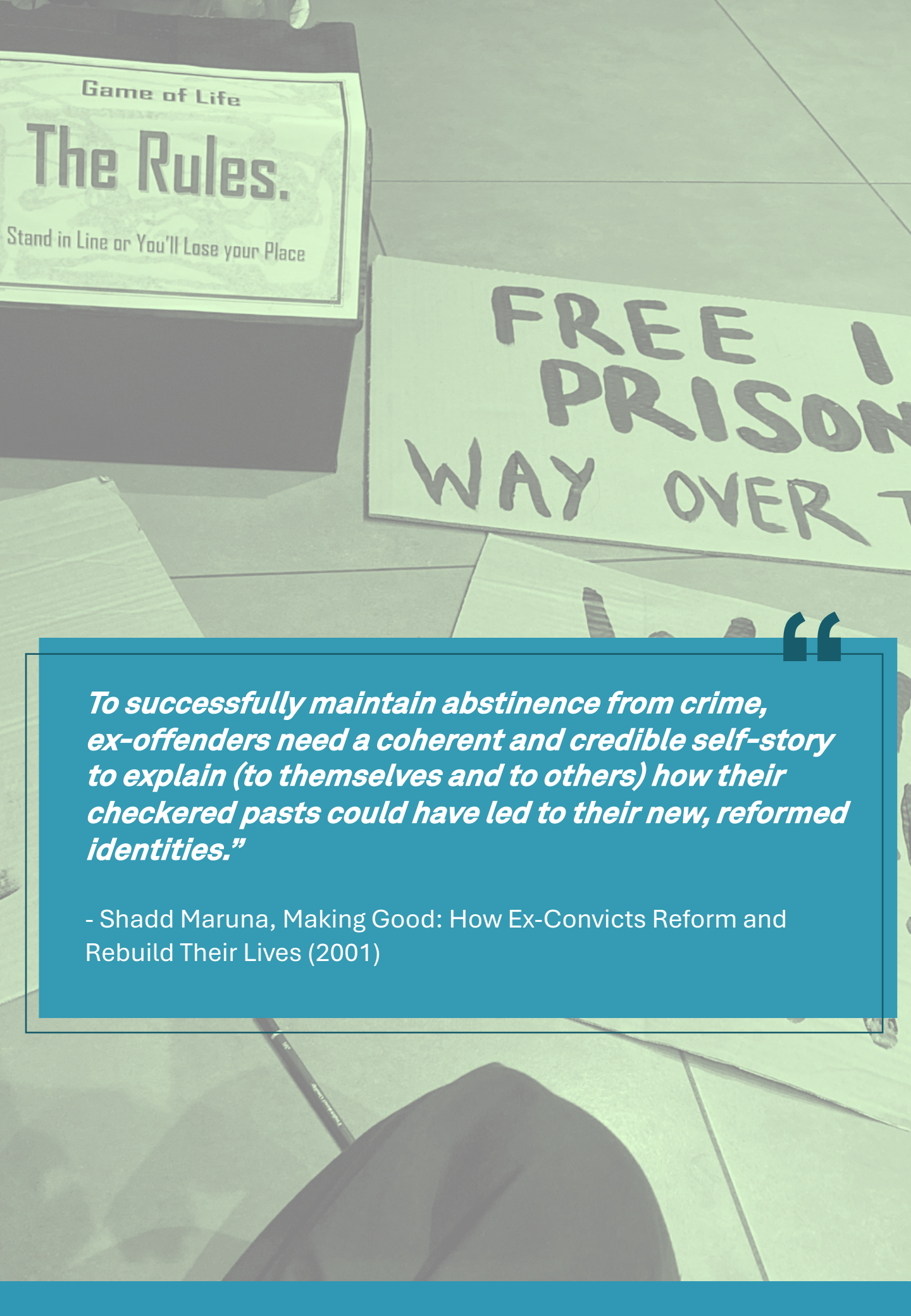


Catch22 Innovation Fund 2025

The BENCH

Reflections of a Creative
Journey



To successfully maintain abstinence from crime, ex-offenders need a coherent and credible self-story to explain (to themselves and to others) how their checkered pasts could have led to their new, reformed identities.”

- Shadd Maruna, Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives (2001)



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AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Project Overview

The Bench Theatre Project was a ten-week creative intervention designed to empower individuals with lived experience of the criminal justice system. Through immersive learning and theatre workshops, culminating in a live public performance, participants embarked on a journey of **self-expression, emotional growth, and community engagement**.

