

Comments from members former OYT members

Secondary school is the place that shapes you as a person and for me drama was a major part of that. When we first started doing drama I HATED it but gradually I started to LOVE drama more than anything. Drama gave me the ambition to be someone if I tried hard enough and changed me as a person for the better. Drama helps in all careers paths because as you become more confident, you become more and more ambitious and creative.

I have continued with OYT even though its about an hours drive from where I live. Without drama I really could have seen myself going down the 'wrong path'. I've seen it change so many people, giving unruly kids a sense of determination to make a better life for themselves and shy people a sense of involvement and the feeling of being part of a team, even if they aren't the best at acting. **Lauren is now on a BA English and Drama Course and wants to be a Drama Teacher.**

Oaklands Youth Theatre

I am writing this email from Tokyo, where I am currently assisting Simon McBurney for Theatre de Complicite. I was a member of OYT from 1990 to 1994 and without it, I would not have had the confidence to take a GCSE in Drama or an A level in Theatre Studies, let alone try to forge a career as a director. This has made me even more aware of how unique OYT is, and how lucky I was to benefit from it. Theatre is about engaging your imagination, and once you begin to do this then the possibilities of what can happen both in that theatrical space and also outside it, become much broader.

The style of OYT shows are way more sophisticated than many professional productions I have seen since. They rely on an ensemble mentality, meaning everyone working as a collective. I really don't know what I would have done without it, actually! It taught me so many skills I use today and still has an influence on how I make work, and more importantly, who I am.

Kirsty Housley is now an associate Director with Theatre de Complicite. Kirsty returned to offer her expertise to OYT when, in 2010, they were preparing One Million to STOP THE TRAFFIK

I had an amazing time at OYT. Not only did it give me the opportunity to improve my acting skills, I made great friends, and offered me a place to go when I was having trouble at home. Some of my best memories include visiting the National Student Drama Festival 3 years in a row, which also helped me gain independence.

Drama helped shape me as an individual, and with the support of OYT I was able to succeed and helped me gain an A* drama GCSE score (my only A*). It improved my grades (in English subjects especially), as I could approach subjects with more of an open mind and I could voice my opinion more easily. I am proud to say I attended OYT, as I am now a better person for it.

Katy is now at University

After leaving school with an A* in Drama, the Youth Theatre equipped me with the necessary skills I would need for further training in my field. I left college with a triple Distinction in Performing Arts and I secured a place at Paul McCartney's school of Performing Arts. I do believe the Youth Theatre has played a significant part in my success.

I have since returned to the Youth Theatre to assist with the choreography on the productions. It was a welcoming sight to see how diverse the Youth Theatre has become. It is refreshing to see youngsters putting their energy and efforts into such a productive cause.

Callum Dixon went to the Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts.

Hi my name is Viviane Simpson. I was involved in Oaklands youth theatre all the way through school. I attended Oaklands 1991-1995. It gave me loads of confidence, I was always a wallflower from preschool all the way up to Oaklands. I really enjoyed drama it touched a part of me that was dormant and I will always hold my experiences in OYT close to my heart as it was one of the main things in my life that has made me the person I am and I am happy because of it.

Vivienne (not sure what Viv is up to now)

Hi Mark.

OYT is an amazing organisation run by passionate and inspirational people. OYT is like a family that anyone can join - it is a supportive environment that really nurtures students lives and talents. To have a group like this is a blessing and has brought the best of out of people for decades. Not only does it achieve great results on stage, with published plays and awards to boot, but it also achieves great results in bringing people together in a very, very positive way. I don't know any other school that has something this special at their disposal.

My name is Dave Jones, I am 22 and I joined OYT in Year 9. I was a fairly shy student who had a small group of friends and little chance to express myself and meet people. I was welcomed in to OYT like nothing else I had ever done or, in fact, have done since. There is so much energy and enthusiasm in OYT that it almost feels like a real living entity. It has affected my life, as it has for hundreds of others, in a hugely positive way. It brought me out of my shell both as a performer and as a person.

Dave Jones Dave studied Music composition for films and is now a Music technician. He wrote the score for OYT's One Million to STOP THE TRAFFIK.

I still find myself now, 16 years later, telling people stories about OYT productions that I saw when I was at school. I remember being so moved by them and also proud to go to a school which could produce such quality productions. I don't think there is any other school around, particularly not in this area that is so good at developing talent. 1 production that particularly moved me when I was at Oaklands was Too Much Punch For Judy. I cried and vowed at that moment never to drink and drive or drive recklessly.

OYT is something that Oaklands offers that no other school in this area can match and you should be very, very proud of that.

Gemma (not sure what Gemma is up to now!)

