Section 1.0 - Overview

Following the successful early years outreach commission 1 in 2015, Big Imaginations’ second commission sought an artist or company to create a brilliant piece of theatre to engage families with children aged 0-4 years. This new commission would change the landscape of early years theatre provision in the region, be flexible enough to perform across the range of venues in the Big Imaginations network and also have the ability to earn money as a touring product. An open call-out was published in Autumn 2015 with shortlisting, interviews and final selection taking place in November 2015 with Sponge by Turned On Its Head selected as the successful applicant.

After R&D sessions across the North West in April 2016, a work in progress sharing at commission supporters The Spark Festival in May and two R&D weeks in Leicester and Manchester previewed at Wild Rumpus’ Just So Festival on 20th – 21st August 2016. A final R&D week took place in September in the week leading up to the premiere of Sponge at Z-arts on September 29th 2016.

Tour One took place between 29th September and 6th November 2016. Sponge was taken by 9 Big Imaginations venues in the first leg of its tour and performed 42 times across a total of 23 venues across the country and was performed to 1616 people. Tour 2 took place between 10th and 21st December 2016 at Lancaster Arts and the Barbican Centre, London with a total of 19 shows performed to a total of 1457 people. At the time of writing Sponge is embarking on its third national tour performing 16 shows at 8 venues between 15th and 25th February 2017. The final tour scheduled in this current funding period will take place between May 20th and June 11th 2017 with 33 shows performed across 15 venues plus several schools as part of Spark Arts Festival. At the end of Tour 4 Sponge will have performed 114 times (excluding R&D sharings) across 50 venues having the potential to reach up to 8550 people.

Post-show data from representatives of each of the venues in Tour 1 and Tour 2 yielded positive feedback with 100% of venues reporting a positive experience with the Sponge team. Audience feedback was gathered in-person with a toured company ipad, and at each show at Big Imaginations venues, audience members were also invited to complete Big Imaginations’ feedback forms. 100% of audiences who completed feedback forms rated the quality of the performance as ‘good’ or ‘very good’, the same figure answered ‘very likely’ when asked whether they would go and see more children’s theatre in the future having seen Sponge, and 90% of respondents intended to return to the same venue in the future after seeing the show.

Following the completion of Tour 1 and 2, an interim evaluation meeting was held with Liz, Clark Artistic Director of Turned On Its Head to reflect on the process of Commission 2 so far and discuss both successes and improvements which could be made looking forward. Liz was delighted with the process of the commission so far and expressed a desire to maintain a close and strong relationship between TOIH and Big Imaginations in the future. Liz felt that Sponge has made a strong impact on audiences so far and that the process had been invaluable in helping to shape the company further and gaining knowledge of touring logistics and the financial end of producing work. This positive feedback confirmed the success of the model Big Imaginations use when supporting commissioned artists.

“So much FUN! Given us loads of ideas for playtime and home. Thank you!”

“Amazing, so much talent, and made my sons day by putting him in a bucket!!! Thank you”

“Why can’t all children’s theatre be this imaginative, inclusion and creative?”

“They just need more audience seating! Larger tent next year!!!”

“The most fun and gentle chaos ever!”
Big Imaginations
Commission 2: Early Years - Evaluation
2016 – 2017

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2. Evaluation – Early Years Commission 2 – Sponge

Following the successful early years outreach commission 1 in 2015, Big Imaginations’ commission 2 sought an artist or theatre company to create a brilliant piece of theatre to engage families with children aged 0-4 years. The piece needed to be performed across the range of spaces the Big Imaginations network supports, and engage families with children aged 0 – 4 years. This new commission would change the landscape of early years theatre provision in the region, and would also have the ability to earn money as a touring product. An open call-out was published with an October 2015 deadline with shortlisting, interviews and final selection taking place in November 2015. Auditions were held in March 2016.

2.1 Big Imaginations as a Commissioner

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.

2.2 Commission Brief and Call-out

There was an open call out to Artists across the country to send a plan detailing their proposed project with an attached budget.

