

“Saying yes to everything”: Slung Low’s mission in a time of rapid change

ABSTRACT

Purpose:

This study explores what it means to be a mission-driven arts organisation (MDAO) in the UK. Drawing on literature relating to mission and vision, artistic risk and rupture, and community engagement, the paper explores how Slung Low, a theatre organisation with a core staff of five, creates large and complex initiatives and seeks to make a difference to its local community.

Methodology/design/approach:

Using a single case study approach, this interpretive study makes use of qualitative data to offer in-depth context-specific knowledge about the role of MDAOs, including; interviews with members of the Slung Low team; attendance at company meetings; analysis of internal organisational documents, company website and artistic director’s blog; and articles about Slung Low from the local, national and theatre industry press. Data were gathered through a research collaboration with Slung Low which is supported by Paul Hamlyn Foundation.

Findings:

The results offer fresh insight into the multiple demands faced by arts organisations and the challenges they create for themselves, by exploring how MDAOs take a positive approach to rupture and rapid change. The study finds that by embracing risk and committing to an ambitious and provocative mission, small-scale arts organisations can achieve artistic, cultural and social objectives which far exceed their size.

Limitations:

This paper offers an organisational perspective on the research questions and so the people who take part in the company's participation initiatives were not interviewed on this occasion. However, the participant view will be the subject of further research with Slung Low.

Originality/contribution:

This research paper provides insight into one of the UK's most innovative theatre companies during a period of monumental change, and advances knowledge on mission-driven organisations by offering reflections on what it means to be an arts organisation which places rupture, risk and usefulness at the heart of its mission.

Keywords:

Mission and vision, theatre, risk and rupture, participation.

Abbreviations:

MDAO = Mission Driven Arts Organisation

CCC = Cultural Community College

INTRODUCTION

Arts organisations of all types and sizes must balance a range of challenges and shifting priorities in order to survive and thrive. These include audience development, artistic programming and financial stability. Subsidised arts organisations have the additional pressure of fulfilling funding and policy stipulations. Those supported by Arts Council England face an ongoing expectation to strive for the objectives of excellence and access, or, "great art and culture for everyone" (Arts Council England, 2019). This means that as well as create high quality art, organisations should cultivate a meaningful relationship with the public.

Using Battilana and Lee's (2014) definition of MDAOs as hybrid organisations which place the pursuit of social objectives at their core whilst also creating powerful art, this paper considers the role of small-scale arts organisations within local communities by exploring a theatre company which sees the contribution it can make to the people around it as central to its purpose.

A moment of rupture, such as an external shift in policy or funding (Hewison, 2014) or an unexpected internal change in key personnel or premises can instigate significant change within an organisation, which may be viewed adversely. In contrast, this paper presents a case study of a subsidised arts organisation which actively embraces rupture as a way to catalyse positive change, making it central to its mission and vision (Eckersall and Grehan, 2014). Slung Low, based in Holbeck, Leeds are renowned for their epic theatre productions in unusual spaces and their pioneering participatory work (Slung Low, 2019a; Henley, 2016). In 2018 the Slung Low team set themselves the new challenge of creating a Cultural Community College (CCC). This "place to come and learn, free at the point of use" (Slung Low, 2019b) pursues cultural, artistic and social objectives. The first term was launched in autumn 2018. Then, in early 2019, Slung Low relocated their premises to The Holbeck, Britain's oldest surviving working men's club, resulting in a period of rapid change for the company and the fledgling CCC initiative.

Risk-taking in the theatre industry has become something of a rarity in challenging times (Gardner, 2015). However, when many subsidised arts organisations in the UK are feeling the financial strain of cuts to central and local arts funding, perhaps even struggling to survive, Slung Low have embraced the opportunity to be risk-taking in their endeavours, giving

themselves permission to try, fail and learn. In fact, risk-taking is part of the company's mandate. They have not only embraced organisational change, but have actively sought to instigate change within their local community and beyond, to the point of creating rupture and interventions in the ways in which people engage with cultural activity. They have always enthusiastically sought new ways of working. It was this approach which meant that in the space of a year they were inspired to launch a hugely ambitious new participation initiative, move premises and then "say yes to everything" for the first month in their new home. This study explores what happened during that tumultuous year, with a view to achieving a deeper understanding of mission-driven arts organisations (MDAOs) and adding to the scholarly conversation on meanings of risk and rupture in arts management.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Mission as strategy

An organisation's mission defines its purpose. Its vision is the projected outcome of successfully pursuing that mission (Byrnes, 2015). Organisations use mission statements to communicate their values, beliefs and identity; internally to staff members and externally to users or other stakeholders. The process by which an organisation articulates its mission and plan for achieving it includes answering questions such as "who do we serve and what do they want? What difference do we want to make? What are our priorities? Where should we invest our time and money for best results?" (Dreeszen, 2007, p.67). Mintzberg (1987) considers strategy as positioning, meaning the way in which an organisation locates itself in its environment. This evokes strategy as the creation of a situation in which an organisation can thrive in some way, usually, but not always, through revenue generation.

