

MAYA PRODUCTIONS REPORT ON HACKNEY STREETS



INTRODUCTION

Hackney Streets was written for Write to Ignite - Hackney Word Festival 2007 as part of the brief for the appointed Hackney "Poet Laureate". This was an opportunity for Michael Rosen to bring together a number of his existing poetry with stories and research which he'd been collecting over many years living in Hackney. Write to Ignite was able to work with the drama department at Brook House 6th form College to rehearse and perform the work. Directed and developed by Christopher Preston, *Hackney Streets* was given one performance by the drama students with Michael Rosen at the Round Chapel, Clapton on 26th September 2007. We hoped to be able to present the work with professional voices in the future. Plans to produce *Hackney Streets* as part of a Hackney Playwrights season incorporating work from our playwriting course did not eventuate and an offer to be programmed at the Rosemary Branch Theatre as part of their "Branching Out" season of new and experimental work seemed entirely appropriate.

PRE-PRODUCTION

The decision to divide the choral work into four groups with the audience in the middle meant that 12 actors were needed and the wide range of characters and accents necessitated both versatility and diversity in the cast. Actors local to Hackney or with strong connections with Maya Productions were approached but final commitment was delayed until the week before rehearsals. This meant that publicity and press releases went out before casting was complete.



Michael Rosen

MARKETING

Associate Producer, Robin Norton-Hale designed the marketing image using a Maya Productions archive image of Ridley Road Market. This was much admired and was particularly relevant as the market cries are a feature of the play. Five thousand A6 postcards were produced and we were able to share the cost of printing and distributing these with The Fix and Nathan Penlington who presented 3 evenings of Poetry, music and magic following *Hackney Streets*. Hackney Libraries distributed cards to all branches in the borough and we covered bookshops, cafes and bars in Stoke Newington, Dalston, Homerton, Hoxton, Shoreditch and Angel Islington. Press releases were emailed to all national and local press and listings publications. *Hackney Streets* information was included in the Rosemary Branch season brochure and website. It was also featured on the Maya Productions and Write to Ignite sites. Maya Board members were asked to promote the production by organising parties of up to 10.



Chorus 1 – L to R Josh Cass, Hamza Mohsin, Eileen Pollock

CASTING

The prospect of assembling 12 actors was quite daunting and we were greatly helped by Cecelia at the Rosemary Branch in identifying local performers. Casting Call Pro and Cast Web were used to extend the choice and Immediate Theatre suggested one of two youth theatre actors who joined a very experienced company.

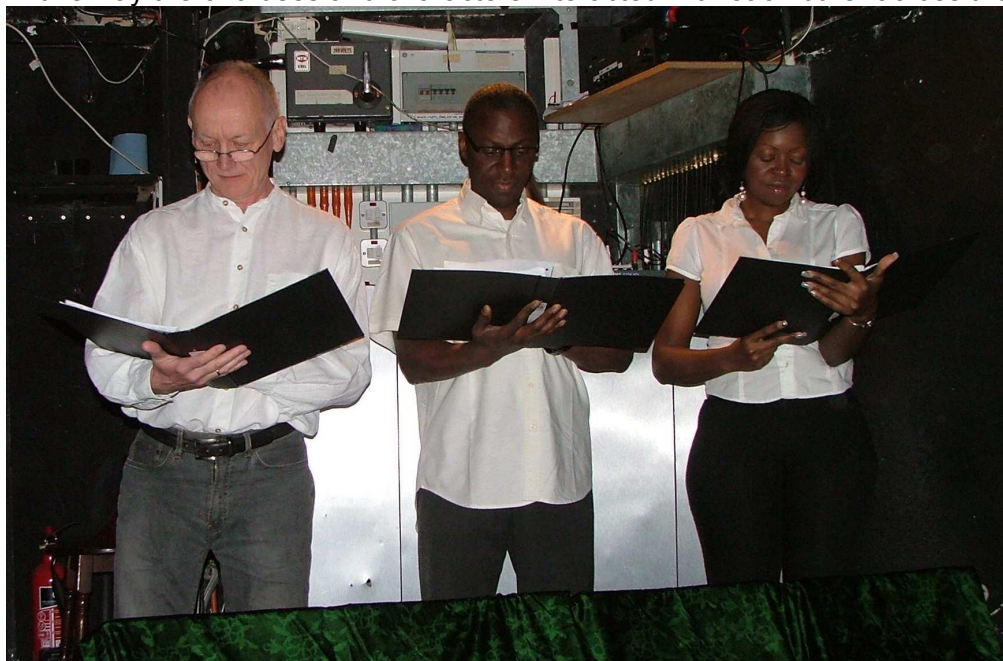
REHEARSALS

As part of Write to Ignite, we were able to find free rehearsal space at Stamford Hill Library where we rehearsed for 3 days. Because the play is read, the rehearsals concentrated on bringing the ensemble together and ensuring that the chorus parts worked in unison, giving shape and pace to the piece.

