

ALWAYS FORWARD

Independent Evaluation Report for Frantic Assembly's IGNITION 2009 – 2011

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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Frantic Assembly's Ignition is a national initiative developing new ways of increasing young men's involvement in the arts: engaging creativity; developing physical theatre skills; raising aspirations and celebrating achievement.

Ignition introduces Frantic Assembly's distinctive way of working to young men who might not have considered working in theatre, but possess the crossover skills, energy and potential to be physical performers. The company believes that the talent is out there, but needs to be discovered. Frantic Assembly delivered four Ignition projects over two years 2009-2011, consisting of Taster sessions, workshop auditions and an accredited four day Intensive Residency culminating in a performance by participants for friends, family and industry professionals. This was a unique chance to work intensively with the award winning Artistic Directors and Creative Associates from a leading theatre company. Ignition benefited over 270 young men aged 16–20 years across the UK. The project was funded by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, with additional funding from the Big Lottery Fund in October 2009.



This summary outlines the insights and conclusions about the value of Ignition. At the start of the evaluation process, I recorded an interview with the whole company – Scott, Steven, Lisa, Laura, Neil and Fiona on 24 September 2009. We discussed their vision, planning, hopes and expectations for the project, the anticipated challenges and how these might be met. The project was well thought through and presented stimulating artistic challenges for the Directors. After writing the first draft of this document, I replayed that interview and it is extraordinary how the testimony from the Ignition participants faithfully illustrates so much of what the company describe and discuss.

Through the over-arching aim of widening the pool of future male physical theatre performers, Ignition seeks to address wider social issues affecting their target group. These are to:

- **Remove barriers to participation in the arts** for disadvantaged young men.
- **Attract participants from diverse backgrounds**, particularly those with little or no access to creative opportunities.
- **Tackle low achievement amongst young men**, by equipping participants with transferable life skills and raising their aspirations.
- **Challenge negative perceptions of young men** by showcasing their skills, experience and achievements.



ALWAYS FORWARD captures how these aims were achieved through a description and analysis of Frantic's methods. This is informed by the articulate testimony of over 200 young men in addition to interviews with the delivery partners and the Artistic Directors. Frantic Assembly hope this account of their particular and effective approach to working with young men will inspire others to incorporate it into their own practice.

Read the full report for an exploration of the creative activities and key aspects relating to the management of the project.



The activities are explored at each level – **Taster, Trial and Intensive**. It is evident that each level manages to encapsulate the key features of the company's approach, even the one-hour Trial. During the four-day Intensive the bar is raised, the experience becomes more profound and the vocational and personal learning is accelerated. The strong leadership and highly effective teaching is characterised by the presence of inspirational, credible role models; the clarity of the goal; economic and clear use of language; action rather than words. The dynamic mixture of challenge, risk and pace; the balance and rhythm between high-energy physical tasks, individual work on text and group creative exercise; the constant encouragement to experiment, to push boundaries, to practise and refine, the value placed on individual creativity and ideas, all work to achieve maximum engagement and tangible results. At each stage, from the outset, the company establishes a professional ethos and generates an atmosphere of trust. This provides the context and the springboard for all that takes place.

The young men describe a range of learning, change or transformation – in physical prowess and emotional expressiveness, creative and personal skills, and vocational insights. They enjoy the immersive action, the camaraderie, the risk-taking, the creative collaborative and peer to peer learning. Failure is understood as a useful part of the creative process. Their life experiences and perspectives are valued. They feel pushed, stretched, excited, exhausted. They are having the time of their lives. The all male environment accelerates conditions for emotional bravery, an important part of the company's artistic process. Their final performances, in professional theatres in the heart of their communities, are a rare opportunity to present a positive and more rounded view of young men, a challenge to the prevailing negative media stereotypes.¹



I surprised myself with how far I pushed myself. Every day we go further. I found out that there is no limit to how far you can push yourself.



My body, the human body is capable of things I never thought it would be. When you're around other people who are just as talented as you, if not more, you get the urge to try new things.

Frantic Assembly worked hard to recruit young men from different social, economic and ethnic backgrounds and to include those with little or no experience of performing arts as well as those studying drama or dance at school or college. They are well aware of the challenges they and others face to reach their target group. Most of the Ignition participants do not have regular access to the arts and Frantic Assembly's approach to their pastoral support and continuing professional development is exemplary. The professional partnerships were vital in terms of local knowledge and infrastructures for recruitment and sustaining momentum and opportunities, especially in the regions of Corby and Plymouth. The partners also gained or developed useful knowledge about targeting young men in their region, understanding the power and value of Frantic's approach and the opportunity to nurture a new pool of emerging talent.



¹ Children & Young People Now, Youth work: A battle against media stereotypes, Thursday, 19 March 2009

There is little for me to recommend in terms of how things might be done differently in future. There is some fine tuning of recruitment strategy, detailed at the end of Part Two. Below I have summarised the characteristics and features that make Ignition so successful and that could be emulated by other artists, organisations and teachers.

