

The Baring Foundation

CREATIVELY MINDED AT THE THEATRE

Exploring theatre and drama opportunities
for people with mental health problems

By David Cutler



CREATIVELY MINDED AT THE THEATRE: EXPLORING THEATRE AND DRAMA OPPORTUNITIES FOR PEOPLE WITH MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

About the Baring Foundation

The Baring Foundation is an independent foundation which protects and advances human rights and promotes inclusion. We believe in the role of a strong, independent civil society nationally and internationally. We use our resources to enable civil society to work with people facing discrimination and disadvantage and to act strategically to tackle the root causes of injustice and inequality. More can be found in *A History of the Baring Foundation in 50 Grants*. Since 2020, the Foundation has focused its arts programme on creative opportunities for people with mental health problems.

About the author

David Cutler is the Director of the Baring Foundation and leads its Arts programme. He is the author of several related reports including *Creatively Minded*, *Creatively Minded Men*, *Creatively Minded at the Museum* and *Creatively Minded and the NHS*.

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Contents

Summary	05
Introduction	06
Case studies:	13
20 Stories High	14
Arcola Theatre: Mental Health Community Theatre Company	18
Bespoken Theatre	21
Chichester Festival Theatre	24
Fresh Arts	27
Geese Theatre	30
Lewisham Youth Theatre	33
Liverpool Lighthouse	36
May Contain Nuts	40
Nemo Arts	43
Small World Theatre	46
Stepping Stone Theatre for Mental Health	49
Theatre Royal Plymouth: Our Space	52
Underground Lights Community Theatre	56
York St John University: Converge and Out of Character	59
Some reflections	63
Recommendations	68
A-Z of theatre offers for people with mental health problems	70
Map of theatre offers for people with mental health problems	71
Selected Baring Foundation resources	73



Photo by Dom Moore for Our Space, Theatre Royal Plymouth, see page 52.

Summary

This new report looks at targeted opportunities for people experiencing mental health problems to be involved in theatre/drama. It is the latest in a series of reports from the Baring Foundation accompanying our current funding programme.¹ This report does not cover dramatherapy but rather focuses on participatory arts. We begin by defining terms and looking briefly at some of the major issues for mainstream theatres and for specialist theatres (those offering a specific programme) in relation to people with mental health problems.

The core of this report is a set of 15 varied case studies (with another relevant 15 case studies in our other publications, see page 73 for a full list). There is a wide range of models for delivery, including:

- specific companies attached to mainstream theatres, e.g. Arcola Theatre or Chichester Festival Theatre;
- theatre-making embedded in a university department, e.g. York St John Converge programme);
- dedicated theatre-making organisations e.g. May Contain Nuts, Stepping Stone Theatre for Mental Health;
- and a strand of work for socially engaged arts companies e.g. Nemo Arts or Liverpool Lighthouse.

Work takes place across the life span, with specialist provision for younger people. It is normal for companies to produce devised work rather than perform pre-existing scripts and this often but not always results in public performances. Companies often place emphasis on how dramas can destigmatise mental ill health. Sometimes work is also used to engage and educate mental health professionals.

Provision is always free to participants and budgets for activities are extremely modest, usually running on a shoestring cobbled together from multiple short-term sources. These groups have many benefits to participants who often describe them as therapeutic and improving their mental health, although there is little academic research. These groups are also sources of friendship and solidarity, giving structure and purpose to the week.

Our recommendations include:

- Policies regarding and support for the mental health of all theatre staff are essential. All theatres should seek to be mental health aware and welcoming through training for all staff and as a minimum highlighting Mental Health Awareness Week.
- There should be many more targeted opportunities for people with mental health problems on offer and all delivery models are valid. In particular, mainstream theatres need to do more, as they already do for young and older people.
- Provision must be free and funders need to give a higher priority to a cash starved sector.
- Lived experience by participants must be central to this work, with participants at the centre of the creative process;
- Paid staff must be well supported, especially through supervision and more good practice resources are needed, including training for paid facilitators.

For a full list of recommendations, see page 68.

¹ See: baringfoundation.org.uk/programme/arts-and-mental-health.

Introduction

AN OVERVIEW OF THE NATURE AND SCALE OF THEATRE AS IT RELATES TO PEOPLE WITH MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

WHY WE WROTE THIS REPORT

The arts have been a major area for Baring Foundation funding for a long time, and largely this has been participatory arts. The Foundation funds across art forms and throughout the UK. We tend to fund in a specific theme for a long time as we believe change is hard won. We approach the arts through a human rights lens. While aware that participation in the arts can have many benefits including for health and wellbeing, our primary concern is the right of everyone to be creative.

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Since 2020, our Arts programme has funded creative opportunities which engage people with mental health problems, deliberately targeting people experiencing mental health problems, rather than funding more preventative work or ‘arts and wellbeing’.

Alongside our grants, we have published a series of reports using as a brand the title of our first publication, *Creatively Minded*,² which served as an initial mapping report for the programme.

Although a number of our *Creatively Minded* publications have included case studies of theatres or arts organisations using drama,

this was not their main focus. Nor are we aware of any other report which attempts to take a broad view of the use of participatory theatre to engage people with mental health problems. So, we hope that this report begins to fill a gap in the growing body of evidence about arts and health and specifically arts by people with mental health problems.

There are also examples of theatre case studies in our previous reports. These include:

- *Creatively Minded and Young*: 42nd Street; Avant Cymru and Fluid Motion Theatre Company
- *Creatively Minded and Refugees*: Compass Collective and Displace Yourself Theatre
- *Creatively Minded and Ethnically Diverse*: Birmingham Rep/Lightpost Theatre; Many Minds and Outside Edge Theatre)
- *Creatively Minded and Heritage*: Theatre for Life
- *Creatively Minded Men*: Black Men’s Consortium; CLEAR; Our Room; Restoke and Re-Live.

In this report, we have deliberately selected organisations not represented in previous reports. This means that across our reports we have a total of 30 case studies of participatory theatre engaging people with mental health problems.

This Introduction briefly takes an overview of the nature and scale of theatre as it relates to people with mental health problems. In terms of ‘mainstream’ professional theatre, this includes presentation of people with mental health problems on stage (including the issue of trauma and trigger warnings) and the incidence of mental health problems in the

² *Creatively Minded*, Baring Foundation, 2020. Available at: baringfoundation.org.uk/resource/creatively-minded.

theatre industry. The main issue for this report is, however, participatory drama for people with mental health problems, either provided by mainstream arts organisations or by more specialist community arts companies. Although there is little data on the sector, we attempt to make some remarks about the history, motivations and distribution of this work.

SOME DEFINITIONS

Mental health problems

Mental health is a highly contested area including in the language that is used. This report uses the phrase ‘mental health problem’ which is commonly deployed by organisations such as Mind and the NHS, but we recognise that some people may prefer other terms such as mental distress. While we do indeed all have mental health, this report looks beyond preventative work on mental health with the whole population, wellness or mindfulness. While valuable, more has been written about this and it is not the focus of the Baring Foundation’s funding programme.

An entire book could be devoted to defining mental health problems, but currently these tend to be grouped into psychoses (effecting around 3% of the population) of which Bipolar Spectrum Disorder is best known, and the much more frequent Common Mental Disorders, especially anxiety and depression. Addictions such as to drugs and alcohol are included as mental health problems, as are conditions such as eating disorders and the poorly defined Personality Disorders.

Theatre

The word ‘theatre’ to describe an activity has been used only relatively recently – since the 1890s. It covers a series of activities such as acting, producing or writing plays (of course with the idea that these are then shown in a theatre). This report is taking a relatively narrow definition of theatre and not including other performances such as stand-up comedy, singing, spoken word or opera. Instead, we are focusing on the creative element of showing the lives of fictional characters within a play or through improvisation. We are accepting though that this work can appear in many venues other than theatres, as well as online.

Dramatherapy

It is worth stating again at the outset that this is not a report about dramatherapy, but about participatory arts. At one level this distinction is clear. A drama therapist needs to obtain a recognised qualification to practice. The British Association of Drama Therapists provides more information about this.³ Dramatherapy is a branch of psychotherapy and therefore practitioners are both clinicians and artists. It is used with both adults and children and young people.

However, it would be wrong to think these divisions are completely clear cut. A very small number of theatre companies employ drama therapists in different roles, including Dundee Rep, Chichester Festival Theatre and the Bush Theatre in London. Sometimes drama therapists will assist participatory artists for instance by providing supervision. The same children or adults might be going to both dramatherapy and to a participatory theatre group. And participants and artists might describe the arts offer as ‘therapeutic’. The description used by the British Association of Drama therapists could well be used by many participatory artists:

‘Dramatherapy has as its main focus the intentional use of healing aspects of drama and theatre as the therapeutic process. It is a method of working and playing that uses action methods to facilitate creativity, imagination, learning, insight and growth.’

Even so boundaries exist and are relevant to this report.

Mainstream theatre

With this admittedly questionable term, we are pointing to work that takes place, often for paying audiences in arts venues, normally performed by paid professional actors.

Specialist theatre

In this context and in contrast to ‘mainstream theatre’, by specialist theatre, we mean productions or work arising from work with groups of people with lived experience of mental health problems or recovering from addictions.

Participatory arts

We define these as creative activities in which a trained professional artist of any art form is sharing their training and expertise with people who do not have their training. This process is often called 'co-production'. The term community arts is also sometimes used.

THE MAINSTREAM PROFESSIONAL STAGE

What we now describe as mental health issues have always been part of drama since antiquity. Psychiatrist Professor Femi Oyeboode in his 2012 book *Madness at the Theatre* sees a historical trajectory in the description of 'madness' on stage. This starts with unobserved but described behaviour in Greek tragedy. The next development is public enactments using a grand method in Shakespeare. The late 19th and early 20th centuries see the domestication of mental health problems, for instance by Ibsen. Later in the 20th century, the experience of mental health problems of the author or their family comes more to the fore, for example in Tennessee Williams. At the further edges of this, the psychosis of Sarah Kane leads the audience into her world of auditory illusions.

Mental health problems and addictions are the central topic in some of the most important plays of the last half century. *4.42* by Sarah Kane was seen as groundbreaking in its directness. *Equus* by Peter Shaffer explored the extremes of psychosis. *Blue/Orange* by Joe Penhall looks at racism within psychiatry. *People, Places and Things* by Duncan Macmillan won many awards for its depiction of an actor struggling with recovery. Even major musicals have focussed on mental health issues, for example, *Dear Evan Hansen* and *Be More Chill*. As this report is being written, *Next to Normal* is transferring from Broadway to London's West End. The list is pretty much endless.

Indeed, so much new work is about living with mental health problems, almost always born out of the performer's personal experience that The Scotsman has an annual award for the best new works at the Edinburgh Fringe.⁴ It is also the case that the Edinburgh Fringe itself has been seen as a very stressful place, often exposing first-time performers to criticism and tough working conditions. This led to the creation of a support initiative called Sick of the Fringe.

The Mental Health Foundation Scotland, with funding from the Baring Foundation, has been interviewing a range of professional artists with lived experience of mental health problems who have created work based on their experiences. This has formed the basis of a new resource considering the performing arts and issues for artists engaged in making this work and for audiences.⁵ The complexity of these issues makes simple guidelines overly reductive.

A related subject is the use of trigger warnings in the arts, including in theatre. Originally the term 'triggering' had a rather narrow use, referring to the triggering of PTSD symptoms where for instance the sound of fireworks could trigger a serious involuntary reaction by an ex-combatant resulting in disassociation or deep anxiety. Now trigger warnings have been used ever more widely, for example, to warn theatre goers about representations of self-harm, suicide or even any manifestation of violence. The preventative effect of trigger warnings has been disputed, along with how essential conflict is to drama. This is a very live but unresolved debate.⁶

The role of a theatre in a community isn't restricted to which plays it puts on. It can act as a centre for discussion and a community resource. For instance, when Nottingham Playhouse put on Alan Bennett's *The Madness of King George*, they used this as a springboard for discussions about mental health with local people and also chose to be the local lead for third sector organisations for the then national Time to Change campaign to destigmatise

⁴ Edinburgh Festival Fringe: 'Fitting tribute' as mental health award is sponsored in memory of arts journalist Tim Cornwell, *The Scotsman*, 3 July 2023. Available at: www.scotsman.com/whats-on/arts-and-entertainment/edinburgh-festival-fringe-fitting-tribute-as-mental-health-award-is-sponsored-in-memory-of-arts-journalist-tim-cornwell-4204503.

⁵ *Performing anxiety: a resource for audience-facing arts projects about mental health*, Andrew Eaton-Lewis/Mental Health Foundation Scotland, 2024. Available at: baringfoundation.org.uk/resource/performing-anxiety.

⁶ Bridgland, Victoria & Jones, Payton & Bellet, Benjamin. (2022). A Meta-Analysis of the Effects of Trigger Warnings, Content Warnings, and Content Notes. 10.31219/osf.io/qav9m.



'State of Mind' symposium at 20 Stories High, photo courtesy of 20 Stories High, see page 14.

mental health problems and encourage the normalisation of discussions about mental health.⁷

A major issue for professional theatre in general is the disproportionately high rates of mental health problems among people working in the industry including those on stage. This has been the subject of campaigning by the union Equity, which produced a global scoping review in 2022 by Lucie Clements.⁸ Although published during the pandemic, most of the 111 academic articles cited were from before this period. The review covered the performing arts as a whole, although several studies related specifically to actors. Although results varied, one study showed that 60% of actors experienced anxiety as a mental health problem, which though common is usually around 6% of the general population. (The problem is not restricted to theatre, with a

2018 Irish study also showing high rates of mental illness throughout the creative sector there.)⁹ Equity's study went on to suggest a series of factors that could explain these higher rates of mental health problems, including low pay, freelance status, poor management and possibly the intrinsic pressures of performance itself. As a result, Equity published a Mental Health Charter for the industry.¹⁰ Theatres will vary in the degree they make available specialist support for mental health problems and their policies regarding this. The main provider of support to the sector is the British Association of Performing Arts Medicine, BAPAM.

Some actors have used their public prominence to promote discussions about mental ill health. Perhaps the best-known example is the actor David Harewood, now President of Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, who in his

⁷ See: www.mynottinghamnews.co.uk/nottingham-city-formally-launched-as-time-to-change-hub.

⁸ *Equity global scoping review of factors related to poor mental health and wellbeing within the performing arts sectors*, Dr Lucie Clements, May 2022. Available at: www.equity.org.uk/media/hwqgp3cu/mental-health-report.pdf.

⁹ Shorter, G. W., O'Neill, S. M., & McElherron, L. *Changing Arts and Minds: A survey of health and wellbeing in the creative sector*. Inspire: 2018 pureadmin.qub.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/229699046/Arts.pdf.

¹⁰ See: www.equity.org.uk/advice-and-support/dignity-at-work/mental-health-support/mental-health-charter.



Photo by Fovea Creative for Geese Theatre, see page 30.

autobiography and related documentaries and interviews, has revealed his experience of psychosis and his treatment by mental health services.¹¹

SPECIALIST PARTICIPATORY WORK TO ENGAGE PEOPLE WITH MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

At the outset it is important to say that definitions here can be elusive. There are initiatives and indeed theatre companies which exclusively focus on work with people with mental health problems and this report looks at examples of these. There are doubtless many more examples of theatre companies who occasionally run projects, perhaps enabled by a specific funding opportunity, and then move on. Work undertaken by theatre companies in schools may have mental health as a greater or lesser aspect of the work they do with pupils. There is a spectrum here and companies will move from more to less focussed over time and vice versa.

