

Creative Relationships

Bill Gee, BGA
Judith Knight, Arts Admin
Hilary Westlake
Facilitated by Simon Chatterton

Simon Chatterton (SC) introduced the speakers and went on to explain that each would be giving a short presentation about some of the projects they have worked on and the creative relationships between commissioners, producers and artists. After that, a discussion would be opened up amongst the panel and the delegates in the room.

Bill Gee (BG) introduced himself as both a producer, working closely with artists, and a commissioner, with a different relationship to the artists. For BG, the producer has the ability to stretch the vision and the more profile the producer has, the more money he/she is able to secure.

The first project BG talked about was *Fragrant*, by the artist Jyll Bradley, which looked at the significance of exchanging cut flowers in different cultures. An initial event in London sparked interest in the project and led to *Fragrant* happening in other places including China, Columbia and Glasgow. The commissioner in Glasgow was Angus Farquhar from nva. Nva had developed a garden (The Hidden Gardens) on a piece of wasteland behind Tramway Arts Centre in one of the most culturally diverse areas of the city. The Hidden Gardens had been open for a few years with a programme of events in the space including several culturally specific festivals of light. The brief with *Fragrant Glasgow* was to respond to the space and to the community and to the will to bring all of the individual communities together for one festival of light. One interesting point here is that Angus Farquhar is an artist as well as, in this case, a commissioner. In some ways this was positive, as he had an understand of the process, and in other ways it caused some difficulties because he expected to have more control over creative decisions.

Jyll's response to the brief was very simple. She wanted to celebrate light as something essential in the growth of flowers. 50,000 seeds were planted in the city and seedlings were given out to members of the community to grow on at home as well as grown in The Hidden Gardens and nearby allotments. 35,000 flowers were cut, dried and knitted together over a 10 day period with hundreds of people working together to make the biggest dried flower garland in the world. This became the centrepiece of four days of festivities for all of the community.

BG's role within this was to manage the process and the expectations of the artist. One aspect of this was when Jyll, who comes from a visual arts background, wanted to install the garland inside the art gallery in Tramway. This would not have worked for the audience for the Hidden Gardens because it was a community that felt comfortable in the gardens and did not feel the same way about the indoor, more conventional, "arts" spaces. BG had to mediate this, knowing that his feelings about it would be different if he was the commissioner rather than the producer working with and for the artist.

The second project BG talked about was *Enclosure* which was the closing event of the Inside Out festival in Dorset. The starting point for the project was spaces in Dorset which are Neolithic gathering points or iron-age hill forts. In this instance, BG (with Simon Chatterton) was the commissioner, establishing the physical space and also the emotional space for the production. BG and SC asked Red Earth – an environmental arts company – to respond to the brief, which, although seemingly simple, was actually very complex because of the history of the site.

It was then Hilary Westlake's (HW) turn to speak. She started by saying that artists always appreciate people who strive to put on their work, although she may not illustrate this with the examples she gives! HW established her own theatre company, Lumiere & Son, with a writer, David Gale. The company was funded to produce its own work and in the first 10 years the ideas always came directly from HW's head. After that time, she was invited by Mick Flood at Waterman's to create a show. He had just started a relationship with Kew Gardens so it seemed a good idea to HW to do something there. She was, at the time, preoccupied with the destruction of the rainforest so *Deadwood* emerged, a perambulatory show about a day in the life of a rainforest.

HW sees the above as the first two stages in a journey. At first, she had total freedom, while in the second example she was influenced by a site. The next stage was when she created a piece for the Nottingham Festival. The festival had an overall theme which was the era at the turn of the 19th/20th century and which HW also had to work within. The event was set in Nottingham Castle and based on a celebration set up by a Lord of the Manor in order to get people to sign up for the war effort of the First World War.

The next stage in the journey was a project called *Out of the Blue*. This was initiated by an arts officer in Great Yarmouth who took advantage of funding for new collaborations. HW collaborated with two other people, but as all of the collaborators would normally initiate their own work, it was a fairly unhappy experience and not terribly successful.

After that, HW did two pieces for Salisbury Festival. The first was *Dining with Alice*, where she was given the site (The Larmer Tree Gardens) and a suggested theme (something to do with *Alice in Wonderland*). She then did another piece to commemorate the restoration of the West face of the cathedral. Here she was given the music, the site, the event and the sort of audience that would come.

More recently, HW directed the Golden Jubilee Parade which would celebrate 50 glorious years of the Queen, but there was quite a lot of intervention in the process because of the scale of the overall event. Since then, HW has worked for Disney and independently on shows which already exist.

For HW, these examples show a clear progression from absolute freedom to many more demands or constraints. On the other hand, the opportunities and the audiences have also changed from small to much bigger. HW thinks that producers have now become the people who originate projects rather than this being directors and artists. These ideas often involve community participation on a scale which isn't eventually realised and the problem is then left with the artist.

Simon Chatterton then spoke about his own experiences. He started with *Elemental*, one of the first projects he produced as a freelance producer. The project was to be a large-scale performance bringing together the best of British site-specific, outdoor,

visual theatre and present it at one of the biggest French street festivals, Chalon dans la Rue, which hadn't taken a piece of British work for a long time. There was a lot of expectation about which companies would be selected and there were four producers on the project. It was difficult and complex and it was far from an open brief. SC feels that producers are there to open up opportunities for artists which offer the best chance of succeeding and this one was very tough.

