

Adam Hemming, The Space

Interview with Adam Hemming, Artistic Director of The Space

Grace (Joseph, director and assistant to the author)

If you could tell me a little bit about the origins of The Space and your relationship with it, in terms of whether you've been able to start from the beginning or when you came on to it?

Adam Hemming

The building that The Space is in was built in 1859. It was built for Scottish dockers, as a Presbyterian chapel. After the Blitz, and the closure of the docks, the Isle of Dogs population shrank to the point where the congregation was about six people, so they merged with another church on the other side of the Isle of Dogs. In the late 1970s, the building was abandoned and left derelict. There was a local resident, who worked for the Wigmore Hall, a guy called Robert Richardson, who had often cycled past the venue. Sadly, his wife was killed in a road accident on the Isle of Dogs and he wanted to have a project to take his mind off things, but also to do something in her name – Marianne's name is on the front gate of The Space. Robert set about finding out how to restore the building and turn it into The Space. He spent about 10 years getting the council to let them have the building and getting the work that was needed to be done to restore and rescue the building. It was pretty much on the verge of falling over and he got the funding necessary to have all of that work done. He got Sir Ian McKellen involved, quite early on, as our patron, and then he opened The Space in 1996 as a Multi-Arts Centre, originally programming music, theatre, comedy and dance – a range of things. Robert also established St. Paul's Arts Trust, which is the registered charity that manages The Space. The aims of the trust are to provide creative opportunities for people locally, and to support new and emerging artists. I joined eight years into The Space's history, about 16 years ago now. At the end of this month, we are just 24 years

old as a venue – next year will be a big one for us. I came on board back in 2004 and it was at a time where there wasn't very much happening in The Space – we didn't have very much money. There was only one staff member working there and local people thought we'd turned into a restaurant. That was kind of the perception of The Space, locally. We had a “meet the new director” event that the trustees set up for me, and invited lots of local people to come along and meet me. And that's what they told me: “Oh, we thought you'd closed,” or “We thought you'd turned into a restaurant.” So, I knew there was a fairly big job in terms of building The Space up and engaging with the local community. That was my sort of my introduction to The Space, I guess.

Grace

What is the relationship with the restaurant? Is it part of the community commitment, given that that was their expectation?

Adam Hemming

The restaurant is kind of hidden at the back of The Space, and for those regulars and locals that know about it, it's a really treasured and valuable meeting place for them. They do really good food and it's a really welcoming and inviting atmosphere. It's a quirky little bar above a theatre space, so people really value that, as an eatery, a bar, a place to meet and chat after shows – but it's also very much for local people. It has very much its own local clientele who are not necessarily interested in theatre at all, but enjoy the bar for the atmosphere in there. There is a sense of community from those regulars, and the people who frequent it. It's run by a separate business currently, but they've been part of The Space's fabric for over 20 years – very soon after the opening of The Space. So we've always had a good working relationship with the people who run the restaurant area.

Grace

So, the income from the restaurant is separate to your own financing for theatre?

Adam Hemming

They have a management contract, so, essentially, we own the building, and they have a management contract with The Space where they run our cafe bar on our behalf, and pay us for the privilege of doing so. There is a service charge which contributes to the utilities, waste removal, and the maintenance of the building.

Grace

How are you financed? How does that break down into subsidies, sponsorship, and income?

Adam Hemming

We're not subsidised at all, unfortunately. We have income which, broadly speaking, is split into thirds: one third being that income from the cafe bar, one third being our current income, e.g., ticket sales and hall hires – it's a converted church hall, so the venue is good for birthday parties, wedding receptions, and other bits and pieces, as well as being a theatre space – and then the other third is through our grants and donations. We have a number of regular donors; we have a fundraising committee, a group of local people who meet to plan fundraising events. We do various different fundraising campaigns, and then I apply for grants from trusts and other bodies – the Arts Council and different organisations like that. We've had a fairly good track record over the years of securing project grants and core cross grants. So that's where, broadly speaking, the finance comes from.

Grace

Do you oversee the project grants for which people bringing work into the theatre might be applying?

