

DYNAMIC FLIGHTS





Overview

From 2023–2025 Maya Productions delivered a two year Creative Mental Health project, in partnership with SYHA – Dynamic Flights.

The main funder for the work was the Baring Foundation, and was granted as part of a funding round in response to their Creatively Minded, Ethnically Diverse publication which noted that: “few diverse-led, organisations were specifically devoted to arts and health work and that ethnically diverse people were not well represented, either as service users or within the workforce of the arts and health organisations” (2020)

The dual aims of this project have been:

To deliver a creative participatory project with people living with Severe Mental Illness, leading to a new piece of theatre.

To develop the skills and career progression of Black, South Asian, East Asian and global majority (global majority) arts practitioners, to work with participants with mental health needs.

In year one we delivered 12 weekly sessions in two residential schemes (24 sessions in total) for people living with Severe Mental Illness. Our Year One report can be found [here](#).

In year two we returned to the two schemes and delivered 45 sessions between April and November 2024, then produced a new piece of theatre that has stemmed from those workshops, performing in 6 venues in Sheffield and Doncaster in March/April 2025.

Our aims in more detail were to:

- Increase the pool of Global Majority artists in South Yorkshire working in arts & mental health, through recruitment, training, delivery and mentoring over a period of time.
- Work with participants, cocreating work across different artforms, supporting their wellbeing and social connections through this work, and cocreating ideas, themes, and pieces which would feed into a new piece of theatre.
- Produce a new piece of theatre to perform back at the schemes and to a range of public audiences, raising awareness of mental health and creative mental health in an inclusive and engaging medium.

We are very grateful to the funders who have made this work possible:

Arts Council England, Baring Foundation, Birley Ward LAC, J.G. Graces Charitable Trust, the Scurrah Wainwright Trust, Sheffield Bluecoat and Mount Pleasant Educational Foundation, Sheffield Church Burgesses Trust, Sheffield Town Trust.

We were also supported by Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield Theatres and darts.



THE PROJECT IN FIGURES

Working at Lister Project (S12) and Beaufort Project (S10)

Year 1: We delivered 24 sessions and we worked with 19 participants

Year 2: We delivered 45 sessions and we worked with 16 participants

In total across the project we employed **29** artists **23** of whom are global majority background artists.

Of these **29** artists, **8** undertook training & mentoring and **5** developed their roles from project facilitators to creative team.

We delivered **6** performances to **105** audience members, at Beaufort Project residential scheme, Lister Project residential scheme, SYHA main offices, Flourish Creative Mental Health project, Sheffield Hallam University Performance Lab, and Creative Directions groups at darts (Doncaster Community Arts).

Our audiences were a mix of participants and staff, other creative health groups, sector staff (e.g. Housing, NHS/Health & Social Care), students, arts professionals and friends and family. The show was free to attend. We met all targets set out to our funders excepting the slightly lower number of participants than the number of people we hoped to reach.



THE PLAY

DYNAMIC FLIGHTS BY TAIR RAFIQ

With music by Dan Loops

It's nearly spring and the sun's out. Upbeat and energetic Bee decides today is the perfect day to fix any past discords with their best friend Dee by exploring nature on a hike. But all Dee wants is the comfort of their bed.

Uplifting, joyful and funny, this heart-warming story about friendship and self-discovery reminds us that no matter who we are, we all need kindness, understanding and access to nature.

***"Shake the dust from my feet, and the blues from my brain.
I can feel like a whole human being again!"***

Dynamic Flights the play was a key culmination of the project. Sessions with residents involved a range of different artforms and work around themes, characters, locations, set design ideas, script readings and music for the show which all fed into the piece. The characters in the play were not based on people who were part of the project.

Tair the writer weaved together ideas that came out of sessions to create a surreal and humorous feel to the show. Some of the characters aren't human, and one actor plays more than one role. There's also a mysterious character who we only hear through the sound design, as a recorded voice.

The hour-long show is designed for community spaces, without theatre lighting, and audiences are told about the sound effects in the show (including recorded voice) in advance. An introduction to the project is given and performers introduce their characters before the show begins.



WHAT WORKED AND HOW WE MEASURED THIS

We measured how the project was doing throughout its life. We did this through participant feedback, staff feedback, artist feedback (both facilitators and Production team/artists) and audience feedback.

Additionally, we worked with external evaluator Dawn Cameron in year two to reflect on the impact of the project on the artists. Work with Dawn is contributing to building an evaluation framework that can be used across Maya's projects, embedding learning and reflection more deeply into the organisational culture.

Artists used artist logs to feedback throughout the project process, undertook interviews with our independent evaluator and anonymous surveys.





THE ARTISTS

We worked with a larger creative team than we originally planned – partly to continue the artist development strand of the work and ensure we brought more project artists into the production. This has felt like a particular success, with one of our core artists reporting that they have already secured work they wouldn't have been able to before this project.

There are specific examples of career progression here:

- Y1 movement facilitator became show choreographer (first time choreographer role)
- Y1 trainee who became Y2 facilitator and then show designer.
- Y2 music facilitator became show composer.
- Y2 theatre facilitator became show assistant director.

Artists had a highly positive experience (and also felt comfortable sharing elements that we could do differently next time). Those artists who developed their roles from project into production all reported that it had been beneficial career wise and that they had much more experience of working in Mental Health settings.

“It provided a holistic view of the different stages of work within mental health from workshop to performance”.

“It has shown me first hand the positive impact it can have for people to be involved from the beginning to then see the finishes article of a project. They feel supported & valued”.

“My expectations were exceeded. I found the whole experience enriching and educational. The production we created became something truly special and is something I am proud to have had a role in creating”.

“As an early career theatremaker, who wants to be a director, I don't currently have enough formal directing experience (professional assistant directing experience) to be considered for professional directing or assistant directing roles. Working as AD / SM on this project has already lead to another ADing opportunity, so I feel it is already opening doors creatively and professionally”.

“Working on Dynamic Flights as a theatre artist delivering sessions also taught me a lot about my own values and the type of work I want to create in the future”.

“Both parts of this experience have provided the opportunity for me to build my network with other South Yorkshire creatives and venues which is invaluable as a local artist”.

“I have gained a greater appreciation of people with mental health needs, and that they have a great deal to offer as creatives. There is hidden talent within them that just needs the right stimulus and nurturing. Creative activities have an important role in the care and self-esteem of people living with mental illness”.

“I remember sitting there as people were coming in at Lister and I was holding my breath, I had no idea how many people would come. And then the room started to fill up and there was that buzz that happens before a play begins, and one of the actors was chatting with the residents, who said they'd never been to see a play before. That person was laughing and clapped the hardest at the end, and it was really magical”.

QUOTES FROM ARTISTS

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LUKE BYEFORD

Sheffield premiere

**DYNAMIC
FLIGHTS**
By Tair Rafiq



ISABELLA HART

Sheffield premiere

**DYNAMIC
FLIGHTS**
By Tair Rafiq



LINDA-RAY NDLOVU

Sheffield premiere

**DYNAMIC
FLIGHTS**
By Tair Rafiq



Here is a complete list of the 29 artists and professionals we worked with on Dynamic Flights.

Ada Onyekwelu	Administrative Producer Y1, Y2 & Production
Cara McAleese	Creative Producer - Y1, Y2 & Production
Dan Loops	Composer & Artist Facilitator - Y2 & Production
Florence Gill	Assistant Director, Stage Manager & Artist Facilitator - Y2 & production
Jen Watts	Production Manager - Production
Jake Pool	Set Construction - Production
Jose Guillermo Puello	Sound Designer - Production
Martin Philpot	Graphic Designer
Minder Kaur Athwal	Assistant Producer - Production
Monika Dutta	Artist Facilitator Y1, Artist Mentor Y2
Nadia Emam	Artist Facilitator - Y2
Nisha Lall	Artists Facilitator Y1 and Choreographer - Production
Suzanne Gorman	Artistic Director and Director - Production
Tair Rafiq	Writer Y2 & Production
Thahmina Begum	Artist Facilitator Y1
Thananya Kaewsanthia	Artist/Facilitator Yrs 1 & 2 - Set and Cosumer Designer - Production
Linda Ndlovu	Actor - Research and development workshop & Cast
Isabella Hart	Cast
Luke Byeford	Cast
Chim-DiUgada	Videographer Y1
Dawn Cameron	Evaluator
Diana Miranda	Social Media Coordinator
Ellie Collyer-Bristow	Casting
Gemma Thorpe	Photography
Jane Titterton	Clinical Supervisor
Niharika Jain	Marketing and Audience Development Lead
Rajnish Madaan	Videographer - Production
Richard Peralta	Actor - Research and Development Workshop
Sabrina Laurison	Actor - Research and Development Workshop





THE PARTICIPANTS

Participants

Participants let us know about the impact of the project in a less structured way. We found that while interviews worked for a few participants, the most effective way to discuss this was check outs and quotes at the end of the session and comments during the session. Surveys were not possible for most of the participants and neither were any scales (e.g. [WEMWBS](#)).

We saw the impact through the progression for some participants, e.g. participants who did not talk very much initially having the confidence to take on spoken word/rap parts in co-written songs within the group setting, towards the end of the project. We also saw the huge enjoyment for participants when watching performances and recognising the ideas and elements they had worked on brought to life.

Another example is participants making a significant effort to push through their barriers to engagement and take part, even when they were very unwell (e.g. hearing voices within the session).

Participant quotes:

quote from support worker 'J has quite severe anxiety and agoraphobia so this is amazing he has come to this session'

'I love this session! It gets me out of my myself, so much better than sitting in my room!'

'It's good to get out, because when you do you see something you wouldn't have. In these sessions we do things we wouldn't usually.'

'If you have issues or health issues it gives you focus, on the play or creative activities. You're learning different skills and discussing stuff with people and all of that is giving your mental health problems a break'

'I did that, that part was me'

'I struggle with my creativity but I feel like this pushes me.'

(in response to 'how do you feel? at the end of a session) *"More peaceful than before"*

'It might make other people less sad if they read it' (the word piece collage)

You can also find out more about participant's perspectives in our year one film too. [HERE](#)



THE AUDIENCE

A total of 55 audience members completed feedback forms out of a total of 105 audience members, giving a response rate of 52%. 47 of them listed the play as excellent or very good

Audience members were asked to select which of a number of statements they agreed with in respect of the show.

- 73% agreed was 'It was well thought out and held my attention'
- 65% felt it was uplifting.
- Asked to summarise their first thoughts about the show, audience members tended to discuss the quality of the characterisation, the authenticity of the story and the ways in which the show represented the lives and experiences of those living with mental health challenges.
- A number of audience members also made reference to the musical aspect of the show and to its humour. These qualities were very much appreciated by audience members.
- Audience members were asked to use up to three words to describe how they felt about the show (shown on the word cloud below).





WHAT WE LEARNT

What were the challenges, and what have we learned?

The main challenge in the work was engagement of participants - which was lot harder than it had been on similar projects at one of the schemes in the past. We did find out that the level of need of people being referred into the schemes has risen, meaning that barriers to engagement are higher than before. The high staff turnover and understaffing at the schemes also presented a barrier in engaging participants.

We have reflected at length on why participant engagement was low. We drew on a lot of past experience working in these schemes. We know we did the right things in terms of early involvement/co-design before sessions began, and co-creation within the sessions themselves. We sought regular staff feedback, as well as input into planning. We provided a wide range of activities for a wide range of participants. Learning about external factors (commissioners reporting higher support needs for people moving into schemes) was useful.

Reflecting back, if we were working in those spaces again we may shift the balance from being very responsive to being more structured and perhaps providing more clarity for participants about the different activities they would be engaging in. We may have an artist structure working with one very experienced artist throughout and a range of artists developing their skills in Mental Health settings. We did this in Y1 with success and in Y2 we worked with more artists, with a focus on mentoring and supervision to reflect their level of experience

Performing to a range of audiences we found that a range of marketing approaches needed and we needed more lead up time ideally to implement this.

We faced the usual challenge of trying to be as ambitious as possible and strive for the highest quality production possible, within a tight budget. We feel we achieved this and came in on budget but it was an intensive process - and we would have liked to do more shows!



We learned more about how long a process real artist development can be when working in Creative Health settings – it's different to a traineeship in theatre processes in a theatre, and so much of it needs to be rooted in practical experience of all the different things that work and don't work in a session. In particular, working only with global majority artists means that the pool is much smaller in the region. This means that inevitably that within a cohort will be quite a range of skill/experience level and projects needs to be responsive to this, through mentoring and opportunities but also to mentor and lead wider aspects of the project. We trialled clinical supervision for the first time during project delivery which artists reported as useful.

We learned that in using cross-art form activities when working with participants, in a cocreation process such as this, we are able to create work that can allow for multiple levels of connection – supporting the breaking down of barriers to theatre. For Dynamic Flights the use of music, song and comedy made the play accessible as well as entertaining. The set design was particularly reflective of the art/crafting that took place in the workshops – and created a bold, simple visual language which again provided another route into the play. In addition – in its music theatre form, Dynamic Flights is contributing Maya Productions development as a company that specialises in music theatre and musicals.

As an organisation it is the first time that Maya Productions have worked in Mental Health, and it has equipped the organisation to do more of this work and generally become more aware of the growing Creative Health field. This will provide future creative and funding opportunities for the organisation.

Conclusion

Dynamic Flights has been such a rich project in terms of all the different creative facets and opportunities and the range of people who've been part of the project, from participants to clinical supervisors.

There were a lot of elements to pull together and we've learned from each stage. We now have a blueprint for working in this field in the future, plus a bank of artists locally who have gained the experience they need to work with us.

There is no denying the challenges of working in this context – but also the huge benefits for people taking part and the brilliant creativity that they bring. We will seek out more of this work and continue to work to support and develop artists from Global Majority backgrounds in the region to work with us.





THE FUTURE

We learned that it feels essential to continue this work, and this has led to a successful joint funding bid to YPERN (<https://y-pern.org.uk/>), to continue a Global Majority Artist training scheme in South Yorkshire, with darts from September 2025 to December 2026.

Having reflected on the show we are thinking about how we re-tour it to share it, and who with and for. It is likely we will apply for an ACE grant to continue to work with writer Tair Rafiq and secondary schools we have an existing relationship with through our Routes to Roots project to workshop it further, and develop educational resources to support it touring to secondary school - supporting its connection to the curriculum, and work for young people in relation to mental health.

See below for a highlights video.

VIDEO

Show photography by Gemma Thorpe
Workshop photography by project facilitators
Highlights video by Rajnish Madaan



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