



DID WE DO WHAT IT SAID ON THE FLYER?



Supported by Goldsmiths Company, ITV, LABAN Theatre, London Bridge Business Improvement District

INTRODUCTION

Urban Dreams was an intergenerational theatre project run by London Bubble Theatre Company from March to October 2008. It started with small writing workshops and ended with a full scale outdoor show performed by 61 participants to an audience of 1,560.

The project had three overarching **aims**

- To involve people in theatre making
- To increase the emotional wellbeing of participants
- To animate public spaces with public theatre

This report will first of all describe the process and then look at the extent to which the above aims were met. At the end comes a few loose ends – successes to celebrate, things to build on, glitches to be ironed out.



Kanshabari – Gods of sleep paralysis

PROCESS AND TIMELINE

The project grew in part from Bubble's ongoing workshop programme. Up until recently this offered year round activities to age banded groups. Although the company had made intergenerational work before, a project of this scale and length was a new development. By June 2007, the company had consulted with participants and applied to various funding bodies. Through the autumn and spring recruitment continued and a key partnership – with Face Front in Enfield, was established.

From April 2008 the project grew through five distinct phases:

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|---------|---|
| Phase 1 | Research workshops to generate words and images (April-May) |
| Phase 2 | Forming of words and images into a storyboard (June) |

- Phase 3 Skills building workshops for all-comers (June-July)
- Phase 4 Rehearsals (July-September)
- Phase 5 Performances (19th-28th September)

Phase 1 - Research workshops. These were led by writer Jennifer Farmer and designer Pip Nash. The eight sessions generated poems, stories, character descriptions, drawings of environments, maps and sketched thoughts.



Image from a design workshop

These were the building blocks from which the performance was made. The research workshops were attended by 86 people as follows:

Where	Group	Who were they
Enfield	Broken Silence Group	20 adults between 22 – 76, who meet at a day centre. The group includes 11 people with learning disabilities, 9 with physical or sensory disabilities and 2 with mental health issues
Enfield	Ghetto Challengers Youth Theatre	31 participants between 8 – 18, 6 of whom are disabled
Lewisham	Entelechy Elders	5 elders (60-80 years old) x 2 sessions
Southwark	Bubble Youth Theatre	
Southwark	Bubble Adults Drama Group	12 young people between 9-17 x 2

The ethnic breakdown of researcher attenders was given as follows: 46% white uk, 22% black caribbean. 11% black African, 11% asian, 4% Turkish, 5% mixed heritage.



The Ghetto Challengers Youth Theatre Writing workshop

Phase 2, Storyboarding. The writer, designer, actors, director, choreographer and composer met for 3 sessions to look at the material that had been gathered, and to shape it into a storyboard. Key to the shape of the storyboard was a chart which mapped brain activity against patterns of sleep.

Phase 3, Skills building. During late June and July, while the writer wrote and the designer designed, the company held a series of skills based sessions designed to recruit performers and to explore the techniques which would be used. There were two sessions each on, singing in a choir, working as a chorus (or "imagists"), making and manipulating puppets and a band who started to come together to meet regularly on a Tuesday evening.

At the beginning of July the whole team came together to look at the script and designs. By now over 70 people had attended one of the skills sessions – 61 of these would stay with the project to completion.

Phase 4, Rehearsing and making. Rehearsals took place in the evening and weekend. Some participants put in extra shifts, working with puppeteer Aya

Nakamura on mask making, or on prop finding with the Stage Manager. The band met regularly to write and rehearse original music under the direction of Martina Schwarz. Everyone worked with Linda Dobell on movement, and with director Jonathan Petherbridge evolving scenes and developing the overall shape of the show.



Skills Workshop

Phase 5, the Performances. Following a break for holidays in the second half of August, the company re-assembled for final rehearsals and performances. The poems, originally written at the writing workshops, were recorded and woven into a soundscape by Sound Artist, Lewis Gibson. Puppets, props, the set and over 150 costumes were completed, and lighting and projections were added by lighting designer Nao Nagai. Three technicians joined the team to lead the assembly and transportation of equipment and set. Finally a team of volunteer stewards were recruited to help receive the audience, and dispense programmes, refreshments and feedback forms.

