

# State of the Nation

2007 - 2009



## final evaluation



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# executive summary

## project outline

*State of the Nation* set out to address questions of identity, sense of community and nationhood, looking at the local experience within the frame of the globalised world. The project used theatre as a tool to explore and articulate who we are and how we live in the early years of the twenty first century. It sought to enable marginalised and underrepresented groups within our society to give voice to their experiences, and provided a series of creative platforms where the underlying issues and causes of discontent could be examined. The project also offered the opportunity for people to explore their aspirations: how can we as individuals and as a society create a better, more integrated world for ourselves and our children. While the focus of *State of the Nation* was in north Liverpool, the project aimed to enable Collective Encounters to reach beyond this area, offering our core groups the opportunity to work with communities outside of their own, and providing the scope for comparison of experience. *State of the Nation* ran between January 2007 – December 2009.

*State of the Nation* also provided a mechanism for the company to continue its long-term research into the efficacy of theatre as a tool for social change and to develop new models of practice in this field.

## evaluation framework

*State of the Nation* was an extensive programme incorporating 28 separate short, medium and long-term initiatives. Our evaluation of the work has been extensive:

- every one of our 358 workshops incorporated a participant evaluation (including a variety of physical, verbal and written creative evaluation techniques)
- each workshop was also evaluated by its facilitator in order to develop and improve our practice and respond to the needs and circumstances of the groups
- for medium and long term projects, we undertook more extensive evaluation at the beginning, middle and end, to measure progress towards achieving personal goals, to feedback on how participants felt the project was going/had gone and to identify what could improve/what must stay
- regular meetings between facilitators, project partners, our participatory programme manager and senior management team enabled on-going evaluation to ensure we were meeting our targets, to discuss best practice and troubleshoot potential problems
- we introduced comments cards and vox pops to gather feedback from audience members at shows throughout late 2008 and 2009; we have also trialled a peer review process
- notes from all these evaluations were used to compile evaluation reports at the end of each initiative
- in addition, we wrote annual reports in 2007 and 2008 to record our experience over the course of the year
- finally, in summer 2009 we commissioned an independent researcher to meet with our participants, audiences, peers and stakeholders from the past 5 years to gather their feedback and assess our impact

All these notes and documents have informed this final evaluation of *State of the Nation*. All quotations used in this report have been gathered through these evaluation and feedback mechanisms. Where the quotation has been given as part of a confidential evaluation process or on an unattributed comments card, just the group or show has been identified. Elsewhere, full names have been used. Copies of all individual evaluations from *State of the Nation* initiatives are available on request.

## achievement and impact

In three years through *State of the Nation* we:

- employed 105 arts professionals
- supported 7 volunteers
- engaged 727 participants in 358 workshops
- accredited 69 participants through Arts Award and Open College Network
- sustained medium to long term initiatives with young people, people over 55, and homeless people
- gave 79 performances of 28 new pieces of work in 24 non-traditional venues to 9,630 people
- played to a 90% non-traditional-theatre-going audience
- worked with 44 partner organisations
- delivered 7 successful cross-community initiatives
- achieved 3 television features (ITV, BBC and Community Channel)
- took participants to The Edinburgh Festival, The National Pensioners' Convention (Blackpool), The House of Lords as well as to a wide range of local and regional shows and events
- nominated a participant for the National Young Achiever of the Year Award (2008), which she won and was made a Fellow of the Royal Academy of Arts
- achieved Arts Council Regularly Funded Organisation status in recognition of our good work

Participants, stakeholders and peers said that through *State of the Nation* we have:

- facilitated meaningful collaborations between diverse groups, contributing effectively to community cohesion in a fragmented city
- increased the self-confidence, skills-base and life chances of marginalised people
- enabled excluded people to engage with things they thought were not for them and achieve things they had not thought they were capable of
- provided a safe and necessary space for reflection and fun, contributing to meaningful, diversionary activity for vulnerable people
- understood and responded effectively to the needs of communities, on their terms, through participant and community-led processes
- created platforms for disempowered people to have their voices heard by others, leading to noticeable attitudinal change
- produced high-quality theatre that tackles important subject matter whilst entertaining and engaging people who would not ordinarily access theatre
- taken theatre performances and drama workshops into places never before reached by arts provision

## principles and findings

As a Practice-As-Research company we constantly analyse our practice to enable us to understand what works and why. *State of the Nation* has offered many opportunities for learning. These are some of our key findings and the principles we believe contribute to best practice in the field of theatre for social change/applied theatre.

- An incitement to think independently, a belief that change is possible, and a commitment to providing the highest quality arts experiences to the most marginalised communities must be the driving forces behind theatre for social change.
- For the greatest benefit to participants and for lasting personal transformation to occur projects need to be long-term and developmental.
- Excellent participatory work demands professional artists and facilitators to be both highly skilled in their discipline and absolutely committed to inclusion, empowerment and collective creation.
- High quality theatre with excellent production values in non-traditional contexts creates a dynamic which leads to real impact for non-traditional audiences.
- Arts provision needs to be free at the point of use if the poorest people are to access it.
- Excellent theatre for social change with marginalised communities must be participant-led; in particular it must enable participants to speak freely and identify for themselves the issues they want to explore.
- Vulnerable and marginalised groups need bespoke programmes tailoring for their specific needs by highly skilled facilitators, and need to be worked with (in the first instance at least) on their own territory.
- Meaningful integration of diverse groups and community cohesion work must be very carefully planned and structured; and takes a great deal of time and sensitivity.
- Participants concentrate work more effectively if they are provided with healthy snacks in breaks.
- The process of exploring difficult issues through drama should be fun and should remove participants from the harshness of the day-to-day reality of those issues.
- Every single workshop should be evaluated with participants using creative and engaging mechanisms, and this must inform future practice.
- Audiences are often relieved and delighted to see work that speaks about their lives offers the opportunity for discussion and new thinking.
- Non-traditional audiences crave collective encounters that remove them from the isolation of the TV and PC. They welcome the dynamic and liveness of performance (appreciating the difference from TV/film) and engage openly and effectively as active audience members.
- Work which involves research with vulnerable communities and which involves telling the stories others have shared with an organisation, should be underpinned by an Ethical Research Policy
- To engage a vulnerable community effectively takes a great deal of time, research and commitment. Organisations must demonstrate that they are in it for the long haul, are sensitive to the needs of that community, and will be led by the expert knowledge within that community.
- Organisations which seek genuine engagement with marginalised communities should create opportunities for involvement in the wider aspects of the organisation, not just in the participatory programme, in order that participants have some ownership of the organisation more widely. This is only really possible when opportunities for long-term participation and engagement are there.
- Formal Partnership Agreements for stakeholders are invaluable in clarifying boundaries, expectations and contributions and in enabling effective monitoring and evaluation
- There is an urgent need to create more and better opportunities for training emerging professional artists in facilitation skills and in understanding the politics and processes behind participatory arts best practice.
- There is a need to lobby for the real-cost of quality arts provision to be recognised, and a move away from the market-led competition which drives costs down and leads to a reduction in quality and conditions.
- There is a need to lobby for participatory arts with young and vulnerable communities to be provided free at the point of use.

