Puppet Place A Collaborative Hub? Creative Group Meeting 1

21 March 2016 at Puppet Place 7-9pm

<u>**Introductions**</u>

Rachel McNally (RM)

Executive Producer at Puppet Place, Bristol Festival of Puppetry (BFP) Co-producer

Rod Burnett (RB)

Storybox Theatre and also a Punch and Judy man (described as one of the top ones in the world! ;))

Emma Windsor (EW)

An independent animator working in stop motion as White Rabbit Animation. Also commercial animator and screen designer. Newsletter Editor at Puppet Place.

Corina Bona (CB)

Cori is a mum, puppeteer, puppet maker and facilitator. She also puts together Smoking Puppet Cabaret – next one 7 April!

Nic Prior (NP)

Freelancer. Production Manager for BFP

David McGoran (DG)

Relapsed dancer who came into robotics through puppets. Working to find practice where robotics engineers and artists can collaborate across the different work cultures.. In creative robotics he's interested in the types of communication that happen without/before language.

Emma Williams (EW)

Director who has worked with many different companies and artists, including Pickled Image. She also directs the RWCMD puppetry performance every year. She worked at BFP+ Curator.

Tessa Bide (TB)

Theatre maker and workshop facilitator. With her own company primarily making work for family audiences. She is also 1/3 of Lady Strong's Bonfire.

Dik Downey (DD)

Co-founder of Pickled Image, he thinks (!). He makes and performs. He also used to be a roadie for Rod.

Chris Pirie (CP)

Artistic Director of Green Ginger, puppeteer. He is also a freelance director, father and former neighbour of Rod.

Gary Topp (GT) – Facilitator

Gary has worked in the cultural and sustainability sectors for 30 yrs worked at all levels from large scale projects to small ones. He likes to give time back volunteer – usually on boards. He is currently Chair of Circomedia Board of Trustees. Most recently he has been director of the Green Capital Partnership in Bristol – now moving into the next stage of its life. He's now starting on a big cultural sector project in Birmingham.

RM and GT first met in 2014. Introduced by mutual colleagues and GT helped in the community asset transfer process. RM reeled GT in! As Puppet Place moved beyond this process, once the building agreement was secure, we asked GT to become a trustee. GT enjoys puppetry but it's not his area of expertise.

GT believes in change, collaboration and impact. He's interested in the polymath and in-between space.

All organisations need to pause and re-think what they are doing from time to time. Doing this on a sector-wide scale is important and particularly exciting for Puppet Place. There is no pre-determined outcome. This is a space to think about what comes next. We need to think about the future as a utopia. It is not an extension of the present but something different.

Why are we here and a bit about the process we are going through

Puppet Place now exists as a physical space, it's got a mixed community of resident companies and associate artists, runs a hugely successful festival, sense of wider purpose, also workshop programme – and a sense of collective caring about why puppetry matters.

The building has a sustainable but fragile economy.

The process we are going through is flexible.

 We have set a timetable of 6 months.

We imagine the Creative Group as the drivers of this process and holding 5 meetings of 2-3 hours each, for which everyone will be paid. However, we could look at doubling up sessions if that desirable. We are also asking the Creative Group to be advocates for this process – so please do talk about it with other people, share minutes and thoughts and bring these back into the meetings, also encourage people to attend the public meetings and use the online comments board – see below.

There will be two public meetings to enrich the thinking and bring a wider public into the process

All documentation will be available online via www.puppetplace.org/hub for comment and feedback

Residents and Associate Artists will also feed into the process via meetings and other forums.

Puppet Place Board will also be looking at governance and business models in parallel to the developing thinking of the Creative Group.

There is no pre-determined outcome, we have tried to devise a process that is responsive and flexible.

Why working collectively and collaboratively might work and matter?

Examples for other areas of life (rule for this section no "p" word).

Family Life

CP

Chris and his family have now instigated a rule that once a meal finishes people don't just rush off, but come together to clear the dishes and clear up collectively, so that one person doesn't always end up doing this. The solution involves loud music and it takes about 3 minutes! They know that keeping this going as a family will be hard as his daughters become older, but it's worth doing.

CB

Cori was able to attend the meeting because Robert was looking after the baby.

Work/Creative Life

TB

Tessa – was working by herself for two years. She's now in a shared artist space. If she needs help with photoshop etc, she can just shout out. People are willing to share skills and materials etc.

DG

Dave travelled Europe seeking out companies that were good to work with. He came across Derevo Theatre http://www.derevo.org/ in Russia. It almost had the feel of a cult. They had decided to live in silence for 6 months. They were making a film, putting on performances etc. The vow of silence meant that they really had to look closely to follow body language, particularly when moving heavy pieces of kit etc. It wasn't always great, the power dynamics of the group were still present, but generally positive. Sometimes, he also encounters strange power structures that exist under the guise of collaboration.

