



Bringing Brilliant Children's Theatre to the North West...



The Adventures of Pom Evaluation Report



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The Commission

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.

Selection Process

There was an open call out to Artists in the North to send a plan detailing their idea with an attached budget.

25 applications were received and were subsequently shortlisted to nine. Big Imaginations invited four artists / companies to interview.

Leading early-years story-teller and performance artist Ruthie Boycott-Garnett was selected for the Big Imaginations commission with *The Adventures of Pom*. *The Adventures of Pom* is an intimate adventure adapting the Greek myth Persephone and incorporating puppetry, projections, soundscapes, storytelling and live music to engage the very youngest audiences and their families in a new theatre experience. Commissioning Ruthie gave Big Imaginations the opportunity to not only work and develop a relationship with a strong artist but also invest in the development of that artist.

The Tour

The Adventures of Pom was programmed by nine members of the Big Imaginations Consortium, and travelled across the North West to 14 non-theatre venues, premiering at Wild Rumpus's *Just So Festival* on the 21 and 22 August 2015.



After its preview at the Summer Festival, Pom began her autumn tour across the North West into local outreach venues chosen by each individual Big Imaginations venue, starting at **Fleetwood Library** with *Spot On Lancashire* at the beginning of September and ending at **Bacup Library** with *The Boo* at the end of November.

Venues

Fleetwood Library, *Fleetwood* – Spot On Lancashire

APNA, *Haslingden* – The Boo

Bacup Library, *Lancashire* – The Boo

Eccleston Library, *St. Helens* – The Citadel

St. Helens Central Library, *St. Helens* – The Citadel

The Forum Library, *Wythenshawe* – Z-arts

Crumpsall Lane Primary, *Manchester* – Z-arts

Linaker Children's Centre, *Southport* – The Atkinson

Wigan Library, *Wigan* – Wigan Council

Reedley Hallows Children's Centre, *Burnley*–
Burnley Arts Centre

Ightenhill Children's Centre, *Burnley* – Burnley Arts
Centre

Bloom Day Nursery, *Stretford*– Waterside Arts
Centre

Seymour Park Community Primary School, *Old
Trafford* – Waterside Arts Centre

Outreach Workshops and Performances

The Adventures of Pom consisted of four interactive workshops and a performance. Participants were split into two workshop groups, one for non-walking babies and one for walking children up to age 4. This split ensured the workshops were tailored to the participants and more age appropriate. The workshops were delivered at each venue over a two-week period, with one workshop per age group per week and the performance taking place for all participants in the 3rd week.

The Workshops

The workshop used two themes from the performance to develop open-ended sensory play sessions that introduced the idea of performance to the hard to reach and non-engaged audiences. Children and parents were encouraged to play through modelling and interaction rather than prescribed instruction, to create a comfortable and welcoming atmosphere that families may be familiar with, similar to a 'stay and play' structure commonly used in Children's Centres. This allowed an introduction to elements of performance, exposing some families to their first experiences of performance.

Theme 1 – Feast

In this session real, wooden and knitted food was used and the wonder of everyday kitchen objects such as salad spoons and metal bowls. Babies could taste, touch and explore objects in a safe and immersive environment. This introduced an element of play that could be replicated at home.

Theme 2 – Shadow play

In this session hand held torches were used along with OHP projectors, fabric and other light sources. Participants were encouraged to use their bodies to create shadows and make shadow puppets, using these to create a group narrative.

Impact

Most promoters and outreach venues preferred the longer-term engagement of workshops, instead of just one performance, with 75% of the outreach venues claiming that having wraparound workshops was better than just the one show, and 100% claiming that the workshops were engaging for the audience.

The workshops were not as well received by the Big Imaginations venues who had programmed the work into the outreach settings. Only 60% of the Big Imaginations venues responded to being “very happy” with the delivery of the workshops with feedback suggesting that a tighter time structure for the workshops and late arrival / set-up could be areas for improvement.

Audience

The Audiences were very engaged throughout the workshops and performances. All feedback was positive and showed an encouraging level of continued engagement outside of the workshops. Below are three quotes from families who attended the workshops;

“The girls have come each week and got very involved. Loving the light and dark and exploring the underground. After week 2 they went home and explored the darkness of our tent asking for lights inside.”