Applicants were required to address the following criteria;

- How their work would develop the new audiences reached during Big Imaginations previous early years outreach commission, The Adventures of POM.
- Flexible staging enabling performance across the range of spaces the Big Imaginations network supports.
- Bold and experimental work.
- Demonstrating diversity and able to attract and build diverse audiences.
- Pushing conventional boundaries.
- Focus on developing work in the North and Northern Artists.

Applicants were also required to demonstrate how their piece would fulfil the Arts Council’s Creative Case model;

- Providing an enhanced and enriched experience for audiences
- Use of new technologies
- Flexible staging, suitable for a range of venues
- Working with collaborators outside of the children’s theatre sector
- Responding to the ACE Creative Case: i.e. embedding diversity within show

Candidates were also asked to include draft a budget for making the work up to a maximum of £16,000 plus £4,000 for additional resources.

2.3 Selection Process

The commission received 15 applications of which three were shortlisted and invited to interview. Candidates were required to prepare a 20-minute presentation giving an overview of their proposal and addressing all the areas outlined in the brief including a discussion of their project budget and
timeline. In response to the shortlisting panel’s observation that shortlisted applications didn’t fully articulate their use of new technologies and respond to the ACE Creative Case for Diversity, candidates were asked specifically to expand on these areas in their presentation.

Interviews took place on Wednesday 4th November 2015 at Z-arts and Sponge by dance company Turned On Its Head was selected by the panel.

2.4 Performer – selection process

After the selection of Sponge, an open call-out was made across the North West to find two North-based dancers with experience in contact improvisation and working with children to perform in the show. Despite publicization across Big Imaginations’ networks no applications from male candidates and few applications from BAME candidates were received. To fulfil the Arts Council Creative Case for Diversity it was deemed necessary to widen the net to find performers which reflected the diversity of audiences across the North West.

We approached the following members of the TYA (Theatre for Young Audiences) Network for recommendations of dancers we could approach with this opportunity

- Adel Al-Salloum – The Spark Arts
- Jonathan Kennedy – Tara Arts

In addition to this we also approached Z-arts resident company STUN (Sustained Theatre Up North), STUN are part of a National Movement dedicated to the growth and prosperity of BAME Creatives across the UK. From this we approached several dancers from BAME backgrounds directly to invite them to audition. Given the distance of some auditionees from Manchester, travel expenses were reimbursed. Though not originally budgeted for it was felt that getting a mix of diverse artists in the audition room was essential to truly embrace the creative case. Subsequently we gathered a group of applicants that we felt better represented Big Imaginations’ audiences in Manchester and the North West.

2.5 Auditions

Eight dancers were invited to audition in March 2016 at Z-arts. The format of the audition was a half day movement workshop led by Turned On Its Head’s contracted Dramaturg Pete Shenton. The afternoon session was an interactive outreach workshop with Martenscroft Nursery School & Sure Start Centre which was attended by 30 children aged 3-5. At intervals throughout lunch and at the end of the day each candidate was taken for a short fifteen-minute informal interview to discuss their interest in the commission, previous experience and to give an opportunity for any questions to be asked to Big Imaginations of Turned On Its Head.

Section 3 - Research & Development, Public Sharings and Preview
Three R&D sessions were held in the North West in April 2016; at Haslingden Community Link Sure Start Centre, Big Imaginations’ venue The Boo and The Forum in Withington. A work in progress was presented at commission supporters The Spark Festival in May. Two further weeks of R&D were held in August 2016, one week at The Curve in Leicester and one at Z-arts. At the end of the second R&D week in Manchester Sponge premiered at Wild Rumpus’ Just So Festival on 20th – 21st August 2016. A final R&D week took place in September in the week leading up to the premiere of Sponge at Z-arts on September 29th 2016.

