Positive Stories For Negative Times

Impact Report
Season 2: 2021/22
Positive Stories for Negative Times is an international participatory project by Wonder Fools in association with the Traverse Theatre.

Born in August 2020 in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, this innovative and exciting project responded to the lack of physical spaces for young people to participate in creative activities due to the pandemic, and instead allowed them to come together to make new work online or live in the space, if government guidelines allowed. The project’s inaugural season took place between August 2020 and July 2021.

Positive Stories for Negative Times: Season Two launched in June 2021, after the success of Season One. As well as growing in both scale and ambition, Season Two was all about coming together, embarking on new processes and changing the way we think about theatre for young people. It welcomed groups from across five continents to creatively respond to seven brand-new plays written specifically for children and young people aged between the ages of 16 and 25.

For further info: positivestories.scot and www.wonderfools.org

Season 2: 2021/22

- 2,830 young participants*
- 182 teachers and practitioners engaged*
- 171 groups*
- 89 organisations and schools*
- 24 online workshops
- 11 countries, 5 continents
- 19 new Youth Board members
- 7 new plays commissioned
- 5000 audience members (approximately)

*These are the numbers of official sign ups to the project. We have since heard of hundreds more young people that have taken part in the project via friends.

‘This project has had a real impact on the kind of group we are, the group dynamic, the way we interact with each other, the way we think about making theatre, it’s really positively helped.’

Lee, Perfect Circle Youth Theatre, Malvern
Wonder Fools and the Traverse Theatre commissioned some of the UK’s most exciting voices to write seven new plays for young people. These were developed in collaboration with the Wonder Fools’ Youth Board and included not only traditional scripts but also blue-prints for devising. Therefore, regardless of a group’s size, age, experience or context, there was something for everyone.

The Plays

A feel-good comedy drama about a girl who keeps a diary of all her anxieties; but as she moves from Primary School to Secondary, from normal life to Lockdown, all of her worries appear to come true.

Age: 11+

Featuring spies, pirates, robots, talking animals and everything in between, ‘Spyrates’ is an interactive, playful and imaginative adventure story with an accompanying process drama.

Age: 6+

A feel-good comedy drama about a girl who keeps a diary of all her anxieties; but as she moves from Primary School to Secondary, from normal life to Lockdown, all of her worries appear to come true.

Age: 11+

A play full of adventure and an exploration of what shapes and what divides us, exploring issues of blended families, bullying, overeating, depression and isolation.

Age: 11+
An absurdist feminist fable for the next generation of feminists. Ellen Bannerman was selected as a Traverse young Writers alumni, following an open call-out for new ideas. Age: 16+

A play about the political power of a rave. Who has the right to rave, to dance and move freely? What is it to feel truly free in your own skin? It tells the story of a queer group of humans trying their best to rave whilst the world tries its best to stop them. Age: 18+

A series of tasks and actions that make a narrative to be performed with props. We are agents of the revolution. How do we revolt? How do we not get into trouble? Where do we get power, and then how do we use it for good? Age: 13+

Not a play, but a process. It explores what it means to be thankful in this world we live in today. It’s a mix of games, challenges and exercises for you to tell your own stories, in your own way. Age: 11+

A play about the political power of a rave. Who has the right to rave, to dance and move freely? What is it to feel truly free in your own skin? It tells the story of a queer group of humans trying their best to rave whilst the world tries its best to stop them. Age: 18+

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Thanks for Nothing by The PappyShow with Lewis Hetherington

Revolting by Bryony Kimmings

The Skirt by Ellen Bannerman

Write to Rave: Step Pon by Debris Stevenson
The Process

The plays were written specifically for the times we are living in and the project was completely free to participating groups between the ages of 6 and 25, from September 2021 to July 2022. Alongside their chosen play/s, every group was sent a link to access an online project portal which included a wealth of resources aimed to support their involvement. These included; a handbook of exercises and guidance; social media assets; template forms; a link to join an online Teacher/Practitioner Slack Forum; and links to book onto the exciting programme of free writer workshops and Play/Meets.

“I think the support you get, the packs, the workshops, are so useful. The opportunities to meet up with other creatives was really great too, I really enjoyed them. It feels like you are part of a community, even though we’re in York and it’s a Scottish-based project, it doesn’t feel like that.’

Becky, Thunk-It Theatre, Pocklington

Season Two was all about flexibility, there was no set outcome but rather the focus was on exploring a creative process together. The participating groups were encouraged to use the plays however they wished and the creative responses included everything from live stage performances to writing, making costumes and creating soundscapes.

“We used the Spyrates script for a block of weekly drama lessons in my P5-7 class in term three. There are 18 children aged 9-12 years old and they loved using the play as a basis for our lessons, listening to one or two scenes each week and then engaging in different group drama activities to explore the themes further.’

