

Episode 3: Looking back to look forward: Sankofa

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 3: Looking Back to Look forward: Sankofa.

KM: Artist Pauline Mayers introduced me to the idea of Sankofa. The Akan people of Ghana use an Adinkra symbol of a bird with its head turned backwards to capture an egg to symbolise taking from the past what is good and bringing it into the present in order to make positive progress through the benevolent use of knowledge. In the spirit of Sankofa, I'm trying to understand what the impact of the role of the independent producer has been over the last twenty years, in order to better understand what role the producer might play in recovery and future building.

At a time when the theatre industry is in peril of various kinds – reeling from the social and financial impacts of Covid, with the freelance workforce leaving the sector or demanding full-scale changes in conditions, and culture wars playing out across policies, institutions, and media, it feels critical to understand how producers, audiences, artists, and partners have been affected across a range of contexts, processes and places, and therefore what insight we can glean about the future role, in a complex ecosystem, of the independent producer, in enabling the UK's performance industry to thrive. Despite the growing importance of this role within the UK cultural sector, there is little literature that examines its history and practice. This research works towards a tangible resource for our sector to understand approaches that might guide us through an unpredictable future.

Twenty years ago, producing began to be reinvented in the subsidised live performance sector. Fuel, founded in 2004 and the first explicitly 'producing' organisation to be core funded by Arts Council England in 2009, was at the forefront of this change.

There were producers before us, of course, in the commercial sector, in a much more well-established and recognised role as the 'money men' (and yes, mostly men then although thankfully not now – in my professional lifetime, I've seen and continue to celebrate the successes of Rosemary Squire, Nica Burns, Hedda Beeby, Kash Bennet, Eleanor Lloyd, Nia Janis, Kate Pakenham, the meteoric success of Sonia Friedman, and now the next generation embodied in the bold and brilliant Ameena Hamid).

There were producers before us in the subsidised sector too. In 2003, when Louise Blackwell, Sarah Golding Nee Quelch and I started imagining a company together, we went to meet 'producers' who inspired us – who had a wide variety of different approaches. We met Michael Morris of Artangel, Judith Knight of Artangel, David Aukin – independent producer across theatre, TV and film - and more. They gave us their time, their counsel, their encouragement, and insights into their worlds which have stayed with me ever since. Like magpies, we took what inspired us from each of their models, along with our own instincts and dreams, and hoped we could create a model uniquely our own. In 2004, we began our programme.

In 2007, the Arts Council and Jerwood Charitable Foundation co-published a book about producers, celebrating a range of producers from Farooq Choudry to Joana Seguro: its editor, Kate Tyndall, wrote in the introduction “The producer is a role that has struggled to establish itself in the arts. Yet at this time of massive social, cultural and environmental change, perhaps we have never needed them more.” (The Producers: Alchemists of the Impossible”, ed. Tyndall, 2007)

In 2009, Birkbeck College at the University of London, created the first dedicated M.A. in Creative Theatre Producing. Since then, producing courses at HEIs have sprung up and proved popular. You can do an MA in Creative Producing at Mountview, Central School of Speech and Drama – as well as at University of Kent, University of the West of England in Bristol, Bath Spa University, and you can even find undergraduate BA courses in Creative Producing e.g. at the University of Essex. As Sarah Wilson-White observes: “Producing has hugely changed, and my own career is evidence of that - having been the first cohort of the Creative Producing degree at Central. There are now texts about the subject and producing - versus arts administration - is a really appealing career to many people with courses at several other drama schools and universities.”

Networks of producers, and training programmes have also emerged over this period – Producers Gathering, Producers Pool, UK Theatre Producers on Facebook. In Fuel’s case, as well as delivering masterclasses for undergraduate and post-graduate degrees, and developing a producing internship programme, we hosted a residency for independent producers at Cove Park in 2011 which became the blueprint for Producer Farm, a residency for producers co-created and co-produced with Coombe Farm Studios, Dance Umbrella, Bristol Ferment and In Between Time, with its first edition in 2016.

