

ANNUAL REPORT

2022/23



**BLACK
COUNTRY
TOURING**



Auden Allen performs in RPM Analogue Audio Ltd as a part of What's In Store Bearwood.



Katie Stevens accompanies the Walking Tour as a part of What's In Store Bearwood.



Brendan Hawthorne performs in the Market Place as a part of What's In Store Wednesbury.

Funders & Supporters



Many thanks to our 2022/23 funders and partners:



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

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Awarded funds from



What's in Store Wednesbury was part of We Are Wednesbury, a cultural programme produced by Multistory for the High Streets Heritage Action Zone initiative, funded by Sandwell Council and Historic England.



HM Government



About Us



Black Country Touring (BCT) produces and promotes high-quality theatre, dance and film in the Black Country, putting local communities at the heart of everything we do.

Vision

Our vision is of a Black Country where everyone has the opportunity to experience captivating, inspiring and diverse performances in their community, regardless of their background, age or income.

Mission

We believe the arts have the potential to change lives by allowing us to see new possibilities, develop new skills and provide opportunities to reflect on our own lives, communities and the wider world.

We work with people across the Black Country to select and present the very best available artists and companies to our local communities.

We endeavour to make our work accessible to, and reflective of, the diverse communities that make up the Black Country.

We collaborate with artists and local people to create new work born out of contemporary Black Country stories for both local and national audiences.



Curious Cargo perform at What's In Store Bearwood



All of BCT's work is focused on creating opportunities for local people to experience theatre, dance and film. They are actively involved in programming, promoting and creating performances, events and festivals. We achieve this through four strands:

- **Community Promoters:** Supporting local volunteers working in their community to select and promote touring theatre, dance and film in accessible and friendly neighbourhood venues such as community centres and libraries
- **Young Promoters:** Schoolchildren and young people aged from 5 – 18 in mainstream and SEND education transform their school or college into a venue for a touring production, learning the skills required to run a theatre venue
- **Original Productions:** Site-specific theatre productions that reflect the cultural diversity and the lived experiences of Black Country people – their histories, origins, memories, interests, hopes and aspirations
- **Community Cinema:** We support local people and venues to bring an immersive cinema experience to their community. The focus is on bringing people together to enjoy the magic of film, programming everything from sing-alongs to documentaries



Rupinder Kaur performs in Al-Raqib Modest Fashion in What's in Store Bearwood. Photo by Anand Chhabra.

Chair's Statement



Rekindling Performing Arts in the Black Country

Dear Friends and Supporters,

I am delighted to present this Chair's Statement for our Annual Report, reflecting on the remarkable strides our organisation has made during the 2022/23 year. This period has witnessed transformative change, continued resilience and new collaborations.

Reconnecting Communities Through Culture

The past year was exceptional for Black Country Touring as we observed the enthusiasm of our audiences across the wider Black Country in returning to events following the pandemic. After a period of isolation, these opportunities to come together in welcoming community spaces felt particularly special and essential, significantly contributing to our collective well-being and sense of togetherness.

The role of culture in connecting communities and reducing isolation cannot be overstated. We swiftly transitioned from the challenges posed by the pandemic to addressing the economic difficulties faced by our communities due to the rising cost of living. Our mission was clear: to ensure that residents across the Black Country could still afford to enjoy outstanding theatre, dance, and film experiences in their neighbourhoods.



A community cinema screening at the Wesley Centre for All in Wednesbury

Breaking Down Barriers

Much of our work centres on challenging and removing barriers and welcoming people into new places, ideas, and experiences. The primary hurdle is often the belief that "it's not for me". In the Black Country, many individuals lack access to arts and culture due to profound inequalities in arts provision across all age groups.

We firmly believe that everyone in the Black Country should have the opportunity to experience the arts, regardless of income, education, or background. This year, much of our site-specific work was focused on taking performances into everyday spaces to engage people where they live, work and shop. Art should be part of the fabric of our lives, something unexpected, happened-upon and exciting, not always confined to a venue with the expectation that the audience will travel for it.



What's in Store Wednesbury. Photo by Philip Parnell.

Enriching Our High Streets

In the heart of the Black Country, we animated high streets and town centres with captivating storytelling, poetry, and performances. What's In Store breathed life into these areas, celebrating the unique stories of local shops, their proprietors, and customers, all crafted in collaboration with local artists. The streets resonated with the sounds of the Rajasthan Heritage Brass Band, and families delighted in the wordless adventures of a yeti, staged inside Bearwood Indoor Market.

