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at York St John University



ISSUE 17. 2019.

Public Engagement Special Issue.

# THEATRE PAGES

ISSUE 17. 2019.

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# PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT SPECIAL ISSUE

At the centre of York St John University's mission statement is the commitment to social justice, ensuring that the university plays its part in making the world a fairer and more just place for all of us. The drama, theatre and dance department embraces this mission wholeheartedly, embedding it within our curricula, in the way that we approach our teaching and learning and in the research and creative practice of staff who undertake work with national and international significance.

The particular power of the performing arts is in enabling the voices and stories of hidden, misunderstood or often silenced communities to be heard and listened to. For our students there is a huge amount to learn and gain by doing so, engaging in 'real world' teaching and learning that will emboldened them post university as they become the future socially engaged change makers that we so desperately need.

This special issue of Theatre Pages profiles just a few of the ways in which the work undertaken within the drama, theatre and dance programmes seeks to engage with and impact upon the wider world. Examples include long-term projects developing innovative practice in the arts and mental health and arts in the criminal justice system; creative events that engage public audiences in surprising and memorable ways; work with young people, with old people and with random strangers.

This is the 'Public Engagement' special issue of Theatre Pages, with articles by staff, students and alumni. The stories it presents make real our ambition both as individuals and as a University to engage with our immediate, national and international communities. Our commitment to share our practice, our teaching and our research in a manner that enriches peoples' lives culturally, intellectually and socially.

Edited By **Rachel Conlon** and **Matthew Reason**.

# VICE CHANCELLOR

## PROFESSOR KAREN STANTON

As Vice Chancellor of York St John, I am committed to ensuring that the University serves the community we are part of. I believe it is the responsibility of all universities not only to educate their students but also to be good neighbours as anchor institutions in their respective towns and cities.

By engaging with the local, regional and national communities in which we sit, our students and staff benefit from learning and researching with a wide group of people and, in turn, those people benefit through gaining access to our research, teaching and facilities. This relationship means that the university is able to give back through education, support and opportunities.

I am very proud to introduce this special Public Engagement issue of Theatre Pages. It highlights many of our projects that engage with our local community and which have a positive impact on our wider society.

The articles that you are about to read demonstrate the talent, expertise and passion that York St John University has for public engagement. Working with our local community we can make York a better place to live, learn and work.



# IT'S NOT OK: THE VALUE OF EXTERNAL PARTNERSHIPS TO STUDENT LEARNING

JULES DOREY RICHMOND

In 2015 my colleague Rachel Conlon and I were commissioned by the York Safeguarding Children Board and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) to create a theatre in education (TiE) play to tour to all year-7 pupils in York. Titled *It's Not OK*, the play would have the same name as a city-wide, year-long campaign to raise awareness of child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation, giving the important message that sexual abuse and exploitation is never OK, as well as practical tools to recognise and report it.

Responding to this brief we worked intensively with a team of York St John theatre students and alumni, who offered their expertise and insights, as young people. As well as their vast knowledge of trending social media platforms, gaming, youth-slang and general attitudes and protocol regarding positive and negative on-line behaviour.

It was imperative to the success and efficacy of the production that we created relatable and likeable characters with credible relationships and story-lines. To this end we worked closely with our commissioning partners to understand the challenging and often complex terrain of child sexual abuse and sexual exploitation; with safeguarding professionals drawn from health, education, social work, police and the NSPCC operating as critical friends throughout our devising process.

Alongside creating a 25-minute play we devised a workshop, which gave young people an opportunity to speak back to the play – identifying and vocalising their worries and concerns for each of the characters, before creating short scenes focusing on an intervention moment, which in the manner of Augusto Boal's famous 'forum theatre' techniques, provided the young people with 'a rehearsal for life'.

*It's Not OK* was delivered alongside safeguarding professionals who were introduced as the 'experts in the room' providing appropriate support around the issues of the play, which was crucial especially when disclosures were made.

Following the success of the York delivery *It's Not OK* was performed at local and national NSPCC conferences and taken-up by further safeguarding children campaigns. To date the production has toured to over 25,000 young people. These tours have also offered YSJU theatre students an opportunity to work on an extensive TiE project with safeguarding professionals, educators and young people across the UK.

To give *It's Not OK* a wider reach the NSPCC commissioned us to translate the play and workshop into a series of online digital films and teaching resources. This initiative saw us again work with our theatre students and alumni, who rose magnificently to the challenge of performing to camera, and together with the London-based

YSJU Alumni Jessica Robson. Photo credit: Tea Films.



film company Tea Films we made four films looking at healthy and unhealthy relationships in online and real-world contexts. This resource was launched at York St John in January 2019 and is available to schools free of charge via the NSPCC website. At the launch event students spoke eloquently and with passion about the power of theatre to reach young people.

Through meaningful and sustained external partnership work, such as that with the NSPCC the University provides students with 'real world' experiences to make work with, for and by a range of communities in a variety of social contexts, which unequivocally enhance the student experience beyond the theoretical. It is in these 'real world' dialogical encounters with others, that our students most often express a sense of 'getting it' – a realisation of what they and theatre can do in the world. This is an empowering moment of learning for the students, which is inextricably linked to their experience of using theatre to empower others. By engaging with ideas, people and contexts outside of the university campus – students literally and metaphorically step out of their own comfort-zones; and positioned differently, they are able to think again and go beyond themselves as co-learners with others. It is through this with-ness that truly transformational learning is able to take place.

Through participating in well-held external partnership projects such as *It's Not OK*, students

experience powerful learning, personal development and clear career paths open-up in applied theatre, dramatherapy, teaching and community activism. This gives them a sense of purpose and they often take-up volunteering opportunities with external partners, not as part of a module but because they have found a purpose to their studies and lives.

**Jules Dorey Richmond** is a Senior Lecturer in Theatre and Performance and course lead for MA Applied Theatre.



YSJU Alumni Jessica Robson. Photo credit: Tea Films.

# MOVING MINDS

ELAINE HARVEY

Holding brightly coloured scarves that trace and extend her movement, Margaret leads a processional dance through the studio. Embracing this role with exuberance and leading the group off through the space, her arms move with energy and grace in time to the music. The session finishes and she retains this energy as she leaves, dancing arm in arm with her husband; animated, vital, her face full of joy.

On her first visit Rachel refuses to remove her coat for entire session, opting instead to sit cross-legged, hands in pockets, avoiding eye-contact with everyone but her carer. I notice a small and private dance begin when, during the final song of the session, Rachel's right foot moves in time to the music. The following week her hands join in too. The week after, the coat is abandoned.

My privilege, over the last four years, has been to witness the dances, great and small, that have emerged as part of the YSJ Dance & Dementia project; a venture that invites people living with dementia, and their partners, family members or carers, into our dance studio for free weekly dance and creative movement sessions. The project is supported by a fantastic team of students from Drama,

Dance and Occupational Therapy who gain valuable experience in planning, delivering and evaluating the sessions. Several students have gone on to develop similar projects independently after graduating and are working professionally within the field of arts and health.

