



UNDERSTANDING THE CLIMATE FOR TOURING THEATRE FOR OLDER CHILDREN

Introduction

This report is based on research commissioned by Leeds-based Theatre Company Blah Blah Blah (The Blahs) to further understanding of the landscape for touring theatre for older children (age 8 to 13).

The Blahs have a 34-year track record of creating high quality participatory theatre for children and young people, exploring the ideas, experiences and issues important to them and how they live in the world. Historically this work has taken place in youth settings, primary and secondary schools. Until 2018, The Blahs were an Arts Council National Portfolio Organisation, our annual programme generally included touring one to two, individual commissioned and partnership projects, teacher CPD and a busy youth theatre.

The loss of core funding and changes in educational policy (which are outlined in full in the context section of this report), has led to a significant shift in our operation and the activity we can deliver, and our focus in recent years has been around actively exploring sustainable approaches to:

- creating work for small-scale venues and non-traditional spaces that engages young, family and intergenerational audiences
- new approaches to partnership and collaboration
- continuing to work meaningfully with schools whilst shifting delivery of our work to other settings

The Blahs have always been passionate about research and exploration that will develop our practice, along with sharing our learning widely within the sector (through articles, presentations and participation in networks and conferences) to support a wealth of excellent and engaging provision for all children and young people. It is in this spirit that this piece of work has been undertaken and we hope will inspire new conversations, collaborations and strategic approaches around how we work together as an industry to support a thriving ecology of work for older children.

There is much work for us all to do. If you would like to discuss the implications of this report further or explore new collaborations in response to its findings, we are keen to hear from you so please do get in touch.

Deborah Pakkar-Hull
Artistic Director – Theatre Company Blah Blah Blah

THE VULTURE'S SONG

The company's most recent performance, *The Vultures' Song* by Mike Kenny was inspired by the stories of the Partition of India and developed in collaboration with Delhi based Yellowcat Theatre. It was shortlisted for Best Play for Young Audiences by the Writers Guild of Great Britain 2019 and toured to children aged 9+ in schools, theatres, and community settings.

Watch the trailer her <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U6SUfhp4wIU>
A full film of the production is also available here <https://youtu.be/J2CbApty2xs>

Feedback from the performance

"Ingenious, witty, wonderful"

"Fantastic...it was engaging and explored some really interesting issues."

"A very unique and special performance...better than we expected – exceptional!"

Context

The climate for touring theatre for older children has shifted markedly in recent years, with relationships between schools and arts organisations, specifically theatre companies, changing significantly in response to a number of changes in school priorities and the reduction of funding for the arts within schools. This research explores how theatre companies have adapted to such changes and how venues approach programming work for this age range.

There is a strong feeling amongst the companies and theatres we talked to that theatre for older children is in crisis. There are numerous factors contributing to this including a potential lack of strategic investment, changes within school funding and inspections, the rapid development of technology for this age range, as well as a potential fear of exploring risky subject matter. Though the Blahs have found the climate challenging, the broader strength of feeling around the challenges of making work for this age group, was both surprising and concerning. As such, this research has come to mean more than a reflection on development for The Blahs alone, but rather a reflection for the sector, and we hope it is the beginning of further conversations.

Both companies and venues were very generous with their time and openness about the challenges of working with this age group. There was an overriding sense from all, that this audience is very difficult to

reach and that work targeted at this age group tends to be loss-leader and so a riskier show to programme that must be compensated for by programming other more popular work for other ages (such as early years work or well-known book adaptations). Despite such challenges, most seemed committed to continuing to make or programme work for this age; indeed, part of the generosity of participation with this research, was that companies and venues alike felt passionate about not letting this age group down, for in doing so we may miss a vital step in the development of audience relationships with older children immediately and as the audiences of the future.

Three years ago, the Blahs carried out a survey amongst secondary teachers and Head Teachers to gain an understanding of the local context in West Yorkshire. From the responses, budgetary constraints were a key reason teachers are unable to book the work.

'We are struggling with budget at the moment. Willing to pay £200-£400, but able to pay £50.'

Secondary school teacher

Also cited was the difficulty in getting young people off timetable for non-Ebacc subjects, and the need to closely align any external provision with exam specifications.

