



# The Attack on Children

*By Richard Holmes, Artistic Director, Big Brum Theatre Company*

Zoe Simon as Asterion, The Minotaur. In the distance the sound of ceremonial drums bring food for the hungry Minotaur  
Photo: Big Brum



children

*The adult world does terrible things to its young, with each new generation of adults finding new ways to do more terrible things to the next generation.*

*This abuse is endemic and the germ of the abuse stems from the defence of private property, defence of privilege and the defence of the power by those who have it. The defence of their wealth and power requires an 'offence' against the rest.*

*Politics over the last twenty years has deepened this attack on the defenceless, especially on the young.*

*We are seeing governments around the world turning to 'common sense' solutions to the cultural and economic crisis we face, solutions which encourage and train the powerless to abuse each other and themselves.*

### **Conditions for the Young**

In his 2015 speech to the Tory Party Conference, David Cameron famously said that he wanted his time in power to be remembered as a

*defining decade for our country.. the turnaround decade.. one which people will look back on and say that's the time when the tide turned... when people no longer felt the current going against them but working with them.*

He also asserted that the Tory Party would

*finish the fight for real equality*

and wage

*an all-out assault on poverty.*

In reality, Cameron drove the country into an iceberg, before leaving the sinking ship. The consequences are that now, seven years later, many people are drowning in debt.

According to the recent report *UK Poverty 2022*, compiled by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2022), 14.5 million people live in poverty in Britain today. The report goes on to say there are more than 4.3 million children (almost a third of the entire child population in the UK) that are living in households on less than 60% of the average income and the number is rising. With a predicted two-year recession on the horizon, things will only get worse.

Since Cameron's speech, food bank usage has doubled, with one in every six households in the UK using them and we are now seeing the rise of warmth banks also.

Poverty has risen by 62%, because of high rents, cuts in welfare and the lack of affordable housing, resulting in 36 people a day becoming homeless since 2015, and this isn't showing any sign of slowing down. At present, according to *The Homelessness Monitor England 2022* report, published by Crisis (2022) there are 282,000 people without a permanent home, including 120,000 children. That

That is an increase of over 100,000 since 2015.

I am reminded of Lorna Jackson, the head teacher from a primary school in London, who said in *The Guardian* in 2018, after finding two of her children sleeping behind a bin,

*Mum, Dad and the two little children were all sleeping on a mattress they'd found. The family had been evicted and the children had very little to eat.*

*The Guardian* 15th May 2018

Her experience isn't unique, or a one-off. Since her interview four years ago, teachers from all over the country talk about feeding hungry children in their classes, or schools contributing to funeral costs for students, or where schools have set up food and clothes banks, offering support to parents unable to help themselves.

Our young are living through these most hostile of conditions. Poverty, and the threats from it, are a real presence in their lives. Children come to school hungry, tired or inappropriately dressed. They may leave homes of substance abuse, violence, disorder, mental illness and Victorian type squalor. For some the conditions are qualitatively better - for others it's inconceivably worse.

So, what did David Cameron really mean by 'an all-out assault on poverty'?

In 2012, a radical, right-wing, Conservative Parliamentary faction calling themselves the 'Free Enterprise Group' sent out a manifesto, entitled *Britannia Unchained* (Kwarteng et al 2012). Their manifesto laid out plans for a 'harsh medicine', which this think tank believed Britain needed to take, in order to be more competitive on the global economic stage. At the heart of this collection of essays was an advocacy of 'Austerity Max', part of which called for a loosening of regulations covering the employment of children. The members of this group were Dominic Raab, Kwasi Kwarteng, Priti Patel, Elizabeth Truss, Andrea Leadsom, Jacob Rees-Mogg, Rory Stewart, Kit Malthouse, Robert Buckland, James Cleverly and Christopher Pincher. In 2012 this group of self-confessed Thatcherites and neo-Thatcherites were backbenchers. Boris Johnson was an advocate of this group's thinking, so much so that he made them all influential cabinet members after his election as Prime Minister.

Other notable supporters of these radical thinkers were Michael Fallon, Sajid Javid

Cameron's 'Age of Austerity',

Rosie Baggott as Theseus holding aloft the head and testicles of the Minotaur for Minos to see  
Photo: Big Brum





coupled with the deregulations of Brexit have paved the way for the Radical Right to implement the harshest of conditions against the poor.

*The talented and hardworking have nothing to fear*

threatened Dominic Raab, while Jake Berry, Tory MP, stated, while serving as the Chairman of the Conservative Party, on *Sky News* (2.10.22) that the solution for the millions of families up and down the country struggling to pay their bills was for

*people (to) know that when their bills arrive, they can either cut their consumption or they can get a higher paid salary, higher wages, go out there and get that new job.*

In 2023, while we see an unprecedented rise in the number of households forced to choose whether to eat or to stay warm, this is proof of how detached, dispassionate and disinterested politicians have become.

