

Episode 5: Values and Conclusion

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 5: Values and Conclusion

Since early dialogue about the company's name and purpose, demonstrated throughout documents held in the archive as well as in its recently published Business Plan, Fuel cites its values as central to its practice: "Our vision will be realised through values-led relationships with artists, communities and places, supported by local, national and international partnerships." (Fuel Business Plan 2022-27, page 6). I'm interested in how these values have evolved over time, how they actually manifest in practice, and what the impact of this approach has been over twenty years.

By tracing the development of Fuel's values through archival research, conversations with producers and artists, this research hopes to shed light on what values like "collaboration" in producing mean now and for the future. As practice-led research, my inquiry seeks to establish the parameters of these terms as they have been understood by Fuel.

Perhaps the place to start is why values – or guiding principles – might be useful. Again, there is a growing reading list of corporate management and leadership literature on this subject, with varying views, but for me it has always been clear. My values are the constellation of stars which help me navigate through the night sky. They exist in relationship with each other. Some shine brighter than others in a given moment, but they are all essential to my evolving practice. They are not static but shaped by my experience and what I learn from it along the way – but equally they are not whimsical or changeable, as they are deeply held.

This image of values as navigating tools felt very strong to me when the Covid pandemic hit and all of our planned programme had to be cancelled. Being a theatre production company who couldn't produce theatre inevitably led to grief, anxiety and a temporary sense of confusion about purpose, and in that moment, I felt extreme clarity that holding on to our values would help us through the crisis – and that they would help me personally to lead. I wrote to the staff team on 3 April 2020, with a provisional "plan" for how we would approach lockdown (not knowing, of course, how long that might be), which included these words: "We will try to inspire each other and those we engage with by living our values – creativity, collaboration, representation, learning, trust, curiosity and now sustainability too – and in the process have as much fun as we can together. There are difficult weeks and months ahead for us, our friends, families and colleagues. Let's be kind and useful."

Fuel's Senior Producer Sarah Wilson-White's comments reflected this approach: "Values-led producing is the road map to a producer's practice, and when things get lost or confused, they exist to remind us why we're on the journey in the first place." Our values immediately and practically helped us navigate the

chaos of that first lockdown, whilst we took time to find new ways to fulfil our vision and purpose in the context of crisis. We knew how we wished to be before we knew what we would do. I believe there is always a dance between purpose and values – together they form a vision of the future you wish to create and shape the actions you'll take to get there. You will only find your true destination if you navigate by your values.

I've written about trust and collaboration in past episodes. This episode will dive more deeply into values. Let's start with creativity.

This idea of the producer as creative of course echoes the relatively recent terminology of "creative producing", a trend I understand but take a sceptical view of.

One of Fuel's current core values is creativity: "Producing is creating something new in collaboration with others. In producing we seek to embolden, support and celebrate the creativity of everyone we work with and for" (Fuel Business Plan 2022-27, page 7). Despite this overarching commitment to creativity, Fuel has maintained a critical relationship with the fashionable term 'creative producer': arising from a perceived need to centre the role of the producer in the creative process, the term has been widely adopted across the UK's subsidised theatre sector. But in foregrounding creativity, what is undervalued in the producing role?

When Louise, Sarah and I were planning Fuel, we knew we needed a name. We asked the brilliant writer, director and performer Andy Smith to help us. As part of the process which led to the name 'Fuel', Andy wrote a paper in which he played back to us what he had heard us describe as our aims as follows:

The company wants to support and develop cutting edge and brilliant theatre artists in all aspects of the production of new, groundbreaking and exciting theatre/performance work. An ability to generate the development of these companies in all aspects of the development of their work (fiscal/practical as well as creative/imaginative), lie at the core of what the company are looking to do. (What's in a name? Andy Smith, 2004)

From our earliest meetings, this combination of "fiscal/practical" with "creative/imaginative", or more broadly "all aspects" was "at the core" for us. That said, in July 2004, we wrote a paper entitled "FUEL: Creative Theatre Thinking" (Blackwell/McGrath/Quelch) which opened with the words "Fuel is a new creative producing organisation... Creativity, strategy and interaction are at the heart of Fuel." Our "Company Mission Statement" went on to define these three values, with creativity defined as follows:

Central to Fuel's creative producing is imaginative and inspiring dialogue with artists. Working in partnership, Fuel will instigate and develop ideas, helping them to flourish; foster collaborations; identify opportunities for training and development and guide the creative process. Fuel embraces the wildly inventive, cultivates craziness and dares artists to dream. (Fuel: Creative Theatre Thinking, Blackwell/McGrath/Quelch, 2004)

These exact same words are replicated in Fuel's 2007-2012 Business Plan – so this foregrounding of and definition of creativity was clearly working for us!

