



Sarah's Appetite Story

Out in the Playground

Introduction

In 2014 Sarah Richardson, a theatre-maker and education theatre practitioner, successfully applied for Appetite's The Kitchen funding for a research and development project called Out in the Playground, which explored the idea of using school playgrounds as venues for theatre. After this R&D phase, Sarah received Grants for the Arts funding to create the installation and performance piece The Restoration Agency, which was directly influenced by the work she did through Out in the Playground. Engaging children and their families in the creative process during both the Appetite-funded R&D phase and the final piece was key to Sarah's project, with a particular focus on reaching people who may not usually engage with theatre or arts events.

Project information

Out in the Playground was a six week research and development project funded through Appetite's The Kitchen artist professional development programme in autumn 2014. Sarah used the funding to carry out initial conversations with other artists and practitioners, to research similar projects, and to run a series of workshops in two Stoke-on-Trent schools with Key Stage One children and their parents. At the end of the R&D phase, Sarah produced a detailed research document that showed the whole journey and plans for how the project could

progress, and held a Sharing Event. To view a short film of the project in schools visit: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ut4col64z5E&feature=youtu.be>

Sarah's story

Creating immersive theatre for children has been an integral part of Sarah's work for many years. Sarah originally trained as a contemporary dancer and then as an actor, and through performing in schools and to young audiences she found she enjoyed facilitating the theatre experience for young people. This led Sarah to join The New Vic Theatre's Education Team in 2005, through which for the past seven years she has written and directed Tail Trail, an annual interactive theatre event for preschool children (3-5 years) and their families.

Through the continued success of Tail Trail came Sarah's idea for Out in the Playground. "Tail Trail made me realise how immersive theatre for really young children is a good way of getting them into theatre, and for a first-time attendee it's a less formal way of coming to that art form," Sarah explains.

Sarah spoke to Gemma Thomas, Appetite's Creative Producer, about an idea for using school playgrounds as venues for theatre. This initial conversation led to Sarah to successfully apply for funding through The Kitchen for the research and development project Out in the Playground. This allowed her to carry out a feasibility study of whether putting on a theatre event in a school playground would be a good way to engage with children and their families in Stoke-on-Trent. She wanted to find out how people would engage with this form of theatre, how a playground would work as a venue, and its potential for engaging people who might not step inside a theatre building. The project aimed to overcome barriers such as transport, price and perception.

Sarah led the Out in the Playground project, working closely with Matilde Marangoni, a London-based Set Designer. They worked in partnership with two Stoke-on-Trent schools: Sutherland Primary Academy in Blurton, and Kingsland Academy in Bucknall.

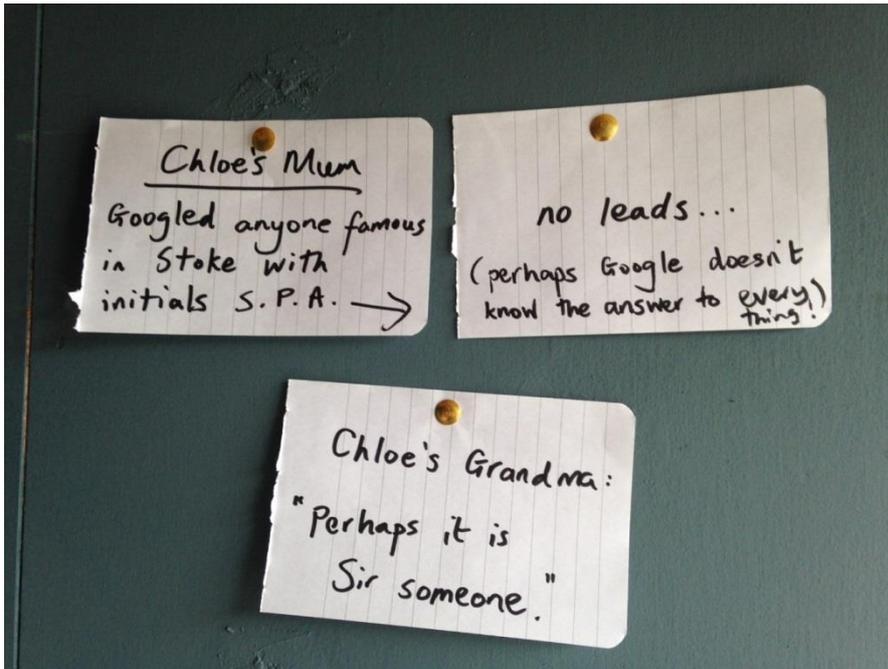
The Kitchen funding also allowed Sarah to have conversations with people who already created outdoor projects for families, such as Highly Sprung in Coventry, and this helped her to gain a better understanding of this field of work.

