acta Festival of Community Theatre, 13 – 16 June 16

“Theatre from the Heart” - Final Report
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Introduction

Acting upon feedback from UK based attendees of acta’s international community theatre festival, which hosted EU COAST project partners at the actacentre in 2012, acta set out to prepare, curate and coordinate a National Festival of Community Theatre in Bristol in 2016.

The concept quickly gained support from other community theatre companies, practitioners and academic institutions across the UK, and a bid was developed to Arts Council England Grants for the Arts, to support a two year programme of quarterly seminars culminating in a National Festival.

The Festival was to be delivered with a similar framework and approach to that of the COAST festival, to include performances, workshops, seminars and debate around key aspects of participatory and community theatre. It would also link to acta’s international work, with guests to be invited from European companies.
Aims

The project set out to:-

• Bring together and celebrate the best of community theatre in the UK.
• Open debate and dialogue around the key issues for Community Theatre practice.
• Improve practice - learning about own practice through the observation of other work.
• Raise the profile and build an audience for Community Theatre, both nationally and for the actacentre.
• Share work and methodologies; learning from other styles of work.
• Promote the idea of community theatre touring between cities; encourage collaboration between companies, and cross-fertilisation of ideas and models, creating opportunities for practitioners and participants to meet and exchange creative ideas.
The Festival would also enable acta to develop its strategic role in the development of community theatre practice at a national level, working with organisations from across the sector to promote a practice that is relevant, reflective and accessible to communities, and building a new audience for theatre.
Community Theatre

In order that conversations at the seminars and National Festival were able to progress beyond a discussion as to what is community theatre, acta shared its own definition of the term with attendees. Whilst it was by no means expected that attendees would agree wholeheartedly with acta’s definition, this did serve to aid dialogue between colleagues who were able to clarify the practice that they were referring to.

For acta, community theatre is defined as work that includes:

- Non-professional participants and professional theatre facilitators working together.
- The creation of original work based on stories and ideas generated from communities.
- Theatre created and performed by non-professional community members.
- Creating theatre with a social relevance & impact.
Project Schedule

The project was developed into three stages:

1. **Year One, 2014/2015**

Research and development, Artistic Director to meet potential partners, and plan festival outline.

Quarterly seminars with Artistic Directors and commentators, to begin debating key issues.

2. **Year Two, 2015/2016**

UK community theatre company to tour show to the actacentre, as a pilot for newly extended building as a hub for community theatre.

Quarterly Seminar programme continues.

Planning and coordination of Festival, and programme is finalised.

3. **April 16- July 16**

Final stages of Festival co-ordination and marketing.

Following the successful model of the COAST Festival i.e. over 4 days, Monday to Thursday; programme to include evening performances from four UK companies (in addition to acta launch night show); morning after discussions and debates; 24 practical workshops with leading sector practitioners.

The Festival would be based at a refurbished and extended actacentre, with a new theatre bar, backstage facilities and a new Studio space. In addition, workshops and performances were to take place at other venues, all within walking distance of the actacentre.

The Festival set out to accommodate 100 attendees each day, with capacity for an additional 300 local audience for the community theatre performances.

Festival passes would be available to buy at affordable rates (£50 - £200), volunteers could work for complimentary tickets / passes, and box office prices would be kept to a minimum (all tickets £3).
Seminar Programme

April 14 – March 16

A new initiative of eight quarterly seminars at actacentre.

‘Finally a seminar that shared current participatory practice & encouraged all to discuss.’

Jonathan Petherbridge, London Bubble, on first acta foundation seminar.

The seminars were offered as sector development, to bring together experienced practitioners, students, academics and people looking to develop a career in the sector, to share & learn. The programme was designed to act as a lead-in to the National Festival in June 16, which would also improve communication and raise the profile of the community theatre sector in the UK.

Each seminar focused on a specific area of practice or a key issue for debate, took place at actacentre 1.30 – 4.30pm and was free to attend. The seminars achieved over 300 attendances from all over the UK, including practitioners, participants, community theatre companies, students, academics, local authority arts and community workers. The seminars were delivered in partnership with Dr Kerrie Schaefer, University of Exeter, but also included expert speakers / panel members as follows:

Francois Matarasso; arestlessart.com

Dr Jenny Hughes, University of Manchester;

Graham Jefferey, University of the West of Scotland;

Mia Grijp, Sering VZ theatre, Belgium;

Kaat Zoontjens, Rotterdams Wijktheater, Holland;

Declan Mallon, Upstate Theatre, Ireland;

Ruth Ben Tovin, Encounter Arts;

Jonathan Petherbridge, London Bubble;

David Slater, Entelechy Arts;

Practitioners from acta, Bristol Old Vic, Common Wealth Theatre Co, Tobacco Factory Theatre, Travelling Light Theatre and Voluntary Arts.
Notes for some seminars are available on the acta website, as is a podcast of the most recent seminar [https://www.acta-bristol.com/podcast/](https://www.acta-bristol.com/podcast/).

The last three seminars were partnership funded by an AHRC grant to University of Exeter, as part of our on-going partnership with Dr Kerrie Schaefer.

Interest in the seminar programme exceeded our expectations, although as is often the case with free events, attendance was not always as good as the bookings received indicated. Each seminar attracted a diverse mix of students, practitioners and academics.

Many attendees commented on how useful and informative they found the experience, particularly the opportunity to spend time discussing key issues with other practitioners. Many seminar attendees returned several times to attend other seminars in the series, but each new seminar also succeeded in engaging a large proportion of new attendees.

