

Schoolwrights



tamasha

Summary of the 2013-14 pilot year

Introduction

Schoolwrights is an innovative scheme bringing together professional playwrights and inner city schools. It is the brainchild of playwright Fin Kennedy, and was born from a ten-year creative relationship Fin has with Mulberry School for Girls in Tower Hamlets (East London). *Schoolwrights* aims to use schools like Mulberry, with expertise in this area, as training bases for playwrights seeking centrally-managed and quality-controlled education training. It also seeks to connect other nearby schools into a network of host organisations for writers' placements, and to make available the resulting plays for schools nationwide to use via an annual digital publication.



Schoolwrights is very scalable – it can be made as large or as small as the partners and funding available, based on the number of playwrights and schools involved. Its structure can also fit very easily into existing networks of theatres' Creative Learning teams and schools contacts in any town or city. Tamasha is actively seeking expressions of interest from future partners around the UK.

This summary of the 2013-14 pilot seeks to offer an overview of the scheme for potential future partners. Play scripts are also available by request to fin@tamasha.org.uk

Pilot versions

Schoolwrights was trialled by Fin in 2011 when he was Associate Artist at Tamasha Theatre Company. This involved 8 playwrights training in Mulberry only, over one term.

Fin is now Co-Artistic Director of the company, and *Schoolwrights* has just completed its first full pilot year. It is set to become Tamasha's flagship education programme from September 2015, with ambitions to roll it out nationwide.

In the 2013-14 pilot, a total of 6 playwrights worked across five schools, coming into contact with 80 young people aged 13-17, nine education professionals and four professional theatre directors. The project lasted for one academic year, from Sept 2013 to June 2014. Nine short plays were written, of which seven were performed at least twice across five different venues including Soho Theatre, Rich Mix and three inner London schools.



“The students gained not only creative skills in this project but also a strong sense of artistic ownership which was very empowering.”

- Sarah Dickson, Assistant Head, Mulberry School for Girls

How is Schoolwrights different from other theatre education schemes?

- *Schoolwrights* is about playwrights writing plays inspired by young people - not about teaching them to write (other schemes already exist to do that). Our main focus is on producing a professional-quality product for them to perform, giving the work equal billing with other professional work in the venues in which it plays.
- *Schoolwrights* is playwright-led, not theatre company-led. It is driven by personal relationships first and foremost (writers getting to know students and vice versa) rather than institutional relationships.
- The small group nature of the work ensures a personal dimension. It is not one playwright standing in front of a class of 30; each writer works with the same group of 4-6 young people every week.
- *Schoolwrights* is long-term and not a one-off workshop or series of workshops. It aims to become a permanent annual rolling scheme, creating a two-way street via which writers can get education experience and young people and their teachers hands-on professional theatre experience – something which simply wouldn't emerge from a short scheme.
- *Schoolwrights* aims to nurture the skills of the adults (playwrights and teachers) as well as the young people. Parity of esteem is key – everyone learns from everyone else. The plays are also performed on the main stages of professional venues, giving the work parity of esteem with the theatre's core output.
- *Schoolwrights* provides quality-controlled training for playwrights working in community contexts – training which is all too hard to come by for freelance writers.



“I think I have consumed the great struggles of what an actor goes through in drama. I have gained confidence and a great volume in my voice.”

- Humaira Tasneem, St Paul's Way Trust School

Schoolwrights structure – Summary

Schoolwrights follows the structure of the academic year. Writers are recruited in the summer for a September start.

In **Phase One: Training** (Autumn Term) all playwrights embark on a period of managed training. Writers receive regular, direct contact with students in the same large class in a 'hub school' which serves as the training base for the project, with each writer assigned their own small group of 4-6 students. Supported by Fin and the school's staff, the playwrights lead workshops with students to generate creative ideas for stories, and write a short play (15-20 minutes) in response.



In **Phase Two: Residencies** (Spring Term) the writers start up their own residencies in a new school nearby, and repeat the process more autonomously, writing another 15-minute play with a new set of students.

