

Darlington & Stockton Times

12:46pm Friday 4th December 2009

Dales performers share awards platform with the nation's best

AN ORIGINAL play performed at Swaledale Festival in the summer has won an international award.

Semmerwater, devised to involve a large number of local people, won the Local Hero category at the inaugural Ability Media Awards.

Winners in other categories included English National Opera, BBC Television, Frank Gardner, Sir Anthony Sher, Sue Townsend, Jimmy McGovern, the Royal Shakespeare Company and Channel Four.

The awards, presented by Leonard Cheshire Disability, are for creative excellence and social relevance. Semmerwater was described as “an uplifting and fascinating work which, performed to the highest standards, showed how inclusive and affirmative community productions can be”.

It was conceived by the festival's artistic director Malcolm Creese as a project that would celebrate a local legend and enable a large number of adults and children to share a stage with professional performers.

He commissioned prize-winning Wensleydale writer Ann Pilling, who was inspired by the William Watson poem The Ballad of Semmerwater, to write the script, and musician David Gordon to compose the music, which contains mediaeval, renaissance and baroque styles, as well as elements of jazz and folk.

Music teacher Rosi Keatinge, of Leyburn, coached the performers in singing, and drama director Amanda Heitler, of [Richmond](#), took charge of staging and props.

Workshops and rehearsals went on for several months.

The performance took place at St Andrew's Church, Grinton, on June 5, conducted from the harpsichord by David Gordon. Instrumental music was provided by London Concertante, and 17 local musicians. There were 98 singers, ranging in age from four to over 80, and professional soloists Emily Smith and David Pisaro, joined by choirs and Richmond and Wensleydale schools.

A Sheep Chorus was made up of 34 children from Arkengarthdale, Reeth and Gunnerside primary schools, while 36 pupils of Askrigg and Bainbridge primary

schools formed a Fish Chorus. There were singers from the Wensleydale Chorus and Swale Singers, and actors from the Youth Theatre of the Georgian Theatre Royal, Richmond.

Even Grinton's vicar, the Rev Caroline Hewlett, had a speaking part.

"We wanted to include as many people as possible, regardless of age or ability' said Mr Creese. "It was a great thrill to see it come to fruition and it is wonderful that all those involved can celebrate winning this prestigious award."

The AMI Local Hero Award was collected at the ceremony by 14- year-old Amy Stockdale, a pupil of Wensleydale School, and 15-yearold Ben Lacey, from Richmond School, members of the Youth Theatres, along with Swaledale Festival chairman John Sparke, Malcolm Creese, Ann Pilling, David Gordon, Rosi Keatinge, Amanda Heitler, and singer/actor Emma Wardell.

