

UNSEENSANDWELL

The Jubilee Arts Archive 1974-94

Coming of Age by Steve Trow

One of Jubilee's founders looked back at the origins of the company in an article published in Mailout magazine in 1992. (Mailout now exists in the digital sphere at <http://mailout.co>)

It's a mixed blessing, parenthood. Remember those sleepless nights in the early years? You fret constantly about whether they're getting enough attention, enough nutrition, whether they're still breathing.

Jubilee Arts came into the world in the summer of 1974. We registered it with the middle name 'Theatre and Community', but like most middle names it was dropped later as parental pretension.

With suddenly no time for ourselves or our friends, the new offspring became the sole topic of conversation, the consuming obsession: overnight we were transformed into worn out wrecks, trying to anticipate and provide for its every need. You think it will get easier once the infant has learned to fend for itself, manage its own pocket money, say please and thank you. It doesn't. And now there's the final rite of passage - the coming of age.

As a Jubilee founder, I've been asked back to help organise the 18th birthday celebrations. Of course, I know that really they just want someone else to do the hard work so they can roll back the carpets, play music I've never heard of, and have a good time with their friends. Grudgingly, the elderly relatives, the aunts and uncles, will be packed off to a back room with a glass of sherry, to coo over old home movies of tentative first steps and the embarrassing snaps of early encounters with make-up and the dressing-up box.

In September, Jubilee will also be getting the 'key of the door' at the official re-opening of the refurbished building on West Bromwich High Street. In 1974, we had the loan of a disused branch library at the back of the municipal tip, an old ambulance with 2 months' MOT, a £75 grant from West Midlands Arts, four pairs of yellow dungarees and an outside loo. The new building has exhibition and workshop spaces; a recording studio; a video edit suite; photographic darkroom; desk-top publishing; and something called interactive, multimedia information technology. Only the basic principles are still intact: the conviction that the creation of original work, rooted in local cultures, local experience and aspirations, has a potency and a resonance that can re-shape our perceptions of what is valuable and what may be possible.

I don't know who can claim the greater credit for all this. It's difficult to assess the respective influences of nature and nurture, especially when both are so strongly dominated by local factors. At the first national meeting of A.C.A. (the Association of Community Artists) in the mid 70's - when every other sentence was still prefaced with the phrase "I think it's reeeeely important that..." - Maggie Pinhorn asked, rhetorically, how many of us were actually born and brought up in the local area where we worked. It was a sort of test of legitimacy and of class credentials. In spite of the elbows in my ribs, I could not bring myself to be the only one to raise my hand. Anyway, at that time I thought local ran to no more than our side of the street and the corner shop.

One of the reasons why Jubilee is in Sandwell is because I have always lived there. Over the years I would guess as many as 80% of Jubilee's permanent and sessional workers have also been locals. As a result the influences they have brought to bear have been increasingly multi-ethnic. Of the present full-time work force of six, their parents' roots were not only in Blackheath, West Bromwich and Bilston, but also in the Caribbean and the Punjab. Project work with elderly Asians, with Asian women and girls and with black community groups has similarly led to the training or recruitment of a significant proportion of local sessional workers with appropriate skills and backgrounds. Cultural diversity is more than an item of faith - it speaks in local accents and is part of Jubilee's character.

Much is owed to the close working relationship with the local authority. Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council is also 18 this year. It was only in the late 1980's that Sandwell, like other Metropolitan and County authorities, saw the need to create its own arts section. For years arts development in Sandwell was Jubilee. Even latterly, it is Jubilee's experience, skills and resources which have underpinned many of the local authority's own initiatives in youth arts, local publishing, training, equipment loan schemes, and the mounting of major participatory projects such as the Wednesbury Community Play and elements of the Arts Festival. Local political support for Jubilee's work is deeply ingrained - support based not on patronage, but on real understanding of the work.

There was a watershed around six years ago, with a maverick motion to withdraw Jubilee's funding. The decision could only be reversed by the Labour Group before the next full Council. Sylvia King (now Artistic Director, but then a mere Jubilee worker) was invited to speak. I don't know what she said, exactly, but it certainly worked. Her impassioned expounding on community arts theory and practice won hearts as well as minds.

Since then, the Council's investment has increased exponentially - revenue subsidy of £128,000 in 1992-3, and over £250,000 towards the building refurbishment and new equipment. Over the years the work has changed considerably. In 1974, we launched ourselves literally onto the streets, in clown

costumes, gorilla suits and a frenzy of kazoos. Loudhailers and big bass drums, singing (all together now):

“We've come to find a place to play

Why don't you come along?

Come and play some games with us

And help us sing our song.

We sing a lot. We play a lot.

There's lots of things to do.

We'll do them all much better

With a little help from you.”

Of course, it was really all a clever subterfuge. We thought we might thus bring down the capitalist state before the Arts Council found out.

In time the street theatre, play schemes, community festivals, murals and T.I.E. projects were supplemented by more technological media: photography, reel-to-reel video, a super 8 camera and a scanner for Gestetner. In 1978 we pulled a neat Urban Aid trick and our local funding was increased fourfold to £15,000 at a stroke. It paid for two extra workers and a double decker bus: now we really had the wherewithal as a mobile, multi-media team (at that time ‘multi-media’ still meant screen printing with one hand and face painting with the other). By the beginning of the 80s we were into campaigns - with the organised and not-so-organised working class. Local groups and committees proliferated: we were anti-cuts, anti-damp, anti-racist, and anti-fascist. Tenants' federations, Trades Councils and trade union groups, Rock Against Racism, they all packed in at the old branch library cheek-by-jowl round the screen wash, or queuing for the outside loo.

From kids to campaigns, to cultural democracy and the realisation that the capacity of women, black communities, young people, to create and express positive self-images is the cultural basis for authentic change, resistance and new alliances. It may be an exhibition like ‘My Mother, My Daughter, Myself’, produced by a small group of Asian women and girls; it may be a borough-wide exercise in ‘mass observation’ like ‘Sandwell in Black and White’, where 52 local people each had a camera for a week to document their personal experience of 1990. And the philosophy is passed on through training programmes for youth or community workers, for sessional and freelance artists, for planners and community activists.

The potential relevance for their own programmes has not gone unnoticed by others. Jubilee also now has what must be one of the most extensive Apple Macintosh set-ups of any organisation in the country. The company is currently running courses with Photocall in the photographic applications of computer technology - digital imaging, image manipulation and desktop publishing. In the current year, a sizeable proportion of the company's earned income will come from design and DTP commissions for a variety of public information services. The option to create an inter-active, multi-media computer package on HIV/AIDS for the District Health Authority has arisen not least because Jubilee, distinctively, can also offer a process which involves local young people in its development and design.

Jubilee has always been part of an extended family. There are close personal contacts and working relationships with many other projects regionally and nationally, with freelancers, and with officers and members of the surrounding local authorities. The work still extends across the generations and there are examples of workshop members who first became involved as children on Jubilee playschemes. In the early years, it was not unusual to find ourselves working with adults we used to go to school with. Nowadays the connections are also international - with cultural projects and activists in the United States, in Finland and France. In the summer, Jubilee will be making its third visit to Poland to co-ordinate a project with Polish artists and local people in the village of Pieróg.

This is community arts grown up. Smugness in one's offspring would be unattractive, but parental pride is permissible. And what the future holds, however tarnished some the old wisdoms may now seem, I like to think there is something inescapably in the genes - some basic principles, an irreverence for prevailing dogmas, a fair amount of brass necked cheek, and not taking yourself too seriously.

Steve Trow still lives in Sandwell and is currently an elected councillor of the local authority.