THE PERFORMANCES

Six performances were given at the Rosemary Branch beginning on Tuesday 28th October 2008. Two rows of seats were removed or covered at the back of the auditorium on each side and three rows of 5 seats placed on the stage area at right angles to the fixed seating. This arrangement allowed for the capacity to remain at

55 and for the four choruses to take their positions in the four corners of the space. In this way the choruses and characters interacted with each other across the



Chorus 2: L to R – Richard Earthy, Cyril Nri, Yetunde Oduwole

audience. Some of the audience wanted to look at the actors, but others were content to listen. Attendance was a very encouraging 66% and audience comments were full of praise for the production. Unfortunately no reviewers attended mostly due to the short run but an audience survey was carried out with the following results.

23% of the audience responded to the questionnaire

Postcodes: 53% of the audience came from Hackney and N1 borders indicating strong local support for the venue, Maya Productions and the writer.

Finding out about the event:- Word of mouth was the most effective marketing tool. (86%) This choice may have included personal email lists from participants, Michael Rosen & Maya Productions. 20% saw a leaflet while only 2% saw a Season Brochure. In spite of coverage in Hackney today, only 4% had read the article or seen Time Out listings. And a disappointing 8% had looked up a website.

Attending a previous event like this:- 60% are regular theatre goers but 34% said they had not attended an event like this before. Most of these said they had attended a play or drama in the past 2 years, indicating that this group found the productions different from anything they had previously experienced.

What made you go to this event?

73% were interested in the performers or writer

55% had been invited by someone

49% had been recommended by someone

43% like to support the venue

41 % Live locally

Only 14% had read a leaflet or looked at a website and only 4% had read about the production in the press.

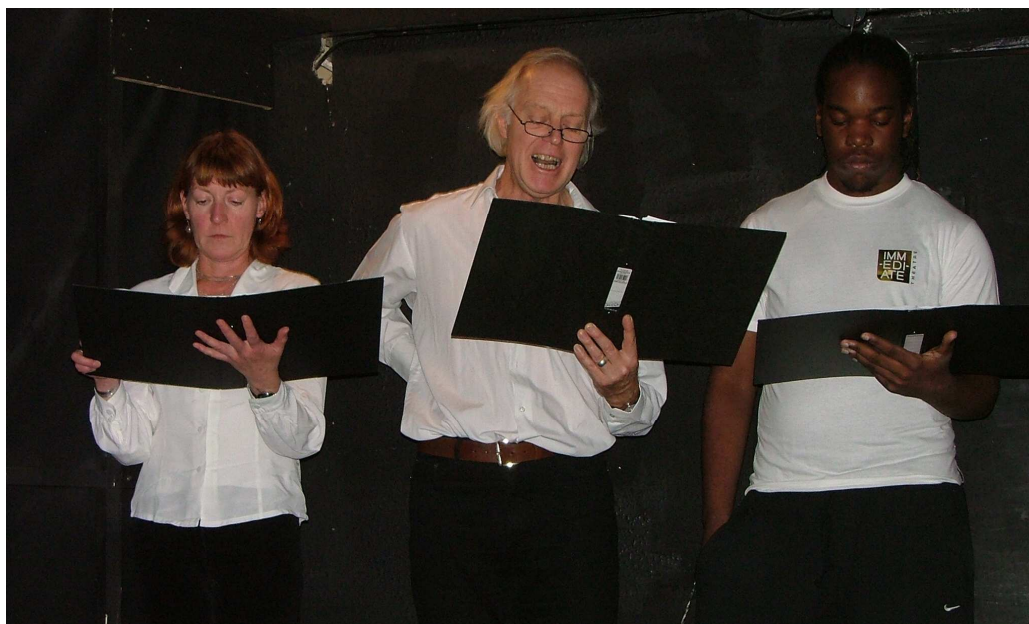
The combination of Michael Rosen and having 12 actors in the cast explains the high scores for the first 5 categories. Added to this is that Michael Rosen lives locally and has a following. These reasons are interlinked as few people go to the theatre alone, usually inviting a family member or neighbour. By contrast the lack of interest from the press is reflected by the low score on this question. Somewhat disappointing was the result for leaflets and websites.

