

Punishment Acts

Evaluation and Reflection



Molly de Dios Fisher

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	2
Timeline and Structure of the Project.....	3
Methodologies and Gathering Reflections.....	4
Key Reflections.....	5
Process made easy.....	5
Atmosphere.....	8
Relationships.....	11
Ownership of process.....	14
Roles.....	18
Autobiographical material.....	21
Space.....	26
Time.....	27
Performance.....	29
Futures.....	33
Questions Provoked by the Work.....	37
Overall Takeaways.....	37
Appendix.....	39
Checklist for project-planning.....	39

Introduction

Punishment Acts:

“Brought me back to being myself again.” (an Expert Citizen)

“Got people to ask questions and understand how broken the Criminal Justice System is.” (an Expert Citizen)

“Was an opportunity to reflect on journeys outside of a more traditional mental health space.” (member of Expert Citizen staff)

“Has given me a purpose in life.” (an Expert Citizen)

“I’ve laughed so much everyday and I am happy and excited for another day.” (an Expert Citizen)

Punishment Acts was a co-created participatory theatre project with people with lived experience of multiple disadvantage including prison. Rideout and Expert Citizens worked together to devise a play through a series of drama workshops which used Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* as source material. The play was performed by a mixed cast of professional and non-professional actors and showed three inmates discussing the ideas of Foucault as different scenes would explore these ideas through tales of retribution, reparation and redemption. The scenes and characters were devised by the expert citizens together with Rideout facilitators and included two brothers facing deportation to Australia for poaching in the 18th century; someone caught between the bureaucracies of modern-day hostels and probation services; a redemption story of a notorious bank robber; and a drunk driver meeting with the mother of a child he had killed through a restorative justice programme. There was shadow puppetry, physical theatre and a musical ballad. The play asked audiences to reflect on their beliefs about punishment and consider whether there are other ways to achieve 'justice'. A filmed recording of the show is available upon request.¹

¹ Email admin@rideout.org.uk for further details.

Rideout (Creative Arts for Rehabilitation) was established in 1999 and uses innovative, arts-based approaches to work inside and out of prisons with people who have lived experience of the Criminal Justice System. *Punishment Acts* is the final in a series of projects that are part of Dr Sarah Bartley's *Staging Justice* programme, celebrating 25 years of Rideout's work within and about prison. *Staging Justice* is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. *Punishment Acts* received additional funding from Arts Council England.

Expert Citizens is “a Community Interest company led by people with lived experience of homelessness, mental ill-health, addiction, domestic abuse, poverty or histories of offending behaviour”².

This report focuses specifically on evaluating the impact of this project on the members of Expert Citizens that took part.

Timeline and Structure of the Project

- Before Expert Citizens became involved in the project, Rideout put an initial team together that researched Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, and developed initial ideas around themes, framing devices and set design for the final performance.
- Expert Citizen's involvement in *Punishment Acts* took place over four months from January to April 2025.
- In December 2024, and then again in early January 2025, Rideout's Artistic Director attended Expert Citizen's weekly Friday coffee morning to tell people about the project and invite them along.
- From 8 January to 12 March there were 10 two-hours workshops that took place every Wednesday 10-12pm at the Dudson Centre, Hanley, where Expert Citizens is based. Three facilitators from Rideout attended these workshops along with one or two members of staff from Expert Citizens and members of Expert

² <https://expertcitizens.org.uk/>

Citizens. Rideout introduced drama games and activities to these workshops alongside themes and ideas that had emerged from the initial research stage of the project to introduce and explore Foucault's ideas in an accessible way. There was tea, coffee and biscuits at each workshop.

- There was an intensive rehearsal and development period from 18 March to 8 April. The rehearsals took place at B Arts, the Arts Centre in Stoke where Rideout is based and where the final performance was due to take place. Rehearsals ran from 10am to 5pm with a fresh-cooked lunch in the cafe that is based at B Arts, Bread in Common, at 1pm. Given it was a long day, it was suggested that the Expert Citizens attended from 1–5pm at the start of the rehearsal period.
- The show ran from 9–17 April at B Arts with seven performances in total.
- On 23 April, following the performance, there was debrief with the Expert Citizens at the Dudson Centre. This was attended by two Rideout facilitators, one of the professional actors who took part in the project, two Expert Citizens staff members and the Expert Citizens. This was a space to reflect on the experience of the project. Rideout suggested a series of further projects and workshops that the Expert Citizens could get involved with.
- A screening of performance is due to take place with all cast and crew on a date in the near future when all Expert Citizens are available.

Methodologies and Gathering Reflections

To understand the experience of the Expert Citizens and the impact of the project it was important to have a broad range of approaches and collate information from across the duration of the project. To that end, reflection and learning that is shared in this report was gathered through:

- Attending a day of R&D on 18 February.
- Workshop observations on 19 February and 12 March.

- A focus group at Dudson Centre with Expert Citizens members, Expert Citizens staff and Rideout facilitators on 12 March. The focus group used pictures as a stimulus to answer the following questions:
 - What drew you to the project?
 - What kept you coming?
 - What was it like to use theatre to talk about the Criminal Justice System?
 - How do you feel about the next stage of the project?
- Devising and rehearsal observations on 21 March and 4 April.
- A group reflection towards the end of the project on 15 April with the following activities:
 - In a circle the cast answered the question: “If you were an animal at the start and end of the project what would you be?”
 - A free-writing/drawing with the stimulus “This project to me...”.
- One to one interviews with Expert Citizens on 15 April.
- Watching *Punishment Acts* with a post-show Q&A on 15 April.
- An interview with two staff members from Expert Citizens on 29 April.
- Audience feedback.
- Gathering and reflecting on relevant documentation from the project.

