

Without Walls Discover Bursary Programme September 2019



The Discover Bursary group at Out There Festival, September 2019

Introduction

The Without Walls Discover bursary programme was piloted for the first time in September 2019 and benefited a total of 16 artists with a package of support to attend one or more festivals in the Without Walls network. 8 travelled from across the UK to attend the Out There International Festival of Circus and Street Arts, Great Yarmouth (13-15 September) and 10 attended Arts by the Sea, Bournemouth (27-29 September).

The Discover programme contributes to the aim of Without Walls in supporting the artistic development of companies or artists who are new to the field of outdoor arts through attending key festivals and events; exposing artists to a wide range of work, broadening their range of artistic reference points and influences, developing their understanding of the outdoor arts context and providing networking opportunities with key industry contacts. The festival visits were facilitated by members of XTRAX staff with contributions from representatives from the Without Walls festivals.

Each weekend schedule included:

- A briefing session including an introduction to Without Walls
- A presentation on some key considerations for making and presenting outdoor work
- Group meals and introductions to the rest of the group
- A guided programme of shows to see, taking in a diverse range of art forms, and flexible to accommodate the interests of the individuals in the group
- Critical feedback and reflection time through group discussion
- Coordinated opportunities to meet artists, festival directors and other practitioners

Selection process

Participants nominated by Without Walls partner festivals were invited to submit a short proposal outlining what they would gain from the bursary opportunity, and provide information on their background, artistic interests and previous experience in the outdoor arts sector. A key aim of this



The Discover Bursary group at Arts by the Sea Festival, September 2019

programme was to increase the representation in the sector of practitioners who identify as BAME or D/deaf or disabled, encouraging long-term development of their artistic practice. Of the 16 artists supported 9 identify as BAME and 2 as D/deaf or disabled. The participants represented a broad range of artistic practices; from comedy, theatre and installation to contemporary dance, circus and carnival arts.

2019 Participants

Alex Rinsler, Alison Holder, Anna Alvarez, David Bennie, Debbie Bandara, Etta Ermini, Hazel Lam, Jamaal Burkmar, Kwesi Johnson, Ling Tan, Paul Smith, Pierre Palluet, Rinkoo Barpaga, Stephanie Applin, Suba Subramaniam, Sonny Nwachukwu.

‘By far the best opportunity I have had to experience an outdoor festival, learn the ins and outs and network with so many artists, organisations and inspiring people... It was such a pleasant surprise to come to such an open space with wonderful people and find guidance in the form of people who knew what they were doing.’

Programme overview

Out There Festival of International Circus and Street Arts, Great Yarmouth, 13-15 September

The Out There festival is one of the UK's largest festivals of streets arts and circus and is part of Without Walls' Artistic Directorate, who co-commission new work on behalf of the consortium every year. It is produced by Seachange Arts and uses its Drill House venue as the central 'hub' for the festival, providing communal space for performing artists and delegates of the professional programme to share meals, meet informally and participate in scheduled events. Year-round the Drill House is available for use for artistic creation, residencies and rehearsal for indoor and outdoor work.

The festival programme is large and varied, with a strong focus on classic 'street art' and circus and takes place across the nearby St George's park and the town's central marketplace. For 2019 the thematic approach of the festival addressed the role of outdoor arts within wider cultural democracy, particularly through its 'Liberty Zone' area



Lunch discussions at the Drill House, Out There Festival

which presented a curated selection of shows addressing themes of democracy, oppression and revolution. This was complemented by the 'Rise Up' professional programme including a conference with keynote speakers discussing art activism.

Arts by the Sea Festival, Bournemouth, 27-29 September

Launched in 2011, Arts by the Sea is an annual festival offering a multi-artform programme across the parks and seafront of the city of Bournemouth, produced by the BCP council and From the Fields with the aim to raise the cultural profile of the city. It is part of the Without Walls' Touring Network and programmes a selection of Without Walls commissioned shows. Due to its coastal location in an area of outstanding natural beauty, the festival places a strong emphasis on environmental safeguarding and sustainability, and the group participated in an organised beach clean as part of the weekend itinerary.

'I always understood how much it takes to put on a show within a black box of the theatre and even articulating your value through promotions and press. Yet wow, it is amazing now knowing how adding elements of weather, the durability, able to tour easily, to the fact that being outdoors you are more than likely always in a 360-degree performance space... So, three walls and a frontwards performance is gone out the window but honestly, the Discover programme has made my love for outdoor performance grow tremendously.'