### The Young

These are the conditions that young people find themselves in when Big Brum encounters them. The reason Big Brum works with young people is because they are remarkable. They feel most profoundly the world and its movement. But however remarkable young people are, they can't find this in their own enthusiasm, needs, or even creativity, without a shared space to help them do it. Drama is a collective and social activity and the theatre Big Brum creates provides young people with the space to articulate their felt experiences. The work of Big Brum has always been audacious, and given the current social, political and cultural crisis,

creating work today that continues to offer such a space, is in itself audacious.

The young's nature is to question, to be tender and social, to be creative and imaginative; but there is a danger that this is being knocked out of them as a matter of course. Schools, colleges and universities find themselves increasingly under pressure to 'get results', rather than to engage in subjects such as the arts which delve deeper into the human condition.

### Big Brums Work: 'In Defence of the Child'

The Company was established in 1982 to provide Theatre-in-Education for Birmingham secondary schools but 40 years later, this remit has been extended to include many different settings, such as universities and SEND schools and in a wider geographical area. However, the common feature of all its work is a fierce commitment to bringing the highest quality of artistic work to those least likely to receive it.

Big Brum take 2-3 original pieces of theatre each year to 80-100 venues, performing to audiences of around 7,500 young people. Since 1982 the Company has produced well over 100 original programmes of work, bringing a richly varied experience of theatre to an audience of over 300,000 young people. From Shakespeare to original plays by Edward Bond, from Greek myths to fairy tales, this body of work has earned it a local, national and international reputation for creating work of the highest artistic and educational quality.

*The work of Big Brum proceeds from the materialist philosophical premise that the world is knowable and that Art, like science, is a mode of knowing this world in which we live. Art cognises life truthfully. But the truth is not fixed immutable knowledge, it is knowing in the present moment and therefore subject to change. Like evolution, artistic production is a process of becoming, born out of the need that human beings have to know and re-know themselves, individually and socially. Art is social imagination, which functions through a synthesis of feeling and thought with implications for future action in life.* (Big Brum's Artistic Policy 2011)

Big Brum also proceeds from the premise that children are not undeveloped adults but human beings in their own right, with specific experiences that go to the heart of being human. The Company uses theatre and drama to work

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alongside young people to make meaning of their lives and the world around them. The Company doesn't believe in telling people how to live their lives but creates space for the audience to do it for themselves. Those that don't work with young people have wondered if Big Brum's plays and programmes might make too many demands on young audiences. They don't. They open up areas that young people are aware of, fundamental aspects of reality that hardly anyone speaks to them about, or more importantly space where they can be heard. The plays of Big Brum ought to be the work Big Brum does, because its work creates such space.

Big Brum has therefore set out a five-year programme of work which is designed around the title *In Defence of the Child: Creating Human Space for the Displaced*. War, poverty and climate change-related disasters have left more people displaced from their home presently than at any other time in history. As well as those literally displaced, there is an increasing number of people that have become metaphorically displaced from their homes, their family and friends, jobs, even themselves. The uncertainty in the world has created uncertainty in us. We can see this in the increase in mental health issues and suicide amongst the most vulnerable in our society, especially the young. Big Brum, like all artists, must take a relationship to the 'displaced', whether working with young audiences in schools, within our local community or with the community of fellow artists we help to develop.

### Programme of work

Drama compacts reality and resonates for an audience on both a conscious and unconscious level. Image enables us to cognize apparently different aspects of reality in their essence and in relation to each other. This resonance is the intuitive starting point for the gleaning of new knowledge that can be conceptualised and categorised. The power of this mode of knowing is that the image resonates in the mind long after facts have been forgotten.

### Minotaur

In 2019 Big Brum planned a new version of *Theseus and the Minotaur*, continuing a programme of work of re-creating classic stories or texts for school tours (*Rumpelstiltskin* in 2017, *Macbeth* in 2018

and *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* in 2019). The Company saw a need for these texts that children and young people read and study to be explored again and re-created for a young modern audience. Working with playwright Chris Cooper, we decided to re-imagine the myth of *Theseus and the Minotaur* as simply *Minotaur*. Our re-telling emphasised that this new work would explore not Theseus, the hero full of hubris, but the craven actions of King Minos in imprisoning the half-man half-bull and asserting his own power by sacrificing children in the labyrinth. We wanted children not to see the Minotaur as a savage beast, but a sentient being in horrific circumstances, forced to eat children to survive but dreaming of a life outside of his prison.

