

By the Bog of Cats...

National Student Drama Festival
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Synopsis

The aim of this report is to share and reflect on our experience of taking the production of 'By the Bog of Cats' to the National Student Drama Festival. Through this report we hope to reflect on our project, its successes as well as its limitations.

The outcomes of the project will be explored in the twenty minute long documentary, '*Ah Go Wan!*' – *By the Bog of Cats at NSDF 10* -, which intends to show the company's process in the lead up to the theatre festival.

Acknowledgements

This personal opportunity, along with the production's subsequent success could not have been possible without the support and dedication of everyone involved in the company. A significant mention needs to go to the Warwick Theatre Studies department and its members of staff (Cate Brennan, Wallace MacDowell, Nadine Holdsworth and Nicholas Whybrow), the Warwick Arts Centre, WUDS and especially the Lord Rootes Memorial Fund for making this ambitious project possible.

Introduction

We first came across Marina Carr's play on our Theatre Studies degree. As students we became particularly attached to the idea of communicating her unique style of writing to a large group of people around us and so embarked on the challenge of staging one of her plays, *By the Bog of Cats*, at the Warwick Arts Centre.

Following the successful submission through the Warwick Drama Society (WUDS), the play was performed in the Warwick Arts Centre Studio in October 2009. After it's acclaimed four-night run, the production was one of twelve shows to be chosen to be performed at the National Student Drama Festival (NSDF) in Scarborough, April 2010, a week-long celebration of student theatre, live performance, discussion and special events.

The whole project involved twenty-three Warwick students, including cast and crew. The objectives of the project were to enable students to have the opportunity to display their talents on a national theatre field as well as broadening our skills and knowledge to new heights. We wanted to widen the number of people who could benefit from the continued development of the production, including new audiences and Warwick University itself. We felt that this national exposure could help Warwick on its journey to becoming known as a national leader of creativity and innovation and that our project has an important contribution to make to this aim.

Receiving financial support from Lord Rootes Memorial Fund made this opportunity become a reality in which all members of the project, as well as the university were able to benefit beyond what we had envisaged in its initial stages.

Background

Loosely based on Euripide's tragedy *Medea*, *By the Bog of Cats* is the prophetic tale of Hester Swane, an Irish gypsy, who attempts to come to terms with lifetime of abandonment within a world where all her loved ones discarded her. Set on the bleak, ghostly landscape of the Bog of Cats, this discloses one woman's courageous attempts to lay claim to that which is hers, her caravan, her house and her daughter. Marina Carr's ability to interweave elements of the supernatural and the mystical with the classic themes of prophecy and fate constitute the originality of the play. Marina Carr obviously uses and subverts Greek drama sources to deal with universal and timeless concerns such as motherhood and identity. Multiple affinities obviously exist between *Medea* and *By the Bog of Cats*. The ideas of fate, prophecy rejection and infanticide are all played out in Carr's script. In taking her basic plot from Euripides, Marina Carr looks back on a classic work that presents a strong, aggressive woman.

The presence of such a challenging text at NSDF was perceived by the company members as an event in itself. Nowadays, it is still hard to assess the role of female 'classics' on the British stage which too often seems to be putting men to the fore. *By the Bog of Cats* presents some strong lead female characters which is unusual to see at NSDF and more generally on the contemporary stage. NSDF, this year again, presented 12 plays, only three of which had been written by female playwrights.

Marina Carr is also one of the most critically acclaimed Irish playwrights today, yet hardly recognized by a student audience. Presenting one of her plays to a wider group has given the students attending the festival the opportunity to discover a visionary and original playwright playing with the conventions of naturalistic drama and ultimately intended to challenge the male hegemony on the theatre scene.

