

Co-Creating Change Project Commissions: Case Study

Introduction

La Lucha: The Fightback was a co-creation project between radical trade union the Independent Workers of Great Britain (IWGB) and theatre company Crowded Room (CR). It aimed to shift the mindsets of the public and employers by telling the stories of women who had fought back against exploitation in the cleaning sector.

Co-creators undertook a 9 month process. The output was originally envisaged as a live performance, but after the lockdown in March 2020, we moved everything online and adapted the project into a film.

Via a combination of interview testimony and scenes devised/scripted by the group, La Lucha tells the story of nine women from the IWGB (the self-styled 'baddest union in town'), following their journeys from their home country to London, exploring experiences of racism, sexual harassment & exploitative work in London, & emerging as a celebration of unionisation & resilient communities who have made the decision to fight back.

CR initiated the project with a motivation to raise awareness of the reality of precarious low-paid work amongst migrant communities in London. We intended for the project to build a roadmap for co-creating with people who have no theatre background but have a story they want to tell. We aimed to build a supportive and constructive environment in which all group members felt safe sharing their experiences & in which agency could be authentically shared.

For CR, co-creation felt like a natural progression from our verbatim work. We wanted to build a process that empowers people to tell their own stories, in contrast to a documentary (which tends to remove editorial control from the people with lived experience).

Guadalupe: For Las Luchadoras, we have suffered many abuses in this country and we wanted people to see so that they could understand the exploitation.

Project description

CR began by meeting Jordi Lopez (caseworker at the IWGB) to discuss mutual aims. Jordi then recruited 9 women who were interested in working on the project.

Two initial face-to-face workshops focused on a combination of group-building exercises and open-space dialogue: co-creators defined themes they wanted to explore & reflected on how these related to their experiences. These sessions were vital for establishing trust within the group and defining a focus for the project.

In lockdown we conducted workshops over Zoom & group discussions over Whatsapp. Working in a digital realm meant we lost some of the liveness and intimacy that comes with face to face contact - & much of the non-verbal communication so valuable with a language barrier - however, it also meant that co-creators were able to define the shape of the sessions more themselves: a digital space felt more like naturally equal footing than a workshop space (in which CR have more experience), so the move online helped to balance agency. Whatsapp also enabled more steady communication, building community.

Nicole: Filming video diaries felt like an important thing to do during the pandemic. We were still going out to work although the streets were deserted which was quite scary. I felt like we had a unique aspect on that perspective which was important to communicate.

Overall the project involved 2 live workshops, 6 digital workshops, 2 in-person rehearsals, and one final filmed performance in a theatre. Co-creators created cartoneras, choreographed dances, sourced costumes, wrote poems, filmed video diaries & devised their own scenes. Here is Miyo demonstrating La Cumbia (a Colombian dance) for the group: <https://youtu.be/Jn-AORluYW4> : this became central to the final filmed performance. Following filming, CR edited a 23 minute film with input from the group.

People involved

Director Mark Knightley worked closely with co-creators to generate material that reflected their experience & collaborated on the presentation of this; dramaturg Harriet Madeley worked with co-creators on condensing & structuring material; designer Luke Robson created animations; translators Gloria Sanders and Tessa Roberts facilitated communication; Vanessa Michaelis and Chaski Pum collaborated on sound design. The majority of the content (including storytelling, interview, devised scenes & cartonera artwork) was created and filmed by Guadalupe, Jovana, Linda, Caty, Ivonne, Mercedes, Nicole, Miyonson and Inma from the IWGB.

Resources

In addition to the CCC commission we received funding from Arts Council England and Unity Theatre Trust to turn the work into a film.

Timescales

First meeting: December '19

In person workshops: Jan – Feb '20

Zoom workshops: March – June '20

Devising sessions/rehearsals: July – August '20

Online discussions of dramaturgy/structure: August – October '20

Filming at ArtsDepot: Nov '20

Editing/feedback: Jan – July '21

Outcomes

Here is one of the co-creators, Ivonne, reflecting on the process: <https://youtu.be/YD-ef1st-T8>

We learnt that co-creation needs:

Commitment: Sharing sensitive personal experiences in this context is a daunting thing to do, so a co-creation project must begin with a strong need to tell one's story, & an environment that instils confidence. Our co-creators had no theatrical experience, significant pressure on their time, & spoke little English. As a result of their commitment, however, their enthusiasm never waned & together we produced high quality material.