Whilst it is understandable that artistic enterprises may wish to avoid management terminology traditionally associated with profit-making, like, “users” and “stakeholders” (Hill et al, 2018), non-profit arts organisations can use practices such as creating mission statements to set effective artistic and social objectives and evaluate their success (Boorsma and Chiaravalloti, 2010; Kaiser, 2010). Walmsley (2011) echoes this, stating that “in any sector of any industry, value creation should refer back to an organisation’s fundamental mission” (p.18). Through the strategic management process, an arts organisation can “understand and demonstrate its values, uniqueness, originality, individuality and overall organisational culture and behaviour” (Varbanova, 2013, p.59). A well-crafted mission can therefore benefit organisations which pursue objectives beyond financial gain. In a study of Chicago-based theatre company Timeline, Sterling (2008) credited the organisation’s exponential growth in austere times to a strict adherence to an ambitious mission statement: “(The TimeLine Experience – creating unique and insightful artistic works and theatre going experiences that excite artists and engage growing, enthusiastic audiences)” (p.18). This suggests two clear objectives. First, offering a collaborative and attractive work environment to entice highly skilled artists and committed volunteers. Second, creating high-quality, specialised productions (in this case, with historical settings and contemporary relevance).

Managing creative organisations, people and processes creates inherent tensions, which a clear mission can help to navigate (Davis and Scase, 2000). Hoyle (2013) advocates adherence to a strong mission for arts organisations to not only thrive in the future, but survive: “Tomorrow’s leaders will overcome challenges through innovation, entrepreneurialism and creativity, through partnerships and collaboration, and above all through a steely focus on

artistic mission” (p.14). This suggests the importance of new initiatives, such as the CCC, reflecting the overall identity and objectives of a MDAO. McDonald (2007) also highlights the relationship between innovation and mission in non-profit organisations, claiming that a mission which has clarity and motivates individuals “creates a climate in which innovations are given a fair chance to succeed” (p.256). While this relationship is often driven by necessity and influenced by external factors, this paper explores an organisation which is inherently innovative.

Voss, Cable, and Voss (2000, pp. 336-338) suggest five categories central to creating a mission statement for non-profit arts organisations; prosocial dimension (provide and expand community access to and appreciation for art); artistic dimension (pursuit of artistic creativity, innovation and independence, potentially expand the art form); financial dimension (maintain and increase financial stability and security); market dimension (provide customer satisfaction and good entertainment value); achievement dimension (pursuit of artistic excellence which is publicly recognised and contributes to the field). An organisation adds value through each of these dimensions, and if these values are shared, resources can flow more easily.

In contrast, Mullins (2002) advises caution over the value of mission statements, claiming that whilst it is important for organisations to have clear ideologies, they are ultimately only as effective as those at operational level who instigate them. Though a vital element of the foundation for strategic planning, Kaiser (2013) warns that drafting the mission statement can be a “frustrating exercise in semantics” which “should not obscure the importance of delineating explicitly the goals of the organization” (p.15). However, semantics can be crucial

because a carefully crafted mission which highlights the company's activities and accomplishments, whilst avoiding embellishments can directly impact an arts organisation's performance (Pandey, Kim and Pandey, 2017, p.404). Evaluating performance in non-profit organisations can be notoriously challenging because the "crisp" measurement of profit and loss is less applicable (Sawhill and Williamson, 2001). Therefore, non-profit arts organisations should proactively use mission statements as the basis for compiling a set of sequenced priorities which consider the interrelated goals of creating powerful art, developing audiences and increasing community engagement (Kotler and Kotler, 2000). Managers can then reflect on the fulfilment of these goals as a measure of success.

Rupture and risk

Rupture is often viewed as a "revolutionary concept" which may be criticised for causing negative outcomes. However, rupture can also be seen as "a dramatic assertion, appealing to its avant-garde precedence for art to breach the known and contemplate alternatives" (Eckersall and Grehan, 2014, p.2). This paper explores how the positive outcomes of rupture have inspired Slung Low in their practice, particularly in the creation of the CCC and the move to The Holbeck.

Crealey (2003) defines artistic risk as "risk that goes beyond financial failure" (p.28), while Crossick and Kaszynska (2016) assert that public subsidy enables non-profit arts organisations to "take risks with creative content and ideas" (p.8). Eisner (2002) suggests that one of the rewards of working in the arts is the surprise of the 'microdiscoveries' which transpire through creative processes, but that the pursuit of surprise necessitates a willingness to take risks. Hewison and Holden (2011) state "creativity is all about risk" (p.163) and argue that

identifying and mitigating risk are integral facets of arts management. An organisational culture which is open and encourages collaboration and creativity is typical of the theatre industry, and it can be argued this is how initiatives like the CCC are developed. However, Boerner and Gebert (2005) argue that “cultural openness in a theatre company comes with risk” (p.209) because of the significant effort of coordination required. This study explores the juxtaposition of an open organisational culture which cultivates ambitious creative products like the CCC, with the extensive strategic planning and coordination required to execute them.