**“It’s a way of expressing how you feel about your life – it helps you deal with issues.”** *Homeless participant*

**“You are given an opportunity to do something in life you never thought you would experience.”** *Lindy Warburton (dis)connected participant*



**“It gave me a sense of hope in a community where there’s usually only negatives”** *Audience member at Barry, Radge and Mingin’*

# what we achieved

## revisiting aims, goals & objectives

aims of *State of the Nation*:

- explore issues of identity, sense of community and nationhood
- with communities in north Liverpool, Edinburgh and beyond
- articulate this through a variety of creative products and processes
- making work for and with marginalized groups in non-traditional spaces
- with a view to contributing to positive change

successful: ✓ partially successful: ♦ unsuccessful: ✗

<b>Goal 1 Undertake an extensive, innovative research process</b>	
Objectives	<p>i. Experiment with a range of creative methodologies to gather information and explore ideas ✓ The evaluation of each initiative enabled us to constantly develop and improve the creative methodologies we used to gather information and explore ideas. Each of the 28 new shows we created used a different creative methodology/theatrical in both devising and performance.</p> <p>ii. Work with approximately 1,000 local people, professional artists and practitioners ✓ 839 artists and participants were involved in our workshops and performances as well as over 9,000 audience members – many of whom were practically engaged in interactive performance.</p> <p>iii. Explore parallels and differences between the Liverpool and Edinburgh experience ✓ This happened through our youth theatre/north Edinburgh exchange, initiative in summer 2008 and culminating in summer 2009, involving over 30 young people, and 10 adults; 3 exchange visits, 20 workshops and 2 performances of a new show.</p> <p>iv. Experiment with theatrical form, with a particular focus on site-specific theatre, theatre for social change and the integration of multimedia in live performance ✓ We drew on a wide range of theatrical forms in our performances including mask, physical theatre, cabaret, music hall, variety, forum, agit-prop, invisible theatre, 'happenings', puppetry, verbatim and opera; we developed innovative ways of engaging the audience actively in the shows; and integrated multimedia, dance and live music in much of the work. We animated 5 very unusual spaces as well as transforming many non-traditional venues into performance spaces.</p> <p>v. Produce two scratch site-specific pieces articulating this research ✓ Your City, Your Neighbourhood, Your Say was realised in November 2007; Songs for Silenced Voices was realised in Dec 09.</p> <p>vi. Generate material and ideas for a large scale, professional <i>State of the Nation</i> piece to be produced in 2009/10 ♦ <i>State of the Nation</i> has generated a vast amount of material and ideas for performance, much of which has informed the 28 new shows we've realised to date. We decided, however, not to attempt to stage a large-scale professional piece in 09/10 as Smoke and Mirrors had been delayed (due to the fundraising difficulties) with the knock on effect of delaying Songs for Silenced Voices. We have many ideas in incubation, however, which we aim to realise at a future date.</p>
<b>Goal 2 Provide a three year drama programme for young people in north Liverpool</b>	
Objectives	<p>vii. Deliver weekly workshops which teach drama skills, provide opportunities to explore key issues and lead to accreditation for 50 - 60 participants ✓ The youth theatre has been a huge success, with weekly workshops continuing between May 2007 and the present. It proved so popular that we didn't have the turn over we'd expected – once participants joined they were loath to leave, so we developed a range of outreach initiatives to enable more young people to access theatre for social change and achieve accreditation. In total we will have accredited 52 young people.</p> <p>viii. Engage marginalised and excluded young people and explore processes of integration ✓ We worked with a group of young refugees and asylum seekers over a period of 8 sessions and then integrated the group fully with the youth theatre. We have also facilitated participants from our outreach programmes (with difficult to reach groups) to join the youth theatre.</p> <p>ix. Produce 4 productions which enable young people to have their say and engage approximately 1,500 young audience members ✓ We've in fact produced 12 productions by young people; and have engaged over 4,000 young audience members</p>

	x.	Involve young people in managing and running the youth theatre We have involved young people in our management processes since May 2007, trialling a variety of methods and processes including steering groups; board representation; working groups; work shadowing and work experience.	✓
<b>Goal 3</b>	<b>Provide a programme of drama activity over three years for people of third age</b>		
Objectives	xi.	Deliver workshop programmes which teach drama skills, provide opportunities to explore key issues and lead to accreditation for approximately 40 participants We delivered weekly workshops to the over 55s between January 2008 and June 2009 reaching approximately 22 participants, of whom 17 were accredited. We found it much more difficult to recruit for an on-going programme amongst this age group and that many participants were not interested in working towards accreditation. As a result of this work and the feedback we've received, we have developed ideas to try some alternative ways of working with the older community in the future.	♦
	xii.	Produce 3 productions which enable older people to have their say and engage approximately 600 older audience members We produced three shows, and performed to almost 1,000 people over the age of 55.	✓
	xiii.	Involve third age people on a <i>State of the Nation</i> steering group As with our youth theatre, we have trialled a range of processes but found that our core participants were not keen to commit to a regular steering group.	♦
<b>Goal 4</b>	<b>Explore ways in which theatre can contribute to social change</b>		
Objectives	xiv.	Find and utilise appropriate platforms for Y3A and professional performances, and attract audiences combining local people with policy/decision makers This has been a real challenge to the capacity of the organisation and has not been achieved to the degree we had hoped. This experience has, however, informed our future plans. We invited appropriate policy and decision makers to all our Liverpool productions, and achieved some recognition and support from a small number of local councillors and city officials, but were unable to build the networks we'd hoped for. Our most successful achievement in this respect was <i>Your City, Your Neighbourhood, Your Say</i> which was specifically geared to enabling people to have their voices heard by the local authority/local strategic partnership, and ensuring those voices shaped the content of the Local Area Agreements and Local Strategic Partnerships. We found many of our small scale in-house productions were able to impact more directly on the services participants experienced (as they were performing directly to their service providers).	♦
	xv.	Work closely in partnership with appropriate voluntary, public and private sector agencies We began <i>State of the Nation</i> with a strong community partnership base, and have extended this significantly. Our partnerships with private sector agencies, however, have become less extensive and less fruitful than they were three years ago. We have developed strong relationships with some public sector agencies, but have failed to forge a meaningful, long-term relationship with the local authority. We have, however, over the final month of the project developed some strong new contacts and leads which we hope will enable us to achieve this aim in the future.	♦
	xvi.	Facilitate the articulation of the local experience within a wider (inter) national context Our youth theatre's performance at the Edinburgh International Festival and our 3 <sup>rd</sup> Age Theatre's performance at the National Pensioners' Convention achieved this. <i>Smoke and Mirrors</i> framed the local experience in a national picture, and we are planning to tour this piece nationally and internationally in 2011.	♦
	xvii.	Publish and disseminate research, findings, and ideas as appropriate Publishing and dissemination is a long-term process. While Collective Encounters has achieved several publications over the past 3 years, these have related to previous projects. Now we have a body of work from <i>State of the Nation</i> we are able to disseminate our findings on this project and have several proposals pending for publication and conference speaking relating: we will present a paper at Central School of Speech and Drama's Applied Theatre conference in April 2010 and have had a paper accepted for publication in a special edition in Contemporary Theatre Review. We have consistently, however, disseminated project findings and local research to stakeholders. This forms a key part of our future plans.	♦
<b>Goal 5</b>	<b>Begin to develop Collective Encounters' work in Edinburgh</b>		
Objectives	xviii.	Begin to build relationships with appropriate community groups, voluntary agencies and arts organisations in Edinburgh We built very strong relationships with North Edinburgh Arts Centre, North Edinburgh youth forum and Muirhouse Youth Development Project, resulting in 3 exchange visits, but did not have the capacity to extend this development to work with other organisations	♦

	xix.	Deliver workshops to youth and community groups in Edinburgh We delivered a series of workshops to young people in Edinburgh March – August 2009.	♦
	xx.	Create opportunities for north Liverpool based Y3A groups to work with groups in Edinburgh As outlined above we arranged 3 exchange visits between our youth groups, but were unable to realise the same with our other groups.	♦
	xxi.	Undertake RD & C in Edinburgh, producing scratch work both there and in Liverpool Due to staffing changes and the necessary focus of the management team on the work in Liverpool, we simply did not have the organisational capacity to realise this objective. We consequently chose to focus our scratch work in Liverpool and focus our development work in Edinburgh on the youth theatre (see Goal 5).	✘
	xxii.	Explore the potential for future collaborative projects We are very keen to further develop the relationships we've already established.	✓
<b>Goal 6</b>	<b>Produce and tour a high-quality professional cabaret in north Liverpool</b>		✓
Objectives	xxiii.	Use the cabaret to explore issues of democracy and disengagement and provoke discussion around the themes of <i>State of the Nation</i> Smoke and Mirrors did achieve these aims. It specifically targeted these themes, and saw many audience members stay after the show to sing-along and have informal discussions with the cast, crew and other audience members.	✓
	xxiv.	Tour to venues throughout north Liverpool playing to approximately 1,500 people who do not usually attend theatre Due to budgetary, aesthetic and strategic considerations we chose to make this a site-specific rather than a touring piece. Unfortunately (due to budgetary and staffing issues) we had to reduce the run to one, rather than two, weeks and given the capacity of the venue, we were only able to reach approximately 500 audience members. The majority of these were people who don't usually attend theatre, and all those with north Liverpool post-codes had free tickets.	♦
	xxv.	Be theatrically inventive, exploring ways of collaborative creation The piece was extremely well received and achieved excellent feedback from peers in the theatre community, as well as from local people. We had a long period of creative development which meant that the piece was able to grow organically and come from a genuinely collaborative process.	✓
<b>Goal 7</b>	<b>Fundraise effectively for the final <i>State of the Nation</i> site-specific production in 2009/10</b>		
		See ix. The decision was taken not to work towards this goal.	✘