Key themes have been identified and articulated in this report through quotes, observations and images with the aim of documenting, reflecting on and learning from the experience of the Expert Citizens.

Key Reflections

Process made easy

In an initial funding application to Arts Council England, Rideout acknowledged that the Expert Citizens may face challenges that could impact their involvement in *Punishment Acts*:

“By definition, the participants of our drama workshops are people who have faced, and continue to face, many difficulties in their lives. The types of difficulty, and the reasons for those difficulties, will vary from person to person. These may impact on their ability to commit to the project, whether in Strand 2 during the workshops and/or in Strand 3 during the rehearsals and performances.” (Rideout funding proposal)

In acknowledging possible challenges, Rideout gave careful consideration to what practical support should be in place and this was factored into the budget of the project. This included covering transport costs throughout the project; providing tea, biscuits and coffee; ensuring there was a cooked lunch or evening meal throughout the rehearsal and performance process; giving Expert Citizens vouchers to the value of £25/day for each day of the rehearsal and performance period.



A selfie of a typical lunch time for the Punishment Acts cast and crew in the Bread in Common cafe at B Arts.

Not only did this practical support serve as the bread and butter to a day's work, but it kept morale high.

“They really enjoyed the food down there, the food has always been a bit of a conversation piece back at the office. They were really blown away by the food.”
(member of Expert Citizens staff)

“If you can feed people, people don’t have to worry about where they’re going to get food from.” *(member of Expert Citizens staff)*

Towards the end of the project one Expert Citizen was complimented on a smart new outfit which they had bought with the vouchers.

Rideout provided clear instructions and support for the Expert Citizens so that they would understand each stage of the project, including concise information sheets which were distributed in each session with copies also provided to key workers.

Rideout ensured taxis were booked for members to attend and leave the rehearsals and performances safely, and liaised with Expert Citizens staff, key workers and hostels over transport logistics if an Expert Citizen had not attended without notice.

Rideout had only anticipated a maximum of three Expert Citizens participating in the project through to the final performance. However, of the four Expert Citizens that consistently took part in the initial workshops, all of them saw the project through until the end. This is despite the fact that several Expert Citizens were facing significant personal challenges at the time of the project relating to housing and rehabilitation that could have made participation in the project impossible.

“They were all going through their own stuff while this was going on [...] any one of them could have fallen off.” *(member of Expert Citizens staff)*

When interviewed, the only challenge identified by the Expert Citizens was in relation to remembering lines and thinking quickly during improvisation. It is clear that the steps

Rideout took to remove barriers to participation contributed to the overall success of the project and the positive experience of taking part.

Key takeaway:

- If basic needs are met through the duration of the project it can remove barriers to participation and enable sustained involvement.
- To ensure practical support is in place it is important to plan the project around the needs of the participant group and ensure any costs are factored into the budget of a project.
- Funders should identify and prioritise organisations that are giving proper consideration to how best to meet the needs of participants in a project and ensure the appropriate funds are allocated.
- It is worth considering not only how needs can be met, but what participants may want or enjoy, for example providing a healthy hot meal that is shared, or considering what vouchers participants would appreciate.
- Providing clear information in different formats can help participants have a clear understanding of each step of the project so that they can feel prepared.

Atmosphere

What is abundantly clear from reviewing the material collated for this report, is that an atmosphere of fun, acceptance and care was fostered, and the Expert Citizens kept going to the sessions because they wanted to be there:

“I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t fun.” (an Expert Citizen)

“That’s why it’s been so nice because the whole atmosphere has been relaxed and it’s never felt like it’s been pressure even though we have done it in such a short amount of time.” (an Expert Citizen)

“I’ve kept coming cause I enjoy it.” (an Expert Citizen)

“I’ve laughed so much everyday and I am happy and excited for another day.” (an Expert Citizen)

“I have laughed more than I can remember.” (a Rideout facilitator)



Selfie of cast members backstage.

Rideout was aware from the outset that it may be difficult for the Expert Citizens to sustain involvement, so rather than exerting pressure to attend, Rideout built in scope for fluctuating involvement to the project:

“To mitigate against the risk of low engagement from people with lived experience we will ensure we work carefully and closely with the co-ordinators of both groups. In particular, we will adopt workshop strategies that allow for people to be able to drop in and out of sessions without compromising the quality of the

work or the experience of people that attend more regularly.” (Rideout funding application)

In interviews with both the Expert Citizens and the Expert Citizens staff members it became apparent that being reprimanded for lateness or non-attendance has been an obstacle and deterrent to involvement in the past. Rideout was mindful not to replicate negative experiences that Expert Citizens may have had in institutional settings, and removing pressure and fostering a positive, trusting and accepting environment were key to the success of the project and the positive experience of the Expert Citizens:

“Those two days I had off when I wasn’t well he completely understood. I thought he was going to sack me. I expected to be kicked out for that.” (an Expert Citizen)

“They must have felt comfortable to be able to do that (come back), they must have felt safe.” (member of Expert Citizens staff)

“I think it was good because there was no expectation that they had to be in it. Useful that people didn’t feel pressured.” (an Expert Citizen)

“I recommend Saul as a manager. He is fair, doesn’t overwork you, doesn’t bother you, lets you do whatever you want within reason.” (an Expert Citizen)

There were small but significant gestures that highlighted this culture of care. The meals were mainly vegetarian, and it was noticed that one of the participants would regularly go to the shop to supplement the meal with some meat. From then on there were options for both meat eaters and vegetarians. The night before a performance when an Expert Citizen was falling ill, they were packed off home with lemon and honey:

“Loved eating together like family and caring and sharing.” (an Expert Citizen)

Key takeaway:

- People will keep coming to a project when they’re having fun and want to be there.

