

# Spectra 2

## Devising a specific aesthetic

2015-2016







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*Spectra is a performance company that draws on the diverse creativity of its mixed professional and learning disabled community cast to devise multi-sensory, immersive theatre. Developed through a partnership between the Midland Arts Centre, Birmingham's Next Generation programme, independent artist Kate DeRight, and Queen's Alexandra College, Spectra is made possible through funding from the Arts Council England*

*Spectra Blog*

*Consultation and inclusivity are the driving forces in my work*

Kate DeRight Spectra 2 Director

## **Executive Summary**

Spectra 2 was an intensive theatre project, workshopping and rehearsing over more than a year (November 2015-December 2016) for multi-sensory performances, including two ticketed public shows at the high profile Midlands Arts Centre (mac) in Birmingham. It sits within Spectra's continuing development of a practice and ethos which focuses on particular devising processes in collaborations between learning disabled and professional artists, giving participants

the opportunity to be fully engaged with the process of dreaming up an idea, experimenting with different ways of realising that idea, analysing what works best in support of that realisation, and feeling the impact of their idea coming to fruition

Kate DeRight

This process was designed to equally prioritise the development of critical thinking skills and performance skills. Kate DeRight described Spectra 2's devising process and aesthetic as

what may seem like an uncertain process ... to create rich, connected characters in work that may be more abstract than narrative

Kate DeRight

The project aimed to follow-up the performance period with a term of work towards participants beginning to establish and lead their own performance company which would enable Young People and Adults with Learning Disability to create for themselves opportunities currently not available.

Spectra 2 was also unusual in that it worked with a range of providers and drew in both young and adult participants. The experience of working with a charity (Mencap) as well as a Day Centre (Moseley) and three different courses at an FE College (Queen Alexander College) was sometimes challenging, but contributed to this being a developmental project with a focus on improving future practice.

This evaluation identifies the following aspects of Spectra 2 as central to creating its impact:

- a specific devising process which was reflective, open-ended and participant-led, yet relied on highly structured, controlled and sometimes challenging practices
- the creation of a team of performers which included LD and non-LD participants and artists, supported by theatre professionals
- aesthetically ambitious public performances, which shaped the workshops and the pace of rehearsals and enabled a unfamiliar, and potentially creatively disturbing, aesthetic to emerge within a still familiar high quality of production values
- strong partnerships, particularly with the Midlands Arts Centre, which provided and supported a professional context for genuinely public performances, and Queen Alexander College which facilitated the involvement of participants
- the length of engagement with YPWLD participants, including long term involvement of a small group (two years before this project) which not only refined Spectra's practice but also helped participants to develop leadership skills and confidence which they took forward into a Performance Company with new participants



### **The main outcomes of Spectra 2 were:**

- the number and age range of participants was significantly increased (from previous work)
- all participants experienced a significant increase in feelings of self-esteem, confidence and pride in their achievements and many seemed happier and more energetic
- most participants significantly improved their performance skills, particularly in expressive physical theatre, dance and music
- most participants significantly improved or developed new skills in communication, planning, leadership in group activities and, to a lesser extent, critical thinking
- most participants significantly improved their ability to be creative, to develop a creative idea, and to lead creative processes in groups
- many participants increased their capacity for reflection
- audience members were engaged, entertained and sometimes surprised, by the high quality of the performances, potentially or actually changing their perceptions about the capacity of LD performers
- artists, professionals and staff from mac significantly increased their understanding of and skills in performance work with LD performers and their confidence and desire to be further involved

**The main impacts of Spectra 2 are:**

- a greater understanding of the potential benefits and specific aesthetic achievements of co-designed and participant-led performance has been created within an influential segment of Birmingham's cultural sector
- a greater appreciation of the creative potential of LD performers has been created amongst significant numbers of the public and families of LD people
- a core group of YP and AWLD have developed the skills, confidence and commitment to create further public performance work within a supportive environment
- partnerships have been consolidated which are key to taking this work forward



## Recommendations

1. That Spectra builds on this highly successful and reflective project, securing funding to work towards wider engagement with new participants and further public performances; retaining the effective model of merging workshop groups into Performance Companies
2. That Spectra identifies and describes its devising process in order to share it more clearly with existing and future partners. This will enable Spectra, its partners and co-opted professionals to better understand the practical demands of the participant-led devising model and how they differ from more conventional theatre practice; to give a value to the fine balance between challenge and safety embodied in it and develop further ways to support participants; and to build better appreciation of the creative potential of such a process
3. That Spectra continues to work with an existing core group of performers in order to maintain and build on their skills as performers and mentors, exploring models towards a more independent performance company
4. That Spectra engages partners to jointly further explore the extent to which participant skills gained are transferable and/or might apply to employability or other roles in theatre than performance
5. That Spectra seeks specific funding to build on its successful partnerships with QAC and mac, to refine and possibly extend the model; and to develop new partnerships

This report draws on a thorough and formal evaluation process which ran throughout the project. Devised jointly with independent evaluator Dr Sue Challis and Researcher Hetty Blades, it involved Spectra staff and a range of experimental and more traditional data collections from participants, artists, audiences, parents, carers, support staff, partners and ‘critical friends’ from the sector. This diversity of viewpoints and the extent of the data collection can only be summarised in this report, but has contributed to its depth and authority.

