

Episode 2: How do producers see themselves?

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. Last episode, I explored what a producer is and began to discuss the different ways producers see themselves. This episode dives more deeply into the metaphors that describe producing.

Episode 2: How do producers see themselves?

KM: In the last episode, Christina Elliot compared a producer to a basket, and Kathryn Billiard compared a producer to an origami box. Director Rachel Bagshaw develops Christina's image of "gathering" and Kathryn's "holding all of those bits" and sees the producer as a "sieve" or more specifically "gold panning pan":

Rachel Bagshaw: I'm going to go with my instinct, and say a very, very, very, finely meshed sieve, that has structure. So, it sort of has boundaries and edges and parameters to it and holds the work. Holds it really carefully and with flexibility, but also enables within that to sift through, I suppose partly dramaturgically. So, in terms of the form and the content and the detail of the work, to really hold that and sift the work and allow the work to drop out the things that don't need to be.

It's more like a gold panning pan that allows the silt to fall through and the gold to stay in the work. It feels too passive as an object, so I'm sort of going to give it animation and make it really engaged with the work. It's really actively doing what I've just described. I think it holds it, but also allows an active process of filtration.

I guess what is important about producing and producers is an ability to be multiple things to artists: to both hold and lead processes, to allow space for processes to shift and change, to support, and also flex with the work, to be responsive and proactive, and to listen and respond.

KM: The producer needs to "contain," or to "hold," to "carry," to "support," and does so by "gathering" and providing "structure" in the form of "boundaries," "edges" and/or "parameters." The producer is working "actively" in a process of "filtration" – and this curatorial or dramaturgical process in Rachel's description is what separates the "silt" from the "gold." I love this image not only because it describes the structure and flexibility in one image, but also because it speaks to the skill involved in gently separating out "the things that don't need to be" in order to create space for the precious "gold" in the work.

There is, of course, safety and security not only in the protective shield or armour, but in the clarity created by a defined "space" within which the artist can take risks. The producer is described by Rachel as "allowing" and "enabling" within that space, as well as "following the ideas". Artist Pauline Mayers' description of the essence of producing as akin to the "Russian doll effect" echoes this collaborative process with a producer:

Pauline Mayers: I'm going to call it a Russian doll effect. You have one idea and then you open up the Russian doll, and you put that bit aside. You're like, oh, there's another thing here, and have you thought about this? It's like, oh, well no I haven't, and you might go away and have a bit of reflection time, or you might think, oh no, I have thought about that, and I know I have thought about that because of this. And then you open up that little doll and so it just keeps going until you get right down to the central core of the idea or the, yeah, why? The why, the how, the who is it for?

The beauty of the Russian doll effect is you start with this huge great big hotbed of ideas, and they are massive. But as you reveal the next doll, you start to hone in on what's important. As you complete one Russian doll, you put it aside and you leave it there and you keep unpacking and you think, oh, I want to go back to the one, that one that I just unpicked several stages back just to make sure of what that is and how that relates to this new kind of Russian doll. It's almost like an ancestral line between the original idea and what the actuality, the reality of that could be.

When I say Russian doll, I'm imagining something very beautiful, and each doll has a very distinct look and a very distinct feel. And I think as you burrow down into the nub of an idea and what that is and what that feels like, if it's the right kind of conversation, that doll in the heart of it is the most amazing, beautiful, fragile thing that then has to be nurtured in order for it to reach its fullest potential. And I think that's where the producing support really properly kicks in.

KM: One of the aspects of producing which Pauline is describing here is the deep knowledge of the work which a good producer has. Through sitting with the artist as each version or redraft of the work reveals another version, the attentive producer is familiar with the multiple bodies of the play each living inside the play. Although those drafts seem to be ultimately invisible to an audience who experience only the final version, they are there within it, and they make it what it is.

Returning to the idea of values, this deep knowledge seems to speak to trust again. For me, there is something about proximity or familiarity with an artist, with their ideas, with their process, in this expression of a good artist-producer relationship. In building trust over time through companionship and shared experience, both good and bad, we become, in some professional sense, family.

