

# An investigation into Independent Producing: an action research project

**Pippa Frith and Thomas Wildish**

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# INTRODUCTION

We chose to work together on a series of projects after deciding to increase our portfolio of independent producing work. This programme was designed to help us to develop a model and framework for the delivery of our work together. We interrogated questions such as: What type of work would we like to do together? What are the best models to facilitate this work? Should we work in a formal partnership or operate on a more informal basis?

This programme of work was funded by Arts Council England through Grants for the Arts. We agreed to publish a report detailing the activity we undertook and conclusions we reached, we hope you enjoy reading it. Our main conclusion is that an ongoing informal partnership is most suited to our working practices, as detailed later in this report.

## About Pippa

Pippa Frith is an Independent Producer who focuses on working with artists to develop, produce and tour new work. In addition she works with organisations to project manage activity, and as a mentor to emerging producers.

Before working as an Independent Producer Pippa worked as a Project Manager at Women & Theatre. She spent 3 years as a programmer at The Drum Arts Centre, Birmingham. In 2007 she project managed the decibel performing arts showcase, Birmingham for Fierce Earth and Arts Council England as well as working on Fierce! 10, Mirage Film Festival and Architecture Week. She has worked in an administrative capacity for Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, and as a Duty Manager for Derby Dance Centre. She studied at Manchester Metropolitan University, majoring in Theatre and Live Arts.

As an Independent Producer Pippa does some work in partnership with Thomas Wildish. Artists and companies she has worked with outside this partnership include: Francesca Millican-Slater, Soul City Arts / Mohammed Ali, Geiger Counter Theatre, Benji Reid, Ravi Thornton, Rachel Mars and Nick Makoha.

## About Thomas

Thomas Wildish is an Independent Producer & General Manager. He produces performance-based arts events. He helps organisations develop their businesses. He helps artists manage their projects.

Previously, Thomas was General Manager at Foursight Theatre. It toured on the small to mid scale and produced site specific work. Immediately prior to joining Foursight, Thomas was Director of The Y, a 300-seat theatre in the centre of Leicester that presents a cross art-form programme with a focus on music. Previously, Thomas was Marketing & Development Manager at Derby Dance, the only dedicated dance house in the East Midlands, and held marketing and Box Office roles at Nottingham Playhouse.

Thomas sits on the board of Red Earth Theatre, a touring company specialising in accessible work for children and young people; Black Country Touring, which programmes professional theatre and dance in the Black Country as well as producing its own work; and the Jewellery Quarter Development Trust, which carries out a range of activities for the benefit of those who live, work, learn within, and visit Birmingham's historic Jewellery Quarter.

As an Independent Producer & General Manager Thomas does some work in partnership with Pippa Frith. Companies he has worked with outside of this partnership include: Bone Ensemble, Jane Packman Company, Rosie Kay Dance Company, Talking Birds, and The Other Way Works

# APPROACH

## ACTION RESEARCH

We decided to work practically on four projects, each selected because of their different starting points and development needs. This helped us test different ways of working together and to explore how our partnership could be of benefit to artists and companies.

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

We worked with a colleague with significant producing experience to offer us advice and challenge our thinking through our programme of activity. We undertook formal 'Go & Sees' with producers/producing companies across the country to learn about their models of delivery. We also had informal conversations with various producers and producing companies throughout the process. We also kept abreast of other activities looking at the role of producer, such as the Invisible Army D&D and Bristol's 'What's love got to do with it' event.

## FEASIBILITY

Throughout the project we met regularly to reflect on our process. As well as interrogating others' models, we met informally with artists, practitioners, and other stakeholders to assess the producing needs of the region. The intention was to ensure any model we developed was appropriate to the region whilst also drawing on practice nationally.

**The programme of activity was designed to enable us to more fully explore the possibilities of how we could work together and the best model for delivery of our work.**

To test a working partnership in the context of leading and commissioning projects (where we develop the concept and put together a creative team for its delivery)

**Commissioning**

To test the working partnership in the context of support the development of an existing

**Development**

**ACTION  
RESEARCH**

**Producing**

To test the working partnership in the context of co-producing a production (and its subsequent tour) with an existing company

**Project Management**

To test the working partnership in the context of project management (delivery of a project when its outcomes are defined by others)

**During the life of this project we undertook a series of action-research activities to test our theories and working relationship in real time**

## COMMISSIONING

### IF ONLY I COULD...

If Only I Could... was an outdoor participatory circus project based in the West Midlands. We initiated in response to sector-discussions about the desire to stimulate circus activity in the region. As well as offering paid work opportunities to circus professionals we also worked with seven participants who were new to circus, building their interest and knowledge of the sector and developing their practical skills.

If Only I Could... took place during May – August 2012. It culminated in 3 performance days with a total of 8 performances, reaching audiences of 7500. The project employed 4 artists for a total of 92 days, and engaged a further 7 participants over 90 training sessions.

