



LEEDS PLAYHOUSE: HOW CAN I REACH YOU?

Few arts speak to our fundamental need for closeness like theatre. The shared experience, the collective atmosphere, the unifying feelings of tension, joy, energy... it's a microcosm of the human experience. But much also happens behind the scenes. The effect of shutting theatre doors during the pandemic wasn't limited to audiences and performers but created an occlusion to education and the wider benefits of creativity. Though entirely necessary, intermittent remote working also had an impact on what was achievable in this time.

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However, the show must go on and the team at Leeds Playhouse were determined to continue to deliver their own brand of personal and thoughtful education to their schools. “From year one, our approach has always been to treat each school as an individual and offer a tailored project,” explains Jenny Jones, Creative Education Officer. “But at a time like this, schools are so swamped they don't even have capacity to think ‘what do I need?’ They don't have that headspace.” As a result, it was left to the team to second guess an approach that would work and found that impromptu resources around wellbeing and careers were really well received. “The partners didn't ask the schools if that's what they wanted, we just thought it might be needed.”

This kind of fast thinking was already a signature of the Leeds Playhouse team's approach to delivery (“we'll be flexible, we'll work around you, what do you want?”), so the shock of the new reality was tempered by a culture of willingness to do what it takes. But all the will in the world alone can't always overcome the issues of access that Leeds Playhouse faced in delivering in-school sessions – or even just getting their Creativity Kits into the students' hands. Jenny was fortunately able to visit Castleford Academy

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to hand over the kits. She held in-person sessions, working across the curriculum to demonstrate that drama is a highly transferrable skill (“show me a job where you don't have to occasionally stand up in front of other people and talk!”).

As we all watched Covid 19 travel through countries and regions at startlingly different rates, Jenny was also able to observe the impact on a micro level through her interactions with schools on the Burberry Inspire programme. “Airdale and Castleford are literally just down the road from each other,” Jenny explains. “It's unbelievable how differently Covid affected both schools.” The team needed to account for the potential for students to head into isolation at a moment's notice, or, indeed, allow time for students to resettle back into the classroom and easing of Covid restrictions.

In the delivery that was able to take place, there's been a clear learning curve in the ‘how’, necessitating crash courses in every imaginable digital collaboration platform, from Google Classroom to Microsoft Teams. “It's important to try to fit in with how the schools are working online and how they're sharing their work with their students,” Jenny explains. Online learning is a major challenge in drama, particularly, as the screen acts to divide students from practitioner in a very obvious way. “Being sat behind a screen means it loses a bit of its magic,” she says. For those without access to devices, however, the divide becomes a chasm. As a result, the Leeds Playhouse Creativity Kits became less about the group working together and more focused on the individual. Exercises included creative writing, physical theatre and ways to move and react to your space, as well as transforming a plain white mask to explore the masks we all wear in everyday life. “It was a ‘sister’ to what we would do in person, but because we're not there to offer guidance, it was certainly simplified,” explains Jenny. “The focus was to do this for your own enjoyment, rather than creating something to be shared with lots of people.”

Reaching the students may have presented a challenge, but the need to reach out to each other has been a really welcome outcome of what has been a difficult year for all the partners, with all four Yorkshire partners pulling together and solidifying their relationship with projects such as the wellbeing resource. The Creativity Kits themselves, however, were designed in collaboration with the Creative Arts Team (CAT) at the City University of New York, a fruitful and positive partnership that's delivering the kits, as

well as working together on Continued Professional Development. Both CAT and Leeds Playhouse shared the challenges and frustrations of adapting to suit the needs of their students and it's clear that Leeds Playhouse welcomed a sympathetic partner and look forward to working with them on June's ‘Creative Runway’ showcase.

Of course, the runway is where each school and partner gets a chance to shine, but the outcomes of the Creativity Kits are largely a private matter and won't see the light of day. While Jenny is disappointed that many of the pieces won't find their way back to her, or even the schools, she feels that they hold a deeper value. “The prompts become more about the process than the end result,” she says. “Normally, you've always got in your mind ‘what is the shiny thing going to be at the end of it all?’, whereas the Creativity Kits are about taking enjoyment in the process, carving out time to be creative and do something fun.” That lack of pressure, she feels, is becoming rarer and rarer, as students get older and find themselves in the harsh glare of GCSEs and UCAS. In this context, the mental health benefits of pure pleasure without burden cannot be ignored.

Summer 2021 is on the horizon and looks set to be the beginning of the end of a truly awful year for the arts, but Jenny and the rest of the team at Leeds Playhouse are thrilled to have an end to pandemic restrictions in sight, goals to work towards and the opportunity to rediscover the “magic” of being back in the classroom, doing what they do best.