In **Phase Three: Performances** (Summer Term) all the teachers involved receive a masterclass from a professional theatre director. The teacher-directors are then asked to rehearse the plays up with student casts, in full mini-productions with lines learned and a small budget for set, costume and props.

After the scheme is over, Tamasha aims to digitally publish all the plays so that schools around the country can benefit from them.

"I found it useful to be in the school with other writers because of the chance to exchange ideas before the session ... The support was brilliant. I liked that my session plans were reviewed and noted before sessions, particularly as I have never taught before."

- Jane Wainwright, playwright

Key stats

In the 2013-14 pilot:

- 6 writers worked across
- 5 London schools with
- 80 students (aged 12-17) and
- 9 teachers, with support from
- 4 professional directors.
- 9 short plays were completed, of which
- 7 were performed at least twice in
- 2 professional venues and
- 3 inner city schools
- To a total audience of 789.

"I loved the challenge of working with a group of voices I wouldn't normally have access to. I really learned how to structure a session; to cater to the individual personalities and bring out their stories and ideas."

- Abi Zakarian, playwright

Outcomes

Evidence from evaluation forms suggests several impacts:

- **Teachers:** Reported a boost to the status and profile of Drama as a subject within the school, making future projects more likely. Several also reported new confidence directing school productions, and most said the *Schoolwrights* plays would have a future life within the school.
- **Students:** All reported enjoyment and most reported increased self-confidence. Some indicated an impact on their choices of subjects for further study.
- **Writers:** Reported new skill sets around session planning/leading and writing for young actors. At least one has received further work from a youth theatre as a direct result of taking part. Another took part in an extra-curricular module about feminism in one participating school. Two of the plays have already been digitally published as part of the Milan Playwriting Festival.
- **Directors:** Reported positive relationships with teachers and schools and having made new contacts for potential future work.
- **Theatres:** Reported new audiences coming through their doors to attend the performances.
- **Audiences:** Feedback forms suggest widespread enjoyment of the work, and a new perception about the kinds of work associated with the theatres they attended.

"*Schoolwrights* has given me the opportunity to support students in creating a new play which is invaluable preparation for GCSE exams. Creating performance opportunities has been very useful and working with other practitioners has given me greater clarity and confidence in the kinds of things we do in the department."

- Sam Butler, Drama teacher, Robert Clack School

Key achievements

There were many achievements this year, including:

- Successfully pioneering a new model of playwright-in-education training.
- The creation of nine high quality scripts for young performers, developed through long-term collaboration with the groups that eventually performed them, many of which will be used in future by the schools involved.
- Creating high quality, high profile performance opportunities for eighty young performers at leading London theatres.
- Sold out performances at all venues.
- An ongoing legacy of digital publication of the plays, taken on by Tamasha Theatre Company, potentially in a new collaboration with Digital Theatre Plus.
- Interest in the scheme from around the UK, with a cluster of theatres and schools in Manchester interested in talking more about rolling out a north-west version of the scheme.
- A commitment from Tamasha to make *Schoolwrights* their flagship education programme from 2015, and to fundraise for a three-year commitment from a large trust or foundation to grow *Schoolwrights* nationwide.
- Further young people's commissions for several of the writers who took part.
- Use of some of the short plays as pieces for assessed performance within several of the participating schools.
- Interest in the *Schoolwrights* model from as far afield as Italy and the United States.
- Coverage of the scheme on the Guardian theatre blog: gu.com/p/3q59k/tw

"I have experienced and learnt about how a play is produced. Now I understand how much fun yet stressful the production of a play is!"