Project partners were Birmingham Hippodrome's Six Summer Saturdays, mac birmingham, and Sandwell Arts Festival.

## PRODUCING

### BABAKAS

We worked specifically on the company's debut show Our Fathers. We joined the team in early 2012 shortly after they won China Plate's Bite Size commission.

Our co-producing role encompassed a wide range of activities including: tour booking, fundraising, partner development, tour management and financial management.

The full show was premiered at Warwick Arts Centre in June 2012. It went on to have a further stage of development before touring in spring 2013 to the following venues:

- mac birmingham | CarriageWorks, Leeds | Rich Mix, London | The Junction, Cambridge | The Arena, Wolverhampton | Illkey Playhouse | Parabola Arts Centre, Cheltenham | The Lowry, Salford

In summer 2013 Our Fathers went to Edinburgh Festival Fringe for a full run at Summer Hall. After receiving good reviews and promoter attendance we booked a second tour which is scheduled to happen in May/June 2014.

## PROJECT MANAGEMENT

# THEATRE FEVER

Theatre Fever was a celebration of theatre in the West Midlands, taking place between 9th and 24th March 2013. It featured 35 shows in 22 venues across Birmingham, Coventry and the Black Country. All the work was from West Midlands based theatre-makers, with some of the programme commissioned specifically for Theatre Fever. Performances were hosted in theatre spaces as well as site-specific locations such as pubs, hairdressers and markets.

We co-curated the programme, which involved detailed venue liaison and programming discussions with artists commissioned for the programme, as well as the five Holding Space consortium members: Birmingham REP, Black Country Touring, mac birmingham, Stan's Cafe, and Warwick Arts Centre.

Our co-management role included recruiting and managing: the Marketing & Audience Development Manager, Press Manager, Communities Manager and a team of approximately twelve front-of-house support staff. In addition we supported two Producer Bursary positions and four Young Reviewers.

## DEVELOPMENT

# TIN BOX

We supported Tin Box via an informal mentoring process, which took two main forms: ongoing meetings to support planning, strategy and development and responsive problem solving through email and phone contact.

Meetings were used to support the company in developing their thinking around a range of things including:

- Understanding the funding landscape and opportunities
- Managing activity
- Reviewing and feeding back on funding applications
- Identifying potential partners and approaching them
- Identifying suitable touring networks and approaching them

Regular contact through email and phone meant the company were able to ask ad-hoc questions on an ongoing basis. The nature and range of these questions varied greatly throughout. On-the-whole these interventions did not take much of our capacity to support, but saved a lot of time for the company.

During this period the company secured a Holding Space commission for Theatre Fever and created a new piece work. They secured funding from Arts Council England to undertake a period of professional development alongside a national tour.

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT



We met formally with the following producers to discuss their practice, career path, the future ambitions:

- Matt Burman
- Emily Coleman
- Ruth Dudman
- Mark Makin
- Lucy Moore
- David Morgan
- Richard Morgan
- Ric Watts

We wanted to understand how others have made it work. Interrogating existing models has allowed us to identify our own.

## FEASIBILITY



We spoke to many other producers and producing companies throughout the process, allowing us to gain a useful overview of Independent Producing activity happening nationally.

We also maintained a strong dialogue with regional artists to consider their support and development needs, This allowed us to examine our development in the context of the overall sector.

This helped to ensure any model we developed was appropriate to the region whilst also drawing on practice nationally.

**This activity has led us to the reflections and conclusions outlined within this report.**

# OBSERVATIONS, REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Our thinking has developed throughout the project with clear inquiry questions coming to the fore:

- **What is producing?**
- **Should we enter into formal partnership (do we need a name)?**
- **How does the relationship between producer and artist change depending on the nature of the project (with or for)?**
- **What does success / satisfaction mean for us on any given project?**
- **How much effort should I put into any given project?**

