44</sup>

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### *Lyric Drama Studio*

Established in the late 1970s by **Sam McCready**, then a lecturer in drama at Stranmillis College, and for a time Artistic Adviser to the Lyric Theatre, this group was expressly intended as a training vehicle for young local actors. Although relatively short-lived, it provided an intensive training opportunity for young local actors, and produced some fine experimental theatre work. **Charabanc** is just one of the local theatre initiatives to have arisen partly because of the group's work.

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### *Fringe Benefits Theatre Company*

Set up in the early 1980s to provide training opportunities for young actors with a serious commitment to theatre, many of whom had professional aspirations, the basis of this company's work was a weekly training workshop with recognised professionals. It differed in this way from the **Lyric Drama Studio**, which was strongly based around the teaching of one individual. As the Company's work developed, the production dimension of their work increased.

The company's main legacy has been the substantial number of former members now working professionally in theatre.

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### *Belfast Youth & Community Drama*

#### **Origins**

This group was set up by the Arts Council as a Belfast centre of the Youth Drama Scheme, with **Peter Quigley** as director of its first production. It attracted an older age-group than was usual for the scheme, however, and soon asserted its independence.

#### **Current Work**

Different members have different motives for belonging to the group, ranging from career ambitions to purely social interest, there remains a strong emphasis on training. The group now performs mainly at the Old Museum Arts Centre. In June 1993 they staged a successful production of *Castle Rackrent* which introduced contemporary local themes into the historical narrative.

#### **Development Needs**

The group are eager to extend their training programme to include more placements for members with theatre organisations. On a more theoretical note, they want to develop an artistic authority for community theatre work which will allow it to be taken seriously alongside mainstream theatre.

As an example of this, **Fintan Brady**, a leading member of the group, cites a proposed production based on the Engineering Strike in Belfast in 1919, an event

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<sup>44</sup> See *Appendix*

which he sees as the turning point in the failure of left-wing politics in Northern Ireland. The company hope that while researching for this production they can also engage in the process of building their audience for the show once it is performed. This approach is similar to what happened with the early **Charabanc** shows, where people who had contributed to research, provided a core audience for the production.

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## *Belfast Community Circus School*

### **Origins**

The Community Circus was set up by **Donal McKendry** and **Mike Maloney** in 1985 as a community initiative of the Arts Council.

### **Current Work**

The interest in the Community Circus is vast. Sometimes they are unable to cope with the numbers. There is a good balance between girls and boys, slightly more Catholics than Protestants, and a good class mix.

Circus is a good way into performance for young people that would be suspicious of drama work. It a good way of getting boys involved and is especially effective with really troubled young people.<sup>45</sup>

Community Circus is an important adjunct to community drama. "Because it is skill-based it offers a real sense of achievement"<sup>46</sup> No less than twelve of the group's original members are now members of Equity.

Besides weekly classes the Community Circus also runs residential camps each summer.

### **Development Needs**

The group are interested in the potential for Circus in education (by analogy with Theatre-in-Education). There is also the possibility of a BTEC course in Circus Skills. One more professional worker would help, but the voluntary nature of the work is very important. At the other extreme there is the example of Fooltime in Bristol, a circus college with an annual seven figure grant and five full-time staff.

Recruitment for the Community Circus is never a problem, but they would like to extend their outreach programme. They are aware that many young people won't leave their own areas. Work in East Belfast last year has not led to a significant increase in members from that area, where people seem reluctant to cross the river.

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<sup>45</sup> cf Circus 3-1

<sup>46</sup> Paula McFetridge

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## Youth Theatre and drama-related youth work

### *Bright Lights*

#### **Origins**

Set up by **Tilly Hay**, Bright Lights offers drama and dance teaching for young people in the Cregagh area of the city across a very wide age-range.

#### **Current Work**

In addition to regular classes, organised by age-group, Bright Lights also stages full-scale productions. The current drama tutor is **Judith West**. The group is unusual of its kind in its location in a predominantly Protestant area.

#### **Development Needs**

The group would be glad of a more appropriate space to work in. At present, they are based in the Cregagh Community Centre, often having to run classes for five-year-olds with a dog obedience class taking place in the next room! The group could also benefit from the availability of technical facilities. They are aware of the existence of commercial technical hire services like Stage Services North, but would lack the confidence to deal with them. The group's future is now uncertain because of lack of funding.

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### *Centrestage*<sup>47</sup>

Set up in 1985 by **Roma Tomelty** and **Colin Carnegie**, Centrestage grew out of a series of annual drama summer schools in response to demand from parents for year-round teaching. The company maintained its own studio for four years in Queen Street in central Belfast before economic considerations led to its being closed. The summer courses have continued to operate.

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### *City Kids*

#### **Origins**

This is an independent initiative by the group's organiser **Danny Robinson** who has previously produced several musicals with young people under the name of Whiterock Community Theatre.

#### **Current Work**

In June 1993, City Kids presented a production of *Oliver* with a teenage cast in the Arts Theatre.

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<sup>47</sup> See also under **Theatre Companies**

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## *Curtain Call*

### **Origins**

Curtain call was set up by **Angela Heaney** to provide drama teaching for children under 16.

### **Current Work**

Besides her teaching work, Angela also produces full-scale productions. In June 1993 Curtain Call presented *West Side Story* at the Arts Theatre with a cast in the age-range 11-16. The production was directed by **Christina Nelson**. **Danny Robinson** has also directed for the group. All these key participants first worked together in the City Council's **Leisurekids** youth theatre scheme.

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## *Deramore Drama Group*

### **Origins**

Deramore Youth Club in the Ormeau/Annadale area of Belfast have presented a number of annual productions including *The Sleeping Beauty* and Willy Russell's *Our Day Out*. As part of the **Belfast 1991** celebrations the group decided to research and write their own play about the Blitz.

### **Current Work**

The production began from a process of improvisation, and involved reminiscence sessions with the local elderly.

### **Development Needs**

The group are keen to attract new members. They are also fund-raising for portable stage lighting.

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## *Europe en Scènes*

This was a one-off, two-week, international theatre project in the summer of 1993 bringing together young people from across the EC. Based in 'Derry, the event sought to stimulate debate on the inter-relationship between art and politics.

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## *Leisurekids*

### **Origins**

Leisurekids was set up as a summer scheme for young people by the Belfast City Council in 1986. **Peter Quigley** was its first tutor. It was based initially in the Maysfield Leisure Centre but soon relocated to the **Group Theatre**.

### **Current Work**

Leisurekids continued to enjoy use of the Group Theatre until 1992 when it was closed because of bomb damage. They hoped to return there this summer. The group recruits through open audition, although participants must be resident in the Greater Belfast area. Leisurekids' current tutor is **Judith West**.

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## *N.I.C.H.S.*

### **Origins**

The Northern Ireland Children's Holiday Scheme was founded in 1972 to provide holiday opportunities for children from disadvantaged areas and backgrounds. The annual holiday programme involves three hundred children (Protestant and Catholic) in two age groups, 9-11 and 12-14. Since 1987 N.I.C.H.S. has also run a Youthcamp for 14-16 year olds for up to sixteen young people chosen for their leadership potential. During the 1991 Youthcamp the group were taken (reluctantly) to see a play (*Wedding Fever* by Sam Cree). For many of them it was their first experience of live theatre.

### **Current Work**

The response was so favourable that N.I.C.H.S. began experimenting with drama work themselves. In 1992 a drama residential was held and facilitated by **Tom Magill**. This led to a full production which toured to the Shankill Leisure Centre, Beechmount Leisure Centre, Portadown Town Hall, and the Golden Thread Theatre in Ardoyne. Further drama projects are planned.

### **Development Needs**

**Sandy Hutchinson**, who initiated the project for N.I.C.H.S., and is now closely involved with the new **Community Arts Forum**, is very concerned at the lack of information that was available when she first wanted to make use of drama. She is very eager for the Community Arts Forum to take on a role in distributing such information for other groups.

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## *Newpoint Players, Newry*

Newpoint Players is rare among amateur drama groups in having a very active youth section. Many members have subsequently joined the Ulster Youth Theatre, and the group has also contributed significantly to the local professional theatre.<sup>48</sup> **Sean Hollywood**, the mainstay of the group, also runs an annual children's summer theatre school which has been funded by the Cultural Traditions Group.

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## *P.A.C.E. Youth Theatre*

### **Origins**

This group was set up in 1991 by P.A.C.E. (Protestant and Catholic Encounter) on the initiative of **David McKittrick**, the organisation's Field Officer, to provide a cross-community opportunity for young people to encounter each other through drama. Recruitment is through schools, with a conscious effort being made to balance numbers between the two main traditions. In 1993, a few members have also been recruited from **N.I.C.H.S.**.

### **Current Work**

The group are presently working on their third production to be written and directed by **Janice Kennedy**. Although keen to reflect the themes underlying the group's inception, she has found that the group themselves are reluctant to address sectarian issues directly. (This seems very often to be the case) She has chosen in the latest play to explore the general idea of the role of the individual

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<sup>48</sup> See *Appendix*

within their community in relation to an urban planning issue. While acknowledging the relevance of thematic considerations, she believes that the true value of the work is less in the theme addressed as in the collective experience of the theatre process which requires the total trust of all involved.

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## *Rainbow Factory*

### **Origins**

The Rainbow Factory was the brain-child of **Brian Drain**, a Training Development Officer with Youth Action (formerly the Northern Ireland Association of Youth Clubs). Brian had some experience of drama work with **James King** while a student at Jordanstown Polytechnic, and wanted to establish a creative outlet for young people of a more challenging kind than the existing disco-dancing championships. He put a proposal for a performing arts programme to Youth Action who quickly accepted it.

### **Current Work**

The Rainbow Factory currently has its own teaching studio in central Belfast. The emphasis is on process-based work geared toward the personal development of members, but two off-shoots ("The Company" and "Kidstuff") have recently been set up to cater for the increasing interest its young members have in performance. The group has a policy of open audition, and recruits members both through the constituent youth clubs of Youth Action and by public advertisement. There is a good balance of Protestants and Catholics and a good class balance. Public advertisements attract more middle-class members. The working-class membership comes mainly from youth clubs.

### **Development Needs**

The Rainbow Factory has secured its premises for the next three years through a £31,000 grant from the **Foundation for Sport and the Arts**, but need substantial support to be able to maximise the benefit of having their own space. David Boyd has recently been appointed Artistic Director of the group and two productions are planned for next year - a Panto for younger members, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with an older group.

The Rainbow Factory is also eager to extend a pilot training scheme in drama for youth leaders led by **David Boyd** and **Louise McIlwaine**, and a programme of outreach schemes catering for young people outside the Belfast area.

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## *The Youth Lyric*

### **Origins**

The Youth Lyric is a drama school for children and teenagers run in conjunction with the Lyric Theatre. It has been in existence almost as long as the Lyric itself, and currently operates from the Lyric's rehearsal room in Cromwell Road.

### **Current Work**

Until very recently, the Youth Lyric's prime mover was **Arthur Webb**. His successor is **Aidan Browne**. In addition to weekly classes, the Youth Lyric presents a major production each year. For the last three years these have been presented in the Lyric Theatre itself. The Youth Lyric operates on a fee-paying basis.

A spin-off from the Youth Lyric is Improv Drama which runs summer workshops.

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## *Ulster Youth Theatre & Youth Drama Network*

### **Origins**

The Youth Drama Scheme was set up as a network of regional centres towards the end of the 1970s with **Denis Smyth** as its first Director. To begin with, there was a high degree of central control but over the years the individual groups have adapted to local conditions. Several of the first leaders (such as **Eamonn Bradley** in Enniskillen and **Margaret Geelan** in Omagh) are still involved.

After several years of mainly process-oriented work, the groups' own needs led to a more performance-related approach, culminating in 1982 in the first Ulster Youth Theatre production - *Ricochets* by **Martin Lynch**. The changing funding climate and the availability of the Grand Opera House led to a more commercial approach for subsequent Ulster Youth Theatre productions, and a series of highly successful musicals were directed by **Michael Poynor**. Many young actors were involved in more than one of these productions, which have left a lasting legacy in terms of the number of professionals currently working in Northern Ireland and further afield who gained experience through this work.

In 1987 the Youth Theatre changed direction with the appointment of **Imelda Foley** as Drama Development Officer of the Arts Council. **Nick Philippou** directed two Shakespeare productions followed by the highly ambitious *Stations*, based on Seamus Heaney's long poem, and incorporating new short plays by six other Irish writers. The production was revived for the 1990 **Belfast Festival at Queen's**. This was followed by *The Last Ferry*, a special event for *Belfast 1991*. In 1992 the UYT moved to 'Derry for two productions, *Goodnight Strabane* by **Gerard Stembridge** and the Three Cities Project in collaboration with the Manchester and Dublin Youth Theatres.

### **Current Work**

The Ulster Youth Theatre production in 1993 was an adaptation by **David Grant** of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. This involved fifty young people and a fully professional production team. Performances took place at the Ardhowen Theatre in Enniskillen and (for the first time) at the Lyric Theatre.

The Youth Drama Scheme continues to operate throughout the year, and regularly encourages exchanges between different regional groups. There is no charge to members of either the Youth Drama Scheme or the Ulster Youth Theatre.

### **Development Needs (with reference to NAYD)**

The Youth Drama Scheme has special significance in being province-wide. As interest continues to grow throughout Northern Ireland in youth theatre, the opening of new centres must be considered. Alternatively, the scheme could take on more of a co-ordinating and lobbying role in the manner of the National Association of Youth Drama (NAYD) in the Republic of Ireland.

The debate within youth theatre about the relative merits of process and product is continual. In the Republic the NAYD made the decision (largely because of lack of funding) to discontinue the annual National Youth Theatre production in favour of a week-long Youth Theatre Festival based on workshop activity. This has had the undoubted benefit of stimulating the development of strong youth theatre groups throughout the country, and each year there is a strong sense of development in the general standard of work. This standard is assessed both in artistic terms and in terms of the personal development of the young people involved.

There is, nevertheless, a strong sense of loss at the absence of the annual summer production. It is quite extraordinary how many of the younger generation of Irish professional actors have come through the National Youth Theatre.

Ideally, both a summer workshop series and a summer production should take place in both parts of Ireland. And indeed, there will be a workshop programme run in conjunction with *Brave New World*.

The essential difference between the two types of provision is this - the workshop emphasis can reach a much wider range of young people but to less profound effect. The production emphasis unquestionably has a more significant influence on the longer-term development of the local theatre community.

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## *Youth Initiatives*

### **Origins**

This organisation is a registered charity set up by members of an ecumenical brotherhood based in the United States. In little over two years they have developed a number of projects to the extent that several are now being run largely by the young members themselves.

### **Mission Statement**

*"Youth Initiatives is a cross-community youth work which aims to awaken hope, inspire initiative, and mobilise youth to make a vital contribution to their community, through the discovery and renewal of Christian faith in daily life."*

### **Recent Work**

Drama is only one means by which Youth Initiatives have sought to motivate young people but it has proved to be a particularly effective one. An initial programme of drama workshops has given rise to "Belfast Born", a series of sketches illustrating both comic and tragic aspects of local life with a subtly stated underlying Christian message. The sketches were written and performed by youth members of various groups set up by Youth Initiatives.

"Belfast Born" was performed as part of a recent community relations event in Ballycastle and provided a powerful testament to the creativity, imagination and commitment inspired by this group. On that occasion alone there were more than fifty young people (average age - late teens) involved.

Youth Initiatives have established a particularly close working relationship with the predominantly Catholic Dairy Farm organisation in Twinbrook, but they also have active projects in Protestant areas, with the potential for further interaction between groups from the different religious traditions.

The Christian ethos of the group is apparent, but not dominant. It provides an interesting example of a Christian basis to drama work in a field where a secular approach is more common.

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## **Other projects of special interest**

### *"Execution" by Ulick O'Connor*

Produced by the Belfast Community Theatre for the first West Belfast Festival in 1988, *Execution* is documentary drama addressing very complex themes. The play met with enthusiastic response and rapt attention throughout its tour of the west of the city. Its setting, shortly after the Irish Civil War, carried with it many parallels to the divisions in modern Irish nationalism and the production generated much discussion. A mixed amateur and professional cast performed the play well.

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## *Saint Patrick's Training School*

There is perhaps no more remarkable example of the effectiveness of drama for building confidence than a Training Centre. It may seem obvious that young offenders often have exceptionally difficult backgrounds. It does, however, make the underlying assumption of drama work that participants approach it with a high degree of personal discipline and self-motivation even harder to attain than in more conventional contexts.