KM: As well as getting deeper or closer to the heart of the matter, there's a metaphor of play in the idea of unpacking the dolls. The link between 'playing' and 'plays', between creativity and playfulness, between artists and children, is a well-trodden metaphor. So too is the related language of "nurturing" artists – language which my team at Fuel will tell you I often reject because of its maternal and gendered connotations which seem to me to be counter-productive in the pursuit of a relationship between artist and producer which recognises equal but different responsibilities lie with both parties. But there is a useful metaphor in actor Khalid Abdalla's reflections, comparing producers to parents, which sees producers as "gardeners", ensuring that the right conditions – soil, water, light – are available to the artist in this held space

Khalid Abdalla: Some of the best parenting advice I was ever given is that good parenting is more akin to gardening than it is to carpentry. It's not about a saw and a hammer and whatever tools you get out of the toolbox to kind of wrench and sand the person into what? It's about kind of understanding what soil they need, what water, what sunlight and how best to nurture that way.

KM: All of this "holding" could feel quite passive, but for two reflections: firstly, that holding a secure and clear space for an artist clearly requires considerable effort, like gardening, and secondly, that the role doesn't stop with the creation of the space and the setting of parameters. The producer is often "curious" and needs to "explore" in this process too. The role is "active", even "proactive" – producers are "animated" and "engaged". They "pilot" and they "lead". Their work is not simply to "hold" but to "unpack", to "filter", to "hone in" on "the nub" of the idea. They are "guides" who "shape", "layer" and "add" to the work: they "shift" it, "change" it, even "transform" or "complete" it through their own

“creativity”. Here, Khalid’s description of the producer as a prosthetic limb creates an extraordinary image of the transformative impact of the producer on an artist’s form and mobility.

KA: From a creative point of view, I think of it more as like a prosthetic, you know, like I'm lacking limbs, or I am not complete with my body as it is. So, I would say that it's more about completing or adding to my body, along the lines of what the project needs and requires. So that, I don't know, maybe I become some arachnid, some other kind of animal that the project requires.

There is something in the visceral and physical nature of this image which is profoundly intimate – the producer as prosthetic limb completing an artist’s body in order to enable them to create the project suggests even greater proximity, intimacy or interdependency than the image of Iron Man’s Suit – although there is a strong parallel there too.

KM: A moment here to reflect on gender in these conversations and this imagery. So far, I’ve found Anthony, Inua and Khalid talking in terms of helmets, body armour and prosthetic limbs, with Christina, Kathryn and Rachel talking about baskets, paper boxes and sieves – with Sarah talking about sewing and Pauline talking about dolls. My future research will explore these areas in greater depth, but for now perhaps to note that as a producer working with all these artists and other producers, I am necessarily shapeshifting to embody these different objects or metaphors as I work – sometimes in one day – with these very different needs. The constant metamorphosing or transforming keeps me curious and constantly challenged by my work – and just as the process of metamorphosis requires significant momentum, I find the process of transforming into different types of producer in order to support different artists’ needs requires considerable energy.

KM: How does this extraordinary process happen in reality? Well, it’s clear that there is real work to be done here – despite the metaphors, it is “not abstract.” For the producer to be “effective” and ensure “it works,” there is “detail” and there are “facts,” as director Alan Lane describes when I ask what object best describes his ideal producer:

Alan Lane: It’s the thing that measures wind. Because there's a point in every show we do outside where someone - sometimes they're the health and safety officer, sometimes they're the council, sometimes the producer, it doesn't really matter - will come along and say, what are you going to do if it's too windy? And then we say, well, if it's too windy, we're going to stop the show. And they go, great. And then later on it'll be windy, and they'll come along and say, it's too windy. And you're like, what do you mean it's too windy? Like, what does that mean? That's a subjective word. And the only way you ever get around this is by actually having facts. And that's one of the jobs a producer does: they stand next to a creative process and they know things. And so you measure the wind and you say, when the wind is 23 kilometres an hour, it's too windy. And then we will stop. And it's ah, it's a blessing from heaven.

KM: In a creative process full of variables and particularly when working in site specific contexts where, for example, the weather becomes one of those variables, Alan looks to the producer for clarity and precision, for facts and decisions. Here is another area where I believe producing and leadership are closely connected: I’ve sometimes said that I think making decisions, and taking responsibility for them, is one of the most important and misunderstood aspects of leadership. Those decisions can be made with extensive consultation and in collaboration with others – but make no mistake that they are decisions, they need to be made, and they need to be owned by whoever is making them, individually or as a group. And, as Alan says, the input that informs those decisions is based on the producer needing to “stand next to a creative process” and to “know things.”

