Bubbling Under
A report on the future of fringe in Newcastle/Gateshead.

Amy Golding
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Clore Leadership Programme/AHRC
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About the Author

Amy Golding is Artistic Director of Newcastle based theatre company Curious Monkey, Clore Fellow and graduate of Northumbria University. She is committed to bringing to life stories that deserve to be told through her theatre work with communities regionally and around the world.

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Image: Future of Fringe Symposium
Photographer Ian Mackintosh
1. Introduction

This research was funded by AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council) and the Clore Leadership Programme. Following on from my Clore fellowship in 2013/14, there was an opportunity to apply for a grant to research an area of interest within the UK culture sector. Spending time away from the north east during my fellowship, I had the opportunity to visit a number of different cities and experience arts and culture in a variety of places. During this period I was able to view the north east, the place where I studied and where I currently live and work, from a new perspective.

The research was motivated by noticing a comparative lack of fringe activity in Newcastle/Gateshead compared with other regional cities, and a lack of venues outside the major theatres where fringe work was being presented. I had visited a range of theatre pubs and small fringe venues in different cities, something I had little experience of as an emerging theatre maker in the north east. There was a growing desire from artists for more experimental work and more fringe spaces to present work in Newcastle/Gateshead. Many performing arts graduates were leaving the city to find opportunities elsewhere. I identified the potential and interest to cultivate and nurture a more thriving fringe theatre climate in the city.

I approached Northumbria University to jointly put together a proposal for the AHRC/Clore award. Working with academic supervisor Kay Hepplewhite, Senior Lecturer in Performing Arts, we wrote the bid to Clore/AHRC. The research started in September 2014, data was collected between October and December 2014, data analysis and the public symposium took place between January and February 2015. Although this is a research study based on testimonies collected from others, (quoted in italics throughout the report), it does include some of my own thoughts and reflections as an insider-researcher. The process of using filmed interviews was influenced by my own artistic practise as a theatre director. I often work with real stories when creating new plays, collecting recorded testimonies from people to create verbatim theatre. As Artistic Director of Curious Monkey, a theatre company based in Newcastle, I have a personal relationship with the aims in this study and I share a passion for the subject matter.

In Newcastle/Gateshead I noted many conversations about the fact that things are changing. There is something ‘bubbling’ under the surface in terms of a fringe scene, but definitely still room for improvement. Through this research I want to explore how we continue to encourage the independent performance sector to ‘bubble’ up and not allow things to ‘simmer’ down.

Amy Golding,
February 2015
www.futureoffringe.wordpress.com
#futureoffringe
2. Rationale for the Research

Why is fringe in Newcastle/Gateshead important?

Fringe is the training ground for artists, where they can develop and hone their skills. It is a place where people can take risks, try out ideas and be allowed to fail which we will all do at some stage in our career as theatre makers. It is a form of theatre, which generally has lower ticket prices; it can be more accessible to new audiences of non-typical theatre goers.

*Fringe – taking risks, trying new things (succeeding and failing and both of these being ok). The new undercurrent of work and artists*
Jemma McDonnell, The Paper Birds

*The joy of going to fringe theatre is that you might see something not so great, but you might see the first play by someone who will go on to do great things*
Natalie Querol, The Empty Space

*Our community - We’re a good community. Sometimes, even, we are great. We are supportive. We are congratulatory. We are friendly. We are willing to give it a go. But we could do better. We could continue to be all of those things, but perhaps we could also be better at being audiences for each other, just a little more open, a little less risk averse, a lot more critical (of course in a constructive way). We could be more honest, passionate, bold, playful, outward looking, ambitious, courageous. And perhaps just a little more competitive - in a healthy way, of course. Perhaps then the future for our community could look even brighter and look beyond the confines of this community - to Leeds, and Bristol, and beyond!*
Kate Craddock, Director, Gateshead International Festival of Theatre
3. The Research Question and Aims

*Researching potential models to guide the development of a healthy independent theatre/performance scene for Newcastle/Gateshead.*

**Aims**

- To research the current fringe/independent theatre scene in Newcastle/Gateshead
- To examine two examples of other regional cities and their fringe/independent culture.
- To gain a greater understanding of the variables that create a vibrant fringe/independent theatre scene
- To explore how this research can influence and develop fringe/independent theatre in Newcastle/Gateshead.

The first three aims of this study will be carried out through the first stage of the research, the fourth aim will be tackled collectively at the symposium and beyond by the theatre/performance community in Newcastle/Gateshead.
4. Research Methods

The research methods used to carry out this study included questionnaires, theatre visits, visits to Leeds and Bristol, a mapping exercise, filmed interviews, data analysis and a public symposium.

**Questionnaires:** The research questionnaire was designed to investigate how people felt about the fringe scene in their city, what the opportunities and limitations people felt there were for making and presenting work, and where people put work on. The questionnaire also set out to investigate the most common factors (variables) that people felt were important in supporting a vibrant fringe/independent scene and how people could further support its development. I included tick box questions in order to collect some quantitative data for comparisons between locations. See appendix 1 for a sample questionnaire.

**Theatre visits:** I made visits to a number of venues and spaces to see the variety of places that work is being presented in the three cities, and to see a selection of work.

**Visits to the three cities:** I visited Leeds and Bristol for 4 days each. I live and work in Newcastle/Gateshead.

**Mapping exercise:** I mapped out everything I encountered or heard about through the process of the research using a mind-map structure. This included venues/performance spaces, training opportunities, companies, festivals and anything else that was contributing to the fringe and independent scene in the three cities.

**Filmed interviews:** I carried out interviews with participants in the study. The interviews used the questionnaire as a starting point for follow up discussion and planned to last no longer than 30 minutes, although several interviews were longer. I used some structured questions but also to allow flexibility for the interview to go in a direction led by the participant.

The edited video clips are available online at the future of the fringe weblink:

[www.futureoffringe.wordpress.com](http://www.futureoffringe.wordpress.com)

**Data analysis:** I approached the data in an instinctual way drawing out common themes. I also used techniques based on grounded theory to code and sample data.

**Symposium:** I planned a symposium with my academic supervisor to disseminate the interim findings at Northumbria University’s NPA Basement Studio Theatre on 5th February 2015. The event involved a presentation of findings, including edited video clips of some of the interviews and a panel discussion. Guest speakers from each city were invited to present for five minutes on the following question:
• What is the future of fringe in your city?
• What's its role/function?
• Why is it important?

