

Task and Finish Group on Participation in the Arts

Response from Hijinx Theatre

Hijinx Theatre welcomes this Task and Finish Inquiry being undertaken by the Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee. We welcomed the huge amount of work that went into the inquiry into Accessibility of Arts & Cultural Activities in Wales undertaken during the last Assembly Term and hope the recommendations are taken forward and acted upon.

We are grateful that the Petitions Committee invited our oral evidence in November, and that this was the catalyst (along with petitions from other arts organisations) that led to the current inquiry.

Our response focuses on Hijinx's position, the changes brought about by the Investment Review and the part Hijinx plays in the arts map of Wales.

Hijinx's portfolio of activities is very wide and varied, although all interconnect and relate to each other. We would define "participation" as being activity that people take part in and watch as audience members. An audience member is participating in an event, sharing the emotions and journey of the characters on the stage, taking away memories and being inspired.

1 Which group of people participate in your organisation's arts activities?

Hijinx's overarching ethos is to include people with learning disabilities in all activities whenever possible and appropriate.

Professional Touring Productions

This includes our professional productions that tour throughout Wales and other areas of the UK. To date the people with learning disabilities who have performed in professional productions have developed their skills through our inclusive participatory group, Odyssey. Each stage of each production has to be carefully managed to ensure we don't set people up to fail just to tick a box of political correctness. This process starts with the writer and the script, and continues into rehearsals, specialist coaching and the support of the rest of the cast in the rehearsal room and on the road.

By casting people with learning disabilities in mainstream productions, we show clearly what people can do and don't focus on what they can't. We believe this is the way to challenge perceptions and prejudice and change hearts and minds of audience members – this all contributes to Wales as a nation who values equality and isn't afraid to say so.

As a year 12 pupil at Blackwood Comp wrote about our 2011 touring show "... Andrew and Gareth (*both of whom have Down's syndrome*) may have a disability but are just as capable as acting as anyone else with or without a disability. I think it made many people realise this and made them think differently about people with disabilities however serious the disabilities may

be.” This, along with the 100 or so other letters we received from year 12 pupils, demonstrates strongly the power of good theatre to open people’s eyes to difference, to change the way they think, and ultimately to change lives.

Training for adults with learning disabilities

There are no opportunities to enable talented people with learning disabilities to undertake drama training; the usual academic route to Drama College is not generally open to them. Hijinx are currently trying to remedy this by offering 2 days of drama / performance training each week for up to 12 learning disabled students, for 50 weeks of the year, delivered in partnership with Vision 21.

The impetus for this is our commitment to inclusive casting and the realisation that we need a far bigger pool of local learning disabled actors to work with. Those we do have need the opportunity to develop their skills in a more focussed and professional way to take their place alongside experienced professionals. At RWCMD the undergraduate students have 25 hours of contact time, for 25 weeks of the year for 3 years. While we cannot provide this yet, we are making a start.

The Academy training will upskill learning disabled Odyssey members and so raise the bar for Odyssey productions. It will train students to take part in short Forum Theatre pieces for conferences and seminars; with the BBC drama village just opened down in the Bay with regular series like Casualty often featuring learning disabled characters – who knows what employment opportunities this may offer in the future.

Odyssey is Hijinx’s participatory performance group made up of people from the local community including those with learning and other disabilities. The group has a membership of 26 and meets weekly for a 2 hour drama session. Members include an eclectic mix of age, gender, ethnicity and ability. Usually there is a Christmas show performed at the WMC’s Weston Studio. During the autumn term music students from RWCMD and pupils and staff from Meadowbank Special School join the group, so there is often a cast of 50+ on stage.

The Unity Festival is an international, mixed ability arts festival. Started in 2008 it showcases and celebrates high quality work of companies from around the world who come to Cardiff to perform, run workshops and network. There is always an inclusive participatory project immediately before the Festival, culminating in performances during the Festival. Unity has become a major player in the world of international arts festivals. It’s ethos of inclusion, equality and quality draws in a diverse audience from all over Wales, while the various companies and performers leave a strong legacy here in Wales. Unity brings the best of the world to Wales, and the best of the world take a small part of Wales home with them. In 2011 and 2012, Unity has received a project grant from ACW Funding for Festivals scheme.

Hijinx Pods are small performance pieces that are short and easily transportable. They have inclusive casts and grew initially from the Odyssey project, although they now stand alone. They range from a silent interactive mime pieces to a loud anarchic rock band. Some are moving to be semi professional and are in demand at conferences, launches and festivals e.g. for The Bevan Foundation and Escena Mobile Festival in Seville.

