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From the producer's perspective: Paul Warwick

Interviewed¹ and edited by Jessica Bowles

Jessica Bowles

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Paul Warwick is an experienced theatre producer and director. He was a founding member and artistic director of award-winning Unlimited Theatre and is currently co-director of China Plate. China Plate is an independent theatre studio that works with artists, venues, festivals and funders to challenge the way performance is made, who it's made by and who gets to experience it. Launched by Ed Collier and Paul Warwick in 2006 the company joined the National Portfolio in April 2018. The company is currently producing new work with Caroline Horton, Chris Thorpe, Rachel Chavkin, Rachel Bagshaw, Inspector Sands, David Edgar, Christopher Haydon and Urielle Klein Mekongo.

China Plate are Associate Producers at Warwick Arts Centre where they develop and commission new work. They are producers of innovative development programmes including The Darkroom, The Optimists (producer training), The First Bite and Bite Size Festivals, the NRTF Rural Touring Dance Initiative and were Programme Consultants for Hull City of Culture 2017 (Back to Ours Festival).

JB: Could you outline the China Plate model?

PW: We've always called ourselves a producing studio. Both Ed and I spent some time working in film development and 'studio' is a term we borrowed from there. It's an attempt to capture the different strands of our work: development, production and distribution. The assumption we kept coming up against was that producers produce shows, and whilst we do that, we do other more developmental stuff too. For us, developing artists has always been central to making work. In fact, for a time, it was all we did, but for our model to be sustainable, it quickly evolved to encompass production and programming too.

Development isn't easy. It's risky. It doesn't always work. And it's hard to raise money for. Especially when you're talking about development that doesn't focus on product, like our Darkroom project, where you're specifically saying there is no expectation of a work-in-progress showing at the end of it, where we acknowledge that the focus isn't on audiences, rather it's about investing in artist's creativity. That doesn't work for everyone in the sector. Quite rightly venues, for example, are more focused on getting work on their stages and getting people through their doors. We are in a position to be able to focus on that kind of development, especially since becoming an NPO [National

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Portfolio Organisation], and in our experience it can have a long-term effect on an artist's career – impacting a number of shows over time.

It's also been our experience that doing different kinds of development simultaneously works better, because the different strands can feed each other. Artists move between our development projects quite a lot. We've always tried to see it as an ecology rather than a ladder of development. We've always talked about trying to offer an ecology of opportunity, so that we can work with different artists in different ways.

And once you start to think about development like that, it's not a huge leap to start thinking about which artists are represented within that ecology and who's missing. Which is why our programmes sometimes focus on specific groups of artists. One example would be our Musical Theatre Darkroom, one strand of which focusses on developing new British musicals by artists of colour. It's important to say that many of these projects are run in partnership. On the Musical Theatre Darkroom, we worked with Royal & Derngate Northampton, Mercury Musical Developments and Musical Theatre Network. Working with partners who can hold some of the infrastructure enables us to deliver many more projects than we could alone. So, collaboration has always been a vital part of our model too. Enabling us to build that ecology of opportunity and act as a catalyst, galvanising energy around a particular project or idea.

JB: Can you take us through your models for engaging with emerging artists?

PW: One of the things we do is an open access scratch festival in the midlands called First Bite, we've been running that since 2009. The idea was to work with a consortium of regional venues to offer a point of emergence for artists and through that to collectively commission three projects for further development. We then mentor those artists through their development process: providing time, space and money, about £3–5 k, with additional producing support from us where needed – we might help with funding applications, for example. They then have the opportunity to show the finished work at the Bite Size Festival around nine months later. Bite Size is like the sister festival and it's a showcase that aims to get promoters from around the country to come to Warwick Art Centre, see the work and pick it up for touring. The most important thing is that it's completely open access, anyone can apply to show work at First Bite. Each year we aim for at least half of the artists presenting work to be unknown to us or the project partners, making sure we give this opportunity to artists who aren't on anyone's radar yet. For the commissioned artists First Bite offers a kind of package of support that makes it easier to make and tour a show, and some of those companies go on to have a longer-term relationship with us or the venue partners.

Caroline Horton's relationship with us developed in that way. We first saw her work at First Bite, where she won one of the commissions. Then she enrolled on our producer training program, The Optimists, which aims to give artists the skills they need to self-produce. Then we started making work with her. Then she did a Darkroom to develop her practice further. Then more shows together. She's since tutored a Darkroom for us working with the brilliant Blink Theatre, a company working with learning disabled artists. Oh, and she's recently been part of one of our musical theatre development programs too. Caroline is a good example of what I mean by an ecology of development opportunities. Likewise, Chris Thorpe. But there are others who just do one of those things with us and that's it. Just because we develop your work doesn't mean we have to

produce it, we're not proprietorial about that, that's very important. So, some artists will do some development with us on an idea that they're making with someone else. We're happy to offer that development opportunity, but they have other producers or venues providing the infrastructure, so they don't need our support in that way.

JB: Have the challenges in the sector changed?