The second part of the symposium gave the opportunity to hear from those who attended the event. Small discussion groups interrogated some of the factors that arose from the research in further detail.

The discussions were facilitated to be forward-looking and action focused, with the aim of addressing the fourth aim:

• How can the research influence and develop the fringe/independent scene in the future?

Each group was invited to feed back to everyone on their discussions and a representative from each group wrote up notes to be included in this paper. To conclude the event people were encouraged to make pledges about something they felt they could do or contribute to developing the future of a vibrant fringe/independent scene in Newcastle/Gateshead.
5. Research Participants

I initially sent out letters of invitation to a selection of people working in Newcastle/Gateshead. The selection process aimed to identify a diverse range of people including recent graduates, independent artists, small companies, producers, local authority and representatives from larger theatre institutions. In Leeds and Bristol I initially recruited participants through personal links who then identified further people. In Bristol I set up some pre-arranged meetings and also met a number of people ad hoc when I visited the city.

- In Newcastle/Gateshead, 22 people took part, 15 people filled in questionnaires and 19 people took part in interviews.
- In Leeds, 8 people took part, 3 people filled in questionnaires and 7 people took part in interviews
- In Bristol, 11 people took part, 1 person filled in a questionnaire and 10 people took part in interviews.

Some people preferred to just be interviewed and did not want to fill in the questionnaire, some people filled in the questionnaire but did not want to be interviewed (usually due to the time commitment).

See appendix 2 for full list of individuals who took part in the research.
6. Research Findings

The questionnaires were more effective as a starting point with some participants than others. Terminology that most people seemed quite comfortable with in Newcastle/Gateshead was not used at all in Bristol. This led to a really interesting debate and a re-phrasing of some terms used in the study. The filmed interviews were more successful as people seemed comfortable talking rather than writing or ticking boxes. The data gathered is qualitative except some quantitative data that mainly came from participants in Newcastle/Gateshead.

www.futureoffringe.wordpress.com

This website contains video clips edited from the filmed interviews in all three cities. The extracts have been selected and organised thematically around the research questions.

As I was analysing the data I found using some techniques used in grounded theory really useful to code and sample data from the questionnaires and videos as a way of systematically searching for thematic patterns that arose. I identified factors that two or more people talked about.

This section discusses what participants said about:

- Terminology
- Context, opportunities and limitations of the three places

6.1 Debates around terminology

It was interesting to note the different responses to the word ‘fringe’ in the different cities - some people embraced it, some rejected it entirely.

*I feel fringe is often associated with an outsider status, or a signifier of the work having an amateur feel.*

Anna Ryder, independent theatre maker

In Newcastle/Gateshead people on the whole were happy to fill in the questionnaire and talk about ‘fringe’ theatre. In Leeds there was more resistance to the term and in Bristol very few people could identify with it and the term was hardly used at all.

*I find this a problematic term, which I would never use... something quite cut off and ignored by the ‘mainstream’. I’d rather think in terms of work made by people who are independent.*

Dick Bonham, Little Mighty
It is hard to conclude whether this response to the term ‘fringe’ was due to the individuals I happened to speak to or a significant regional difference. Nevertheless, it appeared to affect how people initially reacted to the research. Some artists described wanting to work both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the mainstream so did not choose to label themselves as ‘fringe’ artists but wanted to remain engaged with a ‘fringe’ or ‘independent’ scene.

People also had different responses to the word ‘theatre’ and a number of people I met wanted to talk about ‘performance’ as well as ‘theatre’. As the study progressed, I began to open out the definitions to include the words ‘independent’ as well as ‘fringe’ and ‘performance’ as well as ‘theatre’. It felt important to encompass this work and to recognise that different people talk about their work in a range of terms. Many artists did not want to categorize their work at all.

6.2 Three Places

Information about the context for each research location was gathered as part of the research conversations and visits to each city. I made a basic map of Leeds and Bristol and a more comprehensive map of Newcastle/Gateshead which people who attended the symposium were invited to add to.

Newcastle/Gateshead

Image by Ian Mackintosh
**Context**

Talking to people who had lived and worked in Newcastle/Gateshead for many years gave a really interesting perspective on the theatre scene historically. During the 1980s there was a wave of community theatre, theatre in education (TIE) and political cabaret happening in schools, working men’s clubs and other community settings.

*One of the limitations I’ve always felt about Newcastle is it doesn’t really have a history of pub theatre, but in the 80s there was quite a complicated structure of community theatre.*

Gez Casey, Live Theatre

There seems to be a legacy of this work in the city with a number of graduates from the drama and applied theatre degree at Northumbria University staying and working in participatory settings. This was my background and the route I took into making work. When I graduated in 2003 I found it easier to find work and set up as an applied theatre practitioner than to be a theatre maker. Many people also identified the lack of a fringe scene as such in Newcastle/Gateshead and that a lot of the activity happening in the 80s and 90s died down until more recently. There were individuals and small companies still making fringe and independent work but people couldn’t identify a coherent ‘scene’. Some people described a lack of infrastructure particularly for more contemporary performance work. Although some people enjoyed the space in Newcastle/Gateshead for artists to make work that is unique and different, the city was described as certainly not saturated with artists.

The geography of Newcastle/Gateshead was discussed. The system of train lines makes it more difficult to be connected with other places in the UK, particularly the lack of east to west routes. People talked about how it can sometimes feel isolated or out on a limb in Newcastle/Gateshead and therefore potentially more inward looking or insular. The wider north east was discussed. Relationships with other organisations across the region that were supporting artists such as ARC in Stockton were seen to be crucial to the fringe/independent scene.

Many people mentioned that the city has changed and is changing, with new cultural leaders coming into the city with new visions. The major NPO venues felt more open and had invested more recently into artist development. Many people talked positively about opportunities to make relationships with Live Theatre and Northern Stage through artist development programmes, scratch nights and awards. Some artists talked about feeling the need to be validated by one of these organisations to gain further funding support and reputation. There was a general feel amongst artists that having good relationships with the major venues was definitely a good thing, but should not be everything. The work should be valued and validated on its own merits.
The recent 100% arts cuts by Newcastle City Council were mentioned and the challenges of working within a climate of less public funding. It was noted that there are no professional producing or receiving houses for theatre in Gateshead but that the local authority were committed to supporting theatre makers with in kind support and space.