At Saint Patrick's the starting point, as so often elsewhere was with circus skills.<sup>49</sup> Physical skills like juggling and unicycle riding seem more accessible than conventional performance skills to young people, especially young males, who may well have the added prejudice that drama work is unmanly. These skills also manifest themselves very clearly, bringing with them a strong sense of achievement.

In Saint Patrick's, circus skills led onto an interest in more conventional theatre work, culminating in June 1993 with a performance of a play, *Bunjoor Mucker*, written by **Martin Lynch** with the young performers themselves. Directed by **Joe Devlin**, the play also involved Community Circus member **Pat Duggan** who is a social worker attached to the school, and has been largely responsible for the initial introduction of circus skills there. Technical expertise was largely provided by former students of the **BIFHE** Performing Arts Courses.

**Mike Maloney**, currently on a year's leave of absence from the BIFHE course and employed by the Northern Ireland Office as a drama specialist within the Prison Service was also involved in the production. This was one of several specialised drama projects he has undertaken.

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## *The Fair Day*

*The Fair Day* in 1988 in Warrenpoint was a community play on the English model in that it involved local people performing for local people in a play written by someone from the immediate area (Patch Connolly). The only outsider was the English director, John Retallack. While participation in the event was mainly from the Catholic community, a different kind of cross-community dimension became evident with long-standing rivalries between Warrenpoint and Newry being temporarily suspended for the duration!

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## *The Midsummer Music Carnival*

Held in the summer of 1986 for International Music Day in the wake of Welfare State's successful *Jungle Bullion* in 1983, this event was planned as a huge open-air event taking place all over Belfast and culminating in an outdoor spectacle in the Botanic Gardens. The process element of the project was a huge success, but heavy rain in the week up to the event itself meant that it had to be severely curtailed for technical reasons. These problems were compounded by confusion over who had ultimate responsibility for the event, the local organisers or Cardiff Laboratory Theatre who had been brought in as facilitators.

The event provided a hard lesson in the importance attached by funders to product, however much the emphasis is intended to be on process. The failure of the event to take place as planned led to a significant shortfall in delivery of grant-aid. Very many participants nevertheless derived great benefit from the many workshops held in conjunction with the production.

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<sup>49</sup> See also: Community Circus

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## *The Greening of Lord Litter*

This was an open-air street spectacle linked to a series of workshops for children and young people in the Newry area which took place in the early summer of 1991. The project was initiated by **John Keyes**, Director of the Newry Arts Centre. It was directed by **Michael Poynor**.

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## *The Voyage of the Board Treader*

Organised by Ballynafeigh Community Development Association, this was a one-off piece of community theatre involving young people between the ages of 8 and 25. The stimulus for the project came from the Ballynafeigh After School Club following their 1990 Community House Festival. It aimed to encourage young people to reveal and explore their latent creativity and to facilitate the development of self-confidence and mutual respect among them, culminating in a spectacular community production. Following the event the group came to the following conclusions:

- Community Arts can be a very positive form of community development. Through the arts, communities can ask questions, challenge authority, have fun and celebrate their own special identity and uniqueness.
- Community Arts is not second class arts. It is at least equally as valid, powerful and professional as so-called mainstream arts and should be given the respect and attention it deserves.
- Community Arts does not just happen. Ideas once generated, need to be challenged and talent guided and fostered if people and communities are to achieve their full potential. Communities therefore should be able to avail themselves of the best professional expertise and resources.
- Resources and expertise should be made available to community groups on an ongoing basis so that they have the opportunity to build the spirit and imagination of the arts into the fabric of their everyday lives.

The group documented their project in an excellent booklet which includes advice for other groups interested in undertaking a similar project.<sup>50</sup>

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## *The Stone Chair*

*The Stone Chair* was a large-scale community theatre project based in the Short Strand. Written and co-ordinated by **Martin Lynch**, the project is especially notable for having been presented in the Grand Opera House in 1989. Although this was something of a mixed blessing, since the production was therefore required to operate on a vast scale which stretched the resources of the project to the limit, it did serve to give community drama a profile and recognition that it had hitherto not enjoyed. Not only did the production result in residents of the Short Strand establishing their own successful community theatre group after the event.

The Stone Chair production represents a turning point for the development of Community Drama in Northern Ireland. It involved an entire community over the period of a full year and has served as an inspiration to many subsequent projects including **Dock Ward** and the **Ballybeen Community Theatre**.

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<sup>50</sup> *The Voyage of the Board Treader*, Ballynafeigh Community Development Association, 291 Ormeau Rd., BT7 3GG

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## *Those Three Days/Broken Nails*

These two large-scale drama events were organised by the Catholic Church at Saint Peter's Cathedral with the express intention of raising the morale of the Divis area of Belfast. Both plays used professional casts of the highest calibre for the principal roles but also included a substantial involvement by residents in the area. Both had religious themes, and this seemed to enhance the commitment of the local people. The second play was specially commissioned from playwright and poet **Damian Gorman**.

Given the origins and location of both productions, it is perhaps not surprising that the audience for each was predominantly Catholic. Each did nonetheless enjoy some measure of cross-community support. Each event also had a specifically ecumenical aspect. In the case of *Those Three Days*, the cross used in the production was carried from Dublin to Belfast by a mixed group of young people from both sides of the border. It was also observed that the plays drew members of the Catholic middle-class back to Saint Peter's Cathedral.

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## **NIVT Community Arts Awards Scheme<sup>51</sup>**

Since 1985, the **Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust** has offered small grants to community arts projects through their Community Arts Awards Scheme. The list of beneficiaries includes many of the groups itemised above. But the scheme also supports a myriad smaller projects, about half of which are based outside Belfast. The following are just a few examples.

- **The Ligoniel 5-10 Club:** an after-school club run in conjunction with Scarecrow T. C. working on a new version of the Ulster Myths.
- **Morton Senior Citizen's Reminiscence Theatre**
- **Northern Ireland Youth Forum:** an international youth exchange with Catalonia, Slovakia and Belgium. Drama workshops were facilitated by members of Out & Out Theatre Company.
- **Saint Oliver Plunkett Youth Club (Crossmaglen):** a pantomime project.
- **Saint John Bosco Youth Centre (Newry):** a production of *Grease*.
- **Saint Peter's Activity Centre (Belfast 12):** a production of *Joseph*.
- **Sandy Row Community Centre Youth Group:** for dance and drama workshops.
- **Springboard Project:** a disabled group performing *The Wizard of Oz*.
- **Cashel Mummers:** a proposal to revive the ancient mumming tradition.
- **The Dove Project (Newry):** a drama project with teenage travellers.
- **Vishan Drama Group:** drama project for the visually handicapped.
- **Harvest Moon Senior Citizens Club (Coleraine):** Talent Competition.
- **Dungannon & District Assn. for the Handicapped:** drama project.
- **Flip the Lid Clown Company (Omagh)**

While the spread of projects under this scheme is geographically more even, those outside Belfast are inevitably less ambitious because of the lack of developed community arts practice.

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<sup>51</sup> See also under **Funding**

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# Community Arts Forum

1993 has seen the emergence of the Community Arts Forum as an umbrella organisation for community theatre groups in Northern Ireland. It is still at a fledgling stage and by no means enjoys a comprehensive membership. But it represents a vital step towards a greater interaction between groups and individuals. This in its turn will increase the scope for this work to develop a stronger cross-community dimension.

In February 1993 a Community Arts Festival was organised by members of Tongue in Cheek in the Golden Thread Theatre in Belfast. It had two purposes:

- to bring groups together to present their work.
- to discuss ways of working and of developing community arts.

The need for an umbrella body grew out of this discussion and a weekend conference was held at Stranmillis College in April to develop the idea.

The weekend included a number of workshops on specialist areas with leading professionals, and a final plenary session agreed on the following recommendations for the future development of the organisation:

1. The establishment of a newsletter/bulletin to collate and share information.
2. The seeking out of other community arts groups (not just working in the field of drama) from all over Northern Ireland for membership. (This emphasis on attracting membership from throughout the province is to be encouraged).
3. The implementation of a continuing training programme.
4. The establishment of a resource centre with information on fund-raising, facilities for photocopying<sup>52</sup>, and a stock of lighting and sound equipment.
5. Secure funding to allow the effective development of the Forum to be sought from the Arts Council and the Community Relations Council. The Belfast City Council is also to be encouraged to make specific provision for the Forum and its member groups.

The CAF plans a week-long residential in October 1993, when members of different groups will work together on scenes based on the theme of poverty. This seems like an ideal opportunity to achieve close interaction between different groups while at the same time addressing a theme that is widely recognisable.

In view of its aspiration to represent other forms of community arts as well as drama, the Community Arts Forum has the potential to fill the gap left by the discontinuation of funding in Northern Ireland for the Dublin-based Community Arts Organisation, **Creative Activity for Everyone** (CAFE). Established in the early 1980s, CAFE never succeeded in organising effectively in Northern Ireland, probably because of the different funding and governmental structures here. The organisation has more than proved its worth in the Republic, however. Significantly, the exchange of information between groups through its newsletter and computerised database has been seen as one of its greatest successes. It has also been active as a partner of public bodies such as **Combat Poverty** in raising the profile of Community Arts in the wider context of social policy.<sup>53</sup> If the Community Arts Forum can achieve anything like as much it will be well worth supporting.

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<sup>52</sup>NICVA already offer fund-raising information and photocopying facilities to member groups.

<sup>53</sup>See the following chapter

# Community Relations

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## Assessing the Relevance of Specific Projects

From the community relations perspective it is convenient to categorise community drama projects in the following way:

1. Projects that have community development potential but do not directly address community relations issues.
2. Projects which do directly address community relations issues

Projects that fall into neither of these categories fall outside the definition of community drama.

1. Projects in the first category include neighbourhood-based amateur drama groups such as that in Ballybeen, *Stone Chair* in Short Strand and *Tongue in Cheek* in Ardoyne. Many of these groups have recently come together in the **Community Arts Forum**, an umbrella body set up partly for lobbying purposes but largely out of a sense of solidarity and to exchange experiences and ideas. At this secondary level there is great potential for cross-community involvement, but only if Protestant involvement at the primary level can be extended. The best chance of achieving this is to concentrate first on developing drama activity within Protestant communities, rather than by attempts to create cross-community groups. In general, the difficulties of getting such a group up and running are significant enough without additional cross-community expectations. Community Drama can approach the question of community relations like parallel lines moving towards the light at the end of the tunnel.
2. The second category includes **Neighbourhood Open Workshop's** BT17/11 project, the **Frontline** group in 'Derry, the **PACE** youth theatre group, **N.I.C.H.S.**, the cross-community amateur drama company in Castlederg (initiated by the local community relations Officer) and the use in the Limavady area of amateurs theatre groups to present work in local dialect. There have also been interesting experiments with a cross-community pantomime in Armagh and the creation of a new speech and drama festival and Youth Variety Shows linked to *Children in Need* in Downpatrick. Most of

the projects and companies listed above in the Youth Theatre section would also enjoy a significant level of cross-community support.

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## *A Direct or Indirect Approach?*

Community Relations Officers differ in their attitude towards this question. Some believe in the importance of constantly obliging participants in projects to make themselves aware that they are intended to be cross-community events. They warn of the danger of seeming to lure unwilling individuals into cross-community contact against their will, thus instigating a fiercely negative reaction.

The alternative approach is to let the community relations aspect of the work look after itself - to keep it incidental to whatever activities are being promoted.

There is, of course, no right or wrong approach. The differing standpoints result chiefly from contrasting conditions in different localities. A certain amount also depends on the nature of the activity under consideration.

It is the contention of this report that drama work of all sorts is better served by the second non-confrontational approach. Many of the above examples support this view.

**Janice Kennedy** of the **P.A.C.E.** group has made the point that there was an initial reluctance among the young people involved to discuss political issues directly. They had no hesitation, however, about engaging in a drama process that required them to internalise those very issues as part of the drama. That this was done through allegory did not lessen their awareness of the issues.

**Jim Keyes** of **Frontline** in 'Derry also found himself using allegory to address contentious issues with a mixed group of school students.

**Tom Magill** worked for a week using a drama-based process with a cross-community group in Strabane who quickly acquired the mutual trust essential for all such work. A subsequent and more explicitly community relations-based "Prejudice Reduction Workshop" at the end of the week seemed largely irrelevant, most its aims already having been achieved through the drama process.

Another example from my own experience: the **Fringe Benefits Theatre Company** was a group with a very balanced membership in cross-community terms, but this was an aspect of the group that was never consciously alluded to. The issue was not avoided. It was simply irrelevant. Fairly late in the group's history, however, we were asked to participate in a workshop which specifically focused on the issue of religious identity. This workshop had a profoundly destructive effect on group morale - not because we were made to address our differences, but because it was implied that we had somehow failed in not addressing them before.

There is invariably more to be gained from drama work in its own right than can ever be assessed in crude community relations terms. Consequently, the cross-community dimension of drama work needs to be approached with great delicacy. It is clearly necessary to integrate people from different backgrounds if drama work is to have longer-term community relations benefits, but this should never be presented to participants as the main priority.

In the Barricades Project run by **Neighbourhood Open Workshop** with teenage girls from the Suffolk and Poleglass areas there was absolutely no difficulty in achieving an integrated approach to the work. The involvement of people from different traditions arose naturally out of the work. But there was nonetheless an underlying and potentially destructive pressure on the project because of its cross-community credentials.

Over emphasis on cross-community involvement can also be counter-productive in a more practical sense. Esther Mulholland, Community Relations Officer of Moyle District Council feels somewhat limited by the implicit requirement to balance

numbers. What this has meant in practice is that it has proved more realistic to promote events in the mixed community of Ballycastle, rather than the single-tradition communities of Bushmills or Cushendall. This ironic situation seems to result in precisely the opposite of the desired effect.

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## Addressing the Under-representation of Community Drama in Protestant Areas

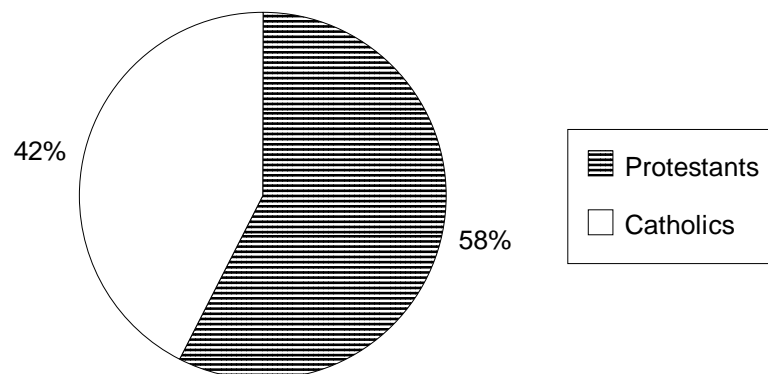
The Arts Council's *Survey of Public Attitudes towards the Arts* found no appreciable distinction in the response of Catholics and Protestants. While this may be the case for the whole population of Northern Ireland about the arts in general, it is clearly a fact that there are more community drama projects in Catholic areas than Protestant ones.

There is also a fairly wide perception in both communities that the arts sit more comfortably in a Catholic milieu. To some extent this seems to be discipline related. Eamonn Bradley, Director of the Ardhoven Theatre, for instance, estimates that his audience for theatre would tend to be 80% Catholic to 20% Protestant. His audience for the Ulster Orchestra, on the other hand, would attract a small majority of Protestants (about 60/40).

Other anecdotal evidence suggests that the problem lies more with drama and theatre than with the arts in general.

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### *Ulster Youth Theatre Auditions (statistical analysis)*

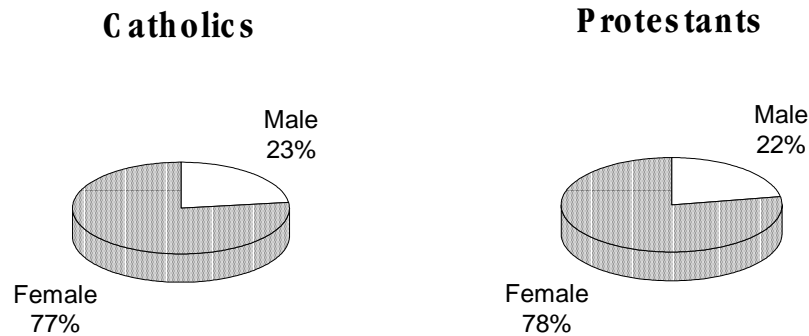


There is an absence of research data in this area, but the recent auditions for the Ulster Youth Theatre provide some indication of the relative interest among young people in the Protestant and Catholic communities. The 1993 production attracted a record number of applicants (559). Based on the admittedly crude criterion of school attended, supported by some personal knowledge of individuals, the balance of Catholic applicants to Protestant applicants provincewide appears to be roughly in proportion with the general population.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> 1991 Census

It is possible to extract another interesting set of statistics from this data. The ratio of boys to girls auditioning was virtually the same within each tradition, suggesting a common level of interest in each.