3.1 R&D Sessions 1, 2 & 3 – Haslingden Community Link Sure Start Centre, The Boo and The Forum, Withington

The initial R&D sessions were held at 3 venues across the North West. Haslingden Community Link Sure Start Centre and The Forum, Withington 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 inviting families to suggest what worked well and what could be improved. These discussions and the company’s own reflection revealed that the relationship between the two characters was unclear and needed further consideration and development. Whilst not a serious concern given the early stage of the process, it was also felt that the scenes presented very fragmented, and focus needed to be given to developing a sense of narrative through movement, essential in a non-verbal piece.

3.2 Public Sharing - The Spark Arts Festival – May 2016

In May, 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 centre, with 134 attendees total. There were two ticketed public sharings at Attenborough Arts Centre which sold 130 tickets total resulting in a total audience numbers of 264 during The Spark Arts Festival. These sharings were performed by Liz Clark, Artistic Director and Oksana Tyminska, Choreographer of Turned On Its Head rather than Louise Gibbons and Shane Shambhu. 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.

3.3 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.
3.4 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. We were mindful of the expected drop off rate for free events and countered this in part calling families the previous day to confirm bookings. Of the families who attended, 41% were visiting Z-arts for the first time. 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 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.

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

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. Poor weather and unsuitable flooring in the performance space was a conquerable hindrance and strong feedback was received from audiences. The performances at Just So confirmed the necessity of appropriate flooring after a performer’s minor foot injury was flagged in a show report.

R&D Week 2 Feedback

“So much FUN! Given us loads of ideas for playtime and home. Thank you!”

“It was brilliant. My friend said it was the best thing Z Arts have shown! And for FREE too!”

“Thoroughly enjoyable. Great fun for the toddler and baby. Particular highlights were the ‘sponge feet’ and ‘sponge cannon’. Thank you”

“Children loved the big dancing feet, the sponge martian and they loved tidying up the sponges!”

“Amazing! Elliot (16 months) loved it. Perhaps get kids on stage 5 minutes earlier? The couldn’t wait to touch the sponge!”

Just So Festival – Preview Feedback

“Amazing, so much talent, and made my sons day by putting him in a bucket!!! Thank you”

“Sponge was amazing today, why can’t all children’s theatre be this imaginative, inclusion and creative?”

“They just need more audience seating! Larger tent next year!!!”

“We have seen Sponge twice so far, and we really love it! Just as magical as Shiny was”

Amazing, never seen anything like it. My daughter (aged 3) was transfixed, thank you!

“The most fun and gentle chaos ever!”

“A spongy joy! Even made the sun shine on a rainy day!”
3.6 Z-arts – final week of rehearsals and ‘dress rehearsal’ - September 2016

The final week of rehearsals was held in the theatre at Z-arts, allowing for the first concentrated period of rehearsal in a dedicated theatre space. Focus was given to tuning up the lighting design, blocking the piece and giving final touches and tweaks to set, costume and choreography. Before the premiere on Thursday 29th September 2016, a ‘dress rehearsal’ was performed to Martenscroft Nursery School & Sure Start Centre who’d participated in the audition workshops in February 2016. The aim was to film footage for a trailer in this show, however unfortunately the company were let down last minute by the film-maker so it was necessary to postpone this until the last week of Tour 1.

Section 4 - Tour One 29th September – 6th November 2016

Tour One took place between 29th September and 6th November 2016. Sponge was taken by 9 Big Imaginations venues in the first leg of its tour and performed 42 times to a total of 23 venues across the country. The show’s flexible staging allowed it to be performed in a range of theatre and non-theatre spaces both across the Big Imaginations network supports and in venues nationally.

