

PUSH: Executive Summary

The PUSH Project

PUSH was a 2-year Creative Europe funded project involving five partners from Scotland, Belgium, Ireland, Norway and Denmark to 'push' and develop thinking, ideas and the art-forms within theatre and dance for children and young people in Europe. It focussed on the three themes of gender and sexual identity, (over)protection and migration. It entailed:

- 3 artistic Labs, one each in Scotland, Belgium and Ireland attended by 41 artists from the 5 partner countries. Each Lab was connected to a local school or other group of children/young people as well as a team of artistic leaders and non-arts professionals
- 3 PUSH two-day events at each Lab for sector peers and the general public
- 5 festival visits for 58 artists from across the 5 partner countries (international delegations were sent to each)
- 5 PUSH two-day public presentations at the 5 partner festivals
- production of a series of professional films including a project trailer and documentary film

An independent evaluation of the PUSH project was commissioned which ran concurrently with the project, the findings from which are presented here. The evaluation methodology included baseline surveys and follow-up interviews for all Labs, surveys after each of the festival visits and ongoing telephone interviews/observational research as the project progressed. All who were involved in PUSH provided individual input to the evaluation.

The PUSH Partners

PUSH centred on the collective thinking of:

Imaginate (Scotland)

The national organisation in Scotland which promotes, develops and celebrates theatre and dance for children and young people and produces the Edinburgh International Children's Festival.

Aaben Dans (Denmark)

Which tours extensively both nationally and internationally and hosts international residencies for up-and-coming dance artists, as well as curating SWOP, an international dance festival for the young audiences.

Cultuurcentrum Hasselt (Belgium)

A centre that presents a high-quality program of theatre, dance, classical and contemporary music for all audiences and organises Krokusfestival, the annual international arts festival for young audiences.

Scenekunstbruket (Norway)

The Norwegian Network for Performing arts and the largest distributor of performing arts for a young audience in Norway. It produces Showbox, an annual festival for performing arts for a young audience.

The Ark (Ireland)

A dedicated cultural centre for children that works in partnership with others as artistic collaborators, including a partnership with the Dublin Theatre Festival.

The partners already had an established relationship built up through long term collaboration and this was strengthened by PUSH.



Main Findings

Planning and Motivations

Planning for the Labs and festivals ran smoothly, with excellent partnership working reported from all host partners, artists and Lead artists.

Each of the partners had clear expectations of what they wanted to achieve and this included increasing and strengthening their professional networks, raising their local and international profiles as organisations (especially the smaller partners), as well as the opportunity to be a part of a cross-border project.

The project attracted a wide range of artists from different personal and professional backgrounds and this provided opportunities for most to learn about new ways of working, different art-forms as well as to learn more about the cultural contexts in which participants were working in their home countries.

The main motivations for artists taking part included building on previous work with children and young people or developing work in one of the three PUSH theme areas. The opportunity to work with a diverse group of other artists was also cited as a key motivator for artists taking part.

“It [PUSH] combines everything that interests me into one project. Art, theatre, children, the topic of migration, collaborating with other artists, exchanging knowledge and experience with people with similar interests.”

Diversity and Participation

Across the Labs and festivals, artists took part from a range of different genders, ages, ethnic origins and sexual identities.

For more than half of the artists who took part in PUSH, it was their first experience of taking part in an International Residency or Lab. For those who already had international experience, many commented that the experience was still unique in that it focussed on artist development and was not a ‘usual’ residency. The uniqueness of the opportunity and a chance to take part in a European project were seen as strengths of PUSH.

Partners reported that PUSH had provided an excellent platform locally and internationally for the artists working in their countries.

The Lab Experiences

Those who participated in the Labs expressed that their thinking in relation to the three themes had been significantly enhanced, with exposure to a broad range of new ideas, biases and heightened awareness of the challenges still to be overcome in delivering work around gender and sexual identity, (over) protection and migration for young audiences.

The quality and depth of materials discussed and the evidence presented by speakers across the Labs were seen as a real strength of the project, allowing artists to explore them on a deep level and develop theoretical as well as a practical understanding of the issues at hand.

Artists spoke positively about the learning and self-development opportunities that had been presented by Labs and felt that the project had enabled powerful personal journeys to take place. Lead artists had played a key role in providing safe spaces to allow participants to work freely and confidently and the Lead artists were also praised more generally for the support and encouragement that they offered, as well as their willingness to openly share their own expertise.

“I can honestly say that it has affected everything that I think about in my work. When I’m watching things, my sensitivity to gender stereotypes and lack of diversity is heightened massively. And, it’s probably given me permission to be a bit braver in what I do.”

Many new relationships were established between participating artists, as well as between artists and the host partners and many of these had started to manifest in the development of new artistic collaborations or outputs within the lifetime of the project. Many other new pieces of work were in development or were being planned by participating artists, either alone or with others.

Artists and partners both expressed that they had been able to share their PUSH experiences with colleagues and their wider professional and personal networks, both during the planning and execution of the Labs and afterwards, meaning that learning from the project was shared much wider than the immediate group who took part.

All of the Labs were successful at engaging with local children or young people to allow artists to test new ideas and explore how work in these areas might be understood and received from the young audience perspective. Being able to work with children and young people directly during the Labs was seen as another real strength of the project.

There was a clear understanding that the artists were not under pressure to produce work on completion of the Labs, and this was welcomed, i.e. artistic development for its own purpose.