In primary schools, the statutory testing regime and the resulting prioritisation of 'core' subjects has led to a well-documented narrowing of curriculum and 'an educational approach dominated by teaching that is focused on answering exam questions' (The Durham Commission, 2019). Primary schools have become orientated towards commissioning arts and cultural organisations on an

'instrumental' or outcome-driven basis, e.g. using the arts as tools to raise attainment in core curriculum disciplines. This shift away from valuing the arts within schools is also reflected in Initial Teacher Training with minimal or no focus on arts subjects, which has resulted in fewer staff in Primary Schools with sufficient understanding and experience to advocate for the arts, articulate their value or create opportunities for children to engage.

It is important to note that this report was commissioned and began before the 2020 Corona Virus pandemic and the accompanying measures that were put into place, which halted much of the practices of the companies and theatres involved in the study. Conversations took place amid the confusion and rapid changes that accompanied the lockdown and so reflect this time. Despite these extraordinary circumstances it is hoped that the findings presented here offer insights that will be useful post-lockdown as touring recommences and theatres reopen.

Research approach

The inquiry has been carried out as part of the final stages of *The Vultures' Song* tour and was proposed to evaluate findings from touring to both community and theatre venues, as well as exploring learning from other companies and theatres. However, the tour was cancelled part way through as a result of Corona Virus pandemic measures. Therefore, this inquiry is founded mainly on conversations with Artistic Directors and Producers, as well as Theatre Programmers and Community Engagement Managers, and reflects their perspective in the midst of this great pause.

Though touring theatre may shift further following the restrictions, when theatres do reopen their doors

this report seeks to offer insights into business models, creative practices and challenges of making theatre for older children. With this in mind The Blahs commissioned this report to inform the sector, in the hope that it will contribute to a positive strategic conversation that may shape the future of theatre for older children, as well as informing the future creative direction of the company.

Contributing theatre companies and their business models

The Blahs are currently operating on a project to project funding model. A key question of the inquiry was 'What do other theatre companies' business models look like and how does being an Arts Council England (ACE) National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) affect their creative practices?' Theatre companies shared their models of working and it appeared that both the NPO and project funded companies we spoke to managed several strands of work, each complementing the core aims of the organisations.

Both theatre companies and venues contributed to this report and what follows is a brief summary of each theatre company's business model; creative approaches are discussed in the following section of the report.

Theatre Hullabaloo is an ACE NPO. A key part of their work is their venue Hullabaloo, which they run in partnership with the Local Authority (LA). This development in their practice came about due to the loss of a previous venue, and the company took the bold decision to go to the LA and ACE for capital funding to get a venue of their own, one which would be a centre for children's arts for the region. They have become the key child-focussed building in the North East. They also run the Take Off Festival and develop one new national touring show each year, which is then toured twice. Their touring productions are usually produced and developed by their Artistic Producer and Chief Executive Miranda Thain, often in partnership with a director from another theatre company.

Polka Theatre is an ACE NPO, predominantly a producing house focussed on theatre for children, but they also receive touring work. They have two performance spaces, a studio theatre for younger children's work and a larger proscenium arch theatre for work for 6 years upwards. Polka produces seven new shows each year, shared between audiences of younger and older children and sometimes co-produced with other companies.

Horse and Bamboo is an ACE NPO puppet and mask theatre company that have been touring work for over 40 years. The company runs from its own venue The Boo, and creates at least one new production each year. The company have focussed on building strong relationships within their community and developing work that reaches local audiences.

M6 is an ACE NPO who have a number of strands to their work as well as creating nationally touring productions for young audiences; these include:

- Weekly Youth Theatre including one group in partnership with Barnados. Also Holiday and Summer School projects to engage people on M6's Youth Theatre waiting list.
- Outreach work in schools and with community groups with targeted young people with emotional and social needs. Engaging them on projects that also create awareness resources for other pupils and schools.

- Franchisee of Speech Bubbles, Speech and Language Intervention Program for Key Stage 1 pupils in schools.
- M6's offices are on a school site with a mainstream and special school, allowing strong partnerships with those schools and easier access to others.
- Secondary school touring using monologue performances to engage single class size groups in a single lesson.
- M6 are recognised as a key deliverer to children and families in Rochdale.