Adam Hemming

I oversee both our in-house projects and the programming of The Space. In terms of our in-house projects, quite often I will bring in staff to help manage those directly, but I will be overseeing the whole thing. With visiting companies coming in to do shows and performances, my involvement is largely at the beginning of that process: meeting them, talking about their proposals and their ideas, and making sure they've got everything that they need. Then I hand over to my other staff, and they manage the process of that. Obviously, I'll check in with visiting companies regularly and I'm always there if they need me for anything.

Grace

How would you describe your creative relationship with the local community?

Adam Hemming

Good. We have a participatory theatre project called SpaceWorks which has been running for 12 years now. And we provide workshops, theatre

workshops, and performance opportunities for local children and adults. Over the years, we've done various different projects, including workshops with special needs students, local schools, and we've done inter-generational projects where we've worked with older residents, as well as children and adult groups. We've tried, wherever possible, to make those beneficiary-led, and led by people who come and take part in the projects – quite often, we're guided by what their interests are and what they want to be working on. We've always had members of the community on our decision-making panels and committees. We have one local resident who has really galvanised and made the most of the opportunity. He has galvanised not just the Space team, but also the community members around him. He's a chap called David Grindley, who has been a regular member of our SpaceWorks group since the beginning, and an audience member since before my time at The Space; he's a long-term supporter. David has cerebral palsy, so he's confined to a wheelchair, and he's always wanted to tell his life story. He's been performing in plays, and he's quite often suggesting *My Left Foot* as the next production, so he can have a starring role! Anyway, we got on to talking about him doing his story – it was always very difficult for a small team for us to find the time to do this, but we talked to our community group, and one of them, Bill, said: "Look, I'd be happy to spend some time with David, get some notes down, and see where we can go from there." He ended up spending six months travelling the country interviewing David's friends and family. He spent a lot of time with David and his carer, and came back with a huge amount of notes and information. We applied to the Arts Council for funding, brought in a playwright and a director that David had worked with before, and four actors to partly devise and partly script this piece from Bill's notes. They created a fantastic piece that performed at The Space for a week. And then David got it on at the Lyric Hammersmith as part of a festival that they have there. We've since made it available on YouTube for people to watch during the lockdown. David really encouraged and gathered other members of the community to help him raise the funds to match the Arts Council funding to make the project happen. He's continued to fundraise for The Space: he does a sponsored walk every year – he did his ninth one a couple of weeks ago where he pushes himself backwards in his wheelchair across the Isle Of Dogs. That's probably the biggest example of our creative relationship with someone from the community. We do try to work with as many different people as we possibly can across the projects that we work on.

Grace

That does seem to be kind of an ethos behind The Space – your work, and the way you include people, evolves from those people and allowing them to be involved. You seem to allow the people who come along to influence the way that you make, in a really pleasing way.

Adam Hemming

Yeah, it's been really interesting during lockdown, actually, in that we've continued to try and engage people. Our community has now grown to the point where we have people engaging from South Africa and Argentina. We have our immediate local vicinity, but, in terms of our theatre work, we've always considered London to be our catchment area. People have travelled in from far and wide, but now we're doing more digital work, and people are engaging from all over the world, which is incredible. One of the things I've really enjoyed about that is that we've had sessions where we allow people to keep their cameras off during online workshops, if they want to just watch and listen, and not be exposed themselves – they're welcome to do that. But the number of people we've seen who've gradually, bit by bit, grown in confidence to the point where they are turning their cameras on and getting involved has been incredible. I think that sums up how it's been. Previously, people had to come into the building for us to be able to engage with them. We didn't have the time, or the resources, or the manpower really, to do as much outreach as we'd like to have done – going out into places. We've done some workshops in schools and other bits and pieces like that, but, by and large, it's people who come into The Space that we're engaging with. This digital engagement has just opened up a whole new level and it was really important for us to make sure that we maintained that welcoming, and inclusive feel with the online work, as we had in the building.

Grace

Could you say a little bit more about how to be inclusive and welcoming online, in a digital space?