OYT was an integral part of my teenage years. I performed in a number of YT productions – increasing my self-confidence, and my public speaking skills. These elements combined with the pressure of spontaneous improvisation shows enhanced a number of the skills needed to do my work as a barrister today.

OYT offered me opportunities that many young people can only dream of – performing in local festivals, at the Edinburgh Fringe, and the National Student Drama Festival. One bi-lingual production even led to a French tour. I still have a number of close friends that I made in my Youth Theatre days.

OYT doesn't just offer benefits to its members. Thousands of young people, and indeed adults, benefit from the education it offers. The plays tackle high profile current issues – anorexia nervosa, drink driving, online suicide, and human trafficking to name but a few. Making that connection with young people is powerful via the medium of theatre, so much more so than in a standard classroom setting. I myself (aged 13) recognised a friend's anorexia having seen *Hard To Swallow* performed that same year.

My days of performing with youth theatre came to an end when I left the area for University. However, my links with OYT remain. I often go and see performances, and travelled to Edinburgh to see them perform at the Fringe in 2006. As the years pass it never ceases to amaze me how I can be moved to tears, educated, and entertained by OYT. I always leave feeling proud that I was a member of such a successful youth theatre group, and with a sense of sadness that I am (nowhere near!) young enough to still be a member.

Louise Harvey now a Barrister.

I became involved with Oaklands Youth Theatre over 11 years ago, and am still a member now. When I first began I was very shy, unconfident and not a particularly good performer. Despite all of this I felt welcome, and was given the time and help to improve. During this time I have developed confidence, social skills, team work and empathy, whilst enjoying every second!

I have realised I would like to teach drama myself and been accepted onto a University course and offered work with a professional touring theatre company. I am certain that none of these options would be available to me were it not for OYT, and its dedicated staff.

Charli Wells is now studying Drama at degree level at Bristol University and hopes to become a Drama teacher.

I started OYT when I was in year 9, at this point in my life I was not doing all that well; academically and out of school. In school I hung around with the wrong people I constantly found myself in trouble either with other students or teachers. My predicted grades for the SATS were extremely low. The kids I hung around with were not nice people (two are now in prison). I found myself in trouble with a man whose car window was just smashed; I didn't do it. He had hold of me, he did listen to me as I cried my innocence and let me go. I didn't tell my mum I but I knew I needed to get away. OYT was key in my social development; I have had some of the best friends and my best memories come out of OYT.

Ed the Duck (anonymous YT member in recent years who has even more recently made a successful application to do Drama at University!)

OYT made me who I am today, and changed my life.

My home life as a child was complicated.... raised on a council estate, by young parents with virtually no money... my mother developed severe mental disorders which continue today. Education wasn't an important factor to them. I was bullied at school and hung around on the street with people who were older than me. The odds were stacked against me achieving anything in life.

So, what made the difference? My school had a youth theatre that welcomed everyone. OYT actually allowed us to devise and produce our own work, rather than putting on existing scripted shows, which made us feel valued and gave us all a huge sense of self worth. Knowing that your input is worth something is so important. It was a team building activity that taught us to value everyone's input.

Drama festivals were important to me as they allowed us to show our work to a wider audience. Opening our productions up for review taught us to value constructive criticism and respect other peoples opinions. We were also able to see the work other groups were producing, and could take away ideas or inspiration from these to enrich our own productions. It didn't hurt to win a few awards and become ambassadors for our school! Festivals opened a world outside Lordshill, and was key in my ability as an adult to feel comfortable in a strange place or situation.

Without OYT I would never have discovered (and performed at!) the National Student Drama Festival, which was instrumental in getting me a job in a theatre in London. Without OYT I would never have moved to London to study and. OYT, quite literally, kept me off the streets and gave me a purpose. It gave me goals, inspiration, and motivation. Very rarely did I get much positive support from my parents, but the sense of community from my friends at OYT and the driving force of Mark Wheeller encouraged me to stay on the right route.

I am now a married mother of two young children, having spent my university years working in a London theatre, followed by a theatre tour, then a spell in television production. I cannot stress enough how big an influence OYT was in shaping my life as a teenager through to adulthood. It saved me from the clutches of poverty, council estates, teenage pregnancy and a grim future.

Samantha Allen-Turner (nee Phillips) who went on to gain a degree in Drama & Theatre Studies and become a television producer.

I can't say enough about how OYT helped me though my teen years and in so many ways influenced the person I have become today, nearly 15 year later. The drama facilities at the school were one of the main reasons I wanted to go there. I am dyslexic and being good at drama gave me a lot more confidence in other subjects and the reason I was good at drama is because of everything I learnt in OYT. Touring and travelling with OYT taught me a lot about responsibilities and gave me some fantastic friends, a lot of which I still have today.