I asked the participants in Newcastle/Gateshead to say how satisfied they felt with the current fringe/independent theatre scene here. As you can see from the chart below notably no-one said they were very satisfied, 58% said they were unsatisfied, 17% said very unsatisfied, 17% didn’t know, 8% were satisfied and 0% didn’t care.
Although a large percentage of people said they felt unsatisfied with the current scene in Newcastle/Gateshead during the follow up interviews everyone I spoke to followed their reasons for being unsatisfied with the word but… Many people described the scene as bubbling, describing how they could feel things changing and that Newcastle was gonna kick off soon. There was a real sense of excitement and expectation from people about what was happening and what was about to happen.
Newcastle/Gateshead: Map

Below is the original map that was created of Newcastle/Gateshead, a later edition was created which people added more detail to at the symposium. (Please see appendix 3 for the final version.)

Image: Amy Golding
Leeds

The background of the fringe/independent scene in Leeds was described as a reaction to the three major funded NPO organisations to which 80% of the arts council funding in Leeds is distributed.

*Leeds is unique in the fact it is the only place outside London that has a leading ballet company, opera company and a producing theatre company and as a result about 80% of all arts funding in the city goes to one of those organisations.*

Alan Lane, Slung Low

The West Yorkshire Playhouse was described as being a *closed shop* historically and many theatre makers trying to build relationships found it very difficult and therefore were taking work out of Leeds to be presented.

*The relationships between the (West Yorkshire) Playhouse and the artistic community were really almost non-existent*

Amy Letman, West Yorkshire Playhouse

When people talked about how things changed in Leeds, they talked about a number of individuals who were *just making things happen* at the same time. West Yorkshire Playhouse began to *open up* and engage with the independent artist community, a new venue *The Hub* was being set up under railway arches in Holbeck in 2011 by

Amy Golding, *Bubbling Under* - AHRC/Clore research
Slung Low and Live Art Bistro, a home for Live Art and contemporary performance opened in 2012.

The geography of Leeds was also mentioned, located centrally making it easy to be connected both north and south. The close relationship with Bradford and the rest of Yorkshire was also noted.

The quality of the university courses at Bretton Hall campus and Leeds Met were seen as a real opportunity. Leeds Met studio theatre had been dedicated to programming contemporary performance work. The studio theatre no longer programmes in the same way and Bretton Hall courses have moved to Leeds University.

*Leeds Met studio was the place where you knew you could see contemporary practise... and the courses reflected the programming*

Annie Lloyd, Compass Festival

Compared to Newcastle/Gateshead, it appeared from the conversations there were lot of independent producers working in Leeds, many of who are working with artists from all over the UK including Newcastle/Gateshead.

There were some small venues to present work in Leeds such as Seven Arts Centre, Workshop Theatre, Trinity, and The Hub but there are no theatre pubs and not really a culture of this in Leeds.
Leeds: Opportunities

People who took part in the study in Leeds identified the following opportunities.

- **The Hub**

  People talked about the generosity of the offer of space and use of the van for free at The Hub, and that artists could take 100% of money on the door (pay what you decide). The successful audience development was also mentioned as The Hub is bringing new audiences in to see fringe/independent work.

- **Outward looking**

  Theatre makers in Leeds talked about making relationship and presenting work regularly outside of Leeds. This was due to necessity historically for some companies and possibly to do with the central location of Leeds.
• **Festivals**

Compass Live Art, a festival of international live artworks happens in sixteen venues across the city every two years. Transform at the West Yorkshire Playhouse is a weekend long annual festival presenting theatre and contemporary performance work.

• **Leeds Inspired**

Leeds Inspired is a council run initiative that people talked about to support culture across the city. It offers a website of listings that anyone can add to and various commissions and grants to apply for.

**Leeds: Limitations**

The following things were discussed as factors limiting the development of Leeds’ independent theatre and performance scene.

• **Fragmented scene**

Some people felt that people didn’t all know each and that the independent scene felt somewhat fragmented.

• **Audience Development**

It was identified that something Leeds could spend more time thinking about was developing new audiences for this kind of work.

• **Central Hub**

Some artists felt that there was a lack of a venue or hub in the centre of Leeds where people could congregate, meet and network.

• **Space**

People felt there could be more places to present work and that many artists were taking their work elsewhere.
Bristol

Image: Alma Tavern Theatre

Image: Residence

Image: The Tobacco Factory Theatres

Context

Bristol was described as a city full of artists and independent producers with many artists living in Bristol with its living costs relatively cheaper than those in London. Within close proximity of the capital, many artists I spoke to in Bristol said they had good connections in London and made work there. People talked about what happened in 2007 when Bristol Old Vic went dark and the effect it had on the rest of the city.

*Bristol Old Vic going dark was one of the major things that allowed for the flourishing of independent theatre makers... if there isn’t one thing taking all the profile it allows other things to bubble up*

Clare Reddington, Watershed

There was no major venue to look to, which meant the rise of more independent work, and the re-distribution of funding provided an opportunity for smaller
companies. The independent scene grew out of a time when there was little else happening in mainstream theatre in the city.

Some of the artists I spoke to in Bristol were graduates of Dartington Arts College, which has a legacy in the city with many graduates attracted to live and work there.

Bristol is famous as an entrepreneurial city with a large number of independent businesses and a DIY spirit running through the city. It also has a vibrant alternative scene of underground music, techno parties, street art, circus and street performance, which add to the independent arts sector.

**Bristol: Map**

Image: Amy Golding

**Bristol: Opportunities**

People who took part in the study in Bristol identified the following opportunities.

- **Support from local authority – Capacity Scheme**

People talked about how important it was that Bristol council visibly supports arts and culture in the city. Certain proactive individuals within the council worked hard to offer support to independent artists by setting up initiatives such as the capacity scheme.

*The capacity scheme was about opening up disused spaces for artists. That’s what really gave Residence a home.*

Ella Good, member of Residence artist collective

Amy Golding, *Bubbling Under* - AHRC/Clore research
The capacity scheme allowed artists to take over any empty buildings in the city to make and present work, the scheme no longer runs and the individual who set it up is no longer within the council, but the legacy of the scheme is apparent across the city.

- **Independent Mayor**

Bristol’s independent mayor George Ferguson is a public figure who actively champions the arts in Bristol; most people felt this was a real positive.

