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Credit: Nicola Young Photography



A Case Study for **Co-creation in Coventry**



Credit: Nicola Young Photography



THE
BELGRADE
THEATRE
COVENTRY

In 2022, the Belgrade leadership team, Corey Campbell and Laura Elliot set out to make theatre in a new way, by co-creating productions of scale, authentically, with Coventry's communities and sharing them with the world.

This unique co-creation model is built on the theatre's long history of radical participatory practice, and drives their vision to make the Belgrade a People-First Theatre. The Belgrade is where diversity powers storytelling.

Our reimaging of *Romeo and Juliet* was co-created with over 150 people from across and beyond Coventry. It enabled the Belgrade to work at the intersection of education, talent development, community engagement and artistic innovation, showing what can happen when creativity is shared and ownership is collective.

Here we reflect on our practice, impact and learnings. We build on these as we begin our next big co-created production, *Nanny of The Maroons* and continue to shape our model.



VISION

This unique co-creation model is built on the theatre's long history of radical participatory practice. Its delivery is core to achieving our vision to make the Belgrade a People-First Theatre, where diversity powers storytelling.

MISSION

Through a co-created and community led approach, we deliver:

- **A STAGE FOR COVENTRY:** Diverse programmes and productions that reflect, entertain and celebrate Coventry's communities and share their stories with the world.
- **TRANSFORMATION:** Creative opportunities, shared experiences, welcoming spaces and services that support health, wellbeing, and education.
- **LEARNING:** Investment in local talent, building skills and opening pathways to careers in theatre.

VALUES

- **ACTING TOGETHER:** We believe by collaborating and co-creating, we'll be greater than the sum of our parts, working collectively to the power of Coventry's people,
- **COME AS YOU ARE:** We believe in providing an inclusive experience to ensure everyone who encounters us can do so as themselves, and that lived experience empowers the LIVE experience,
- **ALWAYS EVOLVING:** We believe in learning and ambition. Each step we take propels the next, and every exit can become a new entrance.

A NEW WAY OF
MARKING THEATRE

Romeo and Juliet is part of a 10 year learning process to build a sustainable model of co-creating productions with the people of Coventry, combining rigorous artistic practice with deep social engagement.

Our co-created productions sit at the heart of our holistic artistic programme for artists, audiences and participants.

Why Romeo and Juliet?

We began our co-creation journey with *Romeo and Juliet* fully aware that it is a story with a long and established history.

The decision to reimagine such a well-known title came directly from the artists and young people we were collaborating with through our programmes — this was about placing the power to create a large-scale show in their hands.

“We recognise that beginning our co-creation journey with **Romeo and Juliet** meant building on existing relationships, ideas and artistic foundations — not starting entirely from scratch. This process has helped us learn how to deepen co-creation from wherever we begin, and how to evolve towards fuller collaboration in future projects.”

Corey Campbell

Commissions, Research & Development, See It First Festival, Creative Associates



Schools Programme (Associate Schools, CPD, Big School, Insight Days), Wraparound Activities, Hubs Festival

Belgrade Ensemble, Media Academy, Springboard

THE BELGRADE METHOD OF CO-CREATION



Our **co-creation** approach is built on an evolving set of principles outlined here. Not all projects currently use all of these, but this is our ambition.

10 Principles of co-creating large-scale work at the Belgrade Theatre.

1

Know why you are co-creating

Co-creation may not be the best approach for what you aim to achieve.

Understand why you are co-creating, and whether you have the right infrastructure and resources so that the collaboration stays purposeful.

2

Build from the Sand Up

Co-creation starts by being in community with no agenda.

Through authentic engagement, an idea, impulse or moment of connection can grow with active listening and shared opportunity. This is our catalyst.

3

Not a single tool, but a collection

Co-creation is flexible and responsive to the people in the room. A collection of tools enables this.

4

Relationships First

Prioritising trust, respect and collaboration above all. Making sure we are not parachuting in to communities.

Being certain that by co-creating we are not damaging relationships; we are building partnership and legacy.

5

Align Values and Vision

Ensure that the values of the practice align with the values of the organisation.

We co-create at the Belgrade as part of our vision to be a **people-first theatre** and **A Stage for Coventry**, supported by our core values: **Come as You Are**, **Always Evolving**, and **Acting Together**.

