



WASTED

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

Report for the Alcohol Education and Research Council

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1. About Women & Theatre

Since 1983, Women & Theatre has been creating engaging theatre and using interactive drama to promote the wellbeing of the whole community.

W&T 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.

Our research-based approach and the use of true life testimonies, gives our work a unique honesty and integrity, approaching often difficult subject matter with humour, warmth and sincerity. We are regularly commissioned by a range of organisations who recognise the value and effectiveness of our approach in reaching out into communities and conveying important messages. They also value our research methods for 'getting to the heart' of different issues, through genuine dialogue and engagement as opposed to more tokenistic forms of consultation.

2. Context: Why a theatre production about women and alcohol?

The idea to create a participatory piece of theatre exploring issues around women and alcohol has been developing for several years within the company.

Women's lives and their place in society have changed rapidly in the space of a couple of generations. Most women living in the UK today enjoy a level of personal, social and economic freedom far greater than their grandmothers ever did. The same period has seen a shift in attitudes towards alcohol. With their own money and busier social lives, women are drinking more.

There are many reasons why women use alcohol to excess and many different justifications that women make to themselves, depending on their age or situation. Health messages about alcohol and safe limits are widely available but even women who consider themselves well informed and living a healthy lifestyle often drink far more than recommended safe limits.

Increasingly, women are forming potentially harmful patterns of drinking that they do not recognise as problematic. Drinking to excess is more harmful to women because they metabolise alcohol differently and there are well documented links between heavy drinking and breast cancer, high blood pressure and heart disease.

Excessive alcohol use can lead to injury or women being in vulnerable situations, such as having unprotected sex or at risk of violence. There is growing evidence that more and more young women people are drinking to deliberately get as drunk as possible and favouring stronger drinks with higher alcohol content. Alcohol is involved in 15% of all female deaths of 16 – 24 year olds, the biggest single factor in mortality in this age group.¹

Alcohol is a part of everyday life for the majority of people in the UK. It is an acceptable way to relax and socialise and is widely available at a range of occasions. This very ubiquity makes alcohol difficult to talk about with honesty. Many people who drink to harmful levels would not even recognise that they are doing so, as the perceived stereotype of someone with a drink problem is not something that they associate themselves with.

There are a number of myths surrounding alcohol use that dilute the impact of health campaigns, such as the perception that alcohol is not a drug and that social drinking of whatever amount is not a problem. This is further complicated by a lack of clear guidance on safe alcohol limits and misconceptions as to what constitutes a unit of alcohol in the first place. Government campaigns such as *Know Your Limits* conflict with policies such as 24 hour drinking licenses. Industry measures such as

¹ *The Guardian*, 6 December 2008

printing alcohol unit information on bottles and cans conflicts with special offers in supermarkets and pubs

As drinking patterns change and more alcohol is consumed at home, women are passing on their drinking habits to their children. The Department for Children, Schools and Families' *Youth Alcohol Action Plan* notes that alcohol consumed by young people is increasingly likely to be obtained from home. Whilst a large proportion of this is taken without parental consent, an even larger proportion is being given to children and young people directly by their parents and carers. As more alcohol consumed by adults is drunk at home instead of in pubs etc, they are more likely to drink in front of their children, so passing on their attitudes to drinking and drinking patterns.

Our own work has highlighted and reflected many of these issues. 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 community 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.

These effects stemmed from a variety of causes. Women told us that they used alcohol as an escape from difficult issues such as coping with a diagnosis of cancer or bringing up a disabled child. Its consumption could also be a direct contributory factor in health issues such as breast cancer, obesity or mental illness. Other people's consumption of alcohol also had a bearing on the lives and wellbeing of the women we talked to, from the domestic violence meted out by a partner or worrying about their teenage children hanging out in the local park.

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

3. Aims and objectives

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 reopening of *mac* (Midlands Arts Centre) offered a great opportunity to partner with them in the creation of an innovative new show that had community participation at its heart. With this in mind, the show itself was part of a wider programme of participatory activity which supported the production's development and also the recruitment of its community participants and audiences.

We devised a programme of community research and participatory activities under the *Wasted* banner that would inform the development of the project and raise awareness. This process would culminate in *The Palace of Wasted Dreams*, an interactive cabaret with original songs and a live band, a safe haven licensed for laughing, crying, dancing, singing and thinking on. It was definitely not licensed for preaching or showing anyone up. We set out to create "a place where anything can happen and something always does".

We set the following targets for community engagement:

- 25 community performers
- 700 audience members over 7 performances
- 96 Participants in 8 Research workshop sessions
- 40 Summer School participants across 2 summer schools, 10 sessions each
- 375 audience members at informal previews and sharings
- 200 individuals online

4. Wasted – Production Process

There were two aspects to the project that were symbiotically linked and ran alongside each other. The research and participatory elements began in May 2010, informing and shaping the final live production. As is the nature of live theatre, planning for the live show also began at this time, even though the piece itself had not yet been made. This is the usual way with devised work as timescales relating to venue programming, marketing, fundraising, availability of artists etc all mean that a production schedule and performance dates are set many months in advance.

