

How to start your own space | Arron Gill Interview

Transcript

Josie: Hi my name is Josie, I'm the Artistic Director of Ort Gallery. Welcome to today's video. In this video I will be interviewing Arron from the Gap Art Space which is literally next door to Ort and also The Mix Cafe which is part of the Gap and used to be Ort Cafe so our spaces are linked and I thought Arron would be a really good person to interview about talking about his experience of starting a gallery space and the barriers that came with it, the experiences he's made along the way.

There's a full transcript of this video in the description box so please make sure that you find that if that is helpful to you. Please also turn on the captions they have been created for you and edited so you can have subtitles if this is useful for you to have. Just as a quick disclaimer: this video with Arron is very much Arron talking about his own experience so it is not a universal approach to starting a space. Arron also talks very much in the Balsall Heath/Birmingham context so this is a video that's very much relevant to people, local people and people generally in the UK, because methods and funding and policies do differ from country to country.

I'm joined today by Arron from Gap and from The Mix Cafe. Both of these are literally next door to Ort and yeah let's get straight into it. So my first question was can you give us a quick rundown of how Gap was started and how and when you got involved with it.

Arron: Yeah no problem so The Gap actually started out as a youth theatre company back in 2000 and early parts of 2001 and at that time it was called Theatre Arc and I joined it then I think when I was 14 as an actor. And the difference about Theatre Arc which was conceived by Ceri Townsend and Richard Holmes from Big Brum and Ceri now is colleague and mentor with The Gap, that it wasn't just training young people in sort of performative aspects of drama but it was actually using drama as a means of getting young people to to ask themselves what is it what does it mean to exist in this world? And for me these sort of really deeply profound questions exploring from drama was the way that I began to really understand who I

was a bit that I wasn't being able to do in in other parts of my life in my family or at school.

So that really grabbed me that did and that's something that we carried over that sort of core element that we've carried over into the company these days and the youth theatre also made a lot of space not just for people to get involved in sort of performance but it also was getting young people to manage budgets and do marketing and production so it was really felt like you had ownership of an actual company and you actually did.

Then the company developed itself quite a bit and became a multi disciplinary arts organisation whilst retaining that identity of drama and education. And we were always committed to championing young people and creating cultural and creative opportunities, meaningful culture and creative opportunities for young people. We did a project called New Life in 2011 which was about the demonisation of young people post 2011 UK riots and it was a yeah that was a self-portrait photography project but still use the concepts of what does it mean to be a young person in today's world? And exploring it through drama but using photography as its medium.

Then the company became The Gap Arts. Project in 2013 and we became a public venue a few years later. Maybe a little bit of context about what the name means might be a bit useful as well because I think sometimes people hear the name The Gap or The Gap Arts Project and for us it has a really really particular significant meaning and we don't often get the chance to to say what that means. So the easiest way that I understand it is that it's a The Gap is a drama concept, it's a part of the methodology that we practice that takes inspiration from the theatre of Chris Cooper, Big Brum, Edward. Bond and what it means is the gap is a sort of metaphysical space in where you make your own meaning. So for example in society we say that you want to close the gap generally, so you want to close for example the gender pay gap. What we say is that we want to open gaps we say for example things like government, ideology, authority and all of its various guises tell young people what to do, what to think, what to dress, what culture they should be engaging in, what culture is accessible to them, what art forms are accessible to them, what not.

That's where we want to create the gap we want to break that a little bit creating, using different great forms, so that young people can step into that gap and understand who they are in relationship to the world. That's what we're trying to do with physical space that's why we called it The Gap you step into The Gap and it runs throughout all of our work as well.

Josie: I love that, that's so nice. So following on from that how would you say your relationship with that organisation has changed over the years?

Arron: Yeah that was a really challenging question when you asked me because it really confronted my personal journey which is which is useful to do from time to time. So personally I think I said before I joined the company when I was about 14 years old and now 12 years later I'm a core team member and I've been in this job for about five years now and that role isn't sort of everything and anything: from delivering projects to fundraising to management, venue management or and every single thing in between that as well.

What I'm really particularly feel like one of my key roles has been is developing into a public space and helping to embed the company in the local community. Balsall Heath, which is where you're based and have been based for a long time as well which is where we are and where I live and all the rest.

But when you ask about what my changing relationship to the company is I think that the only way that I could understand it is that my changing relationship to The Gap is in context to how the world has changed over the past decade and what I mean by that is that we've we've really seen sort of the devastating effects of austerity that has had on a generation of people who have grown up in it, the effects of the hostile environment, policies, increases in poverty, mass low-wage economies for a whole generation and I am that generation and also you know provisions for young people decimated across the board.

