

## “GIVE ME SPACE”

### Opening a Gap for Young People in Birmingham, UK

My name is Ceri Townsend. I have been a theatre designer with Big Brum from 1996-2016. During that time, I designed nine of the ten plays Big Brum commissioned from Edward Bond, and I've also designed two Bond productions for Kerekasztal in Budapest, and one for Unifaun Theatre in Valetta, Malta. I also directed and designed a co-production between InSite Drama and Kerekasztal, and I am also very privileged to work for Drama Rainbow in Beijing, illustrating children's books to accompany dramas and drama lessons co-created with Chris Cooper. However, I'm here today talking on behalf of The GAP Arts Project, one of the partners in the Facing the Gap International Drama Research Project.

In 2009, after running Big Brum Youth Theatre for nine years, we decided to re-found it as an independent theatre *company* called Theatre Ark, and began training the young members not only in performance and theatre arts, but in management, fundraising, budgeting, project planning, facilitating etc. I was increasingly concerned that the very powerful message being communicated to young people through the media and all forms of popular culture at that time was that they only needed to have faith, believe in themselves, follow their dreams and they could 'fly', they could 'touch the sky'. Well, no. I was sick of that lie. I wanted to help young people to live in the *real* world and to make theatre about the real world. So we needed to start to learn how the real world works and how to operate as a company in it, in order to have an audible and effective voice in the city.

That was seven years ago. Two of the original young members, a girl then aged 13 and a boy of 15, worked particularly hard at developing the work of the company, they developed excellent skills in drama, and later in drama facilitation and they embraced the Bondian methodology we've been exploring together at this conference. I am immensely proud to tell you they are still working with the company and are sitting here among you – Maria who is the Company Administrator and Arron, the Creative Producer. Between the three of us we run the company, an arts organisation run by and for young people. In 2014 we decided to rename the company after one of Bond's core concepts – The GAP. And so The GAP Arts Project was born.

I've been invited to talk today about our experience of making 'a gap' for young people in our city of Birmingham. Birmingham, as you may know, is the city with the highest proportion of young people of all cities in the whole of Europe. In fact according to a report produced by the Birmingham Community Safety Partnership in 2013, 46% of the population is under 30 yrs old. So according to the EU's own definition of this demographic, 46% of our city is made up of young people. So you would think that in a city like Birmingham, this would be reflected in a wealth of services and facilities and resources specifically for young people. But no. Youth services were cut to the bone after 2008 crisis. And there is no city centre space for young people, including any cultural or creative space. The GAP had no base to work from, and so our search for a home began.

Recently Maria did a little research into our accounts over the last few years and she calculated that about 45% of our annual income was spent on venue hire, in order to deliver our projects or perform our work publicly. I'm not talking about theatres like the Örkény Theatre here, with a full stage, and auditorium and lights and technicians, nor even studio theatres. I'm talking about an empty conference room here or a vacant rehearsal room there. And I'm not talking about several weeks hire for a full production process or even one session a week through the year: I'm talking about a few odd days here and a couple of half days there. We couldn't have afforded anything else.

There is a problem in our cities. And perhaps it's the same across Europe? Space is increasingly a big political issue. And the problem with young people of course, especially in a city where there are so many of them, is that they take up so much of it with their bodies!

Over thousands of years of the development of human civilisation, we have not as a species managed to overcome our territoriality. In fact the emphasis on division of space, the marking of boundaries and proliferation of borders, fences, walls is more prevalent and emotive than ever. Every scrap of land and square metre of space has been 'claimed' and bound by private property. What we call public spaces – squares, market places, high streets – are in fact private spaces. Our cities are designed in part by professionals whose expertise it is to calculate how to maximise the spend of their citizens. Just as supermarket layouts are designed to get customers to spend the maximum amount of money, so are high streets and public places. And vertical space is colonised by images and messages about consumer goods, escalating young people's confusion between the number and brand of consumer products you possess and your own self-worth. So-called public space is all about extracting your cash and keeping you moving at all costs. The problem is, young people don't have much money any more, and they don't want to keep moving: they want to stop, to congregate and just be. And why shouldn't they?

