



Reaching beyond the building – how to engage communities

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Introduced and chaired by Howard Buckley, Head of Membership – AMA.

During this session [Abbigail Ollive](#) and [Alexander Wright](#) will share details of how York Theatre Royal has transformed the impact it has on its community. York Theatre Royal takes a cross-departmental approach to engaging communities ensuring the whole organisation is audience focused. They build long-term relationships with visitors and participants by working with them to deliver artistic work. Sharing insights from their young-people's *Take Over Festival* and their community-focused *York Mystery Plays 2012* this session will explore how an organisation can develop effective engagement programmes. Abbi and Alex will also discuss *On Our Turf*, a project being funded by Arts Council England Strategic Touring Fund.

Abbigail Ollive

I'm head of communications and enterprises at York Theatre Royal – I am a marketing person and the 'enterprises' isn't anything to do with *Star Trek* – that is a new part of my role as we've recently restructured our organisation bringing all of the front-facing teams together and I now manage the catering department, the box office and front of house and our new events business that includes weddings. It's a broad role that has developed quite significantly since 2006 and includes marketing but it was all about bringing all our teams under one umbrella and thinking about the customer journey right through our organisation.

Alex Wright

I'm Alex and I have to confess that I am an interloper – I don't work in marketing at all – but I am a playwright, theatre director and festival curator. I'm now the producer for a project called *On our Turf* and have also worked on *The York Mystery Plays* and *Takeover*.

Abbigail Ollive

York Theatre Royal is a regional producing theatre and there was first a theatre on our site in York in 1774.

It's an old building that is steeped in history, there's a Roman well under the stage, there's a gateway to the royal mint in the wall at the back of the stage which is part of the old walls of York. The 'new' extension was built in 1967. We produce about ten of our own shows every year and have been famous in the past for our annual pantomime and we have the country's longest-running Dame –



Berwick Kaler who writes, directs and stars in our panto. That's been our longest running, loyal community audience – they camp outside the box office on March 1st every year when we put the tickets on sale and there's almost a competition between them as they've started camping out a day before to see who can get there the first in the queue. The queue goes right down through the centre of York on that day when we open the sales and there are three generations of people who've been coming over the 29 years that we've been doing it.

In the summer months we traditionally, like a lot of theatres, would go dark but in 2008, after two years of planning, we stage a production of *The Railway Children* at the National Railway Museum in York. That was our first big partnership project with another large cultural organisation in the city and it had a huge impact on the more recent history of the theatre. That production sold out, we repeated it in 2009 and then it ran at Waterloo Station, London in 2010 and 2011 before touring to Toronto, Canada. It was very successful and put York Theatre Royal on the map in terms of PR and raising our profile in the arts community both nationally and internationally. We learned a lot from that project and we realised that by doing something outside of our building, by working in a completely different way, by changing the configuration of the relationship between the audience and the action – in the museum a train came through the middle of the audience – the children and the young people who were watching the show were a lot closer to the action than they would be in our usual theatre space because there's a big gap between the stalls and the stage and we have one of the highest stages in the country.

Having done *The Railway Children* we decided that summer was going to be another key time for us. So, as well as our summer production the other important strands of our work have always been our youth theatre (350 people), our Creative Engagements department who work with six partnership schools that change every year, and we have Pilot Theatre as a resident company at the York Theatre Royal who specifically produce work for young people; teenagers and up to 25 year olds. When the Arts Council England's; *A Night Less Ordinary*, fund came into

play just before 2009 we went for one of those grants and were granted one of the top-level grants of £50,000 for two years.

We're very good, as I'm sure lots of organisations are, at marketing and saying 'come to us, come and see what we're doing' but *Takeover* was the turning point for us in changing our relationship with our community. Even though we did youth theatre, lots of schools work and lots of participatory activity it all focused on young people and our community work had also been traditionally focused on young people and their participation. *Takeover* was an opportunity with *A Night Less Ordinary* to do something a little bit different and in 2009 it was a bit radical and a really good success story. It's now an old case study but we're going to start with that as it has led on to a couple more successful things in the last few years in terms of broadening the reach of what we do and creating longer-term projects with a wider demographic – not just up to 25 year olds.