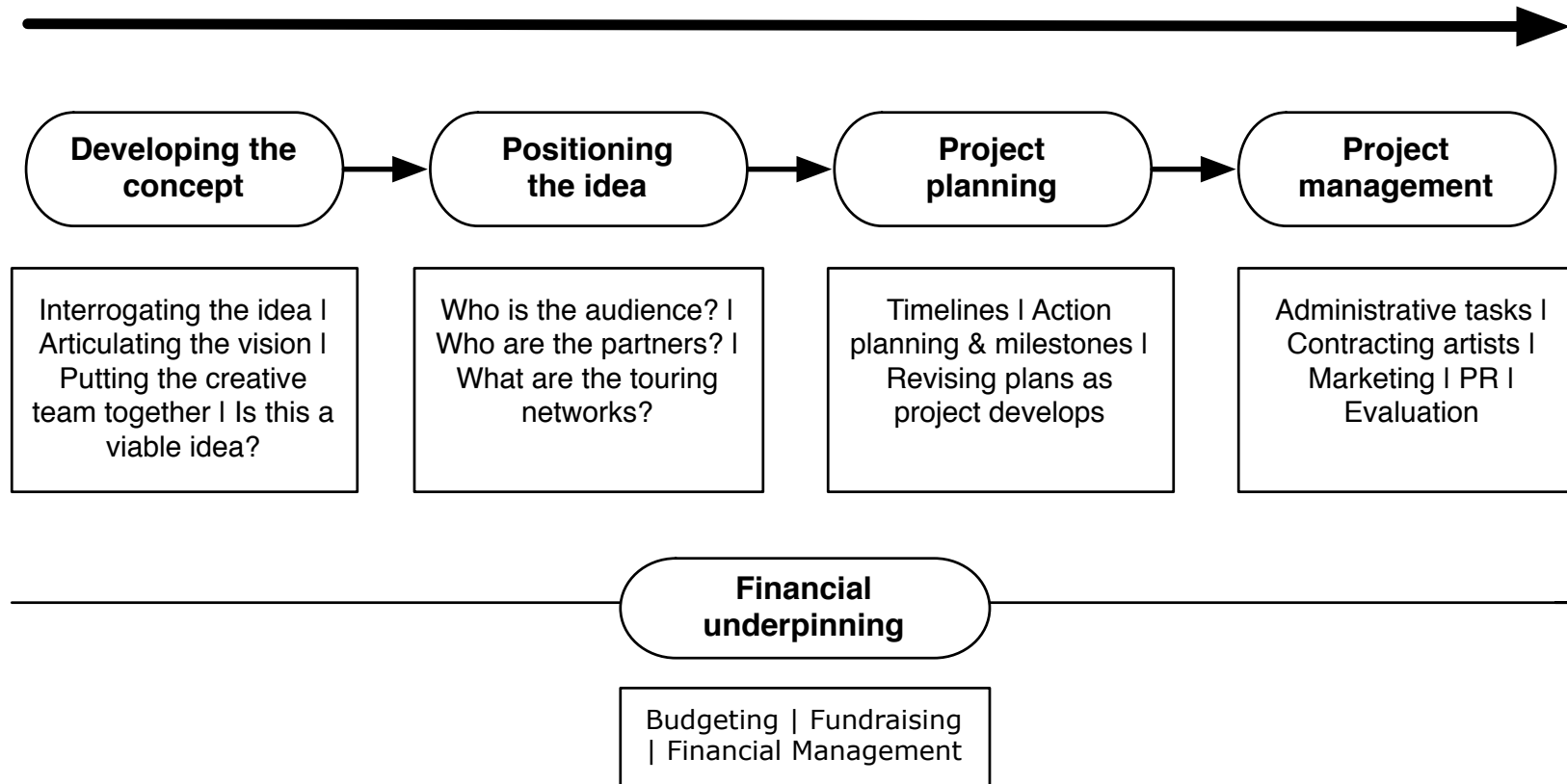
The subsequent diagrams outline our conclusions to these questions.

We have also drawn together a list of **bite-size observations** from our varied conversations.



# What is producing?

**Producing: turning ideas into action**



- We were struck by the focus some people place on 'Producer' (the noun) over 'Producing' (the verb). For us, the role of the producer is about the act of making things happen. This diagram intends to show what we feel the role of a Producer contains.
- The spectrum shows areas of the Producer's role in relation to the development of work. Although this model can also be applied to broader company development.
- The extent to which a producer inputs into different parts of the spectrum depends on the relationship they have with an artist or project. However, the skills to input into 'developing the concept' or 'positioning the idea' is what moves the role of producer away from one which is purely administrative.

