

# Lives Worth Living

## a report by Headway Arts

Lives Worth Living is a drama performance and workshop for young people aged 13 to 15. It is an emotionally powerful piece of drama addressing disability and its effect on those around it. Although it was originally written in 1983 (by Coventry Belgrade Theatre) many of the issues involving prejudice and discrimination addressed in the play are as relevant today as they were then. Thanks to the generous support of the Ron and Louise Bowey Fund (through the Community Foundation) and the Sherburn House Charity we were able to take the performance around schools in the region during the Autumn and Winter of 2009 and 2010. This is a report on what happened and what impact the performance and workshops had on participants.

Lives Worth Living looks at the relationship between two young people. Mark, 26, is learning disabled, Joe his older brother is recently unemployed and since the death of their mother has been Mark's fulltime carer. Mark is now due to move into his new residential support home where he will learn to live independently. He does not want to go. He would rather, much to Joe's annoyance, continue to live with Joe and his partner Tracy. The play takes place on a trip to the beach on the very last day of their holiday. The play lasts 45 minutes followed by a 45 minute workshop where the students get to meet the actors in and out of character and explore the issues raised. There is an accompanying guide for teachers for follow-up work.

The project set out to deliver a thought provoking theatre performance and workshop to 20 high schools and secondary schools in and around Northumberland, North Tyneside and Newcastle upon Tyne. The aim of the project was to raise awareness of learning disability issues amongst young people and challenge existing perceptions and prejudices. It also provided a valuable opportunity for Kris Brown, a learning disabled actor from the Seven Stars Theatre Company to develop his professional practice.

The tour took place in the Autumn and Winter of 2009/10 and visited 17 schools, 2 colleges and 1 showcase event in the region performing 22 times to over 3,000 young people aged between 13-16 years old. The performance was publicised through education networks such as the local authority schools information services. We also contacted several schools directly that were considered disadvantaged either by rural isolation or inner city location who had expressed an interest in engaging with the issues of the performance. Each school was given a choice of how many students they wanted to see the performance with workshop numbers restricted to 30 at a time. We were able to provide additional workshops to many schools who required them so that more young people could take part in the workshops. All the schools were given an evaluation form and encouraged to return it with comments from staff and students. We received a large amount of valuable feedback.

The post performance workshop gave the pupils an opportunity to look more deeply into the issues of the play. Two types of workshops were offered depending on the size of the group. Larger groups took part in a forum style workshop where the issues raised in the play were discussed and the young people had the opportunity to 'hot seat' the actors in character. This was complemented with discussion exercises in 'difference' and 'fitting in'. There was also the opportunity to talk with the actors and the director about the play, the actors own experiences

and the work of Headway Theatre. Smaller groups of 30 students took part in workshops where they could make their own drama with a drama worker to explore the issues more intensely. This involved students selecting descriptive words from the play (e.g. fitting in, acceptance) devising their own character and then being hot seated by the group enabling them to explore how the issues might affect their character's life. This hands-on approach proved a popular and highly effective way-in to discussing the issues of the play.

## **Outcomes**

The tour was extremely well received by both the students and the teachers at all the schools we visited. In terms of reaching targets and meeting aims the project exceeded the numbers expected who saw the performance, in total this was 3,150 young people being some 1,150 more than we anticipated. We were pleased to have a diverse variety of bookings ranging from more remote areas of Northumberland (e.g. Haydon Bridge and Amble) to disadvantaged areas of urban areas (e.g. North Shields and Newcastle). We found that it proved difficult to identify the most appropriate member of staff and establish a regular contact at the schools. This was because the content of the performance addressed several issues and meant different things to different schools. For example, in some cases it was Heads of Year 9 or 10 or the Drama department or the anti-bullying representative or PHSE or Welfare. Otherwise the booking process involving a returnable booking form proved effective.

The success of the project was to be measured by the extent to which young people's awareness of 'being different', being tolerant of others and of the meaning of discrimination is broadened by the project.