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### *Attitudes to Community Drama in Protestant Working Class Areas*

While these statistics are reassuring about the level of response of young people in the province as a whole, they do represent a highly motivated interest group. Furthermore, although the Ulster Youth Theatre actively strives for a broad social mix, there is usually a larger response from Grammar Schools with the inevitable middle-class dominance that this connotes.

In the context of community drama it is clearly essential to see this as a class issue as well as one of religion or tradition. Given the predominance of this work to date in city areas, the need discussed above to establish threshold projects in single tradition areas as a precursor to cross-community involvement, throws emphasis on the need to lower the resistance to drama in working-class Protestant areas,

**David Calvert** of **Neighbourhood Open Workshop** comes from a working class Protestant background. He recalls his acute sense of embarrassment as a professional actor when his parents came to see him perform for the first time. He puts this down to the Puritan suspicion of fun. Theatre is suspect because it is seen to produce nothing.

**Jackie Redpath** of the Shankill Development Agency and with a similar background to David Calvert remembers his family's strong disapproval when, still at school, he wanted to attend a performance of *Romeo and Juliet*.

**Marie Jones**, the successful playwright points out that it is easier for a Catholic to identify with Sean O'Casey than for a Protestant to identify with Shakespeare. Theatre culture seems more immediate for Catholics.

There is also a perception that Protestants prefer less collaborative art forms. **Imelda Foley** of the Arts Council points out that writers' groups flourish in Protestant areas (reflecting perhaps the need to produce something tangible referred to by David Calvert).

Marie Jones sees historical reasons for this reluctance to join with others in a theatre group. Protestants, she argues, grow up with the ethos "The State is Ours". "Any gathering is seen as dangerous to the leaders. So we end up sticking to our own wee square. Only Catholics combine." By contrast, the church bonded Catholics in the face of all their other difficulties whereas the Protestant churches are more fragmentary.

The answer to this reticence is, she believes, to make a conscious effort to reflect the lives of the Protestant community - to make theatre that is familiar to them.

She recalls ruefully early community drama experiments on the Shankill Road. "I didn't even understand what the play was about so I don't now how we expected the audience to."

David Calvert finds that once he goes into Protestant areas with specific projects there's no problem, "except for the general defensiveness that Protestants have about their whole culture". Though he has encountered the attitude towards community drama that "it's the kind of thing priests do".

**Marie Abbott** of the **Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust** comments that external influences tend to take hold less readily in Protestant areas. She contrasts the outside input into the West Belfast Festival with the more parochial outlook of its counterpart in East Belfast.

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## *Suffolk*

As a preliminary to evolving a community arts strategy for the Suffolk area, David Calvert spent two months researching attitudes in the area.

"A persistent theme which appeared like a doleful refrain in discussion with local residents and community workers throughout the research period, was the pervasive sense of deterioration in community morale. A small Protestant estate feels itself to be "fenced in and fortified", as one resident put it, against the threat of engulfment by Catholic West Belfast. This sense of being "under siege" as it was frequently expressed, has incubated a collective lack of confidence and belief in the right of the community to both prosper materially, and to nurture its Protestant identity in a stable environment."<sup>55</sup>

Despite this, the report identified a "constructive ambivalence" in the attitude of many residents towards their Catholic neighbours. "Even young people, male and female, who would become embroiled in sectarian conflict at the edge of the Suffolk estate, will express a desire to meet their peers from 'the other side', and the same young people regard drama and other arts as a way of showing that they are able to express themselves, despite their environment."<sup>56</sup>

In the words of one young local writer, Darren McIlwrath: "I've found something I'm good at, and because I can express my feelings on paper I can come to terms with a lot of negative things in my life. You can change something when you think about it and then write it down. The same goes for drama, and if one person changes from bad habits, then whatever they are doing has worked."<sup>57</sup>

While the positive potential of community arts was recognised within the local community, there was also a deep frustration that so many projects seemed to fizzle soon after becoming established, usually through lack of sustained resources.

"Research indicates that the arts programme needs to put in place community mechanisms for the continuity of arts provision in Suffolk as an integral feature of community development in the area. Residents and community leaders have been encouraged to participate . . . in the process of setting up an independent local community arts committee to provide long-term development of arts in the area."<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *Suffolk Community Arts Programme: A Report on Phase 1 of an 18 Month Developmental Programme*

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*

The Barricades Project<sup>59</sup> grew out of this research and led to group of teenage girls from Suffolk making a video about an imagined encounter between themselves and a Catholic girl from a neighbouring estate. The story illustrated an awareness of the common experiences that bind all adolescents together.

When this project was followed up by inviting a number of girls from the Poleglass estate to join the project, initial workshops proved the two groups to be virtually indistinguishable in their interest and selection of themes. When a conscious attempt was made later in the workshop series to introduce sectarian issues into workshops, this seemed to arouse little interest. This did not seem to be reticence caused by discomfort at the knowledge that it was a mixed group, but rather that the issues were of far less interest than the story based on relationships that they were devising. While the play did have a cross-community theme, this seemed to a large extent a sop to the underlying intentions of the project. "Family politics" played a much larger role in the process than sectarian ones.

It is this capacity of drama to emphasise the personal rather than the political that makes it such a powerful weapon in the arsenal of community relations.

In practical terms, the communities in Greater West Belfast have more to connect them than divides them. As David Calvert puts it, Greater West Belfast is a shared space. Suffolk may feel itself beleaguered, but in Poleglass, Lenadoon and Twinbrook people have their own sense of dislocation. They have been displaced from West Belfast. They come under the jurisdiction of Lisburn Borough Council, but are linked culturally to West Belfast.

Drama can help them discover this communality, not by addressing their differences but by providing a medium in which the common elements in their collective experience can come to the fore.

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## *The Shankill*

Several attempts have been made in recent years to establish community drama in the Shankill area but none have taken root. In one way, this is no different to the situation in many Protestant areas, but the particular character of the Shankill seems to present a unique challenge to community drama workers.

**Lenny Mullan of Neighbourhood Open Workshop** worked on one such project. This was part of a three-year plan, and was begun on the back of a largely successful first project in the Catholic Short Strand area, the production of ***The Stone Chair*** at the Grand Opera House. The overall plan was to develop a similar project in the Shankill, and move towards a cross-community event in the third year.

The political will for the Shankill part of the project existed in the person of Fred Cobain, a Councillor for the area, and there was initial support from all the local community agencies. In the summer of 1991, Lenny Mullan, David Calvert and two musicians were funded through the local BAT Scheme to run a summer scheme for young people in the area. When the response to this (in terms of actual numbers of young people) proved disappointing, Lenny Mullan went into local youth clubs and ran impromptu workshop sessions with local boys who responded well to the work.

By contrast with the "constructive ambivalence" which David Calvert found towards Catholics in Suffolk, among these boys Lenny Mullan found an uncompromising loathing. As he explains it: "When the boys are together there's a wild peer pressure to hate Taigs".

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<sup>59</sup> See also Neighbourhood Open Workshop under group listings.

In October 1991 a meeting was held in the area towards the setting up of a community drama project. Lenny did further workshops in connection with this proposal until Christmas of that year, but the show did not take off.

Mullan identifies three main reasons for this. The first was the choice of playwright. No-one has made a bigger commitment to the development of community drama than **Martin Lynch**. But despite extensive efforts in advance to check his acceptability in the local community and the receipt of positive assurances, such a high-profile Catholic did not prove to be appropriate in the Shankill. Lenny Mullan is eager to find an alternative writer, but points out that there are very few who share Martin Lynch's commitment to community drama to the extent that they will embark on a project with no clear prospect of adequate funding.

The second was the intended size of the project. He is adamant that the next attempt should be on a more realistic scale.

The third reason cited by Lenny Mullan for the failure of the project was lack of co-ordination between the various community agencies involved, and a reluctance to back moral support with actual funding.

Jackie Redpath of the Shankill Development Association sees the main problem with drama in the Shankill as the fact that no-one in the area itself sees it as enough of a priority. He points out that initiatives in Protestant areas nearly always fall at the first fence and argues the need for persistence. He places the question of drama in the context of the development of the Shankill area as a whole, in which the first process is to achieve normalisation.

A strategic approach is required. Not a tactical one. He points out that the present development strategy is based on a ten-year span. They have decided that economic development can only follow from an initial emphasis on education and he believes that the arts have an important role in that process. "It is vital for us to find space to examine the new sense of Protestant alienation in the area."

He cites the positive example of **Tom Magill's** work in Glenwood School where workshops have led to two local youngsters wanting to write a play and perform it. In the context of the absence of local will for drama to succeed, he refers to members of the Shankill community who are due to be released shortly from Maghaberry Prison where they have developed a real involvement in drama work. He has hopes that they might generate the necessary commitment in the area.

Meanwhile, Fred Cobain retains his commitment to establishing drama in the area, and is currently in negotiation with BIFHE and BAT for the establishment of performing arts courses in two centres - one in the Lower and one in the Upper Shankill.

If these succeed in becoming established, they may in time create the basis for effective drama work in the area. But all interested parties seem agreed on the need for a long term and concerted strategy to bring this about.

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## *A Women's Issue?*

One interesting issue that arose in this connection is the extent to which community drama relies for its leadership on women who also make up more than 90% of its participants. It has been suggested that men retain their traditionally dominant role in Protestant communities to a greater extent than in Catholic ones and that this is reflected in the relatively low incidence of women's groups in the Shankill. Another view expressed was that while women's centres are fairly common in Protestant areas, women's groups as such are not. The implication is that such organisations tend to be people-based in Catholic areas rather than building-based and so are more likely to give rise to an involvement in community drama.

This point is related to **Imelda Foley's** observation that where community drama initiatives have taken root in Protestant areas, this tends to have a technological aspect - a music studio or a video project, for instance. She suggests that this may be because they place drama within a traditionally male sphere of interest.

If these conclusions are valid, two courses of action suggest themselves. One would be consciously to emphasise the technical aspects of drama in the hopes of involving more men. A more progressive conclusion, however, would be to see this as an argument for encouraging women's organisations in Protestant areas as a precursor to community drama work.

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## *Ulster Theatre Project*

Set up by actor, **Niall Cusack**, as an A.C.E. (Action for Community Employment) Scheme<sup>60</sup>, and sponsored by the Ulster Society<sup>61</sup>, the Ulster Theatre Project had the express aim of exploring and promoting the Protestant culture of Ulster. The basis of the scheme was a year's training programme. The course gave rise to several productions, including three of the less often performed plays of the Belfast-born Artistic Director of the Abbey Theatre, St. John Irvine, and a contemporary play by Shane Connaughten.

Two major problems seem to have beset the scheme. One was the under-resourcing of the training programme. The other was a lack of funding within the scheme for the production programme. Nevertheless, the group did succeed in touring to the Riverside Theatre in Coleraine and to numerous community centres, including that in Ballybeen where it provided part of the stimulus for the setting up of the **Ballybeen Community Theatre**. Members of the Ballybeen group recall, however, that the work offered seemed unsuitable as an introduction to theatre for audiences unfamiliar with the medium. (**Marie Jones** has a similar recollection of work the Playzone Theatre Company<sup>62</sup> toured to community centres in the Shankill area in the late 1970s. It was too much too soon.) Ironically, attendances in community centres in Catholic areas tended to be greater than those in Protestant areas.

Despite these shortcomings, the project remains unique in its emphasis on seeking to identify through professional theatre a specifically Protestant culture in Northern Ireland. It also introduced several individuals into the profession<sup>63</sup>.

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## *The Orange Lodge*

An interesting recent development has been a competition run by the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland and the Sword of Gideon Society for a play about the events surrounding the Battle of the Diamond in 1795 and the formation of the Orange Order itself. Apparently there has been a substantial response, including from many organisations not directly connected with the Orange Order.

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<sup>60</sup> A similar scheme provided initial funding for Charabanc's work.

<sup>61</sup> Based in Brownlow House in Lurgan.

<sup>62</sup> Community Theatre Company established by Andy Hinds at the Crescent Arts Centre

<sup>63</sup> E.g. Davy McBlain, Mark McCrory, Abbie Spallan (see *Appendix*)

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## The Need for a Long Term View

Taking the broad view<sup>64</sup>, if community drama has the potential to promote confidence and development within a single-tradition community, that alone should be enough to merit supporting it with community relations funding.

This is all the more so when a second tier of activity can be developed to allow and encourage inter-action between groups with different backgrounds. The new Community Arts Forum will certainly have an important role in this respect.

The need to build towards integration is well illustrated on a smaller scale by a youth choir initiative instigated by Aubrey McClintock, the Community Relations Officer of Armagh District Council. Choral music has tended to be dominant in one section of the community in Armagh, but McClintock has set about addressing that imbalance by establishing a junior youth choir on a cross-community basis. In time this will feed into the senior choir and ultimately create another area of cross-community cultural activity.

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### *Community Development*

The general arguments for community drama are well-established. As the Arts Council of Great Britain put it in 1988:

“The arts create a climate of optimism - the “can do” attitude essential to developing the 'enterprise culture' this Government hopes to bring to deprived areas. Inner city economic stagnation is a downward spiral . . . the arts provide a means of breaking this spiral and helping people believe in themselves and their community again.”<sup>65</sup>

Hugh Frazer, former Director of the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust, and now Director of Combat Poverty in Dublin offered a similar view from the community development perspective at NIVT's Arts and Community Development Conference in 1990.

“As a result of my experience of working with the Combat Poverty Agency in the Republic for the past three years, I have become increasingly convinced that if you are working in the field of combating poverty, the arts is an absolutely essential element in that process. Reflecting on my experience of projects to combat poverty both in Ireland and indeed in Europe, I do not think that there is a successful project that has not got some creative element in it. Thus it seems to me that promoting creativity is an absolutely key element in any community development and anti-poverty strategy.”<sup>66</sup>

Two specific applications of this principle merit closer attention.

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### *Combat Poverty*

One of the key functions of the Combat Poverty Agency (a statutory body established in the Republic of Ireland in 1986) is to support and evaluate pilot measures aimed at overcoming poverty. It is highly significant that despite the many other demands on them they have decided to devote a substantial investment in both time and money in supporting the community arts.

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<sup>64</sup> The idea of the Cultural Traditions programme as a two hundred year pilot project!

<sup>65</sup> *An Urban Renaissance* (Arts Council of Great Britain, 1988)

<sup>66</sup> *Playing Our Part* (NIVT, 1990)

June Meehan, a full time worker with the agency, points out that this has only been possible because of the extensive developments in community arts practice in Ireland in the last six years. She gives much of the credit for this to CAFE (Creative Activity for Everyone), the community arts umbrella organisation who have lobbied for, advised, and distributed information to groups throughout that time.

The new Community Arts Pilot Programme is being funded by a grant secured from the Horizon Programme of the European Community. One condition of this support is that recipients seek to identify partners in other EC countries. There is an analogy here with the desirability of Community Drama groups of different traditions in Northern Ireland working together. Just as in the local case cross-community involvement is something to be worked towards, a wider European dimension is something that Combat Poverty is aware it must aspire to. Contact with groups in Northern Ireland would seem to be an obvious first step in this process.

The central aim of the Programme, which is being administered jointly with CAFE, is to introduce groups to the possibilities of community arts. The project has three levels:

- The local level - Combat Poverty will directly support individual groups.
- The regional level - CAFE will operate two pilot regional networks.
- The national level - CAFE will develop its existing database and information service and also run a National Arts Workers Course.

Projects already identified for support include the North Wall Women's Project who intend to work on a drama programme with a target group of men, a Lone Parents Project and a group in Gaeltacht of South Connemara who want to explore their own sense of identity, as distinct from outside perceptions of that identity.

The Horizon support extends until 1995.

# Development Needs

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## Infrastructure

In interview after interview the two main issues that recurred were accommodation and training. Transport and administration also featured regularly.

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### *Premises*

Regardless of the nature of the project, a conducive place to meet and work is always a high priority. Most groups get by on a greater or lesser degree of compromise. Existing facilities are invariably in demand by other groups making consistency of rehearsal impossible. Even where space is available, warm, quiet and acoustically appropriate spaces are rare. Everyone appreciates the substantial investment required for purpose-built facilities, and most people tend to be realistic about what can be achieved, but all stress how much more could be done with better access to premises. In cross-community events, the question of neutrality of location is also high on the agenda.