The programme has been successful in attracting attendees from across the UK, and in inspiring better communication and collaborative working between community theatre companies; eg London Bubble and Entelechy Arts, who first came to actacentre to present at a seminar, later brought work to the June 16 Festival.
Seminar programme in detail:

1 Devising community theatre – with script, or without?

Friday 25 April, 2014

Seminar considered different approaches and practice by acta, London Bubble and Entelechy Arts in producing devised work with participants; including how plays are devised, how scripts are created, what input is enabled from participants when a professional writer is involved, how a deviser or facilitator can then become the writer or editor?

The panel included :-

• David Slater, Artistic Director, Entelechy Arts.

• Jonathan Petherbridge, Creative Director of London Bubble Theatre Company, Neil Beddow, is Artistic Director and co-founder of acta.

• Ingrid Jones, is Associate Director at acta.
2. **Act your age – intergenerational theatre**

Tuesday 15 July 2014

Guest, Mia Grijp, Sering VZ from Belgium (Grey Matters EU project partner), who presented a film of their recent show, *Viewmaster*, for a conversation about intergenerational community theatre.

The seminar provided an opportunity to consider how different companies and practitioners approach making theatre with children and adults working together:

- What are the benefits of bringing different ages together to make theatre, what are the pitfalls, and how can you deal with them?
- How do you find a theatre language that young people and older people can both understand, and a place where communication can take place?
- What is the best way of involving and valuing older people in this work?

3. **All work and no pay?**

Friday 7 November 2014

How to produce the community theatre of your dreams and earn a living too. The seminar discussed partnerships & collaborations, developing project proposals and securing funding.

- Beccy Thomas, Knowle West Media Centre, Programme Manager (Young People)
- Flora Toulson Clarke, experienced acta freelancer and former core team member
- Kat Quartermass, Voluntary Arts England
- Neil Beddow, acta Artistic Director (strategic planning & fundraising)

4. **Valuing community theatre**

Friday 13 February 2015, 1.30 – 4.30pm,

Led by Dr Kerrie Schaefer, Senior Lecturer in the Drama Department at the University of Exeter, UK.

As policy makers argue the case for social engagement in the arts and the intrinsic value of arts and culture for individuals and communities, this seminar focused on evaluation of participatory arts, and how we measure the social, artistic, cultural and economic value of community theatre:
• What values underpin community or participatory performance practice? Whose values are these – practitioners, participants, civic/social partners, funders?

• How do we determine what is of value in community performance practices; who decides?

• How is evaluation important to advocacy for the arts in society? How might evaluation contribute to knowledge and understanding of community performance practice within the arts/cultural sector? How might evaluation improve/develop the theory and practice of community-based theatre itself?

• How is digital media transforming forms of evaluation?

5 Rules of Engagement.

Friday 8 May 2015, 1.30 – 4.30pm

Guest, Kaat Zoontjens from Rotterdams Wijktheater (RWT) discussed how we engage new people in creating original theatre and the RWT Women Connected projects. The seminar discussed the different approaches to engagement for acta and RWT.
The seminar also involved youth theatre experts from four leading Bristol theatre organisations to discuss how they engage young people in theatre:

- Ingrid Jones, Associate Director, acta
- Sian Henderson, Young Company Producer, Bristol Old Vic
- Bryony Roberts, Children & Young People Director, Tobacco Factory Theatres
- Georgina Trevor, Participation Director, Travelling Light

6  The Politics of Community Theatre

Friday 13 November 2015, 1.30 – 4.30pm.

How much has community theatre over last 30 years been a political response to the inequalities of our society, theatre and the arts? Is community theatre a political movement?

The expert panel included:

- Dr Jenny Hughes, University of Manchester.
- Neil Beddow, acta Artistic Director
- Declan Mallon, Upstate Theatre Project (Upstate Theatre)
- Francois Matarasso, writer, researcher and artist (arestlessart.com)

(The seminar was followed by a community theatre performance, The Far Side, from Upstate Theatre, Co Louth, Ireland.)

7.  Whose theatre is it anyway?

Friday 29 January 2016

A conversation about ownership in community theatre:

- What do we mean by ownership and why is it important in community theatre?
- How does the theatre facilitator work towards creating that, and do they control the means of production?
- What power relations exist between the participant and practitioner?
- Is there such a thing as collective ownership?
- Do processes always end with collective consensus?
• How does the practitioner facilitate ownership of a theatre piece by the people making it?

The seminar was chaired by Dr Kerrie Schaefer, and included presentations from:

• Jonathan Petherbridge, Director of London Bubble,
• Common Wealth Theatre,
• acta participants and practitioners

8. Getting in on the act

Friday 18 March 2016

With community engaged work trending across the UK, what can be learnt from community theatre? The seminar focussed on examining the current surge of interest in participatory practice and considered some key issues at the heart of participatory practice:

• Do you wait for an invitation, or do you go and create one?
• Are there any invitations you wouldn’t accept?
• What’s the difference between artist/practitioner-led practice and practice that responds to people?

The seminar discussed the ‘cultural politics’ of community theatre; how is it ‘community-engaged’ or ‘participatory’ or ‘socially-engaged’ and how can we do more, better? It further considered what we should hold on to as the core practice of our sector, why do we choose to make community theatre, and how our sector relates to the Arts Council England “creative case for diversity?”

Panel included:

• Dr Kerrie Schaefer

• Graham Jeffery – Culture & Creativity Research Hub, School of Media, Culture and Society; University of the West of Scotland;

• Ruth Ben Tovin, Encounters, Totnes, Devon.
The Festival

The festival was attended by over 150 people, including 31 people who paid for festival passes, 45 community performers, 30 staff and volunteers and other invited guests and workshop leaders. Additionally, there were three performances available for general public to access, for which tickets were available at just £3, with a view to encouraging new theatre audiences. An average of 45 additional audience bought tickets for each show at the festival, in addition to the festival attendees who were able to watch every show.

