Review of theatrical presentations of prescribed curriculum plays for Irish second-level school audiences

Discussion paper and Call for submissions

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1. Background and context

1.1 Introduction

The Arts Council has commissioned a review of theatrical presentations of prescribed curriculum plays for second–level school audiences. Submissions are invited from all interested parties to inform the review process. Second-level school students, teachers, theatre artists, theatre programmers, teacher-educators, arts-in-education specialists, and others are invited to share their experiences in this area. The review will examine current models of practice and potential ways the Arts Council might continue to support students' theatrical engagement with plays on their school curriculum. Submissions may be made in writing and/or by arranging to speak directly with the researcher appointed to carry out the review. The deadline for submissions is Wednesday, 4th April 2012 at 12 noon. Contact information is included below, and on the accompanying submission form.

1.2 Purpose of the review

The purpose of this review is to assist the Arts Council in considering how best, in current circumstances, to address the provision of quality theatrical presentations of prescribed curriculum plays for second-level school audiences. How might the Arts Council ensure that most second-level students in Ireland have the opportunity to engage in a meaningful way with theatre in the context of the plays they are studying at school? What models currently exist or might be developed with regard to this particular area of provision?

The purpose of this discussion paper and call for submissions is to ensure that all interested stakeholders have an opportunity to inform the review process by providing information on their current practices or experiences, and sharing their ideas on how this type of work might be presented, developed or supported in the future.

1.3 Context of the review

The Arts Council is the national agency for funding, developing and promoting the arts in Ireland. The Council carries out its work in partnership with the arts sector and a range of other national bodies, government departments and local authorities. The current Arts Council strategy, *Developing the Arts in Ireland 2011-2013*, builds on previous plans and "has a dual focus on supporting artists and arts organisations and on seeking to increase public engagement and participation in the arts."

The Arts Council provides funding to a range of arts organisations, venues, festivals, local authorities, and individual artists and practitioners creating work with, for and by young people in and out of school, and has developed Artists~Schools Guidelines to encourage best practice in delivering arts-in-education programmes.[1]

[1] **Arts-in-education** refers to the interventions by artists and arts organisations into the life and learning of young people, via visits, residencies, projects etc. Such interventions can occur within or outside of the school building/ timetable. It might be said that the artist is central to the mediation of arts-in-education experiences, and that responsibility for this field of endeavour falls more on arts policy-makers and providers. **Arts education** on the other hand is understood as the education of a young person's artistic and aesthetic intelligence and responsibility for it lies within primary and post-primary curriculum

Developing the Arts in Ireland 2011-2013 includes a commitment to build on the 2008 Report of the Special Committee on Arts and Education, *Points of Alignment*. The recommendations and actions developed in that document require a dual commitment by the Department of Arts, Heritage and Gaeltacht (Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism at the time the report was developed) and the Department of Education and Skills (then Education and Science) to be acted upon. To date, these recommendations remain largely unimplemented, due in part to increasing financial constraints across all government budgets. Despite this, *Points of Alignment* provides a strong rationale for supporting arts-in-education practice and remains an important reference for the Arts Council's ongoing commitment to this area of work. Theatrical presentations of prescribed curriculum plays, which are the subject of the current review, must be addressed within this broader framework of arts-in-education.

While this review has been commissioned by the Arts Council, the policy landscape and current priorities within the Department of Education and Skills (DES), and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) are clearly of relevance. The NCCA is currently developing a new framework for Junior Cycle which will be introduced for students entering school in 2014. This will include a new English syllabus, as well as the introduction of short courses which can be designed by individual schools (and may include theatre). Overall, the development and implementation of the curriculum over the coming years will be influenced by *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life - the National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People*, published by the Department of Education and Skills in 2011.

provision. It might be said that the teacher is central to the mediation of the arts education of a young person and the remit for this lies with education policy-makers and providers.

2. Key considerations

2.1 Artistic quality

A key consideration for the Arts Council across all art forms and arts practices is quality. The Arts Council broadly considers artistic work to be of a high quality when it is ambitious, original, technically competent, and connects with people in a lasting way.[2]

A theatrical presentation for young audiences might be considered ambitious and original in the production choices made. In aiming to create the highest quality theatre, the direction and concept (including design, casting, performances, etc.) may be significantly informed and enhanced by a company's knowledge of its target audience, impacting on the overall ambition and originality of the work.

Similarly, a venue or festival may be ambitious and original in the manner in which it programmes and contextualises plays for young audiences. For example, a number of high quality performances might be made available specifically for young audiences, or rich and engaging complementary programmes might be offered for teachers and students. A venue might play an important role in fostering a relationship with local schools and with young people in an area, thus facilitating their experience of live theatre.

