



Young Company Storytelling Evaluation Report



Contents

Section 1: Background & Introduction

Royal Exchange Theatre & Young Company

Storytelling Evaluation Methodology

3
4-5

Section 2: Impact & Learning

Themes

Stories in relation to key values

6-10
12-18

Section 3: Conclusion

19-20

Section 4: Stories

21-28

Section 5: Thanks

29

Section 1: Background & Introduction Royal Exchange Theatre

Royal Exchange Theatre

The Royal Exchange Theatre (RET) transforms the way people see theatre, each other and the world around them. We are a nationally recognised, award-winning cultural charity and the North West's largest and only full-time text based producing theatre. We present work in our unique modular theatre-in-the-round as well as in communities in Greater Manchester in our equally unique mobile theatre, the Den. At the Royal Exchange Theatre, our exemplary engagement work sits side-by-side with the theatre we produce. Our Engagement programme includes our Young Company; offering year-round activities to nurture creativity, build skills and confidence and our work with schools and our Elders programme which includes an Elders Company for people aged 60+, supporting those at risk of isolation. Underpinning this is our Local Exchange community programme which sees us residing in areas across Greater Manchester over four-years.

Young Company

The Young Company offers training opportunities for 64 young people a year, aged between 14-25. We train young people as Performers, Makers (Directors, Designers, Producers & Technicians) and Writers. The programme develops skills, raises confidence and aspirations and builds a sense of community for people to make friends and feel at home in their local theatre. We deliver weekly skills sessions led by professional theatre makers and practitioners, group socials, collaborative projects, free tickets to RET productions, intergenerational workshops and projects with the RET Elders Company, mentoring from theatre staff, backstage access and opportunities to be part of our professional, main stage shows as well as create their own production.

Why evaluate?

Over the last six years we have developed the Young Company to be more inclusive and representative of Greater Manchester. This has seen an increase in the diversity of the company (including more global majority, neurodivergent and disabled young people, trans and non-binary young people) and young people who have never taken part in theatre before coming to RET.

During this time there has also been a global pandemic which had a huge impact on young people's education and mental health and still is impacting young people now. This is against a background of decreasing access to drama and theatre within education.

RET therefore wanted to evaluate the programme to ensure that the Young Company model was serving what young people needed now.

Young Company Storytelling Evaluation

In January and February 2024 trained staff collected stories from eight people involved the Young Company in 2022/23. They were representative of all three stands of the Young Company, Writers, Makers and Performers. They had conversations about their experiences and what it had meant for them. These conversations were recorded and transcribed, and then edited by writer Phillip Brennan into shorter stories which captured the experiences and voices of the storytellers.

In April 2024, RET brought together staff, local partners and freelance facilitators to discuss the stories and the learning emerging. The session was facilitated by Inga Hirst (Director of Engagement) and Scarlett Spiro-Beazley (Children & Young People Producer) from RET.

The session was structured around 3 key discussions:

Discussion 1: What struck people on reading the stories? What threads and themes are emerging?

Discussion 2: The stories in relation to four key outcomes

Discussion 3: Reflections on using the Storytelling methodology





Storytelling Evaluation Methodology

To evaluate the impact of the Young Company, RET used the Storytelling Evaluation Methodology.

Storytelling was developed by the Old Fire Station, Oxford (OFS). Inspired by the Most Significant Change (MSC) technique, it involves collecting stories from participants about their experience of a project, and then bringing people together to discuss the stories and what can be learned from them.

Unlike conventional approaches to evaluation, Storytelling is not shaped by quantitative indicators developed in advance. Instead, the storytellers decide what impact looks and feels like for them. The approach is particularly effective for measuring change that is unexpected, emergent, personalised or diverse – and understanding how change happens. It focuses on learning from positive change, and is often a meaningful, collaborative experience which centres the voices of those most involved.

The Storytelling methodology involves the following key stages:

Identifying storytellers

People who reflect a range of different perspectives on the project being evaluated.

Collecting stories

Each storyteller meets with a trained story collector. They have a conversation about their experience guided by four key questions: What has been your involvement? What's changed you? Why is this change important? What enabled it to happen? Crucially, this is not an interview but a discussion – relaxed, informal and on the teller's terms.

Editing stories

These conversations are recorded, transcribed and then edited down into 1–2-page stories, which aim to faithfully reflect the teller's insights on the impact of the project, whilst keep the teller's 'voice' in the story – telling it in their own words. The stories are then sent to the storytellers for their input and approval before being shared.

Discussion Session

We hold a facilitated discussion which brings together people with different perspectives and experiences in relation to the work to discuss the stories and the themes and learning emerging from them.

You can find out more about the methodology and how it works in practice [here](#).

Section 2: Impact & Learning

The initial discussion in groups focused on what struck and surprised people on reading the stories, and the threads and themes emerging.

What was striking and surprising?

People were surprised by the depth and richness of the stories and how personal the stories were, especially given how young the storytellers were. They were struck by the journey of change and growth throughout all the stories and how that had been achieved in such a short amount of time. They were also struck by the joy, commitment and positivity of the young people and the leadership they showed.

Threads and Themes

Whilst each story offers a unique insight into someone's experience and what impact the Young Company had on them, there are several resounding themes which come up again and again across the stories.



1. Confidence and finding your voice

All the stories discussed how much their time at the Young Company had improved their confidence and self-esteem, helping them to find their voice and believe in themselves. This came through the friendships that they made, being treated, and respected as a professional and given creative agency to develop.

“Above all, the Young Company made me feel happy. And it also made me feel comfortable enough to be who I am. I don't know where I would be without it.”

(No Fear)

“I came to the Royal Exchange to regain my confidence and find that old energy[...]I feel great now. Now I can truly be myself. The self I thought I'd lost was so confident and he was so bold. He was goofy, weird, and crazy. I've got that confidence back, but I'm a young adult now. I have to be serious sometimes and I have to be formal sometimes. But I'm still happy that I've unlocked that old side of me thanks to the Royal Exchange. I literally missed it for so long.”

(My Old Self)

“There was so much to think about at high school. But the Royal Exchange was a different type of world where I could explore self-expression. It unlocked something in my heart. It was like a spark. And that spark turned into a firework. It let loose my potential.”

(Fireworks)

“What was nice was it was a few hours every week, talking to a lot of really confident, creative people. Coming from high school where I wasn't talking to many people, it was great. I gradually talked to more people and grew in confidence, and confidence is really important in the industry and life in general.”

(Organising the Chaos)

2. Friendship and belonging

The friendships that were formed during their time in the Young Company was a strong theme in every story. The storytellers often reflected on the differences and diversity in the group but all found a commonality through theatre. From the challenges of school, work and home, the Young Company offered a place to connect and find a place that you could belong.

“Everyone's energy was so high. And everyone was so diverse and so unique. But everyone had that one personality trait: they love theatre! ”

(My Old Self)

“Thanks to Young Company, I've also gotten more friends. Even my dad would say that when I was in high school, I kept to myself. I only had a few friends. But now I'm in a position where I even asked a friend to come around to my house. That never used to happen. The main thing that gave me that push into making new friends was realising that, in a weird way, I wasn't alone. In my head, I thought my situation with my parents wasn't ideal. But then when I got to talk to people, I realised there's a couple other people going through the same thing. The more I got to know people, the more and more I got to realise you do it because it's your passion. It was that connection that I started to make with people. We were family, a Royal Exchange family. There were people that were extroverts and people that were introverts, and everyone was comfortable with each other. We actually went out and saw each other outside of the Royal Exchange, and that made a massive difference. We're planning to catch up soon as well. I'm so much more sociable! ”

(A Royal Exchange Family)

“I made really good friends and we talked about what it's like to be a person of colour in this industry and how difficult it is. There aren't enough stories that are being funded for us. So we have to do that ourselves. And I think that was a reality that we all had to face together.”

(Being in the Building)

3. Access

Many of the stories talk about barriers to accessing opportunities which the Young Company helped to break down through practical finance support like the Arts Pot, as well as supporting people to engage and learn in a way that worked for them.

“while you’re in it you’re meeting with different people and like-minded people. You're learning to trust each other, and learning about different stories. That's just really valuable to me, as a deaf person, that I felt connected to everybody.”

