

# IMMERSIVE ARTS FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES

A report on Action for Children's  
Arts/Globe Education Inspiration Day

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# Introduction

## About the Activity

The Inspiration Days curated and produced by Action for Children's Arts aim to celebrate the diverse range of artistic practice that is created for young audiences and their families. Inspiration Days have been central to ACA's programme since its inception in 1998. These events bring together children's arts professionals to share practice and explore ideas in an area of common interest. They contribute to all three aspects of ACA's mission – celebrating, connecting, and campaigning – but always with a significant emphasis on the first of these.

Inspiration Days have covered a wide range of topics, including opera for children, children's dance, War as a theme of children's literature, the impact of the National Curriculum on children's reading, puppetry and the involvement of children in the design of cultural venues. Within this activity, ACA turned their attention to the development of immersive arts for children and partnered with Shakespeare's Globe Theatre to deliver a day that explored, sampled and investigated what this term meant.

The format of the day included presentations from a range of researchers, artists, producers and educationalists in which current work was discussed and relevant issues addressed. A key partnership with the Globe was nurtured, which ensured that everyone was able to experience an immersive theatrical performance, the Globe's production of 'Muse of Fire', and discuss the production with our hosts, the Globe Education team. There was plenty of time for informal networking and reflection on the inspiration day's theme.



## **About Action for Children's Arts (ACA)**

Action for Children's Arts is the voice of children's arts in the UK. They aim to improve the cultural wellbeing of children by focusing attention on and encouraging support for children's arts, and by celebrating and sharing the achievements of practitioners.

## **About Shakespeare's Globe**

Shakespeare's Globe is a unique international resource dedicated to the exploration of Shakespeare's work and the playhouse for which he wrote, through the connected means of performance and education. Together, the Globe Theatre, Globe Exhibition & Tour and Globe Education seek to further the experience and international understanding of Shakespeare in performance.

*This report aims to summarise some of the key presentations and discussions that took place during the day, drawing on the themes that arose from the event.*



Sam Wanamaker Playhouse

Please credit photographer Pete Le May

For more information contact Shakespeare's Globe press office, 0207 902 1492

## Immersive Arts – what exactly do we mean?

Dr Gareth White, from the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, provided an intellectually rich opening to the Inspiration Day in which he challenged everyone to critically engage with the vital question ‘what are immersive arts?’ This term was deconstructed as we began hear the different ways in which the term ‘immersive’ had been used within artistic practice. To some extent, Dr White argued, all forms of engagement with the arts are intrinsically ‘immersive’ as they have the ability to transcend boundaries, to transport us to different times, spaces and emotional states. He further questioned whether the extent to which we become ‘immersed’ within the arts leans more on the quality of our engagement experience, rather than the specific form or format of the art itself.

As an academic specialising in the theatre and the performing arts, Dr. White acknowledged that his entry point to this discussion would draw on contemporary theatrical productions, however he invited us to search for lines of interconnection between different artistic forms and practices. The work of Punchdrunk (Mask of the Red Death) and Shunt (Tropicana) were analysed in detail as we began to understand the appeal of immersive arts and why audiences had a hunger to become ‘immersed’.

To summarise, Dr White proposed that:

- Audiences do not want to be passive consumers of theatrical ‘production’ that address them solely as a homogenous group, instead there is a desire to co-construct the theatrical performance as active members.
- Site-specific theatre invites a strong element of play and participation from audience. The interest in this maybe linked to the rise of gaming.
- Immersive performance often invites audiences to participate in a quest; there are often multiple ways to engage with the space, text and performance therefore return visits are more likely.
- There is the potential for a stronger sense of individualisation with site specific/ immersive performances, which offer audiences autonomy and individualised experiences. This was explored by “You Me Bum Bum Train”, as the entire theatrical performance was experienced as if it were created for the individual.
- The immediacy and interaction of immersive arts leads to an increased sense of connection that is increasingly important to some audiences.
- The role of social media/ digital arts have impacted on how we related to the theatrical experience.



## Immersive arts and children...

Dr White highlighted that creating immersive arts for children resonated for several reasons – they seemed a ‘good fit’ because:

### Unlearning

Children have fewer pre-conceived notions about how to engage with the arts. The gallery space or the end-on theatre are spaces in which we learn about the social rules and functions, children have not always learnt these rules and so do not need to work so hard to unlearn them.



