

Jubilee Arts Archive 1974-94

Graham Peet worked for Telford Community Arts in the 1970s and at beginning of the 1990s he began to collaborate with Jubilee Arts, working on many of their print and multimedia projects, including the BAFTA award winning interactive CD-ROM 'Lifting the Weight'.



Graham working in the Jubilee studio at 84, High Street, West Bromwich, 1992

Graham Peet was 15 years old when he went to visit his Uncle John in East Berlin. A journalist for Reuters, John had defected to East Germany in 1950.

“We met this old guy as we were going up the stairs, chatted for a moment, and as we went up, my Uncle told me he was a really interesting guy who used to be a photographer. He got this book off the shelf and showed me these extraordinary photomontages of anti-Nazi material, explaining his name was John Heartfield now. He used to be known as Helmut Herzfeld but he was so persecuted by the fascists for doing this amazing work he changed his name. It was all done using scalpels, razor blades, negatives, multiple exposures, stuff you can do quite easily now with Photoshop, but the really difficult thing was the content of them. I went back to England and Heartfield died soon after but his wife sent me a copy of one of his books; it really influenced my direction.

When I saw Photoshop the first time, I thought this is changing everything, this is what I am going to use. I was visiting America at the end of the 80s and this guy gave me a floppy disc with just 1.4 megabyte of memory and he said have a look at what's on this. It had Photoshop 1.0 on it. That did change the way I worked, and the way we worked as community arts groups. And Jubilee were quick to adopt this and so we started to work together. For their 18th birthday celebration we created this A-Z exhibition, where all the images were collaged with Photoshop, then the high

resolution digital file was converted to a 5x4 colour transparency, and an A1 photographic print was made from that. That was the way you had to do it then, now it's digital file straight to digital printer. For the 'M for Music' panel, I remember there was a photo of Bev who was working with a group called Black A/V. It was a close up performance photo of her singing and she had recently chipped her front tooth on a microphone stand, so I photoshopped it back in for her. There was a big step forward in the early 90s with this technology. I remember we went to a demonstration of these large new printers Canon were developing – this technology had been accelerated by the Gulf War, where the military needed large high definition print outs of their targets and so on.

I was born in London and grew up there. The first Arts Lab was in Drury Lane in Covent Garden with Jim Haynes running it. I helped out there with set building as they had a theatre. There was a cinema in the basement with an incredibly low ceiling and they put foam rubber carpeting on the floor so everybody lay down to watch films overnight. That's where I got my film education, watching a lot of famous films but usually only the first half though, as I'd fall asleep. The last year of school was 1967 and I went on holiday with a friend to Formentera and slept on the beach for a month. One of the people there told me about this place in Drury Lane and that's how I found out about it. Everything was free, so it collapsed from a lack of funding, not because of lack of interest or innovation. A second one was set up near Camden Town and I followed it there. They asked me if I'd be on the board; I was only 17 and very naïve about management groups but I think I said yes but never went to a meeting. I did set up a darkroom there though.

Jim Haynes was an American who originally co-founded Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh, as well as Britain's first paperback bookshop. After Drury Lane closed he moved to Paris, where he worked at the university. At the end of the 70s he began to hold a weekly open house dinner party on Sundays. If you wrote to him and ask to come, he'd tell you when there would be a space. You'd turn up and he would remember you. He was one of those people who had a fantastic memory for faces and people and what they did and you'd go and have a meal for free, have a great evening. I was expecting a big artist studio with a long table down the middle, but it was a small ordinary house, crammed full of people, everyone standing. Immediately he remembered me, even though it was some 40 odd years before, and said 'Oh, you need to talk to that guy over that, you'd really get on.' He was this human connections person who would put people in touch with potential like-minded folk.

At school they had sports every Friday afternoon and I didn't like rugby or cross country running and the alternative was you were able to join the Print Department; this was a small room at the top of the school which had old fashioned print equipment, moveable type, lead letters and that. And you could learn about that type of printing, producing invitations for events and that sort of thing. So I got interested in print and graphics. I decided I would try to go to art school. I did badly in my art A-level though, but my Dad had given me a camera and I was using slide film, as you didn't have to do the printing, you just sent it back to Kodak for processing. When I applied to Hornsey Arts School I just took my Kodachrome and Ektachrome images. I'd been showing some colour slides, very abstract, using extension tubes to get very close up images and I was showing them at a party near where I lived. This woman came up to me and asked if I wanted to show the slides in an exhibition in a gallery in

Germany. She told me to send them to the Museum of Modern Art in Munich and put them on. It was very easy and extraordinary but somehow unsatisfactory.

