

Impact case study (REF3b)

Institution: Edge Hill University
Unit of Assessment: 35 - Music, Drama, Dance and Performing Arts
Title of case study: <i>Cultural capital in telling tales: the benefits to community and arts professionals of Helen Newall's portfolio of research-based 'responsive' play scripts.</i>
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>The research and the practice methodology that underpin the emergence of the responsive play scripts, alongside the performances of the plays, have had the following impacts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Educational – improving exposure to music and performance-making of over one thousand school students, and teachers, in over twenty schools, b) Communities, the General Public, Audiences – restoring, and increasing opportunities for audiences disenfranchised from access to locally generated performance by Chester's Gateway Theatre's closure (2007), to see and/or participate in performance events of high professional standard and thereby engage with local narratives and histories c) Local theatre professionals – restoring and increasing employment opportunities, and broadening skill sets appropriate to non-traditional performance contexts <p>Reach: theatre audiences: 7,480; audiences at outdoor events: 27,000. Significance: evidenced by repeat commissions for playscripts and touring productions.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Helen Newall was appointed Senior Lecturer at EHU in 2004, and promoted to Reader in Performing Arts in 2007. During the period for which impact is claimed, Newall was a writer of drama and music theatre, an investigator in and of performance practice, and was commissioned on nineteen occasions by the Nuffield Theatre, Southampton, Chester Gateway Theatre, Theatre in the Quarter (TiQ), and Off the Ground Theatre to produce original scripts for professional performance. This project emerged out of the closure in 2007 of the Chester Gateway Theatre, the city's only funded producing house (and where Newall was writer-in-residence), but also out of a dissatisfaction with forms of community theatre that the professional participants had previously been commissioned to make. Whereas the Gateway was a building, TiQ is for the most part a touring company, taking theatre to local and rural communities and non-theatre spaces. Influenced by Mike Pearson's work in the field, Newall designed an investigation into how latent relationships between Cheshire's palimpsestic sites (urban and rural) and people local to the county now might be articulated in bespoke dramatic forms ('responsive scripts') and performance events. Newall's investigation of reminiscence and/or folklore (sourced from community interviews, local archives, local urban myths, landscapes, artefacts, personal diaries etc.) underpinned the development of Cultural capital in telling tales (CCITT), a portfolio of community-rooted 'responsive scripts' and related artefacts (songs, etc.). CCITT consisted of a series of productions (2008-2012), attracting repeat Arts Council England (ACE) funding and EHU research support (teaching remission). TiQ's creative team included: Newall (writer), Matt Baker (Artistic Director; Composer; Musical Director) and Russ Tunney, (formerly Associate Director, Nuffield Theatre, Southampton; Artistic Director, Pound Arts; playscripts' dramaturg; director). In committing to involve local participants – including schoolchildren – Newall's research speaks to a poetics of community theatre responsive to problems raised by the summary closure of a local cultural institution.</p> <p>Research questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How might relationships between a palimpsestic landscape/cityscape and its current inhabitants be imagined in 'responsive' playscripts? 2. What contributions and benefits might be offered and gained by local participants, audiences and theatre artists involved in participatory community theatre projects emerging from this investigation? <p>Research methodology:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Structured interviews, archive research, generating narrative material realised in playscripts and lyrics, articulating and interrogating, in content and form, traces in landscapes of 'complex articulations of history and place, the milieu of human inhabitation' (Pearson & Shanks, <i>Theatre/Archaeology</i>, 2001: 39).

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2. Bespoke, community-sensitive playscript and production structures designed to enable realisation of community narratives and stakeholder aspirations, in high quality professionally presented theatre events. This approach was underpinned, also, by using local actors and professionals as part of the process.

Insights 1: Responsive scripts foreground narrative archetypes and repetitions in themes of past-in-present; artists should prioritise creative imperatives, while responding to participants and diverse stakeholders (**Newall**, 'Digging to Find Something (to Write): the Archaeology of a Creative Impulse in a Community Context', IFTR Communities Conference, 2011).

Insights 2: Responsive scripts enable production models to accommodate diverse – even contradictory – needs of professionals and amateurs, and create popular forms aesthetically challenging for audiences.

Other outcomes: Seminar presentations; public engagement workshop. Online: article, performance videos; video documentaries.

