

**Presentation delivered by Rose Fenton at Elemental in the South West  
on Monday 8<sup>th</sup> June 2009**

WORKING IN UNKNOWN TERRITORY

Long term experience in boom and bust – ‘working in unknown territory’

Started LIFT in middle of full blown recession of 1980, and saw a couple more in the 25 years ran the Festival with Lucy.

Working in Unknown Territory – always have – been the challenge and creative motor. Whether in the art we produced and presented or the partnerships we forged to make it happen.

1. Setting up LIFT

Lessons it held for us, in terms of

- a) developing project against resistance and meagre resources;
- b) how we wanted to develop and present the artform that is theatre and performance. What can theatre be,

2. Way we worked, looking at a few case studies – Urban Dream Capsule, Factory of Dreams; BAF; Feast;

LIFT (a carousel of images)

The original idea for LIFT was simple – to invite to Britain work from young independent theatre companies which explored the different forms theatre could take, as well as offering a window onto the world of different cultures.

We were evangelical in our mission – at one point even writing a manifesto for LIFT which included preventing the third world war through international theatre encounters!

We had been lucky enough to have been on an international student festival in Portugal where we had seen work from many countries, all of which crossed boundaries of theatre, dance, visual arts and music.

## PREJUDICE

Remember this was at a time of tremendous insularity. Thatcher wanted to put the "great" back in to Britain and the British theatre smugly believed it was the best in the world. WHY would anyone want to see foreign theatre which no-one would understand, and anyway no-one went to see shows in the summer – traditionally dead time.

And if that wasn't enough we were firmly told we did not have the experience – we had just come out of university – AND we were in the middle of a recession, there wasn't enough for British artists to go round, never mind foreigners! Arts Council Head of Drama, " "We cannot allocate subsidy for a festival whose programme is composed predominantly of appearances by foreign companies...Of course such a festival can have a benefit to theatre in the broad sense: the Council, however, believes that the available subsidy produces a greater continuing benefit when given to companies resident in this country." It was 10 years before we became a RFO!

## CENTRAL DRIVING VISION

But the point was that we had a central driving vision for what we - which was essential. It didn't fit with anyone's policies, - in fact contradicted them! (lesson here) it didn't add up for the theatre establishment – as Jo Seelig the Director of the International Mime Festival said, |You'll be shifting dead wood all the way." But as John Locke said some 300 years earlier way back in 1690 about ideas that challenged the status quo "New opinions and ideas are always suspected, and usually opposed, without any other reason but because they are not already common."

## SCALE

And we were determined. Even, we argued, if we only had 2 companies and they stayed on friend's floors, we would do something – a kind of blue print to build on. Moreover there were some theatres were enthusiastic and offered us their spaces for a box office split, so we had somewhere to begin, some significant stepping stone at the London end.

And after 18 months of 'shifting dead wood' we achieved a festival costing £100,000 (third box office, third grants – GLC, third Sponsorship) run by 40 volunteers with 12 companies from all over the world – from Poland, to Brazil, Malaysia, France and Perus... with workshops, debates, a club...And contrary to received wisdom the theatres achieved bigger audiences than at any other time of the year proving that there was an appetite for international theatre in London.

Whilst the Evening Standard's xenophobic headline declared "LIFT off for the Foreigner Invaders", the Times heralded the 'end of foreign theatre famine': and the International Herald Tribune declared "London has at last been given a window on the world that lies beyond these shores"

The Times also said, |A demonstration that unemployment could be put to good use" Interestingly the following year we received an MSC grant for long term youth unemployed with a project. 2 years salary – government is working on something similar now.

Twenty five year later LIFT was an organisation with a biennial turnover of £2 million, investment from the public and private sector, partnerships across the city and the world, artistic presentations and commissions alongside educational and research programmes. "Over the past 20 years LIFT has radically and sometimes roguishly, redefined what we think of as theatre and much of the experimentation in this country can be traced to its influence," Observer

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## LESSONS AND PRINCIPLES

So what lessons can be drawn from what we did back then and how they be applied now – at a time when one might argue there is greater openness to experimentation, greater openness to forms that performance take – not just categorised through dance, music, theatre, visual arts ...its getting better. But still prejudice...also institutions and institutional art forms take the lions share, the work pushing at the boundaries still disenfranchised. (ACE statistic of x % goes to Opera House, National Theatre, Orchestras – very little changed since 40's – yet how much has the landscape changed!)