Capital provision is always problematic. Ideally, the needs of the community arts should be assessed strategically, with provision for localised arts centres in the manner of the existing province-wide network of sports-oriented Leisure Centres.

In practice, the present funding climate is unlikely to allow for this. In view of the growth of activity in the area of community drama, however, this is a possibility that should seriously be addressed when enhanced arts funding from the National Lottery becomes a reality after 1994.

In the meantime, much can be achieved by individual groups identifying specific local possibilities. The example of **Ballybeen Community Theatre's** interest in a new local development is a good example.

The other aspect of accommodation that is important for many groups is the question of performance space. In the community relations context it is important that this is not only technically suitable but also in a neutral location. In Belfast and 'Derry there is a reasonable choice of possibilities, from Arts Centres like the Crescent and Old Museum in Belfast and the Foyle Arts Centre and the Playhouse in 'Derry, to smaller theatres like the Golden Threads and the Group. There are also community-based theatres like the Conway Mill, Saint Kevins's

and St. Agnes' Hall. Outside Belfast, a greater degree of compromise is usually required.

It is preferable from the theatrical point of view to concentrate productions in a smaller number of adequately equipped spaces than dilute the energy of performance in unsuitable venues. The fact remains, however, that in many areas, audiences will not readily travel outside their own areas.

Nevertheless, it is worth devoting time and resources to tempt audiences into suitable venues. Not only does this serve the long-term ends of the development of community drama by allowing work to be seen to its best advantage, but it also serves to widen the "mental geography" of the audiences in question.

As Martin Lynch has observed city centre bombings no longer keep young people out of the city for very long. "There is a renewed sense of *Belfast* as a community."

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## *Training*

Training, the other recurring theme, is spoken of in many contexts. Sometimes it is for local people to acquire skills as theatre workers. Sometimes it is for administration. One person spoke of the difficulty of having so many one-person organisations where all that could be done was to "keep things ticking over", preventing any true development. The implication was that even one additional worker could radically increase the effectiveness of the organisation.

Calls for training took two main forms: practical learning opportunities for those actively involved in community drama, and more specialised vocational training for professional Community Drama practitioners.

### **Participants**

Training for participants in Community Drama in everything from performance skills to stage lighting is also high on the agenda for most groups. Two things give hope of developments in this area:

- The establishment of the **Community Arts Forum** with its commitment to creating practical training opportunities for members of its constituent groups.
- The recent success of the Arts Council in securing substantial funding under the **N.O.W. (New Opportunities for Women) Programme** of the European Community. Technical and administrative training is to be prioritised.

One member of a community drama group has made the important point that it is better not to mix professional and amateur participants in training sessions as each group can inhibit the other.

### **Practitioners**

Most people working in community drama have had no specialist training. While it would be undesirable to eliminate the imaginative scope that such a variety of personnel brings to the community drama field, there is a growing demand for more specialists. Untrained workers take longer to acquire the skills needed for this kind of work.

**James King** calls for the training of community drama facilitators to be formally recognised. He also wants proper recognition of drama therapy as a distinct profession. He points out that such trained drama therapists as are working in Northern Ireland are obliged to do work at one remove from their specialist field.

The Basil Deane Report<sup>67</sup> recommended in the context of a new drama school for Northern Ireland that “the possibility of establishing a course in Community Drama should be seriously considered” but there seems little likelihood of the Report being acted upon in the foreseeable future.

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## *Education*

### **BIFHE**

The Performing Arts Department of the Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education (BIFHE) grew out of the Personal Development through Drama Scheme run as part of the Youth Training Scheme and sponsored at the Willowfield premises by the then Rupert Stanley College. Led by **Malcolm Smith, Rosie Turner** and **Mike Maloney**, the course developed into a properly resourced training centre for the performing arts with its own studio theatre. More recently, they have started to run BTEC courses as part of the new Institute of Further and Higher Education.

The course also runs a centre at Whiterock in West Belfast which attracts an almost exclusively Catholic intake. The Willowfield building in East Belfast (a former Catholic primary school) continues to attract a mixed intake.

Because of its buildings all over Belfast, BIFHE is in a strong position to facilitate cross-community drama work, and the performing arts department are currently looking at the possibility of a special initiative in the Shankill area.

The Department also run community drama courses in both centres. Because of constantly increasing financial pressures within the Institute, however, these courses are under threat. Every course is now expected to be financially self-sufficient, and a high proportion of participants in these courses are in concessionary categories.

The capacity of the college to offer informal help and advice has also been greatly reduced by the growing emphasis on every service offered by college staff being costed.

Over the years, the Willowfield course has contributed a wide variety of individuals to the local theatre community, including several professional actors. It has also given many of those working in the technical aspects of theatre their first hands-on experience of sophisticated theatre equipment.

BTEC Courses in the performing arts are also based at Newtownabbey and Derry.

### **University of Ulster**

The Theatre Studies course is now well established at the Coleraine campus of the University of Ulster and former students are now making an increasing impact on the local theatre scene. Community drama forms part of the course and graduates of UU tend to have a clear, almost doctrinaire vision of this aspect of their work. Significantly, companies like **Out & Out** and **Scarecrow**, whose members have all studied at Coleraine, mix their own performance work with community drama very readily. They tend to interact little with other theatre professionals in the province.

### **Queen's University**

By contrast to the University of Ulster, Queen's offers no encouragement at all for students to participate actively in drama. Perhaps, because of this there is an active drama society (Dramsoc) which takes its turn at hosting the annual Irish

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<sup>67</sup> *Professional Training in the Performance Arts in Northern Ireland*, (Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 1991)

Student Drama Festival. (Interestingly, the University of Ulster never participates in this). Dramsoc, rather than Queen's, has given rise to several independent theatre companies, of which the most notable now is **Tinderbox**. Queen's graduates tend to be less active in Community Drama, David Calvert of Neighbourhood Open Workshop being a significant exception.

### **Teacher-Training Colleges**

**Stranmillis College** enjoys some of the best facilities for drama of any third level institution in Ireland, and **Hamish Fyfe** heads an active drama department there. The College has enjoyed conspicuous success at recent (UK.)National Student Drama Festivals, but tends to feed far fewer graduates into the professional theatre than used to be the case in the late 1970s.

**Saint Mary's** and **Saint Joseph's Colleges** also offer some drama training.

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## *Transport*

Transport is a vital pre-requisite for most cross-community work. It is needed to bring together both audience and participants from different traditions. It can be among the most costly aspects of cross-community drama programmes. In the light of the Transport Research Group's recent report<sup>68</sup>, it is evident that there is a lot of work needed to improve the availability to community groups of the under-used transport stock of public bodies such as the Education and Library Boards. Such a development could be enormous benefit to many aspects of community drama work.

From a practical production standpoint, the availability of the Arts Council's van has been of great use. This is made available to community drama groups at a nominal cost and is invaluable for the movement of scenery and props.

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## *Administration*

Several groups commented on the growing demands of administration. Fund-raising, planning, and publicity all take time. In professionally-based groups this can be an exhausting additional drain on resources. In voluntary groups it can often be an intimidating responsibility. The emphasis on training administrators in the recent N.O.W.(New Opportunities for Women) training proposal is very welcome in this context. But the administrative needs of professional groups such as the other N.O.W. (Neighbourhood Open Workshops) and Dock Ward also need to be urgently addressed.

At the same time, groups should be aware of the danger of administration sucking in time that would be better directed towards the creative process. There can be a danger of groups ending up "playing at offices"<sup>69</sup> and losing sight of the main purpose of their work.

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## **Marginalised Age-groups**

The Priestley Report identifies age as one cause of cultural disenfranchisement. At one extreme are the old for whom specialised theatre provision is beginning to become a reality in parts of Great Britain. This development has been highlighted by the programme for the 1993 European Year of Older People. So far, there are

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<sup>68</sup>*The transport needs and resources for groups in Northern Ireland.*(The Transport Research Group, March 1992)

<sup>69</sup> Chrissie Poulter

few examples of this area of work in Northern Ireland apart from a few reminiscence projects. Since this area of work tends to be associated with DHSS premises such as day centres, it also brings another public agency into the arts arena.

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## *Young People*

Many of those interviewed have stressed the special needs of young people. Youth theatre is one of the best established areas of community arts provision throughout the province, and represents an interesting mix of statutory and private provision.

With the youth service becoming more aware of the possibilities offered by the arts there is an insatiable demand for workshops and training both for youth leaders and with young people themselves. Pilot projects of this kind have been carried out by the W.E.L.B and the N.E.E.L.B. and by **The Rainbow Factory**, but a long-term strategy is required to address adequately the growing need in this area.

There is also a need to temper the initial enthusiasm of the youth sector with an understanding of the specialised requirements of drama work. It is very difficult to do effective drama workshops in either a sports hall or a general meeting place where there tend to be many distractions. One youth theatre worker reports having to give a workshop in a playbus!

Perhaps the most helpful analogy is with sport. It is quite possible to have occasional drama workshops, just as youth club member can throw a ball around or have a game of pool. But real benefits only come from drama when there is some measure of commitment as to a team sport. The main difference between drama and sport in this respect is that drama is non-competitive.

Drama for young people has several distinct manifestations:

### **Theatre-in-Education(TIE)**

This is best represented in Northern Ireland by **Replay Theatre Company**, but **Big Telly**, **Stage Beyond** and the English company **Kent Performance** (who run extended workshops in schools) are also working in this field. It is important to realise that this is a highly specialised area concerned with using theatre as a teaching tool. It is not just a question of doing plays in schools. The related area of Theatre-in-Schools(TIS) is more concerned with presenting curricular texts in a school context. This has its own value, but does not have same flexibility, or relevance for community relations.

### **Youth Theatre**

Despite the extensive existing provision in this area, there is still enormous scope for growth. A possibility of a special Development Agency for youth theatre should be seriously considered by all interested agencies. To date, the Arts Council have assumed this role virtually alone. But recent initiatives by the Belfast City Council and Youth Action point the way to fuller co-operation in this important field.

### **Young People's Theatre**

This represents the third side of the youth drama triangle - the provision of professional theatre for young people. There are two important principles in this work:

- That it presents high quality theatre tailor-made for a young audience.
- That it engages that audience in the process of preparing the play through workshops and discussions with young people in advance of the production itself.

It is for this purpose that the new **Virtual Reality Theatre Company** has been established.

Active participation in drama will not be a practical possibility for many young people. Young People's Theatre provides an essential complement to participatory youth theatre activity.

Virtual Reality is seeking to target the 16-25 age-group on the grounds that this section of the community fall between school drama provision and the older age-range usually represented in conventional theatre audiences.

### **Children's Theatre**

There is a growing awareness of the need to develop specialised theatre for children under 16. One manifestation of this is the proposed £2.8m Children's Cultural Centre in Dublin's Temple Bar area.

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## *A Young People's Theatre Centre*

The growing needs of the various groups and organisations working in theatre for young people raises the possibility of a specialist facility that would allow them all better to coordinate their work. Office and rehearsal space could be shared by participatory youth theatre groups such as the **Ulster Youth Theatre** and **Belfast Youth & Community Drama** and professional companies like **Replay** and **Virtual Reality**. Professional requirements for space tend to be within conventional working hours. Youth Theatre works mainly in the evenings and at weekends. Their needs are therefore complementary.

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## **Possible Ways Forward**

### *Pooled Resources*

Many groups suggested that there should be a pool of technical equipment available to community drama groups. While this has obvious practical attractions the maintenance implications of such a scheme should not be underestimated and would probably be beyond the resources of the Community Arts Forum in its initial stages. Even the Arts Council with a full-time Technical Officer has difficulty in adequately maintaining its own lighting stock.

One solution might be to house such equipment at the Performing Arts Course at Willowfield where students could be supervised in maintenance duties and perhaps even provide technical support for groups.

Another option would be to negotiate special rates for community groups with a commercial operation like Stage Services North who can be relied on to service, maintain and update lighting equipment on a regular basis.

In their submission to the Priestley Report, the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust suggested that Local Authorities take on responsibility for providing technical support facilities for drama in their own area, with perhaps more than one Council combining for this purpose.

In practice technical needs are not among the most urgent considerations for most community drama groups when compared to premises and effective administration. They can, however, assume a disproportionate significance when viewed by groups bewildered by the wide range of technical possibilities confronting them. It is also an obvious head of expense under which to apply for funding. Such funding requests should be treated circumspectly.

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## *Martin Lynch's idea of "Three Year Teams"*

An extension of the idea of pooled resources, is Martin Lynch's dream of trained specialist Community Drama Team who would be funded on a three-year basis to develop long-term projects. The continuity of personnel and expertise offered by such an approach would clearly be of immense value.

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## *The Role of the Churches*

A final note in this chapter on the potential role of the churches in the development of Community Drama. While most community drama workers tend to be secular in outlook, there are examples of ecumenical schemes like Youth Initiatives, and Church-inspired initiatives like the plays in Saint Peter's Cathedral. On the other hand, the limitation of a church-based approach can be seen in the Shankill area where church going has been estimated at less than 10%.

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## *Regional Development*

It is meaningless to compare the state of community drama elsewhere in Northern Ireland with that in Belfast and 'Derry after fifteen years' consistent development.

There is a need to devise a special strategy for the rest of the province, which would include the maximisation of the many excellent resources that exist outside Belfast. In particular the Riverside and Ardhowen Theatres should be encouraged in their outreach work.

Because smaller communities tend to be more integrated, the emphasis on areas of disadvantage which has characterised community drama in Belfast and 'Derry is less appropriate. The association between Community Drama and disadvantage may even have had an inhibiting effect on its development in other areas of the province. *The Fair Day* example in Warrenpoint shows that this does not have to be the case.

The role in a regional community drama strategy of amateur drama, which tends to have a broader class base outside the main conurbation, should also be addressed.

More small-scale professional touring outside Belfast can also be a stimulus for the development of participatory work. This point is developed in the next chapter.

### **Brownlow**

Brownlow is the collective name for a number of estates in the "new town" area of Craigavon. Conceived by the planners as "The Town in the Country" it has turned out to be a loose collection of scattered housing developments with little sense of community or cohesion. The problems of the area are characterised by the lack of adequate transport. A road system that was designed for 80,000 people in two-car families now has a population of 8,000 with 1,000 cars between them. The complex layout of the area makes public transport a nightmare.

The implications of this in community relations terms were set out in a recent report for the Community Relations Council by the Transport Research Group:

"In Craigavon there are areas which have a mixed population and ones where the population is either exclusively or predominantly of one religion or the other. For people from uni-denominational areas to come into contact with people of the other religion or political standpoint they have to travel at least to the neutral territories in the area. Those

dependent on public transport . . . have restricted opportunities of mixing as part of their social, economic or educational activities.”<sup>70</sup>

For Berni Smith, Unemployed Projects Officer with the Brownlow Community Trust, poor transport is just one of the problems inhibiting effective community development. Three quarters of all unemployed people in Brownlow have no qualifications. Self-esteem tends to be low, as is the level of participation in activities.

For these reasons the success of a large-scale Community Arts Day in February 1991 was especially encouraging. The day offered a taster in a wide range of art forms including visual and performing arts. There was a good attendance from all over the area, and although transport was advertised as available, in the main, people made their own efforts to attend. The one major oversight was the absence of provision for child care. This has been addressed in subsequent projects.

Brownlow Community Arts Group grew out of this initial event and a May Festival is now promoted by a separate but related group.

Smith points out that poverty denies access to culture. She speaks highly of the Artist-in-the-Community scheme, which has opened up real opportunities for local people to participate in visual arts activities.

She is disappointed that the Local Authority's Community Relations Officer has not seen the Trust's community arts work to be relevant for support.

She welcomes the revision of the local arts committee's remit to emphasise equality of opportunity for participation in and enjoyment of the arts. But she fears that the implications of this commitment in terms of altering the nature of the arts programme is not properly understood.

Brownlow is particularly interesting in the context of this report for the relative absence of community drama activity despite the developing community arts infrastructure. This may well be because of the greater demands drama places on resources than many other art forms. There is a clear need to be an urgent need to identify ways of taking advantage of the potential for such developments in the locality as part of a broader strategy for the development of community drama outside 'Derry and Belfast.

