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C O M P A N Y

Theatre and Drama within the Criminal Justice System

Performances • Workshops • Residencies • Long term programmes • Staff training • Consultancy

FIRST ACT Project Report March 2022

In partnership with
ingeus



The Project

First Act was a pilot project exploring the potential to develop a creative theatre-based resource for people with lived experience of the criminal justice system in Birmingham. It was a partnership between Geese Theatre Company and Ingeus Community Rehabilitation Services delivered in four inter-linked phases:

1. Information and demonstration sessions for Ingeus staff.
2. Drop in / taster sessions for potential participants
3. A series of 12 workshop sessions, increasing in intensity, culminating in a performance at a high-profile Birmingham venue.
4. Potential referral for participants into Geese's *Staging Recovery Ensemble*.

The Key Facts

- 5 people were referred to the project at the outset and 3 completed.
- 3 members of Ingeus staff supported the participants for the duration of the project.
- 3 members of Geese staff facilitated the project
- 42 people attended the final performance at the Foyle Studio, MAC, Birmingham. The audience consisted of Ingeus staff, Geese staff, family and friends of participants, the UK COO of Ingeus, and representatives of other CJS agencies, including the Head of Partnerships and the Head of Operations at West Midlands Probation, staff from CGL etc.

Significant Lessons

- **Set up and the referral process** – *First Act* could have accommodated up to 12 participants and it was disappointing that the number of referrals was lower than anticipated. There are several reasons why this might have been the case, including:
 - the impact of the Omicron variant of Covid during the referral time-period, which affected Ingeus' staff capacity as well as people's willingness to attend groups.
 - despite running several staff awareness events and providing a range of marketing material it was always going to be a challenge promoting a brand-new service / project amongst staff and service users. Future projects can build on the pilot (potentially using the participants from the pilot as advocates; the use of clips from the final performance as a way of promoting the value of the project etc) and hopefully increase the number of referrals.
 - It would also be useful to ensure that other CJS agencies who might be in a position to refer people to the project (Probation, CGL etc) are involved as much as possible from the outset and that staff on the ground know about and understand the value of the project and are authorised to prioritise referrals.
- **Attrition** – of the 5 people initially referred to the project, 3 completed. Of those that didn't complete:
 - one fractured his foot and was told by his doctor not to put any weight on it for a few weeks. This made his attendance almost impossible (despite this he was so keen to be involved he came to a session directly after his injury and in pain. Subsequently he expressed his disappointment at not being able to complete the project and asked to be considered for any future projects.
 - one dropped out as he was not in a stable enough place to fully engage in the issues being explored. It is worth remembering that for a project like this, due to the nature of the service user group, we are always likely to have a small number of people who start and are unable to complete. For this reason, it is worth getting more, rather than less, referrals.





- **Working with staff** – one of the most valuable aspects of the First Act project was the way in which the participants and the Ingeus staff developed a sense of community, trust and respect for each other.
 - From a Geese perspective, the Ingeus staff were invaluable in providing some of the logistical / pastoral support that is needed for the smooth running of the project.
 - Of equal value was the opportunity that participation in the project provided Ingeus staff in terms of their own learning and professional and personal development. This was evidenced in the post-performance Q+A at which one member of Ingeus staff commented on how being a part of the project had been the best training he had ever received in understanding the needs and challenges of the service users, and another member of staff commented on how much she had learned during the project which she had been able to directly feed into her other work.
- **The structure / process** – First Act was developed as a 12-session project, increasing in intensity as the weeks progressed. Due to some Covid related cancellations early in the process, a couple of the sessions had to be used as taster sessions, which delayed the beginning of the project proper. For future projects we would recommend sticking with the 12-sessions and ensuring that tasters are scheduled separately.

Following the performance an additional session was delivered to debrief, evaluate and reflect upon the project as a whole. All staff and participants were involved in this process, which was invaluable in allowing participants to reflect on their achievements and learning and to establish some action plans.

- **The rehearsal venue / logistics** –
 - the venue (Friends of the Earth – Warehouse Café) worked well for this group but would be too small for a larger group. Geese often use other, larger spaces in the Digbeth area of Birmingham and would recommend researching availability for future versions of the project.
 - providing lunch and travel expenses for participants is invaluable. It is worth noting that a member of staff should be tasked with this responsibility from the outset.
- **The final performance** – this took place in the Foyle Studio at MAC Birmingham at 3.30pm on March 9th 2022
 - Over 60 tickets were booked for the event and just over 40 people attended.
 - Invites were drawn up by both Ingeus and Geese. The audience comprised a range of For future versions of the project it would be useful to consider how we might attract people from a wider range of CJS stakeholder groups, including prisons, probation, third sector and funders.
 - The venue worked well for the performance – a professional theatre studio space with state of the art lighting and sound equipment and technical support meant that the participants had the experience of working in a professional theatre venue.
 - It may be worth exploring a venue closer to the city centre to remove any potential barriers to people attending.
 - Providing an opportunity for a Q+A and then informal space with refreshments meant that the overall feel of the event was one of support and community. It feels important that participants have an opportunity to hear from the audience about how they have received the performance and for the audience to hear from them about their experience of the project as a whole.





