

100 per cent commitment

The success of Harrow Arts Centre's 100% programme of events and festivals is based on the many young people involved in both production and performance. Cate Gordon tells how it has evolved.

In 2009 Harrow Arts Centre (HAC) started offering performance opportunities for young unsigned musicians three times a year at gigs in our studio space. This aimed to help young people feel that the arts centre was for them and to support emerging performers. When I joined HAC in January 2011, I was very much an amateur at producing music gigs so one of the first things I did was invite local young people to get more involved in the design of the events. Under their direction, the name 100% and an age range of 14 to 25 was confirmed and a large network of performers established. A group of young people interested in managing the events formed and became the '100% producers'. Since then, the group has grown and now has 23 members. This year, they have produced 16 events and programmed stages at three festivals, expanding into dance and film and creating events for our 400-seat space as well as the studio, including our first sell-outs.

The programme's success comes from the amateurs, volunteers and aspiring professionals involved in it. For example, producers get involved for a variety of reasons: some join for fun, some to do Arts Award qualifications with us and some because they want to work in the music or events industries. The current 100% technician started with us for work-experience, became a producer and then joined our technical team. The gigs are open to anyone to play, so again some people perform for fun and some to build a fan base to launch a professional career. We offer different slots depending on the confidence and experience of the performer, from one or two songs in an all-comers session (open mic) up to headline performances. The producers introduced an application process and terms and conditions for performers. This has meant we can still offer young people equal chances to perform, but we can tailor those chances to their skills, giving them a more positive experience and maintaining the quality of the events. Importantly, we have created a strong brand for 100%, so audiences know what to expect and support the less established acts as much as the more seasoned ones.

The producers have transformed 100%. What started out as an event designed by professional adults is now our most established participatory project for young people. Currently we do not pay performers or producers – as there are so many people involved in creating each event the ticket price would have to be too high. We are now working out how we can support young people who want to 'go professional' to earn money from their skills, teach others and build their own projects. However, whenever I ask the producers why they do it, 'for fun' is part of everyone's answer, and that will always be a big part of 100%.

Cate Gordon is the Participation Programmer at Harrow Arts Centre.
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