## the narrative and the issues

*State of the Nation* took place over 3 financial years. It enabled us to work with the following communities in Liverpool:

- Disadvantaged young people from across north Liverpool
- Young Refugees and Asylum Seekers
- NEET young people
- Young carers and the siblings of those with special needs
- Excluded young people and those at risk of exclusion and offending
- Young cultural ambassadors and advisers
- third age participants
- homeless people of all ages

as well as disadvantaged young people from north Edinburgh.

In many cases we were able to facilitate marginalised and under represented groups to explore and articulate the issues that mattered most to them, and to provide platforms where their voices could be heard by the people they wanted to speak to. This involved performances in many different kinds of community centres as well as social clubs, theatres and outdoors. Some key examples of this work include:

### CE:YT

The Youth Theatre met weekly from May 2007 – present. A major preoccupation for our youth theatre participants was the media misrepresentation and stereotyping of all young people as anti-social hoodies. They were very keen to dispel this myth for the adults within their own community, and to show them the huge stresses and pressures twenty-first century young people experience. They spoke very clearly about being confronted with complex life choices at a very young age, about the pressures to join gangs, the stress of family breakdown, problems within the education system, the difficulties facing children when parents and siblings are imprisoned, and the conflicting messages conveyed by their supposed role models. Their first performance was a low key event for an invited audience of parents and other local adults (*The Billy Show*, 2007). As the groups' confidence grew they created work to be performed to wider audiences (*Standing Blind*, 2008), including several thousand people at Liverpool's Children and Young People's Festival (*Roopville*, 2008). In 2009 they collaborated with a group of young people from north Edinburgh (a particularly deprived part of the city) to share their experiences. Together they produced a piece which was performed as part of the Edinburgh International Fringe Festival and clearly communicated the struggle between being absorbed into the 'hoodie' life and the desire to break free and make a difference in the world (*Barry, Radge and Mingin'*, 2009). They also performed in our professional cabaret, *Smoke and Mirrors*, attended a House of Lords Debate, participated in several youth theatre and community festivals, experienced master classes and regularly attended professional and student theatre.



### Arts for Social Change Day

This was a one-off initiative delivered at Easter 2008 in response to community complaints that there was nothing for young people to do during the holidays. Youth workers from across north Liverpool brought 60 young people aged 9 – 19 to us to engage in drama, dance, clay modelling, music and DJing workshops for the day. Each discipline used the arts as a tool for social change, enabling participants to explore ideas through an art form and make a piece of work which reflected their ideas, and which they shared with the others at the end of the day. We also provided some training for youth workers in integrating the arts into their practice and conceiving arts projects with young people.

### Third Age Theatre

Our over 55 participants were keen to position themselves as active contributors with a voice to be heard and a role to play in our society. They wanted to celebrate the activism of the past in a bid to rekindle the spirit of campaigning in younger people. They wanted to bring young and old together to learn from each other. They wanted to celebrate the pension, while lobbying for improvements; and state their pride in the NHS, while pointing out the ways in which it could improve its services for older people. They toured work across north Liverpool playing to integrated audiences of all ages in diverse community venues (*The Liverpool Saga*, 2008). They platformed their work and their enthusiasm on *Up for Arts*, a nationally broadcast TV programme commissioned by the Arts Council (2008). They made their case about the NHS at the National Pensioners' Convention, and provided the only opportunity at the conference for open discussion and debate, eliciting powerful and heartfelt feedback (*Doctor, Doctor we need to talk!*, 2009).

In order to break down the stereotypes between young and old, we brought our youth theatre and 3<sup>rd</sup> age theatre groups together in 2008 for an intergenerational project. The groups addressed the credit crunch and learned a great deal from each other about attitudes to spending and consumerism; as well as having the opportunity to speak openly and challenge the ageist preconceptions both groups held. They created an integrated performance which played in a school, a centre for older people and a social club (*A Necessary Evil*, 2008).

### Theatre with Liverpool's homeless community

There were two key concerns articulated by our homeless participants. The first, and most often cited, was the desire to be respected by the mainstream: the need to have people understand that homelessness occurs for many reasons and can happen to anyone. We met decorated soldiers, abused women, care leavers and people who had suffered dreadful experiences now forced to live on the streets and having their experience compounded by the attitudes of the general public. The second desire was to have their voices heard by support staff: both in terms of how they'd like to be treated, and what kinds of services they needed. We staged two different shows: both low-key performances for invited audiences of staff, friends and other participants from other Collective Encounters projects. (*A Day and A Night in the Life of Liverpool's Homeless*, 2008 and *Dreams and Aspirations*, 2009). As this participant group was so vulnerable it was inappropriate at this stage to ask them to perform to a wider and unknown audience, but we have created a professional opera articulating the issues raised through this work which will be performed in December 2009 (*Songs for Silenced Voices: A ten-minute tragic opera*). We also produced *Streetscape*, a full report of our research and work with this community which was circulated to stakeholders.

In other cases we produced professional work for new audiences tackling key social and political issues and aiming to use theatre to excite, entertain and stimulate debate. In keeping with all our professional work, these shows took place outside theatre buildings in community spaces and unusual places.

***Intersection (2007)*** was a professional production for young people which integrated a cast of three professional actors with two young women who had worked with the company a previous participatory project. The piece explored issues of democracy, citizenship and the challenges facing young people in the 21st century through an interactive 60-minute performance. The show toured schools, community centres, exclusion projects and youth groups in north Liverpool for 3 weeks playing to 350 audience members in 12 venues. It was a very successful recruitment tool for our youth theatre, and enabled us to foster strong relationships with new community partners.

***Your City, Your Neighbourhood, Your Say (2007)*** enabled us to work in partnership with Liverpool City Council and Liverpool First (the local strategic partnership) to engage people with the Local Area Agreement and Sustainable Communities Strategy. We used theatre to enliven the proceedings and animate some of the issues; and our facilitation techniques to structure and manage the proceedings. It was a fully integrated and interactive performance for more than 600 people across Liverpool.

***Smoke and Mirrors: A Cabaret for Liverpool (2008)*** tackled corruption, disengagement and voter apathy through song, scenes and slapstick routines. Transporting its audience back to 1908, the production transformed an abandoned mill on Liverpool's dock road into a magical music hall. With a live band this large-scale professional production held a slot for a 'local act' at every performance. Evening performances were followed by a karaoke: our band played live to accompany audience members and often this led into a full-scale sing-along. *Smoke and Mirrors* reached an audience of over 500, mostly non-traditional theatre goers.

***Songs For Silenced Voices: A ten-minute tragic opera (2009)*** articulated the stories of some of our most marginalised citizens through a traditionally 'high art' form, and grew directly out of detailed research we'd undertaken with the homeless community. This 'short, sharp, shock' was performed in a disused shop in Liverpool's St John's centre to over 500 people in December 2009.

# personal transformations

In collating all our evaluation data the following themes have consistently emerged.

Medium to long term participants have told us that:

- their self confidence, sense of self worth, and sense of who they are has significantly increased through participating with Collective Encounters.
- they have met people they would never normally have spoken to and broken social and 'tribal' barriers based on district, clothing, appearance or age
- they have developed new skills and increased their capacity for concentration and self expression, and many older participants particularly welcomed the opportunity for learning new things
- they have altered some opinions, widening their perspective and becoming more open minded
- they have achieved things they'd never dreamed they were capable of and felt a new sense of pride

For many of our most vulnerable participants, taking part in sessions had meant being diverted from problems or addictions for a few hours, doing something enjoyable and self-affirming. For some it provided a "safe haven".

