

Performances for Schools at the Linenhall Arts Centre 2014 / 15

Here at the Linenhall Arts Centre we have for many years programmed the very best performances for children, including the finest international theatre companies. Our programming has always extended to schools, with both teachers and class groups sharing the wonder that a visit to a live performance offers. Research has shown that arts-rich school experiences have very real tangible benefits for children both in terms of academic performance, and social engagement in later lifeⁱ. Of course a visit to the theatre also provides opportunities for fun, surprise, engagement, delight, enjoyment and wonder.

Most schools in Mayo include a mix of children from a broad socio-economic background and therefore engaging directly with schools ensures that all our children get to take part, even those who may not otherwise have the opportunity to do so. In the period 2009 to 2014 schools attendances at our theatre events had waned. In Spring 2014, the Linenhall's Arts Access Officer, Orla Henihan, spoke with school principals in the area to see what caused this change. The consistent answer was that schools were no longer prepared to ask parents for money for non-essential items, and there are no school budgets to support the cost of theatre tickets.

Having spoken to the principals and identified the nub of the problem, we approached a private benefactor who agreed to come on board for one year to support our performance programme for schools. This support (€5000) enabled us to subsidise the cost of tickets (reducing tickets to €2), and provide a contribution towards bus costs for schools outside walking distance. The support extended to a programme of nine performances of four top quality theatre and music shows made especially for children in the 2014/15 school year;

The Way Back Home (theatre) by Branar Téatar / Teater Refleksion

A Most Peculiar Wintry Thing (music) by The Ark / Music Network

Elf Factory (theatre) by Little BigTop

The Girl Who Forgot to Sing Badly (theatre) by Theatre Lovett

The results were immediate. All of the nine performances sold out, one within fifteen minutes of going on sale. In total 763ⁱⁱ tickets were sold, with 15 schools attending. Of the fifteen schools that availed of the programme, eight were small rural schools with less than 65 students. Six schools travelled 20km or more to attend, with one school travelling 46km to see the show. See Table 1, and Appendix 1 for map.

Table 1 (See Appendix 1 for Map)

	Total students in school	A	B	C	D	Distance from school to Linenhall Arts Centre (km)
Scoil Raifteirí, Castlebar	234	40 (3)			32 (2)	.5
St Angelas NS, Castlebar	373		140 (9)			.5
Curious Minds Preschool, Castlebar	30			30 (20)		.5
St Pats NS, Castlebar	455				84 (3)	.5
Cornanool NS, Castlebar	41	21 (2)	41 (2)			5
Balla NS	152		46 (4)			14
Ballintubber NS, Ballintubber	86			26 (3)		14.5
Kilawalla NS	25	13 (1)				17
Holy Angels NS, Clogher	32	14 (2)				17
Facefield NS, Claremorris	32	22 (3)				20
St Joseph's NS, Ballinrobe	342	58 (4)				29
Killasser NS, Swinford	29	13 (2)			13 (1)	36
Scoil Padraig, Ballina	42		28 (4)			38
St Feichíns NS, Cross	62				39 (3)	39
Tooreen NS, Ballyhaunis	115	23 (3)				46

Figures in brackets refer to number of teachers that travelled in addition to the number of students (no brackets).

A = Attended "The Way Back Home"; Branar Téatar / Teater Refleksion
B = Attended "A Most Peculiar Wintry Thing"; The Ark
C = Attended "Elf Factory"; Little BigTop Theatre Company
D = Attended "The Girl Who Forgot to Sing Badly"; Theatre Lovett

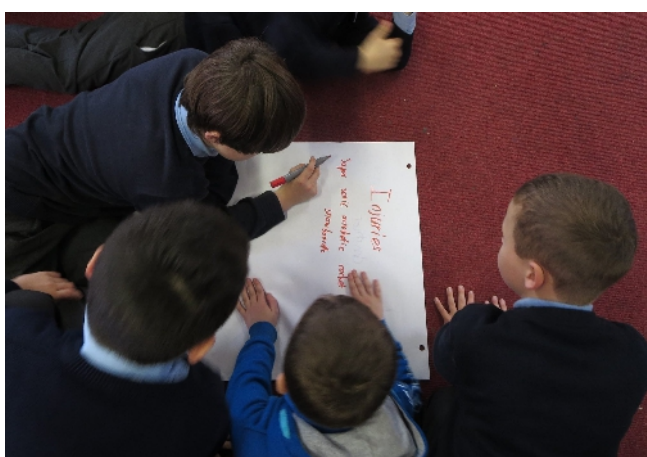
As part of the programme support materials were forwarded to schools where appropriateⁱⁱⁱ. These materials consisted of documents published by a range of organisations with expertise in the field of children's theatre and education. They included ideas for both pre- and post- show in-school activities. Two of the companies also provided tailor made support materials which were also forwarded to the schools.

