



# Back to Ours Festival Highlights Report 2018-19

## Chat to Ours

# Introduction:

## The Reports, The Festivals and Us

### ABOUT THIS REPORT

This Report presents the highlights from Chat to Ours' analysis of four Back to Ours Festivals in 2018 and 2019.

It draws on the reports produced for the half-term Festivals in October 2018, February 2019, May 2019 and October 2019. (There were three festivals in 2018 but October 2018 was our first report.)

The aim of the reporting was to share the findings from our research, and provide a reflection point for further discussion.

We commissioned a writer (Ben Morgan) to work with us, along with Christie Parkin and Ruth Melville to pull together the reports.

This Highlights Report is an extension of our reporting process, allowing us to reflect on our key findings and illustrates these with the best observations and stories from the four festivals.

After this Introduction, the report is divided into three sections: **The Festival Experience, The Themes** and **Summary**.

### BACK TO OURS: THE FESTIVALS

Back to Ours grew out of the half term festivals held during the Hull UK City of Culture in 2017. The focus is on high quality shows in the local communities – 'right on your doorstep' – that are accessible and affordable.

Reflecting this, the venues for shows include schools, churches, shopping centres, social clubs and community centres.

The festivals covered in this report:

#### October 2018 Festival

28 performances, 11 venues, 8 different shows:

- Bullish (Milk Presents)
- Fagin's Twist (Avant Garde Dance and The Place)
- Jungle Book (Gary Starr Pantos)
- Mr Satie (Teatr Atofri)
- Rick Witter and Paul Banks from Shed Seven (Under the Influence)
- Secret Gigs (Ceri Dupree, Cannon and Ball)
- Slime (The Herd and Hull Libraries).

#### February 2019 Festival

30 performances, 12 venues, 7 shows:

- A Super Happy Story
- Delicate Flowers
- Dodgy
- Secret Gig (LaLa Piano Bar)
- Secret Gig (The Grumbleweeds)
- The Allotment
- The Giant Jam Sandwich.

#### May 2019

45 performances, 9 venues, 7 shows:

- Ash (Under the Influence)
- Chores
- High Horse (Back to Ours)
- Powering Up (A play in two days, Back to Ours)
- Secret Gig (Acro, Clown, Sword Swallower, Bobby Davro at William Gemmell Social Club)
- Secret Gig (Soul Sensation & Ruby Red at Willows Social Club)
- Truth to Power Café.

#### October 2019

10 performances, 2 venues, 2 shows:

- Back To Bransholme
- DNA by Casus Circus.

## CHAT TO OURS: INTELLIGENCE FROM THE COMMUNITY

### Who we are

We are a group of Hull residents who volunteered to go out to the Back to Ours events and get a feel for how the audience is responding.

Our name, *Chat to Ours*, comes from 'just chatting to people' – using an informal and friendly approach to capture insights into audiences' behaviour and responses.

For example, as we often stand near the doorway at a show, audiences offer spontaneous feedback as they leave. There are lots of 'thank yous', and people show a willingness to talk about their experiences.

Pride in Hull 2018 was the first time we officially came together. As a group, we bring extensive experience of volunteering (Hull's City of Culture programme, sports championships worldwide and charities) and a diverse set of individual skills. All this has created a unique group and we aim to continually grow and diversify.

For the May 2019 Festival, three new members joined us from the Back to Ours Community Hubs.

### What we do

Chat to Ours is about more than volunteers from Hull gathering data. We work together to develop research questions, methods and do the analysis of our findings.

All the analysis in our reports has been carried out by the group. This followed training in ethnographic data gathering and analysis from Ruth Melville (external evaluator of Back to Ours), and Franco Bianchini (The University of Hull's Culture, Place and Policy Institute). Ruth and Christie, the Monitoring & Evaluation Coordinator, also provided ongoing mentoring, advice, training and support.

Franco was kind enough to recognise our commitment and skill level in his Culture, Place, and Policy Institute report:

"CTO members are highly articulate and capable when engaging with members of the public... The quality of their working practices is to be commended."