But the revolution has not just been in higher education and training: theatres and organisations whose staff never previously included a ‘producer’ have recruited and centred these roles. Where there was once a ‘General Manager’, an ‘Arts Administrator’, a ‘Tour Booker’, you start to see ‘Producer’ roles appearing, then hierarchies forming - ‘Assistant Producer’, ‘Senior Producer’ - and then diversifying into specialisms – ‘Development Producer’, ‘Participation Producer’. Producers started being appointed as Artistic Directors – in 2004, David Jubb at Battersea Arts Centre was a notable example. Here too, Fuel’s contribution has largely been in ‘on-the-job’ training, driven by a belief Louise and I shared that if the role is fundamentally about ‘making things happen’, then the best possible route to experience is learning by doing, in a supported context. I think one of Fuel’s most impactful legacies is our producing staff alumni: each one brought their experience, their instincts, their passion to their roles, and learnt huge amounts during their time at Fuel. In 2014, Clara Giraud writes: “My internship with Fuel was an experimentation – what’s all this producing about? Is it any fun? Is it what I want to be doing? And then, a whole universe of endless possibilities and dreams opened up to me.” (Birthday Cards, Manuel Vason)

At this point, ten years since its inception, Fuel was described as being “an inspiration for other companies” and as making “producing seem as sexy and playful as writing or directing or devising” ” by Lyn Gardner, in an article in The Guardian where she also speaks to the relationship between producer and context with these words: “It would be easy to say that Fuel came along at a good moment in British theatre, when the old models of making work were disappearing and theatre was starting to shape shift. Fuel undoubtedly benefited from those changes, but it has also been instrumental in bringing about that change by brokering relationships between the company and artists... and also between artists and theatres, arts organisations and – perhaps most – importantly, audiences.” ([The Guardian, 13 May 2014](#)).

When I asked producers during this research about changes in the role of the producer over 20 years, Louise Blackwell also recognised the two truths here – that we both benefitted from and contributed to a shift in culture around producing:

Louise Blackwell: When we began Fuel and started producing in a world coming to the end of New Labour, the funding situation was certainly different, but we also were at a moment in time where it was very de rigeur to think about what producers were and to support producers. I think that the funding situation has

changed pretty radically, that the conversation around freelancers because of what happened in the pandemic, because of the work that lots of people including Fuel, did around freelancers, that has changed the perception of a producer. I think when we started it, it was kind of ArtsAdmin, in a way, that we were thinking about, as producers in a similar way to us. And now there's amazing companies and I think producers as a role is valued much more.

KM: Kate Scanlan agreed:

Kate Scanlan: When I started my career, it was all about being a dance manager. That was cool, right? And then that language became uncool. Before that was administrator - that became very un-cool. And then it was about being a producer. And then everyone was a producer. And I think these kind of titles shifts that happen are great, but they're also, well - not everyone is actually producing. It wasn't until I left Sadler's Well, when I left Breaking Convention, that I realized what being a producer actually was. And a few years later I worked with you and I was like, oh wow, okay. This is how Fuel do it. Okay, fine.

KM: As Kate articulates so honestly here, it isn't as simple as changing job title from manager to administrator to producer but essentially doing the same thing. Producing is different from managing or administrating. Whilst there are producers training, producers in buildings, in organisations, working independently, there is still a deficit of deep understanding and so much potential. As Kate Scanlan adds:

KS: The role of producer, the understanding of producer, I still think is in its infancy to be perfectly honest... In dance and hip hop, lots of people try and emulate Farooq [Choudry] because I think he's a brilliant, brilliant producer and very inspirational. But I think what's interesting now, I think there are more examples of producers that are quite different, doing it in their own different way, and I think that's what's shifted is that we need different models of producing.

KM: And why do we need different models of producing now and in the future? Well, because the context has changed hugely over that 20-year period, and I would suggest changes over the next 20 years will be even more seismic.

The challenges facing the UK at the present time, and the arts sector more specifically, are well documented and widely recognised. The state of the economy with inflation at its highest in 14 years, a cost-of-living crisis, and widening economic inequality (Trussell Trust opened its first food bank in 2000 and today manages a network of 1,200 across the UK), all have impacts on the performing arts. One aspect of this is put simply by Ed Collier: "Particularly right now, people have less money to spend on entertainment, going to the theatre."