Finally, the idea of making a film has been motivated by the desire to create a visual documentation that we could both share with the Lord Rootes Board of Trustees which accorded us the funds to go to NSDF, as well as future potential applicants to both the funding and the festival, in order to demonstrate what can be achieved. Although the written report is compulsory, we feel that the format of a video is more widely accessible to an audience of students at Warwick and beyond. Since then, we have encountered an incredible interest for this documentary serving each member of the company in their own professional commitments, as well as the

Theatre Department which wishes to keep a record in order to find future students. We have also distributed the film to the National Student Drama Festival office, which represents a tangible evidence of the benefits of such a festival. We can imagine they will be using it as a way of securing some future funding in a context of growing uncertainty for the arts.

Methodology

Our commitment to making an experience out of this play was born out of our desire to produce excellent drama. Our team consisted of a number of talented actors and musicians striving to collaboratively achieve the highest of standards. Each member of the project has exceptional personal qualities and by mixing people from a range of backgrounds with a broad range of strengths, we intended to create an environment of shared knowledge which can be passed on and built upon. Our rehearsal process mainly consisted of digging even further into what the text had to offer and to offer every individual involved in the project the opportunity to use their expertise to blossom as theatre-makers.

Along with the work that the actor was providing in the rehearsal room, the whole production team met on a regular basis to organise the trip to would be a success for the whole company to deliver their best once in the theatre venue. The company included twenty-three members, for which many logistics had to be considered. As a producer, I was in charge of transport, accommodation and liaising with festival organizers and venue contacts.

The making of the documentary was facilitated by Tegid Cartwright who was already with the production as one of the musicians. His inability to attend all the performances at the festival made him want to remain involved with the project with the making of this documentary. The documentary follows the progress of the production team and the cast as they reassemble the play they performed some months before for the Warwick Arts Centre Studio so that it can be performed in a new space in Scarborough at the National Student Drama Festival. Tegid Cartwright took footage of their rehearsals, interviews and edited it with some footage on a camera he gave the production team to record their experience of their time in Scarborough.

Limitations

Taking the show to NSDF meant that we had to raise enough funding for us to be able to pay for all the expenses which participating to the festival entailed. This necessitated a great deal of time consuming organisational strategies which could have easily impeded on the team's studies. Therefore creating a balance was crucial.

Transporting people, set and musical instruments from Leamington Spa to Scarborough where the festival took place proved to be more arduous than we all expected. The size of the double bass, for example, was taking so much room in the mini-van that a few members of the company had to take a last minute train to Scarborough which significantly increased the cost of the project. A few props, as well as some elements of the set, couldn't be taken due to limited room and therefore we had to source crucial elements of the set once in Scarborough, resulting in a lot of stress for the production team.

Taking an existing show on tour meant that we had to accommodate to the venue we were given and deal with the physical limitations of the space. In this particular case, *By the Bog of Cats* had to perform in a sports hall in which the acoustic was in no way similar to one in a standard theatre venue. Although this could have been a limitation to our work, the whole team made sure that it also represented an exciting challenge for the company which we would use aesthetically in the design of our show. The set indeed became a huge warehouse in which all the characters congregated.

In the end, the revival meant something new and exciting to all members. Each cast members and musicians felt their performances improved when performing in this new space. Somehow NSDF generated the need to take the performance to a greater level than the one we had previously when the show was performed at the Warwick Arts Centre.

Due to the commitments required, some of the original company members needed to be replaced. We overcame this by re-auditioning the roles of Caroline Cassidy and Father Willow. Introducing new actors to an existing cast who had developed a strong bond was a great challenge. However these new comers as well being good actors, needed to become integral part of the ensemble for the play to function. Although this could have threatened the balance of the ensemble, the newcomers introduced a new and interesting dynamic to the existing production. In fact,

when auditioning we had a clearer idea of who these two characters were which meant that those who got casted fitted the part more evidently. Due to the original auditions occurring before the new academic year, we were very attached to the idea that first year students should benefit from the experience of being in a touring show and participate in NSDF. Therefore, we used the need to replace performers to give the required parts to two first year students: William Temple who reads History of Arts, and Stephanie Taylor studying English and Theatre.