6

Agree Boundaries and Expectations

Acknowledge the systems and structures that we are working within; be mindful of the imbalance, and establish equity.

7

Autonomy Scale

Inspired by theatre maker **Naomi Alexander**, we use an Autonomy Scale as a guiding principle to affirm a collective commitment to clarity and respect. Making it explicit who holds decision-making responsibility at each stage, to nurture transparency, trust, and shared ownership.

8

Foster Self-Determined Learning (Heutagogy)

Working micro and macro simultaneously, supporting participants as self-directed learners who shape their own paths through curiosity, reflection, and creative exploration.

Our conversations are rooted in lived experience, by those skilled in drawing out important stories.

9

Continuous Learning

Recognise our co-creation practice is constantly evolving.

Nurture deep, long-term engagement that invites challenge, growth, and transformation - reminding ourselves that we are always in a state of learning.

10

Artistic Practice

Sustain the spark, celebrate the artistic practice of community, be open to new forms of story-telling, and new ways of working. This is an interdependent model; don't leave the community behind.

These 10 principles lead us to a conviction to change.

The idea to reimagine **Romeo and Juliet** through the sounds of rap, R&B and gospel came from **That's A Rap**, a local company on the Belgrade's Springboard talent development programme.

Springboard supports emerging and local artists focused on social change by providing training, organisational development and new stage production opportunities.

The Belgrade paired **That's A Rap** with **Coventry Academy**, an alternative education provider for 11 to 16 year olds excluded from mainstream education. These young people were already working with Artistic Director Corey Campbell, wanting to develop their music practice. Over a two-year partnership, the Belgrade and **That's A Rap** worked closely with students to explore Shakespeare's story through their own perspectives. The collaboration began with an initial ten-week programme of weekly sessions at **Coventry Academy** in November 2023. Following its success, a second phase ran from April to June 2024, supporting the young people to create their own original rap piece and music video. **That's A Rap** then continued working with the school on **Romeo and Juliet**, deepening the relationship and expanding opportunities for creative learning.

Through the weekly workshops, the young people reimaged the play's themes and characters, using rap, R&B, and gospel as creative tools to express how love, loyalty and conflict feel in their world. Their insights reshaped how the story was told on stage, with their music and lyrics forming part of the final production.

The collaboration not only strengthened creative skills but also built confidence, pride and ownership over the work they helped to create. More [here](#).

Over 40 local, emerging creatives were then employed to work on Romeo and Juliet through our talent development programmes. This included our two **Creative Associates** – on a 3 year transferable skills training programme, working respectively in sound and design, and local music producer **A-Class** who was working in theatre for the first time.

Our **Belgrade Ensemble**, a free training programme for 18-30 year olds performed as part of the show, alongside a **community choir** and members of our **16+ Theatre Hub**.

Our **Media Academy**, an industry professional led programme for anybody aged 18+ who enjoys creating content and has an interest in film or video production, produced a **short film** to accompany the production, working with a professional team. This was embedded in our **extensive learning resources**, shared with schools around the country.

The show opened at the Belgrade Theatre in February 2025 and toured to co-producers Hackney Empire and Bristol Old Vic, whose participants also helped shape the production.



Reimagining a classic through **co-creation** with local artists and young people.



ROMEO & JULIET IN NUMBERS

8,192

tickets issued for the Coventry run, with 41% who were new to the theatre.

16,000+

tickets sold for the tour of the show to Hackney Empire and Bristol Old Vic.

15%

of Coventry tickets were from the most deprived neighbourhoods.

2,606

tickets (32%) were issued to Coventry school children.

30

local residents from the Belgrade Ensemble, Hubs and a Community Choir performed in the show.

2 Nominations

at the Black British Theatre Awards.

15,000+

YouTube views for the Media Academy's short film 'Turn and Draw', which won a Royal Television Society Award for Diversity and continues to be used in classrooms across the country as an education resource.

