

Where Will the Message Go?

A critical evaluation of *Glorious* by Rajni Shah Projects

Final Report May 2013 by Elizabeth Lynch, Independent Evaluator



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This independent evaluation was commissioned by Rajni Shah Projects and is based on research conducted during productions of *Glorious* in Newcastle (October-December 2011) and Lancaster (November 2012-January 2013).

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Executive Summary

Glorious was an ambitious project that aimed to create rich relationships between Rajni Shah Projects (RSP), a host venue or festival (the Presenter), and a local community. *Glorious* engaged people who would not normally get involved with the arts – often within a community with whom the Presenter was interested in establishing a closer relationship.

In each location, *Glorious* took place over a number of months. It involved *Write a Letter to a Stranger*, a series of creative interventions in public spaces, followed by a workshop and rehearsal process with two sets of local volunteers: a music group who reinterpreted the *Glorious* score under the supervision of the Musical Director, and a group of 6–10 local residents (recruited through the interventions) who created their own autobiographical monologues during a series of conversations, writing sessions, and walks. These monologues became central to the narrative of *Glorious* in that location. The culminating performance was different in each location, creating a shared moment with an audience that would never be repeated.¹

A production of *Glorious* delivers a unique high quality musical performance and aims to leave behind a constructive living heritage in the form of new partnerships and opportunities for both Presenters and participants. This report is based on interviews and observations of *Glorious* in two of the five locations where the full project took place: Newcastle in November 2011, where the Presenter was Wunderbar Festival, and Lancaster in December 2012, where the Presenter was Live at LICA (Lancaster Institute for the Contemporary Arts). These two Presenters were also co-commissioners of the project as a whole.

The purpose of this report is to help RSP reflect on *Glorious*, think about future projects, and support their ongoing conversations with others about approaches to arts participation and socially engaged practice.

1 An exception was made in London where *Glorious* was performed three times at the request of the Presenter, SPILL Festival.

Twelve people were interviewed at each location, consisting of: six participants, four members of Rajni Shah Projects, and two of the Presenter's team. People were interviewed two or three times giving a total of 58 interviews.² The questions sought to capture the intrinsic nature of the project, the way it engaged all those involved, the emotional, intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic impact on individuals and audiences, and the social bonding it generated. Additional interviews were conducted with audience members, and observations were recorded by the evaluator and others as credited. The material gathered is presented in three parts: gathering, exploring and sharing.

Gathering captures the early process – the letter-writing, recruitment, and the initial workshops. All the participants were asked about their expectations for the project, the discoveries being made, and the challenges they encountered.

Both artists and local people were attracted by the adventurous and open nature of the project. The process of recruiting individual 'strangers' in each location seems to have created a space where people found *Glorious* rather than the other way round. The motivating factors were curiosity and the desire or need for creative expression as well as the tangible goal and focus of the performance itself. There were logistical and practical challenges facing the company and the participants; however, *Glorious* was designed with a structure that could hold the fragile nature of the show and respond flexibly when people and plans changed. In each location a community of people who would not otherwise meet was deliberately brought together and this charged the project with interesting tensions and possibilities. The creative process was revelatory for some, affirmative and 'freeing' for others.

Exploring is about the workshop and rehearsal period, the discoveries made by participants about their creativity, the process of writing and musical improvisation (new to many young musicians), and the impact of working with strangers. The process opened up opportunities for empathy and kindness and for challenging preconceptions – about people, artists, creativity,

2 Full lists of interviewees and interview questions are available in the appendices.

and making work. Through writing and presenting their work, the performers learned about communicating better or differently, and explored physical techniques to build and hold confidence on stage. The musicians transformed the music, making it their own. Trust was established early on between the artists and the participants and this helped to create productive conditions for risk-taking and to prepare participants for the moment when the full team would come together to rehearse. The trust built up over time between the presenter and the artists underpinned the project with supportive personal relationships, ideological commitment, and practical resources.

The artists needed to manage the tension between being prepared to completely let go and the need to produce a high quality piece of work for the performance. Acknowledging the huge risk this involved, RSP built responsiveness and flux into the working process and constantly assessed and questioned what might/could happen.

Sharing captures immediate audience responses to the performances and the reflections of the artists and local participants in the weeks and months after their performance. The audience interviews offer rich feedback on the show's form and staging, its content and ideas, and their feelings and emotions in response to the production. The shifts and changes experienced by the participants range from valuing their creativity more to asking themselves some tough questions about their commitment to expressive activity. The artists analyse the nature of the creative collaboration, its boundaries and challenges, and how trust is an integral ingredient.

All the interviewees are engaged by the show's themes of upheaval and transience, uncertainty and resilience, memory and friendship, and by the space the show itself offers to take creative risks, engage in meaningful dialogue, and share their work. *Glorious* explored what community can mean through deliberately gathering together people who may live in proximity but don't often meet. The project as a whole held up a mirror to this community and asked it to take a fresh look at who they are, what they see and feel, and who is missing.

For some individuals it was a catalyst for community action, while for others it shifted their attitudes to other people and caused them to re-assess the way they communicate their thoughts and feelings.

The participants powerfully describe the immediate legacy of being part of such an intense experience in terms of their creative and personal development. They express an appreciation of the quality of their engagement with the artists whose friendship, sincerity, energy, and commitment inspired them. The artists feel that their hopes for the project have been realised both through the relationships developed and through their own experience of the performances where the sense of facing an unknown future together has been profound. The social and creative capital generated during *Glorious* through dialogue, reflection, creativity, and action is captured by the research. The continuing legacy for individuals may not be evaluated but cannot be discounted. They will continue to draw from their experiences as they see fit and in ways we cannot imagine.

The final section of the report offers insights, observations, and questions. It summarises the particular nature of the engagement and participation with the artists and the characteristics of the creative process indicated through interpreting the research. These include making and giving time, clarity around roles and responsibilities, values, challenge, risk, ambition, curiosity, and mutual respect. The changes articulated by the participants are summarised, followed by some questions it would be interesting to explore further: How can we talk meaningfully about the creative legacy RSP aims to offer to each person who performs in *Glorious*? What role does the project play in helping us to understand the meanings of 'community' and why is this important? Why is it useful to embrace the unknown and unknowable? Can representing 'inbetweenness' through music-theatre be just as compelling as the utopias and dystopias this form usually represents?

Elizabeth Lynch, May 2013



Introduction and Background

Rajni Shah Projects and *Glorious*

I want to explore the sense of not knowing that pervades the UK today – both the fear and the space for hope that has emerged as a result of our increased awareness of climate change and the dramatic impact of the financial collapse. I cannot think of a more appropriate or interesting form for this than the musical – a form that immediately communicates with a vast number of people, including myself, but that is often used to represent some kind of utopia or dystopia. What happens if we inhabit this form with the space of in-betweenness? Can we make a musical that embraces the unknown and the unknowable?

(early project description, Rajni Shah, 2009)

Rajni Shah Projects Ltd (RSP) is a Company Limited by Guarantee that engages artists and arts professionals to deliver socially engaged creative projects that are visually striking, that embrace innovative ways of thinking, and that are open to everyone.

Glorious was an ambitious project that aimed to create rich relationships between Rajni Shah Projects (RSP), a host venue or festival (the Presenter), and a local community. *Glorious* reached out to people who would not normally get involved with the arts – often within a community with whom the Presenter was interested in establishing a closer relationship.

We follow up each show by sharing documentation, writing and images with all volunteers through our *Glorious* People social network (invite only). And we work with writer Mary Paterson to collect stories from all of our participants, which will be woven into The *Glorious* Storybook – a copy of which will be sent, along with a DVD, to each participant at the end of the tour. (RSP, *Glorious* Presenters' Pack)

This report focuses on two iterations of the project that took place in Newcastle, where the Presenter was Wunderbar Festival, and Lancaster, where the Presenter was Live at LICA.

In Newcastle seven student musicians were recruited through The Academy of Music & Sound, Gateshead. In Lancaster a class of thirteen students were recruited from the first year BA Music degree, and fifteen musicians, largely from local ensemble Off the Rails (www.off-the-railsband.org.uk), were recruited via More Music (www.moremusic.org.uk), a regional community music organisation based in Morecambe.

In each location *Glorious* took place over a number of months. It involved a series of playful interventions in public space followed by a writing and rehearsal process with two sets of local volunteers: a musical group of any genre, who reinterpreted the *Glorious* score under the supervision of Musical Director Suzie Shrubbs; and a group of 6–10 individual local residents (recruited through the public intervention *Write a Letter to a Stranger*), who created their own autobiographical monologues during a series of workshops with the company. These monologues became central to the narrative of *Glorious* in that location. A few weeks before the performance date, the whole company would start to come together to create the show. The culminating performance was a unique, shared moment with an audience involving stories and music created by local people.

The ‘speakers’³ in each place were recruited through letter-writing activities in Newcastle’s Eldon Square and Lancaster’s St Nicholas Arcades shopping centres, and in public libraries in Morecambe and Lancaster.

As co-commissioners as well as Presenters, Wunderbar Festival and Live at LICA were involved with RSP and *Glorious* from the project conception stage.

Presenter and co-commissioner: Wunderbar Festival

Wunderbar produces dynamic, creative projects that place the audience at the heart of the experience. They bring their work to unusual places and spaces and invite people to take part;

³ Throughout this report the group of people who write and speak the monologues are referred to as ‘performers’ and sometimes ‘speakers.’

often the work only comes alive if people get involved with it. Their projects are led by artists, but fuelled by unique contributions from those who take part, responding with creativity and playfulness to issues of relevance to real people, real places and real time.

Every two years these projects are celebrated in a festival involving performance, installation, extraordinary happenings, interaction, social events and games. Events take place in both traditional venues – such as theatres, galleries, arts centres, cinemas – and non-traditional performance spaces, such as shopping centres, hairdressers, private homes, and city streets. (Wunderbar Festival website, www.wunderbarfestival.co.uk)

Presenter and co-commissioner:

Live at LICA (Lancaster Institute for the Contemporary Arts)

Located on the campus of Lancaster University, Live at LICA’s mission is to develop and deliver high quality professional theatre, dance, music and visual art for the campus, the city of Lancaster and the wider region. We enable artists to take creative risks, each year commissioning and presenting an extensive amount of new work. We also provide unique opportunities for artists and local residents to meet in innovative participatory projects, and engage creatively with academic teaching and research.

Highly distinctive as a cultural organisation in an academic context, we support artists’ creative ideas at all stages from conception to production, through to public showing and touring. (Live at LICA website, www.liveatlica.org)

Independent evaluator: Elizabeth Lynch (www.elizabethlynchandco.com)

My interests and experience lie with arts organisations that explore imaginative approaches to engaging with audiences, young people, and communities. I have developed and led organisations that place young people’s participation at the heart of their vision, notably at the Roundhouse where I was a Director 2001–8. Recently I have directed and produced theatre

productions, international artists, and creative learning programmes for Wellcome Collection, Rio Occupation London, Oily Cart Theatre, and McMc Arts. I am interested in evaluation as a process of enquiry, reflection, and learning that can be used to both open up conversations and make a bridge to future work.

Methodology

The purpose of this report is to help RSP reflect on *Glorious*, think about future projects, and support their ongoing conversations with others about approaches to arts participation and socially engaged practice. The findings of the Interim Report (February 2012) served to indicate those aspects of the project that worked well and could be developed in order to inform future *Glorious* residencies. This final report is based on the research conducted during productions of *Glorious* in Newcastle, October – December 2011, and in Lancaster, November 2012 – January 2013. This involved formal interviews, observations, and conversations. Additional material from blog posts on the *Glorious* private social network has been included with the writers' permission.

This sample represents participants from two of the four UK performances (*Glorious* was also presented in Mons, Belgium, in May 2012, and *Write a Letter to a Stranger* was presented at Pulse Festival in Ipswich in June 2012). Twelve people were interviewed two or three times at each location giving a total of 58 interviews. Twenty further interviews were conducted with audience members. The evaluator and others recorded observations of the interventions, rehearsals, and performances.⁴

Participants in Newcastle were invited to reflect on their experiences at three stages of the project – the beginning, mid-way, and post-performance – through a series of interviews conducted either face to face or by phone. In Lancaster I condensed the questions and interviewed people during the middle of the creating process and post-performance.

The 15–40 minute conversations were recorded and transcribed. Participants were asked the same or similar questions at each stage. The interviews sought to capture the intrinsic nature of the project; the way it engages all involved; the emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic impact on individuals and audiences; and the social bonding it generated.

Throughout the report I reference the views of four RSP artists, seven musicians, six speakers (who wrote and performed the monologues), and four members of presenting organisations who hosted the project. I aim to represent the feedback from all participants in its range and diversity. I have indicated areas of significant consensus or difference between the two locations, as well as individual responses that might illuminate or illustrate either anticipated or unexpected outcomes.

The report is in three parts. Gathering captures the early process – the letter-writing, recruitment, and early workshops. All the participants were asked about their expectations for the project, the discoveries being made, and the challenges. Exploring is about the workshop and rehearsal period. Sharing captures the immediate audience responses to the performances and the reflections of the participants in the weeks and months afterwards.

Interviewee quotes are highlighted in **green**. Those by company members are attributed in the body of the text; those by participants and presenter/producers are unattributed. A full list of contributors can be found in appendix 1.



