STORIES, IDEAS, LEARNING &
PASSION PIECES FROM

MOVING ROOTS

MAY 2023

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AN INTRODUCTION

Written by Christie Hill,
Producer at Battersea Arts Centre

This report collects reflections, opinions and ideas, written in Spring 2023 at the end of the Moving Roots project. It's not an evaluation report or a report for funders, but emerges from the work done through Moving Roots on touring participatory work, from other experiences working in and with communities, and our feelings from working in the arts industry, that we believe is meaningful to share.

The pieces in this report are written by producers from Common Wealth in Llanrumney, East Cardiff, Restoke in Fenton, Stoke-on-Trent, The Old Courts in Wigan, Jumped Up Theatre in Peterborough, and from myself, while working at Battersea Arts Centre.

These are grassroots organisations, and the producers have been making work in and with their communities for between 7-20 years. By which I mean they live where they work, they have renovated and painted their venues themselves, they are involved in their communities in multiple ways, they don't sit behind their laptops but talk with local people, know why they might participate and also what gets in the way of engagement. I believe we have a lot to learn from these producers and organisations. Especially in the context of Arts Council England's Let's Create Strategy, Levelling Up, and the increasing number of people claiming their work is 'co-created'.

I'm Christie, and I have coordinated the Moving Roots projects at Battersea Arts Centre since 2019. Previous to Moving Roots I worked on the Collaborative Touring Network, a similar strategic touring network; I have also toured some of BAC's co-productions, and been on the programming team to bring in touring work to the building. I have seen both sides of the struggle for touring work and receiving work, in London and around the country. I have felt the struggle of flogging workshops, of looking for venues that can pay the fees, of turning down shows because we can't afford it, felt the disappointment of venues not marketing a show enough, of working with artists that don't care about the local community, spending a fortune on travel and accommodation and feeling like touring is a bad one-night stand.

This report offers a different way of thinking about touring – multiple different ways, but all with access as their key consideration.
It looks at the lack of shows being made that feel truly co-created, high quality and relevant to our communities.
How the bones of the industry are inaccessible to working class and other marginalised people.
What community producing is, and why it's an essential role.
And it asks if the industry has lost sight of the value of singing and dancing together. We haven't – and it's what we're here to talk about.

ABOUT MOVING ROOTS

Where it began:

Moving Roots came at a time when staff at BAC were thinking a lot about co-creation and trying to implement it in our programme. When I say co-creation, I think of David Jubb's definition: making work with people, not at people. Full detail on his blog here.

I remember David went to see Common Wealth's 'Radical Acts' show in Bradford and came back raving about it. The impact on the audience and the people who'd made it sounded big and deep and genuine and exciting. We wanted to programme it at BAC, but weren't sure how. If we brought the original company, would the effect be the same for an audience in London? If we remade the show in London, how would you replicate such an organic process? If we did that, it wouldn't really be co-created anymore, but would it still have impact? It felt expensive, time consuming. But we hear about all the learning and best practice that comes from this sort of work, and shouldn't we try to build from that?

So Moving Roots was partly inspired by questions around how to tour pre-exisiting, co-created theatre shows. Are there models we could try? What is the impact?

The project also came out of learning from leading the Collaborative Touring Network, and various other networks (including Co-Creating Change, and The Agency), and BAC's mission at the time, which included working nationally.

Organising the network:

Moving Roots was project-led by BAC: that is, BAC led on fundraising, held the budget, made final decisions about programming, offered producing support, and led on advocacy of the project and sharing learning.
The project brought together four producing partners who delivered the activity in their locations. Three stayed with the project for all three years: The Old Courts in Wigan, Jumped Up Theatre in Peterborough, and Common Wealth in Llanrumney, East Cardiff. We also began with Lyrici Arts based in Medway for the first two years, but they decided to leave to concentrate on their own work, and were replaced by Restoke in Fenton, Stoke on Trent for the final 18 months.

Budget and activity:

Moving Roots was fully subsidised, and had funding of around £950,000. Esmee Fairbairn funded £587,000 of that, Garfield Weston Foundation funded £300,000, and a mixture of Arts Council Wales, Arts Council England and other trusts and foundations have supported around £63,000 of local activity.

We spent around £300,000 for the touring shows, £470,000 on producing capacity. We didn't have to rely on audience numbers or ticket income, and our main funders gave us the flexibility to experiment and not to know the outcome of some of the activity.

Our aims of Moving Roots were:

- To change perceptions nationally and locally of the places work was touring to
- Increase the agency of local people, to make what they want to see in their hometowns
- To prove that co-creation works as a model of social change

The project ran from September 2019 –April 2023. The bones of activity over that time have been:

- Employ producers in these partner organisations
- Go to see co-created shows
- Programme and remake five pre-existing shows across our four places
- Commission legacy activity
- Set up and run local sounding boards
- Employ local writers to be mentored by Maddy Costa and write about the project
- Collect stories of change in people working on this activity
- Stay afloat and grow as organisations
- Meet up as a network in person four times a year, and regularly on zoom

The shows we programmed and re-made:

Rent Party, led by Darren Pritchard

Epic Fail, led by Kid Carpet

The Posh Club at Christmas, led by Duckie

What Do You See, led by The PappyShow

How Do We Begin Again? led by Jo Fong

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COMMUNITY PRODUCING: WHAT IT IS AND WHY IT MATTERS

Written by Chantal Williams,
Community Producer at Common Wealth Theatre

My name is Chantal Williams, I live in East Cardiff and work here as a community producer with Common Wealth.

From the outside, it can look as though being from a place and/or living there is all there is to community producing. In this piece I'll look at everything else the work involves.

There are many approaches to community producing, and companies doing fantastic work in this area: some on Common Wealth's radar are Heart of Glass, People United, the Migration Museum and Knowle West Media Centre. The learnings shared here aren't a blueprint: they're a collection of things I've learned through years of practice, working hyper-locally to develop skills and opportunities with and for the communities of East Cardiff. Understanding the need to start at grassroots level up in order to have a diverse industry that serves and represents all.

WHAT DO I MEAN BY COMMUNITY PRODUCING?

Fundamentally, community producing is about access.

- Access to high quality cultural activity that is for communities, by communities, and seeks to empower and strengthen cultural landscapes, exposure and cultural democracy.
- Access to opportunities that can help to support change, individually and as part of campaigns for the wider community: that might include access to training and jobs, to networks and learning exchanges, or to platforms where people can share their stories artistically, nationally, interactively.
- Access for the industry as well, to diverse unsung voices and talents: community producing champions and creates pathways and opportunities for people to engage more widely with the arts, and for lesser-heard voices to remain in control of their stories.
- Access for audiences to local artists, who might not describe themselves that way, in whom audiences see themselves reflected.
- Above all, access to human connections.

Here are some examples:

In December 2022, Common Wealth collaborated with another company, Duckie, to host Posh Club at the community hub in St Mellons, one of the council estates in East Cardiff, described by residents as an inner city island and an unlikely cultural destination. With afternoon tea, song and dance and cabaret performances, Posh Club was a catalyst for connection, a place for hundreds of members of the 65+ community to bond with each other, meet new people and feel visible in their community. "When you get to a certain age you become invisible to society," said one of the participants, Lucile, 68, from Rumney. "Feeling seen, looked after and important meant a lot, it still does."

Co-creation of a joyful event wasn't the only outcome. Val and Marina, best friends who attended Posh Club, also took part in a film by Gavin Porter. Val is 82, a St. Mellons resident who likes to garden and bake cakes for her friends, and is super knowledgeable about plants, trees and bird calls, mystifying her fortunate friends with her ability to identify who is singing. Gavin filmed her journey leading up to and attending Posh Club, where she was welcomed with care and authentic connection, and was just as much a part of the success of Posh Club as the acts on stage. The Posh Club Cardiff can now be seen on YouTube and Val glows with pride as she tells her friends how many views it has, her love for the area in which she lives, and her pride in what we had achieved together in this place. This is not the usual narrative of St Mellons, a place more often considered to be disenfranchised and disengaged. Changes in the perception of place start here in these moments, with the

community becoming a destination for cultural activity supporting the platforming of voices and agency over the lens in which the people here are viewed.

Earlier in 2022, another local, Jude, was part of the artistic company who delivered Payday Party with Common Wealth in Edinburgh, following performances in Cardiff in 2021. A spoken word artist, Jude described the effect of upping the retirement age, the real cost of governmental decisions that seem far away to some who vote.
I asked her why she wanted to perform and share her story: it's to set an example of possibility, she insists. "It is very important because a lot of people and especially young people, people of any age, who may not have done so well at school, but they've got some fantastic talents that if they had the opportunity to try them out and use them, they would discover they've got unknown quantities in them that they never knew they had."

Community producing gives space to people to share those talents, build on them, and discover new ones.

WHAT'S INVOLVED IN COMMUNITY PRODUCING?

Community producing takes time, consideration and an investment in people, advocating for them to become part of the make-up and mission of the work. It can be consuming: working in place requires a willingness to be absorbed in local politics, narratives and lives. The commitment is rewarded with deep relationships, shared experiences and the chance to be part of opening new pathways for creativity in the community.

Before joining Common Wealth, I founded the Welsh Streetdance Association, which worked to develop skills and international opportunities for Welsh dancers. The organisation was embedded in East Cardiff in its earliest years, and that time in a hyper-local community helped shape the organisation as it grew to an international scale. That experience has been a solid foundation for coming to Common Wealth, a national organisation based in both Bradford and Cardiff, exploring all the benefits of hyper-local work.

Being from or living in a place helps in the work, so does lived experience. But I also have a number of tools that I use in community producing, which have been developed across all my work. Key to everything is a motivation to dig deep for local artists, using reactive ways of engagement to uncover and celebrate the wealth of talent in people who are, by circumstance, also full-time caregivers, night shift workers, students and teachers – people for whom artist is very rarely high on the list of descriptors.

To find them, I turn to:

- Social media: a fabulous way to find creatives in the community
- Karaoke nights: I guarantee there are some incredible singers there you've yet to meet
- Maps of local creatives – keep them updated, and keep in touch with them!

Finding people is one thing: encouraging them to participate is another. For this it's important

to have non-conventional routes in:

- Don’t use excluding language in call-outs – no arts jargon
- Offer conversations and meetings to build an understanding of the ask – and an understanding in the artist of how they will be an asset to the show/project. These should take place in their choice of place and on their time
- Be open to communication via WhatsApp or telephone until the artist is comfortable to submit an application
- Enable a variety of routes for application: video submissions, assistance with transcribing, informal chats with the team and director
- Remain visible within the community, be open to conversations at the checkout in the local supermarket, the school gates, etc

Once people are involved, the community producer’s role is one of awareness and facilitation, acting as a bridge between participants and organisation. People lead busy lives and traditional rehearsal structures may not work around childcare, jobs and personal responsibilities. Through building relationships with all participants, and knowledge of the organisation, the community producer can usefully find points of flexibility and non-negotiables on both sides, and communicate them clearly, before and after contracting.

Useful tools here include:

- Keeping the language in contracts clear, and walking artists through the contract before they sign
- Regular conversations about access. Common Wealth use access riders from the very first stages: these give a clear idea of how people like to work, how they like to receive feedback, what they need to be fully present, and how they view themselves engaging with the work. These can also be used to learn what methods of communication and payment suit participants best
- Creating a space where participants feel empowered to have agency over what they share and contribute, and know that consent is something that they can give but also take away – it’s flexible, not binding
- Schedules clearly placed in rehearsal rooms
- Template documents to help people with writing an invoice, or writing a feedback document
- Having a care plan for more difficult subject matters and bringing in organisations, specialists and individual support
- Giving space for friendship and debriefing – allowing the company to grow and support one another through the process

Care and the long game

Most arts organisations will say that they use creativity to galvanise, empower, unite and provide creative solutions. Some, though, take an extractive and tokenising approach to building audiences and relationships, in the name of legacy and social change. Community producing is the opposite of that. It’s about care.

There has been a lot of talk of care in the sector; throughout the Moving Roots journey it has been a theme we have reconnected

with many times. Why care? Who are we caring for? Is it condescending? Many of our communities were already, due to political and social means, under-resourced, disenfranchised and disconnected to the arts as a sector: inviting them into the relentless pace of an overworking and exploitative industry required thoughtful, pastoral and respectful project-planning, programming, relationship-building and management. From that perspective, care is an essential principle to work from.

There is so much that funders and larger arts organisations can do to support this.

Funders:

- Be open to a fluid, less prescribed process.
- Allow the gifts of community inclusion to impact the scope of the project, to define and change its output.
- The long work of socially engaged work requires trust: in the organisation's passion for artistic development, and the change that real relationships and embedded process can achieve.
- Develop artists over the long term: check back in, and make space for an open dialogue about what is changing, and the learning that has prompted the changes.

Arts organisations:

Be sensitive to what the community would like to see, what resonates and chimes – but also question the notion of where genres exist and who they are for, and don't be afraid to be part of risk taking and platforming of art forms that may resonate less. This can only enhance critical voice and raise interesting provocation for both audience and artist/institution alike on traditional programming normatives.

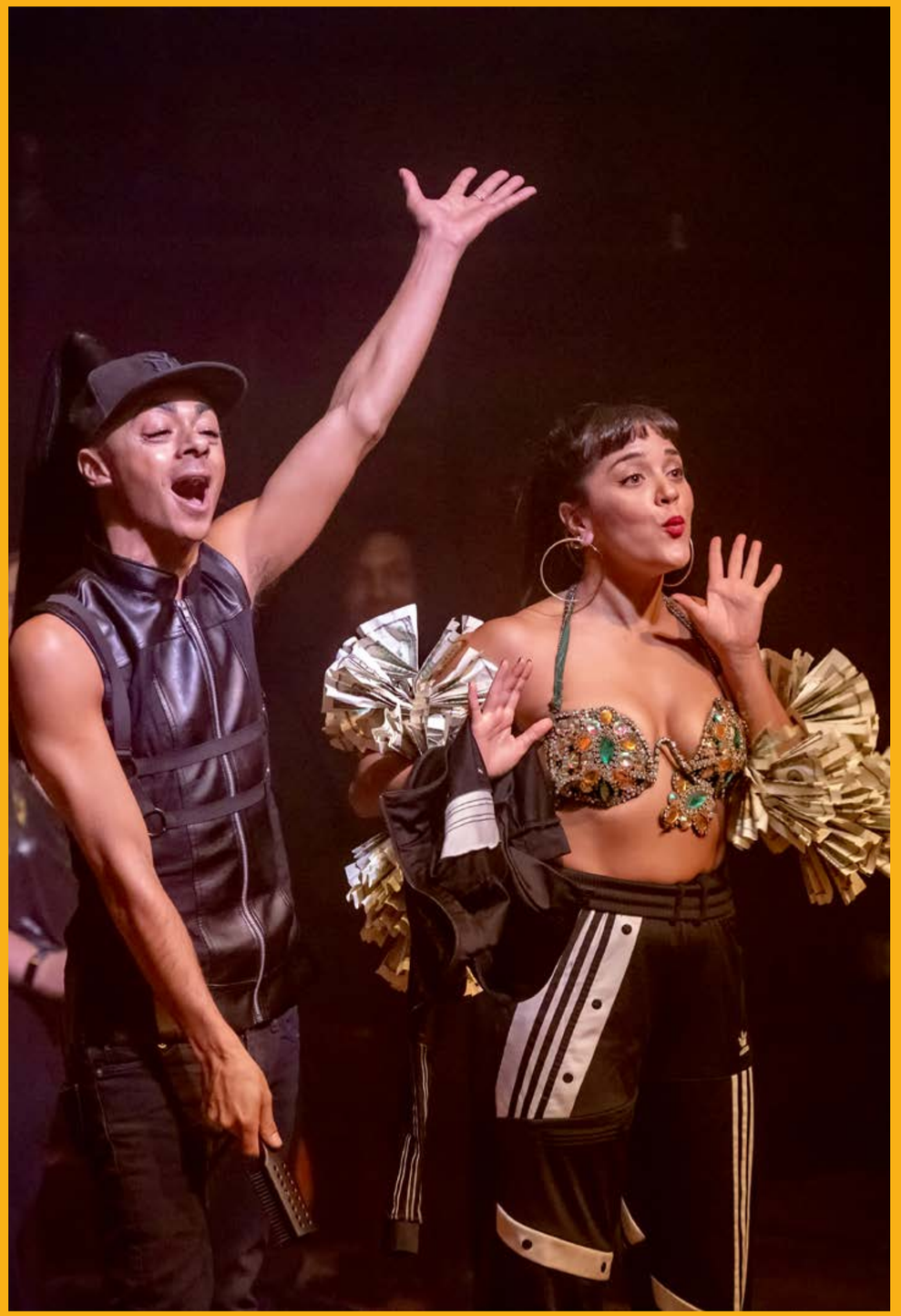
When approaching local organisations to support work in specific communities, consider the ask, their resources, and what the exchange is for them. What resources can you place against the ask? It might be as simple as holding free tickets for us. Or as complex as hosting someone to work at their venue once a week to answer any of the community's questions, or providing a phone number for them to discuss anything around the event.

Use your social media platform to raise awareness for the work that community producers are doing.

COMMUNITY PRODUCING: A SUMMARY

In short, community producing involves:

- Knowing and keeping up on local artists, by social media, organisation, word of mouth and direct support
- Having a knowledge of local community organisers, organisations, movements and charities
- Knowing the political, systematic and social issues faced by the community
- Having advocates and champions for the work in the community you are working for
- Adapting communication styles and approaches – and keeping lines of communication open
- Engaging in non-conventional ways
- Passion about inclusivity and access
- Contracts that have opportunity for questions and clarification
- Value in what people can bring into the entire process but clear asks and opportunity for points of clarification
- A passion to support and advocate for local artists and their development
- Knowing the national landscape of the arts and where opportunities exist
- Dedication to place: a drive to celebrate, question the external narrative of a place and champion the people within it
- And most of all, care. Yes, we are wanting to create art, art that is perceived as quality or provocative to those we present it to and our peers around us. Yes, we are hoping to develop the professional and artistic skills of those we work with and vice versa. But for me, the fundamental reason we create in this way is to hold human experience. Human connections to the work, to those around us, the connections in the audience, the connections to self. Deeply rooted in this creating for me is the desire to add value. Building a creative infrastructure, yes; having deep and long-term impact directly on people – definitely!



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IT'S ALL ABOUT SINGING AND DANCING

Written by Clare Reynolds
Director at Restoke

Restoke keeps its mission simple: it's all about singing, dancing and sharing stories, fundamental human experiences that are part of how we express ourselves collectively and in our communities.

But, as many of us working in community arts know, the work on the ground isn't that simple. Once you set up an organisation to fulfil this mission, the admin involved becomes consuming, as does the urgency of the work, how needed it is in the world. We don't want anyone to be excluded from the opportunities we want to share, but trying to break down barriers for people to access projects, providing travel costs, childcare, food, signposting, a shoulder to cry on – not to mention the fundraising needed to achieve all this... It's a lot.

Restoke is an artist-led organisation: our backgrounds are in community arts, making art with people where they are at, including in schools, community centres, care homes, prisons, residential settings. As young adults we had the privilege of meeting so many people in so many places, hearing about so many life experiences that were different to ours – and of course dancing and singing together. Community art is collaboration and it's raw: we experienced the challenges of these places along with the absolute best of people, and we are better people for it.

At its best this work transcends the things that usually keep us separated. For an hour or a year we can co-exist and express ourselves as a collective of people, in a specific place. We can create softness, humour, connection, action, energy… This work turns on our empathy, and can make us feel safe.

