



**QUEEN'S
UNIVERSITY
BELFAST**

“Feeling things happen”: evaluating the Playhouse Theatre and Peace-building Academy (2018–2020)

Grant, D. (2024). “Feeling things happen”: evaluating the Playhouse Theatre and Peace-building Academy (2018–2020). *Cultural Trends*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09548963.2024.2365714>

Published in:
Cultural Trends

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

Publisher rights
Copyright 2024 The Authors.

This is an open access article published under a Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the author and source are cited.

General rights
Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Queen's University Belfast Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy
The Research Portal is Queen's institutional repository that provides access to Queen's research output. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact openaccess@qub.ac.uk.

Open Access
This research has been made openly available by Queen's academics and its Open Research team. We would love to hear how access to this research benefits you. – Share your feedback with us: <http://go.qub.ac.uk/oa-feedback>

“Feeling things happen”: Evaluating the Playhouse Theatre and Peace-building Academy (2018–2020)

David Grant

To cite this article: David Grant (14 Jun 2024): “Feeling things happen”: Evaluating the Playhouse Theatre and Peace-building Academy (2018–2020), Cultural Trends, DOI: [10.1080/09548963.2024.2365714](https://doi.org/10.1080/09548963.2024.2365714)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09548963.2024.2365714>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 14 Jun 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 34



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

“Feeling things happen”: Evaluating the Playhouse Theatre and Peace-building Academy (2018–2020)

David Grant

Queen’s University, Belfast, UK

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the tension often experienced in “Arts for Peace” programmes between the desire meaningfully to evaluate a creative process and the need to account to funders for the delivery of pre-determined expected outcomes that makes no allowance for discoveries made as the project unfolds. Taking the EU-funded Theatre and Peace-building Academy programme (2018–2020) as its case-study, it reflects on the efficacy of the arts to engage with a wide range of people at a deep level, helping them to challenge their assumptions and presuppositions and to begin to see things in new ways and from opposing perspectives. In particular, it invites a re-examination of some of the assumptions that typically frame peacebuilding activities.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 21 February 2023
Accepted 4 June 2024

KEYWORDS

evaluation; arts for peace; reconciliation; Northern Ireland; peace process; applied drama

“Evaluation” can be a loaded word. Too often what passes for evaluation (an honest assessment of strengths and weaknesses) turns out, in practice, to be about accountability, reflecting a preoccupation with showing to funders that targets have been achieved. While demonstrating value-for-money is important, it can inhibit effective review. In his radical acting manual, *The Actor and the Target*, the theatre director, Declan Donnellan, identifies a series of “uncomfortable choices” for the actor (2002, pp. 28–30). By this he means concepts which appear compatible and even complementary, but which in practice are contradictory and cancel each other out. One resonant example is that between Independence and Freedom: we think we can have both, but by selecting one we make the other impossible. As a Co-investigator on the AHRC research project into the effectiveness of “Arts for Peace”, I came to see how accountability and evaluation can also be seen as contradictory concepts. Our wide-ranging review of the so-called evaluation methods used by funders of “Arts for Peace” projects has served to confirm that the prevalence of tick-box forms does nothing to serve the development and improvement of this work. Because they are seen primarily as an auditing mechanism, recipients feel an inevitable pressure to seek to demonstrate that they have exactly fulfilled the requirements of the grant. There is rarely any incentive or opportunity for funders and grantees to learn

CONTACT David Grant  d.grant@qub.ac.uk  Queen’s University, Belfast BT7 1NN, UK

This article is dedicated to the memory of Jo Egan (1960–2022) whose death has greatly diminished the Arts for Peace community in Ireland and beyond.

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

from their own practice and our research has indicated that the vast amount of data generated by these exercises remains unanalysed. It must be questionable, in any case, whether the resources required to process it would be justified by the quality of the data received, filtered as it is by ulterior motives. A move towards an emphasis on genuine evaluation would allow project teams to acknowledge and reflect on problems and unexpected outcomes arising from their work.

This case study is based on the evaluation undertaken by my colleague Victoria Durrer and myself of the Theatre & Peacebuilding Academy, an initiative of the Northwest Play Resource Centre (“The Playhouse”) in Derry that ran between 2018 and 2020, which was funded by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB, 2023a).¹ Alongside many positive outcomes, we were able to identify through our research, we have also been able to address the many challenges and difficulties experienced during the delivery of the programme. Addressing these as they have arisen has allowed the work to be enhanced and developed as it progressed. Some of these challenges could not have been anticipated and it is salutary to reflect on the fact that advance planning for crisis management was couched in terms of limiting reputational damage; no-one foresaw a situation such as that imposed by Covid pandemic regulations, in which it would become impossible to deliver the public performances that were at the heart of the project plan. But even in the scramble to salvage the programme in the face of the then prevailing Covid restrictions, there was deep learning to be found.

The Theatre & Peacebuilding Academy was originally conceived by the Playhouse’s founding director, Pauline Ross, as a way of building on the legacy of the Theatre of Witness,

a form of testimonial theatre in which those who have gone through significant life experiences share their true stories onstage [...] Its purpose is to create a form for audiences to bear witness to issues of suffering, transformation and peace (Sepinuck, 2023, p. 12).

