
Backstage! Me!

Report for Royal
Exchange Theatre on
Booth Centre
partnership
programme

Gerri Moriarty, September
2012

'The arts matter because they give individuals a chance to be themselves and be creative with people with similar interests.'

'I like theatre because it's not only for the middle classes. But it also shows how anybody likes theatre and its good for working class to express the feelings too.'

'It is very good for people to get out and enjoy beautiful things'

Participants' views about the value of the arts.

Backstage! Me!¹

Northern Soul

An opinion you want! No probs here goes
Red light goes green, creep on in the dark
Si plays the chords and quietly we sing
Hearts beating fast, lights come up and off we go:-
You lot out there, behind the lights
Enjoy the night!
At the end, applause, we hold hands and bow
Green room, relax, what do we do now?

¹ The title of the report comes from an interview with one of the participants, who described being backstage at the Royal Exchange Theatre as one of the highlights of the programme for him. The poem, Northern Soul was also written by a participant, Andy Crossley.

1. Context

For some years, the Royal Exchange Theatre has worked in partnership with the Booth Centre, a centre offering advice and activities for homeless people in Manchester. The partnership is currently delivering a three year programme aiming 'to use theatre processes and practice as creative tools to develop the social and personal skills of homeless adults and to contribute to participants' ability to resettle, find stability and address ongoing health and substance misuse issues'. This partnership is funded externally by the John Paul Getty Foundation and the Rayne Foundation.

Gerri Moriarty, who is a free-lance drama practitioner and consultant was contracted to work collaboratively with Ben Turner (Royal Exchange Theatre Community Coordinator), Janine Waters (drama practitioner delivering the Booth Centre programme) and Booth Centre staff and participants to develop and implement an evaluation framework for the programme. In Year 1 she has

- Worked with Ben to design a basic evaluation technique which has been implemented by participants.
- Suggested amendments to Royal Exchange Theatre existing monitoring and evaluation tools. Amanda Croome from the Booth Centre has also suggested amendments.
- Interviewed a number of drama programme participants.
- Interviewed Janine Waters and Amanda Croome.
- Worked with Ben Turner to review findings and suggest amendments for Year 2 and written this short evaluative report.

Experience of participants in workshop sessions

The Royal Exchange Theatre/Booth Centre programme's stated aim is to work with homeless people; in reality, the circumstances of participants in the programme are more complex than this. Some are recently homeless, whilst others have found more permanent accommodation, but still need support with underlying difficulties, such as health and substance misuse, maintaining stability and developing social contacts.

During this year, it has been possible to find out more about participant experience of the programme through regular evaluation notes² made by all participants at the end of each session and through more detailed one-to-one interviews with some of the regular attenders.

² These notes were introduced as a technique by Gerri Moriarty and Ben Turner and have been adapted by the participants and Janine Waters, the drama practitioner. Participants now decide which reflective questions they will ask at the end of the session

'Not everyone comes every week. There are two levels – anyone can come in brand new, then there is a progression for people who come regularly. Homeless people are like most people, they want a home, a partner, a job, something meaningful to do, friendships. The drama group won't solve everything, it can't give them somewhere to live, but it does encourage friendships and something meaningful to do.'

Amanda Croome, Booth Centre manager

The regular evaluation notes illustrate that for several participants, the drama sessions are mood enhancing and energising. They report feeling tired, groggy, a bit down, a bit upset at the beginning of the session and lively, relaxed, safe, a bit more up-beat at the end of the session. This finding should not be generalised; some people arrive feeling happy and anticipating the session and use words like 'uplifted', 'calm', 'a good feeling', 'being cheered up' to describe how they feel at the end of the session. Just occasionally, someone does not feel good at the end of the session.

Several participants, not only participants who are new to the group – note that they feel slightly nervous at the beginning of a session, but grow in confidence and self-belief as the session progresses. One says, for example 'It's hard getting up and acting when it is my first time here. Quite difficult.' Regular sessions are carefully structured by drama practitioner Janine Waters to ensure that every-one is included and is able to participate at their own level.