PW: The challenge for artists is pretty much always getting access to time, space and money. Without those things it's very difficult to turn ideas into shows. That hasn't really changed. Maybe in the past those resources seemed more concentrated in particular areas, largely in buildings, and it was quite difficult in some parts of the country, particularly for companies making work through a collaborative or devised process, to get access to that support.

Back when China Plate started, I think there was a real feeling that collaboratively-made theatre was a kind of poor cousin to new writing. It was a time when new writing was very strong, very fashionable in a way. I think that's changed. Of course, over all there's been a dwindling of resources as well. It didn't feel like there was enough money around back in the early 90s, but when you look back on that now, it looks like a bit of a golden age in terms of funding. In those days we were largely working with project-funded companies and a real challenge that they faced, that the Darkroom was trying to help with, was the only way you could get money to be in a room working, was to be making new product, to be making new shows. I don't think shows had such a long shelf-life in those days so people made show after show. The Darkroom was all about enabling artists to step off the mouse wheel and spend time interrogating how they made work, an investment in process, if you like. We called it a commission without product. We believed, still believe, that this kind of investment has an impact on the next five shows.

I still think creating that kind of space for artists is important. It seems unlikely in the current funding environment that a lot of companies are going to become regularly funded. So, the same challenges present themselves in finding space to develop ideas, or ways of working, that don't have an audience outcome attached, that's still difficult.

I think touring is harder than it's ever been too. There is a sense across the country that audiences are hard-won. And increasingly, more of the risk for touring is placed on the artist. That's a result of venues having lost so much of their local authority funding. The whole sector is less subsidised so this drips down, and in the end it's often the artist that ends up carrying the risk for that, or the producer.

Alongside this, the whole sector has become much more concerned, absolutely rightly, with diversifying the voices we hear on stage, diversifying the workforce and leadership. So, I guess China Plate's development programmes have evolved to find ways to support that too. To actively look for artists that we hear from less, who have fewer opportunities, and making space for them.

A good example of how China Plate has been proactive in this regard would be Urielle Klein-Mekengo's 'Yvette'. We saw her show at a student festival at East 15 and it absolutely blew our socks off. Ed and I went away saying, 'wow, that was great wasn't it, that was an amazing piece of work. We could never really make it work producing-wise, we just couldn't find the resources for it right now, and she's a very young artist ...' I guess it felt 'risky' in the way we've talked about in some of the sessions on this project.² Of course, looked at another way it was actually a huge opportunity for China Plate. It

was tough news for our producing team when we went in on Monday and said, 'we're taking another show to Edinburgh and we've got no money to do it.' But we felt we had to find a way to do it. It's exactly what Javaad³ was saying about how we perceive risk and which risks we are prepared to find ways to mitigate. It was hard, but it was totally worth it. A lot of opportunity came Urielle's way because of that little bit of support that we were able to give her, and of course because of her huge talent. As important is what it taught China Plate about working with an artist from a socio-economically challenging background. The kinds of support needed are different. It's not necessarily going to fit the artists development model that you're used to working with, so it affects change in the organisation. I believe working on that show made China Plate more accessible.

JB: Have you tried strategies to diversify your network that would be useful for us to kind of learn from?

PW: Yes. Although I think we could still do more of it. Urielle is a good example, a young woman of colour, a working-class artist, as I would understand that term, but even so, we only encountered her because she was coming out of three years at drama school. So, there's still a sense that it's very difficult to find people who aren't coming through higher education. We are just about to start a version of our Optimists producer training course, focussed around a youth takeover at Warwick Arts Centre, where we're going to be working with young people who aren't in full-time education or training. That's going to be a whole new area of work for us, specifically trying to say to young people who are not going to go through further or higher education, 'look, there's a whole industry here that may have interesting career opportunities for you, beyond wanting to be an actor or writer.' We hope we can give them fresh perspectives through focusing on producing or marketing or technical management.

More and more our development programmes target specific groups. Our recent Darkrooms, for example, have been solely for artists of colour or deaf and disabled artists. We've found that this explicit focus is far more effective at recruiting artists from those demographics than just saying we 'welcome' applications from artists from those groups. You also have to work harder to reach those artists, because they aren't already in your networks, and look carefully to make sure that the opportunity you're offering isn't excluding people in a way you're not aware of. So, when targeting deaf and disabled artists, we've worked with Arts Council England's Agents for Change and, also, with the disabled artists on our board. This helps you reach those groups with some degree of credibility and helps you to create the right environment with the right support. The Darkroom is all about taking away barriers so that artists can have the gift of a wonderful two weeks of really creative time and we needed to make sure that our offer didn't actually generate barriers in terms of the need to apply for Access to Work provision, for example. The people that helped us with that also became really useful gateways into new networks where we were able to reach deaf and disabled artists. We could ask them to nominate artists to the programme. Actually, the percentage of nominated artists that went on to apply for this particular Darkroom were higher than previously, which shows that approach is working.