The Theatre of Witness director, Teya Sepinuck, had been keen to train others in her approach to using the arts for peacebuilding and had previously mentored two emerging artists as they directed their own Theatre of Witness productions (Sepinuck, 2013). At a late stage in the application process for funding, however, it became clear that she would be unable to make a commitment to an extended training programme. At short notice, the Playhouse therefore reshaped the programme as a series of four residencies, each led by a different “National/International artist” who in addition to leading a major project of their own would also support several subsidiary projects with “Local Artists” who would benefit from access to their expertise. It was expected that the major projects would reflect the Theatre of Witness model, but the involvement of such a diverse range of artists meant that inevitably many aspects of the project would be less predictable than if Sepinuck had continued to be involved.

In accordance with the published requirements of SEUPB (2023b), the Academy’s aims were to use theatre as a tool to explore truth recovery, peace building and community relations issues in a safe, accessible environment, facilitating significant cross-community interaction amongst participants from diverse backgrounds. As specified by SEUPB, it sought to target those people and communities most affected by the conflict, including representatives from interface and segregated areas, historical atrocities, victims and survivors and public sector workers who were significantly affected. Over a two-and-a-half-

year period there would be four major performance projects in Northern Ireland and border counties of the Republic of Ireland, each lasting for approximately six months and eight ancillary arts projects facilitated by the “Local Artists”. Two principal artists were appointed in the first phase of the programme: Jo Egan who developed and directed *The Crack in Everything* which was performed at the Playhouse in Derry and the Brian Friel Theatre at Queen’s University, Belfast in November and December 2018; and Robert Rae who developed and directed *Blood Red Lines* which was performed in Newry Town Hall, the Brian Friel Theatre and An Táin in Dundalk in February and March 2019. The principal artists for the second phase of the programme were Ailin Conant² who developed and directed *First Response* which was performed at The Playhouse and the Riverside Theatre, Coleraine in February and March 2020; and Damian Gorman who developed and wrote *Anything Can Happen*, directed by Kieran Griffiths. Because of the pandemic shutdown, performances of this final production were postponed until September 2020 and were broadcast live through the Playhouse’s social media channels.

The twelve “Local” artists represented a wide range of artforms. In December 2018, Eileen McClory’s community dance performance, *Turf*, was performed in Cultúrlann Uí Chanáin with poetry by Maria McManus; and Conan McIvor’s short film, *Forgive Me Not* was premiered at the Playhouse. Laurence McKeown’s multi-media production, *In the Shadow of Gullion*, which incorporated Irish traditional music and dance and film inserts by Declan Keeney was performed at Tí Chulainn, South Armagh and the Duncairn Arts Centre, Belfast in April 2019. Emer Kenny’s album, *Ghosts*, which comprised music inspired by first-hand accounts of specific events and tragedies connected to the conflict in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties, was launched at The Spirit Store, Dundalk in November 2019. *Questions of Legacy, Podcast Conversations from Survivors of the Troubles*, featuring the WAVE Injured Group and collated and edited by Pamela Mary Brown were first presented in the form of an installation at the Playhouse in February 2020, and have been made available online. Keeney’s virtual reality (VR) film, *Frictionless*, which explores stories from the borderlands of Ireland and Joe Campbell’s graphic novel, *Peacemakers*, were launched during the project’s closing online conference in September 2020. Finally, Anne Crilly directed *Beyond the Barricades* by Micheal Kerrigan, which was adapted as a live online performance. The multi-disciplinary nature of the “Local Artists” element to the programme was to prove particularly rewarding.

Context and methods

In the wake of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) in 1998, the EU made a significant commitment to funding peace initiatives across the island of Ireland. As each successive programme has been launched (Peace I, Peace II, Peace III, and Peace IV), there has been an increasing emphasis on cross-border activities. Funded programmes have targeted a wide range of communities and taken many forms and to begin with, arts programmes were strongly represented. These demonstrated the indirect ways that arts projects can promote dialogue, often side-stepping the risk of confrontation that more explicit engagement with difference can lead to. With each iteration, however, the criteria have tightened, setting ever more stringent requirements for explicit peace goals. The onerous administrative demands of managing these projects have also deterred most independent arts organisations from applying directly to SEUPB. By Peace IV, most arts

projects were funded from block SEUPB grants to local authorities that had the human resources and flexibility of cash-flow to insulate arts organisations from direct exposure to an intensive monitoring regime. The Playhouse was one of the few independent arts organisations under Peace IV to deal directly with SEUPB, and it had learnt from the experience of managing the SEUPB-funded Theatre of Witness programme about the need to employ a dedicated part-time administrator whose job was exclusively to manage the comprehensive online reporting tool in which regular bulletins needed to be uploaded in relation to a pre-determined set of milestones.

While the need to account for EU money was understandable, Durrer and I were determined to ensure that our evaluation process should not overlap or duplicate this detailed accountability mechanism. When called upon to design an evaluative framework for the Theatre & Peacebuilding Academy, we were encouraged from the outset by SEUPB, to take a genuinely evaluative approach to our work. This allowed us to prioritise what was being learnt from this innovative programme and how this was being learned; what was going well, what was going less well, what practices would be retained in a future similar project and what would be amended. This allowed all the stakeholders to engage in the evaluation process with openness and honesty to provide rich qualitative data from a multiplicity of perspectives. In seeking to understand the depth of engagement both between participants and between them and audience, we were mindful of Martin Buber's three types of dialogue. He distinguishes between "technical dialogue" – a pragmatic exchange of information, "monologue as dialogue" where there can be shared awareness but no fundamental change, and "genuine dialogue" in which "each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them" (Buber, 2002, p. 22). This seemed a good metric to apply to the work of the Academy.

