

Learning to live an actor's life

Pat Rush on tough theatre training at the newly formed Quayside

THERE IS nothing in the name to suggest that Quayside is any different from dozens of other theatre companies whose work can be seen at fringe venues. But just a few minutes into their first London production it was obvious that here indeed was something out of the ordinary – not so much in the content of the show, but in the sheer confidence and versatility of the young participants.

It was, in other words, a glowing testimonial to a new venture which combines three months of intensive, individual tuition in voice, movement and acting with a chance to utilise the newly polished skills in a showcase production at a London venue. And the whole can be fitted – albeit with some difficulty – around an actor's current full or part-time job.

The company boasts the patronage of such respected names as Victoria Wood and playwright David Pownall, but its driving forces are director Simone Vause and voice coach Andrew Wade, who met when both were teaching at the East 15 School of Acting in Loughton, Essex. Vause had been artistic director

of the original Quayside Theatre Company in Lancaster, and had had a great deal of experience working with unemployed actors, while Wade's teaching work had included a stint in New York. There he saw how both out-of-work and working actors would fit in intensive training sessions around their daily schedules, and he was quick to recognise the benefits to be gained from such schemes.

Complete commitment

"I think a lot of drama schools set out with the right ideas to gear the work to the individual, but when you've got group after group, project after project, it's very difficult to actually do that", he points out. "So what we're trying to do with this project is to have the luxury of having individual movement, voice and acting sessions during the week, at times mutually convenient to the tutor and the working actor.

"Perhaps he or she could have their voice class before they go to work in the morning, or in their lunchbreak during the weekdays. That was happening in New York. And then one day a week we have the block sessions of a group movement session, a group voice, and then the main rehearsal period when we can all get together as a company."

It means a hectic schedule for the

actors, who pay £600, or instalments of £55 per week, to take part in the project. But both Vause and Wade are convinced that if a genuine "want" is there, then students will find a way to fit in the classes and to undertake the large quantities of "homework" resulting from them.

"Something we can't tolerate – and I'm terribly extreme in this way – is half-heartedness", stresses Vause. "I have to have complete commitment.

"We've discovered with this three-month course that it is very intensive, and in a way which means that you don't have anything else in your life. If you have a job, that's it – you have your job and the course.

"We give so much homework anyway – improvisations to do on their own and with other members of the company. I give reams of homework – so they have to be the sort of person that's fully committed and excited by it. They're busy all the time – they never have a spare moment."

The actors who took part in the first project at Quayside's SE London premises were all rather younger, more inexperienced, than Vause and Wade would have hoped. They feel that it takes a while for an actor to "want in the right kind of way", to fully appreciate the benefits of all the voice and movement. But they are sure that even this young group gained much from their three months with Quayside. They were visibly more confident than they had been at the beginning, and thus in a better position to go and sell themselves at auditions. And they were also better able to make constructive use of the inevitable slack periods.

Simone's work with unemployed actors in Lancaster had emphasised how destructive a quiet period could be – but those times can be used for further growth, if only the actor knows how.

"We teach them to continue working alone", says Simone. "It isn't just movement from Vanessa (Ewan) and voice from Andrew and ways of working with scripts from me. It's remaining alive creatively in every way. Because it's all out there in life.

You can't switch off

"We've taught that first group a way of really being aware of what's happening to people, so even just walking down Oxford Street they'll know how to use that. If they go to the cinema or to see dogs racing or whatever, they stimulate themselves constantly. They're going to different things they wouldn't normally go to because we've taught them to get out and see, to be aware, because it's all got to be used if you're an actor. In fact, you can't switch off really – it's happening all the time. And I think we have made them see that."

In other words, they hope to teach what they call "technically competent" actors that acting is not merely a question of "how to do tricks well", but is actually a creative art. And that slack periods can be used to develop their art. Then, next time a script is presented to them, they'll be able to bring that much more to it – on their own.

"So we can't guarantee that the course will bring them work", says Vause carefully. "But I think we can guarantee that they'll know how to live with an actor's lot."

6 – THE STAGE and TELEVISION TODAY, May 8, 1986

Show People



VANESSA EWAN, ANDREW WADE and SIMON VAUSE of Quayside – "something we can't tolerate is half-heartedness."