Zest Theatre are a newer company (est. 2007) focussed on making work with and for young audiences aged 12-25 years. Their funding is project based, though they have long established relationships delivering work for the LA. Zest's work is both immersive and digitally innovative, often using sound and headphones for the audience to explore multiple character narratives within a show. The company have evolved their work from a participatory model based around a youth theatre offer to include four core strands of practice; touring educational performances to schools based on issues such as homelessness and co-creating and developing performances with young people in communities nationally. Zest then tour the co-created performances for older children and young adults which include young people performing alongside professionals. As well as these youth-orientated foci, each Summer Zest Theatre is the artistic lead for the Lost Village Festival, a key revenue point for the quieter Summer months.

We also spoke to two receiving houses:

Z-arts is an arts and theatre venue for families and children in Manchester and the North-West. Zoe Pickering, their Head of Programming, manages the Big Imaginations Network. 'Big Imaginations is a network of 22 arts venues and organisations dedicated to providing high quality, imaginative and affordable theatre to children and their grown-ups'. As network manager, Zoe brought insights from her role about the broader climate of touring theatre for older children.

Attenborough Arts Centre is a multi-disciplinary arts centre, part of the University of Leicester. The centre is particularly focussed on programming innovative theatre for both the local and academic community, with a commitment to arts education and learning.

Key learning points

Successful business models for touring children's theatre (particularly 8-13 years) include the scaffolding of other community practices and projects, or by the running of a venue, network or festival, which might bring in alternative revenue and support the core costs of the companies. Such additional work also contributes to the development of relationships within schools and communities, offering easier access to research and development opportunities that might also support audience development. Examples of these are:

- Running youth theatres – often with a funded inclusive strand, to offer opportunities for young people from more challenging socio-economic backgrounds.
- Regular revenue building performances and projects such as Zest Theatre's involvement in The Lost Village Festival
- Funded outreach projects often involving film, that offer resources to local authorities, schools and community groups using the voices and experiences of marginalised young people to educate and build awareness.

- Hosting a children's theatre festival
- Having a venue that has become central to the community (often with LA support)
- Speech Bubbles franchise (See below)

LONDON BUBBLE THEATRE'S SPEECH BUBBLE FRANCHISE

M6 theatre successfully run a franchise of Speech Bubbles which is an approach for Early Years and Key Stage 1 pupils to addressing challenges in speech and communication in schools for children that would not meet the criteria for clinical intervention.

Using Storytelling/Storyacting techniques, a drama practitioner works with a teacher and a group of pupils on a weekly basis, using this approach to develop communication. The franchise provides the model, the evidence base and marketing materials and the franchisee provides the pool of drama practitioners, develops the relationships with schools, and sells the project to each school on the basis that it meets the school's need to reach and support these children additionally to their classroom learning.

These franchises often work on a mixed funding model where funding is sought from trusts (e.g. Shine Trust) and sometimes local authorities to reduce the costs for schools. Relationships with schools take time to develop, however once established the model is often well received and the evidence base provides reassurance around its efficacy.

The project has successful franchises across various London boroughs as well as areas such as in Rochdale, Greater Manchester

Creative models (developing performances and creative partnerships)

We were interested in developing an understanding of how the business model of a theatre company impacted the creative processes and choices; the two elements are closely linked and companies were generous in sharing their approaches.

For most, creating original touring theatre was a core aim of the companies and though other company activities were equally important and sometimes more financially successful, the creative practice of developing and touring new work was integral. Companies intimated that making original performance contributed to the perception of their creative aesthetic and was a way of achieving core principles of reaching particular age groups or developing work around particular subject matters. It was seen as a key element to receiving ACE funding as making original theatre performance contributes to meeting criteria for creative excellence. Touring productions were also a key element of building a national or international profile to compliment more embedded regional creative engagement.

Indeed, the relationship between creative engagement, audience development and productions was often interwoven within the company's practice. This relationship seems often overlooked. For most companies touring productions heightened the national or international visibility of the company and pushed forward their artistic mission; which is key to any ACE funded work. However, the creative

engagement offers that were part of the scaffolding work for most companies contributed to audience development and were often core to the ethos of the company to reach and increase access to the arts for specific audiences (particular age groups, rural communities etc.) When touring productions were discussed, a few companies mentioned their commitment to diversity in casting, perhaps indicating that touring productions were a key area for making vital contributions to the change we all agree that we need to see in our sector around diversity and representation.