Beyond these initiatives, there are many theatre companies specialising in communities of people who are much more likely to have experience of mental health problems, such as care experienced young people, prisoners, refugees and homeless people. Boundaries are porous. In this report, Underground Lights frequently works with homeless people and Geese Theatre has a national reputation for working in prisons, as well as secure psychiatric settings.

Our work includes funding for theatre for people in recovery from addiction, e.g. Outside Edge Theatre. A rare study of this area of work has recently been published by Dr Cathy Sloan of the University of West London. Called *Messy Connections; Creating Atmospheres of Addiction Recovery through Performance Practice*, the study looks at what is distinctive about this area both in terms of value to recovery and to approaches to drama.

In considering the history of specialist participatory work, there are two main factors to recall. One is that the UK has a strong track

11 Maybe I Don't Belong Here by David Harewood – chilling insight into an unravelling mind, *The Guardian*, Monday 30 August. Available at: www.theguardian.com/books/2021/aug/30/maybe-i-dont-belong-here-by-david-harewood-chilling-insight-into-an-unravelling-mind.

record spanning six decades in all types of participatory arts. This comes from the political and moral viewpoint that the arts should be open to all and that particular communities and cultures have tended to be excluded or devalued. In the 1970s and 1980s this intertwined with community development initiatives by local authorities. It has continued to this day becoming gradually broader and more inclusive. This has received support and recognition from funders including national Arts Councils. Arts Council England's current ten-year strategy *Let's Create* has a strong emphasis on participatory arts. This history is examined in depth by former Baring Foundation trustee François Matarasso in his book *A Restless Art*.¹²

A second factor is the way in which the arts have been affected by, and interacted with, NHS mental health services. This is probably less true of drama than some other art forms but there is a pattern of participatory arts becoming more available during the deinstitutionalisation of mental health patients and the introduction of so-called Care in the Community in the 1980s. Former hospital patients who had found arts engagement on wards helpful wanted to find supportive spaces to continue this in the community. An early example was the founding of Art Angel in Dundee in the 1980s. The Mental Health Foundation in Scotland has created an oral history of the development of participatory arts engaging people with mental health problems called 'Reclaiming our Heritage'.¹³

The distribution of drama or theatre opportunities for people with mental health problems is very uneven across the UK. A disproportionate number of initiatives are found in England, even accounting for population. We have found no examples in Northern Ireland, with a few in Scotland and Wales. We have included a map towards the end of this report of the 47 companies that we have found (30 of which are in our *Creatively Minded* reports). This number is probably an underestimate. There is no authoritative list.

Evidence of impact on mental health

There seems to be rather little academic research on the effect of participatory theatre on the mental health of people with mental health problems. The main paper is a recent meta-review of 25 pieces of research which comes to a positive conclusion, with the authors finding that their study:

'revealed that drama-based interventions have the potential to improve mental health (e.g., trauma-related disorders) and wellbeing (e.g., psychological wellbeing), which could position drama as an adjunctive method of mental health care.'

But interpreting this paper isn't straightforward. It uses the term dramatherapy throughout, while most arts organisations wouldn't define their approach this narrowly. A few of the studies in this review would clearly fit the definition we use in this report of participatory theatre with people with mental health problems, but the majority probably do not. The paper also makes a connection to the Covid-19 pandemic which is less relevant here.

Beyond this review, some data on mental health is often collected by arts organisations themselves. Outside Edge Theatre for instance states that 90% of their participants find participation helps their recovery from addiction. Birmingham Rep ran a three-year project for young Black Men called *Shifting the Dial* which had at its heart the Lightpost Theatre company. This was evaluated by the Centre for Mental Health.¹⁴ Quantitative data showed no change in mental health while qualitative evidence was highly positive.

We can't be certain, but it seems likely that the number of specific initiatives for people living with mental health problems to engage with theatre has probably grown over time. It certainly feels as if attention to the health benefits of the arts in general has increased markedly in the last five years at a time when NHS services are under the most extreme

¹² *A Restless Art: How participation won, and why it matters*, François Matarasso, 2019. arestlessart.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/2019-a-restless-art.pdf.

¹³ See www.mhfestival.com/explore/reclaiming-our-heritage/roh-archive.

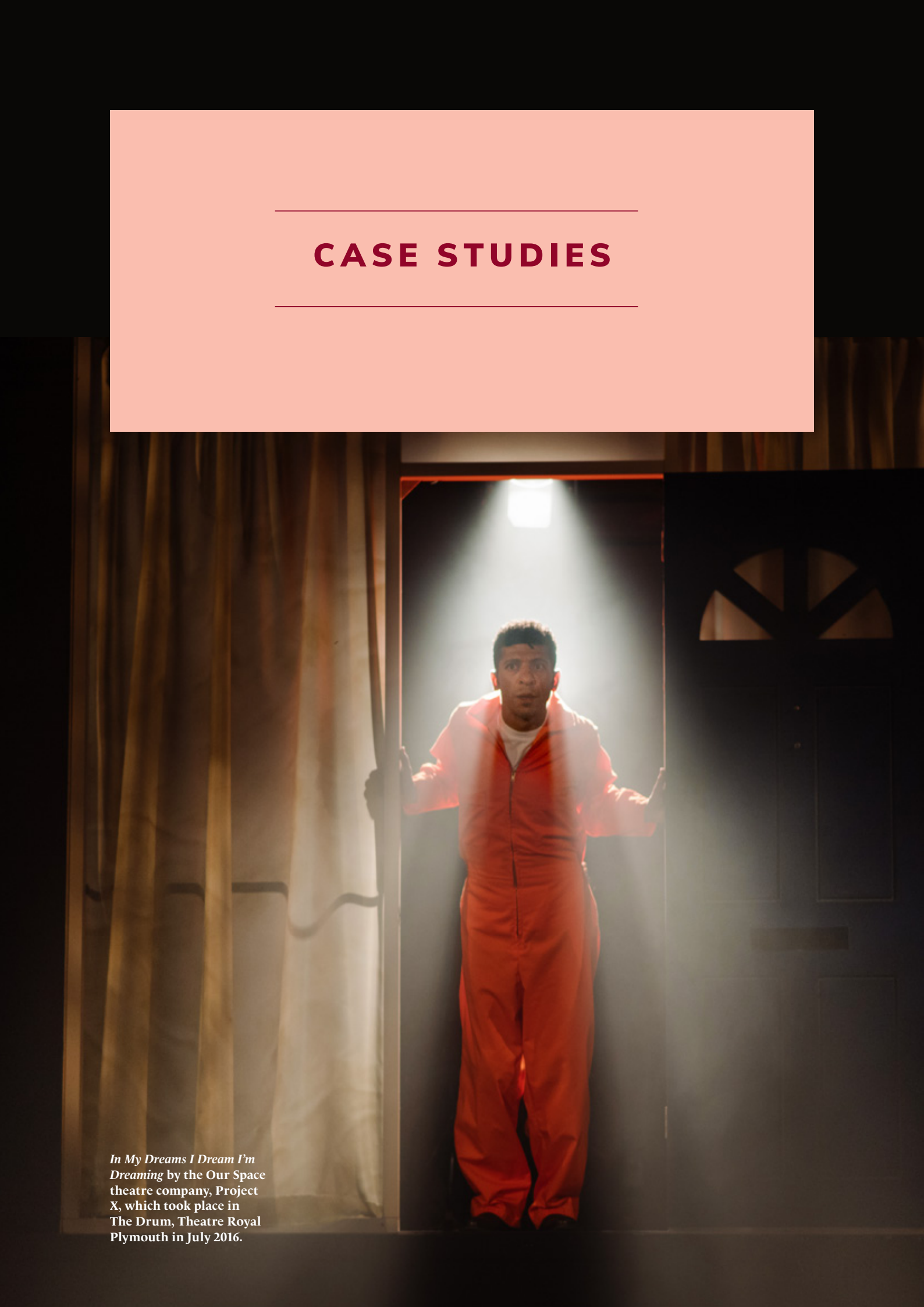
¹⁴ *Shifting the Dial: Evaluating a community programme to promote young Black men's mental health*, Centre for Mental Health, 2022. Available at: www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Shifting-the-Dial-Digital.pdf.

pressures in their history. Though this growth in opportunities to use drama is welcome, it is by no means to be taken from granted as the financial strains on arts organisations mean that some are having to close.

Three of the case studies in this report specialise in working with children and young people (20 Stories High, Fresh Arts and Lewisham Youth Theatre), with a further three in our report *Creatively Minded and Young* (42nd Street, Avant Cymru and Fluid Motion Theatre Company). Rates of mental ill-health among teenagers were already alarming pre-Covid and have got worse since. Consequently, waiting lists for CAMHS have becoming extremely long. Although not an answer to these problems, the types of theatre companies represented here certainly have a positive role to play.

Our experience is that artists in the creative mental health field overall are disproportionately white and female and that they frequently have lived experience of mental health problems which can give them greater insight into the area. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion is a serious concern for the arts sector overall, including as regards class and this area is no exception. It seems to us that many specialist companies have thought hard about mental health inequalities such as differential treatment of Black men and are trying to take account of this in their work.

CASE STUDIES

A man in an orange jumpsuit stands in a doorway, illuminated by a spotlight. He is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background is dark, and the lighting creates a dramatic effect. The man is holding onto the door frame with both hands.

In My Dreams I Dream I'm Dreaming by the Our Space theatre company, Project X, which took place in The Drum, Theatre Royal Plymouth in July 2016.

20 Stories High

BY LEANNE JONES

Leanne Jones is co-CEO / Executive Director of 20 Stories High.



Maisy Gordon in *High Times and Dirty Monsters*, at Liverpool Everyman. Photo © Jack Ehlen.

ABOUT US

Established in 2006, 20 Stories High is an award-winning youth theatre company that believes “everybody’s got a story to tell... and their own way of telling it”. We co-create with culturally diverse, working-class young people and communities, emerging artists, and world-class professionals to tell stories that are challenging, authentic, and uplifting.

Experimenting with rap, dance, beatboxing, music, and puppetry, we mash up art forms to make new kinds of theatre that empowers and enables social change.

We are based in the heart of Toxteth, on the outskirts of **Liverpool** City Centre, but with workshops, rehearsals and events taking place in a variety of venues. Our shows happen in lots of different spaces from theatres, schools and youth clubs to digital spaces and living rooms.

Our values are equity, wellbeing and activism.

Approximately 80% of young people who we collaborate with on a long-term basis, tell us they experience mental ill-health on a short or long-term basis. We work alongside support services like CAMHS, Barnardo’s, Pupil Referral Units and Liverpool Youth Advisory Services,

to ensure young people know about the arts and other offers available and feel welcomed and supported to get involved.

Our participants and audiences continually tell us how much concern and worry they are sitting with whether about the climate crisis, the squeeze of the cost-of-living crisis, and ongoing global conflict and war. Young people and young adults say they often don't know where they can turn for support due to endless mental health waiting lists, stretched support services and reduced careers/development advice opportunities. The list goes on. We also know from teachers, children and young people that there are growing frustrations around the lack of focus on creativity and expression.

We want to do everything in our power and agency to respond to this need. We want to ensure underrepresented voices are amplified, and young people and communities experiencing mental ill-health are seen and heard, have a sense of belonging and a space to creatively thrive and be themselves. We know how much theatre and the arts changes lives, and it gives people living with mental ill-health a space to express their stories and feelings in ways that they may not feel comfortable doing in other spaces.

OUR APPROACH

In 2018-22 we partnered with the Paul Hamlyn Foundation on a strategic project called *State of Mind (SOM)*,¹⁵ exploring our programme and processes through the lens of mental health and wellbeing. We collaborated with research and evaluators Anni Raw and Associates as they led us through a participation action process called 'story building' (ethnographic research) to investigate the impact of our practice. This process uncovered so much, and profoundly changed our practice and culture, bringing about many new techniques including the following.

For participants & performers

- A wellbeing offer that includes pastoral and mental health support in/out of session, mental health first aiders at all sessions/shows, external wellbeing support where

needed, support engaging with service/support organisations (e.g. CAMHS) and wellbeing social sessions.

- Wellbeing experts embedded into all projects (inc. Artists Wellbeing Practitioners, Clinical Supervisors and Therapists), collaborating with participants and artists.
- Wellbeing checks-ins/outs and space to talk about wellbeing needs.
- Support for everyone to create an access rider.
- Food/drink, travel, childcare, loss of earnings to participate, along with bespoke cost of living crisis support (help accessing services, food packages...).

Clark Baim's Drama Spiral (Model for Safe, Ethical, and Flexible Practice when Incorporating Personal Stories) and other wellbeing practices have changed our creation process. A lot of work we make is autobiographical or semi-autobiographical. We use the Drama Spiral to check out how performers are relating to stories/characters and to give performers choices around how close they want the stories they are telling to be to any unresolved personal difficulties. The aim is to ensure there are healthy boundaries between autobiographical work and unresolved trauma.

“ I was very close to the centre of the spiral [unresolved difficulties and highly personal] and it made me take a step back to think is this the story I want to tell? Is this going to affect my mental health by telling something that is my life? Are the people involved going to become offended if they see this because they know it is about them? So that was the first moment I realised I should fictionalise some things or turn it into something else. I think it really helped my mental health in the long run. ”

Jay Cast, actor, Max's Story, State of Mind film

¹⁵ For more information about State of Mind, see: www.20storieshigh.org.uk/state-of-mind or watch a short film about the programme here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=qZNHY17bMLY. You can read Anni and the team's summary State of Mind Chronicles, see here: www.20storieshigh.org.uk/state-of-mind-chronicles.

SPOTLIGHT ON A PERFORMANCE...

High Times and Dirty Monsters



From 2022-2024, in co-production with Graeae Theatre Company, Liverpool Everyman + Playhouse and LEEDS 2023, we created a show called *High Times and Dirty Monsters*.¹⁶ It was created with and for Deaf, disabled and neurodivergent young people and young adults. Built on the stories we hear, the show followed the stories of five characters exploring what it is like to be a young person in 2023. The mental health of the team, participants and audiences was a central pillar throughout the process.

Maisy Gordon was a performer in the show and is now leading the participatory legacy project, she says:

“20SH always sent over information in advance of any sessions such as who would be in the room, what was happening, what facilities there will be, along with one-to-one support offers from the 20SH team and amazing

wellbeing offer for sessions with The Artist Wellbeing Company,¹⁷ a free service for artists to have one-to-one support sessions with professional theatre and arts counsellors. These offers were available throughout both R&D periods, rehearsals and the tour.

I personally used the Artist Wellbeing Company sessions throughout the process and found it so invaluable to have the chance to chat with someone who was removed from the process but there to listen and support. It was great that these sessions didn't have to be about the process either, I had chats with an amazing therapist called Lou about issues I was having outside the rehearsal room which allowed me to feel confident and happier when at work. I believe the support offers were such an amazing addition to the wellbeing 20SH provided and I'm very thankful for them...

Throughout the HTDM process, my mental and emotional health were prioritised, enabling me to thrive both personally and professionally.”

The Drama Spiral was used when creating Max's Story in our State of Mind film.¹⁸ Jay Cast, Local Trans Male (aged 19 at the time) played Max – see page 15. Jay started off as a member of our Youth Theatre, then became one of our professional actors, and is now also one of our pastoral support workers.

For staff/regular freelancers:

- Wellbeing officers available for all staff, Board, regular freelancers and project/show teams (which includes minimum of eight hours wellbeing support).
- Quarterly reflection days: space to pause and test out culture and practice.

For everyone:

- Wellbeing checks-ins/outs and space to talk about wellbeing needs built into meetings, workshops and rehearsals.



Maisy Gordon in *High Times and Dirty Monsters*.
Photo © Jack Ehlen.

¹⁶ www.20storieshigh.org.uk/show/high-times-and-dirty-monsters/. You can watch the full show on YouTube here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=BHwjNfyFsAo.

