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Case Study

# Young Critics

Reviewers in the regions

Carl Woodward, Young Critics founder



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Motivated by artists and organisations bemoaning the lack of national reviews for the regions, Carl Woodward set about developing a new generation of critics.

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**Case Study:**

Carl Woodward



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# Young Critics

## reviewers in the regions

### Background

There had been much debate about whether theatre criticism was in crisis. Arts organisations in the regions were struggling to get anything reviewed by national critics. The arts sector was being very vocal about its frustrations and new critics were struggling to forge paid careers.

I saw an opportunity to address the lack of reviews in the regions and equip young critics with the skills needed to succeed.

### Young Critics

We launched Young Critics as a pilot project at Theatre Royal Winchester in March 2015, in partnership with A Younger Theatre.

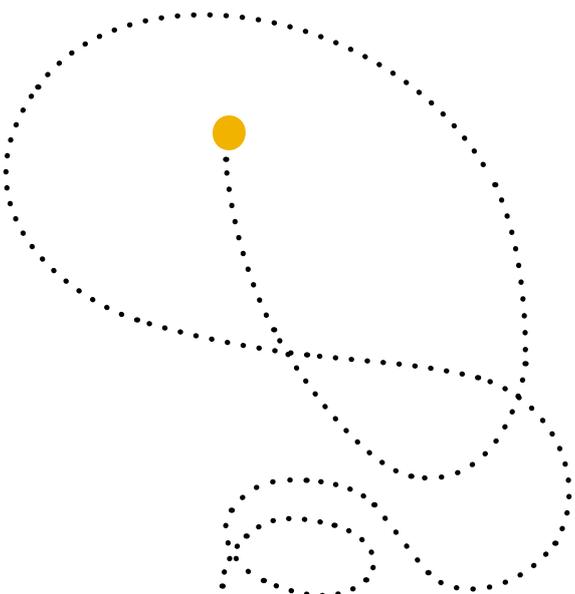
The scheme gives aspiring critics aged 18 to 25 the opportunity to participate in masterclasses with some of the foremost figures in theatre criticism and journalism. Lyn Gardner, Donald Hutera and Michael Billington have all delivered sessions.

Participants attend six masterclasses and review three shows across the South West, with the opportunity to receive feedback from the experts. The scheme costs just £90 for all sessions and two free bursary places are made available for those in receipt of means-tested benefits.

The professional critics also review shows in the venues where their masterclasses take place, providing national coverage for regional theatres.

### Pitching the scheme to participants

I went and talked to youth theatres before we launched and worked closely with the theatre marketing team. We pitched the scheme to young people as something they would have the opportunity to develop. We offered them the chance to improve their writing, develop transferable skills and learn from experts but it was important to give them a sense of ownership over how the programme evolved.



### About Carl Woodward

Carl is a theatre practitioner dedicated to learning, teaching and inspiring others to understand and appreciate theatre. He has been working freelance with a variety of arts organisations across the South West over the past five years. He is an Associate Lecturer at University of Chichester and has an established history of working in youth theatre and education settings.

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[mrcarlwoodward.com/young-critics](http://mrcarlwoodward.com/young-critics)

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### About Theatre Royal Winchester

Situated at the cultural heart of the city, Winchester Theatre Royal is committed to bringing its audiences the best work as well as supporting artists and performers.

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[theatreroyalwinchester.co.uk](http://theatreroyalwinchester.co.uk)

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### About A Younger Theatre

A Younger Theatre is an organisation committed to supporting and nurturing emerging creative talent in theatre and the arts. Founded in 2009 as a blog, A Younger Theatre has grown to become a publication, production company and resource for emerging creatives.

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[ayoungertheatre.com](http://ayoungertheatre.com)

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## Securing top critics

I've always considered networking a necessary evil. I had met most of the critics at different events I'd attended and always made a point of following up those chance meetings with an email to maintain contact.

We offered a nominal fee for the critics' expenses but some volunteered their time and covered their own travel. They believed in what we were doing and were keen to help and share their expertise with a new generation of critics.

## Gaining access for reviews

We pitched Young Critics to venues as a way of getting young people through their doors, of gaining national reviews and of addressing this bigger idea of 'critics in crisis'.

As the scheme has grown in profile, venues have started to offer us free tickets for young people to attend and review shows. The Mayflower in Southampton generously donated tickets to the scheme. We maintain contact with all the Young Critics after the workshops to extend these offers and ensure they're able to continue reviewing.

