

THE STAGE

Taking Brecht and co into schools

By Susan Elkin on December 21, 2011 9:30 AM |

A few weeks ago I had the pleasure of seeing and reviewing a dramatised version of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* - in a girls' grammar school in Chelmsford. The company, which was adeptly and entertainingly demonstrating physical theatre influenced by Berkoff, Brecht and Artaud to A level students, was [Scene Productions](#).

Since then I've had a chat with Katharine Hurst, 31. She co-founded Scene Productions - a Wokingham-based company which specialises in taking physical theatre performance into schools - with her business partner, Kelly Taylor-Smith, in 2004.

Hurst went to [Goldsmiths College, University of London](#) for a BA in Drama and Theatre Arts. Because the latter proved to be "brilliant for the theory but insufficiently vocational for me" (I've lost count, by the way, of the number of times I've heard that about university drama courses) she then did a post-graduate year at [GSA](#).

After a year working in the industry as an actress, Hurst conceived the idea for starting her own company over a drink in a pub with her former drama teacher from secondary school, Ron Price. He pointed out that there was a gap in the market for performance of Brechtian plays which schools need for A level students. Price also offered to help with directing.

"It had simply never occurred to me that I could create my own work rather than sit at home waiting for the phone to ring" says Hurst, pointing out that no one had ever mentioned such a thing at university or drama school.

So Scene Productions was born.

At first it produced just Brechtian plays. In recent years it has developed a precise form of physical theatre of its own with the emphasis on things such as multi-roling, visible stage management, masks, exaggeration, rejection of realism and much more.

The company's actors now play with techniques such as mirroring each other's actions and working out how to move pieces of the set fluidly so that the joins between scenes become an integral part of the action. "It's a physical style which uses crisp precision cursorily so that it becomes almost like dance. I call it 'visual lyricism'" says Hurst.

She thinks in pictures and encourages her cast - and students she works with - to do the same. That way you can build up a physical, visual or symbolic reaction to the text.

Hurst also likes to mix the hilarious with the macabre or the serious so that the work often switches mood. She wants the audience, not knowing what to expect, to be continually surprised.

She is committed to working with a cast of three - thereby providing jobs for young actors - because it offers creative challenges and allows the company to make maximum impact with minimal resources.

I was pleased, for example, to catch up with Stuart Walker in *Metamorphosis* at Chelmsford. I last saw him in *O What a Lovely War* as a drill sergeant just before he graduated from [East 15](#) last summer. In the *Kafka* he met the challenge of changing into an insect with panache.

“Schools are our bread and butter so we continue to demonstrate the work and ideas of Brecht, Berkoff and Artaud because they are the key practitioners most students need to study for their A levels or International Baccalaureate,” says Hurst. “We just try to do it in a way which doesn’t signpost the influences too obviously.”

Scene Productions tours schools extensively in the south of England and will go further afield if several schools want their work in the same week.

Schools can book a one-hour or two-hour workshop to run before students see the show and there is always a question and answer session afterwards. Hurst encourages students to keep in touch by email afterwards and is always happy to help with questions about, for instance, applying for drama school.