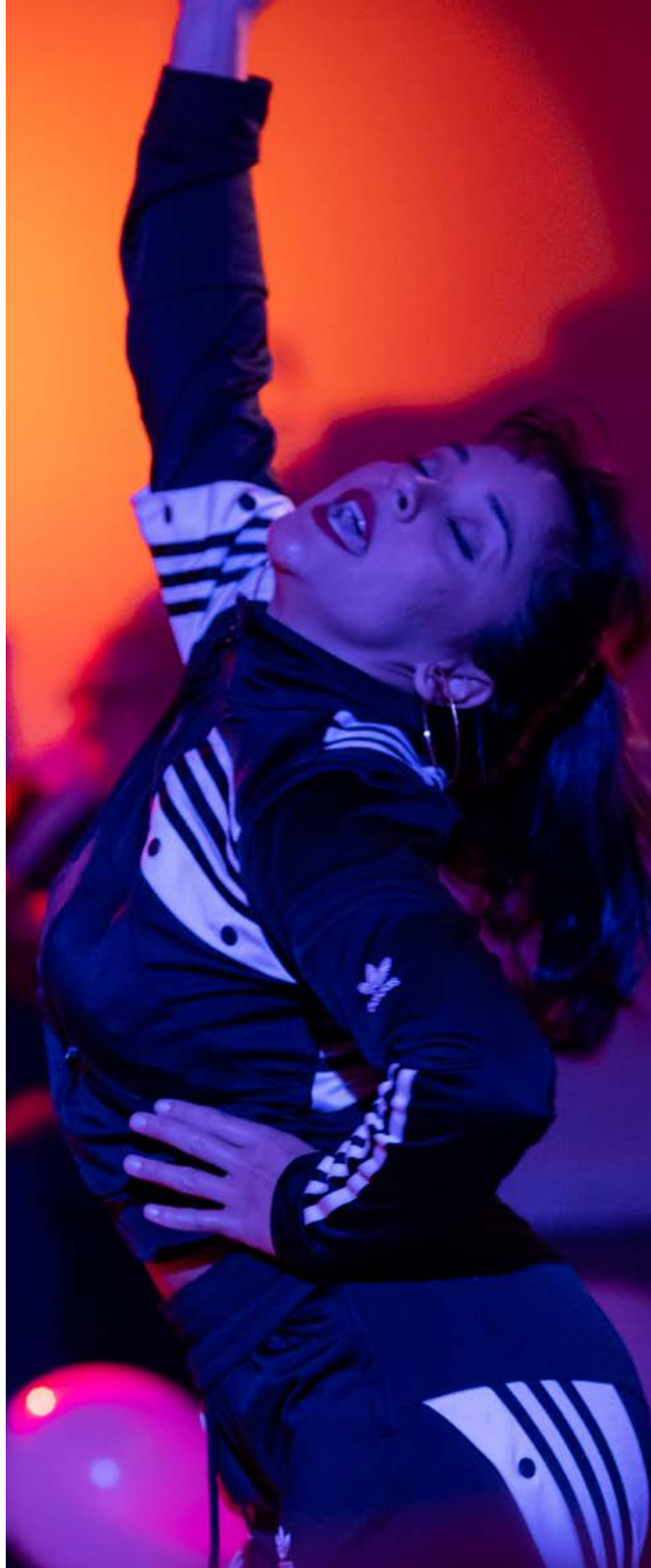
That's why it's great news that the latest funding strategies favour work like this. But it brings with it new expectations. Over the past few years we've realised that in order to prove our worth as community artists, we need to talk about big change. We are encouraged to talk about our art like social care, with data and measurables. And this jars with the fundamentals of our mission.

It's not that we don't have stories of change to share. We see the life-affirming power of the arts every day, we hear it and feel it. But we don't set out to instigate change: we set out to sing, dance and create together.

> **What happens to our responsibility to the people we are working with if change becomes our mission? How do we continue to work alongside each other, in collaboration, and not become a service?**

At Restoke we know that the magic happens when people are together in a room, whether taking part in a workshop or co-creating an epic show. The magic manifests in different ways for different people – and in ways we don't need to get involved with or attempt to take credit for. The magic is often temporary: projects are temporary, performance is temporary. And yet the experience sticks to people's hearts. The legacy is within them: it doesn't need to be micromanaged by the organisation who initiated it.

At the same time, Restoke have wanted to feel a sense of permanency and deepen our role in a community who don't let people fall through the cracks. For us, a solution has been establishing a venue. In 2021 we restored and reopened a Ballroom in Fenton Town Hall, a former civic building which had been repurposed as a Magistrates Courts for over 50 years. This Town Hall is a true story of resilience, saved by the local community who it was built to serve. We have had the privilege of building on the community activism that came before us, the graft and collaboration of Stoke people. No longer courtrooms, the Ballroom is once again a place for dance, song and celebration – more permanent than anything else we could have created.



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A CONVERSATION ON WORKING CLASS ARTISTS AND CO-CREATION

Transcript of a conversation, in April 2023, between:
Darren Pritchard, Artist,
Simon Casson, Producer for Duckie,
Rhiannon White, Co-Director at Common Wealth,
Chantal Williams, Community Producer at Common Wealth
& Christie Hill, Producer at Battersea Arts Centre

Simon

Well first thing to say is I'm not really working class. I mean, I was working class, I come from a very lower working class background, when I say lower working class, and you know, not a very respectable working class background on from a council estate all my childhood and teenage years. There was a rough council estate when Hackney used to be rough. So that's my background.

I never went to university, but I wouldn't really class myself as working class and middle class now because of who I am. And what I do and how I live my life and who me boyfriend is. And I've done alright. But I am obsessed with class. And I'm obsessed with my own working classness. I didn't know what that's about, but I'd say that I'm both, and it'd be illegitimate. I mean, all my family are working class. And I'm the only one that's become bourgeois-fied. But yeah, so that's me. But I do see myself as a kind of leader within the movement to make working class arts and the performance. I'm into performance. I mean, I wouldn't exactly call it theatre, I'd call it performance. I think what Commonwealth does is probably theater. But you know, Rhiannon and Chantal might say different. I suppose what we do is kind of performance and and also really to be honest with you show business. And I mean I'm into show business, and I'm into entertainment. And I'm into giving that to working class audiences. And I'm doing it because I know what I'm doing. I don't really know what I'm doing with middle class audiences. I have zero interest in middle class audiences. Absolutely zero, because everyone else, you know, millions of people do it. They all do it very well. They're well served good luck to 'em. You know, I don't feel resentful about it. Particularly, I feel quite happy to be honest, that I've got a niche. And I just think that I'm good at it. I know what's going down. I'm good at it to a certain extent, I'm certainly good at it with old people. I'm not any good at it with youth, because I don't know anything about youth. That might change. But, but traditionally, and my concept of class is really one that's based in. it's actually changed a lot since since loads of working class people started to go to university, which I didn't, for instance, I was part of that kind of culture that was went to school just before just on the cusp before globalisation happened. So I was just meant to be a worker. I was meant to be painter and decorator or dustman, or working factory or whatever. And they trained me to do that. So I left school at 16 I worked in a shop, you know, shoe shop, whatever. I would have, you know, worked in a shop for three and a half years when I left school full time. Closed Shop, was a painter or decorator for a year, blah, blah, blah. And eventually opened a club and that was my route into the arts. You know, to be honest, I'm afraid I hadn't heard of Common Wealth. I hadn't heard of Moving Roots, and some woman phoned me up, from Peterborough called Kate. And because she knew about the what's the name, the Posh Club. And then so we you know, and I was like, Oh, that's good, quite good money. So, you know, we pitched for it. And eventually after lots of wrangling Rhiannon and Chantal chose us because you know, I think mainly for like, my looks and stuff like that. But you know, it's been the most delightful relationship. Because the thing about me and Chantal and Rhiannon is we do actually quite similar jobs. It's not like working with Darren, if I was working with Darren, it would probably be simple because we I think we probably can do very different jobs. Because I'm not an artist.

But I don't think success is a given. I also come from a generation that used to argue all the time, and just about anyone else. But young people nowadays, I've noticed they're not as cuntish to each other as we used to be. You know, and I don't know, if anyone's noticed this cultural shift, but like, companies seem to get on people seem to be nice back in the day, like, when we were started making work, the 90s and noughties and whatnot, everyone fucking hated each other. And it was a total competition, there was no solidarity whatsoever. And that Thatcher legacy of, of the kind of one man band of the one person capitalist, you know, everyone was getting up the greasy pole and whatnot, all my colleagues, and like, to be honest with you, most of them were middle class, were so busy trying to get up the greasy pole, that everybody kind of, sort of hated each other. And I do find that nowadays with the young people, especially within the world, which I work, which is queer culture, which has changed enormously, in terms of the trans revolution, and the Black Lives Matter revolution. That solidarity has become this central thing that wasn't there before. And care and you know, all that business. And that just wasn't we didn't even know anything about and also mental health, like and thinking about take mental health things, we just used to get pissed like all the time. Take drugs, never even think about mental health, mental health. What's that? You know? Bit of an opening gambit, if that makes any sense.

Christie

How does it feel to straddle being both working class and middle class, experiences, and what does working class under representation in the industry look like to you?

Simon

It's massively underrepresented massively, of course, it is. And also, I actually have made I made a decision not to work within any within any institutions, really, I mean, sure, we took the gig with you, you're

Battersea Arts Centre, your you represent Battersea Arts Centre, we took the gig with you, you could say that it's a tiny bit of an insult, but not really. But we won't actually do gigs in we don't do shows in theatres, or in galleries, or if Tate Modern phone up, you know, we wouldn't bother with them. Generally, we do nightclubs, pubs, community centers, parks outdoors, we do that. And that is we used to do a tiny bit which to work in the Barbican up until about 15 years ago, and bits like that, but I just don't like it. And I like the independence of being able to do whatever we want. So and I think that is also totally connected to class and whatnot. Have I felt marginalised? Hm, not really, I think I've personally as a white bloke who's now middle class middle aged, I personally have benefited from the intersectionality fucking enormously to be fair, you know, this whole intersectional thing. And just because of class and because of the sort of thing that I'm interested in always have been, and people can smell the authenticity. Because you can't really bullshit about things like this.

Yeah, we won't do the Posh Club in the theatre, because it comes with cultural baggage, you know, and you just get the wrong people, the inappropriate people and people have certain assumptions.

But also the buildings are wrong shape, because we don't like seats in theaters and stages and things like that. We want to have it sort of more social and communal. So it's often club based. It's never theater it's never like, everyone sits in the dark in a row. And the show comes on, we never we've never done that in our lives. And that's what those things are set up for. We did it once somewhere in Dorset, I think it was, and it didn't really work, I think they wanted it to be classier or something. You know, I'm really interested in all these concepts around taste.

Now this is based on 28 years of making I'm going to, although obviously we did start skating around on broken glass at 2am in the Vauxhall Tavern and other dumps, you know, and still do. But we did about five shows at Barbican and they'd give us like quite a lot of money to make these shows. And then all these cunts excuse my language would come on review it for like these stupid newspapers. Oh, I'm from the Independent on Sunday. And from the fucking Observer, you know, and they're like, what are we what are we doing and what is this all about? Anyway, so yeah, sometimes they give good reviews, but I don't know. I'm just not into it. And I know lots of good people, lots of good companies work at Barbican probably. And as a punter I would go there you know, because as I say I am middle class as well. And I am I'm interested in art a bit, I'm more interested in community and social change and development community and people. But I'm a little, I'm interested now a bit.

Darren

There's loads of mirrors, loads and loads and loads of mirrors between where I am artistically and where Simon is now. I think all my shows have been co- produced. And it isn't easy. Because on the outset there's lots of egos, and I've got an ego myself and but I think what, I think what works with Common Wealth in particularly is one we were all from the same background. And like Simon says you can sniff out authenticity from the get go. So we're all kind of coming from the same base that for me is what it's all about. And, and I was doing it even before it was kind of like, friendly. In all the conversations that were happening was all about getting people that look like me sound like me come from the same background. And basically wasn't even theatre it was just work. It was just like getting them going. I hate Edinburgh, we've got our own politics, but I was like, wait there six people that can be making X amount of money which is why we went. So it's not about me, and what I think and it's their exposure, and there are working class artists, and it means something to them. And everyone was really good at my kind of way of working because you know, I'm like, I'm shit at writing so a voicenote on whatsapp or simple little things.

I think first and foremost, it was just about our kind of politics and our ethoses aligning. So regardless of what the work was going to be, how shiny it was, I think the process would probably be the best part the show.

And the magic of being like in a place in Cardiff that felt like home, even though we did the show in the Conservative club! But being in there and taking that space and the compassion that that people have in their understanding of their community and just how easy it was to get the cast because it was people's little black books and I'm always going on about the casting process, it's totally wrong in theatre it's like, I cast all mine from phone calls, friends of friends - I don't go through this kind of like, oh, let's be open and equal to everyone because we're different anyway, I was like, I just won't get the people that would respond to a casting call, but I would if I phoned them and said, would you like to work? And those people understood and especially with the type of work that it was because we were telling their personal stories.

The new school of duty of care and compassion. But we did have that kind of old school, 'we've got a show to be done' and it's got to be done. And that care and compassion has to be within the structure of that, we need to get these people on stage and make them look fantastic.

I think it's the authenticity and the care. It was very fair and really easy process for me to kind of like work with probably one of the easiest I've had, I've had for a co-produced show of that scale. We toured a lot, and that shows a good relationship because I would have just walked because I do that a lot. At work, if I don't like it I can't put myself through it.

Rhiannon

I've seen a lot of shows recently that are programmed by people who aren't working class and the impact that has on working class people. So the reason I put Darren's show forward was because I saw Susan and Darren when I worked at a really bougie theatre, the one where I felt most like I wasn't welcome, where people used to click at the

end of the bar to get their drinks for me. I was working behind the bar at the time. And it was the first show that I saw which really reminded me of where I come from seeing your mum and you dancing and having a buffet on stage, like, I just connected with it on a really deep level.

I think for me being like from a council estate, and then like, I was lucky to go to uni, but then developing like this appetite for making theatre and for for bringing theatre to people and places. It's all come based from where I come from, and seeing something like your work and going oh, actually, that would really speak to the people that I know and love and care about. And it speaks beyond the kind of shit that they program in theatres normally. There's something about where are our programmers coming from? And what do they know, because there should be like a real consideration and sensitivity to programming for working class people because they haven't had programming done for them for years.

They're just kind of used as, as material. And then similarly, Simon, like, we knew after COVID, and we kept coming back to this idea of celebration, and our friend Sarah, who worked on Posh Club, she shared the Posh club with us, and it was so inspiring to see people get together in all those different places. And again, really made us think about our community and our older people. And then having those conversations with you where it always came back to like:

I think you asked us four times, why do you want to work with with us? What is it and like, that really made me think about values and who you were and why you would want to work here. I found that really refreshing that kind of frontness, it felt really good to really understand why, you know, and why those value, that you were coming from the same place and you cared about the same things as we did and you wanted it as much as we did to reach those audiences.

Simon

I'd really like to say something about about us and you. I really want to talk about the difference between Duckie what we're trying to do. I mean, when working class people go to the theatre these days, watch the panto, and watch the jukebox musical, you know, and they don't watch Hamlet and fucking new writing or whatever you call it, and whatnot. And I do think to our shame a little bit Duckies a little bit of the version of the kind of the panto, and that's to do with confidence may be prowess, skills, and I really want to get to not making theatre but get to a position where we can really develop it.

Because Commonwealth I do feel a bit jealous of it. Because I think it is hard to make a show, especially as those things that theatre has, like narrative and the director and actors and the designer and all that bollocks. I mean, I'm not necessarily into all that bollocks. But I am into meaning and structure and ambition and whatnot. And actually what we do a lot is sort of variations on clubs, festivals, Tea Parties, especially variety shows.

Rhiannon

I would say, Simon, I think you're a brilliant conceptual thinker. Like it's concepts that you come up with, like Posh Club is a fun concept.

Simon

Yeah it is immersive, but it's also still based on what working class people used to do before the telly happened. And I mean, most people did it as well. But working class people particularly did it, you know, it goes from comes from music hall, and it had its final hurrah, postwar up till the Telly went really big. Anyway, I just admire your ambition and all that and I would really like to not be a slacker.

Darren

It's all about the audience and who's seen the work. Now, the audiences aren't coming. But when I do the stuff in the bars - I'm getting the audience that I want. Now to do a show like Rent Party it works, but then we take that on the road, and we are getting your middle class audience and then it does become a bit like a fish bowl, because not everybody else has caught up. So where I'm at the moment is like the catwalk extravaganzas are kicking off, I'm doing outside festivals, all my work now is about work that is free at the point of access, which is not in a theatre.

Part of the point of like Rent Party was basically because none of my friends were working and I was seeing all this kind of middle class and mediocre work and I was just like, I've got friends that are slaying,

and it was just a frame to put it on and and it was like, oh, what a frame as a traditional show, because Rent Party is a cabaret, it came from queer culture, but I was trying to make a theatre show not sound like a theatre show to get the audience's that I want. Because as soon people put the word "theatre", ah, what I realized was that I was like, actually, the audience's and the vibe wasn't right. We wasn't receiving the energy from new audiences with the audience expectation, we wanted that diverse kind of eclectic, ramshackle kind of audience, which I love and that energy in that light, and audiences that don't have to act proper and don't act appropriate and do everything that the convention says sets up.

With Susanne and Darren, I remember reading one review, and it was like, oh, the authentic voice of the working class. And I didn't even realise, to do a show with my mum, I didn't realise the politics of putting me and my mum doing onstage at that. So I'm kind of at the stage where

I am now really looking at how I can get to my audiences. And I think sadly to say, is not through theatre.

Simon

Going on from what Darren says, I really support that. And if you think about, you know, all this, this study of systemic oppression, systemic racism, and all the stuff that comes with intersectionality, that's really

come into focus in the past decade, right? That everything is in the system.

It's built into the system, like class, and race, and money and all that, of course, theatre is part of that. And actually, how you break out of that is only by absolute radical action, you have to be thoughtful, you have to have a few brainy people that have been at a university that can kind of vaguely start fucking working it out. You have to have the Travis Alabanza's is of this world, you have to have brainy people.

I'm going to go I'm going to try and go in the other direction, actually, because I've been doing nightclubs for 30 years. And I know how to do them, and they're brilliant and everything. I do all sorts of weird things in within those structures. And, you know, it's all very immersive, and we cast audience in roles and whatnot.

But I still feel like I don't, I feel like the bourgeoisie, you know, they make these things they call them live art and experimental theatre and whatnot. And, you know, you know, like, those shows are very experimental and they use all sorts of things that may be the sort of things that BAC might import, oh here's a hot new thing for Berlin or whatever, really, like plays with form and all that. I want to do that in in East Cardiff. I want to do that in Crawley. I want to do that in community centres in Portsmouth, you know, because people don't know.

And you don't just do it simply like get Riminy Protocol in or whatever they're called and just get them to do their thing. No, you have to, you have to take it really seriously as a craft as a proper investment. But of course, all the people that actually run the arts or the funders and all that they're not working class and they haven't got any idea. And, you know, I used to go to the Arts Council in Brighton, we tried to get some money for Crawley to do up the building. And I was talking about, you know, working class audiences and theatre and she looked at me like, as if she was looking through me as if I was just talking a spaceman language. She had no idea what I was talking about, like she just, she just didn't even she couldn't comprehend what I could possibly mean. You know, it was so far removed from her experience, she was only an ordinary person doing an ordinary sort of adminny arts counselly job. She just just, she just didn't. She just couldn't understand what I was even talking about.

Rhiannon

The thing on the audience's is really important. And I think like from Common Wealth, Chantal is really aware of and really good at knowing our audiences, knowing people, knowing who to bring into the room, but also doing that with absolute love, because she wants people to have that experience. And I think sometimes you get these community engagement roles that maybe don't feel the same kind of urgency to it. And sometimes that's where theatre falls short. But that's when it's not reaching people. Because why should people care? Like, we love these people that we're bringing to the Posh Club, and we love these people that are coming to run Rent Party, because they're our families. They're our friends. They're our community. And we know how incredibly valuable and important it is for people.

Simon

Such an excellent point, such an excellent point that, you know, when you get like young people to work for charities, like say, in London, and that they get young people working for these fucking charities and pay them like 22 grand a year, and expect them to work really hard. And all they get is young, middle class people, women that usually women that don't need the money that have no idea about anything. And they're kind of an exploited part of the system. But that really annoys me, an, Chantal is the opposite of that, she's like a proper grassroots worker that knows why they're there, knows what they're doing. They're not just kind of pushing pens around for a little bit. And if you look at the charity sector, it's really inbuilt the class system, and the way it works and the way exploitation works and the way you know, wage disparity and the low wage economy and the precariat.

Our project was made by Chantals really kind of because they were the community. They were the person that was the link between the project and the punters. And I just think you've got to have someone who's the real McCoy doing that, and you can't have a kind of students from you know, Surrey, coming over to kind of give it a go, they have to be shit hot and like just totally into it.

Because again, like we're talking about authenticity, you can't, you know, you're either the real McCoy or you're not.

Rhiannon

And this is where representation really matters like this on this level because I think often people are thinking about artists and directors and like who's running the theatre who's programming and those positions are very questionable. Like I literally saw the worst piece of theatre I've ever seen in my life. Last week, there was the most exploitive piece of shit, and I sat there watching a show about Cardiff, about Cardiff community that I come from portrayed on stage with the wrong accents. Like, the poor man didn't even have enough money to buy a new nappy. So he was recycling shitty nappies, to put back on his baby.