- Mymona Bibi, Year 10, St Paul's Way Trust School

Key lessons learned

Writers and plays

- *Number of writers* - Six became challenging logistically. With more theatres involved six might be possible where admin and other resources can be shared, but in future it is recommended to run the scheme with four writers in the first instance.
- *Number of plays* - Fewer plays would mean more of them can be performed in the highest profile slot.
- *Tone and content* - Clearer training of the writers and better dialogue with the schools, especially where their guidelines differ.
- *Writer drop-outs and non-delivery* - Better contingency planning in consultation with schools.
- *Co-writing plays* - Not recommended. Each writer to write their own.
- *Writer / director tension* - An old chestnut but it did come up. Better Project Manager involvement during Phase Two would have helped.
- *Teacher training for writers* - Classroom management training and more practical exercises from experienced teachers would have benefitted some of the writers.
- *Teachers to assist in writer's session planning* – A big ask for busy teachers, but sessions would have been improved from more teacher input, for example discussing themes and suggesting exercises to tease these out. Could a theatre's Education team support this?
- *Sensitive and verbatim material* – Better briefing of writers not to lift material directly as it may have actually happened. Teachers to brief the students about what and how much they share with the writers.



Students

- *Group selection* - Teachers to work out suitable student group combinations in advance, based on what they know about which students work best together.
- *Student theatre trip* - We did a staff theatre trip but would have loved to have been able to afford to take all the kids too. Maybe a venue partner could offer comps?

Teachers

- *Director training for teachers* - Strong demand for professional development around directing plays.
- *Directing support* - Build in and budget for professional directors from the start. Perhaps a future Project Manager could be a director?
- *More planning time with writers and Phase Two teachers* - A managed meeting to more clearly define roles.
- *Creative meetings between Phase Two teachers and writers* - Build some in. Project Manager to chair.

- *Other teacher's input* - Clearer chain of command about who makes final creative decisions.

Rehearsals

- *Director (and writer) preparation for challenging subject matter* - Build into child protection training at the start the scenario in which unfiltered verbatim material is offered by a participant from their own life.
- *Student rehearsal attendance* - A perennial problem which needs constant attention in all young people's projects. Workload on schools not to be under-estimated. Dedicated staff member to do the chasing recommended. Directors to be more fully briefed and contingency put in place, e.g. understudies.
- *Schools support between rehearsals* - Line runs etc could be factored into classes where director not present.
- *Better rehearsal planning* - Rehearsals fall during the summer term which is very busy. Consultation of the school diary long in advance to avoid clashes and absentees is strongly recommended.
- *Tech rehearsals* – Set limits with directors on the amount of cues. 20 per hour of tech time as a rough guide. Ensure Stage Manager can also operate sound, LX and video/projection (or use theatre staff – and involve them early).
- *General workload on schools* – Not to be under-estimated!

Performances

- *Multimedia* - Some scripts called for this but capacity was limited. Perhaps a venue could offer more in-house support.
- *Technical Stage Manager* - Critically important for the smooth-running of so many plays. Perhaps a venue could offer in-kind?
- *Project Manager* – Recommended in addition to Stage Manager. The logistics of so many performances become complex.
- *More performances* - Huge demand from families and friends for tickets could not be fully met. More performances, especially at the professional venues, would have helped.
- *More tech time* - All teachers and directors requested this.
- *More advertising of performances within schools and teachers' networks* - Suggestion from a teacher's evaluation form. Perhaps a theatre's marketing and/or Creative Learning department could lead.
- *Ask students to compère final performances* - A nice suggestion from another evaluation form, though it would require training and management.
- *Dedicated staff within venues to deal with box office, guest list and comps* - Not recommended for the Stage Manager to oversee this.
- *Better communication with venues re ticket sales vs. comps* - Managing expectations
- *More performances in one another's schools* - This was more limited than we would have liked and the logistics tougher than we expected.
- *Thank the writers!* - An oversight in a speech at one of the performances.
- *More performance opportunities for boys* - Though we did have two girls' schools taking part!

Evaluation and Legacy

- *Documentation* - A training video or other filmed legacy would be great (though not essential)
- *Plays to follow exam board requirements* - 3 mins of material per actor is required for plays to be eligible for assessed performance. There is also a total cast size limit of 9. Stricter adherence to this would increase the likelihood of the plays having a future life.
- *Professional evaluation* – It would be terrific to be able to formally evaluate future versions of the scheme. Perhaps an academic partner could be found to run a study?

