

Project Report for IATL Performance Festival Bursary



National Student Drama Festival 2014

NSDF

Music Theatre Warwick were selected to perform our production of RENT at the National Student Drama Festival in Scarborough from 12-18th April 2014. We first performed this production in the Warwick Arts Centre in June 2013, selling out (even after opening further seats) and receiving fantastic reviews.

We entered the festival with no anticipation of selection having never entered before, but were chosen to perform at the festival, which celebrates the best of student performance. Only 11 out of 93 shows were selected, demonstrating a significant achievement in itself.

Transferring RENT to Scarborough

Transferring a production posed many challenges to us. Firstly in that many of the students in our original production had since graduated and though some returned to perform with us at NSDF, many roles needed to be re-auditioned, requiring many scenes, songs & dances to be retaught. Additionally, for those in the original cast, it had been 10 months since they had performed the show.

Another challenge was taking our significant set, lighting and sound equipment to Scarborough. This required two large vans and a ten-man technical team. All of this was costly. Entry into the festival cost each member of the cast £105 + plus accommodation + living expenses. The total cost of transporting equipment hire, building the set and transporting it to the festival was £3800.

This opportunity was a real test of mine & Jonathan Moss' organisational ability and logistics. The preparation required to tour a production far exceeds that of performing on campus due to the degree of responsibility for ensuring that the whole team has accommodation, catering, transport and dealing with complex finances.



Benefits to cast & crew

Despite the cost of attending the festival, the advantages were innumerable.

Though the opportunities to perform at University of Warwick are undoubtedly incredible, performing in a purpose-built venue gave both the cast and technical team an opportunity to try something new and learn about adapting to the performance space, as would be realistic for a touring company.

Receive critiques from professional directors, movement directors and vocal coaches was also invaluable. We received some excellent feedback and constructive criticisms to improve. This strikes a significant contrast to performing on campus where society members are usually only exposed to their friends, families and peers.

Other ways in which members of the production benefitted from attending the festival included access to a wide range of workshops. Over 100 workshops were held across the week and ranged from those teaching the cast how to act through song, to movement workshops, to confidence workshops. These were hugely beneficial to the cast and helped them to hone in their performances at the festival, which will undoubtedly be taken with them in future performances too. They bridges the gap between the student and professional world- and many received advice from drama school audition panellists and have had their confidence boosted no end with regard to auditioning for postgraduate courses.

Feedback from the festival publication, Noises Off, was also good. You will see from the review below that critics at the festival tend to be very honest but this has been very useful for our director who has learned a lot about her direction. Daily Discussions, where



all attendees are invited to discuss a number of the shows being performed at the festival were particularly insightful. These sessions gave us an opportunity to justify our piece and the techniques used in performing it, whilst opening our eyes to strongly held opinions, both positive and negative in nature, towards the piece. I think that having to justify our performance and choice of production in this context is encountered in no other context but opened our eyes to justifying choices in a way which will stand up to fine level of detail to which level these discussions went.

Many members of the cast were also able to network with industry professionals and theatre companies. Kitty Murdoch who played Joanne was offered the opportunity to perform at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe with WithWings in 'The Duck Pond'- which won numerous awards at the festival. Many others received advice which helped them to make decisions as to which drama schools to apply to and advice which helped them perfect their technique and performance.

We have also made close connections with a number of other societies at the festival. In particular Essex University's Musical Theatre Society clearly have very similar aims and activities to Music Theatre Warwick and our members learned a lot from watching their performances and from hearing about their experiences of performing.

Result

RENT did not win any awards at the festival, but the taking part really is what counts. This festival was a fantastic opportunity for production team, cast and crew alike. The achievement was in being invited to perform at the festival and being able to benefit from the experience in the first place.



Review: Noises Off: *America at the end of the millennium* by Rachael Murray

Rent is a musical deeply rooted in the time and place in which it was written. As an exploration of the effect of HIV/AIDS a community of bohemian artists in New York City in the 1990s; it does raise the question of relevance when performed by student musical societies in the UK. The question of geography has proved a controversial area in the past few days, and I can't be arsed wading into the "discussion" (I think we've all had enough?). The origins of *Rent* are more complex than simply an oceanic divide – whilst HIV/AIDS is still a problem affect young people, there hasn't really been a health crisis comparable – at least not with the same social impact – in the living memories of current students, which leads to many people asking why exactly it's such a popular choice for university performances – by 2014, is the story now irrelevant?

There is an argument to be made that the fact that the issues discussed in *Rent* are no longer in the forefront of this generation's mind is exactly why we should continue to perform it. From the mid 1980s to the late 1990s, a whole canon of AIDS fiction was built, and *Rent* is a part of this. Much of this literature has been forgotten over time, and to consciously step away from one of the few works that has remained popular would be detrimental to preserving the movement. These works should still be read, performed and talked about as that is how the social and personal impact of HIV/AIDS in America and Britain was captured.

Of course, none of this really offers any insight into the Music Theatre Warwick's production. The performances are generally strong, with Kitty Murdoch's "Over The Moon" and Stuart Nunn's "I'll Cover You (Reprise)" standing out as incredibly powerful moments in a show that is just quite good. When performing *Rent*, it is so easy to fall into a trap of desperately making everything, from the blocking to costumes to set, as close to the Broadway possible as possible. Music Theatre Warwick have sidestepped this, and actually tried out things a bit different, which is brave and wonderful, if not always effective. The main addition is physical theatre choreography throughout, which sometimes brought much needed energy ("La Vie Boheme") but at other times was just a bit awkward and distracting ("One Song Glory"). There were also a few moments of audience interaction scattered through – though too few to not be weird. Cast members joining the audience during "Over The Moon" would have been really exciting had it not been hammed up too much by the actors ("Hey, yeah, excuse me, I'm late for everything HAHAHA" x10). I also disagreed with the choice to have Mark hand his camera over to an audience in order to be "filmed" himself – it would have been fine, had they not kept the original dialogue that discusses him observing and not joining in ("You pretend to create and observe when, really, you detach from feeling alive").

Ultimately, it was an enjoyable show, and whilst some elements weren't necessary as effective as they were meant to be; it was brilliant to see *Rent* have some original thought put into its direction.