The making of the documentary in itself was a challenge for the film makers, Tegid Cartwright and Nina Scott. Their original intention was to explain the concepts of the play, show how much work went into the project, render justice to the team, while also trying to gather some sense of its atmosphere. From the final product, we are not even sure we managed to capture the experience as a whole. Tegid went through a long and arduous process of editing and finally managed to condense 14 hours of footage into 20 minutes. Although the documentary was an utter success in its form, it can never fully grasp the intensity of such an experience and how it was felt by the members of the team.

Now that the documentary has been made, we hope to create a longer version of the film which would explore in greater details some elements of the productions which we discussed in some of our interviews but could not fit into the final form of the documentary.

Analysis

Taking a student drama production to a festival such as NSDF meant we could confront our work to the critical gaze of professionals involved in the theatre industry, as well as other students who we could trust to have an objective response to our work. Their response, good or bad, would ultimately differ from the Warwick close-knit community which we had experienced so far. If the play was a success at the festival, the play would constitute a milestone for all members of the company to take a greater ownership over future artistic projects.

On a personal level, and as a producer, I have noticed how much confidence and good analytical skills the people involved have developed throughout the festival. The final discussion during which the play received feedback from the festival-goers showed a tight ensemble with very strong individuals who knew and could defend every single aspects of the performance. I felt extremely proud to see that these people had changed throughout the process, that the project made them confront certain things necessary for their future development as artists, musicians or stage technicians.

Aside from all the opportunities to meet people in the arts industries, the most beneficial thing about Bog of Cats at NSDF was the experience of working really hard on a project with a team of amazing people. I attended various workshops at NSDF, and met many people who I've since been able to work with; but the main way it influenced me was by letting me work with amazing student musicians, directors, designers, technicians, and actors, all of whom are genuinely inspirational. It was difficult and it was weird and we were celebrities for a week, which was a bit horrible, but it was worth it because we got to make something actually good, and everyone should be given that kind of opportunity.

- Ben Osborn (English Graduate) Musical Director,
Makintosh Award for Best Music NSDF 10

Bog of Cats gave me a wonderful opportunity to step into the world of drama for a brief time. I felt so lucky to be welcomed onto the crew and then to experience the festival Scarborough, despite never having been on stage before. The proudest moment came during my graduation ceremony where, surrounded by hundreds of fellow scientists I listened to the Vice Chancellor listing the awards we won at NSDF, and explaining how much he valued the university's enthusiasm for drama - I realised I was the only one in the whole room who had been on the crew and felt very proud that I'd been part of something so different to my academic course. These new experiences are what university is all about, and I'm so grateful for the Lord Rootes funding that helped us get to Scarborough.

- Oliver Steadman (Physics Graduate) Musician

It is certainly an experience from which we all came out with a better credibility in the wider and complex arts industry. However NSDF in itself is not an end and we now need to understand why we encountered some limitations to the project.

Personal reflection

At the time of writing the proposal for Lord Rootes, we were unsure how the work would be perceived, however we gained invaluable recognition from both the public and professional theatre industry which boosted the confidence of all the members of the company who now feel legitimised in a wider theatre context.

The production of *By the Bog of Cats* was highly acclaimed at NSDF and the company was overwhelmed with positive feedback during the run of our show. At the NSDF Awards Ceremony, the play received five awards, including the IdeasTap Festgoers choice for Best Show which is an incredible achievement for the Warwick Drama society and the University itself. This was a great recognition for the hard work that every member of the team put into making the production a success.

After recently graduating, many of the members of this project are now continuing to improve their artistic skills. Director Bertrand Lesca and Designer Jessie Vickerage are reading Text and Performance, an MA jointly taught at Birkbeck College and RADA in Theatre Directing and Playwriting. Elliot Griggs is currently at RADA studying Lighting Design. Clem Garritty who designed the original poster of the show is now following a Production Design course at the Central School of Speech and Drama while Oliver Steadman follows a successful career with his band *Stornoway*.

