England, Arise! Evaluation

We are very pleased with the England, Arise! project as a whole. We believe we created a strong piece of work which stood up in a range of venues and attracted a range of audiences, many non-traditional theatre audiences. The production was well received by the venues, many of whom expressed interest in booking future touring work.

Whilst setting up the tour, we had a few changes in the schedule, due to demand from venues locally. This had an impact on the shape of the tour, particularly in losing one performance at the Lawrence Batley Theatre. This meant that we had to be careful with our budget and also that we opened and had press night on the same night, which is never ideal. Although this was unavoidable, we would not really want to do that again. In the end, though, we were pleased with the tour. The volume of work about WW1 perhaps had an impact on some of the larger venues taking the work and this is also perhaps a reflection on how we sold the piece to them. We will be taking this learning into future projects.

We also found out during the project that they Kirklees Community Heritage Team were unsuccessful with their funding application to support a large amount of engagement work. Although this had been carefully budgeted to minimise financial risk, i.e. that we could lift the work out of the budget and be sure it wouldn’t have an impact on the production as a whole, we were disappointed. Fortunately, we were able to work closely with the team and, as a result, they found a smaller budget of £3,000 to support engagement work in schools in Kirklees in the Spring, which was very successful. We are proud of this relationship and hope to continue to work alongside the team in the future.

We have been successful with all our applications to Trusts and Foundations, receiving £2,000 from the Ameil and Melburn Trust, £500 from the Co-operative Society and the Lipman Miliband Trust gave is £1,000 towards our work. We have also developed a relationship with Leeds Beckett University, and are working with Dr Ingrid Sharp, who is leading on the Legacies of War project. Together we made a successful application to the Leeds University Ignite fund, worth £3,000, to visit Berlin after the tour and research the German CO movement, with a view to delivering an education project between the UK & Germany in 2015/6. Though we have not included this in this project budget, the income has been generated as a direct result of our Grants for the Arts funding and should be recognised.

The project has been managed well. We have maintained our reputation for treating people well who work with us, ensuring people are properly contracted, paid industry rates and in a timely fashion. Though there were changes to the details within the budget during the project, we delivered the tour within budget, through careful
financial management. The venues were positive in their feedback in relation to our production values and scheduling and marketing and box office staff were positive about our work with them. (See below for example comments.)

The production itself was a strong, professional piece of work. We had a strong cast of actors who committed fully to the production and tour and who were willing to try new approaches to their work and take risks during rehearsals. The musicians brought a vital element to the production as a whole and placed original source materials from 100 years ago in a contemporary light. We believe the script had the right balance of character-based journey and historical grounding to create an engaging piece of drama whilst being rooted in authentic research. The design by Barney George was simple yet engaging and worked well across the range of venues and non-theatre venues we toured to.

The subject matter of the play clearly stood out as presenting an alternative narrative to the WW1 centenary and many audience members commented that they found this refreshing and a strong motivator for attending the theatre. This was particularly striking when performances were accompanied by talks and events led by Cyril Pearce and Bread, Print & Roses. It seems that there is a thirst for alternative ideas, and a need to creatively celebrate our radical heritage.

This was also evident in the success of our partnership working, whereby we worked closely with the University of Huddersfield, the LBT, Kirklees Community Heritage Team, Bread, Print and Roses, the People’s History Museum, the Pioneers Museum, Dr Cyril Pearce, Wakefield Libraries, Kirklees Libraries, the Peace Pledge Union and local history groups in Wakefield, Calderdale and Rochdale to provide additional activities such as talks and workshops. We are particularly proud of this aspect of the project. We are also pleased to have connected organisations through creative work.

Following the success of the residency project at E15 that came about as a result of the research and development work for this project, we offered three work experience places for students at the University of Huddersfield, which were very successful. Two students supported the team during the rehearsal and opening week, and one led dance sessions for the cast.

