

FROM THE LOCAL TO THE INTERNATIONAL: Tenderfoot connects



Tenderfoot in action, The Civic Theatre

Tenderfoot, The Civic Theatre's apprentice theatre programme for Transition Year students in South Dublin County, was initiated in 2007 in collaboration with artist in residence, Veronica Coburn, and South Dublin County Council Arts Office.

Until now (since 2007), Tenderfoot has been operating at a **local** level. Through its work, Tenderfoot has been connecting with individual schools and, through these associations, developing relationships with localized audiences and connecting them to The Civic Theatre, Tallaght. It has connected with place and community in South Dublin County since its inception.

The expansion of Tenderfoot, starting in 2020, will shift its impact from the local to the **regional**: by working with ALL schools across South Dublin County, Tenderfoot will operate systematically across this region. By expanding to a regional model, Tenderfoot aims to create a model which can be replicated **nationally**, across regions and across other art forms. Through this, it will contribute to a 'culture of creativity' by connecting schools and arts infrastructure, with an exponential '**theatre positive attitude**' developing within individual schools, and across society more generally through peer engagement and engagement with the wider community through family and friends. This will be done through the implementation of our five-year development plan, 'IMPACT'.

As part of this expansion from local to regional and national levels, it has been important also to begin to work at an **international** level. We have begun a process of learning and potential collaboration by connecting with three international companies who are doing exciting and groundbreaking work with young people through theatre. This process is outlined here.

International Connections in Theatre for Young People

As part of this period of reflection and development for Tenderfoot, it has been important to expand our vision beyond national boundaries, for the purposes of learning, challenging and inspiring our thinking, and making connections for potential future collaborations. Through research with professionals in Ireland with extensive experience of working in the area of theatre for young people, and of viewing and curating theatre for young people, we selected three companies within Europe which are working in groundbreaking ways with young people. The companies we have connected with were selected due to an aspect, or aspects, of their way of working which is inspiring, or speaks to us in some way, or challenges Tenderfoot's own ways of working. We travelled to visit each company to meet artistic directors and artistic teams, and, where possible, to see a performance. Discussions with the selected companies challenged some aspects of current thinking and confirmed others, and highlighted areas for consideration. We aim to incorporate this learning into Tenderfoot's own development.

The **objectives** of these meetings and discussions have been:

- To learn about the ways in which each company is working with young people and the type of work they are producing through this collaboration;
- To discuss the challenges of creating work with young people;
- To explore the similarities and differences with Tenderfoot's context and approach, and through this, to challenge our own thinking;
- To discuss with companies whether clear age guidelines exist for the material which young people see and create, and to explore with them the ways in which they deal with challenging material, age guidelines and 'taboo' topics, in order to help Tenderfoot to gain clarity on its approach to this.
- To create connections with companies outside of Ireland which can be developed and strengthened over time.

The companies we have connected with have been **Lyra** in Edinburgh, Scotland, **O Teatrao** in Coimbra, Portugal, and **Kopergietery** in Ghent, Belgium.

Founded by artistic director Jo Timmins in 2012, **Lyra** has been building a community of children and artists who create and produce world-class live performance and art in the marginalized suburb of Craigmillar, Edinburgh. Lyra works closely with the local community and with schools in the area, bringing in arts professionals from Scotland and abroad to inspire and work with the young people through their 'Watch, Learn, Create' framework. Lyra's Young Company are an ensemble of performers (aged 7-16) who currently take part in their Young Artist programme. They meet to create original productions from scratch, working collaboratively with the Creative Team at Lyra. Lyra

works very closely with schools in the Greater Craigmillar area to ensure that they are in contact with as many local young people as possible. Their aim is to embed a love of the performing arts within the community and to provide inspiring and empowering opportunities which enhance the formal learning within the school setting. Lyra provides workshops to support young people's understanding of live performance as well as opportunities for them to engage with professional artistic processes.

<http://www.lyra.co.uk/>



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O Teatrao is a publically funded theatre based in a suburb of the Portuguese city of Coimbra. O Teatrao works closely with the community in which it is based, and also has close involvement with schools in the area. All of its original in-house productions are also educational interventions in some way through its educational programme. It uses theatre to discuss issues of importance with the community. In Portugal, education and the arts have tended to remain quite separate, with very little artistic activity through schools, so O Teatrao has been actively trying to change this. O Teatrao was involved in an Erasmus Plus programme with young people from 14-19 years old between 2010 and 2017. Over each 18-month programme, groups visited O Teatrao for a residency

period, and young people from O Teatrao undertook residencies in the home-places of other groups in Europe; during this time, O Teatrao collaborated with Tallaght Community Arts and undertook a residency in Tallaght.

