

Hackney Empire:

20

YEARS OF CREATIVE FUTURES



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EMPIRE

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"Hackney Empire gave me a new outlook on my future, it has given me so much more than I could ever give back." Alexandria

INTRODUCTION

20 years 20,000 young people

For 20 years Hackney Empire's Creative Futures has been creating a safe, inclusive space for young people from across East London.

These pioneering programmes use arts and culture to break down barriers, build confidence and provide creative, professional and personal development for young people regardless of their background, education, income or experience.

Today, Creative Futures annually engages over 2,000 young people aged 12 to 25-years-old. At the heart of a borough where young people may experience multiple points of disadvantage including poverty, discrimination and isolation Creative Futures offers young people with new opportunities and life pathways that are representative of their needs and passions.

Through Creative Futures young people experience:

- **Increased mental health and wellbeing**
- **Development of creative and transferrable skills**
- **Increased employability**
- **Career pathways into the arts and the creative industries**

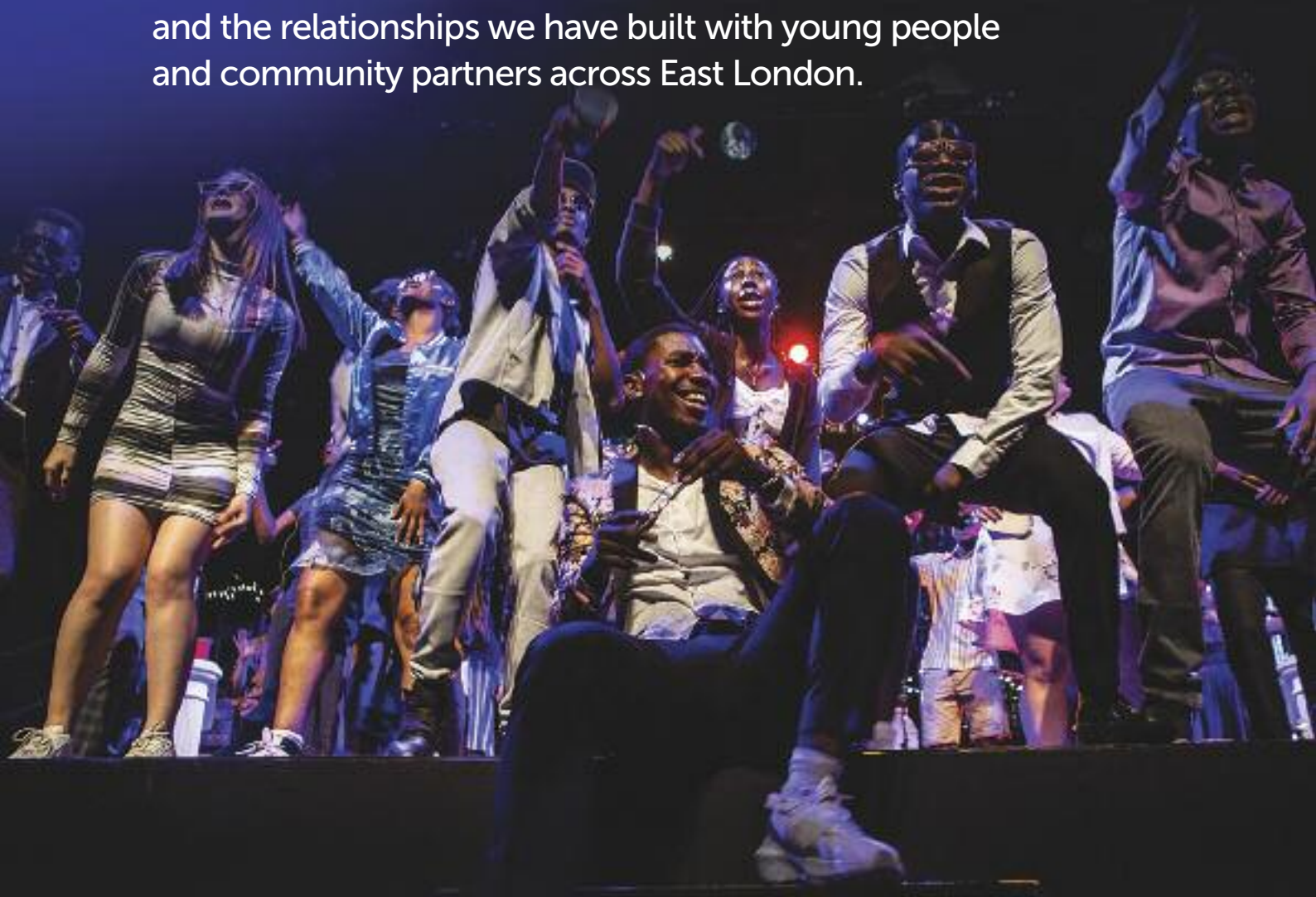
To date, this unique model of youth engagement has impacted over **20,000 young lives**.



How this report was made

Over the last twenty years we have collected a wide range of data and information to evaluate the outcomes achieved by Creative Futures. These include survey responses, case studies, interviews, quotes, and delivery outputs.

This report brings together an analysis of our outcomes in order to demonstrate the impact and breadth of our work, providing a deep dive into the Creative Futures programme and the relationships we have built with young people and community partners across East London.





HACKNEY EMPIRE – AT THE HEART OF EAST LONDON'S COMMUNITIES

Celebrating its 120th anniversary this year Hackney Empire is one of the UK's most beautiful and best-loved theatres, at the heart of its East London community.

Generations have had their first experience of live performance in our legendary auditorium and for decades we have provided a much-needed platform for Black and under-represented voices.

Hackney Empire annually welcomes audiences of over 200,000 from across East London's communities and beyond, for a rich mix of drama, comedy, opera, music and dance.

Our model is based around giving everyone the opportunity to experience arts and culture. We keep our prices accessible and as a result our audiences are drawn from some of the most socially and economically deprived postcodes in the UK (including 23% of households in Lower Clapton, 24% in South Hackney and 23% in Dalston) offering local communities the chance to experience world-class arts and culture on their doorstep.

At the very heart of its community Hackney Empire annually provides free and subsidised space for local organisations and groups as well supporting schools, colleges, community and youth groups to play and perform on our legendary stage.

"Hackney Empire was the most exciting audience I have ever played. People hanging over the balconies. It crossed every age and gender and race barrier."

**Jonathan Kent CBE,
Theatre & Opera Director**

"Hackney Empire is an incredibly special place. It brings people and communities together like no other venue I've experienced, and its atmosphere is legendary."

**Clive Rowe, Olivier Award winner
and Hackney Empire Patron**



CREATING A SAFE SPACE IN THE HEART OF HACKNEY

Hackney Empire founded Creative Futures in response to the clear need for youth engagement in our local area.

