

National Theatre

PUBLIC ACTS

A STORY OF HOPE 2017–2020

Research report
by Professor Helen Nicholson



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

Supported by Arts Council England's
Strategic Touring Fund, Garfield
Weston Foundation, Bloomberg
Philanthropies, Esmée Fairbairn
Foundation, Hertz, The Mosawi
Foundation, Simon & Sue Ruddick
and Wates Foundation.

The National Theatre's Partner for
Learning is Bank of America.

BANK OF AMERICA 

Founding Corporate Supporter
for Public Acts

**Bloomberg
Philanthropies**



Pericles at the NT
Photograph by James Bellorini

CONTENTS

FOREWORD 04

Introduction :

ABOUT PUBLIC ACTS, THE RESEARCH, KEY FINDINGS 06

Section One:

PUBLIC ACTS, A NATIONAL VISION 10

Section Two:

IMPACT ON PARTICIPANTS 16

Section Three:

IMPACT ON AUDIENCES 34

Section Four:

IMPACT ON COMMUNITY PARTNERS 40

Section Five:

IMPACT ON THEATRES 48

Section Six:

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS 54

Appendix One:

RESEARCH METHODS, PROTOCOLS AND PROCESSES 57

Appendix Two, Acknowledgements:

COMMUNITY PARTNERS AND CAMEO GROUPS 60

FOREWORD

The National Theatre launched Public Acts in early 2017 with bold ambitions and questions. Our ambitions were to build sustained partnerships with a group of visionary organisations working across London, and with them to create extraordinary acts of theatre and of community – whether in the community halls and spaces that housed the workshop programme or on the stages of the National Theatre’s Olivier Theatre or the Queen’s Theatre Hornchurch.

Behind those ambitions lay questions. What should the National’s role be in participatory theatre, when so many inspiring and brilliant organisations have been active across cities and communities in the UK for many years before Public Acts? How might this programme grow from its launch in London to work with communities and theatre partners across the country? And, critically, how would it change and extend our role, as the National Theatre?

In launching the programme we knew we needed not just community and theatre partners in making Public Acts, but also a research partner who could deliberate with us on these questions, challenge our assumptions, and bring a breadth of knowledge both practical and theoretical to the new programme. We were fortunate to have been able to work with Professor Helen Nicholson from the early days of Public Acts. Professor Nicholson helped us to shape the questions we wanted to ask of the programme and of ourselves and challenged us to think more clearly about what change we wanted to bring to the National Theatre. She and her research team – Dr Elizabeth Bennett, Dr Francesca Peschier, Catherine Palmer and Dr Sara Reimers – became partners as much as observers, immersed in workshops and rehearsals and observing the detail of what took place moment to moment. Their work has given us a rich and nuanced understanding of the first two years of Public Acts in London, and its impact on all those involved – individuals, community partners, and theatres. And, as all good research should, it prompts a new set of questions which will frame the next stages of Public Acts. The questions raised feel more important than ever.

This report puts participants at the heart of the research process, reflecting the values of Public Acts. It also shows how theatre should lie at the beating heart of communities, and why it matters – both to those whose lives are changed and enhanced by taking part, and to audiences who regularly attend theatres. In 2021, as we put the final touches to this report, theatres remain closed as a result of the global pandemic; our third Public Acts production, an adaptation of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, would have played at Cast, Doncaster in August 2020. The pandemic, the inequalities it has laid bare, and the Black Lives Matter Movement for racial justice and equity ask new questions of theatre and demand change. Professor Nicholson’s report frames Public Acts as part of a ‘national conversation about the role of the arts in building resilient communities, supporting wellbeing and what it means to feel connected to the world’. This conversation is increasingly urgent, and this report, though delayed by pandemic, is important and timely.

Our enduring thanks go to Professor Nicholson and her team of researchers, to Royal Holloway University of London, and to all those who contributed to their research. Their questions and ambitions will help to shape the next phase of Public Acts.

Alice King-Farlow
Director of Learning, National Theatre



Pericles
Photograph by James Bellorini

INTRODUCTION



Rehearsals for *As You Like It*
Photograph by Camilla Greenwell

ABOUT PUBLIC ACTS

Public Acts is a nationwide initiative led by the National Theatre, creating new works of participatory theatre. Its aim, to 'create extraordinary acts of theatre and community', places equal importance on community-building and theatre-making.

As a national programme, Public Acts builds on the experience of creating *we're here because we're here*, a living memorial to the dead of World War One conceived and created by Jeremy Deller in collaboration with Rufus Norris and performed by local people in towns and cities across the UK on 1 July 2016. Public Acts is inspired by Public Works at the Public Theater, described as a 'ground-breaking programme of participatory theatre in New York', and the visionary participatory work of many theatre companies across the UK in the past decades.

Launched in September 2017, Public Acts aims to be a permanent part of the National Theatre's portfolio. It began with a two-year programme in London, initially with eight community partner organisations from across Greater London and one partner theatre, Queen's Theatre Hornchurch. Six community partners were from the Greater London area (Body & Soul, Open Age, Thames Reach, Coram, Faith & Belief Forum, Bromley by Bow Centre), two were neighbours to Queen's Theatre (Havering Asian Social Welfare Association and DABD), and a ninth group, Queen's Community Group, came together in 2018. Led by National Theatre Director of Public Acts Emily Lim, a team of associate artists developed bespoke programmes of drama workshops designed to support each partner organisation's objectives. The first year of Public Acts culminated in three performances of a new adaptation of *Pericles* by Chris Bush with original music by Jim Fortune, directed by Emily Lim and designed by Fly Davis. *Pericles* was performed on the National Theatre's Olivier stage in August 2018.

Workshops recommenced in the community partner organisations in September 2018, with both new and returning members, augmented by regular reunions of the whole company. The second Public Acts production,

As You Like It, adapted by Shaina Taub and Laurie Woolery with music and lyrics by Shaina Taub, designed by Hayley Grindle, was directed by Douglas Rintoul, Artistic Director of Queen's Theatre Hornchurch, and the production was staged at Queen's Theatre Hornchurch for five performances in August 2019.

Public Acts took root at Cast in Doncaster in 2019 with partners from organisations in the local area, working on a new adaptation of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* by Chris Bush. Research is undertaken by the University of Leeds, led by Professor Ben Walmsley.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

The research aimed to document, analyse and interpret the first two years of Public Acts (2017–2019). The research period began in January 2018 and concluded in autumn 2019. Research questions were defined in response to Public Acts' ambitions and emerged through practice, and addressed the following broad areas:

- **Acts of identity, selfhood and theatre:** How far, and in what ways, has theatre-making impacted on the lives of the participants?
- **Acts of theatre and community:** How far, and in what ways, does Public Acts contribute to a sense of community, place and belonging?
- **Acts of partnership:** How has Public Acts impacted on community partners, Queen's Theatre Hornchurch and the National Theatre?

We used a range of research methods to investigate these questions, as described in Appendix One.

ROYAL HOLLOWAY RESEARCH TEAM

Professor Helen Nicholson,
University of London,
January 2018–December 2019

Dr Elizabeth Bennett,
January 2018–September 2019

Dr Francesca Peschier,
January 2018–June 2018

Catherine Palmer,

January 2018–June 2018

Dr Sara Reimers (audience survey analysis),
December 2019



KEY FINDINGS

As this report is finalised, ghost lights are glowing in theatres across the nation. Theatres are dark, auditoriums silent, foyers empty, rehearsal rooms still. This research has taken place between major events in British history: Public Acts began shortly after the vote to leave the European Union in 2016 and this report concluded during the global pandemic of Covid-19 in 2020 and as the Black Lives Matter Movement powerfully amplified long-term injustices on a global scale. It is already clear that the pandemic will have long shadows, and the Black Lives Matter Movement is rightly pressing for urgent change, with serious implications for the arts.

The current crisis makes the work of theatre by, with and for communities, including Public Acts, more urgent. Public Acts is part of a national conversation about the role of the arts in building resilient communities, supporting wellbeing, and what it means to feel connected in a more socially just world. The findings of this research evidence the impact of Public Acts, and why theatre matters.

One of the key findings was that the core values of Public Acts – Open, Generous, Brave – were shared consistently across the National Theatre, Queens Theatre Hornchurch and all community partners. These values inspired participants, informed inclusive arts practices, and generated a shared understanding of the programme’s ethos. The impact of Public Acts on community participants, community partners, audiences and theatres was guided by this vision.

IMPACT ON COMMUNITY PARTICIPANTS

Public Acts had a profound and lasting impact on community participants. They benefitted from the positive social environment created by Public Acts, the supportive workshops, the encouraging rehearsals and the shared excitement and energy

of both productions. Almost all participants reported significantly increased confidence; they found that making theatre enabled them to overcome personal barriers, and taking pride in their achievements led to increased self-belief and stronger feelings of self-worth. Participants felt more connected to their communities, and their wellbeing improved, often with lasting effects.

Their experiences as theatre-makers enabled them to connect with stories in new ways, and this led many participants to reimagine their futures and redefine their life histories more positively. Many took up new artistic or creative interests as a consequence of taking part. A significant number were also interested in building careers in theatre, and although expectations need to be managed, it may provide a positive route to diversifying the industry.

IMPACT ON COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Our research shows that positive partnerships and artistic excellence enabled community organisations to meet their social agendas. Community partners appreciated access to excellence, the attention to inclusive working practices and the high quality of the arts experience provided by Public Acts. All community partners have increased their arts and cultural activities as a result of Public Acts. The renewed positivity of the Public Acts participants spread across organisations, often connecting people who access their services in different ways, leading to increased take-up in their new and existing provision across a wide range of activities.

The experience of working with Public Acts led to a new confidence in approaching arts and cultural organisations, and increased understanding of the skills and resources needed to undertake successful partnership work. Some partners found that taking part in Public Acts inspired profound organisational changes. The positive ethos of Public Acts motivated them to refocus on their organisations’ core values, finding

new ways to articulate their creative approaches to community cohesion and wellbeing.

IMPACT ON AUDIENCES

Although audience research was not the primary focus of the first two years of Public Acts’ research, our findings showed that both productions attracted significant numbers who were new to theatre and new to the National Theatre and Queen’s Theatre Hornchurch. Their positive experience of both Public Acts productions inspired people to attend more regularly and take part in theatre themselves. Public Acts connected theatres to wider audiences, placing theatre at the heart of local and national communities, paving the way for new forms of audiencing that are inclusive, co-creative and socially responsible.

IMPACT ON THEATRES

Both theatres in Public Acts in London were inspired by the experience of working with community partners and changed by working with the Public Acts company. The opportunity to build a sustained relationship over two years with participants and community organisations has led to deep and often lasting partnerships, shaping new agendas in both theatres. Enthusiasm for Public Acts was infectious, and spread across the theatres to include many staff in different parts of the organisation. Theatre professionals learned about inclusive working practices in workshops and rehearsal, and discovered the limits and potential of their theatre buildings to accommodate such large and inclusive companies. The National Theatre and Queen’s Theatre Hornchurch found new ways to engage their local communities, and their community partners strengthened their relationships with places and people outside their usual demographic. Public Acts has informed conversations about inclusivity in the theatre, and its role in social justice and the health of communities across the nation.

SECTION ONE:

PUBLIC ACTS, A NATIONAL VISION



Rehearsals of *As You Like It*
Photograph by Camilla Greenwell

**A nation's worth is truly shown
By how they treat a stranger not their own.**
– *Pericles*, adapted by Chris Bush

Public Acts began at a time of reflection across the arts and cultural sector, partly prompted by powerful feelings of disconnect revealed by the vote to leave the European Union in June 2016. Questions of nationhood and national identity were thrown into the spotlight, promoting wide debate about social fragmentation and what it means to be British in the 21st century. Public Acts was not designed as a direct response to this political landscape, but the deep fault lines in British society amplified by the 2016 referendum were inevitably part of the context in which it took place.

At the NT we realised we need to go further to ensure that we are really reaching people. There's a sense of community that you can create in theatre. With all that's going on in the world, right now, the fact that we can bring people together is just enormous.
– Lisa Burger, Executive Director of the National Theatre and Joint Chief Executive, interviewed June 2019

Public Acts is part of a broad set of strategic initiatives at the National Theatre to engage with diverse communities across the nation. These include: Theatre Nation Partnerships, a nationwide strategic touring programme which aims to develop audiences for live theatre across England, working in partnership with theatres including the Queen's Theatre Hornchurch and Cast in Doncaster. NT Live makes theatre accessible to a wide audience by streaming to cinemas nationally and internationally, and a new programme for primary schools, Let's Play, was launched in 2017 to augment the National Theatre's highly successful portfolio of nationwide programmes for young people.

Theatre needs to be put back at the centre of communities across the nation, in schools, on the streets, in town halls and theatre buildings. We are here to make brilliant

theatre because we think that's a good way of enriching society, not as an end in itself. We have to be national, and that means that we're not just on the South Bank, we're also in towns like Doncaster and in local organisations like Thames Reach.
– Rufus Norris, Director of the National theatre and Joint Chief Executive, interviewed June 2019

Public Acts places equal weight on social engagement and the artistic qualities of the work; they are interdependent. By focusing on the power of theatre to create socially inclusive communities, the ambition is to tackle some of the most complex and stubborn social challenges of our time with creativity, compassion and generosity of spirit.

The ambition of Public Acts is to create a national programme that enables theatre to make meaningful social change by addressing urgent social issues.
– Emily Lim, Director of Public Acts, interviewed November 2019

Public Acts' core values are captured in three words: Open, Generous, Brave. They defined the project's working practices and contributed to a vision of an inclusive theatre.

We have three rules in our workshops: we ask that everyone always try to be open, generous and brave. We believe that theatre-making can be a powerful form of community-building. We believe everyone is an artist and has the right to artistic expression. We believe in partnership and learning from one another as individuals and organisations.
– Public Acts Welcome Pack, 2017

PUBLIC ACTS IN LONDON: THE FIRST TWO YEARS, 2017–2019

The evidence also shows us that meaningfully engaging with someone from a different ethnicity, social background or age group makes people more likely not just to view that particular group positively, but to have more confidence in people as a whole.

– Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan. 2018. *The Mayor's Strategy for Social Integration Greater London Authority*

Public Acts represents a vision for London as a socially inclusive, open, brave and generous city. London is complex and fragmented, and the inaugural Public Acts programme brought people together from across the city with different backgrounds, faiths, ages, abilities, cultures and life histories to make theatre. Partnership lies at the heart of Public Acts, and the programme's values were clearly articulated to partners at the outset of the project:

- **People can be other – we can learn new things about ourselves and redefine who we are and what we are capable of.**
- **People can experience something new – learn new skills, open our eyes to new ideas and possibilities and interact with new people.**
- **People can express themselves and be heard, taking ownership over choices and opinions.**
- **People can have fun.**

– Public Acts' Working Principles in Public Acts Welcome Pack for Partner Organisations, 2017, p. 6.

Community partners are charities and organisations from across the city that have outstanding experience of improving the lives of people living in London. Central to Public Acts' ethos is co-design and shared learning, particularly about how each organisation's social agendas might be served by the programme.

We want to reach out to partners who know much better than we do the complexities and difficulties that their communities are experiencing, and not to assume that we know better than anyone else what needs affecting. What we recognise is that society is not giving people the opportunity to be their fullest and their happiest.

