

**'Join the Fight'  
'Tall Tales 2018'  
High Peak Community Arts**

**Nick Nuttgens**



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## **Executive Summary**

'Join the Fight' was the fifth annual performing arts show produced in High Peak Community Arts' 'Tall Tales' project for young people aged 8 to 18. The content came from an Easter Young Writers' Camp which was inspired by the centenary of some women gaining the vote. The camp visited the People's History Museum in Manchester and looked broadly at a theme of 'campaigns that changed the world'.

Key to the success of this year's Tall Tales was the recruitment of a team who understood the history of the project and the ambitions for 2018. This team have been able to balance consideration of the process and final product to make the experience valuable for both the young participants, the artist team themselves and the audiences who watch the final show.

### Process

Tall Tales 2018 began with the commitment of this team to take risks on a fluid, participant-led approach to the process. The operation of this model relied on daily de-briefs where participant engagement was discussed and timetables for the summer school were planned day by day. There was a wide variety of arts on offer – music, singing, writing, drama, dance, visual and digital arts and film and animation – and participants' personal goals were tracked.

From the early sessions onwards young people were introduced to the methods and tools for devising, with a gradual development from the first evening sessions on estates through to more intensive creation on the Summer School.

Because of this the young people showed a strong sense of ownership, and in the case of an older group (13+), they developed a degree of autonomy in developing their own section of the work. The attitude that every young participant was themselves an artist was taken for granted, which on the one hand gave the work authenticity, but also stretched participants to negotiate artistic differences and find solutions to their own challenges.

At the heart of this was the example of team collaboration being set by the artists and staff themselves.

The evaluation has identified areas to work on, like the inevitable challenge of behaviour management, or meeting the constant demand for popular activities like playing the drum kit, or how to get more young people to take responsibility for tidying up. Other challenges include how to smooth the transition from open, creative devising to disciplined rehearsal. Part of this is how to facilitate deeper artistic reflection by the young people and the balance the artistic direction of the final piece of work. The team also want to work on building the skill levels of the more experienced, whilst keeping the beginners actively involved, and there was also a desire to experience each others' working methods and gain a better understanding of the team's skills.



## Product

Tall Tales 2018 produced *Join the Fight*, a promenade show set around the town of New Mills. The project theme of political action, with the centenary of British women gaining the vote, was given a modern relevance with interesting ideas from the young people who were concerned about the phenomenon of fake news and online manipulation of facts.

The final show heavily featured the character of Tragic Clown, who twisted reality for his own amusement. It opened with a Picket Line, leading to a Gameshow, dance from the Suffragettes, a Nasty News fake news conference and then a fight back led by the Truth Ninja(s) and finished with original songs in a local café and a final dance piece out on the main street of New Mills.

The theme was enjoyed and appreciated by the audience, who found the greatest quality in the variety of artforms and their enthusiastic combination in music, dance and design that 'peaked the audience's interest'.

The music pieces were strong and had a pliability which allowed new members to slot in or replace. The dance and movement pieces showed different styles, size of groups and combinations of performers, and the visual arts were eye-catching as props and sets, but kept the naivety of young people's work.



In evaluation the team reflected on the difficulties caused by cast changes, but across the breadth of experience in the team, this is acknowledged as a feature of working with a representative mixture of young people. They also reflected on the challenges for a promenade piece to hold the backbone of a narrative, particularly when the artistic direction is fluid. There is also a need to balance the often surreal

ideas from young people with creating a coherent narrative for the audience.

Overall quality in this work should be judged holistically, as reflected in Arts Council England's *Quality Principles*, which Tall Tales meets strongly. *Join the Fight* was a very good piece of work, which gave the young people a positive yet challenging artistic opportunity. However, the team are keen to define their own criteria for excellence in the final product more clearly.

## **Background and structure of the project**

'Join the Fight' was the fifth year of High Peak Community Arts' 'Tall Tales' project for young people aged 8 to 18. Its structure was similar to previous years. A term of preparatory workshops in music, art and writing were held in two different youth centres, stemming from three days of inspiration on the theme at the Young Writers' Camp. Then, in the summer holidays, a six-day summer school was held, culminating in public performances. In 2018, two performances were held at the end of the summer school and, six weeks later, the show was repeated as part of a local festival. The project was expertly produced and coordinated by Sophie Mackreth, the youth arts programme manager at High Peak Community Arts (HPCA). The creative work was led by five professional artists, supported by two youth arts workers and a small number of adult volunteers. All sessions were offered for free and a minibus was laid on to transport the young people between venues.

In addition, Arts Award was offered by HPCA on an optional basis, as in previous years. Participation in Tall Tales projects such as Join the Fight can be used as evidence for portfolios. Several of this year's participants had previously achieved Arts Award at bronze or silver level, but nobody has yet completed gold. This year 13 have achieved an Explore certificate, 2 Bronze and 1 silver, with another 10 certificates underway.

The staff team comprised:

Sophie Mackreth, youth arts worker and project lead

Gareth 'gee kut' Carbery, music

Lucy Jackson, writing

Mark Turton, film and animation

Lydia Meiying, visual arts

Trixi Bold, dance

Liz Sexton-Jones, youth arts support worker

Harriet White, youth arts support worker



In this report, the staff are referred to by their first names. Other names used are those of young participants; where sensitivity seemed to be in order, I have used only initials.

High Peak Community Arts provides opportunities for people to participate in high-quality creative arts projects. It aims to respond to real community needs and concerns within the local area, supporting community development and inclusion. Its work with young people is inspired by Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which calls for young people to be given the opportunity to express their views and see those views acted on. The High Peak area of Derbyshire contains five market towns: Buxton, Glossop, New Mills, Whaley Bridge and Chapel-le-Frith and many villages within a large rural area, much of it moorland. Glossop and Buxton, from where the 'Tall Tales' participants come, contains some areas of relative deprivation.

The 'Join the Fight' participants were mostly white, although a handful were of South Asian, East Asian or Caribbean Origin. They were of mixed abilities: some were confident and articulate; others struggled to articulate their thoughts and feelings. Several children appeared to have some degree of social or learning difficulty; others could be erratic in their behaviour.

