

Other Side of the River Case Study

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Background & Introduction

Other Side of the River (OSOTR) comprises a suite of cultural activities and outputs focussed on collaboratively developed and produced performance, the inspiration for which is rooted in the Ferguslie Park area of Paisley. Located in the north-west of the town, Ferguslie Park has gained a reputation as one of the most deprived areas in Scotland; an undesirable allocation which, once assigned, brings a number of challenges, not least the myopia of those who are unable or unwilling to look beyond—or behind—a label.¹ The work undertaken for OSOTR sought to address this deficit of positive representation by providing an opportunity for community members to participate in the creation of theatre and other works which centred on their lived experience and, foregrounded different facets of a fictionalised Ferguslie.² In this way, the community had an opportunity to foster its own creativity, take part in activities which they may not ordinarily be able to prioritise and, contribute towards a potential repositioning or reimagining of Ferguslie.³

OSOTR was supported by Future Paisley, a programme which comprises a diverse range of cultural events and activities based around Paisley and Renfrewshire's unique and internationally significant story, utilising targeted investment to deliver positive change. The programme has striven to place culture at the heart of Paisley and Renfrewshire's regeneration, harnessing its power to support people's lives for the better, by integrating its benefits through key public services such as health and social care, education, and housing.⁴

¹ See: Ferguslie Park: 'Things have changed' in Scotland's most-deprived area & The Feegie Effect: how an idea from the poorest country in the world could transform the poorest part of Scotland, Elaine Carter - The Voice Behind Our Town: Episode 5.

² Initially, the OSOTR project was to comprise the development of a play to be toured in Scotland and England. However, the advent of the COVID pandemic meant a different approach was needed. The monologue element of the work was developed in response to this significant change of circumstance. The podcast was part of the original planning for OSOTR but 'really flourished, changed and evolved' due to the changes necessitated by the Pandemic (Interview with Lisa Nicoll, May 2024).

³ See: Interview: Writer and Director Lisa Nicoll

⁴ See: <https://www.renfrewshire.gov.uk/futurepaisley>.

To deliver OSOTR and associated activities, Future Paisley commissioned Lisa Nicoll and In-Motion Theatre⁵ to produce and tour a play inspired by Ferguslie Park. Active since 2016, In-Motion Theatre specialises in the production of new works, developing new writing and providing a 'platform for writers to take new work to audiences.'⁶ Community participation is a significant aspect of the company's practice.⁷ To meet the brief, Lisa Nicoll and In Motion Theatre took an approach that prioritised embedded work and collaboration with community members.⁸ For this commission, Lisa Nicoll and In Motion Theatre worked with community members in a range of ways; for example, running research and story sharing/ development workshops with SWIFT⁹ and other groups. To develop and produce OSOTR's outputs, In-Motion Theatre received £125,000 Future Paisley funding alongside 50% of the revenue deriving from ticket sales (£3787.50 in total) for the piece.¹⁰ While the play,¹¹ and its 9-show tour around Scotland,¹² was the centrepiece output deriving from this work, several other creative achievements were also forthcoming. These included:

- The production of the podcast "Voice Behind Our Town" which launched on Paisley FM in December 2020,¹³ telling the stories of a cross-section of Ferguslie Park community members. In an interview format, the podcasts provided a platform for guests who ranged in age from 18 to 82, to 'give a broad view of what it is actually like to live in Ferguslie, Paisley, and the battle that people feel they have been up against from the headlines, reputation and comments associated with the area over the years.'¹⁴
- A series of monologues "Voices Behind Our Town"¹⁵ developed with writers who 'live, have lived, or have a connection with Paisley, and in particular with the area of Ferguslie Park' and, reflecting fictionalised portraits of the lives, experiences, and views of a cross-section of the Ferguslie community. With guidance from In-Motion Theatre's Lisa Nicoll, the writers were supported to 'turn their stories into theatrical monologues which were then performed by professional actors'.¹⁶

⁵ <https://www.inmotiontc.co.uk/>.

⁶ See: <https://www.inmotiontc.co.uk/about>.

⁷ See: <https://www.inmotiontc.co.uk/community-participation>.