Part One: Gathering

Elizabeth visits Eldon Square on 13 October 2011 to interview some of the artists, musicians, Wunderbar team, and members of the public. A week later, 20–24 October, she interviews six of the people who have decided to perform in the show.⁵ In Lancaster and Morecambe, letter-writing interventions during November 2012 are observed by volunteer Leo Burtin, who also supports Elizabeth by undertaking most of the first Lancaster interviews.

1.1 Letters

I believe in Destiny and like the game of chance element in the letter writing. Where will my message go and what will I get?

Newcastle observation:

Eldon Square indoor shopping mall 11–14 October 2011. At entrances to the shopping centre, the NE1 Street Rangers⁶ hand out flowers with small notes to the public and tell them to look out for ‘the Glorious living room’. Passers-by are attracted to the incongruous, cosy-looking sitting room furniture set up on the first floor, in a public area close to escalators and the bus station. A simple sign invites them to ‘write a letter to a stranger’. Over two hours on the Thursday afternoon I observe a steady trickle of people stopping to enquire, to chat, and sometimes to sit and take tea with Rajni, Sheila, or Lucille. Even in that short space of time I see letter-writers of all ages, male and female, with varied social and cultural backgrounds. A trio of young men set about writing with an un-self-conscious focus at the table attractively stocked with coloured stationery and pens. A broad bowl on the coffee table receives and offers a tantalising array of sealed envelopes.

Writers place their completed letters in the bowl, and then choose and keep a letter from the letters but focus on meeting and interacting with each participant, inviting them to continue working with the company if they would like to.

⁵ Timelines for the Newcastle and Lancaster projects are available in appendix 3

⁶ <http://www.newcastlene1ltd.com/our-programmes/operations/street-rangers-and-clean-team.aspx>

I wrote a letter, I got wrapped up in it. I loved it! To get one and to do one. I loved receiving the letter.

I enjoyed receiving my letter, it had a list of things about the person, it's a good way to meet and connect with people. The letter-writing let me be reflective.

The company makes this intervention in the indoor shopping centre for long sessions (8am – 8pm) over four consecutive days⁷ rather than shorter sessions spread over several weeks. Contrary to expectations, Rajni is pleased that this short but continuous presence allows people to come back to chat and to tell others to come:

In Newcastle, people have been so engaged with the idea of the letters; you can really see a transformation happening when someone takes part in the process of writing and then receiving a letter. That's a reminder to me about why it is worth all the graft to make this happen. People are really excited about it, the letters, and that there's more to it, that we are around for a bit. They feel that it's important and that it makes a difference. They want us to stay. They have ideas of other places we could do it.

Workshop facilitator Sheila Ghelani⁸ is surprised and delighted to experience how open people are in Newcastle:

I wasn't looking forward to a week in a shopping centre ... but it's been lovely.

Rajni relates a quite extraordinary story:

There was a Dutch man who took part in the letter-writing and absolutely loved it. He was visiting Newcastle and said he was going to set up a similar project (inspired

by ours) when he returned to Holland. We really enjoyed meeting him. Later that day, he came back – we weren't sure why. 'You'll never believe this,' he said. It turned out that the letter he had received had included a description of the letter-writer and his profession. The Dutch man had been in Tesco's when he had spotted a man fitting exactly the description – so he had introduced himself and was right – it was that very person! So two of our strangers actually met! And they started talking about how the Geordie had never left the area, and might get a passport so that he could go and visit his new Dutch friend...

Ilana Mitchell from Wunderbar considers the first audience for the work to be the people who get involved in the shopping centre. The next audience is the people who come and see the performance, and the third is the discussion that happens around the work more publicly – not necessarily in that order. The letter-writing intervention is a discreet activity, complete in itself and similar to models that RSP has successfully deployed in previous work, 'exploring the use of gift as an opening to conversation with strangers.'

Lancaster observation by Leo Burtin:

Dear stranger,

This is how most of my days have started this past week ... meeting strangers and inviting them to write a letter for another stranger ... Starting conversations with a gift and continuing them with a cup of tea. The idea at the core of Rajni Shah Projects' public interventions is simple, but even over just a week I have witnessed how a simple exchange of words, which may start being about the weather, can quickly catch a glimpse of what it means to every person we have met to be here, now. What difference it has made to them, that someone provided a space, made some time, to talk and to listen. I often worry that contemporary arts practice can sometimes be quite sterile and that our only audiences are ourselves ... that we are preaching to the converted. The opportunity I have been given to work on Glorious is bringing to light a glimpse of structures and ideas that might be interesting to explore in order to bring art where it belongs, with people...⁹

⁷ A condition of Eldon Square's agreement with RSP.

⁸ Sheila Ghelani was part of the *Glorious* team for the two examples described in the report. For half the shows, this role was taken by artist Karen Christopher, and in Belgium this role was taken by local artist, Christophe Canu.

⁹ Leo Burtin, 'Dear Stranger', <http://talkwithleap.com/2012/11/12/dear-stranger/> (12 November 2012)

Sheila is struck by how well used the libraries are in Morecambe and Lancaster and by the range of people flowing through. She observes the library is an interesting space for the interventions to happen: 'because people trust that as a location, they will approach us in a slightly different way.'



1.2 Attraction

Part of Glorious for me is getting my mojo back.

After the initial attraction of the letter-writing, individuals who want to know more are invited to attend a workshop and/or further meetings with Rajni and Sheila. The final cast of six emerges from this process rather than being 'selected'. This interactive approach allows for a more organic exploration of the ideas and themes for Glorious, discussion of the working process, and a chance to establish logistics and commitments including any access needs.

Glorious. I instantly took [this word] to myself and realised that we actually don't say 'I'm Glorious.' 'I am glorious' is a wonderful phrase to use and even if you don't feel glorious when you started off, you actually feel quite glorious when you have finished.

It's the creative side, that's it. That's what's brought me.

The Newcastle student musicians attend a meeting in September 2011 with Rajni and Suzie at the suggestion of their tutor. They listen to a recording of the songs and hear more about how they might work on Glorious, contributing their own ideas for interpretation and performance. The seven who decide to be involved are attracted by how they will be involved creatively and by the themes of the show.

What grabbed me was the word Rajni used, 'transition', changing times etc. that intrigued me.

It was different, it lets you do your own thing, rather than following the pattern of normal production – not just sight-reading, but interpreting in different ways.

Lancaster music students, although participating as part of their university course, are similarly attracted by the opportunity to be part of a less formal, more creative process that is 'unconventional' or 'out of my comfort zone'. The Off the Rails band members are attracted by the opportunity to work with professional musicians on a musical.

In Newcastle, Rajni talks about people being drawn to *Glorious* because it offers the opportunity to seize and explore 'this moment right now, change and in-betweenness'. In Lancaster, Lucille Acevedo-Jones, the designer, observes that there are several performers involved who are in-between things in their personal lives, who have had to drop out of something they were doing or take a break.

At the start of this research, I also asked the artists why they were attracted to *Glorious* in the first place. Musical Director Suzie Shrubbs wanted to be involved precisely for the project's open and unpredictable qualities.

When I saw the job advertised one of the first things that excited me was 'RSP makes risk-taking work – we're looking for someone who can cope with the unexpected in a live performance'. This is exactly the work I want to do, I love the fact you don't know what's going to happen.

The people, their stories, and the process are her primary interests. Suzie describes the company members and format as a 2D 'flat pack kit' which the local participants assemble into. Sheila always enjoys witnessing 'the buzz' that someone who has never performed before experiences:

It's exciting to enable people who haven't had the chance to explore certain ideas or aspects of themselves become empowered to do that on stage. That is quite phenomenal.

Lucille comments on the unusual positioning of the work in the sector – not quite a Live Art piece but a theatrical work that draws on an established tradition of music theatre which audiences may find striking in the context of other work of this kind. Lucille worked closely with Rajni during the initial devising and writing period. The process of finding the right imagery for the costume and set had been experimental and organic, influenced by the lyrics and music. She hopes that in the same way, the audience will come away with a sense of the words that triggered her images as well as new words of their own.

For Ilana Mitchell, director of the Wunderbar Festival, what is really interesting about is:

the balance between creating a very high-end product that's been really well crafted, and then how that involves people in a really ad hoc, instantaneous way ... How do the ingredients balance, work together? Where are the tensions and the cracks?

1.3 Expectations

Rajni and people seemed curious people themselves, interesting people.

Foremost for the Newcastle musicians is the opportunity to learn from taking part in a production that invites them to contribute creatively, and Rajni's and Suzie's expectations are surpassed as the project progresses. One of the students is a mature and experienced performer who brings a wealth of understanding to the process, which for him is the most important aspect of the project.

The process more than the end product, more process than final show.

The speakers are not sure what to expect from *Glorious*. They are all uncertain about the journey they are taking towards the performance, but they are confident in RSP, engaged, and curious.

Overall the project is still a bit of a mystery. I have written in the past and am interested in writing and asking questions about life.

The artists are also curious about how their framework will be brought to life in each place. At the start of the process, although their perspectives are informed by their knowledge and experience of the show, they share many ‘unknowns’ with the cast. The artists are open-minded and relaxed with a calm confidence that influences the participants and their approach to the project. RSP has worked in Newcastle before, and Rajni comments, mid-October 2011, that here she feels ‘a celebratory air, a real sense of excitement’ about the show.

The musicians are bringing a lot of fresh ideas to the music. The very sociable experience of working in the shopping centre over an intense period has generated more interest in the final show than in previous places. Lancaster is also familiar territory for Rajni. It was the first location for her work in public space, exploring the idea of gift and meeting strangers, and she has built up a relationship with Live at LICA and Lancaster University.

An early hope of working with a larger group of musicians is finally realised here through bringing two groups together: the first year BA Music students and members of local musical group Off the Rails.

In November 2012, after four full productions of *Glorious*, Rajni feels that knowing more about how the show works means ‘we can allow a kind of freedom, I hope we can be a lot braver with our decisions.’

1.4 Discovery

Just to be open and see what happens and not to be fazed by anything that happens.

Rajni is surprised and pleased by the number of people who came to the intervention in Newcastle’s Eldon Square. This has been the most successful to date. In terms of identifying performers, the pattern is similar to that in Nottingham and London, necessarily erratic and last-minute as the company respond flexibly to the people they meet. The project schedule is constantly revised and updated. The process of talking, transcribing, encouraging writing, and reviewing it with participants is in constant flux and affected by the practical problems faced by some performers. For example, someone can’t take the train to rehearsal because they have no cash for the fare. Rajni goes to collect them.

You just have to be prepared to constantly let go of what you thought might happen. It works really well if you can just stay ‘present’ all the time. Working as a team is really important ... so that we can then give enough to the performers and musicians and make their experience very rich ... Instead of just focusing on the show at this stage, we have to keep our focus quite wide. The real trick of it is maintaining a calm about it because it’s really important that we’re not seeming worried about it, to trust that we feel it will be okay.

In Lancaster there is an unexpected discovery that reveals a connection with the public space work the company have been doing previously. One of the performers had seen an earlier public intervention, give what you can, take what you need, in St Nicholas Arcades shopping centre in 2008. He noticed it, but said that it was during a part of his life when it wasn’t possible to stop,

But this time when I saw you it was. And it was the right time for me to get involved.

Rajni recounts his participation in the letter-writing:

He wrote this really long letter. Usually people think about it for a while and spend a lot of time picking a piece of paper, but he just had this kind of drive and then when I mentioned the workshops he immediately said, ‘Yes, I want to find out more about that.’

Another connection seemingly made at the right time was with a woman who sat with Rajni and talked for a long while about the importance of letter-writing in her life. Rajni thinks that for each person there is a reason they stop and decide to interact, and for some it’s just the right moment for them to take it further. They find *Glorious* rather than the other way round.

This perception is echoed in Lucille’s observations from all five *Glorious* locations:

This kind of project comes at the right time for some people and they need an outlet. There is a high percentage of people taking part who have a very keen interest in writing. This time [in Lancaster] there were more people who had thought about writing in a more formal way and needed a way of exercising that. Through the letter-writing, they jumped at the chance.

At the beginning of the process, interviewees describe wanting to explore more about themselves in general and about their own creativity specifically. They see an opportunity to push their own boundaries, e.g. through improvising music, performing for a live audience, or having the opportunity to articulate narratives about their own lives as part of their personal development. A couple of people have been thinking about more spiritual matters:

At the moment I am asking lots of questions about God, Life and the Universe, and a wee bit of me thinks I might find out more about that. Maybe Rajni is searching as well – I don’t know, I haven’t had that conversation with her.

One musician is intrigued by the approach *Glorious* takes.

It’s challenging people a little bit, ‘can you arrange this musical please’ and then putting them on show, a kind of live version of a ‘mockumentary’. Is this part of it, the audience looking at people trying to make something happen? This is my paranoia!

If this is the case, he goes on to say, he doesn’t mind being exposed like that; it’s good to see something real happening. He is watching, too, looking around with his awareness heightened.

One speaker is keen to discover more about the practical aspects of making performance, ‘the touchstones for confidence’, like making exits and entrances, whilst another is enjoying the structure of the writing workshops:

I respond better to discipline, task-orientated stuff. When I have structure, I write best, rather than waiting for the muse to descend. It helps me with my own creativity.

