

NYT's production of *Private Peaceful* ran at the West End's Ambassadors Theatre



Extracurricular drama

When developing your theatrical skill-set, it would be of great benefit to look at what you can do outside of school to enhance the skills you are learning there. **Jo Caird** outlines just a few of the opportunities available country-wide

'It's hard to put into words how much confidence and encouragement the egg and the Young People's Theatre (YPT) gave me,' says freelance theatre director John East, a member of Theatre Royal Bath's young company from 1995 to 2006. As is the case for so many theatre professionals, it was East's experience at youth theatre that made him want to pursue a career in the industry – and, crucially, made him believe that this might be possible. You can learn a great deal through studying drama at GCSE or A level, and such courses yield valuable qualifications, but when it comes to gaining experience, building confidence and so much more, extracurricular drama activities are hard to beat.

Branching out

Performing, directing or designing (or whatever your theatrical calling) in a new and different context can have a big impact on your development and aspirations. 'What I loved most about my time at YPT was feeling like I was part of a professional company,' says East. 'It felt completely different to doing drama at school. The directors and practitioners we worked with treated us with respect and we knew that our ideas were valued.'

Many youth theatres give their members the opportunity to perform in seasons in working theatres – this autumn, for example, the National Youth Theatre is presenting three plays in repertoire at the Ambassadors Theatre

in London's West End. Knowing that audience members have bought their tickets not because they're related to you, but because they've seen an advert, read a preview or review, can be a big incentive to giving a project your all.

Each year the company auditions young people between the ages of 14 to 25 hoping to join a summer acting course that leads to NYT membership and the opportunity to audition for productions. Technical roles are assigned following interviews. The company also runs week-long skills development courses for 15–25 year olds that you don't need to audition for – topics include audition technique and performing Shakespeare.

Youth theatre can also offer the opportunity to work in a new medium. Leah Byrne has been a member of the Scottish Youth Theatre for the last six years. As well as performing in plays and musicals at the likes of Glasgow's Tron Theatre, the 17 year old has appeared in a series of short films challenging HIV stigma in healthcare, made in collaboration with the NHS. 'I've met some incredible people who are now my best friends, been able to work on exciting and fun projects, and grow as a performer and a person. I've had a blast with SYT over the years and I hope I'll have many more fond memories to look back on,' she says.



Theatre Royal Bath's youth company perform *My Life in the Silents*

SYT runs weekly classes and intensive summer courses for young people between the ages of three and 25, as well as other exciting area-specific programmes. The company also offers free drama workshops in schools as part of its National Roadshow scheme, so pester your teachers if you live in Scotland and fancy the idea of a visit from the SYT.

New directions

Membership of a youth theatre can also help refine your thinking about what aspect of the industry you're best suited for. John East 'loved playing "make believe" as a child, and this naturally led to acting,' he says. 'When I was 16 and starting to think more seriously about my future, I knew from my experiences in YPT that it was directing that I wanted to pursue as a career.'

Theatre Royal Bath runs YPT Backstage too, alongside its YPT Acting programme (for young people aged 12–18 and 9–18 respectively). Both involve weekly workshop sessions where young people explore a wide range of skills and have the chance to take part in one or more of ten YPT productions a year. YBT Backstage members might take on the role of deputy or assistant stage manager, lighting, sound or audio visual operator, or wardrobe and prop assistant, gaining important insights into a side of the industry that gets far less exposure than it deserves in our performance-focused culture.

Extracurricular drama isn't just helpful in terms of personal development; involvement in youth theatre can open doors for you too, both in the short term and later in your studies or career. For a start, it looks great on university and drama school applications says Dr Royona Mitra, admissions tutor and lecturer in theatre at Brunel University London: 'We highly value applicants who come to

us with experience of working in youth theatres and drama groups, as they are not only able to provide evidence of a good level of performance skills, but also their understanding of the power of drama for both self-expression and community building from quite early on in their lives. Personal statements that reflect on these aspects of engaging with drama really catch our attention.'

Drama activities, whether long-term membership programmes or shorter one-off courses or workshops, can also prove valuable when it comes to making connections for the future. Sophie Roberts attended weekly workshops at Llandudno Youth Music Theatre for five years and is planning on applying to drama school in London in 2016. Not only has her involvement with the group given Roberts greater confidence as a performer and the chance to appear in shows including *Billy Elliot*, *Our House* and *Aida*, it has also set her up with a good professional network to plug in to further down the road.

'As LYMT has produced so many professional performers over the years, past members and some of my friends will be just as valuable to keep in contact with as people from the industry who have led workshops over the years,' says the 19 year old. LYMT is open to young people between the ages of 12 and 19, produces musical performances with its members, and invites visiting professional theatremakers to help young people develop their skills.

Beyond theatre benefits

The benefits of youth theatre and other extracurricular drama activities also extend to non-theatrical scenarios – so even if you decide not to pursue a degree or career in the arts, your time at youth theatre will still have been well spent. 'Our ensemble ethos means [young people]

learn as much about themselves and how to relate to others as they do about acting and how to relate to an audience. While some go on to be great actors, many others go on to be great lawyers, journalists, doctors, teachers and CEOs,' says Paul Roseby, chief executive and artistic director at the NYT. 'What they all have in common is that their time in the NYT makes them stand out from the crowd.'

Communication skills, public speaking, people skills, time management – you'll develop all these and more doing extracurricular drama, improving your chances in almost any job market you care to name. In the shorter term, the confidence gained from working or performing with new people and building new skills can have a significant effect on a young person's attitude and academic record. It's a scenario that Bennie Kara, assistant headteacher at a central London secondary school, has observed on a number of occasions: 'You can actually see them change in front of your eyes and in some cases their behaviour changes so much that it does have a knock-on effect on their grades.'

For Elliot Reeves, being a member of Young Everyman Playhouse (YEP) at the Liverpool Everyman & Playhouse Theatres had practical implications for his education. Studying A-level drama at the time (along with law and English language), Reeves found the youth theatre's play library useful for research; £5 tickets for shows at the Everyman and Playhouse Theatres – a perk of YEP membership – was also a boon. 'On one occasion I went to see a play with my school, but because I was lucky enough to be a YEP member I was sat on the front row while my fellow students were up in the gods,' Reeves recalls. 'I am confident that without the resources and support made available to me by YEP I wouldn't have been awarded an A* for my drama performance.'

YEP membership is free to join and open to young people between the ages of 11 and 25, with various programme strands available to join once you're involved. These include YEP Actor, Writer, Technician, Producer, Communicator or Director, and members can also access guidance on careers in theatre.

Last but not least, extracurricular drama is great fun and a fantastic opportunity to meet like-minded people, whatever your specialism or career ambitions. What are you waiting for?