40+

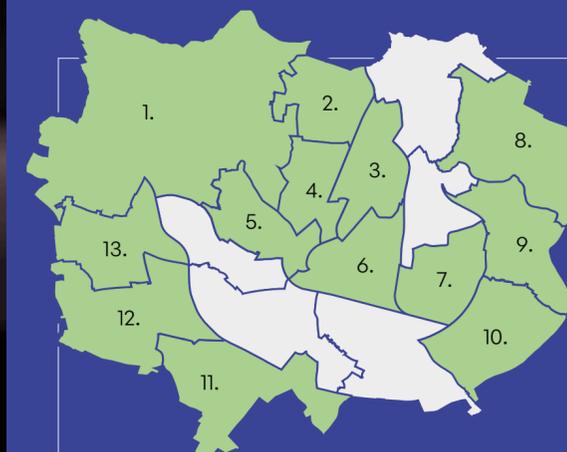
40+ regional developing artists employed, with 10% new to theatre practice.

Over 80%

of the cast made their Shakespearean debut.

Audiences

were from every ward in Coventry and participants / local artists were from 13 wards across Coventry.



Participants came from the following Coventry wards:

- | | |
|----------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Bablake | 9. Wyken |
| 2. Holbrooks | 10. Binley & Willenhall |
| 3. Foleshill | 11. Wainbody |
| 4. Radford | 12. Westwood |
| 5. Sherbourne | 13. Woodlands |
| 6. St Michaels | |
| 7. Lower Stoke | |
| 8. Henley | |

Educational Impact

The educational outcomes of this production have been significant. James Heaton, Headteacher at **Coventry Academy**, reflected on the impact:



We've seen improved school attendance and a significant increase in levels of engagement from the students involved in the production, and we are now predicting our best ever outcomes in GCSE English. We have also reintroduced English Literature for the first time in three years. To be involved in a project with the Belgrade Theatre is such a great thing on so many levels. Being able to say this to future employers and colleges is so powerful, especially as all of the students involved will be leaving us in the summer after their GCSE exams.



For students, the experience went far beyond a school project. It inspired new ambitions, nurtured creativity, and opened pathways into further education and the arts for students who would not normally receive these opportunities.

Skills Development

The Romeo and Juliet co-creation process, gave emerging creatives the space and trust to take ownership of their work, turning learning into leadership and supporting genuine professional growth. By drawing on a range of talent development programmes the impact of the co-creation approach can be clearly seen.

Belgrade Creative Associates

One of the Creative Associates, who was initially brought in to support a professional sound designer, found themselves unexpectedly taking the lead when the designer had to step aside. Reflecting on this, they said, "I was thrown in the deep end. I was like, okay, you're going to have to take the reins on this one,"

What might have been an intimidating situation instead became a transformative learning experience, and demonstrates how the Belgrade's trust in its Associates can lead to genuine growth and improved confidence.

The Belgrade team played a key role in making this possible. The Director of Production was praised by the Creative Associates for taking on a mentoring role and going "the extra mile" to provide guidance and support beyond what was expected.

These gestures of support made a lasting impact. They reflected a workplace culture where emerging creatives could take bold steps forward knowing that they were not alone.

The **Romeo and Juliet** experience embodies what the Creative Associates Programme aims to achieve: creative risk-taking, trust and learning through collaboration. For the Associate, it marked a moment of real growth and confidence. For the Belgrade, it demonstrated the success of its talent development approach, showing how emerging creatives can thrive when supported to lead and learn within a nurturing environment.



Credit: Nicola Young Photography

Belgrade Digital Media Academy

For the first cohort of the **Belgrade's Digital Media Academy**, the creation of the short film **Romeo and Juliet: Turn and Draw** was a deeply significant moment. The short film gave 15 young creatives the chance to step into a professional environment, learn from industry experts, and see their ideas come to life.

Through the project, they learned every stage of the filmmaking process, from planning and shooting to editing and delivery.

The impact of this project was clear. Participants reported a 19% increase in their understanding of the film, TV, and theatre industries, and a 20% increase in feeling connected within them. They also felt more included at the Belgrade, with a 17% rise in those who said the theatre made them feel welcome and included, and a 12% rise in those who felt it appealed to a wide range of people.

Wellbeing for participants improved too, with average SWEMWBS scores (a measure of wellbeing) increasing from 22.25 to 27.08 over the course of the programme – a positive shift that shows how confidence and connection grew through the experience as well as moving from low levels of wellbeing to higher levels across the duration of the Media Academy.