In addition, the impact of Covid-19 continues to be felt across the arts and cultural sectors: audience attendance has not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels, the workforce exodus caused by theatre closures created skills gaps which will take years to resolve (particularly in technical roles), organisations are still running with depleted reserves and lower headcounts following losses and redundancies. Kathryn Bilyard flags other changes in the cultural workforce:

Kathryn Bilyard: At the moment, the thing that is shifting is the conversation around our freelance workforce and caring for that workforce in stepping up how we all care for freelancers, which is changing a lot in terms of day to day, because even at the very beginning that impacts how you might get something off the ground. It's going to cost more, at the most basic level, paying people better, embedding wellbeing support, looking at the balance now between when you get to get physically in the space and how much work happens digitally.

KM: The increase in focus on care which Kathryn raises is a big change identified by Anthony Gray too, as a positive for everyone working in the arts industry, including producers:

Anthony Gray: There's so much more focus and needed focus around wellbeing and the impact of this type of work on not only the creatives but the producers. I think we're kind of the last people to come into that conversation. I think producers have been the last people to be seen as human, I would say, and that's been a huge shift. I think for far too long producers have just been seen as these machines who never make mistakes and just can crack on and are available 24 hours of the day. I think that's the biggest change for me. There's a better understanding of the mental health side of working in this industry which is really important.

KM: Better understanding of mental health is a widespread phenomenon, but how does it really affect producers who can be, as in the image of Iron Man's Suit, seen as "machines" rather than "human"? Perhaps, with new and varied challenges to overcome, the toll on producers' mental health is also more visible.

If a crucial element of the producing role is securing the resource to make the project happen, and delivering it within that resource i.e. on budget, then it's no surprise that the economic and financial context is creating considerable challenges and stresses for producers. With competition for funding high, and increased costs for materials, transport, services and staffing, the available funds simply can't cover what they used to. A Fuel production budgeted in 2019 for production in 2020 was finally staged in 2022, following Covid delays, and the production budget had to be doubled to achieve the same ends. In only three months between May and August 2022, transport costs for one Fuel touring project increased by 30%. Whilst ACE's advice on this seems to be to do less, the reality is that the model for most independent producers doesn't work with low levels of subsidy unless you are producing a critical mass of work – whether as a self-employed producer or as a producing company. In other words, doing less doesn't necessarily make it easier. This is an existential threat to the nascent and vibrant producing ecology which started to develop in the early 2000s, as Kate Scanlan warns:

KS: At the moment with the cost-of-living crisis and everything and with the funding that you can get being so small, I feel like we are losing a lot of producers because it's just a very unsustainable part of the sector.

KM: These economic pressures on producers are very real, and they are compounded by other issues which directly and indirectly affect the work we do. For example, an increasing focus on STEM subjects has decimated arts education, a change which particularly worries Christina Elliot:

Christina Elliot: I think the biggest challenge for producers is the erosion of the value of an arts education, because I think that if you don't instill a sense of the fundamental value of the arts early in someone's life, you have to somehow work from scratch to develop that at some point at which you might be lucky enough to meet those people in some context later on. I think if you take it as a given that our enriches our lives, then you somehow have a stronger, firmer foundation on which to build brilliant happenings and for art to surprise and to somehow interrupt or make a difference somehow in it. It becomes more possible if you have a society in which the art is valued. And in a way, everything, every other challenge comes back to that.

KM: She goes on to articulate how Brexit also continues to have practical ramifications for international collaboration and touring:

CE: Brexit is making it harder to tour within Europe, and I think making it harder for EU students to study in the UK. I think it is having a really big impact or going to have a really big impact in the dance sector, which is a very international sector, but the fact that now only very wealthy European young people can come and study in the UK, I think changes how we interact with our colleagues, friends, future collaborators in Europe, massively. And the internationalizing of the work that we do becomes harder at the same time as it becomes harder to make a case for work in a domestic context.

