



## ARTISTIC EVALUATION

It should be noted the views expressed in this evaluation are intended to represent, as far as possible, an objective aesthetic judgement. Specialist advisors and officers should avoid making judgements based on their own personal tastes and preferences.

**Artist/Company: Shetland Youth Theatre**

**Venue:** Olivier Theatre, NT in London

**Title of Event: National Theatre Connections**

**Type of Event:** (e.g. performance, exhibition, informal showing, work-in-progress, workshop, screening, lecture etc) Theatre Performance

**Date of Visit:** 17<sup>th</sup> July 2007

**Overall Rating** (Please rate the event overall, taking into account your ratings for each section. Please state the key reasons for your overall ratings – i.e. the particular strengths and weaknesses. If the management of the event affects the overall enjoyment of the event, please comment, but the overall rating should be based on the artistic merit of the event.) **Competent**

I am afraid I did not take to this at all. That is not necessarily a reflection on the Shetland Youth Group. I think their chosen material – no doubt in part chosen because it can service a company of almost 30 actors – is problematic and not vintage Lavery. As I've stated elsewhere, there must have been a desire to revive her play *More Light* and so someone thought it might be a good idea to write a sequel. The first play – about the incarceration of concubines in an ancient world by their demagogue leader – was a striking feminist piece written with poeticism and Lavery's characteristic ironic light touch. Here we have a play that lurches between the naturalistic portrayal of bike-shed juvenile jealousies and the tendentious depiction of an insufficiently delineated community from a strange and other world. As such, we do not connect with these people: they are inadequately characterised and so we find ourselves uninvolved. The Director strives to make the world alluring and mysterious with an evocative soundscape and highly stylised entrances and exits by the choral element, but the play lacks drive and the overall effect is stultifying. The production never really takes wing. Individual elements – technical expertise – display an admirable aptitude and application, but the weakness lies in the material that somehow feels re-hashed rather than inspired.

Name: Jack Bradley

Date: 22 / 7 / 2007

Specialist Advisor

Scottish Arts Council Officer

Please tick the relevant title

Council, as indicated at the end of the form. The report will be circulated to the organisation which produced the work and to the management of the venue, if the venue is core funded by the Scottish Arts Council.

The report will form evidence for the Artistic Leadership and Public Engagement sections of the Quality Framework and be taken into account in assessing the work of the producing company in relation to applications for funding to the Scottish Arts Council. It may also be used by the Joint Board to report on the overall performance of its funded organisations.

**Evaluators should enter their rating under each section, explaining briefly their reason for the rating with reference to their comments under each section. Ratings should be given in accordance with the following:**

- 1 - Very Poor** – standard falls well below what is acceptable.
- 2 - Poor** – not attaining acceptable standards of conception or presentation.
- 3 - Competent** – routine rather than especially interesting.
- 4 - Good** – well conceived and executed
- 5 - Excellent** – conceived and executed to a high standard.

## 1. Artistic Assessment

Please evaluate the artistic quality of the event, with particular reference to the strengths and weaknesses of the following:

