# Flood Evaluation

## Appendix 21: Community Cast focus group report

Two focus groups were held with members of Flood’s community cast, who had supporting roles in *Part Two: Abundance, Part Three: To The Sea,* and *Part Four: New World.*

24 community cast members participated across both groups, which were facilitated by a Research Fellow from the University of Hull. Each group contained a variety of community cast members who had worked on different episodes.

Discussions focused on the following areas:

* Motivations to take part
* Overall experience of taking part
* Overall experience with Slung Low
* Overall experience of site-specific nature of Flood
* Themes in Flood
* Personal outcomes as a result of participation

An analysis of this feedback is summarised in the following report.

## Participant profile

* All of the community cast members were Hull2017 volunteers.
* Most said they had limited experience of acting or performing on stage, other than during school or college.
* A few people said they had experience of performing with an amateur dramatic society or community theatre, and a couple of people mentioned they’d provided technical support to local theatre groups.
* Everyone clearly had a wider interest in theatre.

## Getting involved

As Hull2017 volunteers, the community cast members had heard about the opportunity to be part of the production through the Better Impacts system.

For many people Flood represented an opportunity to be part of something. Some said they had wanted to do something outside of their comfort zone or to improve their confidence. It was mentioned that this was the first performance opportunity of the year for Hull2017 volunteers, which appealed to those with an interest in acting.

Other motivations for getting involved included:

* Seeing Part Two or Part Three (for those involved in Part Four)
* It looked fun
* To overcome motion sickness
* Involvement of Mark and Emma from Middle Child
* Slung Low’s reputation
* The storyline

It should be noted that several participants mentioned that they’d been unaware that they were attending an audition for Flood, because it had been advertised as a workshop.

“It's interesting because right back to when you were interviewed because you're asked to choose what sort of things you want to be involved in, but there's also you choose your favourite three and I have to admit cast community was not on my list whatsoever…I spoke to a few people and they were telling me about it and I thought, it sounds really interesting...I think what actually happened was, they hadn’t got the 40 they needed, so they just threw it out wider. It was very unexpected for me because I kind of just went with it really.”

## Experience of being in Flood

All the community cast members were extremely positive about their experience of being in Flood; everyone said it had met or exceeded their expectations. Even the adverse weather conditions – both during rehearsals and the live performances – didn’t dampen their enthusiasm.

The overwhelming emotion they felt was pride. Some said they felt nervous just before the live shows, although this subsided after each performance.

“As the nights went on I just got more and more confident and really started to throw myself into it, you know, cos to start with, I was like, don’t get it wrong, don’t get it wrong, I was very rigid, I had to make sure I did everything as it was written, and then by the end of it I was, well what if I throw myself into it a little bit more!”

The training for Flood was well-received and it appeared to be pitched at the right level. Some were surprised at what they were asked to do on set – like driving a boat – despite having no previous experience, but they were closely instructed by the production team. Indeed, it was reported that community cast members had been encouraged to try things outside of their comfort zone throughout the project.

The production team appeared to understand how far they could push people.

“Don’t you think they also knew how far they could push each person, not just as a whole, but they knew if they were asking too much of you, or if you could be pushed a little bit further, they just knew.”

Most participants felt they’d had adequate rehearsal time; some would have liked a bit longer, but they acknowledged the importance of not over-rehearsing. They also recognised that Slung Low had built a certain amount of flexibility into the production to accommodate any mistakes from the cast.

Expectations were already high, but the level of responsibility given to the community cast, and the all-round professionalism of the production, were far beyond what most people were expecting.

“Now that was one of the things I never expected that we’d be in costume and the things so when they said, you’ve got a costume fitting I was like, have we?! I thought we’d do it in our normal clothes.”

For most community cast members, the highlight of the project was the camaraderie of being on set – *“you were all in there and supporting each other and you're all starting from the same stage”.* Everyone expressed disappointment that the experience had come to an end, but quite a few of them said they’d kept in touch with one another. They also relished the opportunity to do something different.

One of the only disappointments was that community cast members in Part Two and Part Four weren’t able to watch the episodes they performed in. Some said they had also been slightly disappointed that the community cast – or a local choir - weren’t given the opportunity to sing the music which accompanied the live performances.