KM: Fuel has absolutely felt these practical and economic challenges. In 2021 we took part in a pilot project supporting European collaboration and co-production entitled [Perform Europe](#). The pilot has since been

extended but sadly the UK is no longer able to participate and benefit as we have left the EU and opted not to contribute to and therefore benefit from Creative Europe initiatives and funding. Just one example of many issues caused by Brexit being raised across the industry in different forums at present.

And why is it harder to make a case for work in a domestic context?

CE: I think what's changed is that it's no longer possible to develop a work in isolation from an increasingly politicized arts environment. So I suppose what I mean by that is, as the arm's length-ness of the Arts Council is eroded, the politics of how and why work is made is needs to be addressed by producers, and artists, but producers for sure. Otherwise, it's very difficult to get it made.

It's not enough to have a good idea and an audience for that idea, you need to know where it fits amongst a number of priorities for various different stakeholders. And it was ever thus, but that sense for me is increasing, that the value of an artist as being someone who can be a kind of litmus test for the ideas that are urgent in society is somehow being eroded. It's somehow not enough now for an artist to say, I have a brilliant idea. They need to justify that idea somehow or where they got their idea or in consultation with whom that idea was developed.

KM: This increasingly politicised cultural context which Christina describes, and which was exemplified in Nadine Dorries' time as Culture Secretary, eroding the arm's length principle with every move, includes growing 'culture wars', the politics surrounding the government's so-called Levelling Up policy, and Arts Council England's Let's Create strategy. I would add to this list the gradual but determined decimation of the welfare state leading to a far wider 'remit' for the cultural sector covering everything from Warm Hubs to Social Prescribing. We can argue the case for or against any of these developments: but there's no denying this represents significant changes in context over a 20-year period. As one of the key skills for the producer is an ability to scan the horizon, to understand the territory, to function in the environment in which they are producing, these changes represent vivid change to that landscape.

The proliferation of TV streaming services increasing competition for cultural attention worries Ed Collier, whilst also recognising that theatre producers are now working across broadcast themselves. There are therefore pros and cons to this change:

Ed Collier: I think the competition for people's time is different. 20 years ago, this is anecdotal, but it feels like more people went to the theatre more often and there were basically five TV channels to compete with and Blockbuster. Whereas now there's TV on demand and the quality of it is extraordinary. So actually, the competition for people's imaginative space, creative time is huge.

KM: But the same technological advances across this 20-year period, and an acceleration during the Covid years of digital communication and remote working, create opportunities for producers too, as Louise Blackwell identifies:

LB: On a very kind of practical level, when I very first started producing, I was doing cash flows on paper with pencil and a rubber. The communication tools and technology that we now have to be able to collaborate more online. Obviously Zoom, obviously not having to travel so much is a really, really great thing... I think just the ability to collaborate internationally in fact has changed radically, since I first started as a producer.

KM: Another area which has seen both progress and setbacks in these two decades is the arts sector's work on diversity, inclusivity, and access. How representative the industry is or isn't, across protected characteristic and class, how inclusive its practices are, how accessible every aspect of live performance production and presentation is – there are brilliant research papers and books (including Dave O'Brien's 2020 publication 'Culture is bad for you: Inequality in the Cultural and Creative Industries') which document the victories and failures in these areas across the 20-year period. It's a complex picture and again, I aim for future research to delve deeper here.

For Anthony Gray, there has been a positive change in his day-to-day experience:

AG: I would say I walk into a room now and I'm not the only black person. That's really nice. It needs to be better for sure. But yeah, that's been a really lovely change.

KM: This simple statement encapsulates both the progress which has been made across inclusion, diversity, equality and access, and the simple truth that "it needs to be better for sure." This truth applies to the whole sector, with areas of significant progress and areas where there are fresh concerns, born of the talent exodus caused by the pandemic and economic context which now creates fresh barriers for people of demographics which are already under-represented in the arts. For Fuel, we've been fundamentally committed since day one to telling stories which aren't being told, and to widening access to the arts across all areas of the workforce and audiences/participants alike. We have made a positive contribution to the changes we want to see, and I believe we always have more to learn and more to contribute. I'll touch more on this later with respect to representation, one of Fuel's core values.

Outro Instrumental Music Plays by Dave Price

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