My career as a dance-maker and facilitator spans two decades and a diverse range of settings and groups

including survivors of domestic abuse, refugees and in mental health settings. In this time I have witnessed the extent to which dance can transform and affirm the lives of individuals and communities. More recently I have focused on the significance of dance as an artistic and social practice within neurodiverse communities, working alongside individuals affected by Parkinson's disease, stroke and dementia. There is a growing body

of research that strongly suggests that, for people living with these conditions, participating in dance activities has several physiological and psychological benefits including stress reduction, encouraging social interaction, maximizing cognitive function and reinforcing a sense of identity.

We experience the world, first and foremost, through our bodies. We

YSJU Dance and Dementia Project. Photo credit: Kiran Tanna.



express ourselves and communicate with others through our bodies and yet the emphasis of our sense of self is often placed on our minds – we live in our heads. In dance our experience is not dependent on verbal skills and we can connect more readily with our embodied self and with others.

Throughout this project participant-dancers have made reference to

experiencing a sense of coming 'back to myself' or 'feeling more myself'; suggesting an enhanced awareness of identity or embodied 'selfhood'. Dance, as the creative and aesthetic extension of our embodiment, allows people living with dementia to experience their bodies as a field of activity and affectivity, and can, with the right invitation, act as a spontaneous expression of their identity.



YSJU Dance and Dementia Project. Photo credit: Jen Todman.

The experience of 'being-in-the-moment' frequently arose in discussions with participants. Creating a space in which the present moment can be experienced somatically has great significance for those who, due to their condition, are obliged to live largely in the moment. It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of this concept in the development of strategies to help those living with dementia to connect with a sense of selfhood – or, as one participant put it, in 'feeling more of myself'.

Several married couples, where one partner has received a dementia-related diagnosis, take part in the sessions. There is a growing interest in research investigating couples with dementia, and ways in which couples expend considerable effort and ingenuity in sustaining their relationship. Dance, with its focus on touch, reciprocity and connection can facilitate a greater awareness of non-verbal expression and communication in the context of a condition in which spoken language can prove problematic.

One couple, who have been attending the sessions since the project began, spoke of the importance of continuing to dance together; in reflecting on what the sessions offer them as a couple one spouse suggested that the project helped them to maintain a sense of 'what makes us us'; the other later adding 'we dance on, regardless'. These comments highlight the intersubjective potential of dance in sustaining a shared identity, or a sense of couplehood as a collaborative, generative activity.

What has certainly emerged, over the course of the project, is that the participant-dancers involved attribute value to their experience of dance as both a social and an artistic practice. Dance becomes an act of resistance in the face of a condition that threatens a dissolution of self, an activity which foregrounds embodied expressions of identity, and a celebration of what remains.

**Elaine Harvey** is a Senior Lecturer in Dance at York St John University.

# CONVERGE: THE CENTRAL ROLE OF THEATRE IN ITS DEVELOPMENT

NICK ROWE

Converge began in 2008 with a simple idea: to offer a theatre course to local people who have mental health problems. The course would take place in the university and would be taught by the team leader and his theatre students. It would be a theatre course, not therapy, and people would come as students, not patients.

The model adopted in that first theatre course remains largely the same: to offer good quality educational opportunities in a university environment and to engage students and staff in delivery, support and evaluation.

It is informed by the following approach to mental health and mental illness:

- A recognition of the damaging and corrosive nature of a mental health diagnosis, one that can overshadow, leaving a person socially isolated and with limited hope.
- A belief in the potential of education to transform lives, and that the identity of 'student' is one that can liberate and open up the possibility for change.
- An understanding of the importance

of place – a university which is socially valued conveys that value to the individual promoting self-belief and self-respect.

The clarity of the model and the exciting opportunities it provides university students has enabled it to develop quickly across the university programme areas. 11 years later, as far as we are aware, Converge is the largest provider of university based educational opportunities to adults with serious mental health problems in the United Kingdom. We offer 40 courses each year that take place on the York campus, in arts venues and at the psychiatric hospital. We have developed the Converge model in Leeds, Newcastle and at Pacific University, Oregon.

We estimate that in the 11 years of its development over 1200 adults with mental health problems have completed our courses and we have involved over 350 university students in the delivery, support for participants or in evaluation and research.

Christie Barnes. Photo credit: GLB Videography.





## Why theatre?

One question I often wonder about is why theatre was such a fertile ground for the development of Converge. After all I had worked for many years teaching occupational therapy students, surely that would have been a more appropriate environment for a mental health project. There are two reasons I am pretty sure of and one that I wonder about.

Firstly, people in the arts are accustomed to taking risks. As a result, experiments can take place and failure is not a disaster. It is easier to take risks in an arts department than a health department, and this enabled Converge to take root. Second, theatre is by its nature a social and collaborative activity. Loneliness and social isolation are one of the key reasons for mental ill health. By its nature theatre invites people to work together, to collaborate and to trust each other. Finally, I am still speculating about: Theatre is about playing with identities and meanings. This is part of its fascination and perhaps of great interest to those of us who have been less sure of who we are and what things mean.

Whatever the reasons – and it could simply be the openness and tolerance of our theatre department – the central role of theatre in the development of such a successful health project does suggest the crucial contribution theatre can play in social innovation.

**Nick Rowe** is the Director of Converge at York St John University.

## Fresh Visions

### Paul Birch: Artistic Director of Out of Character Theatre Company

Out of Character is a theatre company whose members all have lived experience of mental illness and often use these experiences to challenge the often negative and narrow perceptions of what living with mental ill health might mean. We have, many times, told our theatrical stories to help society begin to abandon a lens of stigma and employ one of understanding.

The influential American actor and teacher, Stella Adler, once said, 'The word "theatre" comes from the Greeks. It means "the seeing place." It is the place people come to see the truth about life and the social situation.'

This, by no means, summarises all forms of theatre purpose but it can be certainly applied to Out of Character's current Fresh Visions project, which is tasked with the challenge of creating a vision of what contemporary Mental Health Care looks like and, indeed, what it might look like in the future.

As artists, however, we don't simply want to make meaningful work but also challenge our own theatre craft and make performances that are exciting and daring. Consequently, in our previous work we have created projects which are varied in style; including adaptations of Shakespeare and Kafka, biography, satirical sketches, songs, dance, stand-up

comedy as well as creating original plays. For the Fresh Visions project we have turned to making our first Science-Fiction trilogy!

A good deal of research has gone into the shows including various workshops and interviews with other service users, families, carers, as well as nurses, psychiatrists and even NHS Managers. Their invaluable contribution has not only helped us to make exciting and dynamic drama but, more significantly, they have also helped us to see other truths about our own lives and social situation. The process has challenged our own perceptions and truly given us a Fresh Vision.



