Puppet Place A Collaborative Hub? Creative Group Meeting 2

25th May 2016 at Puppet Place 7.30-9.30pm

Present

Rachel McNally (Facilitator)

Rod Burnett

Emma Windsor

Corina Bona
Via skype

Nic Prior

David McGoran

Emma Williams

Dik Downey

Chris Pirie

Savita Custead – Board Observer

Rachel Isaacs – Minutes

Apologies
Tessa Bide

Reflections in Meeting 1 and Looking Forward

Key Aim is to create eco system of success.

What are the interventions we need to make to nurture that success and promote the sense of pioneering joy?

RM has done some work on grouping issues list into categories – Does this feel right?

We will then talk about what Puppet Place, this group, this city, bring to the table in terms of a game change and what inspires us and motivates us.

Final part of the meeting we will talk about the next stage of the process – the public meetings. What questions do we want to ask of a wider group to move forward?

Grouping the Issues List from Meeting 1

N.B. Pioneering Joy goes across everything!

<u>Skills and Development</u>

Build Skills and Share Experience

Create a High class laboratory / space *Physical and Intellectual Space*

New approaches to skills development

Research & Development – we mean this in terms of 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.

<u>Brand and Markets</u> – *aware we can also talk about these issues in terms of public engagement*

Create excellent communications and advocacy

Brand re-position – *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 work/performances out there but it is not recognised*

Foster Niche and market differentiation

Open up new markets

Celebrate 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!*

<u>What to Do</u>

Build Strong Networks

Nurture 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!*

Keep the spirit of pioneering joy

Improve access to finance

Group reflected on making the list more accessible and possibility of breaking it into short, medium and long term goals and that's there is a place for all the ideas. This is a first pass on the key issues.

There was a discussion on Puppet Place goals and the Puppet Consortium Report, what is it this group and Puppet Place can do that is different e.g. opening up new markets? What can Bristol offer?

Trans-disciplinary work thrives in Bristol – it has a well connected creative sector and counter culture thrives. Within our Creative Group and Puppet Place community animators, robotic engineers and live puppeteers are all represented. We then started to explore this within the Group.

<u>David McGoran talked about his background in and passion for robotics/puppetry:</u>

David studied dance and movement analysis and that led into puppetry. He busked with his own puppets around the world. He found an ingrained fear and suspicion of technology within the arts as well as an acceptance by creative people of their poverty or poor surroundings or situation.

He began to feel passionate that the Arts should and can develop technology. The divide between science/technology and the arts is recent. For example, it was not unusual for theatre makers in Ancient Rome or Athens to be approached regarding their stage and set developments and how to adapt them to military applications.

He also feels that the arts don't need to accept poverty as part of creativity that it should be possible to open up the culture of the arts to be literate and engaged with technology. We can connect with how the arts isolate ourselves with wider artificial intelligence and robotics, it is, as he sees it, another form of puppetry: the study of movement and "bringing live to inanimate objects".

David finds technology a globally fascinating issue economically, socially and culturally. He wants to engage with that story. Puppetry (?)and Robotics are artforms that use technology to craft themselves.

He still feels it may be the wrong time (too early) for a robotic art from. Walt Disney certainly discovered this when he found robotics to be an evocative and effective platform but social attitudes, scepticism and fear of technology held progression within the arts back.

These attitudes and the misconceptions about robotics and artificial intelligence are still present. David finds there are strong analogies between attitudes towards and public conceptions of what puppetry is and the use of robotics in creative forums.

David suspects that this resignation to poverty and disengagement with technology is perhaps one of the reasons the art form is so marginalised. Perhaps, by embracing new technologies and demanding that our work is valued puppetry as an artform can play a strong role with in society?

Chris Pirie – Rusty Squid creates robotics most notably with the large robotic spider for Arcadia and he finds a thrill and glamour around this work with creative technologies.