Participants on short, medium and long-term initiatives almost all said they'd had a great time; the majority felt better on leaving the session than on starting it and many said that they looked forward to it throughout the week.

Some participants said that since starting with us they've become more active in their school or community – in some cases they have taken up someone else's cause because of their engagement with Collective Encounters.

We've created platforms for young participants (in several different contexts) and for our homeless participants to speak directly to audiences of people providing immediate services or support to them and the actors have felt empowered in these instances to 'have their voices heard' by people who can make an immediate (if limited) difference in their lives.

Stakeholders were often amazed at what participants they'd worked with for years were able to achieve through the process. Many commented on improved timekeeping, attendance record, increased self-motivation, heightened skills and improved confidence. Some of them said it made them think differently about their clients and service users: that over time one could become de-sensitised to the harsh challenges individuals faced – seeing them perform their stories was a reminder of the humanity and needs of service users as individuals.

Many audience members told us that it was their first, or one of very few, experiences of live theatre but that they'd be happy to go again. Many said that they had been provoked to think about the issues at play, and in some cases that they had been exposed to new ideas and to new ways of thinking. Many felt a sense of validation from seeing a familiar world represented back to them for the first time, and some said this helped them gain a new insight. Many commented on how much they'd enjoyed themselves. For some audience members, seeing our participants perform had made them feel more optimistic and hopeful. For many people it was important it was to have theatre come to them and play in their territory on their terms. Others commented on the positive feelings they had when they saw the spaces we'd transformed through our professional work.

Many of the artists we worked with have said they felt their practice improved and their skills base developed through working with us. Many also said they'd felt inspired and excited by working with different communities and in different contexts.

In short, *State of the Nation* has clearly demonstrated the power of theatre to create the conditions within which individuals can be transformed, and attitudes can be changed.

**“Since I joined the group I feel more like me. I feel like an individual again.”**

*3<sup>rd</sup> age participant after Liverpool Saga*

**“There is a worry about going to the theatre – how people might perceive you, it's not the 'done' thing. People feel awkward in a main theatre - it's a huge barrier. They worry about how to react, whether they're going to clap in the wrong place. The context of this sort of theatre, is really good for communities. This played to packed houses. There was lots of enjoyment. They could relate to the subject, and the issues.”** *Eddie Bowman (West Everton Community Centre) on Intersection*

**“This is great, we never get stuff like this by ours.”**

*Young audience member, Intersection*



**“Great to see so many young people enjoying themselves and giving so much pleasure to us all with their vibrancy, enthusiasm and obvious talent.”**

*Tony Forshaw (Restorative Justice Officer Community Justice Centre) of Arts for Social Change Day*

# process, values and learning

Over the past three years many people have told us that what we do is 'different'. Professional arts workers, community partners, the few participants who've tried theatre before, audience members and academics have all noticed something unique about Collective Encounters' work. We've tried, through conversation, evaluation and reflection to analyse what is it that's different and why it matters. We've come to the conclusion that there are several key aspects to our processes and underpinning value system that enable us to meet with such a positive response. These have been refined throughout *State of the Nation* and are outlined briefly below.

## long term provision

We've demonstrated through our Arts for Social Change Day that there is a place for one-off arts experiences; and that if they are high quality, well planned and meaningful such opportunities can be of real value. They can bring diverse groups of people together to share a moment in time, to learn something new and to think outside the box. They can also provide an important diversionary and engaging activity for people with little else to do.

And short-term programmes can work too: our 10 session initiatives have been very successful in introducing difficult to reach groups to new ideas and new skills. Participants have been able to gain accreditation, explore important issues and make work which platformed their ideas to audiences of their choosing.

While these kinds of initiatives do have an impact, the longer-term approach reaps much greater benefit. Our youth theatre has been running for almost 3 years and many of the same participants have been with us from the beginning. The third age theatre ran over 18 months, again with many of the same core group. And our work with the homeless community stretched over four months and then a 2 month period, and will begin again shortly (with a small core of repeat participants). We have found that the impact of participation is directly commensurate with the longevity of involvement. People's confidence grows over time; their skills grow and diversify; their self-awareness and wider awareness of the world around them, and their consequent politicisation grows. They have the opportunity to engage fully in the theatre, experiencing many diverse forms, and develop a real passion for the arts. They develop a strong sense of ownership of the work and have control of the means of production. Even the most marginalised and previously disaffected participants come to realise, over time, that their contribution is valued, they have something important to say, and that they have the power to change their world: this does not happen overnight.

## quality and excellence

Of course, the quality of provision is hugely important in ensuring these outcomes. Because we believe that theatre is vital to a healthy society, we believe that all people should have access to the most exciting, empowering, high quality theatre possible. Consequently both our professional and participatory shows have high quality production values, and to achieve this we employ excellent professional artists and allocate appropriate budgets. We have learned, though, that no matter how good the artist, if they do not understand or fully believe in the principle of theatre for social change, the work will suffer.

The professional artists we employ on our participatory programmes are there as a conduit for the ideas of others, to help draw them out and shape them into something beautiful, exciting and engaging: they must believe fundamentally in collective creation, in inclusion and empowerment, and this must be reflected in their working processes. They must understand how to combine these elements, and we've realised that this is a relatively rare skill set. The artists employed on our professional productions must be able to work with non-traditional audiences, who may not always have the reserve or protocol of mainstream audiences; and they must be comfortable working in unusual spaces which are often less comfortable than theatre houses.

Audience members talk about how important it is that the work we bring into community settings has quality production values and the trappings of theatre attached, that this makes them feel special and valued and makes them more receptive to the content of the work. Participants talk about how important it is to work with professional artists, how they open up new ways of thinking, highlight alternative life choices and give their work a polish and edge that makes them proud.

"Smoke and Mirrors had phenomenal production values. The Mill was one of the most professional site-specific performances I've seen."

*Richard Hall (Asst. Theatre Officer, Arts Council England)*

The quality of the process of exploration and creation is of course key, but again, we have found a dearth of experienced facilitators who are adequately trained to lead the quality of process we demand. This requires someone who is genuinely open, interested, supportive, concerned, politicised and highly skilled. Someone who can manage a group dynamic, engage sometimes the most disengaged people, empower people to take ownership, challenge appropriately, stimulate discussion, respond quickly to new situations and ideas, lead and undertake thorough and open evaluation. And, this being one of the rarest skills, manage the intricate balance between quality process with quality theatrical product.

One of the ways we've achieved this is to maintain a core facilitator with the groups throughout the process, who is highly skilled in all of the above, and bring in a range of different professional artists to work alongside them.

## affording free theatre

A key to achieving high quality work is to pay appropriate fees and wages, ensure conditions are fair and make sure project budgets are healthy. Too many arts organisations are compelled to deliver work within inappropriate budgets, meaning that they do not pay people fairly, and they de-value the contribution of their participants by not being able to offer them the production values they deserve. Organisations are too often compelled to demonstrate 'best value' and so compete with each other to bring the costs of their delivery down. This market-led model is inappropriate for quality arts delivery. This is not to say we do not believe in cost effective provision, but we do believe in budgeting for the real costs of projects and fundraise to cover this.

We offer all our services free at the point of use, and ours is the only free youth theatre on Merseyside: our participants just could not afford to come otherwise (we even offer support with bus fares and childcare, because we are concerned to reach the most marginalised participants). We feed our participants (see below), take them to the theatre, take them on residencies and exchanges for free. We have paid for many of our participants to go to the theatre for the first time, and leave Liverpool for the first time. We also provide all our shows (participatory and professional) for free to north Liverpool audiences. It may be difficult for some to understand that a £1.70 bus fare or a £5 theatre ticket could prevent someone from joining in, but the reality is that for many of the people we work with, it does.

This means the onus is on us to raise funds to cover the real costs of projects, a huge challenge to the organisation in hard financial times, but a principle we refuse to abandon. If we are to engage the most difficult to reach (and consequently, often the poorest) members of our communities in quality arts experiences we must remove the biggest barrier to engagement which is cost, and we must be honest about the real cost of the work.

