

Young people take to

STEPHEN COTTON looks forward to this month's school productions at Edinburgh's Traverse Theatre and explains why the short play programme is so important to teenagers

AS MAX Bygraves used to say, I want to tell you a story. This story is about the vibrant imagination and experience of teenagers and of professional artists struggling against the odds to let those voices be heard.

It seems particularly timely this year, given all the recent adverse media coverage about teenagers. Indeed, it is vital its message of hope – and the importance of each individual's story being told – is not lost among the noisy attempts to stereotype a whole generation of young people.

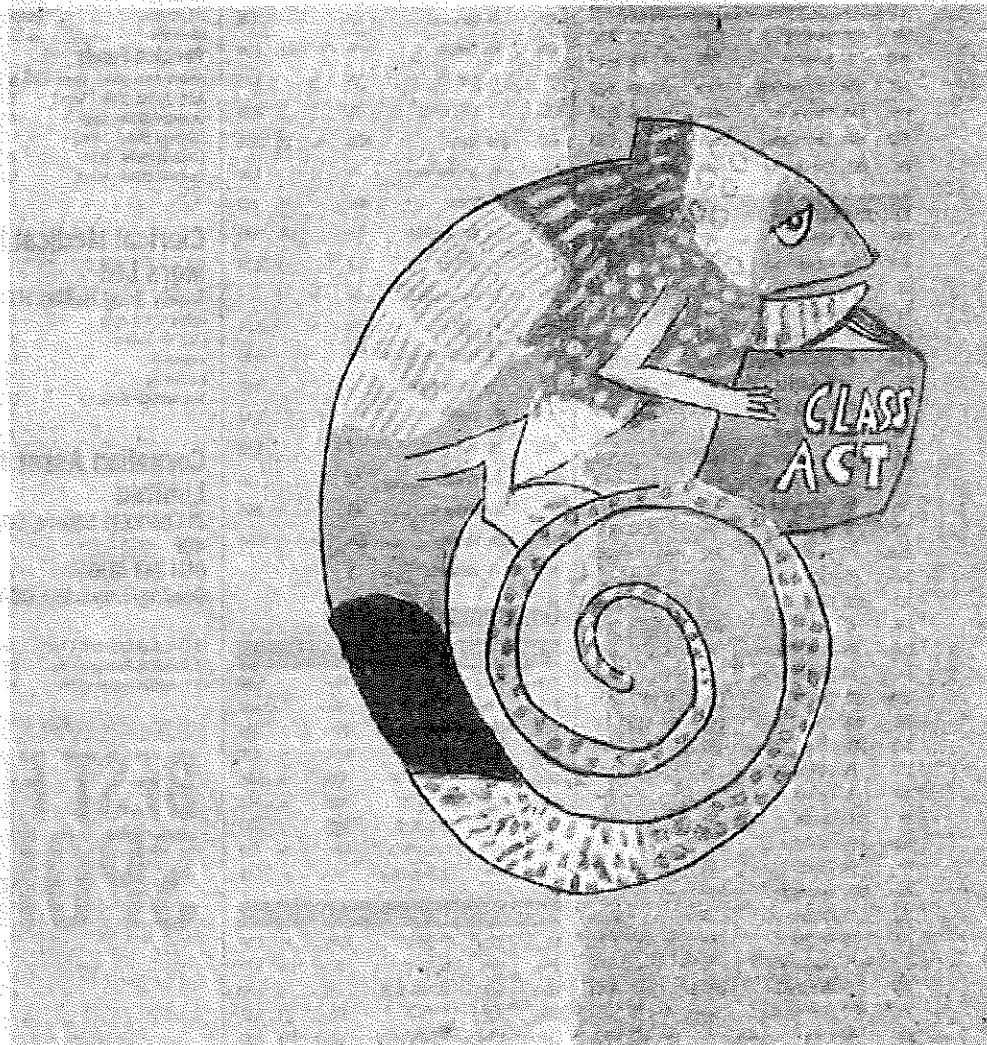
The tale reaches its 18th birthday at the end of this month. Its magic destroys any notion that professional theatre can't be all-inclusive. It builds the confidence of new writers and opens the eyes not only of the audience but also of the writers' parents and carers to their true potential.