We put together an artistic team for the live production that included artists with extensive experience of participatory theatre and creating promenade performances:

- Gwenda Hughes, Director
- Clare Edwards, Musical Director
- Ian Chapman, Composer/songwriter
- Designer, Andrew Purvin
- Lighting Designer, Simon Bond
- Stage Manager, Sara Crathorne
- Performers, W&T's Artistic & Associate Directors, Janice Connolly and Terina Talbot

We hosted two trainee placements, Jo Newman as Assistant Director, a Directing & Dramaturgy M(Phil) student at the University of Birmingham and Aisha Taylor as Assistant Stage Manager, a student from Newman College.

"Working with Women & Theatre on The Palace of Wasted Dreams was a fantastic experience. It was brilliant to work with a team of such talented and experienced members of the creative industry, and in my role as Assistant Director it was a really great opportunity to gain an insight into a professional rehearsal process, and watching the piece grow and develop into a production which was exciting, enjoyable, and had a lasting impact on everyone who experienced it." **Jo Newman**

The idea of an informal, cabaret style performance was established early on in the process to give a framework for the development of the piece and because it was felt that this format would enable a wide range of stories, scenes and characters to be introduced using song, spoken word and interaction in a way that was natural and would put the audience at their ease. The format also allowed for a very free reign as to where the narrative would go.

5. Research and development

The research and development phase was carried out between May and December 2010, using a variety of methods; interviews and workshops with individuals and community groups, informal performances, summer schools and a development weekend.

a) Stakeholder event

We held a stakeholder event at *mac* in May where we invited representatives from organisations with an involvement in alcohol and the community which was attended by 18 people including representatives from Aquarius, Dudley PCT, Birmingham City Council Youth Services.

The event combined presentations, informal discussion and icebreaker games. Attendees were invited to contribute to ideas boards and offer anecdotes about their own relationship with alcohol. For example, one ideas board collected the different situations where people would automatically have a drink. Responses varied from nights out, social events to having a bad day at work or for Dutch courage.

The event was helpful in terms of making useful contacts, particularly for recruiting the community cast. Attendees were also able to offer valuable insight into local issues around women and alcohol and all were very supportive of the project and were of the opinion that this was a very timely and necessary piece of work.

b) "Go and Sees"

W&T's Janice Connolly and Terina Talbot and *Wasted* Director Gwenda Hughes had conversations with several companies involved in promenade, site specific and community productions including Birmingham Opera Company and Black Country Touring. These conversations highlighted issues to consider for the production, particularly around the involvement of a large community cast. As a result, we added a role to the team, that of someone to specifically manage the community cast as this was highlighted as a particularly time consuming role, especially as the nature of some of the participants meant they had higher than usual pastoral care needs.

c) Community research

From May – July 2010, community research was carried out with a range of individuals and groups, through interviews and workshops. The aim was to reach a variety of people with different perspectives on alcohol. In total, 20 research sessions were carried out including workshops and individual interviews, with 60 people.

Research participants were identified through an open call put out to a range of individuals and organisations on our mailing list and also to people and organisations identified through the stakeholder event. Other, informal interviews took place in pubs and bars around the city

and following the performances at *mac* and Artsfest following the Summer Schools.

Community groups included a group of 10 women aged between 20 and 60 who are affected by domestic violence from the Allenscroft Project in south Birmingham. The women talked about using alcohol as a coping strategy to mask the abuse that was happening to them and the effect it was having on their children. One woman talked about her embarrassment at being found drunk and unconscious by her own children in a park. Another spoke of how her children watched her drinking and poured it down the sink.

Another session was held with a group of 14 staff and service users from Anawim, an organisation that supports women and their children, especially those vulnerable to exploitation including prostitution. Several of the women had alcohol dependency problems and spoke of how easy it had been for their addiction to creep up. They told of how long it was before they realised it was a problem but how they felt powerless to do anything about it.

A session was held with staff and service users at Aquarius, the Birmingham based provider of alcohol and other addiction services. The team also attended an Aquarius conference, exploring the impacts and issues faced by grandparents who take on a significant caring role for their grandchildren because of the birth parent's use of drugs and alcohol.

Other sessions were held with an Afro Caribbean Elders Group, Muslim women attending Stanhope Community Centre in Highgate and students at Bishop Challoner School.

Individual interviews were carried out with 13 people. Some were carried out as scheduled appointments, with specific people with particular insights, such as a youth worker, a paramedic who deals with the Friday and Saturday night drinking casualties, a bar manager with extensive experience of the new style drinking bars in city centres.