As described above, the overall quality of a theatrical presentation will depend on the manner in which it resonates with its audience in a lasting way. Second-level students attending a performance may be well placed to connect with the experience in an in depth way if they are in the process of exploring the play through class discussions and assignments. On the other hand, not all school students attending a play will have a prior interest in theatre and may view the experience primarily as a vehicle to assist them with their exams. This presents a potential challenge in ensuring a performance will resonate with these young people on a personal and imaginative level.

While the theatre experience in itself must successfully engage the interest and imagination of the audience, it may also be argued that the manner in which that experience is mediated, whether by the teacher, or by arts-in-education specialists on behalf of a theatre company or venue, or by some combination of these, is likely to impact on the overall quality of the engagement for the young audience. For example, if students have had the opportunity to engage with a script 'on their feet' as an ensemble of actors might, or if they have been introduced to the process of interpreting a play for the stage, they are perhaps more likely to be able to engage meaningfully with a performance as audience members.

The same quality considerations can be applied to any model of artistic engagement targeting second-level students and their teachers. An artistic process which does not include a presentation or performance would be considered to be of a high quality if it is artistically

[2] This understanding of quality is referenced in the Arts Council's various award guidelines. It was developed by Francois Matarasso: *Weighing Poetry – exploring funding criteria for assessing artistic quality*, Matarasso, F., The Arts Council (2000).

ambitious, original, and technically competent in its design and delivery, and connects with the participants (teachers or students) in a lasting way.

2.2 Educational outcomes

The Arts Council's goals in providing quality theatre and arts experiences for young people appear to be broadly compatible with the Department of Education's goals for young people as learners following the second-level school curriculum. It seems logical that young people who have the opportunity to engage in a meaningful way with theatre as a live art form will be in a better place to understand and explore dramatic works on the curriculum. More broadly, there is clear evidence to suggest that by engaging in high quality arts experiences, students are more likely to develop both the core and higher level literacy skills which they need to succeed at school.[3] However, the extent to which all young people might have access to quality arts provision depends not only on the quality of programmes made available by the professional arts sector, but on the extent to which these are considered an essential part of a student's learning experience at school. This raises the following questions:

- From the point of view of delivering the curriculum, and the study of prescribed plays in particular, what level of engagement with live theatre, if any, is essential for young people to experience?

- What should the role of the professional theatre community and arts-in-education specialists be in facilitating that experience?

- Does the curriculum pre-suppose that students will be able to fully appreciate a dramatic text on their English or Irish syllabus without seeing it performed live? Is it acceptable that students might explore their dramatic texts purely as literary works? Or is it sufficient for them to see filmed interpretations of prescribed plays, where these exist?

- From an educational perspective, is it important that all young people should experience professional theatre as audience members at some point as second-level students?

- If students experience a high quality live performance of any play, which is not necessarily prescribed on the English or Irish syllabus, how might this experience assist them when approaching the prescribed plays?

- Are activities and programmes that introduce students to the process of making theatre essential in developing students' literacy skills both as audience members, and as readers of their prescribed dramatic texts?

[3] Bamford, A. (2006) The wow factor: global research compedium on the impact of the arts in education, Germany: Waxmann Verlag GmbH

- Acknowledging that drama/theatre is not currently a subject in its own right at second-level, what common goals might exist for artists, teachers and students in relation to theatre and the school curriculum?

- In what ways might members of the theatre and education communities work together (or continue to work together) to support young people to engage in quality theatre experiences, which assist them in meeting their curriculum goals?

2.3 Public service – equality and access

The Arts Council aims to ensure equal access to quality arts experiences for young people.

"There are some one million citizens who might be characterised as the 'target population' of Young People, Children, and Education (YPCE) provision. Their number and their economic dependence, combined with the critical, developmental nature of childhood, are factors that continue to inform YPCE policies that are aimed at establishing equal access to quality arts experiences..." (Arts Council website: YPCE.)

When considering reaching the widest number of 12-18 year olds, the potential demand for theatrical presentations of plays prescribed across all second-level schools in Ireland is significant. Yet the current budgetary constraints across the arts and education sectors require realistic targets regarding what models of provision might reach an acceptable number of students. With regard to making quality artistic experiences as widely accessible for young people as possible:

- Should presentations of prescribed plays be prioritised for support by the Arts Council when considering theatre provision for second-level audiences?

- What models of provision would ensure that the widest number of second-level students would have access to the richest forms of engagement with theatre?

- If a variety of professional theatre 'offers' for second-level students and teachers are to be supported by the Arts Council, what educational outcomes would ensure an appropriate demand and interest from schools?

- Overall, what should the role of the professional theatre community and of arts-in-education specialists be in facilitating second level school students' exposure to and experience of theatre, in the context of the plays they are studying at school?

