

**National
Theatre**

**PUBLIC
ACTS**

**A STORY OF HOPE
2017–2020**

**Short Report, based on research
by Professor Helen Nicholson**

WHAT IS **1** PUBLIC ACTS?

Public Acts is a nationwide initiative led by the National Theatre, to create new works of participatory theatre. Its aim, to ‘create extraordinary acts of theatre and community’, places equal importance on community-building and theatre-making.

Launched in September 2017, Public Acts began with a two-year programme in London, initially with eight community partner organisations from across Greater London and one theatre partner, Queen’s Theatre Hornchurch. Led by National Theatre Director of Public Acts, Emily Lim, a team of associate artists developed bespoke programmes of creative workshops designed to support each partner organisation’s objectives. The first year of Public Acts culminated in three performances of a new adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Pericles* by Chris Bush, with original music by Jim Fortune, directed by Emily Lim and designed by Fly Davis. *Pericles* was performed on the National Theatre’s Olivier stage in August 2018.

Building on the relationships with the eight existing community partners, a second cycle of workshops was delivered through 2018 and 2019. This culminated in a production of Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* at Queen’s Theatre Hornchurch, directed by Douglas Rintoul, adapted by Shaina Taub and Laurie Woolery, with music and lyrics by Shaina Taub, designed by Hayley Grindle.

As You Like It was produced in partnership with Queen’s Theatre Hornchurch and Artistic Director Douglas Rintoul. Public Acts then took root at Cast in Doncaster in 2019 with five community partner organisations in the local area, working towards a new adaptation of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* by Bertolt Brecht, adapted by Chris Bush.

IMPACT OF PUBLIC ACTS

Community, confidence and capacity building for participants

At the heart of the project is the simple idea of connection, between people, community organisations, and theatres. Public Acts creates conditions for individuals to overcome isolation and builds community and cohesion among participants from a wide range of backgrounds. Almost all participants in Public Acts reported significantly increased confidence and a sense of achievement as a result of taking part in the programme, with many taking up new creative interests. For many participants this change translated positively into their wider lives, including areas which are directly subject to social spending, from improved physical and mental health to resuming training or finding employment.

Delivering for community partners

Public Acts delivered workshops tailored to meet the social aims of community partners. All community partners increased their high-quality arts and cultural activities as a result of Public Acts, reconsidering the role of creative activity in delivering their core aims and values. The programme developed staff confidence in approaching arts and cultural organisations for future collaboration and increased understanding of the skills and resources needed to undertake successful partnership work.

Catalysing change for theatres

For the two theatres, the opportunity to build a sustained relationship over two years with participants and community organisations led to deep and often lasting partnerships that are shaping new agendas. The involvement required from staff across all departments to support the programme facilitates wider changemaking, from



Rehearsals for *As You Like It*
Photograph by Camilla Greenwell

audience diversity to strengthening inclusive theatrical practices. Enthusiasm for Public Acts was infectious and spread across the theatres to include many staff in different parts of the organisation. Theatre professionals learned about inclusive working practices in workshops and rehearsal, and discovered the limits and potential of their theatre buildings to accommodate such large and inclusive companies. Public Acts has informed conversations about inclusivity in theatre and its role in social justice and the health of communities across the nation.

Welcoming new audiences

Although audience research was not the primary focus of the first two years of Public Acts' research, our findings showed that both productions attracted significant numbers who were new to theatre and new to the National Theatre and Queen's Theatre Hornchurch. Their positive experience of both Public Acts productions inspired people to attend more regularly and take part in theatre themselves. Public Acts connected theatres to wider audiences,

placing theatre at the heart of local and national communities, paving the way for new forms of audience development that are inclusive, co-creative and socially responsible.

CONCLUSIONS

Public Acts makes artistically excellent, ambitious and inclusive participatory theatre with those who share a vision of theatre as a force for change.

The programme demonstrates the positive impact of creative activity and sustained cultural partnerships on areas for social spending.

In a sector where investment principles often drive towards 'widening' engagement and reaching more people per pound, Public Acts demonstrates the value added for individuals, communities and organisations by 'deepening' engagement as well.



Rehearsals of *As You Like It*
Photograph by Camilla Greenwell

COMMUNITY, CONFIDENCE AND CAPACITY BUILDING FOR PARTICIPANTS

At the heart of the project is the simple idea of connection, between people, community organisations, and theatres. Public Acts creates conditions for individuals to overcome isolation and builds community and cohesion among participants from a wide range of backgrounds. Almost all participants in Public Acts reported significantly increased confidence and a sense of achievement as a result of taking part in the programme, with many taking up new creative interests. For many participants this change translated positively into their wider lives, including areas which are directly subject to social spending, from improved physical and mental health to resuming training or finding employment.