Dempster (2009) presents an operational risk framework for the performing arts and creative industries, which draws on theories from the financial services industry, inspired by McMaster’s (2008) review of the arts in Britain. Dempster (2009) evokes McMaster’s (2008) suggestion that excellence is achieved through innovation, and innovation is born out of risk: “The desire and ability to innovate and the willingness to take risks is fundamental for any organisation striving to be excellent. Boards of cultural organisations must therefore be the custodians of innovation and risk-taking” (p.7).

This paper adopts Bilton’s (2015) definition of innovation in arts organisations as “the application of a creative idea, typically towards new products, new business models or management processes” (p.155). Bilton (1999; 2015) highlights the positive links between risk and innovation in the creative industries, but also warns that focussing on the novelty rather than the value of innovative practice carries risk which can destabilise the organisation. However, when it comes to participation initiatives, Leadbeater (2009) advocates innovation and ambition, arguing that organisations should strive to create “a portfolio of experiments” (p.21) which engage and challenge participants in different ways, “testing the limits of

collaboration rather than simply celebrating it” (p.26). There is limited empirical research evidence on how arts organisations approach risk and rupture in practice. This research considers the extent to which the risk of creating of the CCC and the rupture of the subsequent move to The Holbeck have affected Slung Low as an organisation.

The participation mission

The Warwick Commission report on cultural value (2015) asserts that a sea-change is needed to provide greater access to, and recognition of, creative activity across the UK. An initiative like the CCC may well be part of this sea-change, given Slung Low’s long-term commitment to creating opportunities for arts participation and other cultural activities in Holbeck. Matarasso (2019) argues “[Participation] is effective because from a very young age we learn about art by doing” (p.63) and “it does not follow that people who stay away from public cultural provision do not enjoy art” (p.64). This paper considers if and how initiatives like the CCC can extend this theory to consider cultural activity beyond artistic practice.

Ragsdale (2016, p.5) evokes the term “radical hospitality”, which was coined by the American theatre company Mixed Blood to explain their mission to remove barriers to accessing art. Ragsdale (2016) argues that radical hospitality can be interpreted in myriad ways by arts organisations; not only through examples like Mixed Blood’s pricing policy of cost-free admission, but through the places art is created, programming choices, the sharing of resources and approaches to participation.

Community engagement is an important part of the remit of subsidised arts organisations, and if done well it can enhance the artistic output of a MDAO as well as benefit the

participants (Kotler and Kotler, 2000). Mutibwa (2019) considers definitions of ‘community engagement’ in the performing arts, finding that some practitioners feel the term is problematic. Although the terminology around engagement and participation is fluid and continues to evolve, ultimately what matters most is that the relationships between arts organisations and citizens are meaningful. In order to achieve this, Clennon et al (2016) advocate including the participants in the development process to create a ‘community of practice’ and ‘collaborative governance’ of community arts initiatives.

Writing about arts participation in the context of museums, Simon (2010) argues, “From the institutional perspective, participatory projects have value when they satisfy aspects of the mission” (p.13). This study considers the mission of the CCC and whether it aligns with the organisation’s overall mission and values, providing benefits to the organisation, or, whether it is a detrimental distraction and in management terms a strategic threat rather than an opportunity.

Cultural activity and arts participation can affect individual and regional identities. In this sense, the idea of place is conceptualised as being fluid and constantly renegotiated (Anderson, 2015, p.181). Schlemmer (2017) conceptualises the community as an arts education space where an exchange of learning and teaching between practitioners and participants can take place, benefiting all parties. Previous studies have explored the value of large arts participation activities within inner cities (Clennon et al, 2016; Kay, 2000) but less is known about the contribution of smaller-scale arts organisations to local communities.

QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY

This study is conducted from the subjectivist view that an organisation should not be studied as an objective entity, but through the people who comprise it (Kolb, 2013), which evokes a social constructionist approach (Cunliffe, 2011). This philosophical position is suggested by the research domain of creative practice, which is not the miraculous product of one individual, unaffected by the world around them (Scott, 2008), but is produced and consumed socially and is open to interpretation and reinvention (Hallam and Ingold, 2007). The study applies inductive reasoning and a qualitative approach to understanding the practice of MDAOs through an exploration of “context, setting, and participants’ frames of reference” (Williams and May, 1996, p.54)

A single case design is employed to allow for meaningful engagement with the theoretical issues being explored (Boddy, 2016; Hartley, 2004). Case study research also enables under-theorised areas to be illuminated (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007) and offers flexible and opportunistic approaches to data collection. Case study can be employed either as a method (Yin, 2014; Berg, 2007) or an overall ‘design frame’ for the study (Thomas, 2011; Simons, 2009). This study utilises case study in the latter form, with it acting as a wrapper for the data collection methods, and as a type of narration within the interpretivist paradigm (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998).

Case study organisation

Slung Low theatre company was formed in 2000 and is run by a core team of five (artistic director, producer, community director, technical director and associate artistic director). The company’s status far outweighs its size. The team are renowned and respected for their

ambition, creative ingenuity, powerful storytelling and innovative approach to theatre-making; with a reputation for staging epic, political theatrical productions in public spaces (Henley, 2016). Examples include; *The White Whale* (2014), a retelling of *Moby Dick* which ran for two weeks with all 4000 tickets given away for free; “staged on boats and floating platforms, this ambitious, thoughtful production asks big questions about our responsibility to each other and the planet” (Gardner, 2014a); *Blood and Chocolate* (2013), told the story of workers in a chocolate factory during the First World War and involved 180 performers, 600 volunteers and walked an audience of 300 through the streets of York each night for three weeks; and *Camelot* (2015), a reworking of the King Arthur legend, told with 127 local performers in a production involving sword-fights, explosions and a tank in the streets of Sheffield.

