

# Bitesize Case Study: 'Fantastic' - a new play from Pete Carruthers

## Voluntary Sector North West

This case study is one in a series of studies curated to capture best practice, and highlight innovations, from the joint Health Education England (HEE) working across the North West and Voluntary Sector North West 'Learning Matters' awards 2017. The awards are part of a cross sector adult learning campaign delivered for the health and care sector through a number of key regional partnerships and collaborations. The overarching theme of the awards is simple: lifelong learning is good for people, organisations and health.

### HEE Quality Standards met:

3 - Supporting and Empowering Learners

### What was the issue or problem?

#### What did you set out to do?

This project began in 2015 when the team decided to produce a play that would explore themes around mental health and treatment, particularly the idea of what constitutes the dividing line between normal human experience and psychiatric disorders.



Funding was successfully secured from Arts Council England to undertake a research and development phase. This phase involved extensive research, including private research as well as interviews with health professionals and several experts by experience.

## What did you do? What was the intervention or initiative?

'Fantastic' is an approximately 70 minute one-act play which explores themes of mental health, forced treatment, the clinicalisation of human experience and the pressure placed on people to conform to a notion of normal. Set in a dystopian view of the not-too-distant future a new 'miracle cure' has been discovered. Simply called, 'The Implant', the treatment promises to cure any psychological disorder by electronically 'normalising' brain activity. The implant promises a happier life, free from distress and a reassurance of finally fitting in. Aisling (who is a voice hearer) and her brother Joseph (who has Aspergers and is a synesthete), are potential recipients of the new treatment. 'Fantastic' depicts their battle to work out if the implant is the scientific advancement they have been waiting for, or if it poses a threat to the very thing that makes them human.

The themes explored in the play include (amongst others):

- The distinction between normal human behaviour and disorder.
- Forced treatment.
- Tiered levels of healthcare based on a private health insurance model.
- Social exclusion and stigma.
- The experience of voice hearing.
- Synaesthesia.
- Links between health care and the welfare system.

Following this research, Peter Carruthers wrote a first draft of the play and the team then began a series of table reads, where professional actors read the play to invited audiences. These audiences varied from reading to reading; one was with members of the Psychological Professions Network, one was with staff and students from the University of Manchester's schools of medicine, psychology and nursing and another was with members and staff from the Bradford Sharing Voices Network. After each reading there was an in depth discussion with the audience, which allowed us to gain insight into people's personal experiences of the issues raised, identify elements of the play that needed further work and also allowed the audience to reflect on their own experiences, beliefs and professional practice.

After each of these events, extensive rewrites were conducted to correct and improve the piece before the next reading. The phase ended with 3 rehearsed readings of the play for mixed audiences, including health professionals, students, experts by experience, and theatre professionals. Again, after each reading there were extensive discussions with the audience. This phase of the project was completed in February 2016.

The second phase of the project began in late 2016, which will culminate in a 2 week run of the finished play in November 2017 at a central Manchester theatre.

The team began by attending a one day workshop provided by the Hearing Voices Network (HVN), extra insight into the HVN's approach to the experience of voice hearing was gained. The team were also able to read an extract of the play to attendees and gained further insightful feedback.

More research was done following this event into the experience of voice hearing, to add more detail and authenticity to the play. The team also had a full day where they were able to discuss the themes of the play with 2 clinical psychologists who work predominantly in the field of voice hearing.

The play is now undergoing final rewrites ahead of the production run in November. As part of the production process, there will be several open rehearsals, where small audiences will be able to observe the rehearsals and ask questions about issues raised in the play, character traits, etc. These events will be aimed at groups such as:

- Health professionals.
- Students and lecturers from various disciplines such as psychology, nursing, medicine, etc.
- People with lived experience of the issues tackled by the piece.
- Policy makers.
- Department for Work and Pensions staff.

These open rehearsals will help us to ensure the piece is as authentic and balanced as possible. It is also hoped that it will encourage the audience members to reflect on their own experiences and professional practice. Many of the final performances of the play will also be followed by Q&A discussions around the themes raised in the play involving the cast, writer, audience and invited experts.

There will also be a cross-discipline symposium between the arts and health sectors entitled 'Change of mind: Alternative perspectives on mental health and disorders'. This will be followed by a dedicated performance of the play for the symposium delegates.

## What were the Key Outcomes?

### Phase 1:

Written feedback was collected from audience members after each of the 8 readings (including the final 3 rehearsed readings). In total the play was shared with over 200 people and written feedback was received from 83 people:

- 98% said they'd like to see the final play (other 2% said maybe)
- 53% had never been to a play reading before
- 58% said they either never go to the theatre or only go once or twice a year.
- 55% of feedback was from mental health/ medical professionals/students or had lived experience of mental health issues.

## What were the lessons learned?

The learning has been on several fronts.

Firstly, the team working on the play (writer, actors, director) have learnt about the reality of voice hearing, autism, synaesthesia and many other atypical human experiences, not just through working on the play and the research needed to produce it, but also through feedback from people with lived experience and the health professionals who work with them.

Secondly, the health professionals, students and lecturers who attended the readings of the play and took part in the discussions, were able to learn about different perspectives on issues that they may have had differing opinions on, not just because of the window into the characters' lives that the play offers, but also because they were able to discuss their beliefs, experiences and professional practice with people from different disciplines, such as medicine, nursing, psychology, etc.

**Published June 2017**

Finally, the other audience members, such as theatre professionals and general theatre goers who attended the rehearsed readings, were given an insight into human experiences that many were either not aware of or had a limited understanding. This was reflected in the written feedback and also during the extensive Q&A discussions held following the readings.

Theatre, if done carefully and respectfully, can be a powerful learning tool for people who work in health as well as in the wider general public. The benefit of working with experts throughout every stage of writing and production has proven to be invaluable, not just to the production of an authentic story, but also in the way it has engaged and challenged the experts themselves.

The greatest challenge has been in finding the right balance between ensuring the play is authentic, sensitive and empowering as well as ensuring the play is dramatic and challenging. The best way to do this was to be completely open to criticism, especially from people with lived experience, and trust that if feedback was addressed and time taken to find a solution that works for both sides, then the final product will be much stronger for it.

**Level of award:** Winner - Social Purpose Learning in Action Award

**Organisation:** Black Toffee Productions

**Author and Key contact:** Pete Carruthers | [pete@blacktoffee.co.uk](mailto:pete@blacktoffee.co.uk) | 07812756925