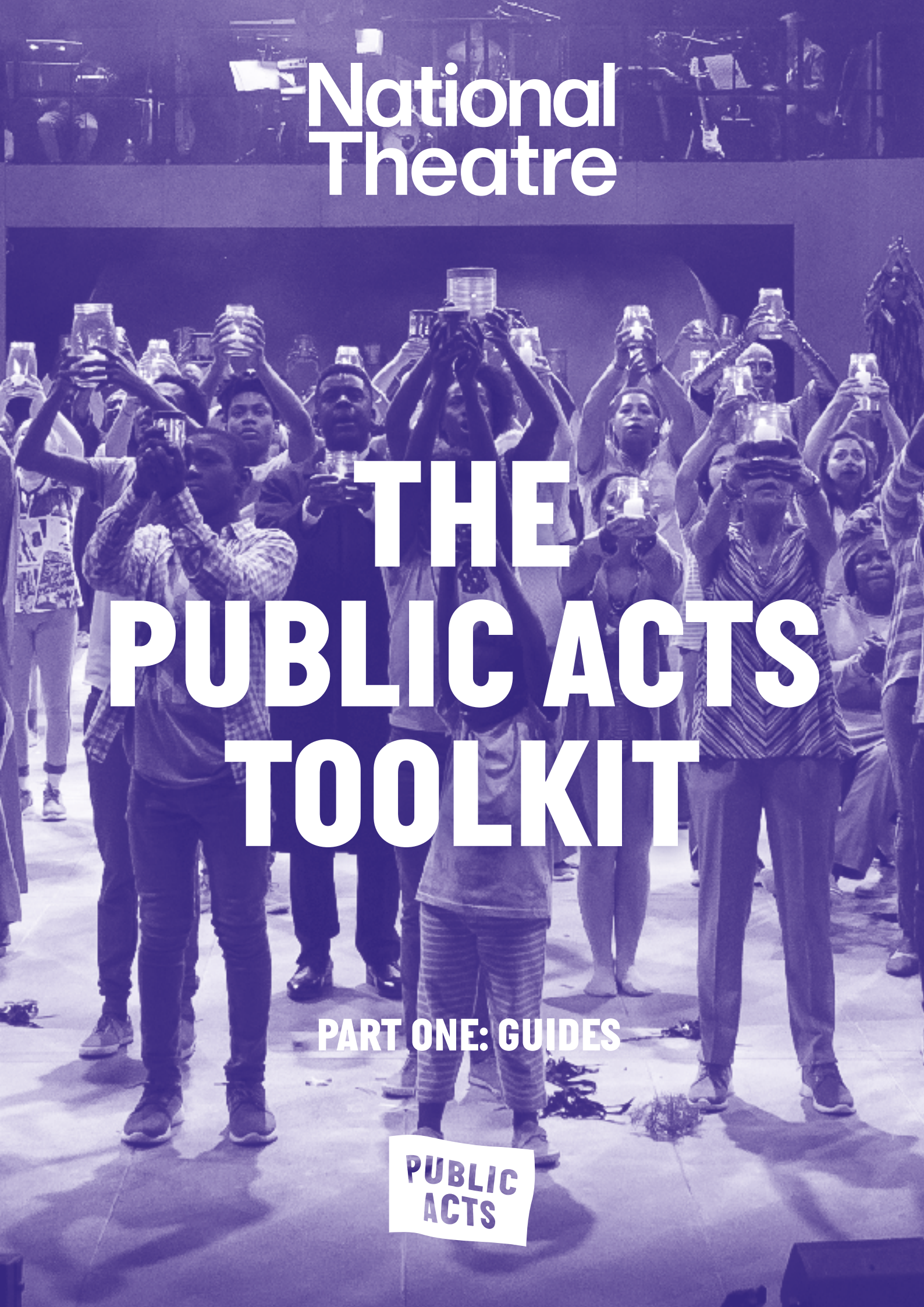
National Theatre



# THE PUBLIC ACTS TOOLKIT

## PART ONE: GUIDES

PUBLIC ACTS

# WELCOME

The Public Acts Toolkit is a resources bank for anyone looking to create theatre with communities. Whether you're a theatre professional who's been doing it for years or a community organiser engaging with theatre for the first time, we hope there will be a gem or two here for you. Whoever you are, and whatever has brought you here - WELCOME!

Across eight years of Public Acts we have learned that putting community, care and radical joy at the centre of an artistic process makes great theatre, makes our organisations stronger and creates vital spaces for us to reimagine ourselves - to feel healthier and happier, more connected to our communities, more hopeful about our individual and collective potential, and prouder of who we are and where we live.

We have been humbled and excited to have been approached by many people over the years who have wanted to learn more about our practice and learnings.  These documents and planning tools are a few of the things we have found ourselves coming back to time and time again across our ten productions. Small things which made very big things possible. They are designed to complement your own process, touching on the areas of our practice that we get asked about the most.

We know that any work rooted in communities needs to stay in constant dialogue with what's happening, and changing, in the world. Our ideas about best practice are always evolving, so it's been hard to choose what to include, and to commit things to writing in a way that feels definitive. We want you to know that each time we open these documents we want to re-write them straightaway in response to new things we've learned! So please take them for what they are - a snapshot in time, things we've found useful at the moment of their making, that we know will need updating and re-interrogation as time passes.

The resources are split into two categories: longer-form 'Guides' explaining some of the key phases of our process, and individual 'Resources' to be used as templates.

Before diving in, we suggest you read **Guide 1: Introduction** to understand the foundational blocks of Public Acts and get an 'at a glance' look at the project's values, typical timeline and mechanics.



*A note on numbers* – our productions have typically featured community companies of around 100 – 200 but we're confident that our methodology applies usefully to different contexts and the resources can be adapted for smaller productions.

