

Running a Youth Theatre: Co-Creating with Young People

with Prime theatre

9 May 2024 – Session Summary

[Link to the session powerpoint.](#)

Introduction

- Hello from **Eve Winters**, Youth Director at [Prime Theatre](#).
- **Icebreaker:** People write their name, where they're zooming from, and why they co-creating with young people in the chat.
- **Introduction to Eve:** have worked in youth theatre for about 17 years. Started out as a side hustle but after a few years moved into a youth theatre based in a local producing theatre, where I started to investigate co-creating with young people. I used to find it really scary to co-create, but found companies who work in this way and learnt more, moving into freelance co-creating and writing with young people. Started my own youth theatre with 5 successful groups, focusing on youth voice and classical scripts. Received an Arts Council [Developing your Creative Practice](#) grant to train with companies like [The PappyShow](#), [Company Three](#) and [Frantic Assembly](#), then worked as a community producer at an NPO in Surrey, and started with Prime in January as Youth Director.

Why co-create?

- The first thing to do is to figure out why we co-create. It's worth spending some time thinking about why you do it and coming up with a specific statement about it.
- This quote from a young person at Prime explains my motivation:

*"I feel like a lot of adults forget what it means to be a teenager but also [what it means] to be a child because a lot of teenagers are sort of like clawing at the idea to still be a child,... I feel like the world is just a lot more colourful like when you were a kid and everything just gets more real and the world darkens because when you're a teenager, everyone expects you to just immediately switch like immediately go into the working life have that responsibility all over you like to be an adult **and there's no real accommodation for that middle experience.**"*

Establishing a co-creation environment

It's important to have:

- **Consistency** - in your expectation of the young people, your behaviour towards them, how you talk and respond to them, starting and finishing your sessions on time all create a space where they feel really secure to be themselves.

- **Encourage failure** – we want to know when we're making that there will be lots of rubbish, but we need to take risks and be ok with failure. We can introduce this in small ways e.g. by celebrating failure when playing games.
- **Responsive flexibility** – responding to the young people in the space, because everyone works in different ways. Adapting things so they suit different people and what they need to join in at their best, e.g. having pen and papers and allowing someone to draw if they don't enjoy or struggle with independent writing.
- **Making space for socialising and positive interactions** – Trust is really important, check-ins can help built connection and trust between the group. I explain why we're doing a check-in, to encourage the group to think about other people in the room. Opening the room a bit early for anyone who wants to gather socially, or a 5 min break in the middle, or a celebration after a performance or a monthly thing. Also important for the adults to bond, by joining in games, failing with them, sharing the theatre-making process with them. Finding moments to encourage and celebrate individuals for their contribution.

Autonomy

- Crucial to establish this before you've even started making work.
- A way to show the group that they have a say and that they will be listened, and their thoughts/opinions will be acted upon. Not enough to ask for their opinion, they need to see it.
- For example, asking for their favourite song to add to a playlist, or offering a menu for different things like warm up games or vocal warm ups, so they vote each session and decide what they want to do. And then widening out, so asking what termly focus they want and saying yes to it. Things like game mechanics, where we put our coats etc – give the smaller decisions to the young people.
- Devising scenes – useful to introduce new art forms, go into the session with an open attitude and don't try to pre-empt the outcome.
- Continually check in with yourself and your power when you're choosing things to develop when you're co-creating – ask yourself 'did this come from me? Is this something that is interesting to me or is it something that the young people have shown they're interested in?'

Making work

- A lot of this has come from training I've done with Company Three led by [Ned Glasier](#), but also throwing in a few other things I've learn along the way.
- Think about how much time you have to make the work – if you have a short amount of time, try to get as specific as possible early on with what your source is. If I have time, I try for the source to come organically from the young people, but if there's isn't time sometimes I will make specific offers to them.
- Set milestones and be transparent about your process – helps the young people not lose sight of what they're creating. Could be a sharing to friends and family.