The film created by the participants won a **Royal Television Society Award for Diversity** and continues to be used in classrooms across the UK as a learning resource.



Credit: Nicola Young Photography

Belgrade Ensemble

Members of the Belgrade Ensemble performed alongside professional artists and community participants, gaining real professional experience and accelerated creative growth.

By the end of the 2024/25 programme:

100%

felt confident in their technical ability
(up from 58%)

86%

had a good understanding of the theatre industry
(up from 75%)

57%

felt well connected in the sector
(up from 25%)

100%

felt more employable and had developed new skills

Crucially, this progression generated an estimated **£28,000 in monetised social value per participant** driven by improved employability, higher skills confidence and increased wellbeing.

This is the Belgrade model in action: creative development that delivers genuine economic and social return, rooted in trust, collaboration and shared ownership of the work.

Engagement

The 30 participants in the show (Belgrade Ensemble, Hubs and Choir) described the project as transformative — building confidence, skills and a sense of pride.



Three words to describe being part of R&J: opportunity, growth ... AWESOME!!!

Raheem, Hub Member

Feedback from members of the Romeo and Juliet Community Choir shows that being part of the production created a powerful sense of belonging, confidence and wellbeing. They all felt that both the Belgrade and the Choir were welcoming and inclusive, with participants describing the group as “a safe space” and “like a little family.”



Being part of the show has taught me that no matter who you are, if you are the lead or a Hub member like us, you have just as much value.

Ethan, Hub Member

This inclusivity extended beyond participation, helping people feel genuinely represented and valued. All respondents said they see people like themselves represented in the arts, and 83% said they feel they have a voice, demonstrating how the project helped participants feel both seen and heard within a professional creative setting.



My experience has been a delightful one. Being part of the choir has been a grounding experience as daily life has been quite hectic as of recent.

Community Choir Member

The wellbeing benefits were equally striking. Every participant (100%) agreed that being part of the Choir contributed positively to their wellbeing, with SWEMWBS scores ranging from 25 to 30, with an average score of 28, indicating high overall wellbeing. Participants used words like “motivational,” “grounding,” and “amazing” to describe the experience, highlighting its positive emotional impact. The project also reignited creative confidence: 100% reported feeling confident as performers and said their skills had developed through the Choir, while 83% agreed they had gained or developed new skills.



It has been the most incredible experience. I have made some amazing new friends and I feel so honoured to have been chosen to be part of the choir and show.

Community Choir Member

Audiences

For audiences, Romeo and Juliet became a shared moment of pride and connection, a production that brought people together, deepened understanding and reminded audiences why the Belgrade matters to their city.



Seeing a production that has been produced and made in Coventry by Midlands creatives really lends itself to the performance and within the Belgrade you can see the sense of community.

Audience Feedback

Many described the experience as energising and uplifting, with 88% saying they felt lively and enthusiastic and 80% finding the show very moving.

The production also encouraged reflection and escape. 77% said it increased their knowledge or understanding, while 71% felt it helped them escape from everyday life.

More than two-thirds reported that it increased their sense of wellbeing, showing the power of theatre to lift spirits and inspire thought at the same time.



Was great to see the Belgrade Ensemble and Hub members being used in this production. Was a really high-quality production.

Audience Feedback

Audiences also spoke warmly about the Belgrade itself. 93% agreed that the Belgrade makes them feel welcome and included, and 82% felt that the Belgrade leads the way for culture in the area.

Reach beyond Coventry

The show was co-produced with Hackney Empire and Bristol Old Vic, involving their own local creatives in the development of the show. It wasn't only socially impactful – it was commercially successful, selling to 22000 people across Coventry, London and Bristol.

The production also achieved **extensive media recognition**, featuring in *The Guardian's* “Best Shows to See in 2025”, *The One Show*, BBC Radio 4's *Today Programme*, *The Stage*, and *Whatsonstage*, among many others, with wide coverage across regional and national media outlets.



At its heart, *Romeo and Juliet* was built on co-creation — artists and communities working side by side to create a story that reflected Coventry's voices and experiences. Our key learnings are...