– Emily Lim, interviewed in November 2019

The community partners engaged people who had experienced social isolation, childhood trauma, homelessness, chronic pain or age-related health conditions as well as those who come together through shared interests, or a collective commitment to interfaith and intercultural dialogue. It is important to note that the mix of partners meant that not all community participants came from socially disadvantaged backgrounds; they represented a wide demographic from across London's diverse population.

The Public Acts team was drawn from staff at both the National Theatre and the Queen's Theatre Hornchurch. Community participants were all members of Public Acts' partner organisations, and they took part in workshops in their own venues, led by a team of professional associate artists with expertise in different aspects of theatre-making and community participation. Everyone who had participated in the workshops was invited to take part in the productions, and 'featured roles' (solo speaking, singing or dancing roles) were also cast via 'recruitment' workshops.

For the productions, up to six professional actors were cast in leading roles and professional musical directors, musicians, choreographers, stage managers and dance captains also took part in rehearsals and performances. High production values were maintained by professionals in design, wardrobe, lighting and sound. In addition to theatre professionals, the productions benefitted from the specialist contributions of cameo groups – semi-professional or amateur performance groups who represented the cultural diversity of the city – including choirs, drummers, wrestlers and dancers. A full list of the community partners and cameo groups is given in Appendix 2.

THE AMBITION OF PUBLIC ACTS IS TO CREATE A NATIONAL PROGRAMME THAT ENABLES THEATRE TO MAKE MEANINGFUL SOCIAL CHANGE BY ADDRESSING URGENT SOCIAL ISSUES.

– Emily Lim, Director of Public Acts

FACTS AND FIGURES

SEPTEMBER 2017–AUGUST 2018

- **192** regular participants in workshops in eight partner organisations
- **160** workshops in partner organisations over eight months
- **472** participants in workshops, tasters, recruitment sessions and *Pericles*
- **220** people performed in *Pericles*, aged from four to 79
- **266** hours of rehearsal
- **22** extra visits/trips/workshops at the National Theatre and Queen's Theatre Hornchurch
- **3,298** audience members for three performances of *Pericles*

SEPT 2018–AUGUST 2019

- **192** regular participants in workshops in nine partner organisations
- **176** workshops in partner organisations over eight months
- **389** participants in workshops, tasters, recruitment sessions and *As You Like It*
- **149** people performed in *As You Like It*, aged from four to 84
- **260** hours of rehearsal
- **46** extra visits/trips/workshops at the National Theatre and Queen's Theatre Hornchurch
- **2,339** audience members for five performances of *As You Like It*

OF 149 PERFORMERS ON STAGE FOR 'AS YOU LIKE IT':

- **52 per cent** were people of African, Caribbean or Asian descent
- **13 per cent** identifying as disabled
- **36 per cent** aged over 50

2,339 AUDIENCE MEMBERS FOR 'AS YOU LIKE IT'

- **92 per cent** of venue capacity
- **68 per cent** of the audience new to Queen's Theatre Hornchurch
- **25 per cent** of the audience were ethnically diverse
- **ALL PERFORMANCES** were captioned and audio described



Rehearsals of *As You Like It*
Photograph by Camilla Greenwell

SECTION TWO:

IMPACT ON PARTICIPANTS



Rehearsals of *As You Like It*
Photograph by Camilla Greenwell

What wondrous land is this, with souls so kind?
– *Pericles*, William Shakespeare, in a version by
Chris Bush

Theatre-making is a social activity that requires collaboration, creativity and commitment. Participants frequently described Public Acts as joyful and life-affirming. They also acknowledged that at times the experience was emotionally intense and demanding, stretching personal resources and physical stamina. The Public Acts team anticipated these challenges, and the three rules – to be Open, Generous, Brave – provided a supportive framework for everyone to be, in Emily Lim's words, their 'best selves'. Public Acts' workshops, rehearsals and performances were characterised by acts of kindness, encouragement and courage, all of which contributed to creating a positive atmosphere that enabled people to grow. Meeting and overcoming challenges, both individually and as a company, was a significant factor in generating powerful feelings of self-worth and a shared sense of achievement.

At the beginning of Public Acts, the word 'change' was much used by the Public Acts team. Reflecting on such a powerful experience, it is often tempting to look for moments of individual transformation that can be directly attributed to Public Acts. The reality is more complex, and the ways in which Public Acts changed the lives of individuals underlines the positive effects of partnership. With some humility, the Public Acts team frequently expressed their respect for the extraordinarily skilful ways in which partner organisations were supporting people to shape their lives and identities in new ways. This clarified the specific role of theatre in change-making, as a socially interactive, imaginative, and creative way to tell stories in ways that enhance and enrich lives. In analysing the impact on participants, we have distilled our findings into two core themes that emerged during the research: impact on wellbeing, identity and belonging; and the impact of theatre-making in shaping experiences, telling stories, and enabling new beginnings.

IMPACT ON WELLBEING, IDENTITY AND BELONGING

People can be other – we can learn new things about ourselves and redefine who we are and what we are capable of.
– Public Acts Working Principles, Welcome Pack for Community Partners

Public Acts rehearsals and workshops were joyful, often noisy, and always full of laughter. The atmosphere was contagious, the mood consistently positive, and the energy of the company could light up a rehearsal space. Theatre-makers are skilled at curating atmospheres, and the positive leadership of the Public Acts team created what the anthropologist David MacDougall described as a 'social aesthetic', a multi-sensory, embodied and social experience that affects mood (MacDougall, 2005). In theatre the social aesthetic is shared as well as personally felt, and this means that the atmosphere of theatre-making often plays a key part in generating positive feelings of connectivity and belonging (Hughes and Nicholson, 2016).

There is a renewed interest in wellbeing in cultural policy, and although the term is often used ambiguously, it is widely used to justify participation in the arts (Dodge et al, 2012; Walmsley, 2019). The definition of wellbeing applied in this report takes account of theatre-making as a social aesthetic and acknowledges that it derives from a combination of social, physical, emotional and psychological factors. This means that although it is experienced on an individual level, it is always constructed in response to the multiple and often complex relationships that define everyday life and life histories. Both identities and subjective wellbeing change, and new experiences, environments and circumstances can have positive or negative effects. This definition of wellbeing has clear implications for Public Acts because it takes account of the multiple and contextual factors that impact on people's lives.

New challenges are required to sustain wellbeing, as Rachel Dodge et al point out, and without them there is a risk of stagnation and low mood. Wellbeing is stable when new challenges are balanced by adequate resources and support.

Stable wellbeing is when individuals have the psychological, social and physical resources they need to meet a particular psychological, social and/or physical challenge.

– Dodge et al 2012: 230

Participants felt valued and appreciated, repeatedly using the word 'kindness' to describe how the Public Acts team helped them face new experiences with courage. One of the distinctive qualities of theatre-making is that it is a shared experience of storytelling in movement, dance, voice, song. Emma Colyer, Director of Body & Soul, described how traumatic experiences are stored in the body as well as in the mind:

Public Acts is a creative project that is not a one-on-one experience, it's relational. Trauma is relational, and healing is also relational. If we don't feel safe, if we don't feel we can trust someone, if we've locked down our emotions so much we don't experience joy, it's hard to heal and change. People hold their trauma in their bodies, and drama, dance and music are all ways to release the embodiment of the past.

– Emma Colyer, MBE, Director of Body & Soul, interviewed June 2019

The idea that healing is relational and embodied is important in understanding the impact of Public Acts on participants' wellbeing. The positive effects of singing and dancing on mood are well documented (Fancourt and Finn, 2019), and increased feelings of wellbeing are integral to theatre as an art-form. Many Public Acts participants reported that their wellbeing improved incrementally as the programme progressed, their confidence grew and they found inspiring ways to meet new challenges.

CREATING A SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

As a shared and social experience, participants felt safe and supported in each new environment they encountered. Three major factors turned Public Acts' values of openness, generosity, and bravery into supportive practice: good partnerships; inclusive ways of making theatre and excellent organisation.

Good partnerships between Public Acts and community partners meant that there was continuity of care for participants, particularly those at vulnerable points in their lives. Staff from community partners were part of the company, performing as equal members. They also used their professional expertise to advise the Public Acts team when complex issues arose, hold appropriate boundaries to keep people safe and put additional support in place when it was needed. Sometimes this was built dramaturgically into the performance; Hollie Smith from Body & Soul integrated pastoral work into rehearsals and performed alongside children she knew well in *Pericles* to give them additional confidence. Denise Vilanou took part in the first year of Public Acts when she was a support worker at Thames Reach. She described how her role not only involved encouragement in the workshops and rehearsals, but she also made many weekly phone calls on Sundays to remind participants to turn up.

People will only try something new if they feel comfortable and supported, so I'll do it as well. I'm not going to ask them to do something that I am not willing to do myself.

– Denise Vilanou, Thames Reach Support Worker, interviewed July 2019

Inclusive ways of working built participants' confidence as theatre-makers. There were a wide range of languages, religions, cultures, abilities and *diff*-abilities in the company, and Emily Lim led the way in using language and inventive strategies that enabled everyone to find points of entry into the work. Theatre games were adapted to respect

cultural attitudes to touch and the choreography was designed to enable company members of all physical abilities to be creative. Spoken language is only one mode of communication in the rehearsal room, and participants appreciated a combination of clear instructions and active demonstration. A team of dance captains worked alongside company members in rehearsals, demonstrating steps and modelling movements. Their unobtrusive observation of the company enabled them to provide the ‘scaffolding’ that bridged the gap between the choreographer’s instructions and the ensemble’s movement. Where verbal explanations were given, they were often most effective when they invoked familiar experiences. At the first full Saturday rehearsal for *Pericles* in June 2018 the company were invited to lie or sit on the floor as if asleep and gradually shift and turn together – a moment that later became part of the shipwreck scene. Initially people were awkward in their movements, but when it was described by rehearsal director Jon Beney as ‘not a fight with a duvet, but a gentle turning over as if you’re having a nice dream’ the ensemble found a shared aesthetic quality. This empathetic and inclusive approach saved rehearsal time as the ensemble remembered this familiar image throughout the process.

Excellent organisation was the bedrock of Public Acts, and participants appreciated attention to small details that made a big difference. There are numerous examples of the ways in which the Public Acts production teams at both the National Theatre and Queen’s Theatre Hornchurch ensured that workshops and rehearsals were welcoming and ran smoothly. For example, the transition from workshops to rehearsals in March 2018 was facilitated by a party at the National Theatre which marked a joyful introduction to the theatre. The first rehearsals were particularly well supported by the Public Acts team who ensured that no one felt lost. Rehearsals often began with convivial eating and talking, and the friendly atmosphere was set by the catering assistants who prepared the refreshments and always took time to chat to participants and remember what food they liked. This spirit of generosity continued at Queen’s Theatre Hornchurch, where James Watson

(Head of Learning and Participation) and other members of the Public Acts team often arrived two hours ahead of rehearsals to ensure everything was set for a warm welcome. Practical support was appreciated, extra taxis were ordered for people who were tired at the end of a long rehearsal, a quiet room was offered to someone who needed to rest, additional gluten-free food was found when it had run out and toys and craft materials sourced to occupy weary children.

Creating positive and inclusive working environments requires continual encouragement, and Public Acts’ ethos was characterised by praise and positivity. Rituals were integrated into the workshops that symbolised Public Acts’ values of openness, generosity and bravery. Synchronised claps in rehearsals, for example, were accompanied by a shared thought that directors Emily Lim or Douglas Rintoul offered to the company – a wish for the session ahead, a hope for working at their best level, a welcome to new members, a recognition of a transition, a reflection on their work that day, and a desire for togetherness. As rehearsals progressed, and high standards of concentration and focus were expected, it was conspicuous that feedback to the company was couched in positive terms as a shared endeavour, suggesting ways in which ‘we can make it even better’.

INCREASED CONFIDENCE, FITNESS AND ENERGY

The positive atmosphere and careful levels of support led participants to report changes in their confidence and fitness levels. The survey showed that 70 per cent of participants reported significant increase in confidence (45 per cent ‘quite a lot’, 25 per cent ‘completely’). Some had needed gentle persuading to join Public Acts and felt self-conscious in the early stages, but they surprised themselves by achieving things they had never thought possible, both physically and emotionally. Decreased social isolation was a significant factor in increasing levels of wellbeing.

Our members come to our LinkUp programme because they are at risk of social isolation and they may not have left their house for a week, and the next thing you know they’re on the Olivier stage. Part of the beauty of the National Theatre programme is that progression is part of our programmes as well as in the partnership. This is wellbeing, and what they are doing to challenge themselves and stay active.

– Jenny Marshall, Head of Member Experience, Open Age, interviewed June 2019

Physical fitness increased, particularly in the older age groups. It was significant that some people reported reduction in chronic pain and other symptoms of illness.

I started off feeling like I couldn’t do this, but as the weeks have gone on, I’ve become more comfortable and now I feel like my body has adapted.

My aches and pains have decreased. It’s changed my attitude to ageing. I’ve found I can move more freely than I could 20 years ago!

– Three participants, in conversation with researchers, July 2018

Gaining confidence, for many participants, translated into other areas of life. A striking 90 per cent of participants had already started or planned to take up a new artistic or creative interest, including singing, dance, learning a new language, and going more regularly to the theatre. Community partners are supporting this enthusiasm; Iain Cassidy, CEO of Open Age, commented that Public Acts had encouraged people to try out new classes at their organisation, and this enthusiasm had spread to people who had not been part of Public Acts. Over 30 per cent of participants credited Public Acts with giving them the confidence to increase sociability, begin training opportunities, or find employment.