¹⁷ www.artistwellbeing.co.uk

¹⁸ www.youtube.com/watch?v=VAODuPOi_AU

For audiences:

- Shows created with the wellbeing of audiences as a key focus, ensuring hope and lightness is part of any show.
- Content warnings, performance guides, and clear invitations to events are provided, welcoming any wellbeing or access requests or information.
- Mental Health First Aiders available during all shows.
- An access table front of house with wellbeing staff on hand, a quiet space, and accessible signposting information.
- Self-care toolkits available online and in person.

WHAT'S NEXT?

We want to keep evolving, and checking ourselves, so that we can be as useful as possible to communities when they need

it most. We have so much to learn from our peers in the sector and beyond, and so we want to continue to be curious about how to grow and adapt. We will continue to put wellbeing at the heart of our practice, protect space to reflect and grow as a whole community and look for opportunities to bring people together to share practice and learn how to do better together. We are reaching out to colleagues in other sectors to look at how we can expand our thinking and practice also, with the ultimate aim of deepening on our positive impact on young people and communities' mental health. The sector and context people are living in right now is so shaky, and we know that bumps in the road are unavoidable, so we will keep striving to offer some space for our participants and audiences to feel connected, heard and entertained and for our teams, a place where they are supported to do their best work.

Arcola Theatre: Mental Health Community Theatre Company

BY CHARLOTTE CROFT

Charlotte Croft is Arcola Theatre's Participation Manager, and Producer and Creative Lead for Arcola Mental Health Community Theatre Company.



Theatrics of the Mind, Arcola's Mental Health Company, Spring 2024. Photo courtesy of Arcola Theatre.

ABOUT US

Arcola Theatre was founded by Turkish migrants, Mehmet Ergen and Leyla Nazli, in September 2000 in Dalston, **East London**. Our mission is to imagine and build a theatre that flourishes as a cultural and environmentally conscious centre for its diverse local and national community. Our socially engaged, international programme champions diversity, challenges the status quo, and attracts over 65,000 people to our building each year. Every

year, our Participation department expands opportunities to everyone by offering free and accessible creative opportunities for the people of Hackney and beyond; our Grimeborn Festival opens up opera with contemporary stagings at affordable prices; and we offer free rehearsal space to culturally diverse and refugee artists.

Arcola's Mental Health Company is one of five adult companies which provide free creative and social opportunities for the people of

SPOTLIGHT ON A PERFORMANCE...

Outside

In the summer of 2022, Arcola ran a 10-week creative theatre project with 25 adults who had experience of poor mental health. The aim was to creatively work together on the theme of 'outside', to devise a performance that was then performed at four outside locations across East London. The theme of 'outside' was significant as we were emerging from the COVID-19 lockdowns. This project was especially important to many of the participants as some of them had not left their homes for two years, so attending this project was their re-introduction to society, and for many, the first theatre project in real life for two years.

Outside was a devised performance created by people who have experience of poor mental health, exploring what it means to navigate the unpredictable terrain of outside. The performances took place at: Arcola Theatre in Hackney, Forest Gate Community Garden in Newham, Spitalfields City Farm in Tower Hamlets and Coronation Gardens in Waltham Forest.

Although the performance was created by adults and dealt with mental health issues, the facilitator team did a wonderful job at creating a family-friendly performance that could be enjoyed on multiple levels. This was important as the performance took place in public spaces. We had all ages in the audience from toddlers to grandparents, and all were engaged. By inviting the audiences to respond themselves to the theme of outside by drawing and writing on the fabric

hangings, they too were part of the story and could express themselves. The performance involved multiple performance styles from poetry to movement and storytelling.

The feedback from participants, facilitator and audience was overwhelmingly positive. This project has helped pave the way for our continued progressive, supportive and life-changing creative work. In the project evaluation, 100% of the participants said the project was beneficial to their mental health and wellbeing. Participation feedback can be read below:

“I think this group is essential and I believe that something similar should exist in every theatre across the UK! ”

“This experience helped me feel less isolated and more confident. The facilitation was excellent, full of understanding, passion, diligence and love. ”

“This group has helped me rediscover creativity and also, being part of an inclusive group, strengthened my links to various local communities. ”

“It has meant the world to me to be part of this project with such an incredible team of people. I have a long-term, serious mental health disorder which has hugely impacted on my self-worth and sense of self throughout my life, and being part of the project felt really empowering and helped with rebuilding both of these things. ”

The 2022 season was supported by Westfields Foundation for Future London.

London to engage in collective theatre making. This group was established to provide a platform for those silenced by mental health to have a safe place to explore and express themselves. It is an increasingly confirmed fact that collaborative activities can help combat loneliness, isolation and poor mental health. By opening a space for people who identify with experiencing poor mental health, we create a world that embraces them instead of ignoring or disregarding them. With the continual cuts

in health and the arts, it is essential we keep making spaces for those most vulnerable in our society. Together we can listen, learn and heal. As summarised by one of our participants:

“It gives me a sense of belonging. I think this should be on prescription! ”

Ali, participant



OUR APPROACH

We work with facilitators who have lived experience of the group with whom they are working. This is fundamental to the success of our community groups, especially our Mental Health Company.

The facilitators work collaboratively and guide the participants through a process of workshops, beginning with ensemble and trust building. Our emphasis is on using devising theatre techniques and improvisation. These methods ensure we empower and validate the participants to allow them to tell their stories and be heard in a safe and supported environment. Working collaboratively the participants have the confidence and peer support to express themselves, explore mental health within our society and challenge social stigmas.

Over the 10-week projects the participants devise a performance that challenges the social stigmas of living with mental health conditions. Central to our practice is having a therapist on the team who can talk with participants if any of the sessions are triggering.

Working in participatory theatre, our goal is co-creation, where the participants feel empowered and inspired to create their own work and build the skills and confidence to take charge of their own lives. Our past projects have been the catalyst for people to rejoin society, encouraging them to apply for jobs or training and make positive changes in their personal lives. We provide free rehearsal space to participants who wish to explore their own creative practice. We are currently supporting two female members with their Arts Council application for a new play that addresses living with bi-polar disorder. We meet quarterly with our participants to hear from them, what they need and want from each of our adult community theatre companies.

“ This project was a great opportunity to get stuck in and learn in an open, welcoming and exciting environment with a great range of professionals. ”

Early career facilitator, ‘Outside’ performance

Bespoken Theatre

BY CHERIE HUGHES

Cherie Hughes is the co-founder of Bespoken Theatre.



Gabriella Shillingford and Abigail Halley, producers of Bespoken Theatre's *Windrush* production.

ABOUT US

"Bespoken: an adaptation to any situation and setting"

"Be-spoken: a spell/chant to release the unheard female voice."

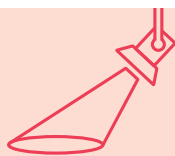
Bespoken Theatre began its journey as resident theatre company at **The Bethlem Hospital School** in 2019. I had facilitated drama groups at the hospital school since 2003 and was inspired by the positive impact of drama working within complex mental health.

I identify as neurodivergent and during my most challenging times in life, I appreciated the joy of going to the theatre, watching a story unfold. At school, drama inspired me. I trained as a performer at Exeter University and experienced freedom of thought through physical movement. I felt better about myself!

But imagine being so unwell that you cannot leave your house or reside in a hospital. How would you ever experience the sensory impact of live theatre?

SPOTLIGHT ON A PERFORMANCE...

Compassion in Crisis (Windrush)



Bespoken have been contacted for whole-school performances dealing with stigma and discussion around mental health promoting mental health first aid. In response, we developed the *Compassion in Crisis* trilogy responding to the Covid-19 pandemic and other major events including the death of George Floyd. Through performance, we questioned how people coped in the past with major catastrophic events. Can we learn from the past to recover in the present with crisis?

The trilogy explores major events in British history including The Blitz and the Windrush migration.

“Normally I feel nervous about going to see theatre due to the loud noises and lights, but seeing *Windrush*, I felt so inspired to see you tackle an issue, I have never even considered before. I feel so grateful to have experienced a piece of theatre and felt I was completely at ease.”

Participant

Windrush is our most successful and requested project, and won us a Carnegie Mental Health Award for our work in Cleeve Meadow School in 2021.

Windrush is told through an interactive story based on true characters. Use of character creates a safe structure for the audience to explore topics around mental health. We use *Brechtian Epic* and *Boal Forum Theatre* techniques to stop the story at crucial points and intervene.

We were fortunate to collaborate with the actress Gabriella Shillingford who has her own story to tell based on the experiences of her Grandmother Zelig, a nurse who came over to Britain in the 1970s.

The first half of the performance is an invitation to meet Zelig and her Caribbean Island through sensory integration with the audience. They experience Zelig's Caribbean Island through the senses. They can smell, touch and taste colourful fruits. Volunteers physically embody the island and sea through movement and sound. Finally, everyone is

taught a traditional *Quadrille* dance with a colourful array of headscarves for costume acknowledging the importance of culture and identity.

A sensory break follows in which groups create paper boats representing The Windrush journey. They discuss the hopes and fears that people may have in coming to England.

The second half begins with a black and white film clip of the Windrush docking in a cold and rainy London. It is a stark contrast to Zelig's colourful home island. Despite experiencing hostility, homelessness and prejudice, Zelig's warm and compassionate character presides as she talks to the audience about her job as a nurse and how England becomes her new home.

The performance ends with the 2018 Windrush scandal. The audience truly feel loss, having become attached to Zelig. The possible removal of their friend sent away from Britain is emotional. The audience identifies feelings around trauma, displacement and grief. A forum intervention empowers the audience to use their voices through debate, and address actors role-playing members of parliament on what is right for those affected by the scandal.

Finally, the audience write or draw their personal hopes for their futures on their Windrush boats. We end on the importance of belonging and compassion. These boats are later used for installation displays within the school as a reminder of the story.

“Truly interactive and inclusive engaging our most hard to reach students.”

T-KAT Executive Head, Jenni Tyler-Maher

“Thank you Bespoken, without your talents and platform, I wouldn't be able to share this incredible story of my Grandmother. Thank you for inspiring young people through this art form.”

Gabriella Shillingford, Windrush project

Whilst teaching at the Bethlem hospital, I could see the impact a simple game played with patients had and observed how they could participate and laugh because drama is so much fun. It also creates community. Plus, there are many stories waiting to be told...

I decided to set up Bespoken with Abigail Halley, an actress who is a specialist in historical live interpretation, biodiversity and storytelling. We wanted to create performances in specialist settings with young people experiencing mental health illness, including depression, anxiety, self-harm and psychosis; to support those who cannot access theatre in the traditional sense.

Bespoken is based in South East London and soon we were contacted by schools and organisations requesting workshops in Lewisham, Bexley, Greenwich and Southwark. We set up performances in settings that request us, hence the reference to '*Bespoke*'; we can adapt!

OUR APPROACH

We are a trauma-informed company. We use different techniques depending on whether we are working on an intimate or large-scale theatre project. Sensory integration, via the five senses, is our overall technique enabling participants from all backgrounds to feel included and comfortable to participate in our projects regardless of size.

For example, we developed a small-scale drama writing project within the Mother and Baby Unit at the Bethlem Hospital, working with women and their babies affected by postpartum psychosis. The theme of our sessions was 'Waiting' based around the play *Waiting For Godot*. The theme of waiting led to discussion. Objects from nature that could be touched, smelled and tasted activated creativity for the participants, resulting in Blackout poetry, prose, verbal scribing and collage artwork, becoming the basis for a short script.

In school workshops we create sensory integrated large-scale performances involving audience participation through character and



Windrush, photo courtesy of Bespoken Theatre.

story. Brecht's *Epic Theatre* and Boal's *Forum Theatre* techniques are employed to generate live discussion and intervention during breaks in the action.

WHAT'S NEXT?

The Arts are struggling. We cannot gloss over this. As a company we have struggled financially to keep afloat and we constantly try creative ways to generate funding. We hope to continue performances in a variety of settings and organisations. Our *Windrush* project has generated so much interest from schools that it has truly inspired our motivation to keep going and walk on despite adversity.

Mental health services are at a breaking point and the bulk of our work seems to be in schools delivering whole school packages so that every child is given an opportunity to see our productions.

Although we did not intend to work on such a large scale in education, Bespoken can adapt to any setting and we aim to perform where people are in most urgent need of mental health first aid.

Chichester Festival Theatre

BY LOUISE RIGGLESFORD

Louise Rigglesford is Senior Community and Outreach Manager at Chichester Festival Theatre.



Photo courtesy of Chichester Festival Theatre. Photo © Phillip Vile.

ABOUT US

At Chichester Festival Theatre our mission is to bring together people from all walks of life, providing a space where experiences are created and shared. Placing creativity at the heart of everything we do, our key values are to be creatively ambitious, community driven and champions of inclusivity. Founded in 1962 by a local optician, and effectively 'crowdfunded' by local individuals and businesses, we have spent the last six decades making work that entertains, provokes thought and occasionally pushes boundaries – always with the core

belief that world-class theatre should be seen by the world. But we are much more than the work on our stages...

OUR APPROACH

Since 2017 our Learning, Education and Participation (LEAP) team have worked in partnership with the Chichester Centre, a low-secure NHS in-patient facility for adults receiving treatment for acute mental health conditions. Initially intended to be a one-off series of theatrical skills sessions, these have developed into a core part of our weekly

programme. Working alongside occupational therapists from the Centre, we were clear from the outset about the importance of facilitating an engaging creative project that would enable a sense of belonging and coming together: something that at times can be hard to achieve in a hospital environment. Building on this, the group chose to name themselves the **Three Trees Company** after the three wards at the centre – Fir, Hazel and Pine.

Roma Carter, Clinical Specialist Occupational Therapist at The Chichester Centre, said:

“I have had the privilege of working with Chichester Festival Theatre and the Three Trees Theatre company for a number of years. Our client group is frequently comprised of people who have been marginalised in society and, as a consequence of mental illness and potential social vulnerability and isolation, have been limited in their ability to access creative opportunities.

The aim of [the Three Trees Company] was always to enable opportunities for participants’ voices to be heard through a creative medium. Sessions allowed for the exploration of active curiosity – encompassing connection, playfulness, active listening and genuine, meaningful engagement.

We have had the privilege of participants annually performing at The Minerva Theatre – their work watched by peers and their families – it has been a joy to be part of this process and to observe participants personal growth and the pride of family members watching their children’s and parents’ confidence blossoming.”

“The aim was always to enable opportunities for participants’ voices to be heard through a creative medium. Sessions allowed for the exploration of active curiosity – encompassing connection, playfulness, active listening and genuine, meaningful engagement.”

Roma Carter, Clinical Specialist Occupational Therapist at The Chichester Centre

For most of the participants, these sessions are their first foray into the world of theatre. Previous projects with the group have focussed

on creative writing, storytelling and song writing, with the content and direction led by the interests of the individuals in the group. Due to the nature of the Centre, there is no obligation for participants to attend every session; however, the majority do take part every week. As such, a flexible working style has developed which is tailored to the needs of the individuals in the room.

We recently conducted an evaluation of the Three Trees Company as part of a Social Impact Report of the entire LEAP Programme at CFT. This report found that:

- 85% of participants either Agree or Strongly Agree that Three Trees sessions help them to connect with other adults and make new friends;
- 71% Strongly Agreed that Three Trees sessions helps them develop new creative skills;
- 57% Strongly Agreed that Three Trees sessions help them feel less isolated and more in touch with other people.

