

## Presentation by Ali Williams at Elemental WM on Tuesday 19<sup>th</sup> May 2009

### Taking risks (successfully) (1)

Some quotes:

#### **Arthur Koestler: Quotes about Risk**

*If the creator had a purpose in equipping us with a neck, he surely meant us to stick it out*

#### **Will Rogers: Quotes on Risk**

*Even if you are on the right track, you will get run over if you just sit there.*

#### **Vaclav Havel: Quotations on Risk**

*Vision is not enough, it must be combined with venture. It is not enough to stare up the steps, we must step up the stairs.*

#### **William Ernest Hocking: Quotations on Risk**

*We cannot swing up on a rope that is attached only to our own belt.*

#### **Maxwell Maltz: Quote: Risk**

*Often the difference between a successful person and a failure is not one has better abilities or ideas, but the courage that one has to bet on one's ideas, to take a calculated risk - and to act.*

Intro

NoFit State circus is 23 years old this year. It was started by a group of students with a common interest in juggling, getting stoned, and avoiding **having to get grown up jobs when we graduated.**

Video of 20 years in 20 mins

So as you can see when we started we were not very good! But the important thing was we believed we could be, and as we had never seen contemporary circus we had no reference as to just how truly awful our first shows were! Fortunately neither did our public who appeared to enjoy our work.

In the late eighties we managed to see some companies like Ra Ra Zoo, Mummerandada and Circus Oz and began to have a vision of what new circus could be like!

By 1990, by living off a government training scheme called enterprise allowance that paid us £40 a week to run our own business and by saving everything we earned we had bought our first little big top which we toured in for five years, performing across the UK for local authorities and festivals.  
Slide: Blue tent

You can find further information and more discussion at  
[www.elementalexchange.org.uk](http://www.elementalexchange.org.uk)

Our motto was if we can't get bigger and better each year then we will give up and go and get normal jobs.

NoFit State is now a registered charity with an annual turnover of 1.2 million last year. The title of this section is Taking Risks (successfully) which is good because that means its not about taking risks (without having a clue what you're doing and dealing with dire if not catastrophic consequences . We have quite a lot of experience of that too).

So I'm going to focus on the story of our production of Immortal, which toured internationally for two years with a touring company of 40 with no public subsidy.

This video was made in 1998.

## End of 'now.here' vid

That was an excerpt from Now.here, the second in a trilogy of large scale participatory performance projects which we produced between 1997 and 2001. The trilogy was called 'Stepping Stones' (to the Millennium) so you can already see that things took a bit longer than anticipated.

Actually, the story starts before that in 1995.

Slide: 1995

Slide: Autogeddon image / poster / something

We applied for funding for a new show Autogeddon, didn't get it, decided to do it anyway.

Autogeddon, from the epic poem by Heathcote Williams, took place in a large industrial warehouse and was our first large scale mixed media promenade show. Involved our own community circus group, Splott State Circus, and other community performance groups, working with professionals and was the beginning of our relationship with director Firenza Guidi who had just finished the directors course at Welsh College of music and Drama

Slide: 1997

Slide: Images from Prophecy and Now.here

Prophecy, Now.here and Immortal (now called zero) were large scale participatory performance projects. The first two took place in 18,000 sq ft industrial warehouses and involved 250 community members working alongside 50 professional artists for a 10 week period to devise and perform a full length promenade mixed media show. (bit more stuff about these) Immortal zero took place in the silver space ship tent.

The Stepping Stones trilogy was funded by Arts for All (A4E in England). This was the first time that projects of this type and scale could be properly resourced and supported by professional production values.

It was possible to take enormous creative risks because the aims and context of the projects were so different to those for a commercial touring show. The sheer scale and complexity of collaborating with so many diverse people and integrating their ideas within a coherent theatrical framework meant that we were constantly firing on all cylinders and the idea of creative or artistic risk was simply not an issue. The first year was chaos, the second year was orchestrated chaos and by the third project, we had a company of 150 people most of whom had been involved in the previous years and shared an understanding, a vision and a confidence in what we were trying to achieve. We were hugely excited by the possibilities of touring this kind of multi sensory surround sound circus theatre

The Stepping Stones project were critical to the development of Immortal

- An extended period of action research and creative risk taking which actively involved a wide range of stakeholders as creative collaborators
- The creation of a new language of circus theatre performance which included the physical environment / context as integral to the audiences' experience
- The relationship with participants, performers and collaborating artists: many of the ImMortal touring company were involved in the original Stepping Stones trilogy as community members, trainees or audience and therefore have a deep understanding and ownership of both the performance and the unique relationship Immortal seeks to establish with its audiences.
- The expanded network of participants and audiences developed through the Stepping Stones projects who have become the core audiences, project partners, advocates and promoters of Immortal.
- Also, importantly, some fantastic visual material which could illustrate our vision for the touring work

We were also successful in a capital bid to construct the silver tent, at the time, the first of its kind as it has now visible external means of support. The tent was made in 1999 / 2000.

We knew we wanted to capture the essence of the warehouse / community shows in a touring show. We investigated the possibilities of touring or involving 200 people in different locations. But it became clear that this was not really feasible, not least because there would be no room for the audience, so we began to work on translating the essence of the promenade experience into a smaller professional company structure. In 2001, we toured Sci Circus in blue tent – our first attempt at translating the promenade style of Stepping Stones into a touring show. The show also involved a number of performers who had been involved in the Stepping Stones projects.

