

# Gap Theatre Project 2007 Evaluation Report



Company of Angels with Icknield Primary School

## **the 25 farewells**

**small steps, big mountains**

a high altitude journey with year 6 conceived by Leisa Rea

## BACKGROUND

In 2003, Leisa Rea and Renata Allen conceived a unique new peer-mentoring scheme which they titled 'The Gap Theatre Project'. The project set out to bridge a gap between two very different age groups by working with them to create a piece of theatre exploring the idea of 'transition'. The two age groups were Year 6 school pupils, facing the big transition from primary school to secondary school, and young adults on a 'gap year' between one higher educational establishment and another.

The pilot programme, at Yerbury Primary School in Islington, was such a success that Company of Angels returned there to create another Gap Theatre Project two years later. In May 2007, Company of Angels decided to try out the project in a rural setting and took it to Icknield Primary School in Sawston, a village in Cambridgeshire. Once again, four 'gap year students' collaborated with a class of Year 6 pupils, drawing on their shared experiences of transition to create a one-of-a-kind theatre performance.



## THE AIMS OF THE PROJECT HAVE ALWAYS BEEN:

- To empower and enable children in the last year of primary school by giving them a creative platform to explore their feelings about the transition to secondary school.
- To harness the creativity of gap students, school leavers and new graduates and provide opportunities for them to mentor younger children using theatre.
- To link creative professionals with school communities and ignite creativity in teachers by giving them access to excellent theatre practice.



## HOW THE PROJECT WORKED IN 2007

In 2007, director Leisa Rea took the metaphor of mountaineering as her starting point for devising a piece of theatre examining 'transition'. Both the Year 6 pupils and the 'Gap Company' – four young adults on gap years – were facing major transitions in their lives, whether starting secondary school for the first time or beginning a new university course. The company undertook to explore the challenges of change by creating a series of theatrical episodes, thematically linked by the notion of climbing an arctic mountain.

Over a six week period, writer and director Leisa Rea, supported by assistant director Laura Baggaley and composer Neil Jones, worked with the Gap Company and a class of Year 6 pupils to create a piece called 'The 25 Farewells'.

The project began with a preparatory week in which the Gap Company worked with the artistic team to investigate the themes of the piece, addressing questions such as 'What stuff do we need for our journey' and 'When did you feel big or small?' During this process, the four gap students were introduced to a range of art forms, including puppetry and object manipulation, origami and song writing, physical theatre and clowning. Ultimately all these different modes of expression made their way into the finished piece; the origami formed part of the classroom exhibition, while the clowning led to an anarchic family called The Stuffs, and puppetry was used to depict times when the children had felt big or small in the world.

During the first rehearsal week, the Gap Company were also briefed on the practicalities of working in a school with younger children, including child protection policy, health and safety, professional conduct and the school's working ethics.

In the second week of rehearsals, the Gap Company arrived at Icknield Primary School armed with their new skills and knowledge to meet the Year 6 pupils. The school has 165 pupils on roll, most of whom will transfer to Sawston Village College at the end of Year 6. The College has approximately 70% more pupils on roll than its feeder primary, making the transition for many Year 6's a tremendous challenge.

The Gap Company swiftly adapted to their new roles as mentors to the Year 6 pupils, both participating in and leading groups in devising sessions. The pupils were invited to respond to questions about transitions in their own lives, and their experiences were fed into the development of the piece. For five weeks, the Gap Company's rehearsal time was split between intensive work in the school and two days a week external rehearsals led by the assistant director. As the production developed, the young adults honed their own performances as well as mentoring the children, the two age groups ultimately performing together in an unusual bridging of a generation gap through theatre.

## FEEDBACK FROM YEAR 6 PRIMARY PUPILS

**Many Year 6 pupils didn't know what to expect from Company of Angels, or had preconceived ideas about how they might work together. The children were excited to discover that the creative team wanted to hear their ideas and were keen to incorporate them into the performance. Year 6 pupils were also inspired by the commitment and energy of the Gap Company, looking up to them as role models:**

"It was clever how they picked us, did games to see who came out the best. I thought we were just having fun through games didn't realise we were creating a performance."

