

# KABOSH

## THEATRE

Arts Council of Northern Ireland states: *Theatre is ever-changing as it reflects and documents our imaginations, histories and realities. The 'play' serves not only as a channel for our words, but as a testament to our society, cultures and visions.*

- Founded in 1994, Kabosh is a Belfast-based, independent theatre company.
- We believe in the politics of the arts to transform.
- Kabosh is committed to challenging the notion of what theatre is and where it takes place.
- What makes us different to other theatre companies is that we do not perform in traditional theatre venues – we take theatre to where people are, into their spaces. We respond to locations from city-centre shops to places of worship to the city hall to disused warehouses.
- This gives individuals ownership of theatre and breaks down perceived barriers to access so increasing impact.
- We pride ourselves on delivering unique, high-quality, award-winning theatre that entertains, inspires and educates.
- The company receives core funding from Belfast City Council and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland for its administrative base and staff of two, Paula McFetridge Artistic Director and Jo Egan Creative Producer. Funding is sought from trusts, foundations, lottery and businesses for each project and freelance professionals are contracted as needed.
- Through responding to location we challenge preconceived ideas about space and the people that inhabit it, aiming to broaden the viewer's perception and facilitate informed discussion. Locations can be particularly emotive. Site-specific performance is a provisional kind of intervention as it is usually time-bound and is concerned with social memory at a particular time of cultural significance.
- Therefore we regenerate communities through theatre: we do this by telling the stories of our communities and helping them to imagine new futures as well as assisting young people in breaking the cycle of traumatic thinking and nurturing inclusive progressive thought.

## **Convictions**

Produced by Tinderbox Theatre Company @ Crumlin Road Courthouse October/November 2000  
(Artistic Director was Paula McFetridge)

- The audience were taken on a theatrical journey around the building (closed in 1998) where they experienced original pieces of theatre that provided a vision for a new inclusive Belfast
- Seven writers were commissioned to write a 15-minute play for a specific location in the courthouse looking at justice, the act of passing judgement and the future of Belfast/Northern Ireland. Each audience group of 20 experienced the plays in a different order.
- An artist, a film-maker and a composer were commissioned to create installations on route based on recorded stories by people who had experienced the building from kitchen and court-room staff to prisoners to officers to family members to judges. They acknowledged the untold stories. These stories were recorded by an independent journalist and became part of the production publication – along with photographs and the scripts.
- So the building was the past, the installations reflected on that and the plays were about new possibilities and how we get there. It was not a living history or a re-enactment.
- The publication is an effective archive of that production – it is widely available and forms the basis of many 3<sup>rd</sup> level courses and thesis, looking at how artists responded to Belfast and its representation of justice 2000. This production could not have happened anywhere else or at any other time – the creators were affected by what was happening in the streets of Belfast (1998: approval of Good Friday Agreement; 1999: establishment of NI Assembly; summer 2000: particularly violent marching season; ongoing internal loyalist fighting), the audience had a particular nightly journey to get to the performance and the building was ever-present. The context was extremely unstable politically – if it was to be produced now it would, by necessity, be a very different production.
- What is interesting is that the production had a broad appeal including many first-time theatregoers – some may have come as they were simply curious about the building and had never been in it, others who had been in it and wanted to lay that part of their lives to rest in some way and others with an historical or political interest in the building and/or theatre. Very diverse people made up the audience groups of 20 that collectively experienced the event – communally they engaged with a location and indigenous artist's responses yet they came from different backgrounds, held opposing political beliefs, had been affected by the courthouse and what it stood for in very different ways. Because of this every performance was unique – the charged atmosphere informed the impact. The production sold out, was revived and sold out instantly – it caught people's imaginations.
- As there are no real theatre trappings when producing in a location, such as an elaborate set or lighting or a 'stage', rather the building is the 'set', the audience cannot hide in the dark: they can see the other audience members, in fact they are usually so close to the actors that they can see the whites of their eyes so each audience member has no real anonymity – they publicly choose to engage or not. The 'play' is presented pure in the same space as them – they are virtually part of the action.
- This project employed a dedicated education and outreach officer who worked with youth and community groups pre and post their attendance. The aim was to increase the quality of their experience attending the production and in turn the impact of its themes – the young people created their own on-site performance based on what the building meant to them.
- Many academics have written about this production: Ken Harris states that even 'the title ('convictions') begins to indicate how the production both acknowledged and undermined the baggage that Belfast and Northern Ireland carries ..... By entering, occupying and installing work in the Courthouse, *convictions* challenged the site's

- dominant position in the social memory of Belfast, as well as the physical, intellectual, and emotional topography of the city. It undermined the Courthouse's assumption of authority by challenging the obedience the building enforced in Belfast's citizens and it destabilised the extraordinary power assumed by the courthouse by filling it with ordinary and everyday and acknowledging its banal unpleasantness..... *convictions* intervened in the Courthouse's history, adding its own stories to those that had gone before and altering the terms in which the Crumlin Road Courthouse, Belfast and Northern Ireland might subsequently be remembered and understood'
- *convictions* offered its audience no single, comfortable position from which to relate to either the building itself or the events that happened there. It offered multiple, varied and often previously marginalised perspectives on the courthouse and its activities. It decentred and re-contextualised the past in acknowledgement of the present and future. It undoubtedly left space for an audience response and the building was ever-present.