– CPPI's Chat to Ours Report

At shows, generally we take on one of three roles:

- **Observing:** Recording how people react pre, post and during shows
- **Chatting:** Talking to audiences in a familiar and comfortable way, in order to gather feedback about the events.
- **Postcards:** Asking people to fill in postcards to capture more formal demographic information on audiences, to feed into Arts Council reporting.

There is a rota for the roles and there are usually two or three of us at each event.

At Back to Bransholme, a larger outdoor show, we also assisted with the Welfare, Access and Information point. At DNA, we asked audiences specifically what they thought of schools as a venue.

### An investigative team

We are an investigative team, the face of Back to Ours to our audience and part of the wider volunteer team. We observe, record and analyse 'customer experience', how people react to the shows.

This forms an important part of gauging and evaluating the success of a Festival – hearing the voices of our audience. We can help Back to Ours achieve one of its key aims – 'everyone enjoys themselves and goes away feeling they've had a great day or night out' (Back to Ours Launch and Festival Report).

Like the Back to Ours staff team, we are passionate about what we do – it's why we have given over 85 days of volunteer time over the four festivals.

Chat to Ours have contributed 85+ days of volunteering time over four festivals<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Calculated from Back to Ours' own figures and based on an 8 hour day

# The Festival experience: Observations

Initially we were asked by the Back To Ours team to explore how audiences respond to the festival experience.

Through working with Christie and Ruth, we identified five broad areas that we have used throughout our reporting to think about this. These are very practical and about how the festivals ran and people responded:

1. **Marketing and communications**
2. **Buying tickets**
3. **Location and venue**
4. **The welcome**
5. **Entertainment around the event**

It is worth noting that there were points of overlap between:

- These five different areas. For example, the venue dictates the (physical) welcome area; pre-show entertainment might add to the attractiveness of the welcome.
- These areas and our themes. For example, how the audience was looked after appears under both The Welcome and our Audience Interactions theme (when discussing volunteers, parents and children).

Below are summaries of the key findings from our observations. More detailed discussions appear in the individual reports.

## 1. MARKETING AND COMMUNICATION

**Word of mouth and 'the internet' were key.** They were the most frequently mentioned when people were asked about how they heard about the shows. 'The internet' often meant Facebook or local websites like Mumbler, an online parenting community used to discover what is happening for families in Hull and the East Riding.

**People came back for more.** Once they'd been to one show, they often came again or told other people they should come along. We have found this more and more as the number of events increases. This included children bringing parents or grandparents, or seeing a new festival brochure and wanting to see another show.

**The brochures worked.** Having them delivered and put in school bags got people to come to the shows. The general reaction to them was positive, though people had lots of ideas how to make them even better, when we specifically asked this question at the February 2019 festival.

### **Tweaks to the marketing had an impact.**

Delivering the brochures to homes using hyper-local marketing techniques, translated marketing materials, show notes, and individual flyers were all positive additions to the marketing.

## 2. BUYING TICKETS

**Broadly the ticketing worked.** Allowing people to buy tickets in person (through Hull Truck) as well as online was appreciated. The later use of Libraries as 'box offices' also seemed successful.

**People loved the low prices.** Though sometimes they couldn't believe a ticket was that cheap, or thought it might reflect the quality of the show.

"Best £3 I've ever spent. Worth at least £15..."

**Audience member, DNA**

**Ticketing glitches.** Though the majority of people had no problem, some Festivals had their share of ticketing problems. This included the Hull Truck and Hull Box Office websites being unavailable. At one festival, there was some confusion over how many free adult tickets were included with each child ticket.

## 3. LOCATION AND VENUE

**Familiar and nearby venues work.** Using familiar venues close to where people live encourages them to come along. Overall, people reacted positively to the venues chosen.

"We love that it's near to where we live... We love Back to Ours."

**East Hull families at The Allotment, St Aidan's Church**

**Comfort, accessibility and good facilities are crucial.** People didn't like cold waiting areas, uncomfortable seating or the lack of baby changing facilities.

**The right performance space matters.** The layout of the performance space can have varying levels of impact (positive and negative) on audiences and influence behaviour.

**Signage needs to be clear.** Clear directions to a venue are important, as is the signage within it – especially if it's large or has poor general signage. We have had some challenges with this at larger venues such as Wilberforce College. To tackle this, we added extra wayfinding volunteers to greet and guide audiences.