The festival was launched at actacentre on Monday evening, with all full festival attendees and VIPs attending a launch event in the theatre, which began with songs from the acta community choir, before a performance of *Moonshine Nights* by the Malcolm X Elders Theatre Co.

Tuesday began with a morning after conversation with the cast and directors of *Moonshine Nights*. Attendees were particularly positive about these morning after conversations, telling us that they provided them with a great insight into different approaches, and many suggesting that they would have preferred them to be a little longer. The conversation with the elders included a discussion of the devising process, why they make theatre and the benefits of the acta process.
There were 12 different workshops offered through the full festival days on Tuesday and Wednesday, with each delivered twice, and each attendee able to attend up to six. Most of the workshops were practical, to illustrate a particular approach to making theatre, but some were also discussion based.

- How acta does it – the acta process of engagement - Rosalie Pordes
- Is the play still the thing? - Entelechy Arts, David Slater
- The rural perspective - MED Theatre, Devon
- Behind the Wall – their approach to working in prisons - Neil Packham, Citizens Theatre
- Making community theatre – the acta devising process – Ingrid Jones
- Arts & Communities – Helen Tomlin – learning & dreaming; how acta engaged new people through a two year pilot programme from DCLG & ACE
- CAN Manchester – Lisapo, Congolese Tales
- Theatre for Social Change – Mandy Redvers-Rowe, Collective Encounters
- London Bubble – Jonathan Petherbridge
- What is community theatre conversation – An exploration of the core principles of community theatre; different from some participatory practise; seeking unity in the diversity
- The next generation of practitioners – Kerrie Schaefer, University of Exeter
- The international perspective – Neil Beddow, acta, with international guests
In the actacentre theatre on Tuesday, Collective Encounters from Liverpool performed *Wealth is Health*; a matinee performance for a local public audience, and a second performance in the evening for festival attendees.

“A very funny show – camaraderie of cast as well as great choice of cabaret genre resulted in bucket loads of goodwill from audience which energised performance further. Interesting use of traditional/popular theatre forms.”

Festival evaluation team.

Festival attendees travelled over to Arnolfini for the first performances on Tuesday evening: The premiere of *Standing in My Own Truth* from refugee and migrant women at CAN Manchester, which double-billed with acta’s *Yusuf Can’t Talk* show, in development for tour later this year.

Wednesday also began with a morning after conversation about the shows seen on the evening before, with members of the cast and directors from Manchester discussing why and how they developed the show. The performers outlined how they had never performed before, the importance for them of having fun and keeping the process playful, their trust in the facilitators and how much of the show was autobiographical.

Nura, the performer of *Yusuf Can’t Talk*, also spoke at this session, and attendees remarked on how particularly useful it was to hear her speak about the process from her perspective.
“Because of its material and the risks it entails, community theatre seems to be always in search of a positive narrative. It is in search of a story of acceptance, or overcoming, or resolution and that’s both important and understandable.”

Francois Matarasso, closing remarks.
Community performers from Liverpool discussed their very different approach to creating their show, which had been scripted from an initial research process. They discussed how getting positive feedback from the audience and knowing that you are reaching people is very inspiring and validating; makes it easier for participants to do other new and unrelated things in their lives.

“By engaging with a performance and hearing personal stories through the magic of theatre we are invited to take the imaginative leap and connect with what is being said… Sympathy should not be discouraged – trying to identify with one another is an important process… but empathy requires further engagement. Instead of trying to imitate what others are feeling, empathy takes us out of our own selves in recognition of what is being communicated to us. We stop viewing it through our own perspective and start to actually listen to what is being said. Through all the performances that were on show over the festival, the engagement that theatre invites allowed the audience to empathise with the performers and appreciate the importance of what was being conveyed.

Yusuf can’t Talk was especially powerful at conveying the stigma of autism in contemporary society, especially in the Somali community. The performance, drawn from multiple accounts of Somali mothers and videos of their autistic children learning, allowed the audience to understand the difficulty of a mother raising an autistic child in an environment where help
and acceptance was difficult to find. Through her own struggle the audience could better appreciate the impact of this stigma and how labels can continue to affect people’s lives.

Glasgow Citizens also explored traces of this in their fantastic Snakeskin where the performers traced their lives with the use of photos. The personal connection this created with the audience was a big factor in why many of us saw it twice and the morning-after discussion showed how much of an impact it had made for those who saw it.

The festival was an opportunity for us to challenge one another and learn through different practices. In parallel with the performances, we were giving ourselves a platform to be heard, for our own experiences and ideas to gain acceptance, to question others and our own judgements, essentially, we could ‘think aloud’. It led us all to think what was next.”

Hector Dyer, Festival evaluation team.

The final show in the actacentre theatre on Wednesday evening was the premiere of Snakeskin from Glasgow Citizens, and as with other shows hosted by the festival, it performed twice, to audiences of both general public and festival attendees. Once again, it was followed up in a morning after conversation with cast and directors the next day.

This was followed by a final fun workshop opportunity for some – a singing workshop led by acta community choir leader, Sarah Scott – whilst all other attendees listened to Francois Matarasso share his thoughts from the week.
Conclusion

(All quotes - Francois Matarasso, arestlessart.com, festival closing remarks, Thursday 16 June, 2016.)

The successful delivery of this project, meeting all original aims and objectives, has proved invaluable to acta’s strategic development. It has paved the way for an extended Foundation programme, to include a series of new quarterly seminars, and a raft of new partnerships and collaborations nationally and internationally.

Festival feedback underlined how welcome everyone was made to feel, and people really valued the opportunity to come together to learn, share, listen and create. Whilst keen to share our different approaches and experiences, everyone was very much looking forward to what next; there was an energy and enthusiasm throughout, and a recognition that community theatre is not standing still, but continually evolving and responding. The festival urged us to:

“Speak from the heart and the work will stay alive.”

