



## **RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL**

### **CABINET**

**17<sup>TH</sup> OCTOBER 2019**

#### **COUNCIL AND ARTS COUNCIL OF WALES INVESTMENT IN THE ARTS**

#### **REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC HEALTH, PROTECTION AND COMMUNITY SERVICES, IN DISCUSSIONS WITH THE CABINET MEMBER FOR STRONGER COMMUNITIES, WELL-BEING AND CULTURAL SERVICES, COUNCILLOR RHYS LEWIS**

**Author:** Caroline O'Neill, Strategic Arts & Culture Manager – 01443 570031

#### **1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to provide Members with information on the Council and Arts Council of Wales capital and revenue investments to the arts in Rhondda Cynon Taf during 2018/19 and 2019/20 to-date.

#### **2. RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is recommended that Cabinet:

- 2.1 Note the contents of the report regarding the investment to the arts in Rhondda Cynon Taf.
- 2.2 Consider whether further information is required.

#### **3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 3.1 That the Members are informed of the capital and revenue investments made by the Council and the Arts Council of Wales to the arts across the County Borough.

#### **4. BACKGROUND**

- 4.1 The Arts Service consists of the Coliseum Theatre and the Park & Dare Theatre (collectively known as RCT Theatres) and an Arts & Creative Industries Team.

- 4.2 In 2010, RCT Theatres were recognised as an Arts Council of Wales Arts Portfolio Wales client and once again in 2015, resulting in revenue funding from the Arts Council of Wales annually.
- 4.3 There are a further two Arts Council of Wales Arts Portfolio Wales clients in Rhondda Cynon Taf - Artis Community Cymuned and Valleys Kids.
- 4.4 The Arts Council of Wales National Lottery funding has enabled the Arts Service, organisations and artists to develop arts projects across Rhondda Cynon Taf.
- 4.5 The Arts Service's Youth Arts and SONIG Youth Music Industry programmes are commissioned by the Resilient Families Services Families First programme.

## **5. THE ARTS SERVICE AND COUNCIL FINANCIAL INVESTMENT**

- 5.1 The Arts Service core budget in 2018/19 of £965,840 consisted of £945,840 revenue and £20,000 capital. In 2019/20 the total core budget is £994,370, consisting of £974,370 revenue and £20,000 capital.
- 5.2 In 2018/19 a further £70,000 capital investment was received to undertake the following works at RCT Theatres:
- Replacement carpet in auditorium at the Park and Dare Theatre;
  - Refurbishment of dressing rooms at the Park and Dare Theatre.
- 5.3 A further capital investment of £161,992 has been secured in 2019/20 to undertake the following works at RCT Theatres:
- Development of new studio space and bar in the Park and Dare Theatre's Lounge Bar area;
  - Refurbishment of kiosk area at the Coliseum Theatre;
  - Refurbishment of gentlemen's ground floor toilets and dressing room facilities at the Coliseum Theatre.
- 5.4 The Arts Service received £25,000 revenue contribution during 2018/19 to secure high-profile events as part of the RAFT festival, resulting in live events from Only Men Aloud (with local support) and Jools Holland and his Rhythm and Blues Orchestra at the Park and Dare Theatre.
- 5.5 The Park and Dare Theatre programmed West End star Kerry Ellis (with local support) and comedian Omid Djaili as part of RAFT 2019 with £15,000 revenue contribution received.

5.6 Revenue funding of £94,350 was awarded in 2018/19 and will be received again in 2019/20 from the Resilient Families Services Families First programme for the commissioning of the Arts Services Arts and Creative Industry Team's Youth Arts and SONIG Youth Music Industry programmes. Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 shows the impact on young people of participation in the arts.

## **6. THE COUNCIL AND THE ARTS COUNCIL OF WALES FINANCIAL INVESTMENT**

### **6.1 Arts Portfolio Wales**

6.1.1 Rhondda Cynon Taf Council's Arts Services RCT Theatres are an Arts Council of Wales Arts Portfolio Wales client and received £150,821 revenue funding in 2018/19 and will be receiving the same amount in 2019/20.