The London Bubble part of Urban Dreams previewed on the 17th September 2008 and then played the following dates

	Venue	Attendance
Wednesday 17 th September	Southwark Park, Southwark (preview)	30
Thursday 18 th	Southwark Park, Southwark	90

September		
Friday 19 th September	The Laban Centre, Lewisham	250
Saturday 20 th September	Elephant Road Park (The Elefest), Southwark	90
Sunday 21 st September	Sydenham Wells Park, Lewisham	230
Friday 26 th September	Cornmill Gardens, Lewisham	200
Saturday 27 th September	The Scoop, Southwark	370
Sunday 28 th September	Cutty Sark Gardens, Greenwich	300

Meanwhile in Enfield, the Ghetto Challengers Youth Theatre worked through the autumn towards a performance that was given on the 18th December, to an audience which included , Enfield residents, the Broken Silence workshops group, and members of London Bubble.



The Ghetto Challengers Youth Theatre

The performance included scripted scenes, songs and performance poetry all of which dealt with the dreams of young people living in urban Edmonton. Both the

young performers and Shirley Mason, the leader/director were positive about the process of having the input of writing workshops in the Summer, and then being challenged to respond to the subject through the autumn before performing in December.

This unusual – some might say forced, , cross London partnership, created in response to policy of the London Councils to spread provision across the capital worked well in practice. A shared theme, use of the writer as catalyst and then sharing work with the strangers from the other side of London made for a dynamic and appropriate programme – a model which should be used again.



The Scoop

FUNDERS

The project was principally funded by London Councils (£25,882) through a pilot scheme intended to “Enhance Londoners’ involvement in cultural activity linked to the themes of the Cultural Olympiad to ensure that communities across London benefit from the 2012 Olympic Games and Paralympic Games”.

After the application had been accepted by the London Councils grants committee Bubble were asked to widen the remit of the project. Bubble had originally applied for monies to support activities in Southwark, Greenwich, Lewisham, Hackney and Lambeth. London Council asked Bubble to add Enfield to this list. To deliver a sustainable engagement with people in Enfield, Bubble teamed up with Face Front inclusive theatre, an established organisation based in Edmonton. Face Front hosted research workshops, then took over the development of material for performances in Enfield.

The project received additional funding from the Garrick Trust (£2,500), the London Bridge Business Improvement District (£1,966) and indirect funding from the Goldsmiths Foundation (£3,000) who contributed towards the running costs of the Band. The project also drew on core funding which came from the Arts Council England, and Southwark and Lewisham Councils.

COMMUNICATION

The communication strategy was based almost entirely on relationship marketing. Advice was sought from Audiences London, and the momentum created by the recent campaign against the Arts Council cuts was harnessed to create a simple, cost effective, direct but warm approach to the audience. This strategy was consistent with the aims of the project and the mission of the company, it involved participants and other volunteers and turned out to prove highly effective.

AIM 1 – “to involve people in theatre making”

- The research stage (8 writing and design/imaging workshops) involved 86 people in 121 attendances. 51 of these 86 were based in Enfield and went on to be involved in the workshops and performances led by Face Front. Of the remaining, South London based 35 who took part in the research stage, 30 continued to be involved in the project. Of the 5 elders who attended the research stage only 1 continued to the performance stage. Reasons cited were travelling distance and the different demands on time. It should be noted that one of the central characters featured in the eventual script was based on the input of the elders.
- The skills workshops (13 workshops for choir, band and performance) involved 62 people in 284 attendances.
- Rehearsals and performance (32 rehearsal sessions and 7 performances) involved 61 people in 1,231 attendances. Although the numbers look quite consistent only 51 of the 62 people involved in the skills workshops went on to be part of the performing company and while 11 people dropped out, 10 new participants joined.

Ages of the 61 performers	Male	Female
5-10	1	6
10-15	4	15
16-20	6	2
20-30	4	8
30-40	2	2
40-50	5	1
50-60	1	2
60-70		1
70+		1

As well as ensuring that the project was welcoming to a range of ages and backgrounds, it was also important that it offered appropriate challenges to people. For some it was their first experience of theatre making, others might remain in a comfort zone if nothing new was demanded of them. Thus the script and schedule

were constructed to offer different “asks”. Some people were rehearsing three days a week, coming in to make masks or props and helping with the marketing of the event – these tended to be people who had participated in a previous project and experienced the buzz of performance. Others dipped their toes in more tentatively – playing smaller roles with less demands on time – if we repeat the project it is likely that these will immerse themselves more deeply.

The 61 performers came from 9 boroughs, however the overwhelming majority (82%) were residents of the 3 south-east London boroughs where the show would eventually be seen,

Performers borough of Residence	
Southwark	30
Lewisham	14
Greenwich	6
Lambeth	1
Hackney	0
OTHER	10

The intergenerational nature of the project helped create a positive and supportive culture. Children (the youngest was 7) were treated equally with adults. Some children who attend the Bubble youth theatre, brought parents along for the first time. In these cases the children were the experts and often the leaders.



