

Have You Ever Worked in a Mill?

[On Big Brum's 25th birthday, Peter Wynne-Willson writes about where the urge to form Big Brum started....]

In 1979, I was an actor-teacher for the first time in a TIE programme in Manchester, about the Peterloo Massacre. We went to an inner-city primary school for a morning, in role as people working at a mill. The children had been warned, in writing, of the visit. A letter had appeared on the wall of their classroom, letting them know that on this morning, the manager of a local textile mill would be visiting to recruit new workers.

I was this manager - a Dickensian villain with a tall hat and a big stick - and my task was to recruit the class to my mill, with smooth promises of wealth and security. The pupils were then led through to the mill itself [the school hall] where the other actors were already in action. They were taught how to operate the machines [invisible machines which they mimed] and they got to know their fellow workers. They chatted about their lives over the taped noise of steam engines, and occasionally the mill manager would storm in to check up on things, issuing fearsome threats as he went.

It was a big, enjoyable game, which everyone took thoroughly seriously. The pupils asked about the machines, asked about the sons and daughters of the women that worked there, all the time making sure that they kept the mill working. They picked up nice little details of 19th century life, some facts about how it was, and a sense, perhaps of how it felt. One of the workers was ill - she had been coughing all along, and looked poorly. She fell from her place at the machine, and lost consciousness. Her friends, old and new, gathered round to help her. Sensing a break in work, the manager came in. He bullied the workers back to their places, and dragged the sick one out. Some of the workers' resentment appeared briefly on the surface. They were not being treated fairly.

When the role-play had run a long time, and the children had become thoroughly accustomed to their new world, a messenger arrived. A meeting was planned for next week, in St Peter's Square Manchester - all the mill workers from all around. The plan was just to stop work, everyone, and march to the town. This was the way, standing firm together, to get some justice. The workers at this

specially created mill had their own meeting, and agreed to join the march. In the week, they would make banners, ready for the march.

A week later, we re-visited the school, and recreated the mill. The pupils, true to their word, had made banners and placards, and we set off, out of the school, and once round the edge of the playground, discussing the things that needed discussing. As we approached St Peter's Square [the main doors back into the hall] we were stopped by one of the workers from the mill, in a bloodied state. She described to a horrified group the events - how the crowd building up in the square had been charged by the hussars, how people had been killed and injured by the horses and swords, and how one of our number was at this moment in the hands of the magistrate.

We thronged into the magistrates court [the classroom] There was the magistrate [me again] and there was our friend, in chains. There was a statement of the facts, at variance with the worker's story, and a final opportunity for questions or statements from the floor. A sea of arms, a gush of righteous anger 'she hasn't done anything wrong', a brief summing up, and the setting of bail at an impossible level. By the time this was over, and the hussar was ready to take her away, five minutes had passed since the section with the pupils asking questions, but one boy had kept his hand up all the time, regardless, in spite of the magistrate's contemptuous glares. Inside the magistrate's body, I remember wondering what to do. Offering him the opportunity to ask his question might spoil the theatrical moment, my well-rehearsed ending. He looked like something of an odd-ball, the one in every class that doesn't quite fit. But he had been waiting with such calm determination.... so I capitulated, and snapped at him to say what he wanted. He stood up carefully, and spoke slowly, looking me straight in the eye throughout,

'Sir. Have you ever worked in a mill?'

'Of course not'

'No. I thought you hadn't. Because if you had, you see, you would understand.'

And then he sat back down. He had made his point, with all the authority of a man who had spent his life as a mill-worker, who had seen children come and go, and seen off a few fierce mill

managers for good measure. I felt like breaking my role and hugging him, but you don't do that. The magistrate muttered something about not being relevant, and the theatrical ending was resumed.

This was a boy of ten, who had never worked in a mill. He had participated in an elaborate drama game, a simple mime, for a few hours. It was clear to me, and would have been to anyone, that some real learning had taken place. This group of children had explored in depth a series of events in history, and on one level the lesson had justified itself in the historical facts and details covered, which are the stuff that we tend to think of as education. But that misses the point - some real understanding was there. Those children were fired up, gripped, inspired, provoked, enlivened. They went away talking about it, they asked questions, they based weeks of work on it, and they may well remember it now, 28 years on. Not the plot, not the acting or the writing, but the frustration of an injustice, the way that exploitation works, the picture in the mind of the road blocked by a hussar on a horse, or just how oppressive the noise in the mill can feel. Not the theatre, but the content, the reason for the theatre, what it was about.

That was my first TIE experience, as a student in Manchester. It was the experience that triggered Big Brum, because it helped convince me to come back to my home town in Birmingham, after finishing at college, and set up a proper TIE company. It sticks in my mind not because it was exceptional, because it is the kind of experience that will be familiar to all of those who have worked with Big Brum, and other real theatre-in-education companies over these 25 years. It is young people like that young man [presumably now 34!] who are the reason, the inspiration and the life force of the company and its work.