Taking Centre Stage

Peter Hodgson and Ali Tompkin look mildly surprised in the Centre Stage offices as they reflect on their school and the years that have passed. Their expressions could in part still be due to the incredible 18 productions they put on in 2010, one every three weeks, culminating in their self-penned Christmas pantomime; but Ali confesses that it’s down to a sudden realization of their achievements over the last 10 years: “We never anticipated it would be this big. We quite fancied having an Arts school, but that was it,” she laughs. “We’re so busy that it rarely sinks in that there is so much to be proud of.”

In 1995, Ali and Pete found themselves backpacking around India in between acting jobs, and discovered a love of Asia. On returning to London, a friend contacted them about two teaching positions at a speech and drama school in Singapore. The pair grabbed the opportunity to return to the area and taught at the school for four years.

But by 2000, they found that they craved more: “We really wanted to do something more performance-based but that wasn’t offered in the school’s curriculum, so we decided to go it alone. We had no kids, no mortgage, nothing to lose, so we took the chance,” says Ali. “We just wanted to teach classes to suit our own style,” Pete emphasises.

The couple began running drama sessions in a room they rented by the hour, and attracted students by placing adverts in the local press: “On the first Saturday, 30 turned up and we thought that was amazing for our first class,” describes Ali. “In the second week, 100 children arrived – it was just the two of us, and all of them. Terrifying! It’s definitely a tribute to the effectiveness of the Singapore grapevine!”

Pete believes the popularity of their classes was a direct result of the years of grinding work they put in running birthday events during the weekends whilst teaching during the week: “We were working 24/7, and spent a lot of time running around people’s gardens doing parties, so we’d met a lot of people and that network basically helped to establish our business.”

Soon after, the couple moved into their own premises, a nineteenth-century shop-house in the heart of Singapore previously used as a yoga centre. At that point Pete and Ali were able to develop the business and buy a small but established dance school from a friend who was leaving Singapore, and “the multi-disciplined profile of Centre Stage was founded,” explains Pete. The only downside to the company’s expansion and success was that they quickly became too large for the shop-house, and again had to relocate, this time to their current location on Woking Road.
The philosophy behind Centre Stage has always been fully inclusive and the pair firmly believes that all children can benefit from the arts whether on stage or behind the scenes: “Everybody has the potential to grow through drama; in the classroom, we build confidence in a supportive environment and let the children dare to give a bit of themselves,” says Ali. “We developed Create@CentreStage specifically for children with additional needs because we wanted them to be as involved in drama as mainstream kids.”

In addition to Create, Pete and Ali have recently expanded their work to include a careers service in schools for students considering a profession in the performing arts. In terms of the advice they offer to pupils, Ali explains: “We want to encourage students – we’re not about knocking anyone’s dreams - but we also want to give them a realistic view, and warn them of the difficulties they may face. We’ve both worked as actors and it’s a cut throat business.”

“There was recently an article in STAGE saying that British accredited drama schools are now harder to get into than Oxford and Cambridge, there are more people going for fewer places,” Pete continues. “We want to arm the children who are keen with the tools we learnt through our experience.”

With so much having been achieved within the last decade, it seems unreasonable to ask what comes next for Centre Stage, but Pete and Ali have no shortage of plans, or enthusiasm with which to action them.

“There are lots of ideas on the to-do-list,” says Ali “and it would be lovely to have a bit of time to realize some of these. We definitely want to develop Create and get funding to take it into the community. We’re also just starting to take drama into schools; for example, we might send an actor to be Henry VIIIth to help bring a character to life and lift a subject off the page for students.”

But Pete also believes that that their previous caution towards developing too rapidly has benefitted them: “We’ve always been careful to let things grow organically and that has worked for us, it has let us keep the soul of what we are about. Maintaining the quality of the delivery, that’s what’s most important for us.”

For more information on Centre Stage, visit www.centre-stage.com

By Lydia Davis