All NPO companies felt their NPO status was fundamental to their ability to push for creative originality and to be aesthetically ambitious as it allowed them to occasionally take a loss or break even and to put more resources into audience development and achieving artistic excellence. There were also some suggestions that innovative work for hard to reach audiences was important in meeting core ambitions to widen access and participation, and this contributed to the appeal of work for venues though it may not bring in significant box office returns.

A few companies explained that creative partnerships were fundamental to their practices, often established around 2 years in advance of a production date. Partnerships drew on the strengths of creatives from both companies to work collaboratively e.g. as Dramaturg and Director or Director and Producer. In this way the reputations of both companies would provide a draw and contribute to potential audiences, whilst building on relationships with touring venues and theatres from both companies. Such partnerships enriched companies, sharing relationships and creative and marketing strategies, whilst also enabling a sharing of the risk and capitalising on multiple regional reputations.

M6 tour into both schools and professional venues, however the offer to each is different. Their theatre performances focus on high production values and are toured to theatres and arts venues. Previously M6 toured these full-size productions into secondary schools with post production workshops. However, this has shifted significantly as the climate in schools has changed. Schools can no longer accommodate full scale productions that interrupt the whole school day. M6 now offer a monologue strand developed from each production that can go into classrooms, usually around the PHSE curriculum, this way the show can fit into a lesson with one class group and the schools can fit these into the timetable. These monologues are sometimes offered to theatres as a 6-monologue evening for their youth theatre groups, creating an alternative audience, but a different offer to their larger-scale touring productions.

Key Initial Findings

1. NPO funding offers significant creative freedom, covering many core costs and subsidising various elements of the touring companies' additional activities. However, the project funded company we spoke to have found ways to support their core costs with careful funding applications that cover core costs along with complimentary portfolios of work.
2. Many companies have an annual or biannual rhythm, sometimes including a specific number of shows developed per year and toured more than once, festivals or regular shows that tour to schools on a repeat basis, as well as ongoing community engagement. Such regularity may support the development and maintenance of relationships with venues and networks.
3. Creative partnerships between theatre companies can offer a good practice model. These include both financial and creative collaborations. Such relationships need to be developed and negotiated up to two years in advance of a proposed tour.

4. The importance of high production values or originality of aesthetic was mentioned by several programmers as important for both audience development, venue profile and as a sign of creative originality. Aesthetics and creative approaches that particularly appeal to the age of the audience, such as digital or immersive approaches, were also mentioned as being more likely to bring audiences in.

YOUTHQUAKE CASE STUDY

Youthquake by Zest Theatre is a show created and devised with groups of young people within a particular area, incorporating verbatim text and adapted for each community with which they work. Young people from within that community perform in the show alongside professional actors. This way, the development workshops within schools and youth groups and the engagement with young people become a part of the audience development within the local area, drawing in participants to become audiences along with their families. This model requires very different relationship development earlier in the production process, but offers a way of working which draws in this age group to see the performances.

Zest's work is immersive, utilising technology to create a unique and innovative audience experience. *Youthquake* is described as part play, part party, part TED Talk. They have a main trailer but also use multiple short trailers, many of which feature young people reflecting on the show.

Partnerships and relationships with venues

Our research sought to develop understanding of the different relationships venues had with companies, how those relationships developed and what making work in partnership with a venue meant to the company. For companies making work in partnership with a venue, this was sometimes a venue offering a pot of money (often small) towards the production, for others this was more complex as they contributed to an R&D process and/or supported with space and building relationships with local groups. Such contributions, though often small or in-kind, can make an enormous difference to touring companies in these challenging times.

'The more accessible or popular work subsidises the more experimental work but I have to have a model that financially balances. There's increasing pressure to stay afloat.'

Pete Glanville Polka Theatre

Sometimes diversity is a key reason for venue bookings, and with that in mind, some companies mentioned this as partially shaping the work they make. One company marked the challenge of booking actors from BAME backgrounds as their work includes a Theatre In Education (TIE) offer, and many actors did not want to be associated with TIE work.