“Really enjoyable, interactive sensory experience. It captivated all of the children and was especially enjoyable as the workshops built up to the final performance.”

“Matilda had excellent time during these three session, She learn more about vegetable by touching different shapes and developed sense of touch & smell during the sensory session she enjoyed and has developed new habit of playing with vegetable in our kitchen which is good and educative and I as mum I would recommend that this activities may continue here and in every different communities to help children to get more closer to the nature than artificial activities.”

The Performance

Overall, the performance had a great success rate, with 100% of the outreach venues claiming that *The Adventures of Pom* was “very successful” at their venue and believing that it was well suited for the age range, showing that the commission was appropriate and successful with its target audience. 50% of the outreach venues also claimed that the commission had attracted new and different audiences to their venue.

Big Imaginations venues were also pleased with the performance’s success rate, with 80% stating that they were “very happy” with the quality of the performance, and 70% claiming that audience members have returned to their venues since.

The Adventures of POM reached an audience of approximately 700 across all venues. Given the popularity of the performance, 100% of venues said they would be very interested in programming a similar performance in the future.

Outreach Venues

“It gave me the chance to ask library users with young children to attend the sessions for customer who normally would have just used a pc or borrowed a book and not access services for children.”

“I thought this was a brilliant idea working together and bringing drama to Wythenshawe has been great some of the families have been to the Z arts centre as a direct result of this project.”

Audience

Below are selected quotes from audiences who attended *The Adventures of POM*;

"Fantastic show, hope there's more to come."

"Thank you so much our students from Piper Hill Specialist Support School had a wonderful time."

"Fantastic! Great interactive performance which captures the imagination of both children + adults. Beautifully presented with all sensory materials. Unique, captivating, imaginative. Well done!"

"Really lovely show and it really got a fabulous response from the children, who were captivated. They listened, took part, played and explored. Fabulous to see our libraries used in that way. A show that was a complete sensory experience! Sue Williamson, Head of Library Services St. Helens."

"A beautiful experience that I enjoyed as much as my 10 month old daughter. Wonderful sensory experiences throughout engaged her throughout the performance. Pom was beautiful and moved so fabulously, a great afternoon, thank you."

"The sessions and performance was wonderful! My daughter has seemed to really enjoy her time with you – this is her first experience with a theatre group and she joined in with ease obviously feeling comfortable, at ease and curious. Well done and thank you for the enjoyment and experience."

Evaluation with Artist

What Ruthie Enjoyed/Gained:

- ❖ The opportunity of sharing work and previewing at *Just So Festival* was beneficial as a testing ground before touring.
- ❖ Opportunity to work in so many different venues allowed Ruthie to showcase her work to a wider range of audiences and theatre professionals. This provided an invaluable opportunity to form new contacts and work with audiences that otherwise may not have ever seen the work.
- ❖ Network support, really useful to have a wealth of experience that could be drawn on.

What Went Well

- ❖ Ruthie felt that she was supported through the process and felt comfortable to give honest feedback throughout.
- ❖ Ruthie also felt she had the freedom as an artist and the ability to develop and change ideas without obstruction.
- ❖ Big Imaginations were very understanding about Ruthie's existing commitments including childcare – being able to have her child in meetings and not feeling concerned about this.

Impact of this Project

- ❖ Touring to a network of venues and showcasing work has led to lots of connections and contacts for future touring.
- ❖ Increased confidence in own ability as an artist and workshop leader. This has had an impact on Ruthie's other work, she now feels better equipped for workshops and better able to respond to unexpected situations in a workshop context.
- ❖ Ruthie claims she has developed her skills as a performer, facilitator, and puppeteer. This commission has also given her the opportunity to work with people in a creative team and reflecting on her own work. This has led to her being better able to see room for improvement and errors in her practice.

The Commissioners

As Big Imaginations first ever commission, *The Adventures of Pom* has been an overall success and has received excellent and positive feedback from parents, children and the outreach venues that hosted it, with 100% of the outreach venues claiming that they would definitely work with Big Imaginations again.

“Those that attended the sessions thoroughly enjoyed them. It was lovely to have Big Imaginations delivering sessions in the centre. Many Thanks.”

