



CHERWELL THEATRE COMPANY PROUDLY PRESENT

MYTH

BY TRISTAN JACKSON-PATE

A FREE 'POP
UP' FESTIVAL
PERFORMANCE
TOURING
OXFORDSHIRE
AUGUST 20-26



Banbury's own Cherwell Theatre Company celebrate their fifteenth year of producing theatre for and with young people this summer with a unique and vibrant community theatre project.

'Myth' is a new play for family audiences, exploring tales from Ancient Greece, devised with young people and performed in outdoor spaces across Oxfordshire.

www.cherwelltheatrecompany.co.uk

Funded by the National Lottery Communities Fund, Cherwell District Council, The Victoria Wood Foundation, Doris Field Charitable Trust, The Ormonde Foundation, The Lynn Foundation and The Bartlett Taylor Trust

Project Evaluation

Overview

This summer CTC undertook a community theatre project involving 35 participants, a professional creative team of 7 and a combined audience of 1,353.

Our members came up with the idea of creating an outdoor performance exploring Greek myths in September 2018, designed to inspire and bring together communities.

Every young person who wanted to get involved in this free activity was encouraged to do so and participants engaged in hands-on learning in acting; puppetry and costumes; assistant stage management and directing.

In devising 'Myth', young people examined classic tales and considered their modern relevance, supported by Artistic Director Tristan Jackson-Pate and specialist workshops in puppetry and ensemble movement in weekly classes from April-July. From August 5-19, participants were joined by three professional actor/facilitators and undertook a two week intensive rehearsal process before embarking on a six date community tour.

Our play targeted early years audiences and their families; bringing free, accessible theatre to the community spaces and events they value the most. Many had not seen a production before.



Our gentle, highly visual production with an emphasis on interaction and music provided a meaningful introductory theatre experience to children, sparking their interest for storytelling. We also produced a printed comic, written and illustrated by a talented participant which we gave to children at each performance, encouraging them to explore the stories further.

We refined our approach by workshopping our play at the Sunshine Early Years Centre and previewing the piece to family and friends of Sophie's Silver Lining Fund at Sophie's Barn, Chacombe. We also performed at Banbury's 'Summerfest' event at Princess Diana Park and in the Market Place with support from Cherwell District Council.



In addition, we instigated 'pop up festivals' at Longford Park and Heyford Park. The population of Banbury increased by 11% between mid-2006 and mid-2016. This growth was above the increase in Cherwell (+7%) and Oxfordshire (+8%) and is partly due to new housing developments.

When planning the project, we spoke with many representatives from CDC, including Rosie Phillips, Community Development Officer for Longford Park who said:

'This diverse and growing community has been severely hampered in its efforts to coalesce by the complete lack of facilities on-site. After five years, residents are still without a community space in which to meet. Couple this with the poor public transport provision, and the distance from Banbury town being prohibitive for many residents to walk, they desperately need something to bring them all together across all ages, faiths, and backgrounds. I believe CTC's proposal will kick start a dynamic new approach by the residents to their community.'

Throughout the project we worked with Community and Residents Associations, Community First Oxfordshire, local organisations and CICs to ensure both locations received unique events, featuring performances from local groups, engaging local businesses and volunteers. The project was delivered on time and within budget.

Stats of participants engaged

- 35 participants took part in the devising workshops
- 31 took part in the production
- 25 participants acted in the production
- 5 participants took on technical roles
- 1 participant was an assistant director
- 8 participants were new to the company for this project
- 16 participants were female and 15 were male
- 7 participants were on the autistic spectrum
- 2 participants were from a BAME background
- 5 participants were home schooled



Staffing

'Myth' was written, directed and co-composed by CTC's Artistic Director, Tristan Jackson-Pate.

The professional actor/facilitators were Liam Nooney, Jess Lloyd-Jones and Adrian Banks, who also co-composed the music. All have previous history with CTC, with Liam and Jess both being ex-participants who have since trained professionally and enjoyed varied careers in theatre.

Harry Card was Stage Manager assisted by volunteer ASM Josie Lovick. Harry is new to CTC and undertook his first professional role on this production, having recently graduated from the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire.

Rachael Twyford was costume and puppetry designer. Rachael was new to CTC and came to us through recommendation from Oxfordshire Theatre Makers.

The set was built by David Brittin-Snell. David has many years of history with CTC and is an ex-trustee.

All staff were DBS checked, safeguarding trained and suitably experienced both in their field of expertise and in working with young people.