We were proud to present **What's In Store Bearwood** as part of the **Birmingham 2022 Festival**, enriching the cultural tapestry of Sandwell during the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games. **What's In Store Wednesbury**, delivered as part of a three-year partnership with Multistory, was another milestone in our commitment to promoting community engagement and cultural diversity throughout the region. Although both towns are within the same borough, they have very different and distinctive identities and environments, so the project was adapted to suit each locale.

Pushing Artistic Boundaries

We furthered the bold experimentation that defined the company's work throughout the pandemic. We embraced the lessons learned during this time, where our company continued to connect with audiences and create immersive and accessible performances. Collaborating with Ghana's Accra Theatre Workshop, we produced **Where Are You?**, a live theatre production for families simultaneously staged in the Black Country and Accra, connected through a live Zoom link.

This endeavour pushed the boundaries of our work within physical spaces and celebrated the power of technology to bridge geographical divides. I particularly enjoyed seeing children from different continents connect through theatre, greeting one another from over 3,000 miles away. The project was made possible thanks to support from the British Council and Birmingham 2022 Festival.

Chair's Statement



Circus Bezercus at Friar Park Millennium Centre, Sandwell

Rebuilding with Communities

In 2022/23, providing ongoing support and subsidy to our Community Promoters in the Black Country was a top priority. We minimised the risks our Promoters faced during these challenging times by providing additional subsidies and support for their events, thanks to generous financial support from **Arts Council England**, **Esmée Fairbairn Foundation**, **Postcode Culture Trust**, **British Council** and many more. We are hugely grateful to our funders for the flexibility they have allowed us as we rebuilt our programme, which allowed us to meet the needs of our communities, partners and promoters as we navigated difficult times.

A Sustainable Future

Our focus this year was on laying the groundwork for a sustainable future. The challenges of sustaining our levels of activity in the Black Country have been apparent for years, with little increase in our core funding from Arts Council England in over a decade. Fortunately, we have received support from local authorities, trusts, and individuals, which significantly boosted our capacity in recent years. However, we recognised that substantial, long-term investment was needed at the core of our organisation to achieve true sustainability and fulfil our potential for impact.

In November, we received the welcome news that **Arts Council England** would increase our annual funding by 51% from 2023 to 2026. This increase will allow us to reach more people than ever in the Black Country, bringing outstanding performances to people's doorsteps and engaging individuals in areas with limited access to the arts. We were delighted to see a vital increase in funding across the Black Country, with a number of brilliant organisations receiving increases or joining the portfolio.

Securing grants of this scale was only possible with the continued financial support of **Sandwell Council** and **Wolverhampton City Council**. Their funding enables us to leverage significantly more income into the boroughs, resulting in a substantial return on investment for the Black Country's communities, venues, and artists.



Enhancing Arts Provision in Libraries

We were delighted to learn that **Rekindle**, a national project to enhance arts provision in libraries, had secured funding for three years from 2023 to 2026 from Arts Council England. Our partnership with Sandwell Libraries will create a culturally relevant, accessible, and inclusive arts programme across five libraries, with training provided to library staff, making these libraries even greater cultural hubs for their local communities.

As we look back on this year of challenges, ambition, and new ways of working, we take pride in the dedication of our Community Promoters, volunteers, and venues in the Black Country. They have proven to be resilient in the face of adversity and passionate and excited about bringing outstanding performances back to Black Country audiences. Together, we understand that the arts have the power to unite and enrich our community, and we continue to strive for a brighter and more culturally vibrant Black Country.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Timothy Rushby', with a long horizontal flourish underneath.

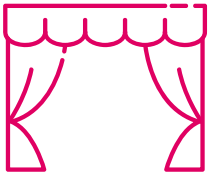
Timothy Rushby
Chair, Black Country Touring



2022/23 In Stats



35,249 people attended events, performances and productions supported, or produced, by Black Country Touring. This is over double our audience for 2021/22!



Community & Young Promoters featured **92 performances** of **36** individual touring productions or acts, in **35** venues across the Black Country. This is a **26%** increase in performances on last year.



