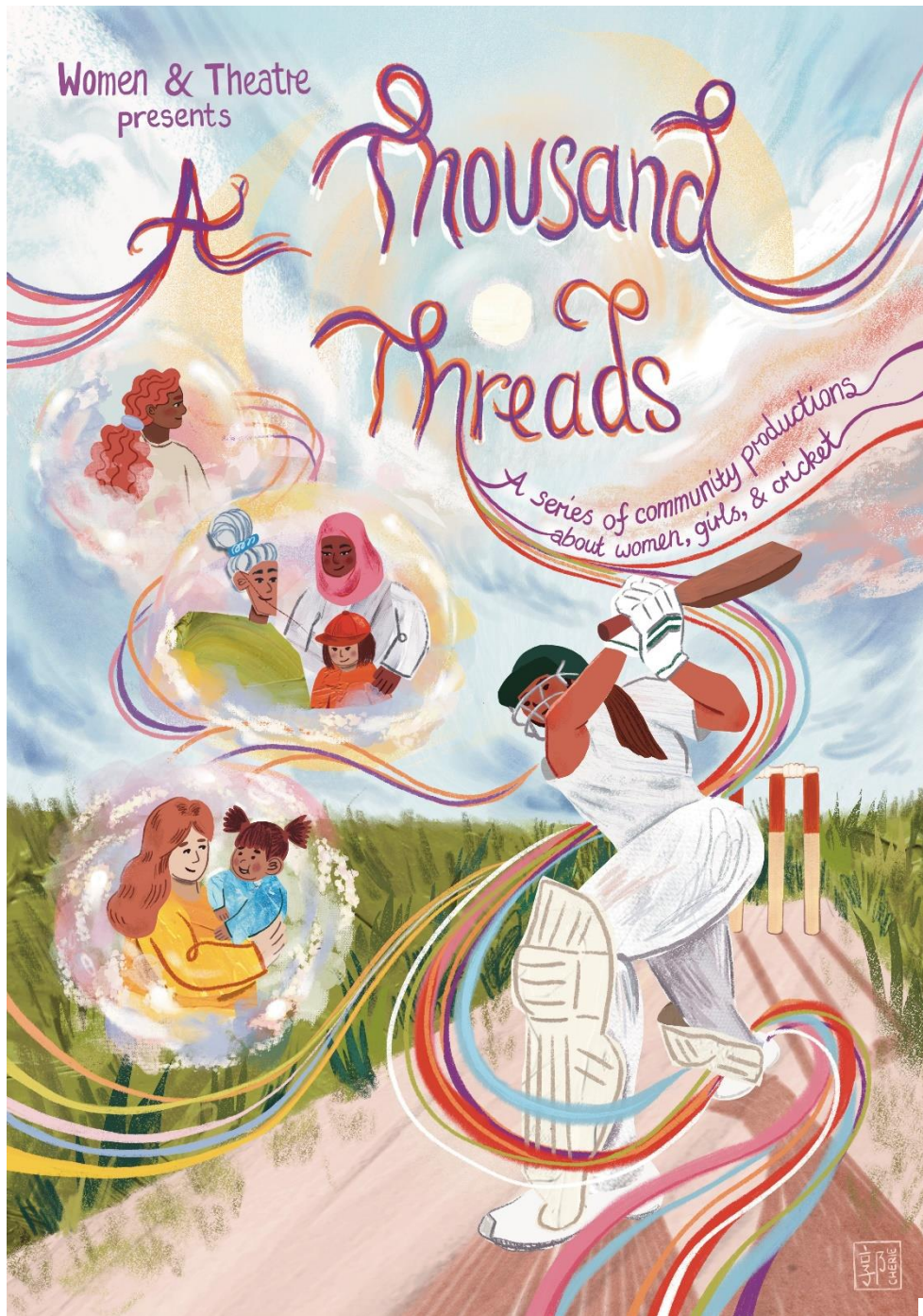




A Thousand Threads

Evaluation Report



Supported using public funding by
ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND



The Grimmitt Trust



WOMEN & THEATRE: A THOUSAND THREADS

“A thousand stories, all woven together, spinning our stories, to show the world, this game is ours.”

Executive Summary

Celebrating Women's Cricket being part of the Commonwealth Games for the first time, Women & Theatre produced a community theatre production and podcast series – exploring themes around women and girls' lives, both on and off the pitch.

The production was developed following research & devising sessions with local women and girls from a range of communities and backgrounds. Structured as a 4-day cricket match, *A Thousand Threads* was performed live in different outdoor locations in Birmingham & Smethwick, with audiences listening to a pre-recorded soundscape of words & music whilst watching the live action performed by intergenerational community casts. The whole series took place with community casts coming together for final performances at Midlands Arts Centre in July 2022.