- Planning for fluctuating attendance not only allowed the project to progress if people dropped out of the project, but took the pressure off participants and made the Expert Citizens feel they could come back.

Relationships

Positive, trusting and reciprocal relationships were built between the collaborating organisations and everyone involved, which was clearly fundamental to the enjoyment and success of the project.

Rideout and Expert Citizens had worked together previously on the project *In Plain Sight* which was also performed at B Arts. The values of both organisations clearly aligned, and there was a trust that had been built through a previous experience of working together. It is clear that Rideout was able to gain trust and legitimacy in the group, because they were brought into the space by Expert Citizens:

“There was a lot of relationship building that needed to be done between Saul, and Emily and Sarah and the guys. I felt we had broken that in a bit until that was built, and then when it was built it felt natural.” (member of Expert Citizen staff)

“There was a bit of handover at some point. We were there mainly to support them, but there was a point where we handed over to Saul and they became primary support.” (member of Expert Citizen staff)

“I was tentative at first [...] and for a couple of weeks we gate kept numbers [...] but then after a couple of weeks thought maybe it wouldn’t do any harm for Saul to speak directly to accommodation providers.” (member of Expert Citizen staff)

“It was nice to see the bond that was built.” (member of Expert Citizen staff)

It was clear throughout the projects that one of the elements that the Expert Citizens most enjoyed and valued were the relationships that were built. When asked in the first focus group what drew people to the project, one Expert Citizen said, “everyone coming together”. When asked how they were feeling about the next stage of the project, they chose a card that showed, “People coming together and enjoying [their] time and giving

a show that people want to watch". During a check-out on the last day of the workshops, when asked what people had most enjoyed so far, one of the Expert Citizens who had appeared shy and less involved at first said "the company". It is clear that the positive relationships and sincere enjoyment of the company was one of the central reasons why several Expert Citizens wanted to stay involved.

There was a lot of laughter during the rehearsal process and one Expert Citizen described really enjoying "the banter" amongst the cast:

"One of the best things is meeting everybody." (an Expert Citizen)

"Saul, Sarah and Emily developed trust with them or else they wouldn't have done it." (member of Expert Citizens staff)

"The support you have in the group, it's a good little group, I hope we keep in touch." (member of Expert Citizens staff)

It is clear that it was not just the Expert Citizens who got a lot from the relationships. There was a real sense of reciprocity and mutual appreciation in the project:

"We all seem to get on. We all have a good laugh before the show and we have to be serious in the show and it's a job not to laugh sometimes." (an Expert Citizen)

"I feel so proud of what everybody has achieved and I am so in awe of everyone." (a Rideout facilitator)

"It's been fun and I'm going to miss coming to this place and meeting everyone." (an Expert Citizen)

"The project for me has been one of the best projects I've ever worked on." (a Rideout facilitator)

Building strong and trusting relationships over several months meant that the Expert Citizens enjoyed the project, kept coming and felt emboldened to try new things:

“They were working so long together – by the time they get to the end doing things they wouldn’t have done before.” (member of Expert Citizens staff)



Whole cast photo with the set designer, stage manager and technician.

On my final day in Stoke I left a room full of the cast dancing, smiling, laughing and gearing themselves up to the final performance – the energy was electric.

Key takeaway:

- Projects can benefit from building on successful past collaborations between organisations.
- Building trusting relationships between organisations serves as a bridge to build trust between individuals.

- For authentic relationships and trust to be built, it needs to be two-way.
- Trusting relationships embolden people to try new things.

Ownership of process

Punishment Act was a co-created play developed from Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* with and by the Expert Citizens and would not have been possible but for the creative input, time and sharing of lived experience:

“It was their play. It wasn’t just ‘come along and do this with us’, it was their play. It’s not there without them.” (member of Expert Citizens staff)

“It genuinely feels co-created and all cast members have a real ownership of their parts in the play.” (a Rideout facilitator)

Rideouts method of working meant that the play was born from the seeds of Foucault's ideas and grew into a play of the cast's creation. It was interesting to observe how small interactions and nascent ideas developed into the final performance. For example, a conversation about favourite biscuits in a workshop became a running theme in the play between the inmates; a very funny improvised scene about two brothers developed into two of the opening scenes and a ballad; a good line someone said in one of the workshops was taken up by a character in the play: “If you do what you’ve always done, you’ll get what you’ve always got”. The Rideout facilitators were able to introduce stimulus to aid the creation of material, embrace and build on the ideas that emerged, and then help weave everything into a coherent play. This was reflected by an Expert Citizen at the focus group on 12 March when they chose the following picture to describe how they were feeling about the next stage of the project:



“Tree blossoming, because I feel like that’s what the project’s doing, it’s growing isn’t it?”
(an Expert Citizen)

The Expert Citizens clearly got a lot of enjoyment and satisfaction through this process of devising and collectively developing the final show:

“My favourite part was seeing it all come from nothing.” (an Expert Citizen)

“Doing my own part has been my favourite part.” (an Expert Citizen)

“I think if I was working with lines and not having a free-flowing character I would struggle. I don’t think I would have put as much into it.” (an Expert Citizen)

“It was a lot easier than doing it on a script. I enjoyed the process more.” (an Expert Citizen)

“They had ownership, their characters. It started small and it was just fun activities and built so slowly that by the time it gets to the end they’re so invested in it because they want to be part of it because it’s their character they created and it’s their line and they added that line to the song. It was their play.” (member of Expert Citizens staff)

As well as the creation of characters and plot, Expert Citizens discussed the purpose of the play and the impact the group wanted it to have for the audience. At the rehearsal I

attended on 4 April the cast were asked “How do you want the audience to feel when they see the show?” and “What do we want the audience to take away?”. The group said they wanted audiences to feel thoughtful, empathetic, impressed, concerned, entertained, shocked and to leave with a better understanding and asking more questions about how the Criminal Justice System worked. In interviews with the Expert Citizens they expressed satisfaction that they had achieved their aims:

“Reading the reviews we’ve hit it on the head, people are asking those questions.” (an Expert Citizen)

“These are all things we said we wanted to get across.” (an Expert Citizen)

Finally, it is interesting to observe how the structure and progression of the project meant that the Expert Citizens were centred and felt ownership over the work. In the group reflection carried out at the end of the project one of the Expert Citizens drew a picture showing that the project began with the Expert Citizens and more people joined as the project developed.