But public space, i.e. private space, like all private property, enjoys maximum protection under the law. So more expertise is put to use designing what's called 'defensive architecture' – studs along walls to prevent skateboarding and spikes to deter free-running; spikes in the pavements and dividers across benches make sitting or resting for long uncomfortable at best, and often impossible, a technique specifically impacting on the homeless; then there are the mosquito machines that send out high frequency signals inaudible to the ears of adults, but which are audible and can be excruciating for children and young people – used to disperse them from prime profit-making hotspots such as outside of major store fronts; and as has been referred to elsewhere in the conference, more surveillance cameras per head of population than anywhere in the world. Cities are designed to be hostile to young people. Young people are criminalised *by design*.

Unless young people are able to participate in the capitalist consumer narrative they are unwelcome in public spaces and forced underground. They occupy the forgotten

corners, the waste ground and backwaters of the city; they make their mark on the walls, and on buildings and under bridges - "I woz 'ere" – to assert their existence in the face of this hostility. And when the only other spaces open to them – home and school – are just as hostile, sometimes graffiti is just not an adequate enough outlet for their need to be noticed and some are driven to extreme behaviours. Last week, Ali Sonboly, a lonely, bullied, isolated 18 yr old – known in the media as the Munich Gunman – shot dead nine people, most of them fellow teenagers. I couldn't help but be struck by the bleakness of his choice of McDonald's, as the place in the world on which to make his desperate mark. That somehow struck me as one of the saddest details of this terrible tragedy.

I want to digress for a moment to share a positive antidote to this grim scenario, and take you to a much nicer place - North Korea. In fact, to the border between North and South Korea. The border between these two countries is approximately 250km long. Two fences, 4km apart, have created a corridor of no-man's land that has been totally inaccessible by human beings for about 50 years. It's called the KDZ – the Korean Demilitarised Zone. Over these years, this strip of untouched land has gradually evolved into an 'involuntary park', one of the most well-preserved, bio-diverse areas of temperate habitat in the world. Several endangered animal and plant species now exist among the heavily fortified fences, landmines and listening posts. These include the extremely rare red-crowned crane (a staple of Asian art), and the white-naped crane. Ecologists have identified some 2,900 plant species, 70 types of mammals and 320 kinds of birds within the narrow buffer zone. And there is evidence that the extremely rare Siberian tiger, the Amur leopard and the Asiatic black bear may also be living in this extraordinary gap.

Marvelling at this phenomenon back in Birmingham, I realised that in effect we were looking for our own demilitarised zone, a small crack that we could get a foothold in to start to force open a gap, so we could start to attract all kinds of local young wildlife, where they could graze, and settle and thrive.

So the search was on. We found a variety of solutions, none of them long term or sustainable – for example, an empty office block that, by virtue of our temporary presence as a charity, saved the landlord thousands of pounds of rates relief until he could find a paying tenant. We had a squatters' existence, unable to move our furniture and equipment in, unable to put anything on the walls, and with only 7 days' notice to leave unable to hold any public events.

In early 2015 we found a more promising space in an old factory that was being used as a shared work space. It was a little out of the city centre but it had everything else we needed, so we were prepared to compromise. But on the day before we were due to move in an independent inspector deemed the building unfit for purpose.

Frustrated, we managed to secure a small fund to open The GAP in the Market – a project whereby we occupied a small market stall in Birmingham Indoor Markets. We set it up as a mini arts centre, and held a two-week festival of arts, creativity and play.

We had craft workshops, music performances, art sessions, creative technology, poetry, play readings – even theatre. The space was extremely small but we were able to experiment with making it adaptable. Design was crucial and we were encouraged by its versatility and what you can achieve even in a tiny space.

It was a brilliant experience but the two weeks soon ended and we went back to working in coffee shops and borrowed corners. But our experience of The GAP in the Market helped us to see that we needed a space that not only served our physical purpose but also reflected our values. So we created a set of criteria in order to aid the process. Firstly – it would need to be inclusive and accessible to all young people so we needed a city centre venue so that it was only one bus journey for everyone. Secondly, it had to be affordable. Thirdly it would need to be flexible and adaptable, because we wanted a theatre but also a meeting room, a workshop space and a gallery, and a relaxing environment for social events.

