



## An assessment of a participatory theatre project exploring women's relationship with alcohol

### Introduction

Women & Theatre produces high quality new theatre of contemporary relevance working within the arts, health and education sectors. We reflect the language and lives of ordinary people, giving voices to those who are not usually heard. We recognise and represent real people's experiences, embrace cultural diversity and tour theatre to both traditional venues and new spaces. We are well known for our trademark approach of making new theatre from research - using the words and experiences of real people. As a result, our work makes an immediate connection with audiences who can instantly recognise and relate to characters and situations.

The nature of our work has meant that we have become increasingly aware of the part that alcohol plays in many aspects of women's lives. We have developed a wide range of issue based productions including work addressing breast health, domestic violence, healthy eating and genetic counselling. From the research we carried out to develop each of our productions, we noticed that alcohol was a recurring theme in all of them, affecting women's lives in a variety of different ways.

We set ourselves the challenge of creating a participatory programme culminating in an entertaining night out that navigated through a complex and overlapping set of issues, offering a clearer, more informed perspective on contradictory messages about alcohol.

The overall aim of the project was to engage diverse groups of people with high quality theatre and health messages around alcohol. In particular, the practical value of the project would be:

- An exploration of women's relationship with alcohol through the stories and experiences of real women.
- An assessment of how creative interventions such as participatory arts projects and interactive performances, impact on the drinking behaviours of participants and audiences.

By approaching the subject through theatre, developed using our trademark approach of devising work based on community research, we aimed to engage with



diverse audiences in a way that was not preaching or intimidating. By hearing the stories of real women and real situations that they could immediately identify with, they would be able to reflect on their own relationship with alcohol whilst experiencing a piece of high quality theatre.

The final production would be the culmination of a process of research, community engagement and participatory activity, including two week long summer schools and a development weekend to recruit a community cast for the final production, *The Palace of Wasted Dreams*.

Feedback and research was carried out with the audience for the final piece, with additional, follow up research a few weeks after the event.

#### F i n d i n g s

The overall positive response to project from a range of sources has borne out our instinct that an interactive, participatory and entertaining piece of theatre is an effective method of conveying serious messages to a wide audience. The fact that the piece was enjoyable, a “good night out” has not diluted its message, but has instead made it more accessible and ensured a good turnout; box office figures show 82% capacity audiences over the duration of the run, with two completely sold out performances.

The audience for the final production did not feel lectured to or coerced in any way, rather they appreciated the packaging of the message in an entertaining format that still had the power to hit home.

The “floor time” section of the piece with its array of sideshows enabled an element of more overt alcohol education to be inserted. The light hearted format ensured that audiences were happy to actively engage with facts and figures.

The high level of audience responses to feedback questionnaires at each performance is a strong indicator of the depth of audience engagement. Responses were not only high in number but lengthy, eloquent and enthusiastic.

Similarly, the high level and quality of responses to the follow up research with audience members also indicates that the piece has touched something deep within the people who came to see it. The piece has continued to resonate with them weeks after seeing the original performance, encouraging them examine their



own drinking behaviour.

The final show was the culmination of many months of research and community engagement and had the added facet of the participation of a community cast. It is this process and the inclusion of a range of different voices and inputs that has enriched the final production and provided wider awareness of the whole Wasted project. Had the production been created in isolation in the studio, it would not have had the same impact.

By carrying out research with real people and using their own words and experiences directly in the production, the piece has been given real integrity and has enabled it to resonate with audiences. By engaging with a range of community groups, individuals, organisations working in alcohol and other support services, the piece has reflected real issues and experiences that audiences can connect with.

The community participation programme in the months preceding the production created a growing awareness of the project that was wider than regular theatre goers. The feedback and experiences of individuals involved in the participatory programme also contributed to the research element of the project.

The community cast became much more than just that as the project developed. They became creators, contributors and advocates for the piece. They benefited greatly from a number of soft outcomes aside from the main issue of alcohol. There was an overwhelming sense that they had gained self confidence and enjoyed the communal experience of being involved in the journey.

Production values were kept as high as possible despite limited budgets. This ensured a high quality experience for the audience who appreciated the richness and complete transformation of the venue. It also contributed to the sense of value gained by the community cast.

#### Implications

We are encouraged by the success of the project and are looking to develop it further and expose more audiences to the piece. We see the project as a model that can be developed in a variety of ways with an extremely valuable body of material that can be put to a range of different uses:



- Exploring ways of presenting a short, logistically simpler version of the show at festivals or similar events.
- Approaching other venues about remounting the show with new community casts local to that venue and/or presenting the work site specifically, in partnership with a venue. Further local research would be carried out to give each new version a specific local flavour and reflect specific issues and concerns in that locality.
- Using elements of the piece as a basis for new health promotion initiatives or health professionals' training programmes.

#### ALCOHOL INSIGHTS

*Alcohol Insights* are brief summaries of the findings made from research or development grants.

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Further information about *Alcohol Insights* can be found at

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