

'Every time we add a bit to the play I learn more about it': Exploring the First World War through Theatre in Education

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This article discusses the experience of pupils at Thorn Grove Primary School, Bishops Stortford, who spent a week with the company Twisted Events Presents learning how the First World War could be explored and re-lived through theatre.

Schools and the centenary of the First World War

In his 2012 speech outlining Britain's plans to mark one hundred years since the First World War, Prime Minister David Cameron emphasised that the government wanted 'to put young people front and centre in our commemoration'. In addition he emphasised that 'we stand ready to incorporate more ideas because a truly national commemoration cannot just be about national initiatives and government action, it needs to be local too' (<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/speech-at-imperial-war-museum-on-first-world-war-centenary-plans>). Consequently the Heritage Lottery Fund set aside money for community projects and local remembrance to successfully take place. This led to a hive of activity in the arts which often included the involvement of schools as a central part of plans to remember the conflict.

Twisted Events Presents

In November, 2014 I was fortunate to be able to observe (as part of my doctoral research into how schoolchildren learn about the First World War) a unique form of Theatre in Education (TIE). This TIE programme was part of a Heritage Lottery Fund project in Bishop Stortford. Finances were secured by Bishops Stortford Museum for the company Twisted Events Presents to bring the history of the First World War alive for year 6 pupils at Thorn Grove Primary School through theatre. The culmination of this week-long event would be a performance at the Rhodes Arts Complex to a large audience.

Prior to the arrival of the theatre company the year group had worked extensively on the conflict, completing art and poetry projects, learning songs from the period, visiting the Imperial War Museum, Duxford and Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies and exploring primary sources with Bishops Stortford Museum on how the war affected their local area. The topic therefore stretched across the curriculum, establishing a wealth of

knowledge in the pupils whilst building their skills in a variety of subjects. The TIE project promised to bring all these strands together.

I'm learning a lot from acting it out



Fellows in Arms: Pupils working together to create their performance

I was greatly surprised by how much educational benefit could be derived from what appeared to be essentially the pupils having a fun week with the actors/writers. Games were included to build team ethos and give children confidence to speak in front of large audiences. However, the pupils spent the majority of the time in three groups of ten with a designated actor/writer, constructing and rehearsing scripts about the First World War ready for their performance.

The actors/writers gave them creative freedom to devise characters and plots which the pupils revelled in doing. Their imagination, combined with the historical knowledge they had gained from their weeks of preparation, enabled them to create narratives about escapee prisoners of war, billeted soldiers in Bishop

Stortford and a family struggling to survive the conflict which led them to criminal activities such as 'scrumping'.



The Training Ground: Twisted Events Presents preparing pupils for acting

The capacity to mix imagination and history appeared to bring the conflict alive for the pupils with one stating that 'I'm learning a lot from acting it out. With the First World War, every time we add a bit to the play I learn more about it'. Arguably it could be seen as problematic that historical facts were being combined with make-believe. However, the actors/writers ensured that the pupils realised this was part of developing any artistic representation of the past. Using their prior research allowed the pupils to imagine what it was like to be in the early twentieth century in a historically accurate fashion. The programme also gave them a great opportunity to exercise the key skill of empathy. The pupils wrangled with how best to portray the moral dilemmas that the war placed many citizens in. One group for example explored how German prisoners of war were really just as much victims of the conflict as their British counterparts were. This led them to devise a script in which British nurses found themselves sympathising with their German patients, whilst facing public condemnation from fellow residents for showing such care and attention to the enemy.

Writing a script

The pupils began to create scripts, with the actors/writers constantly reminded them of and how best to communicate life during the First World War without assuming a high level of prior knowledge on the part of the audience. The pupils were so engaged with the process that too many ideas often bubbled up and important decisions had to be made on the material which needed to be cut and what was essential for the action to take place. Again this process developed key skills necessary for Key Stage 2 English education such as the ability to choose 'content to suit a particular purpose' when writing and to 'ask relevant questions to clarify, extend and follow up ideas' when listening to their peers (DfE, 2015).

An element of spontaneity was important for the scripts to appear realistic. Pupils were asked to adopt the persona of their characters and to respond to each other as if the events were really taking place, whilst another pupil noted down the dialogue. This created a sense of realness and flow in the dialogue, although pupils did have to be reminded that language such as 'oh man' and 'no way' was not part of everyday vocabulary in the early twentieth century!

Devising the script also meant they had to work effectively as a group. It was delightful to see them ensuring each other had equal parts and that their peers were happy with their roles in the performance at each stage of its development. Their passion for the project meant that they became quite enthralled at times debating possible plot twists, character development and what would make audience members like the heroes/heroines of the piece.

Cross-curriculum learning

Numerous aspects of dramatizing the war appeared beneficial to the pupils' education. For example, the need to find and often create costumes and props led to discussions about clothing, technology and machinery during the period.



Attention!: Actors/writers directing pupils in their plays

One group of pupils spoke vehemently about what could be used to represent a gun in their play with the actor/writer explaining that it must look authentic to those of the time. This led one pupil to claim that the dramatization had taught him about the weaponry of the period: 'I thought they [guns] were the same for about 500 years, but they were different'. Another pupil commented that the need to recreate a hospital scene meant she had learnt procedures and medicine in the period were 'not safe as it is now in the hospitals'.

The interdisciplinary nature of TIE was fully explored and exploited by the work. The children appeared thrilled to have an opportunity to perform, with even shyer pupils embracing the dramatic process. Every pupil had a

speaking part within their own play and also appeared on stage throughout the performance Twisted Events Presents put on at the Rhodes Arts Complex on the final evening.

The big day arrives

The four days of rehearsal had brought the pupils acting on in leaps and bounds as shown by their confident performances at the theatre on the final day of the programme. The performance element of the week also undoubtedly helped them meet the speaking criteria of the English syllabus for Key Stage 2. The actors/writers worked specifically with the pupils over the four days to build their confidence in speaking on stage and to have the ability to hold their audience's attention by varying the pace, pitch and tone of their speech (DfE, 2015:15-16). In particular the final day in which the pupils rehearsed at the theatre helped with their diction and clarity of speech as they learnt techniques for filling the auditorium with their voices.



We're Here Because We're Here: Final performances at the Rhodes Arts Complex

There was a huge sense of achievement at what the pupils had been capable of putting together in a relatively short period of time. The audience seemed genuinely touched by the pathos of the drama, whilst at other times finding amusement at the jokes cleverly woven into the storylines. The pupils' professionalism was impressive, they were able to negotiate stage directions, changes in lighting, costumes and props throughout the evening. All the pupils seemed to take a great deal of pride in having the opportunity to successfully present their hard work. And they really had put hard work into the performances. Although much of the learning had been away from the classroom and the activities organised by Twisted Events Presents were entertaining and exciting, behind the fun - or indeed through the fun - their ability to understand, write and communicate what life was like between 1914 and 1918 had clearly progressed.

Conclusion

Theatre in Education may not have been exactly what David Cameron had in mind when he stated that commemoration of the centenary would focus on teaching the next generation about this important moment in the nation's past. Nevertheless, it proved to be a perfect example of the creative and dedicated way in which British schools as well as artistic and cultural bodies have reacted to this special time of remembrance. It has also demonstrated the ability of Theatre in Education to support, enhance and bring to life essential elements of the English curriculum along with several other subjects.

References

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