Home to some of the least engaged and most vulnerable young people in the UK, Hackney Empire is located within an area of high deprivation that is ranked as one of the most disadvantaged in London. The borough is currently rated seventh highest in the country in terms of Child Poverty. **26%** of the children and young people in Hackney Empire's locale are living in poverty compared with 17% across England. Youth unemployment is **30% higher** in Hackney than in England as a whole.

Many young people in Hackney navigate truly complex and challenging life circumstances including poverty, inequality and for some exposure to gang culture and knife crime.

Hackney Empire recognised the power that the arts and culture have to engage young people and help them make new positive connections. .

From its inception, Creative Futures set out to reframe 'culture' by using art-forms that young people were already engaged in, including film, popular music including *grime*, *Afrobeat*, *RnB*, *spoken word* and dance.

Today we work in partnership across the borough and with every school in Hackney as well as with community groups, colleges, and support organisations.

These deep-rooted community relationships have earned Hackney Empire its track-record for engaging young people who may not typically engage with offers from arts and culture, or from education or employment.

"Hackney Empire gives a very warm feeling of family and community. Once you find the people around you who make you feel confident, free and comfortable there's nothing that you cannot achieve." Monae

Creative Futures Timeline

20 YEARS OF TRANSFORMATION

2002

Hackney Empire hosts its first ever **Artist Development Programme (ADP)** – an intensive two-week summer programme where a cast of 20 young people created a new piece of musical theatre performed on stage at Hackney Empire. Over the next 20 years more than **1,000** young actors, dancers, rappers, singers and musicians will take part.

2011

Hackney Empire's **Youth Forum** meets for the first time with five young people, and within months there are 75 regular attenders. **The Youth Forum becomes the beating heart of Creative Futures**, ensuring that all its activity is co-created with young people.

2013

Community project **Hackney Village** launches, celebrating Hackney's culture and providing mentoring for young people who are struggling with the transition from primary to secondary school.

2017

Yamin Choudury is appointed Artistic Director of Hackney Empire. **Rachel Horowitz** is appointed Head of Learning and Participation, and new programmes are launched including:

- **Writers' Room** a writing programme, run in partnership with the Royal Court.
- **On Track** a creative industries festival and careers fair, hosted in the October holidays and produced by our Young Producers.
- **Limitless** partners with the Huddleston Centre, a local charity providing respite care for disabled young people for its summer programme.

2020

Hackney Empire is shut due to the pandemic. Creative Futures goes online, working with hundreds of young people made more vulnerable by lockdown. The programme includes Hackney Empire Patron, **Leona Lewis**, teaching online masterclasses and providing mentoring for 30 young people.

2022

Creative Futures celebrates its 20th anniversary with its busiest programme yet, regularly working with hundreds of young people and engaging thousands, including a residency at the National Theatre's River Stage in July, curated and produced by our **Young Producers**.

2010

Artistic Director of Haringey Shed **Yamin Choudury**, returns to Hackney Empire where he began his career in theatre, to lead Hackney Empire's work with young people.

2012

Alter Ego is launched on Hackney Empire's main stage, bringing together incredible talent and young audiences from different backgrounds and schools that cross gang boundaries. It becomes a flagship event for the borough – one of the first contestants **Jermain Jackman** goes on to win BBC's *The Voice* in 2014.

2016

Hackney Empire's 25 strong Graduate Theatre company take their reimagined version of their ADP show *Macbeth* to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

★★★★★

"Incredibly clever and well-conceived and executed"
British Theatre Guide

2018

Hackney Empire engages over **4,000** young people, including setting a Guinness World Record for the world's largest mental health lesson with poet **Hussain Manawar**.

2021

Hackney Empire opens its doors after 18 months of closure with *Nightshade*, a new piece of theatre created in just 10 days by a cast of 40 young people aged 14 to 19-years-old.

“Hackney Empire
is my second
home and my
point of strength.”

