

# Evaluating Drama-based Crime Prevention: Young People's Affective Engagement with Performance

## Thematic Summary

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*Terriers* is a play written by Maurice Bessman and directed by Miriam Mussa. It was commissioned by the Merseyside Police in response to concerns about gun and gang crime, which intensified locally following the murder of 11-year-old Rhys Jones in Croxteth in 2007. Since 2008, *Terriers* has been seen by over 120,000 young people from secondary and primary schools across Merseyside and the UK. The play is typically followed by a Q&A session led by the actors.

Our research sought to explore qualitatively how *Terriers* creates, engages and influences audiences, with the intention of understanding the social impact of the intervention, including its potential contribution to crime prevention. A multi-method approach was adopted and included: ethnographic observation of performances and follow-up activities at several venues, including a case study school; participatory, arts-based activities to analyse young people's experiences and the meanings they give to the *Terriers* intervention; analysis of RCLT documents, including annual reports; semi-structured interviews with eleven adult stakeholders; and an online survey of schools participating in the 2015-16 Merseyside tour.

Five self-selecting young people at the case study school acted as 'co-researchers' with two members of the research team. This participatory research approach meant that young people had a meaningful level of involvement in the evaluation of *Terriers*. Other research methods at the case study school were designed with the aim of capturing students' initial, raw and immediate responses to the *Terriers* performance. These included: the opportunity to record images and words on large canvases; short interviews using a fixed camera in a black cab; and an opportunity to offer short 'soundbites' to co-researchers, who filmed them using iPads. The data was analysed thematically and a number of the resultant themes are discussed in the full evaluation report. Three of them are briefly outlined below: engaging the imagination; authenticity and identification; and relationships and support structures.

## Online survey of schools and colleges

We contacted Merseyside schools and colleges participating in the 2015-16 tour, using a contact list provided by the Royal Court Liverpool Trust (response rate 41%).<sup>1</sup>

- 80% (12 of 15) of respondents suggested that the student audience was 'strongly engaged' when watching the play. The same number suggested that the student audience 'strongly enjoyed' *Terriers*. One respondent did not watch the play with students, so couldn't comment on engagement or enjoyment.
- Reported feedback on staff reactions suggests that staff were also 'very engaged', 'very positive' and 'keen to rebook'.
- 87% (13 of 15) of school and colleges responding to the survey had invited a repeat performance of *Terriers*.
- 40% (6 of 15) of respondents reported that 5 or more performances of the play had been booked at their school or college.
- Survey responses suggest that *Terriers* is most likely to be performed for Years 9 and 10, or 13-15 year olds. The play is shown to a range of secondary and upper primary year groups.
- 87% of respondents (13 of 15) reported only positive experiences of working with the *Terriers* team, who were described as 'excellent', 'efficient', 'very professional', 'highly inspirational' and a 'highlight for us'. The remaining two responses were neutral: no comment and an acknowledgment that meeting the requirements of the performance can be difficult in some school buildings.
- When asked why the team were invited to perform, 47% (7 of 15) of respondents made direct reference to 'gangs' or gun crime. Responses also emphasised broader social issues and support, the stimulating and thought-provoking aspects of the play, its accessibility to young people and reports of its positive impact, for example from the local Safer Schools Officer.
- Only 20% (3 of 15) of respondents reported that the toolkit was used in their school or college. 27% did not know if it was used.
- Survey respondents reported using the toolkit in Drama and Citizenship lessons. It was judged to be a 'good' or 'very good' resource that allows students to 'explore issues' or 'use drama to explore issues safely'.

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<sup>1</sup> The number of responses is indicated for quantified claims as questions were optional. Respondents were offered the choice of remaining anonymous or identifying themselves. They were also invited to forward password details to a suitable colleague if they were unable to complete the survey. In one case, the same contact name was provided for two schools. Responses for those schools were returned by staff reporting different roles. Three respondents also took part in interviews, and care was taken in the full report to ensure that claims involving both datasets took this into account.



Figure 2 includes a range of enthusiastic words and images such as 'brilliant', 'amazing' and 'well good' together with smiley faces. A drawing of a gun is coloured in a soft orange and the text beside it reads: 'Load your gun with hopes not bullets!'



Figure 2: Selected *positive* text and images from the canvases

Even the more negative responses (Figure 3) tended to reflect the darker themes in the plot, rather than reactions to the actual performance. These included sad emoticons/emojis and images of guns and broken heart symbols, as well as words such as 'death' and 'violence'. In the videos, pupils described the *Terriers* play as 'upsetting', 'sad' and 'scary', and explained that this was because the issues it presented are actually a very real part of their lives.



Figure 3: Selected *negative* text and images from the canvases

The immediate responses from the case study school revealed that young people had successfully identified the play's key themes. For example, elements of the canvases illustrated young people's





models is an important strategy in terms of the play being able to provide an immersive experience. Whilst the realism of some of the narratives is queried, there is little doubt that audience members are able to identify with at least some of the issues raised.