**'Unorthodox' venues can pose unique challenges.** From the expectations of regulars at the social clubs, to the question of whether a school was the right place to stage a play about transgender issues (when 'school' might come with lots of negative memories).

**Using a school as a venue has positives.** When asked specifically about this at DNA shows, audiences mentioned that it was easy to get to and they liked the fact that the school was being used when it might otherwise have been empty. They also saw the school as a focal point for the community and so it made sense to stage a show there. Additionally, a number of people were curious to see inside.

We like the local venues especially this one as it was very close to us and less stressful with three children – a more friendly atmosphere where people would help out.

– Audience Member, Thornton Village Hall, Mr Satie

#### 4. THE WELCOME

**Friendly entrance areas and greetings set the right tone.** An inviting welcome area with things to engage the audience, such as colouring books or other pre-show activities was a positive. A warm 'meet and greet' by volunteers reinforced this. (This was often also related to *Pre-show Entertainment* – see below).

**Looking after the audience makes a difference.**

There were numerous examples of staff and volunteers making sure audiences felt comfortable and able to enjoy the show. (This is also part of the *Audience Interactions* theme below). Examples of this include offering assistance to audience members with additional needs, or simply helping adults with young children.

**Having time and space means better feedback.**

For Chat To Ours, we get the best feedback from audiences when there is time and space for a conversation – and this is particularly true at the start of a show. People respond well if they aren't rushing, are relaxed, there's time for a chat and there's not too much noise. The space available at particular venues lends more to this. When planning the pre-show welcome and Chat to Ours activity, we always take this into consideration. We try not to have too many uniformed staff and volunteers in compact welcome areas, as this could be a barrier to those audience members who may not be accustomed to attending arts events and shows.

**Accommodating Polish language speakers made shows more accessible.**

For the October 2018 Festival, translating marketing materials and teaching volunteers key Polish phrases, made shows more welcoming for our Polish-speaking audience members. This was as a result of Teatr Atofri's show, *Mr Satie - Made In Paper* being part of this festival.

#### 5. ENTERTAINMENT AROUND THE EVENT

**Pre-show entertainment adds to overall**

**enjoyment.** Whether coloured capes (High Horse at North Point Shopping Centre), colouring books, Snack To Ours, show notes or the 'Le Chef' character, giving people (particularly young people) things to do before a show was a real success.

**Post-show entertainment works too.** The entertainment doesn't always stop with the end of the show. From photo opportunities with performers, to badges for adults and children, to taking home the props (notably toilet rolls at Chores, lavender bags at The Allotment and letters from Back to Bransholme).

**SAMPLE OBSERVATION:  
MR SATIE, OCTOBER 2018 FESTIVAL**

13 children and 12 adults. Two adults came with no children.

1.50 pm audience started arriving. Single man buys ticket for Mr Satie because of his interest in Back to Ours. I recognised some children and adults from other Back to Ours events in this Festival. Everyone waited very quietly. A small girl was excited to spot a 'princess' through the door. They were asked to remove shoes – no complaints. All quietly listened to the announcements in English and Polish.

Once in the Hall everyone waited quietly, no chat. Children looked at the pile of the paper. A small child asked parents, 'What's that knocking?' when piano playing started. All eyes were on the performance. When the performer tapped her head, a small girl looked at her mum, smiled and tapped her own head.

Children seemed engrossed in what was going on. A small girl was pointing at the performer who was wrapped in paper. Everyone still looking at the performers – nobody distracted. Children following the movement. All smiling

Small girl grins and then picks up a piece of paper which had blown towards her and threw it back on to the performance area. Child stood up, turned to her mum, asked a question. Mum shook her head and the child sat down again. The children seemed mesmerised, following the actions of the boats. One very animated little boy mouth wide open as the boats appear to be in a storm. Children looked so relaxed. Little girl lay on her front, resting her head on her hands, watching intently what was going on. Another little girl had her head on her mother's knee.

Mainly boys were looking intently at the aeroplanes as they were moved around. Many adults smiling at their children's reactions. The youngest child there looked at her father and smiled when the ball was found. Children needed encouragement to roll the ball but eventually they did, and it was passed from side to side. Other children then became involved.