Ruthie believes that having the Big Imaginations name taking her piece forward is a useful quality stamp, and has enjoyed working with the network, who she states have been friendly and very supportive. Not only has she gained contacts working with the Big Imaginations consortium, but they have also opened her to a wider network and helped made great connections for future and hopefully returning work.

What could Big Imaginations improve on?

- ❖ The sharing of the work and feedback was intimidating. It would be better if feedback was compiled and then shared one on one by one representative of the network.
- ❖ If open feedback is given after a sharing a time limit and a more structured, chaired discussion would be beneficial.
- ❖ Flyers and print. Lots of unnecessary toing and froing. Arrange print specific meetings not involving the artist.
- ❖ Additional practical help with the commission would have been beneficial, e.g. an additional person in rehearsals – director, critical eye, mentor – artistic aide. It would also have been helpful to have a stage manager or technician to help with show get in and running of show etc.
- ❖ A van for touring would have also been useful.

Promoters and Outreach Venues

Accessibility

Some outreach venues stated that some of their regular families could not participate due to being outside of the early years age group. Some venues also reported that the limited audience capacity also meant that in some instances, it was not possible for all who wanted to attend. This feedback was acknowledged, but due to the nature of this commission brief, the age-group and lower capacity was already specified to the artist.

The Future of Pom

Work like this is often the first step for children and parents towards attendance at theatre events. For many of the 700 people reached by this commission, *The Adventures of POM* was the first ever theatre performance they'd been too - a positive and engaging experience which has already yielded repeat attendance in some instances.

The Adventures of Pom been a great accomplishment for Big Imaginations and Ruthie, with nothing but positive and appreciative feedback from its audiences. Due to this success *The Adventures of Pom* will be touring again in 2016.

The Future for Ruthie and Pom

- ❖ New show ready for touring
- ❖ Sold out show at Waterside Arts Centre
- ❖ Approached by *Salisbury Festival*
- ❖ *Whitby Hall* – April 2015
- ❖ Future national tour of *The Adventures of POM*
- ❖ Inclusion in *Baby Boo* at The Boo
- ❖ Workshops and performances at *Harpurhey Library* –March 11, 18, 25 2015

“As always, Ruthie did a great job! Really creative, imaginative + engaging with loads of interaction for my 22 month old! Hope to get to lots more things like this. Also great to have it in the library!”

“A beautiful production which brought tears to my eyes, a very heart-warming show! A great experience shared with my child thank you very much.”

Appendix

Workshop and Performance Dates

Fleetwood Library: 02/02/2015 – workshop 1, am
09/09/2015 – workshop 2, am
16/09/2015 – performance, 10am

APNA: 11/09/2015 – workshop 1, am
18/09/2015 – workshop 2, am
25/09/2015 – performance, 10.30am

Eccleston Library &

St. Helens Central Library: 24/09/2015 – workshop 1, am & pm
01/10/2015 – workshop 2, am & pm
15/10/2015 – performance, 10.30am & 1.30pm

The Forum Library: 30/09/2015 – workshop 1, am
07/10/2015 – workshop 2, am
14/10/2015 – performance, 11am

Crumpsall Lane Primary: 02/10/2015 – workshop 1, am
09/10/2015 – workshop 2, am
16/10/2015 – performance, 9am

Linaker Children's Centre: 08/10/2015 – workshop 1, pm
22/10/2015 – workshop 2, pm
05/11/2015 – performance, 2pm

Wigan Library: 16/10/2015 – workshop 1, pm
23/10/2015 – workshop 2, pm
06/11/2015 – performance, 2pm

Reedley Hallows Children's Centre &

Ightenhill Children's Centre: 12/11/2015 – workshop 1, am & pm
19/11/2015 – workshop 2, am & pm
26/11/2015 – performance, 10am & 1.30pm

Bloom Day Nursery &

Seymour Park Community Primary School: 13/11/2015 – workshop 1, am & pm
20/11/2015 – workshop 2, am & pm
27/11/2015 – performance, 9am & 1pm

Bacup Library: 16/11/2015 – workshop 1, pm
23/11/2015 – workshop 2, pm
30/11/2015 – performance, 2pm