(Fireworks)

“Mum's a teaching assistant, so she wasn't on the best wage. I got a place on performers. There was an option where you can tick for the arts pot, which I also got, and that was a big help.”

(A Royal Exchange Family)

“I struggle with dyslexia, so it's very hard for me to read. I had this chalkboard I was reading off, because I need the script with me to remember what's going on. Everyone was so understanding, they latched on positively to the fact that some people had disadvantages trying to do this play.”

(My Old Self)

4. Diversity and representation

Having the facilitators, artists and other young people in the company from a diverse range of backgrounds was highlighted as a key reason for the participants feeling welcome and having role models within the industry to learn from.

“I didn't have an idea of myself as a deaf person. Where do I have a place? I wanted to be an actor during that time. And Nickie gave me the confidence boost that I can do anything, there isn't anything that's stopping you. Just look at her, she's doing loads of things. That was something that really inspired me.”

(Fireworks)

“Seeing another Asian person in theatre was really important. I'd never really seen that locally before. It was always white middle-class people. Walking in and seeing Naomi with a northern accent, I was like, whoa, there are other Asians! She was just really cool.”

(Being in the Building)

“Most of us are part of the global majority. Whereas at uni, where I did Drama and English, most of my course was very white.”

(I am Kenough)

5. Creating a safe space and increasing wellbeing

A lot of stories talked about the facilitators and the activities and space they created which made it a safe space to be themselves, try things out and it be ok to fail and learn. The sessions helped increase their mental wellbeing, often giving tools they have taken into their everyday life.

“At the end of every session we’d stand in a circle and breathe the day out. It’s to help you clear your mind from one space to another. And now I use it all the time. I was having a really bad day once, but I had an important audition. So I was like: breathe that out. All that matters right now is the audition. And then after that, you can go deal with everything else. I’m quite proud of myself! ”

(I am Kenough)

“I was going through a lot of depression and anxiety. I didn’t know how to deal with it. But the tasks and the things that we were doing at Royal Exchange, those were literally battling my anxiety and my depression[...]At Royal Exchange we would shake things off and walk around. You could make mistakes and do weird things and it was fine. Those exercises really changed how I deal with my anxiety.”

(My Old Self)

“I thought it would be really scary to do something like Young Company. But there’s so much about the space that makes you feel safe. The people are all nice and make you so welcomed and the staff are really supportive[...] If I’d had a stressful day like at home or at school, it was nice to come into that space at the Royal Exchange. We would walk around the room and forget about everything that was going on. We got into our own character, our own space, and focussed just on what was happening in the room. That’s helped me a lot. ”

(No Fear)

6. Skills development

The young people talked throughout the stories about the creative and practical skills they developed but also the transferable life skills they learnt and personal development.

“What makes the Young Company so great is the variety of what you’re taught. It’s mainly learning hands-on, which works really well in such a creative industry[...] But the fact that you go to a session, you do five minutes learning about lighting and sound design, and then you get the actual lights out, and you get actors in place – it’s a great way to learn. One session, you’d be in the costume store, learning about how the costumes are made and fitted. And then the next day, you’re sat behind the laptop on QLab. I love how much it varies, and how much the sessions changed to give you a really good understanding of the entire industry. ”

(Organising the Chaos)

“Over my time at the Young Company I learnt that we’re all here for a reason, whether you think that you have a little or a lot of experience, we’re all here to learn about the same things. And everything you learn in theatre is not just for theatre. It’s something that you can use every day. You learn how to use your initiative. You learn how not to give up. ”

(From the Rooftops)

“As the director, it was all about problem solving, and I love problem solving with stories. With actors, you get to talk it out. And the most valuable lesson with directing is that, while you are a leader, you are also the glue. You are essentially trying to get everybody on board with the ideas. You have to encourage people to create their own ideas as well. You have to work with people and socialise. That is one of the big things I had to overcome. But you are essentially creating a space for everyone. ”

(Fireworks)

7. Future aspirations and progression routes

All the young people identified how the Young Company has helped them understand what it is they want to focus on as a career. Some had clear goals from the start, and others found their love of a certain area of theatre making during their time in the Company. Many reflect that being in the Young Company has opened up other opportunities for them in the industry and others are now gaining employment at RET.

“The Royal Exchange led me to think about who I want to be. It was like this existential journey. It gave me a confidence boost during high school. And I started to look into English and go into books. It made me fall in love with something that I didn't know was possible. Change was constant during the experience. And that was a good thing. You get to experience new things about yourself. But also hear stories that you never heard about before. It was very scary when I saw that I didn't want to be an actor – I wanted to be a director. But then the more you explore, the more you go deep into the ocean of your mind, the more you find out about yourself. ”

(Fireworks)

“I wouldn't have any of the connections in the industry I do now if I hadn't gone to Young Company or the Collective workshops. I'm now doing something that I'm passionate about[...]I had no idea stage management existed as a possible career choice until I'd gone to the Young Company. ”

(Organising the Chaos)

“I'd also like to be in the Young Company staff one day. I know they've had a couple Young Company graduates who have helped out, and I think that's what I would like to do. I've had the experience of being in the company myself and I think it would be nice to help the next ones feel comfortable.”

(No Fear)

8. Parental influence

One of the most surprising common themes was parental influence either positively or in a lot of cases negatively. Some people only found out about the Young company due to a parent and their encouragement, but a lot of people talked about the challenges of pursuing a creative career without parental support.

“My parents are very traditional in their culture, so they don't actually go to theatre or any kind of arts thing. It was a bit rough at first. But they understood by the end. The ideal thing is, Mum said, whatever makes you happy at this moment in time.”

(A Royal Exchange Family)

“Mum didn't want me to do acting, and that was a hard decision for me to just agree with. That's why I left home.”

(My Old Self)

“My mum, as mums do, encouraged me to apply to the Young Company. I was hesitant. But my sister is a huge musical fan, I saw her performing all the time. And that was something I wanted to be a part of. ”

(Fireworks)

“It was my mum that found out about Royal Exchange on Facebook, and she encouraged me to apply.”

(Organising the Chaos)



Stories in relation to key values

The stories were discussed in relation to three key values for the programme:

INSPIRE

Our USP, being a text-based producing theatre, runs through all of our work with children and young people. This includes watching shows in the module, but also being involved in the development of them, having access to the process, artists and RET staff.

HEARD

We will listen and be accountable to young people who bring new and important perspectives. They will shape the future of the work we do, with children and young people, but also beyond.

EQUITY

We recognise that everyone will have different circumstances and may need varying opportunities and support to engage, so we will remove barriers and provide personalised progression routes.

Each group focused on a different outcome, and thoughts about examples of this outcome in the stories and what enabled it to happen.

There were lots of references in the stories to the inspiring creatives and staff the young people had access to, and what they gained from these interactions. Also, the development of skills through being challenged and treated as a professional, skills within the art form but also transferable skills were important. Having a high quality of experience in Young Company raised aspirations and belief that they could be in this industry which led to transformational change personally and professionally.

"I've learnt to take advantage of opportunities, to not be scared to go for things, and to be proud of myself. No matter what I've done in theatre, every single time I write something and I hear it or see it, I know: this is what I'm supposed to do in my life. The Young Company has facilitated that. It has really guided me. It doesn't just give you the experience of how to teach or how to write. You find out where you can apply your skills."

(From the Rooftops)

"And I think doing interactive theatre challenged that bias a lot of us had, including myself, around what makes high-art theatre. This was in a setting that felt professional, that respected and honoured us young people as real artists."

(I am Kenough)

"At school, you're surrounded by people that might not be interested in theatre, but when you're in makers group, people all have the same ideas and interest in theatre. It creates a lot of connections and a lot of friendships. It also increases confidence because you're in a creative space. Then you have industry professionals coming in and talking to you about the different roles and career routes that you're interested in. We also had practical workshops and practical activities, which let you have a creative outlet."

(Organising the Chaos)

"What I really liked is there were times where some of us would be invited to go into a rehearsal for the actual show that was going on. I was like, oh my god, I'm gonna meet the actors! But obviously, it was just watching them doing an actual rehearsal, them being in the moment and how it feels. I saw how the lighting is done and how the sound is made. I was like, wow! That's a lot to go through in the space of what, six, seven hours? It opened my eyes. I saw not every day in theatre is the same, which I am more than happy with. Because I get bored sometimes. I always have to be on my feet doing something. So this excited me quite a bit."

