

street life

VENDOR AND HOMELESSNESS NEWS



Bowled over

Homeless people from Manchester played their part in an opera that had them dancing in the aisles, reports **Ciara Leeming**

Bowler hats, rousing sea shanties and dancing up the aisles – these were just a few highlights of a Manchester show in which homeless performers took centre stage.

Singers from the Booth Centre's weekly Streetwise Opera group were the stars when a "film opera", which marries cutting-edge music with myth and folklore, premiered in their city.

Members graced the stage alongside professional singers and musicians when *Fables* was performed before an enraptured audience at Hulme's Zion Centre.

Together with a group from a day centre in Nottingham, they sang a range of songs in the live show and were also the stars of one of four quirky short films woven into the evening's narrative. The others all featured Streetwise groups from other regions.

Streetwise Opera uses music as a tool to help people who

have experienced homelessness to move on in their lives. It runs weekly sessions in 11 day centres and hostels around England and twice a year stages inclusive professional productions. In this region its practice sessions are delivered through a two-year partnership with Opera North.

Regular positive activities can provide a welcome diversion for people who lead chaotic lives, and the Booth Centre's opera class is well attended. Members have previously performed at the city's cathedral and at an event in London.

Last year they spent weeks practising for – and then two days filming – their seven-minute film *Hey! Come On Out!*, which tells the story of the sudden discovery of a bottomless hole in the ground and stars dozens of homeless people from Manchester and Nottingham.

Composers Orlando Gough,

Mira Calix of Warp Records, Paul Sartin and Andy Mellon from the folk band Bellowhead, and Emily Hall teamed up with filmmakers to produce the four innovative works that span the genres of opera, folk, electronica and film.

Their creations were based on fables including *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*, the folkloric legend of the Hartlepool Monkey, Oscar Wilde's poignant *The Nightingale and the Rose* and Shinishi Hoshi's contemporary *Hey! Come On Out!* which has been selected by the British Council for its short-film support scheme – a list of productions from the UK it recommends to international festivals.

"It was a brilliant night – we are very proud of their efforts."

Steve Scallon, aged 57, who has been coming to Streetwise workshops for two years, said: "I enjoyed the whole experience of making the film and recording the sound track – it was great fun."

Andy Crossley, aged 62, who also attends Streetwise, added: "Taking part in *Fables* was great.

The Fables cast on stage at the Zion Centre. Photo: Ciara Leeming

We worked with different groups from homeless centres all over the country. Performing at the event at the Zion Centre was a great experience – it boosted our confidence and gave us great pleasure."

The Zion Centre show was part of the Not Part Of Festival.

Amanda Croome, manager of the Booth Centre, said: "It was a brilliant night – the group did really well and we are proud of their efforts. They and the teams from Opera North and Streetwise have put in a lot of work, which certainly paid off.

"Homeless people tend to be excluded from society, at great cost to society and the individuals. But when this can be remedied and people brought back into the heart of society then everyone's lives are enriched.

"We've recognised for years the need to not only find people somewhere to live but to also help them usefully occupy their time, if they are really going to break the cycle of homelessness."

Matt Peacock, chief executive of Streetwise Opera, added: "Our performers are inspirational. They prove that no matter what experiences you have had in your life, you can achieve great things."