RB

Rod used to work in community arts – over the course of this period he became more of an "artist" partly due to some nasty moments, however in any group that will happen. There should always be a choice to work collaboratively or alone as an artist. The importance of working alone should not be undervalued. However, the corollary of this is that when a choice is made to work collaboratively it is very powerful. There are other ways of bringing people together to work but not necessarily collaboration.

There was one particular moment when, working with Fair Exchange (group of community artists similar to Welfare State) they arrived in a small town in Notts. They were ready to bring all their community arts ethos to the community only to be greeted by the police who were pitched against the local population as a result of the miners' strike.

Democracy & Collaboration

Good as it allows for representation! As a majority there is more strength to push ideas and action through, but it doesn't always represent who you are (If you are a minority)

In a democracy do radical swings get levelled out into apathy? Does everything become grey? Democracy can provide a level of "safety" so we hide our head in the sand. Alternatively individuals feel "I'm only one person so I cannot make a difference". However, a majority is made up of a collection of individuals and can make a difference.

Politics work differently if there are major issues e.g. no running water etc. Maybe the "greying" is a privilege of a mature democracy.

Political Apathy does exist across social classes but for different reasons: e.g. university students not interested because they are not engaged, city college students not engaged because they feel disenfranchised.

 All collaboration has an element of self-serving. We don't like to admit but it's true. We need to understand our personal as well as social reasons for collaboration.

It's interesting that while we live in a democracy many of our institutions and companies are not democratic – how far is democracy really the structure by which we run our society?

Trickle Down Economics is bollocks!

Sport & Collaboration

Even a solo player such as Tim Henman or Andrew Murray is dependent on others. Likewise Damien Hirst is a "solo" artist with a huge team.

Many artists see their work as individual personal expression. However, engineering and sciences are hugely collaborative. Is there a "cult" of the artist?

Does the desire for instant gratifications (thinking about some young people's aspirations to be famous etc as route to success) present a barrier to collaborative working for the future?

See diagram. We want to find that central "sweet" spot that recognises the issues and situations where good collaboration or good solo work are the ways forward and avoid the pitfalls that lead to bad collaborative working and bad solo work.

Bad Collaboration

Good Collaboration   Good Solo Work

Bad Solo Work
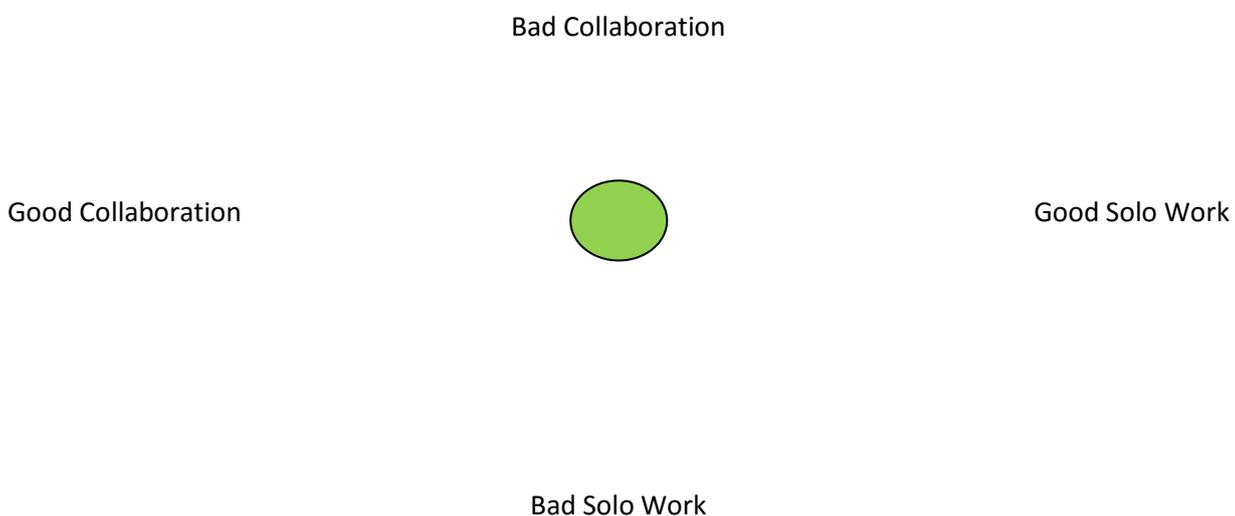
Helicopter View of The Sector

<u>We started with a discussion of cluster theory</u>

<u>Example – A City (we considered Bristol)</u>

What are a city's strengths that make it work?