## Should we enter into a formal partnership (do we need a name)?

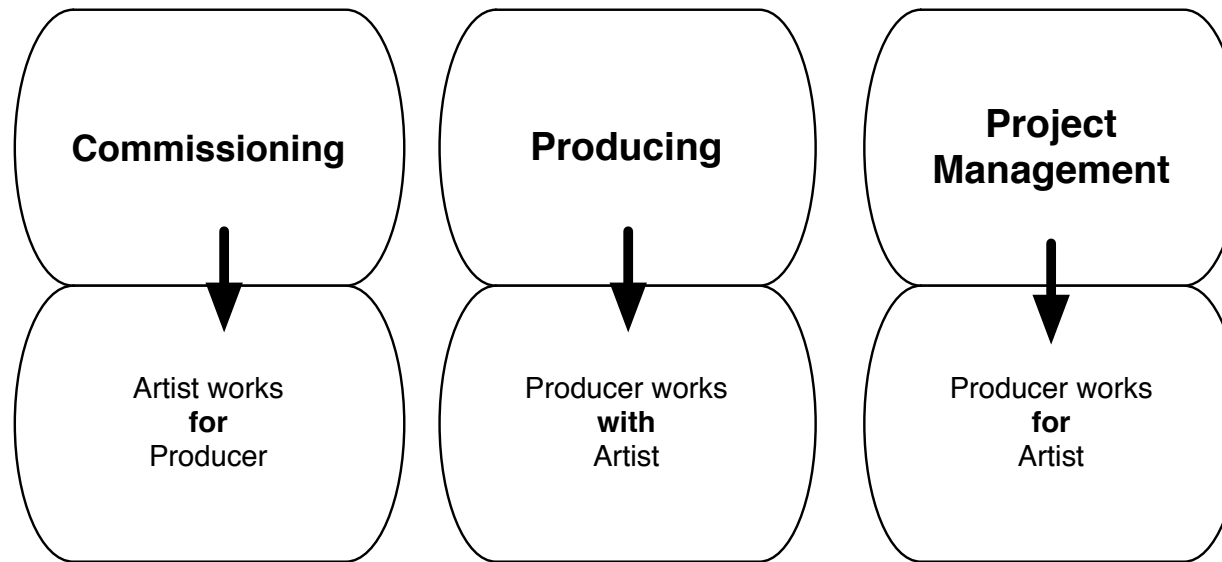
	Brand	No-brand
Formal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Limits liability</li> <li>- More funding opportunities</li> <li>- Clear positioning for artists/companies</li> <li>- Potentially limits range of artists you can work with (do they fit in the 'stable' of artists)</li> <li>- Potentially onerous administrative structure</li> <li>- Requires longer term business planning</li> <li>- Requires commitment to working together for the long-term</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Limits liability</li> <li>- More funding opportunities</li> <li>- Flexibility to work with a broad range of artists/companies</li> <li>- Potentially onerous administrative structure</li> <li>- Requires longer term business planning</li> <li>- Requires commitment to working together for the long-term</li> </ul>
Informal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Clear positioning for artists/companies</li> <li>- Potentially limits range of artists you can work with (do they fit in the 'stable' of artists)</li> <li>- No limit for liability</li> <li>- Requires longer term planning/positioning</li> <li>- Fewer opportunities for fundraising</li> <li>- Lack organisational infrastructure sometimes required by funders/partners</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Flexibility to work with a broad range of artists/companies</li> <li>- No limit for liability</li> <li>- Ability to be very responsive to circumstances</li> <li>- Allows freedom for career paths to change direction</li> <li>- Fewer opportunities for fundraising</li> <li>- Lack organisational infrastructure sometimes required by funders/partners</li> </ul>

- The diagram looks at the features of:  
a) 'formal' companies (the creation of a legal entity through which to deliver work)

b) 'branded' producing outfits (those without a brand usually just leading with the producers name).

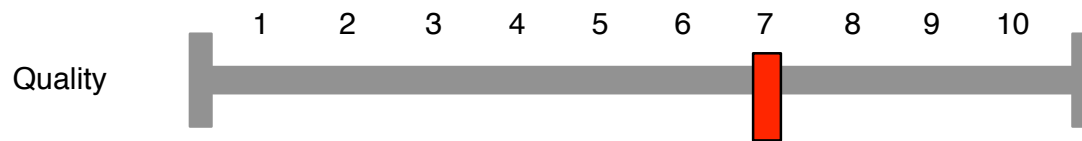
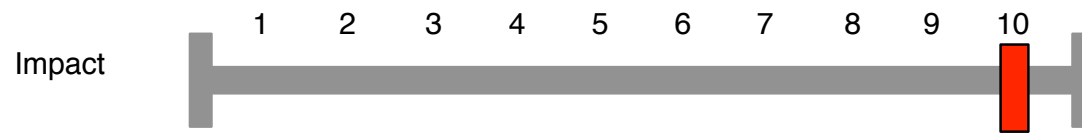
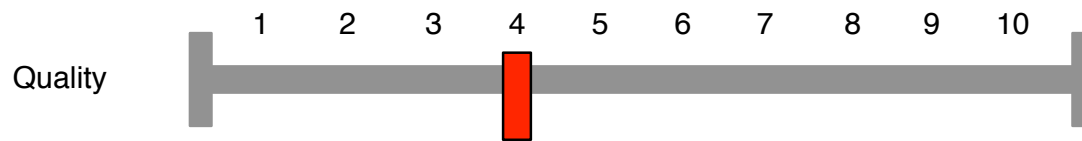
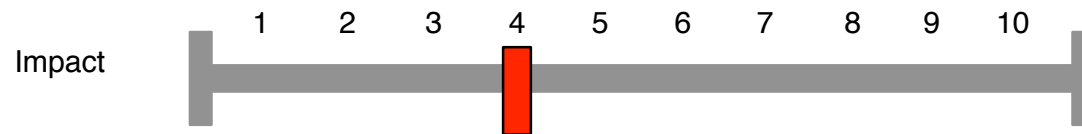
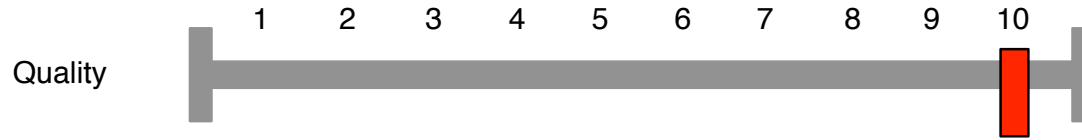
- This activity helped to interrogate which quadrant would be the most appropriate for the work we deliver together

