



Developing work for early years through consultation with children and families in the North West and Leicestershire

About the Companies

Sponge by Turned On Its Head was the second commission from Big Imaginations. The commission call-out sought a piece of work for Early Years which would develop the new audiences reached during Big Imaginations previous early years outreach commission. The work also needed to be bold and experimental, demonstrate diversity, with the ability to attract and build diverse audiences whilst pushing conventional boundaries.



Turned On Its Head

Turned On Its Head are a dance company based in the East Midlands. They create high quality creative movement and dance opportunities for young children and their families in community and theatre settings. Their work focuses on stimulating and nurturing imagination and developing a sense of curiosity for children in the world around them. They engage parents & carers in the process of play and discovery alongside their babies and young children.

Their work is fresh and inventive with storytelling and authentic participation at its heart. They match playful and engaging accessibility with great choreography resulting in work that is refreshingly exuberant and joyfully uplifting.

Big Imaginations

Big Imaginations is supported by Arts Council England through a three-year Strategic Touring Grant. Arts Council England champions, develops and invests in artistic and cultural experiences that enrich people's lives.

Big Imaginations is a region-wide group of venues and promoters dedicated to bringing brilliant children's theatre to the North West. From grand auditoriums to rural village halls and everything in between, our mission is to spark the imagination of children aged 0-13 with the wonder of theatre. Headed up by Z-arts, it has brought together 15 venues to make the North West's children's theatre offer bigger, better and more affordable.

Research and Development

R&D Sessions 1, 2 & 3 – April 2016

Haslingden Community Link Sure Start Centre

The Boo - Rossendale

The Forum – Withington

The first R&D sessions were held at 3 venues in Greater Manchester and Lancashire. Haslingden Sure Start Centre and The Forum, Wythenshawe were semi-public sessions open to people already engaging with their services, the session at The Boo was a public, drop in session.

A total of 73 people attended the three sessions. Following each workshop an open play session was accompanied by informal discussion with the creative team, inviting families to suggest what worked well and what could be improved in a relaxed, non-pressured environment. These discussions and the company's own reflection revealed that the relationship between the two characters was unclear and needed further consideration and development. It was also felt that the scenes presented were currently very fragmented, and focus needed to be given to developing a sense of narrative through movement. Positive feedback was also received, with families and venue staff reporting that for a lot of the audience, this was their first encounter with children's theatre

Public Sharing - The Spark Arts Festival – May 2016

"Loved it, it was playful, simple, great interaction that allows for everyone to respond in their own way."

- **EYP New Parks CC**

The following month there were five public sharings of *Sponge: a work in progress*. Three performances were held at Hamilton Library Children's Centre and New Parks Children's centre, with 134 attendees in total. There were also two ticketed public sharings at Attenborough Arts Centre which sold 130 tickets, resulting in total audience numbers of 264 during festival. Following each performance children and families were invited to give feedback, with Turned On Its Head's artistic directors leading the conversation. On reflection after this sharing it was still felt that the relationship between the two characters wasn't fully developed. Further work also needed to be given towards developing a fluidity between scenes and whilst the piece was not necessarily plot driven, a general sense of 'story'. There was also concern regarding how to control 'pitch invasions' from excited children, whilst up to three children onstage was found to be manageable, frequently the performance area was becoming swamped, overwhelming the performative focus of the show. A discussion was had regarding balancing the interactive element with the performance and 'show' element and how to direct audience participation prior to the open play session at the end.

R&D Week 1 – The Curve – August 2016

Following from the observations in the May public sharing. The focus of the week 1 summer R&D was to establish narrative and character development whilst based at the Curve, who agreed to assist Turned On Its Head by providing rehearsal space. Nursery groups and members of the public were invited to attend morning sessions, with feedback showing that progress had been made regarding developing narrative and meaning through movement. Families reported

"It was lovely to see that you didn't have to use words... just the movement, they all joined in, it was so nice to see"

- **Grandparent at Curve R&D**

R&D week 2 – Z-arts – August 2016

The second R&D week took place between 14th and 18th August at Z-arts. There were four free interactive play sessions which were open to the public and bookable online through Z-arts box office. Of the 163 people who booked these sessions, 126 attended, a 77.3% attendance rate. A 30% drop off rate had been predicted based on attendance records of previous free Z-arts events and this was countered in part by calling families the previous day to confirm and remind them of bookings. Of the families who attended, 41% were visiting Z-arts for the first time and 32% of these new families have since returned to Z-arts for other activities. Feedback from families confirmed that the narrative had become more defined and the 'parent/child' dynamic between the characters was clear to audiences.



The public audiences also provided an opportunity to implement methods to direct and control audience participation. A spongy foam 'barrier' had been constructed from foam pool noodles and large industrial sponges to make a clear distinction between audience seating and the performance space without being formal and incongruous with the relaxed, accessible atmosphere of the show. Whilst children were by no means 'banned' from stepping over the barrier, and children still stepped into the performance space, it prevented the mass 'pitch invasion' that had been seen in the May R&D sessions.

Preview – Just So Festival - 20th – 21st August 2016

“Fantastic show! Lots of fun for everyone (kids and adults) The kids loved being able to explore and be part of a wonderful experience”

Sponge previewed at Just So Festival (an outdoor family-friendly arts festival organised by Big Imaginations member Wild Rumpus). The performance space was a tent and, as festival goers had free access to all stages within the grounds, capacity was not controlled in the same way as formal theatre venues. Estimated capacity of the space was 200, and it was felt that the tent was close to capacity for each of the four performances, resulting in a total capacity of 800. Due to the large and quick turnaround between performances, it was not possible for the creative team to speak in depth with families directly, with feedback instead being captured by festival staff and volunteers and on social media with the hashtag #spongetheshow.

Poor weather and unsuitable flooring in the performance space proved a conquerable hindrance as universally strong feedback was received from audiences.

Conclusions

In total, 463 children and their families participated in R&D sessions and approximately 800 people attended the previews of Sponge at Just So Festival resulting in total engagement numbers of 1263 prior to the final rehearsal week and premiere of the show. The feedback from children and families was invaluable in the development of *Sponge* revealing elements that may never have been discovered in an empty rehearsal room. Using children and families as a sounding board was key in testing new ideas and finding out what worked, particularly for audiences which would be considered as coming from hard to reach groups.