

Julia McGhee *Interactive Experiments* presentation for *An Audience With Janice Parker Projects*

Firstly, to explain a little about who I am and what I do - I'm a freelance dance artist based in Highland. I run dance projects and I teach classes for people of all ages, from very young children to older adults. I live in a small ex-fishing village called Inver, near Tain in Easter Ross - a rural and fairly remote area. I've been based in Easter Ross for 6 years now, having moved from Falkirk to take up a post with plan B dance company back in 2011. I love living in the Highlands, despite its various challenges, and I have made it my home. My regular work is spread over a wide geographic area – from Ullapool in Wester Ross, to Dingwall and Inverness, up to Bonar Bridge in Sutherland. Over the last few years I have focused on making more work happen closer to home, by initiating projects, finding funding myself and working with local and national organisations.

During the last year I've been leading a project in Easter Ross called Interactive Experiments. There were a number of catalysts to beginning this project: firstly, I decided it was time to bring together my experience of being a carer for young people with autism with my work as a dance artist; secondly, I met, and was completely inspired by, Ellie Griffiths of Upfront Performance Network and asked her to give me some mentoring support; thirdly, I successfully applied for the Janice Parker Projects and Saltire Award Bursary. And so Interactive Experiments began in December 2016.

The original idea was to create an interactive dance performance in collaboration with young people who have learning disabilities. Over the last few years, I've been a playworker for a local organisation called SOAR Youth Projects that runs a playscheme in the school holidays for children and young people who have a range of disabilities. Through SOAR I sent an open invitation to these young people to meet with myself and two other artists to start experimenting with ideas for moving and making music together. The two other artists I'd invited to collaborate with me were musician Quee MacArthur and choreographer and filmmaker Robbie Synge. The Saltire Award Bursary allowed me to contract both of them for the duration of the project and also covered the costs for venue hire.

As a team of artists we ran a series of experimental workshops – beginning on a one to one basis and progressing to small groups of up to 5 young people and their carers. From the outset, it was my intention to create an environment that was very open and where there was minimal verbal instruction. I had already started experimenting with a variety of materials in workshops at a local special school, and had found that these gave me a playful way in to initiating movement, particularly with children who are non-verbal. Quee brought a range of instruments to each workshop and encouraged everyone – young people and parents alike – to be involved in jamming together. And Robbie was brought on board to film the workshops and be an outside eye to help us reflect on what was happening at each meeting.

The following film footage is from workshops throughout the year:

<https://vimeo.com/250758242>

Over the course of the project I've learned much more about each of the young people and their interests and this has caused a shift to happen in my thinking about what this project is. By creating a space where there is opportunity for decision-making and choice, the young people are the ones deciding what is created. And I've become excited by the potential for these young people to create art and to collaborate with artists to achieve that. I'm interested in being led by these young people, to be ready and open to receive their ideas.

Three of the young people we have been working with have shown a particular interest in playing and composing music and as a result Quee and I have run two separate music workshops at my house. This has involved a lot of jamming together and we've made recordings of each session. Here are a couple of examples:

<https://soundcloud.com/user-404734176/gentle>

<https://soundcloud.com/user-404734176/piano-delay>

From this, ideas about how to layer and develop new tracks have emerged and Quee has made a recording to explain how that could be taken further:

<https://soundcloud.com/user-404734176/bell-shake-demo-with-voice>

This is the future for the project and how it has evolved. I want to create opportunities for young people and artists to collaborate together and produce art for ourselves and others to encounter. My ambition is to create an artist collective made up of young people who are based in Easter Ross and visiting artists. I see this collective as beginning with the young people we have already begun working with but then expanding to include others, some of whom we've already met through our workshops in SOAR.

This is clearly a departure from the original idea of creating an interactive performance. Rather than creating one performance, we're now aiming to make a range of work in different art forms and finding ways of presenting these to audiences. Quee has identified the potential for him to collaborate with Dean and Calum to create new recorded music. Robbie would like to collaborate with Ellis and his family to make a film. I want to set up an opportunity for Jamie to direct a live performance. I see my role as having shifted from choreographer to that of artistic director – inviting artists to come to Easter Ross to collaborate with these young people to create art. It is therefore my role to find the organizational structure to enable this to happen, to source the funding, to communicate with the young people and their families to gain their interest and consent, and to continue to find ways to bring them together. Interactive Experiments has developed beyond being just a project – it's a number of ongoing relationships that I am responsible for maintaining and nurturing.

At the end of October, Robbie, Quee and I had a week's residency at the Workroom through a supported Imagine at the Workroom residency. This was a fantastic opportunity to reflect on the project to date and review the film and music recordings that we've made over the year. We also invited a number of other artists to join us in the studio throughout the week to experience some of the ideas we've set up with the young people, to view some of the film footage from the workshops and discuss their reactions and our future aims for the project. They were all hugely supportive and very generous with their feedback, reminding me that there is a strong community that I can tap into for expertise. I am very grateful to Amy, Julie, Sean and Ruth from Indepen-dance, Caroline Bowditch, Penny Chivas, and Luke Pell and Katie Miller from Janice Parker Projects for their enthusiastic support.







Following the chance to participate in *Interactive Experiments* and watching some film footage from our workshops, we asked our guests what stood out for them about the project:

“The emphasis on autonomy and young people having the artistic decision making”,
Amy Stevenson, Indepen-dance

“I was really interested in how much freedom comes when there are less rules. I was really excited by the lack of words and also that there wasn’t a correction of behaviour by you. That it actually is a place for play, not a place for being appropriate or getting it right. ” Caroline Bowditch

Inviting these other artists to join us in the studio, underlined the importance of being able to articulate the project and its values clearly. I knew that this was something I lacked confidence in doing and that I needed help with. When Luke Pell visited us on Tuesday afternoon, he led myself, Quee and Robbie through a process called personal cosmology - a series of exercises about articulating artistic practice. This was extremely useful in helping me to find the words to explain what Interactive Experiments has become and what its core values are:

Luke’s interview with Julia on SoundCloud:

<https://soundcloud.com/user-404734176/luke-interview-with-julia>

By the end of the week, we'd drawn up a mission statement for Interactive Experiments:

- To work creatively and collaboratively with young people to create beautiful, exciting, high quality works of art.
- To create an environment for young people to have artistic voice and means of expression.
- To use minimal instruction and offer opportunities for decision-making and choice.
- To be led by the young people, to be ready and open to receive their ideas.
- To invite other artists to the Highlands to be inspired by young people in Easter Ross.

My ambition for Interactive Experiments is to create an artist collective made up of young people and visiting artists that is supported by an organizational structure. Through discussions with Anita from the Workroom, Noel and Fiona from Imagineate, possible routes were identified in how to take this forward from seeking out organisations to collaborate with to secure funding, to setting up a limited company and aiming for charitable status in the future. What is certain is that as an individual artist, I have faced a number of challenges in developing this project so far and feel a very great responsibility to everyone involved to keep it going.

The next steps for Interactive Experiments are to focus on its sustainability, growth and how to achieve its ambitions. That means sourcing funding through an application to Creative Scotland Open Fund and additional support from local community groups to apply to bodies such as Awards for All Scotland. Fortunately I have secured support from a local community dance company to do this and hope to submit an Open Fund application early in the New Year. Over the next few weeks, I am meeting up with all of the young people and their families to discuss the future plans and share with them our findings from the Workroom residency.

I am extremely grateful for the opportunity that the Saltire Award bursary has afforded me and know that all of the young people involved in the project so far have had a great experience and want to continue to be involved. It is my responsibility to ensure that happens but I know that there is a great deal of support available to help me.