

BEHAVIOURAL SAFETY TAKES CENTRE STAGE

As Ireland's building sector continues its recovery, a new series of behavioural safety workshops is providing both employers and employees with an opportunity to consider their approach to workplace safety, under a new initiative spearheaded by the Construction Industry Federation in conjunction with Annette Tierney's Theatre at Work. Report by Elaine O'Regan.



As part of a unique safety initiative for the Irish construction sector, the Construction Industry Federation (CIF) recently commissioned Annette Tierney and her team of actors at Theatre at Work to produce an interactive play based on a major incident that took place during the construction of an extension to a terminal building at Gatwick Airport in the UK.

“The time was right for a piece specifically related to the construction industry in Ireland as it begins to get busier. It’s a really high-risk time with contracts on offer and people bidding for work,” Tierney recently told ‘Health & Safety Times’. “The focus is very much on getting the jobs and then getting them done, but safety needs to be a part of that.”

EVENTS DRAMATISED

The two-hour play dramatised the events that led up to the accident, during a period when both principal and sub-contractors were under pressure to get the job done.

“One of the sub-contractors was working on the roof area and the foreman working for that sub-contractor was renowned for getting the job done on time,” said Tierney. “The project was behind schedule and there was pressure to get it finished. Safety took a backseat in the decision-making process.

“They made a bad call under pressure. Communication wasn’t great with both the client and primary contractor and they decided to work on a roof over a live area, which they obviously shouldn’t have done.”

The sub-contractor was lowering a steel beam into place over the international departure lounge in Gatwick’s South Terminal, when it came loose and crashed through the roof over the restaurant. The 140kg girder smashed into the table of a woman seated in the restaurant who was awaiting a flight to Florida.

She sustained a broken leg and an open wound and subsequently required seven operations. It emerged subsequently that the subcontractor had used the wrong type of sling to transport the beam over the restaurant.

MINDFUL APPROACH

“The accident should never have happened,” said Tierney, “so the idea behind forum plays like ‘Terminal’ is really to encourage people to be mindful in the moment and to be aware of risk.

“We want them to think about the choices they are making and to be aware of risk in that moment, so that they make the right decision, and they don’t feel under pressure to make an unsafe choice.”

Employers have a vital role to play in communicating clearly to staff the importance of upholding safety procedures, regardless of on-the-job pressures, according to Tierney.

“People really need to feel that it’s okay to speak up if, at

ABOUT ANNETTE TIERNEY

Annette Tierney has used innovative theatre-based learning methods since 2000 to provide high impact solutions in areas such as leadership, behavioural safety, culture change and commercial skills.

She has also produced and facilitated learning events in Europe, Asia and the US, working with organisations in a range of sectors including transport, construction, utilities, energy, hospitality, health, pharmaceuticals and financial services.

Her clients in behavioural safety include CIF, Ervia, ESB, Tesco Ireland, BG Group, Rolls Royce, Shell, Pfizer, Bombardier, Network Rail and CECA.



that moment, they think ‘actually, I don’t want to work over a live area’ or whatever their concern might be. “It’s important that they feel comfortable enough to go to their employer or a senior person on site and say ‘I don’t feel safe doing this, what can we do differently?’”

CLEAR COMMUNICATION

In the case of the Gatwick incident, the primary contractor did not have a clear system of communication in place for all of various parties working on the project, according to Tierney.

“They should have known that the choice was being made to move the girder over the live area, so there are a lot of different avenues for responsibility,” she said.

“When we dramatised that, we have that conversation with the room and look at all the people, the systems and the individual choices that were involved in bringing about the accident.

“We talk about all of the opportunities where things could have been done differently, so it’s a bit like a ‘swiss cheese’ line-up of events.”

THEATRE AT WORK

CIF 'TERMINAL' DEBUT

'Terminal' had its debut last November at CIF House, funded by the Construction SME Skillnet Training Network. The play was opened by Robert Butler, CIF's Head of Learning and Development, and included a workshop for all those who attended, hosted by Annette Tierney.

"Annette produced a play for us before 'Terminal' called 'Mousehole', based on a rig accident, and we would see what she does as a new approach," said Butler. "It's innovative and there are different benefits for the safety and non-safety professionals in the audience."

He said that 'Terminal' is tailored to the construction industry, so the people watching the workshop get a real feeling and understanding of the behaviours, site terminology and how these type of accident occur. "They can relate to the characters and the relationships between the supervisor, the crew and the management."

Tierney also brought 'Terminal' to a Cork-based engineering firm following CIF debut last November. Butler said the organisation would continue to work with Theatre at Work to roll out further behavioural safety plays for members that could be staged in the workplace.