Others took place informally in pubs and bars around the city and included drinkers and landlords.

d) Summer Schools

The summer schools took place at *mac* in July and August. Participants were recruited through W&T and *mac's* marketing materials and 5 places were reserved for referrals of service users through mental health services, probation and local organisations such as Anawim.

Each summer school week followed the same format, with a core member of W&T's artistic team supported by a freelance artist. Participants were guided through a series of activities that were drama based and all with the theme of alcohol.

There were 16 participants across both courses including 3 referrals. Feedback from all participants was extremely positive with 6 going on to attend the development weekend and 3 subsequently joining the community cast.

"An amazing course. Through which I gain inspirational confidence in my arts drama abilities/ skills and an even stronger passion to create through this creative medium. For me this is the beginning – definitely wish to be involved/participate in this production." **Participant**

Following each summer school, participants carried out a short presentation at **mac** as part of the venue's *Tuesday Tunes* slot. The company animated the public areas of **mac** with a variety of interventions including 'Living Statues' of women drinking alcohol. **mac** visitors were invited by host Barbara Nice to comment on these women and why they were drinking.

Poetry and snapshot scenes from the summer schools were also shared at Birmingham City Council's free Artsfest weekend in September with a well attended performance at the Library Theatre in central Birmingham. This also contributed to collecting further research and recruiting the community cast.

e) Devising

The research brought up far more material than could ever be used in the final piece so an ongoing process of revisiting, refining and distilling continued up until the devising weeks in September.

Janice Connolly and Terina Talbot worked with Director Gwenda Hughes with additional contributions from the composer and designer. By the end of the two weeks, an outline script and a number of songs for the final piece had been produced.

The content for the show came directly from the extensive research. The central idea of "The Palace of Wasted Dreams" was a metaphor for what people turn to alcohol for; belonging, escapism, to let off steam, to be part of a community, to laugh, to cry, to dance. The difference with the Palace was that it was saying we can have these things without alcohol. We purposefully wanted to make everyone feel at home and welcomed.

On the last day of the devising, an informal sharing took place attended by other members of the artistic team and stakeholders such as **mac** staff and staff from alcohol charity Aquarius.

f) Content development

Following the devising period, the artistic team worked on their various responses to the process and tightened up the material. Janice did further work on the script and the composer, Ian Chapman, worked on the music in consultation with the artistic team.

The bulk of the script was made up from comments made during the research process. We recorded verbatim monologues from women we had talked to and recorded them to be heard on the end of a phone line. This was in response to women talking about "Drink and Dial" - a classic symptom of alcohol abuse where phone calls are made when drunk that ramble on and are often inappropriate .

Tunes for song lyrics were set and other songs sourced such as "The Story of Little Mary" a Victorian Temperance movement song.

Some items were dropped because of lack of time as we wanted to keep the show to one hour 20 mins.

We prioritised material that had come straight out of the research we did e.g. a conversation between a Landlord and a paramedic about the dangers of women and drinking and the game "A different kind of a lady" which used real stories of what women had got up to under the influence.

An interim design meeting was held before the Development Weekend so that it was possible to share an outline of the final production's design during the weekend. The final designs including a full model were then brought to a production meeting in December.

g) Development weekend

At *mac* on 6 & 7 November 2010, The Director, Musical Director and W&T Artistic team led a weekend of varied activities with 26 participants. The team were able to try out ideas from the devising process and peoples' observations, responses and engagement with the material was thoughtful and insightful. They also worked with Clare Edwards on songs Ian had written, which was fun and quickly established this was a group of very capable singers.

Some participants had been recruited via the Summer Schools and through other projects. Further recruitment took place in the months leading up to November, with the opportunity publicised through our mailing list, the *mac* brochure, W&T and *mac's* websites and other publicity materials.

The weekend genuinely developed the project as a whole. Bonds were formed between people and there was a commonality of purpose and fun that went from strength to strength and served to support the project's success.

6. The production: *The Palace of Wasted Dreams*

W&T artists Janice Connolly and Terina Talbot took the leading roles of “hostesses” Kitty and Stella. The rest of the cast, the “regulars” at the Palace, was made up of 13 community members, a diverse group reflecting different ages, experiences and cultural backgrounds. In addition, the Composer, Musical Director, Assistant Director and Apprentice Project Co-ordinator performed in the production. The Composer played piano and guitar and also recruited members of a band that he performs with to create the house band, *Guridan Thomas & the Draymen*. Between them, the band played a number of instruments including a range of brass, percussion and accordion.

For each performance, audience members were asked to wait in the public areas of *mac* until they were called. Two “cleaners” chatted to them as they waited, before announcements requested they follow the ladies with pink umbrellas who would lead them to the palace. The usual theatre entrances were bypassed, with audiences going through a side door to the lower gallery, up some steps and through an enormous set of doors into the theatre through what is normally the back wall of the space.