The reflective notes also show what participants particularly enjoy about the programme, as certain themes recur again and again. These include:

- Games
- Singing
- Meeting friends, old and new
- Getting over hurdles such as shyness and lack of confidence

It may be useful to tease out some of the possible reasons for this. Games are by their nature highly inclusive and involve learning and skills development by stealth. So for example, a category game³ is both the cause of much enjoyable laughter and also a way of developing the group's vocabulary. Games have strong elements of ritual and pattern, which contribute to a feeling of safety and predictability, of moving from the known and trusted to more unknown and difficult activities. Song has strong underlying patterns and rhythms, which are very helpful to participants who have difficulty memorising. Singing in a group also builds confidence and a sense of community quickly; many people who

³ Each participant has to suggest something that falls into a particular category – for example, types of hair-cuts. Each suggestion has to add to those already made by others

'What's important is taking part, knowing I can do something, knowing I'm not the only person who's on their own. I'm not on my own. I've got friends.'

'At the start of to-day, I felt in a very good mood. Good to be out and seeing so many good friends.'

'Meeting new friends and enjoying seeing old ones'

Participants' reflective comments

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would find it difficult to sing solo enjoy singing with the support of a group. Music also forms a somewhat hidden part of many people's cultural lives; it was interesting in talking to participants to discover that some had listened to opera arias from an early age and one had been a professional popular singer.

The social importance of the drama group to participants cannot be underestimated. Drama gives permission to people to cross barriers to social interaction in a gentle and surreptitious way. Booth Centre Manager, Amanda Croome underlines the importance of the work when she says '*Homeless people are guarded about their information, they don't want to be made vulnerable, even by people knowing their names. This group really know each other, look after each other, depend on each other – you can see this back at the Centre. It may seem like a small thing, but they make each other cups of tea.*' This is not a small thing. It is an important part of building a sense of belonging and safety within the group.

It is clear from participants' reflective comments that they feel they are addressing personal challenges through the drama –such as overcoming shyness, regaining self-esteem and '*getting up in front of people I don't know.*' In the case of one participant, A., who is an elective mute, it has been possible to see quite dramatic developments in terms of participation in the group and use of language. Janine Waters explains '*Each week he joins in more than the week before, he is smiling and laughing and he cracked a joke last week, which is a massive step in communication.*' Amanda explains of this participant that '*his learning difficulties are being assessed and it's useful to notice what games he will join in with and which he will not join and this is fed into his psychological assessment. He was sleeping rough as he was assessed by the council as too high risk. Now he is in accommodation and not causing a problem, partly through participation in the drama group.*'

In terms of monitoring and evaluation of participant experience, three issues need to be considered in Year 2 of the programme.

1. The use of short reflective notes to record the experiences of participants has been very useful for the purposes of evaluation. It is hoped that in

Year 2, some participants will move on to a more detailed form of reflection, using either a luggage tag or a playing card to record their thoughts. There is an intention to form a 'progression group' of more experienced participants who might under-take this task and then work with an illustrator to turn these into a visual form that could be used in the proposed exhibition.

2. The Booth Centre does keep records of participant attendance at sessions and of significant changes in circumstance (for example from sleeping rough to accommodation). There are, of course, important confidentiality issues, but it would be helpful if there was a way of sharing these as overall findings with the Royal Exchange Theatre, perhaps twice during the year, so RET can monitor how many 'new' participants join the group who attend regularly, participants who return to the group after an absence, participants who drop out of the group very quickly, etc. and reflect whether there are any issues which need to be addressed.
3. The case of A is of particular interest in terms of exploring the experience of participants. In reality, many of the participants will be progressing (or not making progress) during sessions, but their progress may be a little less dramatic and hence less observed. The observation technique⁴ developed for the Royal Exchange Theatre for their Songlines project might be of value. In addition, a more formal system for capturing the benefit of the programme for individual participants should be developed, so that when specific moments occur these are recorded and documented.

