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The Personal Made Public: an Actor-Led Devised Film Project.

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1 The personal made public: an actor-led devised film project

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Abstract

This project enabled students on the DIT Conservatory's BA in Drama (Performance) to create five short films on a subject of their own choosing, drawing on their own personal experience. Using methods derived from Jerzy Grotowski and Anne Bogart, the students worked in small groups to workshop ideas and, with the support of two co-directors, to develop their scripts. A professional production team was assembled to shoot the films. After post-production, there was a public screening and the films were made available online.

The project addressed two questions:

1. Through devising, to what extent can actors be more empowered in the creative process?
2. Through film-making, to what extent can the programme help students to be better prepared for film and television work and to promote themselves in the performance industries?

The aims of the project were threefold. Firstly, the project aimed to position the students as creative artists, drawing on personal material to create content. Secondly, the project aimed to provide students with experience on a film set with professional practitioners. Thirdly, the project aimed to provide an artistic product that could be distributed to industry representatives.

Keywords: acting, actor-training, devising, film-making, student-centred learning

Introduction

Description and background

This project, carried out between September 2013 and May 2014, enabled final-year students on the DIT Conservatory's BA in Drama (Performance) to create five short films on a subject of their own choosing, drawing on their own personal experience. The students worked in small groups of four and five to workshop ideas and, with the support of two co-directors (one from staff, one from industry), to develop their scripts. A professional production team was assembled to shoot the films. After post-production, there was a public screening and the films were made available online.

The project addressed two contrasting features of contemporary actor-training: the increased prevalence of devising (the generation of original work by performers) within training; and the low emphasis on screen acting, compared to theatre acting, on actor-training courses.

Firstly, devising and the notion of the actor as creator or co-creator have become widespread in contemporary actor-training and university theatre courses (Oddey 1996: 10–11; Magnat 2005: 73; Govan, Nicholson and Normington 2010: 33–34). Challenging the traditional model of actor-training as an accumulation of skills, devising asks the actor to create or contribute to an artistic vision and, in doing so, devising harnesses third-level education's emphasis on student empowerment, self-development and self-realisation.

Secondly, recent public discourse in both Ireland and the UK on actor-training has focused on the lack of skills for screen in young actors because training is too theatre-centred (Mullally 2012: 13; Merrifield 2013). This is seen as imperative because formal studies such as the Irish Arts Council's 2005 report on the socio-economic circumstances of theatre practitioners have highlighted the heavy reliance by actors in particular on film and television work due to the higher income such work generates compared to theatre. In both regards, the DIT Conservatory's BA in Drama (Performance) can be seen as typical, as it provides opportunities for small-scale devising throughout the programme and it devotes only one final-year module to screen acting.

Aims of the Project

An opportunity was therefore seen to draw on two of DIT's fundamental strategic aims – student-centred learning and engaging with industry – to create a project that posited two basic questions:

1. Through devising, to what extent can actors be more empowered in the creative process?
2. Through film-making, to what extent can the programme help students to be better prepared for film and television work and to promote themselves in the performance industries?

The aims of the project, which was positioned within the Contemporary Drama module in the final-year curriculum, were threefold. Firstly, the project aimed to position the students as creative artists, with the students drawing on personal material to create content, rather than their being interpretative artists cast in someone else's script. Secondly, the project aimed to provide students with experience on a film set with professional practitioners. Thirdly, the project aimed to provide an artistic product that, unlike a traditional theatre production, was able to be distributed to industry representatives, particularly via the students' own showreels (portfolios) and via online links.

Outline of Project

Stage 1

The methodology used for the creation of content for the films drew on Grotowski's "Statement of Principles", where the revelation of the actor's deeper self is put at the centre of performance (Grotowski 1995: 211–218) and Anne Bogart's strategies of composition (Bogart and Landau 2005: 137–161). While both were formulated in the context of theatre (and the methodology had been successfully implemented on previous theatre projects) Bogart's composition strategies draw heavily on film techniques such as montage and storyboarding and her emphasis on non-theatre spaces for performance can be directly applied to choice and use of location for film.

To provide unity for the project, the whole group of 19 actors agreed on a single question that everyone in the project would be pursuing. The question decided upon dealt with identity: how much of ourselves is really ourselves and how much is how we present ourselves to others? The group were divided into five small groups to begin devising around this question. Students accumulated material (personal stories, texts, images, music, sound) and set creative performance tasks to generate dramatic content. The staff director circulated among the groups to offer advice and suggestions when needed.

Milestones were set during October and November for which each group presented works-in-progress to the rest of the group and to the two co-directors and received feedback on the impact and dramatic viability of the performances.

Stage 2

In late November, deadlines were set for the final decisions on the location of each group's film and the final draft of each script. Other members of the professional creative team were brought in at this stage, being briefed on scripts, interpretation, consulting with actors on costume and props decisions and doing "recces" at the locations. Scripts were rehearsed and shot lists began to be formulated.

The shooting of the films took place over five days in December, with each film allocated one day's shooting. A "handing over" of sorts took place at this stage as, on the film sets, the actors were positioned solely as actors, while the production team made their creative decisions accordingly, based on their expertise. It should be noted that, for each shoot, one of the groups of actors that was not filming assisted with specific roles on set.

Stage 3

The final stage of the project occurred from January to May, after the end of the module, and involved the post-production process of picture and sound editing, music composition and picture grade. While the students' artistic visions were at the forefront of these processes, students' time constraints and the more highly technical know-how required for much of this process meant that the students were not directly involved in this stage.

In April a public screening was held for an invited industry and DIT audience at Cineworld Parnell Street. All five films were shown under the title "Who We May Be". Finally, in May the films were made available online through the DIT Conservatory's YouTube channel, with links emailed to industry stakeholders. Students were given access to the film files for possible inclusion in their showreels, which they were preparing for acting agents and casting directors.