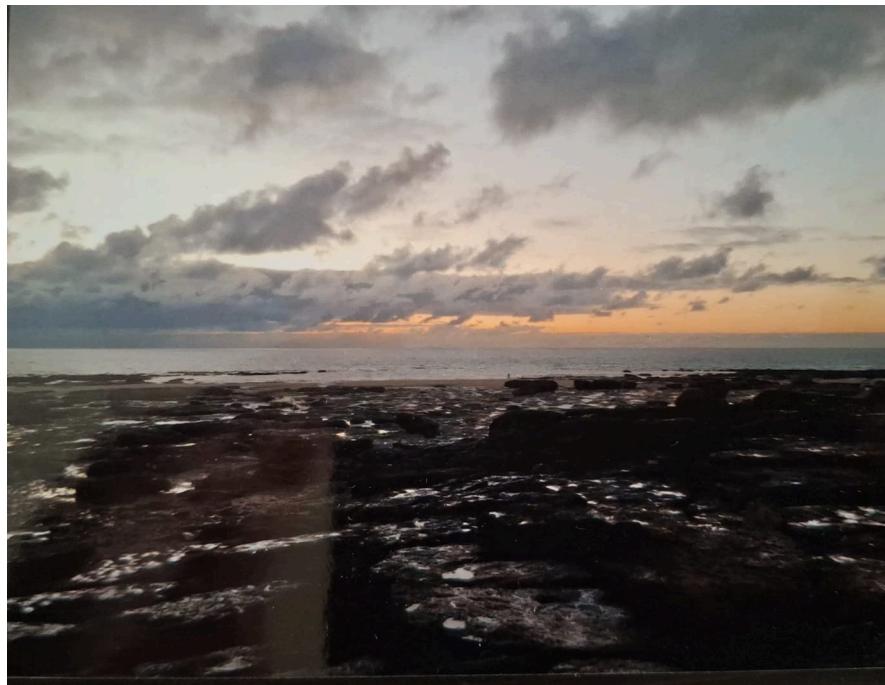
“There was me, then there was me, a, and b, then there was me A, B and C. Then D came along and then you E...” (an Expert Citizen)

There are 39 people listed in the programme as being involved in the production of the show, but the people visible and present as a group from the beginning of the workshops in January to the final show were the Expert Citizens and the Rideout facilitators:

“There were constant introductions of people and they did really well, they didn’t seem to be intimidated by professional actors.” (member of Expert Citizens staff)

The Expert Citizens were the initial creators and actors in the show, and it felt as if they were welcoming the professional actors and grew into their space and project. This may have also contributed to a sense of ownership.

It seems there is real value in creating spaces where people have agency, authorship and can use creativity to explore ideas and grow. This was captured in the first focus group when asked what kept people coming and one Expert Citizen chose the photo below in response to the question “What kept you coming?”:



“Mine is really about freedom and adventure because that’s what this project is to me because I’ve never done it before. I have to explore the unknown.” (an Expert Citizen)

Key takeaway:

- Devising work gives participants an opportunity to create the play and feel a sense of ownership.
- Devising may be more engaging and accessible than script work.
- Centering and planning a project around core participants can enable a sense of ownership.

Roles

Punishment Acts was a professional and relatively large-scale production with a range of arts professionals involved. As well as the cast made up of professional and non-professionals, there were lighting and sound technicians, set designers, a dramaturg, costume designers and more. The set-designer worked on part of the set with the group *Men Who Make Things*, a “weekly creative making and well-being space for men”³ based at B Arts. This show was very much a community-based professional arts production. Working with professional artists was key to the quality and scale of the overall production and the Expert Citizens were able to participate in that process and work at different points with the various people who played a role in bringing the show to life.

“It’s a lot bigger than I thought it was going to be.” (an Expert Citizen)

In a funding climate where lived experience is increasingly sought, there is a risk or tendency for people with lived experience to be siloed, fetishised, used tokenistically or to have their experiences extracted. *Punishment Acts*, however, highlights the opportunity to create large scale productions where people with lived experience are valued for their knowledge and insight and involved as part of an overall project.

As highlighted by one of the cast members, there were also clear roles and expertise within the cast – there were professional actors, people with experience doing theatre in Criminal Justice settings, a specialist in restorative justice, people with lived experience

³ <https://www.b-arts.org.uk/whats-on>

and a researcher. Rideout was clearly intentional as to the team they drew together to participate in the project, it did not feel like a cast of “them and us” divided into the Expert Citizens and the rest of the cast. It felt like one cast where everybody brought important skills to the table.

In addition to the experience that everyone contributed in the cast, there were a variety of different roles to perform in the play and different cast members took up singing, puppetry, and supporting roles as well as performing the characters that they had created. The show very much benefited from the different mediums used, and there was something for everyone to try and excel at.



Cast members performing the ballad of Jack Daggs.



A snapshot of the puppeteers in action.

