

## **DARE Creative Labs 2015**

### **An insight**

#### **A bit of context**

The first three DARE Creative Labs were created in Spring 2015, each a partnership between a performing arts organisation and a research academic from the University of Leeds. As with all Leeds Creative Labs, the aim was simple - let's see what happens when you bring experienced arts practitioners together with respected researchers. No expectation of an output and no predetermined goals.

The brief was for each Lab to spend around three days together, over a period of several weeks, exploring thinking, ideas, curiosities, challenges, ambitions..... And on 6 July 2015 all three Labs came together to share their experience. The event, which was also attended by colleagues from the arts and the University, was an illuminating insight into the rich and productive relationships that such a framework facilitates; and the opportunities for activity with significant potential impact, that could not have been developed without such cross-sector engagement.

What emerged was as diverse as the organisations and individuals who participated, including the ambition to create a new kind of performance work; a framework for the dissemination of research through performance; and the development of new research methodologies to inform programming and presentation.

This summary looks at the ways in which participants approached their Lab; the ways in which it inspired and shaped their thinking; and their shared ambitions to build on what the Lab kick-started.

#### **The 2015 Leeds Creative Labs: DARE Edition**

- **SAA-uk** (Keran Kaur Virdee, Chief Executive) with the **School of Performance and Cultural Industries Audience Research Group** (DrJoslin McKinney, Associate Professor in Scenography; DrBen Walmsley, Lecturer in Audience Engagement; DrAnna Fenemore, Associate Professor in Contemporary Theatre and Performance and Director of Research)
- **Opera North** (Dan Norman, tenor), with **Dr Alan O'Leary**, Associate Professor in Italian
- **Cap-a-Pie** (Brad McCormick , Artistic Director, and Katy Vanden, Producer), with **Dr Lou Harvey** Lecturer in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

#### **The first encounters**

All Lab participants were intrigued and excited by the opportunity, though never having met before, some had a few first night nerves about meeting their team members - would they get on and find anything in common; how would they start the conversation with someone so expert in a field quite different from their own?

Keen to get to know each other quickly in order to make the most of the three days, each Lab connected in a variety of ways. All Labs spent their first meeting sharing an introduction to their work, ambitions and challenges. This was topped up with activity including, in the case of the SAA-uk Lab, attending a performance of SAA-uk's work together and watching film of

SAA-uk's project work. Opera North's Dan Norman gave a short recital of work relevant to their area of interest to Alan, whilst Alan suggested Dan watch films relevant to the theme. Such insights, which helped develop create a shared landscape, also helped develop a shared language at the early stage of the relationship.

It was interesting how the Labs approached the concept of not having pre-set objectives or the expectation of an outcome. For all Labs, this was one of the most enjoyable aspects of the programme – and the most unfamiliar. For the Cap-a-Pie and SAA-uk teams in particular, the identification of individual ambitions created a pathway which led to a shared interest in working collectively.

Cap-a-Pie is interested and experienced in using performance to explore research questions, which provided Lou Harvey with a valuable opportunity to develop her own research ambitions – to communicate her research findings (including the difficulty experienced by immigrants who speak English as a second language integrating into society without an understanding of the nuances and conventions of social conversation) to achieve an impact beyond the potential of the written word.

SAA-uk, in its commitment to making the traditions of South Asian music and dance relevant and accessible to a broad contemporary audience, seeks a deeper understanding of the impact of its work on current audiences in order to inform future activity. The PCI Research Group, interested an interdisciplinary approach to understanding the relationship between the audience and the art itself, seeks to develop new research methods that might identify the ways in which the relationship happens. The Lab, a partnership between research and arts practice, offered a laboratory in which research experimentation could be explored in a live context.

Dan Norman and Alan O'Leary discovered a shared interest in how the conventions of performance, song and film respectively, can be shaken up to un-nerve, engage and motivate audiences to think in new ways. Coming from two different sectors and artistic spheres, and with a shared interest in performance, they were encouraged by how readily each became intrigued an interested in the thinking of the other. Dan's interest in how the classical song cycle can be made relevant to a broader audience provided a springboard for dynamic conversation and activity.

### **How the Labs worked**

Energised by initial conversation, **Dan Norman (Opera North) and Alan O'Leary** regularly fired ideas and questions electronically in addition to spending three days together. Other commitments meant it worked best for them to spend a concentrated time in an Opera North studio experimenting with ideas through a three stage process –documented in the form of a visual scrap book. The first day was spent exploring each other's work and identifying potential directions for the Lab. On day two a mosaic of Post-It notes illustrated multiple ideas, comments and questions, which led to a third day spent bringing the ideas together to form an idea for a project.