In Lancaster, a new element will be introduced by Lucille who wants all the performers and musicians to create a mixed-media corsage/buttonhole to wear on stage with their costume/outfit. Through making something she hopes they’ll go through a visual equivalent of the textual and musical journeys taken with Sheila and Suzie. It’s a small intervention to help people connect with the visual element of the production.

Wunderbar’s Director appreciates the learning *Glorious* offers to them, commenting that RSP’s experiment is a bit like the Festival’s experiment, which asks ‘How do we make projects with people outside of arts communities?’



1.5 Challenges

There's a real kind of fragility about the show and that is something that defines it.

Having made the commitment and discussed their personal circumstances with Rajni and Sheila, the chief concerns for participants in both places are about achieving all that needs to be done creatively within the tight timescale, the challenge of the music itself, and being open to the creative process.

The hardest part is trying to interpret it differently, not play it as it's written, trying not to follow the pattern, trying to create something new.

A musician talks about the challenge of 'being present enough in the performance,' as Rajni expresses it. For one performer it is all about

Beginning something, sticking to it, being on time, being constant, the structure. It's very difficult, but because I'm part of something else I don't want to let the others down and this is helpful.

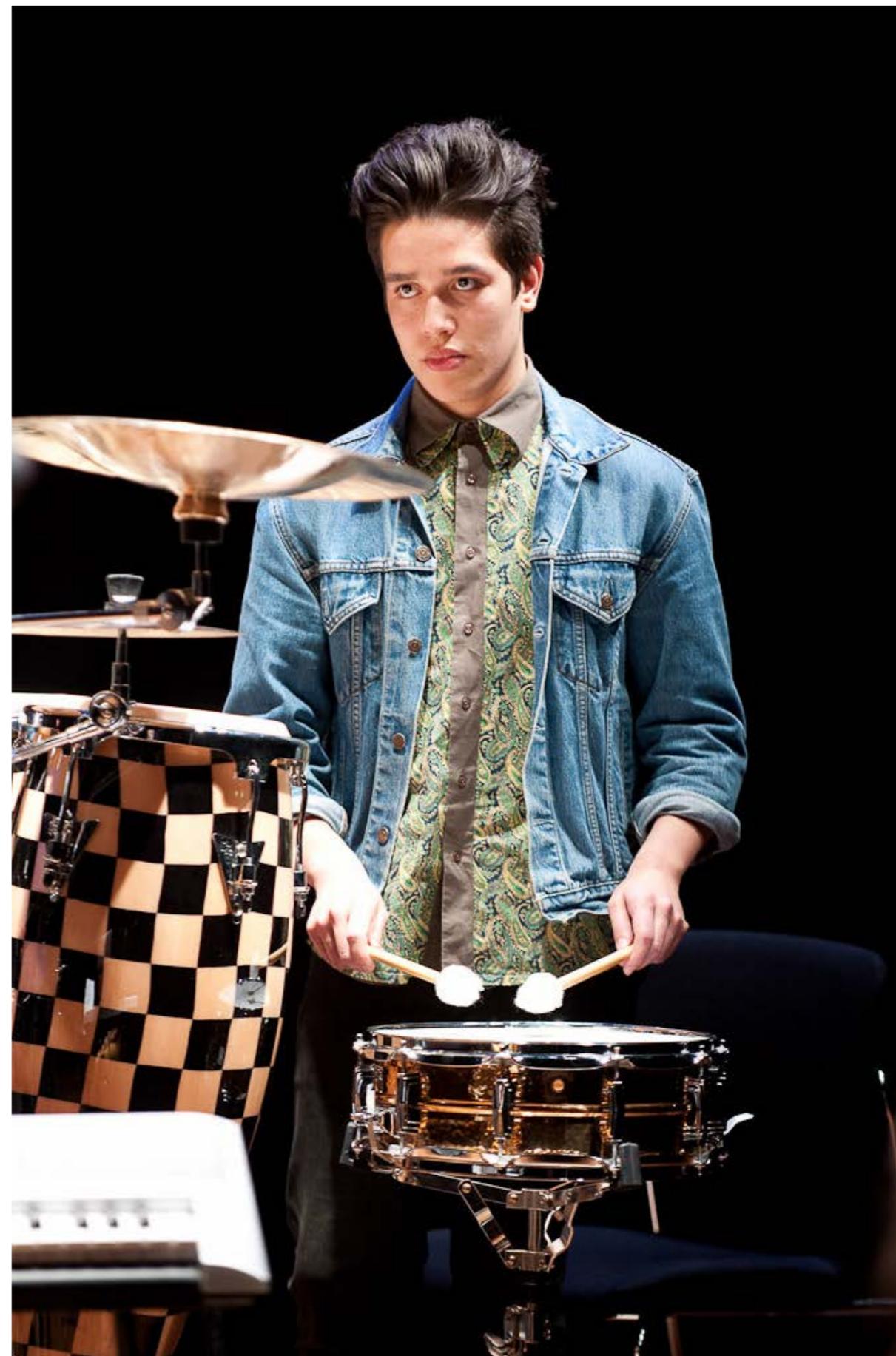
The performers are available for different lengths of time, so Rajni and Sheila often work with them on a one-to-one basis, rather than as a group. Sheila describes the delicate process of getting the performers hooked, and then once hooked, eliciting interesting material without pushing. This performer's words capture the challenge they face:

Not worrying about getting up onstage, being myself. Trusting that I have something to say and that Rajni will put that in some sort of context, pull it together into a credible musical.

Despite the calm confidence that infuses the whole team, the company appears to be making a huge leap of faith. There are inherent risks in a process that deliberately engages with people who have other priorities and slender resources. Rajni and Sheila are thinking and creating on their feet, being responsive to the participants' needs and responsible for ensuring that the collective effort delivers on its promises for all who have invested in its creation:

Our shows, even though they involve a lot of improvisation, are very, very tight. So it's an interesting experiment. There's a real kind of fragility about the show and that is something that really defines it. We can allow ourselves to be completely responsive to the people we meet and to change and shift within the tight structure we have created – knowing that at any point our performers may or may not show up. We've designed *Glorious* with a structure that can hold this fragility, so that we can work with anyone who wants to work with us, whatever their schedule – but the fragility is definitely also one of its defining qualities.

In Lancaster, a practical challenge for RSP is the location for the rehearsals and performance at the Nuffield Theatre on the university campus, just on the outskirts of Lancaster. Efforts to make *Glorious* physically accessible include holding interventions and workshops in Morecambe and Lancaster town centres, having a BSL signer, and hiring a bus to bring performers' friends and family from the two towns to the campus. Another significant challenge is working with two very different groups on the music, juggling the mature experience (but limited availability) of Off the Rails musicians with the young, less confident first-year music degree students. The former have chosen to participate; the latter are doing the project as part of their course and are being assessed on making a piece of work during the project. Off the Rails are comfortable with improvisation, experiment, and creating music; the students, Suzie observes, are still immersed in formal education, more cerebral, and more reluctant to try things. Finally, Lucille has realised that she won't be able to manage the styling and the buttonhole/corsage making alone, as the cast and band total 35. Volunteers are being recruited.



1.6 Creativity

Glorious is very freeing.

Expectations around personal creativity vary according to the participants' experiences. Some are learning a lot about working collaboratively and about generating material from their own histories. This can be revelatory for the student musicians:

Normally throughout productions I'm following the bass player, trying to lock in with him. But this is a lot more about trying to fit around the music and cue people ... very different to what I am used to, no sort of definite structure, it's all improvised. It's awesome, it really is.

I wasn't a fan of improvisation before but would like to try it in future as a way of composing, a useful experience.

Whereas for one of the more seasoned players:

It's more about giving my experience and bringing it to the table, sharing. It is challenging in the sense that we are re-arranging original music, that in itself is a challenge, and working with the other musicians to contribute a different energy to it.

For the artists, also, personal creative development varies depending on their role in the project and the nature of their contribution. For Suzie, the whole experience of working on *Glorious* has made building relationships with people more central to the way she works. She feels it has broadened her practice.

It's helped me to feel confident about letting people (my students for example) be the way they are. *Glorious* is very freeing. 'Let something be what it is,' Steve [a Newcastle musician] said. 'Every sound has a meaning.'

Creative exploration for the design occurred during the initial process of conceiving the work. Now Lucille's challenge is to work with the personalities of the individuals in order to facilitate and integrate their being themselves on stage, comfortable, confident, and looking good. This challenge is echoed by Sheila who needs to work out how to bring out the best in the participants:

That's the bit I can develop and learn from, and will always learn from.

Having made many changes and refinements after the *Glorious* preview and premiere, Rajni feels that, in Newcastle, for the first time they have a show to work with. This presents an exciting challenge as a director and as a performer.

We can play around and do what we set out to do – we can really tailor the show to the place ... In future, ideally, we can take this model and adapt it to each place so that it really is a unique celebration for that location and a reflection of the people who live there.

As *Glorious* is made in different places, the show continues to change and grow. After Newcastle, it takes place in Mons, Belgium. When it comes to Lancaster, the company brings new learning and ideas to the process. The enquiry and dialogue between the artists, the participants, and the Presenters is part of the dynamism of the project and gives it a healthy edge and energy.



Part Two: Exploring

Newcastle: during the workshop and rehearsal period 24 October – 1 November 2011, Elizabeth interviews artists, performers and musicians over the phone or face to face, prior to the dress rehearsal. Lancaster: second interviews are conducted by Leo Burtin during November 2012 and post show by Leo and Elizabeth, December 2012 – February 2013.

2.1 Discovery

Suzie is quite amazing, she pulls things out of the air.

The project opens up possibilities for both artists and participants to explore and learn – creatively, technically, and about what is possible for themselves and for the work. All seven musicians interviewed describe being stretched by the project. One student is enjoying working in groups instead of alone, while another is delighted by the opportunity to improvise:

The amount of lenience ... the whole improvisation side has been a real shock to me. It's quite strange to be allowed to do that. It's taught me so many things, how to improvise on the spot, things you wouldn't normally do, you just try them out and it works.

We have never had the chance [before this] to do whatever we want with the music, it's great. It helps us to progress and work as a team and respect each other.

Just as much as the musicians are surprised by the openness of the music-making process, Suzie enjoys discovering how creative they are and what they are achieving:

I don't have prior expectations. I never have any expectations going in. Here in Newcastle I've been able to work with the group dynamic from the word go and work directly with individuals.

Sheila echoes this attitude, supporting the perception of the open approach and the ‘opening up’ process integral to making *Glorious*, which comes through from all the interviews.

For one performer, discovery lies in receiving unexpected appreciation for the texts they are writing:

The piece of text Rajni and Sheila chose for the show, a letter to someone ... I thought it was slight but they were raving about it ...I think that they saw something [in it] that people could relate to, funny, natural.

For another it's the space to create:

To express a part of myself I thought I'd lost for a while, with the support from the company. No one doubted you.

In Lancaster, Rajni initiated some measures to increase the show's accessibility. She wrote a show description and asked Live at LICA to make it available to their audience, which, in turn, opened up a discussion about other things the venue could offer. A touch tour prior to the show was arranged and a signer engaged. Discovering how to effect these simple and easy measures was timely and helped to contribute to the ambition for the show.

I'm slightly frustrated that we've never done this before ... All of those things occurred to me as things that the venue does. It made me realise that I can take more responsibility for those things. It opened up more about how the show read, it gave it more depth.

The process of discovery can involve a high degree of risk, and this inherent quality attracted Suzie from the outset.

This kind of work allows you to be a human being. I love the fact that, even though I have my toolkit of activities and you do plan ... you don't know what's going to happen until you start working with people. You mostly have to think on your feet. You have to be prepared for the unexpected. I like what composer R. Murray Schafer says: 'You should teach on the verge of peril'.

2.2 Strangers

The performers are strangers, how can I talk to them? They are all different, new people.

Halfway through the process, the reflections on working with a diverse group of strangers indicate a mixture of openness and reticence, confidence and shyness. It is clear that the company works hard to make everyone feel welcome, comfortable, and able to move at their own pace. People appreciate that although the stakes are high, they are not being pressurised. There is a sense that the process is as important as the final production and they are enjoying getting to know each other through writing, talking, and listening. There is also a sense that the work is serious and purposeful.

[RSP] are very patient, kind, and encouraging, and they're very gentle with their direction. They also seem quite at peace with themselves. They seem happy and positive and optimistic and that helps.

I like it, I like to see what they bring to the table, how they do things. I am always open to that. They are strangers but they're sort of – in my world – aspects of me that I haven't met yet, or aspire to or want to run away from...

One musician is struck by the opportunity this approach to casting creates:

The most surprising thing was how the actual public off the street was involved in writing the script. One thing I was concerned about, I suppose, was who might get involved, who you might meet on the street in Morecambe. There must be a lot of people who would shy away from something like that, who might be quite interesting. That sort of approach to musical theatre should be used more often and if it became commonplace people might see it as more of a likely thing to do.

The challenge of bringing three distinct communities together on the Lancaster University campus is reflected in several interviews. For example, one student describes the opportunity to mix with people from different educational and musical backgrounds as ‘a breath of fresh air’. Working with strangers encourages her to stay open-minded to ‘the way they think and convey their thought processes’. This isn’t always the case for everyone, however. A performer from Morecambe comments:

Some of the students are a bit immature. Suzie doesn’t pick up on their cheekiness.

This is poignant in its juxtaposition with this comment from a Lancaster resident:

Because they are strangers, we want to give them gifts. The students – Off the Rails are trying to help them. We want to make it a safe place for them amongst all these middle-aged weirdos!