The parameters set for 'Join the Fight' grew out of the general mission of HPCA and the particular history of 'Tall Tales'. A strong commitment to inclusion and the personal and social development of the young people grows out of HPCA's mission. But several specific decisions were made by the staff team as a result of previous experiences with the 'Tall Tales' project.



- HPCA likes to ring the changes. Putting on a promenade performance in New Mills was a new venture that lent itself to the creation of themed fragments that could be performed in different locations.
- Because of some resistance to particular art forms and some drop outs in previous years, a decision was made to personalise the programme, allowing the young people to choose which art form they wanted to focus on.
- A number of previous participants were now in their mid-late teens and had expressed their readiness for trying a different approach from the younger ones. HPCA decided to give them space to explore their own interests whilst also challenging some of them to step forward into mentoring and leadership. During the preparatory workshops in 2018, this 13+ group decided to focus on LGBT issues.
- In previous years, an overall Artistic Director had taken responsibility for driving the project towards its final performance but some of the participants had resented being told what to do and wanted more ownership of the product. In 2018, therefore, HPCA decided that the ethos of the summer school would be highly participatory - for both young people and staff. No overall artistic director was appointed, although Sophie Mackreth held a clear coordinating role. Team meetings were built into each day's plan, so as to ensure good communications, to plan / direct collectively, and to nip any behaviour problems in the bud. The staff team was chosen with this approach in mind.

## Desired outcomes for 'Join the Fight'

Desired outcomes were stated in the funding applications made to the National Foundation for Youth Music (NFYM) and Arts Council England (ACE). For the evaluation process, I created a matrix (see appendix 1, pg 28) with a selection of evaluation objectives. My aims were to:

- Reduce the number of objectives to a manageable list
- Cross reference the NFYM and ACE criteria and principles
- Incorporate the learning from previous HPCA evaluations, especially about the attributes and commitments that make for the best staff team, as perceived by previous young participants.

The staff team were asked to monitor all of the outcomes in section 1 (participants' engagement and artistic development) and to choose three from section 2 (quality in project delivery) for their personal/professional development. The thinking here was that experienced professionals know best for themselves what they could sometimes pay more attention to, and that concentrating on a limited number of personal objectives would tend to sharpen up their practice and thus improve their impact on the young people.



The young people were each asked to choose a personal goal and were given support to think about it. Not all wanted their goal to be specifically musical or artistic. For example, one boy plays second cornet, trumpet and piano at school and home but he said that his goal for the summer school was to “get better on social skills, learning to control my anger, when people say something stupid just to insult my intelligence.” Another older participant aimed to “working with dance artist to learn choreography techniques.” Younger participants picked out key skills they wanted to develop in drumming, keyboard, guitar etc., and chose whether they wanted to perform live or take more backstage roles.

## Reflections on 'Join the Fight'

The reflections below draw largely from the thoughtful evaluations conducted by the artistic team, supplemented by material gathered in different forms from the young people. I have also included some suggestions of my own, *which I have put in italics*, not to emphasise them but to distinguish them. The HPCA team know their participants far better than I and my suggestions may not be appropriate.



*I should state my own bias upfront, as a former director of a youth theatre based in a professional theatre, in favour of the artistic and personal development that is possible when young people achieve disciplined, high quality performance. However, I also know from experience of working in community and youth work settings with young people from a range of backgrounds, including the less privileged, that you won't get a high quality product unless the process has engaged the young people's interest, and engaged with their difficulties; they need to be supported as they explore what is meaningful to them on their own terms, not inducted into a particular set of values and behaviours that characterise what might be described as 'mainstream' theatre. At its best, youth theatre that combines excellent process with artistic discipline results in performances which nobody else could have given so well.*



## The Process: what went well

### Evaluation objective A: Engagement and teamwork by the young people; pastoral issues

#### **Ethos**

A new and risk-taking commitment was made to a participant led approach, with a view to maximising engagement, minimising drop outs and challenging the young people to take artistic responsibility. In particular the 13 plus group were given a lot of autonomy and as a result felt they had ownership of their chosen theme and way of presenting it.



#### **Structure**

A new structure was tried where every young person had a taster of every art form on the first day but thereafter chose a focus. The staff team found a way to accommodate the young people's interests within a flexible, day to day rehearsal schedule, that was posted up each morning. A wide variety of art forms was on offer – music, singing, writing, drama, dance, visual arts, prop making, film and animation. The visual art sessions were offered as a drop-in for young people who wanted a break from the other activities, as well as being the workshop for making props and set. To a large extent, the music sessions were open for drop in as well; at least two people in the final band, including the lead singer, abandoned their original artform choice and focused on music instead.



Key to this year's process was the meeting at the end of the day when the artists agreed a rating for each young person's engagement and teamwork, the two behaviours deemed to be fundamental to the achievement of the other desired outcomes. Lucy said, "This was very helpful in ensuring everyone's progress was discussed and to ensure development of the show." Sophie said, "It needed a willingness on the part of the team. It was hard work actually, those meetings after the end of days were long. On Friday night we were dropping asleep!" Careful attention was paid to managing the needs and troubleshooting the problems of several young people with special needs. Liz said, "Every single person at some point engaged." Some young people found the situation challenging at times but on the whole what I observed was a general buzz of happy activity and a deepening of engagement as the summer school went on.

## Numbers

Numbers are up year on year (from 25 in 2016 to 30 in 2017 and up to 36 in 2018) which meant that there was a combination of experienced and new young people. Both sides appeared to benefit from working together as was seen when Angel began to lead on music jamming in lunch and break times. Some older participants were challenged to take a mentoring role, and took the responsibility seriously, including two who themselves had some degree of learning difficulty.

