

ENTREVISTA

Interview: Huw Champion: “Da capo” Mail Out -

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Ida Mara Freire: Could you, please, tell me about your work?

Huw Champion: My commitment is to community arts but that has a lot of different meanings and so basically it covers all sorts of areas from arts work in prisons to arts and young people, arts and health, arts and disabilities, arts and the environment and all those kinds of things. And [people with] disabilities have always been a very obvious and important area and it's one of our commitments that we spend some time on. So that's me.

Ida Mara Freire: When did you decide to edit the magazine Mail Out?

Huw Champion: In my planning practice we are called “da capo”. That refers to the fact that my wife and I are partners and we have other associates who work with us and together we do art planning for different local councils across the country. And so, at the moment we're working in Doncaster, which is South Yorkshire, on a new performing arts venue. We are working in Cumbria on a cultural strategy. We're working in Blackburn, which is in Lancashire, on a cultural strategy and Janet, my partner, is working in Glasgow on a disability study which has helped Glasgow City Council work effectively with ... there is a new law coming into effect next year which is the disability discrimination act and she's working with the City Council to help their libraries, museums and arts institutions comply with the new law. But we do all sorts of things; we are working with the Ashfield Council which is quite close by. I'm just finishing work with a school in Barnsley to set up a new common arts venue

Huw Champion

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Huw Champion

in the school, or a plan for that. And I've just finished an employment and training study for Cumbria County Council. So Da Capo works in different parts of the country. Mail Out was started because when I was working at East Midlands Art, which is a funding body, that distributes money which comes from the Arts Council, which in turn comes from the Government. I used to get information which was useful to me but was more useful to Arts organisations in the region so we used to copy it and send it out and that got so many people saying, "oh, can we have it?". That was costing a lot of money in photocopying and I persuaded the finance person that it would be cheaper to print it as a magazine. So we printed it as a magazine and in the meantime I got other regional arts boards to be partners so that's how it became a national magazine. It was set up as a trust and I've been a trustee since it started and so has Janet and so have some of our associates and it had its own editor. We had two very good editors and then the third one was very bad and so we gave him the sack and what happened was that the magazine was very close to running out of money and so the trustees produced the next few issues so that we could recover ... put some more money in the bank. And because we'd got the office, we ended up doing most of the work and that's the way it's been for two years now. We're trying to get some funding so I don't have to edit it. But for two years this has been Mailout's office. It was only temporary, but it goes on forever! So that's how we are. And Kate, she works partly for Mailout and partly for De Capo. It's not ideal, it's not the best way of doing it but until we get some national funding, and a lot, we're sort of stuck because everybody says that arts and health and all those things are very important, and Mailouts the only publication that deals with the whole spectrum. Everybody at the arts council agrees that it's very good, and everybody at East Midlands Arts and West Midlands Arts agrees that it's good, but they still won't come up with the money so we're a bit stuck. We will get there. That's the background to the magazine.

Ida Mara Freire: Is it free or do readers have to pay for it?

Huw Champion: They pay.

Ida Mara Freire: It's not possible for it to pay for itself?

Huw Champion: It's very close. At the moment its circulation is about 1,100 nationally. If we could get its circulation up to 3,000, which is not very many, it would pay for itself. To get the circulation up that high means we need to spend time and that means you have to pay somebody to do it. We don't have

the money, so we're kind of trapped which is why we need sensible funding. But it's very close. We also run conferences and events and we can mostly raise funding for those separately. Last year we did a national conference on arts and inclusion which covered a wide range of areas. We'd like to run a national conference next year on community theatre but we haven't really started organising that yet, we're trying to get the funding sorted out. It's difficult.

When I started working with East Midlands Arts in 1979, arts and disabled people was just beginning to be a priority. One of the first people I worked with there was a woman called Ann Peaker who was establishing East Midlands 'Shape'. I don't know if you know anything about the 'Shape' organisation?

Ida Mara Freire: A little bit.

