

St Mary Redcliffe

Place Based Theatre Club

Evaluation

'The theatre club brought people from all different walks of life together. I seriously hope this project can continue as it has tremendous potential.'

PECo Theatre's Place Based Theatre club was a fun and accessible course of creative activities exploring how stories of place can inspire theatre.

Funded by Bristol Ageing Better and in partnership with Redcliffe Care, the project brought together older residents from the Redcliffe community to share stories and learn new creative skills.

The Place Based Theatre Club

In January 2017, funded by Bristol Ageing Better and in partnership with Redcliffe Care, St Mary Redcliffe's outreach arm, PECo Theatre ran fortnightly, site-specific, theatre devising sessions inspired by the memories, stories and spaces in and around St Mary Redcliffe and the local area. Our aims in running the project were; to bring a diverse selection of older members of the local community together to learn about their local area, to explore their own and others stories, to learn creative approaches to engaging with place and gain an insight into developing site-specific work, to develop new friendships, meet new people and to develop self confidence, supporting health and well being.



The first session, on Saturday, January 21st, was an Inspire Day and Tea Party that began with journeys through usually unseen and unexplored spaces in the church and continued at the Faith Space community centre, where over 30 people came together for live sharing of stories from community members, an exhibition of local history and presentations from local historians and the neighbourhood development forum – all whilst enjoying tea and delicious cakes, kindly donated for the occasion by local independent café Spicer and Cole.



So many people contributed to making this first day a success and thanks are due to all those who gave their time to help us set it all up, attendees and volunteers as well as the contributors of stories and knowledge about the church and local area, past, present and future. A particular highlight was Eric Tyley's memory of his Redcliffe childhood, a pre-car, pre-war Redcliffe, complete with bustling Docks, haggis and pea shops and horse drawn carriages.



Sessions

Sessions then ran from January through to April 1st on Thursday afternoons at the Faith Space. The Inspire day had generated a story bank of local history and a group of ten over 50's who signed up for the duration of the course.

'I joined in on these sessions as part of a journey of self-discovery. This was to take me out of my comfort zone, as I have not participated in drama/theatre type events before, other than being a member of the audience.'

The first few sessions were led with great energy by our writer, Miriam Battye, who worked with the unearthed stories from the inspire day, as well as the groups own stories, and took everyone through a series of games and introductory exercises looking, amongst other things, at the shapes, structures, characters and points of view that she might consider as a writer when approaching developing a story into theatre.

'I loved meeting other people, hearing other people's stories and learning writing techniques'



'I got to meet people who live in the Redcliffe area and people who live in other parts of Bristol.'

Another session explored the world of our audio-visual artist, Tom Price from the collective Limbic Cinema. Tom shared his own inspirations, treating us to clips of film and audio that had helped shape his artistic work. He also played examples of the extraordinary capacities of projection mapping; where visuals projected on a

surface can completely transform the way the surface appears, buildings can seem to crumble before your eyes, or morph into scenes from another time or shift perspective to a birds eye view or pretty much anything else you can imagine - provided you have the equipment and resources!

The group then got to work with stories of their own choosing exploring how to bring Tom's visual and more abstract approaches to it. A challenge that everyone more than rose to.

'The course leaders are top notch, friendship, interesting ideas....it woke my brain up!'

A further session, led by PECO's artistic director, Rachel Aspinwall, took place in the church itself. It explored how the physical spaces and atmospheres of the church and the relationship of the audience to it and the story, might impact how a story gets performed or told. The group took their stories into the space and devised approaches for experiencing them in a site-specific way. The results were fabulous; inventive, accomplished, diverse. We could have taken any of them and worked them up into a performance.

'I have really enjoyed every aspect of this journey with all the individuals taking part.'

Throughout all of these sessions, people's stories were constantly being told and retold. Local stories about local events and characters; Lady Di's visit in the 80's, Matt Smith's Doctor Who filming in the Redcliffe flats, were shared by more than one participant, sometimes people had stories that another person held a new perspective on or an extra chapter of. The enjoyment and connection felt by discovering these shared community stories of lived experiences was palpable and through the telling and re-telling, people made new connections to each other and their environment. Even the stories of more traditional 'history' became more vividly alive once a personal connection to something in the present day was made.

'I have so enjoyed the enthusiasm and courtesy of all involved, the honesty of sharing stories and learning human details of lives over the centuries. I like the sense of a journey with an unknown final destination.'

From day one the atmosphere was friendly, relaxed, respectful and generous. People were encouraged outside of their comfort zones, often finding themselves taking part in exercises or activities that they might never have imagined they could. Friendships and new connections were made, to each other as well as to place, and by the final sessions, where ideas for a piece of theatre that might come out of it all were being explored and honed, there was a tangible sense of excitement at the possibilities and at the thought of being able to continue in some way to engage with each other and the area in an ongoing and creative way.

'I am quite new to the area and the whole experience has helped me feel I'm settling in, more relaxed here, more confident about living in a big city.'

'I learnt a lot from the other people at the group and I enjoyed the friendship and the stories they told'

'I thoroughly enjoyed meeting all the people and learning more about Redcliffe.'

Proposal

At the final session of the Place Based Theatre Club, a proposal for a community play was agreed upon by the group. Inspired by the entirety of the work done during the course, as well as information that had been shared at the inspire day about soon to come regeneration developments in the neighbourhood and at the church, the proposal puts the activity of a community sharing the stories it feels are important to be told about itself centre stage, in a playful and imaginative way. Its scope allows for every voice in the community to be heard, represented and ultimately celebrated and, in a new and surprising way, it will bring these meaningful and diverse community stories and spaces together with the exceptional heritage and architecture of St Mary Redcliffe church.

'It's been a most interesting experience meeting people with different ideas, everyone was made very welcome and put at ease.'

Our next steps for developing the proposed community play will include:

- The creation of a Senior's Community Theatre Collective – a group led by older residents and others with a keen interest and engagement to the area, who help steer, develop and lead the direction and content of the work, whilst gaining experience and new skills in community theatre project development.

- Further community story collecting - extending engagement to beyond the theatre group's previous demographic to include groups of all ages, denominations and cultures who play a part in the story of Redcliffe now and whose presence ought in some way to be within the piece.
 - Creation of a bespoke website /online presence of the stories collected, an ongoing, accessible, community story archive available to all.
 - Script development - writer working with groups, trying out, co-writing, and alone writing time to a first draft reading for the Autumn of 2017.
 - Audio-visual development – artist working with groups and alone to ensure first draft incorporates worked up plans for how projection mapping and audio-visual are integrated into the piece.
 - Producing - further funds and resource raising and partnership development to enable the community play to happen.
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*The experience of listening to other people's stories about Redcliffe was so rich.
I like the idea of opening it out and would help with interesting others
as part of getting more Redcliffe people involved in activities...*

In evaluating the activities and outcomes of this project against the aims and objectives set out at the start we are really pleased to see how well it has lived up to and surpassed expectations. We look forward to taking the project forward to its next stage working with project partners Redcliffe Care, St Mary Redcliffe church and the Faith Space as well as funders of the Seniors Community Theatre Collective, Bristol Aging Better, to make something truly exceptional happen that will bring together people, place and the power of the imagination.

*'I do so hope that the group can continue, and look for ways
to develop the stories that have unfolded... creating the next episode.'*