Slung Low are also known within the theatre industry for their bold operational practices, such as: pioneering a “pay-what-you-decide” pricing strategy for all their work, where audiences decide what to pay after seeing a performance or taking part in an event (Gardner, 2014b); regularly preparing meals for their participants and audiences; and their company wage, whereby all members of staff and associate artists are paid the same rate (Tripney, 2016). They also run “How to” festivals to share skills with local community members and host performances from a wide range of touring theatre companies. They have always had the mission to be useful, purposeful and welcoming; utilising their building as well as their work to do this (Massie-Blomfield, 2018). They freely share their resources with other artists. Having moved into five railway arches in 2010 named the HUB (Holbeck Underground Ballroom), they created rehearsal and performances spaces and an allotment, plus they converted one area into a free hostel for artists passing through the area (Snow, 2016). In

January 2019, Slung Low relocated all their operations from the HUB a few streets away to The Holbeck, a working men's club with a long history but which had been struggling to survive in recent years. Slung Low forged a collaboration with the volunteers who had been running the club in order to secure its future and create a partnership which would benefit the company, the club and the local area (Morton, 2018). All this conspires to make Slung Low renowned for their "iconoclastic approach" (Mellor quoted in Hemley, 2018) to what an arts organisation can be and can offer.

I was engaged by Slung Low to observe the development of the CCC and offer insight on the process as an expert witness. The organisation was keen to be evaluated in order to learn and develop through an action research approach. This case study offers the chance to explore the theoretical concepts of risk and rupture in arts management and to draw out some of the inherent tensions of setting ambitious artistic and social objectives within MDAOs.

Methods and analysis

The methods employed within the case study are: semi structured interviews (face-to-face and telephone), document analysis (internal organisational documents and the artistic director's online blog), reflective notes taken during observations of CCC advisory panel meetings and CCC classes. The timeline covered by these methods (March 2018 to May 2019) addresses the period from Slung Low securing the funding for the initiative, developing the concept, launching it, CCC term one, the move to The Holbeck and CCC term two. The data also includes articles written about Slung Low in the local, national and arts industry press

covering the period 2016 to 2019 to add some external voices and consider reactions to the company's practices.

Data collection and analysis were conducted iteratively, with one helping to inform and refine the other. Thematic analysis was used because it is flexible, interpretive and can offer rich and detailed understanding of a research topic (Braun and Clarke, 2006). A process of open and axial coding enabled me to move from the lived experiences of the Slung Low team to the theoretical constructs. Emergent themes were: mission, rupture and risk, engagement and participation (including place/space), and management structures (Table 1).

Table 1: Data sources

<u>CODE</u>	<u>DESCRIPTION</u>
PRIMARY	
Int. a	Face-to-face interview 1 with Slung Low artistic director (Alan Lane) and producer (Joanna Resnick).
Int. b	Face-to-face interview 2 with Slung Low artistic director (Alan Lane) and producer (Joanna Resnick).
Int. c	Face-to-face interview 3 with Slung Low artistic director (Alan Lane) and producer (Joanna Resnick).
Int. d	Telephone interview 1 with Slung Low producer (Joanna Resnick).
Int. e	Telephone interview 2 with Slung Low producer (Joanna Resnick).
Obs. a	Observation 1 of CCC planning meeting, including Educationalists and Slung Low team members.
Obs. b	Observation 2 of CCC planning meeting, including Educationalists and Slung Low team members.
Obs. c	Observation of CCC classes.
Obs. d	Observation of theatre performance at Slung Low.
Slung Low INTERNAL DOCUMENTS	
Doc. a	Strategy document used to develop the company's mission.
Doc. b	Summary on the vision for the CCC.
Doc. c	Strategic overview of the CCC for Slung Low's advisory board.
Doc. d	Minutes from Educationalists meetings

SECONDARY	
Doc. e	Artistic director's blog
Other	Articles about Slung Low and the CCC from local and national news outlets and theatre industry publications, including; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Guardian • BBC News • South Leeds Life • The Stage

FINDINGS

Slung Low's mission: Embracing risk and provoking rupture

A recurring theme throughout the data is that Slung Low's activity is centred around the commitment to be useful: "It's our continued mission to attempt to be as useful as possible with public money in as many imaginative ways as we can...You are what you do. That's as true for organisations as it is for individuals." (Lane quoted in Gardner, 2018).

