**Final report re Hull Freedom Chorus participation in DEPART**

An excellent project offering great experiences for all participants.

Of the 110 who initially signed up, 98 singers of all ages and abilities took part in the performances, which, though hampered by bad weather, were of the highest standard. The Freedom Chorus sang well, and courageously, in challenging circumstances – rain, darkness, in some cases leading their own singing (only the Large Group had a professional conductor, so the Small Group, the Trios and Soloists were on their own) and, with a few minor grumbles, were consistently open to the frequent changes and developments that outdoor performance demands. This has raised the confidence and skills of the singers, which I’m sure will be evident in their next project.

The Chorus members really appreciated the ‘once in a lifetime’ opportunity to perform alongside world-class physical performers, and were very proud of their own achievements. This has enriched a sense of pride ownership in the project, in Hull as a cultural success, and in the Freedom Chorus itself.

I was pleased that so many older singers, some with physical disability, some with emotional challenges, stayed the course of the project even when the weather made performances so much more difficult and tiring. Soaking wet, covered in mud, lanterns in hand, they slithered along the cemetery pathways in the pitch dark with fantastic humour and camaraderie, in small groups, large groups and on their own. Some singers were very nervous of the individual singing I had given them to do, but all absolutely rose to the challenge and were then so proud of their achievements. All singers were aware that they were performing alongside top professionals, which encouraged them to raise their game. I was particularly pleased with the sound created by the eight lower ‘Stillness’ singers, and all the men, and am hoping these singers stay on to take part in future projects. One of the Freedom Chorus goals for this year is to develop an ‘elite’ smaller group, and this project has helped initiate this quality, and the self-confidence required to achieve it, among these participants.

I was also pleased with our initial judgement re how many rehearsals were needed, with whom, and when. The timetable enabled good learning, confident rehearsing, Alice coming to hear us at just the right moment, (in terms of the singers being ready to present the songs to a Circa director,) and by production week everyone knew what they had to sing. This was fortunate, as there were a whole string of unknowns once the singers got to onsite staging and final rehearsals.

Having worked with circus companies and site-specific shows, I know how flexible everyone needs to be, and how last-minute changes are an integral part of the process, and I’d briefed the singers to this effect from the start. I was however surprised by quite how many last-minute unknowns there actually were from such an established company relying so heavily on a community cast. It took a lot of soothing the singers to reassure them that we’d all have what we needed in time for the shows. And, to be fair, we did. There were a couple of moments where singers were genuinely frustrated by decisions that could have been made differently, but whenever I raised these to Alice or Cian, solutions were found promptly. Singers learned the Opening as written in the score, practised it loads and loved it – but were told very late that it wouldn’t be performed as written and only one group would sing the new version. The dress rehearsal was cancelled two hours before singers’ arrival time due to weather. The forecast had been terrible the day before and it would have been better for singers to have had 24 hours’ notice of this. Some singers’ names were omitted, through a print error, from the programme, which put a few backs up. But in the excitement of the performance, and with swift action and excellent communication between Clare, Cian, Alice and I, we all responded to these issues efficiently.

All the production team and performers have been really friendly to the singers, which they’ve appreciated; they’ve felt part of something unique; they really appreciated the programming of the extra performance enabling friends and family to see the show - and they’ll never forget the experience. Their singing has improved, they’ve been stretched musically, and physically – some of them way beyond their comfort zone – and this is a fantastic legacy, which I’m sure will be evident in the next Freedom Chorus project.

Em Whitfield Brooks. 21.5.17