

Swimming in the shallow end

**Opportunities for girls in youth drama,
focusing on the quantity and quality of
roles available to them**

A report by Lucy Kerbel

A Tonic Theatre Research Project, in partnership with
Company of Angels, the National Youth Theatre of Great Britain and ZendeH.

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Contents

Introduction	1
About the research	2
The Research Partners	3
Definitions	4
Additional	6
The Current Situation	7
Introduction	8
The context	10
Girls Today	13
Why are there so few boys in youth theatre?	14
Summary	15
1. The benefits of youth drama - and who has access to them	16
1.1 The broader benefits of youth drama	17
1.2 Why young people want to take part	18
1.3 Productions	20
1.4 Auditioning	21
Summary	22
2. Roles for girls	23
2.1 Who's playing what?	24
2.2 Damsels in distress and other stereotypes	26
2.3 Writing 21 st century girls	27
2.4 Who's driving the action?	29
2.5 Looks count	30
2.6 The complex territory of cross-gender casting	32
Summary	35
3. The effect on girls of the lack of roles	36
3.1 Grinning and bearing it or voting with their feet?	37
3.2 The importance of playing varied roles	39
3.3 The importance of being in 'the group'	41
3.4 The importance of being the centre of attention	42
3.5 The importance of gaining confidence	43
Summary	45
4. The way ahead	46
4.1 Better writing for girls and more of it	47
4.2 How will this happen?	49
4.3 An exciting creative prospect	50
Summary	52
Conclusion	53

Introduction

The impetus to conduct this research came initially from my own experience as a youth theatre director. I began working with young people just over ten years ago and immediately found myself confronted with a room full of girls, but a knowledge of plays full of men. Again and again I'd be looking towards my deadline for selecting a script for the end of term production, totally stumped. As my confidence as a youth theatre director grew and I was able to start devising work with the young people, the situation eased a little. Yet there were still times when scripted work was required and at this point, once again, the problem reared its head: there never seemed to be a wide enough range of plays to choose from that gave the girls a fair crack at the action. In the intervening years, I found myself having countless conversations with other teachers and youth theatre practitioners who shared the problem. When I became Director of Tonic Theatre, an organisation that promotes gender equality within the British theatre industry, some of these conversations turned into questions about what we at Tonic could do about it.

My hunch was that Tonic should begin commissioning and publishing a range of female-heavy scripts aimed specifically at the youth drama sector. Before committing the somewhat sizeable resources necessary to make this happen, we wanted to first conduct a piece of research to see if these plays really would be needed. Three wonderful organisations, Company of Angels, the National Youth Theatre of Great Britain and Zendeh agreed to come on board as partners and collectively we launched the research study, the results of which you will read in this report.

Having completed the research, the answer to whether these plays are needed is an overwhelming "Yes!" The thirst for such plays among the youth drama sector is strong and the need for them is great. It is a need that, according to many of the participants in our research, extends beyond the practicalities of how to fit large groups of girls into productions. Rather, they told us, broadening opportunities for girls is fundamental to what the youth drama sector can achieve, both on its stages, and in the lives of the young people it works with.

Lucy Kerbel

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Lucy Kerbel

Lucy has over ten years' experience running youth theatre groups, leading drama classes, and staging youth productions for a range of organisations across London and the South East including: Attic Theatre, BAC, Camberley Theatre, GLYPT, Lyric Hammersmith, Royal Court, Stagecoach, Surrey County Performing Arts, Theatre

Exchange and the Young Vic. She has devised nationwide projects for BBC Learning and Shakespeare Schools Festival and is currently Learning Associate at the National Theatre. In addition to work with young people, Lucy directs in mainstream theatre. She is the Director of Tonic Theatre.

About the research

This report contains the results of a UK-wide research study looking at opportunities for girls in youth drama, with a particular focus on the quality and quantity of roles for girls in scripted work.

The research was conducted between January and May 2012 and was led by Tonic Theatre, working in partnership with Company of Angels, the National Youth Theatre of Great Britain and ZendeH.

Tonic Theatre

Tonic Theatre promotes the benefits of gender equality within the British theatre industry. We work in partnership with other theatre organisations who, like us, know that not enough talented women are rising to the top. Together, we're developing more productive and more equitable ways of working that allow the skill, creativity and potential of the entire workforce to flourish.

www.tonictheatre.co.uk

The Research Partners

Company of Angels

Company of Angels is at the cutting edge of new work for and about young people, in theatre and other media. For eleven years the company has toured groundbreaking plays to young people nationally and internationally. Meanwhile, through a range of research projects and development schemes, the company explores and documents new ideas, encourages the next generation of theatremakers and directly engages young people, including 'hard-to-reach' groups both within and outside school settings. The company is strongly influenced by European theatre practice, and is especially interested in work that revolves around advocacy and social change. Company of Angels is one of the Arts Council of England National Portfolio Organisations and has received regular funding since 2004.

www.companyofangels.co.uk

National Youth Theatre of Great Britain

The National Youth Theatre of Great Britain is a world-leading youth arts organisation. It was established in 1956 as the first youth theatre in the world, pioneering a world-wide youth theatre movement, and over the past 56 years has nurtured the talent of hundreds of thousands of young people. NYT inspire, train, and showcase exceptional performers and theatre technicians aged 14-21 from Great Britain and Northern Ireland, each year reaching out across the UK to discover diverse new talent. NYT's training is unique because it believes that the best place for young performers to learn is on stage in front of an audience. They showcase emerging talent on West End stages, in stadiums world-wide and at iconic sites both at home and abroad, commissioning brave new writing and reinterpreting classic stories for our time. NYT's world renowned alumni include: Dame Helen Mirren, Daniel Craig, Colin Firth, Rosamund Pike, Daniel Day-Lewis, Orlando Bloom, Catherine Tate, Sir Ben Kingsley, Ashley Jensen, Sir Derek Jacobi, Timothy Dalton, David Walliams, Matt Lucas, Hugh Bonneville, Matt Smith and many more. Former NYT members also include sector-leaders in politics, business, law, the media and medicine.

www.nyt.org.uk

Zendeh

Zendeh explores hidden histories and modern identities; finding the compelling and epic in ordinary stories; creating culturally eclectic productions. Our artistic practice is collaborative, poetic and innovative, combining art forms, text and digital. We creatively engage in making intercultural and intergenerational learning experiences for a range of participants. Zendeh imaginatively, in a variety of spaces, connects and reaches broad audiences in the greater north, nationally and internationally.

www.zendeh.com

Definitions

What do we mean by 'youth drama'?

The focus of the research is all the drama activity undertaken by young people outside of their academic studies and in their free time. This includes (but is not limited to) membership of youth theatre groups, participation in extra-curricular school drama activities such as lunchtime drama clubs and end of term productions, attendance at part time stage school classes, membership of college and university drama societies, participation in community drama projects e.g. summer schools. We have used 'youth drama' as a broad umbrella term that encompasses all such activity.

What do we mean by 'girls'?

The research refers to females between the ages of 11 and 25.

Who took part in the research?

The research centred on the perspectives of three groups:

// young people between the ages of 11 and 25 who currently participate in youth drama activities

// adults who run youth drama activities with anyone aged 11 to 25 – collectively termed in this report as 'teachers and youth theatre practitioners'

// stakeholders - individuals with a particular vantage point on the youth drama sector

// Young people

A series of interviews and focus groups were conducted with young people between the ages of 11 and 25 who currently participate in youth drama activity. A total of 41 young people were included in the sample.

While numerous quotes from the young people are included in the report, names have been changed in order to protect anonymity and confidentiality. To this end the schools, youth theatre groups and performing arts societies of which these young people are members will not be detailed in the report.

// Adults who run youth drama activity: teachers and youth theatre practitioners

Any adult who currently runs extra-curricular youth drama activities with 11 to 25 year olds was invited to complete a survey that Tonic posted online between 16 April and 4 May 2012. A total of 291 respondents from across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales took part.

The survey respondents represented a broad range of organisations including (but not limited to) schools, colleges, youth theatre groups, theatre companies, arts centres, amateur dramatic societies, pupil referral units and part time

stage school franchises. The diversity of the respondents reflects the diversity of the youth drama sector, with respondents referring to themselves under a range of titles that included 'workshop leader', 'facilitator', 'tutor' and 'director'. For the sake of clarity, we will be referring to the survey respondents under the collective heading 'teachers and youth theatre practitioners' throughout the report. We recognise that this is a broad umbrella term and one that encompasses a wide range of specialisms and approaches.

Those who completed the survey include a combination of full time and part time workers, paid employees and volunteers. A number of the respondents wrote about the 'grey area' nature of their employment status in their organisations, commenting that although they receive payment for certain aspects of their role, some of the drama work they do with young people falls outside of their official job description or contracted hours. This was particularly the case for school and college teachers. Others commented that they were sometimes volunteers and sometimes paid depending on whether funding had been secured for various projects.

Definitions

84% of respondents identified themselves as female and 16% as male.

While quotes from survey respondents have been included throughout the report, names have not been included and some personal details may have been changed or removed to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the respondents and the young people they work with.

// Stakeholders

The research was augmented by interviews with a range of 'stakeholders'. These individuals were asked to participate because of the particular vantage points they possess on the youth drama sector. Stakeholder interviews were conducted with:

Jill Adamson

Chief Executive of NAYT (National Association of Youth Theatres)

Anthony Banks

Associate Director – Learning at the National Theatre

Adam Barnard

Joint Director of Company of Angels, one of the partners in the research study.

Kate Buffery

An actress who is currently training to be a barrister. She was a member of the National Youth Theatre between 1974 and 1978.

Fin Kennedy

Playwright. The Urban Girl's Guide to Camping, an anthology of all-female plays Fin wrote as writer-in-residence at Mulberry School for Girls in Tower Hamlets, London, was published by Nick Hern Books in 2010.

Anna Niland

Associate Director at the National Youth Theatre of Great Britain, one of the partners in the research study.

Nazli Tabatabai-Khatambakhsh

Artistic Director of Zende, one of the partners in the research study.

Tamara von Werthern

Performing Rights Manager for Nick Hern Books.

