

FST Producers Project Presentation:

Helen Milne: Emerging Producer: Aberdeen Performing Arts

As an aspiring producer, training alongside Lesley Anne Rose and the rest of the team at Aberdeen Performing Arts to deliver the programme of work at The Lemon Tree has been an unparalleled learning experience, which I hope will put me in good stead to continue working in a freelance capacity after the length of the Producers Project.

To provide you all with a slightly different angle, from an emerging producers perspective who is working up in Aberdeen. I am offering a reflection on the challenges faced as a freelance emerging producer based in the North East and the different ways I've been approaching my practice to overcome this.

The main challenge I've faced working in a freelance capacity is that there aren't many theatre makers working in the region to provide support to. Out of the limited number of artists and companies only the minority are at a stage where they could successfully achieve funding. Although much of the work I'm assisting Lesley Anne with at Aberdeen Performing Arts aims to plant the seed and begin nourishing the creative landscape, this is very much a long term goal for future generations of theatre makers.

So for now, really the only option in terms of attempting to sustain a freelance career is to work with artists based down in the central belt. This poses another challenge as an emerging producer and that is being quite far away from where all the action is. Being able to make these initial connections is key and many opportunities for acquiring work in the first place are made through those chance encounters in a theatre bar. The initial enthused creative conversations about the idea or work that's being developed. Once that bond is made, this is where the hard work starts – as I know you're all aware it isn't all glamorous – much of getting the job done involves sitting at a desk with an ever expanding excel spreadsheet. It is really these initial human connections and conversations that are important in establishing trust between artist and producer and providing the thrust required to initiate the work and ensure there is enough forward motion to sustain the project through all the challenges that may be encountered and see the project through from concept to realisation. It is key to discovering whether there is really a shared passion surrounding the work, and gauging what is expected of each other, which can be more challenging to achieve at a distance over the phone.

The third and final challenge I've encountered is really just one for all aspiring producers regardless of geography and that is: you need to exude confidence and calm, know the answer even if you're making it up, act as the creative glue, liaise, mediate, negotiate and most importantly be a dab hand at hiring a van so many things which to be really good at requires experience. So far I've nailed hiring a van. Just to give an example of the importance of gaining experience and putting yourself out there without naming names, I recently met an artist at FST emporium and offered assistance in giving touring advice and budgeting. Once back in Aberdeen I followed up the contact and received a very short email saying that they were receiving support from another producer based in the central belt. I was heartbroken because they had left me for a far more experienced producer. To me this makes perfect sense because if it's a choice between someone who has all the answers straight away and a proven track record and all the established connections that can help your work achieve its full potential then you probably would be silly not to choose them over me.

So this doesn't start sounding like a producer's lament, here are some ways I have been utilising my training to overcome the challenges I've identified. Firstly to avoid future heartbreak I'm aiming to get as much experience as possible, whilst I'm in the very lucky position of being funded for a sustained period of time. I have been focusing on making strong connections and partnerships with companies whose work I am interested in, feel capable of supporting and also might in some way go towards increasing and nourishing the culture of making theatre in the North East. Two artists I am currently working with are creating a work called Skye and Skye on Skye and although they are based in the central belt their work is highly geared towards touring to more rural locations in both the North East and the Highlands and Islands.

I have been focusing on fostering relationships between artists in the central belt and arts bodies and promoters based in the North East. As well as this our producers hub has been in conversation with Lindsay Brown at Play Pieces who has incorporated us into their latest Play Pieces model which is funding dependent. I think there is real potential here working in a freelance capacity to support and develop a good number of works that are being made by artists based in the North East and The Highlands

In addition, I am about to launch my new freelance website which includes a page called The Bureau. The Bureau is my way of reaching out to artists who require support, and creating the opportunity for those important initial conversations, where I can be honest about what I can offer and they can let me know what they are looking for. It is a way to discover if there is a mutual passion for the work and potential for a harmonious creative relationship-without too much pressure.

The challenges I've faced so far have at times been frustrating but I'm learning that I need to embrace this and turn it into the tension that propels me forward instead. My training so far has given me a clearer understanding of all the many and varied roles of the producer who needs to be able to transform over and over depending on the needs of the production. I'm looking forward to continuing to learn and adapt in order to overcome the challenges ahead.