SPOTLIGHT ON A PERFORMANCE... In Our Shoes



The most recent piece the Three Trees Company performed was a variety show titled *In Our Shoes*. The piece was written entirely by the participants in the group over a period of 12 months, looking at a broad range of topics and interests from seafaring and rap music, to personal reflections on their ongoing mental health journey. The show was performed twice; once in an informal dress rehearsal for fellow patients at the Centre, and once to an invited audience in the Minerva Theatre at CFT. Most of the company performed their own work, some contributed material for the script but chose not to perform, and others joining the group later in the process kindly agreed to perform material written by others. Everyone who attended a Three Trees session during the process, even if only once, contributed to the final product.

“It has been a voyage of discovery doing things I have never done before.”

“I’ve never really had the chance to take part in something like that before.”

“It’s given me a way of expressing myself and a positive activity to focus on.”

“Exploring different aspects of what we can do in the group makes me feel bigger than life itself!”

Participants

Another unique initiative at CFT is our in-house Creative Therapy Programme which has been specifically set up to support the mental health and wellbeing of young people in our youth theatre, as well as staff members and visiting creatives. Shari A Jessie, our Creative Therapist, facilitates weekly wellbeing support, consultancy and targeted programmes; including dedicated and intensive 1:2:1 therapy sessions for youth theatre members who have

found life a lot more challenging since the Covid pandemic; intervention group therapy sessions for all youth theatre members, giving them strategies and techniques to enable them to look after their wellbeing; Practitioner CPD; and support for CFT staff members, professional actors/creatives during Youth Theatre and Festival Theatre productions.

WHAT’S NEXT?

At present, the group are working towards their most ambitious piece to date: *My World, Our Planet*. Buoyed by the positive reaction they received from the audience at their last performance (participants regularly reminisce about the feeling of receiving a standing ovation), the company wanted to create a piece that explores both the day-to-day realities of living in a clinical setting, whilst also reflecting on wider social issues (particularly climate change and its impact on the physical world). This piece will take the form of an interactive installation at CFT in the Summer of 2024, and will feature artwork, poetry, soundscapes, live performance and a short film.

Fresh Arts

BY DAVINIA KHAN

Davinia is the Principal and Artistic Director of Fresh Arts.



Photo courtesy of Fresh Arts.

ABOUT US

Fresh Arts C.I.C are an arts education community interest company and are committed to widening arts access for children from all backgrounds. Fresh Arts has been delivering arts workshops, enrichment and projects in nurseries, primary schools and community settings over the last 15 years, working with close to 2,500 children each week.

One of our strands of work has focused specifically on designing and delivering arts projects that support the wellbeing of children

and young people, including The Grenfell Arts Project and The Village Theatre School Project. Both projects aimed to boost the wellbeing, confidence, self-expression and self-esteem of the children, and evaluation of these projects demonstrated strong evidence for these outcomes.

Post-pandemic, school leaders have become particularly concerned about children aged 7-9 who represented cohorts of students whose in-class learning, development, and socialisation in the Early Years and Foundation Stage was severely impacted by lockdowns.

“ When I felt sad when my grandma was dying, I went into a breakout space with a friend, and we tried doing hand breathing and nose breathing, and then we did some drawing. We drew things that made us think of my grandma. I did this after I started the Bounce Drama Project. ”

Pupil

The Bounce Drama Project drew on learning from the earlier projects and was initially developed to explore using a drama-based pedagogy for teaching the statutory mental wellbeing strand of the PSHE curriculum. It then developed into delivering both universal school-based interventions and then targeted interventions for children identified by the school as being known by CAMHS or in need of social or emotional support.

This was a natural progression as we had seen that the content of our programmes was impacting children positively and that children who needed more targeted support would benefit from a small group session which was focused on their specific needs. It supports children with their social and emotional wellbeing by focusing on topics such as emotions, zones of regulation, self-esteem, handling problems, asking for help and healthy habits.

“ I usually cry all the time without telling my parents but now I tell them why I am sad. ”

Pupil

We work across London and the South East. The Bounce Drama Project delivery area has included schools in Harrow, Croydon, Ealing, Kensington and Chelsea and Barnet.

OUR APPROACH

Our project is drama based, so we begin the workshops with a short physical warm-up and then a game or creative activity. We then use short films featuring a puppet called Freddie



Photo courtesy of Fresh Arts.

the Frog: in each film the children see Freddie struggling with a scenario which might be like something that they would face at school or at home. The children then use role play and drama to take on the role of the expert and help Freddie to solve his problem. The use of a school-based creative intervention, with a puppet character Freddie the Frog, role play, physicality and learning through play helps children to embody the lessons and apply them more readily to their own lives.

We deliver 30 units of work over the course of each academic year, so children have year-round provision. Children commented that they particularly liked the piece of work around recognising, sharing and managing emotions, maintaining and developing positive friendships and recognising and dealing with bullying.

“ It really does feel like we are teaching this all from scratch, talking about all of these and explaining how they are feeling, really does feel like there was this massive gap, and these drama lessons are bridging that gap. ”

Class teacher

“In the playground I hear them using the techniques they learnt. Last week I heard a boy saying, ‘I need to do nose breathing’, and I said you just learnt that one. It’s brilliant.”

Class teacher

WHAT’S NEXT?

We have recently secured a further three years of funding from The Paul Hamlyn Foundation to expand the age range for the Bounce Drama Project programme for the whole primary age range. This will provide both universal and targeted school-based interventions to support children’s mental health and wellbeing.

We will be spending time developing programmes for Early Years and Foundation Stage, KS1 and upper KS2 and refining our programmes for years 3 and 4.

Alongside this, we will be delivering other projects including Fresh Arts Holiday Camps, Enrichment Clubs, Fresh Arts Theatre School, Chatterbox Project (drama for English as an Additional Language learners), and developing a programme of work in our new building in Brent.

Geese Theatre Company

BY ANDY WATSON

Andy Watson is the Artistic Director / CEO of Geese Theatre.



Staging Recovery ensemble. Photo by Fovea Creative for Geese Theatre.

ABOUT US

Geese Theatre Company is a charity, based in Birmingham, UK, with a remit to work in criminal justice and social welfare settings. Established in the UK in 1987, the company consists of a permanent staff team of actor-practitioners who deliver a broad range of projects and performances in prisons, youth offending institutions, secure children's homes, secure hospitals and in collaboration with community-based organisations. Geese is an Arts Council National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) and has received numerous awards for innovative practice, including a BAFTA and twice being recipients of the Royal

Society for Public Health's Arts and Health Award. Whilst the Geese team has a base in Birmingham and most projects are primarily delivered all over the UK, they are also regularly invited to collaborate with international partners, including recent projects in Norway, Australia and South Africa.

The company's mission statement is to '*use theatre and drama to enable choice, personal responsibility and change amongst individuals who have offended, other vulnerable or marginalised groups and those who work with them*'. Some of our work in secure hospitals, prison Therapeutic Communities or PIPE Units (Psychologically Informed



Photo by Fovea Creative for Geese Theatre.

Planned Environments) involves working with individuals with a diagnosed mental illness. Equally, the arenas in which we deliver our projects means that, even if not working directly with people who have a mental health diagnosis, we are working with people who have commonly faced a range of adverse experiences throughout their lives, whether because of past traumatic events, experiences of homelessness, addiction, mental ill-health, offending and imprisonment or often a combination of these.

“The masks were incredible. I’ve never seen anything like it before.”

Participant

OUR APPROACH

Our work can take many forms, including performances we create for specific audiences, group-work projects which use theatre and drama methodology to explore particular issues (including wellbeing, resettlement, substance misuse, or violence reduction), and creative projects in which a group are enabled to create their own theatre performance or film.

What runs through all these projects and performances is our use of mask, one of the central metaphors in our work. We talk about mask as the ‘front’ we portray to the outside world and the idea that we all have many different masks – for when we are at work, when we are in public, when we are at a social function, or to help us survive prison. The metaphor also allows us to explore what happens when we ‘lift the mask’ – when we reveal the hidden thoughts, feelings, attitudes or beliefs that might lie behind the front we habitually show to the outside world.

One long-term project we have been delivering which engages people with mental health problems is **Staging Recovery**: a community ensemble for people in recovery from substance misuse, which was formed by Geese in 2015.

The ensemble has developed into a group of creative and supportive individuals who come together three times a year to co-create performances with practitioners from Geese. Their work has explored a variety of themes, including explorations of identity, stigma, the need for consistency from support services, and the media portrayal of addiction, mental ill-health and offending. Their work has been performed at Birmingham REP, Midlands Arts Centre, Liverpool’s Everyman Playhouse, and they have created pieces specifically for International Overdose Awareness Day, HMPPS Insights Festival,¹⁹ BEDLAM Arts Festival and Birmingham 22 Festival. The ensemble has collaborated with a variety of other arts organisations, including Birmingham Royal Ballet, Fallen Angels, Music in Prisons and Ascension Dance.

“This has helped me with my recovery. I’ve met some amazing people and feel confident. I don’t feel trapped anymore, I feel positive. Instead of feeling nervous, embarrassed and scared I wake up happy.”

Staging Recovery Ensemble member

¹⁹ HM Prison and Probation Service, see more about the Insights festival here: hmppsinsights.service.justice.gov.uk/insights-festival.

“...The best thing I’ve ever done in my life...It’s really helped me out. It made me come out of my shell...I stayed in the house for two years...I couldn’t even go out the door, I couldn’t answer my phone... If somebody knocked at the front door I couldn’t do it, I was a nervous wreck. But, since I’ve been doing Geese I’m able to go out by myself and speak to people.”

Staging Recovery Ensemble member

All the work with Staging Recovery is co-created: the ensemble take responsibility for making decisions about what they want to explore and the style in which they want to work. Geese practitioners are on hand to help guide the process but with an understanding that their role is primarily to enable each ensemble member to have an equal opportunity to contribute to the performance.

One of the longest-serving members of Staging Recovery, Shay, has been a part of every performance since 2015. His reflections of being involved provide an excellent insight into the role that involvement in a participatory theatre project can have on wellbeing.

“I would describe Staging Recovery as an opportunity to build confidence, self-esteem and resilience in a safe, friendly and fun environment. Doing Staging Recovery has an overall positive effect on my wellbeing, particularly from a ‘connecting with people’ perspective, which helps my overall mental health. It’s also a nice boost to my self-esteem and confidence which tends to drop between projects. Lots of movement, fresh air, positive mental stimulation, taking responsibility for my own behaviour within our group and daily structure can only lead to a positive physical and mental outcome, which in turn keeps me on track in my recovery.”

Shay, Staging Recovery member

WHAT’S NEXT?

Geese has several other long-term community-based projects, including a three-year project working with people who attend a homelessness service in Birmingham city centre, and working over the next four years with people living in Wolverhampton, who have experienced the criminal justice system. These projects, and the range of other interventions we deliver across the prison and secure hospital estate, all address mental health issues, either directly or indirectly. For as long as Geese Theatre Company exists, these sorts of projects will remain as the central focus of our work.

Lewisham Youth Theatre

BY VICTORIA SHASKAN

Victoria Shaskan is the CEO of Lewisham Youth Theatre.



LYT performers in #ConfessionChallenge. Photo © Tunde Euba.

ABOUT US

Lewisham Youth Theatre (LYT) is “so much more than a youth theatre” (former participant). Since 1987, we have brought together participants aged 8-25 from different geographic areas and communities of need to take part in free theatre projects that nurture and inspire their voices. In doing so, participants develop enduring and transferable skills, resilience and ambition to fulfil their potential and to achieve long-term wellbeing.

We work from the core belief that artistic excellence is key to expanding young people’s horizons and creating lasting transformation.

Placing participants’ voices at the centre of creatively challenging and socially relevant work is key to achieving the difference we want to make for our participants and our community.

Over the last two years, LYT has developed a model of a Youth-Led Creative Hub while activating an erstwhile retail unit on Lewisham town centre. Now in a new home on Lewisham High Street, our Creative Hub model places young artists at the centre of change-making – for their own personal development, their career development, their community and the local creative and cultural eco-system.

Participants come to us from many backgrounds and with different needs. While some have diagnosed mental health issues or recognised neurodivergence, others struggle with needs outside of statutory systems and often alongside difficult circumstances including poverty, family disruption and educational disengagement. We recognise that young people's mental health is at a crisis point, and only those with the most acute problems are able to access care. Alongside this bleak backdrop, participants and families repeatedly tell us that LYT is a "lifeline", providing a space for positive social interactions and where they can feel "really supported and safe".

OUR APPROACH

We build a sense of safety and belonging through repeatedly co-creating and expressing expectations for an inclusive space where everyone feels respected and cared for. A welcome from our Members' Committee (youth board) is posted on the walls and group contracts developed by each session group line the space. Instead of talking about group 'rules', we ask each group "What do we need in order to work together at our best?"

Individual meetings with participants who disclose a need introduce them to the space and identify potential difficulties so we can

put support in place. The physical environment includes pictures of staff, sessions plans posted on the wall and a sensory room for those who might need to step away from the session. These methods all help lessen the anxiety participants might feel when coming into a new space.

In sessions, we aren't afraid to engage and value young people's voices on big issues that impact our participants' lives. But we are careful to use creativity and fiction to create boundaries. Instead of asking young people to tell us their own experience, we engage them in creating fictional characters and scenarios to explore difficult topics.

WHAT'S NEXT?

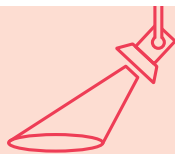
LYT will continue to build our Youth-Led Creative Hub in Lewisham as a place for personal growth, career development, community change-making and a hub of activity for the local creative ecosystem. We are currently developing three new plays with participants in primary and secondary schools and college, telling the stories of the same set of characters at different ages as they meet the challenges of growing up in Lewisham today.

LYT performers in #ConfessionChallenge. Photo © Tunde Euba.



SPOTLIGHT ON A PERFORMANCE...

#ConfessionChallenge



In 2023, our Senior Acting Company performed #ConfessionChallenge, a play about the mental health impact of social media on young people which toured in Lewisham and to the FUSE International Festival in Kingston. Developed over three years with participants aged 16-21, the play followed a group of classmates called together after a friend, Gabriel, has attempted suicide. Learning about the struggles of each character through this story, the play explores the emotional toll of social media on the 'haters' and victims alike.

“By telling a story of each individual character, the play recognised that not everyone’s perfect. Everyone had a part to play when it came to the character Gabriel, but internally everyone was going through their own journey of mental health behind closed doors. And it showed their impact on Gabriel and each other. I guess it just showed that no one wakes up out of the blue and goes, ‘let me just go and bully someone’. There’s always an underlying problem.”

Performer

While initially conceived through collaborative workshops with participants and a professional playwright, in the third year of development, LYT employed three young ‘Graduate Creatives’ to help write and direct the final piece. The Graduates had to develop their leadership skills within their peer group, with the challenging task of learning to be role models in a room of their peers. Through the process, they were able to take on the mantle of leadership, leading warm-ups, supporting individuals in rehearsal and helping to write scenes. This process allowed them to draw on their own lived experience and that of their peers to ensure the play spoke authentically to young people’s experiences of social media and its impact on their mental health.

Audiences found the piece:

“Fantastic, insightful examination of the impact of social media on young people... Touching... we loved the richness of the characters and the storytelling... the performances were excellent and authentic.”

The non-linear style of the piece provided another challenge to the group, which took dedication and commitment on the part of the participants. Some were initially resistant to change and challenged any changes to position or language, no matter how minimal. Through individual sessions and consistent group building, those who initially struggled with the creative mechanisms of the piece were able to better understand the structure, to contribute their suggestions constructively and to instigate change.

Directors saw significant growth within the performers, many of whom had been LYT participants for several years. The mindset, attitude and outlook of some performers was able to significantly shift through the process, providing them with the confidence and ambition to write and direct their own work.

Family members of the performers were able to articulate the difference that the process of creating and performing the play had made, saying that they had become:

“more confident, responsible and grown up... less fearful about life...able to communicate emotions in creative ways...the growth is shocking.”