4.1 Tour Dates

*Sponge* toured to the following venues.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Venue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thursday 29th September</td>
<td>Z-arts, Manchester (premiere)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saturday 1st October</td>
<td>The Egg, Bath</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sunday 2nd October</td>
<td>The Egg, Bath</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monday 3rd October</td>
<td>Lincoln Drill Hall</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tuesday 4th October</td>
<td>Louth Playgoers - Riverhead Theatre</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday 5th October</td>
<td>South Holland Centre, Spalding</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friday 7th October</td>
<td>Curve, Leicester</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saturday 8th October</td>
<td>Curve, Leicester</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monday 10th October</td>
<td>The Core at Corby Cube</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thursday 13th October</td>
<td>Lakeside Arts, Nottingham</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friday 14th October</td>
<td>The Turnpike, Leigh Library</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sunday 16th October</td>
<td>The Civic, Barnsley</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday 19th October</td>
<td>Blackwood Miners’ Institute, Caerphilly</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thursday 20th October</td>
<td>Spot On Lancashire</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friday 21st October</td>
<td>Widnes, Brookfields Special School (schools show)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saturday 22nd October</td>
<td>The North Wall, Oxford</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tuesday 25th October</td>
<td>Sunderland City Library and Arts Centre</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday 26th October</td>
<td>The Atkinson, Southport</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thursday 27th October</td>
<td>Waterside Arts Centre, Sale</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friday 28th October</td>
<td>St Mary’s Creative Space, Chester</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tuesday 1st November</td>
<td>The Kirkgate, Cockermouth</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday 2nd November</td>
<td>Action Transport Theatre, Whitby Hall, Ellesmere Port</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thursday 3rd November</td>
<td>Burnley Arts Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday 4th November</td>
<td>Citadel, St Helens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saturday 5th November</td>
<td>Citadel, St Helens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunday 6th November</td>
<td>The Boo, Rossendale</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.2 Venue Evaluation (Tour 1)\(^1\)

Following performances, data was obtained from each of the 23 venues through an online venue feedback survey. The survey was conducted to evaluate the first leg of the tour and to open the dialogue between Big Imaginations as Producer and with venues nationwide. Where concerns, questions and comments were raised from venues these were followed up and, where necessary, steps were taken to prevent problems and issues from reoccurring in subsequent tours.

The survey asked the following questions:

1. How many shows did you have?
2. How many tickets did you sell in total?
3. Box office income
4. What did you think of the show?
5. Please comment on the production values and the standard of the performances
6. Why did you book Sponge?
7. How would you rate the communications for the following from 1-5 (where 5 is excellent):
   a. Booking of the tour
   b. Tech
   c. Supporting material, marketing packs etc.
   d. Publicity Material appropriateness
   e. The Sponge team
8. How was Sponge received by your audiences?
9. Would you be interested in working with Big Imaginations again in the future?
10. Any additional comments?

Of the 23 venues Sponge visited on the tour;

- 3 took Sponge for two days, 20 for one day.
- 20 venues had 2 shows per day, 3 venues had 1 show per day.
- Ticket prices ranged from £0 - 7.50 for children and £5 – 8.50 for adults.
- 90% of venues rated the booking of the tour as excellent or very good.

- 80% of venues rated the communication of tech as excellent or very good.
- The 20% of venues who were not satisfied with the communication of technical aspects of the show were smaller, non-theatrical venues who were unable to provide the same level of

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\(^1\) For full survey results see appendix a.

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**Tour 1 Statistics**

- **1616** tickets sold
- **39** shows
- **£7076.58** total box office income

**Quotes from Venues**

“This was a very engaging piece for some of our youngest audiences whose enjoyment was clear from their response and reaction. We received genuinely enthusiastic comments from parents/carers who had a lovely time; even the more reluctant or children less sure of their surroundings seemed to come round and engage as the production developed”. Shona Powell – Lakeside Arts & EMCTD

“This was a wonderful production ideally pitched for the age range and provided a magical interactive experience for the intended audience. By special request the company were able to accept 3 young adults with significant learning difficulties to participate alongside the younger audience which was very appropriate in breaking down potential barriers in the future but also gave the young people in question a sensory experience appropriate to their needs. The company were charming and rose to the challenge of adapting their performance to these unusual circumstances seamlessly” Roy Hobson – Louth Playgoers, Riverhead Theatre

“Liz Clark has a fantastic reputation for creating work for young children... We are really proud to present her work here, as it is imaginative and high quality” Emma Ling – Curve

“They loved it. For 70% of the audience it was their first visit to family theatre. The feedback was fantastic and they’re coming back! We had a broad age-range and every single child was engaged throughout” Helen Stalker – The Turnpike Centre, Leigh Library
technical support as established performance venues, it was established that communication regarding technical details had not been clear prior to the performance. A meeting was arranged with the company Stage Manager to establish how this could be improved for subsequent tour dates. In each case where a venue was dissatisfied it was clear that thorough communication between the production team and the Stage Manager could have prevented most issues that had arisen and additional fields were added to the venue deal sheet making clear what the technical requirements of the show were and requesting the venue to confirm the level of technical support they could offer.