Experience of participants through performance

During the course of Year 1, Booth Centre participants were involved in three performances: Northern Soul, an improvised piece of drama and song, performed at the Royal Exchange Theatre alongside theatre pieces by two other groups associated with the Education programme, an Open Mic night organised by Streetwise Opera and With One Voice, a performance as part of a night of theatre and music contributions from homeless people's groups and individual performers from across the UK. This last performance took place at the Royal Opera House Covent Garden.

Participants think that performance adds a huge amount to their experience and it is therefore worth considering separately. However, before moving on to the positives of performance, it should be noted that there was a drop-out of participants from the group in the weeks leading up to the Northern Soul performance. This is not surprising – rehearsals and performances make different kinds of demands on participants than workshops. Even more discipline is required, there is a need to move into a space that is not familiar and to work alongside even more new people and all of this makes involvement more difficult to sustain for people with more chaotic patterns of behaviour. This is, however, an issue for the Royal Exchange Theatre and the Booth Centre to consider further – it may perhaps be inevitable, but it might be that additional peer support could help address the issue, for some if not all.

⁴ An observation technique which enabled case studies of 3 individuals, with different abilities was introduced. A skilled observer looked for evidence of artistic/creative development, development in social inter-action and individual development which did not fall neatly into the first two categories.

The positives of performance appear to be:

- Responding to the level of professional discipline expected by Janine and others

'My personal achievement was starting the musical drama and sticking with it and performing live'

'What I learned about theatre was it is hard work and takes staying power'

'At the Royal Opera House, ROH – I wasn't expecting that many people. I thought 'Wow, I've really got to work here.' The venue – the Royal Opera in Covent Garden, I was all in awe. We were a bit rusty at first. I tell you what amazed me – that chap from Australia what came just to watch me.'

Participants' reflective comments and interview

- Being back stage and learning more about how theatre works
- Meeting other performers and measuring one's own work against theirs (using comparison in a positive and not a negative way)
- Gaining pleasure from giving huge enjoyment to an audience.

It might be of value to allocate some evaluative time in Year 2 to looking in more detail at the way in which performance and/or exhibition venues showcase the work of the Booth Centre group, in order to identify key principles which could be shared with others.

Experiences of professional staff

During Year 1, qualitative interviews were undertaken with the manager of the Booth Centre and with the drama practitioner who works most regularly with the group. Some of their comments are of particular importance in articulating issues of partnership and practice.

A major reason for the stability and success of the group is that a dedicated member of staff from the Booth Centre is present at most sessions and able to offer advice and assistance to the Royal Exchange Theatre and support to participants. Amanda Croome explains why she can justify the allocation of a member of staff to the project:

'The drama group leads to openness and vulnerability in participants and enables them to reveal things we wouldn't necessarily know, for example, mental health issues, domestic violence, if someone not coping well. Often

people don't realise help is available. One of our project workers is closely involved with the drama group and can identify problems and offer solutions. We learn more about people in a drama session that in an advice session, it's a deeper knowing. An advice session asks technical questions, in the drama group you learn about people and know better what they are capable of. In terms of managing an allocating staff it's worthwhile for me to allocate a member of staff who's with it all the way through because of these extra benefits. It is worthwhile in terms of staff time, because it offers knowledge and insights, it is not just babysitting a drama group. The alternative would be to allocate a volunteer who might not be available all the way through.'

It is not possible to over-emphasise the importance of this professional staff role in the group; many excellent arts initiatives founder precisely because there is not a strong enough professional link back to the partner organisation and the full range of expertise required to support a group of this nature is not available.

Amanda also explains that the arts practitioners tailor their work absolutely to the fundamental needs of participants. 'Drama practitioners and the Royal Exchange Theatre fit their work in with the rest of the work going on at the Booth Centre. The drama work does not take place separately, the advice work is happening alongside – e.g. if they have to phone DSS then they have to phone the DSS. Things have to be prioritised, which may mean someone has to leave a rehearsal.'