Last year a pretty tough-looking father, barely able to speak through his tears of joy, said to me: "I never knew she had that within her. You should tell everyone about it."

Over the years, I've seen countless testimonies from teachers, pupils and parents saying much the same thing. My purpose in telling the story is to share some sense of that father's own wonder at the Traverse Theatre's Class Act project and to invite you to think about seeing it for yourself on the evenings of 30 and 31 January (there are different plays each night from different schools).

Down to brass tacks: just what is it I am rambling on about? Certainly it is a "you have to be there" experience. Reducing that to something a little more prosaic, the Class Act project invites teenagers to write a five to ten-minute one-act play about anything they choose. From September to November, playwrights drawn from a pool of some of Scotland's leading writers run a series of six creativity and writing workshops at participating schools, leading and enabling the students in the writing of short plays.

During the workshop process, a team of actors and directors from the Traverse also lead a development workshop at the school,



giving the students the opportunity to discuss, develop and see their work performed by a highly skilled group of professionals. It is in this practical interaction between the student and a professional group of artists that the true value of the project lies. To have their work read, taken seriously, discussed and contributed to is an immensely empowering experience for the students involved.

The project ends with a public performance of the plays on the Traverse main stage, in front of an audience that includes family, friends and invited guests. Each evening will typically comprise the work of two or three schools in a highly entertaining and moving evening at the Theatre. At the end of the production, each of the students are presented with a published anthology of their work from "their" playwright in front of a packed audience. I have yet to meet a parent, teacher, young writer or audience

member who has had anything less than a fantastic night out as the magic happens. The constant reaction seems to be unconfined joy coupled to disbelief at what theatre is really like – with not a black tie in sight.

The themes range widely from very dark teenage angst to how, in a teenage romance, you would know you had just been dumped via text messaging on the school bus.

I used to ask myself why something so demonstrably fabulous had to be kept in a Scottish box. Happily, in 2004, the British Council "got it" and asked the Traverse to set it up in Moscow. It has since spread and prospered in Russia. When the project first kicked off in Russia, the organisers were so concerned about tensions between the different groups that mediators were brought in to keep the peace. As it turned out, they were not needed and, after a slightly mistrustful start, new friends were made.

the stage of life



Anna Genina, from the British Council in Moscow, told how, after a night out, the teenagers were being transported back to their accommodation and the different groups were put in different vehicles. This caused an outcry among the "antagonists" who didn't want to be separated - this commonality transcends regional and national borders and serves not just as a force for unification but as a great outlet for teenagers to express themselves. Their voice is not often heard for a multitude of complex reasons, which range from an unwillingness to open up, to not being listened to or valued.

Hopefully, the current problems being experienced by the British Council in Moscow, simply as a result of being pawns in a larger political game, will end soon, and the project will continue to prosper over there.

Meanwhile, back in Scotland, the Barcapel Foundation also got the point immediately.

Art by Liam Hay of Craigroyston High, Edinburgh, left and Ashley Lessels of Woodmill High, Dunfermline, right to promote Class Act

It recently offered three-year funding to help sustain the project and develop it further into Glasgow. Other discussions are taking place with regard to its possible use with vulnerable young adults and even as a tool for the rehabilitation of young prisoners.

In its 18th year in Edinburgh, the project is a living testament to the commitment shown not only by the Traverse team but also by the many professional writers, actors and directors who have contributed to the project down the years.

So, if you really want to understand your teenage son or daughter and the world they are growing up in, or indeed if you still consider yourself a teenager at heart, why not come along and share the wonder?

● Stephen Cotton is chairman of the Traverse Theatre. Tickets for the Class Act plays are available from the box office at £5. Call 0131-228 1404 or visit www.traverse.co.uk