

Mischief La-Bas - Submission to Scottish Cultural Commission

Mischief La-Bas policy:
'To gently warp the underlay of the fabric of society'

Who are we?

Mischief La-Bas are Scotland's longest standing interactive walkabout street theatre company, currently expanding activity to an international status.

Where do we come from?

Mischief La-Bas was formed in Glasgow in 1992

Creative Director: Ian Smith has a 25-year background in crossover arts including:
Fine Art / Theatre / Music / Dance / Performance Art / TV Radio & Film / Circus

Arts.

Partner: Angie Dight has 20 years similar experience in:
Fine Art / Theatre / Dance / Performance Art / Circus

Company Manager: Sarah Jean Couzens has 15 years involvement in:
Arts Programming / Venue Management / Physical Theatre / Teaching Circus Skills / Flying Trapeze

Administrator: Emma Taylor has 18 years involvement in:
Burlesque Performance / Mathematics / Art house Cinema Management

Wardrobe: John McInnes has 15 years involvement in:
Music / Performance / Film-Making / Wardrobe Management

Core team of 25 Performers have various backgrounds including Theatre, Film & TV, Teaching, Shipbuilding, Rock Bands, Armed Forces, Cabaret, Music, Cartooning, Bus-Driving, Architecture and Ski-instruction.

What do we do?

Our constant activity is that of walkabout interactive theatre in public spaces.
We have a 'catalogue' of some 40 different routines or 'manifestations'

Parallel activity is that of creating larger-scale projects designed for touring.

Complementary activity includes maintaining connections and involvement in Fine Art, Theatre and Circus worlds, and also developing experiments in creating workshops and bespoke projects for commercial as well as community and art-based clients.



Where do we do it?

All of our work interacts directly with the audience in public environments.

This can include the streets, parks and any outdoor environments, but also venues such as corporate events, hotels, nightclubs etc.

The company and its resources are based in the W.A.S.P.S flagship artists' studio complex in Dennistoun, Glasgow.



What is unique about Mischief working practice?

Apart from the obvious points about the accessibility of the work for public audiences, where it takes place and the way it is appreciated there are also important implications for the participation of the performers.

Because various natural skills are required to present this work, (notably a certain attitude and ability to improvise confidently) the prerequisites for participants are not restricted to formal training in any one field.

The development of the team has been entirely organic, with people being introduced as necessary on merit and ability to cope and contribute. Doing the work is the training.

Mischief does not rehearse. As a performer, the first Mischief gig is a baptism of fire - supported by a group of experienced performers. Individuals soon realise whether they have the ability to flourish.

Every 'gig' is unique, with the performers creatively contributing their interpretations of the secure and proven brief they have to work within. There is no script.

This openness to experimentation allows for the growth and accommodation of many skills.

How does that practice relate to the bigger picture?

The reason for explaining this aspect of the work is to emphasise that although there may be fewer recognisably established structures for this kind of activity e.g. far less experimental theatre or circus courses than painting, dance or theatre – the sheer lack of restrictive conventions leads to dynamic experimentation.

Anything is possible – and the boundaries broken by these experimentations are inevitably assimilated at a later date by more conventional performing art forms.

(This influence becomes all the more direct when larger scale collaborative projects are undertaken e.g. – in the case of Mischief, the commissioning of international artists from all fields to join their more ambitious presentations.)

Who traditionally pays for it?

Mischief has always been a 'gigging band' by which we mean that since 1993 the sole income for the core company has always been from paid engagements.

If the market supports our basic work then we are always on a secure and independent footing.

This has been the underlying principle of our longevity and adaptability.

(This is a common history for artists working in Circus, street skills, comedy, non-classical music etc, who regard themselves as working 'gigging' people and more often than not would never dream of applying for funding or assistance. In many cases they would not be familiar at all with application procedures, the structures of funding bodies etc. This is changing rapidly, not least because in the last decade there has been more exposure to the work of European artists, and an understanding of the higher status and funding practices for such work on the Continent.)

Clients include: Arts Festivals, local councils, nightclubs, corporate clients and agencies. We think of some gigs (high satisfaction, artistic integrity) as cathedrals, and some (commercial, cynical) as brothels, but most fall around the 'country' church level.



What about funding?

Up until recently Mischief never sought funding or assistance, apart from for one or two specialist art projects. When SAC supported 'one-off' art project 'Painful Creatures' was adopted for development with substantial European Funding through InSitu, (a group of six European festival promoters) the company suddenly found the stakes had risen dramatically, and sought assistance for organisational development from the SAC. This was granted, and the project's development was further supported by the SAC and ACE for successful touring in the U.K.

What do we think of funding?

For organisational development:

From our limited experience, seeking help only through necessity as we risked implosion through rapid expansion after 10 years' steady growth, the support of a funding body (primarily SAC) was timely and crucial. The help offered was practical, and concerned with bolstering our skills and ability to deal with progress. The most re-assuring and important thing was to have a personal contact who understood the field and the situation and had the ability to support us – in this case Jaine Lumsden at the SAC.

For touring:

For festivals in Britain we found that it was our company, not the festival promoters, that had to raise the money for presentation from the SAC or ACE.

With our increased skills and confidence, this system now suits us. It allows us to prudently keep control of budgets and organisation. It means that we are forced as a company to make robust our management systems, particularly financial management. A good thing.

Where are we going now?

We continue to operate as a 'gigging' band with our 'Catalogue' of walkabout theatre.

We are continuing to promote ourselves in the wider international arena – pursuing recent affiliations in Europe and opportunities with The British Council.

We are developing further 'larger projects' to maintain and improve our status.

We are continually improving our organisation to be able to cope with whatever challenges we may wish to set ourselves, so that our visions are not crippled by crisis management.

What do we think would be useful?

We think that our particular organisation thrives through independence – and while expertise and advice and specific help at times may be welcome and necessary – support such as core funding is not desirable.

This might be translated in modern parlance as 'keeping it real' avoiding complacency, laziness and self-indulgence. A connection to the 'marketplace' – especially for public work – is a valuable connection to current trends and needs.

X We think funding assistance works best on a project-by-project basis - our company will automatically be supported by merit and track record – so long as we deliver.

Projects should be supported in a way that allows them to sensibly grow and develop – no sole dependence on high-status 'flagship' projects – rather several evolving projects that will attract further support as they grow in stature.

The InSitu model of creating three projects per year for three years is a good example, for the creation stage of development.

Another example is the BBC encouraging independent productions and testing out 'project based work' on BBC3 & BBC4, then promoting the best work into the mainstream.

Most of the high quality arts, history and comedy programming is developed this way.

In our field this might translate as a funded 'one-off experiment' within a tangible showcase - developing into a 'supported project' that might be presented on tour within Scotland – developing into a 'work of stature' (e.g. a project that enters the international arena and consciousness)

Cultural exchanges with other countries in Europe and the rest of the world need to be developed, as does the local marketplace for the work to be presented.

Channels of communication and support need to be acknowledged, supported and strengthened. Networks, dialogue and shared experience strengthen understanding and confidence to create. Access to knowledgeable advisors in practical areas such as Fundraising, Creation and Touring would be invaluable.



Cultural Entitlements

In our field it is a simple equation:

- 1) Artists should be entitled, encouraged and enabled to create public work
- 2) Citizens should be entitled, encouraged and enabled to experience public work