And that shit was peddled out to the great and the good of Wales who are making decisions who were really powerful, and you got theatre, on a national stage, because it opened at the National Theatre is portraying working class people in that way. And that is how they see us or how they see our community, you know, like, that's how they see people, and all of them are lapping it up, as if it's the best fucking piece of theater they've ever seen in their lives is fucking horrific. I bet they didn't have Darren's little black book. You could tell that the writer was observing the culture, because he got all the lingo right. But any of the new nuance was like completely gone.

And then the two lead actors, one was from the valleys, and one was from Talbot. And bless them, like they young people on stage, pretending to be something that they're not, or they're not really you know that they haven't got any kind of anything to draw from.

And then yeah, experimental theatre, I think there's like this, this misconception that, like people won't get it, or that it'll go over their head. But actually like people, from my experience, people love to be in something and immersed in something and like experimental work, and really, like tap into emotions and feelings and like, the experience of being in something. Experimental work that connects is, I think is the one.

Simon

For me, it's not about experimental or not, it's one thing that I talked about is the intersectionality of the working class is like the intersectionality of everything, we're not all the same. It's just, it's just being aware. I think like the underground always becomes an overground experimental, kind of look at someone like Vivienne Westwood. She was experimental, she was punk. And that became mainstream. And I think there needs to be allowance for all of it. And then I think if you get into a trap of going, this is just one type of work. I think some stuff will work in some instances, and some stuff will work in others, because then you have to also look at the intersectionality of race, sexuality, and stuff because what would work in a Jamaican community necessarily wouldn't work in a Bangladeshi community which people have this broad stroke or white working class community. So I think it is a very intersectional, intersectional case by case basis. It's like I grew up knowing graffiti artists, but also other artists that are really quite abstract and have lots of concepts as well. And it's like, the best of may have not been mainstream. For me, it's about who's producing that experimental work and where the structures are around them as well. Because I know that the some of the live arts experimental work wouldn't work for some of the working class communities.

But I know there is an audience of like, well, non binary and trans people that would love it if Marina Abramovic was in the conservative club in Llanrumney, they would love that shit. They will be like, this is me, this is my voice. And this is what it's about

Rhiannon

You are right, you are actually right about that, I think, it's the acknowledgement that working class people shouldn't just be fed one particular type of art because that's them. And that's that suited to their needs. Or like, this is the tradition, do you know what I mean, like actually, for me being someone like for me coming from a council estate and doing experimental theatre in uni, it blew my mind. And it made me feel more possibilities and more radical ness and really highlighted things in my life.

Simon

I think a lot of the stuff that's fed to ordinary people is through the commercial world, which is where working class people usually get their arts, especially if you talk about performance and theater, and it's fodder. The X Factor, I think is fodder, jukebox musicals in the west end is fodder. And that's when this kind of idea of commercialism and most of drag I personally think is fodder. Drag brunches and the fucking drag industry. Alright, it's work, it's low level showbiz work for people and that's good, that's good. But, but for me, it's fodder.

And I think often people that haven't been to university, they don't go see the brainy theater, they go and see the jukebox musical theaters and the X factors and the popular TV and whatnot. And I find that fodder, and I find that patronising. And I think that's actually built into the system of oppression. And I think it's like the society of the spectacle, like Guy Debord wrote about in the 1960s, which is about blinding people with kind of colorful bullshit, in order to make them think that everything's okay. And I do think it's deeply political and very serious topic.

Chantal

Yeah, I was gonna respond to this idea of taste and quality that's why it's important that we're collaborating in these communities with people like Darren and people like Simon, because it challenges the notion of quality and where it exists. And that's super important. And not even about like challenging quality, I guess, like, it brings quality, just that marriage.

But I was gonna respond to what we see being sent at about audiences and community. Because I was part of one of the the sort of cultural activities that happened way back in the 90s, in St. Mellons, and I've seen firsthand what kind of difference those cultural movements make in places. So when 20 years later when these things are happening, and there's opportunity for people to be part of a cultural movement or cultural shift, then I have to be completely invested in making people be there and be passionate about it and want to be part of it. And I think they've just been beautiful all the shows that we've done because the audience don't sit there and be told a story or they're not passive to what's happening. It's an exchange between them to say I see you, and with Posh Club, there was a whole moment where the show was the audience.

And they were dancing and singing. It is all about the whole picture, in the 90s when we were running the Underdogs. We had the dance community but we also had the aunties who just sewed the costumes. And we appreciated every single person there that made that happen. I mean the movement might not have been relevant to the entire community of St.Mellons but everyone who showed interest was thought about in how they could be and were involved.

Simon

Chantal's really talking, digging deep into structural issues about lifestyle and all that. The reason that I got into the arts, as we call it, is because when I was 17, I went to Hackney Youth Theatre, which was up the road and I don't know, somebody said it was in the local it was in Hackney Gazette - Hackney Youth theater's looking for people and that started my trajectory, and they've gone to the toilet now, but I was gonna I was gonna ask you Darren like, what what happened? You know, why aren't you why are you what you are? You know, what happened to you?

Darren

Youth Theatre as well, really weirdly enough. Yeah, it was it was it was my neighbour, just going. Oh, he was like, Do you wanna go to youth theatre? And my Mum, used to just let me do what ever so I just used to get an a bus on a Monday and that's when I met Rennie and Richard from Quarentine.

Rhiannon

Know what I was thinking listening to Darren. And I was like, fucking hell because like, I went to youth theatre too. And then I was like,

is this whole generation of council estate kids who got into theatre, from youth theatre?

Simon

We're running two Youth theatres Duckie is at the moment, because I believe in youth theatres. You know.

Darren

Sorry it's just this damn internet round my house - talk about working class communities - you never get your decent internet round around here. Yeah, so the reason why I'm still in it is because I'm in a position where I can create a lot of opportunities for a lot of people. Like, what gets me off is how many people I've managed to employ who are queer, black, gay and working class, and this is my thing. Because I grew up in a diverse white working class, black communities, I've seen that we were all struggling together to know there was intersectionalities there, but it was just like, we're all in this shit together, and how are we on the rise from it, and I do see in theatre I think it's getting harder. And since the pandemic, especially people of colour. So I that that's why I'm still in it now, just facilitating those opportunities, because I have seen it change lives. And I have seen those that have gone on, especially from the dance careers, that these working class kids that have gone on to smash it and are still doing it now. And they broke every single convention of where they should be in their life. And they're having these, they're having these amazing careers, it's getting tougher for them because of the cost of living prices and opportunities and pay and stuff. So that's that's what keeps me in it as a fighter, I'll be honest, it's only the money that I want. And we keep putting money into building after building and we like this in Manchester that he's like, I just like it that building gets another studio but you're not getting new audiences in for that.

And I always say the reason why a lot of my success is because I played the game, I went to the northern School of contemporary dance. My first dance company was with Wayne McGregor so when I left that I had this stamp of authority from the bourgeoisie and stuff so it made a lot easier. I've been through the process I did everything that the process kind of churn churned out. So that made the doors a lot easier. But I was also working class, I was too opinionated. I was too. Yeah, I have to be in charge. But also, I think I'm a good team player as well. Sorry, look what my mum's brought for me. A whole sausage butty. With a sauces selection. Beautiful. This is my council home on my council estate!

So yeah, I think I need to be in charge because I speak to so many idiots, and if I'm not making work, or we're not making the work, and we're not facilitating that for other people, I'm like, it's gonna be some nob head that is and it's getting worse.

I was lucky because I had Richard and Rennie that you had kind of like John McGrath, who he's really down to earth for artistic directors. And, and even like Sarah Franco, she was still a lesbian. So you had all these people that were kind of like down to earth, kind of sounded like me. So I never really seen it as a barrier to be like them. And I think that's why I'm in theatre. And I'm still in it.

I've just worked on a show with a brilliant all Black cast. Soul music pumping out and the first night I'm looking around, and I'm like there's nobody, probably under the age of 40 in this audience who's not white then I was like, I've said to the marketing people, you best give me 10 tickets. And then it was like, 'Oh, we're not sure'. And I was like, look, I'm going to bring people that are not otherwise going to step into this venue. And it was like, well, no, because you had your guest list. And I was just like, what is the point of creating black excellece work if black students isn't going to see it? That's why

I'm really focussing on work outside the theatre, I think club do concepts really well, they've just never got the funding to kind of make it fully conceived because you just beg borrow and steal all the time.

Simon

Did you see Sound of the Underground? It was amazing and the audience were incredible. And it was like, it was like the recent kind of QTPOC revolution that's happened, writ large onstage in the audience in Royal Court. I think Royal Court did a really good job. I just think it fucking knocked it out of the park. And yeah, I really respected it. And that is the big advertisement, look who you have to employ cos the people that you put on stage, look at the power. You get the reflection back because it was Travis. And it's like, we need 10 of them.

Darren

Yeah, it's an it's a new wave of the kids nowadays, these new queer kids, you can't

mess with them, they'll call you out on Facebook, they'll call you out to your face, they'll even call you, they're not taking no, this new queer revolution are militant, political and they don't play games.

Simon

Also because people are even more desperate than they used to be because capitalism don't work anymore. And it's hard to make a living, especially in a city like London, and Manchester, and you get a flat, you know, and all these basic stuff in life, it's all broken. So in a way, people don't give a fuck anymore. Yeah.

Christie

What do you think the opportunities are for younger working class people entering into the arts and what do you see as the pitfalls?

Simon

The youth theatre model, I believe in bursaries and paying people, I believe in this kind of concept of volunteering about paying volunteers, like so paying people to train instead of you have to pay to train you know, like the opposite of what the university system, the college system university system is. I believe in doing it grassroots right there on this on the estate, right? Where, you know, I believe in going to St Mellons and starting, like, for instance, a queer youth theatre, an avant garde, queer youth theatre in St Mellons. Or yeah, it could be anything. And I believe in like, make new systems make them by literally talking to people. Also, the other thing is, I think I'm a bit controversial, actually, about this point, which is actually I don't think working class people have to run it. I don't. In terms of youth theatres. My thing is that I don't think that working class people have to run the working class Youth Theatre, because my working class Youth Theatre was run by these sorts of slightly posh gay guys, you know. And they were fantastic at it. And, and they absolutely believed in it. And it was their job, and they were passionate about it. And the money wasn't great. They just really believed in it. And they were really, really good at it. And they were like, some old queer people that from like, you know, they'd gone to do sociology at university or whatever they were, you know, and I, but they were the absolutely the right people for the job. And I don't, I don't necessarily believe that you have to be that you have to be I don't believe in taking identity politics that far, that everyone has to be the same. Or you know, it's only Yeah, I mean, I can't speak about black and brown people, but I can speak about working class people.

I just don't think that you have to match the participants. I think you can complement them by being an expert and by being in service, I don't know that might be a controversial opinion.

Darren

For me I agree. Because for me, it's about balance. I think at this point we need to kind of like keep fighting for those because it is unbalanced, but it's like Zara Nielsen said and I always refer to this, that your skin folk are always your kinfolk and I'm like, give me a good ally. I give me a good ally in the right position that will like if I look at someone like John McGrath who's like, he pulled my career up, I would not be where I was today and and controversially, I've had people who look like me and sound like me that have been more detrimental to my career. And so I'm just kind of like it's a people I think for me, I still think we need to kind of like a re-address the balance.

Simon

What is it you think that John McGrath has got? John McGrath is a very special person isn't he?

Rhiannon

He believes, like he believes in people like he really like he, he really fucking means it. And he takes you seriously, which makes you become more serious about your practice. That's what my experience is. He's got a lot of, I think he's got a lot of power that he's like, willing to share. It's like he makes time for you as well. And I think that's, that's what it needs to boil down to, really is that the people who run youth theatre, they need to want to be there.

Chantal

And skills are skills, right? That doesn't really matter about class. Yeah, skills, skills.

Christie

I'm interested in that idea of power- about middle class people holding on to power and an idea working class people will not hold on to it in the same way.

Chantal

Can I go first on this one?

When I started working theatre, I didn't even notice class in the way that I do now. Like, I was ballsy, I was brash, I just did what I wanted to do. I was pretty ambitious. I didn't need permission from anyone to do the things that I was doing. I didn't ask for it. I just did the things I did because I was ambitious and I was ballsy and it was nothing to do with my class. That might have been from a very matriarchal council estate, but then the coming into theatre. And my advice to working class kids is just know your worth. And don't question yourself when you walk into the rooms where these structures exist that never existed before. And suddenly there's this massive discussion about class that happens.

Simon

Working class people don't describe themselves as working class. I mean, certainly people like me that go on about working classes this and working class that, like my family were totally working class would never use the term working class. And the shame attached, and all sorts of complicated things attached, and you might feel very empowered by the

words, but a lot of people don't. And it's only politisised, unusual, socialist-y kind of working class people that go on about class.

Rhiannon

Did you know like, the first time we started using the words working class was when we were in Bristol. And because it was such a rich city, and loads of middle class kids were pretending to be poor to be activists. Like it was reactionary because it was like, growing up here, I didn't give a fuck, but then throw me into posh fucking Bristol!

Darren

When you're oppressed, you start to cling on to the part that people are oppressing you for. And then what you start to do is twist it. So you get all these people like us, like I'm working class, I'm working class, I'm working class, because there's nobody else like that.

And if I don't talk about and I don't say I'm a working class artist, it makes it seem like everything's all equal and lovely. No, it's not. The reason I cling on to that, call myself queer. That's why I happen to call myself like, black or working class. It's like, you go into a room and politicise those statements, and you go, "I'm a working class artist" because you're in a system and you're in a place, which isn't for you. And that's what happens with the arts. And that's why with queer people, we go "we're queer".

And I do agree that there's lots to do with words, I claim it because there is lots of shame. And some people don't claim themselves as working class, like I know a lot trauma in the working class communities through substance abuse, and what poverty does to people, mentally, but yeah, I think that's why now that I say, Yeah, I'm a working class artists, I do think because we've had a little conversation. I think someone says, oh yeah, we do see working class as a protected characteristic. It's not written down anywhere.

Simon

Middle class people think it's divisive. They resent it, and they think it's divisive. And when people resist the working class terms that are used, because they think it's divisive. And I think that's a pain in the ass and complicated, and it's about them. Also, the other thing I just want to say is, if anyone's reading or listening to Darren McGarvey, at the moment, he's really on fire, and he's really on fire talking about trauma. He's got two books at once called Poverty Safari. And he's got a podcast and if you want to think about economics, look at Gary's economics on YouTube. It was, you know, the working class economists talking about the way the rich have stitched everyone up. And if you want to think about kind of lifestyle, and culture and trauma, and just living look at Darren McGarvey, I mean, I'm saying this very much from a kind of white perspective.

Rhiannon

And I just wanted to say something on like, advice to young, like young artists, like the times that we all come from, like, the times are really different now. So when we set a Common Wealth, we were able to sign on, we could squat, we could do whatever, we wanted to set up our company and feel supported. And those things just do not exist anymore. So I used to say, don't wait for permission, that don't wait to be paid. But actually, that's really complex, in how we live today. So I think there's a responsibility on people like us, to open up things for people and to put on things for people to go to. Because, yeah, it's just a fucking hustle. Like, it's more of a hustle than it's ever been.

Darren

And it's going back, because what I think he's coming from kind of like, a kind of black background, where we reclaim history a lot. And we're always looking back, there are lots of working class stars, there is lots of positive representation, there isn't our poverty porn, and it was like, and the thing, what I what I tell people is, it was like, everything that everybody will hate you for will be the fire to gets you started. I was like your colour, your culture. It is those rich ingredients because you've got something to say, that will create all kinds of like fantastic art, and is just trying to find it in a different way. The word volunteer doesn't exist in any of my shows, like people asked to volunteer all the time. And I say no. And I'm like, No,

I pay absolutely every person. Every person gets paid on that stage, the judges get paid, the people that are printing up, everybody gets paid on the project. And I'm just like, shut your building down on a Monday, so you can pay people Thursday, Friday, Saturday and save on that electricity bill, do what you need to do. So each of those people can get paid. I'm really strong on that.

Simon

They're more likely to be giving their money to architects and building companies and go let's have a new swishy new thing. You know, rather than actually what goes on in 'em.

5

MODELS FOR REMAKING SHOWS

Written by Christie Hill,
Producer at Battersea Arts Centre

One of the key aims for Moving Roots was to explore how you re-make pre-exising co-created shows. Shows like Common Wealth's Radical Acts project, or Restoke's Man Up. We saw the impact of this type of work, and wanted to see if we could recycle some of this, extend the work and best practice. The shows aren't just about being entertained, but an excuse to come together, to feel good, to feel seen, and to have your life changed in a big or small way because of that. It's not surprising that after performing in Rent Party, some of the cast went on to set up Peterborough Pride. Or an audience from seeing Rent Party in East Cardiff decided to campaign for more defibrillators in her community.

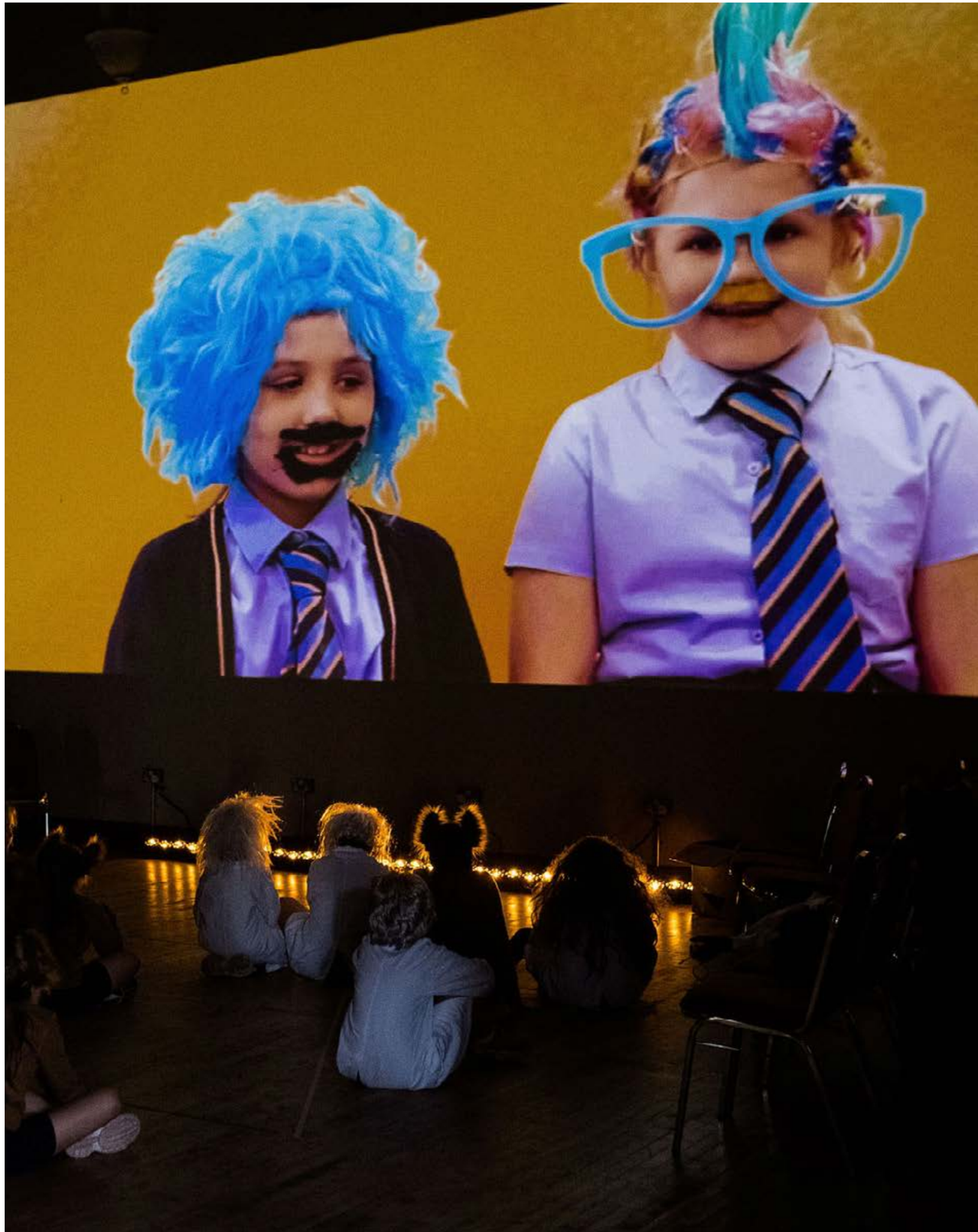
These shows are often expensive, because they often have big teams and are made over a longer period of time. I'd guess that on average a standard studio show like this costs around £50k and takes years to develop and make. BAC knew some of this from shows like Frankenstein; How To Make A Monster, which finally went on tour around 5 years after conception.

