

Running a Youth Theatre: Building a Programme of Work

with Nuna Sandy, Artistic Director of Company Three

Thu 29 Feb – Session Summary

Introduction

- Hello from **Nuna Sandy and Gabi Spiro**, Artistic Director and Producer (Exchange & Relationships) [Company Three](#)

Everyone puts where they're Zooming in from in the chat, and how old they feel on that day. There are people joining from Leeds, Japan, Derby, Swindon, Ireland, Bristol, Manchester, Dorset, Plymouth, Sunderland, Llanrug, Brighton.

Opening statements

- We are not experts, we are here to share what we do. We see this as an Exchange because it's a chance for us to hear and learn from everyone in this space.
- We're all at different stages, and some of us are freelancers and some are in companies.
- I will start by talking about Company Three, then we will go into breakout spaces for discussion and then come back and speak as a group.

Company Three's Programme

Planning the programme:

- We programme annually and look at the life cycle of the company.
- There have been large shifts in our programme in the 6 years I've been at C3 – we always rejig and shift depending on what works well and what doesn't.
- When we are planning, we start by looking at our **mission and vision** and whether the **climate and/or community has changed**. We will keep sense checking this throughout the year, to see if we've noticed any big shifts or changes in what's happening for our young people. We plan in May, as it's the quietest time of our year in terms of delivery.

We ask ourselves:

- Who are we working with? Why this group in particular?
- What do they need? How would we achieve that?
- Have we achieved it so far? If not, what changes do we need to make?
- Why us and why now?

Our programme consists of everything we do: the board, the staff, our satellite projects, social time with young people, residentials – so we don't just look at the play, but all our work with young people and everything that gets us to the point of making plays with them.

We look at:

- **Our board** – I see them as Avengers who all have different skillsets, for us finance, Climate and the environment and safeguarding are really important. Working with the board is an ongoing thing that will shift throughout the year based on what we need.
- **Staff** – Do we have the right staff for the work we're planning? We look at core staff and freelance staff.
- **Training** – What training do individuals need, or does the company need?

Some things are finalised very quickly, some things go back and forth a lot, some things need discussion with the young people. We look at space, funding, staff – to make sure everything we want to happen, can happen throughout the year

Our year-round programme

Weekly sessions and spaces – our groups meet once a week, but we have games nights, and have spaces where they can all hang out called 'den nights.' This gives our whole company the chance to meet together rather than in their smaller groups. This is especially important with co-creation as we can't expect them to trust each other and be comfortable around each other if we only bring them together once a week for a short time.

Affinity groups – came out of the Black Lives Matter movement gaining traction in 2020, and seeing our young people talking about it but in a filtered way, because often you've been raised to watch what you say and where you say it. So we offered them a space, run by Black artists, to talk about what was going on, not as therapy, but as a way to speak openly. Then we made the offer to make some creative work stemming from the conversations we had. Other young people told us they wanted groups too, so we created an LGBTQ+ group and a group for young Muslim women, which they called Muzzies.

We often talk about how long these things will last, they'll go on for as long as they're needed.

Residential – We do this every year as a way to connect our young people.

Satellite projects – Go into schools and do smaller projects

Exchange work – sharing practice with other youth theatre groups and practitioners.

Company Three's Life Cycle

Once we've discussed the above, we look at our life cycle. *Refer to this amongst the Lifecycle document.*

Deep Dives – A schools project to bring in young people who for various reasons wouldn't walk through our doors. For the past 2 years, we've been working with young people on the verge of being expelled, now we're looking at working with SEN young people.

For a long time we were looking at building recruitment packages to bring in new young people, but this wasn't working, so we shifted our programme and this has been much more effective.

Adventures – 6 week project bringing in different artists to work with our young people to teach them different skills i.e. in different theatre disciplines. The idea is we use those skills as we move into the Summer.

