

# Research into the potential for a national spoken word development programme – summary research findings

## Introduction

Earlier in 2016 Phrased & Confused conducted research into the potential for a national spoken word producer development programme. Our research set out to test demand for and explore possible delivery models of a spoken word development programme that would tackle the following widely-acknowledged challenges within the spoken word sector:

- Artists struggle to create viable national tours, because venues find spoken word too financially risky.
- Low audience numbers make it financially risky for venues to book spoken word; consequently, they struggle to build a spoken word audience.
- A lack of skilled experienced spoken word producers

We conducted a series of 20 telephone interviews with a cross-section of artists, producers and venues, drawn up in consultation with Arts Council England. This document summarises our research findings.

## Key issues uncovered during our research

The key issues we uncovered can best be divided into the following categories:

- Low quality product
- Lack of diversity in terms of product – has become reductive
- Artist skills development needs
- There's no real progression route – fat base, but no pipeline
- Relatively few venues taking on producer role/support role
- Touring is still broken – even more so
- Need for alternative circuits to be developed

### ***There's an issue with the product***

Perhaps the most commonly uttered observation amongst our consultees was that there was a problem with a lot of the work that's being created at the moment. There was an overall feeling that spoken word has written itself in a corner, become a bit reductive, in that most shows that are being created are one person, single narrative shows, often supposedly auto biographical, and with low production values. Some people felt that this is because what artists 'know', what the artform has become in recent years; others felt that work looks this way because there's not enough money for artists to make anything else, and/or no producers helping artists to think outside the box, and challenge themselves artistically.

Where's the artistic diversity? That was a question asked by a number of consultees. "Spoken word should be as diverse as music", said one.

Our research clearly points to a feeling – amongst artists, producers, venues and those working at development agencies – that we need to take a look at the artform itself.

### ***What do we mean? The perils of definition***

As ever, the question of how to define spoken word, what it is, how to describe or label it, came up. This question of definition appears to be linked to the comments about what the artform is defaulting to. One consultee asked "is spoken word just shit theatre?". Another said that by default spoken word these days is taken to mean "slam poetry... and that's for young people". Meanwhile, the question of whether using the word 'poetry' is a turn off or not continues to be asked. And not answered!

Linked to the idea of the artform needing perhaps to reinvent itself, there was also a widespread feeling that spoken word is also in need of a 're-brand'.

### ***There's a widespread acknowledgement that artists need to skill up – and toughen up***

The ecology of the spoken word scene means that artists are having to produce and promote their own work, perhaps more than ever before. It also means that there are more artists than ever operating on the bottom couple of rungs of the scene, making survival of the fittest a reality for lots of them. Despite this, there are very few training opportunities for artists, especially those over 25.

In this context, there was a widely held perception that artists are often ill-equipped to do this, in that they lack the basic skills and understanding that they need to develop, produce and distribute their work, and to earn a living.

There was also a feeling amongst a number of a consultees that the majority of artists are not equipped to deal with critical reactions to their work, to be challenged by 'outside eyes' or critical friends.

These two issues were seen to as contributing to the issues already referred to around the quality and artistic diversity of the work being made.

### ***At the same time, financial realities mean there just aren't enough producers out there***

Surely it's the role of producers to help artists develop creatively and produce work that will connect with an audience? Of course that's their role, but the financial reality of the spoken word scene that there just aren't that many independent producers around to do this. There are a few organisations doing a bit of this and some venues are doing this a little bit too, but very few independent producers. That's because it's so hard to make a living from that role, which in turn is partly to do with the next issue we describe below. Even if you are willing to take a punt on an artist, to put in a speculative grants for the arts application, as a producer there's no guarantee that you'll be able to secure the tour dates and get the fees you need to submit a decent looking application.

***Many years on, touring is now widely acknowledged to be ‘broken’***

As long ago as 2011, in a project report to Arts Council England, we advocated that ‘touring was broken’, in that the model that underpinned touring (one night stands to receiving house venues) couldn’t deliver or develop audiences for spoken word. Our own experience back then clearly demonstrated that we enjoyed much better and more sustained audience development returns on our festival work than on our national tours. So, we stopped touring.

Some five years on, it’s even more clear now that touring – in the traditional sense at least - really is broken, and that we need a new approach to getting work made and seen around the country. Arts centres and theatres alike struggle to attract audiences for (their often very occasional) spoken word shows, so they take fewer and fewer shows, and the decline continues. Meanwhile, other potential spaces – libraries, galleries, community spaces, creative hubs – are not connecting with (often volunteer) independent promoters, and so their potential isn’t being realised.

***Consequently, there’s no real progression route, no “middle rung” for artists***

As a consequence of the issues around touring, the progression route for artists starting out is seen to be almost non-existent. There’s no touring circuit for artists to ‘graduate to’, no middle rung, perhaps equivalent to the comedy club circuit where comedians hone their craft and build their audiences. As a result, the idea of making any real kind of living as a performer feels increasingly like a pipe dream.

In fact, perhaps the closest thing spoken word artists have these days to a middle rung is the festival circuit. This makes sense to us – we’ve long been advocates for working with festivals to build artists’ fanbases and extend their artistic range, and have commissioned over 20 new pieces of work by working in this way with festivals.

***Changes in government policy and spending have made it even more difficult for spoken word artists to make a living***

The demise of Creative Partnerships, the re-structuring of the National Curriculum and general spending cuts at local and central government level, all mean that there is significantly less education work around for spoken word artists. This is another factor in making it difficult for artists to make any kind of living from their work.

## Potential responses explored during our research

The following points summarise the potential responses offered by consultees during our interviews with them:

### ***Touring/distribution***

- Incentivising venues to programme more regular spoken word gigs – potentially by funding them to take a risk – is key
- Developing a national touring circuit, like the comedy club circuit, could help
- Encouraging people running non-traditional performance spaces to programme spoken word or hook up with on the ground promoters would also be useful
- Venues could do more by programming spoken word artists into support slots for music gigs, to develop artists' audiences

### ***Artist/artform development***

- There a need for artists to be supported to develop different, more diverse types of work – richer material – and this is where producers would come in.
- There's a need to encourage artists to work with 'outside eyes'
- Arts Council needs to encourage more venues to take on a producer role
- There's a need to encourage more cross artform work involving spoken word artists
- Is there merit in some kind of finishing school for artists?

### ***Producer development***

- There's a lot of interest in encouraging the development of a larger pool of producers, but not much insight into how to do that
- Producers are seen to be key to tackling many of the issues raised, but there's a 'chicken and egg' scenario at play here – how do you add producers to the mix when there's no money in the scene?
- Consultees all very keen to see a producer development scheme that would potentially build venues into the mix

### ***Sector development***

- There's a good collaborative feel across the consultees, and a sense there's real interest in multi-agency approach to tackling some of these issues
- There's an apparent energy and sense that now is the time for action
- There's a sense that there are a number of key venues around the country, who would be keen to be part of any new developments

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