Dr Sue Challis February 2017

## Spectra 2 Performers

Daniel Ashby  
Poppy Barrett  
Robert Bate  
Duncan Bird  
Dominick Brittain  
Sam Budd  
Peter Coley  
Julio Graham  
Calum Hayes  
Zoe Herbert  
Nathan Hill  
Alex Lane  
Charlotte McCarthy  
Tehseen Meghani  
Bethany Millns  
Louisa Myatt  
Brendan Nolan  
Michael Notice  
Sian Stait  
Robert Whittle  
Tyrone Williams







## **Aim**

To use consultation to create compelling, aesthetically sophisticated multi-sensory performances to empower people with learning disabilities to become creative leaders

## **Outcomes**

- To expand the number and age range of participants (following Spectra's previous work)
- To create two moving, vital and vibrant public performances.
- To equip participants with stronger communication skills.
- To develop and utilise our participants' leadership skills.
- To establish strategies for and resource future work.



## Project structure and timeline

Spectra 2 began in November 2015, meeting almost weekly with a core group of ten young people with learning difficulties (YPWLD) from a Queen Alexandra College BTEC course, five of whom had worked on theatre skills with Spectra for two years. New adult participants were recruited through taster sessions at centres for adults with learning disabilities (AWLD), Moseley Day Centre, Queen Alexandra College's Independence Plus programme, and the charity Mencap. They formed a 'combined adults' group which met in parallel with the core group until they merged in May 2016 to form a Performance Company to rehearse the first public show, *Seek / Find* in June.

As well as two Spectra staff (Kate and Bethan) other non-LD participants or professionals worked alongside and in support of the groups. For *Seek/Find* there were two musicians, a dance artist, a theatre artist, a designer and a design assistant (and a food consultant who led an afternoon's work and acted as a consultant); mac's Next Generation Producer and Productions Manager, two Customer Service Assistants (who worked as Learning Support Workers throughout and performed, co-funded by mac and Spectra to support independent adult participants), as well as two technicians and numerous Customer Service Assistants (and managers) contributed. The company was composed of nine QAC BTEC students, five QAC IP clients and two adults attending independently (one a former QAC BTEC student and the other recruited through the taster sessions at Moseley Day Centre). Between 1-3 Learning Support Workers came with the BTEC group and 1-2 with the IP group; they may have had specific responsibilities for individuals but were usually offering general support.

In March a piece developed between November 2015 and February 2016 was performed by the nine students that made up the BTEC group at the three taster sessions. This was supported by the Designer and Design Assistant (and one Learning Support Worker for the BTEC group performing).

After a two month Summer break, in September 2016 the Combined Adults and core BTEC groups met in parallel again for ten weeks until merging into a Performance Company for the final show, *Manifest*, in November 2016. They were joined by the aforementioned CSAs from mac, Spectra's Theatre Artist; a Designer and a Filmmaker also made crucial contributions to the show. The company's make up had shifted over the summer such that there were five QAC BTEC students, two independent attenders, and eight Independence Plus clients.

At the start of the project Spectra also worked with a group of YPWLD at Queen Alexandra College on a Preparation for Learning course, with the intention of supporting some of those students onto the core Spectra group. However, both Spectra and the College staff felt that PFL students were not ready for the transition at this point.

Altogether, Spectra 2 comprised 77 two hour sessions with participants (up to all day during rehearsals), most of them at mac, and 27 artist planning sessions.

The BTEC group averaged nine and five attendees for the first and second rounds respectively, the Combined Adults group between six and 8.6, and the Performance Companies had regular attendance of 15-16 throughout. Altogether Spectra 2 worked with 22 regular attendees plus 16 others in partnership venues.

### **The participants**

Participants were aged between 16 and 41, with slightly more males than females. They were able to demonstrate a diverse range of intellectual and physical abilities. Disabilities included limited mobility, visual impairment, autism, Down's Syndrome and other cognitive disorders. There were two regular participants using wheel chairs during the period. All lived in the Birmingham postcode area or nearby West Midlands including Solihull, Cannock and Sutton. Most participants had previously taken part in performance-based activities to a greater or lesser extent, although very few had presented work to a public audience.

Spectra set up a volunteer scheme through mac, and following a taster session one regular volunteer was recruited from January 2015. Overall, five volunteers worked intermittently with the group and other volunteers were brought in to help with the performances.

### **The audiences**

The public performances were marketed through specialist networks of providers and groups connected with Learning Difficulty, direct invitations to the show for SEN schools, VIPs, potential stakeholders, and previous mac audiences; the usual local media channels, including social media and the Spectra blog. Mac included the performances in their mainstream online and other marketing, including its Next Generation programme promotion, DASH programme (which seeks to make work by disabled artists more visible to mac audiences) and its Spring/Summer season programme of outdoor work; and managed tickets sales.