Storytelling Evaluation – Ask members questions about their time with us, which are turned into a story. We then read the stories with our core team, some ex-members and some freelance staff. A great chance to see what worked and what didn't.

Summer Project – A week long project where we use the skills learnt in Adventures to cultivate lots of ideas that we might want to develop further. We look at the sources the young people are interested in and make lots of short plays.

Residential – This used to be in October half term, but we shifted it and lengthened it. A chance to make lots of work based on skills learnt in Adventures, and ideas generated in Summer project. We listen to them and choose various sources that have emerged and ask them which group they'd like to be part of. And then share this back with everyone.

Break – After our August residential until we regroup in September.

September to December – We develop the ideas. I use the analogy of cleaning rice and picking out stones – we're sifting through ideas to find the stones that will be our project. And being really brave with it.

Scratch in December – A moment for the whole company to come together to scratch the work they've been making. Came out of a desire to keep them engaged throughout the whole year. They share some work and feedback to each other. Then have a Christmas party afterwards.

Jan to Apr - Rehearsing and refining the work for **Assembly**, which is when we share our work with friends and family. We try to have a professional stage manager, production manager, set costume and then each year we focus on either sound or light design.

Other things we've found:

- Sep to Dec is the best time to take them to see plays as they're not in exam mode
- We were struggling with recruitment – we used to do something called Big Weekend where we would bring together young people across various schools, but since lockdown we've seen the young people are so anxious at these events that we decided to change tact. So now, we go into a school for 6-7 weeks to work with year 7s, with the view to bring them in afterwards, and have found they are much more comfortable.

Breakout room activity

In groups of 5, discuss the following questions:

1. When did programme work really well for you and why?
2. When did it not work well and why?
3. When did you need to shift activity and why?

Discussion

- It feels tricky to balance young people's desire to perform with the amount of time, energy and resource it takes to put on a performance. And the lack of understanding about the other things that drama can be, not always a performance.
- From a young person's perspective, I remember feeling like we couldn't do shows in the Summer term anymore and it becoming stressful because of school.
- Needing to develop skills in the younger ones before you're able to make a performance with them – having a Scratch as a useful idea.
- Ways around other commitments/school – like including a young person in a few scenes of a play, so they only need to come in for a portion of the rehearsals.
- The pressure when you're a freelancer to have a performance at the end of 10 weeks, when you don't have the time to develop skills and bond the group.
- The show being the really important thing at the end of the cycle – how can we alleviate the pressure from this? Scratch being a useful way to show young people the process and how some ideas don't work.
- How do you manage those expectations with parents? Maybe it's about how you pitch your offering – it's about teamwork, collaboration, being brilliant future humans rather than it being about performance.
- Sometimes when sharing work with parents you could frame it as an open rehearsal, share a couple of polished scenes but also do things like warm-up games with the parents. Then when you get to eventually sharing something else, just because the young people are wearing a small amount of costume or aren't holding a script makes it feel for everyone like they've come a really long way.

Q&A

- **How do you get young people out of school?** Build a relationship with the schools, speak to the teachers and try to negotiate their time. And asking parents to help you when speaking to the schools.
- **When working with younger children, how should you balance them being shy but also wanting to perform?** Depends how long you have them – if you have them for a longer time, it's easier to keep parents off than if you only have them for 6 weeks.
 - You could play games and invite parents into a session rather than a performance.
 - You could make the performance feel like a game like spreading the audience out around the studio and the kids hiding.
 - You could pair them up so that there's 2 young people with the same role, so if on the day someone doesn't want to perform, it stills works.

- You could explore maybe wearing masks? It could be about being seen.
- You could use voiceover or microphone at the side of the stage also can work.
- You could frame it so that every time the young people come into the room it's a play, each week you build on the story and then the young people come back each week wanting to find out what will happen next.

Find out more about upcoming *Running a Youth Theatre* sessions:

<https://www.companythree.co.uk/running-a-youth-theatre>

Or get in touch with gabi at gabi@companythree.co.uk