Some members of the performance also have continued to work together since *By the Bog of Cats*. Fiona Mikel, Bertrand Lesca and Clem Garritty indeed performed an adaptation of *The Seagull* last June at the Capital Centre. They have now set up their own theatre company, *FellSwoop Theatre* which hopes to be performing at the next Edinburgh Fringe Festival in August 2011.

The idea of forming a professional theatre company has only been possible following the acclaimed success of *By the Bog of Cats* at NSDF and the encouragement from professionals at the festival to pursue in this particular direction.

As Producer of the project, successfully receiving money from Lord Rootes to take *By the Bog of Cats* to NSDF presented a much greater challenge to my producing skills, as not only had this been my first experience at organising a performance event on such a big scale, but taking the show on tour required another level of learning. This was hugely rewarding from the realization of the importance of detailed management to the success and enjoyment

of a tour. Through coordinating a large-scale event I have become aware of the necessity of funding. Being awarded money from Lord Rootes, I have gained experience in managing extensive budget and financial administration.

I also took a creative role in organizing various extra fundraising events, such as a live music night to further support our project. My organisation skills and passion for this project were recognised by others at the festival and I have gone on to receive many requests to work on projects in the role of a producer. Following my role in this project, I successfully applied to be Assistant Producer on a production at Edinburgh Festival 2010. Since graduating, I have assisted on the professional production of *Bonnie and Clyde* by Fairground Theatre and am currently Line Producer on a production at Bristol Old Vic. Through this experience, I have realised the scope for creativity and excitement within production roles.

I now think it's important to create an ethos of strong ensemble work through establishing and maintaining close relationships within production teams and appreciating the value of every role and the importance of fun teamwork. As well as acting, this project enabled me to gain skills and credentials in other branches of the performance process which is invaluable in creating theatre.

Summary

Lord Rootes is an invaluable source of support offered to the students at Warwick to develop an ambitious project which they wouldn't otherwise be able to fund. Taking *By the Bog of Cats* to the National Student Drama Festival meant that all the various aspects of the show would have to be reconsidered for its transfer to a new theatre venue. The wide range of technical requirements ranging from sound and lighting equipment to an intricate set made of thousands of fabric materials meant that the transfer of the production to the festival would involve a consequent amount of money. These elements of the original production were so integral to the piece when performed at the Warwick Arts Centre that we could not reconsider any other ways of doing the show differently. This is one of many financial reasons why we thought of applying to the Lord Rootes Fund.

The production team was in charge of sorting out accommodation for everyone involved in the making of the production. The size of the cast which involved not only eleven actors, but also five musicians, considerably increased the cost of the rent for the Festival week. Again, it would have been difficult to go with a smaller cast as we felt that everyone had been so involved in the creative process of the play that they would not have been ready to decline the opportunity of participating in NSDF.

What did we gain from this experience at NSDF?

NSDF was an incredible opportunity for the ensemble to consolidate the work they had put into the making of the play and to feel the work was artistically accomplished enough to be taken to a different theatrical environment. The whole ensemble felt much more passionate about the production once we had taken it to the Festival. It had a much higher stake than it originally did at the Warwick Arts Centre. Furthermore the extremely positive reactions we received from the spectators made us realise the quality of the work that we had generated. All the work and effort we had put into the making of the production indeed paid off and was acknowledged by everyone present at the festival. The award ceremony which occurred at the end of the festival also showed that we had not only made a good impression on the students attending the festival, but also the professionals, who rewarded our commitment to the production and our ambition to create something innovative and faithful to the original text.

Recommendations

Was NSDF worth attending?

The National Student Drama is a unique platform for student theatre-makers. It enables them to take their show to a different artistic environment. The shows are watched by students from other universities along with a panel of professionals who often give valuable feedbacks on the work.

