

## Episode 1: What is a producer?

*Intro Instrumental Music Plays by Dave Price*

Kate McGrath: Hello and welcome to Fuelling Change, a podcast series produced by Fuel and presented by me, Kate McGrath. Fuelling Change is a series of five podcasts examining the effect of the producer on the UK's performance sector, co-commissioned by Clore Leadership and the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

I have been working as a producer in the arts, and particularly in live performance, for more than 20 years, most of which I've spent producing through Fuel, an Independent producing company I co-founded in 2004 and lead today.

In these five episodes, I'm reflecting on the development of my practice over those 20 years as a producer through conversations with artists and producers I've worked with during that time and on the evolution of the role in the context of the changing social, political and economic environment during that period.

Episode 1: What is a producer?

KM: There is relatively little literature around this role, and what exists is often practical – handbooks, or interviews on the “in conversation with” model. While we have a good body of critical theory on curating, there is almost zero critical theory on producing. The reasons for this are in themselves interesting: perhaps the nascent and developing nature of this role is one reason, or – reflecting on my own experience – perhaps it is the time-consuming, all-absorbing, hands-on nature of the role which precludes producers from interrogating their practice through critical research and reflection. I was asked to write a book about producing a decade ago, and have only just – purposefully, intentionally, and with great difficulty - carved out the time to commit to this research project. Yet the development of this role has been considerable in the last two decades, my professional lifetime.

In this writing, I explore tendencies, skills and approaches of producing, but one element is constant: producers make things happen. And now, in the context of social, political, economic and environmental challenges unparalleled in my professional lifetime, I believe we need people who make things happen - and, not just that, but vitally, who see what needs to happen, as well as with/for whom, why, when, where, and how. If producers are able to fulfil their full potential, I believe this will enable our cultural landscape to flourish.

Producers make things happen: what is it about good producing that not only makes things happen, but makes those things happen well? My enquiry begins with a search for the essence of the role: by considering language(s) associated with the producer, unpacking metaphors and tracking tendencies. Studied English and Modern Languages, and often think of producers as translators between different languages. And, of metaphor and imagery in theatre as ways of reaching for a shared language. For that reason, in interviews with producers and artists I have chosen to invite metaphor and imagery, to reach to some more essential or shared understanding. I'm also looking at how my own language, values and methodologies have evolved; at the image and language(s) of producing more widely; at what qualities or tendencies producers might have in common, to reach for what the essence of producing might be.

But the producer crucially operates in context not in isolation, so I then look to identify changes in context over this period, and how producers and producing have been affected by those shifts. Many producers articulate a desire not just to make projects happen, but to make change through their projects, whether that is through development of the artists and participants, individual or collective audience responses, economic impact, social impact or any other legacy of the project. To what extent – and how – do producers make change and shape the context, and to what extent – and how – does context shape a producer, their modes of working, and their impact? In other words, what is the nature of the productive tension between producer and context?

Finally, this research seeks to reflect on how values might function as navigational aids to the producer journeying through constantly shifting contexts, as they have for me, both as a leader and producer. 15 years on from my AHRC Research as the Clore Leadership Theatre Fellow in 2008, I find myself drawn to re-examining the role of the producer as what I term the 'outside eye' in the development of new performance (Speakeasy: an inside look at the outside eye, McGrath, 2009). How has my approach to providing dramaturgical support for artistic processes evolved, in relation to the development of our understanding of the role of the producer in this time? I now see this 'outside eye' role in the wider context of a values-led approach to producing, and of the evolution of a producing methodology which encompasses all aspects of the role. To be an effective producer, you need trust underpinning your collaboration, you need a shared set of values, you need a shared vision – and you need skills in listening (in my case, hugely enhanced by training as a coach) as well as knowledge of this particular artist(s) practice and of the wider craft of theatre/performance-making. Ultimately through an extended period of research, of which this report is one part, I'm seeking to imagine what all of this might mean for the future – for me personally, for Fuel, and for the role of the producer.

