

# State of Mind

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## **Chronicle 2:**

White allyship and the wellbeing of  
Global Majority stakeholders:

How State of Mind has supported the  
20SH activist ethos

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# 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-building associates Joe Taylor, Paislie Reid and Anita Welsh, the narratives below were built up over a 4-year period, parts of the jigsaw then pieced together to make a whole. The Chronicles aim 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

UK arts and cultural organisations in the socially engaged arts sector are once more walking the high wire in a high wind.<sup>1</sup>

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'<sup>2</sup> shines a light on some interesting and timely balancing tricks, that may assist others through the storm...



The following think piece is one of a set of a set 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'<sup>3</sup>, 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 Principles<sup>4</sup>.

1. See also Mark Robinson's use of this image in <https://www.tacticsforthetightrope.com>

2. 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

3. '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.

4. <https://www.culturalvalue.org.uk/our-work/evaluation/evaluation-principles/>



## 3. Starting Point

This chronicle explores 20SH's recent work on State of Mind (SoM) and how this interacts with the company's activist ethos and activity. This is their work, creative and more widely, towards greater Equity, Diversity and Inclusion in theatre making, including work with Nathan Powell, and numerous specially targeted programmes – see the 'Activism' page on the company's website<sup>5</sup>. The chronicle charts important moments in the SoM<sup>6</sup> story, sharing our perspectives as the company's external evaluation team (Story-builders). We suggest that this interplay between SoM and the company's activist work offers a more widely useful framework in current times.

20 Stories High is an activist theatre company. The Toxteth-based company has been working, since its 2006 inception, to confront and undermine embedded inequalities and barriers to inclusion, specifically in theatre making and the performing arts sector. This work has involved highlighting the persisting multiple (intersectional)<sup>7</sup> barriers facing people due to their cultural heritage and class: *"A commitment to equality has always been part of our DNA. That has driven the work we make and the ways we make it."*<sup>8</sup>

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5. Found at <https://www.20storieshigh.org.uk/equality-diversity-inclusion-and-activism/>

6. The acronym SoM is used to identify the funded programme of work under the title 'State of Mind (note 1 above)', as distinct from the concept 'state of mind' referring to how somebody is feeling and what this means for them

7. Intersectionality refers to the multiple ways that different identity experiences and oppressions can interact, and will complicate and reinforce deeply negative disadvantages, injustices and violence for individuals in our current society

8. Source: 20SH Equity Principles/Process, 16.12.21

Activist principles – seeking and working for change – are embedded also in the way the company works. For example the commitment to giving a voice to the lived experience of groups whose pathways into positions of influence are systematically blocked. This as a long-term company commitment, offering opportunities to young people as they remain members of the 20SH community, and providing structures for including young people's voices in decision making where possible. Some young people have remained active within the company for over a decade, moving through roles as makers, performers, directors, facilitators (e.g. see the [Launch programme](#)<sup>9</sup>), as core staff team members, on the Board, or in mentorship roles.

However, in common with all efforts to achieve social, structural and political change, the journey is never complete. As a learning organisation there is a deep awareness at 20SH that realising these principles as working practices is an ongoing process. While the company's Board, participants, artists and audiences have been diverse, the make-up of the core team has not reflected the diversity of the community the company has served, and this has remained an area of ethical discomfort. The subject has been much discussed, seen as further highlighting the urgent need across the sector generally to open up access to more diverse groups and people from the Global Majority<sup>10</sup>. Partnership work and training with Inc Arts in this area is ongoing.

With a commitment to social and activist engagement so central to the company's culture and practice, it had long been foundational when we arrived as story builders to capture the SoM narrative. In many organisations this kind of commitment can become an unspoken 'normal' - a way of being and doing things that's explicit through actions and that's willingly accepted by everyone as a shared foundation to everything, that sits below the surface. Against this backdrop, in 2018 the company introduced the additional commitment to explore State of Mind, and what this means in every aspect of their work, including in core ethics and established working culture. The interplay between these two strands of 20SH work, and the ways each tested the other, is the focus of this chronicle.

