



Say it Loud

IATL Festival Bursary Award Project Report



The Festival

The National Student Drama Festival (NSDF) is an annual festival, which showcases “the best work by people aged 16-25 in the country” as well as running workshops and discussions with industry professionals. This year it was hosted in Hull in association with UK City of Culture 2017.

Feat.Theatre is a company founded at Warwick University that is committed to making socially and/or politically engaged theatre with diverse voices at the heart. Our first show *Say it Loud* is a multi-authored piece about the UK’s response to the Syrian refugee crisis. We spent a week in residence at Wilton’s Music Hall in London in January as part of their *Plays Without Décor* scheme, where we researched and developed the show and shared a scratch performance with London-based artists. After further development and rehearsals, we performed *Say it Loud* at Warwick in February and invited Luke Barnes to watch on behalf of NSDF as a selector.

In the year leading up to the 2017 festival, selectors watched 125 shows around the UK and chose 14 productions to perform at and take part in the festival. *Say it Loud* was lucky enough to be one of these shows and we spent a week in Hull, where we performed the show eight times to different audiences.

Our week at NSDF was both exhausting and hugely rewarding: we received invaluable feedback, learnt new skills and met inspiring people.



New Opportunities

Having the opportunity to present *Say it Loud* at NSDF gave the show a platform we would not have otherwise been able to access. A number of individuals in the theatre industry watched our show, giving us the chance to receive feedback and build contacts for the future. Performing the show eight times gave us a variety of audiences and enabled the actors to experience a longer run. This gave them time to develop and build on their performances, and for us all to refine the shape of the show. For the cast, the festival offered the opportunity to showcase performances to casting directors, such as Hannah Miller, the current Head of Casting at the Royal Shakespeare Company. Similarly, the 20 contributing writers had their work showcased to a wealth of experienced playwrights.

A key component of *Say it Loud* is a new writer who responds to the most recent news articles about the refugee crisis live during the show. At NSDF we were able to collaborate with new writers from other companies, diversifying the voices in our piece and facilitating organic and unique responses from new people. As well as benefitting our show artistically, it also acted as a form of outreach, broadening the reach of our piece and the conversations it raises. Accessing and collaborating with these writers would not have been logistically possible had they not been attending the same festival.

The festival also offers a wide range directing, producing, writing and acting workshops, with huge variety in each discipline; the workshop programme encompassed everything from *How the fuck do I talk about what's going on?* to *Audition Technique*. We all had the chance to partake in workshops led by a variety of professionals with numerous specialties, ensuring that all of us learnt skills relevant to the fields we want to pursue. For example, actors more interested in physical theatre were able to attend workshops led by Frantic Assembly practitioners, while those more drawn to classical performance and Shakespeare were able to select workshops led by the RSC. For those of us studying Shakespeare in our degrees, these workshops also practically supplemented our academic learning.

The discussions are another valuable addition to the week; everyone in attendance at the festival comes together to discuss both the work presented and wider issues around the theatre industry. Some of the key

discussions this year were *Integrated and Gender-Blind Casting* and *Female Leadership: Is the glass ceiling shattered or is it merely cracked?* led by a range of artists including Erica Whyman, and chaired by Chris Thorpe. We all learnt a great deal from listening to professionals' experiences and hearing from peers from other universities with different outlooks. The Q&A about *Say it Loud* gave us the opportunity to articulate our ideas publically and to learn from being questioned and challenged by a wide range of people.

While "networking" can be a daunting prospect, having the chance to talk to people in a welcoming environment made it far less intimidating and resulted in new contacts for all of us. As there is no set path for a career in the theatre industry, having access to so many artists that have continually made theatre work allowed us to access advice on different ways for us to make work and careers. We were also exposed to paths we had not considered before, and all of the encouragement we received made a future in theatre feel possible.



Feedback

One of the most valuable elements of the festival is the constructive feedback available from professional directors and theatre makers, which was hugely beneficial for us all in developing further as artists. Another central part of the festival is the magazine *Noises Off*, which encourages young writers to critically engage with the work at the festival in the form of reviews. There were also reviewers from other publications present who engaged with our piece. For many in our company, it was their first experience of having their work formally reviewed – a valuable experience for a future in the theatre industry.

