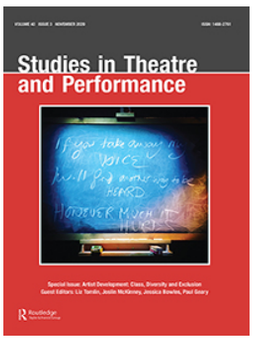

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Lilli Geissendorfer & Kate Danielson

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Weston Jerwood Creative Bursaries: case studies from a decade of supporting the next generation of artists from lower socio-economic backgrounds

Lilli Geissendorfer[a] and Kate Danielson[b]

[a]Jerwood Arts; [b]Weston Jerwood Creative Bursaries

ABSTRACT

Since 2010 the Weston Jerwood Creative Bursaries programme has supported 124 practitioners, recent graduates from lower socio-economic backgrounds, at 110 arts organisations across the UK to kick-start their careers. This practice-based review shares four Fellow case studies from the past decade, reflecting on their experiences with the programme and their journeys in the arts since. Reproducing first person accounts gives a visceral and direct insight into the impact policy-driven intervention programmes like the Weston Jerwood Creative Bursaries programme can have beyond standard evaluation data.

KEYWORDS

socio-economic diversity; arts; emerging artists

Introduction

The arts can act as a powerful mirror of society creating representations of individuals, communities and experiences. As a result, *who* makes art, and who works in the arts, (for example their class origins, their gender, and their ethnicity) is important to ensuring all experience is represented on page, stage, and on screen, as well as in galleries and museums. However, individuals from higher socio-economic origins are currently over-represented in most creative occupations, compared to those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and compared to society as a whole, particularly in leadership roles. Since Jerwood Arts started addressing this imbalance, the 'class crisis' in the arts has only deepened, with recent research (Brook, O'Brien, and Taylor 2018) highlighting that chronic issues of socio-economic, race, and gender under-representation persist.

The Weston Jerwood Creative Bursaries programme has been working to change this, by providing individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds with the opportunities to get into and progress within the arts, and enabling their leadership potential to flourish. Jerwood Arts set up the Weston Jerwood Creative Bursaries programme in 2010, with funding initially from the DCMS and ACE, to look at the barriers faced by those looking to start their careers in the arts but without the financial support to work for free or the networks to find their way in. Since then, the programme has supported 124 emerging arts professionals to undertake paid work placements of up to one year with 110 arts organisations across the UK. Host organisations apply to create and host a placement which they feel will offer the best opportunity to set an emerging creative

CONTACT Lilli Geissendorfer lilli@jerwoodarts.org Jerwood Space, 171 Union Street, London SE1 0LN

professional on their route to success. Independently of their host organisations, Fellows come together quarterly as a cohort to take part in training and development provided by the programme, developing their peer networks and their understanding of all art forms across the UK.

For too long, unpaid and unadvertised internships have been the main way into the arts, excluding those without the financial means or networks to gain these positions. This programme promotes a new generation of arts leaders and makers who are more representative of our society and are hungry for the opportunity to showcase their experiences. The programme also supports the host organisations to change, focussing on their organisational culture and recruitment. This improves their practice for the long term but also ensures that Fellows from different backgrounds feel welcome in their new roles: their experiences are valued and they are supported to thrive.

The case studies here provide an insight into the personal experiences of four Fellows from the programme, written by them in response to Jerwood's invitation to describe their journeys. They are inspiring examples but also indicative of the experiences of many of the 124 Fellows who have been reaching leadership roles across the arts both as freelancers and artists creating their own work and within organisations. These include Curator at the Whitworth Gallery, Director of Chisenhale Dance Space, Artistic Director of Birmingham's Fierce Festival, Producer with the English Touring Theatre, and Classical Music Programme Manager for the British Council. 95% of respondents of a recent poll of Fellows said the programme helped them progress in their careers, most stating strongly, and 90% said the programme raised their aspirations and increased their confidence. All but three are still working in the arts.

The programme has been improved and updated following evaluation of each edition. This has led to a number of significant changes to the fourth edition of the programme (2020-22) in response to what has been learnt: opening up Fellowships to include those who do not have a university degree, increase in their salaries, focusing more on support for Fellows to progress at the end of their placements (including the option to apply for international placements with the British Council offices around the world) and a new organisational development programme for all host organisations to ensure they have internal cultures that are welcoming to those from different backgrounds. Having used full maintenance grants throughout university as the measure of financial need to date (indication of parental income of less than £25,000 pa), we will be trialling new eligibility criteria to ensure that all those who have faced socio-economic barriers to entering the arts are able to apply.