*Classes 5 & 6 were treated to an excellent drama based on the Greek Myth. The performance made us question what each character was really like and made us realise that if we only hear one version of a story, you don't always get the full truth. We are looking forward to doing follow up work in class.*

(Craig Ellicott, St John Bosco Primary School, West Bromwich)

*You did a superb job as the session was very interactive and engaging throughout and made pupils think deeply, question and reflect on the story and characters. The way the actors stopped after each key chapter to engage with the pupils and repeated the questions, 'What did you see?' and 'What did you hear?', which encouraged their participation and higher order thinking. The performance was exceptional, and we all thoroughly enjoyed the experience.*

(Kirsten Hemns, Y5 teacher, Catherine Wayte Primary School, Swindon)

### The Monuments Trilogy *Socially Distant* (Part 1)

*Socially Distant* was the company's first attempt at film drama for schools. This digital resource was produced during the first lockdown in 2020 and includes a programme of work designed to support Drama teachers.

The activities have been designed to accommodate any year group and the material has an emphasis on Drama but could be used as part of PSHE. The



aim of the digital TiE programme is to provide students and teachers with material to explore fully the content and context of the story and the people in the story, while providing a stimulus for thinking and reflecting on their own lives, safely through the fiction.

We have provided teachers with a multitude of tasks to help steer their student's experience around the central concepts of isolation, disconnection, and repression, with the key question being:

*Living in this world has made us socially distant from ourselves and each other, where lies and greed conceal our true nature. How then can our true selves be revealed in such conditions?*

The programme and the drama aim to provoke young people into



finding their own relationship to these central concepts, while working in an integrated, connected and expressive manner: in short, working in the opposite way to the world the drama is set in. The young people are asked by a socially considerate non-governmental organisation called *Humankind* to help them understand the suicide of a teenage boy, which occurred during lockdown close to the young people's school. A local community action group has commissioned *Humankind* to explore the event, in order to offer a design for a monument or memorial; one that holds the meaning of the incident to help the family and community at the centre of the situation move on from the tragedy.

The fictitious NGO *Humankind* contacts the young people, via their teacher, first by letter then through a filmed request directly addressed to the young people.

*This monument should not just be for now but to help all those in the future to understand, and never forget what happened here. We believe that you are the right people to help in creating the monument and hope that you might offer proposals for what it should be. We at Humankind want the final monument to be all about the voices of young people.*

Over the last few years, the Company has moved away from putting the young people in 'role', but rather invites them to experience the situation as themselves. Big Brum has steered away from 'putting them in the shoes of others', adopting a more 'stepping into our own shoes' approach and giving ourselves the chance to experience the given situation from us. One could also say that working in the crucible paradigm we are 'building the shoes together' that we will all stand in.

Alongside the film, teachers are provided with a collection of activities, designed to be spread over a term, in the form of a publication called *Socially Distant*.

### Romeo and Juliet (Part 2)

The news of late seems to be awash with someone saying, 'We weren't expecting it to happen' or 'It happened so quickly we weren't ready'. Think back to the Brexit result, the Grenfell Tower tragedy, Covid-19, the retaking of Afghanistan by the Taliban and the economic crisis we are living through presently. However, while politicians



and the media scratch their heads trying to catch up, people's lives are turned upside down, or they are losing them.

This is not new. Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* unfolds over four days, taking place two weeks before Juliet's fourteenth birthday. At the end of the story, all the adults are shocked, struggling to make sense of the tragic events that have overtaken them.

Though set in Verona, Shakespeare was reflecting on his England, a nation in transition from Catholicism to a sovereign Anglican Church, part of the Reformation that enabled the birth of capitalism and the journey towards Empire. Shakespeare's story also foreshadows the coming English revolution, 40 years after his death.

Verona (Shakespeare's England) is a society obsessed by power, position, and property. The desires of the adults, however, leave young people disconnected from the adult world, fractious, fractional and frustrated by the status quo.

The story sees the murder of three young people and the suicide of two more. None of the adults would have imagined that such a thing could be possible. But why are they so surprised? And who or what is truly responsible?

The production is a mix of live and filmed moments. The live moments concentrate on the *Romeo and Juliet* story performed by our touring Company while the film focuses on the broader social, political, context. The filmed elements are performed by non-professional

actors, teachers, social workers, a scaffolder, students etc. The material on film has the feel of the laboratory, being experimental and explorative. The film's conceit sees the return of the fictitious human rights organisation *Humankind* which is now made up of members of 'the community'. The young audience are asked to watch and listen to the story and reflect on where the responsibility for the suicides of *Romeo and Juliet* really lies.