The project integrated **psychodrama** and **forum theatre** methodologies, fostering artistic exploration and personal development.

The initial phase centered on drama-based workshops that encouraged play and **self-discovery**, while the latter half focused on collaboratively devising a theatre piece to be presented to an invited audience of family, friends and professionals. This approach encouraged participants to redefine their stories, find new layers of identity and showcase their talents beyond their past experiences.

Project Objectives

- ❖ Provide service users with a creative outlet that promotes self-reflection and challenges personal boundaries.
- ❖ Reduce recidivism rates among individuals with criminal justice system backgrounds by supporting positive behavioral change.
- ❖ Develop transferable skills such as self-efficacy, confidence, self-worth, and compassion.
- ❖ Introduce innovative rehabilitative methods through artistic interventions, encouraging new approaches to personal and social growth.
- ❖ Showcase the effective impact of creative intervention approaches as a meaningful way to engage in self discovery and reflective practice.

CATCH 22

INNOVATION FUND

Organisational Initiative

The **Innovation Challenge** was an initiative launched in 2025, designed to bring the *Reform* agenda to life. The Trustee Board agreed to invest £125,000 to fund ideas that Catch22 colleagues had for their services, programmes or areas of work to **'do things differently'** and drive change.

The theatre project was awarded a £5,000 budget following its project submission.

**catch
22**

“

The criminal justice system is, I contend, a space that has a **complex relationship to performance**, both historically and contemporarily. **Prisons and punishment are performative.** " **Theatre in Prison, Theory and Practice**
(Balfour,2004)

PREPARATION

Recruitment

We wanted to ensure that we were able to offer this opportunity out to as many people as possible so decided to recruit both internally from our CRS services but also utilised our partnerships and network spaces to bring

Suitability Criteria

We set the following criteria to ensure the project could be accessed by many:

No performance experience necessary!

- Creative drive/ motivation
- Over 18's only
- Ability to be dedicated/ engaged with the project
- Availability on Thursday's 3.30pm-5.30pm and able to attend most workshop sessions (10 weeks)
- East London Theatre Space – able to commute to this location (Dalston)
- Interested in building community/ collaboration
- We have allocated funds to support with travel costs where needed
- The space will be open to accommodate to personal interest – a general interest in any kind of performance/ art form can be adapted to within this project.

Logistics

Effective logistics planning was key to the success of project. The selection of a rehearsal space prioritized affordability and accessibility, opting for a local grassroots theatre in East London Actors East. This venue not only supported the project's budget constraints but also fostered a sense of community engagement.

Time management was something we as facilitators had to be mindful of throughout the project whilst we juggled our day-to-day responsibilities, often creating time out of working hours for planning sessions and arrangements.

Health and safety considerations were rigorously addressed throughout the planning and delivery phases. Comprehensive risk assessments were conducted for all activities.

SESSION DESIGN AND APPROACH

Design of the Program

From the outset, the intention was to deliver five devising workshops, ensuring sufficient time to foster strong relationships and establish a safe, transparent environment. This approach enabled participants to engage meaningfully with the more complex themes that would shape the play's narrative.

Each session would begin with a check in and warm up / icebreaker game, relevant to the session or what we as facilitators needed to draw upon. The sessions always concluded with a feedback round, inviting reflections on personal and group experiences, and a closed circle for final thoughts and self-assessment.

Session Overviews

Workshop Session 1:

Participants engaged in a series of activities aimed at building rapport, understanding individual motivations, and fostering group cohesion.

Key activities included a "Name Game" to encourage interaction, a guided exploration of the space to heighten sensory awareness, and paired discussions to uncover each participant's "why" for joining the project. The group collaboratively established a group agreement, setting shared expectations and behavioral norms.

Emotional literacy was developed through "Emotions Charades" and character-building exercises, prompting participants to embody and reflect on a range of feelings.

*For a moment
there I felt
true emotion"*

– Participant, session 2

Workshop Session 2:

Participants engaged in a series of activities designed to foster group connection, creativity, and ensemble skills.

Guided exploration of the space heightened sensory awareness, prompting reflection on how environment and physical movement influence creativity. Paired discussions explored recent highlights and the role of failure and collaboration in the creative process. Emotion and physical expression were developed through warm-up games isolating body movements and ensemble-building exercises such as "Pass the Click," "Mirror Work," and "Fish Shoaling." Participants learned about Laban's 8 movement efforts, experimenting with different movement qualities and creating short sequences to express emotional journeys.