The festival had set out to explore community theatre practice, and in his closing remarks, Francois examined the **unity in the diversity** of this theatre; the diversity of the people brought together to share stories at the festival. He urged practitioners to remain true to this practice by being:

“Self-critical, curious, open to others, and passionate about our own beliefs at the same time... Respecting other people’s judgements about what’s good for them is fundamental to any good community practice. I don’t want anybody else to decide what’s good for me: it follows that I can’t decide what’s good for anybody else.”

Whilst the Arts Council’s “creative case for diversity” was acknowledged, discussed and illustrated throughout the festival, it also provided an opportunity for the sector to explore beyond this to the moral and ethical:

“The human rights case for diversity – One of the things that’s really striking as I watch community theatre is that I am looking at the society that I recognise. That’s not true when I sit in a mainstream theatre... Just people telling their stories – I don’t see that. And I should.”

The framework of the project, with a series of quarterly seminars leading up to the final festival, proved a particularly successful element. They were a crucial part of the marketing plan, and helped the Company to develop the “theatre from the heart” strapline. They also provided a further affirmation of the work and further helped to raise the profile of acta and the community theatre sector. This **affirmation** of the work came through strongly in the festival week.

“Use the strength that you get from the self-affirmation, from the sense of being a group with shared values and beliefs to say, “Right, now we need to bring these stories onto a wider platform... to the people who know nothing of them. And to say, here is my story, what is yours?”.. That’s a vital mission for community theatre today.”
Appendix – Impact Testimonies, (conducted by University of Exeter)

1. Dick Penny (Watershed)
   Interviewer (I): How important do you think it is to have a space like this to have these community events?

   DP: *It is great to bring people from different towns & cities together to share... I think what’s so strong about acta, as a company, is just that they’ve been embedded in using performance as a way to empower communities in the city of Bristol for 30 years. And it’s just a deep deep commitment to encouraging people to explore their own voices. And I think that participation is just so important.*

   I: And do you feel these events reflect that?

   DP: *I think what events, festivals, whatever do is just help people to share, and it reinforces the value of your own participation, I think that’s the really important thing. I think participation in anything that’s expressive has huge benefits for your confidence, for your health, just for a sense of belonging.*

   I: And do you think this framework has given people the space to do that?

   DP: *Ultimately we are social beings. It’s all about sharing stories. Half the joy of telling the story is listening to the story. The power is the genuine sharing; reinforcing of communities... I think what this does is help to reinforce what happens day in day out. [...] Just that affirmation I think is really powerful.*

2. Richard Smith (audience member)
   I: What did you think of the choir this evening?

   RS: *I thought it was a wonderful performance and I was just remarking that it’s such a rare thing to get people who want to sing together, just for the sheer love of it. At times things can be quite commercialised and the sheer love of singing and joy of music is often forgotten. So it’s just nice to see that happen in such a place as this.*

3. Celia Phipps (Bristol City councillor)
   CP: *We [her and her husband] think acta are extremely important to the local community because it involves so many people and that’s what’s important. It’s so great to encourage all sorts of people with a very happy festival atmosphere that’s what’s so good about it. We have quite a few tower blocks round here where we want to try and encourage people to come and use the space and they have been coming, I think some are coming tomorrow to see a production which they will really enjoy. And I suppose it’s about breaking down those barriers and going somewhere new.*

   I: Do you think events like this help gather the momentum for more festivals?
CP: Yes I think anything here that’s a big success and attracts people from outside the city, people will talk about it. As Neil was saying at the beginning that national link has to be important. I think it’s so important because this place is so grounded on the community and that’s something perhaps others can take to other places. That community theatre lives and works if the community that live near it actually use it and value it and love it.

The actacentre is a fun place to hang out; a community space, not a scary theatre! Get down to acta, its great! ... People are encouraged to come in; they make all feel comfortable.

I: What do you think you’ll take away from this evening?

CP: I suppose where acta is being positioned in the national arena. ... It is important to have time to reflect.

4. Kathy McNeil (Citizens Theatre, Glasgow, participant)
I: what do you think the value of events like this and festivals is?

KM: This is the first time I’ve been to an event like this but what I’m hoping is to get ideas... I’m interested in the impact on communities... there is such a range of people in our theatre.... everybody really supports each other... you start from the life experiences of people, and you act that out and you build on that, and you take it somewhere ... We’re doing a performance tomorrow night.

5. Laura Oliver (Aberystwyth Arts Centre)
I: What do you think is valuable about festivals and events such as this?

LO: It’s an opportunity to network between different companies and organisations and practitioners to see what else is going on in the world because Aberystwyth is quite tucked away we don’t often get to work with and experience, talk with other companies that are mainly outside of Wales; it’s nice to see the difference. I’ve just been in a talk about how the centre [acta] use the community arts grant that they’ve received and how that’s impacted them. It’s interesting to see how the differences between Arts Council England and Arts Council Wales work because they’ve got some slight differences. So it’s a great opportunity to learn a little bit more about what’s going on in the world rather than just our tiny little bubble in Aberystwyth. It’s nice to meet people and find out what they’re doing to almost steal ideas, see what’s working for other people and trial that out and see if we can use and incorporate some of their ideas to help us with our community work.

I: How has your thinking today been changed or challenged by the things you’ve seen? And what do you think you’ll take away?

LO: At the moment our community groups are very much performance based. We have two community theatre groups we have one that meets on a Monday that is a paid class if you will, it’s no audition, anyone can be involved so it’s nice to get everyone from the community involved in that. But also our other one which is audition based which is once every term to ideally put on a
show at the end. [...] It’s nice to see here today that there are other opportunities that are running and that are working that maybe necessarily we need to work and to focus on getting people in the community that maybe don’t have the funds to join our, it’s not a ridiculous priced thing but we understand that it’s not accessible to everybody, how can we make our community programmes more accessible to other people.