These case studies include reflections on some of the intersectional barriers and challenges which the programme is designed to address, such as motherhood and gender, and on signifiers of class such as accent and the currency of artistic taste. While Fellows received more support in later editions than they did at the start in 2010, it is hard to compare what impact these changes have had on their individual experiences. Across all three editions, 95% of Fellows completed their placements, strongly indicating that the bespoke nature of Jerwood Arts' support works.

Chris Lloyd joined the programme as Social Media Assistant at Sherman Theatre in Cardiff in early 2018 and is now working successfully as a freelance film maker in the city. In the same cohort as Chris, Megan Hamber spent her year-long placement as Creative

Projects Assistant at Yorkshire Dance in Leeds and was offered a full-time role as Assistant Creative Producer with the organisation at the end of the year. Gemma Connell was a Fellow in the first year of the programme (2010), as Trainee Producer at Manchester International Festival, before going on to forge a successful career as a producer, maker and dancer first with other organisations (including Cheshire Dance, Pavilion Dance South West in Bournemouth, Aberdeen Performing Arts) and more recently running her own company, the Artifact Dance Company. Athenoula Bartley Sophocleous was in the cohort with Chris and Megan, working as Junior Producer for Duckie, producers of 'cultural interventions', before being offered a full-time role with the company. Here are their stories.

CHRIS LLOYD

I wasn't working class, my parents never worked. We existed through benefits, living in an ugly council estate in the Welsh valleys where those who were employed in any job were in the minority and there was no ambition or prospects anywhere.

The Arts were not on the radar whatsoever. The only piece of culture I would ever get was through jumble sales where my parents were able to buy me unwanted books or magazines from someone else's lives which I read religiously. Stories of people who existed in what I saw as the impenetrable outside world fascinated me. I held the same subconscious view as the rest of the people in that council estate that jobs, adventure and being written about was what happened to other people.

I was always conscious of being poor. My parents would often have me steal bread from the corner shop like a modern day Jean Valjean. I remembered bringing it up in school once and my peers were outraged. It was then that I realised that it's not the done thing and I didn't feel like everybody else. My free school dinners were often the topic of humility in school as well as not having a new bag every year after the summer holidays. My parents' income and where I lived became something I was very ashamed of and I tried my best to hide it.

I had my first job when I was nearly 20 as my parents moved to another council estate, this one five miles away from a market town which was a walkable distance for me. I worked long hours for little pay for eight years. I had a job which I was grateful for but retail wasn't for me. After rescuing an old video camera which was destined for a bonfire, I got interested in creating film. Whilst performing monotonous tasks in the supermarket, I would plan out films shot for shot in my head and shoot them on my one day off a week.

I took a bold step to quit my life and pursue a career in film through a degree as a mature student. I went off to study Film at University of South Wales in Cardiff. I spent three years working tirelessly in my course and took part in every extra-curricular activity possible to gain the maximum experience possible and make the most out of my university experience which was one that I never thought I'd have. By the time I graduated, I was equipped with hard and soft skills as well as a confidence and self-belief that I had never experienced before.

Experience on the programme

I came across an opportunity that seemed to tick every box and was exactly what I was looking for. Weston Jerwood Creative Bursaries were looking for recent graduates like me, from my background, to work within a leading arts organisation through a year-long paid placement. I jumped at the chance and enjoyed the creative application process which allowed me to utilise and demonstrate my skillset in a format that reflects my strengths.

This was something that I really wanted and I conveyed this through my short application video where I wanted to accurately portray my passion for stories and how they can be told and received by any audience, regardless of their background. I also wanted to show my understanding of marketing and its importance, and how looking at engagement patterns through my own socials helped me reach particular audiences with my own films: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wMXLQ7A1TAE&feature=youtu.be

I was successful and was very excited to start this excellent opportunity. My role was Social Media Assistant at Sherman Theatre, a producing house in the middle of Cardiff. As my start date came closer, my excitement was mixed with anxious thoughts that I would be an imposter in this world of theatre which I knew nothing about. I really believed that the differences between me and my new colleagues would be very prominent. I was Chris Lloyd the imposter.

It took me a couple of months to find my feet. After meeting the rest of the 40 strong cohort of other participants in placements across the country at a training day in London, I realised that I wasn't the only one who appreciated what an excellent opportunity this was and we became a real support network for each other. The team at WJCB were a real backbone for us all, dedicated people who were aware of our needs and there to answer any questions or fix any problems.