Out of Character In The Moment.

## Being part of Out of Character

### Christie Barnes

When I joined Out of Character, I didn't have friends, I was nervous and inward. Despite that I felt I had to turn up, I was committed to a performance and I didn't want to let people down. But the company were an easy group of people to be around. I felt less lonely when we rehearsed and then went to the pub together. I didn't go out at all at the time except for that. It was useful having Out of Character when I was at university, the Company was a place where I could be myself. Sometimes as a student I felt I was pretending, in the company I could strip that back. They held me, I could walk in, cry and then I would be alright and then move on.

Sometimes I wonder if I should leave the company now that I am much better, but Out of Character is not only our place. It is where we get to test ourselves, there are opportunities that we wouldn't get elsewhere. It allows me to push myself as a performer. Out of Character has made me the performer I am today. It's much more than just about mental health.

Christie joined Out of Character in 2013, she commenced a BA in 2013, graduating with first class honours. Christie is now at Trustee of Out of Character, a dance/theatre tutor, teaches ballet and continues to perform.

# CONVERGE DANCE

## 10<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY

In 2019 the Converge Dance and Creative Movement courses at York St John University celebrated their 10th anniversary with a specially created performance aptly titled *Ten*.

Converge is an organization within the University that offers educational opportunities to local people who have lived experience of mental ill health. Converge Dance and Creative Movement courses are facilitated by experienced dance tutors alongside YSJ Drama, Dance and Occupational Therapy students and have played a significant part in the growth of the students as socially engaged arts practitioners.

In order to celebrate our anniversary we invited ten current and former members to create a dance that will be performed at various venues throughout 2019 including York Theatre Royal and Harrogate Royal Hall. For this article Converge and York St John students, along with returning alumni, reflect on their involvement on a dance course that offers space for moving, creating, exploring and expressing.

Converge Dance. Photo credit: Esme Mai.





Converge Dance. Photo credit: Esme Mai.

**Nicola Forshaw**  
**Senior Lecturer in Dance**  
**Converge Dance course leader**

*Ten* is a piece of choreography devised over the Spring term in collaboration with YSJ and Converge students. I think we have managed to create a performance that highlights both the uniqueness of each performer as well as the connections that have come from dancing together over the last 10 years. I have been involved with Converge Dance from its first beginnings, establishing the course when I was a second year BA Hons Dance student in January 2009.

Since then Converge Dance has played a central part in my research that explores the connection between dance and recovery from mental illness. For me it began as a place to deepen my understanding about the stigma that surrounds mental health but the learning has gone far beyond this. It became evident that dance, community (or inter-subjectivity) and creativity can work to bring hope and new perspectives for all those participating.

**Ellie Smith**  
**BA Dance: Community Practice**  
**(graduated 2016)**

During my second year of studying at YSJ I volunteered at the movement sessions with Converge for six months. I was very quickly struck by how creative the group were and how everyone had something different to offer – whether it be their movement

ideas, sense of humour, perseverance, or encouragement of one another – which made for a wonderful energy. The sessions always had an open, safe space atmosphere and everyone as supported to creatively express themselves and share their ideas either through verbal or non verbal communication. During my time with Converge, I learnt how important it is to have the ability to attune and translate a session plan to the needs and mood of the group on the given day and this is something which I have carried through to my ongoing work since graduation as a community dance facilitator. Some days it is more beneficial to throw away the structured plan and just move together!

**Ian Knights**  
**Converge Dance Student from 2015**

Each semester of dance has been unique with different dancers and themes. I've also seen a wide variety of productions I wouldn't have experienced without Converge. All this comes together in a friendly and supportive atmosphere. From diverse starting points and inspiration, we are all involved in creating original material we can be proud to share. One of the really big things for me was a creative process based around exploring different qualities in movements. How a simple arm movement can be changed to express an idea as eloquently as tones of voice, or how hard you press pencil to paper. I've learnt to enjoy dancing in a group as expression and not just repeating set moves.

It's been a revelation to find out what I can do and a pleasure seeing others gain confidence and ability. It's not an overstatement to say Converge Dance has improved my life in ways I could not have predicted when I first thought 'I could give that a try.'

**Jolyon Firth**  
**3rd year BA Occupational Therapy student**

In occupational therapy, one of the fundamental principles is that the occupation must be meaningful to the individual in order to have any degree of therapeutic value. Further, that as occupational beings we are 'made to move'. I feel that often it is the denial of this that may be one of the sources of a person's ill health. Indeed, a source of frustration and a sense of being stuck is the lack of a creative outlet. Being involved in creative movement felt as though I was reconnecting with a long-forgotten practice.

More and more we learn that mind and body are intimately connected, despite the separate silos into which mental and physical health are often placed. By having the opportunity to move freely, there is the potential to move through mental health issues.

The class had further added value and opportunity for bonding, from getting ready before class to the post-class get together, providing further opportunities for folk to express themselves. I had many deep conversations with people far

sooner than I would expect in a typical traditional healthcare setting.

Everyone who takes part at Converge is known as a student, a great leveler to hierarchy which can often undermine the effectiveness of the health professional. From an occupational

perspective, the environment and context of an activity is a vital component of facilitating greatest therapeutic value for individuals and groups. Again the Converge model of 'everyone is a student' and this is a safe non-judgemental space goes a long way to contributing to giving occupation for all.



Converge Dance. Photo credit: Esme Mai.

# PRISON PARTNERSHIP PROJECT

RACHEL CONLON

Now in its sixth year, York St John University's Prison Partnership Project works across two female prisons to deliver weekly drama, music and dance courses. Within these workshops, university students and female prisoners come together in a genuine and purposeful creative arts process that very much embodies values of social justice, arts for all, community partnership and public engagement.

The emphasis in the weekly workshops is on facilitating a creative dialogue that is open, respectful and responsive to 'what and who' is in the creative space each week. This collaborative, non-hierarchical and relational way of working enables relationships to be built that re-balance the power and status difference that may have been perceived between an academic institution and a criminal justice setting.

The drama, dance and theatre programmes include modules where students can undertake work placements in prison, or performances can be shared on campus or on a prison wing. For our students, the Prison Partnership Project provides a unique opportunity to engage with a sustained and embedded process.

It is an innovative educational offer that has enabled YSJU and our students to be closer to the lives of women in prison and the stories that surround the criminal justice system. The workshops generate creative and empathetic exchange between all the participants, as together we explore stories of difference, politics, social justice and hope. Through these encounters I encourage students to see how many of the women whose offenses have led them to serving a prison sentence are themselves often victims in their own right.

This attuned and sustained nature of the Prison Partnership Project has enabled a pedagogical mind shift to happen in the university – one where it is the norm to hear around the theatre spaces on campus from staff and students alike the remark 'I'm off to work in prisons today.' And it has also prompted a shift to occur in the prison, causing prison officers and staff to consider how we can use the arts to help rehabilitate offenders alongside the more traditional offender focused programmes. A creative space can be provided in prison to free the creativity in the minds and bodies of women in order to re-imagine new ways of being and new identities adopted as they approach release from prison.