We also understand that we might need to offer additional resources in some cases. So for our Optimists course, it's all well and good to say we welcome applications from those that are less represented in our sector, but it doesn't mean anything, unless you say, 'and there are bursaries, support for access costs, travel and so on' to make that possible for

people. And that's all up front, so you know if you are selected and you need additional support, we will help you.

It's also about how you reach out into those communities, and sometimes, you know, because I'm a white, middle-aged man, I'm not the right person to be fronting up that conversation. Another reason for working in partnerships. It really helps that we've got a very diverse board, and that we are beginning to diversify our staff team. But again, trying to hire diverse producers is not easy. That's one of the reasons that 8 of our 16 Optimist places are now always reserved for deaf and disabled producers and producers of colour. Because we want to be getting more of those applications for the jobs we advertise. It's one approach to fixing that lack of diversity in the sector as a whole.

JB: *In terms of developing inclusive, accessible productions for diverse audiences – is there a strategy that you deploy that we could learn from?*

PW: If you can invite those audiences into the creative process, that's when I've seen it work best. We did this for Chris Thorpe and Rachel Chavkin's *Status*. *Status* is about nationality. How that is felt by different people? Whether that's useful or dangerous? Because of this subject matter it felt like we couldn't make that show solely in the UK, and that it was important to get out of the liberal, arts industry bubble that we work in. We worked in America, obviously, as Rachel lives there, and we worked in Germany with our fantastic co-producers Staatstheater Mainz. This meant the creative team were partly non-British. We also did a lot of research, both in the UK and abroad, working with people who would might feel their nationality in ways that were different from ours: refugee groups or people who have had their nationality compromised or taken away. We also worked with communities of British 'working-class' people in three towns where the Leave vote had been very high, and in rural Devon. Chris went to meet those groups in the first instance in the early stages of R&D, and Chris would just stay in that town, talk to them. Because of the work that we did on *Confirmation* where Chris spent two years talking to a British white supremacist, he's become very skilled in holding a meaningful dialogue with people with whom he disagrees, sometimes profoundly. He's really good at that. The conversations Chris had with all these people shaped the work, but they also developed a community of people who were engaged by Chris and the project – we'd built those bridges.

Then when the first draft was done, we went back to those communities and we did readings with them. This shaped the work further. I should say this was all supported by Battersea Arts Centre's fantastic Collaborative Touring Network, who helped us support these relationships over about a year. Then when the show was finished, even though it couldn't play in the full production format because these places don't have arts centres in them, we made a sort of unplugged version of the show, and we took that back to those communities. I guess most of those audiences would never normally come to see something like *Status*, but because they'd been involved in the conversation for, by that point, like two years, they did come. And it was amazing. I think many of them still disagreed quite profoundly with Chris' views, but together we had created a space in which that was ok. In which we could agree to differ and still have a productive dialogue. I think that goes quite deep in terms of engagement and we're looking at ways in which we might be able to do something similar on tour in October, albeit without the same level of resources. For each location we're making a bespoke YouTube video, which is just Chris basically saying, 'I'm in your town, this is what it's about, I'm just a lad from Bolton, I'm not an

alien, I'd love you to come along, and please talk to me after the show". We'll see how that works. Anyway, I think, as artists, we stand a better chance of making our shows more inclusive if we start by making the making process inclusive.

Notes

1. Interviewed at China Plate's London Office in Toynbee Studios 31 July 2019
2. The Incubate Propagate project took place over 2018–19. Further details of the activities and the full project report can be found on the *Incubate Propagate* website here: <https://incubate-propagate.com/>
3. Keynote by Javaad Alipoor at the first Incubate Propagate workshop, University of Leeds, 26 September 2018.

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Notes on contributor

Jessica Bowles is an academic with a background in professional practice as a theatre designer-across the UK, including at Dukes Playhouse Lancaster, Young Vic, and the RSC and as a producer of large-scale festival experiences. At Royal Central, she wrote the BA (Hons) Theatre Practice Course, along the way introducing new undergraduate programs to Higher Education including the first Circus and Puppetry courses to be offered at degree level. In her role as Head of the Centre for Excellence in Theatre Training (2008–11) she led research into the factors contributing to the sustainability of graduate companies which in turn led to the development of the MA/MFA in Creative Producing, the course she now leads. Between 2010 and 2014, Jessica was on the Management Board of the Centre for Creative Collaboration (C4CC), a University of London initiative to bring together leading researchers from London's universities together with creative industry freelancers, small businesses, and students. In 2011 and 2015 she produced the educational component of the Prague Quadrennial, the world's largest festival of performance design and space. Her educational and research practice focuses on the materiality of performance and the collaborative and interdisciplinary nature of performance-making including work with the Bartlett School of Architecture UCL, ScanLab and SHUNT exploring 3D scanning and live performance. For over 20 years, Jessica has been active in the development of Puppetry and in 2014 was invited onto the Board of award-winning company Theatre-Rites, a field leader in the creation of experimental theatre for children.