

Ctrl.Alt.Shift



Above: Fiona Ross.

Autumn 2008 saw Sadler's Wells education programme, Connect, team up with Ctrl.Alt.Shift – the youth sub-brand of Christian Aid - on a project which pushed the Connect team out of its comfort zones and into the areas of sex education and the political engagement of young people. **Fiona Ross**, Head of Connect, tells us more

Sadler's Wells is a theatre with a strong, dynamic contemporary programme, dedicated to bringing the very best international and UK dance to London audiences. The theatre presents a diverse year round programme of dance performances,

from cutting-edge performance to mainstream contemporary dance, tango to tap and flamenco to family shows. In recent years, under the direction of Alistair Spalding, Sadler's Wells has started to commission and produce its own projects. Collaborations with Associate artists

like Sylvie Guillem, Akram Khan and Russell Maliphant have demonstrated the value a venue can have in encouraging new creative collaborations.

This approach to producing and curating has been echoed through the work of Connect, which curates,

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Above: Sadler's Wells Ctrl. Alt. Shift project. Photo: Belinda Lawley.



commissions and produces community and education projects in partnership with our Associate artists and some external partners. In this way, Sadler's Wells Connect sees its work as a broker, catalyst and producer for projects. We encourage our associate and visiting companies to stretch themselves, to imagine new projects and we provide the support for this. Where appropriate we also work in partnership with external organisations, where Sadler's Wells can add value to a project or lead on an unexpected event - like Ctrl.Alt.Shift.

Sadler's Wells was approached by Christian Aid in early 2008, who were developing a new and experimental sub-brand, Ctrl.Alt.Shift, aimed at engaging young people aged 16-25 in the understanding of key development issues, while raising awareness of ways for them to become involved. Christian Aid wanted to create three distinctive international creative

exchange projects with cultural institutions utilising the arts to activate an interest from young people to effect change. The other organisations signed up were The Baltic art gallery in Gateshead and photography magazine VICE. An interesting proposition.

The Ctrl.Alt.Shift branding was fresh, bold, high impact and perfectly pitched for youth audiences. The language of the Ctrl.Alt.Shift campaign website and magazine publicity was designed to motivate and engage, describing the project as an "activist movement of passionate and outspoken individuals joined in the fight against poverty and social injustice". The budget was large. The opportunity for Sadler's Wells Connect to curate an issue-based event was exciting, and it would stretch us. We knew that dance was well suited to delivering issue-based messages and felt that the ethos of Ctrl.Alt.Shift would appeal to the younger audiences Sadler's Wells

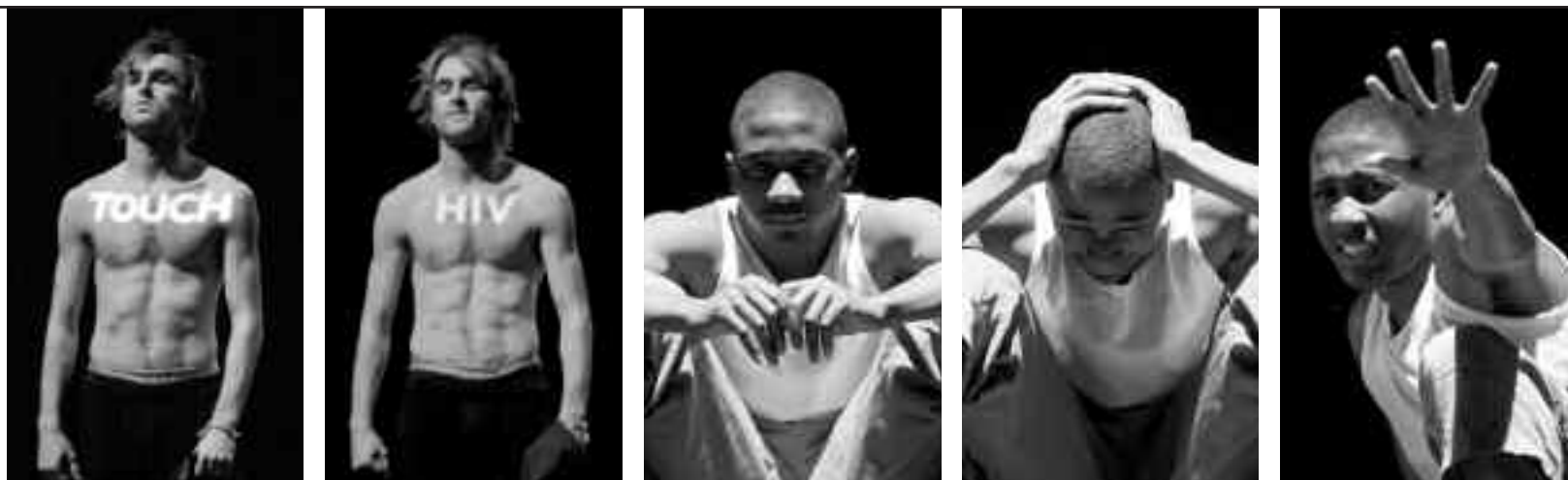
attracts. So, we signed ourselves up to Ctrl.Alt.Shift, which turned into a six-month rollercoaster of international bank transfers, sex education workshops, PR campaign launches and production meetings.