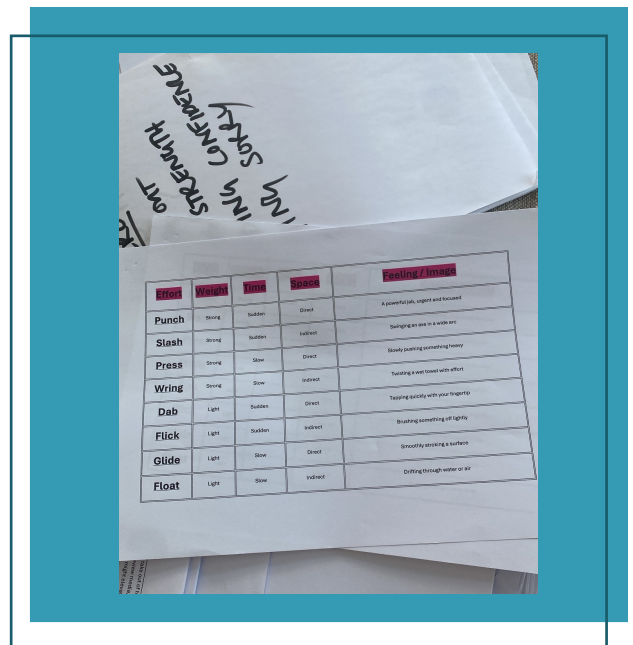
SESSION DESIGN AND APPROACH

Workshop Session 3:

This workshop was led by an external practitioner, specializing in voice, participants engaged in a playful and non-performative session focused on breath and voice as grounding tools. Participants began with a gentle welcome and check-in, followed by breath-and-body grounding exercises (including silent breath mirroring in pairs) to build focus and connection. The group then explored voice through a circle game (“Pass the Breath”), warm-ups and call-and-response sound play, before moving into small-group sound scaping where layered vocal textures were created around shared themes. The session closed with a calm cool-down and brief reflection, inviting participants to notice shifts in breath, sensation and sound without judgement.

Workshop Session 4:

Participants took part in a dynamic session designed to foster group connection, emotional awareness, and creative collaboration. Activities included the Meisner Technique, where participants practiced attentive listening and honest emotional responses through repetition exercises, both in pairs and as a group. Improvisation circles followed, challenging individuals to adapt and build on each other’s ideas, promoting spontaneity and teamwork. The session also featured reflective exercises, inviting participants to consider which activities resonated most, what emotions and themes emerged, and personal growth experienced so far.



Workshop Session 5:

The last of our workshop sessions focused on potential play themes and storytelling, reflections on techniques learnt in the previous 4 weeks and how we begin to bring this all together. Participants explored scene work through provided scripts

The group reflected on key themes such as growth, vulnerability, masculinity and resilience, especially in the context of transformation after involvement with the criminal justice system. Scene work followed, with participants exploring, annotating, and performing scripts in pairs and back to one another.