"I like the idea that we were going to get better at acting and working with a real director and actors. I think they were all great."

"I was not keen on drama before, now I like it."

**The Year 6 pupils were able to draw parallels from the performance reflecting on their move to secondary school:**

"The way we found climbing a mountain is similar to going to secondary school and how we made that into a play."

The pupils also spoke about how they had gained in confidence and discovered talents they hadn't realised they possessed. Overall, the Year 6 response was tremendously positive, describing how they felt both more confident and able to express themselves.





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## THE GAP COMPANY

**The Gap Company came from a range of backgrounds and found their interest in the Gap Theatre Project had developed from a need to solidify future plans:**

“I am currently in the position of looking at the point which I aim to reach and surveying and assessing the possible routes and obstacles I may have to overcome... I am scared and yet excited...”

**There were some concerns for the Gap Company going into a school and working with Year 6 pupils and what their response to the work might be:**

“Communicating to the children exactly what we want...how to be clear but not demanding.”

“The type of theatre we were devising is totally new to me. I have not done much physical theatre before so sometimes I feel a bit inhibited. Despite this I am learning lots of new skills and it is forcing me to be more imaginative. Everyone in the group is really relaxed and I feel free to let myself go and give it my best effort.”

**At the end of the project there was a marked change in the Gap Company's responses; most had become extremely positive about themselves:**

“Their enthusiasm is wonderful and my fears that they might take a little while to get used to us have proved totally unfounded - their creativity and spark has really impressed me and they made us feel totally welcome in the school from the outset...I ended up being blown away by the experience.”

“[It] made me think about the purpose of theatre and the effect it can have on participants, and how this project translates into my own work.”



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## TEACHER'S RESPONSE

The teacher of the class, Jane Reichardt, was fully involved and highly supportive throughout the project. Even when Company of Angels weren't in the school, work on the piece continued, with the pupils using classroom time to create video diaries and artwork for their arctic installation. Jane commented that the Gap Theatre Project gave the children a clear focus for their last weeks at primary school:

"It benefits pupils to have more adult attention, bridging the gap between children and authority figures."

Jane also found the devising process to be a unique and positive way of working. Rather than rehearsing from a pre-written script, the Company of Angels team used rehearsals to discover the skills and aptitudes of the children, as well as uncovering their preoccupations and life experiences. These discoveries all fed into the final production, with the script content reflecting the pupils' concerns and performances drawing on all their various talents.

## AUDIENCE RESPONSES

The audiences included young children and adults of all ages (the oldest recorded being sixty-five). They were asked to fill out questionnaires at the end of each performance, and all the returned forms contained extremely positive feedback. Here are a few of the comments:

"So moving and entertaining and such creativity from the children. I taught all those children 2 years ago when I was drama teacher for the school's enrichment programme and it was wonderful to see their progress."  
(Amanda Marty – Director of Public Arena)

"Can't really express in word how the show touched me. I am a governor and do not personally know all the children but to see their enthusiasm and smiles was fantastic. Well done to all involved."

"It was absolutely outstanding, I saw confidence and talent in my son I never knew he had! Well done on a wonderful performance."



**So moving and entertaining and  
such creativity from the children**



## THE EVALUATION PROCESS

All those involved in the Gap Theatre Project – the pupils, teaching staff, Gap Company and artistic team – were monitored throughout the process, providing feedback through various formats including paper evaluation forms, film, observation, dialogue and video diaries filmed by Year 6 pupils. Evidence was extracted from all these in order to compile the evaluation report.