The role of the peer mentor at Expert Citizens was also key. At Expert Citizens, members with lived experience have the opportunity to become peer mentors and support other members of the group. This peer mentor had no previous acting experience beyond school drama, but it was their leadership and participation which supported the involvement of others in the project:

“I was drawn to the project to get the guys and get the numbers up.” (Expert Citizen peer mentor)

“I think seeing him do it and seeing us do it opened the door a bit. If there has been a lot of resistance in the group it would have hampered it. But because he’s doing it ‘If he can do it I can do it’. Leading by example isn’t it.” (member of Expert Citizens staff)

The peer mentor was a constant presence throughout the project and being more familiar with the rest of the Expert Citizens was able to spot challenges and offer support. One example was noticing that another Expert Citizen felt a bit anxious about catching a taxi home late alone and they offered to go with them:

“Just having someone there who had been through the mill, been through the services themselves and was able to recognise maybe some difficulties the individuals were facing in their lives [...] they’re a really good bridge.” (member of Expert Citizens staff)

The peer mentor also felt rewarded in “seeing the guys and how they have built in confidence”.

Key takeaway:

- Involving and centering community members in a professional production gives people the opportunity to participate in a high-quality production and learn about the different trades in theatre.
- Recognising, valuing and harnessing different people’s skills, interests and experience contributes to the success of a project.
- Peer mentors play a vital role in recruiting, engaging and supporting people through a project.
- Having a variety of different roles to try gives people the opportunity to learn and find new interests.

Autobiographical material

Key to the success of the co-creation was the Expert Citizens lived experience and how this informed the characters and plots they created:

“Because they’re stories I’m used to and heard.” (an Expert Citizen)

“This character came from my worst nightmare so I put a lot into that character.”
(an Expert Citizen)

Using Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* as source material was remarkably successful, arguably because of its relevance. Foucault's work is academic and complex for most people to understand – some of the professional actors later confessed they had not read the text and did not have a clue what Foucault was talking about, and the researcher involved in the project highlighted that their university students often struggle with Foucault. Rideout, however, successfully introduced Foucault's ideas through the initial workshops in ways that were accessible, for example, by introducing lists of key words. It is also true that the material clearly resonated with the Expert Citizens and they had experiences that made them well equipped to understand the text.

“I find the stories and what Foucault has done to be really interesting. I like how Foucault goes into great detail about the Criminal Justice System. He highlights key issues even though his work is from way back.” (an Expert Citizen)

“I found it interesting and gives me awareness about the old days and today. The old days' punishments were very different.” (an Expert Citizen)

For some Expert Citizens who attended the initial workshops, looking at the theme of punishment was challenging and they chose not to continue with the project:

“A few people came along and it just wasn’t for them. The content was a bit triggering, maybe a bit early in their recovery journey.” (member of Expert Citizens staff)

It seems there was real respect and understanding from both Rideout and staff at Expert Citizens that for some looking at themes of punishment may not be appropriate. There was no pressure on people to come back and there were members of staff from Expert Citizens in the room who could identify anyone who found the material challenging and offer support after the sessions.

However, for others the experience was cathartic, an opportunity to express frustrations that had been ignored and helped them process tough memories at a distance:

“Brought up memories, helped because you can act them out, deflects all the memories.” (an Expert Citizen)

“They had always been very quiet and to then see them coming more and more out of their shell and to be interacting and coming up with great ideas and pushing the direction of the story and adding to the character. You can see that they hadn't really had the opportunity to do that, and it seemed to be a really good platform for them to be creative and also get their points across in terms of their experiences.” (member of Expert Citizens staff)

“The character they developed was a reflection of themselves. A guy coming good and creating a decent, honest life for themselves.” (member of Expert Citizens staff)

“The character they came up with embodied the frustrations they've experienced.” (member of Expert Citizens staff)



A scene of young people at Sparkout Gym in a story of redemption.

Using theatre also provided an outlet for some of the Expert Citizens that they had not necessarily found in more traditional mental health settings:

“It was an opportunity to reflect on their journey outside of a more traditional mental health space. (member of Expert Citizens staff)

“It’s a therapeutic cathartic process they were going through as well.” (member of Expert Citizens staff)

“It’s one of the benefits of art isn’t it – you can express things in drama that maybe you wouldn’t want to explore internally. When it’s about you it’s very difficult to process but if you transpose it onto a character and then process it through that character it becomes quite cathartic.” (member of Expert Citizens staff)

It is clear that the Expert Citizens’ generosity in sharing their experiences to create the characters and scenes contributed strongly to the overall quality and authenticity of the final performance.

“The final scene bringing the victim and criminal together was so, so, so good.” (an audience member)

“I thought performances were more authentic from the guys. Rawness and intensity from someone who is talking about something they actually lived through.” (member of Expert Citizens staff)



A story of restorative justice.

On the day I went to see the performance an audience member approached one of the Expert Citizens to say thank you and to express how angry they felt at the hostel worker and probation officer when seeing the performance. The scenes and performances clearly elicited visceral reactions from the audience that made them leave *Punishment Acts* asking questions about our Criminal Justice System.

Key takeaway:

- People with lived experience are experts on their topic and can tell stories that are more authentic and honest.
- Some people will find theatre a useful way to explore, process and understand past experience, whilst others will find it triggering. It is important to create a space where people feel able to step out of any activity, workshop or project.

- Theatre can be a cathartic space to process tough memories and support people in their recovery journeys.

Space

The use of space in the project may also have contributed to a sense of ownership and allowed the Expert Citizens to feel comfortable in their environment throughout the project.

The initial workshops were carried out in the Dudson Centre, where Expert Citizens is based. The Expert Citizens knew the building, so there were no initial barriers to participation in terms of travelling somewhere new or feeling uncomfortable entering a new space. There was tea, coffee and biscuits available in the space.