(A Royal Exchange Family)

What enabled this to happen?

- Raising aspiration – having experiences in Young Company that inspire, challenge and affirm the young people was essential to them believing in themselves and their future.
- Access to process and people - speaking to range of people who are already working professionally in the industry and seeing the process of how work is made was important to be inspired and demystify.
- Skills building – the Young Company develop skills through in depth training, hands-on experience and support from professionals.
- Seeing progression routes – the programme shows that there are multiple directions people can take and there are opportunities at the Exchange for paid roles, and they will be supported into external opportunities too.
- Transferable skills – confidence, communication and teamwork was developed through working with other Young Company members on projects, and being encouraged by staff

“The first few weeks we got to know each other and got comfortable in our own space. We did workshops, like improvised singing, dancing, scripts, reading monologues. We became a detective when it came to reading texts. And then we went into a collaborative project where all three groups – performers, makers, and writers – would get together and make something. We did a game show kind of thing. It was an absolute highlight. When it came to the final performance, we actually couldn't believe we'd done it.”

(A Royal Exchange Family)

“I'm also keeping an open mind in more things. For example, if a job opportunity comes up, or a casting call comes, I give it a go. I don't think, oh, I won't suit it, or it's not for me. I give it a go.”

(A Royal Exchange Family)

“First I was a writer, then a maker and now I'm an assistant. [...] I'm now also directing a show that I wrote. It's going to be put on at Contact, which feels insane. I just feel a lot more hopeful for my career. And I'm so confident that I know I'm going to have a career that I will enjoy, even though I haven't really started it yet, which is a wild thing to have. It's a little spiritual as well – I have a need to show and a need to create”

(Being in the Building)

“The Young Company has given me so much support with my play, Untitled Emotions. Naomi would read it and give me feedback. Before, I would have never shared my work because it was really nerve-racking. Now, it's going to be performed in April! And it was longlisted for the Mustapha Matura Award and mentoring programme.”

(From the Rooftops)

“It's made me realise there are different routes I can go down besides performing on stage. A show is not just what we see on stage.”

(No Fear)

There were plenty of examples from the storytellers about being listened to and valued. There were references to having ownership over what they were doing and encouraged to bring their unique and important voices. It was clear that an environment was created that allowed them to express themselves and be confident in who they were.

“I was in a group of adults, but I felt like I was a proper creative being taken seriously, which was sick.”

(Being in the Building)

“I'm quite an introverted person. So I would sit there and not speak. But I feel like I have such a strong voice and I'm a very opinionated person. I just want people to hear me. And when I wrote my first play, it was linked to my dad's death, which happened when I was 10. My parents were divorced. We didn't talk to him at all. And it was such a weird experience. It kind of felt like my feelings weren't fully acknowledged. At that moment in time I wanted to be heard from the rooftops. It really came out when I was doing the collaborative project. I felt like my words were being heard and acknowledged. We were exploring themes of capitalism and power. And I thought that was so interesting. We were able to create this narrative through game which adds this extra layer of intrigue. I felt like my words had control over the narrative and the story and people. To watch it and my narrative unfold, and the ending and start and everything coming together, I just thought it was the most incredible feeling of all time”.

(From the Rooftops)



What enabled this to happen?

- Given responsibility and ownership – the collaborative project hands over most decisions to Young Company, they are treated as professionals and have autonomy
- Resilience and overcoming challenges – there were opportunities to work through challenging situations with support, persevering and being encouraged to do the parts that they struggled with, showing them they could do it.
- Supportive environment – the staff created a safe and welcoming space that made the young people feel comfortable. They took the time to give personalised advice and guidance, as well as encouraging the young people.
- Championing individuality - Young Company are encouraged to bring their unique selves, share their opinions and are celebrated for what they each bring to the group.

“After Young Company my confidence is up. I'm used to being in groups of people, playing games and having no fear, whether that's performing or talking to people who are in college. If I hadn't done the Young Company every Tuesday, I don't think I would be able to do what I do in college – like being in the groups of people, playing those acting games, and getting points across about production.”

(No Fear)

“My tutor was so amazing. She was so sweet. And all the tutors were. They were so understanding and patient. The empathy was there. And that was important, because sometimes it could get really pressuring and hard. I'd never done this kind of acting before. And I was so far away from home. It was really hard for me to dissect everything that was going on in my personal life, and also make sure I was doing the right things in the show. So I'm really thankful the tutors were there for me. I feel great now. Now I can truly be myself. The self I thought I'd lost was so confident and he was so bold. He was goofy, weird, and crazy. I've got that confidence back, but I'm a young adult now. I have to be serious sometimes and I have to be formal sometimes. But I'm still happy that I've unlocked that old side of me thanks to the Royal Exchange. I literally missed it for so long.”

(My Old Self)

“First rehearsal, the director was meant to talk to me about what the story was about. But he didn't acknowledge me. He was also much taller than me. He was a white guy. And the way he was talking – it wasn't talking to me, it was talking at me. I felt like he was putting me below him. Had it not been in that environment, it would have affected me a lot more than it has. I had the support of other people. And Naomi talked me through it. I literally stood up to this director in the rehearsal room and said, you're not listening to me. It opened my eyes up to the conflicts that you can have professionally. People may not respect you at first, but you have to respect yourself, to know when you need to make a boundary.”

(Being in the Building)

“The Royal Exchange gave me that comfort: you are being yourself.”

(Fireworks)



Many of the storytellers talk of a lack of access to the creative industries or belief that it wasn't for them, for a multitude of reasons. This could be because of their cultural heritage or lack of parental support, or other barriers such as finances or disability, mental health, neurodiversity. Through removing some of those barriers to access, creating inclusive environments, increasing representation within staff teams and creating a safe space where people could be their authentic selves, the storytellers grew in confidence, self-belief and entered the industry thinking that they could do this and that this was for them.

"In high school it was very hard for me as a deaf person to communicate with people who hadn't learned about me or my deafness. I was very shy, and I didn't have any confidence or social skills."

(Fireworks)

I didn't think a career in acting would be an option before the Royal Exchange, because actors are people you see on screens or on stages, and it just seems like a very opaque sort of thing."

(I am Kenough)

"The only drama I got to do was at school, in GCSE and A level, because that was academic enough for my parents. I fought really hard to be able to do drama outside of school but my parents were like, this doesn't feel like it's helping you. My parents are Asian immigrants. They literally used to grow up in villages. My dad didn't have electricity until he was 10. I emigrated here when I was four years old, so I really just jumped into the deep end. My oldest sister works in international development. My other sister studied criminology. And I was like, I'm gonna do drama! My parents were like: no. But eventually they just gave up. They were like, okay, you really seem like you want to do it, so go."

(Being in the Building)

"I didn't know then but I've got severe ADHD. I think that's the reason why a job at a desk wouldn't be for me. I thought to myself, what is it that will make yourself most happy? Acting. My parents were kind of dickheads about it. I know now that the dickhead-ery came out of a place of worry and care. But obviously, that was not nice for me at the time. It felt most vividly like they were saying I was wasting my talents. You won't be able to make a living, you won't be able to make a future. But I get why they're that worried. Both of my parents grew up very working class. I didn't have to, and it's because of them."

(I am Kenough)

What enabled this to happen?

- Representation of artists - Ensuring we have diverse staff members on the team means that the Young Company can see themselves reflected, this raises aspirations and develops an belief that this is a place for them.
- Arts Pot - Removing financial barriers through Arts Pot was important for young people to take part, whether that was travel, lunch or the fees
- Community, friendship and social skills - Sharing a space with other people like you, who are also passionate about theatre but may have had similar challenges was essential. Working together towards a common goal during projects and shows bonded many of them.
- Being your authentic self – creating a non-judgemental environment, ensuring a diverse cohort and representation in staff teams and course content, and valuing people for their individuality, allowed people to be themselves and develop more self-belief.
- Meeting access requirements / inclusive environment - this allowed Young Company to engage and contribute, and be the best they could be in the space.
- Well-being - the most important thing in a project isn't the end product, it's the process, so checking in regularly and having that space for feedback was essential.