2.3 Trust

The biggest challenge is that you have to pretty much instantly trust these people because you have to write a show with them and it has to be good.

The participants and musicians trust the artists. Maybe that is not surprising: they know that RSP have done this before. But more importantly, the company creates a working environment

that is nurturing and generates trust, confidence, and a sense of purpose between all the participants.

How do the artists manage the tension between being prepared to completely let go and the need to produce a high quality piece of work for the performance? Rajni acknowledges the huge risk she is taking.

She has built responsiveness and flux into the working process and constantly assesses and questions what might/could happen.

The way we have built the project, it means that you can do things like go and pick someone up from another town, who is feeling quite vulnerable, and talk to them. We also gave ourselves permission to work quite in-depth with people who really wouldn’t do this kind of thing normally. There’s a lot of trust in other people, not just in our team but outside of it as well. And we’re actually living that, not just thinking, what would it be like if we took a leap of faith? And then living that in a professional setting.

For Live at LICA, trust has been crucial and integral to the relationship with Rajni and the *Glorious* project. They have supported the process from the early discussion stage when RSP were not sure what *Glorious* would even be. The Creative Producer acknowledges that trust is vital for artistic risk-taking and that is why it is important to ‘create relationships with artists that allow them leeway to experiment or to open things up’. This approach, however, does present challenges to the venue in terms of marketing and publicity: to find the right words and images that will convey the work and to attract the widest audience to experience the performance.



2.4 Communication

We are all different. We try to make a conversation with each other. Through music we can tell others how we feel.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the participants say they best express their emotions and feelings through playing music or writing. Five of the six speaker/performers interviewed describe how the project is psychologically useful to them at this particular time. For example:

This is a challenge because it's about me. It's a very personal piece of writing. I am ready. I accept the things that have happened to me ... but ask whether it's okay to share these bits or those bits. That's what it is for me, this performance, a challenge, [which is] definitely right for me. I'm feeling very here and now with it. I'm up for taking risks.

I'm okay communicating face to face when I'm well. I'm prone to depression and can be up and down, so when I'm like that I prefer writing.

It was a very nurturing environment where I could feel like I could [perform] again ... like the spark of something, a light showing you the way forward, that's what it felt like.

The speakers also comment on the value of working with the company on techniques for feeling more comfortable on stage.

I have never thought about making a relationship with a stage or an audience – entering and leaving the stage, how to walk, smile, respond, listen to someone.

Being aware of the use of the microphone and slowing down. When you are expressing something personal you don't want to ham it up. With Rajni, we explored use of eye contact.

Lucille adds to this work on physical technique with a level of personal attention to the performers and musicians, who are each given one-to-one consultations about what they would like to wear. Memories attached to clothes are discussed, any minor repairs and alterations made, and any accessories needed either found or adjusted. She is conscious of giving what is required, of not being intrusive. Some people want more support than others. Her role is to help them look the way they want to look. Through conversations that start early on in the process she also reinforces the ideas that she thinks fit the overall look of the show. Knowing what they are going to wear supports the performers feeling confident on stage, and she says the cast are grateful not to have to worry about it.

2.5 Glorious?

What is *Glorious*? Is it a thing or a feeling? Is it something you do, share or even experience? Well, it's this and much, much more.

The project is described as 'glorious' by the participants because they have a unique opportunity to create a performance that will entertain and move their audience. They appreciate the freedom of the creative process and the manner in which the project is hosted and facilitated.

The freedom of creativity is what *Glorious* is for me. It's the process, it's the 'before the performance'. It's creating something, feeling responsible for it, nurturing it, nurturing it together, changing things, having feedback, being ourselves, and sharing that with an audience.

How nice and calm and chilled everyone is. I have worked on plays where after two weeks everyone hates each other!

Just being invited to write whatever we wanted and perform it. The fact they organised

everything for us, that we could just be ourselves on stage ... and they wanted to listen to our own ideas, our own stories, as ourselves.

Suzie says the project is glorious because it gives people a space to be themselves – and from this space they project something about their humanity that they own and can be proud of. Lucille talks about the way hope is central to the whole creative process and this thread then runs right through the show. From previous feedback, she says, this hope is also palpable for the audience. For Rajni, the way the musicians have transformed the songs is glorious. They make her smile – quite a challenge, she says, as the original versions are rather slow and melancholic.

2.6 Challenges

We all want to see everyone in the process as being equal – but that's different from us all having the same role.

In one sense, RSP are casting the show, but the process seems to be a collaborative task with the strangers they meet. If someone is really keen, a place will be found for them. They look for people who haven't performed before. Through the letter-writing intervention, followed by workshops and conversations, somehow the company find the people they want to prioritise to have the experience. It is a subtle approach and not an exact science. Careful choices about the locations for the interventions help to determine the kind of people who do take part.

It's about the conversations, people who have the time and inclination to stop and talk – they have time for a reason, they want a conversation, maybe they are not working, or they are drawn to the content. There is a kind of organic logic at work in the approach.

A closer observation and analysis of the intervention and workshop process in several locations would yield some fascinating data about the process of casting strangers in *Glorious*.

This would require resources beyond the scope of this evaluation research, but the learning could be useful for others exploring behaviour, community engagement, and creative expression.

During projects like this, the challenges the participants face in their daily lives are continually part and parcel of what the artists need to acknowledge and respond to with sensitivity, empathy, and pragmatism. Working with unpredictability is familiar territory for many practitioners. However, in most of these projects and interventions, a set of allies and education or community partners are involved who can take responsibility for or share the pastoral support of the participants. By working with strangers,

RSP is taking on direct responsibility for their relationship with individuals who perform in *Glorious*. That is why the casting process is a careful one. By the final project in Lancaster, the company are reflecting further on the challenges presented by the collaborative process:

The thing that we've been able to do more and more as we've become more comfortable with the project is to learn from people, and to be able to take on their thoughts and ideas when maybe they are challenging something that we are saying or we think might work. It's finding that balance and taking responsibility for who we are within that process. Which is interesting, because all our instincts and the language we use is about equality, and we all want to see everyone in the process as being equal – but that's different from us all having the same role. So it's just treading the line between those two things: explaining and allowing each person to have their own role but within that also allowing them to have a real stake in this bigger thing.

Specific challenges arose through music students being required to participate as part of their course at Lancaster University. This necessitated dialogue about why the project was worth doing, the extra time it required, and its value to the students. It also required sensitive and

robust management on the part of the company when a student's disruptive behaviour and attitude was having a negative impact on the people around them. This person was asked to leave the project, as it seemed clear his interest and commitment wasn't there. However, this dramatic action proved to be a catalyst for the individual who renewed his commitment to the project, declaring his enjoyment and interest in *Glorious* but also the emotional challenge it presented.

For Live at LICA the challenge is to both market and explain the show to others.

I think the language is complicated. I don't want them to come and see the show because they think it's 'a good thing' as opposed to being a good piece of work.

2.7 Place

So many different places with different conditions. I suppose that's one of the things we are trying to communicate, that other people do have the same experiences of the world as you do. It's reassuring to know that, that people have the same pains and joys.

Rajni and Sheila work with the performers to explore how they experience the places where they live. The Newcastle group like talking about their city and most of them live in it by choice or circumstance. An exercise that asked people to map their route from home into the city centre generated a shared conversation about special spaces and landmarks. In Lancaster the group went on walks and visited areas that had significance for them.

I love the areas man hasn't tamed. The river, the cycle track, Clougha Pike, Ryland's Park, Millennium Orchard, canal walk. But that's only because closed-minded people haven't had the chance to take over.

(Extract from monologue by Amy Dobbie, Lancaster performance)

RSP's successful effort to engage people from the three distinct communities of Morecambe, Lancaster, and the university campus is referenced by several participants and members of the audience. There is a widely expressed negative perception of Morecambe.¹⁰ This seaside town suffers from greater social and economic deprivation than its sister town and is defended with passion by one of the speakers:

Where is your fight? Why aren't you using your sea defences? You've let the sea of excuses swallow you up and spit you out. For God's sake! You were voted a crap town! You were once great! You still have so much to give. There is life in you yet. You have the most amazing sunsets, a glorious bay, stunning views of the Lake District; and the people aren't that bad either. Stand up and fight. Build your resources, don't fall to ruin. We'll work together, you and I. I'll support you. I'll take your hand and lead the way. You'll be on the road to recovery soon. (Extract from monologue by Amy Dobbie, Lancaster performance)

Sheila says that whilst the process has explored how place resonates for individuals, there is also the aspect of the mapping of people's experiences in time. The theatre space, where everyone will gather to share what has been created in partnership and collaboration with an audience, is another tangible focus – a container for all these experiences to come together for just one night.

¹⁰ In addition to the interviews for this report, I observed this negative perception in conversations with taxi drivers, residents, cast and audience members.





Part Three: Sharing

*I attend the dress rehearsals and the performance of *Glorious* in Newcastle on 1 November 2011, when I see the production for the first time, and the final performance in Lancaster on 1 December 2012. This section is based on observations, interviews, and conversations with all the participants after the performance and during the weeks and months that followed. After each performance a representative sample¹¹ of 10 audience members at each venue gave us their immediate reactions to the show. My own observations as an audience member are also included, indicated by italics.*

3.1 Audience

We just walk on and do it. It helped walking out and coming in with the audience, it gave us a connection to them. Behind the drum-kit, I was in the zone ready to play.

Preparing the musicians and artists for the performance is low-key. There is no formal pre-show preparation, no big group ‘psyching-up’, just a quiet moment of coming together and sharing one exercise before walking into the foyer.

The audience gather in the foyer and then Rajni and the full company, including all participants, come to join us, to welcome us to the show and lead us into the theatre. Rajni greets the audience to signal that the performers and audience are all doing something together. In Newcastle, where this greeting is first introduced, she feels the coming together during *Glorious* has been experienced more strongly than in the previous locations:

It’s about a lot of different types of people coming together, people who we have met in the shopping centre as well as the performers, musicians, and their friends and family

11 We gathered responses which aimed to reflect a balance of age range and gender.

... What makes it different is that a lot of people in the audience have some kind of relationship to the journey we have been on. Others may have come because they read about it. There's a real mix in the space.

This experience is held and developed. After travelling to the theatre from Morecambe and Lancaster on the bus laid on for audience members, Rajni reflects:

I felt more than ever that we all entered the theatre together. That we as a full company with an audience entered that space together with a sense of anticipation, but with a kind of equality between us and an equal sense of not knowing. That's what really stood out to me about Lancaster.

The performance is absorbing, surprising in form and content, entertaining, with a visual and performance aesthetic that brings simplicity, a sense of control, and clarity to frame the personal monologues performed by their authors, and the ideas and emotions expressed through the songs and music.

Watching it again in Lancaster I am struck by the capacity of the format to hold its core ideas, to dynamically absorb local musical interpretation, and to enable distinct voices to emerge. The greater number of participants and the increased movement on stage around the still central figure not only conveys the joyous tumult of humanity but also heightens the contrasting themes of solitude, stillness, and reflection.

This extract from a review of the show in Lancaster offers a useful brief description of the performance:

Described as a 'musical in three acts' each section of *Glorious* is woven around the same 'core' material which includes: a suite of songs performed by Rajni Shah, monologues

created for the show and read out by six local speakers, a 'set' that consists of various chairs, microphones and flowers and Shah's monumental costume that holds her immobile in the centre of the stage. In each section elements are added or subtracted or the various bits are re-arranged. Chairs and flowers are moved around in different configurations; more and more sections are added to the costume; the monologues unfold a piece at a time; on each repetition, the lyrics of the songs are truncated while the accompaniment expands from simple piano to dense and complex orchestration.

In the first 'act' Shah introduces the songs in their full version and in their 'original' settings accompanied by the piano. The lyrics of these songs are in the present tense and addressed to 'you', referring to people, places, actions and relationships in a fashion that is abstracted and poetic enough to allow them to apply to the here and now, especially when juxtaposed with the 'local' monologues. These told of an encounter with a burnt forest on holiday, of feelings of love, pride and exasperation for Morecambe as a place, of an unfinished sculpture and time running out for the sculptor, of love for family and friends, of 'ten things you must know' and of a busy but fulfilling daily routine. This latter was especially touching in its sense of gratitude for the simple pleasures and challenges of living, and a couple of these accounts contained welcome flashes of humour. Together they gave a sense of being offered a genuine glimpse into some of the preoccupations and emotions of the people we pass everyday on the street, who might in many ways be 'different' to ourselves but ultimately not alien to us.¹²

After each performance, audience members were asked how the ideas in the show resonated or struck a chord with them and what they would take away from the event. Their responses can be grouped into three areas: **form and staging** of the production; **content and ideas**; and **feelings and emotions**.¹³

¹² Geraldine Harris, '*Glorious*, Rajni Shah Company, Lancaster (and Morecambe) December 2012' <http://dramaqueensreview.com/2013/01/12/glorious-rajni-shah-company-lancaster-and-morecambe-december-2012/> (12 January 2013)

¹³ Analysis indicates a total of 14, 19, and 14 comments on each aspect respectively.



Form and staging: Comments about the production observed how the incorporation of the technical and visual set-up into the performance breaks down barriers between audience, performer, and production team. One person felt that the foyer introduction had raised expectations of a more participatory role for the audience and notes how the performers were mostly static throughout. Another struggled to find coherence between the different aspects of the show. Two people are intrigued by the use of repetition:

A monologue started and the next time they appeared and repeated the lines ... you seemed to get to know them more and you listen more to each line.

