

Questionnaire for theatre expert

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Please answer the following questions giving specific examples where possible:

# Experience and Expertise

Outline your experience and expertise in the area of theatre

I’m a playwright, director and education consultant who specialises in working with educators, communities and young people, both in the UK and internationally. I am a consultant and trainer for the International Baccalaureate and an Artsmark validator and trainer for Trinity College, London. I was Education, Youth and Participation Manager at the Sherman Theatre, Cardiff and have worked for a number of organisations in the UK, directing large-scale work with young people for Birmingham Royal Ballet as artistic director of a new ballet with over 80 young people. As Development Officer for Children and Young People and Creative Learning Programme Manager at the Arts Council of England, South East, I have contributed to creative learning initiatives. I have developed and led site-learning programmes at the SEARCH museum in Gosport and the American Museum of Natural History, New York. In 2012 I was commissioned to write a play as part of the 2012 Cultural Olympiad for the South East and I have just completed a commissioned play touring in spring 2015. I am running a two-year programme developing young writers 16-25 at Theatre Royal, Brighton. I am a part of the artistic team and a board member of the International Schools Theatre

Association (ISTA) and Theatre Versus Oppression. I developed and ran UCAN

LEAD, a workshop leader training programme and I am currently developing UCAN DIRECT.

What has been the impact of theatre on your own life?

Theatre has been both my passion and, I’m fortunate to say, the basis of my career. From an early age, and like many children, I escaped into worlds I had made in my imagination and through play, often solitary, I would create and inhabit those made up worlds. I discovered quickly that through imagination I could be anyone and I could be anywhere. As I grew up I discovered that theatre did just that- it creates imaginary worlds, alternate realities, that not only resemble our own world but also shed light on it. Whatever the play, whatever the situation, whatever the scene, theatre always deals with humanity, with what it means to be human. Through theatre I have not only discovered the world but found a way of expressing my feelings, thoughts, ideas and preoccupations about our humanity. Using theatre with children, young people and members of the community has given me most joy. Because theatre not only transports us to other places and gives us an experience of other worlds, it also transforms us, it teaches us how to be better people through our observations of other lives and it gives us confidence and belief in ourselves. Because it is a communal process, a gathering together of people to share stories and experiences, it is also a celebration of our shared humanity and in this respect its joyful. It gives permission to anyone of anyone age to play and to discover the world through play, to try out different roles in order to find our true self and to experiment and take risks within the make believe, knowing that any consequence in the make believe will not effect our real lives. It takes away fear and makes us resilient, prepared to take risks. This is the very basis of self-confidence.

What impact do you think theatre can have on our lives and what you consider to be its instrumental value (i.e. the way theatre can be used in particular settings rather than theatre as art or entertainment)?

Theatre transforms us physically, emotionally and cognitively. Because theatre teaches us that we have the ability to construct new worlds and gives us the tools to do it, it is a powerful agent for change and it empowers people to feel they can play an active role in society. It builds physical, vocal and emotional confidence and this is particularly evident in children and young people. Theatre has the ability to bring people together to share stories and experiences and to reflect on our humanity and to celebrate our capacity to create. It builds collaboration, team work and a sense of community and this is a key aspect of the work that I do with young people and communities. It also gives us the tools to express ourselves and a voice so that we can be heard.

What strategies do you use and how do you work with hard to reach groups or people who are not usually engaged with theatre or who might be reluctant to take part?

The basis for all my work with groups is empowerment- giving people confidence to create, express themselves and work with others beyond the time frame of the project. My approach to working with hard to reach groups involves the creation of a productive and purposeful working atmosphere where everyone has a voice and every contribution is valued. It’s important to build trust from the very beginning- trust between facilitator and participants and trust between the participants themselves. Trust is the basis of it all. Choosing activities and exercises which are enjoyable and which are ‘safe’ and don’t require any performance element are important so that no one feels exposed or under the pressure of presenting. I tend to work very quickly at the start so that there’s no time to say ‘I can’t’. With some groups it’s also a case of being patient as everyone works at a different pace and takes some people time to relax and put their trust in you.

# Theatre and Working with visually impaired people

Describe any experience you have had of working with visually impaired people either with theatre or in some other capacity.