I: Has this helped show you some frameworks?

LO: Yea definitely because I’m relatively new in my post so the whole funding situation is still relatively new to me so learning about the different funding that is available to fund these projects and get them up on their feet, even just sort of trial and error is really interesting.

6. Neil Packham (Community Drama Director, Citizens Theatre, Glasgow)

I: How important do you think it is to have spaces like this festival for community theatre?

NP: Oh I think it’s really good, it’s wonderful to see the people from the community collective that I run at the Citizens Theatre in Glasgow mixing with so many other people and realising that other people do this as well, that’s it’s not just their but it’s actually other people think it’s quite important. [...] It’s an opportunity for people to communicate and share ideas and take stuff back with them.

I: Anything else you think you’re going to take away?

NP: You have a base that is primarily community theatre… it must be extraordinary for this group of people to go, “this is where we come, this is our home.” Respected... held in high esteem...Some new friends and some new contacts which I think is always really important as a movement of community theatre. It always reignites, cause you know you just do it most of the time you’re just doing doing doing, but then it gives you a time to talk to other people who do it and reflect on your practice.

7. Kaat Zoontjens (Rotterdams Wijktheater)

I: What do you think is the value of festivals like this for community theatre?

KZ: I think it’s really really great because you meet so many people working in the field and you somehow always get stuck in your own approach, or your own way of working, maybe stuck is not the right word but you know you have kind of found your own dynamics and then you hear all different stories and people, and people doing different stuff and then it opens up and you get more ideas, you get inspired. And also community art is a very difficult issue to discuss, you know there are so many ways you can do it and you can take it very professional, you can take it loose. What’s the value of it and it’s always what you wonder, it’s always in the back of your mind, like is this good enough or can I get this out of my performance or should I tickle them more to be better or should it just be is this just it. So it’s nice to see that people have different ways of making, different opinions, different values of what it should be or how strict the script should be or not, or loose or not.
I: Do you think this has shown you different ways of thinking or working that you’ll take away with you?

KZ: *Yea, yea, thinking and working. Yes, yes definitely.*

I: Any final thoughts?

KZ: *About the festival? I think it’s great, I think it’s lovely all these people coming over.. every group is based on lots of fun here... in Holland we work in depth and sometimes it is more tears than laughing actually, and also fun. And it’s nice because it’s only English, so there’s so much going on in England itself that is wonderful. I don’t think there’s so many in Holland actually.*

I: Does it inspire you to have a similar format in Holland?

KZ: *Yea it would be great if we do it actually. Just a small one like this, two and a half days yea.*


I: What have you enjoyed about this event?

SS: *Meeting people. Going to the bar and dancing. Really liked the show.* [communicated in signs]

JS: *I enjoyed learning on how to teach. And how it’s been being here, talking to people, sharing the learnings of Act Up.*

HF: *Yea I know what you mean like we were doing the workshop earlier and they were saying we’d have to adapt the games a bit for Act Up because it’s inclusive so we’ve got people with different needs. We were saying for Sterre how she can’t see very well so all the noises around her when she’s trying to improvise, we have to do it one at a time.*

I: So were they helping give you those tools?

HF: *No we were bringing those tools for it, we were looking at their exercises and saying this is how we’d do it, we would change it to this or that. I think it’s really important for Jade and Sterre.*

I: What do you think the value is of events like this festival?

HF: *I think it’s really great you get to meet loads of different people. It’s really great that it’s not, so often they have disability arts festival, elder people arts festival [...] most people don’t want to be put into those segregated groups. And that’s why we wanted to come here because we’re really like we’re inclusive, we have a mixture of people in, we’re inclusive we don’t want to have just disabled people when we end up going to disability arts festivals it’s all about just working with disabled people and it’s not really fair because then their kind of segregated. Why should they only get on better with disabled people? Actually Sterre, because she speaks with signs, finds that other people with learning difficulties don’t always understand what she’s saying, so she’d rather speak to non-disabled people who can understand her better. Obviously she has great disabled friends but why should you only have people. So that’s why we wanted to come to something like this because it’s so like wide ranging and stuff. [...] We all loved the show last night.*

I: How important is it for you to have a platform like this festival to come to and talk about community theatre?

JP: It’s very important I think, I’ve been talking to Neil a little bit about how best we might be able to join forces and advocate and talk about what we might do better.

I: How does this event help you with wanting to bridge that?

JP: We meet, we talk, we show, we understand, we go away and we talk.

I: Do you feel this event has benefitted your practice?

JP: I don’t know yet, can you ask me tomorrow?! What it immediately does is every time I’m asked to talk I have to reconsider what I’m doing. So what I’m showing this afternoon is a new presentation with some new thoughts and it’s terribly interesting to put the stuff up about care and then to be challenged about are we going to move into the health sector.

10. Eve Houston (acta freelancer)
[came to a seminar at acta last year]

I: What do you value about events like this festival?

EH: I think the chance to get a really good picture of different community theatre companies and different practitioners who are working across the country, the different methods, different models of community theatre. And meeting other people, I think when you’re working as a practitioner you can be quite, you know you spend a lot of energy, very consuming when you’re working on projects you don’t kind of have the time or the chance to really step back and look at the picture. I’m quite interested in now actually going and visiting some of the other companies that I’ve met. I was chatting to people and I said I’d really love to come and see the way that you work and people you know are really really up for doing that so that’s really exciting. So I’m just gonna make sure I make some time to make that happen.

I: Has it given you a platform to make those connections and those ideas?

EH: Yes and I think it’s really interesting hearing about people’s working within the workshops but also having the time, like this, over coffee to mingle and just happen to start talking to somebody and you start off that conversation of who are you and what are you working on and those conversations start happening and you find out things that you might not find out otherwise.

