

## Episode 4: Collaboration

### *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 5 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 4: Collaboration.

KM: The term 'collaboration' was articulated as a core value in Fuel's 2017-22 Business Plan, and features in definitions of three of Fuel's core values in our 2022-27 Business Plan: 'creativity', 'curiosity' and 'trust'. Fuel's vision statement reads: "Our work is made with, by and for artists, audiences and our team: we are all theatre-makers. Our purpose, as a team, is to bring these artists and audiences together." (Fuel Business Plan 2022-27, page 6). We go on to talk about partnerships and relationships: the emphasis is very much on people and on collaboration.

The emphasis on collaboration, and the language of collaboration, runs throughout this document: "made with," "all theatre-makers," "as a team," "bring...together," "relationships with," "partnerships." We are very consciously collaborative: I have chosen theatre, or live performance, as my primary art form because it cannot be made alone, only as a team, and it cannot be experienced alone. This is a political choice: theatre insists we can work together to be more than the sum of our parts, it creates a space for different people – friends and family, neighbours and strangers - to be together, to share stories and images of our relationship with each other and the world around us, to experience something collectively. At its best, it reminds us through its very form of our collective humanity. At its most dead and dull, it forgets this beauty and power – and renders itself irrelevant.

When Fuel launched, we had a tagline which articulated our purpose as "to produce fresh work for adventurous people by inspiring artists". We deliberately found and celebrated the double meaning of the phrase "by inspiring artists" – the work would be created by artists who were inspiring, and by producers who inspired artists, the word "inspiring" functioning both as an adjective to describe the artists and a verb to describe what we as producers do. At the heart of our understanding of collaboration was the idea that this was a two-way street, that as producers we would work with artists both reactively and proactively. In addition to this, the description of our participants and audiences as "adventurous people," long debated for fear we might put off the timid or risk averse, echoes this idea of a proactive relationship: the people who experience our work as participants or audiences are proactively joining us on an adventure – they are not passive observers but active explorers with us. Although we've interrogated it regularly through the years, we still use this phrase as, even within its compact form, it holds so much meaning for us, about the collaborative nature of our approach.

It's worth pausing at this point to note that Fuel was formed and led for 12 years as a collaboration between myself and Louise Blackwell. Although Louise left Fuel in 2017, this will probably always be the most powerful collaboration of my professional life – as well as a profoundly important friendship. We shared a set of values and a vision which we discovered working together at Battersea Arts Centre, and which continued to grow and evolve over the time we worked together as Co-Directors of Fuel. We gave

each other the courage to leave our jobs and begin our own company. I learnt a huge amount from Louise, five years older and infinitely wiser. We brought different skills and experience to the founding of Fuel, and we pursued distinct but deeply connected passions through our time together at Fuel. We worked together on the organisational development of the company, and on some commissioned projects, and we supported each other in the projects we each produced. We celebrated our successes together, and we survived many challenging times together. Practically, we curated our programme together, we wrote our Business Plans together, we led the team and managed the finances together, we batted funding applications and pitches between us to make them stronger, we did a damn fine double act in meetings, and across the years, we held the company for each other during a total of four maternity leaves. Whilst even the most powerful collaborations can run their course, and it's perhaps natural for paths to diverge as we grow and change in our professional lives, I miss my collaboration with Louise, my professional sister, who knows me – for better and for worse - like only family can.

KM: So, in this example and many others, collaboration has been and continues to be at the heart of Fuel's ethos. But what has the impact of collaborative working been on artists, audiences, staff and partners who have created theatre together across nearly twenty years? What examples can we draw on to learn for the future? Talking to producers and artists linked to Fuel, past and present, I asked them to reflect on collaboration, and what it has meant and means to them. But I'm not interested in waffle about collaboration – I wanted tangible examples. Who were their key collaborators and how did that manifest in their practice? For Louise, firstly there was a triangle:

Louise Blackwell: There's the producer, the production manager, and the artists. That's the kind of triangle of key collaboration for me. I think without having somebody who can help to realize the ambitious or unusual or risky ideas that the artists have and that me as a producer is trying to kind of facilitate and realize and move forward, everything falls apart. It's not possible to make stuff happen in the real world without somebody who knows how to do that practically. So those are the two key collaborators, definitely.