KM: Context of the research. Since 2004, Fuel has led the field in independent producing in the UK's live performance sector, collaborating with theatre makers, professional and non-professional, audiences and communities, partners and stakeholders, scientists and researchers. During this time the company has negotiated and shaped public perception of how and what producers offer as cultural leaders and as changemakers within the sector, responding to quickly shifting conditions and thinking through complex networks of factors from the socio-political to the ethical, material and pragmatic during any one project.

Given I bring that context to this work, I'm taking a Practice as Research approach which incorporates collaborative working with academics (my co-supervisors, Dr Aoife Monks and Dr Molly McPhee at Queen Mary University of London), artists (as collaborators on this research, in particular Khalid Abdalla, Rachel Bagshaw, Inua Ellams, Alan Lane, Pauline Mayers, ESKA), producers who have previously worked at Fuel (also as collaborators on this research, in particular Kathryn Bilyard, Louise Blackwell, Ed Collier, Christina Elliot, Kate Scanlan, Hannah Smith), audiences (as bringers of meaning through surveys), current staff (as co-devisers of methodologies and questions, and in some cases also collaborators on the research, in particular Anthony Gray, Luke Holbrook, Sarah Wilson-White, Angela-Bryan Brown), and partners (as co-producers of impact). The methods involved include:

- archival research: working with Dr Molly McPhee to unearth clues in Fuel's archive as to the evolution of Fuel's values-led approach and producing methodology and examples of this in practice;
- survey: creating and disseminating a pilot survey to ask current and former collaborators (artists, staff, audiences and partners) a series of initial questions about Fuel's impact, including questions about values;
- conversations/interviews: holding a series of conversations/interviews with key collaborators; reflection on practice and research findings with research co-supervisors Dr Molly McPhee and Dr Aoife Monks, Queen Mary's Department of Drama; reading around the area and compiling evidence and references with my co-supervisors' support.

Critically, I undertook a series of interviews over a few weeks with producers and artists all directly linked to Fuel to inform my research. I wished to further and deeper than the conventional or received definition, as exemplified in Wikipedia:

[A] person who oversees all aspects of mounting a theatre production. The producer is responsible for the overall financial and managerial functions of a production or venue, raises or provides financial backing, and hires personnel for creative positions. (ref, [Wikipedia](#))

This is echoed and broadened slightly in the Stage One definition:

The producer is the person that “puts on the show”. A theatre producer oversees all aspects of a theatre production, from the generation of an idea to the day-to-day management when it is on stage. They are the person responsible for the financial, strategic and managerial aspects of staging the production. [Stage One](#)

From my perspective, there’s nothing untrue about the Wikipedia definition – or indeed wrong with a commercial approach to producing theatre – and the Stage One definition is broad enough to encompass any production, which is useful, but I’m interested in social and political change through art and creativity, not simply or even primarily financial return. My task is to seek out the essence of producing, beyond this corporate understanding, arguably driven by a capitalist mindset. As a producer, I have chosen to work primarily within the subsidised sector. And when I work commercially, I carry the same consistent values into that model. The concept of ‘value’ in my practice is strongly oriented towards a meaning of the word as aligned to social and political change, positive impact on individuals involved and crucially on what I see as the extraordinary diversity and ultimate connectedness of our collective humanity, differing quite wildly from concepts of value within capitalist modelling. Similarly, when I talk about ‘values’ in my practice, the term is aligned to explicitly or implicitly anti-capitalist ethics or principles.

But just as the terms ‘value’ and ‘values’ are multi-dimensional, changing, and carry many histories within them, so are those ‘values’ themselves: abstract terms such as trust, collaboration, care, sustainability, representation, collaboration, creativity, learning. And so, in this quest, I find myself inviting metaphor and imagery to get closer to what I believe values are for a producer in a material way, through charting some deep terrains: what the essential qualities or psychological makeup of a producer might be.