On entering the theatre, the audience were presented with a transformed space. The doors opened onto a flight of steps leading down to a red carpet that in turn led to a fountain with a huge, ornate chandelier suspended over it. A bar was in one corner and a podium the other. The overall look included Art Deco and Moroccan influences but with the slightly faded, dated air of holiday resort ballrooms. It was arranged cabaret style, with audience seated in small groups at tables with cloths and candles. The band played as people entered, and the community cast in role as “regulars” at the palace sat at tables and chatted to new arrivals, quickly establishing an informal atmosphere.

The show was led by hostesses Kitty and Stella, two larger than life characters who oversaw the proceedings. They acted as links to different scenes, acts, songs and games, portraying different stories and different aspects of women and their relationship with alcohol. They continued to be the main performers with input from the band and the regulars along with occasional audience participation.

The scenes and characters were developed from material collected during the community research. Different issues relating to alcohol, different reasons why women drink and different viewpoints were included. This idea stemmed from some of the material on the Drinkaware website, that included features on different types of people and situations that were instantly recognisable such as the tired parent with no energy to go out but “rewarding” themselves with a bottle of wine at home instead or peer pressure to join regular after work drinks with colleagues.

The first song, "Why I've Come Out Tonight", was sung by the regulars who stood up from their seats interspersed among the audience. Each had a different tale to tell about why they'd come out and their lives; celebrating reaching their target weight and getting into a smaller size dress, taking their mind off a job interview the next day, reluctantly being dragged out by friends, escaping from home life post divorce and a non drinker who resents being everyone's lift home.

Some of the songs were presented in a cabaret or music hall style, such as "Father Dear Father" sung by two little girls imploring their father to come home from the pub. Others were deliberately poignant, such the song "Bloody Awful" told by a widow who has lost her beloved husband after a long and happy marriage and is struggling to cope alone. There were also short sections of dialogue with Kitty and Stella becoming different characters, such as a landlord of a pub bemoaning the affects that cheap supermarket booze is having on his livelihood while one of his customers, a paramedic, talks about a typical weekend night with hundreds of callouts, mostly drink related and young girls with fake ID.

Some material was also very light hearted, such as the game *A Different Kind of a Lady*, which presented stories about outrageous things that women had done whilst drunk. Kitty and Stella drew the names and details of ladies out of a handbag, such as "Melissa, aged 38, speech therapist and mother of two". From another handbag, they drew out slips of paper with some of the things they had done whilst under the influence, such as urinating in their linen basket, kissing their best friend's son etc. The idea for the piece came from a woman who was interviewed during the research whose young daughter had said to her as she was on her way out for a drink one night, "Please don't drink alcohol – you might turn into a different kind of a lady." Likewise, the "ladies" and their tales were real women's experiences collected during the research phase and from a box in the venue foyer.

"Floor time"

A false interval was announced part way through for audience members to enjoy "Floor time". The regulars brought out a range of activities for people to have a go at, all with an alcohol theme and aiming to inform about the effects of alcohol in a fun and entertaining way. Side shows included:

- Beer goggles that simulated the affects of drinking 10 pints of lager – people were invited to wear them and then try to pick up keys, a mobile phone and some loose change from the floor
- An activity pack with quizzes and puzzles relating to alcohol, such as a game to match up foods and alcoholic drinks with the same calorie count.
- A group of telephones with recordings of monologues based on research interviews

- A front door where people were blindfolded, spun around and then attempted to put the key in the keyhole.
- A hangover box sculpture that people peeped into with the sights and smells of a typical hangover
- Oversized body suits worn by two of the regulars with labels describing the affects that alcohol has on different parts of the body.
- A PowerPoint slideshow on a laptop of a fictitious young woman's Facebook page full of stories of wild nights out, rip off taxis and a drunken car crash.

The bar that formed part of the set became an actual bar, with **mac** bar staff selling non alcoholic cocktails. Very few people chose to leave the space and go to the venue bar and buy an alcoholic drink, although it was possible for people to leave the theatre if they wanted to.

Also during floor time, the programmes or Members' Handbooks were distributed. As well as the usual performance credits, these were produced in the form of full colour brochures with a history of the Palace of Wasted Dreams and a map of its travels. The back four pages were given over to factual advice on alcohol, suggestions on making changes to drinking habits and ways of saying no to a drink, but presented in a light hearted and non-judgemental way. Contact details for Aquarius and where to find more information on alcohol or support services were included.

7. Audience research

The total audience figure was 633 over seven performances, with two selling out completely. The usual capacity for the theatre is 220 but this was limited to 110 because of the cabaret style format of the piece. Feedback forms were inserted into the programmes and in total, 84 were completed and collected in after the performances. The forms were kept very brief to ensure a good level of response, asking just two questions and inviting other comments.

