

In our neighbourhood: a regional theatre and its local community

Over a twelve-month period, the West Yorkshire Playhouse (WYP) in Leeds set out to make itself much more accessible to its most local residential community. The Ebor Gardens Estate was already benefiting from regeneration, but there was little contact between the theatre and the estate. Dick Downing tracked the 'In Our Neighbourhood' project and found that the Playhouse succeeded in establishing a relationship with the community, but one which produced some surprising results.

f Workers on the estate, both paid and voluntary, were an important source of advice to the WYP team concerning the style and content of the project. Staff from the theatre became part of a broader support network and forged strong bonds with estate residents.

f WYP staff provided one-to-one advice and support to key individuals. Only after personal relationships were developed and embedded in working practice, could the partnership become more balanced.

f Although residents were initially keen to see a developing programme of participatory activities, in practice there was reluctance to engage in them, for a variety of reasons, including a lack of confidence and, in some cases, a preference for continuing with their already existing creative activities.

f Any assumption held by residents that they would not be welcome in the theatre, and any assumption held by the theatre, that the residents would want something other than mainstream theatre experiences, were not borne out.

f During the time of the project, mainstream theatre attendance increased at a startling rate. This was one of the most unexpected and successful outcomes, and indicates residents' interest in attending the theatre that had not previously been acted upon.

f The researcher concludes that there need be no conflict between a theatre's regional, national and international reputation and its role within its own neighbourhood, as long as each aspect is given the attention it deserves.

Background

Leeds Playhouse was established in 1970 on the campus of Leeds University, where the theatre enjoyed two decades of considerable success. In 1990, the West Yorkshire Playhouse (WYP) was established on the site of the old Quarry Hill Flats. It has established a reputation for the attention it pays to community development and its aspiration to contribute to the widest possible spread of 'cultural democracy'.

The A64 divides the West Yorkshire Playhouse from its nearest residential community, the Ebor Gardens Estate, which has a population of approximately 3,000. Demographic information shows an increasingly stable population, mixed housing ownership and a broad range of ethnic and social backgrounds, ages and family make-up. Its regeneration began at around the time that the Playhouse became a close neighbour. However, until July 1999, the number of contacts on the Playhouse database from the estate was in single figures only.

The 'In Our Neighbourhood' project set out to generate a productive and sustainable relationship between the community of Ebor Gardens and the West Yorkshire Playhouse. The intention was to increase the range and quality of what the Playhouse offers in the hope of increasing the take-up by the community of new and existing WYP services and products, through improved accessibility. A number of staff from the Community and Education Department were given a special remit but it was always hoped to increase the awareness and commitment of the whole WYP institution and its staff towards their local community.

The research study that was attached to the 'In Our Neighbourhood' project has identified a number of themes that emerged from the developing relationship between the theatre and the local community.

The pace of familiarisation

Although they had been neighbours for almost ten years, there had been virtually no contact between the two parties. The population of the estate had experienced a low level of confidence for years and a feeling that they had little right to use the arts facility on their doorstep. In such circumstances, community development of any kind can be a cautious, tentative and usually slow process. In contrast, the West Yorkshire Playhouse has always enjoyed a high level of self-esteem and validation from many sources. As the creator of theatre productions, it has the habit of making things happen fast and with an essential display of confidence.

Consequently, the earlier part of the emerging relationship could be characterised as the Playhouse making the running, injecting the energy and providing the 'goodies', in the form of activities for a community introductory event. This in turn generated a dependency relationship for a short period; when a second event was mounted, with the intention that it would be organised in partnership, there was disappointment in the results. The precedent of provision outweighed the intention of partnership, the Playhouse had to carry a desultory event, and the community ended up feeling guilty about what it saw as its own failure.

It was only at that point that the relationship started to become authentic. New strategies for relating to the members of the community developed, a much lower key, person-to-person style took over and the pace and pressure of the first encounters were reduced. This much more 'laid-back' approach released considerable confidence and trust in a significant number of local residents.

This is not to suggest that the initial high profile engagement was a mistake - it was essential to announce the intention of the project. If there was a mistake, it was the failure to recognise the precedent that 'providing' can create, and the tendency of an under-confident community to allow itself to be 'done to'. Once this was registered, and counter-measures taken, progress was made, but not necessarily in the most expected directions. For example, in the short period that the initial project ran (the relationship continues) little was achieved by way of organised participatory activities. However, a dramatic increase in attendance at performances did take place, and this continues to grow.

Making assumptions

We have lived so long with the conventional view that only a culturally aware elite would want to attend theatre that even those committed to social inclusion can forget the potential attractiveness of theatre for everyone. There may be some with a subconscious, even conscious, resistance to the idea of just anyone attending theatre, and others have come to assume that 'they' just wouldn't want to come - even that it may be patronising to invite 'them'. On the other side of this barrier, there are those who have not been brought up with or introduced to theatre and who believe that they would not be welcome over the threshold. It would seem that this cocktail of assumptions has kept a large number of people away from the experience of theatre.