Joy



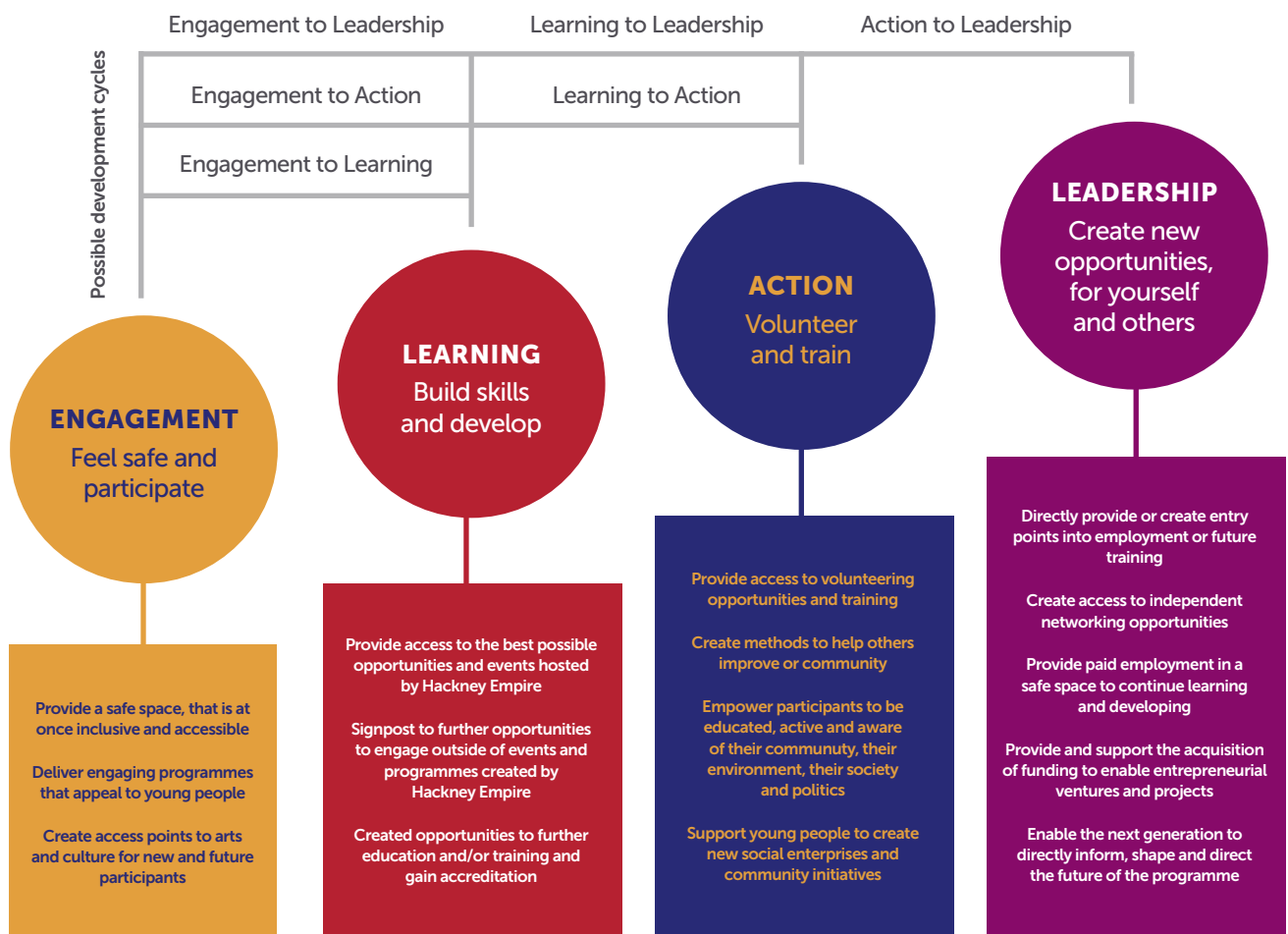
CREATIVE FUTURES

FOUNDING OBJECTIVES

Creative Futures was founded using **six underlying objectives** – all aligned with the mission, vision and values of Hackney Empire.

- 1 To create a safe, inclusive space and a sense of belonging for all our young people regardless of background, education, income or experience.
- 2 To break down barriers to access and participation, creating access to creative, personal and professional development opportunities for future generations.
- 3 To make young people feel more confident and independent, to better appreciate their own value, to foster self-determination and enable their own agency.
- 4 To defend young people's wellbeing wherever possible, both on an individual and societal scale.
- 5 To leverage the values and interests of young people as a vehicle for their personal, professional and creative growth.
- 6 To create pathways into the cultural and creative industries for young people especially from under-represented groups.

How it works in practice





ACCESS FOR ALL

Creative Futures helps cultivate a sense of belonging for young people regardless of their education level, family income bracket, ability or experience.

90% of Creative Futures participants are from Black, Asian or ethnically diverse communities and around **15%** of our participants are disabled or neurodivergent young people.

Our young people are more likely to face a range of disadvantages including greater risk of marginalisation, social exclusion and financial disadvantage, as well as additional barriers to achieving positive outcomes, such as discrimination and cultural prejudice.

By consistently providing free and open programming, Creative Futures breaks down barriers to access and participation by engaging young people of all financial, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, including those who may not normally engage with offers from arts organisations.

In total Creative Futures provides an average of 20 hours of free youth programming each week across 45 weeks of the year.

These include workshops and masterclasses alongside professionally produced training and performance programmes, all of which are provided free of charge to all participants.

**"An escape from everyday life...
I always feel welcome whenever I participate.
It's a safe space.
Hackney Empire becomes your family without you even realising."**

Rianna

Leading with lived experience

Hackney Empire is committed to increasing representation across the arts and society at-large. We are uniquely placed to lead this change. Hackney Empire is one of the sector's leading organisations in terms of workforce diversity and representation.



40%

of our team identify as Black, Asian or ethnically diverse, as do

75%

of our Senior Leadership, and more than

60%

of our freelancers.

Over **49%** of Hackney Empire's artistic programme is created by and with Black, Asian and ethnically diverse practitioners. Of our two associate artists / companies one is disabled-led and the other LGBTQI+.

"Hackney Empire has a legacy as a cultural beacon and safe space, supporting a community of creatives, audiences and participants that fully reflects the incredible diversity and vibrancy of contemporary London. For decades Hackney Empire has been regarded as a vital and exceptional platform, championing marginalised and isolated people, ideas and voices. This legacy continues to this day as a central pillar of the organisation's manifesto."

Yamin Choudury, Artistic Director Hackney Empire

Co-creating with young people

"Creative Futures is a space for young people to know their voice is valued and celebrated. We tell our young people, 'know from day one that you are the artist, producer, leader'. They have the ownership to create what they want and we will guide them along the way."

Rachel Horowitz, Head of Learning and Participation, Hackney Empire

95%

of our participants said they felt empowered and able to shape the activities at Hackney Empire

93%

of participants said it make them feel like an artist

97%

of our participants say they feel listened to and appreciated by Hackney Empire staff

"Hackney Empire nourishes the minds of each upcoming generation..."

Siobhan

The community is at the heart of our process – all our activity is developed by, for and with the young people of Hackney and because they are so involved we have a legacy of creating valuable, urgent, programmes that live on through high-levels of peer-to-peer referrals.

We speak with hundreds of young people each year – our own participants and through our community partnerships and schools' networks enabling us to co-design a year-round programme of activity that fills gaps in provision and responds to what young people want and need.

Our cohort of circa 40 Young Producers aged (14–19) are the voice of Hackney Empire. Meeting weekly across 45 weeks of the year all our activity from the strategic planning of our annual programme to individual projects is driven by their ideas and feedback.

We use youth co-production methods in our processes and practices, ensuring that the voices of young people are captured, listened to and enacted upon. Their thoughts, feelings and opinions are instrumental in delivering and directing programming that is relevant and responsive.

Participants are encouraged to initiate and are entrusted with responsibility. This enables young people to discover and recognise the power of their own agency.





WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

Creative Futures plays a vital role in its local ecology, its ethos is rooted in partnership working and values of trust, openness and flexibility. These partnerships ensure we do not duplicate activity already available and help guarantee that our programme is as relevant, resonant and engaging as possible

Our offer uses Hackney Empire's network, expertise and practice across the Borough and across four main sectors.

> Hackney Council

We are a strategic partner for our Local Authority – both organisations recognise the role arts and culture play in improving the physical and mental health of individuals and society at large, and both are committed that all our children and young people have access to high-quality and affordable arts and cultural activities and pathways. We deliver key programmes for Hackney Council via Connecting Young Hackney and Discover Young Hackney.

> Education

We work in partnership with every school across Hackney to identify where we can provide focused support for the curriculum itself, and young people's needs beyond it.

> Sectorial Support Organisations

We work with support organisations including The Huddleston Centre and Hackney Shed to identify the programming needs of shared participants and provide these organisations with funding advice and advocacy.

> Creative Sector

We work with leading cultural organisations, individual artists and industry specialists from across the creative sector, including theatres, venues, media outlets, record companies and broadcasters.

Creative Futures also acts as a vital centralised information hub for many organisations and young people, providing signposting to other services and providers. We work in close collaboration with colleges, housing associations, community groups, pupil referral units, intervention units, youth hubs, care centres and additional provision centres.

“For over 20 years, the partnership between Hackney Council and Hackney Empire has positively impacted the lives of thousands of young people and its wider impact has been felt across families, communities and the borough at large.”