> Having this figurehead who’s really able to advocate for this creative city is really useful. And seeing the value of this grass-roots stuff - that everything feeds everything else.
> Sarah Kingswell, Theatre Bristol

There were also some reservations about the use of the arts to promote the city for tourism and profile but not always truly valuing the expertise of artists in monetary terms.

- **Artist Collectives**

I visited two different artist collectives in Bristol, Residence and Interval who shared space, skills and practise and supported and championed each other’s work.

- **Theatre Pubs**

I visited three different theatre pubs in Bristol. The Alma Tavern, The Bierkeller and The Wardrobe. I also heard about another one that had just opened. There was a community of theatre makers surrounding each of these venues - professional, student and amateur. I saw a production at The Alma Tavern and one at The Bierkeller; both were very well attended.

- **Positivity**

Everyone I met spoke very positively about Bristol; there was a perception of the place from the inside that it was a great place to be and to work. This positive perception seems to permeate outside the city attracting more artists to want to live and work there too, adding to the community of artists.

- **Theatre Bristol**

Theatre Bristol was set up to make the theatre scene more cogent and linked up. They offer flexible support for artists depending on their needs and also run a website that is made by and for everyone interested in live performance in Bristol. Anyone can add to the listings making one central place to find out about what’s on in the city from small-scale work in a theatre pub to that on the main programme at Bristol Old Vic.
• **Festivals**

Bristol is a city of festivals. I met people from three different performance festivals - Mayfest, Inbetween Time and Ausform programming a whole range of international and local work.

*Brasil is a small city... Having all that international and local work, that very progressive, sometimes boundary pushing work, explode over the city, it becomes very exposed.*

Danny Prosser, Massive Owl

• **Artist development**

Bristol Old Vic runs a programme, Ferment, which supports theatre-makers from Bristol and the southwest to develop new work. The Tobacco Factory also offers some support to theatre makers developing work.

Image: Future of Fringe symposium – photographer Ian Mackintosh
Bristol: Limitations

The following things were discussed as factors limiting the development of Bristol’s independent theatre and performance scene.

- **Space**

Although many artists had been able to reclaim empty buildings in the city to make work, often these spaces were small and shared by a number of artists. A lack of affordable, sizable and technically equipped making/rehearsal space was identified.

- **Critique**

It was felt by some artists that because there is such a close and supportive artist community that there was a lack of critical rigour of each other’s work.

*I wonder where the spaces are for a bit more critical rigour. Is it possible to have this collaboration and generosity towards each other’s work but also more critique?*  
Jo Bannon, Independent artist

- **Competition**

As the there are many artists making work in Bristol, often they are competing for the same opportunities and commissions. Although artists did talk about how if one artist from Bristol got an opportunity then the rest would rally to be supportive to that artist and pleased that they had come from Bristol.

- **Scaling Up**

Some artists mentioned that it felt difficult to move from making small-scale work to making larger scale work in Bristol.
7. Variables to support a vibrant fringe/independent scene

The questionnaire asked people to identify out of a list of twenty-one the five factors they thought were most important in supporting a vibrant fringe/independent scene. This graph shows the number of people who chose each factor across the three cities. This section will look at these factors in more detail.

The top 8 factors were as follows:

- An audience for fringe – 14 people
- An artist community – 12 people
- Access to rehearsal/making space – 7 people
- A designated fringe venue – 6 people
- Creativity – 6 people
• Sharing of resources – 5 people  
• Artist development programmes – 5 people  
• Good university/college courses – 4 people  
• Knowledge and access to other funding – 4 people

Although people did take part in this exercise when they filled in the questionnaire, many people said it was very challenging and they wanted to tick many more out of the list.

From the data collected through the questionnaires and filmed interviews I identified a number of different factors that were talked about by 2 or more people. I divided these factors into five categories:

   a. Training and Artist Development  
   b. Making Work  
   c. Presenting Work  
   d. Support  
   e. Advocacy

Time and money were factors that were talked about with regularity and ran across all five of these areas. This ranged from younger artists talking about having a number of zero hour contract jobs to keep them afloat which made it difficult to find time to make work on the side to discussions about competition and access to funding. It was noted that philanthropy was more challenging in the north east as there is generally less money and that the emphasis on philanthropic giving has changed.

*Patronage has been lost. Philanthropic support for developing theatre and the arts has become increasingly difficult to get post 2008. The social culture has changed in philanthropic giving and large companies prefer to give money to ‘social causes’ rather than to simply support the arts*

Ednie Wilson, Gateshead Council

**a. Training and Artist Development**

• Good university and college courses

People across all three cities identified the need for strong drama and performance courses, particularly those that encourage students to be ‘makers’ as well as ‘performers’. The difficulty of getting students to attend work outside of that prescribed by their course was discussed in Newcastle/Gateshead. Students are a valuable audience for fringe and independent work and could perhaps be more aware of the opportunities to see work and get involved before graduating.
• Retaining/attracting graduates

People identified the need for graduates to feed into the community of artists and future generations of independent theatre/performance makers. Younger artists who are in a position to be able to take more risks in their theatre making are vital to the eco-system.

• Artist development – NPOs

It was identified that the major theatre venues have become much more open with a responsibility through their arts council funding to support and develop artists. Many artists identified various schemes that they were either involved in or aspired to be part of in Newcastle/Gateshead and spoke very positively of these. There were questions raised in Bristol and Newcastle/Gateshead about whether there were too many schemes and could there be more bespoke, flexible support for artists.

*Sometimes it seems we are too ‘scheme’ heavy - how could we offer more flexible support?*
Jo Cundall, Northern Stage

*I feel like there is a lack of opportunities for more ‘experimental’ performance or devised work. I’m not 100% sure how accessible some of the opportunities are.*
Zoe Murtagh, graduate/theatre maker

An interesting question currently being debated that also came up during the study was that of artist’s livelihood vs artist development.

• Exposure to different work

Barriers were identified that prevented artists from seeing a variety of work. For Newcastle/Gateshead specifically the geography, train-lines and more generally ticket prices.

*I can’t afford to go to the theatre here, let alone in another city.*
JonLuke McKie, Precious Cargo

The importance of seeing a variety of work was highlighted to enable emerging artists/producers to be able to make informed decisions about the kind of work they want to make. There was some feeling that major theatre venues could be more risky in their programming. Particularly those young artists making more ‘experimental’ or ‘contemporary’ work felt there wasn’t enough of this about.
• Youth theatres

The importance of more informal training and introductions to making work for young artists was highlighted. Youth theatre was seen as another route into the industry and the fringe scene.