Photo credit: Donmar Warehouse.

For the past five years, the Prison Partnership Project has collaborated with the Donmar Warehouse and Artistic Director Phyllida Lloyd in their development of a acclaimed trilogy of Shakespeare productions all staged with all-female casts and all relocated to the setting of a women's prison.

The Donmar Warehouse's desire to carry out their research and development for the trilogy with the Prison Partnership Project's drama group has afforded a rich learning

environment for the prison's residents and the Donmar's creative team. It has fostered a deeper understanding of the terrain of prison and has strived for authenticity in its desire to map the topography of prison onto Shakespeare's plays. Through a carefully nurtured creative process working together, we have illuminated each others desire to interrogate and to dig deeper into the Shakespeare's texts to unearth a voice to speak the words so that it challenges the perception of women in prison and questions how

we as a society lock women up. This innovative collaboration sought to give voice to women in prison through the exploration of Shakespeare's great plays Julius Caesar, Henry IV and the Tempest has been a vibrant opportunity for both the women prisoners and our students to engage in.

Each of the three productions in the Shakespeare Trilogy were filmed, and since 2018 we have, with Arts Council England funding, been investigating the value and impact of working in prison with the films and the digital resources that go within them. Through these films there is the potential for this initiative to be rolled out across the female prison estate nationally. This work has taken place in prison in the education, learning and skills and Industries departments, with particular focus on working with at risk women in prison.

The Prison Partnership Project works with live performances, film screenings, creative writing and drama workshop to develop a hugely impactful three way collaboration between education, the arts and the criminal justice system. The result is transformative experiences for both students and women prisoners, and tangible evidence of the benefits of high quality arts provision within the criminal justice system.

**Rachel Conlon** is Director of the Prison Partnership Project and Senior Lecturer at York St John University.

### **A student's perspective** **Jessica Robson**

For the past 5 years I have had the opportunity to work on a fabulous social justice project called the York St John University Prison Partnership Project. The Project is a partnership between York St John University, HMP New Hall and HMP Askham Grange; it brings together female prisoners, students and university staff, two different communities coming together to inspire creativity and provoke social change.

I started my journey as an ungraduated student on the project where I formed Through the Gap Theatre Company with four other women as part of my year-long third year project where we co-ran theatre and singing workshops on a weekly basis. This is where I began to shape what my theatre practice is today.

As a student I was incredibly intrigued in this world of theatre in prisons which was new and unknown territory to me. I was drawn to making work with other women, where they were the experts of their own stories which were powerful and hard hitting; and we were emerging experts in theatre making. Together we united to form two shows- one for a mainstream audience co-created with the women that challenged the misconceptions and stigmas surrounding women in the criminal justice system and a show where we performed alongside the women we had worked with, where they were granted 'release on

temporary license' which enabled them to perform on campus to an audience. This moment was powerful and life affirming, it solidified the journey I would undertake as a theatre maker and facilitator. The ability to enable women to be creative and make discoveries and re-discoveries of their own identities and talents in an environment which we worked together on a level playing field felt empowering for both me as a student and for the women.

Upon completing my undergraduate course, I immediately submitted an application for a master's in Applied Theatre to enable me to develop and continue my work on the York St John University Prison Partnership Project. This opened up real world, professional opportunities for me where I was able

to network and have the opportunity to work with top industry professionals. I am now employed by the York St John University Prison Partnership Project where I run a weekly drama groups and take on the role of practitioner in the space and share my skills and learning with students who come onto the project.

The journey I have undergone with the women has been life changing and opened my mind to wider possibilities which extend past the classic black box studio. A real sense of wider thinking, and a better understanding of the world through the lens of theatre in prisons and theatre with women.

**Jessica Robson** is a YSJU alumni and currently graduate intern with the Prison Partnership Project.



The Tempest. Photo credit: Donmar Warehouse.

# COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH WITH LEARNING DISABLED THEATRE MAKERS

MATTHEW REASON

Based in Yorkshire, Mind the Gap is one of Europe's leading learning-disabled arts organisations. As well as a theatre company, performing work for UK and international audiences, they also run an Academy offering short and long courses in the performing arts to adults with learning disabilities. YSJU drama programmes work with Mind the Gap at a number of levels, including undergraduate student placements, staff research projects and an ongoing PhD studentship. This article explores a specific research and development collaboration, which seeks to enhance the reflective and critical abilities of learning-disabled theatre makers.

Located within the context of a society which devalues and lowers expectations for people with learning disabilities, arts practice in this context can suffer from a well-meaning but ultimately unhelpful lack of criticality. Sometimes the simple existence of the work is seen as an achievement in its own right. Mind the Gap, in contrast, seeks to produce work that is ambitious and that excites, surprises

and challenges audiences, making great theatre, presented by great performers who can impact audiences with their humanity, humour and the stories that they have to tell. In order to achieve these objectives, Mind the Gap artists need to develop the tools and abilities to creativity and critically reflect upon and develop their work as actors, writers, directors and theatre makers.

These skills of creative criticality are exactly those that York St John University seeks to encourage amongst its drama and dance students, and with this in mind we conceived a project that would seek to develop new resources and approaches to reflective practice through collaborative research.

Across a whole range of arts practices there exist many 'methods' or 'tool kits' designed to support and inspire creativity and critical reflection. Just two examples of these are Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way* and Goat Island Theatre Company's *School Book*, both of which include creative

Theatre Makers'  
Doodle Book

DO  
THINK  
REFLECT

Produced by Matthew Reason  
and Brian Hartley  
in association with Mind the Gap

Prototype Doodle Book Cover.

tasks and prompts that are designed to help artists think about and through their practice. I have also long been a fan of the work of Keri Smith, a Canadian artist who has published interactive books about creativity with titles such as *Wreck this Journal* and *How to be an Explorer of the World*. What is brilliant about Smith's work is its immediacy, its understanding of the interrelationship between play and

reflectivity, and the hands-on quality of the books themselves. I proposed to Mind the Gap that we undertake a set of collaborative R&D workshops with learning-disabled artists to see if from these starting points we could develop a new resource to support the creative criticality of theatre makers.