Hijinx Outreach offers workshop and project opportunities to a wide range of organisations. This work has been scaled down dramatically since the cut in funding, and with the new focus on providing focussed drama training is likely to diminish even further. We simply do not have the staff to manage, deliver or support Outreach projects to the extent we did in 2009/10 and 2010/11. The table in 2a below demonstrates the drop between 2010 and 2011.

2a Do you think that budget changes have affected participation in the arts, either positively or negatively?

The 32% cut in Hijinx’s ACW revenue grant coupled with the consolidation of the Odyssey project into core activity with no additional resources meant an overall reduction of 39.5% in revenue grant. This meant that 2011/12 was a catastrophic year for Hijinx and the audiences and participants that we serve. We undertook a radical restructure of activity and staffing, and had to make four valued members of staff redundant. Our output throughout the activity portfolio was reduced as energies were focussed on internal change rather than external engagement. This is hard for big organisations, but when it is being undertaken by a tiny organisation with a staff of four, who are still trying to plan dynamic, exciting and vibrant work it was very hard.

Hijinx’s professional production capacity reduced by 50%, with only one touring production.

Comparative performance totals between 2010 when our revenue grant was £234,448 and 2011 when it was £160,000 are in the table below.

	Total no of performances	Performances in Wales	Performances in England	Performances in Scotland	Number of touring weeks
2010	72	38	29	5	18
2011	24	14	9	0	6½
Percentage decrease	66.6%	63.75%	68.96%	100%	63.88%

Below are comparisons of Outreach projects between 2010 and 2011 that show a significant drop in activity

	Participation projects	No of participants	No of sessions of project
2010	6	110	134
2011	2	23	38

There was no Odyssey Christmas show in 2011 – the first time for 11 years. Odyssey members continued to meet for weekly workshops and those who were involved during the summer term played a large part in activities for the Unity Festival, plus a Glanfa performance at the WMC open day in November. Some members performed (busked) at Sainsburys Colchester Avenue (Hijinx are their Charity of the Year) and collected money from shoppers. But none of this replaced a Christmas production in the Weston Studio. Hijinx undertook no work at all with RWCMD music students who have previously participated as an assessed module as part of their

degree. We were only able to do a small project with pupils from Meadowbank Special School because of sponsorship from Wales and West Utilities.

This demonstrates clearly there has been a massive reduction of activity all round.

2b Do you think that certain groups of people have been affected more than others?

People in small communities throughout Wales have been affected by the cut in Hijinx's revenue grant. Less people are able to enjoy high quality theatre in their community, less people are able to see professional productions with an inclusive cast – less lives are touched and fewer people have their eyes opened to the joys of inclusivity. By no longer performing in small communities people who have difficulties travelling to mainstream venues, or cannot afford the ticket prices are disadvantaged. "... please do not rob us of this work ..." – comment from one audience member.

Adults with learning disabilities who live in supported housing and are not able to travel by bus are unable to access either performances or participatory activities. Performances in mainstream venues are often too expensive for them.

Vulnerable adults and older people are often anxious about travelling after dark. Our touring performances are at a time suitable for the community in which we are performing – this decision being taken at a local level - and in a place in which they feel safe.

As mentioned above, the loss of the 2011 Odyssey Christmas show was a great disappointment to Odyssey members. We were able to undertake a small project with Meadowbank children due to financial support from Wales & West Utilities. Music students had no opportunity for participation during the 2011 autumn term.

3 Are there gaps in provision for people to participate in arts activities, either demographically or geographically?

Our professional touring work has always performed at small venues throughout the whole of Wales. The amount of professional performances have been radically reduced since the massive cut in revenue funding, with some communities losing out entirely (see table in 2a above).

Odyssey is a participatory group who meet for 2 hours every Monday evening, there is no geographical exclusion for membership, but the practicalities of transport mean that members do come from the Cardiff area, The Vale of Glamorgan and Newport. We have had requests over the years to set up an inclusive Odyssey type group in other areas of Wales. While we have always offered mentoring, guidance and help in the initial stages of setting up such a project, it is not practical for Hijinx staff to run a weekly project over 25 miles from company base. A far larger and philosophical issue is that such a community project needs to have passionate and committed driver from within that community for it to succeed. It needs to work from the bottom up, not the top down.