Moving Roots gave us the support to re-make 5 shows over 3.5 years. This piece of writing is more practical than the other pieces, and is designed to share some of the models: what we did, what worked, what was hard. I hope this is useful for artists or producers wanting to programme or make this type of work, and you can use it to springboard from.

A few things to acknowledge first:

We realised that in remaking a show that already existed, it's not really co-created any more, because too much has already been decided. But the impact was still strong; it still shared a sense of agency with local people, and placed their voices and stories front and centre, making the work feel local and relevant to each place.

Moving Roots funding gave us around £25k + producing fees for each show in each place. This is a relatively big budget, but there are still things you can replicate without this large budget.



RENT PARTY/ PAYDAY PARTY

Being broke never looked so fierce!

About the show:

Led by Darren Pritchard, this project was derived from an original show, Rent Party, co-written by Cheryl Martin and Darren Pritchard, produced by Jayne Compton, dramaturged by Sonia Hughes, commissioned by Homotopia, and supported through Javaad Alipoor as part of his Changemaker stint at Sheffield Crucible.

The show was a 21st century take on 1920s Harlem Renaissance Rent Parties, the original show featured real life stories of five Black artists, and showcased their skills. The audience were given pretend money at the start of the show and instructed to give money to each of the performers based on what they thought they were worth. The show was hosted by Stewart Bowden and also included party games connected to the themes of austerity.

The show was advertised as a party, cabaret, performance.

Remaking:

The driving question for Darren was: what does a Rent Party look like in Wigan/ Medway/ Peterborough/ East Cardiff?

Darren directed the show, and Stewart remained the host for each performance, with some of the same script and party games. For each place we toured to, we cast different local performers. They weren't specifically Black performers any more, the criteria was exceptional artists who were local and marginalised.

The show structure remained the same, with new performers telling their own stories. The starting point for performers was: have you got a personal story to tell? Especially stories of overcoming personal adversity; challenges connected to the wider political environment, and how they found joy at the end of it all. Performers also showcased their extraordinary talents across styles such as Hip-Hop & Trap music, fire dancing, spoken word, ventriloquism and opera. There were around 21 performers across 4 places, in total.

The process began in November 2019 and the first rehearsals were supposed to begin in Spring 2020. This was delayed and changed due to COVID. Lyrici Arts made their piece as a digital show. Audience capacity for all shows was limited.

Casting:

- 3 months in advance
- There was a lot of Community Producer resource to find the artists. We tried to 'dig deeper' than the usual suspects.
- This relied a lot on personal recommendations, social media and one-on-one conversations.

Rehearsals:

- 2 weeks
- Including around 1 week online, working one-on-one with performers on Zoom to write and rehearse their monologues
- 1 week in person rehearsing & joining parts
- 2–4 days of shows per partner

Team:

Director: Darren

Assistant Director: Stewart

Production Manager/ lighting designer: different in each place

Community Producer: different in each place

The shows were presented in:

Studio theatre, The Key Theatre, Peterborough

Online, through Lyrici Arts website

Events room at Rumney Conservative Club, East Cardiff

Old court room at The Old Courts, Wigan

Budget:

View here

What worked:

- Having a show with a structure which was easily replicated, allowed for a quicker process where some content remained the same, and each performer concentrated on their own monologues
- Being able to rehearse monologues on zoom, to save time, budget and travel
- Having Stewart as a host who was consistent to each show. Stewart was a connection between the performers and Darren the director, and later became Assistant Director due to his work in shaping the piece and supporting the performers
- Asking performers to tell their own stories; this was the first time many of them as performers had been asked to present themselves authentically. It was also the first time a show had been made in and about many of these places.
- The show's structure was made up of a series of monologues, so the power and agency was owned by each of the performers, rather than the director.

Challenges:

- Although the power was with the performers who wrote and presented their own stories, the original conception and themes were pre-prescribed. The show wasn't really co-created, but it didn't feel like it mattered
- We ran into trouble with ownership rights with the original show. It was not made clear to original artists and producers that we were adapting the show. They were not invited to be part of the process and this caused financial and personal upset.
- The digital show didn't give an opportunity for the performers to connect to the audiences: this was particularly challenging given the content of the show. It was felt by some performers that their stories were being extracted.

EPIC FAIL

About the show:

Artist Ed Patrick aka Kid Carpet made ‘Epic Fail’ with year 5 pupils, a show and project exploring the idea that if failure was a virtue, to be cherished like success is, might we all feel better?

Ed had a concept and some content from a Primary school in Bristol but the show had not been finished or presented. Through Moving Roots, Ed became resident artist in 4 primary schools, working closely with year 5 pupils to explore the themes of failure, run workshops, and create the show while in residence.

The school partners were: Milbrook Primary school in Wigan, Our Lady’s Catholic Academy in Stoke on Trent, Gladstone Primary in Peterborough and Glan-Ry-Afron Primary in East Cardiff.

The process:

- 16 weeks in total
- 2 weeks in each of the 4 schools, running workshops and creating content for the show
- 1 month break
- 2 weeks returning to each of the 4 schools rehearsing and presenting the show
- The whole of year 5 (around 30 pupils) performed in the show with Kid Carpet
- Presented the show in school time to pupils & after school for parents
- Each presented in school with the exception of Restoke who presented it in their Ballroom venue because it was across the road from the school
- There were around 800 kids and adults who saw the show in total.

Budget:

View here

What worked:

- Working over a long period of time helped develop a deep relationship between Ed and the kids
- Being in-residence at school disrupted the rhythm of school life, and gave pupils something to remember
- Having workshops as well as making the show diversified what we were offering to schools; it wasn’t just about coming in to make a show, it was about exploring failure
- Teachers said that this creative alternative was particularly beneficial to pupils who don’t do well in the classrooms, and some teachers were surprised to see how confident and engaged some harder to reach pupils were
- Making the shows while in schools meant that it felt made for a school, and absorbed the context of the place
- The aesthetic of the show felt more like a DIY jazzy school assembly, which meant it fit well in schools and was more easy to set up and take down. And the budget went on people rather than loads of set and hire costs.

What was challenging:

- Working with young people meant that there wasn’t time to re-make the show in each place, instead Ed had to arrive with a script and structure for them to learn. And although the show included content from kids, the creative decisions and the show were led by Ed. Meaning it wasn’t as co-created as maybe intended.
- The touring team was only Ed, which made things cheaper, more flexible and meant we could employ people local to each place, but meant that Ed held a lot of responsibility, power and information to pass on. On reflection a bigger touring team would have felt more collaborative.

POSH CLUB AT CHRISTMAS

About the show:

The Posh Club is a concept and show curated by Duckie who have successfully run The Posh Club for many years. It is a social experience for the over 65s that seeks to tackle social isolation with a delicious array of artists and sandwiches. It was held in Cardiff for the first time in December 2022, Duckie and Common Wealth collaborated to deliver three cabaret-style shows that welcomed over 350 guests to dine, dance and connect.

The event happened in St Mellons Hub, a council-run community building. Common Wealth and Duckie transformed the sports hall to include a huge stage and seating for 150 people, a photobooth area, podiums and theatre lighting. Each show included afternoon tea and refreshments, a cake dance, a raffle, a compere, three acts performing 6 times in total, and time to dance for guests in the later stages of the event. Guests put their glad rags on and had a good old knees up, over Christmas time.

Common Wealth programmed two of the acts, from local performers: a tap dancing trio and a Shirley Bassy and Tina Turner impersonator. There were also 12 hosts recruited by Common Wealth, and they took on a new more theatrical and choreographed role; supported by movement director Lara Ward. The hosts' role was to entertain, serve, seat and act as the official encouragers of fun. They rehearsed three times prior to the shows and were paid a £200 honorarium for their time.

A long and invested process of community organising, partnering with organisations, on the ground leaflet distribution, press and a booking line were key to gaining the trust and attendance of the local and wider Cardiff community. Duckie made multiple visits to East Cardiff in the run up, to visit the venue and directly engage with the East Cardiff community and garner relationships in an attentive and honest way.

The process:

- Site visits to choose a venue
- Duckie led on hiring, transporting and setting up the space
- Common Wealth led on engaging local people and signing up guests
- Programming was joint
- Common Wealth led on recruiting 12 hosts and a choreographer & organising three rehearsals
- Common Wealth recruited a Press Officer and led on wider Comms, including making a video about the project, centring local women Val and Marina.

The Team:

Community Producer & Landlady:
Chantal Williams

Producers for Common Wealth:
Rhiannon White and Camilla Brueton

Duckie Producers:
Simon Casson and Dicky Eton

A compere

A stage manager

Two facilitators to head a photobooth; a fun Christmas card station, with fancy dress and instant print cards.

A technician

A photographer & a videographer

A local press officer

What worked:

- The collaboration between Common Wealth and Duckie: they understood their individual roles, and were confident and experienced in what they brought. Duckie brought a well-tested concept and Common Wealth brought deep understanding and connection to their local community.
- Cross programming; mixing local acts which felt safe and enjoyable, with Duckie performers that felt more radical, giving a good mix of performance
- Having a local landlady who looked after a booking phone, for people to call or text, to ask questions and connect.
- Thinking about the project as more of an event than a show; including as much work in organising transport to the venue, food, hosting, as the performances themselves.
- Inviting people from across East Cardiff to the event at the local community centre in Llanrumney, encouraging older adults to cross boundaries of place. It changed perceptions of St Mellons and encouraged a local community group to be more open in who it welcomes.

What was challenging:

- There was some nervousness about what local performers to programme, to match the quality and impact of the Duckie acts. But this worked brilliantly in the end.
- There was some drop out with people attending, but it didn't affect the atmosphere.

WHAT DO YOU SEE?

About the show:

Led by The PappyShow, What Do You See? is a project that explores unconscious bias, identity, and stereotyping.

Originally made in 2021, the show is an ensemble piece with a range of diverse performers, aiming to represent the spectrums of race, disability, sexuality, age and body shapes. We paired four local creatives with a further four existing PappyShow members to recreate the production both in Wigan and in Stoke.

The project had two weeks in each place to make and present the re-cast show, and was presented at The Ballroom in Fenton, Stoke-on-Trent and at The Turnpike Gallery in Leigh. There were 4 shows in total, performed to around 300 people. The project also included unconscious bias training for both Restoke and The Old Courts organisations, and a hosted post-show conversation after each show.

The show had the same structure and sections as the original show, but included new cast members, and pieces devised by them, about them. This took the form of dance, singing, painting, spoken word.

The process:

- The show was chosen by local sounding board in Wigan and Stoke.
- Pre-show recruitment and consultation: We had 1 week with PappyShow to think about how to re-make the show, and what the process would look like. Local producers in each place led on the casting call for performers, and worked collaboratively with PappyShow to choose the artists
- Week 1: A research and development week for the cast and crew to get to know each other. Focusing on The PappyShow's style of making, this week comprised a playful approach to creating and devising while also creating a safe and encouraging environment for the creative team to share some personal narrative around the topic of What Do You See? which would later be used in the performances.
- Week 2: A creation week, rehearsing in devised sections and rehearsing the show all together, ended with public performances

The team:

PappyShow Directors

PappyShow Producer

Local Producer

PappyShow cast x 4

Local cast x 4

Local Production Manager

The budget:

View here

What worked:

- Throughout the making of the final show, the cast members had agency in the way in which they were represented on stage and every decision on content reflected that. The PappyShow Directors spent a lot of time giving people the option and choice to change their minds about the stories they were telling.
- Performers were asked to make outside their usual artform: so musicians were encouraged to dance, spoken word artists were encouraged to sing. This meant the cast felt like an ensemble rather than a series of cabaret performances.
- Employing local performers for a project based locally. In Wigan, all of the performers lived there but typically had to find work in either Manchester or Liverpool.
- Presenting honest, playful and challenging stories of unconscious bias, and presenting a diverse cast in places that are visibly less diverse.
- Having a post-show conversation allowed the impact of the show to land with audiences and a space to process the theme of unconscious bias. It also allowed performers to connect with the audience, which felt useful after presenting themselves vulnerably, and allowed the company to explain some of the process of making the show, which otherwise goes very hidden, but the detail of which is interesting.

What was challenging:

- Holding space for the artists to be vulnerable, to talk honestly about the prejudice and trauma they've faced because of their identity, some for the first time; asking them to perform outside their artform, and to collaborate. Having local producers who had an existing relationship with the local performers and an understanding of the context of place was useful, and both directors from the PappyShow came with experience of making and facilitating this sort of work, and had their own lived experience of similar prejudice which offered understanding, respect and delicacy.
- Selling tickets to a theatre show in areas without a regular theatre offer, with a topic that people prefer to ignore or might find challenging.
- Getting accurate and engaging press and PR around the show. See 'Attention Please' article for more detailed conversation around this
- Time restrictions of making: 2 weeks in total made it harder to find a balance between time that felt organic and looked after, and having enough time to generate content and properly rehearse. Ideally the process would have been 4 weeks as a minimum. This time pressure meant performers felt more vulnerable before the show, the show structure was more formulaic, and there was pressure on the creative and producing teams to work hard and faster than what's ideal.
- Finding a venue that was wheelchair accessible. For The Old Courts this meant partnering with another venue in a neighbouring town to present the show.

HOW SHALL WE BEGIN AGAIN?

A five-month dance residency, led by Jo Fong, created a new network of 35 dancers in Peterborough and culminated in a ten-hour durational live performance, How Shall We Begin Again? at The Key Theatre, celebrating diverse and predominantly female bodies in a public space.

The group were supported by Jumped Up and Jo's care-centred practice and the creative infrastructure provided by a creative team of 10 people, from associates who work regularly with Jo, to local professionals.

The process:

- There were nine taster sessions which engaged 120 people between June and December 2022
- 40 people were invited to an intensive rehearsal process in February and March 2023
- Ultimately 32 local people took part in the final show
- An audience of 150 people attended the final performance at The Key Theatre, where a senior member of staff commented that they wished "it felt like this in here every weekend".

The team:

Lead artist: Jo Fong
Lead producer
Core Artistic Team
Assistant Producer
Lighting Designer
Audio Description
Sound Designer
BSL Interpretation

What worked:

- The people-centred approach, and encouraging people to take up space, led to personal transformation in the collaborators.
- A long lead up time, from June 2022 to March 2023, gave time for relationships between collaborators, Jo and Kate to grow and develop. This helped to understand people's needs and ways of working, and tried to resist the process feeling forced or rushed.
- The project allowed a community of people to spend time together, understand each other and share an experience together. It encouraged the importance of a community, over independence.
- It did something different with the stage at The Key Theatre. The style of the show, in offering a relaxed atmosphere, and giving the full stage to local people, changed people's perceptions of who and what should be presented on stage, and feedback from collaborators indicated this was empowering and made them feel more connected to The Key.

What was challenging:

- Despite having a long lead in time, more time would have deepened and helped understand the ask from collaborators to understand more deeply the social and political effect of taking up space. Some collaborators chose to use the time on stage to reflect on the project, rather than thinking more broadly about what it meant for them specifically to take this space.
- The project was in part about representation, practising being together in a diverse community of people and giving leadership roles and moments to feel empowered to Black, Asian and global majority women. There was an assumption and pressure on Jo to be the spokesperson for this with the press and marketing. This brought up questions about what we expect from an incoming touring artist, and the additional work asked of global majority artists in explaining and championing social change like this.
- We found that women of colour were more likely to drop out of the project because they felt less able to ask for reasonable adjustments around the process.

6

IT'S NOT A 'NICE THING TO HAVE', IT'S A NEED

Extracts from a conversation between
Christie Hill, Producer at BAC
& Zha Olu, performer from Rent Party and What Do You See?

What is the value of touring work? Why bring someone in from outside a local community, and not just employ and commission artists from that place? These were the key questions in a conversation between Christie Hill, producer at BAC and Zha Olu, who performed in Rent Party and What Do You See? in Wigan. Here are the highlights:

What was it like working with people from outside Wigan?

When it's someone coming in from outside your area, you want to show off your area. Whereas when it's someone from your area, your stereotypes can play out harder. You almost oppress yourself in that situation. There's comfort in your oppression.

And people from different places can draw different things out of you. Darren [Pritchard, director of Rent Party] drew a lot out of me that I didn't know was in there. It didn't matter that he wasn't from Wigan: it was about who he was and how he worked.

While the PappyShow being very queer led, working with people of different sexualities and genders, empowered me to dig deep into those areas of myself and be proud of these things about me. Because of town [Wigan] it sometimes gets a bad rep of being closed minded. It takes someone with that lived experience to empower me; it makes you think: you're from this town but you're also all these other things. Working with a diverse group of people, I instantly felt comfortable and safe.

North vs South, Big vs Small

You think the northerners have to go to London to put a show on – it's so nice when the Southerners come up to the North to put something on. They [Kane Husbands, director of The PappyShow] loved the Northern-ness about us. They didn't make us fit into a box. These people aren't here to teach us – it didn't feel like the Southerners are here to teach us. It felt like a collaboration.

I think it's important to do [work like this] in smaller places like Wigan. We do have diversity but it's hidden. In Wigan, I'm the only person I've seen today who looks like me.

The impact on you

Gig culture, which is what I do here, it makes me feel like a wilting flower. This project brought a feeling of being celebrated and accepted: I've lived a life of hiding away or dulling it down. I've not had that sense of belonging in my life, ever.

It's a new sense of family: how is it I feel safer working with these people for 2 weeks than my family for 25 years? Being in a creative practice, you're instantly vulnerable with each other – you're sharing a piece of yourself.

If I hadn't done these two projects, my life would have been drastically different. Especially with The PappyShow: it's changed me as a person as well as an artist

It's not a 'nice thing to have', it's a need. Especially in towns like Wigan: there's a huge gap with conversations like this, it's a small town mind-set. We need to start challenging it – to know the arts are important. Arts need to be bumped up the pecking order.

7

WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU JUST DANCED?

OR SAID HELLO TO A STRANGER?

Written by Chantal Williams,
Community Producer at Common Wealth Theatre

“While we all have basic needs, we are all more than that, and we also need things to look forward to; occasions to put on our best clothes; places to meet friends, new and old; and opportunities to dance!”

This extract is taken from a beautiful piece of writing by Sophie Lindsey, which takes us effortlessly through her experience of Posh Club Cardiff: Common Wealth and Duckie’s collaboration in East Cardiff just before Christmas 2022, an afternoon tea extravaganza with three turns and a host of black tie waiters. From pre-event outfit nerves to moments lost in song, Sophie – who also lives in Cardiff – celebrates the power of a party. Those unprescribed moments in which we fuel the deeper parts of ourselves, the parts that need connectivity, hope and freedom.

> When we are young we often make friends anywhere and everywhere: inquisitive and full of gusto, we simply say hello, I like your (insert cool item here – examples include sticks, rocks and unicorn jumpers), would you like to be friends? And that’s it: we have a new buddy, a pal to kick the dirt with. The older we get, the harder those introductions become. We get packaged into friendship groups, each categorised by social normatives, status, postcode. We’re reduced to interactions that require red wine or obvious statements about the weather. And when we are dredging through muddied political times, with a large majority of society stripped to the necessity

and working hard to provide the basics, it can be easy to become lost in survival mode, focused on maintaining basic needs.

The artist Theaster Gates argues that beauty and art are also basic needs. I agree. I have been in many rooms where participants and audiences have become overwhelmed with emotion, through the sharing of a deeply personal story or the bravery of a performer exposed and vulnerable; connecting to the message of the show, the talent on the stage or the power of the piece. When I reflect deeply I think it is also a very personal moment of deeper needs bubbling to the surface, of connecting with others in the rooms in a shared moment, of feeling a part of something wider, something bigger than ourselves. In those collective moments, we know we are not experiencing things alone. Art platforms those connections in deep and meaningful ways – and it can remove the borders people manufacture between each other, even resulting in friendships based on our similarities and shared interests.

I’m speaking from experience. At Posh Club in East Cardiff, 350 glamorous Goldies gathered, dressed in their finest, to dance, to eat and to be entertained; from feather boas to bare bottom cheek we had it all, iced with french fancies and finger sandwiches. Guests were seated in a transformed community centre with 150 cabaret-style seats, and people from all over the UK coming together. After the event, one community organiser expressed that coming just 2.5 miles away from their organisation’s home to a less central location, they realised that their members protect their borders, out of a sense of comfort. That the people who attend their club were specifically

from certain postcodes and that because of coming to Posh Club, they were going to widen their engagement and improve the access to their club. See, borders did not exist at Posh Club: London danced with St.Mellons and St.Mellons danced with Penarth and now Splott will eat with Cardiff.

