

## A Case Study of *The JukeBox*: a radio show for young men in Polmont Young Offender Institution unlocks creativity and learning during the Pandemic



### Introduction

Young men aged 16-23, resident within Polmont Young Offender Institution, have benefitted significantly from the creation of a new fortnightly radio show. Called *The JukeBox* it is a creative response to the challenges faced by this community as a result of the Covid-19 Pandemic restrictions. During 2020 and 2021 it has provided a framework for creative participation to continue remotely, when physical access was severely limited. Led by Glass Performance and delivered collaboratively with the support of Barnardos Youth Work based in Polmont and the Scottish Prison Service, it has cemented the position of arts as an essential service, promoting transferable skills, literacy, mental health and wellbeing in participants. The person centred and youth-led approach to co-production embedded at the core of this project has resulted in transformative benefits for individual participants, increased communication across the population, and developed empathy, tolerance and a sense of community. It has generated over 15hours of new creative content, researched, developed and scripted, and increasingly voiced, recorded and produced, by the young men themselves, resulting in a range of new skills for participants. It has inspired all the partners involved to think about how these ways of working could be applied to other contexts. It

clearly demonstrates how partnerships with creative organisations can unlock the potential of resources, knowledge and skills within institutions.

### ***The JukeBox* increased participation in cultural activities**

The Covid-19 pandemic restrictions resulted in the withdrawal of most services available to the young men, and the increased restriction of them to their cells. Glass Performance is led by co-artistic directors Jess Thorpe and Tashi Gore, and supported by Company Manager Louise Allan, Lead Artists Gudrun Soley Sigurdardottir, Ricky Williamson and others. They have been working with Polmont since 2018, delivering in-person devised theatre workshops and developing performances through Polmont Youth Theatre and Theatre Lab. Further, Jess Thorpe has over a decade of professional experience in the Arts in Justice sector, and was a founding member of the Scottish Prison Arts Network charity, now known as Arts and Justice. With a longstanding relationship to, and experience of, arts in justice work, Glass knew the risks this isolation and loss of services posed to the young men within Polmont.

Working with partners in Polmont, Glass moved swiftly to explore new approaches to delivery. For the first time they utilised the Email A Prisoner (EMAP) service to communicate with the young men. They wrote letters to their existing youth theatre participants, not knowing what the response would be, or what the next step would look like.

**Our provocation, as an organisation that was in a position to keep working, was what do you do when everything stops in this space? How can you engage these young people, because they are already the most isolated, disenfranchised, fragile, vulnerable young people... one of the most fragile groups in Scotland, although of course that's not the public framing of them. And out of that provocation emerged first the emailing and then the radio show.**

- Jess Thorpe, Co-Artistic Director, Glass Performance

The form that emerged, a radio show, was guided by the needs, aspirations and interests of the young men, collected through the letter writing activity. Started in September 2020 following a pilot project, *The JukeBox* provided the opportunity for the young men within Polmont to work remotely with the lead artists from Glass to individually and collaboratively develop and research proposals for segments, request music and other content, produce new writing for segments, write and record music, perform scripts, record and produce the episodes. Further the project had multiple levels and depths of engagement: a flexible and responsive structure meant for the first time, Glass were able to work with all of the Polmont community, even those within the secure and protected populations who had previously been unable to engage in Youth Theatre workshops.

**The JukeBox, the way it has been running up till now, it's offered a service to the whole population. They were all able to get involved in it, regardless of what population they were. And that was unique.**

- Lisa Hogg, Service Manager, Barnardos Youth Works, Polmont

Initially, Glass had proposed releasing hourly episodes of *The JukeBox* weekly, but it quickly became apparent that a longer, fortnightly structure suited the capacity of the creative team better, and was more flexible and able to include a greater range and number of participant segments and music requests. Ten episodes each lasting around 90 minutes were produced with 27 young men participating regularly. Each completed episode was played three times a day for five days to maximise opportunities to listen, with an estimated 50% of the prison population (150 people) listening fortnightly, with many subsequently undertaking creative tasks posed within the show: draw a picture, write a letter to someone they admire, or describe their favourite place in the world. Reaching more, and more diverse participants, *The JukeBox* increased cultural participation and developed increased appetite for future cultural activities, beyond those that had historically been engaging in existing programmes in Polmont's Performing Arts Centre.

### **The youth-led approach drives mental health and wellbeing benefits**

*The JukeBox* has been praised by all partners for its young person led approach. From the outset the young men's needs, particularly their mental health and wellbeing, were forefront in the way the show was constructed and broadcast. Due to the pandemic restrictions Glass had to take a more active role in the beginning, with lead artists Gudrun and Ricky voicing the young people's segments, editing and producing the radio show. However, Glass worked closely with Barnardos Youth Work and the Scottish Prison Service and the young participants to ensure *The JukeBox* became increasingly led and directed by the young men. This approach ensured the young men understood *The JukeBox* was their space and both those contributing and listening invested creatively and emotionally in the development of it.