"So happy with the shows tonight - what a fantastic night at the theatre. Thank you so much for letting us be part of it, it has meant so much to the girls. Out of all the collaborative projects I've done at EGA, this has been the most exciting and rewarding. Congratulations!"

- Jayne Gold, Head of Drama, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson School

Fee levels and budget

The 2013-14 *Schoolwrights* pilot ran for £30,000 though this figure does not adequately reflect the full costs of staff time required to support the project, directors' fees to fully support teachers, or travel and accommodation for a version outside London. Future iterations have been costed for between £50,000 to £70,000 per year-long cycle, depending on the size of the scheme. These totals also include increased professional fee levels and higher budgeting for directing and stage management support.

The budget comprises of fees for: playwrights, lead artist, project manager, dramaturg, stage manager and some production costs.

In-kind support was received for:

- Venue hire
- Rehearsal space
- Marketing
- Teachers' directing masterclass
- Technician and front of house time
- CRB checks

A full budget is available on request.

"I found how engaged my students were a real highlight. They committed a lot of time and effort to ensuring the play was well-rehearsed and polished, and it was rewarding to see them come together and create a fabulous piece of work. The fact that they were so proud of themselves after the Monday night at Soho Theatre was THE highlight of the project, as it was why I wanted to be a teacher - getting to watch young people achieve things they never dreamt possible."

- Jen Verity, Drama teacher, St Paul's Way Trust School

Funding

Schoolwrights is attractive to funders. The direct ways in which the scheme makes a demonstrable difference to the groups it serves makes it an attractive prospect for both trusts/foundations and individual giving. *Schoolwrights* 2013 received an initial donation of £6,000 from a retired hedge fund manager, after Fin made a personal visit to his house (brokered by Sofie Mason of OffWestEnd.com). This gift was instrumental in allowing us to then to go to other sources. (The same donor also generously topped us up by £1,000 when we found ourselves a little short during the scheme's third and final phase).

However, fundraising for the 2013 scheme still took two years, with the balance coming from a patchwork of trusts and foundations, the Arts Council (Grants for the Arts) and also

Tamasha's core funds. In future we would like to spread the responsibility for financing or fundraising for the scheme more evenly among the venue partners involved, especially if they have in-house Development teams, which Tamasha does not.

Schools were asked to contribute £250 each in the pilot – this was helpful in securing buy-in at senior levels. However it masks the amount of work required of schools to support the project, in terms of staff time, planning, rehearsals and student liaison. But in return they received two playwrights' residencies and opportunities for up to 20 of their students. We also negotiated with the writers for participating schools to be able perform the plays, royalties free, in future, within the school. (Other schools or external performances require a separate agreement).

We could ask schools to contribute more in cash in future years; although Drama department budgets are meagre we could possibly access professional development funds if we build in more directing support for teachers. One school also suggested we could potentially access the Pupil Premium; this would require further research and consultation.

“Schoolwrights project was a great project because usually in school workshops you get the chance to act out someone else’s play, however in this case we were able to be part of the writing process and act out our ideas. The project was really personal to me because they were my words being said how I wanted and how I thought they should be said. The project really allowed me to gain a different understanding on how to write scripts and plays and it allowed me to get creative and put my imagination into something real in which a whole audience would later see. It also really helps when you have an amazing playwright and director.”

- Almitra Simpson, Year 10, Mulberry School for Girls

Staffing and franchising

Fin Kennedy and Tamasha were the driving forces behind the pilot. Both Fin and Tamasha would always want to be involved in any future version of the scheme which bears the *Schoolwrights* name, but this could be done in greater partnership and with a lighter touch. For example, Fin could run the initial writer training before handing over to a local project manager on a freelance fee, with remote dramaturgical support.

In time *Schoolwrights* could be run on more of a franchise model, with participating schools and theatres forming consortia to ‘license’ running the scheme themselves, with Fin and Tamasha in more of an ‘Executive Producer’ role, helping get the project set up, then advising as required, troubleshooting and overseeing quality-control, in exchange for a management fee.

But the model is flexible and nothing is set in stone. We would encourage interested to partners to contact us to discuss how *Schoolwrights* could be made to work for their particular circumstances.

Contact and further information

To get involved or support Schoolwrights in any way please email fin@tamasha.org.uk or call 020 7749 0090

www.tamasha.org.uk/schoolwrights

APPENDIX A: Writers, Schools and Plays from 2014

The Writers

The playwrights who took part in the 2013-14 pilot were:

- **Alia Bano** (winner of the 2011 Evening Standard Most Promising Playwright award)
- **Rachel Delahay** (winner of the 2013 Evening Standard Most Promising Playwright award)
- **Rex Obano** (2010 Alfred Fagon award shortlisted)
- **Jane Wainwright** (Royal Court Supergroup and BBC Writers Academy member)
- **Morna Regan** (2012 Irish Times Best Play award winner)
- **Abi Zakarian** (2012 Soho Theatre attachment scheme; 2013 RSC Writers' Group)

The Schools

The schools which took part (all in London) were:

- **Mulberry School for Girls** – a large state secondary in Tower Hamlets comprised of 96% Muslim students of Bangladeshi heritage.
- **St Paul's Way Trust School** – a mixed state secondary in Tower Hamlets with a diverse intake of students from all backgrounds, including Bangladeshi, Indian, Sri Lankan, Eastern European, Turkish, Somali, white British and others.
- **Swanlea School** – mixed state secondary with a male majority comprised of predominantly students of Bangladeshi and African-Caribbean heritage.
- **Elizabeth Garret Anderson School** – All girls state secondary in Islington with students from a wide variety of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds.
- **Robert Clack School** – state secondary in Dagenham with a white working-class majority but also black and Asian students, in an outer London borough without a great deal of arts provision or access.

"I loved the school, the energy and the students. I loved being challenged as a writer to do something completely different ...I found the support of Fin and the playwrights incredibly strong, compassionate and professional."
- Morna Regan, playwright

The Plays

Some terrifically imaginative plays were written, which we intend to digitally publish soon. In the meantime, any or all of them are available electronically, by request to fin@tamasha.org.uk

The Difference by Rex Obano

In the aftermath of crime which has caused community tensions, three students rehearse a play. But what is real, what is drama, and how far can the friends take control of the script?

Still Lives by Abi Zakarian

When Amisha gets lost during a school trip to an art gallery, she gets an education from the portraits which changes her life.

Prom Night by Alia Bano

Three female friends prepare for the biggest night of their lives, but one of them is being held to ransom online by an anonymous boy with Photoshop skills.

How I Skinned My Sister by Jane Wainwright

Tanya and Afsana are twins with a difference – Afsana’s dead. But since when did that stop anyone from having a life?

Diana’s Answer by Morna Regan

Diana Hasan never speaks. But one day her hand spontaneously raises itself in class. And refuses to go down. Then it starts to speak... and it is well sassy.

“What a pleasantly goofy piece of story telling. What I loved about this is how it gave the actors lots of chances for ensemble playing. They did a great job of playing off each other, maintaining the thread and yet distinguishing their parts. This was a really new piece of vernacular theatre.”

- Audience feedback form, Rich Mix

Etta In The Night by Morna Regan and Abi Zakarian

When Etta runs from her East London flat wearing full make-up after a fight with her mother, the night-time London she encounters is a different world.

Leftovers by Jane Wainwright

A group of young friends take the law into their own hands to catch a friend’s killer. But the perpetrator is closer than any of them realised.

The Princess Party by Alia Bano

Three girly girls at a sleepover discover what life is really like for three Princesses they once admired.

They Only Count The Dead by Rex Obano

In 2014, two boys queue at midnight for the latest *Gears Of War* video game. In 1914, a father searches the hospitals of the Somme for his missing son who signed up underage.



APPENDIX B: Schoolwrights visual structure (with 4 playwrights)

