

## Business Plan Summary 2022-23



## Mission

In a time of social division, Unfolding Theatre brings people together to co-create and experience remarkable theatre that builds connections.



*The Unfolding Theatre* piloted a new co-creation model with community partners Projects4Change (Cowgate, Newcastle, July 21), *Free School Meals* co-created with 16 children from Byker & Walker and reopened Northern Stage (August 21), *High Street Duets* inspired by residents in North Shields and Lancaster was launched by pop-up choirs (Sept 2021)

## Values

Unfolding Theatre works to achieve its vision by co-creating big-hearted theatre with surprising combinations of people. We love hosting people. We value a warm welcome and good listening skills. We bring people together around theatre, music, food, laughter, good stories or all of those things at once. Our work has a positive, sometimes profound impact on the artists, audiences and community co-creators we work with.

**“Unfolding Theatre is one of the region’s most precious cultural assets, making eclectic big-hearted performance work rooted in community participation and co-production.” North East Bylines review of *Free School Meals* (2021)**

## Vision

People feel more positive because they can express themselves creatively.

Theatre better reflects the experiences of diverse communities.

Through cultural experiences, people build social connections, get out of echo chambers and listen to others better.

## Achievements & Awards

Unfolding Theatre has reached 28,000 live audiences over the last 3 years. It welcomes audiences at venues, festivals, community settings & schools across the UK including Northern Stage, Battersea Arts Centre, Summerhall (Edinburgh) & Summer Streets (Sunderland). Its creative projects are in demand from a wide range of cross-sector partners. Described as **“thrillingly talented people”** (Guardian), Unfolding Theatre has won awards & acclaim over a decade of theatre making.



*Hold On Let Go, Summerhall & Battersea Arts Centre, Free School Meals, Northern Stage, Multiverse Lab, VOICE & National Institute of Health Research Newcastle*

- **“Bold, big-hearted. Local but universal. A defiantly live experience, directed with empathy by Annie Rigby,”** ★★★★★ *The Stage* on *Free School Meals*
- High Sheriff Tyne & Wear Top Award 2021 for *Right Now People* and Unfolding Theatre’s work with children and young people
- Arts & Business Partnership of the Year 2019, Journal Culture Awards & Best Event Durham Finalist, *Everything There Ever Was*
- Performance of the Year 2017, Journal Culture Awards, *Putting The Band Back Together*
- **“Fantastic – funny, big-hearted, moving, truthful”** Guardian, *Putting The Band Back Together*
- Engaging Young People Award 2014, National Centre for Public Engagement, *What If?*
- Northern Stage Title Pending Award for **New Theatre 2014**; “Chiming, harmonising, enchanting” Telegraph, *Lands of Glass*
- Northern Royal Television Society Innovation Award 2012; 3 Big Chip Awards: excellence in digital technology, *Time Machine* with Tyneside Cinema
- Best Emerging Company finalist 2012, Total Theatre Awards; “There can only be one word for it: magic theatre” Guardian, *Best in the World*
- Performance of the Year 2010, Journal Culture Awards, *Building Palaces***Executive Summary: September 2021**

**The world has changed.** Some change grew steadily. Social division grew through Leave vs Remain politics, social media echo chambers & divisive press. Climate change became a crisis. Some change was sudden. The pandemic caused trauma, isolation & fear. It exposed inequality. Yet it also revealed new ways for communities to live alongside each other.

**Unfolding Theatre's mission has never been more relevant.** Unfolding Theatre brings people together to co-create remarkable theatre that builds connection across social division.

In this context, we have looked deeper into Unfolding Theatre's values and practice. We have considered how we can have the most reach and impact. To set out **a plan that responds to the changed world.** To draw from our enormous learning during the pandemic, working in new ways – both online and live – to build meaningful relationships with audiences.

This is **a plan that we expect to adapt.** Unpredictability will remain a feature of 2022-23 as we emerge from the pandemic. Unfolding Theatre has operated flexibly throughout the pandemic. This **flexibility remains key to our resilience and dynamism.** This plan is a live document, which we will return to, adapt and develop as we navigate a changing world.

Arts Council England's new strategy, *Let's Create*, provides a great opportunity for Unfolding Theatre's next steps. The strategy champions the way Unfolding Theatre has been working for over a decade. It creates a context for us **to be even bolder.** To develop our artistic practice of **co-creating remarkable theatre with and for communities.**

This plan is built around piloting *An Unfolding Theatre*. Pop-up, environmentally sustainable structures will act as focal points for co-creation in the heart of local communities. This will make space to explore our **ethos of hosting, welcome & listening.** Creative exchanges within *An Unfolding Theatre* will act as engines for making new theatre. We will pilot *An Unfolding Theatre* with our partners in Cowgate (Newcastle), Seacroft (Leeds) & Wandsworth (London): all areas of socio-economic disadvantage, yet with bucketloads of creativity.

