



Theresa's Appetite Story

Reading the Riot Act

Introduction

In 2015, as an active member of the Brighter Futures Community Hub, Theresa commissioned the show Reading the Riot Act. In the run up to the commission Theresa visited a variety of arts events to inform the artist's brief she would produce, and shadowed Gemma from Appetite to gain a deeper understanding of the processes behind creating events. Theresa was highly involved throughout the commission, from writing the brief to providing creative input for the shows. The experience has given Theresa more confidence and a desire to build a career in the arts.

Theresa first became involved with Appetite in 2013 through the Brighter Futures Community Hub. Theresa has taken part in two other case studies as part of the evaluation of Appetite. The first of these explores her initial involvement with the programme, attending arts events alongside other service users from Brighter Futures and then starting to volunteer at Appetite events. The second, a creative case study (view the video on [Youtube](#)), illustrates how Appetite has empowered her. These case studies come together to show the journey Theresa has been on through Appetite.

Project information

Reading the Riot Act was an interactive walk-through show held in the disused Fenton Library for one weekend in November 2015. The piece, created by visual theatre company Periplum, drew on the true stories of Stoke-on-Trent's 1842 Chartist Riots. The shows operated on a "pay what you think it's worth" basis,

and Theresa also utilised crowdfunding to help towards the cost of the event.

Theresa's story

Theresa first became involved with the Appetite programme as a service user of Brighter Futures. She attended several arts events with other members of the Brighter Futures Appetite Community Hub and became increasingly more involved, going on to volunteer at Appetite events. As the only consistent and most active member of the Brighter Futures Hub, Theresa took on the challenge of commissioning an arts event with support from Appetite.

Between November 2014 and June 2015, Theresa took two event trips per month, introducing herself to a wide range of artistic experiences to help influence her commission. Gemma Thomas, Appetite's Creative Producer, recommended several questions for Theresa to reflect on at each event she visited. Before each event, Theresa asked herself why she was going to see it. Then afterwards, she would ask herself: What were the top three things about the event? Bottom three things? Would you recommend it and why, and if so, who to? How was it delivered (considering aspects such as the art form, quality, and style)? Overall experience? And what would be two things to keep from the event to put in a commission?

These research trips were all designed to help Theresa think about what she wanted from the commission. Gemma wanted to challenge Theresa's perceptions of different art forms through the research trips, so their trips included going to see opera, ballet, Shakespeare, immersive events, festivals, and exhibitions. "Some things I thought I didn't like I have changed my mind on, and vice versa," says Theresa. "Some things I enjoyed but all the other things around it made it not a good experience. One of the shows didn't open the doors until fifteen minutes before and the staff were miserable as sin... It just put a dampener on it."

After each performance Theresa would reflect and make notes. She sometimes did this on the train home, after a day or two, or between shows if at a festival. She has found it interesting to read back through these notes later, as she noticed how her opinions had sometimes changed between writing it down and then looking back later, finding herself thinking, "Oh, that's not my lasting memory of that!"

After this research phase, Theresa sat with Gemma and did a tally up of the things she would like to keep and the things she didn't like. She used this tally to help her decide what it was she wanted from her commission. She didn't want to replicate any of the events she had seen, only elements of them, and so over June-July 2015, she wrote her own original brief instead, with Gemma giving her examples as a framework.

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Theresa also spent one to two days a week shadowing Gemma, going along to meetings, reading artist promotions, contacting people, and typing up notes. This gave her an inside view of Appetite, taking her more away from the general volunteering and into the more technical side. When she needed to contact the City Council during Reading the Riot Act she could put a face to the name, making the process easier for her.



Theresa knew that she wanted her commission to incorporate history, and that it should take place indoors, in a disused building, and as a walk around event. Even as she was writing the brief she knew that she wanted Fenton Library as the venue, a building she used to go to as a child. Visiting it again brought back lots

of memories. “It made me feel really happy to be back in the building but sad as well as it had fallen to bits,” she reflects. Stoke-on-Trent City Council offered the use of Fenton Library rent-free for Theresa’s commission. The building was very derelict with lots of leaks, so Gemma encouraged Theresa to see other potential venues too. Gemma has since let on that she had reservations about the building at the time, and Theresa recognises that it was good of Gemma to trust her to run with it.