Deborah, Colinsburgh Primary School, Fife

At the end of their process, each group was invited to submit anything they had created to be uploaded to our interactive map, which shares and celebrates all the brilliant work from young people across the UK and beyond.
Participating groups

Similar to Season 1, Season 2 attracted an incredibly diverse range of groups — from youth theatres and youth groups to schools, colleges and charities. However, the geographical reach this year exceeded all expectations. Internationally, Positive Stories engaged young people from Tokyo (Japan), Bangalore (India), Bundall (Australia), Cape Town (South Africa), New York (USA), Gatineau (Quebec), Amsterdam (Netherlands), Alfraigde (Portugal) and Pesero (Italy). Nationally, groups and schools participated from up and down the British Isles from Guernsey to Benbecula, Inverness to St Albans, Kilcogon to Kilmarnock.

‘Many of the young people in my class grew in confidence, learned commitment and overcame their fears and anxieties.’

Deborah, Micklefield School, Cape Town

Amongst these groups was Little Creatures Act Out from New York. This new, weekly drama group for 6–10-year-olds was set up as part of a family housing project for children who have experienced or been at risk of homelessness. As part of Positive Stories, the group were looking forward to providing a regular space for ‘kids to just be kids, have fun, play and use their imagination whilst picking up some drama skills along the way’.

Saturday Citizens, Glasgow
In Glasgow, at the Citizens Theatre, a group for learning disabled young people aged between 14-18 years old, called Saturday Citizens explored The PappyShow’s Thanks for Nothing. The group worked together initially via Zoom and then came together for a day of filming to record their movement piece ‘Thank You for the Dancing!’.

At Leeds Playhouse the youth theatre department knew they wanted to start things off with something exciting to engage their participants again after the pandemic. Positive Stories for Negative Times provided an opportunity for each group to have an exciting script or process to explore and also provided the perfect platform to share the performances in a festival format. Bringing the groups back together in the theatre for one evening and, for many of them, the first opportunity to really see and connect with their peers in different groups.

Talking about staging the multiple Positive Stories plays as a festival, Gemma Woffinden, Youth Theatre Director at Leeds Playhouse said:

‘I think it’s important for young people to consider their place within the group, and then that group within the wider Youth Theatre, and then that Youth Theatre within Leeds and then Leeds within the world. And that’s why we wanted to have them all on stage in that one evening. Positive Stories for Negative Times provided us with the perfect project in order to do that.’

The seniors have loved working on ‘Thanks for Nothing’, it’s brought about lots of conversation about rights and they called it their new therapy. This project has been brilliant, we’ve loved being a part of it and having access to all the resources and fresh new writing has been great.’

Jackie, Stageability, Mortimer
Positive Stories for Negative Times Season Two involved two key developments to the project; the creation of a Youth Board and the selection and commissioning of Traverse Young Writer, Ellen Bannerman as one of the artists.

Wonder Fools has given me the platform to start my play writing career. Receiving my first paid commission allowed me to solely concentrate on my craft as a writer. The experience was invaluable, as I was supported creatively through the process of writing my first ever short play. Since this experience I have written two full length plays ‘SIMA’ for drama centre London and ‘Kill The Second Coming With Slime and Pies’, which I developed at the Royal Court Writers Group. As well as this I have been long listed for the David Maclennan Award for my plan ‘Not Much Here On The Way To Heaven.’ I know without the support of this company I would never have been had the confidence to continue writing.

The Youth Board comprised of nineteen young artists aged between 16 – 25 from across Scotland who met regularly throughout 2021-22. They made key decisions on how the project was run, worked directly with the commissioned playwrights, collaborated, participated in skills development workshops and produced their very own version of Revolting, which was performed at the Traverse Theatre in April 2022.

View the documentary here → www.youtube.com/watch?v=fo8rKX9Zdng

The Youth Board participated in workshops ranging from directing to dramaturgy and world collaboratively to develop their skills and knowledge throughout the year. Commenting on this opportunity to work with industry professionals but also collaborate with his peers, Youth Board Member, Arron 22, commented:

‘Having that wider national web and connecting with people who you maybe wouldn’t normally and having that face-to-face contact; that ability to connect with peers has been my absolute highlight. It’s something that I think has been largely missing and I believe it addresses those problems in terms of connectivity across Scotland. Professionally, I feel like I’m in a much more solid position now.’

‘It’s had a hugely positive impact on my wellbeing. Particularly as the Youth Board came at a time when everything creative felt a bit impossible. Even now, a year later, the process has helped me to feel more positive and optimistic and believe that I am on the right track.’

Vicky 23, Youth Board Member
The Response

• 49 live theatre productions
• 45 recorded extracts
• 7 digital productions
• 2 films
• 2 pieces of cross-artform outdoor performance
• 1 zine

Other creative responses included:
Scripts, arts and crafts, designing and making costumes, creative writing, prop-making, soundscapes and music.