## The results so far

The focus of the scheme is very much on depth of engagement and having a real impact on the skills and employability of participants.

- 10 young critics participated in the pilot project
- 90% of pilot participants had never attended Winchester Theatre Royal before
- Participants have experienced things they'd not seen before and returned to the theatres with friends
- The scheme has been extended and has now run for three seasons, providing 44 hours of contact time for young critics
- 6 regional theatres have had reviews in national papers as a direct result of the scheme
- Big Issue South West and Southern Daily Echo have shared the Young Critics' reviews, boosting the profile of theatre in the region and enabling young people to see their writing in print
- Some participants have gone on to study theatre at postgraduate level and two have recently been offered press and marketing roles
- Young Critics has been adapted to become a formal Theatre Critique module as part of Musical Theatre Critique and Arts Journalism at the University of Chichester
- I have been asked to help a number of other theatres set up their own Young Critics schemes including Lighthouse Poole's Centre for the Arts and ICIA Arts at The Edge, The University of Bath
- The scheme is financially sustainable with participant fees covering the running costs

## Feedback

'A scheme like this is vitally important at a time when young critics need all the practical help they can get in a world where the digital revolution has created new opportunities.' Michael Billington

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[Michael Billington - a scheme like this is vitally important](#)

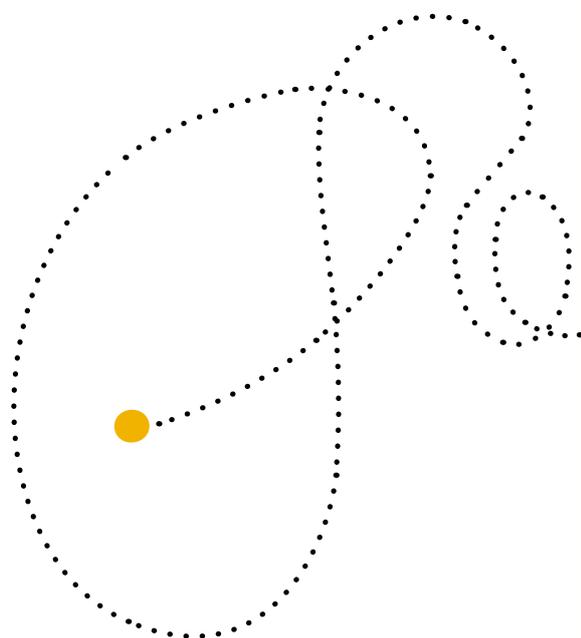
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'I was delighted to take part in the Young Critics scheme. It's terrific to see a theatre encouraging young people not just to engage with performance but to think and write about it too. Supporting a critical culture is good for theatre as a transferable skill that can be applied in many areas of life.' Lyn Gardner

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[Experts' feedback about young critics programme 2015](#)

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## Recommendations

### Don't take no for an answer

Persistence is key when it comes to getting people and organisations on board with an idea. If you believe in something make a strong case for it and make sure it's heard.

### Create mutually beneficial projects

We created a scheme where everyone wins. Theatres in the South West have benefited from national reviews by professional critics as well as regional reviews by participants. Young people have been able to learn from experts and see their writing in print. Regional magazines like Big Issue South West have gained new contributors. Audiences in the South West now have greater access to informed critique of shows taking place in their region.

### Plan thoroughly and seek collaborators

It's much easier to get an idea off the ground if you have people on your side from the outset.

### Ask

If you don't ask you don't get. It would have been easy to assume that experts like Lyn Gardner wouldn't be interested in a project like this and therefore not ask them. It's always worth asking. I did and it paid off.

### Take action

If you're not happy with the way something is then do something about it. We've achieved reviews in the regions and created a fantastic opportunity for young people at the same time.

### Network and maintain communication

As I said before, it is a necessary evil and it opens doors that may just help you out later on. If you meet someone at an event make sure you drop them an email afterwards to maintain contact.

### Invest time in national initiatives

I got involved in My Theatre Matters, which is how I met several of the critics and a philanthropist. That has proved to be an incredibly worthwhile investment of time.

## Further resources

Find out more about Young Critics on Carl's blog and watch or listen to extracts of masterclasses on YouTube and Soundcloud.

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[Carl Woodward blog: Young Critics](#)

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[Twitter \[carl\\\_woodward09\]\(#\) #YoungCritics](#)

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[Lyn Gardner Critics in Theatre workshop](#)

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[Michael Billington gives Young Critics 3 tips to writing a review](#)

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[Young Critics Soundcloud](#)

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