• Artist mentoring

It was identified in Newcastle/Gateshead that as the fringe/independent scene felt quite new (and different to that of the 80s) there were a generation of theatre makers who had to work it all out for themselves.

*What the region lacked because it was just starting on this journey were the people who had been there and done it.*
Tom Walton, Fallen From Grace

Now those makers are more established and the scene is building there is a legacy and the opportunity to pass on their experience to the new generations of artists.

b. Making Work

• Risk taking

The importance of artists/makers who are willing to take risks and push boundaries was emphasised.

• Diverse routes

A number of people spoke about being open to different routes into making theatre/performance. That going through a traditional route of training schemes and making relationships with venues was one option but not the only option – there was recognition of more DIY options or presenting work at festivals and making relationships outside your city. The more winding the pathway or the more routes you take the more relationships you can build.

• Be ‘Reckless/cheeky/impatient/bolder’

Young theatre makers I spoke to talked about how being cheeky had really got them somewhere; by asking for things they often got what they needed.

*We’re just dead cheeky... we ask for space or to borrow someone for half an hour on a lunch break... make the most of the expertise around you. Shy bairns and that...*
Tory Copeland and Zoe Murtagh, graduates/theatre makers
Representatives from theatre venues I spoke to said they would be happy to be much more inundated with bolder requests, that they would be happy for their doors to be knocked on more regularly.

- **Space**

There was a need for more affordable and technically equipped making and rehearsal space across the three cities.

*It’s that catch 22 isn’t it... if you’ve got no money for space then you can’t rehearse so how can you show anything...*

Sam Bell, independent artist

It was noted that there was more pressure on some venues to hire out their spaces for corporate functions to generate income therefore leaving less space free for artists and independent companies to use. Schemes such as ‘spare room’ at Northern Stage was described as really useful to artists but some people found they were only able to book a dressing room which although was appreciated it wasn’t ideal for making work.

- **Cross Arts**

In Bristol it was clear that there was much more cross- art form, multi-disciplinary working and in Newcastle/Gateshead it was felt that people were working within silos and would benefit more from breaking them down and communicating across art forms.

*The bits of the fringe at the moment in Newcastle/Gateshead are all quite siloed... They exist but are not quite crossing over each other... in art form as well as in organisation. It’s getting better but hasn’t quite reached that tipping point yet.*

Lorne Campbell, Northern Stage

Artists were much less willing to categorise themselves in Bristol and there was much less distinction between art forms. The vibrant independent visual arts scene in Newcastle/Gateshead was commented on in terms of what we (the performing arts) could learn from them.

- **Producers**

In Leeds there were many independent producers, many of whom also work with artists in Newcastle/Gateshead. It was felt that there had previously been a lack of producers in Newcastle/Gateshead but that is now changing with The Empty Space’s initiatives of trainees and support. Since the producers gathering D and D event, *The Invisible Army 2* hosted at Dance City in Newcastle in January 2015, there are a number of new producer-led initiatives such as ‘Souping’ at Space Six and a new UK Producers Network on Facebook.
c. Presenting Work

In each city there was a different response to venues presenting work. In Leeds people talked about the one major venue – West Yorkshire Playhouse being a closed shop historically and therefore the fringe/independent scene was happening in Leeds Met university studio theatre and later popped up in venues such as The Hub’s railway arches and other reclaimed buildings and spaces in the city such as those run by East St Arts and Live Art Bistro. Festivals such as Compass are presenting work in many different spaces across the city. In Bristol there was a real culture of theatre pubs as well as venues such as the Tobacco Factory and Bristol Old Vic. Through Bristol’s capacity scheme many empty buildings in the city became making and presenting spaces. In Newcastle/Gateshead many independent/fringe artists tended to have really strong relationships with the major theatre venues Live Theatre and Northern Stage (if they had got in there) but that there was a lack of other places to present work. The changes in programming in Northern Stage’s Stage 3 feel more open and there is a lot of excitement around the opening of Alphabetti Theatre in the centre of Newcastle. The potential for other designated fringe or smaller scale venues was very welcomed.

• Festivals

Festivals such as GIFT (Gateshead International Festival of Theatre), Mayfest, Inbetween Time and Ausform in Bristol, Compass and Transform in Leeds were felt to be important parts of the eco-system. They allow exposure to different work from around the world and opportunities for local artists and companies to present work.
Some local artists felt it was difficult to get an opportunity to present at these festivals but appreciated the opportunity to see other work coming into the city.

- **Audience Development**

Particularly in Leeds and Newcastle/Gateshead it was noted that audience development needed more time and attention. An audience for fringe was identified as the most important factor to support the development of fringe/independent sector in the questionnaire. It was felt that when making low budget work it was often the thing that suffered due to time and financial restraints of a small number of people working on a project. It was also discussed that in fringe we are typically dealing with smaller audiences and potentially more open venues so there is an opportunity there to identify and target more diverse audiences.

d. **Support**

- **Artist community/collectives**

Artist collectives such as Residence and Interval in Bristol, The Shed (although this no longer exists) and Space Six in Newcastle/Gateshead and East St Arts in Leeds were seen as incredibly valuable for sharing resources and support but also for critiquing and championing each other’s work.
• **Generosity**

Many people shared stories of acts of generosity from others in terms of advice, time, space, practical help or expertise that really helped to give them and their companies a kick-start. It was felt that generosity really pays off and creates a culture of support within the sector.

• **Funding**

Those who I spoke to who were at the very start of their career identified a need for support with information about how to apply for other pots of funding and how to know when was the right time to start going for Arts Council England grants for the arts.

e. **Advocacy**

• **Champions**

Those who have influence championing the independent and fringe scene were appreciated and necessary to advocate for the importance of grass roots work, allowing for the next generations of artists to emerge. E.g. Bristol’s independent mayor, members of local authority or those in visible positions in institutions.

• **Local authority role**

Having a city council that visibly values the arts and its impact on a city was talked about as crucial to the sector. It was identified that with cuts to local authority arts development departments it was important to connect with other local authority members from different departments e.g.: property so they could understand the value and impact of the independent arts scene on a place and support through use of space. Both Leeds and Bristol had schemes set up to support artists – Leeds Inspired and the Capacity Scheme, these were set up by particularly visionary individuals within the council, some of whom had now left or been made redundant. People in the study talked about Gateshead council and support for the arts, notably no one mentioned Newcastle City Council.