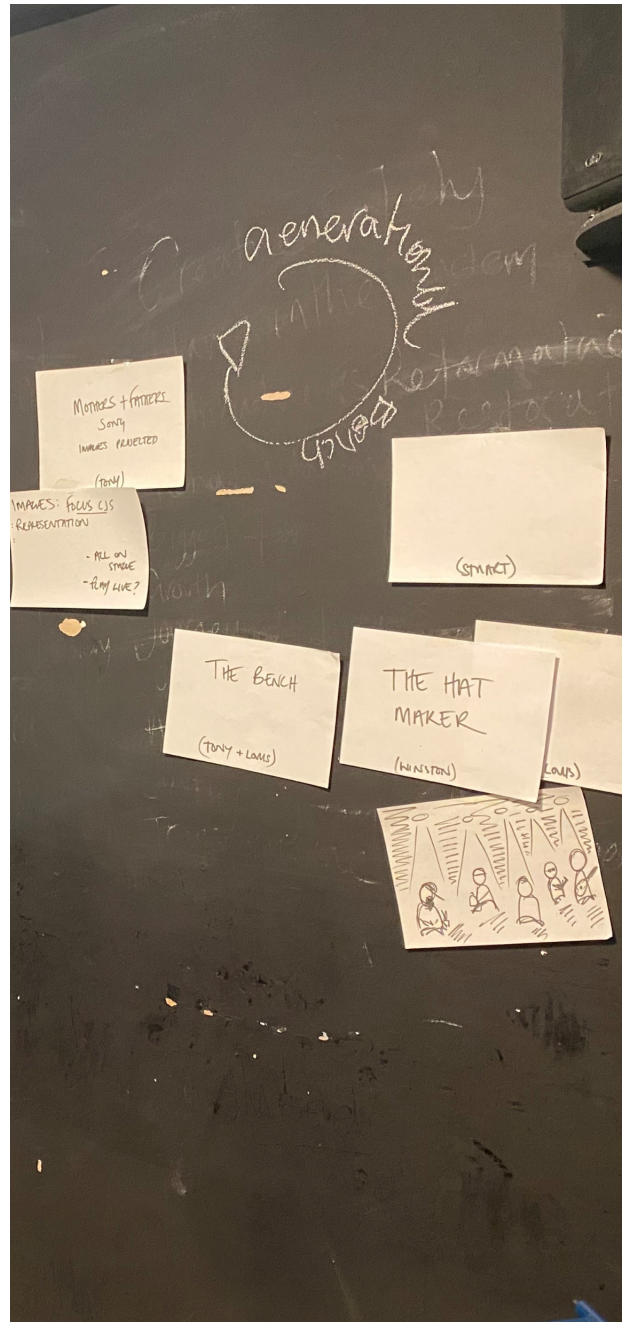
DEVISING

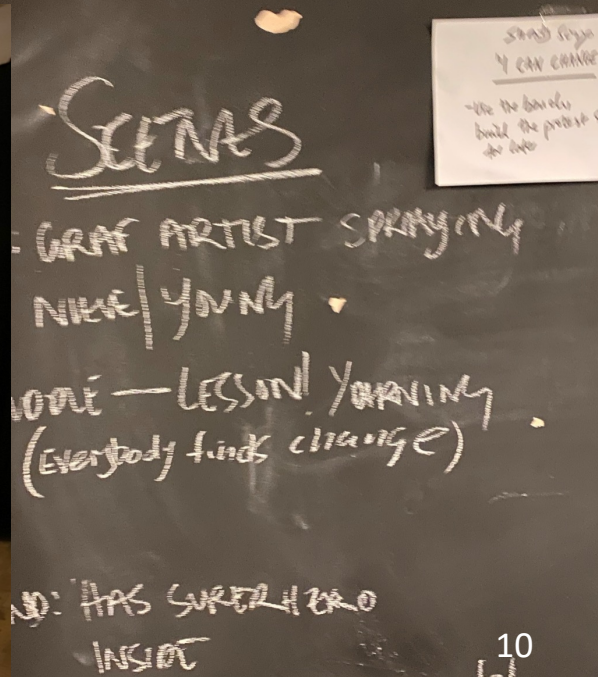
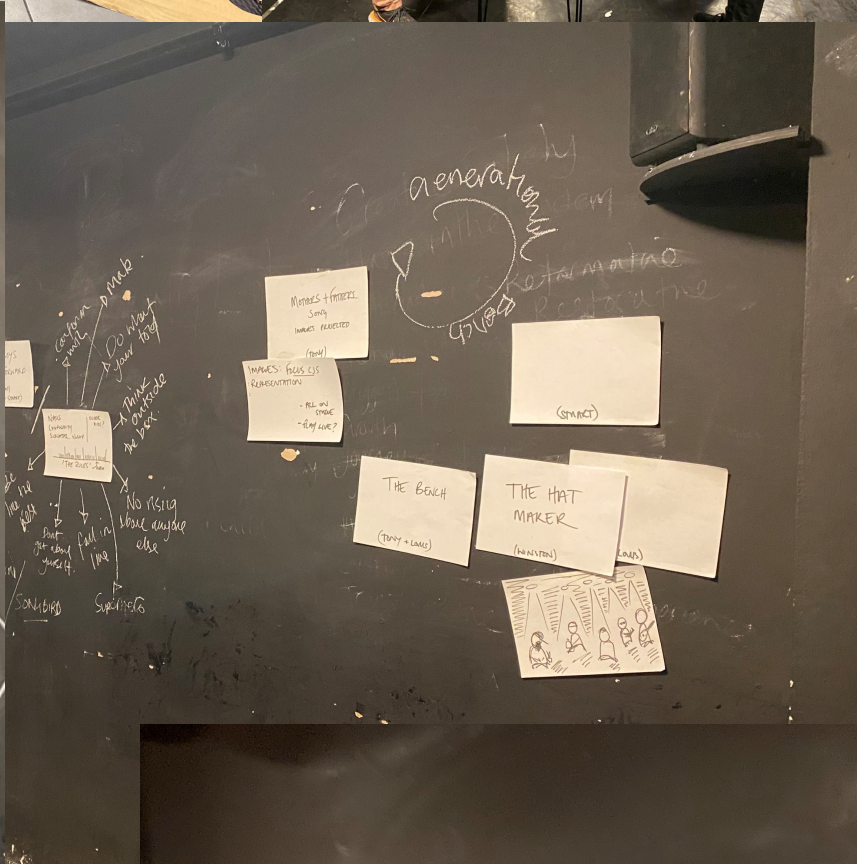
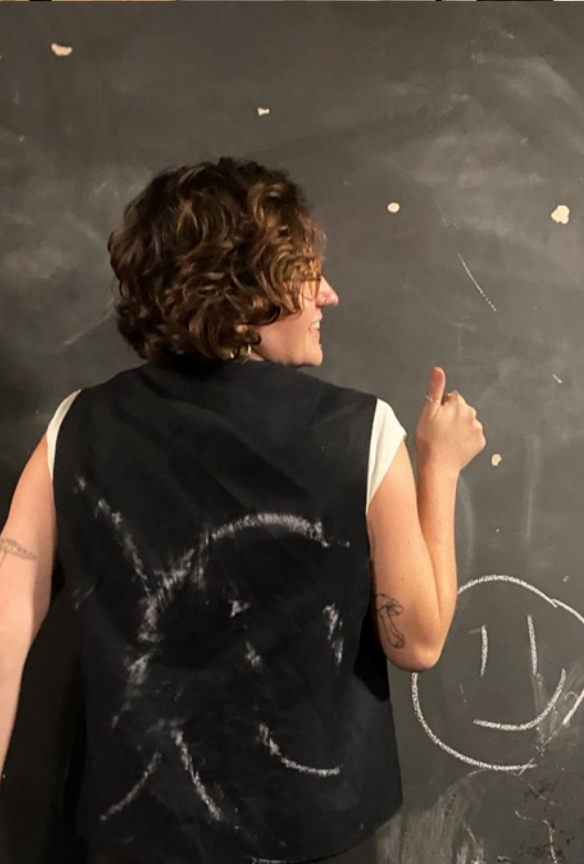
Over the final 5/6 sessions came the dynamic and engaging devising phase of the project. Exploring the diverse themes that emerged from the initial workshops.

This period was marked by extensive reflection and experimentation as we played with a variety of ideas and scenes, continuously refining the creative approach.

We invested significant time in scriptwriting and providing constructive feedback, which gradually helped to shape the structure of the play. Efforts focused on weaving together multiple narratives into a cohesive storyline, identifying a central thread that could unify the varied stories into a compelling and singular narrative. Alongside the development of the script, we began to consider the sensory dimensions of the production, including the integration of sound, lighting, and musical elements, all of which promise to enrich the overall theatrical experience.

This collaborative process was instrumental in bringing clarity and cohesion to the project, setting a strong foundation for the next stages of development and performance.





Final Performance

Overview

The Bench Theatre Project stands as a testament to the transformative power of creative interventions within justice and community settings. This evaluation aims to highlight the positive impact the project had on its participants and wider networks.

The project's impact extended beyond the stage. It demonstrated how creative practice can support rehabilitation by fostering self-awareness, communication skills, and a sense of worth.

In essence, The Bench was more than a performance—it was a collective act of courage, creativity, and connection. It stands as a testament to the power of theatre to inspire change, nurture talent, and reminds us all of the strength found in shared stories and storytelling. To be seen, heard and recognized beyond a label, allowing people to make sense of the past in order to move forward – to connect with their own narrative, not as something fixed, but something that can be re shaped.

The final performance was a bold, emotionally charged showcase that captivated audiences and left a lasting impression. Feedback highlighted its inventiveness and authenticity, with attendees describing it as a reminder of the untapped talent within the criminal justice system and a celebration of human potential.