**Petra Roberts, Cultural Programme Officer,
Hackney Council**

BRINGING IN THE PROFESSIONALS

Our young people work with some of the most inspirational and recognisable figures and organisations in art, activism, business, entrepreneurship, psychology and sociology.

“The chance to be mentored by industry professionals was a once in a lifetime opportunity that shaped my musicianship and helped me to believe in myself as much as my mentors believed in me.” Qudsiyah



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**"You always
make friends and
feel supported.
Everyone cares
about your
growth."** Blessing

**"My experience at
Hackney Empire spring
cleaned my mind and
helped me look outwards."** Eva

"The feeling of being part
of something bigger than
myself, the feeling of
forward movement and
progression. Every time
I leave this building I feel
closer to my ambitions
than when I went in.

Hackney Empire is not a
conveyor belt organisation.

They don't bring young
people in to profit off them
then move onto the next.
It's long term progression
and growth. That's why all
of us feel at home there."

Brian



Creative Futures Outcomes



Creative Futures enables over 2,000 young people each year to achieve a variety of personal, creative and professional outcomes, its impacts are felt across the lives of individual participants, the wider Hackney community and the creative industries at-large.



INCREASING POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

“Participating at Hackney Empire had me feeling like I could take on the world. My peers and the staff were so supportive, and they had helped me to get passed some of the negative emotions that I was feeling at the time, allowing me to perform to the best of my ability. I feel way more confident, on- and off-stage.” Raiquan

92%

of participants surveyed said they experienced greater emotional wellbeing

95%

said they are more resilient

95%

said they are more independent

80%

of those we worked with during Covid-19 said it helped them get through

Creative Futures is committed to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of its young people.

With one in six children aged five to 16 identified as having a probable mental health problem in July 2021, (a huge increase from one in nine in 2017) and 83% of young people with mental health needs agreeing that the Covid-19 pandemic had made their mental health worse, organisations like Hackney Empire have a vital role to play.

A recent participant survey indicated that 90% of participants in Creative Futures felt it was a safe space where they could talk about personal issues with friends on the programme and 88% with staff.

Sharing important decisions with young people helps to foster self-determination and an increased sense of independence. The young people we work with grow in confidence as they are trusted to lead in the initiation, design and delivery of their own ideas.

Through co-creation and co-ownership, our participants develop greater agency and recognise their value, with an overall increase in positive mental health and wellbeing.



DEVELOPING CREATIVE AND TRANSFERABLE SKILLS

"Participating in Hackney Empire, changed myself for the better. Communication skills, interpersonal skills, confidence... the list could go on forever Hackney Empire provides the best opportunities that suit you best and will help you to grow." Savannah

97%

of participants said they'd developed creative, communication and time management skills

95%

said they were more able to express their ideas to others

82%

said their marketing and event management skills had increased.

Young people working with us develop new skills in dance, choreography, singing, music, song writing, music production, spoken word, rapping, acting, event production and marketing. They are supported to practice new artistic techniques and methods by experienced creative professionals and mentors from the Hackney community and beyond.

As young people develop their artistic abilities, they also gain critical transferable skills, including technical, communication, critical thinking, multitasking, teamwork, creativity, and leadership.

INCREASED EMPLOYABILITY

"I felt like I was aided in identifying what my talents were. I wasn't told who I was, I was able to grow there in many directions and be given so many wide ranging chances to expand my skills and knowledge. From my time being involved with the Empire I managed to get my first job at another theatre." Maisie

85%

of participants said Creative Futures improved their chances of getting a job

55%

of participants credit Hackney Empire directly with helping them get a job

Young people working with Creative Futures achieve clear professional outcomes through programmes that provide hands-on experience, training, paid employment as well as a range professional pathways into the cultural and creative industries. Many of our programmes offer participants training or qualifications, including in Advanced Project Management.

INCREASING REPRESENTATION AND CHANGING THE FACE OF THE CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

"...it's hard to be part of something if you don't see people that look like you when you go to these things. If Hackney Empire did not open their doors to me ten years ago, I wouldn't be standing here today, because they said, 'we want to offer you these opportunities'".

Jasmyn, Open Court Producer for the Royal Court Theatre

93%

of participants said Creative Futures made them feel like an artist

70%

of participants said that Creative Futures led them to take part in other cultural or creative activities as artists or producers

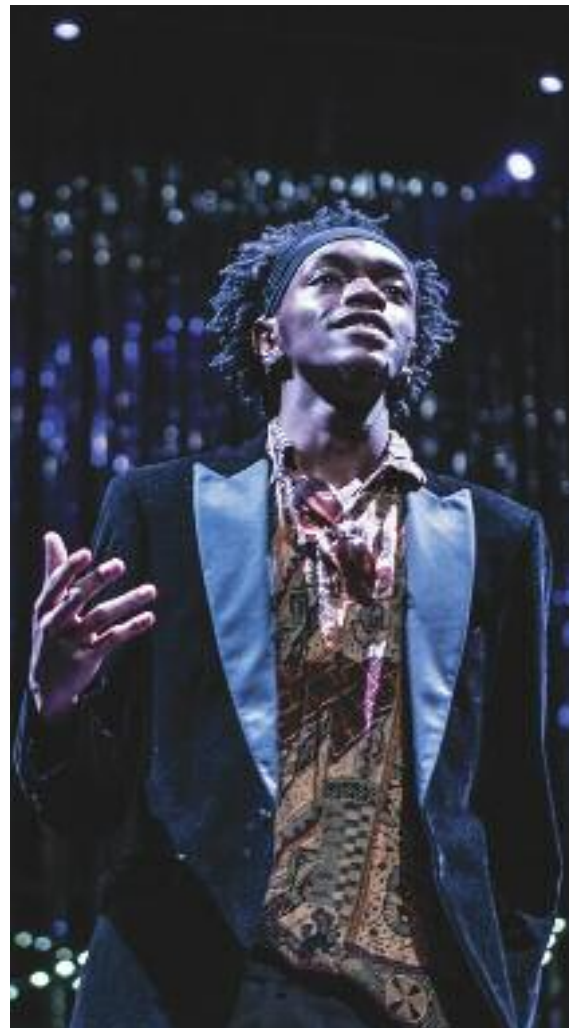
The lack of representation across the arts and the creative industries is widely acknowledged. Artists and creatives from under-represented backgrounds face a range of disadvantages, including discrimination, unequal access to opportunities and a lack of representative role models.

As a sector leader in its commitment to diversity and representation Hackney Empire is uniquely placed to address this issue - providing training, employment mentoring and career pathways.

Over 100 freelance artists and creatives each year help deliver our programmes – providing vital employment and industry experience opportunities for artists from under-represented groups.

