

acta Community Theatre, Gas Girls – Evaluation Report



Background

acta came across the story of the munitions factories at Chittening and Avonmouth in 2009, and conducted some initial research into the manufacture of mustard gas in Bristol in WWI, with a view to developing a project proposal to create a play to perform as part of WWI centenary commemorations in 2014. Early research and consultation with Peter Insole, Archaeological Officer at Bristol City Council, led the company to believe that there was a rich and important area of local history which needed further examination; a story to be told.

Further research was conducted with Bristol Records Office, and with chemists and biochemists at University of Bristol and UWE, including Professor Jeremy Tavare, University of Bristol Biomedical Department and Maggie Leggett, Head of Participation, University of Bristol. Whilst the project proposal was being developed in 2012, an officer at Bristol Records Office, Richard Burley, related his own grandmother’s story of working as a Gas Girl; the story of Maud in the final play.

Other local community meetings took place with Avonmouth Genealogy group and local history groups. In Spring term 2013, acta worked with 20 local children in Avonmouth to create a short piece of theatre on the impact of the First World War, on the people of Avonmouth. Their performance at Avonmouth Community Centre was attended by 50 local people, who were also informally consulted about the forthcoming project.

Aims

A funding bid was made to Arts Council England, Grants for The Arts for the *Gas Girls* project, with the following aims:

- Increase audiences for theatre in areas of least engagement in Bristol.
- Raise the profile of community theatre; locally, regionally and nationally.
- Increase the impact of acta’s community touring initiative.
- Involve a larger and more diverse group of participants in community touring.
- Promote greater knowledge and understanding of the First World War, and the social conditions and personal challenges of people living at the time; particularly the changing role of women, and attitudes to war.

In the knowledge that historical material about the Avonmouth factories in this period would be hard to find and not readily available in the public domain, a partnership funding Heritage Lottery Fund bid was also developed to address this need, and to:

- thoroughly research what historical material is available from all sources;
- interpret this material through a process of devised community theatre, bringing history to life through performance;
- disseminate this material through 12 touring performances in working class areas of Bristol, where the workers in the factories came from;
- further disseminate through a touring exhibition, a booklet, a documentary film and blog on acta website throughout the process.

Arts Council England and Heritage Lottery Fund project support was secured in Summer 13.

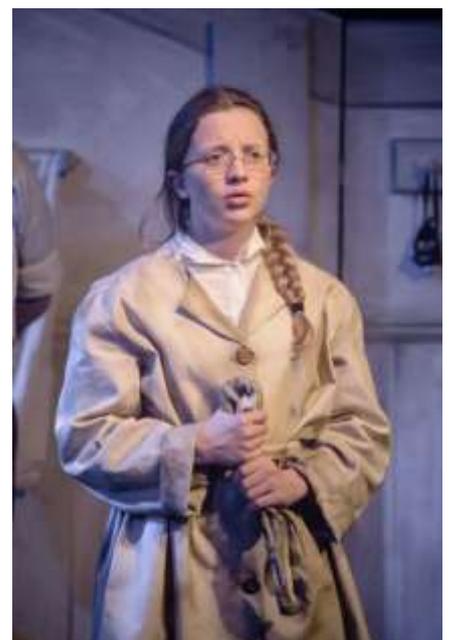
Creating the play & the book, September 13 – March 14

In September 13, a small research group started meeting weekly, and community theatre devising sessions also began. A new company of existing acta community performers was brought together for weekly evening workshops, 11 female and 8 male performers aged 14 – 60 yrs, including two disabled and three black/minority ethnic members. acta had already been in contact with potential participants for the play, all of whom had accessed previous acta projects. It was decided to engage community members who would be able to cope with the challenging material, the extensive devising and rehearsal process, and the intensive tour schedule, and would also have the required level of performance skills needed to interpret and portray characters drawn from the heritage material.

The Research Assistant role was undertaken by Rosalie Pordes, appointed as the new Director's Assistant starting September; mentored by Neil Beddow, acta Artistic Director, who led the project throughout. Neil and Rosalie led the research group throughout the Autumn term, working with five key volunteer participants, three of whom also performed in the play. They visited the Bristol Records Office (found a map of the original plans for the Chittening factory) and the National Archives at Kew (found medical reports, plans etc), as well as using internet searches, and a range of primary source material. They examined numerous reports written at the time and other material discovered through National Archives, Bristol Records Office, BFI, Imperial War Museum and newspapers of the time.