## participant led process

The issues and ideas explored in workshop sessions, and which lead to the production of new work, grow directly from the groups we work with. We offer a framework for consideration (*State of the Nation's* framework, for instance was to 'address questions of identity, sense of community and nationhood, looking at the local experience within the frame of the globalised world'), but within this we facilitate groups to identify the things that matter to them. While our framework and processes will connect to key priorities in terms of social change (and will sometimes be tied into things like the Local Area Agreement indicators or government generated ambitions for change), we are not hidebound by these but empower our participants to inform the direction of the work. We believe that everyone's story matters, that everyone has something to say and is an expert on their personal situation, and that if we listen to each other we will develop greater empathy and consequently a healthier society. This approach means that we get a true and accurate picture of the most pressing issues for the marginalised groups we work with, and have a clear understanding of their perception of the world. Because we listen and ask open questions, We are able to publish research which truly reflects the experiences of some of our most disaffected citizens (such as the Streetscape report which grew out of our work with homeless people).

Our on-going evaluation processes mean that participants can identify the things they want to get out of the work and can shape the project. They decide when and where to meet; they tell us what they like and do not like in sessions; they set their own goals; they decide the content to be explored; they decide (after being exposed to a range of options by professional artists) what form their theatre should take; they speak in their own voices. This process ensures a high level of ownership of the work.

**"I wasn't going to join in and I have done. You got us! How did you do that?"**  
*Homeless participant*

This approach has been extremely well received by participants and stakeholders alike. Too often, we've been told, community groups/participants are expected to participate to someone else's agenda: 'we'd love to hear what you think about x subject' rather than 'what do you want to say, what matters to you?'. By ensuring a participant led process, participants come to understand that we genuinely value their contributions and are genuinely interested in what they have to say. This, for many, is the first time they believe anyone has been interested in their opinion, which in itself has a huge impact on their self esteem.

## bespoke tailoring

Of course participant groups are all different. While it is not difficult to recognise that, for instance, young people and older people would have very different needs from a facilitated process, it's not so often recognised that different groups of young people have diverse needs or that the over 55s is a huge age bracket comprising many different needs and circumstances. It has been hugely important to the success of our work that we are able to respond sensitively to specific needs of vulnerable groups – recognising the different needs of each group and tailoring our work and process accordingly. As an organisation that genuinely believes in inclusion we need to find ways of accommodating all needs and do our very best to engage everyone. Yes, sometimes some of our homeless participants may not be completely sober; yes, some of our young participants may not feel able to remove their coats, join the circle or speak; yes, some of our young refugees and asylum seekers may have no English; but we will find ways to accommodate everyone. We have never excluded anyone from a session, and have always achieved some level of engagement and collaboration: in many instances this has been a real triumph that has amazed partner organisations.

In addition, some of our participants have additional support needs and often chaotic and very challenging lives. Some need one-on-one support outside the sessions and build up strong relationships with core facilitators. Support, empathy, the ability to refer when necessary, the ability to maintain clear boundaries are all key skills of the facilitator.

## professional development

Not all facilitators/artists are sufficiently skilled to be able to be so flexible and responsive. We've been fortunate to find two excellent practitioners to deliver most of our participatory work (collaborating with a range of artists), but have identified a clear need for training in the sector. Having always had a commitment to training and to supporting emerging practitioners, we have continued this process through *State of the Nation*. We've provided long-term work placements to five degree students and mentored two of our youth theatre members to develop facilitation skills (one has since gone on to run her own youth theatre). We've fed into a range of further and higher education programmes and published case studies and work for students.

We have sought opportunities for participants to be involved in the wider running of the organisation. We've trialled steering groups and board representation, and have developed working groups for participants. At the moment we have a group developing our on-line profile (including a youth theatre specific website, Twitter, Facebook, Bebo and Myspace entries); another group working with us on print and marketing materials; another on recruitment; and another on fundraising. In addition participants have helped stuff envelopes, staffed stalls promoting our work, undertaken arts admin jobs, planned and programmed their own activities, worked with the design and production team on professional shows etc. As a result the long-term participants feel a real sense of ownership of the company – a real belief that it belongs to them. We're trying to write this into a strategy/policy for engagement, but have found frameworks like Participation Works too prescriptive. The informal, open approach has worked best for us to date.

We have created opportunities for professional artists to be challenged, to collaborate with new colleagues, and to make work they would not otherwise have had the opportunity to make. The learning Collective Encounters' core team gained from working with such a range of excellent and diverse artists has been profound.

**“My time with Collective Encounters professional impact on me. It helped me to build up my network in the north west, showed me how to apply for funding and manage budgets, gave me a knowledge of how companies work – all really useful for me now I'm self employed.”**

*Natasha Seldon, work experience student*

## food for the soul

It's a small point, but an important one. We have found that people concentrate and engage more effectively if we provide healthy refreshments in breaks. If we're working for a whole day with a 3<sup>rd</sup> age group, they really appreciate and benefit from a hot meal, whereas young participants are happy with sandwiches, crisps and fruit. We always give our young participants fruit juice instead of fizzy drinks (pineapple juice is a particular favourite) and we always give fruit rather than sweets (which they eat happily and without complaint). We've exposed our youth theatre to many seemingly basic foods they had never encountered before (plums and raspberries for instance) and on residential have taught them to cook (many had never seen garlic, chopped an onion, used fresh herbs). Learning to cook was, in fact, one of the key achievements cited by youth theatre members. We do provide treats too – our homeless participants particularly appreciate chocolate biscuits; and at after show parties we always lay on a decent spread. Art may be food for the soul, quality physical nourishment is important too.

## collective creation

We have mentioned above the importance of professional artists working as facilitators to the ideas of participants in our participatory work. This requires a collective approach to creation where everyone involved in the production process is recognised as having something valuable to contribute. The same is true in our professional work. The Artistic Director creates the frame and identifies the creative team, but once in place there is a collective approach to creation. We have experimented with these processes throughout *State of the Nation*. We have repeatedly found the need for clear direction: for one person to pull everyone's ideas together into a final shape with a clear structure, and, of course, the better the artists the better quality that final piece has. We've experimented with writing scripts, with exclusively devised and unscripted work, and with all the gradations in between: each has its own strengths and weaknesses. We are interested in democratic processes of creative development and these lead to greater satisfaction from the co-creators and, we believe, a more exciting final product.

## street to stage

All our professional work grows out of research at community level and is directly informed by pressing social and political concerns, as experienced and articulated locally. *Smoke and Mirrors* dealt with disengagement, apathy and political ennui and was a battle-cry for people to stand up and have their say. It was created in direct response to the fact that one of the wards in our area had the lowest voter turn out in the country at the last general election, the majority of the people we work with don't vote, don't see any reason to and have historically been completely removed from the political system. Other work grows more directly from specific pieces of research. *Songs for Silenced Voices* was created from the research material we had gathered when working with the homeless community, and drew on their stories, experiences and creative ideas. Other work comes from a devising process that involves participants: *Intersection* involved a core group of young people and professional actors in the devising process to ensure the piece accurately reflected the issues and concerns of young people. Importantly, all our work is underpinned by our Ethical Research Policy: this both guides our processes for gathering research and ensures we do not use people's stories or words unless we have their express permission. While our professional work is a creative, artist-led response to the research material (an opera about homelessness; a music hall piece about democracy) and has all the trappings of theatre, this process ensures that our work is truthful, grounded, and tells of lives and experiences not usually seen on the mainstream stage.

The response to this by audiences is overwhelmingly positive: people appreciate seeing themselves and their situations represented on stage; they are stimulated to discuss ideas and enjoy finding new ways of thinking about common problems; the theatre is meaningful to them and directly connects to their lives, rather than being an entertaining adjunct. For others they are exposed to new ideas or new life experiences that they had never encountered before and compelled to think outside the box and to empathise with new points of view.