One family member commented:

“LYT is her happy place. It has made her more committed, responsible and helped her get into college too.”

Liverpool Lighthouse

BY HELEN BROWN

Helen Brown is the Development Manager at Liverpool Lighthouse.



Liverpool Lighthouse participants in *Building a Best for Baby Revolution*, photo courtesy of Liverpool Lighthouse.

ABOUT US

Liverpool Lighthouse is a Black-led Arts and Community Centre based in Anfield, UK. Our local community is in the top 0.1% of most highly deprived areas in England and we have been working for 25 years on community transformation through creative-led wellbeing projects.

Based out of a 1930s art deco former Gaumont Cinema, we work with the communities of North Liverpool, Anfield, Everton and Kensington.

We have a legacy of high impact work. Our creative-led youth provision for young people excluded from mainstream schooling was spun out into an Alternative Provision setting, Harmonize Academy, which has twice been recognised as Outstanding by Ofsted for the impact it makes for the most vulnerable young people.

More recently, one strand of our work has been working with lived experience groups on theatre as a tool for wellbeing and advocacy, work that is starting to have national impact.

“So, when I initially came here, I really didn't know why I was coming here. As time progressed, I realised that I was doing something really important. Now coming from a person who felt powerless, and not valued, given my status, this was something really important to me.

That was something that gave me hope that I do have some purpose... Being a person with no status it like made me really lose my own self many times. Even the thought of, you know, that I'm lying. I think that changed with the passage of time because it is my story. It is what it is and it doesn't have to be believed. It is what I've been through and that confidence, you know, of someone just listening to me without judging me, helped me believe that this is the place for me. I felt I was being heard.”

Participant

Liverpool Lighthouse has always been here for the most vulnerable, responding to the needs and changes in our neighbourhood. At present this includes programmes for women in addiction and street-based sex work, perinatal refugees, asylum seekers, and people experiencing food poverty. With experiences of trauma, addiction and stress, almost all our participants have mental health difficulties to some degree.

OUR APPROACH

Our theory of change recognises that for people stuck in crisis and challenging situations, positive change starts with wellbeing, and the arts are a powerful tool for improving wellbeing. We focus on mental health because that is an issue, often the key issue, that needs to be addressed for people in challenging situations to make progress with their lives and escape from cycles of disadvantage.

Our theatre programme has a combination of weekly creative wellbeing sessions and short-term theatre residencies, where participants come together to create their own work, often based on their lived experience.



Café Happiness Theatre group for perinatal women, photo courtesy of Liverpool Lighthouse.

Careful risk management and wellbeing focused practice is needed to ensure that this remains a safe space for participants to share their experience and create performances that engage hearts and minds without triggering trauma.

Over the past year we have run six theatre residencies with three of our most vulnerable groups, perinatal refugee women, street-based sex workers and people with mental health problems.

Drama residencies target improving wellbeing through two different mechanisms. Firstly, by telling their stories in a supportive, safe environment, participants reclaim ownership of their lived experiences and can begin to address their trauma, feel heard, respected and understood.

Secondly, creativity levels the playing field between 'patient' and 'professional' and empowers participants to share their lived experiences with audiences who are specially convened because they have the power to make decisions and make change. This creates a sense of empowerment, self-esteem and agency for the participants, knowing that their experiences are not only being heard but are being responded to.

Nowhere is the success of this approach more evident than with our perinatal refugee project. This project involved a group of 26 perinatal refugee women with mental health difficulties in a weekly creative wellbeing project, built around drama and singing sessions.

Then, working with an NHS collaborative looking to address the disparity in outcomes for women and babies from ethnically diverse and socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, five women from this group came together in a residency to create a theatre piece that highlighted the experiences of pregnant women in the asylum system.

This work has had incredible impact; it has been performed at the local women's hospital and for the decision makers and commissioners for Merseyside NHS and social care services. It is now being recorded as a film to be used in training for all midwives in Liverpool. Our five Creative Influencers were also invited as the only non-medical session leaders to a national NHS conference and several other NHS trusts are interested in including the filmed work and resources in their training for midwives.

The work has also had incredible impact on the women's wellbeing.

“The drama residency allowed me to use my voice, to be bold and confident. I was not like that but now I can, I can even go down to the department [Home Office], I can go there stand and speak. It helped me to find my voice. To speak the truth, to speak what's necessary to stay here.”

“I was scared. I was scared with everything that happens with me, I was like, I'm not someone so good. Now I'm like, hunting now for school, going to college. That I want to start to learn. Then become a mental health nurse or interpreter, my calling needs me now. I want to achieve for myself. Now I know I am someone good, with the help of everything [at Lighthouse].”

Participants

“I was even taking antidepressant medicine. I go up and down, up and down. But since I start doing this perinatal group in Lighthouse [on Thursdays], it helps me be better, it helps me a lot.

I didn't go for my prescription anymore since I started because every week I look forward for Thursday to come because that's where I get my prescription now.

Thursday is where I get my medicine. So, I have to go to Lighthouse.”

Participant

WHAT'S NEXT?

This is a work in development – we have seen the impact that lived-experience inspired drama, created and performed by people with those experiences, can have on making real world, life-saving change. There are so many other areas where the voices of the most vulnerable often go unheard, because of power imbalances and barriers to access.

We are planning to continue this work, bringing together groups of people with lived experience and letting the participants lead on deciding the issues that most impact their lives, acting as facilitators of the creative process and conveners of audiences with the power to make change.

Photo courtesy of Nemo Arts.



May Contain Nuts

BY GERALD MAIELLO AND THE MAY CONTAIN NUTS COMPANY

Gerald Maiello is the Director of May Contain Nuts.



May Contain Nuts members working with adult nursing students, photo courtesy of May Contain Nuts.

ABOUT US

May contain Nuts Theatre company is a multiple, national, award-winning theatre company which has been creating and performing material on mental health for the past 13 years. The company is affiliated to Hertfordshire Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust's (HPFT) therapy programme; meeting weekly to devise, develop and facilitate workshops and productions based upon the personal testimonies of company members, all of whom have had some involvement in mental health services, or who are experiencing mental illness. We conduct numerous

workshops annually for a number of prominent universities as well as perform for mental health teams, schools and in public spaces. We have a rehearsal space in **Watford** but tend to travel regionally in order to perform. Our Patron is Sir Mark Rylance, for whom we have performed exclusively upstairs at the Harold Pinter Theatre.

OUR APPROACH

The company's strength lies in its unique approach of being run and led by people with lived experience of mental health issues. Each production and workshop benefits from direct

input accessed through personal narratives, which enrich and deepen the work that the company produces. In this way, the work we construct maintains integrity, honesty and truth in its understanding and portrayal of mental health and mental illness. We approach each commissioned production and workshop from two very clear perspectives:

1. How can our lived experience inform the work?
2. How can we best fulfil the requirements made of us, whilst promoting the need for a wider understanding of mental health issues?

The company utilises both workshops and performances as teaching aids. Each commissioned project is looked at individually

in terms of what is required, which subsequently leads us into the application of various drama techniques (improvisation, games, narrative work, physical exploration, whiteboard work, discussion, text based reflection etc) that enable us to build a rehearsed-improvisation ready for performance. None of our performance work is scripted; we rely on the high level of trust and awareness we have of each other in order to share an immediate sense of theatre that engages directly with the audience and our relationship with them. Workshops are, similarly, conducted from a knowledge base of personal experience and theory. We employ a number of techniques for a wide range of students and professionals such as: qualified clinicians and doctors, general

SPOTLIGHT ON A PERFORMANCE...

Sleeping Dogs

Our most recent production in 2023 was *Sleeping Dogs*. We performed this particular play extensively throughout last year and will be performing it once more for 2024, alongside developing new work. The production focuses on the dysfunctional dynamics of a mother and her two daughters and the impact of lies and distrust within their lives. As we have done with all our previous work, we facilitate a Q&A session alongside, as well as a workshop.

Audience response has been very good, with the following illustrating how *Sleeping Dogs* was received:

“...I am talking specifically about the May Contain Nuts theatre group, which I think was the best day we have had. The value of those with lived experience is invaluable to me, the engagement did not stop all day. The play was outstanding and the opportunity to speak to the group was amazing.”

“Their theatre-making is a gift of true knowledge about mental health, delivered with humour and intelligence. To be repeated!”

Sleeping Dogs is the company's first two-Act play. The evolution of the characters and the twists and turns of the plot have enabled the company to thread into the narrative and characters deeper, more resonant,

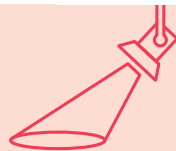
elements of biography. The resulting benefit, therapeutically, as one company members says:

“allows us to explore ourselves in our own minds whilst being detached. It also means we can work through things that other people have said to us, for example working the words through in my head for me as well as for the character.”

This process facilitates a high level of clarity for both the actor and the character in developing a better understanding of how things do and have impacted upon us. Therefore further understanding of the character, in order to create a narrative and emotional arc, also remains true to the actor's biography.

The company leans heavily on a number of practitioners in order to develop its work. These include: Bertolt Brecht, Antonin Artaud, Jerzy Grotowski and Antonin Stanislavski. Well defined characters with believable and truthful narratives are the fundamental underpinnings to all that we do. As one company member says, the work:

“has helped a lot, helped me change my life for the better and I feel like I have more self-worth.”





Members of May Contain Nuts, photo courtesy of May Contain Nuts.

nurse and mental health nursing students, psychologists and dramatherapy students. We also, on occasion, hold public performances as part of street theatre (Ghost Walks of Hemel Hempstead) or in selected venues (Blue Pixie, Pump House Theatre).

To date, we have devised and performed a number of shows which look at very difficult and distressing subjects such as: suicide, self-harm, psychosis, depression, anxiety

and tragedy. Each theme is brought to life through vivid imagery and visceral language. On occasion we have been challenged about our approach; but we believe there shouldn't be any censorship around issues which should be challenging and, whenever possible, direct and honest.

WHAT'S NEXT?

For the future we hope to increase our audience base and move from a regional company to a national company. In part this has already started with NHS England approaching May Contain Nuts to help develop a focused production on carers' involvement. If commissioned, it will be toured around seven national hubs. We hope to push the creative envelope by which we develop our work, making it more challenging and informed in promoting the value of an open forum, when it comes to discussing and raising awareness of issues around mental health and illness. And, last but not least, we will continue to raise the efficacy of the arts in exploring and understanding mental illness by increasing our number of performances and workshops, as well as supporting the wellbeing of staff in HPFT.

Nemo Arts

BY HUGH MCCUE

Hugh McCue is a co-founder and Chief Executive of Nemo Arts.



Photo courtesy of Nemo Arts.

ABOUT US

Founded in 1998, Nemo Arts has been at the forefront of providing high-quality, participatory arts activities, which support people in recovery from poor mental health for 25 years. We have pioneered work with children and families of prisoners, young carers, adults in psychiatric units, prisoners, and most of all people in communities in and around **Glasgow**.

We provide a weekly programme of activities which currently includes drama and physical theatre, as well as Taiko drumming, embroidery, visual art, guitar, choir and creative writing. Participants attend their chosen activities each week for a session lasting two hours. These sessions provide vital opportunities for participants to develop important skills, improve their confidence and engage with others. Involvement in activities improves the mental health and wellbeing of participants.

SPOTLIGHT ON A PERFORMANCE...

Animal Farm at HMP Barlinnie



We work with many groups and produce a lot of great performances and exhibitions every year; however, one that is close to my heart is a production in HMP Barlinnie in 2006. We worked with a group of people in the care of the Scottish Prison Service and with the group decided to do an adaptation of *Animal Farm*. As we worked through the text to extract some of the core themes and plot highlights, it was clear that the group identified with a lot of the content and it became a mirror of their own experiences, both within the prison context as well as living in the community.

The teamwork, dedication and final performance of the adaptation made this a memorable project to be part of.

“This once again has been a very powerful performance. The comments from such a diverse range of individuals are great testimony to all involved in the preparation and the performance of the production. It has never ceased to amaze me the heights that Nemo Arts have been able to achieve since first coming into the prison. You have played a significant part in the amazing culture change which has happened in Barlinnie over the past few years. This performance has scaled new heights. Keep up the good work and keep challenging.”

John McCaig, Prison Inspector

As tutors we only see our group for a few hours each week, and in that short time we see powerful transformations through a relatively simple process of creating a piece of theatre. In that short time we create a community, a shared identity and friendships. All this turns into a positive cycle of support that reaches beyond the rehearsal space and has the potential to change the course of a person's life.

“I should mention the most powerful thing Nemo Arts do. They let institutionalised staff of all grades and backgrounds see the potential of some of the men in their care and that is very powerful. Many staff believe that the prisoner group are not capable of positivity or creativity unless linked with negative activity. There is also an underlying belief that people with mental health issues must be ‘daft’. The performances are very challenging and very powerful and it reminds everyone watching that we are dealing with ordinary people who are demonstrating that they have the potential to change. The frustrating bit is that SPS have not found a way to make changes in prisoners long-term or lasting but perhaps it will take society to make that change? However, showing that people have skills, capabilities, and feelings is very powerful in prison.”

Prison Officer



Photo courtesy of Nemo Arts.

Lived experience is at the core of the organisation; it is why the organisation was founded and after 25 years of serving our community, it continues to be an important service within the mental health landscape of Glasgow. Nemo is Latin meaning nobody; this name was chosen to represent the all too familiar experiences of people living with mental illness. Through stigma, isolation and loss of confidence, people lose their sense of self.

OUR APPROACH

Through our creative group projects people can regain their identities through revisiting skills and activities they have done in the past or discovering new skills and talents. Becoming part of a community of peers helps to develop confidence and opens opportunities to build friendships and social circles of support. Showcasing achievements through public performances and exhibitions cements people's confidence, introduces them to creative spaces and venues around the city and ultimately brings people back to engaging in their communities.

WHAT'S NEXT?

As with many third sector organisations and businesses alike, it has been a struggle to recover after the pandemic. However, over the last 12 months we have re-established our services within HMP Barlinnie and within psychiatric units around Glasgow. Over the next few years we are looking to increase our services in hospitals and prisons and are developing a preventative strategy to deliver work with schools.



Photo courtesy of Nemo Arts.

Small World Theatre

BY DERI MORGAN

Deri Morgan is the AMETHYST Project Manager at Small World Theatre.



Invitation artwork by AMETHYST young people's theatre group. Courtesy of Small World Theatre.

ABOUT US

Small World Theatre (SWT) are creators of environmental puppet theatre and processions, with core projects supporting health and creativity. SWT's practice has always sought to build safe and strong communities, where people of different backgrounds and lifestyles can live and work together with mutual trust and respect. We promote equality of access to the arts and wellbeing for people of all ages, abilities, cultures, characteristics, and communities and practise inclusivity in all our projects and planning.

Arts and Health is integral to SWT's work: for example the well-established **AMETHYST project** uses theatre and other art forms to work with young people with mental health issues, supporting them and their parents/guardians. SWT has a track record of using the arts to support diverse groups and communities in educational and community

settings. We work in **west Wales** and beyond and are based in our beautiful near zero carbon building in **Cardigan**.

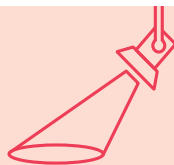
The AMETHYST project was born from our knowledge of the gap in mental health provision for young people in west Wales, which is due to statutory services being overstretched, rural isolation and lack of opportunities. We know that taking part in theatre and other creative activities improves young people's mental health.

“Amethyst enabled me to express my emotions in healthier ways and helped me say how I'm feeling without fear of being judged.”

Participant

SPOTLIGHT ON A PERFORMANCE...

