

NDB1 - Learning from Lockdown

As with the rest of the arts industry, companies, buildings and individuals, the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic created a number of challenges for Next Door But One and brought with it an enforced period of learning, reflection and adaptation.

Company Overview

We are a small-scale theatre company (and proud of it) creating performances and delivering workshops with and for community groups across Yorkshire. We are built on a committed company of freelancers and rely on project funding to continue our work. More can be found at www.nextdoorbutone.co.uk

Learning from Lockdown

Between March-September 2020 we migrated the delivery of 5 projects online, undergoing creative processes through digital platforms, engaging with company members, participants and audiences remotely, whilst also factoring in the effects of a global pandemic.

From this, there are **5 key areas of learning** that we are ensuring we take forward into our future work.

1. Clear Communication of Company Ethos

We have always strived to make working with NDB1 as supportive and accessible to all those we engage. This has always included creating rehearsal schedules in negotiation with the whole company and inquiring into access needs prior to appointment, among other considerations. Overall, we aim to be as flexible as possible. During lockdown, where many of our company members had heightened caring responsibilities, limited space to engage in their creative practice and personal wellbeing impacted by the various concerns and uncertainties brought on by COVID-19, we thought it was even more important to stress our supportive company ethos.

At the beginning of our online R&D of [The Firework Maker-Daughter](#) in which we engaged 8 artists for 4 weeks during lockdown, two specific actions supported the full company:

- **A collaborative rehearsal schedule** - We created the rehearsal schedule 4 weeks in advance of our readthrough, enquiring into the best days and times for the whole company as well as the lengths of rehearsal (we gave the option of full days, half days and two hour sessions). Based on every member of the company's availability (enabling them to factor in their home-life, caring responsibilities, other commitments and personal wellbeing) the schedule was drafted then signed off by each member. We also factored in 15-30 minutes where our 'Zoom Studio' would be open for company members to meet more socially before each rehearsal, or to ask questions to, or inform our Artistic Director and Producer of certain things. We also kept the rehearsal schedule in review, enabling individual members to join later or leave early for childcare reasons, appointments and health reasons.
- **Explicit Statement of Company Values** - Understandably there was a lot going on in the lives for each company member due to COVID-19. Working from home whilst factoring in caring for children and family members, being creative whilst having significant financial worries, having limited space and trying to support one's own wellbeing (during a global pandemic) is no small feat. Because of this, at the beginning of the process, our Artistic Director and Producer had an open conversation with the full company about the expectations of each other during this time. Particular stresses were given to conversations about caring responsibilities, support around working digitally, and the space needed to talk about current emotional strains. Our Artistic Director and Producer openly welcomed these conversations. Based on this, we are now developing a **Statement of Support**, which acts as a covering letter for all agreements we will send in the future, so individuals are aware of our company values and the conversations that are encouraged. We have also become a **Charter Partner of PiPA** (Parents and Carers in Performing Arts) as 55% of our current team have caring responsibilities.

This approach was greatly appreciated by the full company, with individuals reporting that hearing such a clear communication of the supportive company ethos meant that they felt they could confidently bring up aspects that they needed to in order to contribute their fullest, whilst not feeling judged for doing so. Overall it meant that during an incredibly difficult time, our full company felt supported to continue to engage in the area they are skilled and experienced in. Both of these aspects, we will continue as part of our practice post-COVID.

2. Harness the Benefits of Digital Platforms and Remote Access

The steep learning curve of migrating arts engagement online is one that many will have experienced. Whilst throughout lockdown there was a general consensus that many creatives missed working in-person and craved to be back in the studio, there are a number of learning points which we will be working into the future practices of NDB1.

- **Flexible working benefited the company and individuals** - The cost of a Zoom subscription was significantly less than the hire of a studio and the ability to work from home for creatives and actors meant that additional costs which may have been incurred through childcare and travel were reduced. Working remotely also had a positive impact on people's individual schedules and time management, removing any commuting times. This could have a significant positive impact on an individual's access to work in the future.

We will be exploring how any future meetings, read-throughs, production meetings and even some rehearsals can occur digitally.

3. Value Freelancers

At the best of times, freelancers in the arts can often experience feelings of loneliness and a lack of belonging or a need for a supportive network. This feeling for many of our company was amplified by the COVID-19 measures.

- In response to this, we had **Project-Exit Interviews**, which gave each company member an opportunity to feedback the positive and negative aspects of the project as well as openly discussing what opportunities individual freelancers would like from the company. There are a number of actions which have come from this, but a key outcome is that we are establishing an **Ensemble Mentoring Scheme**, which will facilitate a regular opportunity for freelancers to discuss their current work, ideas and projects and receive input from the rest of the company. We have already hosted a **funding surgery** workshop for freelancers to fund their own projects and held a number of 1:1 mentoring sessions to support this process further.

4. Power in Partnerships

From lockdown in March 2020 to July 2020, NDB1 were successfully awarded 4 grants to continue our work during lockdown. 2 grants were emergency response funding to cover losses incurred through COVID-19, and the other 2 were to create new work with our partners in relation to engagement that they needed from us for their members/participants. We are incredibly lucky that nearly all of our work is delivered in partnership with other companies and community groups. These really strong relationships that we have developed, meant that our COVID specific projects were informed, strengthened and made relevant by our partners. As a theatre company our work spans youth, learning disabilities, mental health, young carers, LGBTQ+ youth, and bereavement through our partnerships. What the pandemic has illustrated is that being able to create **multi-sector partnerships** lessens risk, increases relevance and adaptability. We now value this collaborative approach, which incorporates different insights to achieve a shared goal, even more than we did before COVID.

5. Professional Development can Benefit the Company and Individuals

Often Professional Development opportunities can be seen as an 'add-on' or 'bonus', separate from the main focus of a company. However, from our work during lockdown, we found ways of incorporating this provision within the rehearsals, to equally upskill the company but to improve the quality of the final product.

- During the development of *The Firework-Maker's Daughter* the full company learned Makaton, had an opportunity to be presented with research and be facilitated through a process of performing for screen

(particularly across Zoom). This was a valuable use of time, as all of those newly developed skills could be directly incorporated into the final product, but also means that as an ensemble of creatives there is a new collective skillset which will benefit future work of NDB1.

Moving into 2021, we will be applying all of this learning into our Artistic Programme -- [Building Back Creative People and Places](#).