

# Shop Front Theatre

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## **A vital space pushing back on many of the things just not there in mainstream civic theatres, systems, structures and arts leadership**

I find creativity easy, I am a very creative person with a very creative life. However making all the complex parts align into place to make and fund Art, I don't find so easy (getting better).

As an independent Artist of 20+ years constantly having to apply for funds to do my job and navigate broken Arts systems, it is exhausting, isolating and over time; deeply damaging.

Enter Chris O'Connell who I met in 2015 when he came to experience a piece of work I created as part of Forest Fringe's curated programme at 'Out of the blue drill hall' for Edinburgh Festival Fringe.

Learning about Chris and Julia's Theatre Company and their Shop Front Theatre project in Coventry was refreshing and life changing – I could see immediately they were very successfully making work, a concept that many mainstream Theatres and Arts Organisations talk a lot about implementing elements of but so often don't quite hit the mark.

Shop Front Theatre in Coventry were a vital space supporting and pushing back on many of the things just not there in mainstream civic theatres, systems, structures and arts leadership. And all being achieved and led by Artists (Chris and Julia) from a shop with only project funding. WOW!

Chris and Julia were doing things another way at Shop Front Theatre – exemplary ways that really spoke to me, ways that felt like anything was possible with positive change happening with just an idea, consistency, hard work and a belief. They have without a doubt been a huge influence on me cultivating better my own confidence to believe in my own vision as a leader of my own space (studio space art) where we too are desperate to do things differently in Dundee.

Artists live and work often alone so feeling part of a community of like minded Artists is everything – Shop Front really delivered on that – across years getting to know Chris and Julia, having their expertise, support and arms around me felt like a real treat, like they were genuinely interested in me and my needs as an artist and not just my work – they get it.

Being commissioned by them as part of their *Humanistan* provocation to make work at their space was a real honour and a joy to be part of their history in Coventry.

A commission where I felt free yet supported enough within the provocation to share my unique practice. An empty space for me is the equivalent to the writer's empty page - a dream project as a site responsive maker to be given the trust and the keys to an empty space to design something for an audience. I know the work I created, 'the only way out is in' and the Humanistan provocation will stay with me forever and continue to always percolate into my practice!

Shop Front Theatre is a brave and hopeful idea, inclusive, bridging gaps between communities and artists, it understood the importance of working together across sectors and vitally it listened. It listened to Artists and communities; allowing and trusting them to lead.

Brilliant leaders support and shape others to lead, they share the power, the space, the keys and they are aware of their privilege – working in these ways ensures keeping what is happening, a vital heartbeat, needed, current, relevant, progressive and ahead of the curve.

Thank you to Chris and Julia and Shop Front Theatre for their bravery, kindness and for being all of those things.

**Sharron Devine**