This image of the pragmatic and organised producer who for Alan is represented by measuring wind speed is reflected by producer Hannah Smith in comparing a producer to a diary

Hannah Smith: Because on a macro level it’s about setting strategy over a number of years and scheduling multiple projects and on a micro level it’s about sensibly dividing and utilising your time to do a million

different things each day - some of which are very short-term and immediate - like writing thank you cards for the creative team or finding some emergency rehearsal space - and some of which are super long-term - like enquiring about the rights for a book an artist wants to adapt one day. You're constantly zooming in and out, moving from day view to month view to year view.

KM: Every producer I know and work with would recognise this constant shifting of timeframe and zooming in and out of the short- and long-term view, and scheduling time with a practical and strategic brain, as key skills in a good producer.

KM: This more literal metaphor of the producer as diary recognises there are "techniques" and "processes" and "mechanisms" for dealing with "logistics" and "problem-solving" across many "elements" or "components" to producing. These can also be imagined as "ingredients" with the producer as "cook" or "chef" combining them into a "recipe" which creates one unique "cake," an image evoked by singer/songwriter ESKA as well as producer Ed Collier.

Ed Collier: The classic thing that we talk about through the Optimists training program [a producer training scheme run by Ed's company China Plate] is the sort of cookery metaphor and how the producer is the chef, and that you are looking at a recipe and essentially that's a budget and you are looking at all your ingredients and the quantities and the timings and the processes and the different cookery techniques in order to achieve different cookery results. So that is a very helpful way of explaining producing to people who might not have looked at it before.

This image of the producer as chef speaks to the idea of curation: the chef/producer considers who will eat the cake, the occasion/location/event at which the cake will be served, the time of the day as well as the season and weather, in order to select the recipe, ingredients and processes to bake, decorate and serve the cake. Their reward comes – or at least mine does – when the guests react to the cake. This is the moment when the expertise of the producer, invisible in the kitchen, manifests – hopefully in a delicious outcome, which surprises and delights those gathered together to experience it. This image, connected to a moment of gathering and celebration, is echoed in producer Louise Blackwell's comparison of the producer to a party popper or confetti canon

Louise Blackwell: Like a huge, big party popper but the reason that I've chosen that is that the intricate mechanisms that go into making that thing go pop are all part of producing. So, there's so many component parts, and then hopefully, at a point when everyone is ready, you can pull the string and there's a glorious moment of celebration that means that the process has happened: the thing that you wanted to make happen has happened.

KM: The producing process as combining ingredients or components is also described as "alchemy" by Christina Elliot, echoing the title of 'The Producers – Alchemists of the Impossible', a book about a new wave of producers, commissioned jointly by Arts Council England and the Jerwood Charitable Foundation, and published in 2007, when Fuel was just three years old, in which the brilliant Marc Boothe writes "Producer feels like a limited definition. If anything, I feel like an alchemist – you start with nothing, just a kernel of an idea, and make something of it." In the same publication, David Jubb writes: "When asked to make a contribution to this book I thought it best to share some kind of skill or wisdom or even alchemy." There's a modesty about David's use of the alchemy metaphor – as though there is nothing really to it, and it happens naturally and somewhat mystically: but I'd argue it's describing a methodology of curation developed over time and requiring both skills and accumulated knowledge – aka expertise.

Interviewees describe producers providing "energy" or "fuel" in an "intuitive" way which creates an "explosion" of "colour," a "beautiful" "celebration." It is "magic" which not only enables the artist to "be seen" but "makes immortal." Without wanting to plagiarise Spiderman, producers have great "power" and, with it, great "responsibility."

Let's catch our breath. The producer is a companion, a psychologist, a protector, a vessel, a gardener, an explorer, panning for gold, a transformer, a chef, an alchemist, a god-maker: they really are super-heroes with special powers.

It seems inevitable then that producers are constantly "juggling", that they have many "arms" or "tentacles" as in Kate Scanlan's vivid comparison to Lakshmi, the Hindu god:

Kate Scanlan: For me, it is the Hindu God, Lakshmi. I think it's the multiple arms and the hands - producing for me is like a massive juggling act. I've always wanted a scan of my brain when I'm in deep producing mode on a big project. You have so much detail in your brain. You have the micro urgent to do, you've got the long term, you've got the medium term. You've got what your artists and your creatives need. You've got the production needs. You've got the venue partners, the funding KPIs, and somehow as a producer you develop this ability to use your brain in this way. And as a freelance producer as well, imagine: you're often juggling three, four, five projects all with different timescales. And you need to bring your best brain and your best creativity and best problem solving to all of those projects at the same time.