At the time of writing we are mid-way through this process, also working with

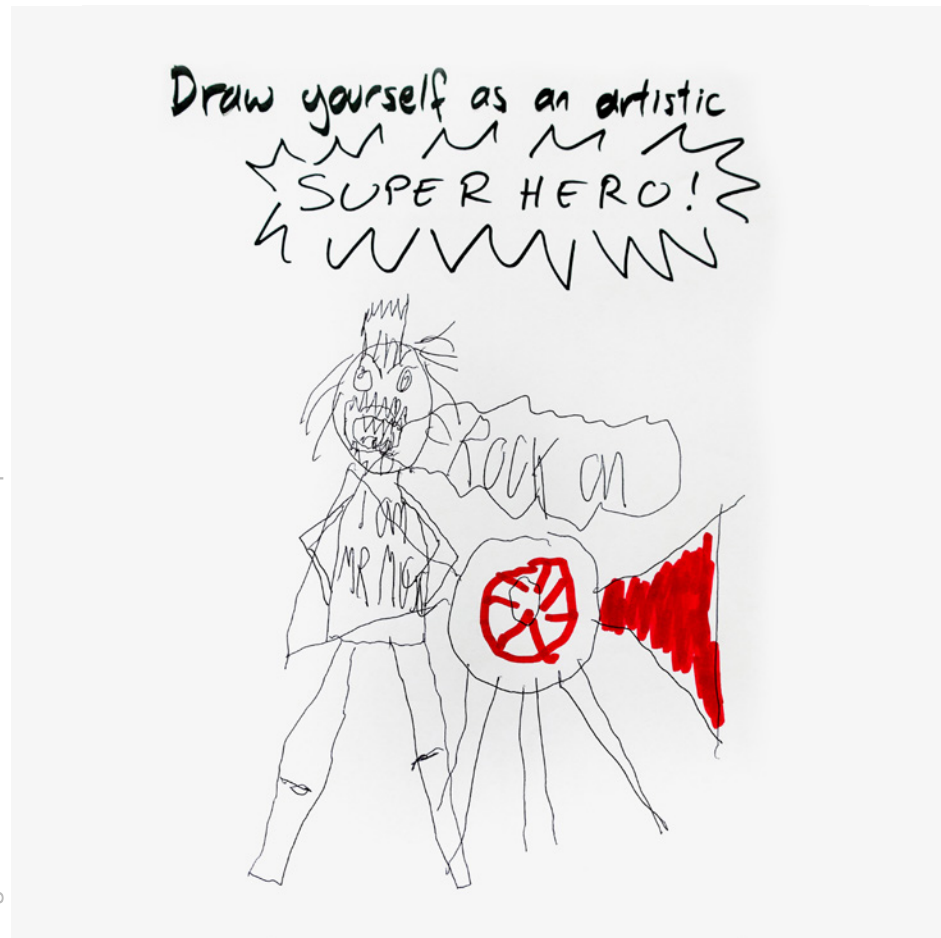
artist and performance maker Brian Hartley who will help turn our ideas into a beautiful and stimulating publication. Our opening gambit was to give each of the artists a copy of Smith's *Wreck this Journal* and let them loose on tasks that include 'Document your dinner: Use this page as a napkin'. We then worked collaboratively to see if we could develop immediate, playful, creative doing-based tasks that were more immediately suited to the needs of theatre makers. We asked our participants to describe their creative processes, noting the different stages they went through from beginning with an empty studio/page/mind through to the final production. What were the challenges in this process? What were the blocks to creativity or decision making? What help might they need at different stages? We drew on various resources to map this creative processes and think about the kinds of tasks that could support, surprise and stimulate artistic reflection.

Together we then spent two very productive and creative days playing with ideas, setting each other tasks and activities, creating potential pages to include in a Theatre Makers' Doodle Book. Some of these are too absurd to want to do more than once (one example being: describe your art making as if it was a tall glass of water), but others inspired intelligent and insightful acts of reflection. We had inspirational answers to the question asking participants to describe their ideal creative space; we had lists of impossible things that they would like to see on stage; drawings of the

insides of their heads; and pictures of themselves as artistic super-heroes and super-villains.

From this process we learnt a few specific things. First, that playfulness and criticality can and should go together: one supports the other. Second, that there is both a challenge and a real pleasure in crafting tasks that are at once immediately accessible and yet potentially infinite in the richness and surprise of the responses. This last point is worth dwelling on. In disability activism there is the important assertion that increased accessibility – whether in our physical environment, in the provision of information or in career and educational opportunities – ends up not just benefiting people with disabilities, but ultimately are used and appreciated by everybody. This process confirmed our sense that the creative/critical tasks we were developing absolutely needed to be clear and precise and accessible, but that this needn't make them any less stimulating or the responses less insightful.

The next stage in process involved returning to Mind the Gap with a proto-type Doodle Book, which we explored with the actors and theatre makers. Feedback from the artists included that the process was at once 'intense and useful', both 'easy and difficult', and also 'perceptive and challenging', with this being an intriguing balance that indicates the point between accessibility and ambition that we want to occupy.



Page from Doodle Book R&D workshop.

Together we developed further ideas, grouping them into sections with tasks designed to invite us to imagine, to think, to do and to reflect. The next steps involve developing the book further, into a full-length publication, and also producing short versions translated into French and Swedish for international partners. The process has been a rewarding collaboration, seeking to research

collaboratively not just with Mind the Gap as an organisation but also in close participation with learning-disabled artists who will have an ownership of and investment in the final outcomes.

**Matthew Reason** is a Professor in Theatre and Performance at York St John University.



# JOURNEYS WE MAKE: CREATING 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY ODYSSEYS IN LEEDS SCHOOLS

CATH HEINEMEYER

*When I interviewed pupils from refugee backgrounds about their experiences, they often preferred to talk about other aspects of their lives instead. One said, “I was a refugee for one year, but I was alive for twelve years before that!”*

Journeys We Make is a practice based research project conducted in collaboration with education researcher Dr Michalis Kakos, of Leeds Beckett University. Michalis has spent several years researching the challenges facing students from migrant backgrounds as they settle into UK schools. His aim has been to help teachers understand and meet recent arrivals' needs, and to allow these pupils to share their stories. Yet interviewees were often concerned that their experiences might shock their hearers, or pigeonhole them within the identity of 'refugee' or 'new arrival'. After all, other journeys – such as their journey towards adulthood – may be of greater significance to a young person than their geographical migrations.

In my practice research as a storyteller, I have often observed how people can use fictional or mythic stories to discuss important or difficult subjects at one remove. Michalis and I decided to collaborate on a pilot project, using Homer's *Odyssey* – a classic cross-cultural myth of both migration and human development – as a framework for creative dialogue about journeys in two Leeds secondary schools.

In one school, we worked with 30 young people aged 11-16 from EAL (English as Additional Language), migrant and refugee backgrounds; in the other, with a diverse group of self-selecting volunteers from all year groups. Each group listened to a performance of part of the *Odyssey*, then spent a full day working with writers Hannah Davies and Linda Marshall Griffiths, and animators Glass Cannon, to create original poetry and short films responding to it. The young people's articulate work homed in on characters whose experiences they recognised, and moments which seemed to resonate with their experience.

Photo credit: Cath Heinemeyer.