#### **It's our own choice what we do and make.**

– JukeBox Participant

The increasing numbers of participants (rising from 12 to 27 in the space of a few weeks) was matched by the quality and depth of engagement, which was beyond all expectations. A watershed moment within the project has been the Christmas episodes. The ease in restrictions enabled young men to work in small bubbles to use Polmont's Media Centre to record three 2-hour episodes. Glass worked closely with Barnardos Youth Work and Polmont's Media officer to upskill and support them to carry out the technical support required to realise this. As a result, these episodes featured the young men's own voices for the first time, presenting their own devised segments, and featuring music and spoken word they had written and recorded themselves interspersed with favourite tracks, informative talks on subjects they cared about, as well as quizzes, Christmas cracker jokes and other seasonally themed content.

**We had kind of a breakthrough at Christmas time when we had access to their [the young men's] voices for the first time. Which was done in collaboration with youthwork: Caroline and the Barnardo's team and the officers pulled it all together. I was literally training someone who had never touched the microphone never**

**done anything, training her remotely on using GarageBand to record the guys in Polmont. And they created three two-hour long episodes, which are their own segments and their own creations which were recorded, which was the highlight of the project.**

– Gudrun Soley Sigurdardottir, *The JukeBox* Lead Artist, Glass Performance

Building from this breakthrough throughout 2021, as restrictions lifted, Glass were able to meet the participants face-to-face and work with them within Polmont's Media Centre for the first time in June. The episode released at the end of June 2021 was entirely devised, recorded, produced and presented by the young men themselves. The young people continue to develop the project with the artists as the project transitions into this new method of delivery.

From the end of project questionnaires 100% of the feedback received was positive. When asked how taking part in *The JukeBox* made them feel, 21 of the 24 participants who responded (88%) reported increased feelings related to SHANARRI wellbeing indicators, and 100% of the responses related to positive feelings, including happiness, pride, accomplishment, and excitement. Responses related to the importance of feeling included, respected and nurtured as contributors. Through their experience of contributing to *The JukeBox* the young men have developed their capacities as effective contributors and responsible citizens: working to deadlines, schedules, researching, problem solving, planning and organising their contributions, and considering how to work with others to realise their ambitions.

**I... challenged myself to create songs / raps inspired by happy memories using positive and appropriate lyrics. The most challenging aspect of this task was trying to control my emotions - mainly my temper - so I could work in a group environment as my temper is normally the way I deal with tricky situations but doing these tasks helped me figure out new ways of expressing my emotions positively.**

– *The JukeBox* Participant

*The JukeBox* has reduced loneliness and isolation, increasing communication between the population, and supported participants to develop empathy for others and a stronger sense of community. Sharing their own thoughts, ideas and contributions with others was a generous act: *The JukeBox* became a way to positively affect others within the community.

**Having it all come together so when I write or record it, it might not sound brilliant to me but hearing it on the radio makes it be important and you realise how it can influence and have an effect on others.**

– *The JukeBox* Participant

The consideration of others' needs within the community influenced the participants' decisions about what to develop segments about and how to present them: segments on mindfulness and relaxation techniques were developed, one participant chose to highlight services available within Polmont. The Christmas episodes included cracker jokes and a quiz,

designed to give listeners space to laugh and enjoy themselves, at what can be an emotionally difficult time of year for many. This developed from participants' understanding of their peers' needs. *The JukeBox*'s commitment to being youth led and increasingly so, has resulted in improved mental health and wellbeing for those involved.

### **Person centred learning drives individual motivation to gain skills and knowledge**

The project has made a significant contribution to skills and employability. The youth-led approach underpins this, with personal inquiry and interests driving motivation to learn. As a result of taking part in the project 10 young men gained Dynamic Youth Awards, and all acknowledge developing transferable skills such as planning, organising, listening to others and confidence. In the wider participant group 23 out of the 24 young men who responded to the end of project questionnaire articulated learning that had resulted from participating in the project. Many of the responses included reference to finding enjoyment, motivation and a sense of achievement that came from the challenge of doing something new:

**Before I used to lack confidence and by doing *the JukeBox* I learned to believe in myself. I didn't think I'd ever record a segment but I like to push myself and before I never did that and now I like to push myself.**

– JukeBox Participant

Across the feedback participants' appreciation for their own achievements, and the sense of pride and confidence in abilities was clear. One participant's journey is particularly powerful and is indicative of the transformative potential of the creative arts partnerships within justice settings.

