

# IT'S A BIT LIKE JUGGLING

**A report on a recent London project for young homeless people**

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I was approached by Centrepont to create a series of 3 Minute Wonders for Channel Four, to help celebrate Centrepont's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. As I am an artist/film-maker often working in communities as a facilitator this felt like a natural way to progress.

The project involved working with young homeless people living in London who were to be offered training by a circus company. The concept behind the films was that the learning and performing of circus skills could act as a metaphor for life skills. The aim was to make four films about four individuals learning circus skills over a period of twelve weeks, with the twelfth week resulting in a performance in a theatre with lights and costumes.

Normally I play the role of facilitator, but in this case I felt the film needed to have a more formal, documentary element. Although I was still in the role of facilitator, I was structuring the film around what I needed, rather than the individuals' immediate desires and interests, which felt like quite a jarring way of working.

When I started the project I was told that the ratio of young people dropping out of activities, courses and workshops was 70%. This meant that to begin with I would have to get twelve young people to attend the classes in the hope that I might end up with four of them and hopefully enough footage for each one to make a three-minute film. This was more easily said than done.

At first there was a lot of interest from the young people, but when it came to the crunch of attending the classes, it was a different story. Many didn't turn up, and

those that did often dropped out, either for personal reasons or because they could not cope with the practicalities of learning a circus skill, As I was soon to discover, learning a circus skill can be quite demoralising at times.

Over the twelve weeks we gained and lost people, but four of them stuck to the course, visibly improving every time they came. They had different abilities, backgrounds and personalities which I hope shine through in the films as essentially this is what the films are about – people.

The cast was made up of Omari , Jarman, Johanna and Norman.

Omari is nineteen, and a street dancer. He is thoughtful, caring, charming and physically articulate, and was aiming to work in the gaming industry. He had been estranged from his parents since he was sixteen years old.



*Omari*

Jarman, twenty-four, is a skilled draftsman, had left home at nineteen and is managing a bipolar condition. Although he was currently working as a chef, he ideally wanted to make a living from his drawing.



*Jarman*

Johanna, eighteen, hated living in the countryside and has moved back to London in an attempt to create a life for herself there, but she is struggling to find stability, trying to find somewhere to live, dealing with housing benefits and job seeker's allowance. Yet she is open to all possibilities and ideally wants to work in the arts, whether it is as interior designer, illustrator, graphic designer or even, maybe, joining the circus.



*Johanna*

Finally there was Norman, twenty-one, who has a two-year-old daughter, had been in and out of care from an early age, had been excluded from school and has learning disabilities. Norman was magic! He was not able to travel to and from the classes on his own, as negotiating the underground and remembering directions was a bit daunting. For about the first seven of the twelve weeks I picked him up to take him to training and took him back afterwards. This meant that I spent more time with Norman than with any of the other young people.

All the way to training, Norman would practise juggling, which often meant I had to stop him from running into the middle of on-coming traffic to retrieve his balls. It caused him great hilarity to hear me say to him, "Norman, you've got to be careful. You keep dropping your balls." His favourite comment was one I made to him about running into the road: "However good you are at juggling, Norman, a squashed Norman is going to be rubbish."

He wanted to present the persona of a hard man, but in fact he was terribly worried about the safety of his girlfriend and daughter who lived in Brixton, because of the number of stabbings that were happening there. He had dreams of becoming an actor, and felt that learning to read was going to be crucial. I was shocked to learn that he had been unable to hold down a job stacking shelves in a supermarket because his reading ability was so poor. It became clear over the course of the training that his strength lay in his ability to move and his hand-eye co-ordination. He practised juggling whenever he could and loved doing the mat work such as lifts, rolls and jumps. His sense of humour was wicked and brought a smile to everyone's face.

Once he was confident enough to come and go to training on his own, he was always the first to arrive, often before the trainers, and he was the last to leave. He was the most consistent and reliable person in the group. It was always touch-and-go if the others were going to turn up and when they did they often arrived up to two hours late for a three-hour training session.

It was hard to explain to them that by being late, they were not only wasting their own time, but also "letting themselves down" – a phrase that I had hoped would never pass my lips. The films were about them and their abilities, and if

they didn't look as good as they could doing circus skills, they would be annoyed with themselves when they saw themselves on the telly.



*Norman*

Having said that Norman was the most consistent attendant and the most reliable, I have to add that I was nervous about his attendance for the final day of training when they were to be performing in a theatre and we were working with a lighting person and an additional camera-man using a high-end camera. Every one turned up except Norman. We tried calling him and calling the people at the sheltered housing where he lived to see if they could contact him, but to no avail. I felt terrible as I knew that Norman would have appreciated performing on stage with lights and hefty-looking camera pointed at him, being the centre of attention.

However, working on these films has shown that commitment and communication are difficult issues for these young people.

The following day I got a phone call from Norman apologising for not being at training, explaining that he had a meeting with Social Services at his girlfriend's house and had left his phone to charge in his flat so did not get any of the calls. He kept apologising and saying that he would be there next Monday for training.

I had to explain that there was no more training, but that the circus company had offered to continue training him on Saturdays if he wanted to go, for free. He declined as the training was in another location which was quite difficult to get to and the circus company were unable to guide him there.

In the end the other young people, Jarman, Omari and Johanna have continued to go to training and have subsequently had several days' paid work with the company, performing at public events. Norman, on the other hand, I think is still unaware of what has slipped past him, and also how good he really is.

*The four 3 Minute Wonders about these young people are due to be aired on Channel Four at 12.30, 19<sup>th</sup> – 22<sup>nd</sup> October ,2009.*