'Legislative Theatre'



AMETHYST rarely does public performances due to the vulnerability of the young people we work with. Most of our theatre with young people takes place in a well-boundaried workshop setting where participants perform on a small scale to each other. Several previous AMETHYST participants now come to IBB, our inclusive youth theatre where they can take part in large-scale productions with other young people who enjoy performing.

One production Amethyst co-created involved our peer group of parent/guardians of young people with mental health issues, who AMETHYST had been supporting online. The group were finding that their own wellbeing was being negatively impacted by their young people's mental health problems, so they were struggling with their own anxiety and low mood. The group were particularly interested in influencing change in legislation around young people's mental health, so we sought funding and worked with them in a safe, non-judgemental space to discover their personal stories.

We devised a Legislative Theatre performance to explore the personal and systemic issues they experienced. The performance was online as we were still affected by the pandemic. The story told of a young man's struggle with his mental health and his single mother's efforts to support him when neither of them were being seen or heard by his school.

“Taking part in the theatre, I felt seen and heard by the audience.”

Young person

The performance was a great success and was attended by parent/guardians, young people, representatives from voluntary and statutory services across west Wales, our MP, the Children's Commissioner, two Assembly Members and our local health board.

“A sobering and effective performance.”

Local Assembly Member

“Powerful theatre performed very well.”

Pembrokeshire Association of Voluntary Services

Some conclusions drawn from the performance included:

- when a young person is in crisis, parents and siblings, the whole family are affected and need support. In particular, a parent's mental health is impacted by being permanently on watch after a crisis and from feelings of failure, guilt, and judgement from others;
- the educational system doesn't work for those with mental health issues. There is an urgent need for reform, particularly since the pandemic;
- schools face a real challenge in supporting young people because of underfunding, reduced pastoral care and changing policies. The numbers of children and young people in the Super Schools are another problem;
- not all young people can cope with the clinical delivery of some services.

Solutions suggested included:

- mental health issues need to be normalised in primary school so it is not stigmatised later in secondary school;
- young people need to be more involved in decisions about them that affect them;
- there needs to be more communication between schools and services, the individuals that are accessing them and their families;
- there needs to be more access to a variety of different services that support young people's mental health.

We encourage young people referred to Amethyst to attend IBB, our inclusive youth theatre, and SBB, our aerial circus school.

OUR APPROACH

AMETHYST uses Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) techniques, particularly Forum Theatre and Image Theatre along with games, theatre exercises and other art forms such as aerial circus, animation, visual arts and music. We also use Transactional Analysis (TA) concepts and nervous system information which we bring to life using theatre and creativity. We find that Image Theatre is a particularly effective technique for young people who are struggling with their mental health as they can show complex issues without having to verbalise them and can interpret each other's images. Forum Theatre is invaluable for exploring and processing stories of participants' real experiences in a way that is safe and empowering. Transactional Analysis combines particularly well with theatre as its concepts are easy to comprehend, very useful in helping us understand ourselves and our relationships, and translate well to performance. Nervous system information is similarly relatable to Aerial Circus.

“ I finally don't feel alone with it all. ”

Participant

WHAT'S NEXT?

AMETHYST has grown in recent years alongside an increased need for creative mental health support. We intend to carry on delivering high-quality, positive, participative, meaningful experiences for young people who are struggling with their mental health and those who support them. We would like to have sufficient funds to be able to be responsive to the need for support when and where it arises and to co-create appropriate projects with the groups we work with. In the future we would like to create performances with young people who have gained the confidence to perform and raise awareness more widely.

Stepping Stone Theatre for Mental Health

BY BILL AND KATE RODGERS

Bill and Kate are the co-founders of Stepping Stone Theatre.



Photo courtesy of Stepping Stone Theatre for Mental Health.

ABOUT US

Stepping Stone Theatre for Mental Health is a multi-award winning company that does what it says on the tin. We enhance wellbeing through creativity – specifically theatre. The company is our brain child as a husband and wife team. The ethos is quite simple: we have created a group that we wished had been available when, together, we began the journey

of recovery (Kate is bipolar and Bill is her sometime, when needed, carer.) Workshops are provided for writing, singing, walking and theatre. We also provide a podcast discussing Kate's journey. Three times a week we also do a live broadcast to discuss and debate all things mental health. Listeners are encouraged to join in. We do not have a venue, but we

SPOTLIGHT ON TWO PERFORMANCES...



We have performed at many events connected to mental health, such as conferences. We have also produced several stage productions and presented them at our local theatre, the Trinity Arts Centre. All of our shows are really well received by both service users and members of the general public alike. So much so, that we are now a multi award-winning community mental health theatre group, having won eight major awards within our community for services to mental health. Two productions come to mind which are incredibly memorable. One was a joint production we did with a group called ACT NOW! and ourselves. ACT NOW! were made up of members, all of whom have some kind of learning difficulty. It was an amazing joint event and everyone involved had a very special time, especially the audience. One review from a family member of one of the cast said:

“ You have changed my opinion forever on how creativity can lift the mood and spirits of everyone connected to the production from people involved to audience members. ”

Another incredible event for our members was last year when we were invited to perform at a conference for mental health

professionals and other mental health groups from across Lincolnshire. It took place in a huge venue and Stepping Stone Theatre opened the event. It prompted a member to write this feedback:

“ How do I start this? With great love for Bill and Kate. Over the years they have managed to calm me down, encouraged me to know my worth. As a girl my mother said I belonged on the stage and after 50 years, there I was, along with Bill, Kate and the cast, performing in front of 350 people. I volunteer at the Singing Social on Fridays; a warm and friendly bunch of people just out socialising and meeting new people. Writing group on a Wednesday with Bill and Kate, Friday on-line Scribblers. It is a great way to start the weekend; Kate’s a joy, a good way to unwind. Sunday mornings is a good brisk walk along the Trent. Just fresh air and girly chat – gets you through a long day ahead. Then Monday comes around and you know you are not alone. Just waiting, hoping, and praying for the Drama group to restart later in the year. ”

Angie

Stepping Stone Theatre for Mental Health is now regularly signposted to by peer link support and social prescribers.

work with the local library, village halls and the local theatre. We are based in **Gainsborough, Lincolnshire**.

We believe that all those who suffer mental ill-health can recover completely. We are propelled on because we have an expertise in mental health and a belief that creativity can positively affect mental illness. There is nothing more rewarding than seeing our members grow more in confidence and positivity and less afflicted by their mental health struggles.

OUR APPROACH

We use writing as a tool. Members are encouraged and keen to share their stories in testimonial exercises. We provide them with

a prompt and then ask them to write about that. We encourage them to write what comes straight from their own thoughts, without censorship. Some of the exercises are to be shared; some are private. We use singing as a method of expression. There is much joy in singing: from the choice of song to the performance. We provide a singing social; sometimes people sing alone, sometimes in groups. The main priority is that it is fun. We use walking as a distraction so that members will open up and tell their stories. We use podcasts to inform and share with the general public. We use improvisation techniques to promote discussion and debate about all things mental health. All of the above fully utilises our theatre and drama disciplines.



Photo courtesy of Stepping Stone Theatre for Mental Health.

“ I believe Stepping Stone Theatre for mental health is now a true asset to its local community. Aiding people with mental illness to tell their story and helping to rid the stigma which often surrounds mental illness. It also helps with social isolation and gives a voice to people who often find it difficult speak for themselves. ”

Mental Health peer support worker

WHAT'S NEXT?

Our plan for the future are to continue on with the work we are presently doing. We have applied for funding to take our work further afield within the county of Lincolnshire. If not, we will continue to focus our work in the town of Gainsborough and surrounding areas. We hope to encourage more people to come and participate and be open about their mental health journey. We are also hoping to encourage more men to join in and share their struggles and stories in an open, stigma-free way.

Theatre Royal Plymouth: Our Space

BY SARA RHODES AND LEE HART

Sara Rhodes is Associate Director at Theatre Royal Plymouth.

Lee Hart is the Creative Director for Our Space.



Photo by John Allen for Our Space, Theatre Royal Plymouth.

ABOUT US

For 14 years the Theatre Royal Plymouth has co-created and developed the Our Space programme in collaboration with highly skilled artists and partnerships with a wide range of services working with adults experiencing multiple disadvantage. This includes homelessness, mental health issues, substance misuse, reoffending, and more recently with veterans and long-term wounded, injured or sick service personnel. Over this time, we've built a reputation for our expertise

in placing lived experience at the heart of our work through creative approaches to trauma informed practice.

We provide experiential interventions and transformative experiences that address issues surrounding mental health and wellbeing, community integration, resilience, and hope.

Our Space was funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, Ministry of Justice and Veterans' Foundation.

“ For 2 hours in the week, I’m not depressed, for 2 hours I’m the person I could be, the person I want to be, the real me. ”

Participant

OUR APPROACH

Our Space addresses the lack of provision for adults experiencing multiple disadvantage to engage in a fun, participatory activity that contributes to recovery but sits outside of a clinical environment. We know there is a need for this through our partnership work with services across Plymouth and the wider region, which includes working with Hamoaze House,²⁰ Devon Mind,²¹ Pathfinder - Devon and Cornwall Police,²² the Changing Futures²³ programme and HMP Channings Wood.²⁴ These services express that there is an ongoing need for provisions such as Our Space as it provides an alternative outlet for their clients’ recovery, with a particular benefit of providing an energising, feel-good activity, and an effective framework for social participation.

Our Space offers individuals regular and meaningful activity, giving their week a focus and purpose, which contributes to recovery and rehabilitation. We use drama as a tool to play, offering people opportunities to escape their reality, to re-imagine themselves and to connect with others. This enables people to develop a sense of self, to feel confident in their own skin, building resilience, teamwork and communication skills which can then be transferred into everyday life.

“ Creative activities are a fantastic way to support people to self-manage their mental health challenges, and the response to the Our Space project is incredibly positive. ”

Olivia Craig, CEO Devon Mind

“ It’s helped me in all aspects of my life, 100%. I’m so much more confident, I’ve got so much more self-esteem, that’s come about from doing live performances. We’ve got this fantastic Director that gives us this freedom to create and feel ownership [...] it’s very empowering [...] it’s given me a sense of community, belonging to a community, giving to a community. ”

Our Space artist, Rehearsals for Life podcast²⁵

Participants have opportunities outside of the weekly sessions to build positive social networks. They regularly receive complimentary tickets to see productions on our stages, access one-off workshops with visiting companies, and take part in volunteering/training opportunities.

A key strand within Our Space is the creation of new work, co-created and performed by the artists with lived experience who develop through the programme. Over the last decade or so, we’ve produced numerous shows on the stages at Theatre Royal Plymouth and in found spaces in the community.

The elements and stages of making a new piece of work do not necessarily start with a particular theme being brought to the table and we never start with text, the work is always devised as we slowly find our mutual ground as a company of makers. We start by finding what we are curious about, through weekly check-ins the group share what’s on their mind, learning what’s common amongst them, what challenges they face and any victories from their week.

In a way, each session is like a little microcosm of the wider process. There’s a check-in, warm-up games and exercises that bring the group into the moment, opening themselves to connect and offer creative generosity to one another.

²⁰ hamoazehouse.online

²¹ www.devonmind.com

²² www.devon-cornwall.police.uk/police-forces/devon-cornwall-police/areas/about-us/local-support-and-guidance/out-court-resolutions

²³ www.plymouth.gov.uk/changing-futures

²⁴ www.gov.uk/guidance/channings-wood-prison

²⁵ podcasts.apple.com/ng/podcast/rehearsals-for-life/id1533034237



Photo by Dom Moore for Our Space, Theatre Royal Plymouth.

We are setting up a play space where anything goes and we can't fail. Over time we get braver with what we offer and how we bring that into the space.

A common feature in the early stages of making new work is free-writing exercises, which are designed to open up our world of the interior. This is done with care and forewarning; it's never fishing for anything in particular. It's simply about turning up on the paper and opening up our ideas, imagination and world, which we then bring back into the playful building blocks of the devising process. It's also about creating the frame for somebody to thrive, drawing out the best in each performer by finding out what is unique, beautiful and vital about them and responding to that. We never want to overexpose people, to leave them vulnerable; we build upon the strengths of the individual and collectively celebrate them throughout.

Whilst the public sharing of the work, in a way is not the most important part, it does give meaning to the process, a culmination of the journey we've all been on; it provides a sense of achievement and offers an alternative 'high'.

OUR IMPACT

In November and December 2022, we conducted a consultation; an invaluable exercise enabling us to investigate how Our Space fits within the wider city agenda around trauma informed approaches to complex needs, mental wellbeing, offending behaviour and homelessness.

Common themes that emerged from the consultation with partners were around inclusive leadership, power, and co-production. It was noted that Our Space has created a unique methodology that levels power, exemplifying co-creation as a tool that gives voice to lived experience, providing people with a language to articulate themselves, to feel a sense of belonging and human connection.

“It's the difference that makes the difference.”

Vicky Brooks, Plymouth Trauma Informed Network, consultation

It was also noted that the longevity of the programme has enabled life-changing transformations to occur. It's recognised that recovery and rehabilitation are ongoing, they require consistency. Our Space has been that consistency for people over the years:

“As twelve-week programmes come and go, Our Space has always been there, to pick me back up and remind me that I have a life worth living.”

Our Space participant, consultation 2022

WHAT'S NEXT?

Over the next three years of the project, as well as increasingly ambitious production work, we'll be sharing the Our Space methodology more widely, setting up collaborations nationally and internationally, and with our team of associate artists delivering training packages to organisations that want to bring a more creative and person-centered approach to working in the community.

Underground Lights Community Theatre

BY BETH FIDUCIA-BROOKES

Beth Fiducia-Brookes is the Artistic Director
and CEO of Underground Lights Community Theatre.



Lights Up! A performance by Underground Lights. Photo @ Mandip Seehra.

ABOUT US

Underground Lights offers trauma-informed creative workshops to develop artistic voice and excellence, to reduce homelessness, recidivism and to promote wellbeing. We are run for and by adults experiencing social disadvantage, homelessness and/or mental health issues in **Coventry, Warwickshire and the surrounding area**. Established in 2018, our co-founders have their own experiences of these issues. Underground Lights is a

former Belgrade Springboard Company, running workshops in association with the Belgrade Theatre.

In January 2019, we started to run our relaxed but vibrant drama workshops in a safe and supportive environment, where people could increase their confidence, learn new skills and make decisions for themselves about what they wanted to work on and perform. Today we continue to run workshops in partnership with the Belgrade Theatre. We also run 'Creative

SPOTLIGHT ON A PERFORMANCE...

Lights Up!

In February this year we performed *Lights Up!*, a musical that had been written and produced by 30 members, on the flagship Belgrade Theatre's B2 stage, using stories and themes from the members themselves. This was an Arts Council England funded project and the first opportunity to work at this scale with professional creative support and high production values. The confidence and pride members have gained is invaluable – accessing such a culturally significant space inspires members to recognise their potential.

“Anybody who gets to be part of this community, it will affect them for the rest of their lives in a very grassroots positive change for the future.”

Underground Lights member

The project vision, theme, characters and stories were member led. Members were able to contribute to all elements of the production, including lighting, sound and movement decisions. There were also opportunities to shadow backstage roles and understand the mechanics of a professional theatre through the support of the Belgrade Theatre. Collaborating with FabLab, members were supported to design and build costumes, props and set. Members also co-wrote songs based on their personal challenges which were performed on stage by *Choir With No Name*.