“Georgia took a lead vocal part in the dance piece. She showed great voice projection and dance leadership skills.” Trixi

“Angel this summer was amazing. She’s taken the initiative right from the start – even on lunch times she was going into the room, singing songs and organising other people – “you go on drums, you on keys...” Gareth & Lucy



## Evaluation objectives B-D (YM outcome 2): musical/artistic development of the young people

### Personal goals

Sophie tracked the participants’ personal goals and assessed most as having achieved it, with around half of the group exceeding it, and three not having reached it but nonetheless having shown some degree of engagement or learning.

Sophie comments: “collating the evaluation suggests participants divide into 3 groups – those who attended term time workshops only (24), those who attended everything (23) and those from other projects joining the Summer School (12), including 18 who have participated for between 2 and 7 years.

Everyone in these groups participated in ensemble music making, just over 50% for the first time. They all improved in the ability to play together.

Goal setting was recorded in the lead up to the Summer School, so only 60% formally set a goal, out of which over 90% achieved this, or another goal chosen through taking up new opportunities. Around a third of participants achieved something significantly greater than their goal.”

Each day, the staff noted particular achievements on Post Its, including some notable breakthroughs, e.g. a young person dancing on stage for the first time, taking on a leading singing role, showing an interest in new art forms, or getting over their nerves to perform a solo song.

## Skills development

The majority of the young people were observed to have developed their skills in either music, dance, film or visual arts, even though they didn't always find the changes easy to articulate. For example, A did art on the first day but then changed to music and became the lead singer. She was not able to explain why she made that choice, or preferred simply to be intuitive. When asked "How did you get from here to there?" she said, "Guesswork."

Matthew said, "Playing bass was completely new... It just came to me. I'm pretty bass-ic!"

Rosie said, "I did every single song [in the music team]. I did [Tall Tales] last year [but] I didn't perform." She explained why she likes working with Gareth: "I used to play the guitar with one of my teachers in my school but I stopped going because I hardly knew how to do it and I got bored... but Gareth helps you, and he's funny. I didn't get bored at all."



## Evaluation objectives E-G: (YM outcome 4): collaborative creative working by the young people

### The devising process

Some skills were taught during the summer term workshops in preparation for the summer school. Key concepts were explored and draft scripts and characters were developed, so that there were ingredients to work with from the first day of the Summer School.

Sophie comments: "In Tall Tales those who progressed to the Summer School had the most scope to develop the skills of teamwork, empathy and creating collective work. These participants are on a journey now to continue into next year's Young Writers' Camp leading to another round of Tall Tales, the ethos of which is to develop team, collaborative and collective production skills, which is central to

the purpose of community arts. On our weekly and summer school register we tracked teamwork for the first time this year. This confirmed what we witnessed, that 27 out of 35 successfully developed their collective working skills, and in addition 13 who couldn't come to the Summer School still developed their teamwork skills and took part in making collective music."

Some of the experiences that the young people cited as having being particularly enjoyable were not related to the production of the show, rather to the opportunity of following their own creative impulses and working with friends. J (9) was one of younger girls who had found it hard to engage last year. This time however she was



engrossed in making a teddy bear house with a friend. She said that she also liked the sewing. Similarly, Charlie PH (12) and some of the other boys really enjoyed building a big wall out of cardboard and making “a humongous slide.” For some, Tall Tales is primarily a summer playscheme.

### Evaluation objectives H-M: collaborative creative working by the staff team

#### Ownership

In interviews and conversations with the young people, especially past participants, it was clear that the young people had a strong sense of ownership over the Tall Tales project. Charlie L (9) said of last year: “Everyone had to help each other, like, say ‘you do this and you do the other part.’” You could choose what you wanted to do: “My sister did the big parts. I were helping Gareth on the guitar... I don’t like singing, I’m too shy.” 2018 was



Rachel’s (16) sixth year and she said, “It was good from the beginning.” In 100% Wolf she wrote and performed her own song. Her favourite show was The Enchanted Gathering “because we did it in the woods. It was outside. It was really fun. It was at night and everything.” Paul (16) said that he had written one of the stories for that show and he still keeps the notes for it at home, “it’s sentimentally valuable.”

During Join The Fight, The young people showed initiative and ownership of particular sections that they were involved in e.g. The group who constructed and performed the coconut shy game show started to rehearse themselves, as did the 13+ group.

#### Authentic artistry

The attitude that every young participant was themselves an artist seemed to be taken for granted. In interviews, some of the young people made clear how important this was to them. Millie N (11) did Tall Tales for the first time last year. “I remember some people [dropped out] before the show so I said I’d do their parts for them. I already knew their parts.” In the last year, she has been writing songs on her ukelele, (one of which she performed in Join the Fight.) When asked how she writes songs, she said,



“Well I wrote down some chords on a piece of paper and started playing them over and over, then – like the first time you have to write a word, it just really confuses you – I didn’t want to do it after that, because it just seemed stupid and I didn’t think I could do it – so I went off to hang around with the other kids. Then Lucy came and said “Millie I’ll help you”. So then I did do it and I was happy with it, and then for me, it just kind of flowed out...”

The music team who formed the final band obviously enjoyed the process and were equally proud of the results. Elliot (11), who rather came from behind to become one of the most versatile performers in the project - making props, acting, and being one of the core band members – showed his critical judgement when he said he was proud of “the last performance as we had different things and it became a good show.”

Millie G (18) commented perceptively on the challenges of the writing process that the 13+ group had gone through, having decided to focus on a LGBT theme: “Some of them [the group] are trying to be politically correct so, like, you’ve got news and social media there were doing and it’s people heckling [LGBT characters] but at the same time you’ve got to make sure you’re not going too far with it... You want to point out that it’s there and it’s bad but don’t go too far.” She talked about editing: “I worry about [the monologues] being a bit cluttered... Everyone has their own ideas and they all wanted to be in there. It can come across as messy. My mum didn’t quite understand what was going off [when she read a draft].”