More than 450 people (mainly adults) attended performances. The two main public shows at mac, *Seek / Find* and *Manifest* drew audiences of almost 380 people (290 and 90 respectively) . Although the majority of those surveyed had some connection with the performers (such as family, friends, College staff) a significant majority (over 1/3rd ) did not. Ticket sales brought in an income of £876 (*Seek / Find*) and £150 (*Manifest*)

## The Workshops

The workshop structures tended to have a routine, such as 'warm up/ group activity /something created and shown /break /more in depth exploration of a topic/ wind down (although the content of activities was very varied). They were based on a circle where participants and artists/support workers were more or less evenly spread (for example, in the Performance Company sometimes as many as a ratio of 15:16 artists/supporters:participants). Everyone participated in the activities. Support workers included two mac Customer Support Assistants (CSAs) with no prior experience of the field who joined the group from March 2016, and three further artists who joined the group in April 2016 (two of whom had worked on Spectra's May 2014 show). The general atmosphere in sessions could legitimately be characterised as 'calm and purposeful', in some ways relaxed (for example, with the opportunity for individuals to 'take time out' freely accessed), but in others quite formal (with the workshops leaders continuously managing and extending focus and concentration through encouragement and critique).

Workshops demonstrated these regular processes:

- reassuring routine
- encouragement to concentrate and extend
- incremental building of participant-led narratives or physical expression towards eventual performance themes
- reminders of past activities, agreements and previous participant-devised scenes

As performances approached there was greater time given to specific scene rehearsal.

Below is an example of a session from Spring 2016:

- Physical warm up in circle (individual and whole group)
- Process drama 'game' in the circle (eg 'Showers with buzz')
- More intensive group activity to focus concentration (eg moving freely close together, travelling far apart, while singing (quiet when close together and loud as they move further apart), and then reversing this, moving from the outside of the room to the centre, gradually getting quieter)
- Group thinking game – Stop/start exercise again, straight into white sheet to maintain concentration
- White sheet – looking at different ways of moving the sheet as a group
- Break
- Individual or group performance activity, context set by Spectra leader but each cameo led by individuals or small groups to a brief performance in front of group (eg 'explored different natural objects such as leaves, twigs, grass, Christmas tree branches, sand, water etc and created movement pieces from those stimuli').
- Closing ritual in circle including review discussion about the session; individuals contribute to whole group routine







These small cameos often became the basis of longer and more refined scenes which formed the final performances. They were discussed and re-visited by the whole group, with participant suggestions clearly leading their development into more finished and subsequently rehearsed scenes. For some artists it was a positive experience to discover that 'the creative process is a joining of lots of small achievable ideas and new tasks' (new Spectra artist). This process was at the heart of the development of the final performances, which in turn were frequently referred to and which helped shape the workshop sessions from the start. For example, early in the workshop period,

We made sure that people worked in different areas of the room today, so they don't get used to facing the same direction in the same room - they need to be able to adapt and work in different spaces for the show. (Log 15)

Closer to performances, the support system was flexible. For example, mac CSAs doubled up for group sessions to support the

rapid development of ideas and arrangements that required a good deal of flexibility, sensitivity and responsiveness on both our parts

mac CSA [J]

In summary, the workshops clearly aimed for and often achieved a balance between the open-ended creative devising process and disciplined effort. An observation from a mac staff member who took part in about half the sessions characterises this approach as:

There is fairness and there are clear boundaries, rules and structures with a wonderful sense of [Kate] being involved and present and a part of the group

Although there was quite a gap in workshops (from the Summer to Autumn terms), neither participants nor professionals raised this as a problem.

### **Artist logs**

An unusual aspect of the workshop practice was a detailed written account Spectra produced and shared with artists (and the evaluator) after every session. This account described activities and commented on participants' responses to them and any progress in skills, problems or incidents. Changes to routines or plans made in the light of each week's reflections were detailed. 57 of these Logs were analysed by the independent evaluators. Among other things, they demonstrated that staff made close, detailed observations of individual participants and a genuine attempt to visualise *their* experience of the sessions. For example,

We had some lovely moments with [L] under the white cloth saying "I like the way this feels on my face". I asked, 'So you like that?' and he said, 'I LOVE the way this feels on my face'. [F] had a huge smile on his face when we began moving the sheet up and down that lasted throughout the exercise (Log 11)

The shared logs of sessions often included feedback from participants, for example, about the length or character of routines and the content of sessions. These were debated in the logs and, more often than not, revised routines planned:

Having read through students' comments this week we have adapted the 'warm-up' to bring more variety (Log 13)

The session was much more suitable for the group this week. Having met them we were able to tailor it to them. Instead of finishing with the white sheet, we shared our mirroring exercise in pairs with the rest of the group (Log 16)

There is a dominant member of the group and this took up a lot of energy this week because he continually asked so many questions, and so now we will have a Question Time after the break each week, an allotted time for questions so we can keep focus during the activities (Log 33)

### **Participant feedback**

Regular participant feedback on the sessions during the sessions was a key part of them, facilitated by workshop leaders. It appeared to be 'free and easy', perhaps because participant remarks were often accepted without comment except for thanks. For example, Kate described the benefits of a 'warm-up', asking participants before, at halfway through and then immediately after the 'warm-up' 'How ready do you feel to do a creative task now?'. Sometimes feedback was elicited through participants devising non-verbal 'freeze frames' or other physical expressions.

More formal feedback was periodically carried out using colour symbols or other visual means, asking participants to assess their own progress in terms of one key project outcome, self-esteem, expressiveness, leadership or critical thinking each time. This complex task was broken down into short activities, sometimes with physical expression, and a simple colour scale. For example, participants identified themselves with one of these statements regarding their leadership skills through colour symbols:

I have big ideas and want to share them  
I listen well and use others' ideas  
I volunteer to lead  
I convince other people to try things out  
I have started to share my ideas but still feel uncertain  
I have some good ideas but I'm still working out how to share them  
I feel somewhat confident  
I didn't want to take the lead  
I only have a little bit of confidence

When participants had made their self assessment, Spectra staff and Learning Support Assistants fed back their own observations. In this context participants were challenged to achieve artistic goals they set for themselves.