And I think it is absolutely amazing how your brain can work in that way. And so, for me, it's that image that I really hold tight. And when I'm at [MOVE IT](#), running around with four stages, 30,000 audience Members and all these classes and 12 studios, somehow in the middle of all of that, it gives you this unbelievable ability to be really serene and calm because you are holding all of these things in a way that you found that works for you. We all have our slightly own quirks that work for our own brain and our characters. It must be quite phenomenal to watch the brain activity. And I wonder, if you're a creative producer like we are, and you are being as creatively resourceful as you are, how do both sides of the brain talk to itself in these moments?

KM: Kate is describing producing as an embodied experience here: not just holding, but also running around and juggling, with the left and right sides of the brain talking to each other, constantly in active dialogue. Picking up on this idea of the producer brain, and also on the idea of juggling with many arms, ESKA describes the producer as a mind-map with octopus-like tentacles

ESKA: A really good-looking mind map. When I think of a producer or creative producer, it's a page, a very colourful page. Lots of colours, lots of intersections going on, lots of lines all over the place. The mind of a creative producer, it's just got tentacles going all over the place. Lots of circles that overlap or some that are on their own, but this curious mind map explosion, it would look scattered and completely bonkers to most people: you'd think, what is going on in that brain? There's way too much information overload, but it makes complete sense.

And I think a good creative producer is also a bit of an excellent psychologist, understands psychology, understands the layer cake of the human creative mind in a way, you know? And they're able to hold all of that and it doesn't look crazy to them. To the mind of a creative producer, there seems to be more of an understanding or empathy to the fact that as human beings, we're not just one thing. You know, the front facing thing, that's all it is, it's just the facade. But behind that, that building is full of lots of rooms and there's lots going on, lots of movement. I think a great producer is able to visit all those rooms and explore and enjoy the exploration, even if it doesn't lead to anywhere, you know, but they have a curiosity about potential in another human being. What if? And how? Which can really transform what an artist does.

KM: I've got to admit I'm feeling a bit exhausted simply describing this SuperProducer – and that's not surprising because amidst it all they also need to be "serene" and calm." But just as producers recognise the complexity of human beings, producers are also ultimately human, and this is why they also describe the toll of taking on this role, as Anthony Gray does here.

Anthony Gray: Sometimes you wear those hits with pride, don't you? You are there to support. It feels great because you know you've had a really huge impact on that creative's work and a lot of the time that artist's life, you know. Creatives really put their all into a work a lot of the time, and if something is going

wrong, they take it: it's such a deep internal feeling that they can have sometimes. So yeah, to sometimes take those hits or the arrows or the bullets whizzing through the air. You can kind of feel that and wear that with pride, but you know, there are times when it takes a lot to take those hits. It takes a lot of energy, and it can be really shattering and really thankless sometimes. But on the other side, you could build amazing, wonderful relationships with people because hopefully you are there to give them that trust and support that they sometimes might need. It can feel really, really positive a lot of the time, but there are times, you know, I'm not going to lie, when it can be the most draining thing ever and you just need a week to hide in a dark room and be like, Ooh, that was something else.

KM: Perhaps this kind of superhuman effort is always going to be "draining" or more viscerally "shattering," suggesting that it isn't just the artist who feels "fragile" but also the producer. I found it saddening that the role was also described as "invisible" and "thankless" by several producers. As Kathryn Bilyard said:

KB: It is quite a lot of responsibility I think, to hold as a role, creatively and practically but when it's joyful, I think, or when it's done really, really well, then it's almost kind of invisible. People aren't concentrating on it. They're looking at what's being made as a result of good producing rather than at the producing itself.

This was almost exactly reiterated, word for word, by Hannah Smith of the Wardrobe Ensemble

HS: I feel like good producing is not very noticeable - it means everything has worked smoothly and without an issue. If you're noticing the way a project has been produced then probably something has gone wrong, which can sometimes make it feel like a thankless task!

KM: And by Fuel's Senior Producer, Sarah Wilson-White:

Sarah Wilson-White: The difference good producing makes can be hard to identify, as with good producing it almost becomes invisible - like a swan's feet paddling beneath the serene surface.

In an audience survey, I asked "What difference do you think good producing makes?" and received this response from one audience member:

Makes the art look effortless to an audience (probably when it has been anything but...).

Artist ESKA reflected:

E: Every artist, I think, wants to be seen, wants to be really seen, not just for the things that are obvious, but all the other things, all the layers underneath.