### **Negotiating artistic differences**

The young people understood that Join The Fight was rooted in the concept of collaboration, with all that requires. Negotiating conflict was seen as integral. Millie G (18) said, “Artistic differences... that has been a problem in the past. I think it has actually gone quite well this year. J is the one we tend to have trouble with. He makes these characters he doesn’t like being changed... It’s the same to some degree with everybody. At the end of the day we [have always] got the performance out there... It might just be people are more forgiving this year. Everybody is a little



bit older.” Other, younger, participants also understood the need to compromise. Paul said, “I usually just go with it because nothing really is a bad idea... If it could be improved I’ll let them know.” Millie H (11) said, “When someone’s speaking and they have an idea, don’t say it’s terrible before they’ve ended the sentence. They might have good ideas and you don’t know that because you interrupted.”

### **The staff team setting an example**

Collaborative working was very evident between the artists too. Staff worked in a highly personalised fashion with individuals and small groups and stepped in as necessary to help each other, whether with developing material (e.g. songs) or with coaching and behaviour management as necessary. Two staff members (Liz, Harriet) and a volunteer (Rhiannon) held primarily youth work roles and supported engagement and positive behaviour. Harriet also brought strong dance skills and became a valuable assistant to the dance leader. It was helpful for a new member of the artistic team (Trixi) to spend one day circulating between the groups, getting to know the other artists, helping out and seeing what the young people were making. There was general agreement that the team this year had worked very well together and were all on board with the participatory ethos.

## The Process: what could be done differently next time

### Evaluation objective A: Engagement and teamwork by the young people; pastoral issues



#### **Behaviour management**

Behaviour management is an integral challenge of all work with young people. In an ideal world, there would be time during a project such as this for individual and small group reflection on personal development. During Join the Fight, a huge amount of this took place in a responsive fashion, the staff showing great dedication to reaching out to each child e.g. at one point, I spotted one of the artists lying on the floor talking to a young woman who had hidden herself under a table because of something distressing that had happened to her.

A lot of this pastoral work was about confidence building. But there was another element too, which was asserting the values of HPCA and challenging some provocative behaviour including racist comments – in one case, clearly knowingly naughty, in another probably just naïve. A particular group of boys had caused trouble the previous year but in at least two cases their behaviour was markedly improved this year. In fact one became a stalwart of the art room, took great pride in cleaning up thoroughly, and later took the

lead on the post performance evaluation with audience members. (In retrospect, I, for one, underestimated what he could do.) Another contributed hugely creative ideas and performed well in the final piece.

However the boy who knowingly made racist comments took up a lot of the team's mental energy, raising the question whether he was profiting unduly from the attention. There are no easy answers here and the team was admirable in the way that they worked with him and his parents, and there is no doubt that he too was one of the stronger performers in the final show.

*One idea that was mooted but not followed through, because of time, was to institute small home groups, led by an artist or youth worker, to check in with each young person at some point in the day. Perhaps having a stronger emphasis on on-going artistic critique might also help with discipline as well as giving talented young people appreciation when they do focused, quality work (rather than seeking attention by being naughty.) Although they apparently resisted being told what to do, is it possible that these boys were actually feeling under-challenged?*

#### **Other ideas for improvements in behaviour**

Further improvements suggested by young people in the group evaluation sessions included:

- Confiscating the mobile phones of people who tend to be distracted by them. (However Sophie suggested that they adopt a policy of allotting mobile phone times, not bringing them

into the creative sessions unless they were being used for research directly relevant to the show.)

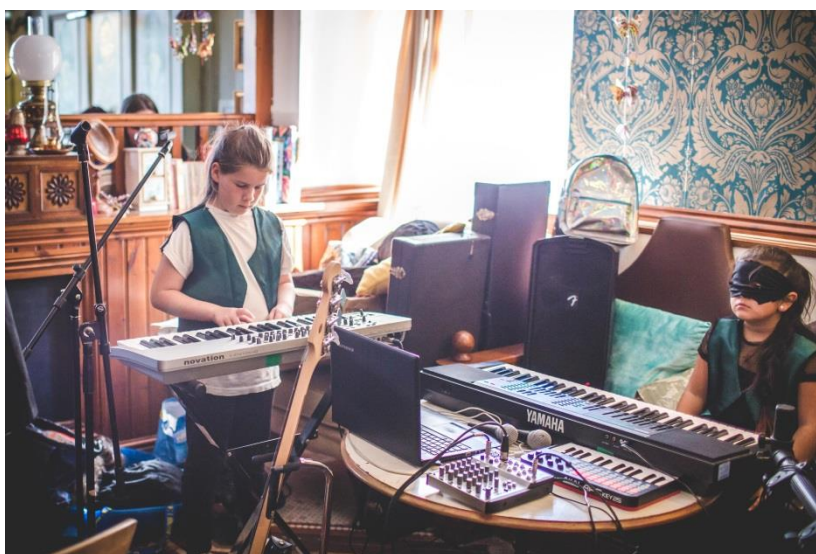
- Not letting people play with cardboard outside.
- Making sure people clean their mess up.

On the latter point, it is worth saying that, in fact, a group of the young people tidied up the art space very willingly.

### **Evaluation objectives H-M: collaborative creative working by the staff team**

#### **Music**

Gareth had found a way to involve as many young people as possible in ensemble music making, even if they had no previous knowledge. This meant that Ayesha, for example, could step in and join the band for the second performance. Changes could also be accommodated for the final show, which took place after a month's gap. However the downside could be that some of the young people were under challenged. Rosie, a stalwart band member, loved the project but had a suggestion for the music next time: "Maybe teach you how to actually play, not just use your fingers... I'd like to learn how to play a song."



Gareth was trying to balance the production and rehearsal of numbers for the show with people wanting to have a go on various instruments. There was repeated feedback from the young people that they liked the drums and wanted to do more. (It is not clear from their comments whether they were particularly wedded to electronic rhythm instruments or whether they might be equally excited by acoustic percussion instruments.) Gareth commented that he was restricted by having only one drum kit. Giving everybody a chance meant that individual progress was slow. One possibility, in future, would be to have two drum kits and a more formal queuing system.

