

Mad Spirits

A creative project by English Touring Opera based on Purcell's *The Fairy Queen*, involving students from Hendon School and St Mary's High School in Barnet, and funded by John Lyon's Charity.

A letter by Kevin McKellar (Head Teacher, Hendon School).

The process leading up to the performance was so meaningful. The students had to work together to write a really challenging musical text. They had to think about the language they had to use to communicate to a very mixed audience. They had to work together to try and understand what opera is all about.

Progress for me could be seen in the way they were challenging the conventional notion of opera. Many of them thought that it was an art form for the elite, for the rich, for those who can afford to go to Covent Garden etc. Interestingly not one of them thought about opera in relation to story telling and acting. They talked to me about feeling that it was quite magical, they talked to me about how they were challenged to think about language in relation to war, love, togetherness etc. I walked in on a seminar when they were using the most ridiculous words to highlight the ridiculousness of name calling. In this age of inciting hatred via Facebook it was such a positive, powerful metaphor.

One thing which struck me was that they were very attracted to the title 'English Touring Opera Project' and the idea that they could possibly take this (their new art form) to other venues and other audiences. The process for me was as magical as the actual performance itself.

The impact of the performance can be measured in the following ways:

- Four of the students started engaging more in lessons, especially English, Maths and Drama
- One student who has language development issues was able to take part in a performance in front of an audience for the first time in his life
- One student who has body image issues told me it was one of the best things he has ever taken part in
- A significant number of the students come from the Graham Park estate which has the highest crime rate in the whole of Europe. Many of the students talked to me about how great it would be to perform at the local community centre in the middle of Graham Park. They were clearly enormously proud of what they had achieved.

As the Head teacher the whole experience simply wowed me from start to finish. Here we have a credible example of tackling cultural impoverishment. Here we have examples of modernising and relating an art form to younger generations. Some of the students were concerned that the project was simply going to go away and it would be sad to think that this enthusiasm has nowhere to go. We must strive to keep this momentum moving. My greatest fear is that people who do not really experience projects like this from beginning to end think that it is no more than a tokenistic event. There are so

many projects and funding strands for football and the sports. How can we make this a more credible initiative to reach more young people, to reach more gifted and talented teachers like Charlotte and Michael?

Please note that this was a fantastic professional development opportunity for everyone concerned including the ETO staff. To sum up it was an enriching, empowering, harmonising experience for all concerned. I hope the best is yet to come.