The research task was not an easy one, as all workers in the factories had to sign the official secrets act, and few of those engaged in the industry talked about their experiences. But the group did have the key story from Maud's grandson at Bristol Records Office (see above), and were also given a photograph of the Gas Girls football team. The photograph was used to raise the profile of the project in the first few months, through press releases and setting up a blog on the acta website, whilst the research team were pursuing connections in local communities to discover any stories that may have been passed down through families.

The research group regularly fed back to the production team, which



in addition to Neil and Rosalie, also included acta Associate Director, Ingrid Jones, who led on the film projections used in the show, as well as co-directing. Research material discovered by the group was also presented to performers in the weekly devising sessions e.g. Captain Roberts' reports, archive film footage. The football team photograph and story inspired the filming of cast members playing football, in order that this film projection could also be used in the play.

Neil wrote first drafts of the script whilst devising sessions were in process, and completed the script end of November, to read through with all cast members in December, before rehearsals began in earnest in 2014. A final cast of 20 performers was confirmed by the end of the year, made up of 19 members of the devising group plus one new male performer invited to join to take the part of the Factory Manager.

The research group continued to meet into the new year, and once script devising was completed, they turned their attentions to writing the booklet, to include as much supplementary research material as possible. It soon became clear that the "booklet" would be a book; and acta Programme Assistant, Kathryn Harris, put together a final design and the printing of 300 copies was ordered in early March.

The wider production team also met regularly with the Directors throughout the devising and rehearsal period. Katie Delaney, acta Production Manager, coordinated the team which included: Samantha Pine, Designer, with set construction by Jeff Cliff, and costume team, Jill Blundell & Mark Foster; Geenie Hills, make-up; and with Shirley Pegna, Musical Director. Set, costumes and music were all provided in some rehearsals, so as to give the cast as much time as possible to rehearse with everything they needed, but also to support the marketing of the show, which included photographic and film documentation of rehearsals to produce an online trailer and a photographic image of the gas girls for the graphic design.



The performances, March – June 14

There were a total of 11 performances of the Gas Girls show, which previewed at the acta centre in Bedminster, 19-21 March, before a sell-out tour in June to Avonmouth Community Centre, to the Wickham Theatre in central Bristol (University of Bristol Drama Dept), to Withywood Community Centre, and to Orchard School in Upper Horfield, (where it performed to the largest audience of 170 people, and to a student audience the following day of the same size.)

Four venues were chosen to target an audience of people living in disadvantaged areas who would not normally be able to access theatre, and who would not have access to the heritage information contained in the play. The target audience for the tour was 1000 people of all ages, and this was achieved almost exactly, with a final total audience of 983 people.

Questionnaires were completed by an average of one third of the audiences, and provided a large part of our audience evaluation of the project, the headlines from which are included here:-

acta centre, Bedminster x 3 preview performances, 80 people each night.

- Over half of the audience had never seen an acta show before;
- A third of the audience heard about the show through acta staff;
- A third of the audience heard about it through a cast member or a friend / word of mouth.

Avonmouth Community Centre x 3 performances, 50 – 60 people each night.

- 1 in 5 of the audience lived in Avonmouth;
- 2 in 5 lived Shirehampton, Sea Mills, or other very local area;
- 1 in 4 said they heard about the show through social media;
- 10% heard about it through press, 17% friends, 16% acta staff, 14 % Avonmouth CC;
- Only 1 in 5 were regular theatre goers;
- 3 out of 4 people had never seen an acta show before.

Wickham Theatre, x 92 total audience.

- Over two thirds of the audience had never seen an acta show before;
- Just over half of the audience were regular theatre-goers;
- Three quarters travelled from S or E Bristol.

Withywood Community Centre x 2 performances, 149 total audience.

- Two thirds had never seen an acta show before;
- Two thirds were not regular theatre-goers;
- 1 in 5 lived in Hartcliffe & Withywood itself, and over half were local to S Bristol.