Most companies described having existing and longstanding relationships with venues based on reputation. Some venues spoke of booking an

adaptation that would bring in revenue and then booking the theatre company where they expected revenue would be reduced, but diversity and creative originality heightened. For most programmers, creative originality was a priority but balancing that with the need to at least break even was the challenge for this kind of work. The touring landscape has changed, theatres rarely book for three or four night runs, rather single performances are a more common booking model. This change drives up touring costs and challenges for theatre companies, particularly those without NPO support.

Venues talked about the value of long term relationships with companies, that they are more likely to programme work from a company they've worked with before. Quite a few companies had invested time into conversations around marketing and audience development for each tour with the venues, and felt this was worthwhile in making the most of marketing resources and relationships with schools etc. in the area.

It is important to acknowledge that we did not manage to speak with Programmers or Directors of venues who have a remit beyond children's work. We did approach these larger Producing and Receiving houses but perhaps due to the challenges of lockdown and furloughed employees, we did not manage any conversations. The challenge for such venues around balancing creative excellence and originality with box office revenue is likely to be even higher, however, for many companies it is these venues, situated prominently within their communities, that are the mainstay of a regional or national tour.

Key learning points

1. Venues may well support the development phase of a production; this seems to be on a financial basis most often, though sometimes creatively as well. Some venues suggested that companies reach out early on to several potential producing partners with ideas and the kind of support/partnership that would be sought. This relationship then often supports the audience development process as knowledge and understanding of the show develops over time and there is opportunity for more complex conversations around marketing approaches.
2. Touring original work for the 8-13 age range is attractive to theatres and venues for its originality, diversity and creative excellence rather than as a source of revenue. Venues try to balance adaptations and classic theatre which bring higher audiences, with more original challenging work, however a production that brings a loss will be hard to justify suggesting the fundamental role of strategic audience development.
3. Sometimes there are partnerships with multiple venues where one might support the research and development phase both financially and creatively, and another might support the tour. There might also be collaborative casting where actors from a specific region are included in the cast according to particular regional priorities of a company.

Audience development and marketing

The Blahs have historically made a great deal of work for young people aged 8-13 years which has enabled touring into both primary and secondary schools, though this is a challenging age

developmentally. **Both companies and venues emphasised just how difficult this audience is to reach.**

Whether this challenge comes from a lack of work made for this age range, or a reluctance to program work is unknown, however reflections on work for this age group suggests a need to address the challenge of reaching older children or we risk losing future audience goers.

We also wanted to understand how different companies and venues approached marketing and how agreements were established. The results were very diverse with some interesting points of potential learning.

Most companies had a local network of schools they could reach out to, often connected to their location. These relationships were frequently underpinned by other partnerships with, and offers to schools, and developed upon reputation for quality creativity within a locality. Such connections and reputations were established over years and decades requiring significant investment in resources to support such relationships and offering consistent regular offers that work for the local communities. Both venues and companies acknowledged the real challenge of these kind of relationships when it comes to touring.

Contributors generally felt that the 8-13 age group was incredibly difficult to reach and that there was a resulting gap in the work being made for this audience. Both venues and theatre makers suggested a reluctance for schools and families to watch risky or challenging productions for this age range. Others felt that it was due to digital and technological advances making traditional theatre less attractive to tech savvy older children. Some suggested there had been a focus and investment into Early Years theatre, partly due to a developing evidence base, but perhaps this focus had come at the cost of not supporting theatre for older children. Many referred to the restrictions brought about by an increasing Ofsted focus away from the arts, especially drama, as a key challenge to relationships with schools and getting schools to come and see performances that were not adaptations of set texts. Most felt it was an almost impossible task to reach this age group outside of school settings, that are now so difficult to get into. There were even suggestions of only aiming for late primary, so 8-11 audiences, as secondary schools are becoming increasingly difficult to reach. Such reflections highlight the need for investment in long term relationships with schools as part of a longer term audience development strategy within the local community, or communities, targeted for touring work.



‘Even free tickets for our youth theatre participants don’t bring that age range in.’