“For Chaos, we had to apply to be Assistant Directors for Gitika. Obviously, I did research. She’s South Asian and queer, and I was like, that's me! I need to work for this person. She taught me how to back myself. I was in a group of adults, but I felt like I was a proper creative being taken seriously, which was sick.”

(Being in the Building)

“There's still days where I'm so depressed. I literally just got out of a depressed episode. But the Royal Exchange supported me immensely with my anxiety in that period of time. The Royal Exchange pushed me and helped me grow in so many ways. It even helped me make friends and great connections. To begin with it was awkward, like, should I say hi? But we ended up getting used to each other and after that we ended up going Wetherspoons like every single week after the session.”

(My Old Self)

“We had two characters who are given boys’ names in the script. They very much like each other. But because of our cast, these characters were played by girls. And the biggest thing about their story has got nothing to do with the fact it’s a queer relationship. That really did stand out. The characters got to dance and I nearly cried the first time I saw that. I thought, if this is what being a professional is like it would absolutely be worth it. It was my first taste of it. If it weren't for Chaos, I don't know how I would've felt coming out of uni.”

(I am Kenough)

“I didn't have a lot of control over what was happening in my life when I first started the Young Company. But when you're a writer, you get to create a world and control it. And there's something about writing human conversations which I find incredibly interesting. I have autism, so social interactions are really nerve-racking for me, and I always listen to what people say. I'm intrigued by what people are doing and thinking. A lot has changed since I started the Young Company. I'm actually going out and speaking to people. I can communicate about theatre. And I've made friends, which is something I never did. I was also able to go home and write a full-length play. Whenever I'm struggling, writing has brought me comfort.”

(From the Rooftops)

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Through the conversations it felt like what was missing was a connection to the main RET programme. The young people have a strong connection to the building because of their positive experience of Young Company, but only one story connects to their experience with the main stage work. This is something that is key to addressing with the next Young Company to help us achieve our key value of INSPIRE.

The stories are overwhelmingly positive but raised the question of how we collect as detailed and in depth feedback from those that withdrew from the programme during the year (12%) to really understand what adaptations or developments we need to make to the programme.

Something else to consider was how we measure longer term impact of being part of the Young Company. These stories were collected for those who participated recently, but anecdotally we know that the programme has been a catalyst for those working successfully and professionally in the industry, as well as what was gained more holistically that contributed to positive life outcomes such as social connections, confidence and communication.

Those who took part in a main summer production (CHAOS / MIXTAPE) cited the experience as a important and transformative and a key highlight for them. However, for those that didn't have that experience their learning and the impact of the programme was still as strong and the Collaborative Project provided the same learning and impact. As we look at how to make the production outcomes more accessible to all members of the Young Company this is an key consideration to help with planning the future.

The Young Company demographics and experience have developed significantly over the last 6 years. We were unsure if we were serving either those experiencing theatre for the first time or the young people who were very experienced and already on a career path into the industry. The stories have helped show the value in keeping the groups a mix of levels of experience and it is a real strength of the programme.



Conclusion

We embarked on this evaluation to help us understand the impact of the Young Company for the participants and help us to develop model and offer to best meet the needs of young people we are working with. The stories have helped us to understand and articulate the benefits of the programme and ensure that we hold on to the key enablers that make this such an impactful and important programme for young people. These are:

- Representation and diversity – both in terms of the artists and facilitators to create a space where everyone can see themselves but also the make up of the group, we shouldn't move away from it being a mixed cohort of experience and backgrounds
- Friendship and belonging – recruiting a diverse group of people with shared interests and creating an environment to allow the building of meaningful connections
- A safe and inclusive space – acknowledging why people might not feel safe and included, and use this knowledge to create a space to learn, fail, try things out, play and most importantly to be yourself and be heard and valued
- Holistic approach - although the development of skills and creating work is important, this can only be possible by meeting people where they are and understanding them as a person first, and an artist second
- Access to RET's work, staff and artists - this is key to igniting that spark of creativity, raising aspirations and developing the theatre makers of the future
- Skilled facilitation – none of the above could be achieved without the skills and care of the artists and team working on the programme.

A Royal Exchange Family

I actually started off doing a work experience week at the Royal Exchange, back when I was in college. Makeup, lights, sound, all that stuff. I think that was the start of realising what theatre actually is. And then someone introduced me to the Young Company. The application deadline had already passed, so the next year, when I'd started a foundation year in drama, I applied. Mum's a teaching assistant, so she wasn't on the best wage. I got a place on performers. There was an option where you can tick for the arts pot, which I also got, and that was a big help.

The first few weeks we got to know each other and got comfortable in our own space. We did workshops, like improvised singing, dancing, scripts, reading monologues. We became a detective when it came to reading texts. And then we went into a collaborative project where all three groups – performers, makers, and writers – would get together and make something. We did a game show kind of thing. It was an absolute highlight. When it came to the final performance, we actually couldn't believe we'd done it. After the collaborative project we had more workshops, and I think we had more singing lessons. We had a karate lesson! And if you ever needed help, there was always someone to ask.

What I really liked is there were times where some of us would be invited to go into a rehearsal for the actual show that was going on. I was like, oh my god, I'm gonna meet the actors! But obviously, it was just watching them doing an actual rehearsal, them being in the moment and how it feels. I saw how the lighting is done and how the sound is made. I was like, wow! That's a lot to go through in the space of what, six, seven hours? It opened my eyes. I saw not every day in theatre is the same, which I am more than happy with. Because I get bored sometimes. I always have to be on my feet doing something. So this excited me quite a bit.

My parents are very traditional in their culture, so they don't actually go to theatre or any kind of arts thing. It was a bit rough at first. But they understood by the end. The ideal thing is, Mum said, whatever makes you happy at this moment in time. That's fine. But there were still those few nudges like – why don't you try this other thing instead? It wasn't the worst situation. But it left me in two minds about drama school. There was always that thing my mum said. And when I got into drama school, I just didn't feel like I belonged there. It didn't feel right. And it got to a point where I just wasn't enjoying it. Do I want to pay a loan for something I'm not enjoying at all? With the Young Company, there were aspects of drama school, but I wasn't working towards a degree or anything, and I wasn't paying 70 grand for it! I'm actually doing something in which I feel comfortable. And that's why I carried on.

My confidence has massively grown. During drama school and Young Company, I was also working. And I was a very quiet person at first. Acting made me a whole different person. Right now, if I was in this room a year and a half ago, being interviewed for my story, I wouldn't be opening up much at all. That's one big improvement. I'm also keeping an open mind in more things. For example, if a job opportunity comes up, or a casting call comes, I give it a go. I don't think, oh, I won't suit it, or it's not for me. I give it a go. That's what we were taught. Especially when it comes to the industry. You just have to give it a try. And at least you won't have the regret.

I think I'll start going for acting jobs and stuff like that now. Potentially find myself an agent. That's a bit lazy. But that's probably the route I'd take at the moment. I'm working in retail, but in my spare time, I do try and go to background acting.

Thanks to Young Company, I've also gotten more friends. Even my dad would say that when I was in high school, I kept to myself. I only had a few friends. But now I'm in a position where I even asked a friend to come around to my house. That never used to happen. The main thing that gave me that push into making new friends was realising that, in a weird way, I wasn't alone. In my head, I thought my situation with my parents wasn't ideal. But then when I got to talk to people, I realised there's a couple other people going through the same thing. The more I got to know people, the more and more I got to realise you do it because it's your passion. It was that connection that I started to make with people. We were family, a Royal Exchange family. There were people that were extroverts and people that were introverts, and everyone was comfortable with each other. We actually went out and saw each other outside of the Royal Exchange, and that made a massive difference. We're planning to catch up soon as well. I'm so much more sociable!

At one point we all wrote a letter to ourselves, to open in a few months. In the last session, we opened that letter. Oh my god, what did I write? It was like the most obvious thing ever. It said along the lines of: 'Don't be scared. You've got this. Don't worry, everything will be alright.' Still, it was a genuinely nice moment. It's part of being a community. We might not see each other every single day, but at least we know we can ring or text each other and we'll be there. To develop that in the space of eight or nine months, when we see each other only two hours a week – I'd say that's quite a big thing.

