

# We Are All (Made Of) Stars

## MAYK's international touring project

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### Background

MAYK is an arts organisation based in Bristol. We work with artists to create, produce and tour new performance work. Our work is often participatory, always experimental and has broad appeal. One of our biggest projects is Mayfest, a festival which presents live performance from all over the world in Bristol every two years. We also tour work nationally and internationally.

As popular opinion seems to become more isolationist and nationalist, we believe that culture has an important role to play in celebrating internationalism, helping people share stories and make new connections.

In 2018 we toured three international participatory performances to areas of low engagement. We worked with Strike a Light (Gloucester), Theatre Orchard (Weston-super-Mare), In Good Company (Derby) and Quarterhouse (Folkestone). We also showcased all three performances at Mayfest.

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*"This... has opened my mind to theatre because I've never done any theatre before, so seeing how people interact and seeing how beautiful the differences are, there's a huge age range here, there's a huge range of where people come from and it's just perfect to have everyone coming together and working together to do something that, in this story, is about making sure there are places where people can perform and can enjoy sharing music together."*

**Participant, heavy metal band, WE ARE LIGHTNING!, Bristol**

We were interested in asking 'how does touring work reflect place when the artists presenting the work are not of the place', and how much participatory work is able to act as an audience development tool. We were also responding to our partners who wanted to develop their skills in presenting international work.

We chose three international shows that were all doing something very different with participation.



**WE ARE LIGHTNING!** was a large-scale participatory project involving up to 100 participants in each performance. It was created by the Australian artist Joseph O'Farrell (JOF) and UK artist Sam Halmarack. The show is a big-hearted celebration of how live music can bring people together. Performed across four stages, WE ARE LIGHTNING! features a choir, a brass band, a teenage band (all recruited locally) alongside Sam and JOF's house band.



**Contact Gonzo** are a performance group from Osaka in Japan who create highly physical improvised performance/dance work, often in unusual settings and with non-performers as part of the ensemble. For our project they worked with local dancers and musicians in Bristol and Weston-super-Mare to create a new performance in each location, teaching the dancers their style/mode of performance, but also working with each performer's own skillset.



**Town Choir** by Vancouver's Theatre Replacement, is a performance piece for public space that involves a local choir and four writers. The choir sing the words of the writers who are all writing from different places. The work transforms the mundane into the beautiful, singing out the everyday into a public space. We sited the work in a shopping centre in Bristol and at Weston-super-Mare's museum.

## Objectives

- Test new a new approach to touring participatory international performance in England, ready to be used with a larger network, reducing the need for investment from funders, by maximising economies of scale.
- Develop ways of engaging new audiences for contemporary international performance in locations that do not currently have access to it
- Develop the skills of programmers in presenting international work

## Target Audiences

This project tested whether participatory work could be an effective way to build audiences for international work – would the networks of participants translate into audiences?

In the process of finding choirs in particular, we realised we were doing audience development almost by accident. We called around 70 choirs in each location, all of whom were interested in hearing more about the shows and some of whom came along to the final performances.

We also targeted the following groups:

- Passers by (Town Choir)
- Family audience
- East Asian audiences (Contact Gonzo)
- Club/music culture
- Gig-goers
- Music networks
- People who attend theatre work in each partners' organisations (all were multi-artform)

## Process

### **Stage 1 - Selection of the work and understanding the needs of the project**

- Which artists and ideas are exciting you right now?
- What feels like it will connect best with the audiences you're trying to attract?
- What does the work need in terms of producing, participation, audience development?
- What can you afford (in energy, time, money)?

### **Stage 2 - Introduction of work to partners and selection of what tours to which location?**

- If the partners haven't seen the work, how is it best to share the essential qualities?
- What do you and your partners need to understand about the requirements of each project
- How is it meeting you and your partners objectives?
- What will the project help you all do that you couldn't do before?
- What feels best suited to which location?

### **Stage 3 - Recruitment of delivery team**

- What skills, expertise and personal qualities do you need to deliver the project(s)?
- How will you work with your partners? What skills do they already have on their teams?
- What capacity do you have (time, energy, people) to deliver the work and who do you need to fill the gaps?

### **Step 4 - Dissemination of information from creative team to delivery team about needs of the project**

- What are the key things that the people helping deliver the project need to know?
- What systems do you need to put in place to ensure that vital information is captured and disseminated?
- What have the creative team learnt from previous iterations (if any) of the project that it would be useful to share

### **Step 5 - Fact-finding with partner organisations on relevant networks?**

- What knowledge needs sharing about contacts, 'gate-keepers', networks etc?
- Who is best to contact who and how should the workload

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*"It enabled us to work with ambitious international companies who we would not normally have encountered, or been able to afford. It brought additional producing support for these experiences that extended our capacity."*

**Fiona Matthews, The Theatre Orchard, Final Programme Feedback, 2019**

- be shared?
- Where are the gaps and what research needs to be done?

### **Step 6 – Research and recruitment of participants**

- What is essential and what can be flexible in terms of skills, qualities, experience?
- How can you capture and retain the information of the people you're approaching?
- How can you adjust your approach as you work, based on feedback from people you're speaking to?

### **Step 7 – Meeting of creative team with participants**

- What do you need to have in place to make sure these meetings run smoothly?
- How is it best to share information with participants?
- Where is a friendly, accessible place to hold the first meeting?
- What do you need to have agreed before the end of the meeting?