The rehearsals and performance took place at B Arts where Rideout is based. B Arts is an arts organisation in Stoke-on-Trent that has existed since 1985. They are one of the country's longest running community arts organisations. They are currently based in a former tyre factory in the town of Stoke that has a number of different spaces including offices, a meeting/rehearsal space, a workshop, a large performance space and a café. The vision of B Arts is, “to produce high quality arts experiences with people from many different backgrounds who would not normally engage with the arts”. It is interesting to note that the values of Rideout, Expert Citizens and B Arts closely align and this was likely key in the successful collaboration across the organisations.

The rehearsals took place on the top floor of B Arts where Rideout has its office. There are sofas and a kitchen where people can make themselves a brew. It is a relaxed space and easy to feel at home.

Every lunchtime the cast and crew would go downstairs and eat together in the community kitchen at long tables:

“Very communal, got to engage, ask to pass the bread, added a level of comradery.” (member of Expert Citizens staff)

The performance took place in the performance area with a specifically designed set, lighting and sound. Expert Citizens saw the space grow into their set over the course of the rehearsal period.

Key takeaway:

- Travelling to a space familiar to participants may help participants feel comfortable at the start of a project.
- Creative learning departments in professional theatres, that increasingly seek to showcase lived experience, could draw lessons from B Arts and Rideout to create a welcoming space and introduce the cast to the set.

Time

The project duration and set-up was well thought out. The initial workshops were two-hour sessions with games, conversations and improvisations. This was a gentle introduction to the project that allowed the Expert Citizens to get a flavour of the project and build relationships with each other and the Rideout team:

“Everyone that took part got something out of the workshops as well as contributing to the overall content.” (member of Expert Citizens staff)

“During that workshop period people gelled as people alongside people and everyone became comfortable with each other.” (member of Expert Citizens staff)

“It was all fun and games at the Dudson Centre.” (an Expert Citizen)

The rehearsal period was a lot more intensive with rehearsal going from 10am to 5pm five days a week. At the beginning of the rehearsal period it was suggested that the Expert Citizens arrived for lunch to make the day more manageable:

“We will be rehearsing from 10am to 5pm each day during the first three weeks. This changes once we get closer to the show [...] For you we suggest you arrive

for lunch around 1pm and then we will all work together in the afternoons finishing at 5pm.” (Rideout info sheet)

Despite suggesting a later arrival time, it seems that the Expert Citizens would often come early because they wanted to be there. It was noticeable that one Expert Citizen who would arrive late to workshops in the early stages became one of the most punctual members of the team during rehearsals:

“They would come here every morning from the hostel because it was quiet and they just wanted to stay clean and focussed. They would stay here for four or five hours just to be able to go to B Arts. So that completely changed from the person who you never knew if they would turn up or they would just be in and out, come in half asleep lying down on the couch and then go. A completely different degree of focus they developed in those ten weeks.” (member of Expert Citizens staff)

Rideout is aware that it does one-off projects and is mindful of how people may feel as these projects draw to a close. It seems, however, that the intensity of the final period that culminated in a final performance meant there was a natural end point:

“It’s been not too strenuous, but taken up quite a lot of time but that time’s been well spent.” (an Expert Citizen)

“I think they miss it, but because it was so intense they’re kind of glad to have a break now. It had a natural end point. It wasn’t like we stopped it, it’s like it worked up to something, they did it and it’s kind of done, so now it’s like ‘what next?’ It doesn’t feel like we’ve taken it off them, it doesn’t feel like falling off the edge of a cliff.” (member of Expert Citizen staff)

Rideout has taken steps to stay in touch and ensure the Expert Citizens have the opportunity to get involved in more projects following *Punishment Act*:

“We did a really good handover last week with Emily, Saul and Bharti who came into the office, and we celebrated the guys and it was like a kind of debriefing, and they handed over a couple of projects that the guys might be interested in

over the next couple of months. Wonder Women allotment projects based near B Arts, and another one is a project that B Arts is doing around Molly Leigh.” (member of Expert Citizens staff)

“Saul and the rest of the team gave more options for them to be involved in which is good, I really appreciate that they’ve done that because obviously they’ve thought of them as human beings and thought of what they can do beyond the project and that’s been useful to us and to them.” (member of Expert Citizens staff)

It is clear that both Expert Citizens and members of the staff appreciated the thought and care of offering other projects they might be interested in and staying in touch.

Key takeaway:

- Carrying out a project over a longer period of time allows for relationships to develop and can have a greater overall impact for those involved.
- Pacing the project gently at first is beneficial to engagement.
- When doing a one-off project, it is worth considering how to support participants when the project comes to a close.
- Having connections with a local community and Arts Centre offers participants further opportunities for involvement beyond the end of a project.

Performance

“When you’ve put the hard work into it and you get a five-star rating you know it’s a good show.” (an Expert Citizen)

The final performance was a resounding success with sell-out audiences, [BBC media coverage](#), [five-star reviews](#) and outstanding audience feedback⁴. This success is

⁴ Audiences were invited to complete feedback cards at the end of the performance. A total of 210 cards were received.

reflected back first by audience feedback followed by Expert Citizen quotes, which strongly reflect the experience of the final performance.