Audience questionnaire response summary:

Total responses: 84

Q1 – Have you found out something about alcohol that you didn’t know before?

Yes	47	56%
No	36	43%
No response	1	1%

Q2 - Has seeing the show made you think about your own alcohol consumption or that of someone you know?

Yes	68	81%
No	12	14%
No response	4	5%

Audience comments were universally positive, with many people writing lengthy comments, taking time over their responses.

As well as writing in the space for individual comments, several people added their own comments to the yes/no options on the questionnaire. In response to the question “Have you found out something about alcohol that you didn’t know before”, several respondents indicated particular facts that they had picked up from the production. The calorie level of alcohol as demonstrated in one of the activities in the pack seems to have taken many people by surprise.

The response to the question “Has seeing the show made you think about your own alcohol consumption or that of someone you know” was particularly positive at 81%. Some people put additional comments about wishing they’d brought particular people with them. One person added that they had been attending alcohol counselling services for a number of years but had been brought face to face with

the reality of their behaviour and felt compelled to address it seriously for the first time stating “you know what you should do but do you do it?”

Of the general comments, most were about how the piece had managed to balance being funny and entertaining whilst still carrying a serious message and how effective this was. There were also several suggestions to take the piece to schools, community centres etc.

Audience responses:

- Used to work in alcohol field, so think it's a fab way to raise awareness through different ways as it can affect us all.
- A brilliant piece of theatre that is thought provoking and informative
- I really enjoyed my visit to the Palace – it made me laugh, cry and think.
- Loved the set, well thought out, great having the cast scattered in the audience, lose the conga at the end though
- It was a bitter sweet journey, not too heavy, not too light.
- Great to have live and original music in the production
- Fantastic! I could've been watching the rugby but don't feel like I missed it at all. I've never been to such an interactive production, but I'd love to go to more like it.
- An unusual and original and unorthodox show. Happy party atmosphere and good original music. Good fun and a good antidote to the stress of the working week.
- Friendly and comfortable environment. Staging worked brilliantly and enabled participation in a non-threatening way. The singing from within the audience was a pleasant and welcome surprise!

8. Follow up research

The audience questionnaire also included a tick box for people to indicate if they would be willing to answer more questions a few weeks after the show. 58, over two thirds, said that they would. A short email questionnaire was sent out to these people after a period of reflection of three weeks. 16 people responded to the email.

Response summary:

Q1 – Since seeing the Palace of Wasted Dreams, have you thought about the issues raised in the production?

Yes	16	100%
No	0	0%

Q2 Have you talked to someone else about the production?

Yes	16	100%
No	0	0%

Q3 Have you thought about your own alcohol consumption in any way?

Yes	10	62.5%
No	6	37.5%

Q4 - If you picked up an activity pack or a programme at a performance, have you looked at it since then?

Yes	13	81%
No	2	12.5%

Q5 - If "The Palace of Wasted Dreams" was to be performed again, would you recommend it to a friend?

Yes	16	100%
No	0	0%

Whilst this is only a small sample, this still represents almost 20% of the original respondents to the audience questionnaires at the performance, a very high level of response. Such a small sample makes it difficult to make any concrete assertions, but the very high proportion of positive responses must demonstrate that this has been an effective way of highlighting the issues involved. Likewise, the high level of engagement in the feedback process itself is a strong indication that the piece has affected the people who saw it. As with the audience questionnaire, some

respondents made lengthy, insightful and enthusiastic replies indicating how deeply the piece had affected them.

The most common type of comment was that the piece was effective because of its combination of serious issue being addressed through an entertaining format. There were several comments that described on the individual's reflection on their own drinking.

Comments on why "*The Palace of Wasted Dreams*" should be performed again:

- Because it was so different from anything else I have ever seen! I thought having the crew on the tables really meant you felt part of the whole experience!
- I think it was a clever, moving and hilarious reflection on how women can rely on, escape with and be damaged by alcohol, without feeling too 'preachy' or judgmental. The show was very unique in its set-up and took the audience on a roller coaster of emotions - laughter one minute, and harrowing honesty the next. Rather like the effects of alcohol in itself at times!
- The production was realistic with the issues that females have. It would be a great touring company for teenagers at school/youth clubs. The cast were excellent and was very enjoyable as well as educational.
- Because some have said they have friends who said "wished I'd known" and would attend another chance.
- Because it is awesome, fun and thought provoking, interactive almost Brechtian style, open inclusive non-snobby theatre experience all round. My alcohol consumption has gone down considerably and I sometimes do not drink at all when I go out now, which is unusual for me, the activity pack is very persuasive with just facts.
- Because it's very enjoyable, inclusive, creative, and has a serious message. A good night out! Everyone I know who saw it loved it.
- The performance hit on the real emotional (non medical issues) surrounding our relationships to drinking and alcohol: The many, many reasons why I and many others have 'issues' with alcohol. Wasted was not your average 'units a week' lecture or guilt mongering. It picked apart the social aspects of drinking; drinking with your mates, the social implications of choosing not to drink, drinking alone, binge drinking, drunken regrets, drunken happy and sad memories, the effect that these things have on our 'sober' lives and our psyche, the reasons why women might drink and not (as seems to be the norm) on the stats. It also allowed moments of reflection amidst the comedy that I think tapped into vulnerable aspects of the audience that due to the comedy and open atmosphere had been left unguarded. These moments were key in allowing the audience to

