Excluded young people can find a route to formal educational qualifications through performing arts organisations, as **Diana Hillier** reveals.

Peckham's got talent



Diana Hillier
Theatre Peckham



Photo: Geraint Lewis

The Storyteller's Boy is a Peckham Theatre production including professional actors and young people

Tucked behind Southwark Town Hall, amidst the hurly-burly of some of South London's most challenging estates, Theatre Peckham is unusually both a professional theatre and an extensive education facility. It's this unique combination which helps nurture talent and self-esteem within the local youth population, many of whom feel excluded (or are excluded) from traditional education programmes. There are currently over 350 members – young people from Peckham and Camberwell – ranging in age from under-five to 16-plus. All take classes in acting, singing and dance, and some are invited to appear in productions alongside professional performers. These original plays, incorporating both music and dance, are presented to public audiences as well as to houses packed with local schools. In this way, children as young as seven make regular public appearances, so by the time they leave primary school many are seasoned actors, with the confidence and self-esteem performing can generate.

Established over 22 years ago, the Theatre School and workshop programme has an reputation which is reflected in the high number of distinctions received by students studying towards the Trinity Guildhall grade qualifications. We run a wide range of classes from African Dance and Ballet to Baby Singing (exactly what it sounds like!). There's a strong emphasis on retaining the cultural identity of the participants, and everyone has classes in acting, singing and dance to give them a real grounding in performance arts. There is also an range of projects out and about. In primary schools, 'Pathways' is a long-term project in which practitioners work in local schools to provide accessible routes into the performing arts. A significant percentage of members have come via this route since 2003. 'Blast-off Boys' engages the lads aged 11–16 through street dance, break dance and stage combat. 'Opening Doors, Opening Minds' was a drama workshop held in two Southwark schools to improve community relations. Our tutors also staff various after-school dance and drama clubs in local schools, including a project based on 'Amazing Grace' by Mary Hoffman, with younger primary school children.

Routes to qualifications

Last year we started teaching a BTEC course, offering a nationally recognised qualification for anyone aged 14 and over interested in pursuing a career in the performing arts. Eighty percent of the students are from Black and Minority Ethnic communities, and half are boys. Theatre practitioners supply the students with vocational training in a professional setting. The year-long course is equivalent to two GCSEs, which gives the students a real incentive to attend. Many members join us during primary school years and stay throughout their school career and beyond. Four of this year's students extended their training with the National Youth Theatre, The Steam Industry at The Scoop, Siobhan Davies Dance and the Intercultural Dialogue Camp, a European Theatre Exchange in Bosnia. Our BTEC First Certificate classes in Acting and Scripted Text are led by Gavin Brockwell and Cerian Eiles, both of whom are East 15 graduates and regular performers as well as teachers. Laura Gillham, a teacher and jazz performer, teaches Singing and Jreena Green, a Jiving Lindy Hopper, is pioneering a course of Black Dance, including the origins of modern black dance forms in Britain.

> "There's a strong emphasis on retaining the cultural identity of the participants"

Mixing it up

From September 2008, we will be running BTEC First and BTEC National courses in performing arts, and we hope that this level of vocational training will open up a variety of training and employment opportunities for the students. Working with partners such as Central School of Speech and Drama and the Royal Court helps to raise the aspirations of young people who might not previously have considered a career in the performing arts. Our students often audition for professional work alongside their schooling – we currently have several boys in the final round of auditions for the upcoming West End production of 'Oliver!' The BTEC culminated this year in production of 'The Cotton Club', a new piece of work by artistic director Teresa Early, based on research the students did themselves into the original Harlem nightclub. The provisional results for 2007/8 show that 50% of the students achieved a Distinction and a further 40% a Merit. High-quality training goes hand-in-hand with high aspirations for artists and arts leaders of the future.

Theatre Peckham also produces several productions each year using a unique mix of professional actors and young people enrolled in the workshop programme. Teresa Early collaborates with a wide range of creative professionals and young burgeoning artists to create highly engaging shows suitable for families, young people and school groups. By showcasing new talent and raising the awareness of different forms of theatre, we aim to cultivate new theatre audiences and develop an appreciation of the arts. ■

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