It is arguable that evaluation is intrinsically associated with the qualitative, whereas accountability tends to prioritise a quantitative approach. The choice of qualitative methods was mainly dictated, however, by the relatively small cohort involved in the creative work of the programme. The use of "Wordclouds" as a tool to analyse the more abundant audience questionnaire data, on the other hand, has introduced a quantitative dimension to the research – one that allows for a minimum of mediation and that gives equal attention to less prominent voices. As evaluators, we initially considered an arts-based approach to data collection (using drama and storytelling, for instance, as a research method) as advocated by Barone and Eisner (2012). Since available resources did not allow for this, we sought instead to work in close alignment with the working methods of each of the four main projects, drawing where possible on each key practitioner's own approach to the work and engaging with as many of the participants as possible. Since most of the projects had a clear ethnographic dimension and involved extensive interviews with participants, this aligned well with our aim to gather and analyse a representative range of qualitative data to allow us to assess the effectiveness of the Theatre and Peacebuilding Academy both as a means of direct and indirect peacebuilding. In addition to observation of rehearsals and performances, focus groups and interviews with participants, we devised an audience questionnaire intended to prompt a wide range of responses to the affective impact of the performances. Open-ended questions encouraged respondents to express what they had seen, heard, felt, thought, and

learned from what they had witnessed on stage, rather than to address specific issues and attitudes relating to the plays' themes. This was to avoid respondents being led towards pre-determined expected outcomes. This worked well in practice, with only one negative response from among the hundreds collected about the nature of the questionnaire itself.

For the twelve projects led by the "Local" artists, we began by encouraging them to engage in diary writing. Influenced by Jess Dart and Rick Davies' *Most Significant Change* theory, diaries were designed to capture each artist's own learning objectives (2003, pp. 137-155). For various reasons, the artists did not respond to this method of data collection. Some found the format unengaging or cumbersome, while others cited workload. Focus groups proved a more fruitful means for engaging artists in a reflective dialogue with one another. We also interviewed the Project Coordinators throughout the duration of the project and facilitated an interim evaluation meeting to reflect on what had been learnt up to that point. This allowed feedback on the first phase of the project to be acted upon during the second phase.

The Crack in Everything

The first project to be performed, *The Crack in Everything*, told the poignant stories of six children killed during the Northern Ireland Troubles. It was written and directed by Jo Egan, a professionally produced playwright, trained oral archivist and facilitator. Early interviews with Egan evidenced the meticulous care and sensitivity with which a cross-section of subjects was identified, reflecting not just a balance of Protestant and Catholic experience but also a cross-border Donegal Protestant experience. The stories also addressed a wide timespan from the early 1970s to the mid-1980s. We were able to observe several stages in this process, including initial script readings with three of the families, rehearsals and performances in both Derry and Belfast. Post-performance interviews with audience members and audience questionnaires were also used to gather data and served to evidence the wide range of motivations that led the participating families to become involved. These included renewed recognition of a neglected story and raising the profile of an existing case that was still being pursued. Jo Egan, in our interviews with her, highlighted the vital role played by the organisations representing victims and survivors that enabled her to identify and contact family members of the children who had been killed, but also the importance of her being able to follow up with participants independently once contact had been made. The way in which these family histories had influenced younger family members in their own artistic careers was also evident, especially in those actors who participated in the initial script readings for the families, many of whom had direct connections to traumatic events. The project therefore contributed to the understanding of gate-keeping and inter-generational memory that have emerged as strong themes in the Theatre & Peacebuilding Academy's work. Another issue that arose was the need to balance the participants' sense of ownership over their stories with the viewpoints of others represented in the stories, and the compromises that are sometimes necessary. Egan's frank account of the emotional demands made on the lead artist in this kind of project also provided a crucial learning outcome from the project.

Audience feedback was consistently positive – though many audience members also reported the deep affect the performance had on them. Especially memorable was the

reaction of the uncle of Kathryn Eakin, one of the young victims whose story was told during the performance, who in one of the post-show discussions in Belfast spoke about his experience as a doctor at Altnagevlin Hospital, when he unexpectedly discovered his niece's body in the hospital morgue. His daughter who was with him that evening informed us that he had not spoken publicly of this before, and we were able to refer him to one of the counsellors in attendance that evening to support audience members. This episode is emblematic of "the ripple effect" regularly observed throughout the Theatre & Peacebuilding Academy programme, where stories told on stage prompt other stories within the wider family and audience circles. A drama workshop with members of Brassneck Youth Theatre six months after they had seen the performance evidenced the longer-term impact of the experience on them. This seemed to be influenced by the heightened empathy they felt with the stories of young people close to their own age.