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9. Launch Programme found here - <https://www.20storieshigh.org.uk/launch/>

10. See sector leadership on this issue by [Inc Arts](#)

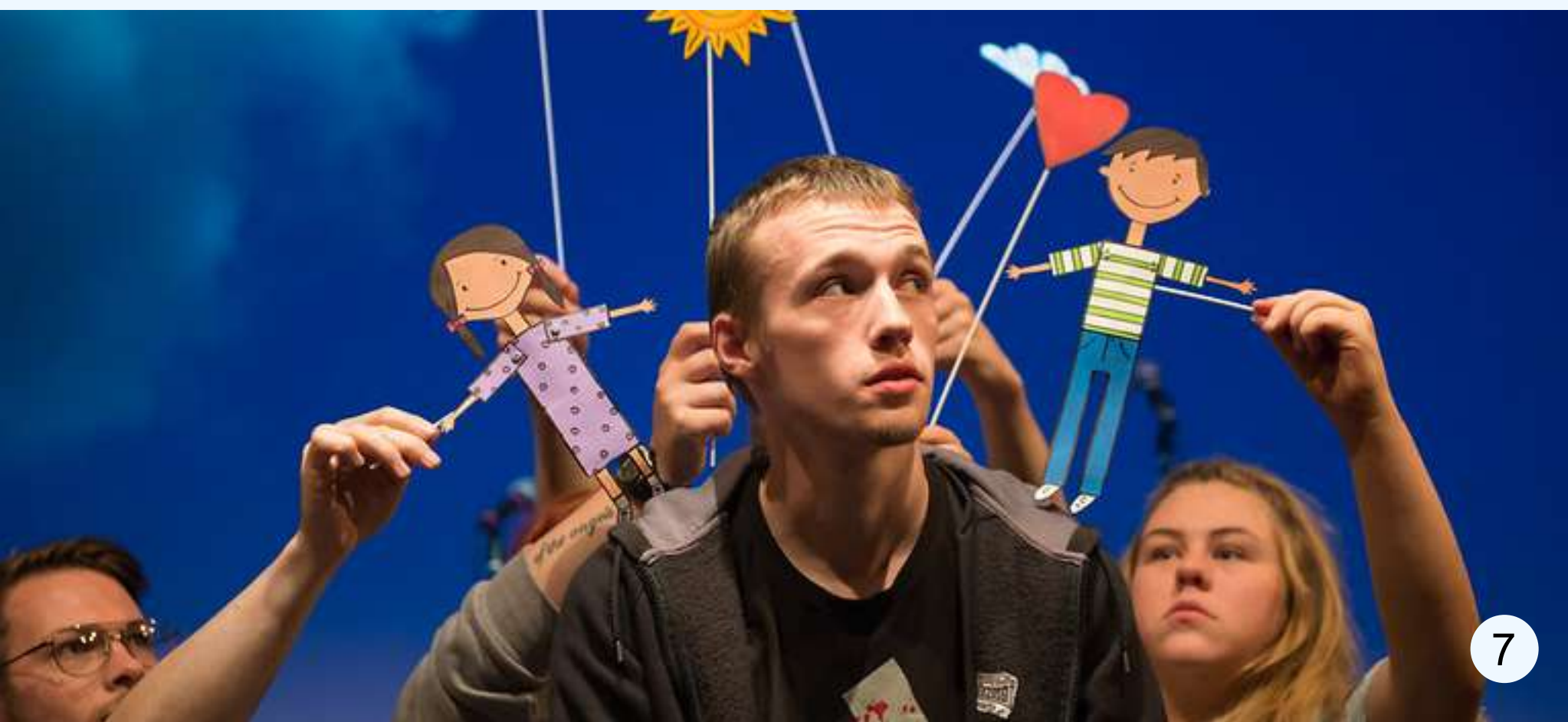
The SoM exploration provided a constantly reflective framework and culture - "a way for 20SH to evaluate, assess and action," developing "a toolkit of ways to make sure our work supports the wellbeing and safety of everyone" - "a way for us to understand where we're at, and how we can do better, and share that more widely." This ensured that mental health and wellbeing (attending to people's personal and interpersonal emotional needs) became a central conversation and guiding preoccupation within the company, and the externally focussed activist or political work (in practical, public ways, work on structural change) was less obviously at the forefront of discussions. SoM became explicit, and the activist and politically engaged focus more implicit.