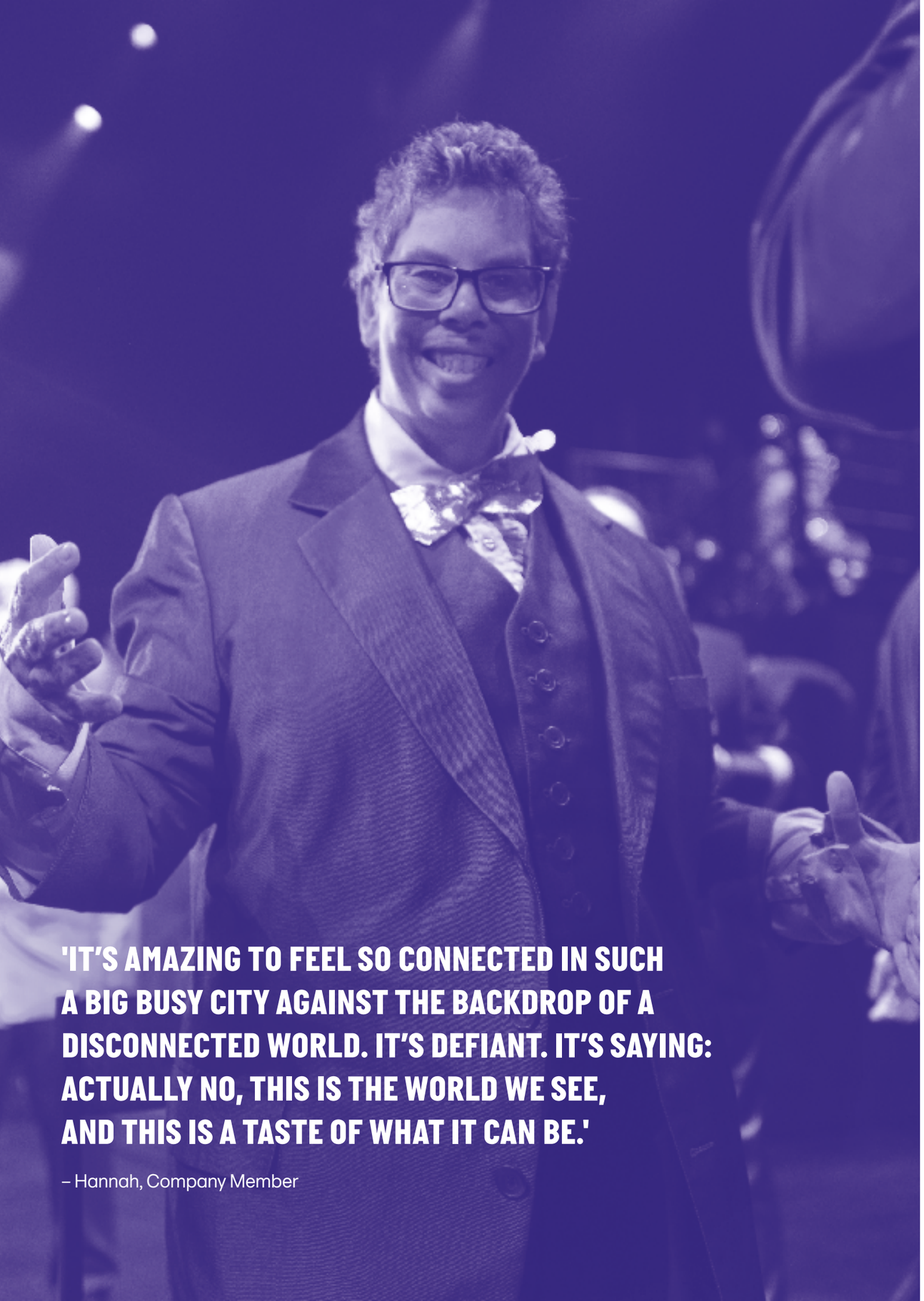
*A note on tense* - by the time you're reading this, Public Acts will have drawn to a close to make way for new projects to emerge under Indhu Rubasingham and Kate Varah's leadership at the National Theatre. We have chosen to keep our resources in the present tense as they were created while we were in the exciting heat of delivery mode! And, of course, because the values and principles of our work are still very much present in the work we and our partners continue to do across the country. You can read all about the shows we made, watch a documentary about our production of *The Odyssey* and explore other videos on the National Theatre's Public Acts webpage. On this page you will also find our research reports which articulate the impact of our work.

Finally, we want to make two important acknowledgements. Firstly, to the Public Works team past and present at the Public Theater in New York who were the key inspiration for Public Acts coming into being, and whose practice has heavily informed these resources. We are so grateful for their guidance and support throughout our journey. Secondly, to all the people we've had the gift of working with over the years - our partners, professional artists, NT colleagues and, of course, company members. Every person we've interacted with has shaped the contours of our work in some way. Like everything we make this Toolkit is very much a collective act, born from the ideas, hopes, expertise and generosity of a wide community of people. We hope that you feel all of us with you in these pages as you move forwards on your own adventure.

Whether you're here for a quick shot of inspiration or because you're building a full road map for your own epic project... we are with you in solidarity and we send you all our love and luck!

Emily, Lara, Ros and Amy
(The Public Acts Team, 2025)

*The Public Acts Toolkit was written by Emily Lim (Director of Public Acts) and Lara Taylor (Producer, Public Acts)*




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# 1 INTRODUCTION

- About Public Acts
- Our purpose and values
- Three stages of a project
- Our companies
- Finding the right story

## ABOUT PUBLIC ACTS

Public Acts was born from the belief that theatre making can be a powerful act of community building and a force for change. Conceived in 2016, at the start of Rufus Norris' tenure as Director of the National Theatre, the starting provocation was simple: how can participatory work become central to the bloodstream of the National Theatre? How can the work at the National Theatre be defined by its meaningful social impact aswell as its artistic quality? How can civic engagement and artistic excellence sit side by side on a national scale? How can our communities take centre stage?

Rufus gave us the keys to the Olivier Theatre, the National's biggest stage and one of the most iconic theatres in the country, ensuring the work would sit right at the heart of the building. We built a model with partnership at its core, trusting that long-term relationships with theatres and community organisations across the country would yield the most attuned, sustainable impact. We created a culture rooted in care and ambition, striving to bring out the best in people. Through the shared purpose of making shows together, we hoped to create extraordinary acts of community, building connections that would deepen and transform our sense of place, pride, belonging and joy.

In the eight years since we've created ten productions, including new musical adaptations of Shakespeare's *Pericles*, created with 225 community members in London, Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, created with 120 community members in Doncaster, and an epic five-part retelling of *The Odyssey*, where each episode was created in a different community across the country, culminating with a finale at the National Theatre, performed by 160 people drawn from across *The Odyssey* communities. Our most recent and final show, *Public Record*, was a musical portrait of Sunderland, devised with a company of 100 people from across the city. Our work has been recognised nationally and internationally, receiving critical acclaim and is regularly cited as a flagship example of best practice by practitioners and researchers in the UK and abroad.



## OUR PURPOSE AND VALUES

Our work is defined by our core values of openness, generosity and bravery. Our companies are intergenerational and inclusive.

### Our Values

Open
Generous
Brave

↑

**Theatre making as community building**

↙ ↘

### We believe

Theatre-making is a powerful form of community building

A culture of care brings out the best in all of us

Ambition is a dignifying force, everyone is capable of amazing things

We do our best work when we learn from each other, as people and organisations

### We hope

To give people the space to see ourselves and the world differently

To celebrate creativity, difference and joy

To build sense of place, pride, connection and belonging

To make brilliant theatre that shows what is possible when we come together

# THREE STAGES OF A PROJECT

Here's a simple overview of how it all works before we get into the gritty detail! Each cycle of work begins with us finding a theatre partner. Led by their local knowledge and interest we then identify a group of community partners (see Guide's 3 and 4) and move through the following stages.

## 1 COMMUNITY WORKSHOPS

We pair an Associate Artist with each community partner to deliver bespoke workshops over a few terms (a 'term' being a block of ten to twelve weeks), exploring theatre skills which support the mission of the organisation. We've delivered dance workshops for a community centre wanting to promote physical wellbeing; a play writing course for a multi-faith organisation dedicated to encouraging discussion and debate between members of different faiths, beliefs and identities; acting workshops for a homelessness charity wanting to improve the confidence of its members to present themselves in job interviews, and so on.

## 2 THE SHOW

We unite everyone from across our different community partners on the main stage of our theatre partner, together with professional artists: a full creative team, a small number of professional actors or dancers and a band. Everyone who takes part in our workshop programme is invited to put themselves forward to be part of the show. We also include 'cameo' groups who reflect the cultural breadth of wherever we are working such as a gospel choir, colliery band or specialist dance crew. See the next page for more information on cameo groups.

## 3 LEGACY WORK

Following the production we move into a legacy phase, supporting participants and partners to continue engaging with participatory theatre projects. This process is led by our theatre partner and takes many forms, from supporting the development of new long-term programmes, such as the Doncaster People's Theatre, to initiating connections with pre-existing groups in the region.





# OUR COMPANIES

Large, intergenerational companies representing the communities we work in are the beating heart of all Public Acts shows. Our companies bring together performers of all experiences – people who have never been on stage before will be performing alongside people who've trained professionally and done it all their lives. In our experience this mix creates a powerful alchemy, allowing everyone to uplift and learn from one another through their difference.

