

Transparency

Theatre Royal Stratford East ran Open Stage,
a participatory community
engagement programme
that was about giving up
programming power to the audience
for a six month period.

It unexpectedly evolved
into a volunteer programme
and it turned out
that those volunteer participants
developed a very close relationship
with the organisation.

Kerry, can you tell us a bit more
about how that came about?

We did a lot of qualitative
and quantitative research.

And one of the earlier things
that we did,
we discovered was our audience
the largest percentage wanted to have
further engagement with us,
wanted to do more than just answer questions.

They wanted to get further inside the organisation
and that's where the volunteer thing
came on board and then, what we were also able to do,
was very quickly realise that there were

a pool of people who wanted to constantly talk to us.

So a whole volunteer scheme was set up

and people who have registered interest,

and that kind of went into a pyramid

where the more you engaged with us

the more we engaged with you.

And then.. this wasn't difficult,

but I can imagine this might have been

perceived as remarkable to other people.

Our volunteers, those who wanted to come in,

always came into the building

and they were always hanging out.

And sometimes it was structured,

on a Tuesday night there would be a session

on what marketing does,

or what finance do, or meet this author,

or this is what Kerry does.

We would have those sessions

where they were fact finding sessions

for the community to learn about us and learn what we do.

But they would dogmatically champion the volunteers.

They were at lots of meetings.

I would have volunteers in a programming meeting

that I would have, and I would have no problem with that

and volunteers were sitting in the rehearsal process

and there would be no problem with that.

And I think because our history,

and the kind of organisation we are,
we weren't precious about any of that,
but also I remember having a full staff meeting
and there were eight volunteers there.
So the volunteers kind of became another
department within the organisation.
And I suppose for some people
that would be quite difficult,
to have people who aren't employed
by an organisation in a staff meeting,
who have no legal or qualified ownership of the organisation
but I think we're the kind of organisation
that, in principle, understands that we like being open
that's part of our DNA,
so that wouldn't be a problem, having those people there.

Did that feel threatening to any of your staff?

I genuinely don't think it did, no.

I also think, you know, the fact that our ushers
would constantly live in the building,
our young people constantly living
in the building, the regulars in the bar
are always here, our audiences, we know
some of them really well...
all those are things that have happened before Open Stage
so we sort of just like having more
the family extended slightly larger.