### **The quality of delivery**

Up until the *Seek / Find* performance, LSA's accompanying participants also recorded their weekly observations on a specially designed template based on the Arts Council Children and Young people's Quality Principles. These sometimes alerted artists to issues not raised elsewhere; for example, that the 'warm-ups' were not always suitable for a visually impaired participant. The Observations represent independent comment from people familiar with participants but not necessarily with a theatre project of this sort.

The 14 Quality Principles (QP) Observations (plus four completed by the independent evaluator and 'Critical Friends') evidenced artist and participant activity (behaviours, attitudes and processes) in terms of quality of delivery. For example, as evidence of the ACE QP 'Striving for excellence and innovation', two observers noted that students were given verbal feedback on run-through, 12 noted that participants were concentrating and listening well/better than usual and that tasks were clearly explained.

Four Observations noted that expectations were high ('reminded students of the importance of a professional attitude' / 'giving genuine criticism in a productive way'). The Observations reflect sessions which were on the whole 'exciting and inspiring' (ACE QP). For example, seven comments note that artists 'including guests' showed 'energy and enthusiasm' and four that *all* participants asked questions and contributed to discussion, and that the variety and open-ended nature of activities and performance opportunities were exciting and inclusive (ACE QP).

The inclusive nature of the session activities was widely noted, particularly the opportunity it gave for participants to *lead* in devising and collaborating on performances (15 comments), to develop individual movements in physical theatre (five), talk through show ideas (two), and that they were given tasks that allowed them to 'make it personal to them'.

The quality of relationships observed suggests a 'positive and inclusive experience' (ACE QP), that participants were 'inspired by positive feedback' - 'without being over the top' (11 comments), and 'lots of laughter and fun' (three), answering questions personally (using names) and often 1:1 (four). There were many comments on how sessions included participants with a wide range of abilities and disabilities: 'everyone had a chance', 'all students have a role', 'everyone was asked to answer questions and express ideas'.

The project blog, maintained by staff and visiting artists throughout the project, also analysed in terms of the ACE QPs, reflected a similar inclusive approach expressed through photographs of participants and their comments - although no data was collected on participant 'hits' on the site and there was not much participant-led content (14 Jan 2016 was written by a QAC student; 21 June 2016 was written by a QAC staff member, 10 June by mac LSW, 26 April by dance artist).

Inclusivity and respect was strongly modelled by session leaders and may have contributed to the generally benign nature of inter-participant relations. I observed the following exchange in one of the regular review discussions about the sessions which also demonstrates the 'striving' ethos of the project:

Kate: 'Let [N] speak, give him time...

[A] : 'The warm-ups are too fast...he can't do it

Kate: 'It's more important that you say ideas about how to make it better, can you?

[A]: 'Don't go on the floor [in the warm-ups] because [N] can't do it...

Kate: I'm not sure I agree, because everyone needs to be able to express themselves...we need to find a way that [N] can too... [N] do you want to think about that and tell us after the break?'

[N] (Nods)



The marked attention paid to the group dynamic and its role in the devising process, was commented on by several observers, for example:

the focus on cementing intra-group relations leads on to the generation of ideas, from which the final show emerges. What has always impressed me is that at every stage of the show's development, the process provides a vehicle by which participants' creative and personal voices are encouraged, valued, and incorporated into the final presentation

mac staff member/participant

The QAC course tutor noted how tiring sessions could be for participants. She linked this with the challenge of Spectra's 'open-ended, more spontaneous and less structured' method, which placed greater creative responsibility on participants. Some QAC students found this approach less enjoyable or comprehensible than others, so following QAC feedback, Spectra staff modified their practice to increase the amount of explanation and explicit 'forward planning'.

The slow process of participant-led devising meant that some artists (for example, the Producer, Designer) could confirm practical elements of set, props, costume and stage management much later than is usual practice, and this was experienced as a challenge.







## The performances

There were three performances of the first show - one at QAC, one at Mencap and one at the Moseley Day Centre; the June show (*Seek / Find*) had four performances, one of which was invite only and for a large group from QAC; the November show (*Manifest*) had one performance).

mac is a recently refurbished large arts complex produces theatre, dance, music and comedy performances, cinema, regular artist and community exhibitions and workshops, and is set in a popular city centre park. *Seek / Find* was an outdoor show that took place in the park and the outdoor amphitheatre. When it was 'rained off' and moved into the building the venue enabled the performances to move between five different spaces as the audience 'promenaded' from large hall/theatre to corridor, balcony and foyer space. *Manifest* was all in the theatre. The venue was exciting (professional, architecturally high quality, diverse and popular) and would have been challenging for any cast (open to the public, sometimes noisy, and very different from the more confined rehearsal/workshop space). Access to mac technical and other support staff was clearly a great advantage in supporting the high aesthetic ambitions of the performances.

