

PUSH!

Evaluation

Note

This evaluation has been carried out by David Edwards on behalf of Aldeburgh Productions. In the course of the evaluation, David Edwards had conversations with the Director, Bill Banks-Jones, the Aldeburgh Almeida Opera Producer, Patrick Dickie, and Aldeburgh Productions Chief Executive Jonathan Reekie. In addition to seeing the performance at Cambridge Arts Theatre and reading the reviews, David Edwards analysed the audience feedback forms from each venue, and the financial statements. The format of the evaluation is based on the company's originally stated aims and objectives for the project.

1. Introduction

The project was introduced to the Arts Council as follows:

PUSH! builds on another of Tête à Tête's long-standing relationships, this time with composer David Bruce (*Seven Tons of Dung*, part of *Shorts*, 1999-2001, and *Has it Happened Yet*, part of *Six-Pack*, 2002.) For this opera David is collaborating with librettist Anna Reynolds, (highly accomplished novelist, playwright and television writer,) *PUSH!* is a series of snapshots of mothers-to-be at the very point of giving birth.

David Bruce writes: "*PUSH!* combines the comic and the tragic; the epic and the deeply personal; the surreal and the everyday, in an intense and vivid portrait of one of the most extreme, and yet the most normal and natural events that a human being can go through – the process of giving birth.

"*PUSH!* continues the Tête à Tête tradition of building a great evening's entertainment out of a series of sketch-like scenes. The opera is structured as a series of birth experiences, each centering on the mother's journey, and coming directly out of her perceptions of the world - however bleak, ecstatic, distorted or just plain gas-and-air'd those perceptions are. Inter-cutting the high drama of these scenes, we follow the gentle, nascent romance between Caretaker and Cleaner as they go about their work on the labour ward. When, in the final scene we follow Cleaner's own process of giving birth, *Push!* becomes more than just a series of stories – it becomes a celebration of the pure power and life force bound up in every labouring mother."

PUSH! is a very unusual project for Tête à Tête in that the developmental phase was virtually complete before the company became involved. *PUSH!* is one of the two

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remaining finalists in the Genesis Opera project, and has had a series of workshops under the wing of Aldeburgh Productions. In the build up to the most recent workshops (March 2005), Bill Bankes-Jones was invited in as a mentor, discussing drafts with the composer on an almost daily basis.

Through this process, it soon became apparent that David Bruce is creating a really remarkable, challenging yet accessible piece of work, and that through his development as an opera composer with Tête à Tête has acquired such a strong visual sense of theatre and high production values that Aldeburgh alone didn't have the resources to deliver the quality of production and exposure that this opera deserves - hence the plan to co-produce with Tête à Tête and this element of the application.

We would like to deliver 5 performances of *PUSH!* at the Riverside Studios in London (February 2006,) before 5 performances on tour throughout the UK, including one at Aldeburgh. (March 2006.)

The opera represents a major growth in scale for our touring work (13 instruments, 8 singers,) though almost exactly the same size as our production of Vivaldi's *Orlando Plays Mad*, BAC, 2000, (12,8). This leap in scale is very much compensated for by the selling power of our co-producers, which already seems to make it far easier to secure tour bookings, and the content of the narrative, which again provides a potentially invaluable way in for new audiences. This growth in size and profile for the company is in turn absolutely invaluable in the thrust of this overall plan, building Tête à Tête a secure base from which to produce the final phase of *A Shetland Odyssey*. With allowance for early planning of future projects, this programme as a whole also at last allows Tête à Tête the regular public presence so vital in confronting our disappointing audience figures for *Family Matters*, and in strengthening the company as a whole.

We intend to deliver a series of educational workshops to support the project, along the lines of the extended schools' programme delivered as part of *Family Matters* in which we worked with 247 young people. Workshops were tailored to the needs of each school, venue and LEA. These needs were identified over a series of discussions with teachers, venue education officers and artists. We offered a range of workshops looking at performance skills, composition, design and technical skills and artistic collaboration ranging in intensity from 2 hour sessions to full days with 6 artists. Workshops were available for musicians and non-musicians and were supported by an extensive education pack. We expect to conduct at least one workshop around each venue.