## CORE COMMUNITY COMPANY

Recruited through our community partners, the core company are all non-professional performers. The youngest performer we've ever worked with was four, and our oldest 93. The core company make up the majority of the whole company, they are the centrepiece of the show and are required to attend the most rehearsals.

## CAMEO GROUPS

We include several cameo groups in each of our productions. These groups are highly skilled and community based (as opposed to professional) – local collectives who specialise in a performance skill which represents the cultural breadth of wherever we are working. They bring flashes of flair and brilliance and are always a highlight of any Public Acts show! Each group is written closely into the narrative so that they are essential to the story rather than additional – we've had the Ascension Eagles youth cheerleading squad perform as part of the parade in *Pericles*, the Lucha Britannia wrestlers fight in Duke Frederick's court in *As You Like It*, and local drag queen Miss Smoochie appear as Lord Azdak's secretary in *The Doncastrian Chalk Circle*.

## PROFESSIONAL PERFORMERS

We usually work with three to six professional performers. We rely on these artists to work confidently, calmly and responsively in a busy, changeable environment, so take care to cast people with the right level of experience and approach. Our professionals are always key to anchoring our performances, leading the company from within and modelling our values.

## BAND

Where possible we work with a live band, ranging in size from two to six players. We seek out the most experienced musicians we can, knowing that the band will need to work efficiently and patiently in a process involving many people and moving parts.

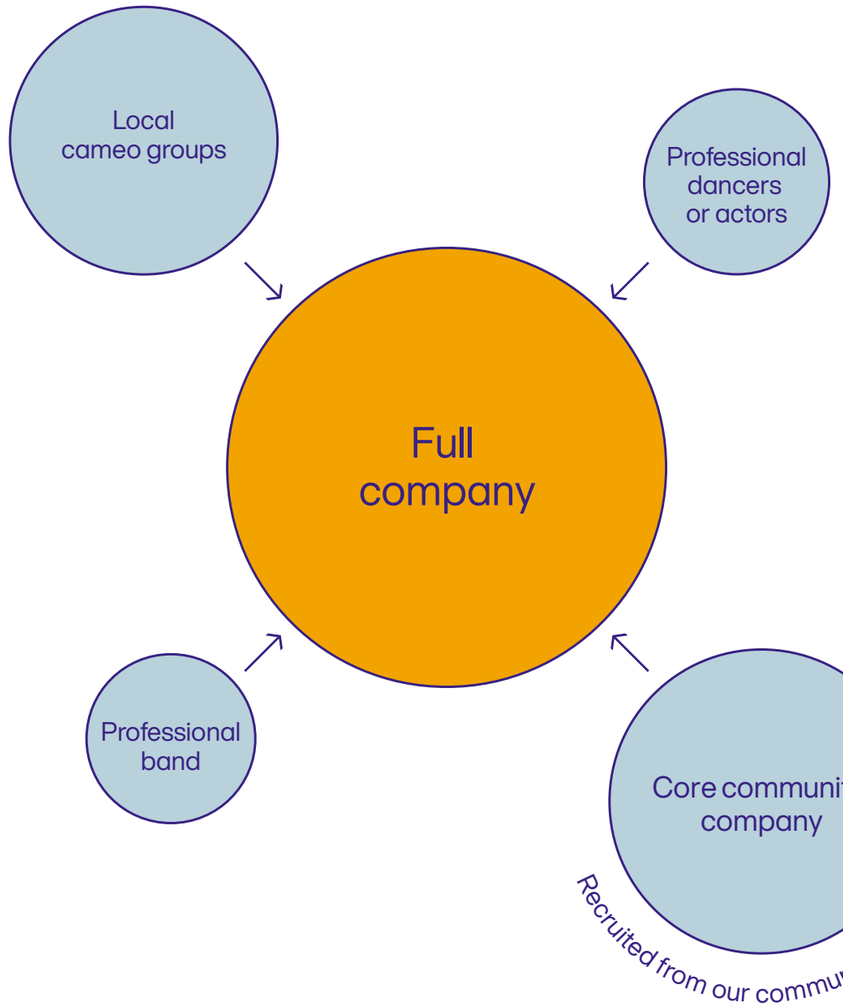
**Across all our teams and companies:**

1. We prioritise representation because we know it makes the work better and it is essential that the company see themselves reflected in the people holding power in the room. This includes offering as many roles as we can to local artists.
2. We have conversations with every professional artist before rehearsals start, talking in detail about our values, what to expect in the room, how the creative process will work and how they will be supported throughout. It's crucial that everyone steps into the process knowing which aspects will feel different to a 'normal' professional show and being clear, and fully on board, with the wider purpose and mission of the project.
3. We create an inclusive and accessible environment, aiming to meet every person's access requirements so that no one is excluded from our work. Whether working on costume design or the rehearsal schedule, access is always front and centre of our decision-making process.



## SHOW COMPANY STRUCTURE

A typical Public Acts company is made up of the following groups:



## FINDING THE RIGHT STORY

As with any piece of theatre, the most important thing is to have cast-iron faith in the meaning and the significance of the story we're telling.

Here are some questions we ask when looking for source material, whether adapting an existing play or story, or creating original devised work rooted in a particular place.

- How will the company play a key role in the storytelling? Why is this story better told *because of* and not *in spite of* it being told by a community company?
- What are the universal themes that many different people (of various ages, identities and life experiences) can find connections with? How and where will the company find themselves within the material?
- What makes it 'of here' and 'of now'? What is the significance of telling this story, or these stories, today?
- How will our company be represented in the story? How can it honour, hold and celebrate their multiplicity?
- What opportunities are there for large-scale images, mass movement, communal singing, human spectacle?
- Are there any specialist skills or cultural practices within the community that the story should spotlight?

All of our productions have responded to these questions in different ways. In *Pericles* we found a story of home and belonging, in *The Doncastrian Chalk Circle* a story of found family and a revolution of care, and in *Public Record* we created a portrait of Sunderland, built from the music and memories of our community. The process of adapting existing stories or working with people's autobiographical stories hold different challenges but both have proved equally powerful as ways of expressing, and celebrating, each community's identity.