Being in the Building

The only drama I got to do was at school, in GCSE and A level, because that was academic enough for my parents. I fought really hard to be able to do drama outside of school but my parents were like, this doesn't feel like it's helping you. My parents are Asian immigrants. They literally used to grow up in villages. My dad didn't have electricity until he was 10. I emigrated here when I was four years old, so I really just jumped into the deep end. My oldest sister works in international development. My other sister studied criminology. And I was like, I'm gonna do drama! My parents were like: no. But eventually they just gave up. They were like, okay, you really seem like you want to do it, so go.

I got into the Young Company because of Jenny Hughes at The University of Manchester. It was my first semester in a new city. I said I wanted to do theatre, and she mentioned the Royal Exchange. I did a little workshop thing, a dialogue about a Filipino parent and child. And Naomi was like: 'You're in!' First I was a writer, then a maker and now I'm an assistant.

I was really shy when I was in first year. If we were on the same course at uni, you probably wouldn't have noticed me. But as I got into drama at uni and the Royal Exchange, I was forced to socialise with people, and I very slowly became more confident. Now I can't stop talking!

The first project I worked on was Sorry, We're Closed. I remember that being slightly stressful for us because it was the first time we wrote for someone else to act. The set design was so beautiful. It was in the lounge. There were hanging papers from the ceiling. And they shut the door so you would only hear through the speakers which made it sound sick. First rehearsal, the director was meant to talk to me about what the story was about. But he didn't acknowledge me. He was also much taller than me. He was a white guy. And the way he was talking – it wasn't talking to me, it was talking at me. I felt like he was putting me below him. Had it not been in that environment, it would have affected me a lot more than it has. I had the support of other people. And Naomi talked me through it. I literally stood up to this director in the rehearsal room and said, you're not listening to me. It opened my eyes up to the conflicts that you can have professionally. People may not respect you at first, but you have to respect yourself, to know when you need to make a boundary. It's actually really affected the way I direct currently. Just because one of us may have final say over the other, doesn't mean we're not equal.

I felt a lot more comfortable towards the end. And actually, I had written a letter to myself at the start. It said: 'Hopefully you make friends. And I hope we do something we're proud of.' I definitely did that in my first year. A highlight was meeting the dramaturg, Suzanne Bell. She was like, don't write what you know. No one wants to know what you know. Write what you don't know. And I still say that to myself when I write. Writing doesn't have to be intimidating. It's going with the flow. But planning also helps. And it's nice to talk to people in the building.

I came back for a second year to do makers. I liked having somewhere to go every Tuesday and knowing it would build toward a career. I felt respected. And Naomi was really chill. She didn't feel like a teacher. Seeing another Asian person in theatre was really important. I'd never really seen that locally before. It was always white middle-class people. Walking in and seeing Naomi with a northern accent, I was like, whoa, there are other Asians! She was just really cool.

With makers we had mini projects every week or so. Me and my group made a Barbie before Barbie was huge. It was like low-key drama therapy for us, because we would be making things and doing art, but also talking. I made really good friends and we talked about what it's like to be a person of colour in this industry and how difficult it is. There aren't enough stories that are being funded for us. So we have to do that ourselves. And I think that was a reality that we all had to face together.

For Chaos, we had to apply to be Assistant Directors for Gitika. Obviously, I did research. She's South Asian and queer, and I was like, that's me! I need to work for this person. She taught me how to back myself. I was in a group of adults, but I felt like I was a proper creative being taken seriously, which was sick. A race monologue I did was originally meant to be done by a white actor. And it took a lot of time for that white actor to understand what they were actually talking about. It took an analogy with polar bears dying and the Arctic for them to understand! I got so frustrated. I spoke to Gitika about it and she was like, that's not your job to question that, your job is to help them understand it. So she taught me a lot about patience, kindness, and listening. It's a problem-solving thing really.

I also learnt that even if I say something, and it doesn't connect with people at all, at least I said something. I remember Gitika saying the majority of the people in the audience will be white. And that's why she wanted a white actor to say that monologue in the first place, because they'll see themselves in that person, and it will hit harder, which is a shame, but it's true.

I now have a job as Naomi's assistant. And I support specific members of the Young Company, to make sure they feel comfortable in the room. We have a lot of people who need extra support. I sit with them and have a chat with them to help them feel less overwhelmed. I love it. I literally just love being around them. They're so smart. When I get my opportunity to do 1-2-1s with them – oh my god, it's such a joy.

I'm now also directing a show that I wrote. It's going to be put on at Contact, which feels insane. I just feel a lot more hopeful for my career. And I'm so confident that I know I'm going to have a career that I will enjoy, even though I haven't really started it yet, which is a wild thing to have. It's a little spiritual as well – I have a need to show and a need to create.

After Young Company I'm so much more confident, sociable, open and a lot more forgiving. I used to be really hard on myself. I still am sometimes. But I'm better at sensing when I need a break. I could never have done that in first year. I was such a people pleaser. And I was so eager to be in the building. Now I'm here, I see a lot more value in myself. I'm just so glad for they let me into the building, that I had the opportunity to get things wrong, and that they wanted me back!

Fireworks

In high school it was very hard for me as a deaf person to communicate with people who hadn't learned about me or my deafness. I was very shy, and I didn't have any confidence or social skills. But then my mum, as mums do, encouraged me to apply to the Young Company. I was hesitant. But my sister is a huge musical fan, I saw her performing all the time. And that was something I wanted to be a part of. I thought maybe I could be an actor. So I did acting for the first year of Young Company. And then I rejoined the second year to makers.

Mixtape changed a lot of things for me. Mixtape was all about the different stories of Manchester, the lives we see but don't always hear about. It was all about perspective, and how we experience music – it was like a big musical party. It was such a vivid, life-changing thing when I look back at it. I saw how a director works with people. I grew my confidence. And because Mixtape looked at different stories, I got to tell my own version of the story.

The way I worked with the director of Mixtape really impacted me. He was really encouraging. There was communication that made me feel seen and understood. And I got to work with writers who really understood me. I didn't know how to put the words together to talk about my deafness. But working with them, it helped me express what I wanted to say. There was so much to think about at high school. But the Royal Exchange was a different type of world where I could explore self-expression. It unlocked something in my heart. It was like a spark. And that spark turned into a firework. It let loose my potential.

The brilliant thing about Mixtape was that you were the writer in a way. We spent weeks exploring Manchester. We had a tour guide who explained the history. And the people I worked with had stories to tell. We had therapeutic moments of sharing our experiences. And we had a writer who was talking to each of us about the moments that defined us, like religion, sexual orientation, family members, people that we look up to, or Manchester itself. Why are we connected to a city that is so chaotic, but also has such a passion for creativity, and hidden creativity? I didn't have to think about the words because I was working with someone who specialises in writing, and who knew what stories were. It was liberating. You could be comfortable and vulnerable.

It was so important to me because I didn't have an idea of myself as a deaf person. Where do I have a place? I wanted to be an actor during that time. And Nickie gave me the confidence boost that I can do anything, there isn't anything that's stopping you. Just look at her, she's doing loads of things. That was something that really inspired me.

The Royal Exchange boosted my self-esteem. There was that huge challenge of expressing the script and performing for people. I remember a quote from Ethan Hawke. Something like: 'when we tell each other our stories, we come out of our corners, and we start to witness each other's humanity.' And it's nice that in performance people celebrate who you are, and you get work with people who are passionate about acting and storytelling. I valued the experience at the Royal Exchange so much that I rejoined a couple of years later as part of makers.

Makers was very practical. You got to create something and work with people. You get to learn loads about teamwork and what goes on behind the scenes. Everybody had that creative control. And that gave me such a massive opportunity to learn about directing. I was talking to one of the actors that I was working with for Show Me The Money and they were really happy that I got to direct them. That gave me a boost because it showed I was doing the right thing. I just got this really happy feeling as part of Makers. It was liberating.

Show Me The Money was about capitalism. There were two makers, five performers, and then two writers. We all got together and talked about the heavy side to capitalism. We saw it is a competitive game, and we wanted to represent this through interactive games, because there's always winners and losers in capitalism. We turned it into a carnival game. And it was magical getting that opportunity.