The wider cultural understanding of art, especially live performance, involves sitting stiffly in theatre seats, drink precariously balanced on knee, with minimal interaction between the audience as we take in a bounty of woven colour, light and emotion. This is important too – but the opportunity to share this kaleidoscopic experience is minimal, a critique with friends after the show or a lost flurry of untwined internal reflection. That's why we also need other moments, events where we can connect and dance and say hello to strangers (unicorn jumper optional). Moments where these skillful and beautifully presented shows are claimed collectively, interactively; and other moments, in community centres and bandstands, the community produced shows and parties. These opportunities to dance with one another, to sing; to connect honestly with people around you, and see oneself represented – all these hold such value too!

As a community producer, my question is also: is connection value enough? There are opportunities here to include all, to relinquish the controls and let the people we are working for lead what they design and decide the experience to be. We can centre exchange in creating – and should, because there is space and need for it. The kind of exchange described in this story about Bill, who attended Posh Club Cardiff, where he met Linda, who then took him to the widows club with her to meet new people: "He said in those two days he had more conversations with people than he had had in the last two years since his wife had died. You really don't know how much this means to people."

8

CULTURAL DEMOCRACY: STORIES FROM OUR SOUNDING BOARDS

Written by Kate Hall, Producer at Jumped Up Theatre,
Chantal Williams, Community Producer
& Rhiannon White, Director, both at Common Wealth Theatre

Part 1

PLACING THE POWER IN THE HANDS OF OUR COMMUNITIES. WHAT IMPACT DOES THAT HAVE?

by Kate Hall

Having a youth-focused sounding board started as a side-project for Jumped Up: a response to the young demographic of our city, a familiarity with working with young people, and an observation that they were being left out of the loop of decision-making, especially during the pandemic.

The group came together in March 2021, following three months of recruitment via our network of contacts in education settings and youth groups. Membership has been refreshed and expanded through ongoing grassroots recruitment, ie meeting people while we have been out and about delivering work. Only a couple of participants have been recruited via a general call out on social media.

We wanted to create a balance of mutual exchange with the group, so, as well as paying the Sounding Board for their time advising and influencing us as an organisation, we also offered them the opportunity to develop their own creative projects. This exposed us to a promise to deliver and required that we apply for additional funding and wait for external decision makers to respond. Fortunately, additional support from Youth Inspired, and latterly Arts Council England and Cambridgeshire Community Foundation, has meant we could fulfil these promises.

In 2021 the group created the Fierce Talent film, as part of a wider campaign celebrating young people's passion for and practice in the arts. The group of six, all from different cultural and social backgrounds, and from different areas of the city, mainly met online (pandemic restrictions were in place), selecting the lead artist, briefing the film-makers and co-creating the narrative. It was joyous when they began to meet face-to-face, on the filming days, on its first public screening, and when we took them en masse to London, to lead an online seminar as part of the Guildhall's Disrupt Conference. https://www.disruptfestival.org/toolkit

In 2022 we experimented with a different model, where five artists covering dance, drama, spoken word, film and graffiti, worked with over 100 young people, to create content for the Right Here Right Now zine alongside two live events, a spoken word night and a street art battle, giving a platform to young creatives.

For Jumped Up, having a youth-focused sounding board has enabled us to experiment with participation models, forge new partnerships, and experiment with form across a number of new projects. This activity has provided a framework for conversations about Jumped Up's wider programme that have been much deeper and more meaningful than any tick-box focus group or online survey. And, more potently, we have been gifted the energy, perspectives and curiosity of youth, which has provided relief to the demands of running a micro-arts organisation in a challenging setting like Peterborough. It has strengthened us as an organisation, developed our programme and supported us as individuals.

Thankfully, the young people tell us that they too have benefitted from being part of Jumped Up through our Sounding Board:

Jen Ramm was recruited to the Sounding Board after interviewing Jumped Up as part of a student assignment. As well as being an active member of the group we also commissioned Jen to write about the Moving Roots project, and her articles have been published online and in a local magazine. She says:

> **"I've gained a lot more confidence by working collaboratively, and it's brought experience I couldn't find in school. It has helped me develop not only in my career as a journalist/writer, but also as a person, by engaging with social issues and what's important right now in my city and getting the chance to write. Self-belief has been a significant change. It's about being able to work with others who hear you and treat you as equal and being given the opportunity to work on my creative skills in a supportive environment. The work is so positive and has a real purpose."**

Eva Woods was the youngest member of the original group and has since spoken on behalf of Jumped Up to funders and policy makers. She is also currently in the second year of her term as Peterborough Youth MP. She says:

"Working with the Sounding Board has improved my confidence and verbal and written communication skills, led to many professional networking opportunities, and allowed me to connect with like-minded young people from across the city – but the most significant impact it has had on me is the way it has increased my faith in and love for my local community. This has made me proud of where I come from and greatly improved both my mental health, ambition, and enjoyment of life.

I have had the opportunity to build networks across communities that are otherwise closed off to one another, which has literally increased my faith in humanity: to a young person, believe it or not, it's mind-blowing to realise that the world is bigger and better than the people immediately around you. The opportunities this work has given me have genuinely made me a happier person, permanently."

We had always hoped that the Sounding Board would develop the young people's skills and new connections; what we hadn't expected is how creating new platforms for expression also supported the group's individual well-being, agency and pride in place.

It can be scary handing over power. The outcomes are uncertain, in a world with plenty of uncertainty already. It tests the depth of our expertise, our relationships with funders and stakeholders, and the authenticity of our beliefs.

Similarly, lives are complicated. Even more so if you are a young person, balancing work, study, family, friendships and significant life decisions, often with limited resources. So, we are still debating internally as to what membership of the Sounding Board means in relation to commitment of time, bandwidth, and longevity. This tension also shapes our conversations with the group. We want them to be high-value and productive, and are as likely to engage with the group members 1-2-1, through them being commissioned, speaking at events, or responding to opportunities, as gathering them together to consult or create.

Moving Roots was an action learning project, and we will continue to learn how to work with our Sounding Board, including celebrating that they have recently renamed themselves as Jumped Up's New Creatives – centring their aspirations and skills, as part of a shared ecology, and mutually respectful power-sharing.

We celebrate because centring young people in the decision-making about work with young people, works. It supports them to grow, connect and dig deep. It revitalises organisations, structures, and processes. It generates greater success, sustainability, and legacy.

Part 2

CULTURAL DEMOCRACY: STORIES FROM OUR SOUNDING BOARDS

by Common Wealth

Common Wealth's shows are often seeded by a conversation, or chance encounter with a friend, neighbour, family member about what is going on in the world for them. This is the start of a co-creation process we call 'meet, need, act': we meet our collaborators (the friend, neighbour, family member), discuss a need, and create an act which is a performance intervention. This is the bedrock of our process - and it often happens organically when we are developing and getting excited about the work we want to make.

Through our work we have built long-term relationships - sometimes creating transient communities which come together through the context of telling the story, in that place, at that time, but always with the energy and drive of creating a movement. These transient communities continue to bleed into other projects, our creative ideas and ways of working.

When we set up home in East Cardiff it was our opportunity to explore how we could build on some of our established ways of working in a place we knew and wanted to be long-term. Through Moving Roots it made sense for us to establish a sounding board that could feed, support and create shows with us - shows which were relevant, important, exciting and fit for purpose. People have assumptions about what it might mean to work in a community like ours: we wanted to challenge assumptions of taste, ambition and quality by creating experimental, high quality performance with critically acclaimed artists.

Moving Roots gave us the opportunity to explore these things with rigour and curiosity, and test out what we mean by cultural democracy and co-creation, asking questions of agency and social change.

The Sounding Board is made up of ten people, some local and some from other parts of the city. When recruiting for the Sounding Board we were keen to get people not directly involved in the arts, we were looking for working-class people who are curious, enthusiastic and looking to have the opportunity to get involved with creating change in their communities. We want to create change in the sector as well as the communities we serve and this means we have to pay attention. Ten people who work in the arts deciding what people would like to be staged in their area felt too distant and inauthentic to these aims. It acts as a catalyst, kick starting passion, conversations, developing future community leaders and creating entry points into the arts.

Practically the Sounding Board help co-curate the programs Common Wealth deliver, maintaining a lens of relevance to the community in which we work; they also play a key role throughout the life of each project, from seed idea to evaluation, developing their knowledge. They support our conversations with artists, and have opportunities to investigate artistic processes first hand. And they support in the delivery of shows as front of house, advocates and sometimes even becoming cast members. Each year the Sounding Board form a deeper knowledge & experience of making and delivering site-specific, high-quality performance through programming conversations, workshop participation, open rehearsals, direct job opportunities related to shows and access to free tickets to see artistic work. It has been so valuable and given us energy. It put the fire at our feet. It breathed life into the purpose of the company and made us feel true to the sense of creating a movement.

But that's enough from me - on the next page are what the people involved in the Sounding Board have to say about their experiences.

THE SOUNDING BOARD:

Nicola Shepheard

51 years, Retired

Why did you join the sounding board?

To make a change and take myself out of my comfort zone.

What have you done since joining the sounding board?

Poetry/spoken word – I even performed at the poetry night associated with the writing course I took.

I've had access to places i've not before, have made new friends and been included in new ideas.

What has changed for you since joining the sounding board?

Being included in ideas and also knowing that plays can be accessible to myself and that my ideas are relevant.

Describe your journey in three words

Fun, Different, Enjoyable

Callum Lloyd

Actor

Why did you join the sounding board?

I wanted to join because I like the political/site specific kind of work they make and how they champion the communities of East Cardiff.

What have you done since joining the sounding board?

I have been to BAC in London for the co-creation festival in 2021 to learn how companies can collaborate. I have also taken part in several of their community workshops. My favourite was the spoken word/poetry writing workshop where we got to share our work at the end.

What has changed for you or your community since joining the sounding board?

When the show Rent Party took place in Rumney it was great getting to work front of house for it. It's brilliant that workshops were held in Cardiff East, my area, as in the past you would always have to travel into the city centre to go.

Describe the last 3 years in 3 words

Fun, Eclectic, Inspiring

David Melkavik

43 years, Business Analyst

Why you wanted to join the sounding board?:

I have lived in Cardiff East for over 13 years and, although I have seen many positive changes, I have always had to travel to other areas in Cardiff for anything arts related. Therefore I was over the moon to join the SB and become involved with supporting Common Wealth because in addition to staging events through co-creation they are trying to establish a legacy and give Llanrumney artistic opportunities that previously wasn't possible.

What have you done as part of the SB?:

I've attended workshops and classes to broaden my artistic experiences so that I can help to better support the work of Common Wealth. This includes poetry performances, art workshops, book clubs and travelling to London to represent Common Wealth at a co-creation conference.

What has changed for you or your community?:

Personally I have become more confident and happier through my participation on the SB because it has led to me rekindling my interest in the arts. Locally, the talent hidden here has been given a platform and community members, from school children to senior citizens, have been given opportunities and new experiences that normally would not happen here. There's a buzz about the place and – fingers-crossed – it's going to get louder.

Three words to describe the last 3 years:

Electric, Inspired, Joyous

9

ATTENTION PLEASE!

CRITICISM AND COMMUNITY WORK

Recorded from a conversation hosted by Maddy Costa,
mentor with the Moving Roots Writing Project.
With participating writers: Alliyah Dawud, Chandan Shergill and Jennifer Ramm;
Lyn Gardner, independent writer;
Moving Roots partners: Clare Reynolds, director at Restoke, Kate Hall, producer at Jumped Up, Rhiannon White, co-director of Common Wealth;
And participating artists Simon Casson, producer at Duckie, Giuliano Levato, producer at the PappyShow.

Maddy Costa

This conversation has its roots in a different conversation, organised by Sarah Blowers in November 2020, in which a group of people – myself included – came together online to think about the kinds of critical and documentary writing that happens around community, participatory and co-created theatre. Should it be journalists, and reviews? What else is possible? I work in and around theatre in various ways – as a critical writer, a dramaturg, but also as a host of post-show conversations, encouraging audiences to think critically about what they've watched – so I'm really interested in that 'what else'. And within Moving Roots I got to explore it a bit, as a mentor to five writers, one in each participating place, supporting them to write about the work in their community.

During this conversation we're going to share some of what we learned through that project, and look collectively, and in a practical way, at the 'what else'. Alongside me as the main speakers are Lyn Gardner, who has been writing and thinking about theatre for some four decades now; Clare Reynolds, co-director at Restoke; Alliyah Dawud, participating writer in Stoke; and Giuliano Levato, producer with the PappyShow and also a critic-blogger in his own right. As this is an open conversation, we hope everyone present will join in.

To begin I have a quick starter question for each of the people on the panel, starting with Clare. One of the learnings that came out of this project was around local press attention on community work. Would you speak briefly to your experience of generating local press interest in Restoke's work, both with Moving Roots and elsewhere?

Clare Reynolds

For the final Moving Roots project, we used some local PR, which is something we've done in the past fairly successfully, but since Covid, a lot of things have changed in the city and with the local newspaper. Especially with The PappyShow's What Do You See?, we were trying to gather audiences around a different project, not a Restoke show, but an incoming show, and we really wanted to look at how we get the word out there and how we share information about the people involved in the project and why people might want to come and experience it. And the short answer is that that was really hard and not particularly successful.

I'll point out a few of the things that I think are really challenging about working with local press that might be specific to Stoke but I feel are probably universal.

So our local paper is in survival mode. They were bought by a big like reach PRC, which runs lots of other national press that are not the sort of press that we're interested in, and they only seem to take on negative news. A lot of press now is the local paper and journalists seeing things in Facebook groups, and taking those on as headlines for news articles. So it's click-bait, it's sensationalism. And we found that sending press releases to our local paper is just not successful, it's not picked up, and we have lost any relationship with the local journalists.

We did employ a local PR person who wrote a great press release, and who used to work with a local paper. Again, in the past that's enabled us to get into the papers, or the magazine that's attached to the paper. But we've found through the Moving Roots projects with What Do You See?, but also our own projects, that getting any sort of local press coverage is really hard. Or just doesn't happen at all. And obviously, the capacity for small organisations to be really pushing that is small. We don't have a PR person, we don't have a marketing person in our organisation. So we're doing a lot, and relying a lot on relationships that are quite hard to build now in our local area.

And then when press does happen, when you are successful, it's not necessarily positive. Working with The PappyShow, we did have our local news, Midlands Today, say they'll cover it. But basically, they are only interested in the human story. I understand that: we're all interested in a human story, and Restoke's work and PappyShow's work is about human stories.

But the press want to zoom in on one human story that you have in your project. They want to extract that and use that to sell the thing. And actually this person who came from the news was very honest, and was like, I'm not covering the show. This is a nice, inspirational human story that I want.

As the producing organisation and the person responsible for the care of the people involved in that show, that puts us in a really horrible position of feeling borderline exploitative. They knew that this person had a bit of an inspirational story, but also a tricky story – and that digging into somebody's life and history that wasn't part of the show just felt really icky and difficult. That's everything we're trying to avoid doing when working with people's stories, trying to put so much care around that and how we do that and how we look after people.

But that means that sometimes the people we work with feel like that care might be extended to a journalist we're responsible for bringing in, or the press: they might think this is a safe place where we talk about these things, and so talk to someone else who doesn't use that information safely.

I think those are the main challenges: either things not getting picked up, or they are picked up but the angle that they want to take just doesn't feel ethically safe. We're at a point where we're like, do we just not even bother, do we just go out and build audiences on the ground. Obviously it'd be great to do one article and reach loads of people.

But that just doesn't feel like the best way and the safest way of working for us.

Maddy Costa

So a bunch of tensions have already emerged from what Clare's said: tensions around people coming from outside into the project being extractive, and tensions around care, but also a tension that I felt a lot in the Writing Project, which is between writing that's done before, that's to generate audience, and the writing that might happen afterwards. Almost all of the work that I did with the writers was around writing afterwards. What stories remain, rather than what stories might be told to bring in an audience?

Lyn, it'd be great to hear from you about some of the difficulties that you've experienced as the person receiving those press releases to then generate an editor's interest. I partly ask that having worked with Lyn as an editor at The Guardian, and definitely been in the camp of the bad guys, not actually being sufficiently interested in community work. Also I'd like to ask about another tension, around attention for community work that's local or that's national, some of the advantages of national attention, but maybe some of the dangers.

Lyn Gardner

OK, gosh, I could go on all afternoon about this. These are questions that I've been thinking about really from the very beginning of when I began writing about theatre, because it became very clear to me really early on, that what is reviewed and what is written in culture is what tends to be valued in culture. So the decisions that are made about what gets coverage and what doesn't, are crucially important, so I'm very pleased that we're having this discussion today.

I think one has to be realistic – and the picture in many ways is not particularly pretty. And I think there are reasons for that, and that one needs to accept those reasons.

One, it's because many people who are editors at newspapers or in broadcast media, quite simply their concept of theatre is stuck in the 20th century. They think that basically this is social work, and it shouldn't be on the arts pages. And then reviews are largely stuck in a consumption model, where the purpose of the review, to a large degree, is to pass judgement, and to be part of the capitalist system of making theatre entirely a transactional thing. So it helps to sell tickets.

On the whole my time at The Guardian around this was deeply depressing.

You also have to accept that the journalists concerned often don't have a lot of choice about what it is that they cover. I was really interested, Clare, in your question: 'is it ethically safe?' I would say that that is something that has occurred to me, and happened to me again and again, throughout my career. Because the truth is, if somebody is putting on a show about sex workers, I can absolutely tell you that a national newspaper wants to run a story on that.

There are moments when I don't share that press release with an editor, because I know they all want this story. And I am not sure that I will be able to write it and present it in a way that is really safe and useful and a good way forward for everybody who is involved in that.

There's a danger here of sounding very negative. So I am really looking forward to the bit of the discussion when we talk about how we might approach things differently. But I also think that, if you are making this work, you need to think quite hard about why it is that you want to have the coverage? If you do want that coverage, then it is absolutely about building relationships with people, possibly with individual journalists over quite a long period of time. I think that it's nice to get reviews, but generally whatever kind of work you're making, people say 'I'd really like to get this publication or that publication to review my show' – but they don't actually think beyond that about what that review might be like. You know the value of what it is that you do, and you know the context, but the reviewer often won't, because yesterday they were seeing something at a fringe theatre in London and tomorrow they might see something at the National Theatre. And their tendency will be simply to review those things and set them side by side. So what is the reason for wanting to get this work reviewed? Is it that somehow people feel that the review gives them affirmation, that it gives you validity? It goes back to what I said, that what gets attention in the culture is what is valued in the culture.

And I do think there are reasons to be optimistic. One of those reasons actually has been Let's Create.

Whatever you think about it, and the difficulties around it, the latest round of NPO funding has been very interesting, because of the fact that a number of companies and organisations who often have been doing this work under the radar for 20 years, are now part of the Portfolio, which again kind of affirms what it is that they are doing. And I think that makes it harder for editors to ignore that work.

I just give a very small example: I'm an associate editor at The Stage, where it has been difficult to cover this work, but I'm currently running a series where I am profiling people who have just become NPOs. I feel that is a little breakthrough. It came about through saying to the editor that lots of people who work in the industry will never have heard of any of these companies – so this is the moment to start profiling them. That feels for me like a small but useful win.

Maddy Costa

You've raised some really important questions around what artists are looking for, in press coverage, in critical writing, in relationships with their work, and I wonder, Giuliano, if we could bring you in to talk for a bit about what The PappyShow is or isn't looking for in writing about your work or dialogue around your work?

Giuliano Levato

This is such an interesting question. We had a meeting last week with the company to talk about the next production we're going to have, and this concern came out during

the conversation: we talked about who's going to come and see our shows in terms of coverage and reviewing, because the experience in the past, as Clare was saying, is that sometimes we get discussed in terms of the stories that we bring on stage – but we don't get to be talked about in terms of the process we bring to the work, or the impact that we want to have as a company on audiences and also on our own industry. And that feels a little bit unfair, as Clare was saying, to the artists that we work with, or to the care that we have at the very core of our company, for the nine of us, but also for the wider network of people. Our work is about really nurturing those relationships, and goes beyond the actual show that we put on stage.

And so we would really love to have someone, a reviewer, a journalist, someone who's really invested in getting to know more about the companies, to come to our rehearsals, to come to speak to us. Someone who really wants to invest in knowing the stories behind these companies, not just the shows, and not just that particular show on that particular night in that particular venue, to really understand what's our ethos, because that will give you an understanding of the whole journey that brought us to that to the show, and how we connect with our communities.