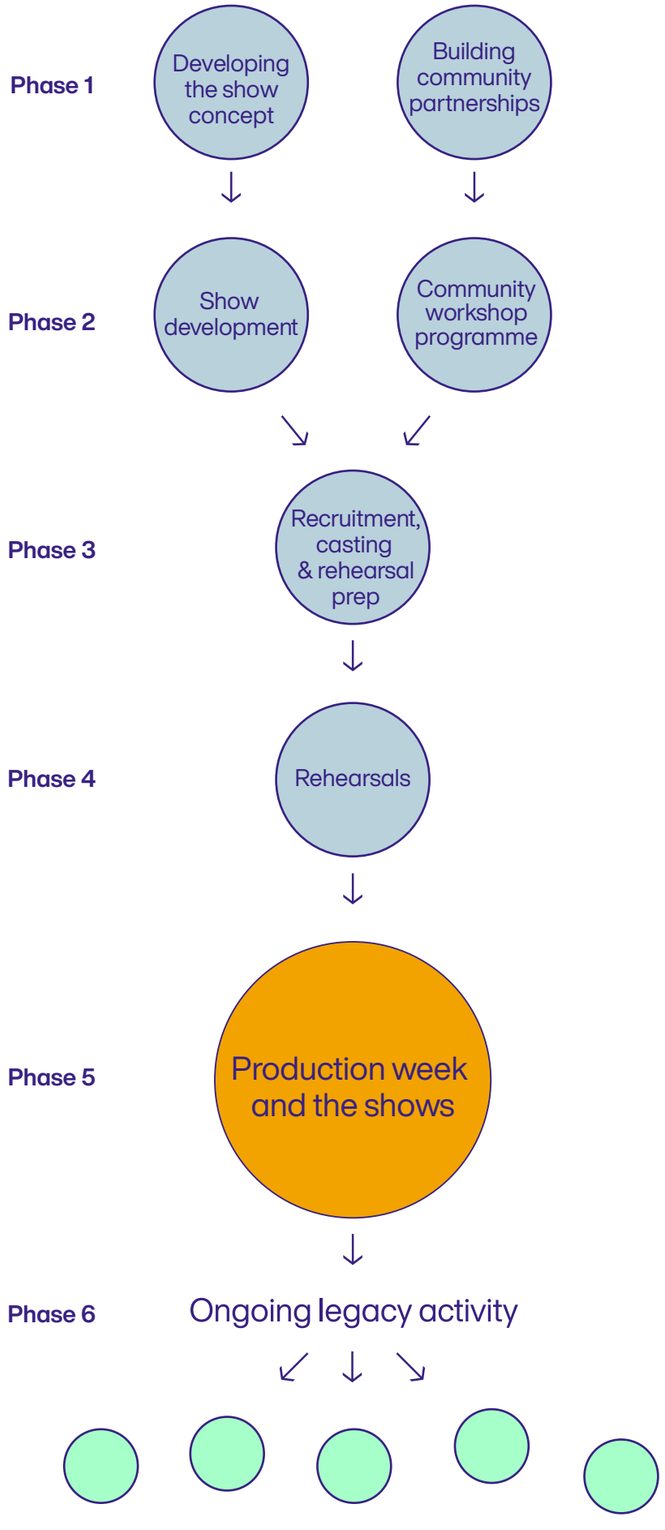


# 'WE'RE ALL HEROES ON OUR OWN EPIC JOURNEY'

- The Lotus Eaters, Restoke, 2024

# 2 TIMELINE

A typical Public Acts project runs across 18 to 24 months, with legacy work continuing after the final show. Here is a snapshot of the big picture.




Here is a sample timeline. Building our relationship with our theatre partner and researching community partners with them is a thoughtful process, which often takes many months and happens prior to phase one below.

| Phase | Time | Steps |
|---|---|---|
| **1**<br>Building community partnerships and developing the show concept | Months 1 to 6<br><br>March to August | • Research and establish community partners (see Guide 4)<br>• Co-design workshop programme with community partners and hire team of local Associate Artists (see Guide 3)<br>• Assemble Creative team (see Guide 3)<br>• Conceive and develop show creatively<br>• Identify local cameo groups (see Guide 1). |
| **2**<br>Community workshop programme and show development | Months 7 to 13<br><br>September to March | • Continue creative development of show<br>• Delivery of workshop programme – one session per week led in each community partner location<br>  • **Term One:** integrate the group, introduce the project and values, build confidence and performance skills<br>  • **Term Two:** introduce material from the show – text, music, choreography, story beats, images, themes, etc. Invitation for key show creatives to visit.<br>• End of term sharing for each group in their community partner location<br>• End of term party! All groups come together for the first time for a creative workshop, food and celebration at the theatre<br>• Invite all those from community workshops to put themselves forward for the show via recruitment workshops (see Resource 8)<br>• Start building the rehearsal schedule (see Guide 5). |
| **3**<br>Recruitment, casting and rehearsal prep | Months 14 to 16<br><br>April to June | • Administrative gymnastics begin! Finalise the rehearsal schedule.<br>• Hold recruitment workshops and confirm casting (see Resource 8)<br>• Rehearsal logistics, preparation and team training<br>• Final preparation of all show material including choreography day/s to test mass movement and finalising of entrance and exit master plan. |
| **4**<br>Rehearsals | Months 17 to 19<br><br>July to August | • Kick off with an essential Launch Day (see Resource 13)<br>• Weekly rehearsals (see Guide 5). |
| **5**<br>Production week and the shows | Month 19<br><br>August | • Five to seven days of technical and dress rehearsals (see Resource 21)<br>• Perform four to five shows across three to four days. |
| **6**<br>Wrap up and ongoing legacy activity | Month 20 onwards<br><br>September onwards | • Company members supported with ongoing engagement in participatory projects, led by theatre partner<br>• Post-show reunion and reflection two weeks after final performance<br>• Evaluation process (and accompanying research) completed for community members and team<br>• Seasonal *'Acts of Joy'* to keep the community connected. |

# 3 PEOPLE & PARTNERS

- **Core staff**
- **Teams**
- **Partners**

The scale of our work is made possible not just by a team but a whole village of extraordinary people. A Public Acts show adapts conventional creative and producing roles and structures.

We are transparent with everyone from the get-go about how the different roles break down, ensuring that people know who to go to for what, and that everyone understands how the team structure will differ from a more traditional theatre-making process.

## CORE STAFF

Within the core Public Acts team the strategic view of the programme as well as the executive and artistic leadership of all productions is led by our Director and our Senior Producer, who work closely with our Community Producer and Project Coordinator. Our Director Emily has directed three shows over the years with freelance directors working on the others.

The core team works symbiotically across all stages of each project, with a specific focus on the following areas:

### DIRECTOR

- Leading creative development of the show
- Overseeing content and delivery of the community workshop programme
- Assembling and leading the Creative team
- Casting of the show, including professional performers
- Selecting and overseeing the cameo groups
- Directing and rehearsing the show.

### SENIOR PRODUCER

- Managing theatre partner relationships
- Financial management
- Show producing, including contracting of creative and production teams and sales, press, and marketing
- Overseeing research.

### COMMUNITY PRODUCER

- Managing community partner relationships
- Managing Community team (see below)
- Managing delivery of the community workshop programme
- Care and delivery of all aspects of the community company experience, including scheduling, travel, food, access, welcome and pastoral care
- Key delivery role in: workshops, rehearsals and backstage running of shows.