A lot of people used their *A Night Less Ordinary* grants to give away free tickets to try to engage more young people in the arts by getting them in to try things out. As a senior management team at the time we had already programmed almost a year's worth of work before we got the funding and thought that while it was fine to offer free tickets to that programme of work it might not be work that our young audience would want to see or use a free ticket on. We had lots of conversations about that fact that the shows we had programmed may even put off a younger audience from coming back to the YTR even if we did manage to give away loads of free tickets. It may not be a production that is inspiring to them or engaging to them as it may not have been built and programmed in that season with a younger audience in mind. So, we thought that we'd do it a little bit differently. Our artistic director has to be fully credited with the idea, he said; 'why don't we recruit a group of under 25 year olds to programme three weeks of our season?'. So when the brochure ran out, the next three weeks would be a festival that a group of under-25 year olds would curate. Alongside that, for the festival, there would be a number of free tickets so if anybody who was under 25 and wanted to come to see work during those three weeks could come for free.

We were really surprised at the result. The way that we set up *Takeover* was that every head of department had an under-25 year old that would come as an extended placement and shadow them. There was the senior management team, head of department level, as replicates our staff structure and a board consisting of 11 to 25 year olds. Anybody taking a senior management role had to be 18 to 25 years old because of the level or experience but the board could be 11 to 25 years old. The 'chair of the board' would shadow our chair of the board and we had a 'young' board working with our theatre board. We thought that what would happen would be that our youth theatre members, the schools who already knew us, and other people that we know

would be the ones who would apply for a position and we could therefore give them a different experience. That didn't happen. Some people we knew, and for some people we advertised like we would any other job, as we do for every volunteer role. People came from surprising places. The picture (right) shows us with our 'mini me's' – I'm in the middle with Izzy who was my *Takeover* Head of Communications for the first year, down to the left-hand side is Damien our artistic director with Sam and Charlotte – he took on two artistic directors for the project and Robbie shadowed Dan, who was our chief executive at the time (bottom right), and was the festival producer. Robbie had been working in the meat hygiene service, had done a maths degree and had no experience of theatre but knew that he enjoyed coming to the theatre and at a young age wanted to change his career – he's now running a theatre.



Even in the short space of two years of having *A Night Less Ordinary* funding we worked with about 50 young people per year – including the front of house welcome team, volunteers, street teams and the board. They've become such an integral part of our organisation that after two years it wasn't an option for us we had to try to find a way of making it work when that funding came to an end. We don't have a development department, myself and our general manager applied for Paul Hamlyn Foundation and Esmee Fairbairn Foundation money to keep the project running and we were successful in gaining Esmee Fairbairn funding until 2015 and we've had Paul Hamlyn funding for the last two years. Not to the same level as *A Night Less Ordinary* funding but to a level where we can put money into this particular project.

The board are a rolling board and now we're in the fourth year of *Takeover* and some board members have grown up with it and are still on the board and some are new so every year we recruit new people. The placements are 'real' and there are many stories of individuals who have gone on to be successful because of 'running' the festival at York Theatre Royal. You wouldn't usually get the experience of running the festival, programming three weeks of work in a regional producing theatre, budgeting for it and marketing it until you were way into your career. For someone like Robbie at the age of 23 years old there's no way that he'd do the job of a Chief Executive but it is a real experience and they work really closely with staff and there's also a mentoring element. Izzy went on straightaway to get a job at Sheffield Theatres as Marketing Assistant and then as Marketing Officer and is now at the Unicorn Theatre.

Robbie went to Otley to run the [Otley Courthouse](#) and is now part of the senior management team at the Forum in Northampton. My Head of Communications from last year, Emily, is at Richmond Theatre in London and Helen who was our chair of the board for two years went to work with Mind the Gap theatre in Bradford – the list goes on. People get a real experience, have a meaningful relationship with us and it gets them into the industry as they leave the project knowing what they're doing.