6.1.2 The RCT Theatres are awarded this annual revenue funding for their status as a Venue and Production House. Appendix 3 includes a review of a production funded by this.

6.1.3 The only other Local Authority run venues to receive annual revenue funding from the Arts Council of Wales are Blackwood Miners Institute (Caerphilly County Borough Council) and Theatr Clwyd (Flintshire County Council).

### **6.2 National Lottery: Capital**

6.2.1 Through participating in the Arts Council of Wales Resilience programme (a programme for its Arts Portfolio Clients to future-proof their business), £95,000 capital funding contribution has been secured to undertake the development of the new studio space and bar in the Park and Dare Theatre's Lounge Bar area.

6.2.2 The circa £4million redevelopment of the Pontypridd YMCA has secured funding from the Arts Council of Wales, Welsh Government and the Council.

### **6.3 National Lottery: Revenue**

6.3.1 The Council has successfully secured Arts Council of Wales National Lottery funding for the following projects during 2018/19 and 2019/2020, as a lead organisation or in collaboration with a key partner:

- £48,250 awarded for the Arts Services SONIG Youth Music Industry programmes Forte 4, a unique music artists development programme for young people, delivered with partners across South

Wales and a research element to look at the feasibility of extending the programme throughout Wales. £30,000 has been awarded for Forte 5 during 2019/20.

- £5,000 awarded to develop the Arts Services RCT Theatres co-production of 'Ned and the Whale' with its artists in residence, Flossy and Boo. This production was then chosen as part of Arts Council of Wales' #ThisisWales programme at Edinburgh Fringe Festival 2019.
- £4,840 awarded to develop the Arts Services RCT Theatres and Bale and Thomas' co-production 'The Night Porter'.
- £16,433 awarded to develop the Arts Services RCT Theatres and Flossy and Boo's co-production 'The Ramshackel's Brilliant Adventure'.
- £16,450 awarded to research and develop a co-production between Yeah Yeah Theatre and Arts Services RCT Theatres and a further £17,350 secured in 2019/20.
- £24,800 awarded to develop Hip Hop Theatre as a collaboration between Avant Theatre CIC and the Arts Service.

6.3.2 During 2018/19 and 2019/20, there has been an allocation of revenue investment totalling £145,773.

#### 6.4 **Creative Learning through the Arts**

6.4.1 The Arts and Creative Industries Team has also worked collaboratively with Arts Active Trust to secure Arts Council of Wales Creative Learning through the Arts funding to develop the Central South Education Consortia Arts and Education Network - A2 Connect. In 2018/19, £200,000 was awarded and a further £150,000 in 2019/20.

6.4.2 A2 Criw Celf visual arts project for the Central South region is managed by the A2 Connect Arts and Education Network and has been awarded £185,235 for 2019/20 delivery.

### 7. **RCT SCHOOLS AND ARTS COUNCIL OF WALES INVESTMENT**

7.1 Many schools in the County Borough have successfully been awarded funding through the Arts Council of Wales Creative Learning through the Arts programme.

7.2 The Creative Learning through the Arts programme has three funding options for schools: Lead Creative Schools, its Go and See and

Creative Collaborations schemes which are two funding options under the Experiencing the Arts fund.

### 7.3 **Lead Creative Schools**

7.3.1 The Lead Creative Schools scheme aims to promote new ways of working for schools giving them the opportunity to develop an innovative and bespoke programme of learning designed to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

7.3.2 Two schools were awarded a Lead Creative Schools grant for school to school support in 2018/19 to expand their reach and the impact of their works as a Lead Creative School.

- i) Gwaunmeisgyn Primary School was awarded £8,000 to work with Maesybryn.
- ii) Coedpenmaen Primary School was also awarded £8,000 to work with Heol y Celyn.

7.3.3 Three schools were awarded a Lead Creative Schools grant for school to school support in 2019/20 to expand their reach and the impact of their works as a Lead Creative School.

