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From the producer's perspective: Yamin Choudury

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As Artistic Director of Hackney Empire, London, Yamin has developed a unique youth engagement strategy that has led to a 12% growth in just the past twelve months and enabled four thousand young people aged between eight and 19 to take part in the theatre's free Creative Futures programme, which put on over 800 hours of activities. The scheme has seen 50 new projects created by and for young people and designed specifically to remove barriers to participation.

Yamin's work addresses the social and economic realities of Hackney, an inner London borough situated to the north east of the centre of London. The borough was the eleventh most deprived local authority overall in England in 2015² and experiences significant problems of poverty and inequality with a poverty rate at 36%, well above the London average of 27%³. It is a relatively young borough, with 45% of its population under 30. It is also one of the most culturally and ethnically diverse boroughs in London having seen many waves of immigration since the eighteenth century and has significant well-established black and Turkish communities.

One of the flagship initiatives of Yamin's work at Hackney Empire is the annual talent showcase 'Alter Ego', an event created, produced and performed by the young people and watched by 1,400 of their peers. Since becoming Artistic Director in 2018, Yamin has been instrumental in the renewal of the Empire's mission to serve its youth and community, questioning why there should be a conflict between community and commercial programming in arts and culture, asking 'If community isn't at the centre of your process, then who buys the commercial tickets?'

Yamin's association with the Empire is a long one, his first contact with the theatre was a teenager, and passing on the welcome that he experienced underpins the ethos of the organisation and its mission and values which has accessibility at its core. Yamin adds: 'We want to create a sense of entitlement for those that feel unentitled. If you're in the space, it's yours.'

JB: You have spoken very powerfully about your frustration with slowness of change in the sector, what's missing and how do you tackle this at Hackney Empire?

YC: I'm massively angry, massively angry, and I do feel fairly impotent when it comes to changes that the sector needs for the future of the art form. I definitely find myself in a little bubble bouncing around, but with the young people we can actually start effecting change as a sector. And I think it's quite straight forward. And the more I do it, the more

I wonder why it's not an industry standard. And if not industry standard, then, you know, nation-wide, just, how we exist. And, essentially, it's about creating a dialogue. And that dialogue is what's missing. We're giving them [young people] rules and structures that they're not a part of the creation of, it's implemented without understanding or context. Things exist that are massively prohibitive, particularly for young communities that find themselves outside of the mainstream. So, there's disengagement from society, that's an extreme, and then there's an existence where you're in a parallel universe, where the things that you experience on a day-to-day basis, and this isn't drug dealing or fatal, violent crime, this is seeing drug dealing. This is seeing young people with knives and guns. This is seeing stolen cars and robbery. And not necessarily being involved, but experiencing that on a day-to-day basis to the point where, to the extent where it becomes the norm, it becomes normalised. And then not seeing that being conversed in any way shape or form by leaders. Or influencers. And actually when you do try to do it, and when councils genuinely mishandle these conversations because there's either external or internal pressure to ensure that these conversations are had, you're either not involved or you're being spoken at as the one with the lived experience. It's ridiculous.

JB: In this context, is the term 'disengagement' problematic, because it is judging whether a young person has engaged with the stuff that's being created for them, without consultation. Not work that they actually want to create themselves?

YC: Absolutely. And that's where, that's why Alter Ego works because it's the non-tokenistic engagement of young people in an arts and culture platform. And that's this massively loaded set of terms. But what does that mean? All we're doing is saying we're going to give you this arts and culture platform, Hackney Empire, a 120-year-old theatre, and we're going to let you curate the arts and culture you want to invest in and be inspired by on that stage. And not only are you going to curate it, you're then going to be the ticket-buying audience and you're going to be 75% of the acts on that stage. And we're not going to tell you what song to sing or what rap to rap, or what piece of spoken word. We're not going to tell you not to use language that we don't agree with. We're not going to tell you how to dress or, you know, any of those things. What we're going to do is we're going to create a context where you're able to, as eloquently as possible, communicate the idea that you feel is most pressing, that you want to communicate. And that's what's so powerful about Alter Ego.