Blood Red Lines

The second of the larger-scale projects was written and directed by Robert Rae, a theatre and film director, writer and producer based in Scotland. More ambitious in scale than *The Crack in Everything*, *Blood Red Lines* involved eleven stories that brought together performers with traumatic memories of events during the Troubles from north and south of the Irish border. The evaluation team interviewed Robert Rae before, during and after the project period and attended a mid-point rehearsal and performances in Newry, Dundalk and Belfast where interviews were conducted with all but one of the participants. Audience questionnaires were distributed and collected at all venues, but the longer running time of *Blood Red Lines* precluded the use of foyer interviews. Some audience members, however, took up the opportunity which was offered to post or email more considered responses. One of the performers, Lee Lavis, a former British soldier, also provided questionnaires completed by two members of the Loyalist community which were very positive in their responses to the performance. Because of concerns expressed about the inclusiveness of the participant selection process, interviews were also conducted with the project partners – The Playhouse, the Holywell Trust and Thomas D'Arcy McGee Trust.

Interviews with Robert Rae highlighted the exceptional demands placed on the lead artists in this kind of project, including the process of first conducting extended interviews (of up to two hours) with each participant he selected and then repeatedly revisiting recordings of their traumatic stories. Interviews with participants consistently referred to how much each felt they had benefitted from the opportunity to share their stories in this way, with many references to the sense of being part of a creative family that had emerged through being part of the project. Many participants also commented on how much the project had meant to their own families, in many cases allowing difficult stories to be shared in detail for the first time. A distinctive aspect of this project was the inclusion of stories from across the border in Monaghan and Dublin and the involvement of victim and survivor support agencies there. This was in addition to support from the Pat Finucane Centre which already enjoyed a close working relationship with the Theatre & Peacebuilding Academy, through Jo Egan's project. Alan Brecknell, who works for the Pat Finucane Centre and is used to talking about his father's death to

journalists, spoke to us of the cathartic nature of being involved in this production which gave him the opportunity to understand his father's full life history. It also deepened his friendship with and understanding of fellow cast members with whom he previously enjoyed a purely professional relationship. He doubted that this depth of engagement would have been possible had his story been told for him by a professional actor. He was also very aware of the need to interact sensitively with potential participants whose stories were not included in the production. Concern was expressed by Project Partners, however, at the under-representation of PUL (Protestant, Unionist, Loyalist) voices, and the challenges of supporting those whose stories did not feature in the production, some of whom reported feeling their stories had been invalidated by not being included. Nevertheless, the commitment of the participants and their readiness to move out of their comfort-zone in workshop activities was clear in the rehearsals we observed, as was the careful process of consultation that Rae engaged in with each participant.

First Response

One outcome of the interim evaluation of Phase One of the project was for the Project Partners to set clearer thematic guidelines for the remaining two major projects, which were to address the experience of first responders and the year, 1972. Ailin Conant, a Japanese-American director with a reputation for creating theatre that engages audiences in a visual, visceral way was appointed to create a performance on the former theme and participants were identified with backgrounds in nursing, the fire service and journalism. The group also included two police officers who, as was generally acknowledged in the focus group meeting for all the participants held after the first performance, had a different experience from the other participants because – as one of the other focus group members put it – “they couldn't feel safe when they returned home at the end of the working day”. The group also referred to the heightened sensitivities around first meetings when police were involved. The police participants indicated that they would have preferred advance notice of who would be in the room. The other participants, for their part, would have preferred knowing in advance that police officers would be involved. In the event, all participants agreed that through the process a great sense of mutual trust had been developed, to the extent that they felt able to air their earlier concerns in the focus group meetings. It was agreed, however, that for future projects clearer rules of engagement around advance disclosure of participants would be welcomed. None of the group indicated that this would have inhibited them from engaging in the project.

In periodic interviews with Conant, she spoke about the challenge of what she described as a tacit set of assumptions about how her project should develop. This, she said, had not been made clear prior to her appointment and required her to significantly adapt her working methods. She was used to a devised process, but there was pressure from the Playhouse for her to move quickly towards a fixed script and an assumption that the performance would consist of a number of discrete stories, whereas she wanted to achieve an integrated narrative structure. But she came to see how the resolution of these apparent tensions ended up serving the process. Her Lecoq (2020) training inclined her towards a physical theatre method in which allusive imagery could stand for more explicit facts. It soon became clear to her, however, that

the participants were more comfortable with more traditional storytelling, so she brought students from Ulster University into the process with the intention of providing a physical complement to the verbal narrative. But as one of the core participants put it, what began with the idea of using the students as a sounding board for the historic stories being told became a deeply meaningful dialogue, so that the students' questioning of what they were seeing related on stage seemed neither naïve nor belligerent, but a means of allowing the witnesses to re-evaluate their stories from the fresh perspective of the younger generation. It was, in the end, this intergenerational dialogue that was identified by both the younger and older participants, and in audience questionnaires and post-show discussions, as among the most meaningful outcomes of the production. Alongside an acknowledgement of the absence of mental health support for first responders during the Troubles, and the value they found in unpacking the boxes that comprised the stage set as a symbol of their unshared stories, the need to value equally the problems faced by the younger generation was also acknowledged. One memorable moment in the first post-show discussion was when the final question came from the mother of an autistic child to one of the student cast who had spoken in the performance of his own experience of autism. A strong recommendation in the cast discussion was that a future Playhouse project could address the pressures faced by young people today.

