**Young at Arts**

**Food for Thought Reflections by Christian Watson**

Asking people if they have any memories of food is like asking people if they have breathed recently. It’s one of those questions that never fails to get an answer. In this respect, I felt quite fortunate to be involved with a project with a clear, universal theme. A good part of my task as writer and workshop leader was to try and bring focus to the discussions I fostered, to try and edit the experience of the 15-25 participants who would regularly turn up at the Armley Junktion Café, with an aim to create a performance that involved some members of the group.

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I will miss the meals. This is something that I did not expect.

One of the challenges of the workshops was to share the workshop space with a meal and cocktails. As workshops are usually very intense and focused, with the primary goal being to create something, either as an individual or as a group. I found that, with the atmosphere being one of a meal, this type of workshop was not wholly possible. I found, after the first two workshops, that my role was less to provide a workshop with an activity and goal, but more to facilitate conversation and ways for the group to interact while sharing the meal.

These meals were by far the best part of the project, for me. I felt that, over the five months, we built good rapport, that the participants all became closer, they enjoyed sharing, they enjoyed talking. These meals were something that I felt was really, positive for the participants, and something I am sad is not going to continue now the project is over. It became a real social hub for those involved, and I felt privileged just to be part of something that brought so many people together, even if only for a short amount of time.

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I became quite close with four participants: Lucia, Sita, Maggie and Ted.

These were the participants that were to become the cast for the performance.

Maggie had kept me enthralled with her stories of growing up in Yorkshire, they always had so much humour and life in them, she is a real natural storyteller, and I felt great warmth off her from the moment I spoke to her. She has mobility and health issues, but if this has slowed her down I can’t imagine what she was like before!

Lucia is an Italian immigrant who came to England after the second world war. A lovely woman with great love for her family and who kept me laughing, especially when she teamed up with Ursula, another Italian immigrant. They told wonderful stories at the meals, and having Lucia’s energy was something that I really appreciated throughout the rehearsals.

Ted is a very stoic Yorkshireman, likes to keep his emotions to himself and likes to tell jokes. But, under that exterior there is real sensitivity. There were times in rehearsal I was close to tears with Ted’s story and how he shared it with all involved. A brave man, and one I have a lot of respect for.

Sita was someone who I had not met before rehearsals as she had been away during the meals, but she has been working with Young at Arts for a while. She came in with a huge amount of energy and some fantastic stories about growing up in Trinidad. Her and Lucia, when teamed up, were almost unstoppable, with so much energy and laughter. Sita definitely kept me on my toes!

Working closely with these four was sometimes quite difficult, mainly as none of them are professional actors or performers, and memorising lines became a real challenge. But, I must say, everything that got thrown at them- the monologues, the dancing, the gestures, the number of rehearsals- they took on the chin and just threw themselves in. It got to a point where I didn’t have any fears or quibbles about what the ned product would be as I knew, with these guys, it was going to be fun, that we were all going to have fun, and that became important to me. I wanted them to recognise how well they had done, not to measure themselves against professional actors or performers, but to measure themselves against themselves at the beginning. And, in that respect, they all really did an amazing job.

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For me, the hardest part was trying to find a way to make sure that each participant got their own story out there, that they felt there was something of themselves in the performance.

As someone who is used to scripting one-man shows and writing for my own performance, this was a new challenge that I really relished. My idea was to create something that was a framework for the participants stories, something that had me on stage with them as a host/guide/moral support, and gave them enough room to tell their personal story.

The script development was, to begin with, a series of improvisations. This was mainly because I knew learning a script may prove difficult, whereas knowing an objective is easier. Over the rehearsals monologues were developed and, out of the objective improvisation, a shape was formed that I eventually scripted out in full. Once this was done, the participants seemed more comfortable as they had a whole thing to read and work through.

At the end stage, when performing, we were using the scripts as my fears around memorising were well founded, but the monologues each one performed were unscripted, giving them freedom to play with their own stories as they saw fit. This had mixed results, with Ted often turning his story into two sentences to get it over with quickly, or Maggie going off on tangents during her telling. But, it was important to me that they each had some agency with regards to their performance. For me, it had to be a collaboration, and I hoped that the more ownership they had, the more they would enjoy themselves.

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The performances were flawed, but fun.

The Left Bank was an excerpt, and we decided to stick to the monologues and the last two pages of the script. There was real difficulty with the sound. The Left Bank is an old church, very echoey with high ceilings. Not an ideal acoustic space for non-professional performers to try and project into, but all the participants were happy to get on with it.

The scripts were used and there was much forgetting, and Ted broke-up trying to do his monologue. But, they all jumped in with two feet, did their parts in front of a large audience and didn’t run away.

Ted was quite distressed afterwards, thinking he had let people down, but the others had no such feelings and seemed to be very buoyed up by getting out there and having a go. It was great to see just how much confidence they had in themselves after all the rehearsals.

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The care homes went very differently. In each performance, Ted did his whole piece and he almost glowed after each one. The pride he had really radiated off him. It was so good to see that confidence rise out of him. The others as well really got into it.

The audiences at the care homes were very mixed. I got to feeling that maybe a piece that was less word heavy may have been better for that kind of audience, one with more music and more movement to keep it more dynamic. The reason I say this is because I felt the audience, especially at the second care home, were having trouble following the piece. Also, I saw one of the other pieces created by Peter Spafford which incorporated popular music from the fifties/sixties, and older people in the care homes seemed to really react to that quite positively. Even during our performance, the bits I felt the audience perked up were when we played the music for the dances and gestures.

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I will miss this project a great deal. For me, the performance and the work I did with Ted, Maggie, Sita and Lucia was great fun and I could see that the four of them got a lot out of it, but it isn’t the part of the project I feel was the most important. I think the meals were the real heart of this project.

Being able to host and facilitate conversation, reminiscences, and new relationships really gave me the most satisfaction. Especially after Spring Fling. I held a workshop at that event and a number of the ladies who came to Spring Fling ended up coming over the The Junktion Café for our next workshop. I was able to be involved in them meeting new people, socialising, sharing their stories, sharing a meal, and becoming part of the group. It was that which made me feel I was doing something worthwhile, and it really saddens me to know that these monthly meals are not continuing.