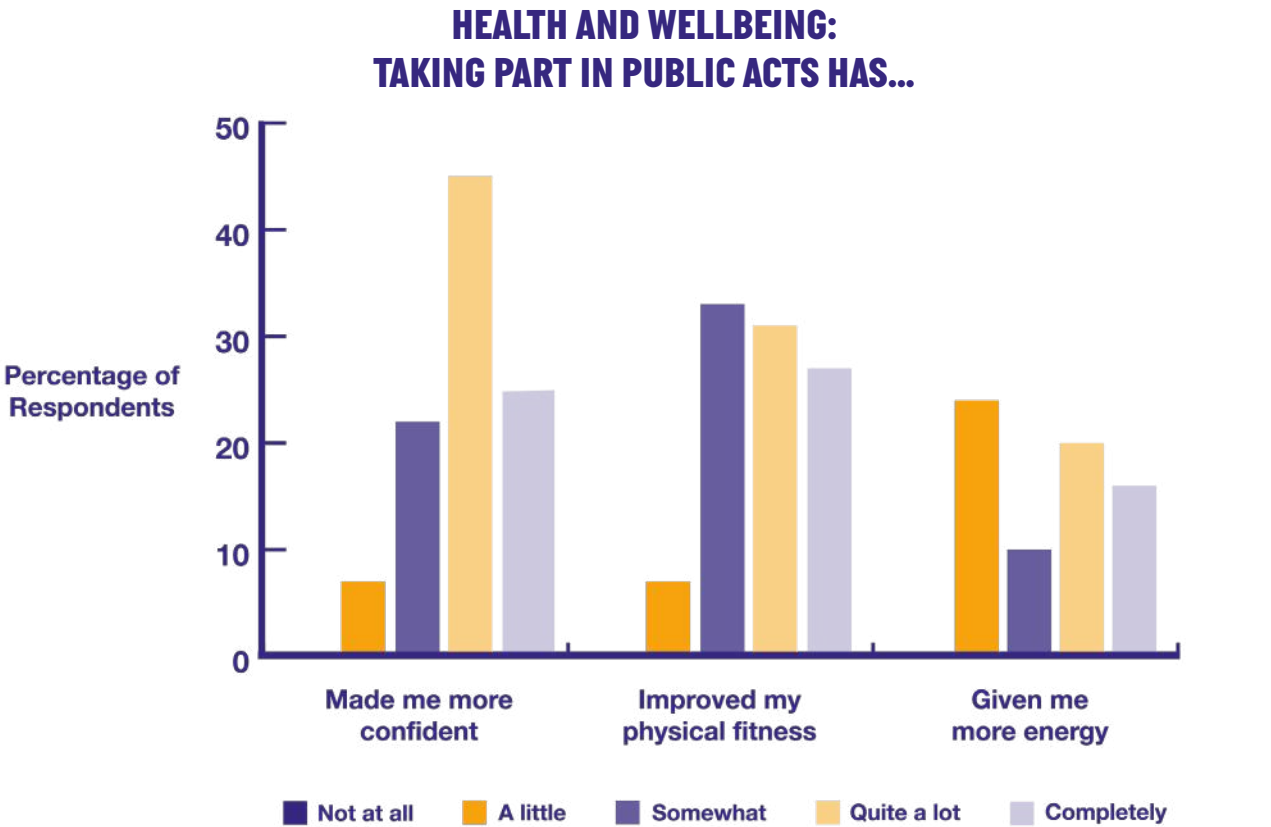


Figure 1

Public Acts really changed my life. I've found the confidence to apply for a job, and I've got a job – for seven months now. I didn't have the bravery to do that before. Performing is the one thing that I really enjoy and feel confident in, and Public Acts has really helped me. I never went out much before, and I'm now much more adventurous.
– Rowanne Simpson, interviewed August 2019

INCREASED POSITIVITY

Public Acts enabled participants to feel significantly more positive about the future. 41 per cent of respondents reported feeling 'completely' more positive and a further 20 per cent felt 'quite a lot more positive'. Ten people did not respond to this question, all in the under-10 and 10–15 age groups.

One reason given for increased positivity was the opportunity to connect with others. A recurring theme in interviews was that feeling more visible, recognised and understood created positive feelings of self-worth.

I felt like I was somebody... I had billboard pictures up of all of us around, they'd be like there's that girl. And it made you feel like you were somebody. And people say to me, but you are a somebody, Sharon. You know I came back to work and I thought, oh it's back to reality. But it made me feel very special. It felt like, look at me, look what I've done kind of thing.
– Sharon Bidecant, interviewed by Charlotte Tottenham, researcher at Bromley by Bow, September 2019

Many appreciated the opportunities to be 'a bit silly' and this helped overcome self-consciousness, and reported increased feelings of trust, connectivity and openness to others.

A lot of our clients are single people and quite isolated. So the opportunity to come together as a collective and work together and support each other was massive. It was a big challenge to work in groups, to do silly things and not feel stupid. It really helped combat social isolation. And the confidence that's coming out of these people is amazing.
– Denise Vilanou, Thames Reach Support Worker, interviewed July 2019

High positivity scores demonstrate that participants were seeing themselves differently. Bill Tidnam, CEO of Thames Reach, described how taking people out of their day-to-day environment removes self-imposed barriers and enables them to tell different stories about themselves.

Taking people out of the day-to-day, and asking them to look at themselves differently is important. When you are stuck in a bit of

a depressive rut, and your life story tells you that things generally go wrong, trying to break that a bit is hard. Asking people to go into different situations and think about what they can do can be life-changing, particularly when you are with different people and have shared goals that you can achieve. It's important when all you can see are things you can't do and the limitations around you.
– Bill Tidnam, Chief Executive Officer, Thames Reach, interviewed June 2019

Many participants found that applying Public Acts' values to everyday life led them to new achievements. Humphrey Mwamje, who took part in both productions and works at Body & Soul, described how Public Acts had enabled him to overcome physical challenges.

I understand the power of being able step out of yourself. After the end of *Pericles* I went on holiday, and I'd never normally take physical

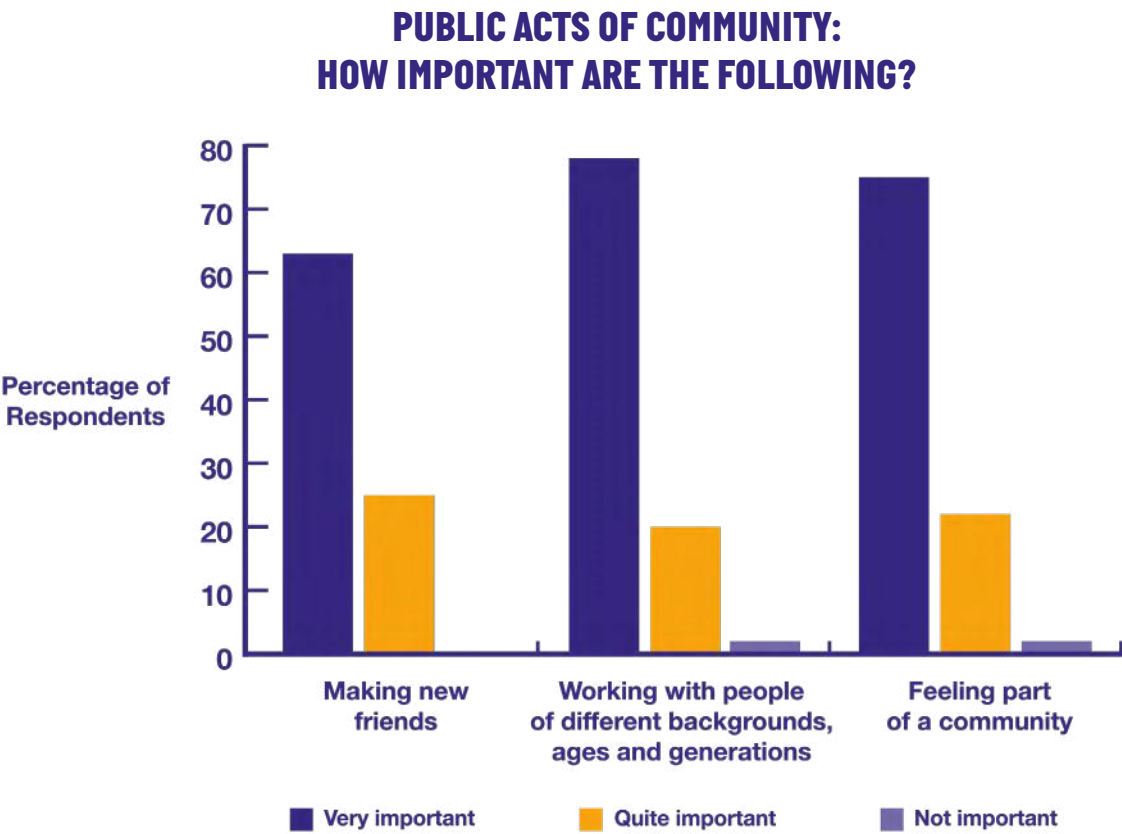
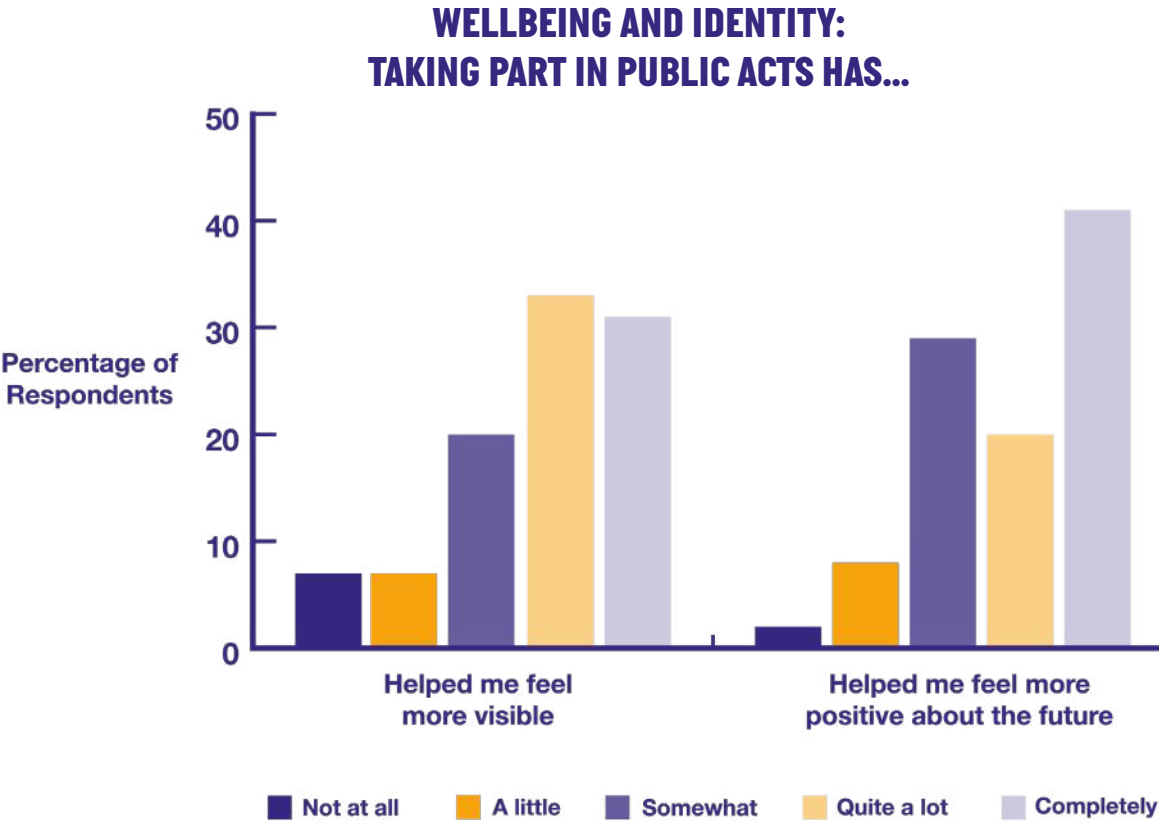


Figure 2

Figure 3



risks but I looked at a mountain and I thought, I'm going to give it a go. And I got to the top, and the sun was just rising. I thought, yes, this is it. I've done it. The repetitiveness of being told to be open, generous and brave sinks in. And every obstacle in rehearsals, they found ways round it. So now I feel there's nothing that I can't do if I'm open, generous and brave. Push for perfection. Everyone has their own struggles, but you realise that you will get there.
– Humphrey Mwamje, Body & Soul, interviewed August 2019

Many participants shared Humphrey's view that the ethos of Public Acts helped them to be more positive. 'Open, generous and brave' became mantra in everyday life that linked theatre-making to living increasingly fulfilled lives.

Having the chance to do acting has opened something. There's a me that's out there that's another me. And she doesn't say 'no I can't'. She just does it. And for me to find something like this, it's so special and I have felt it – boom, I am focusing, awake and alert. I'm living life as I actually want it to be.
– Sandra Nakigagga, interviewed August 2018

INCREASED FEELINGS OF BELONGING

Most of us now live in cities, it is the urban, the congregation of strangers, which defines our contemporary experience.
– Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks, 2001: 147

We shall answer to adversity with kindness.
– *As You Like It*, adapted by Shaina Taub and Laurie Woolery

As research in urban studies recognises, living well in cities requires feelings of connection and belonging to the cultural geographies of place and to each other (Amin, Massey and Thrift 2000). The scale and complexity of London means that creating positive feelings of belonging across the city's many populations is an everyday

challenge. Participants from different parts of London, community partners, ages, experiences, cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds came together in rehearsals, and this marked a transition. Company members appreciated that they were discouraged from asking each other which partner organisation they belonged to, which meant that they were not defined by their previous identities and became equal members of the *Pericles* and *As You Like It* companies. This enabled participants not only able to see themselves differently, but also to see each other in new ways.

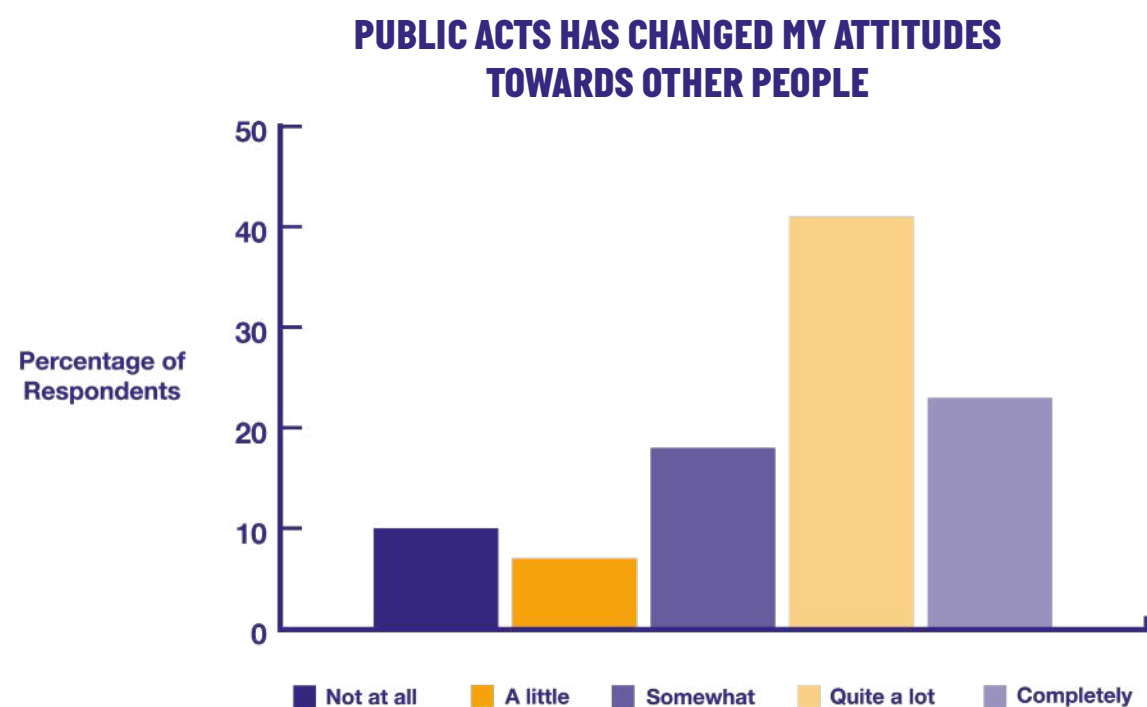
At the beginning I couldn't bring myself to share anything about myself. But I've learnt that sharing a bit of yourself can be quite easy.
– Participant, interviewed July 2018

One way in which the Public Acts team fostered a sense of belonging was to encourage participants to see themselves as a community. 75 per cent of respondents considered community to be 'very important', and some commented on how this came from increased levels of trust.