Jovana: It was very emotional watching someone else tell my story back to me. They told it with such care and thoughtfulness and, yes, I think it built trust.

Facilitation: We conceived the project with Jordi Lopez, who helped with the language barrier, mutual trust, & helped us create suitable safeguarding policies for approaching sensitive experiences. With knowledge of both groups, he set the tone for the project. At the first rehearsal Guadalupe reflected: *“In this next hour we are going to talk about many of the things that we have experienced.... it is going to be us that puts this together, us that makes it.”*

Trust: An early exercise involved co-creators telling each other their stories in pairs, before performing their partner's story back to the group. This gave the women the experience of seeing

their own story reflected back at them. It also showed them how much care was going to be taken over their stories, as each co-creator delivered a sensitive and considered performance of the other's personal story - often moving their partner to tears.

Time: Building trust, exploring themes/ intentions, & consolidating all of this into an artwork with 9 co-creators who have busy lives takes a long time, & was all-consuming for the main creatives from CR. Our initial timeline of February to May would have been far too short and left the women underprepared. We would suggest a year as a minimal timescale for a project like this.

Money: Despite extra funding from the Arts Council and Unity Trust, CR worked for free on the project for a number of weeks: shifting from theatre to film meant a huge amount of editing time/ upskilling. As outcomes weren't fixed at the outset, we needed resources that could adapt; alternatively, we would have benefitted from funding split into development and output.

Outputs

We produced a 23" film with 2 narrative strands: the first (the 'Story of the Migrant') involved interviews & scenes devised by the group based on their experiences; the second told the story of making the project. The film (completed in July 2021) will be entered into film festivals.

SEE THE FULL FILM HERE: <https://vimeo.com/573427342>

PASSWORD: Fightback9

The output was created from a multitude of sources. The result feels distinct & authentically co-created, & whilst we inevitably lost the clarity more possible with a singular artistic vision, we felt the 'patchwork' form reflected the co-created nature of the content & was a worthwhile trade.

Agency

Agency became more equally distributed after the project moved online (as detailed above), & as co-creators became more comfortable with the process. It was a challenge for agency to be shared completely equally at any moment: instead, whilst we led the project more at the beginning and the end, the women led the project throughout the mid-section, creating the majority of the content.

Jovana: I felt like we were able to tell our story and that it came from the group. We had Zoom meetings every two weeks or so to discuss new ideas and to rehearse scenes and the group met up a number of times when it was possible again. I would have liked to have been able to meet more in person. When the final dance was filmed I was looking at flying back to London from Spain to join the group, but sadly it wasn't possible.

Unexpected events

Our process was subject to a lot of upheaval: 2 co-creators left the UK due to ongoing harassment in their workplace; COVID involved obvious disruption & meant that during the summer Jordi Lopez also returned to Spain. Structured meet-ups concluded in November 2020, but digital communication has continued/acted as a support network, and strong bonds have endured: eg.

Miyo & Guadalupe visited Mark from CR in July this year with presents for his new baby!

Moving Forward

Could your project be sustainable in the long term?

We believe co-creation in theatre can be a valuable part of the fightback against precarious work, and that there are large and diverse groups that our process could continue to serve, providing space to explore experiences, opportunities to develop confidence/communication, & a platform to get

stories heard. We are in dialogue with other precarious workers interested in this work via The War on Want and The Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants.

Challenges remain. The nature of precarious/zero hours contracts is that it is harder for workers to organise their time: co-creators may therefore struggle to commit to set meetings around ever-changing working patterns. Saying that, the resilience and commitment that the La Lucha co-creators showed is proof of the viability of the process.

We plan to embed co-creation into all CR's future projects. We worked with the CCC Accelerator programme to explore ways of replicating and upscaling methodologies & will use valuable learning on Theory of Change, Agency Scales and Mapping Dimensions when developing future projects.

Our process is adaptable to a variety of contexts, & we reported our findings as we went in order for our learning benefit others. Recently, we have been speaking to Zhujing Liu from King's College, who will be referencing our experiences in the context of her academic journal on the importance of care in co-creation.