

FEATURE

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ART and culture have enormous power to uplift and nourish a community. Art has always been central to our lives; without it, we would simply exist. It can give you a sense of identity and belonging, as well as a sense of pride and inspiration. It can also help to challenge negative community stereotypes and promote understanding and respect. Solace and hope can be found in art, as well as self-expression and song.

Karen Mulcahey is a driving force in Rotherham's art and culture scene. She has over 25 years of experience as a professional drama practitioner, writer, director, performer, and songwriter. As the founder and artistic director of Breakout Arts, a professional theatre and collaborative arts company based in Rotherham, she is putting her skills and passions to work to effect meaningful and long-term change.

Their mission is to give the voiceless a voice and to assist people in developing confidence, communication, and self-expression through creative skills.

They also create new works for theatres, communities, and young people, as well as touring classic texts such as Shakespeare at schools, colleges, and universities.

Karen founded the company after noticing that many of her graduates were relocating to Manchester or elsewhere in search of work. She wished to support local graduates and artists and keep their talents in Rotherham. Rotherham has an exciting burgeoning art scene, and they want to be a part of it and help it grow. Everyone can benefit from the performing arts.

"We break rules, we break boundaries, we break limits. We are Breakout Arts," said Karen.

The majority of the company is neuro-diverse, and this is simply a part of who they are. They have great actors who have autism, ADHD, and hearing impairments, but the audiences would not



There is everything to play for and to get excited about'

LEIGH DE VRIES of Rotherham Open Arts Renaissance (ROAR) meets Karen Mulcahey who is an important name in Rotherham's art scene.

know unless they were told. The company has discovered that not only does encouraging employees to reach their full potential produce amazing results, but that young and old people who see their work see these actors as positive role models.

The company has a team of actors and artists with a variety of skills such as technical/stage management, production, marketing, acting, workshop delivery, music, film, and more, allowing them to

work creatively and easily collaborate with others.

Breakout Arts selects the best people for the job and encourages others to learn.

Above all, the company's uniqueness stems from the kindness and decency of the people involved, as well as the fact that it has an amazing board of directors who fully support their ethos.

"We are inclusive and high quality in everything we do," said Karen.

Breakout Arts tailor their work to the needs of the local community at the same time producing professional productions that enable its local young professional actors to ply their trade for everyone's enjoyment. Their recent

production of Macbeth at the Rotherham Civic Theatre got rave reviews and they have been able to take a group to Edinburgh Fringe this year.

Saturday Youth Theatre at the Civic Theatre Annexe, walkabout theatre in Rotherham carrying a giant lioness head for the Euros' Rotherham matches, an environmentally conscious children's show written and performed for Friends of Ulley with songs performed to packed houses outside, and 'Culture Catch' events with FLUX Rotherham and RMBC support are just a few of Breakout Arts' engaging and thought-provoking projects. They collaborated with Dalton Early Help and Karen's degree students to perform at this year's Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Four actors played all the roles in an innovative edited version of Macbeth in South Yorkshire classrooms in 2021 and the success of this show has resulted in multiple continued bookings.

A significant achievement is a year-long Heritage Lottery Fund project in which three groups of young people and professional artists will research and explore the history of Rotherham men who fought fascism in Spain during the Civil War. In collaboration with the Clifton Museum and archives, they are recording oral histories from family members and local experts. Graduates and Dalton Early Help, university students, and other participants will learn research skills and work with artists. This project will culminate in September/October 2023 with a performance, short educational film, and exhibition.

The South Yorkshire Police Commissioner Fund supported them to work with domestic violence survivors, and as a result, they have had the most incredible experience using drama-based techniques with Women's Aid and local survivors in refuges.

Breakout Arts are proud to have witnessed and been part of some amazing individual stories in the short time they have been doing Breakout.