Julie Ward

Co Director and Founder of Jackass, a youth theatre company based in rural County Durham that operates as part of Jack Drum Theatre.

The total number of participants who took part in the research was 341.

Additional

What the research does not cover

This research is not designed to be an all-encompassing study of youth drama; rather, it is specifically concerned with the experience of the girls who participate, with a particular focus on the quality and quantity of roles written for them.

The question of why so few boys participate in youth drama activity is one that is fascinating and worthy of further exploration. It was deemed however, to be a separate issue to the focus of this particular study and so beyond touching briefly on the possible causes and consequences of low take up among boys, this report does not focus on the issue. Likewise, the experience of transgendered young people in youth drama was considered to be deserving of a separate research study of its own and is not a consideration of this report.

We appreciate that a young person's involvement in youth drama can take many forms. Not all young people perform – some choose to focus on stage management, technical skills, design, writing, directing or other areas of theatre-making. However, the focus of this research study is on performance opportunities for girls, and specifically in regards to their work on scripted productions.

Acknowledgements

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The Current Situation

“Because fewer boys participate, their experience is often more positive. Couple that with the inherent sexism as regards the number of female roles and the portrayal of women in theatre generally, and the girls are definitely swimming in the shallow end.” Youth theatre practitioner, Kent

Introduction

“It’s a general given, across the sector - everybody knows there’s more girls taking part than boys.” Jill Adamson, Chief Executive, NAYT

The results of our research strongly support Adamson’s statement. In our survey of 291 teachers and youth theatre practitioners across the UK:

- // 75% described their organisation as having more girls than boys or having an entirely female membership.**
- // 40% of all respondents said their organisations work with ‘many more girls than boys.’**
- // Organisations that are male-dominated accounted for a tiny proportion of respondents. Just 5% said their organisation had more boys than girls or an entirely male membership.**
- // Only 20% of respondents said their organisation had equal numbers of boys and girls.**

Despite the demonstrably high numbers of girls participating in youth drama, what many of the teachers and youth theatre practitioners went on to tell us is that it is very hard finding scripts that contain enough female roles to accommodate them. They told us that while this is borne out of the greater proportion of girls attracted to youth drama, it is exacerbated by what they perceive to be a lack of female roles across scripted work.

Where female roles do exist, reservations were expressed about the quality of these roles across the full range of our research sample; by teachers and youth theatre

practitioners, stakeholders, and also by the young people themselves. Questions were asked as to whether many female roles provide enough of a challenge for the girls playing them, and whether they reinforce unhelpful gender stereotypes. These concerns were expressed in regard to new writing as well as older plays and, surprisingly, to contemporary plays commissioned specifically for the youth drama market, as well as for mainstream professional theatres. Our research sample told us that there are plenty of plays that contain one or two interesting female roles, but given the high numbers of girls who take part in youth drama, offering opportunity for one or two girls in any production is not enough.

While teachers and youth theatre practitioners commented that they regularly ask girls to play boys’ roles in an effort to redress the balance, many of them identified this solution as far from ideal. They shared concerns that routinely asking girls to play boys affected the girls’ confidence in themselves, contributed to insecurities over body image, inhibited the depth of their creative engagement and left them with a reduced appreciation of female voices, experiences and stories. Above all, they commented on the ideological problems inherent in asking girls to dress up as boys in order to fully participate in the action on stage.

Introduction

Despite these difficulties, script work continues to be a popular option for youth drama organisations. A huge 77% of the teachers and youth theatre practitioners we surveyed said they use scripts with their young people. A further 9% don't use existing scripts but write their own material or commission playwrights to write for their groups. A surprisingly small number of respondents – just 14% – said they focus solely on devising.

This research study seeks to assess the impact of this apparent lack of roles for

girls in youth drama. It will examine the current situation in regard to this, and then go on to explore what it is about youth drama that draws young people to it. The research will then assess the current range and quantity of roles available to girls and analyse the extent to which the nature of these may be restricting girls from accessing the full benefits that youth drama participation can provide. Finally the report will make recommendations for a future approach which broadens opportunities for girls.

The Context

The youth drama sector does not operate in isolation; it is an integral and integrated part of the much broader theatre landscape of this country. UK theatre still has a long way to go in terms of gender equality. Women continue to be underrepresented in key artistic roles, both on stage and off, as well as being less visible in senior leadership positions. Despite the evident enthusiasm of girls at youth drama level, in the professional realm it is estimated that women make up just 35% of actors, 23% of directors and 17% of playwrights working today. Whilst progress is being made (in particular, recent years have seen a promising rise in the number of women moving into artistic director positions), this change is slow. For now at least, female voices and female experiences do not enjoy the same level of exposure as those belonging to men.

Anthony Banks is Associate Director – Learning at the National Theatre, a role that includes commissioning scripts for NT Connections (the NT's range of new plays for young actors to perform). He agrees that in terms of who is making work, and the focus of that work, in British theatre men tend to be more visible than women:

“Flicking through the theatre section of weekend listings in a newspaper, you’ll notice that most plays being produced are written by men, directed by men, with main parts played by men, as men. Theatre posters more often contain images of men than women. There are more women directors now than there were when I was a student, however there seem to be fewer women playwrights than men. When a play

has a strong female character at its helm, it’s still something that is remarked upon, rather than being commonplace.”

Every year, NT Connections commissions ten plays from leading playwrights. These are original plays for young actors aged 13-19 to perform. Banks says it is crucial that in a programme like NT Connections, which has such profile and reach, that five of the writers are men and five are women. He believes that NT Connections presents the theatre community with a real opportunity to redress the balance: for young people to see both male and female names as the authors of the plays in the collection is important as hopefully it will go some way towards creating “a generation that thinks a playwright is a playwright, not a man”. As a starting point for deciding which writers to commission, Banks first looks to who is being produced in mainstream theatres. In some years however, he says finding enough female writers under these terms is difficult: “If I were just to go off who is being programmed and produced in the main theatres, I’d get stuck. I do think there’s still an imbalance and it’s one we have a responsibility to be doing something about.”

Perhaps the most pronounced aspect of gender inequality in theatre – and one that our research suggests impacts heavily on the experience of girls in youth drama – is the current imbalance between men and women on stage. A quick sweep through the brochures of theatres across the UK will demonstrate that habitually and across both the commercial and subsidised sectors, the majority of roles in drama currently being produced are male. This is the case whether looking at new writing, classics, modern works, musical theatre

The Context

or straight plays. Theatre productions in which the number of women on stage is equal to or higher than the number of men are rare; productions in which the entire cast is female, exceptionally so. Furthermore, when women are on stage, their roles are more likely to be peripheral to the action, and played by actresses of more limited age ranges, ethnicities and physical 'types' than their male counterparts. While some notable exceptions do exist to these norms they are just that – exceptions.

Teachers and youth theatre directors who participated in the research said that this imbalance has a pronounced effect on the experience of the young people they work with. Many of them said they use scripts of plays produced by mainstream theatres, meaning this underrepresentation of female roles and female voices is something their young people see as 'normal' and 'professional' as well as leading to girls having far less to do on stage. Even those who work with scripts commissioned specifically for the youth drama market expressed disappointment in the lack of those that give girls an equal or greater 'crack at the action'. This lack of female roles in the available scripts, coupled with the high levels of female participation that characterises the youth drama sector, led to many of the research participants expressing dissatisfaction with the current range of opportunities open to girls.

Furthermore, the general low visibility of women in the theatre industry was argued to have an indirect but notable impact on girls in youth drama. When teachers and youth theatre practitioners were asked in our survey "In an ideal world, is there anything that could improve the experience of girls in your organisation?" respondents referred to this imbalance, arguing for a

greater number of female role models in professional theatre (as well as in television, film and the wider media). One youth theatre practitioner said that the experience of girls would be improved by "more female presence on stage at a high professional level, more role models and female protagonists on TV, more stories which hold the female as central" while another cited "more female role models working as artistic directors."

In the UK, work to improve the representation of women and girls in either mainstream theatre or the youth drama sector remains extremely limited. However, it is not a given for women to be less visible than men in theatre. A look to other countries such as Sweden proves the point. Here, targeted and cohesive action across the entire theatre system has led to impressive and sustained improvements in its gender balance. The Swedish model has employed a holistic approach, with all areas - including the youth drama sector, drama schools and funding bodies – collaborating in co-ordinated action, schemes, and initiatives. For example, *Att gestalta kön*, a programme aimed at scrutinising gender perspectives in actor training within Swedish drama schools, has had a knock-on effect on the programming of mainstream theatres. Artistic Directors have commented that young actresses emerge from training and enter their acting companies more confident, empowered, and likely to be vocal and persuasive about the need for the theatre's repertoire to include vibrant and varied female voicesⁱⁱ.

Nazli Tabatabai-Khatambakhsh, Artistic Director of Zende, argues that the youth drama sector could be a catalyst for driving change in the role of women in mainstream British theatre. Today's youth drama participants are tomorrow's theatre

The Context

makers, so where better to start a culture shift than at grass roots level? Tabatabai-Khatambakhsh draws a line between her own experiences in youth drama and the path she has subsequently taken into the theatre industry:

“when I was a young person, I had really excellent opportunities to engage with the arts and a lot of that was about people making the space for me to tell stories about my friends, who were girls, as well as stories about the fellas in my life. The fact I was given the capacity to own that process, and was supported through it was very important to me.”

Tabatabai-Khatambakhsh suggests that unless girls, and boys, are given “the space” to explore female experiences at youth drama level, when they themselves become adults and begin to make work at professional level, there will be nothing in their experiences to challenge the traditional view that drama is an inherently male form, practised by men and about men. If youth drama organisations are better equipped to offer girls the requisite support and opportunity to develop into confident, empowered theatre makers, the cycle is more likely to be broken. Interestingly, 84% of the teachers and youth theatre practitioners we surveyed said they themselves had participated in youth drama as young people, a clear indicator that the experiences of one generation of youth drama participants feeds directly down to the next.

Girls today

The past one hundred years have seen an astounding rate of change in relation to gender roles. Whilst inequalities do persist, the speed of change has been fast and shows no sign of slowing.

