

Transit is the kind of participatory project that will be under threat from funding cuts. It was an experiment which took place at High Wycombe last spring under the aegis of the Thames Valley Partnership in which 11 young people of 18 who originally signed up from a pupil referral unit, a school, the youth service and social care, took part in a week's crash course in dance, culminating in a public performance. Are such projects worth funding? The cultural consultant **Dr Richard Ings** was asked to evaluate it, and this is his summary report.

Not just in passing

The focus in many accounts of participatory arts projects is, understandably enough, on the experience of the participants. In terms of fundraising and advocacy, the rhetoric of transformation seems central to making the case for such projects and the organisations that deliver them.

The bottom-line task of any evaluation of the activity, therefore, is usually to measure what impact it has had on the people taking part. If the evaluation turns up good evidence, then it can support arguments for investment in further projects of this kind, whether in terms of money from funders or of strengthened partnerships with the agencies that may have supplied the participants. But something vital is lost if this is all that people get to learn about a project of this kind.

A project like, say, Transit, which took place at the Swan Theatre in High Wycombe last May.

Transit was the brainchild of Judy Munday, arts and community safety officer at the Thames Valley Partnership (TVP). Inspired in part by the work of Dance United and experienced in delivering TVP's participatory arts projects, Judy worked with a wide range of agencies, including the Youth Offending Service and Connexions, to find apparently disaffected young people who might benefit from a seven-day dance project culminating in a public performance at the theatre.

In discussing my commission to evaluate this process, we agreed that the impact on these young people had to be assessed – and yet we both wryly acknowledged that we already knew what the impact of



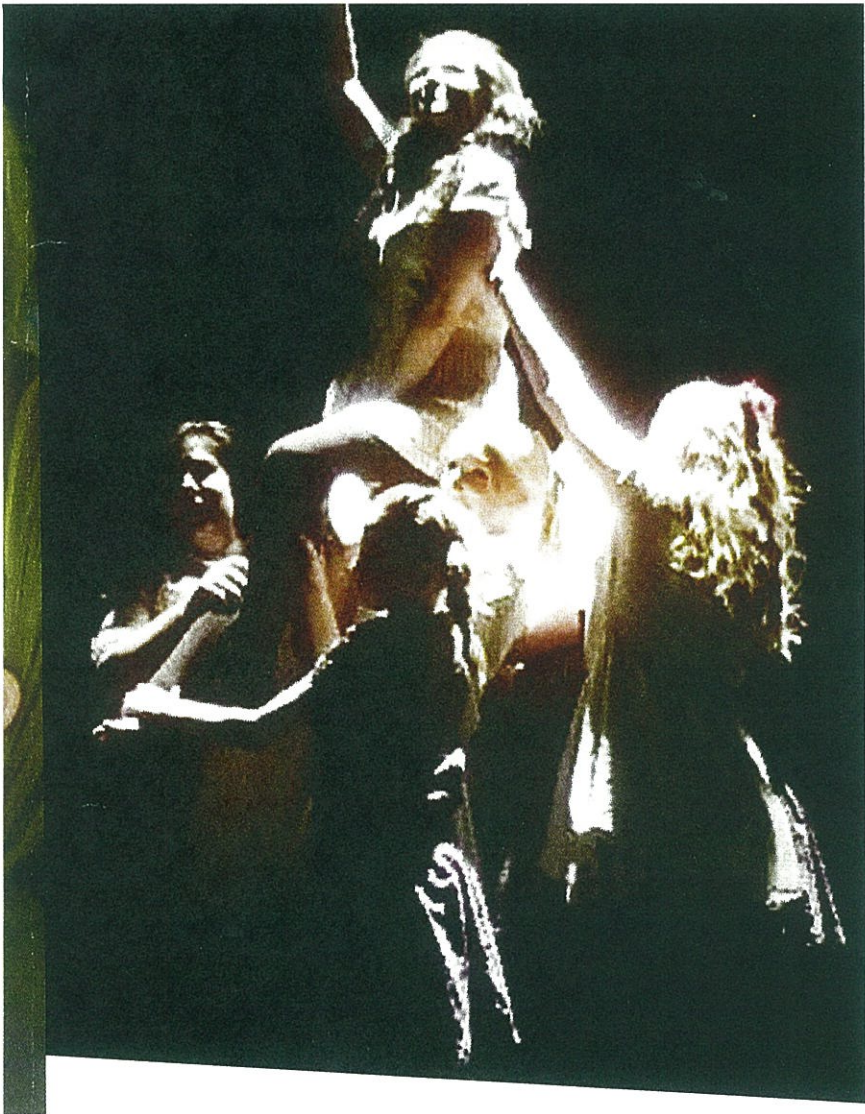
such a project would be, as long as it was well-run and led by the right kind of artists.

Often, observers sceptical of the rhetoric around participatory arts do indeed suspect evaluations of such projects to be “pragmatic” – that is, setting out to prove what the organisers already assume (or hope) to be true.

Having spent a good part of the last quarter century funding, wit-

nessing, documenting and evaluating arts education and participatory arts projects, I can only assert that the case has indeed been proven for their inestimable worth – and proven many times over.

The rigorous social research methods often recommended as the only way of producing “hard” evidence are, in my view, limited by their rigour, which tends by its nature to exclude the less quantifi-



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able impacts and the less definable after-effects of a creative experience. Opening your eyes and ears is a better way, in most cases, of appreciating the value of an intervention like this.

What I saw over the seven days was the transformation of a group of variously disengaged teenagers into a dance company. This transformation might or might not represent a definitive turning point in each of >



those lives – and the company itself dissolved, of course, after the show – but there was little doubt in my mind that, in the process of developing new dance and choreographic skills as part of a focused group enterprise, each participant had been given an opportunity to develop a new sense of their own possibilities and had seized it hungrily. This result was, at the same time, both quite remarkable and entirely predictable.

It is a good story and telling it well may lead to support for further projects – I certainly hope it will – but it excludes what may be a much more important narrative, even in terms of advocating for participatory arts. Transit was also an artistic event. The transformation of participants is part of a larger story of transformation, which describes the process and impact of art itself.

Listening to dance artists Helen Parlor and Maria Ryan describe their work for Transit, it is clear that making the dance is fundamentally the same here as in the professional context – just a bit more interesting for a choreographer, as Helen explains:

“In the professional world, you don’t get that many surprises, simply

because a trained dancer can probably do anything you ask them to. I prefer to work with people with more landscape in what they can do. You get surprises that way.”

In projects like these, the professional artist works with the raw human energy and creativity of the non-professional to create new art that has its own aesthetic. This is very different from the traditional conception of the amateur as someone who sets out to imitate the professional. Here in High Wycombe this group of young people did more than produce a juvenile version of *The Nutcracker* or *Dirty Dancing*. Placed in a professional artistic environment and led by professional artists, they were enabled to produce something entirely original – a unique work of art where the contributions of the professional choreographer and their own cannot finally be untangled.

You can now go and view this piece, *All About Trust*, on YouTube and make your own mind up: was Transit a way of getting young people back into education, training or employment or simply another way of bringing new dance to our attention? Or was it both?