I guess for us, what we are trying to understand is that having the national coverage in the Guardian is probably not going to serve our ambition in that sense.

And I think what I'm also trying to bring to the company, and to the artists we work with, as an independent blogger myself, is actually talking to those who are from those communities that we want to talk to. Those communities we try to represent on stage are the most important thing. And having bloggers that are invested with their readers, with their followers on social media, will actually help us, because that kind of coverage has an authentic voice. Because these are people that know us, that know their communities and the communities where we work, and can tell more about our process and the work we try to put on stage.

We are trying to shift our attention from the ego of being in the Guardian, from thinking that that's going to help our reputation, to recognising that actually we're going to increase our reputation or impact on audiences, if there's going to be someone from those communities that will talk to those audiences in the way they know they can get our message across.

So that's the conversation we're having internally, and with the artists we work with, to shift our thinking on who will actually validate our work if we need that, and to talk to the communities we want to talk to.

Maddy Costa

Absolutely loads came out of that for me that I'd like us to explore. There's something very sticky here around criticality: when you're working with writers who you become more and more close to, what happens to critical thinking? There's also the cost of living crisis: I don't know about you, Giuliano, but as a blogger, I make zero

money – but obviously, there's social capital attached to that. But before we kind of develop any of these things, I'd like to bring in Alliyah, to talk a bit about your experience in this project, as someone who's experienced as a writer, but not experienced in writing about theatre. And what you learned about how it might or might not be important for people within a community to be able to write about the work that's happening in their community.

Alliyah Dawud

Like you say, my background in writing was nothing to do with theatre or arts for that matter: I come from a self-help and competence-building background. How I got involved in this project is, one of my brilliant friends recommended me to Restoke, because she was aware that I was looking for a new challenge. As a writer, I felt I had so much more that I could potentially get involved with, but you get to a certain point in your career where you feel a lot of fear. So I was looking for an opportunity to be able to explore different types of writing and be able to do something that's community based, empowering, being able to challenge things, and do it in a way that hopefully leaves some kind of footprints or empowers people to start asking questions in terms of things that we just normalise.

For example, I come from a South Asian background, and unfortunately for the majority of our communities in areas such as Stoke on Trent going to the theatre is classed as something that we don't resonate with, or isn't accessible for us because of misconceptions around the fact that it's all very expensive to get to. We're not fully aware of the fact we have amazing community based projects such as Restoke where it's affordable to go. So being able to break down those barriers.

When I got involved, I had no idea where this was going to take me or if I'm any good at it, but I was like, I'm gonna give it my best shot. But Clare took me under her wing, so that was brilliant to have, and Maddy as my mentor, and the encouragement that I had from everyone else involved as well, to be able to push the boundaries, was phenomenal. And writers don't get these opportunities. Especially when you're a smaller writer that isn't established on a national scale, being able to do something like this is really, really important, not just for the writer, but also being able to open it up to communities as well. And what better way to be able to showcase Restoke's brilliant work, than to be able to have people within the community be able to write about it, be able to write about things that resonate with people within the community?

When I was writing, I wanted to provoke thought within people in regards to not just the subject, but also the way theatre fits into their lives. We readily talk about going to the cinema, that's acceptable culture for everyone. But when it comes to theatre, we've still got a lot of barriers surrounding that, especially in certain areas, and I wanted to be able to tackle that. And I think I've done quite well on this one. It's opened up my eyes to the fact that it isn't just me, there are other people out there that feel that they want to be able to access theatre, but may not necessarily feel it's their type of thing.

And as a writer, it's definitely taught me that if you have a passion for one genre, it doesn't mean that you cannot cross over and be able to do things in other places, and utilise that passion to be able to transform not just your own writing, but also be able to reach out to different people.

Maddy Costa

That loops back really wonderfully to the question that came up for me when Clare was talking earlier, around what kind of writing are we talking about? Are we talking about before writing, during writing, after writing? What I hear in what you're saying Alliyah, is that when you've got people who are in the community who are writing about the work, writing about the previous projects becomes part of the promotion around the next project as well: it becomes part of a sustaining dialogue. And maybe we put too much importance on writing actually: what space is being made for dialogue, whether post show dialogue, or pre show dialogue or just conversations with people about theatre? The role of someone like Chantal, the community producer with Common Wealth Cardiff, is really about talking to people about the work – and in a way that takes the place of promotional writing.

At this point I'd like to invite everyone here to come in, with further questions, but also to begin reimagining the landscape of writing around critical work. What is the landscape that we actually want?

Emma Jane Benning

Hey everyone, I'm joined in the office by a number of our community producers, I'm really pleased they could all be here. And I'm really interested in this press conversation.

For us at Strike a Light, press feels really irrelevant. We stopped courting press media interest quite some time ago. And what's been really useful and helpful for us is social media, for our team, and for our community to have control over what they want to say and how they want to say it.

So our marketing department, which includes our producer, Jess, has really started to rip up the rule book about how we talk about the art that we're presenting. And we've done that in consultation with the artists that are coming in. We've really changed the language that we use, we've started to talk about what you're going to see, what you're going to feel and where you're going to experience all of that, rather than using lots of adjectives to describe a brilliant piece of dance that the company might have provided us with. So that's one thing.

Who we're trying to reach with our writing is only ever about the communities and the audiences that we're engaging with. We're really not that interested in people that are living beyond the boundaries of our city.

They're welcome, but our primary focus is how our community producers who are helping us select the work that we're presenting speak to the people that they want to see come in through the door, and you're dead right, they're not reading The Guardian. So it's irrelevant to us how many

stars it gets from The Guardian. It's more interesting to understand what the people in the communities that these producers want to reach, how they think about that kind of work.

Last thing, we ran a great project called Hear Me Out, where we brought a writer in to work with a group of young people from the community, to help them think about the skills that they might need to write. And what you've said about needing long-term relationships with writers is definitely the case. And if someone like Alliyah could come and work with our communities, and I think we should really look at the funding to do that, to come and work on a more long-term basis with our community producers and understand the voice that they want to have, pre-work, I think that would be really exciting.

Lyn Gardner

You really have got to the crux of this. It comes back to this point: why are you seeking the affirmation of the national press, or of different kinds of media? I think one needs to think about it completely in the context of community – and of writers being as much part of that community and of developing that community. I'm always really struck when mainstream theatres, often out of London, find that they can't get coverage from the national press and can't get those reviews that they really want, and so they think that what they will do is to try to encourage bloggers, and therefore that they will try and get me to come and talk to those bloggers and maybe run a couple of workshops. And my view about that is, I'm really happy to come and do this for you, but I don't think that is what you really need. You need to think about critical responses as being part of audience development.

And that actually the best possible people to write about your work in that particular context are in fact, your audience, and then trying to broaden your audience.

And it seems to me this is exactly the same as how do you make theatre more accessible. It's easy to think that you are making it more accessible by throwing a few free tickets around, but actually, it's only if those free tickets are properly targeted, that it's really helpful in any way. And it is people in your community who actually will know where those free tickets should go, to keep on broadening your audience and your community. It's the same with critical writing.

But I think we also really, really need to get away from writing. Somebody responding in a voice message or creatively in a collage, is as much a piece of criticism as a review in The Guardian is, or somebody writing 1000 words at length on their blog.

It is all part of the creative offer that all of you are all making.

Clare Reynolds

As an alternative on why we want press, for organisations like Restoke, where we are artists who are from that city, and being from a city that's had nothing but really shit press and really shit attention, going so the press is not just about the shows.

That's why I don't want a human story about someone who's had a shit time growing up in Stoke, I want a positive story that says: look at what's happening here. Look at what these people in Stoke do and create and build together. Stoke's got its issues, but I want to celebrate the Stoke that we love and the city that we grew up in: that's what we want national press for. We don't need national press to fill a Restoke show – but we need, we want national press to come here and sell a positive story about our city.

Rhiannon White

We want press! We want press and it's really important to Common Wealth to get press. I was one of the people that pushed for Moving Roots to have press attached to the project, for the very reasons that Clare stated, but also because we believe in a different type of theatre. And that story about a different type of theatre needs to be told and it needs to be told at a national level – The Guardian popping in and writing about it. I don't care about the reviews necessarily, but the features. The social impact of the work, if we can get people writing on that scale about work that happens in Stoke on Trent, that happens in the council estates of Cardiff, then things will start to move and change. Like, why can't we have press of that level in our context?

Context is a very important thing in this story and in the story of getting exposure because for Common Wealth being in two locations, one in England and one in Wales, we feel the different contexts that we work in. Yes, the arts are devolved in Wales, and the press hasn't really caught on:

we don't really have journalists operating in Wales at the same level that they're operating in England. We made a show about the steelworks in Port Talbot, with National Theatre Wales, and the story there had not been told by Welsh journalists. The story of Wales was not told by the people who know it best.

And that is an ongoing thing. So in the context of Wales, we're always inviting in journalists, there's a couple that work within Cardiff, but then you're competing against the national organisations to get those journalists in to write about the work.

Common Wealth have been going for 15 years, and I remember the moment we went to Edinburgh, and we got loads of press, and it changed our life. Because that's the structure that we exist in. We exist in those structures, we can't hide away from it.

Maddy Costa

So there's always a tension between the what is and what if, and, and I think the thing that I'm interested in here is, does it change your life if you get a bunch of press attention and it's all negative? Or what happens if the national press come in, and they're not looking at the context, they're just repeating the same negative narratives? That's a delicate risk.

Clare Reynolds

I'll just touch on that, because we did, for our last show, have a review in The Stage that was really not great. I'm fine with a bad review or whatever. But again, it's about context.

It's about understanding the context of the work, and of Let's Create strategies, relevance and community and place. When someone walks in and doesn't comment on the relevance, the community or the place, it just feels a bit weird, because you've come and watched this like it's a show on a stage in any town. How can you not acknowledge that you've just walked into our venue, into a packed ballroom in an old town hall in Stoke on Trent, and that not be part of what you're reviewing or what you're talking about?

How can someone just walk into a show that's been made with a community in a place that's really deep work and not acknowledge any of that depth?

Kate Hall

I'm suddenly thinking of TikTok reviews: I want my audiences to do TikTok reviews. I know that will be really powerful to engage wider audiences to come, we know that word of mouth is what sells, believing somebody else. And I think it's a bit horses for courses. Peterborough has been voted the shittest place to live three times in a row in a lovely troll campaign to do with some horrible newspaper. And in response to that, we created a film, which has been viewed over 40,000 times. And so that is like a counter narrative. So I think there are some forms, which are about the good news, changing the messaging.

There's something here about who you're trying to talk to, and starting there. We talk a lot when we're creating this type of work about building structures around what those in front of us need. We're breaking structures down, by paying artists properly, and also we're making a new structure. It's that challenge:

if you want to make change, you have to double the work. You're finding new structures to sell the shows, getting people through the door, getting more people in who you want to engage with the work. And then you're changing infrastructure which is not serving you, you have to reinvent that as well. And when we come back to resource, I'm describing all of that going, Oh God, I've not got time for that. But it's about thinking about doing less so we achieve more and create that change, which is what we're talking about.

Maddy Costa

Yes, that's been in my mind: the development of the relationships, the creating of the work, all takes time, which all takes money.

Gabrielle [participant on zoom]

I wonder how some of this conversation feeds into the conversation about arts organisations archiving their work?

Maddy Costa

An amazing question. This is a preoccupation for me even in terms of the writing project itself: how are we archiving that? How are we sharing that writing? What's the legacy of that writing? How might it be used to inspire other people to write as well? In terms of organisations documenting, are you documenting the positive bits? Are you documenting the negative bits as well?

Giuliano Levato

In terms of archiving what's been said about the work you've done, when it comes from a place of being constructive, and for us to understand how we can work better with our communities, and the artists we work with, Kane Husband, PappyShow's artistic director, is always very keen to hear more. That's why we were very, very glad to get Alliyah writing on What Do You See?, because that really felt focused on the work and the process. It was not about judgement on the show, but there was a critical thinking behind it that we've received as a feedback to work on and giving us certain guidance, or maybe we are doing this right, we can focus on this more. I think for companies that's really important, it's also something that helps you create the narratives for your funding applications, because you get the idea of how you can pitch the shows and the stories you want to tell when you're asking for funding.

So yeah, in terms of archiving, we do have our process of collecting different sorts of coverage. We get those negative reviews, but even when it's positive reviews, if it didn't really understand what we did in terms of process, that is difficult. That's a conversation for us too, because it's not just about the negative review. We've had four and five stars before with our shows that didn't understand what we really wanted to do as a process, as a journey to the show. Even when it's positive it can be not very fulfilling either.

Maddy Costa

That's really useful. And to clarify, when I'm using terms like positive and negative, I'm not just talking about review responses, I'm also talking about the process. At what point does a negative experience within the process become visible? Or is it never visible? Making work in communities is so precarious and involves so much care, and it can go wrong: so how are we talking about that when it goes wrong? One of the things that's been really important about the Moving Roots network is that these community producers have had each other to share negative experiences with in really safe ways, and also sharing what was done to resolve problems. I'm interested in that too: we had this difficulty, and we learned this from it. How is that being communicated beyond the participants I feel is also the responsibility of writing. To be honest Lyn, this is something that you set me thinking about, probably 15 years ago: you made that argument in a Guardian column and it has really stayed with me.

Lyn Gardner

I think that's true:

we would all love to believe, wouldn't we, that a rubbish process is always going to lead to rubbish work. And that a great process will always produce great work. But we know that that is not always going to be the case.

I am really interested, as Kate from Jumped Up from Peterborough said, that it's not one or other: I absolutely understand the position of both Common Wealth and Strike a Light. I think the most useful thing is to think about this in a two pronged way: that to some degree, it would be useful to do both.

One is to develop a group of writers around your work, who are as much part of your process as the professional and non-professional artists would be, and who are treated in the same way.

And that's something to be worked out in terms of how are they rewarded: are they paid?

And then the second thing is to create painstaking, long-term relationships with journalists, who over a long period of time will understand your work, and may be able to help give it a national profile, if that is what you're looking for.

I am much persuaded by the Common Wealth argument: a set of really good reviews or interesting responses really can change how you are seen nationally and also within the industry. I think that comes back to using things like Twitter as well. But I think you can use professional journalists in a useful way.

One of the things that it's worth remembering is that often, if a journalist was going to write something, let's say for The Guardian or The Independent, it's hard for them to get a handle on what it is that they're going to write about – and they're quite lazy! So if you already have some writing around your work that you can show them they will often bite and be interested in exploring that.

And I would say that personally, some of the most interesting work that I've done over the past few years has been about working with companies over a long period of time. They have paid me to write a few pieces about their work, which has involved me having a long-term relationship with them and seeing stuff over a long period of time. And they can use it in whatever way they like, because effectively I've been paid for it. And sometimes it's been syndicated, sometimes they've published it on their own, sometimes it's gone to local papers, sometimes it's gone on their blogs. And that makes it easier next time, when maybe there is an opportunity to get the Independent or The Times or whoever to write about it: when you can go, oh look, we've already got this piece of writing, people are more likely to go for it. So I think it's a two pronged attack really.

Simon Casson, Duckie

I'm really fanzines, really into DIY culture, when I was 14, I bought my first fanzine, I bought loads of fanzines, and I think, you know, fuck the Guardian!

Read it if you want, but make a zine, make your own magazine. When we do a really big project, we make a publication that goes with it. We've done two or more really big ones, like big newspapers, or big magazines.

The last one was called Wank Bag and it was pornographic, but that's because the show was about 18th-century sexuality and whatnot. And it was very learned, interesting writing and some very saucy pictures, some pin-ups in it. It's about taking a creative, inventive approach, seeing it as another tool.

And theatre programmes are so boring, blah, blah, blah was in blah blah at the the Globe Theatre, and blah, blah, blah studied blah, blah, and who gives a blah blah fuck, do you know what I mean? If you're making a show that's full of content about something, and deeply embedded in the community, there's loads of people that could write about that.

Unfortunately, I have learned, though, that I have to employ professional writers to do that job. Because if you just get your mates to do it, or people that are fans, it is quite crap – no offence! It's spirited, but maybe get someone to overlook it or do it in a more creative way. We don't need to go to other people. Just do it yourself.

Maddy Costa

That brings up for me a recurring conversation that happened with the writers in the Writing Project, around expectations in terms of what does it mean to be creative in writing about work? It'd be lovely to bring in Alliyah here, but also Chandan Shergill and Jen Ramm, the writers in Wigan and Peterborough. When writing about someone else's work, what is owed to the community? If you're trying to write something that might pique a newspaper's interest – this was a tension that particularly came up for Chandan and Jen – what happens to your own voice? Does it mean that you end up trying to write in the voice of the newspaper?

Chandan Shergill

I did find that hard. I don't have a writing background, and I joined this project just because I was working with the Old Courts. I really liked the freedom of writing for Moving Roots, because you could write whatever you want to, but it was really hard not to just write something that fits into a particular mode, like a review type piece, or aiming it somewhere like The Guardian. I had absolutely no traction or for my piece, even the local press weren't interested in it, which was a little bit disappointing at first. But then these conversations are really helpful because who was I writing it for, anyway? I think the second project I wrote on, which was the PappyShow's What Do You See?, I wrote a much more personal piece, because I knew it was only going to the Old Courts website, and the Battersea Arts Centre website. And on reflection, I'm much happier with that piece, because I did have complete freedom to write that.

Jen Ramm, Peterborough

I felt a lot of responsibility to capture everyone that was involved in How Do We Begin

Again?, and do the project justice – it was such a sacred body of work, and I could tell that it meant so much to them. That was kind of my Kryptonite: how do I accurately represent this, but also capture it in a way that other people are going to understand, not just insiders, opening it up and making it accessible. I think I was able to do that, because I wanted to look at the human experience of it. I wasn't worried about my writing seeming too poetic, I just went for it. And because I wasn't writing for a specific newspaper or a university assignment, it wasn't stereotypical writing for me: it was a lot more special than that.

Alliyah Dawud

We had such freedom in how we were going to approach the work that I felt that if I could dissect the subject and put a spin on it, that would make it not just relevant, and not just showcasing the amazing talent of all the artists involved, it would also resonate with the people that I'm trying to reach out to, the ones that would thoroughly enjoy being able to go to theatre, but feel it isn't for them. There are so many people, even within my network that are like, no theatre, it's not really us. So I wanted to be able to make that bridge, to do it in a way that if they read the article, they could be like, Oh, OK, I'll keep my eye out if something like that happens again.

I had no publication in mind when writing, I just wanted to be able to showcase all this amazing talent and show that theatre is about being able to explore and see things through somebody else's eyes, and maybe get a bit emotional about things or a bit passionate about what you believe in yourself. So I thoroughly enjoyed being able to dissect stuff and put it back together in words.

Maddy Costa

I wanted to bring in the three of you because I want to think about how more writing projects like this can happen. As I said at the beginning, this one came out of that big conversation within the Co-creating Change Network in November 2020, in which I said that if organisations want to hear different voices writing about their work, then that's something that actually actively needs supporting, rather than just lamenting the absence of those voices. Christie was in the conversation and got in touch with me a few months later, basically saying: OK, you've mouthed off, now come and do that work. I'm curious what the legacy for this Moving Roots writing project is. How might it carry on with this group of partners? How might it spread to other organisations? Is it just money that is stopping it from happening more? How we might collectively advocate for more work like this, and why might we do that?

Emma Jane Benning

I think money is a barrier. But if we know that's what we want to do, then we find the money to work out how to do it. For our organisation, it's about changing the voice that people hear. So for me to be moving away as an artistic director who programs the work and handing it over to Katrina and Zarya and Halima and Phillipa. There's something that we need to do as well about how we help nurture those voices that get heard. And we can only do that when we have professional support to do it. We need people like Alliyah to come in and work with our community producers, to help them find those voices in their own communities. And we need to think about how those writings can be used for evaluation and documentation, really moving away from boring methods of doing that stuff. We still need to capture it, but how can a writer's commission be woven into evaluation and documentation and supporting the voices to come out from the communities that we work with?

Christie Hill

I also wanted to acknowledge that the part of the reason that we've been able to do this writers project is because Moving Roots has been funded by the Esmée Fairbairn and Garfield Weston Foundations: originally we had a budget line in for press and in the last couple of years, we re-did that budget and took money away from the press agency and put it into this project. So we paid Maddy and we paid the writers for their time and for their expertise. And we've been able to do this because we've had funding and we've had funding that was a bit flexible. When we first applied for funding for this project about four years ago,having a line in for press felt really obvious and really important. But we changed that.