⁸ Correspondence with Lisa Nicoll, (4th June 2024).

⁹ Stronger Women in Ferguslie Together. See: <https://paisley.is/listing/honouring-renfrewshires-strong-women/>. Workshops with this group ran for a period of 15 weeks, enabling In-Motion Theatre's Lisa Nicoll to become acquainted with the group and to collaborate in development of characters, locations, story, plot, obstacles and conflict (see: Project Monitoring & Evaluation Report, June 2023).

¹⁰ Project Monitoring & Evaluation Report, June 2023. There was an additional in-kind £2,900 contribution from OneRen for lighting design.

¹¹ The trailer can be viewed, here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WqkJ65_18xA.

¹² The play was staged in Paisley, Shotts, Moodiesburn, Dunoon, Brechin, Buckie, Dundee and Perth. See: Project Monitoring & Evaluation Report, April 2023.

¹³ Episodes are available here: <https://www.inmotiontc.co.uk/voice-behind-our-town>

¹⁴ <https://www.inmotiontc.co.uk/voice-behind-our-town>.

¹⁵ The monologues are available to watch, here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zh_2R3iu2dk&t=1s

¹⁶ Project Monitoring & Evaluation Report, April 2023.

- Workshops hosted in the communities where the play was staged during the tour. These pre-performance activities ranged from 'cookery classes for local residents to journalism sessions for high school students.' These additional elements meant that, attendance of the OSOTR performance was a 'dining and activity experience with a play at its heart.'¹⁷

This case study draws upon published reports, a stakeholder interview, and other available data to explore the contribution that OSOTR has made to the Future Paisley Programme. As part of the Future Paisley Evaluation Framework, OSOTR is a significant contributor to several of the step change and outcome indicators that the Framework outlines. OSOTR was intended as a foremost contributor to:

¹⁷ OTHER SIDE OF THE RIVER, a Play Inspired by Glasgow's Ferguslie Park Will Tour Scotland.

- Step Change 1 [Radically Change Paisley's Image and Reputation in Scotland, the UK and Internationally], outcome 1: increased civic pride,
- Step Change 2 [Raise Prosperity and Increase Wellbeing in our Communities], outcome 6: the cultural offer is dispersed and accessible across Renfrewshire, enhancing wellbeing in our communities.
- Step Change 3 [Paisley will be Recognised for its Cultural Innovation], outcome 8: Innovation in Paisley's programming leads to wider engagement by local and national audiences.

The findings discussed in this case study are set out within the relevant parts of the outputs, outcomes and indicators framework developed as part of the Future Paisley evaluation process.

We share consistent positive messages about Paisley via town spokespeople & There are more opportunities to hear something positive about Paisley in the media.

OSOTR comprised a touring play and other outputs – in the shape of a podcast and video monologue piece – that were/are easily accessible to residents and curious parties living elsewhere. The play both presented an opportunity to tell a fictionalised story of people and community whose lives and experiences are rooted in an area which is traditionally unlikely to be associated with the creative production and touring theatre. Ferguslie has arguably suffered a double disadvantage, comprising deprivation and, the media's tendency to 'focus on the negatives instead of the positives, especially when the good stuff doesn't always make as captivating a headline'.¹⁸ The development of the play represented an opportunity to showcase the positive – or ordinary – stories that can be found in such 'overlooked' places and, to position the tale told within the canon of new and innovative work being created in contemporary Scottish theatre; its staging attracted considerable media attention.¹⁹ Overall, data collected indicates that the 19 pieces of news coverage relating to the play garnered an estimated 1.94 million views²⁰

¹⁸ A working-class community's fight to be seen for who they are... through theatre, bingo and a good feed.

¹⁹ See, for example: Lisa Nicoll's new play offers food for thought on community spirit; A working-class community's fight to be seen for who they are... through theatre, bingo and a good feed; Community-inspired play to take to the stage in Buckie.

²⁰ A prediction of lifetime views of coverage based on audience reach and engagement rate on social [media] and, leading to 4.14k engagements – a combination of likes, comments and shares across social media platforms. See: Press Report OtherSideofTheRiverfinalPRReport.