Orchard School, 170 total public audience.

- For 82% of the audience, it was their first ever acta show.
- Two thirds were not regular theatre-goers;
- 1 in 5 of the audience lived in Horfield & Lockleaze, and over half were local to N Bristol.

In summary, the show succeeded in attracting a new audience, 3 out of 4 of whom were not regular theatre-goers and had never seen an acta show before. In each of the five tour venues, it successfully engaged a significant local audience, but audiences also travelled from neighbouring areas, with a third of audiences travelling from further afield.

Heritage Outcomes

'This is a 'must see' for anyone wants to learn about aspects of World War One on the home front – excellently researched and performed, powerfully staged and unforgettable, this is community theatre at its very best. Don't miss it, seek out its next performances in parts of Bristol in June. The associated small book should be mandatory reading for every history student covering 1914-18.'
Cherry Ann Knott, Heritage Lottery Fund

Gas Girls set out to enable heritage material to be identified and recorded, and better interpreted and explained.

There had been little or no research into the specific history of the Avonmouth HM Mustard Gas Factory, or its counterpart, the Chittening Filling Factory. The facts and reports available were deposited in a range of archives, and we set out to discover, research and collate the available material in order to provide the best interpretation possible of how the factories were run, what the processes were, what was the level of danger to those who worked there and



the range of illnesses caused by working in the industry. Additionally, we wanted to set this against the wider context of the changing roles of women in the First World War, and focus in particular on the women and girls who worked in the Avonmouth Mustard Gas factories.

By the end of the project, both participants and audiences were able to demonstrate their learning about the role of women in the First World War Period, the Mustard Gas Factories in Avonmouth, the medical effects of the gas, the general context of the period.

Community theatre had successfully communicated the historical learning in a direct and engaging way, to local people who would not have necessarily been interested in accessing the heritage material in other ways.

Audience evaluation asked people whether they learnt anything by watching the show and whether anything in the show had surprised them. Without exception, all responded that they had learnt something about the historical story, and many also reported that it was the hitherto untold story that had most surprised them about the show.



Some of the audience feedback is included below:-

- *The show was very well performed and raised awareness of unknown aspects of the Great War.*
- *I loved the use of histories of real people.*
- *It was very moving & poignant. I knew it would be a dark & tragic story... It was very well researched, a story worth telling.*
- *The surprise was learning a story I didn't know about.*
- *I learnt a lot from the show, as didn't know half the things that happened in the war.*
- *Caught the atmosphere of the time really well.*
- *I was surprised at how educational it was.*
- *Surprised it went on so close to home.*
- *Brilliant interpretation of a harrowing story.*
- *Thought-provoking script, unexplored subject and great acting.*
- *Over and above what I expected, so authentic.*

- *Great, professional and detailed research, and very emotional. The secrecy by government surprised me.*
- *The story of the Gas Girls was unknown to me before – the importance of their work to the war effort.*
- *Effects on women working with gas. Nobody cared about them.*
- *No idea of the manufacture of mustard gas in Bristol.*
- *Loads about the role of women in WWI, the social impact, Bristol's forgotten role.*
- *Had not previously thought about British use of gas.*
- *The whole story that I knew nothing about.*
- *How dangerous mustard gas was.*
- *Everything. Had never really heard about gas girls until this production.*
- *About the girls working in Avonmouth with mustard gas. That mustard gas was first used by the Germans. The meaning of abbreviation HS.*
- *I learnt about the munitions factories and the relentless targets set to achieve production.*
- *Loads – conditions in the munitions factory.*
- *I had not known about the gas girls before, so it was an education.*
- *About the history of mustard gas and the sacrifices involved.*
- *I did not know about what the women did – how dangerous it was.*
- *Women's war work was not simply "munitions factories".*
- *Everything – had no knowledge at all.*
- *I knew nothing about any of this before so learnt loads.*
- *It was all new to me. I learned so much in so little time.*
- *Much – never heard of the gas girls in Avonmouth.*
- *That Britain produced and used mustard gas ... workers' lives and health were so at risk.*
- *Factory in Avonmouth unknown to us.*
- *The history of the Chittening site.*
- *Surprised to find out about history I didn't know in my area.*
- *I hadn't known anything before about the gas girls.*
- *Didn't know that women only were to fill the canisters and that it was so local.*
- *It was all a closed book to me, this is so valuable.*
- *A lot of history that I did not know before; did not know anything about mustard gas factories.*
- *Yes the appallingly high risks to the workers and sacrifice because of the war effort.*
- *Yes, the story of a place local to my childhood I never knew.*
- *I hadn't heard about the gas girls or their story before.*
- *I couldn't believe what our folk went through.*

