

From Them to Us: the Bike Shed Theatre, Exeter

Bike Shed started as a pop-up theatre in a basement in 2010 and within weeks was heralded as “keeping theatre alive in Exeter” (The Guardian). The theatre expanded and set up a bar in the next door basement to support the running costs of the theatre.

When The Bike Shed opened, the joint directors, Fin Irwin and David Lockwood, wanted it ‘to be a space that changes the semantics of theatre. We wanted to move away from the ‘classic’ audience of older, middle class people and the more austere atmosphere’. They staged new productions with the guiding principle ‘to present the work that the artist wants to make’.

In 2012 Bike Shed Theatre ‘got drawn into balancing the books’ and changed its focus to hosting visiting companies, and introduced a residency model in order to continue to support emerging companies. They were invited to develop new work during the day while performing existing work in the evenings. Three of these companies are now Bike Shed associates (Third Man, The Wardrobe Ensemble and Rhum and Clay). The Bike Shed was named the UK Theatre’s Most Welcoming Theatre, an award decided by public vote, in 2013.

In 2014, Bike Shed became part of the Arts Council England’s National Portfolio of core-funded organisations. Lockwood describes the four things that determine how they programme:

- Quality: good work - not ‘less than’
- Support for local companies - want to make Devon their home, and make work there
- Reach out to people who don’t usually use/ access culture
- Work which provokes a conversation - social/ political.

A new post of Director of Strategy and Comms was created in 2015, and the new postholder has particularly inspired The Bike Shed to think about audiences. She had seen the organisation from the outside and asked: ‘is The Bike Shed “too cool for school”?’ Is it programming in an ‘echo chamber’? What does it need to do to make it accessible? This prompted deeper strategic thinking about audiences, exploring the intersection of artistic programme and audience development as the basis for the 2016-20 business plan. In 2016, Bike Shed also began to

experiment with taking work out: for example, making show with two beatbox artists who originally come from Devon, to go to the Latitude Festival and then to Bike Shed.

In 2013, Bike Shed began to develop a capital project for a new building which will be completed in 2017-18, subject to successful fundraising. The business model for this is to generate 95% of income. In developing ideas for the new building, Lockwood has drawn on the Wellcome Collection of a swimming pool, inviting people into the shallow end then drawing them deeper into the building and experience.

As a very small organisation, with only five full time equivalent posts, Bike Shed is keen to maintain its 'pop up' spirit as it moves into the development phase. Its methods, for example to 'get into audiences' shoes', may be very informal. The senior team - Artistic Director, Director of Strategy and Comms; Bar Manager; Creative Producer - meet monthly to ensure that their programming achieves the reach and returns they need. They are also exploring how to increase crossover between the bar and the theatre.

Lockwood sees his relationship with the Board as one in which he sets the direction and 'fills them in'. Their role is critical for fundraising and relationship building; they also provide advisory support around the artistic programming. They are less involved with audience development and reach. In 2016 he will expand the Board and to 'reach people who don't read the Guardian'.

Gaby Porter interviewed David Lockwood in April 2016.