So mental health support in Birmingham in particular is shocking and what I think has happened is that community arts organisations have had to step into the role that the state not only is supposed to provide but has actively disenfranchised. So you become, so if you're a community arts worker now

you don't, you're not necessarily a producer or writer or designer you become a sort of social worker, you become a community organiser and for me I sort of never anticipated that happening, like I've always had that in me but that's but when I started that was all external to how I understood arts how arts work. But now all that sort of social community resilience stuff is completely central to I think what the organisation does and is now.

So I think everything that we do we we have to ask ourselves are we being resourceful, is what we is what we are doing meaningful, does it make a material difference and these are some really big questions I think that every particularly community arts organisation should be asking themselves every step of the way so yeah my relationship has changed in the context of the abyss of the world that we live in.

Josie: It's so interesting hearing you say this like you know it's so true for me as well and I think you don't initially really sign up for that either because you don't have any kind of training to deal with like complex mental health situations and you know I think over time I've become more empathetic to understand where someone's coming from but that requires a lot from you and when you're you know essentially especially if you're in like for example the cafe space and someone comes to you and you're already overworked and underpaid and undervalued and you know it's in your face with whatever they need or want from you it's so hard to like actually take them seriously and listen to them and empathise that you know they you you can help them in that moment because what you really want to do is just go like oh my god this isn't me like leave me alone right. So yeah I don't know if there's a question in that but there's definitely something over the years that I would say I've had to grow a thicker skin and there's times when I can be really giving and support. Different times I have to just say like no it's enough for today or I can't deal with this particular issue.

Arron: I mean I think that's really useful because what it sounds like you're talking about is really taking it on yourself I think one of the key things that I've learned in these settings is that that's impossible to do so it's really key for us for example to to make sure we know where to signpost we know what's BS and what's not BS you know. We know who the good people are we know they're good fighters and that we really listen to people because if I - you're right people do come in all the time with different issues that people

are facing and I don't have the answers and I never profess to but what I can do is make is much space for you at least or you know get you a cup of tea or something to eat for that day or something like that. But yeah I think it's about community building you're not not trying to do it but yourself I think it's worthwhile.

Also people just need space that's something that I've really realised like one of the key things I think about running a venue is that regardless of what it is people need space, there's public space has been decimated as well hasn't it. And I think in this city, in Birmingham in particular, I'm from. Birmingham, I've lived here pretty much all all my life never really interacted with the city centre and I don't know any of my mates who really do either, so you don't go to hang out in the city center everything happens in small towns and things like that. So then we have a role as community artist or people who run public spaces as well to think about what happens beyond the art you know and how are you holding that space because yeah there are some sometimes there's nowhere for people to go you know.

Josie: Yes, so have you ever started your own art space gallery business? I mean I feel like you've half answered this one already.

Arron: Yes so yeah we we run the venue that's next door to you that was your Ort Cafe as well yeah so we've worked in the same building so yeah yeah I have started that but by no no means was it something that I did by myself yeah that sounded like when you asked me this question in the email I really wanted to stress which was that I think and well I guess I'll come on to it in a different question but yeah there's myself there's there's a couple of other people in the core team and then there's our board of trustees as well and that and there's more people, but particularly when we were going through the process of of building and starting a space, you know, I think it was impossible to do by yourself, you know, you don't have all the key skill sets. You need to be able to to balance things off from people who have different experiences and expertise and yeah... and ask for help when you don't.

Josie: Always ask for help! Yes definitely. I agree. I guess that makes the next question irrelevant does it?

Arron: Oh the barriers question.

Josie: Yeah we can ask: What are the barriers?

Arron: Oh yeah yeah I've got other stuff to say about that. There's so many barriers, there's so many barriers... so being able to be steady, like this isn't, if you don't want it, it's sort of about the space but it's also generally about the barriers of working in the arts as well.. So being able to to be steady in the arts world is difficult enough and I think when you're, when you're racialised it becomes even harder so I learned pretty early on that I was gonna have to stick up for myself to create my own structures. I think that's a really key thing and not rely on existing ones that have historically been active in subjugating people like me and what I mean by that is Black and Brown folks.

So I, you know, had the opportunities to work with and for other organisations sometimes they're big national large organisations, sometimes they're very small organisations as well, but they are steeped, historically steeped in a culture of whiteness. And whiteness in particular relation, because I think whiteness in the arts is always a very particular type of discourse and I realised really early that there was no way that I could, there was no way that I could do that and I've consistently said that as well. Like. I will never dance for the white one, you know, what I wanted to do, what was really key for me, is to figure out to learn from my history, to learn from what was happening before me, because there is a brilliant history of Black and Brown... for me was particularly important was Asian and Brown art spaces and when I was researching, when I was thinking about what I want my space to be it was amazing how it was so hard to find examples, community examples of Brown arts organisations that weren't tied to a location, to a geography, to a community, to a practice of community care and resilience. It was always so integral to what was also up on the walls and what their program was and it made me realise really quickly that there was no way that you could do this if you work toward the Tate or something like that, you know.