In my view, creativity is essential to great producing – and by creativity, I mean active engagement in the actual process of developing and creating the work, bringing ideas and insight, as well as experience and skill in the actual craft of theatre-making, as well as creativity in your approach to audiences and audience development, partnerships and relationships, fundraising, budgeting, marketing – all of it! But I also believe that the rise and rise of 'Creative Producer' as role describer carries risks. It is essential to great producing to have hard skills and to deliver on the less obviously creative sides of the role – submitting your Theatre Tax Relief claim or PRS form is part of the job, as are applying for visas in a timely manner and knowing the consequences if a van on the road is overweight. The producer who claims their role is creative may ignore these pitfalls and who will pick them up if they do? Also, the ability to be creative as a producer does not

make you a great artist – knowing the limits of your expertise is a crucial part of respecting the expertise of those you collaborate with. Equal, perhaps, but different, for sure. In many ways it is the distance between the creativity of the artist and the different creativity of the producer which enables the producer to be of any use to the artist – and vice versa - in my view. It was beautiful to read in the audience survey for this research, a response to the question “What difference do you think good producing makes?”, the response “Creativity, excitement, pushing boundaries.”

One of the ‘slowest burn’ projects I’ve worked on is with Khalid Abdalla, for good reasons, which I don’t need to go into here. But over the course of the time that we’ve been working together, our relationship has developed immeasurably in terms of how we can now collaborate. He describes this collaboration here:

Khalid Abdalla: Everyone has their traditional roles to a certain extent which is very important in terms of what they're doing. That's the primary thing they're focusing on but everyone's creative investment in the work should at some level break hierarchy. In a proper collaboration, that's just absolutely fundamental. And I think how that develops over time is that, you know, yes, there's a space where something originates but together, we become guardians of what it can be, right?

In relation to this [project], it's a very personal work, right, and it's originating very much so from my experience but I'm stepping into Fuel, which is your creation, right, yours and everyone else's, and is a space that I feel that I have witnessed grow over the length of those almost 20 years that we've known each other. So I feel like I want to live up to the meaning of that space in relation to the work that I am producing and the values that I've seen it try and hold and maintain over that period of time. And so in some senses, I feel like that is the core of what our friendship has been and was even when we first met, right? It's this kind of instinct like we share values in relation to the world. We might articulate them differently in terms of what we're doing at different points in our life, but there comes this moment where these things come together. And so let's make something as beautiful as we can with everything that has come from my experience and everything that has come from your experience.

KM: With other artists, this might be a faster process, or articulated in different ways, but I find Khalid’s articulation of a meeting of minds at the right moment to be a very powerful description of the conditions that might enable a producer to work as an ‘outside eye’ on a very personal piece of work, both the content and form of which are being discovered by the artist through a collaborative process. As Hannah Smith summarises: “I think one of the reasons that I have worked with The Wardrobe Ensemble for so long is that we instinctively share a lot of the same values.”

As dramaturg Ruth Little said when I interviewed her about the ‘outside eye’ role back in 2010, “We come into being through our relationships with one another, person to person, artist to audience. It’s all about relationships actually, so let’s be honest about that and make better relationships.”

And if we do make better relationships? Then the conversation is about more than this project, or this note on this scene, but about a journey towards greater understanding and clarity. David Harradine, in the same set of interviews in 2010, said “Every project feels part of the same project in a way. I remember my conversation with you about An Infinite Line which happened quite a long time after it finished. It was a conversation about An Infinite Line. For me, it was a conversation about my practice and everything I do in a way and my approach to making what I do, in a way that was very enriching in terms of that, not in terms of feedback on this show. Each project seems like such a small part in a lifetime’s work, and more interested in the search than the arrival. So the conversation is more about that, the ongoing search, rather than the relative success of a particular thing.”

For me, one of the great privileges of my role is to have the opportunity to follow an artist’s practice over many years, to experience their work with different audiences, to hear them speak, watch them work, gradually understand their process more and more, and to feel myself better able to support them through that learning. And of course every new collaboration fills me with curiosity in terms of what that new journey and relationship might reveal to me.