• **Individuals**

The importance of individuals who make things happen was highlighted. In Leeds it was identified that at the time when changes were beginning to happen they were brought about by a number of different individuals identifying a need and then making it happen, not waiting for someone else to do it.
• Communicate the positives

There were some really interesting examples of how advocating for a place in a positive way attracts more people to want to go there, artists to want to work there, it attracts money and it gets stuff done. It was noted that often it is harder to see the positives from the inside of a place; how important it is to think about how you talk about the place you are from and work in, and the impact it can have on the perception.

8. Summary Statement

A vibrant fringe/independent theatre/performance scene needs a balance of many variables to enable it to thrive.

There are many factors that all need to be in place to create a healthy eco-system with in a city. Some of these factors were discussed in more detail with a wider group of people at the Future of Fringe symposium.
9. Symposium and Actions

The symposium event held on 4th February 2015 at Northumbria University sold out and was attended by 120 people including students, recent graduates, independent artists, small companies, Arts Council England, Gateshead council, members of larger building-based theatres including NPO companies Live Theatre and Northern Stage, academics, festival directors and producers. A hash-tag was set up and people tweeted throughout the day. (#futureoffringe)

After the presentation of interim findings there was a panel discussion with invited speakers: Matthew Austin (artistic director of MAYK and Mayfest in Bristol), Dr Kate Craddock (senior lecturer in performance at Northumbria University and director of Gateshead International Festival of Theatre), Alan Lane (artistic director of Slung Low and The Hub in Leeds), and JonLuke McKie (artistic director of Precious Cargo, a fringe collective in Newcastle/Gateshead).

The speakers each spoke for 5 minutes responding to the questions:

What is the future of fringe/independent theatre/performance in your city?
What’s its role?
Why is it important?

The floor was then opened for questions and discussion from the room. Some interesting discussions and provocations were raised around:
- Politics - Should fringe be political?
- History - What can we learn from models that have come before?
- Place - What does it mean to choose to stay in a place and make work?
- Funding – What is the impact of few companies receiving a large proportion of Arts Council funds?

We then divided into seven small breaks out groups to discuss some of the variables identified in the research at greater depth. People were encouraged to go to the group with whichever topic they were interested in talking about and to move around the groups if they wished. The groups were:

- Space
- Mentoring
- Training/artist development
- Designated fringe venues
- Audience development
- Artist collectives/community
- Diversity

It was encouraged that these discussions would be action-focused and forward-looking led by the interests of the group members. Each group fed notes from their discussions back to be included in this study. See appendix 4 for a summary of the discussions that took place in each group.
Symposium Actions

This section will look at what action people have taken or pledged to take since the symposium. The final activity at the symposium was to contribute to the pledge wall. Attendees were encouraged to write a pledge, however big or small, on to a post-it note and stick it to the floor or pledge wall. Some emailed one at a later date as they felt they needed more time to reflect. The following pledges came out of this session.

- **To set up an independent performance network**

  (This has already started, a group called Shoal now meets monthly at Space Six in the centre of Newcastle for an open space session to tackle questions/provocations/skills and knowledge sharing amongst independent artists from many art forms)

- **To go back to my school and have a word with them about them stopping their drama GCSE**

- **To organise a creative mapping day to continue the mapping exercise and to map backwards, looking at history.**

- **To open the university for more events like this**
• To share knowledge on diversity
• To bring back the spare room scheme at Northern Stage, to open space for artists to use.
• To put on a performance poetry night at Alphabetti Theatre
• Write a proposal for creating a critical network
• I pledge to engage 200 people/audience who have never seen a show
• To build a company you’ll probably think is a cult (it isn’t)
• To help paint and get Alphabetti ready to open
• To spread the word about equity’s campaign for ‘Live entertainment works’ to encourage venues e.g. pubs, community centres to realize potential
• To try and provide a place for emerging artists
• Make the theatre I want to make – no more dicking around!
• To finish my script and showcase it at Alphabetti
• To make my art as honest as I can
• To be courageous and make my own theatre
• To just do it!
• To stop complaining about the lack of theatre in Bolton and to put on an independent production in the town centre
• To find a way to reach more diverse audiences for Live Theatre’s writers/artist development courses
• To stop comedy being undermined as a genre and find like minded funny individuals to create work
• To get a comprehensive email list to send arts info and opportunities from the arts council
• To put on my work at Alphabetti and Star and Shadow
• To make art regardless of money and its power over arts ‘legitimacy’
- Create 15 emerging writers, directors opportunities across March, April and May
- Create another symposium on 21st May with Northumbria University students
- Share the ‘creative case for diversity’
- Finish that stuff for Curious Monkey
- To see more theatre by people I’ve never heard of
- To start a new venue

10. Website

www.futureoffringe.wordpress.com

This website includes edited video clips of the filmed interviews and symposium, a summary of the research and a link to this paper. The web link will be disseminated to research participants and attendees of the symposium. It will also be publicly available.
Appendices

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Appendix 1

Sample Questionnaire

**Future of fringe in the North East.**

Researching potential models to guide development of a healthy independent theatre scene for Newcastle/Gateshead.

**QUESTIONNAIRE**

(Double click the checkbox next to your chosen answer)

- [ ] Independent artist
- [ ] Run/part of a small theatre organisation
- [ ] Run/part of a more established theatre venue
- [ ] Local Authority
- [ ] Arts funder
- [ ] Student
- [ ] Other - Please state:

**About where you are**

**How do you feel about the fringe/independent theatre* scene in Newcastle/Gateshead**

- [ ] Very satisfied
- [ ] Satisfied
- [ ] Don’t know
- [ ] Unsatisfied
- [ ] Very unsatisfied
- [ ] Don’t care

**What opportunities are there in Newcastle/Gateshead for making and presenting fringe/independent theatre?**

**What limitations are there in Newcastle/Gateshead for making and presenting fringe/independent theatre?**
Definition of fringe theatre

How would you define fringe theatre?

Making Fringe Theatre

(Please go to next section if this is not relevant to you)

Do you define the work you/your company makes as fringe/independent theatre? Please explain.

Why do you choose to make theatre in this city?

What venues or spaces do you present your work? Why?

Do you work in other cities/places? If so, where? Which venues/companies?

