

Making a Brew

Book Launch at Waterstones, Leeds Monday 24 April 2006

Whenever I think of Heads Together Productions, one particular image always springs to mind – two rows of terraced houses with grass right down the middle. For me, this was a seminal piece of work, not just for the organisation itself, but something that speaks volumes about what participatory arts can look like at the cutting edge. The Methleys was a project that made it to the national press and achieved a change in government policy (see '*Home zones*'). Not only that, but it is a piece of work that is conceptually on a par with works like Christo's wrapping of the Pont Neuf in Paris during the mid-eighties.

I am proud to say that I have recently joined the Heads Together Productions team. On my first day in the job, I was given the task of covering the launch of the book, 'Making a Brew', which took place at Waterstones in Leeds. Here is another example that typifies the work of the company.

Many of us still associate the participatory arts sector with the ubiquitous *mural on an end gable, to cheer us up on our way to the dole office* type of project. But it doesn't have to be that way. The sector has always been about achieving transformation in peoples' lives, particularly in socially deprived areas; and fortunately, organisations that currently lead the field have long since moved away from projects conceived solely by artists and then imposed on sceptical communities without prior consultation. Heads Together Productions is one such organisation and the process always begins by asking questions about what people want and then developing a collaborative relationship between stakeholders to deliver an appropriate programme of work.

So it was with 'Making a Brew'. Heads Together Productions were invited in, to become involved with one of the country's first Sure Start projects, based in Seacroft, East Leeds. Part of the government's strategy for eradicating child poverty in the UK, Sure Start is currently being delivered across the country through the development of services for young children and their parents. The role of Heads Together was to facilitate the documentation of Seacroft Sure Start, by the community, through the use of creative writing, photography and interviews. The result of two year's work, 'Making a Brew', the book, is a work of art in itself. This is largely due to the influence of Katy Haley, project worker for Heads, who worked with small groups and then combined their photographs with hers, to produce a story in pictures of the Seacroft Sure Start experience. The quirky, journalistic style of the photography, juxtaposed with jolly, coloured text in varying point sizes, makes the whole thing very tactile and readable.

My first sight of the book was on the morning of the launch and I read it from front to back in a couple of hours. It wasn't a difficult task. Apart from its obvious visual appeal, the stories that it contains make compelling reading. 'Kelly's Story' is a poignant account of a woman's experiences of domestic abuse and how she overcame the situation and rebuilt her life. I was deeply touched, and so when I met Kelly in person, I was not surprised to learn that some of the details of her story were, "Far too personal" to include in the final draft. The original was twenty-five pages long, she told me.

Prior to the launch, I had also been involved in the edit of five hours of ELFM radio broadcast, a sister project to the book, that provides a platform for Seacroft Sure Start. One-hour slots, broadcast daily over a one-week period highlighted local activities and featured live and recorded interviews with Sure Start workers and users of the services. For me as a newcomer to Heads Together, this provided a useful insight into the project and people's direct responses to their recent involvements. Now as I scanned the room looking for clues, and attempting to match faces to the voices I had listened to, I came across Tommy, who has developed a thriving service in installing safety equipment and installing gates and fencing, creating safe playing areas for children at home. Funding originally intended for a communal playing area was diverted and used to subsidise the service, because local people had articulated their need for something more closely matching their needs.

The evening had begun with a steady flow of people arriving for the event. Contributors to the book arrived with their families, along with representatives from the partner organisations involved in the project. There was a lively atmosphere as people chatted, clutching glasses of wine and circulating around the prominent display of the book, with its cover showing a pair of royal blue child's wellies against a green grass backdrop, that have become the trademark of the Seacroft Sure Start project. Once the eighty or so attendees were gathered, it was time for speeches. Chris Peat, former director of East Leeds Family Learning Centre, described how the book had achieved its aim of communicating what Seacroft Sure Start was like in reality, citing the project as "The best in the whole country". Andy Reece, Seacroft resident, talked about his personal journey: coping with redundancy and depression while his partner became a worker for the Sure Start project and how after hitting rock bottom, his own personal involvement - taking his kids to play sessions and then becoming actively involved in an action group eventually led to his current position as Chair of the Board.

Manager of the project, Bernard McMahon, is adamant that the success of the project is due largely to a firm ethos that was laid down from the outset of the project. Using a bottom up approach, residents were consulted about their wish list for the area before any plans were put into practice. Not only that, but workers were actively recruited from within Seacroft, so that 60% of

the present Sure Start workforce is local. In order to gather support for the scheme, workers took a proactive approach and went out in pairs, armed with leaflets, persistently calling from door to door to coax people to take advantage of what was on offer, returning time after time if the initial response was a negative one. For one woman, the timing of one such call was something of a godsend, "I was very stressed up at the time, effing and blinding. There was this knock on the door. When they asked if I needed any help, I just burst into tears. It was the relief."

Bernard is keen to point out that this unique approach has changed the way that professionals operate, a fact acknowledged by Sally Threlfall, Head of Early Years, Leeds, in her address to the audience. Other speakers at the event included Arts Council England, Yorkshire's Chief Executive, Andy Carver, who noted that the project responds directly to the Arts Council England's own mission of "placing art at the heart of people's lives".

The written elements of the book were drawn from a combination of interviews and creative writing sessions led by Peter Spafford. The highlight of the evening was without a doubt a series of readings from the book, by their authors. Five of the women participants, stood and read extracts from their very personal stories. As the audience listened to the emotive stories and poems written around themes of friendship, motherhood and individual struggles, I observed a number of people around the room that were clearly quite moved.

Seacroft Sure Start has already been recognised as an exemplar of a wider government initiative – its success is clear. The question that remains, is the true legacy of involvement of Heads Together Productions and the publication of the book. This is something that the company is committed to finding out, through a critical examination of all of their programmes of work. In order for the participatory arts sector to grow and develop, what is needed is meaningful debate, based on relevant data gathered from organisations leading the field. Hopefully, this will raise the status of participatory arts away from negative associations of the past.

Rachel Brooke

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