As the director, it was all about problem solving, and I love problem solving with stories. With actors, you get to talk it out. And the most valuable lesson with directing is that, while you are a leader, you are also the glue. You are essentially trying to get everybody on board with the ideas. You have to encourage people to create their own ideas as well. You have to work with people and socialise. That is one of the big things I had to overcome. But you are essentially creating a space for everyone.

The Royal Exchange led me to think about who I want to be. It was like this existential journey. It gave me a confidence boost during high school. And I started to look into English and go into books. It made me fall in love with something that I didn't know was possible. Change was constant during the experience. And that was a good thing. You get to experience new things about yourself. But also hear stories that you never heard about before. It was very scary when I saw that I didn't want to be an actor – I wanted to be a director. But then the more you explore, the more you go deep into the ocean of your mind, the more you find out about yourself.

I'm just really happy that I got to go through such an amazing company. It helps young people think about career choices. And while you're in it you're meeting with different people and like-minded people. You're learning to trust each other, and learning about different stories. That's just really valuable to me, as a deaf person, that I felt connected to everybody. There was a great line from a philosopher. He was like, anxiety is the dizziness to freedom. And it sums up my learning about anxiety. I'm growing more confident across theatre, films, and stories. I want to create this amazing story about something. But you have to learn to trust in actors and makers, and trust in yourself. The Royal Exchange gave me that comfort: you are being yourself.

From The Rooftops

I didn't know this theatre existed. I was not a theatre person. I thought theatre was just really annoying and obnoxious. But now I'm obsessed with it. How the tables have turned!

During lockdown I was watching a lot of TV sitcoms. I thought, I'd love to write something like this. And I wrote a really bad TV show about government workers, which was basically like knockoff Parks and Rec. I started looking for junior-level TV and writing programmes in Manchester. When I found out about the Young Company, I applied instantly.

I didn't have a lot of control over what was happening in my life when I first started the Young Company. But when you're a writer, you get to create a world and control it. And there's something about writing human conversations which I find incredibly interesting. I have autism, so social interactions are really nerve-racking for me, and I always listen to what people say. I'm intrigued by what people are doing and thinking.

A lot has changed since I started the Young Company. I'm actually going out and speaking to people. I can communicate about theatre. And I've made friends, which is something I never did. I was also able to go home and write a full-length play. Whenever I'm struggling, writing has brought me comfort.

The Young Company has given me so much support with my play, Untitled Emotions. Naomi would read it and give me feedback. Before, I would have never shared my work because it was really nerve-racking. Now, it's going to be performed in April! And it was longlisted for the Mustapha Matura Award and mentoring programme.

I was also picked for Vignettes, which is a show for female writers. We read each other's plays and give feedback. It's so lovely to be in a room of all women, because theatre can be quite male dominated, especially in regard to directing. All our directors are women, which I think is incredible.

I'm now more confident in my beliefs. I was like 16 when I started and I did not know a lot about theatre. But there were people there who were getting degrees, going to the Edinburgh Fringe. I felt at times that I wasn't doing enough, or that I wasn't good enough. But I realised if you're competing with other people, you're not focusing on yourself. Over my time at the Young Company I learnt that we're all here for a reason, whether you think that you have a little or a lot of experience, we're all here to learn about the same things. And everything you learn in theatre is not just for theatre. It's something that you can use every day. You learn how to use your initiative. You learn how not to give up.

Now I'm doing like 3,000 things, even outside of school and theatre. Back in year 11, I would literally just go to school, revise, go home, sleep, that's all I would do. But I'm able to have a schedule now which is jam packed full of things. And I'm able to navigate the anxiety and the stress associated with it. So I get enjoyment and happiness out of it.

When I first joined the Young Company, I wasn't aware of that many opportunities outside of the theatre. But through doing all the work, I've learnt to take advantage of opportunities, to not be scared to go for things, and to be proud of myself.

No matter what I've done in theatre, every single time I write something and I hear it or see it, I know: this is what I'm supposed to do in my life. The Young Company has facilitated that. It has really guided me. It doesn't just give you the experience of how to teach or how to write. You find out where you can apply your skills. And you're able to speak to people who work in the industry. I feel like in theatre, you need to be able to do everything, and through the Young Company and the Royal Exchange, I've had the opportunity to do those things. It's led me to decide on specialising in certain areas, like directing.

I'm quite an introverted person. So I would sit there and not speak. But I feel like I have such a strong voice and I'm a very opinionated person. I just want people to hear me. And when I wrote my first play, it was linked to my dad's death, which happened when I was 10. My parents were divorced. We didn't talk to him at all. And it was such a weird experience. It kind of felt like my feelings weren't fully acknowledged. At that moment in time I wanted to be heard from the rooftops.

It really came out when I was doing the collaborative project. I felt like my words were being heard and acknowledged. We were exploring themes of capitalism and power. And I thought that was so interesting. We were able to create this narrative through game which adds this extra layer of intrigue. I felt like my words had control over the narrative and the story and people. To watch it and my narrative unfold, and the ending and start and everything coming together, I just thought it was the most incredible feeling of all time.

I am Kenough

You know Avatar The Last Airbender? There's a scene in the third season where two of the main characters, Katara and Toph, get thrown in prison. Katara is a waterbender – she can control water – but there's no water to bend. So she starts running on the spot and bends her own sweat to slice their way out of jail. That scene makes me laugh every time I think about it. The sheer ingenuity, ridiculousness and fun of it. That's what my year with Royal Exchange was like.

I didn't think a career in acting would be an option before the Royal Exchange, because actors are people you see on screens or on stages, and it just seems like a very opaque sort of thing. But I joined the Young Company to become a better actor and equip myself with industry knowledge. I wasn't going to do that at the expense of friendship. And I ended up really liking the people in my group. Most of us are part of the global majority. Whereas at uni, where I did Drama and English, most of my course was very white.

I was actually gonna apply to law for uni. But I genuinely have always loved theatre. I got that spark during GCSE drama. We had to do a monologue and I put my all into it. I put my whole bussy into it. I was driven by the way the audience responded. It was deeper than feeling appreciated. It was being heard. The character was a young person, having a good rant about the world. And the audience felt something. For me it was like – this is what stories are for. I want to keep bringing stories to people. I want to embody these stories.

I didn't know then but I've got severe ADHD. I think that's the reason why a job at a desk wouldn't be for me. I thought to myself, what is it that will make yourself most happy? Acting. My parents were kind of dickheads about it. I know now that the dickhead-ery came out of a place of worry and care. But obviously, that was not nice for me at the time. It felt most vividly like they were saying I was wasting my talents. You won't be able to make a living, you won't be able to make a future. But I get why they're that worried. Both of my parents grew up very working class. I didn't have to, and it's because of them.

At Young Company, I liked the script work and the character work. At the end of every session we'd stand in a circle and breathe the day out. It's to help you clear your mind from one space to another. And now I use it all the time. I was having a really bad day once, but I had an important audition. So I was like: breathe that out. All that matters right now is the audition. And then after that, you can go deal with everything else. I'm quite proud of myself!

For the interactive production Show Me The Money, I was the owner of the club. It's a 60th birthday. My character gets to pull back curtains, discover the body, and I get to scream like hell and I love that. My character was this really posh lady. There's this one line, where the narrator is like: 'She's got as many bathrooms as there are pearls on that necklace'. That was written early on, and someone managed to find an absolute chandelier of a necklace. It made that line so much funnier.

It was exciting to meet the other young companies during the production – we hadn't really spent a lot of time together up until then. And I think doing interactive theatre challenged that bias a lot of us had, including myself, around what makes high-art theatre. This was in a setting that felt professional, that respected and honoured us young people as real artists.

I loved learning the acting through song workshop. When Anna did it, I was terrified shitless. And I'm sure I wasn't the only one. I think the reason people are scared is because it's vulnerable. It feels like you're standing naked in front of everyone. Your soul's just there flopping around. But Anna made us feel so comfortable. She put the emphasis very clearly on the acting. Forget how you sound. You guys are actors, so honour that craft first and foremost, and the rest will come naturally. It felt very powerful to be able to confront a fear like that.