The two groups met at Seven Arts in Chapel Allerton to share their work and reflect on the process. Although nervous at first, they were soon organising themselves into icebreaker games, and collaborating to explore themes that arose during the process. Teachers involved reported that some young people, including those with limited English language, had felt able to express (whether directly or obliquely) aspects of their experiences which had not yet surfaced in class, and that this process had continued in subsequent lessons.

We will be attending the European Citizenship Education Research conference in Hamburg in September 2019 to report on the project so far and our plans for the next phase:

working longer-term with up to six schools in Leeds and York, and a cohort of trainee teachers at YSJU and Leeds Beckett, to develop and disseminate storytelling-based approaches to facilitating creative dialogue on journeys of migration and identity. We hope to be able to offer learning opportunities to YSJU Drama, Education and Community students as part of this.

**Cath Heinemeyer** is a post doctoral researcher at York St John University.

# REPRESENTING YOUNG PEOPLE'S NARRATIVES

ANNA GLARIN

5pm. Friday. Waterloo. London. A bunch of teenagers together in a room. One has an obsession with the Royal family and EastEnders and switches between a royal wave and shouting 'Oi!' to everyone who comes near. Another sits at the back and mumbles into a microphone. A few of the girls are chatting to each other on Snap. A few others are playing bits of songs off Spotify and showing off their moves. A diverse group of young people with different stories to tell. But as Aristotle famously said, 'the whole is greater than the sum of its parts', so we weave these stories together, creating a unified theatrical narrative.

The young people are taking part in a workshop with Waterloo Community Theatre, a young people's theatre company making original work with, for and about young people. I am the founder and co-artistic director and am now using the experiences as part of my PhD studies at York St John University. Public engagement is prominent in every aspect of not just my work with young people, but also in my research. My theatre-making practice with young people was born out of an interest in the disparity in how adults and society in general perceive young people and how young people perceive themselves.

Waterloo Community Theatre. Photo credit: Anna Glarin.





Waterloo Community Theatre. Photo credit: Anna Glarin.

and theatre-expert', can collaborate with young people as the 'topic-experts'; while I bring the academic and theatre-making knowledge, they are the experts on their lived experiences. Through drama-based creative workshops we will explore young people's sense of identity and place in the world, and how their narratives can be authentically (re) presented through ethnotheatre/ethnodrama. The young people will be co-researchers with equal stakes in the process, and throughout we will together negotiate the multiple power relations at play as well as the ethical implications of this process.

Theatre, by its very nature, serves the public engagement agenda well; sharing stories and entertaining, and enabling conversations with an audience. Adopting a participatory approach with ethnotheatre and ethnodrama at its core will hopefully enable these stories to be shared as the participants want them to be shared with the audiences they want to share them with. Over the next few years, in conjunction with my doctoral research at York St. John, I look forward to exploring this process in detail.

**Anna Glarin** is a postgraduate researcher at York St John University. Her PhD explores the practice and potential of making theatre *with* young people.

Teamed with a belief in theatre as an effective platform for young people to tell their stories from their point of view, my research-interest has grown organically from my practice. It centres around a group of young people living in or around the Waterloo and South Bank area of London and who are regular members of WCT. Our theatre-making approach is similar to that of action research: plan, act, observe and reflect. We workshop

and play around creatively with ideas that are interesting and relevant to the young people. We share our work at different stages of the development process through informal scratch-performances, and seek the opinions of the audiences we perform in front of; parents/carers, friends, local stakeholders, the general public. What resonated with you? What stood out for you? It is a dynamic dialogue; we listen and make changes as a result

and our work continuously develop until we have a theatrical product we are confident truly represents the young people's narratives while also engaging the audience in meaningful ways.

With my research I want to extend and build on this dialogue, and interrogate the participatory element of the process as well as my own practice. I aim to explore how I, as the 'academic

# ARTIST AS WITNESS

## DAVID RICHMOND

Throughout the drama, dance and theatre degree programmes at York St John University we ask our students to take responsibility for themselves as artists, to be able to work from the 'self' to the 'other' and back again. To make sure that the work they make has an ethical relationship to the world around us.

At the exact midpoint of the degree we also take them all to Krakow, Poland, and in particular to the concentration camps Auschwitz and Birkenau.

We spend three or four days there, we have a walking tour of Krakow, investigating the former Jewish quarter, Remu Synagogue, its smashed grave stones with piles of pebbles on them. We spend a day at Auschwitz I & II. We visit Schindler's factory, now a museum, and Cricoteka, theatre maker Tadeusz Kantor's archive and museum.

We talk, a lot, trying to find a vocabulary that can adequately speak of what happened 'here', and then find a structure to put it into meaning. Auschwitz is a memorial with the ashes of a possible 2 million Jewish people, it is considered the epicentre of the catastrophe of the Shoah, and stands, culturally for the murder of 6 million Jews by the Nazi regime. The epicentre of Europe, of the twentieth century, of the Shoah, and so of the

cultural trauma that is still sending shock waves around the western world and northern hemisphere.

It is not unusual for students on return to the UK to discover that their grandmother was Jewish. One student learnt that their great uncle was a professor of philosophy at Jagiellonian university. Indeed one student changed their surname by deed poll to their former family Jewish name. For everybody it raises the question of ethnic identity and how none of us are simply one thing, simply one culture.

Before visiting Auschwitz, many will have read survivor texts, in particular the remarkable Primo Levi, and therefore understand the events through that lens. Of course, once they get there and are standing in the ashes of the victims of mass murder, they realise that they would have not survived and there were no rules to follow to survive, as Levi stated you lived in the grey zone.

Through this experience the students begin to realise that uncertainty, sense of loss and fragmentation are at the centre of the postmodern condition they are living through. This is a condition of the cultural trauma of the Shoah – the shock waves are still being felt now, and our culture and the products of our culture reflect that. Narratives with no beginning and

no end, just stops and starts; images piling up upon images relentlessly devoid of context.

The Shoah is a cultural trauma and contemporary theatre making reflects this, endlessly. To really begin to highlight this on return from Poland approx. 20 to 30 students will work with me on a module called Artist as Witness, which asks the question 'How can I bear testimony to something I did not witness?' We begin by exploring our recent experience of Auschwitz through the lens of our own memories and those things we bear witness to and for. If left like this we would merely get a to'ing and fro'ing, in order to understand this discourse between ourselves and the cultural trauma of the Shoah we add to the mix by braiding a Shakespeare text. For instance: *King Lear*, which brought to

fore the original Welsh tale and how we blind ourselves every day; *Taming of the Shrew*, Nirvana's Smells like Teen Spirit and loss of innocence; *Hamlet*, the story of Ophelia and the loss of the white working class; *Measure for Measure*, #metoo and the SCUM manifesto. These pieces of collective contemporary theatre are performed at the York International Shakespeare Festival.

Through the process students realise that though we live in a world dominated by loss and despair, we act in resistance to this by getting up each morning full of hope for a better world and by taking action to bring it into being.