### 3. A moment sparks renewed activism

During this early Covid-pandemic period, a time of international, national and local anxiety, all emotional antennae were alert to intensifying culture wars, increasing social media dominance of the airwaves, and the toxic impacts on people's states of mind generally. People were seeking connection to a wider sense of human solidarity, focusing more critically on political and social conditions of injustice and inequality. For 20SH as chronicled previously, the SoM programme with its deep reflective learning approach and specialised training had equipped the team well for navigating the heightened sensitivities and real vulnerabilities of this early pandemic period. However, when George Floyd was murdered by police in the US in April 2020, sparking intensified rage about racial injustices and the Black Lives Matter tidal wave of action, this moment impacted powerfully on the 20SH community and company. 20 Stories High activist work needed to focus more on the emotional toll such acts of injustice takes on company and community members from the Global Majority, while simultaneously recognising the urgent need for white colleagues to embrace more impactful white antiracist activism. So how would SoM help the team with this new challenge?

The team entered a period of addressing some deeper questions, as one team member reflected: *"Because it was a time when organisations were asked to look internally, it felt like we should be doing that, if we hadn't been doing it before... there was a new sense of urgency, for the right reasons. There was still work to do. We needed to start doing that work now. ... we talk about who our work is for, but if you look at the make-up of the staff team, ... it's not just shows, it's about who has a say, and power..."* This was a delicate period of reassessment, because shock of the moment had very different impacts for team members with experience of racism and for those whose lived experience had been protected by their white privilege.





In this process the company was tested: it was a difficult time for the team in how the aftershocks played out for people locally in Liverpool and in the company, individually and collectively. Some team members spoke about a jarring initial experience, a deep "shock to the core", doubt, and awakening. Some feared a schism could undermine the deep trust built up over so long within the team. This was an unexpected emotional turmoil, a crisis of confidence. Black team member Nathan's reflection captures the sense of this as a profound "moment" for the company *"in its journey of understanding itself as an anti-racist organisation". "It's easy to get into a position of complacency - the work that we do is great etc... The important stuff about how power is shared and who has a voice in the big conversations can be a bit lost. It was a moment for the company to think - 'ok if this is who we say we are, we got to walk the talk'. We had realise that no meeting about a funding bid or marketing etc. is more important than this conversation [about George Floyd's murder and what it signifies], on this day"*.

Within the mixed 20SH team new learning was prioritised, to help white colleagues more actively and effectively take up the role of anti-racist 'allyship'. Team members took steps to understand the existing emotional cost to people of colour from being asked to educate others. *"We became aware of the imbalance in who 'pays' for the activist agenda". "Several of us white colleagues feel we want to fight that fight - we're in it together, it's about making sure we have the education and articulation to do that"*. For some in the team these new steps felt awkward, messy, uncertain, with fears of inadequacy, despite strong conviction and commitment to this important work. Team members found anti-racist tools and resources very useful at this time.<sup>11</sup>

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11. For example: *'Me and White Supremacy: How to Recognise Your Privilege, Combat Racism and Change the World'*, Layla F Saad, 2020; and *'Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race'*, Reni Eddo-Lodge, 2017.



