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Joan Bakewell

Left: *The Gift*, 1996 © Robert Workman
Below: *The Inner Circle*, 1989 © Y Touring



21 Years of Y Touring

By Dame Joan Bakewell

How do you catch and hold the attention of restless teenagers? How do you interest anyone in the convolutions of science? How do you make exciting drama that is enthralling to watch? How do you explain the ethical dilemmas that affect our daily lives? How do you do all this without boring people to death? The answer is – uniquely – Y Touring.

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So what does it do and how does it do it? It all began in 1988, twenty two years ago, when Nigel Townsend became Performance Arts Director at Central YMCA in London. Prior to that Nigel had been a member of a distinguished acting company at the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry, a company that included such pillars of the British acting fraternity as Sue Johnson and Maggie Steed. The Belgrade was the one

of the first theatres to set up a Theatre in Education scheme – TIE – a project to introduce young people to theatre that was to spread across the country. Nigel Townsend saw at once what theatre work with young people could mean. He has since focussed his life's work on realising this potential. In doing so he has harnessed the interests of science into the already complex mix of children and drama education.

In the beginning Y Touring worked in collaboration with the Health Promotions Departments of local authorities. Hampshire and Dorset were among the first. In those days they would embark on 25 week-long tours, though they now find shorter tours more appropriate: 5 week tours to London Schools and 8 week tours round the country. Their scope has extended since then and they have found collaborators and people keen to promote such valuable work. The support of the Wellcome Trust has been invaluable, endorsing the high standards of scientific accuracy and social value to which Y Touring aspires.

Schools respond with delight to the impact a visit from the company has. Their arrival in a school heralds a performance, sometimes even two, of a specially commissioned play acted by a company of four professional actors, who then reappear at the end of the show to join the audience in an often strong discussion of the issues raised by the play. This is negotiated by a trained facilitator – who knows just how to bring young people into debate and allow them to interact. With all the bad PR there is these days about teenage behaviour it is surprising to see the zeal with which young people get their teeth into thoroughly tricky moral dilemmas. Their teachers enjoy it too and welcome the company's return visits. Just listen to this, from a teacher after a performance of *The Inner Circle*, a 1989 play that dealt with teenage sexuality in an era of AIDS:

"a really valuable experience for the boys that raised issues that sometimes schools find difficult to tackle effectively. A brilliant production which I think all teenagers should see."

And this from an outspoken young student who had seen the play *Starfish* about clinical drug trials:

"To be honest I didn't sit down to watch *Starfish* with an open mind. I simply assumed it would be another play for teenagers endlessly preaching to us on the dangers of drugs and under age sex... but I was wrong and pleasantly surprised... the charm of the host and the animated chat really made me feel that my opinions were being listened to and counted... one of the best educational theatre pieces I have seen."

So what is their secret? What is it they do so well? For twenty one years now the company has been led and steered by Nigel Townsend. So first

of all it is his sustained commitment and his ever-broadening awareness of what is possible that make the company what it is. His skill extends to appointing strong people to support him and leading a team who understand the specific brief of the company and don't deviate from it. Instead they allow its practice to develop and mellow with the changing times. Without such clear leadership such a venture could founder in mixed intentions and well-meaning mistakes.

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Teacher, on *The Inner Circle*

Secondly he commissions and encourages young writers to take on board the difficult task of making entertaining theatre from scientific dilemmas. Over the years around 15 playwrights have written for Y Touring, many at the start of what have proved to be successful careers. Nicola Baldwin is one of their most prolific having written some five plays in all. Her first, *The Gift*, back in 1995 concerned a young athlete struck down by Friedreich's Ataxia, a muscle disorder that dooms its victims to a wheelchair life. The play explores the way families are afflicted by inherited ailments and medical sciences attempts to help. As the plot unfolds, a character who learns he is a symptomless carrier of the disease, marries another carrier and they confront the possibilities that exist for having children and how far they should be allowed the choice of embryos. This play presented not one, but many problems

From Left to Right:

The Gift, 2000
© Robert Workman

Starfish, 2010
© Sheila Burnett



and the tangle of issues was, when I was there, thoroughly grasped by an eager young audience.

Other subjects they have tackled include teenage pregnancy, the use of animal organs for transplants, the biological cause of depression, the debate surrounding stem cell research, prejudice against immigrants, sexism in football, the use of animals in research, the surveillance society, and the use of personal data in research. The writers have on each occasion risen to the challenge of writing lively and engaging plays around what may seem at first sight heavy, even forbidding, subjects.

We take for granted that we live in times of great scientific advances, but even as adults we often haven't always considered the moral issues that surround them. Even when we do, we place our confidence in formal institutions such as the Human Fertility and Embryology Authority and NICE - the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence - and await their deliberations and judgements. Only when their judgements impinge on our own lived experience do we come to question them. For example NICE's denying of expensive drugs in certain medical conditions rouses those whose close family might stand to benefit. At the point of engagement, our own judgement is already swayed by our personal involvement. How difficult it is to stand back and actually hear the measured reasons given for such a decision by NICE. One of the great wisdoms that Y Touring helps young people realise is that every issue has many sides to it, and that each of these different points of views is as powerfully valid as the rest for those who hold it.

For example, *The Gift* raised the possibility of choosing the genetic inheritance of a child and

brought home very clearly just how momentous such a choice is for all those involved. The parents eventually find they can choose to have a child with a strong chance of being inherently good at games and are shocked to find that when this son grows up he feels his natural athletic prowess doesn't bring him credit in his own eyes, because it was the result of a scientific decision made for him and about him before he was born. He feels cheated and robbed of any spontaneous skills that might have developed by his own application. The anguish of parents, son and colleagues is heartfelt and a million miles away from the scientific process that gave rise to the story. Yet in the real world we will soon be able to choose the sex and natural skills of our children, and we need to imagine what that impact will be. Nicola Baldwin won praise from *The Observer* for her play. She has since written for Bath Theatre Royal, London's Royal Court Theatre, had a feature screenplay for Channel Four and a television series *Where the Heart Is*. Y Touring has the knack of using the best.

The educational community has long recognised that they can trust Y Touring. Such trust is an important component of a long term relationship that is of benefit to both. Y Touring for their part is scrupulous in gaining feedback and listening to what teachers and scientists have to say. At each level their operation insists of keeping standards high. And that insistence is recognised and valued by all who have dealing with them. It is why they are still riding high after 21 years.

From left to right:

The Inner Circle, 1995
© Melvyn Vincent

Starfish, 2010
© Sheila Burnett