The audience response reflected the intense emotions underpinning the storytelling and also picked up on the telling symbolism of the boxes in the set. As with other Theatre & Peacebuilding Academy performances, a strong empathetic connection between audiences and participants was evident, with a few acknowledging their lack of engagement. But the inter-generational theme emerged strongly in audience feedback. There were many one-word responses including stories, drama, trauma, truth, sorrow, love, hope, respect, togetherness, grief, sadness, happiness, humanity, honesty, pain, forgiveness, compassion, bravery, courage, inspiration, regrets, emotion, integrity, vulnerability, authenticity, remorse, dialogue, fear, care, understanding and connection.

Anything Can Happen

Damian Gorman, the principal artist engaged for the final of the larger projects has written extensively for television, radio and the stage. He was also the founding director of *An Crann/The Tree* in the 1990s, a project which worked to help people tell, and hear, the stories of the Troubles (Wilson and Gorman, 2010, pp.193-207). Planned for production in March 2020, the unavoidable postponement of the performances until September due to the Covid crisis and the move to an online performance format inevitably changed the nature of this project. Nevertheless, the production was successfully mounted online and accessed on multiple social media platforms including YouTube and Facebook both on the nights of performance and as an archive recording.

Being asked to create a performance about the year 1972, presented obvious challenges for Gorman as the lead artist, as many key witnesses would now be of advanced age. He adopted a broad approach to the theme, however, which as a pivotal date in the history of the Troubles, cast a long shadow. In our first interview in December 2019, Gorman was clear about the importance of looking after both the participants and the audiences and not shifting the weight of their stories from one to the other. He was also aware of the challenge of finding suitable participants who had not already been

involved in a similar process before. Because of his long association with peacebuilding in Northern Ireland, Gorman had a wide network of contacts to draw on, as well as potential participants referred by the Project Partners and other organisations. Given his stronger links with the Catholic Community, he spent more time in the preparatory period making connections with the Protestant community, although he was also concerned about accessing people who were not members of existing groups. To this end he offered writing workshops, finding one of his project participants this way. He also advertised two open meetings in the Playhouse which attracted a much larger response than he had anticipated. But he was nonetheless anxious about the potential need to reject some of those who had expressed interest for fear of seeming to invalidate their stories.

Like Conant, Gorman understood the need to create a narrative structure to link the selected stories together. He therefore introduced the idea of the Caretaker, a narrator who would help link the individual stories, as well as fulfilling a caretaking role for the audience by lightening the mood of the performance. This caretaker oversaw the space where the storytellers were preparing their performances and through the ingenious device of having him pick up seemingly discarded drafts of unused stories and reading them aloud, this character was also able to give a voice to some of those whom Gorman had spoken to but who had chosen not to commit to a full performance role. The caretaker's speech impediment underlined the fact that he spoke for those who were uneasy about speaking for themselves – but he also represented those who preferred not to have their stories told at all. The core participants each had twelve minutes to explain the impact of 1972 on their lives and their subsequent history. The performance itself took place on a meticulously detailed set designed by Ciaran Bagnall to evoke memories of the 1970s, and included a large screen for the projection of video imagery prepared by Conan McIvor. Richard Moore, who as a child was blinded by a plastic bullet, preferred not to perform live each evening and chose to have his contribution pre-recorded and projected on the screen. But he made a surprise appearance at the end of every performance playing the guitar to accompany the song by the project's Local Artists coordinator, Liam Campbell, which provided the production with a stirring finale.

Interviews with three of the participants conducted during the run of performances confirmed the sense in which they felt safeguarded by the production team, especially in the face of understandable first-night nerves. There was a clear desire to perform the piece afresh each night rather than rely on a pre-recorded version, maintaining the sense of liveness in each performance. Victor, who had become involved because he knew people from the Protestant community were more reluctant to engage in this kind of work, spoke of his family's positive reaction on hearing his story in a way they had not done before. Susan also spoke of the importance of the support of her son and her siblings, one of whom watched the performance from Australia. It was because of her that Susan had wanted the seats of the auditorium to be filled with the memories of the bereaved. For her, the performance was about a continuing search for accountability for her brother's death. According to Siobhan, she got involved by accident. She was one of Gorman's writing group. She found the project a gently paced and nurturing process. Gorman wanted it to be her words, not his words. Tom had known Gorman for a long time, having been involved in documentaries about the Bogside for *An Crann*, commenting that he appreciated this opportunity to say something

about how the Bogside murals are ultimately images of hope; he was also positive about how the project might lead to a longer association with the Playhouse as custodians of the Bogside murals.

The local artists

The experience of the so-called Local Artists evolved throughout the programme. To begin with, the relationship between lead and local artist was not always clearly enough defined and there was significant variability in the way the process of mentorship operated. Interviews with Local Artists in Phase Two, however, indicated that much was learnt from the first phase of the Academy. In particular, the boundaries between the work of International/National Artists and the Local Artists became much more clearly delineated and less hierarchically applied. As the project progressed, there were many examples of cross-fertilisation. For example, Laurence McKeown participated as a subject in Joe Campbell's graphic novel, *Peacemakers*, and Declan Keeney contributed as a filmmaker to Laurence McKeown's multi-media performance. Ailin Conant noted how she drew on some of Brown's workshop techniques in the development stages of *First Response*. A more flexible approach was taken to mentoring, with Kieran Griffiths, the director of *Anything Can Happen* also becoming involved. The role of Liam Campbell as the Local Artists' Coordinator also became more focussed on mentoring and all the Phase Two artists emphasised his unfailing encouragement and support, particularly when plans had to be adapted to the demands of Covid restrictions. As the Theatre & Peacebuilding Academy developed into its second phase, the somewhat arbitrary distinction between local and international/national artists became increasingly blurred. What emerged was a sense of a mature community of artists with the common purpose of applying their artistry for the purposes of peacebuilding. The diverse range of artistic disciplines added to this sense of extended learning and an increasing focus on the peer learning opportunities provided by the Academy was evident in the discussion between some of the artists in the programme's closing conference. These developments reflected well on the Playhouse Team's readiness to apply the learning achieved in the early stages of the programme.