## active audiences

Collective Encounters' consistently experiments with theatrical form: re-imagining traditional forms of political theatre and innovating in order to excite a 21<sup>st</sup> century audience. A key part of this for us is to find ways to engage

**“Just having Collective Encounters here has a really good effect. People using the centre feel part of it – they hear the music, they see rehearsals. It breaks down the barrier to theatre – people wouldn't have come to the show otherwise.”**

*Leslev Black (Manager, League of Welldoers) on Smoke and Mirrors process*

audience members as active participants in the live experience, in both our professional and participatory work. We also believe passionately in the importance of the post-show experience to consolidate and deepen the collective encounter. In *Smoke and Mirrors*, for instance we had a slot for a 'local act' in every performance, and finished the show with a karaoke and sing-a-long, with audience members singing to the live band. One of the most wonderful moments was the standing ovation one performer got for his spoons playing; another was when 40 people mounted the stage to sing Bohemian Rhapsody with our band.

We've used forum and legislative theatre techniques; voting on outcomes and choices; mid-show discussion points; facilitated heckling; singing along; post-show discussions (both facilitated and informal); hot-seating; invisible theatre and other more random ideas. They have all worked in different ways, and have repeatedly demonstrated that people are happy to engage – people want to be active contributors and respond extremely well to being part of a collective encounter. People engage with others from across social, economic, cultural and geographical divides.

One real highlight of *State of the Nation* was after a performance of *A Necessary Evil*. We had a disco subsequent to the show, and a DJ charged to keep both our young people and over 55s happy. Many of our audience members stayed behind and comprised a very diverse crowd: members of our refugee and asylum seeker group, members of our homeless group, women from an ex-offenders unit we were about to start working with, parents, friends and peers of the cast, people who had seen the show advertised in local press, locals of the social club it was playing in who had just stopped in for a look and stayed, our peers and stakeholders – artists, community workers etc. Part way through the night the DJ played Michael Jackson's *Thriller* and almost the whole group, actors and audience alike, were up dancing; the others were looking on and chatting. All sorts of dancing. All sorts of encounters. Genuine community cohesion. Lots and lots of fun and a truly shared and memorable experience.

## fun!

It's got to be fun! One of the most important things for our participants is that, however deep and dark the subject matter, the process of exploration is fun. There's lots of laughter in our workshops, lots of risk taking in a safe space which means people can afford to be silly, to have a laugh, to let their hair down and enjoy themselves. For many of our participants this, in itself, is hugely important – for a couple of hours in the week they can engage in something that removes them, elevates them from the challenges of their day-to-day life.

We also believe that in order for theatre to have an impact it must be entertaining and we try, where appropriate, to find popular, enjoyable theatrical forms to engage audiences. Not all our work is happy (*Songs for Silenced Voices* is a tragic opera that ends in suicide) but much of it is! We use a great deal of comedy and song to relieve the harshness of the subject matter we explore. We try to find a balance between fun process and serious content.

## feedback and evaluation

On-going, participant led evaluation has been highlighted above as being key to a successful participatory programme. We use diverse creative methodologies to evaluate with participants. But we evaluate all aspects of our work. We invite all artists and facilitators to contribute to evaluations and we regularly evaluate with stakeholders. We have introduced a system of partnership agreements which help us to identify what each stakeholder wants to get out of the process and evaluate clearly against these objectives. This makes sure our work continues to grow and develop, that we are able to tackle problems, identify weaknesses and move forward.

We also solicit feedback from audiences. We began a system of using comments cards and vox pops after shows which has been hugely successful in garnering interesting feedback and helping to chart impact on audiences.

We've also commissioned an independent researcher to meet with almost 70 people (artists, participants, audience members, other stakeholders) who have worked with us over the past 5 years to ask questions about our processes and impact. This has been a hugely beneficial process and has helped us to better understand our work and its position.

**“The fullest value of the work was demonstrated in *A Necessary Evil*'s after show party. The genuine respect and friendship that had built between the two groups was very obvious. This sort of intergenerational work is invaluable.”**

*Melanie Ndzinga, (Coordinator of Future Years, Regional Forum on Ageing)*

By using a wide range of feedback and evaluation mechanisms facilitated by different internal and external staff; by consistently reflecting on our practice; by checking back against our aims and objectives we are able to be honest about our successes and failures and to consistently improve our work.

## geographical commitment

In evaluations with stakeholders one of the most welcome compliments was community recognition of our commitment to north Liverpool. When we first established ourselves here there was some suspicion: many organisations (arts and others) had delivered parachute projects then left the area; people came to work in the area for a while then moved on and new staff members had to start building relationships again; the area had been so neglected for so long that it was difficult for residents and committed community workers to trust outsiders. Over the years, though, our continued commitment to north Liverpool and advocacy on its behalf has begun to win the trust of the communities. This means they are much more receptive to working with us and genuine partnerships, based on mutual trust and respect, have emerged. We have a very strong and wide network of community and voluntary sector organisations across the area. We attend local community services meetings and are very much engaged into the communities of north Liverpool to ensure we keep abreast of the politics and issues of the area. This all means that our work can genuinely come from and reflect the diverse communities of north Liverpool.

In addition, wherever possible we spend our money locally (for instance we hire rehearsal space in local community centres) and use local services (timber yards for set construction etc.).

## non-traditional spaces

We seek out non-traditional spaces to work in within north Liverpool. Many of the people we work with will not cross geographical boundaries and do not feel safe moving outside of their patch. For these people, we deliver work in settings they are already familiar with (homeless shelters, exclusion units, youth projects etc.). We will work in inadequate spaces if needs be in order to make sure they are on safe ground. If we're working on a medium to long term project we will aim to try and get them out of their own area as part of the process, so once we've gained their trust we'll meet them in their comfort zone and travel with them to a new space.

Ironically, a non-traditional space for our youth theatre has been Liverpool Hope University's Cornerstone Theatre. This has been the only mainstream theatre Collective Encounters has worked in, and was chosen because our young participants have so little connection to university life, most saw it as very far removed and were very excited by a 'proper theatre'. Over the years the group has achieved a real sense of ownership of the space and is very comfortable in a university setting – some say it has changed their whole perception of university and a couple are even applying to study at Hope now. They have also grown through their excitement by theatre space and are now interested and committed to performing site-specifically and in non-traditional spaces!

In terms of performance, we are interested in taking our work to settings which are accessible and require neither confidence nor cost to attend. Our research has shown that many of our audience members are first time attendees; they feel that theatre isn't for them, and are intimidated by the idea of going into town to a theatre building. By performing in social clubs, community centres, schools and youth clubs we take theatre to them and they love it! Group leaders are constantly amazed by the concentration levels of audience members and by the way their group will participate in the action. Audiences talk about how important it is to have things brought to them – how special it makes them feel.

We are also very interested in transforming unloved and unlovely urban spaces. In an area blighted by half-finished regeneration, empty properties, derelict housing, abandoned green space we believe it is important to breath magic and beauty into the air. We are interested in the metaphor of transformation: if we can convert this abandoned mill or disused shop into a beautiful, magical world, what other transformations could be wrought? Again, we get local audiences who tell us they simply wouldn't have considered going to the theatre, but this looked intriguing and was on their doorstep so they thought they might as well give it a go. They are often amazed by the transformations we've achieved.

***“Collective Encounters pick up subjects that are important to the people because they have been here long enough... What I value most about them is that they are positive in their response to the demand for consistency, sticking with the community and being committed.”***

*Ruth Little (Manager, Anfield Breckside Community Council)*

## incitement to think

At the heart of all our work is an incitement to think. The core of every workshop we deliver and every piece of work we create, the purpose behind every publication and debate we produce is a call to people to break out of the haze of apathy so pervasive and debilitating in our society and think for themselves. We believe that as a society we have become inured to inequality and suffering and have reached a point where we are totally disempowered by believing that nothing we or anyone else can do will make a difference. We do not believe that this is the case. We are not party political and have no affiliations, we do not encourage anyone to think in a particular way, just to think for themselves. We encourage them to think about the issues that matter to them; to think about the lives of other people; to think about bigger issues that affect us all; and then to think about what they can do to make a difference. This means the subject matter in our workshops and shows is never random, it is never trivial, though it is entertaining, it is never entertainment purely for entertainments sake. Feedback from audiences and participants shows that this works: people do think and do experience attitudinal change.

