

Learning to Drive: York Theatre Royal

York Theatre Royal's (YTR) story of change is about how participation-based work has transformed the culture of the organisation and built a diverse, committed community around their theatre. As Associate Director, Juliet Forster's leadership has taken this work from being a strand of activity among others to being part of the theatre's - and the city's - DNA.

In this brief interview, Juliet describes the theatre's journey alongside her own as a creative leader, and the impacts they have had.

Juliet Forster, Associate Director at York Theatre Royal (YTR), leads the Creative Engagement team; she was a freelance theatre director before that. YTR ran their first Take Over in which young people were invited to plan, programme, mount and perform in their own festival, running all aspects of the operation of the event.

"Take Over" as a concept has become much more familiar in the intervening years - Kids in Museums for example are now rolling out their long established programme in scores of organisations around the country. But YTR were pioneers in this field: for them Take Over is more than an effective access project, it's now part of their genetic make-up, informing what they do, how they do it, internally as well as in the public space. It has shaped their purpose and values: see their [manifesto](#) at the end of this document.

Juliet took part in the *From Them To Us* leadership programme, introducing the idea of the arts organisation as "agora" - the ancient Greek market place where merchants, citizens and artists, politicians and poets all gathered to do business inspired and provoked by one another. YTR's recent development was about more than a capital refurb, but about creating the locus for a latter-day agora. Take Over, and the approach to participation and involvement it has precipitated, breathes life into this concept.

Audience-Focus

Juliet believes that YTR is genuinely "audience-focused" - by which she means "*open and democratic, actively encouraging our audiences (now and potential) to have ownership of created work. We try to draw people in from all walks of life, and recruitment is intensive working across and building on all our networks. It's very different from a straight-forward, managed participation project. It goes beyond that: we aim to give audiences a clear voice and stake in what happens*".

But achieving this has been a gradual evolution. Take Over taught the organisation much and led to a different, ambitious approach to large-scale community productions and involvement programmes.

Take Over as a process for change

Take Over was seminal because it went deep, involving young people in everything the theatre did, and everyone in it. YTR had already learned how to meet this challenge reasonably adeptly thanks to a ground-breaking, cross-curricular partnership schools project which saw all staff involved, from SM doing prop-making with children, to the Finance Director teaching maths.

When *A Night Less Ordinary*, the ACE Under-26s free ticket scheme was announced, YTR was determined to use it as an opportunity to build on this experience and ensure that new relationships with young people were lasting; *“it needed to be relevant; we wanted U26s as decision-makers, not just passive, grateful recipients of comps”*.

The proto-version of Take Over was launched on the back of the campaign for *A Night Less Ordinary*. It was, Juliet says frankly, a hairy experience. All senior managers and HODs shadowed a young person doing their usual role in the run up to the festival. Some people took to the role of mentor more readily than others, some were positively negative. Juliet notes how essential strong, directive leadership can be at the kick-off: *“It had to be a top-down, clear instruction from the leadership. Everyone is doing it. No opt-in/ opt-out”*.

The net impact of this first total take over was unanticipated. *“There was a reaction!! We put young people in the driving seat but we forgot they hadn’t yet learnt to drive. We did not have dual controls. We learnt that you need to sit attentively in the seat next to them, and point out hazards.”*

But despite the challenges of the first Take Over, the value to participants and the organisation was such that they gave it another shot, this time carefully equipping themselves as supportive “driving instructors”.

Many people in the organisation began to develop expert mentoring skills, and the deep understanding of other, outsider perspectives that come with being a skilled mentor. In some senses, staff were also learning to drive in a new way - flexing new muscles as coach or mentor and supporting each other in doing so.

“We had to keep asking: how do we make sure the project is meaningful to participants, but doesn’t fail, nor make them feel as though they have failed. When to intervene and when not. It was

terrifying for many of us, but has had a huge positive impact on management styles and leadership across the organisation”.

As the other case studies in this series, YTR has developed a distinctive process to engender inclusive leadership: enabling staff as receptive “driving instructors” through working with participants and volunteers. It promotes understanding of the other, competent coaching skills and helps people to deal with complexity:

“It was unwieldy and messy and untidy, but it brought about big organisational change. Once we started to give away power (while taking responsibility), the more we learnt to trust one another. It has had a big impact on the way we work with staff. We are less hierarchical, we work more in task-based matrices, we let people get on with making decisions but in a clearer framework”.

YTR subsequently worked with management consultants to build a comprehensive culture based on this learning, alongside the bricks-and-mortar re-building of the theatre.

Meanwhile, Take Over became established in the programme and started to affect other areas of creative producing, including large-scale community projects which now started to see a very diverse section of the local community fully involved.