Artistic Content of the Project

Devising

As always, the process was highly collaborative and challenged the young people to have their own thoughts and ideas included in the direction of the final piece. In the initial devising and workshoping process, young people explored the use of the chorus and its function in Greek drama, commenting on the stories of Pandora and Prometheus, , sharing their own opinions and asking pertinent questions of the stories and their morals.



We explored the vast collection of classical characters practically through movement and improvisation, the group taking ownership of each

role before being 'cast' in the final piece. The general tone and 'attitude' of the characters and the chorus in the final piece were influenced significantly by the young people's improvisations.

Rachael Twyford, our designer and new asset to the company facilitated practical workshops on set design (a first for CTC) and puppetry, which inspired the young people, many of whom assisted with making props and puppets throughout the process.

Emma Webb, working with us once again as movement director led inclusive workshops on ensemble movement and creating chorus, which many audience members commented were particularly strong aspects of the final production.

Rehearsals

Rehearsals ran from 10am-6pm five days a week between 5-19 August at Banbury College, who provided their studio rehearsal space as support in kind.

As always, this mirrored a professional rehearsal process, with movement and voice work in the morning, led by Tristan, Michael and Emma and scene work in the afternoon. There was a focus on creative, group exercises in the first week especially, to bond the company together, develop skills and encourage team work. Several young people commented in evaluation interviews that they enjoyed the fact that the actors were 'part of the group' and worked alongside them. There was a great deal of music and young people engaged well with singing and choreography, with two participants also playing musical instruments in the final piece.



Young people were encouraged to research their characters and give presentations early in the process as well as creating informative wall displays and resources. These presentations were an early highlight of the project, with young people taking creative approaches such as performing short stand up routines, acting out puppet shows, creating songs and short sketches to illustrate their research. It showed meaningful investment in the material from the participants.

In the latter stages of rehearsals we moved to Sophie's Barn, where we rehearsed outdoors with full costume, set and music, culminating in our first 'preview' performance to family and friends of Sophie's Silver Lining Fund.

Performances

This project marked CTC's first foray into touring theatre and we were generally pleased with the results. We visited six touring locations and young people were dropped off and picked up by parents and carers at each.

The stage management team were efficient in 'get ins' and 'get outs' and parent and participant volunteers assisted with costume, hair and make up at each performance, helping to maintain a high standard of presentation. Any maintenance of costume, set, puppets and technical equipment was carried out by the stage management team and volunteers.

The majority of participants appeared at every performance, though a small number in bigger roles were 'double cast' to allow all members of the company to participate.

Touring Statistics

Sunshine Centre

- Audience size: 48 inc. pre-school children and parents.
- Performed 20 minute extract of show and taught the audience a song, which we sang together.
- Children were invited to meet the puppets and talk to the actors.



Sophies Barn

- Audience size: 78
- Trustees of CTC in attendance
- Trustees of Sophie's Silver Lining Fund in attendance
- Raised approx £130 fo Sophie's Silver Lining Fund



Princess Diana Park (Summer fest event)

- Audience size: 180 seated, 500 in attendance (approx)
- Festival event had upwards of 500 people attend thoroughout the day, audience size is based on those actively sat watching, several people came and went, and others watching from across the field.



OYAP, Bicester

- Audience size: 146 (approx)
- Bicester Rusty Musicians and 2 x solo musicians performed with us.
- Elite dance school, 6 performers also joined.
- OYAP staff did a sweet stall, with fete style games, involving their participants.
- Fish and Chip Van and Ice Cream Van in attendance.
- CTC had one new sign up from this event.



Heyford Park, Upper Heyford

- Audience size: 210
- Ice cream and cakes stall ran by local business owners.
- Balloon modelling done by volunteers raising money for cancer research.
- Candle stall and other crafts by local business owner.



- 8 x performers from Aspire Dance Academy, plus a solo singer and a pianist.
- Fish and chip van in attendance- sold out!
- CTC got three potential new sign ups from this event

Banbury Market Place

- Audience size: 230
- We had the most passing trade at this venue- lots of people watching by and stopping to watch, our biggest standing audience.
- Banbury Rusty Musicians performed, 11 piece band.



Longford Park

- Audience size: 111
- Banbury Rusty Musicians performed, 12 piece band.
- Local Brownies had a stall doing glitter tatoos.
- Other local stalls with crafts and home knits to raise money for Katharine House Hospice.
- Local school provided use of their field and toilets/changing facilities at community discount rate due to community centre not being opened in time- Taylor Wimpey the developers, have settled this sum.



Total audience members: 1,323

Learning from the Project

This project was a new way of working for CTC and as such, there is much to learn from what went well, and what could be improved next time.

