

Warwick 2065: What role(s) do the Drama Societies play in the Warwick Performance Ecosystem?



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Introduction

A “Drama Society” was one of the first societies to spring up and student drama helped to establish the first performance ecosystem and continued to be a major contributor to the varying performance communities that developed before, during and after the building of the Arts Centre. This project assesses the role of the drama societies in three strands: their impact on the performance ecosystem, their wider reputation and repertoire and student experience.

Methodology

Primary Sources

- Society questionnaire sent out to current and past members of the Drama collective societies
- Interviews with various students, alumni and staff about their involvement in student drama.

Secondary Sources – Material Archives

Secondary data has been collected through consulting the material archives in the Modern Records Centre. Including:

- The Boar Archive - student newspapers.
- The Students’ Union Handbooks from 1966-1996.
- Warwick Arts Centre Annual reports

Also,

- The WUDS Materials- a collection of production materials kept by WUDS executive committees.



Findings

The Ecosystems

Drama societies have been a part of Warwick University life since it opened its doors to undergraduates in 1964.

• Initially, there were a small number of performance societies which included choirs and music groups, the drama society was one of them. Immediately, and without real facilities the drama society started producing plays and bringing in professional companies (Student Handbook 1966).

• When the Arts Centre opened it created opportunities for student work to be programmed alongside professional touring companies.

• WUDS used to have three productions, per term, in the Warwick Arts Centre Studio and then a Main House production (Student Handbook 1979/80)

• In more recent years a wider range of societies now have access to Arts Centre performance spaces, with last year alone seeing 9 shows from WUDS, Freshblood, Opera Warwick and MTW making up 8% of the Arts Centre’s programme, with 6690 people seeing Performance Societies’ productions (WAC Annual Report 2013/14).

• The Drama Societies, which now form the Drama Collective now compete for two slots per term in the Arts Centre Studio.

Findings

Reputation and Drama Society Repertoire

Warwick Drama societies have a proud history of prolific, varied and high quality programmes.

• In the 1967 student handbook, the Drama Society reported having produced “fifteen plays in first two years” despite a “lack of facilities.” The society continued to grow with Warwick University Drama Society alone, currently producing around fifteen shows per year .

• Warwick drama societies have enjoyed a long history of success at the National Student Drama festival, with some members citing that it was this reputation that attracted them to studying at Warwick.

• An entry from the 1978/9 handbook encapsulates the experience of the drama societies at the Festival: “WUDS is building a reputation for varied, interesting productions of a high professional standard and it is hoped that this trend will continue but this can only occur with enthusiasm and vitality of all its members” (1978/9). This assessment was made thirty six years ago but still holds true today with WUDS productions continuing to be highly successful at the National Student Drama Festival and in Edinburgh

• “I’m still amazed and staggered by the quality of the work that comes out.” (Howard Potts, WAC)

Findings

Student Experience

Drama societies create communities. The process of putting on a production requires many hours of rehearsal and production meetings, this in itself creates friendship groups but there are also activities and social events outside of rehearsing which help friendships to form.

• In the questionnaire results many cited their drama society involvement as the thing that “defined” their University experience.

• Responders spoke about how they made friends through the societies, how involvement helped them integrate with other students and how being involved helped create careers and networks within the arts industry.

• However, some felt intimidated or put off by the societies, Jesse Meadows, an interviewee who was at the University between 2007-10, sought other ways to act in student drama, through IATL. But she spoke about joining the WUDS executive to try to change that.

• The competitive nature of the drama societies makes for an environment where everyone pushes each other but in certain circumstances it can be intimidating and off-putting .

Conclusions

Drama societies are a major part of the performance ecosystem at Warwick having helped to establish performance as an extracurricular activity from the University’s early days. Since then the drama societies’ reputation for high standards and professionalism has propelled Warwick Drama into the spotlight on many occasions in nationally recognised events like NSDF and the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. And this reputation is something that still makes Warwick an attractive University for those who consider a career in the arts. Aside from putting on productions the drama societies provide a place for learning with the Arts Centre offering opportunities for students to develop their skills in a professional environment. A key part of extracurricular activity is the social aspect and due to the nature of creating productions and the vast social events on offer the drama societies have become a place where students form long-lasting friendships but can be an intimidating place for some people. It is important that drama societies continue to improve to make themselves more approachable, and inclusive. Warwick Drama is a sociable, thriving community which continues to make high quality, exciting work.

References:

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