*Seek / Find* was interactive in these ways: the audience was given shakers and asked to shake along to music, to sing along, were served food by performers, asked to hold up signs that directed activity in the performance, and asked to empty their shakers to help make one of the treats at the end. Spectra 'Critical Friend' Richard Hayhow (Director of The Open Theatre Company, expert in work with YPWLD) commented,

the use of spaces at the mac was adventurous and engaging and never tokenistic – it had its own internal logic, breaking down traditional barriers between performers and audiences in ways that enhanced the experience

*Seek / Find* was a multi-sensory production, (involving music, dance, voice, smell and food) with a cohesive design aesthetic expressed both through striking costumes and props and the organisation of scene changes and spaces. The narrative was slight, as a series of scenes, some of great charm and delicacy, others exuberant or mysterious, were enacted by changing groups of actors. A professional designer worked with the company for several weeks before the event.

From my observation notes made at the time:

A complex production with good quality production values. I had a strong sense of well-rehearsed scenes and some performances were outstanding and very engaging (e.g sportsmen, boat, band); 'narrator /guides' were clearly well rehearsed and often – not always - achieving fluency and smooth transitions (in the difficult circumstances of venue changed at last minute due to weather) but always with maintained focus and role which transcended a sense of disability.

Two musical pieces: the band felt very musician-led; it was a confident, focussed and an entertaining performance, musicians showed skill, jumped in on time for their solos and were well rehearsed; in the singing in the boat there was a completely shared harmonising performance of an ethereal gentle song.

Self esteem of many actors seemed high – this was confirmed in confident conversations post performance. Possibly a quality of self-absorption in some of the actors made the performance both more relaxed and added mystery?

'Critical Friend' Richard Hayhow, was asked whether the show represented a 'different' performance aesthetic - that is, clearly or possibly derived from young people with learning disability:

Absolutely, reflected in the bold and honest engagement with the audiences, the non-logical narrative with alternative visual/emotional/sensory internal consistency, the seamless blending of a range of artforms, the commitment and authenticity of the performers

A number of professional non-learning disabled artists worked alongside the performers, sometimes 'managing' the movement of the audience or scene changes and, very rarely, prompting. Although this mix of professional and LD performers is central to Spectra's ethos, the performance itself seemed to minimise the presence of the professionals. Richard Hayhow perceived this to be 'authentic and creative' and felt that 'performers with learning disabilities were genuinely leading the performance through its narrative and were completely aware of and in command of its structure and purpose'.



The QAC course tutor reflected a possible ambivalence amongst some participants:

The mix of professional and non-professionals is a really good opportunity for our students, especially working with professional designers, musicians, technicians and producers. But there have been some reservations expressed by students about working alongside professionals in performance, they feel they don't need support as such (and perform at QAC without it). This suggests that they feel the intention is to support rather than work alongside.

My own notes suggest that the impact and form of this strategy may vary according to each participant's specific needs:

Diverse roles co-created with participants so actors seemed to be working to their individual capacity – some in more physical theatre than others. Severely disabled actors included as active protagonists (eg in 'compere repartee'). I sometimes was not sure who had LD and who didn't and it didn't matter

This was confirmed by participant interviews and by a further comment from QAC:

[Spectra] gives responsibility to those who want it - [ M ] is our lowest academic ability student but has embraced this opportunity to do everything he can and take a leading role in performance

Audience feedback (both 'on the night' and in a post-show written survey) was overwhelmingly positive about the performances. All respondents felt it was 'well worth the time and cost of attending' and most felt 'inspired' by it, citing 'inclusivity' and production values (costumes, props) as significant factors. Almost all respondents also felt 'entertained' by the show. At the start of each performance some audience members were clearly taken aback by the promenade (looking for seats) and some seemed confused by the lack of obvious narrative. However, it did seem that the audience very quickly accepted the experience (despite the occasional hiatus in the hastily reconvened indoor performance of *Seek / Find*). All respondents to the survey found the show 'easy to follow'. It would have been interesting to distinguish between the responses of family and friends and public audience members, which we did only in random informal interviews - when responses from non-family were equally enthusiastic. There was an element of surprise expressed about the standard or quality of performance, which may have been connected with low expectations.







## Impact of workshops/rehearsals

### Participant survey

All of the 11 participants who completed a detailed anonymous questionnaire with their chosen parent/carer/sibling found the workshops and rehearsals 'exciting' and 'enjoyable' (and none found them 'boring'). A typical answer to the question, 'What was the worst thing?' was 'I liked everything'. Almost all participants 'seemed happier' because of taking part.

At the same time, over half also reported them to be 'tiring' and 'challenging'. For example, when asked about changes observed by parents/carers/siblings a typical comment was

[He] used to talk about the project in an excited manner, talked about his role with passion and would be tired a lot at times

Participants associated the tiring or challenging element of the workshops with two things: social interaction (a constant and vital part of the collaborative devising process described above) with its concomitant demands and frustrations; and the striving towards a more professional, more polished or complex performance. For example,

it was tiring and when other people didn't learn their lines  
[He] was anxious at times about getting things right  
[The worst thing was] having to concentrate and thinking about stuff

Tiredness was not necessarily identified as a negative impact, and was connected by several respondents with subsequently increased energy:

[What changes did you notice in the participant?]Relaxed, enjoying life, tired  
Tired after sessions, but had more energy generally

The workshops were 'challenging in a positive way' (Questionnaire respondent). Although for one respondent the 'length and demands of some sessions was difficult and sometimes breaks weren't long enough', she also associated 'challenge' with 'increased focus and passion'. Another commented, 'It has helped me concentrate'. Feedback from one of the artists working alongside suggests that some participants found the open-ended devising (which gave them more responsibility than they had previously experienced) uncomfortable.