<https://oteatrao.com/>

Kopergietery has been running in various forms since 1973, with the current artistic director, Johan de Smedt, in place since 2004. Kopergietery is a creative venue entirely for young people, and is known for its challenging and exciting performances, often created in collaboration with children and young people. Workshops are central to the work of Kopergietery, with about 150 children between the ages of eight and eighteen meeting up with a professional coach/artist on a weekly basis. The approach and ways of artistic expression, the group set-up and team of coaches change regularly. The workshops try to yield at least one tangible project per season. In 2009, Kopergietery established a second space in Rabot, one of Ghent's most marginalized suburbs, with a high concentration of different nationalities. Kopergietery (KG) Rabot develops specific artistic projects to appeal to the inhabitants of this area. This mainly happens through collaboration with local organizations and/or local artists. In addition to artistic projects, weekly drama workshops are organized for children from the neighbourhood. The aim is to make them familiar with theatre, and, when the time is right, to move the ones who want to the 'regular' drama workshops in the main theatre. In June 2012, Rabot opened its own local restaurant (*eetcafé Toreke*), where Kopergietery also programmes cultural activities, alongside regular shows in KG RABOT.

<https://www.kopergietery.be/>

There are some clear common points between all the companies we spoke to and Tenderfoot, including:

- Strong relationships with **schools**;
- Working in **marginalized localities** and the importance of connecting with local **communities**;
- Collaboration with young people as well as a learning aspect for young people; work based on the idea of the '**young person as artist**'.

Some other aspects relevant to the work and expansion of Tenderfoot which emerged in discussion with companies included exploring the methods through which work is devised and levels of collaboration with young people; the importance, or not, of writing by young people themselves; the relationship to quality and professionalism when working with young people; the importance of a strong connection with schools while maintaining the theatre as a space separate from school; and the issue of funding programmes.

Relationships with schools

All four companies (including Tenderfoot) have strong relationships with schools in the localities in which they are based, both in terms of schools as audiences and providing

students with access to participation in the theatre. The companies work closely with schools to enhance learning.

Lyra works very closely with schools in the Greater Craigmillar area to ensure that children's lives are culturally rich and to ensure that they are in contact with as many local young people as possible. Lyra's aim is to embed a love of the performing arts within the community and to provide inspiring and empowering opportunities which enhance the formal learning within the school setting. Lyra provides workshops to support young people's understanding of live performance as well as opportunities for them to engage with professional artistic processes. Schools often refer young people to Lyra who they think might benefit from their programme. Younger children in the afterschool programme are collected from school and brought to Lyra's centre.

At **O Teatrao**, all in-house productions are also educational intervention projects. Each show has a series of surrounding activities: movies, historical/academic research, round-table discussions and **involvement of schools**. The theatre aims for a proximity with the public through its educational programme. Schools are involved in various ways beyond this educational programme. One of these is during a week in May every year, in which schools from all over Portugal come to show their own drama productions in the theatre. This often creates lasting connections between the theatre and schools, as well as between schools themselves. The most recent production had, as part of its educational programme, a movie, the involvement of four academic research and a programme of round-table discussions. All students in the final year in all second-level schools were involved.

Each season, **Kopergietery** takes its own productions, as well as guest performances, to more than 270 schools (some 11,000 children and young adults). What is made and shown relies on maximum participation of the schools' children and teachers. To help performances run smoothly, Kopergietery fully supports schools and provides ample background information. Kopergietery also sets up various educational projects that meet teachers' (and future teachers') need to acquire deeper insight into the performing arts, insight which they themselves pass on to their pupils. In addition to the school performances, Kopergietery is also strong in developing and supporting initiatives that bridge the gap with education. With these initiatives, Kopergietery aims to meet the urgent demands and needs of teachers, and, by extension, of all people who are in educational practice, to gain a deeper understanding of the arts. Moreover, Kopergietery encourages them to transfer these insights to children and young people. For years, Kopergietery has developed an educational framework around what is created and displayed in the house. For example, for each new production, Kopergietery organizes an information evening for teachers and provides a comprehensive portfolio so that the performance can be properly framed for the students. Interested schools can also have a free tour of the theatre. Each year, Kopergietery organizes special educational projects, whether or not linked to a specific school. Kopergietery also works together with the city of Ghent, art education and the Ministry of Education.