What is it about these places that attract you to want to work there?

Future of fringe in your city
What are the most important factors that support a vibrant fringe theatre scene? Please tick your top 5.

- Artist development programmes at established theatres
- Theatre pubs
- Reclaimed spaces
- An artist community
- Fundraiser events
- Anarchists
- A good university theatre/drama course
- A fringe festival
- Networks
- A designated fringe theatre venue
- Creativity
- Access to rehearsal space
- Mentors
- Youth theatres
- Sharing of resources
- Access to public spaces/buildings
- Other artists to collaborate with
- Knowledge of arts council application process
- Knowledge and access to other funding
- An Audience for fringe theatre
- Other - Please specify:

What would an ideal fringe venue look like in this city? What would it include? How would it run?

What else would support the fringe theatre scene in your city?

Any further comments

Name:

Job Title:

Thank you for your time.
Appendix 2

List of Research Participants

Newcastle/Gateshead:

Kate Craddock – Gateshead International Festival of Theatre
Ali Pritchard – Alphabetti Theatre
Lorne Campbell – Northern Stage
Gez Casey – Live Theatre
Melanie Rashbroke – The Six Twenty
Tom Walton – Fallen From Grace
Brad McCormick – Freelance performer
Samantha Bell – Independent artist/member of North 15
Bev Fox – The Suggestibles
Tess Denman Cleaver – Tender Buttons
Annie Rigby – Unfolding Theatre
Maria Crocker - The Letter Room
Andrew Rothwell – Newcastle City Council
JonLuke McKie – Precious Cargo
Natalie Querol – The Empty Space
Jo Cundall – Northern Stage
Morag Iles - Space Six
Ednie Wilson – Gateshead Council
Tory Copeland – Graduate / theatre maker
Anna Ryder – Graduate/ Theatre Maker
Zoe Murtagh - Graduate/Theatre Maker
Jenny Dewar – Curious Monkey
Leeds:

Dick Bonham – Little Mighty
Alan Lane – Slung Low
Amy Letman – West Yorkshire Playhouse
Adam Young – East St Arts/ Live Art Bistro
Milan Govedarica – Independent Producer
Jemma McDonnell – The Paper Birds
Annie Lloyd – Compass Festival
Penny Saunders – Seven Arts Centre

Bristol:

Danny Prosser – Ausform
Jenny Duffy – Massive Owl
Jo Bannon – Independent artist
Ella Good – Residence
Nicki Kent – Residence
Silvia – Residence
Matthew Austin – Mayfest
Sarah Kingswell – Theatre Bristol
Ali Robertson – Tobacco Factory
Lee Roberts – Activist
Clare Reddington - Watershed
Holly Newton – The Alma Tavern
Appendix 3

Map of Newcastle/Gateshead
Appendix 4

Symposium Group Discussions

Below is a summary of the discussions that took place in each group at the symposium on 4th February 2015. The group discussion areas were:

- Space
- Mentoring
- Training, artist development
- Designated fringe venues
- Audience development
- Artist collectives/community
- Diversity

Space

Venues we have access to for making/rehearsing:

- Space Six
- Stage 3
- Spare Room
- The Stand
- The Cumberland Arms

- The Stand comedy club was a venue not everyone was aware of so the discussion became more about a sharing of knowledge and information with regards to space. It was suggested to create a space catalogue. Ideally through this people would be able to ask for space, tell others about space, advertise space, (like airbnb for rehearsal/making.)
- It was also discussed that sometimes people just don't ask. There are a lot of venues that people were unsure what they used their venue for during the day such as cafe's and music venues.
- There was a desire to take over disused spaces but a lack of knowledge on how to go about it and what the rules are.
- Some people wanted to be making theatre not managing space. But it seemed that if you want space, this might be one of the ways to go about it.
- Considered using more open spaces and site-specific spaces.
Mentoring

People in this group all agreed mentoring is a good thing. People had positive experiences of both being mentored and mentoring. Feeling like being part of a chain is a healthy thing. For example, you can mentor as well as getting mentored - you’re always learning and hopefully also passing learning on.

- There was a recognition that sometimes individuals / companies can find budgets for mentoring. It is great to be able to bring in support from someone who’s ‘been there, done that’.
- There was an acknowledgement that in terms of ‘fringe theatre’ expertise, mentoring from beyond the region might be helpful.
- There was a conversation about the fact there are lots of people willing to give mentoring for free, but that their time might be very limited (or the time they can give for free might be very limited).
- There was also a recognition that mentoring works best when the ask is really specific and appropriate (e.g. I want mentoring from you because I’m also setting up a company and I am interested in your journey). It can also work well where there’s a bit of an existing relationship.
- Ways of bringing people together to mentor / find mentors in a time efficient way was discussed. Improbable’s mentoring fete was thought to be a good format to enable lots of people to benefit from hearing about the experiences of a few people (and making the most of those mentors’ time). Out of this relationships might be forged for longer term mentoring too.

Training and artist development

This group overwhelmingly attracted young participants, including students, graduates and trainees. The focus for most of the discussion was on how ‘real world’ training can help the development of artists. Issues already raised in the presentations were highlighted such as, the need for getting together to not feel isolated, the draw of London, how to find places to rehearse.

Training

- The opportunities such as schemes run by Northern Stage and Live were very much valued. (There was further discussion from some representatives of these organisations who were finding some of the initiatives were not getting the uptake they anticipated.) The fact that these schemes were free was not stated, but presumed. The value of schemes such as North at Northern Stage were praised, as were opportunities for further encounter with all the departments within the theatre organisation, not just about acting. Venues should be and are willing to share expertise. The learning on a summer
scheme (2 weeks on Springboard) was seen by one as worth the whole of a three year degree.
- Diversity of those taking up opportunities needs addressing, the schemes should not just be for graduates.
- Find an audience for a style of work which is not just what comes out of degree training - outreach to communities is also important for training opportunities.
- People of 19-21 have to have other jobs.
- People wanted to know how to find out about writing funding applications.

**Education**

- Partnerships between regional colleges/universities were valued. (Newcastle College and Northumbria University were represented in the group, as well as independent young artists).
- Need to introduce the reality of living as an artist earlier onto education courses. Knowing how to apply your training was important (and missing)
- Training was valued where it helped to create a better understanding of what you want as an artist and how to make it possible. Empowerment and focus on targets was valued.
- More seminars were requested on how to write a CV, programming and how to manage financially.
- Hard to keep the momentum after graduation.
- Young artists need a link to people already doing it.