In the Government's Every Child Matters: Change for Children strategy, five key targets are listed:

- Being healthy;
- Staying safe;
- Enjoying and achieving;
- Making a positive contribution;
- Achieving economic well-being;

(From The Common Assessment Frameworks for Children & Young people: Practitioners' Guide p.5)

The Gap Theatre Project could not seek to tackle the entire framework in a five-week period, but two key points were identified as being particularly addressed: enjoying and achieving, and making a positive contribution. Another key element is the fact that the Gap Theatre Project values the opinions of young people and takes their views into consideration; Year 6 pupils become the key protagonists in the project.

## BENEFITS OF THE GAP THEATRE PROJECT

The benefits of the project to Year 6 pupils were identified as:

- Discovering their own talents and skills;
- Working with professionals;
- Bringing two groups together that would not ordinarily meet;
- Reflecting in a personalised way what is important to them at this stage in their lives.

## LESSONS LEARNT

The work of the Gap Theatre Project

- put some strain on the working timetable within the school;
- sometimes suffered from the limit on space availability in the school – actions for the future might include hiring a rehearsal space outside of the school, to avoid disruption;

Yet overall the response from the school has been a very positive one and they are looking forward to Company of Angels returning in 2008.

## A FINAL WORD

This project really serves those it seeks to serve: Year 6 pupils, their teachers and students, and graduates taking a Gap Year.

People who have participated in the Gap Theatre Project speak of significant changes in themselves as a direct result of the experience, and can be seen to have increased in confidence both personally and professionally. Past Gap Year Students, uncertain of which path to take in life, have found direction through the project and gone on to gain places at drama schools, colleges and universities. The very first cohort, from the Gap Theatre Project in 2003, remain in contact with Company of Angels and still speak very highly of the project and what it did for them.

The Year 6 pupils we worked with at Icknield Primary School were a real inspiration to us all. Each of them made an incredible personal journey during the production, and overcame worries and fears about performing in front of a large audience and being challenged by new skills and styles of working. Many discovered real talents in themselves they didn't realise they had (including clowning, puppetry, design and dance).

We had a fantastic relationship with them, helped by the bond they forged with the four Gap Year students/graduates (the Gap Company) and the complete support of their class teacher, Jane Reichardt. They were able to share with us their real hopes and feelings about the future, and we, in turn, were able to feed this into the production and give them a platform from which to be heard.

Over the years, the children who have taken part in the project are always keen to stay in touch and we are considering making this easy by installing a visitors' page on the Company of Angels website. Many will be going to their new schools in September with the increased confidence in themselves which a project like this engenders. That makes me really happy. That's what this is all about.

**Leisa Rea**  
**Gap Theatre Project Director 2003,**  
**2005, 2007**



**Artistic Team**

|                  |                              |
|------------------|------------------------------|
| Leisa Rea        | Writer and Director          |
| Laura Baggaley   | Assistant Director           |
| Neil Jones       | Composer                     |
| Jennifer Lewin   | Project Manager & Evaluation |
| Paul Dutnall     | Video                        |
| Liam Jarvis      | Print Design                 |
| Julian H Eardley | Creative Practitioner        |

**Gap Company 2007**

Josh Mann  
Lucy Barnes  
Max Appleton  
Rachel D'Arcy

**Icknield Primary School**

Year 6 Pupils  
Sarah Robins Acting Head  
Jane Reichardt Class Teacher of Year 6  
and all the support staff and other teachers at Icknield Primary School.

**With thanks to**

Alan Nee at Cambridge News  
Cat Moore  
Chris Adams at ADC Theatre  
Chris Hill  
Classworks Theatre  
Hoipolloi  
Jacqui Watkins  
Jolene Barrett  
Lesely Morgan  
Louise Hawes at 209 Radio  
Louise Nicoll  
Mark Long  
Menagerie  
Q103 Radio  
Richard Fredman  
Sally Brown at Harston Village Hall  
Sarah O'Meara at Cambridge News  
Steve Biggs at Young Actors Company  
The Junction  
Val Rutt  
TES (Times Educational Supplement)



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