It's nice to trust people. We can't live with the idea that all people are bad, we have to be open to new things and relationships.
– Survey response, August 2019

Replacing social isolation with feelings of belonging also enabled many participants to make new friends and, importantly, have a new capacity for friendship.

I was surprised how friendly it was. The workshops brought me out a bit. I didn't want to be in the play, I was too nervous. It takes a while for me to get to know people. Straight after *Pericles* I stopped looking after myself and ended up ill. But I have a friend now [from the company] and so I won't do that again. Before I did Public Acts I always thought I was a failure, but since I've been doing this I feel like a person. And with my friend, I feel like he's a true friend, and people see something in me that I don't always see myself.
– Gary Green, interviewed August 2019



It is striking that 77 per cent of survey respondents described working with people of different backgrounds, ages, and generations as ‘very important’. Related research shows that acts of making – including theatre-making – bring people together and form sustained social connections (Gauntlett 2011; Putman 2000). The reasons given by participants, however, directly invoke the positive values of Public Acts.

It was like a whole roomful of people who were so positive, who wanted the best for you... I’ve never had conversations with so many different people and have them share parts of themselves, their stories and their experiences. That completely transformed me as I’d never been around such diverse people. Seeing how brave other people were made me brave.
– Layla Shirreh, interviewed August 2019

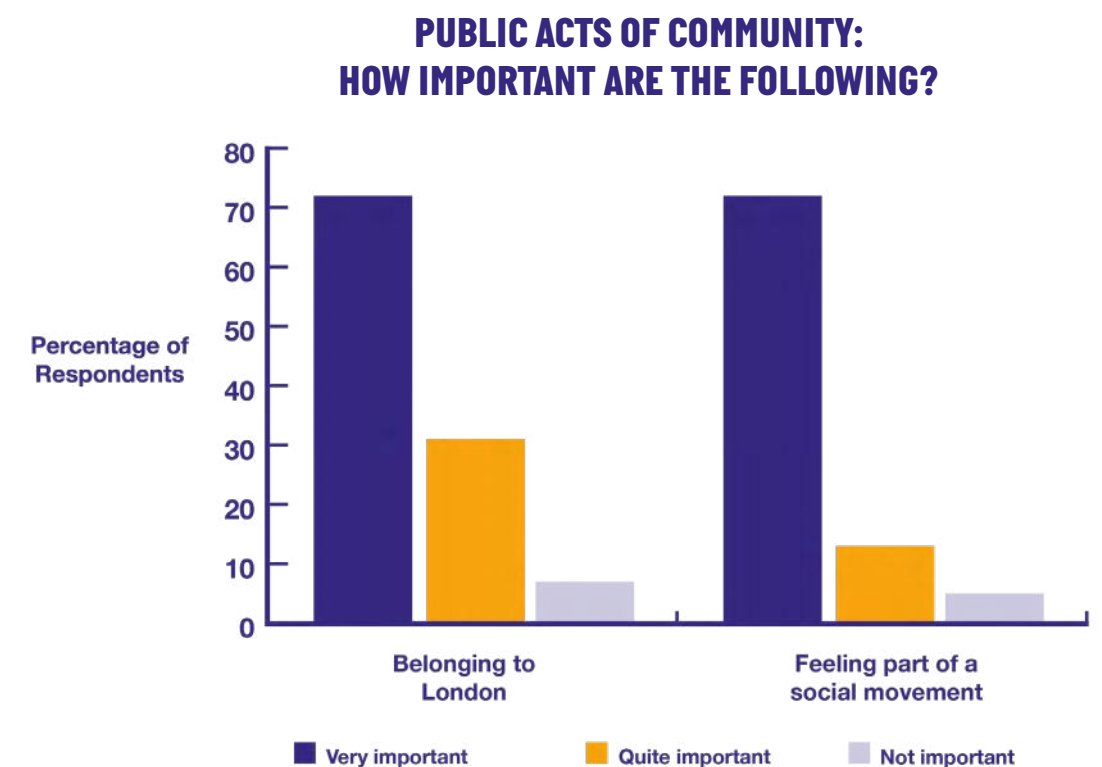
Attitudes to other people changed significantly, and where low scores were recorded, they were explained by people who already considered themselves to be socially aware. 72 per cent of

respondents regarding belonging to London and feeling part of a social movement to be ‘very important’.

Because it’s all round London, people are mixing with others that they wouldn’t normally meet. And they are finding that they are not that different from themselves just because they live in another part of London. London’s huge. It’s made some people realise that theatre isn’t elitist. It’s for them.
– Ann Simpson, interviewed July 2019

It’s amazing to feel so connected in such a big busy city against the backdrop of a disconnected world. It’s defiant. It’s saying: actually, no, this is the world we see, and this is a taste of what it can be.
– Hannah Miles, correspondence, September 2018

Connectivity with others and self-care was a major factor in increasing feelings of wellbeing. One survey respondent thoughtfully linked the physical and emotional experience of theatre-making with



feelings of wellbeing and community:

Doing Public Acts at this stage in my life has been so great for me as a whole person – my body, mind and feeling connected with others. It’s given me a really positive outlet to develop outside work. I’ve needed this so much, and taking care of myself and others in this process has been really meaningful. All our wellbeing is connected as a company.
– Survey response, August 2019

IMPORTANCE OF THEATRE-MAKING

I had always loved to dance, from a very long time ago when I danced professionally. But time goes on, and I thought no, I shall never do that again. I have children and grandchildren and I am very busy with them. But when I started Public Acts in the workshops, you know, I felt what I had been

missing. I had forgotten. And my grandchildren said no – go on – do it. I’m doing this just for me, but for them too. They are seeing me as a different person, not just as grandma.
– Saroj Vadher, interviewed August 2019

One of our central research questions relates to the specific role of theatre and theatre-making in community-building, and why working with professional theatre-makers made a difference to participants. For many participants, performing on a professional stage represented an opportunity to revive a passion for theatre, or try something new, or extend their knowledge of theatre-making, or realise a long-held dream. Emily Lim described the importance of all aspects of the process, including the positive effects of a well-resourced show with high production values.

The shows are just one part of the process. They need to be well resourced with the best possible production values so that everyone can feel as magnificent and proud as possible within them. The productions have to live up

to the community – from the set design to the costumes and the quality of the writing, every element that holds their performances has to meet the expectation of excellence that we are asking everyone to aspire to. I think, for me, it links back to the idea that, handled right, ambition is a really dignifying and motivating force.

– Emily Lim, interviewed November 2019

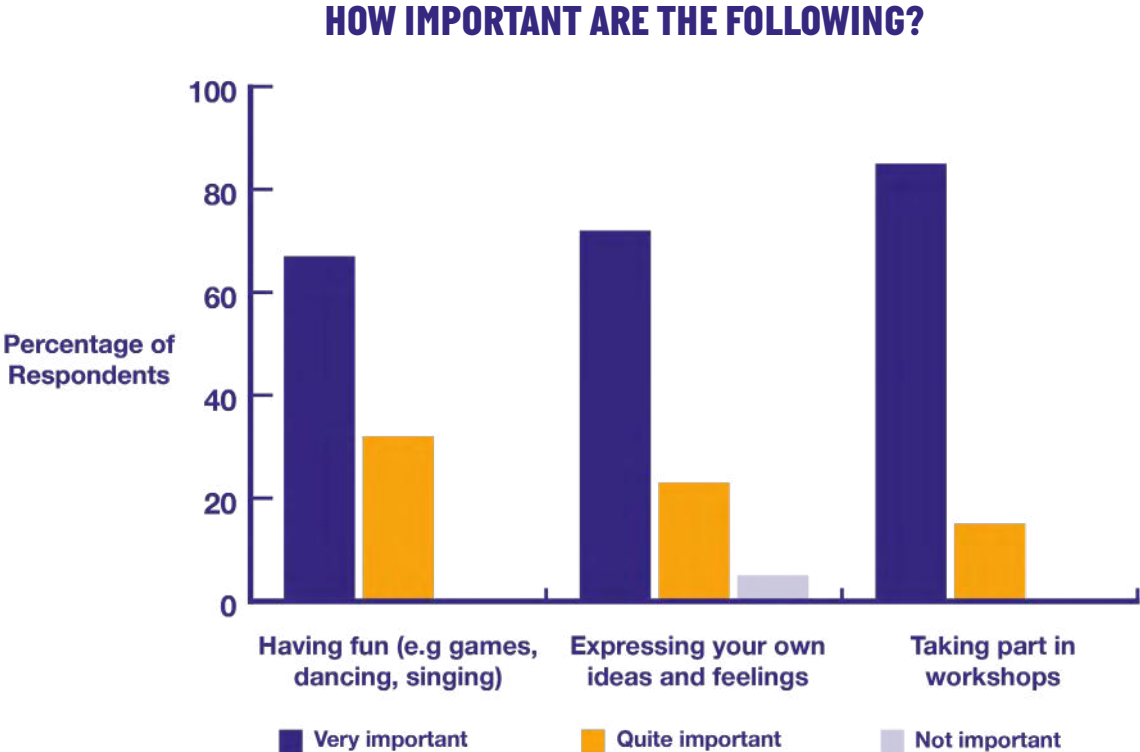
Being trusted by world-leading theatre-makers to stage high-quality productions in professional theatres was a significant factor in raising self-esteem, but it was the workshops that were credited with greatest self-development. ‘Having fun’ and ‘expressing your own ideas’ scored highly, and 85 per cent of respondents considered taking part in workshops to be ‘very important’. Our interviews revealed that the choice of Shakespeare’s plays was, perhaps surprisingly, uncontroversial; the only comments about the canonical status of Shakespeare referred to how the productions reduced perceptions of elitism.

Learning the words of a song or choreography was absorbing, and of course at times the process could be frustrating. Many participants reported finding new levels of energy and resilience, forging strong bonds by working together.

What I realised through the workshops and rehearsals is that I can identify and feel an emotional connection and empathy for fellow cast members who shared a disability or life-changing event. I also learned about the kindness and help I received by cast members, always encouraging me with my singing and dancing.

– Lisa Brown, correspondence, September 2018

Storytelling was an important way in which participants were able to identify with each other and the stories told in the plays. Chris Bush’s poetic adaptation of *Pericles*, commissioned for Public Acts, spoke to contemporary concerns about belonging, loyalty and generosity. Its dramaturgical structure invoked different theatrical



HAVING THE CHANCE TO DO ACTING HAS OPENED SOMETHING. THERE’S A ME THAT’S OUT THERE THAT’S ANOTHER ME. AND SHE DOESN’T SAY ‘NO I CAN’T’. SHE JUST DOES IT. I’M LIVING LIFE AS I ACTUALLY WANT IT TO BE.

– Sandra Nakigagga, Public Acts participant

worlds, enabling company members to find emotional connections with their own stories. One participant described eloquently how Marina’s story, played by Audrey Brisson, struck a deep chord:

Her message was not only for Marina, it was for all the people on stage, backstage, the audience, everywhere for all those whose ships sank in the middle of the ocean and spent a long journey to find home. I believe theatre is the best place where people could bring their emotions and transfer in art.

– Ketrin Vardiashvii, correspondence, September 2018

Shaina Taub and Laurie Woolery’s adaptation of *As You Like It* also resonated with the company. Alya Rashid summed up her response to the play.

It’s about having a voice. It’s about having an identity. It’s about not giving up. It’s about

connecting to others. This play is everything about growth. Individual growth, growth as a community, growth as a society. I never knew how powerful drama is until I started doing Public Acts.

– Alya Rashid, interviewed June 2019

Many found that theatre skills benefitted other aspects of life. Sue Agyakwa, for example, described how she had learned how to make better use of, and care for, her voice. Nadege Rene, among many others, told us that she was using her voice more effectively to make herself heard in circumstances when they might have otherwise remained quiet.

I was a reserved person, but I’ve learnt the value of being around people. Outside Public Acts I’m much better at introducing myself and making my voice heard.

– Nadege Rene, interviewed July 2019

Sometimes theatre skills were used in unexpected ways. When one of the younger cast members attended hospital his doctor asked him to take deep breaths. His mother reminded him how to take ‘Emily breaths’, a phrase that was put into his medical notes and used as a short-hand to help him cope with his illness.

The survey revealed the extent to which working with professional actors and performing on the professional stage was important to participants. One reason for consistently high scores across all age groups is that almost all respondents were members of the *As You Like It* company, and therefore a self-selecting sample of people who had chosen to be in the production rather than everyone who took part in Public Acts in London. The reasons for not taking part were usually related to time commitment and practicalities, and it is testament to the inclusive ways of working that people were happy to take part in workshops when religious, health or cultural reasons

meant that they felt unable to perform on the professional stage.

One result requires further analysis. There was a surprisingly high number of respondents who said that developing a career in theatre was ‘very important’ (52 per cent) or ‘quite important’ (25 per cent). Only a quarter regarded this as not important, mostly in the under-10 or over-60 age groups. The Public Acts team were careful to say that the performance was not a route into the professional theatre, and the timing of the survey – two weeks before *As You Like It* – might account for some of this enthusiasm. But it is worth taking seriously. In the survey comments and interviews, two trends emerged. First, around a third of survey respondents hoped to strengthen their skills as workshop facilitators in partner organisations and/or adding theatre to their professional portfolios in related fields. The majority had career aspirations in the arts, as actors, musicians, stand-up comedians, performance poets and dancers.



Pericles
Photograph by James Bellorini

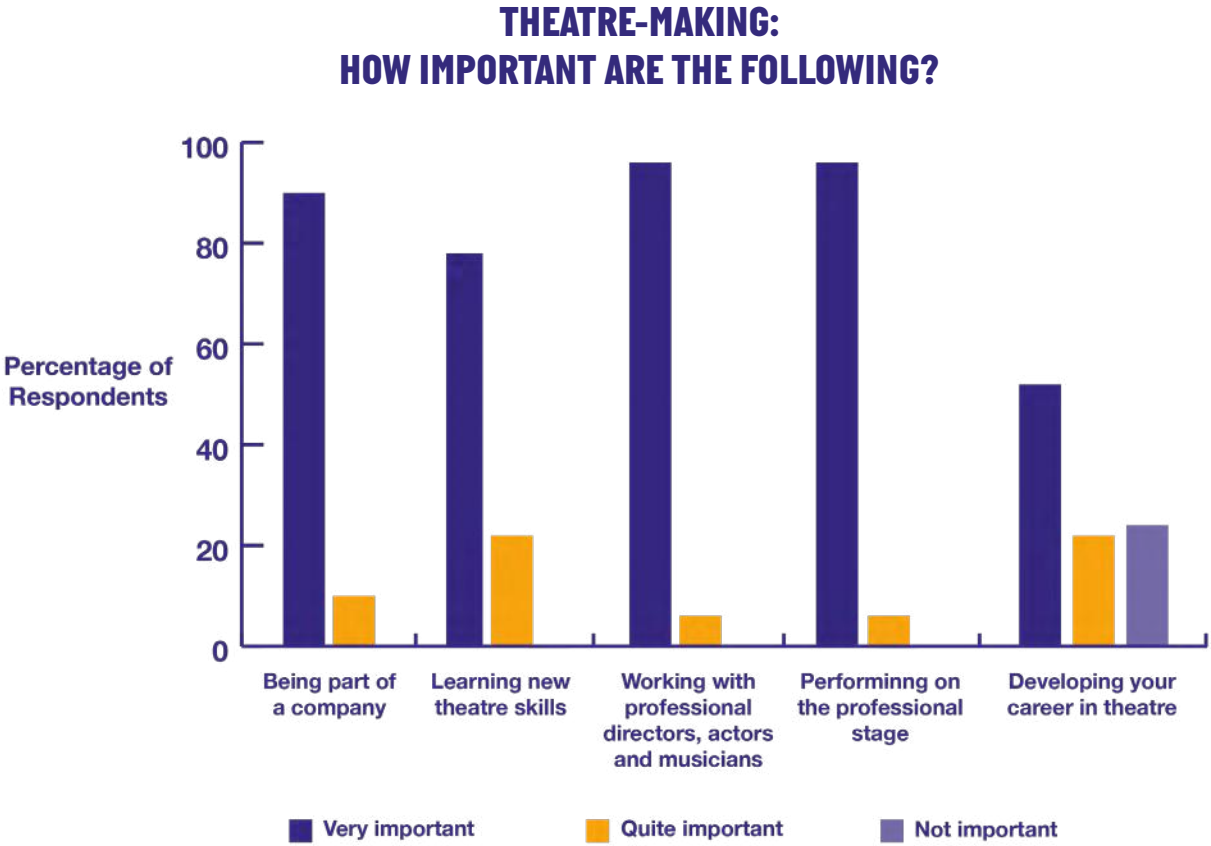


Figure 7

There are those that know that creativity nourishes the soul, and they need to integrate it into everyday life. And you have those who are thinking about a career in the arts, and this opportunity has amplified it.