<u>Emma Windsor talked about her background in and passion for animation:</u>

She started in stop motion animation. She traveled to Canada and helped make shorts with both 3D and 2D creations after which she came back to the UK once her visa ran out and tried to get work with stop motion but found few posts. Opportunities opened up in web design due to the growth of the internet and she did work with 2D promos and adverts firstly on CD rom. This led on to running a software and information business in marketing and communications. She became dissatisfied with this and went back into traditional processes and making things with her hands and started a degree in Bristol. She now works independently as a film maker and animator, dividing her time between her own independent creative projects and working professionally, making mostly for promos for marketing and advertising.

<u>Discussion and points on what makes Bristol/Puppet Place a unique environment for creative development:</u>

Bristol has dancers, painters, robotics in a small setting and cross sectors. There is an acceptance of multi disciplines

Puppeteers tend to be trans- disciplinary from the nature of often touring and operating alone or in small teams where there is a requirement to do marketing, lighting, sound and build sets as well as make the puppets and perform.

Bristol benefits from being a small city where it easier to maintain a focus and access – this can be seen at Bristol Festival of Puppetry where multiple locations are generally no more than 20 minutes walk from each other. Suspense - London Puppetry Festival has lots of shows across a wide network of theatres but it can take 2 hours to travel between venues.

However, is Bristol's trans-disciplinary culture as collaborative as we think? We talk about it but do we do it?

There is a ready willingness to share practical resources and knowledge, but how deeply is collaborative thinking embedded in Bristol's cultural sector at a strategic and creative level?

(Emma Williams)

We then opened up discussion to the wider group: What inspires and motivates you to keep working in your chosen field:

It's thrilling and involves risk (Chris Pirie)

Can't do anything else, never done anything else. Enjoys making and performing in own shows more than anything else. (Dik Downey)

Still finds there are challenges and frustrations with requirements for forward planning, organizing the logistics etc. (Chris Pirie)

Likes being his own boss and in control of his own fate. As a freelancer it is up to him to rectify his own mistakes. In relation to the festival he has been able to shape it and improve it each year. (Nic Prior)

There is still a need for more finances / even leading directors still suffer from low pay. (Chris Pirie)

Work in creative sector still has a tendency to be undervalued resulting in a lack of funds/investment. The passion and desire people have to work in those fields means there is high demand for limited jobs. This makes the creative sector a buyer's market. It also means that emerging artists and students are willing to work for free to get contacts and get ahead. Is this healthy? (Nic Prior)

Why do you work with puppets?

Storybox acts as an educational tool performing in schools. It promotes a way of thinking. He agrees with John Fox that performers/artists are "engineers of the imagination". In his work, he tries to keep things loose and not show everything to promote imagination. He believes imaginations leads and creates empathy and through that artists have a social reason to continue work. (Rod Burnett)

The enjoyment comes from the essence of sharing yourself and being able to connect with others.

Puppetry requires the use of the audience's imagination. There is a strong sense of community and it attracts amazing inspiring people.

It's uniquely valuable, we can get away with things as puppets are once removed. It has the ability to address political and social issues as well as vulnerabilities around issues of abuse or domestic violence. It enables things to be disconnected as provides a powerful social tool. Examples or Nina Conti's Monkey and Sacha Baron Cohen's work as well as older work such as Spitting Image and Team America. (Dik Downey)

Everyone can connect with puppetry. When working with design students to make and perform in a annual puppetry performance at Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama two questions are asked of them at the start. 1. Have you ever been a puppeteer – NO. 2. Have you ever played with a toy – YES.   (Chris Pirie)

N.B. Little Angel's work in training to create a standard of excellence in Puppetry. He worries about the concept that anyone can be a puppeteer after 20mins or a actor including it on a C.V after doing a small about in one performance. (Chris Pirie)

There was concern about who determines a standard of excellence in such a diverse artform. However, there is need for a cultural knowledge of professionalism

Rachel McNally will find out more about this and send round papers.