What was originally conceived of as a legacy programme for the Theatre of Witness evolved into a more broadly-based concept of a Theatre & Peacebuilding Academy, through which a community of artists, both professional and community-based enjoyed a rich learning experience with positive benefits for all concerned, regardless of their level of prior experience. The ability of the programme to adapt as it progressed and to learn from its own practice has been central to that successful outcome, not least when faced with the challenges of the Covid emergency.

Ursula McHugh, the counsellor for the second phase of the programme, explained her own practice to us in terms of beginnings, middles and ends and the Theatre & Peacebuilding Academy has highlighted the importance of supporting the artists who lead and facilitate arts-based peace projects at all stages of the process, not only at the research stage where they will often repeatedly revisit traumatic testimony, but also after the conclusion of a project. The involvement of student performers in *First Response*, on the other hand, had the unexpected effect of throwing emphasis on the changing audience for arts-based peace building as we move further into the Peace Process and

an increasing proportion of the population have no direct lived experience of the conflict. Participants in the *Questions of Legacy* podcasts, for instance, cited a concern for their stories to be available to younger generations as a key motivator.³ There is a clear connection between the need to reach younger audiences and the widening range of media with which the Academy engaged.

A key area of innovation has been in the exploration of the potential for different artistic approaches to facilitating community dialogue. This has had added significance during the Covid crisis, with Pamela Brown's use of podcasting and Joe Campbell's graphic novel proving particularly resilient in the face of the then current restrictions because they can be shared online. Film has also featured, not just in the self-contained work of Keeney and Mclvor, but also in how both collaborated with other participating artists. Mclvor created a vivid record of Eileen McClory's community dance work *Turf*, while Keeney contributed some expressive film content to McKeown's multi-media performance. Anne Crilly's production, for its part, illustrated the extent to which online performance emerged during the Covid crisis as a new and distinct form.

The Theatre & Peacebuilding Academy also tested the boundaries of the Theatre of Witness model in a number of important ways: through the integration of witness-performers and professional actors in *The Crack in Everything*; through the interwoven chronological storytelling and use of Tommy Sands' songs in *Blood Red Lines*; through the physical stage imagery and the symbolic use of the boxes in *First Response*; and through Damian Gorman's linking narrative in *Anything Can Happen* which allowed those who chose not tell their stories in person to be included. Each of the four major productions also broke new ground in how the choice of participants influenced the themes explored. An intergenerational approach was evident in how some of the performers in *The Crack in Everything* were the younger relatives of those involved in the stories being told, *Blood Red Lines* introduced an important cross-border dimension with some of the stories relating to stories from the 1974 Monaghan and Dublin bombings (which resulted in 34 deaths, and over 300 casualties), and the involvement of student performers in *First Response* profoundly influenced the development of the script.

It seems appropriate when evaluating an Academy to express this in terms of learning outcomes. These include the careful balancing act required when combining community and professional artists within the same process and the negotiation required between the artists' perspective and the guiding ethos of the programme and the need to adapt to each artist's vision and distinctive methods. The specialist counselling and support needs required for this kind of work were also evident, including support for artists whose professional training can often be imagined to insulate them from repeated exposure to the traumatic memories of others. But it was also clear, as was the case with *First Response*, that the creative process can become the mediator of internal group tensions. The value of what might have seemed like ancillary activities like writing workshops also became clear, with "drop-in" sessions for *Anything Can Happen* leading to an expansion of the range of stories told. The extended reach of the online format necessitated by pandemic restrictions and the use of artefacts to evoke the "sunlit absence" of loved ones on the theatre's empty chairs demonstrated the resilience of the creative imagination.

Common themes emerging from interviews with the project participants included the importance they attached to the opportunity to express their stories and have them

recognised. Also of value was the ripple effect of untold stories being brought to the stage, which has worked to the benefit of wider family and community circles. Participants also consistently described the process of being involved in the performances as therapeutic and cathartic, with many examples of their involvement in performances opening conversations that have been suppressed, sometimes for decades. The lived experience of the programme also served to challenge the distinction set out in the original funding application between “International” and “Local” artists. While this was based on a legitimate concern to bring the highest level of external expertise within the reach of local practitioners, as it turned out, two of the four major projects were led by artists (Jo Egan and Damian Gorman) deeply connected with the local experience, and feedback from across the whole range of participating artists highlighted the importance of peer dialogue and shared expertise, rather than top-down mentorship. This was then complemented by the outside eye and fresh perspective of the other visiting artists, Ailin Conant and Robert Rae.