– Emma Colyer, MBE, Director of Body & Soul, interviewed June 2019

By the second year of Public Acts, with larger featured roles on offer, some people with ambitious career aspirations considered *As You Like It* to be a way to raise their profile. Casting decisions occasionally caused tension, and a very small number of people decided not to take part because they were not offered featured roles. Although this was a minority of the company, when set against the high numbers of people who expressed interest in a career the arts (77 per cent of the company) it raises questions about how expectations are managed and ambitions appropriately supported.

Across the two years, participants who had the richest experiences made connections between the personal, social and artistic agendas of Public Acts. But there is also a balance to be struck between community participation and professional development. Majorie Agwang, a community participant who played Celia in *As You Like It*, hoped that Public Acts would contribute to a more equitable theatre industry.

There are very few opportunities for people of colour to see themselves on the stage. Having access to the rehearsal rooms at professional theatres, walking through the stage door, being able to pray there, it made me feel really uplifted. It was crazy to feel that the stage could be ours. There are so many institutional barriers, still, and people of colour don't feel they have access to those places.

– Majorie Agwang, interviewed August 2019

The care taken over the casting of professional actors and cameo performance groups was appreciated; the casting reflected the inclusive ethos of Public Acts and demonstrated a wide range of talents in the company. The specialist

skills of local cameo groups ensured that performance was a celebration of London as a place, platforming cultural specialisms that created an exciting forum for cultural exchange. Company members commented that professional actors Ashley Zhangazha who played the title role in *Pericles* and Ebony Jonnelle who played Rosalind in *As You Like It* inspired young performers. Blossom Cole, who took part in both productions, commented that this was a welcome change from her own childhood in the 1960s and 70s when there had been very few black performers on the professional stage. Public Acts offers an opportunity to address issues of under-representation in the theatre industry, and there is scope for further research about how members of community companies might find pathways into the profession without loss of the project's communitarian ambitions.



Rehearsals for *Pericles*
Photograph by James Bellorini

SECTION THREE:

IMPACT ON AUDIENCES



As You Like It
Photograph by Camilla Greenwell

The National Theatre looked different, felt different and was different on the occasions of those performances, in a way that it would do much to digest and consider for its future. The ways in which the production was reviewed and resonated to a wider consumer audience is probably its greatest legacy and certainly the most important aspect for the National Theatre itself. For a moment in time the National Theatre was genuinely theatre of the nation.

– Dr Carol Homden, CBE, Chief Executive Officer, Coram, interviewed 10 July 2019

Both *Pericles* and *As You Like It* enjoyed standing ovations at each performance and received critical acclaim. The performances, both at the National Theatre and Queen's Theatre Hornchurch, created very special theatrical atmospheres that showed how theatre by, with and for communities has its own social aesthetic that does not compromise on the high production values expected at world-leading theatres. Two research methods were used to capture and analyse audience response. For *Pericles* at the National Theatre, we followed a consistent line of inquiry by using ethnographic methods, whereas at Queen's Theatre we undertook surveys to better understand audience experience via quantitative data. Taken together, they offer early insights that can be further developed in future research on Public Acts audiences.

Audience studies are newly defining 'audiencing' – the experience of being an audience (Fiske 1992) – as not only a transaction between audiences as consumers and theatre-makers as producers, but as a relational and creative act of co-creation between them (Heim 2016; Walmsley 2019). This emphasis on relationality and collaboration is particularly pertinent to Public Acts, not least because it extends the equitable values of its working methods to audiences. Both Public Acts productions attracted audiences who were new to theatre, some were connected to members of the company, and their empathetic and energetic engagement was partly responsible for creating a different 'feel' in the theatre that Dr Homden rightly identified when *Pericles* played at the National

Theatre. Building on such positive experiences of co-creative audiencing is, Ben Walmsley suggests, part of theatres' 'strategic, artistic and social responsibility' (2019: 166). It also challenges the myth that spectatorship is inherently passive and participation is active, sloganised by Augusto Boal in the mid-20th century, which has dominated much rhetoric in participatory arts. It allows us to think through how productions with community companies can lead the way in generating new understandings of audiencing that are both co-creative and socially responsible.

Giving to audiences was important to participants, and after weeks of rehearsal, performers were excited to share their work with others, including family, friends and staff in partner organisations. Each person had four complimentary tickets and many people appreciated the invitation. Company members without family or friends able to attend were given sensitive support. Hearing the audience's appreciation was a positive part of the performers' experience, and it also provided opportunities for more personal expressions of pride from families and friends.

The support I felt from the audience was amazing. I felt pride and achievement like no other to please the audience.

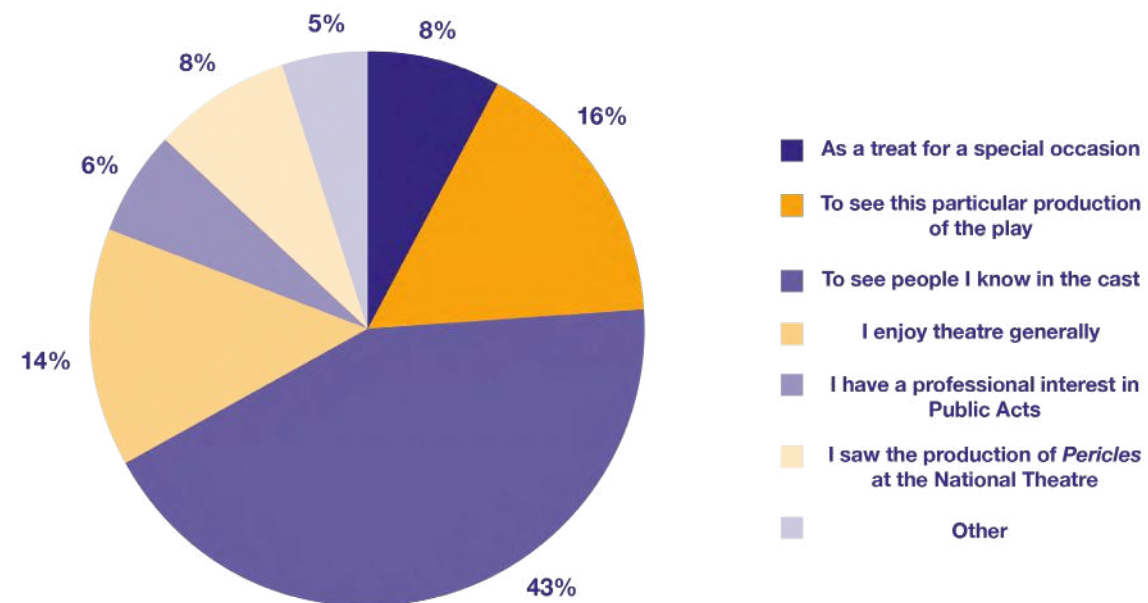
– Lisa Brown, correspondence, September 2018

It was good for me to ask my family, and they really liked it. I was really surprised because they are not easily impressed. It was great to hear that they were proud of something I had done. It felt healing.

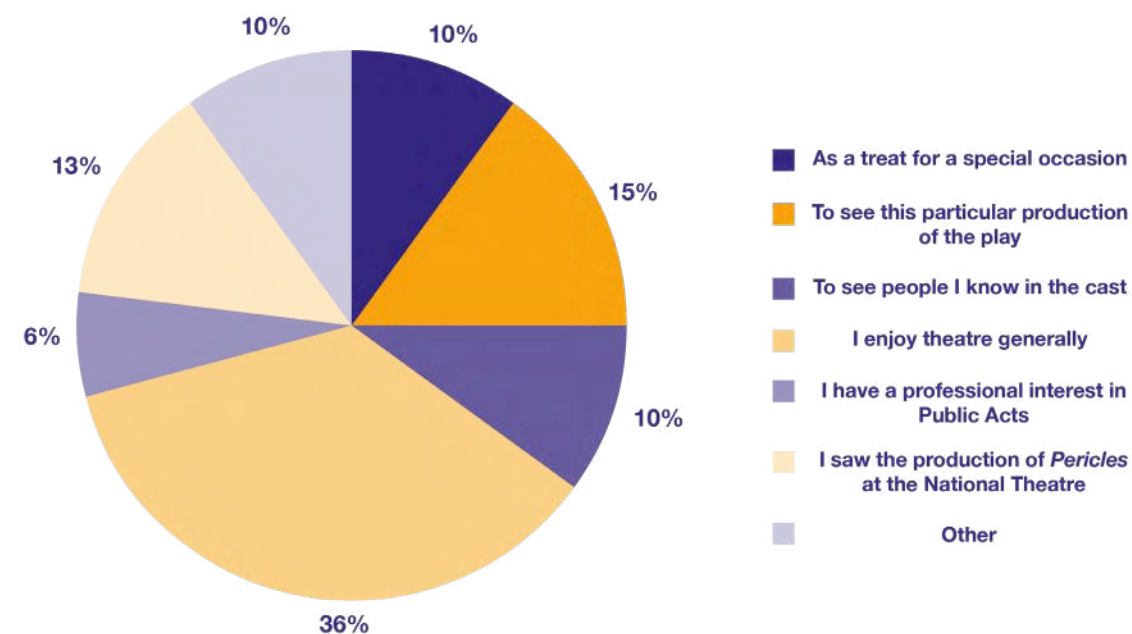
– Nadege Rene, interviewed August 2019

Public Acts audiences had an animated sociality that is often evident in popular performance, amateur theatre and community productions, but can elude mainstream professional theatre (Ashton and Harris 2013; Walcon and Nicholson 2016). This sociability extended to the foyer areas and bars, and friendliness was also felt in the auditorium. When the maypole – a key part of the set – failed to descend on the first night of *Pericles* there was an unscheduled interval, and strangers sitting next to each other chatted about the

WHY DID YOU COME TO SEE 'AS YOU LIKE IT'? MAIN REASON



WHY DID YOU COME TO SEE 'AS YOU LIKE IT'? ANY OTHER REASON



production, who they knew or why they had come. It is misleading to suggest that this temporary community created in the auditoriums for both productions was due to the presence of people somehow connected to the company. Both productions were very well received, suggesting that Public Acts' values of social responsibility, connectivity, storytelling and high artistic qualities are infectious and highly valued.

Rather than capturing social media responses, at Queen's Theatre Hornchurch we conducted a post-performance survey *As You Like It* and received 220 responses across all performances. *As You Like It* played to 92 per cent capacity and 68 per cent of the audience were new to Queen's Theatre Hornchurch (Box Office figures). For nearly half of respondents (42.96 per cent) the main reason given for coming to see *As You Like It* was because they knew people in the cast. A further 16 per cent came primarily to see this production of the play, and 14 per cent came because they enjoy theatre generally. The popular appeal of the show was evident in the comments – one group of women who attended as part of a 'girls' night out'. Secondary reasons for attending were more varied, although enjoying theatre was selected

most often (36 per cent). The majority had been to the theatre at least once or more in the last year (87 per cent), although one respondent added a note that this was their first time at the theatre and commented 'I hope to continue. I have discovered another love'.

We asked audiences to describe their experiences in three words, and the responses were overwhelmingly positive. The top ten most frequently used words can be seen in Figure 11.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the audience survey was that nearly three-quarters of respondents reported that they were inspired to take part in theatre after seeing this production. Those who were not intending to take up theatre provided written caveats to their answer. For example, three respondents cited their age as a reason: 'I'm too old'; 'I've done it before but I'm getting on a bit'; 'If I were younger'. A fourth respondent suggested that they 'would like to but facilities not near plus medical reasons'. Some respondents chose to emphasise their response by adding to the tick-box. One person wrote 'totally inspired, absolutely loved it!'