I also loved stage combat. It was all like, this is how you drag someone around the room by their hair. And I pretended I was having a domestic with stuff. That was also the night before the draft of my dissertation was due and I was like, fuck it!!! Stage combat before anything! I don't think I really slept that night.

I got the chance to be involved in Chaos and I loved it. Gitika, our director, is a motherfucking G. She was like a let's-try-different-things director as opposed to an I'm-going-to-tell-you-what-to-do director, which is great, because who likes being told what to do? It was actually the first full production that I've ever been in.

We had two characters who are given boys' names in the script. They very much like each other. But because of our cast, these characters were played by girls. And the biggest thing about their story has got nothing to do with the fact it's a queer relationship. That really did stand out. The characters got to dance and I nearly cried the first time I saw that. I thought, if this is what being a professional is like it would absolutely be worth it. It was my first taste of it. If it weren't for Chaos, I don't know how I would've felt coming out of uni.

Before Chaos I got so nervous I snuck into one of the classrooms in East Manchester Academy and started writing the characters' emotional trajectory across two whiteboards. It was very therapeutic. It made me love my cast mates so much, like visceral, deep love. For a lot of us it was a pivotal summer – graduating uni or college. It only felt that way because we cared so much.

The experience was also very humanising. This is going to sound like a cliché, but I had been so focused on trying to break into the world of theatre that I almost forgot that we're people first and artists second. None of us are defined by the stuff we make. You've got to trust yourself. Because the biggest obstacle is always internal. But you're enough. I'm Kenough. After the Young Company, I've got more faith in myself, and I have a better relationship with myself. Part of that is just young people growing up things, but the Young Company definitely had a positive role in that, because so much of my feelings, identity, and desires are connected to the love of creation and the love of acting. I am not my art, I'm more than that, but it's an important part of me.

If I had a message for my fellow Young Company, it would go like this: You are all icons. And if I had an infinitely large oven, I would bake you all infinitely large cookies, just to show my love, respect, appreciation and gratitude. I wish you all the best because you deserve it. And I really hope we'll work together again. I can't wait to see all the world domination you embark on. Love and a lipstick kiss. Send it off to war.

My Old Self

Mum didn't want me to do acting, and that was a hard decision for me to just agree with. That's why I left home. I went to Wireless Festival to spend my student money. I'd never been to a festival, or out of town without my family. But I ended up going with a really good friend of mine. We stayed in an AirBnB, and the daughter of the person who ran it worked at a theatre in London. She was talking about acting school and then she just randomly said, since I was in Manchester, she could send me the link of the Royal Exchange. And that's how I got involved.

I was a performer in the Young Company. And I did a variety of things. I learned improv, and how to dissect a script. I've never been in a theatre surrounded by people that love acting so much. The jazz hands! Everyone's energy was so high. And everyone was so diverse and so unique. But everyone had that one personality trait: they love theatre! We made a play between the makers, performers, and writers. I didn't know the writers or the makers, but I ended up making great contacts and friendships with them. We created a kind of Cleudo, murder mystery thing. It was set in 80s Manchester, in a luxury club, so only rich people and elites would be there. I was the host, and the audience would interact to figure out who was the killer.

I struggle with dyslexia, so it's very hard for me to read. I had this chalkboard I was reading off, because I need the script with me to remember what's going on. Everyone was so understanding, they latched on positively to the fact that some people had disadvantages trying to do this play.

My tutor was so amazing. She was so sweet. And all the tutors were. They were so understanding and patient. The empathy was there. And that was important, because sometimes it could get really pressuring and hard. I'd never done this kind of acting before. And I was so far away from home. It was really hard for me to dissect everything that was going on in my personal life, and also make sure I was doing the right things in the show. So I'm really thankful the tutors were there for me.

One thing I liked, and a lot of people don't talk about, was the warmup games. They were so fun, especially mafia! But what I enjoyed the most was exploring the characters in the group project. It was a challenge, but it was so fun to push that character forward. We were walking around the room and Anna would say, how would your character walk? How would your character speak? How would your character act in a certain situation? It pushed my creativity forward.

It had been so hard for me to deal with things at home, that I threw all my charismatic energy into the bin. My parents never shared an interest in acting. So I pushed that dream away. I ended up doing fashion, which my mum kind of still agreed with, although only partially. When I was doing the interview, the questionnaires, and the Zoom call to get into the Royal Exchange, that's what I mainly said: I feel like my personality has kind of faded away. I came to the Royal Exchange to regain my confidence and find that old energy.

Embarrassment was the hardest thing for me to push through. But some of the tasks that we did helped me be myself. It made me push on. And Anna told me how to push that in the real world and to regain the things I missed so much about myself. And it's worked. I feel like I've regained that fun, goofy, charismatic side of me from this whole experience. It was a slow process. And I felt weird at times. And sometimes I didn't like it. But I knew it was something good for me. And I kept persevering to come to the Royal Exchange.

I feel great now. Now I can truly be myself. The self I thought I'd lost was so confident and he was so bold. He was goofy, weird, and crazy. I've got that confidence back, but I'm a young adult now. I have to be serious sometimes and I have to be formal sometimes. But I'm still happy that I've unlocked that old side of me thanks to the Royal Exchange. I literally missed it for so long.

I was going through a lot of depression and anxiety. I didn't know how to deal with it. But the tasks and the things that we were doing at Royal Exchange, those were literally battling my anxiety and my depression. I was getting up, going college, then I was going to do the acting thing, and I would go home. And like – bless me – I would always literally cry on my way home, because I would miss home. I would feel so sad about it. And I would feel like this hustle is so exhausting. It's too much for me. But I kept at it. And the anxiety started fading away, because I was pushing myself outside of my comfort zone. At Royal Exchange we would shake things off and walk around. You could make mistakes and do weird things and it was fine. Those exercises really changed how I deal with my anxiety.

It gave me my confidence back. I was always so shy of dressing how I used to dress. I could literally wear makeup and have my hair done, look good, and I was shy to do that. But now I notice that I have elements that are pros, if I step out onto the street, everyone's head is turning, and their necks are breaking too! I've got that confidence back and it just it felt great.

There's still days where I'm so depressed. I literally just got out of a depressed episode. But the Royal Exchange supported me immensely with my anxiety in that period of time. The Royal Exchange pushed me and helped me grow in so many ways. It even helped me make friends and great connections. To begin with it was awkward, like, should I say hi? But we ended up getting used to each other and after that we ended up going Wetherspoons like every single week after the session.

Now I have my acting girlies. I can literally just text them and be like, 'Hey girl, how's the acting thing going?' Some of us want to continue doing acting and some of us want to do acting school. For me, I'm in the I don't know what I want to category. I don't think I want to go to acting school. But I might do acting work. I'm not sure. But the experience is so nice, because I can talk to these friends, and they share opportunities on social media. It's nice to have that communication. There are so many creative spaces in Manchester you might stumble across them. And when you go, 'Hey, girl!' you're not alone.

No Fear

I was 15 when I joined the Young Company performers group. I was doing musical theatre BTech and then I was coming to the group straight after school on a Tuesday. It was a good way to get to know people and build some confidence.

I also wanted to gain more experience with acting and understand more about the different routes into the industry. Thanks to the Young Company, I've now got more acting skills and more insight into writing. I don't really do script writing, but it was interesting to see how you would write a script and create a play.

We focussed a lot on acting skills and improv. At first we did games like going around a circle saying 'what you doing' to a person, but you weren't allowed to say what you're actually acting out. You had to make it up when you answered. It's like putting you on the spot, which was fun.

If I'd had a stressful day like at home or at school, it was nice to come into that space at the Royal Exchange. We would walk around the room and forget about everything that was going on. We got into our own character, our own space, and focussed just on what was happening in the room. That's helped me a lot.

One of the key things in the Young Company was how we created an ensemble, working together, which was a really big thing. We had the writers, makers, and the actors all came together to create this production – Show Me The Money. It was about law and money and things like that. It was like game theatre, which is something I've never done before. You were getting the audience involved, which was really interesting, because I didn't think you could create something like that in such a short amount of time.