The company had recently made a conscious effort to crystallise their mission, vision and values, with the help of an external arts marketing consultant. They described this to me as figuring out how to "express the values we have lived" (Int. e), making their mission clearer for themselves and those around them. The aim was to decipher a "shared language" they could use in their communication to stakeholders. The mission statement which emerged from this process is: "to create cultural adventures that are available to everyone, working in and with our communities." The team's vision is "of a more equal society where everyone has access to a fulfilling cultural life," which is compelled by a belief that "access to culture is a fundamental part of a happy life. We believe that actions, however small, can have a big impact. We believe that culture can change our world for the better. We are uncompromising

in our beliefs.” The keywords representing the values which the company distilled their beliefs into are “inventive, audacious, uncompromising, useful, kind, open” (Doc. a).

The artistic director, Alan Lane, expands on how enlightening this process was in his blog: “We spent a long time talking about the distinction between reckless and danger, risk and hazard. Finding a way to express the determination and boldness and wildness which we work hard to maintain in everything we do in a way that might not appear unhelpfully combative.” (Doc. e). Through all of these discussions the following tagline emerged: “Culture can be dangerous in the right hands”. This shows the company’s commitment to pursuing the positive outcomes of risk and rupture, coupled with the challenge of communicating these principles in a way which would inspire rather than alienate people.

Slung Low have always been entrepreneurial and resilient. Their previous successes, such as Flood, (the year-long, four part production which was a central tenet of the Hull 2017 City of Culture programme and was seen by a total of 500,000 people) have meant that, relatively speaking, they have found funding easier to secure as they have grown. Therefore their risk-taking is not solely informed by the uncertainty of receiving public funding or the changing landscape of cultural policy, it is rupture of their own design because that is part of their mission: “We programme genuinely risky, radical work and we’re always full. Other venues in Yorkshire are now doing pay-what-you decide; considering Slung Low is a theatre company who are accidentally running a venue, that’s a lot of impact.” (Lane quoted in Tripney, 2016). In this 2016 interview with theatre industry publication The Stage, Lane recalls how an early Slung Low production opened their eyes to the possibility of risk-taking and thinking differently; “In that warehouse we discovered that if an audience is asked to behave like more

than a customer something happens. People don't think of it as a contemporary performance, with all its associated hang-ups. If you call it something else, if you call it an adventure, that gees people up – but you have to deliver on that, you have to make it exciting. (Lane quoted in Tripney, 2016). This philosophy began to become increasingly important to Slung Low's work: "You start realising; we're going to need an actual Land Rover and not a model of a Land Rover. I want to make audiences lean forward." (Lane quoted in Tripney, 2016).

Moving to the Holbeck – new context and management issues

The move to the Holbeck came about through uncertainty for both Slung Low and the working men's club. Slung Low were outgrowing the HUB and were facing some challenges to maintain the building. The Holbeck, though run by a group of committed volunteers, was struggling financially. Slung Low's proposal of paying the outstanding debt to the brewery and moving into the building to manage it and create a partnership with The Holbeck members was informed by the company's mission to be useful and so it was ultimately rupture of their own making. To focus on the positive aspects and mitigate any negative effects of this merger on the club members and local residents, the company came up with a plan to build trust:

"For the first four weeks we said yes to every practical request from the members: outside tap, new glass washing machine, re-varnish the bar and on. A month of grafting: we replastered, repapered and painted rooms for toddlers, bedrooms, offices for other theatre companies." (Doc. e).

The team referred to the HUB and latterly The Holbeck as "a way of welcoming people, not a set of bricks." (Int. b). It has always been important to the Slung Low team that one of them is on hand to welcome people into the building or to any of their events. They have made

capital alterations in order to fulfil this commitment at the HUB and the Holbeck so that audience members, participants, artists and passers-by feel welcomed; “it will be one of us” (Int. b) who personally deals with each person who wishes to engage with them. However, this approach has placed a strain on the company on occasion, never more so than after starting the CCC. The staff hours needed to run the college began to take its toll soon after launching. Each CCC participant received five points of contact from the Slung Low team, such as emails, texts and phone calls in an effort to encourage people to follow through on their initial enquiry about attending and keep the drop-off rate to a minimum. Then on the day of the class one of the five team members would be there “to say ‘hello, welcome’. That is the hook” (Obs. a). Offering a college of classes to the public inevitably meant that the schedule would run predominantly across evenings and weekends. So one of the biggest reasons behind the college’s success was also proving to be one of its main challenges.

This strain became even more prevalent during the period of rapid change created by moving into The Holbeck. The pledge to “say yes to everything” for the first month along with delivering the second term of the CCC meant that the team members were finding themselves working morning, afternoon, evening and weekend shifts in order to manage the occasionally conflicting artistic, social, cultural and economic demands of covering all the events on offer from Slung Low, plus the day to day running of the building as a social club. Additionally, they were increasingly being approached by local social enterprises regarding potential collaborations or just for use of the building. To try to alleviate this pressure, the team decided to trial closing Slung Low on a Monday to give everyone at least one day off a week, which at the time of writing, was having mixed results. The team resolved that employing separate front of house staff to welcome participants to the college was not in line with their mission

to welcome everyone themselves on an individual basis: “It’s who we are. It’s how we make an impact; person by person” (Obs. a). Although a vital part of the mission for Slung Low and the CCC, this presented complex management challenges:

“The Holbeck has already had such an impact on what we do and how we do it. The opportunities it offers are huge in our mission to be a useful and kind theatre company. But it requires that we look again at how we manage our work within the values we use to guide us- this Monday off might not be the answer, we’ll see but it’s one of the privileges of public subsidy that we get to scrutinise every aspect of what we do and how we do it. Even when the weekend is.” (Doc. e)

The Slung Low team were inspired by the models of mission-driven hybrid spaces like working men’s clubs and The Women’s Institute, whereby people are invited into a building to come and take part in an event, learn something new, or hear a talk on a particular subject. Through the college, they were able to offer events which gave people the chance to “come and listen to a really smart person talk about a really difficult subject” (Obs. b) which shows how the building has opened up new opportunities for the college. The move has been transformative because the team has also found that the new location is more convenient for many local people to access than the HUB. Theatres are often located in town and city centres, but Slung Low have always been committed to being in a community-centred space.

The former business model of the club was no longer financially viable and the subsidy from Slung Low makes for a strong reciprocal relationship: “We aren’t obliged to see the people who come into the club as customers, we can see everyone as participants, as partners. So saying yes to everyone who wants the space upstairs is the most useful thing we can do as we work to make The Holbeck vital to all.” (Doc. e).

The move to the Holbeck and the associated rupture has clearly affected the company profoundly, presenting a huge range of opportunities along with some challenges, but the Slung Low team are excited about the adventures which lie ahead: “Making the Holbeck a space vital to every part of our community is no easy mission - it’s a task worth our best and every effort” (Doc. e).

The Cultural Community College: A values driven mission

“On board a double decker in Holbeck, a small revolution in cultural education is brewing” (Love, 2019). This shows the reaction to the development of the CCC as a different way of thinking about arts participation and cultural education for adults.

Slung Low believe it is their duty as a subsidised organisation to explore “new ways of being” because that is “exactly what the privilege and opportunity of public funding is for” (Lane in Snow, 2018). Snow (2018) continues: “The college is part of the company’s mission to take the highest cultural activity and place it in communities that would not necessarily otherwise get it. It’s about disrupting the normal power hierarchy.” In one interview the team told me they had been inspired by John Berger’s (2001) book *The Shape of a Pocket*, in which Berger

describes a pocket of resistance held by two people in attempt to offer an alternative way of thinking to the current economic world order. The company has continued their pledge to transcend the customer relationship with audiences and participants into the CCC: “The belief we’re testing in action is that it is important for adults to learn to do new creative things...making people happy, beyond customers” (Doc. b).

Sharing the workload across a team of five means that Slung Low is a nimble organisation which moves fast. In an early meeting the team told me they had initially looked for premises for the college but had started thinking instead about something more flexible and might procure a bus because “the college having wheels seems really sensible” in terms of the “social economics” of the college being able to travel beyond Slung Low’s headquarters (Int. b).

Within a couple of months I went back to visit the team and I was given a tour of the newly acquired bus, painted in bright yellow, seats ripped out and with a plan in place for heating, new seating and technical facilities to convert it into two flexible learning spaces, one upstairs and one downstairs: “We chopped the floor out of the bottom last night, just before we finished the press release” (Lane in Youngs, 2018). On the front, where the destination should be, is Slung Low’s statement of intent for the CCC; “Culture can be dangerous in the right hands”.

A cornerstone of the CCC is to maintain the company's pricing policy, with all classes offered on a pay-what-you-decide basis: "Pay What You Decide at the HUB was an attempt to provoke a better conversation about the role of money in theatre and in the subsidised sector, and to do that as thought in action" (Doc. e). A concise vision and mission statement for such a project which align with but are separate to those of the organisation are valuable. These help determine not only the project's purpose, but the resources needed to deliver it: "the mission is very clear and simply stated: The creation of a cultural adult education programme based in Holbeck, operating beyond the market" (Doc. b). This also reflects the political stance of the company, to offer adult cultural education in a way which the market does not currently provide: "maintaining our core identity as theatre artists who strive to be useful, operating beyond the market and with a clear set of principles and values that sustain the company has never been more important with changes in society and the industry, and our community in Holbeck". (Doc. e).

Slung Low were continually exploring new ways of working which were not a customer relationship. They had found, like many arts organisations that "it can be a struggle to connect with the people where you are." (Int. e) and so endeavoured to come up with new ways to be useful. They wanted to build an infrastructure for participation in Leeds, and create opportunities for people to try things out. Therefore, the main objectives for the funding application for the CCC were; "being responsive, having a strong connection to the membership, pay-what-you-decide and a broad cultural offer" (Int. e). Slung Low continued this commitment to connect with the people around them with their marketing strategy for the CCC. Not only did the team hand-deliver a flyer to every home in Holbeck (in all weathers)

to launch each new term, but booking was initially open to Holbeck residents only for the first week, before being opened out to the wider Leeds area.

Part of the vision for the CCC was to broaden the definition of culture and show the power of someone being able to open their mind to something new. This came from the reaction the team had seen participants have to attending a CPR course months earlier. Lane argued it makes people feel “an inch taller” to know how to administer CPR and that owning this kind of knowledge gives people “one less thing to be intimidated by” and makes them feel “a little more citizen and a little less customer” (Int. b). The Slung Low team had also been inspired by new skills they had each learnt while creating Flood (such as first aid, forklift driving, food hygiene and rope access) and the confidence it had given them to have been given some new knowledge which did not necessarily have to be artistic.