Each generation of girls born into the UK in the 20th and now 21st century has a set of opportunities open to them, and expectations placed on them, that are notably and profoundly different to those of their mothers. The girls who participate in youth drama today are experiencing life – and what it means to be female - in a way no earlier generation of young women has. They have a unique and previously uncharted perspective on the world.

When the girls who participated in the research were asked what they pictured ten or twenty years in their futures, the responses were interesting. A reticence to have children was strongly expressed, as was the assertion that focusing on a career would be paramount for them.

While many pictured themselves in long term relationships – although not necessarily married – they stressed the importance of these relationships being equal. The refusal to be financially reliant on a man was an almost universal statement and when asked what their biggest fear for the future is, answers such as “not fulfilling my potential” and “not being able to support myself or my family and have the career I want” recurred regularly.

While it is impossible to tell exactly what path these girls' lives will eventually take, their expectation that they should be treated equally to boys, and that they have the right to be developed to their fullest potential, is not necessarily reflected in their experiences of youth drama. For youth drama to remain relevant to these girls' lives and to have an enabling, rather than limiting effect, care must be taken to listen to and respect their thoroughly modern expectations and aspirations.

Why are there so few boys in youth drama?

When asked 'is there anything that could improve the experience of girls in your organisation?', the second most common answer given by teachers and youth theatre practitioners after more good roles for girls was "more boys."

Teachers and youth theatre practitioners expressed widespread disappointment that more boys do not participate in youth drama. They suggested that this is a shame for those boys who might get a lot from taking part but who, for a variety of reasons, may feel unable to, as well as for the few boys who already do attend and who can become isolated within such female-heavy environments. To just as great an extent, the lack of boys was viewed by the teachers and youth theatre practitioners as a loss for the girls. They said the balance, different perspectives and what one teacher described as the "alternative ways of approaching drama and the expression of emotion" a greater male presence in their groups would bring, would be of benefit to

their female participants.

Two reasons were commonly identified for a lack of boys in youth drama. The first, according to the research participants, is that at a young age, boys tend to be encouraged by parents towards sport and girls towards dance and drama. This means that when boys reach youth drama age, habits have been formed, sport takes up much of their free time and taking up a completely new hobby is less likely. Meanwhile, for those girls who have always participated in dance and drama, segueing into youth drama feels like a far easier and more predictable transition.

The second reason offered was that for many boys, participating in drama is not socially acceptable. Fear of homosexual bullying was cited as the main reason boys are reticent to take part in youth drama (or indeed most types of performing arts activity) and it was suggested that pressure on boys not to take part could come from a combination of peers, teachers and parents. Additionally, the suggestion was made that it

was less acceptable for boys to be seen as emotionally expressive, whereas this was not the case for girls. As one girl who participated in the research said, "You do usually find more girls than boys [in youth drama], because boys don't really open up as much. They have their reputations to worry about".

What teachers and youth theatre practitioners did say is that for those boys who do attend, the hurdles they have had to overcome simply to be there can mean they exhibit greater levels of commitment, persistence and confidence than the girls. A number of teachers and youth theatre practitioners, as well as the boys we spoke to, referred to making an 'active choice' to participate. By contrast many spoke about the social attraction for girls of attending and that for them, being part of a youth drama group may be just as much about friendship as the creative elements of drama and performing.

The Current Situation

Summary

Compared to the boys, it certainly seems that girls' entry point into youth drama is a far more accessible one. This in part could account for the high numbers of girls that participate. However, once they have chosen to dedicate their free time to youth drama, the apparently low quantity and quality of roles available to them in scripted work could mean the girls' experience is not as full as it could be.

Youth drama is part of the broader UK theatre system, one in which - despite progress - women continue

to be underrepresented in certain key areas and particularly on stage. However, rather than simply reflecting the gender inequalities within this mainstream culture, youth drama could actually be a catalyst for change. It is the place in which tomorrow's generation of UK theatre makers and audience members are shaping their views, their interests, and their creative responses to the world around them. A change in thinking here could, in time, lead to a change in theatre practice on a much larger scale.

1. The Benefits of Youth Drama – and who has access to them

“Youth theatre doesn’t exist to service the theatre industry. It serves the whole of society and its outcome at the other end is producing a young person who has got something positive to offer in terms of citizenship, whether they become a bank manager or a politician or a nurse or an actor.”

Jill Adamson, National Association of Youth Theatres

1.1 The broader benefits of youth drama

What the teachers and youth theatre practitioners who participated in the research said very clearly, was that while delivering a high quality creative experience to their young people is important to them, it is the broader personal, social and emotional benefits of youth drama participation that primarily motivate them to do the work they do. When asked in our survey what they most wanted young people to take away from their time in youth drama, a negligible amount of replies foregrounded training young people for the profession. Yes, some of them spoke about former members' success in the industry as a nice by-product of their work, and there was general agreement that offering young people a varied creative diet and the opportunity to perform in high quality productions will enhance their youth drama experience. But what the survey respondents focused on almost exclusively were the broader benefits – confidence, understanding of others, articulacy and a deeper engagement with the world around them.

Could you tell us what you most want the young people you work with to take away from the drama activity they do with you?

“A sense of achievement, increased confidence, self-awareness and

pride in who they are.”

Youth theatre practitioner, Berkshire

“To feel that they have great ideas that they want to share with other people and that they are interested in the world around them.” Teacher, Fife

“To reach their potential and become the person they want to be.”

Youth theatre practitioner, Belfast

“Creativity, happiness, self-worth (‘I made that’) and resilience (‘it didn’t go to plan but it’s ok’).”

Youth theatre practitioner, Essex

“I would most like the young people to take away great memories and confidence and other transferable skills that will help them in the outside world as they grow older.”

Youth theatre practitioner, London

The teachers and youth theatre practitioners said they don't do the work they do because they want to train up the next generation of performers. They do it because they believe in the life-enhancing effect of youth drama and want the young people they work with to have access to this.

1.2 Why young people want to take part

When asked why they choose to spend their free time participating in youth drama, the young people spoke passionately and at length about what they feel they get from the experience. Certain common themes quickly emerged:

Confidence

“When I came to this school I had a grand total of zero confidence. I got here and I started doing drama and it made me relax. I’m now happy with who I am.” Jasmine, 16, Kent

The young people spoke avidly about the confidence that youth drama had given them; confidence in themselves, their opinions, ideas, ability and also in dealing with a range of situations and people, both inside and outside their youth drama groups.

Empathy

“It shows you how to listen, to think about things from other people’s perspectives.” Ella, 15, Shropshire

After confidence, the reason the young people gave most often for enjoying youth drama was the opportunity it offers them to temporarily take a look at the world through someone else’s eyes. They spoke about how much they like being able to slip into being someone else when they are acting, particularly someone whose life is very different to theirs. They felt it encouraged them to learn about other people and other perspectives on the world, but also about themselves.

Likewise, they spoke about the chance youth drama gives them to work in a team with people who might have

opinions and experiences different to their own. This is something Anna Niland, Associate Director at the National Youth Theatre of Great Britain, certainly feels is key to what NYT offers young people:

“At NYT we believe there’s opportunity in the young people coming together and working together and meeting people from all different walks of life. They share and exchange something that has never normally happened in their lives because they meet people that are so different and so outside of their own environment. There seems to be a bit of magic that happens in that exchange. We really believe it changes lives and gives opportunity and ambition and drive to young people.”

Freedom

“It brings out the inner you. You find yourself. You find ways of expressing yourself you didn’t know you were capable of.” Jade, 13, London

When we asked the young people to choose three words to describe their experience of youth drama, “freedom” and “escape” came up on a regular basis. Youth drama can be a refuge – from exam stress, trouble at home, bullying, and also the social pressure of having to behave in a certain way. Some of the young people talked about the chance it gave them to explore what they called the “weird” side of themselves and to talk, dress and express themselves in ways they usually felt inhibited from doing outside of youth drama.

1.2 Why young people want to take part

Julie Ward, Co Director of Jackass youth theatre group in County Durham, agrees that this freedom from the sometimes suffocating social pressures placed on young people, along with an opportunity to test out different versions of who they might want to be, can be very appealing:

“It’s a safe place where you can explore the extremes of what you might be. In terms of sexuality as well; it’s ok to be gay here and it’s ok to be different.”

Many young people who participated in the research spoke about what an accepting environment youth drama could be. The word “family” was used regularly to describe how being part of a youth drama group feels.

Affirmation

“When somebody comes up to you and says ‘you were really good’, there’s a sense of self-achievement and ‘oh I did it’.” Caroline, 12, Cornwall

The importance of being seen to be good at something was regularly raised by the young people. This was especially true for those young people who felt they didn’t excel in academic subjects or sport; many of them spoke about how important it had been to them when they had received praise and recognition from family and friends after a performance.

Being listened to

“For me the enjoyable bit is being on stage and seeing so many people listening to what you’re saying. You’re in a room of people, whether it’s five

or fifty or a hundred, and the fact sometimes they’ll have paid to come, and their only job is to sit and listen to you, it’s really nice.”

Ben, 20, Lincolnshire

The young people relish the opportunity that performing on stage gives them to have their voices listened to. Interestingly, the idea that people had not just turned up, but had actually paid to hear them speak seemed to give the young people particular pleasure. Kate Buffery, an actress and former member of NYT in the 1970s, suggests that as a young person, what can be particularly appealing about acting is *“wanting to get out there and say ‘this is my voice, this reflects my take on the world’, but being buoyed by the safety net of using someone else’s words.”*

Achievement

“When you do drama there’s a whole different set of skills every time.”

Leila, 16, Kent

Youth drama appears to contain a great many benchmarks of achievement against which the young people measure themselves. Successfully remembering their lines, singing a solo and being cast in a lead role were regularly mentioned as examples of moments when young people felt they had really achieved something or demonstrated progress. Many of the young people spoke about the strong and often fond memories that these achievements in youth drama had given them.

1.3 Productions

When asked to identify their favourite aspect of all the work they do in youth drama, the almost unanimous response was “working on productions” and “performing”. While there was enthusiasm for the games and exercises they do during sessions, it was the parts of the year when they are working towards productions and then getting up in front of an audience that the young people put first, almost without exception.