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PUSH! was performed at Riverside Studios from 18th to 24th June 2006; at Shrewsbury Music Hall as part of Shrewsbury Summer Season on 28th June, at Cambridge Arts Theatre on 5th and 6th July, and at The Corn Exchange Newbury as part of the Newbury Comedy Festival on 12th July.

Workshops were delivered

2. Aims

Tête à Tête's Mission Statement:

To bring uplifting, surprising, daring and intimate opera productions of the highest quality to the widest possible public.

Aims:

Tête à Tête aims to achieve this by:

- presenting opera in unusual, innovative and imaginative ways to the highest possible standard.
- widening access to opera through both participation and through the development of new audiences, performing in English and in unusual venues and formats.
- developing the repertoire through the commissioning of new operas, translations and orchestrations.
- contributing to the personal development of authors, performers artistic personnel and all other staff while creating the best possible working conditions.
- operating efficiently, creatively, generously, and professionally.

Specific aims for *PUSH!*

- to create a major new production of exceptional originality
- to deliver 10 performances of this production across the UK
- to make these performances reach as wide and broadly-based audience as we can
- to use the subject matter (birth) to draw in as many newcomers to opera as we can
- to re-define and invigorate the art form of opera
- to re-invigorate and inspire the company of artists
- to surround the whole project with a highly developed education programme involving as many young people as we can

Marketing:

Our target audience is: people who already enjoy contemporary opera, people who enjoy opera but do not normally attend new work, as well as people who never attend opera events. For our last show 11% of the audience had never attended an opera and 32% had never attended a new opera. This segment of our intended audience is very important to us and we cultivate it carefully via targeted campaigns and workshops.

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3. Evaluation

The following methods were used to assist the process of evaluation:

- audience feedback surveys
- press report
- venue feedback.

Analysis of Evaluation

a: audience feedback

Each member of the audience was given a feedback form at all performances. The return rate for feedback forms from programmes was as follows:

Riverside	93 forms returned out of xx attenders (yy%)
Shrewsbury	23 forms returned out of xx attenders (yy%)
Cambridge	43 forms returned out of xx attenders (yy%)
Newbury	40 forms returned out of xx attenders (yy%)

Summaries of the feedback forms for each venue form part of the appendix to this report, but as a general overview:

(1 = disliked, 5 = liked)

72.4% rated the music at 4 or 5

56.8% rated the words at 4 or 5 – this figure was much lower as several respondents commented that they could not hear the words

64.4% rated the singing at 4 or 5 – again there was some negativity on the grounds of audibility

77.9% rated the direction at 4 or 5

79.4% rated the acting at 4 or 5

88.5% rated the costume and set at 4 or 5

Although there were some variations between the venues, the pattern of approval was remarkably similar across all of them, with the Riverside (the first venue, also in London where the audience may be expected to be a little more sophisticated) scoring more number 1, 2 and 3 in all categories.

The feedback forms also asked the respondents a number of personal questions. Although it would be unwise to extrapolate conclusive figures from the number of forms returned, the data is nevertheless interesting in the light of Tete a Tete's objectives:

All venues: 10.6% of attenders had never seen an opera before, and 26.1% had only seen one in the last 10 years. Again, the out-of-London venues had a higher proportion of attenders who had not seen an opera before – e.g, 17.5% of the Newbury respondents.

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49.2% had never seen a NEW opera, and for 19.6% it had been in the last 10 years. Again, out of London the figure was much higher – 47.8% in Shrewsbury, 62.8% in Cambridge and as high as 75% in Newbury.

70.4% had never seen a show by Tete a Tete before, although a smattering of people appeared to be company followers, who claimed to have seen a Tete a Tete show in the last 3 months, 6 months and last year.

