

## Prism Arts



Prism Arts is an inclusive arts organisation based in Cumbria. Our core project, Studio Theatre, devises, produces and performs new original theatre led by young people and adults with learning disabilities. The Creative Case Bursary enabled us to explore approaches to development, production and touring of Studio Theatre's work. We embarked on a fantastic programme of skills sharing, meetings and conversations with regional and national theatre companies, including companies that tour work by artists with learning disabilities and companies that develop new devised theatre with a diverse range of artists/groups. We also talked to NPO Theatres in Cumbria.

The Creative Case Bursary enabled us to have frank, open and engaging conversations with a view to developing our touring strand into the medium and long term.

## The Activity

Our bursary team included Prism Arts' lead artist, a theatre practitioner and a director. We met some excellent companies delivering innovation and leadership in this area, including Mind the Gap, Dark Horse, Cardboard Citizens and 20 Stories High. We were able to fully explore the practical challenges of touring with learning-disabled performers and artists, but also explored how to market our work to venues. We also explored how individuals are developed as artists and considered how to raise profile of work developed by artists with learning disabilities. In Cumbria we met NPO Theatre venues to explore programming strategy, audience development and approaches to programming diverse work. This involved practical areas such as box office splits, technical requirements and publicity, as well as audience development and marketing of our work. We explored diversity through programming both in terms of work promoted but also in terms of developing audiences. The bursary allowed us to have open and honest conversations. We used our upcoming tour as a lever and focus for discussion.

## Learning and Insight

**Don't get frustrated, work in partnership.** Cumbrian NPO Theatres are interested in promoting learning-disabled work. We discovered that we must work in partnership with each theatre to support bespoke marketing and audience development within each locality. There are no barriers to promoting the work on the same basis as any other small-scale visiting touring company in a practical sense (contracting, box office split/contracts). But each theatre has a different understanding of how to promote and market work produced by people with learning disabilities and how to articulate this both in-house and to audiences. We learnt that we need to engage audience development and marketing departments with the quality of our work and support targeted promotion through clear narratives, therefore moving the focus from learning disability to quality. This learning was backed up by the conversations we had with theatre companies.



**Touring is challenging and there is still a way to go in terms of raising the profile of learning disabled work.** Through talking to theatre companies, we explored the practical challenges of touring with learning-disabled performers in respect of additional care and support needs. This fact is not always fully recognised by the arts and funders. There appears to be a disconnect between understanding the needs of work toured by learning-disabled performers and other touring work. Offering training for venues as well as considering touring with a smaller ensemble emerged as an option.

Theatre companies were clear that the quality of the work is at the heart of ongoing relationships both with audiences and with venues; this mirrors our current experience in Cumbria. Quality and professionalism is essential, not only in terms of the production, but across all marketing, publicity and production packs.

**The work of artists and performers with learning disabilities is still not visible within the arts.** Getting to grips with enabling artists to develop practice through theatre, touring and visual arts relies on a strategy of building partnerships with NPOs to increase promotion of work and to build audiences. Networking with peers emerged as an opportunity.

**To support the development of work, funding is essential.** This needs to be explored in more depth. For example, learning-disabled artists could apply for G4A to develop their practice but would require the support of a host organisation; this is difficult for NPOs. Not one learning disabled theatre company we met had achieved Strategic Touring funding.

## **Impact: What we are now doing as a result of the bursary:**

We now have established partnerships with 3 NPO theatres, allowing us to build a strategic network of promoters.

We have secured a tour of 6 dates for our next production, including 3 NPO venues; all venues will apply the same contracting terms and conditions to Studio Theatre as any other small-scale touring company.

We have developed bespoke marketing and audience development plans in partnership with each venue. We will pilot delivery of workshops in each location in advance of the performance as well as assist in targeting key audiences.

We are working on high-quality technical and production packs for our upcoming tour. We are commissioning an illustrator and photographer to develop high-quality imagery for our publicity.

We have built new networks with other learning disabled companies. We have an exchange planned in May and July with Mind the Gap, further work with Cardboard Citizens through Rosehill Theatre and a new learning disabled participatory theatre project at Brewery Arts.

We will share information from the companies we met with NPO promoters and make sure that promoters attend a sharing of work planned for May with Mind the Gap. This will enable us to develop awareness of work produced by artists with learning disabilities, with a view to expanding promotion opportunities in Cumbria building to a critical mass of work.

We will apply for a Strategic Touring Grant to enable us to develop our production and to continue to build strategic partnerships with NPO venues in Cumbria.

We will talk to ACE to look at how we might be able to host G4As on behalf of artists with learning disabilities. We will also explore payment of artists.

We will develop the quality of our work, production values and how we tour: from 2017 we will explore developing work designed around a smaller ensemble cast. We will look at engaging visiting producers and art form specialists.