

SOFT TOUCH THE FIRST 25 YEARS

by **TIM BURKE**

Most small businesses fail after three to five years. In the fragile commercial world of the arts, for a company to prosper for 25 years – especially one who seeks to work with excluded and hard to reach communities – is an extraordinary achievement. So what motivated the Soft Touch pioneers back in 1986?

“I think it was frustration at doing sessional arts work and not having any say about what happened, where and why,” remembers Sally Norman, one of the two founder members still at Soft Touch. The late 1980s was a highly politicised time and fellow-founder Vince Attwood stresses their motivation was also about empowering communities: “We didn’t want turn up and say ‘here’s a pottery workshop’, we wanted to say ‘right, what do you want to do?’.”

The impetus to strike out on their own came with a commission to create a panto that would celebrate Spence Street Pool. Soft Touch worked with the local community to create an original production that took place in the empty pool and played to packed houses over Christmas. “We’d been thinking about creating a business,’ says Sally. “It was the success of this project that made us think yes, we can do this.”

So three months later a constitution was drawn up and the founder members signed up to the Enterprise Allowance Scheme which helped fledgling businesses get off the ground with a capital sum and paying workers £40 a week. Vince sees the irony of this Thatcher government programme being used to launch a whole range of radical arts groups.

“It was great for us, especially because it was very subversive. Margaret Thatcher said that community arts was actually socialist arts – we were happy with that. But we used the money exactly for what it was meant for, helping us get a base and a vehicle so we could start work.”

“The best move we made was to form ourselves as a co-op,” adds Sally. “This enabled us to access vital financial and business development advice from the Co-operative Development Agency, which helped us navigate through those early years.” Vince adds: “It made us entrepreneurial – the things that many third sector groups are having to learn today.”

That first year saw the new company operating out of suitably shabby premises – “The Shack” – near Sanvey Gate. Housed in an old stable block heated by only a wood-burning stove, they kept warm thanks to a neighbouring estate agent who donated some poles from their ‘for sale’ signs.

They picked up bits of work through contacts with youth and play workers, and a small Leicester City Council grant helped keep them afloat. Not everyone was confident they would succeed. They didn’t fit the Arts Council’s idea of community arts groups – not least because there was an uneconomic five of them on every job – and failure was confidently predicted. Fortunately, this prediction was proved wrong, and the Arts Council continues to be one of the organisation’s longest-standing and most enthusiastic supporters.

Moves followed to Stamford Street in the city centre, and then Connaught Street in Highfields. The latter had its advantages though it also involved sharing premises with an Islamic morgue. Continued growth eventually saw a move to the current premises on Hartopp Road in 1994.

Over time the company started to take on larger and more complex projects. Sally remembers “Percy and Patience Pearson’s Big Adventure”, a summer scheme project that highlighted Soft Touch’s creativity, its informal

educational focus and its ability to engage young people. The project saw a caravan tour playschemes with two actors claiming to be travellers who had broken down while on a world tour. They then took young people on an imaginative journey, researching countries from all over the globe, making music, immersing them in an inflatable undersea environment and creating artwork. At the end of the summer, young people from every playscheme took the caravan to Skegness for a parade down the prom showing off the work produced. It was fun, educational, and the kind of resource-intensive activity that had others shaking their heads. But it showed that if you hired Soft Touch, you wouldn’t just get a couple of workers turning up with a box of crepe paper and a pair of scissors.

During the 1990s new partners were gained as Soft Touch consolidated its reputation for being able to deliver: – the Youth Offending Service, the Commission for Racial Equality, Youth Music and the Heritage Lottery Fund joined the City Council and Arts Council as major funders.

The organisation moved from one fired up with youthful idealism to an increasingly professional body as staff recognised that they had something they wanted to protect and expand. The happy-go-lucky co-operative had to adopt a new structure and adapt the collective working principles that had defined their early years.

In 2009 the Youth Sector Development Fund provided the biggest single grant yet, around 40 per cent of annual turnover, which created the MASH-UP programme. This developed new models for engagement on the

To support this work a major grant from Leicester’s Youth Opportunity Fund enabled young people working with Soft Touch to create a mobile music studio. This is a great vote of confidence as this funding is controlled by young people themselves.

In the difficult economic circumstances of 2010, the company believed it was well-placed to ride out the storm. The YSDF grant heightened Soft Touch’s profile and provided some crucial business development support and recent funding successess. A five-year Big Lottery Fund Reaching Communities programme grant, funding BIG-UP New Parks, and success in securing Arts Council National Portfolio funding means the company is now financially secure with plans to expand into new premises.

It seems that the rest of the world has somewhat caught up with Soft Touch’s community-focussed approach:

“Every museum, every gallery, every theatre now has an education team, an outreach team, an audience development team,” says Vince. “Our task is now to stay one step ahead of that. What makes us different is that we’ve no ulterior motive. When we go out to New Parks, we’re not doing outreach for something else, that is the work we do – it’s art for arts’ sake, because its good for the soul. There’s one young man we work with and the key difference for him is not so much that we’ve stopped his offending – it’s that he gets up in the morning excited about what he’s going to do that day. That’s the power of what we do and everyone needs that in their lives.”

So a quarter of a century after disregarding advice and launching an arts business, it’s a pleasure to report Soft Touch is continuing to deliver and continuing to develop.