



Making art. A Part of every day life
- what happens when communities play a strong role in commissioning?

A story about Simon...

I'd like to introduce you to Simon or as I like to call him Mr Heckmondwike. That's because he's in the know in Heckmondwike, the small postindustrial mill town where he owns a 1950s retro café. When I first met him I was 4 days in to my new job and sheepishly attending a meeting of Batley Festival volunteers. Simon's wife and best friend were part of the group so Simon had been coerced along. Before the meeting started we'd both **grabbed a cuppa** and were sat opposite each other. Short of a more original opening gambit I asked him what he does for a living. He told me about his café and then I asked about Heckmondwike and he spoke far more passionately about the town and their illuminations.

"Heckmondwike's illuminations are legendary. Gas-powered versions first appeared in the town in 1860s, beating Blackpool as the earlier illuminations"

(If there's anyone in from Blackpool we can fight this out later).

Simon told me of the quirky nature of these lights, these were illuminations not just for Christmas but for all year round with a lighthouse and boxing cats!

"Can we create a new light for the town?" Simon asked

I didn't know but I was keen to find out more so I met him the next week in his café to **listen** to more stories from the town and it's illumination history.

Simon's enthusiasm was infectious, I didn't know yet what we could do but I knew we should do something. **I told him as much.**

Over the next few months we invited Simon to visit some other light related events – Illuminating York, Lumiere in Durham and a work in progress of Wired Aerial Theatre's *As The World Tipped*.

When he came back he told me and a group of people from the local cricket club:
*"It's staggering to say the least. We saw it in the daytime, without lights, projection or music so I can only imagine the full production would be just awesome. If we brought it here to Heckmondwike, well, people would remember it for years, **it would inspire people.**"*

He well and truly had the bug and over the next few months conversations turned to refocusing Heckmondwike's Christmas Lights Switch On, which Simon already headed up the committee for, to a festival of light or HeckmondLIGHT.

We continued to support Simon to see other events, he attended events management training with us, we paired him with a digital artist, Simon put his faith in us – moving the funfair off the prime location in the town centre – and we put our faith in him – to bring local people on the journey, as volunteers, as audience.

Saturday 28th November came and it was the wettest and windiest day of the year so far, Christmas Lights switch-ons were been cancelled all around us but spirits in Heckmondwike were high and we had to **give it a go**. So several changes of clothes later we were holding an illuminated ice cream, enjoying the sounds of an illuminated brass band, surrounded by illuminated stilt-walkers, a digital funfair and the songs from the Sound of Music billowing out from the large projected heads of local people. (The composer of Do Re Me is from Heckmondwike) People were interacting with the illuminations.

Weeks later, it took that long to dry off, I was reflecting with Simon on the days events.

“After past events there'd often be some criticism. This time the first person I heard from was the cashier at Morrisons. She told me everyone coming in the store after the event was absolutely buzzing. In fact, I've not heard one negative comment and that's fantastic.”

And with **feedback** like that and an infectious enthusiasm we set about plans for this year but bigger and better. There's **momentum and it's building** - at a first meeting 9 new people joined us to give their ideas for this year's event including commissions specific to Heckmondwike and its communities.

To make this happen Simon, with us as a **springboard/failsafe**, has just submitted his first Grants for the Arts bid and a Heritage Lottery bid, is approaching local businesses for support and, of course, is continuing to visit other events...

*“It's not like visiting a gallery or seeing a play. I want to know how these events are produced, what's gone on in the background. For Luminaire in Durham, Creative Scene arranged for me to go early to see the set-up. Now I can transfer all that knowledge to **my own community**.”*

Simon is making the arts scene now in his town.