Most venues rated the quality of the publicity material and supporting Materials, Marketing Packs etc. as very good or excellent. However, one venue mentioned that the marketing and publicity material did not reflect the show well, making it hard to sell to audiences, particularly those who wouldn’t usually engage with the arts. Following this feedback, venue copy for venues booking in 2017 was redrafted. During Tour One, a new trailer and teaser trailer for the show was filmed and distributed to all venues in advance of 2017 tour dates. The aim being to achieve 100% venue satisfaction with supporting and promotional materials in upcoming tours.

100% of venues rated their experience with the Sponge Team as good or very good reflecting the professionalism of the team.

Many enquiries had been made from venues and promoters regarding an up to date trailer in advance of and throughout the run. Unfortunately, due to being let down by the originally booked film-maker it was not possible. Looking ahead to future projects, the company and Big Imaginations learned that both contracting in advance and ensuring that any external companies come recommended first-hand or by strong second-hand recommendation is essential. A new trailer and teaser trailer were filmed by Hawkshead Productions at Burnley Youth Theatre in the last week of the run. This trailer was invaluable in securing future touring dates and feedback revealed that this assisted greatly in boosting venue sales across future legs of the tour.

“The show was fantastic, simple yet effective. The two performers were exceptional and adapted their routine very well to the Children who wanted to get involved early. Costume and props were put to great use. A great experience to see parents get involved and play with their Children as part of the show”

Daniel Woods – The Citadel

“As part of our high-quality programme for children, young people and families. We had previously booked SHINY which went really well, with 2 sold out performances, and was really high quality work. Our audiences told us they want more of this kind of work in our programme. Following this positive experience with the company it was great to be able to follow up with SPONGE”

Sharon Casey – Blackwood Miners’ Institute
4.3 Audience Feedback

*Sponge toured an ipad to collect feedback comments from audiences after each show in the tour. After each show at Big Imaginations venues, audience members were also invited to complete Big Imaginations’ feedback forms which the below questions. Where negative feedback was received this was subsequently investigated with the venue and touring members of the company.*

1. What did you think of the show?
2. Where did you hear about today's performance?
3. How would you rate the following?
   a. Your overall experience at the event today
   b. Overall value for money at the event
   c. The quality of the performance
4. Having seen the show, would you say that you are likely to...
   a. Go and see more children’s theatre in future?
   b. Come back to this venue again in future
5. Is there anything else that you would like to tell us about your experience today?
6. Have you and your family been to a children's theatre show before?
7. If yes, approximately when was the last time you saw a children’s theatre show?

The final section of the survey focused on founding out who are audiences were;

8. Are you...? Male/Female/Prefer not to say
9. Are you...? 12-16/17-24/25-34/35-44/45-54/55-64/65-7475 plus/Prefer not to say
10. What are the age groups of children in your party (please tick all that apply) 0-2/3-5/6-8/9-11/12-16
11. What is your postcode? This is for analysis purposes only and not to contact you
12. Full Name
13. Email Address
14. Would you be interested in taking part in further Big Imaginations research?

Of the responses received 84% rated their overall experience as ‘good’ or ‘very good’. 96% of respondents rated the value for money as ‘good’ or ‘very good’. In an incredibly positive result, 100% of audiences who completed feedback forms rated the quality of the performance as ‘good’ or ‘very good’.