Rhiannon White

For Common Wealth, going forward, we're gonna have a critical friend in the same way that we did for Moving Roots attached to all of our projects. We've recently written it into our NPO application in England for ambition and quality, in terms of evaluation, because we found that process so valuable, to have someone there observing, and asking questions, and knowing the context of our place, and the context of the stories we were telling. So there's something around breathing a bit of life into that social change element of who gets to be a writer, and who gets to tell their story in that way. But in our budget line, we also have a line for press: we're balancing it out.

Kate Hall

We're gonna be recruiting a Digital Officer, and I'm thinking: is it a writer in residence for a year? Is it somebody who might be doing the creative writing course at the local university, or maybe they're a journalist or a filmmaker, or they're a podcaster? They'll do a bit of what I call the potatoes in the field, they do need to schedule our posts, but then I can also ask them: what other platforms do you want to use? What do you want to experiment with? Rather than a job, make that into a commission. Because there's a space out there, which is more than print newspapers, it's more than the Guardian website. There's a whole Metaverse out there that needs to be explored. We need to take it over and experiment with it, like this project has done.

10

CO-OPTING CO-CREATION

Recorded from a conversation hosted by
Hassan Mahamdallie, Independent consultant
with Rhiannon White, Co-Director at Common Wealth,
Kate Hall, Producer at Jumped Up Theatre, among others

Hassan

Good afternoon, everybody. Everybody in a room and on Zoom and hello to those who know me and hello to those who don't yet. And thank you to the organizers for inviting me. It's nice in a couple of ways. The first is I was brought up just down the road in the early 1960s when if you can believe it Battersea was the was the kind of place where ones with council used to send single parent mums and property and families as a punishment to, on the, on on the let them premises on the estates around here. So Battersea has certainly changed so things do change, but when you think that's pretty good or worse, I don't know. But anyway, that's Battersea.

Secondly, I'm very pleased because this is an independent forum. And actually in the arts in the UK, I think we should treasure independent forums, which are set up, because actually a lot of forums are set up by the kind of structures that that shape, the arts world in which we we attempt to navigate I guess, I'm very big at the moment on autonomy, notion of autonomy of practice, and a notional ultimate autonomy a thought.

So for me, this is a is a forum to be to be treasured as it were. So that's really important. And what I'm gonna do very, very briefly before I hand out Kate and Rhi and, and everybody else to come in on a conversation, it's just to maybe frame the big picture as I see it. And then allow you to either challenge that big picture or to fill it in is entirely up to you. The first thing to say is, although I don't work in the field of co-creation, as you do, back in the mid to mid 80s to the mid 90s, I worked in what was called Community Theatre and theater and education. And that was a kind of iteration historical, I guess, iteration of kind of way that the field in which you were work now. I worked in the north of England in Rochdale, and also across Wigan as well. So shout out to people from Wigan today. And Rochdale Wow. How wonderful is that? Rochdale? Fantastic. And I guess in those days, there was a big theatre in education movement, which was very independent. There was community theatre movement, which is actually very varied. So we had community theater like we did, which was was rooted in communities in which we we lived and served. There were organisations like the Colway theatre trust, who used to go to small villages in the southwest of England and put on massive community plays using the people of the community to tell their own story back to them some kind of historical episode, usually, there were big kind of outdoor community theatre, people who put on massive outdoor events, like welfare state international run by a man called John Fox. And then they're also if you like, political theater companies like Red Ladder, who were very much part and grew out of their communities and kind of told the stories and the communities back to them struggles and, and historical episodes. And I'm probably missing out other kind of models. But even then, it's very varied landscape, really. And I think we all kind of respected what each other did. And we would come together and then argue fiercely about who was doing the right thing and not. So maybe things haven't changed that much. But I guess what has changed is that in those days, the work that we did was begrudgingly funded by the Arts Council. And they would take any opportunity they could actually to kind of cut us. And eventually, during the early days of fracture, and the education reforms, which led to the national curriculum, they squeezed out CIA community theater, and most companies, of which there were dozens, dozen dozen dozens, and they had their funding withdrawn, and were closed down. And strangely, now we're in a kind of period, where the official slogan, if you like, of the Arts Council is Let's Create, and it's kind of if you like, it's mimicking, if you like, the kind of language of community or co creation, or whatever you want to whatever, however, you want to phrase it for yourself.

Since a long time ago now in 2018, I publicly criticized the Arts Council for trying to co-opt notion of cultural democracy and said they had no real business of using that term, given that they were really a body, which was very close to government now is even closer, I think we could probably say the arm's length is, is rapidly shortening.

So now it seems to me we have this strange kind of world we live in, where we have this language of democracy and co-creation and creation, as it were, which now has become, if you like the the guiding criteria for funding from the Arts Council, anyone who's filled in a project grant application form recently knows what I'm talking about. You've got about 50 words to talk about the art and lots and lots of boxes to talk about priorities, and God knows what else, which I still don't fully understand. I have to say anyone who could enlighten me, please do. But I don't say cynically, because in one sense, I guess it's a step forward. But in other sense, I guess it creates challenges as well, particularly for those individual artists, small companies, who are already working within communities or with communities, to co-create work.

And I guess, the biggest challenge I see coming down the road is that the Arts Councilcreates its own marketplace. So what you have now is those, that small minority of people, artists who were working as freelancers or small organisations on shoestring budgets, working in depth, maybe for years, with particular communities, not necessarily driven by the notion of producing an end product, which could be led, measured and weighed and on a scale and then the results sent off to the treasuries show you how the arts can solve all the problems of humankind. You know, sometimes you're working in

depth and nothing is created, or maybe for the outsider, nothing is being created. But for those who are doing it, you can see the little sparks, where things begin to happen. But but because that's very difficult to measure, isn't it? And that's one of the thoughts that I have is, are we now in this this notion of measurement, and also the mistaken notion that the answer a sticking plaster on a, on a fragmented society, and that the material problems that ordinary people face can somehow be alleviated by the arts, making them feel better, or I don't know, I have no idea.

That's certainly not what I understand the arts to be. And its role in society. But, but that's kind of where we are. And as I say,

coming back to this bigger framework, the notion of the Arts Council, producing a market place, means that suddenly everyone is looking to co-create, everyone is looking for artists and humanities to co create, with or to, as it were, and, and I guess, there's a possibility that the work that people like yourselves do kind of gets lost in that massive wave that's kind of rolling, rolling up the beach at the moment,

the Arts Council these days, puts most of its resources into its NPO portfolio, therefore, has has to deliver results through the NPO portfolio. So you find that whether it's equality or diversity, or a horrible word inclusion, I don't want to be included anything, you know, really, I'm happy being a loner, but anyway. But, you know, everything has to be worked through NPO portfolio. And now, you will know, and I know through experience, right, when you go to, for example, a bigger NPO portfolio, and I'm not making them out to be these terrible beasts, that organizations are human beings and bricks and mortar and whatever, and ideas and artistic endeavors.

When you go to the big NPOs, the first place you're directed to is the outreach department, or the education team, or whatever it might be, and I don't care what anybody says, that model has failed. Really, because otherwise, in one sense, the Arts Council wouldn't have had to push NPOs down the road of let's create it the existing model was working. And I guess it will be the case that that it will be a challenge for NPOs who are underfunded really to really set up models of co creation, that are intellectually and artistically rigorous, or culturally rigorous in one sense, because if they go through these outreach teams, I think that's problematic, because that's a kind of that kind of the over there kind of bottle, isn't it? I mean, it's a bit like the motion of hard to reach communities. A black youth worker in Tottenham once told me that, I don't know why they called us a hard to reach community, because the police could always seem to find us. But, but that's a model, which I think has failed.

And also, I think, the great temptation for the NPOs, will be to say, well, the grand result of what we do in our let's create endeavors are to make sure that those people come back into our theatres, that somehow those people is that kind of transmission belt in some way back into the main house to see the musical or whatever it might be. And I understand why, because you have falling audiences across subsidized theater, particularly after COVID, and so on, so forth. So I guess just to end on this and open it up to Kate, is that:

I guess the issue for smaller organizations and individual assets, is how do you continue to retain and grow your mission in the face of all of this kind of marketplace?

And the dynamics of this particular marketplace, particularly if, as I think you will be, you're driven to NPOs for that bit of extra funding, and so on, so forth. And then you find yourself in a, in a power relationship, particularly of an individual artist, but also as a small company, it's not that much different, you're in a kind of a relationship of unequal power. And how do you navigate that? How do you get a big organization to promise that that great conversation you had at the outset? is they actually going to keep to that brief as it were, and not try and push you in a particular direction. And that, and that is a question of power. Because power infuses your house, no one really talks about it, but really, that's the truth. That's the truth of the matter. So I'll leave it there for a moment. So there's that big picture, the let's create policy, the marketplace now created by the Arts Council, what it means, what it means for autonomy for our ticket integrity, what it means for in depth co creation, which doesn't necessarily send back a result to the Treasury overnight.

Also, that kind of in-depth co-creation, which respects if you like, the people that you're working with, you're not on a civilizing mission, they're, you know, it's not to get them to enjoy opera or to enjoy the art that you like, or even to share the ideas that you have, necessarily, you know, very much a lot of other kind of bad community work has always been seemed to me to be like, a kind of internal colonial program of trying to civilize the the unwashed masses, you know, we, you know, we try and avoid, we try and avoid that kind of thing.

But, you know, I think that will also begin to raise his head as well. So, I'll leave it there and I'll hand it over to Rhi or Kate to kind of respond to it and then just open it up.

Rhiannon

Yeah. Yeah, firstly, thanks for setting the context. Because I think I think in a way that's really grounded, gathering, because we've been talking about all these big things, but to set it in a time, a place, and a political context, is something that I think we might have been missing. And actually, that backdrop, that political backdrop, really is just about everything in like in my vision, and yes, thank you for that. I think that we live in potentially very troubled and dangerous times. And I think that because of the agenda of how things in the arts have shifted, and what that means to them, make people fit into the idea of what the Arts Council want culture to be. And we started Commonwealth like 15 years ago, before, let's create before this term, co-creation was banded around everything.

We started Common Wealth before we even knew the Arts Council existed. And that felt really actually important to us, because actually, what we were doing was making theatre in the way that we wanted to, but for no personal gain or for no profit. And again, setting the context, it was a very different time, then we were able to sign on and get money, we were able to work multiple jobs, who are able to squat, those things, you can't do any more. So yeah, the way society was set up for us, allowed us to experiment and explore and have the kind of as kids from a council state have the capabilities of being able to create and make on our own terms. And it wasn't until someone from the theatre that I worked at behind the bar, said to me and Evie, we set up Common Wealth together, said you can get funding for this project. And then all of a sudden, this whole new universe opens up and we're like, what the fuck, you can get funding for doing this. And then the hustle began. And it is a hustle, it's a hustle. And it's a whole other world as a whole other language is a whole other territory for us to explore. And there's something around like becoming, stepping into that world and going, Okay, now we have to think about our worth and our value and our audiences.

And yes, we should think about those things as a funded organisation, but also the kind of pressure that puts on you and take and how that takes you away from the work that you want to make. Anyway, the thing that's always held us together, I think, is the values and the mission of Commonwealth. So every time we feel a bit wobbly on that curve, so that we get that it's not quite working, we always go back to the reason why we set up and who we are and where we come from, is a massive, massive part of that, and also the politics behind the company. Yeah, so we live in dangerous times, potentially dangerous times, I think.

Because what we're seeing now and what we're feeling now, as a repercussion of the NPO rounds, and the portfolio rounds in Wales, and that shift towards looking at communities and wanting to reach these audiences, what we're seeing is a scramble for some money, and a scramble for recognition and a scramble of a way of working in this way. And I think, it becomes quite dangerous, then when it's in the hands of people who were doing that to get profit for their theatres and, and to be relevant. And I think I think there's a lot of people for a long time who've been working in this way, who work deep and they work wide, and they understand and they carry a lot of knowledge.

And the thing that we see in Wales, I think, what I see in Wales is, is quite significant, because we do have a lot less funding than England. And then actually how that is proportioned and cut up, then is determined by the work you're doing and how you're reaching those communities. And when you cut things up like that, the portfolios we've have the time to write the big applications or they've got 25 staff in their office you can write all day long and they can write in a way that we can't then get a lot more than someone small like us, for the small ones like us it's kind of on the front line doing the work day in day out, you know, is facing the like real burnout of like being upfront and personal with with that work. So yeah, there's something for me around, yeah, this kind of equity of fairness and the dangerous shift of like, imbalances. Yeah, everyone doing the same work all at the same time, even those who maybe don't care about it, or do care about it, or might. I don't know or something like that?

Kate

Thank you. Yeah, and I just say, what I'm going to talk about is actually in the disrupt publication that I only talked about, which is online and our chapter, which is talking about our sounding boards standing on the shoulders of others. And one of the sets of people that I described that were standing on the shoulders of this is Common Wealth, and the young people that we've worked with. And so what I'm gonna talk about is much more a practical structure that we finding ourselves has evolved as a new NPO. And I know lots of NPOs will be going and now we're going to have a youth board that we're going to talk to, we've moved beyond that. And it hasn't come from, we must do this in order to get this funding. It has come from meaningful conversations, and feeling about how can we how can we be even better at what we're doing? So first of all, I'm gonna start explaining how we've ended up with what was called a youth sounding board. So we were part of Moving Roots, this project exploring can you tour co-created work. And we did some benchmarking with our communities talking about what was important to them. I am a local producer, I live and work there. I'm heavily invested in in where I live. And then in a conversation within the network, we talked about having sounding boards, who would be how can we basically how can we keep the projects on track? How can we keep them rooted where we are. So it's not just our voices in the room. We all know as you get busy, you start off with really good intentions. And then you just go, Oh, we've drifted. It's about a way of keeping us there. And embedding local project people in the projects. And then our first project that we were working on was Rent Party, and Darren Pritchard, who directed that came to visit Peterborough and I did my spiel about Peterborough about how incredibly diverse it is. And it's also statistically really young. I can't remember what the latest statistic is, but it's something like 34% are under the age of 25. I think. And that's, that's really young. And Darren was on that I went right, our version of the party will be young. That's what we'll focus on here. That planted that seed in my head, it's always interesting to have a visitor to see how they respond to you. And then we hit the pandemic. And I felt that young people were being ignored. They weren't going to die, so they can just get on with it and learn at home. And then I was in a conversation where there were lots of the great and the good talking about, oh, yeah, I'm really worried about young people. But it's interesting how creativity is helping them and I was like, Hello, can we talk about this? So we decided to have a youth sounding board, I really focused that and we were different from the rest of the network by doing that. Not inexperienced in working with children, young people,

lots of workshops, working with young people in various settings, and also lots of programming for families for nought to fourteens for young adults. But we've never brought those two things together. Why? Because our programmes have always been influenced by having conversations in the street people going like having a taking a temperature test and going on and then come across something going oh, yeah, that would work. I mean, I'm quite privileged and Peterborough, I always joke that we have everything. We have city, suburban, urban, countryside, and we even have some hipsters now. But we brought this together this idea of having a conversation with people and working with young people at the same time. And I was thinking about this this morning, and I realised:

what we were doing is young people were no longer vessels to pour our expertise into. They were our creative partners. They had things to say that needed saying and people who wanted to hear. They also gave us something as an organisation. They gave us different viewpoints there so shone a light where there were blockages, we had conversations where we were startled as to how small their worlds were. And that was an interesting insight for us. And they also gave us huge energy and enthusiasm.

The number of times on a Friday afternoon we'd be like, its the weekend, I don't think I can handle it and then four o'clock on a Saturday. We're like, that was great. I'm just good. When are we gonna do so they really gave us that. We did talk to them about what we were programming. But what was really became centralist, they co-designed activity. And we created a film called Fierce Talent, which is how we ended up being part of the disrupter programme. And we took those young people and they chaired a conversation at the Barbican, about about what they did, and we did a zine about their attitudes about education called right here right now. We were placing their practical needs, timing and location is central to what we were doing. We were responding to what was important to them and really importantly, we were hanging out and getting to know each other. And I look back now and I realised I was really good at hanging out and getting to know other adults, but hanging out with kids probably not quite appropriate. So it created that kind of environment where, and they wanted to hang out with each other. And that was really important as well. And also, we were familiar facilitating them to be creative. First and foremost, they created their own projects. And we're also constantly looking for specific commissions we could give them so three of them have had their first paid publication, published commissions through us. So it was not a case of you sit there and tell us what you think about our work. And then we'll go away and be artists, thanks very much. I've got trustees, I can always already have those conversations with. So it shouldn't have been a surprise to us that they have decided to remain themselves. And they're calling themselves the creatives. And they're completely re centred, what their role is within the organisation. Their outputs and their learning is the key journey that they want to talk about. And by hanging out with us, we get all the oh, there's other benefits that we have, but they're centering themselves. And this is strengthening our practice across other activities. As a consequence of those conversations and connections, which have always been there. We've started to work through dance, for instance, we've done a Northern Soul project and Bollywood. We've had lots of those conversations. And that's just led to us working with Joe Fong, on a 10 hour dance piece called How Shall We Begin Again. And I can see that all the shifts the processes that we developed in working with our youth sounding board, now the creatives have come into the frame here, paying people for their time, adapting scheduling, and timing and context and place around the participants needs not ours, planning the next steps with them as creative partners. And reframing commissions so those who may not consider themselves creatives to apply for a commission, suddenly it becomes an opportunity for them. So by becoming an NPO, we're hoping that we'll be able to do this work bolder and deeper and be more rigorous, and it has been a little bit tap on tap off because we've had to go, what do you want to do, I'll go away and get the money and come back again. And that's been difficult. And also, I think another thing is tell the story of what we're doing, which disrupts has been a huge part in helping us do that. And that will then bleeds back to all the other activities that we're going to do.

Hassan

Thanks very much. Well, just to sum up, but you know, we have this kind of careful iterative process, but you're talking about evolutionary process, kind of digging deep kind of process, which I think it's good to hear the kind of steps of it. And we also have come on the other side, I guess, or, oh, it's part of the same world, we have the kind of warning bells about, you know, the kind of pitfalls which now in the whole world is creating, as it were, what does that mean, for organisations who work in a particular way you have a particular history, or a particular mission, I guess, and how you stick to that. So I'm just gonna open it up now ready for people to to come in with thoughts, people online as well, obviously, coming have any thoughts and responses to, to either what's been said, or to the title of the thing?

Shanti Sarkar

(Engagement Producer at Unicorn)

Okay, I just had a quick question. I wanted to know your thoughts on kind of a little bit combining what you guys were touching upon that there are some people who have got these huge teams, who can like bung out all these applications with 25 people, and then you've got the community group to probably need that money, but they don't have the resources to write all the applications and then you've got, you know, communities like us. So but we're the creatives whether, you know, I'm just thinking a little bit about the power dynamic of when we're doing when we're doing the kind of projects who in the space is paid to be there, because they work with the organisation that is running the workshop or the project, and who in this space is the participant who's therefore not paid to be there, but effectively, they're the ones who are making the art. So

it just it reminded me a little bit of a moment I had like years ago when I was working with a refugee youth organisation and we can I had a weekly, chill out hang workshop thing we had every week. And you know, it became like a family and everyone would like cook together every week. And we're going to do games and this and the other. And it got to the point where everyone's very comfortable with each other. So there were times when some of the young people I worked with would be actually quite late. So they turn up like two hours late. There was a couple of uncomfortable moments where we'll like if you'd come earlier, like, we would have been able to do this, this and this.

And there was a young person who actually called me out on it, and said, you're paid to be here on a Friday evening, I'm not paid to be here. So I feel like I just want to go home after I've been at college all day, because I've had a bit of a shit day. And I turn up two hours late. That all right with you, you know what I mean? Like, and it was the moment for me to be like, actually, right? So I'm just wondering about that power dynamic of who's getting paid in these spaces, and therefore, whose values are being valued. And on the flip side of that, if we do then start a programme where we start to pay people, because we thought, oh, let's start a programme where we pay the youth leaders, and they were sort of instant incentivise them to become a youth leader, because they get a bursary for doing it or you know, whatever. Then on the flip side of that, are we then in commodifying art?