## 3 KEY PRINCIPLES

### •WALKING IN OTHER WORLDS AND CREATING PARALLEL UNIVERSES

Walking in other worlds – culturally – other countries and their traditions, other sectors and the way they approach the world, and across generations.

There is no one way to do things...recognise that, People do things differently everywhere.

So this gives you courage to challenge or even break the rules – to take permission beyond your authority..

### •UNLIKELY ALLIANCES – EXPERIMENTAL ZONES OF SOCIABILITY

Developing a community of support – a broad based community – bring them in as stakeholders, participants – not just funders, enablers, performers...they are part of the success and realisation.

So identify your common purpose of goal with them

### • A LEARNING ORGANISATION/KEEPING AN OPEN MIND

Don't be afraid to ask advice/ say you don't know.

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Be constant student of your environment..be vigilant.

Create a learning environment in your organisation , where risks are taken (fun had in the process – Roy Faudre) Leave the comfort zone. The more we step out of our comfort zone, the more inherently creative we become, both in our workplace and in our personal lives.

Reflective practice.

## LIFT THE DITY – ANIMATING LONDON'S SPACES AND DISCOURSES

The Lin LIFT's name always as important as the T – theatre and of course the F of Festival and I of international.

An opportunity for artist from around the world and the people of London to celebrate and explore together what makes the world tick, was our mission statement.

Under that came 4 worlds – Quality, Celebration, Adventure and Connections. All 4 intimately connected.

How we explored the city through performance, revealing it's untold stories, its dreams, and animating its neglected buildings - abandoned power stations, derelict hotels - public spaces - the river, parks and streets.

Alliances made over the years – beyond the artists and audiences, a whole host of unlikely players including. with police – including underwater police – crane drivers; security guards;

This was key to many of the successful realisation of what appeared to be in the beginning crazy projects...financially, technically (would they get the

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licence in an increasingly circumscribed risk averse environment) that they were creating a sense of belonging and community in the city...encouraging others to break the rules too!!

As Neil Thomas, the creator and director of Urban Dream Capsule said, "This show is about human relationships..." Would argue ALL LIFT shows about human relationships – the more complex and impossible the more so -

URBAN DREAM CAPSULE – a 3 way relationship between a Department Store, an international festival and a group of shaven headed experimental artists....

(4 IMAGES - URBAN DREAM CAPSULE)

What it was... Originally commissioned by Myers Department Store, Australia...5<sup>th</sup> biggest DS in world.

3 men in shop window living their daily life under scrutiny of public gaze, for 14 days and night. Communicated by fax, telephone, e mail =, sign language and post it notes...Before Big Brother!

- How we went about finding a venue for it..Money we had to raise, arguments we put and the alliances we forged to make it happen..
- Search for venue up and down Oxford Street; Arding and Hobbs. 14% increase in profit argument, media attention etc...
- Salvation came in form of Richard Cooney – our man! Clapham Junction Town Centre Development; Wandsworth Economic Development Forum; Adlers Department Store; Arts and Business; Wandsworth Council; Australian Government; Police.

- Store – Kitchen Furniture, Bathrooms, Menswear, Cakes...
- Community – Schools including deaf school; shoppers; BAC, nurses late night shifts, visitors returning, dinner party...FINALE when they emerged from their capsule... reception with Mayor, security guards guests of honour...

Adlers made their extra profit; the town centre buzzed for 14 days with increasing numbers visiting the men day and night; a sense of humanity openness to vulnerability was injected into gritty London streets...

Quote

FACTORY OF DREAMS

(Bankside and CB/Gardens of Light)

LIFT always had a penchant for fire – the danger, creativity of fire. Going way back to Els Comediants in Battersea Park in 1985 with The Devils that had 5000 Londoners racing across the park in a Bacchic frenzy 'corrre con el foc' chanting "Fire Fire Fire.

The Bankside of course – the launch of the Lift '91 Festival by Anne Bean, Richard Wilson and Paul Burwell...Knew we wouldn't get a licence so had to make it a word of mouth 'private event' (not so easy before time of mobiles and e mails) ...Fire engines.

(Factory of Dreams Images x 3 )

The French Pyrotechnician extraordinaire , Christophe Berthonneau, came to London and, as part of his quest to explore the theatrical and human dimension of fire, worked with 130 13 year olds from an inner city school. Christophe's vision was to create with them their dreams through fire,

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sculpture, music and performance. His work over 3 months, with a team of London based artists, culminated in 2 large scale performances attended by over 5,000 people..