Audiences were clearly impressed, moved, entertained and left thinking about the Criminal Justice system:

“One of the most outstanding shows I have seen for a long time. Our system of justice too often fails, not least because we seldom ask why a crime was committed. We see victims and perpetrators – too often, both are victims.”
(audience member)

“I absolutely loved the show. I wasn't sure what to expect, but I came away with an entirely new perspective on our justice system and punishment as a whole.”
(audience member)

“It could not have been expressed any better what individuals are faced within the loop of the system – in, out, in, out. Receiving prejudice for what they have done and not what they can become with the right support.” (audience member)

“Thank you. The show was thought-provoking and challenging. I cried and laughed and have been left with a lot to think about.” (audience member)

“More compassion, empathy and healing. The show is amazing. Please do more. The opportunity it has provided for Expert Citizens members is mind-blowing.”
(audience member)

Everything the Expert Citizens and cast said they wanted to achieve with the show, was achieved and the Expert Citizens were left with a huge sense of pride:

“After the first show I walked off the stage and I had this amazing sense of pride for the guys and I got halfway up the stairs and I thought I am proud of myself for doing this as well.” (an Expert Citizen)

“I was proud that I was in it and I was proud that I met people like Bharti and other people like that, and I'm proud how the show's gone.” (an Expert Citizen)

“Felt excited and good, proud of myself.” (an Expert Citizen)

“I love what we have made and it’s emotional and interesting.” (an Expert Citizen)

“Felt great, because they loved it.” (an Expert Citizen)

“Obviously people were saying it was dead good afterwards.” (an Expert Citizen)

In addition to the pride of creating a high-quality performance that was well received, the Expert Citizens were given a platform to express experiences and injustices that are often judged or poorly understood. The audience bore witness, listened, and the Expert Citizens experiences were validated. This was particularly notable in a scene of an individual who was caught between hostel staff and probation staff:

“What it raises in their bit is that if you raise a concern it’s seen as bad behaviour and you’re penalised for it. You’re put into a system that actively prevents you from giving feedback, and this you’re given literally a stage and a quiet audience to get it all out.” (member of Expert Citizens staff)

“It’s that validation. You’ve had these frustrations all these years, you’ve had these experiences and people are telling you it’s you and not the system. And then all of a sudden you turn back and people going, ‘actually no, you were right, it is the system that’s the problem, it’s not you. And that’s massive to be vindicated.” (member of Expert Citizens staff)

“The system doesn’t work for those who use it. I feel they’ve tried to get those messages out for a long time and it’s always fallen on deaf ears. I think it was an opportunity for them to get those messages out. It gave them an audience.”
(member of Expert Citizens staff)

“One of the best things out of all of it, a lot of the feedback saying, even academics, education can’t get this across to people, but by putting it in a play it’s not all teaching and learning it but getting it sinking in and thinking about it more.”
(an Expert Citizen)

There was also an overwhelmingly positive two-way impact on friends, family and acquaintances of the Expert Citizens coming to see the show:

“Felt great that I knew my people were coming to see me, made me feel more motivated. They loved it, said it was dead good.” (an Expert Citizen)

“Key workers loved it, said it was brilliant and they were proud of me. Felt good. Changed relationship with key workers, made it stronger.” (an Expert Citizen)

“There’s value in the show itself around people that came to see the show. Family members, support workers came. It’s an opportunity to say ‘Look what I can do. I am not just the person you’ve been supporting the past few years I’m not just a chore and look what skills I’ve developed. It’s their opportunity to show that.’” (member of Expert Citizen staff)

“The members enjoyed seeing the guys. Now they know what it’s like it’s sparked their curiosity, they’ve seen how well it’s gone and seen how well it’s been received they want to be involved... It might have been too ‘acting, that’s not for me’, but now they’ve seen others do it they will certainly be interested if they do another one.” (member of Expert Citizen staff)

“Feel like I could write an essay. Thank you for taking care of them. This is the first thing that has supported them as an individual and us as a family. There are limited opportunities for kids that struggle at school and in life if they are not sporty. I cannot begin to explain how much respite this has given their father. We really enjoyed the show. Tears, laughter and proud moments. Thank you.” (an Expert Citizen’s relation)

It is clear that the quality and reception of the final performance was key in the Expert Citizens' overall positive experience of the project. The audience feedback shows that the work had real value, both by conveying strong messages and emotions to members of the public and positively impacting personal relationships between Expert Citizens and their loved ones.

Key takeaway:

- It is important to ensure arts projects are properly funded to be able to create high-quality art with community members.
- Creating a final performance gives participants an opportunity to showcase their creativity and skills, and have an audience to validate and bear witness to experiences that are often misunderstood.
- Showcasing a performance can have a significant two way impact on personal relationships and serve to strengthen.
- Performances born from lived experience can create a big impact on audiences.

Futures

At the end of the project the cast was asked to choose an animal that represented them at the start of the project and another that represented them at the end of the project. This is what the Expert Citizens said:

Crab to Kraken

“A crab because I was withheld, staying in my shell and not wanting to come out, just wanted to be backstage and didn’t want to put myself up there. Gone from crab to Kraken. Kraken, the sea monster, part of the show, can eat ships and fart them out.”

Spider to fox

“A spider cause dead nervous and now fox because more confidence. More curious.”

Tortoise to cheetah

“Tortoise because when it comes to singing I just don’t like the way I sound. But now a cheetah cause bouncy and fast.”

Sloth to Lemur

“I felt slow at first and now I feel quicker.”