W&T utilised its established methods for engaging with communities to make vibrant new theatre, whilst also developing its practice, through the involvement of a larger team of creative collaborators, bringing different artforms. Working alongside Deaf Explorer & D/deaf artist Maral has been a powerful experience, enabling the organisation to continue to improve the accessibility of projects for d/Deaf audiences & participants.

The high-quality productions were entertaining and thought-provoking. Presenting work in different areas as well as at the Midlands Arts Centre, meant we were able to reach very local audiences, including new audiences, in their neighbourhoods. We had very engaged and enthusiastic audiences everywhere we went and have had good levels of digital engagement with our podcast & other online content.

The project has had a significant impact on the participants involved in terms of skills development, wellbeing, confidence & self-esteem as well as strengthened connections in their local areas, & citywide. Being part of an ensemble cast performing in a high-profile festival gave the participants a sense of pride. They showcased their local area, their connections with cricket, and celebrated themes about being a woman/girl.

The process enabled W&T to grow new partnerships with communities in Edgbaston, Ward End, & Smethwick, and with organisations that we will continue to work with in the future, as well as strengthen partnerships with MAC & Grosvenor Road Studios.

The involvement of a steering group of local people & relevant stakeholders from early planning stages also proved to be invaluable. They provided advice, local insights & expertise which helped shape the project & strengthen delivery plans; a feature that we will build into future projects.

A Thousand Threads has been a significant project for Women & Theatre. The delivery of its largest community production to date has helped to raise the company's profile – both on a grassroots level through high levels of participatory activity delivered in areas we had not previously worked in, and also through the significant amount of press coverage the project attracted with features on both BBC and ITV local TV, as well as radio & other press.

We are delighted with the success of the project and the delivery of our desired aims & impact. It was also validating to be part of Birmingham 2022 Festival, which delivered significant benefit for the City.

A THOUSAND THREADS: PROJECT PROCESS

Inspiration & Feasibility:

Following the success of *Into the Water* at Moseley Road Baths in 2019, and *Run, Jump Throw!* in 2021, Women & Theatre was keen to complete its *Women & Sport* trilogy. The Commonwealth Games coming to Birmingham in 2022, and it featuring women's cricket for the first time inspired both the subject matter and our ambition for our third community production about women and sport.

In spring 2021, we secured some feasibility funding from Birmingham City Council which enabled us to undertake research & consultation activity – which helped inform our project plans, develop partnerships & community connections, and generated some early ideas for content – all convincing us that this project area was ripe for theatrical exploration.

Steering Group:

Evolving from connections made during our feasibility process, Women & Theatre formed a project steering group – a specialist group of people interested in cricket, community development, and cohesion and from the cultural sector. Throughout the creative process we maintained monthly meetings. The group was a continued source of information, advice and creative ideas that helped shape the project and maximise its impact.

Research:

We delivered a mixture of in-person sessions and some online activity in Autumn 2021. Facilitating in-depth conversations with women & girls local to Edgbaston, Ward End and Smethwick, we spoke to women in small groups, individually, and we also attended some existing group sessions run by other community organisations, including our partner venues.

Conversations were led by Janice Connolly and Jo Gleave and focused on women and girls' experiences of cricket, as well as wider aspects of their lives. We were struck by the deep conversations that emerged, with groups speaking about things that really mattered to them - so we felt we had a great quality of research that touched on both cricket and the wider metaphors about life.



Women & Theatre is developing a new theatre production about women, girls & cricket to be presented in different outdoor locations in the West Midlands in 2022.

We are looking for women & girls of all ages & backgrounds in Ward End, Edgbaston & Smethwick to be part of our cast, and to rehearse & record sections of the production's soundtrack.

Come along to one (or more) of our introductory sessions, in person or online before we start recording at Grosvenor Road Studios w/c 8 February.

Introductory sessions

Ward End
Monday 24 January, 4-5.30pm &
Monday 31 January, 4-5.30pm

Recording sessions (only needed for 1 or 2 slots)

Tuesday 8 February
2-5pm or 6-9pm

Script, Music & Production Development:

Following the initial research, the team used the broad themes that had emerged to inform a series of in-person script devising sessions at our partner venues: Dorothy Parkes Centre, The Dolphin Centre, Unity Hub & The Red Shed.

Following these sessions, Janice Connolly & Rupinder Kaur developed the script which was structured as a 4-day cricket match.

"It has been so great being around such creativity and passion... I love this... and have just woken from wonderful dreams which were direct experiences from conversations we had tonight!"

The Artistic Team came together in February 2022 for a Research & Development Week, working closely with Sound Designer Sam Frankie Fox, Designer Ella Barraclough, and Choreographer Genevieve Say, to shape ideas for the audio, set & movement aspects respectively.