The cohort would meet quarterly, where participants across the country would host training days at their placement venues, carefully selected speakers would share their experience and offer us advice. This was especially valuable to me as they often spoke about their own journey into the arts, where I could identify similar hurdles and milestones within my own. The cohort was also taken on a trip to Avignon Festival where we were able to experience first-hand how international audiences engaged with different art forms. Regardless of this, I was still very conscious of being Chris Lloyd the imposter.

A real turning point for me was an international placement offered by the programme which was available to 14 of the participants. I was fortunate enough to be chosen for one of these where I was to work at Theatre Zetski Dom in Montenegro, creating video and still images around their summer play. Shortly after arriving there, I discovered how much I had learned during my time at Sherman Theatre. Although I still had my support network back in the UK, I felt quite detached in this environment where I had to deliver excellent work, quickly. I realised that I was talking theatre language without prompt, I knew what instructions meant, I was aware what may cause problems in plans and came up with better alternatives, such as identifying early on generators that would drown out the sound of video playing within the production itself. I felt part of it all. Along with the rest of the cast and crew on the production, I was asked to do a piece to camera about my involvement which prompted me to reflect on the huge benefits of working internationally, where I'd

increased my cultural awareness, discovered different approaches to engage with audiences and hugely expanded my professional network: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gba12rLDYXc&feature=youtu.be

After a month of hard work for this amazing opportunity in Montenegro, I returned to Sherman Theatre with a new gust of energy. I doubted myself less and really felt more integrated as part of the team. Somehow after the International placement, I felt like I finally deserved my place at Sherman theatre and as one of the WJCB cohort. I felt less like Chris Lloyd the imposter.

Since the placement ended, using the connections I made in theatre, I work freelance, shooting film and still photography for some of the most influential names within the arts, including Sherman Theatre who I feel I owe a great debt to.

Through my work as a freelancer, I have met many key creatives across different platforms, who thanks to the programme feel that they can openly talk to me about socio-economic diversity, my background and what they can do to target people like me who want to follow a similar path. A dialogue has opened where the particular class of people who dominate the arts want to hear and target new voices from untapped corners. I often get told how lovely it is to hear a Welsh accent from someone working on and around a Wales-based production, one that comes from the depths of a voiceless council estate. Whilst growing up, I was really glad that I didn't have a voice to speak about where I lived and how, but through my experiences with the programme, I tell anyone who will listen how people like me can be targeted.

Through social media, traditional marketing and audience development has changed significantly. Rather than relying on audiences to buy particular publications, or be in a particular place, audiences can be targeted regardless of their location without them having to spend any money or go anywhere. Social media is a platform that is used by a hugely diverse range of people where background or income isn't a factor. It's a platform where people feel very comfortable, and sometimes the first time they have been exposed to the arts, whether they realise it or not.

During my placement, I was able to really develop and evolve as a filmmaker. I learned how to both achieve a captive audience through film and show them, through storytelling, that they are the right audience for particular theatre productions. I have learned how to craft film and stills photography into a device which excites potential audience members enough into taking a chance with a particular production. Coming from the background I do, and now working within the arts, I feel I have a wide scope of how to reach audiences from many different pockets of society.

Chris Lloyd the filmmaker.

Weston Jerwood Creative Bursaries Fellows in Cardiff.
Photo: Tim Dickenson

MEGAN HAMBER

Mother/Artist

People ask me how I do it, and I really don't know. I just have to.

So here are all the pieces of me at the moment; the patchwork of risks taken – some I've faced deliberately, some unwillingly.

I'm creative. I want to *be* creative. I'm also a mum. And yes, a single mother now, who started a university course in Prop Making/Theatre studies with one child, and fell pregnant again two weeks into it. Getting through that felt like a huge achievement, but the hard stuff was yet to come.

I'm from a low-income background, so starting out into any kind of career with limited financial backup was always going to be a risk. It's hard enough, as a single parent, to find a place to live. But a combination of high rents, the cost of childcare – nearly £2000 a month upon leaving university, despite the then 15 free hours per week – and no maintenance payments made it really challenging.

I worked three jobs, which nearly killed me, and I suffered the guilt of being absent from my kids' lives so much. I took paid work, which didn't need my creativity so I could grasp any unpaid opportunities. I volunteered in the run up to fringe festivals, to help expand my knowledge of how large scale events were run, I shadowed theatre companies to develop my understanding of the different roles in creating performance and I ran a theatre company of my own – this is just to name a few. All of this was to develop my creativity in a situation where paid opportunities to do this were few and far between,

meaning I'd at times be working sixteen-hour days just to keep my head above water and my creativity expanding. Not ideal when you have two small children waiting at home.

Striving to create a freelance career is a risky proposition at the best of times. At times it's looked impossible – it's hard to travel far for creative work when you have kids, to make artistic choices about where you'll work, how far from home it'll take you, to work out how to expand your horizons when you're rooted in that way.

