The Paper Birds

Feel Me

Student Resource Pack

Contents

This pack has been produced to support the 2023/24 UK Tour of 'Feel Me'.

Watch the `Feel Me´ Video HERE

Filmed and edited by Parkin Films in November 2023 at The Point, Eastleigh.

Performed & Devised by:

Lil McGibbon

Daz Scott

Kiren Virdee

Writer & Director: **Jemma McDonnell**

Co-Director: **Kylie Perry**

Assistant Director: **Shanice Sewell**

Executive Producers: **Charlotte Kalantari-Gregory & Charlie Tapp**

Producers: **Adele Souto & Katie Webster**

Designer: **Imogen Melhuish**

Sound & Music Design: **Fraser Owen**

Film Director & Movement Consultant: **Munya Muchati**

Video Designer: **Ben Glover**

Video Associate: **Bella Meyersohn**

Lighting Designer & Technical Consultant: **Mat Spencer**

Technical Stage Manager: **Fraser Owen**

The Paper Birds

Co-Artistic Directors; Jemma McDonnell and Kylie Perry

The Paper Birds is a devising theatre company, founded in Leeds in 2003 by Co-Artistic Directors **Jemma McDonnell** and **Kylie Perry**. Today, the company is based in Essex, UK and run by a small team of women who deliver engaging theatre projects with both professional theatre artists, young people, and communities.

Artistic Policy

Our vision is to provoke change, one encounter at a time. Our mission is to be quiet rebels, amplifying the voices of everyday people. We inspire change through the theatre we create.

We are story collectors. We spend time in communities, listening to personal experiences. The words of the people we meet form the backbone of our shows, giving voice to the voiceless, painting powerful and very human alternative social commentaries.

Our desire to listen, to understand and then 'give voice' means not only making space for the under-represented and the misunderstood, but also that our shows explore voices from all walks of life. We aim to do this in breathtaking theatrical fashion.

'Feel Me' is **The Paper Birds'** 14th professional production. The project was built around a mentorship programme for emerging theatre artists under the age of 30. **'Feel Me'** asks, via your mobile phone, who and what you care about from the stories unfolding live on stage in front of you. A stunning mixture of live performance, film, projection, dance and music, **'Feel Me'** explores the different lenses through which we are told, and connect to stories in the modern digital world.

Worlds unfold from backpacks, and tents are constructed and dismantled again, each scene and location temporary, like transient a teenager in search of safety, acceptance and a new place to call home. An interrogation of empathy, **'Feel Me'** asks what makes us 'feel' for another person, as we journey through landscapes and across borders, through weather storms and paperwork, changing seasons, endless queues and interviews.

Devising Process

About the Show

Made by a team of multi-disciplinary young artists, in collaboration with **The Paper Birds, 'Feel Me'** explores the theme of empathy through a story of forced displacement.

> **'Forced displacement' definition:**
>
> **"Forced displacement is an involuntary movement of a person or people away from their home or home region." (Wikipedia)**

'Feel Me' was researched in 2022 and devised and previewed in 2023. The show was made in seven weeks in Summer 2023 and previewed at **New Wolsey Theatre** in June. It began a preview tour across a select number of venues in Autumn 2023, before embarking on a larger tour schedule across the UK throughout 2024.

Artistic Director, **Jemma McDonnell** would identify areas of the topic to explore, based on research and conversations with advising academic experts, charities and steering groups. Tasks would then be given to the cast to devise and create material, whilst also working closely with choreographer, **Munya Muchati.** The material was regularly shared with advising groups for them to feed back and comment on how the material was progressing.

The show was developed in consultation with a range of charities, academics, and youth steering groups.

Largely a non-verbal, physical and visual piece, the show tells the story of an 'every-person' on a journey after being forced to flee their home. Through movement, dance, film, video projection and audience interaction, the issue of forced displacement is examined, whilst encouraging us to question where our own empathy lies.