### **Step 8 – Rehearsal, making and delivery**

- What's the best way to make sure everyone is in the right place at the right time?
- How can you be clear about what is expected and what makes the experience difficult for everyone (e.g. lateness, absence etc)
- What can you do to make the process run smoothly as possible (e.g. providing drinks and snacks)
- How are you documenting the process?

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*"My family is coming tonight. I don't think they've been here before."*

**Choir member, Quarterhouse, Folkestone**

*"My husband came last night, he hasn't been here before."*

**Choir member, Quarterhouse, Folkestone**

*"My neighbours came last night... they've not been here before and believed the plot, they thought Quarterhouse was closing."*

**Folkestone Singing for Health Choir member, Quarterhouse, Folkestone**

*"I've never done anything like this in my life."*

**Brass band member, Quarterhouse, Folkestone**

### **Step 9 – Performance and Touring**

- How will an audience meet the work? What will make the performance feel accessible and enjoyable?
- How can you be clear with audiences what will happen when and what is expected of them (v important for work where audiences may be asked to participate)
- How will the event be documented and what data do you need to capture?
- How and what do you need to communicate with the venue/site?

### **Step 10 – Evaluation and Feedback**

- How will you evaluate with participants, audiences, artists, each other?
- Who should lead the process? Do you want to work with an external evaluator?
- What's the best way to capture and share learning?

# Outcomes

- Three international participatory performances toured to four locations across England during summer 2018
- The development of new skills and experiences for over 200 participants
- Reached almost 2000 live audiences members, plus almost 6000 online
- Huge learning for MAYK and our partners for how to deliver projects like this in the future – particularly around capacity, resource and engagement
- A rich, fun, thrilling experience for participants and audiences that for many was the first time they'd engaged with a project of this nature
- Audiences saw something in their towns that was new, unusual and that had a deep connection to their sense of place
- The international artists we worked with had a more satisfying and rich experience of sharing their work with English audiences – not just visiting one or two major international festivals in metropolitan areas, but meeting new audiences and participants in places where international work rarely travels

# Top Tips

## **Don't try and do everything new at once**

Participatory projects are demanding and can be draining on an organisations' time and resource. For us, almost every element of the project was new. We were working with new artists, new team members in new locations on a new structure. Reflecting back, this sometimes felt really exciting, but at other times it felt like maybe we tried to do too much, too quickly.

## **Allow plenty of time for recruitment**

We underestimated how long it would take to find and engage participants. Our Engagement Producer worked tirelessly for weeks following up leads, getting tips from gatekeepers, cold calling and emailing. Some participants were recruited very easily, others took a lot of time. In our case, finding a choir that was available in May and July and who could read music was much more challenging than we had expected.

## **Prioritise care of participants and include costs for this**

Making sure the people you're working with to co-create are happy, well-fed and are not out of pocket is hugely important. We made sure that our producing team were present as much as possible, that there were always snacks, fresh fruit and water and that people know where they had to be and for how long as far in advance as possible. Make sure you have a generous hospitality/care budget so you can cover unexpected costs (such as taxis after late night rehearsals etc). Participants also become powerful and passionate advocates for your project.

## **Embrace the unexpected**

One of the most thrilling things about working on projects like this is that the most extraordinary, thrilling, hilarious

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*"It was an inspiring experience which I will never forget. I think Contact Gonzo have created a style of performance which is truly unique - the like of which I have never seen or experienced before... The performance itself was truly subjective; allowing complete freedom of interpretation from within the performance and as a spectator."*

**Nikki Warwick,**  
Contact Gonzo participant,  
Weston-super-Mare

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*"Best experience ever... It was really different, exciting, you would never expect it to be the way it actually was... amazing to be part of that. To see everyone's faces light up, was out of this world."*

**Participant feedback, WE ARE LIGHTNING! Gloucester**

things happen in ways you least expect. Get comfortable with improvising. Be willing to change direction if you need to. Everyone is learning.

### **Working with a skilled producer/fixer can help solve a lot of problems**

We were really fortunate to have a brilliant team delivering this project both at MAYK and with our partners across the country. This worked best when there was a skilled person in the location where the performances were to take place who knew the community well, had good connections and had a shorthand/cut to reaching potential audiences and participants

### **Networks become audiences**

While we were searching for participants we worked with a series of gatekeepers and community leads to help connect us to people who might want to get involved. Often one phone call would lead to four more to four more and so on. And each person we spoke to then became aware of the project and could spread the word on our behalf. Plus we now have a huge amount of knowledge in specific areas (choirs, heavy metal bands etc) that we can use for future projects.

## Conclusions

While a one-year pilot might not be enough to be able to see real change in audiences, there were clear signs that investing long-term in projects like this could help really shift perception of 'contemporary' performing arts for people who might usually reject it. Actually involving people in the creation of the performance, and giving them as much agency as possible means that they feel ownership of the artwork and become advocates for the project as a whole. In each place we toured, we saw the beginnings of this through participants bringing along their friends and family to the shows because they were proud of their role within it. In the case of WE ARE LIGHTNING!, some of the participants travelled to other dates on the tour to watch the show again with different participants.

## Links and more

Co-creating work with participants helps performing arts projects feel accessible, local and meaningful rather than 'parachuted in'. It's a richer experience for everyone involved – not just fly-by-night; it's a deeper engagement.

[Short film by Phoebe Holman about the project](#)  
[Gallery of photographs by Paul Blakemore](#)  
[Blog by Theatre Replacement's Maiko Yamamoto](#)

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## Get in touch

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