While we have received ACW project funding for The Unity Festival (for which we are very grateful), the Festival is based in Cardiff. It is an international arts festival with people coming

from around the world, and while some audience members come from all over Wales, the reality is that the majority come from Cardiff and the south Wales area.

4 Are there enough funding sources available other than ACW? Are alternative funding sources accessible?

If there are they any regular sources of funding they have proved hard to find. Cardiff County Council have been very supportive during the past year and increased our revenue grant by £2K from £6,784 to £8,784 at a time when their own departments were having deep cuts. They have become pro-active in additional support, from finding us a city centre site in Queen Street, to including a page on our Unity Festival in their Summer Festival Brochure, both free of charge; plus advice and help from the Events team. But their grant is only a small part of our overall turnover.

Other income generation is always a challenge. Many Trusts and Foundations don't cover staff or core costs, and are mainly interested in new projects rather than supporting activity which is continuing. Many are hesitant to fund projects that have previously been publically funded, like Odyssey. The money they distribute relies mainly on investment income that in the current financial climate has a low percentage growth. As public funding is cut back on many social projects (homelessness, drugs projects etc) so there is far more call on Trusts and Foundations to step in to fill the gap, meaning arts projects miss out even when they fit the criteria.

Corporate giving is always hard to attract for small organisations who are not high-profile, although most companies do have a corporate social responsibility commitment. We have developed strong relationships with some companies who do sponsor us regularly, but their budgets are being cut and their own guidelines changing, their sponsorship declines, and the kind of projects they are allowed to support diminishes.

By losing touring weeks we lose the opportunity of performance income through the fees we charge venues. Although the training we are now offering to adults with learning disabilities does open up an income stream from social services departments who pay a daily rate for activities for vulnerable adults following an assessment of their needs. Vision 21 are our partners in this and undertake much of the complex negotiation with social services departments.

I recognise that the financial world is changing dramatically, but generating a grant of £500 takes as much time as generating £20,000. Many small awards need more servicing than one large one – this is particularly hard in a year when our staff capacity has reduced by 43%, with no dedicated fundraiser.

5 What role does the voluntary arts sector play in promoting participation in the arts in Wales and how can this be supported?

It plays a crucial role, but sadly many of the voluntary sector organisations disappeared following the Investment Review, and those who are struggling on are not able to support, promote and inspire the projects they could in the past.

6 Is the strategic relationship between the Welsh Government and the bodies that distribute arts funding effective in increasing participation?

- i) The Petitions Committee on 1st November requested that the Heritage Minister considered other AMs having an input into or discussions about the content of the annual remit letter to ACW. The Minister rejected this idea. We feel it is a major structural weakness that the decision that frames arts policy for the coming year resides with the Minister alone. We understand that decisions are made in the context of strategic priorities, but would welcome a more collaborative structural approach. At the very least a committee discussion, and ideally an annual plenary debate on arts priorities for the coming year. This to be followed by committee scrutiny on the progress of ACW during the year, rather than it again being the sole responsibility of The Minister, especially one who has such a massive and diverse portfolio.
- ii) We would welcome more cross-portfolio working. In the early days of the first Assembly matters were frequently discussed by Heritage, Education and Health Ministers. This was down to the individual Ministers at the time, with no structure in place to ensure it happens on a regular basis. Arts activities are not an add on, but are inter-linked with and have an impact on many portfolios, including economic development.
- iii) As a member of the WAPA executive it is important that WAPA, as the umbrella body representing the majority of professional arts organisations has a voice on the Arts Strategy Board or it's successor if it is no longer in operation. The professional sector cannot be represented by the funding body. Such an arrangement would enable a two way flow of information between the Welsh Government and the arts sector.

7 All public bodies in Wales will have published a strategic equality plan by April 2012. Do you think that these new equality duties will help to increase participation in the arts among under-represented groups in Wales?

It is impossible to crystal-ball gaze with any accuracy. People who work in the arts are generally optimists, hoping for good outcomes, but while strategies can help to establish a strategic framework and set goals, but are often left to gather dust on shelves. Real ground-breaking steps towards equality are made by changing hearts and minds, by engaging people in a real way – inspiring them, firing their emotions and showing real and positive images of what can be achieved when people with different abilities work together. This means participating in events as audiences or active participants at a grass roots level, being passionate about and really engaging in the event. This is the way for disenfranchised and under-represented people throughout Wales to engage in a wider society – the arts is a major pathway toward this.

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