**Artist development**

- It was hard to know how to approach venues.
- More networks and craft sharing is needed. And chance to meet together to share knowledge and resources.
- The importance of bridging the gap between training and work.
- People welcomed more events like this – theatre conventions.
- Awareness that it takes a long time to get the confidence to take yourself seriously as an artist.

**Designated fringe venues**

This discussion included representatives from Alphabetti Theatre, a local company that has supported the development and staging of new work in Newcastle.

**What is a fringe venue?**

- A fringe venue is a professional theatre (and wider arts hub) regardless of how much funding it has, it is not amateur
- There are ‘stealth fringe venues’, often rooms in pubs or libraries (e.g. the Lit & Phil) used regularly by small companies, but there is a need for dedicated fringe venues that exclusively programme emerging talent - they open more doors for artists
- Fringe venues are made by grass roots communities of artists – developing the artists and growing audiences simultaneously

Larger venues and funders

- Newcastle has one existing dedicated fringe venue (Alphabetti Theatre) which has a positive relationship with bigger venues; this is really important for advice, support and development of artists
- The same is true for relationships with funding bodies, indeed the relationship with bigger venues helps to solidify relationships with funders including ACE

Audiences

- Is there an audience for dedicated fringe venues? – from recent experience there is, if you go and find it!
- A challenge with this is pushing the onus for finding an audience to the artists, some do this very well but others don’t
- Train artists to make best use of social media and to have direct contact with audiences.
- All it takes is one dedicated person to drive the marketing campaign

Making it happen

- Don’t wait for it to come to you – just go and get it!
- You have to want the venue...and if you do then you can make it yourself, wherever you can find and with whatever resources you can draw on

Audience Development

This discussion around audiences focused on:

Cross art form audiences

- The fringe / independent scene provides a great opportunity for cross-fertilization of audiences.
- Examples given were that of Spoken Word, cabaret nights, mixing art form and genre for one audience.
- Opportunity for less formal settings, more like gigs
- Focus on an entertaining evening out with friends rather than sitting for one long performance
A critical mass of activity

- If audiences know that in a particular area or at a certain time or in a certain venue, there will always be something on, then does the art form become less important?
- Opportunity to meet audiences that already exist – through being part of things like the Late Shows and existing festivals.
- Could there be a multipass system if there was work by different artists over a season or event or weekend?

Breaking Down Barriers

- If we can start to break down audiences’ expectations and perceptions of what certain arts experiences will be, and what they think they want to see, this would go a long way in breaking down barriers surrounding arts by people with learning disabilities as well.
- What do we expect from our audiences? Breaking down barriers of what we expect our audiences to do, making events more accessible and less formal, less intimidating.
- People are familiar with gig set ups, which cross over with stand up comedy, poetry and spoken word.
- Older Audiences – there was some discussion around older audiences and making work that is accessible to them too – this links with breaking down barriers of ‘is it for me’ and which spaces events take place in.
- Pay what you decide is also a good way of breaking down barriers for people.

Artist collectives/community

This discussion around artist collectives focused on:

Politeness Versus Critique

Within the arts community there is a feeling of being too ‘polite’ and that this slows progression for artists. However it is difficult to find a balance. When does critique become, or become perceived as a personal attack? How do we come together as a community of artists to offer this support sensitively but honestly?

How do you find your collective?

As an independent artist, where can you go to try and find a collective to become part of, or a team to link with to create work? What can we do to make meaningful connections?
- Show your face - make going to see work and staying behind afterwards to talk a part of your ‘job’
- Actively approach people
- Call outs for like-minded artists on websites such as arts jobs, Facebook etc.

**A meeting place for artists**

Can we create some sort of creative hub? There was a feeling amongst the group that this was lacking in the North East, particularly amongst graduates and artists in the early stages of their careers.

- We discussed Ouseburn cultural quarter as such a hub. People felt that while Ouseburn may have served this purpose in the past it had now become too ‘trendy’ as well as too expensive. Studio space in Ouseburn is incredibly expensive (such as the Toffee Factory) so most organisations that reside there are highly established, e.g. Northern Print, Seven Stories
- Space Six artists’ studios were discussed as a potential hub. It is a creative hub for those who already access it, such as studio holders, those who hire out space or those who take part in workshops in Space Six. It felt less accessible to those who were not already involved in some way. It was mentioned that a coffee shop where anyone could go and hang out would allow more easy-flowing, less pressured networking opportunities as anyone could go there and hang out without feeling they needed a specific reason.
- We discussed the Star and Shadow cinema as an interesting example of a successful creative community. It was mentioned how the success of this organisation relied on the continued investment of time from it’s members.
- Collectives require commitment and participation, if those who are involved are not willing to pull their weight and share responsibility is it truly a collective?

**Arts convention**

Could there be a ‘Comic Nerd’ style convention, perhaps it could be in the style of Tedtalks, to allow for artists in the community to make connections and discuss issues. Who would take responsibility for it?

**Theatre outside of theatres**

This group discussed building on the theatre community by making theatre without the support of venues or funders. There was talk of ‘just doing it’ and not depending on funding to create work. Some group members felt this was naïve, that undervaluing work financially would not develop the independent theatre scene but reduce quality of the work as artists would not be able to support themselves for longer, or more in depth projects. This led us to discuss, how we value our work if
it’s created independently? The general public have already paid taxes that go towards paying for subsidised arts. Should they then have to pay high ticket prices to watch shows? Artists who are not funded by the government generally charge a great deal less for tickets to their shows than venues that have already been subsidised by the taxpayer.

**Diversity**

This group talked mostly about diversity. I identified a real lack of diversity amongst research participants and those active in fringe activity early on in this study, both in terms of cultural heritage and in terms of class. It was predominantly white middle class people who took part across the three cities. We discussed:

- How we begin to tackle this in the city? Identifying the need for much more time, effort, resources and thought.
- Calling upon those who have been successful at attracting and developing more diverse artists and audiences to share expertise.
- Those who have managed to access training or participation in the arts feeling they cannot make the choice to become an artist or work in the arts, as they do not have the security of parents that can bail them out financially if necessary.
- What about those who haven’t even had the opportunity to train? How can we engage them?
- When will we really begin to tackle diversity meaningfully?
- We identified this as a recommendation for further research.