

What does democratised theatre look like?

Theatre is an industry which likes to spend a lot of time talking about itself, talking about its practice, and talking about its purpose. Reflection is built into the very idea of what it means to work in theatre and what good theatre aims to achieve. The problem is, when those reflections are taking place and discussions are happening, not everyone gets to be in the room for them which means things are always going to be missed.

The relationship between salaried creatives working in an institution and freelancers is complex. Many people operate both spaces at the same time and there are inherent power dynamics that exist, regardless of how inclusive and wonderful the institution is. When reflecting on what democratised theatre should look like, power is at the forefront of everything. Without intentional exchanges of power, freelancers and creatives will never be able to meaningfully be able to have a fair and beneficial relationship with a creative institution. Through my time working with Ad Infinitum and Tobacco Factory Theatre, I've had a couple of thoughts on how power exchange looks like and how that creates democratised theatre.

Power in information

When speaking to multiple people, the issue of information asymmetry came up again and again. When you freelance and you must account for every hour and pound, how do you navigate giving value and giving enough and doing too much? Institutions could democratise theatre by being far more transparent about how they work and their practices, so creatives aren't left constantly guessing. For example, how does a company programme work? Does it have a detailed and accessible brief on its website that makes it clear to freelancers what they should expect and what the company is looking for? A lot of the time, companies assume that they are being more transparent than they actually are; they assume that when they write 'we're looking for bold plays that re-imagine life', everyone has a shared understanding of what the company means. The problem here is that companies don't want to appear too prescriptive, so they leave a lot of things open to the creative, but instead of that allowing for a wider range of work, it just leaves creatives guessing about what the company wants and the people who end up benefiting are the ones with the most experience and insight in decoding theatre language. Even if being more honest and explicit puts people off working with you, it means that the ones who do choose to engage have a clearer understanding of who you are, your ethos and how you work.

Power in decisions

Decisions are made at many different levels within a company, and often freelancers have very little awareness of where decisions are being made and how. When companies are developing their risk register and strategy, not including the voices of freelancers in their decisions should be right at the heart of it. For many theatre companies I investigated, no one on their board of trustees was a freelancer. This presents a tangible risk because boards play such a key role in shaping a company, and freelancers are completely boxed out of this process. 92% of trustees in the UK are white with an average age of 60, theatre boards need to do more to not replicate this if they want to democratise their practice. Equally, within the organisation, how are freelancers represented? When decisions are being made about programming, bookings, or outreach; what checks are in place to ensure

freelancers feed into that loop. Companies need to have explicit checks in place if they want to ensure they are considering the views and values of freelancers.

Power in connection

Often the relationship between freelancers and the company puts the company at the centre of partnership, with freelancers and creatives having less chance to engage with each other. Building in practices that allow creatives connected with a company a chance to share their own experiences and best practices acts as an instant safeguard as there are strength in numbers. There's been many instances in my own creative practice where, if I hadn't had the chance to meaningfully connect with another creative working with that institution, I wouldn't have known I wasn't getting the same opportunities as them. Often companies encourage freelancers to connect and collaborate, but it's not always built into the residency or project, so freelancers aren't able to prioritise it in their time management. Built into every project and programme should be freelancers and creatives getting to engage with each other, outside the eyes of the company, so they can be each other's support system.

Overall, I think the main conclusion I have is that companies need to be more intentional with how they navigate their relationships with creatives and freelancers. It's not that they don't care, it's that with everyone else going in, it's incredibly easy to not realise when you're dropping the ball with how you work with creatives. Companies need explicit policies, safe-guards, and practices that they can refer to in meetings and in their comms that will help all staff members navigate that relationship. It allows all staff to be on the same page and to mean there's consistency in how companies work with freelancers. That doesn't mean there can't be flexibility, as meaningful relationships need to be specific to the individual circumstances of that partnership, but best practice needs to be clear and followed. Democratised theatre is often dressed up in the language of EDI, and that's definitely a part of it, but this is a conversation that's far broader. This is about how power works within a company and how that shapes the way freelancers are expected to mould themselves. Covid has meant companies are largely just on survival mode, but as we come out of that period, I hope we can move towards creating structural changes within the industry that re-address power imbalances and allow for better work and partnerships to flourish. Engaging freelancers in a more meaningful and equal way benefits us all.