“There was just one thing that one or two people made a comment on, and I have to say I thought was a disappointment, was that we weren’t asked to sing the music for Holy Island, which was beautiful, really nice music, and there’s plenty of choirs in Hull that could have done that, but it was done by a choir in Sheffield. It was just a production thing and it’s nothing major, but it would have been nice to have done that as well.”

## Challenges

The main difficulty for community cast members was working in cold, wet and windy conditions, both during rehearsals and the live performances, which created significant physical challenges.

“To have so many layers on, you couldn't actually bend very easily, so getting into that boat, especially that wooden one, the very first time I’d seen everyone else just stepping into boats, and I thought, right, I’ll just step in, and my foot went didn’t it, and it slid, it’s quite a long way down into the keel of the boat, and my foot slipped, and I went all the way in and luckily I was so padded with all these layers but after that I was always just a little bit more careful, so I was sitting on the edge and sliding in. It was always wet and always slippery.”

Even then, most people said they eventually acclimatised and some felt it had helped to forge bonds between the cast members.

“I think that's why we bonded so much. It's because we were in this extreme absolutely drenched cold, wet wind and you just looked after each other.”

There was also a risk of motion sickness, but the Slung Low team had advised all the community cast members to drink Coca Cola, which seemed to do the trick.

“The other thing we got to do was watch the film for part three, which was the one that was on television, and I thought that was really nice that we were invited back to see that.”

## Audience reaction

There was some discussion about how Flood was received by audiences. There was a feeling that the four episodes didn’t work as standalone pieces, and Parts Two, Three and Four would have benefited from a short recap of the story so far.

“I really expected when I started the program that they did some sort of very quick recap on what happened in part two and then led into that.”

There was also some frustration about the limited availability of Part Three on BBC, which restricted the potential audience.

Having said that they felt the narrative itself was interesting, engaging, and encouraged debate about the issues it presented.

Some felt the audience experience of Parts Two and Four had been hampered by the poor weather conditions and poor lighting, although some felt that certain audience members hadn’t dressed for the cold.

**“**The night that my guests came and basically all of them except my husband and son went home after Part Two because they were too cold and they did not stay and watch Part Four with me in it, and I haven’t quite forgiven them yet! And I’d said to them, dress really, really, really warm, and they hadn’t.**”**

It was suggested that encouraging audience members to move around might have prevented them from feeling so cold.

## Working with Slung Low

All the community cast members were very complimentary about the Slung Low production team, who made them valued and integral to the project. One person described them as *“very egalitarian”.* They were treated the same as the professional cast, and it was mentioned on several occasions that they felt like they were part of a family.

“It was like at the end of that first week, it might have been the first night, when he said over the radio, everyone back to the flat for pizza and drinks, and I didn’t think he meant us, and I started walking home when he goes, ‘No I mean you as well’.”

“Some of my friends were in the Lillian Bolloca piece at the Guildhall, and they did not get this experience at all, in fact the comment from one or two that I spoke to was, the only people that talked to us were the band, none of the professional actors. What we got was a real family.”

Being in Flood demanded a significant commitment from the community cast members, which some found challenging.

“Fitting it in around all my kids and my family and school and all that kind of stuff. As I said I've got a brilliant husband because I just said, "That's it, I'm doing it, deal with it, get on with it." I think that was my biggest challenge that I had to overcome was finding babysitters and stuff like that.”

Despite this, Slung Low were understanding and supportive if the volunteers were forced to miss rehearsals.

“I had some fight choreography for a weekend but I couldn't make it and you know when you’re thinking, that’s it, they’ll kick me out, but they were just so accommodating, they bent around us, there was never a problem, they’d just reorganise.”

They were also attentive and accommodating of the needs and physical limitations of the cast.

“At the time I had an injury as well, so they positioned us so we were both seated, and that was done on purpose because we didn’t think we could stand for that long.”

With Slung Low’s professionalism and support, community cast members said they’d felt empowered to try new things and push themselves out of their comfort zone.