Returning to Khalid, and the journey of establishing trust and recognising a shared set of values, he says this:

KA: Who Fuel was during Covid was incredibly important to me, and not just me, but many other people. Whether it was in terms of just those Friday meetings or whether it was in terms of its response to the murder of George Floyd, those are values that are not always directly related to the production of a play, right? They are - and I think this is what theatre is really fundamentally about - about creating space and spaces where audiences meet, where work is made, where collaborators find each other, in which that constellation of values can find somewhere in the real world.

You know, for me it's as much in work that I've seen you do as it is, you know. When I came to see Barber Shop Chronicles during that preview and audience members were coming out like, you know, finally, there's a respect for the various different African accents and that's a space in which I found myself as an Egyptian who knows what it feels like to be culturally misrepresented. Or I mean, frankly, you know, when I came back, I think I've told you this, but the first time I came back from Egypt, the first play I saw was An Evening with an Immigrant when it was at Soho. And just simply seeing that was part of me feeling at home. Like, oh, there is a home for me here still in this country. And weirdly that's in some ways what his play was about, but the story that he tells about his relationship with you and how that work was made and how that related to him applying for his passport and residency and all of that – those are values, those are real values.

KM: Khalid is talking about trust here, specifically of a trust born of witnessing me, and Fuel, living our values in our programme, and in our practice, and specifically of how representation – another of Fuel's core values – manifests in our work. This is a value I was brought up with and comes hand in hand with a deep-rooted sense of justice which burns in me as brightly now as it did when I was a child. My understanding continues to develop and I have much more to learn. But in terms of how this value resonates in Fuel's work, we say:

Performance is representation and we believe the people who make it and experience it should be representative of the diversity of the world we live in. We seek to break down barriers and enable everyone to participate freely in cultural life.

This last phrase consciously echoes the Rome Charter of 2020 which states: “The Right to Participate Fully and Freely in Cultural Life is vital to our Cities and Communities”. This reference is about consciously situating our approach to representation in human rights frame. For me, equitable representation is not purely motivated by “the Creative Case for Diversity” (ACE, 2011) although of course there absolutely is one – this is about fundamental human rights. As Anthony puts it:

Anthony Gray: I will fight tooth and nail to make sure that everything I'm part of is as representative as possible. And that can be, you know, building a youth board at the Barbican or creating a youth opera company at the Royal Opera House, or the Travis project or the range of projects that the Fuel have done.

KM: The visceral language of “fight tooth and nail” conveys Anthony's strength of conviction, a sense of right and wrong, or striving for justice, which we share. I believe this is one of the reasons why in Fuel he has found a professional home which shares his values, and in me, a collaborator who he trusts. As a cis het non-disabled middle-class white woman, I am clear that I need to acknowledge my privileges, as well as where I do and do not have lived experience. Since researching Speakeasy, my understanding (through study and practice) of dramaturgy has been impacted considerably by considering the implications of post-colonial approaches, and I've questioned whether or when it is my place to offer feedback, as well as whether my perspective would be helpful or unhelpful, in each process I have produced. I believe that some of the crucial and innovative work we are iteratively experimenting with within anti-racist and anti-ableist producing strategies can usefully enrich, disturb and agitate against assumptive processes within

collaboration. There is much more thinking and work which I hope to do in this space, and this work needs time, care and many other voices than my own.

Where are we now? Without doubt, there is much more to learn, and much more work to do. There is no question in my mind that these extraordinary producers who I have worked with and interviewed, and many others besides, have the potential to create significant and lasting change for our cultural landscape and the wider social and political culture we live in. But to unleash this potential, what do producers need?

According to the producers I interviewed access to resources – and explicitly to money – is the key challenge:

Kate Scanlan: I think the biggest challenge as a freelance producer right now is money.

Kathryn Bilyard: I think the most difficult thing for me as a producer at the moment is the financials. Trying to get our projects to stack up financially feels really difficult. I feel like it was already very difficult and now it's harder.

One reason for this might lie in what Louise Blackwell describes as her biggest challenge:

Louise Blackwell: The biggest challenge I have is how to embed creativity and arts in our everyday society. I have to fight for the value of arts and culture. And I don't feel like I've had to do that really as much in my career until now. So that has changed. That is something I wasn't quite expecting. I think that's to do with political context. I think it's to do with the cost of living. I think it's to do with the fact that the pressures on people and on decision makers are pretty extreme. There's still not an understanding of how arts and culture can solve some things and can change some things and can make things better.

KM: If we can collectively make the case for more investment (from many directions) in the arts, perhaps the potential of these powerhouse producers can be unleashed. But there is no doubt that the political and economic context can make that argument harder to land. However, as Louise says, we have solutions and contributions to make and now producers are part of making that case.