The audience were also asked what the most memorable thing about the show was, and most responded that there were two particular scenes that would stay with them: the accident in the filling factory at the end of the first half of the play, and the final scene of the show, when all the characters relate how they died. Many of the audience responded that it was difficult to pick out anything in particular, as there were so many poignant moments. In terms of their learning about the story, many gave additional comments about what they had learnt from watching the show:-

- *Lots: depiction of the accident, and summary monologues at the end.*
- *Uncovering a hidden story.*
- *Conflict between winning the war and producing a horrific weapon.*
- *Effects on women working with gas. Nobody cared about them.*

- *The long-term effects on the workforce.*
- *You covered so many different perspectives of war, yet it was personal to the individual characters.*
- *The details of the gas girls were portrayed very realistically.*
- *Lack of compensation to those who died – blamed on Spanish Flu.*
- *The devastation caused by the injuries and losses.*
- *How many people died.*
- *All the individual characters' life stories.*
- *To find out that this happened locally. To know about the appalling conditions they worked in.*
- *All of the show was very memorable as my grandma was a gas girl.*
- *Learning of the horror of the gas for all who came in contact with it.*
- *Hearing the individual stories about the impact of the war and the work on them.*
- *The different social ranks had to work together.*
- *The courage, camaraderie and good humour of the gas girls was well done.*



In terms of the learning of the participants themselves, the devising process ensured that participants were engaged in extensive research about social conditions in 1916-18, the developing role of women at the time and life on the home front, using this information to build characters, scenes and dialogue. This process of enabling the cast to devise their own characters ensured that the final show had a freshness and immediacy, with the local dialects and accents of the community performers speaking and connecting directly to the largely working class audience.

Finally, in terms of extending the learning to others, the project set out to ensure that background information and research would be interpreted and disseminated through a range of other formats:

- *Booklet* – We originally aimed to produce 150 copies of a booklet, which in reality became x 300 books. The books were sold at every one of the performances, and proved to be hugely popular with audiences, selling over 200 copies to date. The books are now available to purchase online from the acta website. A free show programme was also printed, including a pull-out poster with key historical facts from the book, for any audience members who chose not to purchase a copy of the full book.
- *Film* - Local film-maker, Benjie Croce, led the film documentation of the project, and the final film is now available to view online via acta website.
- *Exhibition* - a pop-up exhibition was created, using the research material, and accompanied the tour. We intend to prolong the life of this exhibition by organising it to be displayed through the Bristol Library service and with other partners, therefore disseminating the learning to an estimated secondary audience of up to 4000.
- *Website information* - a blog to track project progress was created on the acta website: www.acta-bristol/gas-girls-2/
- *Other* – In addition to the above planned dissemination, Neil was also invited to meet with a number of different groups to discuss the learning from the acta project, including staff at Bristol Records Office and the M Shed Museum of Bristol, the local Bedminster Memories history group, and even an appointment at 10 Downing Street for a WWI centenary project reception.

As mentioned above, cast and audience members were asked whether they found the various interpretation methods effective, through interviews and questionnaires. In terms of the community theatre piece itself, people demonstrated that they had not only understood the historical facts, but also that they had a better understanding of the people of the time; their motivations, their struggle with the moral dimension of using gas, their attitudes to the war; a sense of the past as being full of real people living real lives. Although the subject material covered a particularly tragic period of history, the project succeeded in finding the human side to the everyday lives of the people living at the time.