The positives:

- We reached a more diverse audience through touring and through presenting the production as a free event- especially very young children, many parents commenting that they were **“amazed the show had held their interest”**, and that they **“don’t usually go to the theatre”**.
- Almost 100% of participants who had not worked on a CTC show alongside professional actors commented that they had found the experience unique, educational and rewarding. One said **“I like the way the actors work with you, it’s not just “I’m an actor, you’re a child”**. Another commented **“Performing in an outdoor setting helped with my confidence and with vocal projection. I’ve never worked with professionals before and I was able to pick things up and improve my quality of acting.”**

- It was positive for young people to get out in their community. Participants commented: **“I liked it that people who haven’t come to watch us before came to watch us.”**, **“I think it’s made me a lot more confident because we had to perform to people I’ve never seen before. It’s the first time I’ve done that.”** Another said **“It surprised me, the reactions to the Banbury market place performance, I was expecting a load of shoppers not expecting theatre and wanting us to be quiet and get on with their day but I was surprised at how many stopped to watch and enjoyed the show. I was really scared I’d run into someone I knew, I was dreading that show but it went really well. Someone I knew was there actually and they were supportive.”** Another participant commented: **“I was surprised by the amount the audience participated. I thought they’d just sit down and stare at us but they joined in. It makes it feel more fun. I love making everyone else enjoy it, which makes you enjoy it more.”**
- The fact that the project was free for all to take part in was inclusive and advantageous to many, who otherwise wouldn’t have been able to join in.



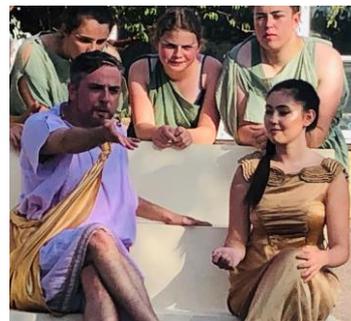
- Designing and printing a free comic book was a great opportunity for one of our participants, a talented artist who took a great deal of pride in the work. It was also a wonderful souvenir for children to take away from each performance, to remember the event and explore the story of Persephone further, and encouraged some audience members to make a cash donation to CTC. A small number of comics we didn’t manage to give away were donated to Banbury Library, who have been giving them to children since.
- The standard of the production was strong, with many commenting the shorter run time was more accesible for children and allowed a more polished performance.
- The participants gained a great deal from taking part. Comments included: **“It has been very ensemble. Loads to do no with sitting around. At school they work with the main characters while you sit around but it wasn’t like that, it was very professional.”** Everyone had a role they were comfortable with”, **“It was definitely a positive thing to tour- if you stay in one place for a week you get too comfortable, this project taught you how to adapt to different performance spaces.”** **“I learned how to properly warm up my voice. No one takes it seriously and warms up at school, preparation is vital.”** **“I feel more comfortable performing around different audiences, lots of children and very noisy, then some have more older people- I feel more comfortable about adapting.”**
- The events at Longford Park and especially Heyford Park were highly sucessful in bringing new communities together, with residents, local businesses and groups for young people all getting involved. Residents Association Chair Marc Theilke at Heyford park commented: **“As we were organising the event, people kept asking me where the village green was. I had to say “it’s right there, it’s going to be the heart of our community.”** I think a lot of people felt a lot more comfortable there [on the day] as some of those houses around it can seem imposing, and I think we claimed the space- gave it baptism. It also gave us the residents association an excuse to ask the developers to take the fencing down and make it an accessible space. We took it over from the construction crew and made it a fun place, which we’ve been waiting a long time to do! The



thing I kept hearing on the day was “this is exactly what the community needs” so if you want to do another event we would love to have you”.

