

Project Report for Performance Festival Bursary Recipient:

five kinds of silence

at the National Student Drama Festival 2011



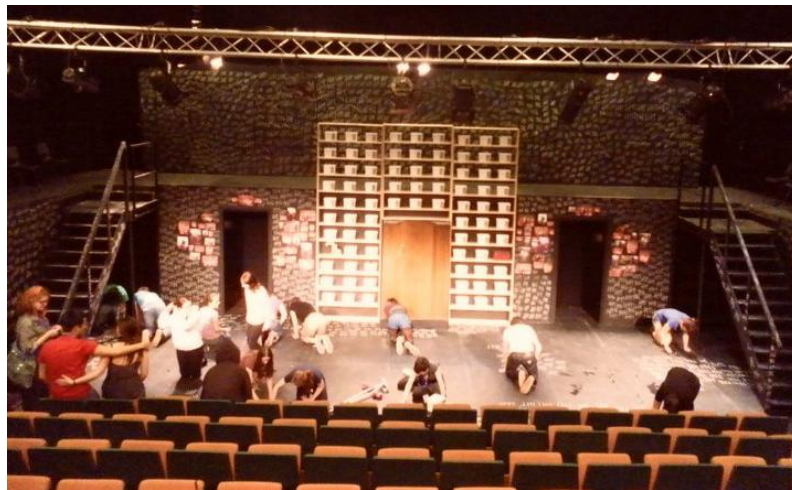
The National Student Drama Festival (NSDF) is an annual celebration of student theatre intended to showcase the works chosen by a team of selectors, who view shows from across the country throughout the year in an effort to discover the greatest of student talent. Additionally, the festival intends to act as an insight and potential gateway into the theatre industry by providing access and tutelage by industry professionals in the form of workshops and networking events. Warwick University Drama Society's production of *Five Kinds of Silence* was selected as one of 13 out of over 120 productions to be transferred to the National Student Drama Festival 2011.

The simple action of transferring the production to a different location was an opportunity for Warwick Drama to break out of the bubble of on-campus performances, opening our work up to a wider audience and giving our company a chance to both produce and view theatre on a national platform.



Though we are infinitely appreciative of the opportunities provided for students by the Institute of Advanced Teaching and Learning and Warwick Arts Centre, without which we would certainly not be in a position to produce anything worthy of transfer, there are several clear disadvantages in consistently producing work within the same platforms. As audiences are often comprised principally of friends and peers of the performers and creative team, constructive feedback on the process is limited and normally given in the form of conversational praise and criticism rather than formal discussion. Additionally, company members involved in the administration and technical aspects of student theatre will not be exposed to the process of transfers and touring, restricting the development of skills necessary to a career in the industry.

NSDF, in contrast, is designed to provide multiple outlets for feedback on the performances, the primary ones being reviews in the daily magazine *Noises Off*, to which participants are able to contribute, and the discussion forum nicknamed “The Bear Pit,” which sees an audience of over 300 able to ask the cast and creative team questions and inspire debate about their process and final production. This was beneficial to the company for multiple reasons: some feedback received, such as comments on how the use of movement to develop the audience’s emotional engagement with the narrative were thought too distracting from the text, and the potential controversy behind our portrayal of epilepsy, were an excellent investment – although the show itself is not intended to be performed again, such comments will make for heightened awareness of such matters in the company’s future work. Additionally, the pressure of being able to justify our process in front of a crowd was, though daunting, a rewarding and confidence-enhancing experience.



The logistics of transferring the full set and technical equipment gave many of the crew, particularly myself as a producer and company manager and Jonathan Moss as technical manager, the chance to experience the necessary preparation behind touring productions, a very necessary element of professional theatre production that is regularly lost on the more stationary student theatre. The degree of responsibility associated with this, including catering for the transport, accommodation and management of the company of twenty and the transfer and storage of our extensive set and properties, developed skills of time management, planning and communication that will be invaluable in future projects including those on a professional scale. Perhaps the greatest feat involved in the process was raising the necessary funds, a difficult task given the time limitations due to the late notice in which the final shortlist is given. The entire team worked together on fundraising events and were opened up to novel fundraising platforms such as WeFund, and myself as producer was put through the process of appealing to various funding sources within the university, a test of my own ability to closely

regulate our budget and articulate our needs. The final result, a successful raising of over £3,000, was a testament to the team's dedication and the university's willingness to support student endeavour, for which we are infinitely grateful.

The festival itself is designed to widen the participants' knowledge of theatre as well as giving them a chance to showcase their own work. Over the week, over 100 workshops are organised that aim to cater to the wide variety of interests and ambitions that those attending the festival have. These were diverse not only in content, covering everything from choreography to administration and set design, but also in their intentions – many offered a means to explore areas such as performance practically and physically, others looked to teach the ways of the industry and advise on means to build a career within it. These were of particular use to those who were graduating this year. For example, one of our lead performers was able to finalise her decision on which drama schools to apply to and our set designer successfully gained a work experience placement based on the professional advice she was given. The workshop leaders were all incredibly approachable, even after the closure of the festival – one offered to go over examples of CVs and covering letters to help in search for work experience.



Aside from giving practical advice and experience, the workshops also offered an opportunity to bridge the gap between the student and professional world. By making their time available to participants in the festival, students were able to explain their own circumstances to industry professionals and get advice on what action to undertake, and

potentially open up a networking opportunity for professional interaction on future projects. This led for example to a performer in our company receiving interest from Royal Shakespeare Company director Michael Corbidge in a site-specific production of *Macbeth* that they were in the process of creating, which is now in consideration for the RSC Stages project. Various contacts made at the festival followed up discussions with company members by attending the production of *The Nose*, created by Warwick students who had attended NSDF, on its transfer to the Edinburgh Festival and have asked to be kept up to date with the company's actions in future. In an industry as difficult to access as theatre, insights and interactions such as these will go a long way to securing the futures of the ambitious company.

Overall, the feedback that the production received from the festival was overwhelmingly positive – we received the Festgoers' Award for Best Production, a prize voted for by all 400 attendants of the festival, and many visiting artists and professionals expressed how impressed they were with the work. The week was a testament to the ability of Warwick's talent to stand up on a national scale, and opened up the company to possibilities of the industry beyond student theatre.