I: What do you think you’re going to take away from this event?

EH: I think, I’ve been really inspired by the work that people are doing with older people and I’ve done a little bit of work with older people on intergenerational projects but I haven’t worked with older groups very much and I just, I really feel like in our communities they are quite often not part of the day to day culture that happens. You know lots of cultural events are very family orientated
so young families, young children and that’s great but I think older people are quite often not visible at those events and yea I think that they have so much to offer in terms of our own cultural heritage and I think it would just be a real shame to lose that.

11. Abby Stobart (Med Theatre, Devon)

I: How important is it for you to have a platform like this festival for the work that you do?

AS: This has enabled us to have a contact with a completely new audience of people that we wouldn’t of reached because we are very rurally isolated and local is one of our things. So we are in contact with a lot of organisations and community on Dartmoor and Devon but this has enabled us to reach people nationally and tell them about our work as well as us absorbing their work so it’s been a completely unique opportunity, we haven’t attended anything like this before, so very valuable.

I: And where do you hope that that will lead for you?

AS: Well firstly I’m getting some new ideas, but secondly I hope that we will of perhaps inspired other people to get into contact with us about how they might further their practice with rurally isolated communities.

I: What are you hoping to take away?

AS: New networks with people. We’ve already had someone who we wouldn’t of come across before, a graduate on an MA course come and talk to us about the possibility of a work placement, so getting some work experience with us. So that’s great to build a volunteer base as well. As well as graduates here and other organisations my conversations here with Raj, obviously he’s an Arts Council person, that’s started a conversation between us of ways that we might be able to work together as well in the future, so it’s given us a space to have that conversation. I suppose there’s the strands of finding other networks nationally that we might be able to link up with, bigger organisations like the Arts Council and initiating conversations with them, and then more of the community volunteer level as well, so those three prongs.

I: Do you think it’s changed or impacted how you think about community theatre, about the work that you do and the people you encounter?

AS: Well I’ve only come to this workshop so far.

I: Because you’ve been running them?

AS: Yes. But actually in the one which we ran last, our previous one to this, one of the older women, Rose I think her name was, who was in the projections from this workshop, as an older participant she provided a really interesting input into our workshop session. And now I’ve just heard actually she’s a really creative person and she’s worked with this organisation [Entelechy] so before I came here we were having some early conversations about older people work and that we really would love to develop that more. But if I’m completely honest we were feeling a bit stuck, we haven’t got that much experience in that area and so we were looking for a starting point which is why I really wanted to come to this workshop. And so having met her and her being a
participant in our workshop and now heard how this company works it has given me some ideas of how I might be able to help Med Theatre do some more in depth work with older people. So I guess it’s developed my ideas along that route. I wouldn’t say community theatre as a term or idea, or practice, it hasn’t changed my ideas of that though.

12. Mark Beeson (Med Theatre, Devon)
I: How important is it for you as a theatre practitioner to have this festival as a space to talk about your work?

MB: I think it’s important because community theatre is a rare commodity anywhere and to have a festival of community theatre seems to be even rarer. In fact this is the first one that I’ve heard of in this country and I think it is important practice and should be networked more and a festival is a good way of communicating ideas between practitioners because the very nature of community theatre means that we tend to be very local in our practice and therefore don’t see each other’s work or hear each other’s ideas except to read on the internet.

I: What do you think you’ll take away from this event?

MB: Just a lot of interesting thoughts about different ways of looking at theatre. [...] The workshop I went to was very interesting and I enjoyed giving our two workshops and talking to people who came, listening to their comments and their questions are always thought provoking and it’s good to just put your work out there and hear what people think of it. We don’t have that chance beyond the shores of Dartmoor sometimes.

I: So has this given you a different platform?

MB: Yea it’s the first time we’ve presented our work outside of Devon. [...] this is the first time we’ve had a chance to present our work to a wider audience outside Devon.

13. Rajni Patel (Arts Council England)
I: What do you think is valuable about events such as this?

RP: Uniquely it’s particularly important as it’s the first national festival for community theatre [...] and the drawing together of so much diverse practice both nationally and internationally it’s really interesting.

I: From your role do you think it has helped you better understand community based work and the importance of funding this work?

RP: I think there are two elements to that question. Yes in terms of a better understanding of the range of work, what it looks like, how it’s developed, the different forms it takes. In terms of the funding I think that’s a different question in relation to the opportunities, ambitions and challenges of the organisations. [...]
I: Do you feel this event has helped you get a better picture of what’s going on in this field of community theatre?

RP: Yea I mean this is only the beginning of the second day. But already it’s been interesting to see workshops from Scotland, from London, see companies from Manchester and from Bristol acta perform as well and the different takes of the organisations, different range of practice but the commonality so far has been that it’s about the work, it’s about creative work. It’s about the art it isn’t about addressing issues about refugees it isn’t about addressing health and well-being for elderly people, it’s about the work and actually that is a really powerful message.

I: Have discussion bought up anything new for you about community theatre?

RP: I think it’s that term about community theatre why do we call it community theatre? Why do we do that, it’s just theatre.

I: What do you think the impact of this event will be?

RP: That’s interesting that’s one of the conversations I want to have with acta. I think as a networking events, as a drawing of people together, you can always see there’s a dialogue there’s conversations happening there’s something about those connections being made that will have a resonance, there will be work, connections that comes out of this already. [...] I think the opportunity is to go with the ambition for acta and the partners that they see regionally, nationally, internationally that would be the opportunity that I would see arising.

I: And what do you think you’ll take away from it?