*Alternatively, it could be made clear to the young people that after a couple of days, the focus is on rehearsing for performance. This relates to the question of whether there could be an explicit shift into rehearsal and performance mode earlier in the Summer School, perhaps at the start of the second week, to ensure that everybody knows what they are committed to and is ready by the time of the dress rehearsal (e.g. off book) and that backstage discipline is in place. This area is discussed further under 'Product – What could be done differently' (pg 19).*

#### **Suggestions from staff for future improvements**

The artistic team made a number of suggestions for improvements next year. These included: finding more ways for the different artists to see each other's work in progress; drama and dance practitioners giving the visual artist earlier notice of props that need making; greater emphasis



necessity to create props for the show.

being given, in the film and animation work, to non-performing roles; and establishing improved conditions for recording sound.

The visual artist, Lydia, said that she would ideally have liked to introduce more and different materials for the young people to experience, which she thought might have helped with the attention span of some participants. However the possibilities were limited by the

### **Evaluation objectives E-G: (YM outcome 4): collaborative creative working by the young people**

#### **Artistic reflection**

There was some feeling this year that the team had not managed to engage the young people in as deep artistic reflection as they had hoped. At the end of each day, the whole company came together, work in progress was shared and appreciations were invited for good work or progress made by particular individuals that day. This plenary enabled the company to get up-to-date with what was being made in other groups and helped to develop a positive spirit. Although much of the feedback was from the staff, some of the young people took the concept on and appreciated each other publicly – a positive antidote to the relentless criticism many of them no doubt experience in their lives, in person and online. However there was usually not enough time, and there were perhaps too many people, to engage in constructive artistic criticism.

*My suggestion would be that this element be more consciously built into the devising and making work during the workshops and the summer school, highlighting the importance of the audience role and developing the young people as perceptive critics of their own and others' work. (See criteria E, J and K in the evaluation matrix.) Trixi suggested using film so that the young people could watch a run back and critique it; she would also like more time in the schedule for 'cleaning and polishing'.*

*There might also be a case for making the plenary more playful but focused on building a company spirit. It was noticeable in the young people's feedback that they did not separate out the games that they played with each other in breaks, or when they got bored, from the formal artistic process within the project. For example Lydia said "Jessica loved sewing. She worked well on her own and with Amy. They created a [cardboard] house all on their own."*

*Whole group games or singing might have a bonding and trust building effect, as well as being a means of restoring the choral element to the show, something that was lost this year because of the young people choosing their artistic focus.*

Finally, thought might be given to how best to update the youth worker who travelled with young people in the minibus and therefore missed the team debrief each day.



## The Product: what worked well

### **Evaluation objective M: Session leaders strive to co-produce authentic work that strives for excellence.**

The show was themed around political action with the centenary of British women gaining the vote being the initial stimulus. But an interesting sideways take had emerged during the summer term workshops when the young people expressed interest in the phenomenon of fake news, which (along with the ever present interest in superheroes) led to some surreal and, and as Mark said, surprisingly dark ideas, e.g. aliens from outer space being described as immigrants “who want to take our jobs away.” Most of the more eccentric material ended up in the filmed inserts, but the character of the Tragic Clown ran through the live performance sections.



The show opened with a game show which tested the audience’s knowledge of the suffragettes. This was followed by several songs and two big dances, interspersed with short dramatic scenes and the filmed material. The linking narrative didn’t come out strongly in the first dress performance, so some new links were added for the second dress show, as well as introductions to the songs. The theme came across well - when asked, one parent said,

“I enjoyed the topic – the media, the suffragettes” - but in my opinion the running narrative was not as developed as it might have been, a view that was echoed during the team evaluation by Lucy when she commented that, although the young people had learned some new skills in constructing narrative this year, in future she would like to help them develop their skills further. (One challenge was persuading the young people not to kill off their characters soon after they introduced them, so Lucy taught them the three act structure.)

The 13+ group, which included some young people who were very clear that they did not want to perform on stage, chose to write monologues about discrimination against LGBT people. These were recorded with a musical under score. In the final section of performance, to which younger children were not invited, the recordings were played while the dramatists took up still poses as the characters lost in thought.

In music, Gareth thought the band held together well and showed a clear progression from performance to performance. The “pliability” of the songs [with their simple accompaniments within a clear chord structure] meant that the band could cope with missing people without compromising the sound and equally could add in new players.

The dance sections were strong – “clean and effective” with “good timing, movement memory and basic coordination”, as Trixi said. As with the music, the young people proved resilient about

last minute cast changes (which, despite the new flexible format, still took place owing to illness, nerves and family circumstances.)



The film and animation sections were well-performed and amusing and added enormously to the richness of the final piece. Mark would like to give attention next year to finding a more suitable space for sound recording.

The artwork was “suitable for what it was needed for, eye-catching for the performances and still kept the nice naiveté of children’s/young people’s work” (Lydia). Key elements were placards held by the company playing suffragettes, the

coconut shy and a tower block, all made out of cardboard. The young people also created the sets and puppets for the filmed news room and stop animation sections.

Three performances were given:

10.08.18: Dress performance 1 for parents in Buxton. In the drama studio at Buxton Community School where the show had been rehearsed.

11.08.18: Dress performance 2 for parents in Glossop. In the Geoffrey Allen Community Centre in Gamesley.

29.09.18: The final show. In various venues in New Mills, as a promenade performance.

*Unfortunately I was not able to see the final promenade performance in New Mills but I have seen some sections on video. It is immediately striking how the production values had moved on since the two dress performances. There had been some changes of cast but typically the young people did not seem at all put out, but threw themselves in with relish.*

*Feedback from the audience is in Appendix 2, but includes:*

“The whole day had a lot of variety to see – it was really good for them artistically, and for the audience – not like when you have to sit through school plays with other peoples kids and you get really bored – this peaked the audience’s interest.”

“I really liked the songs in the café, they were cheerful and expressive it’s nice to see them express it in a solid way – you can keep a song, you can share it and keep for themselves, they have it forever.”

“The scene outside in the town centre – I loved how colourful they were, how they were enjoying it, so confident – they were really enjoying it.”