Creative Futures alumni can be found across the sector working at leading organisations including the Royal Court, the National Theatre, the BBC, Netflix, Parlophone Records, Channel 4, the Roundhouse and across the West End.

They are helping to change the face of the creative industries in the UK, forging careers that enable them to achieve their own creative and personal goals whilst making the cultural landscape at large more representative of modern Britain.



Our Programmes



Creative Futures is uniquely placed to engage young people who may not typically connect with mainstream arts and culture, or even education or employment using a range of programmes across three main areas: **Schools Outreach**, **Participation** and **Creative Development**.



SCHOOLS OUTREACH

Hackney Empire offers music, dance, drama and media to every secondary school and college in Hackney for free. We provide focused support for the curriculum itself and young people's needs beyond it. Our Schools Outreach programme aims to build trust with young people by going to them, creating new outcomes for young people who have no prior experience or knowledge of the performing arts.

Every programme is tailor-made specifically for targeted groups alongside teachers and community leaders:

- **Delivered by expert practitioners from across the creative sectors**
- **Designed to empower, encourage and engage**
- **Taking Hackney Empire out of the building, and into our community**

Access

By having no cost, pupils can access the theatre and performance-based activities, courses and workshops that Creative Futures offers. This barrier normally exists for other creative youth services.

Role Models

Because Creative Futures is so grounded in the local community, the performers on stage, the facilitators on the activities and the talent that help on the curriculum are also local, and act as visible role models with relatable experiences.

Aspiration

Exposure to these role models help raise aspirations and open student's minds to the possibilities within the creative industries. These role models also help pupils to challenge familial notions of the arts as experienced at home.

Safe Place

Creative Futures provides a physical space and forum for young people who are at risk of getting caught up in anti-social behaviours. The activities that Creative Futures provides help build confidence and transferable skills that will help in life after school, either in education or in the world of work.

Improved School Results

Teachers have found that students improved their performance in other subjects other than drama. Participation in Creative Futures' activities stimulates debate and activity back in the classroom and in other subjects.

"If Hackney Empire hadn't come to my sixth form to do a writing workshop, I'd have never known about the writers programme which then led to me beginning my career as a professional writer."

Sumah Ebele, Playwright

"Our school serves one of the most deprived communities in the country and it is hugely important to raise the aspirations of our young people, provide them with transferable skills for successful employment and inspire them to be lifelong theatre goers. Hackney Empire are an invaluable resource for our community for access to live theatre, curriculum support and enrichment beyond school hours. Their practitioners and programmes are incredibly diverse and provide role models and inspiration for considering a career in the arts."

**Paul McIntyre,
The Urswick School**

PARTICIPATION

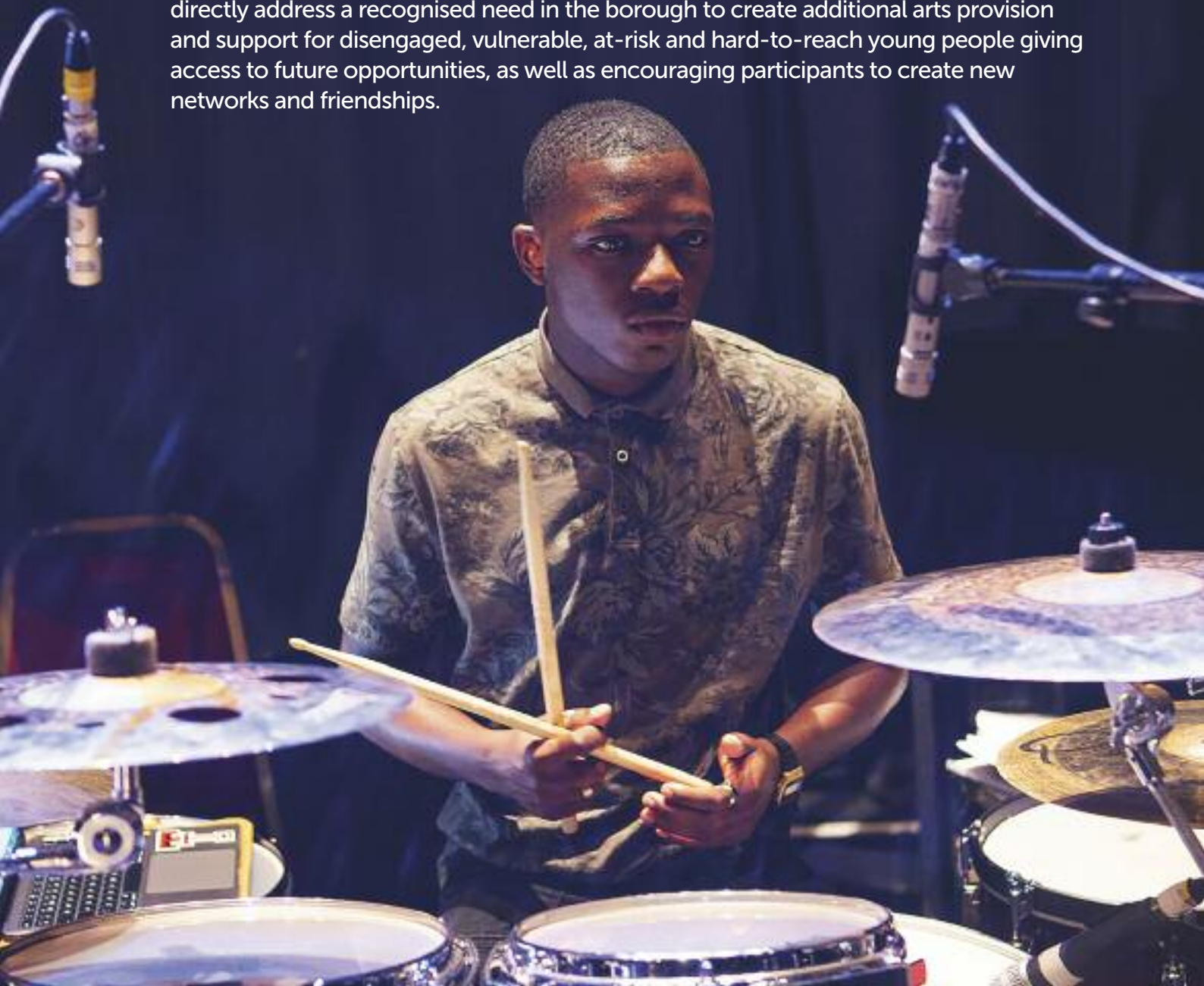
AFTER SCHOOL & HOLIDAY ACTIVITY

"Hackney Empire has built me up throughout my life, they have been there throughout my journey into foster care and growing into an adult, they have always supported me as a family unit, and I couldn't be more grateful for what they've done throughout the years helping me grow within the music industry". Reece

After School Programmes

Designed to increase engagement through participation, encouraging progression from the Schools Outreach programme - with a focus on accessibility and enabling young people to explore their own creativity.