## integration

Underpinning all our work is integration: of process and product; professional and participatory; artist and audience; academic and practice; hard hitting subject matter and entertaining theatrical form; local and (inter)national issues; diverse communities. This is always a challenge and can often cause creative tension, but almost always leads to new discoveries and positive outcomes.

Some of the most interesting moments of integration have been about making human contact where perceptions are challenged and new understandings and friendships, emerge. We managed a very careful integration of our young refugees and asylum seekers into our youth theatre. Many of the former group had experienced ferocious racism since arriving in Liverpool, and our white north Liverpool youth theatre members had a set of received ideas about asylum seekers. Following carefully planned work with both groups we began a slow process of integration: initially the groups met at different times, then at the same time but separately joining up just for breaks, then with warm ups together, then eventually as a whole group. This was hugely successful and while we lost several of the YRAS members due to relocation, a significant core have remained as fully engaged members of the youth theatre for the past 18 months. Another strong example was the connection between our homeless group and our third age group. Our homeless group were very keen to remain separate and worried about the prejudices others carried about them. They felt that 'the drama' was their safe space and did not want it spoiled. With their approval, however, we invited our over 55s group to their sharing of work. The audience naturally carried preconceptions and prejudices but were extremely impressed by the power and honesty of the performances. After the show they played some joint drama games then chatted and socialised over tea and biscuits. Subsequently, both groups asked to do a collaborative project. These are just two of many examples which demonstrate that real community cohesion and attitudinal change is possible through theatre based collective encounters.



“A very good show. I’d like to see more of these plays as a way of getting people to think about important issues.”

*Audience member, Dr Dr We Need to Talk (Blackpool performance)*

# challenges

## capacity

The main challenge to the organisation in delivering *State of the Nation* has been one of capacity. It was an extremely ambitious and extensive programme of work for a very small organisation. In addition, during *State of the Nation* our two senior managers each had short periods of maternity leave, the company had an organisational restructure, a review of all company policies and procedures, initiated some remote working, and, due to unforeseeable circumstances, had a high turn over (3 staff members) in one post. This has meant that at times we have been stretched to the limit to deliver the quality of service we are passionate about. Unfortunately it means that some things have suffered:

- We have failed, at times, to identify conferences/events and performance opportunities in time to enable participants to have their voices heard nationally by those who can really make a difference
- We have not promoted the work as widely as we would have liked, and have not made the most of opportunities to raise the profile and demonstrate the quality of the work in wider public spheres
- We have not been able to publish our research and findings during the course of *State of the Nation*

## partnership working

As our partnerships with other community and voluntary sector organisations have always been largely very positive we have historically had verbal agreements or loose written documents. During the last year, however, we have experienced two particularly challenging partnership projects: one involving a major staff change just before our project was due to start, and the loss of funding for a significant part of their end of the initiative; the other was a problem of confused boundaries and areas of responsibility. We have subsequently introduced a Partnership Agreement template which we complete with all partners and which sets out clearly the expected outcomes for each party as well as what each party will contribute/provide. This has proved to be extremely successful.

## engaging vulnerable people

It's difficult to begin working with a new constituent group of vulnerable people. With both YRAS and Homeless organisations our first approaches were met with suspicion. We understood this suspicion and were happy to take the time to demonstrate our values, commitments and expertise to key people in relevant organisations and to win their trust before being introduced to their service users. Once we had been accepted by staff we recognised the need for lead facilitator to spend some time in situ speaking informally to people and becoming known a little before trying to offer any kind of workshop. Because of the high stress levels for staff in the organisations we were engaging, there was lots of staff sickness and consequently cancelled workshops and meetings. Due to all these factors it took much longer than anticipated to set up significant initiatives. Due to the life circumstances of participants, group members shifted a lot at first and it took a while to settle down to a core group of regular attendees. While we were able to be flexible and respond appropriately in all these circumstances, they are real challenges worth highlighting for organisations wishing to work with new constituent groups.

## long term sustainability

The biggest challenge facing Collective Encounters is the one facing all small arts organisations: financial stability. Although we have been made an ACE Regularly Funded Organisation, this grant covers approximately one quarter of our annual turnover, the rest is still project funded. In the current climate fundraising is more difficult than ever, and it is particularly hard to secure funds for long-term provision for vulnerable groups. For the past twelve months, while continuing to deliver all our work we been energetically fundraising through traditional channels (City Council, trusts and foundations, grants schemes). While this has secured the immediate future for most of our provision, it has not offered long term viability. Over the next 15 months Collective Encounters will be undertaking a review process to explore more sustainable ways of securing the future of our work through partnership, embedding delivery within stakeholder organisations, tendering and earned income.

**“Being in CE gets me out, lets me be creative, imaginative and also free!  
You have really changed my life for good and I’m happy! Thank you!”**

Danny Fitzgerald, Youth Theatre member

# the future

## from the personal to the political

Our work through *State of the Nation* has had an extremely positive impact in north Liverpool and beyond. We have witnessed many personal transformations and instances of behavioural change. We have been responsible for an impressive series of meaningful collaborations which have led to new insights, new understandings and new alliances. Our work has demonstrated consistently that theatre does have the power to affect change. We remain committed to the communities of north Liverpool and the marginalised, disenfranchised groups we work with. We plan to keep innovating and working collectively to find new ways of engaging participants and audiences in processes of change and transformation.

We also want to develop and extend our work though, moving from the personal to the political. We want to explore ways in which theatre might affect policy and provision; ways in which it can challenge the dominant ideology; ways in which it can effect concrete behavioural change. Through *State of the Nation* we have begun to take our work to a national stage, and we now want to build on these foundations.

Between January 2010 and March 2011 we will deliver *From the Personal to the Political*, an interim bridging project. This will enable us to undertake a process of research and development, which will result in:

- a five year business plan (2011 – 2016) setting out our new creative, research and business aims
- revised staffing structures, board membership, financial and business models all suitable to achieve our aims
- an innovative five-year programme of work characterised by it's integration of local-level theatre for social change initiatives, focusing on personal transformation and community cohesion; with national, high-profile initiatives focussed on using theatre to affect change at policy/provision/behavioural level

This R&D process will involve desk and academic research as well as practice-based-research. Two examples of practice-based-research are *Dementia?* and *Songs from the Streets*.

### Now ad Then

A twelve month project with the over 55s, delivered in partnership with PSS, a national organisation providing community, social and health care services.

Our 3<sup>rd</sup> Age Theatre group will work with artists, specialists and researchers to gather stories from sufferers of dementia, their relatives and care workers. This will involve interviews, creative research and peer-to-peer workshops. The material thus collected will be developed into a series of performance pieces with supporting documentation. The group will perform at PSS's National Dementia Conference to give professionals in the field a wider awareness of the issues carers and sufferers are facing, and what changes people want to see in the services they receive. They will also perform at The National Pensioners' Convention (Blackpool) and on tour to 10 Liverpool community venues to raise awareness of Dementia and the key signs to look out for, and to give carers/sufferers confidence and information on how to access services and how to improve the care they are receiving. We are seeking practical and innovative ways of working with PSS to feed into the development of the National Dementia Strategy at government level.

**“In all honesty I can't believe the respect I have now for you having seen the play...before when I saw some one on the streets I'd instantly presume that have an addiction to drugs or alcohol, they have done something, not that they exactly deserve to be on the streets, but they've put themselves there, watching this made me realise that it's not your fault that you are there, that there's stuff behind it... you've achieved what you set out to do.”**

*Sarah Johnson, Youth Theatre member following A Day and a Night performance*

### **Songs from the Streets**

A twelve-month project with the homeless community in partnership with The Whitechapel Centre, one of the longest established support organisations for homeless people in Liverpool.