The young people were asked to talk about their ‘personal youth theatre highlights’. Nearly all of the memories and anecdotes offered revolved around productions. Of course, the out of the ordinary experience

of working on a production is likely to stick in the memory. Yet so many of the benefits of youth drama that the young people spoke about – the sense of achievement when you remember your lines, knowing people are paying to sit and listen to your voice, receiving praise from family and friends after a show, growing in confidence – hinge around being in a performance.

However, this research shows that it is at this point – staging productions and putting on performances – that girls tend to miss out. Potentially the aspect of youth drama that the young people most want to be a part of – and from which they say they derive the greatest benefit – is something which the girls are finding it harder to access.

1.4 Auditioning

In our survey of teachers and youth theatre leaders, a very small percentage of respondents, just 8%, identified their organisations as selective i.e. requiring every young person who wants to take part to audition or undergo some other kind of selection process. A further small percentage said their organisations were not selective but were actively tailored towards specific groups, for example young people with learning disabilities. The vast majority of respondents described their organisation as 'open access' – any young person who wants to take part can do so, without having to go through a selection process.

However, what many of the teachers and youth theatre practitioners who identified their organisation as 'open access' did say, was that when it comes to certain projects – and particularly to productions – they audition. Many of them identified that at this point, a bottleneck is imposed for the girls. While girls face no hindrance in taking part in the standard activities of the 'open access' organisations, when it comes to

participating in productions, it can be harder for girls to have the opportunity. Those that are cast are likely to have a smaller role than their male counterparts, while those that are not forgo the experience of participating in the production altogether, along with all the benefits the young people were so vocal about.

Some teachers and youth theatre practitioners said they cast on the basis of ability and others in response to hard work and dedication. But whatever benchmarks are being used, they said the high numbers of girls coupled with the low numbers of girls' roles means a double standard is often applied to girls and boys in the casting process. They said that this could lead to frustration on the part of the girls and friction between the young people. One teacher described the confusing experience the situation creates, particularly for girls; a meritocracy has been implied by the presence of auditions and yet girls watch boys who are weaker performers, or who have put less work into their audition, getting roles higher up the 'pecking order' or indeed being cast at all.

1. The Benefits of Youth Drama – and who has access to them

Summary

The young people, teachers and youth theatre practitioners we spoke to were clear – participation in youth drama leads to numerous benefits that can reach out into many aspects of a young person's life and have a long-lasting impact. At the same time, the disparity between the number of girls who want to take part and the number of roles available to them means that accessing these benefits is something not all girls are able to do effectively. When working with scripts, and particularly when staging

productions, a 'bottleneck' can be imposed for the girls that prevents them from taking part fully.

Most teachers and youth theatre practitioners don't cite a desire to train their young people for a career in the industry as their prime motivation. Rather, they identify the development of life skills as their key drive. Consequently a challenge to the current quantity and quality of roles available to girls is necessary, in order for these skills to be accessible and achievable by all.

2. Roles for Girls

“I want girls to have more aspirational characters to play - I want them to have the same opportunities as the boys - I want them to feel encouraged that their stories are important and that boys will also find them important - I want them to stop settling for being victims in the process and in the product - I want the theatre industry to look really carefully at how much sexualisation of young women takes place and look at that responsibly. Mostly I want them to have zillions of good female monologues to choose from and great pieces to choose for A-level and GCSE without resorting to the ones they always do. I want them to know that men as well as women in theatre will fight for their voice and not just tell them ‘oh you’re being a feminist’ if they question it.” Youth theatre practitioner, Nottinghamshire

2.1 Who's playing what?

When the young people we interviewed were asked to speak about the roles they had played in youth drama, the boys tended to deliver a list. The roles they spoke about encompassed a range of style and genre, from Shakespeare through to new writing, musicals to straight plays, with many of the parts being leading roles, challenging supporting roles or smaller but 'important' roles. Boys tended to start getting what they called "proper parts" at a younger age than girls and these roles were more likely to get progressively better, the older they got.

When asked the same question, the girls' responses were very different. Older girls tended to have played just one, or maybe two significant roles. Younger girls explained that they hadn't yet got to the point where they were able to play "proper parts" but looked forward to being at the top of the school or amongst the oldest in their youth theatre and therefore in with a chance of getting one. In the meantime they said, they were generally cast in the ensemble, in non-speaking roles, as dancers if the production was a musical, or not cast at all.

Possibly because the girls generally had less opportunity to get substantial roles, if and when their turn came around to play one, they spoke about the excitement of it, but also the huge pressure of wanting that production to go well and wanting to 'prove themselves' in it. Some of the girls spoke with real dismay about feeling 'their' show wasn't as good as it could have been, or about what they perceived to be a lack of focus in rehearsals or effort on the part of fellow cast members.

The boys in contrast appeared more relaxed about the success of individual productions, instead tending to talk more about their youth drama "career", with the implication of repeated access to opportunity and longevity. Tarek, 15 from Manchester, shared an anecdote about an embarrassing moment on stage in a musical when he was younger and his voice was breaking. He was singing a solo when his voice squeaked uncontrollably. But he carried on and said he looked forward to his next show, telling himself at the time "if I can get through that, I can get through anything". In contrast, Phoebe, 16 from London, when asked to describe her 'youth drama low point' spoke about her disappointment when it became clear that the production in which she was playing her first lead wasn't going to be very good; "I could see it wasn't going to come together and I just felt awful".

While the boys played a series of substantial roles, and found themselves cast in the vast majority of productions they wanted to be a part of, they didn't appear to consider this as odd or problematic in any way. The girls on the other hand exhibited a tendency to be critical of any girl they described as getting "more than her fair share" of good roles. While the girls said almost unanimously that they would like to play bigger or more significant roles, and to be cast in productions more frequently, this was matched with a real reticence to appear 'pushy' or 'big-headed' in front of their peers, or to be seen as someone who is trying to 'steal the limelight' from others. This tendency for girls and boys to respond differently to competition wasn't unnoticed by the teachers

2.1 Who's playing what?

and youth theatre practitioners. One commented, "My experience is that boys are brought up to be competitive and that is seen as acceptable. While girls have a maturity ahead of the lads, they feel embarrassed to show how much they want something and worry a lot about being disliked".

Likewise anything perceived as favouritism from teachers and youth theatre leaders was viewed very critically by the girls. Kate Buffery says that as a member of NYT in the 1970s she proved herself playing a lead role once, but after that, the tendency was for her to always be cast in these leading parts. Although she enjoyed the creative challenge, in terms of her relationship with her peers it could be uncomfortable; *"it was embarrassing when there were so few parts for women, that I was playing the leading lady again, even when I knew my audition*

might not have been so good." Buffery said this was exacerbated by the lack of significant female roles: *"In my final years there, I would always get one of the very few good female parts available."*

While boys were able to develop their performance skills through playing significant roles across a series of productions, opportunities for girls to hone their acting skills were far more limited. The suggestion was made that talented girls found it harder to access opportunities that adequately stretched them and allowed them to progress, while sometimes less talented boys had to take on roles that they were ill-equipped for. One teacher commented "as we have more girls than boys and there are often more leading parts for boys than girls, the girls sometimes have parts which are undemanding for their level of talent. The opposite is often true for boys."

2.2 Damsels in distress and other stereotypes

“I usually play ‘airy-fairy’ girls with nothing to say, drippy parts.”

Isobel, 18, Cambridgeshire

“I’ve always been picked as the ‘delicate female’, I’m not a strong character ever, I’m always the damsel in distress.” Caitlin, 15, Surrey

Interestingly, none of the boys who participated in the research spoke negatively about the range of roles available to them; if anything they commented on the variety of roles they had played and how much they had enjoyed such a mixture. In contrast, the girls voiced almost unanimous frustration and disappointment at what they widely referred to as the “stereotypical” nature of the majority of the female roles on offer. “Princess” “bimbo” and “damsel in distress” were types repeatedly referred to by the girls to describe the sort of female characters they had played or seen other girls play.

Some of the girls felt these outdated stereotypes of femininity had their roots in classical works which, although written at a time when women were viewed very differently in society, continue to play a central role in our contemporary theatre culture. One girl described characters like Ophelia as “stupid, a bit dippy, ingénues; it’s like they’re little girls”. Although there was agreement that stronger and more challenging female roles in classical plays do exist, because of the high numbers of girls who want to perform, the chances to play them are rare. Additionally, the girls felt that those of them who do not fit the conventional ‘look’ of these more feisty or powerful female roles rarely got

to take them on. One girl commented “I’m always thought of as the sweet, posh girl, just young and basic. There’s a frustration in that because I know I don’t look like the parts I want to play. I’d love to play characters like Beatrice and other strong, impassioned women”.

Other girls suggested that the stereotypical nature of the female roles they had encountered – where women are required to be “delicate”, “elegant” and display other traditionally “feminine” attributes, are derived from their youth drama organisations’ tendency to stage adaptations of fairy stories and traditional children’s tales. “A lot of the stuff we do here is family orientated,” commented one girl about her school, “and there’s nothing wrong with that, but when you get plays like *The Wizard of Oz*, you have Dorothy at the centre who is this typical, really stereotypical ‘female’ character. Everyone assumes the girl playing her has to have a high voice and has to be pretty and have good, upright posture.”

Beyond the ‘princess’ ‘bimbo’ and ‘damsel in distress’ stereotypes, further stereotypes were identified by the girls as deriving from class and accent. “I generally just get to play the ‘feisty Northerner’,” said one girl, “you just get pigeon holed, but it would be great to be cast against that because that would be a real challenge.” The young people too felt that looks and physicality create additional stereotypes. Jack, 21 from Essex, spoke about his friend Cheryl: “she’s short and fat, she’s a bigger girl, big boobs, and she always plays older ladies, or a mum, because she’s a little bit rounder.”