Alongside this, we took on a recent stage management graduate from E15 as paid ASM for the tour, which gave her valuable professional work experience. As she came from Huddersfield, she was able to stay with family, thereby keeping costs down. Caroline stayed with us for the duration of the tour and went on to find work at The Point in Eastleigh when we finished. We believe that this approach working with young artists is fundamental to our outcomes for both this project and in the future, in terms of supporting young professionals to take the next step.
We were very pleased with our audiences, and had good houses at the Lawrence Batley Theatre and almost selling out on a dark winter’s Sunday night at the Square Chapel in Halifax. We reached audiences in Sunderland, even though the performance was part of a new audience development initiative and the venue itself has no audience to speak of. We had healthy groups at Rochdale, even though it isn’t a venue, and Manchester, and brought people into Wakefield, where we were the first professional company to visit. Feedback from audiences after the event was very positive

Though our audience figures would stand up well to comparisons with similar touring performance projects, this project has really made us think creatively about our work in the future and how we connect with audiences. It feels like having a great story, a strong cast and a confident production is no longer enough – we must look for more creative ways of engaging with people and perhaps challenge ourselves to have a different approach to our work. This feels like the strongest learning point coming out of the project that will directly influence our work into the future.

“England Arise! was a great addition to our second space programme in Autumn. Audiences really enjoyed the quality of the work and it gave a new perspective on the subject of the First World War – refreshing when you consider how many plays on the subject are currently available to programmers! The subject itself also spoke loudly about messages vital to today, it wasn’t just a play stuck in the past – and this created interesting debate and discussion after the event. Bent Architect knew their strengths in this production and worked well to communicate with us key marketing tactics and the overall feel of the play ahead of its visit so we could target audiences with confidence. Our key markets were those interested in new writing and those interested in political theatre. We were able to secure audiences on both fronts – having people attend from earlier work they’d seen such as Red Ladder Theatre Company and also from our Scripted sessions. Mick Martin supported our ongoing development by leading a masterclass in Writing For Solo Performance, which was really well received by our emerging writers and artists and supported the development of a stronger relationship between ourselves and Bent Architect. We certainly believe there’s room for their work in our future programme and we look forward to the next tour when we’re confident England Arise! audiences will return and we will be able to build on the success as we grow as an organisation.”

Graham Whitehead
Head of Marketing and Communications, Cast
“England Arise! transformed the Rochdale Pioneers Museum's Learning Loft and showed the potential for holding further drama performances in the future despite it being a relatively small space. With no theatre venue in Rochdale Town Centre the performances of England Arise! provided a cultural activity not usually on offer in the area and enabled the Museum to attract a new audience that had not previously visited. England Arise! was a very professional and well received performance and it was a pleasure to work with Mick, Jude and the team. We would be very interested in working with you again in the future for performances with a similar historical and topical focus. Thanks again for bringing a great production to the Museum.”

Jennifer Mabbott, Museum Manager, Rochdale Pioneers Museum

“Thanks again for a great show last night and for your talk for the students. I really enjoyed it, and like going to a play where you listen to a carefully argued dialectic. Here are two comments from my students, amongst many other positive ones: ‘I didn’t know what socialism meant until last night.’ ‘I didn’t think theatre could work so well in such a small space.’”

Richard Vergette, Teacher, Ackworth School, Wakefield.

“It has been a pleasure to take on the tour booking for a project as wonderful as England, Arise! Amongst a plethora of First World War related productions, this has stood out not only as a refreshing and new perspective on the remembrance season, but also as a quality and important piece of work. Venues have been exceptionally receptive, especially those with local links and interest in the story. It has been brilliant to see an account of events one hundred years ago made so relevant to happenings in today’s society. Younger audiences (14+) have certainly found something to take away from seeing this show, besides just a history lesson.”

Jen Sullivan, Dep Arts Producer

“Something significant is happening in this part of South Yorkshire and the theatre is beginning to grow audiences in a town where Art and Drama is often thought to be ‘Not for people like us’. This is due in no small measure to CAST’s Kully Thiarai’s varied and imaginative programming. This is coupled, as in this production, with a mission to challenge the audiences.

This magnificent production, was challengingly programmed in Armistice week. The play immediately avoids the trap of most agit-prop theatre... No easy answers are provided by the play. However we as the audience are left to examine the dilemmas faced by these brave young revolutionaries. As we leave the theatre we need to examine what the lessons are for us to learn and influence our lives and the socialist future.

The important thing is to see this play – this is real theatre and not Shaftesbury Avenue shenanigans.”

John Wheeler
“The cast transferred their enthusiasm for roles and the true story of friendship and conscience to the audience. They entertained from start to finish, making you wonder what strength of character we would have if we ever had to face such circumstances. The themes remain current, 100 years on.”

Malcolm Scott, Kardomah 94, Hull

“A fantastic play that brings together the world changing elements of that period into an emotional and provoking performance and draws unnerving parallels a century later. Probably the best thing I’ve seen at the LBT.” Audience Member, LBT