So what we want to avoid is that, they (the young producers) say, right, we want performer X and then a series of overseers come in and pull apart performer X, and say, 'well this is not good, and this is not good, and this is too much grime'. Why can't we trust them? Why don't we try to understand why they want to see these young artists, why are we evaluating and examining these choices that they're making? That's what we're doing with Alter Ego. We're looking at these choices that they're making, and we're trying to understand, right, so they've picked a series of artists who are specifically talking about violence, either witnessed or perpetrated, they're talking about all these, you know, clichés and stereotypes. But why? Why do they feel that this is so pressing and urgent and needs to be discussed? And not only that, they'll gain enjoyment, you know, they'll saturate themselves in this experience because they can't access it anywhere else.

This is an uncurated, unaudited platform where information can freely be passed between people. And yes, in one sense it glamorizes and glorifies subject matter that might be uncomfortable for you and I, but if that's their lived experience and nobody's providing viable alternatives or solutions ... How can we judge? But I'm also going to curate 10 artists, young artists from Hackney and East London that'll provide a range of other stories and narratives and information, and see what else people are trying to ... and let's give them those options and let's give them those opportunities, and let's give them 'emulatable' figures that they can say, 'oh, just because I don't do Trap maybe I could do Soul or R&B, or maybe I really want to do something else'. It's these series of really open-ended conversations. And I've always said, in this world and with projects like this, I'm much more interested in starting conversations than ending them. We're so far away from presenting solutions.

JB: I'm really interested in this idea of starting conversations. How does the young producer programme help unlock the barriers or start those conversations?

YC: So that is totally essential. You can't, you literally can't at this point in time, have one without the other. And this is a microcosm, the youth forum, which then became young producers and was professionalized and evolved into that, the youth forum is a microcosm of all these wider conversations. If you look at the conversation around diversity and inclusivity etcetera, it is equality of outcome as opposed to equality of opportunity. So, we're constantly focused on presenting quick fixes to these huge institutional problems, societal wide problems. Why isn't that equality of opportunity at the beginning stages central to everything? And so, if you boil that down to its component parts, then we're talking about education. And in the education sector, where are our successes and where are our failures in terms of ensuring that our young people are as best equipped as possible to deal with modern day environment. And actually, break it down, education is, and I'm not talking about higher education or further education necessarily, or elected further education, but compulsory education is not doing what it needs to do for our young people to train them in how to deal with a real world environment now.

When I started the youth forum at HE at the end of 2011, I wanted to take a cross-section of young people from Hackney and give them a sense of entitlement and privilege that they are never connected to, by themselves or by external factors. So, what we're looking at consistently is key indicators. What are the key indicators and who are these people that we're working with? So, are they black or are they white, are they male or are they female, are they high income or are they low income, you know, what level of opportunity do they have? And so, when you're talking about an area like Hackney and an organisation like Hackney Empire, you're talking about working-class, the deprived, the at-risk, the vulnerable, the gang members, young black men specifically. Whereas actually, if you walk across Hackney it doesn't take you long to realise that Hackney is much more diverse than the words that we use, the lexicon that we use to describe these key indicators.

So, to come up with the best process that was going to be most applicable and most accessible for young people, I needed to involve young people in that conversation. As opposed to come up with another template for them to slot into that suited me. Why doesn't the organisation – that has even some finances or some resources – become

the template that young people feel that they can mould. And so that youth forum, that's the embryo of all of our success. Success isn't traversal of young people into the arts and culture sector. Success is the transformation of how young people feel about themselves, their environments and their societies. That's success. So, whether they go on to become an accountant or a lawyer, even the unemployed, if they've changed their motivation, how they feel, how they think, if they feel that they've been empowered, that's still success. And so, our delineators of what that journey is and key progress indicators along that line have to change. You have to get these young people involved and let them be aware of what they're involved in, so total transparency ... And so, I devised this modular programme, which is the Creative Futures⁴ programme now, so that young people could have entire ownership over their journey.