You tried to put a story, tried to figure out what they were talking about and where they had come from, like returning to a page in a book: 'Now what was all that about then?'

Two people appreciate the 'odd, strange' mix of personal narratives and the theatricality of the singer, her dress, and the music. One describes his 'grumbles' with some 'annoying technical things', 'music out of balance' in Acts 1 and 2. However, he felt by Act 3, 'it was what it was' and realised that his these initial thoughts 'were a bit unnecessary, that place I was going to with all those thoughts!'

I wasn't sure until the last act, and then as people starting leaving and we heard the reduced stories, it became poignant, about letting go and endings.

Other comments address the poetry of the lyrics, the music, Rajni's voice, the monologues, how the elements work together, and how the themes flowed through the piece:

The whole idea of it being a tapestry, something about the human spirit, individual voices and commonality ... Very positive, from ordinary people, they could be faces in the crowd – they have different life experiences, but it's about the shared ones as well.

Content and ideas: Six people talk about the ideas that resonated with them, both in general and specifically. These relate to friendship and time, loss, and appreciating the detail of our lives. Two mention the symbolism of the singer's dress:

Right at the start she was like earth mother, then afterwards the base becomes the knottiness, the detritus of human life.

The concept of the dress – was it a tree, was it hinting at the industrial heritage of Newcastle? There were layers and growth. I would have liked more signposting.

Others reflect on what we wish and hope for and ask some personal questions:

Why do I fly around like an idiot in day-to-day life and why can't I just calm down and be calm and peaceful like I have been tonight?

Would I want to be that person up on the stage opening myself up, giving that personal narrative? Would I want to do that and look at myself in that way?

In Lancaster one woman sees people in the Nuffield Theatre that she doesn't normally see:

I teach here and have never seen anything like it, different people, from different environments. It gave me a nice feeling of hope and a sense of community. We don't have this here, we are criticised for that at the university.

Feelings and emotions: In Newcastle, eight people describe feeling moved emotionally by the performance. This ranges from feeling involved, 'the audience felt part of something together', being moved by the honesty and poignancy of the personal experiences recounted in the monologues, to feeling 'embraced' by the music.



In Lancaster most people are happier talking about their feelings and emotions than the ideas in the show because ‘It’s too soon to say. After a show you deal with feelings.’ They describe *Glorious* as ‘beautiful and touching’, ‘powerful’, ‘poignant’, ‘it gave a sense of hope’ – and that they will be thinking about it for a while:

I’m sure it’s going to be a long burner in my mind, my body, my heart. It will keep resonating for days and weeks.

I feel quite calm. [The show] was almost like a chant, slowing me down to take things in, to relax a bit more. A reminder to enjoy the everyday, to take positives out of the simple things in life.

You get taken away from thinking about other peoples’ lives by the hurly burly of everyday life and by yourself, from thinking about the shared emotions.

At Live at LICA one of the two producers reflects:

I think we really split the audience with it. The work doesn’t get unanimous delight, it gets people questioning. I didn’t get to grips with it and other people love it. That’s fine, that’s okay, but it remains a difficult beast to promote to a general public.

He reports specific critical feedback from five people who expressed difficulty with hearing the lyrics, not understanding what the show was about, and who questioned or disliked the implications of Rajni’s role as a central, still, elevated figure on stage, and what they described as the implied politics of that image. With regard to the last point, his colleague offers an alternative perspective. She perceives the central presence as one that physically holds the work and makes it a safe place, giving the speakers the power to express themselves:

Rajni appears to be taking ultimate responsibility for the work. Rajni clearly steps into the costume, signalling her role as a performer, and steps out of it at the end ... We’ve had a very fantastic audience and it was a very, very positive experience. It’s very rare that we get to see a stage that is absolutely full of people. I love the audience piling on at the end of the show, to see the theatre populated in that way and people engaging with each other.

Two of the performers reflect on the audience experience:

We invited the audience (we were the audience) we sang, spoke, shared and invited them into our beautiful world. We broke that fourth wall, in fact it wasn’t there. We entered and left the performance space together. Each of us having changed in a profound way by gaining a new and fresh insight not only into ourselves but another person. In a way the audience wrote us a letter, one of acceptance ... Our words, our ideas, ourselves ... a spotlight fell on us, and that was our moment to tell our stories and share that little bit of ourselves. There was tension, electricity, magic, unity, and love that night.

They felt energised. It had a profound impact. It was powerful, cosmic. The show connected with them, they enjoyed it, were knocked sideways, definitely moved by it, they had emotional responses.

The feedback indicates a rich range of critical and emotional responses from the audience sample. The form was a challenge for some but nevertheless intriguing. The content and ideas were engaging, entertaining, thought provoking, and emotionally resonant.

In Newcastle, when the audience is asked about the word ‘glorious’, some people comment on feeling at one with everyone in the room; the warm, welcoming atmosphere; the flowers given

out at the end; and empathy for the performers and their stories. For others, the word glorious does not resonate with their experience:

‘Glorious’ is such a beautiful word. There’s beauty in the voice and everyday experiences but glorious means so much more for me than that.

I felt it was a bit evangelical; I was a bit uncomfortable with that.

Rajni comments that the show is challenging the usual definitions of the word ‘glorious’:

...trying to redefine what the word ‘glorious’ might mean – it’s making a stand for a quieter and perhaps more internal state than the word usually implies.

3.2 Creativity

That day, walking into the library was a chance encounter, almost poetic.

When asked about the impact of the project on their creativity, the responses from the participants cover technical, expressive, and attitudinal changes. For the six performers interviewed there is increased confidence in their creativity and/or in how they value it.

I value my creativity more. I’ve asked myself if I am creative in ways I wasn’t before.

It has made me more open to expressing emotions in my work, although I’ve tried to do so in a quite wry, brutally simplistic way. Usually ... I would give away nothing personal and view doing so as self-indulgent.

It made me realise how important being creative is, because for a while work and stress have stunted that side of me. I’ve had a chance to reflect through writing for fun, not for a purpose or reason.



However, one speaker eloquently articulates his reflections on the flip side of this opportunity:

My creativity? I'm not using it enough ... I'm not a writer, I've been playing at it a long, long time. If I am using other people's definitions of what a writer is – pen and paper, time – I have plenty of that. I stumbled across the letter-writing and that made me do it, but otherwise it would not happen.

All seven musicians interviewed in both locations spoke about the creative benefits of the experience in terms of opening up their minds about performance, collaborating creatively, and enabling them to experiment. The musical director of Off the Rails says the experience of *Glorious* has already affected the group. They are thinking more creatively about future activities. At their recent AGM, a few people put forward ideas, 'more than would happen normally'. For him personally, *Glorious* has been developmental. During a chat in a taxi home with one of the performers, he recalls a discussion that led him to conclude:

Maybe it's okay to indulge oneself in being creative, and accept the tension between family and stealing time for yourself. It's okay to make artistic things happen, it's as good a role model as anything.

Another Off the Rails member says he felt reassured by working with professionals:

... what I was doing was valid; it validated what we do with Off The Rails.

The fact that the Lancaster show is the final performance of *Glorious* is quite overwhelming for Rajni as a performer. She mentions several times, as do the other artists, 'being present', both during the workshop process and being on stage. She attributes this to the size of cast, the large yet intimate space of the Nuffield Theatre, and travelling by bus to the performance with some of the audience – which meant she couldn't 'panic or worry or be absent'.



There was no space to be scared ... it really wasn't at all about me. From the start it was about being with people, standing for something, and being a part of something.

One of the significant features of *Glorious* is that the performance in each place happens just once, which can heighten the experience for the cast and possibly the audience. For this final performance this unique experience was shared by the artists for the first time.

Doing the show for the last time meant that it felt very different, very precious. One of the themes is an unknown future together and that was really present for all of us, especially at the end.

3.3 Collaboration

We ask them to step into the unknown.

Creative collaboration takes place on several levels and across different timescales: between members of the RSP company; with the presenters; between RSP and the musicians; and between RSP and the performers. Managing, producing, and delivering the process is dependent upon careful planning and understanding the nature of each type of collaboration. Some of the artistic team have been collaborating creatively for years, while others are working with the company for the first time. They share a commitment to the project's approach to engagement, to staying open to whatever the individual musicians and performers bring to the process. In Newcastle and Lancaster, members of the company appreciate the time given to setting up relationships between the musicians and performers during workshops prior to rehearsals. This helped to build the sense of company that was experienced on stage and seems to have been communicated through to some of the audience we spoke to.

The relationship with the musicians and the speakers is very specific, described by Rajni as a micro-collaboration occurring within defined parameters, and she thinks that this helps people to decide to take part. The roles are clear and their contribution is defined:

[The performers] can speak in their own voice but trust us to deliver a professional show. There is a level of friendship there, too. It's not really a collaboration, it's not co-production, their role is as performers ... It's about saying something in your own voice as part of a piece of work whose themes resonate with you.

Listening to the performers, artists, and presenters, the importance of mutual trust is mentioned frequently. Everyone is bearing some risk. The performers may feel that it is an important moment to have the experience of standing on stage and speaking in their own voice, but it also feels like a bold step, a brave step. RSP, Wunderbar, and Live at LICA, despite their careful framing of the project, must have faith that the individuals will have, or will find, the personal resources to come through the whole process. It is not unexpected or unsurprising that a few people need to drop out during workshops or rehearsals.

For Suzie, working with the musicians is different and feels more like co-production. There is a format, a structure, which gives space for the contribution of the musicians to exist. They have to rearrange and rewrite the material and make it their own, which she says is a real test of the skills of the musician. Classically trained musicians can find this way of working quite challenging. Rajni is pleased that the musicians took greater control in Newcastle than in previous locations. They said that they didn't want all the songs to be sad. This experience opened up new possibilities for the company. What might be possible in other cities? Could RSP set up a *Glorious* community choir for anyone to join?

The power and evocation of the simple, celebratory act of singing together, which includes all of the Glorious team – even the producer who is busy on her phone but stops to join in – helps evoke the sense of equality which appears to exist between all of the individuals involved in bringing this version of Glorious alive.

(Extract from rehearsal observation by Jenny Duffy, research student placement, Wunderbar)

The ambition to work with a larger ensemble was realised in Lancaster. The two musical groups are at different stages of their lives, bringing different expectations and experiences to the collaborative process. However, two people from each stage describe receiving a confidence boost that has triggered a willingness to get involved in the future, 'like another bit of bolster in the world'. Three musicians describe the impact the project has had on their own approach to music-making, their desire to spend more time exploring musical ideas, and their thinking about how they communicate with different audiences. They have personal questions about their own creativity, a resolve to practise more, and a recognition of how interesting collaboration can be with theatre performers and designers.

It's very rare for me to come in to the theatre world. I just do gigs normally, so it's much more interesting to collaborate. It's more evidence that this is worth doing, because it's quite scary to give up one's control of something and invite someone else in. But it's more exciting.

Analysing the nature of the collaborative process both for the company and herself shortly after Lancaster, Rajni felt that the team had come into its own:

It was like the ultimate *Glorious!* Genuinely a space where anything could happen – trust and collaboration were very close together.

3.4 Ideas

There was a sense of 'human-ness' about it. We were all in it together, wherever we came from.

The musicians and performers were asked if the project had made them think about any particular issues or ideas and if it had raised any questions for them. One loves the broader concept of *Glorious*:

I appreciate the glory of every day. There's a couple of TV programmes that bang on about that and how interconnected everything is, which is the sort of feeling that I got from *Glorious*. The world now is so crowded, we have to understand that it's a special place and be a bit more gentle with it.

A musician wants to re-examine the text and lyrics:

I want to look through the script again, I want to look at Rajni's words again because a lot of them affected me ... I want to think about some of the things she said and what they might mean to me. For example, part of her words were about letting go of stuff, objects and people, and I wasn't sure exactly what she was saying but it stirred something in me. I want to reflect on it and perhaps give Rajni a shout.

It helped some make creative or personal connections:

The ideas about things falling apart, losing things that are precious and still honouring them – the lyrics are fierce and gentle at the same time ... Interesting to contrast with some hip hop, the same vibe of themes – but the same message is delivered in a more gentle way, and this is more powerful.

No questions, just answers. Mainly: when you love someone it 'never really goes away', which admittedly I wrote, but not until I worked my issues out in the writing exercises.

It tapped into the zeitgeist of the way I am feeling or experiencing the world at the moment.

One musician speaks about Rajni's costume as a symbol of life and letting go of it; how it was built up during the show from a simple beginning to something complex and multi-layered:

Then, at the end, Rajni stepped out of it, wearing something very simple. She just let it go. The costume is like how we grow up in life. Like a tree, it grows.

For Sheila, the ideas and themes became clearer in Lancaster, where she felt she had understood better how to tie the workshops to the piece as a whole. Each workshop used one of the songs as a kind of 'spine,' which then influenced its theme (e.g. the weather) and the content of the participant's writing, its relevance, depth, and subtlety.

Suzie reflects on the idea that maybe we need to practice improvising more in our lives, to make the space to play more. This helps us to make valuable connections to each other and between ideas:

It alters the sense of time and makes us present in time and it makes us feel great!

