

THIS IS CROYDON

OUR STORIES

Photo: Chris O'Donovan for Croydon Council.

KENDRA HORSBURGH, UKWELI ROACH, STACIA MCEACHRON AND BERRY CARRIER

FAMILY (DYS)FUNCTION

As part of *This is Croydon*, London Borough of Culture, hip hop choreographers BirdGang Ltd worked with a community cast of young people aged 12-18 and adults 55+ to co-create the performance, Family (Dys)Function, produced by Dance Umbrella.

IN NUMBERS

Family (Dys)function

BirdGang Ltd and Dance Umbrella
21 October 2023, Stanley Arts

2 sold out performances

30 community participants

We heard from two of BirdGang's directors, **Kendra** and **Ukweli**, and two of the project's participants, **Berry** and **Stacia**, to discuss overcoming fears, intergenerational collaboration, and the power of hip hop to build community.

Tell us about the project

KENDRA: Our brief was to include different age groups and co-creation with a community cast. It was important that it wasn't just BirdGang creating a story. It was about guiding, working with the team and putting people's stories and ideas at the forefront.



We had three directors and fantastic young and adult casts. It ended up being an immersive theatre piece - the audience was invited into Auntie Jackie's living room. A story developed between her and a younger character, and the audience went on that journey.

What was the process?

UKWELL: We started by brainstorming, because it was quite a difficult brief to fulfill. We decided to work with young people and older adults to show that separation between generations and made a narrative around that.

How did you put the cast together?

KENDRA: We spoke to different organisations, like Croydon BME Forum, and tapped into existing groups. We reached out to our youth company, to Beeja's and Savvy's groups, and went to local schools and care homes. We tried to get all our parents involved at one point! We really tried to reach out to everyone in the area. We opened sessions where people could come and try it out to see if they would be interested in coming on the journey with us to create the actual show.

Berry and Stacia, what prompted you to get involved?

STACIA: It was something completely new, and I'm always up for trying something new. I didn't know anyone else who was doing it, and that's what fascinated me. I went to the taster session, and I loved it. I thought, "yeah, this is something I can do". I went for it!

BERRY: I didn't know Croydon well before I started going to school here. It was a way for me to get more involved locally.

How did the project evolve over time?

UKWELL: It changed a lot! We went to meet different groups – at a school, at a care home – and we spoke to people about their

experiences, challenges with modern life, the differences between generations. We took notes and started to think about what we could make a show about.

As rehearsals started, as we firmed up our cast, that changed things again. It's a refining process, really, of whittling off parts that don't serve the story, getting down to the brass tacks of, "what are we talking about here?" and tailoring it to the skills of the performers.

Berry and Stacia, what was it like for you?

BERRY: It was challenging to not know what it would actually entail! I left with a more open mind to things changing and adapting, to not always being how you expect them to be - in a good way.

STACIA: I've got to say, to start with it was scary. I'd never acted before, and I thought, "I'm gonna be disastrous up there". But right from the beginning, they gave us little exercises that made it much less scary and achievable. It was a great way to build confidence.

It was also amazing the way they incorporated our stories, which were so precious to us, into the production. That was special and made us really feel part of it. We learned a lot about ourselves and the people we were working with.



What were your highlights?

BERRY: I think the key highlight was meeting new people, connecting with people I hadn't connected with before. It allowed me to find this sense of community and family.

STACIA: For me, it was working with the younger generation. We don't often get an opportunity to do that, and we learnt so much from them. When we first started our sessions, we did them separately. As it got closer to meeting them, it

felt so scary. We had it in our heads that it was hip hop, and they were all going to be brilliant and think, "Who are these old fogies?" Then we met them, and they were the nicest group of young people. They said they had been scared of meeting us, because they thought we were going to be all serious and that we'd know everything. It was so funny when we met each other.

UKWELI: There's so much isolation nowadays. One of the great things about doing this show was watching people who maybe normally wouldn't interact with each other really bond.

KENDRA: That's what hip hop is. It's community. For us, as a company, we're proud that we could introduce hip hop theatre and let the art form do its job by connecting people. Relationships, expressing yourself, moving - that's ultimately what hip hop is about.



How was the audience at Stanley Arts?

UKWELI: There was a real buzz in the audience, and a real sense of pride in what the cast had achieved.

KENDRA: Everyone was represented in that room – different ages and cultures, friends and family as well as industry professionals. We're still getting emails from contacts saying how much they enjoyed the show. It connected the industry to the community and created links in every area.

Were there any challenges or lessons learnt, in the process?

KENDRA: There were a few things. Every community member and participant had a life, so sometimes couldn't turn up to rehearsals. Allowing for that and not putting that stress onto the performers was a lesson learned, but very much a positive one.

UKWELI: The spread-outness of the rehearsals was hard too. There was a certain amount of going over what you did in the last rehearsal at the next one, more concentrated periods would have been useful. But people had lives.

What's next for each of you and for projects like this one?

UKWELI: BirdGang learned a lot - community involvement is something we're much more interested in now. You gain so much from it.

KENDRA: We'd be missing out if we didn't do things like this in future – not just BirdGang, but Croydon as a community. Some participants joined our youth company, staying with us in the long run. It's lovely that young people are continuing to grow with us.

BERRY: I stayed on with BirdGang's EGGZ youth group until the end of 2024. I think what's next is just trying to get involved in as much as I can. I see a future for me in dance.

STACIA: Certainly, we'd love to do something else again – I think I'm speaking for the whole group! I'm keeping my eyes open for anything that's going on in Croydon.



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Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
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Made possible with
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