

Follow the Herring...

A challenging collaborative theatre and visual arts tour to engage coastal communities in the arts through singing, performing and knitting.

Based on the heritage of fishing communities we will be 'Following the Herring' from Scotland along and down England's East Coast with a contemporary explosion of creative opportunities for all to join together in celebrating the story.

The tour has been supported by Arts Council England's strategic touring fund.

We're following the Herring...



The Proposal and Partnership

A touring co-production between The Customs House Arts Centre and Guild of Lillian's Theatre Company.

The Customs House, established in 1993, is a multi disciplinary arts centre based upon the River Tyne in South Shields it has a theatre, art gallery, cinema and community spaces. Producing and delivering a range of professional high quality performance and visual arts exhibitions as well as developing a range of audience development and community arts initiatives.

The Guild of Lillian's was established in 2004 by a group of writers, performers and directors based in the North East of England, with the aim: "To put women's stories centre stage".

In 2014 The Guild of Lillians and The Customs House propose an ambitious, highly relevant themed tour over three months which will celebrate and highlight the shared rich fishing, boat building, and knitting heritage of the East Coast. The communities along the coast, which share the love and tradition of storytelling, will be brought together through the arts in ways never done before. The tour will 'follow the Herring' and comprise the development and tour of visual arts exhibition 'Coat for a Boat' - a knitted ship - and production of the play by Ann Coburn 'Get Up & Tie Your Fingers'.

The previous success, legacy, and feedback of both these participatory projects developed in South Tyneside and the potential relevance and reach to all coastal communities has provided the impetus for the collaboration and ambition to tour this work nationally.



About the work - a perfect fit...



Gutting crews at Peterhead curing yard, 1880s



Fife and Zulu boats, Peterhead, 1880s

Get Up And Tie Your Fingers, originally written by Ann Coburn as a play for three actresses, is a fiction set against a real event, the Eyemouth Fishing Disaster of 1881. The play was produced by The Guild of Lillians in 2005 and was expanded to include community choirs at three venues on Tyneside, who performed a specially written a cappella score by Karen Wimhurst.

In 1881, the year the play is set, women from fishing communities along the east coast of Scotland and England, the 'herring lassies' as they were known, would follow the herring fleets down the coast to meet the catch at each port of call. With knives at the ready, they gutted, salted, and barreled the 'silver darlings', the bountiful herring that were destined for markets across the world. Echoing the journey of the herring lassies, we will take the story of three such women - Jean, Janet, and young Molly - back to the communities from which they sprang; and give members of those communities the opportunity to create and participate in a piece of theatre alongside a professional production team.



“The style of performance was innovative, not least in the fact that a new category of modern ‘choral theatre’ was forged... The music element stretched everyone involved artistically because of the ambition and intricacy of Karen Wimhurst’s composition... The design was on an epic scale. The artistic collaboration between the lighting designer and the set designer resulted in a stunning visual spectacle. The designer’s mix of period costumes (for the principal performers) and universal/emblematic outfits (for the chorus) was inspired and gave the piece a timeless quality that helped it transcend the narrow category of heritage drama... The Guild of Lillians’ intentions of empowering women to tell a story principally about the female experience of a particular moment, from the women’s point of view were achieved.”

- *The Stage*, 2005



In February 2009, Casting Off... A Coat For A Boat! was launched. The project spanned a five-month period and saw the creation of a 20ft coble boat swathed from fore to aft in knitting. The boat was then launched and sailed in the Tyne as part of the 2009 'Mouth of the Tyne' festival. Retired shipbuilders and over 350 knitters aged 6-85 years were involved in the construction of the boat.



The project was targeted as broadly as possible. This community project actively engaged the general public through regular knitting activities both within the Customs House main gallery space as well as through outreach activities in many community-based settings. Participants included isolated older people through day care centres, the visually impaired and blind, and families and schools.

