

## ***What Makes a Great Festival for Families?***

### **Big Imaginations Open Meeting**

**Date:** Thursday 22 March 2017

**Venue:** Z-arts

#### **Discussion/Notes**

##### **Panel Introduction**

**Sarah Bird (chair)** - Director of Wild Rumpus who hold Just So festival annually in August.

**Steve Ball (Birmingham Rep)** - Started out in teaching, then moved to Birmingham in mid-80s for a job as a clown. Head of Arts at Birmingham City Council for 2 years where he was responsible for programming ArtsFest. This has now been replaced for the Birmingham Weekender, a biannual event in Birmingham. Focus on making Birmingham Rep less hard to reach. Reps Children scheme with Birmingham City Hospital - every baby born in October 2004 and February 2013 got a free theatre experience once a year for the first ten years of their life. Chair of TYA UK for 6 years. On The Edge festival. Awards ceremony including Young Critics award - PICK STEVE'S BRAINS ABOUT THIS.

**Maggie Clarke (XTRAX)** - Specialise in outdoor arts. Puts on showcase events, performed at outdoor festivals - discussing the business of festivals, shows are generally available to programmed at other festivals. Greenwich & Docklands showcase of outdoor work 21/22 June, an opportunity to network with other festival organisers - free to register <http://xtrax.org.uk/gdif-2017-showcase/>. Opportunity to meet other people who are putting on festivals, making festival work etc. Holzminden festival - 2-4 June, XTRAX (while unable to cover costs XTRAX can help facilitate the experience for UK delegates). Audience research/data gathering. Perspective of co-ordinating festivals, working with artists to create new work.

**David Agnew (So It Is, Ramsbottom Festival, Artistic Director - The Met, Bury)** - Ramsbottom festival - 80% not regular arts attendees. From experience audiences at festivals are more likely to take risks. Bury Met audiences benefit in the year following a successful Ramsbottom festival. Runs - So It Is, delivers The Lost Carnival in partnership with Wild Rumpus. Manchester Folk Festival.

##### **Quality Control - where the balance is in a diverse programme between the headline events and your programme fillers?**

**David Agnew** - Ramsbottom is performed in the town centre and there is a close relationship with the local residents. A reminder that everyone makes mistakes but you should still be prepared to take risks!

**Steve Ball** - Have a trusting relationship with producers/directors/companies that you know will bring in quality work. See everything that you're programming UNLESS it's from a company you know and trust.

**Maggie Clarke** - Without Walls is all high-risk work, commissioning new work from new artists. XTRAX's job is support the companies, it's a careful balance of budget and experience and you need to have trust in your own judgement. No easy answers to this question.

##### **Digital Platforms - how can festivals embrace different digital technologies -**

**Steve Ball** - Used in the past, and used very effectively by Young Critics, but needs to be further taken advantage of.

**Maggie Clarke** - We continue to support artists who are playing with this technology. However, in working with artists who enjoy working outdoors, many feel liberated by the fact that they sometimes can't use it. Question of how technology can enhance the audience's experience.

**Sarah Bird** - Wild Rumpus resisted technology for a while as it felt counter to what Wild Rumpus stood for. However as we've changed our understanding of what digital means we've realised that we can use it to enhance rather than detract from the experience.

**David Agnew** - Partnership with BBC summer of festivals, connecting with local festivals which is then captured and stored under the BBC summer of festivals brand. Using technology to give information to audiences, so at the very least audiences go away knowing who they've watched. It's important to give people incentives for connecting with your streams. Ramsbottom festival have worked with media partner Northern Soul and given them exclusive interviews with artists for their website.

### **How do you keep people engaged between festivals so that they'll come back in the future?**

**Maggie Clarke** - Work hard at Marketing and developing relationships. Have recognisable mental signposts (i.e. same location, same time of year)

Work with local groups as volunteers to create signage and festival décor – a good way of bringing them in to feel part of it all.

**David Agnew** - Use digital channels and choose your timing well, don't send messages in February for something that's happening in September.

**Sarah Bird** - Really active on social media, inadvertently were 'signposting' by talking to existing audiences via social media, pointing out arts events that are occurring in the region.

**Maggie Clarke** - Think about where your target audience hang out. Don't underestimate the importance of physical signposting in the areas that your audiences will pass through every day.

**Steve Ball** - Residents commission' where members of the community performed work in their front rooms. Steve mentioned that they linked 20 companies to 20 schools which ensured they got buy-in for selling shows.