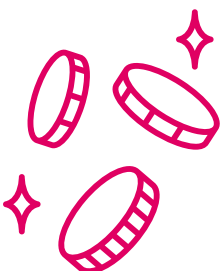
What's in Store took place in two towns in Sandwell, featured **32** artists, **10** performances and was attended by **5,923** people in total.



1,199 people attended **Community Cinema** screenings, a **116%** increase on last year.



730 people engaged with our digital projects, including the **Black Country Stories podcast** and short films for **What's In Store** and **Where Are You?**

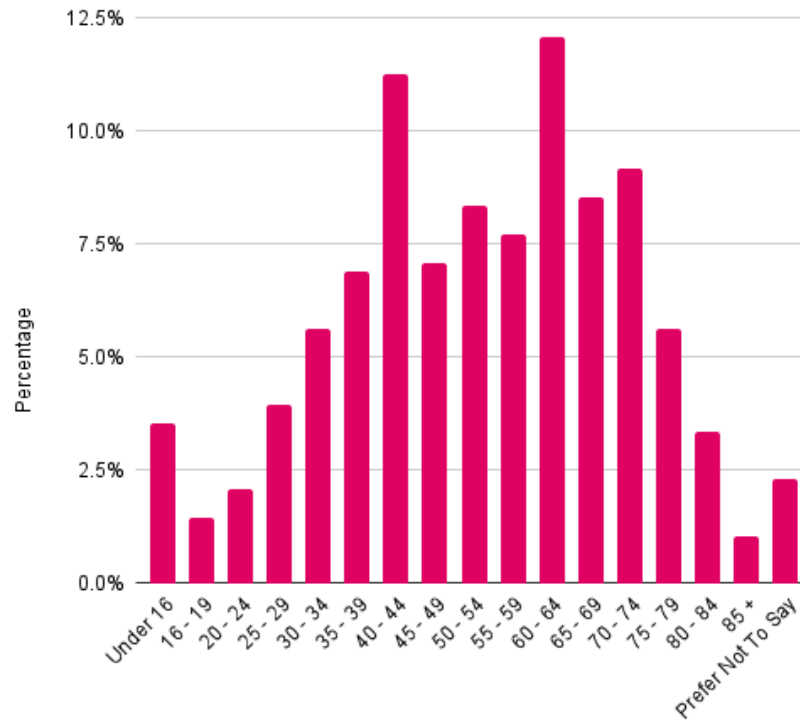


For every £1 granted to Black Country Touring by Arts Council England, Sandwell Council & Wolverhampton Arts & Heritage, **we raised a further £1.83** to invest in the performing arts across the Black Country.

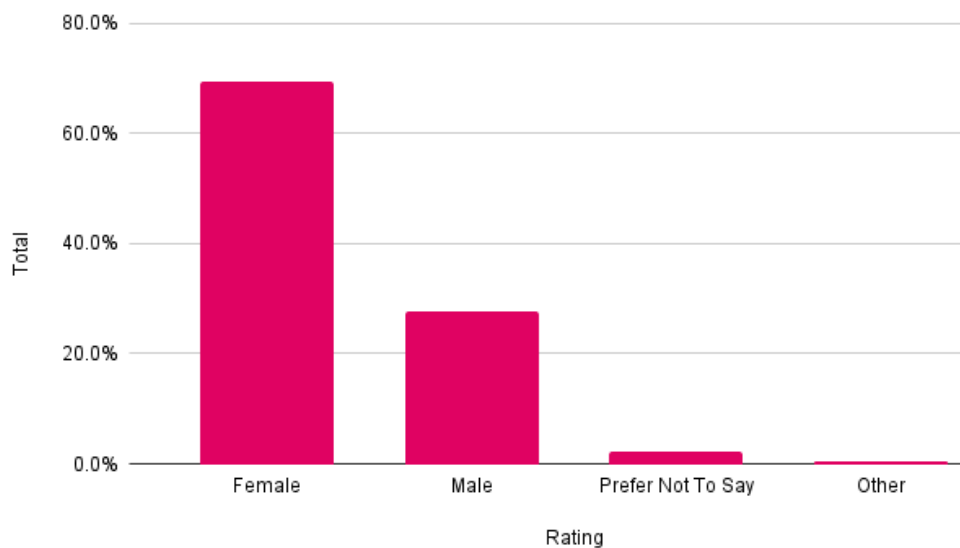
2022/23 Our audiences



Age Range



Gender



20% of our audience identified as having their daily activities limited by a disability.