- i) Hafod Primary School was awarded £8,000 to work with Ynyshir Primary School.
- ii) Ysgol Gynradd Gymraeg Aberdare was awarded £8,000 to work with Ysgol Penderyn Community Primary School.
- iii) Llwynypia Primary School was awarded £8,000 to work with Pontrhondda Primary School.

### 7.4 **Go and See**

7.4.1 This funding scheme can be used to fund visits to high-quality arts events in galleries, theatres, arts centres and other venues. Events could include visits to performances and exhibitions or visits to experience art professionals developing and creating their work.

7.4.2 Twenty three schools were awarded funding through the Go and See scheme during 2018/19, totalling £11,875.

7.4.3 Nine schools have been awarded funding through the Go and See scheme to date in 2019/20, totalling £4,479.

## 7.5 **Creative Collaborations**

- 7.5.1 This strand focuses on arts, cultural and creative activities that are out of the ordinary and not run-of-the-mill. There is an expectation that projects will be innovative and have significant **collaboration** between arts or creative sector organisations, teachers and learners.
- 7.5.2 During 2018/19, Vision Fountain CIC were successfully awarded a grant of £13,701 to work with Gelli and Penyreglyn Primary Schools for an audio-visual storytelling project entitled 'Dragon's Dream'.
- 7.5.3 During 2019/20, Tylorstown Primary School have been awarded £9,900.

## 8. **OTHER ARTS COUNCIL OF WALES INVESTMENT IN RCT**

### 8.1 **Arts Portfolio Wales**

- 8.1.1 Valleys Kids and Artis Community Cymuned continue to receive annual revenue funding from the Arts Council of Wales.
- 8.1.2 Valleys Kids received £122,383 in 2018/19 and it remains the same for 2019/20.
- 8.1.3 Artis Community Cymuned received £199,960 in 2018/19 and it remains the same for 2019/20.

### 8.2 **National Lottery: Revenue**

- 8.2.1 Three individual artists residing in Rhondda Cynon Taf were awarded grants by the Arts Council of Wales during 2018/19, totalling £24,200. A further five artists have been supported financially during 2019/20 to date, totalling £18,045.
- 8.2.2 One RCT based organisation was awarded a grant of £5,000 in 2018/19 to specifically deliver a project within the County Borough.
- 8.2.3 One organisation has been awarded a grant of £15,000 in 2019/20 to date to specifically deliver a project within the County Borough.
- 8.2.4 Many national organisations and production companies were awarded grants during 2018/19 stating Rhondda Cynon Taf as one of the areas served by their provision. The total grants awarded were £430,252.
- 8.2.5 To date in 2019/20, £136,218 has been awarded to national organisations serving Rhondda Cynon Taf.

### 8.3 **Strategic Award: Sharing Together**

- 8.3.1 This funding is to support strategic initiatives aimed at encouraging the creation of new networks and the strengthening of existing networking opportunities.
- 8.3.2 Wales Arts Review were awarded £2,490 during 2018/19 for the development of its Young Critics and Youth Arts Forum.

### 8.4 **Strategic Award: Arts and Health**

- 8.4.1 The Arts Council of Wales recognises that in order to carry on making an impact and creating new experiences for people to reap the health benefits of art experiences, it is important to work together and make the most of existing frameworks across Wales.
- 8.4.2 The Arts Council of Wales now have a Memorandum of Understanding with the Welsh NHS Confederation and work closely with Public Health Wales and with participants in the Cross Party Group on Arts and Health in the National Assembly.
- 8.4.3 The Arts Council of Wales have invested £25,000 in Cwm Taf Morgannwg University Health Board as part of its capacity building programme within Health Boards across Wales.
- 8.4.4 The investment will support the expansion of the Arts & Health Team at Cwm Taf University Health Board, through the funding of Year 1 of a full-time Arts & Health Co-ordinator (Band 6). This role will be managed within the Planning & Partnerships Team and will focus on implementing Cwm Taf's Creative Arts Health & Wellbeing Strategy. Cwm Taf UHB will cover the shortfall for the post as partnership funding.

