

# Sharing learning: Slung Low - Flood

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Slung Low, Flood Part 4, Photo credit: Malcolm Johnson

## Artistic leadership as community co-creation: cultural participation in Flood 2017

*“I believe in artist exceptionalism. And I believe exceptionalism for loads of other people as well... [But] if you spend your life making art and you decide to make your living from it – that does something to you, you are changed. There are certain ways of making your living that change your life because they change the structures with which you think. It’s not true of all jobs.” Alan Lane, Artistic Director, Slung Low*

### What’s the story?

#### **Flood 2017**

Slung Low has been making outdoor performances since 2000. *Flood*, commissioned by Hull City of Culture 2017 and the BBC, was the largest and most complex project the company had undertaken to date. Its direct roots were previous shows *The White Whale* (Leeds Dock, 2014) and *Camelot – The Shining City* (Sheffield City Centre, 2015) with *Flood* completing the trilogy.

Planning began in 2015 and preparation took up a significant amount of company time in 2016 and 2017. Across the trilogy, the creative team was kept largely the same. The *Flood* company comprised around 50 people including Slung Low company members and associate artists, and a cast of professional performers (some of whom had worked with Slung Low in the past). The community cast was all new to the company, many of whom were also Hull 2017 volunteers. Before *Flood*, there has been a sense of steady growth in artistic ambition and scale of the company’s work. The size, scale and duration of *Flood* felt like reaching a pinnacle, from which it was unlikely that future shows would be able to keep growing in size.

#### **Juggling multiple agendas**

In many ways, the company was free to imagine its own process and to make a show as far from institutional restrictions as was possible. Nevertheless, the sheer number of partners, including 11 executive producers, meant that things had to be signed off months in advance. *Flood* had to achieve lots of different aims and objectives for different stakeholders, at all different levels. It had to show that theatre can look different to what’s often presented on theatre stages. It also had to speak nationally from Hull, and it had to demonstrate how the power of participation and collaboration can work together with the exceptionality and uniqueness of the artists involved.

### **Conflicts of leadership**

This juggling of agendas can make things interesting for a project. While many relationships with the Hull 2017 collaborators were positive, like any company formed around a project, there was a tightly protective attitude towards interventions from people external to the collective. In particular, disagreements arose around values and creative aspects of the project between the company, and the executives of Hull 2017 and the BBC. For example, around content control, project ethos and rates.

As a result, working relationships with a number of external executive producers broke down. Exchanges could reach a level of aggression at times: Alan Lane, the company's artistic director, remembers a BBC executive saying "we will end you!" in a meeting, and a Hull Executive Producer stating the company did not need to know what their role was, they just needed to follow their instructions. Slung Low has always been uncompromising in their beliefs and on the whole, the company was assertive in addressing problems and fighting to make their own decisions. Challenging existing structures for ideological or practical reasons has always come with the territory. But ultimately, the executive producers had expected a certain type of hierarchy, rather than a collaborative relationship.

### **Creation and production**

The project team worked across a whole year, living in close proximity, sharing meals every day. In fact, mealtimes were often opportunities to look after the sense of collective and for the leadership to make changes in response to complaints or suggestions from team members. There were extensive conversations when disagreements occurred about the project or practicalities and a lot of effort was taken to ensure that the team owned decisions.

In a [blog post](#) reflecting on the project, Alan describes this as "a way of making that allowed the creative artists the closest possible relationship to the practical making of the thing; a creative process restricted only by our determination, safety and the physically possible". He writes that the systems and processes in place for the project ensured that "the practical act of making theatre was as closely aligned to the creative act of making theatre to make them almost entirely the same thing. It is therefore not just a practical process wholly responsive to the creative team, but as "a team of equals with sympathetic skills working as one".

## Community participation

The involvement of the Hull 2017 volunteers as participants was extremely successful. The community participants' enthusiasm about the project and their role in it was very positive, their investment of time and energy was considerable and strong bonds were formed amongst company members and the rest of the Slung Low team. In an interview conducted by the [FailSpace Project](#) with Sally Proctor, Slung Low's Community Director at the time, Sally explains, "people are continuing to do things and they will say that being in *Flood* has completely changed their trajectory. [T]hey now do as much performance as they possibly can". However, the logistics of the project and the fact there was a lot going on as part of Hull 2017 meant that there was not enough time and space to allow for the sort of co-creative collaborations with communities that Slung Low set out to achieve. The community company did not have as much space and creative input as they wanted, mainly because of time constraints and the complex logistics of the site.

## **Flood as an impetus for change for Slung Low**

Ultimately, some of the things defined as failures during and after *Flood*, such as participatory rather than co-creative format, the lack of national press coverage for the show or the conflicts of leadership with executive partners, in fact provided Slung Low with liberating new impulses. It could be said that *Flood* confirmed the company course of untethering itself from accepted industry conventions of 'success'.

The company has since further affirmed its status as a community company by moving to a building in the middle of the community it wants to serve, The Holbeck, and setting their compass by their needs. The Slung Low Cultural Community College, which opened in Autumn 2018 is currently in its 5<sup>th</sup> term. The Leeds People's Theatre has since been established around this way of working. The 2020 short film *The Good Book* was its pilot project and there are plans for another short film, *The Magician*, to be filmed in early 2022. The company continued to play a vital role during the Covid-19 pandemic, running a food bank from March 2020 to June 2021 and has since set up an anti-racist football club, Holbeck Moor FC.

## What's the learning?

### **Projects and organisations cannot be all things to all people**

In an interview with the FailSpace Project, Alan Lane makes the point that cultural participation is political. He explains that there is a degree to which cultural participation is used as the kind of catch-all to redefine our relationship with society, without properly redefining it. Alan explains that it is not just about saying you need to listen to 'the community': community is not a homogenous mass. You need to decide what working with the community means to your organisation.

