

Theatre Exchange

Immediate
Theatre

OFF THE CUFF COMMUNITY TOUR

November 2024

Supported by



Photography: Carina Vogelsberger | Ben Moss | Devere Mahbeir

Project Overview

In November 2024 Theatre Exchange was able to create a live tour with a new format. While in the past the group have performed in lunch and social clubs this year, following suggestions from some of our funders and the growing number of participants it was decided that we would perform in larger venues bringing together audiences from different community groups. In addition, we invited organisations that support older people to have stalls at the events providing information and support to the audience.

There were five performances (three in Hackney, one in Enfield and one in Newham) reaching an audience of 416. Sixteen performers took part with additional backstage support from a professional stage manager and under the guidance of a director and a music director. The performance was based on a cabaret format created entirely by members of the cast and was extremely well received by audiences. Many audience members experience social isolation and rarely or never have live entertainment they thoroughly enjoyed the event. The participants were overwhelmingly positive about the experience.

The Process

In July 2024 the ensemble created 'Off the Cuff' for a fundraising event which was shared with paying family and friends. The group built the cabaret show on the lessons learned from past performances and the feedback given by audiences – i.e. relatable themes, music and songs, dancing and laughter. They focused on the group's individual skills and interests, creating a series of sketches including well known songs adaptations, jokes, modern life issues, standup comedy, ventriloquism and physical performance, musical and dancing numbers.

Off The Cuff 's fundraising event was a resounding success and the positive feedback from this event allowed the Theatre Exchange company to reflect on the process thus far and decide to develop the work for our autumn tour rather than work on a scripted production as in previous years. They returned to sessions in September 2024 supported by a fantastic team of professional creatives to help them develop and add to the material. More intensive rehearsals started on November 4th with the first show on Tuesday 19th November.

Led by professional team - director Jo Carter, music director Ashley Hodgson, stage manager Ruth Pownall, long standing facilitator Penny Cliff and designer Pip Nash the group the group were quickly immersed in the process of preparing the work. One group member Christine took a leading role as musical director, composing work and arranging tunes to fit the skills of the group before Ashley joined us. We were also reliant on Christine and Hugh's accomplished musicianship, so that we had a band of accordion, guitar and percussion as well as Ashley on keyboards. The band kept the audience entertained whilst waiting for the show to start as well as playing throughout the performance. Two new ensemble pieces were created in September– You Only Live Once – a rap about aging and ailments which opened the show and the Pavement Apocalypse – which explored the terrors they experience walking to the shops. These group numbers brought the whole team together and raised the energy the production. Participants worked on characterisation, choreography and physical theatre sequences, learning about breathwork and enunciation, timing, and rhythm.

Whilst last year the script required an ensemble approach, this year the group was challenged to build separate numbers to link seamlessly in a cohesive continuum. Although it felt new and created apprehension for some of the members and a slightly disjointed rehearsal schedule in the end there was a great sense of ownership and union between the members and for the final product. Furthermore, this new way of working was beneficial to support the integration of new members joining the company at the rehearsal stage.

Partnership Work



Partner organisations at the Newham performance.

In July 2024, we found ourselves with no clear funding for the tour and a number of organisations that had started working with in January 2024 - wanting to host our tour. There was an expectation that the way we performed in November 2023 would be repeated. Thankfully in September we acquired funding from Awards for All for a tour in five venues. This format involved travelling to less venues (5 in total instead of the 9 from the 2023 autumn tour), 3 in Hackney, 1 in Newham and 1 in Enfield but bringing together people from different organisations.

Immediate Theatre was also involved in Hackney Neighbourhood Action groups particularly Hackney Downs who were looking for a Winter event. We therefore decided to join forces replicate the popular Winter Warmer format that the Hackney Council had been forced to abandon. This idea was then replicated in all the other areas, opening the space to health, wellbeing and financial organisations to present their over 60s services to our invited audience. We provided tea and cake for the audience whilst they looked at the stalls before the show started. This was an enormous success, much enjoyed by stall holders and audience members.

The first show opened as part of the Hackney Downs Neighbourhood Forum at St Paul's Church with a great audience of 100 people and 9 wellbeing organisations from the Hackney area.