“It was so good to see everyone at the beginning share their ideas. I got experience of doing a bit of directing. [...] It was hard because we had to go over things again and again, but we left smiling, and we all did a great job. Lot of hours and time put in especially during production week. It took a lot out of everyone, but we did it all and it was a beautiful show at the end of the day. Even my son got to see me on stage for the first time and he was proud of his dad. The only thing that surprised me was people paying to come and see me on stage. I wouldn't pay to see myself. I see it as an improvement for me and the whole Underground Lights project going forward. [...] In a positive way, there's really no negatives when I come here. You've got the world in front of you. [...] Mentally, I go into a horrible cancer treatment, and it affected me really badly mentally. But since getting involved with the Underground Lights theatre things are much better because when you are in a dark place now I can speak to one of the staff of UL and they are willing to take my problem and put it on their shoulders.”

Matthew, UL member

“All of this was only made possible by the care-centred and compassionate approach in all that Underground Lights do. On an almost intrinsic level, the organisation understands the necessity of consistency, trust and forgiveness when working with vulnerable adults.”

Artist staff

Café' sessions, informal, drop-ins for people to try new performing arts activities and meet others in a low pressure and friendly setting.

We believe that 'theatre has the power to change lives' – we know this from our own personal experiences and observations, but also from research that shows how participation creative activities can improve mental health and wellbeing. We work with people who are often excluded and we're able to meet people where they are at, so that they can engage with us and develop creatively at their own pace. Our work is informed through

the belief that our members can develop their artistic voice and reach platforms on the same basis as other artists.

OUR APPROACH

A trauma-informed approach underpins all of our work and runs throughout our values; this ensures that people are not excluded because of a lack of understanding of their needs, experiences and behaviours.

Creative: using a strength-based one-step-removed approach, we encourage and inspire each other to explore and grow



The *Lights Up!* cast. Photo @ Mandip Sehra.

our own creative identities through our lived experiences; to tell the stories that are important to us; to be curious, radical, transformative and playful.

Community-led: we are a collective of people with personal experience of the issues we address. We aim to challenge stereotypes by creating performance platforms that enable our voices to be heard.

Compassionate: we strive to be a safe, encouraging, caring and hopeful organisation with accessible, welcoming and empowering activities.

Connected: we want everyone involved to feel a sense of belonging where people can grow and care for themselves and others.

WHAT'S NEXT?

We have an ambition to become a member-led organisation. We are working together with our Trustee Board, staff and members to achieve this sensitively, to avoid tokenism and achieve meaningful member-led leadership at all levels.

Alongside this, we are planning 'The Festival Collective', a member-led project in which members will be supported to learn skills, lead on, and explore artistic ambitions in an evolving three-year programme of work.

Finally, we're working to expand our reach and to continue to raise awareness around homelessness and mental health distress.

“ It was good to learn & express my feelings through drama. A different way of coping mechanism. I feel like I'm on a positive, step by step, I feel optimistic. ”

Underground Lights membe.

York St John University: Converge and Out of Character

BY NICK ROWE AND KATE VEYSEY

Nick Rowe is Director of Converge at York St John University
and Kate Veysey is Artistic Director of Out of Character.



Photo courtesy of Out of Character.

ABOUT US

We began with a simple idea: to offer a course in theatre in a university to local people who use mental health services and to involve university students in the delivery of the course. The course was led by the author, a theatre lecturer, and two of his students.

That first course, *An Introduction to Theatre*, took place in 2008. It was held in a university drama studio and was clearly advertised as an introduction to theatre. There was no mention of wellbeing or mental health. This was deliberate. The mental health identity is corrosive and limiting. A mental health diagnosis and its stigma can overshadow

and over-define an adult's identity. With opportunities and potential being narrowed, an individual can become limited in what they think of as their potential, risking forever remaining a 'patient' or 'service user'.

We wanted to challenge the profound limitations that the mental health identity involves. To offer education, not therapy, in a socially valued environment, in which people are regarded as students and performers, not people with mental health problems.

Twelve people started the first Introduction to Theatre course and nine completed it. Encouraged, we offered another course and growing interest led to the creation of our

theatre company, Out of Character, in 2009. Fifteen years later, that Company is flourishing with over 20 members, weekly rehearsals, and regular performances and short films. At the time of writing, the Company is preparing for a performance in the main house of York Theatre Royal, an ambitious step forward for its members.

OUR APPROACH

In **Out of Character**, there are two main ways of working toward performance. The first begins with a lengthy devising process in which ideas, images and scenes begin to emerge. It is then common for the artistic director, or a commissioned playwright, to write the script based on the work that has been created and the current members of the Company. The second way of working is to take an existing script: we are currently working on Jack Thorne's play, *After Life*, which will be performed by the Company at York Theatre Royal in May 2024.

In addition, members of the Company regularly work with nursing students at York University, educating them about mental health issues through theatre and workshops and engaging in simulated patient work in which members, guided by the university tutors, create characters for nursing students to practise their interviewing skills.

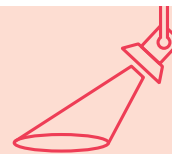
Members of Out of Character are trained at the university by the Converge project, a partnership between the university and the local mental health trust. We run two ten-week courses each year: *An Introduction to Theatre* followed by *Working toward Performance*. Members are then invited to join Out of Character. Of course, not all do: some move on, some do another course, and some register for the university's undergraduate theatre course.

OUR IMPACT

In 2019 (Heinemeyer and Rowe),²⁶ we published a paper in the *Mental Health Review Journal*, setting out the impact on members' recovery of being part of a committed, long-term theatre troupe. Two overarching themes emerged:

SPOTLIGHT ON A PERFORMANCE...

A Christmas Carol



In December 2022, we performed a version of *A Christmas Carol*. Our artistic director created a promenade performance in which audiences were led around various scenes in the university's Creative Centre. The audience were encouraged to dance and eat mince pies at the Fezziwig's party, to make paper chains at the Cratchit's house, and to stand outside in the cold at Scrooge's graveside. The company devised around the original story, and the production was supported each night by a performance by the Converge choir singing carols, and music created for the production by the Converge music team.

A Christmas Carol, a show by Out of Character. Photo courtesy of Out of Character.



- 1. The importance of "being known" within the company.** Interviewees returned repeatedly to the idea that the company was a place of deep and abiding relationships, in which they feel secure and valued.

²⁶ Heinemeyer, Catherine and Rowe, Nick (2019) Being known, branching out: troupes, teams and recovery. *Mental Health Review Journal*. (In Press). ray.yorks.ac.uk/id/eprint/3957.

“It’s like a family, you know [...] We get to know each other very well, our strengths and our weaknesses, and how we can express those, in a kind of family situation. It can be very empowering to feel that sense of belonging.”

Member

2. The ways in which individuals “branched out” from this secure basis into artistic, professional, and voluntary roles, while remaining company members.

“It’s actually opened up a lot of doors. Normally you think of things closing down. But actually, you know, in a few years you don’t know where I’ll be.”

Member

Mike (pseudonym) provides a vivid example of the possibility of escaping the narrow confines of the mental health identity. His story begins on the first day of the first *Introduction to Theatre* course in 2008.

When Mike arrived, he seemed distracted. He clutched sheaves of paper, which he told me were plays and poems he was writing. As we walked together to the theatre studio, he told me that his writing helped him to manage the voices in his head.

As a means of introduction at the beginning of the course I asked people to say their name and one thing about themselves. Mike said, “My name’s Mike, I’m a schizophrenic”. This was how he defined himself. Some years later he told me that, at that time, all his friends were people who had mental health problems and all the activities he was involved in took place in a mental health context. His life and his view of himself was overshadowed by his diagnosis.



Afterlife, a show by Out of Character.
Photo courtesy of Out of Character.

But Mike enjoyed theatre. At first, he attended the classes irregularly but gradually it became clear that he had a passion for theatre. He joined the newly formed Out of Character Theatre Company, performing with them in the university, at conferences and memorably at York Theatre Royal in 2010. In the same year he enrolled part-time on the undergraduate Theatre programme, got a job and in 2013 got married. Despite occasional relapses, his mental health remained good and as a theatre student, he led a course entitled ‘Have a Go, Jo’ designed to integrate local people from the community with those who use mental health services.

Mike has come a long way from 2008 and now he introduces himself in the following way, “My name’s Mike, I’m a theatre graduate and theatre facilitator, a husband, a stepfather and recovering from schizophrenia.”

Mike’s story is not uncommon in Out of Character and Converge. This revisioning of the self as highlighted the story Mike comes significantly from a reframing of identity – from service user to student or performer – and of context – from ‘clinic’ to university.

Photo courtesy of Our Space,
Theatre Royal Plymouth,
see page 52.



Some reflections

TARGETED OR INCLUSIVE?

This report focuses on *targeted* approaches to create specific theatre groups for people experiencing mental health problems. The case studies here and in our other publications (see page 73) show that there are people that really value this type of initiative for reasons we mention below. But we assume that there are far more people with mental health problems who either don't have this opportunity locally or who feel able to access a 'general' local theatre group and might indeed prefer this experience. All we are proposing here is that there are people who might not take the step into drama without specific provision. The same can be seen among many other communities such as asylum seekers who may wish to be part of a targeted group.

VALUE TO PARTICIPANTS

The most important aspect of this work is the impact it has on the lives of participants. From the case studies in this report and others, it is clear that these activities often have deep importance for participants and in numerous ways. Many will describe them as therapeutic. There might be an observable effect on their mental health or sense of wellbeing. As population level studies show, this is certainly the case for the general population when it comes to participation in the arts.²⁷ These theatre groups quickly become an essential source of friendship and solidarity. Some participants are very isolated and weekly sessions get them out of the house and engaging with the work in a way they find safe and supportive. Occasionally these activities might be routes to further volunteering or even paid work.

LIVED EXPERIENCE AND DEVISED DRAMA

All of the case study organisations in this report (and doubtless the organisations in our directory, see page 70) place the highest value on respecting and listening to the lived experience of participants. Given that the common factor here is experiencing mental health problems (even though these are highly varied), it is no surprise that the themes of mental health, and indeed mental health services, come to the fore in work being produced. In almost all cases, new work is devised through workshops with participants, rather than working with existing scripts. In some cases, this also has the added benefit of not needing to memorise scripts and allowing for a greater degree of improvisation. Occasionally pre-existing scripts are used and in inventive ways. For example, Arcola's Mental Health Company (see page 18) did a production about the Shakespeare's many plays where mental health is a major component.²⁸

THEATRICAL TECHNIQUES

Some theatrical approaches are common to both work in mainstream or other socially engaged theatre. Bertolt Brecht famously used a playbook of techniques to create a distancing or alienation effect for the audience to more actively question what is happening on stage rather than be won over by its verisimilitude. The Theatre of the Oppressed was a term coined by the Brazilian director Augusto Boal in 1970 based on two decades of work. It desires that theatre can be an instrument of change for the 'oppressed' and traditionally has several aspects including a facilitator or 'joker' and active audience participation as a 'spec-actor'. This has led to many developments, but the

²⁷ *Evidence Summary for Policy The role of arts in improving health & wellbeing Report to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport* April 2020, Dr Daisy Fancourt, Katey Warran & Henry Aughterson. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5f9812268fa8f543f786b37f/DCMS_report_April_2020_finalx__1_.pdf.

²⁸ www.youtube.com/watch?v=kCK5RpgirXU



Theatrics of the Mind, Arcola's Mental Health Company, Spring 2024, see page 18. Photo courtesy of Arcola Theatre.

most relevant here is probably 'Forum Theatre', where after a scripted first performance which includes oppression, there is a repeat performance when audience members can intervene to overturn the oppression, including by coming on stage themselves. These traditions can be more or less explicit in the targeted work examined in this report (for example, Bespoken Theatre, see page 21, directly cites these influences) and there is also a relationship to the masked theatre performed by Geese Theatre (see page 30). Much of what is produced by these companies is devised and this needs a careful, ethical approach. 20 Stories High reference their use of the Clark Baim Drama Spiral to achieve this (see page 15).²⁹

DESTIGMATISING MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS AND VISIBILITY

The importance of destigmatising living with a mental health problem or recovering from addiction is shared by arts organisations and artists working in this field. Stating that participants are experiencing these issues

can be a powerful method of destigmatising, which can extend to even the name of the theatre company, memorably May Contain Nuts (see page 40). Performance, especially to the general public, can help broadcast that message more widely, although it may also be the case that participants do not feel able to put on public performances. Small World Theatre makes clear that performances by their AMETHYST groups of young people are a rarity and they need to consider vulnerability and disclosure as issues. This is probably especially true for young people.

VARIETY OF ORGANISATIONAL MODELS

There is a great deal of variety in the types of organisation undertaking this work. Indeed, some of these categorisations might feel clumsy to the organisations themselves, but here goes:

- mainstream or General Professional Theatre, usually as a strand of community engagement, e.g. Arcola Theatre (see page 18), Chichester Festival Theatre

²⁹ Baim, Clark. (2017). The Drama Spiral: A Decision-Making Model for Safe, Ethical, and Flexible Practice when Incorporating Personal Stories in *Applied Theatre and Performance*. 10.1007/978-3-319-63242-1_4.



LYT performers in *#ConfessionChallenge*, see page 33. Photo © Tunde Euba.

(see page 24) and Theatre Royal Plymouth (see page 52). Underground Lights (see page 56) developed out of an emerging talent programme at Coventry's Belgrade Theatre;³⁰

- dedicated theatres, e.g. Bespoken Theatre, May Contain Nuts and Stepping Stone Theatre;

“ There are many different types of organisations that can offer targeted work to engage with people with mental health problems. ”

- socially engaged arts organisations, e.g. Fresh Arts, Lewisham Youth Theatre, Liverpool Lighthouse, Nemo Arts and Small World Theatre;
- university based, e.g. Converge at York St John University,
- This eclectic mix (which is mirrored in the larger group of organisations listed in our Directory below) shows that there are many

different types of organisations that can offer targeted work to engage with people with mental health problems.

FREE MEMBERSHIP AND ACTIVITIES

We are not aware of any specialist theatre provision where there is a charge for membership. Free access is so fundamental that it is possible to take this for granted. For many participants any charge would be an insuperable barrier. But with this approach those costs need to be met by funders and can't be raised commercially or through fees.

FUNDING, SIZE AND SCALE

All of the examples in this report are fairly small in themselves, even if they are then attached to large organisations like Theatre Royal Plymouth or the Arcola Theatre. This also seems to be true of the full list of 47 organisations included as a mini-Directory on page 70 of this report. At the larger end of the specialist initiatives is Outside Edge Theatre in London working with people in recovery with an average budget of

³⁰ www.belgrade.co.uk/stories/new-springboard-companies-announced-for-spring-2019



Photo by Fovea Creative for Geese Theatre, see page 30.

around £250k per year. Typically, the annual cost of the targeted work will be under £50k and may be as little as £10k. It is also common for a number of different sources of funding to be used which may vary year on year as opportunities arise. Funders include Arts Councils, independent funders, local authorities and different sources of NHS funding.

CONNECTIONS TO THE NHS

The complexity of the NHS and its mental health services is explored in our publication *Creatively Minded and the NHS*.³¹ For some of the participants in the case studies here, drama is complementary to the services they are receiving from the NHS. Most of the work here takes place outside of clinical settings, but there are exceptions where arts organisations go into hospital wards (e.g. Chichester Festival Theatre, see page 24). Working in clinical settings brings many challenges and artists and facilitators need to be extremely flexible to adapt to changing circumstances.

The Baring Foundation has recently funded the development of guidance for arts organisations working in medium secure, often forensic settings.³²

For some participants it is welcome that the artistic process feels quite different from treatment, including from dramatherapy. It is common practice for actors to play the role of patients for doctors and nurses in training. In this report, there are examples of theatre participants who really have experienced the mental health problems playing these roles to support health worker training (e.g. Converge at York St John University, see page 59, and May Contain Nuts on page 40). Unusually East London NHS Foundation Trust in another of our publications³³ describes its ambition to have an 'in-house theatre company' for training and education, presumably including regarding patients with mental health problems.