Problems and Development of Puppetry:

Dik Downey talked about the article on Huffington Post by Miss Behave entitled " Live Performance is Dying – Change or Become Extinct. http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/miss-behave/live-performance-is-dying_b_10096358.html . Is theatre becoming less popular / accessible?

Discussions on the need to get a wider spectrum of attention / people attending and how to grab the emerging generation, the future ticket buyers, especially with proposed changes or loss of GCSE drama on curriculums. Exposure to the arts can be most effective through the engagement with the young this keeps future audiences involved.

Question on whether Puppet Place is trying to maintain the audience or attract a new one and if puppetry should be focusing on other platforms outside of theatre? Example of demand for puppetry: on film for example as part of Star Wars as well as agencies in the US having a demand for a "hand-made aesthetic" and online platforms.

Puppetry still marginalized. This does create a strong sense of community. However, there is always comparison and this lead to competition which can be artistically positive and motivating, however economically and socially it can have negative repercussions. The concept of always being able to collaborate is a little naïve. In certain situations you have to compete for the same gigs, funding or venues. In live puppetry, everybody wants to play on home turf but that creates competition. Theatres want a limited number of puppetry shows to keep seasons varied, worldwide puppetry festivals will only take a limited number of UK acts. (Emma Williams)

Bristol has a puppetry audience and we can capitalize on that and nurture it. Puppetry increasingly appears on TV and digital platforms, but it is not filmed regularly in Bristol. We have innovative makers could a channel be possible here? (Corina Bona)

Lisbon Puppetry Festival is very successful (currently in 16th annual year). Other festivals struggle. How do we keep learning from the successes?

Finances

Emma Williams spoke about Sue Palmer's talk during Mayfest about pensions and that if it not possible for you as a freelance you must remake your future and think outside the box. Doing things for free and getting things in return is how a lot of work is made and how an artist survives. Should we be looking at pooling resources as opposed to making ends meet in little bubbles?

David McGoran We should not have to resign ourselves to poverty and give up the desire to be financially successful. If we get angry about this, might it not be better? Don't have to be dependant to subsidy.

Emma Windsor finds that by staying in marketing she keeps herself financially secure. That sometimes means a distinction between professional work and personal creative projects

<u>Collaboration</u>

Concerns were raised that when you create groups and work together there are always people outside. This leaves a dilemma about how you deliver information related to the conclusions you have reached as a group. By working as a group, it is easy to fall into the assumption that you represent a larger community.

Member of the group have found that collaboration works on a informal individual basis (for practical issues) – borrowing equipment directly form in house technicians for example.

It was noted, again, that we do form are a privileged group. Are we able to speak for the broader community? Are we representing ourselves or a wider community? Do we want Puppet Place to be a facilitator? Is that Puppet Place's identity and strength? Do we want to push out and forward or concentrate on what we have?

Puppet Place already has a wider community associated with it, eg the associate artist scheme. Therefore, there is already a wider significance. (Rachel McNally)

Also, Puppet Place is based in a public building and receives public funding – we therefore have a responsibility to make it a social resource. (Chirs Pirie)

This is a conversation we need to keep having and maybe now is the time to think about the Public Meeting as part of this process (Rachel McNally)

<u>Public Meeting:</u>

We want to ensure that the meeting is a space for focused and meaningful discussion, not just a reporting forum. Is it useful to formulate some questions based on our discussions so far? (Rachel McNally)

Who is the public?

We will publish it via our newletter etc and usual channels – as with all meetings it will be a self selecting group. (Rachel McNally)

Concerns were expressed that we will be preaching to the converted. The group expressed a desire to invite and include other forums an groupings such as artists and sculptors from Bower Ashton, Circus artists, who have a strong presence in Bristol, also Pervasive Media from The Watershed which have had success in running public discussions. Is it also useful to invite technical companies such as Set Squared, the student community etc, also Made In Bristol?

Request that the group use their contacts to share invitation to include widest spectrum possible for the public meeting.

Group agreed that Rachel McNally should propose some questions for public meetings. The group will respond about which questions feel most important.

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

Thank you all for coming!