'S' had engaged with the project for a number of weeks, requiring support from Barnardos Youth Worker, Caroline, to read and respond to project letters as he was unable to read and write. Motivated to contribute his own ideas and interests to the show, he set out to complete a Dynamic Youth Award. He set himself the challenge to "participate in *The JukeBox* and contribute to a radio show", which included practising writing the alphabet, learning to write a letter, researching a what's on segment, keeping in contact with *The JukeBox*, and taking part in creative tasks. Through personalised support from Barnardos and the artists 'S' was able to fulfil his ambitions. His pride and new found confidence is evident in his own words, which he wrote towards the end of the project:

**I have been working on the alphabet and letters. I'm proud for this. The writing and reading has been so hard! Being involved is something I'm also proud of. I've never done anything like this. I enjoy it.**

– 'S', JukeBox Participant

While some might be surprised by the young men's achievements, Glass, however understand that cultural participation has incredible potential for unlocking latent talent, skills and the desire and motivation to learn.

**The prison staff say they cannot believe the outcomes that we get with these young people. They can't believe that these young people have got so much to say that they're so positive. And of course, we know they were always like that, it just needed the right kind of process to support them and build them up. And that's what the arts does. That is what the arts can give. So they feel constantly excited by the outcomes and we can be more ambitious over time.**

- Jess Thorpe, Co-Artistic Director, Glass Performance

### **The Power of Partnerships**

Invited to reflect on why this project has been so successful at achieving positive outcomes for participants, Glass, Barnardos and the Scottish Prison Service highlight the longstanding collaborative relationship built on good communication, trust, respect and shared values.

**Glass, they've got a very good profile with Polmont in terms of the quality, because they also take the time to actually engage with the prison service, engage and explain what they're doing... Glass are the most professional, most creative, innovative partners I've worked with.**

- Lisa Hogg, Service Manager, Barnardos Youth Works, Polmont

**We've all got a common goal. And it's about the interests of the young people and the women that we look after... Now sometimes we'll go in different directions. But we're always working towards each other for the best for the young people and the women we look after.**

- Grant Marshall, Unit Manager Offender Outcomes, HMP YOI Polmont

This foundational relationship has enabled Glass and the partners to work in action learning cycles: experimenting, testing and taking risks with the work. This has generated new ways of doing things that can be applied in other contexts. Informed by *The JukeBox*, and the response of women in Polmont to it, Jess Thorpe has produced *WomenTalk*, a weekly radio show featuring segments and contributions tailored to the needs of the female population. She has also brought the learning into other Arts in Justice projects. Other partners within Polmont have begun using the Email A Prisoner system to continue engagement and delivery remotely resulting in increased access to services for the young men. The Scottish Prison Service have acknowledged the underused potential of The Media Centre and have committed staff and resources to increase access to it. Glass continue to reflect the project learning in *The JukeBox*, shifting their approaches to meet the emerging needs and interests of participants, as well as the changing nature of physical access to Polmont for the artists.

Glass Performance are clear about their ambition to take this learning out into the wider justice system:

**My goal is always trying to influence the whole system. I spent a long time working in individual prisons, and all of these experiences, these different approaches have given us templates that we are starting to share with the whole estate.**

- Jess Thorpe, Co-Artistic Director, Glass Performance

*The JukeBox* has unlocked new ways of approaching work for Glass, their partners and the artists involved, and foregrounds the possibility of using this project as an advocacy example to encourage creative partnerships to be embedded in other justice, youth work and recovery settings. This project demonstrates the importance of opening up opportunities to learn and explore new ways of doing things collaboratively. As a result it has the potential to positively influence others to shift their behaviour and approaches. Learning from this project has the ability to support others to increase access to cultural participation, support mental health and wellbeing, and skills development.

***Acknowledgements:*** *The JukeBox has been generously supported by Creative Communities funding from the Scottish Government's Culture and Justice Directorates, the Scottish Government's Youth Arts Fund through Creative Scotland with support from Youth Music Initiative and Time to Shine and the National Lottery Community fund. This case study was produced by freelance researcher Rosemary James-Beith in August 2021. Many thanks to everyone who contributed evidence: The JukeBox project participants, Jess Thorpe, Gudrun Soley Sigurdardottir, and Ricky Williamson from Glass Performance; Lisa Hogg, Service Manager for Barnardos Youth Work; Grant Marshall, Unit Manager Offender Outcomes, and George Ferguson, Acting Deputy Governor, HMP YOI Polmont. Special thanks to Louise Allan, Company Manager for Glass Performance who provided access to the project documentation materials.*