Finally, the organisations featured in this report take referrals from a variety of sources. The rise of social prescribing – especially in England – is

³¹ *Creatively Minded and the NHS*, Baring Foundation, 2021. Available at: baringfoundation.org.uk/resource/creatively-minded-and-the-nhs.

³² This work is being undertaken by the Birmingham based Red Earth Collective and will be available later in 2024.

³³ *Creatively Minded and the NHS*, Baring Foundation, 2021. Available at: baringfoundation.org.uk/resource/creatively-minded-and-the-nhs.

going to bring both mental health outpatients, and participants where a GP has not made a definitive diagnosis, into theatre groups.

SUPPORT FOR ARTISTS AND FACILITATORS

There is a strong theme throughout these case studies of the importance of support for artists engaged in this work. The Baring Foundation recognises this and has recently funded two cross artform initiatives; one based with Arts & Health Hub³⁴ in London and Manchester, and one with WAHWN, the Wales Arts, Health and Wellbeing Network, called How Ya Doing?.³⁵ These examples show that there is no one right way of providing this support. Sometimes arts therapists are involved, for instance in regular group meetings. Converge, by contrast, uses mentoring and emphasises that it is theatre that is being made, not a traditional therapeutic intervention. Is 'clinical' supervision required or support for reflective practice that allows artists to discuss their feelings?

WHY ISN'T THERE MORE?

Although we have found dozens of initiatives across the UK in varied forms, this feels like a drop in the ocean against potential need and interest. Let's assume that each project has an average of 40 participants (and it's likely to be lower) that might mean that say around 2,000 people with mental health problems are able to access specialist drama provision.

Most professional theatres have an associated youth company. There are good reasons for this and they have been the subject of funding for a long time. More recently, there has been a blossoming of older people's companies as explored in our 2016 publication *A New Kind of Theatre* by Kate Organ.³⁶ Of course people with mental health problems can and do join participatory theatre companies. But the experience of Arcola Theatre in particular shows the value of a dedicated company that can feel like a particularly welcoming community and produce work that is of interest to broader audiences. Given that people live with mental health problems everywhere, why

is this approach such a rarity? We have only found a handful of examples out of more than 1,000 theatres operating in the UK.

“ Given that people live with mental health problems everywhere, why is this approach such a rarity? ”

The same question might be asked about a participatory theatre company built alongside dramatherapy, as in the case of May Contain Nuts (see page 40). This was set up by a drama therapist with a passion for participatory arts and is used by participants who have mostly experienced and value dramatherapy but also want something different. There are possibly thousands of dramatherapy sessions taking place each week yet May Contain Nuts appears to be unique. Given its success, doesn't it deserve replication?

Due to the limitations of this research, it is only possible to speculate what the reasons for this lack of activity might be. Our own experience of the enthusiastic response of arts organisations when we are able to make dedicated funding available suggests that funding must be a major factor. Other reasons might include the low profile of the specialist sector and lack of familiarity with its work by, for example, mainstream venues.

NETWORKING

There are some relevant networks that overlap with this area of practice, such as the Addiction Recovery Arts Network (ARA) and the national networks for arts and health in each of the four nations. Events such as the Scottish Mental Health Arts Festival also allow for some convening. But overall, this field does feel fragmented with some great individual organisations that rarely have an opportunity for exchange.

³⁴ See: www.artsandhealthhub.org.

³⁵ See: wahwn.cymru/en/programmes/how-ya-doing.

³⁶ *A new form of theatre*, Kate Organ, Baring Foundation: 2016. baringfoundation.org.uk/resource/a-new-form-of-theatre-older-peoples-involvement-in-theatre-and-drama.

Recommendations

01 Good employers

Theatres of all kinds should be making clear their support for employees experiencing mental health problems and making tailored support available.

02 Mental Health Awareness

All theatres should be welcoming to the entire community and this includes people living with mental health problems. As a minimum, staff should undertake Mental Health First Aid training and/or trauma informed practice training, and theatres should draw attention to Mental Health Awareness Week.

03 More specialist offers by mainstream theatres

The type of engagement activities offered by the Arcola Theatre, Chichester Festival Theatre and Theatre Royal Plymouth should be considered by many more theatres. People with mental health problems live everywhere in the same way young people live everywhere – but the latter are offered tailored drama opportunities and the former are generally not.

04 Better recognition and financial support

The initiatives featured here are often under the radar and work on a shoestring. They deserve a higher profile and better funding. Indeed, these things can go hand in hand.

05 Centrality of lived experience and valuing participants

This is such a central principle to all the organisations in this report that it might be taken for granted. However, it should be an explicit principle that the purpose of this work is to put people with mental health problems at the heart of the creative process and to ensure that their experiences are recognised.

06 Research on the impact on mental health

While not a priority for the Baring Foundation, it is a priority for health funders and there appears to be little academic research in this area or any overview of the service level data collected by theatre companies themselves.

07 Support for creative practitioners

There are different options such as mentoring and group or individual supervision. It is an evolving area where individuals will find different approaches of benefit. But there is consensus about the importance of support and that more needs to be available.

08 Good practice resources and training for artists

So far, there has been little published guidance that is relevant to this area, although the upcoming resource the Foundation commissioned from the Scottish Mental Health Arts Festival will help.³⁷ More guidance is needed, along with signposting to the different types of training that are on offer.

09 Networking

There are no specific networking opportunities people working in this area at the moment, although broader networks covering arts and health are active across the UK. One or a series of conferences could showcase the variety of models at work and encourage new entrants to this work

³⁷ *Performing anxiety: a resource for audience-facing arts projects about mental health*, Andrew Eaton-Lewis/Mental Health Foundation Scotland, 2024. Available at: baringfoundation.org.uk/resource/performing-anxiety.

Directory & map

DIRECTORY OF THEATRE OFFERS FOR PEOPLE WITH MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

Organisations in dark red either focus on or have a significant stream of work focusing on children and young people and mental health.

A-Z

20 Stories High

acta community theatre
 Arcola Theatre
 Arts at the Old Fire Station
 Avant Cymru
 Battersea Arts Centre
 Bespoken Theatre Company
 Birmingham Rep
 Brixton House
 Cardboard Citizens
 Chichester Festival Theatre
 Community Links (CLEAR), Kirklees
 Compass Collective
 Contact (Manchester Young People's Theatre)
 Displace Yourself Theatre
 Fluid Motion Theatre
 Fresh Arts, London
 Geese Theatre
 Lewisham Youth Theatre
 LouDeemY Productions
 Liverpool Lighthouse
 Many Minds
 May Contain Nuts
 Nemo Arts
 New Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent
 Night Light Theatre
 Odd Arts
 Our Room
 Outside Edge
 Out of Character/Converge
 Pan Intercultural Arts
 Playing ON
 Real Talk Theatre
 Re-Live Theatre
 Restoke

Small World Theatre

Small Performance Adventures
 Soldiers' Arts Academy
 Stand Easy Productions
 Stepping Stone Theatre for Mental Health
 Stepping Out Theatre
 Theatre for Life CIC
 Theatre Royal Plymouth
 Theatre Peckham
 Theatre Troupe
 Underground Lights Community Theatre
 Women & Theatre

BY LOCATION

Number = counties on the map overleaf.

ENGLAND

01 London

Arcola Theatre
 Battersea Arts Centre
 Bespoken Theatre Company
 Brixton House
 Cardboard Citizens
 Compass Collective
 Fresh Arts
 Lewisham Youth Theatre
 Outside Edge
 Pan Intercultural Arts
 Playing ON
 Theatre Peckham
 Theatre Troupe

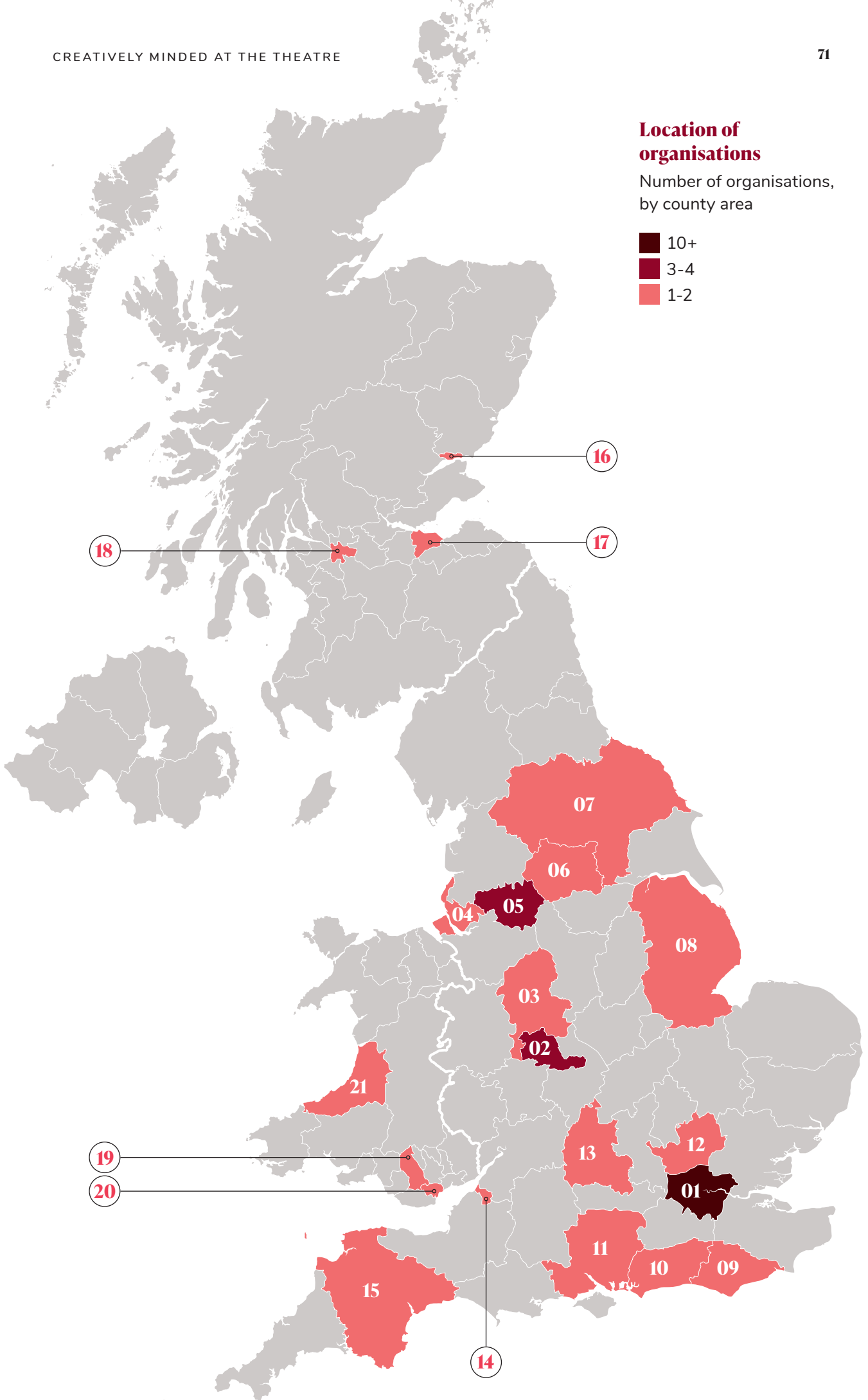
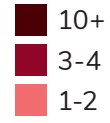
West Midlands

02 Birmingham & Coventry

Birmingham Rep
 LouDeemY Productions
 Women & Theatre
 Underground Lights Community Theatre

Location of organisations

Number of organisations, by county area



03 Staffordshire

New Victoria Theatre
Restoke

North West**04 Merseyside**

20 Stories High
Liverpool Lighthouse

05 Greater Manchester

Contact (Manchester Young People's Theatre)
Odd Arts
Our Room

Yorkshire & Humber**06 West Yorkshire**

Community Links (CLEAR)
Displace Yourself Theatre

07 North Yorkshire

Out of Character/Converge

East of England**08 Lincolnshire**

Stepping Stone Theatre for Mental Health

South East**09 East Sussex**

Small Performance Adventures

10 West Sussex

Chichester Festival Theatre

11 Hampshire

Fluid Motion Theatre
Theatre for Life

12 Hertfordshire

May Contain Nuts

13 Oxfordshire

Arts at the Old Fire Station

South West**14 Bristol**

acta community theatre
Many Minds

15 Devon

Theatre Royal Plymouth

SCOTLAND**16 Dundee**

Stand Easy Productions

17 Edinburgh

Real Talk Theatre

18 Glasgow

Nemo Arts

WALES**19 Rhondda Cynon Taf**

Avant Cymru

20 Cardiff

Re-Live Theatre

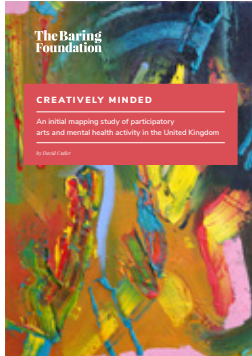
21 Ceredigion

Small World Theatre

NATIONAL/ONLINE

Geese Theatre
Night Light Theatre (North of England)
Soldiers' Arts Academy

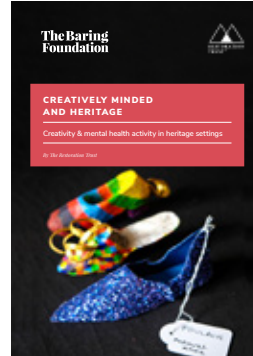
Selected Baring Foundation resources



Creatively minded
David Cutler
 2020



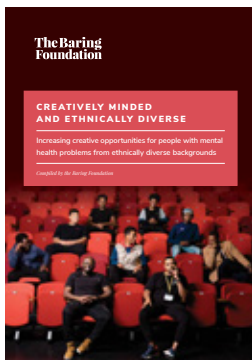
Creatively minded and young
Harriet Lowe
 2020



Creatively minded and heritage
The Restoration Trust
 2021



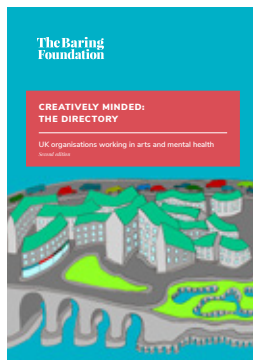
Creatively minded and the NHS
David Cutler
 2021



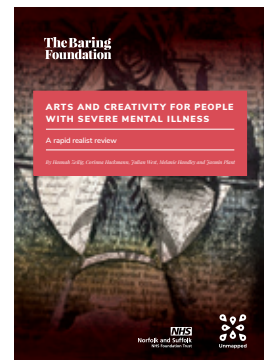
Creatively minded and ethnically diverse
Compiled by The Baring Foundation
 2021



Creatively minded at the museum
David Cutler
 2022



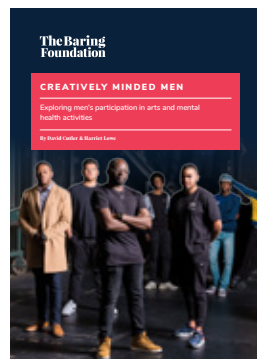
Creatively minded: the directory
The Baring Foundation
 2022



Arts and creativity for people with severe mental illness
Hannah Zeilig, Corinna Hackmann, Julian West, Melanie Handley and Jasmin Plant
 2022



Creatively minded and refugees
Counterpoints Arts
 2023



Creatively minded men
David Cutler
 2024



Performing anxiety: a resource for audience-facing arts projects about mental health
Andrew Eaton-Lewis/Mental Health Foundation Scotland
 2024

All resources can be found on our website
www.baringfoundation.org.uk

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