For me was really important to start my own, to create my own structures and to to build co-operative models for example even pay parity, for example,

it's really really big thing that we practice in our company. So I'll come back to this again in a different question, but we always make sure that there's pay parity for example, and, or everybody gets a say in what programs are being designed and it's always tied to the community that we live in as well. So yeah there has definitely been barriers.

The other thing I will talk about definitely as well is that one of the barriers that I faced... I've been a lot on these sort of professional development leadership programs, you know. Oh my god they're terrible! For the most part, for the most part, because what they assume and often the ones I've been on are specifically catered for Black and Brown people, right, it's diversity groupings for you to become an. Artistic Director of a big building like the Rep or the Old Vic or something like that. And that's also when I learnt what the barriers are, because what that whole program is designed for you to do, and these are funded, these are funded by the Arts Council, by National Organisations, you know, people get dozens of thousands of pounds to run these courses and it's... when I go through them it's like: how is this possible? Because it's all about how do you assimilate your exoticness into something which is socially acceptable to white institutions. I've always said to myself, like: I already do this, but I just don't do it in a white culture so therefore to you it's not valid, for you I have to go through this training program. I don't need a training program, I've been doing my thing for a very long time now. I will train you, you know. But for some reason it always seems like I have, for me, I have to constantly be jumping through these hoops because this art world will never allow me to do my own thing. It will always, at the top level, it will always ask me to assimilate. So that's why, for me, starting my own space starting my own thing was non-negotiable.

Josie: Did you have any special training for the work that you do now and if not what other types of training do you use, such as self-directed study?

Arron: Special training... so I've got a degree in Theatre and Performance which whilst I don't feel like it was the most useful academic thing to do it actually taught me a lot in resilience and how to work in a creative field that is dominated by whiteness. When I did my degree I was the only Asian person, there was one Black person, everybody else was white, most people came from money, I'm the only person in my generation, my family to go to

do something like this. So I don't think I learned practical skills relating to arts but I learned resilience which I think is special training.

The biggest thing that I think I have in terms of training is a mentor. Something that I really advocate for people to do, all the time, and my mentor, I'm lucky that I work with my mentor. Most people don't get to do that. So Ceri who's the founder of the company, I class her a my mentor, sometimes she winces when she hears that word, but she's a skilled thinker and creative thinker and she's resilient in her own right as well and I'm lucky to have a relationship where constructive feedback and criticism is given wholeheartedly and with the idea of growth as well. And then yeah like you suggested, I have a self-study and. I think most people who work in these situations do a constant every night negotiation of what do you know, what do you not know, what's meaningful, how can I make things better for everybody and yeah so self-study mentorship and resilience are key things.

Josie: What message do you have for young people who want to start their own space. Obviously it's not just for young people.

Arron: Yeah yeah for sure. It sounds so basic but like ask yourself why? I think you have to, most of the time, you have to have a really good idea why you want to set up the space, you know. At least one, what I always call non-negotiables yeah, at least one non-negotiable reason that nobody's going to turn you over that's not, that you're committed to, that's going to drive, it's going to the centre of what we're doing, you know. Otherwise it might not be the right thing to do, I think a lot of people think that having a space is the answer to then they can do whatever they want. It just doesn't work that way whatsoever.

Having a space actually can add a whole load of issues. It's very easy to have, when you have your own space, to stop producing work and you just become an arts manager or an arts organiser, which can be great, but if you're an artist yourself I think when you're when you're running space the administration of the space is just massive. So research into what exactly it entails, speak to everybody you can, because it might be better that you just collaborate with people, you know, you find people who have spaces that you trust and that you have principles, share principles with and you work

with them, because running a space is a full-time job and there's very little money in it as well.

But if you still really want to do it, great go for it, you know, and I think I said it before the number one rule is don't do it by yourself, that's insane, you'll, you will burn out. Find people who have, you know, you share your vision, share that non-negotiable with you.. Try to be clear in your mind about what that non-negotiable is as well. It can be conceptual but have it written down somewhere as well. Share that with other people if they get it and they back you bring them in. Yeah just share the workload really and talk to many people as you can research and stuff, talk to me if you need to.

Josie: You just said that you're not gonna earn much - how much do you earn?