## How does the relationship between producer and artist change depending on the nature of the project (with or for)?



- Our working partnership is most suited to projects where the relationship with the artist is that of a commissioner or project manager because the power dynamics are clear.
- In the role of producer, as outlined in our producing spectrum, it becomes more problematic for us to work together because the relationship between artist and producer is more equitable. Therefore, it is often personality led and cannot be 'forced' by a partnership.

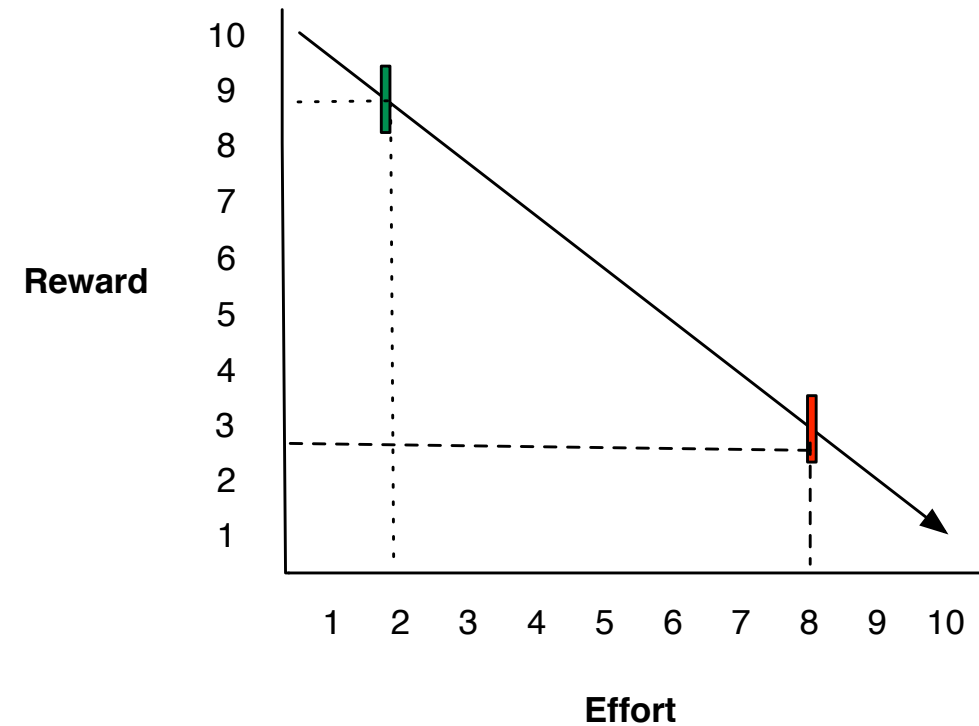
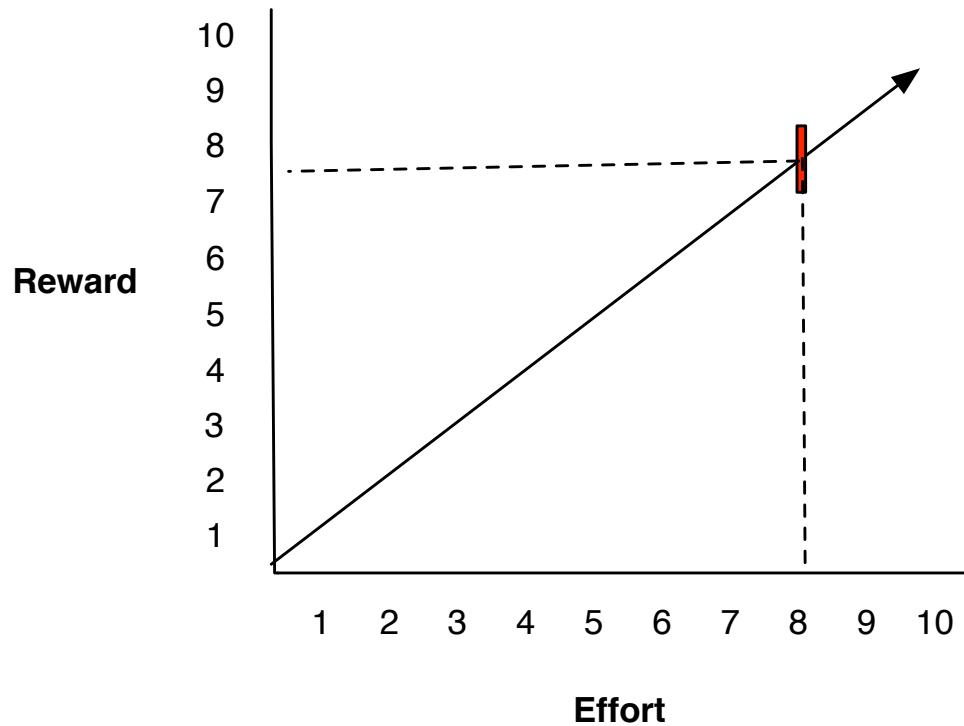
## What does success / satisfaction mean for us on any given project?