regress to lower moments in their own lives where alcohol, fear or stress may have been a factor- even if the subject matter was unrelated- in order to become even more open to the understanding; 'you are not alone.' Cheesy yes, but in my opinion the truth!

Wasted didn't seem to label, chastise or guilt its audience members instead it celebrated fun, friendship and camaraderie – this allowed the creation of an open atmosphere in which people felt more able to approach the underlying and more serious issues well beyond the performance space – often in to the bar ironically. This didn't matter though, the point wasn't for the audience to leave feeling ashamed with plans of becoming teetotal but to leave thinking about the effects of drinking on ourselves emotionally and physically and also to leave with a (perhaps subconscious) intention to keep an eye out for those close to us who may also be struggling with issues surrounding alcohol consumption.

The performance had an essence of a chat with friends who understand what we are going through and who are very much in the same boat; most of us drink, usually too much and we all have regrets and fears and not just about alcohol – alcohol just sometimes makes us feel worse (sometimes better) but we 'are not alone.' I don't want to get too sappy but it really did hit home with me. Mostly because I realized that I am not the only one who feels dreadful in myself after a drunken night and that I'm not the only one who has regrets and feels I may hit it too hard. I am also not the only one who allows alcohol and being drunk upset who I am as a sober person.

- I would, without hesitation, recommend 'The Palace'. Myself and my partner (there is much use of alcohol in same sex relationships) thought it excellent. Subtle in places but nevertheless powerful, sad, funny and poignant.
- Enjoyable and thought provoking evening out, focuses attention on an issue that, perhaps, people have ceased to pay attention to in the news/that can sometimes feel more abstract than personal/can sometimes be difficult to recognise in yourself.

Other Comments:

- Great production very different and enjoyable way of getting across a serious message. Well done and the set was brilliant
- I thought the interactive stands during the interval were a really good idea, but unfortunately my partner and I couldn't get around them all in time! Perhaps more time to do so?
- I thoroughly enjoyed the evening and it couldn't have come at a better time. Things were a little crazy in my life and like most women I am typical of not

allocating any time for ME. My very good friend made sure this was time for US, something that I don't usually do and to be quite honest on the day had a million things to do and was running incredibly late even to make the production. The evening stimulated a lot of self reflection at a time when I felt that I needed to regain some inner strength. I recognized myself in some of the portrayals of women throughout my life some humorous and some tragically sad. Did I tell anyone - yes of course. Did I think about my alcohol, consumption - yes I did, however was a little to free with it that night. But only with my friend I was at no risk. Whilst 'drank like a fish' would be the term I acknowledge that I would need to consider why this night over any other – was I free for the night?? Was I trying to capture as much as I could in a short few hours?? Was I that stressed that it just seemed like a natural response?? Probably all of them. Have I picked up the pack - yes loved the production of it. Thank you for creating the right space for me.

- The cast and crew were amazing, the two leading ladies captured the audience. It was great having the choir sitting with the audience.

9. Community participants

There were 13 members of the community cast so an informal approach to feedback was carried out. Feedback was collected throughout all the different stages of the production, the summer schools, development weekends and rehearsals. A feedback discussion with cast members was held on the last night of the show and written feedback was invited by email.

Feedback from the community cast was overwhelmingly positive, with everyone stating how much they had enjoyed the project and what they had gained from it. Everyone enjoyed the sense of community and camaraderie that they had felt. In particular, they all expressed how respected they felt by the artistic team and how their input and efforts felt genuinely valued. Several noted their confidence had been boosted and they had done things that they hadn't thought they'd be able to.

Some participants noted that they would have liked more opportunity to take a larger role in the piece although recognised that to achieve this would have meant more commitment. Recognising that different people are able to commit different amounts of time to a project such as this, we have discussed having two levels of involvement for future projects so that there is scope for greater involvement for those who can make the time commitment. This would also enable more artistic opportunities for the piece produced.

The participants echoed the audience feedback regarding the balance of presenting an enjoyable evening's entertainment and conveying a serious message and felt that had been achieved by the changes in mood and tempo. There was a general agreement that this was an effective method of putting across a serious health message and that they felt that the piece was not hectoring or judgemental, neither did it make light of the issue.