Huw Champion: 'Shape' was set up in London by a dancer called Gina Lavite and she developed a number of initiatives in London. In England, London is very dominant in some ways, the Arts Council put funding into 'Shape' in London and thought that they were doing their bit for disability across the country and obviously they weren't. East Midlands 'Shape' was one of the first organisations, outside London to take up the issue of offering opportunities to disabled people and was a pioneer. 'Shape' in the East Midlands sparked off quite a lot of initiatives and some of those still exist. Have you come across 27A in Leicester? There's a centre called 27A. That was a venue in the middle of Leicester which was a small sort of centre for people with disabilities and that's still going but 'Shape', the regional organisation, closed about a year ago partly because it ran out of money. The 'Shape' organisations were mostly run by non-disabled people who were offering things for disabled people and the logic that follows from that is that disabled people should run activities for themselves. And so that in different regions, 'Shape' organisations developed in different ways and some of them became very strong disability run organisations and some of them sparked off a lot of smaller disability organisations and projects. East Midlands 'Shape' did both: it was run by disabled people and Ann left 'Shape' when it established its strong link and moved on to work in arts in prisons and she set up another project called the Unit for Arts and Offenders which still exists.

What happened in the East Midlands was that 'Shape' was very strong for a number of years but it sparked off other things and other people took their own initiatives because they felt that was the best thing to do. 'Shape' couldn't offer enough all the way across the East Midlands because the East Midlands has 6

Huw Champion

million people and that means that there's probably nearly a million people in the region who've got some disability; so that's a lot of people spread over, well in English terms, quite a big area, obviously not in Brazilian terms. So that working regionally stopped being the best way to work. But 'Shape' has only just finished, only just stopped working in the East Midlands. Most of the sister organisations in other parts of the country have finished as well; they've been replaced by different kinds of disability forums.

Ida Mara Freire :What leads organizations such as Shape to close?

Huw Champion: I think there are a number of reasons. One is that the roots of the 'Shape' organisations are 25 years old and although, if you're a disabled person there are still lots of barriers to participating in arts activity, there have been big changes in 25 years so that, for example, every theatre has to be able to deliver effective services for disabled people. They're not all perfect but things are much better than they were 25 years ago, and similarly, the idea of dance with and of disabled people is a much more commonly accepted idea and it's much more at the heart of what arts organisations do to involve disabled people. There are many more examples of disabled people being practically involved in arts activities than there ever were then, and that's part of disabled people having become more confident, more demanding and more recognised.

So, disability arts organisations are often very active for a short time and then they break apart just in the way that small organisations do. I was on the board of an organisation called Open Theatre. One part of what it does is work with people with learning disabilities and when it started it was one of five in the country and there are probably 30 companies with learning disabled performers now. It's not as many as there can be, there is room for more, but it's growing. I think the same is true of all kinds of art and disability. So that's why in a way the development initiatives in the 1970s have had quite strong effects and it's simply that the model they were built on [is outdated] and there are new things happening now.

It's also interesting that once it's established, once people have been forced to face up to the issues of disabled people and their opportunities to make art and enjoy art that consciousness remained within the funding system. So since about 1980 there has always been a disability unit in the Arts Council of England and the Arts Council of Great Britain.. When the lottery started there was lots of new capital to spend on buildings, one of the things that

became a priority was making those new buildings accessible to disabled people. That was because the disability unit in the Arts Council really understood buildings, because buildings are obviously important to disabled people. So they secured a very strong position within the lottery grant process which is excellent. But the parallel things which arose at the same time, like Arts and Health or Arts and Working People ... over the late 1980s and the 1990s were just fashionable, or not fashionable so there were three years when arts and health were really important and then it stopped being. Another three years when arts and young people were really very important and then it stopped being. Because people who don't have a disability at the moment can register, they can understand disability and once it's lodged in the consciousness it's stayed there. I also think disabled people are more visible than they perhaps were. For example, I know that only a small percentage of disabled people are wheelchair users but the number of wheelchair users has grown as wheelchairs have got better and as people have got more confident about being seen out in their wheelchair. And similarly, people with learning disabilities, they were often hidden away, and now they're not so hidden away. When I was young, the number of people that I was aware of that had Down Syndrome was very small and people with Down Syndrome are much better accepted – they have a more visible place in the community, which is good. So things have changed. They have a different view. Disabled people might not be quite so optimistic as I am but that's the way it seems to me.