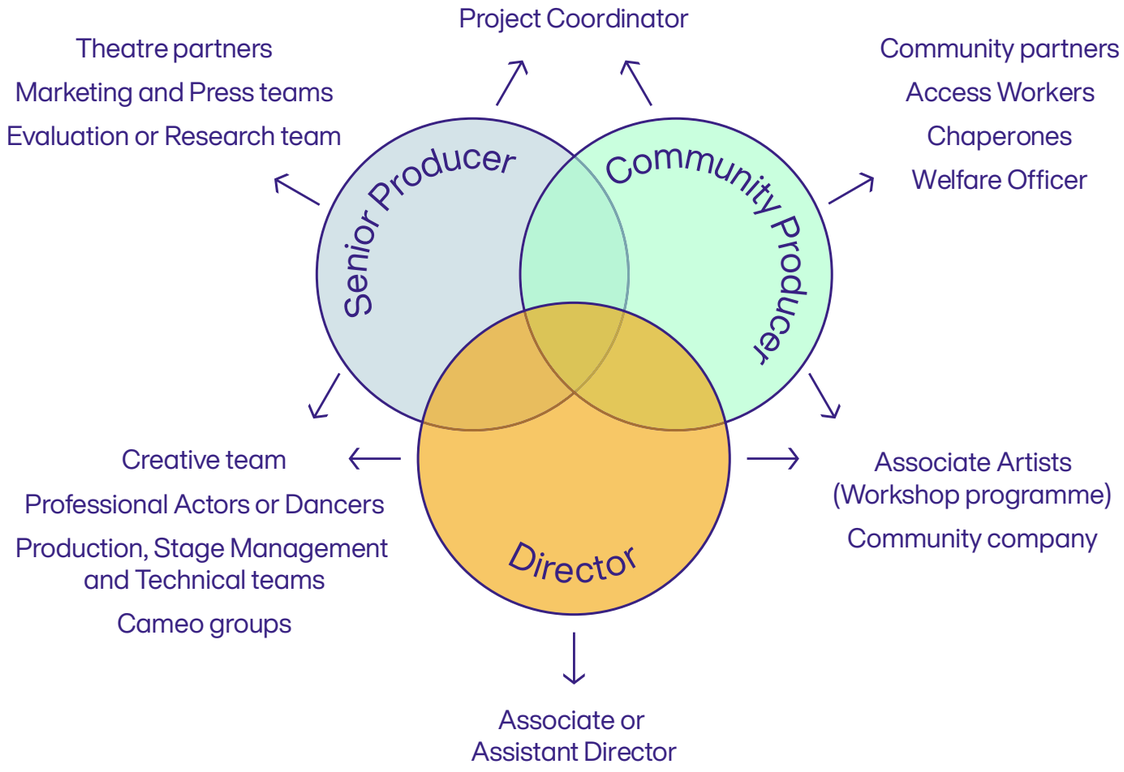
### PROJECT COORDINATOR

- Supporting the Community Producer, with additional general support to the whole team
- Project scheduling, financial processing and logistical delivery
- Communications with community company throughout the process
- Key delivery role in: workshops, rehearsals and backstage running of shows.



## CORE STAFF

Our central team work together symbiotically.
See below for a breakdown of the lines of responsibility:



# TEAMS

## CREATIVE TEAM

An example of a Creative team for a full-scale Public Acts production of between 100–150 participants might look like:

- Director
- Writer
- Composer
- Choreographer
- Musical Supervisor/Director (acting as choir leader)
- Set & Costume Designer (on a costume-heavy show, and where resources allow, this role is split in two)
- Associate or Assistant Director
- Associate or Assistant Choreographer
- One to three Movement Associates (to support teaching of choreography)
- Lighting Designer
- Sound Designer
- Three to six professional actors or dancers
- Four to six band members

We work with two to four Associate Artists to deliver the community workshop programme prior to the show. Where possible these artists are also part of the Creative team, e.g. the Associate Artist is also the Associate Director or Associate Choreographer.

## COMMUNITY TEAM

- Community Producer
- Project Coordinator (sits between Producing and Community team with focus on the latter)
- Community partner leads
- Project Assistants* (joining for final rehearsals and show delivery to support company and backstage running)
- Welfare Officer*
- Access Workers*
- Chaperones*

** Joins team for rehearsals*
We ask each of our community partners to provide a 'lead' staff member in-kind who works closely alongside our Community team throughout the process to guide decision-making and provide informed, specialist pastoral support for members. In many cases, this staff member has gone on to perform in the show as part of the company, to really positive effect.

## PRODUCING, PRODUCTION AND STAGE MANAGEMENT TEAMS

- Senior Producer
- Show Producer from partner theatre
- Project Coordinator (sits between Producing and Community teams with focus on the latter)
- Production Manager
- Stage Manager
- Deputy Stage Manager
- Assistant Stage Managers
- Technical team and show running staff

**A note on Stage Management and Community teams aka 'backstage heroes':**

The complex nature of managing such large Public Acts companies backstage means we adapt the usual set up of the Stage Management team being the sole runners of the backstage area. Instead, the Community team work hand in hand with the Stage Management team:

- The Stage Manager manages the practical running of the show as they normally would, controlling the flow of action backstage including set, props and entrances and exits.

- The Community team focus on the smooth movement and pastoral care of community members. They are responsible for ensuring that everyone has what they need and are where they need to be when they need to be there, be it dressing room one, entrance G, in the stage-left wing behind Jan's balloon garland, etc! Many people will never have performed in a show before, so the extra support and care here is vital.



# PARTNERS

## THEATRE PARTNERS

Whenever we work outside of London (which is more often than not – only two of our ten productions were performed at the National Theatre), we anchor our work with a theatre partner, for example, Queen's Theatre Hornchurch or Cast in Doncaster. This theatre becomes the 'hub' in our 'hub and spoke' model. The team at this venue act as co-producers, lead on local community relationships, host the show at their venue and take responsibility for the project's legacy beyond the performances.

## COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Our community partners are the 'spokes' in our 'hub and spoke' model, branching out into the town or city of our theatre partner, and connecting us to community members. In response to local contexts, as well as our own budgets and timelines, we've had a different number of community partners on each cycle of work, ranging from three to eight.

To read more about how we work with our community partners, see Guide 4.





**'IT'S ABOUT HAVING A VOICE. IT'S ABOUT GROWTH. GROWTH AS AN INDIVIDUAL, AS A COMMUNITY, AND AS A SOCIETY.'**

– Alya, company member

# 4 COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

- **Finding community partners**
- **Criteria**
- **Laying partnership foundations**

## FINDING COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Like the start of any creative process, the beginning of a Public Acts journey is full of lots of hope and excitement, balanced with a healthy dose of mild to full-blown terror at the scale of the job ahead! But the first task is always, at its heart, very simple: we need to gather our community. Our community partnerships are the bedrock of the programme. By engaging with community leaders at a grassroots level, we trust that we will be able to reach people who might not ordinarily have had access to this sort of cultural opportunity or thought that theatre was 'for them'.

Led by the knowledge and aims of our theatre partner, we identify organisations with strong roots within their community and clear social missions in alignment with the values of the project. We seek out a wide range of partners, of varying scales and missions, who together represent the breadth of lived experience within the community. We stay responsive to local and national priorities in order to maximise the social impact and relevance of the work – during the post-Covid recovery period we sought out at least one partner with a specific focus on young people's mental health, for example. Our partners have ranged from hyper-local movements, such as the Sunderland Nigerian Families Group and Conversation Club in Doncaster, through to established national charities such as the Doncaster branch of Changing Lives and Coram.

We have worked with organisations delivering transformative work in fields including childhood trauma, social isolation, homelessness, domestic violence, and many others. We know that each context is different, and that the most important thing is that there is an open, robust, creative relationship with each partner.

## CRITERIA

Here are some questions we ask ourselves when researching and meeting potential community partners:

- **Values and mission:** Is there clear values and mission alignment between our programme and the organisation? Will our programme complement their existing work and help to deliver on their social aims?

- **Readiness for long-term engagement:** Does the organisation have a consistent group of members for whom a long-term project would be beneficial?

When collaborating with organisations working with temporary and transient communities, such as asylum seekers, newly arrived refugees or people experiencing temporary homelessness, we ensure there will be a core group of individuals who partner staff are confident might be able to engage in the full scope of the programme, as well as those who might have a shorter-term engagement. In some cases, we have designed a shorter workshop programme that happens much closer to the start of rehearsals meaning that participants are more likely to be around to take part in the production.



- **Space for delivery:** Does the organisation have a space where creative sessions can be delivered? Does this come at a cost, or can it be given in-kind?

Where possible we lead workshops in the community settings. We want to build up to the point where participants feel confident and willing to come to the theatre, but some participants may never have left their postcode, let alone been to a theatre before, so we start by going to a space that is familiar to them. If a community partner does not have an appropriate space, we have sometimes held sessions at our theatre partner.

