



# Marlborough Productions

## Background

Marlborough Productions has been producing queer-led, intersectional performance, parties, heritage and radical community gatherings for the past 10 years. Based in Brighton, but increasingly working nationally and internationally, the organisation had run the Marlborough Pub & Theatre venue until early 2020. Giving up the venue has altered the rhythm and scope of the organisation's activities and ambition, and the organisation has become an important partner in working with others to develop and deliver LGBTQIA+ cultural and heritage projects and models. The organisation has 4.5 FTE staff, and the Executive Director participated fully in the Heritage Compass programme on behalf of the organisation.



A Queer Night at the Museum 2 (2020) Photo by Rosie Powell

## What Marlborough Productions needed from Heritage Compass

Marlborough Productions had recently left their venue base, and were pivoting to a different business model. The onset of Covid-19 and the related disruption made the development of a new business model much more urgent. The earned income which had previously been a significant part of the income base for the organisation was unlikely to recover any time soon, and the organisation needed to re-examine all of its activity to see what would be financially viable in the future.

The move away from the venue also meant that Marlborough Productions was re-thinking its value and how it fitted into the wider sector. Partly as a result of wider changes taking place, the organisation was finding itself being recognised and acknowledged particularly as a minority-led initiative by the culture and heritage sectors, including by funders. The organisation had previously had some funding which supported them to begin redeveloping their business model and producing

a plan, and they wanted the Heritage Compass programme to help them to revisit and update this, and help them to articulate their long-term vision and plans.

## Developing a business plan and taking opportunities

As the organisation emerged from lockdowns and from a period of running a venue, staff members felt burn out and it was clear that some elements of the programme and activities felt obligatory rather than something that was creatively fulfilling or financially rewarding. The period of change and disruption was also very challenging for the staff team, and exposed some of the weakness that many small organisations experience in relation to HR and managing difficult situations. The organisation had felt a big responsibility to their diverse staff team and network of LGBTQIA+ freelancers during the pandemic.

The Heritage Compass programme has helped Marlborough Productions to review and refine the new business model and plan, and to prioritise new areas of income generation. In the period in which the organisation has participated in Heritage Compass they were able to use this stronger articulation of the vision and business plan to make successful, multi-year funding applications to two major trusts and foundations, which has supported new staff roles and built the capacity of the organisation in pursuing the new business model.

## How Heritage Compass has been useful

Marlborough Productions have found their Heritage Compass critical friend an invaluable sounding board during the pandemic, particularly when there were challenging moments with the staff team and board. They helped the organisation and senior staff members who participated in Heritage Compass to feel less alone, and practically supported them in creating a trustee recruitment pack which helped to identify a new co-chair, and is supporting the search for three new trustees. The organisation has also had a mentor who already made an impact in a short space of time, introducing them to data collection and feedback approaches which are supporting the organisation to develop its brand identity. The significant experience of the critical friend and the mentor has been appreciated at both an organisational and a personal level.

The training gave the organisations a few things which could be implemented very quickly in the organisation – for example, the earned income training meant that Marlborough Productions changed their risk register format and connected it to their reserve policy, enabling them to better assess the financial value and impact of projects. Generally the training was found to be useful in underpinning the business planning process and the organisation's confidence in applying (successfully) for significant funding from trusts and foundations.

Marlborough Productions also found the programme useful for connecting them more widely in the heritage sector, and they have already made a connection outside the programme to exchange experiences and learning. Sitting alongside other organisations from the sector also helped the organisation think about how it might work with and alongside the sector to bring the specific skills and experience which Marlborough Productions has as a LGBTQIA+-led and focused organisation.

## What Marlborough Productions needs next

The new, multi-year funding from two major trusts and foundations has helped to underpin the shift to a new business model, and this has been further underpinned by a successful application to be a National Portfolio Organisation with Arts Council England from 2023. Whilst Marlborough Productions had some National Lottery Heritage Fund support, they have found that the jump up to a larger application still feels like a big step in practical terms. The organisation has undertaken

some pilot work trying out models for other LGBTQIA+ heritage groups in the South East, and is working on some other potentially interesting partnerships with major cultural and educational institutions.