Bringing together the professional artists who have developed *Songs for Silenced Voices* and the homeless participants we've worked with over the past 18 months, this will be a fully collaborative initiative. It will involve accredited skills development leading to peer-to-peer workshop facilitation; the development of flash pieces to be performed by homeless and non-homeless performers across Liverpool to raise awareness of the key issues; the development of a fully integrated opera building on our existing material to be performed in Liverpool and London (including at Capita's 12<sup>th</sup> National Conference on Homelessness), and live via the internet; preliminary conversations and work sharings with Cardboard Citizens (London) and Headlines Theatre (Vancouver) in advance of international work post March 2011. We will be working with The Whitechapel Centre and a network of local support organisations to see how we can use our work to influence Liverpool City Council policy.

In addition we will be continuing to find new ways of engaging difficult to reach young people; building partnerships with statutory bodies and non-party-political pro-democracy organisations in order to tour *Smoke and Mirrors* nationally, as part of a campaign to get people registered to vote; identifying what debates and policy issues will be coming up in 2011 at local and national level and discussing these with the communities we work with to identify project ideas that could feed in to the debate.

As well as this Research and Development, we will be disseminating our findings from *State of the Nation*, and reflecting on our practice over the past 3 – 5 years in order to contribute to the wider field of theatre for social change. This will include:

- publishing a best practice case study of our youth theatre, highlighting the methodologies used and the impacts which have resulted, in *Mailout*, the participatory arts trade paper.
- publishing a paper arguing the case for a move away from target driven, funding led, high number/low impact participatory arts practice in *The Journal of Arts and Communities*, the peer reviewed academic journal.
- presenting a paper discussing the development of our aesthetic and the ethical implications of large-scale professional work in the applied theatre sector, with reference to The Harmony Suite, Smoke and Mirrors and Songs for Hidden Voices, at *Central School of Speech and Drama's international conference, Theatre Applications*.
- presenting a paper discussing the move from the personal to the political, the next challenge for theatre for social change, at *Liverpool Hope University's Research Seminar Series*.

This next stage in the company's development will be launched at *Talking Spaces*: a symposium to be held in December 2009, which will celebrate Collective Encounters' first five years and contextualise our work within the wider field of theatre for social change.

**“Collective Encounters’ work is, in my view, a model for the ways in which arts activities can be used to reinforce civil society and, ultimately, democracy itself.”**

Professor Catherine Graham (McMaster University, Canada)

# appendices

## appendix 1: *State of the Nation* Main Events Programme

- March, 2007**      **Intersection**  
Following a devising process involving young people and professional actors, this professional show for young people integrated two young actors into a professional cast. The piece looked at choice and consequence, family breakdown and racism as experienced by young people in Liverpool today. Creating an innovative form of interactive theatre, it toured to schools and youth centres across north Liverpool to help recruit for our youth theatre.
- November, 2007**      **The Billy Show**  
This was our youth theatre's first show and it was an open workshop with performance elements. The group wanted to show adults what it was like to be a young person in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and wanted to gain the audiences' understanding of the particular challenges they face. Discussing stereotypes, celebrity culture, role models and instant gratification, the group tried out lots of different theatre for social change forms and involved the audience directly in the action.
- November, 2007**      **Your City, Your Neighbourhood, Your Say**  
Collective Encounters was commissioned by Liverpool City Council and Liverpool First (the city's Local Strategic Partnership) to enliven their consultation process. They were required to consult city wide in preparation for writing the Local Area Agreement and the Sustainable Communities Strategy. With two actors and some new music, we devised sketches to stimulate debate and introduce new ways of thinking about age-old problems. The actors hosted the event, using interactive voting technology and making sure everyone had chance to have their say.
- March, 2008**      **Standing Blind: Secrets and Lives in Liverpool**  
Working with a full professional creative team, our youth theatre devised this piece to explore how they felt about living in Liverpool today. Touching on gang culture, family breakdown, isolation and peer pressure it was a hard hitting piece that tackled the issues head on. Using the metaphor of Anthony Gormley's Another Place figures brought an elegiac and very theatrical feel to the piece.
- April, 2008**      **Arts for Social Change Day**  
More than 60 young people from across north Liverpool came together for a day of arts activity to explore how they could communicate their ideas and have their voices heard through creative work. Using DJing, drama, dance, music and clay modelling the young people tried lots of new ideas and created work to share with each other at the end. We also provided training for youth workers in integrating the arts into their practice.
- July, 2008**      **Smoke and Mirrors: A Cabaret for Liverpool**  
Our professional cabaret transformed a disused mill in the north Liverpool docklands into a sumptuous music hall ala 1908. With music and magic, satire and slapstick, dance and delights we offered a sugar coated battle cry for people to stand up and be heard by the forces that govern our city and our nation. With four actors and a four piece band the show transported its audience back in time drawing lots of parallels between then and now. We're hoping to tour *Smoke and Mirrors* nationally in 2010 in a bid to encourage more people to vote.
- August, 2008**      **The Liverpool Saga: A trip through the decades**  
This was our Third Age Theatre group's first production and grew out of a lengthy devising and skills development process. Participants chose to celebrate a century of activism and of being active, with particular emphasis on the anniversaries of the pension and the NHS. The development of the piece was profiled in an Arts Council Commissioned documentary, *Up For Arts*, screened on the Community Channel.
- Summer, 2008**      **Youth Theatre, Summer 08**  
The youth theatre had a very busy summer with a residential trip to the Edinburgh festival to see lots of shows and meet other youth groups, as well as performances at a variety of Liverpool's summer festivals. Their performance highlight was at Liverpool's Children and Young People's Festival where over 5,000 audience members watched their antics as residents of the fictional Roopville. Having recently integrated young people from our young

refugee and asylum seeker project, this enabled the group to take a more light hearted look at issues around sense of place, isolation and immigration.

- December, 2008** **A day and a night in the life of Liverpool's homeless**  
Streetscape was our first project with Liverpool's homeless community and it set out to uncover the day-to-day realities of those who live and work on our streets. We carried out research across the city through interviews and workshops and ran a 10-session programme at The Whitechapel centre. The work at the Whitechapel culminated in *A day and a night*, an in-house sharing of work.
- March, 2009** **A Necessary Evil: a modern day variety show**  
Our youth theatre and third age theatre groups joined forces to create this toe tapping, laugh-out loud look at the economy. It dazzled and delighted audiences with sketches, songs, gags and glitter. In only three months, the groups worked both independently and collaboratively to devise a piece which let them to look at the personal and political implications of the credit crunch. They then toured it to three north Liverpool community venues.
- April, 2009** **Paul's World**  
Working in collaboration with the NSPCC and North Liverpool Academy, this short film enabled 13 year old boys to explore issues around bullying, peer pressure and drinking. The piece was created and performed by a group of 5 boys we worked with over 10 sessions and has subsequently been shown as a stimulus for discussion to 1,400 young people.
- June, 2009** **Dr, Dr we need to talk**  
This exciting new theatre piece followed Angela Neverwell's trials and tribulations as she navigated her way through NHS services. Using songs, sketches and a bit of light relief, the show highlighted the experiences of many older people and involved its audience in trying to find solutions to the problems. It played at the National Pensioners' Convention in Blackpool, as well as to community audiences in Liverpool.
- August, 2009** **Barry, Radge and Mingin'**  
The end product of a collaborative project between CE Youth Theatre and North Edinburgh Arts Centre/Muirhouse Youth Development Project. Following several months of workshops devolved separately in Liverpool and Edinburgh the groups came together for a week to create the final performance piece. A site-specific piece which animated the local area; using puppetry and performance to explore the challenges facing young people and the ways in which they can choose to make a better world.
- September, 2009** **Dreams and Aspirations**  
Our second project with the Whitechapel Centre, this piece used monologue and song to enable participants to share their present and past personal dreams and aspirations with the audience. This was performed in-house to an invited audience of centre staff and other CE participants.
- November, 2009** **What Life is Like**  
This project marked a new partnership with PSS, the national social care provider, and enabled us to work with the siblings of children with special needs. It enabled us to explore the issues confronting them and to create a piece through which they articulated their experiences to parents and support staff.
- December, 2009** **Songs for Silenced Voices: a ten-minute tragic opera**  
Growing out of the research we'd undertaken with the homeless community, this piece used a high art form to tell the tragic stories of some of our most marginalised citizens. It animated a disused shop in the St John' shopping centre in the run up to Christmas and over 500 people stopped to watch the show.