The impact that it's had on York Theatre Royal as well is that it was the project that started us off on a path of working cross-departmentally in a way that we'd never done before. I remember the festival opening for the first year and the festival team that year set a precedent when they said that they didn't just want to programme stuff for under 25s and that it was really important to not exclude the regular YTR audience for three weeks. York Theatre Royal is a hub for those people where they meet up and spend time together and share their understanding of audiences. There are some space issues with the number of people who are coming in but they have a *Takeover* office and work within our departments as well.

Audiences to the festival weeks during these years have been about 50% under 25 year olds and 50% over 25s. We have grown our under 25s audience and we have carried on doing 10 free tickets per show for every show in our main house at York Theatre Royal. One of the things that we've learnt is that young people are travelling to take part in *Takeover*. Georgia who I mentioned before lives in Tunbridge Wells and travelled for nearly a year, every Tuesday, on the bus from Tunbridge Wells. That can't be an enjoyable experience but there wasn't an opportunity for her near her home. She'd hear about *Takeover* from a friend who was at York University and she felt passionately that she wanted to try arts marketing and so she made that commitment to be in our office every Tuesday while working part time at other jobs. We know that the experience had worked for them but one thing we hadn't agreed was to pay travelling expenses and so last year £3,000 was allocated to pay people travel expenses as we're reaching out into communities that aren't just our York-based community.

We realised, having done *Takeover*, that we were still focusing on under 25 year olds and young people and that's now running as a project that we know works and have learned lots from it. Going back to *The Railway Children* and working in partnership with other organisations in the city, thinking about our community and the value of having worked with those young people in the community we decided that we'd really like to do a bigger project as York Theatre Royal that would involve members of the community aged over 25 as well. This project, our big summer production running for the whole of August last year, was a long time in the planning and was *The York Mystery Plays*.

Alex Wright – The *York Mystery Plays* are a cycle of *Bible* stories which have been told by the community of York since Medieval Times. They were originally told in churches in Latin and then the people of York took them out of the churches, put them into English and told them around the streets of the city. They are stories that are owned by the people of York and ordinarily they are told by people on wagons that are drawn around the city. Each Guild in the city would tell a part of the story. For example, the Guild of Woodcarvers would tell *Noah's Ark*, the Butchers would tell the story of the *Slaughter of the Innocents* – each Guild would tell the story that best-matched their profession. You could sit in one place in the city and throughout one day these 40-45 plays would be drawn past you – a bit like an annual festival.

Occasionally they would be staged in one place over the course of an evening and often happened in the museum gardens in York. The last time it was staged in St Mary's Abbey was in 1988 and the last time it was staged as a play was in 2000. What we wanted to do in 2012 – York's 800th anniversary as a city with its own governance – was to stage *The Mystery Plays*, the static play, back in the museum gardens and with the community at the very heart



of every aspect of it. We commissioned a new adaptation by Mike Kenney and our aim was for it to be about the community without one star or big name. We had two professional actors in the whole of the run and everything else was created with our community.

Alex played the *York Mystery Plays 2012* teaser: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q1KHM75H1Nw>

Abbigail – A big project like that has to have a longer reading time than most of the projects that we do. We did a city launch – as you saw, we had the leader of York City Council speaking along with our Chief Executive and the Head Curator of York Museums Trust. York Museums Trust owns this site and we worked with them as a partner and also with Riding Lights Theatre Company based in York. We were three very different organisations working in partnership and came across many challenges throughout the project but we also had many positive outcomes. We had the launch to get the people and the city interested and start raising awareness. The next thing we needed to do was to recruit people to be involved.