Pre-show visits by the Linenhall's Arts Access Officer further prepared the children for their visit to the theatre. For many of the children this was their first time attending a live performance, and this pre-show visit was designed to ensure that their visit was a comfortable and enjoyable experience for them. Children were advised what to

expect when they arrived at the Linenhall Arts Centre. They were told where they would wait before entering the theatre, who they would meet (photographs of Linenhall staff were shown to the students), what would be expected of them (to follow the directions of our staff, respect the performers etc., no eating or drinking during the show etc.), and they were given advice to ensure a relaxed comfortable experience (visit the toilet before entering the theatre, take off coat and store under the seat before sitting, get comfortable in seat before the show starts). Finally the children were engaged in a discussion about the differences between live performance and television/film, and were given some information about the company whose work they were going to see.

For "A Most Peculiar Wintry Thing" The Ark and Music Network offered a free pre-show music composition workshop to one school group who would attend the show. During the workshop Brian Irvine, composer of "A Most Peculiar Wintry Thing", worked with the third to sixth class students at Cornanool National School to invent imaginative & energetic music together inspired by all their favourite things about winter. At the end of the workshop the group performed their newly composed song "Supersonic, Acrobatic, Rocket Powered Snowboards" for the rest of the school. A classroom activity pack was also provided for all school groups attending the show: http://ark.ie/downloads/AMPWT_Classroom_Activity_Pack.pdf

In Mayo we are fortunate to have a number of musicians with experience in developing performances for children. Due to the nature of schools bookings (each booking usually requires upward of 10 seats) there were a small number of seats available for both performances of "A Most Peculiar Wintry Thing". These seats were offered to, and taken, by these musicians, and the co-ordinator of Music Generation Mayo as an opportunity for professional development.



School group taking part in pre-show song writing workshop in conjunction with the Ark's "A Most Peculiar Wintry Thing"

In general the response to the performances was very positive. "I wouldn't have thought of actors as artists. But that guy, he was an artist!" - 6th class teacher St Pats National School speaking about actor Louis Lovett in "The Girl Who Forgot to Sing Badly". A number of schools engaged with the support materials we had sent them, and got back in touch with the Linenhall after attending, sharing information about their in-school post-show activities which included written and drawn reviews. The following review is from a collection of nineteen reviews written by the senior classroom students at Cross National School. It was the school's first time coming to a theatre production at the Linenhall Arts Centre. The Linenhall forwarded copies of the reviews to Theatre Lovett, who in turn sent them on to the playwright, and featured one on their social media pages (<https://www.facebook.com/theatrelovett> , <https://twitter.com/theatrelovett> March 6th 2015).

The Cross School Times

Theatre Review

"The girl who forgot to sing badly" is an outstanding production by Theatre Lovett. With the beautiful scenery, the well placed props and lighting, the amazing music and sound effects, and of course, the brilliant actor, it makes the perfect one-man play!

The entire play was acted by Louie Lovett (heh, you could say the play was so good you'd "lovett") a man with a great singing voice, and no shame.

The play was written by the talented Australian writer, Finegan Kruckemeyer.



The story is about a young girl named Peggy O' Hegarty. She and her family are packers (which is very convenient with the set-up). Each morning they'd get a phone call by people asking them to pack for them!

But, one cold Wednesday morning the phone didn't ring. So, they waited...