Areas for improvement

- Participant numbers were high, though inevitably some who wanted to take part could not due to pre-booked holidays and other responsibilities. We could announce the dates earlier next time to avoid this and consider moving performances to take place before the August bank holiday which was a popular time for many to be away.
- Our number of BAME participants was particularly low, representing under 10% of those who took part. We must work more closely with schools and community groups and organisations such as Sunrise, who work with young Muslims in our town to engage them in our accessible projects.
- Audience numbers were generally good, but at some venues numbers were lower than anticipated. The weather was an issue for the majority of performances, with the bank holiday weekend seeing extraordinarily high temperatures. This meant lower numbers than we might have in Banbury Market Place and Longford Park (which had little in the way of shaded areas). It may be an idea to provide Gazebos for members of the audience with small children at each event, or to find venues with more shaded areas. One participant commented **“I would have changed the times of performances, as performing in the middle of the day is boiling hot”**. At OYAP, numbers were lower than anticipated, which was in part down to hot weather, but also the accessibility of the venue, which the youth centre continually struggles with. Though the venue is located in the town centre, it is not easy to find, and not visible to passing footfall, though we flyered in the market place in advance of the performance. Were we to perform in Bicester again, a more central area such as the market place should be explored, to reach a wider audience.
- Audience feedback often stated that the show should have been more visibly marketed. Though we utilised a broad range of press and radio contacts, and targeted social media marketing, many found the flyers and A3 posters harder to spot. A bigger budget for marketing would allow us to print large PVC banners to display throughout the town and at each location, where A3 posters did not always stay up.
- Transport was an issue for some parents, though many offered lifts to participants who needed them, a small number complained about access to some venues, notably Heyford Park and OYAP. One participant who relied on lifts of other parents commented: **“It would have been nice to have a minibus so all the cast could have travelled together”**, perhaps this is a sensible suggestion for other similar projects.
- Working with other groups was a key aspect of this project which was not as successful as it could have been. Over 40 local groups were contacted, from community choirs to bands to martial arts groups. Though roughly half expressed interest, with several semi-committing and dropping out nearer the dates of the performances, ultimately only 4 groups performed with us at the events. While the events were not lacking in performances, it would have been better to engage larger numbers with the project. This level of engagement was largely due to the timing of the summer holidays and the bank holiday weekend especially. Many commented they would have loved to have taken part, and appreciated the local publicity for their clubs, but that the dates were sadly not possible for them. Others said they didn't have the time to get something together. Perhaps in the future, we might consult the groups



in our earliest stages of planning. Ultimately, the small number of groups performing with us did not spoil each event, so it may also be worth re-considering this model, as it used a significant number of project management and administration hours.

- Some of the participants commented on the process itself, finding the 'intensive' aspect of the work a challenge: **"I found it hard to focus early in rehearsals, there were a lot of people there and it was loud and hard to concentrate. It was hard but ultimately we made**



a good thing. Maybe we could double cast more of the parts next time?" Another suggested: **"If the rehearsal days were shorter but it was three weeks [for rehearsals] I'd prefer it. Not such long days. Perhaps we could have two half hour breaks because sometimes I lost focus over lunch?"** Another participant commented: **"It would have been nice to learn more from the professionals about their careers and what they've learned at drama school"**. Perhaps building in more Q&A with the professionals can be prioritised next time, and even an extra rehearsal week included to allow for shorter working days. Calls for some of the cast could have been more

'staggered' to allow more time off for those who needed it also.

Unexpected outcomes

- Both audiences and young people taking part commented that it was "educational" in an accessible and fun way. Though we see our work as being educational from a theatre making perspective, we're not often told this from a literary/classics perspective.
- Though we were disappointed not to have performed at the opening of the new community centre at Longford Park, we were pleased to have hurried along it's opening, which will take later this month by working together with the council and the residents association to put pressure on developers delaying the hand-over by speaking with Adam Ball at BBC Radio Oxford.
- We are also in talks with Rosie Phillips, Community Development officer about starting a new drama club at the development, once the centre opens.
- CTC received five new sign ups (at the time of writing) for our regular classes and a large number of new 'likes' and follows on social media. This has been by far our most visible community project with over 50% of audience members not previously aware of our work.
- Several parents, whose comments are listed below, credited the project with making their young people feel better. Many struggle with anxiety and depression, some have experienced bullying and isolation, others are home schooled and rely on our group to make friends.

Participant Feedback

We asked our participants which aspects of the project had surprised them they most. Some of their responses are below:

- "I was given the opportunity to run warm up and have developed my leadership skills. I've kind of developed socially too, actors and facilitators gave me feedback on my session. It's nice to feel like you're part of something."
- "I feel like I've got a lot of my confidence back because being at school grinds you down a bit, all the peer pressure- I don't let it bother me too much but it's just been nice, and even though it's



been hard work it's been relaxing- good to take a break from the real world for a while."

- "I was surprised with how much say we got in what we were doing. I was expecting it to be more strictly directed as a whole because of the short time frame. I thought it would be formulaic but we got a lot of say."
- "I really enjoyed the touring. It was really interesting to go to different places. I've never been to most of them before. You got to see different aspects of places close to home which you never normally see."
- "Because it was performed in public places people come and watch halfway through- it's better this way because it's more inclusive, not locked away in a theatre so anyone can come."
- "I knew we'd do puppeteering, but didn't think we'd get such great puppets and professional puppeteer to teach us."