**David Richmond** is Senior Lecturer in Theatre at York St John University.



Photo credit: Artist as Witness.

# THE HEAPS: EXPERIMENTAL PERFORMANCE IN PUBLIC SPACES

CLAIRE HIND AND GARY WINTERS

Photo credit: Gary and Claire Images.

Performance in public spaces, in its variety of traditions (street theatre, passion plays, performance activism and more), has a remarkable history of engaging people because it can happen almost anywhere away from the conventions of a theatre space. The creative approach to conceiving and producing experimental performance is very different to the approach taken when developing a production for a studio because it considers how an idea can shift in meaning according to the environment it finds itself within at a specific time of day. Experimental practice for outdoor settings thinks first and foremost about its relationship to its pedestrian traffic, and how its cultural presence differs in meaning from within the imaginations of the audience. Public place has historical, political, playful, social and spiritual connections to humans (and their pets), so when something other comes along and shifts perceptions, if only for a fleeting moment, questions are asked.

*The Heaps* are a live sculptural performance slowly and curiously gliding through a place to ignite the imaginations of an incidental audience. They are 'things' that appear non-human. Their presence is not sinister but enigmatic, their qualities of movement are non-threatening but spirited. *The Heaps* have been interpreted as mystically medieval or playfully futuristic. Sometimes they stop still for a rest and loiter, and when they glide, you can hear them communicating perplexingly to one another through sounds akin to whale

song. They make other sounds too, distorted versions of the voices that echo the spirit of the locality they inhabit. Where ever they appear, they situate themselves for a while, before drifting off into the distance as wayfarers on a mysterious voyage.

*The Heaps* is the result of an intermedial collaboration between two artists presented under the name 'Gary and Claire', spanning an eight-year period of producing engagement projects locally, nationally and internationally. From dream walks to zombie trails we have twinned neighbourhoods in York with New York. Our audiences come from the locality of where we make work and are an important feature of our creative process. *The Heaps*, of many ideas we have had for outdoor performance, are the one that seems to provoke the most fascination. They incite movement, gather communities, change the perception of the landscape and ask us to think about our identity within it.

Made up of aluminum tubing from a gazebo frame attached to a back pack, taped together with black fake fur covering the performer's whole body, *The Heaps* are huge geometric shapes. The sculpture is featureless except for a pinnacle made from sticks cabled tied onto the top of the material. Our experience inside the heap is other, our vision impaired and we need to rely on each other's abstract sounds to guide us through spaces, some very narrow needing careful negotiation. Performing them and playing with different height levels

can be dramatic shift in interpretation for the audience.

*The Heaps* have engaged the public in different ways. On the Village Green at Thornton Le Dale, the birthplace of the hermit Richard Rolle, folk sat on the grass and guessed what we were by shouting an array of different animals “an ostrich?” At Falling Foss Hermit’s cave, a group of ramblers assumed we were imitating boulders left behind from the last ice age, and a dog sat next to us and snuggled down. In York a man became emotional and thanked us. He talked to us about how his brother, now homeless, has been drifting without identity for many years. An audience in Chicago gathered together and guided us across the pedestrian crossing of a wide busy road, safely escorting us to the closest neighborhood. In Norwich a group wandered with us for so long they ended up on the outskirts of the town in a retail car park, excited that they had walked so far. In Pontefract town centre the police showed up, eager that we were not a threat ventured inside one of the heaps to talk to us. They were delighted when they realized we were performing. The experience for the audience is multiple because as an image they are simple in form, yet as an entity and as a live presence they are very complex. They resonate on a deep level with the individual, charge the energy of a community and as a blank canvas, they soak up and echo the imaginations of the public who have taken delight in naming them and who offer meaningful reasons for their appearance. This



Photo credit: Gary and Claire Images.

form of meaning making, where the public gets to literally announce their identity is liberating to witness from inside the dark, and very cozy cave-like structure of the heap itself, where the outside world looks very blurry through the tiny tear in the fluffy black fabric.

Outdoor performance is provocative, it can ignite something celebrational, political, personal and environmental in

relation to its immediate surroundings. Performance in public spaces can also be inclusive and every day, removing barriers between performer and audience creating a communal atmosphere where everyone is entitled to respond.

**Claire Hind** is an Associate Professor of Theatre at York St John University. For further information visit: [www.garyandclaire.com](http://www.garyandclaire.com)

# ‘THE FLOURISH OF LIBERTY’: AN EXHIBITION OF CONTEMPORARY CONCEPTS OF FREEDOM

AIMÉE YEOMAN

In 2019, myself and a group of first year drama students had the opportunity to contribute to a showcase of textual/visual artworks as part of a public exhibition titled ‘The Flourish of Liberty’ at Shandy Hall, the North Yorkshire home of novelist Laurence Sterne. Shandy Hall has a public engagement focus with a history of opening its doors to diverse audiences through free exhibitions, sharing knowledge about the value of and legacy of Sterne’s work and how his creative ideas are relevant today.

The exhibition invited over 102 artists to respond to the idea of liberty. We understood this as an invitation to produce work that engaged the public with contemporary concepts of freedom, as well as a response to an 18th Century writer’s ideas. This in turn allowed us to ponder how an audience might contemplate a multitude of interpretations on the central theme, which naturally had an impact on how we composed our works. It meant that we responded to the invitation in completely contrasting ways.

The project began when Dr Claire Hind invited Patrick Wildgust of the Laurence Sterne Trust to give a talk to students on the Writing and Theatre module at York St John University. Dr Hind invites Patrick each year to work with students because of the cross overs between her own research into death and play in the writings of Sterne.

Drawing on our own passions and interests it was amazing how no two responses were the same. I responded by exploring the idea of liberty found in different languages and how the reality of freedom differs across the world. One student drew on his interest in music and its liberating powers, whereas another responded through the use of contemporary photography. The countless interpretations drawn from one concept can also be articulated through the use of different mediums, which we discovered through the work of one artist who used and photographed snow to create their page.

Over the course of the semester, we explored the conceptual pages found within Sterne’s novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy Gentleman*. One being ‘The Black Page’, a space to contemplate the death of the character Parson Yorick. The module invited us to look at the different ways Sterne’s pages could inspire our own writing, specifically relating to how the visual page can be interpreted as performance. We used page 17 from Sterne’s novel – a visual page that consists of ‘Trim’s Squiggle’, a representation of a character’s cane moving fluidly through the air – as a stimulus for our contribution to the exhibition.

We are very happy that our work is included in the exhibition alongside renowned artists as Lemony Snicket and Alison Turnbull and the opening put into perspective for us what a brilliant and rewarding way it was for us to end our first year here at YSJU. This project has significant cultural value for a wider artistic community. We share the learning from the module with the public that



Photo credit: Aimée Yeoman.

relates to the paradoxical nature in artistic composition: the freedom and representation of artistic expression, and the restriction of working to strict page size dimensions. We now have the confidence to move into our second year with this invaluable experience.