In this process the 20SH activist agenda had become personal – the forms that the questioning took were internal, opening up very different experiences, personal searching and honesty. As SoM learning was being tested again, we as story-builders wondered how it could facilitate and encourage positive practices to help the team work on this complex agenda? Team members took on self-education, taking personal responsibility for the knowledge gaps, and the safe, open discussion spaces previously practiced in SoM work enabled some in the team to disclose deeply sensitive feelings: *"People have got very comfortable with saying 'I don't know, I don't understand this thing, can you tell me?' or 'I don't know, so tell me if this is wrong, but this is what I think?' which is healthy"*. Others found that the individual reflection time encouraged by the SoM tools and practices helped them to create personal space through which they could regain their balance and confidence in interactions with colleagues: *"people hear something, feel something and go away to think about it, digest that in their own time ... and let it mean whatever it means for them in the future – which is good too I think."*



Through this period, one instinct was for the company to focus on its own socially and politically engaged identity as an identifying characteristic, describing the Black Lives Matter protests as "*a wake-up call.*" The company initiated a number of specific performance projects and activities in a response<sup>12</sup> (listed in SoM Chronicle 1 part II): "*Both Black with a Capital B and Black Scouse and Proud (with the youth theatre) are pieces of work that profiled young Black artists, and whatever they wanted to say*" – and these creative responses gave energy to the 20SH activist commitment publicly. The team and Board agreed that the existing understanding of the 20SH 'engaged' identity needed to become much more explicit. But some expressed feeling cautious that 'politics' and 'political' had become terms that carried unhelpful baggage, and didn't accurately reflect the nature of the 20SH community's commitment to creating change. Over the summer months of 2020 the word 'activist' was accepted as the right way to convey and understand what 20SH was about, and they began emphasising the company's 'activist' identity externally. Internal SoM work led the team to develop a deeper and expanded equality diversity and inclusion (EDI) training programme<sup>13</sup>. The initial 'A' was added here also, to emphasise a focus on activism (EDIA). Ultimately, in 2021, the company agreed the first initial should stand for Equity rather than the previous Equality, as another more accurate representation of the 20SH *approach*<sup>14</sup>. While this EDIA work initially focussed specifically on learning more deeply about the effects of racism and how to confront the realities of white privilege, the learning agenda quickly widened to look at intersectionality<sup>15</sup>. The programme incorporated awareness raising of a range of lived experiences of oppression, including specifically LGBTQ+ experiences, living with disabilities, neurodiversity, body-based oppressions e.g. plus-size experience, and how to confront these and other injustices in multiple ways – beginning with self-education and reflection<sup>16</sup>.

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12. See detailed information here: <https://www.20storieshigh.org.uk/equality-diversity-inclusion-and-activism/>

13. See note 11 above on working with Inc Arts; and note 16 with a link to the EDIA page on the website

14. This is because 20SH as a company aims consciously to confront and undermine structural inequalities, by seeing and responding to needs on an individual basis – so that equity in resourcing this individual tailored support enables equality of access for everyone in how they can participate. Source: 20SH Equity Principles/process, 16.12.21

15. Intersectionality refers to the multiple ways in which different identity experiences and oppressions can interact, and will complicate and reinforce deeply negative disadvantages, injustices and violence for individuals in our current society.

16. Following the September 2021 dedicated SoM month, the company developed a thorough 'Equity Principles/ Process' document with flow chart, to support and underpin putting learning from the EDIA training into practice in all aspects of the company's activities. Similar resources can be found on 20 Stories High's website. <https://www.20storieshigh.org.uk/state-of-mind/>

SoM story-building traced internal/external and collective/individual pushes and pulls for people in this period of the company's work. As a SoM measure, throughout this intensified learning phase the company continued to offer time either as groups or in one-to-one sessions with the artist wellbeing practitioner Lou Platt<sup>17</sup>, to help people work through vulnerabilities. Lou was invited to lead a session with young Black artists at the beginning of work on Black with a Capital B, exploring what felt safe for them to explore. Keith noted: *"It was a tricky emotional session. Lots of people online shared their histories of trauma and racism. Lou helped us navigate the waters, she spoke to the group about re-traumatising, and that finding a safe space to talk about these things was paramount"*. Lou (herself a white woman) felt other wellbeing practitioners with different lived experience of inequities and injustice should be introduced, to better match and support the needs of many in the 20SH community. Posing the question: *"At the moment I'm giving you the fish, how can I give you the fishing rod?"* she supported the 20SH team to adopt for themselves some of the tools she uses, to give options for the company to pursue its SoM work more independently of her. Meanwhile the efforts to identify other highly skilled artist wellbeing professionals with more diverse identities and lived experience are ongoing.