When I was in year ten I had my career meeting. I told her I wanted to work in television as a researcher and was told people like me don't do jobs like that and maybe I should consider childcare as a career. Through Mark Wheeller and OYT I met people who had interesting jobs in the world of media and theatre. I realised is that they were just normal people who had a passion for something that they became their job. I did go on to become a Television researcher and then a producer a career that lead me to travel a lot and meet some amazing people.

Not everyone in life is academic, I am most definitely not!! But the skills I learnt at OYT and my drama lessons gave me the confidence to pursue a career path which I don't think I could have done otherwise, something for which I am eternally grateful.

Carley Sefton a former TV producer who has returned to work on a voluntary basis as a Director for OYT

I was really nervous when I first went to OYT, worried I would not fit in or be as good as the others who had been going for years. I was instantly made to feel comfortable from every member of the large group and

the atmosphere was fun, lively, friendly and positive. I grew close to everyone in OYT and made a special group of strong friends, of whom I am still friends with to this day! We always reminisce about the fun we had and the memories we share!

OYT made me realise my abilities and gave me a starting point to work and develop my skills. I went on to University at Roehampton, London where I am in my final year completing a BA HONS in Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies. In the future I hope to complete a PGCE in secondary education for Drama, as I want to be that person who helps children develop their skills. Every child deserves the chance to experience the fun and development I had thanks to OYT.

Rachael Dennett is currently completing her PGCE year training to become a Drama Teacher under Andy Kempe at Reading University.

Mark,

I am writing because I realise that I have never properly thanked you for the inspiration that you were to me in my school years. My involvement in OYT provided me with some of the most memorable experiences of my life: experiences that have defined much of my own thinking about drama and education and which certainly set me on the path to where I am today. Looking back now, as an Assistant Headteacher, I realise that my passion for education and for teaching drama was sparked some twenty years ago in my first OYT audition.

I had never anticipated the rich life-experiences that would accompany this. Visiting Graham Salmon at his home and spending time with such a truly inspirational man is an experience I treasure to this day and that I often find myself sharing with students in lessons and assemblies!

My involvement in OYT over the ensuing five years opened up a whole new world to me. What strikes me now is the sheer breadth of 'real' theatrical experience that this provided for me: being on the writing team for *Hard to Swallow*; visiting the Edinburgh Festival Fringe; performing at the National Theatre; designing posters, touring Houston; performing in live improv shows; writing and directing my own piece and taking it to a local amateur drama festival. This inspired me to want to be a teacher.

It was only really when I started teaching that I realised just how rare and special OYT is. As a drama teacher I quickly set about mounting school productions and events. However, I quickly realised that the breadth of experiences that I had encountered as a member of the Youth Theatre were just not possible within the confines of a school production. Consequently, I worked with Brendan Burns at the Haymarket Theatre in Basingstoke to set up a Youth Theatre. This ran for a couple of years but I'm afraid still never really offered the breadth of experiences I'd had in OYT.

Now, as Assistant Headteacher, in this era of extended schools and in the context of a new National Curriculum which welcomes 'real' experiences for young people, I wish that my school could have a Youth Theatre on site. The benefits to the school and the community as a whole I can now see are immense.

More importantly, the potential benefits to individual young people, if they were to have anything close to the experiences that I had in OYT, would be immeasurable.

Chris is an Assistant Head in a Hampshire School

I attended the Scarborough drama festival with the Youth theatre and it opened my eyes to the possibilities of art. I was also given the amazing opportunity of directing a group of my peers at a very young age which later enabled me to get into a drama school in London to study directing. OYT was very important in my life and I now teach drama in an inner city school in London so clearly it affected my choices in life. I also saw it help many of my peers and inspire them to want more from their lives than they would have without it. It made me the teacher I am today.

Linzi Adams is teaching Drama in disadvantaged countries.

I am very proud of what Georgina [my daughter] has achieved at OYT; the theatre group has played a major part in my daughters development not only as an actress but as a person. I believe she has benefited from having a safe environment to put into practise her artistic skills as well as the opportunity to develop positive relationships with her peers and her Teachers.

Andrew Mattack – Aged 44 – HR Manager, Parent of OYT member

OYT is a fantastic theatre group, not only for its members but for its audience too. It is a wide-reaching group that appeals to all ages; the audience varies from teens to OAPs. I feel it 'teaches' it's teenage audience that plays and the theatre are not scary or out of reach. It covers many varied topics, from light to heavy, from audience participation to thought-provoking dramas. Some topics are very salient and open the audiences eyes to another aspect of the world around them, whether it's frivolous or highly emotional.

Cath Mattack – Aged 44 – Teaching Assistant, Parent of OYT member