3. Submissions

3.1 Overview of the submissions process

Submissions are invited from all interested parties in response to any aspect of this discussion paper, and in particular to the questions posed in Section 2 above (*Key Considerations*). You are invited to offer your perspective on any of these issues based on your own experience, and to raise any pertinent issues which you feel the Arts Council should keep in mind when considering the findings of this review. While all observations are welcome, contributors are encouraged to focus on potential solutions to some of the questions raised.

A submission form is available on the Arts Council website and is divided into three parts:

1. Your interest in this discussion
2. Narrative response
3. Stakeholder-specific questions

All submissions should indicate in which capacity you wish to participate in this discussion. Please see 3.2 below for more details. School students may prefer to frame their narrative response as a short essay following the prompts in section 3.3 below. In addition, in section 3.4, students, teachers, and theatre/arts professionals are invited to answer specific questions relating to their own experiences.

Written submissions can be sent by email to: seonani@gmail.com and must be received by Wednesday, 4th April 2012 at 12 noon. If you wish to set up a time to speak with the researcher, please send an email to seonani@gmail.com as soon as possible indicating your interest and how you can be contacted.

Your input into this review process is greatly appreciated.

3.2 Your interest in this discussion

(See part 1 of the submission form.) Please preface your submission by indicating which of the following – or which combination thereof – applies to you and is relevant to your response. On your submission form, please indicate if you wish to contribute to this discussion as:

- A current second-level school student in Ireland
  (Please indicate whether you are a 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th or 6th year.)
- A former second-level school student in Ireland
  (Please indicate the year you finished school.)
- A school teacher/school principal
- A parent/primary carer
- An audience member/member of the theatre-going public
- A theatre professional
- An arts-in-education specialist
- A teacher-educator
- An academic
- Other (Please specify.)

3.3 Essay question

(See part 2 of the submission form.)

You may prefer to frame your submission as an essay in response to one of the following prompts.

"A play does not live on a page. It needs to be performed to be appreciated." Discuss, with reference to any play or plays you have studied at school.

OR

"Who needs live theatre when you can watch a film?" Discuss, with reference to any play or plays you have studied at school.

3.4 Stakeholder-specific questions

(See part 3 of the submission form.) Taking account of the current practices and experiences of key stakeholders is fundamental to the review process. If you are a student, teacher, theatre professional or arts-in-education specialist, please take a few moments to describe your experience in response to the questions below.

3.4.1 If you are a **current or recent second-level school student** (please indicate which year you are in):

- What plays have you studied in school? Have you seen these plays performed? If so, where and when?
- How did your experience of live theatre impact on your understanding of the play?
- What were the most exciting or engaging aspects of the play you saw performed?
- Do you feel it is essential for all students to view a professional production of the plays you are studying? Why/Why not?
- Have you been to see theatre performances of plays you are NOT studying in school? If so, how would you describe those plays? How did your experience of those plays compare to your experience of the plays you are studying at school?
- Do you have an interest in theatre or performance outside of school? If so, please describe your experience (for example, are you a member of a youth theatre?).
- Does your experience of theatre outside of school help you in any way with your school studies, or do you view it as completely separate?

3.4.2 If you are a **teacher or other professional in the field of education** (please indicate your subject or area of work):

- In your opinion, is a live theatre experience essential for second-level students to fully engage with their prescribed curriculum plays? If so, why? Or if not, why not?

- How often do you bring your students to see professional theatre? Are the productions always of prescribed plays? Please list any recent productions they have attended, and the company or venue presenting the work.

- Do you introduce your students to theatre in any other way? For example, do you conduct drama activities in your classroom when studying the prescribed plays?
- Have you experienced any other models or programmes offered by the professional theatre community for students and/or teachers? If so, please describe this experience.
- Do you find it helpful if a theatre company or venue offers workshops with teachers and/or students, compiles a theatre resource pack, or mediates a production in any other way? Do you consider these aspects to form an essential part of the theatre experience, or not?
- What are your aims in bringing your students to live theatre productions?
- Has your students' experience of professional theatre helped them to meet their curriculum requirements?
- What models or programmes would you like to see offered by the professional theatre community for students and teachers?

3.4.3 If you are a **theatre or other arts professional engaging with school audiences**:

- Please describe your model of practice when engaging with schools (i.e. what do you do?)
- Do you present plays which are on the school curriculum? If so, which ones?
- What are your artistic and/or educational aims?
- What resources (financial and otherwise) facilitate your work?
- What challenges do you experience in developing, presenting or programming work for second-level audiences?
- In what ways, if any, do you consider an audience of second-level students to differ from a general theatre-going audience?
- Does the manner in which you approach the development and presentation of work for an audience of second-level school students differ in any way from work targeted at a more general audience? If so, what is distinctive about the way you develop work for an audience of second-level school students?
- How do you market your performances/programmes to school audiences?
- How do you gather feedback from schools and in what way does this impact on the plays you programme or develop?