- **Regular programme activity:** Are there regular programmes run by the organisation with good attendance? Is there space in the organisation's weekly programme for a new session (or an existing session to be enhanced) without competing priorities?

- **Partnership history:** Does the organisation have experience of partnership work? Is there appetite for a new partnership?

- **Added value:** Will the project add value to their services, complementing existing work and appealing to those who access their services?

- **Member recruitment potential:** Does the organisation have an active group of participants who could be recruited for the project? Has there been good take-up in previous partnerships and in-house activity, with participants staying with projects? Do they have alumni or wider partners to reach out to?

Our work is at its best when our workshops are attended by lively, regular, full groups. We want as many people as possible to have a supported, positive experience. This is about breadth of representation and access, and us being responsible for how our resources are shared.

- **Organisational stability:** Is the organisation financially stable, with a balanced staff structure that isn't overly stretched?

- **Capacity for programme integration:** Does the organisation have the capacity to absorb the programme without staff feeling overly busy or distracted?

- **Leadership support:** Is the leadership team fully behind the programme and would they act as advocates? Does the head of the organisation understand the values of the project and seem excited by it? Does their ethos permeate through to the staff?

## LAYING PARTNERSHIP FOUNDATIONS

Our compass points for building partnerships with strong foundations:

- **Start by listening** – take time to hang out with and get to know the organisation in a rounded way, attending groups, absorbing what they're about and how they work

- **Connect directly with the senior leadership** of each organisation – it makes a big difference when support comes from the top

- **Be transparent about the resources needed** to deliver the project from the get-go

- **Take a 360-degree approach** – the partnership doesn't just exist in meetings! Invite staff to take part in taster workshops, regular sessions and even the show itself, alongside the participants. **We have had a receptionist from one partner and the Executive Director from another perform in our shows!** Longitudinal engagement with the whole culture of an organisation can really affect how that organisation thinks and the legacy of the work after we leave

- **Be transparent about the desire to share resources** as widely and responsibly as possible. Ensure there is a shared responsibility for making sure groups are full and a thriving company is recruited. Set a clear goal for the minimum number of core participants

- **Stay mindful and compassionate about capacity**, understanding that staff are often working at a grassroots level in changeable and demanding environments

- **Ensure there is a shared understanding** of the purpose of the project and take time to collaboratively set aims and goals for the process

- **Identify one key person** within each organisation who will be the 'community partner lead', ensuring that they have the support of their line manager to commit to the project as part of their regular workstream. The work is always at its best when we have close collaboration and trust with a community leader who is deeply embedded in their community and able to signpost and support participants through the project.






# 5 THE REHEARSAL SCHEDULE

- **Company structure**
- **How to start**
- **rehearsal process overview**
- **A note on systems**

The process of creating the rehearsal schedule is not to be underestimated! It's a complex piece of administrative gymnastics but a satisfying and important one. Putting in the hours to build a detailed schedule that we can trust is time well spent. It allows us to start rehearsals knowing that we won't run out of time and ensures we only calling people to rehearsals when they are needed and not wasting anyone's time. (see Resource 10).

Doing attentive work at this point in the process is a direct act of care for our community. If we want everyone to feel properly seen and valued then, as well as holding the big picture of the final show in mind and steering everyone towards that collective end, we need each individual to see that their small piece of the massive jigsaw really matters. We want them to know that their time is respected, and that their experience as a member of the company has been considered from all angles.

We build the schedule *before* recruiting community members so that people know what they are signing up for and so that we can cast according to people's availability (see Resource 8). The groundwork laid in this phase of planning is integral to the smooth running of the subsequent phases when space for slow work and reflection is harder to find.

## COMPANY STRUCTURE

Everyone is part of the **'core community company'** (see Guide 1). There are usually four to five 'mega moments' in the show which feature the full community company. These are rehearsed during the full company rehearsal calls.

We then have a number of **'featured roles'** which involve extra movement, singing or acting, either in small groups or as solos. These require extra rehearsals in addition to the full company calls. Participants can put themselves forward for a featured role when they fill out their recruitment form (see Resource 8), and can specify if they would prefer a singing, dancing or acting specialism (or all three!). Featured roles vary in scale - it could mean taking the role of a main character with a lot of spoken text, like Celia in *As You Like It*, or singing one solo line of a song.

Our professional performers take on substantial parts within the show which anchor the story and the community company. The professionals join our process a few weeks in, giving the community company time to familiarise themselves with the material and build their performance confidence. While we are waiting for the professionals to join we rely on our Assistant Director to read in their lines.

## HOW TO START

Typically, we rehearse over seven to eight weeks with the core community company attending three times per week: two evenings midweek and a full day on Saturday. For our *Public Record* 2025 show we adapted this pattern and rehearsed in a less intensive schedule over a longer period of 13 weeks, with one full company midweek evening rehearsal every week and one full day Saturday rehearsal every other weekend.

Our compass points for building the rehearsal schedule:

- **Consistent rehearsal patterns:** Call featured role rehearsals in the same weekly slot e.g. the pirates always rehearse on a Saturday, 4–6pm

- **Respect people's time:** If people are called make sure they are being used and minimise gaps in their schedule. Plan calls for featured roles should take place before or after calls for the full company, so that people can attend without extra travel

- **Allow some wiggle room so things don't feel rushed:** Optimal call times allow for an arrival buffer – 15 minutes before a call for featured roles and 30 minutes before a call for the full company. This will ensure they have time to have a snack, settle in and get comfortable and are ready to start promptly

- **Prioritise a stagger-through at the end of week three before the professional performers join:** This is the first time the company get to celebrate each other's work, and a great chance for everyone to get a sense of the whole. It might feel early in the process (and very scary..!) to be running sections together but it will definitely be worth it and always gives everyone a massive boost

- **Be realistic (things always take longer):** How long does it really take 80 people to have a cup of tea and get to and from the rehearsal room to the loo?! But really??!?!

- **There's a world outside the rehearsal room:** Is there a major shift in your company's availability partway through the process that you need to be alive to, e.g. school holidays, religious celebrations?

- **Build in flexibility:** Plan for early finishes for those who you know will need it, e.g. families with young children or older members of the company.

**A note on cameo group rehearsals** – our cameo groups (see Guide 1) rehearse their section of material in their own settings and on their own time, with members of the Creative team e.g. the Associate Director or Choreographer visiting them once or twice to check-in. Each group then has an 'integration session' built into the final weeks of rehearsals where they join the core community company in the rehearsal room and piece the whole sequence together. Each cameo group is responsible for one or more 'spotlight' moments during the show which celebrate their particular skill, for example a dance break within a particular song. In addition, all cameo groups perform as part of the finale.