- This diagram acknowledges that, for us, satisfaction about the success of a project is based on two key factors: the quality of the work produced and the impact it makes.

- Whilst a project can still be considered a success if the level of 'Quality' and 'Impact' is as per the first two examples, we found that satisfaction levels are highest when both these elements are maximised (as in image three).

## How much effort should I put into any given project?



- A sense of natural justice can lead you to think that the reward from a project is commensurate to the amount of effort expended: the more you put in, the more you get out.
- This is not the case, however; a judgement call on the amount of effort required for the outputs needed is a crucial part of the project planning process. The picture on the right illustrates it is possible to put in a lot of effort for little reward, or a little effort for high reward.
- A problem arises if budgets/capacity are planned based the picture on the left, but during delivery activity is closer to the red-marker on the picture on the right.

## Bite-size observations

- The importance of networks and recognising these begin at the starting point of your professional life, not just your producing career.
- A high volume of work is important; it gives you the opportunity to craft your producing skills.
- Working in an organisation will develop a series of skills and knowledge that will support an independent producing career later on.
- If an independent producer does not have enough passion and commitment around the artist / project, combined with a can-do attitude, this is likely to impact on job satisfaction and in some cases quality of delivery.

- Allowing each working relationship to develop on its own terms.
- Be useful to both parties, never communicate if it's not of interest.
- If it stops working, stop doing it.
- Understand and monitor the potential for change in opportunities for financial support to develop and present work and be ready to adapt to the climate.
- There is complexities around working with someone on a long-term basis, but financial support being on a project to project basis.

- Whilst lessons can be learnt from others' operating or business models, the nature of independent producing means each individual's model will be bespoke to them.
- This process forced us both to consider 'what does success look like for me?'
- There is a value in being nimble and quick.
- The value of informal support networks when working independently and building contact with these networks formally into your working practice
- Accepting there is a financial risk to working independently.
- Find the one or two things you're good at and focus on those, don't be afraid of outsourcing the rest.

- Learn to say no
- Someone's role and their tasks cannot necessarily be inferred from their title.
- Words can mean different things to different people, make sure everyone's on the same page.
- Whilst there is a desire to contribute to broader sector-development (over and above the delivery of your own projects), it can be difficult to prioritise this. Solutions can come by contributing to structured sector-development programmes.

## CONCLUSION

A key objective at the beginning of this process was to explore the potential of some form of working relationship. Through understanding and analysing the many working models for Independent Producers, alongside delivering a series of practical projects together, we sought to find our own working path.

There are many routes to producing and individual, partnership, and company working models have been successful for producers nationally. But every person's story, journey and preferred working methods are unique to them. Despite the wide ranging patterns, models and career paths, it was clear that information sharing and connecting with others doing similar roles - either in a formal or informal way - supported the development of those we spoke to.

For us, we have concluded an informal and unbranded - but practical - partnership will be most useful. There is a range of work we are both interested in, but also a sufficient diversity in areas which only one of us carries a strong interest. By remaining as sole-traders we are able to make entirely independent decisions about projects and act nimbly. Additionally, for us, the administrative and branding needs of a formal partnership felt incompatible with our particular needs and desired outcomes.

Continuing a partnership informally - underpinned by ongoing joint commitments such as co-production of the regional work-in-progress platform PILOT Nights - allows potential partners to consider the option of working with both of us on specific projects (we have regularly been approached to work on projects throughout this programme of work). This means we retain the potential for both of us to work together on larger-scale projects, alongside the ongoing opportunity to choose to develop and commission projects together.