At the end of the project Christophe declared, "There is no limit to what can be achieved when artistic skills, discipline and responsibility are combined with the powers of the imagination"

The Headmaster of Stockwell Park School was full of praise for the project. "Creativity was an outcome but along the way there was opportunity to develop listening skills. An appreciation for individual talent, teamwork planning and organisational skills, communication skills and the opportunity to experience major success in their young lives."

How raised £100,000. Looking at what the agendas were of potential partners as we built the project...The partners we gathered to make this project possible ranged from the inner city regeneration agency, Brixton Challenge, which was rebuilding a broken community following the riots; the French government, Eurostar (the train passed alongside the park), the local bus company, the local M and S, and the BAF.

Very importantly , in this partnership was the LIFT Business Arts Forum group, the purpose of which was to build, through a shared experience of LIFT shows, a community of people from different sectors, generations, cultures and countries.

**BUSINESS ARTS FORUM/BAF**

(Business Arts Forum image)

History of BAF – from BT sponsorship. Common Purpose idea Financial Times, Charles Handy. How to engage key institutions, individuals, financial and creative motors of the city – through international experimental

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practice....(they became our greatest fans and understood far more than most of the so called 'experts' – the critics. ) Their investment in commissioning of innovative work

This group which we put together for every festival came from Business, the Public Sector, Arts and Education. So worked across sectors and generation – From the emerging leaders of international corporations in Shell, British Airways; Rio Tinto through to the Directors of National Health Service Trusts, or the Treasury ` to artists involved in LIFT and young people from Higher Education Colleges – all were committed to a co-learning relationships through walking in other world,

The group became involved in the whole process of Factory of Dreams, giving advice, identifying support , and spending an afternoon with the pupils of Stockwell Park, learning from them how to carve out their dreams through working with metal. One CEO commented, "How do you build a shared vision in a global company. I gained huge insight from the Factory of Dreams project in a school where 40 languages are spoken and a large number of students have been in the country for just 18 months."

Other issues the LIFT Business Arts Forum tackled through meetings with artists and attending performances from some of the most innovative theatre companies of the world - from Europe, Russia, South Africa, the Far East, the States – included Risk Responsibility and Authenticity, The Power of Metaphor, How to Sustain Innovation, The interdependence of Commerce and Culture, and The Value of Shared Human Experience.

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## THE POETICS AND POLITICS OF OUR URBAN ENVIRONMENT

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One of the biggest challenges facing our world is that of the environment and sustainability. Together with a series of lectures by leading environmental thinkers, including eco activist Vandana Shiva and Jeremy Rifkin, whose books *The Hydrogen Economy* proposes new forms of energy and community living, we created a series of artists commissions around the theme of the Poetics and Politics of our Urban Environment.

*Dilston Grove* a meditation on life and decay, in which an abandoned church was grown with grass, was one of the commissions.

*Feast - 100 6 - 10 year olds* imaged their perfect school dinner; they prepared the ground in the nearby allotment, planted and nurtured the seeds, they then harvested and finally cooked them, serving a delicious dinner on the allotment for audiences. They worked with chefs, gardeners, ceramicists, choreographers and other artists over one year, reconnecting with nature through this a celebration of the earth and our interdependent relationship with it.

JEREMY RIFKIN. Jeremy Rifkin in his book *The Age of Access* in which he describes the interdependence of commerce and culture, makes this very point; " From the very beginning of human civilisation to now, culture has always preceded markets. People create communities, construct elaborate codes of social conduct, reproduce shared meaning and values, and build social trust in the form of social capital. Only when social trust and social exchange are well developed do communities engage in commerce and trade."

FEAST – sense of participation, engaging in the world...and its challenges...Citizenship, well being all these issues identified by governments...  
AND TRUST - MUHAMMAD YUNNUS MICRO CREDIT BANK....

Make them work for you.but always be led by the art.

Be led by the art, be bold, develop a community of support, break the rule with them...and just begin . Does not have to be big...Here Whilst We Walk...

To give the last word to an artist, the musician, Brian Eno, who at a LIFT event reminded us :

“Human are capable of the unique trick creating realities by first imagining them, by experiencing them in their minds. As soon as we sense a possibility of a more desirable world, we begin to behave differently. As though that world would start to come into existence. As though in our mind’s eye we are already there. The dream becomes an invisible force, which pulls us forward. By this process it becomes true. The active imagining somehow makes it real. And what is possible in the art becomes thinkable in life.”