

All We Ever Wanted Was Everything,
at the Roundabout



Mulie Marr

Gigging it up

Gig theatre is a relatively new performance method; it involves a healthy mesh of drama and music, with an 'anything can happen' attitude and high levels of energy. **Jo Caird** speaks to Mungo Beaumont of Middle Child Theatre about the phenomenon

There's no strict definition of 'gig theatre' – it's too new for that. And that's fine by Middle Child Theatre, which has made a name for itself by creating work that blends vibrant new writing with a high octane gig. For this young Hull-based company, 'gig theatre' is simply 'a gig with a story', a way of harnessing the rawness, energy and atmosphere of a live music event to create theatre for an 'audience that don't usually see theatre as something that interests or offers much to them'.

Its latest show, *All We Ever Wanted Was Everything*, which premiered as part of Hull's UK City of Culture celebrations before running at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in August, has elements of musical theatre about it. The show's songs – all original music by composer James Frewer – help to tell the story of Leah and Chris, 1980s babies from very different backgrounds who grow up disillusioned about their place in the world. *All We Ever Wanted* is also underscored throughout, by a live band. But this is no musical.

'It's a bit messier, a feeling that anything could happen,' says Mungo Beaumont, Middle Child producer. 'Musical theatre is great but it's very set in its way. You know exactly what you're going to get each night, which is a perfectly fine thing, but what we're trying to do is create an environment that truly feels unique to that one particular night and that one particular audience.'

Creative collaboration

That feeling of being witness to a unique event is very rewarding for audiences, but it's an appealing prospect for cast and creative team too. Making gig theatre is an excellent option for student productions, not to mention the perfect opportunity for creative collaboration between drama and music departments. (Middle Child was formed, in fact, after company members studying music and drama at the University of Hull were introduced when the departments began working together.) Students will also relish the fact that they're working at the cutting-edge of theatre and performance – there are just a handful of companies doing gig theatre, with Middle Child citing Nabokov, Not Too Tame and Paines Plough as inspiring models and collaborators. ▶

Gig theatre

Creating a gig theatre show from scratch is the ideal scenario in terms of giving students ownership of work of this nature and is more in keeping with the ethos of the genre.

'Gig theatre is about telling real stories and it's a new form of theatre – therefore the best type of work is stuff that's coming from people's hearts and people's presence right now,' says Beaumont – but if you don't have the time or resources to do so, doing an off-the-shelf production is also an option. *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, for example, which premiered in New York in 1998, has wowed audiences all over the world with its glam rock score and transgressive story of genderqueer frontwoman Hedwig growing up in communist East Berlin.

The process

All We Ever Wanted was years in the making due to the fact that it was first staged as part of the Hull City of Culture celebrations, but this type of show needn't have such a long gestation period. It all depends on the project, says Beaumont; whatever the timescale, it all starts with fairly broad conversations about what the aims for the show are.

'Our starting point tends to be with the type of event that we want to create and what type of environment and who it's for, rather than with the specific story,' he goes on. The music came next. 'It was a case of director Paul Smith and Frewer sitting down and going, "What fits with this show and, particularly because we're going through these different decades, what are the feelings?"' Inspiration for the music on all of Middle Child's shows comes from artists and bands the company are watching and listening to, with the very deliberate result that in the finished work, 'the genres feel familiar, even though it's all original music'.

Casting

Once they had 'the shape of the show', Middle Child set about casting it. Casting is obviously an essential element in the making of any piece of theatre, but it takes on even more significance when it comes to this new genre, Beaumont explains.

'The show was very much informed by who we cast. Alice Beaumont, who plays the asteroid, does Ableton in the show, which is effectively electronic music, and that came through that audition. It was because she brought that skill and chose to demonstrate that in the audition that it became a part of the show.'

This works particularly well in the context of student theatre because you



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can shape a production to the abilities of your students, rather than vice versa. It also means that young people who don't necessarily have the traditional skills associated with musical theatre – such as very strong singing and dancing – can still be involved, and might even develop a whole new skillset while they're at it, which they can then take on into future projects or apply elsewhere in their academic career.

What's important for Middle Child, says Beaumont, is 'really strong actors who can play musical instruments. It's about getting a balance across the cast but we focus initially on the strength of the performers' acting and then work to that. In the cast of *All We Ever Wanted* we've got two or three performers who are really talented musicians. And there are a couple of members of the cast who've picked up instruments for the first time as part of this show.'

Writer Luke Barnes then wrote a complete script for *All We Ever Wanted*, ready for the start of rehearsals. Cast members, Beaumont says, were 'encouraged to experiment', and adjustments were made to the script and score as a result. The finished show,

therefore, 'very much reflects the skills and the input that each of the cast members chose to give in that rehearsal period'. Again, it's a format well suited to the classroom environment, with the potential to give students a real sense of ownership in their work.

Performance

When it comes to staging theatre like this, the choice of venue can be helpful in creating a particular type of environment. *All We Ever Wanted* was performed in a nightclub and live music venue in Hull, but at the Edinburgh Fringe it was staged in the Roundabout, Paines Plough's self-contained in-the-round touring theatre. Though very different, each venue helped to foster an immersive atmosphere akin to the feeling of being at a rock concert.

The music itself, of course, is key in creating that atmosphere. 'Practically speaking, part of that is how loud it is. That sounds really simple, but that element allows you to be taken over in that moment.' It's striking a balance with the storytelling side of things that's the tricky bit, says Beaumont, and there's no formula for that. *All We Ever Wanted* is Middle Child's third gig theatre show, and its most successful attempt so far at getting the balance right, the producer believes. Critics and audiences were inclined to agree – the show received glowing four- and five-star reviews, and played to packed houses.

If that's inspired you, it's time to start a conversation with colleagues and get your students brainstorming about the type of event they would like to create. It may only be rock and roll – but you'll like it. 🎸