KM: I recognise this triangle, and it's worth noting here that for 10 years, Fuel's Production Manager then Head of Production, Stuart Heyes, was my key collaborator in this production management role. For the last five years, he continued to be a crucial collaborator for me in a new role as Associate Director at Fuel, as he sought new challenges and outlets for his experience, creativity and skills, and supported my leadership of the company.

The third point of the triangle here, the artist, is of course a crucial collaboration, which I've already explored in detail – with more to come. But then Louise goes on to add a different group of collaborators:

LB: But actually, you know, without money, without resource, nothing is possible... In terms of making ambitious, creative, artistic high-quality ideas, meet an audience in real time, there has to be money involved and other resource. And so increasingly, and in sort of different ways, people who have keys to buildings or can give permission to public space or people who have money that can pay for these ideas to become a reality are actually some of the very key component parts and therefore collaborators... And so hopefully those collaborators can be a really important part of the kind of creative process. And if they're not, it's a blooming disaster.

KM: So as well as production managers and artists, venues and funders are also key collaborators. This is perhaps particularly true of Fuel, a building-free organisation which is therefore always working in partnership with the gatekeepers of particular spaces, be they theatres, schools, car parks, or "public" space. For us this collaboration is not simply about permission to use space – these gatekeepers are also often one of our key conduits (although not necessarily the only ones) to establishing connections with audiences and participants, and in many cases supporters, co-commissioners or co-producers of the work, providing crucial resources (in cash or in kind) to help make the project happen.

So what does collaborative producing mean now and what new forms does it take?

In 2020, amidst the turmoil of the pandemic, we found ourselves working in completely new ways with artists. We were all working remotely, using Zoom really for the first time, un-producing planned projects, reimagining others to take different forms, and inventing and initiating whole new strands of activity, including a significant commitment to sector support focused on freelancers, all whilst in an existential financial crisis requiring furloughing staff, desperate fundraising and reforecasting of budgets and cashflows, and emergency board meetings. The artists we were working with were in varying states of crisis, as we discovered through phone calls, emails, and drop-in zoom sessions we set up every Friday from April 2020.

At some point during this turmoil, I felt a strong need to articulate how we – as a team – would uphold our values. Not a theoretical or ephemeral expression of them, but an actual practical guide – and commitment – to delivering on them. One of the drivers was a desire for us to be consistent about this across the team, who – whilst strongly bonded by the crisis and truly heroic in their efforts - were no longer all in the same office breathing the same air.

I drafted something, entitled “Looking after relationships with theatre makers” shared it with members of the producing team, and once we’d arrived at something which felt useful, we spent time in team meetings talking through how it would be consistently implemented. In the document, I linked “trust” and “collaboration” as one section, instinctively reinforcing the idea that trust is the bedrock of successful collaboration. The document articulates that this process starts with an “introduction to key team members working on project” because:

We aim to start well. A good start means introducing all theatre makers to the whole team and explaining what everyone’s purpose is in the process. It also means inducting the artist into all of Fuel’s strange ways and inducting the Fuel team into the strange ways of the artist and their project. We expect questions to be asked in both directions.

(Looking after relationships with theatre makers, Kate McGrath, 2021)

KM: This final point a reminder that the establishment of collaboration and trust is a two-way street. By declaring our values, and defining them as best we can, we seek to meet our collaborators openly and transparently, to be clear about our values, to be curious about theirs, and to search for common ground – a Venn diagram, the intersection of which is where we will meet as collaborators. But just as our Venn diagram will have an area of intersection and also areas where our values differ, which are just as important to identify, recognise and acknowledge, so our values exist in dynamic relationship with each other. I talk to the team about areas of conflict in these terms sometimes. For example, what is happening here in this moment of a difficult decision or choice, is that two of our values are in tension with each other. We need to unpick both of them and recognise that we may not be able to fully reconcile them in every situation, but by understanding what is at play, we can make better choices and understand what those choices are.

