Running a Youth Theatre: Building a Programme of Work

with Rachel Ashton, Artistic Director of Theatre Factory

Tue 13 Feb – Session Summary

Introduction

- Hello from **Rachel Ashton, Artistic Director of [Theatre Factory](#)**
- Theatre Factory are an Arts Council National Portfolio Organisation based in Barrow in Furness in the North West of England.

Everyone puts where they're Zooming in from in the chat. There are people joining from Sheffield, Somerset, Sunderland, Dorset, Plymouth, Fife and Japan.

- Today we'll be looking at Building a Programme of Work. I'll give an introduction, tell you about 5 key things to consider, and whip through our programme at Theatre Factory.
- Then we'll split into groups and discuss, and then share back and ask any other questions.

Opening statements

- I'm giving opening statements but am not an expert. There is lots of expertise in the room, we'll all approach this slightly differently, but there will also be lots of things we have in common.
- If I explain things you're already doing then great, that's some confirmation. If it's new to you, I hope it's useful.
- So what is programming in the participatory sector? Lets start with what programme isn't.

What programme isn't

1. **Programme isn't just the things you do with young people**.
   Part of your programme might be developing a board, or sorting out your finances. That's programme because it takes your time, emotions and mental energy. If you're stressing because you have a mountain of marketing or board papers to do, don't worry – that's part of your programme.

2. **Programme isn't just a list of shows.**
   It's more strategic than that.

3. **Programme isn't your latest great idea.**
   We're artists, and we have loads of great ideas. How does the great idea build into our programme? Our company? Or participants? If you have a great idea in the

middle of the night, write it down and put it in your back pocket. Don't led it lead your programme, instead cocreate with the people you're working with.

What programme is: informed by **need** and **desire**.

For example, there might be a need to relieve loneliness in your community, but there may not be a desire amongst those people to get together and do a show.

5 things to think about when building a programme:

1. **Who –** Who are you working with most? It might be children and young people in your village, or young people who are neurodiverse, or young people in a very specific area of your city. Who are they? What is the age? What are their needs? What is their economic grouping?

    As our programme developed, I realised I needed to know more about them.

2. **What –** There are two 'what's:

    What are you going to do? What are the outputs of your programme? Outputs meaning the stuff you produce, like a comic book or a dance piece or a series of workshops or a pilot.

    What will you do to achieve it? That's the outcome, what happens as a result. Does everyone feel happier? More confident? It's not just numbers, it's the impact.

3. **Why** – why these participants, and not others? What's the 'issue' you're addressing, and how do you know? How do you know these people are lonely? Do you have evidence or research?

    Why this activity? Why now? And Why you? This is what funders want to know.

4. **Where –** This might seem like a detail but it's actually a really important question. We know there are barriers to people going into creative buildings. You might think, we'll do this activity in a community hall or church hall. Or you might think, our project is about bringing people into that creative space.

5. **When –** When is really important. Depending on what it is e.g. it might seem like a bad idea to do a project the week before Christmas, unless what you're doing is giving out mulled wine and mince pies. A project than runs on quiet Sundays might be more enticing to a certain section of the community.

The Programme at Theatre Factory

A bit about the programme and how it evolved. Here's a diagram:
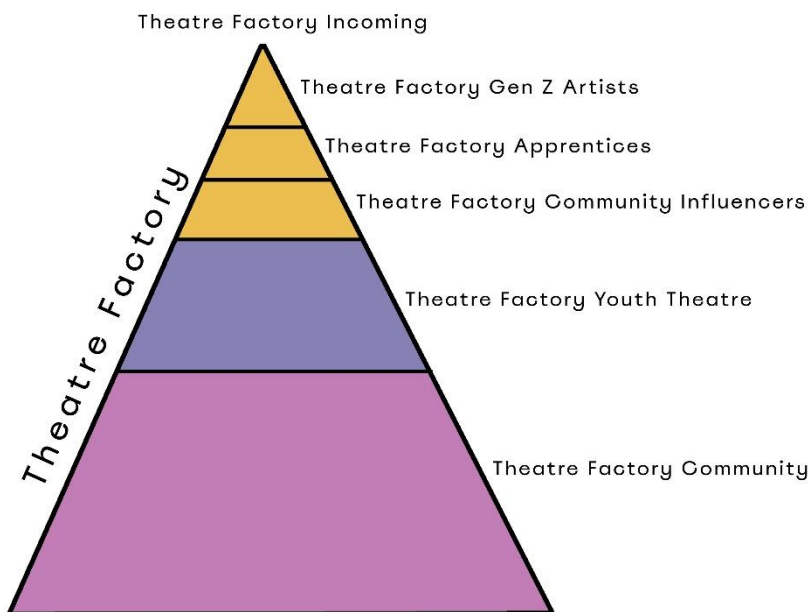
The base is wide and corresponds to the number of people involved with us. The steep, slopey sides correspond to the level of engagement. The higher you go up, the more engagement there is, and the smaller the group.