I found it interesting working with other parts of the company. It's been eye opening for me. It's made me realise there are different routes I can go down besides performing on stage. I could go behind the scenes, into the technical theatre, I could help make the show happen, or do the writing. A show is not just what we see on stage. There's so much more that happens, which I don't think you always realise when you go to watch one. Just building a shelf is a huge effort!

Through the Royal Exchange, I also ended up on BBC Three Radio. It was a reading of The Woman of Troy, and I was part of the chorus line with the women. It was really cool. I really enjoyed it. That was a key memory for me. We were in the exchange suite with this woman who was doing the recording and she told us a bit about the background to the play and what she wanted to gain from it. She wanted to capture a woman's voice during war. It was epic. I felt nervous, but I was very excited to know that I was on the radio.

After Young Company my confidence is up. I'm used to being in groups of people, playing games and having no fear, whether that's performing or talking to people who are in college. If I hadn't done the Young Company every Tuesday, I don't think I would be able to do what I do in college – like being in the groups of people, playing those acting games, and getting points across about production.

I thought it would be really scary to do something like Young Company. But there's so much about the space that makes you feel safe. The people are all nice and make you so welcomed and the staff are really supportive. If you have any questions about anything they're always there to help. For example, finding monologues for my audition at college. I asked one of the staff if they could help me find a monologue that I could do. I did a play by Jim Cartwright called Road. I played a woman called Valerie, and I passed my audition!

I think it's important to be confident. If you're gonna act something out, be confident about it. Don't half do it, do it to your full potential. Show all the skill you've got. Forget about who's looking, or who's around. Get into that character. That's what's helped me. I had a job interview for Tesco where they were asking me questions like, how have you shown your confidence? And I'm not that confident. I just had to fake it until I make it. But it went well, and they've recently offered me a full-time position, after my temporary contract, because they like me!

Being in the Young Company, there's so many different opportunities you can take. I always think to myself, you should take every opportunity you can, because you never know what it could lead to. I think next I'm going to complete my acting level two course. And then I'm going to do my level three. And then I want to come back here and do something. I'd like to be involved in the acting course. But I'd also like to be in the Young Company staff one day. I know they've had a couple Young Company graduates who have helped out, and I think that's what I would like to do. I've had the experience of being in the company myself and I think it would be nice to help the next ones feel comfortable.

Above all, the Young Company made me feel happy. And it also made me feel comfortable enough to be who I am. I don't know where I would be without it. I think I would have still done something in the industry, but I don't know whether it would have been directing, tech, acting or makers. I wouldn't feel as confident either.

Organising the Chaos

I thought I was going to be a forensic scientist. I was going to go to uni and do psychology and start my work in the theatre industry with a proper degree. But no, the Young Company makers group put me back on course.

I chose makers because I was always interested in the technical side, and the backstage work. I just didn't know which specific area. It was a really good opportunity to figure out what I was interested in. I'm applying to uni now, because of that, and I've actually just got an email before this – I was accepted at Royal Central! I've also been accepted to my first-choice uni (Rose Bruford) and got an unconditional offer for LAMDA (which will be insurance choice). That ultimately because of the experience and opportunities the Young Company has given me.

It was my mum that found out about Royal Exchange on Facebook, and she encouraged me to apply. Once I was in, we had weekly Tuesday sessions, and it gave me a lot of insight into what's going on in the industry. You've got the admin and the spreadsheets of stage management. But then you've got the creativity, the design of costume and sound, and the technicalities of lighting. After a year, you leave the Young Company with lots of skills and experience. And when you finish makers group, you're able to then get work experience on a summer production that the Royal Exchange puts on.

At school, you're surrounded by people that might not be interested in theatre, but when you're in makers group, people all have the same ideas and interest in theatre. It creates a lot of connections and a lot of friendships. It also increases confidence because you're in a creative space. Then you have industry professionals coming in and talking to you about the different roles and career routes that you're interested in. We also had practical workshops and practical activities, which let you have a creative outlet.

Because you're surrounded by similar people, you're able to make creative progress. It's very easy to make friends and connections in that group. You have creative passions, rather than wanting to go into football, for example. It was just easy to work with other people. Even though on the first session, you were in a group of 16 people that you've never met before. Because everyone was very similar, it was easy to work and create with them. Some of us even formed a production company and we've started making films together and applying for funding.

Through the Young Company, you get access to the Collective and all of their workshops. So I went to a pitching your show workshop. We were divided into small groups and told to come up with a show. We came up with this idea for a horror film of a shrinking house. And people were saying you should actually make this. We made a group chat to start planning and scripting. We've got a script. So we're hoping to make it, but then we want to get funding because we want to do it properly. So now we need to make short films to get a portfolio to then get more funding. It's kind of branched out from there. People know us now as the people that make films. We've actually got a band that's approached us and asked us to make a music video for them. I wouldn't have any of the connections in the industry I do now if I hadn't gone to Young Company or the Collective workshops.

I'm now doing something that I'm passionate about. And a lot of people at 17 or 18 might not have that direct passion of knowing exactly where they want their lives to go. I had the idea of going into the film industry and going to film school. And then that changed from film to forensic science. And now I just want to do the thing I'm interested in, the thing I enjoy most, which is stage management. I had no idea stage management existed as a possible career choice until I'd gone to the Young Company.

What was nice was it was a few hours every week, talking to a lot of really confident, creative people. Coming from high school where I wasn't talking to many people, it was great. I gradually talked to more people and grew in confidence, and confidence is really important in the industry and life in general.

The summer production gave me lots of skills and experience in the industry. We also did an interactive theatre production in Easter. That taught me all about QLab, lighting, directing and stage managing. It was a proper production. You're exposed to ticket sales, box office, setting, planning, designing and writing. It was a lot of skills and a lot of technical experience that is really good for the CV. I went through the entire process of production meetings, rehearsals, and the show notes which was fantastic.

After I finished the Young Company, I found this volunteer role at a small theatre near me called Partington Theatre. They saw Royal Exchange on my CV and thought I was overqualified. So they put me on as Master of Props. On a couple of those shows their stage manager wasn't there, so I had to fill in. After those shows, I was told that they wanted me to come back and be their stage manager until I go to uni! And that was literally because of the word Royal Exchange on my CV. Because I'd worked on the summer production as part of the Young Company, I was also offered a work placement on *Sweat*, a main house production at the Royal Exchange, due to being put in contact with people working in the industry.

What makes the Young Company so great is the variety of what you're taught. It's mainly learning hands-on, which works really well in such a creative industry. I could imagine if we were sat there for two hours just looking at a PowerPoint, it would be completely uninteresting. But the fact that you go to a session, you do five minutes learning about lighting and sound design, and then you get the actual lights out, and you get actors in place – it's a great way to learn. One session, you'd be in the costume store, learning about how the costumes are made and fitted. And then the next day, you're sat behind the laptop on QLab. I love how much it varies, and how much the sessions changed to give you a really good understanding of the entire industry.

Stage management has just kind of clicked. I don't know how to explain it. I can picture myself doing it in the future. It has a bit of everything. It's organising the chaos into spreadsheets. It's the feeling of being backstage and having a cue sheet and knowing that when this happens, you do this, and this happens. It's seeing the light and hearing the sounds. It's the buzz of the theatre, the buzz of being backstage.

With thanks to:

All Young Company members past and present.

Young Company Leads, Assistants, Guests and Artists.

The storytellers: for sharing with us their stories.

The story collectors: Emily Oldroyd, Inga Hirst, Ria Phatarphekar-Karmarkar & Tom Stocks

Editor: Philip Brennan

Discussion session attendees: afshan d'souza-lodhi, Aisha Brunt, Billie Collins, Emily Oldroyd, Gina Fletcher, Inga Hirst, Jade fox, Julia Wilson, Nickie Miles Wildin, Patience Kanjira, Paula Rabbitt, Ria Phatarphekar-Karmarkar, Ruvarashe Nyakupinda, Scarlett Spiro-Beazley, Suzanne Bell & Tom Stocks

The funders who have made this work possible Arts Council England, Beaverbrooks, The D'Oyly Carte Charitable Trust, Garfield Weston, GMCA, Noel Coward Foundation and Victoria Wood Foundation

Report written by Inga Hirst & Scarlett Spiro-Beazley

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