**Setting up and running a Scratch Night**

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Theatre Scratch Night is a collaboration between [UnderConstruction Theatre Company](http://underconstructiontheatre.com/) and [The Old Fire Station](http://www.oldfirestation.org.uk/event/theatre-scratch-night-2/).

Arisen out of the desire to share ideas and new work with audiences, producers and other theatre makers in the city of Oxford, UnderConstruction has developed a platform for artists, performers, writers and directors to share work in a theatre space and get feedback from a supportive audience.

Theatre Scratch was launched in July 2012, and happens in the theatre at The Old Fire Station once a season.

The night will usually consist of three pieces performed with feedback given afterwards in a facilitated discussion. UnderConstruction Theatre receives applications from artists and companies to perform and curates the pieces and facilitates the feedback each night.

This paper shares the learning acquired after two years of running the night, from practical logistics to wider philosophical thinking around sharing work in progress.

**The Launch: July 2012**

We launched the night at The Old Fire Station in July 2012 and have since curated 12 nights with 35 unique performances. Initially it was a monthly occasion, and launched around the same time as Playground, a largely visual art platform for artists to share work, also at OFS. It seemed like the right time to launch such a night, as there were no other regular sharing forums for theatre artists in Oxford. OFS were keen to provide space for local artists despite no guarantee of large box office sales, and agreed to give UnderConstruction Theatre free use of the theatre every Scratch in return for curating and organising the night. Performers have primarily been from Oxford or the wider county however we have had a number of companies come from further afield, including Gloucestershire, Winchester, Berkshire and surprisingly given its offering of a myriad of Scratch Nights, London.

After an initial flurry of applications in the first six months, applications plateaued; perhaps there was not enough new work being made at any one time in the region to fill a monthly night? In November 2013 we switched to organising three Theatre Scratches per year in Spring, Summer and Autumn. This has had numerous benefits as organising a monthly night, and juggling numerous application forms for different months was a significant administrational task. The up side since this shift to seasonal nights has been that deadlines for applying can be more distinct. We have since set this to one month prior to the Scratch, which seems to be an optimum time for artists to know whether their work should be ready or not, without being too far in the distance for them to be able to commit.

**How long should a piece be?**

From the offset we established that pieces performed should be a maximum of fifteen minutes long and most have used all of this allocated time. Feedback for each would also last up to fifteen minutes. There would be space for three pieces per night. We have had four on one occasion but this proved to be too many. We have also had only two per night and this has provided more time for feedback discussion but this did not always mean more things of worth were shared; it is surprising how much constructive feedback you can convey in fifteen minutes.

 Whilst we have had a number of short plays and monologues, most have been an extract from a longer piece. Some artists have chosen to present fifteen minutes of work from a number of moments across the piece, and others have chosen to present the first fifteen minutes as a way of establishing it to the audience. Both approaches have worked equally well. Artist’s may be wrestling with a particular moment in a piece, in which case focusing on this and asking for feedback from an audience on the dramatic presentation of that particular section would be most valuable in this case. If an artist wants feedback on the overall presentation, questions such as ‘who is my audience?’, ‘is the message I am trying to convey coming across?’, ‘are the transitions between characters clear?’, tend to be most useful.

What we have found is that creating fifteen minutes of work especially for the Scratch, (reshaping an idea just to fit this fifteen minutes, condensing and cutting things) has not worked, as the feedback given can only be based on what the audience has just seen and this does not prove fruitful for an artist if this is then not going to be what they develop further.

**How to give feedback?**

One of my main considerations when establishing the night was how to facilitate the feedback. As host for the evening, one of my biggest concerns was nobody saying anything and being faced with a silent audience expecting thoughtful and provocative comments to come from the chair! As a result I focused on how to establish an encouraging environment where both audience and artists felt comfortable and relaxed enough to proffer thoughts. I came up with a three-stage feedback process. After initially introducing the act and the company (who they are, what they are going to perform etc.), followed by the performance, I would ask audience members to reflect on what they had just seen and discuss with the person sitting next to them. Then one of them would be encouraged to come forward and note on two flipcharts “something they enjoyed” and “something that could be developed”. Following this I would then use notes on the flipchart paper to commence a discussion with the artists, asking members from the audience to comment further on their points if they wished to.

 Initially this system worked very well, and it was very handy to have bullet pointed feedback already noted down to hand over to the artists at the end of the night as points for reflection. However audiences soon got very comfortable with giving feedback. Many people returned to each monthly night and became familiar with the setup and I found myself having to rein everyone in to keep to the fifteen minutes allotted to discussion of each piece. After a month or two of using a timer, with five minutes allotted to each of the three stages, I decided that I needed to get rid of the writing stage in order to cut down on time. I also did a bit of research about good feedback, and went to a forum event by Getinbackofthevan who were also researching the nature of Scratches, and as a consequence stumbled on an excellent article about Liz Lerman’s ‘Critical Response Process’, a system devised by the choreographer to aid dancers, and other artists, to give helpful feedback to each other. As Lerman herself states it is ‘a simple process with a lot of complexity buried within it.’[[1]](#footnote-1) I took the main elements of this process and shaped it in order to fit within the allotted fifteen minutes. As a result the following process was devised:

* Artists submit two or three questions they want to explore on their application form. Together we shape these by email to get the most useful response on the night.
* I offer these questions up before the piece is performed for the audience to bear in mind whilst watching
* The piece is performed
* I ask the audience to discuss with the person sitting next to them what their initial response is for up three minutes to gather their thoughts (this is also handy time for the artists to get a drink of water and for me to lay seating out for us on stage)
* I ask the audience to start by commenting on things they enjoyed; what was inspirational, familiar, inspiring, unusual, thought provoking etc.
* We move on to talking specifically about the questions posed by the artists at the beginning. If this seems to be helpful, and what the artist was looking for, we continue, otherwise I will ask the artist to interject / clarify / ask another question / reshape their question
* The artists comment further and ask for any specific additional feedback from the audience in the time remaining.
* *During all of this, a volunteer is also making notes on a flipchart for the artists to take away with them to look over after the night.*

This has to date worked very well, and is continually tweaked ever so slightly but on the whole gives the best possible chance that the feedback that is given is most useful to the artists within the constraints of the night. A big key to success is the quality of the questions that artists pose about their work as this will help determine the feedback of the quality received. I ask artists for their questions in their application form, and this is an effective indicator of where they are at with their thinking. If their questions are not thought out enough I work with them to reshape their questions, giving them an example of what makes a good question to try and arrive at something an audience will be able to answer. “Was the mother’s intention clear at the moment she left home?” is a more useful question than “Did you find the mother believable?”, for example. The one important principle reinstated at every night is that the feedback should be useful to the artists and that if it is not the feedback they need then we will move on. We want to avoid artists become defensive about the feedback they are receiving because of misplaced negative feedback. This constant principle has meant that the large majority of feedback has been constructive. In the majority of cases, even if an audience member has found that the piece presented is not their cup of tea, the feedback given will still be thoughtful and based on what the audience is trying to achieve, rather than whether they liked it or not.

**How to know what artists to select?**

After dealing with how to give feedback, a large point for consideration was how to know what work to show as part of the Theatre Scratch Night. I was keen that it should be open for anyone to apply, but people quickly started to ask me questions about whether their work was appropriate. I had to adjust my thinking and consider each piece and question as they came. I quickly established that this wasn’t a night for performing music. Oxford is full of open mic nights and I felt that musicians already had lots of opportunities to perform in front of an audience. This night was for theatre performers, and was established due to a lack of forums for theatre artists to share their work in the city. What did I mean by theatre however? I was open to dance and in fact on the second night a dance company, The Mostly Everything People, performed and was well received by the audience. Their piece had an inherent theatricality and strove to tell a narrative despite making use of an abstract performance style, and so the theatre audience gave it feedback based on the success of them doing this. The company therefore got different comments from what they could have received at a dance scratch and was a useful way of testing the work in different contexts.

I established thereafter that the Theatre Scratch was open to all art forms as long as there was a theatrical motivation underlying the piece, employing dramatic storytelling in one way or another. Since this point we have had a musical folk operetta, monologues, radio plays, clown mime, comedy sketches, script in hand readings, and more rehearsed plays, devised and improvised work. Since we have launched the Theatre Scratch, other groups have approached Arts at the Old Fire Station about organising other work in progress nights, and there are now both a seasonal Dance Scratch (organised by Oxford Dance Forum) and a Comedy Scratch (organised by the Dead Secrets). This has resulted in more distinction between different forms of performance and different artists will on the whole select which night is relevant for them. However I believe there is opportunity for cross art-form fertilisation and we as Scratch organisers have a chance to recommend the various forums to artists depending on the audience they wish to present to.

**Quality:**

This leads me to think about quality of the work. Should there be a level of quality expected by our audience? Can the night be open to performances from students, amateurs and professionals? Should it be for those early in their career or more established artists?

This is a difficult one. Firstly what do we mean by quality? What some people see as good theatre, might not be the case for others. It is clear as curators of the night that we want people to have a good experience, and we don’t want to programme bad work with no artistic merit. However it was also important for us that the Theatre Scratch was somewhere people who have not had the opportunity to perform their work previously, now found a forum to do so, and that might entail nervousness, patchiness, or lack of understanding about technical aspects and I did not want to exclude people on this basis. We have had a wide range of work in the two years of the Theatre Scratch both in form and content. Work by professionals has not always been more successful than that shown by students and amateurs. *IPhone64* by John Harper, a ‘Writing for Performance’ student at Ruskin College at the time, was extremely well crafted, amusing, and an unusual theatrical depiction of the future use of robots.

The variety within one night has proven to be an enjoyable aspect for audiences, and the feedback for one piece can inform how feedback is given to another, which is a useful exercise. Even on nights where there has been a piece that is clearly at the very early stages of its development process, if the idea is strong, or has an unusual take, then the discussion following continues to be insightful and just as important a part of the night as the performances. In fact, the conversation afterwards can be the most challenging and interesting part of the evening for audiences. As stated above, the quality of the questions is a good indicator of a well thought out piece, and bad questions in an application form are a good filter. It is not enough to state that “I want to show my work in front of an audience” as a reason for performing in a Scratch or “Did you enjoy it?” as a question. Sharing new work in front of an audience is an exposing process especially when seeking honest feedback afterwards. It is important as curators of the night that we have the artists’ needs at the forefront, and do not programme work that might not yet be ready for this platform. It is best to work with the artists to get them ready for this process, and give them an understanding of what this entails, rather than encouraging an artist who is not ready to perform simply to fill a performance slot.

**Future plans:**

As we move in to year three of Scratches at the Old Fire Station we are evaluating what we have achieved to date. After a year of the Theatre Scratch I felt that there needed to be a second stage offer and applied for and received funding from Arts Council England and Oxford City Council Culture Fund for a Theatre Scratch Residency. This was a two-week residency for one company who had previously performed at the Theatre Scratch, complete with rehearsal space, marketing and technical support, a £1000 bursary, time with me as a dramaturg and a ticketed showcase performance in the theatre. Applications were received in March and Steve Larkin, spoken word poet, was awarded the residency to develop his piece *TES*, a contemporary reimagining of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy.

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We are now evaluating the success of this project. As a result of the Residency Steve was able to develop his show with the support of a production team, and put on a full-length piece with a fully realised soundtrack that is now ready for an international tour of Canada in the summer, and hopes to tour it in Britain in 2015.

It was interesting that the majority of artists who applied for the residency were individuals; writers without a company or a Director. Does this suggest a gap in provision for this group and a need for more support for writers to get their work out there? Indeed, many writers approach me in regard to the regular Scratch nights, looking for actors to read or perform their work and are unsure about where to start. With this in mind, the residency could be tweaked in future years to provide the support writers need, complete with a whole team, if this is the target group we wish to attract. Or at the very least, a budget that enables flexibility once the artist or company is selected, to reflect the needs of the group rather than a team with roles affixed prior to application.

As previously mentioned, since launching the Theatre Scratch in July 2012, numerous other artist-sharing platforms have emerged in Oxford, predominantly at the Old Fire Station. Playground continues, along with Meeting Points (a dance focused collaborative night), The Listening Room (an Indie music night), Short Stories Aloud (short stories by well-known authors read by professional actors), Hammer and Tongue (a spoken-word night), and Oxford Improvisers (an improvised music nigh), all as part of the Old Fire Station’s Tuesday programming. In addition Dead Secrets have launched a seasonal Comedy Scratch and Oxford Dance Forum have moved what was an occasional Dance Scratch at other venues to become a regular seasonal night at OFS.

 There is clearly a desire at least on the part of the organisers to share new work with audiences, experiment with form, and expose the process of developing work. Audiences, whilst often small and intimate, also remain loyal to coming and seeing new work and sharing their responses. As curators of the nights we now face a challenge in continuing to attract new artists to these nights. Many artists who have already performed at the Theatre Scratch are not returning just yet because they are still working on the pieces they first scratched in 2012 – the life cycle of a theatre show can quite easily be two to three years. Are there enough artists in and around Oxford to sustain these nights? Despite this, feedback received from the artists who have performed in a survey conducted last year is overwhelmingly positive about the experience they undertook, with many surprised at how useful the process had been, not only in terms of feedback, but as a reflective process for themselves. Writer and actress, Gaye Poole, who has since gone on to get her first funding for touring her piece *Memory Exchange*, writes ‘I would have left the piece languishing in a drawer if I hadn’t been prompted to try it out at Scratch Night.’ Joe Graham, professional playwright stated, ‘Theatre Scratch Night gave us a great opportunity to try work onstage in front of an audience prior to staging. You just don’t get that! Well structured, relaxed and well presented. It made us look good and left us with ideas to take away and try.’

In conclusion, setting up and running a Theatre Scratch Night is a continually evolving process, which responds to the needs and demands of the artists around you. As a curator of such a night there is a balance between flexibility and openness to ideas and work, as well as defining a night for an audience to know what to expect and why to come. Indeed, artists too are asking ‘is this a night for me to show work?’ ‘Will it benefit me?’ ‘Is it the audience I want to show work to?’ In many ways it is much like the work of a dramaturg – being both on the inside and the outside of the process, interrogating and shaping the format, and then letting artists and audiences experience it and respond, and then adjusting accordingly.

*Lizzy McBain, June 2014.*

1. <http://www.lizlerman.com/crpLL.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)