Alex – the scale of this became more and more impossible in my imagination the more we talked about it. The plan was to do this play for three weeks outside and we built a 1400-seat stadium and a large stage that went straight through the Abbey windows. We needed about 30,000 people

to come to see it and the budget was about £1m. We needed hundreds of people to make it possible along with a lot of care, imagination and time from our audiences and people who care about the plays. We recruited a producer who spent a lot of time talking to people in schools, colleges and community groups. We worked with York College on building much of the set and we recruited 80 people to make costumes who in



themselves became a community. There were two casts of about 400 people each and they all needed around three costumes. We needed to find partners to offer rehearsal space around the city because our spaces aren't large enough and that meant brokering new relationships – Tesco sponsored all the catering and Morrisons sponsored the front-of-house uniforms. We also had a team of 40 community photographers working on a voluntary basis to document the whole process.

Abbi – we decided that we didn't need professional production shots as we had such a wealth of photos from the whole process that we opened up the Flickr site and engaged the press using that – the local paper ran a story every day in the month leading up to the shows using the different photos.

Alex – From a director's point of view there was little sense that we were in charge and what was outstanding was that it was based on peoples' care and passion for something.

Abbi – I had 25 volunteers who were interested in promotion put their names down in the recruitment process so I managed with my team a group of 25 volunteers who met on the last Wednesday of every month somebody from the artistic team i.e. directors, set designers or costume designers who would come to brief them about the next steps and stage of the project. They were then like a small army of people who felt excited about something and would go and talk about it. They would come to me with a list of events that they would like to go to such as the York Dragon Boat Race, the Community Fair and the Great Yorkshire Show. They divided themselves up and we managed them but they wanted to put a T-shirt on and get out there and become ambassadors for the project – they ranged from teenagers to pensioners and some of them volunteered for front of house jobs during the show.

Alex – I think it changed our perceptions about what an exchange is with an audience – the audience become participants. We had around 1700 people involved who would have all been

having conversations with family and friends about it. People were talking about it all over town and many people knew someone who was involved in some way.

Abbi – this is the video of the first get together of the whole team. There were 12,700 people involved in the project and the casts came together with some of the teams to do a read through of the show which I'm sure must've been one of the World's biggest read throughs ever: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YnCZ2b32YF8>



Alex – that was on the 15th April and we opened the show on 2nd August. We rehearsed every night in

that period. As a theatre it felt right and as our duty to provide the bottom-line organisation in order to allow people to be involved in something remarkable.

Abbi – one of Megan's (Megan was a delegate in the audience for this session) roles when she worked with us as a volunteer in the marketing team as a marketing and digital marketing volunteer was to curate a series of videos. A graduate working in our youth theatre wanted to get into the industry and make theatre videos and trailers and so agreed to make a series of six videos for us with stories that were curated by Megan. A 'community four' went out to 1,700 people to ask some interesting and quirky questions so that we could glean some information about who they were and what their background was. From all the gathered information, Megan sat down and worked out which stories Ed should produce as videos.

It's a huge undertaking for an organisation and we'll probably do something on this scale every six years as it's not sustainable to do it more often than that. There's also the challenge of working much further in advance while you're still programming the season in the theatre and the challenges of partnership working with a big museums trust as they work in a different way to the theatre with different budgets, working differently in terms of their marketing and different ways of team working.