Feedback and Evaluations

- Audience –

The audience at the final performance were invited to provide feedback via post-it notes in response to three questions:

1. What would you like to say to the participants?

"I was amazed at how you overcame your anxiety. So many of our service users struggle with social anxiety, fear of judgement and negative evaluation. Well done!"

"Genuine, authentic, brave. Well done!"

"The emotion you portrayed was moving, impactful and joyous!"

"People need opportunities to move on."

2. How might the performance have changed your perspective on the issues raised?

"We hear labels like "prisoner" or "offender", but the play made me think of the people and issues behind those labels."

"The performance showed us that people resettling in the community are human beings and deserve to be treated with kindness and understanding."

3. What did you find most memorable about the performance?

"The humour and humanity of the interactions between the cast"

"The emotion and authenticity in the scenes"

"The excitement of being involved expressed by a participant"

"The fact that all three played James. A universal story"

"Each actor braved showing their vulnerabilities – stunning!"

They were also invited to complete an online survey following the performance and below is a sample of the results:

- **100%** said they would like to attend more events like this.
- **100%** said they would like to see more creative work like this
- **100%** said it is important that work like this is happening in Birmingham

Some of the additional comments include:

- "They deserved the standing ovation they got."
- "This will most definitely inform my future work."
- "Raw. Emotive. Heart-warming."





- “You showed great vulnerability and honesty... Loved the sense of community and team on the stage.”
- “Thank you for raising pertinent issues to those in the criminal justice system so that we continue to question and improve our practice to meet need.”
- “They have shown us how to overcome self-doubt and self-sabotage ways of thinking, but to push through the difficult times. A big well done for the amazing performance.”

- **Participants**

All three participants were asked to reflect on their experience of being part of the First Act project via a paper feedback form, with comments including:

- “This has improved my confidence and personal understanding.”
- “This has boosted my confidence.”

- “Overall a great service – 5 stars.”
- “Keep doing what you are doing”

In addition, during the post-performance debrief session each participant was briefly interviewed about their experience of the project. Comments during those interviews include:

- “Really worthwhile experience. You’ll get so much out of it. It’s really worth doing.”
- “Gives us a chance to get across our message that we struggle to get across at times.”
- “You never know what you are capable of... at the end of it you feel amazing... you feel proud not just for yourself but for everyone else as well... we’ve all worked so hard together and it’s been brilliant to see how it has all come together.”
- “The response we got [from the audience] was amazing.”
- “Meeting lovely people... How warm and welcoming everyone made me feel. It’s just the people – they’re absolutely brilliant.”

- **Staff (who supported the project)**

As described above, one of the most valuable aspects of the First Act project was the integration of the Ingeus staff into the process. Feedback from Ingeus staff includes:

“I was very honoured and grateful to be involved... the benefit to staff and service users from this is priceless. I personally and professionally learned a great deal about myself moving forward. The service users gained a great deal from the experience... watching their confidence grow from week to week and engaging 100% all the time and seeing the trust, teamwork and rapport build. I truly hope these projects can continue – they are immensely valuable to all who take part.”

“I learnt a lot from observing the Geese facilitators – how they managed and developed the group dynamic; how they developed simple human concepts into meaningful material. I think the work that Geese does is wonderful – you are the best at what you do...”

“The sense of pride that the cast had was just off the scale, for both staff and service users. They have grown in so many ways, it’s amazing.”





Next Steps

• **Participants:** during the post-performance debrief session the three First Act participants were introduced to several of Geese's Staging Recovery Ensemble members (who had been in the audience.) The First Act participants were given the opportunity to chat with the ensemble members, to hear more about the Staging Recovery projects and were all invited to attend the next three-day Staging Recovery three-day Foundation Course. Following this they would then be able to join the ensemble and take part in future Staging Recovery projects, including forthcoming events as part of the Commonwealth Games Creative City programme; a national film project as part of the International Overdose Awareness Day; and a forthcoming Arts and Recovery Conference at the University of West London.

• **First Act Project:** following the success of this pilot it would be useful to consider a range of potential next steps, including:

- o Continuing to develop the model with Ingeus (business case already submitted)
- o Strengthening the model (in-reach projects in local prisons etc)
- o Broadening the partnership model with buy-in from key stakeholders (NPS, police, WMVRU etc)
- o Replicating the model in other regions
- o Seeking additional funding from PCC's, Trusts and Foundations, ACE etc