### Risk

It is popular within theatrical discourse to use the term ‘risk’ to mean all sorts of things – from participation, to facing failure, to creating more intimacy within performance. These are less likely to be perceived as risks to children who have an innate sense of curiosity and exploration and who have not yet learned the rules of being ‘good audiences’.

### Play

The playfulness required of audiences within many immersive arts practices relies upon a sense of openness, curiosity and imagination. Children have this in abundance. They ask questions, seek answers and have less guarded responses to what they encounter.

### Participation

As some theatre makers will say, children are your most honest audience. If they find you funny they will laugh. If they are bored they will ask to leave. If they have a question they will ask it – in the middle of the show. Once engaged they participate fully with what they encounter, it is this type of participation that lends itself fully to practitioners working with immersive arts.

# Jargon Busters!

## Understanding some key terms:

- **Site Specific**– Any performance that takes place in a non-theatrical space in which the content of the performance relates to the site. For example a performance about mental health which takes place within an asylum.
- **Immersive Theatre** – A term broadly used for performances that use expansive environments, which enable audience participation. From moving around a space or taking on a role.
- **Site Responsive** – Artists respond to a site and use it as the basis of a creative enquiry/ practice. The work is performed/created on the site but the content itself can be a departure from the original site.
- **Site Inspired** – the site is the inspiration for the artistic work, but the work itself does not have to take place within the site. For example an installation could include sound sampled from a site, or the theme could explore the legacy/ heritage of a site.



## Muse of Fire – A Theatrical Performance

*“Deep beneath the streets of London lies Muse, the last spirit of Fire. Hidden for 400 years by the cooling waters of the Thames it watches and it waits... Discover an Elizabethan hermit hiding under the stage, learn from a master of magic in a secret forest, take tea with the strange puppets that live in the abandoned library and uncover the clues to stop Muse burning down the Globe once more.”*

**Muse of Fire** is a multi-award winning promenade performance for intrepid families around Shakespeare’s Globe and the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse. We joined an audience of ACA delegates, children and families as we journeyed through the Globe to learn about the theatre’s great fire and who created it. During our journey we were taken into ‘the fascinating nooks and crannies of this bankside reconstruction of Shakespeare’s favourite seventeenth-century theatre’ and introduced to a range of characters that revealed clues. The production was directed and produced by Globe Education with the help of Punchdrunk’s Matthew Blake, sound artist Melanie Wilson and Little Angel puppet theatre.

The performance is educational in terms of learning about the Globe’s fiery history and is sold as a “story-based treasure hunt” aimed for children aged six to eleven and their parents alike. For the Inspiration Day delegates this was an exceptional choice as it:

1. Allowed all delegates first-hand experience of immersive arts (performance) created for children.
2. Enabled delegates to have a shared experience that then served to foster reflection and dialogue.
3. Encouraged delegates to engage with the creative team from the Globe during the presentations and Q&A sessions.





# LET'S HEAR IT FROM THE SPEAKERS!

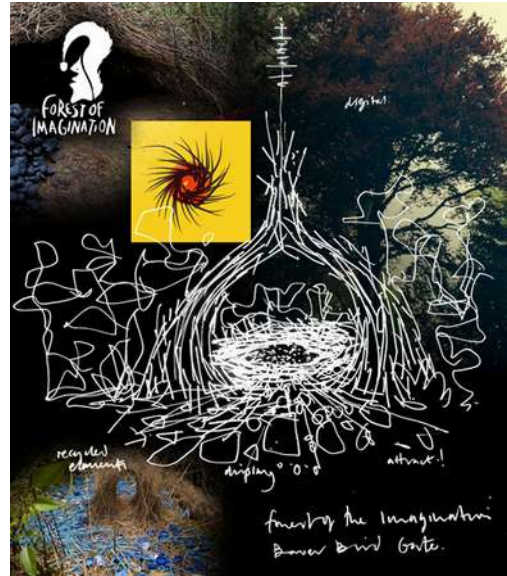
## OUTDOORS WORK

Penny Hay, Director of Research

5X5X5=Creativity

[www.5x5x5creativity.org.uk](http://www.5x5x5creativity.org.uk)

*Penny Hay spoke about Forest of Imagination (11-14 July 2014) a four-day contemporary arts event in the city of Bath.*



This was a contemporary arts event set within a magical, immersive Forest designed by international landscape architect, Andrew Grant, with contributions from a wide range of artists.

Visitors wandered through the thicket of living trees and discovered the stunning installations and artworks by artists such as Edwina Bridgeman, Michael Brennan-Wood, Alison Harper and staff and students from Bath School of Art and Design. Forest delights included fantastical flowers and creatures made from found and reclaimed objects.