# REHEARSAL PROCESS OVERVIEW

The following example rehearsal schedule is built on a model of seven weeks' rehearsal plus one week of technical rehearsals (see Resource 21) and summarises the key stages. You can also have a look at the Individual Rehearsal Schedule (see Resource 10) to see how this schedule is presented to a community member.

| Phase | Who | Focus | Activity |
|---|---|---|---|
| Weeks 1 to 3 | Core community company only | Learning material | • Three full company rehearsals per week (Tuesday and Thursday evenings, Saturday daytime)<br>• Additional calls for featured performers as needed (selected Tuesday and Thursday afternoons before full company rehearsals, Wednesday afternoons and evenings, Saturday 4–6pm)<br>• **Stagger-through** of all material by the end of week three. |
| Week 4 | Professional performers join community company | Learning material and integrating professionals with the community company | • Community company rehearsals continue as before, with **professionals joining those sessions** as needed<br>• In addition, the **professionals rehearse separately** and with featured performers during daytime calls<br>• **'Choreography catch up'** sessions begin (optional 30-minute drop-ins before full company rehearsals led by the Choreography team). |
| Weeks 5 to 6 | Full company, cameo groups and band | Integration | • **Cameo integration sessions:** each cameo group meets the company and rehearses their section into the piece<br>• **Band joins** rehearsals<br>• Full company **run through with professionals.** |
| Final week | Full company | Final preparation and run through | • **'Spacing day':** community company steps through their tracks on stage and the Creative team problem-solves, making adjustments prior to tech rehearsals<br>• **Sitzprobe**: a seated full play/sing-through of the music with band (led by the Musical Director)<br>• **Final full company run-through** including all cameo groups, band and professional actors. This is usually the only time we run the show with absolutely everyone before the first dress rehearsal – it's a VERY exciting moment...! |
| Production week | Everyone (as needed) | Technical rehearsals | • (See Resource 21)<br>• Before the tech begins, we run a **'familiarisation session'**, allowing all company members to familiarise themselves with the stage and set and to walk through their backstage routes<br>• Week-long schedule with two to three sessions daily<br>• One ring-fenced day off<br>• Company members called for one to two sessions per day as needed<br>• **One to two dress rehearsals** (ideally two) with the first one attended by friendly faces. |
| Performances | Everyone | Show time! | • (See Resource 21)<br>• Four performances over three days<br>• Includes one matinee on the final day, followed by a company picnic / barbecue / celebration |



# A NOTE ON SYSTEMS

By the time we were making our fifth show, we had discovered Airtable, an online platform which allowed us to (amongst a lot of other very clever things) run our schedules, database, entrance and exit tracker and mass personalised communications through a single platform. It has quickly become our most treasured and important producing tool for operating at scale efficiently.

There are of course other platforms available, but we have found Airtable to be the most user friendly. Some practical examples of how we use the software:

1. **Building the (very complicated!) rehearsal schedules:** Creating the rehearsal schedule within Airtable saves us weeks of time in the long run, as the platform automatically generates personalised rehearsal schedules for every community member (as well as call times for the professional team) from one original base. It eliminates the need to manually generate 100–200 personal rehearsal schedules whilst cross-referencing the casting and scene breakdowns (we used to do it the analogue way and trust us... it was painful!). Most recently, we moved to using Airtable to generate live rehearsal schedule links, so that company members were always notified and up to date with any small changes made to their call times (see Resource 10).

2. **Managing the database of community members:** Airtable will allows us to discreetly store community company member information, creating profiles of each person with personal information (such as costume preferences and access needs) as well as show notes (characters, scenes and each person's entrances and exits).

3. **Sending out mass, personalised communication:** Throughout rehearsals we regularly contact both whole companies as well as pinpoint messages to selected groups. Through Airtable we are able to quickly send an email to, for example, people in scenes four, seven and nine to let them know about a minor script change with an attachment.

We recommend building the Airtable subscription cost into your budget. Taking the time to establish your schedules and database within this system is something you will thank yourself for!



# 6 RECRUITMENT & CASTING

- **Recruiting the company**
- **A note on featured roles**
- **Recruitment workshops**
- **Casting**
- **Key stages of our casting process**

## RECRUITING THE COMPANY

At the end of our second term of the community workshop programme we start the recruitment process for the show. Every community member who has taken part in the workshop programme is invited to attend a recruitment workshop (see Resource 8), run by the Director, Choreographer and Music Director of the show.

We refer to this process as 'recruitment' rather than 'auditions' to avoid connotations of pressure or competition. The workshop consists of three sections: movement, text work and singing.

Depending on the scale of the show and the number of people who put themselves forward we are clear that either everyone will be able to take part, or that there will need to be some selection. We are transparent with our members about what the selection criteria will be and are explicit in stating that it is not about 'talent'. Instead, our aim is to assemble a company who will collectively:

- Represent the breadth of our community, and of all our community partner groups
- Be able to commit fully to the rehearsal schedule
- Align well with the roles written into the piece

The recruitment process is conducted in close conversation with our community partner leads and decisions are guided by their knowledge of individuals.

## A NOTE ON FEATURED ROLES

Everyone is given the chance to put themselves forward for a featured role via the recruitment form (see Resource 8). As well as the general recruitment workshops we hold one to two **featured recruitment workshops.** We run movement, acting and singing stations within this, rotating people according to which skill they've said they'd like to focus on. In the singing and acting stations, we make sure that everyone is given the chance to sing or speak solo. We also run callback sessions for any chunkier featured roles.

We are clear when talking about featured roles that it might not be possible for everyone who puts themselves forward to be cast in one, but we try to adapt the material to accommodate as many people as we can – increasing the number of Fisher People from ten to 12 is a quick job for a deft writer (and on more than one occasion in our shows the majority of the company have had a featured role). That said, we are very careful to emphasise throughout recruitment that the beating heart of any Public Acts show is the community ensemble, and that everyone will be kept very busy and have lots of stage time whether they have a featured role or not.

## RECRUITMENT WORKSHOPS

Some things we do to make our recruitment process run smoothly:

- Make sure time has been allocated in the final term of the community workshop programme for the Community Producer to talk through the project information pack and recruitment form (see Resource 8) which includes an availability checker.
- Take a photo of everyone who attends a recruitment workshop, holding a board with their name on it, to be used in the casting process (see Resource 9)
- Be clear about the expectation that people must attend all rehearsals, and why this is important. We express that it's about showing up for each other, making the most of the experience and creating something of real quality that we can all be incredibly proud of
- Dedicate time in the last section of the recruitment workshop to help anyone fill out a form in person who hasn't been able to do it online.

## CASTING

The knotty puzzle of casting a show with so many parts involves both the Creative and Community teams. We know that this is one of the most sensitive parts of our process and take care to hold our community properly throughout.

When matching people to parts, in addition to the usual creative task of matching someone to a character, we hold in balance several factors:

- **Suitability:** does this role give our community member space to shine and to grow? We don't want to expose or underestimate anyone. In our writer Chris Bush's words: 'Everyone should feel challenged but no-one should ever feel exposed by what they're being asked to do'
- **Availability:** can they attend all the rehearsals for their section? (see Resource 10)
- **Preferences:** have they put themselves forward for a featured role and can this request be met?

We also love finding ways to spotlight people's special skills and party tricks – in *Pericles* we turned one of our youngest members' flossing skills into a solo moment and in *The Odyssey* we had great fun casting Charis, a real life blacksmith, as the God of the Forge, and Raf, a real life chef, as our Chef to the Gods!