YTR engaged the largest, most diverse community group since medieval times in the 2012 Mysteries - some 2000 volunteers took part in an adapted Take Over model as full contributors rather than simply as performers told when and where to move-speak. This then led to critically acclaimed, co-created community productions like the site specific *In Fog And Falling Snow*.

[These events bring] *“a huge sense of community achievement and people feel really proud. It’s important to me that the process of involvement is excellent, but it must lead to amazing art”*

Leadership Approach: The Joy of Enabling

I am struck by how important the lessons of experience have been. Juliet describes many things that didn’t quite work the first time, but get adapted to great success in the next iteration. They’ve stuck with Take Over and given it time to evolve. All this suggests a strong commitment to review and learning, and openness to change:

“We are always learning as we go: I’m less disappointed now when things don’t go more as planned. And I’ve learned a lot about what level of change you can expect, at a realistic pace. But if anything our attitude to learning makes us MORE ambitious than less so, less afraid of failing.”

It seems indicative of Juliet's personal leadership approach. In her career as a director, she had always separated and balanced her creative work as an artist and her work in management. When she first started work on Take Over, it was a struggle to give up creative ownership:

I thought, I'm sacrificing my careers as a director to make this happen! But what I learnt was that I felt pride in ENABLING. In the end, the event was so amazing, that all fear was banished. There was even a sense of relief: it doesn't always have to be me! I discovered the joy of enabling.

In fact it was a turning point. I didn't need to keep the expertise greedily to myself. The line between professional and not is more fluid than we might like to think, and not particularly helpful. I'm a convert to interactive practice: theatre is a fundamentally collaborative artform, about making a space together, so it's helped me as artist and manager.

Story of change: what difference has audience focus made?

So as we've seen, the Take Over approach has had major impact on organisational culture, and on personal leadership style, but what are the wider benefits?

"...They are multi-faceted. It's given everyone here an audience-focus and created a network of relationships, and that all brings different kinds of value. Certainly financial value, though not on a single income line. I think it drove the local capital campaign, and it boosts secondary spend from café and spaces that we've been able to maximise in the development."

And while converting participants to ticket-buyers is not necessarily the prize, new-to-theatre participants do become committed attenders. Juliet's sense that YTR now attracts more diverse audiences in a sustained way is backed by engagement stats. The YTR volunteer alumni network is extensive in the 1000s, widening the range and depth of the theatre's relationships at family and community level, especially among those new to theatre.

"But it's about more than that: it's vital that we play a part in addressing loneliness, social isolation and disconnectedness by creating rich communal experiences. It's about playing our part in social change"

Juliet points out that there is a lot of creative value in their participative approach. The work itself is ambitious and epic, and demands of artists' new skills and sensibilities that take them back to the origins of theatre-making, while enabling a very modern kind of democratic story-telling. *"Somehow, for me as an artist, it's just more interesting. I'm inspired by working with a wide cross section of people, by forming a cohesive story across the divides. As a leader and an artist, I'm better for*

having faced my fear of opening up, of letting people know my secrets. You have to let go. We live in an open-source world!”

As for other case studies in this series, YTR’s story of change has involved a shift in emphasis of their **purpose** towards creating social meaning, a strong commitment to and intensive engagement with their **place**, and the multi-layered communities of York, and a highly **people**-centred approach to building commitment.

York Citizens Theatre Trust Beliefs

We exist to inspire and cultivate the potential of our community through the creative arts

We believe that bringing people together for a shared, artistic experience has the potential to make people more united, with a shared sense of understanding and purpose;

We believe that a shared sense of purpose has the potential to be a potent instrument for collaborative change;

We believe that the narrative arts can successfully connect people with different views and experiences which can encourage empathy and tolerance;

We believe that contact with creative activity develops our imaginations and has the potential to support advanced critical and dynamic thinking;

We believe that enhancing critical thinking skills will lead to improved problem-solving, generating new ideas that will lead to positive change;

We believe that involvement in well-executed and ambitious creative activity encourages people to positively re-evaluate their abilities and has the potential to make people feel more capable;

We believe that when people feel more capable there is the potential for an individual and a community of people to be more adept at bringing about change or simply making things happen;

We believe that artistic achievement in the city has the potential to stimulate people to reassess the value of their community;

We believe that if people value their community more there is the potential for people to have the drive to imagine things differently;

We believe that using local suppliers for our bar and bistro has the potential to support the local economy;

We believe that designing new products with local and regional producers has the potential to expand the market for Yorkshire goods;

We believe that we can support partners in the city to tell an engaging story which has the potential to help them in connecting to their public;

We believe that supporting artists and practitioners to work in a professional environment has the potential to develop their skills and expand their opportunities for work;

We believe that a culture of empowerment in the organisation has the potential to make the theatre more effective.