In its aims and objectives, this project did not mention increasing attendance at performances as a specific target. Neither was it excluded as an outcome. However, few of those involved would disagree with the suggestion that other, more 'community-oriented' activities were expected to be the main focus of developments between the theatre and the estate. Initially this was the case, but the effect of meeting each other as people, of realising that the differences were not that great, released a sudden confidence among community members to take up their rights as theatregoers. There had been no real obstacles to this happening before, but there had probably been very real misconceptions on both sides. For organisations committed to social inclusion this can be a painful acknowledgement, but it also can also release a potential that has lain dormant for some time. It took the investment of sustained face-to-face contact and cautious familiarisation, but opened an unexpected number of doors.

Benefits to both sides

While the objectives set out at the start of the project were substantially met, both sides derived very specific additional benefits from the developing relationship. It was clear from the outset that this particular estate was ready for 'community development'. A major refurbishment programme had been recently completed. The residents were experiencing some sense of liberation from fear and insecurity; in some cases, they were daring to venture out for purely social reasons for the first time with some confidence. There were clearly expressed opinions that this project provided opportunities through which some residents developed latent capabilities. Organising and venturing out on theatre visits, and supporting less confident friends to join them, developing a habit of planning for future excursions, discussing informally the relative merits of theatre productions, were all quoted as beneficial outcomes. It was even claimed that the visit to the Community Centre to acquire theatre tickets resulted in a considerable increase in enquiries concerning other Centre activities.

The most obvious way that the theatre benefited was in the entirely unexpected increase in attendance at performances. In addition, a range of theatre staff from various departments became involved in the project. This not only gave them insights into a community that they might not normally encounter, but for some this contributed a different kind of satisfaction than that which they derived from their usual work. New light was shed on the means to

attract new audiences and participants. One resident has become an assistant at the Playhouse's cybercafe, having himself been supported by staff at the Playhouse in this field. The possibility of the Playhouse more thoroughly fulfilling its community ambitions has become a reality, but this in turn presents new challenges in finding the staffing resources to continue down such a route.

Involving more people

It was originally intended that one member of the Playhouse staff would be designated to undertake the development work with the local estate. This turned out to be impractical, and instead a number of staff from the Community and Education Department shared the task. They each brought particular skills in working with children, community arts activities and community co-ordination. More significantly, staff from other departments became involved in various ways. The Costume Hire Department and Catering Department contributed to community events; marketing, design and development staff all gave individual advice and support to residents needing skills in those areas; and the box office developed regular contacts with the members of the community who organised theatre visits.

Sharing responsibility for community relations in this case appears to have worked. The range of expertise made available, and the variety of personalities, seems to have contributed to the overall relationship, making it a two-way flow of benefits. The trading of skills and insights, and the familiarity with a number of faces at the Playhouse, seems to have provided community members with the confidence to venture inside.

It became necessary for the Playhouse to focus its efforts on one part of the community, and the project became linked very closely to the Community Centre, recently refurbished and ready to increase its activities. While paid staff were very important in opening the doors and making the introductions, it was agreed that the relationship also needed to be generated directly between residents and the theatre. A small number of highly motivated individuals became closely involved with the Playhouse, sharing perceptions, learning skills and undertaking community organisation. Providing them with training opportunities, for example in publicity and organisational matters, was some, albeit insufficient, reward for the investment of their time and energy. Broadening the network of active involvement is a slow task, but with the increasing enthusiasm for theatre attendance, this could easily accelerate. The

involvement of approximately thirty residents in research interviews, about 90 in community events, and over 400 theatre attendances is an impressive outcome for a one-year project.

Implications for the future

This project has demonstrated that an appetite to partake in the life of the theatre may lay dormant in any community, and can be awakened. Having revealed this through a one-year project, the Playhouse intends to sustain the relationship into the future. Theatre Board members, through the Community and Education Sub-committee, have been monitoring the progress, and will hopefully consider the possibility of extending such an approach to other areas of the City.

Not all theatres in the country are of a scale that can support the level of community staffing engaged by the West Yorkshire Playhouse, and some may not aspire to a similar relationship to their community. While resources to fund such staffing and activities are a significant factor for all establishments, including the West Yorkshire Playhouse, attitude and commitment are equally important elements. Without the dedication of the Chief Executive, supported by the Board, this project could never have taken place. The willingness of staff from various departments to become involved, possibly to the short-term cost of their own area of responsibility, generated a richness and diversity of experience that could engage a sizeable number of local residents.

Money, time and commitment will have to be secured if work of this nature is to be promoted more widely. The benefits, especially in terms of social inclusion and community development, would seem to merit a continuing effort to make our cultural institutions palpably open to the whole of our population, and not only to those who are already part of the club.

About the study

This research was undertaken by Dick Downing, a freelance arts and education consultant. Data collection began before the start of activities involving the theatre and the residents, and is based very heavily on interviews with residents, community workers, locally based professionals in education and local regeneration, arts workers and West Yorkshire Playhouse staff. Some documentary

research was also undertaken, especially concerning the history of the development of both Ebor Gardens and the West Yorkshire Playhouse. The full report contains a considerable number of quotes, especially from local residents, for which the researcher is most grateful.

How to get further information

The full report, *In our neighbourhood: A regional theatre and its local community* by Dick Downing, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (price £13.95, ISBN 1 85935 064 X).