Ida Mara Freire: Have you been working with people who have a disability?

Huw Champion: I'm not really an arts worker myself. I do direct theatre but mainly through the arts project that I'm involved with in Bolsover and that's mainly with one group of people from the town where I live, so I don't work with disabled people as a matter of practice, well not in making art. So what you're getting from me is sort of a planner's, administrator's, manager's view and a magazine [editor's] view as well. And I think that there are lots of people who would be valuable for you to see who I've worked with who would have really interesting direct perspectives. Some of the disabled people themselves and some of them have just a lot of experience from working with disabled people.

Ida Mara Freire: How do the disabled people get the information from you? How do you support them in an administrative way?

Huw Champion

Huw Champion: That works in different ways, so for example, on the magazine a lot of what we cover is arts and disability and our relationship with the field is that we pick up ideas about why there is good work going on and we invite people to explain their work. And so there's no formal relationship, it's not that there's a kind of network or that we're a network as such.... we just listen really and the work is out there and the people are out there. A lot of the information that feeds into the magazines, a group of us are involved in it working in different parts of the country so that when we come across a really good theatre project with disabled people, we go, "that's good, will you write us an article", and so it's changing all the time. So that's on the magazine front, on the art planning front, one of the things that characterises our practice and makes it different from others is that we have a kind of commitment to disability so that all our work tends to be informed by that and we have one associate who works with us quite a lot who lives in Nottingham and who I think it would be very good for you to meet. Her name is Michelle Taylor, she is a disabled performer and director and we've known her for 15 years and she's worked with us on a number of studies we've done for venues. In Doncaster ... we're actually working directly for the council in developing this new venue and Michelle is also working with us to, if you like, lead a group of disabled people who are ... they're the sort of a monitoring, planning group. So that when the venue opens in 2004, disabled people will have been actively involved in the planning of it and the programme that happens and in making art that happens in there. So that those people, and through other disabled people in the area, own the building in the same way that non-disabled people will feel it's their building, disabled people will feel it belongs to them. So they're the kinds of connections that we have. It's very much a sort of outside perspective, if you like, informed by a kind of commitment to it.

Ida Mara Freire: I am interested about education because you told me that you're a community educator. How is the role of education in your job?

Huw Champion: I have ... I believe the most important reason for encouraging anybody to take part in music or dance or drama is that the creative part of everybody's personality is ... it's normally underdeveloped. It's not normally seen as important. Education in this country changes like the tide so that there have been times when the arts and creativity have been very important. But for a long time they were regarded as not important and education is seen as being

apart [from] fitting people for jobs, for employment. And that, it seems to me, is clearly not right. The job of education is helping individuals to achieve their full potential, whether that is as a runner, or as a banker, or as an engineer or as an engineer and a singer, an engineer and a dancer, or just as a painter, or just somebody who makes radio programmes. I think that if the creative side of people's personalities is helped to become strong, it just helps in all sorts of other aspects in their lives..... sometimes that's fashionable and sometimes it isn't fashionable and I think that what's happening in education now is that the tide is turning. Creativity seems more of a priority in education so that there is more money being spent on art in schools. There are growing numbers of courses in higher education – too many. For an example, in Doncaster where we're working on this new venue, one of the partners in the venue is Doncaster College which is the college of further education, not higher education or university and it is looking to grow and the biggest area in which it's growing is performing arts degree courses. And the reason its growing in those areas is that it's very easy for them to fill the courses; it's very easy for them to recruit students and the target is to have 180 young people graduating each year with dance, or drama, or music or technical performance related skills. And that's separate from... they're developing courses in digital, multi-media, computer media and it seems to me that's a huge number of young people coming onto the job market – there won't be jobs for them.

