

EPIDEMIC: OLD VIC NEW VOICES

Date	2012
Region	London
Artform	Musical drama
Number of participants	100 members of the community and 20 professional artists
Annabel Jackson Associates Ltd role	We evaluated EPIDEMIC for Old Vic New Voices
Methodology	Online survey of audience Online survey of participants

What happened



EPIDEMIC was a new multimedia musical performed by the OVN Community Theatre Company, a multicultural, intergenerational group of 120 individuals brought together especially for the project. EPIDEMIC looked at contemporary issues surrounding mental illness and obesity, exploring the stigmas, the science and the solutions. The production was the result of 18 months of research and local consultation with local residents and frontline health service providers. The script was written by Morgan Lloyd Malcolm and the music by Suzy Davies. Dance is incorporated into the performance, in partnership with Dance United.

Photograph by Guilherme Zühlke O'Connor

Some insights from evaluation

EPIDEMIC was a high quality production. 92% of the surveyed audience said the production was very good or good quality. 90% of

the cast thought it was definitely high quality. This was also the opinion of the evaluator, who attended a production.

“This was one of the best examples of community theatre I have ever seen: by, for, and about Londoners. It addressed serious and relevant issues that are rarely explored so openly. But it did it in a way that amused, saddened and entertained and thoroughly engaged the audience.”

“It was a really special event. I touched on so many issues relevant to me, my friends and family. It moved through so many different emotions, and I left with some resolutions of my own.”

EPIDEMIC contributed to the wellbeing of the participants. We mapped the emotional response: 92% of the surveyed cast and 64% of the surveyed audience said that EPIDEMIC made them feel happy. EPIDEMIC produced a strong feeling of community, during the rehearsals, through the production and in the messages of the show. 85% of the surveyed cast and 49% of the surveyed audience volunteered that the production made them feel more connected to other people.

“It restored my faith in people and knowing many of the cast have been through depression really inspired me that life goes on.”

EPIDEMIC communicated messages about health well. 97% of surveyed audience members and all the surveyed cast said that it was a good idea to encourage people to talk about obesity and mental health issues through musical theatre. 83% of respondents said that the show helped to remove some of the stigma around mental health. There was some concern that not enough people had seen the show, that it should have gone on tour, and that people who attended might already have been sympathetic to issues of mental health and obesity. Musical theatre was seen as a strong route to communicate public health messages because: it is fun, emotionally engaging, personal, sociable, open ended, accessible, memorable, new, and linking to a very popular interest.

“It touched on real issues but was so uplifting.”

“It tackled relevant issues in a way that wasn't pretentious or inaccessible.”

“Using some gentle humour and music is a great way to engage people with the issues, without feeling like you're 'educating' them. Instead you're opening a dialogue.”

“Making light of something dark in our culture allows us to see it without offence but more recognition/memory/understanding/compassion.”

“It's a fantastic media to reach people, and only music can connect to emotions in such a powerful way.”

EPIDEMIC reached new audiences. 45% of the surveyed audience had never been to an Old Vic performance before. 29% of the surveyed audience said they came to the performance because they were interested in the issues in the show. 77% of the surveyed cast said the show made it more likely they would come to see other Old Vic shows. 18% already come as often as they can. Respondents were encouraged to come to the Old Vic because of the quality, emotional impact and risky nature of the production, which was seen as complimentary to the Old Vic's other work.

Reflections

Two questions arise from this evaluation:

Can musical theatre affect wellbeing?

Musical theatre would appear to have most of the requirements already established in research to give strong influence over public behaviour (MINDSPACE, influencing Behaviour Through Public Policy): in that it has attractive role models/actors, a group effect, novelty, sub-conscious cues, strong emotional links, and a positive overall feeling. These characteristics should mean that messages communicated through musical theatre, and other art forms, are more memorable, more personally meaningful, more persuasive and less likely to arouse resistance. Our impression is that the arts empower and energise participants and audience members rather than depressing or overwhelming them. The key question is whether this impact sustains.

How is quality created and experienced?

Old Vic New Voices would seem to be producing exceptional quality through a relatively short period of intensive rehearsals, after a long process of R&D. This raises questions about what techniques the artistic team is using, how these techniques are adapted to different participants and contexts, and how participants experience the techniques.