Graduate Gregory Fitzgerald, who is autistic and exceptionally bright, has extensive theatre experience and graduated with a first class honours degree after an initial battle to be accepted. His own resilience, his family's support, and degree teaching staff all demonstrated that neurodiversity can be a positive if it is facilitated properly. Greg has played major roles such as Ollie of Ulley, Macbeth, and Macduff, as well as co-producing work with Leigh de Vries at ROAR and Sheffield Hallam University Drama Society. Breakout Arts now provides technical assistance to them, thanks to Greg's connections and assertiveness. Greg is now their personal assistant and Breakout producer because he



Breakout Arts believe the impact has made everyone feel more supportive of one another. Rotherham is a town with a wealth of talent; it is also a place that must never lose its pride in its diverse and vibrant local communities and heritage

has demonstrated intelligence, ability, and a strong work ethic.

Mitchell Nuttall who went right through college from level 1-6 and achieved his degree doing an excellent student speech at his graduation. He now acts for Breakout Arts and thrilled audiences as Macduff and will soon be in the Domestic Violence production.

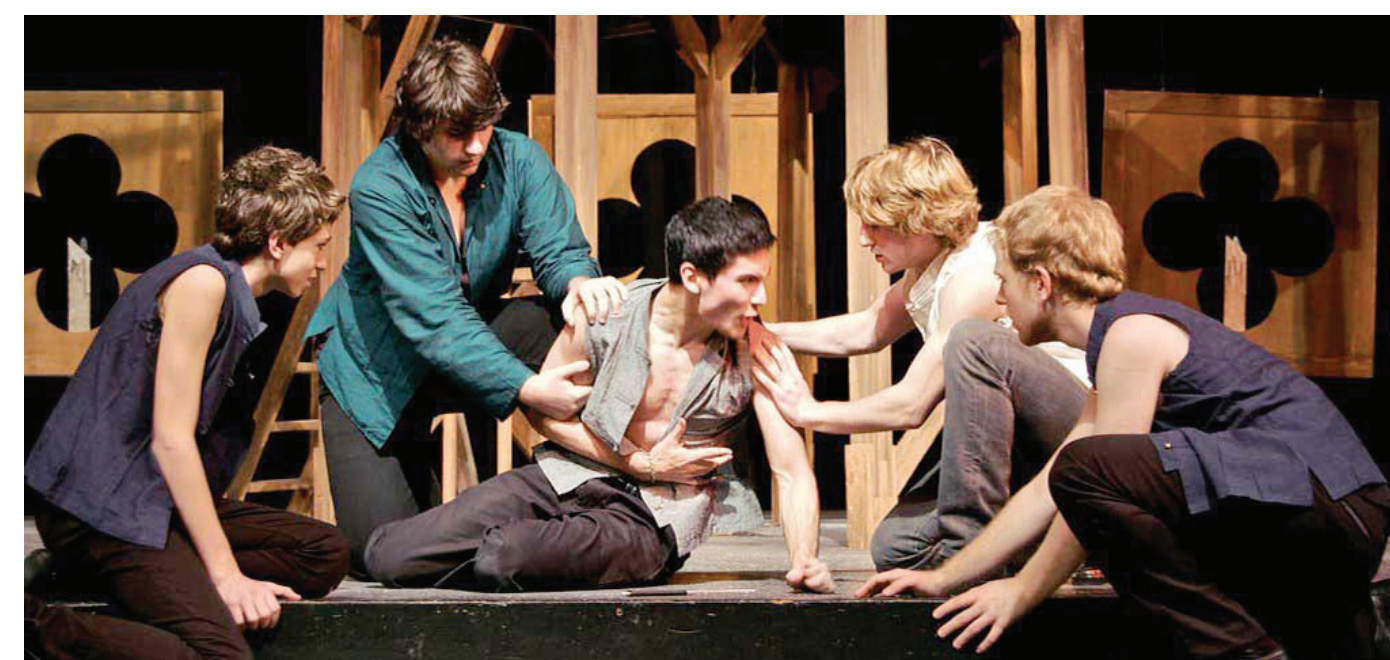
Eleanor May Blackburn is another ex-student who suffered a terrible brain injury whilst at university. She recovered (is still recovering) and has become an actor with an agent and is in demand. Ellie is humble and always wants to learn more, she acts as Lady Macbeth (when she is free), has done her own solo show and was at the Edinburgh Fringe when Breakout Arts was in a show with Sylvester McCoy. She is a published poet and is in the Domestic Violence piece.

