

Unpaid and Low-paid Labour on the Fringe: a look at Orange Skies Theatre

By Laura Kressly

Orange Skies Theatre had been devising their newest show, *Wild Onion*, for over a year. They had applied for a grant from the Arts Council England that would fund the artists' wages and other production costs, but wouldn't know until much closer to the show's opening at Brighton Fringe 2020 if their application was successful. In the mean time, all of the creatives involved had to assume they were working for free.

This is common in small-scale British theatre despite campaigns by Equity—the British trade union representing performers and creatives—to end the practice, alongside pushing for fringe venues to pay their teams at least minimum wage. These unpaid and low-paid shows—which fill festival programmes and fringe theatre stages in London and around the country—are often made by young and/or emerging artists with little or no professional experience. These artists may have recently completed their training, or are currently students, or are looking to make theatre before or in lieu of formal training. They may just want to make work and break up the drudgery of day jobs outside of the arts, or other reasons entirely for working for little or no money. Regardless of their reasons, having little professional experience in a field that is shockingly under-funded means less experienced artists aren't likely to receive funding from one of the few pots of money that theatre artists can apply for. Even if they do, the amounts needed to fully pay production staff anything close to a fair wage as well to cover a show's other production costs are rarely covered by this money alone. Crowdfunding and self-funding are all common ways of covering production costs, although these methods rarely stretch to cover sufficient wages.

As such, people who work on these unpaid or low-paid productions must have other sources of income. While some people may subsist on personal or familial wealth, it is probable that the majority

of people working in unpaid or low-paid theatre do so whilst working in paying jobs and/or have the support of student loans to pay rent and bills. Given the dire conditions of late-stage capitalism and London's high living costs, what are the personal and professional implications of working for free or low pay? How do people balance multiple jobs, mental health, family, and friends?

I was due to visit Orange Skies in the capacity of an embedded critic during their late-March and early-April rehearsals. By observing their rehearsal process and meeting the artists involved in this devised production, I had intended to explore the unpaid and low-paid labour that is too often needed to create small-scale theatre productions in the UK. But due to COVID-19, I was unable to physically visit the rehearsal space and get to know the artists face-to-face. Fortunately, the company sent me some video footage of past rehearsal and development sessions so I could get a feel for their work, and I had several conversations with the cast and creative team by email¹.

Orange Skies' Artistic director Daisy Minto explains they have crowdfunded previous productions at Camden Fringe and Edinburgh Fringe Festival, but the company is still not able to provide a fair fee for everyone's labour. Of course, she believes that all artists should be fairly paid for their work, but systemic issues of inequality, poor funding, and high costs that come with self-producing small-scale work override the best of intentions. As I emailed back and forth with Minto, she joked about the evenings she spends doing production work—like chatting with someone about rehearsal schedules—as being invisible, unpaid labour. It's work that isn't directly seen on stage, but necessary for the show's production process. She cannot do it during her day job, so has to do it outside of this time. This means her evenings, which would otherwise be spent with her family, at the theatre, socialising, or recuperating from a full day at work are instead devoted to carrying out the unpaid labour of running a small theatre company.

Whilst of course there is at least some degree of financial and

¹ The company members were given the option to be interviewed and did so knowing their answers may be used in the published piece.

social privilege that enables new artists to work for low or no pay, a delicate balancing act between fully paid work or full-time studies and unpaid and low paid work is necessary for most theatre-makers. In the case of the *Wild Onion* cast, they have been devising and rehearsing the show for months, but only on Saturday afternoons in order to work around those with full-time jobs and degree courses. Whether they are in the workforce or studying, the five company members I spoke to all have to do a lot of work just to manage their time let alone the actual balancing act of work, education and caring commitments.

As well as working full-time in the arts as a freelance producer and director to pay rent and bills, Minto lives cheaply so she can feed money into the company. However, this amount of work takes its toll on her mental health, physical health, and social life; though her passion is evident, she never seems to stop working. It's not just turning up to rehearsals—she coordinates the production timescale, facilitates the devising process in the rehearsal room, and ensures the budget is as low as possible by seeking in-kind donations. She has to put this planning and production time in outside of normal work and rehearsal hours, so she's at risk of burning out from never being able to switch off.

The company's producer Sam Hughes, who works full-time as a building manager, also discusses the risk of burn out. However, he then talks about the urge artists have to create even though he believes that working for free devalues the artist's work. This drive is also evident in the outpouring of digital content during the present lockdown—from simple monologues delivered straight-to-camera, to experimenting with technology's potential—that is often done without pay, either for the purpose of fulfilling the need to create and/or to elicit financial support for venues, companies, charities, and so forth.

But what's at stake for artists willing to work for little or no money? Apart from the burnout—both physical and mental—that Minto and Hughes mention and the poor mental and physical health associated with precarious labour and worrying about finances, there is the risk that the time, money and work they put into the show could be lost. Orange Skies general manager Rachel Coleman is a student who

has invested some money into the company. She's done this because the work brings her joy, but despite having the cash to do so, she still has to make sacrifices. The time she donates to the company means she doesn't have any spare to use on other projects that pique her interest, because although she has a money job, it doesn't bring her the same level of happiness that she gets from making theatre.

Company member Audree Barvé is also a full-time student and admits she has so far resisted the need to associate making theatre with capital. But she's nearly at the end of her course and recognises that the stakes will be much higher when she isn't in a position to rely on student loans to pay her rent and bills. Gabriel Harris is another company member in a similar situation; he is a student whose student loan and part-time work as a drag artist serve as his income so he can use unpaid work as a learning experience. He hasn't yet decided to impose limits on how much unpaid theatre work he takes on because he wants to use the time he has now to widely network before he graduates. However, Harris still speaks of money worries and the impact on his mental health. With less time available to take on paying work, he is still at risk of financial insecurity.

The Orange Skies team all talk about time pressures and financial concerns, issues which aren't generally brought up in polite company in the UK. Yet, these issues, and their impact on artists' health, are no doubt widespread amongst theatre-makers who just want to make work they believe in and advance their careers. Wider conversations on these topics have only recently become more visible on social media, but there's a big step—probably a series of big steps—between acknowledging the problems are there and actively overhauling systems of labour. The theatre industry needs to ensure creatives are paid fairly and their health doesn't suffer for the sake of furthering their careers.