Lucille makes an interesting observation about risk, commitment, and value. The *Glorious* team is very flexible in the way it responds to the individuals who become involved in the writing and performing in terms of managing their commitment and attendance. If a rehearsal can't be attended, a one-to-one, at their convenience, is scheduled. 'There's almost no getting out of it, if you are really flexible,' says Lucille. This flexibility is a way of demonstrating to participants that the project, and their contribution, is so important that the artists will go to great lengths to accommodate them. It's an interesting way of conveying value and status both to the participants and the project. The stakes are high and the risks are shared.



3.5 Community

There's lots of people here tonight who I don't normally see at the theatre who are part of my community. I feel there is a celebration of that community in *Glorious*.

A sense of community, how we feel part of one and how we can be part of one – these questions are quietly interrogated through the show's themes and boldly addressed through the way the project is deliberately created from previously unconnected individuals and groups in a location. The performers are strangers to each other and to everyone else in the company.¹⁴ The musicians know people within their own groups. The artists are at the centre, making new connections within and across all the groups, communicating ideas and developments during the creative process. This means that the community of *Glorious* discovers and makes itself through rehearsal and performance.

The interviews indicate that this very particular social engineering has generated surprise, reflection, and questions for participants. It's as if *Glorious* holds up a mirror to the community it gathers together and asks its people to take a fresh look at who they are, what they see and feel, and what might be missing.

When asked about any impact on their perceptions of community, the younger interviewees describe experiencing some change as a result of the project. For one, this is a change in attitudes to older people and to people not like themselves. Others mention now knowing people outside student circles and beyond the bubble of the campus, increasing their capacity for team work, and having some prejudices challenged and confounded:

I'm a lot more open minded ... The people arriving for *Glorious* weren't what I had in mind. I wouldn't have put them in the show. I had preconceptions. I judged them, and I was wrong.

An older performer in Newcastle attributes her increased confidence in organising community action with local residents to being part of *Glorious*. A Lancaster performer has decided to become more politically active in her local Morecambe community, with a longer-term aspiration to become an MP. She and her husband have also been galvanised to be more creatively active and are setting up a writing group. They have started with small interventions – letters left around town for strangers to find, and poems in bottles sent off from the end of the pier.

One of the musicians felt that the Off the Rails players contributed to a sense of community through bringing their ease and experience at working with people from different backgrounds, musical or otherwise, and that this was appreciated by Suzie and Rajni.

In both places, the speakers talk about the enjoyment and stimulus of meeting and spending time with artists for the first time:

I'll be staying connected to Rajni and keeping an ongoing relationship with the *Glorious* crew.

They are allies and creative friends, there's a connection there that is permanent.

One of the problems is accepting where I am at, not having creative people around me, not having creative relationships. How much am I in control of my own destiny?

Working closely with artists and forming a relationship with them is an unusual and rare opportunity for those who find *Glorious*. The offer of the relationship is open-ended and only time will tell if individuals want or need to make contact beyond the project. Rajni appreciates that there will be frustrations and questions after the residencies and tries to prepare people for this during the process.¹⁵

14 One exception to this was in Lancaster, where a married couple joined as performers.

15 See 3.7 Reflection

Two audience members in Lancaster specifically mention a sense of being part of a community, albeit for one night, as a significant part of their experience of the performance. They also describe seeing on stage and in the audience ‘people who we don’t normally see here.’ The implication is people from a different socio-economic background, an observation that is backed up in a discussion with the venue director about their regular audience profile. One performer directly articulates this, describing his social circle’s perception of a community who are involved in *Glorious* (and in the arts in general) which is middle class and which they do not feel part of. However, he says that his friends who came to the show all remarked on how friendly the artists are, ‘really really nice, genuine’. He describes how excited and proud his friends and their children were to see him perform:

They don’t usually see people they know on stage, except perhaps at a school production.

The experience of the performance and the verbal feedback from audience and cast has given Rajni rewarding affirmation of what she and the company had tried to create in terms of a sense of community, and each of the individual artists expressed a profound personal sense of this phenomenon in Lancaster. The hopes for the project’s legacy are about the impact on individuals. Rajni says:

What’s next is really complicated. *Glorious* is a massive net of friendships and relationships, and I’m really interested in how these grow and what becomes of them. We have to confront the fact that the project is ending. The relationships that come from that project have begun and it’s up to us as individuals how we nurture them.

3.6 Communication

I think differently about way we communicate as human beings. Like finding friends, empowering, you’re not on you own.

Lucille reflected on how making the decorative buttonholes had given people the opportunity not only to be creative in a different way but to interact informally with people who they were not directly working with, and she would like to do more of this in future. The activity was geared towards people who don’t sew or make things on a regular basis. Even if people didn’t have time to sit and make, they could talk through their ideas for design and make decisions about colour and other elements.

Three men talk powerfully about the impact of the project on their thinking about personal communication:

I think differently about the way we communicate as human beings. Like finding friends, empowering, you’re not on you own. I like sharing my perceptions of the world with Rajni. The lasting legacy is empowerment, a strengthening of my world view.

In communicating our emotions I think we find it easier to do it indirectly. We don’t say what we feel, we say something that communicates our mood instead of saying what we feel and why we feel. I’m thinking about men especially, we tend to talk around it a bit more with our friends.

With *Glorious* you really have to think. You really had to think and feel about what you were writing. You put effort into it. You revise it. I don’t think we think about what we say as much as we would if we were writing a letter. Speaking personally, I think maybe I should put some more time and effort into thinking about some of the things I need to say to people in my life.

The Live at LICA producer talked about their team’s challenge of communicating *Glorious*, both in terms of recruitment and promoting the performance. However, after the production she is pleasantly surprised:



It wasn't a process where we were struggling to get people interested, it was brilliant – for work that is hard to define at the start, the number that engaged and time they put to the project and ownership they had, and how busy and buzzing the process was. Another positive was the almost immediate crossover of participants who then came to see other things that we were doing that season. That doesn't always happen. It's not audience development for us ... but it worked in that way which is quite rare.

3.7 Reflection

Art can be therapeutic, but also healing and redemptive as well.

In contrast to the prompt about ideas and questions, when I ask about what they would take forward or carry with them from this experience, the responses from everyone are varied and detailed. Several mention the enjoyment of working hard and well with such a diverse group of people, united in their goal; the creative challenges; working with the participants and the company in an atmosphere of mutual respect; increased confidence in their creative ability; and a renewed sense of purpose for their immediate ambitions for studying, writing, or performing.

There were some interesting personal responses that connect to RSP's aims for the project's legacy for individuals. The reflections indicate that the company members' approach to generating material is appreciated for its authentic spirit of collaboration and enquiry.

Standing and saying something that was a private part of me – I didn't feel she had a prescribed agenda, anything we wrote would be considered, something we were comfortable with.

I found it really beautiful to watch somebody like Sheila, the way she works and talks to the people she's working with.

We received comments on a postcard, personal feedback, positive things. It was a very nice thing to get, to hold the memory of it. A gift.

The feedback below validates some of the aims for *Glorious* articulated by Rajni, Suzie, Sheila, and Lucille, and the feelings and spirit they hope the show will evoke in participants and its audiences.

The general joy, the fun, the laughter, the friends, the being made to feel special and seeing that for the other performers as well, and the connection. Connection with the audience, definitely.

Seeing people put together a project with such tranquillity and good feeling has inspired me to be calmer in my personal life. Also being open to things. It came about through a chance meeting and I'm very glad it did.

Two musicians reflect on the way 'strangers' are involved as performers and how it has shifted their perspectives and thinking about making work.

All views are valid, it's a very powerful idea. I'm trying to carry that around with me. It means one is very open to rawness and vulnerability. It's a good way to function in your everyday life but doesn't come very naturally.

For the producer at Live at LICA, the most glorious thing was the team's commitment and drive. Her colleague also liked the use of the foyer, where activity spilled out of the theatre as people wrote scores and made the buttonholes, creating a buzz. He also commented:

I thought a particular strength was Suzie's approach to galvanizing and inspiring the musicians. She's really amazing doing what she did, having the confidence to work with

the jazz musicians and students all together and also be really tough and professional with them. That was glorious.

Having clarity of purpose as well as a creative vision helped Suzie's approach and carried her through some of the challenges of communicating what the show could be during the process. Sheila is taking away a more profound understanding about the kind of care necessary to deliver and to be part of this kind of work: care before, during, and after the art event.

There is a kind of fierceness to that care that is necessary when you are leading this kind of work. No-one should really feel this fierceness, but it should be there.

As already described, RSP are well aware that being part of such an intense project can leave people feeling bereft when it is over. The artists do all they can to prepare people for this experience and how to understand it as an inevitable part of the process. For the musicians who are familiar with rehearsal and performance this is better understood, but for the speakers this is unfamiliar territory:

What surprised me was the intensity of it all, the energy, the effort, the focus, it's not really something I do a lot of. So what has surprised me is the downside of it. Afterwards, now, I find it quite difficult personally because I enjoyed it so, and I didn't have anything else to do. It's quite an island of energy and intensity and I found it quite disappointing afterwards if the truth be known.

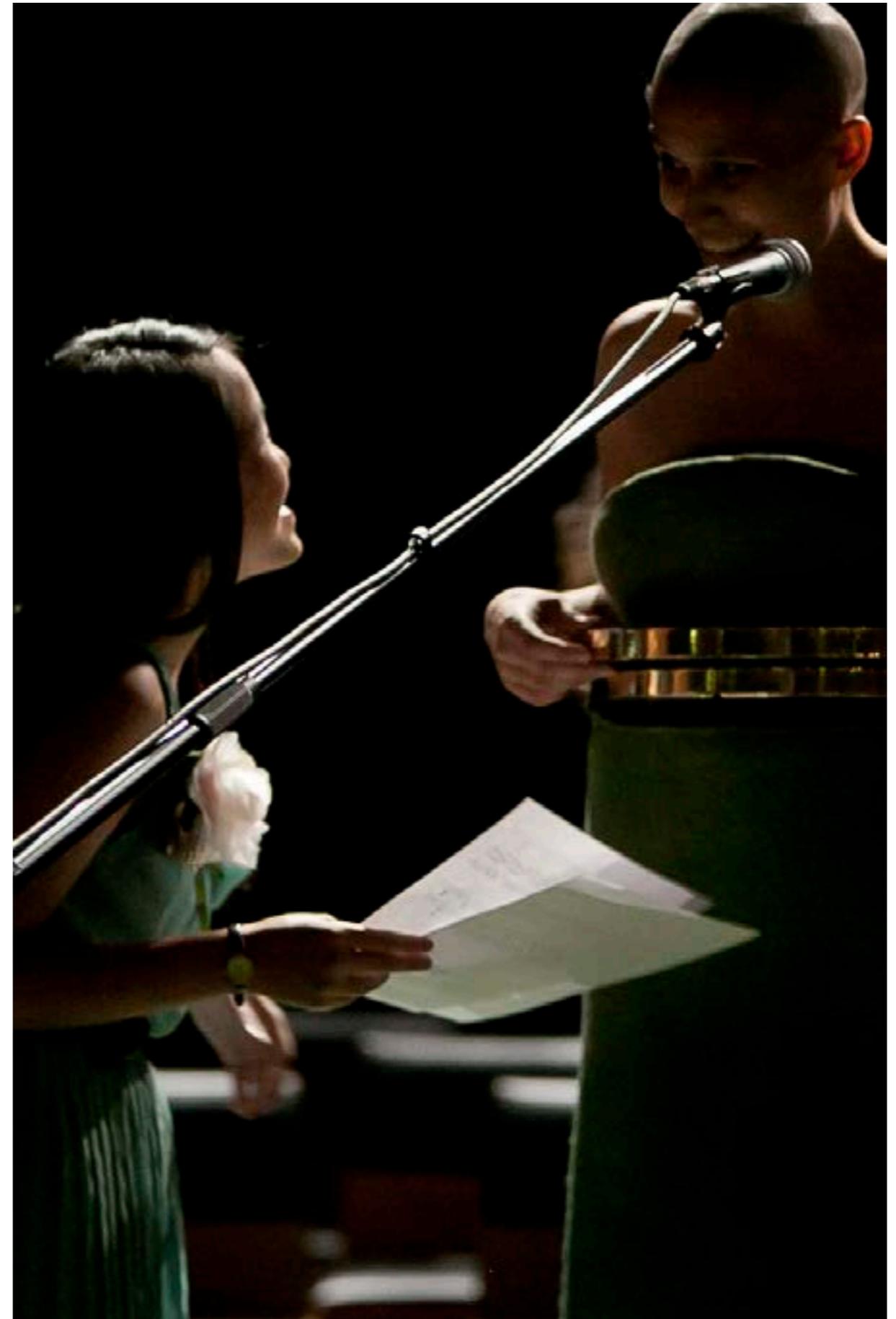
Whilst Rajni and Sheila present *Glorious* as an intense and important period of time with boundaries and responsibilities for all participants, they realise that it is still difficult to manage everyone's expectations. The offer to remain in contact, if people wish, is a sincere commitment – via the website for a while, and then through personal email and phone. It will be interesting to see how this pans out, not just this year or next, but in years to come. It could

be that several years pass before some people feel they want to acknowledge the significance of their experience through making contact. In the short term, there might be functional or social communication. What is important is that the ephemeral experience of making and performing *Glorious* is as whole as it can be at the time it takes place.