(and as such we now work with him as a SceneMaker)

PLACCC Festival

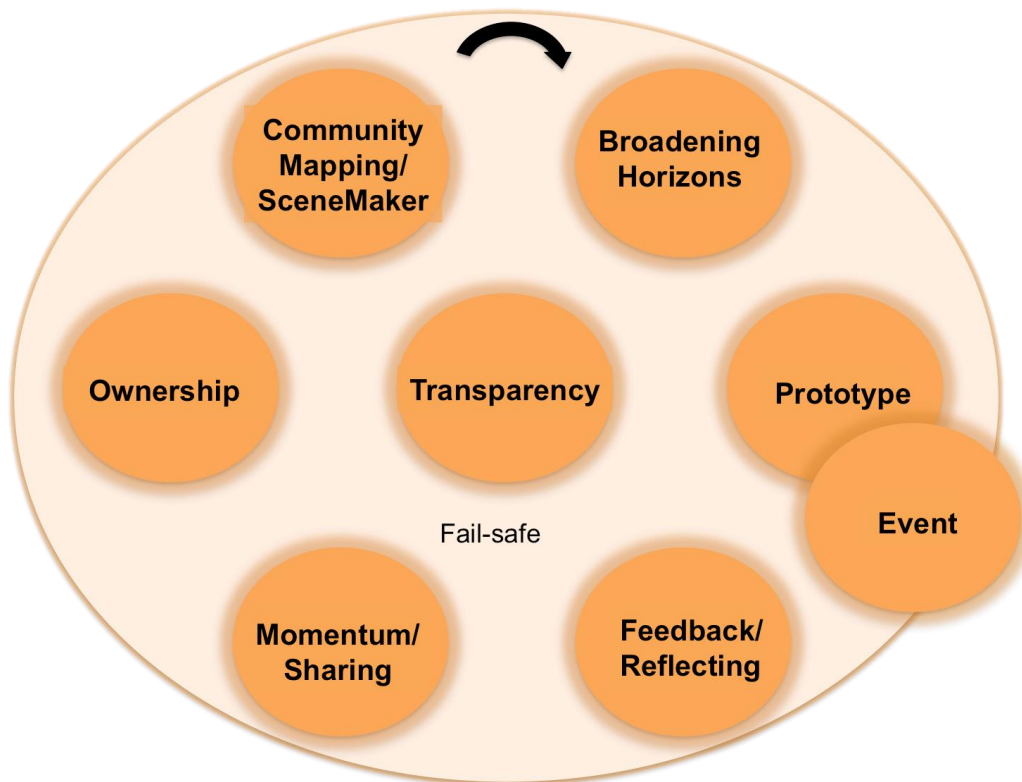
As part of the Tandem Europe programme I started chatting with Fanni who runs PLACCC festival in Budapest. It's a festival of art in public space across Budapest that brings in artists from all over Europe. As she explained their work she started talking about this one area of Budapest called Csepel. It's an old industrial area of the city, not far out of the city but far away in people's minds. They have tried doing work there before but found that local people didn't really attend. She asked me about Creative Scene, our work and in particular our SceneMakers. We wondered if there might be a model or a process that she could replicate from the work we do that would help us better identify the ways in which we are working. Through looking at Simon's story we pulled out key things that had been part of the process, put them in bubbles and pulled them together...



We decided to give it a shot both working through the process in our own post-industrial towns. Fanni is questioning what we do and how which has enabled us to spruce up the model in arts-speak! We're testing whether the model is flexible enough to facilitate local & project differences whilst providing principles for deepening ownership of arts within a community.

She's adding her own methods to areas of the process e.g. community mapping through formal interviews with a few members of the community, while we've used more facilitated workshop techniques. She's now found her SceneMaker and we're currently looking at how we approach non-arts partners.

We're capturing our processes as we go now and hope that as well as the effects in our own community we can share this in the future.



I'd like to tell you a story now about Julia as it highlights how this cycle is working in another scenario.

A story about Julia...

Let me start at the beginning, I've not met Julia yet. Instead I've got a problem and an idea about a solution.

My problem – there are no traditional performance venues in North Kirklees in which to host performances and I've just started work on a new arts programme.

My potential solution – it's hardly groundbreaking but there are a lot of other venues around – community centres, working men's clubs, pubs. Maybe we can use them.

