

State of Mind

wellbeing in everything we do

Chronicle 1.1: Walking the high wire in high winds

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Contents

1. About the Chronicles
2. State of Mind Chronicles
Introduction
3. Starting Point
4. Chronicling the Narrative and
Context
5. Reality Shift
6. Resilience - together - a
community
7. Meanwhile.... the mental
health in wider society
brings in chill wind
8. Strained nerves - new
approaches needed
9. Two new thoughts on head
and heart...

1. About the Chronicles



A Short introduction to the State of Mind Chronicles, what they are and how they were developed

The State of Mind Chronicles were written and developed by Anni Raw & Associates, a team that are more than evaluators. Their evaluation style uses an ethnographic process which tells the stories from within. Working with story builders the narratives below were built up over a 4-year period, parts of the jigsaw then pieced together to make a whole. The Chronicles will come in 5 parts and hope to explore the State of Mind journey in depth, to offer clues, insights and questions to what State of Mind is and how it can evolve.

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2. State of Mind Chronicles Introduction

Arts and cultural organisations in the applied and socially engaged arts sector (UK-wide and more generally) are – with a generous nod to Mark Robinson's 'Tactics for the Tightrope' – once more walking the high wire in a high wind. As ever they are balancing challenges of role and contribution, social responsibility, artistic integrity, equality, equity, diversity, access and inclusion, organisational survival, alongside other gusts and headwinds... But they are doing so currently in ever more socially and economically complex times. The winds are at gale force! Useful responses to these challenges are always multiple, however the story of 20 Stories High's exploration of 'State of Mind'¹ shines a light on some interesting and timely balancing tricks, that may assist others through the storm...



The following think piece (in 2 parts, of which this is part 1) is one of a set of 5 that chronicle the 'State of Mind' narrative, emerging provocations and insights. The method used for capturing the story is an approach we call 'story building'², which involves reflective journaling by team members, observations and being present in the space and action, interviews at key points, and collaborating as a team to make sense of the emerging learning. This is a participatory action research (PAR) approach, underpinned by rigorous qualitative research principles, and aligns directly with the Centre for Cultural Value Evaluation Principles³.

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1. State of Mind is 'A four-year strategic project, exploring our programme and processes through the lens of mental health and wellbeing'. State of Mind (2018-2022) is funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation
 2. 'Story-building' (which is our construct) is a 'Participatory action research' (PAR) approach – a formative, collaborative and embedded process. It works with narrative (stories and themes gathered/emerging over time), ethnography (reflecting on / writing about embedded experiences), and reflective practice: with a 'reflect – discuss – evolve' evaluation cycle. Story-building is values-led, it ensures that widely diverse perspectives inform the evaluation findings – so that a multiple story can become a collective narrative of learning. It is rigorous, guided by high level qualitative research principles.
 3. <https://www.culturalvalue.org.uk/our-work/evaluation/evaluation-principles/>

3. Starting Point

This think-piece traces 20 Stories High's deep exploration of the theme 'State of Mind', unfolding across a four-year stretch that has encompassed tectonic shifts in our lives and social fabric, due to the COVID pandemic, and a rising temperature in the 'culture wars' and fundamental social questions. In a month when mainstream media outlet Sky News was asking: "What is the role do you think for local theatre in a community?"; Leeds theatre company Slung Low published their pandemic memoir "The Club on the Edge of Town" by Artistic Director Alan Lane; and in the academic world the 'Theatre and Performance Research Association' (TaPRA) is exploring "The power of 'care-full' practice" at its national 2022 conference, the time for sharing these thoughts and provocations is now.

We propose that the narrative of this journey may provide new perspectives on resilience approaches that are proactive and flexible, potentially central to the day-to-day balancing acts of this socially engaged theatre company. Has 20 Stories High's attention to exploring and embracing mental wellbeing as a constantly changing, fluid and fluctuating, creative process, rather than a risk area to be managed, offered useful insights on weathering tumultuous contextual challenges? Does this constitute a resilience strategy of some kind? Read on for this chronicle of an approach and commitment to understanding the dynamics of states of mind, together as a creative, story-telling community.