Attracting a wide spread of community participation, the project clearly touched many people's lives. Its success was rooted within the community who took ownership of its core values – a professional quality work of art produced by the community for the community. It provided a platform and access routes for those who had not previously engaged in creative and cultural activities and the visual arts.

Attracting interest from communities from across the region and beyond, following the formal exhibition at The Customs House Gallery the exhibition went on tour to specialist craft and knitting exhibitions nationally, receiving acclaim wherever the attraction went. Becoming a site-specific piece at each venue visited, and creating a new narrative through community involvement, the exhibition engaged each community afresh. Like the voyages of a fishing boat, each journey created a different story to be told.

“One of the interesting elements of the project was the cross over between the knitting community and the boat building community. There was a definite link between the two. During some of the sessions we specifically invited these two communities to come together and share knowledge and skills whilst participating in, or doing some knitting. For some of the men whose wives were involved in knitting and they were involved through the boat building side, it gave a wonderful opportunity for social gatherings, laughter and reminiscing tales of old.”

- Esen Kaya, Curator, The Customs House

“I used to knit when my children were younger but lately no one wanted to wear hand knitted items so I hadn't knitted for years - until this project came along. Before, I felt as if I was brain dead. Now my brain aches, for all the knitting challenges I have been given! I am jesting, I love it. It gets me out of the house, I have made new friends and I have been able to use a skill I never thought I would ever use again. Plus, I am learning new things all the time!”

- Brenda, project participant, aged 71

How will the tour work ?

We will work with a local choir at each tour location to become part of the performance on stage. Promoting the opportunity for local choirs and amateur theatre companies, they will work with a professional theatre company, bridging the gap between the amateur and professional world, and culminating in a week long performance in each venue. Local knitting, craft, and arts groups will work with visual artists, curators, and set designers to develop knitted stage set/designs bespoke to their community. These same groups will bring knitting, visual arts and performance together, developing an exhibition to 'set the scene' for the arrival of the 'Coat for a Boat' installation. High quality, inclusive participatory arts engagement will provide high quality, challenging opportunities supported and mentored by professionals.

There will be a production development period at each location from September 2013 prior to the start of the tour in April 2014.

A production team will maintain communication with all partners in each location to ensure continuity, support and development of the project. Theatres and venues on the tour will work together in partnership with the production team and local galleries, community spaces, libraries, heritage and history groups, fishing / shipping groups, textile / knitting groups, and local choirs to develop an all encompassing, challenging arts experience based on the coastal heritage in each community.

A community and educational engagement resource will be developed for use by the venues, schools, library service, local authorities and any other partners to develop the reach and audience for project.



A week long programme of supporting activities and events in each location will be developed, including talks and presentations by the artists and heritage groups; story telling; 'knitathons'; oral history workshops; writing workshops; performances; poetry evenings; maritime inspired music and song; celebratory cooking and sharing.

Each location will have at least a week-long programme on the tour, which will be the culmination of all the development work and a real celebration. This 'celebration' tour week will see the performance of 'Get up and tie your fingers' over a number of days and the arrival and installation of 'Casting Off - A Coat for a Boat' The capacity of the location or venue will determine if both elements can be accommodated in the same space or arts venue. It may be that the boat needs to be accommodated in a larger space, e.g. a community hall, shopping centre, museum or library.



Audience Development

A precedent for successful audience engagement.

Casting Off - A Coat for a Boat Visual Arts Participation project was mounted by The Customs House in 2009. The engagement and participation statistics are impressive.