Again, this may not have had a wholly negative impact:

I think that the participants went through stages of feeling unsafe, due to the nature of how the show was created. However I think that this 'unsafe' feeling was hugely beneficial to them, and resulted in them being pushed out of their comfort zones, and feeling like they had achieved so much more in the end as they had overcome personal hurdles

It was the right level but there were a small number who didn't seem to feel entirely safe during the creative process

The challenge of social interaction and collaboration was most commonly identified with increased self-confidence and positive development:

[The best thing was] meeting new people, staff and students  
[He] has become more focussed and motivated to do activities, especially of a group nature  
[ ] is less shy...more willing to take part in group activities

All respondents identified the workshops and performances as leading to significantly increased self-confidence. This was associated in many responses with being 'proud of achievements' and 'having something to look forward to'. All bar two noted that participants 'seemed happier', and none that they 'became discouraged'.

Respondents were also asked about possible 'transferable skills' gained from participation in the workshops. Of the list offered, improved 'listening', 'contributing to group discussion' and 'musical' skills were cited by almost all, with 'being able to communicate ideas better' close behind. Other improved skills identified by more than a third of respondents included 'staying focussed', 'physical skills', and being able to 'communicate feelings better'. However, it is worth noting that, even where only two people have mentioned an improved or new skill (such as 'being more independent', 'planning ahead', 'dancing', 'storytelling' or 'understanding another's point of view') this remains significant, as it is likely to reflect the very different starting points of participants and their specific needs. No one identified 'didn't seem to change much' as an option.

### **Participant self-assessment**

Formal self-assessment took place at the start of each phase (to set a baseline), at the midpoint and after the first performance and then again at the end of the final term, using the colour symbol and expressive activity described above in terms of key project outcomes, self-esteem, expressiveness, leadership and critical thinking. These were quite different from the terms in which the QAC students reflected on their progress (tending to be more in conventional theatrical terms such as 'characterisation', 'script learning' and so on) and were unlikely to have been familiar to the other participants.

My observations suggest that, although it seemed that participants did understand these complex concepts through the highly 'applied' explanations and very gradual self assessment process, they sometimes found it very difficult to reflect and give themselves a rating, especially a positive one and especially at the beginning of the project. Nevertheless, all participants did rate themselves. From the baseline to the mid-point, all as improved in expressiveness, 50% as improved in leadership and 66% as improved in critical thinking. From the mid-point to post show participants tended to continue to identify improvements or sustained high levels in all these skills as well as self esteem, with leadership remaining at a lower level - although consistently rated at a higher level by Spectra and LSAs. Within these overall figures were occasional decreases and lots of remaining at the same usually high levels.

Perhaps the most significant outcome from these processes was the increased self-awareness and reflection they supported. For example, participants often discussed the ratings, especially when Spectra/LSAs had rated them less skilled or more than they had themselves, which frequently occurred.

### **Observations and interviews**

Concepts such as 'leadership' may sometimes have been difficult for participants to identify, but an interview with the QAC course tutor confirmed that improved 'leadership skills' was a notable and lasting (longer than two terms) impact of Spectra:

There are many fairly confident students in the group anyway, but what we have observed as directly emerging from Spectra participation was an improvement in confidence to *lead* work in lessons - taking control of a situation and the development of their own work.

My own observations of workshop sessions, for example, returning after a few months' gap, confirmed that participant behaviours had changed, specifically in the area of creative physical expression and task focus:

The warm-up is much livelier, participants are performing much more elaborate movements, more physically challenging and lengthier. They are making much louder sounds, but in a more controlled way and there is evidence through body language, eye contact and speech, of greater attention being paid to each other as well as the artists. For example, there was widespread laughter at one point but it stopped instantly when the next instruction was given. (Evaluator's observation notes)

The QAC Course Tutor confirmed that participants were demonstrating in their College course 'new and refined skills', especially physical movement (not in the curriculum), and focus and control, clearly developed during their Spectra experience. She linked this to the specific nature of Spectra's practice (participant-led, open-ended devising process) in contrast to the more scripted experience of the BTEC course. The identification of the devising process as central to impact was also made by one of the participants:

I've never made a show like we do in Spectra before. We make it from the beginning. There is no script. This can be stressful and scary but the show at the end is so good

Asked whether participating made him 'feel good about himself', this participant answered:

Yes! I feel more confident now. This is a good opportunity and I feel more adult when I do things with Spectra. It's like being professional.