Community Mapping – When we start this mapping it's very much about infrastructure – what size is the venue? What size performance space can we create? How accessible is it? But very quickly it moves to people – who uses the venue already? who lives around it? Who runs it?

Through some online research, calls and site-visits we quickly assemble a picture of the venues that are out there and then I'm out and about, meeting people who run the venues and drinking lots more tea.

This is where I meet Julia, and Sarah, and Rachel, and Jon. Two run rugby clubs, one runs a community centre and Julia (who we will follow for the rest of this story) runs an 18th century barn attached to a children's charity. The barn normally hosts weddings to help fund the charity but as with the other three Julia is open to trying something new.

I tell her I don't know if it will work and ask her to give me two shows to find out. She agrees to give her space, her time and most importantly her enthusiasm to the cause. I for my part will find a couple of shows. We will split the ticket income. She agrees.

Broadening Horizons - In May 2015 Ripstop Theatre bring their show A Real Mermaid's Tale to town. Julia and her team embrace the theme and get dressed up to welcome people to the event. The show is a great success with over 80 in the audience at the barn there is a buzz in the air and Julia asks me what the next show will be. I tell her that this time she will choose.

At a meeting with all the venue representatives a couple of weeks later we share promo packs and videos of three shows we have preselected that will fit in the venues and are touring at the right time. They discuss gender implications, fancy dress opportunities, puppetry and performers before agreeing on Tadpoles by M6 theatre.

Prototype - The show goes on in October 2016, it's our second prototype event, the first chosen by the Julia and the other venue reps and audiences are smaller. It's a bit unsettling and we meet again afterwards to reflect.

Feedback/Reflection - A number of possible reasons for the lower turnout are mooted. From time of year – there were a lot of Halloween activities this half term to promotional materials and tactics. Julia talks about the different age ranges of the two shows. One was a 3yrs+ and one a 5yrs+.

"In half term people want to do activities as families" she says "so it needs to be appropriate for a 3 year old and their 12 year old brother". The others around the table agree and are talking with a real knowledge of their audience now as well as an understanding of what they liked and didn't like from the previous two shows.

There's no mention of the two-show trial we agreed at the beginning, all are talking about finding the next show. We have our **momentum** and with it this group has started to take **ownership** of the work they want to bring to audiences.

I set out on a search for a family show. It's tough – there's a lot out there for early years but will they keep a 12 year old entertained? If they do, will they physically fit in a venue with a 2meter something height restriction? No.

Another approach is needed and we start the cycle again:

This time it is the venue promoters who **know their community** – it is a family audience from diverse cultural backgrounds who are usually within walking distance of their venue and don't attend many arts events. This starts to form the ground for a commission.

To build her knowledge (or **broaden her horizons**) Julia joins me at a Big Imaginations conference in Manchester looking at diversity in children's theatre. Drawing on this knowledge and on the shows they have now seen, the group adds to the commission the need for shows to be interactive, have local or popular cultural references and of course fit in their venues.

We receive 18 applications for the commission, the group read them and with a slightly complicated matrix system we agreed on those to be interviewed. Julia and Sarah join us for these interviews and select two companies to spend residency time in North Kirklees, visiting the venues, local groups and creating a 'scratch' or **'prototype'** performance.

These scratch performances were then put in front of two local audiences who fed back before a decision was made on which production they would like to seed commission.

This is a work now very much **owned by these promoters and the communities they serve**. The artist, Olivia Furber, has spent time in these communities, she's met users of the spaces, some of the audience have had a sneak peak of the production and fed back what they liked and didn't. Connections are building. We also found through the process a family performance by emerging theatre company, Wrongsemble, which the venues programmed in May with the most successful audiences and feedback for a performance to date.

The success of this we believe is growing the capacity of people in the community to select the work they want to see, to talk to artists and to audiences while at the same time testing new ideas and developing new skills. Our role is to give them a place to fail safely, provide opportunities for artists and communities to engage, and to be transparent – that way we build a new infrastructure together with new venues and new people.