Artform	Criteria	Rating	Comments and key reasons for rating
All	Vision and imagination of work - Quality of ideas, skills in execution; if you've seen the work of this artist(s)/ company before, please comment on the comparison.	Competent	I feel slightly harsh with this rating because I think the Youth Group have approached this with seriousness and professionalism, but the idea they are saddled with is pedestrian and ultimately uninvolving (one of theatre's worst sins.)
All	Curatorial/ programming vision/ selection Please indicate how the event originated eg from the exhibiting/ producing organisation, artist-led or commissioned.  If the event is part of a Festival, please say how it contributes to the overall programme.	Competent	The play was commissioned as one of ten to offer to participating youth groups all over the British Isles. Plays are then prepared and shown locally and 10 presented as the culmination of the year-long festival at the NT. The aim is clearly to present each of the plays, from a variety of regions to provide a holistic picture of good Youth work from all over. It is not a competition but a celebration of the work.
All	Success of event against stated aims - in the programme or other printed material, including how well it communicated the artistic themes.  Education events – see <sup>1</sup> below for guidance	Excellent	The event is very successful in its stated aims. The 5 day festival does give a snapshot of the work taking place outside of the professional theatre world as well as giving professional training to those participating. I have attended this event intermittently over the last decade and am always impressed by the blend of excitement and seriousness demonstrated by these fledgling performers.
All	Performers/tutors - technical standard, performance skills and ability to communicate and engage.  Where performers are not trained, please reflect this in your comments.	Good	The Olivier is a tough space to play. It does not relish naturalism nor insular acting. To compensate some of the performers playing the angst-ridden adolescents opted occasionally for tortured and intense acting, which was not to my taste. However, they were all audible, disciplined and confident. I think on this showing they are being given a thorough grounding in good practice.
Dance, Theatre	Choreography/Use of choreography - originality, use of space, number and use of dancers, length of piece, etc	Competent	The play allows for a huge cast of soldiers and courtesans who have been entombed to gradually reveal themselves. As a result, the play demands several processional entrances by this choral body. This is done in a rather stately fashion which I found ponderous, tho' their arrival from upstage to down was highly theatrical.
Theatre	Script – particularly in relation to new work or second productions. Relevant to classics where the original has been substantially changed.	Competent	I'm afraid, for me, this was a case of the law of diminishing returns. Red Sky is a sequel to the much more successful More Light. In that earlier play, Lavery boldly describes an ancient world where a demagogue, on realising he is not immortal decides to take his concubines into his tomb. They are effectively walled up alive. Poetic and striking in its depiction of the abuse of power. It has long been

<sup>1</sup> Education is a bridge between artform excellence and increased access and participation, and it is people centred. Providing opportunities for learning and progressing in an artform or using an artform to address other, non-artistic, outcomes are equally valid; in either case a high quality strategic approach is required in order to benefit the participants and the organisation. Delivery can be through workshops, post/pre-show discussions, outreach work, etc aimed at any age group.

Artform	Criteria	Rating	Comments and key reasons for rating
			popular with Youth Groups. As the evening demonstrates, there had been a decision to revive More Light (it was the first show of the evening) and so one might think that a companion piece might be a good idea. It wasn't. The contemporary scenes felt inconsequential and quotidian, but more alarmingly the freshness of More Light was missing here in the depiction of the ancient world. What had begun as a eye-catching idea, now felt pedagogic and laboured.
Theatre, Dance	Direction - Concerns issues of interpretation, casting and presentation.	Competent	I felt the director was more at home with the naturalistic scenes between the teenage interns than with the more stylised elements of the play, tho' I'm sure one of the reasons the director chose it was because it provided substantial roles for 6 or so principals as well as involving the rest of what is a size-able Youth Company. There was evidence of some good training: actors were vocally audible and disciplined (very little shuffling of feet!). So, it was well staged.
Dance, Theatre	Use of music – appropriateness and effect of sound or music (whole/part, live/recorded) to the production.	Excellent	As has been said, this is a strange and eerie piece which oscillates between scenes set at an archeological dig and the world beneath where those being excavated used to reside. Philip Taylor's soundscape is very striking, conjuring atmosphere of the netherworld as well as feeling quite modern as appropriate to the contemporary world of the archeological interns who are living out their more domestic and adolescent concerns.
Dance, Theatre	Design – costume, set, lighting. Take into account how appropriate the design is in relation to the venue and, where appropriate, the touring schedule.	Good	This was both bold and simple, which works on a notoriously difficult and cavernous apron stage. The scenes around the "dig" were placed downstage, off-centre which gave immediacy to the highly charged contretemps between the students (i.e. their squabbling!) The rest of the set was more suggestive rather than fully representative, with simple frames and trellises indicating an off-stage working area.
All	<p>Quality of Presentation/Engagement</p> <p>Performing Arts - technical presentation of the production (eg lighting and sound cues, etc).</p> <p>Crafts/Visual Arts - Use of equipment, space and overall layout/hang</p> <p>Education events - relevance/appropriateness of presentation and teaching methodology (one to one, group, child centred); details of participant group and activity, including genre.</p>	Good	Technically, this was adept revealing a Youth Company that was confident about their ability to present a polished show. The cue-ing was faultless and the audience at ease with the production.
All	<p>Audience</p> <p>Performing Arts - appropriateness of the production for the audience/participants; estimate the size and reaction</p>	XXX	

