

# Final Report on new lines

## A new Theatre Writing Project for young people in Cumbria

### Background to the project



Since 2005 The Ashton Group has run a ground breaking project for young people, The Apprentice Actors Company.

We take small groups of young people into the Company for 6 week periods and work with them as if they were trained professional actors on the understanding that they are not. The project gives paid work experience to those young people not only of the theatre profession but also of the adult working world. It aims to instil work place disciplines as well as recreating the life of a Touring Theatre

Company on the road in an atmosphere that is both supportive and challenging.

In 2009 we decided to extend this way of working to young writers. The challenge that the Company set itself was to find 3 young people in the county of Cumbria who showed the potential to write a one act stage play of production quality and to facilitate their writing processes.

Cumbria is a county which, despite its historical associations with poetry, has very little professional theatre production aside from a couple of small scale Touring Companies and a small regional Repertory Theatre. There is nothing that can be described as a sustained tradition of the development of new writing for the theatre as there is in the metropolitan areas of Manchester, Liverpool, Yorkshire and the North East. Our process therefore needed to start at grass roots level.

We called the project, 'New Lines'. The reason for this was because we wanted to refer to the writing process whilst continuing the sense of an industrial process (a manufacturing company will produce 'new lines' for production). At the heart of our project is the idea that this replicates as closely as possible a real world situation in which a contemporary writer may find themselves



## The New Lines project in detail

The company employed 2 writers to work together on the West Coast of Cumbria, from Barrow-in-Furness to Maryport. The choice to focus on the West Coast was in part to do with funding but was also an artistic decision. West Cumbria and Barrow have much in common culturally being largely working class areas that currently suffer post-industrial decline. The company's experience is largely in this type of environment and we feel it is our natural constituency.



The writers, Sarah Miller and Ann Wilson, made contact with over 60 agencies working with young people including, Libraries, Schools, Social Service and Youth Service Agencies and Arts Organisations. They worked with 89 young people in around 20 workshops.

The focus of the writing workshops with the 89 participants was to get the first idea for a potential play and to develop it into a 'pitch'. From these pitches 20 were shortlisted and those 20 were invited to write a 10-page excerpt. The 10 page pieces were then given to a panel of industry professionals: Stefan Escreet, Associate Director, Theatre by the Lake; Andy Booth, Artistic Director, Quondam Theatre; Professor Gerry Harris, Lancaster Institute of Performing Arts, Lancaster University; Rachel Ashton Artistic Director, Ashton Group; Sarah Miller and Ann Wilson. We chose 3 pieces for development and production. Those 3 young people were rewarded with a prize of £500 each.

The pieces that the panel chose were:

*The Big Bang Theory* by Jonathan Bissett from Dalton-in-Furness

*Diffusion* by Jamie Cubiss from Barrow-in-Furness

*Hollows* by Alex Mullarky from Whitehaven

This 'commissioning' model may be viewed as being less developmental than most community based writing projects and indeed was much less so than any that we have previously run. The reason for this was as previously stated that the company wanted to replicate the cut and thrust of the real world of the writer in a way that would nevertheless be accessible to young people.

The dramaturgical programme for the 3 chosen pieces however was much more developmental. Each writer needed a different process to complete their script, just as professional writers need different processes. The methods we used included one to one story lining sessions, online support, workshops with professional actors and improvisation on the script during rehearsals

The pieces were produced in a rolling programme from Spring 2010 until Spring 2011.

The actors were auditioned in Barrow and Kendal at Barrow 6<sup>th</sup> Form College, Furness College, The Old Fire Station and at Kendal College. As the rehearsals took place every night for 4 week periods it was important that the actors were able to travel into Barrow each evening.



We marketed the auditions through our local networks, our website, by flyer, and by advocating directly to students in the Colleges. The numbers of young people auditioning mushroomed throughout the project as word spread that this was a great project to be part of.

As part of the project we decided to appoint 3 newly qualified Directors. The first play, *The Big Bang Theory*, was therefore directed by a

young directing graduate from Hull University and the Interact Programme at Northumbria Touring Company. She brought a freshness of approach and an impeccable contemporary practice. However, after evaluating the project we felt that the closeness in age between young, untrained actors and the Director meant that discipline in the touring stages of the project was lacking.

We therefore decided to offer the following 2 successful candidates the role of Assistant Director instead, thus giving them the opportunity to work without the pressure to maintain discipline in a young cast. The second and third pieces were therefore directed by Rachel Ashton. The company greatly benefitted from these young Directors' contemporary expertise and the touring product was tighter and more professional.

## Project Outcomes

The Writers worked with 98 young people in the script writing workshops. However we had aimed to contact 500. The reasons that this target wasn't reached are complex. In some areas major school reorganisations around the opening of new Academies proved a barrier to schools accepting new projects even where they had been very positive in the research period.

In addition, the writers experienced a degree of 'gate-keeping' by some Social Agencies, where workers made decisions on behalf of the young people they represent, about the suitability of writing as an activity. We think that the reasons for this may be that workers feel that if they offer what they fear may be an unpopular activity, their own attendance figures would decrease.

In future we would offer workshops to the workers themselves to allay fears about what 'writing' in this context means, because although it was explained very carefully to them at all stages, there appeared to remain very little understanding of what Creative Writing can achieve with even the most disaffected young people.