The Festival Experiences

Everyone who attended one of the festivals said that they had made new contacts, broadened their networks or consolidated existing professional relationships as a result. The festivals also provided a valuable opportunity for artists from different PUSH strands to come together and share their learning.

Some of those who attended the festivals had not been to an international festival to see work for young audiences before. This was especially true for those attending the Edinburgh International Children’s Festival.

Across the five festivals, almost all said that they had learnt something new about PUSH that they did not know before attending. More generally, artists commented that the festivals had:

- allowed them to meet fellow PUSH participants and learn about the different experiences across the Labs and festivals, ‘connecting strands’
- reinforced the importance of including children and young people in making work

- provided opportunities to tell others about plans and projects they would like to be involved in
- presented opportunities to meet programmers and/ producers or representatives from arts organisations, providing opportunities to consider future collaborations
- made them think more about touring and presenting work internationally

All had reflected more on the PUSH themes after attending the festivals and all were keen to use their festival experiences to feed into their future work.

“I met some people that I could potentially collaborate with and it is also good to meet producers from around the world as this is very helpful for a freelance artist.”

Challenges and Lessons Learned

The formative nature of the evaluation meant that feedback data were collected from artists and partners as the project progressed, which was used to respond to emerging challenges and improve the project as it went along. Most of the learning was around planning for the Labs, handling how artists and partners would find appropriate time and space to share their experiences, and enabling even wider participation.

There were also some disappointments along the way, which were less easily resolved, but these related mostly to the level of community engagement achieved, including media engagement with the project. Getting people in both the arts and non-arts community and beyond to engage with these themes and feel more confident programming and watching work around these themes that is designed for young audiences perhaps was the biggest barrier still to be addressed on conclusion of the project (although it was recognised that this is something that no single project could ever hope to achieve in isolation).

Summary of Evidence for Meeting the Project Objectives

<p>To initiate new ideas for theatre and dance for young audiences - exploring topics that are currently underrepresented and require addressing; topics that can be taboo and/or experimental</p>	<p>All participating artists reported learning something new, learning from others and sharing their experiences, direct and vicarious, around the three themes</p> <p>Several new pieces focussed on these themes have been developed or are in development as a result</p>
<p>To create positive and open spaces to pilot new ideas/experiments with audiences</p>	<p>Artists praised the partners and lead artists for creating safe spaces in which everyone felt supported to pilot new ideas</p> <p>Children, parents/carers and teachers all engaged with the project, including viewing work/taking part in interventions and gave feedback that inspired new thinking among artists for how to engage multiple diverse audiences in the future</p>
<p>To offer high quality training and peer-to-peer learning for European artists and practitioners based in Scotland (UK), Belgium, Ireland, Denmark and Norway</p>	<p>Participation of artists from all of the partner countries was consistent across the project, with artists coming from a broad range disciplines and from nations within Europe and beyond</p> <p>Lead artists received praise for the way in which Labs were facilitated and for sharing their expertise, which inspired many</p> <p>Guest lectures from specialists in the field were attended, and artists were exposed to a broad range of evidence-based research and practice, as well as benefitting from the shared lived experiences of peers</p>
<p>To create a visible network of artists, peers, organisations and festivals across the EU</p>	<p>Partners promoted participating artists within the partner organisations and ensured their connection with the network was not a one-off experience - many artists took part in multiple PUSH strands</p> <p>Spontaneous networking events were facilitated to strengthen and consolidate relationships</p> <p>Online resources were developed to facilitate public accessibility to the project, the artists and the project outcomes</p>
<p>To enhance the international career potential for artists through opportunities to find new collaborators and new markets for their productions</p>	<p>Festival and Lab attendees all reported making new contacts, extending networks and strengthening ties internationally</p> <p>A number of new collaborations emerged, with several collaborate pieces already underway, including some sponsored/supported by the partner organisations</p>
<p>To build stronger and more diverse partnerships, using the PUSH opportunities to build connections in parts of the EU where our connections are not yet as strong</p>	<p>A total of 41 artists from 20 different nationalities took part based in five European countries. All festivals included international delegations</p> <p>Partners have already secured funding to continue to work together on PUSH+ and involve a new partner from Thailand</p>

The PUSH Legacy

All partners said that the project had exceeded their expectations and had been an excellent learning opportunity. The content of the Labs and festivals had gone to plan, and the range of artists who had engaged was even more diverse than anticipated. Praise was given to the Lead Partner for the strength of leadership, management and enthusiasm dedicated to the project throughout.

Artists also expressed hopes that the industry would learn from PUSH and that it would provide a starting point for future conversations around these themes and programming work in these areas. Others expressed a desire for the project to be realised in the making of new work and several artists were already delivering or planning new PUSH inspired pieces as the time that the project reached its end.

Towards the end of the PUSH project, funding was secured for PUSH+, a three-year international project which seeks to stimulate European dialogue and initiate new artistic ideas and performances around the topics of Home, Failure and Different Bodies. This will build directly on PUSH.

Conclusions

The project was successful at engaging artists, partners and, to a lesser extent, wider communities in the importance of tackling challenging themes in work for children and young audiences. The project benefited those who took part both professionally and personally, and all participants were invested in the project from start to finish. Valuable lessons were learned which can be used to 'PUSH' further creative thinking and exchange of knowledge, experience and skills, not only among the PUSH project participants, but to others in the artistic community and beyond.

