

On a National Stage

The National Youth Theatre and the National Youth Orchestra of Ireland

The National Youth Theatre (NYT) and the National Youth Orchestra of Ireland (NYOI) could be described as the flagships of youth theatre and youth orchestra in Ireland. With young people from all across the country auditioning for places in the NYT and the NYOI, the standards of quality are extremely high. The prestige of performing on a national stage and working with world class artists is an experience that many young people would love to have. For those young people lucky enough to have this opportunity, the amount of commitment and dedication required from them is significant. However, the experience can be extremely rewarding, as new skills and confidences are developed, as well as lasting friendships.

In this article Emmet Sheerin, NYC's Youth Arts Project Officer, speaks with those responsible for organising the NYT and the NYOI, about the aims, challenges and highlights of their work. He also speaks with some of the young participants about their experiences of being involved in the NYT and the NYOI respectively.

The National Youth Theatre 2009

"...a polished vibrant piece of theatre teeming with energy and emergent talent" Orlagh Ní Arachtáin, Irish Examiner

During Easter '09 young people from 58 youth theatres across Ireland auditioned for parts in the NYT's production of *The Seagull*, directed by Wayne

Jordan. Eventually sixteen young people were selected as the cast for NYT 09. These young actors then spent four weeks rehearsing on a full-time residential basis and working with a professional crew, before performing six nights at the Peacock Theatre in late August. 2009 is the third year in a row that the NYT has been performed at the Peacock Theatre, which is part of Ireland's national theatre.

Orlaith McBride (Director of the National Association for Youth Drama)

Emmet: *Orlaith, 2009 is the third year in a row that the NYT has been staged in the National theatre. What is the significance of this for youth theatre and youth arts in Ireland?*



Orlaith: It's important that the National Youth Theatre performs on the national stage. For NAYD, it sends a signal that the work of young people and youth theatre in Ireland is valued nationally and that the significant role that youth theatre occupies on the spectrum of theatre provision in Ireland is acknowledged and validated within the sector. It is also important for local youth theatre of which there are 58. The cast represent the local and the significance of having one of their young people representing their town and their young people is vitally important for that youth theatre. It gives them local and national profile and also gives their young people something to aspire to. The National Youth Theatre is a platform that provides an opportunity for NAYD to showcase the best of what young people from youth theatres around Ireland can achieve by surrounding them with a professional team of theatre makers from directors to designers on the national stage. The young actors respond to this context by committing to the process and working to create a work of the highest artistic quality.

Emmet: *What does NAYD hope the young people involved in the NYT get from their experience?*

Orlaith: NAYD hopes that the young people develop their craft and skill as young actors, work with, share and support their fellow cast members through the process, understand the complete theatre process through participating in a professional production and bring the learning from the production



back to their own youth theatre. We also hope that the young cast, whether they pursue a career in theater/the arts, will always advocate for youth theatre because of the experience.

Emmet: *What are the greatest challenges and highlights in coordinating the NYT?*

The biggest highlight is seeing the young people develop and grow over the

five weeks. Most of them don't know each other but by the end of the five weeks they have formed special bonds and friendships that have allowed them to embrace the experience and immerse themselves completely in it. The joy of seeing them create a piece of theatre that shows their commitment, their enthusiasm and ultimately their creativity is one of the greatest elements of the NYT. Sitting in the audience watching a piece of theatre that comes from the young people and is inspired and owned by the young people is a true testament to what youth theatre is all about. The greatest challenges are ensuring that all the cast regardless of the size of their role feel 100% involved in the process and the production and that the young people feel supported and safe at all times during the five weeks particularly as the production nears completion and people feel under pressure.

Sean Dunne (20) (Independent Youth Theatre)

Emmet: *Sean, why did you audition for the National Youth Theatre?*

I auditioned primarily because I saw last year's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and I thought it was a really interesting approach. So much really great work comes from youth theatres. So if the cast is coming from all across the country then the result is likely to be very good.

Emmet: *What has it been like working with a professional crew and director?*

Sean: It has been great. The main difference between [local] youth theatre and this is that you're constantly aware that you're on someone else's time. With [local] youth theatre you have everybody mucking in together. You get the sense of it being a job when a professional crew are around....you can't let anyone down.

Emmet: *You'll soon be performing on a stage where many famous actors have performed before you. How does that make you feel?*

Sean: Obviously it's a privilege and it'll be great to be able to say that you were on stage at the Peacock. It's pretty cool I think, particularly because it's part of the Abbey and there's so much history here. It's exciting just to be part of this whole thing.



