

Article 3

For our second interview for our research project into R&D models, we spoke to Gemma Paintin of performance company Action Hero (www.actionhero.org.uk). Action Hero have been making work together for six and a half years – they have been through the ‘emerging’ period and have negotiated their way through the various opportunities targeted at emerging makers. They continue to engage with development opportunities as they work, but have a very clear understanding of how they position themselves in relation to such events now.

When we talked to Brian Logan at Camden People’s Theatre, he spoke about the position of the theatre in London and its relativity to the other venues in the city, and what they offer in terms of experimental theatre. Action Hero is based in Bristol and talking to Gemma gave us not only a useful non-London-centric point of view, but also an interesting insight into the importance of considering locale in general and the needs thereof, when offering artists an opportunity. It is fair to say that when a maker/company is starting out, they will usually be willing to travel further for less measurable ‘gain’ just in order to have access to the exposure. So there’s an argument for saying that organisations should pay *particular* attention to how they demonstrate the value they place on these emerging artists’ time and work, given that the likelihood is that they will not be demonstrating this financially.

We asked Gemma her experience and thoughts on the ‘trend’ of scratch opportunities and the motivation for venues and organisations that offer them.

GP: You know what it’s like...Someone has the idea of scratch and it’s going well so other venues think ‘oh we could do that as well’ which sometimes works really well, you know, it develops in an interesting way or it’s made more specific for that context, but sometimes it’s just like ‘you haven’t really thought about that, you’ve just gone, “we’ll have that” and plonked it in your venue’. Which is just a lack of imagination more than anything. Rather than thinking really carefully about, ‘well why would a work in progress night be a good idea for the artists living in this city? Or artists that might come into this city? And what might they need? Or if we’re based in Aberdeen or whatever, is it realistic to get a load of artists from London to come? Maybe they would prefer if we put them up, maybe that would help...’. So I think often there’s just a lack of thought and concern that’s gone into the structure of the event that, actually, if thought about really carefully, could be a really good event or opportunity. And then it could be worth it, worth everyone’s time.

We want to focus this article on this central idea of artists’ time and work (which is often the same thing), and how the plethora of scratch opportunities relates to that discussion. Scratch and work-in-progress events are often framed as a sort of ‘side dish’ to the main programme of a venue or organisation, and accordingly it can seem that they are afforded less planning time, less staff support and less care than the other ‘main’ events. But in fact a lot of time and care and precision of planning is needed in order to get the framing of the context right so that such an event can do the work it purports to.

HC: I feel like they're talked about, work-in-progress events, as a kind of bringing together of audience and artists and 'you talk to us, we'll talk to you, get this dialogue going', and sometimes there can be such a divide created or furthered, actually. Because of confusion over what's being offered. And confusion about how to be with that as an audience, because I don't imagine many audience members want to put their hand up and be like 'I thought it was shit' straight afterwards, because they know that's just a bit rude. So then they're going, 'so what can I... how can I... how do I respond usefully?'

GP: I think that's partly to do with venues realising what they're taking on when they're saying, 'we're going to do work-in-progress' or 'we're going to do a scratch scheme' or whatever. And realising it's not just 'oh yeah see who turns up... see what happens'. That actually it's a much bigger thing than that. It's more work than just booking a gig and getting a company in. They've got to facilitate it, they've got to make sure the audience know what they're doing, they need to really carefully structure the whole evening. They need to make sure that feedback's given in a useful way, and you know, actually it's *more* work than just putting on a normal show. So I think that that's the [thing they] need to realise. And I think that the good ones really do.

HC: Yeah. It can be the opposite, can't it, of light touch? It can be a really great way to demonstrate to an artist that you're really committed to their ideas.

GP: Yeah, like really care about the work.

HC: Yeah and even though, you know, nobody knows the makers and their ideas are a bit...early. You'll put it out there, you'll help an audience talk to them...

GP: Yeah, and I think that it's good for venues as well. And I think the good venues know anyway. But just for them to realise how it demonstrates to other artists who might be in the audience how much care they take over the work. And even if the work's completely different [from your own], even if it's like 'it's a million miles away from my work', if you see 'well actually they're really taking a lot of care about the way that they're treating this situation, they're taking care of the artists, they're taking care of the audiences, and it shows that they value the creative process and they value the artists within their community', and even if it stops there and it's like 'okay well, we can't help you develop this work because it's not right for our venue or we feel like it needs changing, or... blah blah blah' - you know, there's a million reasons why a place might not support your work - or they can only support one, or whatever... I think that doesn't necessarily matter [as long as] you feel like the artist has got something of value from that exchange. I think what's rubbish is if you feel like you've put loads of effort in, and the venue hasn't. It needs to be like an equitable kind of exchange, because actually they get quite a lot. You know, they get a lot of stuff by having all these artists come in.

HC: What do you mean by that? Do you mean kudos?

GP: Yeah they get kudos, and they get, like you say, they can tick their box and say they've supported some people, probably part of their funding is dependent on artist development, and you know, they'll have their funding renewed or not based on the success of their

programming and how big their audiences are. Also I think as an artist you should kind of realise the value that your work has, and the value it has to the place that it's being shown. It does have an [inherent] value to them.

