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## **FEATURE: My Neck of the Woods plays out at the Royal Exchange**



**Feature by Tracey Lowe**

The Royal Exchange's 'Truth About Youth' programme is doing some fantastic work. It is inspiring young people to engage with their community, and challenge negative perceptions that people may have about the younger generation.

Funded by the Co-operative Foundation, the Royal Exchange facilitates a number of events that gives young people the tools they need to change the world, and encourage dialogue between young and old. Last year, there was an extremely successful festival, which involved drama, comedy and even a cooking competition. This year, patrons are being encouraged to interact with young people in their natural habit via video link, in 'My Neck of the Woods'.

Presented by BAFTA-nominated interactive artists Blast Theory, 'My Neck of the Woods', hopes to provide a unique insight into the minds of Manchester youths. From 20th to 21st September, a special bank of monitors will be displayed in the main foyer of the Royal Exchange, allowing visitors to peer into the lives of Leigh, Connor, Callum and Lauren. The whole experience is also available on the 'My Neck of the Woods' website. And it's not just the performers that are young;

this technologically ambitious project is completely facilitated by up-and-coming technicians.

But don't expect this to be a bit of a chat about the X Factor or football; these may be young people, but they have big questions. Leigh, who will be transmitting from his kitchen, wants to speak about how to be a successful and sustainable adult. Connor, an aspiring civil engineer, would like to start a family but is worried about finding the right person to settle down with. Karate expert Callum would like to know how to prepare for university life. And Lauren will be giving us a sneak peek behind the scenes of the Royal Exchange theatre, which she compares to a spaceship.

I had a quick chat with Kirsty Jennings, Blast Theory's Business Manager, to learn more about this innovative and exciting project.

### **TPR: How did the idea for 'My Neck of the Woods' come about?**

Kirsty: 'My Neck of the Woods' is part of a larger project called Digital Voices. Digital Voices is a collaboration between European organisations Blast Theory, The Patching Zone, and Translocal, working at the leading edge of digital and interactive media to investigate new ways of working with young people and mobile media. Digital Voices is supported by the cultural programme of the European Union.

Rather serendipitously in March this year, the Royal Exchange Theatre contacted Blast Theory about the possibility of collaborating on a project for the 'Truth about Youth' programme. This felt like the perfect partnership for the piece and through conversations with the RET and the young people alike, My Neck Of The Woods was born.

### **TRP: What is the project hoping to achieve?**

Kirsty: We want to explore how we can create platforms for meaningful exchanges for young people, and how this could open up the potential for the exchange of knowledge and skills between experienced digital media professionals and an emerging generation of digital media makers.

The outside broadcast platform for My Neck Of The Woods builds on Blast Theory's work in 'You Get Me' and 'I'd Hide You'; it is a platform that gives young people the opportunity to "broadcast" from their communities to a global audience.

We are hoping to get a wide and varied audience to take part in and engage with the stories presented in 'My Neck Of The Woods', and to challenge perspectives of young people and to have an uninterrupted honest exchange with somebody that they wouldn't do normally when walking down the street or popping into the local supermarket.

**TPR: How and why were the young people involved selected?**

Kirsty: The young people were selected through the 'Truth about Youth' programme. Leading up to the live event in Manchester, young people from 'Truth about Youth' have been taking part in workshops; developing their technical and presenting skills, and also exploring stories that are important to them as individuals and how they would like to share these. At the start of these workshops, a taster day was held with a wide call-out to young people in Manchester. All those that attended and showed interest in the project were invited to attend the workshops and subsequently have a role in the live event, be that through performing, taking on a marketing role or as technical support.

**TPR: Do you think the young people selected accurately represent the youth of Manchester?**

Kirsty: The young people represent a section of the youth in Manchester, following an open call for participants. The participants range from 15 to 21-years-old and come from different parts of Manchester. All of the young people are at a point in their lives where they feel they are at a crossroads; the point of becoming an adult, taking on new responsibilities and choosing a path for themselves.

**TPR: What are you hoping the young people will learn from the experience?**

Kirsty: We're hoping that the young people involved in the project will learn some of the elements that go into making a complex performance and digital art work. They will use their own biographies, personal skills and neighbourhoods as the subjects for the work, and this will provide a fresh approach to them for their own creative practices. Hopefully they will have a lot of fun, gain some experience of working very hard and explore new cultural forms.

**'My Neck of the Woods' is taking place in the Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester from 5:30 pm to 7:30pm on 20th and 21st September.**

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This entry was posted on September 19th, 2013 at 11:38 am and is filed under [Featured](#).

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