From isolation to community

One way in which the Public Acts team fostered a sense of belonging was to encourage participants to see themselves as a community. Replacing social isolation with feelings of belonging also enabled many participants to make new friends and, importantly, have a new capacity for friendship. Connectivity with others and self-care were major factors in increasing feelings of wellbeing. 75 per cent of respondents considered community to be 'very important', and some commented on how this came from increased levels of trust.

At the beginning I couldn't bring myself to share anything about myself. But I've learnt that sharing a bit of yourself can be quite easy.
– Participant, interviewed July 2018

The workshops brought me out a bit. [...] Before I did Public Acts, I always thought I was a failure, but since I've been doing this, I feel like a person. And with my friend [made

through Public Acts], I feel like he's a true friend, and people see something in me that I don't always see myself.

– Gary Green, Participant, interviewed August 2019

Cohesion

Acts of making – including theatre-making – bring people together and enable sustained social connections. Participants benefitted from the positive social environment created by Public Acts, the supportive workshops, the encouraging rehearsals and the shared excitement and energy of both productions.

97 per cent of respondents said that working with people of different backgrounds, ages and generations was 'Quite' or 'Very' important. 72 per cent of respondents regarded belonging to London and feeling part of a social movement to be 'very important'.

BEFORE I DID PUBLIC ACTS, I ALWAYS THOUGHT I WAS A FAILURE, BUT SINCE I'VE BEEN DOING THIS, I FEEL LIKE A PERSON. PEOPLE SEE SOMETHING IN ME THAT I DON'T ALWAYS SEE MYSELF.

– Gary Green, Participant, August 2019

65 per cent of respondents said that Public Acts had changed their attitudes to other people 'Quite a bit' or 'Completely'. Only 10 per cent of respondents said their experience hadn't changed their attitudes at all, and where low scores were recorded, they were explained by people who already considered themselves to be socially aware.

I've never had conversations with so many different people and have them share parts of themselves, their stories and their experiences. That completely transformed me as I'd never been around such diverse people. Seeing how brave other people were made me brave.
– Layla Shirreh, Participant, interviewed August 2019

Confidence and wellbeing

Many Public Acts participants reported that their wellbeing improved incrementally as the programme progressed, their confidence grew, and they found inspiring ways to meet new challenges.

One of the distinctive qualities of theatre-making is that it is a shared experience of storytelling in movement, dance, voice and song. Emma Colyer, Director of Body & Soul, described how traumatic experiences are stored in the body as well as in the mind:

Public Acts is a creative project that is not a one-on-one experience, it's relational. Trauma is relational and healing is also relational. If we don't feel safe, if we don't feel we can trust someone, if we've locked down our emotions so much, we don't experience joy, it's hard to heal and change. People hold their trauma in their bodies, and drama, dance and music are all ways to release the embodiment of the past.

– Emma Colyer, Director of Body & Soul, interviewed June 2019

The positive effects of singing and dancing on mood are well documented (Fancourt and Finn, 2019), and increased feelings of wellbeing are integral to theatre as an art-form. For Public Acts participants, their experiences as theatre-makers enabled them to connect with stories in new ways. This led many participants to reimagine their futures and redefine their life experience more positively.

Confidence and energy

The positive atmosphere and careful levels of support led participants to report changes in their confidence and fitness levels. Some had needed gentle persuasion to join Public Acts and felt self-conscious in the early stages, but they surprised themselves by achieving things they had never thought possible, both physically and emotionally.

70 per cent of participants reported a significant increase in confidence (45 per cent 'quite a lot', 25 per cent 'completely'). Physical fitness increased, particularly in the older age groups. It is significant that some people reported reduction in chronic pain and other symptoms of illness.

I started off feeling like I couldn't do this, but as the weeks have gone on, I've become more comfortable and now I feel like my body has adapted.

My aches and pains have decreased.



It's changed my attitude to ageing. I've found I can move more freely than I could 20 years ago!

– Three participants, in conversation with researchers, July 2018

Wider impacts

Gaining confidence, for many participants, translated into other areas of life. 90 per cent of participants had started or planned to take up a new artistic or creative interest, including singing, dancing, learning a new language and going more regularly to the theatre.

Community partners have supported this enthusiasm. Iain Cassidy, CEO of Open Age, commented that Public Acts had encouraged people to try out new classes at their organisation and this enthusiasm had spread to people who had not been part of Public Acts.