A little boy tried to blow the paper which was on the performance area. A girl throws some paper back on to the performance area. At this point the children were encouraged to join the performers on the paper. They were wrapping themselves in paper, throwing and tearing it too. Some puzzled faces when the performers spoke to a small group of children. Parents helped to fold red paper to make hats. More adults folding than children. Small girl puts hat on her head and her dad then puts it on his head and the child squealed with laughter. She had previously been playing with a pen and the pen top – seemed to lose interest temporarily.

One small boy didn't like to have the hat put on his head. Most children played with the torn paper on the mat. One boy was a little reluctant to join in but eventually started running around and chasing another boy. Volunteers all playing with children, but one was particularly involved. Children were throwing paper at the volunteers. Two children attempt to bury their dad in paper while he videos their antics. Performers interact with the children, stamping their hands but one girl refused to have her hand stamped. Parents taking photographs of their children playing with the paper, filling hats with paper.

Two adults who came without children left. Children carry on playing, parents interact, paper ball fight. Always jolly.

Graham Reedier

## Emerging themes: Recurring topics, engaging stories

Here, based on our observations and analysis, we summarise the themes that have emerged over the last four festivals.

These are around how people relate to the shows, the performance and other people in the audience.

Some themes were constant throughout all our reports (Audience Interactions), whilst others were specific to certain festivals.

Below are four key themes which represent our key findings:

1. **Audience interactions**
2. **Wow!**
3. **Challenging the audience**
4. **Familiarity and fans**

To illustrate these and the audience engagement more generally, we include in this section:

- Brief descriptions of the themes and their different aspects, plus our relevant observations.
- Short stories and snapshots from different shows.
- Two observation transcripts, giving a flavour of both the shows and our methodology.

### **THEME ONE: AUDIENCE INTERACTIONS**

**We noticed throughout all four festivals the role of audience members in interpreting and supporting each other's experience of the shows.**

There were four main parts to this theme:

- Children taking control
- Parents supporting or influencing children
- Adults engaging other adults
- Volunteers, children and parents

### **Children taking control**

A show gave children the freedom or permission to 'lead' the adults.

- At several October 2018 shows, children dragged their adult into the performance area of Mr Satie - Made in Paper. This was facilitated by performers giving the children permission to interact.
- At High Horse, some parents were quite shocked by their children's responses to the actors' invitations to contribute and actively defended their position relating to their child's comments.

### **Grandad**

Three children desperately wanted their Grandad to see High Horse. Their mum came to The Living Room twice to check show times as they had to wait for Grandad to finish work. They excitedly brought him to the final show of the day, showing their obvious love for him and their determination to share it with him.

### **Parents supporting or influencing children**

Parents often interpreted or shaped children's experience of show.

- At Giant Jam Sandwich, parents in one family emphasised to their children (who were 'reviewers') about the importance of their feedback so that they could review the show and help improve standards. This came about as a result of speaking to us before the show began.
- At The Allotment, a female audience member was overheard saying to her two grandsons that vegetables with eyes were silly. As a result, the older of the two boys did not get involved with the show, but spent the whole time playing with the abacus. His younger brother though, was happily engaged and did not seem to be affected by the comment.

## Expectations

I hear a mum explaining the 'expectations' of the theatre to her daughter aged around 4:

'You need to sit on your seat, listen to what is happening and not shout out; that's what happens at the theatre.'

The lights go out and the theatre is dark. The family in front of me gasp. A loud announcement happens, a toddler clings to the person next to him. The actors appear, a little girl shouts out: 'They are here!' Her parents smile at her and then exchange smiles. (Chores)

## Adults engaging other adults

Adults interacted with each other in a couple of interesting ways.

- At Mr Satie - Made In Paper, seeing another parent in the audience playing with the paper allowed others to feel that they could get involved themselves. The layout of the audience seating really helped with this.
- From observations at Slime, adults also used the performances as a way to meet up before a show.

## Volunteers, children and parents

The interrelationship between volunteers, children and parents produced many interesting stories. This relates to The Welcome (above) and how looking after the audience makes a real difference.