The project involved 7 artists. Five had worked with the Bubble before on participatory work (Designer, Pip Nash. Movement Director, Linda Dobell, Composer, Martina Schwarz, Lighting Designer, Nao Nagai and Actor, Eric MacLennan). New to the company were Writer, Jennifer Farmer and Puppeteer, Aya Nakamura. This team, led by Director, Jonathan Petherbridge, were selected not only for their creative skills but for their ability to work collaboratively and with a range of ages.

At the end of project evaluation the artistic team reported positively on the intergenerational aspect, the timeline and the process of making Urban Dreams – all felt proud of their work.

They recommended: adding a performance “coach” to the team – who might work one to one with participants on specific skills, integrating the rehearsal of the music and script earlier, and continuing to push the boundaries and standards of the work.

Also involved were a team of 9 voluntary stewards who helped core staff members - Shipra Ogra (Producer), Caroline England (Administrator) and Adam Annand (Associate Director, Creative Learning) - to set up the shows, look after the audience and pack away. All enjoyed their involvement with the project and one is currently on placement with the Bubble.

AIM 2 - “To increase the emotional wellbeing of participants”



Puppetry workshop

Drama is unique in providing a safe space where people can use their whole self to communicate their stories to others. Performers have license to deploy a range of emotions, to use body language and consciously use facial expression and vocal tone to communicate feelings. This is not only fun and enervating but taps into important communication skills.

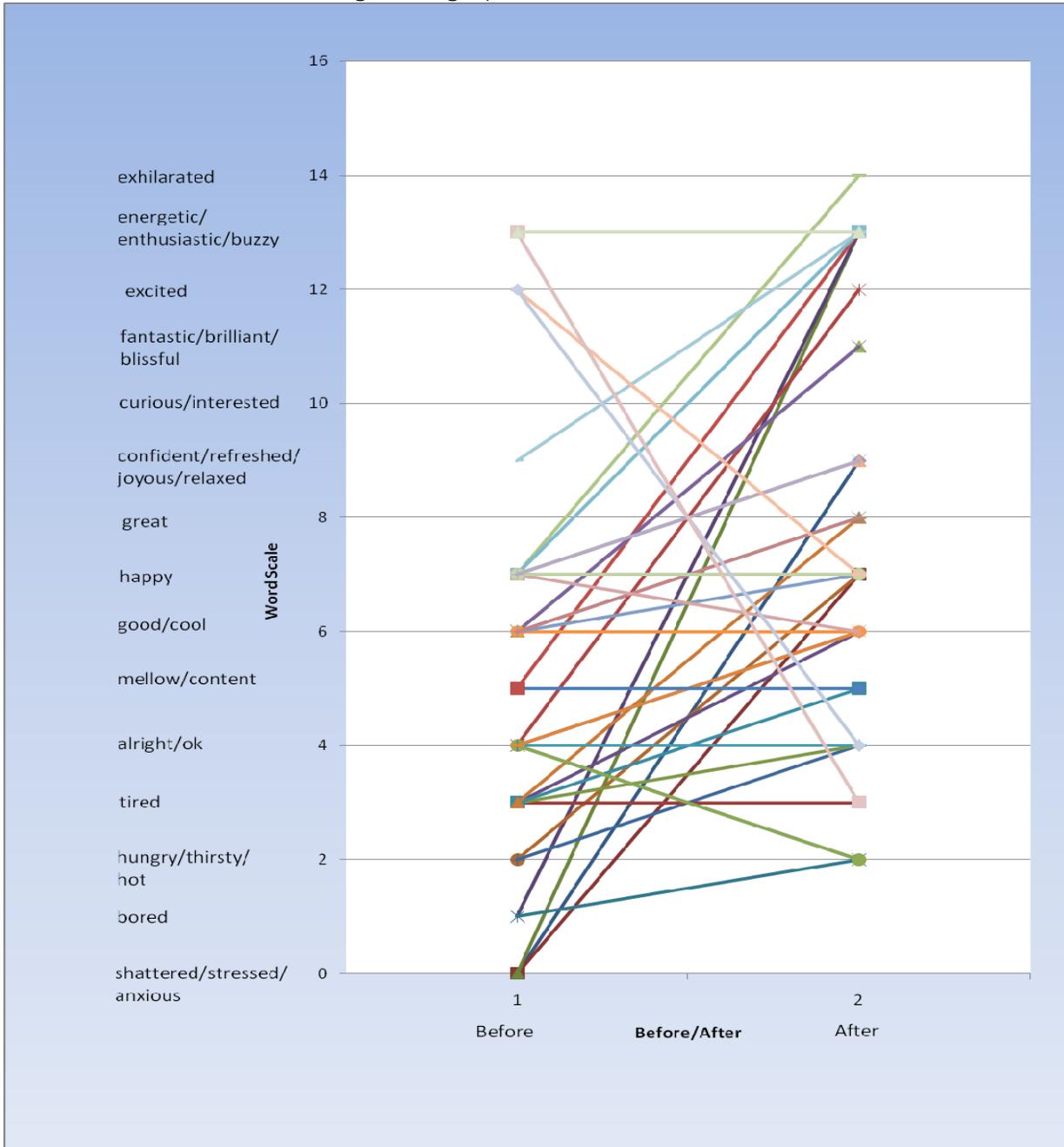
Neuroscientists now suggest that adult humans exchange more information through the eyes and face than through words. Daniel Goleman has nicknamed this “low road” communication, explaining that the signals we send travel from the emotional regions of the brain then through our face and eyes. These are received and then “felt” by those we encounter via the firing of “sympathetic” brain cells he called “mirror neurons”. These cause our brains patterns to loop with or mirror the emotions of the other – we call this empathy.