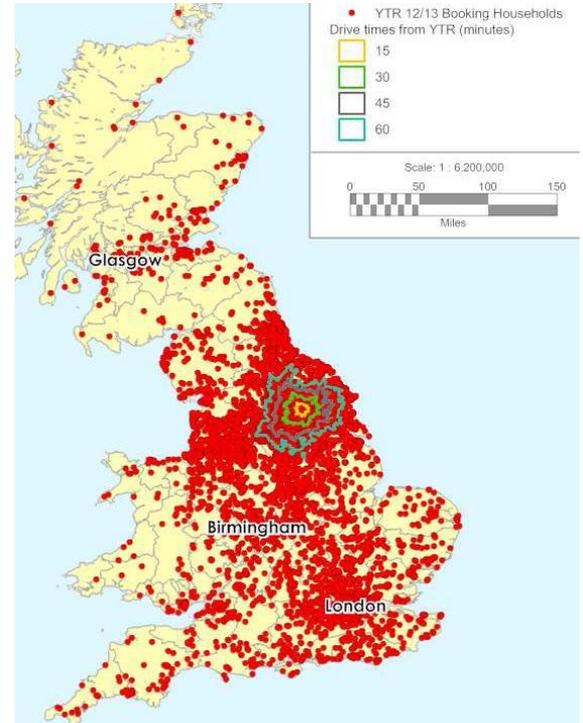
We had project groups and our marketing team consisted of a group of volunteers and the marketing team from York Theatre Royal, York Museums Trust and the Riding Lights who would all come together once a week. Tickets went on sale a year in advance so we started meeting over 18 months in advance. I've learnt a lot from that way of partnership working but there are the challenges that obviously people do things in different ways and differ in their decision processes but it was all very equal and there wasn't a leader to that particular team. It was a really valuable experience and relationships have been built throughout the city that have legacies for the future.

The image below shows just half the cast and here's a video about the community involvement in the plays: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C8STHka1x3w>.



LEGACIES AND OUTCOMES

- The production was well received gaining positive press coverage and hitting financial targets
- We won Visit York Tourism Awards – Visitor Experience of the Year
- Damian Cruden (YTR Artistic Director) was awarded the York Tourism Ambassador of the Year, giving the arts a voice in the national tourism sector
- 32K tickets sold – 57% of those people had never booked through York Theatre Royal box office in the past. We believe that was down to our community producer engaging with a range of community groups. We also had an extensive national reach as you can see from the map (opposite)
- Staff were volunteering on parts of the production and working off site in different ways to their usual ways of working within the building
- We were working with a team of volunteers, training and development programmes leading up to the event



From the very start we had joint team meetings across the three organisations and briefing meetings so that everyone from every department in all three organisations knew the progress on the project and felt involved from start to finish although some departments, such as marketing and sales, need to start working on the project a lot earlier than others. We were encouraged as staff members to think about areas in which we could volunteer alongside the 1,700 community volunteers. As an organisation we needed to make time for people to do that and to join in with the things that needed doing on site in the gardens and to encourage them to step out of their regular jobs for a short time. We were all authorised to do familiarisation tours of the site for people who might go away and promote it for us, such as the tourism bureau and school groups. This is the *York Mystery Plays 2012* cinematic trailer which (when I came to do this presentation) had over 14,700 views on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GAKzf4zndmc>

FOLLOW UP

We genuinely feel like we've made nearly 2,000 friends in the city. Our next community production – with a much smaller cast of just 300 this October (2013) will be *Blood and Chocolate* – a promenade about York's chocolate production during the First World War. It is again a production with two other partners; Pilot Theatre and Slung Low, and will take place around the streets of York.

A really interesting thing from one of the keynote speakers this morning was that he said if you are working with community volunteers then the quality of your product may not be as great as you would like it to be. I think that we changed people's perceptions internally and within the community as well because the show itself and working with community actors didn't mean that the quality should be any different to our usual shows. We couldn't believe just how good the volunteers were. We worked with the BBC and Arts Council England's *The Space* project to live-stream it and it was watched around the world. Now over to Alex to explain how he followed up his *Mystery Plays* experience ...

Alex – We grew up in a small community, in a small village in North Yorkshire and I'm used to working in the theatre community where you meet people often for just short periods of time. I thought it would be a good thing to try to bring those two communities together and invited friends from the theatre community to come to our 400 year-old local pub to perform any new ideas and things that they were working on. We paid their travel, accommodation and