Half said that they had learned something from taking part and most said that it had made them think about their own alcohol use. Everyone said the piece had made them think about the alcohol consumption of someone that they knew. One cast member felt that there was a particular family member with alcohol issues who they had wanted to see the show but had felt unable to ask her to come. She felt that because she was in the show, it would have been too obvious why she was asking her and that it would have done more harm than good. When asked if she felt that might have been an issue for other audience members, her response was no, because it was a night out; it was her direct involvement in the piece that made it a difficult situation with this one individual.

The involvement of a community cast has meant that the production had an in built team of advocates for the show and its issues. The experiences and comments of some of the cast were included in the final production or in supporting material such as the telephone monologues during floor time. The cast took on board their roles as

educators and enjoyed talking to audiences explaining the different side shows and demonstrating them.

Community cast comments

- It's like having a baby, it's been beautiful, watching it come to fruition.
- I loved it, it has wakened something inside me
- We have all been able to put our own colour into it
- Everyone's views have been respected
- It hasn't been "exclusive" - I've been spoken to like a human being!
- I really feel an effort has been made, people genuinely want to know what I think.
- The best theatre experience I have ever had!
- I used to act and sing but never thought I'd do it again – I loved doing my solo.
- My son bought me my place on the Summer School as a gift for me to do something for myself and I'm so glad he did.
- It was awesome, fun and thought provoking, interactive almost Brechtian style, open inclusive non-snobby theatre experience all round. My alcohol consumption has gone down considerably and I sometimes do not drink at all when I go out now, which is unusual for me, the activity pack is very persuasive with just facts.
- Having only moved to Birmingham a few months ago and on my own, I can't thank Women & Theatre enough for providing a space in which to meet like-minded people and have a good laugh. I felt wholly welcomed throughout every minute of rehearsals, being backstage, onstage and in the bar afterwards. I have stayed in contact with all members of the cast and have formed good friendships with many of them. In all honestly this project was one of the best things I've been a part of in years. So thank you!
- I have wished I had invited more people; one, because I was so proud to be a part of it but more importantly, because some of the issues covered are issues that I feel I cannot broach with some of my friends. I now think that the issues of drinking to cloak grief and inner unhappiness and general binge drinking were covered empathetically and without preaching. Now I need an equivalent production for being a shopaholic, spendthrift, call it what you will... Thank you for the opportunity. I am very pleased to have been a part of such a worthwhile venture. I met wonderful people who willingly gave of themselves. It gave me a renewed confidence in human beings. It really did!

10. Marketing and promotion

Marketing for the production and the wider project was carefully considered and planned as we were conscious from the outset that we needed to give out a balanced message; too serious and no-one would come, too light hearted and audiences might get the wrong impression. A marketing strategy was developed including a range of public engagement methods to raise awareness as widely as possible.

Print - Early in the research process, a generic postcard was produced to highlight the different aspects of the project and promote the summer school and community cast opportunities. The print was distributed until it was superseded by the main *The Palace of Wasted Dreams* print.

In order to encapsulate the complexity of the themes & stories of *The Palace of Wasted Dreams*, we commissioned an illustrator (Bianca Prentice) to produce a hand-drawn image, inspired by vintage music hall publicity, featuring characters inspired by the *Palace*. A4 posters and A5 flyers were produced and distributed through mailing lists, displays at **mac** and distribution runs to arts venues and target neighbourhoods in Birmingham.

Online - W&T's facebook fan page regularly provided its 370 followers with updates about the show, rehearsal images, and press coverage. Members of the audience and community cast were in regular contact with W&T via the page and fans increased by 40 through January & February, the main period of *Wasted* activity. *Wasted* was also featured on W&T and **mac's** websites, and in both organisation's email newsletters. An e-flyer for *The Palace of Wasted Dreams* was produced.

A local filmmaker attended the summer schools and created short films that were used on **mac's** plasma screens to promote the event. However the decision was taken that due to the scope of the artistic development between the summer schools and final scripting, the films were not representative enough of the final performance to serve as a key marketing tool.

Press coverage - Preview coverage was secured in Birmingham Mail and Metro. Leigh Mancarini from the Metro attended a performance of *The Palace of Wasted Dreams* and gave a very positive review. Online blogs including Created in Birmingham and Spaghetti Gazetti also featured the show.

"This was neither an overly moralistic nor judgemental show... A rollercoaster journey to explore how women use – and often abuse – alcohol for a variety of reasons... [moments] had the audience in stitches... [the hostesses] kept the tone of the show playful and fun, and then drew the audience into moments of poignancy with their delicate solos." **Leigh Mancarini, Metro**

11. Reflection against aims and objectives

The whole project has been a journey for us. It has been satisfying both for us and the participants for there to be a progression from one engagement opportunity to another, through the Summer Schools and Development weekend on to the main production. We aim to continue to keep in touch with participants with a view to building a pool of community performers.

