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The Truth About Youth: It's good to talk

Dave Cunningham previews the Truth About Youth at the Royal Exchange in Manchester.

By Editorial Staff • 16 Sep 2013 • Northwest



The Truth about Youth
© Royal Exchange Theatre

The Royal Exchange's *Truth about Youth* programme, which sets out to challenge negative perceptions of young people, has become even more ambitious.

In 2012 *My Young and Foolish Heart* brought together an intergenerational group of non-actors on stage at the theatre. This year the programme sets out to use video streaming to take the audience out of the theatre to observe and converse direct with the young participants and to visit parts of the city with which they may be unfamiliar. I went behind the scenes to see the effort and innovation needed to create the online participative experience.

Interactive artists Blast Theory have developed the project entitled *My Neck of the Woods*. Seven young volunteers carrying unobtrusive equipment, no bigger than a satchel, will film themselves wandering around their chosen locations discussing things that interest them, showing off their skills and pointing out sites that have a particular meaning for them. This material becomes the live feed that can be observed by anyone who logs onto the site from home or uses one of the terminals at the Exchange.

By signing in your e-mail address, you are able to observe the cast wandering around and listen to them talk about their lives. There is also the chance to play a more active role. The cast raise questions and ask for advice on issues such as musical preferences, food, sustainability and the most appropriate items to take on a visit to London.

Respondents are drawn into a conversation with the volunteers and have the option to switch between them until they find a video stream that looks most appealing. People whose interest is limited to theatre may be encouraged to take part as one of the sites that will be visited is backstage at the Royal Exchange.

Although this will be very much a spontaneous experience a great deal of care has been taken to ensure its success. One of the egalitarian features of the *Truth about Youth* programme is that the people who work backstage are regarded as just as important as the performers. This is certainly the case with the current production with the youngsters displaying a terrifying technical skill with the equipment needed to make the show succeed and a baffling ability to speak techno-babble.

The show will be entirely live and subject to any developments that arise on the night. Technical support will be available to deal with any emergencies and advise if environmental factors (traffic noise and so on) are affecting the quality of the broadcast. Blast Theory has developed a loose structure for the production in consultation with the cast. Using techniques as basic as a 'Blue Peter' compass and as sophisticated as Google earth the cast traced their route from residence to the Royal Exchange pointing out landmarks with a personal significance. The stories around these sites will provide an emotional core for the broadcast.

Ultimately, however, *My Neck of the Woods* seeks to achieve communication between people. What is said is less important than the act of conversing and taking part. The Royal Exchange and Blast Theory hope that theatregoers will show support and join in the event. And it really couldn't be much easier to do so.

This combination of documentary, performance and live-stream video experience runs for two hours each evening between 5.30 pm to 7.30pm on Friday and Saturday 20th and 21st September during which time audiences can dip in and out and stay for as long as desired.

You can take part online at www.myneckofthewoods.co.uk or by using the free online terminals at the Royal Exchange.

It is, after all, good to talk.

- Dave Cunningham

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