Emmet: *What has been the highlight for you so far?*

Sean: Hopefully the performance will be the highlight, but so far it's been a great laugh. While it is like a professional production, it's different in the sense that we are all living together and it's very much like a full time experience. No one goes home and clocks off. We're together all the time and that's what's interesting about it. One person's experience is really everyone's experience.

Emmet: *What would you say to someone who is considering auditioning for the National Youth Theatre?*

Sean: I'd say definitely do it, but do it knowing that it's a huge commitment. You can't really do anything else with your summer if you do this. The Leaving Certificate students didn't get to go out the night of their results. They got their results and came back. It's not a holiday camp at all. It is a great laugh and you have an amazing time, but at the same time a really great show has to happen, so there's that added pressure, which you have to commit to.

Dylan Coburn Gray (17) (Dublin Youth Theatre)

Emmet: *Dylan, why did you audition for the National Youth Theatre?*

Dylan: Well I didn't intend to originally and then I did a workshop with Wayne Jordan [Director of the NYT 09] in Dublin Youth Theatre in which we worked off the script for *The Seagull*. It was really interesting, reading a scene one way, and then reading it a different way and then again another way. I thought doing a production with him would be great fun and it has been so far.

Emmet: *What has been the most challenging aspect for you so far?*

Dylan: The whole thing has been very challenging, but I suppose commitment really, in that you've to put a lot of time into this - a lot of rehearsals and a lot of work because the end product has to look professional. We can't lose the energy or the buzz of it because it will look terrible. This is what Wayne is

always saying to us, to keep it sharp and to keep it new.

Emmet: *What does youth theatre mean to you?*

Dylan: Youth theatre is a chance to do something really, really worthwhile. Something that you can put a couple of months into or a couple of weeks and in the end you have an end product which is great...hopefully!



The National Youth Orchestra of Ireland

"The interpretation was outstanding, and the playing more so" **Michael Tumelty, The Herald [Scotland]**

In 2010 the National Youth Orchestra of Ireland (NYOI) will be celebrating its fortieth anniversary. Since 1970 over 2000 young people have participated in the NYOI (formerly the IYO) playing music under the guidance of world class professionals. All players gain their places through a rigorous national selection procedure. Participants re-audition annually to keep their places as no seat is guaranteed. Auditions for the NYOI 2010 are taking place in November 2009.

Zoe Keers (General Manager of the National Youth Orchestra of Ireland)

Emmet: *Zoe, what is the significance of NYOI members working with top quality musicians?*

Zoe: It's a hugely significant thing. They'll be doing three sessions a day with these professional musicians. That's the moment when a twelve or thirteen year old thinks, ok that's how you end up playing like that, and they realise the amount of work that goes into it. Some of the young people won't want to be professional musicians but many of them do. A lot of professional musicians would identify this as a point in their lives when they say, 'this is what I want to do'. I suppose that's the age where you have to start if you want to train to be a professional. I think it's hugely significant.

Emmet: *How intensive is the audition process?*

Zoe: It's really intensive. Our programme is decided a year in advance so they'll know what they are auditioning for. In terms of our juniors, there are around 240 people auditioning for 100 places, so 140 people aren't going to get through.



Emmet: *Where does the NYOI fit in terms of the arts sector in Ireland?*

Zoe: If you went to see the NYOI performing at the National Concert Hall and you didn't know who they were you'd be pleasantly surprised when you got there. They perform like a professional group, they sound like a professional group and whatever critic is there on the night would look at them as if they are a professional group. They are

working with world class conductors who are conducting world class orchestras, so in terms of the arts sector I see it as a stepping stone to professional orchestras. I think most people who are in professional orchestras will have been through a youth orchestra. The NYOI is the tip of the iceberg in terms of youth orchestras but I would also see it up there with professional orchestras.