Zoe Pickering - Z Arts

There is a general sense that the market is full of book adaptations which have a potential audience that know the text, or that schools will bring classes to performances of set texts. Furthermore, that venues were far more confident that these would bring in revenue, however most theatres were passionate about creating and programming original work, but had to balance this with revenue generating productions.

There were also suggestions that the right material, subject matter and ‘trendy’ enough content worked better to reach this age group as they have more autonomy than younger children. Following from this, marketing via social media in a way that appeals to young people – including making both the performance and marketing in consultation with the age group – have been mentioned as effective

approaches to audience development (see the case study of Zest Theatre's *Youthquake* above). There is a particular challenge for this age group where adults still make the decisions about what content is appropriate and which tickets to purchase, whereas the 8-13-year-old age group are developing autonomy over what they want to engage with. Such tensions bring additional complexities to both the development and marketing of productions for this audience.

One venue director spoke of changes in approaches to effective marketing campaigns, they suggested that some posters for the venue, and a well-produced trailer that gives a real taste of the performance, are really useful. Another spoke of trailers for schools' audiences that described the performance and the merits for students of engaging with particular curriculum elements through theatre. Suggestions were also made for savvy social media campaigns as these can be more effective for young people in particular, though this carries additional cost implications for smaller touring theatre companies.

One company has a marketing rider with venues where they ask for particular minimum ways that venues will reach out to both schools and audiences. This type of contractual approach to marketing responsibilities points at a longer term relationship with both venues and potential audiences. This is supported by some venues' expectation of booking schools in, up to a year in advance for targeted performances. When there is a schools' offer (workshops, reduced performances or expectation of school trips to a performance) with a touring piece of theatre, programmers appreciated if the company would support the campaign to reach out to local schools. This longer term approach within each area puts more pressure on a touring company, yet perhaps develops the potential for longer term relationships with schools in different regions. It points to a need for greater investment in audience development and marketing from the outset of performance development.

Audiences for early years are well established and there seems to be a general understanding of the value. However, this is very different for 7+ where our audiences are somewhere between 20% and 80% capacity. The risks are therefore much greater as a receiving house. Financially the theatre needs to have some work that will hit 80% capacity...

Our mission is to support children to navigate their way in the world. 83% of our audience are under 7 now, that has changed hugely over the 40 years of Polka. Councils used to fund schools to bring children into the theatre. There's a more flexible funding model for Early Years and nurseries, but it doesn't seem to be that way for Key Stage 2. Polka is committed to supporting that age with quality theatre – it can change lives and help children reflect on their humanity. This changing landscape is really concerning to us.

Pete Glanville - Polka Theatre

Ceri Brierley, Producer for The Blahs, reflected on her experience programming *The Vultures' Song* tour. She explains that large theatres are like a well-oiled machine which can make it challenging to establish innovative marketing strategies, particularly for the small scale touring theatre company. Conversations with venues were around whether the show fit with their priorities, as for the most part they would be expecting to lose money. During the tour, one arts venue was utilising the performance to strengthen relationships with a local school. Ceri suggested a need to develop The Blahs' touring profile both regionally and nationally, perhaps focussing on engaging with children's theatre festivals, building on the existing reputation but developing the company's profile as a touring theatre company rather than a TIE Company.

Suzanne Wynne, freelance marketing specialist for The Blahs reflected that marketing strategies and relationships with schools need to be developed at the beginning of the school year so that performances are scheduled into the school program, requiring confirmation of performance dates in the June or July for the following academic year where possible. Suzanne also noted the value of return performances and recommended building on relationships where schools had already seen the performance so that different year groups could also be an audience. This ties with practices of other companies who might carry out a two-stage tour and have regular shows that can be expected by schools, thus nurturing ongoing relationships within a local community.

The Vultures' Song tour offered a small marketing budget for venues to choose bespoke marketing options according to their needs; this was particularly important for community venues. For these audiences there also seemed to be some success in tapping into local online parenting networks (paying for a premium listing), emphasising the need for an adaptive digital marketing campaign.

From the limited audience feedback received due to the cancellation of the tour during the UK lockdown, *The Vultures' Song* was well received and appreciated as both entertaining and educational for the age group.