100% of responses also answered likely or ‘very likely’ when asked whether they would go and see more

Audience Comments

“Every aspect of our visit was fab, not just the show but the hospitality of all the Action Transport staff and how the children were made the real focus of the event. Brilliant value for money too”

“When will you be back?!“

“Excellent for all age groups - 6 months to 65!”

“Amazed at how my 11-month-old twins stayed focused! WELL DONE”

“Wonderful, really engaging and stimulating for my 10-month-old.”

“Amazing, all of it. It was fantastic, I wasn’t sure what to expect, glad we came. Very clever”

“My 6-month-old couldn’t stop watching, she loved all the movements and textures”

“First class entertainment and interaction, just the right length, are 4½ month-old was enthralled”

“Brilliant sensory show, even our 4-month grandson got involved. Can’t wait for the next show!“

“Outstanding performance. 5 stars”.
children's theatre in future having seen Sponge. On top of this, 90% of respondents said they were ‘likely’ or ‘very likely’ to return to the same venue in the future.

Audience feedback also confirmed that the commission had achieved its aim to engage new audiences. 49% of respondents were attending a children’s theatre show for the first time, and of the 51% who had attended children’s theatre previously, 10% hadn’t done so in over a year. In addition to this, 53% of respondents requested to receive information about future Big Imaginations events which will hopefully assist in securing an ongoing relationship with some of these new audiences.
Section 5 - Tour 2, December 2016

Tour 2 took place between 10 and 21 December 2016 doing one date at Lancaster Arts before travelling down to London for an eight-date run at the Barbican Centre.

5.1 Tour 2

Tour 2 of Sponge took place over December 2016. After two days of rehearsal Sponge performed at Big Imagination venue Lancaster Arts, selling 122 tickets across two shows before travelling down to the Barbican Centre, London for an eight-date run and a total of eighteen performances, all but one of which sold out.

In total, 1335 tickets were allocated across the Barbican run. In addition to the general capacity, the venue allowed the company an allocation of 6 ‘observer comps’ which could be allocated to industry professionals to sit at the back of the auditorium and not impact on audience allocation. Several industry professionals came to the show including Jonathan Schmidt Chapman of Lincoln Center Education in New York and Dina Mousawi of Complicite.

The Sponge Press launch was held on Wednesday 14th December 2016 with BBC Breakfast, The Stage, Time Out London and The Sunday Times attending amongst others. Most reviewers commended the show, though one review commented that the level of audience participation and invasion of the performance space appeared ‘chaotic’. Whilst this review represented a small minority of the press reviews and audience feedback received, an additional ‘director check-in’ was scheduled to ensure that performers were comfortable with the show.

Across tour 2 Sponge played to 1457 people.

Press Reviews

“Sponge is an exploration of a material that isn’t held back by any pressures of narrative; instead, it dives into abstraction, just the kind of imaginative, suggestive and open-ended visual and material play that really gets toddlers going – the best kind of theatrical play session.” – Exeunt Magazine

“In essence, ‘Sponge’ is a soft play session with bells (made of sponge) on, and by the time we hit the final third, Shambhu and Gibbons are just two more bodies running about in the springy retro mayhem. But it’s their careful stoking of the audience that gets us there, lightly amusing and encouraging the little’uns but also keeping the more rambunctious toddlers contained until everyone is ready to get involved” – Time Out London
Interim evaluation with artist – Turned On Its Head, Liz Clark

Following the completion of Tour 1 and 2, an interim evaluation meeting was held in January 2017 with Artistic Director of Turned On Its Head to reflect on the process of Commission 2 so far and discuss what went well and what improvements could be made looking forward. Liz was delighted with the process of the commission so far and expressed a desire to maintain a close and strong relationship between TOIH and Big Imaginations in the future. Liz felt that Sponge had made a strong impact on audiences so far and that the process had been invaluable in helping to shape the company further and gaining knowledge of touring logistics and the financial end of producing work.

Below is a précised transcript of the meeting;

1) What worked well with Big Imaginations?

Clear, honest and speedy communication between representatives from Big Imaginations and TOIH. Couldn’t ask for more. Liz & TOIH felt that there was a level of trust and respect before the commission started through Shiny being programmed previously by Big Imaginations and hope this relationship with Big Imaginations strengthens and develops further moving forward.