Data is taken from audience surveys conducted between April 2022 and March 2023.

2022/23 Our audiences



Count of CQ8

Asian/Asian British: Any other Asian background

1.4%

Mixed/multiple ethnic groups: Any other Mixed/multiple

1.2%

White: Any other White background

2.9%

Prefer not to say

2.2%

Mixed/multiple ethnic groups: White and Black Caribbean

1.4%

Mixed/multiple ethnic groups: White and Asian

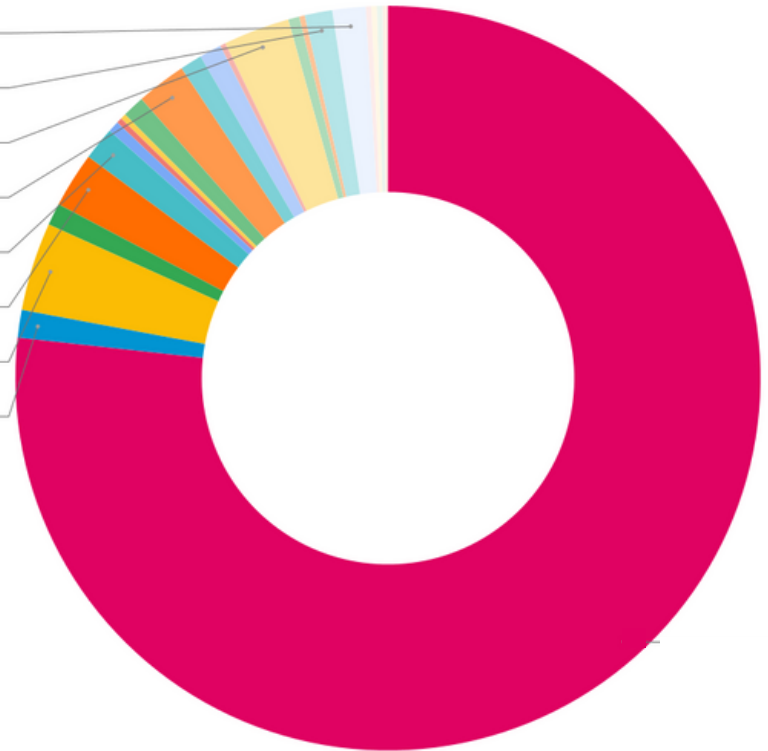
2.4%

Asian/Asian British: Asian/Asian British: Indian

3.8%

White: Irish

1.2%



21% of audiences were from ethnically diverse backgrounds. This is a small drop from pre-pandemic levels, potentially due to the range of active promoters and the areas of the Black Country where performances took place.

Our 2023–26 business plan and programme aims to further engage under-served and under-represented communities, including people from ethnically diverse backgrounds.

White: English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British
76.7%



62.3% of Black Country Touring's audiences live in the 30% most deprived areas in the UK, based on postcode data. Many have been hit hard by Covid-19 and the cost of living crisis, which is why we are providing additional support to promoters, keeping ticket prices low and trialling pay-what-you-can ticketing.

60% of our audiences travelled less than 2 miles to attend an event. 82% of our audience travel less than 5 miles, demonstrating the localised focus and impact of our work, in an area with few dedicated arts venues.



2022/23 Our audiences



90% of audiences rated the performance they attended as Very Good, 9% as Good and 0% as poor.



91% of audiences rated the performance they attended as Very Good value for money.



Pleasant evening out, joyful & thought provoking subject matter

It was a wonderful show, I haven't laughed that much in years. Well done, excellent!!

It was so original and funny. Something very different, loved it

It's an important event bringing people together. The years of the pandemic have been awful and we need more events like this please.

This event has been perfect for us. As a big family (8) we struggle to find events in our price range and that will be appropriate for all the children's ages. We will definitely be looking for more.

I loved the creativity. The sets were beautiful. My youngest gasped when the big book was opened. It's brilliant to have something like this on our doorstep, very accessible.

It was a magical experience with my close & extended family and made me feel connected to this community. The fact it took place in a library felt like the books came alive!

A chance to really see in a new way, my local high street. Thank you!

Great for lifting people's spirits, community building, educational, fun and imaginative.