Please see the full list of partner organisations attending the performances in the table on page 13

Challenges

Partnership work comes with a set of challenges – which have not changed since last year -brought on by the post covid and cost of living crisis and health inequalities with organisation's coordinators being overwhelmed by support requests from their clients/residents, therefore the in-person connection with Immediate Coordinator played a significant role in sustaining the organisation's desire to do more for their participants and helped in bringing more audience to the tour in the three Boroughs.

The most significant challenge was the timeline: we had a short period of time to engage with both audiences and stall holders. The engagement required outreach, travel and time, nevertheless thanks to relationships establish in the prior year, it was received enthusiastically from everyone involved. We also liaise with

Leaside in Hackney which volunteered to support with transport for members of the audience who needed it. We were happy to support the HCEO in Hackney in collecting and dropping off their members on the first day of the show.

Opportunities

The outreach engagement and the offer of a free show was very well received from all those attending, audiences and stall holders alike. It brought also new partners for the Creative Connection Coordinator which translated into opportunities for 2025. The Coordinator was able to secure new partnerships which led to 2 Voices of Change – Asper's mapping workshops, and a sound/music/singing 6-week workshops with people affected by dementia both in Newham and a 6-week visual arts/music workshop in Enfield (thanks to the excellent networking support of Age UK Enfield). We will also be collaborating with Well Newham and SubCo Trust in Newham to co-create a talent show to perform in June 2025 as part of the Age Without Limits campaign.

This has also demonstrated that this is an engaging and enjoyable format is for everyone involved and can be repeated if we start the booking process in advance.

The Coordinator continues attending Age UK East (Newham, Tower Hamlets & the City)'s meetings in St John's Church in Stratford and has an established partnership with Age UK Enfield and MHA in Enfield as well as working on a new partnership with Well Newham.

Live Performance

Our Host: [Patricia Lewis](#), introduced each act and kept the audience engaged –



Health & Safety Officer: [Thelma Sharma](#), interacted with the audience, reminding them to turn their phones off etc., she opened the show, and took on a number of roles including Santa's Elf.



Heckler: [Evelyne Lustig](#) interjected from the audience, encouraging participation until she was whisked away by Charlie Chaplin for a romantic encounter.



Y.O.L.O. A GRANNY RAP: written & arranged by [Christine Taylor](#), performed by the company as the opening number, listing their aches and ailments whilst breakdancing.



I'M SIZE 16 GOING ON 17: written and performed by [Janet Evans](#).



RHYMING RHONA'S BIG FAT RAFFLE: featuring Priscilla the Gorilla. Conceived and performed by [Janet Bettesworth](#), audiences were given raffle tickets on entry and called to the stage to receive unexpected rhyming prizes.



THE DANCE MASTER: performed by Ali Birang, featuring Janet Evans & Atefe Bahrambeigi Sohi



THE CRACKERS: Jokes from [Barbara Susman](#) with [Judy Frumin](#) showing her how its done and sharing some good old stories.



THE STRIPPER: performed by [Hugh Poulton](#) with assistance from his elf, [Thelma Sharma](#)



DESERT DREAM: devised and performed by Chock Kooi Glendinning featuring Bill Ferguson



THE PAVEMENT: devised by the group and developed by Hugh Poulton and Alan Bettesworth – narrated by Alan Bettesworth.





THE HUNGRY, LONELY TRAMP: Devised and performed by Behige Molina, featuring Bill Ferguson



CHANTELLE & THE CLEANERS: Devised and performed by Sue Loder, vocals Hugh Poulton featuring, Behige Molina, Janet Evans, Atefe Bahrambeigi Sohi, Chock Kooi Glendinning, Ali Birang as "The Cleaners"



FINALE: "When You're Smiling", "Goodnight, Ladies" Devised and performed by Ashley Hodgson and the Company



THE BAND: Ashley Hodgson: Keyboards, Vocals & Effects, Hugh Poulton: Guitar & Vocals Christine Taylor: Accordion & Djembe



The first live performance was at St Paul's Church in Hackney and was brilliantly received. It was a great start to overcome any fear, kinks and worries about an unfamiliar setting and to boost the performers confidence in front of warm and enthusiastic audience.

The group toured to a variety of venues adapting well to the distinct locations, and bigger audience size and were quick to modify elements to make the show work, supported by the staff team who were present at every performance. There was a huge support from the Immediate Theatre's staff doubling as front of the house and hospitality including members of Immediate Theatre SEND group 25+ project who volunteered in two of the Hackney based shows.