We are inspired to explore further possibilities of what we can achieve together by working with a venue and its local communities. We are confident that this is an effective model to convey serious messages and encourage participation, breaking down barriers to real engagement with the arts and increase social capital. We want to examine further our relationship with audiences and explore how we can use informal performance formats to attract new theatre goers.

We have on the whole met our targets for community and audience engagement and have been encouraged by the volume and depth of responses that this has been a production that has genuinely touched and affected those involved in it, whether as participants and audience members.

Community engagement statistics

	Target	Actual
Community performers	25	13
Audience members for final production	700	633
Performances	7	7
Participants in research	96	63
Research sessions	8	20
Summer School participants	50	16
Summer School workshop sessions	20	20
Audience members at informal previews and sharings	375	295
Informal previews and sharings	6	4
Individuals online	200	428

W&T has produced many issue based theatre productions over the years, usually presented in informal, non theatre settings and commissioned by partners. This production marked a shift for the company in that it combined the participatory element of our work with a theatre based presentation and so we were keen to ensure that it was as effective as possible in conveying its message to its audience.

The report commissioned by AERC, *Review of Literature Relating to Theatre in Education as a Tool in Alcohol Education* has a number of recommendations. Whilst the report relates specifically to Theatre in Education (TIE) carried out in schools with

children, we felt that the same issues applied to ensure that the project had a real and lasting effect on the adults watching or taking part. From the report, *Wasted* addressed the following recommendations:

- *Be based on a needs assessment and targeted for the particular audience*
By developing the piece from community research with a range of local women, *Wasted* reflected genuine local issues and concerns. Now that the framework has been established, this is a model that we can repeat with other venues in other parts of the country, tailoring the production to each community.
- *Be delivered in partnership with the whole (school) community*
Wasted involved a range of different interventions and so engaged with different people on different levels. Our marketing campaign raised awareness of the project across the city. The production process and related activity took place over six months so awareness and engagement built over a sustained period.
- *Use participatory methods and a workshop*
Wasted went further than this in that it involved members of the community in the actual production as well as the activities in the lead up including the Summer Schools, development weekend etc.
- *Have a well planned programme of preparatory and follow up work*
Research in the community before the project was followed up by revisiting some of the same people and groups to see how their attitudes and behaviour has been affected by the project. The high level of response and engagement in this process indicates the deep impact the piece has had on audiences and participants.
- *Be delivered by actors who are skilled in participatory teaching methods and who are well informed about alcohol related issues*
All our creative staff are skilled and experienced education practitioners and underwent a period of research on alcohol related issues prior to the project.
- *Ensure actors are trained in child protection issues and confidentiality when working in schools*
All creative staff involved were fully trained and experienced in these issues.
- *Where possible, commission new programmes based on thorough needs assessment rather than an "off the shelf" package*
Wasted was planned in close partnership with *mac* (Midlands Arts Centre) who were committed to this partnership and the opportunities it offered to them. The project has fostered an extremely fruitful and mutually beneficial relationship. It has proved to be a useful means of making links with communities physically close to the venue but who do not currently access its activities.

Through W&T's strong community links in the Balsall Heath and Highgate areas of the city, we have been able to involve people from these areas and effectively

broker a new relationship between them and the venue. It has already been a satisfying process to work closely with the venue and its local communities to provide opportunities for meaningful engagement.

We are already discussing with *mac* ways for this relationship to continue and develop into other projects over the next few years, starting with a planned smaller scale community production later in 2011 involving older people.

12. Conclusions and implications

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.

Feedback overwhelmingly demonstrates that 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. There were aspects of the production that were fairly dark and poignant, relating to some of the more serious repercussions of alcohol use, but these were rendered digestible by the music hall style format of the piece, counterpointing pathos with humour.

The "floor time" section of the piece with its array of sideshows enabled an element of more overt alcohol education to be inserted. Again, the light hearted format ensured that audiences were happy to actively engage with facts and figures in a way that they perhaps would not if they had for example, been given the same information in a leaflet by a GP.

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.

However, it is not just the production, *The Palace of Wasted Dreams* that has created this engagement. 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.

A long lead in time is necessary to prepare, plan and develop the different aspects of the programme and to recruit partners and participants.

The community cast became much more than just that as the project developed. They became creators, contributors and advocates for the piece. It is clear that their involvement has made them consider the issues in the piece both in regard to themselves and people that they know.

The community cast benefitted 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.

Throughout the process, we ensured that production values were high 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.

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.

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www.drinkaware.co.uk

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www.knowyourlimits.info/TheEffectsOfAlcohol.aspx

Additional documents:

- Wasted Flyer
- The Palace of Wasted Dreams Flyer
- Members' Handbook
- Activity pack
- Script