- ✦ Overall participants: approximately 920
- ✦ National participants: 15 regions, with approximately 32 participants of various age groups
- ✦ International participants / countries: 10 with approx 12 participants of various age groups
- ✦ Regional participants: 306
- ✦ Core participants: 181 (who met regularly)
- ✦ Youngest participant: 5 years (knitting) and 26 (boat building)
- ✦ Oldest participant: 82 yrs (knitting) and 87 yrs (boat building)
- ✦ BME participants: 15 (special targeted activity)
- ✦ Older People participants: outside of in-house activity: 60
- ✦ Isolated / Special groups: 20
- ✦ Special Needs / Disabled / Visually Impaired and Blind participants: 30
- ✦ Schools: Six schools (four primary and two secondary) plus teaching staff: 230
- ✦ College & University students (core participation and volunteers): 34

Adult & Community Learning – participants: 20 targeted, 14 recruited. 2 went into employment with 4 into further learning / training. Individual personalized learning programme with targets were set in collaboration with adult & community learner lead officer at the beginning of the project and followed up with regular ‘catch-up’ sessions to monitor progress. Final evaluation forms completed to measure achievements against targets.

Exhibition Audience Attendance: Approximately 14,000 (three months)

Engagement Activities

We will empower those who participate in the project and bring together audiences who may not otherwise engage in creative and cultural activities, as well as nurturing those who already do!

We will find 'hooks' that people can connect with, and and bring them on board. The quirky subject matter allowed it to go viral. So our partner venues could:

- ✦ Work with local press to invite donations of materials, raising awareness and attracting wider participation
- ✦ Host project 'welcome' sessions
- ✦ Arrange project activity involving local knitting groups
- ✦ Recruit local volunteers, including groups from libraries
- ✦ Programme workshops in local community venues including libraries and schools
- ✦ Set up workshop programmes specifically for schools, and include Arts Award as part of the offer
- ✦ Encourage any school applying for Arts Mark to engage with the project as 'case study' for their application process
- ✦ Invite local colleges and universities to actively take on a key task or role
- ✦ Broaden the scope of the project beyond your region
- ✦ Commission recent graduates / emerging artists to make work in response to the theme
- ✦ Create associated projects to run alongside main project i.e. local history & writing
- ✦



Engagement Potential

The project will create long term, exciting, yet strategic opportunities to engage and develop new audiences for theatre and the visual arts. Developing outreach in each location through the 7-month development period will enable the project to become a real part of each community, leaving a lasting legacy from which future initiatives will grow. The production team will support each venue to develop its own bespoke audience development plan.

Based on the track record of the previous combined production and exhibition, if we secure 14 venues for the national tour we expect the following outcomes combined across the 14 venues nationally:

- ✦ Sessions for participant engagement in high quality arts activity including, drama, singing, knitting and visual arts, which will contribute to the final production
- ✦ At least 13,028 live theatre audience members and an online engagement potential of millions
- ✦ At least 14,000 attendees to visual arts exhibitions
- ✦ A total reach of over 111,604 people, both active participants and audience for the project nationally.

International participation and interest in both pieces will be promoted through digital means. Through 'Coat for a Boat' alone there were ten countries involved - which was an unexpected outcome that we harnessed. The scope for international interest and involvement in the tour is huge and will be promoted from the outset.



Publicity

Each location will have its own appropriate marketing and PR plan. The opportunities for local, national, and international press - both general and specialist - is massive, and both productions have previously received much positive coverage, highlighting artistic merit and specific social impact.

Making it happen

We require additional funds to make this ambitious tour a reality. We will be making additional applications for funding, in kind support, and sponsorship to develop and deliver the tour. Please let us know if you are prepared to support this project or perhaps you know someone who might ?

This touring project has the potential to establish a new pattern for touring, promotion, and audience development across mid-scale theatre and visual arts venues down the East Coast of Scotland and England. We aim to bring about a step-change in the way venues programme, produce, market to, and develop audiences.

The tour will commence for a week in each location on the 5th May 2014 in Musselburgh and travel to Berwick, South Shields, Hartlepool, Scarborough, Hull, Grimsby, Kings Lynn, Great Yarmouth, Rayleigh, Margate, Folkestone and Hastings.

For more information, questions, or a friendly chat about any aspect of this project please contact; Heather Walton, Project Manager, The Customs House, Mill Dam, South Shields, **Telephone:** 07771635546 - **Email:** Heath_walton@hotmail.com