***The end scene,
it made me
tear up”
- Audience
Member***

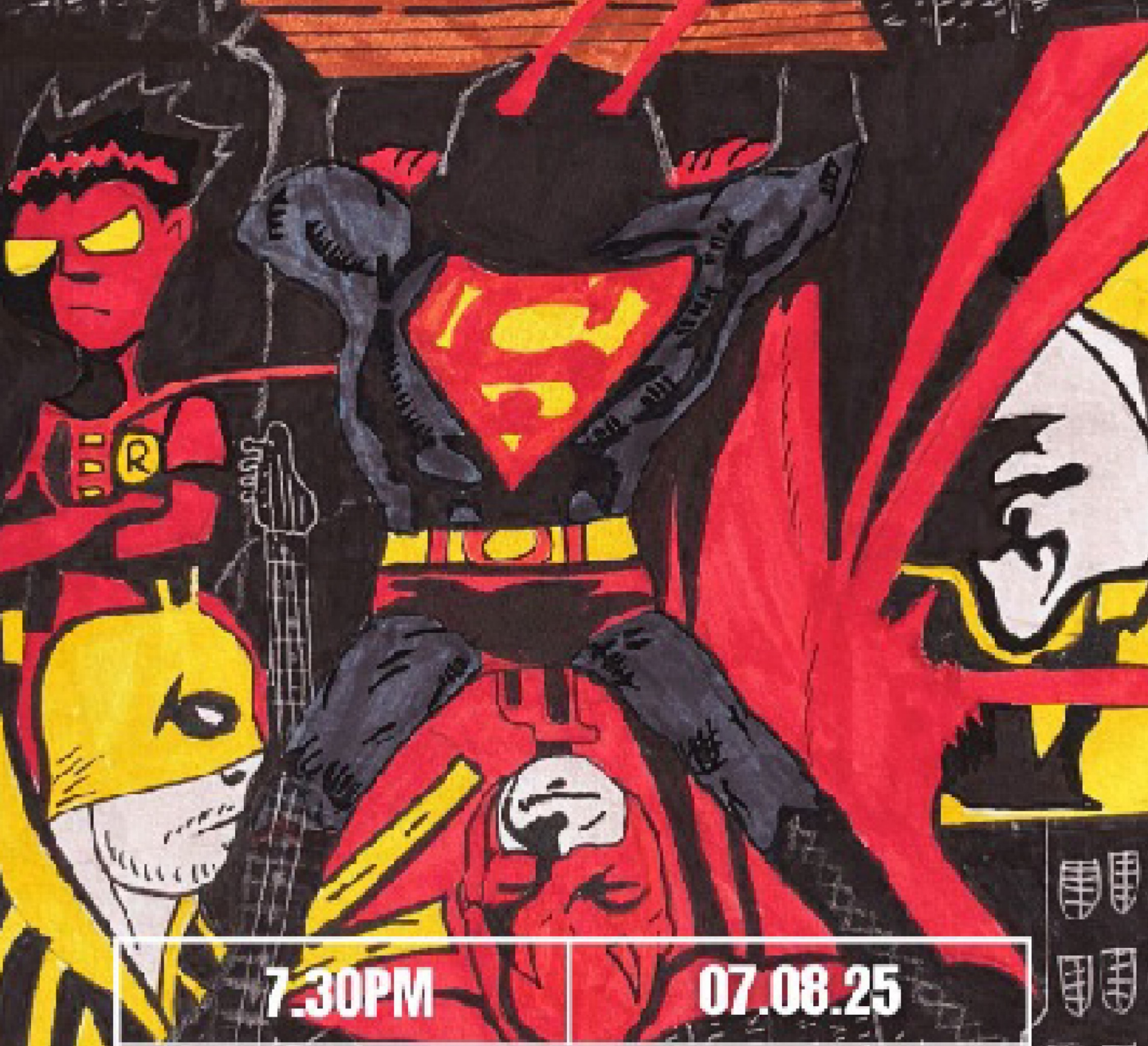
Batch22's 2025 Theatre Project Cohort Presents:

THE BENCH

TRUTH. HUMOUR. PAIN. HOPE.

BENCH

CATCH
22



7.30PM

07.08.25

Playhouse East, 258 Kingsland Rd, E8 4DG

ARTWORK BY DANIELA

Feedback: Participant Feedback

Participant feedback forms were co designed with the catch 22 evaluation manager to align with key areas aligning to the initial proposal outcomes and desistance theory.