# KEY STAGES OF OUR CASTING PROCESS

| Stage | Activity |
|---|---|
| 1 | Build an 'availability overview' to create an easy-to-read overview of any requested absences logged via the recruitment forms (see Resource 8) |
| 2 | Create physical 'casting cards' (see Resource 9) displaying each person's photograph, name, age, community partner group and featured role preferences to help you lay the casting picture out in front of you during the 'casting roundtable.' |
| 3 | Host a 'casting roundtable' session with key creatives, Community Producer and Coordinator to allocate roles – this can take several goes to get right! Be careful to cross-check people's availability for additional featured rehearsals when allocating featured roles. |
| 4 | Once casting decisions have been made, send out offer emails with individual rehearsal schedules (see Resource 10). |
| 5 | Sensitively contact any members who haven't been given a part via email, offering follow-up support via phone calls and mentioning details of future opportunities to get involved including free tickets to see the show. |
| 6 | Call every company member individually to discuss their schedule (see Resource 10) in detail and ensure they understand the commitment they are making. It often takes a few weeks to reach everyone, so be sure to leave enough time. |
| 7 | Allow time for adjustments and schedule recalibration based on the information received e.g. if someone has changed their mind about wanting to sing and will need to have their part switched, or if someone's availability has changed. |



**'I'LL ALWAYS WANT MORE FROM MY LIFE BECAUSE I'LL ALWAYS KNOW THAT I'VE DONE THIS.'**

– Layla, company member



# 7 REHEARSALS

- **Launch Day**
- **Public Acts rehearsal rooms**
- **Running the room**
- **Doing hard things!**
- **People care**
- **Hospitality**

## LAUNCH DAY

To prepare everyone for rehearsals we host a Launch Day (see Resource 13) a few weeks before rehearsals kick off. This is a key moment where we bring the community company together for the first time to officially welcome them, inform and excite them about the production, and get through some key admin. We split the company into groups and schedule a carousel of activities:

1. Model box sharing and talk through of the show with the Director and designers so that everyone understands how they'll be involved

2. Individual costume measurement sessions and chats with the costume team about how preferences for costume and hair can amplify people's individuality and confidence on stage

3. Headshots taken by a professional photographer. These are used for the show cast sheet and sent to company members for their own use – it's often a highlight for people and makes them feel very special!

4. A talk through the Company Welcome Pack (see Toolkit website page to download) highlighting key information and expectations of the project. This is where everyone is asked to sign the Community Company Agreement (see Resource 14).

## PUBLIC ACTS REHEARSAL ROOMS

Once we begin rehearsals the rehearsal room becomes the heart of our community – our community centre. We take care to ensure it's a space defined by warmth and welcome as well as hard work. Bunting and fairy lights are just as important as the props tables, the craft box for our youngest children (and emergency stash of sweets!) are just as important as the costume rails.

We want to create a room that everyone looks forward to coming into, that can hold both rigorous work and collective joy. Over the years we have celebrated everything in our rehearsals, from birthdays and GCSE results to the arrival of grandchildren and someone being given the all-clear from cancer, we've even staged a surprise wedding proposal! The way we live alongside each other while we're making the show defines the work, and is the work: to us, living our values as a community is an act of creativity in itself.

## RUNNING THE ROOM

For obvious reasons, our rehearsal rooms are usually very busy places.

Some things we do to create a comfortable and focused working environment:

- **Rehearsal room guidelines:** Along with a Team Welcome Sheet (see Resource 15) these guidelines are shared and discussed in advance with all our staff who will be supporting or leading the room. These are shared and discussed in advance with all our staff who will be supporting or leading the room. They serve as an important yardstick for how we want to hold the company and create a caring, inclusive and calm space for everyone (see Resource 16)

- **Information sharing:** When working on something of such big scale, understanding your individual role and contribution clearly within the overall vision is essential to each person recognising their value. We think carefully about what practical information the company needs at their fingertips in order to understand the process and their place within it

- **We create accompanying resources, including:** a large visual synopsis (or 'map') of the whole show, scene-by-scene wall displays detailing all groupings, entrances and exits, headshots of our professional actors, a stage word glossary (see Resource 17), and so on

- **Who's who:** We create a clear visual distinction between different teams so that the company are clear about who to go to for what – different coloured high-vis jackets, pin buttons or bum bags have served us very well! And we have a photo sheet up on the wall for people to refer to names, roles and phonetic spellings

- **Lateness and absences:** We talk to the company from the recruitment stage and all the way through rehearsals about the importance of punctuality and not missing rehearsals (whilst understanding that of course life happens and things can arise unexpectedly). The phrase 'showing up for each other' is useful for us to express how valued and necessary their presence is at each and every rehearsal.

- **Bring the joy!** A bake-off part way through rehearsals, a 'super Saturday' potluck lunch, spontaneous ice cream deliveries, an Easter egg hunt – find ways to inject joy and fun throughout rehearsals. These shared communal experiences and acts of community are just as important as anything else happening in the room – they don't just keep spirits up and make the work better, they are the work.



# DOING HARD THINGS

Many people in our community company will never have had the experience of learning material for a show – it's a hard thing! The new challenge of this, and our expectations that we can and will do hard things together, is a huge part of what makes the journey so satisfying and transformative for everyone. But only if we take care of people along the way and set everyone up to succeed. Some of the things we do to support people with their learning include:

- **Choreography catch ups:** optional sessions run by the Dance team half an hour before rehearsals start where people can go over material in detail in a smaller group
- **Track sheets:** we give everyone a small printed form to fill in and keep in their rehearsal lanyard as we move through rehearsals which details all their entrances, exits and any other key responsibilities (e.g. what prop they bring in) for each scene. We hold 'track sheet surgeries' throughout rehearsals where people can check-in with a team member about any questions or gaps they have in their track (see Resource 19).

**Teaching materials** which can be accessed from home. These include resources which can be:

- **Choreography teaching videos** including breakdowns of all the sequences
- **Music teaching tracks for all songs**, including audio breakdowns for each vocal part and talk-through with tips and notes from our Music Director
- **Tips sheets for learning lines and lyrics** (see Resource 18).

# PEOPLE CARE

Rehearsals are very exciting but can also be overwhelming for both company and team, with lots of new experiences and a step up in pace. The Community Producer leads the Community team and takes responsibility for the experience of the community company, pastoral care and weaves core principles of accessibility and inclusion through the fabric of the project.

In our rehearsal room there are always at least two Community team members present to support the company and allow the creative and Stage Management team to keep rehearsals running.

During rehearsals the Community Producer oversees:

- **Project Coordinator**
- **Community partner leads**, who are present in rehearsals and often perform in the show, supporting their group from within the process
- **Welfare Officer**, who is embedded within the rehearsal room and is also available for one to one sessions outside of rehearsal times
- **Creative Access Workers** who work one to one with company members with more complex access needs and often perform in the show
- **Chaperones**

We have a separate welfare provision for all team members, who are overseen during the process by our Senior Producer.

# HOSPITALITY

Great hospitality is a key principle of our work and preparing to host and meet the practical needs of 100 company members across several weeks is no small task. We want everyone to feel looked after and to minimise rehearsal room faff and wasted time.

Our compass points for large scale hosting:

- **Good food!** Provide a tasty, culturally varied food offer, including three meals a day during long rehearsal days. Have tea and coffee available throughout rehearsals
- **Toiletography** (yes, we made a word for it!): Ignore toiletography at your peril. How are you going to get 100 people to the toilets and back during a 15-minute break? It's possible, but it takes planning!
- **Belongings:** Make sure everyone, including the team, has a dedicated space (a named peg, a box, a space on a rail) to safely store their belongings. We use a portable clothes rail of named pouches to store everyone's mobile phones and valuables
- **Space:** Organise the rehearsal space in detail, down to where scripts and water bottles can be placed within easy reach, putting name labels on water bottles and Creative team chairs, and having clear systems for storing coats and bags to keep the working space clear.
- **Life happens:** Note people's birthdays or key events (exam results day, religious festivals, and so on) on the rehearsal schedule so they don't get forgotten!

Extra thought is put into how **families** are best supported to take part. We create bespoke schedules allowing children to leave evening sessions early where needed, hold a welcome meeting and mid-way check-in between all chaperones and families, cast families in the same scenes where possible to simplify their rehearsal schedule, and so on. We write to each child's teachers to tell them about their involvement in the show, as we know that often our children might not feel confident enough to tell their teachers what they've been up to – but they always deserve enormous celebration and acknowledgement!

*To read acknowledgements and photographer credits please refer to Toolkit Part Two: Resources.*