When performed at the Warwick Arts Centre, *By the Bog of Cats* certainly did not reach its original expectations. It is possible to say that once the play was presented in its initial form, the whole creative team saw some new questions arise about the themes and the underlying meaning of the script written by Marina Carr which we did not see until it was presented to an audience.

It is undeniable that the opportunity given to the team to perform the play once again at NSDF gave a greater consistency to the play. The gap between the first and the second run of the show left enough time for everyone to process what the show meant but also how they could take it further.

We also felt entitled to create the best work as we came to the realisation that the show would be a representation of the artistic creativity at Warwick. If the students liked the work, their vision of Warwick and its drama collective would undeniably be enhanced by it. Once at the festival, a few people already expressed their interest in seeing the work as they had seen other shows from Warwick University at the previous editions of the National Student Drama Festival. As a result, the level of commitment which we expected from the entire team was extremely high and similar to the working environment of professional companies. We learned that committing to such a grand scale project could be extremely demanding. For some of our participants it was a taster to the professional theatrical environment which some of them want to embark on.

Advice for future participants

Applying to Lord Rootes

Once we applied to the Lord Rootes fund, the team had several meetings to sort out our proposal but also to work towards the eventuality of going to the Festival. It is obvious that without the grant offered by the Lord Rootes Scheme, the viability of the project would have been highly threatened. However it was very important to prepare to go in the hope of receiving funding for the project. This is something which showed in our original proposal. We hoped to demonstrate clearly our engagement with the project and our firm desire to attend the Festival.

The clarity with which we briefed all the members of the project who attended the meeting also gave a greater credibility to our application. We knew that we wanted to attend the Festival in order to enhance the performance, as well as to display our work to a professional environment involving today's most important figures of theatre making.

It is important to be prepared and to foresee all the potential issues that the project could encounter in its making as well as its development. By envisaging the project in its entirety, it becomes much stronger to those who are judging its quality.

Finally, it is important to make strong and realistic proposals rather than complicated ones which are unattainable. If any of your ideas involve other academic departments or members of the university, approach them and confirm that they can offer you their support. You also need to give prior notice to be able to be considered and display a well thought-through proposal. Allowing the other participants to reflect upon it will also enable suggestions which you may want to include within your proposal. During the meeting, you will then be able to testify the extra support, ultimately giving more weight to your proposal.

What we would do differently

Although we felt that we were giving ourselves enough time to rehearse the show, we unfortunately had to meet during the Festival week to make sure that what we had learned had been understood and integrated by every member of the cast.

As a result, some of our cast members felt that their abilities to attend some of the workshops offered to them throughout the week had been jeopardized. As a producer, it is thus important to leave enough time for them to attend what the festival has to offer members of your project.

The production and technical team also felt very much pressurized by the little amount of time they were being given before the festival. As an example, some elements of the set could not be taken with us as they wouldn't fit the cars or the van which we had rented. The whole team could have considered more wisely what would be possible to take or not. It is important to rely on your team's ability to take on every aspect that the project entails.

Financial Plan

Estimated costs

Outgoing	Amount
NSDF passes for 23 team members @ £85 each	£1955
Minibus to Scarborough (estimate from previous years)	£480
Accommodation (estimate from previous years)	£634
Performance rights	£200
Technical:	
Festoons	£60
Gels	£20
Snow effects	£40
Hazer	£25
Sound	£50
Piano hire and tuner	£100
total	£3834

Actual costs

Outgoing	Amount
NSDF passes for 23 team members @ £90 each	£2070
Minibus to Scarborough (quote)	£500
Accommodation (quote and reserved)	£1225
Piano hire and tuning	
Costume/Props	£236.68
total	£4031.68
Incoming	
WUDS	£925
Lord Rootes	£2000
Participants x 23 – paying £20 for passes	£460
Capital Centre	£500
Theatre Studies	£180
Fundraiser	£84
total	£4149