The brief was advertised and received ten applications, out of which they interviewed four. Visual theatre company Periplum was commissioned to produce Reading the Riot Act, a walk through show based on The Chartist uprising of 1842, drawing strongly on Stoke-on-Trent’s heritage.

Theresa got on really well with the Periplum team and enjoyed working with them. It took her a while to have the confidence in her ability to contact people, and Gemma wouldn’t do it for her, which made her take the step herself. Theresa was heavily involved in researching the history of The Chartist Riots and life in Stoke-on-Trent at the time, finding out details such as what clothes people wore, and sourcing original newspapers from the trials. Theresa’s research directly influenced the artists’ work.

“I felt part of the team working with Periplum,” says Theresa. “I had a couple of ‘What am I doing?’ moments, but Periplum were very supportive and said, ‘You

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are doing it!’” Theresa feels that her relationship with Gemma has been fantastic. “I have never had any doubt she had confidence in me.”

The popular Reading the Riot Act shows took place on Saturday 28th and Sunday 29th November 2015, with audience members going round the performance in pairs. Theresa is writing her own report on the response to the show, including the success of using ‘Pay what you want’ ticketing.

She has gained a lot from her experience of commissioning Reading the Riot Act. She feels she has learnt “to have more faith in myself in the future.” She has also learnt about reflecting on art, “being realistic about things and not so negative,” and to “pick your battles - I only have so much energy. When working so close with the artists I have learnt not to be intimidated, which is hard when you are at the bottom of the ladder, looking up to the really successful artists at the top. Periplum were very complimentary.”

Periplum want to keep in touch to continue to run Reading the Riot Act again, showing the potential longevity of Theresa’s commission.

Theresa also took part in other aspects of the project. “I went on the radio and also did two voice overs for the show, and appeared on film. I did it all,” she says. It was the first time Theresa had been on the radio, something she concluded is not as terrible as it looks. She doesn’t think she would ever enjoy going on the radio but she would do it again.

Challenges and learning

Theresa feels there were some tensions during the process. At times she felt that other people saw her as “just a volunteer” and “not a member of staff.” “I know this has made me stronger - if I can deal with the tensions I can deal with anything,” she says. “I know I am a good volunteer - I didn’t know if I was a good producer. It was all about making people believe I was in control - but I was like a duck out of water.”

Periplum and Appetite were both juggling lots of projects while working on Reading the Riot Act, which led to a level of stress. Theresa felt there was never time to talk things through as everyone was stressed, and this stress made all the existing tensions become huge. On top of all this Theresa was having to deal with her own situation, in the background.

Through Theresa’s experience emerges learning around the support that Appetite can give to individuals and Community Hubs who are commissioning work. “If they were going to support a Hub to do this again in the future they should make the timeframe longer - especially if it is a new piece of work,” says Theresa. “If the project is being discussed in an Appetite team meeting make sure someone

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from the Hub is there. Make sure communication is clear.”

Looking ahead

Theresa has gone from being an event volunteer in Year One of Appetite to commissioning a successful, innovative performance for Year Three. “It proved to me that I can do it,” she says. “I want to pursue this as a career. I can’t argue with what happened that weekend. I have started taking this seriously, whether it is creative producing or history and heritage. I am starting to develop a network of support and have a potential mentor.”

Theresa has the confidence now to say what she does and does not like. “I don’t think I would give artists so much leeway - I wouldn’t want to be in a job where I was just putting on work. I like to have a creative input. New work is the route I want to do.”

She is interested in combining the areas of art production and mental health in her future work. “I want to break down walls and reduce rough treatment,” she says.

Theresa is still volunteering with Appetite, and also volunteers at The New Vic Theatre each week. Even though the team were concerned about overloading her, Theresa wanted to (and did) pull together the choir for #LoveChristmas, the Christmas Lights Switch On event in Stoke-on-Trent City Centre in November 2015. Creating the choir was another “I can do this” moment for Theresa.

The whole process of commissioning Reading the Riot Act has deepened Theresa’s understanding of the arts and cultural sector, leaving her inspired to do even more.

What themes would you use to categorise this case study?

Engaging communities; working with local people; artist’s development; mental health; heritage; supporting volunteers

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