## 9. **COMMITMENT TO DEVELOPING THE ARTS IN PONTYPRIDD**

- 9.1 The Council is currently working with Awen Cultural Trust as preferred tenant to agree lease terms for the building and to potentially develop a significant capital investment programme to reopen the Muni Arts Centre as a vibrant venue for entertainment and events to serve Pontypridd and the wider region. Awen Cultural Trust are committed to working with the Council to provide a programme of arts and cultural events complimentary with the Council's venues.
- 9.2 The Council is making a £1.5m capital funding contribution to the £4m redevelopment of Pontypridd YMCA. The project will create a state of the art multi – purpose facility within a prominent position in the main commercial area of Pontypridd Town Centre. A major redevelopment, the building will be fully accessible and create new and improved

facilities including a suite of dedicated arts facilities. The project will involve the YMCA working in partnership with Artis Community and also includes a £2.28m capital funding contribution from the Arts Council of Wales.

## **10. Potential Challenges**

### **10.1 Resilient Families Programme: Families First Commission**

10.1.1 The Youth Arts and SONIG Youth Music Industry programmes are delivered through this commission. SONIG celebrated 20 years in 2020.

10.1.2 The commission enables the delivery of arts and creative industries engagement activity for children and young people and the employment of 5 part-time posts; and:

- SONIG Co-ordinator;
- Youth Arts Co-ordinator x 2;
- Young Promoters Network Co-ordinator;
- Performance Officer.

10.1.3 The programme is currently commissioned until March 31<sup>st</sup> 2020.

10.1.4 A decommissioning or decrease of commission would impact on provision of opportunities for children and young people to engage with and participate in the arts, as well as loss of knowledge and expertise within the Arts and Creative Industries Team

### **10.2 New ACW National Lottery Guidelines**

10.2.1 Arts Council of Wales have recently concluded a consultation on the future direction for their National Lottery funding, which coincided with their new corporate plan 'For the Benefit of All.'

10.2.2 The publication of the outcome of the consultation in 'Transformation and Change' states that Arts Council of Wales will "only consider funding to Arts Portfolio Wales organisations if a) they're the only ones who can deliver a particular project; and b) that they meet a higher threshold test in demonstrating quality, innovation and public benefit."

10.2.3 The new Arts Council of Wales Lottery Funding Guidelines will be published on October 7<sup>th</sup> 2019.

10.2.4 A restriction on the availability of lottery funding for the Arts Service and its RCT Theatres would impact on opportunities for residents to engage with and participate in arts and creative industries activity,

such as music industry career development and live theatre productions created with and of relevance to them.

### **10.3 Arts Council of Wales Investment Review 2019/20**

10.3.1 The Arts Council of Wales will be issuing its draft Terms of Reference to undertake its third investment review to determine which arts organisations are to be included in its revenue-funded Arts Portfolio from April 2021.

10.3.2 The Arts Council of Wales have stated that the Lottery consultation responses will be considered when framing the terms of reference for the investment review.

10.3.3 The loss of or reduction to revenue-funding received and our Arts Portfolio status will impact on the live programme at RCT Theatres, co-production and production work, arts marketing and promotion, participation activity and staff.

### **10.4 Creative Learning through the arts**

10.4.1 The current action plan and funding commitment is for the five year period from 2015 to March 2020. Further information about the programme can be seen at Appendix 4.

10.4.2 As yet, there has been no announcement from the Arts Council of Wales with regards to the programme and funds available post March 2020.

10.4.3 If this programme were to be discontinued or a reduction in funding available, this would have an impact on schools accessing creative expertise and opportunities that would be key in supporting the new Expressive Arts curriculum.