Of course the practicalities of getting the show on the road were much like any other project. Research, head scratching, planning, more head scratching, contracting and delivery. The first decision was how to create the international creative exchange. We wanted to work in Africa, ideally with a group of young Africans. However, did we take artists from the UK to work in Africa? Or did we invite dancers to come and perform in London? We decided on an exciting combination of both. Partnering up with creative arts agency LiveEd, directed by Rachel Bradbear, we accessed Ombetja Yehinga Organisation (OYO). This group was based in Namibia where one in five of the population is HIV positive. I'd heard about OYO through reading an Animated article by Wieke Eringa who had met and worked with the group and their French-born director Philippe Talavera. Both Rachel and Wieke told compelling tales of young Namibian performers touring Namibia teaching young people about HIV/AIDS awareness through dance, music, drama and song. LiveEd had recently brokered a visit to Namibia for dancers Victoria 'Skytilz' Mantey and Simone 'Flex' Wilson from Olivier-Award winning Hip Hop company Boy Blue Entertainment. Both had spent a week in Namibia in May 2008 training OYO artists in hip hop dance performance and teaching skills.

To inspire and engage the target audience about HIV/AIDS issues, we



All pictures: Sadler's Wells Ctrl. Alt. Shift project. Photos: Belinda Lawley.



commissioned Boy Blue Entertainment and three UK youth groups to create original works that would be showcased at a special Ctrl.Alt.Shift performance on Saturday 22 November 2008. Boy Blue dancers Skytilz and Flex were also commissioned to return to Namibia to work with eight dancers from OYO and create a work that would be performed back in the UK. OYO would also present two of their own pieces, a dance and an acapella song. Lastly, film partners Circus Media came onboard to document Skytilz and Flex's trip to Namibia and capture the process and progress of the UK-based groups. The films created would be screened during the show.

The UK groups commissioned were FuzzyLogic male dance company from Southampton; Bennu, the Leeds-based youth dance group linked to Phoenix Dance Theatre and East London Dance Youth Company. Each company would work over a two month period to create a 6 - 8 minute work exploring a issue related to stigma and HIV including; fear, stereotyping, myths and rumours, chain of infection and the biology of the HIV virus. The show was presented at the Peacock Theatre, Sadler's Wells 1000-seater venue in the West End.

Offering guidance to the dance groups was Michael Bath, sexual health & relationship adviser, who led a workshop with each group. We wanted this to be an essential ingredient in the project - to ensure the performers had a solid factual knowledge of HIV/AIDS but also contributing positively to their own ongoing sex education. For most groups though this was met with inevitable giggles and embarrassment.

Charis Osbourne-Charles, Education Manager for Leeds-based youth group Bennu, the session provided useful information on a personal and creative level. "Initially they were shy and I think embarrassed because I was in the room with them. Once I had left they got into the workshop and when I did return to the workshop they were really engaged. It was a really important feature of the project...it gave them more information which helped with the understanding of the piece we were working on, therefore allowing their true emotion to come across in the performance."

As the show loomed closer, the different elements started pulling together. Circus Media visited Leeds and Southampton to film Bennu and FuzzyLogic in rehearsal, Boy Blue Entertainment had an intensive week of rehearsals and the seven OYO dancers from Namibia arrived on a particularly chilly November day for a week of final rehearsals at Sadler's Wells. Rehearsing their own pieces in the mornings and then rehearsing each afternoon with Skytilz and Flex they had limited time to get out and about in London, but did manage to get a tour of Arsenal's new Emirates Stadium which they were thrilled about!