Arron: Oh I love, I love love love that you put this question in, because it's such a useful question, it's such a useful question, that I think people are absolutely afraid, totally scared of asking each other. It's a taboo isn't it? Yeah! You don't do that, it's rude! Really happy because it gives me the chance to be honest here. So I try and answer this as as practically, as literally as I can yeah. So the question you asked me was how much do I earn from my work in The Gap? The easy answer is it's not a set amount, yeah, so the the company's a charity, so it means it's not a formal employer, nobody who works there is on salary.

In fact and what's quite common is that everybody is a freelancer it's just that most of the work that we do is freelance work through The Gap. So we work, which means, we work on a project to project basis which is which, if people work in arts contexts and specifically small arts contexts, is fairly common as well. So depending on what project I'm working on depends on how much I earn. What also that relates to is something I said earlier where that public money has been decimated and shrinking and shrinking so funds every year we apply for some set, for the same funds, they get smaller and smaller and smaller and which means that your wage and smaller but always the ask is always bigger as well. So you always find yourself working for less money and doing more things and it also means in this context as well is that when you only get paid project to project, all that other stuff, administration, venue management, staff management, just everything that's not a project... core

costs obviously, nobody wants to pay you to do that, you know, because it doesn't have the same type of outcomes.

So that. I think, people shouldn't fool themselves into actually like how much unpaid voluntary hours, hundreds of hours go into something like this. And it's actually something that I was thinking about, I was talking to a friend the other day actually and he was talking about this, I'm trying to find it because I wrote it down a little bit, so it's really difficult to have financial security in the arts, generally, yeah, unless you're Nicholas. Serota or whoever whoever, you know. And particularly for racialised folks who don't have the same, quite often, intergenerational wealth that white people do, which means that they can afford to do precarious work, because they have, they have safety nets, financial safety nets, you know.

For people like me it's incredibly intense to live on a project to project basis, you know, I have to have side hustles, I have to have support networks, finance, like literally financial support networks, friends who I know I can... and it's a taboo thing as well to be like I need you to support me this month. you know. So it's incredibly intense to live on a project to project basis and also it really reminded me of this really really super jerks tweet that I know that Tobi from the Black Ticket Project, aren't you doing some work with. Tobi?

Josie: Yeah, for the last exhibition, yeah, there was a producer workshop, yeah.

Arron: I saw Tobi did his tweet years ago and I used it in an art video and I still come back to it because it's making me feel... it's so funny:

"If you're the only Black or Brown person on your, in your arts organisation then you're also it's unpaid diversity officer, as well."

And I laugh about that quite a lot, because, for some time I was the only racialised, like everybody else's white in the organisation, you know, it's a bit different now. And that was the role, I didn't realise it until it's said to you, but I realised by default I've been a diversity officer and there's a whole lot of things that come with that, as well. So how much do I... to go back to your question, how much do I earn? It's not much, but that is that's not the

fault of the company whatsoever, it's really not. That is the fault of living in a world, a society and economy and I would say government, but I don't think they would be any better either. Living in a world that completely disenfranchises the arts as a means of gainful employment or of, you know, of linking it to, even if it was more linked towards education, if there's a more formal link between community arts organisations and education settings there'd be pathways, clear pathways for artists like yourself or producers or whatever to gain extra income, have extra credibility as well.

But yeah the UK is extremely narrow-minded in how it understands the value of cultural workers and I say cultural workers as opposed to artists because I don't think it's just artists or people who run galleries or anything like that I think it's extremely broad, anything to do with cultural work and is deeply undervalued.. And it's crazy isn't it? Because as I said earlier like these things we do the job of the state socially, you know, I filled in so many sort of like employment forms for people, so many housing forms for people, who come in off the street, who don't, who maybe don't speak English as their first language or don't have the time or taking people to internet cafes and help them log on, you know. That's part of my day-to-day work as much as running projects for young people, as much as hanging paintings on the wall, I probably do that more than I do artwork you know. It's insane! Can I just add a small thing to that?

Josie: Yeah!

Arron: I think for example like most people might know what the White Pube are yeah? Yeah. I think some of the things that they're doing about finances is brilliant, you know, they document their incomes and outgoings on their website, amazing! Because one thing that does is not only makes it accessible for somebody who's about to get into the arts understand, okay, this is generally, you know and they're there at the top of the game, everybody knows them really well, so that's what the top end looks like, you know, so imagine when you're just starting out, but once things that does is pressure and I think that's one of the intention as well isn't it, it puts pressure on universities, or if you are, if you want to hire artists or what not to think about you: need to pay people on time you need to pay them proper wages, otherwise we'll just out you, we'll just shame you. I think that's absolutely fine as well. Thanks for having me.

Josie: Thank you so much.

Thank you so much for watching, I'm hoping to make this a series so there should be more interviews coming up. If you are interested in seeing them make sure to subscribe to Ort Gallery's youtube channel so you don't miss out. Thank you bye.

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