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Grid Iron Theatre Company –
Crude: An exploration of oil



Grid Iron, Crude: An Exploration of Oil 2016. Photo: Eoin Carey

**CENTRE FOR
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Managing risk: Lessons from staging site-specific theatre

“The uncomfortable truth is despite all the difficulties that came before, during and after the production, I can’t put my hand on my heart and say we definitely wouldn’t take the same risk again. But what can we learn?”

Judith Doherty, Producer, Chief Executive and Co-Artistic Director of Grid Iron

Grid Iron is an Edinburgh-based new writing theatre company which has developed a reputation over the past 25 years for creating award-winning site-specific and location theatre across Scotland and beyond. We have built relationships with a skilled and dedicated team of freelancers and developed a way of approaching our work on site, creating and managing all the documentation we need, and delivering and evaluating projects. However, despite our best efforts and intentions, sometimes forces align to make things difficult.

In 2016 we produced a show called *Crude: an exploration of oil* which was an investigation of the oil industry focusing on the lives of offshore workers. Although essentially fictional, it was based on interviews with current and past oil workers including survivors of the Piper Alpha disaster. It garnered positive reviews and we were proud of it. But from its very inception it was fraught with difficulty and in the end, it caused us financial loss that has taken the company several years to recover from.

What’s the story?

We started thinking about the show back in 2007. We had just made a seemingly impossible show in Edinburgh International Airport with the National Theatre of Scotland and were full of the slightly unrealistic ambition that success can bring. Back then we wanted to do the show on an oil rig we even costed up how much it would be to take the audience to a rig by helicopter! Then realisation hit that not only was that ridiculously expensive, but hardly in keeping with the ecological message we wanted to have. We shelved it and it fell from our radar.

However, by 2015 the time was ripe again for an investigation into this controversial Scottish industry. So we put *Crude* back into our plans. Our writer and director Ben Harrison identified a great spot for the show - an oil rig manufacturing yard just over the Forth Bridge from Edinburgh. This meant the show could be staged close to our company base and therefore we wouldn’t incur too many travel, accommodation and subsistence costs. Planning started in earnest and it was looking like a promising and exciting project.

By the end of 2015, everything went very quiet with the site. Our contacts there were failing to return any calls or respond to emails. It became apparent that we had to find another location. This wasn’t the first time we’d found ourselves in this situation - it’s always a danger with site-work. If it’s a commercial property for let or a building with a clearly defined primary purpose (i.e. airport, hospital, tourist attraction), their circumstances can quickly change. We need to confirm locations quite far in advance and we are far from their top priority. The show wasn’t until October, so we had plenty of time, or so we thought.

It took until August to secure our new location. It was a massive oil rig manufacturing shed in Dundee, which meant we incurred all the costs that we would have avoided in the previous location. Staging site-specific work is always costly but as this space was much larger, we also had increased costs for extra technical and safety equipment. Relocating the show also meant we lost our original co-producers, as we were no longer within their catchment area. Dundee Rep Theatre kindly stepped in, providing box office support and helping us market the show to their audiences.

Of course, it's a different audience experience entirely that you are offering in site-specific or outdoor theatre. The entire audience journey needs to be taken into account when planning shows that do not take place in usual spaces. We try to make sure that people have as much information as they possibly can have before buying a ticket. Show start times need to take into account public transport timetables. The unique nature of the performance site for *Crude* meant we needed to control how and when audiences accessed the site and take responsibility for security checks.

We overcame all these logistical challenges, but we just didn't sell the number of tickets we needed to bridge the funding gap, let alone cover all the extra costs incurred by the change of location. It's hard to pinpoint one reason for this. We had toured to the Dundee Rep before, but this time we were too late to be included in their season brochure, the most direct access to the largest theatre audience in the area. We also set our ticket prices using the Reps pricing structure as guidance, but we should have taken into consideration that our usual audience were in Edinburgh and Glasgow and would need to travel using one of the most expensive train routes in the country.

What's the learning?

Consider costs to audiences when setting ticket prices

We can't charge the same ticket price for every Grid Iron show, wherever we tour. It is important to consider the audience's journey from the moment they are buying a ticket. I think that there's a tendency in the arts industry to think: 'what's the highest amount that we can get away with charging?' when we should think: 'what's the lowest amount we can charge?' We need to consider not just train travel or petrol costs, but also if the audience will need to buy something to eat on the way or have to travel at peak time. Lower ticket prices should then be considered to make sure there's proper accessibility.

However, setting ticket prices is a balancing act. It's important not to devalue the product and the work that has gone into making the show. Being open about the processes involved in making a show can help to show the amount of effort, time and size of workforce needed to create a theatre production.

Don't believe your own hype

Whether you are a company that works site-specifically, outdoors or tours, you quickly learn that previous success in one part of the country does not guarantee an audience in another. You need to plug into local communities where you can. There were times when we would take a cab somewhere or speak to the security guards at the port, and they would ask 'why have you not told anybody about this – your audiences should be huge!'

You can always use a bigger marketing budget

Just because a typical theatre-going audience might have read about your work, or follow you on social media, it doesn't mean this will translate to sales where you tour. This is especially true if you don't have the budget to adequately let them know about it. The late notice and limited budget for *Crude* meant we just didn't have enough time and resource for marketing. As well as ensuring that audiences have all the information they need to plan their journey to the performance site itself, your marketing can also help to give people a sense of what's included in their ticket price (e.g. travel to and from the site) to communicate value for money.

The show doesn't always have to go on

A week before we opened, sales were still low. To have pulled the project after so many years of work and planning would have been very hard and the fact we'd only found our venue with two months to go may not have been an adequate enough reason for our funders. However, we could perhaps have looked to honour the contracts we had in place, and negotiated with the team to consider postponing the show for six months.

Of course, with site-specific work in particular, there is a lot of aligning of stars to make things happen, and there are rarely any guarantees. When you're working with commercial or industrial property, you only ever get a notional agreement, and your plans can always be thwarted if the building or site is sold or occupied. Very often the moment you realise you shouldn't do this anymore, it's too late. It's important to consider early on what your project's dealbreakers are – what you won't compromise on – in case the worst happens.

Go with your gut and don't be afraid to ask for help

Good decision-making is a mixture of intuition and rigour. It pays to be aware of who the final decision-maker is. If it's you, don't put off making the decision for too long. If your head and your heart are saying 'this is not going right', then don't ignore it.

Yet rarely are decisions made independently: you're doing it with your team, with your board, and with your funding body. Of course, it's hard when you don't want to put a foot wrong in their eyes but it's okay to ask for help and advice.



Grid Iron, *Crude: An Exploration of Oil* 2016. Photo: Eoin Carey

Additional resources and information

For more information about Grid Iron Theatre Company visit gridiron.org.uk.

Watch the [promotional video](#) for *Crude* and read an [interview](#) with the show's writer and director Ben Harrison.

You can also read the company's case study about their latest production *Doppler* on the [Creative Carbon Scotland website](#).

Case study written and provided by: Judith Doherty, Producer, Chief Executive and Co-Artistic Director of Grid Iron. These are Judith's personal reflections on the project.

(Edited by: Emma McDowell, University of Leeds on behalf of the Centre for Cultural Value)



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