Adam Hemming

I think it's about creating that welcoming, inclusive environment in the first place. This is something that we've been really fortunate with in a lot of the work. The very first group that we had really bought into that, so the group itself when you first come in is very welcoming, very supportive of new people. We made sure that we are upbeat and friendly and pleased to see

everybody – we welcome everybody in, then we just lay out what's going to happen and explain that if people want to have the cameras off they can do. We let people know what to expect at the top of the session, so that they can make the choice themselves. We're always checking back in and saying: "If there's anything you have any questions about, or if anyone has any issues, then please do let us know." With all of our online workshop courses, we had two tutors there – so there was always someone there who was available, either on Zoom Chat if somebody wanted to sort of send a chat message to them, or just observing who was engaging and who wasn't. They were able to be aware of any issues, and that I think was really, really valuable in that respect.

Grace

There are so many different functions now of using platforms like Zoom, and using your voice and body really changes when you're engaging with people through a screen: there's almost more focus. I can imagine having the camera off and using Chat might hinder that.

Adam Hemming

We did a prep session with the tutors, where we did a little dry run. It was interesting – things like having your mouth visible on screen and good lighting – those sorts of things were really important.

Grace

On a more personal level, how did your commitment to community involvement develop, and has it built up over the years over your time at The Space?

Adam Hemming

When I was younger, I was always involved in community theatre and really valued the way that it brought people together, all sorts people of different ages. As a young person, I was in shows with people who were much older than me, and I really valued that. When I was at university, I took a community theatre course, where we ended up doing a show in Greenwich Park for children as part of the course. The course really opened my eyes to the different things that you could do, from working in festivals to club theatre – back then that was kind of a thing. When I first started at The Space, it was really about trying to get people in to see shows – so we needed to have some shows. My earliest thing was having a sort of "open book" policy when it came to programming – just trying to get some stuff on for people to see. I wanted people to get used to the idea of there being shows at The Space.

That policy led to us having quite a lot of new work and experimental work, and that was quite a hard sell for people in the local area. We would get people travelling in, and people who were interested in that sort of work came from other places, but I was aware that we weren't necessarily pulling people in from the local area. So, one of the things we decided to do was set up our own in-house production company. We formed Space Productions, with the aim of producing known plays and known stories, to try and give people that "hook": something they would have heard of, to pull them in to come and see shows at The Space. We also wanted to make it known that we weren't just a "visiting house" – that we were producing work locally. We did things like *The Graduate*, and *A Doll's House*, and *Treasure Island*, in those early days of Space Productions. That definitely helped us build that local audience. We got to a point where there was a lot of "Section 106" funding on the Isle of Dogs as some new buildings popped up. The money that was drawn down for the community was being distributed by the Isle of Dogs Community Foundation, which is now the East End Community Foundation. We'd never applied for one of their large grants, but it was suggested that we would be a good fit. There was a fairly blank sheet of paper – they were quite broad in their scope of what we could do. We talked a lot about what we wanted to do, and SpaceWorks was the project that came out of that. The idea was this three-tiered participatory theatre project: we had two youth groups and an adult group, and these were very much about building confidence and bringing people together, rather than training up actors to be stars of *EastEnders!* We had funding for three years to start that project off, and that enabled us to bring in a company manager to engage with people and recruit participants. Having someone whose role was to go out there and talk to people in the community, encourage them to come into The Space and do some work with us, was really valuable. It's just grown and grown, and developed from there really – SpaceWorks is still going now. Every couple of years, we try and do an intergenerational project – we did a series called "Share Your Stories," which is about storytelling, and taking stories from young people and stories from old people, and then switching them over: the younger people were then performing the stories that were written or created by the older people.

Grace

What kind of age range do you find you have on those projects?

Adam Hemming

Anything from seven up to sort of late 80s and 90s, is the age range. We just got funding to do a series of workshops around a family dinner, which is linked to a production that we hope to be staging. So, we've got a new

intergenerational project that we're going to be doing in the spring or summer next year. It's really interesting, actually – when we first launched SpaceWorks as a project, we had “Community Theatre Project” all over our website. It resulted in us getting fewer reviewers to our shows – in the web community apparently, everybody then felt that we were a community theatre, as opposed to an “Off-West End” professional theatre. So we chose to stop – because your community is your audience, and if you're not engaging with your community and enthusing them about theatre and the arts, then why are you even there? So, we had to switch our wording from “Community” to “Participatory.” Apparently, that is a big difference, but I don't really understand it. It's strange.