One of the co-researchers spoke about the inner-city area where he lives:

I'm not saying that my family's involved in all that, but I've heard people die over the road from where I live. And it's scary – knowing that this sort of stuff happens less than a hundred yards from your bedroom window. Which my bedroom window's on the back and it looks over to [Street] where someone got shot and murdered. I'm not even gonna say shot anymore - murdered. You get shot, yeah, but you're taking a boy, you're taking someone's son. (Co-researcher)

This description of the crime as 'murder' is a notion that the co-researcher took directly from the *Terriers* play. The character Luke challenges Drew's use of euphemisms in a way very similar to the co-researcher's self-correction: Drew talks about how he was shot; Luke argues that he was murdered and should 'tell it like it is'.

The 'realistic' nature of the storyline, the acting and the clothes worn by the actors was also a recurring theme in young people's immediate responses to the play at the case study school. Given that the play incorporates dance, 'slow motion' scenes and a supernatural element (two characters are dead and communicating from the afterlife), this emphasis is particularly notable.

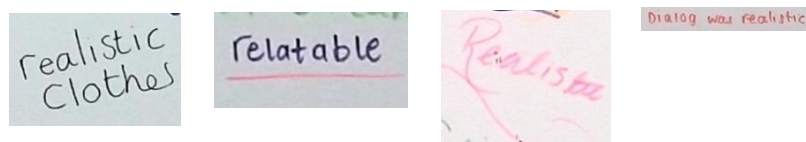


Figure 5: Selected *realism* text from the canvases

The play's Writer and Director intended that *Terriers* should be as authentic as possible. As such, they distance themselves from more didactic, 'teach and preach' forms of 'Theatre in Education'. The Writer explained how he would 'try and bury' the play's message in a story and let the audience work it out, 'rather than wagging the finger'. This means that the audience has to reflect on the play's content in order to 'work it out'. Viewers become active participants in interpreting the storylines and characters' actions. This was supported by interviews with teachers and comments in the school survey, with one respondent noting how the play 'never once patronised' its audience.

### Theme three: relationships and support structures

This theme includes the audience reaction to the relationships portrayed in the play. It also explores relationships outside the play and the support structures that are in place in schools to assist young people with some of the issues raised in *Terriers*.

The Writer told us that *Terriers* is ‘a love story’ and it is clear that the audience at the case study school recognised this. One of the predominant, repeated images on the canvases was a love heart with an arrow through it. The students had also repeatedly written portmanteaus of characters’ names, so Eve and Eightball became ‘Eveball’; Chelsea and Aldo become ‘Chaldo’. The romantic theme extended to audience members expressing their own attraction to the characters (or perhaps to the actors playing them) on the canvas: ‘Luke is fit’ and ‘Mmm Aldo’ (Figure Six).



Figure 6: Selected text and images on *relationships* from the canvases

Whilst Chelsea and Aldo’s relationship might be construed as romantic, Eve and Eightball’s is much more problematic. Eightball continually exploits Eve and again this tended to be recognised by the audience: ‘He seduces her and he manipulates her’ said one co-researcher. Another added that ‘he basically talks about girls as in bragging’. They could identify with this, seeing it ‘in everyday life’, and they made links between Eightball and a boy in their class who ‘talks crudely. And like Eightball [...] he talks like that and he’d do actions, and he’d skit people for certain sexual things – for not doing certain sexual things’ (Co-researcher). The co-researchers also discussed how love ‘can make you do things that you don’t want to, like join gangs’.

Once the performance and Q&A session are over, the onus is on teachers to continue the conversations raised in the play. Again, relationships are important here, in this case between teachers and students. A wide variety in quality of these relationships was discussed during the research. When considering the support available in local schools, the Regeneration Officer believed that ‘teachers are doing as much as they can’, but suggested schools are limited in how they can tackle the issues that the play raises. The student co-researchers at the case study school frequently

discussed their ambivalent relationships with the school, in turns describing it as 'one of the best schools in the city' and discussing how it is a place they dread. Each of them discussed episodes of personal experience of violence and intimidation during the school day. One lamented the fact that although school was a 'safe haven' for some young people, for him it had 'turned into something where you're dreading going because you don't want someone to call you a faggot.'

Yet when teachers are engaged and resources are in place, *Terriers* can provide an excellent starting point for discussion of difficult yet important subjects. A teacher told us that whilst elements of Eve and Eightball's relationship were 'quite shocking', it was 'good for then opening up discussions about relationships and power and control in relationships'. She understood this to be a really useful area to discuss with teenagers and generally a difficult one to tackle 'without concrete examples that you can use to illustrate your discussion'. She described how classroom discussions about the relationships in *Terriers* would frequently become quite heated in terms of the way that the male characters fit into 'sometimes quite stereotypical roles' and 'the way that they're treating the girls'. This meant that some of the more 'articulate, argumentative girls' would 'get quite cross'.

The play thus has the ability to generate reflective thinking in its audience. *Terriers'* Development Manager understood this as being a particular power of the arts: 'whether you read a book or you go and see a piece of theatre or a piece of comedy, you could be thinking about it weeks later and something will be relevant to you'. She recalled that, in Croydon:

A young person tweeted us maybe two or three weeks after we'd been there and just made a comment about the play. And we were like, "We've been gone for three weeks, but they've been thinking about it, because they've just tweeted us just now". So, I think it has the ability to do that, theatre.

In this sense, she understood *Terriers* to be 'a piece of art' as well as being educational. The full report further reflects on this issue and its implications.





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