Unfolding Theatre's **digital practice & innovation has been one of our major success stories.** This is especially in making new work with & for young people. *Multiverse Arcade* captured & amplified 1000s of young voices calling for action on climate change, nature & tackling intolerance & hate. This plan seeks to build on our success. Projects include *Multiverse Lab*, *Unfolding Conversations* podcast and co-created family audio trails. We will continue to increase digital audiences & support young people's positive action.

Unfolding Theatre's journey as a new NPO has **increased diversity** across its board, staff & artistic team. Plans for 2021-25 address 2 structural issues. Our plans **open up our artistic decision making to more diverse voices.** We will also **build partnerships to offer meaningful artist development for under-represented artists.** Our productions will continue to see **under-represented artists take leadership roles.** This includes growing our Associate Artists from 3 to 4. Our programme will feature casts of all ages drawn from the communities that inform our work. This creates exciting opportunities to take part, supports talent development and celebrates co-creation between artists & communities.

Unfolding Theatre **surpassed audience targets** set out in its 2018-22 business plan. 3 years in, we have reached 90% of our 4-year target to increase live audiences by 30% [31,200 audience members]. This is an incredible achievement considering the impact of lockdowns in 2020-21. From 2021-25, Unfolding Theatre aims to continue to grow and diversify audiences. However, we recognise the significant uncertainty in public gathering that will impact touring into 2021-22 and beyond. We also recognise the tough financial climate ahead. Therefore, we are setting a target of growing live and digital audiences by 10% across the 4 years [34,300 live audience members; 48,000 digital audiences].

Unfolding Theatre will seek to **better measure its impact** in 2021-25. Numbers don't always capture the impact creative experiences have on individuals and communities. Ongoing collaboration with independent evaluators and academic partners seeks to address this. The development of our Executive Producer role from 2021 onwards builds capacity for better evaluation practice. It also seeks to increase company resilience. It builds leadership, fundraising and partnership building capacity.

NPO funding enables longer-term planning. It improves our ability to attract trusts, foundations & larger commissions. Even so, the **tough financial climate** leads us to be cautious. This plan sees annual **turnover grow by 10%** over 4 years with 51% from earned income and trust & foundations. It sustains reserves of £30,000 as set out in our reserves policy.

Unfolding Theatre is **committed to learning.** We will mentor emerging artists & volunteers. We will share learning, speaking at events & publishing evaluations. We will engage talented artists as mentors (Past mentors: Selina Thompson, Tassos Stevens, Coney, Alex Kelly, Third Angel). We will **build our board's diversity & skills.** We will recruit 1 new board member & sustain 7 trustees. Our youth group will enable neurodiverse young people to inform our practice. A new junior group will increase long-term engagement with children.

## What does the world that Unfolding Theatre operates within look like right now?

### POLITICS

Politics of right and left diverging. **Political division** becoming more pronounced.  
**Government attitude** to arts & culture could lead to less money for DCMS and Arts Council England.  
**Low priority** and status of arts subjects in government's education plans.  
**Levelling Up** agenda – could benefit companies outside London and the South East.  
Introduction of **devolved powers for North of Tyne**, but South of Tyne and Durham not involved.

### ECONOMICS

Economic growth likely to be slow. Possible **recessions**.  
**Impact of Covid-19** = reduced budgets in the short-medium term for local authorities, trusts & foundations, venues, commissioners, sponsors and audiences/supporters.  
Possibility of return of **austerity** measures post-pandemic. Reduced spending power for public.

### SOCIETY

**Polarisation** of society more pronounced than ever. Covid-19 has shone a light on **inequalities**.  
Social justice movements including **Black Lives Matter** and **Ending Child Poverty** are demanding change.  
**Growing ethnic diversity** of Newcastle's population and other areas in which Unfolding Theatre operates.  
Many North East communities continue to experience high levels of **deprivation** and **disadvantage**.  
Impact of **Covid-19** on attitudes towards **physical and social proximity**.

### TECHNOLOGY

**Digital poverty** and divide highlighted as result of Covid-19 pandemic.  
Continued **growth of social media** usage. Use of data for **bespoke targeting** more sophisticated than ever.  
Opportunities to **engage more audiences digitally**.  
Opportunities to utilise and incorporate **new technologies** to fulfil artistic vision and ambitions.

### LAW

Impact of **UK withdrawal from the EU** on law. Possible change to employment, intellectual property laws.  
**Admin impact** on touring, trading and artists' visas in EU.

### ENVIRONMENT

Weather and **climate** more **volatile** and **unpredictable**.  
**Greater regulation** for environmental impact. Government and ACE policies/funding requirements.  
Increased **awareness** and support for environmentally responsible practice. i.e. zero carbon emissions, carbon offsetting.  
**International focus on climate crisis**.