### **Shifting to a more collective responsibility allows us to learn from our mistakes**

Failure is often seen as personal; as former Slung Low Community Director Sally suggests: "it feels personal, like it's your failure – or 'I'm a failure'". Ultimately this might begin with a cultural understanding of 'the need to succeed' and subsequent hatred of failure. If any one individual feels like they have complete ownership over a project, or a particular aspect of it, they automatically feel more vulnerable and this can inhibit learning. A shift to collective ownership within the structures you create as a company, enables you to talk about what wasn't quite right or what didn't work, without feeling like you've got something really wrong and taking it personally. This reframing allows for more productive learning from failure, as well as a more collective, and arguably more satisfactory, ownership of the successes.

### **Challenges can be unexpected opportunities for deepening relationships**

Of course, there is a balance between the tight control on the story you tell publicly, and the management of the risks internally. In the case of *Flood*, the company experienced break-ins and vandalism of the floating set. As good communications had been a priority from the start of the project, residents of Victoria Dock alerted the company and its security when criminal acts occurred. This transparency of communication and shared responsibility with local residents then evolved into an opportunity to invite them to watch or participate in the show, and resulted in deeper community ownership and acceptance of company members and *Flood* activities.

### **Sometimes what we perceive as failures can actually be the cost of keeping your promises**

Slung Low is a company with a comparatively high threshold for risk. As Alan Lane argues, "when you're 'in the business of doing impossible things, or things that look impossible' you are keenly aware that managing these risks takes hard work and effort: "[t]here is a myth that if you're just well organised enough you can do the impossible and it's easy... If you're going to do things differently, or work in different ways, it will be hard work and you will get things wrong." But it also reframes how Slung Low talks about success and failure, and

learns from them as a company. Many things are so often classed as ‘failures’ instead of the cost of doing things or the cost of keeping your promises to stakeholders, collaborators and audiences.

### **To learn as a company you need to be open to changing the structures in which you work**

Making a major show such as *Flood* on such a large scale was a huge challenge. Yet the company was free to imagine its own process and to make a show as far from the institutional restrictions as was possible. While this was “a freedom that [Slung Low] had demanded for over ten years, we also found a better appreciation of the relationships we had made over the years with those working within institutions. There is something in the skills needed to work in those institutions that would have benefitted *Flood*, more that we can learn from that. After a decade positioning in firm opposition to the stability that too many of our institutions value, over responding to their commissioned artists and the new demands of their audience, the certainty that we’ve hit as hard in one direction as it is possible to and must now reassess was not an easy resolution. Still, learning is learning.”

### **Build on the past, and look to the future**

“The response to *Flood* from audiences and participants was overwhelming and nourished our current imagining about what comes next in Slung Low’s development. It can’t be more of the same. But it must have the same ambition, the same desire to imagine new ways of making new things for audiences.” Alan Lane, in his blog [‘Some of the Things I’ve thought Post Flood’](#)

In this sense, *Flood* directly informed the strategic direction of the company. This learning goes beyond the development of future theatre shows, or how the company provides opportunities for cultural participation. It got the company thinking about alternative formats which would offer more space for community co-creation. Over the past 15 months, co-creation has meant many things for the company: it’s meant navigating club members’ expectations of what the club and bar should be and do. It’s involved developing close partnerships with a local primary school, and developing arts projects with local communities and artists. The motto for the company is simply: ‘Be useful, be kind, we go again tomorrow, pals’ (which is now up in neon in the company’s upstairs space).

## Additional information

Case study written by resident dramaturg at Slung Low, Kara McKechnie (also project dramaturg on Flood) and draws from personal conversations with Alan Lane (Slung Low Artistic Director and Director of Flood) and Joanna Resnick (Slung Low Producer), as well as extracts from Alan personal blog ([alanlaneblog.wordpress.com](http://alanlaneblog.wordpress.com)).

The case study also draws from interviews in 2019 conducted by Dr Leila Jancovich with Alan and Sally Proctor (associate artist on *Flood*, and former Community Director at Slung Low until Spring 2021) for the Failspace project.

Edited by Emma McDowell, University of Leeds, on behalf of the Centre for Cultural Value.

## About Flood

Commissioned by Hull City of Culture 2017 and the BBC, *Flood* took place on a 100 x 100m disused Victoria Dock basin in Hull on floating stages, connected by boats. Part 1 was a film, shared widely online, and also made available to Hull audiences via a custom-made cinema in a caravan. Part 2 was performed live at Victoria Dock throughout April 2017. Part 3 was broadcast on BBC2 on 13 August 2017 and Part 4 was performed live at Victoria Dock in October 2017. There was a *Flood* omnibus in October 2017, where all 4 parts were shown at Victoria Dock.

Slung Low / *Flood* Slung Low members: Alan Lane (director), Joanna Resnick (Producer), Matthew Angove (Technical Director), Lucy Hind (Movement Director). Associate artists: Sally Proctor, Peter Bradley, Ingrid Adler. David Farley (Designer), James Phillips (writer), Heather Fenoughty (sound). Full lists of the creative team, cast (including community chorus) and crew can be found [here for part 2](#) and [here for part 3](#).

You can read a review of the production in [Exeunt Magazine](#).

## About Slung Low

For more details on Slung Low, The Holbeck, the Cultural Community College, Leeds People's Theatre, Holbeck Moor FC, and audio recordings from the September 2021 Conference of Holbeck Moor, visit [slunglow.org](http://slunglow.org)



Slung Low, Flood Part 3, Photo credit: Malcolm Johnson

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