Plot & Characters

The show follows the cast of performers telling a story of an 'every-person' who is displaced.

The cast invite the audience to interact via their phones, to imagine their own character's scenario for why, where and how the character is displaced. There are two 'strands' that run throughout the play; the first is the story, and the second is the exploration of 'empathy' as an umbrella theme.

The Story

We first meet the character when a text message arrives, instructing them to pack a bag and flee. We watch as they pack up their things and begin a journey told through choreography and physicality of them walking, flying on an aeroplane, boarding a boat, and then arriving at a 'processing' centre where they are required to present paperwork. We next see them at a hotel or temporary accommodation. We follow them through different landscapes and see snapshots of the people who assist them on their journey. We see them sleeping outside and conversing non-verbally with other travellers. We don't know where they are journeying to or whether they reach safety.

'Empathy' strand

As the play develops, the two strands of 'story' and 'empathy exploration' being to merge and overlap. Scenes such as the 'TikTok toothbrush' scene, the 'Headlines' scene, or the 'TED Talk' scene, begin to infiltrate the story. The play becomes less about the character, and more about a wider examination of what empathy is, and how, and why, and who, we feel it for. By the end of the play, the two worlds have fused – as the cast repeatedly try to emulate the strain and exhaustion that a refugee seeking safety experiences, the filter of the character has dropped and we see the cast perform the exhausting routine over and over. The lines between the two strands have been blurred.

Acting Style & Themes

Performance Style and Acting

The show dips in and out of 'acting', (where the performers play the character); and 'non-acting', (where the performers play themselves or talk directly to the audience).

The two styles simultaneously present two main narrative strands; that of the character and the key points in their journey, and the 'non-performance' strand; where the performers explore the theme of 'empathy'.

'Feel Me' is representative of a lot of devised contemporary theatre. Often, there is no fourth wall and the performers directly address the audience. It is fragmented in its structure – whole scenes seem standalone. This demands a range of acting approaches; one minute the performers are playing themselves and reading out the interactive questions, and the next they are portraying the character placed in the world of the story.

Theme: 'Empathy'
Empathy is the umbrella theme that links together all of the separate scenes and content throughout the show. It was the starting point for the devising process, and was first suggested by Director Jemma McDonnell as a theme when she was inspired to question her own empathy in relation to the refugee crisis after it kept appearing in news headlines.

The definition of empathy is "the ability to understand and share the feelings of another." The show asks who we feel empathy for, and why? Throughout our research we examined how it is proven that people feel more empathy for people with whom they have things in common. Therefore it is much harder for us to empathise with people who are different to us.

Theme: 'Forced Displacement'
Whilst considering 'empathy' as our main umbrella theme or throughline, we kept needing to anchor it to a topic or issue in order to assess our levels of empathy. We repeatedly mentioned the refugee and migrant crisis happening across the world. This led us to research the issue of forced displacement, the concept of being forced to flee your home due to war, persecution or natural disaster. In 2023, over 110 million people worldwide were currently forcibly displaced from their homes. (International Rescue Committee).
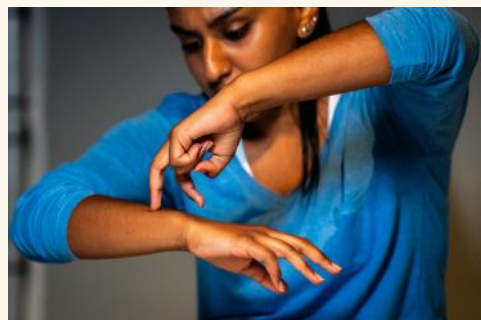
Theme: 'Technology and Phones'

We wanted to acknowledge that the way we each view the world as individuals, is actually filtered by the way we consume tailored content online, through the portal of our mobile phones and screens. It seemed important when considering our own empathy towards world events and social and cultural situations, that we consider how the way we receive these stories relates to the type of emotional response we develop to it — eg, do we feel empathy or not? Who do we feel it for? How much empathy do we feel for different groups of people?