Emmet: *What are the main differences in working with a youth orchestra as opposed to a professional orchestra?*

Zoe: Well the rehearsals are one of the things. The National Symphony Orchestra will do a programme every week, so they're doing that every single day. Professionals have obviously played these pieces many times before and I suppose it's really fine tuning. But we take the young people from scratch and it takes them days of really intensive rehearsals. However, the finished product could be quite comparable. The other thing is that with professional musicians it's a job, but for the young people after

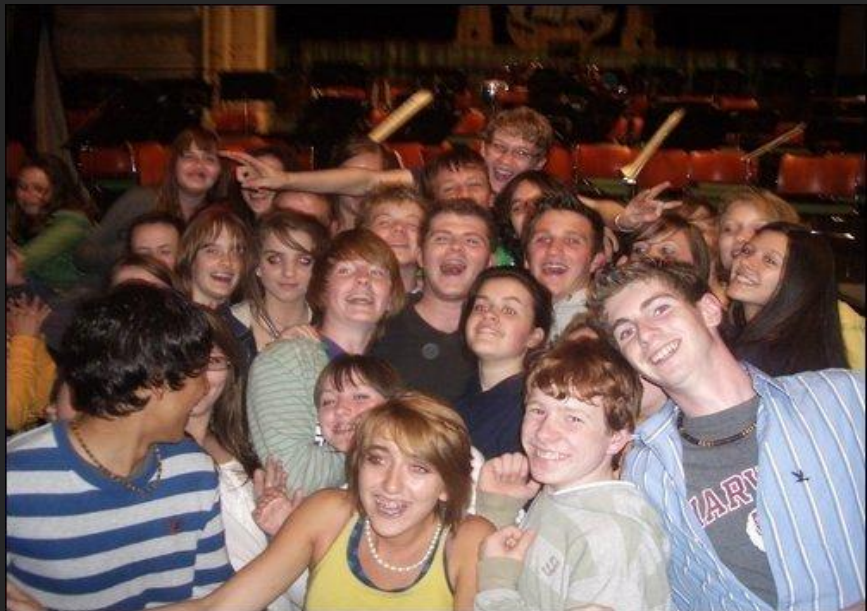
a week of rehearsals like that, to show an audience your finished product is just fantastic, and the enthusiasm and the energy that comes off stage on our final night is massive.

Emmet: *Do you try to strike a balance between the artistic objectives and the young people's personal and social experiences during the NYOI?*

Yes, absolutely. One person who would be central to the youth orchestra every year is the leader. They would go through a separate audition process, and obviously they have to be a fantastic musician, but they also have to be a real people person. The audition panel is really interested in how they will interact with the rest of the orchestra. Some of the leaders we've had in the past number of years have just been fantastic. They are the type of person who is respected by the whole orchestra and whenever they walk into the room people see that they are being professional. It's someone the same age as themselves, but they're also the life and soul of the party, so that person is very important. But throughout the time we also have lots of social activities. Once they finish rehearsals at nine o'clock there's always something on every night, like karaoke and other things.

Emmet: *How do you think the experience of participating in the NYOI impacts on the lives of the young people?*

Well it's a really prestigious thing first of all. It's huge to be a part of it. If you ever do something like this, a week seems like a year at that age, and people make such good friends. It's the National Youth Orchestra's fortieth anniversary this year and over that period lots of friendships have formed. Also if people do go on to play professionally, these people are going to be their peers and their colleagues.



Emmet: *What are the greatest challenges and also the greatest highlights of managing the NYOI?*

One of the challenges is trying to get people to recognise it for what it is. Someone could see the National Youth Orchestra of Ireland on a programme and they might think it's a group of young people scraping away at a load of instruments. Until they go to a performance they don't realise that young people are actually as brilliant as they are, so just getting people over that hurdle and getting them to go to the concerts can be a challenge. But the highlight of seeing them perform is just absolutely brilliant, and also hanging out with them is great fun.

Maeve Bryan (21) (Double bass)

Emmet: *Why did you audition for the NYOI?*

Maeve: I remember going to a Christmas concert of the NYOI under 18s when I was 14 and thought 'Wow! These kids have such passion and talent.' I knew then and there that this was something I wanted to be a part of.

Emmet: *What has it been like for you performing in a national orchestra with professional conductors?*

Maeve: Humbling! You come from your everyday, boring life into a rehearsal with someone who has dedicated their life to producing music of an exquisite standard. You learn so much and their passion tends to rub off!

Emmet: *What have been the main challenges and highlights for you throughout your experience of the NYOI?*

Maeve: It has definitely pushed me to keep up my standard, which is hard as I'm not studying music in University. My degree was very demanding so it took a big effort to keep up with the rest of the gang! But it was all worth it. The biggest highlight for me is that first full rehearsal we have at the start of a course. It reminds you why you put in all the practice in the first place!

Emmet: *What does youth orchestra mean to you?*

Maeve: It's an amazing opportunity to play music at a high standard with amazing friends, and it's something I'm very proud of.



Photos: NYOI and Ros Kavanagh

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www.nayd.ie www.nyoi.ie www.iayo.ie