To help with this tension, this same document also borrows from Alan Lane of Slung Low’s motto “Be useful and kind”, outlining the need for mutual understanding, clarity and transparency:

We see mutual understanding and compassion as the bedrock of a good relationship. We aim to have as clear an understanding of the whole picture as possible, however changeable this picture may be. We seek to offer the theatre maker a transparent overview of how things look from our perspective.

This idea of transparency is then developed into a commitment to “avoid promising what we cannot absolutely guarantee”, and to be “honest about our capabilities and capacity from the beginning”. Whilst I think Fuel is good at being honest and transparent with artists, we have often struggled with the balance between the required drive and stubbornness to make impossible things happen. Sometimes the role of the producer is to keep the candle of an idea alight whilst everyone around it believes it to be unachievable. And the risk of pushing this to the point where we are actually trying to deliver the

impossible, with some version of failure in the quality of the work itself, in keeping to the set timeline or budget, or in exhausting those involved, somewhat inevitable. So this one requires us to hold that line, which does not always appear to be in the same place for everyone, with as much honesty as we can.

Step by step, this document goes on to outline how we will “sometimes serve” and “sometimes lead”, how important “communication” is, specifying our minimum commitments. For example, to a “session to set aims”, a “meet and greet”, weekly, fortnightly or monthly meetings and/or emails depending on the stage the project is at and the role the artist is in. We also commit “to be available according to the requirements of the work as far as is possible whilst maintaining our own wellbeing, and to communicate with clarity about when we are not available” – a nuance which might not have been articulated when we started work in 2004, perhaps echoing Anthony’s observation that wellbeing and mental health have, happily, travelled further up the agenda for ourselves as producers. We also commit to – and require commitment to – an evaluation process at the end of each project or phase of a project.

In terms of grounding the collaboration, we also commit to contracts, timelines with clear milestones and parameters, and acknowledge the complex processes and contexts we work in by noting:

Whilst recognising that we are not able to control all factors around a project, we aim to be as clear as possible about the available resource for the project, and where there are unresolved parameters, to work together to resolve them.

In some sense, this document seeks to lay out in ethical and practical terms what we mean by our values and how we will activate them in reality. This feels crucial to me – otherwise they are just words which can either be dismissed as good intentions without the carry through or misinterpreted through a lack of stated definition.

To dig deeper into how producers actually enact their values, I spoke to other producers who have – at some point – worked at Fuel, about what a key collaboration has meant to them. Ed Collier of China Plate says this:

Ed Collier: One of the longest collaborations that I've been involved with is with Caroline Horton. I can't even think how many shows we've made together now. That relationship has taught me a massive amount about producing and making work, and how to do things well and when things have not gone so well and it's hugely affected a lot of the function of China Plate and focus of China Plate over that time as well.

One of the biggest lessons that's taught me is how to really deeply trust somebody in a creative process when both you and they don't know where it's going to go. There have been moments in which I think we've both hit a wall with it and not known how it's going to come out the other end. Working with somebody over that period of time, and with Caroline always working with material that's hugely personal for her, either because it's politically personal or because it's directly related to her own experience, has really shown me how and when to give up being in control and let somebody run with an idea that I don't understand and I don't need to understand all of it. That's had a big impact, but that's a very difficult place to get to and isn't something that you can make a first show with somebody in place.