The constant interplay between SoM and the 20SH activist ethos, identity and activity suggests they are inextricably linked: two ethical frameworks central to 20SH that have both been developing in depth and capacity during the lifetime of the SoM programme. In the next part of this chronicle this interrelationship and the insights it offers for the sector more widely are explored and outlined.

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17. See Lou's website: <https://becreativebeinspired.wordpress.com/>



## 4. Discussion – merging tides? Deeper seas? Creative resilience?

The narratives of these two key strands of 20SH work – SoM and an activism identity and activity – share many similar traits:

- a similar 'ethical' impulse initiated them, as outlined above, marked by a similar focussed commitment, and whole team engagement
- each theme has developed into a distinctive cultural currency of the company – e.g. each is generating shared short-hand languages and practices, that everybody understands. Two good examples of these are:
  - the phrase 'clarity is kindness' (developed from author and researcher Brené Brown's original motif "*clear is kind, unclear is unkind*")<sup>18</sup>, which is used to remind people that there is a potentially unhealthy power dynamic in play when lines, terms, expectations or any aspects of collaborative working are unclear, and leaving things unclear is uncomfortable and unethical
  - the role anyone can adopt of monitoring discussions and decision making with an outside eye, to be alert for implications for either agenda (SoM or EDI or anti-racist activism) – known as "*being a tree person*", indicating they can see a big picture clarity, while others in the discussion might not be 'seeing the woods for the trees'
- as part of both themes, team members are developing similar shared expectations of themselves and of each other: mutuality and sensitivity, alertness to each other's signals, openness and honesty, responsibility and self-education, deep listening, collectivity in finding creative solutions to challenges
- and both themes are sustaining a general curiosity within the team, and quest to continue learning about these two aspects of human experience, so central also to the company's performance making. One catch-all term often used for this is the aim to "*stay curious*".

18. From Brené Brown, Dare to Lead, Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts. Penguin, 2018



## 5. Complexities

As the company's SoM work was put to the test following the murder of George Floyd, the two themes of activism and mental wellbeing became dynamically intertwined. There was an impact on individuals' states of mind resulting from their engagement with the 20SH activist agenda - *"Yes, being an activist organisation has an impact on wellbeing. We've seen that with our colleagues of colour, seen that exhaustion from continuing to challenge and fight"*. This newly heightened awareness of the state of mind cost to colleagues of colour raised questions: what cost had there been to those leading on this work before, where it echoed painful lived experiences? Since a previous lead had been taken by British Asian and Black team members, who can or should lead an activist anti-racism agenda now? The state of mind impacts for all concerned when these roles were opened up were an additional test for the SoM tools.

The team raised in their story-building journals that effective allyship requires a lot of personal work, and is complex. One team member highlighted the personal impact of confronting gaps between what they truly wish to change, and what they can pragmatically achieve: *"it's hard because I've got such a consciousness of wanting to do it, my whole heart is there, but these commitments carry emotional weight if you don't meet them – for you and for others. You feel you're letting down colleagues who've already experienced racism, which can be damaging to their mental health..."*

On the other hand, story-building picked up that SoM was supporting the company's activism by offering a framework of active care, with tools and techniques for listening and maintaining awareness. SoM has offered the team:

- *New ways to have difficult conversations that can minimise divisive impacts:* team members noted that SoM has helped build emotional resilience, helping them combat the distancing and potentially paralysing effects of "white fragility"<sup>19</sup> so that discussions could be fluid
- *New ways of spotting subtle organisational or team dynamics, and their impacts;* especially focussing on how power differentials within the team disrupt the possibility for people to contribute equally or openly. SoM techniques helped develop new systems to meet the challenges these power structures create