Connor Gale is an ex-student who studied acting at UCLAN and has an agent. He travels from Manchester to his family home in Rotherham to work with Breakout Arts and though he has had to adapt to hearing impairment he has played Macbeth for the group multiple times and lights up the stage with his presence.

Heather Bellamy is a mother and has come back to acting. Her partner is Antony Hopkinson who, though working in other areas, is learning film from Breakout Arts filmmaker James Poulton and helps manage the day to day accounts.

Owen Jones has an agent and always steps in for Breakout Arts no matter what difficult caring duties he has in his life.

These employees have an incredible range of skills, are



resourceful, flexible, and creative – all qualities that employers look for.

Karen dislikes singling out individuals because Breakout Arts's entire cast of actors and staff members strive to advance their professional lives while working for the group. She hopes that eventually more of them will be employed on a regular basis, allowing the jobbing actors to keep working.

The real impact of Breakout Arts is twofold: 1) The employment and skill/career development of recent graduates and other locals in their early or mid-career, and 2) The impact on project participants and partner local organisations.

When the business first began, its goal was to give back in some way to the amazing students and the neighbourhood where they live. Breakout Arts believes they are doing both, and the team members they have are learning new skills and gaining access to networks (acting workshops led by industry professionals, marketing and business training from One Tech and Webiz, collaborations and paid work from visual and other artists, and Flux), in addition to receiving internal and external training and networks (acting training through Children's Capital of Culture, and acting workshops led by professional practitioners they bring in).

The community members they have worked with have provided feedback on the impact, which has ranged from teachers telling them they have never seen their students so

enthralled with Shakespeare to children telling them they have gained confidence and imagination to survivors providing feedback that they felt their stories/voices had been heard and they could express themselves and feel less isolated.

Youth theatre audiences have reported to Breakout Arts on the enormous advancements made by young people, and people with disabilities or other conditions have told them that our actors have inspired them. Rotherham College and UCR have asked Breakout Arts to be on their college employer advisory board and Breakout Arts provide work experience placements.

As artists living in a small town, Breakout Arts believe the impact has made everyone feel more supportive of one another.

"Rotherham is a town with a wealth of talent; it is also a place that must never lose its pride in its diverse and vibrant local communities and heritage," said Karen.

The company's challenges are similar to those faced by most businesses and individuals: how to maintain their existence while continuing to produce useful and inspiring work and services. They will continue to be creative, submit applications for jobs, collaborate with neighbourhood groups, and produce shows that can be purchased to support classroom instruction. The staff have experience working with the elderly, homeless people, people with complex needs, people with emotional, social, and behavioural issues, as well as professional theatre directors, actors, and producers. They have a

really diverse range of expertise and

experience between them, including in academia and research, and they hope that this will result in a variety of beneficial collaborative work. They also want to make sure that their current team can continue to work together and grow for as long as they see fit.

However, they are aware that people change and grow, so they are constantly on the lookout for new, talented young actors and other individuals who want to work in the arts and have a variety of skill sets they can contribute.

The bigger issues are that everyone is struggling to survive because of the economic crisis, and the arts are frequently viewed as a luxury when in reality we all go home and listen to music, podcasts, turn on the TV, and sit on artistically-designed furniture.

Moving forward, Breakout Arts' goals include becoming a charity and acquiring a proper office and rehearsal and/or performance space. At least two additional paid positions are needed to run the business, and they want to hire more locals. They want to produce brand-new, top-notch professional touring plays and, in the future, to produce plays especially for the Rotherham Civic Theatre and help draw more patrons there and to other theatres. Breakout Arts aspire to revitalise the Rotherham Shakespeare Festival and restore Rotherham's reputation as a fantastic destination. In order to draw visitors and encourage them to spend money in the town centre for events, workshops, and a mixed-arts and cultural heritage trail, Breakout Arts wants to highlight the area's heritage and culture.

"There is everything to play for and to get excited about. We want to survive and to thrive. We want to change lives for the better and to develop local people and the local economy and ourselves," said Karen.

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