Children were invited to take part in seriously playful workshops, 'The Inspiration Generator', led by The House of Fairy Tales. These theatrical learning experiences encouraged a sense of creative discovery and allowed them to explore the collection of interactive artworks and activities in and around the Forest.

Key Points:

- Community involvement is key – bringing people together to create an environment honours children's skills and talents alongside adults.
- Be mindful to keep exploring during the process – focus on the enquiry.
- Partnerships are essential to the project development - working with the House of Fairy Tales was very important to engaging children playfully.

# SPOKEN WORD

## Joseph Coelho (Poetry Joe)

<http://joseph-coelho.com/>

<http://wordpeppertheatre.com/>

*Joseph Coelho is a storyteller, performer, writer and poet who creates work for children. Joseph playfully engaged us with some of his work which included participatory poetry and semi-improvised work.*

### Key Learnings:

- That participation is key to being engaged and 'immersed' within the arts.
- That once audiences understand and feel comfortable with the 'game' or activity that has been set up they are very willing to play, however they must feel safe.
- The playfulness and responding to the immediacy / reality of the audience are key ingredients to make live performance exciting.



# SITE SPECIFIC & SITE RESPONSIVE THEATRE

## Daphna Attias (Theatre Director)

<http://www.danteordie.com/>



*Daphna spoke about the challenges and opportunities of creating site-specific work, and detailed how the site itself leads within the development of the work's content, informing both the artistic direction and logistical matters.*

Daphna offered useful insights into creating immersive arts and advised that theatre makers consider the following:

- Design / rig / tech– how much modification can you make to the space? Can you work with resources/materials already on the site? Most non-theatrical spaces do not have a rig or sound equipment, so how will these scenographic elements be managed?
- Budgets – budgets can be more challenging to manage in site specific performances because each performance context is different and there are more likely to be 'unknowns'. Plan carefully and do extensive feasibility checks on production plans.
- Audience engagement – think about the audience experience from day one, how do they encounter and engage with the space.
- What are the constraints? Does the space only allow for a certain amount of audience members? How can you work creatively within these constraints?
- How can the space be read? What are the different readings?
- How can this type of event be marketed to families? How can you use known language to help them make sense of the activity – e.g. 'adventurous families wanted' or a treasure hunt.



## Vicki Amedume – Upswing Aerial

<http://upswing.org.uk/>

*Vicki Amedume, Artistic Director of Upswing Aerial spoke about the research and development of her new work 'Bedtime Stories'.*

Vicky explained: “My love of stories most definitely comes from my mother. When I was a child my mum often had to work nights. She would record tapes of stories for us to listen to the next night so we could still have our bedtime stories. It was our little tradition and those times tucked up with my brother and sister and listening to my mum’s voice were some of my most cherished childhood memories. It may sound strange but when we listened to those tapes I felt she was with us and I was never afraid of the dark.

In the show we are making next, ‘Bedtime Stories’, I want to explore those narratives of connection and attachment. The idea is that audience will watch the show unfold around them in family groups tucked up in bed. Being together whilst experiencing an immersive production that touches on risk, loss and the danger of being pulled apart. Part of the development will involve working with adoptive and foster families using circus workshops to stimulate dialogue around building attachment and relationships.

I wish I still had those tapes my mum made. I hope my nephew is better at holding onto those things and I hope that within ‘Bedtime Stories’ I find a way to recapture the essence of the experience my mum created.”

### **Key Learnings:**

- Vicki encouraged us to consider the power of the imagination and its role in enabling us to feel ‘immersed’. Vicki said that through listening to pre-recorded stories she was transported to other places and felt the presence of her mother. Vicki felt that this process was similar to theatre where the intangible can be expressed and experienced.
- Vicki was interested in how to create ‘immersive spaces’ where young people and their parents/guardians could experience aerial circus, and is currently exploring the possibilities and technical challenges of making this happen.
- Vicki is interested in the metaphorical language of circus arts and how this can express emotions and experiences that can resonate with audiences of all ages.

## Jon Cooper – Difference Engine

[www.differenceengine.co.uk](http://www.differenceengine.co.uk)

Jon Cooper, the Artistic Director of Difference Engine told us about his work, which seeks to create ‘choice-laden, immersive experiences using a fusion of theatre, games and technology’. Its Cooper’s guiding principle that true immersion requires decision - the audience must be able to influence its experience in a meaningful way. Cooper impressed delegates with a thoughtful critique of contemporary site inspired performance and immersive arts practice and articulated his work as an emerging practitioner with a strong sense of vision and ethos.