In terms of the company's objectives of widening access to opera, PUSH! appears to have been very successful in attracting new audiences to opera, who enjoyed the experience across the piece (save the issue at all venues of not being able to understand all the words)

Qualitative responses: audiences were invited to give general comments on the performance. The vast majority of those taking up this opportunity were very favourable (see Appendix) with people commenting on its originality, its bravery and its production values. A very small minority were disparaging, with some people having a rant against what they saw as the show's banality. A common criticism from all venues was the audibility issue, although there were different views as to whether this was a problem with the diction of the singers, or the volume of the orchestral playing. As the numbers demonstrate, however, this did not in general have an adverse reaction on the overall enjoyment of the piece.

The opera appears to have attracted the majority of people in their middle years; for all venues, 41.7% of respondents were aged 25 – 45 (child-bearing years!) with 36.2% aged 45 – 64. Only 1% was under 20, but perhaps the subject matter did not appeal to this age group.

Interestingly, a lot of the very positive comments came from people who had not seen an opera before, or only very rarely. It was perhaps disappointing therefore that only 32.7% of the total asked to be kept informed of future Tete a Tete productions. Certainly in the provincial venues there appeared to be added gratitude that the production had been seen in their venue ("thanks for coming out of London").

b: press

ADD SUMMARY OF PRESS RESPONSES

c: venues

Venue feedback forms were circulated and returned at the end of the project.

Riverside reported that their audiences generally enjoyed the performance immensely, and their feedback was very good. Production values were first-class "if a little ambitious", and there was some criticism of the design – "a great deal of stress would have been avoided if the set had been designed to be more flexible"

Need to add more here

5. Results

A: GENERAL AIMS OF THE COMPANY

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- **presenting opera in unusual, innovative and imaginative ways to the highest possible standard.**

It is clear from both audience response, critics and personal experience, that the production of *PUSH!* met this general aim. Presentation values were consistently highly rated in audience feedback, and served to make “new opera” extremely accessible to an audience that had had very little experience of any kind of opera, let alone “new opera”. There was some criticism of the design in relation to the space available, and it goes without saying that future designs should take the variety of venues to be visited into account when establishing stage dimensions.

- **widening access to opera through both participation and through the development of new audiences, performing in English and in unusual venues and formats.**

Audience feedback forms show that *PUSH!* attracted a good proportion of people new to opera, and while the reason given for attending may appear quite often to be quite passive (someone told me about it/someone else bought the ticket), they did enjoy the production once they got to the theatre. Only a third of respondents asked to be put on the company’s mailing list, so it is too early to say whether these audiences will return to another opera (say, on a less accessible subject) but there is clear evidence that the majority of attenders enjoyed their experience, so hopefully would want to repeat it. The Director has revealed the difficulty in getting venues to accept the show, but the evidence from the feedback from the regional venues shows how much people value shows like this touring to their own town, and the Arts Council should be encouraged to help as much as it can in encouraging regional venues to take companies such as Tete a Tete.

- **developing the repertoire through the commissioning of new operas, translations and orchestrations.**

PUSH! was in quite an advanced state when Tete a Tete came on board, but the company is to be congratulated on taking on the piece and developing it to its final outcome.

- **contributing to the personal development of authors, performers artistic personnel and all other staff while creating the best possible working conditions.**

I have not been able to evaluate this, although clearly the company has a history of working with David Bruce, which is a very supportive relationship.

- **operating efficiently, creatively, generously, and professionally.**

From what I have seen, the project has been handled professionally and efficiently. Marketing was creative and of a high standard, and effective in attracting new audiences, and the project overall came in on target.

B. SPECIFIC AIMS FOR *PUSH!*

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- **to create a major new production of exceptional originality**

Achieved.

- **to deliver 10 performances of this production across the UK**

There were only 9 venues on the tour. The director explained how difficult it had been to get venues to book new opera.