Audience data is based on 514 audience surveys and 597 postcodes collected between April 2022 and March 2023

2022/23 Highlights

WHAT'S IN STORE



The Rajasthan Heritage Brass Band perform in Bearwood Indoor Market as a part of What's In Store Bearwood.



Lorna Meehan performs in Allsorts as a part of What's In Store Wednesbury.

2

towns

4

days

46%

of commissioning fees
were paid to artists
from ethnically diverse
backgrounds

32

artists

19

micro-
productions

47.5%

of audiences were from the
lowest 3 deciles for multiple
deprivation (32% in
Bearwood, 69% in
Wednesbury)

110

performances

5805

people attended

Celebrating Our High Streets

What's In Store has seen Black Country Touring develop a unique approach to presenting performances in town centres and on high streets; invigorating, animating and celebrating the independent spirit of shops, cafes and businesses in Bearwood and Wednesbury. It built on developmental projects in West Bromwich and Wolverhampton in 2019 piloting the work in partnership with the local Business Improvement Districts. The project embodied the organisation's ethos of *Big Ideas in Small Spaces* - presenting high-quality and accessible work, with emotional depth and rich storytelling in everyday but unexpected spaces where audiences don't expect to find theatre, poetry and live music.



What's In Store celebrated the positive impact multiculturalism has on our high streets - the vibrancy of culture and cuisine from around the world and the stories of the people that have settled in Black Country towns; shaping the sights, smells and signage of these bustling thoroughfares. At a time when society often feels fragmented and divided, it's more important than ever that we encourage local people to step over thresholds that they usually pass by, to hear the stories of the people within and walk away with new, positive perspectives of the people and places where they live.



A chance to really see, in a new way, my local high street. Thank you!

***Great for lifting people's spirits, community building,
educative, fun and imaginative.***

Brilliantly presented, fun & funny. Great combination of story & music and a window into people's lives & local shopkeepers you'd never be aware of otherwise.

Great event! So lovely to see live & local theatre & poetry in such a different space!



What's In Store Bearwood

17 & 18 June 2022



What's In Store brought two days of live poetry, music and theatre performances to independent shops and cafes along Bearwood Road, Smethwick. Part of the **Birmingham 2022 Festival**, it helped to bolster Sandwell's representation within the festivities and spotlight its rich cultural diversity. The high street is reflective of the many communities that have settled in the area, with cuisine, culture and groceries from Brazil, Mexico, India, the Caribbean and many more.

The project was made possible with funding from the **Esmée Fairbairn Foundation's Reinvent Performing Arts Fund**, which allowed BCT to invest greater resources into a production than ever before and unprecedented creative freedom and capacity to develop the project at a hugely challenging time, as we emerged from the disruption of Covid-19.



It made me realise how important it is to write about lived local experiences and lives. Storytelling is a very powerful medium and sometimes we do overlook it.

- Artist feedback



20 freelance artists were employed in total, the majority of whom are residents of Sandwell and the wider West Midlands. At the heart of the project were a team of 7 local artists who were in residence in shops along the high street. They developed new performances based on stories gathered from business owners and customers and inspired by the Bearwood Road. Examples include **Auden Allen**, who celebrated the crackle of vinyl in RPM Audio, while **Rupinder Kaur's The Never Ending Journey** was inspired by the clothing store Ar-Raqib Modest Fashion and the story of its owner. **Bohdan Piasecki's The Shop of Poems** popped up Bearwood Indoor Market in the run-up to What's In Store and saw Bohdan write and perform poems based on stories gathered from local people who visited.

There were two special shows for children and families - BCT's original production **Where Are You?** at Bear Bookshop, and **Is That A Yeti Hetty? by Crow's Nest Theatre** in Bearwood Indoor Market. Poet **Dreadlockalien** created freestyle poems together with members of the public, while **Jake Oldershaw** performed **Coffee & Tea**, a warm-hearted performance inspired by tales from Black Country cafés that finds the extraordinary in the everyday. High street spaces came to life with **Curious Cargo's** mischievous **Lollipop Ladies** and the incredible **Rajasthan Heritage Brass Band**.

Where Are You?

17 & 18 June 2022, presented as part of What's In Store Bearwood

Where Are You? is a hybrid theatre production for families produced by Black Country Touring in collaboration with **Accra Theatre Workshop** in Ghana, commissioned by **Birmingham 2022 Festival** and funded by the **British Council**. It tells the story of two penpals, Rochi in Bearwood and Abena in Dzorwulu, who embark on a perilous journey courting danger and adventure in order to meet each other in the middle.