## How do Unfolding Theatre's strengths and weakness meet the opportunities and threats it faces?

<p>ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS</p> <p>UNFOLDING THEATRE'S SPECIFIC FACTORS</p>	OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<p><b>STRENGTHS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong shared <b>artistic vision</b></li> <li>• Good <b>reserves</b> &amp; finance practice</li> <li>• Good at building <b>partnerships</b></li> <li>• Growing <b>cross-sector</b> networks &amp; partners</li> <li>• <b>Community engaged</b> practice</li> <li>• <b>Skilled, knowledgeable &amp; increasingly diverse team, artists &amp; board</b></li> <li>• <b>NPO funding</b> secured until 2023</li> <li>• Good <b>public speakers</b></li> <li>• <b>Flexible, nimble</b> practice, <b>innovators</b></li> <li>• Artistic <b>quality</b> and <b>reputation</b></li> </ul>	<p><b>HOW TO USE STRENGTHS TO MAKE THE MOST OF OPPORTUNITIES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Be ambitious.</b> Invest in new work to build momentum and develop artistic practice.</li> <li>• <b>Keep experimenting.</b> Seek opportunities to work in new ways.</li> <li>• Use the framework of Let's Create to be even more ambitious about our <b>co-creation practice</b>.</li> <li>• <b>Demonstrate track record.</b> Position Unfolding Theatre to meet the need for positive, accessible cultural activity. Keep <b>emphasis on quality</b> of Unfolding Theatre's work.</li> <li>• Create <b>strong, effective communications</b> strategy to strengthen profile. <b>Play strong and visible sector roles. Use audiences &amp; partners</b> to vouch for Unfolding Theatre.</li> <li>• <b>Develop stronger focus areas</b> to deepen relationships: geographic &amp; interest based.</li> <li>• <b>Build relationships with new leaders</b> in North East.</li> </ul>	<p><b>HOW TO USE STRENGTHS TO DEAL WITH THREATS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Tell the story</b> of our <b>resilience &amp; flexibility. Increase visibility of impact</b> to give confidence to funders &amp; commissioners.</li> <li>• <b>Use networks</b> of artists &amp; partners to access opportunities &amp; build new partnerships.</li> <li>• <b>Be true</b> to our strong sense of <b>offer and vision.</b> Keep checking this.</li> <li>• <b>Diversify income streams</b> – look at the successful models of our existing partnerships to explore new possibilities.</li> <li>• <b>Keep experimenting</b> and <b>reflecting on learning</b> to adapt to changes in public behaviours.</li> <li>• Build in <b>strategic slack</b> in finance &amp; staff capacity to respond to unpredictability and threats.</li> </ul>
<p><b>WEAKNESSES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Lower national profile</b> and partnerships than regionally</li> <li>• <b>Reliant on flow of good ideas</b></li> <li>• <b>No succession plan</b> for Artistic Director</li> <li>• Limited staff <b>capacity</b></li> </ul>	<p><b>HOW TO USE OPPORTUNITIES TO MINIMISE WEAKNESSES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Build UT's engine room.</b> Use talent development &amp; diverse pool of artists to generate ideas, increase capacity &amp; address succession.</li> <li>• Use NPO status and existing partners to <b>develop new networks.</b></li> <li>• Use digital platforms to <b>increase national profile.</b></li> <li>• Look at high profile contexts to build profile for UT projects</li> <li>• Avoid spreading too thinly. <b>Identify best opportunities.</b> Do that well.</li> </ul>	<p><b>HOW TO NAVIGATE THREATS &amp; WEAKNESSES MEET</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Be honest. Acknowledge weaknesses. Address &amp; understand</b> to the point of creating strength.</li> <li>• Make the most of the <b>nimble</b> practice, scale &amp; <b>flexible</b> practice to <b>continue good resilience.</b></li> <li>• <b>Expand leaderships:</b> build Company Producer &amp; Associate roles.</li> <li>• <b>Reflect</b> on challenges with peers &amp; board. <b>Learn.</b></li> </ul>

## **Artistic Plan: 2021-25**

### **Developing creative practice: 2021-23: An Unfolding Theatre**

**An Unfolding Theatre** is a pilot exploring a new model for how we co-create with communities. It builds on over a decade of Unfolding Theatre's community-based artistic practice. The pilot will be delivered in partnership with Projects4Change in Blakelaw, Newcastle, a low socio-economic area under-served by mainstream arts.

The pilot will test pop-up, outdoor structures that host creative exchange sessions. Sessions will be built around food and hospitality. In early sessions, we will programme artists and activities, spark ideas and build relationships. From there the local community will co-programme and co-create with us. We aim to eat, laugh, learn, make together and nurture what unfolds. Creative content and relationships built through **An Unfolding Theatre** will act as engines for our theatre productions. From 2022 onwards, we will deliver **An Unfolding Theatre** in other areas we hold strong partnerships to grow our practice and relationships.