Reflecting on the 'exit' from the work, Sheila comments:

If we were to do this again, I would recommend we don't leave until a week after the performance – to allow some more support of the local performers, some time to reflect with them and help them set up a future plan and talk through 'what next'. It would have been good to have a proper meal with them post-show and perhaps even do a final bit of writing together to help the post-show blues.

A post-show plan like this might help to reinforce the support offered during the process, especially as it is hard to imagine 'post-production blues' if you are new to performing. However, on the evidence gathered in these interviews, I have two observations that support having confidence in people's capacity to absorb and use their creative experiences beyond a particular project. Most of those who took part in the evaluation interviews said it was a process that was useful and enjoyable in itself. It was an opportunity to think aloud and to process experiences, and many people commented on the usefulness of these questions. The replies were articulated with openness, honesty, and confidence, and people were free to challenge or bring their own questions. The second observation is about the social and creative capital generated during *Glorious* through dialogue, reflection, creativity, and action. It is evident from this research that this 'capital' held high value during the actual delivery timeframe. The memories made, and the creativity and change experienced by individuals, remain a lasting legacy that may not be formally captured or evaluated but cannot be discounted. *Glorious* is part of the continuum of these people's lives, and they will continue to draw from their experiences as they see fit and in ways we cannot imagine.





3.8 Beyond *Glorious*, 30 May – 2 June 2013

The whole idea of having a symposium came from *Glorious*. I don't think we have a language for talking about work that is open, generous and kind, and challenging and difficult as well. I really want to make a stand for that kind of work to be present in the world.

In order to close the *Glorious* project and open up its thinking to a wider audience, Rajni Shah Projects organised a public symposium entitled *Beyond Glorious: the radical in engaged artistic practices* to take place at Birkbeck, University of London; Artsadmin's Toynbee Studios; and Crisis Skylight London.

The symposium is described as follows:

What is the place of art in acts of social re-imagination and repair?

What languages can be found to articulate such practices?

Is it possible to break new ground within the realm of engaged artistic practices?

This symposium marks the end of Rajni Shah Projects' Glorious. It aims to bring together people from different spheres of life to discuss and experience the meanings, methods and effects of art in relation to engaged and radical practices

Using Glorious as a starting point, we are keen to explore the potential of engaged artistic practices, not in terms of a reductive understanding of the 'efficacy' of art in the world, but as a complicating, delicate, nuanced, uneasy journey towards new ways of thinking.

(www.rajnishah.com/beyond-glorious)

Insights, observations and questions

The nature of the engagement and participation

The testimony from the interviews is evidence for the perception by RSP and Presenters that the individuals who are ‘cast’ find *Glorious* rather than the other way round. The local residents become performers on stage but they are not required to ‘act’. They walk to the microphone, speak, place flowers on the stage, and exit. This movement is organised – you could say choreographed – but it is natural and minimal. I say ‘perform’ rather than ‘present’ because they are consciously taking part in an artwork that has a formal structure. They are the authors of the text they speak, but they have worked with the director on editing the content and selecting the phrases that will be repeated. The performers only reveal as much about themselves as they wish to disclose. The use of metaphor is powerful and discreet.

The journey to Newcastle reminds me of my life journey. There is a really, really steep hill that fits perfectly with my childhood. It is a relentless incline and one I am proud of reaching the summit of. At the top, there’s a large grassy area, and I fly my kite there when the weather is good. (Extract from monologue by Pauline Frost, Newcastle)

The relationships generated between the artists and the writer/speakers are intense and focused. They spend hours together both one-to-one and in small groups. This interaction produces considerable shifts in personal and creative confidence through the practical exercises such as writing tasks, image-making, walks, and conversations about their lives and experiences. The artists and individuals become friends and colleagues during the residency. The intense shared experience is temporary but significant. The project ends with a commitment from Rajni and other company members to remain in touch, if that is what is wanted. Time will test this offer. The fact of the offer is good, and indeed further contact isn’t necessary for the project to be successful in terms of its objectives. The commitment to a continued connection is part of the ethos of the approach.

The nature of the relationships between the artists and musicians is more varied across the two groups, reflecting the difference in numbers involved in each location and the way they collaborate on the music. However, amongst the seven musicians interviewed, four described developmental shifts in thinking about their work and in their attitudes to others as a result of participating in *Glorious*.

Collaboration within this project occurs within defined parameters so that roles and responsibilities are clear and risk can be approached without fear. The interviewees speak powerfully about their relationships with the artists and their values and qualities.

For an audience, the insight into ordinary lives offered by *Glorious* is an antidote to both reality and celebrity TV. The true stories offer emotion, insight, humour, reflection, and self-possession. There is neither sensationalism nor sentimentality. Nobody breaks down in tears. The performance generates a strong sense of togetherness for many people in the theatre. *Glorious* is powerful and moving but aims to provoke empathy and reflection rather than a sentimental response. Whilst for some audience members it was a baffling or opaque experience, the majority of the sample interviewed found much to like and reflect upon.

Characteristics of the creative process

The **qualities** and **values** described by artists and participants are trust, openness, kindness, curiosity, attention to detail, calmness, and hospitality.

The **timescale** provides the opportunity to build relationships over weeks/ months and offers a short period of intense productive activity. The company also make time for things to happen by planning carefully and being flexible.

People are valued for who they are and what they bring to the project. The artistic form is the framework for interaction; creative enquiry is the vehicle for engagement.

There are clear roles and responsibilities for the artists, participants, and presenters within a framework of equality.

The **ambition** for the project's tangible outcome, the public performance, is inspiring for the participants. There are high production values throughout the process, for the show, the website, and for the *Glorious* book and DVD.

The process generates **curiosity** and **mutual respect**.

Challenge and risk are framed as a positive and intriguing choice. *Glorious* offers a creative challenge to individuals, and the risk they take is shared with the artists and producers.

The fragility of the project is understood by the company and all the risks are embraced and managed carefully. The artists ensure that the local non-professional performers and musicians are in control of what they present to the public and that they are adequately prepared physically, emotionally, and technically to present themselves and their work with confidence, authenticity, and style.

Shift and change

The participants described the shifts and changes experienced as a result of being involved with *Glorious* in terms of:

Self-esteem, interaction and dialogue

- feeling valued for what they could offer
- communicating productively, listening and being listened to
- enjoying being with new/other/ different people
- spending time with artists
- being part of an event with artists and local people

Creativity and exploration

- experiencing/exploring something new
- being part of a stimulating, nurturing process
- enjoying the opportunity to express themselves creatively
- following their curiosity
- acquiring skills and knowledge

Reflection and action

- having the space to reflect on aspects of their lives, e.g. communication within their relationships, their agency within their community, their creativity
- thinking differently about their behaviour in respect to the above
- changes in attitude and perception
- deciding to take specific personal or social action
- influencing future choices

Questions

1. How can we talk meaningfully about the offer of a creative legacy?

One of the company's stated aims is 'to offer a creative legacy for each person who performs with the company'. I hope that a strong sense of the immediate legacy of making and performing *Glorious* is communicated in this report and will be seen, too, in the accompanying publication, *The Glorious Storybook*. The longer-term creative legacy is, of course, unpredictable and probably unknowable. As time goes by, the artists may or may not get to re-engage with the performers. However, it is interesting to think about the nature of a creative legacy. What could be considered as evidence for that? Is the intense, high-quality experience offered by the RSP artists a good enough reason to imagine that some of the immediate effects of *Glorious* might continue to develop and manifest themselves for individuals in a range of ways? In accepting this, should we also make the assumption that individuals will continue to appropriate their creative experiences as they see fit and make use of their experiences in ways the artists cannot imagine?

2. What role does *Glorious* play in helping to understand the meanings of 'community' and why is this important? What can be learnt from the project's approach to connecting people through shared experiences?

As the local presenters testify, their involvement with *Glorious* is not about audience development but about a considered and committed approach to participation and engagement with all sections of their communities. *Glorious* is one of many artists' projects, including others undertaken with RSP, that are programmed over years and shaped by a strategic vision and purpose.¹⁶

The construction of the musical format and the creation of a community attracted by some shared interests and curiosity is a deliberate and intensive intervention. RSP are making a

stand and taking a risk in coming to a locale as artists and as strangers with such a bold and ambitious project. They quickly and effectively create opportunities for intimacy through the letter-writing activity. The micro-community subsequently created through *Glorious* is a space where all those involved are engaged with exploring the sense of not knowing and the spaces that this creates or reveals.

What does *Glorious* tell us about the role artists can play as creative catalysts for thinking about personal and social relationships and connections as citizens and residents?

3. Why is it useful to embrace the unknown and unknowable? Can representing 'inbetweenness' through musical theatre be just as compelling as the utopias and dystopias this form would usually represent?

The people taking part in *Glorious* seemed to have little problem with taking the risk of being involved in a project that they themselves acknowledged was rather opaque in nature. Why was this 'unknown' so attractive? In summarising the characteristics that made the process successful for the participants, I identify risk and challenge as factors indicated in the interviews as attractive, intriguing, or enjoyable. When we face the unknown, what helps and influences us to embrace it? What role can art and artists play as significant catalysts for thinking and acting differently when the models we are offered and the choices we face appear limited or irrelevant?

¹⁶ A third evaluation was planned with a new Presenter in Glasgow which would have added an extra dimension to this research, but unfortunately this partner had to cancel the project.

Suggested reading:

University of Central Lancashire Psychosocial Research Unit, New Model Visual

Arts Organisations & Social Engagement, http://clock.uclan.ac.uk/3024/1/WzW-NMI_Report%5B1%5D.pdf (October 2011)

After writing the Interim Report in 2012, I came across this publication and the concept of the 'aesthetic third', which is useful when thinking about socially engaged practice and the way the *Glorious* project has been conceived and delivered. The researchers offer this definition:

Artistic outcome and aesthetic (whether conceived as aesthetic of process, product or both) is not subordinate to other social agendas. The artwork remains as an essential third object or point of dialogue between the arts organisation and members of the public who are not arts professionals. However, it may also act as a third between the provisional community involved in its production and appreciation (artists, curators, participating publics) and the social domain that it aspires in some measure to change.

Jo Broadwood, Arts and Kindness (People United, 2012), available for download from <http://www.peopleunited.org.uk/resources.php>

François Matarasso, Where We Dream: West Bromwich Operatic Society and the Fine Art of Musical Theatre (Multistory, 2012), available for download from <http://regularmarvels.com/about/downloads>

Richard Sennett, Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation (Allen Lane, 2012)

Appendix 1 Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the following people who gave their thoughts, feelings and ideas so generously for this study.

Interviewees

Lucille Acevedo-Jones, Designer, Rajni Shah Projects

Paul Bodie, Performer, Newcastle

Alice Booth, Creative Producer, Live at LICA

Tom Burns, Musician, Lancaster (University)

Iain Campbell, Musician, Lancaster (Off the Rails)

Amy Dobbie, Performer, Lancaster

Matt Fenton Director, Live at LICA

Pauline Frost, Performer, Newcastle

Sheila Ghelani, Workshop facilitator, Rajni Shah Projects

Brian Gilham, Performer, Lancaster

Rosa Hinksman, Musician, Lancaster (University)

Ben McCabe, Musician, Lancaster (Off the Rails)

David Marshall, Musician, Newcastle

Ilana Mitchell, Creative Director, Wunderbar

Stephen Oliver Jones, Musician, Newcastle

Bella Quinn, Performer, Lancaster

Mahsa Salali, Musician, Newcastle

Rajni Shah, Director, Rajni Shah Projects

Suzie Shrubbs, Musical Director, Rajni Shah Projects

Nicola Singh, Producer, Wunderbar

Kate Taylor, Performer, Newcastle

Special thanks to: Helena Suarez, Project Director, Rajni Shah Projects; Jenny Duffy, research student placement, Wunderbar Festival; Leo Burtin, student volunteer, Live at LICA; Jack Heaton, Charlotte Blatt, Matthew Bosley, Xanthe Rann, Ewa Witaszeck and Ji Hyeon Park.

