

Paying it forward to share

Cultured Mongrel Dance Theatre (CMDT) acts to drive dance as a vehicle for social innovation through making socially relevant dance theatre that challenges the audience and the sector. Here, **Emma Jayne Park**, CMDT's Artistic Director, considers new ideas for access and inclusion in the arts

As an artist, being politically active is complicated. You have the freedom within your work to show your political voice but do not always have the capacity to effect large-scale shifts. The constant state of being distracted by survival, sadly a state affecting too many people across the country today, combined with a personal choice to work in a variety of urban and rural communities, affects my ability to be permanently present in any one location to drive a movement.

When developing Cultured Mongrel, the aim has always been to develop a collective ethos more than a formal company, placing investment in networks and social activism high on our agenda. As a Social Innovation Incubator Award winner 2014-2015 at Edinburgh's The Melting Pot, my network has expanded considerably over the past year, placing me in a much stronger position to initiate changes in the dance sector and beyond. Refusing to waste this opportunity, I dedicated Winter 2014 and Spring 2015 to attending as many sector events and network meetings as possible, as well as meeting for a cup of tea with many groups frequently targeted for 'participation programmes'.

The phrase 'participation programme' leaves me apprehensive; eight years of being a dance artist has shown me that many of these programmes are designed not at the request of the proposed participants but as a result of a top-down decision-

making process. I have often been thrust into a community to teach dance to a group who have no interest in the physical act of dancing. These programmes have led me to truly question what participation in dance is. In my work, I am a dancer, performer, choreographer, audience member, curator, critic, designer, technician and administrator, so why do many programmes ask participants to be solely dancers and performers?

Similarly the phrase 'audience development' leaves me cold and can feel somewhat corporate whenever it comes up in sector meetings. Do we simply want to develop an audience to save our sector and does this audience even want to be developed in the first place?

Therefore, in February 2015, as I heard another programmer declare "we have been working to develop new audiences", I began to seriously contemplate - who is not going to see dance? And is this because they do not want to or because of circumstances I can work to change?

Heading straight to the extreme end of the spectrum, I began speaking with people experiencing homelessness or facing housing issues, who naturally have far greater priorities than seeing live performance. Fundamentally, money is a key factor in this situation but at the core of the issue are concerns deep-rooted in the history of theatre itself and the social code associated with the theatre. One man, in his mid 50s, recalled a time when he >>



dance theatre



Emma Jayne Park, Emma Houston, Christopher Maule & James Fogerty - Status Anxiety. Photo: Mike Chalmers

had attempted a theatre visit to see a staged version of a book he loved and was laughed at by a steward when he asked what a box office was. Needless to say he has never returned and even stated that “people like [him] don’t really belong there”. I felt like I had been transported back in time.

Through these discussions a three stage plan has been hatched which Cultured Mongrel is hoping to grow over the next five years, supporting people experiencing homelessness to attend and feel welcome at live performance, then help these individuals to continue as audience members if they choose to. In brief, participants can choose to be involved at three different stages designed to generate a sense of ownership, understanding and comfort in a theatre environment, encouraging connection with the theatre as a place of recreation, not alienation.

Step one involves attending a performance specifically designed for newcomers to the theatre, with the cast and crew delivering a short tour of the theatre prior to the performance and joining the audience post-show for a sit down meal, allowing conversations about the work or just conversation to happen naturally.

Step two moves on to a theatre buddy scheme where people attend a performance alongside a regular theatre attendee. Many theatre buddy programmes already thrive, however in this case we would consider asking the regular theatre attendee to cover the cost of their buddy’s ticket. Prior to the performance, the buddies would meet over drinks and then join the cast and crew for a meal afterwards. The whole premise is to allow everyone attending the performance an opportunity to see dance through fresh eyes again. Those who regularly attend the theatre often miss out on some brilliant insights due to being accustomed to theatre conventions. It is hoped that conversations at the post show meal would give people an opportunity to reflect on their own relationship with both the subject matter of the performances and wider social issues.

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Finally, once individuals feel that they are comfortably a part of the theatre community they would be introduced to Suspended Tickets, a method of simply supporting the financial cost associated with going to the theatre. Inspired by the spirit and ambition of the Suspended Coffee movement, Suspended Theatre Tickets give everyone the right to engage with dance through the advanced purchase of a theatre ticket for someone who needs it. It is a Pay It Forward scheme that enables dance lovers to buy tickets which Cultured Mongrel redistribute through its connections with a variety of support centres and networks.

Finding a theatre willing and able to participate in every stage of the plan has been a surprisingly slow process; therefore, the Suspended Ticket movement was launched in April 2015 and hopes to be the catalyst for the entire programme.

The crowd funding campaign moved quickly and resulted not only in overfunding but a great deal of support – people really believe this should be happening! What was even more exciting was the level of support from artists and organisations that were interested in doing something similar.

At present, the scheme is rudimentary, with initial donations being made via a crowd funding website, however we are hoping to encourage larger organisations to become involved so that Suspended

Right: Emma Houston, James Fogerty, Emma Jayne Park - Thinking In The First Person. Photo: Sid Scott





Tickets can be purchased through booking websites when purchasing theatre tickets. At present, in order to utilise a Suspended Ticket, individuals just have to drop us an email with their name and the show details and we will book it for them, with tickets being collected from the box office. The whole scheme works on trust; we don't ask any questions, if you feel you need a Suspended Ticket you get one.

Long-term it was always the plan to drive Suspended Tickets to a national level. They have never been intended for sole use at Cultured Mongrel performances, partly because I've always just allowed people who couldn't afford it in for free but also because I am a firm believer in building communities. By supporting artists and the sector as a whole we can create an environment in which everybody's work can thrive.

Excitingly, the movement is catching on. Dance Base in Edinburgh has supported Suspended Tickets as part of its Fringe Programme 2015, promoting the initiative and offering some tickets into the mix. More over, they will be continuing the initiative with an in-house Pay It Forward scheme on classes.

In October 2015, we will also be working in conjunction with The Scottish Mental Health Arts and Film Festival, connecting with mental health groups to begin using Suspended Tickets. We intend to develop the larger campaign throughout 2016, ensuring that participation is accessible in every aspect of dance, not just attending classes. So, if you're interested, please get in touch and get involved!

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