

## The Crossroads evaluation – “The Thursdays”

**Thursday 3 March, 2016**

A diverse group of ten adults aged 23 – 85 years, met weekly on Thursday mornings in term-time throughout 2015, to create a new show, *The Crossroads*, that would tour to primary schools in January – March 16.

A project review was carried out on the day of the final performance, in a group evaluation session with the final day performers and acta production team.

The Thursdays remembered back to the start of the project, which was significant for them because they were given the brief to create a show for a specific audience; primary school children in Bristol with little experience of theatre. They had researched the primary school curriculum for ideas that they could incorporate into their story, and agreed to use their play to raise the lessons of not to be selfish, not to tell lies and not to be bossy.

*An emotional experience and an intellectual experience. Taking the exploration of ideas further every week, until we began to hone them in and make them concise.*

The final show was watched by a total of over 700 people, over 9 performances. It previewed at actacentre in November, where it was seen by an invited audience of children from Compass Point school, as well as two public performances.

It was then brought back for the schools tour in the new year – six primary schools across Bristol where the majority of children are from families who do not attend theatre:-

- St Mary Redcliffe
- Fonthill, Southmead
- Glenfrome, Eastville
- Avonmouth
- Hannah More
- Stoke Park, Lockleaze

The Thursdays appreciated the gentle process that acta had offered them, and they felt it was a very inclusive group, with no right or wrong way.

*Here everyone is so generous. They are generous performers.*

*The group enables. Being part of the group is a positive reinforcement and everyone is so accepting.*

The performers also reported a real sense of achievement, and how they could not quite believe what a good result they had, as it had been such a long and challenging project.

*We lost people and it didn't stop. We just kept going.*

The project group overcame a wide range of unexpected challenges:-

- Hanna Lune, one of the two project facilitators, left the Company at the start of the summer term. Rosalie Pordes worked as facilitator and director throughout, but was joined by both Ingrid Jones and Neil Beddow for summer term workshops, during the final script edits before start of rehearsals in the Autumn term. A fifth director, Deb Miles, joined the project for the rehearsal period and performances.
- The youngest child of one of the performers underwent major surgery early in 2015, so she was not available to attend for many weeks, although committed to return as soon as she could.
- Another performer fell pregnant in the summer term, but was committed to stay through to perform in the preview performances at actacentre in November, before leaving to be replaced by a new community performer for the schools tour; (who came in with just one rehearsal in January 16).
- One of the older performers went into hospital for a hip operation just a few weeks before the dress rehearsal in November, returning for the previews, having missed all the final weeks of rehearsal.
- A much loved member of the group passed away suddenly in the Autumn term.
- The oldest member of the group fell ill as the tour began in January, but still performed in the first two performances, before being hospitalised for some weeks. She returned for the final performances of the tour soon after being discharged from hospital.

The significant changes to the group over the course of the 14 month project served to increase the importance of everyone feeling part of the team. Performers reported how important it was to them that the project enabled them to get to know new people, and how much they learnt to welcome in the “newcomers” who joined them as the project progressed.

The oldest member of the group reported that she had been persuaded to join by an older friend who was also participating, as she herself had been concerned she was too old. When her friend passed away during the project, she was nevertheless determined to continue herself.

*It has done me the world of good.*

Observing the final performance to year 1 – 6 children at Stoke Park School in Lockleaze, the artistic quality achieved by The Thursdays was evident by the children's focus throughout; all ages thoroughly delighted with the show. The show had been originally created for children in years 2 – 4, and in most of the schools, it was these classes that were invited to watch the performance. However, the older classes at Stoke Park School were equally enthusiastic about the show, engaged and delighted both by the spectacle of theatre, and by the issues the show raised with them.

Each performance was followed by a short question and answer session for children to ask the cast members anything they wanted to know. This was particularly successful in developing a relationship between the audience and the cast. The Thursdays noted how many of the children said goodbye to them as they filed back out to their classes at the end of the morning.

*For me, it was so lovely to hear the children laugh. A chance for all generations to be together... to have a connection with them.*

*Working with children is a tremendous thing. It is a privilege. Working with schools is the most important thing acta can do.*

*I now feel connected with the next generation.*

The community performers also noted how much they themselves benefitted from the opportunity to be part of a project that was beneficial to others.

*You want those kids to go away (from the show) and for everything to be better.*

*It was very empowering. Confidence giving and energy giving.*

*The moment you enter the stage there is a feeling of expectancy from the audience and from then on you want it to be the best thing it can be.*

*I was quite frightened at the beginning, but so pleased I did it.*

The Thursdays were always interested to hear what sort of questions the children would have, and this helped them to understand the objectives of the project in terms of the long-term benefit for the children watching, introducing them to community theatre and inspiring them.

*It was so clear to see the value it gave to us and the value it gave to the children.*

*It is important for the children to see lots of different ages perform.*

*It was a good bit of stimulus for the children to use when making their own theatre.*

The magic of the theatrical experience created for the children in their school hall was observed by acta's Executive Director, Helen Tomlin, when she visited the final performance:

*"The children were enthralled by the characters, and were completely drawn into their magical world. When one of the characters pointed out a herd of unicorns at the back of the hall, at least half of the children turned around to see it."*

### **A herd of unicorns... and other benefits – a summary:-**

- The Thursdays benefitted from being given a need to address - the task to create a show for a specific audience – energy-giving.
- The community performers further benefitted from the gentle process and welcoming group that acta facilitators engendered.
- Overcoming a series of challenges to complete the project provided all with a real sense of achievement.
- The team spirit within the diverse and ever changing group of community performers was a key element.
- The high quality of the production was vital to the project's success; inspiring to a new generation new to theatre.
- The tour of schools enabled an important relationship to develop between the children and the older cast members.