This model is largely based on trust and a good understanding of each other. In real terms we speak regularly and have a good understanding of each others portfolios. We often use each other as sounding boards, our conversations help us to solve problems we may have and are a good source of general support. We share resources and information. We work together on projects if it feels appropriate and viable to do so and make those decisions together on an ongoing basis. We are careful to allow people to approach us together or individually - or to explore both options - by being transparent about our working relationship. The needs of the project itself will often dictate the most appropriate way of working.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & THANK-YOUs

We would like to thank all the producers we met with and the companies we worked with; their biographies are detailed below. We would also like to thank all the other people: artists, producers, and other professionals who talked to us informally along the way and helped us develop our thinking.

### **Matt Burman**

Matt is Head of Programme & Audiences at Warwick Arts Centre, leading on audience development, and on commissioning, producing and programming new work across artform. Between 2008-2011, he was Executive Producer at the Norfolk & Norwich Festival producing and programming circus, dance, theatre, music and outdoor work. He has worked with Hannah Walker and Chris Thorpe on *This is Just to Say...* and *The Oh Fuck Moment*. From 2003-2008, he was General Manager of Forced Entertainment, producing works including *Bloody Mess*, *Exquisite Pain* and *The World in Pictures*. He has worked for the British Council and the Big Chill, and began his career as a violinist touring with orchestras including the Academy of Ancient Music and the King's Consort. He has a MA in Arts Criticism from City University, London and is on the board of Reckless Sleepers, Candoco Dance Company and Bootworks Theatre.

### **Emily Coleman**

Emily is an independent producer based in Brighton with 10 years experience working in venues and with artists such as *The Future Is Unwritten*, *Hannah Jane Walker* and *Chris Thorpe*, and *Bootworks Theatre*. She currently produces *Hijack*, a children's festival and programme of innovative, interactive events for children and families. Emily is also Co-Director of *Pebble Gorge*, a new company making participatory and technology based theatre experiences for children. She is a founding member of *SOUPing* which is a model of working building knowledge, sharing skills and encouraging camaraderie between independent producers. Emily works as the Press Officer for *Komedia Brighton* and undertakes other freelance projects for organisations such as *Fuel*, *Stopgap Dance* and *Brighton Dome and Festival*.

### **Ruth Dudman**

Ruth Dudman is an independent producer based in Shoreham by Sea specialising in work with children, families and schools. She is Director and Founder of *Undercurrent* – a festival and year round programme of cross disciplinary performance work for children and families on the South Coast. Ruth also works with various artist and organisations. Recent posts include Relationship Manager *Combined Arts*, Arts Council England, Executive Producer for *Coney (Adventures in Learning)* and Associate Creative Director for the *Good Neighbour* a *Battersea Arts Centre* Production. Other recent clients include *Lighthouse (Brighton)*, *French Mottershead* and *Chichester University*.

Prior to becoming an independent producer Ruth worked as Creative Producer at the *Basement Brighton* and Producer and Schools Consultant at *Battersea Arts Centre*. Ruth is a founding member of *SOUPing* which is a model of working building knowledge, sharing skills and encouraging camaraderie between independent producers.



## Mark Makin

Mark Makin established makin projects with his partner Penny in September 2005 to work with outstanding theatre and dance companies of all scales who produce high quality, accessible, entertaining and stimulating work. makin projects handle the national and international tour booking for these companies along with co-producing several new touring productions each season. In addition to running makin projects Mark is also Programme Manager of house, an NPO which supports venues by improving the range, quality and scale of theatre presented across South East England, and exists to build the audience for contemporary theatre across the region.

The team at makin projects also founded and co-own and Cheltenham Spa and Leamington Spa Comedy Festivals, publish CDs and books to support their touring productions (via makin projects publishing) and also run very popular day training and consultancy sessions to a range of emerging and established theatre and dance companies, giving an insight into how to book sustainable UK and International tours.

Before setting up makin projects Mark enjoyed a year with Birmingham-based ACE dance and music as their General Manager and prior to that, from 1999 – 2004, Mark was tour booker and then the head of tour booking for UK Arts international.

## Lucy Moore

Lucy is currently working with theatre O and Cartoon de Salvo. She has supported artists to create, fundraise, tour and promote their work independently and within organisations including China Plate, ArtsAgenda, Battersea Arts Centre, and the Arts Council England, South East. Her experiences include presenting work and events within site-specific contexts, in the outdoors as well as within conventional theatre spaces; both nationally and internationally.

Since 2010, Lucy has collaborated with companies to make and tour the following productions: theatre O's 'The Secret Agent'; Inspector Sands' 'Mass Observation', 'Portrait of the Ordinary Festival Goer', 'Rock Pool' and 'A High Street Odyssey'; Cartoon de Salvo's 'Made Up' and 'The Irish Giant'; and Hydrocracker's 'The New World Order'. Shows in development include theatre O's 'Sheriff'; and Cartoon de Salvo's 'Cyrano de Bergerac' and their new show for rural touring 'The Powercut Compendium'.

Lucy is a founding member of SOUPing which is a model of working building knowledge, sharing skills and encouraging camaraderie between independent producers.