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Photographs

Jonathan Brisson (for Un Pas de Trop Festival, Mons) - page 27

Oliver Dalby (Nottingham) - page 14

Ian Hughes (Lancaster) - pages 5, 20, 26, 29, 30, 38

Christopher Matthews (Beyond Glorious symposium) - page 39

Pari Naderi (for SPILL Festival) - page 1

Steve @ 4130 (Newcastle) - pages 15, 24, 33, 36

Stephen Oliver Jones (musician, Newcastle) - pages 10, 17

Rajni Shah - pages 8, 23

Glorious Newcastle credits

Performers: Paul Bodie, Pauline Frost, Hannah Goudie, John Paul Hewitt, Kate Taylor - with additional texts by Charlotte Bolam, Catherine Cullen, Keith Stephen Wearn

Musicians from the Gateshead Academy of Music and Sound: Richard Hetherington, Stephen Oliver Jones, David Marshall, Dominic Reed, Destra Orsheena Ross, Mahsa Salali, Tyron Spence

Glorious Lancaster credits

Performers: Amy Dobbie, Brian Gilham, Stephen Grew, Bella Quinn, Ali Rhodes, Georgie Whittle

Musicians from Off the Rails and Lancaster University: Clayton Jackson, Nick Cooper, Steve Varden, Matt Davies, Griffith Jones, James Wood, Graham Mapp, Chris Rhodes, Richard Zahler, Ben Agar, Rosa Hinksman, Sharon Moo, Niall Kelly, Tom Burns, Emmy Roberts, Hayley Lawson, Sarah Norman, Nathan Stevenson, Andrew Goddard, Jamie Quirk, Paul Clark, Pete Hyde, Ben McCabe, Tom Barnish, Steve Daly, Mary Austin, Iain Campbell

British Sign Language interpreter: Janet Guest RSLI/MASLI

Rajni Shah Projects Glorious team

Creative Team: Lucille Acevedo-Jones, Lucy Cash, Karen Christopher, Sheila Ghelani, Mary Paterson, Ben & Max Ringham, Rajni Shah and Chahine Yavroyan; **Project Director:** Helena Suarez; **Technical Director:** Steve Wald, with Marty Langthorne, Adam Hooper, Nao Nagai, Beky Stoddart; **Musical Director:** Suzie Shrubbs; **Documentation (film):** Becky Edmunds; **Producer:** Rajni Shah; **External Evaluation:** Elizabeth Lynch

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Co-commissioned by Live at LICA, Wunderbar Festival and InBetween Time Productions

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Appendix 2 Interview questions

| | Interview questions | Newcastle performers & musicians | Lancaster performers & musicians | Newcastle artists | Lancaster artists | Wunderbar Festival | Live at LICA |
|----|---|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------|--------------|
| | First interview questions (26 interviews) | | | | | | |
| 1 | Please introduce yourself and tell me about your role in Glorious. | | | | | | |
| 2 | What attracted you to this project? How did you get involved? | | | | | | |
| 3 | Why did you decide to write a letter? | | | | | | |
| 4 | What interests you about Glorious? | | | | | | |
| 5 | What are your hopes for Glorious in Lancaster? | | | | | | |
| 6 | What are you most curious about in terms of this project? (To artists add: 'In this particular location?') | | | | | | |
| 7 | What do you observe as the most striking aspects of the project? | | | | | | |
| 8 | What have you brought with you from previous Glorious projects? | | | | | | |
| 9 | How do you effectively communicate this project internally and externally? What are the key points? | | | | | | |
| 10 | For you, what are the three most important aspects of living in this area? | | | | | | |
| 11 | What do you think you will discover (or are discovering) through taking part in Glorious? | | | | | | |
| 12 | What excites you about taking part or presenting this work? | | | | | | |
| 13 | What are the challenges? (and how are you meeting them?) | | | | | | |
| 14 | How do you hope the project will impact on your work? | | | | | | |
| 15 | How have you prepared for the project in this location? | | | | | | |
| 16 | How do you find working creatively with strangers? | | | | | | |
| 17 | How do you want to stretch/develop your creativity during the life of this project? | | | | | | |
| 18 | Are there any other observations you'd like to share? | | | | | | |
| | Second and/or third interview questions (32 interviews) | | | | | | |
| 20 | How did you meet the challenges presented by the project? | | | | | | |
| 24 | Why do you think the individual performers took part in this art work? | | | | | | |
| 19 | How did this project affect your creative work? | | | | | | |
| 21 | Can you tell me about your experience of the performance in your role? How did the ideas and themes resonate with you? | | | | | | |
| 22 | What could be developed or changed? | | | | | | |
| 23 | How does the creative format make the most of the material generated locally? | | | | | | |
| 25 | How would you describe the nature of the collaboration between the artists, student musicians and the locally recruited people who performed? | | | | | | |
| 26 | How has taking part made you think or feel differently about the way we communicate? | | | | | | |
| 27 | How has taking part made you think or feel differently about trust, community, place? | | | | | | |
| 28 | What changes or learning do you experience and/or observe as a result of Glorious? | | | | | | |
| 29 | Has this project (to artists: 'this version of Glorious') made you think about any particular idea or issue? | | | | | | |
| 30 | What questions does it raise for you? | | | | | | |
| 31 | What will you take forward or carry with you from this experience? | | | | | | |
| 32 | Have you discovered more about your organisations role/place/contribution in this community? | | | | | | |
| 33 | During this project, what has surprised you or has been unexpected? | | | | | | |
| 34 | How is the experience of producing Glorious making an impact on your organisation? | | | | | | |
| 35 | What was Glorious about this project? | | | | | | |

Appendix 3 Newcastle and Lancaster timelines

Newcastle timeline (abridged)

| | |
|------------------|---|
| 6th October 2011 | RS arrives - make contact with local community orgs |
| 7th | |
| 8th | LAJ arrives, press interview - prep for interventions |
| 9th | prep for interventions |
| Monday 10th | 8am-8pm interventions in Eldon Square, SG arrives (pm) |
| 11th | 8am-8pm interventions, pm band rehearsal (LAJ to talk about costume) |
| 12th | 8am-8pm interventions, Culture Lab to attend and record |
| 13th | 8am-8pm interventions |
| 14th | Additional work finding participants, HS arrives |
| 15th | Workshop #1, SG + LAJ depart |
| 16th | DAY OFF |
| Monday 17th | RS/HS to meet, RS to find additional performers as necessary |
| 18th | HS depart, LAJ arrives, evening band rehearsal (LAJ to attend) |
| 19th | One to one rehearsals with performers (RS + LAJ consultation) |
| 20th | One to one rehearsals with performers (RS + LAJ consultation) |
| 21st | Music + one to one rehearsals continue as necessary |
| 22nd | Music + performers workshop, journalist attends, SS + LAJ depart |
| 23rd | DAY OFF RS to write intro and any other bits |
| Monday 24th | SG arrives, one to one rehearsals with performers |
| 25th | LAJ arrives, one to one rehearsals with performers (SG) Costume fittings |
| 26th | Evening rehearsal for everyone, RS to lead, Phil to lead band |
| 27th | Evening rehearsal for everyone, SG to lead |
| 28th | DAY OFF for sorting stuff out! |
| 29th | Full rehearsal with everyone, SS arrives (pm) |

| | |
|--------------|---|
| 30th | Dress Rehearsal at Academy, tech team arrive |
| Monday 31st | GET IN - am: core team, evening: performers and musicians sound check |
| 1st November | Participants meet MP, rehearsal and performance |

Lancaster Timeline (abridged)

| | | | |
|--------------|---|-------------|---|
| | | 21st | 10am-12pm RS/SG meet re workshops, 1-5pm individual musician reh |
| 2nd Nov 2012 | RS, SS arrive, 6-9pm music rehearsal (students) | | 5.30-7.30pm RS/SS meet re music, 7.30pm host <i>Glorious</i> party #2 |
| 3rd | RS/Leo prep interventions, 10am-6pm music rehearsal (students) | 22nd | SG one to ones then leaves, SS one to ones |
| | SS leaves | 23rd | 10am-5.30pm, SS music sectional rehs, LC arrives |
| 4th | RS/Leo prep interventions, space available at uni for students | 24th | 10am-6pm music reh (combined), Lucy filming |
| Monday 5th | LAJ arrives, 11am-3pm Interventions Morecambe library | 25th | 10am-6pm full company rehearsal, Lucy filming |
| | 7-10pm music reh (Off the Rails) | Monday 26th | Lucy filming, RS/SS music rehearsals daytime, SG/HS arrive |
| 6th | SG arrives, 11am-3pm Interventions Morecambe library | | 7-10pm music reh (Off the Rails) |
| 7th | 11am-3pm interventions Lancaster library/market stall | 27th | 10am-12pm & 3-5pm music reh (students), LC leaves |
| 8th | HS arrives, 11am-3pm interventions Lancaster library | | 2-5pm participant costume and buttonhole workshop |
| 9th | 11am-3pm interventions Lancaster library, host <i>Glorious</i> party #1 | 28th | Tech team and MP arrive, reh as needed |
| 10th | HS arrives, SG leaves | | 7-9pm performance workshop for musicians |
| | 11am-3pm interventions Lancaster library/market stall | 29th | Tech team rigs and focuses, 7-10pm sound check |
| 11th | 11am-3pm interventions St Nicholas Arcades | | 4-6pm performance workshop for musicians |
| | SS arrives, 2-7pm music rehearsal (students) | | evening monologue rehearsals, buttonhole workshops all day |
| Monday 12th | LAJ leaves, return interventions furniture to Furniture Matters | 30th | 9am-1pm tech, EL arrives |
| | 7-10pm COMBINED music rehearsal - EW/JG observe | | 2-4pm run |
| 13th | SG arrives, SS leaves, 10-12 & 3-5pm music rehearsal (students) | | 4-6pm dress |
| 14th | Intro workshops - 12.30-2.30pm, Lancaster library, | | 7-10pm tech |
| | 3.30-5pm Morecambe library | 1st Dec | 3-5pm run |
| | Theatre outing for anyone who wants to come! | | 5-7pm dinner |
| 15th | Begin workshops and one to one reh | | 6.30pm Touch tour + RS/MP leave for bus |
| 16th | Workshops and one to one, all day, Lancaster library | | 8pm Bus arrives, Show, meal and get-out |
| 17th | 10am-12pm workshop, SG leaves | | |
| 18th | LAJ arrives by car with new costume | | |
| Monday 19th | SG arrives, 7-10pm music reh (Off the Rails) + costume consultations | | |
| 20th | SS arrives, 10am-12pm & 3-5pm music reh (students) + costume | | |
| | 2-5pm participant workshop | | |

Appendix 4 Aims for Glorious

As stated by Rajni Shah Projects in December 2009 within an application for Arts Council England Grants for the Arts funding.

Our main aims are as follows:

- To create a new and exciting piece of British musical theatre, including an innovative costume design and new film, at a time when many people feel disempowered and frustrated
- To engage with those who normally have little or no access to the arts
- To create 10 unique pieces of public intervention, each tailored to the host city or town
- To bring in new audiences to each partner venue
- To create 10 performances (some performed twice) that are unique to each venue and created with the people who live there
- To offer a creative legacy for each person who performs with the company
- To create a publication that celebrates and documents each performance
- To create an innovative pre-recorded score that is adapted at each venue and played alongside a range of local musical groups
- To create an online community of participants, partners and artists that grows through the tour

In summary, the project will benefit partners, audiences and the arts more widely by:

- Inviting a wide range of people, including many who would not usually participate, to engage with the arts in a professional setting.
- Allowing programmers to engage on a long term multi-faceted project that results in a performance in public space, a week-long workshop for local musicians and residents who are performing with the company, and a large-scale new musical that is unique to each venue.

- Creating an online community that will allow the company to support a legacy for all participants in a light touch but deep impact way.
- Although *Glorious* will use a more conventional method of audience engagement (the audience will be seated for most of the show), the company plan to explore ways in which the audience are nevertheless implicated in the trajectory of the work. This will happen by inviting the audience to experience the on-stage installation in some way, possibly by passing through the stage during the finale.
- Generating audiences of over 2,500 for the theatre performances, who will be a mix of regular venue audiences, family and friends of the local performers, musical theatre audiences, and local people who have taken part in or witnessed earlier public interventions by the company.
- Creating the first musical from the Live Art sector.
- Pioneering a new model of touring that prioritises relationships and long term audience, artist and venue development.

Appendix 5 *Glorious* Numbers

5 Presenters

57 Musicians

33 Performer/speakers

1,535 Audience

540 Letter-writers

2,395 Passers-by who stopped to talk and look

Nottingham – NottDance Festival/Dance4, February 2011

- Musicians **6**
- Performers/speakers **6**
- Public interventions: passers-by **72** letter-writers **26**
- Audience 11 February Taster songs from *Glorious* Act One performance **20**
- Audience 26 February *Glorious* (preview) performance **194**

London - SPILL Festival/Barbican, April 2011

- Musicians **11**
- Performers/speakers **6**
- Public interventions: passers-by **305**, letter-writers **72**
- Audience 19 April *Glorious* (premiere) performance **300**
- Audience 20 April *Glorious* (premiere) performance **250**
- Audience 21 April *Glorious* (premiere) performance **100**

Newcastle - Wunderbar Festival, November 2011

- Musicians **7** (6 on stage)
- Performers/speakers **8** (5 on stage)
- Public interventions: passers-by **653**, letter-writers **176**
- Audience 1 November *Glorious* performance **96**

Mons - Maison Folie/Le Manege(Belgium) May 2012

- Musicians **4**
- Performers/speakers **7**
- Public interventions: passers-by **825**, letter-writers **80**
- Audience 5 May *Glorious* performance **60**

Lancaster - Live at LICA, December 2012

- Musicians **29** (27 on stage)
- Performers/speakers **6**
- Public interventions: passers-by **420**, letter-writers **140**
- Audience 1 December *Glorious* performance **120**

Additional participants and audiences

Performance and Cocktails, Duckie, August 2010

'Song of Letters' and costume only 25-27th August: Audience **321**

Glorious launch party, Thursdays @ Artsadmin, September 2010

Songs from *Glorious* 23 September: Audience **60**

Settle Down Cafe, October 2010

Monologues only 12 October 2010: Performers **3**, Audience **15**

Errollyn Wallen Song Club, October 2010

Songs from *Glorious* 28 October: Audience **25**

Chisenhale Dance Space, December 2010

Glorious Act One performance 1 December: Performers **6**, Audience **14**

Bristol - InBetween Time Festival, December 2010

Taster songs from *Glorious* 3 December: Audience **60**

Pulse Festival Ipswich, June 2012

Letter writing intervention only 8-9 June 2011: passers-by **120**, letter-writers **46**