## The Product: what could be done differently

It was generally agreed that the day of the first technical/dress rehearsal was not as disciplined as it could have been and consequently the performance had some flaws. These do not need to be emphasised as in fact it was remarkably good, I thought, given how rushed the day had been, and it just needed some tightening up. However it is a testament to the young people's willingness to reflect critically that they later identified the flaws.



They pointed to:

- The run through was late getting started.
- There was a backstage argument about someone's lunch apparently being stolen.
- The first performance had gaps between some of the scenes.
- The stage managers were slow to clear the coconut shy game and it fell over.
- "It wasn't very practised."
- One girl reported that her father had felt embarrassed by

being invited on stage and not knowing the answers to the questions.

However they also recognised that it wasn't bad overall and the young people showed an admirable insouciance about last minute cast changes. Lexi said, "Everyone picked it up easily. In the second one I think that was better was everyone knew all the dances and things. The worst part about the second performance is it was a bit hard because some people weren't there."

Perhaps more significant was this fact that people were missing. Despite all of the efforts made by the staff, there were still cast changes at every performance and for the second dress performance two members of staff had to step in to perform as well. In two cases, the absences were down to injury or illness. In other cases, advance notice had been given of holidays etc. and the team had decided that they would rather that somebody participated in one performance than in none.

*As mentioned above under discussion of process the difficulties in bringing participants up to performance standard also affects the final product. Perhaps there could be a strand of work, running right through the project, which is about individuals developing their performance skills, coaching each other to perform music, songs and speeches – or even playing charades! Such approaches might help with behaviour management issues in the latter days of the summer school, particularly brought about by nerves.*

*The question also arises whether, in working so cooperatively, some loss of artistic direction can result. Might it be possible to have a stronger artistic drive but without returning to the kind of urgent product focus which has alienated some of the young people in previous years? It seems to me that the form of the piece relates to the rehearsal process. In my own experience, there is a difference between the informal sharing of devised work and the formal presentation of a finished piece. The former is more like a demonstration of the devising process to the audience; the latter is*

*designed to take the audience on an aesthetic journey, including a sense of a coherent structure (if not narrative as such), and those all important features of rhythm and pace. It is possible to combine a number of different artistic directors, if, for example, there is less focus on narrative, and perhaps a greater value is placed on chance. In that situation, different elements directed by different artists (or young people) can be collaged together to good effect. Alternatively, if more of a narrative drive is wanted, the scenes or sections in a pre-written script can be parcelled out to different artists to direct, perhaps with a rehearsal director pasting the sections together at the end of the process.*

*Time is a limitation in every arts project. Tall Tales has developed a model of working three days a week over two weeks because experience showed that the young people found it hard to concentrate for a full week. This does mean, however, that after the taster day, there are only four days to make and rehearse everything for an hour long show. This is incredibly tight and certainly does not allow for the kind of skill building that, for example, Trixi said would be desirable to add in to the schedule. In addition, it was generally agreed that the dress/technical rehearsal day wasn't as efficient as it could have been, and that was partly down to things still being made (as well as the young people not grasping the need for a more disciplined mode of working at that stage.) The obvious solution would be to have more time, for example a third week, in which to run taster sessions and*



*company-building activities and teach or reinforce core skills before moving into the devising process. Alternatively perhaps the young people could manage four days each week, with the day off on the Wednesday, which could be used by staff for planning, film editing and costume making.*

The reflections of the young people were not primarily about artistic quality, however a few observations on quality were made, e.g.

- “The news reports in the street were good.”
- “If I had to say the best thing I’d put down Josh James’s performance as the clown.”

One boy had questions about the narrative: “It got too weird.” As mentioned above, Lucy Jackson, the writing lead, also thought the coherence of the narrative was something that could be improved next time around. *There is perhaps the challenge here of respecting the young people’s ideas, which may be surreal, and managing to combine or refine these into something ultimately satisfying both for them and for the audience.*

One 13+ young man felt that communication about the 13+ performance taking place in a separate space after the main show could have been better. Not as many stayed as the group would have liked. However, Sophie did announce the 13+ performance to the whole audience and

most parents with younger children simply chose to leave. Such difficulties should not arise next year as HPCA plans to run an entirely separate performance project with the 13+ group.

Other practical comments from the young people's evaluation meetings, looking ahead (at that time) to the final performance, were:

- Everyone who is going to be in the final performance should come to the rehearsal day on September 22.
- People should learn their scripts thoroughly beforehand. [Sophie had produced a DVD to help people practice the songs and dances at home.]

### **Promenade performance**

The team were ambivalent about the promenade experiment. Sophie questioned whether using the whole town created more problems than the value it added, and Gareth thought that the various sections of the piece were stronger when played as a single show. In future, he would like a live band to form the backbone for the whole multi-media performance.

Audiences were down on last year and this was rather disappointing. The team could only speculate about the reasons. One suggestion was that perhaps the title and subject matter gave the impression it was not a family show, unlike previous 'Tall Tales' pieces.



## A note on quality

In her written evaluation, the dance lead, Trixi, said: “The work was authentic, but [I am] not sure if the young people achieved excellence. Perhaps the measure of this is something that needs to be reviewed.”



In contrast, Gareth, the music lead, commented: “There is only so far we can stretch excellence in this situation but quality work was always on each leader’s mind through the preparation sessions and the final gathering. The individual pieces from each discipline were of a high standard from each age-group.”



Overall, as an observer, I thought this was a very good piece of work, which gave the young people a positive yet challenging artistic opportunity whilst supporting their personal and social development in a compassionate way. Where there might have been improvements, the team were well aware of them, and will no doubt take their reflections into account in future projects.

In response to Trixi’s question about a measure of quality, I would point the team to Rachel Blanche’s paper, “Developing a Foundation for Quality Guidance for arts organisations and artists in Scotland working in participatory settings” (Creative Scotland, 2014) which

assets that “Quality is not perfection, a standard, a procedure, a measure or an adjective,” it is rather something multifaceted which takes account of both process and product. She quotes a paper by Francois Matarasso in which he identifies five phases of participatory arts from

*conception through contracting, working, creation, and completion* (Creative Progression: reflections on quality in participatory arts, Matarasso 2013).