4. Chronicling the Narrative and Context

20 Stories High is, in its origins, mission and vision, an activist theatre company. Set up in 2006 in Toxteth, Liverpool 8, by founders and then Co-Artistic Directors and CEOs Keith Saha and Julia Samuels, its mission was to make high-quality theatre with young people from excluded communities in Liverpool, to counter embedded inequalities and barriers to inclusion in theatre making, then and now. Keith and Julia were highlighting barriers facing young people due to their identity, cultural heritage, colour, class. (The company's recent work under this mission, and work and recognition over the years can be seen on their website)

As a characteristic of the 20 Stories High model, relationships have always developed over time with the young people who become part of the 20 Stories High community, with some remaining active within the company for over a decade, their roles shifting as their experience develops. Some move on from involvement in Youth Theatre to develop as makers and performers, directors, facilitators (e.g. see the Launch programme). Some contribute within the structure of the organisation, as staff team members, on the board, or in leadership roles (e.g. 'Future Collective', a young people's advisory group to ensure young people's views remain central to the direction of the organisation; and peer mentoring). Certainly, evidence shows that the 20 Stories High community engenders a sense of belonging⁴, and long-term commitment.



4. See Chronicle 4 for more on young people's connection to 20SH

Due to the corrosive challenges most of the young people in the 20 Stories High community face in their daily lives (racism, socio economic disadvantage, additional identity-based aggressions and barriers) their journeys with the organisation have often incorporated fluctuations in their states of mental wellbeing. In common with other arts organisations working in a sustained way in collaboration with local communities, navigating the sometimes perilous ups and downs in their young collaborators' mental wellbeing in a healthy way, as well as supporting the mental wellbeing of staff team members, has long been a recognised feature of the relational aspects of the company's work⁵.

Because of the depth of trust developed through strong relationships with their young people, the 20SH⁶ team has inevitably and often over the years needed to take a role as the first port of call and support for their young people when in difficulty. This is despite not being formally trained professionals in mental health support: a situation many other community-based arts organisations will also recognise.

5. This theme is picked up in Chronicles 3 and 4

6. 20SH used as an acronym for 20 Stories High throughout the State of Mind Chronicles



Increasingly, under a national economic austerity regime since 2010, the team became aware of the dire inadequacy of specialist mental health services for young people in the City. The virtual collapse of this sector due to endless funding cuts meant that 20 Stories High staff couldn't even effectively or safely sign-post young people to other specialist services for crisis support.

The heavy responsibility for young people's wellbeing, reaching beyond the skillsets of a (creative) theatre company team felt risky, unsustainable. So then, as a reflective, activist organisation, the company took safeguarding steps, to address this social responsibility themselves, and to mitigate the impacts on staff members of feeling/being ill-equipped to be in such a specialist support role:

- Advisors and board members with professional roles and experience in adolescent mental health were introduced to join 20SH (e.g. through a CAMHS⁷ partnership)
- In 2018 the company applied for funding to explore the theme of 'State of Mind'¹. The case for the application was based on the dire state of support for young people's mental health locally, and the team's experience of frontline support giving for young people in distress, despite being "a theatre company, not a mental health service".
- This resulted in the 4-year funded 'State of Mind' programme (SoM)⁸. SoM comprised activities for young people – targeted creative outreach projects; and pathways into the company's core work programme including youth theatre, a Young Actors' Company, touring shows and community performance projects. It also offered organisational level activities, including training and awareness raising at all levels around mental health and wellbeing; developing a staff wellbeing plan covering structures, practices, recruitment etc; and partnership building with other youth focussed organisation locally.

7. Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service

8. The acronym SoM is used to identify the funded programme of work under the title 'State of Mind', as distinct from the concept state of mind, which has developed its own momentum as a thinking tool – as is outlined in this think piece



Stated SoM aims included:

- *"To better support young people to be resilient and independent, and those working with them to be more aware of and more confident in responding to mental health issues."*
- *To ensure that "there is a more diverse future for the arts, with young people from working class and culturally diverse communities coming through 20SH's programme and inspiring others," and that "positive stories about YP in Liverpool can be shared and celebrated".*

From the start, the company was continually defining and refining the offer of SoM support to team members, and the SoM character of every aspect of the company's work, external and internal. SoM was giving everyone a framework and some vocabulary to engage in in-depth conversation about elements of the company's practice that previously felt tacit. 'State of Mind!' became a code, a flag, a kind of safe word that could stop proceedings of any kind, to consider aspects of how something might be affecting the state of mind of anyone in the room, or of anyone who might be touched by whatever was under discussion (a performance, a strategy, a decision).