This question of value is key and goes hand-in-hand with the onus on the host to provide clear context and support. It is a simple trading or exchange of value – we provide this of value, you provide that of value. The artist must not abuse the work-in-progress opportunity by equating 'in progress' with 'lack of care, thought or preparation'. The audience's time (and sometimes money) must be respected as much as the artists'. And simultaneously, the venue or organisation offering such an event is not entitled to adopt a careless, or worse magnanimous, position if it presents the work/idea/scratch, no matter how embryonic. If you programme it, you must tend to it. Do not programme it if you do not have the time, resources or inclination to choose it carefully and stand behind it (which does not have to mean liking it). Genuinely creating a space in which artists can 'fail' with early work, requires the programmers to be steadfast and committed and to know clearly why they programmed the work/ideas in the first place. If scratch is about honouring process, it cannot just be about searching for the next 'big thing' and good 'stuff' – it has to be about being interested in the conversations and ways of thinking that makers are developing.

GP: There's a grabbiness which is kind of gross. But at the same time it's one of those things. It's the nature of the beast in the way. You just have to find a way to grapple with it. In terms of, if you're a young artist and people are taking an interest in the work or whatever, or even if they're not I suppose, it's [about] having an awareness about what you are giving to the venue as well, and not just what the venue is giving to you. But I think it's easier for me to think about that now that we've been making work for six and a half years, whereas when we'd only been making it for a year, I was just grateful to have a gig anywhere, for anything. You know, I was still temping and all the rest of it, so it would be totally normal to drive to wherever to do a ten-minute gig and then drive back again and go to work the next day. And I think that that part of it is just the nature of it, because no one is going to pay you [at the start] because there's lots of people making work and there's not enough money to go around. As much as I don't really like it, there is an economic sort of bind, which means that you have to prove that your work [is worth it] unfortunately. Which means that you have to enter a market place, which is really difficult.

[...]

HC: The vocabulary of things like scratch and work-in-progress is generally about 'process' and, by and large, unless something is particularly well framed, things tend to be received as products. Not that there's no cross-over between the two, but...I feel a gap of venues really going 'I will bank on your *ideas* and your *approaches* and your *process*'. Because the opportunities [emerging makers] have available to get the work [and ideas and approaches] out there and garner interest, are these little 'product slots'.

GP: But I think that as an artist, one of the things you can do is try to be aware of... first of all the range of work-in-progress stuff that's available, and try to make sure that when you decide to put your work forward for something that you're aware of the terms under which your work will be shown and framed, and what context you'll be putting your work into. And of course it's difficult to do that when you want to show your work, but it's about trying to

have an awareness of what you're contributing to, and what sort of climate or what kind of environment you're participating in helping to build. For example, James and I just did a year of organisational development, to try and get all that together really, about the way that the company works. And one of the things that we did was write an ethical policy, which was just for us to articulate the ways in which we wanted to work and the ways we wouldn't work. And we started out by being 'we'll try not to fly short haul', and then ended up being more about how we'd work with each other and work with other people and the implications of what you do with your labour. And one of the things we decided was that we wouldn't work for free, if we felt like our labour was being used to support a system in which everyone gets paid except the artists, and where our labour was being used to keep in employment an entire system and structure of people that was based on free labour. And that doesn't mean at all that we don't work for free. We work for free all the time! But that we'd be really careful about if we were showing our work and not being paid, about what that free labour was contributing to. We felt like we didn't want to participate in a system where the work of the artist was being de-professionalised, whereas everyone else in that system was getting paid. And so we felt like we would just try to, for ourselves, be really clear about if we were going to show something somewhere and not get paid, what are the values [of the event], what is the value for ourselves.

It is interesting to consider what role economics might play in the construction of the slippery term 'emerging maker', which has come up a lot during this research. How does one define 'emerging', and when can an artist be said to have stopped emerging and to have become - what? 'Mid-career'? 'Established'? Does the shifting of the relationship between the work and money go towards defining when the maker is no longer emerging? Do you stop emerging once you start being paid properly for your work – once it starts being viably economically valued? As with most industries, there is a level at which artists can work to raise the degree of professionalism with which they are treated, by growing their own 'myth' of their work and how professional it is/they are. This can be done in terms of self-generated exposure – which social media is obviously central to now – but at a basic level it can be done by the artist fully understanding and not apologising for the fact that their work has value which should, by rights, be recognised economically. And if money is not available, its value should be recognised in the support and care afforded by those who programme it, whatever stage of its development they choose to programme it at. And indeed, it could be argued, the more nascent the work, the more support and care should be afforded.

Our next article will focus on our interview with the artist Mischa Twitchin, who brings the dual perspectives of his work as a founding member of Shunt and of his own artistic practice, which juxtaposes performed images and sound montage, exploring poetic or philosophical thoughts rather than drama. Our discussion with Mischa focuses on ways to support artists' general investigations and practice in a long-term model, as opposed to supporting particular pieces of work (finished or unfinished), and the question of how far an audience can really usefully feedback on an artist's work - do we really, should we really, care what the audience think about material as we undertake research and development?