In the broader context of Craigavon there are already signs that the Borough is giving a lead in this direction. Rosaleen McMullan, the local Arts Development Officer currently promotes a systematic series of professional theatre productions in the newly re-equipped Portadown Town Hall with the express strategic intention of building a wider and more consistent audience for theatre. She also wants to make Lurgan Town Hall a centre of excellence for participatory workshops. Strong local initiatives such as this should be strongly encouraged.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup>*The transport needs and resources for groups in Northern Ireland.*(The Transport Research Group, March 1992)

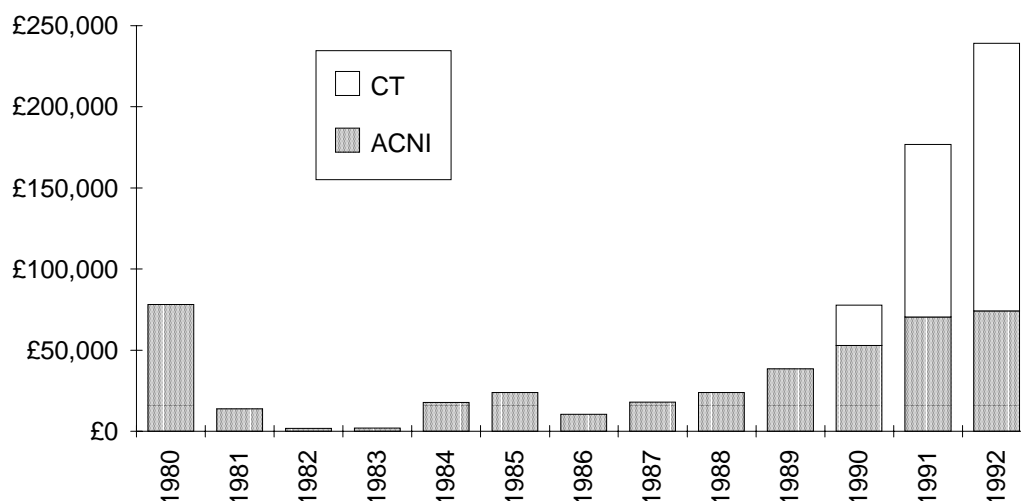
<sup>71</sup>See also: **Examples** - The Dolly Mixtures

# Theatre Companies

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## Smaller-Scale Professional Theatre

**Arts Council Spending on Smaller-scale Drama  
(including Cultural Traditions)**



Notes: Expenditure in 1980 was on Interplay, the TIE Company.  
In 1984 Charabanc began to be funded by the Arts Council after a year of A.C.E. funding.  
In 1990, Replay's Cultural Traditions Funding became routed through the Arts Council.

As is clear from the above chart, the growth of smaller-scale professional theatre in Northern Ireland has been enormous in recent years. This has been made possible, partly by increased funding from the core Arts Council budget, but mainly by reliance on Cultural Traditions funding. This has created serious problems for some companies which are discussed below and in the next chapter.

Theatre Companies come and go. Some last more than ten years. Many do not survive their first production. For the purposes of this report, it has been decided to focus on companies that have a realistic continuity of activity throughout the

year. This may be in the form of full-time administration, or a lesser form of continual planning. This definition excludes companies brought together for one-off projects and where there is no clear intention of creating a permanent organisation. It should be pointed out, however, that many long-lived companies began life in just such an *ad hoc* manner.

At the upper end, building based companies and companies touring mainly to larger venues have been excluded. **Charabanc Theatre Company** has been also been included since although it operates increasingly in the middle-scale its origins are in smaller-scale work, of which it was very much the pioneer in Northern Ireland.

The question of smaller-scale theatre provision is a related but quite distinct area of provision from Community Drama but many of the same issues apply. The work of such companies can provide contexts for social interaction on a non-competitive basis, and can also provide a forum for exploring difficult ideas.

The problem with professional provision of this kind, however, are that the nature of the interaction (as an audience) is not as profound as when people come together to perform. This can be extended by associating workshops and discussions with the event, but this is not always a natural development for many companies who are uncomfortable with and ill-equipped for direct contact with their audiences. TIE companies such as Replay are clearly an exception to this general conclusion, but equally this work is arguably at its most valuable outside a school context.

It is necessary, however, to establish some basis for assessing in advance what theatre productions are likely to be effective in this way. Many Community Relations Officers currently apply a test of thematic relevance. This has proved to be an unsatisfactory test. Dull appropriate work is bound to be less effective than inspired work that perhaps seems less “relevant”.

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## The Question of Relevance

Trying to assess the relevance of an individual professional theatre production for community relations is like trying to measure it in feet and inches. Theatre by its very nature operates on an intuitive basis. It is highly subjective. It is often said that there are as many plays in a theatre as there are people in the audience, each person bringing their own insights to it.

Consider the **Tinderbox** production of *Independent Voice* discussed at the end of this chapter. For many promoters this was an unattractive proposition precisely because it addressed difficult local issues. One Community Relations Officer, when it was described to her, thought she would be unlikely to help promote such contentious work because of a possibly negative reaction in the local council.

Another Community Relations Officer felt **Charabanc's** recent production of *The House of Barnarda Alba* would not have been relevant to a community relations or cultural traditions agenda.

The question raised by both these positions is what then is a Cultural Tradition? Must it be uncontentious? Must it be backward looking? If the work being done by our contemporary young theatre companies is not part of our culture, how then is that culture to be defined so as to exclude it?

The point behind these somewhat polemical questions is this. Theatre cannot be expected to fit within a policy-led agenda like jelly in a mould. Artists make theatre (or should make theatre) because they feel they have something important to say about the society they live in. Often this is best done indirectly through allegory or in a parallel situation to our own. Take the example of **Charabanc's** production of *The Stick Wife*. On the face of it, a play about the American Deep South has passing relevance to our own small world. And yet that

story of a family coping with a concealed murderer in their midst had powerful resonances for local audiences.

It is the lateral nature of the connections theatre can make with our own reality that makes it such an effective tool for widening our imaginations.

Funders in the community relations field need some acceptable justification for supporting professional theatre work. But this must be based on a better mutual understanding between theatre companies and local authority community relations officers about each other's needs and aspirations. It must also be on equal terms. Companies like **Big Telly** who have tried to tailor-make their work to suit a cultural relations brief inevitably feel compromised. Their work is likely to be poorer as a result.

This is not an argument for giving theatre companies *carte blanche*. They must operate in good faith. But they must also operate within the spirit of true two-way partnership with the community relations sector.

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## Economic Implications

One important additional aspect of professional theatre provision, and one that is perhaps of most relevance in regional centres, is its capacity to further community development in economic terms. There are many examples in the Republic of Ireland of theatre companies emerging in quite small towns. Where this has happened, this has not only created employment but has also provided a boost to community morale and even tourism.

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### *The Waterford Example*

A good example of the beneficial effects for community development of the emergence of a local theatre company can be found in Waterford. In 1985 a group of actors began to work together on a purely voluntary basis. By 1987 they were operating on a job creation scheme, and had received their first £1,000 from the Irish Arts Council. In 1988 they went fully professional and in 1991 they won the overall Bank of Ireland Arts Award for their production of a new play by their Artistic Director, Jim Nolan.

This brief summary of their work ignores the considerable personal sacrifices that lie behind the success of Red Kettle Theatre Company. But their story is inspirational when viewed in the context of the relative absence of regional theatre initiatives in Northern Ireland.

The only comparable Northern Ireland examples are Field Day in 'Derry and the O'Casey Theater Company during their time in Newry. But each of these differ from Red Kettle in being much less rooted in the local community, the emphasis for both being more on national and international touring.

In the words its General Manager, T.V. Honan, "Red Kettle had the responsibility of establishing the principle of professional theatre in Waterford". In practice, this entailed involving the whole community in every aspect of their work, from suppliers to publicans.

The success of Red Kettle has encouraged a wide range of other theatre activities including a very active youth theatre. Equally, Red Kettle has never had a monopoly on theatre in Waterford. There have been many initiatives over the years, mostly stemming from the enthusiasm of Ted O'Regan, a local teacher, to whom most of the native Waterford theatre community acknowledge a profound debt. His work with young people in the 1970s and 1980s laid the foundations for much that has followed.

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## *Newry - a northern Waterford?*

In many ways, Newry represents a northern parallel to Waterford. The number of professional actors to have come out of Newry in the last fifteen years is truly astounding. In the main, they owe their interest in theatre to one man - local teacher, **Sean Hollywood**.

The reasons why a native theatre company has never emerged in Newry must in the end come down to lack of investment. All the Waterford groups ultimately depended on one form of job creation scheme or another. In Newry, when economic development money was put into theatre it was directed at the O'Casey Theater Company, a group who had no real connection with the town. A successful local initiative depends on a balance of global and local authority funding, and the O'Casey Theater Company failed to win the confidence of the Newry & Mourne District Council. They have now re-located to the Riverside Theatre in Coleraine.

It is not too late to recognise the latent potential for a truly indigenous initiative. It cannot happen without the existence of key artistic and administrative personnel, but there are many successful theatre professionals with strong local credentials who might be tempted back given the right circumstances. The pattern in the Republic suggests, however, that the starting point must be with people permanently resident in the town.

Ultimately, the main difference between Newry and Waterford is that in Waterford the local talent remained there. In Newry it has mainly gone away. Newry's loss has been the Abbey Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company's gain!<sup>72</sup>

If such an initiative were contemplated for Newry, it would be important to see it as a medium- to long-term process. It took Red Kettle more than five years to become properly established. But on the basis of the work already to have come out of Newry it would seem to be an investment worth the making.

Newry, as a border town, is well-placed to take advantage of the growing range of European funding sources, many of which stress the need for participation by groups in more than one EC country.

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## **Specific Companies**

### *Big Telly*

#### **Origins**

Big Telly Theatre Company was set up in 1987 by **Zoë Seaton** and **Jill Holmes**, graduates of the Theatre Studies Course of the University of Kent at Canterbury, where they had specialised in directing in their final year. They originally worked mostly at the Flowerfield Arts Centre in Portstewart and retain their office there.

#### **Current Work**

The group have maintained a prolific output throughout their history, mainly generating their own scripts, but also developing a relationship with the Hull Truck Company's repertoire. They have worked more or less equally for children and for a general audience.

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<sup>72</sup>E.g. John Lynch, Susan Lynch, Gerard Murphy.

They have been described as “the ideal Cultural Traditions company” - a description which they consider ruefully ironic. While they have shown a genuine enthusiasm for working with the community relations sector on certain projects, there is a real sense in which they now feel trapped by their dependence on Cultural Traditions funding. One of their plays *Cut & Dried* had actually to be adapted to suit Cultural Traditions criteria when they discovered that this was the source of their funding.

The problem they face is not so much the principle that their work should serve community relations ends, but the narrowness of the criteria governing the head of Cultural Traditions money that comes to them from the Arts Council. Because this is actually Department of Education funding channelled through the Arts Council it has to be applied to productions catering for people under the age of 25. This distinction seems arbitrary when viewed from the perspective of a professional theatre company whose policy is not exclusively educationally oriented. It is one of the most problematic aspects of the area covered by this report and is discussed in more detail elsewhere<sup>73</sup>.

From Big Telly's point of view, while they are under no actual coercion to accept Cultural Traditions funding, it has been made clear to them by the Arts Council that in the present funding climate there is little likelihood of significant funding from other sources.

### **Development Needs**

Apart from the need for a less restrictive funding regime, the company are eager to work with a wider range of writers. They would also like to vary the nature of their work and explore a more multi-disciplinary approach.

As for the community relations aspects of their work, they are keen to retain a commitment to this, but feel that this needs to be less of a one-way process. At present the community relations sector tends to set the agenda for and dictate all the terms of such work. Big Telly believes that theatre companies need to have a greater input and be able to engage in constructive dialogue with community relations officers towards a better mutual understanding of how best theatre can serve community relations ends.

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## *Centrestage*

### **Origins**

Set up as a drama school in 1985, Centrestage also operates with increasing frequency as a production company.

### **Current Work**

The company has produced a number of independent theatre productions in recent years. Their next production about Louis MacNeice and W.R. Rodgers is being supported by the Community Relations Council.

### **Development Needs**

For four years, Centrestage maintained a teaching studio in central Belfast which also provided rehearsal premises. While they would not lightly take on the financial burdens of a permanent space which is rarely used on a full-time basis, there would be clearly advantages to them (in common with many companies listed here) in having easy access to suitable rehearsal space.

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<sup>73</sup> See: **Funding**

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## *Charabanc Theatre Company*

### **Origins**

Founded under a Department of Economic Development A.C.E. (Action for Community Employment) Scheme, Charabanc were the trail-blazers of independent theatre in Northern Ireland. Consisting originally of five women actors (**Marie Jones, Maureen McAuley, Eleanor Methven, Carol Scanlan, and Brenda Winter**), Charabanc re-invented theatre in Belfast. They began very much in the spirit of community theatre, researching their plays among the people they were to perform to, and making their work relevant and accessible to that audience. Their first play *Lay Up Your Ends*, was directed by **Pam Brighton** and written by **Martin Lynch** who provided much advice and support for the company during its early development. The play made an enormous impact on the way theatre was seen in the city. Suddenly there was a new audience for theatre, and Charabanc nurtured that audience for several years. They also attracted a substantial section of the existing theatre audience who were looking for new and challenging work after the lean years of the 1970s.

### **Current Work**

With the passage of years, Charabanc's work has evolved and changed. Maureen McAuley, Brenda Winter and then Marie Jones all left the company, each to pursue successful careers. Brenda Winter set up **Replay Theatre Company**, and Marie Jones now writes prolifically for television, radio and stage. Carol Scanlan and Eleanor Methven remain as joint Artistic Directors, and make no apology that their policy has adapted to changing circumstances. They now seek to address a broader repertoire, but they remain firm in their primary commitment to widening opportunities for women who have for so long been drastically under-represented in Irish theatre.

There are those who regret that they are no longer the powerhouse of radical drama in the province. But this mantle they have passed to others, having done much to create the climate in which younger companies can now develop.

### **Development Needs**

Over the years, Charabanc has slowly climbed up the Arts Council's funding ladder. Recently, they have made a stand against what they see as the dangerous reliance on Cultural Traditions funding to support the developing drama programme of the Arts Council. They view the criteria governing this funding to be incompatible with the current breadth of their work.

They still operate on a frugal basis and Carol Scanlan and Eleanor Methven share the Artistic Director's salary between them. They are now an established and experienced production management, but still need security of funding to be able to develop effectively. They are strong advocates of three-year funding agreements with the Arts Council to allow for essential advance planning. They point out that this is the lead time for a new play from commission to production.

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## *Dubbeljoint Theatre Company*

### **Origins**

Dubbeljoint was set up in 1991 **Pam Brighton**, Mark Lambert and **Marie Jones** to produce *Hang All the Harpers*, and received funding from both parts of Ireland for that project.

## Current Work

They are now operating mainly as a middle-scale company, but have also produced two smaller-scale productions. All their work so far has been with new plays, including a re-writing of Gogol's masterpiece, *The Government Inspector*, to an Irish setting by Marie Jones.

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## *Hole in the Wall*

Not strictly a professional theatre company, this comedy group nonetheless constantly address community relations issues in their satirical revues.

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## *Mad Cow*

### Origins

Set up in 1992 by **Simon Magill** and **Jackie Doyle**, Mad Cow represents a reaction against what the company see as the inward-looking nature of Irish theatre. Their main aim is to present the best of world theatre and to be outward-looking in their approach.

### Current Work

The company presented a highly acclaimed production of **Two** by Jim Cartwright at the Old Museum during the 1992 Belfast Festival at Queen's and are planning another production in the Spring of 1994.

Although the company profess no interest in community relations as such, their policy begs the question whether community relations priorities are not in themselves excessively inward and backward looking if they exclude this company's preferred area of work.

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## *Out & Out*

### Origins

This company was set up by graduates of the Theatre Studies course at the University of Ulster at Coleraine. They were based at first at the Old Museum Arts Centre but now rent their own studio space in Donegall Street.

### Current Work

The group work together closely and share an equal commitment to their work in the community and their own performance work. They see the one as a natural extension of the other. The community arts work helps them to make contact with the place they are working in.

In addition to their own performance programme, they are currently engaged in a number of long-term projects with the Belfast Education and Library Board using drama for the pastoral care of children with behaviour and discipline problems. This has led to workshops with professional workers in this field and the families of the young people involved. The initiative for this project came from Out & Out and was facilitated by Roger Kelly of the B.E.L.B.

On the performance side of their work they are planning a production of David Rudkin's Northern Ireland allegory, *The Saxon Shore*. This is a difficult play, both intellectually and technically, but it has palpable community relations significance.

## Development Needs

The group have undertaken a number of EMU (Education for Mutual Understanding) and community relations projects but believe that the timescale for these has tended to be too short. It has proved impossible to develop the work properly in one or two isolated sessions. Using drama as a means of addressing deep-rooted questions like prejudice is only of value where there is time to acquire the trust of participants. Very often, by the time a project has reached this stage the money has run out. This leads to frustration on all sides.