There are reasons why we only do short-term programming and why we haven't just turned into another youth theatre or created another long-term youth academy. Because again then what you're doing is saying, 'right, we're going to work with this small subset of young people, we're going to create this really valuable and intensive programme, and the chances of creating successful alumni and really powerful success stories in a small group are really high'. But actually, that's available everywhere. And there's so many people that are doing that. Instead, what if we create this small modular programming where young people have multiple points of entrance, but they're also not committed overly. So that these young people who are in education, these young people who are young carers, these young people who have issues outside of Hackney Empire, have control over what they need to do away from us and what they need to do with us. And then we become a resource that they tap into. And as soon as they take that independent behavioural management step into saying, right, Hackney Empire's a resource, it's a utility for me, which can stretch me in these ways and develop me, but can also support me and back me up in these arenas, suddenly, weirdly, [as an institution] we've got much more control. Because then you're not worried about recruitment or feedback or worrying, okay we've done this group and now we have to recruit ... this is why so many organisations don't do modular programming, because as soon as you've finished 4 weeks or 6 weeks you're saying, shit, I have to recruit another 30 young people. Whereas for us, recruitment isn't [high] in our hierarchy of needs. Recruitment's all the way at the bottom. Messaging's all the way at the top to ensure that enough young people find out about us initially, but recruitment's nowhere near value and need and resonance.

JB: So your strategy emphasises the importance of process and individual agency and this opens their world view. Through that agency, you want them to understand what they're able to do, even if that's nothing to do with performing arts?

YC: I'm much more interested in creating creatives and helping shape creatives than artists. And, what's the difference? Well, in the theatrical sense you have creatives, off or on the stage, and what I'm talking about is actually creative ways of exploring what you have to offer a wider world. And we're extremely keen on young people exploring all of their options. So, we are actually big, big advocates of people, particularly people who want to go to drama school, of ensuring they've explored all of their options. Particularly when you're coming from this kind of background where the barrier to participation

generally can be surmised as finance. Ensuring that they're aware of what their spend is, their net spend for their life, and the debt that they're going to enter into when they leave, and weighing that against the expectation of what is a reasonable outcome of engagement with that kind of facility. Because if you go in there expecting to say that within 2 years I'm going to break, I'm going to be a star, and I'm going to be able to pay this all off, that's an unrealistic expectation.

So understanding how we weigh up with these vulnerable young people whose aspirational index is generally so low, weighing up not being dream killers, while ensuring that young people are as pragmatic and reasonable and empowered in reality and a sense of reality for what the industry can and can't do for them, it's hugely important. But, to get young people to that stage, this goes back to what we were talking about, you have to hook them. You have to let them know that this exists and that they can interact with us in their way, that we're consistently behaving in their best interests, then if you want them to engage with HMRC and learn about self-employment and tax, they'll do that, where they wouldn't have done that before because now they're empowered to make that decision. A massive part of what we do annually is understanding a tax form. If you're a musician, understanding what PRS is and royalties. And then getting people from agencies, like United and places like that, to talk about contracts. And then label deals from small indies to massive umbrella corporations.

The infrastructure around how emerging talent engages with an industry is missing, it's a missing link generally. And when you're talking about those who experience privilege from a young age, they are generally better equipped or have more resources behind them to at least, even if they make a mistake initially, to protect them and potentially finance them to ensure that they don't make the mistake a second time. But if you're talking about the communities that we feel should be more represented in these industries, you're talking about the communities that if they make the mistake once, they're fucked. They're done. Because you've built up this weight of expectation of what's going to happen when you sign, or when you film, or when you perform. When that doesn't match, when your agent isn't representing you in the way that you think that they should ... all of these things, but you don't understand how this structure works, then you're not equipped.

JB: So tell us more about your model?

YC: Hackney Empire has had a history of working with massively diverse audiences, and artists, and storytellers, writers, it's had a long eclectic history, but it hasn't been at the forefront of the media or the press or audiences' imaginations in terms of saying, Hackney Empire is synonymous with this particular type/genere of work so potentially more challenging to know how to engage with us as participants or audiences. I refused to create any kind of programming until we had a youth voice at a very nexus of where this creativity was coming from. So, we created the youth forum first of all. We started that in November of 2011, we had 5 members at the first meeting. By March 2012, we had over 50 young people who would attend weekly. And by the summer of 2013, we were one of the biggest youth committees in London. So, you're talking about less than 2 years. In an organisation that, as is well known, doesn't have the financial resilience of other organisations or the resources, and it was important I had the right business model to really sustain that kind of programming.