Sound Recording & Accessible film/captioning:

Following initial research, and script development at our partner venues and other community sessions, the audio soundscape was created with the women's voices recorded at Grosvenor Road Studios. Having worked with GRS in our previous production of *Run, Jump, Throw!* we were able to build on our strong partnership with them and we are again grateful for their support and professional expertise.

"It has been so great being around such creativity and passion... I love this... and have just woken from wonderful dreams which were direct experiences from conversations we had tonight!" **Participant**

Recognising that the audio soundscape would not be accessible to D/deaf audiences, we collaborated with Deaf Explorer and our D/deaf community cast members to produce a BSL and captioned film of all the audio, which audiences could watch on tablets, screens or their own phones.

Rehearsals & performances:



Following the recording stage, the participants came back together, along with new recruits to our community cast, for rehearsals ahead of performances in the local areas – Ward End Park, The Red Shed, Edgbaston & Uplands Manor Primary School, Smethwick.

The productions featured live action at the beginning & end of each show, with W&T's Artistic Director, Janice Connolly and D/deaf Performer Maral forming a double act of commentator characters that interacted with the audience before the main 'Day' action began.

Choreographed movement pieces were threaded throughout the piece against the backdrop of sound and the many and varied voices heard on the audio. The ensemble of community performers moved around the space together, while BSL and captioned video was available for d/Deaf and hard of hearing audiences.

The vibrant set included giant cotton reels, a scoreboard and towers of sandwiches, enormous cakes and jars of juice. A focal point was a woven 'cricket strip' which had been created through a series of community craft sessions in April. Each "day" of the production had its own energy that responded to the age, abilities and needs of the group – all having a sense of celebration and joy.

Our ambition was for community casts from all areas to come together for the final shows at MAC. Inevitably due to caring and other commitments, this was not possible for everyone, but we worked hard to overcome barriers to many participants' further engagement. For several of the women, travel to MAC posed a barrier and so we coordinated lifts and supported travel to enable them to get to MAC for the final rehearsals and performances. Being able to take part in a production in both their local area but also at a professional venue like the MAC gave them a real sense of achievement and pride.



A Thousand Threads Podcast & Listening Experiences:

From the outset, we had always planned to adapt the show's audio to exist as a standalone podcast and audio experience. We built this into our planning and recorded Commentator speeches that were performed live but would need to be replicated to frame the audio versions. Following the live productions, we launched the *A Thousand Threads* podcast at the Sparkhill Festival Site during the Commonwealth Games. Three of the participants volunteered to take part in representing the project on the day – talking to members of the public, alongside facilitated collective listening experiences.

The Podcast is also available and can be found here: <https://womenandtheatre.co.uk/project/a-thousand-threads/> or by searching “Women & Theatre” in your podcast app. We are also producing signage that will be displayed in our partner venues enabling people to scan a QR code to download and listen to the podcast.

Audiences:

We attracted enthusiastic audiences everywhere we went. They were a mixture of people attending to watch family members and friends, others who were cricket fans and others who were in the local park and interested in what was happening. Audiences were intergenerational – families with grandmothers, mothers and children enjoying the performance.



“Really enjoyed the whole performance. Fun, inclusive variety of thoughts from others involved in girls’ cricket in the performance. All ages involved another plus, liked the inclusion of threads – handicrafts. It’s all one.” **Audience Member**

Providing the ‘have a go’ cricket element on the day (in Edgbaston, Ward End & Smethwick) was a great part of the event and also attracted people using the park who hadn’t known about the show but took part in the cricket and then saw the show.

Overall, audience numbers were good – totalling 639 and 103 for the Listening Experiences at Sparkhill Festival site. We were disappointed with the MAC audience numbers. Despite a well-implemented marketing strategy & lots of press coverage we did not hit our targets. This was partly due to competing with other festival activity including free work. With post-covid audiences generally booking later, the very hot weather also impacted on potential walk-up. We had to cancel 1 of our 5 shows due to the heatwave & safety concerns. That said, all shows had a great atmosphere with brilliant audience responses.

Audiences really responded to the material – they enjoyed the pre-show fun talking to Noreen and Anita (the commentators played by Janice Connolly and Maral). There was particularly great involvement from the children attending. Once the show begins in some ways it is a solitary experience with the headphones precluding any conversations between audience members, so having pre-show build up really brought the audience together to make it more of a collective listening / live experience.

We had very positive responses to the performances, and we were pleased with how many of the audiences were local and engaged in activities that celebrated their local areas. In reflecting back over the project the decision to make the performances at Ward End women only was the right approach – with many of the audiences saying how relaxed they felt.

“Really enjoyed hearing an authentic community voice being expressed.” **Audience Member**

We were also delighted to increase our digital reach with our podcast, and other film & audio shared via TikTok & other social media.