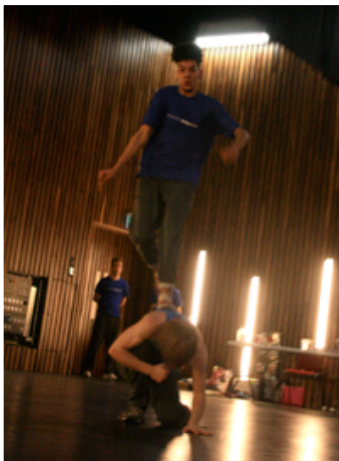


- **Professional artists who are committed to teaching, sharing skills and collaborating with young people as part of their own artistic development.** The Frantic Assembly artists are positive role models, approachable, charismatic and effective leaders who display confidence, inspire trust, excite and nurture talent, provoke and encourage experimentation and new ways of thinking and doing.
- **An extraordinary experience, new to the participants, different to the way they are taught in school or college, with unfamiliar people in an unfamiliar place.** An extraordinary experience was anticipated, certainly by the time the boys had reached the Intensive. The characteristics they describe relate to the atmosphere generated, the unique, dynamic creative process and the intensity of the week.
- **Space to create – physical and psychological space, a space to think and behave in a focussed manner, to feel safe and enjoy being with like-minded souls.** A space where time flies because, as Ken Robinson expresses it, you are in your element.²
- **Clarity of purpose and a tangible, high value goal – the company are frank about their ‘selfish’ motives for Ignition – to address an industry shortage by investing in unleashing potential and training young talent.** The purpose of each stage of the project is clearly defined for the participants and the stages are carefully designed to be intrinsically enjoyable and valuable learning experiences. Working as a professional company towards a public performance is motivating and a source of pride. It validates their effort and demonstrates the company’s faith in their ability.
- **An environment of trust where the participants can feel confident in themselves and with each other.** The high level of physicality and the imperative to work safely helps to generate trust quickly. Sensitive management of tasks that elicit personal thoughts and feelings, collaborative working process and pastoral support – all these features feed a working culture of respect and trust during Ignition that is noticed and appreciated at every stage. This culture gives the participants the confidence to be themselves, to push their own boundaries and to be free of any limitations imposed by other peer groups.
- **A sense of urgency and adventure, ‘risk in a safe place’,³ drives Ignition. The tension of learning skills, devising original material and the need to present a professional theatre production is a pressing challenge for young men and for the Directors.** Simultaneously they are encouraged to freely take physical and creative risks in order to achieve their goal. The Directors are committed to ensuring that the content comes from the Ignition companies and is specific to them as individuals and groups. They themselves were taking artistic risks each time. The performance goal is a catalyst for focus when physical energy flags.
- **An open learning process where experimentation and collaboration are valued and failure is recognised as a useful and integral part of the creative and the learning process.** Constant encouragement is offered, even for the smallest progression.
- **Teamwork – helping each other, listening to each other, taking responsibility for themselves and others.**

“ It can take years to build this level of trust. We’ve done it in four days. It has shown me that trust is the foundation of everything you do if you are working in a group. ”

² The Element, Ken Robinson with Lou Aronica, 2009

³ Imaginative Actuality, Learning in the Arts during the Nonschool Hours, Shirley Brice-Heath 1998



- **The quality and use of language by the Directors is appreciated for its economy and its clarity. The writing tasks are playful and purposeful. The ideas and personal stories are shown respect and valued for their authenticity and honesty, their humour and wit.** Reflection is integral to the creative process as the participants worked in pairs, threes and fours making and refining material, negotiating and selecting physical phrases. The evaluation process itself is an opportunity to individually explore and reflect on experiences, to make connections. It is interesting to hear how the young men's use of language expanded in its level of detail, its breadth of analysis and depth of understanding as it moved from the Taster and through days 1-4 of the Intensive.
- **Peer to peer learning is modelled and fostered.** The devising process demonstrates that the Directors valued the participants' ideas as well as vice versa.
- **The involvement and commitment of whole company, which is discernable to the participants and gives status and value to the project.** The practical and moral support by other company members for the Directors/Creative Associate pre and post sessions is clearly valuable. This is a useful space for them to discuss the day, critique, troubleshoot and plan.
- **Professional Partnerships with agreed, individual and shared aims and objectives bring mutual practical and strategic benefits.** Ongoing communication, managing changing circumstances and a contract or Memorandum of Understanding are vital ingredients for effective collaboration.



What an incredible piece of work – I laughed, thought hard and sat in awe at the physical prowess on show. It is a truly intimidating thought that four days ago, there was nothing. A very talented all-round team.

Audience Member



Ignition engages with young people in a way that is exceptional in today's theatrical community offering them genuine opportunities to participate in serious, exciting and innovative physical theatre.

Andy Dawson, Theatre Royal Plymouth



What an extraordinary achievement in such a short rehearsal time. It is such a joy to see that kind of commitment from young men of that age. You should all be hugely proud.

Anne Henderson, Casting Director, National Theatre Scotland



Elizabeth Lynch
June 2011

Images by Eric Richmond, John Hunter,
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