## **11. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS**

11.1 An Equality Impact Assessment is not needed because the contents of the report are for information purposes only.

## **12. CONSULTATION/INVOLVEMENT**

12.1 No consultation exercise has been required.

## **12. FINANCIAL IMPLICATION(S)**

13.1 There are no financial implications aligned to the recommendations in this report.

**14. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OR LEGISLATION CONSIDERED**

14.1 There are no legal implications aligned to this report.

**15. LINKS TO THE CORPORATE AND NATIONAL PRIORITIES AND THE WELL-BEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS ACT.**

15.1 Investment in the arts and creative industries across the County Borough contributes to the Council's corporate priorities:

- Economy – such as providing targeted arts and creative industries opportunities for young people supporting them into education, employment and training, developing transferable skills through being creatively active, supporting increase in educational attainment, supporting and developing artists and; providing cultural experiences within our town centres.
- People – such as providing targeted opportunities for children and young people accessing the Resilient Families Service, looked after children, those at risk of exclusion/offending, and developing cultural experiences for positive health and wellbeing.
- Place – such as providing opportunities to engage with and participate in the arts and creative industries within our communities, town centres and parks and; developing themed bespoke projects, such as on the importance of recycling.

15.2 The investment contributes to the seven national wellbeing goals, particularly:

- A Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language;
- A prosperous Wales;
- A healthier Wales;
- A Wales of cohesive communities.

15.3 The investment is consistent with the sustainable approach promoted by the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act through the five ways of working:

- Long-term – capital and revenue investment seeks to achieve a long-term and sustainable arts and creative industries infrastructure with the Borough;
- Prevention – engagement and participation opportunities offering early intervention and prevention support;
- Integrated – contributing to a range of local, regional and national strategic priorities, by adopting an integrated and coherent approach;

- Collaboration - through working across Council services and public, private and third sector agencies, locally, regionally and nationally;
- Involvement – through consultation, feedback, advisory groups and professional networks.

## **16. CONCLUSION**

- 16.1 This report notes the financial investment for the arts by the Council and the Arts Council of Wales within Rhondda Cynon Taf during 2018/19 and 2019/20.
- 16.2 Investment has enabled residents to be creatively active, supporting their health and well-being, educational attainment, employment, and supporting communities.
- 16.3 Investment has strengthened the arts infrastructure within the County Borough, redeveloping its theatres and supporting professional artists.
- 16.4 It is hoped that access to funding from a range of sources will continue to be available so that residents can continue to benefit from engagement with the arts in all its forms.

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972**

**AS AMENDED BY**

**THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985**

**RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**CABINET**

**17<sup>TH</sup> OCTOBER 2019**

**REPORT OF DIRECTOR PUBLIC HEALTH, PROTECTION & COMMUNITY SERVICES IN DISCUSSIONS WITH THE CABINET MEMBER FOR STRONGER COMMUNITIES, WELL-BEING AND CULTURAL SERVICES, COUNCILLOR RHYS LEWIS**

**COUNCIL AND ARTS COUNCIL OF WALES INVESTMENT IN THE ARTS**

**Background Papers**

None

**Officer to contact: Caroline O'Neill, Strategic Arts & Culture Manager –  
01443 570031**

**INDIVIDUAL CASE STUDY (JM)**

**1. Description of the Course**

The Fortitude through Music Course is a pre pre-employability course aimed at young people 16-24 who are Not in Education, Employment or Training. The course is run for 8 weeks for two days a week where young people are engaged through music. This includes a variety of activities including industry based seminars, career research, speed networking with people in the industry, song writing, playing and developing instrumental skills, recording music and a music video and performing in a performance. This course is accredited via Asdan Expressive Arts Short Course and aims to re-engage any young people into taking their next step towards employment or training.

**2. General Background of participant (History):**

The young person was referred to us through the Drop In centre, the centre is run through social services 16+ team which aims to engage anyone who has been involved in their services to participate in activities a few times a week to strengthen the bonds between social workers and young people. The young person is a very polite young woman who is attending college in Aberdare studying childcare. She has taken part in the sessions at the Drop In and from there took the opportunity to enrol onto the Fortitude through Music Course. She has been in care and is now living in sheltered accommodation, she has some financial barriers and can be easily coerced into acting inappropriately with friends around. This can result in her fighting and arguing with other people.

**3. Describe what the participant was like at the beginning of this study**

At the beginning of this study the participant was reluctant to attend however after a few phone calls she started attending afternoon sessions that just included the music sessions. She attended alone and was very quietly spoken, she only communicated with other participants when necessary and it was evident that she lacked in confidence to speak and sing along with the band. She had taken part in another music session at the Drop In but we had noticed that she didn't actively take part in this, she just sat and watched.

