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each overseen by staff members, but with responsibility given to the students.

### Drama project

Today I'm here to observe one particular large-scale drama project. I was invited by King's head of drama Adam Cross (a TD contributor). Cross, along with Chapman, and assistant director of partnerships Rebecca Catterall, are putting on their most ambitious production yet, and have employed for the year a director in residence – David Antrobus – who comes with credentials, having previously been artist in residence at the Orange Tree Theatre.

Asked to come up with a production which could be mounted using groups of students from ten different schools, split into sub-groups and mixed together, and rehearsing in different buildings all over the Merton and Kingston area, every Friday for two terms, Antrobus turned to the ultimate and original form of community theatre: the Mystery Plays. 'I thought back to how each guild would take responsibility for a section of the story and I thought maybe that would work,' explains Antrobus, 'so that we'd create some watertight sections and somehow put it together, with me working on it broadly.' The original Mystery Plays would go on for days, so Antrobus selected two dramatic sections of the story: the flood and the passion – which seemed particularly appropriate given that the scheduled performance date is to be the Friday before the Easter holidays.

This is the first time that King's has attempted a production on this scale. Though drama and music projects in the different schools have come together in past years for a one-off performance they've called an 'Open Doors' evening, that has been more of a revue. This year there is a thread which ties the whole piece together.

### All kinds of collaboration

Staff from a number of school departments are involved in this project. While being overseen by Antrobus in drama, members of the French, philosophy and theology, design and technology, art, music, and psychology departments are all also closely involved – the latter in working with one of the two special schools participating in the project. And each of the partnership schools boasts willing and enthusiastic staff members as well: the whole enterprise is testament to a level of trust between staff and students of King's and the other schools, built up over a number of years.

## Sarah Lambie meets the team behind an ambitious multi-school collaboration project: *The Merton Mysteries*

When I arrive at King's College School, atop a hill, right beside Wimbledon common, it feels a little like I've walked into a summer school. It helps that it is a rare sunny February Friday with a glorious blue sky, but mainly it's because while many classrooms are deserted, others are hives of excited and extremely varied activity.

In one room a group of students of all ages are sitting on desks throwing ideas at a teacher – one of them is wielding a cardboard legionnaire's shield, while outside the window more of the same group are chanting enthusiastically in Latin: this, I'm told, is going to be the Latin Film Project with a local primary school.

In the tennis courts, the CCF Royal Navy students are marching round in circles, with commitment but varying degrees of accuracy. I'm taken past them and into a large upstairs room where I find about 30 primary school children and a handful of older students in a zoological cacophony, processing round the room with giraffe and zebra heads, peacock tails, enormous grins on their faces and, in one lad's case, a

near-deafening 'moo'. This is Bond Primary School, working with their own staff and with staff and students from King's, on their particular section of *The Merton Mysteries*.

King's has a truly impressive permanent outreach programme, involving close ongoing relationships with more than 25 maintained secondary, primary and special schools, and other institutions. Friday afternoons on the King's timetable are given over throughout the academic year to extracurricular activities: and one of these is a community projects programme, to which, director of partnerships and outreach Harry Chapman tells me, 362 students in Years 10–13 have signed up this year.

Students who volunteer for community projects are required to take part for at least an academic year, and a variety of opportunities are offered them, such as academic mentoring or teaching subjects which aren't offered at the schools in question (classics, for example). A number of the projects are creative: there are joint-schools choirs, guitar groups and art classes,

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King's partnership schools for *The Merton Mysteries* are Bond Primary School, the Coombe Schools (boys, girls and sixth form), special schools Cricket Green and Perseid, Ricards Lodge High School and its sixth form RR6, and St Mark's Church of England Academy. Each has something different to bring to the table. St Mark's Academy, I'm told for example, have a fantastic gospel choir, and a group of students from three schools are rehearsing spirituals to link sections of the show.

In the main auditorium downstairs I find a group of King's music students who've written a score for sections of the production, putting their composition to the action for the first time. In the space, students from the Coombe Schools – sixth form and Year 9 – are rehearsing with King's students the physical theatre they've devised to tell the story of Noah and the building of the ark. Energetically they chop down an enormous tree and begin to construct their ship. The commitment and the fun are both palpable, and it's clear that over the weeks these students have all become firm friends. There is no sense of separation across either school allegiance or age boundaries.

### Getting up on its feet

The design element of the production sounds spectacular as well. Overseen by Antrobus' artistic collaborator, designer Sammy Dowson, also previously of the Orange Tree Theatre, the DT department are building a tree of knowledge, which will later become the cross for the passion part of the show. 'It's a most unusual tree,' says Antrobus, 'it's very ... "essence of tree": a lot of 4x2 and bits of wire – but it's coming together really well. Out of it come these wonderful ten-metre long ribbons all of different colours: suddenly we festoon the space with ribbons to create the rainbow, so we're trying to create a simple and relatively inexpensive coup de theatre moment from that. And then all the Bond Primary children do their movement section representing the storm and flood among the water, big blue cloths coming out of the bottom of the tree, and then the Perseid children play the dove, flying above the water ... that's the idea anyway.'

Of course, 'that's the idea' is the crux



of the matter, here. Antrobus is the Danny Boyle of this production: he's put forward his grand plan, allocated sections of the story to groups who are rehearsing minibus drives away each Friday in different schools, and in some cases he hasn't seen what they've come up with for as many as seven weeks.

'I get to see it all together the Friday before we do it. We did a run at the end of last term, a sort of stagger-through of what everybody had so far, which was like a marker in the sand, and there were quite big sections where we said "At this point we will ... flood the earth ..." There was quite a lot of that going on! But it was nice to have everyone in one room – because that's the tricky part about it, helping all the different people in all the schools to understand that it's bigger than their little section. There are around 130 students from the partnership schools, and about 40 from King's. So just fitting them all in the auditorium is tricky.'


### The process

Naturally the other tricky element is the logistics. Chapman and Catterall have rehearsal programming down to a fine art, and it takes staff members willing to take on this gargantuan task to keep such a project from collapsing altogether. 'Harry and Rebecca are superb at organising this,' says Antrobus. 'The

logistics – the minibuses, who's available when. A partnership school has a group that is going to be away one week; some of the schools have two groups and they work alternate weeks with our same King's students, so if one of those groups suddenly can't rehearse for some reason it could be that a particular group don't rehearse for three weeks at that school.'

Of the Year 9 boys I watched from Coombe, Antrobus says 'I've never seen that younger group all together before. Last time they were here, half of them were on a trip to Germany. So that was the first time they've been in the space and the first time some of them have actually done that section' ... keeping all the plates spinning is certainly a challenge.

Overall, however, it's very clear that the project is incredibly rewarding. 'You will have days in a school where everyone thinks "I don't know, have we achieved anything?" and they may go away downhearted. That's part of it,' says Antrobus. 'And other days you go and it's great – it's fantastic ... and other days the bus gets stuck in traffic and you only have 20 minutes of rehearsal ... and that sort of builds the bonds in the schools – which is ultimately what it's all about.'

'We try to impress upon everyone involved that whatever happens in our final performance is not what it's all about. It's about that whole process of the students interacting regularly, week in, week out: having good days, having bad days, having transport problems, and then finally having to take that big leap of faith thinking "Oh my god, I've got to get up in front of 200 people and do something". Hopefully at the end of it they'll think "Oh! It was rather fun!"' 

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