RP: I think two strands really. One is about the practice, understanding more about the practice and that interconnection. It’s been interesting that this is described as a national festival of community theatre, the organisations are talking about dance and music and drama and visual arts actually it’s community arts or it’s the arts within community. So understanding the breadth of practice and also how intergenerational it is actually. And I was just talking to someone a little bit earlier, one of the volunteers here, actually it’s about 0-105 the practice the work that people are wanting to make it’s about their creative expression and it might be spoken word, it might be dance and that’s really interesting there’s something really powerful about saying it’s helping people develop their arts practice and practitioners they want to engage and think of themselves as practitioners and I think that’s because they’re treated by the organisations as practitioners.

14. Ben Tinniswood (National Theatre Wales and freelance theatre maker and musician)

I: How important do you think it is to have an event, like this festival, to come together and talk about community theatre?

BT: Speaking as a relative newcomer and outside, I mean personally it’s very important it’s a great thing for me to start connecting and start reassessing.

I: Thinking about what this space enables and how valuable it is, do you have any comments on that?
BT: I think it’s very useful, very refreshing to me. This is a space, a place I haven’t had a huge amount of experience in. I was quite aware in this conversation [referring to the workshop discussion] I’m a relative beginner or newcomer to this conversation. So it’s very very useful to me to see other people sort of at many many different levels with many different experiences of calling community theatre.

I: Any final comments on the event as you’ve experienced it so far?

BT: So far very friendly, very nice, lovely building and really nice it’s sort of quite an informal atmosphere as well which is very useful.

15. Philip Milburn (Lifemusic, freelance music tutor and facilitator)
I: How important do you think is it to have a festival such as this, to bring people together?

PM: I think it’s essential really because I think it’s the only way where people can really meet. You know I like to meet people in person, face to face and then you can get to know them and engage with people. I don’t really like online stuff very much, so I really like meeting people yea.

I: And what do you think the impact of this event will be for you and your future work?

PM: For me I’ve just been getting a lot of inspiration, it’s not directly from the sessions it’s more I come in the environment, my imagination just kind of goes ping ping ping ping ping about my own practice and what I want to do. So it’s about feeling inspired and connected with other practitioners.

I: And what do you think you’ll take away from it?

PM: Well I’ve got loads of ideas, I’ve written down loads of ideas about my future project and connections yea that’s what I’ll take away, yea.

16. Cilla Baynes (Creative Director, CAN Manchester)
I: How important is it for you to have an event like a festival, such as this, on community theatre?

CB: I think it’s really important. We get very little time to do this and I think that’s quite sad because I think there’s always, you know, there’s so many benefits that come out of events like this. New connections, new networks, opportunities to share practice, that’s really important and opportunities to see each other’s work, to see what people are doing and that’s why it’s important. I mean one of the things that I was really impressed by was that we had an after show discussion this morning from the three groups that performed last night and was the kind of participation of the cast members in those discussions. That’s quite rare actually. A lot of kind of things you go to now, communities are just so marginalised and they become really white middle class affairs that really, you know are talking on behalf of everyone else. It feels you know the kind of democratic principles are very strong in events like this and I know that’s kind of like the roots of the practice. [...] Everything I’ve seen has been very positive and really interesting and inspiring but I do worry that there is a move within the arts nationally to marginalise this kind of work into
a well-being agenda because it obviously fits well into those agendas, cause it always has done. But I worry about that because it kind of pigeon holes the work in a way where you’ve got institutionally the idea of well we’re doing it to make people feel better, well all art makes people feel better.

I: What do you think you’ll take away from this festival?

CB: I think lots of things really, you know it’s just very rewarding to experience everybody else’s work. I always find that really really rewarding take that back there’s some very interesting practice. [...] it’s all very inspiring and interesting, the discussions and the debates. If there’s one drawback that I have, and I think its worth mentioning here, is if I’m disappointed with anything it’s to see that the people leading the work, the work force, hasn’t changed a lot. And I see that not just at conferences like this but most arts conferences. It’s still quite a white middle class demographic and I think as a movement we need do to something about that, we need to be encouraging more people, more looking at why that is the case.

17. Sam Pine (freelance designer)

I: How important do you think it is to have a festival such as this?

SP: I think it’s great to get everybody who works in community theatre together in one place and to find out what other people are doing from different parts of the country and also finding out how they go about setting about a group say, you know, to work with elderly or people from minority groups and things. It’s really nice to have them all together in one place.

I: How do you think it’s impacted you in your work?

SP: It’s been lovely to meet so many really interesting people and to make some good contacts. To learn about like-minded people and the lovely things that community theatre can bring to people’s lives. It’s just been a really enriching thing, just very nice.

I: What do you think you’ll take away from it?

SP: [...] Well it’s just lovely to be part of a community really, you know people all getting together who are sort of like-minded.

I: And had you had the chance to meet many of these people before or is this the first time?

SP: No, lots of new people, so it’s been great.

18. Christina Fonthes (Performer, CAN Manchester)

I: How important is it for you Christina to have a festival like this to come to?

CF: [...] I mean of course it’s important it’s art. And I think one thing that we’ve learnt throughout this whole time that we’ve been here is that it’s moving. You know, listening to people’s stories listening to people’s experiences. I mean the thing about festivals is that you don’t just get to, sort of, consume. Which as an artist I’m not particularly fond of people just consuming for the sake of
consuming. I mean that’s fair enough but I think what festivals do is it gives you a chance to have a human face and to realise that actually the story came from somewhere and you know it resonates a lot more when you get to hear the voices behind the stories and festivals in general allow for those conversations to happen. The fact that you have the Q & A. The Q & A that I was on this morning was very powerful nobody expected that to happen where one of the cast members told her story which is very deep and very personal; but because of the safe environment that it was in, and because obviously it was within you know context she was able to share that. And that gives you just another element of you know you think about the piece that you saw on a completely different scale when you get to hear the humans and the voices and the experiences behind them in a way that you don’t in sort of day to day just going to the theatre. [...] again it’s not just about consuming, you get to have the whole thing, you get to see the peoples sadness, you get to hear their stories but you also get to have a drink with them, you also get to have nice food with them and that sort of exchange.