Key learning points – audience development and marketing

1. Given the strength of concern about the climate for touring theatre for 8-13 year olds, it is clear that complex and long term audience development strategies need to be put in place and properly funded for touring theatre for this age group. One approach could be the scaffolding of touring work alongside other community engagement that would deepen relationships and reputation within a particular region.
2. The creative model where performances are developed with, and for young audiences and schools within particular regions where tours would be targeted, might be an effective innovation in response to changing relationships with school. By doing so, companies are establishing an audience with early engagement in the production development.
3. Up to date, technologically savvy and age appropriate marketing (as well as 'trendy' form and content of performances) was also recommended by several venues in order to appeal to older children and their rapidly evolving experience of media and technology.

Recommendations

Scaffolding touring production work with local arts-based community engagement

In order to have a sustainable presence, there is a need for a mixed economy model business approach where regional or national touring theatre is one part, but local community engagement through youth theatres or other established programmes of arts delivery within schools and the local community, are also a significant activity. Such a model often seems to support local audience development.

For the Blahs: To explore what their other community or participatory offers within West Yorkshire could be and how these might support the development of local audiences.

Developing creative partnerships

Theatre companies often support their creative development by establishing creative partnerships with other theatre companies where productions are made collaboratively with another company. Companies also negotiate partnerships with venues as well, often more financial in nature, they can also bring useful feedback and connection to another regional producing house. These relationships allow companies to build their creative excellence, bring additional resources and expertise, share risk and support long term audience development.

For the Blahs: Look to form relationships with likeminded organisations who we can create work with; looking to establish these with venues and companies/artists in the early stages of planning a production. Consider how such relationships might build upon the existing reputation of The Blahs and further develop our reputation as a touring theatre company.

Audience development through embedded community engagement

Given the widely reported challenge of engaging 8-13-year-old audiences, innovation is required in this area. Examples of such approaches are researching and developing new productions throughout a local region, or a region targeted for a tour, working with young people who might go on to be a large part of the audience for the show thus supporting the audience development for a tour within that region. This as well as considering tech-savvy marketing initiatives making use of trailers that will appeal to the audience demographic and social media campaigns focussed within particular targeted localities.

For the Blahs: Formalise how we can use our expertise to support venues' audience development and make this a part of the relationships we form. Consider including potential audiences within a region in the research and development of a production in order to establish a future potential audience. To include a further learning and development project within project funding – as was intended with *The Vultures' Song* – to refine our approach.

Further strategic work to develop the ecology of theatre for older children

There is a need for further strategic work and understanding across the ecology of theatre for older children in response to changes in relationships between schools, theatre companies and venues. It was remarked that theatre for early years has been well supported, researched and is thriving by comparison. Further research with non-children focussed venues as well as non-NPO and community venues is required to understand ways to support audience development as the pressure for such venues to generate ticket revenue is even higher. Many towns do not have an NPO receiving venue, if we don't consider these areas, children in the places of least arts engagement and infrastructure are likely to be left behind even further.

For the Blahs: To consider continuing this strand of investigation into developing the ecology of theatre for older children in future strategies and to encourage conversations across the sector based on the initial findings of this report.

Concluding Thoughts

Pete Glanville speaks of a potential strategic model for theatre for 8-13 year olds, 'Venues that want rich diverse inclusive work for 8+ should work together to commission something that we programme and perhaps the Arts Council would support that.' Making work for this age group in a post-Covid world will bring even more challenges. At a time when UK theatres are at their most precarious and when box office returns are going to be even more crucial for venues teetering on the brink of survival, it is vital that theatre for older children and young people survives and that our future audiences are nurtured and have the chance to see their experiences, fears, hopes and dreams reflected back at them from the stage.

Contributors

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Appendix

UK Theatre for Young Audiences Networks

In conversations it was clear that the various regional and national festivals for children's theatre play a vital role in publicising new work and supporting the development of co-production relationships. The following is a list of those mentioned by contributors.

Take off Festival <https://www.theatrehullabaloo.org.uk/takeoff-festival/>

Big Imaginations Network <http://www.bigimagination.co.uk/>

In Good Company Network (Midlands) <https://www.derbytheatre.co.uk/artist-development/in-good-company>

Small Size Network (European arts for early years) www.smallsizenetwork.org/site/about