This is all very positive, but the organisation recognises that there has been a lot of change in the last two years, and that staff are quite tired and feel a bit burnt out. As the organisation moves into a more national space, they would like to build their networks and to have opportunities to keep refreshing those networks over time, so that longer-term partnerships can emerge. Marlborough Productions are keen that participating in the Heritage Compass programme isn't seen as the end, and that organisations have had their 'go' – organisations like Marlborough Productions would benefit from further support in three to four years, organisations need 'topping up'. There's also still significant challenges for organisations like Marlborough Productions to try and encourage funders to support more innovative practice, and engage more with processes which may be riskier and involve more research and development, rather than guaranteed outcomes or existing ways of working.

### Advice for other organisations

Make time for the learning to percolate, for you to share it with your teams and to practically implement it in your orgs. It was partly a factor of the pandemic that we were in 'survival mode' but to be honest as a small organisation there is never enough time unless you really carve it out of the schedule.

Don't be afraid to let things go that are not serving you anymore - we have had problems with getting nostalgic about certain activities and programmes which are just a drain on time and money.

When you are going through a period of change you probably need to explain the rationale behind it at least twice as much/often as you think to your team. It's vital that you take them on the journey for a change process to succeed. If people are blocking you, intervene early and listen carefully, so that things don't fester.

Marlborough Productions

# Update

February 2024

Towards the end of the Heritage Compass programme David Sheppard, Co-Director and Joint CEO at Marlborough Productions, had just started the Clore Leadership Fellowship programme, and Marlborough Productions had been told that its application to be a National Portfolio Organisation with Arts Council England (ACE) had been successful. The organisation was also in receipt of funds from ACE and the Arts & Humanities Research Council for a large project which was part of Brighton Festival.

A key part of the journey for Marlborough Productions has been exploring how the organisation fits into the heritage space. The organisation's work is based in arts practice, but increasingly the historical value of what they do is being recognised by funders. The organisation itself found that sitting alongside other heritage organisations through the Heritage Compass programme, and David's participation in the Clore Leadership Fellowship, has helped it to feel more comfortable and confident understanding its contribution to heritage, and right to think of itself as a heritage organisation, in part.

Some of that has been very practical: learning the language used in heritage practices, professionalising their approach to collecting archive material. Some of it has been about building relationships with other heritage organisations (e.g. museums), and understanding and advocating for the way in which their skills – coming from an activist and producing background, embedded in a community – can help to bring other things into more traditional heritage settings.

For Marlborough Productions – led by, working with and for the LGBTQIA+ community – the organisation and its staff can feel quite vulnerable in some of the work they do, in the current climate in which there is hostility to all and parts of that community, and particularly because the organisation's relationship to its community means that the work is very personal. Reflecting on this, the organisation feels that funders are beginning to recognise that this kind of work with marginalised communities may require more time and space to develop projects than might typically be planned for.

Marlborough Productions has been successful in gaining funds from a number of key sources, and particularly in gaining some longer-term funding, alongside its ACE NPO status. Paul Hamlyn Foundation have provided some longer-term support, and the organisation has secured a substantial, four-year funding award from NLHF.

The longer-term funding is enabling the organisation to bring in an executive director for the first time, partly to build and maintain systems, to give some structure to the strategic direction of the organisation and to support its longer-term thinking. More generally, the organisation has been thinking about how it involves a wider group in making decisions about new projects and activities, and builds a wider consensus about the future direction. Marlborough Productions is developing a new rhythm for work, including how it collects material and how it works in partnership with others, and trying to move into a longer planning cycle.

Some of the board did the Heritage Compass trustees training, and David did the governance module, and that has been useful in helping Marlborough Productions to shift the way it engaged with the board. Staff are more prepared to bring difficult problems to the board, and to develop the quality of the discussion and input. The organisation's critical friend on Heritage Compass was able to introduce them to someone who has become a new board members, and more generally the training around financial and risk management has been key to establishing good systems and practices. Marlborough Productions will be renewing its business plan in the next year, and David plans to dig out his notes from the Heritage Compass business planning training to support that process.

Looking to the future, the organisation would benefit from any opportunities to continue to engage from time to time with other heritage organisations, whether in shared affinities or around similar issues. The organisation has grown and developed very rapidly, and one of the next challenges is to consolidate that growth, and potentially to plateau and ensure that the organisations is able to sustain these new ways of working rather than always to chase the next new or bigger opportunity.