

# The twins and I

## Carran Waterfield of Triangle in Coventry talks about the unique relationship between her professional theatre company and Bare Essentials Youth Theatre.

In the once upon a time of 1988, non-identical twins were born in a city in the centre of England.

Now, that city was a strange place, for it mourned, and celebrated, huge contradictions - near obliteration after a terrible war; making the motor car; massive unemployment; rich cultural diversity; architectural innovation; a naked horse-riding politician; and an endless stream of creative people, rock musicians, writers, directors, actors and actresses who had moved away, out of frustration, fear of the city's reputation for failure or the lack of Council support for "arty" things.

Almost with religious fervour, powerful and influential people said: "How on earth can anything good come out of Coventry? ...Nothing ever lasts. Nothing even happens there. Coventry? Where's that?" Even the pop singers chanted: "This town is nothing but a ghost town" and made quite a bit of money out of it - in London...

So often was this repeated that eventually even the citizens themselves began to believe in the lie told every year when the Council met to spend the money they had collected in taxes.

Now, these twins lived on the north of the city, far away from what cultural life there was in the centre. Yet they felt in their hearts that they wanted something different and exciting to happen. One day they made a vow: "we want to challenge the old lie, bring about change.... to make people think about their lives.... so that they can make their own connections in what they see, hear and feel.... We want to learn about ourselves and who we are... to confront the uncomfortable and the distasteful. We want our voice to be heard. And we will make performances and do this through our playing."

And so began, with next to nothing, a unique partnership. These twins were not identical though they had much in common - needs for space, resources and encouragement.

Little by little their wishes came true. Enter a Fairy Godmother, a City Arts Officer. Someone somewhere was looking favourably upon the efforts to breathe life back into the

city. And so they battled with the Mighty Giant Mainstream even though those with the power secretly believed the ancient lie that 'Local means Mediocre.' Both twins got to play their unusual performances in the city's mainstream theatre, and in their city's Russian twin town.

Intrigued? Bemused? So are many who have watched Triangle and Bare Essentials Youth Theatre grow. The rest of the tale is history which hasn't quite reached the "right" books yet.

Bare Essentials began from a group of young people with whom I had been working at a comprehensive school where I taught Drama between 1986 and 1988. I had been teaching English and Drama in the city for the previous six years and was tired and keen to get out of mainstream education, to find my own way of expression and communication.

We had so much in common, the twins and I. We both had to get away from rules and regulations, to create in a free and safe atmosphere of mutual respect and acceptance. So we moved out of the school

mainstream, the safe way. We were doing pretty unusual work at that time and seeking new ways of fusing dance, mime, drama, design and so on working from scratch. Triangle had just created "Married Blitz" and Bare Essentials had featured in the National Association of Youth Theatres' "Finding Their Voice".

I was learning my craft in various ways, including a study trip to Denmark, where I worked with actors from the Odin Teatret looking at what makes a Euro-Asian actor. The course drew on the strengths of the Asian approach to performance and training for actors working within a European tradition.

When I returned from Denmark we had a huge celebration, "Sticks and Stones", a visual movement play about playground torture and education. The process drew on what I learned with Odin but on a level accessible to Bare Essentials - a company of about fifteen young people aged between 6 and 18. For Triangle, the Denmark spin off has been in terms of our most recent production, "The Dig", which plays the Edinburgh Festival this year and "goes



Workshop with Bare Essentials

to a local church hall with a friendly open-minded vicar. We both wanted to try out and experiment; challenge the status quo, the

home" to Denmark in November. Working with Odin, I learned as much about myself as about technique.

For Bare Essentials it is similar:

"...if you do this sort of drama it helps you to express yourself more easily and talk to people about things...and get across an issue...that's why we do it ...not because we want to be on Broadway or anything ...we learn a lot about ourselves... about what we think about certain issues like inequality and power...issues which affect our world today."

Rachel from Bare Essentials.

In my own work diary I wrote:

"In the training everyday you confront yourself and parts of yourself you do not like. You are your own teacher eventually; your own judge...and that is lonely...but you still do it and you never know what really drives you on...this is your life...you are your work".

This way is about empowerment of the whole person - an holistic approach - which is why you gain on so many levels. It is worlds apart from the "starry eyed" philosophy of mainstream theatre - a trap so many young people fall into. The work is not dictatorial: the focus is on process. If the process is given enough time, the end product begins the process for the next project. It is cyclical. It is about the practice of fluidity and the challenging of hierarchical approaches in theatre.

You are not only responsible for your own training, and material, but for your group's very existence. This is probably where Bare Essentials differs most from other youth theatres - and Triangle from yearly funded theatre companies. No one decided to set us up. We set ourselves up and it's up to us to keep going.

Four years on, Bare Essentials are running themselves. Funding applications, project development, general administration - even the six year olds take part in this. They don't need me anymore.

"Ah Wey Ahwey Zaman Gwa Za" is an African chant which translates:

"He who carries his stick  
No longer needs his mother"

They negotiate with Triangle like they would any other organisation. If they feel we have something to offer then they call on us. One of the greatest tests of the groups' strength and independence of each other was when both went to Russia last year, Triangle to perform "Married Blitz" and Bare Essentials to perform "Sticks and Stones". Just as fairy

tales focus on rites of passage, so the Russian adventure was like that - a journey into independence. The umbilical cord that fed us both was ready for cutting.

And so back to the City of Contradictions. Well, Triangle have just been "allowed" to play the main stage in the city's main theatre. Both companies have received grants from the City Council for two years running and a joint project is currently underway. The lie part of our foundation, ironically - is becoming a myth, something of the past. However, we will see next April when the collectors of taxes meet whether we have truly chinked their armour or not. At least our Fairy Godmother is in a permanent post - though with a smaller wand than last year...