Following each performance there was some lively and intensive debate, the quality and level of understanding of which surprised many of the teachers present. It was commented that students were energized by the performance. Nearly everyone who saw the performance was surprised at its emotional intensity which was almost entirely perceived as a good mixture of 'funny and sad' providing an effective contrast between being entertaining and carrying a serious message and insight into the characters lives. Not everyone was aware that the two actors were acting and many students thought it was 'for real' which perhaps reflects the extent to which drama can bring the subject alive. Many identified with the family themes and were impressed by, and related to the bonds that held the family together despite and arguably because of, the problems they faced. They were also touched by the affection between the two brothers. Many students were very interested in Kris Brown, our disabled actor who played Mark. Kris is also a wheelchair user so the performance gave a wide insight into his character's world and his own life. Students felt his presence 'totally challenged the stereotype of disability' and that his humour endeared him to them. There was a considerable amount of outrage about how Mark was treated by those around him including his brother Joe. Students said they had not realised how it might feel for Mark to be treated in this way but seeing the performance made them feel differently about the problems he faced as a disabled person. Generally the feedback revealed that there was a lot of empathy towards Mark's character and greater understanding for what he was going through and how he felt.

Judging by the responses from students, the performance had a powerful impact on them and stimulated them to consider and debate their feelings, thoughts and ideas towards what it means to be 'different' in society. The immediacy and emotional power of the performance meant young people were able to relate very strongly to Mark and what he was experiencing.

There were very few criticisms raised in the project. In practical terms some venues without stages resulted in poor visibility for those at the back for larger audiences. Lack of disabled access to the stage or risk of Kris's wheelchair being near a drop were factors but without schools providing an appropriate dedicated space this will remain an accessibility factor for them to consider. There was evidence that some schools were unprepared for the content and impact of the project and felt they could have made better use of the visit if they had known. To be fair no-one was felt to be at fault for this but it did highlight a need for developing relationships between schools and organisations like Headway who can provide extra curricular input. Similarly some schools wanted the teachers pack in advance of the visit although it had been devised as a follow up tool. Pressures of getting the production ready meant it was hard to change the schedule but in future we will develop the support materials in advance.

### **Recommendations:**

- To develop existing contacts with schools and establish a consistent point of contact.
- Develop support materials with schools to add relevance to content.

**We are delighted to announce that since completing the project Kris Brown has been awarded the NIACE Outstanding Learner of the Year Award 2010 (North East Region) for his drama work.**

### **The Schools that took part with audience numbers**

|                                       |                     |              |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------|--------------|
| King Edward VI School                 | Morpeth             | 40           |
| Queen Elizabeth High School           | Hexham              | 300          |
| Norham Community Technical College    | North Shields       | 140          |
| The Blyth School (2 performances)     | Blyth               | 210          |
| Longbenton Community College          | Newcastle upon Tyne | 90           |
| Coquet High School                    | Amble               | 120          |
| Haydon Bridge High School             | Haydon Bridge       | 150          |
| Epinay School                         | Jarrow              | 50           |
| Walbottle Campus                      | Newcastle upon Tyne | 300          |
| Northumberland College (2 shows)      | Ashington           | 100          |
| Cramlington Learning Village          | Cramlington         | 350          |
| Kenton High School                    | Newcastle upon Tyne | 350          |
| Marden High School                    | North Shields       | 180          |
| Bedlingtonshire Community High        | Bedlington          | 150          |
| Northumberland C of E Academy         | Ashington           | 130          |
| Ashington High School                 | Ashington           | 50           |
| St Benet Biscop High School (2 shows) | Bedlington          | 320          |
| University of Northumbria             | Newcastle upon Tyne | <u>120</u>   |
|                                       |                     | <b>3,130</b> |

In addition we also performed at a showcase event at the Cluny 2 theatre in Newcastle upon Tyne and initiated ongoing work with students at Northumberland College