- An Absolutely Cultured volunteer was helping a child with a drawing when another child decided to come and join her. Then another child, whose mum was interacting with her, seemingly decided that the volunteer looked more interesting and left mum to join in. This was a lovely moment as the volunteer then had three children around her (The Allotment).
- One child refused to enter the theatre area at High Horse. When the show started, his brother burst into tears and was escorted out by one of his parents. Great effort was made by staff and volunteers to accommodate this family. They ended up sitting on the floor of the Living Room space watching the whole

show, whilst fully interacting, through a gap in the drape curtains.

## THEME TWO: WOW!

**One thing that really struck us was the intensity of the experience for some people and how emotional it could be.**

There were six elements to this theme:

- Deep involvement
- Moment of joys
- Emotional connection
- The audiences returns for more
- Sharing with the group
- Audiences shape the show

## Deep involvement

Audience members became spellbound – totally engaged by a show.

- Two toddlers were sitting side by side, sharing lots of snacks including jam sandwiches. They rarely took their eyes off the stage, except to turn to the row behind to give their mums their rubbish. An elder brother smiles at them and joined in too. We spot looks of pride and amusement on the mums' faces. All three children were open-mouthed when they saw the size of the dough, followed by the bread and finally, the sandwich (The Giant Jam Sandwich).
- Pre-show a mother said it would be a miracle if her son sat in his seat for 30 minutes. It was explained the show was about 50 minutes in duration, but very energetic with lots going on. After the show, the mother said he never took his eyes off the performers (Chores).

"Phenomenal. Fantastic. Out of this world. Never seen anything like it. Every minute brilliant. Best thing I've EVER seen."

**Audience member, DNA**



## Moments of joy

The shows produced pure, spontaneous happiness.

- At the end of Fagin's Twist, a young boy was seen to be dancing as he came back into the foyer. It appears that he was inspired by the dancing in the performance. He carried on dancing while the adults with him went to the toilet. When they returned to him, he carried on dancing and out down the corridor.
- People responding to 'Love Train' by forming a conga line and dancing through the rest of the audience and around the tables. (Secret Gig, February 2018 Festival)

### Astounded and moved

After the second performance (at High Horse) a woman came to speak to me while her husband and seven-year-old daughter played nearby. She was absolutely astounded and moved beyond description at her daughter's reaction during the performance.

She and her husband had adopted the little girl a year ago after she'd been removed from her birth parents. She'd seen terrible things happening to a sibling in an abusive home and, as a result, is very wary and always has to know she's in sight of her parents. She has triggers which her reactions show are reminding her of her previous life. She is full of enthusiasm and keen to take part in activities with others but is always unable to do so and backs off.

However, much to the amazement and joy of her parents she took part in High Horse and even gave her real name. Mum asked me to pass on her thanks to the actor.

While her mum was talking to me, her daughter was displaying behaviour which her parents recognise as showing she is comfortable and feeling unthreatened. She certainly appeared to be a delightful, happy, well-adjusted child.

Not even all of her adopted family know her previous circumstances and the mum said she had spoken to me in such detail because she felt comfortable doing so. She now can't wait to tell her daughter's teacher what had happened that afternoon.

## Emotional connection

Some shows had a real emotional impact, connecting with something profound.

- A suited man in his forties took to the stage. He began his talk about his life – coming out to his friends and family, fighting to see his daughter after a separation and also his faith. A couple of ladies on the front row began to cry and neighbours comforted them. The talker's voice broke and audible sobbing sounds were heard from the front row. The biggest applause of the evening greeted this story (Truth to Power).
- A Super Happy Story had a strong emotional impact on the audiences that saw it. At Thornton Village Hall show, the audience watched the entire performance intently and in silence apart from laughter at appropriate points. The facial expressions showed some were visibly moved, others wiped away tears.
- This lady started a conversation with me while I was getting her postcode. She said that she lives in one of the RAF houses and that her husband had seen the ghost of an RAF man at the top of their stairs. I suggested that she went to the Living Room and chat to people there and see the exhibition. (Back to Bransholme).

### The Power

The following was told to one of our colleagues at Truth to Power Café:

'I only found out about this last minute. After a very traumatic day training for the Race for Life and ending up in tears. I pushed myself to come and see this...You see, I have cancer.

I have had a very difficult journey in my life after losing two babies and fighting 'the cancer', so, after a gruelling day training, I was flagging until I came here and heard all those beautiful words by all those wonderful speakers.

