

Arc Theatre

Colin Bye

'Teacher in charge of school transport' – if there's a more lethal poisoned chalice in education, I'd like to know what it is!

Responsible for something that it is technically not the school's responsibility, that is operated by bus companies over which you have no control, that is commissioned through a contract in which you have no say, that is populated by students out of school and sometimes travelling ten miles to get home, that is 'supported' by colleagues who can find an extra reverse gear when the dreaded words 'problem on the bus' is mentioned, this is no drama – it's a full-blown crisis!

So, imagine my surprise when I found a group of individuals who were willing to help me – who actually volunteer to share a room with that most feared of animals, *kids on the school bus*.

I had watched the Arc Theatre Company perform for local primary-school children in the summer term. Their aim was to challenge students to consider the consequences of their actions on school buses and to confront the sort of behaviour that too many youngsters see as acceptable and the norm.

The show was slick, professional and flexible. Starting with



a humorous, entertaining drama, the performance moved into an interactive forum-theatre stage, where the actors had to think on their feet; this was no smoothly scripted act, where everyone knew what was to happen next – there was no control over the comments, suggestions and contributions from the youngsters. All suggestions were treated seriously but those that were less sensible were thrown back to the audience who were forced to consider their consequences. So, if the message was good enough for Year 6 students, I thought it would be just as good for our younger secondary-school students. I asked Arc if they could perform for us as well.

However, Arc don't come cheap. They write, produce and perform their own work, and an individual performance for a single school would be most impractical. More realistic, is to 'buy in' to a series of performances commissioned by the county authorities who tend to foot the bill. We were lucky enough to do just that and Arc was booked for October to confront 'bad bus behaviour'.

Obviously, liaison is crucial beforehand – timings, performance area, props, lighting, parking, size and layout of the audience, age, how to introduce, how to summarise, tea or coffee and how many sugars – all of these issues need to be clarified beforehand.

In fact, Arc needs very little – a space to perform and room for the audience (and four coffees, one tea – no sugar). They are able to turn the most spartan of spaces into whatever they want – another compliment to their ability to stimulate the most barren of imaginations.

You do need to consider the audience layout – Arc tends to be interactive so a layout that allows the characters to get in

among the audience is crucial. The size of the audience is also vital. The performances that I saw had an average audience of about 40 students, an ideal number. This contrasted with a show I saw by another company recently dealing with similar issues that was performed to 250; the performance was fine, but the debriefing and interaction at the end just didn't work – there were far too many students and too much opportunity for inappropriate interaction. Of course, a small audience can also be a problem – how do you get the performance to be seen by larger numbers? The obvious answer is to have it performed more than once. We had three performances – tough on the actors, but more manageable and satisfying for them and for the viewing students.

The performances were excellent. The actors were outstanding but what was more crucial was their empathy with both students and characters and their ability to communicate with the audience. They carried off their characters well – it's amazing what an ill-fitting tie and an untucked shirt can do to your age and image. One had the feeling that they had been there before – perhaps their schooldays had been preparation for method acting! Indeed, if it's true that the best teachers were a bit naughty at school, it might be true that the best educational drama is performed by grown-up naughty kids.

If you want to sit back and enjoy a play, go to the West End, but if you want to take risks, sit on the edge and feel a warm glow of professional satisfaction afterwards, try Arc Theatre.



Biography

Colin Bye is deputy head at Brentwood County High School in Essex, with responsibility for student services, pastoral system and behaviour.

need to know

Arc Theatre
PO Box 1146
Barking
Essex
IG11 9WB

020 8594 1095

info@arctheatre.com

www.arctheatre.com