## David Morgan

David Morgan is a producer who has developed numerous theatre, dance and visual art projects over the course of the last seven years. In 2012 he co-founded 53° North an independent producing partnership that he runs with Joanne Peters. He is also Executive Producer with Breaking Cycles (Benji Reid's physical theatre company) and at the time of writing he is also an Artistic Assessor with Arts Council England. Prior to moving to England in 2009 David spent five years working as General Manager with Suspect Culture, one of Scotland's most influential theatre groups of the last 20 years. During the course of his career to date he has co-produced shows with; National Theatre of Scotland, Brighton Festival, Drum Theatre Plymouth, Tramway, The Tron, Dundee Contemporary Arts, the CCA (Glasgow), Z-arts and Graeae Theatre Company.

## Richard Morgan

Richard has over 25 years experience of theatre and performance including regional theatre, opera, national and international touring, installations and major site specific projects. He has worked in production and technical departments, marketing, finance and administration and is currently Senior Producer for the Royal Exchange Theatre looking after work in both the Studio and the Theatre. He also acts as advisor and mentor to a range of artists and companies in the Northwest region through 3-Sixty an independent producing partnership with George Harris.

## Ric Watts

Ric Watts is Producer for Unlimited Theatre, based at West Yorkshire Playhouse in Leeds. For Unlimited he has recently produced *The Giant & The Bear*, *MONEY* the game show and *The Noise*. Ric is also Producer and a Company Director of *Analogue* (Mile End, Beachy Head, 2401 Objects, Re-enactments) and *Chris Goode & Company* (*The Adventures of Wound Man* and *Shirley, 9*, *GOD/HEAD*, *Monkey Bars*, *The Forest & The Field*). In addition, he is currently working with *Hannah Jane Walker* and *Chris Thorpe* (*The oh fuck moment* and *I Wish I Was Lonely*). He sits on the board of *Cartoon de Salvo*; on the advisory boards for *DEP Arts* and *RashDash*; and the *Large Grants* committee at *Wellcome Trust*; as well as regularly mentoring emerging artists and producers in the North of England.

Ric started his career as Producer at *Your Imagination*, where he produced work by *Cartoon de Salvo*, *Ridiculusmus* and *Kazuko Hohki*, as well as the *This Way Up* touring initiative. He has worked independently since 2006, producing and touring work by *theimaginarybody*, *The TEAM*, *Filter* and *Schtanhaus*, *The Frequency D'ici*, *Laura Murgidge*, *Starving Artists*, *Royal & Derngate*, *The Other Way Works*, and *Slung Low*. Ric was also the festival producer for the 2010 *Queer Up North International Festival* in Manchester, following three years as associate producer.

### **Babakas**

Babakas consists of the founding members: Mike Twedde (UK), Juan Ayala (Spain), Brian Mullin (USA), Miguel Oyarzun (France / Spain), Sofia Paschou (Greece) and Bert Roman (Belgium). They believe in combining experimentation with entertainment, bringing different languages together, playfully exploring social questions, putting education and social development at the centre of their work. Since 2006 they've created theatre together for various companies all over Europe, and they've all been involved in developing BE FESTIVAL - Birmingham's European theatre festival. In 2010 they decided to start making their own theatre in Birmingham.

### **Theatre Fever**

The Theatre Fever concept was put together by Holding Space, a consortium of arts organisations in the West Midlands who help theatre flourish in the region. The group's aim is to open opportunities for theatre makers and producers to develop their skills, to increase their profile and meet greater audiences. Members are: Birmingham Repertory Theatre, Black Country Touring, mac birmingham, Stan's Cafe and Warwick Arts Centre. Holding Space is supported by Arts Council England.

### **If Only I Could...**

If only I could was a project conceived by Pippa Frith and Thomas Wildish. They employed two lead artists: Kim Charnock (RoguePlay) and Joe Fearn (CircusMash), as well as employing two additional professional circus artists and engaging seven participants. Orit Azaz offered the key team mentor support.

### **Tin Box**

Tin Box is a Birmingham based theatre company founded by Directors Jo Gleave and Jo Newman. Together with a team of collaborators they create theatre that explores inventive uses of storytelling, visual theatre and site-specific performance. Their first two shows were Stop the Clocks (2011), funded by Ideas Tap and Not Known at This Address (2012), developed at Battersea Arts Centre. Since then they have gained a place on the REP Foundry programme 2013 and secured a commission from the Holding Space Consortium to make a piece for pubs (Pint Dreams) for Theatre Fever (March 2013). They received Arts Council funding to tour Pint Dreams across the UK, Summer 2013. They are currently developing a new project, The Salvagers, which they have developed as part of their year as Theatre Makers with the Birmingham Rep as part of their Foundry Programme and which they will be working on at New Diorama, London, as part of their Emerging Theatre Companies programme.