Artform	Criteria	Rating	Comments and key reasons for rating
	<p>Crafts/Visual Arts – time spent, interest, activity, and visitors' books comments, number of visitors/ participants at the time of visit</p> <p>Education/learning – pre-event involvement, participants/ schoolteachers reaction, understanding, commitment, enthusiasm, number involved, etc</p>		
All	<p><b>Additional Interpretative activity</b> – what activities were available to enhance the experience of the event eg workshops, artist's talks, discussion groups? Please indicate age-groups targeted.</p>		<p>Writers often visit the schools where their plays are being performed as well as the regional centres where the work is showcased locally. There is the retreat (see below) which offers professional training as well as local workshops.</p> <p>The target age range spans all school ages but in practice, the writers tend to write for the 15-25 year olds, tho' there are some examples of writing for primary levels.</p>
All	<p><b>Outcomes of education activity</b> – what learning/skills development took place? What did participants take away with them? Are education resources being provided for follow up work? Is it strategically linked to the curriculum (formal or informal)?</p>		<p>This is a project organised by the NT Education Dept. It aims to give Youth Groups a chance to work with living writers on a new play. As part of the process, Youth Groups can choose to go to a retreat with writers and other workshop leaders in the Autumn. Here they can have first-hand access to the material prior to embarking on their own productions. There is therefore a blend of professional help for the Youth Groups.</p>

## 2. Management of Event

Please evaluate the way the event was presented/organised by the organisation and the venue, with reference to the checklist below, including additional comments/observations. Please try to view the venue and the services, and interpretative material as though you had never visited it before eg if you did not know the venue's location, how easy would it be to find your way there, and to find your way around once you had arrived?

Criteria	Comment
Suitability of the venue for the event	The Connections programme is shared by the Cottesloe theatre, a 300 sea Studio, and the larger Olivier space where RED SKY was performed. Because the play has a substantial level of choric and ensemble work, this was a better venue for this particular show.
Information/ interpretive material at venue - programmes, displays etc.	The programmes were free and a book containing the plays was available for purchase. At the beginning of every evening, the nature and process of the project was explained to the audience. Before each performance, the individual companies were introduced to the audience and afterwards they were thanked and awarded a souvenir cactus, by a celebrity.
Publicity/ pre-publicity – leaflets, posters, websites, etc. What is produced, is it easy to understand and where can you get the information? Please be alert to the publicity available prior to your visit to the event and comment on the company/organisation's website.	The Connections Festival, being funded by a variety of sources, including, in the past, business partners is a very highly sophisticated publicity machine. The programme is also a poster; there are postcards and the event is advertised on both the NT website as well as via the Education department section on that website.
Ease of booking and payment	n/a – I was given a ticket as a former Associate of the NT
Location of venue – eg is it easy to find? Is it on a main transport route?	The NT is very centrally located on the South Bank
External signage and signposting	The area around Waterloo, the array of underpasses and platform levels means it is routinely found to be difficult to navigate from Waterloo Station and the theatre. There is a lot of – albeit small – signage.
Internal directional signage	The NT received a Lottery upgrade in the late 90's which improved its signage. There are plenty of ushers to consult.
Access and provision for disabled people – what can you see?	All 3 theatres are equipped with wheelchair spaces and there are lifts for 2 theatres.
Timing of the event – was the length appropriate? Did the start and finish time seem to be appropriate for the audience?	The play, being the second show of the evening started about 20 minutes late. It was advertised as being 1 hour but played at nearer 80 minutes.
Customer service - quality and efficiency of staff (e.g. box office, front of house, bar and/or catering)	Customer service at the NT is very high, though the bars and catering is expensive.

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Comment</b>
Acknowledgement of Scottish Arts Council Funding <sup>2</sup>	I only received the festival programme listing the tens shows being performed. This does not display the SAC logo, Though individuals from the Shetlands are thanked.

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<sup>2</sup> In press releases, at launches, on all published materials (including leaflets, brochures, programmes, posters, company's website, notices display, exhibition materials, websites and advertising, recordings, publications, video, broadcasts, computer programmes etc.) Where the event is publicised in the programme brochure of another organisation (eg venue, gallery, etc) then SAC acknowledgement should appear against the particular programme entry for this event.