Because the five shows were spread over two weeks, we didn't encounter any cast absences, every performer was present all the time and very happy and eager to give a helping hand from setting up chairs, guiding audiences to seat and to collecting feedback forms.

The diverse audience was very enthusiastic, encouraging and engaged with our actors, before, during and after the show. This engagement was very much appreciated by audiences who do not often get to meet people beyond their groups.

The first show in St Paul's church was particularly exciting for the group because they didn't really know what to expect from a new format, a new venue and audiences coming from different centres, however the visit to the Dugdale Arts Centre in Enfield really stood out. The DAC was the first conventional theatre space the company performed in, and they had to adapt the show to that layout, adjusting exit and entrances and timing. The audience was also new for the ensemble, and it comprised of participants active in the Enfield area, who have been participating in Creative Connections' community workshops throughout 2024. They were delighted about the performance, the refreshments and the opportunity to attend and make a day out of it.

Hosting health and wellbeing organisations and duplicating a winter warmer format, offering refreshments and a show proved an excellent way of bringing the community together across three boroughs.

Tour Schedule

Date	Partners Attending	Location	Audience
Tuesday 19th November 2.30 pm	Hackney Downs Neighbourhood Forum Age UK East London, Family Action - Social Prescribing Service, Shoreditch Trust, Homerton Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust and Healthwatch Hackney NHS Bowel Cancer, Richmond Road Medical Centre, London Borough of Hackney: - Money Hub Outreach Team, Resident Participation Team, Climate, Sustainability and Environmental Services	St Paul's Church, Hackney	99
Thursday 21st November 2pm	Edmonton community partnership, EAWA, Healthwatch Enfield	Dugdale Arts Centre, Enfield	99
Monday 25th November 2pm	NHS Bowel Cancer, Hackney Circle, City & Hackney Talking Therapies, National Energy Action, London Borough of Hackney :Resident Sustainment Team, Home delivery library	Frampton Park Baptist Church, Hackney	80
Wednesday 27th November 2pm	Woodgrange Medical Practice, NHS Bowel Cancer, Our Newham, Well Newham Hub Newham New Deal Partnership - Dementia Services, London Borough of Newham Ageing Well	Memorial Community Church, Newham	60
Friday 29th November 2pm	Sustainable Hackney, Age UK East London, Shoreditch Trust, London Borough of Hackney: Money Hub Outreach Team	Fellows Court Community Centre, Hackney	70
Total			416

Most of the venues in Hackney reflected the mix of Hackney residents, however the audience at the St Paul's church and Frampton Park Baptist Centre were predominantly from the black African and Caribbean communities, while the Memorial Community Church in Newham, reflected audiences from the south Asian community.

Feedback From The Audience



The response was extremely positive. We collected 225 evaluation forms which reported that 94% thought the show was either "excellent" or "good".

Positive comments included:

The flow, it was amazing to see everyone working together so well! Great mixture of genres as well."

"Full of admiration for cast".

"All of it! Big up to the music"

"All was very entertaining, songs and music, jokes. Brilliant, great fun!"



On 212 forms we asked the question "Do you often see live entertainment?" 65% percent said either "Never" or "Rarely". This demonstrates that we are reaching audiences who have had little access to live entertainment. Comparing those numbers to previous years we also believe that the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis have exacerbated those figures further. People are worse off both in terms of health and finances with theatre tickets being extremely expensive with no schemes to support the over 60's.

We were delighted when asked "How attending the show today made you feel?" many replied positively expressing similar feeling, i.e.:

"Happy, relaxed & feeling good"
"Happy, stimulated & uplifted"
"Very uplifting, enjoyed mix of audience"
"It made me feel I should join as well"
"Much happier. Worth the long journey"
"Smiling :) + happy. Thank you!"



The Participants Experience

The final team comprised of 16 performers, ranging in age from those in their 60s to their late 80s.

The show was initially created in a couple of weeks in July and then further developed and rehearsed through improvisation, physical theatre, choreography and music sessions in the Immediate Theatre workshop space from September 2024. The rehearsals process was an enjoyable way for the actors to engage with the process and to explore different ways to interpret the themes and the characters, as well as create cohesion and union. The group were able to hone already existing skills for some and to learn new skills. This process also allowed actors to feel confident in owning their material and ideas, building their own performances or playing characters very unlike themselves. We had one performer who had never been on stage since school and joined us in January 2024 and felt most proud of being "in a show for the first time since school".