There have been many strings to my bow. While I had to take whatever creative work was available to me at the time, just to get my foot in the door, it allowed me to gain a more holistic view of the arts. I made props, puppets, worked in set design, project-managed, directed theatre performances, acted in them, even marketed for a spell (not my forte).

And then the Weston Jerwood Creative Bursaries came up, and an opportunity at Yorkshire Dance – and opportunities like these feel very few and far between in the arts. But there was a big risk here, too. I'd have to move, with the kids, from the south coast to Yorkshire, to start a new job in Leeds, leaving an unhappy relationship and uprooting us all.

Some people will tell you that you might have to give up your dreams for the sake of your children. Some people have told me that.

And I *have* been on the brink of giving up.

But having the kids had given me a real sense of purpose and determination. Life wasn't just about me anymore. I had two small people who depended on me and, while I needed to provide for them, I also felt I needed to show them that being a parent needn't mean letting go of your dreams. I needed to fulfil my life and my passions both within and beyond the family, to find a way of nurturing my own personal growth at the same time as nurturing theirs. To prove to them my capabilities as a mother and as a creative professional.

Mothers can be deemed unreliable due to their family commitments but – trust me – you will not find a better multi-tasker or project manager than a mum.

So I made the move and found myself working in Creative producing, specialising in artist development – a role in which I can see myself carving out my long-term career – and able to support others, which is something close to my heart. Jerwood and Yorkshire Dance have allowed me space to learn and be paid, to work. I know I'm actually very privileged – I have family around here, and without their support I couldn't do any of this, not all working parents have this.

I've been extremely lucky to have worked for companies that do have flexible working hours and management with children of their own, understand the constraints, especially as a single parent. Not all companies work this way and are that understanding, having heard a fair few horror stories from other working parents.

Through the Weston Jerwood bursary with Yorkshire Dance I've been able to meet a huge cohort of other creatives in a similar position to myself, unable to carve their way into the arts due to the lack of support for individuals from low-income backgrounds. Not only was this a great opportunity as an individual, it was particularly important for a mother as it was very hard for me to get out and meet similar creative people. Through doing this I not only have a great creative support network but also am now working with other cross-disciplined artists within and outside of the cohort on exciting projects outside of my current employment.

And yet … it's a constant fight, and it's exhausting and isolating.

Even now it's a struggle, maintaining a full time job, washing clothes, making dinner, affording to live.

There's debt. Debt, debt, debt, and the casual cruelty of the benefits system.

Even in full time employment I am hugely reliant on Universal Credit. And when an admin error completely out of my control occurred, and I didn't receive anything from them for a month, the only thing they gave me was details of my nearest food bank … I was fortunate that I had family nearby to look out for us and an understanding employer who could lend me an advance, but many people do not have this and the outcome can be bleak.

The last year and a half has been one of the most difficult – and life-changing – I have ever experienced, but I wouldn't change a thing about it.

I've been around other mums in the same situation. I've talked to many women who want to start families but are worried about what that will mean for their artistic work, and about how they will sustain freelance careers after having babies. We've talked about work/life balance and about prioritising – learning to let go and drop work stuff when our families need us.

None of this has an easy go-to answer.

How can we create a better system to hold up and support working mothers within the arts? How can we create artistic jobs with

more security? How can we create opportunities for those that have the desire and passion for a career in the arts but lack the financial means? These are questions I ask myself every day. I don't have an answer but the Weston Jerwood Bursary has created a good stepping-stone in the right direction.

Without the bursary I would have crumbled away. It came at a time when, without it, I wouldn't have been able to continue doing what I love and have passion for. Meritocracy is not all it takes to carve out a career in the arts. Sheer determination can only get you so far.

Even now as I work full time, still with Yorkshire Dance, I continue to pick up outside projects in set and prop making, making performance work and setting up queer performance workshops and events. It's all about balance and sometimes I get that wrong. With funded contracts there is still a risk that what I have now may not continue, and the next job may not be logistically or financially visible. So I work hard to create a net that – hopefully – my family and I can fall back on.

I've thought and talked a lot about how we can better support people like me, and people less fortunate than me.

I'm just trying to be honest here. I know I'm not unusual. I hope I'm speaking for everyone in, or knocking on the door of, the creative industries. We – you – are taking risks every day to do the thing you love, for the people you love. And it's worth it, isn't it?

And here I am, look. Here we are, doing it.