I'd also say from a, a practical point of view, working with Caroline over a very long period of time has also really helped me and China Plate more widely think about how we support artists' wellbeing and wider team wellbeing through those processes. We were careful but basically busked it with Caroline for a long time, but consciously busked it when making pieces like Mess, which was about her experience of anorexia, and recovery. We worked with her therapists and medical people that had worked with her through that process, which was very helpful for the show. But collectively the focus of that was about how we work with those people to create a piece of theatre that really reflected it, whilst as producers we were acutely aware of the position that Caroline was potentially putting it herself in, in terms of talking about a thing that in talking about it is triggering. And so from there we began thinking about how we create structures around artists' wellbeing, which Rosie Kelly, who was our senior producer for a long time, was very, very

closely involved with and passionate about. That's allowed us to make work that we couldn't possibly have done without it. It is also very definitely an ongoing process, but it was that relationship with Caroline that helped China Plate realise how important that was.

KM: The benefits of collaboration time here are articulated so clearly as reaping the rewards of deep trust, which takes time to build on both sides. There is a humility in how Ed talks about what he has learnt from this long-term collaboration which has informed his personal practice – giving up control – and his company's practice – introducing wider learning around wellbeing.

Hannah Smith also reflects on the impact of her long-term collaboration with The Wardrobe Ensemble on her as a producer:

I have worked with devising company The Wardrobe Ensemble (TWE) for ten years now (nearly the whole of my career) and that collaborative relationship has completely shaped me as a producer. I have grown and developed my skills alongside the company, as well as developing my theatrical taste. As a result of working with TWE I have found myself specialising in devised work, and mainly working with Southwest based artists. My favourite part of working on multiple projects with the same artists is the R&D stages and assembling partner, choosing venues & organisations who suit the project, and setting strategy for a company over a number of years.

For Hannah, this long-term collaboration, then, has significant impact on her own practice, taste, networks, skills and specialisms – and it has enabled her as a producer to work more strategically, benefitting the ensemble.

Kathryn Bilyard also talks about building her collaboration with Improbable over time:

Kathryn Bilyard: We started with like the project collaboration and then as we've got to know each other more and more and I can embed what they're really driving at for their organisation. Then we've moved into that kind of bigger picture as collaborators, where we go: what impact do we want to have? And I see their work and I can see it having so much impact everywhere, which is really exciting. I learn more about it, then I can find those little opportunities and go, okay, right, we should be supporting this, or we need to make this, we need to share this work more. We need to tell people about how we made it. So we made a podcast so that people can listen to it, because otherwise you never see any of that work or you don't see the connections between the shows that look quite disparate. That kind of thing is now coming out of that longer term collaboration.

KM: It's interesting that the beginning of the journey of collaboration Kathryn describes was the projects, and time is enabling it to grow into something wider, about producing the company, not just its productions. My experience of this phenomenon is that the producer journey can indeed move from making a project happen to developing an artist or company more widely and beyond that, to producing change in the wider sector, in policy, in culture, in society. It is understanding this journey from the bedrock of making a project happen well to making much wider change that enables a good producer to connect the day-to-day work they do with the deeper impact they wish to make.

Fuel has often started a new collaboration with an artist with one project, to see how the relationship works in reality, before either side commits to more work together. This has enabled us to explore the dynamics of the relationship, learn from that, and decide together if we'll work together more. I have really valued the one-off collaborations where we've made something extraordinary happen together in a way which has been enriching and productive for both and for audiences and held legacies for us all. Our collaboration with Belarus Free Theatre to produce Minsk 2011, created as they moved to the UK, is a memorable example. I value the long-term collaborations in a different way, recognising both the accumulated trust which Ed feels, and the shift from project producing to artist producing which Kathryn describes. My own ongoing development as a producer is, I believe, the result of a combination of what I learn through my insatiable curiosity for the new, fresh, and unknown, with what I learn through long-term

collaboration, reflection, repetition with variation, evaluation – looking backwards in order to move forwards, as the Sankofa bird does. By practicing curiosity and learning as two of Fuel’s core values, and placing emphasis on both experimentation and evaluation, as well as working daily to create a culture within the team which celebrates both successes and learning, I seek to embed this combination of the vitality of the new with the power of accumulated understanding. For me, one of those long-term collaborations, over around 15 years now, has been with Inua Ellams, who notes that he has learnt over time what the value of that relationship is to him:

Inua Ellams: I think it's changed in the sense that, not that I took it for granted, but in the start of our working relationship, I just assumed this was the case for everybody, and then I've realized that it really isn't. So I've begun to understand the importance of it and the value of it.