Six months later we came across a building in the city centre with a neglected top floor space that seemed to have the potential to foot the bill. We signed a tenancy contract and put together a group of young people to co-design a space that was conducive to creativity. On 6<sup>th</sup> May we opened THE GAP.

The GAP is a large, two room space with natural light, and big windows with a great view over south Birmingham. We have flexible staging for performance work, lots of gallery wall space, and a workshop room which doubles as a pop-up cinema. We have individual work spaces and social space for relaxing. We have a team of young programmers, who have begun to programme and deliver regular sessions according to their interests, such as life drawing, craft workshops and film nights. We held our FTG rehearsals there and Arron plans to start a youth theatre group for south Asian boys in September. We had Big Brum perform Macbeth to home educated children last week, and have more performances and TIE programmes scheduled. We've had a full programme of exhibitions and there is a lot of demand for wall space from local young artists. We also plan STEM and tech activities for younger children, and one young man has started his own Minecraft Café Club there. And next week we begin weekly creativity sessions for young refugees.

One activity we didn't expect to be running is our Civil Courage Workshops. Another fact about Birmingham – it has a highly multicultural population: more than 238,000 of Birmingham's one million population were born outside of the UK – that's almost 1 in 4. School children come from 87 different ethnic groups, and speak 108 different languages. This is the pride of the city. However, since Britain voted to leave the EU there has been a spike in open hate crime and the city is divided. So I took an idea to Chris and he and I began a series of workshops at The GAP that use drama techniques to prepare participants for speaking out against hate crimes if/when they witness them, for trying out what to say, how to react, how to support victims and deter perpetrators. It's not the way we would normally want to use Drama, but it's important work that we can contribute to defend our community. And the point here is, that having our own

space made that possible, and meant that we were able to respond quickly and effectively to what was happening around us.

The GAP is now an independently run, youth-led space, and the only arts space dedicated to young people's creativity in the whole of Birmingham, the UK's second city. And we've discovered that space begets space: we not only have the physical space but space in time, space to think, space to develop and grow. We have never been so productive, never so available to support young people's projects, so accessible. We open 6 days a week. We operate a really cheap membership scheme. And it's open to everyone.

Of course nothing is that simple or straightforward and there are still problems to solve: there is no running water and we have to operate a slop bucket system. Moreover, there is no heating whatsoever and it is a big space to heat. Come the autumn months we will get extremely cold, and in winter it will simply be unworkable without heating. So we've started a crowdfunding campaign to raise £10,000 to keep the space open all year round by installing infra-red panels and a kitchen. I have a short crowd funder film I'd like to show you, so you can see The GAP, hear Arron and Maria explain the campaign and get a sense of some of the things we're doing there. I would like to take this opportunity to publicly thank every individual and company here that has so very kindly donated to our campaign – we have reached £6000 because of you. As artists we are not an affluent community, so we really do appreciate and thank you for every single pound and penny you have donated.

FILM: <https://igg.me/at/thegap>

One last thing I'd like to share with you. One evening last week, Saturday 23 July, 30 young people from Hungary, United Kingdom, Malta and China sat together on the Liberty Bridge here in Budapest. They chose to sit right in the middle, high above the Danube, a natural boundary which was once a border dividing Buda from Pest. I asked them the next morning how they'd felt sitting there and among many things they said they felt "Free", "Connected", "Powerful", and "Other worldly". I asked them how it had made them feel about the *world* and they said it made them feel "that the world is not lost", that "things *are* possible", that they felt "the need of other people in this world" but also "overwhelmingly hopeful about life". My last question was how did it make you feel about *yourself*? Their answers included: "I have a *need* for meaningful connection and reflection", "I need to pause and take life in more often and appreciate it", "The freedom that I felt last night gives me an incredible amount of hope for me to live my life" and that "Discussing and listening to someone else's hopes and dreams makes me feel alive".

With just a little space - to be together, to talk, to listen, to feel, to take the time, to reflect, consider others, feel hopeful, powerful, connected and free – that 'other world', the world of our hopes and aspirations, begins to emerge in the gap that is imagination. Only then can we start to realise it.