This started me thinking about who was looking at them and why they are looking at them and what engages them, which is what brought me into community arts as an idea. So I did my time Hornsey, then a post-graduate fellowship at Norwich School of Art, set up a small print shop for Norwich Council and really enjoyed that and then had no work, saw this advert in 1976 in New Society for a print worker.

I had no idea that Telford was a new town, because the only map I could find didn't even have it on. I was expecting some romantic little village that didn't warrant being on the scale map I had. I hitchhiked from Norfolk to Telford and as we arrived we started driving through these big council estates of the new town. The interview was actually for a two-week project working on a playscheme, which was astonishing, a team of 5 people taking over a whole school.

Telford Community Arts was set up by Graham Woodruff as a theatre project, who had been a drama professor at Birmingham University, with one of his students Cathy Mackerras, and they brought on some other media, a ceramacist, a theatre designer and then me as a print worker.

I had come from a privileged middle class background in North London, and pretty soon came to the conclusion that I had no idea really how most people lived, the story of working class lives and that these stories needed to be told and shared. I remember when Enoch Powell did his 'Rivers of Blood' speech, I must have still been at school and saw it on the news, and I remember thinking, 'That sounds like the worst place on earth! I am never going there...' and yet here we are now in this area of the Black Country, and I've worked in this place for over 20 years. It's ironic, because now I couldn't think about any place better.

Telford Community Arts had a strict approach to community arts, taking the view that you have to live on the estate where you are working and you have the base the work on weekly workshops, particularly the theatre work, and you would get a group of people together to talk about life until an idea came up, the germ of a narrative, a problem or an issue that would work as a play from a working class point of view.

The print shop worked rather differently. We didn't have weekly workshops all the time. It was less about the development of a group of people. It was more of a resource facility, where, for example, you would do a poster for a community group that was campaigning to get the speed limit reduced on a road where a child had been killed.

We worked with a whole range of groups, making posters for all sorts of different community campaigns, or advertising events such as different Community Celebrations or performances, exploring workers' history or unemployment issues.



Posters from the print shop at Telford.

Around this time, 1978, my partner, Carola Adams, who had been a teacher and a youth worker, got a job with the National Association of Youth Clubs to do some research for the Department of Education and Science. The brief was to look at young women 'at risk', a programme over three years designed to address problems faced by young working-class women. The assumption by the authorities that these were 'problem girls' wasting their lives hanging out in coffee bars and things like that, but the girls weren't taking about this, they were talking about things like abuse at home and violence. Carola was working with Leah Thorn, and another worker, Laksmi, who had done some research with Asian young women. Jo Klein, a psychologist, was also part of the project. They were hanging out on street corners talking, and they had been using photography, getting the girls to take photos of each other, recording lengthy conversations over the time.

Normally what would happen to research like this is that it would end up as a written paper, an article in *New Society*, or possibly a Penguin book. At the end of the project the people at the Department of Education and Science were seeing their perceptions challenged and they said to them, 'Well, we don't believe this', and they put a lot of pressure on the National Association of Youth Clubs to put a stop to the project. So the research was never printed in any form, and the archives ended up at Birmingham University, with a 100-year limit on access as the material is highly personal. Eventually they took the project out on a year-long tour with a tape-slide show, cutting edge media at the time, talking to youth workers face to face. Jonnie Turpie,

who was a member of Birmingham Film and Video Workshop, also helped out at that time.



So, we thought we would publish the work independently. We met with a group of young women at the printshop once a week for quite a while and designed a set of 9 A1 silkscreen posters inspired by the research. They went on to have national distribution, rather than local. We didn't have the capacity to print them at Telford, so these large posters were printed by a community printshop in Brixton, Fly Press & Badger, with a first edition of 500.

It was a fascinating process of design, two men working with a group of girls and women. It started as a more normal process of us producing a set of designs on A4 and at the first meeting, one of the girls said, "That's rubbish, we could do better than that", so we turned over the process to them. And that was the best way to do it. We started with a process of making an edited list from the diaries of what we called one-liners. So a young girl had said something like "We hate boys when they call us slags" – which was a phrase that worked well as a headline on a poster, which would then have additional text and a photo. We had some 30 headliners from which 9 were chosen. Jonny and I then did full size mockups of potential posters with different ingredients that could be moved around. So we might have a black and white picture of a girl looking directly at you printed at the right size, a really strong image, which could be put against different headlines and text and different coloured backgrounds. It was like a kit of various parts that everyone could move around until they were satisfied. We were all bringing different skills. When the girls said at one point, "That's true, that is" we felt then we knew the poster was ready.

