

Shop Front Theatre

ARCHIVE 2009 – 2022

An audacious attempt to redesign the cultural map of Coventry

I've told this story a thousand times but it's always worth repeating. In June 2010 I was about to set off for a theatre internship in the US, when I happened to pass by the shop. It seemed to me that some greater power must have dropped it there by mistake. A 'Shop Front Theatre' in the City Arcade? What even was that?

Had I not had the time pressure of an imminent flight out of the country I probably wouldn't have stopped, and I definitely wouldn't have knocked. The door seemed to open immediately, almost as if I expected – as if I were already late. It was Chris O'Connell. I said a few things, he said a few things. Then I blurted out that I wanted to write for the theatre and that a place like this was manna from heaven. But before Chris could get too encouraging I told him I was leaving the country for six months. That didn't seem to bother Chris in the slightest so I told him that prior to leaving the US in December I would write to him and explore how I might get involved. Time was of the essence as the lease on the Shop was due to expire in 2011.

Cut to that December. The John M. Olin library, Ithaca, New York. Me, hunched over my laptop, proofing and re-proofing. The letter read:

Dear Mr O'Connell

I am writing to explore the possibility of interning as your artistic assistant for the remainder of the Shop Front Theatre project. Having recently graduated with a BA in Theatre and Performance from the University of Warwick, I've been interning as assistant to Artistic Director Peter Flynn here at the Hangar Theatre in Ithaca, NY since June and would welcome the opportunity of working alongside you upon my return in December.

Having been born and raised in Coventry, I have always fostered an acute awareness of how the socio-political issues of our time are affecting our City and of particular concern has always been the feeling of disenfranchisement which affects many of our fellow citizens. Though the belief that we can begin to engage creatively and meaningfully with a community through the inherent power of the theatre is not a new one, the issue of increasing access to such experiences is too often overlooked.

You can therefore imagine my excitement upon stepping into the Shop Front Theatre for the first time a week before my departure to the U.S back in June. The project immediately struck me as an audacious attempt to redesign the cultural map of Coventry; an attempt to create a working dialogue between the City and its people, and all in the spirit of inclusivity and experimentation. I have been following its progress ever since and now express a keen desire to play an active role in its development up until the lease on the shop ends next year.

As my attached resume and reference demonstrate, I have much experience both academically and professionally in many aspects of theatre practice and want to develop these skills further. I would particularly welcome the opportunity to be able to further my understanding of how an audience engages with the unconventional space and to be able to see and reflect upon on the significance of this in relation to social and cultural empowerment. As an aspiring playwright, such themes are of the utmost importance to me.

As you have always recognised in your work, our identities as individuals are inevitably shaped by the environment in which we were raised. To be able to help shape that environment is however an opportunity too few of us realise we have; an opportunity which the Shop Front Theatre highlights with an uncompromising abundance of energy and vigour.

I look forward to discussing my application with you further via email. I will be available for interview after the 25th December.

What strikes me reading this back so many years later (apart from its earnestness!) is how so much of the potential I saw in the Shop Front Theatre has come to pass. It's centrality to the City of Culture bid and programme. The countless artists it brought on and supported. Its role as both cultural and societal cornerstone. If my letter to Chris were the criteria by which the Shop Front could be judged a success, I believe we can safely say it passed with flying colours.

There's so much I could write about Shop Front Theatre – about the shows I put up there, the shows I saw, the artists I met and the lifelong friends I made. But I'd much rather you took the time to read that letter one more time. Twenty-two year old me couldn't have known all that was about to happen, but you do. As do I.

That said, if I were to apply my writerly, critical eye to the letter, I would say it's a little too long. So many years on, a shorter letter shall suffice.

'Chris, Julia Thank you.'

Richard Walls