Sarah and Matilde spoke with Key Stage One teachers from the two schools who explained that the idea of respecting other people's property was something they felt was important to children, leading Sarah and Matilde to decide that the final piece was going to be about a lost property office. They took research trips,

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including one to Transport for London's lost property office, which gave Matilde a lot of visual ideas.

Inspired by this research, they then led workshops in both schools. Sarah led drama workshops which focused on building characters, story and narrative. The children would look through a box of objects and imagine who these might have belonged to, the story behind the objects getting lost and what they should do with them - should they return them, keep them, throw them away? Matilde led the design workshops, where the children were given objects such as cardboard



trees, ladders, and chairs from which they created their own lost property offices, thinking about what that space might look like, and what it might have inside. "The children loved it - it really fired up their imaginations,"

Families were encouraged to take an active role in solving the mystery of a lost globe that had turned up at their school by posting their ideas on the wall of the installation. This sparked lots of conversations between performers and audiences out in the playground.

says Sarah. "They were coming up with fantastic words to describe the objects and ideas that we

hadn't thought of. A lot of the lost property offices had gardens on the roofs where the officer could get up to have a look outside - that idea had never occurred to us! Another child said that there should be seashells." These both fed into the final installation, with grass on the roof which one of the characters pretends to cut, and the shelves inside adorned with seashells and other objects suggested by the workshop participants. When children see their ideas from the planning stages used in the final piece "it gives them a sense of ownership, and seeing their ideas used and validated by somebody else can give them a great sense of confidence," says Sarah. "We definitely saw that when we went back to schools with the performance and installation."

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Sarah and Matilde also invited parents into some of the workshops. As the children already knew the task they were able to lead their parents through it, which encouraged the families to engage. “It made it easier for adults to not feel quite so silly, or if they’ve got a fear about engaging with theatre, it took away that - they went, ‘Right, I’m coming in for my child.’” Sarah’s choice to explore using school playgrounds as a venue came from wanting to engage not just with the children but their families as they would easily see and be more inclined to explore an installation placed outside of the school building.

Engaging children in theatre was a key aim for Out in the Playground. “If it’s not something you’re exposed to as a child or get an excitement and enthusiasm about, it can be a lot harder stepping in as an adult,” says Sarah. She feels theatre can be about “opening up a child’s horizons - opening up their ideas. It helps them reflect on the world that is around them. Theatre can be a really safe space to explore issues - to see things played out in front of you and then to reflect on it and go, ‘Was that the right thing that character did? Would I act in the same way?’ Or, ‘That character has the same problem I’m dealing with and this is what they did to help themselves out of it.’ Theatre has this intrinsic value.” Sarah has also seen how getting children and young people involved in the creative process helps with communication, speaking and listening skills, and building up their confidence to talk in front of others and the confidence to express an opinion.

The Restoration Agency

At the end of The Kitchen funded project, Sarah produced a research document that outlined the whole journey and included plans for what the lost property installation may be. She also held a sharing event, which Lou Lomas (the producer for The Kitchen) and Gemma both attended, where Sarah shared the findings and what the next steps might be and had the opportunity to talk through potential paths.

The Out in the Playground research document became an important part of moving her idea forward as Sarah sent it to funders and to other schools, meaning she could show what she had already done and where it could lead.

Sarah successfully applied for the Arts Council’s Grants for the Arts funding to transform the idea into reality. In summer 2015, Sarah returned to the two schools she had worked with for Out in the Playground to bring them The Restoration Agency.