While the play was the centrepiece of the staging, OSOTR, was presented as a 'dining and activity experience' which embraced cooking, eating, bingo and karaoke as part of the theatrical performance. In the lead-up to each performance on the tour, cooking and journalism workshops were hosted for local community members and high school students. Cooking workshop attendees then prepared food so that audience members were able to dine during each performance.²¹ OSOTR garnered national media attention and, positive reviews. Writing on Broadway World Scotland, Stephi Wild called the play 'compelling, accessible and upbeat.'²² The Scotsman's reviewer was similarly positive, describing the 'depth and originality of the characters' as 'striking'.²³ A total of 523 tickets for the play were sold across the tour²⁴ While the more local performances of the work attracted the largest audiences, ticket sales for the other touring locations were generally strong.²⁵

The work undertaken with emerging local writers and, which matured into the "Voice Behind Our Town" monologues evidences an additional avenue through which an innovative and original approach to capturing, developing and raising community voices has been taken. Here, through a process of workshoping and reflective practice, a powerful and affecting fictionalised narrative has been created.²⁶ The emphasis on foregrounding local community voices and narrative is clear and, the central positioning of potentially overlooked stories and viewpoints once again provides a platform for projecting a range of community voices.²⁷

²¹ OTHER SIDE OF THE RIVER, a Play Inspired by Glasgow's Ferguslie Park Will Tour Scotland. The organisers of each cooking workshop received £500 from the OSOTR budget to support the activity. In Dunoon, attendees to a slow cooking workshop were each given a slow cooker of their own to take home; a positive and enduring legacy of their participation (interview with Lisa Nicoll, May 2024).

²² OTHER SIDE OF THE RIVER, a Play Inspired by Glasgow's Ferguslie Park Will Tour Scotland.

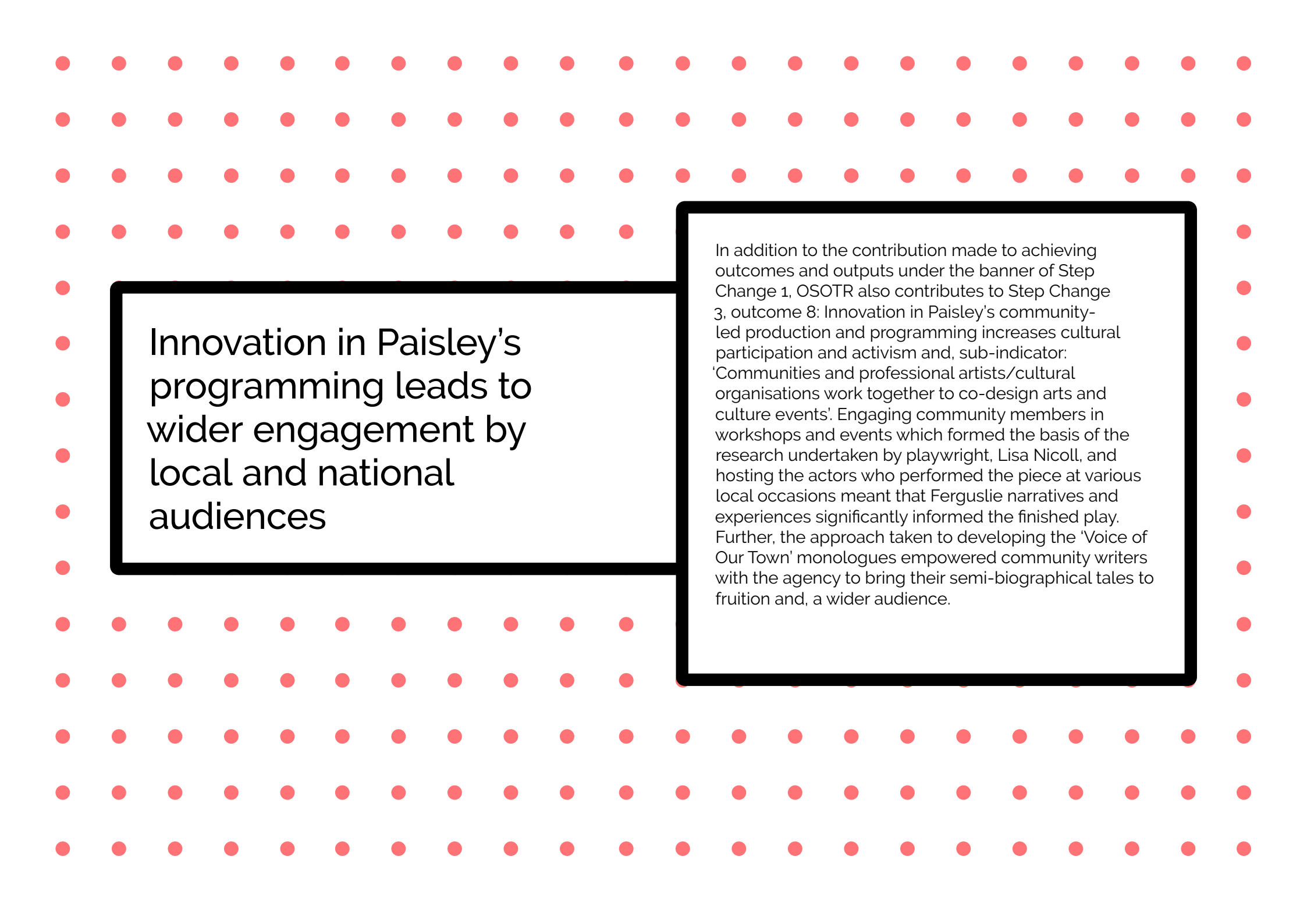
²³ Theatre reviews: Sean and Daro Flake It 'til They Make It | The Other Side Of The River.