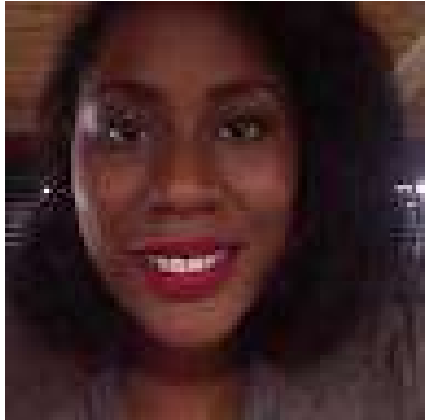
In discussing ‘Who is Mr White?’ Cooper explained:

“We felt that children who attend Play Local and The Shop of Possibilities would enjoy a bit of fantasy and imagination, so we welcomed the mysterious Mr Grey and Andrew for a bit of detective work fun. The children helped the two detectives, put up posters around the estate, asking ‘Have you seen Mr White?’ (Mr White is an evil spy who believes he can’t be caught!)”

The performance included a group of children being recruited as detectives enlisted to help find the evil Mr White. A mysterious suitcase is found hidden on the estate and the children help to work out the combination code to the lock... Inside, it is filled with 9 small portable analogue radios. Using the radios, the children tune into a broadcast by Mr White. He has planted clues around the estate, and only by finding them all will the children be able to stop his evil plans! After completing the first mission, the children are awarded a spy moustache; they are now in disguise and are ready for the second part of their mission. Recordings, drawings, letters were amongst the finds. At the end of the day the children gather to hear whether they have succeeded in stopping Mr White’s evil plans, which was presented via a broadcast.

Cooper stated that this performance was an experiment for Difference Engine and for the Play Local project and that he did not expect the children to react so strongly to the story as they did. The children were fully immersed in the story, the mystery, the fictional characters and the quest. He articulated that the engagement time was far longer than expected, with children dedicating the whole day to the mission. As a theatre practitioner, Cooper’s work is not mainly aimed at children or families. However, inspired by this experiment he reflected that his interest and creative excitement in making immersive arts for young people has grown, stating that ‘there really are no rules’ when it comes to creating this work.





## PLAY AT TATE: Past Present and Future

Sharna Jackson

### The Gallery Experience, Interactivity and Immersion

*Sharna Jackson, Editor of Tate Kids spoke about some of the games and toys that have been created at Tate, how audiences have responded to these games, and the lessons learned along the way.*

Tate is an institution that holds British, International and Modern Contemporary Art. With four physical galleries – two in London: Tate Britain and Tate Modern, and also Tate Liverpool in the North West and Tate St Ives on the Cornish coast. Sharna's role was to head up Tate Kids, which is an online destination for 5 – 12 year-olds where they can play with art, create art, share art, talk about art.

#### **Why is Tate playful?**

- Games and toys are a great way to communicate with your audiences - not just children – also confident adults who are frequent gallery-goers.
- They're 'sticky'. People will spend time on them.
- They're a great way to express your institution's vision and mission.
- They can unlock collections.
- They often bring those hard to reach audiences through your doors - both digitally and physically.
- They're a gateway, a beginning, the front-line of engagement to deeper content. And, when created well, are works of art in themselves.

## **What have we learned?**

Sharna highlighted four key things learned that might be useful when working for a cultural institution:

### Know your audiences

Be clear on whom you are aiming your game or toy at, and figure out what they expect from the content you propose to make. If you are a museum, start playing games so you know what mechanics you like and what might work for your audiences.

### Know your brand or institution

What kind of a brand are you? What are your values? What does that mean for your output?

The positioning of your brand or property will inform what kind of 'interactivities' it makes sense for you to produce. At Tate we "invite everyone to look again, think again and join in". Tate Modern, in particular, is seen, as a bit trendy so there was scope for Tate Kids to develop an ethos around irreverence, iconoclasm, whilst being smart and fun.

### Collaborate, Collaborate, Collaborate

Build mutually beneficial relationships, internally and externally, and when you work with a game studio – respect their expertise and let them bring their knowledge of play to your knowledge of your collections and audience.

### Think about UGC

If you are planning to create a tool that allows users to generate a lot of content, you need a strategy to manage it. It was something I was very naïve about when I first started. Because content for children needs to be pre-moderated - and pre-moderated in a timely manner to make sure the kids come back – make a plan. Does content from every child go live? If not how do you judge what's 'good'? If you just choose a selection, how will you update it? How large are the files, will there be implications on server space?

