



CREATIVE ARTS TEAM: WHAT CAN WE ACHIEVE TOGETHER?

Creative problem solving is the name of the game. When arts organisations educate others, they are not just imparting skills of an artistic medium, but a wider scope of thought, a fresh way of seeing the world and a new means to process ideas. It is then, perhaps, somewhat ironic that the Creative Arts Team (CAT) in New York needed to use precisely the skills they promote in order to quickly negotiate the Covid crisis.

In New York, “when the schools shut, the city shuts,” says Chris Tokar, Director of Resource Development at CAT. She was initially optimistic that New York schools would remain open after the announcement of the global pandemic. After all, the city is home to the largest urban school system in the United States, with over one and a half million students within its jurisdiction. A long-term closure of this kind would be unheard of – and nothing short of a logistical nightmare. However, on 15th March 2020, it happened. “The chancellor said ‘The entire system is going completely remote. We’re going to take a week for teachers and schools to plan and to do training in tech. Then everything is remote.’”

As the coordinating arts partner for Burberry Inspire New York, CAT’s role in this critical moment was to act quickly and work closely with the Ideas Foundation to enable the pivot necessary to keep the programme on the rails. Of course, this was within a high-anxiety context. “At the beginning of lockdown, it was messy and panicky and difficult for all the reasons you can imagine,” recalls Chris. But equally, it created something that had previously been tricky to facilitate – connection between the partners, both UK and US. “We were always talking about how great it would be if we could work with the international partners and they were saying the same,” says Chris. “Then Covid. And immediately here in New York we went from monthly partner meetings to weekly intense ‘how are you handling this?’ meetings.” They were in near-constant

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I WOULDN’T WANT TO ERASE THE YEAR. THIS STRONG WORKING RELATIONSHIP AND NEW ROLE FOR US AT CAT HAS REALLY BEEN FUN AND EXCITING. AND TO WORK WITH THE IDEAS FOUNDATION AS A PARALLEL AND AS A MENTOR REALLY GIVES A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE.”

contact, trading information and support, which soon expanded across the ocean and encompassed the UK arts partners, who were facing exactly the same issues: “how do you deliver a completely remote programme that is really going to benefit the students? How can we use opportunities in the arts to give them something to hang on to?”

The decision to move resource from delivering the annual Cultural Runway to the Creativity Kits felt difficult, but it also created a shared sense of purpose and a focus on something new for all the partners to get behind. An international collaboration of this kind felt exciting and optimistic, even with the operational challenges that everyone faced. Chris is very open about the fact that this positivity was fuelled by the way in which the Inspire programme is funded and the support they received from Burberry during this time. Where partners were all enduring varying levels of financial fears – from plugging income gaps to the very real prospect of having to lay off employees to stay afloat – the ability to continue working, albeit differently, felt like a blessing.

As it transpired, this decision was a catalyst moment for the way the partners connected, with important bonds forging between the Yorkshire and New York contemporaries that will, as Chris says, “definitely continue to impact their practice going forward.” Working together on the contents of the kits and their respective creative prompts ignited sparks of creativity in a really dark time. For example, American Ballet Theatre and Northern Ballet created stunning collaborative videos around the concept of ‘inspired places’, where ABT choreographed eight minutes of performance for Northern Ballet to bring to life and film.

A further exemplar of international collaboration could be found in the professional development aspect of the programme. With an immediate requirement to pivot came the need for fast access to new skills. Together, the Ideas Foundation and Creative Arts Team facilitated some training for partners that would support them as they adapted to a new way of delivering the programme. “There was international PD from the Ideas Foundation and it offered technical resources that really helped in the remote world, looking at suites of software that teaching artists and arts partners can use to connect to schools.” Further PD came in the form of workshops on lighting from ReelWorks, drama strategies for

health and wellness from CAT and an introduction to sketchbooking as a way to support thinking, seeing and processing ideas.

Chris gives the example of Studio in a School as just one organisation that will benefit from working with an international partner (in their case, The Hepworth Wakefield), enabling a more global view of their own practice with that of similar organisations in mind. “The impact that they’ve had on each other will really impact the capacity for the organisations individually,” she explains. “It’s refreshing for them and their mindset around how they’re doing work and how they relate to others in the field.”



It goes without saying that this year will have a long and profound repercussions on everyone, everywhere, but it’s incredibly heartening to learn that some definite positives have come out of the programme for the partners. “I would say that it’s becoming clear to us as we talk more and look back on this last year that it [Burberry Inspire] has had a huge impact, both in terms of the financial support and making these connections to see how they can pivot, individually and also in this larger community. It’s really strengthened them for the future.” She admits that it’s been “at times exhausting” but feels energised by the new perspectives and the future for these new, strong international relationships that she’s watched unfold. “There’s a lot of love,” she says. And if there’s an ultimate happy outcome from a harrowing year, then that’s got to be it.