Not surprisingly most people who elect to join a theatre project and get to play with “low level” communication, enjoy it. As we become more fluent in connecting with and generating “feelings” so we communicate or “loop” better with others and our brain releases chemicals that make us feel good. Connecting and socialising with others – particularly new acquaintances of different ages and backgrounds – reinforces our sense of belonging. Add to this, creating and then showing a piece of art to others, (who then attend and validate it), all of which results in something that brings meaning to life and a tangible sense of community to all present.

The aim of increasing emotional wellbeing has become an integral aim of all bubble projects. However there is still an outstanding question about how this might be clearly defined and measured.

During the project we tried different evaluatory methods (which themselves now have to be evaluated). In the early stages of the project we asked participants to give us one word on how they were feeling as they arrived at a workshops or rehearsal, then at the end we asked again for a

word to describe their feelings. The graph below tries to tabulate this.



A graph to show the feelings of 39 participants before and after an Urban Dreams rehearsal on 18/06/08

At the end of the project, after quite a long evaluation session looking at the process and show, we asked participants to fill in a questionnaire reflecting on their feelings about the project. What was notable – before we even get to the results, was that most people spent at least 15 minutes writing answers to the questions.

Responses during both the interviews, evaluation and with the questionnaire were overwhelmingly positive. In the 19 “feelings” questionnaires, words that were used more than once were:

Excited (7 uses)	Happy (6)
Good (5)	Confident (4)
Proud (4)	Teamwork (4)
Energised (3)	Nervous (2)
Achievement (2)	Pleasure (2)
Joy (2)	Responsible (2)
Community (2)	Belonging (2)
Glad (2)	Buzzed up (2)

Looking at the data, participants seemed to talk about two sorts of feelings – one looking within – an internal or personal perspective, the other considering the interpersonal, or group, perspective.

Internally participants experienced many positive emotions, often linked to an increased sense of energy using words like “Excited”, “Energised”, “Confident”, “Joy”, or “ Buzzed up” .

The external/interpersonal feelings related to a sense of belonging. Words such as “Teamwork”, “Community” and “Belonging” recurred.

A recent report published by the Young Foundation – *Belonging in Contemporary Britain*, explores the importance of this last issue.

“Belonging is a different language to culture, identity and rights. It is a basic frame of reference which relates to human need, and encompasses the many ways in which people find points of recognition in their lives. As Abraham Maslow (1943) argued in the Theory of Human Motivation, the need for happiness, recognition and self esteem are seen to be at the very base of human need. Belonging is as complex as it is intuitive: in day-to-day life, people exhibit a need to belong in their desires to have a family, be a part of a community, a member of a church, a player in a team, a part of a gang. Belonging can connect people to others around them, as well as leading to a sense of being valued, recognised and listened to”. *Belonging in Contemporary Britain*, June 2007, Alessandra Buonfi no (with Louisa Thomson) for The Commission on Integration and Cohesion

The Young report goes on to look at the damaging emotional and societal consequences as well as the damage to health and wellbeing which can be engendered by a perceived lack of belonging. The report then comes to a series of recommendations which include:

- making opportunities for intergenerational contact
- creating local social events
- using public spaces for social encounters

Which brings us to the performances and the experience of the audience.