KM: Perhaps this could be said for producers too: not necessarily in the public eye, but in ways which are personal to each producer, my instinct would be that these superheroes sometimes need their multiple special powers to be really seen in all their superhuman complexity.

In 2014 when Fuel celebrated its 10th birthday, we commissioned photographer Manuel Vason to create a series of portraits of a range of people connected to Fuel: artists, staff, partners, even audience members. Manuel asked them to bring "an object which spoke of their relationship to Fuel." Clara Giraud, once an intern at Fuel now working in Projects and Policy for the Mayor of London's Culture team alongside independent producing, wore "a shiny protective suit, to take the blows, and moonboots, to keep me grounded!" David Jubb, then Artistic Director of Battersea Arts Centre, now an independent producer, described Fuel as "outlaws who work inside and outside the system." Inua Ellams wrote of his "hope for Flight" and created an image of himself flying with wings, and Lilli Geissendorfer, then General Manager at the Almeida and a Fuel Catalyst, and now a Fuel trustee, rode a bicycle and wore a flowing cape, writing that Fuel "enables imaginations to fly."

So, yes, my object to capture the essence of producing would be a superhero's cape which gives the wearer many special attributes:

- to earn trust,
- to tend the soil,
- to listen and speak with care,
- to shield, to hold,
- to sift for gold,
- to journey and explore together,
- to shape-shift,
- to uplift.

But it also occurs to me that it is actually one of SuperProducer's powers to be invisible some of the time, as well as – like all superheroes – to transform back into their human form in their day-to-day lives.

Reflecting on gathered observations about the essence of the producer role, I find myself considering whether any of the qualities, or the combination of qualities, is unique to the role of a producer of live performance, or if we could be talking about a similar role in any other industry. Are we doing something fundamentally unique or is it fundamentally the same as a manager/facilitator/leader in another sector? There is a level of curation, for sure, but I wonder if it's not the profession that makes this role unique but something else – not quite a personality type (for there are many different personalities represented in the producers I interviewed, for example those who lead more from the front or more from the back, those who approach in a more matriarchal or more patriarchal way etc) but perhaps a certain temperament or set of tendencies or skills which enable (or drive?) someone to fulfil this kind of role. The established and respected [Stage One](#) producers training organisation outlines the "Theatre Producers skill set" as:

- Negotiation
- Communication
- People management
- Knowledge of theatre audiences and appetite
- Scheduling
- Leadership
- Business management
- Financial planning
- Problem solving

The respected website '[Get Into Theatre](#)' says "You will need a detailed understanding of the management and technical process involved in theatre production" and agrees with Stage One that you'll need business management, communication, financial planning, leadership, problem-solving, but replaces negotiation and scheduling with event management and organisation and adds – usefully in my view – collaboration and teamwork.

If we extend the description of the producer role beyond the skills and interests of the performing arts, into a completely different field, do we discover that the alchemic combination of protecting and exploding, holding and shaping, shielding and revealing, following and leading, are actually present there too? If we peel away the surface layers of understanding being played back to me in interviews, is there something more fundamental about the role: holding a vision or goal, understanding people and what they need, surveying a landscape, assessing opportunities and dangers, deploying people to work together, making choices and decisions, taking responsibility. Described like this, it feels less like super-heroics, and more like skilled leadership.

So why do we reach for the language of alchemy, magic and superhuman powers? I'm not sure it's just because we are working in a creative industry and have vivid imaginations. I think it might have something

to do with how challenging the context in which we are working is, and the need for both artists and producers alike to recognise that a perfectly normal set of leadership skills in one context, require a whole new level of recognition in a context which makes them extraordinary.

So what, if anything, is extraordinary about our context?

Outro Instrumental Music Plays by Dave Price

Thank you for listening to Fuelling Change. Fuelling Change was produced by Fuel and edited by SLAP – Sounds Like a Podcast. The research was co-commissioned by Clore Leadership and the Arts and Humanities Research Council and was supervised by Aoife Monks and Molly McPhee from Queen Mary University. Special thanks to all of the research participants: Khalid Abdalla, Rachel Bagshaw, Kathryn Bilyard, Louise Blackwell, Ed Collier, Inua Ellams, Christina Elliot, ESKA, Anthony Gray, Alan Lane, Pauline Mayers, Kate Scanlan, Hannah Smith and Sarah Wilson-White.

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