expenses and asked the village to accommodate the artists and made it free for people to attend. We called it the *Little Festival of Everything* and it included music, dance, cabaret, comedy, installation, visual arts, poetry, crafts, eating and drinking. About 50 artists took place and around 1,000 people came. Much collaboration came about as a result and new friendships were made. We did it again the following year and it has now become a key part of the *On Our Turf* project which is made up of the principles of *Little Festival of Everything* and the *York Mystery Plays*. We were aware, although they were such a success, that the *Mystery Plays* were very York-centric and that people had to come to York to see it. In order to build our relationship with our regional and rural communities we put in a bid to Arts Council England's Strategic Touring Fund in which we were successful. This goes towards the 2-year *On Our Turf* project that will run until September 2015 although we aim to make the project sustainable and continue indefinitely into the future once that funding has run out. We're working with four small market towns and each of them has an arts centre with a relatively similar flow of audience through them but all have very different types of management and leadership, box office capacities and data capture. Working with each community we will commission an international or national artist to come in and create with the community a high-impact show – four £10,000 commissions. The only stipulation is that those shows are not to be made in an arts centre. Based on what the local amateur dramatics company might sell for a show we'd like to get 300 people to come along over a weekend. Each show, be it a show that is based around a walk around the village or an opera taking place at a market stall, will be shown in their particular village and then toured to the other three in the following weekends – they couldn't make a show for a cathedral, as not all of the towns involved have a cathedral in which to perform it. We'd like to see at least 50 people involved in making each of these shows and the only professional infrastructure in place is the artist that is commissioned to create the piece along with myself. The rest will be done by the community. It is very important for us that there is a national or international artist involved to bring each of these projects to a national arts level. Over the two years each community will also create four festivals each – 16 festivals in total – following the model that we created for our first *Little Festival of Everything* and creating work in all sorts of venues including shops, bandstands, public toilets etc. In each of these places we've set up a steering group who have taken ownership and leadership of each of the projects when I'm not available to be there. These projects need to meet many hard-to-reach groups and Arts Council England's segments such as 'bedroom DJs' and 'old or home bound' but I'm more interested in talking to the rugby club and other groups of people to engage them actively in something they wouldn't usually get involved in and that might matter to them. My main role really is to go into these communities, talk to people and encourage them to

talk to other people and give a community an excuse to be imaginative and the people that come to the meetings come because they care about it.

It's important that, as a strategic project, what we learn from this is disseminated to other areas and we are partners with Bristol Old Vic and Theatre by The Lake – two organisations based in very different locations in terms of social set up and density of population and artistic population. We are also partners with the National Rural Touring Forum so we get involved in great conversations with the rural touring groups across the country. We are also working with Trestle Theatre Company and Indefinite Article. Trestle, in the spring of 2014 will come to make a piece of work with us that will be for 11 to 25 year olds which will be a participation- or intervention-based piece of work. It won't be something that you can tour rurally with a traditional set but it might be that they run a classroom or a café for a day and will work their piece around that. The following year, puppetry and animation company; Indefinite Article will do something similar with a show targeted at participants of 60+ years and that can move quickly and easily around the country while inviting people in. The key thing for me with *On Our Turf* is that I spend my time inviting people to join in something rather than trying to 'sell' them something – I'm letting them know what's happening and asking them to join in and what they can bring to it.

Abbi – For York Theatre Royal it's a new role, a new project – Alex dreamt it up, applied for the funding and it's been a new way for us as a 'building', as an organisation to work in a different way, evolving our relationship with our community and involving people in a meaningful way. I've always believed that word-of-mouth marketing is stronger than any paid-for advertising. Going back to our partnership with the museums, they were very much an 'advertising' organisation and we fought to say 'no, it's about talking to people'. The *Mystery Plays* community team, between them, raised £10,000 towards the project by doing bake sales, raffles and auctions etc. We continue to have meetings and days set aside where people from our communities can come along and offer suggestions and ideas for programming as we want to keep these community ideas going even if we're not working towards a big show. We're going to try to get the arts council to fund the role of a Community Cultural Producer for York – someone who goes around making those connections with groups in our communities. We all go to networking events and talk about our organisations but we don't go out talking to people in fish and chip shops as part of our working day and that would be the role of the Community Cultural Producer.

Alex: In the last few years, we've learnt that our job as a regional producing theatre is to do just that – to create and animate our region alongside people in our communities.

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