

Go See Events

The Cultural Spring visit to Edinburgh Fringe



Image courtesy of Jason Thompson

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The Cultural Spring and bait



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See events have opened up
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The Cultural Spring and bait Go and See Programme

The Cultural Spring is a Creative People and Places (CPP) programme working to raise participation in arts and culture on South Tyneside and Wearside.

The six-year Cultural Spring project is part of the Creative People and Places programme, initiated and funded by Arts Council England through the National Lottery. CPP works to encourage more people to take the lead in choosing, creating and taking part in art experiences.

Our Go and See programme aims to ensure that people living in our wards get the chance to experience the best arts and cultural events happening across the North East and beyond.

We work with theatres, galleries, festivals and artists to gain access to special events, back stage tours and discounted tickets for people living in our wards. In August 2017 we worked with our sister CPP project bait (South East Northumberland) to offer people an opportunity to visit the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.



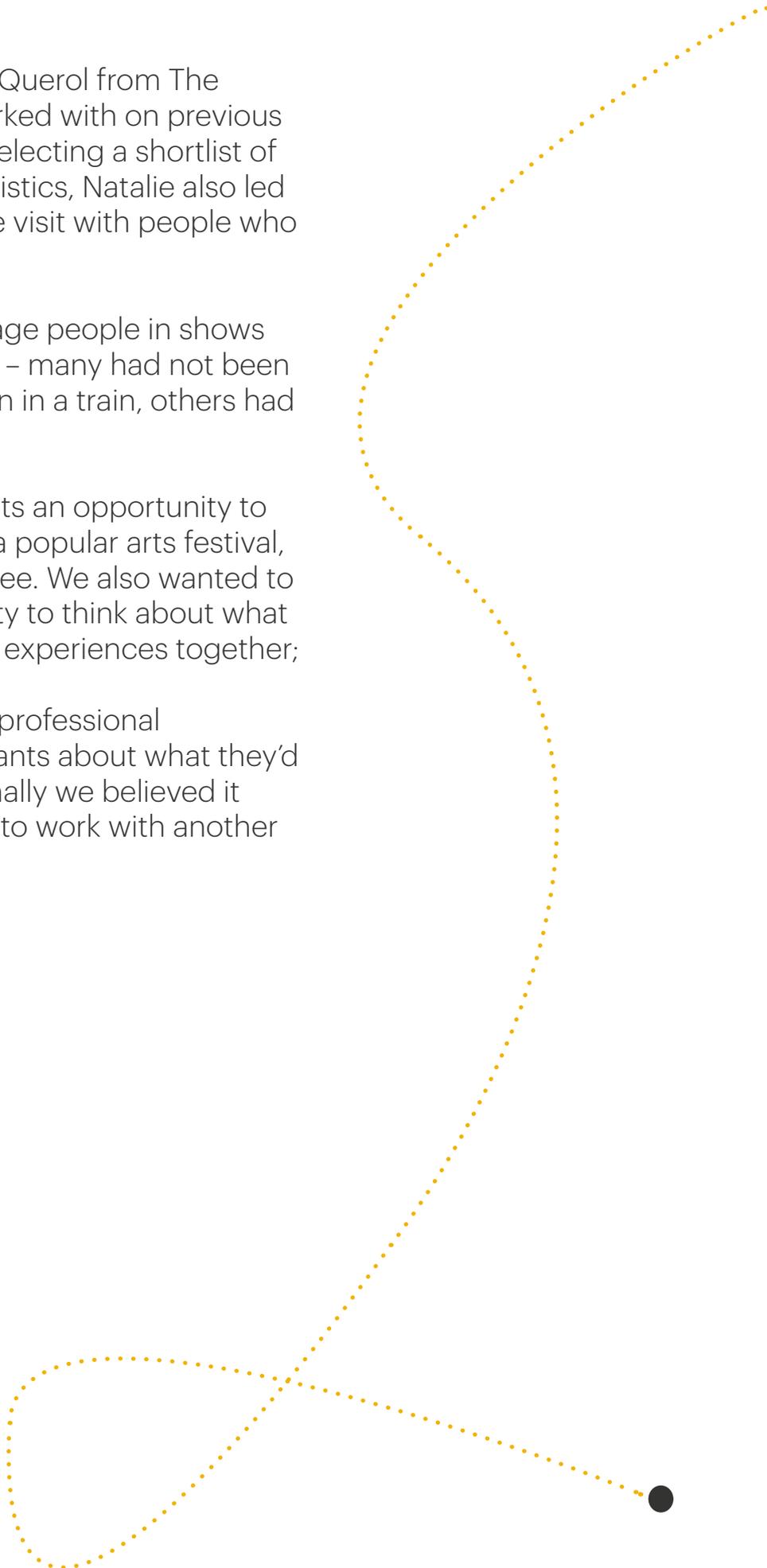
The goals

The trip was curated by Natalie Querol from The Empty Space (who bait had worked with on previous trips to the festival). As well as selecting a shortlist of shows and managing all the logistics, Natalie also led discussions before and after the visit with people who took part.

The trip's main goal was to engage people in shows at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival – many had not been to the city, some had never been in a train, others had never been inside a theatre.

We wanted to give local residents an opportunity to see a range of excellent arts at a popular arts festival, so chose a variety of shows to see. We also wanted to give the residents an opportunity to think about what they'd seen and to discuss their experiences together;

Another objective was for local professional programmers to talk to participants about what they'd like to see performed locally. Finally we believed it would be an interesting project to work with another CPP programme on.



