

A different class

The education system has long been an important source of work for the performing arts, says **Susan Elkin**. This is set to grow as more state schools specialise in theatre and the private sector embarks on a flurry of venue building

Study the job advertisements in any issue of *The Stage*. There will almost always be openings for trained theatre professionals at the growing number of in-school theatres and/or to provide support for school drama departments.

In recent months, for example, Gresham's School, Norfolk, Withington Girls' School, Manchester and Plumstead Manor School, Greenwich have all advertised in these pages. So have James Allen's Girls' School in Dulwich and Bishops Stortford College, Hertfordshire – and that's just a random selection.

It has become de rigueur for independent schools to build theatres or to convert an existing facility. Parents and pupils are customers and in 2008 they want state of the art drama just as much as they want excellent academic teaching, computers and plenty of sport. The result is that almost every fee-charging school which doesn't already have a theatre is in the process of acquiring one.

Britain has more than 500 independent schools whose head is a member of one of the major independent school organisations, such as the Headmasters' and Headmistress's Conference or the Girls' School Association. Potentially, that means a lot of theatres and a constant stream of job opportunities for professionals.

At the same time, in the state-funded sector, 210 secondary schools in England (out of about 2,500 secondary schools overall) have specialist status as Performing Arts Colleges and 51 specialise in performing arts along with something else. In these schools too – which get a £100,000 one-off, top-up capital grant from the government and a higher annual funding per pupil than non-specialist schools – theatre professionals are routinely employed alongside mainstream teachers. Many of these schools, like their privately-funded counterparts, have a theatre or theatre space to be managed.

It doesn't stop at technical support either. Once performing arts professionals are on school staffs they are usually expected to work directly with students. They might, for instance, teach part of the A level theatre studies course.

They certainly provide quasi-apprenticeships for keen youngsters in skills such as front of house management, lighting, sound and so on. And sometimes it leads, eventually, to a complete change of career. Many a school-employed drama teacher began his or her career as an actor or other performing arts professional.

A growing number of schools in both sectors now recognise the advantages of employing an actor or director in residence too. Millfield School in Somerset advertised in *The Stage* for a new one last term, for instance. Jeremy James Taylor – founder and veteran of National Youth Music Theatre – has just begun a residency at Portsmouth Grammar School. Sedgehill School, a performing arts college in Lewisham, works continuously with artists, actors and musicians in residence.

Another way in which actors can find satisfying work in schools – at least in London, Birmingham and Brighton – is through Bigfoot Theatre Company. Founded in 2000 as a reasonably conventional Theatre in Education company, Bigfoot then spotted a niche in the education system and launched Bigfoot Supply, in parallel with its other work, which includes drama workshops in schools, specialist courses for gifted and talented pupils and teacher training.

Bigfoot Supply trains suitable actors to work in primary schools as stand-in teachers while the regular teacher has his or her block of time out of the classroom to prepare lessons – now a legal entitlement.

An actor trained by, and working for, Bigfoot usually goes into a primary school and teaches the same class regularly. And a typical session is a creative interpretation of

some aspect of the National Curriculum.

Actors tend to like it because the commitment is part-time and they can usually fit in other work around it.

By 2005 Bigfoot was delivering more than 100 workshops a week in London schools and the work has continued to grow. (www.bigfoot-theatre.co.uk).

Traditional Theatre in Education is also still alive and well and not to be overlooked as a source of satisfying work. Scene Productions, for example, is currently touring to schools a four-actor interpretation of Brecht's *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich* – a hands-on introduction to Brechtian methodology for GCSE and A level students. And Y Touring has, for many years, produced inspiring, beautifully-written plays focusing mainly on science and ethics.

Exeter University specialises in research into Theatre in Education and has a useful list of the many UK companies involved with it – many with handy links – on its website www.spa.ex.ac.uk/drama/links/theatreedu.html.

The list includes, of course, companies such as Big Fish, Magic Carpet and Oily Cart. Between them such organisations keep many hundreds of actors and other professionals in active, creative work and employment.

Theatre directors often say that their job is, effectively, teaching. Thoughtful teachers – and not just of drama – have been heard to argue that managing a class of students has a lot in common with theatre directing.

Despite ACE's current and contentious round of cuts, there has probably never been as much scope for professional crossover between the stage and the classroom as there is now.

The UK's first comprehensive ebook devoted to secondary schools which specialise in the performing arts, edited by Susan Elkin, is available at www.thestage.co.uk/ebooks.



Scene Productions' *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich* is currently touring to schools