**4. Activity involved in and what you did**

The participant was involved in the Fortitude through Music course at Aberdare Rugby Club. The participant was interested in singing but had to be encouraged to sing. When a song was chosen we sat together to learn the song as she hadn't heard it before, she was very quiet to start with and when she went back into the group she didn't really sing along.

She was involved in the song writing aspect of the course but didn't voice her ideas much, as the weeks went by she introduced a friend to the course which encouraged her to be a little more confident in general.

She performed two songs with the band at the performance and was a backing singer for the other participants.

**5. How did the participant change during the activity  
(e.g. improved confidence, time keeping attitude to staff/others)**

We saw improved confidence in the participant every week noticing that she was participating a little more in all activities and turning up earlier as the weeks went by. She originally said she could only attend one afternoon a week which grew to a full day and then two full days. She made friends easily with other participants when she felt comfortable and was a pleasure to work with.

She built relationships with the tutors and was confident enough to ask for help when needed. She easily completed the Asdan accreditation and took the time to understand how she could use it for the future.

She demonstrated personal development by learning words to songs herself without being instructed to and learnt to manage her anxieties around performing more effectively.

**6. What next for the participant:**

The participant would like to continue working with us creatively so we will be inviting her to attend any future music and arts projects both at the Drop In centre and in the community. She wants to study in college until she can gain her qualifications in childcare that will enable her to get work as a nursery assistant.

**HOT JAM MUSIC SONG-WRITING BOOTCAMP CASE STUDY**

**Why / How participants were chosen?**

Participants had previously taken part in courses and have been taking lessons with Hot Jam practitioners in school. The course was also advertised on social media (Twitter, Facebook and schools). The course information was sent to officers in the council and various community associations to aid in recruiting participants. The participants contacted us if they were interested in attending.

**Project Outcomes**

The main project outcomes are: to learn to write original songs; learn how to structure a song and to memorise what has been written to perform at the showcase. The aims are to be able to work in a team together; listen to each other; allow everyone's ideas to come together; and to learn stage craft and presence; to improve confidence and self-esteem.

**What was delivered, where & when? Who supported project?**

The Hot Jam song-writing boot camp held at the Park & Dare Theatre is where young aspiring musicians attend to be coached by professional musicians, form new relationships and improve transferable life skills like communication, teamwork and confidence. The young people have the choice of undertaking drum/ bass/ guitar tuition, singing coaching, improving performance skills and learning how to write songs. Taking all of these activities into account they then work towards showcasing their talents and what they have learnt over the duration of the course.

**Pen picture, how many did we reach & geographical info**

22 young people between ages 11-16, in full time education

3 young people being supported into education, employment and training (targeted 16-24's)

All from RCT

**Outcomes achieved**

Each group wrote an original song to perform on stage and also played some cover songs, most of the bands successfully performed three songs. They played and developed their instrumental skills, developed their stage craft, and built the confidence to perform really well on stage. The feedback forms showed that 100% were proud of their involvement and 80% noted a higher quality feeling about life in general than before the course. 17 out of 17 family members said that the project had a positive impact on their family life and 100% also said that they feel the project has a positive impact on the participant.

### **Links to Wellbeing goals**

20 young people out of 25 young people asked demonstrated on our feedback forms that they felt better after the project than before.

16 young people said that they were proud of their involvement and 9 said they strongly agree.

### **Quotes - Participants**

'I loved it.'

'Everything was so good.'

'Very good.'

'It was fun.'

'Great fun, look forward to it all summer, really enjoyed.'

'Thank you so much to the teachers. They help us loads and I have loads of confidence by the end.'

### **Quotes –Family members at showcase**

'We are very proud of (participant name) and the confidence that this course has given her. The teachers and tutors have been very supportive and seemed to have helped all of the students embrace their talents.'

'This is the third year we have been and it's the best one yet.'