These six-week open-access programmes, taking place after school, feature high-profile artists and organisations delivering new and innovative programmes designed to facilitate a next step for young people into arts and culture. These programmes are curated to directly address a recognised need in the borough to create additional arts provision and support for disengaged, vulnerable, at-risk and hard-to-reach young people giving access to future opportunities, as well as encouraging participants to create new networks and friendships.



Case Study

Progression Sessions

The number of schools offering Music BTEC level 2 or Music GCSE is falling. This greatly diminishes engagement with music through education, in turn isolating those who have talent but lack the means to develop creatively. Since 2014 Progression Sessions has provided young aspiring musicians with the opportunity to develop their skills within music genres, they are passionate about, led by artists who inspire them.

Progression Sessions is Creative Futures' annual seven-week programme for young musicians, aged 14 to 20-years-old. Run in partnership with the local music charity of the same name twenty participants drawn from across Hackney's diverse communities receive one-to-one support and mentoring on song writing, production, studio engineering, mixing and studio recording, culminating in a live performance.

All participants develop music and production skills, gain performance confidence and build a new network of industry contacts.

Half Term Programmes

Half-term programmes are week-long intensive workshop projects, delivered by recognised industry leaders, concentrating on developing young people's abilities and networks and looking at employment opportunities for young creatives, artists and producers.

These programmes have been designed to allow participants to learn, develop and explore in a safe and accessible environment. We bring expertise into the borough, create access and encourage participants to create networks and have experiences outside of their comfort zone.

Creators Collide

Taking place over October Half Term Creators Collide is a creative industries career festival curated by our Young Producers. Now a weeklong event it features a packed programme of workshops and Q&A sessions and networking sessions with industry figures from music, media and publishing. Over 100 young people attend this unique event which gives young people the chance to meet, access and network with professionals.

100%

of attendees say they would attend again

98%

of attendees say their confidence grew after attendance

CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT

YOUNG PRODUCERS: THE CORNERSTONE OF CREATIVE FUTURES

Young Producers mentors and educates young people to create opportunities and pathways for themselves, encompassing everything from finance to marketing and company administration to event management. The programme builds the confidence and skill sets of the participants themselves, whilst the events programme they create offer performance platforms for other young artists.

Each year Young Producers provides up to 25 participants from under-represented backgrounds across Hackney with the opportunity to curate and produce an arts and cultural events programme, using Hackney Empire's infrastructure, performance spaces and technical support.

To date, over 250 young people have been on the programme. They have created over 50 events and performances including co-producing the BBC Radio 1Xtra Academy, the 2012 Olympic Torch Relay, the Hackney Big Weekender and the National Theatre's River Stage.

Young Producers attend weekly sessions gaining skills in producing production management, marketing, budget management and artist liaison. Within this unique model for arts-based personal and professional development for young people aged 14 to 21-years-old, the sessions also count towards a Level 2 qualification in Advanced Project Management.



ARTISTIC DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME (ADP)

A SUMMER OF CHANGING LIVES

"Joy, appreciation, relief. ADP has given me a new outlook on life. It has meant so much to me. I feel alive again." Alex

Our flagship summer activity the Artist Development Programme (ADP) has developed a whole generation of young artists.

Over 1,000 young people have gone through this life-changing programme which brings together professional directors, choreographers, musicians and facilitators from the international arts scene to work with over 50 young people, shaping their ideas into a performance that takes place on the Hackney Empire main-stage.

With a series of workshops that take place beforehand, young people, regardless of ability, can audition and learn more about how to develop their own material into a performance. ADP works towards empowering a young, diverse community of creatives and artists, with the tools, knowledge and information they need to create their own projects in the future.

The programme provides employment for young and emerging freelance artists and creatives as well as providing vital industry experience for young trainee mentors and facilitators.

After nearly 18 months of a pandemic which hugely impacted our young people's opportunities and wellbeing, in August 2021, ADP brought 50 hugely talented young people aged 13 to 19-years-old together to make a brand-new piece of musical theatre in just 10 days.

Nightshade was an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*. The classic love story was re-imagined by professional young playwright Sumah Ebele – returning to Creative Futures where she first discovered her passion for writing drama. *Nightshade* was not only a vibrant and exciting new piece of theatre created by a hugely talented young ensemble, but it was also the first in-house production to be performed on Hackney Empire's legendary stage since the pandemic shut their doors back in March 2020.



ALTER EGO

A CELEBRATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN HACKNEY

"There is great partnership working between Hackney Empire, Hackney Integrated Gangs Unit and the Hackney community. Yamin and his team are working daily to support the community's needs using creative measures including art, music and mentoring as prevention and diversion-intervention strengthened by Hackney Empire's relationships across statutory bodies, community leaders and third sectors not just in Hackney but also neighbouring boroughs." **Mark Barton, Hackney Integrated Gangs Unit**