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19. White Fragility is an exploration of how an emotional response from a white person to a sense of responsibility for, and connection to the racist impact on people of colour of, their privileges due to their white experience can disrupt or destroy positive action, and can reinforce racism. See 'White Fragility: Why its so hard for white people to talk about racism', and 'White Fragility' (<https://libjournal.uncg.edu/ijcp/article/viewFile/249/116>), both by Dr Robin DiAngelo

- *New courage for some colleagues to take on a more visible activist role, both as a person of the Global Majority, and as a white colleague and ally (or ally to a different marginalised group). For example, Keith has felt able to lead a high visibility 'Truth and Reconciliation' campaign lasting over a year, to challenge a leading Liverpool venue to examine the systemic racism experienced by people of the Global Majority who worked with and for them. "It wasn't easy, but SoM definitely contributed to that intervention and to the wellbeing of everybody in that room... There's something about the SoM process that allowed me to take on that organisation with a different strategy, so it had less of an impact on my mental health"*



## 6. Strategic dimensions



For us, as story-builders, a question emerges: are SoM and EDI Activism actually distinct strands of work, or are they now inseparable? Is one part of the other? Or are they complementary parts of the same whole – a strategy or framework that facilitates the company to be more 'care-fully' activist? Both themes feature a concern with safety, social connectedness and belonging, reducing discrimination, prejudice and exclusion, increasing pro-social behaviour and an impulse towards a more explicitly activist ethos and practice – at the personal level and externally, through social action. Some team members explained that the two themes are related but not blended, because they each carry different emphases, and because it's important to maintain a distinct awareness of both, to avoid the work becoming blurred and lost.

Drawing on the sharpened awareness that the company has developed of the diverse SoM needs across the 20SH community, people's states of mind are really an equity consideration within the team – an activist, internal aspect of the Equity Principles. This captures the lasting importance of and accountability for everybody's state of mind, with SoM becoming a foundational policy consideration for the company for the long term.

The team's motivation with both EDI activism and SoM continues to be high, despite the extra energy that being so conscious or mindful takes: *"This way of working requires more of your whole self"*. Without a strong sense of community to sustain and support the work, the effort itself might cause burn-out for team members. But the SoM work has provided many collective ways to notice and head off these risks for people at the personal level: *"We're going on the two journeys together, and everyone's so committed – we help each other flag up and notice the details of what it all means, reminding each other."*

Viewed as two markers of a 20SH culture more broadly, this is a culture of 'care-full' responsibility<sup>20</sup>: This is care for self, for team members and for wider social impacts, in the collective sense – a culture of caring and being bothered to care. As SoM story-builders we have found that the 20SH equitable, reflective working practices, combined with the constant interplays between collective/activist and personal/internal work SoM has developed, come through in this holistic way of 'taking care'. It acknowledges the internal world of each person's state of mind (personal and interpersonal focus) and its impacts, and external world of activism (public focus, work on structural change) as twin pillars: which 20SH has been making more consciously central, and strengthening in relation to each other, over the past four years throughout the SoM programme.

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20. See Chronicle 3 for more on this theme





## 7. Concluding thoughts

The company continues to navigate the heat and pressure of a potentially divisive crisis point in anti-racist work, and a reckoning with their own activist identity as a company, with the SoM learning process as their guide. This thread of the SoM story shows that precisely through the company members' creativity, and imaginative impulse to create theatre and art works, and all the processes involved in creating unique performances together, they managed to use SoM in this way so effectively. Embarking on new learning processes that mean team members and groups have to confront risky or vulnerable realities, explore their own needs and limits, demands courage, honesty and resilience. Resilience is central to finding healthy ways to explore the more challenging, interpersonally complex aspects of socially and politically engaged work, as an activist company. Building resilience is also a central aim of the State of Mind programme. In this thread of the SoM story, when the company's activist identity as an anti-racist organisation was tested during the tumultuous events triggered by the murder of George Floyd, the SoM programme actively supported the company's resilience.

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

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# State of Mind

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