‘I have learnt so much about writing, devising, rehearsing and basically the whole process of putting on a show. Working with my extremely talented peers has helped shape me into a better, more confident, creator. My peers and I working with Wonder Fools has given us all the support, mentorship and platform to be able to share our work and learn what it’s like to put on our own show from scratch. I’m already thinking about how I can do it all again soon!’
Morna, Youth Board Member

‘It was a lot of fun, the script was amazing, I loved getting to do a Hannah Lavery play and there was so much joy and laughter in rehearsals. Our cast was very small as the play only had 4 characters, so we all grew really close and it was so much fun exploring character dynamics and staging the play together, the whole thing was a very collaborative process.’
Katie, hidden route, Dundee

‘Both times we’ve been involved have been amazing and really different. I just think it’s a fantastic project and such a great resource. For us youth theatre practitioners who can feel a little bit isolated, a little bit lonely. But when we make theatre in this way, it’s just brilliant to feel connected to other people, to get involved in work that’s been resourced in this way with practitioners such as Bryony Kimmings is totally invaluable. I really hope it can carry on.’
Lee, Perfect Circle, Malvern

‘There were a number of young people in the group who lacked confidence at the beginning of the project and would have previously been unwilling to be featured having any solo lines to sing or act. However, by the end of the project they were not only much more confident, they were excited to perform and extremely proud of what they had achieved.’
Marie-Anne McGrattan, Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, Glasgow
‘It helped my pupils work on their teamwork, cooperation and communication skills. The suggestions of how to exploit each scene given in the handbook really helped me as a teacher by providing me with ideas of how to adapt the script for my learners in different ways. This in turn helped me develop my skills as a primary class teacher in delivering effective and engaging drama lessons.’
Deborah, Colinsburgh Primary School, Fife

‘Now I’m more confident than before the project.’
Guilia, Teatro della Brigata, Italy

‘I was truly inspired. I found it so practical, and yet so revolutionary! The idea of actually going out and creating a story through real action in the world makes so much sense to me. I loved it.’
Sarah, Leeds Playhouse on Bryony Kimmings workshop

‘I have a few pupils in my class who have additional support needs. They have gained so much confidence from this whole experience and really enjoyed every part of it! They kept asking me about when we are doing drama. Confidence and performing to an audience has given the class that ‘buzz’ for drama!’
Rhonda, Kirkton Primary School, Carluke

‘I’ve enjoyed working with Wonder Fools and on this particular project - it’s been interesting and ‘meaty’ for the children and so well planned out for the practitioners - often finding projects that can support delivery is rare so I can see the company wanting to work with Wonder Fools again.’
Aisha, Freedom Studios, Bradford

‘It’s really strengthened our professionalism; we’re now taken much more seriously as a company. It’s a really good jumping board for us to be able to say “we work with this national participatory project”, people don’t just think we’re running a little youth club in the corner of a field.’
Becky, Thunk-It Theatre, Pocklington

‘It’s been the best thing I have ever done. And I will be forever grateful to the company.’
Danny, Youth Board Member
Sector Impact

‘This is why Positive Stories for Negative Times has been such a benefit to the youth theatre sector. It has taken this pressure from the shoulders of the leaders and facilitators, and it ensures quality of writing across the board. We need more of these initiatives, not less. We need to increase the bank of new writing that facilitators can choose from, and only in that way will the sector thrive and emerge from the marginal spaces in which it exists. It will also ensure quality of experience for young people, from which they can benefit, grow, and become the new theatre makers of the future.

Martin O’Connor, youth theatre practitioner

‘From start to finish this project was a JOY! The group was made up of newbies and some folk who had moved up from our younger groups. This was the perfect project to bring them all together. They gelled perfectly, it was pitched brilliantly and allowed our oldest members to take on a real leadership role in the group. We had one brand new person who had tried various extracurricular groups before and had many bad experiences but they had the best time with us every Wednesday evening and her parents have not stopped singing the praises of us and the project’

Catherine Ward-Stoddart, Tron Youth Theatre

‘I am just so continuously impressed by the heart and values at the core of Wonder Fools, everyone who is a part of WF or works with you has been so lovely, every production and project seems to hang on questions of story and accessibility, and I can’t think of a single other company whose name is so synonymous with fun and hope. I am so proud to have worked on this show and I am so excited to see what’s to come. No one else is doing theatre like you guys and the impact you have in people’s lives is huge. Just, thank you.’

Sophie Jacome, Youth Board Member
Traverse Theatre

‘It is more important than ever that creativity and storytelling becomes inclusive and globally connected, and that young people in particular are able to explore and expand their imaginations to show us inside their minds and hearts. And judging from what we have seen from the artists and participants involved in this season of Positive Stories for Negative Times, we can see that the future is in very exciting hands!

To see so many groups around the world getting involved with this project, at a time when international tensions are running high, is hugely encouraging for the global community, and goes to show that despite everything going on around us, wherever we are, stories still have the power to unite and remind us of what we have in common.

And we are particularly proud to have been able to platform the unique, feminist absurdist piece The Skirt from Ellen Bannerman, one of the Traverse Young Writers who has developing her skills with us during the lockdown period, and bring her work to an international audience in such an engaging and meaningful way.’

Linda Crooks, CEO & Executive Producer Traverse Theatre
What Next?

We are currently fundraising for Positive Stories for Negative Times: Season 3. This season will be bigger and better than ever before with new plays to explore, more chances for groups to meet each other and will culminate in four live youth theatre festivals throughout Scotland. This aims to provide performance opportunities for young people and chances to connect with their local theatres, as well as groups from around the world still being able to take part online.

If you’d like to learn more about the project and how you can support our work, please contact Executive Producer Steph Connell at steph@wonderfools.org

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