



## **Working for Health**

*Opera and health*

### **Presenter**

One recent arts project that had an outcome visible for all to see. It involved a group of homeless people putting on an opera. This is part of a programme first broadcast in March 2000 on Radio 4.

### **Project worker**

Building wings here, look like coat hangers that have been unwound and usually we're finding that two together will span a cross a child's arm. And there'll be wings from coat hangers.

### **Matthew Peacock**

I think it's a case we don't want to come along and be blind to people. It's listen 'hey we can do things, we are people, we're not just somebody you can pass by'.

### **Homeless man 1**

The majority of people you know they go to work in the morning, they go home in the evening, and they know absolutely nothing about homeless people.

### **Matthew Peacock**

I very much want you know to slap the public in the face. These people are just the same as you and I. It's very very easy to become homeless, you just have to have a few bits of bad luck.

### **R4 Presenter**

It's a long way from cutting up a piece of MDF in a night shelter for homeless people to the Royal Opera House. But that's the journey Matthew Peacock is making with a group of men who live in the shelter. By day, Matthew is assistant editor of 'Opera Now' magazine. In the evening he works at The Passage night shelter, just a stone's throw away from the Houses of Parliament in London. So for him a project which brings together opera and homeless people doesn't seem so unusual. The choice of opera was a natural one too. Several years ago, Matthew adapted the children's book 'The Little Prince' into an opera. Because it's a story about displacement and has a little prince who leaves his asteroid home and wanders from planet to planet. It seemed to be raising the same issues as the project itself.

### **Matthew Peacock**

I wrote it a few years ago before I was involved in homelessness, but when I decided to use it, I wanted something new, and I wanted something for children as well, to let children know about homelessness as they have far fewer preconceptions about things like this.

### **Homeless man 2**

I've only actually been in the shelter since the Tuesday before Christmas. Matthew somehow talked me into giving this little lot a go, and I decided it was something worth doing so I've come along ever since.

### **Matthew**

Everybody who walks past homeless people in the street every day just about, and most people think maybe they don't have anything to give society. And this is one to prove that they are just as valid members of society as another group.

### **R4 presenter**

Persuading the Royal Opera House to give up their Linbury Theatre for the afternoon was Matthew Peacock's work as well. The performance passes without a hitch and the proud production team and packed auditorium look on as coat hangers, masking tape and MDF are transformed into simple and effective costumes and sets. The opera is performed by children from a school close to the night shelter and a bunch of professional singers and musicians. And as the final notes of music are played, the proudest people in the house are the people from The Passage night shelter, identified in the programme by their initials only.

### **Homeless man 2**

Somebody wrote an article, I think it was Classic News, it was very kind of them to give us some advance publicity. They mention something about a Tory politician having referred to the homeless as 'the people who you step over on the way out of the opera'. I think it was another example of misquoting out of context, but either way, I'd like to have seen that guy down here front and centre.

### **Homeless man 1**

We're not just bums on the street begging for money and selling the Big Issue or whatever, we are actually people who can do things, and hopefully it's sent a message to the people out there that we are the guys, we've done it, we can do it again.

### **Homeless man 2**

Standing up on stage, taking a bow, it felt really positive, welcoming. It was near enough a full house, people staring at you, yes I really enjoyed it, really nice. Given a chance, you can accomplish things like anyone else. That's all we're asking. A chance to show what we can do.

### **Presenter**

In 1999 the Health Education Authority commissioned a wide scale report into arts projects and their links with health. Jane Meyrick was the Research Manager involved.

### **Jane**

In very innovative and newer areas like art for health for example, there are no published studies there is no evaluation done, and so if we wanted to kind of er build up some evidence of whether it works or not what we had to do was look at practice what people were doing, and what people judged to be successful. It wasn't just saying here's an art project, X many people stopped smoking because of it, it was trying to backtrack that to what is it about arts projects that makes people healthy. I think one of the most surprising outcomes of the review, was the way it highlighted the important role of I think what we called in it in the review itself, social entrepreneurs, the kind of passionate individual who often will start projects because they want to, and they think it's a good idea. And that is almost the worst thing for funders, to kind of count in you know an individual is something very uncontrollable and not very predictable, and so it's very difficult to see that to see that effective and good practice maybe supporting a passionate individual rather than trying to set down prescriptive steps that you must take. There was some key findings about the quality of the artwork produced, that arts projects that do art for the sake of it, for the sake of just the activity without looking at the quality of the product at the end or the artwork at the end, were failing the people that were the they were working with because there was such a sense of accomplishment and pride if something was good, and that that also gave life to the project as it was displayed and taken on tours and people continued to say oh wow that's fantastic and so people got you know continued benefit from a good piece of artwork. The facilitator wasn't there to always say yes what you're doing is right and just be supportive they were also there to say 'that's not good enough you need to do it like this' so they could be quite directive. I think an issue that came out of our research was a need for sustainability. That doesn't mean a project is always the same for ten years, it means sustainable work so the project might be w in one form for three years, re-invent itself the work continuing in another line of project work, but the work itself continuing. So this was quite a difficult issue to to understand so sustainability and funding meant short term funding for example three year funding grants, but with the idea that the work would continue so that projects re-invented themselves for example every three years so were responsive to the group they're working with, but were able to maintain the work and keep going. But if they stop if they just suddenly stopped then they're hugely damaging to the

people who've been involved in it. Interacting with your community, self esteem friendship networks, all of which - independently of the artwork - has been proven to contribute to health, but that arts somehow gets people to do those things in a way that other projects don't. So there's something about artwork in itself that facilitates friendship networks that facilitates self esteem very very well. I don't think that any particular art form is somehow better at creating emotional literacy or self empowerment or whatever you want to call it but I think what is important to remember is that you cannot be prescriptive about arts projects, and that the art work or the art form will grow organically from the people that are there and what they want to do. And that's the key thing, and I think that's the key across not just art projects but any kind of community development work, that it is not prescribed you do not do A B and C. You let things grow, organically, which is the hardest thing for funders to take account of because it means giving over power, letting go. But that is that is always the way it works best.

### **Francois**

Different art forms do have different characteristics , for instance theatre tends to encourage people to have more self confidence in speaking out and working with others, can be beneficial in terms of human physical contact and things of that sort and co-operative working. But equally there are people for whom those either are not a problem, or they're such a problem that that the last thing they're going to do is theatre anyway.