²⁴ A pay what you can pricing structure was adopted, ticket prices started at £2.50 per person. (See: A working-class community's fight to be seen for who they are... through theatre, bingo and a good feed).

²⁵ The duo of performances at the Tannahill Centre, Paisley sold a combined total of 172 tickets. The remaining tour locations averaged 43 ticket sales. (See: Total Sales OSOTR).

²⁶ The monologues were developed on the basis of an octet of online workshops which were attended by interested community members who responded to an open call for participants circulated on social media. Hour-long workshops took place monthly. In addition, short, pre-recorded videos were shared in the intervening time to help writers keep their motivation. Along with editorial support, one-on-one sessions were also provided. When a piece was approaching completion, the writer joined a professional actor and director, Lisa Nicoll, for an online read through. Each monologue was then finessed further prior to the actor recording the finalised piece on their phone at home. The approach taken to evolving each monologue also provided the community-based writers with an experience that was fairly close to that of a professional writer, working with actors and a director to develop a piece of theatre (interview with Lisa Nicoll, May 2024).

²⁷ At the time of writing, the monologues (available to view, here: <https://tinyurl.com/2fh6wh4f>) have been viewed approximately 1,600 times on social media.



Innovation in Paisley's programming leads to wider engagement by local and national audiences

In addition to the contribution made to achieving outcomes and outputs under the banner of Step Change 1, OSOTR also contributes to Step Change 3, outcome 8: Innovation in Paisley's community-led production and programming increases cultural participation and activism and, sub-indicator: 'Communities and professional artists/cultural organisations work together to co-design arts and culture events'. Engaging community members in workshops and events which formed the basis of the research undertaken by playwright, Lisa Nicoll, and hosting the actors who performed the piece at various local occasions meant that Ferguslie narratives and experiences significantly informed the finished play. Further, the approach taken to developing the 'Voice of Our Town' monologues empowered community writers with the agency to bring their semi-biographical tales to fruition and, a wider audience.





Targeted investment in arts and cultural providers increases the accessibility of the cultural offer for marginalised groups and, Renfrewshire residents have access to high quality cultural experiences at all stages of life.