What we want to do is create business model templates for every single organisation to invest in their local area and their young people in this way. So, we go from questioning why other organisations across the sector aren't doing it, to accusing other organisations as to why they aren't investing in this way when the initial investment is so nominal. So, no, it hasn't existed for decades. We went from 5 to 50 to, next year we're projecting 5,000. In a programme that's entirely free that has reach across East London, a programme that doesn't monetise its participant base in any way. Young people don't pay for a single thing in terms of involvement. But neither do the schools or the youth organisations that book us to work with them.

We removed finance as a barrier to participation entirely to ensure that our offer is as egalitarian as possible. But that doesn't mean we've had to sacrifice a level of the artist. We've got the Royal Opera bed down in Hackney for 11 weeks. Not because we're best friends with the Royal Opera but what I hope they would agree with is that we create a really easy, accessible structure and system for them to access Hackney. Now we only deliver about 30% of the programme in house. Because I feel the same way about creative learning departments as I do about artistic directors. You shouldn't be the same voice over and over again. Not for companies, not for artistic companies, but for artistic venues and organisations in those venues.

If you have the same voice and the same ideas asserted on an area again and again and again, one, it's boring, it's dull, two, how are you diversifying the offer that these young people can offer, so that these young people can access, so that if I get one person accessing at 14 in year 1, I can ensure that in year 4 at 18, they've got as interesting and exciting an offer as possible. If it's me, it's pointless. So what we do is we deliver, in house, we deliver the youth forum, so that's young producers now, and we'll deliver a few programmes across the year including Artists Development Programme (ADP), and then for everything else we will pay to bring in the best possible deliverers and organisations and resources, and make them accessible to people across Hackney in the hopes that these young people and these communities engage with them separately to us. Failure is actually if this young person goes from 12 to 21 having only engaged at Hackney Empire, because then we haven't opened any doors for them or given them that sense of entitlement, ownership and privilege that these spaces and these people are accessible to them.

Notes

1. Interviewed at Hackney Empire 23 July 2019
2. London Borough of Hackney Policy and Insight 2019 – *A Profile of Hackney, its People and Place*
3. Trust for London <https://www.trustforlondon.org.uk/data/boroughs/hackney-poverty-and-inequality-indicators/>
4. Hackney Empire's Creative Futures programme is designed to nurture and provide support, fuelling artists and creative entrepreneurs and building their skills, confidence and understanding.

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Notes on contributor

Jessica Bowles is an academic with a background in professional practice as a theatre designer across the UK, including at Dukes Playhouse Lancaster, Young Vic, and the RSC and as a producer of large-scale festival experiences. At Royal Central, she wrote the BA (Hons) Theatre Practice Course, along the way introducing new undergraduate programs to Higher Education including the first Circus and Puppetry courses to be offered at degree level. In her role as Head of the Centre for Excellence in Theatre Training (2008–11) she led research into the factors contributing to the sustainability of graduate companies which in turn led to the development of the MA/MFA in Creative Producing, the course she now leads. Between 2010 and 2014, Jessica was on the Management Board of the Centre for Creative Collaboration (C4CC), a University of London initiative to bring together leading researchers from London's universities together with creative industry freelancers, small businesses, and students. In 2011 and 2015 she produced the educational component of the Prague Quadrennial, the world's largest festival of performance design and space. Her educational and research practice focuses on the materiality of performance and the collaborative and interdisciplinary nature of performance-making including work with the Bartlett School of Architecture UCL, ScanLab and SHUNT exploring 3D scanning and live performance. For over 20 years, Jessica has been active in the development of Puppetry and in 2014 was invited onto the Board of award-winning company Theatre-Rites, a field leader in the creation of experimental theatre for children.