Who the programme was for

Our target audience was people living in the ten Cultural Spring wards in Sunderland and South Tyneside, and communities in South East Northumberland.

The trip included 12 people from Cultural Spring (including two staff); eight from ESCAPE family support group; six from bait's men's groups and seven individuals from South East Northumberland. A couple of professional programmers also attended, making the total number 39.

We recruited participants by emailing people who had previously attended our workshops and events, asking them if they'd be interested in a trip to Edinburgh Fringe. We also approached some of our community champions, and bait engaged with some of the groups they regularly work with. Lastly, we spoke to people who had enjoyed other Go and See trips.



Image courtesy of Jason Thompson

The process

Bait had previously taken residents on similar trips to the Festival, so we met with them to see how the trips had been organised. It made sense for us to work together on the project and learn from bait's experiences.

A lot of the planning was around logistics – getting people from different areas up to Edinburgh and then arranging to meet together.

Similarly, there was much planning went in to the range of shows we wanted to attend – and in particular arranging for Kamaal Hussain to perform his show *Becoming Sheherezade* specifically for us and then meet with the group after his performance.

The trip was free to participants – the budget put together by Cultural Spring and bait for the joint activity was £5,000.



Image courtesy of Jason Thompson

The trip

A total of 39 people went on the trip – a mixture of residents, professional programmers and Cultural Spring and Bait staff. The day was incredibly busy – travelling up to Edinburgh, seeing five shows and then returning – but very successful and energising.

The shows we saw were:

- **Fauna, Assembly Roxy**

A beautiful, funny and hugely skilled contemporary circus show. By contemporary circus think acrobalance, static trapeze etc - it's closer to dance than to traditional circus. There are definitely no clowns in this show.

- **Lists for the end of the world by fanSHEN, Summerhall**

Delightful show composed entirely of lists that have been crowdsourced through social media, workshops and from the audience at each performance. Joyful and more profound than its premise suggests.

- **On Ice by Suzanne Grotenhuis, part of the Big In Belgium season, Summerhall**

A gentle piece of storytelling told by a beautifully engaging dutch performer. The piece is funny and charming and full of tangents but at its heart it's a show about loneliness with a pinkle of magic.

- **Translunar Paradise by Theatre Ad Infinitum, Pleasance Courtyard**

Stunning piece of physical theatre using mime and mask to evoke an older man looking back over his life and memories of his late wife.

– **Becoming Sheherezade, Edinburgh Conference Centre**

This was a special performance just for us. Kamaal Hussain greeted us with baklava and turkish delight in traditional Iraqi dress. Once we were settled he performed his one man show Becoming Scheherazade, traced his and his family’s journeys from Iraq to London via the Midlands. The piece is still in development and sits within a wider project in which Kamaal is collecting 1001 stories from British Arabs.

He stayed for a conversation with the group afterwards. The first question was “Can I give you a hug?” which gives you a sense of the emotional impact the show had had on the group. It was especially joyful to hear so many people in the group were keen to tell Kamaal about the Arab communities near them, in South Shields in particular, and to start giving examples of some of the interesting stories he would find there. We drew the conversation to a close after 45 minutes but if we hadn’t had to leave for our train I think it would have gone on for hours.



Image courtesy of Jason Thompson

The feedback

First of all our residents benefitted hugely from the whole experience. Feedback included the following comments:

“Thanks for an amazing day. The organisers really catered to our group’s needs and are excellent at what they do, happy memories of my first time in Edinburgh and first time in a theatre. Thank you.”

“Absolutely loved today! Brilliant experience seeing art and theatre I would never have picked for myself. I loved every show I saw.”

“ An excellent range of shows for us to see. Embracing my inner child with Polar Bears was the perfect start to our day. The show/talk with Kamaal was astounding. I’ve been hugely entertained all day but this was the show that moved me to tears. Such an incredible story told with dignity - perfect close to a brilliant day. Massive thanks to Morag, Natalie and both bait and Cultural Spring teams for looking after us and ensuring we had a brilliant Fringe experience.”

We also believe that both Cultural Spring and bait both enjoyed and learned from working with each other, while the professional programmers with us on the trip benefitted from engaging with our residents – there is the possibility of work identified by our community programmes finding its way into their venues.

So hopefully our communities will benefit from new opportunities to see shows that may result from having the professional programmers on the trip.

Sucesses and challenges?

The logistics worked very well, and added to the enjoyment of the day for those attending. If we hadn't booked transport and pre-booked tickets for the shows, participants might have had a very different experience. Planning for the day took some time and organisation, but was well worth the time and effort.

Not everyone enjoyed every show, but exposing our residents to different types of dramatic experiences, challenging them and developing them was one of the reasons for going.

Taking professional programmers was a good idea – they interacted well with our residents, who could learn from them. The programmers were also interested to see what shows might work in Sunderland, South Tyneside and South East Northumberland.

The trip worked extremely well and people who came along have since come to other Cultural Spring Go and See events. It has opened up people to arts experiences which they have never had before, all the feedback was extremely positive, and the trip is something we'd look to do again.

Recommendations

Bring the learning back to your area

Take along programmers and cultural staff to see shows which could work in local venues and chat with people on the trip about their own ideas and what they would like to see.

Let them do something unusual

Try to ensure you're taking people to shows they've not seen before and let them experience something new.

Time to talk

Factor in time for the group to discuss the events afterwards with each other and to bond over their shared experience.

Check your tickets

Make sure the travel arrangements and ticket arrangements are absolutely nailed on; provide as much information prior to the trip as possible

Be flexible on the day

Unplanned things will happen but being flexible means you are able to adapt and respond to them.

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