## Impact of performances

The evaluation attempted to distinguish between the impact of the performance and the preparatory workshops, although of course these were interlinked. Respondents to the anonymous participant questionnaire clearly identified the experience of a public event, associated with striving towards a polished or 'professional' performance, as a significant contributor to positive impact. This was reflected partly by the comments above about the positive impact of the 'challenge' of the rehearsal workshops, but also, for example, by answers to the question 'what was the best thing about the show?' (in the survey and in post-show evaluation discussions):

Having performed to the general public and not only to parents and friends  
singing in front of an audience and wearing the costume  
the interaction with the audience  
making the audience laugh

Participants' QAC tutor observed that the fact that the performances were public rather than for friends and family (as at College) was highly significant for some participants, for example, especially (but not only) for those with visual impairment:

Students talked about the impact of performing to the unknown audience...this has been a lasting impact. Whereas students might have said, 'I talked to that [stranger] and they didn't understand what I said so I gave up', they are more likely to grasp the idea that you have to deal with people who don't know you, to keep trying. It has built resilience and is a factor in some students taking on volunteering inside and outside College (QAC interview)

There was some reference in the parent/participant survey to a 'different' aesthetic:

It was a different kind of theatre that showed a different side of [him]  
[The best thing was] the full inclusion of all the participants

In evaluation sessions following each show, participants most frequently mentioned the impact of the quality of production values and the success of the performance: 'I met wonderful people and created a wonderful performance', 'I loved the costumes', and then the impact of working intensively as a team for performance: 'I've made bonds, strong bonds, I haven't known you very long so it is quite touching for me'.

The most cited changed behaviours ascribed to the performances were 'became more confident', 'made new friends' and more able to communicate both feelings and ideas. Fewer respondents cited 'seemed happier' in relation to the performances themselves (compared with the workshops), although 'pride in achievements' again featured frequently in comments. 'Listening' and 'physical' skills were those most linked to performances, along with 'showing more concentration', 'contributing to a group discussion' and 'understanding another's point of view'. 'Being more independent', 'planning ahead', and 'storytelling' were also cited, although by fewer respondents.

Finally, the impact of the main venue (mac) cannot be overestimated, both as a professional rehearsal space and versatile performance space - both inside and out (Canon Hill Park). Expectations of professional behaviour were clearly shown both by mac staff and by members of the public and audiences.

## Quality of partnerships

Spectra's partnership with mac was deemed 'extremely successful' by staff from both organisations, and each could identify mutual benefit, such as 'reaching out to new participants' (mac) and 'offering a professional context' (Spectra). Several (fairly minor) issues of poor communications or misunderstandings were reported to have been resolved quickly. Paradoxically, Spectra's open-ended devising process relies (as suggested in this report) on highly structured practices; there was some initial tension experienced in both organisations when these were challenged, resolved during the first few months as (in the words of one staff member) 'people trusted more and felt less territorial'. mac's integration of Spectra into its marketing, and the integration of support and technical staff was highly advantageous.

Generally, Spectra was seen as good at communicating schedules and needs for both artists and mac: 'they keep us totally informed all the time, ahead of time and are keen to protect us from overwork or being excluded from anything'. mac CSA [J]; 'schedules ahead of time - perfect for childcare!' (artist). Most of the moments of 'panic' (props not obtained, production management unclear, roles ambiguous) occurred in the intensive period just before the shows and may have been endemic - perhaps compounded by the devising process.

The partnership with QAC also proved robust and successful, and will continue, although somewhat modified. QAC welcomed the opportunity for its students to experience the professional context offered, particularly the public performances, not usually available to them. However, it took the decision to take the Spectra experience out of curriculum assessment, a highly structured process reliant on the kind of pre-planning not necessarily compatible with Spectra's devising process: 'If we don't understand the nature of the show then it is difficult for us to help them understand why the work took place or discuss with them how a particular workshop links to the overall performance. This will mean that the logbook/ Diary of the work created by the students doesn't follow a linear pattern showing progression in skills and the creative process. There *is* a progression in both these areas but is hard to document in the way the curriculum needs'. Spectra will continue to be valued by QAC as 'work experience' contributing to employability skills.

There were some tensions too arising from the different forms of theatre represented by both organisations - scripted / participant-led - with consequent impact on some student expectations. Some students felt confused by the open-ended work, not always understanding what they had achieved. This may have been compounded by the different registers of the practices, so that familiar terms (such as 'characterisation') were replaced by new concepts ('leadership', 'critical thinking'). Issues such as over-stretched staff support and transport were less acute during the second part of Spectra 2, with a much smaller student group.

## Impact on staff and artists

mac identified a Next Generation Producer to liaise and integrate mac staff with the project. Two mac Customer Support Advisors worked directly with participants weekly. Interviewed some months after project end, these staff were highly enthusiastic about the project - 'sheer joy and reward', 'it is one of the most important and significant things I have ever done':

I enjoyed the way we both learnt from each other...I have learned such valuable skills...become less inhibited, more trusting of my own creativity, of other people's, of my body ...and my ability to share a creative space with those who are different from me

mac CSA [J]

[I was] invited to take part in the shows, and have accepted on both occasions: in practice, this means that I feel very included and accepted by the group, and that in many ways, I enjoy the same benefits, re my self-actualisation, as any participant.

mac CSA [M]

She has taught us about so many things, from confidence and positive self-regard, to team work and leadership, body movement and so much more, including time-keeping and caring for our voices and bodies ...building a very respectful team, motivating people with praise and affirmation. They ...work so hard, and they make us work hard, without us even knowing

mac CSA [J]

For most arts professionals involved this was a different way of working:

It was all a slightly new thing for me, working in a collaborative way, being in rehearsals, doing warm up, not worked this way start to finish so was great, having the relationship with the team and not alone making. Learnt a lot in terms of rehearsal, the way devised work is created, working with participants, getting the best out of them, how to keep people in a positive mood

Assistant Designer

I feel more confident in my ability to work with people with learning disabilities, not only to lead movement sessions, but also how to draw out their strengths and help them to find a way to better express themselves through movement

Artist

I question my ability to lead a longer-term instrumental project in the future but generally feel more confident about engaging with YPWLD

Artist



My cross-disciplinary collaboration skills have developed  
Artist

It's unusual that so many art forms are included in the creative process and so it's been an eye opener, for example, when choreographing the finale, thinking about the BPM of the original music  
Artist

## Next Steps

*What would you like to do with Spectra in the future?*

I want to do a show with a jungle theme and I want to be the gorilla!

