

THE
COLLECTIVE ENCOUNTERS

M A N I F E S T O

OUR CREED

We believe that the arts are vital to a healthy, thriving society; that great art has been at the heart of all great civilizations; and that all people should have the right and the opportunity to engage with high quality art that helps them make sense of their world.

We believe that the arts hold both intrinsic and instrumental value: that they enhance capacity for life, experience of life and that they have powerful applications.

We believe that our world is undergoing huge changes, and that we face unprecedented environmental, economic and socio-political challenges. We believe that in these difficult times, the arts are more important than ever: they can help us to question our ways of life and the systems that govern us; help us to feel better about ourselves and our communities; and help us to recognise ourselves as agents of change.

Collective Encounters will use theatre as a tool for social change: to explore problems and solutions, to empower our citizens and their communities, as a battle cry and as a rehearsal for change.

We will use theatre to excite, entertain and stimulate debate; making new work for new audiences in new spaces; that tackles pressing social and political concerns and gives public voice to marginalised experiences.

ON ART

We adopt the definition of art as an original, creative idea, which demonstrates self-expression, effort and skill on the part of the artist/s, and which is a shared experience that lifts people from the day-to-day, broadens the mind and offers more than basic entertainment.¹

ON SOCIAL CHANGE

We believe that theatre has the power to transform lives and contribute to social change. We have witnessed its affect on attitudinal and behavioural change in people and communities and are committed to exploring, through innovative new models, if it has a wider role to play in affecting policy and provision.

We are concerned that traditionally the values of engaging in theatre have been polarised along class and

social lines: with the middle classes assumed to gain intrinsic benefit and more marginalised groups thought to benefit from the instrumental. We believe that this distinction is inappropriate and discriminatory; and that for theatre to contribute to genuine social change this polarity needs to be broken, and will aim to achieve this across our programmes of work.

We will articulate how, specifically, we hope initiatives will affect social change and will identify clear measures of success.

ON ETHICS

We believe that all people should be treated equally, regardless of their area of expertise, their background or status. We believe that all creative contributions should be valued; that people's stories should be treated with respect; and that our working processes must be inclusive. We value dialogue between company and community; artists and participants; and between all those working in different ways to effect social change. We believe in cross-community working that values and respects all involved.

Our work is grounded in ethical, transparent and democratic processes, underpinned by appropriate and accessible policies and codes of practice.



ON ACCESS

We recognise that in our society the arts are the preserve of an elite. 70% of the public either rarely or never engage with the arts². We recognise that there are many social, psychological, political, logistical and economic barriers to preventing more people from engaging.

Our work directly targets those that do not ordinarily engage with the arts, especially those least likely and able to do so. To do this we work in non-traditional spaces rooted in local communities, with agencies that are able to reach non-traditional participants, and we provide our work free of charge. We have an Engagement Strategy that sets out a clear action plan for continuing to extend our reach.

ON EVALUATION

We believe that arts initiatives should be subject to rigorous monitoring and evaluation, and are committed to open and systematic evaluation by all stakeholders. We are concerned though, that traditional forms of evaluation can impair the enjoyment of the experience for participants and audiences, and that retrospective evaluation lacks depth.

We use creative, flexible and non-invasive processes for evaluation, which are put in place at the beginning of projects, and ensure that our stakeholders have a genuine input into the direction of the work. This is underpinned by a detailed Evaluation Policy.

ON INNOVATION

We believe that innovation is at the heart of all great art; and that it is vital for us to keep innovating and risk-taking if our work is to continue to grow and thrive. We believe that innovation is the spark caused by the collision of reflection, imagination and ambition.

Across our programmes, we will continue to experiment and innovate:

- i. using provocative strategies to extend our reach; engaging new marginalised, diverse and difficult to reach communities
 - ii. seeking out new work/play spaces that attract non-traditional participants and offer the opportunity for powerful transformations
 - iii. exploring theatrical form, re-imagining political and applied theatre traditions for a contemporary audience, and finding new ways of engaging people as active participants
 - iv. uncovering hidden stories and platforming marginalised voices in creative, exciting ways
 - v. discovering new ways of impacting positively on social change, through personal transformation or wider political and policy impacts
 - vi. refining, re-developing and disseminating models of best practice in participatory theatre and theatre for social change
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ON EXCELLENCE

We agree that “excellence in culture occurs when an experience affects and changes an individual.”³

We believe that excellence is quantifiable, but that it is also contextual. We recognise that excellence and quality are problematic and loaded terms, and so have set out in our codes of practice and Evaluation Policy what we understand by them in relation to quality of experience, quality of product and quality of project.

We believe that all stakeholders in the creative process, both professional and non-professional have the right and the capacity to assess the quality of our work, and artistic excellence is at the heart of our evaluation processes.

ON TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

We believe that for our organisation and the sector to thrive, on-going training and professional development are essential. We value the new skills, new ideas, enhanced life chances and improved practice that result.

We are committed to offering training and placement opportunities to students and emerging professionals; accreditation and progression pathways to participants; and CDP to staff.

ON LOCALISM

Our participatory programmes are firmly rooted in local communities, and much of our professional work grows out of research at grass roots level. Our work always seeks to connect with local interest, needs, and gaps in provision; and is often delivered in partnership with local communities. Where ever possible we seek to develop long-term and sustainable relationships with communities, and do not engage in parachute projects.

ON INTERNATIONALISM

While much of our work is local in origin, it tackles themes and issues with much wider national and international resonance. We are committed to placing these stories on a wider stage to enable comparison of experience and to lift our actors and participants from narrow geographical confines and insularity.

We believe that national and international relationships are important to help us develop our practice and keep us outward looking. We aspire to make work of world-class significance and to understand our work a in global context.

ON GROWTH

We do not aspire to unlimited growth in terms of output or scale of operation; but do aspire to continual growth, change and development in terms of the depth, skill, range and quality of our work.

END NOTES

- 1 A definition that emerged through wide scale sectoral and public consultation articulated in *Public Value and the Arts in England: Discussion and Conclusions of the Arts Debate* by Catherine bunting (Arts Council England, 2007)
 - 2 *Arts, Audiences, Insight* (Arts Council England, 2008)
 - 3 *Supporting Excellence in the Arts: From Measurement to Judgement* by Sir Brian McMaster (DCMS, 2008)
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