### **Theatre Production: 2021-22: Free School Meals**

**Free School Meals** is a show co-created with children about hunger, inequality & how they want the future to look. We would say it is inspired by the free school meals food parcels supplied by private companies during the pandemic. But inspired is not the right word. It is more accurate to say it is a project enraged by them.

The theatre production invites audiences to step into a restaurant run by children. Children will host the audience, take orders, prepare & serve food. It will explore power, ambition & the ingredients children need to thrive. It is about seeds, tools & trust. Not money bags stuffed with half a tin of tuna.

This project is a co-production with Northern Stage. It will be presented at Northern Stage in Newcastle and be made with children in Byker and Blakelaw. The co-creation model seeks to engage audiences from the socio-economic backgrounds for who the show is most relevant. It will also engage audiences digitally.

### **Theatre Production: 2022-23: A Street Like This**

**A Street Like This** is a site-responsive music and theatre production in Sunderland. The project has grown from a 5-year relationship with our 'house band'. They are 25 local people aged 15 to 75+ who co-created and performed in past production, **Putting The Band Back Together**. The creative process draws on these trusted relationships, as well as inviting in new people. It explores what happens when people from different political, social and economic backgrounds are brought together and share an experience and the resulting understanding and unexpected friendships that can occur. The project involves communities from across Sunderland, including areas of low engagement, in an ambitious, high-quality theatre production.

### **Diverse artists & community co-creators shaping our future programme: 2023-24 & 2024-25: 2 Productions**

We plan 2 new productions from 2023-25. Their themes will be discovered through **An Unfolding Theatre** community creative exchanges and **artistic R&Ds with diverse artists**. It is a strategic choice to leave themes for future work open & responsive. We are living in a time of rupture, upheaval & trauma. We need listen to inspire our future programme. It is fundamental to make space if we want our programme to be shaped by talented diverse artists and communities we work with.

### **Touring & Digital**

These 4 productions will expand and diversify our touring repertoire, for outdoor and indoor settings. While 2021-25 touring is the least predictable part of this business plan, our aims are clear. To make work that draws from communities often under-served by the arts, and tour into diverse settings to maximise our reach. We will continue to create innovative digital projects that make children, young people's & communities' voices heard, building on the success of **Multiverse Arcade**.

### **Let's Create: A framework for Unfolding Theatre's SMART targets: 2021-25**

Arts Council England's 2020-30 strategy, *Let's Create*, brings an exciting opportunity for Unfolding Theatre. Since 2008, Unfolding Theatre has co-created with communities to make remarkable theatre. We have presented theatre in community centres, sports clubs, schools, on beaches, in parks, in venues and festival tents. We frequently collaborate with communities in areas facing socio-economic deprivation and in places underserved by mainstream arts. We are a nimble, adaptable organisation that is dynamic, flexible and responsive to our environment.

Unfolding Theatre plans to use the framework of *Let's Create* to be even bolder in its artistic ambition and community co-creation practice.

### **Planning Process**

Unfolding Theatre trustees and staff held an away day on 19 November 2020 to discuss *Let's Create*. Trustees and staff explored what *Let's Create's* outcomes and principles meant for Unfolding Theatre; where the opportunities and challenges lay. This business plan is built from that discussion.

Since 2021, trustees took the decision to structure Unfolding Theatre's SMART targets around *Let's Create* investment principles. Our decision to adopt the principles at this early stage reflects the close alignment that already exists between Unfolding Theatre's practice and Arts Council England's strategy. It aims to give our team the chance to learn by doing.

At our December 2020 board meeting, trustees and senior staff discussed Inclusivity and Relevance. This included how we set ambitious, artistically driven targets, measure progress and respond to the social contexts we operate within. That discussion informed this plan's Inclusivity & Relevance principles and targets.

In March 2021, the Unfolding Theatre board discussed and reflected on a first draft of this business plan to create this document.

On 12 July 2021, trustees and staff discussed how we develop our 2022-23 business plan and beyond. A key area for focus in 2022-23 was identified as developing our plans and thinking around Ambition & Quality. We will set aside board and staff time in 2022-23 to reflect on learning in action and to consider this investment principle in detail. Key questions will be:

- What does being bold look like for Unfolding Theatre?
- How are these SMART targets and the *Let's Create* framework enabling us to measure success in achieving Unfolding Theatre's mission?
- How do we sharpen our evaluation practice, including data gathering, to understand Unfolding Theatre's impact?
- Where do the challenges lie and where can we be more ambitious?
- How do we choose which communities we co-create with? Do we need a strategy for making decisions about who we prioritise?