*What would you like to do in your future? Can Spectra help with that?*

If Spectra ever folded, I would want help to find another group like this as I want to keep doing it!

Spectra 2 Participant

At time of writing Spectra has applied for further funding to the Arts Council England for 18 months of work, including two productions and substantial organisational development. Kate DeRight writes:

‘The two are intrinsically linked, as we want the organisation to develop in a way that embodies our artistic ethos of consultation and is led by our company members. Our first production will be an invitation for stakeholders to engage and will start to address ideas we want to explore in our more traditional organisational development: it will be a multi-site, outdoor performance using a city centre space, mac's park and perhaps the College too. We will be working with a consultant throughout to look at how we can keep our strong partnerships going and also continue to develop, with an eye towards becoming a professional, touring theatre company with learning disabled artists as part of the core company (all this underpinned by community work too). The second production will be a series of consultation events that ask great questions but uses all the multi-sensory fun of a Spectra show to do so. QAC and mac are partners in this work, making significant financial and in-kind contributions.’

## Evaluation Methodology

The evaluation was designed not only to gather data on the impact of Spectra 2 on all involved, but also to explore and describe the detail of Spectra's specific devising process.

The evaluation strategy was devised jointly with Spectra, Sue Challis and Hetty Blades, based on extensive discussion. It was intended to produce an integrated, reflective loop, feeding back into practice during the project using methods which dovetailed with the project methods and content and used the skills of existing project members.

The evaluation strategy was to involve as many people in giving feedback as was feasible, in order to offer a 'triangulated' picture of the project. This is particularly important in a field which generates so much passion.

Examples of data collection:

A number of observers were asked to comment on workshops/rehearsals using the Arts Council England's Children and Young People's Quality Principles as a framework. These were QAC staff or Learning Support Assistants, mac staff or volunteers, Arts Council and Critical Friends.

Bethan Ball kept a detailed written log of activities with her observations on aspects of participation, student and staff interactions, examples of problem-solving and so on. These were analysed thematically.

Participants were asked directly in 1:1 interviews or regular group evaluation activities tailored to their communication needs, using colour and symbols and physical performance.

The independent evaluator observed two workshop sessions and performances and made written notes at the time.

11 detailed questionnaires (eight completed together with the participant) were sent to the participant's chosen 'significant other' (mainly parents/carers/siblings), and returned privately to the independent Evaluator.

Evaluation meetings were held after performances with participants and separately with staff, artists etc; or partners; written or telephone interviews supplemented these.

Observations (informal and based on the ACE template and a specially devised template) were made at all performances. An experienced and respected professional practitioner in the field was invited to become a Critical Friend to the project and observe performances, as did a representative of the Arts Council.

Audience members were interviewed informally, asked to complete feedback on the spot and some were surveyed separately afterwards

## Acknowledgements and thanks

Running since 2013 and developed through a partnership between mac Birmingham's NEXT Generation programme, independent artist Kate DeRight, and Queen Alexandra College, Spectra is made possible through funding from the partners and Arts Council England.



Director Kate DeRight

Theatre Artist and Coordinator Bethan Ball

Musicians Paul Carroll and Natalie Mason

Dance Artist Hayley Guest

Designers April Dalton and Ryan Laight

Filmmaker Scott Johnston

Production Manager and Visioning Facilitator Amy Martin

Food Consultant Kaye Winwood

Photographer Kate Green

Visiting Artist - Meditation Preya Chauhan

mac birmingham Next Generation Producer Dan Whitehouse

mac birmingham Productions Manager Josephine Reichert

mac birmingham Technical Staff Lizzie Moran, Jim Wyatt-Lees, Joe Henderson, Justin Roberts

mac birmingham Learning Support Assistants Jessica Boulton, Mrinal Kundu

Queen Alexandra College Staff Rachel Khan, Jonathan Garratt, Amanda Munday, Donna Woodall, Aretha Gordon, Hayley Jinks, Jo Pogorzelski, Kanchan Rajput-Goode, Paul Geary, Mark Bowen, Layla Hamer, Paul Crompton, Dave Longmore and Kimberly Wellings

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Page 2 Performance at mencap Hub, 15 March 2016 (Kate Green)

Page 9 Seek/Find Performance, Cannon Hill Park, 18 June 2016 (Kate Green).

Page 16 Warm-up for March Performance at mencap Hub, 15 March 2016 (Kate Green)

Page 20 Seek/Find Performance, Cannon Hill Park, 18 June 2016 (Kate Green)

Page 24 A typical session, mac Birmingham, May 2016 (Kate Green)

Page 30 Seek/Find Performance, Cannon Hill Park, 18 June 2016 (Kate DeRight)