Blanche comments: “To take a holistic view of quality means acknowledging the influence of each phase of a project on ultimate quality and not just the creative/participatory phase. This correlates strongly with evidence from beyond the arts sector that quality can only be ‘built in’ during early planning stages.”



Matarasso stresses that *it is possible to identify the characteristics, the objective qualities*, that need to be in place to ensure a good participatory arts process (Matarasso 2013 p9), underlining the importance of underpinning *principles*. And even though it can never be absolutely guaranteed in advance that the final project or showcase will be an artistic success, the evidence shows that “a good quality process can form a reliable precondition for creating good art” (Matarasso 2013 p9), meaning that there are *quality conditions* that can be planned for.”

Key to the success of Join the Fight was the recruitment of a team who understood the history of the project and embraced the ambitions for 2018. Matarasso points out that the contracting phase is often overlooked, reduced to literal employment contracts, when what it is really about is ensuring that all parties are signed up to the same vision and principles. This of course includes the young people; the earlier they are involved, including in the conception phase, the more ownership they will feel.

Blanche draws on the quality principles first developed by the NFER and then taken on board by Arts Council England and she adds two further principles of a more logistical nature:

<b>Artistic distinction and professionalism</b>	The team were all talented professionals who sought to make work of quality that was appropriate to/ for the participants.
<b>Authenticity and social relevance</b>	The project was rooted in the ethos of community engagement and the young people were challenged to see themselves as artists and authors.
<b>Inspiring, engaging</b>	Every staff member worked hard to find ways to inspire and engage every child.
<b>Participant-centred</b>	The entire project was characterised by a compassionate commitment to drawing out the young people's ideas and providing personalised encouragement.
<b>Purposeful, active and hands-on</b>	The purposes and values of the project were made clear to the young people and their families. The emphasis was very much on learning by doing.
<b>Progression for participants</b>	The team brought a strong awareness of its participants' previous relationships with Tall Tales (or none) and explicitly supported and challenged them to try new things and develop their skills, most notably this year the 13+ group.
<b>Participant ownership</b>	All of the material, with the exception of some of the choreography and some basic frameworks provided by the musical director, was conceived and created by the participants. Their sense of ownership was apparent in the pride they showed when performing the work to family members and in their readiness to cover for each other whenever necessary.
<b>Suitably situated and resourced</b>	HPCA had selected the venues carefully. The young people were offered an impressive array of musical, digital and artistic equipment and materials.
<b>Properly planned, evaluated and safe</b>	The project had been thoroughly thought through by the HPCA staff. The incoming artists were well briefed and included in all on-going planning and evaluation. Appropriate safety measures were in place so that when there were small accidents, such as a grazed knee from falling in the playground, First Aid was to hand and the incident was properly noted.



NFER Principles adopted by ACE <i>... in context of children, young people and arts education</i>	Common quality principles synthesised through this research <i>... in context of participatory arts</i>
Striving for Excellence	<b>Artistic distinction and professionalism</b>
Emphasising authenticity	<b>Authenticity and social relevance</b>
Being inspiring and engaging	<b>Inspiring, engaging</b>
Ensuring a positive child-centred experience	<b>Participant-centred</b>
Actively involving children and young people	<b>Purposeful, active and hands-on</b>
Providing a sense of personal progression	<b>Progression for participants</b>
Developing a sense of ownership and belonging	<b>Participant ownership</b>
	<b>Suitably situated and resourced</b>
	<b>Properly planned, evaluated and safe</b>
Lord et al (2012); ACE (undated)	

(Blanche 2014, page 14.)

I have no doubt that 'Join The Fight' met all 9 of the above Quality Principles.

(I note that teamwork, which was a crucial aspiration of Join the Fight, does not appear to be highlighted in either list; in other contexts, I have seen it assigned to principle five. Blanche's paper however makes clear that partnership working is central to the concept of participatory arts.)

Taking a more holistic view of quality, does not mean entirely ignoring the standards desired for the final product, which is perhaps what Trixi was referring to. In discussing the 'creation' phase, Matarasso says:

"Participatory arts projects are about making art, though this evident point is sometimes forgotten. When it is, projects risk becoming a form of adult education [sic] for people who do not attend adult education classes, focussed on individual progress, notably through the acquisition of skills and confidence. While that is a common outcome of good participatory arts practice, such progress is not its purpose, which is primarily to involve people in opportunities to create art. So the criteria for quality in creation must relate to those that apply to the arts generally, including *aesthetics, technical ability, innovation and the intellectual and emotional satisfaction offered by the completed work*. Does it, in short, offer an artistically satisfying experience both in its own terms and in the wider context of what is considered to be good in the arts today?" (Matarasso 2013, p.9 *my italics*)

Perhaps, for next year's Tall Tales project, the artistic team could spend a little time specifying the criteria for quality in creation that they would like the young people to achieve, whilst not undermining the fundamental ethos of the project, which is to include and enable. Meanwhile, in 2018, much was achieved in Join the Fight, both socially and artistically.



## **Ideas and goals for the future**

*One suggestion for next year might be to bring in additional resource to the film and animation team, so that a documentary of the entire process could be made, training up the more senior members of HPCA's Film Cuts group. Clearly there would be budgetary implications both in terms of staffing during the project and in terms of editing. Mark Turton, the film lead, is already under pressure, producing the multimedia elements of the performances, so it might require additional staffing. Similarly, it might be helpful to build into the budget additional writing time.*

### **Ideas for future shows that were mentioned by the young people who attended the two evaluation meetings included:**

- More comedy and fun – make people smile
- Sitcom
- Linking seemingly unrelated events together into an overarching story
- Not restrictive - people can do what they want and work to their strong points [as in 2018]
- More interactive [This comment may have been inspired by the success of the gameshow element in Join the Fight.]
- Roald Dahl
- Anthony Horowitz
- First contact as the theme [older boy]
- Dinosaurs as the theme [younger girl]
- Zombie apocalypse as the theme [older boy]
- Powerful and inspirational characters from history
- Jess liked having a historical theme [in Join the Fight.] It was educational and gave people ideas.