Over the initial two years, SoM in practice developed numerous tools, bespoke to the team and company. These were wide-ranging - examples include paying attention to how time is used, and to the impact of different work or discussion paces on different people, ensuring healthy breaks, providing healthy food as a nurturing strategy, establishing systems for 'checking in' and 'checking out' in group dialogue situations, learning new groupwork techniques from an established artist wellbeing practitioner, and providing reflection space with her as needed, increasing specialist child and adolescent safeguarding training, and developing shared understandings of how to recognise, support or simply make space for different state of mind needs at any time. There was a strong emphasis on awareness – being present and connected, for each person to notice signals extending beyond their immediate experience – a version of group mindfulness perhaps.

The SoM focus was enabling the team to see how it works as a unit with more clarity: noting different kinds of roles in a crisis, and that each staff member needs to understand how their strengths fit with others... doers, helpers, emotional antennae, enablers, drivers, 'tidiers' (emotional mopper uppers) etc etc. SoM was becoming a company culture, or giving an implicit company culture of care a stronger and more explicit framework.



5. Reality Shift

Two years into the SoM programme timeframe however, external factors crashed in to impact in complex ways on people's states of mind, and on the SoM agenda. Some form of resilience was required. Mark Robinson has worked with the concept of 'adaptive resilience', and while he has since moved on to reformulate this as 'creative resilience'⁹, the former idea might be specifically useful for this exploration:

'Adaptive resilience is the capacity to be productive, loved/valued and true to core purpose and identity whilst absorbing disturbance, adapting with integrity in response to changing circumstances and positively influencing the environment'.

Mark Robinson – Blog: 'Thinking/Practice: Adaptive Resistance' 18.09.2020¹⁰

So, at the SoM midpoint in March 2020, when the COVID 19 pandemic hit the UK, this reality shift affected every aspect of the SoM programme context –

- Face to face 20SH activities ceased
- Young people were in lockdown, isolated from friends as well as from their organised activities
- The team members were in lockdown, working from home
- As elsewhere across the country and the world, both team members and members of the 20SH community of young people were facing different magnitudes of challenges to their own and peers' states of mind
- Some faced complex pressures and worsening emotional environments at home, even increased potential risks to their own safety at home, bereavements, family financial crisis, disruption of learning and worsening future prospects, disorientation, and a dominant sense of fear – of this unknown reality, and fear for others' safety and for people, community, and even peoples globally, suffering worse scenarios: *"it was getting to be a big deal in our heads"*

9. <https://futureartscentres.org.uk/app/uploads/2021/09/Tactics-for-the-Tightrope-Mark-Robinson-Future-Arts-Centres.pdf>

10. <http://thinkingpractice.blogspot.com/2020/09/adaptive-resistance.html>

- Some faced complex pressures and worsening emotional environments at home, even increased potential risks to their own safety at home, bereavements, family financial crisis, disruption of learning and worsening future prospects, disorientation, and a dominant sense of fear – of this unknown reality, and fear for others' safety and for people, community, and even peoples globally, suffering worse scenarios: "it was getting to be a big deal in our heads"
- Home working presented new stresses for staff, and experiences varied widely, with different amounts of space, companionship at home, connectivity; pressures from home schooling, vulnerable family, COVID infections, and then bereavement for some
- Meanwhile young people mourned the absence of 'somewhere to go' every week during COVID. "There was somewhere for me to go every week and forget about things and the outside world – just go and be with people who have the same interests as me and be creative - and now I haven't got anything like that, I'm just in bed all day. I feel a lot more tired and lethargic, going to bed at 4am and waking up at 12pm / 1pm....." (former Young Actors' Company member)

The immediate shock to the company of the magnitude and seriousness of COVID was in keeping with the shock experienced everywhere. Then two months into this COVID nightmare, the murder of George Floyd delivered a new and different set of challenges – further affecting the mental health and wellbeing of 20SH participants, audiences, staff and community. The twin impacts from these two major external events were felt differently at the personal level by all the different members of the 20SH community. People's experiences in this moment were marked by the wide range of intersectional injustices affecting them differently as people of colour or white, with or without lived experience of violence, police violence, systemic discrimination due to their identity, and so on) and there was a risk of this creating divisions within the team and company.