I: So has that side of the festival been beneficial as well? Sort of around the workshops.

CF: Definitely I mean that’s what makes a festival. It takes away that whole view of consuming art and just peering in and then criticising it without actually knowing anything about it. When you get to speak to people, when you get more insight into the process, into the stories etc. when you get more depth and you actually appreciate the art a lot more.

I: For you having performed and also participated in things today what do you think has been the impact on you?

CF: I think again it’s just remembering why you do the work that you do [...] that bit of motivation that bit of encouragement reminding you why the work you do is important and why you need to do it.

I: Is there anything else you think you’ll take away?

CF: I think the hosting has been brilliant. We’ve been made to feel very at home, we’ve been you know really well looked after. We’ve had you know like a volunteer with us the whole time, it’s very relaxed, very friendly and I think a very supportive audience.

19. Tamsin Buckley Bell (freelancer also works for the Arnolfini)

I: How important do you think it is to have an event like this for community theatre?

TBB: Well yea it’s very important, I don’t think community theatre can kind of run without it to be honest. These types of events where practitioners and thinkers can get together and share ideas and thoughts and local community members can get involved as well with volunteering and yea it’s great.

I: What will it change for you do you think or what do you think you’ll take away?

TBB: The performances I think because I haven’t weirdly, although I’m a drama practitioner, I haven’t seen a lot of community theatre. Like the ladies with the refugee asylum seeker performance yesterday I hadn’t seen any performances from that specific group of people before.
And the Yusuf Can’t Talk performance as well. You can just really see the power of community theatre and why it’s so important and I think that’s what I’ll take from this. I actually feel quite inspired going to see those performances that I want to do more and get more involved.

I: And do you feel it’s given you ideas of ways you could do that?

TBB: Well yea, I mean I’ve spoken to a lady who works for the Baring Foundation and she was talking to me about kind of funding streams. So yea it’s definitely, cause I also work for Arnolfini and we’re trying to make Arnolfini dementia friendly at the moment so yes it’s kind of opened up links between myself and the Baring Foundation and she told me about some money that might be available so I wouldn’t of known about that if I hadn’t of come here and spoken to her about it.

20. Heleen Hameete (Rotterdams Wijktheater)

I: For you what is valuable about a festival such as this to talk about community theatre?

HH: The most important thing is that you’re not alone, the fact that you’re not alone. And the most important thing is that you learn from other people and how they work and you can also talk about the problems you face in your practice and you don’t have to explain to these people what your practice is because they know it so well, they do themselves, so your starting point is way different. And I cannot talk about my problems to, you could say, the mainstream theatre companies because they don’t understand what we do. So, it’s very important to meet companies and artists who do exactly the same and understand so well.

I: What do you think the impact of this festival will be on your work?

HH: […] For the impact here is, it’s a very small festival and so it’s a kind of family thing and you are with this smaller company all three days so your discussions will go more deep than when it’s a large festival and you meet and greet and then you go onto the next person. […] I meet some people here I’ve met before and the valuable thing is that your relationships get more close and that you can sometimes, by meeting at a festival, you can make the next step in sometimes what is going to be maybe a collaboration or whatsoever or maybe the starting point of an exchange. So that’s the most important thing for me, to meet people again and meet new people with making next septs or making new steps with people.

I: Has it given you a way internationally to meet people who you hadn’t come across before?

HH: Yep, yep. We’ve been working in different countries and we have a very long term relationship with acta. By coming here it’s just meeting new people and meeting older people and just getting tighter relationships that’s the most important thing. And already by meeting Patrik from Bratislava you talk about a festival and he invites us to come over to his festival, so it’s important. You can always do anything by email but it’s very important to meet each other alive and have a different talk than by email because everybody in their own practice is always very busy; so you need some points in your working practice that you meet and you only, I’m here only for this. So my practice at home is far away and I’m focused on here and that’s necessary to make steps.
I: And has it been important to have that space, almost outside of the workshops? Has it given you that route to do that?

HH: Yep yep exactly. The moments around that are important too, during lunch or during dinner or whatsoever or after the shows. And also talking about shows, its form your ideas about how you will make theatre, what you see can be in a negative way but also in a positive way inspire you in what you won’t do and what you want to do and sometimes it’s a conformation that what you do is right and sometime you think wow that’s a great idea or that’s something I have to bring along and put in my own practice.

21. Patrik Krebs (Divadlo Bez Domova, Slovakia)
I: For you how valuable is it to have this festival to be able to come to and participate in?

PK: Honestly for me this kind of festivals, events, are the best moments of meeting diversity of reflecting own work, seeing work of others, meeting people who I never would meet otherwise and is to know really the place. Bristol for me is thanks to acta, thanks to this festival I know this place differently than I would know it just like a regular tourist.

I: What do you think the impact will be on your own work? What are you sort of coming away with?

PK: There will definitely be big impact because thanks to the performances I have seen mainly with refugees or people coming from very different countries this is helping me to see new possibilities of our own work which is not so rich with refugees. We do have one, only one actor, who comes from Iran but because of Slovakia not having so many refugees, if there will be in the future I can clearly see for the future possible ways of how to work, or how to be inspired for own work. This is one thing. Second thing is also the way festival is done. For example I like that it is a national festival with some international flavour and this is nice because I am witnessing your British community theatre reality, of course not all but many people are coming here and I can see like your reality is very close to our reality.

I: And has that given you ideas that you’ll take away?

PK: I wish I could take idea of the venue but this is impossible but anyway it gives me courage to think that there are possibilities in the world where such a great place like actacentre is devoted to theatre, to communities and to many other things.