Equally, it is important to point out that working with the group presents a creative and artistic challenge to the practitioner. Janine comments:

'The challenge for me as a practitioner is looking at ways of making interesting theatre with people who won't do that for me. It can be very last minute – I may be working to make a giant improvisation into a moment of theatre – because one never knows who from the group will turn up, or what material will be ready or not ready. I think the creative bonus is working on that kind of edge – in a masochistic way.'

Janine notes that the group find it difficult at present to sustain the kind of planning required to produce long improvisations, they are better at lengthy group improvisations where she can be in role and frame the action so they can get involved. Janine is much trusted by the group, who clearly love working with her and this can pose some difficulties when she has other commitments. Janine also comments on the benefits of this particular initiative for the Royal Exchange Theatre in terms of its wish to attract people who do not regularly engage in theatre to its performances. She says:

'I've tried talks, taster workshops, free tickets as ways of getting people interested in the Royal Exchange with limited success; I feel strongly that it is participative projects with proper outcomes at the Royal Exchange that really bring down the barrier for people. It's about them sitting in the Green Room – a club that they get to sit in and the audience doesn't get to sit in'. Participants like to tell Janine what they've seen at the theatre. For example, one participant says 'I went to see such and such' with great pride and 'I bought those tickets, I'm saving the ones I've been given for July'.

It would be useful to allocate some evaluative time next year to ask participants their views of professional theatre performances, as Year 1 has focussed on experiences as participants rather than as audience members.

It should also be noted that in this year's programme, the participants were able to extend their creative experiences by working with a professional musician and a professional writer.

Training and 'Progression' Group

A declared aim for Year 1 of the programme was to offer training for one participant and explore how other participants might move into co-delivery of the programme.

It is clear that over time, some of the more experienced participants have become skilled in nurturing, encouraging and supporting other members of the group and this means that the pastoral work of the group is becoming co-delivered. In addition, the whole group supports the delivery of the programme by creating a warm and welcoming environment for outsiders, including myself.

Year 1 was less successful in offering training to one of the participants and after observing a session, Gerri commented that this might be because it was placing a very high focus on one individual. At the same time, the Booth Centre group now has a core membership of participants who have developed quite a bit of experience with the Royal Exchange Theatre and (in some cases) Streetwise Opera. Some have now developed their confidence to such an extent that they have joined other arts groups and classes, such as The Edge theatre in Chorlton and a choir called Golden Voices. There is a need to find ways of developing the experience and skill of this group, without closing down opportunities for new and less experienced participants to join the group.

Ben Turner, the Royal Exchange Theatre community co-ordinator has put forward a proposal to develop a 'Progression Group'. This is in the early stages of development, but might involve members of the group in additional sessions on workshop technique, more detailed evaluation activity and a planning role, for example, for the proposed exhibition. It is likely that this would provide a more supportive route towards co-delivery than a discreet training programme for one or two individuals and in the long term, it could reap many benefits for the programme. From an administration and delivery perspective, however, it will be important to recognise the time and resource commitments required to develop a group of this nature, especially in its preliminary stages.

Summary of Evaluative Recommendations

1. Ensure that the time and resource commitments required to develop the 'Progression Group' are fully understood and addressed
2. Develop a more systematic way of using Booth Centre monitoring records to monitor and evaluate this initiative.
3. Consider developing an observation technique based on that developed for RET's Songlines which can be used to provide case studies of participants' development and also consider the resources required to implement this.

4. Consider allocating some evaluation time in Year 2 to considering how venues/exhibition spaces respond to showcasing the work of the Booth Centre group and groups like it.
5. Consider allocating some evaluation time in Year 2 to participants' experience of attending performances.
6. Continue to develop and extend the activities available via the evaluation framework.