

## Streetwise Opera Methodology

### Streetwise Opera and Homeless Link Core Values of Arts and Homelessness Projects

#### 1. CLEAR AIMS, OBJECTIVES AND OUTCOMES

It is important that your project has been well thought through and that everyone involved has a clear understanding of what you are going to achieve and how you are going to achieve it. While it is important that projects have ambitious targets, it is also vital that these targets are realistic in relation to the scale, duration and resources available. Unrealistic expectations can lead to disappointment and dissatisfaction which can be detrimental to participants' experiences, the project's success and sustainability. While your project should have a long term vision for development, you should not be afraid to 'start small'.

#### 2. INVOLVING PARTICIPANTS

It is essential that you listen to the ideas and suggestions of your participants. Involve them wherever possible as you plan, deliver and review your activity. People can often have skills or interests they'd like to share, and if they believe that their ideas will be listened to, it is more likely that they will keep coming back.

#### 3. REGULARITY

Many homeless people feel isolated and their lives are dominated by change and uncertainty. Once rehoused, they may be living in communities where they know very few people and can become further isolated resulting in many returning to homelessness. When your life is changing it is vital to have something that you can rely on come what may.

#### 4. HIGH EXPECTATIONS

Facing homelessness often results in facing low expectations – from others and from yourself. Immediate benefits can be seen in people's self-esteem when they realise that a project has been set up with the expectation that they will do well. It is also possible to create artistic excellence in process and product with a group of vulnerable adults without excluding anyone but it is essential that expectations are reasonable and people are not set up to fail.

#### 5. TRYING SOMETHING NEW

When people achieve something that they didn't think they would be able to, doors of further opportunity can be opened up. They may try something new or tackle a problem that they didn't think they could deal with. It is important to listen to what a group wants to do, however it may also be beneficial to encourage them to try something different, that they may have no previous knowledge or experience of. Overcoming the challenge of trying something new, especially a creative activity, can often result in a huge boost of self-esteem and pride. Taster sessions can be a good way of introducing new activities.

#### 6. BEING A CREATIVE PERSON

It is important that within a creative workshop, participants are allowed to leave any troubles or worries that they may be experiencing at the door. We believe that a holistic approach to support should include the opportunity for everyone to re-connect with the creative part of themselves and forget any other demands or pressures they may be facing.

While some arts projects can be really useful in helping people work through issues and make sense of particular experiences, there is also a lot of value in exploring a completely different subject matter whether that be visual arts, performing arts or digital arts. This can help people discover/rediscover their interests, skills and talents, appreciating that they are not solely defined by their problems.

## 7. CREATING A SAFE PLACE

All work with vulnerable people needs to be in a safe place; a place which can be in a variety of locations but where the members *feel* safe. This is created by a number of factors: somewhere familiar; someone present they trust; a structured approach to the session; clear expectations of behaviour and where inappropriate behaviour is dealt with in an effective and fair way; an atmosphere of acceptance and respect; a qualified support worker present; quality leaders who have been trained. Group agreements can be a good way of establishing a common understanding of behaviour e.g. Streetwise Opera's '*attend and participate, respect each other, zero agro, stay clean and sober, have fun!*'

## 8. CLEAR BOUNDARIES

Many people we work with have had relationships that have been damaging which can make social situations, making friends and interacting with strangers potentially confusing. It should be made clear from the outset that you are delivering a professional service with clearly established boundaries in place. This can be empowering and reassuring for both participants and staff/volunteers.

## 9. AFFIRMATION

People who have experienced homelessness often feel looked-down upon and defined by their weaknesses rather than their strengths. Encouraging and congratulating participants for their work is essential and can be transformational if they have never experienced this before.

## 10. EVALUATION AND REVIEW

Evaluation helps every initiative understand what it is trying to achieve and to grow and strengthen. If you understand your aims and know how to measure your outcomes, you can see clearly how the work is progressing and how it needs to develop. It is essential to collect feedback from your participants and be honest where things have gone wrong.

## 11. COMMUNITY

The chance to meet new people, form positive relationships and work together as a team is often one of the things participants appreciate most about being involved in a creative project. It is important that these interactions are supported through provision of an inclusive and safe environment. Offering the opportunity for participants to chat in a relaxed way e.g. with a cup of tea in a break, can be a valuable part of a successful session.