What interventions do we need to make, where do we invest to maintain and develop those strengths?

What are Bristol's strengths?

We are the only city outside London to make a net return to the UK economy. The city strives to advance and keep itself up to date e.g. no 1 for web stuff.

It has a capacity for innovation, not only in technology. It keeps its edges and boundaries (around sectors/organisations etc) loose. For example sub-cultures, squat communities feed into the high tech sector as researchers etc move freely between the different sub-cultures.

The city does not take it itself too seriously. It value authenticity. If you "try too hard" you fail.

Bristol is a bit like London's stoned, hippy cousin. Many sub-cultures thrive here despite dying off elsewhere.

The size of the city makes it powerful. It has a high proportion of talented and engaged people across sectors, but it is small enough to participate in multiple networks. There are fewer barriers. It is also geographically well-placed.

However, we do need to remember that there are "two" Bristols, the inner city and the outskirts. They are quite different.

We then talked about the aerospace industry as it's a Bristol success story

What do you need to keep aerospace at no 1?

Need right skills, need innovation, appropriate premises, ability to keep ahead of the future demand curve.

What we are starting to do is articulate a set of characteristics that make a sector significant. We can describe an eco-system of success and then work out what are those interventions to keep success going?

THE ISSUES HIT LIST

What do we need to make this "cluster" (Puppet Place and its community) the best in the world for this sector?

1. Strong Networks

2. Excellent communications and advocacy

3. Skills and Experience

4. High class laboratory / space *Physical and Intellectual Space*

5. Brand re-positioning – *change public perceptions. Can Bristol decide to do something very different with puppetry? We don't want to repeat work that is already successful. We want to be different. Puppetry is making some of the most exciting theatre out there but it is not recognised.*

6. Trans-disciplinary working *Bristol has a thriving creative arts sector that supports this*

7. New approaches to skills development

8. Niche and market differentiation

9. Opening up new markets

10. Celebrating the fact that we are a successful cluster outside London, with strong counter-culture tendencies. *We want to be the proud, if smaller, cousin with a brilliant idea!*

11. Confidence/Courage/Leadership *There is no shame in being an expert. Be proud of knowledge! We need to stop being the land of the self-deferential!*

12. Investigation into puppetry as a tool for positive change (i.e. applied puppetry/puppetry for social change)

13. Research & Development – we mean this in terms investing/setting up a number of projects and testing them to discover which one succeeds e.g. Venture Capitalist may expect to invest in 10 different companies and get a return on 3. Implicit in this is that it is ok to fail and learn from failure. We are not talking about R&D in terms of developing a show...a bit.

14. A spirit of pioneering joy

15. Access to finance.

In doing this work we recognise that we are a privileged group. We want to own the opportunity but celebrate it widely and engage widely. This is important.

Do these things create a paradigm shift in the artform?

The language we are using in this list is the language of business – do we want to go in this direction as artists?

We need to ensure that the language we use does not destroy the power of joy.

However, we also recognise that thinking in this way allows us to recognise that conditions for change across different sectors are remarkably similar. We have used an industrial cluster as a comparison to kickstart the process, can we now find our own language to articulate these issues?

Some of us also find thinking in this way is useful as a tool for fulfilling creative potential. It helps change the models of thinking from scarcity models (traditionally prevalent in the arts) to more entrepreneurial models.

Does the conversation between finance and creativity have to be a battle?

We need to look at different finance models, not just different pots. We live in a country where it is remarkably easy to set up as a small business. We can embrace this, learn from failure and move forward into different models of working. Technology and Science sector work in this way – why not the arts?

These are all big questions – we cannot solve this in one meeting. We are outlining a set of issues which we can dig into in the future. We are setting the scene.

The next piece of work is to look at the list and identify which of these issues can best be addressed by collaboration, As we go through we must keep reminding ourselves of the common purpose and find the language that allows us to springboard our thinking and ensure meaningful communication.

Puppet Place and the Creative Group are well aware of the work of the Puppetry Development Consortium. They are also discussing the national sector and changes. Puppet Place is not repeating this work, instead we are asking what is it that Puppet Place, as an organisation working with artists, can be doing to develop/support the sector. We are interested in the future potential and making a game-change.

As we go forward we want to build trust within the Creative Group and the Collaborative Hub work more generally. We want everyone to know that their opinion is valued and say what is important to them. We also recognise that if the process is not working for them, then it makes complete sense to walk away.

We want to keep the spirit of pioneering joy at the heart of the process.

Thank you all for coming!