### **Arts Champion Scheme (Birmingham Rep - How does this work?)**

**Steve Ball** - Each district has its own arts forum which is community led and meets quarterly. Hello Erdington - offers any residents with an Erdington postcode £3 tickets. Going into communities with bus tickets and meeting people at bus stops to accompany them into Birmingham Weekender, all 200 tickets were taken last time. Cheap deal with bus provider to arrange reduced bus tickets.

### **Signposting - How do you create a festival feel when you're working across different venues/cities/regions when you don't have the resources to put up banners in every town and city?**

**Maggie Clarke** - Some local authorities do have support for festivals who are trying to create that sort of presence. Guerilla tactics - WITH PERMISSION, go to events which attract similar audiences and flyer and have a presence at these events. Give out leaflets and have signage in town centres (WITH PERMISSION OF THE COUNCIL). It's very important not to aggravate or alienate your local authority!

**Sarah Bird** - Barnaby festival do a competition for the best dressed window in Barnaby. Put up A-Boards and signage at other festivals and events to promote your own: find events with comparable interests / target audiences and ask them to help promote.

**Steve Ball** - Biggest and quick win with On The Edge was persuading Birmingham City Council to make 2016 the 'Year Of Arts and Young People'.

**David Agnew** - Importance of training up your staff, making sure that staff across all venues are welcoming and know about the festival and all the shows. Make a cohesive greeting across all venues

**Maggie Clarke** - An idea could be to pool the marketing budget to create a cohesive festival image. Be that through t-shirts/decoration, banners, badges, bunting etc.

Ask artists who are taking part what they might like to do to enhance the festival.

### **Quality Curating about a family festival, when has feedback been surprising?**

**David Agnew** - Generally people comment on something specific when they've been surprised by there's a temptation to re-programme the next year, but instead you should seek to find something again that surprises them the following year.

**Maggie Clarke** - You can learn from people's feedback on their favourite and least favourite show. Whilst you need to take the feedback on board you need to continue to stretch and challenge your audiences. Don't ignore what your audience are telling you but similarly don't be afraid to challenge them.

**Steve Ball** - The Blue Dog and The French Detective - feedback, "I loved those books as a child" even though it was a brand new show. Make something approachable and familiar even if it isn't.

**Sarah Bird** - Audience feedback is rarely surprising, often families want the same thing back again because repetition is important for young people and families. There's a value in rebooked stuff as children adore the familiarity, but the balance is struck between new work and old favourites (about 60 - 70% of audiences are families who've been in previous years).

### **Participation - How do you strike the balance between participation and audience watching?**

**Maggie Clarke** - There's a huge range of activities available including projects that directly invite participation and collaboration with audiences, (e.g. audiences building a cardboard structure that is present throughout the festival).

**Steve Ball** - Artists working in schools is invaluable. 'Free Haircuts by Kids', amazing project! Mammalian Diving Reflex, Canadian Company <http://mammalian.ca/about/>.

**Spot On, Stephie Jessop** - Turn data capture into a participatory project in itself. Put them in holding spaces where people will be waiting before an event. E.g. A map where people can pin/sticker on their home location and postcode.

**Sarah Bird** - Cigarette butt bins for Brexit - STAY OR REMAIN. We're toying with the idea of having some version of this around our festival site.

**Zoe Pickering, Z-arts** - Participatory elements can often save an otherwise average show. E.g. 15 minutes 'meet the puppets'/'interactive play sessions'.

### **What do you wish you knew when you started out?**

**David Agnew** - Importance of quality control. Don't be tempted to have everyone who ever submits work.

**Steve Ball** - YOU DON'T NEED PERMISSION TO DO BIG THINGS! If you call something a world festival it can be a world festival, you don't need to go the UN to get permission. No one festival is going to please everyone, so don't expect that.

**Sarah Bird** - Flipping the question on its head, we always need to remember to think back to what we did when we didn't have money. Focus on creating shared memories that become a part of that families life.

**Maggie Clarke** - For outdoor festivals - know and understand your location really well and the implications that go with it. Artists are your best PR, so make sure you look after them really well. The artists you choose to work with need to feel welcomed and supported.

### **How do you engage across the regions? Launch strategies.**

**Steve Ball** - Satellites within each region

**David Agnew** - Launch event in Northern Quarter, Manchester for Ramsbottom festival

**Sarah Bird** - Where the Wild Things Are - Wild Rumpus Event across Manchester.