Grace

I had an interesting flow of thought, as I was reading the About Us section on your website – because you say: “We engage with the community.” I thought: “Oh, right, that really is at the centre of what they do.” And then I thought: “That's any theatre's mission statement” – isn't it, within a funding application, usually – or it won't appear in “front and centre” wording.

Adam Hemming

You'd hope so. I don't know enough about other venues. But you would really hope that that it's part of the responsibility of a venue in an area to engage with people who live there. We've got a crowd-funding campaign at the moment, as part of the Theatres Trust “Save Our Theatres” campaign, and have been overwhelmed by the support that's come out – the value that people have placed on The Space's existence, really. More than anything else, I think that has sort of demonstrated to me how big of an impact we've had in the local area and community.

Grace

Are there any specific groups within the community that you try to make sure you're engaging with? I don't know much about what demographics exist on the Isle of Dogs – but if you could talk a little bit about that?

Adam Hemming

We haven't done a huge amount of targeting of specific groups. This is largely down to our resources and manpower, but it is something that we're going to be discussing more and more in the future. Other than age-specific projects where we've either worked on projects for young people, adults, or for all ages, we've tried to make everything as open as possible and as inclusive as possible so that we're not excluding anybody. Everybody's welcome to come in and

join us – we have a good mix of people. We have people of mixed abilities and mixed backgrounds – our adult group has people from their early 20s, up to mid-80s. What we are going to have more focus on now is: who's not accessing what we're doing – and how we can encourage them? So, rather than doing specific projects for specific groups, the ethos is still going to be: everybody is welcome. We're going to try and bring people together as much as we can, but we want to do a bit more analysis on who's not engaging and why, and how we can encourage them to engage.

Grace

Do you have any initial thoughts about who might not be accessing those opportunities?

Adam Hemming

Yeah – there's a large Bengali population in Tower Hamlets and on the Isle of Dogs, and I think that's certainly one group that doesn't engage with the work we're doing as much as some others. Again, I think we need to do a lot more analysis of work before I've got firmer answers – but that's definitely the sort of biggest group that we're not engaging with, as much as we perhaps could or should be.

Grace

In terms of class, do you feel like you get a good representation of the local area engaging with the work?

Adam Hemming

We do, I think. As I said, certainly the participatory group is a real mixture of backgrounds and class – definitely, it's well mixed. When I was talking about the Bengali population – they do access The Space as a venue for their own events, as a venue for hire – Mehndi parties, etc. The Space is kind of well used by a whole range of different people in different ways, whether it's as an audience member, as a workshop participant, or as a customer in the bar who has The Space for their birthday parties and stuff.

Grace

It feels like it operates really well as a building. How does the participatory work impact the style and content of the creative work that you do, or that gets made?

Adam Hemming

Again, we have local members on our planning committees, and we've been doing a lot of post-show discussion stuff, trying to find as many opportunities

to bring our artists and our audience members together and break down those barriers. Quite often, we find, with young companies, or new and emerging companies, that they haven't necessarily considered their audience – they're so wrapped up and enthusiastic about the work that they're creating, that they're not really sure who their audience is. They tell us that their audience is "everybody" – which can't be the case. So, we really try and encourage them to think a bit more about who their audience is – what kind of wraparound activities and events can we do that will increase your engagement with the audience members? With the participatory group – they started doing their own productions about eight, nine years ago. We give them a budget and a director, and they work on everything else themselves. They do everything from designing the set and costumes to stage managing, and the marketing, and that sort of stuff. I think their active engagement in theatre makes them more interested in seeing some of the stuff that's coming in. But, I think, one of the best things we had during lockdown was our Space Theatre Club. The idea was just to watch the shows online and then meet on Zoom to talk about them. So we would pick a show a week, and you'd have a week to watch it – then we'd all meet on Zoom, and we would invite people from the original productions to join us to talk about the shows. We had people like Patsy Ferran, Adrian Scarborough, and Sally Cookson – incredible people available to come and talk to us about the shows. That was a really lovely mix – people who were part of that club were a really great mix of our participatory theatre club members, our regular audience members, and our new and emerging theatre-makers. Everyone was able to come together and talk about the show that they'd watched online, and then to be able to ask questions of these high level theatre-makers. It was one of my favourite things of our online programme during lockdown. It was always fascinating and interesting, and everybody felt comfortable to put their point across, even if they disagreed with other people. It was just fascinating to hear different viewpoints.