2.3 Writing 21st century girls

If roles such as the ‘princess’ or ‘damsel in distress’ ever adequately reflected the female experience, it seems they certainly don’t for young people in the UK in the 21st century. Interestingly, there was a big gap between how the girls who participated in the research talked about themselves, and how they described the female roles they felt were open to them. “Determined”, “focused”, “driven”, “ambitious”, “bubbly” and “energetic” were words regularly selected by the girls when asked to describe themselves in three words. Conversely, “drippy”, “silly”, “floaty”, “boring” and “weak” were commonly used by them to describe many of the female characters they had come across. While generally the girls appreciated the historical and social conditions in which these now archaic female stereotypes originated, they argued this traditional view of girls and women no longer matches who they consider themselves to be, or what their expectations of themselves are. They expressed a keen interest in seeing females depicted on stage in a more authentic, creative and dynamic way.

“In the future there needs to be more plays where there’s big female protagonists, where they’re not stereotypes. You need to write things that aren’t the same as they have been before, but are completely radical. It’s the only way we can move forward and away from the stereotypes. Otherwise it’s like a big circle and you just keep going round and round.” Nia, 16, Surrey

“I like to see women [on stage] who aren’t ‘typical’ women. And when I say ‘typical’, I mean ‘typical’ to how they’re often represented in theatre; as mothers or sisters or crazies or sluts. There are these stereotypes and it’s quite hard when you see a lot of that. You want to see something else, something a bit more close to home, a bit more relevant.”

Marie, 23, London

Although many of the teachers and youth theatre practitioners spoke positively about an increase in the amount of scripts available either for or about young people, when it comes to roles for girls, a number of them said, there is still a long way to go. Concerns were raised that new writing – and even new writing produced specifically for the youth drama market – still doesn’t give girls an equal share of the action, and tends to rely on stereotypes. One youth theatre practitioner commented:

“The majority of those roles [for girls] are sexualised or limited in scope: many of the young women written in contemporary writing for teenagers are focused on ‘female issues’ such as teenage pregnancy, sexual bullying/violence, being a girlfriend, being bitchy or being a victim in some capacity. I find the voice of young women is often shockingly limited. This bothers me in that it reinforces those

2.3 Writing 21st century girls

stereotypes for young women and encourages them to see themselves in those terms. It also shows a lack of aspirational characters or women as strong and capable.”

Youth theatre practitioner, Leicestershire

Nazli Tabatabai-Khatambakhsh of Zende comments that perhaps in seeking to move far away from the ‘princess’ stereotype, some new scripts are sending girls into an opposite, yet equally restrictive casting arena. She says, *“We’ve pigeon-holed girls into quite a narrow definition – troubled, a future destroyed, a future stolen, irresponsible at the core, sexualised before they’ve*

even got a handle on what it means”. Tabatabai-Khatambakhsh feels this isn’t necessarily something that reflects the experience of most girls any more than other, more established stereotypes. Nor is it reflective of the aspirational and positive aspects of many girls’ lives. She observes *“I come across a great many young people in the work I do and sure, there are some that are finding their path more difficult than others. But there are many who are able to be of support to their peers and are reaching out to each other in a way that is healthy and helpful.”*

2.4 Who's driving the action?

“Name me one actor who doesn't like to be centre stage”

Tarek, 15, Manchester

Interestingly, what the young people who participated in the research said, is not everyone wants to play a lead role. While many of the young people expressed a preference for playing main parts, there was a smaller but significant percentage who said they would prefer smaller parts. However, this was on the strict condition that their character has a 'moment in the spotlight', does something that holds the audience's focus or is 'memorable' in some way. Cameo roles such as the Porter in Macbeth or small yet influential roles were given as examples of the type the young people had enjoyed playing, or hoped to play in the future. Being 'significant' in some way is key:

“I'm happy to play roles that are small but which have a great significance, that are memorable. Even if you only have four lines, but you get stabbed on stage or something, that's memorable. If you're playing a shopkeeper and your two lines are: 'Here are the apples. Thank you for the money', it's a bit of a meaningless part. You want to have that moment in the spotlight.”

Jemma, Somerset

It was when playing roles where they didn't get their 'moment in the spotlight' that the young people said they engaged less with the production and felt they took away fewer benefits from the experience. One boy remembered a rare experience of not playing a part, but being cast in the chorus:

“In Year 11 I was in the chorus

in Oliver! because I was doing my GCSEs that term so my teacher didn't want me to have a big part. That I didn't enjoy. I found it awful. I was always in the background, with nothing to do. I thought: 'I could not be in this show and it really wouldn't affect the course of anything'.” Jack, 21, Essex

Many of the young people echoed this sentiment – that when cast in chorus, peripheral or non-speaking roles, it is easy to feel that their presence isn't valued or even noticed, that should you decide not to go on stage one night, very little – if anything – would be affected. Although some of the young people spoke about good experiences they had had in the ensemble, these tended to have been when working with scripts in which the ensemble was, as one girl said, “the heartbeat and the focus of the show, not just somewhere you stick all the extra people you don't have enough parts for.”

While both the boys and the girls expressed their desire to drive the action in a production at some point or in some way, what a number of the girls suggested, is that this is less likely to happen if they are playing female roles. “In my opinion there's too many girls that are in a play to support a leading man” one girl commented, “they're the mum, or the sister, they're basically just an extra thread in the man's storyline or are there in order to somehow explore something about him, rather than to ever explore something about her.” While the girls said that playing boys' roles was often open to them, they didn't feel that pretending to be men should be the only way they could take control of the action on stage. “Can't we just have plays that give women important things to do?” one of them asked.

2.5 Looks count

What do you think are the barriers to you getting a main part?

“I have a couple of ideas – maybe my skin colour, or my weight or something because you know, directors, when they create a play, they have a vision of the type of actress that they want to play different parts and sometimes I might not make the cut. So for me that’s a barrier.”

Want do you think those directors might want?

“Maybe someone who’s blonde and skinny. I’m not sure.”

Sabrina, 15, London

What came through incredibly strongly in the research is the extent to which the girls believe their physicality and level of personal ‘attractiveness’ influences the size and nature of the roles in which they are cast in youth drama. In reality this may or may not be the case, but in terms of the girls’ perceptions, looks absolutely play a part. Interestingly, the ‘blonde haired, blue eyed’ cliché of female attractiveness was mentioned with a surprising level of frequency. The need for girls cast as leads to be “skinny” or “thin” was likewise expressed with regularity. Equally troubling, among more ethnically diverse groups the opinion was articulated that girls of certain ethnicities were less likely to be seen as ‘lead girl material’.

Many of these perceptions may have their origins in the often skewed or limited definitions of female ‘attractiveness’ adopted in wider society. Interestingly,

the young people expressed awareness of a double standard for men and women in the attractiveness stakes, with one girl commenting, “if you think of a woman in power, people always expect her to be attractive. If she walks around with no make-up on, people are like ‘what’s she doing?’ If she comes to work with a skirt and a jacket that don’t match, people talk. Whereas if a man comes to work looking not that good, people don’t blame him.” Likewise they agreed that in the acting profession, a higher level of pressure is placed on actresses than their male colleagues to look good. One girl noted, “you never open a magazine and see a picture of a man topless and a caption going ‘oh he’s really let himself go’, whereas you see it with actresses all the time.”

The young people felt these double standards often manifested themselves in the balance and nature of casts. One girl observed “there are lots of plays where there is one optimal female lead and she’s quite often blonde, and a bimbo, and not very interesting. I know where that comes from and there are a lot of movements trying to go against it. But I think for some reason the male gender has avoided more of that ‘this is the perfect stereotype’ than women have. And this idea of ‘perfection’ has transferred into female roles.”

A number of the girls raised the opinion that in writing for theatre, a disproportionate amount of female characters are described during the course of the action as being attractive, and consequently, the actress playing that part must herself fit into contemporary definitions of attractiveness. They suggested it’s uncomfortable to be an ‘unattractive’ girl cast as a character who is described in the play as being beautiful because of a fear “everyone in

2.5 Looks count

the audience will be laughing at you, or thinking 'why did they cast her?'. On the whole, they didn't feel that attractiveness was attributed to male characters with the same level of frequency as it is to female characters. Indeed, some of the girls said that for female roles, the character is often defined by her attractiveness, that being beautiful is her character. In contrast, male characters could be described in far wider and more complex terms.

A perception a number of the girls shared was that their castability was hindered by what they considered to be their own lack of attractiveness. One girl commented "I definitely don't look right for leading parts. I'd need to be prettier. I've got quite a good record of getting interesting character parts

which is satisfying now I've accepted I'll never get main parts". At the same time, some of the young people expressed the opinion that the most attractive girls being cast in the best roles is 'natural', what audiences 'want to see' and 'just how it is'. One boy who now directs some of the work his youth theatre produces admitted "as a director sometimes I've been very shallow and cast a girl in the lead because I've thought 'oh she's really good looking, she'll be it'. And I know it was really harsh of me to do that, but there are certain roles where you need someone who's good looking. And if they can act as well, that's a bonus."

2.6 The complex territory of cross-gender casting

In an effort to overcome the imbalance of too many male roles and not enough boys to play them, many of the teachers and youth theatre practitioners said they routinely ask girls to play boys' roles. Sometimes they rewrite a role so that a male character becomes female and a girl can play the role as a girl. But often, they said, this doesn't make sense in the context of the play and so in the production, they ask girls to dress up in male clothes and pretend to be boys or men.

The experience of playing male characters was something that nearly all the girls who took part in the research had experienced. Indeed some of them said it is incredibly rare for them not to play boys. By sharp contrast, the boys said that times when they had played girls, or seen other boys play girls, were few and far between, and generally only done specifically for comedic effect.

Generally the teachers and youth theatre practitioners expressed a dislike for the practice. However, many said it was the only way they were able to stage productions. Likewise, in the main, girls said that they found playing male characters less desirable than playing female. Although they almost unanimously agreed that if it came down to playing a man, or not being cast at all, they would rather play a man.

In certain contexts, the opportunity to play a character of the opposite gender can be a fascinating challenge for an actor. Likewise, the practice of cross-gender casting is an interesting theatrical device that has the power to make performers and audiences re-evaluate their own preconceptions and sense of identity. However, in the main, the

teachers and youth theatre practitioners said, their use of cross-gender casting was not an artistic statement. They said they used it for the purposes of expediency and that if they had the opportunity to avoid it, they would. The fact that boys were generally not asked to engage in the practice while girls were, made the teachers and youth theatre practitioners even more uncomfortable.