Amongst the array of roles that the independent producer takes, central to my own interests is how the producer supports artists, across multiple projects. I believe this starts with one of my – and Fuel’s – core values: trust. I have always believed trust to be key to relationships which are fulfilling and enjoyable as well as productive and successful, in life and in work. Trust is one of Fuel’s core values, and we talk often about what it means, how to build and sustain it, what threatens it, and what can make it stronger. In Fuel’s current Business Plan, we’ve defined it as “the foundation on which people take risks and collaborate productively.” (Fuel Business Plan 2022-27, page 7)

Back in 2010 when I published my Clore Leadership Fellowship research (funded by AHRC) under the title ‘Speakeasy: an inside look at the outside eye (McGrath, 2009), it included a direct description of this from director Melly Still:

What benefits the relationship between a director and a producer? Hunger for the producer’s feedback. A shared objective, if not vision. A willingness to open your head and heart, even if you don’t feel like it, to difficult notes. It helps enormously if there is trust. Establishing trust is key.

Trust came up often in my more recent research too, with interviewees talking about “understanding” and “empathy” through “interdependent” relationships, and “conversation”. Sometimes this was described as “companionship” and working “together”, and there was also an idea of the producer as “psychologist” which speaks to and recognises the particular role the producer has in leading the process of building trust. One cornerstone of this, articulated in Fuel’s Business Plan and also in an interview with Louise Blackwell, co-founder of Fuel, is about the effort and work required: “we work hard to build trust by delivering on our promises” (Fuel Business Plan 2022-27, page 7), or as Louise puts it to “do what you say you’re going to do.”

I’m interested in the construction metaphor around trust: building, foundation, cornerstone. This metaphor speaks to the effort involved, and the stability of the result, but we also do well to remember that buildings – like trust – require constant and careful maintenance. Trust is not something we build and then forget about, but something we have a duty of care to maintain. Like the famous Forth Rail Bridge joining the central belt of Edinburgh to Fife and the Highlands beyond, we have to keep repainting it for, if we don’t, the weather insists on creeping in to erode any exposed metal below.

There is, of course, another metaphor at play with trust: that of earning and giving, or of “holding in trust” - but the cost of trust here is a cost counted not in pounds and pence but, as the construction metaphor also suggests, in time and effort.

We need trusting relationships to produce our best work – many corporate management studies such as Amy C. Edmondson’s *The Fearless Organization* cite the success of companies like Barry-Wehmiller whose CEO Bob Chapman extols the rewards of creating an environment of trust amongst team members. As Edmondson describes: “He learned that trust...was key.” (*The Fearless Organization*, Edmondson, p121). But are there any reasons in particular why artists need to trust producers?

The clue might be in another family of terms to arise in interviews. Both artists and producers speak of a need for “armour” or “security” to “protect” processes and ideas which are “fragile”. The producer role is to be “strong”, to “warn” against danger, to work “carefully”. This language describes the vulnerability of an artist and the delicacy and instability of their emerging idea, with the producer visualised as a tough shield or layer of defence around them. The coat of armour or shield which the producer provides must be strong for the artist to feel secure. Artists and producers alike acknowledge the artist needs to be able to trust that the producer will protect them in order for them to feel able to take creative risks. Recognising this role of producer as protector, Fuel’s Head of Programme Anthony Gray describes the producer as a “helmet” to protect the artist, and recognises both the negative and the positive sides to this:

Anthony Gray: Back in those old school movies, like wartime movies, and those soldiers are wearing those metal helmets, which probably did nothing at all but created that sense of such security that it meant that people would just run into a battlefield. I think that's what producing is for me. It's that sense of being able to give an artist or a creative so much security that they can kind of just jump into the abyss without fear. And if they fail or if, you know, a bullet hits the helmet, it'll just bounce off them. And I think that's what a producer is.