Sarah took the learning around engaging the children's families from Out in the Playground to see schools set aside times after the school day to open up the installation and performance for families.

The Restoration Agency was at each school for two weeks, and on the second Fridays both schools held an Open Afternoon for the families to come in and see the installation and performance and to see what the children had produced in response to the project.

In both schools they had to hold extra sessions as more people had come than they had anticipated. "We had such an incredible response," says Sarah. "I got an email from one of the teachers one evening saying, 'Um, we've got about fifty children who are bringing one or two parents - what are we going to do?' which was lovely, though we had to think through the logistics!"

One experience was especially memorable. "There was one boy whose parents never usually came to anything at school," says Sarah. "But his mum and dad both turned up for the Open Afternoon - he was so pleased that they were there, and they looked at the work he had created in response to the project and saw the performance with him. It was really special. There's something about this project, with the children getting really excited about it, which has made these parents come in."

Prior to the project teachers from both schools had reported parental engagement with the school as being low. The teachers agreed that the project had helped parents engage with the schools.

As well as visiting the two schools with The Restoration Agency, Sarah went on to bring the piece to several festivals over summer 2015.

Earlier in the year, Sarah had successfully applied to be part of The Forge, an artist's engagement incubator scheme run by Wild Rumpus CIC, and this is where The Restoration Agency was rehearsed before being taken into schools. Out of this connection with Wild Rumpus came commissions to take The Restoration Agency to two family festivals: Run Wild Child (part of the Dig the City Festival in Manchester), and Just So Festival. The Restoration Agency also appeared as part of the line-up for Appetite's The Big Feast, held in Stoke-on-Trent City Centre over August bank holiday weekend (pictured).

Taking The Restoration Agency to festivals was a great learning curve for Sarah, giving her experience in adapting a piece originally created for use in school



playgrounds to different environments, from green field sites to city centres. The Restoration Agency is a piece “where you get rewarded if you’re curious enough to step inside” - something which Sarah noticed children were more willing to do than their parents - which made considerations such as how the piece interacted with the rest of the festival line-up, its location, and how the actors engaged with passing audiences key to its success.

In September 2015 The Restoration Agency went on to appear at Ramsbottom Festival, where it was seen by Z-Arts and the Staffordshire Arts Team, both of whom Sarah has since had conversations with.

As well as exploring festival work, Sarah also plans to keep the project true to its original aim by working with more schools in and around Stoke-on-Trent.

Appetite funding and Sarah’s development as an artist

Receiving support through The Kitchen was invaluable to Sarah’s development as an artist. Sarah learnt about the logistics of producing and touring an outdoor theatre event, from insurance, security, health and safety, to attracting audiences in different contexts. She learnt about managing a team of creatives, budgets and independent project management, all of which will inform her future work.

Lou Lomas, the producer for The Kitchen, provided valuable advice and guidance and helped with the nuts and bolts of the project, such as recruitment and contracts. Sarah found this support invaluable, especially as Out in the Playground was her first freelance project. Through The Kitchen, Sarah also

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received support around areas such as other sources of funding, and suggesting other people to get in touch with.

Beyond the funding and practical support, the experience has given Sarah the confidence to work as a freelance artist. “For me it set the ball rolling. I don’t know if I’d have got it off the ground without it,” she says. “Building your confidence to plough on with an idea is really valuable - in some ways, more than the money - because, especially if it’s an idea you’ve had on your own and you’re not part of a company, it’s very easy for that energy to drop or for you to go, ‘I don’t know - maybe it just won’t work.’ Support is really important to get that idea off the ground. It’s amazing what you can do with support like this, what it can lead onto and it really felt like it was the spark to get me going.”

Would she have gone ahead with Out in the Playground without support from The Kitchen? “No. I just wouldn’t have known how to approach it - it would’ve seemed too big a step. The Kitchen works really nicely as a stepping stone onto other things. And then you go off and learn more as you go. I still feel as though if I got stuck I know where the Appetite team are - I know there is a friendly face. That’s really nice to know.”

What themes would you use to categorise this case study?

Family arts; outdoor events; education; artist development; participatory arts; community arts; engaging with local people; arts for children; widening participation



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