### **Personal objectives included:**

- I think it'd be interesting to try sculpture next time
- In the past I have enjoyed writing our own stories and characters. I would like to do this again.
- I have done acting. I want to do it again. I would love to dancing again
- I like doing the drumming because it is fun
- Get better at the drums!
- Things I would like to do it again: dancing, art, playing drums
- I like doing drums, dancing, singing, gymnastics.
- The 13+ group freely chose to focus on writing but now some feel they would have liked more variety e.g. art and music and creating songs from their own writing.

## Appendix 1:

<b>Tall Tales 2018: evaluation matrix</b>		
	<b>The achievements we are monitoring</b>	<b>How each will be tracked</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>Session leaders support each participant to:</b>	
A	Engage well	Session leaders assess engagement on the register after each session, rating 1-5.
	<b>Outcome 2:</b>	
B	Set a personal goal to learn an instrumental, vocal or composition skill, achieving or surpassing their goal.	Baseline goals noted by Sophie & Liz: to be reviewed at the end of the summer school. Any progress made in sessions noted on a Post It by session leader or discussed in daily team debrief.
C	Play a solo part in the ensemble for the first time [or develop on previous solos.]	Session leader final notes.
D	Improve in their ability to listen to others, stay in time and respond to instructions.	Any progress made in sessions noted on a Post It by session leader or discussed in daily team debrief.
	<b>Outcome 4:</b>	
E	Increasingly give and receive constructive criticism.	Session leaders assess teamwork on the register after each session, rating 1-5.
F	Increasingly negotiate and compromise over creative differences with others.	
G	Create a collective piece of original music/art for the first time [where relevant.]	Sophie to track from HPCA records.
<b>2</b>	<b>Session leaders strive to ensure that:</b>	
<b>H</b>	<b>M2</b> The leader has a clear intention and has planned the session accordingly, while retaining room for flexibility.	Session leaders to choose three objectives (H-N) to focus on during this year's project.
<b>I</b>	<b>S1</b> Activities are engaging, inspiring and purposeful. They are clearly explained and/or demonstrated to the young people.	Written reflections by session leaders, after sessions and at the end  Observation notes by Nick.
<b>J</b>	<b>S2</b> Ownership of session content is shared between the leader and young people. Participants contribute to decision-making and have the opportunity to take on	Participants' notes on the 'Best Bits' sheet.  Interviews of participants by Nick.

	leadership roles where appropriate.	Group reflection at final team debrief.  Audience/ parent / carer feedback.
<b>K</b>	<b>Y4</b> Young people receive clear feedback on their work, identifying next steps for individual improvement. Young people are encouraged to participate in this process through structured peer and self-reflection.	
<b>L</b>	<b>HPCA</b> Session leaders communicate clearly with each other and collaborate flexibly.	
<b>M</b>	<b>ACE</b> Session leaders strive to co-produce authentic work that strives for excellence.	
<b>N</b>	<b>Personal</b> Any additional personal/professional goal specific to this project.	Confidential. Shared with Nick at the outset. If appropriate, shared at final team debrief.

## **Appendix 2: Audience feedback**

“I remember the show outside in the town centre – I loved how colourful they were, how they were enjoying it, so confident – they were really enjoying it.”

“I saw the songs in the little pub – they did dead well didn’t they?”

“I think it all worked well – I just liked seeing them actually happy and enjoying themselves doing it - I thought wow – they’ve put all this together and there’s not one bit I’d say didn’t work well. It was all great.”

### *Remember most clearly:*

“The bit with the girls on sofa – it was interesting and stuck out for me, because I have teenage daughters, and it made me think that although I talk to them about loads of things, I still don’t really know what it’s like for them – and this gave them their own voice, and the subject matter showed that they need their own voice.”

### *Most entertaining*

“The super heroes were ridiculously entertaining, because they were just over the top and it was good to see people allowing themselves to do that.”

### *Favourite*

“I really liked the songs in the café, they were cheerful and expressive it’s nice to see them express it in a solid way – you can keep a song, you can share it and keep for themselves, they have it forever.”

“The whole day had a lot of variety to see – it was really good for them artistically, and for the audience – not like when you have to sit through school plays with other peoples kids and you get really bored – this peaked the audience’s interest.”

“Varieties of expression - letting people say what they want to say in their own way and linking it with the trail.”

### *On the down side*

“We were wiggled out about how interactive it was at the beginning”

“Walking to places – New Mills is quite an uppy downy place.”

“There was a system to follow – but we still managed not to follow it!”

### **Appendix 3: Nick Nuttgens Biog**

I am a facilitator supporting organisations to develop participation skills, peer support, strategic thinking, sustainability and creative approaches to learning.

I worked previously for Cape UK, running their professional learning development programme for head teachers, teachers and artists working in education settings.

I was the founding Director of Creative Partnerships Sheffield from 2005 – 2009, managing a budget of £1m p.a. and training up education and creative professionals to develop creative approaches to teaching, learning and leadership in 75 schools.

Prior to Creative Partnerships, I worked as a theatre director, performer and choreographer in Theatre in Education and Youth Theatre. I was the Director of Crucible Youth Theatre at Sheffield Theatres from 1997 to 2005 and was a trustee of DV8 Physical Theatre for over 20 years.

In parallel with my creative work, I developed my practice as a facilitator, trainer and advice worker. I worked on the National AIDS Helpline in its early days, giving advice on sexual health and drugs. In the 90s, I was Deputy Manager of a Citizens Advice Bureau for 3 years and delivered training for other bureaux across Yorkshire and Humberside. At Creative Partnerships Sheffield I designed and delivered both large and small-scale training events. Recently, I have produced & facilitated a conference and series of learning days for the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation; delivered training on the arts in schools for Cape UK and the Arts Council; and facilitated a range of events for community groups, including Carbon Conversations.

I am accredited in Training Delivery by the Training Foundation and also in Action Learning Sets, participatory planning (ICA:UK), conflict resolution, NLP and drama-based methods.