

Article: **It started around a kitchen table...**

by Martin O'Brien

**Article available for immediate release
27 June 2017**

I am convinced by the power of story and drama to change hearts and minds. I know this because it was the foremost means of communication used by Christ to address the crowds who followed him, and because I have experienced my own heart changing gradually over the time as the result of experiencing powerful stories in theatre, on screen and by individuals sharing their own story with me.

It was this conviction which led me to found the Catholic charity, Ten Ten Theatre, over 10 years ago. Until this point, I had been working in the world of professional theatre all of my life and in the years before setting up Ten Ten I had been creating stories with a particular moral or faith dimension for young people and adult audiences. These one-off productions seemed to move people greatly and I was at a point in my career when I had to decide whether to continue a burgeoning career as a writer of television drama, or apply to these skills and experiences to a project with perhaps more meaning and purpose.

The crucial deciding factor was that I had two very important supporters in my life: my mum, Anna, and my sister, Clare. They too believed in the power of story to change hearts and minds and so came on board as key co-workers in the development of Ten Ten. It all started around a kitchen table and this same spirit remains today.

Coming out of retirement, my mum became our company administrator. She printed letters, stuffed envelopes, took phone calls and put tour schedules together. The response from Catholic secondary schools across the UK to our first mailshot was overwhelming. When it became evident that this work might, just might, support a small salary for both me and my sister, Clare took the brave decision to leave her stable job in Central London to work full-time for Ten Ten and with me to become the co-founder and co-director. With her business and accounting background, she became my key partner. Out of nothing, we were now running our own small business and working with thousands of young people in schools.

Ten Ten gave us an opportunity to create and source new stories which moved and changed people. One of our early successes was the first UK production of Tim Robbins' stage adaptation of his powerful feature film, "Dead Man Walking". We presented this with two actors in a scaled-down tour of the North-East culminating in a performance at Newcastle City Hall. The play was performed in front of Sister Helen Prejean herself, the religious sister on whom the story is based (which must have been a terrifying experience for Margaret Tully, the actress playing the part of Sister Helen!)

“Dead Man Walking” was swiftly followed by a new play of our own following similar themes called “On Eagle’s Wings”. This told the story of a Catholic priest in Liverpool who was visited by a ghost from his past, a young man who had just stabbed another. We developed it with a dozen young men at HMYOI Feltham and it explored areas of life which were quite unexpected from what the premise might suggest. This project also saw the introduction of Paul Jepson to Ten Ten, a director of considerable experience having created his own work in the West End and at the National Theatre, and who has worked for Ten Ten on numerous occasions since.

However, it was the work in schools that saw the most exponential growth of all. Increasing our output year-on-year firstly in secondary schools and then in primary schools and parishes with confirmation candidates, many children and young people came to know ‘Ten Ten’ as an ‘entity in its own right. On so many occasions I’ve been in a school or a parish and heard a young person say, ‘Yes, Ten Ten are in today’. Despite the fact that the personnel changed year-on-year, they identified with Ten Ten as a constant presence in their school. Over the 10 years, we’ve worked in 872 Catholic schools in England and Wales which is over a third of all Catholic schools.

Starting an arts project that works in schools during a time of recession, and continuing to run it through years of austerity, has presented many financial challenges. In the early years, we were awarded some significant grants from trust funds who silently and wonderfully support so many projects, and without whom we would not be in existence now. The crucial full-time voluntary support from our mum, Anna, has probably been the single largest ‘donation’ we have received as she has saved us hundreds of thousands in salary and on-costs. But the growth of our work has also been driven by our poverty. In effect, we had to ‘do more’ in order to remain sustainable.

Matters came to a head in 2011 when our charity faced near-closure due to the money drying up. Friends responded by making generous donations to the charity, whilst we responded with a huge effort to increase production and, therefore, turnover. The fruits of this effort was a phenomenal year of production in 2013 when, for The Year of Faith, we produced our greatest level of output yet: an all-year round tour of primary schools, secondary schools and parishes (4 teams); a Passion Play in our hometown of Runcorn; a Passion Play with young offenders in Feltham; a new one-woman play on human trafficking; various one-off performances in theatres; and a sell-out production of the play “Kolbe’s Gift”, about St Maximilian Kolbe and the man whose life he saved, in a theatre in the heart of London’s West End. The success of these productions finally gave us a small financial cushion which we desperately needed to ensure long-term sustainability. Self-sustainability for us has always been a blessing not a right, and no doubt it will remain like that for the lifetime of Ten Ten.

For our 10th year, our work has taken an exciting and unexpected direction due to the launch of two major projects: the first is our online platform, Ten Ten Resources, which provides a gobsmacking number of high-quality resources for primary schools; the second has been our decision to move into film-making by creating three short films which are now shown in secondary schools part of our new cinema-in-

education format. The potential for these new ventures, alongside our ongoing theatre and education work, is very exciting. Although these last 10 years have felt like 30 years at times, we look forward with relish to what God has planned for us for the next ten and beyond.

- ENDS -

Enquiries

Martin O'Brien, Artistic Director

Tel: 0345 388 3162

martin@tententheatre.co.uk

Photographs

Martin O'Brien directing The Runcorn Passion – [here](#)

Award-winning play, "This Is My Body" – [here](#)

"Kolbe's Gift" at the Leicester Square Theatre – [here](#)

Still from "Facts of Life", a short film for secondary schools - [here](#)