In Chronicle 1 part II and in Chronicle 2 we look more deeply at the specific impacts of George Floyd's murder, and how this threw a new focus onto the company's anti-racist activist ethos. While the impacts of both traumas were of course constantly interacting through this period and are hard to separate out from each other, in this chronicle we go on to follow the unfolding story and reality of the Pandemic lockdowns as a specific challenge. At this moment of potentially paralysing trauma (resulting from the cocktail of these events) it was noticeable with 20SH that the first instinct of the company was to focus on caring – safeguarding the on-going states of mind of all those who make up the extensive 20SH community. Other considerations came second to this.

6. Resilience - together - a community

In the face of this immense upheaval, from the early pandemic phase 20SH responded proactively, through a well-grounded connection and sensitivity to local and individual needs. The SoM lens helped 20SH focus on how they could best deploy their resources, time, people...

Team members had diverging responses to the COVID 19 lockdown situation - different energies working differently. Early on, team members identified a 'speeds split', a "*slight pulling apart*": Some team members wanted to slow down "*taking our time, breathing, observing*;" Others were keen to jump into action, "*go fully digital and be part of the National conversation*". Anticipating each team member's need for reflection time to absorb and understand the change that was hitting everybody, and recognising the impulse company members had to flex their attention and energies towards the urgent needs in their own local communities, two hours per day were allocated to all staff, for self-directed pandemic response locally.

Some other cultural organisations took a different track - reinventing themselves as local community support services, setting up food banks¹¹, dog walking, collecting and delivering people's medications, shopping, becoming a local information hub etc., but for 20SH the relational ties with members of their community were best supported through social and creative processes.

11. For one example see Slung Low's pandemic memoir "The Club on the Edge of Town", and "What is the role do you think for local theatre in a community?";



Planning and regularly reviewing a COVID 19 health and safety response became the new norm, meticulously putting into practice agreed protocols so that everyone in the 20SH community remained protected from the virus while involved in any 20SH business. Story building processes (our reflective practice evaluation)¹² noted numerous detailed ways in which the 20SH team responded to the multiple changes and stresses of the crisis, from the beginning and the first national lockdown in April 2020, through the repeated and unceasing changes to health and safety guidance and legal frameworks for group work, through local lockdown phases, and the subsequent national rules changing throughout the (so far) 24 months of the Pandemic. Real-time journaling noted that the response to the disruption was marked by 'care' as a priority – "an embrace", of all those belonging to the 20SH community.

7. Meanwhile... the mental health in wider society brings in chill wind

Even before the Pandemic, and accelerating during this time, mental health and wellbeing was becoming a flagship concern, at all levels of society. These wider societal tides of focus seemed at that time to be infused by a 'neoliberal orientation'¹³ towards individualism, a divisive and competitive orientation, in which for example social media would amplify and encourage celebration of individuals for declaring their mental frailty, or create a worrying 'race to the bottom', with people competing in how serious their mental health crisis was.

Concerns about this trend were discussed by the youth theatre team through their SoM work, seeking strategies to combat and reverse this culture, for example in youth theatre sessions or in one-to-one support for young people. Was it even possible to work with a declared 'state of mind' theme (amidst the wider culture of frenzy about mental health issues), *without* inviting young people into a space in which they felt they must be in crisis to qualify and belong, as part of the social group? - a key question for SoM. There can be a seductive safety in feeling bonded by shared trauma, or even by experiencing empathy for others' trauma. But this was the opposite of the resilience that the SoM programme was seeking to build. How could this creative making space be safeguarded, so that the impact on their peers of each young person sharing their difficult experiences and feelings could be positive for all of their states of mind – both in the room and beyond?

12. See State of Mind Chronicles introduction paragraph – also footnotes 2 and 3 above for more detail on this

13. For one example see Slung Low's pandemic memoir "The Club on the Edge of Town", and "What is the role do you think for local theatre in a community?";

One feature of the approach in SoM from early on was collectivity, characterised by the much-used opener to any discussion or meeting: "*how are we all doing?*" This offers a collective embrace, rather than focussing each individual on their own separate isolation or anxiety¹⁴. With skilful handling, creative team members managed to steer the young people from this opener towards recognising positive aspects of their state of mind in the room, and their valued, positive place within the collective. Affirmative responses and positive focus began to reverse the spiral – e.g. in June 2020, youth theatre director Nathan responded to young people sharing their own SoM practical tips, writing for CHOKKA: "*This is lovely, I feel like you guys should be my life coaches and I'll have all these things recorded: 'You can DO this Nathan!!'*". These tips were included as part of the CHOKKA final production.