You can find further information and more discussion at

[www.elementalexchange.org.uk](http://www.elementalexchange.org.uk)

In 2004, we toured the first professional production of Immortal in the silver tent in UK. For this show, and because Orit was pregnant we had to chose a new director. This was obviously a huge risk as we had developed our large scale work with Orit in the driving seat and had fully expected her to direct the professional show. Since directing NFSC for Autogeddon in 1995 Firenza Guidi had worked on many large scale promenade performance events across the world and had developed a huge international profile. Firenza was the obvious choice to work with us as few theatre directors at this time had experience in directing circus. We knew her, we loved her work and she lived in Cardiff. We just had to persuade her that she wanted to work with us. Fortunately for us she was available and willing and the new style Immortal show was born.

In 2005, we toured a reworked production of Immortal in Uk, including Edinburgh Festival, and Tarrega festival in Spain. This year, Immortal has toured to Ireland, Germany, Edinburgh, Denmark, and currently France.

For those of who haven't seen the show, here is a quick snippet:

## **Promo DVD Immortal**

When we started this venture in 2004, we had no experience of touring the silver tent, no experience of touring a company of this size and no experience of marketing this style of work to audiences in the UK – no seats, no clowns, no 'acts'.

We had no core funding so all the development work, the funding applications, tour booking and pre-production work was unpaid.

We took huge risks. Most of them paid off and some came with great costs.

2004

Budgets based on funding available rather than what was needed **and extremely over optimistic income targets**

Funders dates close to or after rehearsals start

Tour booking incomplete **until after the tour starts**

Difficult to hold onto artists availability

Decided to go ahead before notification of funding and before tour booking completed

Decision supported by our Board

We toured in Wales and UK for 20 weeks

Touring company of 40, 20 performers, 20 crew and support staff

Trainee programme which enabled us both to provide professional development for performers who had taken part in Stepping Stones projects and to stage a production of this scale

You can find further information and more discussion at  
[www.elementalexchange.org.uk](http://www.elementalexchange.org.uk)

## Results

- We lost £40,000 and had a very long list of complaints from touring company members and Tom and Ali mental and physical exhaustion

## But

- Great reviews
- Great documentation and promo material
- Invited to Tarrega in 2005
- Company wanted to do it again
- Knowledge and experience of doing it
- Thorough evaluation process which provided basis for learning and improvements for next year
- A group of trainees with vastly developed skills and experience of large scale tented touring

## 2005

We toured to.....

Key risks were:

- Edinburgh – self promote
- Tarrega – only 50% costs covered
- London – self promote
- Not delivering to recommendations made by evaluation process and therefore pissing people off

## Results

- Lost £20,000 and had a slightly shorter list of complaints from company members and huge personal cost to both Producers once again

## But

- Edinburgh broke even on costs
- British Council Showcase – 200 international promoters
- Tarrega – won awards
- Generated interest from international bookers for 2006
- Great reviews
- Guardian pick of the fringe
- A group of trainees from the Cardiff community who were now highly skilled and excellent performers

## 2006

We managed the risks more effectively and step by step. Mostly this was because we had someone on our board who knew what risk management meant and someone in the company who was being paid and therefore had to do it.

You can find further information and more discussion at  
[www.elementalexchange.org.uk](http://www.elementalexchange.org.uk)

Key risks were identified in advance:

- Tour booking / financial
- Cash flow
- Edinburgh
- Touring company well-being
- Quality
- International touring logistics
- Contracts
- Tour management

Results

- Tour not finished but looks like we broke even with no public subsidy
- Working outside UK meant trainees paid properly
- Sold out tour and averaged 88% capacity in Edinburgh
- More interest for 2007

Key risks can be summarised as:

Going for broke, or repeatedly undertaking projects knowing that financial failure will jeopardise the company and possibly cause it to close

Green lighting projects while carrying significant financial risk

Constant do or die attitude but better to do than die of boredom

Repeatedly going beyond the company's comfort zones – creatively, in terms of scale, complexity etc

Risking the core company operation by stretching it beyond previous capacity / experience

Design of silver tent

Losing the trust / commitment of touring company members due to impact of all of the above

So, while the show has been sold out and some of our reviews have looked like this:

## **Slides of reviews**

We thought you might like to know some of the things people have said about us in our evaluation:

## **Slides of quotes from evaluation**

Creative / artistic risks – not looking to repeat past successes but continually seeking creative innovation

You can find further information and more discussion at

[www.elementalexchange.org.uk](http://www.elementalexchange.org.uk)

There are some big challenges for us now:

Immortal is a great show and there is still an international market for 2007. We want to continue to tour Immortal but we need to continue to keep the show fresh, exciting and rewarding for audiences and performers.

We want to create new work both for the silver tent and for other environments and contexts. We want to do this with the same creative integrity and freedom with which we created Immortal but we want to do it in less than 10 years and we want to do it at the same time as touring Immortal.

We want to continue to inspire, nurture, develop and support circus performers at all levels of experience and we want to build a thriving circus community around our new training space in Cardiff

We want to – from business plan

We want to expand the company etc and we want to maintain the ethos, values and alternative lifestyle which has characterised the company for 20 years. We want to grow but not up.

The risks are now different but no less alarming to manage: Reputation, Profile, Artistic development and innovation, Company well-being as well as Financial. If we're still here in 10 years time, we'll let you know how we get on...

And if we're not we will surely go out with a bang!