2) What went well with the management of the commission?

Transparency and honesty at all stages. Always being contactable and being honest about any concerns or problems, e.g. budget limitations.

3) How could the management of the commission be improved?

Nothing, except reinforcing our role in managing logistics and any problems which arise.

4) What impact do you think this commission has had on your audiences?

Lots of families returned to see Sponge having seen Shiny, bringing younger children that weren’t born before with them! Sponge worked well in SEN schools and with adults with PMLD in Lincolnshire and it was great to see the impact this had on them. Lots of venues visited in Tour 1 particularly had audiences that hadn’t been to a theatre production before and for a lot of the children it was their first experience of theatre. There was a real sense that the audience feel as though they’ve been “kissed all over” and a sense of fun, warmth and safety, which as an artist, is great to see.

5) What impact do you think the project has had on Turned On Its Head as a company?

The company was in a state of transition when they won the commission, with Liz becoming Artistic Director and Oksana becoming Associate Artist. The process of this commission has been invaluable in galvanising these new roles and cementing the transition process. Another great impact has been developing a good relationship with the Barbican which will hopefully develop further in the coming years. The process has also been the start of the challenging process of stepping back and trusting other people with our work.

6) Do you feel you have developed any additional skills during this process?

Gaining knowledge and perspective on the financial/business side of things and appreciating how much everything costs as well as understanding the concept of financial risk. Negotiating with venues and seeing yourself as a valuable commodity, being conscious to not undersell yourself and value your own skills, company and the value of your work. Don’t do something for nothing!
Further recognition of Oksana’s skills as both a choreographer and designer/prop-maker as well as self-realisation of own strengths.

7) Has this commission brought with it any further opportunities?

Gina Westbrook at Take Art has invited us to be included in the Hopper Early Years Strategic touring bid menu. We are also, in partnership with Big Imaginations, negotiating the possibility of a Christmas 2017 run at Battersea Arts Centre. Further afield we’ve also been approached by Act 2 in Singapore, to discuss the possibility of touring to Asia.

8) Beyond 2017, what would you like to happen with Sponge?

We’d love to tour Sponge internationally and continue to create bespoke practice and shows. For TOIH we’d like to set up a production wing of the business managed by an additional staff member who will handle logistical side. This process has confirmed the importance of having a dedicated tour booker, so we’d like to employ one to work on upcoming shows.

9) If you could go through the process again, would you do anything differently?

It might have been useful to have a more concentrated R&D over a shorter period. However, there were advantages to having it more spread out in that it gave a greater time to speak and negotiate with the Barbican, find creative collaborators and think about ideas for the show.

In future TOIH will always meet potential collaborators in person and trust instincts if something doesn’t feel right. TOIH will also aim to get all contracts signed and confirmed sooner.

10) Did you feel you required anything else during the process?

One thing that wasn’t adhered to was the costume and set maintenance list drafted up by Oksana. This will need to be rectified for upcoming tours to cut down on avoidable maintenance costs.

11) This is the first time that Turned On Its Head have sent other performers out on the road. What are the challenges and opportunities that this has brought, both to you personally and to Turned On Its Head?

The biggest challenge by far has been handing over the show from being the performers ourselves to having others perform your work. It means that we haven’t had the immediate feedback from our audiences and that disconnection has been really challenging. TOIH have found the Director Check-Ins useful, though perhaps the term ‘check in’ could be changed as we don’t want it to be perceived as a test or something for the touring team to be concerned about. We acknowledge that fully ‘letting go’ of the work is an ongoing process and we feel that we’ve come far from where we were previously as performers.
Commissioner Evaluation

Following tour 1 and 2, each Big Imaginations venue was sent a Commissioner’s Survey, inviting them to comment on how far Sponge met the criteria specified in the original brief. The survey questions are printed below followed by an analysis of the largely positive results.