The group are keen to develop their work with the mentally disabled and are aware of the need to educate funders about this area of drama provision which is neither widely acknowledged nor understood. They stress the need for team teaching, drawing on the resources of the whole group.

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## *Point Fields Theatre Company*

### Origins

Point Fields' first production was *Rinty* by **Martin Lynch** at the Group Theatre and on tour in 1990. In 1992 they produced two plays by new writers, **Owen McCafferty's** *Winners, Losers and Non-Runners* (directed by Martin Lynch) and **Hugh Murphy's** *Justice* (directed by **Joe Devlin**) at the Old Museum Arts Centre.

### Current Work

The company are planning a production of *Manos Arriba*, a new play by Martin Lynch at the Arts Theatre in February 1994, and a Studio Season of four commissioned works scheduled for performance at the Old Museum Arts Centre in April.

### Development Needs

Although already having a substantial production record, Point Fields are still in the process of setting up formally as a full-time theatre company and need office space and "start-up" equipment. They also stress the need for effective administration and adequate funding to fulfil their primary aim of commissioning plays from new writers.

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## *Replay Productions*

### Origins

For a long time, Theatre-in-Education (TIE) in Northern Ireland has been seen to fall outside conventional funding categories. The Arts Council of Northern Ireland acknowledged the importance of this area of provision but, unable to meet existing funding needs, were reluctant to take on additional responsibilities. In the 1970s they funded Interplay to tour curriculum texts to schools. Many of the Province's current theatre community owe their first taste of professional theatre to this company.

But the Interplay initiative was more a response to the virtual collapse of Northern Ireland's traditional theatre infrastructure in the face of the Troubles than a commitment to TIE *per se*. As conventional theatre began to regain confidence in the late 1970s resources returned to the mainstream, the Arts Council regarding the Department of Education as the appropriate body to fund TIE.

In 1988, the Belfast City Council Centenary celebrations provided support for Replay Theatre Company, under the leadership of **Brenda Winter** to stage its

first production, *Under Napoleon's Nose* by **Marie Jones** (from an original script by Jonathan Bardon).

Although a significant success, this first production also showed up the structural inadequacies of the fledgling company. There was also the problem of future funding, since the City Council support had been expressly on a one-off basis. Theatre-in-Education only exists in Northern Ireland today because of Cultural Traditions funding. Although this is now channelled through the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, it is clearly designated as Cultural Traditions money. While this has enabled the Arts Council to associate itself with Theatre-in-Education it also begs two questions:

- What are the special characteristics of Cultural Traditions money that permitted the Arts Council to make an effective about turn on their position with regard to Theatre-in-Education?
- What would happen if Cultural Traditions money ceased to be available as a separate category of funding within the Arts Council's budget?

These questions are considered further in the following chapter.

### **Current Work**

Since 1988 Replay has grown into a full-time company employing three full-time staff. They have extended their work to include "Living History" projects, and have become one of the main commissioners of new theatre writing in Ireland. They have toured extensively outside Northern Ireland and have won numerous awards. Their hallmark has continued to be a steadfast commitment to local themes, local artists and writers and, above all, to their young local audiences. In the nature of their work, they provide a telling example of the educational capacity of theatre, but they have contributed in equal measure to the artistic development of theatre in Northern Ireland.

### **Development Needs**

The company is now working to the limit of their present resources. Demand from schools for each show always far exceeds the number of performances available. The company is also outgrowing its single office at the Old Museum Arts Centre. In the longer term they would like to be able to move out into premises of their own that would provide space for rehearsal, office storage and set-making. They would also welcome a clear government policy statement on the role of Theatre-in-Education. The company is presently funded mainly through the Arts Council from Cultural Traditions sources, a position that carries with it an uncertain future.

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## *Scarecrow Theatre Company*

### **Origins and Aims**

Set up in September 1991 by **Paul McVeigh** and **Siofra Campbell**, both graduates of the Theatre Studies course at the University of Ulster, the company aims to experiment with new styles of performance and to make the work as available to as wide an audience as possible.

### **Current Work**

In addition to a number of original theatre pieces of an experimental nature they have become heavily involved in community relations oriented workshops aimed mainly at the 5-10 age-group. Their first such work for Ligoniel Community

Centre was much appreciated by the local organisers<sup>74</sup>, and has resulted in several return invitations.

Their most recent production visited the 1993 Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

Scarecrow were also the main initiators of the **Armada Festival** as a co-ordinated platform for emerging companies.

### **Development Needs**

At present, Scarecrow live very much from hand to mouth with their workshop practice subsidising their performance work. More secure funding would allow them to consolidate and develop their work. In this respect they are the same as many of the newer theatre companies.

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## *Sightlines Theatre Company*

### **Origins**

Formed in May 1990 by graduate members of Queen's Dramsoc, **Tom Gorman**, **Bridgheen McWade**, and **Alan McKee**, this company has maintained a significant production record since then, but their long-term intentions are still not clear.

### **Current Work**

The company will present *Dogman!*, adapted from the Bulgakov novel *The Heart Of A Dog*, and directed by **Eamon Quinn**, as part of the 1993 Belfast Festival at Queen's.

### **Development Needs**

Sightlines have still to attract meaningful Arts Council recognition, and this would be an essential condition for their longer-term development. For their part, the company still need to assert a more convincing commitment to working together in the medium to long term.

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## *Stage Beyond*

### **Origins**

Consisting mainly of former members of **4D Theatre Company**, Stage Beyond have toured one production so far.

### **Current Work**

*Too Much Punch for Judy* - adapted from an existing script to a Northern Ireland context was commissioned by the Department of the Environment Road Safety Office, and sponsored by Dupont. The company performed and gave workshops for six weeks in schools all over the 'Derry area and are aware of the huge demand for such work. They have also been contracted by the W.E.L.B. to devise a series of drama workshops for youth leaders.

### **Development Needs**

Stage Beyond would like to develop full-time TIE provision in their own area. They stress the need for systematic training in drama techniques for youth leaders. They are aware that formal youth theatre provision such as the 'Derry Youth Drama Group is only going to attract a small section of the community.

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<sup>74</sup> Grant application to NIVT

Their work with youth leaders so far has convinced them that there is a huge need and demand for more of this kind of work.

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## *The After Eights*

An off-shoot of the **Fringe Benefits Theatre Company**, this revue group (whose core members are **Liz Kennedy** and **Judith West**) presents satirical comedy with a feminist emphasis.

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## *Tinderbox Theatre Company*

### **Origins**

Tinderbox was established by a group of actors, mostly recent graduates of **Queen's University**, in 1988. Throughout their existence they have been closely associated with the Old Museum Arts Centre.

### **Current Work**

The company have produced at least two productions a year for the last three years and have increasingly been specialising in new writing. In addition to their full-scale productions, they have run a number of showcase festivals of new work.

They are aware of the pressure to produce more commercial work for the regional touring circuit, but are anxious to resist this temptation. They have now established themselves as one of the province's most adventurous producing managements, and recently appointed their first full-time administrator which should lead to further consolidation of their position.

The company has two Artistic Directors, **Tim Loane** and **Stephen Wright**, the latter having just completed a year's attachment with the Bush Theatre in London. **Paula McFetridge** is an associate artist of the company.

### **Development Needs**

Given their emphasis on new work and the time required to see a script through from first draft to production, the company need greater advance knowledge of their funding situation. They are also aware of the need to devote more resources to reaching a wider audience<sup>75</sup>, but are limited in this by the "shoestring" nature of their activities.

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## *Virtual Reality*

### **Origins**

Based on a proposal by **David Grant** for specialist professional theatre provision for the 16-25 age-range, Virtual Reality has secured funding from the Central Community Relations Unit for research into how best to identify and interest young audiences in going to the theatre.

### **Current Work**

The company has commissioned a new play from playwright **Gerard Stemberidge** which is due for production in the Spring of 1994. The script will be developed through a series of workshops with actors and constituent members of the target audience.

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<sup>75</sup> See: the Youth Forum Interview at the end of this chapter

## Development Needs

Given that this is an audience that has been traditionally lost to the theatre, it is vital that the process of audience development works hand in hand with the production process of the play itself. This necessarily involves the allocation of greater resources than would be usual for a play of this scale.

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## Youth Forum (Interview)

As part of this research project, a meeting was organised between members of the Belfast City Council's Youth Forum (a cross-community initiative) and **Tinderbox Theatre Company**. The Youth Forum had organised for some of its members to attend a performance of *Independent Voice* by the local playwright, **Gary Mitchell**. This was a new play produced early in 1993 by Tinderbox at the Old Museum.

The young people who had seen the play were impressed by its relevance to their own lives and also by the fact that although it was clearly set in Northern Ireland and was concerned with paramilitarism, it was not specific to either a Catholic or a Protestant community. They welcomed the sense in which theatre could provide an outside view of situations they were familiar with.

None of the young people had been to a professional production before and there was a paradoxical contrast between a widespread prejudice in the group that going to the theatre was a snobbish activity and the sense of pride they said they felt in being able to tell their friends that they had been to see a play.

There were mixed feelings about the accessibility of the Old Museum. The fact that you waited to see the play in a gallery was seen as an advantage since it gave something to do while you were waiting. There was as strong sense that everyone else in the audience knew each other, but the group also agreed that they would feel less intimidated about coming to the Old Museum a second time.

The group also made general comments about the experience of going to the theatre. One was surprised that he was able to sit and concentrate for two hours. It was felt that while first-time theatre-goers might feel a sense of "not knowing the rules", care should be exercised in telling people in advance how to behave as this might be off-putting. It was felt that contact with members of theatre companies in advance would help prepare new audiences for theatre-going. They thought that it was important that the Youth Forum had attended the play through choice and not through any sense of compulsion as might be the case with a school visit, for instance.

The production had been enjoyable and had stimulated considerable informal discussion.

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## Development Needs

Simply by qualifying for inclusion in this category, most of the above companies have successfully addressed many of the threshold problems that beset a new theatre company in its early life. Some degree of funding is reasonably likely. They are now engaged in the fraught process of trying to scale the "funding ladder".

The extraordinary growth in this area of work over the last few years can be seen to have had two main causes:

- The development of better infrastructure (the Old Museum Arts Centre being an important example of this).

- The growing impact of educational and training opportunities (including the Arts Council's Youth Drama Scheme) in promoting the development of a distinct Northern Irish theatre community. Young local actors are staying here. And many that have gone away are coming back.

Obviously, this level of activity can only be sustained through a correlative increase in funding, but these companies have shown great ingenuity in broadening their funding base, sparing the Arts Council the full burden of this mushrooming area of provision. But the increase in Arts Council spending has still been dramatic. As is clear from the chart at the head of this chapter, much of this increased support has come from Cultural Traditions.

The welcome growth in the investment being directed towards smaller-scale theatre has serious implications in the longer-term. Individual actors, technicians and other theatre artists are matching monetary investment by investing in personal terms in training and skill development. Once this area of provision has expanded, it will not be easy for it to contract. Nor should we want it to.

It is essential in the interests of maintaining this important and life-enhancing extension of Northern Irish cultural life that the whole funding structure of smaller-scale theatre be constructively reviewed. Sustaining the additional investment can be justified in terms of cultural traditions. What, after all, is our culture if it is not the current work of our writers and artists?

There is no danger of this position being exploited by commercial interests. By definition, the work of smaller-scale theatre companies can never be commercial. The people who work in this field do so because they believe in the value of the work they do - and this can be defined as much in social as in cultural terms.

There should be a presumption that new local writing for the theatre has relevance for the Cultural Traditions programme. The onus should be on the funders to show otherwise.

Ultimately, how this work is funded is a matter of public policy. What is important is that it continues to be supported, and that this support is secured on a longer-term basis than the existing year by year arrangements.

The more established companies like Charabanc and Tinderbox, who have proved their commitment and expertise are calling for three-year funding agreements. They should be listened to.

How this works in practice, clearly depends on the forward planning allowed to individual funding agencies. But the amounts in question are relatively small, and it should be possible to make longer-term funding commitments subject to there being no major change in overall funding structures.

# Funding

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## Principal Funding Agencies

The wide range of agencies with a current interest in smaller-scale professional theatre and community drama creates a paradoxical problem for groups seeking financial support. Where groups have adequate administration, they can exhaust considerable energy just coping with the multiple applications. In other cases, they may be uncertain where to begin.

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### *The Arts Council of Northern Ireland*

Although there may be some overlap, in general terms the two main areas of this report are dealt with by separate departments within the Arts Council. Smaller-scale professional theatre tends to be supported by the Dance and Drama department (Director: **Denis Smyth**). Community drama is supported from the Community Arts budget of the Combined Arts Department (Acting Director: **Imelda Foley**).

The recent appointment of a new Arts Council may alter these structures, but there is no immediate indication of radical change.

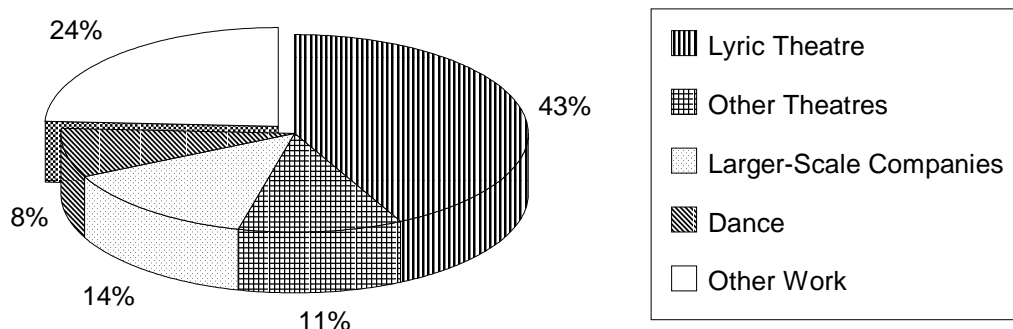
#### **Dance and Drama**

In common with all departments of the Arts Council, the Drama and Dance Department have many more demands on them than they have resources to meet them. In the 1991-2 Financial Year (the most recent for which figures are available) money allocated by the Dance and Drama department of the Arts Council came from two sources. £895,706 came from the Arts Council's own budget. A further £175,000 was administered by the Arts Council on behalf of the Department of Education as part of the Cultural Traditions programme.

Of the Arts Council's own money, 43% of resources available for dance and drama were allocated to the Lyric Theatre. A further 33% went to the other theatres (Arts and Riverside), three larger-scale companies (Theatre Ulster, Field Day and The O'Casey Company) and to dance (including Youth Dance). The remaining 24% had to cover everything else, including a grant to IMPACT 92 in Derry, Charabanc Theatre Company (who were also funded through Cultural Traditions), Tinderbox Theatre Company, a programme grant for the Old

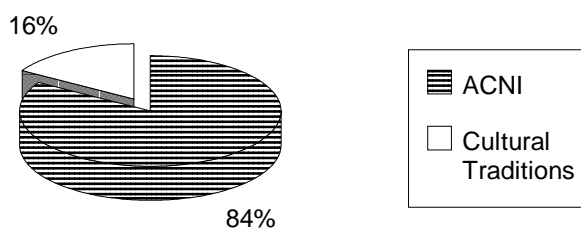
Museum Arts Centre, Theatre Ireland magazine, amateur drama, youth drama, Point Fields, Out & Out Theatre Company, awards and bursaries to individuals, departmental expenses and a wide variety other small grants.

### Dance & Drama



In addition to Charabanc, the Cultural Traditions allocation was divided between Replay Theatre Company, Big Telly Theatre Company, Dubbeljoint (for *Hang All the Harpers*) and youth drama. Following this financial year it was made clear by the Department of Education that because their responsibility only extended to young people up to the age of 25 Cultural Traditions money administered by the Arts Council on their behalf had to be targeted at projects catering for that age group. In view of this stipulation, Charabanc believes that to accept Cultural Traditions funding compromises the flexibility of their artistic policy. Big Telly have striven to bring their programme within the narrower criteria. Replay and youth drama clearly fit comfortably within the new brief.

### The Arts Council and Cultural Traditions



*A substantial slice of the drama cake!*

Apart from the restrictive criteria applying to the Cultural Traditions money channelled through the Arts Council, theatre companies also have other reservations about it. They tend to see it as transitory and uncertain. While it is true that this a separate head of budget and might be withdrawn by a future change of government policy, it is important to note that Cultural Traditions money from the Department of Education comes exclusively from the Department of Finance. This distinguishes it from the Cultural Traditions money channelled through the Central Community Relations Unit at Stormont which includes a high proportion of European Funding which is definitely subject to a time limit.