Although we did not meet the target of 500 young people joining the writing workshops, we now recognise that this was not feasible in the first year of the project, and have refined our model accordingly. New Lines delivered a very significant capacity build for the Company and successfully embedded the project in the minds of young people in our area and cemented good relations with our partner venues.

Overall the project resulted in a threefold increase in the number of young people auditioning to be part of the project and a 50% increase in the number of venues joining the touring programme.

## Project Impacts, Legacy and Sustainability

### Participants

All the young people that we worked with, both writers and actors, report that the project achieved one, some or all of the following:

- They enjoyed the process
- It had a positive impact on their learning
- It had a positive impact on their emotional/social well-being
- It was an important/life changing experience

Some of their comments are included in the appendix to this report.

### Partnerships

For the Company the project has brought us an array of new partnership with both Arts and Educational Organisations. For the first time we have been able to tour out of the region, visiting the North East with *Hollows*.

The project has inspired and informed similar projects in Lancaster and Burnley, and we have plans to extend our partnerships to include a joint writing project with The Kirkgate Centre, Cockermouth. This will go part way to addressing the problems we had in Allerdale of contacting young people through the Social Agencies. We share information with our partners and have plans to set up import/export deals with performances and workshops.

As a result of the project professor Geraldine Harris put a proposal together for funding for a PHD post to be jointly run by her department and The Ashton Group. Although the application was not successful, the partnership with Lancaster University continues and we have hosted an undergraduate student writing her thesis in Applied Theatre.

### Company practice

The project also helped to develop our practice, opening the Company up to challenging ideas and experiences. For example, we met a touring company of young disabled actors and theatre artists in Lancaster whose practice not only inspired our participants, but has led the Artistic Director to consider how we can extend our offer into the disabled sector in Barrow.



New Lines was not without its issues, but our ongoing monitoring and evaluation after each of the stages; workshops, productions 1, 2 and 3, helped us to tighten and strengthen our practices.

### External

Apprenticeship and work experience projects have been identified by the current Government as an area for development. In this respect The Ashton Group Theatre is ahead of the game. Having run this project now for 5 years we are considered to be regional leaders. The project is seen as a model of good practice by Arts Council England, North West and they are currently doing a study of our model as a joint project between drama and literature.

## The Future

The project is now an embedded part of our programme and although money has to be found each year we are very confident that its track record will continue to attract funding.

We feel that we now have a good foundation from which to develop the ambition of the project. We would like to achieve the following with the next phase:

- Continue to increase the number of young people auditioning, particularly those from hard to reach groups who may not be in Training, Education or Employment.
- Continue to develop the theatre writing work of young people, particularly those in the more deprived areas of our County.
- Make links with other young people's writing projects out of the region
- Offer Arts Award as part of the project
- Extend the project to young Apprenticed Technicians



## Conclusions

New Lines was a very important capacity build and learning experience for The Ashton Group. It has left us in a strong position to further develop and to further innovate.

We recognise that nothing stands still for very long and that we must not only react to change in the economic and social circumstances around our communities, but more importantly must try to be ahead of those changes. We must think ahead, think fast and think creatively.

New Lines was above all an experiment. It might easily have failed. The fact that it didn't was the result of hard work, vigilance and creative problem solving. A critical part of its success was to have Funders who understood that this was a leap of faith and were prepared to take the risk with us.

Thank you.

## Appendix - What the participants said

I learnt about myself and built confidence. Doing plotlines and learning to do character lines improved a lot of aspects of my ability and onstage presence.

**Male Actor, Aged 17, The Big Bang Theory**

I learnt how intense professional acting can be, and how focussed you have to be. I learnt more about characterisation and giving my character an objective. I believe my characterisation skills improved which allowed me to portray a more believable character. Also I learnt to listen and be spontaneous, making my acting more realistic.

**Female Actor, Aged 17, The Big Bang Theory**

I have taken part in The Apprenticed Actors before but this was a completely different experience. I felt I was pushed more during this tour and worked harder, helping me to become more professional. I never had the confidence to go ahead and study drama at university but after this experience I have applied for several university drama courses.

**Female Actor, Aged 17, Diffusion**

The touring experience was brilliant and the chance to constantly develop and improve both the script and the blocking whilst on tour, and adapting to each venue's space was so valuable. Each audience were worlds apart, and working off their reaction and the atmosphere to keep the piece fresh and spontaneous was integral to not getting bored. It's been an intense and demanding journey, requiring several skills, not just the delights of acting, and if anything it's only compounded my desire to perform and pursue a career in the theatre industry.

**Female Actor, Aged 18, Diffusion**

I have learnt a lot about how dedicated you have to be to be involved in this industry. It also gave me a kick up the backside in my timekeeping skills. I learnt that hard work pays off, and the more you put into it the more you get out. Teamwork is key when putting up a set.

**Male Actor, Aged 17, Hollows**



I have learnt quite a lot on my acting as I can now use my voice and physicality a lot more. I have learnt to be more confident and punctual. It gave me a lot more confidence as I now believe I have the skills to go onto University and possibly further

**Male Actor, Aged 17, Hollows**