Certainly there's a returning of awareness of the arts within curriculum in schools, not all schools, some of them will take a long time to catch up and get out of the business studies mindset, but it's happening. That's the way I think things are going. I also think that the reason that arts have become recognised as important in different kinds of disability, but particularly for example, learning disability is because they open up huge new areas of self-expression for people. It enables them to open up in different ways that weren't allowed 20 years ago. So that's where I think the education links are, that's why I think it's important.

Ida Mara Freire: In relation to social inclusion, some people maintain that the fact that people do art work does not mean to say that they are included in society. What do you have to say about this? Does making art involve social inclusion or not?

Huw Champion: I think that there's a huge problem in this country about a) what we regard as art and b) the degree to which it is inclusive. There are two things about this, one is that art has become defined very narrowly to mean, if

Huw Champion

you like, court ... the arts that stem from this upper strata of society and so that ballet, or opera, have an artificial value because of what the 18th and 19th century aristocracy were interested in. They developed in the way that they did because the resources were there because that was where the money was for them to develop into quite complex and well resourced art forms so that music was able to develop in sophisticated ways because people who had the money were paying composers to experiment and develop techniques with ranges of instruments and so on. So what we now call Classical music might have come from folk roots in some of its ways and has always looked back to folk roots but it was able to develop in a very artificially sophisticated way which moved away from its roots and community. If you look at something like dance, the ritual skills and traditions that make up ballet were able to develop for the same reasons because the money that went into it enabled techniques to develop in certain ways and standards to be set and styles to be set. I often think that, if in the 18th century English country dancing had been fashionable in the court, instead of having a Royal Ballet now, we would have a royal Scottish dance company and it wouldn't be Scottish dancing like Scottish dancing happens now, because there would have been professionals in it, they would have taken its techniques to extremes and would have set new standards and would have developed new styles. It might be that it would be dressed differently and danced in completely different contexts. Ballet might be the thing that kids do in the street and it wouldn't be like ballet is now, it would be more basic. So that's what's happened in this country. The same has been true of theatre and when the Arts Council was set up, it was set up with a very clear division between what was art, what is art, and what is entertainment, and what is popular culture. And so arts in this country, to some extent, have been defined by what's funded, what gets the money from the Arts Council. You can still see this in, like the regional arts boards, for example, if they're not putting money into something, somehow they don't realise it exists. We've worked a lot in a place called Lichfield, which is north of Birmingham, and it has seven festivals every year. It has a folk dance, a jazz and blues festival, a music and beer festival. It has an international festival which does get funded and we've worked with them over a number of years on plans for venues and helping them to develop their arts practice. The relationship with West Midlands arts is very difficult because they won't fund it because they don't fund it already and because they don't fund it, six of these seven festivals don't exist whereas there are thousands of people going to them every year and really high quality blues, rock, folk musicians, but they don't count. Part of the struggle has always been to offer quality opportunities

at a community level, whether that be for communities around here, like mining communities, from which almost nobody would ever go to see the Royal Ballet. But actually getting the resources out to open up opportunities, its always been a battle and its always been marginal amounts of money. And no matter how fashionable it becomes to develop arts and inclusion, it's still only a minor part of the money. And the other issue is that when arts and inclusion is fashionable, all the organisations that get lots of money, like the regional theatres, like Derby or Nottingham Playhouse, what they always do is that they set up programmes which are always inclusionary. So, basically, inclusion becomes a matter of, come here, come to us, come and see what we've got. They're not about we'll come and develop dance or music opportunities where you live, or we will offer opportunities to you in your learning disabled group in the suburbs – it's you must come to us. There are very strong arguments against that approach and the same is true of the national companies like the Royal Ballet. It's approach to social inclusion is to tour shows to Newcastle, or Sheffield, or Manchester on the grounds that we're taking our shows to the people. Well they're only taking them to the same people in Sheffield who would probably go to see them in London and so that's a real issue. A huge amount of money is spent on, for want of a better word, elite cultural organisations and that's the wrong place to start for me, but it's too late: that system is already in place and always we're knocking on the door to get resources. To talk about the venue we're developing in Doncaster, one of the things that we're trying to do is with that [in mind], Doncaster is an ex-steel making town, an ex-coal mining town. It has a lot of engineering and it was a very important railway town and lots of that employment has gone and what we're trying to develop there is a venue that isn't just about - we'll get the Halle orchestra to come and play for you - it's about opening up opportunities for people to make their own art. And it also says [about] the dance schools, because in England there are thousands of dance schools, which are run by professional dancers as businesses and they teach ballet and tap and all those things. More young people participate in those than ever go to the Royal Ballet but there not regarded highly, they're seen as working class. The venue in Doncaster is meant to be as much for them and helping them to develop their work differently, maybe, as it is for bringing in people from outside. Doncaster's not a centre for the arts at all and there's no reason why it shouldn't be, it's as big as Nottingham, nearly, and Nottingham's got loads of facilities. Inclusion is all sorts of things: it has to do with geography; it has to do with national attitude; it has to do with who controls the purse strings, who controls the money and where their priorities lie. One of