- **Source or stimulus** – you can go in with offers, or listen to their conversations or the check-ins, see if you can identify any commonality amongst the young people, something they're all interested in.
- **Research and development** – pull at your source, go a little deeper. Ask questions and expand it, develop it by generating lots of short pieces of work about it, encourage different styles, forms etc. Encourage them to work quickly and with their instincts.
Try to debrief and evaluate as you go so you get a sense of what moments they are finding interesting.
- **Purpose** – Figure out what you're trying to say, the effect the young people want to have on their audience. Should be specific, if you can form it into a statement or a sentence. Something you can return to throughout your process.
- **Editing and filtering** – Now you have your purpose, go back through previous work and filter bits which build towards that. Craft it together, give it a structure or a script. Share this with the young people and let them feedback on it.
- **Rehearsal and performance** – once everyone is happy with the piece, start preparing it for performance!

Breakout room exercise

In groups of 5-6 people, **create a short piece of work.**

1. Find a commonality shared by every member of your breakout room. Start broad then see how detailed that commonality can become. E.G. do you all have a relative called Maureen who like Jam Doughnuts? **(4 minutes)**

Examples/Prompts to get you going:

- Foods (favourites, least favourite)
- Places you've visited
- Family members
- Pets you have/grew up with
- Jobs you've had
- Items in your home
- Music/TV Shows

2. Writing in the chat box, ask as many questions about your found commonality as possible. Let your imagination flow and don't think too hard. The questions don't have to be logical or intellectual! E.G. Why did my grandparents name my aunt Maureen? What flavour jam? How many grains of sugar are on an average Jam Doughnut? **(1 minute)**
3. Discuss the questions: Choose one or two as a group that provoke a response (make you laugh, confuse you, provoke discussion, etc.) **(3 minutes)**
4. NOW, we are going to make some quick art to show the other groups!
Choose a style from the list:
 - Poem

- Song/Rap
- Documentary
- Puppet Show
- Radio Play

Make a piece of art (approx. 1 minute in length) in that style about the question/s you have chosen. You can try to answer the question or leave it unanswered. Up to you. **(5 minutes)**

The three groups shared their pieces of art back with everyone, we saw a puppet show, a phone call about dominoes pizza and a visual art poem/piece. We fed back a few things that we enjoyed about the performance.

Discussion and Q&A

Q: How do you support young people who are shy or resistant to share their own experiences in a devising process? For example, when they struggle to share even the smaller things like a check in about their breakfast.

A:

- Remember that some people will naturally take a little longer to get to a place where they feel confident enough to share, and to remember that they are coming back week on week and that is a success. Continue building trust within the ensemble, the more you can reinforce it with that young person so they feel safe.
- Splitting them into smaller groups for check ins before sharing back to the larger group can help them feel more confident in sharing.
- Some younger ones bring in plushies or toys and talk through them instead.
- Allowing them to communicate in a way that is best for the e.g. drawing out their response, also sometimes creates a distance from what you're asking them to do or something that may feel too personal or exposing.
- Playing simple games that are not verbal to allow them to create as part of a group and build up confidence without being in the spotlight.
- Having short bursts of activities so people don't have as long to get in their head. So breaking up writing or speaking with song and dancing to free people up and remind us not to take ourselves too seriously. Looking for play, fun, joy

Q: If you're working with a preset script, how can you still keep it youth centred?

A:

- Choosing the script as a group is helpful.
- Giving agency in how they look at character
- Giving as much of the vision of the piece back to the young people.
- Taking a scene and asking them to make it for you, or to talk about the moment they think is the most important within it.
- Ask the group to talk about what excites them in plays, TV, films they've seen, and to share moments which gave them a visceral response like shock, fear, anger, happiness, excitement. Interrogate the theatrical elements that made it happen e.g.

element of surprise, lighting, inventive use of a prop, and ask them to incorporate that into a scene you're working on.

- Goes back to giving them more ownership of it, and wherever you can, giving your power over to them.

END

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