Parent/carers feedback:

- "As you know, participant has been working really hard to improve her acting skills and gain the experience and confidence she will need to take it forward. Although the course at Banbury College has been great, participant does sometimes still struggle with her peer groups and she can become distracted and sometimes disillusioned. Participant came to Cherwell Theatre Company a little nervous, but within a day she was happy, focused and committed. That in itself says so much about you and the rest of the cast. Participant found everybody, especially the more experienced ones, to be super supportive and I think she gained a huge amount of confidence and pride at being accepted straight away and fully involved. We wholeheartedly support the work you do and its importance in involving individuals and communities is amazing."



- "I can't express how much it means to have seen participant so engaged and involved in this project. She loved every minute of it, her confidence has soared and the whole experience has fuelled her enthusiasm and determination to continue. Needless to say she would like to join your Monday evening sessions. Please pass on my congratulations to all the cast and volunteers for an amazing run of performances ...what you managed to achieve was truly outstanding."
- "Thank you so much for all your work with Myth. Participants have absolutely loved working with you and the rest of the cast and have had an experience they will remember for many years to come."
- "CTC has transformed my son. He had been struggling with the after effects of years of homophobic bullying, and felt isolated and victimised. Since joining CTC he has formed really strong, supportive friendships and feels valued by his peers and the adults he works with. He has been encouraged to share and develop his existing skills, and has discovered talents he never realised he had. CTC celebrates diversity in a unique way, and my son isn't the only child who has flourished under it's nurturing ethos. I am currently struggling financially, and simply couldn't afford to fund this myself, I will always be grateful for the bursary that allowed my son to attend, and the



personal input of Tristan, whose talents extend beyond the artistic to the ability to recognise an individual need and find ways to address it.”

- “I think ‘Myth’ has been an amazing experience for my participants to be involved in. They have both enjoyed it immensely and given it their all. It has been great for them to be able to work closely with professional actors and with a diverse group of CTC people who have all bonded so well together. It is brilliant that everyone can take part and have a place. Participant has even credited taking part in ‘Myth’ with making her feel better.
- “The fact that the project has been free to participate in is a huge bonus. Costumes were provided and that was another weight lifted for parents. For me, I have found the driving to out of the way venues to be a bit stressful and time consuming. I think the availability of nearby parking needs to be considered both for parents and for potential audiences. I have seen the piece several times and it has been entertaining and slightly different each time. I loved the Sophie’s Barn one the best because it was the evening and somehow more magical. We would like to thank you all for giving them both this opportunity, working so incredibly hard and being so friendly and helpful throughout. Looking forward to next year now.”
- “I hope you all can really know and own the impact you have had through the work you have done on Myth! I have been so impressed by your creativity, energy and your empathy with the kids. In my work I come across many leaders (coaching and developing them) and it is rare to find one with such energy, enthusiasm and capability in what they are doing. We are delighted that participant has had the opportunity to join CTC for Myth, as he has always enjoyed drama, but his interest was beginning to wane. Being in the group has reignited his enthusiasm and he has learned so much from the older kids and from you and the professional actors. It was wonderful for us to see him working alongside the other cast members and we could see even during the week, how he became more confident, projecting his voice and using his non-verbal acting more. We particularly like that CTC is so inclusive and the atmosphere between the young people is very encouraging and warm. It was a pleasure to be able to join in the hair and makeup as we were able to experience the positive vibes as everyone prepared for the shows. The professional actors were amazing and such warm friendly and enthusiastic people. They got on so well with the kids and I know that they were very encouraging, giving lots of praise and gentle nudges to try out new things in a way that empowered people. We were delighted that our other participant could get involved in a lower key way, she has been under a lot of stress, which has resulted in us taking the decision to home school, and she enjoyed being around such an accepting group. It got her out, at a time when she didn’t really want to see anyone, which has meant so much to her (and me and my husband). The script, music and lyrics were incredible and it’s only a shame that they could only perform 6 times.”
- “I cannot emphasise strongly enough what a fantastic opportunity this project this has been for my two participants, who have been with Cherwell Theatre Company for a few years now. Our elder participant had the opportunity to take on a main character, with opportunities to interact with the professional actors and learn from them and develop her skills in drama. My younger participant, who is also studying drama at school, had her first



opportunity to be involved in a show that ran over several days. Both have developed as actors through their involvement. The project aims, which included to bring theatre to the community and to be accessible to young people gave the show a special quality, which was really worthwhile. I was also struck by how inclusive the group is and how there is a welcome and place for everyone in an accepting group that bonded very well. The writing and performance values of the show were of high quality, which was also positive and beneficial.”