An additional – indirect – output which evolved as a result of the work which took place to create OSOTR has been the publication of Pat Kidd's book of short stories, *Cardboard in the Sole of my Shoe*.²⁸ A collection of tales and reminiscences drawing on a childhood spent in the Ferguslie area, the book is a result of In-Motion Theatre's Lisa Nicoll mentoring of the author. Pat's talent for storytelling emerged on the closed Feegiememories Facebook page and, during the development of his "Voices Behind Our Town" monologue. Lisa encouraged him to write down the stories of his youth and supported Pat to develop his book. The volume was self-published, a fundraising bingo and karaoke night was organised by In-Motion Theatre and members of Ferguslie's Darkwood Crew, a local community action group.²⁹

²⁸ See: Popular Paisley taxi driver releases book about his life growing up in Ferguslie Park.

²⁹ See: <https://darkwoodcrew.co.uk/>

The above further demonstrates the ways in which the suite of work that comprises *The Other Side of the River* has provided a platform upon which members of the Ferguslie/Paisley community have been able to develop and distribute their own views and narratives of their place and, to raise their voices using formats that may not ordinarily be accessible to them. The reach of this work has been considerable, e.g. audiences for the touring play, workshop attendees, and there is strong evidence of success in taking new narratives about – and awareness of – Ferguslie and Paisley beyond local settings.

The approach taken to staging the play is also of significance here. The inclusion of a dining – and the incorporation of bingo and karaoke/singing – as part of the entertainment sought to exploit the idea that food is a foremost motivator for gathering. Furthermore, the 'dining, bingo and singing' approach drew upon the established attraction of these activities, particularly for audience members who were not regular theatre attenders but, for whom karaoke and bingo were popular leisure and cultural pursuits. In addition, the play was staged at different times of day; with some performances taking place in the traditional evening slot while others began at 1 or 4pm both as this 'fitted in with the whole timescale of people's lives but also, [with] people who might want lunch.'³⁰ Playwright and director, Lisa Nicoll, also noted that she did not recognise the vast majority of audience members at each performance, providing some evidence that the piece had succeeded as 'theatre for the general public [rather] than for peers who work in an industry,' family members and friends.³¹

³⁰ Interview with Lisa Nicoll, May 2024.

³¹ Interview with Lisa Nicoll, May 2024.

New cultural space & programming investment enables new and original work to be show in Paisley.

Overall, the foregoing also evidences the ways in which OSOTR has contributed to the development of cultural and creative outputs which are original and, inspired by local stories and experiences. Lisa Nicoll's view – that while rooted in Ferguslie stories, the play tells a universal tale which will have resonance well beyond the immediate area³² – points to the way in which the outputs from this work have the potential to showcase their place of origin; both to its current residents and to an audience outwith this group. While COVID19 frustrated the plan to tour the play to England, it of course remains as a script which can be picked up and performed by others. Additionally, Lisa Nicoll is currently seeking collaborators and funding with a view to investigating the possibility of developing the play into a television drama.³³ If successful, the series would denote a very significant legacy for the OSOTR work.

³² Interview with Lisa Nicoll, May 2024.

³³ Interview with Lisa Nicoll, May 2024.

Insights & Recommendations

The range of work and outputs comprising OSOTR demonstrates the creative capacity that small local communities can contain. With encouragement and appropriate support, such potential can be realised in a variety of ways. For projects and programmes of this type, where possible a longitudinal assessment examining whether – and how – participation had positively impacted the lives of those involved would be insightful and informative.

³⁴ Initially, the work was planned to take place over a couple of years, because of COVID Lisa Nicoll spent about 6-6.5 years engaged in elements of this project (interview with Lisa Nicoll,

We suggest that keys to the successes that OSOTR has achieved include the prolonged nature of the period of engagement,³⁴ over the course of which In Motion Theatre's Lisa Nicoll and – eventually – the professional actors who staged the play were able to build genuine, trust-based relationships with community members. Further, the flexible nature of the engagement was also significant. The advent of the COVID19 pandemic necessitated considerable changes and, the recognition of Pat Kidd's talent as a storyteller led to the development of an unexpected, but very significant, output. Embracing these unexpected obstacles / discoveries as opportunities has served to strengthen and diversify the work produced through this project.

Going forward it will be fascinating to see whether the OSOTR work successfully develops additional facets, with, for example, a transfer to television or other arts and cultural platforms.

Sources

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