'Brilliant! Long may it continue. Teachers should be supported to enable them to bring out the musical talent in young people. Keep music alive in the valleys.'

'On a daily basis she has spoken about her worries and excitement on this course. I know she thoroughly enjoys it EVERY year! Love seeing her develop.'

### **What's next for participants?**

The 22 young people will be invited to future song writing boot camps and signposted to other arts related activities. One band will be supported through SONIG's Young Promoters Network. One young person will continue vocal coaching that she has been supported into via SONIG Youth Music Industry. The 3 being supported into education, employment and training will receive a one to one mentoring meeting to see how they can be supported further.

**Theatre Review: Exodus (RCT Theatres co-production with 2018 Artist in Residence, Motherlode)**

**(<http://getthechance.wales/2018/10/10/review-exodus-motherlode-by-judi-hughes/>)**

Suspend your disbelief and fly Exodus airways

4 out of 5 stars

Motherlode are a relatively new theatre company, directed by writer and dramatist Rachael Boulton. After training in London, she says “coming back home is the best thing I ever did”, her connection to and understanding of Valleys life in Wales is reflected in their new play Exodus.

The work shows us life on two levels – one of four very different people, drawn together by circumstance, who bravely take the chance to escape everyday Valleys life to go to Cuba in a light aircraft (don't expect realism here!) and the more detailed experience of the female character, a manager in Peacocks whose main job is to discipline, hire and fire people in the shop. In true Valleys style she describes how, in between family crises, she tries to keep her own job and do it well. On orders from above she has the difficult task of disciplining a woman who is clearly on the edge and this doesn't end well for either of them.

Exodus is a devised work, developed by the whole team under Rachael Boulton's directions. Because of that and because they are genuinely skilled performers, the actors quickly inhabit their roles and are able to make their ridiculous ambition to fly to Cuba, using the local high street as a runway, almost believable. Each has their own story to tell, conveyed with humour, energy and a solo violin.

With underlying serious issues about the struggles and problems of working class Valleys people, Rachael Boulton and her team have created a funny, clever, relevant and thought provoking piece of theatre that strikes a chord with its audience; a reaction that can be heard in their laughter and the warmth of their response. With just a few tweaks, it could enjoy the success of its predecessor 'The Good Earth'.

The strong Valleys accent of Mary meant that I sometimes missed words so although very important, it could be toned down slightly. If there is other criticism to be had, for me it was the programme. Whilst presented in a clever format, it wasn't easy to read with small print and colours that are difficult to discern for people with sight impairment. There was also scant information on the company's website about the cast and the background to the show. I'd really like to know the full backstory to Exodus and the ambitions of

Motherlode. Oh and if you're going to use stage smoke, do it properly or not at all – the intermittent wisps that I presume were meant to represent clouds didn't do anything except distract.

Motherlode is supported by RCT Theatres and was created and performed at the Coliseum, Aberdare as part of their 80th anniversary celebrations. In my opinion this is the best way forward for local theatres, to support their own and create strong Welsh drama, already internationally renowned and requiring constant investment. Their support of Motherlode should be applauded and I hope that the Arts Council of Wales, who helped to fund this show, are able to give the company much more support in the future.

Exodus is not laugh-out-loud like a Frank Vickery play, but it does have echoes of the same concern and observation of the lives of Valleys people; their humour, their frustrations, their sorrow and their sheer resilience and ambition that lifts them out of their everyday lives. Hopefully a new generation of theatre goers will be able to appreciate it and fill the theatres like Frank did. Suspend your disbelief and climb aboard Exodus airways, it's better than Easyjet!

**ARTS COUNCIL OF WALES PROGRAMME 'CREATIVE LEARNING THROUGH THE ARTS': FURTHER INFORMATION**

- Annual Report 2017/18: Creative Learning Through the Arts – an action plan for Wales

<http://2018.creativelearning.arts.wales/>

- Evaluation of the Creative Learning Through the Arts programme: Report 3 Interim Evaluation Report

<https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2019-04/evaluation-of-the-creative-learning-through-the-arts-programme-report-3.pdf>