8. Strained nerves - new approaches needed



SoM approaches, tools, languages, the SoM culture, were becoming ever more explicit during 2020: providing a shared currency within 20SH. This offered ways of riding out the pandemic challenges through collective action, even though the challenges kept on coming, and pandemic impacts were experienced differently across the team.

By autumn 2020 exec team members were wondering how long people could continue to 'stay well', amidst so much uncertainty... all were needing to respond to new levels of complexity: The focus on SoM can ironically accentuate stress, since people are more aware of what others are suffering (and empathy, as well as awareness of the potential for damage, cause their own anxieties). As people's states of mind were shifting and changing all the time, there was "*lots of stuff bubbling under*", and exec team members reflected that it was hard knowing how to support people (and to keep SoM central to everything) "*without being on edge all the time*".

14. See Chronicle 3 for more on this theme



Indeed, after almost a year of COVID stress the team was very tired and expressing strains: *"It's very tough... when (Govt) rules keep changing, our systems need to change, but the end of 2020 we all fell off a cliff..." "I'm wearing thin on patience to keep adapting"* The new 2021 lockdown made the situation clearer, but constrained again. *"Where do we get the energy to restart again after this?"*. While 20SH had equipped itself with highly useful tools and an entire strategy for developing care and resilience as a team through the SoM focus, SoM as a strategy was being severely tested.

The team nevertheless used SoM tools and dialogues to confront these strains and tensions, and managed to stay cohesive, problem solving together. There is certainly evidence that 20SH, with its grounded, actions-based focus on SoM for almost 3 years, was better able to respond immediately to the pandemic crisis with an appropriate offer, and more able to remain steady as a team, than without SoM to work with. *"The team reported feeling very supported during lockdowns, SoM practice helped us prioritise the team's wellbeing over that time in numerous ways"*.

9. Two new thoughts on head and heart...

SoM seemed to be forming into more than just an exploration – it was giving back in very practical ways, under the multiple COVID 19 pressures. Perhaps SoM highlighting and more consciously developing this team's emotional 'ecology' (how individual strengths fit together ... the doers, helpers, emotional antennae, enablers, drivers, 'tidiers' or emotional mopper uppers...) as a strategy has in itself been useful. This kind of collective approach places extending emotional intelligence, sensitivity to multiple needs, and cohesiveness as a group at its centre; and this perhaps provides an antidote to the increasingly dominant, neoliberal-infused individuality trend: which focusses on individual needs, and a responsibility for self-care.

Could one strand of practical learning from SoM be understood as a form of 'adaptive resilience'? one that takes feelings (those ever-changing states of mind amongst all members of a small team or a wider group) as the heart and strength of how things work, adapt and change for the better? There is a lot of interest amongst social scientists and the therapeutic professions in how emotional connections like this work, both positively and potentially negatively for groups. The term 'affect' is used to describe these dynamics. (In State of Mind Chronicle 3 we return to this idea of 'affect' with more discussion). We wonder whether the robust and unflinching focus on SoM practiced by 20SH over the past four years has road-tested a form of collective affective resilience? In other words, was SoM at this point in the story perhaps beginning to emerge as a pressure-tested resilience strategy that draws its strength (its head and heart) from its focus on learning how states of mind collectively interact in difficult times?

Part II of this State of Mind Chronicle picks up the tale, and discusses the role SoM continued to play under new pressures from 2020 onwards, how its own challenges threw up additional questions and needs, and how 20SH responded.

A. Raw, April 2022, in collaboration with 20 Stories High

These chronicles are one outcome of a deeply collaborative and rich story building process. Huge thanks and acknowledgements to all those in the 20 Stories High community who have shared their perspectives and reflections so honestly, without your voices these chronicles would not exist. Thanks also to all who have offered thoughts on the text, especially Dr Madeleine Irwin, Leanne Jones, Lee Corner and Lucy Graham. The story building process for SoM is supported by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation State of Mind programme grant. Find out more on 20storieshigh.org.uk

Follows:

State of Mind Chronicle 1) Walking the high wire in high winds - Part II: Gale force

15. See 'Reality Shift' and footnote 9 above.

State of Mind

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