Andrea Grimason

Founder, Nitty Gritty Theatre Company

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I'm a drama teacher at New Bridge Integrated College and when we started a school theatre company, the IEF gave me advice on drawing up a constitution and found some grant money.

Our first play was a large-scale Brechtian look at conflict; as a result we were invited to the National Student Drama Festival, to join a discussion on political theatre alongside some of the biggest names in the profession.

I took a career break from teaching and established "Nitty Gritty Theatre Company" open to all integrated students in Northern Ireland, producing innovative theatre for and about young people. Now students travel from as far as Derry and Enniskillen, Carrickfergus and Banbridge to rehearse in Belfast. Past pupils come along to mentor and gain experience themselves. This is all possible through the IEF's Carson Awards – a bursary and a prize which means we can give the young people a truly professional experience.

We always wanted to link with the wider community and we ran an inter-generational project with a local over-50s club and a local special school. We learnt from each other – my students took ballroom dancing lessons from the older people. We've also taken shows round local primary schools. Our latest show brought us to the Lyric Theatre in Belfast, that exciting new professional space; the cast took it all in their stride and got a standing ovation on opening night!

I write the scripts based on workshops which happen early in the creative process. It's exciting going into the first rehearsal and seeing the diverse group of people forming the company. Then you get the first full reading of a new script and realise "Together we have created this."

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The IEF runs The Carson Awards programme, which encourages and rewards creativity in integrated schools around Northern Ireland, giving bursaries to support student projects and prizes for completed work on the theme of integration.

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