For all three Labs, bringing a practitioner and an academic to the table, with each challenging the other, tested long held assumptions. In Dan and Alan's case, for example, the definition of a song developed from 'words and music' to the more liberating 'voice and

rhythm'. They discovered a mutual curiosity in the concept of the *Carnavalesque and the Grotesque* in film and performance as a way of subverting normal conventions and behaviour, which gave rise to the question of what could happen if such an approach, or form, was combined with the creation and performance of a new song cycle. This thinking led to the final few hours of the Lab being spent considering what sort of performance piece might emerge; something that would draw in an audience before disrupting and engaging them in that disruption, ensuring a different experience each time.

**Cap-a-Pie and Lou Harvey** had research data from interviews with international students to inform their discussion, which led quickly to an exploration of how, through performance, an audience could gain an appreciation of how such immigrants can feel alienation and confusion when they don't have an understanding of the pragmatic rules of communication – the difficulties of big talk v. small talk.

The team spent half a day playing with ideas on how form can be used to disconcert and tell a story – noting relevant points on a flip chart. Through a 'Creative Enquiry' exercise using the notes and excerpts from the research data, they developed a story through which to communicate the message. The value of academic/practitioner partnership at this early stage included exploring the balance between using traditional form to disrupt and disconcert and audience, and ensuring a meaningful audience understanding. With a view to refining and testing their approach, the group then used the event on 6 July for further research, when Brad McCormick experimented with the emerging performance on the full Lab cohort.

To inform and motivate their thinking, **Keran from SAA-uk and the University's Audience Research Group** met three times in three different spaces. Initial conversations allowed questions and curiosities to be shared that resulted in increased confidence and the identification of common interests and opportunities to share knowledge. Following this initial conversation, the team attended a performance of a SAA-uk co-production of *Sacred Sounds* in the Howard Assembly Room, with the aim of experimenting with research methods by connecting with the artists and performers post-show.

Even at this early stage there was mutual benefit. It was the first time academics Anna and Joslin had undertaken research with an audience for performance work that wasn't their own, and it helped clarify how such methodologies might be refined in partnership with an established cultural organisation in order to make sure methods respond to the real-world context from the start. Keran gained a valuable insight into academic-led research methods and how it can draw out audience responses in ways that non-collaborative activity can't. The experience motivated the SAA-ukLab's final session, which resulted in a commitment to develop a programme of partnership activity which provides new research tools for the cultural sector.

### **Inspiring future collaboration**

All partners embarked on their Labs with heaps of curiosity and a keen interest in working together, without the shackles of an expected outcome. This approach provided freedom to breathe – to talk and think creatively and inquisitively, and to learn from experts in their field. The result was a unanimous agreement that they were only just off the starting blocks,

and an ambition to continue collaborating to develop projects and activity that would benefit the sector and their own work.

Alan O’Leary and Opera North’s Dan Norman’s vision to create a new song cycle which uses the physical environment to change the nature of the relationship between artists and audiences, will be the inspiration for a ‘sandpit’ in spring 2016 alongside Opera North’s new co-commission *Passion*. A series of provocations led by Dan and Alan will energise debates and discussions on the topic of the *Carnivalesque* and the *Grotesque*, between a diverse cohort of performers, artists, academics and professionals.

Saa-uk and the University’s Audience Research Group are already giving thought to the multiple opportunities to explore additional research questions. Identified events in the forthcoming SAA-uk programme will be the focus for the development and testing of research methodologies, with the aim of creating research models that will inform programming and production for SAA-uk and beyond.

Cap-a-Pie and Lou Harvey are now thinking of practical ways to progress the creation of performance work that communicates the challenges and experiences of immigrants in England. The plan is to submit an ESRC funding bid to write, in collaboration, a performance project – making the mechanics of performance visible in the process of telling a human story.

### **Top tips from DARE Creative Lab participants**

When thinking about embarking on a Creative Lab, participants in the first DARE Edition recommend: -

- Meeting in and responding to creative environments.
- Lots of talking and lots of asking questions. About your organisation and your partner’s; about your aims, your experiences and your challenges.
- Watching, reading and talking about each other’s work, and drawing on the expertise of those outside your team.
- Making lots of notes to record your journey and inspire the next steps.
- Being prepared to rethink your thinking – to be creative in communicating research.
- Shaping your conversation and ideas into a vision for the future – however ambitious.
- Enjoying the freedom of time, space and no expected outcomes. That’s when the most creative ideas emerge.