
Moveable Feast

Project aims

- To improve the quality of FEAST projects and the value artists put on themselves by embedding opportunities for CPD in the FEAST commissioning process, adapting our criteria and budgets to make this a reality.
- To create a framework which encourages more experienced artists to provide routes into participatory work for younger or emerging artists.

Context

FEAST is a creative programme entering its 9th year with a mission to make great art happen across Cornwall. It is funded by Arts Council England and Cornwall Council.

We run an open call for proposals against our criteria, help to develop project ideas and select some for funding. We commission projects in villages and towns the length and breadth of Cornwall, with an emphasis on reaching whole communities, including people who would not normally consider the arts are for them, and communities disadvantaged by rural isolation or social and economic challenges. All the projects we commission are delivered by professional artists and around 900 artists are involved each year. The majority of the projects we commission are entirely participatory in nature or have strong participatory elements.

FEAST has plenty of experience of what makes a successful community project, but limited experience of what constitutes effective training for artists. Currently there is no reference in our business plan to CPD provision, post the advice we provide to artists through our two stage application process. We wanted to use this ArtWorks project as an opportunity to challenge ourselves and see what changes we should make. We were particularly interested in the ArtWorks' finding about the validation that training opportunities bring, and the obligation of funders to build in budgets for CPD so that the quality of the work and the participatory arts sector is constantly nurtured.

FEAST has an extensive network of artists, community cultural leaders and participatory projects, and a range of experienced and emerging artists across all creative disciplines applying to FEAST. Consequently, we can take a more proactive role in encouraging skills development, with plenty of opportunity to mix and match artists and projects to create interesting mentoring, placement and skills exchange possibilities.

The need in Cornwall is perhaps particularly pressing as we have many small, scattered arts organisations, sole traders and freelancers. There are a number of physical creative clusters but limited infrastructure and as at the point of writing (implications to be explained later) funding for artists' professional development. We also have a lot of arts graduates coming out of HE and FE with quite undeveloped progression routes.

Project Partners

Rogue Theatre – www.roguetheatre.co.uk

Rogue produce a distinctive style of immersive theatre which engages mainly family audiences in a physical and metaphorical theatrical journey. Their shows take place in a large wood in one of Cornwall's most deprived areas, with the audience led to the final "show" in the heart of the wood along a path transformed by various installations and interactive performances. Rogue are immensely popular; this Winter Wood show drew audiences of 10,000 in December. Their work is intrinsically participative, with the audience entering a magical world that they are part of making. Rogue director describes the process as creating the sense of "a gang that the audience wants to be a part of."

Creative Skills – www.creativeskills.org.uk

Creative Skills are our sister organisation within Creative Kernow. Their remit is skills and business development for the creative sector in Cornwall. They are currently bidding for substantial European funding for creative industries skills development. We did not know this was a possibility when we started this Paul Hamlyn project, and a successful outcome could have a transformational effect on our plans for CPD for participatory artists. It means that our Moveable Feast project was immensely timely.



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What We Did

Through this pilot project FEAST worked with partners Rogue Theatre and Creative Skills to:

- create 3 six week placements / apprenticeships for emerging artists in Rogue Theatre's Winter Wood show
- advertise and recruit the apprentices from a broad base of practitioners
- monitored all the aspects of these apprenticeships to explore best practice in mentoring / placement situations
- structured a reflection process for the apprentices, host company and ourselves

We then held a one day seminar called "Everyone an Artist" to:

- discuss these findings with the broader participatory artist sector
- explore the appetite for, and practicalities of, greater CPD provision for artists delivering FEAST projects
- consider how to implement change in our commissioning process, adapt our criteria and make provision within our budgets

Our original plans for the placements had to change but the resulting project was actually stronger for this. The need for flexibility was the first lesson learnt! We had planned to recruit 2 emerging artists (referred to subsequently as apprentices): one would work over 12 weeks on two Rogue shows, the Halloween Show and the Winter Wood Show, carrying over the experience of the Halloween shorter project into the more intensive and lengthy Winter Wood Show. Rogue would top their bursary up to £1250 to cover the extra time. The second apprentice would just work on the 6 week Winter Wood Show. As it transpired, the planning and recruitment phase was more time consuming than envisaged. (The second lesson was the reality of delivering a project with a busy creative company.) Also changes within the Rogue team meant that when we did get to the recruitment phase we were able to recruit 3 rather than 2 apprentices all of whom worked on the 6 week Winter Wood Show together. No one worked on the earlier Halloween Show. Rogue paid the extra £1,000 bursary to the third apprentice.