It is clear that the Expert Citizens feel more confident as a result of their work and involvement in *Punishment Acts*:

“They were quiet as little mice when they first starting doing it and now they are belting out what they’ve got to say and just seeing them grow in confidence”
(Expert Citizen peer mentor)

“Boosted my confidence, feel more sociable, feel like I’ve got more of a purpose in life now” (an Expert Citizen)

“They’ve seen something from beginning to end. Seen a full project through. Put a lot of confidence and wind into their sails moving them forward into their recovery journey.” (member of Expert Citizen staff)

“Each night I’ve been getting louder and louder and more confident.” (an Expert Citizen)

“I love the acting part, I always wanted to be on the stage and now I’ve done it I’m more confident – I feel more confident every time I do it. You grow as a performer”. (an Expert Citizen)

In the one to one interviews all of the Expert Citizens spoke of the fond memories they will take away from their involvement in this project:

“Very good memories and fond memories.” (an Expert Citizen)

“Lots of good memories, I like pictures, I’ve got postcards and the poster, I’m going to keep my uniform and bag, I can’t take the shoes. To remind me of everyone, pictures more than anything. I think they’re great actors and actresses.” (an Expert Citizen)

For some Expert Citizens involved in the project it seems to have had a profound impact in terms of supporting them in their recovery and helping take them away from negative environments:

“Brought me back to being myself again.” (an Expert Citizen)

“Kept me away from who I was chilling with before. Took myself away from those people.” (an Expert Citizen)

“The more they engaged in that, the more they engaged in their recovery.” (member of Expert Citizens staff)

“You can see that definite bridge from where they were when they started and where they were when they ended. A completely different person in terms of having that desire to be engaged.” (member of Expert Citizens staff)

“Really noticeable. I have worked with them for three years and have seen agencies, mental health services, drug and health services giving up on them because they are not seeing they wants it enough and losing faith in them as a person and their desire. Maybe they need to think about their processes. After three years to see that change in three weeks...” (member of Expert Citizens staff)

The staff from Expert Citizens also reflected how the *Punishment Acts* has given the Expert Citizens transferable skills that can be drawn upon to seek future employment:

“I think the best ways to learn are when you don’t realise you’re learning.” (member of Expert Citizens staff)

“All these skills have developed under the radar because of the fun.” (an Expert Citizen)

“It was a huge commitment, and I’m hoping this is something that they can carry forward. The issue we get sometimes with people, particularly when they’re caught up in the Criminal Justice System, is with employment and having to explain time not in work in CVs. But I feel we can lean on projects like this to demonstrate certain skills such as time management and to be able to use that to platform gaps in employment to help employers feel more confident in employing

people who have been involved in these kinds of projects.” (member of Expert Citizens staff)

“They’ve never been great with time keeping, but actually they were spot on. And they were reliant on transport, none of them had their own transport, they had to be dropped off by a worker and still managed to turn up. I’m thinking about how we can break down those transferable skills.” (member of Expert Citizens staff)

All Expert Citizens have expressed interest in working on future projects with Rideout and continue their involvement in activities at B Arts:

“I’d like to meet the guys again and do more work up here.” (an Expert Citizen)

When asked what they would say to others about the project one Expert Citizen said:

“Get involved cause it’s good for the mind and the body and gives you a clear mind and you feel motivated in life when you do stuff like this.”

Rideout has stayed in touch with the Expert Citizens and will be reuniting the full cast for a private screening of the play in the near future. The film will then be available to the public to see.

Key takeaway:

- Carrying out projects with arts organisations and arts centres with broader links to the community can provide trustworthy links to other projects for people to get involved in.
- Engaging people’s time in a positive environment can support recovery and remove them from environments that are detrimental to their wellbeing and recovery.
- Theatre projects like this clearly improve people’s confidence and self-esteem.
- Engaging and enjoyable projects inadvertently build soft skills that are useful for gaining future employment and accessing services.

- Documenting and filming projects leaves a lasting legacy which participants can take pride in and others can see and learn from.

Questions Provoked by the Work

- What is the long-term legacy of a one-off project like this, and how can that be measured?
- How can Arts Centres and theatres adapt and create welcoming spaces to host community projects?
- How can successful collaborations between arts and lived experience organisations be built on?
- In a climate where “lived experience” is increasingly sought, how can lessons from successful projects such as this, be carried into other projects and organisations?
- How can funders use lessons from successful projects such as this to understand where to direct funding and what to look for in organisations that work with lived-experience participants?
- Can arts projects be better integrated in rehabilitation to create bespoke arts-based recovery programmes, or work with existing recovery programmes?
- How can evaluation reports be more accessible and inclusive to those whose experience they are seeking to reflect?

Overall Takeaways

Punishment Acts was a resounding success and the Expert Citizens have had an overwhelmingly positive experience through participating in this project. This project has:

- built confidence

- made people laugh
- made people feel supported
- supported recovery
- helped Expert Citizens process difficult memories
- given Expert Citizens a sense of pride
- given Expert Citizens the opportunity to devise, perform and learn new skills such as puppetry
- given Expert Citizens a platform to have a voice and educate members of the public about the Criminal Justice System
- strengthened relationships with family, key workers and other Expert Citizens
- built new relationships with members of the community
- given Expert Citizens the opportunity to get involved in further groups and projects
- given families respite
- built a valuable link between the Expert Citizens and B Arts
- demonstrated skills that are transferable and can be used when applying to jobs
- created good memories

Rideout's way of working is not tokenistic or extractive, but builds an environment that enables people to thrive and make high-quality art. At a time when "lived experience" is increasingly valued and sought, Rideout's methods should serve as an example of best practice.

Appendix

Checklist for project-planning

Below are a series of ten questions drawn from the learnings of this project that can be used as prompts by organisations planning future projects or by donors deciding where to direct funds.

1. How can we meet participants' practical needs through the duration of the project?
2. How can we foster a fun, caring and supportive environment?
3. What organisations are we working with and why?
4. Who is being invited to contribute to the project and why?
5. How can we plan a project so that the materials and methods of making theatre are accessible to the participant group?
6. How can we centre lived-experience participants so that they have true ownership of the project?
7. How can we harness people's existing skills and experience, and offer opportunities to explore and learn new skills?
8. What space are we using for the different stages of a project and why?
9. How long will the project last and how will we pace it?
10. How are we supporting participants as the project draws to a close?