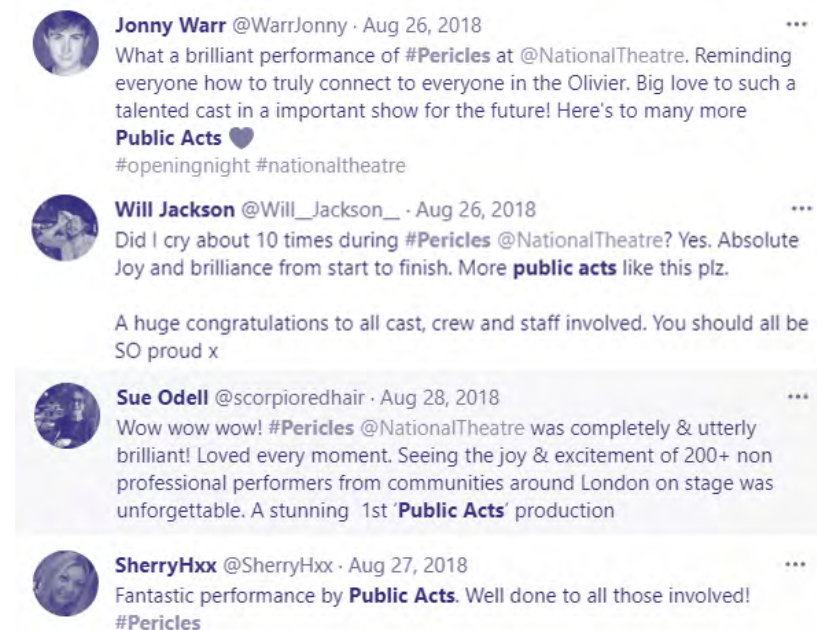
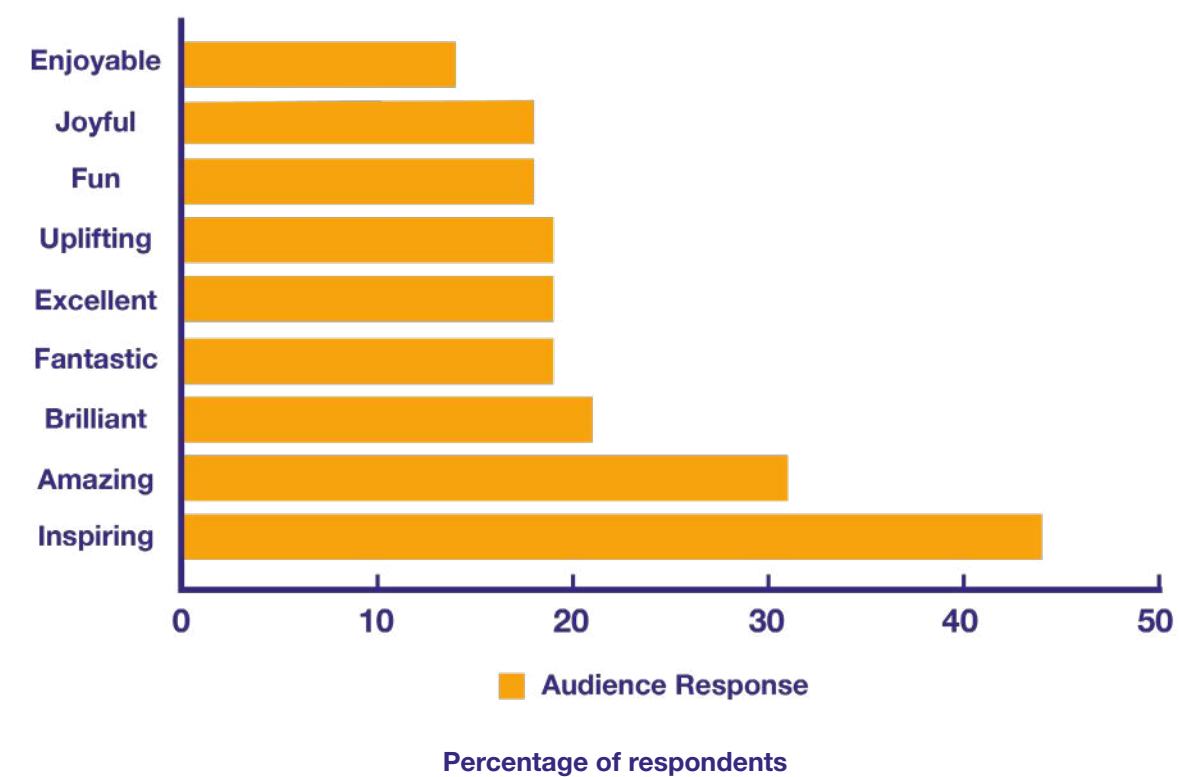


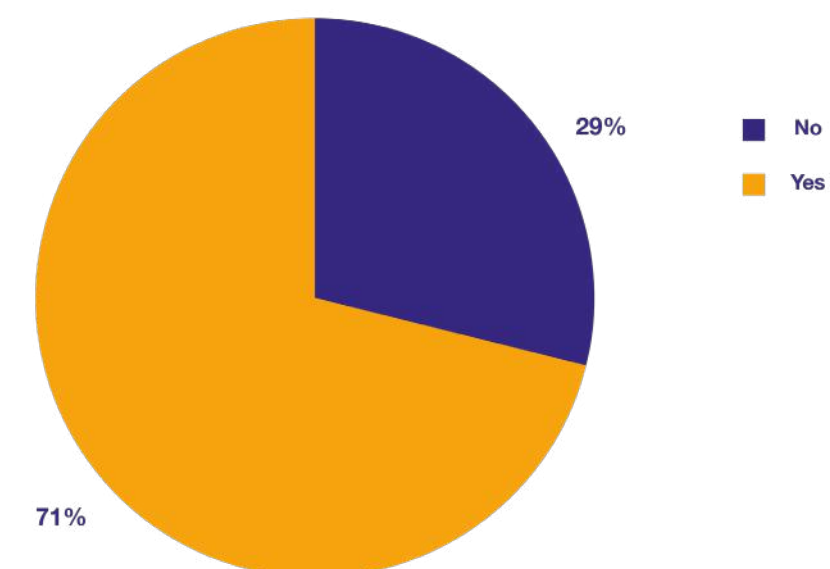


Figure 10

AUDIENCE RESPONSE



HAS SEEING THIS PRODUCTION INSPIRED YOU TO TAKE PART IN THEATRE?



Figures 11-12

SECTION FOUR:

IMPACT ON COMMUNITY PARTNERS



Community Partner Workshop 2017
Photograph by James Bellorini

Partnerships work best when they are complementary, when you each bring different things.

– Phil Champain, Director, The Faith & Belief Forum, interviewed July 2019

Good partnerships are mutually beneficial. You learn from each other.

– Emily Lim, interviewed November 2019

Although the benefits to individual participants are key to the success of each year's project, the long-term impact of Public Acts lies in how it informs the vision, strategy and activities of both the theatres and community partners. This will take time to emerge and, as each organisation has different social agendas and levels of interest in the arts, this will take many forms. For this report, the impact on community partners has been distilled into four key areas: Equality and Excellence; Increased Arts Provision; Access to Resources and Funding; Inspiring Organisational Change.

EQUALITY AND EXCELLENCE

Public Acts is the democratisation of glamour.

– Bill Tidnam, Chief Executive Officer, Thames Reach, November 2018.

Public Acts is reclaiming theatre for the people and a huge statement of intent to do things differently.

– Sue Agyakwa, Family Learning tutor, Bromley by Bow Centre, interviewed July 2019

Equal access to excellence was frequently given as a reason for joining Public Acts, and the National Theatre's reputation and status was initially a key motive. Public Acts community partners were unanimous in the view that artistic excellence was a major factor in enabling them to meet their social agendas and made a compelling case that each served each other. Challenging inequality was also an important motive for everyone in the partnership, and they welcomed the practical ways in which Public Acts dispelled

the myth that everyone working in professional theatre is white, middle-class and socially privileged.

Many partners already had a history of successful work in the arts, and they brought this experience to Public Acts. Associate artists were carefully selected to lead workshops in each partner organisation, and all had considerable expertise as theatre-makers in community settings. Not only were the social agendas of each partner addressed through the workshops' content, the Public Acts team also chose artists with creative skills in different forms of theatre-making that suited the partners' interests and extended their members' capabilities. In the first year, for example, playwright Brian Mullin was recruited to fit The Faith & Belief Forum's brief and Corinne Meredith, as a Laban trained dance artist, worked on movement with Open Age. The work of the associate artists was strengthened by their regular meetings as a team, led by Emily Lim, where they were able to reflect on their experiences and share their expertise and practices. Some staff in partner organisations, especially those with an arts background, used the opportunity for their own professional development. Working alongside associate artists in the workshops helped to demystify the process, and they appreciated the carefully structured progression that the associate artists introduced into the workshop programme that built on participants' confidence and creativity. In the second year, some staff in partner organisations became increasingly involved in the weekly planning of the workshops, and valued the opportunity to learn alongside highly skilled practitioners. The National Theatre has responded by offering training in drama facilitation, and by helping community partners to find artists with the appropriate skills to contribute to their programmes.

The Faith & Belief Forum is a good example of how Public Acts impacted on community partners' arts provision. They had previously run arts projects, sometimes with Arts Council funding, to address intercultural dimensions of identity. Fiona Ranford, development co-ordinator, described how working on Public Acts had clarified their policy.

We shifted away from a kind of DIY approach as the work wasn't very satisfying for anyone. We realised that working with high-quality arts partners and curators is really important if we wanted to have social impact. There's a big difference between bringing people together to do crafts and working with artists. We want to do quality arts, in and of themselves, as well as address issues that matter to us as a Forum. We have sometimes struggled to find artists to work with us who understand how they're integrated.

– Fiona Ranford, development co-ordinator, The Faith & Belief Forum, interviewed July 2019

The workshops at The Faith & Belief Forum, led by Brian Mullin, used playwriting to examine complex issues of faith. The high quality of the workshops persuaded staff across the organisation that the arts have a powerful place in their core mission, and the success of the workshops inspired their members to continue writing plays that explore faith and identity. By July 2019, The Faith & Belief Forum had already acquired funding to develop an inter-faith arts collective inspired by Public Acts, and they were developing plans for a playwriting competition designed to represent a wider range of voices in theatre.

INCREASED ARTS PROVISION

All community partners aimed to expand their arts provision since Public Acts. Demand and take-up of existing and new arts and cultural activities increased, and this included people who had not taken part in Public Acts. Without exception, community partners were more interested in extending the benefits of the workshops than in further productions. Tim Ellett, Marketing Director at DABD described the workshops as the most valuable part of the project, and although the productions were prestigious and life-affirming, they were the 'cherry on the cake, not the main meal'.

All community partners had prior experience of partnership work, and Public Acts added new insights into the value of partnering with theatres and arts organisations. Workshops led by Queen's Theatre Hornchurch practitioners were quickly

integrated into the activities offered by DABD, building on their very good relationship with Jules Tipton as Public Acts associate artist and *As You Like It* assistant director.

The workshops for us were far more important than the final production. The whole act of the workshop, in a controlled, known and structured environment was the first stepping stone for people. When I look at the two different groups, young people with quite challenging issues, and our Golden Years programme with older adults, they have both grown as a result. The workshops with Queen's Theatre are fundamental to the legacy of Public Acts.

– Tim Ellett, Marketing Director at DABD, interviewed June 2019

By the end of the first year, some partners were already using their collaboration with the National Theatre to attract the attention of other leading arts organisations.

The quality of the work we have done with the National, and with Tate Modern, has helped us reaffirm our belief that part of what we do has to be arts and culture. And our partnership with Public Acts has helped leverage the attention of other leading arts and cultural organisations. We can say we know how to be a partner, and what that means.

– Iain Cassidy, Chief Executive Officer, Open Age, interviewed June 2019

At an organisational level, learning the potential and pitfalls of good partnership was part of the work of Public Acts. By the end of Public Acts London in autumn 2019, Thames Reach was establishing a relationship with the Young Vic, Open Age was in conversation with The Coronet Theatre, and Body & Soul was building a network of creative partnerships across London. Coram, the largest Public Acts partner, were alone in finding that Public Acts had not raised the profile of their highly respected organisation, but Karen Robinson, Managing Director of Coram Voice and Young People's Projects, noted that working on Public Acts had given them a new confidence in approaching funders to support their arts and heritage projects.

**WHAT IS RADICAL ABOUT
PUBLIC ACTS
IS THAT IT'S A LONG-
TERM COMMITMENT.
A MEASURE OF SUCCESS
WILL BE IN TEN YEARS'
TIME WHEN WE CAN
SEE WHAT WE HAVE
MANAGED TO ENGENDER**

**– Rufus Norris, Director of the National Theatre
and Joint Chief Executive**

ACCESS TO RESOURCES AND FUNDING

The scale and ambition of Public Acts meant that it required significant investment and fundraising from the National Theatre, and all community partners raised the issue of resources and access to funding. There was widespread appreciation for the level of funding the National Theatre had succeeded in attracting for Public Acts, and the scale of ambition it represented. Bill Tidnam, CEO at Thames Reach described the workshops as a ‘gift’ to the organisation, and this positive view was widely held.

Nonetheless, there were concerns about staff giving their time to the project in kind, without funding from the Public Acts programme. Almost all organisations found ways to give staff time off in lieu after late nights and weekend rehearsals, but many people also gave their time freely. Although they were keen to stress that there were huge personal and professional benefits from taking part, they also felt that relying on in-kind labour was not a sustainable model of partnership. Understanding the complexities of arts projects at firsthand led some community partners to reassess the level of staffing and support needed. At Body & Soul, Hollie Smith’s role evolved to include development and management of creative partnerships.

When this project first started, I don’t think we realised the scale of how much time and input was needed from me, and from us as an organisation. It was an amazing experience – and worth it – and the start of a new role for me. We recognised that projects like this do need a lot of input, and that came from the National Theatre team as well. The support they gave was amazing, and it made us realise that we need someone to be working on these creative partnerships as they take a long time to build if they are going to have this scale of impact.
– Hollie Smith, Head of Creative & Corporate Partnerships, Body & Soul, interviewed June 2019

Only one partner organisation found the partnership was less collaborative than they had hoped. Many others found synergies with other partner organisations that they had not anticipated. The National Theatre is addressing feedback about funding, and put in place a Public Acts legacy programme before the programme ended in London. This has provided opportunities for partners to meet National Theatre staff who specialise in Trusts and Foundations, and their advice on how to approach funders to support arts projects was widely appreciated. There is significantly more scope for partnerships with funders who have been inspired by Public Acts.

INSPIRING ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE

One of the unforeseen outcomes of Public Acts was that some community partners used the opportunity to reassess the strategic direction of their organisations. Insights gained from working on Public Acts both informed change programmes and affirmed changes that were already underway.

Unlike many other schemes, Public Acts was not driven by key performance indicators or objectives, and this emphasis on positive relationships was described as ‘liberating’ and ‘refreshing’, and ‘what we are all about’. Iain Cassidy at Open Age expressed the view, widely held among partners, that Public Acts had reaffirmed their belief that connecting people is the most important aspect of their work. Body & Soul and DABD – very different organisations – found that bringing people together from different parts of their organisations had positive benefits. The ability to articulate the value of arts and culture to their membership, particularly in community partners where trustees were sceptical about the relationship between theatre and their core objectives, is part of the legacy of Public Acts. Some partners used the opportunity of working on Public Acts to refocus their core values. Bromley by Bow Centre, which leads the way in creating new models of healthy communities, is a good example of how Public Acts inspired new ways of working. Emily Lim was their

associate artist for the first phase of workshops, and with community producer Flo Paul, developed particularly strong relationships with people working in the centre. The openness of this relationship and their shared values mirrored Bromley by Bow Centre’s innovative model of working. Chief Executive Rob Trimble described their management structure as ‘dispersed’ and their decision-making process as organic.

Everything we do is about human relationships, and all the really good stuff we have done is because we find someone we can connect with. At no point in the process did we have a senior management meeting to discuss whether we should take part. The decision evolved because we trusted the people.
– Rob Trimble, Chief Executive Officer, Bromley by Bow Centre, interviewed June 2019

More tangibly, they introduced a performance space into their development plan that will embed theatre into the work of the centre. It will contribute to realising a new vision for creative, healthy communities.

Public Acts reminded a number of us of what it’s all about, and why we do it all. We had a meeting with Emily and Flo a few weeks after *Pericles* to think through what we might do with our performance space. What if we were to do something quite radical and quite different – that might relate to health but isn’t about social prescribing. It’s something more fundamental about seeing health not as a series of interventions – but how you build and support vibrant connections and relationships.
– Rob Trimble, interviewed June 2019



Rehearsals for *As You Like It*
Photograph by Camilla Greenwell

For Rob Trimble and his colleagues Catherine Tollington and Sue Agyakwa, Public Acts clarified the power of the arts to support healthy and happy lives which, in Rob Trimble's words, cannot be 'distilled into a formula'. Catherine Tollington, a member of the senior management team and performer in both productions, observed the rehearsal process closely. In August 2018 she described being part of the Public Acts company as 'a lesson in leadership' to understand how they might work at Bromley by Bow in ways that were 'fluid and creative, when everyone knows their roles and what they need to do without needing to ask'.