On the positive side, a special focus on younger people is to be welcomed, particularly in view of the findings of the Arts Council's Public Attitudes Survey<sup>76</sup>, and the recommendations of the Priestley Report<sup>77</sup>. Whether or not money for drama aimed at young people should exclusively be tied to Cultural Traditions, or indeed whether drama relevant to the Cultural Traditions programme should be targeted only at young people is more problematic. In theory, the over 25 age group is the responsibility of the Community Relations Council. The age distinction makes sense in terms of the route the money takes, but to base policy on this practical distinction alone seems arbitrary. It also begs the question of who bears the responsibility of theatre work that crosses the age-barrier in its appeal. Arguably, such a project could seek funding from both the Community Relations Council and the Arts Council. The complexity of existing funding arrangements can prove very perplexing for applicants.

## **Community Arts**

The Arts Council have had a specific community arts budget since 1978 for projects taking place in Belfast and 'Derry. The current funding criteria identify four areas of provision:

1. Grants (allocations between £500 and £5,000)
2. Projects (allocations between £50 and £500)
3. Resource Facilities
4. Community Drama

The Community Drama category is subdivided as follows:

- 4.1. Established Community Drama Groups
- 4.2. Project Funding

The general guidelines for funding community arts are that activity is based in or directed towards a specific community and that adequate standards of skill, qualifications and expertise are available. This tends towards the support of mainly professional input.

Applications for grants are required to be submitted at least one month before Advisory Committee meetings which take place three times a year. Depending on the timing of a particular project, this usually means a lead-time of at least six months. The application procedure under the Projects heading is simpler, with only one month's notice required.

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## *Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust*

The Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust is an independent charitable trust established in 1979 with an initial £500,000 government grant and a promise to match £1 for £1 all sums raised independently. This arrangement has now come to an end and the Trust now has a capital base of £4m. Its aims are "to support and encourage the efforts of voluntary and community groups to tackle the worst effects of Northern Ireland's serious social, economic and community problems".<sup>78</sup> Now one of the main funders in the general area of community arts through its Community Arts Awards Scheme, the NIVT appreciated at an early stage in its development the importance of cultural activity for community development.

In 1986, the Trust's then Director, Hugh Fraser, set up a special Arts Award Scheme with help from the Save and Prosper Trust who wanted to support

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<sup>76</sup> See: **Preliminary Considerations**

<sup>77</sup> See **Preliminary Considerations**

<sup>78</sup>NIVT 1992 Annual Report

education and the arts. Unlike the Arts Council the NIVT scheme extends beyond the main urban centres of Belfast and 'Derry. They stress the need to support activity at local level.

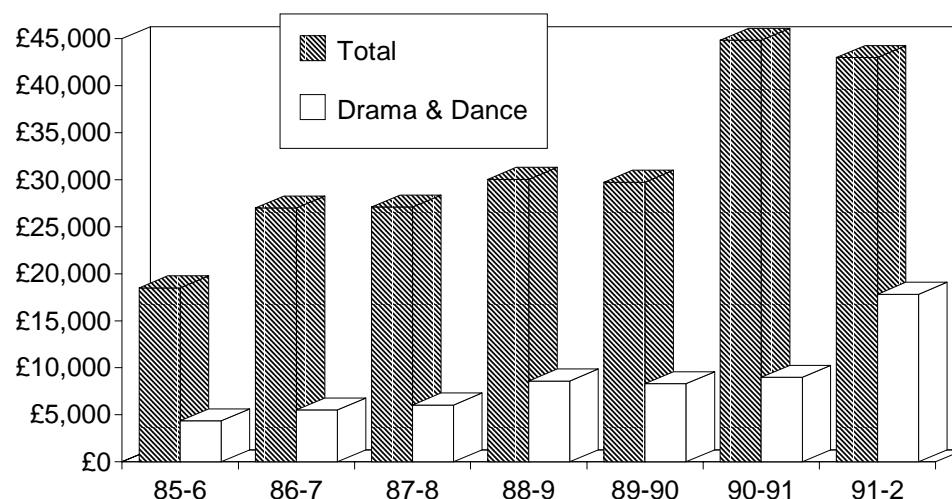
NIVT operates more flexible criteria than ACNI and tends to concentrate on smaller-scale projects. They also provide valuable top-up support for larger undertakings.

In 1991-2 the total grant aid for community arts amounted to £43,000 divided among 101 projects. 37 of these were in the Dance/Drama category and received a total of 42% of the total funds allocated.

Projects supported in this category ranged from professional resource groups like **Neighbourhood Open Workshop** to a Disco Dance group in an individual youth club. NIVT have a policy of assessing each project directly and this in itself helps to improve morale of groups making applications. It also provides a good basis for informal networking.

On average half the projects in each year take place outside Belfast and 'Derry.

### Dance and Drama and the NIVT Community Arts Awards



*A barometer of the growth in Community Drama!*

In its submission to the Priestley Report<sup>79</sup>, the NIVT stressed the importance of proactivity (as distinct to a passive consumer mentality) in community arts. They also recommended greater inter-agency co-operation.

This echoed the findings of a report on the first three years of the Award Scheme<sup>80</sup>. This report recommended a review by the Arts Council of the limitation of its Community Arts programme to Belfast and 'Derry. It also commented unfavourably on the low priority given to the arts by most Local Authorities.

<sup>79</sup>Structures and Arrangements for Funding the Arts in Northern Ireland, July 1992

<sup>80</sup> Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust Community Arts Awards Scheme 1985-1988 - a Review by Mark Robinson

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## *The Community Relations Council*

The Community Relations Council is an independent organisation with three main branches to its work:

- Reconciliation
- Work in the Community
- Cultural Traditions

By commissioning this report, the Cultural Traditions Group of the Community Relations Council have signalled their interest in the area of community drama and small-scale theatre. Given the interconnected social and artistic values of community drama, there seems to be no reason in principle why funding might not also be forthcoming from either or both of the other two groups.

### **The Cultural Traditions Group**

The Cultural Traditions Group has four main areas of operation: Media, Publications, Fellowships and Local Cultural Traditions. It is through the Local Cultural Traditions Programme that the Community Relations Council has so far supported community drama and smaller-scale theatre.

The Community Relations Council receive funding through the Cultural Traditions programme from the Central Community Relations Unit. Most of this finance is sourced from the EC<sup>81</sup>, the remainder directly from the Department of Finance.

Through this scheme they support the Local Cultural Traditions Grant Scheme. The scheme is directed towards community and voluntary groups wishing to develop projects and programmes which are designed to encourage cultural confidence and an acceptance of diversity in Northern Ireland. Because responsibility for the Cultural Traditions Programme as it effects people under 25 is deemed to lie with the Arts Council, the scheme is aimed primarily at projects involving adults.

Local Cultural Traditions projects may involve any of the following processes:<sup>82</sup>

- **Expression:** The performance of cultural traditions - musical, dramatic, linguistic, historic - in ways which are enjoyable, without being triumphalist or sectarian. Such performances need not involve participants with different religious or political affiliations, but must not be exclusive and *should seek to avoid offending the views of non-participants*.<sup>83</sup>
- **Education in Own Cultural Traditions:** Projects which investigate the history, background, origins, derivations, symbolism etc. of cultural expressions. Such projects should seek to include men and women, young and old, and to link the professional expert with the amateur.
- **Exploration of Other Traditions:** Groups and organisations may wish to widen the range of those interested in their projects and enthusiasms, or learn more of the cultural traditions of others, by facilitating access to what has generally been a body of knowledge or cultural tradition limited to one religious or political group. Exhibitions, festivals and performances provide such opportunity.

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<sup>81</sup> Under the Physical and Social Environment Programme of the European Community. The money is designated for Community Reconciliation and is divided between Community Relations and Cultural Traditions programmes. The original grant was of £9m over the three years 1991-3. A further allocation has now been announced.

<sup>82</sup> Cultural Traditions Group leaflet, July 1993.

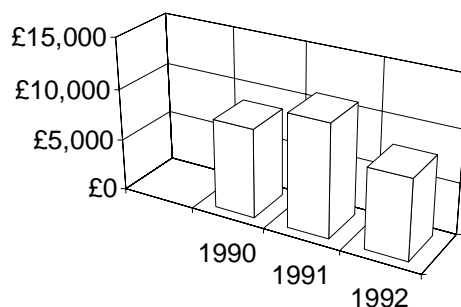
<sup>83</sup> This stipulation might prove problematic for theatre work. If theatre is to challenge, it must almost invariably risk offence.

- **Encounter with Other Traditions:** Groups may be involved in interests which are widely shared on a cross-community basis, and may not want to devise projects which specifically aim to ensure wide participation. Local history and heritage organisations, environmental, literary and language associations, writers', musical, women's and community drama groups are among those involved in such projects.
- **Debate:** Groups may wish to organise workshops, seminars or conferences which address the questions of identity, allegiance, division, diversity, pluralism, etc., in a manner which offers an opportunity for people to discuss these issues in safe, neutral and friendly surroundings.

Community Drama and theatre can provide exceptional opportunities for the furtherance of all these aims. As is evidenced elsewhere in this report, drama is a very effective way of communicating ideas. Because it operates on an intuitive rather than an analytical basis it can often bypass prejudices that would cause resistance to conventional discussion. Because it is less cut and dried it carries with it an element of risk correlative to its capacity to provoke. It is a bad vehicle, however, for polemical or partisan argument since the drama process tends to show both sides of an argument simultaneously.

The CRC is not linked to political structures and has the freedom to be more adventurous. On the whole, Local Authority Community Relations Officers seem reluctant to engage in that risk, often because of the perceived attitude of the councils that employ them.

### Drama Funding by the Cultural Traditions Group




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### *Belfast City Council*

For years the Belfast City Council was accused of a philistine indifference to the arts. In fact, they have long had some level of involvement, particularly at a community level through their Community Services Department. They were not, however, as involved as many progressive City Councils in Great Britain (Glasgow, the GLC etc.) and this served to fuel the indignation of their critics. An alternative view is that they saw the definition of the arts they were called on to support as an élitist one and they looked in vain for a more egalitarian alternative. The fact that they have now extended their funding for "Miscellaneous Arts Grants" (with an emphasis on community arts) in the current year by £150,000 to £250,000 and committed themselves to the appointment of an Arts Officer, can be seen in part as a response to the lobbying of the arts community. But it also indicates that fifteen years after the Arts Council began specifically to fund Community Arts as a discrete category, the egalitarian alternative is now a reality. This support is in addition to that already given to the Ulster Orchestra and the Arts Theatre.

The City Council are also reallocating responsibility for the arts within their committee structure to allow applications for funding to be processed with a greater degree of specialisation. The lead-time of six months will still be a deterrent for many groups, however, and the Council continues to favour projects that will attract publicity, much in the manner of a commercial sponsor.

It is worth noting here that the province's Theatre-in-Education company, **Replay**, owes its existence partly to a one-off Belfast City Council initiative.

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### *'Derry City Council*

For so long synonymous with a developmental arts policy, 'Derry City Council seem now to be reviewing their commitment to the arts in the wake of the highly successful but expensive IMPACT 92 celebrations. It would truly be a tragedy if the role of the arts in promoting the image and economic development of the city was to be allowed to decrease. (Tourism increased substantially in 1992). It is to be hoped that 'Derry City Council decide to renew their commitment to the arts with its accustomed vigour.

Where, as is the case in 'Derry, a significant infrastructure for community arts work exists, it is all the more essential to continue to sustain it and keep it adequately resourced.

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### *Other Local Authority Arts Committees and Officers*

The Arts Council's emphasis in the community arts on 'Derry and Belfast is based on the cultural responsibility placed on Local Authorities by the Recreation and Youth Service Order 1973<sup>84</sup>. Unfortunately, this is vaguely worded, and most Local Authorities outside Belfast and 'Derry (with some notable exceptions) still give inadequate regard to the arts. Perhaps unsurprisingly, community arts continue to have an even lower profile.

It is unreasonable, however, to expect community arts to operate in a vacuum. The predominance of such work in 'Derry and Belfast is only partly because of the concentration of funding and support there. Community drama needs a context. Any project will need to draw on a range of expertise and other resources that are more readily available in a large city. The broader question of how properly to prepare a suitable seed-bed for community drama in smaller centres has still to be properly addressed.

It is unquestionably easier to establish a base for community drama where there is an existing arts officer or arts centre facility.

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### *Local Authority Community Relations Officers*

The need to identify a role for Community Relations Officers in helping to create the political will for a serious commitment to community drama is vital. Cultural arguments alone are easy to set aside in a turbulent political climate. And indeed the case of 'art for art's sake' may well be weaker in such times. But the need to take the arts seriously as an instrument of social amelioration is all the more cogent. By this reasoning, the community arts have an even more pressing claim on our attention than the mainstream.

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<sup>84</sup> "Each district council shall secure the provision for its area of adequate facilities for recreational, social, physical and cultural activities... by financial contributions or otherwise."

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## *Education & Library Boards*

Curricular changes are extending the involvement of the Province's five Education and Library Boards in drama and the arts in general. This process is still at a very early stage, however, and merits encouragement. As is clear from the Appendix, school experience is still of crucial importance in introducing young people to the arts. The Boards also have a wider role to play in supporting extra-curricular arts activity for young people through more imaginative use of the substantial resources under their control. This can be in the form of access to premises and transport as well as hard cash.

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## *Action Teams*

Although having a mainly economic brief, Action Teams have regularly involved themselves with drama. They have supported theatre visits by people in their areas. They have promoted professional touring productions. They have even sponsored the writing of a play (*Weddin's, Wee'ins and Wakes* by **Marie Jones**). It seems that they may be becoming less responsive to activities peripheral to their main function, but given their community development role, a strong case can be made for them retaining an interest in this area.

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## *Department of Economic Development*

Various Training and Employment Agency schemes have at various times served arts development. Most notable was the origination of **Charabanc Theatre Company** as an A.C.E. Scheme. But D.E.D. money was also involved in the setting up of the **O'Casey Theater Company** in Newry, the **Ulster Theatre Project**, and the Performing Arts Department of BIFHE (through the Youth Training Scheme). The Training and Employment Agency of the D.E.D. now have a strong emphasis on skill development in their work, but there seems no reason in principle why a suitable drama initiative could not be brought within one of their schemes. Many professional theatre companies in the Republic (including Red Kettle<sup>85</sup>) owe their existence to equivalent schemes there.

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## *The Foundation for Sport and the Arts*

This agency linked to the betting industry has a minority brief to support arts activities as well as sport. The proportion of funding allocated to the arts has been exceeded, so the Foundation will be attempting to redress the balance devoted to sport in the immediate future.

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## *Sponsors and ABSA*

Both smaller-scale theatre and community drama find it especially difficult to attract sponsorship and yet it seems likely that there are sponsors who would welcome an association with such work on grounds of policy rather than profile. It is to be hoped that this is an area which ABSA (the Association for Business Sponsorship of the Arts) might want specifically to prioritise.

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<sup>85</sup> See under: **Community Relations**

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## *The Ireland Funds*

The Ireland Funds have been regular supporters of community drama and smaller-scale theatre in recent years. Their current criteria include an emphasis on Arts Development. In particular, they invite applications which:

- encourage/promote a greater involvement of young people in the arts.
- offer practical help and support to young artists working in the context of an arts centre or community-based arts programme.
- are, in the contexts of Arts Centres, multi-media in their organisation.
- foster participation in, and appreciation of, the arts in communities lacking an arts tradition.

In short, there is a high correlation between these aims, and the spirit of this report.

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## *Other Trusts*

There are a multiplicity of other (mainly UK-based) trusts with various and sometimes changing policies. Some kind of brokerage would be of value to many groups working in the fields of community drama and smaller-scale theatre. This should be limited to an advisory service, however, and should not seek to encroach on the independence of individual fund-raisers. Successful fund-raising invariably depends on such individual commitment and enthusiasm. A more institutionalised or centralised approach would be likely to be less effective.

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## *The National Lottery*

Expected to come on stream in 1994, it is to be hoped that the National Lottery will help free up the log-jam that has for so long prevented effective capital development for the arts.

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## *The Neutral Venues Fund*

Another source of hope for capital provision is the Neutral Venues fund. This is an aspect of European funding under the EC's Physical, Social and Environmental Programme administered by the CCRU (Central Community Relations Unit) at Stormont. While provision of specialised arts facilities through this fund is admittedly unlikely, any such investment should at least seek to ensure that proposed buildings are drama-friendly. The needs of drama work are fairly simple, but reasonably sized, warm and acoustically acceptable spaces are essential for process-based work.