- **to make these performances reach as wide and broadly-based audience as we can**

The audience data captured via the feedback forms is too limited to draw any real conclusions in respect of this aim. There was some diversity of age, with a good spread between the ages of 25 and 65. The under 25s are a notoriously difficult age group to target, with Shrewsbury and Newbury showing hardly anyone at all in this age bracket – not surprisingly, Cambridge did much better in attracting an audience from this group. No data exists to show breadth in any other category, although the Riverside venue report notes that the audience profile was not as diverse as they had hoped.

- **to use the subject matter (birth) to draw in as many newcomers to opera as we can**

Undoubtedly the show did well in introducing new people to opera. It is not clear what aspect of the show attracted them (we know how they found out, but not what then made them want to buy – this may be a useful question to ask in future).

- **to re-define and invigorate the art form of opera**

Given the number of newcomers to the artform and their obvious delight in many aspects of the production, the production can certainly be said to have invigorated the artform. I would find it hard to judge whether the artform had been re-defined by this production, except insofar as it was presented in a way that was very accessible (with the exception of the often-repeated problem of audibility).

- **to re-invigorate and inspire the company of artists**

I have seen no feedback from members of the company. However, the impression received from the performance I saw was that it was a wonderful ensemble piece of work, and these only work in my experience when the whole company are inspired by their work, and this seemed to be the case with *PUSH!*

- **to surround the whole project with a highly developed education programme involving as many young people as we can**

I have still not seen any report about the education programme, so cannot comment on this.

C Marketing

The company adopted a coherent approach across all promotional material that was then carried through most effectively into the design of the production, with its imagery of a real-life baby and jelly

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babies – to the extent of giving each member of the audience a bag of (sponsored) jelly babies, a touch that was referred to a number of times in the audience feedback!

The project was aimed at both those who already enjoy contemporary opera, and people who never attend opera events. Tete a Tete report that for their last show, 11% of the audience had never attended an opera and 32% had never attended a new opera; audience feedback forms show that again, near 11% (actually 10.6%) had never seen an opera, but as many as 49.2% had never seen a new opera. This is a significant improvement.

The largest group of people generally came as a result of word of mouth, and a high proportion of people came because someone else bought the ticket. (Does this indicate that there were a lot of parties?) Regionally, the venue's brochure played a big part in attracting an audience (43.5% of the Shrewsbury audience and 30.2% of the Cambridge audience claimed to have been attracted to come as a result of the brochure, whereas at Riverside, the Tete a Tete mailing list and word of mouth were much more persuasive triggers). Riverside respondents highlighted Time Out as a key persuader, while regionally the venue brochure shows how important developing a relationship with each venue and its particular audience is. The warmth expressed, for example, by Shrewsbury audiences at having a touring company such as Tete a Tete in their own "home" venue is something that should be built upon in successive years.

There was some criticism from Riverside that the marketing agency took very little active involvement in the promotion of the run, and they would have preferred less money spent on "style" than on direct marketing tactics that would have had an impact on sales. Audiences at Riverside were slow to book, although they felt the final figures were "reasonable".

D Financial outturn.

Total budgeted income for the project was £216,628, including £37,600 of Box Office and tour revenue and £155,524 of subsidy. The outturn as at 28th July showed that Box Office and tour income was well below expectation at only £15,500 and a shortfall in fund-raising income, including specific support for the Education project, led to the overall total income falling short by 34,878.

However, only partly thanks to the 3% contingency not being required, expenditure also was much less than budgeted, bringing the project in with a creditable small surplus.

Salaries and fees came in under budget, with only the set costs going over budget to any significant degree. Touring and activity costs were considerably under budget, as were budgeted Education workshop costs.

6. Conclusion

PUSH! appears to have met all the Company's general aims, and most of the specific aims as set out in its Arts Council application. It created an innovative, entertaining and accessible evening of musical theatre that introduced a significant number of people to the world of opera, which was also highly praised by those who already had some experience of opera-going. The one recurrent criticism was audibility.

The production used innovative marketing and adopted a coherent design concept across the piece.

Venues appear to have been pleased with the outcome, despite some criticism that the set was a difficult beast to fit into at least one of them.

Family Matters - Evolution

The project came in within budget.