Introductory briefing at Bourne Space, Bournemouth

Professional programmes and industry networking



Discover participants being interviewed at Arts by the Sea Festival launch event

Participants commented that attending professional programme events gave them some useful insights into the outdoor arts sector, providing opportunities to hear what other artists and producers were working on and how they approach their work, as well as being a useful forum to share opinions on the experience of the festival with peers. All agreed that having direct access to performing artists and the festival team on both visits was hugely beneficial as they could ask questions and share

'It was interesting to observe and hear how the various companies present made their work tour friendly, both practically and artistically... For example, Acrojou have carefully created the set so it can be transported easily via plane to different countries.'

insights on practical considerations of how to prepare for touring, including the communications with the festival team to bring out the best in the artwork (e.g. choosing a good site, providing a detailed technical specification for the work and so on). Conversations focused on developing understanding of the unique challenges with presenting work in outdoor public space and the strategies that companies have used to overcome these, from weatherproofing the work or assessing what type of weather it will be suitable/unsuitable for to ensuring visibility – both in terms of the importance of the presence within your work so that it engages with participants as well as practicalities such as seating and sight lines.

Artistic Programme

A suggested schedule of performances taking in a range of artforms and styles was provided for the group on each visit. Participants were asked to reflect and comment on a range of points including:

- How each performance worked artistically in the context of the festival
- The ways in which audiences interacted with the works
- Technical and practical considerations
- Narrative and structure: are these successfully communicated?
- Audience reactions and reception

‘Each of the shows I saw had a major impact on my practice and offered key learnings for what works and doesn’t work in public space.’



Discover group enjoying the Actual Reality Arcade at Arts by the Sea Festival

‘This is where the impact of the Discover Programme really struck home: I probably wouldn’t have gone to see Pequeno Payaso’s Manic Freak without the prompting and recommendation of other artists on the programme. Clowning simply wasn’t on my radar as I sought to choose shows that might impact our work specifically, yet I was so glad that I did. It was a great lesson on audience interaction.’

‘I think the key thing has been watching performances as a group and hearing various perspectives, which allowed me to understand how an audience might interpret the same piece of work, therefore allowing a degree of creating future work with an outside eye.’

Discussions explored the challenges of maintaining the artistic quality of outdoor touring work, whilst ensuring it engages and is accessible for the wide-ranging audiences that might encounter the performance in a festival context. Through a process of critical group reflection on the effectiveness of shows seen, conversations kept returning to the importance of strong dramaturgy and writing, even in non-verbal work.

‘I know our work can be quite engaging just simply through dance and composition, but some of the performances allowed me to see all the ways we might enhance our unique selling point with more story and character.’

‘I am very keen to share the non-verbal work I create in outdoor settings, and the weekend helped me to see how this can be a possibility.’

‘My takeaways are crafting the interaction, engagement and simplicity of the performance/experience to maximise the full potential of the work for audience benefit.’

Some of the works seen by the group incorporated audience interaction into the narrative or to activate the work in different ways, and they were asked to consider how successful this was. Experiencing the festival as an audience member also highlighted the importance of sightlines and positioning on the experience of the work, and how responsibility for this needs to be shared between the company and the festival organisers to ensure the best possible audience experience.

‘In terms of my own practice, my main takeaway from the weekend was related to the importance of having a clear relationship with the audience, strong sightlines and, for me, a narrative for the audience to relate to.’

‘I feel that I have learned so much watching the way the artists interact with the audience... The key point was how well the performers had to be prepared for the interaction with the audience because they react differently, and they are not paying to watch the show... and being prepared if an audience wasn’t forthcoming or willing to participate.’

‘In my own practice, it was relevant to how I make interactions with the outdoor audiences without relying on sound or on BSL interpretation for accessibility.’

Summary

After the visits, participants were requested to comment on the relevance of the experience to their own practice and whether they thought that the programme had created a worthwhile opportunity to support artists new to the field of outdoor arts, as it had set out to do. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with participants commenting that the programme allowed them to attend festivals far from where they were based, as well as connecting artists in different fields, offering fresh perspectives and experiences.

'In terms of my own work, it has made me reflect on how to use the space as opposed to changing it in an invasive way. The experience has installed a greater commitment to making environmentally friendly work and exploring eco-friendly ways of touring work. As I continue to plan to create work for the outdoors I will, following Out There Fest, be mindful of creating more site specific work that engages with the festival setting and public.'



Discover group taking part in an organised beach clean, Arts by the Sea Festival

'Very relevant, very useful. With everything I saw and every conversation I had with my peers I could feel the improvement in my future outdoor work.'

'It was all relevant because it gave the best overview of a festival which I needed in order to understand what works and what could be better. The discussions as a group and in smaller groups were also very useful to share ideas.'

'It's the perfect introduction and kudos to without walls for opening up this opportunity!'
'It is an excellent opportunity to have in-depth experience and conversations about outdoor arts.'