The artists involved included Forkbeard Fantasy, Company FZ, Homelife, Dream Engine, Blissbody, Avanti Display and others. The idea was to create a nocturnal world which showed aspects of the companies' old and new work. There were also very different approaches from the French and the English, even in terms of things like marketing copy. The French thought the wording was too descriptive and not about the deeper meanings so they rewrite it. The artists then felt that it did not truly represent what they were doing.

The producers had to deal with each person's and each organisation's agenda and expectations. The range was enormous as it included the French festival, the Arts Council, the British Council and the artists. It was a long and difficult journey, but it taught a lot of lessons about working out how to manage the different agendas before getting too deep into the project.

The second project SC talked about was *Luminox*, done with a French company called Carabosse who work all over the world and are very professional and easy to work with. SC wanted to work with them in the middle of Oxford where there are a number of very precious old buildings. The project involved fire installations, so it was very important to bring all the relevant people on board so they felt they wanted to be part of the event and not to fear it. The rationale was a celebration of 1000 years of Oxford, which also meant trying to make the work of Carabosse more locally significant, which involved doing community workshops and also working with a local artist to create another element to the event.

Judith Knight (JK) then gave some examples from her work. Arts Admin has produced lots of large-scale projects over the years, but works quite differently from companies like Artichoke. Sometimes they work as mediator between the artist and the commissioner and sometimes they have been the commissioner. JK is always interested to know what makes a commissioner take a leap of faith and her role is to encourage them to do this. She feels that the projects Arts Admin have done have been artist-led, not producer-led.

JK started by talking about Graeme Miller and the variety of relationships at work in different projects. The first piece, *Sound Observatory*, was commissioned by Antony Sargeant who was running the Sounds Like Birmingham festival. Graeme created a sound map of Birmingham in an unfinished shopping centre. He created a method for pinpointing places on the map of Birmingham and then went to those places and recorded the sounds of that place. When you walked around the space in which it was installed you heard the different sounds at points corresponding to a scale map. There was no strong brief in this case.

The second project was commissioned on the back of an earlier piece that hadn't been very successful, but within which Marie Zimmerman, who was Director of the Vienna Festival, had been able to see the potential of Graeme's work. She gave a very open brief and Graeme created a sound and video walk around the streets of Vienna. The third piece, *Linked*, was totally Graeme's idea. His house was knocked down to build the M11 motorway in the 90s and he wanted to make a sound installation about the area where all these streets were demolished. Transmitters are

hidden in lampposts and you pick up a receiver from the library so as you approach the lampposts, you begin to hear the stories of the people interviewed about the area and the development. This project is still running.

JK then talked about Station House Opera and the breeze block projects. Following two early incarnations of the idea, a French organisation did some of the groundwork to encourage someone in France to commission SHO as part of the bicentenary of the French Revolution. The city of Cherbourg put in about £100,000 - essentially to an unknown British company - and *The Bastille Dances* resulted. It was a surprise to JK that someone would take such a risk. The project then toured to some other places, including the South Bank with the support of Lift, the National Theatre and the South Bank.

JK then suggested another breeze block project to the person running the Dresden festival. This version was sited next to a church which was bombed by the British, along with a lot of the rest of Dresden. 20,000 breeze blocks were positioned and performers moved them in motion to create different objects such as a staircase or rooms, so it felt very appropriate in terms of building and rebuilding.

JK went on to talk about Anne Bean, an artist she has worked with for a long time. The relationship changed for a recent project as Arts Admin commissioned Anne Bean to create an opening event. There was a brief, and lots of discussion over the creation. Anne also brought in other artists to work on it. JK was very pleased with the results, but it was a very different relationship with the artist than she is used to.

JK's job is to give commissioners the support they need to take risks with their work. She is always looking for opportunities and the joining up of relationships. You have to be very careful about the fit and how tight the brief is. There has to be a constant dialogue between event/artist/producer and commissioner. You also have to mediate resources and expectations and question whether the artist needs to compromise.

SC then returned to HW's point about producers being the new celebrities and whether the credit they get is fair. SC asked BG to comment on this. BG replied that the producer can encourage the artist to think bigger and be more ambitious, which is what he did with Jyll Bradley in *Fragrant*. SC then asked whether producers are needed now more than in the past, because, for example, of the scale. JK replied that profile of the producer can help open other doors than the profile of the artist. HW added that the situation has changed because sources of income have diversified and it's not just the Arts Council. There is a lot of negotiation to be done and the path is often found by the producer. It is just important to discuss and agree things in advance so that the expectations from both sides are met, and if they change it is understood that the work should change too.

Neil Butler (UZ) wanted to talk about another creative relationship which is between the artist and their audience. The purpose of the producer is to enable this relationship. He also wanted to talk about the difference between spectacle and large-scale work which really touches people. Again, he thinks this is down to the relationship between the artist and the audience.

BG replied that he is totally motivated by the audience and this is a move away from his early work which was more focused on the artist and drew a small audience. He also talked about the importance of giving an audience a shared experience which they can talk about afterwards.

Somebody else raised their worry about what HW had said about producers. This delegate felt that it can be very positive for artists to be uncompromising about their work. In ways, this makes the producer's job easier as it gives the passion to group around and the drive to deliver.

HW responded that she wonders what motivates producers to put work on. She worries that for producers it is often about getting the largest audience possible, or delivering a social objective, which is not usually the same for the artist.

JK said that we should never put numbers above quality. *The Sultan's Elephant* succeeded because it was very good as well as playing lots of people.