Bringing Public Acts in London to a close in 2019 was emotional. Although participants would have enjoyed many more years of Public Acts, both theatres and community partners felt it was right to take the learning forward to new places, partnerships and people. Jed Marsh, assistant director at Body & Soul observed that Public Acts had prompted them to reflect more

deeply on transitions and endings, including how people leave one project or system of support and move onto another. In an email to Emily Lim, Rob Trimble reflected on how learning from Public Acts might be cast widely.

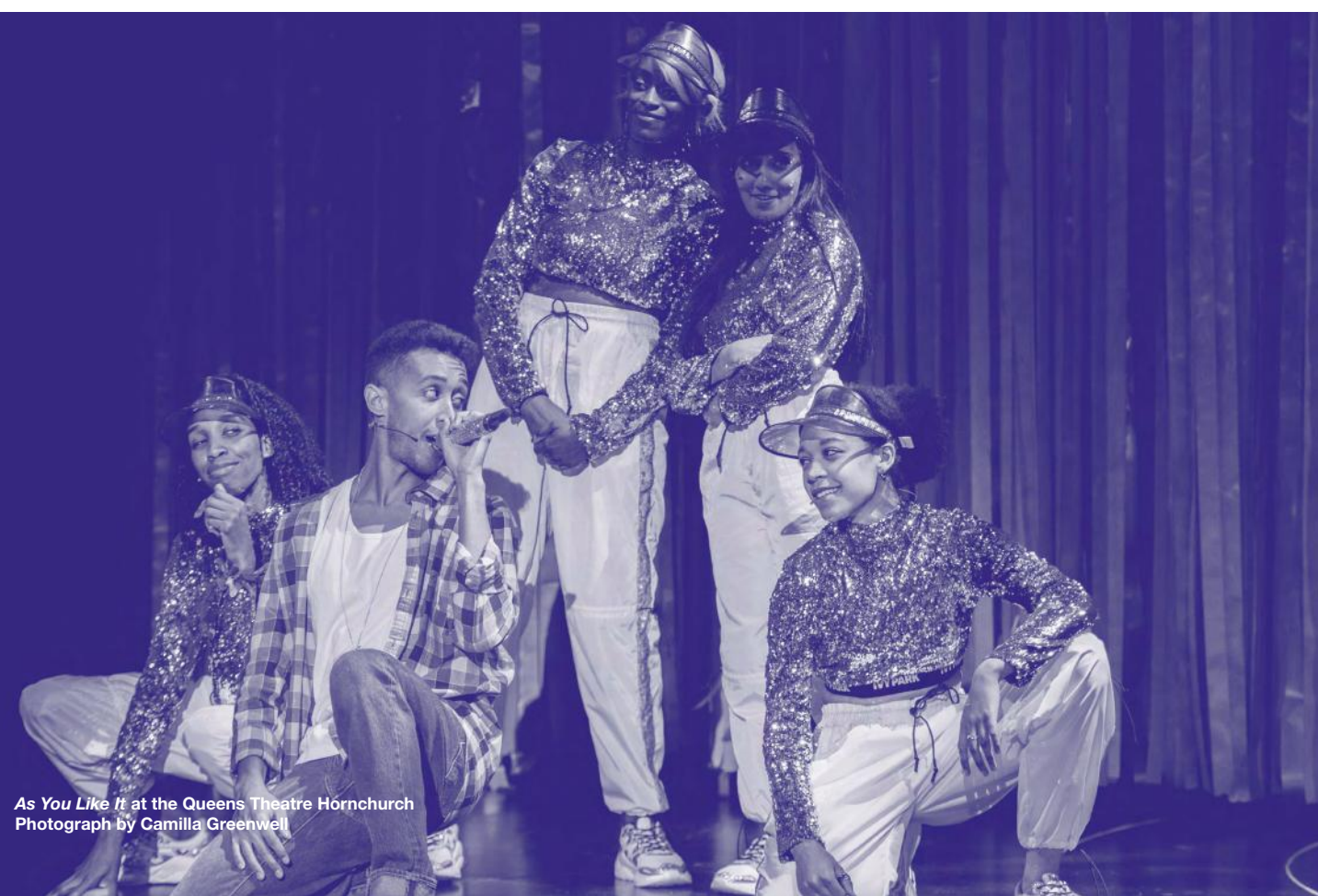
The last three years has changed lives forever and if the Bromley by Bow Centre is typical, then the lives of our organisations too. And the way we think. And how we want to unleash the liberating and health-enhancing power of the arts in every health centre in the country. If we can.

– Rob Trimble, correspondence with Emily Lim, October 2019

The founding community partners and the people they serve have become the greatest advocates for Public Acts in London. Those who benefitted most from the partnership were those who were sufficiently open, generous, and brave to think through its implications for the future of their own organisations.

**THE LAST THREE YEARS
HAS CHANGED LIVES
FOREVER AND IF THE
BROMLEY BY BOW
CENTRE IS TYPICAL,
THEN IN THE LIVES
OF OUR ORGANISATIONS
TOO. AND THE WAY
WE THINK.**

*– Rob Trimble, Chief Executive Officer,
Bromley By Bow Centre*



As You Like It at the Queens Theatre Hornchurch
Photograph by Camilla Greenwell

SECTION FIVE:

IMPACT ON THEATRES



Community Partner Workshop 2018
Photograph by James Bellorini

It is no exaggeration to say that Public Acts has become the most eloquent expression of what Lisa [Burger] and I have come to believe this place is about, and on this point at least the entire staff agree with us. I have lost count of the number of times someone has come up to me, dropped their customary shyness about giving it to me directly, and demanded that we mount another one here before long. The dedication, kindness, and life-changing energy that the two companies have made manifest is extraordinarily infectious. So much so that it has infected the whole direction of this ocean liner of a place, and that's no mean task.

– Rufus Norris, speech to Public Acts partners, October 2019

Public Acts represents a long-term vision for the National Theatre, illustrating how new forms of participatory theatre are becoming increasingly embedded into the repertoire and culture of mainstream building-based theatres. The emotional impact of Public Acts was infectious, as Rufus Norris observed, and this enthusiasm spread throughout the organisation. This is not to be underestimated; theatre professionals have been known for their scepticism towards community projects and attitudes towards participatory theatre have sometimes been a barrier for lasting change. Public Acts is helping to redefine theatre, not only by widening access to the theatre as it is, but by developing new approaches to theatre-making that are inclusive, socially engaged and artistically innovative.

As this report is finalised, the world is in the grips of a pandemic, and the challenges that theatres will face in the post COVID-19 world can only be imagined. The Black Lives Matter Movement is a reminder that it is more urgent than ever to reassess theatre's contribution to society, to communities and to people in all areas of life. In this climate the impact on theatres will take time to mature, but two themes emerge that can lead to lasting change. The first relates to Public Acts' influence on changing theatre-making in ways that are more inclusive, and the second is how partnerships between theatres can strengthen relationships to place and place-making.

PARTICIPATION AND INCLUSIVITY

It is important to note that Public Acts is part of a wider culture of participatory theatre that is changing the theatrical landscape. Public Acts in London blended three broad theatrical traditions, as well as benefitting from the artistic expertise and craft-knowledge of outstanding creative teams. Inspired by New York's Public Works programme, Public Acts is designed around a set of principles and partnership-led work rather than a fixed formula. Public Acts in London followed Public Work's crowd-pleasing tradition of staging musical adaptations with large casts, and shared their social ambition to restore and build community through theatre. It was also indebted to the inclusive working practices developed in applied theatre, young people's theatre and the disability theatre movement, and directors and associate artists used a wide range of techniques to encourage participation, particularly in the workshops. Public Acts also contributes to a growing movement in European theatre that is made by, with, and for the communities it serves. Community choruses are increasing visible in the work of, for example, directors Volker Lösch and Nicolas Stemmann in Germany, Romeo Castellucci and Pippo Delbono in France, and playwright David Greig in Scotland (Katuszewski and Donath 2020). This is theatrically affective for audiences, described as the 'Authenticity-Effect'; the aesthetic qualities of the untrained body on stage, the presence of 'real people' on stage with diverse life stories, and their visible effort as performers is not only emotionally powerful, it also offers new perspectives on theatre's social significance (Garde and Mumford, 2016). But although community choruses provide opportunities for untrained artists to perform, they have also been criticised for their use of local people as unpaid supernumeraries. Public Acts was alert to these pitfalls, and with their community partners, drew on a long tradition of participatory arts that harnesses theatre-making to social change, placing participants at the heart of the process.

Public Acts in London combined two complementary approaches to theatre-making; the workshops were process-led and exploratory, and the productions represented directorial vision which, with the design, music and choreography, provided an aesthetic that framed the company as both individuals and an ensemble. Local cameo groups brought their semi-professional expertise as, for example, choirs, dancer, wrestlers, gymnasts and musicians in ways that both contributed to the productions' cultural offer and deepened their relationship to place. Detractors might argue that Public Acts' productions were over-dependent on the vision of professional directors, or question the decision to stage two adaptations of Shakespeare, but this was not the view of the community partners or participants. They recognised that Public Acts is one approach amongst others, carried out with integrity.

Public Acts provided practical opportunities for theatre professionals to extend their understanding about working with vulnerable groups. The Public Acts team all received training on safeguarding, including how to respond to new challenges or situations that cannot be fully anticipated. Getting to know each participant was an important aspect of the Public Acts team's work and led to appropriate ways of working. Part of this work was carried out in breaks in rehearsals and workshops where the Public Acts team was always available. Creating a sociable atmosphere required considerable skill; some community partner organisations were integral to this work, whereas others have strict codes that prohibit socialising between clients and staff which was sometimes challenging. Laura Richardson summed up what this meant:

We did a lot of safeguarding training, and it's important to understand that some of the participants are vulnerable or have been vulnerable. But it's also important not to label and realise that people have great stories to tell and want you to listen.

– Laura Richardson, Queen's Theatre Hornchurch Learning and Participation team and Public Acts team, interviewed October 2019

The empathy and kindness of the Public Acts team led participants to tell stories about their lives, and there were sometimes fine judgments about when this shifted into disclosing confidences. This brings a risk of over-involvement – sometimes without realising – and the advice of experienced partners enabled theatre professionals to work in ways that were more trauma-informed. This complex work is emotionally draining as well as rewarding, and it is important that formal structures are put in place to support the mental health and wellbeing of theatre professionals. In the future, resources may require repurposing to help all Public Acts staff, particularly those working in contexts in which dedicated human resources teams are not always available to support the wellbeing of people working on such a sensitive and intense projects.

Public Acts provided opportunities to understand how performers with additional access needs, religious commitments and cultural sensibilities can be welcomed and accommodated in theatre-making and theatre buildings. At the National Theatre, everyone who had contact with the *Pericles* company received training in unconscious bias, including people on stage door and in security. Space was made available backstage for a prayer room, and company members were given safe and respectful environments to dress. For *Pericles*, the large and diverse company presented new challenges for costume and wardrobe departments. Helen Casey (Deputy Head of Wigs, Hair and Make-up, National Theatre), Mike Roff (Head of Running Wardrobe, National Theatre) and Amanda Tyrell (Wardrobe Supervisor, National Theatre) described how they interpreted Fly Davis' clear design vision and enjoyed making costumes and enjoyed meeting requests for modest dress and head coverings. Their attention to detail, and respect for each person, was widely appreciated by the company.

I loved dressing up and it reminded me of dressing up as child and being outrageous. The Costume staff chose outfits which were exactly right to emphasise the beauty of each person.

– Sade Hewitt-Ibru, correspondence, September 2018

The physical limits of the National Theatre were tested during the *Pericles* run, and it became evident that some backstage areas at the Olivier were inaccessible to wheelchair users. This set wider discussions in place about levels of access backstage. Public Acts is already influencing conversations at the National Theatre led by Head of the Creative Diversity Project, Charlotte Bevan.

At Queen's Theatre Hornchurch the whole staff was involved in *As You Like It*. The crew lighting the show joined the company in breaks as well as in rehearsal, and the box office team took time to attend rehearsals and get to know the participants individually. The box office team include audience development in their remit, and they also take a personal interest in people who come into the theatre, sometimes providing what Executive Director Mathew Russell described as 'social care' by initiating referrals to social services or attending funerals of long-standing audience members. Artistically, the inclusive language of

workshops and rehearsals became second nature, and Douglas Rintoul found that his experiences of directing *As You Like It* influenced how he structured rehearsals in other productions. James Watson, Head of Learning and Participation at Queen's Theatre Hornchurch, was inspired by the ethos and working practices of Public Acts to redefine the values of Queen's Youth Theatre which, echoing Public Acts' positivity, aspires to be 'authentic, bold and curious'.

PARTNERSHIP, PLACE AND PLACE-MAKING

We hope that Public Acts, as an idea, as a movement, as a programme should feel different everywhere it goes. But we hope that the National will have a long-lasting relationship with the idea of socially engaged theatre.
– Emily Lim, interviewed November 2019



Pericles
Photograph by James Bellorini

Public Acts is designed to be responsive to place, and partnerships with local theatres are as important as those with community organisations. The inaugural Public Acts programme sustained a two-year partnership between the National Theatre and Queen's Theatre Hornchurch, working with the same community partners and staging a production in each theatre. The major strength of the partnership lay in their shared ambition to make world-class theatre that has resonance for people across all sectors of society, nationally, internationally and in their local areas. The Public Acts team included staff from both theatres, and although there were opportunities to learn when things didn't quite go to plan, the success of their teamwork, their deep level of care for participants and shared achievements are evident throughout this report.

Although Public Acts in London was conceived as a coherent project, the experiences of each theatre in the partnership was different. For the National Theatre, the spectacular production of *Pericles* was a major statement about the theatre's social ambition and marked an important moment in its history. One company member described the Olivier stage as having an 'aura', and another described how she had occasionally passed the National Theatre and taken photographs, but never imagined that she would perform on one of its stages. Perhaps more importantly, the company reflected the theatre's locality; the rehearsal room 'looked like London', in the words of Director of Learning Alice King-Farlow. For staff working on *Pericles*, Public Acts showed that it is possible to make new connections between the theatre and their experiences of London as a place to live.

As someone who has worked at the National for a very long time, I can say that this was the first time that the theatre connected me with the London I see on my street.

– Helen Casey, Deputy Head of Wigs, Hair and Make-up, National Theatre, interviewed October 2018

The sight of a group of women coming out of the National Theatre's stage door wearing their hijabs having just performed on the Olivier stage should

not be unusual, but it is. *Pericles* showed what it is possible to achieve, and how deep connections to local populations might inform a nationwide vision for theatre.

Public Acts in Hornchurch also provided an opportunity to connect with people and communities that were new, or newly welcomed, to the theatre. When Queen's Theatre Hornchurch joined Public Acts it was beginning an ambitious programme of change and redevelopment. Part of this involved reassessing how the theatre might serve local people as the demographics of outer London boroughs become younger, less wealthy, and more diverse. One of the attractions of Public Acts was that its values of social inclusivity and artistic excellence were in alignment with their vision.