KM: Kate Scanlan tells a story from the producer’s perspective about how her collaboration with B Boy Pervez Live changed as she grew more confident and experienced, and as he began to understand her role as a producer more:

Kate Scanlan: I think at the beginning of the relationship, I was a bit in awe of this person that was like an incredible creative talent and had done you know, the really, really important thing of laying the foundation and creating a culture. And I was a bit like, oh wow, I'm not really that worthy. Over the last decade, I've done so many different things in so many different contexts with my producing, I feel as worthy a collaborative partner. So now I think we have a much more equal partnership. And I think in the beginning, because I didn't feel confident when he would give me feedback on something, I'd take it really negatively and really personally. And I feel like now we have a really great relationship because we can sort of really reflect each other areas where we need to do more or where we need to tone it down, slow down, and so I feel now, when we give each other constructive criticism, it really is like a two-way street. And I feel like we respect each other's strengths now, and we're really aware of the differences in the partnership and what we both bring.

I think the producing bit is always challenging though, right? Because so much of the producing role has to happen before you get anywhere near a creative, like actual actualised moment, like in the studio or an event, whatever. So I think that's the bit that... I mean, I'm speaking for him, right? But I think that's the bit that I think he's realised over the years is actually how hard you have to work as a producer to get to the moment where he starts the project essentially. Obviously, he's involved in the creative concept, but I think there's a realisation that actually there's points where my work is the most important bit in the realising of this idea. And then there's another moment where it's his point to be the lead. So I think that's something that we've both learnt over the time. So it's a much richer relationship, right? Because it feels much more equitable. We understand the strength and weaknesses and I think it's more interesting and more powerful.

KM: I find it so telling that in the middle of telling a story of increased mutual understanding and growing equity, Kate almost confides in me “the producing bit is always challenging though, right?” This points to the invisibility or opacity of the producing process. We’ve talked about this over the years at Fuel – how visible we should make our work to the artists we collaborate with, to our funders, even to each other within the team. Often, we’re so busy doing it, we don’t show our workings – but the cost of that can be high. I remember reflecting on this at the end of a long relationship with a company who we worked with exclusively over many years. They decided to take up an offer from another producer to develop a project without Fuel’s involvement, and to end their relationship with Fuel. I was (perhaps naively) surprised and hurt. There were many reasons for their decision, I’m sure, but one comment they made struck me, as it revealed that they didn’t really know or understand much of what we were doing as their producers – and it occurred to me that some of the responsibility for this lay with us because we hadn’t really told them the half of it. They knew the big obvious things, but they didn’t know we were working away in a whole host of different ways, because we didn’t tell them, we just did it. And whether that was renewing their insurance or advocating for them in conversations with venues and funders, we hadn’t found a mechanism to make

sure they knew all of that was going on. So, we started to do that consciously with all the artists and companies we work with, in regular emails or meetings. To build trust, respect, equality, understanding – we need to communicate to collaborate. It seems simple, but so often it is assumed or presumed, and then things can go awry.

Christina Elliot also links respect and value to trust, and here again her comments suggest that sometimes a producer can feel their role is not understood or valued:

Christina Elliot: In the collaborations that I have developed over the years, I would say that the most important thing is trust. I mean, it sounds like an obvious thing, but I do think that essentially, they need to trust that you will do a good job with something that is very precious to them - an idea - and I need to trust that somehow, they also value something of what I bring to the process. I think if I have a sense that the role that I'm doing is not valued, it can be quite hard. Those can be the more challenging moments, where there's no shared sense of each person's value in the collaboration.