We shunned “the little black book” and advertised widely through Creative Skills, Arts Council and FEAST websites and email networks, plus FE and HE institutions local and regional. Shortlisting and interviewing were undertaken by FEAST Director and both Rogue Directors. We had 53 applicants from across the southwest, with 2 from London. All artists appeared to be at early career stage. We did face to face, or skype interviews with 13 – this was important to Rogue. We recruited 3 young, recent graduates. Two from Cornwall graduated in 2015 and had no prior experience of paid work within the creative sector. The apprentice from Devon had graduated a year earlier and had set up her own touring theatre company.

Rogue undertook the apprentices’ training, placing them in the heart of the team, ensuring they had experience of every aspect of delivering a cross discipline, participatory, immersive theatre event and providing them with a one to one mentor within the company. The Rogue ethos is that the company are completely self-sufficient: devising, composing, making, technical management, rigging and de rigging everything including the marquee, wood chipping paths, manning the box office, performing and most importantly “hosting” the audience.

We planned that the apprentices would be given the opportunity to take part in the final shows at the level they and Rogue deemed appropriate for their confidence at that point. As it transpired all of them were actively engaged in every element of the final performances (52 in all).

FEAST and Creative Skills directors met the apprentices and Rogue directors on day one of the placement, mid-way and on the last day of the project. We also attended the Winter Woods show.

It was important to establish the context at the start: this was learning for us as well as them. We asked some baseline questions which provided the framework for the apprentices to set their own targets/measures of success at the outset.

- Where do you see your career now?
- Where do you see it in 5 years' time?
- What do you think you need to learn to achieve this?

We then reviewed against these at mid-term and at project end. We were as interested in whether what they thought they needed to learn at the beginning was actually what they found the most important. We kept a log of our observations and Rogue Theatre kept a daily log of practical activity. However, the most important records were the daily diaries that the apprentices kept. We had made this a condition of the placement and had discussed it at the interview. As it turned out the apprentices not only kept a daily journal, but went one step further and on their own initiative kept a video diary. This really evidenced the changes that took place.

Creative Skills and FEAST directors planned and delivered a seminar on February 10th 2016 to explore the findings from the Moveable Feast project. We wanted to have input from other ArtWorks Pathfinder projects and were fortunate in securing Mary Schwarz, who was an independent consultant for ArtWorks, to be our keynote speaker. The other presenters were Tough Dough, a Cornish based CIC with extensive experience of participatory work, and Rogue Theatre Director alongside two of the three apprentices. In this session we also screened the apprentices' video diary.

The seminar asked:

What is excellent participatory art? Why is it important? And how do we support you to do it better?

- What are the skills, knowledge and qualities that artists need to work in participatory settings?
- How and where do artists develop the necessary skills to bring out the creativity in other people?
- How best can you be supported to develop these skills, and what can artists do to help themselves and each other?

We had 50 delegates and 95% of the evaluation forms rated the day as very good or excellent.

What was achieved

The artists started their apprenticeships on November 23 and worked all but 3 days until Jan 3. Through the 3 weeks in which the show was performed they did 3 shows a day, every day but Christmas day. Part of the event involved a walk through the wood – whatever the weather – so they had to contend with some extreme and muddy conditions. One of our apprentices managed the outside queue while people waited to enter the wood; that basically entailed having direct contact with 10,000 people! All 3 apprentices completed every hour expected of them. All 3 said they would not have exchanged the experience for anything.

Rogue Theatre have offered paid employment to all 3 in upcoming Rogue shows. Rogue have had the benefit of recruiting 3 new team members they would not otherwise have met.

We have a video diary made by the apprentices which in itself is an inspiration to do more to help young people develop their careers.

We have their written diaries which show that opportunities such as this can effect profound change, personally as well as professionally. For example, one apprentice talks about his changed attitude to challenge. Rather than shrink inside he now knows, having worked in a number of tense situations alongside the Rogue Artistic Director “there is always a way.” That sort of mental shift changes lives.

The apprentices all learnt more about the skills needed to be successful participatory artists. They thought at the outset that they wanted to improve their performance skills and knowledge of the mechanics of a performing arts company. What they all found by the end was that it was the skills, techniques and confidence to create a one to one link with audience members that was the crucial element of Rogue’s success. They understood what it is to “host” an audience, to create the gang that everyone wants to be a part of, and threw themselves into this role. This meant everything from interacting with the audience in their individual installations in the wood, to treating the audience in the marquee as guests.