Because of COVID, we couldn't travel and be in the same place, but to have the opportunity to explore a new way of working was really what we needed at the time.

Emelia Asiedu, Artistic Director - Accra Theatre Workshop



The creative team crossed both locations and never met in person, collaborating entirely over Zoom and Whatsapp. The show, featuring a mix of live performance, pre-recorded performance and animation, was staged simultaneously in Bear Bookshop (Bearwood) and J-CLU School of Arts (Accra) and was connected through a live stream. It was accompanied by a beautifully illustrated children's book and a standalone film.



A wonderful feelgood show with an excellent use of digital technology. Made me feel more connected to my community and people in Ghana. Brilliant to take place in a local bookshop.

Audience member



What's In Store Wednesbury

23 & 24 September 2022

12
artists &
performers

8
micro-
productions

56
individual
performances

9
participating
shops

2,605
people
attended

Black Country Touring were commissioned by fellow Sandwell arts charity **Multistory** to produce a version of What's in Store bespoke to Wednesbury, as part of **We Are Wednesbury**, a three year programme of cultural activity in Wednesbury led by Multistory for the **Wednesbury Heritage Action Zone**. The aim of **We Are Wednesbury** is to enable local people to express the pride they feel for their town, celebrate the role and importance of the high street as a hub of the community and enable people to understand the history of their town and share their memories and stories.

The project was built on the learnings of the Bearwood iteration and responded to the unique identity of Wednesbury town centre and its communities. The We Are Wednesbury steering group were engaged throughout the project and the programme was tailored towards families and people with limited opportunity to engage with the arts. New market stalls in the heart of the town were transformed into performance spaces, welcoming passers-by with **Is That a Yeti Hetty by Crow's Nest Theatre**, stilt performers **Top Bananas** and a stall hosted by Wednesbury Poet Laureate **Brendan Hawthorne**.

Actor **Vimal Korpall** and musician **Derek Nisbet** led audiences on a journey to some of the fantastic independent businesses throughout the town, uncovering their stories and giving a new insight into the people at the heart of the local community. **Lorna Meehan** wove stories of her crafty past with that of the Allsorts wool shop and its loyal customers, giving insight into what makes it an integral part of the Wednesbury community and how important it is to let the world see what you've made. Poet and actor **Suzan Spence** welcomed audience into Mama L's coffee shop, with tales of an often overlooked gem on the high street.



Wonderful to have activities in [the] town centre for everyone.

***Good quality theatre in the heart of the community.
Bringing people to participate in the arts in the heart of the
community is important connecting people and place.***

Interesting to find out who the people are behind the shops. It was nice to hear their stories.

This event is so beautiful, it meant a lot to me since I was able to learn more about Wednesbury and had a lot of fun.



Smethwick Celebrates The Queen's Jubilee



A New Creative Consortium for Smethwick

In Spring 2022, a consortium of four venues in Smethwick, Sandwell, joined forces to create a vibrant arts project funded by Arts Council England's Let's Create Jubilee Fund. With Black Country Touring's support, **Bearwood Community Hub, CAP Centre, The Dorothy Parkes Centre, and Thimblemill Library** secured £10,000 via the Heart of England Community Foundation to organise four community events featuring live theatre, uniting the diverse communities of Smethwick in celebration of the Queen's Platinum Jubilee.

The primary goal of this project was to bring Smethwick's communities together after enduring the hardships of the pandemic. Prolonged loneliness, isolation, rising living costs, and the emotional trauma of Covid-19 had taken a toll. Furthermore, limited arts opportunities exacerbated social inequality and deprivation, particularly for low-income families. According to the Active Lives Survey, Sandwell had the lowest arts engagement in the Midlands.

BCT supported the consortium in selecting and promoting professional touring theatre companies. We also assisted in organising creative workshops, booking and contracting theatre companies, event logistics, and marketing.