As for the audiences, themes that recurred consistently included the importance they attach to the recovery of unknown or forgotten stories, including an increased awareness of injustices and cover-ups; the desire for the work to be seen more widely and by others including politicians, perpetrators, and young people; the raw emotion and power of personal stories from “everyday” people, and a sense of empathy, which often evoked connections to audience members’ own stories: there was wide acceptance of the positive role of the arts in peacebuilding. The category of words most frequently used were those relating to truth, honesty, authenticity, and realism. Next came pain and hurt, which if taken alongside sorrow and loss becomes the largest category. Positive categories such as resilience, strength, courage, love, empathy, family and friendship also occur frequently. Comments like “Personal stories are stronger than statistics” and “ordinary folk making stories come to life” resonated in this context.

The “wordclouds” shown in [Figure 1](#), are based on the frequency with which individual words recurred in audience feedback in relation to the first three major productions. The final composite image is based in words that occur in the feedback more than once. The fact that the word most used in feedback about all the projects is STORY underlines the central role of narrative in these kinds of testimonial theatre events. Unsurprisingly, PEOPLE is also consistently prominent since stories depend on transmission from teller to hearer. But the other most common words provide a helpful visual summary of the nuanced differences between the first three productions. The word NEED stands out in the response to *The Crack in Everything*, underlining how strongly families were motivated to have the deaths of their lost loved ones recognised. The word FELT looms large in response to *Blood Red Lines*, drawing attention to that production’s exceptional affective power, whereas the word HOPE features prominently in the *First Response* image, capturing the inherent optimism of that performance, with its intergenerational energy. One audience comment about *Blood Red Lines* – “There is no hierarchy of victims” – stands in striking contrast another about *The Crack in Everything* – “There IS a hierarchy of victims” – highlighting the heightened impact of the children’s stories. Taken together, these responses, even those less positive in tone, capture the mood of empathy and engagement typical of the relationship audiences enjoy with arts-based peace interventions.

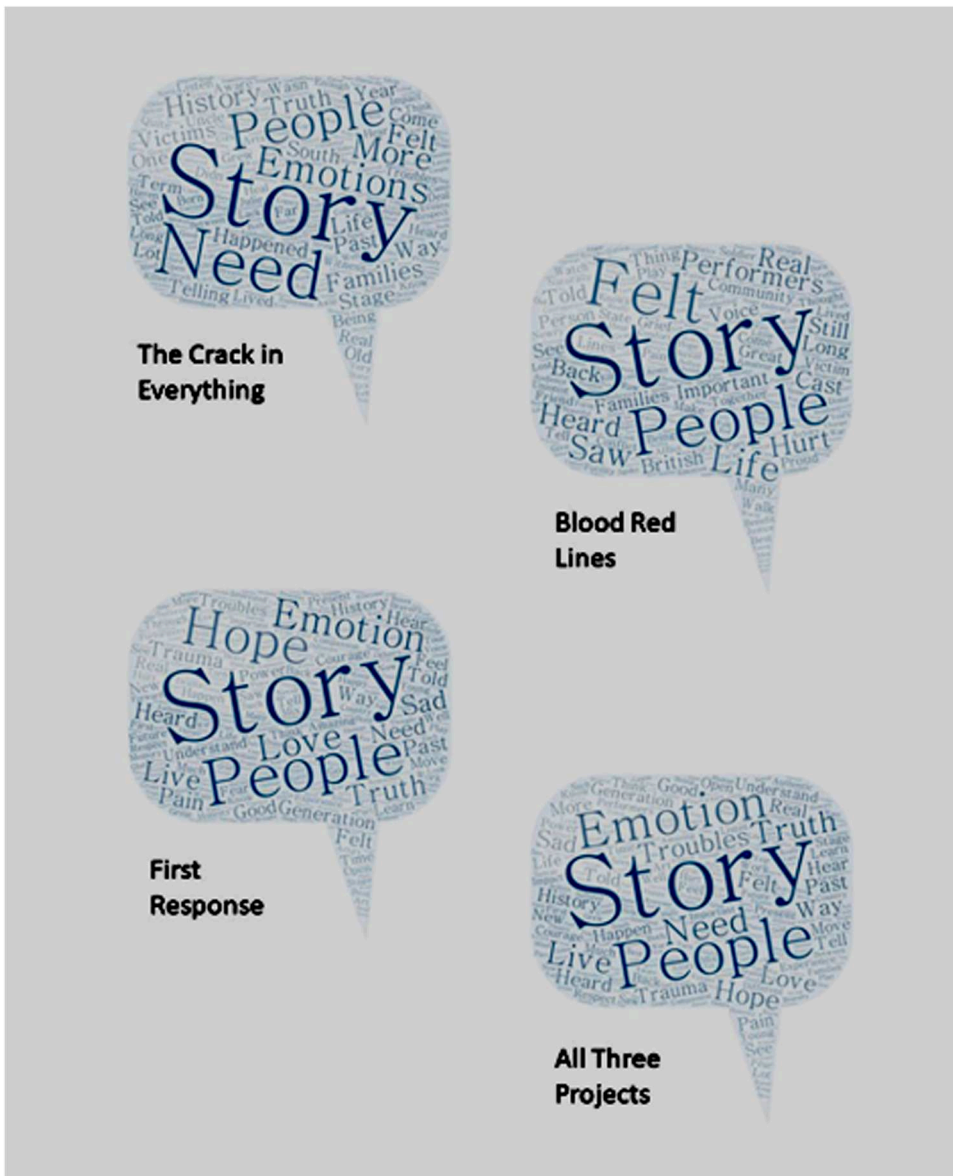


Figure 1. Wordclouds illustrating the frequency of word use in audience questionnaires.