3. References to the research

The following is available in the Practice Portfolio (output 1) submitted under REF2:

1. **Research Papers (2009):** '*Silent Night: The Story of a PaR Play*': Department of Performing Arts Research Seminar; Edge Hill Institutional Research Seminar; Liverpool Hope University.
2. **Paper and workshop:** '*Forgotten Fortress: 'Digging to Find Something (to Write): the Archaeology of a Creative Impulse in a Community Context*', IFTR Conference 2011, Osaka, Japan (peer reviewed)
3. **Online outputs (2011)**

Website Article: *Forgotten Fortress*

http://www.cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk/microsites/habitats_and_hillforts/discovery/forgotten_fortress_video/forgotten_fortress.aspx

Video: 'Remember *Forgotten Fortress*'

Made by Habitats and Hillforts (Photographic stills: **Helen Newall**; Neil Kendall)

http://www.cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk/microsites/habitats_and_hillforts/discovery/forgotten_fortress_video.aspx, and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GaikTiADQck>

Featured:

Audioguide Productions (<http://audio-guide.co.uk/clients/past-projects>)

4. Videos:

a) *Be the Best That You Can Be* (2012) (video micro-documentary)

Words: **Helen Newall**; music: Matt Baker

Micro-documentary feature: video made by DeeDigital; The Harlequin Project, The University of Chester.

Featuring: Matt Baker, Artistic Director; Matt Dimbylow, Paralympic Football Team (Captain), London 2012 Paralympics.

Featured on The Harlequin Website, University of Chester, and YouTube throughout 2012.

Recording cast: Oaklands School (Special School), Winsford; Sandiway County Primary School, Sandiway.

Full cast included children from those schools, ten other primary schools, two high schools, Chester Schools Concert Band, Homegrown Dance Theatre, four community choirs, and The Chester Giants (www.thegiants.org.uk), Handbags of Harmonies (<http://www.handbagofharmonies.co.uk/>), and Frodsham and District Choral Society (<http://www.fdcs.org.uk>).

b) *Be the Best That You Can Be* (2012): *Fly In Your Dreams* (song)

Words: **Helen Newall**; music: Matt Baker

Songs, accompanied by documentary video footage of the rehearsal process; video made by DeeDigital; The Harlequin Project; The University of Chester.

Featuring: Matt Baker Artistic Director and Musical Director, Theatre in the Quarter

Hosted on The Harlequin Website, University of Chester, and YouTube throughout 2012.

Recording cast: twelve primary schools, two high schools, Homegrown Dance Theatre, four community choirs, and The Chester Giants (www.thegiants.org.uk), Handbags of Harmonies

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(<http://www.handbagofharmonies.co.uk/>), and Frodsham and District Choral Society (www.fdc.org.uk).

5. **Public engagement workshop:** 'Silent Night, Forgotten Fortress: How to Write a Play', Formby Bookshop, July 2013.

4. Details of the impact

Impact 1: Educational (See Corroborating Statements 1, 2)

- Increase in singing in schools: Musical Director, Matt Baker, visited weekly to teach production songs (lyrics by **Newall**, music by Baker), and encourage teachers to rehearse them months in advance of formal rehearsals. Cultural impact: scheduled singing in schools. Song lyrics were not production-specific, but thematic, so schools 'owned' them, continuing to use them in school concerts, assemblies etc. (see lyrics in REF2 Practice Portfolio).
- Opportunities for students to perform: (singing and/or playing instruments) as school groups but outside of school and with other school students (*A View from the Hill; Forgotten Fortress; The Chester Giants: A Community Opera*).

Impact 2: Local Communities, the general public and audiences

Cultural and economic impacts include:

- A rise in community contact and audience numbers: 1. Tours initially scheduled across the Cheshire circuit of the Rural Touring Network (RTN) extended into the Lancashire Rural Touring Network, Edge Hill University, and *Showzam*, Blackpool's annual Festival. Even in RTN venues with small capacities (often as small as 30 seats) occupancy was sometimes below capacity in the initial stages. Year on year, audiences increased, with venues selling out on the night, or in advance, leading to subsequent performances being scheduled for two nights rather than one in certain venues. This audience development process made it possible to attract lost audiences back into Chester for a new community adaptation of *A Christmas Carol* (2012), which sold out before opening night. Current production, *The Snow Queen* is also demonstrating equally strong advance sales. 2. *Be the Best that You Can Be* (commissioned by A Handbag of Harmonies, for *Across the World*, BBC Music Nation Weekend: BBC/LOCOC Festival, Cultural Olympiad 2012) was performed by over 700 people from across Cheshire to 5000 people (3 March 2012). Theatre in the Quarter reprised it for Olympic Torch relay celebrations (Chester; Tatton Park), and for the visit of HRH Queen Elizabeth II to Chester. It was filmed to show the process of making the work, as well as the final performance (Other Source (OS) 2).
- New audiences in difficult to reach places: the inclusion of schools in less affluent and deprived areas of Chester brought in people – parents, families - who might not usually visit the theatre and/or who have never visited a theatre before. Direct targeting facilitated inclusion of schools such as Blacon Primary School, with matinées and evening performances given at Blacon Community Centre, leading to these communities having the opportunity to engage with cultural narratives and histories (Corroborating Statements (CS) 3 and 4).
- Increased community participation: community singers/players - choirs were incorporated into narratives as a body of characters; ghostly ancestors (*Forgotten Fortress*); 1940s radio station audience (*Home for Christmas*) and were included in all performances, but increasing demand for participation and stage design economies required for small venues led to the creation of teams performing in rotation. Community participation rose from 20 choristers (*Silent Night*, 2008) to 140 (*A Christmas Carol*, 2012) (CS 3).
- Increased community awareness of their environment: the Hillforts project in particular led to greater engagement with, and appreciation of, the local environment and history by people in the community (OS 1).
- Expenditure in local economies: It was company policy, where possible, to employ locally based artists, or those originally from the area. Impacts thus include 'local spend' of company grants and artists' income close to rehearsal location (Garden Lane Methodist Church: rehearsal charges at £500 per project); actors received Equity rates and daily subsistence allowance (food, etc.); actors and artists rented rooms locally (CS 3).
- Increased opportunities to see professional music theatre – bringing musical theatre to a wider audience, either in Chester, or on The Rural Touring Network circuit (CS 4).

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- Audience spend: venues in the Rural Touring scheme are subsidised by the Network, but rely on additional audience spend: capacity audiences mean that beverages sales and raffles can raise more income.

Artist Employment (See CS 3, 5)

The critical success of CCITT projects led to commissions for Theatre in the Quarter to create five new works (2011-14). Further impact is claimed, therefore, in terms of the company's ability to employ creative artists with concomitant financial, cultural, and creative career benefits to them. In the census period, the company has employed over 50 artists – actors, designers, writers, musicians, stage-managers – some of them repeatedly, and all at Equity rates (CS 3, 5; OS 2). Commissions include:

- *Forgotten Fortress* (2011), commissioners: UK government initiative, Habitats and Hillforts; Cheshire RTN (developing themes, songs from *A View from the Hill*).
- *James* (2011), commissioner: Frank Field MP; funders: The King James Bible Trust; The Arts Council.
- *A Jacobean Christmas* (2011), commissioner: Hampton Court Palace (to develop *James*); funders: The King James Bible Trust; The Arts Council.
- *It Will All Be Over by Christmas* (January 2013, for production in 2014): a short play for railway stations, commissioner: Cheshire West and Chester, Cheshire East local authorities
- *Silent Night* (January 2013, for production in 2014): Cheshire-specific rewrite; commissioners: Cheshire West and Chester, Cheshire East local authorities.

Apprenticeships: Theatre in the Quarter employs local 'apprentices', some of whom (e.g. David Edwards) are now training or working professionally as assistant directors or semi-professional community actors (CS 3).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact**Corroborating Statements**

1. Teacher, Bishop's High School, Chester (and choir member)
2. Head Teacher (retd.), Helsby Hillside Primary School, Cheshire
3. Chair of the Board, Theatre in the Quarter
4. Rural Arts Officer, Cheshire Rural Touring
5. Director, Theatre in the Quarter

Other Sources

1. **Habitats and Hillforts Evaluation:** 'Interpretation Highlights' p30, 'Conclusion' p52; David Mount, (2012) *Habitats and Hillforts Evaluation*, Chester: Cheshire West and Chester.
2. **End of Project Evaluations:** TiQ to ACE (2008 – 2013)