

Shop Front Theatre

ARCHIVE 2009 – 2022

Full of exciting possibilities

My first-ever encounter with Shop Front Theatre happened in 2014 - weirdly, at another venue. It was an event at The Tin organised by Silhouette Press: *Creative Crush: Working as a Creative Practitioner*.

One of the speakers was this cool playwright bloke called Chris O'Connell who described a project he was involved in that had transformed a chippy into a community theatre. I hadn't realised grassroots arts stuff like that was going on in my own city, it was a real eye-opener. My post-Uni future, as a writer based in Coventry, finally felt full of exciting possibilities.

I didn't know then, but Shop Front Theatre would end up playing a vital role in many of them... it gave me my first-ever writing commission; my first time writing & performing for theatre (and this on my CV then led to first radio play broadcast on BBC R4); and my first time being part of a Coventry-focused writing cohort.

The City Voices workshops were a lifeline for me during a period of writer's block. I was privileged to befriend lots of writers from around the city who I'd never met before – people who hadn't written in ages or who'd never attended a workshop before. Together, we formed a supportive and encouraging mini creative network. I'm still friends with writers from the group, and always pleased to share their latest artistic achievements. Those sessions were an important reminder of how much dormant talent there is in Coventry, and how it just needs a little nudge to be reawakened...

One of my proudest writing achievements is being commissioned to pen a poem for display in Shop Front Theatre's windows during the Covid-19 lockdowns. It granted me the opportunity to directly address my city as they passed by, at a time of serious isolation and need for hope. It was an honour I couldn't turn down.

I felt challenged to write something optimistic without being corny, without knowing what state the world would be in by Feb 2021, and I'd also barely managed to complete any pieces of writing in months - it took a lot of work but I was pleased with the final result. All of the poems in the project looked amazing hanging in the windows, something to read when trudging home loaded down with 'essentials' shopping – a true exhibition of poetry as art!

And the Shop Front Festival in 2018 was one of the best things I've ever seen happen in Coventry city centre. I remember thinking 'it'll just be the usual arts people getting involved, the rest of Cov won't even know it happened'. I couldn't have been more wrong!

The festival was all over; everywhere you looked, people were enjoying pop-up shows and interactive games and installations – there was something to suit every taste.

I'll never forget *The Empathy Museum* and the experience of literally 'walking a mile in someone's shoes' while listening to their story on headphones. The festival was fun and innovative, the curation and organisation flawless.

Raef Boylan