Conclusion

Overall, the evaluation demonstrated the efficacy of the arts to engage with a wide range of people at the deepest level, helping them to challenge their assumptions and presuppositions and to begin to see things in new ways and from opposing perspectives. In particular, it invited a re-examination of some of the assumptions that typically frame peacebuilding activities. The identities explored through the twelve Academy projects are defined as much by geography and gender as by the more familiar categories of Protestant and Catholic, Unionist and nationalist, prompting us to analyse the reach of the Theatre & Peacebuilding in terms of *diversities*, rather than diversity.

Perhaps the single greatest learning outcome of the Theatre & Peacebuilding Academy has been the discovery of the growing need to address arts-based peacebuilding to a younger generation of audiences who have less direct experience of the conflict. This was evident in the way that Jo Egan was able to identify artists whose own practice has been informed by traumatic events in their family's past and performers – in both *The Crack in Everything*, and *Anything Can Happen* – who stepped forward to speak for earlier generations. It was evident too in how John Reavey, a young film-maker, became inspired to make his own film on a similar theme after hearing his father tell the story of his family's tragic past in *Blood Red Lines*. But it was most vividly evoked in the dialogue that emerged unexpectedly between the performers in *First Response* and the Ulster University students with whom they shared the stage. It cannot be a coincidence that Ailin Conant herself is from a younger generation of artists to whom responsibility for leading the next stage of development of this important work is now being passed.

The most important thing about the evaluation process, however, was how it was able to influence the operation and development of the Peace Academy during the programme itself. Crucially, a mid-project review allowed project coordinator Elaine Forde and the team of organisers to address issues raised by Project Partners in relation to clarity of role, selection of themes and participants, and the delicate ecology of victim-survivor support groups (gate-keepers), which were addressed in the second phase by involving them more directly in the selection of participants and themes. As Crossick and Kaszynska have observed in their influential Cultural Value report:

Formative and participatory evaluation [...] has been less well developed, primarily because they are rarely required by funders, who are seen as the principal drivers of evaluation. Nor has the cultural sector itself generally grasped the potential of wider approaches to evaluation (2016, 128).

The evaluation process for the Playhouse Theatre & Peace-building Academy provides an unusual example of an evaluative process which actively encouraged all the project stakeholders to acknowledge difficulties and challenges and to work together to ensure that important learning outcomes were applied to the second phase of the programme.

Notes

1. The original SEUPB Project Summary read as follows:

The NW Play Resource Centre (NWPRC) has been awarded €859,069.50 under the PEACE IV Programme for the 'Theatre Peace Building Academy'. The ambitious project will use theatre as a tool to explore community relations issues in a safe and accessible environment. People and communities most affected by the conflict will be the main beneficiaries. The project will recruit eight local artists and a range of internationally based artists with significant experience of utilising arts activity in areas of conflict and social breakdown. An estimated 76 cross-community participants will be reached delivering approximately 2,200 h of collaborative working time (SEUPB, 2023a).

2. Ailin Conant attended the Jacques Lecoq School in Paris which specialised in clowning and physical theatre. For discussion of these techniques, see Lecoq (2020).
3. Pamela Brown also collated and edited the interviews for broadcast as *Questions of Legacy: Interview Transcripts From Survivors of the Troubles* (Derry: Playhouse, 2020): <https://youtu.be/Y7Lli2h5y94?si=o1Er7zO55h1DtJRU>, accessed 24 April, 2023.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

References

- Barone, T., & Eisner, E. W. (2012). *Arts based research*. Sage.
- Buber, M. (2002). *Between man and man* (trans. R. Gregor-Smith). Routledge.
- Crossick, G., & Kaszynska, P. (2016). *Understanding the value of arts & culture*. AHRC.
- Dart, J., & Davies, R. (2003). A dialogical, story-based evaluation tool: The most significant change technique. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 24(2), 137–155. <https://doi.org/10.1177/109821400302400202>
- Donnellan, D. (2002). *The actor and the target*. Routledge.
- Lecoq, J. (2020). *The moving body (Le corps poétique): teaching creative theatre* (trans. D. Bardby, Methuen) (3rd ed.). Bloomsbury.
- Sepinuck, T. (2013). *Theatre of witness: Finding the medicine in stories of suffering, transformation, and peace*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Sepinuck, T. (2023). *We are the ripple effect: Theatre of witness in northern Ireland*. Playhouse.
- SEUPB. (2023b). "Peace IV: What Was Funded: <https://www.seupb.eu/current-programmes/peace-iv/what-was-funded>
- Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB). (2023a). "Peace IV: Current Programmes: Overview": <https://www.seupb.eu/current-programmes/peace-iv/overview>
- Wilson, C. and Gorman, D. (2010). "'What my own wee divil bids me': an interview with damian gorman." *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 36(2): 193–207. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41955436>