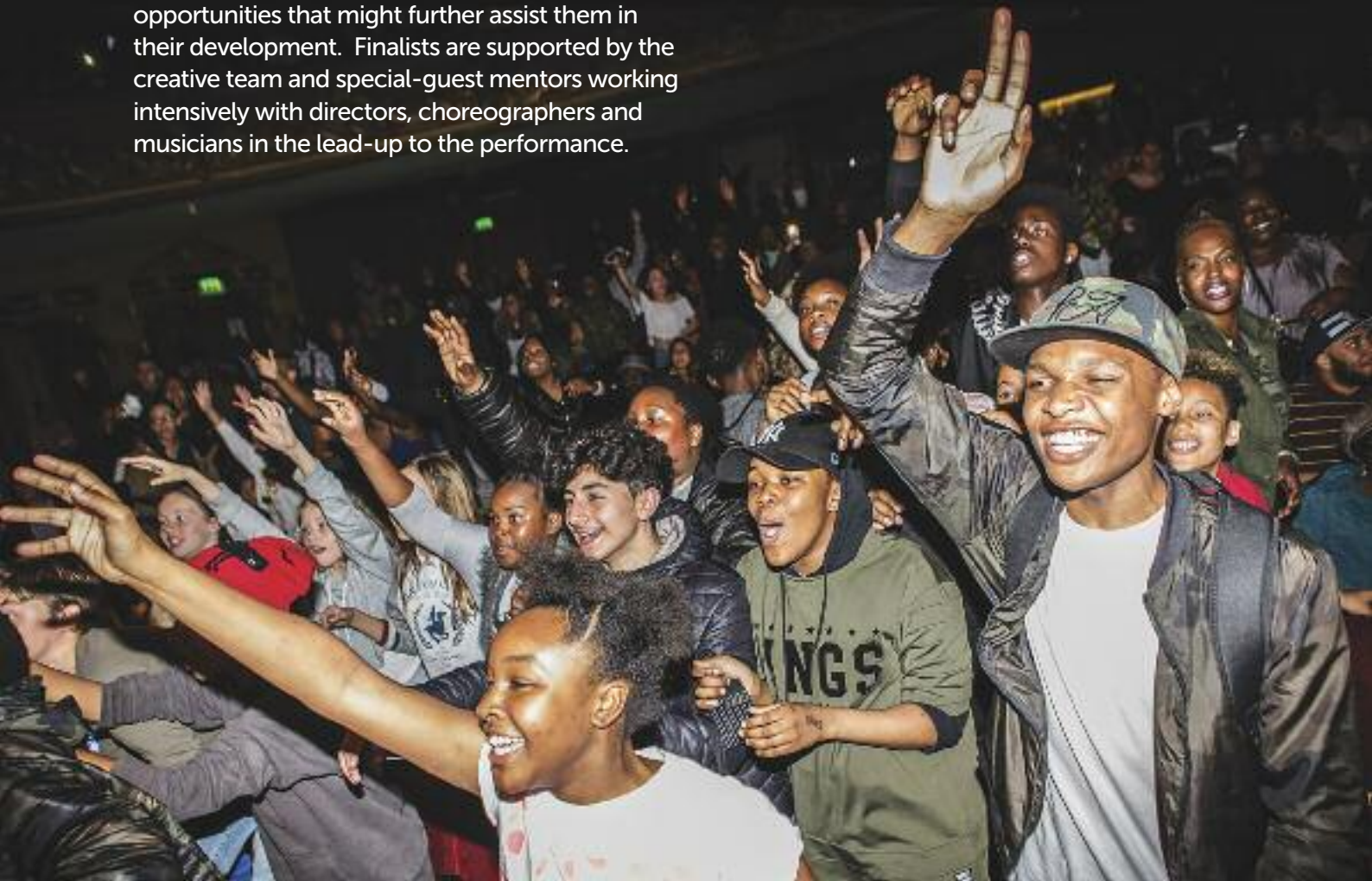
Founded in 2012 Alter Ego was specifically designed to bring together 1,500 young people with high levels of disengagement under one roof at Hackney Empire.

With over 1,300 young people in the audience and 50 young people working behind the scenes in event planning, production management and marketing. Alter Ego features up to over 90 young performers on stage, providing a massive social media presence and celebrating the aspirations and creative talents of young people in Hackney.

Over 150 young artists audition each year in order to make it to the Alter Ego finals; any participants that do not make it past the audition phase of the process are then signposted towards any opportunities that might further assist them in their development. Finalists are supported by the creative team and special-guest mentors working intensively with directors, choreographers and musicians in the lead-up to the performance.

Headline artists are chosen by our Young Producers, in order to ensure that young people from the borough have the opportunity to see the most current and exciting artists at an affordable price, in a safe and accessible environment.

Few organisations programme events like this due to concerns about whether its young audiences will interact with each other safely when under the same roof. However, working in partnership with Hackney Council, and the local integrated Gang's Unit as well as the police, Alter Ego has become a safe, hugely successful event and provided a flagship for the borough engaging with over 15,000 young people.



LIMITLESS

“Limitless encourages our young people to be creative and build their confidence and self-esteem. Some may be extremely shy but then perform in front of a large audience by the end of the week. The program challenges our young people to speak freely, take part in activities they may not have done or been able to access before, socialise with others and make new friends. Feedback from parents/carers is always very positive – they tell us about how much confidence it gives their children. This is an amazing programme that everyone – looks forward to all year.”

Cassandra Delisser, Projects Manager & Safeguarding Officer, Huddleston Centre

For nine years Limitless has brought together 40 young people aged 14 to 25-years-old many of whom, have special educational needs and disabilities of all types including autism, visual and hearing impairments on a five-day intensive creative arts programme in the summer holidays.

Supported by Children in Need, Limitless creates a safe and supportive atmosphere which enables the young people to participate and contribute regardless of ability. Participants from our partners Hackney Shed and the Huddleston Centre work with creative practitioners to explore issues that matter to them which they turn into a new piece of performance designed to enable each participant to perform within their ability and often includes singing, movement and BSL. It's shared with an invited audience of 100 parents, carers and friends.



OUR RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Hackney Empire had to shut its doors for 18 months during the pandemic and lost 100% of all commercial and earned income during that time. From a pre-Covid 19 team of 120, for 12 months Hackney Empire operated on a skeleton team of 12 staff on reduced hours.

Meanwhile we immediately saw a surge in need for safe spaces for our young people and their communities. The closure of schools and support centres was particularly hard on young people.

Despite being shut to the public and facing an uncertain future, Hackney Empire maintained its commitment to young people. We immediately took our work online and continued a core offer to hundreds of young people – many of whom were made more vulnerable or isolated by the pandemic including:

- **Our Patron, Hackney born singer-songwriter Leona Lewis, ran an artist development programme via Zoom – offering a cohort of 30 young people mentoring, training and masterclasses with world-renowned vocal coaches and producers.**

- **Limitless, our annual intensive summer programme for disabled and neurodiverse young people, was reimaged as an outdoor festival.**
- **Regular programmes, including the Writers' Room and Progression Sessions, adapted to meet the needs and safety of young people in a pandemic context using filming and digital as well as in person activity.**
- **We launched a Facilitator Training course, a bespoke personal and professional development scheme for young people whose education, employment or training had stalled because of the pandemic.**



"It's been a huge pleasure and inspiration to work with young people from Hackney Empire's Creative Futures programme – getting involved creatively and helping to amplify the voices of some of our amazing young artists."

Leona Lewis, Hackney Empire Patron

Case Study

Compulsory Subjects: Hackney Empire's response to lockdown and Black Lives Matter

Amid the Covid-19 pandemic, global protests against systemic racism catalysed as a result of the murder of George Floyd at the hands of the police, and statistics showing that young Black, Asian and ethnically diverse communities had increased mortality rates, we had to ask ourselves... How are our young people coping? And what structures and facilities are being implemented to ensure that young people will not be left behind in the wake of universal crisis?

In August 2020, Hackney Empire worked with poet **Hussain Manawer** to launch Compulsory Subjects; a school for a diverse and representative group of 18 to 25-year-olds. This week-long intensive programme featured Q&As, panel discussions and seminars from some of the leading figures and organisations in arts, science and business, exploring everything from art, activism, business, self-employment and entrepreneurship, psychology and sociology. With an additional focus on pastoral support and mental health and wellbeing, the programme was specifically designed as a response to the overwhelming necessity to create live, practical infrastructure for young and emerging artists, creatives and entrepreneurs at a crucial and transitional period in their lives.