It was inspiring to me and gave me the lift I needed to carry on. I am very grateful for everything in my life including the cancer as it has taught me how precious life really is.

I wholeheartedly believe I was meant to be here tonight. It has given me the Power to not only be inspired but to go ahead and inspire others."

## The audiences returns for more

Audiences came back for more – often bringing new people with them.

- Children bringing different parents or grandparents to different performances. This was children loving a performance so much that they returned to another performance of the same show.
- A child who had seen Slime with their parent(s) at Hull Libraries and had come again with their Grandparent, because the child had recognised the photo in the brochure.
- People who attended Back to Bransholme then came to DNA (despite performances being in different parts of the city).

### Inner happiness

Because there was no expression on a child's face as she left Slime, we suspected that she maybe hadn't enjoyed it. But after speaking to her parent, we discovered she had seen the show previously with the same expression. Her parents thought it had been a waste of time. But the child had spoken incessantly about it afterwards, and spotting it in the festival brochure, insisted on going again. This brings us to learn that we cannot make judgements based purely on physical expression and that having conversations to supplement observation is certainly worthwhile.

## Sharing with the group

The different ways people shared with their group – or were aware of group dynamics.

- Children leaving Fagin's Twist at Wilberforce for the interval were trying out the dance moves they'd seen with one another.
- We were sitting quite close to a table of what appeared to be two couples at a Secret Gig. One of the men appeared to not be enjoying the show. He was uncomfortable or unhappy at certain points – though this reduced as the performance went on. This did not dampen the enjoyment for those on his table who appeared to be having a great time. When we spoke to this man on his way out, he noted

that the fact his group had enjoyed it still mattered to him.

## Audiences shape the show

Both Truth to Power Café and High Horse at the May 2019 Festival felt different from previous shows. They very much relied on people participating and making the show.

- At Truth to Power, local people telling their stories provoked a discussion around how this changed people's perception of them.
- At High Horse, the whole performance changed through the week, becoming better with each performance. Both of the main actors developed their characters throughout the show run and adapted well to different audience sizes and various levels of willingness of the audience to interact.

## THEME THREE: CHALLENGING THE AUDIENCE

Sometimes the audience was challenged by a show – eliciting positive and negative reactions.

- At Truth to Power Café, the truth may not always have been comfortable. One contributor told his truth about his trans journey and how he feels about society etc. Some members of the audience listened whilst bowing their heads. The audience sat still and silently throughout until the end of the speech and then clapped raucously. The middle aged gentleman behind me said, "Bloody hell, that must have been so hard to do". The lady next to me reaches for another tissue.
- At High Horse, the rules did not always make for an easy listen. "Parents should not get drunk at children's parties" and "Adults should not drink and drive" provoked horrified reactions from the relevant parents.
- At the Secret Gig at William Gemmell, although the majority of audience members enjoyed the performances, for some the challenge of LaLa Piano Bar appeared too much. They could not comfortably watch the show. This resulted in homophobic and sexist remarks, heckling, gesturing and physical threats, observed by us and the staff team, both in the main room and outside in the smoking area.

### Girl under the table

We chatted to a lady with a young girl at the end of a performance of The Allotment at North Bransholme Community Centre. At the start of the show, when the children were moving into their first zones, the girl ran under a nearby table.

We spotted a nearby Absolutely Cultured volunteer about to give her some drawing paper. The volunteer got down on the floor, to the child's level, and talked quietly to her. The mother started to talk to her daughter, and the volunteer walked away. A cast member also quietly talked to her. After about ten minutes, she was coaxed out by her mother and got herself involved, though on the periphery.

The funniest and most ironic moment was when the girl pulled a banana out from her bag and started to eat it while wandering in the middle zone, only minutes after singing 'Happy Birthday' to the bananas.

At the end, when talking to her mother, she told us that she was really pleased with the response from both the volunteer and cast member, making her little girl feel special. At the end when given the yellow token the little girl put it in the 'yes' box with the comment "can we come again?"

Mum had told us that she had been surprised that at home, on the morning of this performance, her little girl had got out her red hat she had made at Mr Satie - Made In Paper, (from the October 2018 Festival) without any prompting.