Our programme began with the **middle band**, Youth Theatre, which has been going for over 30 years. It was a request, it came out of need. The Barrow council wanted a developmental Youth Theatre offer, because before there was only Am-Dram or Musical Theatre, and all the decisions in the youth theatres were being made by the adults. Our programme within the Youth Theatre band has changed and morphed over the years.

There were two problems we faced: how do you get funding? What do you do when people get to old for youth theatre?

Fundraising advice always says not to chase the money, but I disagree: when I started out I went to all the third sector organisations in town and asked them a simple question: would you like to work with us? What would you like us to do? Out of that developed co-curated programmes. The point is we built relationships, and we build programme with them, based on need and desire. We still make work with other third sector organisations in the town, that's the **bottom band.**

The **top band** helped us solve the programme of people ageing out of the youth theatre. We had some young people who liked what we were doing but didn't want to do it for a job, so we created a site specific work in the market, museum and library. Then our Apprentices want to be actors, so that's an industry focussed project to give some experience of working professionally. Then right at the top, some of our young people leave, train, and come back – so we give them work as actors, directors, writers. And recently some commission to make their own work.

Our programme didn't just appear, it's a question of looking at what's in front of you. Now I'd like you to look in front of you and at the opportunities, to help you think about programme.

PEST Analysis exercise

P – Political
E – Economic
S – Social
T – Technological

For example, in Barrow:

Political - there's a new council, they're pulling the market down
Economic – Barrow is a levelling up town, so there's potential sources of money coming in
Social – We're being told loneliness is an issue, can we respond to that
Tech – I have no idea, I'm hopeless with that, but I'm sure you're not

Exercise: get into groups, discuss for your community, and let us know your top 2 in each category

Feeding back and discussion

Discussion around the following points:

- Issues in government and the impact it's had on people's access to provision
- Homelessness and deprivation in some areas
- Areas that are considered 'semi rural' so not rural enough to qualify for support
- Youth crime and violence, often coming from youth unemployment – working with NEET young people (people who are not in Education, Employment or Training)
- Theatre as a really strong tool to engage and connect with young people about issues that are going to affect their lives, so it's not just reaching or lecturing, but cocreating so they can understand and share their experiences
- Where you can do that, taking projects into schools in a way that's useful and not mirroring traditional theatre in education models
- Opportunities that exist or don't exist if you are based near a large city
- Mental health and additional needs and lack of support for those things – cocreation as a tool for working with people and supporting them to support themselves
- Issues with funding in local authorities and volatility around local funding
- Looking at Facebook community forum pages as a tool to think about desire and need – a way of bridging the gap between what we think is great, and what people actually want
- Free or incredibly cheap provision, and food offered – meeting a need. Group of committed young people who return but aren't interested in making theatre; sometimes there's a pressure to be making really high quality theatre when actually that's not where the desire is
- Fewer participants and less take up as a result of the twin peaks of Cost of Living and COVID fallout

- Drop out – sometimes this means that the offer isn't quite right
- Sometimes find positive uptake in the short term, but it's harder to convert that into commitment in the long term – because the offer needs to keep evolving to continue meeting need
- Sometimes we feel pressured to deliver, deliver, deliver when actually it's important to sometimes stand your ground and think, we need to slow down, or go back into the community and ask them why something isn't working
- Sometimes things feel fractured or splintered in an area, with lots of organisations trying to make different things happen. Perhaps there's an opportunity for collaboration or joined up thinking

Find out more about upcoming *Running a Youth Theatre* sessions: https://www.companythree.co.uk/running-a-youth-theatre

Or get in touch with gabi at gabi@companythree.co.uk