The company therefore felt starting a cultural college was the “most useful and interesting thing” they could do with the “privilege” of their subsidy (Lane in Youngs, 2018), given the cuts to adult education budgets in the UK: “Everyone agrees access to cultural life is an important part of living well...But there are fewer places for adults to go learn new things that have nothing to do with your workplace” (Lane in Youngs, 2018).

The company have a mission to give everyone in Leeds the opportunity to learn CPR by 2023, on the basis that “CPR is the way to win the argument” of “It’s not about the knowledge, it’s about how it makes you feel to have the knowledge” (Int. b), which then paves the way for learning about cooking, stargazing, our place in the universe and all kinds of creative and cultural activity. They also wanted to find the links between owning different types of

knowledge because “learning CPR makes people believe they can get an allotment” (Int. b). For Slung Low “cultural learning is about confidence, citizenship and empathy” (Love, 2019) because “specific knowledge can bring general confidence” (Doc. e).

Another prevalent theme in the data of rupture and risk is doing something different and challenging:

“Exploring education for enjoyment’s sake, distinct from the demands of employment and operating beyond the access restrictions of the market, the Cultural Community College is the creation of a place designed to disturb the barriers to engagement in both adult education and culture”. (Doc. c).

The Slung Low team took an approach of “development in practice”; deciding to “disturb the barriers” and then figuring out how best to do this as they went along. Here the use of the word “disturb” shows how the college aligns with Slung Low’s inherent approach to rupture:

“Subsidy allows the privilege to imagine, test, create other ways of living. Ways beyond the market. Not only with the work we put on stages but with the structures we create to make that work. The chance to create mini worlds beyond the market, to imagine other ways of being, to find out together how else we can live. If our subsidy is used just to correct the market, or as seed funding for institutions to venture into the commercial sector then we are the least interesting versions of ourselves: and the least justifiable” (Doc. e).

A central tenet of the college is the importance of offering the opportunity for learning and playing; providing an environment for learning to do creative things and learning to do new

things. Early documents laying out the plans for the CCC state that it aims to be a “cultural education hub in Holbeck” (Doc. c): “From cooking to pyrotechnics, from sword fighting to star-gazing. A diverse curriculum drawing upon subjects from a full spectrum of culture” (Doc. c).

Slung Low set up a panel of “Educationalists” to act as a steering committee. The group includes arts participation practitioners, arts administrators and scholars from the local area. In collaboration with the Slung Low team this panel set the agenda for the college. In time Slung Low intends for the CCC participants to curate the college programme according to their interests because they want the participants to feel ownership of the college and its user-generated content.

When planning the programme, the team started with themes, rather than specific classes, such as the “pragmatic unusual”, “the pragmatic domestic”, “food”, “outdoors”, “arts”, “the romantic”, and “radical thinking” (Doc. b). Sometimes they would start with an idea and other times the teacher/practitioner would come first. They were also clear about what they did not want to offer. They did not want the primary focus to be theatre-making, in other words, what they do as a company. This aligns with Slung Low’s mission for the college to broaden the definition of culture. The CCC offering therefore extends Matarasso’s (2019) notion that those who might avoid public arts provision might still enjoy art, to include a range of cultural activity.

The CCC received funding from Paul Hamlyn Foundation for four years and was launched in autumn 2018. Courses range in length and level of commitment. There are one-off weekend

long sessions, other courses last for one day, or a term of eight weeks. The team planned to repeat some courses on weekdays for those not in employment, offer childcare where possible and design courses with a broad appeal. Slung Low also wanted to explore pedagogical approaches by working with a broad range of practitioners, teachers and workshop leaders in a bid to offer an alternative to learning environments from which people may have felt disenfranchised. In this regard, the company used terms such as “experts”, “talkers” or “practitioners” to describe those running the classes. The college also aligns with Slung Low’s mission to be welcoming and useful, with courses which are “Taught by specialists in their field in an inclusive, friendly, accessible style” (Doc. b). They wanted the college to avoid being seen as a purely social offering: “hence fire eating and junkyard challenge...It needs to not feel like woodwork at school” (Obs. a). The investment in quality is as evident in the CCC as it is in the high production values of the company’s plays, showing their commitment to the concept.

MDAOs: The way forward

In the article entitled, “Slung Low shows how we must embrace the shock of the new”, renowned theatre commentator Lyn Gardner (2018) states that arts organisations who avoid innovation, change and rupture in favour of maintaining the same approaches to management and practice are less likely to survive in the 21st century: “Those that embrace the technological, social and political disruptions as a challenge and an opportunity will reinvent themselves and the role of a funded theatre organisation” (Gardner, 2018). The CCC can be seen as an example of how Slung Low are at the forefront of this way of thinking; showing how arts organisations can embrace risk and rupture to catalyse positive change.

DISCUSSION

The findings extend knowledge on risk and rupture in the arts. Eckersall and Grehan (2014) state that rupture can have positive outcomes, in this case, offering opportunities for cultural education beyond the market. This paper has shown that these outcomes extend to arts management and organisational behaviour, as well as artistic practice.

