

Grants for the Arts Case Study

Urban Playground: involving audiences



Image courtesy of Urban Playground, photo by Richard Raybitt

AMA Associate Editor, Sara Lock, interviews
Urban Playground's Alister O'Loughlin



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**



Case Study Introduction

What will I learn and is it relevant to me?

Themes...

- Children and young people
- Dance
- Audience development
- Touring

Learning...

- Working with young people
- Involving audiences in the creation of new work
- Funding continued development of a touring production

Relevance...

This case study is relevant to:

- Touring companies wanting to involve audiences in the creation process
- Organisations keen to work with children and young people
- Grants for the Arts applicants who want to find out more about funded projects

The Urban Playground Team
is the original performance-
parkour (2PK) company combining
authentic French free-running
with dance and physical theatre.

Background

Introducing Urban Playground

Introducing Urban Playground

The Urban Playground Team are the original performance-parkour (2PK) company combining authentic French free-running with dance and physical theatre.

The Team tours extensively across five continents for clients including the British Council, teaching wherever they go.

Since 2006 they have worked in partnership with co-creator of Parkour Malik Diouf.

The Team appeared in the feature documentary 'Come Fly With Us', BBC's Blue Peter and Sky1's Got To Dance.

The Architecture For Everyone documentary 'Our Urban Playground', made in collaboration with the Stephen Lawrence Trust, features The Team's design of the UK's first permanent Parkour Training Area.

Target audience

The Urban Playground Team have a strong focus on young people, particularly 12 - 25-year-olds at risk of social exclusion. This is the audience they keep in mind when making work. The company is committed to working with young people who are considered 'troublesome' and re-presenting them as artists.

While maintaining a youth focus, The Team makes work to appeal to the general public. It's important to the company, particularly when making work for outdoor spaces, that they create performances that appeal to all ages and backgrounds.

Ambitions

- To bring together the classic literary influences of their original company, Prodigal Theatre, with Urban Playground's Parkour
- To create adaptable productions that can work in different settings
- To give audiences more ownership of the work
- To continue working as an ensemble and demonstrate to other companies that it is possible
- To reach young people before they become classified as 'not engaged'

Steam

Involving audiences in the creation process

The project

The Urban Playground Team initially applied to Grants for the Arts for support with the research and development phase of its new show, Steam.

The idea was to reimagine the life of a steam locomotive in a performance designed to engage young people.

The Team wanted to experiment with involving an audience from the very early stages of development. They also wanted to create a show that was flexible and had a set list that could be added to.

Following a successful research and development phase, the company received a second grant to create and tour Steam.

The process

A recent addition to the Grants for the Arts questions about how audiences had been involved in the creation of the work sparked The Urban Playground Team's imagination.

The company saw a real opportunity in involving its target audience in the development of its new show.

In previous jobs Alister and Miranda had run scratch nights for artists to share work in development and really understood the value of that process.

Keen to find a way to test their new work with an audience, they approached South East Dance.

South East Dance were similarly enthused by the idea and arranged for Urban Playground to use the site in Brighton that's destined to become The Dance Space in 2018.

As well as recognising the value to The Urban Playground Team's work, South East Dance saw an opportunity to start building relationships with the community surrounding The Dance Space site. They contacted the Oasis Project, a substance misuse service for women and families based in the area, and offered free Parkour workshops and performances.

The Urban Playground Team worked with 50 people over a week, delivering workshops and testing ideas for Steam on a basic scaffold set. It was some of the roughest work they'd presented in years but it helped them get a sense of whether they had scenes for everyone.

They discovered that the James Bond scene went down really well with dads. The Wild West scene got young children all excited and giggly. The commuter scene felt familiar to anyone who'd ever worked in the city. The World War I scene prompted young girls to ask if the soldier survived.

Through that process the company realised they could lower the target age of their work because it was appealing to a wider audience.

The company maintained a dialogue with Arts Council England about the progress of their research and development. They talked about how they saw the work developing and applied for additional funds to support the creation and tour of the performance.

They toured the work across the UK, performing at festivals and into a wide variety of settings. Each performance, where possible, was followed by an informal workshop where the audience were invited onto the set to engage more deeply in the work.

Cost

Urban Playground received £5,000 from Grants for the Arts for the initial research and development phase. That was followed by £35,000 towards the creation and touring of the show in 2015.

The company secured additional funding from South East Dance, Pavilion Dance South West, Civic Barnsley and Dance in Devon.

Urban Playground operates as a social enterprise so any income from previous tours, beyond artist fees, goes back into the creation of new work.

Results

Changing the world one piece at a time

The results

- 50 people took part in workshops and watched the performance in development during the research and development phase
- The company received further Grants for the Arts support to create and tour the full production
- They presented 36 performances in total
- 5,900 people attended performances of Steam
- 1,700 people have watched the film

Further developments

Urban Playground has received a Strategic Touring grant of £30,700 to develop Steam into a larger project. The team will work with four sets of partners, each combining a heritage railway with a dance organisation and a group of young people.

They will deliver a series of workshops with each group of young people, exploring the significance of the railway in their community. They will then create a curtain raiser that will become an integral part of the Steam performance in their location.

Steam has toured to Thailand and Milan. It has also received funding from Arts Council England and the British Council through the Reimagine India fund to develop an Indian version of Steam.

Benefits to Urban Playground

The team has benefited from skills development throughout the research and development phase. Everyone played five or six characters in the performance and can do that confidently now.

The tour has enabled the company to travel more throughout the UK and develop new relationships with organisations such as Lakeside Arts and The Gulbenkian.

They've developed their ability to tell a story really quickly in an outdoor setting. That's a real skill and something that's essential for outdoor work when you have to capture people's attention.

The tour and ongoing project has strengthened Urban Playground's relationship with audiences. People have watched the show and afterwards sent photos of themselves on trains doing the commuter salute from the performance.

Benefits to audiences

Offering informal workshops after each performance has created a real sense of togetherness and acceptance. People who'd never take part in an activity together will watch a performance and get up and have a go - that's equally true for children, adults and people with disabilities.

Audiences have been given permission to behave like children, play on a set and move beautifully without having to be a dancer.

Recommendations

Learning from The Team's experience

Recommendations

- Find a way to create that time in the early stages to share your work with an audience - they will tell you so much about the work you're making and help you break bad habits and hold tightly to good ones
- Develop relationships and begin the process in the cheapest and simplest way possible with free rehearsal space - testing ideas before asking for major funding will enable you to develop a clearer and more compelling plan
- Keep dialogue with funders and supporters open - keep them up to date with developments and you will keep the door open for the next stage of your project
- Plan evaluation from the outset to make that a straightforward and valuable process
- If you're staring at an application form not knowing what to write then ask someone for help
- Know your strengths and weaknesses and bring in expertise when you need it
- Constantly re-evaluate and look for ways to improve your process and change your ways of working

Find out more

<http://www.theurbanplayground.co.uk/>

[Watch a video of Steam](#)