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## **Cultural Traditions in the Arts Council**

The existence of a separate Cultural Traditions budget administered by the Arts Council on behalf of the Department of Education, and of another head of Cultural Traditions funding channelled through the Central Community Relations Unit and administered by the Community Relations Council and by Local Authority Community Relations Officers creates the potential for confusion.

The Director of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Brian Ferran, makes the logical point that as the government agency charged with administering and encouraging the arts, the Arts Council should be responsible for all cultural

funding derived from government sources. He is concerned at the perception created by the existence of a separate category of Cultural Traditions funding that the Cultural Traditions Group and the Arts Council are doing different jobs.

In his view they are not.

To underline the absurdity (as he views it) of such a distinction, he suggests that it might make more sense to have the Cultural Traditions Group responsible for existing arts provision, freeing the Arts Council up to concentrate on arts development. Implicit in this suggestion is that tradition is a backward-looking concept and therefore should be concerned with what already exists.

There are two problems with this argument:

- It requires us to accept the main existing arts structures as emblematic of Northern Ireland's culture
- It requires a leap of faith that the new Arts Council will be able to recast prevailing definitions of the arts and distance itself from allegiance to its longest established clients.

The will for radical change needs to exist not only with the permanent officers of the new Arts Council. There is also a need to compensate for the innate conservatism of the collective decision-making of a committee system. For this reason, Cultural Traditions funding with its separate social agenda can be seen to have some advantage. What will be accepted by an often cautious committee on social grounds might not win approval on cultural or aesthetic grounds, and yet may in practice be no less culturally effective.

This problem is even more acute at regional level, where local arts committees are more likely to need encouragement in adopting a more progressive arts policy.

Despite the need for a clearer delineation of arts funding responsibilities and the apparent attractiveness of concentrating all arts-related spending in the Arts Council, there are therefore strong arguments for retaining the distinction between Arts Council and Cultural Traditions funding.

There remains the problem, however, of the restrictive regime governing the administration of Cultural Traditions money according to age-range. There is also a need for clearer criteria and procedures within the Arts Council for Cultural Traditions funding.

# Summary

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## 1. General Conclusions

- 1.1. As evidenced by the examples in this report, the whole area of Community Drama and Smaller-scale Professional Theatre has clear value for the improvement of community relations in Northern Ireland.
- 1.2. Community Drama achieves this through promoting community development and has the potential for facilitating qualitative interaction between individual members of the two main traditions. Increased self-confidence in individuals has a direct bearing on the confidence of entire communities.
- 1.3. Professional theatre productions can have an important role in widening public imagination, stimulating debate and fostering an interest in participatory drama work.
- 1.4. Both Community Drama and Smaller-scale Professional Theatre need to have artistic considerations as their first priority. The community relations agenda will always be relevant to their work, but should not dominate it for fear of stifling creativity.
- 1.5. Neither Community Drama, nor Smaller-scale Professional Theatre should allow itself to be marginalised within the overall arts structures. They have a responsibility continually to assert the intrinsic value and validity of their work.
- 1.6. Both Community Drama and Smaller-Scale Theatre Productions should keep in mind the distinction between two distinct aspects of development: formal experiment and widening the audience for theatre.
- 1.7. Small-scale Professional Theatre and Youth Drama are currently better placed to extend this area of work outside Belfast than Community Drama. Their development in regional areas should be strongly encouraged.

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## 2. Community Drama

- 2.1. The main division in community drama as presently practised in Northern Ireland is between professionally-led and mainly voluntary groups. The differing requirements of these two kinds of group need to be clearly understood.

- 2.2. While groups in both categories share accommodation and other infrastructural difficulties, the general financial demands of voluntary groups are less pressing than their more fundamental need for better cross-fertilisation between them. This can best be encouraged by the development of an appropriate umbrella body.
- 2.3. Financial support should be prioritised to such an umbrella body for voluntary groups, and directly to professionally-led groups, who on the evidence of this report are more likely to initiate projects with specific relevance to a broad community relations agenda.
- 2.4. The development of Community Drama depends in large measure on a small number of dedicated practitioners, who need to be adequately resourced and supported if the work is to continue.
- 2.5. Community Drama should seek to address all the divisions in our society in the awareness that these continue to be defined at least as much by age, class and gender as by “tradition”.
- 2.6. Community Drama needs to be defined in relation to the “new constituency of arts consumers”<sup>86</sup> and should seek to challenge the idea of passive consumption of the arts.
- 2.7. The benefits of Community Drama in confidence-building at both a personal and neighbourhood level can be seen in many existing projects.
- 2.8. Community drama need not necessarily be production-based. It can take the form of workshops and drama therapy.
- 2.9. Community Drama is a difficult art-form to establish. Time needs to be allowed for skill development before its full benefits are felt.
- 2.10. While Amateur Drama tends not to conform to the community relations agenda, in view of the strength and following of the amateur drama movement in Northern Ireland, serious attention should be given to encouraging it to do so, especially outside 'Derry and Belfast. This question requires further research.

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### 3. Community Relations

- 3.1. Beyond the general benefits that Community Drama brings to community development, it can also have clear implications for community relations.
- 3.2. In assessing these benefits, it is necessary to distinguish between Community Drama organisations that have full-time members and those that operate on a mainly voluntary basis.
- 3.3. Full-time organisations are more likely to have the resources to develop the long-term strategies for cross-community projects.
- 3.4. Voluntary organisations are most likely to move towards cross-community involvement within the context of an umbrella structure such as the new Community Arts Forum. This body has the potential to become a full-time organisation and to co-ordinate the interaction of its constituent groups.
- 3.5. A necessary prerequisite of increased cross-community activity at this secondary level is to address the under-representation of Community Drama in Protestant areas and in areas outside 'Derry and Belfast. Specific strategies are required to encourage the extension of community drama in both these contexts.
- 3.6. In the former case, consideration should be given to the related under-representation of women's organisations in some Protestant areas. Community Drama tends to depend in the main on women participants and its development may well be facilitated by targeting existing women's groups.

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<sup>86</sup>cf Priestley Report

- 3.7. In the latter case, attention needs to be given to the development of an infrastructure for community arts in centres outside Belfast and 'Derry. The present state of Community Drama in city areas is the result of fifteen years consistent development. Many projects feed into one another, and share facilities. The development of Community Drama in centres outside 'Derry and Belfast therefore needs to be seen as a long-term process. The role of existing theatre facilities such as the Ardhowen and Riverside Theatres should be greatly encouraged.

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## 4. Youth Provision

- 4.1. Theatre and drama for young people needs to be seen as a separate but related area to community drama in general.
- 4.2. Youth drama tends to attract a broader mix of participants than Community Drama in terms of sex and class as well as tradition.
- 4.3. The existing province-wide infrastructure for youth drama is well established, but growing demands in the light of the widening interest in arts activities within youth clubs necessitates its further development. The work of the National Association of Youth Drama in the Republic might provide a possible model.

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## 5. Smaller-scale Professional Theatre

- 5.1. Apart from security of funding, the key developmental challenge facing Smaller-scale Professional Theatre Companies is how to gain access to a wider audience.
- 5.2. When a film is made, however many millions of dollars the budget, the same amount is invariably spent selling the film as making it. The same argument should apply to every aspect of the arts. There seems to me little point investing in creative activity without an equal awareness of who will be the beneficiary.
- 5.3. The class question is of vital importance in this regard. Many critics of drama as a medium for community relations dismiss it as a middle class activity, which in the words of one community artist (words very nearly matched by one Local Authority Community Relations Officer) is "totally alien and intrinsically hostile"<sup>87</sup> to a working class experience. This prejudice is understandable, but it is in no way an objective truth. It is however, a reservation that has to be answered.
- 5.4. The challenge of providing greater access to the theatre is complicated by the wide range of attitudes within even one small community. In the words of the prophet, "the people living in Turf Lodge aren't one monolithic thought!"<sup>88</sup> There are people who won't leave their own areas. But equally, there are people who won't go near a community centre.
- 5.5. Marie Jones points out that in some cases there is a need to introduce audiences to the concept of sitting and watching live theatre. People need to see something before they know what it is.
- 5.6. It is also important to remember that audiences change with time. Some of the audience who watched the Turf Lodge community plays in the 1970s now go to the Grand Opera House and other mainstream theatres.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup>Dan Baron Cohen

<sup>88</sup>Martin Lynch

<sup>89</sup>ibid.

- 5.7. One starting point of community drama is very often allowing people to see professional productions of plays. The Community Relations Council have already established an important role in ensuring wider access to theatre. It is one they should continue to see as a priority.
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## Recommendations

### *A) Community Drama*

1. Recognition of the need to support and retain the services of key full-time Community Drama practitioners, and a concerted approach by funding agencies to ensure their adequate remuneration.
2. Consolidation of the Community Arts Forum, and the development of second-tier provision including training for group members, joint lobbying and the collection and dissemination of information. Given the changing funding climate for the arts in general, a strong central voice for community drama (and other aspects of the community arts) has never been more essential.
3. It may be that the Community Arts Forum can also take on a servicing and support role for key professional community arts workers, but this should not be at the expense of those workers independence of initiative and action.
4. A long-term strategy for the development of Community Drama in Protestant areas, with possible emphasis on the involvement of women's groups.
5. A long-term strategy for the development of Community Drama in areas other than Belfast and 'Derry, with Local Authority Community Relations Officers being asked to encourage regional arts committees to make this a priority. Opportunities for dialogue between CROs and theatre practitioners (including the managements of existing facilities such as the Ardhowen and Riverside Theatres) would greatly help this process.
6. Either or both of these strategies should give consideration to a proposal by Martin Lynch for "Community Drama Teams" or task forces to be funded on a three-year basis.
7. The question of training for Community Drama practitioners should be taken up with appropriate Third Level Institutions.
8. The need to assess, analyse and document projects and to encourage cross-fertilisation between them should always be kept in mind. No project should be allowed to happen without leaving some legacy.
9. The practical value of centrally administered technical equipment should be investigated with due caution.
10. Capital planning for the arts should take into consideration the need for a province-wide network of community arts centres along similar lines to the existing network of sports-(and male)-oriented Leisure Centres.

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### *B) Youth Provision*

1. A broadly-based umbrella body for Youth Drama should be established, possibly in association with the Community Arts Forum.
2. The training of youth leaders in drama should be extended, with an emphasis on the special demands and needs of this area of work..

3. The availability of professional theatre product for a younger age group should be extended. Very often, seeing appropriate theatre is an important precursor of practical participation.
4. A Youth Arts Strategy should be commissioned to develop a strategic approach to the involvement of young people in the arts. This should involve the youth sector and the Education and Library Boards in addition to the Arts Council, and should include consideration of the establishment of a Young People's Theatre Centre with rehearsal, workshop and performance facilities. This could provide a common forum for many groups working in this area.
5. The introduction of drama onto the schools curriculum should be strongly encouraged, with an option for a less academic emphasis, since drama is an area in which the less academic often excel.

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### *C) Smaller-scale Professional Theatre*

1. The long-term funding needs of this growing area need to be given urgent consideration by all interested parties including funding bodies and the theatre companies themselves. This should take into account the planning cycles of these companies. This would suggest confirmation of core funding at least three years in advance for established companies.
2. The potential of professional theatre for community relations should be opened up to wider debate. In particular, the Community Relations Council should enter into dialogue with the Arts Council, and Local Authority Community Relations Officers should liaise more closely with regional arts committees with the aim of adopting a more flexible and adventurous policy in this area. There should be a greater readiness to take risks.
3. As an extension of this process, the administration of Cultural Traditions funding by both the ACNI and the CRC should be constructively reviewed to take account of the inappropriateness of the existing age criteria for most Smaller-scale professional theatre companies. While an emphasis on theatre for younger audiences is entirely consistent with the spirit of this report, it may be felt desirable to designate some portion of Cultural Traditions funding from either or both agencies specifically for the encouragement of Smaller-scale Professional Theatre. The consistent commitment of these companies to broadening the cultural horizons of Northern Ireland deserves to be acknowledged in this way. Such a decision would seem to be entirely consistent with the broader intentions of the Cultural Traditions programme.
4. With regard to the development of Smaller-scale Professional Theatre in regional centres, the Department of Economic Development should be encouraged to consider case histories from the Republic of Ireland showing the positive economic implications of supporting locally-based theatre professionals in smaller urban centres.
5. The need remains to address the overall question of drama training. The *Appendix* makes the point that theatre is one area of Northern Irish life by which younger people are actually attracted back to the province to work.

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### *The Wild Card*

None of the above should discourage the Community Relations Council from going out on a limb to support a particularly imaginative project. Very often, new theatre initiatives come about as a result of funding from an unusual source. Three examples will suffice:

- **Charabanc** might not exist without the imaginative support of the A.C.E. Scheme administrators.

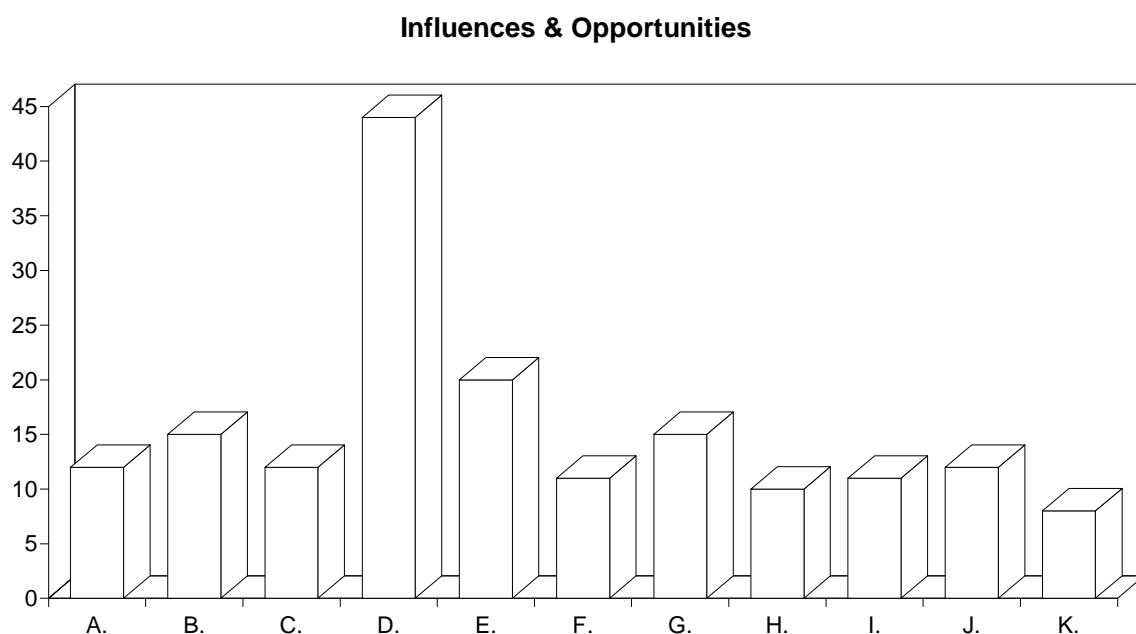
- **Replay** might not exist without the seed funding made available by the Belfast City Council Centenary Celebrations.
- **Dubbeljoint** might not exist without support from Cultural Traditions and the co-incident of the *Belfast 1991* events with Dublin's year as City of Culture.

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## Appendix: Influences & Opportunities

The following section of the report seeks to analyse the range of interconnected influences and opportunities that has given rise to Northern Ireland's growing community of theatre workers and artists. In many cases, the first experience of theatre work has been in a school context, and the importance of encouraging the development of drama in the school curriculum cannot be overstated<sup>90</sup>. But while general educational provision can create the conditions for interest in a career in theatre, there is usually some additional and specialised stimulus which takes individuals on towards a serious commitment to this area of work. This experience often take place in third level education, or in an extra-curricular way.

The following chart seeks to illustrate the main avenues of opportunity for people currently working full-time in smaller-scale professional theatre and/or community drama in Northern Ireland.



**Key (based on a sample of 158 people)**

- A. Drama & Other Vocational Training
- B. Queen's University
- C. University of Ulster (inc. Ulster Poly.)
- D. Other University/College
- E. Ulster Youth Theatre
- F. Other Youth Theatre
- G. Fringe Benefits Theatre Company
- H. Lyric Drama Studio
- I. Other Training-based Groups
- J. Community Drama
- K. Amateur Drama

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<sup>90</sup> cf *Proposals for Drama in the Northern Ireland Curriculum* (Northern Ireland Curriculum Council, 0232 381414)