Huw Champion

the things for us, and for Mailout, is we're not a London-based organisation; we're a national magazine and our base isn't in London. It's actually very hard for us because we can't ... we don't have time to meet the people from the Arts Council, we don't drop in for coffee at the Arts Council, we don't invite them to our parties, they don't come round to dinner. So we don't exist, except when we run a national conference and they're all really keen to come, and say oh, you're doing really well, and pat you on the head.

So inclusion is all sorts of things and ... in an ideal world, the opportunities for people to dance or make theatre, or be in a band, ought to be there locally, at a very local level and then you generate interest, and commitment and strength. Then people would be interested to come to see Shakespeare or the Royal Ballet, or whatever else... all kinds of music. There's a huge amount of art going on which doesn't count as art. Tonight, for example, Eric, blues musician is on in Sheffield on a national tour but there'd be no chance... that's not counted as art.

Ida Mara Freire: What are your ideas about the artistic work of people with visual impairments?

Huw Champion: There are obviously differences around different disabilities but the principles remain the same. Within different kinds of disabilities there are different attitudes. I learn more about visual impairment from an interesting person who perhaps you should try to spend some time with, I think she's still at East Midlands Art, Penny Hefferon. She was the music officer and when I finished at East Midlands Art, music was in my department. She was my music assistant and she's sight impaired and I learnt more about sight impairment from working with her than I would ever, ever have learnt. She's very interesting, at the time she was very right wing. She came into an organisation which was basically left wing and it was quite unusual. It was something we didn't expect from somebody sight impaired. I think she changed over time but she was very [conservative] that's partly from her family background, but also it came from having made her way through life with a very serious sight impairment. It's not an area that I knew anything about and I think I do now and that's come from her. You will find lots of interesting practice around from sight impaired people. I don't know how broadly you want to explore, but there's a really interesting visual arts project for sight impaired people near Harrogate, Yorkshire. It's partly a sort of charitable trust. Sight impaired people are basically educated in this country through charities. The trust is called Sir Thomas Henshaw's Trust for Blind People. Somebody

within that school in Naseborough realised how valuable arts activity was for sight impaired people and she set up a work-shop centre in which, mainly young sight impaired people who've left school have an environment in which to make art. It's visually not dance or performance, although there are dance and performance opportunities. It's just that they don't have the chance to do craft and to make things. That would be an interesting place to visit if you've got time. There's lots of arts practice around that involves visually impaired people, it's not an area that I know all that much about, especially performance. There are some key contacts you ought to make. There's a national disability arts forum whose office is in Newcastle and the person who runs that would be really helpful, he's not sight impaired although he is disabled. There's a string of organisations that you can talk to and I'll give you a list of contacts. I think, to a degree, sight impaired people end up being integrated in disability arts organisations anyway. That may not actually be true, that's just the way it seems to me.

Ida Mara Freire: Why the name “Da Capo”/

Huw Champion:When I left ?? one of my colleagues left with me, or a little bit after me, and we both left not knowing what we were going to do and we ended up doing consultancy. And we realised that we ought to have a brand name and we'd got this book of poetry and Da Capo as we understand it means from the top of the head and it's a musical term to go back to the top of the page. And it's also got the implication of improvisation.

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