LEARNINGS



1

Co-creation looks different every time

Each project brings its own community, context, and creative energy. *Romeo and Juliet* reminded us that there is no single model for co-creation — the process must evolve to fit the people, place, and moment.

2

Process and product carry equal weight

The journey of co-creating is as valuable as the final performance. The relationships, learning, and shared ownership built along the way are part of the artistic outcome.

3

It's resource-heavy — but worth it

True co-creation demands time, money, and emotional investment. While resource-intensive, it delivers depth, authenticity, and community impact that justify the scale of commitment.

4

Everyone must buy into the process

For co-creation to succeed, all partners — artists, participants, producers, and funders — need to share belief in the approach. It requires trust, patience, and a willingness to let go of control.

5

Balancing professional, community & emerging talent

One of the biggest challenges was finding the right balance between professional standards, community participation and talent development. Each group brings vital perspectives that enrich the work when held in creative tension.

6

Negotiating between tradition and innovation

Romeo and Juliet exposed the friction — and potential — between established theatre practices and new, participatory methods. Embracing this clash became a source of creative energy and renewal.

7

Always return to the 'why'

A clear shared purpose anchors the process. Knowing why we are co-creating — and what change or experience we hope to bring about — helps navigate complexity and keep the work authentic.

8

Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

Its essential that principles of equity, diversity and inclusion are embedded in the practise — it goes hand in hand with co-creation.

WHAT'S NEXT?

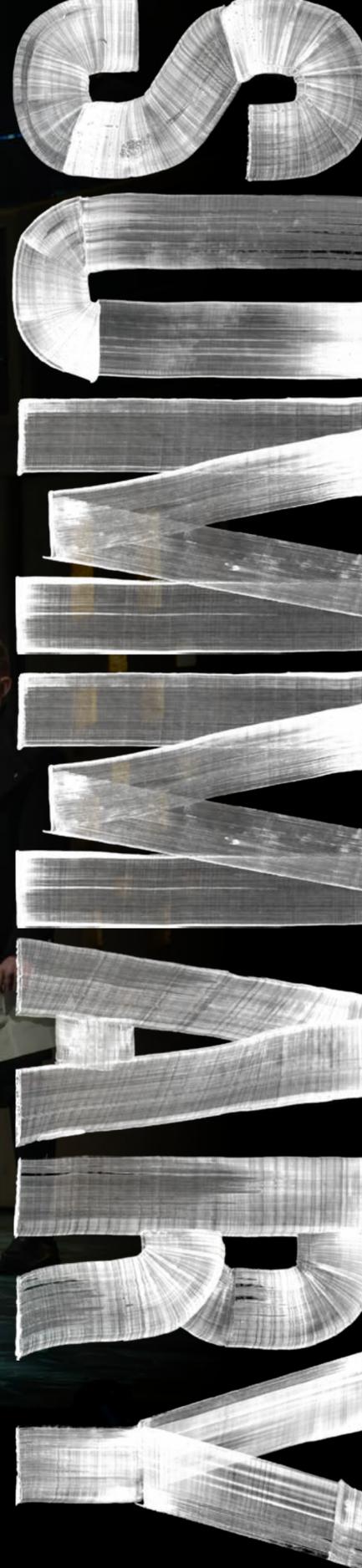


Our next two large scale co-created shows are currently in development. ***Nanny of the Maroons***, born out of conversations with Coventry's Caribbean community and shared through story telling workshops over the past two years- will premiere in Spring '27 at the Belgrade.

We are also producing a new version of ***Macbeth***, for Spring 2028 which will continue the partnership between the Belgrade, Coventry Academy and That's A Rap.

If you are interested in learning anything more about these productions, or the Belgrade's co-creation process – please email execassistant@belgrade.co.uk





Romeo and Juliet stands as a bold example of the Belgrade's co-creation model: theatre made with, and for the community, powered by partnership, talent development and the belief that great stories begin when everyone has a voice.

It is core to our vision to be a 'People-First Theatre' where diversity powers storytelling; developing bold, nationally significant theatre that grows from deep local connection and shared authorship with Coventry's communities.

There has been invaluable learning, which has supported the development of our evolving model of co-creation and will feed the future work.

We are grateful for our funders, without whom none of this would be possible.



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