Artistic Outcomes

As detailed above, *Gas Girls* set out to ensure that the cast would be fully involved in the interpretation and dissemination of the heritage material, through the acta devising process. The aim was to make the story live; to make the past come into the present, real things that happened to real people, to bring alive the horror, the dilemmas, the humanity of the period, so that all involved, participants and audience alike, would have a better understanding on a deep and emotional level. The audience evaluation has evidenced how these heritage outcomes became inextricably linked with the artistic ones, ensuring a high quality piece of touring theatre that raises the profile of community theatre and builds a new audience for theatre.

Audience evaluation at each of the neighbourhood shows evidenced achievement of this high quality touring community theatre again and again. Comments included:

- *Brilliant script – very well thought out and moving.*
- *Extremely well delivered by each member of the cast, with real feeling.*
- *All the actors were very real.*
- *Very well co-ordinated use of mixed media – old film, film made to look old. Very good costumes, props & scenery.*
- *Brilliant interpretation of a harrowing story.*
- *When the cast stood staring at the end you could almost touch the sadness in the air for all that had happened.*

- *The original film of the war really added to the atmosphere, especially seeing the doctor examining the girls, and the funeral scene, with the music.*
- *Wonderfully produced & staged as well as telling a terrible, touching & affecting story.*

As well as their extensive learning about the heritage material outlined above, cast members evidenced achievement of a range of other benefits from their participation in the project: growth in self-confidence, better relationships with people of different ages and cultures, new skills, a new sense of identity as project member, a sense of pride in the project and in the sacrifices made by the generation living during 1914-18. *For more detailed cast interviews, see Gas Girls film documentary.*

The *Gas Girls* project has played an important part in acta raising the profile of high quality touring community theatre, and has been closely linked to the Company's new approach to marketing and communications. Audience development has been a key priority for the project, focusing on a gradual dissemination of information about the project throughout its course, to raise interest in the story from an early stage. As new stories were discovered, press releases were issued, new posts were created on the website, #WWIGas Girls tweets released etc to ensure that the profile of the project was built up over time. Audience development has therefore been a particular success of the show, with practically every show selling out, and large numbers of the audience reporting that they will be looking out for future community theatre productions.



Online marketing, with the website and social media playing a central role, was crucial to the project marketing strategy. The acta website was designed to make best use of photographs, and this influenced the choice of image for the graphic design for the show, a strong image which has worked particularly well online. The design brief included the need for the image to make a connection between the cast today and working class stories from 100 years ago; exploring & learning about their own heritage, connecting different generations today. The photograph of the Gas Girls cast achieved this well. Flyers were also printed using this same image, to reinforce the online marketing.

The press coverage of the Gas Girls story has also been particularly successful. Both BBC and ITV regional television news channels covered the story extensively in the week of the March preview performances, and local newspapers and radio also picked up on every one of the press releases. Programming the project delivery early in the WWI centenary year has proved particularly beneficial in engaging the interest of press and media.

Tickets were sold online via the website, but were also available to buy by telephone or in person for those people without online access. All tickets were just £3 for every show, in line with acta's

diversity action plan target, to keep box office prices to a minimum to ensure that people living in poverty are not excluded from attending.

In addition to the established acta audience, the show succeeded in securing its target new audience, which included some regular theatre-goers, but was largely made up of new theatre audiences amongst people who rarely attend theatre, as follows:-

- Older people across the City and beyond – those audiences whose grandparents lived through WWI, who remember talking to their grandparents about their experiences and who are therefore more likely to be interested in the WWI centenary commemorations.
- Local history and heritage groups, across the City.
- Students (particularly KS3 & KS4) – a strong education and learning focus as well as providing audiences with a fun and entertaining experience, so relevant to students studying WWI era as part of the curriculum at school – The final performance at Orchard School was presented to year 9 & 10 students, but there were young people at each of the 10 public performances too.

Bristol Post Weekend, June 13, 2014 – “Pick of the week: Gas Girls tells the riveting and moving story of the Avonmouth munitions workers... powerful and evocative... Neil concludes: This story has become a part of us all, and this play an act of remembrance; in a year when everyone’s thoughts turn back 100 years, it has been our mission to try to bring the past to life, to shine a spotlight on a forgotten piece of history, to let the Gas Girls speak.”