We need to take care though, as producer Hannah Smith (and others I spoke to) directly link the current economic challenges and lack of resource with producer burnout:

For me the biggest challenge is lack of resource all over the industry which ultimately leads to producer burnout, as the responsibility for ever-increasing budgets and decreasing income ultimately lies with us.

If we want producers not to burn out, and not to leave the industry, we need to take note of Sarah Wilson-White's words here:

The risk facing producers is similar to that of other skilled professionals in the sector - it's how to sustain a practice after the first ten years when wages are stagnant and working practices still ask for too much for too little.

The talent drain kickstarted by the pandemic is documented elsewhere and producers are not immune to this effect. As a Trustee of the Clore Leadership Programme, one of my ongoing concerns at present is the impact of current political and economic pressures on the leadership of the arts and cultural sector: as well as "holding" artists, producers tend to "hold" the responsibility for making budgets stack up, and as Hannah outlines so succinctly, costs are increasing apace and income (earned, raised or statutory) is not.

And if we do succeed in generating the resource, in making things happen, in producing change, what then? Anthony Gray has this to say:

AG: Producers hold a lot of power. If you are from a lived experience where you are quite fortunate, and that could be for a range of different reasons – you could be able-bodied, you could be white, you could be earning a good amount of money or from a good background, then you have got to leave that door open. Not even leave it open. You've got prop it open and you've got to get ladders up there. And you have to be pulling people through in a really safe way, to make sure that our sector is as diverse and brilliant as possible. And then if you are from the global majority, you're Black, you're Asian, or you are from the LGBTQ+ family, or you are disabled, you are a woman, you are a single mum, then I would say don't be fearful. Know that your presence in this sector is what is going to drive this sector forward.

KM: A big focus of my work as a producer, which I aim to extend both in my practice and in future research, centers around exactly this: how to prop open doors, provide ladders, and do what I can to ensure our sector is as diverse and brilliant as possible. This is a vital part of producing change.

So what is emerging from this enquiry and where might it lead next?

That a good producer needs to be a transformative superhero in temperament, with an ability to embody lots of seeming opposites. For example, to be reactive/proactive, visible/invisible, firm/flexible – and that this role can be both exhilarating and exhausting. In future research, I hope to dig even deeper into the language(s) of producing as a way to understand the challenges and needs of producers more profoundly, and what new ways of describing this role and articulating what conditions or environments might unleash its potential further.

That the producer role has grown in number, visibility and diversity over the last 20 years – because of an increase in both opportunity and need for this role, caused by the political and economic context across the arts, the UK more broadly and global political and economic shifts – and equally that this growth is now threatened by our current economic and political context. I'm keen to dig deeper into what part gender plays in producing, and age, and class, and into articulating strategies and methodologies for anti-racist and ant-ableist producing, and into the complexities of intersectionality and producing.

That in order to navigate this terrain the producer can really benefit from a clear set of values according to which they can build relationships and make decisions in order to make things happen. Having begun to explore trust, collaboration, creativity and representation in this research, how can I take those beginnings further, and if my values are a constellation can I understand the skyscape more fully by deep diving not only into those values but into other personal values like curiosity, sustainability, care, and justice.

I've focused my research here very deliberately on producers – and artists – with whom I have close working relationships – to dig deeper into the intersection in the Venn diagram of our shared experience and understanding. I'd love also to throw those shared assumptions into relief by talking to producers with different methodological and/or ethical approaches, who understand their role using different language(s).

I'd also love to find ways to engage with audiences more in this research, which will take different skills and processes, not least because of the aforementioned invisibility of the role of the producer.

Of course, producers don't just need an adaptable temperament and values. They need many other things which might include a clear vision, skills and expertise, knowledge and networks, access to resources. There is much more to understand on all of that too. For producers like me, in the middle (I'd like to say prime...) of our professional lives, there are very real practical and economic challenges in how we can succeed in making things happen. It's one thing to research – and a hugely useful process – but for now at least, it's back to my day job: collaborating with brave and brilliant artists with care and creativity, seeking to make a tangible contribution to embedding the arts in everyday life and to making a case for that in all the contexts in which I advocate and agitate, and sharing what power I have with people who will be the future of our sector. This combination of challenges and opportunities is what producing is for me, and in different ways for my courageous colleagues. And, as they say, not all superheroes wear capes.

Outro Instrumental Music Plays by Dave Price

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