However, some of the girls said they liked playing male roles, with one commenting, "I used to play boys quite a lot and I quite enjoyed it. You have to play a completely different character and change how you move and everything. I liked having to be so different to myself." Another felt a greater sense of achievement when she successfully depicted a male character, saying "it seems more impressive, because you've had to change yourself more. Whereas if you're playing a girl, it's easier because you're already a girl." A pattern that did emerge was that as the girls got older, their willingness to play males decreased and they exhibited a greater level of unease at the idea.

By and large though, the majority of girls expressed dissatisfaction at playing male characters. They said they found it harder to "connect" with them, felt "embarrassed" by having to wear male costumes and fake facial hair and struggled to adopt the correct physicality when playing men. As one girl said, "for my Drama GCSE I had to play a dad and he was really big and butch and I didn't feel that comfortable". The girls felt they weren't able to give their best performances when playing male characters and said they didn't enjoy the experience of performing to the same extent as when they were playing female characters. They said they felt less inclined to invite family and friends to see the

2.6 The complex territory of cross-gender casting

production and tended to feel less proud of their contribution.

Additionally, some of the girls expressed a reticence to play male roles because they felt their acting achievements would be obscured by the simple fact that they were playing the opposite gender. One girl commented:

“even if you cast a woman as a male lead part, because she was just ten times better than all the men that auditioned, the audience are still going to be going ‘look, there’s a woman playing Hamlet, I wonder what they’re trying to get at by having Hamlet as a woman, I wonder what they’re trying to say with that strange, crazy interpretation’. It doesn’t occur to people that you’ll have just cast someone who can say the lines in the best way.” Lizzie, 13, Surrey

Adam Barnard, Joint Director at Company of Angels, has previously had concerns about casting girls as male characters, feeling the practice – if motivated by expediency rather than creative choice – can limit girls’ experience of the entire process of working on a production. He recalled a youth theatre production he once worked on as a freelance director:

“there was a very talented girl and she was playing a male role and we decided that it didn’t really make any sense for that character to be female in the context of how it was written, so we were kind of doing this quasi-male version of her and

I just thought ‘I don’t know what you’re going to take away from this experience, or what the value of this is to you as a 16, 17 year old’. It started to feel: let’s just grit our teeth and get through it.”

Barnard felt the casting of a girl in a male role in that particular context was something he found difficult to reconcile to the young people, and also to himself as a youth theatre practitioner:

“the girls were having to be boys but not vice versa and I thought ‘I don’t really know why I’m asking you to do this’ bar the fact that this is just what the play is. And that’s where you think ‘I am lying to these young people because I am trying to be enthused about the idea of theatre while presenting them with something I don’t believe in’.”

This sense of discomfort was something many of the teachers and youth theatre practitioners echoed.

A number of the young people observed that certain girls are repeatedly cast as girls, while others are repeatedly cast as boys. Sometimes the young people felt this was on the basis of personality with girls who are louder, more confident or who have strong personalities being more likely to be cast in male roles (“I’m not girly enough to play a girl” was one girl’s somewhat surreal analysis of her casting ‘type’). Generally though, according to the young people, looks are the determining factor. “Tall”, “big” and “broad shouldered” girls, they said, were likely to be cast as men, while “small” or “under-developed” girls regularly play

2.6 The complex territory of cross-gender casting

boys. Levels of 'attractiveness' contribute to a girl's chance of being cast in a male role as does the way in which she presents herself. As one boy said, "some girls are so pretty and beautiful; they just don't suit playing boys. Whereas some girls look a bit more plain, they don't wear make-up, so

they'd probably play the boys." The act of casting an adolescent girl as a male character could, it seems, inadvertently open up a whole quagmire of insecurities over attractiveness, sexual maturity and body image.

2. Roles for Girls

Summary

While the participants of the research identified that female roles tend to be fewer than male roles, they also expressed concerns over the quality and range of those that are available. In particular, the girls who participated in the research were vocal about what they consider to be the stereotypical nature of the female roles open to them. A mismatch appears to exist between how the girls see

themselves, and how they see girls and women depicted in drama. Furthermore, concerns were expressed over the extent to which a girl's physical appearance could affect her casting and also the problematic nature of asking girls to play boys. When it comes to female roles, it would seem a far greater variety and complexity are needed, as well as a greater number.

3. The effect on girls of the lack of roles

“Boys always become a precious commodity in youth theatres.”

Adam Barnard, Joint Director, Company of Angels

“As girls, in youth theatre you’re told you’re ten a penny, there’s ten more that can do exactly what you can do, who look exactly like you, and that can play the part.”

Marie, 23, London

3.1 Grinning and bearing it or voting with their feet?

Across the research, girls were articulate about how not getting a good role, or failing to be cast at all in a production, made them feel. “Worthless”, “deflated”, “disappointed”, “embarrassed” and “frustrated” were some of the words they used to describe the experience. At the same time, they knew that the number of girls who wanted to participate was high, but that the number of roles available to them was low. They knew that female roles could be less challenging, less engaging and less likely to be central to the action. In short, they knew that the odds were stacked against them.

What was notable in light of this, was the girls’ general reticence to actively challenge or be seen to complain about the situation. Rather, the girls focused on the importance of what was referred to as ‘just getting on with it’. Discussions about the barriers they perceived to be in their way were invariably followed by the girls talking about the “competitive nature of acting” and how “lucky” they were to be part of a production at all, no matter how small their role. The girls regularly commented that anyone who wants to be in a production ought to feel “grateful” even for getting the smallest of parts. As one girl put it; “when you’re in a show you should be grateful for anything you get. Even if you only have one line. You should just be pleased you’ve had that experience, to be able to say ‘I’ve been on that stage’.”

This wasn’t the case with the boys. On the rare occasions when they hadn’t received the roles they had hoped for, they wanted to know why. Some of them relayed conversations they had had with teachers and youth theatre leaders in which they had asked them to explain the rationale

behind their casting choices. Answers such as “you’re already playing a lead in a production this term and you won’t have the time to rehearse for both” or “you’re sitting your A Levels in the week of the show” were grudgingly accepted by the boys. Others spoke of times they had dropped out of a production when they felt the part offered to them wasn’t enough, or had left that particular youth drama group altogether in order to join another one where they felt they would get better parts. The smaller number of boys in youth drama – and their consequent status as ‘precious commodities’ – thus enabled them to ‘vote with their feet’ in a way the ‘ten a penny’ girls tended not to.

In the main, the girls adopted far more of a ‘grin and bear it’ approach. Some suggested that complaining or asking too many questions as to why their group wasn’t performing scripts with more suitable female roles would get them branded as troublemakers and therefore less likely to be cast in big roles in future. Others suggested that asking teachers and youth theatre leaders why they hadn’t been cast in larger roles would make them look ‘too big for their boots’ and that behaviour of that type would be viewed critically by their peers. A reticence to appear ‘pushy’ was widely demonstrated by the girls.

When asked, the girls generally agreed that this tendency to keep their dissatisfaction to themselves possibly contributed to the mismatch between the experience they wanted from youth drama, and the one they actually got. “Because we’re so good at putting a happy face on things I think sometimes our teachers think we really are happy”, one girl commented. At the same time, other girls argued just ‘getting on with it’ was the best approach because competition and rejection are part and

3.1 Grinning and bearing it or voting with their feet?

parcel of involvement in the performing arts. As one girl commented stoically, “you’ve got to have a thick skin, you’re lucky to get cast in anything”. While boys commented that the development of a ‘thick skin’ might be necessary should they go into the profession, at youth drama level they felt it wasn’t needed because their chances of casting success were so high, sometimes regardless of talent. As one boy said: “If you’re a boy who can stand on stage, speak loudly, you get a role, that’s how it works at that age. It’s much harder for girls to get cast because there are so many more of them who are strong performers.”

Many of the teachers and youth theatre practitioners we surveyed expressed regret at what they saw to be the more limited opportunities for girls, and in particular

disliked asking them to play male roles. At the same time, comments such as “the girls don’t complain too much” and “thankfully we’ve got a good bunch [of girls] – they just get on and do it” were numerous. By contrast some of the teachers and youth theatre practitioners spoke about “pandering” to the boys and the additional effort they routinely put into attracting boys to their group and, once they were there, retaining them. Offering boys free places for fee-paying projects and classes, fast-tracking them up the waiting list, dedicating a greater amount of time to managing their behaviour and prioritising projects and scripts it was felt would hold their attention were various tactics mentioned. Additionally, teachers and youth theatre practitioners spoke about giving boys “more leeway” for poor behaviour, lateness and absenteeism than the girls.

3.2 The importance of playing varied roles

“Because when you act you’re studying human beings, you’re having to think about what it is to be a human being and also you have to think about yourself – who you are, what you do, how that affects other people. Once you’re thinking about a character doing a certain action, you can’t help but think about yourself doing that action. I think you start looking at the world in a different way.” Marie, 23, London

A common theme among the young people who took part in the research was a shared passion for the opportunity that acting gives them to temporarily stand in someone else’s shoes and look at the world through their eyes. They claimed this gives them new perspectives and helps them to understand how other people think. It also encourages them to re-evaluate themselves and their own behaviour.

However, if a minority of roles in drama are female, it stands to reason that it will be harder for young people – both male and female – to develop their understanding of female behaviour, female thinking and female experiences. Likewise, given the girls’ concerns over the stereotypical nature of many of the female roles on offer to them, opportunities for them to ‘try out’ being different types of people is limited. Julie Ward from Jackass has commented that youth theatre is “a safe place where you can explore the extremes of what you might be.” If all that the girls can be in a youth drama context is a princess, a bimbo or a damsel in distress, what is there for them to explore?