Figure 1.1: Still image from Fix*, one of the short films*

Figure 1.2: Still image from Boys' Club, *one of the short films*

Evaluation and Conclusions

The project was evaluated through a combination of structured reflection by the students after the shooting of the films and, after the availability of the films online, through surveys of the cast and of industry stakeholders[1] and through interviews with the professional production team.

Making a short film

The clearest conclusion to be drawn was the positive significance of the opportunity to create a short film. All of the respondents from the cast said that acting in a short film should be an important part of the training on the programme, in addition to (rather than as a replacement of) the existing module in screen acting (91% saying "extremely important" and 9% saying "somewhat important"). An indicative student response was: "The course needs this film, as realistically when you leave college there are more auditions for film than theatre so we need to have this experience under our belts."

The members of the production team (two of whom have also delivered the screen acting module) emphasised how the context of shooting a short film raises the stakes of the acting compared to the screen acting module because of increased time pressures, increased numbers of personnel on set and the more comprehensive artistic considerations at work. Some 86% of industry respondents (e.g. agents, casting directors) felt that experience on a film set was important when considering an actor for work (29% "extremely important" and 57% "somewhat important"). One stakeholder commented, "Experience, or at least know-how [on a film set], is invaluable ... as long as the person understands their job, role and boundaries." The latter point about roles and boundaries was indeed something negotiated during shooting (see Stage 2 above). so here the project directly tackled an industry concern.

Devising

The positive significance of devising was another conclusion to be clearly drawn. Of cast respondents 82% said that it was important to them that they were co-creators of the film, rather than being cast in someone else's script (64% "extremely important" and 18% "somewhat important"). Further, 81% felt it was important that their own personal experiences formed part of the creative process, though this was less emphatic than being creators (45% "extremely important" and 36% "somewhat important"). Some 71% of industry respondents commented that they found it useful when a performance is created by the actor(s) performing, presumably because it gives an insight into the type of person they are considering hiring. Positioning actors as creative artists is therefore a help to the industry.

The co-director from industry commented that the personal investment by the actors gave the films an "edge" which they might not otherwise have had. He added, however, that the fact that the actors were creators could be an inhibiting factor at times, if the actor's focus strayed to the big picture rather than the essential "in-the-moment" aspect of good acting. The director of photography, who also happened to direct a short film (not devised from the actor's personal experience) with the final-year students at another major actor-training college, said that the devising element meant the actors experienced learning about themselves and about the demands of the process of original creation (i.e. how a creative idea can be realised cinematically). He agreed that, at their most successful, the films had edginess and originality. Citing one of the less successful films, however, he added that at times stronger intervention by the directors was needed to develop the cinematic language of the piece and give it a tighter, more effective narrative structure than the students provided.

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1   Response to the formal surveys was 12 out of 19 cast members and 7 industry stakeholders.

Engagement with industry and promotion

The project's engagement with industry had mixed results. The fact that the films were made with a professional production team was crucial for the students, with 91% of them asserting its importance (73% "extremely important" and 18% "somewhat important"). "It helped us to understand what it would be like working on a professional set," one cast member commented, "which is invaluable going forward into the profession". In all, 71% of industry respondents felt that actortraining courses need to put more emphasis on screen acting than they do at present. So a project such as this responds to that need in the industry in a comprehensive way.

Approximately 80 people from the industry and DIT community attended the screening in Cineworld Parnell Street and the YouTube links to the films were emailed to over 180 industry stakeholders in Ireland and the UK. As of July 2014, the average views of the films was 99, with 141 the highest views of a single film. While more needs to be done to increase the viewing figures, all industry correspondents cited the usefulness of an online link for viewing an actor's performance (71% "extremely useful" and 29% "somewhat useful") and the ongoing potential for increasing audience figures is a clear advantage over a theatre production.

Only 50% of the cast said they would use the film for their showreels and 20% said maybe. On the positive side, cast members using the films said that the films were "essential" to their showreels and "some of the best stuff I have". Reservations expressed included whether the film had "enough" of just themselves or whether the content was "appropriate" in terms of promotion. The 30% who said they would not use the film did not offer reasons. This might point to a possible discrepancy between the artistic criteria of the films and the needs of an actor regarding self-promotion; however, further investigation would need to be done to uncover the reasons behind the reluctance to use the films.

Overall conclusions

Overall, the project was creatively empowering for the student actors and has made them better prepared for work in the industry. A project such as this also serves a number of key industry needs. More work needs to be done to determine whether the final products can serve the promotional needs of more students.

Recommendations to DIT

Drama provision in the DIT Conservatory needs to respond to the importance that students and industry stakeholders accord to screen acting and experience on a film set. Embedding the making of a short film or films within the regular curriculum is one comprehensive way of doing that. To ensure students are prepared for film-making in the industry, it is imperative that the experience includes a professional production team. Whether that film is devised or not is a more open question, as the creative empowerment brought by devising could be provided within a theatre context instead, where devising is more established as a practice and the actors are more present in the final phases of creation (see Stage 3 above). This question should be dealt with, in the first place, at the level of the Programme Team. Finally, more sharply focused research needs to be done regarding students own promotional needs as actors and regarding generating interest from more industry stakeholders.

Proposed Future Work

A similar project should be developed in the near future. In addition to that, further research could be done in relation to how other training programmes in Ireland and the UK have responded to the increasing demand for screen acting and filmmaking. Collaborations might be possible with other film-making projects within the institute, provided the opportunity for the students to work with professionals is not sacrificed. The programme could also establish stronger links with organisations and key individuals in the film and television industry, along the lines of the links the programme currently has to theatre organisations and companies.

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