Like, rather than just making art for art's sake, then like, Oh, we've got to pay people to be here. And, yeah, I don't know if that's the question. But that was just the thought. So we pay our youth sounding board, we can't pay them for every moment that they're in the room, because otherwise we'd have to pay them when we go on a go see. So we try to distinguish between, when it's a benefit to the organisation, when they're working for the organisation, we in that includes, co designing the product, then we pay, we pay for them to be in the room, it's really hard to get invoices out of them, Oh, my god, we tried to buy them in vouchers, which is great, but they actually said they prefer cash. So but then they never give us an invoice. And there are times where we go, we have this amazing opportunity, but we can't, that's coming often it's coming from a different project, we can't pay you to be there. But it's optional. And I will say we're really flexible. So the original six that we work with, they dip in and out. None of them are here today, because everybody's got exams. So they dip in and out. And we're like thinking about how we can now we've got NPO we can think right, we're gonna be here three years, we definitely know we can provide for you for three years. But yes, we do. If they're not getting something directly out of it themselves, we definitely have to pay them to be we can't do it, unless we pay them in to be in the room. But we also won't deny them an opportunity because We can't pay them to be there. That's, that's when it sort of becomes you can sort of opt in. So, um, but I would prefer to pay them to be there and do less. Um, but what we do is when we recruit, we're recruiting the opportunity. And we tell them that they're getting paid sort of further down the line. So its about how we bait the hook as it were. So the project we've just done with Joe Fung, we had 38 participants and they all got paid to be part of the project, didn't spend any money on set or costume. It's just on people. And that budget looks great, because I'm really quite proud of that, like, big wedge of cash has gone to creatives. So you have to create a different mindset to when you're doing it. Yeah, I think it's really complex. Actually, I think what you're saying is really complex. And I don't have an answer for it. Because I think there's moments like Kate's describing where you can put a value on people's time and pay them. But there's also moments when, I don't know you might meet someone in Tesco and have a conversation and their idea builds and builds and builds and becomes part of the idea for something and it's like that. How do you even put a value on that? I remember one of my friends, she used to work for an Art Centre go into somewhere in South America and being like there's no subsidise arts and art sector at all. And the arts absolutely on fire. And there's also that kind of like how do you not commodify because that's also quite important for us to remember, as well. I personally, I think come from a place of just trying to sense out like what people might need. So sometimes we pay people in vouchers sometimes it's just about having a wicked event and having loads of food and just like creating a wicked space for people to be together. But it's just yeah, it's just about using all the senses and just really paying attention to the circumstances people find themselves in and then always trying to value people's like contribution towards a co created piece of art, which is complex.

Hassan

Yeah, these are great ethical questions, aren't they? Which we which we struggle with continuously? You don't necessarily even have a solution to them right? And, and it's that notion of ethics, I think is embedded in co -eation and the kind of historical movements that I used to belong to. And I would contrast that with the question of morality, which I think when artists start talking about morals, then we really are in trouble. But ethics, I think is a legitimate arena to try. And please ideas. One thing it kind of said to me was this notion of actually, there's also the question of class comes in. Because let's be honest, I mean, I don't know about anyone else. But I was raised in a very poor family of 11 brothers and sisters, the notion I could make it to youth theatre at 5:30 on a Tuesday, right? I mean, pigs could fly, you know, I'm saying that as a Muslim. There's always the temptation, the path of least resistance isn't there. You get the kids who have got organised parents who can drop them in their SUVs at the door, and so on. Lett's be honest – you know they're going to be the ones which are more reliable, and then kind of value judgments begin to kind of creep into that. And, and, you know, there's always these kinds of pitfalls. It's a very kind of narrow kind of cliff face where we were traversing, isn't it really, where there are these pitfalls on either side? So who else wants to? To come into?

Liz Moreton

(Director of Creativity & Social Change, BAC)

I just wanted to Yeah, yeah, could come back, not move on to a new point. But you'll say I think it is really complex. And I think it is, definitely, as Kate said, to do with a change in mindset and commodification as well. Yeah, just a reflection, we, BAC and Conrad tried it with the BAC beatbox Academy. why we've been bringing together a group of young people for years, it was an ongoing project that's been going for 15 years, and we had a bit of money, we had a bit of funding. So we tried paying the young people and that was brilliant while the funding lasted. But then when the funding ran out, we couldn't pay them any more. They didn't want to come anymore. Because it was almost like the initial enjoyment or impetus for them wanting to come together and make music together and been, I don't know, it'd been sort of forgotten or confused or something like that. So yeah, it's just in practice. It's so delicate. And messy. Yeah. And yeah, didn't really come to a conclusion with.

Kate

I always, I've freelanced a lot. And I always have a rule that if, if everybody else around the table is being paid, so am I. So I apply that same principles to this, that sort of environment. And I think there is something about, you know, again, I'll go back, if our organisation was benefiting, we have to pay them like, I'd pay my bookkeeper to check I'm doing my budget, right. So but when they want to do a six hour workshop, rather than a two hour workshop, and we can pay for that artist to do that, they would really, really sort of value that is tricky. And I'm not saying we're very, we're perfectly consistent. But sometimes it's just about having that really quite an open conversation about it. And not getting all like, oh, it's money, I can't possibly talk about it, or just talk about I mean, we had one young person who stopped coming. And when we finally tracked him down, it's because his parents couldn't drive them in. So we put them in a taxi. And it's 15 pounds each way. I'd never spent 50 pounds on a taxi, but I would to get him in. Because he didn't have that option. But we had to have that conversation with him once a once you have to spend that sort of time having that having those conversations. So it comes about quality rather than quantity. And then you're making that change.

Luís Correia

(Programmes and Communications Officer Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation)

Hi. Yeah, I'm Luis from the Gulbenkian Foundation. My question is, what could funders do differently?

Christie

Beyond what the council can I just very quickly do a shout out for Esmee Fairbairn and Garfield Western Foundation, who funded Moving Roots, and that's part of the reason why we're here. And I feel like BAC were in a really amazing position when we applied for funding for this project where we had worked with them for a long time before and I think they allowed us to take some risks and sort of enter into a bit of uncertainty with this project where we knew that we were working with cocreation and therefore we didn't know exactly what the outcomes would be. And I think we were really lucky to have that relationship and that support from those two funders. And I know it's something that we've spoken about a bit as a network before about needing that trust from funders, especially in relation to co-created work that actually the outcomes are not predetermined. And it's really hard. Yeah. Being trusting relationships with organisations, especially smaller, more grassroots organisations, and that being really important. And just trusting that they will deliver something excellent. So yeah, I think in terms of, you know, what funders could do, I think continuing to work like that, I think with that trust, and not knowing what might come out of it is important.

Rhiannon

I think funders have got a really, really tough job on their hands. Because I think there's something around and being able to identify what's coming in and how, what how authentic it is, actually, because it's really easy to talk about co-creation and use the language and paint a picture. But like, what is actually happening, what is happening on like, for the funders, to have an awareness of like, what is authentically happening on the ground and what that impact is, is going to be super, super tricky. I think the trusts and foundations do it particularly well, like we're funded by Paul Hamlyn, and they really have a relationship with us and they get to know our community and they get to know our work. That I think that's really hard when Paul Hamlyn are based in London, and we're based in Wales and Bradford so it's, yeah, it's something around them. Yeah, full admiration for those who are getting to know their Fundees. But yeah, the rigorousness of like, knowing and being able to spot when it doesn't quite do what it says it's doing a tough job.

Liz Moreton

Yeah, I think the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation are doing amazing things, though, with the civic role and everything you're doing to sort of yeah, give a bit more visibility to this work. But yeah, through the co-creating change, network BAC became a bit of a funder giving out little pots of funding to people all over the country. And exactly that it was impossible for all these applications, where people were using all the language of co-creation and sharing power and democratisation and all of this. And we also tried to devise a bit of a model for how we could sort of understand what co-creation people were talking about. So we called it the agency scale. And it was sort of saying, how much agency does do you hold in this process? And how much does does the community hold? And everyone just sort of put exactly what we wanted to hear. But then, actually, the budgets were the place where the sort of the true morals of the project came out, actually, which was quite interesting.

I also think one of the one of the things that I'm struggling with is just that there's a bit of

money to test projects out. But then when you've got a project running, and it's really working, and there's lots of momentum and energy and evidence behind it. The sort of the usual suspects, the funders who we're working with, don't have enough money to sort of help that progress and grow, and then trying to find the new thing. And so maybe introducing us to other funders, or I don't know, working, how can we work more collaboratively as a sector with funders to try and figure out what are the long term partnerships and collaborations we need for long term sort of social change rather than just like piecemeal bits and bobs here and there?

Ellie Frances

(Blown Fuse Theatre)

Hi, I'm Ellie, and I. I'm sure it's not as simple as this. But I think funding bodies could be a little bit better in core funding and covering overheads and things like that, because we're a very small company, there's only three of us. And so we have to work on a project by project bases because we just can't afford to pay ourselves for the, you know, the strategy time and developing the organisation between projects. So I think that's something that could definitely be improved for me.

Hassan Mahamdallie

Good point. Good point. I mean, I have to say, we should say that the lack of funding landscape has changed altered almost unrecognizably from when I started out. So for example, when I started out local authorities and councils were equal partners around the table. And the councillor would sit on your board and direct you to you know, his constituents and so on, so forth. And he had, he had a right to because that was his Democratic role as it were. And now you are now in one sense, I guess trusted foundations have kind of filled the gap that local authorities used to feel. But and it's not a criticism of trust and foundations, but without the democratic impulse, or accountability that you had when you partnered with local authority. But anyway, risk is a great one.

Kate

I just say there's something about for funders to think about exit strategy, sometimes it is okay for project to finish, but it sometimes doesn't always finish well. And we built legacy into the Moving Roots programme and try to think about that we began, we probably got it perfect. But there's sort of like, it doesn't have to be a life support system. But it could be a dignified exit, thats where the legacy is captured and created, and maybe passed on. So from our first show, in Moving Roots, there's a new organisation has come from that. That's our legacy, we're not going to carry on running it because they need to beg. They want to stand on their own two feet, and do it themselves. So there's something about not all projects need to live forever. But how can we the best impacts continue on, because that's when it's heartbreaking when you've done them or something amazing. And that there's no way of sort of giving it new life and a new form. Those sorts of that sort of support system to do that would be great, because you certainly can't go back to the Arts Council and say, I did this brilliant thing, can we just keep it going for a bit longer, but in a different way? Like you say they want the obsession with something new, can be very distracting.

Hassan

That's very, very good point obsession with something new. And who and who would in their final, in their final reports to the Arts Council say, well, actually, the project failed, for example, but we'd know don't mean that failure is part of our work, surely. And that's how we learn. Well, that's what we say to kids, isn't it? But it's very interesting here. Alan Davey, the was the chief executive of the Arts Council say that we're, we're not in an era of risk anymore. That risk taking. I guess what? We're not in a, we're not in an era where risk taking is except is going to be the thing that that drives the arts forward.

Tom Spencer

(Producer, on Zoom)

Funders being explicit about being first funders, giving Artists Communities, organisations the chance to test new ideas without having to go to multiple different sources and or to leverage more public funding.

Kid Carpet

(Artist)

Hi, Kid Carpet. I just like to say, as an independent artist, the jumping through funding hoops, is so hard. And the language of funding applications is a specific language that producers seem to know. But artists don't know.

There's 1000s of artists in this country, that are never crawling out from under the stone, because they don't have that language. They might be a fantastic painter or an amazing beatboxer or whatever. But you're not going to know because they can't access the money because they can't access the language. And I'd much rather write a poem for application than all that nonsense, but I don't understand.

Hassan

It's strange, isn't it, that the Arts Council talks about let's create a kind of cultural democracy. But yet the funding application to get the money from the Arts Council becomes more and more obscure and time consuming. And we've longer periods of waiting as well for results. And God knows where else. This is contradictory kinds of things. Factors, aren't they at play, I think. Anyone else? Last word who was the last word? So can't be me. No, no, no.

Rhiannon

Me and Hassan had this is a very unusual experience where we went to an arms factory. We're doing some research for a play. We went dressed, very smart. I remember seeing someone do a presentation and they use the word co-creation in relationship to building weapons. So just just for us to rumi-

nate on cocreation not always be anything for good. And also not being exclusive to the arts.

Hassan

So true. Yeah. co-creation to get government contracts for artillery or something.

Clare Reynolds

(Director at Restoke)

Yeah, just on that, I feel like it feeds into the language because co-creation is like a new term for community arts and in Stoke on Trent, there's like such a rich history of community artists, and community arts organisations that I feel like we all directly like standing on the shoulders of.

And so like, I feel like we're reclaiming the word 'community' as we call ourselves a community arts organisation. Because now co-creation has become a buzz term, it then kind of loses meaning. And it's like, what do we mean by that? And for me, the community there is what's important because we work with communities, or we create new communities to make stuff together.

And so communities is at the core of it, because yeah, you can go create weapons. Yeah, you can co create, like, evil. Yeah. But what community you know, we understand some of this tangibly, like good and important inherit to human existence. So I say reclaim the word community arts.

Hassan

Yes, a similar process, what went on in if you like, the, the anti racist battleground, where decolonisation started out something, which was a movement in the colonies, then became a kind of a term of academia, and now has been completely emptied of content. So you know, Lloyds Bank decolonised, in themselves, our wish. arms manufacturers are decolonising themselves. And of course, you can't meet you can't actually use the word anymore. So don't you think that people? Yes?

Sagal Abdullahi,

(Community Organiser and Creative Producer)

Thank you. My name is Sagal. I think just sitting and just listening. I think the issue is that the funding space, the community organising space, the co-creation space, is incredibly middle class, and just sitting there listening to conversations, some of the conversations also really middle class in a space of like, even the question of, of like, like, why would you pay young people and why blahblahblah? That's everything.

I'm just thinking if if you have more working class people in these places, in the funding space, in the cocreation, space, these questions or these kind of like theoretical kind of like questions and talking and conversations wouldn't happen, because what space is all about action? It's about kind of like, cool. We don't have the resources, the money. Okay, let's do something about it. Let's actually create things are still things instead of let's just have conversations, because I think it's nice to speak. And it's nice to like, oh, let's, let's have these long kind of debates and questions about, you know, all is this the way we should be doing things?

How about, you know, thinking about what space am I taking? Someone in the beginning was talking about, like, whether you need to be from the community to, you know, how important is that kind of that debate, right? And I think the bigger question maybe is kind of like, what space am I taking from someone who is better placed to do the work that I'm doing now? And that's a very kind of like, a question requires more honesty? I think the question I think is more about, Are you honest with the work that you're doing? Or how your placements work? And are you willing to move out of the way for someone else? Yeah.

Emma Jane

(Strike a Light)

Hi, it's EJ from Strike A Light, I totally agree with what you're saying. And we are an organisation that was set up by two white middle class women. And we have thought long and hard about what is succession? What does succession and what does success look like? And how do we change how our organisation looks and who holds authority and power. And one of the ways that we're trying to change that is by moving away from me being in the artistic director and making things happen and working with people from our community that we pay and bringing them to places like this so that they can be part of that conversation and start to change the way that we do things. But I totally agree with what you just said. Yeah. Opened up a whole new conversation there. Thank you.

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CIRCLES OF CARE

Written by Maddy Costa, Independent Writer

When making performance in community or co-creative settings, one word will come up repeatedly: care. What it connotes could be fluffy but really it's fraught with tension. As Chrissie Tiller wrote in an essay called Care as a Radical Act for the social arts agency Heart of Glass, neoliberal politics has claimed care as 'a profit-making exercise', reducing it to 'a one-way contract between provider and recipient', the latter 'largely characterised as being without agency, without power and without capacity for reciprocity'. So much of the work in participatory arts involves overturning these characterisations, challenging the power dynamics they describe.

With two projects completed, the Moving Roots collective are in a good position to reflect on some of the issues around care that have emerged in their work. Where is care missing? Where does it needs expanding? And where might care have an impact opposite to what's intended? The advantage – and joy – of being part of a collective is the ease with which learning can be shared; however, there's a desire within the Moving Roots project to extend learning to other producers and organisations. It's another way of thinking about care: as mutual aid rooted in a sense of responsibility not only for one's own work but for the field in which it takes place.

At the same time, issues requiring care can be difficult and delicate to talk about: worse still, recording those conversations to share in public can itself become a harmful act, exposing people or events that don't want to be exposed. For that reason, I haven't attributed quotes to any of the producers present from the five partner organisations involved in Moving Roots (Battersea Arts Centre, Old Courts Wigan, Restoke, Jumped Up Peterborough and Common Wealth Cardiff), buWt have written this in a singular voice from the notes I took during a reflective conversation between ten of us in October 2022.

Care as access

At the core of Moving Roots is care for participants. The multiple crisis people are living amid are making it harder to get people in the room – and we want to be able to treat people as creative rather than a set of problems. This means care has to start before participation: what do we need to do in order for someone to be able to sing and dance? It might be sort out childcare, speak to someone's housing officer. This requires capacity – and ideally that should always fall to the same producer who's also organising everything else.

Co-creating with people means supporting them to be the best version of themselves. But that also means giving them agency to decide what and how much they want to share. Access riders and documents are useful tools for establishing those boundaries, as well as clarifying each person's desired working conditions.

There's a shared desire in Moving Roots towards a care that involves being human, not over-administrating relationships – a culture of care that doesn't come from paperwork but comes from people. After all, email can be misconstrued. On the other hand, it's good to have a document to refer back to, especially when conditions or relationships get tricky.

Equitable care

Like many participatory arts workers, Common Wealth's producers begin each working relationship with a dialogue, asking a set of questions that acknowledge different expectations of what working in community might be. Their framework includes: the conditions each person likes to work in, the best ways to communicate, the ways people like to receive feedback, as well as asking each person what they need, what they struggle with and what they love. The aim is to create equitable space, more than care for everybody, because one person might need no care and another loads.

Doing so requires flexibility. You might have agreed on values around care in an interview situation, but people's access needs or working desires change: they might have thought they needed x but actually want y. You have to revisit it and be honest. In which case, does the care conversation have to happen on a regular basis?

The saviour/mother role

This revisiting can be especially important when people have different ideas around what care might mean. What if your values or instincts lead you to care for someone who doesn't want to be cared for? It's easy to forcibly over-care: you need to trust the instinct to know when to start caring – but also when to stop. When approaches to care are incompatible, care can start to feel patronising, or undermining. This cultural difference might be bridged by a conversation right at the beginning about what care looks like to each of us.

There is fear of veering too close to being someone's therapist, and it can be altogether too easy to slip into a 'saviour/mother role', which is why we're interested in collective care. Often it's the case that organisations do a great job of creating collective caring situations in creative work – but don't always practice it in the practicalities. For instance:

is there one person who is always doing the washing up? Practicalities can be an easy load to share, as long as collective care is embedded here as well as on the creative side.

It's easy for boundaries to get crossed – especially given that sometimes you don't know where your boundaries are until they're crossed'. But people know you can't solve their problem: sometimes they just want to know they're being listened to.

Care as privilege

So many people's problems result from precarious financial situations. The tendency in participatory arts is to think of this in one direction only: in terms of the lives of participants. But what happens when the artists or organisational team themselves exist in conditions of precarity? The arts funding structure – aka the battle for long-term money rather than project grants – forces artists and organisations to live an endless hustle, hand to mouth. Among the problems this creates is that you need money before anything else – including multifaceted care – can exist. Arguably it's a privilege to be able to give care. Who has that privilege?

Working-class people can't afford to exist project by project: we're going to lose a whole generation of potential artists and leaders as a result. Which is why it's so important not to have a fluffy discussion about care. Real-life pressures – being able to feed your family – are also involved.

Care for the outer circle

All socially engaged artists need supervision, especially now – but the general mode of the arts industry is that producers are good at talking about participant care and not very good at care for themselves. The Moving Roots organisations have developed a number of strategies to challenge this: for instance, assigning different trustees on the board to be responsible for individual staff members' care. That's about safeguarding, reporting – but also about relieving the pressure. A trustee can nag producers to have a time sheet, book holiday. It's like putting on an oxygen mask on a plane: you have to be fed, otherwise you can't feed anyone else.

Another way of thinking of this is through the model of 'circles of care': there's lots of care at the centre, that we give to the people we work with; the artists who support those people also need care – but care for the directors/lead producers of the organisation has to be included too. You have to make sure everyone has an outer circle of care. Core funding has enabled Restoke to work with a specialist firm, The Artist Wellbeing Company, founded by mental health worker and theatre-maker Lou Platt: they have a session once a month together, and can also call on Platt ad-hoc to work through specific problems that arise.

These structures, or circles, of care are even more necessary when interpersonal issues emerge within an organisation, or between organisation and artist. At such times, care looks like having a really hard conversation – and, depending on who is involved in the issue (a Kickstarter member of staff, for instance), a more junior member of staff holding the conversation might enable it to feel less like an informal warning, and to happen on a more peer-to-peer basis. Some problems can be averted by being very direct at the very beginning of a working relationship, especially regarding capacity.

There's a temptation to avoid difficult conversations: calling out issues in an organisation is hard, and sometimes we don't call them out because we're trying to be careful. But the harm will always emerge at some point. And it's in those moments of crisis – when anger is present, or frustration – that care can be hardest to enact.

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