One the most seminal experiences of my working life was UCAN LEAD. This was a year long training programme, which I developed and delivered, to train visually impaired young people (17-25) who were interested in theatre as workshop leaders. The young people involved have gone on to run workshops as well as work for UCAN.

How was working with visually impaired people (if there was such work) different to the way you would normally work?

The games and activities that I often used often relied on visual clues or commands. These had to be adapted which was very exciting as it gave me the chance to rethink and develop some of my exercises. The language I used to give instructions was also something I had to be conscious of so that I didn’t use words like ‘over there’ or express ideas physically without explaining them orally. I also, especially with new groups, have a heightened sense of health and safety, ensuring that the space is safe and clear so that the visually impaired young people can move confidently. I have generally become much more aware of space and the use of space during exercises and theatremaking. It’s also humbling, as someone with sight, to suddenly find yourself in a situation where, in terms of visual impairment, you are not the expert. In fact, you are the one person in the room who has the least knowledge or understanding of what it means to be visually impaired. It would be ridiculous to proceed with constant consultation with the experts, the visually impaired participants. I have found this a very powerful and effective way of working. This has effected all my practice as I now tend to view theatre making as the creation of a dialogue rather than the staging of a vision.

What impact has working with visually impaired young people (if there was such work) had on your own practice?

I had always thought of the theatre as a primarily visual art form. As a playwright I visualized scenes, as a director I was concerned with the creation of strong visual images on stage. In games, exercises and theatre activities, the visual aspect always played a role. Working with visually impaired young people resulted in a fundamental shift both to my definitions of theatre, the way I thought about it, but also to my practice as a playwright, director and educator. I now think of theatre as an experience and the artist/educator as an engineer of experiences. Thinking of it as an experience, rather than as living images, changes the way you organise and make theatre. I am even more conscious of the power and use of the word and I have become fascinated by intimate one-on-one theatre, the use of aural technology in guiding the audience through an experience and a form of theatre that is not about the aesthetics of spacing but rather about how we tell stories and the interaction between listener and speaker, audience and performer.

What do you think is the value for visually impaired young people of working through theatre?

Confidence building

Confident use of body and voice

Well-being

Working in collaboration

Creativity

Making new friends

Confident to express ideas and emotions

Aspirations

Working with professionals

Empowerment

# VISION

What do you think we should consider regarding the use of theatre in the VISION project?

* A central area of inquiry or theme should be decided as the focus of the work. This will help to establish this as a learning experience, as well as a theatrical one. The focus or area of inquiry could be quite general e.g. The sea OR Travel OR Telling stories etc.
* There should be a cultural activity giving the participants a sense of where they are. This could be to a particular location or a famous landmark. This should then be explored through theatre exercises.
* The nature and types of activities need to be carefully considered and planned
* There should be pairs work, small group work, whole group work as well as individual work.
* There should be a final outcome so that there is a sense of working towards something- this may be a final sharing, a piece of theatre, a whole group activity
* The length of sessions should be considered so that everyone does not get over tired
* The use of language is important and exercises should be adapted or developed so that they are appropriate
* The work should be enjoyable but challenging- ‘dumbing down’ is patronizing and not as much fun!
* Everyone needs to be involved, committed and willing to ‘give it a go’. This is key in recruitment.
* Time should be spent building the ensemble and a sense of community.
* It would be good to use visually impaired assistants or workshops leaders as these provide a great role model
* Spaces should be safe and large enough to work in
* All facilitators should be internationally minded and recognise the value of inter cultural awareness and collaboration.
* Appropriate, rigorous and robust safeguarding

What do you think could be the impact of this work?

I believe this work can have a great impact in bringing together young people from different countries and cultures to work together. It could build Internationalmindedness and increase cultural awareness. I believe that the young people involved will be empowered and build their confidence. Developing new strategies for self-expression, with an awareness of their body and voice, will make them confident learners and increase their curiosity and motivation for learning. The legacy of the project- not only through dissemination to other interested parties but also through what the participants take away with them is important. They should leave with a love of theatre, self-confidence, new friends from other countries and lifelong learning skills.

**Please attach a current CV with this questionnaire!**

Thanking you for your time and consideration:

The V.I.S.I.ON team

*“This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.”*