“Deciding what we are going to do, then figuring out how to do it” is how one team member put it in an interview. This is arguably how all mission statements work, but what Slung Low do is something different. Their approach is to seek rupture, change and innovative new ways of sharing creativity. Dreeszen (2007) claims that organisations should ask questions of themselves to define their mission and strategic plan. For Slung Low, this list of questions is extended to include provocations such as; now we know how to do something, what else can we do? How can we be useful? This is less about the pressure to secure funding and more about their response to the world around them and exploring the most purposeful ways to use their subsidy. As a team they seem to thrive in an environment of risk and rupture. They embrace a policy of “thought in action.” As Lane’s blog states, it’s about “turning up” and “standing in the rain” until people trust you to do what you say you’re going to do. This expands on Mintzberg’s (1987) theory that through careful consideration of how it is positioned in its environment, a mission driven organisation can achieve objectives far beyond financial gain.

The study has also shown that although all the activity of an arts organisation should reflect the overall mission (Walmsley, 2011), there is also value in a large-scale initiative such as the

CCC having its own mission, which is separate from but aligns with the overall mission. This makes the initiative easier to explain to stakeholders, can make the division of resources clearer and also helps keep the initiative on track.

The CCC could be classed as an example of radical hospitality (Ragsdale, 2016) in its mission to exist beyond the market by encouraging local people to learn new cultural activities on a pay-what-you-decide basis, simply for the enjoyment of trying something new. This shows the need to expand theory on arts participation in subsidised organisations by thinking more broadly about creative and cultural activity, and exploring the power of learning for the sake of learning.

The findings also expand on Boerner and Gebert's (2005) assumption that cultural openness in an organisation comes with risk. Slung Low's move into the partnership with The Holbeck and the inherent challenges of "saying yes to everything" has certainly presented challenges and the human cost of delivering the college is significant. However, the company's "open-door" policy and insistence on welcoming and getting to know each person who enters the building has been vital in cementing their role in the community. This point also relates to Anderson's (2015) notion that a one-off project is less likely to affect regional identity in a meaningful way than a long-term embedded initiative like the CCC, which can connect communities and develop local cultural spaces.

Slung Low's commitment to a mission of usefulness is also achieved through a policy of visibility. Welcoming people into the building personally and "standing in the rain" shows a visible commitment to building trust and, in turn, a meaningful relationship with community

members. However, questions remain about how sustainable this approach is in the long-term. The CCC has expanded their portfolio of offerings but so far they have retained the same organisational structure of a theatre company, which shows the amount of strategic planning needed to execute this type of initiative. Slung Low now find themselves running a large venue, as well as the college and all the other activities they have always offered. Despite the inherent challenges – potentially running out of ideas (the law of diminishing returns), sourcing the teachers, participant drop-out rates, the staffing levels needed to facilitate five points of contact per participant - the reaction so far has been overwhelmingly positive, arguably making the CCC a catalyst for positive change in regard to how people can experience cultural activity. This study therefore also adds to the scholarly conversation on organisational hybridity (Battilana and Lee, 2014) in understanding how Slung Low have had to navigate the challenges of balancing the cultural, social and artistic demands on them, whilst maintaining their identity.

The CCC fits with the ACE goals of excellence and access given the response to the college to date. The Slung Low team felt that although this was not the biggest project they had ever undertaken, it had been the most well-received overall. This reflects their concerns about the lack of adult arts education opportunities in the UK. However, given the amount of planning and facilitating the college requires to be successful, perhaps this is not something that any arts organisation could offer. The findings support Leadbeater's (2009) assertion that arts organisations need to be innovative and take risks in order to create a portfolio of ambitious and meaningful participation initiatives. What this study has shown is that organisations also need to be aware of the potential impact of success.

CONCLUSION

This paper offers perceptive research into the inner workings of one of the UK's most innovative mission-driven arts organisations and its creation of a pioneering new initiative. It has captured a moment in time and provided a snapshot of a year in the life of a pioneering MDAO whose positive approach to risk and rupture is realised through their management structures and creative practice.

For Slung Low, "saying yes to everything" means showing commitment, being visible, building trust and setting up relationships for the future with the CCC participants, the board, the Educationalists, the club members and ultimately all members of the local community in Holbeck. The relationship between Slung Low and the community has developed not only in the use of the building but through the organisation's engagement strategies and management structures.

Through their mission-driven approach, Slung Low endeavour to invite people into The Holbeck building and feel inspired to try different types of experiences. The reaction to the CCC arguably shows a need to create more spaces where people who find it hard to engage in creative events, or think artistic places are not for them, can feel at ease. This micro study of an organisation with a proven mission to be useful and create meaningful relationships with the people around it shows the value of small MDAOs to the cultural ecosystem of the UK.

A proposed agenda for further study includes the participants' views on the CCC, along with further consideration of the managerial challenges and practicalities of offering this type of

initiative. This paper offers insight into a new chapter for this mission-driven arts organisation. My research will continue to follow the development of the Cultural Community College, along with Slung Low's future at The Holbeck.

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