## **Comments on the performance and workshops**

### **Young people said:**

- "I really enjoyed the production because it was humorous and gave a really strong message"
- "I think the play was excellent because it has shone a light on everybody – you shouldn't judge a person by their appearance 10/10"
- "I liked the way it showed us how different types of people react to bullying"
- "I liked the production because it showed me how hard it is to be like that".
- "I thought it was really inspiring to see that someone like Kris could pull off such a great performance".
- "It made us think about our actions and people's feelings"
- "I thought the play was excellent because it was really funny but it also made me realise that it does not matter if you are different".
- "It showed you what happens in real life when someone is disabled, it helps to explain how a disabled person feels".
- "It was funny but it was sad and shocking"
- "It showed me what it was like to have problems and thinking about you guys made the play really good. I laughed lots with 'Mark'"
- "It showed you about bullying and what it feels like to be bullied. I think it would help a lot of people who might bully people"
- "I think it was good because it shows you how to avoid people taunting you"
- "I thought the play was excellent because it showed you how people felt when being bullied because they are not the same or have something wrong with them, like a disability"

### **Teachers said:**

- "The students were energised and stimulated to ask some very poignant and searching questions –they surprised us (the teachers) with their comments!"
- "We were particularly impressed with the level of engagement of some of our more 'difficult' students".
- "Extremely thought-provoking, well performed and a valuable experience for students  
It got the class thinking and talking"
- "Students said it made them feel differently about disability and that they had not realised before how it might feel for 'Mark'"
- "As part of our anti-bullying week it really enhanced lessons on disability discrimination and barriers to learning".
- "Staff have commented on the quality of discussion and understanding which have resulted from the performance".
- "Entertaining and with a real message"
- "It brings the issues more alive and is more personal than a DVD or film for example"
- "Please, please, please can you put us on the list for future performances!"
- "We sincerely hope there will be future opportunities to experience performances in years to come".
- "Extremely powerful, challenging and thought-provoking".
- "Heartbreaking and intense – good mixture of humour and sadness".
- "The students were engaged throughout and affected immensely by the power of the realistic professional performance".
- "Realistic portrayal of teasing and bullying and its affect".

“Some valuable issues raised in a way that was suitable for young people”

“I found the whole performance riveting – I was immediately taken aback by the emotive content”.

“The workshop strengthened the underlying themes and was approached in a fun and secure way.”

“Material and acting second to none”

“Excellent, honestly, I would love to have them back”

“I was surprised at the students reaction – often we don’t realise how mature and sensitive they can be”.

“Thoroughly enjoyable. Students were very engaged and we had some difficult students behaviour-wise. Good for them to meet a disabled person, whom they thought was ‘cool’”

“A simple but powerful drama performed well with a very strong emotional and well-delivered message”.

“All the students were able to identify with someone in the performance”.

“The young people, once they overcame their emotions really enjoyed the performance, they loved it and wanted more”.

“The young people asked for more partnership work”.

“This resource is invaluable”

## **Budget**

|  |                |
|--|----------------|
| Director's fee (15 days @ £150)                  | 2,250          |
| Actors fees (2 x 35 days @ £100/day)             | 7,000          |
| Facilitator (20days x £100/day)                  | 2,000          |
| Rehearsal space                                  | 450            |
| Set, costume & workshop materials                | 250            |
| Vehicle hire/fuel                                | 1,800          |
| Learning pack for teachers                       | 1,200          |
| Publicity  | 300            |
| Tour management (including direct project costs) | <u>1,200</u>   |
| <b>Total budget</b>                              | <b>£16,450</b> |

## **Actual costs**

|                               |                |
|-------------------------------|----------------|
| Director                      | 2,292          |
| Actors                        | 3,500          |
| Facilitator                   | 2,000          |
| Rehearsal space               | 400            |
| Vehicle hire/fuel             | 2,078          |
| Admin costs and teachers pack | 1,520          |
| Publicity                     | <u>160</u>     |
| <b>Total cost</b>             | <b>£11,950</b> |

Any other costs were provided as 'in kind'.

## **Generously supported by:**

|  |                |
|--|----------------|
| <b>Ron and Louise Bowey Fund<br/>through the Community Foundation<br/>Sherburn House Charity</b> | 9,950          |
|  | <u>2,000</u>   |
| <b>Total income</b>  | <b>£11,950</b> |