KM: Poet and playwright Inua Ellams describes his need for this kind of protection both viscerally and playfully by comparing a producer to Iron Man’s suit:

Inua Ellams: Iron Man's suit. It's a suit of armour. It is a highly effective CPU – Central Processing Unit. It makes calculations automatically. So it protects Tony Stark from all weathers. It pilots him, it chills him, it guides his missiles. So he can just be the soul in the machine, making the moral and ethical decisions, figuring out who to save and how to save them well, and the suit does the logistics stuff for him. It makes the man immortal. The Ironman suit also has an artificial intelligence called Jarvis, and it acts like a companion to Tony Stark, but it very much also automates and just does things that Tony Stark doesn't need to think about because he trusts that he's there. So, for me it speaks to companionship and to trust and to a togetherness of suffering. And by that I mean, when Tony Stark is being battered, so is the suit and the suit tries to protect both of them. It means that they go on long, epic journeys together. They survive together, they remember things together. They pull each other up. They warn each other away from things, you know? I think that's what a good producer feels like. It isn't protection because that can be a cold relationship. It's more intuitive and interdependent than that.

KM: This comparison starts with the producer as a physical line of defence against missiles, threats to the artist’s fragile idea or confidence, and weathers, the dangers of the environment in the widest meaning of the word, in which the artist is trying to create. The image of producer as protective suit, speaks to me of boundaries. Clothing and skin are boundaries between inside and outside. And here the artist is describing how the producer embodies or provides boundaries for an artistic process.

Inua then moves to an image of the producer as an automaton or machine delivering logistics. Recognising this might feel “cold”, Inua goes on to qualify or clarify that the suit is a “companion” to Tony Stark, that they experience suffering, battering, long epic journeys, survival and memory together. In this image, the artist is Tony Stark, the human “soul”, and the producer is Jarvis, the AI companion and protector. They are

not the same – but they are interdependent. Trust here is aligned with companionship, with shared experiences, with shared memories - above all with time. Trust is not immediate but accumulated.

This image of producer as shield morphs into a more peaceful image in the idea of the producer as vessel: producer Christina Elliot describes the producer as a “basket”:

Christina Elliot: I think it would be some sort of container, maybe a basket or maybe a bowl. It would represent something about holding together. I think it would somehow represent how you can bring quite disparate people's influences, contexts, together. And it's the alchemy of how those things then are in relation to each other which is the moment of experience of an audience in connection with the work.

It makes me think of those analogies that they sometimes use, probably now very dated, but I learned at school about - is America a melting pot - but maybe I like the analogy of a basket rather than some sort of soup because I think those elements are all still distinguishable. I mean I would say that the producer somehow brings those elements together, but I don't transform them on my own. I feel like the artists are the magicians, you know, the cooks. But I do feel like there's a kind of gathering that I do in producing.

KM: I'll talk more about the idea of producers as magicians or cooks later, but for now I'm interested in the idea of the producer bringing elements together, or “gathering” as a vessel or basket. Like the helmet, it feels like a safe space, but it's also more porous and the metaphor speaks more to ideas of harvesting or nourishment than to images of defence and war. This idea of bringing together is echoed by Fuel's Senior Producer Sarah Wilson-White comparing a producer to a “spool of thread, binding people together”. I love the connotations of this image too – of creating something new, of bringing different fabrics together, of mending, of detailed handiwork.

The image of the producer as gathering and holding is echoed in producer Kathryn Bilyard's metaphor of the producer as an “origami box”:

Kathryn Bilyard: I think maybe it would be some sort of magic origami box or thing that can hold stuff, but that can change shape and it's flexible but strong. Maybe it's just Mary Poppins' bag!

If you can support a project properly, so you get enough team members in place with the right experience, get the funding that means that it has enough time and budget to be what it wants to be, find the right partners for it that are going to really invest in it and make it flourish and find the right space for that to happen, effectively what you are doing as a producer is sort of holding that and giving it some sort of shape, holding all of those bits, trying to not let any of them drop. And as the project develops, moulding and changing that shape. You've set enough in place that you can follow the creatives in what they're doing so that your work shifts around that and is always following the ultimate end game of what the work that needs to be.