GEMMA CONNELL

'You're not working-class anymore'

My journey with the WJCB scheme began as a working-class graduate who loved to dance. I wanted to work in the arts, but those around me always said that it wouldn't be possible. Whilst working on my undergraduate degree, someone took a chance on me. That person was David Slack, Executive Director of 24:7 Theatre Festival in Manchester. Through him, I gained work experience in arts marketing and festival management that turned into a cherished ad hoc job – returning home during university holidays to work for 24:7, and Dave would pay me what he could. This experience would prove vital for the career that I was about to embark on – a career that began with festival producing. However, at the time, 24:7 were not regularly funded and so their economic status in the

industry was as precarious as my own. Upon graduating, I knew I would need something else. However, Dave's generosity and trust seemed so rare to me. But low and behold, a job appeared on my radar: Trainee Producer at Manchester International Festival – a 12 month paid placement funded by the DCMS Jerwood Creative Bursaries Scheme, as it then was. I remember noting in the interview that I hadn't known what a producer was until I read the job description, and I realised that 'producing' is what I'd been doing at 24:7. Jerwood and MIF gave me an opportunity which changed my life in incredible ways. At MIF, I supported the Senior Producer and the Director of Creative Learning in the development, coordination and delivery of 'Music Boxes'; a major new, outdoor, site-specific, children and families commission, located on a large plaza at Media City UK. The role gifted me with the skills I would need to start my career as a producer, but also gave me insight into an artist-led festival – something which would prove helpful to reflect on when I later decided to focus my energies on creating my own artistic work.

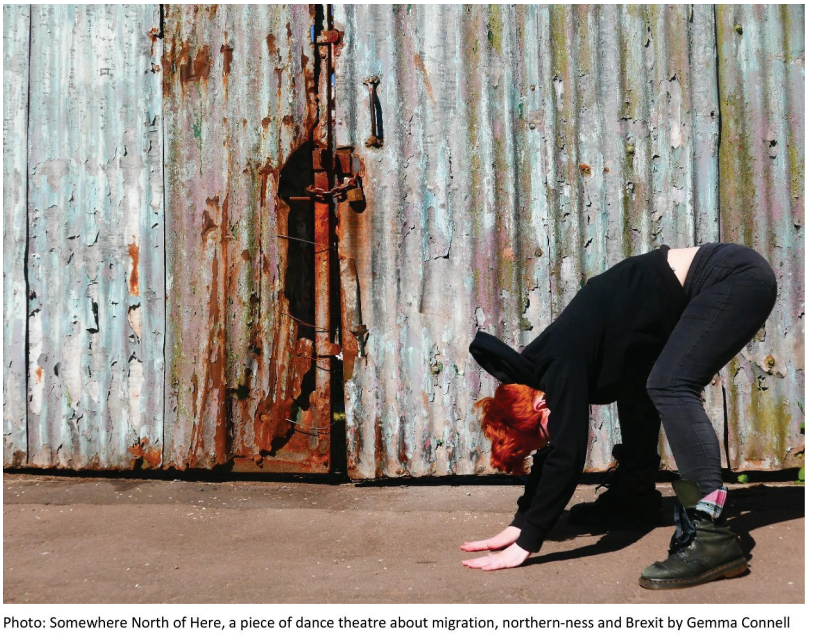

Photo: Somewhere North of Here, a piece of dance theatre about migration, northern-ness and Brexit by Gemma Connell (The Artifact Dance Company). Photo by Ian Abbott.

Something 'other'

For the next four and a half years, I worked a series of fixed term contracts, mostly full-time, as a producer in the performing arts. I moved around the UK – from Manchester, to Bournemouth, to Aberdeen. Mostly, I felt that I was trusted to do my job, and do it well. However, I also encountered some white middle-class men who treated me as if I should feel lucky to be in the room with them – that because of who I was, my ideas would never be good enough. I was simply there to witness and implement their ideas. I experienced a culture of being expected to be grateful that someone had *allowed* me to participate in the arts.

In this instance, it wasn't only classism that I was experiencing – it was sexism too. An insidious ageist sexism in which, as feminist scholar Vikki Turbine notes, working-class women are often seen as 'other by way of being simultaneously "not enough" and "too much"' (Turbine 2019, 5). Our socio-economic background seems to determine that we

are not good enough to be in the careers we desire, but we are also 'too much' as women who assert themselves.

My experience of this kind of discrimination led me to take a huge risk – I left full-time employment and went freelance. Going freelance in the arts is a difficult experience for anyone, as it can be rife with constant rejection. I experienced going freelance as someone from a working-class background all the more terrifying because, as feminist theorist Sara Ahmed points out, those who are from middle or upper class backgrounds 'have more resources to fall back on when you fall' (Ahmed 2017, 219). I had no savings. Neither did my parents. I found myself constantly fighting the anxiety that, if I took this chance and it didn't work, my career could be over.