Anna Niland at NYT is keen to see a greater range of aspirational roles for girls,

“inspiring work that they want to be part of, that isn’t just about abortions or problems.” The girls themselves said that playing a character who isn’t weak or a victim, but is proactive and powerful, can make them feel that way too. One girl commented “say you’re playing an inspiring character like Jane Eyre, you can really put yourself into that character, you can be like that person.” It’s an experience shared by Kate Buffery, who still looks back on her experience playing Volumnia in Coriolanus at NYT as a release from previous parts she had played and an empowering experience:

“I was suddenly playing somebody who was extremely powerful intellectually and emotionally, and I found it liberating to play a character to whom being ‘attractive’ or ‘unattractive’ to others was irrelevant. She was active rather than passive and driven by a need to do what she believed was right. It was probably the most enjoyable part of my career.”

Beyond feeling empowered on stage, or as a performer, the effect of playing a powerful character can have a wider impact on a young person’s life. As one girl said:

“When I was bullied, I liked acting because it was a way for me to break away from everything that was horrible and just be actually me. Or to be someone else, but to be free. If I was commanding on stage, it was as if I could stand up to the people that were bullying me, and I could do anything I wanted.”

Alice, 14, Hertfordshire

3.2 The importance of playing varied roles

However, according to the young people, the teachers and youth theatre practitioners, the range of roles open to girls that allow them to be commanding, (and commanding and female at the same time) are rare. One teacher commented “often women [in scripts] are shown as

subservient or linked to sex in some way”. With a greater range of roles depicting females as determined, driven, weighty and complex, the chances for girls to temporarily take on these attributes – and therefore envisage themselves in possession of them – will increase.

3.3 The importance of being in ‘the group’

“In the first play I did at senior school I got a really small part. I remember not feeling very connected with the play and not feeling very connected with the rest of the group either, because all the people with roles were off rehearsing together and I just had to turn up once or twice. In that situation you’re not part of the group and you feel very excluded.” Aaron, 19, Hampshire

When asked why they dedicated their spare time to youth drama, a reason offered by many of the young people was the sense of ‘family’ they feel it provides. They spoke about friendships they had forged through youth drama, the sense of acceptance they found amongst their peers there, and a sense of freedom from having to behave in certain prescribed ways. In particular, many of them spoke about the importance of being in a team and feeling part of a group when working on a production.

At the same time, the young people did observe that when it comes to working on productions, the extent to which you are involved in the action on stage can have an impact on the extent to which you feel part of the group. Those with larger or integral roles are more likely to be at the centre of the action and consequently at the centre of the group. Meanwhile, those who have less to do are likely to be peripheral – both to the action on stage and to the group itself. Given that girls appear to experience a greater number of barriers to being cast in large or integral roles, they are less likely to benefit in the same way from this feeling of being part of the group.

One boy described the group dynamic during a rehearsal period by saying “it

comes down to a practical issue of if you’re not there for every rehearsal, you’re not in the group”. Another commented, “if you see someone every day for six weeks and you see another person six times in six weeks, it affects how you bond with them. There are things that happen, there are shared experiences which give you jokes with each other, you discover things in common, you become more close to the people you see more often”. This, the young people told us, can lead to a demarcation between people in the production, based on the size of their role:

“There’s definitely a separation between the people with the smaller roles and the people with bigger roles. You have to make more of an active effort to be part of the cast if you only have a small role. But if you have a main role, or if you’re a Macduff or a Malcolm, you’re already there, part of the cast and you’re there every rehearsal. But if you’re only there once a week, it takes more to be part of the group and get those benefits.”

Ben, 20, Lincolnshire

The young people spoke about what they variously described as the “pecking order”, “food chain” and “hierarchy” that the division of roles in a production can create. They commented as much about how this affected the social elements of being in a production – whether they got invited to cast parties, developed friendships, or had a sense of ‘identity’ and ‘belonging’ within the cast – as they did on the creative aspects. For the girls, the reduced chance of finding themselves at the heart of a cast meant they accessed these social benefits less frequently than the boys, if at all.

3.4 The importance of being the centre of attention

While the young people commented that being the centre of attention on stage was gratifying, they identified clear benefits in their wider lives of being cast in important roles in a production. In particular, those who participate in drama at school commented on how receiving a good part in a production gave them a cachet with both teachers and peers and raised their level of visibility, often across the entire school. One boy spoke about being cast in the lead role in his school's annual production saying, "knowing it was going to be a term's worth of work where I was going to be the centre of attention and I would be spending a lot of time with the teachers, that felt great. I knew the show had a five grand budget behind it and that felt really important". Being selected to "carry a show", the young people said, felt like an "investment" in them by their school or youth theatre. They spoke about feeling "trusted" and "respected" by the adults who ran their youth drama group and particularly looked forward to "showing what they could do" and "proving themselves."

As well as getting to hone their skills as performers, they knew they were picking up a wider range of life skills:

"You felt like you were learning more than other people. Particularly later on, when I was doing really big parts, I felt I was benefitting more because I was spending more time with the teachers and getting their input more. I felt like I was getting a leg up in that sense. It gave me knowledge of very practical things like how to organise loads of people and how to organise a rehearsal."

Aaron, 19, Hampshire

At the same time, the affirmation that comes from being at the centre of attention both on stage and in the rehearsal room was something the girls appeared to be accessing less frequently than their male peers. While the boys said they may have had this central role five or six times before leaving school or youth theatre, the girls may have experienced it once, if at all.

3.5 The importance of gaining confidence

In an ideal world, is there anything that could improve the experience of the girls in your organisation?

“More confidence.”

Teacher, Staffordshire

The young people, teachers and youth theatre practitioners who participated in the research spoke extensively about the confidence-building aspects of youth drama. While many elements of youth drama activity can build confidence, what the young people suggested is that being cast in a significant role in a production raises confidence levels hugely. They also said that once you have been cast in such a role, the confidence this gives you leads to a “snowball” effect:

“If you’re given a lead role and you do it well, it gives you the confidence to go for the next one. You go into your audition thinking ‘I can get this lead role because I’ve had a lead role before’. And if it keeps happening it just builds your confidence and builds your self-esteem and the fear that you’re not going to get a role, that fear of failure, fear of rejection, it diminishes that. And you think ‘I’m going to get this role.’”

Ben, 20, Lincolnshire

Once this sense of capability has been achieved, the young people said, it positively influences other areas of a person’s life. One boy commented that being cast in significant roles regularly “gives you confidence. My mum used to say to me before an exam ‘treat it like a

performance’ and then you go into your exam going ‘this is my chance to shine’ and so you do better”. Some of the young people claimed the confidence they had gained from getting good parts in youth drama helped them in interviews for university and college places, others said that success on stage had galvanized them to ask people out on dates, while some spoke about the positive effect it had had when going into the workplace for the first time. There was an agreement that in such situations, a desire to ‘be the best’, which they believed originated in their success in youth drama, played an important role:

“I took a gap year before university and worked in Waitrose. Because I was confident and polite I was instantly bumped up from checkout to customer services and I very much felt like I wanted to be the best person there. We’d often set ourselves challenges like who could sign the most people up to store cards and I was very confident going up to people and things like that. I was promoted very quickly because I was quite confident, and confident to try anything they wanted me to do. I felt I would try anything and give it my best shot.” Aaron, 19, Hampshire

Conversely, the young people suggested that failing to experience casting success at youth drama can actually reduce confidence. They suggested this was exacerbated if a person repeatedly auditions for roles and is turned down or if, despite doing youth drama for some time, they continue to be cast in small or insignificant roles. Just as being cast in good roles has a positive snowball effect

3.5 The importance of gaining confidence

on a young person's confidence, so it would seem, repeated rejection can lead to the opposite. And the sharply increased competition among girls in youth drama suggests they are more likely to experience the latter than the former.

Some of the young people suggested this gradual erosion of confidence could be self-perpetuating in that it reduces the likelihood of girls challenging the inequalities they are facing. One of the boys, a member of a university drama society, spoke about the choice of plays made by the society and the girls' reticence to take active steps to secure better options for themselves:

“It’s ridiculous that we put on so many male-heavy plays because the society is about 90% female. There are a handful of boys who go for the male roles but then for the female roles, there’s loads of competition. The roles are not reflective of who’s in the society. A few of the girls were complaining about it and I went ‘alright then, bid to direct a play next term’ and they said ‘oh no, I couldn’t do that’.” Ben, 20, Lincolnshire

3. The effect on girls of the lack of roles

Summary

Youth drama can bring a wide range of benefits to a young person's life. These are benefits which, in the right circumstances, have the potential to snowball, creating long-lasting and wide reaching positive change in that person's life. Yet currently these benefits can be more difficult for girls to access. At the moment, girls are

finding it harder to make their voices heard, their presence known and their confidence increased within youth drama. With a greater range of opportunities available to them to play strong, complex roles and to be at the heart of the experience of staging a production, rather than on the periphery, these benefits will become far more accessible.

4. The way ahead

“We find across the board with amateur groups and schools, that plays with strong roles for women sell really well, because there are so many more women in the amateur theatre world and girls interested in drama in schools. If you have a play that has interesting, strong parts for women, it will do well most of the time. It is remarkable that there are still more plays coming through being written for men than women”

Tamara von Werthern, Performing Rights Manager, Nick Hern Books

4.1 Better writing for girls and more of it

When we surveyed teachers and youth theatre practitioners about what they felt could improve the experience of the girls in their organisations, repeatedly the same answer was given – more scripts that have a greater quantity and quality of roles for girls.

A number of them gave positive examples of scripts they had worked on with their young people which they felt successfully offered girls high quality and challenging roles. At the same time though, they said these scripts are too few and can be difficult to find. Many of the teachers and youth theatre practitioners commented that their organisation stages several productions in any one year, and members are likely to stay involved for long periods of time. This means there is a pressure to locate not just the occasional good play with plenty of strong female roles, but to find them regularly and on an ongoing basis.

What this means, we were told, is that those plays that are female-heavy and which are located where teachers and youth theatre practitioners can find them, tend to be incredibly popular. Tamara von Werthern is the Performing Rights Manager for independent theatre publishers Nick Hern Books. Von Werthern manages the amateur performance rights for a number of the plays NHB publishes, a role that brings her into frequent and regular contact with teachers and youth theatre practitioners. She agreed that the female-heavy plays for which NHB holds the amateur rights get performed with great regularity. She spoke about *Be My Baby* by Amanda Whittington, an all-female play with several roles for younger women that premiered in a professional production at Soho Theatre, London in 1998. Von

Werthern commented, “we do very well with plays with large casts for mainly female performers, such as *Be My Baby* which has been in our top ten for the last ten years.” She added that at any one time, several amateur productions of *Be My Baby* could be seen being staged by youth drama and adult amateur dramatic groups across the UK.