This is an example of volunteers and cast members coming together and taking the audience members' experience to the next level of enjoyment and comfort.

### THEME FOUR: FAMILIARITY AND FANS

**We are beginning to see that Back to Ours is developing a following in a number of ways – people are coming to more than one show and looking out for the next Festival.**

At DNA, some people who had seen multiple shows even described themselves as 'groupies'!

We identified five elements of this theme:

- Looking for the next Festival
- Fans of the performers
- Fans of the Secret Gigs
- Knowing Back To Ours
- Knowing Chat to Ours

#### Looking for the next Festival

People are aware of Back to Ours and look out for the next festival.

- A mum and son from Anlaby had been to lots of shows at Back to Ours Festivals. The son loves them and always asks what's on at Back to Ours when it's half-term. Mum told us that she loves the relaxed atmosphere – friendly and without the formality of 'proper' theatres. Mum also said she likes the way Back to Ours shows are all different but always good - and the prices are great.

#### Fans of the performers

We encountered people coming to see a specific show (A Super Happy Story) and work by a specific writer (Delicate Flowers), as well as some of the bands.

#### That story is my story

One group of four young adults were attending a performance of A Super Happy Story because two of them had seen it previously in Huddersfield and they wanted their friends to see it. They were not aware of Back to Ours but took a copy of the brochure.

The leader of the group, who had seen the show on at least three occasions previously, was full of praise for the production. They believed it to be 'the best and only play I've ever seen that deals with depression in the right way – it's so true and so me. It tells my story.'

## Fans of the Secret Gigs

Because of the format, The Secret Gigs are developing ‘fans’ – people who like the excitement of not knowing who they might see.

- We met four people at the Willows Secret Gig who were enthusiastic about the format - ‘Did we choose the right one?’. This was in relation both Secret Gigs taking place on the same night; one at William Gemmell Social Club and one at Willows Social Club.

## Knowing Back To Ours

If the audience know Back to Ours, they know what to expect and are better able to enjoy themselves:

- Just before the end of the final morning session of High Horse, a mum, daughter and son, when told we were closing for lunch, said they’d come back at 2 pm for the first afternoon performance. Having spent an hour and a half whiling away the time at North Point, they did return. The boy has additional needs and is being assessed for ADHD. His sister is extremely reserved and lacks confidence. But they are familiar with Back to Ours, the Living Room and the Chat to Ours volunteers, so had no hesitation in entering the area and taking part.

## Knowing Chat to Ours

Seeing Chat to Ours regularly means the audiences are used to giving us their feedback.

- When audience members were asked if they would take home questionnaires for completion and posting, people responded positively especially when they were told it would help funding applications. Being told they could win shopping vouchers also helped. We have never noticed this any more so than at Back to Bransholme. When audiences saw that we were handing out surveys, they came over to ask what we were giving out and asked if they could have one. When told what they were, they still happily took them away.

### The Boxer

Before the show, a member of Chat to Ours had met a female audience member in the bar area. Along with her father-in-law and husband, they approached the same person after the show to provide feedback on her experience. She wanted to ensure that we passed on their sincere thanks to everyone at Back to Ours for showing Delicate Flowers at Willow Social Club.

Her father-in-law had recently been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s and had been a professional boxer at a very high level in his younger days. She commented that his facial expressions and interaction levels during the show had been heightened, and that he had passed comment on and praised the actress’ boxing skills.

Other family members were staggered at his recall of memories and level of concentration, which he had not demonstrated in weeks.

## **SAMPLE OBSERVATION: CHORES, MAY 2019 FESTIVAL**

Everyone comes in and takes their seats, avoiding the stage area and filling up the seats from the front. Chatting happens between families and I hear a mum explaining the 'expectations' of the theatre to her daughter aged around 4: 'You need to sit on your seat, listen to what is happening and not shout out, that's what happens at the theatre.'

The lights go out and the theatre is dark. The family in front of me gasp. A loud announcement happens, a toddler clings to the person next to him. The actors appear, a little girl (5 years old?) shouts out: 'They are here!' Her parents smile at her and then exchange smiles.

The voiceover of the mother plays and the actors respond with petulant stances and exhale. Multiple children of various ages, and adults mimic the noises. A mum in front turns to her daughter (8 years old?) and says, 'That's you'.