However, one of the reasons that I took the leap into freelance life, was so that I could be my own boss. I wanted to generate the kind of work culture I found when I started life as a WJCB fellow; one which celebrated my lived experiences and the experiences of those that I worked with, using them to generate artistic work. My leap into self-employment was accompanied by a desire to stop producing other people's work and start concentrating on making my own. In this vein, I set up The Artifact Dance Company, whose driving force was to create dance theatre work and outreach programmes that respond to the lived experience of our artists and community participants. Through this company, I created the solo performances of *Somewhere North of Here* (responding to the Brexit vote) and *Lies My Parents Told Me* (deconstructing British working-class ideologies of gender). I also developed and delivered outreach programmes in dance and spoken word to marginalised groups such as survivors of gender violence, stroke survivors and young people with special educational needs. The key here, is *lived experience* – that, in order to be truly reflective of society, art should represent the experiences of people from all walks of life, and that can only be done authentically by tapping into the lived experiences of marginalised groups. This doesn't just mean *letting us participate*, it means actively giving us the floor, the mic, and the power to pursue our own ideas throughout the lifespan of our careers. My website: www.gemmaconnell.com/gives more information about the work I do now as an independent choreographer, theatre maker and arts researcher based in South Wales.

Social Mobility on floor 7.5

When you gain a certain amount of success in any field as a working-class individual, people often talk to you about social mobility. In many ways my various identities now form a vicious contradiction – whilst having grown up working-class, and having experienced sexism and ageism in my career, I have also managed to sustain a freelance practice, develop my own dance company, and I am currently pursuing a PhD. I have gained a certain amount of social mobility, but that doesn't mean that my fight for socio-economic diversity in the arts stops here.

The phrase 'you're not working class anymore' is now so carelessly bandied around, that it is possible to be lured into a false sense of security in thinking that your position in the arts industry is safe. Whilst it's important to reflect on how far we've come, it's equally important to reflect on the work that is left to be done. I have found that this kind of reflection can be thrust upon you in unexpected and magical ways. In March 2019, I saw Rebecca Atkinson-Lord's one-woman show *The Class Project*. Atkinson-Lord takes us through a story about working-class regional accents, of how they might be

metaphorically beaten out of you, and of how heart-breaking it is to watch someone else change their accent and hide their working-class origins just to fit in. At the end of the performance, I watched Atkinson-Lord write these words on a chalkboard, in silence:

> If you take away my VOICE,
>
> I will find another way to be HEARD,
>
> HOWEVER MUCH IT HURTS.

I broke down in tears. As I cried, I realised something. I was, at the time, just over 1 year into my PhD in dance research. I had inadvertently begun to change my Mancunian accent in academic contexts. No, not change … lose. Did my continued success in this field, hinge on whether I was willing to lose such a huge part of my identity?

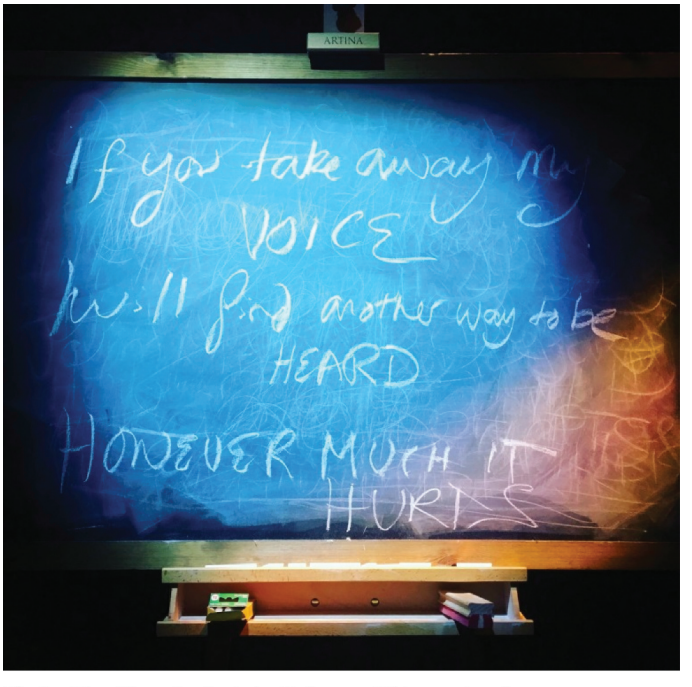

Photo: The Class Project, by Rebecca Atkinson-Lord.
Photo by Gemma Connell.