With over 200 applications in 48 hours, 11 incredible young people were selected to attend the five-day pilot programme. They experienced a week-long intensive programme of free and accessible development opportunities, designed for the next generation of creative entrepreneurs and arts activists, empowering the next generation of arts and culture leaders.

"It's just been so amazing, this programme built so many bridges and opened so many potential doors. I'm feeling so hopeful. It's the most exceptional thing, it was just a pilot – but this needs to be happening, young creatives need this, it's essential."

Evie

Alumni Profiles

Maresh: Artist, Facilitator, Creative

"It's been life-changing. Hackney Empire has opened doors and made me realise I want to do things I did not really know about before."

Maresh first came to Creative Futures when he was 13 years old, initially joining as a musician. During his 10 years with Creative Futures, he has taken on wider roles including as a peer mentor and paid facilitator on summer programmes as part of his time at university, studying Classics. After graduating, Maresh returned to Creative Futures to take part in the *Writers' Room* programme. As a result, he was recruited to the Royal Court's Young Agitator programme (designed for non-performing theatre creatives) and most recently he has been enrolled to Ark Music's Youth Leadership programme for future music leaders. Currently Maresh is a facilitator for Hackney Shed – a leading inclusive theatre group for young people and one of Hackney Empire's main partners on its Creative Futures programmes.

Chifa: Spoken Word Artist and Activist

Chifa auditioned for *Alter Ego* in 2017. Despite the fact she had only written her first poem four months previously, she performed to a packed audience on Hackney Empire's main stage, and went on to win the competition.

After going on to take part in ADP, Chifa became Resident Artist at the Roundhouse where she used spoken word to explore issues of mental health, gender inequality and female empowerment, specifically to engage young people.

She currently works at the BBC in Learning and Community Engagement.

Renell: Composer and Musician

"Hackney Empire introduced me to a world I never knew existed."

Renell first took part in our *Artistic Development Programme (ADP)* before joining Hackney Harlem an ADP graduate company who created *A Midsummer Night's Madness* – a new piece of musical theatre that toured to the Edinburgh Fringe and Hackney, New York.

Renell has gone on to develop a prolific career as a songwriter, composer, producer and multi-instrumentalist. He has recorded and toured with artists including Orphy Robinson MBE, Rudimental and Jess Glynne. In 2020 he won an Ivor Novello award for *The Vision They Had* a track from his acclaimed album *The Windrush Suite*.

Renell continues to work with Hackney Empire recently as Musical Director on *Alter Ego*.

He is committed to helping young people develop their own musical voice regardless of genre.



Qudsiyah: Doctor

"The impact that the Hackney Empire has had on my life is exponential." "I've achieved things that I never thought I could achieve, musically and in my career path, because of the support and mentorship from Hackney Empire. Hackney Empire still feels like home to me: it is not just a theatre, it is a place of opportunity."

Qudsiyah first attended a one-off musical workshop at Hackney Empire aged 13-years-old. Her talent was immediately obvious, and she was asked to audition for our summer programme, *ADP*. Qudsiyah went on to regularly take part and perform in *ADP* showing incredible talent for piano, guitar and composing her own songs.

She became musical director on Creative Futures' graduate production *Macbeth*. After this, Qudsiyah graduated from medical school and is now a doctor.

Di-Andre: Poet and Law Student

Di-Andre came to Hackney Empire to participate in *Alter Ego* when he was 13. He then took part in *ADP* each summer, broadening and developing his creative skills, ultimately writing for the show and becoming a peer mentor.

Like many other Creative Futures alumni, he then became a professional facilitator on Creative Futures programmes.

Aged 18 he created his own headline show at Platform in Islington – where many of the artists showcased came from Hackney Empire Creative Futures.

He is currently studying Law at university.

Khalif: Dancer and Producer

Khalif joined *ADP* aged 14 as a dancer, but the programme has allowed him to develop much wider skills.

Aged 17 he was selected by the prestigious performing arts college The Juilliard School in New York to take part in a one year programme. In 2021 he came back to Hackney Empire and worked as a dance mentor on *ADP*. This role underlined to him how much he wanted to work in the creative industries as a dancer or creative producer.

Now aged 20, Khalif has set up his own dance school for children in North East London and formed his own dance group.

He continues to be an active member of Hackney Empire's Young Producers and works as an assistant practitioner on Hackney Empire's schools outreach work.

Our Funders, Stakeholders and Supporters

"Hackney Empire is a legendary venue which plays a key role in the cultural, civic and economic life of its community. With an enviable track record in engaging young people from traditionally the most isolated and at-risk communities, Hackney Empire has expertise that we anticipate will be much needed in the days to come. We are all going to need arts and culture to inspire and reconnect us on the other side of this, and we're especially going to need places like Hackney Empire – which are embedded in their communities and able to bring people together." Mayor Philip Glanville, Hackney Council



"Hackney Empire would like to express our sincere gratitude to all our funders and supporters for their shared passion and vital enthusiasm to create change and transformation amongst those who are most in need and often most ignored."

Jo Hemmant, Executive Director, Hackney Empire

We could not do this without support.

Hackney Empire is an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation and a leading provider of youth activity for our local authority Hackney Council.

Creative Futures is generously supported by:



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- **The Churchill Fellowship**
- **The Steel Charitable Yrust**
- **The Friends and Supporters of Hackney Empire**

Conclusion

For 20 years Hackney Empire has worked to positively impact the lives of over 20,000 young people. It has provided a model for arts organisations of how access and inclusion can be achieved. We have engaged with thousands of young people many of whom are from under-represented backgrounds or abilities who may not previously have accessed offers from arts and culture.

Creative Futures has helped young people to build confidence, develop skills and break down barriers to access. It has provided career pathways for emerging artists, directors and producers from under-represented groups, ensuring that some of our most talented and skilled young artists can develop personally and professionally within their own community.

With its people-centred, holistic and flexible approach, Creative Futures has improved the well-being, resilience and independence of its participants. Many have gone on to forge professional careers in the arts and creative industries and in doing Creative Futures has played an important role in addressing the recognised need for artists who are representative of the UK's diverse population to have opportunities to develop their practice.

However the central impact of Creative Futures is that it has provided the skills and foundations for thousands of young people from across Hackney and East London to take charge of their lives and direct them as they choose.



"Participating in Hackney Empire changed my life, it helped me overcome difficulties I faced and channel them into something beautiful and creative." Joy





20 YEARS OF CREATIVE FUTURES

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