The teachers and youth theatre practitioners told us that locating appropriate scripts to produce with their young people in general can be a time consuming process. In addition to finding plays with enough roles for girls, many other considerations come in to play. These include cast size, subject matter, the suitability of the content and language for the age of their group, as well as whether they feel the script itself will appeal to their young people. Some suggested that even among scripts written specifically for the youth drama market or those that focus on the experience of being young, many, for a large and varied range of reasons, will be unsuitable for their young people. Adam Barnard of Company of Angels gave one example of why this may be the case, commenting “there’s a lot of scripts [for or about young people] that are very urban at the moment. There’s an interest in writing about really urban stuff; ‘yoot’ as opposed to youth, gangs or whatever. Is that necessarily of interest to a youth theatre in a rural setting? Is there a London-centric-ness or a big city-centric-ness to writing for young people?”

While this search for appropriate scripts can be time consuming, the teachers and youth theatre practitioners also said that for them, time is generally a precious commodity. 21% of survey respondents identified themselves as volunteers, with a number of others commenting that the

4.1 Better writing for girls and more of it

work they do for their organisation is not necessarily paid, but depends on whether fundraising targets have been hit. Among those who are in paid employment with their organisations, some commented that much of the youth drama work they do falls outside their contracted hours or official job definition (this was particularly the case for teachers who said they often deliver a range of extra-curricular drama activities for students on top of their full teaching timetables). Others commented on the further stresses that recent cuts had put their organisations under, saying their workloads had increased. This is a situation Jill Adamson said NAYT identified when conducting their 2011 research study, Effect of Funding Cuts on the Youth Theatre Sector. After increased hire costs

for meeting and performance spaces, Adamson said the second highest effect of the cuts on the organisations she surveyed *“was losing staff and programmes being cut. So organisations that were left with core staff only, saw those core staff being asked to do more, but for no more money so there was more pressure on them.”*

It seems that in addition to the need for a greater number of scripts with a higher quality and quantity of roles for girls, these scripts need to be visible. What the teachers and youth theatre practitioners suggested is that knowing how to find such scripts is important and accessibility is key.

4.2 How will this happen?

While there is a clear and strong need within the youth drama sector for more scripts that have a greater number of high quality female roles, these scripts are not going to materialise overnight. Nor will they necessarily materialise at all unless there is some kind of proactive intervention that challenges the current culture.

Given the evident thirst for these scripts along with the astoundingly large gap that seems to exist between supply and demand, surely the time is ripe for some enterprising playwrights, theatre organisations or youth drama organisations to step in and fill it. After all, if *Be My Baby*'s trajectory is anything to go by, a quality script with strong female roles that gets onto the radar of the youth drama sector stands a significant chance of being produced constantly, repeatedly, across the country, and for decades.

Adam Barnard argues that waiting for mainstream professional theatres to begin commissioning significant numbers of female-heavy scripts that the youth drama sector can adopt is unlikely to yield results.

"In professional theatre we largely put on plays with small casts because of economic reasons" he commented, adding that while youth drama groups often require plays for large casts, "who is choosing to write a play with 30 parts at the moment? Well absolutely no one in their right minds because no one would put it on." While he pointed to an increase in new writing that has foregrounded the experiences of younger characters in recent years, he added that much new writing has small casts because of the financial risk attached to producing plays that are not yet tried and tested, particularly those by emerging playwrights with whom audiences are unfamiliar. Of the tiny handful of mainstream UK theatres that do have the resources to commission large-cast new plays, the frequency with which they are able to do so is realistically far too limited to meet the large demand for scripts from the youth drama sector. Coupled with the poor record in producing large-cast or large-scale works with predominantly female casts that many such theatres have, it seems that looking to their repertoires is unlikely to provide answers.

4.3 An exciting creative prospect

Despite this, several of the participants of our research argued that the artistic case for generating a greater range of plays that foreground female characters is a strong one. Nazli Tabatabai-Khatambakhsh, Artistic Director of Zende, suggests that if those characters are themselves girls, this could be particularly important. She argues that across wider society as well as in UK theatre, the experience of contemporary girls is not yet being fully explored, either artistically or culturally. Tabatabai-Khatambakhsh suggests these girls make fascinating subjects for theatre, standing as they do on the cusp of a more egalitarian existence than any generation of women before them has known:

“We’re still living in a world where we don’t completely appreciate what equality means and what one little shift will open up for one girl, and close for another. How do we actually see girls? How do we understand their role, their function, their importance, and their value? We’re still working on a range of assumptions.”

Adam Barnard agrees that writing more characters that are girls, but doing so in a way that seeks to understand and represent their particular behaviour and experiences, could challenge not just how we think about girls, but how we think about playwriting and the dramatic form:

“There’s a lot of work out there for ‘dysfunctional lads’ whereas I think there is maybe less that tries to get inside the psyche of a 15 year old girl. Broadly speaking, boys’ behaviour when under stress - and

most drama functions around seeing what happens to someone when they’re under stress - is very externalised. They punch stuff, hit stuff. In girls’ cases of being under stress, their behaviour is often far more internalised. They retreat into a world that no one’s allowed into. Innately in drama the sheer loudness of the dysfunctional, aggressive teenage boy is a really, really seductive device and it’s the bread and butter of drama. Whereas I think it’s harder to get to the equivalent teenage girl.”

Barnard reflects that writing a play about a girl might demand a new theatrical language, one that finds a way to stage a girl’s inner world, or “one moment in time that expands in her head.”

Several of the participants of our research reflected that if this exploration of previously uncharted creative terrain is going to happen anywhere within UK theatre, it will happen in the youth drama sector. Tabatabai-Khatambakhsh comments “there is still the sense that if you’re making work for or with young people that it’s the poorer cousin in our trade which is bonkers because actually, the intensity, the ability to turn on a penny, the way young people can create worlds and then dismantle them in seconds, is a breath of fresh air in any rehearsal room.” The ingenuity, energy and independent-mindedness of the sector is something Jill Adamson of NAYT identifies too, commenting on youth theatre’s reticence to be limited by “sticking to traditional theatre form” and observing the “best youth theatre isn’t about mimicking what the adults do in the mainstream”.

4.3 An exciting creative prospect

For playwrights too, there seems to be a clear incentive, not just for engaging with previously neglected girls' voices, but for doing so within the supportive, engaged environment of the youth drama sector. Fin Kennedy is a playwright who writes for mainstream theatre, but also through his involvement in Half Moon Young People's Theatre and as former writer-in-residence at Mulberry School for Girls in East London, has written several plays for young people to perform. He explained why working within the youth drama sector has been important to him:

“there's a much greater canvas in the young people's sector, you're allowed to develop plays over a far, far longer period. There's no equivalent in the adult sector. You get given a commission, you deliver the first draft in six months and you have little or no contact with the theatre company in between.”

Kennedy went on to speak about how he likes to “try out new ideas in young people's plays; it's a bit of a nursery in that respect” and how the opportunity he has had to work in the youth drama sector has enriched his work for mainstream theatre. Commenting on one of his plays for adult audiences which he regards as “one the best things I've ever written,” he went on to say, “I couldn't have written that play without having had that experience in the young people's sector.”

Above all, Tabatabai-Khatambakhsh says, increasing the prominence, variety and importance of girls' voices on stage shouldn't be seen as a chore, a box-ticking activity, or an act of expediency, but as positive creative choice. *“Don't just do it because it's required of you,”* she says, *“do it because you want to look at the world around you. Not because it's practical, but because it's important artistically.”*

4. The way ahead

Summary

The need for female-heavy scripts among youth drama organisations is great. Yet locating them can be time consuming and difficult for teachers and youth theatre practitioners. Scripts that do have high numbers of strong female roles tend to be performed with great

frequency, yet enough large-cast female-heavy plays to satisfy the needs of the youth drama sector are unlikely to come from mainstream theatre. Despite this, a greater range of roles for girls could open up new creative terrain for the youth drama sector.

Conclusion

This research has highlighted a paradox within the youth drama sector – that there is a pronounced gap between who is taking part, and who the scripts available are written for. While female-dominated groups are the majority across the sector, teachers and youth theatre practitioners widely report a lack of plays that contain enough roles for girls. Where female roles do exist, concerns are held over the quality of these parts; whether they are reinforcing existing unhelpful gender stereotypes, whether they fail to offer girls an adequate level of challenge, and whether they all too rarely see girls driving the action on stage.

While the beneficial effects on a young person's life of playing complex, demanding and central roles have been catalogued, so too has the erosion to self-esteem, confidence and aspiration when these opportunities are repeatedly held out of reach. The research has found that for too many girls, this is the case.

As a consequence of the findings of this research, Tonic Theatre will be actively addressing how we as an organisation can begin to generate a greater range of scripts that are appropriate for performance by youth drama organisations, and which have a wider quality and quantity of roles for girls. We hope our colleagues who create work with and for young people will join us in this. The current gap between supply and demand is so vast that ignoring it feels not so much negligent as foolhardy. For writers as well as the companies that commission them, developing scripts that, if successfully brought to the attention of the youth drama sector and of a sufficiently high quality, will be performed widely and for many years, is an opportunity too great to be missed. The reach of a script that answers the youth drama sector's cry for more roles for girls and better roles for girls could be quite a remarkable one.

Above all, the young people who participated in the research said to us that they want more. The girls we spoke to said they don't recognise themselves as the princesses and damsels in distress they see in scripts, that they want more of the few strong female roles that are out there, and that they certainly don't want to be treated as anything other than equal to boys. It is time for these girls to have a range of scripts available to them that respect the commitment, enthusiasm and talent they are so willing to give to youth drama. Doing so will open up new creative possibilities for the youth drama sector and enable it to develop all our young people into the empathetic, empowered and aspirational citizens we want them to be.