My partner has likened the phenomena of social mobility to the setting of floor 7.5 in an office block in the 1999 film *Being John Malkovich*. Education and hard work allow us to rise to floor 7.5 – a mysterious and odd world where we're offered attractive opportunities but are completely misunderstood. We cannot advance beyond that floor. Instead, we're stuck at an awkward point in the office block of social mobility – too educated or 'different' for our origins, and too working-class for anyone else. We exist in a sort of limbo, where we find ourselves because many organisations believe that by helping those from marginalised communities get through the door, they have done their diversity work. The WJCB has supported me and my work fiercely since 2010, funding

my attendance at the Atelier for Young Festival Managers in Slovenia in 2012, and employing me on a freelance basis as a speaker, writer and grant selector. However, this issue is bigger than one organisation, bigger than one bursary scheme. Just as Jerwood Arts have continued to support me through funding and freelance employment since I graduated from the WJCB scheme, the industry at large needs to consider how to support working-class artists throughout their careers.

Here is a video recorded recently for Jerwood, speaking about my experiences. In this video I discuss the barriers I believe that I faced in pursuing a career in the arts, as well as more detail on how the WJCB has continued to support me through funding, networking and freelance employment beyond my initial placement at Manchester International Festival: https://vimeo.com/351610285

Photo: Gemma Connell speaking at the launch of the 2015 cohort of Weston Jerwood Creative Bursaries. Photo: Hana Makovcova.

ATHENOULA BARTLEY SOPHOCLEOUS

A rejection of highbrow art. An argument for drag queens.

In 2017 I started my placement with Duckie, an organisation I still find hard to summarise in a snappy way but sometimes defines itself as 'homo honky tonk' sometimes 'socially engaged showbiz clubs'. Duckie's tendency to swerve conventional venues means I have found myself hoisting red curtains into Elephant and Castle shopping centre and carting trestle tables through housing estates; pondering how I started to resent theatre spaces in years gone by and how I found myself creating and building alongside an organisation which made so much sense to me.

I spent this year with Duckie as part of a cohort of 40 Fellows on the Weston Jerwood Creative Bursaries (WJCB) programme. We often spoke about class; if we considered ourselves working class, what it meant to be working class, if we, having studied arts at university could really represent the working class. Sometimes being an

arts graduate feels totally incompatible with being working class, the two seem not to fit together.

I slip in and out of phases of defining myself as working class, it's something that feels transient. I asked the people around me if they considered themselves to be part of a social class.

My dad said, 'The idea of being labelled is not attractive, the only classes I belong to are "not white" and "Londoner"'. I asked my younger brother – part of a large group of boys who as teenagers were regularly stopped and searched by police officers without reason. As adults they have trade jobs and drive nice, new cars. He said he doesn't really consider himself working class and neither would his friends, he said 'we are not middle class, but we have everything we want'.

My mother had similar ideas about class; for her 'Class' is a word loaded with 'Englishness', masculinity and manual work. With immigrant parents, 'working class' has often felt like something associated with Britishness, which, and like class is something I sometimes identify with, but only for fleeting moments.

I definitely identify with being skint.

My family have stories, survival stories, success stories, tales of woe. The tales told have taught me that little is black and white. In art too there is often little value in seeing things in normal delineations, simple categories, which may have practical applications, are generally less interesting unless there are also competing or incongruous classifications overlaid that show the complexity of real life where people simply do not fit completely into any one box with easy to read labels. It's a desire to understand the complex areas, to find empathy or compatibility or relatability with an audience or with a performer which makes me want to tell stories.

If you'd asked me my ambitions at 18, I'd have told you I wanted to be an actor for the Royal Shakespeare Company. What could be more prestigious? Shakespeare to me was a symbol of intelligence and understanding him a sign that I had bettered myself. Years of youth theatre later and an AS in Theatre Studies have not dulled the memory of feeling stupid which washed over me when I first (and sometimes second and third) sat through a Shakespeare play.

Having 'drama' friends was hard work, I found I had different priorities and expectations of the world, for them the smallest things could be very high stakes, they were easy to explode, often seemingly entitled. I value my WJCB Fellows as we seem to share similar values. They rarely create a scene over nothing, but they are loud and outspoken when it comes to injustices. I have found solidarity and hilarity in my peers, from coping with excruciating imposter syndrome to listening to their stories about the blank faces that look back at them when they tell their colleagues they have *never* been on a skiing holiday. Furthermore, my network reaches so much further afield than performing arts, to visual arts and music, in a way that would have seemed impossible to me three years ago. I feel like somehow WJCB has helped me cheat nepotism which is so rife in the arts. The scheme allowed me to sneak past it due to the requirements of the role (in my cohort this was receipt of full maintenance grant at university) and simultaneously acquired 40 friends with an in to different arts organisations across the country.