I loved this theatre production, and I believe you will too! I rate the 9/10

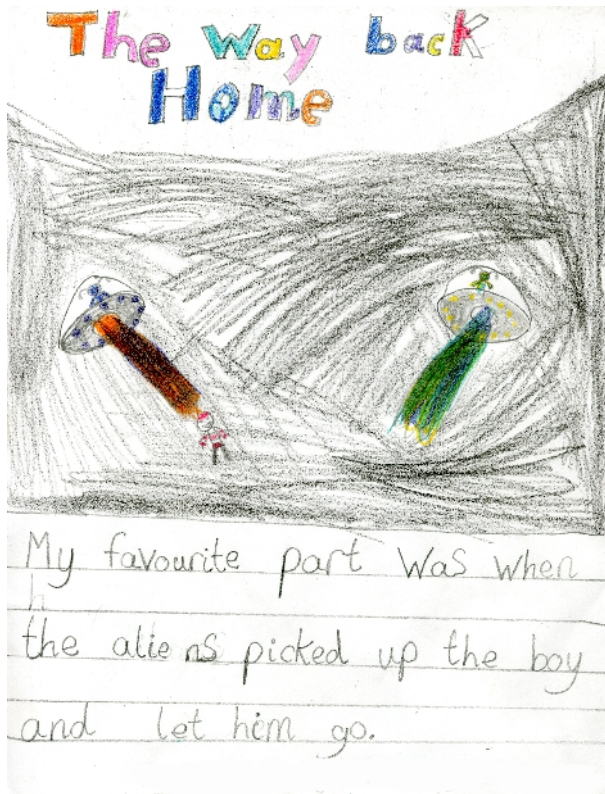
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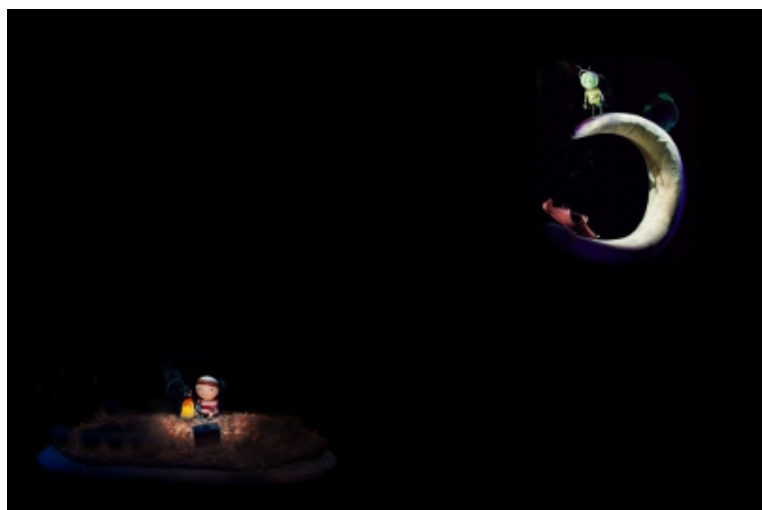
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For younger children attending theatre, drawn responses are one of the more appropriate ways of eliciting feedback on performances^{iv}. The following are two of twelve drawn responses to "The Way Back Home" by students in junior Infants, senior infants and first class at Holy Angels National School, Clogher.



These drawn responses reflect the use of darkness in the lighting design of the show and highlight moments of dramatic intensity in the piece. Once again these responses were shared with the theatre company who described them as "terrific" and highlighted them on their social media (<https://www.facebook.com/branarteatar> , May 27th, 2015).



What we've learned:

- Schools are keen to engage with theatre and music performances
- Pre-show visits to prepare students for their visit to the theatre/venue are effective. We found that children engaged with venue staff on arrival, calling staff members by their name, were generally relaxed, and happily followed instruction when given.
- Many teachers are enthusiastic about, & engage with support materials if provided. In this regard it would be useful if a document was available which served as a general introduction to engaging with live performance for schools, along the lines of those listed in end-note three, but tailor-made for the Irish curriculum.
- Theatre companies like to receive feedback from their audiences. This is not new to us, but was confirmed through this programme.
- The key deterrent to schools attending live performances is cost: *"Baineann na páistí Scoil Raifteirí an-taitneamh as an 'Seó Beo' i Halla an Línéadaigh. Bheadh tuistí na scoile iontach sásta le cead isteach ar thicéad €2. We see the value for our students in attending high quality live theatre performances, however we simply do not have the budget to pay for full-price tickets. It's really only possible for us if ticket prices are subsidised. A €2 ticket price at a venue within walking distance, makes attending a theatre show an attractive option for adding a live theatre element to our delivery of the curriculum"*. Principal, Scoil Raifteirí

Brass Tacks:

As already noted, it is clear to us from this experience that schools are keen to engage with live performances. Unfortunately they do not have the budgets to make it happen. Neither is the Linenhall Arts Centre in a position to absorb the full cost of presenting shows for school audiences at reduced rates. Without the support of a private benefactor it would have been impossible to present our schools theatre programme for 2014 / 2015. Their involvement meant that the cost to the Linenhall for theatre company fees for this programme (offset by box office revenue) was reduced to €284. The Linenhall also paid out in the order of €514 on bus subsidies for this programme.

We cannot overstate how much we appreciate this support.

ⁱ James Caterall et al UCLA

ⁱⁱ This figure includes 8 seats offered to local musicians with experience in developing performances for children

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.childrenandarts.org.uk/resources/>
<http://www.imagine.org.uk/learn/schools-teachers/>
<http://www.slingsby.net.au/experiencing-theatre/>

^{iv} See "Drawing the Theatrical Experience" Matthew Reason
<http://www.imagine.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Drawing-the-Theatrical-Experience-Final-version.pdf>

Appendix 1: Map of Schools that attended the Theatre Performances for Schools at the Linenhall Arts Centre 2014 /15 programme

Castlebar Town Schools
(Linenhall Arts Centre, purple pin)