Experience of the event:

Advance information: 27% Excellent, 35% Good 20% Average
Box office. staff welcome & help: 69% Excellent, 29% Good, 4% Average
Atmosphere & Facilities: 51% Excellent, 43% Good, 4% Average
Quality of performance & material: 80% Excellent, 13% Good
Value for money: 76% Excellent, 18% Good
Physical & sensory access: 38% Excellent, 29% Good, 8% Average

For Advanced information, the range is indicative of the limited success of securing preview articles specifically for this production. Write to Ignite was featured in Hackney Today and The Hackney Gazette mentioned us in passing in relation to the Rosemary Branch Branching Out season.

It is excellent to have overwhelmingly positive responses to the Box Office, staff welcome, atmosphere and facilities and this in some way makes up for the steep stairs which some customers found difficult when scoring physical and sensory access. The excellent acoustics of the theatre, however allowed deaf customers to follow the show clearly.



Chorus 3: L to Rt Sally Armstrong, Ben Bazell, Jerome Boothe

80% of customers found the quality of performance and material excellent which is gratifying for the company. A similar percentage (76) also found the show excellent value for money, which is particularly interesting as the performance lasted 35 minutes and cost £6.50.

Attendance at other cultural events in the past two years

The majority of the audience are highly engaged with cultural activities. Museums consistently come out on top since the introduction of free entry, but this audience

are equally regular in their theatre attendances followed closely by film. 48% of the audience were 45 or over and 18% between 35 and 44. This has an influence on the lower percentages attending Night clubs, Stand up Comedy and Pop concerts which are associated with younger age groups.



Chorus 4: l to Rt Joe Shefer, Janie Booth, Nathan Thompson

Age range, ethnicity & disability

- White British 68%
- Other White 10%
- Mixed white & Black Caribbean 4%
- White & Black African 2%
- Asian 2%
- Black Caribbean 2%

These demographics are not representative of the Ethnic breakdown of Hackney where 44% identify as White British.

- 65 or over – 18%
- 35 - 44 18%
- 45 – 54 16%
- 55 – 64 14%
- 25 – 34 14%
- 20 – 24 4%
- 16 – 19 4%
- Under 16 2%

This age range indicates that Michael Rosen has a considerable following amongst older people.

- Deaf 4%
- Disabled 2%
- Neither 61%
- Didn't say 33%

Comments:

A great piece, very atmospheric though presenting a romantic view of Hackney: modern development seems bad, old development presented as good.
This should be a radio performance. Actors were outstanding.
That's excellent that is.
Fabulous. Really enjoyed it. Glad I was told about it! Will come again.
Brilliant: local: poetic, show. A great evening - & Pete Docherty too!
Excellent
Good to hear spoken verse that trusts the voices. Lovely piece of theatre.
So good, as a Hackney teenager I find it inspiring & it is so well performed. Thank you! Was Brilliant
Beautiful show.
Lovely afternoon. Glad I came.
All-round great!
Very enjoyable
Fantastic
Really interesting – never knew Shakespeare's theatre was in Hackney
Fantastic writing + performance. Great Atmosphere

Recording

The performance on the 29th October was recorded by the British Library for their sound archive where it may be heard by members of the Library.

Hackney Streets was written by Michael Rosen, directed by Christopher Preston and performed by: Sally Armstrong, Ben Bazell, Jainie Booth, Jerome Boothe, Josh Cass, Richard Earthy Hamza Mohsin, Cyril Nri, Yetunde Oduwole, Eileen Pollock, Joe Shefer & Nathan Thompson. Poster design by Robin Norton-Hale

It was performed at the Rosemary Branch Theatre 2 Shepperton Road London N1
3DT Tues 28 Oct – Sat 1 Nov @ 7.30pm Sun 2 Nov @ 4.00pm

SUMMARY & CONCLUSIONS

I was extremely fortunate to be able to work with such excellent actors. Time and again they were complimented on their performance and this is partly due to the quality of the writing. I was particularly pleased to be able to ask 2 young youth theatre actors to join us, giving them the opportunity to work with very experienced professionals. Everyone got a lot out of the experience. With such a short rehearsal period, my first priority was to get an ensemble together so that the choral speaking would come together as a force in the play, driving the pace and reacting with, for or against the individual characters which emerged to tell their stories. Michael's story of Hackney reiterates the patterns of the history of London which other biographers have recorded, but in this case the character of Hackney, while recognisably "London" is distinctive. My thanks to Michael for this work.

It was a pleasure to work at the Rosemary Branch Theatre with friendly and accommodating management, willing to take risks and supportive of new and experimental work. Audience and company alike found it a great venue with lots of atmosphere. We will hope to present more work there in the future.

Thanks to: Hackney Library Services for rehearsal space.

Christopher Preston Producer/Director November 2008