4/5 forms were completed at the end of the program.

Overall Satisfaction & Recommendation

Participant satisfaction was extremely high, with all respondents reporting being very happy with the facilitation and stating they would definitely recommend the project to others. This highlights the strong quality of delivery and the project's perceived value among participants.

Engagement and Enjoyment

Engagement levels were consistently high, with all participants reporting they felt very involved throughout the sessions. Feedback suggests the creative format successfully sustained interest and provided a meaningful alternative to more traditional interventions.

Confidence and Self-Expression

The theatre project had a clear positive impact on confidence and self-expression. All participants reported increased confidence, with the majority reporting a strong (“very”) improvement, particularly in performance, communication, and being visible to others.

Emotional Regulation & Coping

Most participants reported meaningful improvements in managing stress and difficult emotions, suggesting the creative process supported emotional regulation and healthier coping strategies.

Self-Awareness and Reflection

The project strongly supported self-awareness, with all participants reporting increased understanding of themselves and their actions. This aligns with desistance-focused approaches that emphasise identity change and reflection.

Empathy and Perspective-Taking

Participants demonstrated emerging gains in empathy and perspective-taking, suggesting that collaborative creative work supported understanding of others' experiences, even where baseline empathy may already have been present.

Peer Relationships and Belonging

The group-based theatre model successfully fostered peer connection and a sense of belonging, with all participants reporting strong relational bonds and positive group experiences.

Motivation and Future Focus

All participants reported increased motivation to make positive changes, suggesting the project supported hope, future orientation, and the development of pro-social identities.



First time on stage... I couldn't see myself doing that in my life"

- Participant

Feedback: Participant Feedback

Overall evaluation data and participant reflections revealed significant personal and social outcomes. Individuals reported increased confidence, emotional regulation, empathy, and motivation to pursue positive life changes. Many described the experience as life-affirming, with moments of deep introspection and joy shared among peers and family members.

Participant feedback was gathered in multiple forms throughout the project. Along with gaining valuable feedback at the end of each session whereby participants were encouraged to self reflect on challenges, successes. This helped shape approach and content, often collated through words, actions, and metaphors.

Participants were also asked to complete a midway reflections sheet in order to capture personal progress, and encourage self reflections

What emotions / themes have connected with so far ?

What have you learnt about yourself?

Can you set yourself a challenge for the next two weeks?

I can walk into a group and build confidence, making me feel stronger in positions of vulnerability”

To let go, be free and be silly”

Feedback: Audience Feedback

The final performance of the bench was amazing. It was clear that the cast had an amazing experience and, despite it being nerve wracking, the sessions they had undertaken clearly helped them to feel comfortable and confident. It was also an incredible night for attendees, and many frontline Catch22 staff said that this kind of event reminds them why they love their role. The whole night was so wholesome, and is a great way of bringing together those with lived experience, VCSE staff and statutory staff, and family and friends to celebrate the unique talent of each performer

It was incredible to see individuals that have been involved in the CJS have a platform to showcase their amazing talent. It is a reminder that there is so much talent within the CJS that doesn't get recognized

The performance was brave, emotionally charged and unexpectedly abstract and inventive

What an incredible show! the storyline was beautiful to follow and had such a mix of emotions throughout, i loved the music, the laughs and also how important the storyline was. You could tell how much effort was put in from not just the actors but also from Maria and Nic who put in so much time and dedication into bringing the show to light. I could tell the passion of the performers in delivering such a show, and with some having no experience - they were truly amazing, its not easy to stand up in front of a crowded room and perform so how amazing! i also liked the intimacy of the space as it helped us feel close and connected throughout the show to the performers who were sharing the story so close to up

Feedback: Audience Feedback

One of the cast members parents came to chat to me at the end of the night and told me that their son had been in the play - they were so proud of what he had achieved and said that it has been lovely to see how much he has been loving the sessions and doesn't want them to end.

I loved how raw it was and how every performer was able to showcase their own talent through their individualized sets. Seeing the performers come into their own and their own personalities and characters shine through was so moving and all of them should be so proud!

The performance was brave, emotionally charged and unexpectedly abstract and inventive

The confidence, the talent, the singing! They looked so confident and like they enjoyed every second of it as did the audience.

For further information please
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Click to watch the project
reflections video [here](#)

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