A brilliant experience for the young performers was of critical importance. We'd all been involved in shows where different groups had met each other only briefly and didn't feel part of a 'performing company'. A schedule was devised which would enable the performers to spend an afternoon and evening together, getting to know each other in a group warm-up and workshop, sharing their pieces. As Charis Osbourne-Charles reports "the

Friday sharing was essential. All of the groups were aware of how big this project was but until they were all put into the same room to watch each others interpretation on the theme, they hadn't realized quite how big! It was great to see the different groups mix into one huge group and the warm-up/workshop helped to start bringing down the barriers. It added excitement to each of the groups and there was a really fantastic energy in the room. Everybody wanted each other to do well making it such a positive experience."

The night before the show, the groups attended a performance by Jasmin Vardimon Dance Company at The Peacock. This was a fun social for the groups that also gave them an insight into being an audience member at the theatre where they themselves would perform the next day. The budget also allowed us to arrange two nights accommodation for the out of London groups so groups didn't need to rush off to catch trains or coaches directly after the show.

One of the principal ambitions for Christian Aid was to gain significant press attention and coverage for the project. Sign-ups to the Ctrl.Alt.Shift campaign would only increase if the profile of the project was pushed intensively. To this end, influential figures Nitin Sawhney and Carlos Acosta were engaged as creative ambassadors for the project, offering inspiration for the performance. Although not directly involved in the delivery of Ctrl.Alt.Shift, Acosta lent his support through quotes expressing his belief that "dance has the power to engage the most diverse groups of people from all walks of life and it's

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fantastic that Ctrl.Alt.Shift is using it to highlight such an important issue for today's youth." Sawhney's involvement was more direct. He attended the Ctrl.Alt.Shift show and spend Friday afternoon with the performers, watching their rehearsals, talking about his own career and his thoughts on the importance of creative exchange and sharing tips on how to remain calm and focused before going on stage - a tip that was welcomed by the nervous performers!

Equally, Ctrl.Alt.Shift were also hugely concerned about the presentation of the venue. A team was engaged to put up banners, posters and campaign branding on virtually every surface and wall-space. T-shirted volunteers signed up audience members to the campaign on hand-held PDAs and gave out magazines and flyers.

So what are the risks and benefits of theatres moving into more of a curation and commissioning role? Is it good to stretch out of our comfort zones?

Ctrl.Alt.Shift was an immensely successful collaboration for Sadler's Wells and Christian Aid. For Sadler's Wells the performance contained the ingredients of a great show - impact and integrity, strong performances, a full auditorium and an engaged audience.

For the performers the experience of tackling issue-based material and making personal and creative exchanges was clearly crucially important. These young dancers certainly provided a fresh approach to the issues of HIV/AIDS. OYO's director Philippe Talavera feels the trip demystified Europe for his Namibian dancers. He believes they "travelled both physically and emotionally". Although there had been some concern that his dancers may not feel as experienced as the UK-based youth groups, he was delighted that they infact felt "equal and confident" working alongside the other dancers. Philippe hopes to bring some of the UK choreographers and possibly some

of the youth dancers to work with him in Namibia. The dancers benefited creatively and socially. Indeed, Zoie Golding, director of FuzzyLogic reported that an unofficial aftershow party back at the hostel where FuzzyLogic, Bennu and OYO were staying went on until 4.30am!

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The project certainly did stretch Sadler's Wells Connect conceptually and heightened our awareness of the importance of expectations with partners. As we all know partnerships require careful negotiation, empathy and clarity of vision. A cautionary note would be that whilst sharing common goals, our commissioning partners did place significantly different emphasis on different parts of the project. The project was driven by Ctrl.Alt.Shift and their PR agency whose main interest was in profile raising coverage, attention grabbing and maximizing sign-ups for the overall campaign. For these partners, the coverage and 'look' of the event was equally, if not important, than the content of the event itself. Proceed with caution!

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The next production for Connect is Destino, a landmark collaboration with Dance United and choreographers Hofesh Shechter and Russell Maliphant involving 120 local people from Islington. Destino can be seen at Sadler's Wells on 12 & 13



Above: Sadler's Wells Ctrl. Alt. Shift project. Photo: Belinda Lawley.