# Inclusivity and Immersive Arts – Hijinx Theatre

## Ben Pettitt-Wade, Artistic Manager & Unity Festival Director

<http://www.hijinx.org.uk/>

*Hijinx Theatre is a professional theatre company based at Wales Millennium Centre in Cardiff who tour small scale theatre throughout the UK and Europe. Their work always includes actors who have learning disabilities.*

Hijinx identify with the term '**inclusive theatre**' because they endeavour to use the skills and raw talent of people who often get overlooked in today's world and offer them a platform to make and perform stunning theatre alongside actors who don't have disabilities. During the Inspiration Day, Ben Pettitt-Wade spoke about the collaboration between Hijinx Theatre and Punchdrunk Enrichment on 'Beneath the Streets'.

Hijinx and Punchdrunk Enrichment invited audiences to uncover the city's secrets in a site-sympathetic theatre event, which explored a subterranean world masked by a veneer of respectability. The performance was the discovery of hidden secrets and stories of Cardiff traders, devised over two weeks with Punchdrunk Enrichment and led by a cast of 25 artists and members of the Hijinx Academy (the company's professional training course for actors with learning disabilities).

The selected location was steeped in history - the tunnels beneath Cardiff's Castle Arcade are invisible to passers-by and provided the perfect setting for a completely different experience of theatre, where the audience were free to roam through the performance space encountering characters and uncovering a story as the action took place all around them. Ben spoke about the ethos of Hijinx and the need to work with cast of mixed abilities in their productions. The devising process was a powerful method on ensuring that the cast were 'immersed' and invested within the performance. Creating performance within a non-theatrical space was a unique experience for the whole cast and gave ample opportunity for individuals to share their skills within a different context.



# CONCLUSIONS

## Summary of day:

- Delegates were offered an academic context from which to engage with the subject, this presentation addressed the rising interest in immersive arts and suggested why audiences want to be engaged further in this work.
- We explored different ways that audiences can be 'immersed' – the physical, geographic and psychological spaces in which immersion occurs.
- We discussed the intersection between online immersion and being immersed within a physical space and the possibility for interplay between these two spaces.
- We heard from a wide range of speakers who approached the subject from different backgrounds – as artists, producers, educationalists and digital media specialists. These speakers worked in diverse artistic disciplines including digital arts, theatre, spoken word and circus arts.
- We experienced an immersive performance, 'The Muse of Fire' and heard about the development of the production from the creative team at the Globe.
- We had the opportunity of informal networking.

## Summary of Learnings:

- That immersive work is applicable to a wide range of artistic forms and different contexts.
- That immersive arts strongly resonate with children who seek to explore, play and interact.
- That new technology has been key to developing different ways of becoming 'immersed' and that immersion is no longer restricted to a physical location.
- That the definition of 'immersive arts' is dynamic and is constantly shifting and developing, as stated during a presentation 'there really are no rules'

## Further Reading

- Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance by Josephine Machon
- Site-Specific Performance by Professor Mike Pearson
- Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place and Documentation by Nick Kaye.
- Choreographic Dwellings: Practising Place (New World Choreographies) by Gretchen Schiller and Prof. Sarah Rubidge
- Environmental and Site-Specific Theatre by Andrew Houston (Editor)
- Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation (2013)
- 'On Immersive Theatre', in *Theatre Research International* 37:3, October 2012, pp. 221-235 <http://crco.cssd.ac.uk/143/>
- 'Noise, Conceptual Noise, and the Potential of Audience Participation' in Kendrick, L. and D. Roesner (eds.) (2011) *Theatre Noise*, London, Cambridge University Press
- 'Odd, Anonymised Needs', in Oddey, A. and C. White (eds.) (2009) *Modes of Spectating*, Bristol: Intellect.
- <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/jul/30/immersive-art-do-audiences-deserve-it>
- <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/features/is-theatre-becoming-too-immersive-8521511.html>
- <http://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/magazine/272/good-read/immersive-theatre-marketing>



*“So what does family theatre look like? I looked outside the conventional audience research in theatre and towards the business of television and film. Unlike theatre, film and television have always segmented their audiences differently. As well as children's and adults, family has been a named category. This was partly historic as the old Hollywood film certificates were created with these categories to reinforce family values. So studios were forced to consider the family in a way that the theatre industry has not.”*

*- Harper Ray, Director Muse of Fire, Digital Producer, Globe Education*