AIM 3 – “To animate public spaces with public theatre”



Rehearsing on the slopes of the Laban Centre.

Urban Dreams was described by writer Jennifer Farmer as a “multi-media outdoor community play”. The fact that the performance would be given in a range of settings, some of them busy and noisy, was born in mind throughout the making process. The piece was highly visual, included projections, soundscapes and movement sequences all intended to conjure up the power and beauty of dreams.



Rehearsing in Sydenham Wells Park

UD played 7 quite different spaces which were chosen for their centrality, local significance and aesthetic qualities. The show was seen: within the trees of two parks – Southwark and Sydenham Wells, in two purpose built outdoor auditoria – The Laban Centre and the Scoop, in two busy urban spaces – Elephant and Castle and Cornmills Gardens, Lewisham. And, finally overlooking the Thames in Greenwich with Canary Wharf as a backdrop.



Saturday night performance in Elephant and Castle

The Bubble were helped by some supportive partners – the Elefest in Elephant and Castle, the Laban Centre in Deptford and the Open Rehearsal operation within the

Greater London Council all invested in the project. The other venues were overseen by the local authorities (Southwark, Greenwich and Lewisham) all of whom were helpful and keen that their spaces should be used.

Audiences for the project were larger than anticipated. Reasons.... the tour was scheduled later than in previous years (avoiding both the school holidays and the rainy season), the event was free, the Bubble weren't performing another summer project and the company had garnered a lot support and attention during campaign to overturn the Arts Councils threat to remove the Bubble's Regularly Funded Organisation (RFO) status.

Venue	Total audience	Questionnaires Returned
SOUTHWARK PARK	30	0 (preview)
SOUTHWARK PARK	90	32 (35%)
LABAN	250	56 (22%)
ELEPHANT ROAD PARK	90	33 (27%)
SYDENHAM WELLS PARK	230	79 (36%)
CORNMILLS GARDENS	200	74 (37%)
THE SCOOP	370	85 (23%)
CUTTY SARK GARDENS	300	55 (18%)
total	1560	414 (27%)

As the table shows, a high proportion of the audience returned questionnaires. These gave us information on who the audience were and what they thought of the experience.

The audience were very local - 32% came from within a 1 mile radius, over 80% from within 5 miles.

The audience's experience of theatre was very varied - 14% of the audience had not been to theatre in the previous 12 months, while 20% had been more than seven times in the past year. The audience was a good mix of returners and people new to the company - 40% had not seen a Bubble production before while for 52% it was at least their third Bubble show.

The diversity of the audience did not, as hoped, truly reflect the diversity of South East London - 80% described themselves as white - 20% as Black or other Minority Ethnic group (6% as Black, 4% Asian, 5% mixed heritage, 2% Chinese and 3% other. This picture fluctuated quite widely however, with a greater diversity being achieved in the very local audience who attended in Lewisham, as opposed to the almost entirely white audience who attended the performance in Bermondsey.

169 audience members also took time to fill in comments sheets; these contained 131 positive comments and 38 negative, or critical, comments.

Recurring themes were:

The music - "good atmospheric music"

The animation of spaces - "it's great to feel London parks can be lively, community spaces at night" (especially notable here was people's appreciation of the more urban spaces in Lewisham and Elephant and Castle)

The cast - "lovely production for it's inclusivity"

The visual language - "beautiful images, effective music and sound effects, clever, funny, moving, original, poetic. Lovely ideas. Dreams and also spooky at times, really cool!"

Locality - "it's only over the road from us so we love it. Great setting – we took a blanket so we were really cosy. We'll be back"

The sound was poor - "couldn't hear some parts of the dialogue"

It wasn't promenade – "a return to the "wonder" style of venues in parks please!"

The story was lacking - "it was slightly hard to follow at times"

FINALLY, SOME CONCLUSIONS AND CONUNDRUMS

We should celebrate and build upon:

- The inclusive design of the project – allowing many entry points and roles

- Examining the way the project builds community

- The aesthetic – collective, multi-voiced, unvarnished.

- Performing for free in public spaces.

We need to continue to tussle with:

- Involving many people and making excellent theatre

- Trying to attract a company and audience which reflects our area

- Being rigorous about the safety of all

- Talking, explaining, advocating and creating a buzz around this work.

Jonathan Petherbridge, Creative Director, December 2008.