## 12. EVERYONE IS WELCOME

People who have experienced homelessness may be used to feeling rejected, and so setting up a system where there is a possibility of failure e.g. through auditions should be avoided. (There are obvious exceptions to this for instance with progression activities for the most independent performers).

## 13. FUN

Whatever the activity, it should be fun and involve laughter. This is an easy yet significant way to impact upon the emotional well-being of your participants. If your activity isn't fun, it is unlikely that people will come back.

## 14. A PLANNED ENDING

Many projects with vulnerable people end directly after some kind of event (a performance, exhibition). The sense of loss after these events can be great as it can leave people with nowhere to take their new-found confidence and self-belief. If projects must end, it is always best to do so with sufficient wind-down and a solid exit strategy. Try to ensure that you can offer another project soon afterwards or that you have clear progression routes in place – e.g. a different activity, volunteering opportunity, college course, work placement etc.

## Additional working methods

In addition to our Core Values, all Streetwise Opera work:

- Is led by professional musicians – ideally a singer and a pianist or two singers – trained in running this programme
- Is attended by a support worker
- Has an ‘Open-door’ policy and involves no auditions
- Uses many techniques that are non-language based so as to be engaging for people for whom English is not their first language – examples of this include use of percussion instruments, clear gestures to indicate singing together, high/low pitch, soft/loud etc.
- Concentrates on the personal benefits of arts participation and increase in skills. We communicate that we are not a professional development programme but we can sign-post participants to other such groups and courses
- Involves everyone contributing – there is a welcome for everyone who attends; everyone is addressed by their name and by the end, everyone has contributed something
- Has a Code of Conduct that the participants agree to: Attend and participate, respect each other, Zero aggro, stay clean and sober, have fun!
- Will include opera as ‘core’ repertoire although a variety of other styles are also used
- Is multi-layered – giving performers the chance to sing, act, improvise, direct (give ideas to the leader about how a scene can be staged), work in a team, have their ideas listened to
- Uses a variety of approaches regarding plot and character for example, ‘Hot-seating’ characters – individuals in the group all get the chance to play a character in a piece so that everyone gets familiar with the piece in greater depth and one person is not associated with one role

## Streetwise Opera workshop frameworks:

### 1) Drop-in Singing and Acting Workshops (in homeless centres)

#### Aims:

- Workshop to have a drop-in feel, emphasis on new participants
- Flexible enough to accommodate individuals’ requirements and skills
- Use a variety of repertoire including opera in each workshop
- Engage a variety of tools including use of instruments, untuned percussion, poetry and text, composition and improvisation
- Provide a space at the end of each workshop for a participant solo item
- Avoid a ‘drilling’ approach which can alienate new participants

### Example of a Drop-in Workshop structure:

- Warm-up and welcome
- Stage skills exercises, ice-breakers, physical work and vocal improvisation
- Non-operatic repertoire, possibly using instruments
- Introduce the operatic repertoire via melody, story, text or character
- Solo slot
- Tea Break
- Brief warm up possibly to include the regular 'performance' chorus (see below).
- Operatic repertoire continued, to include improvisation and devising
- End with non-operatic song or 'performance' of today's opera scene

### 2) Explore Singing and Acting Workshops (in arts venues in the community)

#### Aims:

- Workshops to be project based, each term's material building throughout the 12 week course
- Workshop to provide a regular stable space for existing participants who commit to a term and will for the most part be regular attenders
- Some flexibility to accommodate requirements from the group eg. to work on specific repertoire or genre
- Main content of the workshop to focus on opera and performance skills
- Sessions will include rehearsing performance programme
- Participants will be able to show their journey through the programme via a diary or 'passport' which outlines achievements in relevant areas
- The programme will be open to including other areas of performance in a project, such as lighting, set design, or occasionally another genre such as dance

#### Example of Explore Singing and Acting Workshop Structure:

- Warm-up led in conjunction with a participant
- Skills using physical and vocal
- Operatic repertoire
- Any discussion/ announcements
- Tea Break
- Improvisation
- Rehearse opera set for performances
- Revisit opera material from first half of session