Below are extracts from some of the reviews we received at the festival:

“Get Up and At ‘Em”

Mary O’Connor, *The Sunday Times*

“a powerful spoken-word piece directed by Josie Davies, appealed to the fence-sitters to act... screamed for us to take action - and underlined the consequences for refugees if we do not”

“Powerful Voices From The National Student Drama Festival”

Chris Grady

“a piece of theatre which MUST be seen more widely...Dramaturg Lilith Wozniak, Director Josie Davies and the cast of 5 present their voices and those of 15 other writers in a vocal tapestry which is terrifying to witness, disturbing and emotionally draining to confront, as they offer the matter of fact genocidal stories and the failings of all of us to do enough as we watch the stories unfold amongst us. It is beautifully simply staged and even offers us a way to do something at the end to care for someone we don’t know. We cannot save all the starfish on the beach, but we can help one with our love.”

<http://www.chrisgrady.org/blog/powerful-voices-from-the-national-student-drama-festival/>

“Actions Speak Louder Than Words”

Florence Bell, *Noises Off*

“The writing is really the best part of this. It’s at times lyrical, at times rhythmic, sometimes funny and always powerful. Twenty writers have contributed material to the pieces, and there’s also a writer in the room who writes a short segment, based on current news stories about refugees, that gets performed at the end. The writing is the star of the show.”

“Paper is an important image...This is intensely clever: paper is mutable, is fragile, gets words written on it (a canny comparison to the words of the newspapers used to write the final segment).”

*“What’s really central to why *Say it Loud* works so well is the fact that it isn’t just a play about taking action, the play itself takes action. At the end, each performer tells the audience what they will do in the future to try and help Syrian refugees. And an invitation is extended to the audience to do something, to write a letter to a refugee or to donate. What’s interesting is that at one point the play acknowledges that theatre doesn’t necessarily achieve much, but that “small things do matter”. Not always, but a lot of the time, we watch and we do nothing. Here we don’t just sit and watch, we take part. *Say it Loud* continually references the idea of watching...But the show goes beyond watching, offering the audience the chance to do something to become active agents. That matters.”*



Awards

The main reward for us was the generosity of our audiences, who both donated money to charity and wrote letters to be sent to refugees. Furthermore, the conversations the piece generated, and the pledges people made to do more to help refugees confirmed that we had achieved some of our hopes.



Although these achievements far surpass the formal awards we received, it was an honour to be recognised by the following:

UK Stage Directors

Josie Davies (Say it Loud)

Camden People's Theatre Award

Josie Davies

Both of these awards are hugely valuable, not only personally, but also for the future of the show and the company.

The Future

Thanks to the *Camden People's Theatre Award*, I am able to develop the concept further with the support of a theatre. The award will enable me to continue gathering writing and viewpoints to supplement the pieces we have already created, and to develop the project with additional support from experienced artists and producers.

Many of us are hopeful to pursue a career in the theatre industry and feel we are now better equipped to do so. Some of us are going on to train at drama schools after university or have secured jobs in theatre, where the skills we gained at the festival will undoubtedly benefit us. The people we met at NSDF are friends, future collaborators and employers, and all the beginnings of important relationships. The festival also provided a wealth of transferable skills that will be useful for us all outside of theatre too.



Thanks

A huge thanks to every audience member who donated money and wrote letters. We raised money for the Peace House in Coventry, who among other things acts as a night shelter for refugees, and for the Coventry Asylum and Refugee Action Group who run community meetings for refugees and asylum seekers to share experiences, support each other and raise their voices for change. It was important for us to support charities local to Warwick University, and we raised over £270 in total. We also provided envelopes, pens and paper for audiences to write a "Letter of Hope" to be sent to refugees, to let them know that people in the UK are thinking of them, fighting for them, and ready to welcome them. We collected hundreds of letters.



The biggest thank you must go to IATL, who have made this all possible. Without your generous funding it would not have been possible for us to attend the festival. We all gained so much from the experience, and it has undoubtedly led to a multitude of future opportunities for each of us. Most importantly, your funding has allowed us to raise money and awareness for the refugee crisis, and to use theatre to inspire people to make a change.