Grace

How do you see your role as a director, and what are the other essential creative and administrative roles at the theatre?

Adam Hemming

My actual job title is "Director", and I am a combination of the Artistic Director and the Executive Director – so I have overall responsibility for everything that happens in The Space. The key things that are my responsibility – on the Executive Director side – are on the fundraising and the management of the building – and on the artistic side – are on the programming and the project management side of things. My role is really to question

and explore and challenge, wherever possible. We're constantly questioning what we're doing, looking for input, support, and suggestions from other people – whether that'd be our audience members, workshop members, or our theatre-makers. We have an arts committee – we've met every month during lockdown – to really look at what we're doing programming-wise, how we can improve, and what we can do differently, or better. I'm drawing all of that in, I guess, and then paving a way forward and getting people enthusiastic and buying into what we're doing. We definitely encourage risk-taking amongst our theatre-makers, and I think that's a really important part of what I do. It's about giving people the confidence to be brave and courageous, to try different things and do different stuff. I try and offer alternative thoughts, ideas, and suggestions for things that they might do, and might not have thought about. So it's just about engaging those theatre-makers in a conversation and seeing where they feel their boundaries are – and whether we can push through them a bit. I have a Deputy Director at the moment – we've kind of played around with the job title of my number two – it's currently "Deputy Director". I just felt I needed somebody who would support me. I needed an overview of everything that was going on, and I needed somebody who was going to support me in all of those different areas – who was going to have as wide-ranging a remit as me. So, I have one full-time Deputy Director at the moment, and then a part-time Theatre Manager, who does a combination of Box Office and bookkeeping, looking after the technical side of The Space. Matthew Jameson, my Deputy Director, and I cover everything from cleaning the building to writing grant applications, to producing and directing our shows.

Grace

How has the pandemic affected you creatively and financially?

Adam Hemming

Creatively, it's been strangely inspiring. We started by just trying to move as much as we could online, but, the more we did, the more we learnt from the possibilities. An Arts Council grant enabled us to develop our Locked Down, Looking Up online programme that included new script readings, a discussion group (Space Theatre Club), six workshop courses and a duologue festival. It's opened up a new digital audience for our work and we're continuing to develop work for this format. We've had lots of positive feedback, plus four OnComm awards from OffWestEnd.com. It's led to all sorts of things for me, from speaking on the King's Head online broadcasts to being invited to the Baltic House International Festival. Financially, we have had to draw on reserves that we've spent 15 years building up. We've been very fortunate to

have such brilliant supporters making donations, and are working on income models for our unfunded online work, but the uncertainty as to when things like ticket sales, hall hires, and income from our bar will return is worrying.

Grace

How do you see the future, short term and long term, for the Space and for yourself?

Adam Hemming

Short term, we're re-opening the venue for socially distanced performances and continuing to explore online delivery. We haven't yet put a call out for shows to perform in the venue; we're working with the companies that had to be cancelled when the pandemic hit. It's going to be interesting to see how things develop – we've been encouraged by audiences wanting to come back into a theatre again, but the experience is going to be very different, just as watching an online play is. Long term, we'd love to build on the audiences we've discovered online, and continue to develop the work and how we deliver it. With our size and resources, it has always been challenging for us as a venue. This is certainly a bigger challenge than any we've faced before but we're determined to stay positive and make the most of the opportunities and time that we have.