I was thinking about origami. So that, you know, it's beautifully folded and you're like, it's perfect, and then it changes, and you have to unfold a bit of it and fold it back up into a different shape. So that it still works, but it's always beautiful.

KM: In this rich articulation of the balance between holding and moulding, of support and also shift, Kathryn is – perhaps sub-consciously – describing one of the great paradoxes at the heart of good producing: the combination of solidity and flexibility. Yes, the producer holds, and also, the producer holds in a way that allows for change. Kathryn's paper which is unfolded and refolded is being recycled and re-used in a different form - there is no waste, or damage, no rips or tears, but rather there is a care and a delicacy with which the producer reshapes to hold the artist or the idea.

Also encapsulated within the idea of “holding” is the inference that the producer does not “drop” the artist or idea. One of the ways in which I have sought to build trust is for artists I work with to know that we are committing to their idea from the moment we say “yes” to it, throughout its journey, whatever that may

be. Many organisations, particularly venues, take a phase-by-phase approach to this: supporting a workshop, or a first draft, and then judging the work through a review of that first draft, or attendance at a (sometimes therefore highly pressured) sharing, as a consequence of which they will either commit to a next phase or “let the project go” or “pass on it”. Whilst the reasons for this are many and sometimes positive (e.g. it enables them to support more artists at early stages, who can then continue with any developed work which is not taken forward by the original venue with a new one), I find it creates a hierarchy as the power to decide whether or how the project will be further developed lies with the venue. By committing to the artist and their idea to its natural conclusion, we build trust and travel together with the artists.

One of the consequences of this is that projects can change really dramatically on that journey, and yet we are all still there. We are holding the essence of the idea with the artist and working together to find its best form or articulation, the best context for it, and so forth. The idea might start out as a play and turn out to be a book or a film, it might start out as a solo work and end up as an ensemble piece, it might initially seem to be about one theme and become more about something else. As a building-free producer, a phrase we use often, we do not start with a pre-conceived destination for the work we produce, in bricks and mortar, in physical relationship to an audience, in a particular geographic location or community. Instead, we are free to commit to the idea and follow it where it takes us: we can change shape, as Kathryn describes unfolding the origami box and folding it up differently.

In practice this might mean working differently ourselves, drawing on different past experiences or networks, and/or bringing different partners or freelancers on board to collaborate, depending on the skills and connections needed as the form of the work evolves. I believe it is this flexibility and adaptability which enabled us to thrive creatively during the pandemic. A project originally intended to happen live outdoors was reimaged to be experienced live over the phone (*Signal Fires*, 2020); an outdoor performance became a film (*The Kids Are Alright*, 2020); a project was delivered to its audience by post (*Thirst Trap*, 2021); another was created in eight locations, local to each artist, across the country when travel wasn't possible (*The Litten Trees*, 2021).

I am reminded of a conversation with a colleague who ran a development centre and asked what our “conversion rate” was – meaning how many projects in development did we produce as fully realised projects. I was confused by the question and said I thought it was probably 100% unless the artist decided along the way that they didn't want to pursue the project anymore. My colleague found this surprising, taking pride in their low “conversion rate” as a sign, I think, of having a high bar which ideas and artists had to leap over in order to be taken forwards. My colleague seemed to be offering an alternative model of boundary. Less protective barrier, more gate keeper. In other words, border than boundary. For me, perhaps, this is where the primary focus of a building as providing a programme for its audiences differs from the ways in which we can work as a building-free producer, to follow ideas – whether they come from artists or from communities – until we discover what they become, together. We can hold the idea lightly, like Christina's basket, or Kathryn's origami box, and reshape to hold it in a different way, if that's what it needs.

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To find out more about Fuel's work, please visit our website [fueltheatre.com](http://fueltheatre.com)

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