Project Impact & Legacy:

We were able to bring a welcoming and positive experience for the women & girls taking part - the rehearsals were about supporting one another and many commented that the regular rehearsal sessions were a great tonic to the reality and pressures of home life. They found it sustaining and felt hugely committed to the project.

The strength of the group as an ensemble was a true stand out impact - the supportive nature and the special atmosphere that it creates - a truthfulness that allowed them to grow in confidence. The podcast is a wonderful legacy that will be a reminder in perpetuity of the work they made and the commitment that went into it.

"It was an amazing and very lively performance. Loved the theme and really appreciated it. Thank you so much for giving us a chance to be part of it." **Audience Member**

"I had an amazing experience. As someone who loves theatre - one thing I've learnt is that theatre can be anything. Us women have the power to do anything when we put our minds to it." **Participant**



The process has enabled us to grow new and deep partnerships with communities across Birmingham and Smethwick, and with organisations that we will work with in the future. We developed different levels of partnership through the project - from more light touch connections to support recruitment and research, to deeper partnerships with our venue partners. These encouraged involvement from women across the area, of all ages and backgrounds.

We also strengthened existing partnerships with MAC & Grosvenor Road Studios and enabled them to connect with different communities like those in Ward End.

We strengthened our partnership with Deaf Explorer - working in a new way to incorporate BSL into the creative fabric of the production. The collaboration with them has been huge for the company - helping us to develop our

practice, and embedding an inclusive way of working with D/deaf artists, participants and audiences. We are keen to continue working with them in the future.

Talking with D/deaf women about cricket highlighted to us the lack of awareness and inclusion for D/deaf people at places like Edgbaston Cricket Ground. These conversations were enlightening and helped us centralise BSL within the production.

We were able to develop new connections with cricket specific organisations – particularly with the English Cricket Board's Desi Women's team and their community Activators who attended the local performances and enabled audiences to play cricket after seeing the performance with their 'have a go' cricket sessions.



FUNDERS

A Thousand Threads was part of **Birmingham 2022 Festival**, and made possible with generous funding from Arts Council England, The National Lottery Heritage Fund, Birmingham City Council, The Roughley Trust, The Grimmitt Trust, The Feeney Trust & Cole Charitable Trust.

APPENDIX

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Artistic Team & Community Cast:

Scripted by Janice Connolly & Rupinder Kaur with additional material from Maral

Directed by Jen Davis & Janice Connolly

W&T Lead Artist Practitioner: Jo Gleave & Jen Davis

W&T Artist Practitioner: Benita Umurerwa

Designer: Ella Barraclough

Sound Designer & Composer: Sam Frankie Fox

Sound mixed & mastered by Fox & Rocha

Movement Direction & Choreography: Genevieve Say

Dance Artist: Francesca Robson

Creative Artist: Maral

Access Collaborator: Deaf Explorer

BLS Interpreters: Rachael Veazey, Chloe Matthews, Andrea Daly, Olivia Whitter & Emma Dunlevey-Dale

Drummers: Joelle Barker & Ruth Ible

Production Management: aquismedia

Stage Manager: Liam Walsh

Technical Operator: Lexi Pegg

Volunteers: Heather Collier, Sharon Wallcott, Debbie Cole & Abi Hughes

Chaperone: Lorna Lawrence

Project Management & Marketing: Jess Pearson, Rosie Gunn, Katie Webster & Matt Smith.

Project Illustrations: Cherie Kwok

Graphic Design: Dave Walsh

Community Cast: Abi Hughes, Ayesha Hussain, Aiyana Thind, Azba Nazam, Bal Braich-Bains, Beckie Clark, Carolina Vilela-Khan, Chantell Faure, Chelsea Drew-Fowels, Debbie Cole, Deborah Ufton, Elaine Williams, Ellie Murphy, Emma O'Brien, Hannah Beech, Ines Vilela-Khan, Jasmine Arden-Brown, Jessie Hughes, Jessica Butler, Joanna Gay, Kyra McKeown, Lauren Slater, Lele Samms-Takam, Lucy Poulson, Madison Cole, Maggie Parsons, Maral, Margaret Cunningham, Maryam Nazam, Mary Jane Russell de Clifford, Molly Oldershaw, Nettles Derbyshire, Nooreen Khan, Peta Goodman, Razia Begum, Rebecca Kibuuka, Renia Banerjee, Rozeena Sujjad, Saima Nawaz, Sarah Mehboob Mamdani, Shan Zahra, Sharon Walcott, Shamim Akhtar, Sophia Khan, Sophia Grace Heath, Sumaiyah Naza, Teresa Allcock, Tisa Klicsek, Zamida Ashraf, Yasra Khalil.

Thank you.