

Our great journey



Blue Room members Mark and Donald in the gallery with the work of Hew Locke

The work the Bluecoat does in giving people with learning disabilities access to art and artists is not therapy – it's about giving people freedom of thought and action, says **BEC FEARON**

As the limousines pulled up to the kerb, cameras flashed, voices called to those alighting from the cars and passers-by on Church Street were magnetically drawn to the scene. Which celebrities were visiting the Bluecoat tonight?

Twelve people emerged from the vehicles, blinking a little at first and then gracefully making their way up the red carpet, beaming at the crowd. It was a typical sight at any film premiere – dinner jackets and gorgeous dresses, smiling and waving, lots of cameras. But this was a unique occasion for the stars of this particular film. They were all service-users from L8 and Fazakerley Resource Centres for adults with learning disabilities. For most, this was a rare opportunity to dress up and be the star of the show.

For nearly two years the group of 12 had been working with artist Leo Fitzmaurice on WILD!, a project investigating what contemporary art meant to them. Part of the Bluecoat Connect programme, run with

support from Liverpool Biennial and funding from Arts Council England, the WILD! project aimed to increase access to contemporary art, focusing especially on the Liverpool Biennial, the city's international festival of contemporary art.

The project organisers recognised that people with learning disabilities faced particular barriers in accessing public venues and cultural experiences within Liverpool. They set out to break down some of these barriers, increase integration and develop a sense of confidence in those involved when entering cultural buildings in and around Liverpool.

Arts space

For just over a year the WILD! group met weekly and visited countless exhibitions and venues. They came regularly to an arts space at the Bluecoat to have discussions and make their own work in response to what they had seen. They documented the whole process

through photographs and film, which acted as a memory aid for some service-users who found the visual stimulus useful when recalling their experiences.

Eventually the group came to the point where they felt confident enough to create their own piece of contemporary art, in collaboration with Leo. The result was a film piece called *The Journey*, which captured an important aspect of any visit to a gallery: the act of travelling by bus and on foot to reach a destination.

The filming took place over several months with the support of a dedicated team of staff from the City Council's Supported Living portfolio. There were many laughs along the way and the group learned a huge amount about the technical aspects of filming, from the importance of the light and how this is affected by the weather to the continuity of clothing. Just when they were getting really sick of wearing the same thing every Monday the filming was complete!

The group were heavily involved in the whole process of editing and selecting the music to accompany the film. Every individual felt a real sense of ownership and authorship of *The Journey*, jointly held with Leo Fitzmaurice, whose sensitive approach to the collaboration led to a high quality of artistic product of which everyone was proud. Then, in my role as Participation Manager for the Bluecoat, I worked with the group to explore how they would like to present the work to people. A grand premiere was planned with red carpet, champagne on arrival, posh nosh and speeches.

On the night of the premiere of *The Journey* there was huge excitement about the sharing of this product, as friends, families and support staff came together to celebrate the achievement. It was a very special night in many ways. As always at such occasions, the Great and the Good were invited and were overwhelmed by what had been achieved through the project. *The Journey* was acclaimed by all and we were invited to present a private showing of the film to then Chief Executive of Liverpool City Council David Henshaw and some of the senior councillors. This was a fantastic opportunity and some of the group demonstrated their newfound confidence by making brief presentations to the gathering about their experiences.

But soon the group were feeling a bit of the 'post-party depression' which so often follows a great success. Questions were being asked about the future and at the Bluecoat we were starting to wonder if there was any way to make work of this kind more sustainable. A project of this nature has the potential to literally change the lives of the people involved, and we had seen this in action, but at a financial cost. Meeting almost every week for two years with a paid professional artist and a fund for materials and equipment had resulted in a budget of around £20,000. This is a lot to spend on one day a week for just 12 service-users, on top of existing staffing and support costs. But the individuals involved wanted a continuity of service and it felt unfair to raise expectations and then dash them by taking away what had now become such a powerful part of people's lives.

Discussions began with central staff from the City Council and it was clear that there was now a commitment to making something happen at a high level. With the support of one particularly imaginative officer, Natalie Markham, we started to form a plan for the future.

It happened that this coincided with the closing of the Bluecoat for a major capital development project. We knew that this would give us a period of time for the development of initiatives ready for when the building reopened. Key to this was the new accessibility, which we were intent on achieving through the development. The building was incredibly difficult to navigate and inaccessible to people with mobility impairments, with no lifts and a myriad of staircases and level changes.