1) On a scale of 1 - 5 how far did you feel that Sponge provided an enhanced and enriched experience for audiences? (1 = not at all - 5 = very enriching experience)

2) How well did Sponge make use of new technologies? (1 = No use - 5 = Excellent use)

3) How flexible was the show in being able to be staged across a range of venues in the BI network? (1 - not flexible at all, 5 - very flexible)

4) Did Sponge work with interesting collaborators outside of the children’s theatre sector?

5) How well did Sponge respond to the ACE Creative Case and embed diversity into the show? (1 - not at all - 5 - very strong response)

6) Do you feel Sponge met the high quality that we as a network are striving for? Please also use the space below to expand on any of the questions above and for any additional comments.

We gathered responses from eight of the fourteen Big Imaginations venues. 100% felt that Sponge provided an enriching or very enriching experience for audiences and most felt that Sponge was flexible to be performed across a range of spaces and responded well to the Arts Council’s Creative Case for Diversity.

Less positive feedback included most commissioners being unsure whether Sponge had worked with interesting collaborators outside of the children’s theatre sector. As one of our performers and our sound and set-designer work chiefly outside of children’s theatre it became clear that this hadn’t been communicated effectively across the network. Only one of the responses rated Sponge above 3 for its use of new technologies, showing that it had fallen on one of the key criteria.

Comments from Commissioners

“As a venue director I had absolute faith in the show to deliver to a new and slightly tentative audience. They loved it. 72% had never brought their family to professional theatre before and 100% said they would return”.

“Being programmed at a festival is always tricky for theatre makers used to indoor spaces, whilst they were fairly frustrated with the set up they did perform beautifully, it was a real highlight of the festival programme and our audiences loved it”.

It was great to have a very early-years dance performance as part of rural touring. It was hard to get promoters to choose a dance and children’s show as both are difficult to get audiences for and it was too big for some venues. We are trying to break down barriers in this regard and this Sponge helped to do that but showed that more audience development would be needed to engage nurseries etc. for any future similar performances”.

“It’s fantastic how long a touring life the show has got - and that it might take the Big Imaginations name international. I’m looking forward to seeing it again after so many performances to see how it might have changed and grown”.

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Upcoming Tour Dates, Tour 3 and Tour 4

At the time of writing Sponge is embarking on its third national tour performing 16 shows at 8 venues between 15th and 25th February 2017. The final tour scheduled in the current funding period will take place between May 20th and June 11th 2017 with 33 shows performed across 15 venues plus several schools as part of Spark Arts Festival. Full tour dates are detailed below;

Sponge 2017 Tour Dates
Feb 2017
Weds 15th Feb  Quarterhouse, Folkestone
Thurs 16th Feb  Salisbury Arts Centre
Fri 17th Feb  Déda, Derby
Sun 19th Feb  mac Birmingham
Thurs 23rd Feb  Darlington Civic
Fri 24th Feb – Sat 25 Feb  Gala, Durham

May/June 2017
Sat 20th May  arc, Stockton
Tues 23rd May – Fri 26th May  The Spark Arts
Sat 27th May  Ropetackle Arts Centre
Sun 28th May  The Lowry, Salford
Tues 30th May  Cornerstone Arts Centre, Didcot
Weds 31st May – Thurs 1st June  Theatre Clwyd
Sun 4th June  Gulbenkian Theatre (University of Kent)
Weds 7th June  The Point, Eastleigh
Thurs 8th June  Little Angel Theatre
Fri 9th June - Sat 10th June  Stratford Circus
Sun 11th June  Artsdepot

Summary
At the end of Tour 4 Sponge will have performed 114 times (excluding R&D sharings) across 50 venues having the potential to reach an audience of up to 8550 people. It is hoped that the positive venue and audience feedback will continue in Tours 3 and 4. Several venues across Tours 1 and 2 have expressed an interest in working with Big Imaginations in the future, showing how Big Imaginations’ reputation and legacy continues to spread nationwide across the sector. As a network this process has been a highly beneficial learning curve as we embarked on the biggest tour of a commissioned piece to date.