In the past Queen's Theatre Hornchurch had served quite a stable and homogenous audience, but the local area has changed quite significantly over the last few years. With that the organisation faced both challenges and opportunities and learning around working across the whole spectrum of diversity – including the people it employs as staff, the people it works with as artists and the people it attracts as audiences. A project like this, that represents London so beautifully through the participants involved is helping to accelerate that learning in the theatre.

– Mathew Russell, Executive Director, Queen's Theatre Hornchurch, interviewed July 2019

The Queen's Theatre Hornchurch leadership team defined clear objectives for Public Acts that were shared across the organisation. They addressed a range of areas, including partnerships with local organisations; how the theatre connects with communities across London and 'forgotten' areas of outer east London; audience development; professional development for staff; and how it 'learns as an organisation to be more inclusive and equipped to embrace and celebrate difference'. Public Acts helped to make these strategic objectives visible to staff across the whole theatre, and showed how partnerships with local organisations might assist their delivery.

Finding community partners close to Hornchurch led James Watson to contact many different organisations. The theatre has maintained contact with many groups, including those who were unable to take part in Public Acts, with a view to further partnerships and build capacity in their local area. Casting the cameo groups also offered the chance to work with local companies and organisations who had not been part of the theatre before, and the spectacular drumming of the Dhol academy, the CommUnity Gospel Choir and the wrestling of London School of Lucha Libre meant that they aligned with Queen's Theatre Hornchurch's ambition to connect with diverse local communities. Queen's Theatre Hornchurch also intends to raise aspiration in their local area, and Jackie Redmond, a member of staff at DABD who worked on both productions, expressed pride in her local theatre in Hornchurch.

I love that we're all here in Hornchurch. I'm Dagenham born and bred, and we can show everyone that this is a great place to be and a great theatre to be in. I'm proud to be here.

– Jackie Redmond, Co-ordinator for the Golden Years programme DADB, interviewed July 2019

Queen's Theatre Hornchurch had hoped to gain more recognition for the high quality of their work, but as a highlight in January 2020 it was announced that they had won London Theatre of the Year Award at The Stage Awards. The citation recognised its impressive achievements in strengthening positive relationships with local communities and its successful national partnerships, including their work as the inaugural theatre partner for Public Acts.

Much press coverage at the time of *Pericles* commented on how it made the National Theatre feel 'national'. One particularly moving moment towards the end of the play showed the dramatic impact of what must be the most diverse company ever seen on the Olivier stage. As the company gathered on stage carrying lights – some using wheelchairs – they each spoke the line 'You are your own way home' in many different languages, and in accents from across the UK and voices from all over the world. This theatrical

moment symbolised how a positive sense of national identity is inclusive, deriving from strong collaborations and welcoming communities. London does not, of course, stand for the whole nation, and in common with other aspects of the National Theatre's portfolio of nationwide partnerships, future Public Acts programmes will evolve to reflect their local areas. But close relationships with local organisations is already shaping thinking at the National Theatre about the wider social role of theatre, how it connects people and communities, contributes to the health of the nation. This is a radical vision for theatre, and it will take time.

What is radical about Public Acts is that it's a long-term commitment. A measure of success of Public Acts will be in ten, 20, or even 35 plus years' time when we can see what we have managed to engender or propagate.

– Rufus Norris, interviewed July 2019

SECTION SIX:

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This concluding section draws together some of the strands that are woven throughout this report, together with how it might inform the future of Public Acts. Theatre is, at heart, about telling stories, and storytelling is a reciprocal process that involves openness, reciprocity, and generosity. The report asks whose stories are told, who listens and how can the learning from Public Acts become integrated into the lives of theatres, of partner organisations and participants.

KEY FINDINGS ARE:

1. Public Acts had a profound and lasting impact on community participants. They benefitted from the positive social environment created by Public Acts, supportive workshops, encouraging rehearsals and the shared excitement and energy of both productions. Almost all participants reported significant increase in confidence; they found that making theatre enabled them to overcome personal barriers. Taking pride in their achievements led to increased self-belief and stronger feelings of self-worth.

2. Participants felt more connected to their communities, and this was an important factor improving wellbeing, often with lasting effects.

3. Public Acts enabled community partner organisations to meet their social agendas. The renewed positivity of the Public Acts participants spread across organisations, often connecting people who access their services in different ways, leading to increased take-up in their new and existing provision across a wide range of activities.

4. Community partners appreciated access to excellence, the attention to inclusive working practices and the high quality of the arts experience provided by Public Acts. The experience of working with Public Acts led to a new confidence in approaching arts and cultural organisations, and increased understanding of the skills and resources needed to undertake successful partnership work.

5. Audiences for both productions attracted significant numbers who were new to theatre and new to the National Theatre and Queen's Theatre Hornchurch. Their positive experiences inspired audience members to attend theatre more regularly and take part in theatre themselves.

6. Public Acts connected both theatres to more diverse audiences. Public Acts placed theatre at the heart of local and national communities, paving the way for new forms of audienicing that are inclusive.

7. Public Acts enabled the National Theatre and Queen's Theatre Hornchurch to engage their local communities. Working with community partners strengthened their relationships with places and people outside their usual demographic.

8. Public Acts has informed conversations in both theatres about how they can be strengthened by including a more diverse range of voices. Theatre professionals learned about inclusive working practices in workshops and rehearsal, and discovered the limits and potential of their theatre buildings to accommodate large and inclusive companies.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Powerful stories and compelling acts of theatre change everyone. The value and social benefit of Public Acts lies in understanding how it might be used to change the theatre as an industry, influence the partner organisations and enrich the participants' lives.

2. Public Acts is built on a model of partnership in which learning is mutually beneficial, with each partner respecting each other's roles and skills. There is already evidence that theatres and community partners are continuing to learn from each other. Structures to support this important dialogue should ensure Public Acts' legacy is sustained.

APPENDIX ONE

3. High-profile participatory programmes such as Public Acts have the potential to change the theatre industry by building a more inclusive workforce. Taking the lessons learnt from working with Public Acts participants, it is recommended that theatre professionals work to understand how the barriers to progression might be overcome, and how they are experienced by members of community companies. Exceptional professional artists, with diverse and varied backgrounds, enrich all theatre, including participatory programmes.

4. Public Acts and other change-orientated participatory programmes should be given time to mature. Change is incremental, and sustained funding would enable this to happen.

5. Public Acts and related participatory programmes accelerate how theatres relate to place and place-making. When theatre professionals listen deeply to Public Acts

participants, partners and audiences, the theatre becomes more inclusive, more representative of national and local identities and connects more deeply with audiences and communities. It is time for a national conversation about how theatre lies at the heart of communities, particularly in the light of the changes to creative practices in the pandemic.

This research is a story of hope. It shows that it is possible for major theatres, with international reputations, to listen and learn. Telling stories shapes lives and speaks of our shared values and our differences. Public Acts has the potential to help us imagine a theatre that is kinder, more inclusive and more socially just. In challenging times this asks everyone in theatre and beyond to let go of old certainties and find different ways of working. And this will require all of us to be open, generous and brave.

RESEARCH METHODS, PROTOCOLS AND PROCESSES

This research followed the values and empathetic ethos of Public Acts by conceptualising change as process-orientated and relational, based on networks of people, encounters and creative practices (Pink, 2009). The research methods were primarily qualitative and ethnographic, designed to reflect Public Acts' core values and take account of the unpredictable, multi-sensory qualities of rehearsals and theatre that are experienced physically and emotionally as well as cognitively (McAuley, 2012). This meant that research was open to the unexpected rather than measuring organisational change against pre-determined criteria or testing participants against pre-set goals.

We analysed over 550 hours of qualitative data drawn from participant observation of workshops, where the researchers took part alongside participants, rehearsals and performance, and related Public Acts events. We conducted 48 semi-structured interviews with theatre-makers, community participants and leaders in partner organisations, read 15 reflective diaries offered both anonymously and named, received poetry and art-works inspired by Public Acts. We were also privileged to have many informed and informal conversations as we spent time with the company. Quantitative data came from two paper surveys. 107 participants completed a survey at Queen's Theatre Hornchurch on 10 and 17 August 2019 (92.2 per cent of *As You Like It* community company), and an audience survey was conducted at each performance of *As You Like It* in August 2019. Responses have been digitised using Qualtrics and analysed using Excel and NVivo software. Not all respondents answered every question, and where there are significant variances this has been noted. Where permission was granted, comments made in interviews, written feedback, focus groups, research conversations and on surveys have been attributed but otherwise anonymity has also been respected.

The research received ethical approval from Royal Holloway, University of London.
royalholloway.ac.uk/iquad/services/researchsupport/ethics/ethicsandgovernance.aspx

CITED INTERVIEWS

THEATRES

Lisa Burger, Executive Director of the National Theatre and Joint Chief Executive, 3 June 2019
Emily Lim, Director of Public Acts, National Theatre, 13 November 2019
Rufus Norris, Director of the National Theatre and Joint Chief Executive, National Theatre, 3 June 2019
Mathew Russell, Executive Director, Queen's Theatre Hornchurch, 25 July and 21 October 2019
Douglas Rintoul, Artistic Director, Queen's Theatre Hornchurch, 21 October 2019
James Watson, Head of Learning and Participation, Queen's Theatre Hornchurch, 21 October 2019
Laura Richardson, Learning and Participation team, and Public Acts team, Queen's Theatre Hornchurch, 21 October 2019
Amanda Tyrell, Wardrobe Supervisor, National Theatre, 8 October 2018
Helen Casey, Deputy Head of Wigs, Hair and Make-up, National Theatre, 8 October 2018
Michael Roff, Head of Running Wardrobe, National Theatre, 8 October 2018

PARTNER ORGANISATIONS

Emma Colyer, MBE, Director of Body & Soul, 18 June 2019.
Jed Marsh, Assistant Director of Body & Soul, 18 June 2019
Hollie Smith, Head of Creative & Corporate Partnerships, Body & Soul, 18 June 2019
Humphrey Mwamje, Body & Soul, 10 August 2019
Catherine Tollington, Interim Executive Director, Bromley by Bow Centre, 5 August 2018
Rob Trimble, Chief Executive Officer, Bromley by Bow Centre, 26 June 2019

Sue Agyakwa, Family Learning tutor, Bromley by Bow Centre, 26 June 2019
Dr Carol Homden, CBE, Chief Executive Officer, Coram, 10 July 2019.
Brigid Robinson, Managing Director of Coram Voice and Young People's Projects, 10 July 2019
Tim Ellett, Marketing Director DABD, 26 June 2019
Jackie Redmond, Co-ordinator for the Golden Years programme DADB, 26 June 2019
Phil Champain, Director, The Faith & Belief Forum, 7 July 2019
Fiona Ranford, Development Co-ordinator, The Faith & Belief Forum, 7 July 2019
Iain Cassidy, Chief Executive, Open Age, 24 June 2019
Jenny Marshall, Head of Member Experience, Open Age, 24 June 2019.
Bill Tidnam, Chief Executive Officer, Thames Reach, 4 July 2019
Denise Vilanou, Support Worker, Thames Reach, 7 July 2019

INTERVIEWS WITH PARTICIPANTS

Sharon Bidecant, September 2019
Blossom Sandra Cole, 25 August 2018
Sandra Nakigagga, 25 August 2018
Louise Duguid, 25 August 2018
Ann Simpson, 3 July 2019
Gary Green, 6 July 2019
Alya Rashid, 13 July 2019
Nadege Rene, 13 July 2019
Rowanne Simpson, 10 August 2019
Layla Shirreh, 10 August 2019
Saroj Vadher, 17 August 2019
Majorie Agwang, 25 August 2019

CITED CORRESPONDENCE

Hannah Miles, correspondence, September 2018
Lisa Brown, correspondence, September 2018
Sade Hewitt-Ibru, correspondence, September 2018
Ketrin Vardiashvii, correspondence, September 2018

REFERENCES

Amin Ash, Doreen Massey and Nigel Thrift. 2000. *Cities for All the People Not the Few*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Ashton, Elaine and Gerry Harris. 2013. *A Good Night Out for the Girls*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Dodge, Rachel, Annette Daly, Jan Huyton and Lalage Sanders. 2012. The challenge of defining wellbeing. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 2(3), 222–235.

Fancourt, Daisy and Saoirse Finn. 2019. *What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review*. World Health Organisation culturehealthandwellbeing.org.uk/sites/default/files/9789289054553-eng.pdf. Accessed 12 December 2019.

Fiske, John. 1992. *Audiencing: A cultural studies approach to watching television*. Poetics. 21. 345–359.

Garde, Ulrike and Meg Mumford. 2016. *Theatre of Real People*. London: Bloomsbury.

Gauntlett, David. 2011. *Making is Connecting: The social meaning of creativity, from DIY and knitting to YouTube and Web 2.0*. Cambridge: Polity Press

Heim, Caroline. 2016. *Audience as Performer: The changing role of theatre audiences in the Twenty-First Century*. London: Routledge

Hughes, Jenny and Helen Nicholson. 2016. *Critical Perspectives on Applied Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Katuszewski, Pierre and Stefan Donath, 2020. Amateur Choruses: The professionalization of the choric form. *On Amateurs, Performance Research*. 25.1. 73–80

Khan, Sadiq. 2018. *The Mayor's Strategy for Social Integration Greater London Authority* london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/final_social_integration_strategy.pdf. Accessed 27 December 2019.

MacDougall, David. 2005. *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography, and the Senses*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

McAuley, Gay. 2012. *Not Magic But Work: An ethnographic account of a rehearsal process*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Pearson, Mike and Michael Shanks. 2001. *Theatre/ Archaeology*. London: Routledge

Pink, Sarah. 2009. *Doing Sensory Ethnography*. London: Sage Publications.

Putnam, Robert. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Walcon, Erin and Helen Nicholson. 2017. *The Sociable Aesthetics of Amateur Theatre*, *Contemporary Theatre Review*. 27. 1:18–33.

Walmsley, Ben. 2019. *Audience Engagement in the Performing Arts: A Critical Analysis*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.



Pericles
 Photograph by James Bellorini



Rehearsals for *As You Like It*
Photograph by Camilla Greenwell

APPENDIX TWO

COMMUNITY PARTNERS AND CAMEO GROUPS

COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Body & Soul
Bromley by Bow Centre
Coram
DABD
The Faith and Belief Forum
Havering Asian Social Welfare Association
(HASWA)
Open Age
Queen's Community Group
Thames Reach

CAMEO GROUPS

Pericles

The Archetype
Ascension Eagles Cheerleaders
Faith Works Choir (FWC)
London Bulgarian Choir
Manifest Nation
The Bhavan
Youthsayers

As You Like It

CommUnity Gospel Choir
Dhol Academy
London School of Lucha Libre

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to everyone who invited us to join the work, who shared thoughts and insights. We would like to acknowledge contributions from fellow academics Shirley Bryce-Heath and Gay McAuley. Director of Learning at the National Theatre, Alice King-Farlow's wise guidance helped the research progress; Director of Public Acts Emily Lim, Executive Director Mathew Russell and Artistic Director Douglas Rintoul at Queen's Theatre Hornchurch and the entire Public Acts team generously opened the doors of workshops and rehearsals and answered our many questions. Community partners and participants kindly gave their time to reflect thoughtfully on the experience. Everything we heard, saw and read informed our thinking, even if you are not mentioned by name.

National Theatre