When I left Telford, we didn't even have a photocopier. Working with Jubilee, we saw computers as a way to raise the game. Desktop Publishing was one thing and the fact that interactivity was possible – that was a big thing. Macromedia Director was the game changing application, which was used by 'Sex Get Serious', and Hypercard

was used for 'Asthma Attack'. One of the biggest projects I worked on with Jubilee was 'Lifting the Weight'. Mark Ball was on the board of Geese Theatre in Birmingham, and he had been doing some work with Jubilee as well in terms of identifying new sources of funding for projects. Geese were doing extraordinary theatre work in the confines of prison, presenting a multi-choice interactive play where prisoners were gathered together. The actors appeared in front of the audience of inmates, sometimes in masks and a series of scenarios were presented to them. . For example, this character has been in prison for five years and today he's being released and has to get home to Middlesbrough on his own. He's given his clothes back and a five-pound note and he's outside and it's raining. He's waiting for the bus, he gets on and the driver shrugs and says, 'I'm don't have change, mate.' Then the actors would stop would stop and ask, 'What's he's going to do?' The prisoners would then come up with various scenarios which the actors, improvising, would then enact to a logical conclusion. It was all about examining the consequences of any one decision, and what path that would lead you down. Mark Ball thought this could be done digitally, as Geese didn't have the capacity to go round all the prisons in the country except perhaps once a year, made into a CD-ROM that could be sent to all prisons to use as part of their education programmes.



Screenshots from 'Lifting the Weight'.

The project was submitted to IBM, and won a Community Connections Award, which enabled the first phase of the project developed and tested.

Geese had the expertise in navigating potential pathways and there were enough people in Jubilee by then with the design and technical experience to work on this with Geese. The challenge in putting it together was that in a theatre it could go anywhere, and one person in the audience could say one thing and the actors had the

experience and skills they could take that one direction into somewhere they had never been before. The actors were very skilled in doing this, having done this over and over in prisons and could go in multiple directions. A CD-ROM could not have infinite directions, so the storylines needed to be edited down, with three possible routes out of one situation to the next. That was tricky for the actors to cope with, editing it down from their instinctive well-honed knowledge and improvisational skills down to certain limited choices. It had to work as a game, essentially the idea was that a prisoner had to survive their first day out of prison, their first week, their first months, working through dramatic scenarios that had been provided from Geese and their work in prisons. The whole idea was that it was designed to stop offenders returning to a criminal career by bringing them face to face with the consequences of their decisions, where the real life situations could lead, for good or bad, allowing them to reflect on behaviours and anger management. It was designed to be stopped at any point to allow for discussion of participants in a group situation.



The theatre piece was originally designed by John Bergman, and he was closely involved in the production. The use of masks were an important ingredient of the work and the design. As Geese Theatre described it: 'The mask as a metaphor for how we present ourselves to others. Lifting the mask allows us to contrast the public presentation of characters with their inner world. To do this we use the phrase, 'lift your mask', which in effect asks the character to tell us what he/she is 'really thinking' or 'really feeling' at that moment.'

There was a big technical issue, in that the computers used in educational setting in prison were really low spec and very out of date, so we were forced to design the whole thing to an absolute minimum; this turned into a strength, we worked with a film noir look, with limited screen colour, using montages of photographic images, sound clips and rather than any moving images or animations. 'Lifting the Weight' went on to be nominated for and win the first ever BAFTA for Interactive Learning, presented by David Puttnam and Stephen Fry. Many years later, I was working on a project for Multistory in Strangeways Prison, the education officer there told me they were still using it, some 20 years later. Amazing."

Graham Peet went on to be Exhibitions Manager at the Public until 2013.

See www.thepublic.com

Notes:

John Heartfield, born in 1891, was on the Gestapo's most wanted list and fled Germany in 1933, first to Czechoslovakia and then to Britain. After the war his applications to remain in Britain were denied and in 1950 he went to live with his brother in East Berlin. He died in 1968.

Geese UK was established by John Bergman as offshoot of his highly successful Geese Theatre USA, with a remit to develop performances, workshops and residencies for prisoners and ex-offenders. Geese Theatre continue their work in UK prisons to this day. Their process is described in a 2002 book, 'The Geese Theatre Handbook: Drama with Offenders and People at Risk' by Clarke Baim, Sally Brookes and Alun Mountford.

John Bergman came of age in England at a time of burgeoning theatrical experimentation. He studied drama at Birmingham University where his teacher, Clive Barker, was a protege of Joan Littlewood, the creator of the innovative pacifist musical 'Oh! What a Lovely War', and he then spent 1967-71 in traveling avant-garde theater groups in Europe and Africa before founding Geese.

Mark Ball went on to become Artistic Director at the Southbank Centre.