Over 30 per cent of participants credited Public Acts with giving them the confidence to increase sociability, begin training opportunities, or find employment.

Public Acts really changed my life. I've found the confidence to apply for a job, and I've got a job – for seven months now. I didn't have the bravery to do that before. Performing is the one thing that I really enjoy and feel confident in and Public Acts has really helped me. I never went out much before and I'm now much more adventurous.

– Rowanne Simpson, Participant, interviewed August 2019

DELIVERING FOR COMMUNITY PARTNERS



Public Acts delivered workshops tailored to meet the social aims of community partners. All community partners increased their high-quality arts and cultural activities as a result of Public Acts, reconsidering the role of creative activity in delivering their core aims and values. The programme developed staff confidence in approaching arts and cultural organisations for future collaborations and increased understanding of the skills and resources needed to undertake successful partnership work.

Our research shows that positive partnerships and artistic excellence enabled community organisations to meet their social agendas. Community partners appreciated access to excellence, the attention to inclusive working practices and the high quality of the arts experience provided by Public Acts. The renewed positivity of the Public Acts participants spread across organisations, often connecting people who access their services in different ways, leading to increased take-up in their new and existing provision across a wide range of activities. Some partners found that taking part in Public Acts inspired profound organisational changes. The positive ethos of Public Acts motivated them to refocus on their organisation's core values, finding new ways to articulate their creative approaches to community cohesion and wellbeing.

The Faith & Belief Forum is a good example of how Public Acts impacted on community partners' arts provision. They had previously run arts projects to address intercultural dimensions of identity. Fiona Ranford, development co-ordinator at the Faith & Belief Forum, described how working on Public Acts had clarified their policy.

We realised that working with high-quality arts partners and curators is really important if we wanted to have social impact. There's a big difference between bringing people together to do crafts and working with artists. We want to do quality arts, in and of themselves, as well as address issues that matter to us as a Forum.

– Fiona Ranford, development co-ordinator, the Faith & Belief Forum, interviewed July 2019

The workshops at the Faith & Belief Forum, led by writer Brian Mullin, used playwriting to examine complex issues of faith. The workshops persuaded staff across the organisation that the arts have a powerful place in their core mission. By July 2019, the Faith & Belief Forum had already acquired funding to develop an interfaith arts collective inspired by Public Acts, and they were developing plans for a playwriting competition designed to give representation to a wider range of voices in theatre.

IT'S IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND THAT SOME OF THE PARTICIPANTS ARE VULNERABLE OR HAVE BEEN VULNERABLE. BUT IT'S ALSO IMPORTANT NOT TO LABEL AND REALISE THAT PEOPLE HAVE GREAT STORIES TO TELL AND WANT YOU TO LISTEN.

– Laura Richardson, Queen's Theatre Hornchurch, Learning and Participation team and Public Acts team, October 2019

CATALYSING CHANGE FOR THEATRES

4

For the two theatres, the opportunity to build a sustained relationship over two years with participants and community organisations led to deep and often lasting partnerships that are shaping new agendas. The involvement required from staff across all departments to support the programme facilitates wider changemaking, from audience diversity to strengthening inclusive theatrical practices. Enthusiasm for Public Acts was infectious and spread across the theatres to include many staff in different parts of the organisation. Theatre professionals learned about

inclusive working practices in workshops and rehearsal, and discovered the limits and potential of their theatre buildings to accommodate such large and inclusive companies. Public Acts has informed conversations about inclusivity in theatre and its role in social justice and the health of communities across the nation.

Two themes emerged from Public Acts that can lead to lasting change for theatres. The first relates to Public Acts' influence on changing theatre-making in ways that are more inclusive, and the second is how partnerships between theatres can strengthen relationships to place and place-making.

Inclusive working practices

Public Acts provided opportunities for creative and technical theatre professionals to extend their understanding about working with vulnerable groups, including training on safeguarding. Laura Richardson summed up what this meant:



We did a lot of safeguarding training, and it's important to understand that some of the participants are vulnerable or have been vulnerable. But it's also important not to label and realise that people have great stories to tell and want you to listen.

– Laura Richardson, Queen's Theatre Hornchurch, Learning and Participation team and Public Acts team, interviewed October 2019

Opportunities to understand how performers with additional access needs, religious commitments and cultural sensibilities can be welcomed and accommodated in theatre-making and theatre buildings were also explored. At the National Theatre, everyone who had contact with the *Pericles* company received training in unconscious bias, including people working on stage door and in security. Space was made available backstage for a prayer room and company members were given safe and respectful environments in which to dress.