**Aimée Yeoman** is a 2nd year BA Drama Education and Community student at York St John University.



YSJU students at Shandy Hall. Left to right: Aimée Yeoman, Chloe Halburn, Mitchell Strong, Danian O'Connor, Nelli Yli-Malmi and Jay Sullivan. Photo credit: Claire Hind.



# IN THEIR SHOES: PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND ARTS ACTIVISM

KATHRYN MORRIS MCHARRY

In my second year at York St John I took a module titled Politically Engaged Practice that invites drama and dance students to explore how they can use art to engage the public with political issues and concerns. Personally, this module had a massive affect on me, making me question my

role within a group and whether I can consider myself an activist; a term which I grappled with throughout the project.

At the beginning of the planning stage, I was immediately drawn to the idea of raising awareness about sexual violence and consent in a public setting. I felt that this was important as despite a shift within society towards acknowledging these issues, including the '#MeToo' movement, it is my belief that their extent is still not fully recognised. There is also the possibility that these movements will lose momentum and the issues will be seen as 'solved', despite the fact that they still persist. It was whilst researching the topic that I found a troubling statistic: in 2017, 41,186 rapes were reported to the police in the UK. Setting aside for a moment that the majority of sexual violence goes unreported, this means that a rape was reported in the UK every 12 minutes and 45 seconds. It was from this statistic that 'In Their Shoes' was born.

The idea was simple, myself and a group of fellow students would set up in the centre of York and every 12 minutes and 45 seconds we would ring a bell and set down on the pavement a pair of shoes, each representing a survivor of rape.

Shoes have had a long history in being used in political protest, in America in 2018 for example 7,000 pairs of shoes were laid out in front of Congress to represent the number of children who

In Their Shoes. Photo credit: Connie Cowell.



had lost their lives to gun violence since the Sandy Hook school shooting. To us, the use of shoes forced us to imagine the implied victims who filled them, by presenting the shoes we are silently confronting our audience, asking them to put themselves in the position of the victim. We also found it important to include both male and female shoes, to give a voice to a portion of survivors who are often overlooked or belittled.

The module encouraged us to think of who we could contact for support or guidance, and we approached IDAS (The Independent Domestic Abuse Services) a Yorkshire based charity as well as from the 'All About Respect' campaign created by York St John. Conversing with representatives from these groups helped us make sure that we were dealing with the topic in a sensitive and safe manner; making sure that we were signposting our audience towards professional organisations which could give support; and preparing ourselves for the reactions we may get from passers by – a preparation which we found was most certainly needed given some of the interactions we encountered.

As it unfolded on Parliament Street in the centre of York, our activism installation received an overwhelming range of reactions from the public, both positive and negative. The interactions which I found most impactful were those where passers-by approach us to tell their experiences with the topics. This willingness to open up and share that they had been



In Their Shoes. Photo credit: Connie Cowell.

touched by the project allowed me to see the ways in which arts activism can have a significant impact. Despite these positive reactions, the negative reactions we received were perhaps more enlightening in the sense of gauging just how far there remains to travel in the face of deeply engrained patriarchy and misogynistic opinions. These reactions ranged from eye rolls and scoffs, to men telling us that 'Brothels should be opened so that men go home to their wives satisfied instead of raping women' and a man who said 'When men get horny, they think down here' whilst grabbing his crotch. These reactions were extremely troubling, but by

working together as a group and through drawing on the advice we had attained from professionals we were able to deal with these people in an appropriate manner.

'In Their Shoes' became a project which I was deeply attached to: as a feminist I welcomed the opportunity to raise awareness of such an important issue. It was also interesting to see the ways in which the public engaged with the project. To me, the people who took an interest in the project and interacted with it, even if only for a second in their busy day shopping or working in York, became quasi-activists – in the sense that they took

notice and acknowledged that there is an issue here that collectively we must not overlook. From acknowledging the issue, the next step is to become more of an active participant; trying to do something about the issue and contribute to the cause. 'In Their Shoes' gave me an insight into how through using art individuals can encourage change in others by starting a conversation and speaking out about issues which are important to them.

**Kathryn Morris McHarry** is a 3rd year BA Drama and Theatre student at York St John University.

# PLATFORM: YSJ SPARK SOCIALLY ENGAGED ARTS PRACTICE IN THE HEART OF YORK

LYDIA CROSLAND

Although I did my undergraduate degree at York St John in English Literature and Theatre, by my third year I was spending more time devising plays, acting in productions and working at a theatre. I knew then where my passion really was. I graduated in summer 2018, and in September of that year I started a Graduate Internship coordinating Platform: YSJ Spark Community

Theatre; a partnership between York St John University's School of Performance and Media Production and Spark: York CIC.

Community spaces are becoming less available and more important in York and the world we live in. York St John University's city-centre community theatre Platform\* is based in Spark\*, a social enterprise and supports



communities in creating, making and advocating for positive social change. This synergy with Spark\* specifically highlights the School of Performance and Media Production's emphasis on taking meaningful arts practice to different public spaces.

In our first year of the partnership York St John University students, alumni, lecturers, community partners and artists have come together at Platform. The interconnection of diverse communities interacting with innovative arts practice has empowered voices to be heard, prejudice to be challenged and creativity to be celebrated by all.

An integral part of the work we deliver in Spark\* has been to research and analyse how effective Platform is in engaging new communities. A representative from the Walmgate Community Association discussed their experience of community spaces being taken away specifically in the Walmgate area in which we work: 'One of the biggest problems in this area is the lack of space which is available to hire because things like the council, as soon as the cuts were announced, they shut down the community centre.' Platform challenges this lack of community orientated facilities by providing a space in which the public can engage by creating their own arts practice or attending work offered by York St John University's staff, students and alumni.

York St John students are encouraged to create high quality art that responds to current issues and engages with different elements of the public in our city-centre space. A diverse range of members of the public enter Spark\* and happen upon the arts practice taking place in Platform. Allowing for both pre-planned and chance encounters to engage those outside of university in socially engaged community arts practice.

I'm so proud of the work we've been able to offer because of the rich resource of talent in the student, staff and graduate community at York St John. Events, performances and exhibitions have brought people together under a shared goal of creating a better world around us. Amongst this we've held events to tackle climate change, provided a week of free performances for International Women's Week and housed socially conscious art exhibitions.

The best part of the job has been meeting so many different people at YSJ and in the wider community. I've been constantly inspired by people's generosity, passion and genuine desire to positively impact the community around them.

In terms of working in the Arts, the theatre industry is historically male but we're starting to see a change both in small and big scale theatre. I've been given the confidence by the Theatre Department here at YSJ that I can go on to make positive change as a woman working in the Arts.

SLAP Festival at YSJ Spark 2019.



**Lydia Crosland** is a YSJU Alumni and currently a Graduate Intern with YSJ Spark.



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