### ***The Wedding Community Play***

Produced as part of the Belfast Festival at Queens, Autumn 1999

(Artistic Director was Jo Egan and Production Manager was Paula McFetridge)

- Set on the morning of a mixed marriage this was a 5-hour community theatre piece, where the audience journeyed between 2 houses in East Belfast, a city-centre Church and hotel with Belfast as the backdrop
- Over 18 months in the making, over 90 community participants were involved
- In this production as well as the unique yet everyday locations, the city and how it was navigated became a major player in the story
- As part of the creation of this play the community artists from across the city along with the professional writers (Martin Lynch & Marie Jones) went for a weekend retreat to Co Fermanagh where they openly discussed concerns and beliefs on sectarianism, identity, representation etc.
- The play is a largely comic examination of two families reactions to a cross community marriage with stereotypical, but not necessarily unpopular prejudices about the other political community. This production also sold out – was revived and sold out again
- The political landscape in which it was produced had a direct impact on content, atmosphere and experience - throughout the run of the play the Ulster Unionist Party was debating their vote to accept or reject the limitations and demands of a devolved government and power sharing executive in Northern Ireland. On the last day of the performance they voted Yes.
- Both of these projects involved a comprehensive oral history project – a recording of the facts as those involved saw them. The artists fictionalised these stories – re-imagined them and therefore challenged both the tellers of the stories and those who experienced them via the production. Each production helped individuals convey their ideas to others.
- Briefly to touch on production programming in a '**traditional' theatre.** Paula McFetridge was Artistic Director of the Lyric Theatre for 5 yrs (2000-2005). Many individual members of our society see theatre as elitist, not for them and even out of touch. During those five years there were numerous productions that looked at who we are, why we are and where we hope to be – productions that looked askance at the past and therefore commented on the present. Productions that held a mirror up to society.
- Those include the revival of great works from the contemporary Irish cannon – Tom Murphy's *Conversations on a Homecoming* which among other things examines southern Ireland's relationship with the north and Frank McGuinness's *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* - centering on the experiences of eight men who

- volunteer to serve in the 36th (Ulster) Division at the beginning of the First World War. To new commissions such as *Paradise* by Pádraig Coyle, Conor Grimes and Alan McKee – the story of Belfast Celtic, a cross-community semi-professional football team 1891-1949 and *1974: the end of the year show* by Damian Gorman which looked at alcoholism and the breakdown of the family unit in Belfast 1974.
- There have been other very popular Ulster plays which allowed us to laugh at the abnormal lives that we considered normal from Marie Jones *Somewhere Over the Balcony* to Martin Lynch's *The Interrogation of Ambrose Fogarty* and *The History of the Troubles ..... According to my Da*
  - As well as controversial plays such as Sam Thompson's *Over The Bridge* which looked at sectarianism in Belfast docks to Patrick Galvin's *We Do it for Love* to Gary Mitchell's canon of work looking at the contemporary Protestant community.

A recent, Feb – May 2007 Arts Council of England Report revealed the findings of an inquiry into the value place on the Arts by people from all walks of life.

- The arts are seen as part of our fundamental capacity for life - **enabling us to interpret, adapt and understand the world around us, helping us to express ourselves, communicate with others and broaden our collective horizons**
- The arts enrich our experience of life - **they bring colour, passion, beauty and intensity to our lives. They are a source of pleasure, entertainment and relaxation and a means of escape from the day to day**
- The arts offer powerful applications in other contexts - **contributing to health and well being** (At an individual level the arts offer an outlet for emotions and a means of expressing what might otherwise be difficult to say), **to education and learning, a sense of belonging and community** (the arts can offer a safe place to explore difficult issues, and an alternative shared language) **and so to social cohesion and a healthy economy**

Future work for Kabosh

- Kabosh is currently working on two major site-specific projects that will both involve a major oral history project resulting in an exhibition and publication that will compliment original time-bound productions in unique locations. One is working with a diminishing community that want their story told. This will be archived and presented to a professional playwright who will create a play to be performed in their own space – therefore a professional creative team will respond to these recorded stories rather than simply presenting them and in turn challenge them and the audience. The production venue will inform the experience for all who attend. The other production is a collaboration of writers, actors, visual artists, composers and designers responding to a contested site with the aim of allowing us to imagine new possibilities for its future. Again the stories of those connected with the site will be archived.
- Someone once said the only thing really new in the world is the history we don't know.