Role of new embedded community partnerships

The National Theatre and Queen's Theatre Hornchurch found new ways to engage their local communities, and their community partners strengthened their relationships with places and people outside their usual demographic. The Queen's Theatre Hornchurch leadership team defined clear objectives they hoped to gain from working with Public Acts, including partnerships with local organisations; how the theatre connects with communities across London and 'forgotten' areas of outer East London; audience development; professional development

for staff; and how it 'learns as an organisation to be more inclusive and equipped to embrace and celebrate difference'.

Finding community partners close to Hornchurch led James Watson, Head of Learning and Participation at Queens Theatre Hornchurch, to contact many different organisations, including the Dhol Academy, the CommUnity Gospel Choir and the London School of Lucha Libre. The theatre has maintained contact with many groups, including those who were unable to take part in Public Acts, with a view to further partnerships and build capacity in their local area.

In the past Queen's Theatre Hornchurch had served quite a stable and homogenous audience, but the local area has changed quite significantly over the last few years. With that the organisation faced both challenges and opportunities and learning around working across the whole spectrum of diversity – including the people it employs as staff, the people it works with as artists and the people it attracts as audiences. A project like this, that represents London so beautifully through the participants involved, is helping to accelerate that learning in the theatre.

– Mathew Russell, Executive Director, Queen's Theatre Hornchurch, interviewed July 2019



Rehearsals for *Pericles*
Photograph by James Bellorini

WELCOMING NEW AUDIENCES **5**

Although audience research was not the primary focus of the first two years of Public Acts' research, our findings showed that both productions attracted significant numbers who were new to theatre and new to the National Theatre and Queen's Theatre Hornchurch. Their positive experience of both Public Acts productions inspired people to attend more regularly and take part in theatre themselves. Public Acts connected theatres to wider audiences, placing theatre at the heart of local and national communities, paving the way for new forms of audience development that are inclusive, co-creative and socially responsible.

Both Public Acts productions attracted audiences who were new to theatre, some were connected to members of the company. *As You Like It* at the Queen's Theatre Hornchurch and *Pericles* at the National Theatre were very well received by audiences and critics, suggesting that Public Acts' values of social responsibility, connectivity, storytelling and high artistic qualities are infectious and highly valued.

Rather than capturing social media responses, at Queen's Theatre Hornchurch we conducted a post-performance survey of *As You Like It* and received 220 responses across all performances. *As You Like It* played to 92 per cent capacity and 68 per cent of the audience were new to Queen's Theatre Hornchurch (Box Office figures). For 42.96 per cent of respondents the main reason given for coming was because they knew people in the cast. A further 16 per cent came primarily to see this production of the play, with 14 per cent coming because they enjoy theatre generally.

Secondary reasons for attending were more varied, although enjoying theatre was selected most often (36 per cent). The majority had been to the theatre at least once or more in the last year (87 per cent), although one respondent added a note that this was their first visit to a theatre and commented 'I hope to continue. I have discovered another love'.



Rehearsal for *As You Like It*
Photograph by Camilla Greenwell

**THE NATIONAL THEATRE
LOOKED DIFFERENT,
FELT DIFFERENT AND
WAS DIFFERENT ON
THE OCCASIONS OF
THOSE PERFORMANCES.
FOR A MOMENT IN TIME
THE NATIONAL THEATRE
WAS GENUINELY THEATRE
OF THE NATION.**

– Dr Carol Homden, CBE, Chief Executive Officer, Coram, interviewed 10 July 2019

National Theatre

Public Acts makes artistically excellent, ambitious and inclusive participatory theatre with those who share a vision of theatre as a force for change.

The programme demonstrates the positive impact of creative activity and sustained cultural partnerships on areas for social spending.

In a sector where investment principles often drive towards 'widening' engagement and reaching more people per pound, Public Acts demonstrates the value added for individuals, communities and organisations by 'deepening' engagement as well.

Discover more about the impacts of Public Acts [here](#).

Research conducted by Royal Holloway, University of London



Supported using public funding by
ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

Supported by Arts Council England's Strategic Touring Fund, Garfield Weston Foundation, Bloomberg Philanthropies, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, Hertz, The Mosawi Foundation, Simon & Sue Ruddick and Wates Foundation.

Community partner workshop 2018
Photograph by James Bellorini

The National Theatre's Partner for Learning is Bank of America.

BANK OF AMERICA

Founding Corporate Supporter for Public Acts

Bloomberg Philanthropies