

A SCHOOL AND THEATRE IN THE HEART OF THE COMMUNITY

SUSI EARNSHAW THEATRE SCHOOL LONDON BOROUGH OF BARNET

ABOUT OUR SCHOOL

Susi Earnshaw Theatre School is an independent specialist non-selective performing arts school located in Barnet High Street for children aged 11-16, from Years 7 to 11. It is rated by Ofsted as an outstanding school. The average class size is 10-12 pupils and the maximum number accepted in any year group is 15. The school currently has 51 children and takes a maximum of 60. It encourages students to look beyond the norm and to dare to dream of new ways of contributing to the performing arts industry.

Formerly sited within a church, the school is now based within the Bull Theatre. It provides a central focus to the area; it is in the middle of the high street and, as a theatre, it attracts people to use the shops and restaurants in the high street. The school has always had a high standing locally. We took over what was a professional theatre and brought it back into the community, and now other schools use it and community groups use it in the evenings. The vision I have is to always give back to the community. Our school completely embraces the community as do our children. If you can give young people the right ethos it will stay with them for the rest of their lives.

We are known as a specialist theatre school with incredibly talented children, but some have gone onto other areas of the arts. For example, Amy Winehouse attended our Saturday school for four years before going on to study at Sylvia Young Theatre School. We had not opened our full time school at that time. Tobi, an 18 year old singer songwriter and guitarist, graduated from the school two years ago. He is now signed to an American record label and has just released his second album.



OUR APPROACH TO ARTS AND CULTURE

Everything we do is about linking the creative arts; the arts are all-encompassing. We orient the curriculum to the arts as the children are here because they want to enter into the performing arts business: radio, TV, film, writing, producing, directing, theatre lighting technology, PR and journalism.

We still need to have excellence and a wider curriculum. Our pupils are academically able as well as very talented vocationally. However we found we have to balance their vocational training with academic results as we don't wish to prevent them from being able to change their minds and go on to university. Therefore the school is constantly changing and developing to adapt to the needs of the children; we alter timetables and subjects taught as necessary, depending on the students each year.

In keeping with the school's central location, the theatrical productions and arts initiatives are embedded within the local community. Four

shows are put on per year and the local junior state schools come to the school for our dress rehearsals and to see Christmas and summer shows for free. We have 120 children at each show who get to learn the behind-the-scenes technology, see the performance, what is going wrong and how much work goes into putting on performances. The children love it and it connects the school with the other local schools. What is interesting is that the state schools are really hungry for it and the private schools don't come. Most of the children are coming from the surrounding local areas, some of which are quite deprived with families on low incomes and so they wouldn't necessarily come to one of our shows otherwise. Some children come to the school on scholarships eventually.

In addition to the scheduled productions the school takes part in wider community initiatives. This summer is the 75th anniversary of Barnet Museum, run by volunteers, which would be lost as a community resource if it were closed. To support its much-needed fundraising to keep it open we performed children's film favourites: *Oliver*, *My Fair Lady*, *Mary Poppins* and *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* to an audience of 500.

Also, we work with the residents' associations to collate activities in Barnet into one brochure, which we create here at the school, around art and cultural engagement. This is published every two months for the community.



The students are given further opportunities to explore broadcasting to reach a wider audience. Each week the children broadcast on EN5Radio.com doing two shows a week, for 52 weeks of the year. They take it in turns to present this talk and music show and at the same time one of them manages social media and Twitter throughout. Students take this really seriously; if they know they can't do their slot, they find someone else to take their place.

The school also runs a number of adult programmes which the school children can be

involved with: we run Bravo, a weekly group for adults with learning difficulties as well as a contemporary dance programme for the over 55s. This gives the children the opportunity to see that art is for everyone.

FEATURED PROJECT

The Role of the Performer within the Community

Susi Earnshaw Theatre School aims to teach its students that a career in the arts is about more than gaining celebrity status. It is about connecting with an audience and the community.

The school's Christmas shows are produced by Year 9-11 students, written for two year old children. The young children are invited to talk with the students afterwards, and their belief in the actors that their characters are real demonstrates to the students the importance of their role and the power of connecting to a young audience.

Additionally a recent project 'Entertaining the Troops' showed how the performing and creative arts raised the morale of those fighting in the two World Wars, demonstrating that there is always a place for performers. The school received funding from the National Lottery, marking the 60th anniversary of VE day, to put together a teacher's pack and DVD around the entertainers from ENSA who entertained the troops in the wars which was compiled by the students and distributed to Barnet schools.

IMPACT

Through the school's approach to education via the performing arts, the children are learning new skills – they communicate very well with adults and young people alike. They have a lot of personal responsibilities, they need to work in teams – and that includes evenings and weekends! They need to get used to doing a range of things such as presenting at a pop festival on the internet radio during the day and then putting their costumes on for something else for the evening. They are often really tired but they step up to the mark as they have responsibility to themselves, each other and the community. They learn this right from

the beginning, from when they are aged 11 years. We're very different from other schools and we can only do it as we're very small and because of the building that we are in. The theatre building has developed us and our characters.

We understand our community and recognise the importance of community to our children. This is our distinctive face. As a result we have a high standing in the local area. All the local traders know us and put posters up for the school. Our children do the lighting for other schools' shows. The council provides limited support to the arts in the borough and no grants are available. We're offering something that is needed – the public recognise that and give us a lot of support.

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNT

Susi Earnshaw Theatre School would recommend that other schools see that art is for everyone, whatever their age and backgrounds. Inter-generational activities can work really well. Children accept difference much more readily than adults. If they have experience of different people as children they can be more understanding as adults. The arts can provide the opportunity for people of different ages and backgrounds to come together.

We find children listen to other children – you are more likely to get a better learning experience and impact if the children are put in charge to talk to their peers. They learn how to manage their own nerves as well and understand how others must be feeling. I remind them actors on stage get nervous too.

At our school teachers are all called by their first name; this gives children a sense that they are 'real' people. It reminds them they are people first and teachers second and that they have feelings just like them.

www.susiearnshaw.co.uk

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Images courtesy of Susi Earnshaw Theatre School