**BUSH THEATRE
COMMUNITY ASSOCIATE COMPANIES 2017**

*“Art is a way of showing people who you are”*

**Engagement at the Centre not the Fringes**

**Executive Summary**

**Part One: The Bush’s Enquiry**

The Bush is a new writing theatre, championing world-class work from voices that see the world from a different vantage point. In January 2015, *The Guardian* singled them out as a rare example of a theatre that embodies diversity, an ethos that *“has led to new plays, new conversations, new voices and new audiences, too”.*

During 2017, with funding from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, the Bush Theatre set out to test and explore a new model for working with their local community. They invited two organisations to become Community Associate Companies in order to from a long-term collaborative creative relationship with the Bush, offering them the same status and resources as Associate Artists. The Community Associate Companies (CACs) were **Nubian Life**, who selected theatre director **Cressida Brown** to work with them, and **Shepherd’s Bush Families Project**, who selected **Tangled Feet**, a physical theatre ensemble. Nubian Life is a community resource for African Caribbean elders. Shepherd’s Bush Families Project (SBFP) supports families who are homeless and those who have an unmet housing need. They run a drop-in where families can make friends and enjoy playing together.

This project forms part of the Bush’s strategy to create and demonstrate a model of a theatre that is culturally democratic and embedded in its local community. As part of their mission to develop the voices that represent the world today, they want to explore how the CACs can feed into their producing choices.The aim, following evaluation of the project is to run this initiative as a core project within the Bush’s Community programme, working with two new community organisations and their participants every two years.

**Part Two: Aspirations & Challenges; Part Three: Observations**

*It’s not for fun, I need to do something for myself.*

This formative evaluation sets out to evidence agreed impacts and outcomes for the project and open up a wider conversation about the progression of the model. The aspirations, reasons, challenges articulated by all parties at the start of the project in Part Two are tested and explored in the accounts of the workshop sessions and final events in Part Three, alongside unexpected moments of joy and reflection.

Key findings in Part Two for participants are around the wish and need for developing confidence and agency, exploring and enjoying creative activity and expressing something about themselves beyond day to day concerns. The Bush Team wanted to gain new insights about the neighbourhood and feel better connected with local residents. There is a strong desire to increase the status and profile of the Bush’s community work and consequently its ambition and impact on the whole of the theatre’s programme. The artists anticipated personal creative and technical stretch and exposure to new cultural experiences.

For artists and Community Associates the main challenges were around access. The Nubian Life elders were mostly frail and some had physical difficulties and/or dementia. With SBFP it was about the time families could commit to attending when having to face pressing personal priorities. The Bush staff voiced anxiety about the time and capacity they could commit to engaging with the project, the need for disability and dementia training and the challenge of integrating the work into the organisation at all levels.

During the introductory workshops with each group we established a high level of interest in creativity activity in each group as well as specific knowledge, qualifications and skills. The workshop with the elders gave an indication of a fount of rich stories about their experiences of migration and work as well as a strong Caribbean cultural identity and expressiveness. The SBFP women were animated by the discussion about art and its place in society and their lives. “We don’t talk about these things enough!” said one. Another asserted:

*Art brings the community together - people who you might not otherwise associate with.*

Part Three findings, as a result of the observations of the mid-project sessions and the final shared events, illustrated the continuing engagement of each group as well as some of the anticipated challenges. The physical working space and short contact time are significant challenges for the families and Tangled Feet, but a strong concept for the final event emerges, a feast. The elders from Nubian Life are responding well to the stimulus offered by Cressida and her guest artists and make creative and physical leaps during their session.

The final events showcase talent, skills, poetry, dancing, images, personal stories, food and proud expressions of cultural heritage. Audiences and guests are by invitation only but each group shares something in the public domain. The Nubian Life elders’ powerful film interviews ‘Saluting the Windrush Generation’: are available online and SBFP’s playful photo booth images were exhibited in the Bush foyer. This publicly shared, rich content conveys unexpected or often unrecognised images and stories of people significantly under-represented in mainstream media.

**Part Four: Shift and Change**

Finally, participants and the evaluator reflect on what has worked well and what might be done differently in future. Nubian Life report strategic benefits for their organisation and clear mental, physical and social benefits. The project has shone a light on the stories of a West Indian generation that have shaped local history. These stories are fertile ground for further activities for Nubian Life staff and a valuable resource for all of us. Cressida developed new techniques and approaches to help her engage creatively with older people and also developed a strong connection both with the group and individual elders. SBFP have developed a good working relationship with the Bush and plans for further projects in 2018, incorporating more time for the women to do something for themselves. Tangled Feet learnt much from the challenges they encountered and are keen to build on the mutual knowledge and insights gained:

*It feels like a beginning, an opening of possibilities and it would be great to harness that.*

The artists recommended using the Bush spaces more often in future, despite the challenges, as bringing people to a different environment had a positive impact on their sessions. The concept of Associate Company has meaning for the organisations’ staff but is harder to grasp for participants and their audiences. Physically connecting the project activity to the Bush building over a period of time could make the concept more concrete:

*By relocating the project to the Bush space for the final week - all sorts of interesting things started happening.*

The Bush staff were more cautious in their assessment of whether their initial personal aspirations had been met, but the majority of the survey sample agreed that

We ask ourselves different questions about our role and work with the local community.

There is almost unanimous confidence that the project has opened up further opportunities for a key aim, that the community directly have a creative impact on the artistic programme. Impact on the staff’s delivery and the organisation’s working practices is something that will have to be captured and measured over a longer period of time.

**Part Five:** **Recommendations** **and Questions**

In the short term, the project’s legacy has affected conversations about how community use can be more actively built into the Bush’s programming.

*It has allowed us to investigate creating a different kind of contract with our local communities*

What is the contract? An important question that emerges for both artists and participants is how to understand and negotiate the roles, risks and responsibilities in collaborations between artists and community participants. It is a challenge to balance the role of being inspiring artists and facilitating the participants’ agency to be creative and make decisions.

Are projects like this only processes that encourage expressiveness or are they also able to create art that communicates beyond its immediate producers? For a project that places emphasis on the values of collaboration and co-production, were all the conditions to achieve this in place? These issues need to be built into the artistic brief and project process.

The 17 recommendations address the artistic planning and processes and ongoing support for the CACs; physical, visual and psychological access to make the building more porous; engaging and making the most of all the staff’s expertise. The latter is about confidence in community engagement becoming embedded in the Bush’s culture and approach to all its delivery. Finally, looking forward, how can the CAC status be communicated and signalled more meaningfully to participants and what practical measures can be implemented to continue to nurture the individual relationships established.

*“Now, quite simply there is an urgency to continue to shorten the gap between the community engagement work and the work on our stage.”*

*Madani Younis, Artistic Director*

**Elizabeth Lynch**

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