“If he turned around to me and told me to jump in the water and I said, ‘do you think I may need a lifejacket, I can’t swim’, and he’d said, ‘you’re alright there’ll be somebody there to catch you’, I think I might just have done it.”

There was also a clear sense that community cast members really trusted the production team; despite the obvious perils of working on set (the fire and explosions for example) they reported feeling completely safe with the production team.

“The detention centre would go up in flames and the wind would really take the flames, but you just thought, no I’m fine, because you knew they wouldn’t do it if they thought it wasn’t safe.”

There was also very positive feedback about the Slung Low Producer, Alan Lane, who they felt had acted in a friendly, supportive and professional manner. A number of people commented that they were impressed by his patience and problem-solving skills on set. He was also very supportive and often offered words of encouragement to the community cast members.

“He was so positive, he told you constantly that you were doing well, you got lots of positives from him, you’re doing brilliantly, I know it’s hard, it looks good from here etc”

The professional cast members also made the community cast feel welcome.

“The thing was not knowing who everybody was when we got there, you could not tell who were the professionals and who were volunteers and I was quite shocked when, oh you’re not on the volunteers? You’re one of the professionals! You know, they were so lovely and ordinary, nobody said, ‘Oh I'm above you’ or ‘I’ve done this all my life’.”

## Impacts

Participants said they’d learnt or developed a number of practical skills from being in Flood, such as how to drive a boat and how to throw accurately, whilst a number of people said it had helped them to develop their teamworking skills.

The opportunity to work with the same group of people on a regular basis also enabled them to develop friendships and expand their social networks.

“I’ve made friends with one of the cast, we’ve been messaging each other.”

“I think because we were such a small group, we sort of just I don't know just became best friends didn't we? All of us.”

Many of the community cast members said that Flood had given them the opportunity to learn how to take artistic cues and direction, and having an earpiece was a new experience for most.

One person said it had reaffirmed their desire to pursue a career in the arts, whilst quite a few said they would keep an eye out for other participatory theatre opportunities, and for future Slung Low productions.

“From that experience I've grown to have patience for acting and want to do more and want to set my actual foot on the acting field.”

“I do tell you one thing though, if I can and if Slung Low do something at the next city of culture and I can find the pennies in my pocket, get a ticket, I will be going and see it, definitely.”

Although being in Flood didn’t challenge their understanding of theatre, they felt the experience had been enlightening in terms of understanding how theatre is produced. They were particularly impressed by how quickly the production team were able to transform the set during the omnibus performance.

“I don’t think it was challenging but it was interesting to see during the rehearsals because they were rehearsing different bits at different times so it was disjointed. It felt disjointed to start with and then all of a sudden it all just sort of came together”

They were also impressed by the professionalism of the paid actors, even when things went wrong during the live performances.

“We had one night when things went really badly and the mics failed on two of the main actors, and watching how they just did it, they just carried on and then adapted what they were doing and we were all like, ooooh.”

A number of people said that the Victoria Dock setting had challenged their perception of where theatre could be produced.

“For me it didn't challenge the form, but it did challenge where you could actually do it, cos I never imagined you could actually do it in a dock. That was quite something.”

## Summary

Being in Flood was an overwhelmingly positive experience for all the community cast members. They felt valued and trusted by the Slung Low team and this was reciprocated by the cast themselves, who felt invested in the project and determined for it to succeed.

The experience undoubtedly pushed community cast members outside their comfort zone, although the Slung Low team appeared to understand each person’s limitations and none of them reported feeling uncomfortable with anything they were asked to do. The training was well-received and appeared to be pitched at the right level.

The main benefits of working on Flood were:

* Feeling included / part of a family;
* Learning how to work as a team;
* Learning how to take direction;
* New experiences – being pushed outside of their comfort zone;
* Increased confidence;
* Learning about outdoor theatre;
* Feeling valued (by Slung Low, other cast members and audiences);
* A renewed interest in theatre and Slung Low’s work.

The only negative aspects of the experience were:

* Music performed by a Sheffield choir rather than a local ensemble;
* Not being able to watch their live performance and limited availability of Part Three: To The Sea;
* The four episodes weren’t standalone;
* The conditions and lack of spotlighting made it a challenging audience experience;
* The end of the experience.