The '**culture of creativity**' evident in schools in Ghent is particularly inspiring for our research. It is obligatory for all school students to see a theatrical performance three times per year. The focus of this is around cultural participation and using the performance to create discussion around themes raised by it, rather than being

confined by theatre that may be directly on the curriculum. The idea of systematic involvement of teachers is also inspiring, with information evenings provided for teachers on how to deal with topics arising from the show.

For Tenderfoot, this confirms the importance of working more closely with schools, not only in terms of providing greater access to the Tenderfoot programme by including all schools in South Dublin County, but also in terms of ensuring that students of all schools are regularly seeing theatrical performances and that teachers are engaged in this process. The high level of cultural participation in schools evident in Ghent contrasts with our own findings from schools participating in our survey in South Dublin County: in 60% of the responding schools, teachers estimated that that a student would have the opportunity to see a play/performance in a professional venue only **once or twice during their second level education**.

(See detailed results of our survey on theatre provision in second level schools in South Dublin County [here](#)).

In 2017, responding to a perceived lack of engagement of schools with contemporary theatre (a perception which was confirmed through our subsequent research with schools), Tenderfoot and The Civic Theatre began a pilot project, entitled **INSPIRE**. This project has worked in partnership with Tallaght Community School and is funded through The Civic Theatre's philanthropic fund. The programme is investigating the effect of systemic and systematic exposure to theatre on a school population. Starting in 2017, each year, an incoming first year class is selected to participate. That class is brought to see three or four contemporary pieces of theatre in The Civic over the course of the school year. The programme has the full support of Tallaght Community School staff, in particular the relevant class teachers, and could not operate without their cooperation. The pilot, now in its third year, currently has three classes attending theatre in The Civic: the original class who are now in third year, the second class who are now in second year and the most recent class who are midway through their first year of secondary school. At the height of the pilot, there will be one class from each year involved in the programme. Feedback, thus far, has been extremely positive.

Research on the ground with both schools and with international case studies has confirmed the importance of the philosophical underpinnings and practical approach of Tenderfoot - namely, an apprentice theatre programme for young adults, based on a 'young person as artist' approach, with a focus on access, inclusivity, articulation of a young voice and contemporary practice. Discussions have confirmed for us that:

Tenderfoot is not working in a void. The international companies which we have connected with share Tenderfoot's priorities, namely:

- The importance of a '**young person as artist**' approach, with the creativity of young people at the heart of the work.
- The importance of **working in a long-term, sustained way** with both young people and with schools, with schools as a long-term way of fostering creativity

in a population. Discussions with members of these companies have confirmed for us that effect and change come from long-term engagement, rather than one-off projects.

- The importance of **freedom of expression** for young people, and of theatre, and the space of the theatre itself, as a space to deal with difficult or 'taboo' issues. Our discussions throughout this research have shown that content and age-appropriate material are complex issues for both teachers and artists working with young people to navigate. However, they have also shown that strict age guidelines are not necessarily useful, but rather that 'difficult' issues need to be dealt with in a context-based, sensitive and supported way.

Our research has also shown that **Tenderfoot is quite unique** in terms of its emphasis on articulation of young voice through its model of writing and apprenticeship. Work WITH and FOR young people is extremely important, but there are very few organisations which simultaneously prioritise work BY young people.

Strengthening connections with international companies

Research with international case studies has inspired our work and expanded our vision beyond national boundaries, confirming the importance of international connections and collaborations and of continued discussion with these. It has become evident that the rich engagement with international peers will greatly influence Tenderfoot's thinking and practice going forward, providing a challenging and informed forum within which new ideas could be trialed. In developing these relationships further, Tenderfoot, a national leader, will represent Ireland in an international context.

We envisage the following steps towards strengthening connections with the international companies with whom we have entered into conversation:

- Inviting representatives of each company to a facilitated cultural conversation with Irish artists in line with the Tenderfoot readings in May 2020. This initiative will strengthen connections and expand the reach of the dialogue nationally. This step is **funding dependent**.
- Return visit for the core team of The Civic Theatre (Michael Barker-Caven, Niamh Ferry, Veronica Coburn and Zoë O'Reilly) to Kopergiety to view performances of young people from Kopergiety workshops (April/May 2020) and to meet with artistic director and workshop facilitators. This step is also **funding dependent**.
- Exploration of future possibilities for collaboration with Lyra, O Teatrao and Kopergiety.