My closest friends have always been people outside of performing arts, performance was my 'work' life, which they were kind about, but fundamentally had little interest in. Shakespeare had little relevance to their lives and plays were long and expensive. Without

the years of subsidised youth theatre, led by fantastic working-class women, this world would be as alien to me as it was to my baffled but tolerant pals.

Finding queer work, performance art and live art was the antidote to this. Being in nightclubs and hearing people roar with support as a performer bared their soul, talked about not fitting in, or ate a pack of Kraft macaroni cheese in six-inch heels whilst playing the star-spangled banner. The shortness gave it energy, the location more accessible, the openness of performers allowed us to have open conversations within our friendship groups. For the first time I was sharing profound arty experiences with my 'non-arty' friends in nightclubs and pubs, late at night.

The NYC ball culture, which would eventually inspire Ru Paul's drag race and have worldwide impact on drag was not just about gender-rejection but also class-rejection, and saw working class, queer people of colour 'walk' pageants satirizing the upper classes. Maybe this is like my flirtation with Shakespeare.

Raising artistic taste might be a goal of some arts organisations but I want to build my career around rejecting the idea that there is a league where High Art is somehow above other art: High Art may have rich and powerful patrons that influence what is considered High Art but I want to shout from the rooftops that Beyoncé changed the world more than Shakespeare ever has or will. I don't want to have reasonable academic conversations about this. That high-brow moments appear in low brow places and that art isn't something that needs to be learnt. That Lily Savage did more for gay liberation than Tony Kushner. That nuance is present in every 6-min-night-club-performance-art-piece, which everyone can find something to say about, and that after a couple of drinks it could make *even more* sense. Art that is accessible, accessible to make, to watch, to find, for anyone, is the most empowering art. When art commentators relate art to other pieces of art they often do it a disservice for the best art relates directly to the world as it is.

Music hall, drag queens with thick accents and cheap wigs, glitter curtains and bright lights washing out sticky carpets, drama and laughter, small stages in the corner of working men's clubs and a serious commitment to glamour are things that continue to bring me so much joy, that are comforting and familiar. Just for a moment, with everybody else present, I am British and I am working class.

Conclusion

The case studies speak to the breadth of experience and unique circumstances of each individual who has been part of the programme. We would like to give them the last word, to highlight how the real, human impact of programmes like Weston Jerwood Creative Bursaries remain beyond much of our evaluation processes, tick boxes and carefully designed programme elements.

'I often get told how lovely it is to hear a Welsh accent from someone working on and around a Wales-based production, one that comes from the depths of a voiceless council estate. Whilst growing up, I was really glad that I didn't have a voice to speak about where I lived and how, but through my experiences with the programme, I tell anyone who will listen how people like me can be targeted.' Chris Lloyd

'Without the bursary I would have crumbled away. It came at a time when, without it, I wouldn't have been able to continue doing what I love and have passion for.

Meritocracy is not all it takes to carve out a career in the arts. Sheer determination can only get you so far.' Megan Hamber

'We cannot advance beyond that floor. Instead, we're stuck at an awkward point in the office block of social mobility – too educated or "different" for our origins, and too working-class for anyone else. We exist in a sort of limbo, where we find ourselves because many organisations believe that by helping those from marginalised communities get through the door, they have done their diversity work.' Gemma Connell

'The most valuable thing about the past 2 years has been the empowerment I've had to develop my feelings and thoughts into something more tangible. I'm still ducking labels and being hard to pin down, but with a strengthening sense of my voice and a niggle that it might just be worth listening to.' Athenoula Bartley Sophocleous

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Notes on contributors

Lilli Geissendorfer has led Jerwood Arts as Director since January 2018. Previous roles include Producer at Almeida Theatre and Relationship Manager for Theatre at Arts Council England. Lilli is a trustee of Fuel, and co-produced the first HighTide Festival in 2007. She is a Salzburg Forum Cultural Leadership Fellow, a Clore Emerging Leader 2012 and has a MA in Social Research from Goldsmiths College.

Kate Danielson has been the freelance Director of Weston Jerwood Creative Bursaries since it began in 2010. She has worked with a wide range of organisations to develop and run ambitious projects, fundraise and create long-term stability. Previously Director of Cheltenham Jazz Festival, she runs the Gloucester Roundhouse Project; runs special projects for Garfield Weston Foundation and is a trustee of Orchestras for All and the Reckitt Arts Trust.

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