



LES WALTON COLUMNIST

It is worth remembering that in the year of the Meadow Well riots children from the community were performing at Buxton Opera House.

I have always had a belief in the importance of the creative arts as a basis for rejuvenating organisations. In my first school in the 1960s we had an annual 'Play Week' in which every child in the school performed once a year in a whole week of plays.

When we opened Tyne Metropolitan College the day was filled with wonderful performances, which helped us to transmit the optimistic vision for the new organisation.

At Norham High School, on the Meadow Well Estate, we introduced an annual staff/student 'event'. The first one was a Medieval Banquet. The staff and pupils sang traditional folk songs. PE staff and pupils became a troupe of tumbling acrobats. Specialists in Japanese sword fencing displayed their art. The Home Economics department prepared medieval dishes. The school hall was transformed by the art department into a baronial hall. Staff and pupils dressed in medieval clothes.

One of the event's high points was the Senior Leadership Team Rapper Dancers. We practised the traditional Winlton sword dance every Monday evening. This is an incredibly complicated routine which ends in all the swords intertwined into a star and held aloft by one of the dancers. The pupils and staff could not believe it when this bunch of quite serious senior staff all piled into the hall and completed the dance. After shouts of 'encore', we foolishly decided to do the dance again. Within one minute, the intricate manoeuvres broke down and we nearly ended up garrotting each other before we managed a quick exit.

The school's fortunes began to turn around about the same time. I often wonder whether data analysis or dance should be the real keys to transformation.

In 1988 Mike Waller, head of music, and an English teacher, Raymond Anderson, wrote a 'play' to celebrate the retirement of a member of staff. New music was composed for the event and the staff had a great time putting it all together. Our colleagues left with happy memories.

It was then decided to cement the Anderson & Waller collaboration with a new musical for staff and pupils. The idea was highly risky and quite revolutionary. Pupils and staff were asked if they wished to take part. All were guaranteed a part in some capacity. I was then asked, as headteacher, to accept that I would have no editing rights as well as supporting the shows financially. I anxiously

agreed to both. This was important. Mike and Raymond wanted to feel in control of what they were doing and did not want 'central tampering'.

In 1990, the first production, Mr Marvel's Music, was set in a school. The next musical was called Starsinger and ran for three nights March 25-27, 1991.

Starsinger was ambitious. A bigger cast with more staff involved and a request for a budget to build a substantial set was demanded. Impressive costumes were made for each of the three alien tribes that inhabited the planet. The sell-out show prompted the need for new bleacher seating and an impressive speaker system was installed in the ceiling.

Around the same time, a national competition - A Quest for New Musicals - was announced by Richard Stilgoe. Six new musicals were identified. An abridged version of Starsinger was then performed at Buxton Opera House. Starsinger was the only one of the six new musicals from across the UK performed by a school - children, in the year of the Meadow Well riots - performing at Buxton!

The momentum produced further success with Sylvan, set in Albion Wood and Charlie's Garden, with colleague, Dave Gill, excelling as the Seaton Sluice hermit. The underwater scenes were spectacular and the plot lines full of genuine emotion as well as the expected slapstick.

A touring production of 'Titanic - The Musical' for the local primary schools was a great success. Raymond narrated, Mike accompanied the four actors and the primary pupils wore lifejackets they had made.

The final production was 'Run out of Time', ambitiously set in the afterlife with probably the strongest musical score of all.

As with all the previous shows, the children had something to call their own, something unique - something they could be proud of.

Above all, they had fun taking part and had memories to last a lifetime. Within a year, the school was identified as one of the most successful urban schools in the UK. Maybe fun is a card that is significantly missing from the school improvement pack.

A couple of years later I worked with some headteachers in Northern Ireland. The schools were continuing to provide the very best learning environment possible in the midst of the large scale political violence of the 'Troubles'.

Every school I visited was proud to present their pupils performing traditional Irish dances and songs, because as one headteacher said: "If we stop dancing the 'Troubles' have won."

Les Walton CBE is chairman of the Northern Education Trust.