*We want to invite you, to join us, to help us shape this work in progress. We want to know what you think. We want to know from you, who or what is responsible for this bloody mess. We need your feedback, and it's our hope that with the assistance of your teachers you will be able to give us that. So, please, attend to this story with your hearts and minds as you attend to your own stories, to see we can learn for HumanKind.*

### Over the Balcony ( Part 3)

The combination of the trilogy explores fundamentally the world we live in now. But more importantly what does being a human mean today? Part One begins during the Covid crisis, amidst the unfolding logic of late capitalism. *Romeo and Juliet* takes us back to Jacobean England, capitalism's birth, to see today from a different perspective. Part 3 will be set in our near future. The story is linked to *Socially Distant* and the play is currently being written and will be touring from April 2024.

### Our Near Future

While writing this article, Big Brum has discovered it has been awarded Arts Council National Portfolio status. The funding will support and enhance a programme of work geared to North Solihull, one of the poorest areas in England. We believe that our plan will make a significant difference to young people's lives.

**We have identified three key priorities:**

#### 1 Schools of Recovery

Big Brum is currently running a model of Schools of Recovery (SoR), working with some primary schools in areas of deprivation. This is funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. This model places a strong emphasis on young people's creative and personal agency and in doing so is bringing about a cultural change in schools. Rather than a one-off

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or short-term engagement in schools, this model involves intensive and extended collaboration with teachers, supporting their use of drama in order to improve creative and cultural education for children and young people.

Building on this, Big Brum has gone to large funders to seek support for its collaboration with Solihull Local Authority & Unity Trust Solihull to implement the SoR programme in North Solihull. The aim is to bring world class theatre and drama to EVERY school and EVERY SEND support setting, reaching an audience of over 8000. Every child, aged between 5 and 15 will experience a live performance at least once each year and each school will receive multiple copies of a company-produced picture book or graphic novel, based on the plays performed – an enrichment to our work that has proved extremely successful in the past.

Our current model is demonstrating that this will bring about a cultural change within schools and will hugely boost the social and cultural capital of the community. We believe that such sustained and regular access to live art will excite interest in the hearts and minds of the young people. This incites a desire to become involved, to engage in arts activities in and out of school. As a Year 6 teacher from the pilot school told the project evaluators,

*We'd struggled to get much from the children, but... they really went for it.. Drama is the perfect device to move children on in their thought process and their understanding of the world we are living in: it is just a phenomenal way to do it.*

### 2 Community of Recovery

While SoR offers the initial incentive to become involved in the arts, the plan for a Community of Recovery (CoR) ensures the continued provision of these artistic opportunities for the young people of North Solihull. With ACE support, Big Brum can now create a core Company post for a Community Facilitator, whose role will enable the Company to provide a much widened and improved range of creative and artistic opportunities for



'Giants Embrace' Trapped by the giant and about to be eaten, Tom makes a promise that he wishes he never made  
Credit: Illustrator Matt Reeves

young people, based in their community. The Community Facilitator will ensure that the young people's creative & cultural education is deepened and enriched from a 'Theatre Makers Group', a 'Film Makers Group' and a 'Visual & Digital Art Makers Group', to visits to galleries, exhibitions, and theatres.

### 3 Artists for Recovery

The plan of work to build Schools and a Community of Recovery leads to an expansion of opportunities for participatory artists, hence the third aspect of our plan: creating Artists for Recovery. Alongside the work already outlined, the Company will produce three new TiE tours each year, targeting other ACE Priority Areas, our partner schools & the North Solihull schools that are central to the project.

Not only will this new body of work ensure employment opportunities for many different artists, it will also enable the Company to give opportunities to people to start a professional career in the creative arts, with a particular emphasis on reaching those currently under-represented.

Artists for Recovery will mentor and develop a new generation of artists and practitioners for both Big Brum & for the wider arts & education community.

### Looking Forward

Our young people are facing unprecedented challenges. This world

is a difficult place for them to live in. Big Brum has always placed itself unconditionally on the side of the young and of those wishing to defend the young. Furthermore, the Company is and has always been a small organisation with big ambitions and, as Gramsci reminded us, 'pessimism of the intellect' should be partnered with 'optimism of the will'. The power and audacity of Big Brum's work, coupled with the innate positive, confident idealism that we witness, not only in the international youth movements for action on climate change or for social justice, but in our daily work with the young people of our city and beyond feels that change is not only possible but inevitable. We believe that this generation of young people have the power to imagine and to create a better future. ■

### References

- Crisis (2022) *The Homelessness Monitor England 2022 Report*
- Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2022) *UK Poverty 2022*.
- Kwarteng et al (2012) *Britannia Unchained*. London: Palgrave Macmillan

For access to the digital resources mentioned please contact Big Brum at <https://bigbrum.org.uk/contact>

**Richard Holmes** is Big Brum's current Artistic Director. He began working as a director of Big Brum's Youth theatre in 1996 before becoming one of their full time Actor/Teachers in 1999. Richard has dedicated his adult life to the theoretical, philosophical and methodological development and preservation of Theatre in Education as an art form.