The actors communicate with each other and the audience with noises, a girl (8 years?) shouts 'Don't they speak English?' Mum notices and does not respond. Later on during the show, the same girl shouts, 'Are you speaking Japanese? Why don't you just speak English?' Her mum does not respond.

The actors juggle separately and as a team, and a toddler squeals, he shouts what sounds like 'Juggle.' The actors squirt each other with water, and the various children (across age ranges) and families jump out of their seats and jump up and down. One girl aged around 4 years old gets out of her seat and hides underneath. Her mum notices and smiles.

An 18 month old lays on mum throughout the performance watching the action. Children giggle and laugh in the appropriate place for the laugh to happen throughout the performance.

The actors at a couple of points during the show pretend to 'fall' into the audience – whilst riding a unicycle, when running with material on their faces – and each time the audience inhale and move as if they were going to be impacted. And audibly exhale as the actors' retreat.

A little girl (4 years?) says 'This is the most funniest one that I have ever seen.' She continues to laugh heartily and smile at her mum and dad. She says this during the water spray scene when she gets sprayed from the stage. In the next minute the actor joins the audience and sits next to that little girl. She sits still and stares at him, she turns her head and her body remains in the same position. When he gets up, she says to mum, 'He sat next to me didn't he?' The mum smiles.

The actors pretend to be asleep and a dad behind me says 'Shhh' and then shuffles on his seat. He laughs heartily at the actors pretending to hit each other and his wife laughs with him. The two girls sat with them still and continue to focus on the action.

The actors stack blocks on top of each other and pretend to fall asleep on them, during this scene one of the actors pretends to fall off and a gentleman in a wheelchair at the front of the auditorium laughs very loud and continues to do so, the actor notices and smiles at the man. Later in the show the actors pretend to be dead and the man in the wheelchair laughs again. The actor again interacts with the gentleman.

Throughout the performance a couple of children of varying ages shuffle in their chairs, shifting their wait to the front, getting out of their seats and standing in front of their seats. A boy about 8 years gets up and walks up and down the aisle near the back several times.

Every member of the audience claps and some make noises, such as 'Wooooo!', 'Yeah!' People file out of the theatre and wait in a queue to have a photo with the actors. Several little girls leave the theatre with an arm full of toilet paper from the performance.

Sam Chegwin

# Conclusions

We hope this report gives a sense of what we observed and talked to people about during the four Festivals.

As we've said in each of our reports, there were lots of good things happening and positive reactions but also a few things to improve on and learn from.

We, as a group, support everything that Back to Ours is founded on and strives for. We hope that this Highlights Report provides a useful summary of our findings so far.

## SUMMARY

### The Festival Experience:

#### 1. Marketing and communications

- Word of Mouth and 'the internet' were key.
- People came back for more.
- The brochures worked.
- Tweaks to the marketing had an impact.

#### 2. Buying tickets

- Broadly the ticketing worked.
- People loved the low prices.
- Ticketing glitches manifest in several ways.

#### 3. Location and venue

- Familiar and nearby venues work.
- Comfort and good facilities are crucial.
- The right performance space matters.
- Signage needs to be clear.
- 'Unorthodox' venues can pose unique challenges.
- Using a school as a venue has positives.

#### 4. The Welcome

- A friendly entrance area and greeting sets the right tone.
- Looking after the audience makes a difference.
- Having time and space means better feedback.
- Accommodating the Polish language made shows more accessible.

#### 5. Entertainment around the event

- Pre-show entertainment adds to overall enjoyment.
- Post-show entertainment rounds off a great experience.

## Themes

- 1. Audience interactions.** The role of audience members in interpreting and supporting each other's experience of the shows.
- 2. Wow!** The intensity of the experience for some people and how emotional it could be.
- 3. Challenging the audience.** Sometimes the audience was challenged by a show.
- 4. Familiarity and fans.** Back to Ours is developing a following in many ways, and people are coming back for more.

"At the end of the performance there was prolonged clapping and a standing ovation. Again, many audience members provided spontaneous comments: 'amazing', 'brilliant', 'absolutely brilliant', 'really good'..."

Observation of Fagin's Twist, 27 October 2018