"The idea is that they can engage with the plays in their own environment," he said. "Behavioural safety is really about taking responsibility for your own safety as well as those around you. The key focus is on ownership and accountability – the willingness to take somebody to task in an informal way, and to challenge somebody if needs be and say 'I don't think that's right.'"

The added value offered by the behavioural safety approach, according to Butler, is in prompting people to think about the course of action they would take if they witnessed colleagues on-site engaging in dangerous or risky work practices.

"The challenge is in encouraging people to challenge senior staff when they think safety is being compromised, and it's about how to go about doing that in a way that they're comfortable with."

COMPANY CULTURE

Company culture has an important role to play in promoting an open and on honest approach to safe working practices in the construction sector, according to Butler.

"You need to have that message coming right from the top of the organisation, where the workers on the ground are encouraged to challenge decisions and practices if they think they are unsafe," he said.

'Terminal' has a four-strong cast, assembled to accurately portray the shifting dynamics that are played out on-site between the main contractor, sub-contractors and the client in the run-up to the Gatwick incident.

"The actors involved really understand what it's like on



Robert Butler, CIF's Head of Learning and Development.

site and that's what came back to me, when talking to the audience afterwards," said Butler.

"The supervisor depicted in the play was very hard to deal with and I've met supervisors like that in the real world on numerous occasions. You would find it difficult to challenge them and they would make it difficult for you to do so, but that's the reality of life.

"There are people out there who have that approach. They're not always right, but they're also not used to being challenged. When you do challenge them, it can become hostile, so the idea is to look at different approaches you could take."

FORUM THEATRE

Tierney set up Theatre at Work three years ago, having returned to Ireland from Britain where she worked with AKT Productions. A trained actor, she studied at the Gaiety School in Dublin and in forum theatre with Augusto and Julian Boal in New York.

"The use of actors in industry has been around for a long time. It's been going in the UK for about 20 years, but it's a newer concept in the Irish market," she said.

"Whereas role play enables skills practice, we bring in a fully scripted play based around open theatre, whereby it creates a forum theatre for group discussion. It originated in a social context in Brazil in the 1970s and I've adapted those principles for industry, so companies and organisations can use it as a learning and development tool."

As a tool for cultural change within the workplace, open theatre has the advantage of "holding up a mirror"

to the audience, reflecting their own behaviours. “They can understand how their own choices, actions and attitudes can influence a course of events,” said Tierney.

“In a safety context, when you dramatise incidents that have actually happened, you can see all of the various choices that were made, and actions taken, in the run up to an incident. You can break it down and look at where the opportunities lay to do things differently.”

Tierney and her team of actors, stage managers and facilitators visit workplaces to host behavioural safety plays, such as ‘Terminal’, and other productions on the safety theme as well as business skills and cultural change.

INTERACTIVE APPROACH

“We can host a half-day workshop for a group of 20, right up to an event with a few hundred people in a conference centre. We don’t just go in and do a play. It’s interactive every step of the way,” said Tierney.

“The audience might see one event unfold and then we would open that up for discussion, before going back to the story. They get to interact with the characters on stage and ask them about their choices.” She can offer behavioural safety plays for the oil and gas, utilities, warehousing and distribution and manufacturing sectors.

Tierney is currently developing a play based on an incident that occurred in Ireland’s construction sector. She also has been commissioned to develop a play for a client in the retail and distribution sector.

“People are starting to see the importance of focusing on attitudes and behaviours to improve safety in the workplace,” said Tierney. “It’s not just about the paperwork and documentation. People have to buy into it and that’s what we are about.”

For more information on Theatre at Work’s interactive plays and workshops visit www.theatreatwork.ie

‘TERMINAL’ PLAYS IT SAFE!

Annette Tierney’s Theatre at Work linked up with the Construction Industry Federation (CIF) last November to launch a unique behavioural safety programme for the Irish construction industry.

In partnership with CIF’s Learning & Development Division, Tierney and her team of actors illustrated a safety case-study based on a real-life event during the construction of an airport terminal extension, when both principal and sub-contractors were under pressure to get the job done.

The interactive safety play ‘Terminal’ follows what happened in the wake of the incident at Gatwick’s South Terminal, going back in time to uncover the attitudes and behaviours, which contributed to the serious incident.

“Through facilitated discussion the topical safety themes explored included responsibility, rule-breaking, intervention and the human factors that influence a culture of on-site safety,” noted Tierney.

“Theatre is a powerful medium by which to convey information, stimulate awareness and enable understanding. Interactive techniques like forum theatre give participants valuable insights into workplace behaviour, including their own.”



Tierney’s Theatre at Work actors as sub-contractor and construction workers during the ‘Terminal’ interactive safety play at CIF Construction House last November.