

## Features

Anyone can find a voice at Acta, a theatre with a difference, finds **Beccy Golding**

**F**OR THE last 15 years South Bristol has been home to an innovative, internationally-renowned community arts organisation that many people locally may not know about.

Once a YMCA, then derelict for years, the Acta centre is on Gladstone Street, halfway between North Street and West Street. The beautiful and peaceful community garden outside, maintained by volunteers, was once a tennis court. The centre now has a large rehearsal and performance space, a meeting room, and a props and costume store which is fabulous to explore! In 2015 a new studio and café was opened.

The group that calls this spot home is Acta, which last year celebrated its 30th birthday; an educational charity that supports communities to create original drama that is relevant to them.

There are lots of different ways of seeing community theatre – for instance, amateur dramatics – but Acta is not that. There are no auditions: “No one at Acta is an actor, and there are no scripts,” Kathryn Harris, communications coordinator for the charity, told me.

“We don’t tell people what to do – we are participant-led.” Meaning people bring an idea or a story and Acta helps them make it happen. The only scripts are the ones created by those involved – which emerge through stories, games and sharing. “We give people a voice and a platform to tell their stories,” said Kathryn.

Acta creates a place where everyone’s story matters. Examples include a project with Bristol Refugee Rights, in which refugees tell the stories of their journeys to this country, and work with young carers, some of whom are working towards arts awards. Kathryn said she is always moved by how real and honest the carers’ performances are – “it’s clear the stories they tell are full of care.”

There are also drama groups

# A place to tell stories



Free speech: All the scripts at Acta are made by the performers, like this Young Carers, show, Total Eclipse

PICTURE: Mark Simmonds

which span different generations and cultures, and work with SPAN (Single Parent Action Network) and Autism Independence. Nura, a Somali woman with an autistic child, approached Acta – there is a higher than average level of autism in her community – to raise awareness among

families. Her idea led to a trip to Rotterdam, and research by Bristol University.

Locally, readers might have seen *Stories from the Great War*, at Arnos Vale cemetery earlier this year, a project which saw First World War soldiers brought back to life to tell their stories; of

### An Acta face ...

TRACEY Harvey, theatre bar assistant, got involved after her daughter, then 16, had mental health problems. “When she came out we came across Acta. I was blown away by how professional it was.” Five years ago Tracey joined the Acta adult group. Since then she has taken part in 12 shows, been to Rotterdam, and co-written a book on the show *Gas Girls* (about Bristol women who made mustard gas in WW1). Now she works in the café bar,

doing all the cooking and baking. “Coming here changed my life. I have a new network of friends and finally feel like I belong.”

### What’s on?

*High & Dry*, September 20 & 23  
New show from Acta’s adult company. £2 (10yrs+)  
*Three Green Bottles*, October 6-7  
By young adult company, Phoenix. £2 (not for children)  
*Sailors’ Tales*, November 2-12  
Local performers of all ages retell compelling tales from late 1950s Avonmouth. Bristol. £3

Christmas shows created by Phoenix, Acta’s youth theatre group. Acta also started Bedminster’s annual Christmas Lantern Parade, before handing it over to the community.

There are workshops for adults, children and young people (check the website), which are as much about positive change – building confidence, raising aspirations, improving self-worth and employability – as they are about performance.

There are drama sessions, of course, but also craft activities, a recorder group, the community choir, and the studio space for hire. Keep an eye out for cinema screenings, tickets are just £3 – “We want it to be affordable and accessible to everyone, like the building itself,” said Kathryn.

Anyone can get involved: the Acta team will listen to people and try to incorporate their ideas. Volunteers are also very welcome to get involved in front-of-house, festival and event teams, gardening, prop production, technical assistants and the participant befriending scheme.

Every year Acta runs a community theatre festival. This year’s four-day event in June was a big success. Community theatre companies from across the UK (and beyond) gathered, all sharing “theatre from the heart”.

You might have seen London project Entelechy Arts and their thought-provoking “nomadic street event” BED, where an older person was literally left in a bed on East Street, as a way of starting conversations about loneliness in older people.

“We are well-respected across Europe,” Kathryn said, “and held up as a champion of the art form.” Acta also takes part in research into the health and wellbeing benefits of community theatre, in conjunction with Exeter University and others.

Acta believes that theatre belongs to everyone, and wants to engage audiences who might not usually go to the theatre. “We are really keen to be a core part of the community,” Kathryn said.

Everyone is welcome to come to the café – it’s open from 10am-4pm Monday to Friday. The café team know all about the centre – they are very welcoming and really happy to chat about what’s going on. Why not start with a cup of coffee and see what inspires you?

• [acta-bristol.com](http://acta-bristol.com)