They all spoke of the rewards of one to one interaction, the need to think on their feet and to devise their own techniques and stories to manage. One in particular, the queue manager, spoke of the need for honesty, reading an audience member’s need and giving them what they required – reassurance, explanation or entertainment- being human and prepared to use her own silliness. They talked about there being “no 4th wall” and learning how to deal with this by combining their own personality and wit with their theatrical persona. There is no doubt that all 3 apprentices were very proud of what they had achieved.

We have a record of the consultation with the sector at our seminar on their CPD needs, which has been fed into the Creative Skills programme and European bids – see below.

What we learnt

We learnt an immense amount about how placements can work and perhaps even more importantly are inspired by the experience to create more opportunities for young emerging artists to learn by doing.

Recruitment:

Selecting the right artists for the right placements is key. At interview some applicants were more interested in the paid employment than the opportunity to learn. Some saw it as an opportunity to “collaborate” with Rogue. The formal nature of the recruitment process was rather foreign to Rogue, but they found it beneficial for the company, enabling them to find artists they would never have met through their own networks. The formality also established a set of expectations in the apprentices’ mind – the reflection and journal keeping was a serious commitment. The apprentices noted that the combination of formal application process and the informality of email exchanges with Rogue as interview times were arranged, was good for them.

There can be a role for FEAST in brokering/arranging these placements in projects we commission.

Being part of a team:

Rogue integrated the apprentices completely within the team. Being part of the team, with the support, respect and responsibility that involves seems important, and something we would look for in other placements. One of the apprentices noted that having 3 of them on the placement created an extra bond and sense of apprentice identity that was very helpful.

Outside broker role:

The apprentices knew they could talk to FEAST if there were problems it was difficult to talk to Rogue about. This was never necessary but simply having the knowledge that there was an outside mentor in such an intense environment was felt to be helpful.

Agreeing expectations:

FEAST and Rogue set out was expected from the apprentices from the point of interview.

Reflection:

FEAST provided a framework for reflection. However brilliant the Winter Woods experience for the apprentices, I do not believe the apprentices would have taken away so much without this. It was also important to establish a spirit of openness and honesty from the outset - there were no right answers.

Demand for networking opportunities:

Overwhelmingly the seminar feedback, involving a broad cross section of participatory artists, was that there is a real appetite for opportunities for artists to meet, exchange ideas and possibilities, set up new ventures and co operations, share challenges, problem solve jointly. In Cornwall with its dispersed and largely freelance artist base this call is one we want to respond to.

Valuing artists:

A good lunch is an important part of a successful seminar day! We put a lot of thought into speakers, venue, content and menu and this sense that you are valuing the artist's time is really appreciated.

Follow up for seminar delegates:

An area we had not given enough thought to and need to plan for future events.

Financial realities of Moveable Feast:

We have loved doing the project and it has opened all kinds of doors. However, the reality is that £3,500 only paid for the activity itself; our staff time and that of the Rogue Directors had to be contributed free. Organisations differently resourced, or committed to full cost recovery, would not be able to do this, thus restricting the number of organisations engaging with this strand of ArtWorks.

What is happening next

What we did not know at the beginning of Moveable Feast was that there would be an opening for Creative Kernow (our parent company) to bid for substantial European and Arts Council funding for creative industries training in Cornwall. If successful, our plans can be much more ambitious,

so the actions below are the minimum we will undertake and will not be finalised until we know the outcome of these bids.

FEAST is in the process of adapting its criteria so that we can actively seek a proportion of projects which contain CPD opportunities, adjusting the funding we distribute accordingly.

FEAST and Creative Skills are publishing the findings / outcomes from the project on our respective websites.

On the basis of the feedback from the seminar, we are committed to organising and funding 3 networking events a year.

Outcomes

Finally the outcomes we hope to achieve:

- improved value put on the professionalism of participatory artists by themselves
- more opportunities for emerging artists through placements/ mentoring
- more peer learning / cross disciplinary skills exchange

All of these outcomes will be evidenced by applications embedding these CPD opportunities:

- A strengthened network of FEAST artists – evidenced by response to the planned networking events.
- Better understanding of the workings of Paul Hamlyn Foundation and vice versa providing the opportunity to build a more strategic relationship.
- Better quality FEAST projects delivered by more professionalised artists.

More Information:

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