The Monday group responsible for *The*

Journey were able to help us achieve the accessibility we craved by getting involved in what we called the Wayfinding Project. With artists Julia Keenan and Andy Weston they looked at accessibility in its wider sense. Alongside several other groups of disabled adults and children they worked with artists to investigate and articulate the main issues and suggest solutions.

While the group was working on the project I continued to develop our ideas in consultation with service users, staff and artists. I drew up a plan for a project called 'Blue Room' and made an application to Arts Council England North West for Lottery funding for an 18-month development period and a yearlong pilot.

The bid was successful and we soon established a working group of service users and Liverpool City Council staff. Some of them had been involved in *The Journey* and previous projects at the Bluecoat but the others were from another resource centre where staff had been developing a successful approach to using the arts. Working with the Bluecoat was going to be a departure for them from their more traditional technique-based style and we had a lot to learn from each other.

Blue Room

The basic idea of the Blue Room was that it would offer a three-day-a-week service for up to 45 service users. Each member would attend one day a week for as long as the project continued or until they decided to move on. A team of artists would be recruited who would work on projects of a set length that would use the Bluecoat's exhibition programme as inspiration. Each time a new exhibition opened, the groups would start by exploring the exhibition and responding to ideas that engaged them. The artists would not be there for every session, in order to make it more financially sustainable, so the support staff and some service users would be trained to lead the groups in continuing project work when the artists were not there.

The staff first attended the excellent Opening Doors course offered by Tate Liverpool for those involved in social care with an interest in how the gallery might be used as a resource for working with service-users. As part of the course, the staff led a gallery visit for a group of service-users, a powerful experience which led to a disclosure from one service-user inspired by the subject matter of a particular painting. This resulted in a creative outpouring, following years of stifling memories and emotions. Seeing the potential power that contemporary art has in unlocking feelings, thoughts and ideas was a motivating force for the staff who supported the service-user through the experience. They already knew that creating art could help people express emotions but now saw that engaging with other people's art in a supported context can be as much of a catalyst for expression. We now had a fully committed staff team on board who knew the value of what we were working towards.

The next 18 months saw the recruitment

of five artists who were interviewed, assessed and selected by the group. The artists then got to know the working group through a series of sessions creating project ideas. This was followed by a training period where each artist spent four weeks developing skills and knowledge of processes with the group. In summer 2007 the group was ready to start recruiting the new membership and spent two months visiting eight resource centres running workshops for potential new members.

Engaging all of the staff in the centres to support this recruitment process was a challenge. For many, the world of contemporary art is a mysterious and impenetrable one. In many centres there are art and craft activities that are seen as therapeutic for service-users but Blue Room is about much more than therapy. I visited every centre to brief staff before the workshops and this helped in encouraging applications from potential new members.

The most challenging part was yet to come. From the very start, Blue Room has been about increasing independence of thought and action for members. All members are encouraged to use public transport or get a taxi to get to us and no one arrives on a big yellow bus. Obviously, some members need support and staff members meet them at their homes and travel in with them. But there were many potential members who were identified as being suitable for independent transport training. For many parents and carers this was too big a step. Disappointingly, some people who were really keen to be involved were prevented from becoming members by reluctant parents and carers who would not support the training. This will be an ongoing issue that will take time to resolve.

Finally, in April 2008, Blue Room opened and the tiny seed of an idea sown in November 2004 became a reality. Now the members have settled in and got used to their new independent travel arrangements. They are working with artists who really know how to bring contemporary art alive and have become a valuable part of the community at the Bluecoat. They have produced some magnificent art work, met international artists and visited lots of exhibitions at the Bluecoat and elsewhere. There is more to be done and we are really keen to encourage some of the members, who have been assisting in the workshops, to get involved as volunteers in other activity at the Bluecoat. Some have already helped out as tour guides for their own exhibitions and can only grow in confidence as they become more integrated into the life of the Bluecoat.

I am extremely proud to say that at the beginning of December Blue Room won the Best Emerging Community Arts Award at Dadafest 2008. This was a perfect end to an amazing year for the members and staff associated with it and, of course, for the Bluecoat.

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adults learning

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