KM: Perhaps what I'm arriving at through these conversations and reflections is a sense that the producer role is, not always but often, invisible, misunderstood, undervalued. That the producer, in their efforts to breathe life and confidence into a project, can hide their workings and their fears, their methodologies and their graft, and that in doing so, they can be taken for granted by artists, or institutions, or funders. Perhaps it is a role that is under-recognised in the eco-system as a whole. I have certainly felt that many times over the last twenty years. Whether it be an artist deciding to take the funding we have raised to make the project without us, or the Artistic Director of a major institution failing to acknowledge, credit or thank us as co-commissioners and co-producers in their press night speech, or a core funder seeming to reject our request for a desperately needed uplift on the grounds that we will keep going regardless, or reviewers crediting ownership of a production to the host venue who are only presenting rather than producing the work.

There seems to be a value system in our sector, widespread and deeply embedded, largely unchallenged, which relates to what we recognise as 'real work' and therefore value. The work that writers, directors, performers do is visible and recognised. Often undervalued in cash terms, but definitely visible and recognised. The work that buildings do is visible and recognised, partly because the buildings are visible and recognised. But the work that producers do, like technicians, stage managers, production managers, costume and prop makers, is much less visible and much less valued. I've always insisted on not being described as an artist, because I respect too highly the work that artists do, and understand that is it distinct from what I do. But I have lost count the number of times that people who work in our industry in other roles, have inferred either directly or indirectly, that there isn't actually any expertise in producing, as if it is just something that some people do, and others don't.

What if we did explain what we do? What if everyone in the arts and cultural sector understood the role of the producer? What if great producers were identified, invested in and celebrated?

Before someone points out that this does happen and that I wouldn't be where I am now if it didn't, I willingly acknowledge that some very brilliant people have absolutely identified the producer role, invested in it, and celebrated it. Chief amongst these in my professional life was the phenomenal Roanne Dods, whose blend of experience as a dancer and as a lawyer led her to become a visionary founding Director of the Jerwood Charitable Foundation, now Jerwood Arts. Roanne believed in the potential of producers and gave Louise, Sarah and I a grant which enabled us to set up Fuel in 2004. She championed producers in many other ways over the years and became de facto Chair of Fuel's advisory board, known as the Catalysts. As Graham Leicester and Maureen O'Hara wrote of Roanne:

She saw that the arts are not just about artists and 'arts organisations'. There are also certain individuals who have the skill and capacity to mediate between creative artists on the one hand and structures of funding and accountability on the other to deliver acts of the imagination that are (by definition) unique and original. (International Futures Forum/Korea, 20 May 2022)

I consider crossing paths with Roanne at a critical moment in my professional development to have been an absolute game-changer. Her clarity, conviction and passionate advocacy for producing was deeply considered as well as genuinely, pragmatically helpful. The clarity of other producers I learned from also gave me confidence, for example in Michael Morris's clear articulation of the producer's role as connector: "It's the producer's role to be the bridge between the work and the world, the artist and the audience" (The Producers, Alchemists of the Impossible, 2007). I've found that when we speak to audiences, they echo this understanding. In the audience survey for this research, I asked "What do you think is the most important thing a producer does?" and received this response: "Creates the conditions in which artists can flourish and then gets the work to audiences."

I'm also lucky enough to work with artists who 'get it', and I am more articulate about my understanding of the role now so that I can usually accelerate that journey of mutual understanding – I hope. ESKA articulates how she understands the heart of the collaboration to be creativity:

ESKA: I've been very fortunate, I think with the producers that I've encountered that, it feels very much that they are an artist too, even though their job seems like there's a more sort of administrative aspect to it. And that's super important, to have a great organized administrative mind as a producer, to be able to hold that space for the artist but they are a creative person as well. And I think they flourish best when they're also allowed that opportunity to be creative in the way that they work. It's not just seen as this sort of functional role, that's nuts and bolts, about sorting out the artist's world, because there's creativity in doing that, but also it's the eye, it's the ear, all of those things. The taste, all of the things that is to do with aesthetic. You know, it is an artistic mind. It's a creative mind. And I think the collaboration with the artist and the producer grows as long as both of them are growing artistically.

*Outro Instrumental Music Plays by Dave Price*

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