At the end of the production the participants were asked to complete an evaluation form and give feedback through group discussion. The response was overwhelmingly positive with participants reporting that they learnt new skills and developed their confidence. 100% of the participants said that they had fun in taking part and 90% felt they had ownership of their contribution.

Surveys analysed skills development showing that:

100% of participants reported improving in all areas of performance, falling in line with the skills building desires of the participants as part of the feedback following the "...in progress" sharing event in July 2023

and 2024.

100% of the participants reported that the process allows them to build confidence “a lot” or “quite a bit”. And 100% reported developing skills and achieving personal goals.

H.P., 74, an active and consistent participant in regular sessions and an experienced musician, expressed his journey from trepidation to competence through “being part of it!”. He remembered that he “didn’t do anything like this for 30 years.”

A.B.S. 61, a new participant, who joined the group in January 2024 expressed her pride in being “part of this group, and of myself” despite her mobility and health issues, “performing on the stage was my desire. I never imagined I would work with so many talented people”

S.L, 80, felt that she grew in confidence and skills because of “being part of such a diverse, and creative group of people.” which was possible because she “never felt so supported”.

E.L, 87, a new participant joining in January 2024 said: “Wow, what an experience!”.

C.T., 75, a seasoned participants and part of the Theatre Exchange core group, took a leading role in putting musical numbers together and she reflected: “Proud of the company”, for her it was an “exciting and glorious challenge of putting the music together.”

Participants attributed their success to the work of the creative team, particularly the presence of director Jo Carter, which alongside Penny Cliff supported the cast with structured rehearsals from September, “the direction instructions were great”. They also appreciated the music director Ashley Hodgson who many knew from the previous year. They were delighted by the simple but glamorous set and props created by Pip Nash and very much appreciated the organisation of the stage manager Ruth Pownall and Coordinator Tiziana Silvestre for organising the venues and bringing such wonderful audiences.

The Staff Team Experience

Due to the nature of the show, it was decided that the Artistic Director of Immediate Theatre, Jo Carter would direct the work. Jo has experience of directing cabaret and was able to be with the group for a more extended period of time than a freelance director. We were very pleased to be joined by Ashley Hodgson and Pip Nash who had been involved in last year’s production. The addition of a dedicated Stage Manager to support rehearsals and smooth running of the tour was also a huge benefit. The staff team worked very well together with the majority attending every performance everyone commented positively about the experience.

At the end of the performance the team were asked to reflect on their experience. The comments below are an extract from this feedback focussing on the participants journey perception, challenges, lessons learned and professional achievements.

Working with the group again on a full production was a total delight. Each person invested so much into the creation and performance of their piece making them a joy to work with. I am extremely proud of each individual, whether that be for demonstrating their huge experience and skills or trying something out for the first time. Watching them thrive on the wonderful audience response was seeing community theatre at its absolute best. [Jo Carter – director](#)

I think I did a good job as a facilitator – there were a lot of ideas that were already quite clearly formed by the time I came to the project, and I managed to tailor my music/sounds in such a way that foreground the performers.

We created a show that felt, to me, like a real expression of each group's member personality. We also created an environment in which performers felt able to push themselves out of their comfort zone and to take risks. [Ashley Hodgson – composer and musical director](#)

J really impressed me. I heard her rehearsing her song with Ashley (MD) and she struggled to keep to the tune of the song when we first started. After rehearsing not only does she perform the song note perfectly on stage, but she also completely embodies the character with her expressions. So much so that my husband asked if she was a professional. [Ruth Pownall - stage manager](#)

Because of the new format – a smaller number of venues but bigger in size, and the collaboration with local authority partners and community organisations – I felt a great sense of responsibility in involving different audiences and stakeholders in a relatively short period of time.”

Not a one participant stands out, but the group worked tirelessly to make the performance work. They not only put together a fundraising event in July, but they also then went deep in perfecting pieces, learning choreographies and generally trusted one another. [Tiziana Silvestre - Coordinator](#)

Immediate Theatre

The company's purpose is to involve communities in making theatre that inspires wellbeing, breaks down barriers and engages people in the process of personal and social change. Our work is:

INCLUSIVE

Working at the grassroots and celebrating diversity

INTERACTIVE

Involving communities throughout the creative process

IMAGINATIVE

Finding new ways of engaging with vital issues

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Thanks to our funders