Community Engagement:

- 474 people attended Smethwick Celebrates events, theatre shows, and workshops.
- 123 people participated in 6 workshops, creating decorations for each venue.
- 98.8% of attendees rated their experience as 'very good' or 'good.'
- Attendees expressed the impact on their well-being and sense of community. Quotes like: "Helps me get out of the house as I haven't been very well" and "Queen's Platinum Jubilee - really special to me" highlight the event's significance to local people

Reaching Underserved Communities:

- 68.5% of attendees lived within 2 miles of the event, demonstrating successful local engagement.
- For 45.4% of attendees, this was the only professional arts event they had attended in the last 12 months, addressing the impact of Covid-19 on arts attendance.
- 67% of attendees were from the lowest 3 deciles for indices of multiple deprivation.
- 22.2% of attendees identified as having a disability, and 20% were from ethnically diverse backgrounds, reaching often underserved communities.

This partnership between the consortium venues and BCT not only brought live theatre to Smethwick but also fostered community, alleviated the effects of the pandemic and addressed inequalities in arts access. Our future aim is to support and expand this creative consortium to bring more cohesive and collaborative projects to Smethwick, bringing its community assets to life in with arts and creativity.



“These opportunities are vital for the wellbeing of our community. We had vulnerable adults and children attending workshops and a show free of charge. We were able to utilise the power of the arts and link it with a historical event, and it will have created lasting memories for all attendees. We also learnt more about the impact of partnership working as the offer we provided overall for the Smethwick community was a lot more than we could have ever done on our own.”

-Robert Bruce, Chief Executive, Dorothy Parkes Community Centre



The Head Gardener by Untied Artists



In recent years and for obvious reasons, the nation has collectively embraced the joys of gardening, from tending windowsill herb gardens to embarking on ambitious horticultural projects. Amid this green revolution, Black Country Touring played a pivotal role in bringing a transformative theatre production to life.

Seed Funding

When *The Head Gardener* faced uncertainty due to funding challenges, Black Country Touring stepped in to help Untied Artists bring the project to fruition, as Jake Oldershaw explains:

“Without the support of Black Country Touring, our touring performance ‘The Head Gardener’ simply would not exist. After two unsuccessful Arts Council grant bids, the first tour in 2022 was in serious jeopardy. As an artist and producer, this was deeply worrying as we had a tour of over 20 dates booked.

It was at this stage that BCT offered not only enough money for us to finish creating it, but also suggested that visiting various community gardens in the region might also provide inspirational material for the work. This was a process that directly informed the material, and it was a moving and humbling experience to then perform the show in those venues.”

The result has been 2 tours, over 40 shows, to venues across the country. We also have a good deal of interest for touring in 2024, including several Rekindle library venues, thanks to the pilot scheme we conducted with BCT in Black Country libraries in July 2023”

We believed that this production that celebrated community, growing and mental health needed to be seen by audiences in The Black Country and beyond. Jake and Warren Oldershaw combined storytelling with live music to create an immersive experience, while their heartfelt songs added depth and resonance. As Warren’s garden thrived, it served as a metaphor for the growth and transformation experienced by Warren, Jake and many other people as they connect with nature.

A Breath of Fresh Air

“A joyful, courageous, and inspiring piece of theatre, just what Riverside House stands for. The living garden on stage mirrored the growth we all aspire to.”

“A spectacular live performance, touching and skillfully delivered. It felt like stepping into a world where the boundaries between the stage and the audience dissolved.”

“Your story touched me deeply, promoting nature’s healing power. Your brotherly bond was heartwarming and added a layer of authenticity to the narrative.”



Trustees & Team



Trustees

Timothy Rushby, Chair

Imtiaz Dungarwalla, Vice Chair

Akila McLean

Julie McKirdy

Hitesh Patel (resigned November 2022)

Carla Priddon

Paul Reece

Black Country Touring Team

Frances Land, Co-Artistic Director

Steve Johnstone, Co-Artistic Director

Matt Andrews, Development Director

Corinne Morris, General Manager (joined September 2022)

Deb Justice, Company Manager (resigned November 2022)

Natalie Kidman, Promoter Manager

Sampira Al-Fihri, Creative Producer

Bobby Tiwana, Development Producer (Freelance)

Amrit Kaur Juss, Marketing & Communications Coordinator

Olivia James, Community Cinema Coordinator (Freelance)

Donna Clarkson, Community Programme Coordinator (from April 2023)

Laura Leech, Administration & Projects Assistant (joined May 2023)



Black Country Touring | @bct_touring
www.bctouring.org.uk

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Charity No: 1080608
Company No: 3446320

Black Country Touring is an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation.