



Annie Rigby is a Theatre Director and founder of Unfolding Theatre, a company whose shows sit within a participation programme of artistically ambitious projects with children, young people and community groups.

She graduated from Downing College, Cambridge, with a degree in English Language and Literature in 2001 and was Northern Rock Foundation Fellow (2007/8) on the Clore Leadership Programme. Her fellowship included secondments to the V&A Museum, Edinburgh Festival Theatres Trust and research into theatre made by non-professional performers.

"I've done a lot of work recently with young people struggling in mainstream education.

I also work with adult and community groups on a range of different projects. One of these projects was working with people recovering from addiction – that has been very rewarding.

I tend to work in schools and community centres, in existing venues rather than places that might be classed as new venues.

I've done projects for councils, theatres, charities, schools, festivals and universities.

I don't separate my theatre work from the projects I do in participatory settings. I think the work I do with participation helps me in the creative process for my shows. A good example of this was the work I was doing with the referral units in Sunderland. I was working on our Best in the World play at the same time, and it

was interesting to get the young people's views of what it might be like to be so good at something that you're 'best in the world.'

I discovered this sort of work by accident really. On leaving university, I knew I wanted to be a theatre director. I was offered work at Northern Stage as an assistant director, and offered some drama projects in local schools at the same time. I'd never thought about this sort of work, nor really knew about it.

I was young, only 21, and just took the work – and found I absolutely loved it. So it was through doing it that I discovered it. About the same time I was offered some similar work by the Lawnmowers Independent Theatre Company. This was with a group with learning disabilities and I thoroughly enjoyed that too.

I'm interested in working in different settings and with different groups of people, with different experiences of life. My approach has always been responsive, to listen carefully to people about their projects. Although most of our work is theatre-based, that isn't always appropriate to the group, so for one group recently we worked on an installation using film and design work. It's great to have a bit of variety, but vital to be responsive to an individual group's needs.

One project of which I'm particularly proud is the work we did with recovering addicts. It was called Let Me Tell You and it really changed the way I felt about the world. Virtually all projects are measured on the impact of participants of the group, and that is understandable, but the biggest impact of those projects was on me. I got a real insight into the lives of these recovering addicts and their families. I felt that I could understand them.

The project ended with art installations in Stockton, Gateshead and Eldon Square. Different groups worked on each project, which was completed between 2009-2012. The work was funded by Stockton and Gateshead councils, the Northern Rock Foundation and the Greggs Foundation.

It wasn't all plain sailing. I started off describing the project as being about addiction, but it was really about recovery. The language was important.

One group of young men wasn't really interested in what we were trying to do. They weren't at the recovery stage and were a bit aggressive. They weren't interested in the changes the project was trying to bring about, and it was hard to make a connection with them. There was a mandatory element to the course they were doing with us, and this didn't work either. They plainly didn't want to be there, but the staff were very good and supportive and stepped in when they needed to.

I learnt a lot from the experience – even if they didn't!

I'm always conscious that I'm not an expert – I'm an artist. I'm not an expert in working with people with special needs or things like that, and it's always important to work well with those who are.

There was no opportunity to do any work in participatory settings at university, but a piece of work I completed for the Clore Fellowship did help. That was a paper I wrote on 'theatre work made by non-professional performers.' That got me thinking, and it was a piece of work supervised by some great people at Newcastle University. I have done a lot of shadowing and learning on the job though.

There are two people who have particularly influenced or inspired me in this line of work. Alan Lyddiard, a founder and artistic director of Northern Stage, always enjoyed working with people who weren't trained actors. He could see the theatrical potential in non-actors and this always excited me.

Richard Gregory, one of the founders of Quarantine in Manchester, is the other one. He won't use the word 'participatory' but that is what he does. He produces theatre in community settings and with community groups, but not for a social purpose, but just to make good theatre. His work has been a big influence on me.

I would encourage anyone to go into this sort of work. It's been a real privilege for me to have the opportunity to meet these wonderful people, and do things I would never have got the chance to do. It's also creatively rewarding work. People should be ambitious in community settings. Sometimes it can be seen as less interesting, but it shouldn't be and doesn't have to be. It can be incredibly creative and rewarding working with non-professional performers.

There isn't really a formal route into this work, but it's a small artistic world in the north east and it's easy to make connections quickly, which helps. The big theatres all run participatory work so this helps people get into it.

You can feel a bit isolated at times and it would be good to have more networking, a few more seminars or conferences. Not to discuss policy, but it would be good to see what other people do, how they perform."