The technology theme also appears throughout the show in a variety of ways. It is a visual motif that is used by the video design; such as glitching, text messages that pop up, dragging and dropping and swiping motions, The other throughline in the 'phones' strand, is that phones, media, and tech are an essential part of our lives, and that our world is richer for it, allowing us to connect and capture the world around us.

Theme: 'Snowflakes / Gen Z'

One theme that emerged as we started making content was the issue of how young people are perceived by other generations. 'Snowflake' is coined as a derogatory term relating to *"the generation of people who became adults in or after the 2010s, viewed as being less resilient and more prone to taking offence than previous generations."* (Collins English Dictionary).

This issue became relevant as the show was being devised by a cast of performers under the age of 25 years, and the theme of technology and phones went together hand in hand with the idea of Gen Z being 'digital natives', having lived their whole lives after the arrival of the Internet. The generational divide also threw up questions surrounding empathy—do some generations have more empathy than others, and how do young people's levels of empathy compare? Are Gen Z more affected by the content they see online? Are they more likely to act or react to certain content or events they see played out in the media?
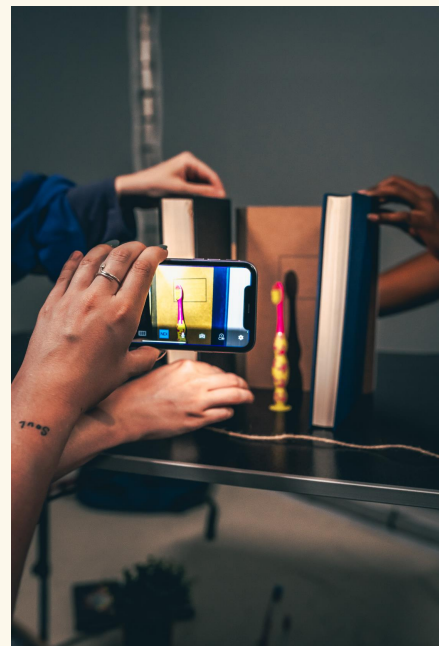
Snowflake:

"the generation of people who became adults in or after the 2010s, viewed as being less resilient and more prone to taking offence than previous generations."

Set Design

The 'Feel Me' design brief was to create a set that could be easily toured internationally whilst incorporating video design. We wanted to be able to transport the character through different landscapes and locations and atmospheres – we wanted a 'conceptual' set design, a space that was not locked into a place and time, but became a backdrop for us to create lots of different locations using video projection.

We also wanted playback of live video feed on screens, we wanted to explore what was 'on stage' and 'off', where we could construct images and scenarios that looked real through a lens, but played into the premise of 'not everything you see in the media is real', by the audience being able to see the 'set-up' of these shots.

Designer Imogen Melhuish was tasked with coming up with the concept for the stage design. She would source inspiration images and share with Co-Directors Jemma and Kylie. After each discussion, Imogen would refine her ideas until she presented the shape of the box (or 'container' as she thought of it). The inspiration for the box comes from the transient nature of the migrant crisis – of tents and temporary shelters, of shipping containers, of the makeshift camps and communities that are built and constructed as quickly as they can also be torn down.

This concept then widened out to the other furniture and props used on stage – the chairs are 'institutional;' the type of chairs you find in most schools or offices or council buildings. The table is foldaway – the type of temporary furniture used for camping or as an occasional extra table.

When the box was presented as a design, this immediately gave the directors a space to play with the onstage/offstage concept. It was a clear convention that provided a place for the story to unfold, whilst allowing the rest of the stage to be the place where we explore the 'non-performance' empathy strand.
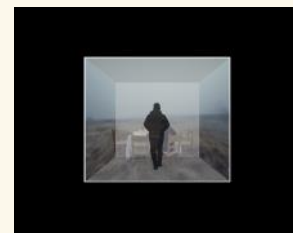
The stages of design. Images by Imogen Melhuish.

Lighting Design
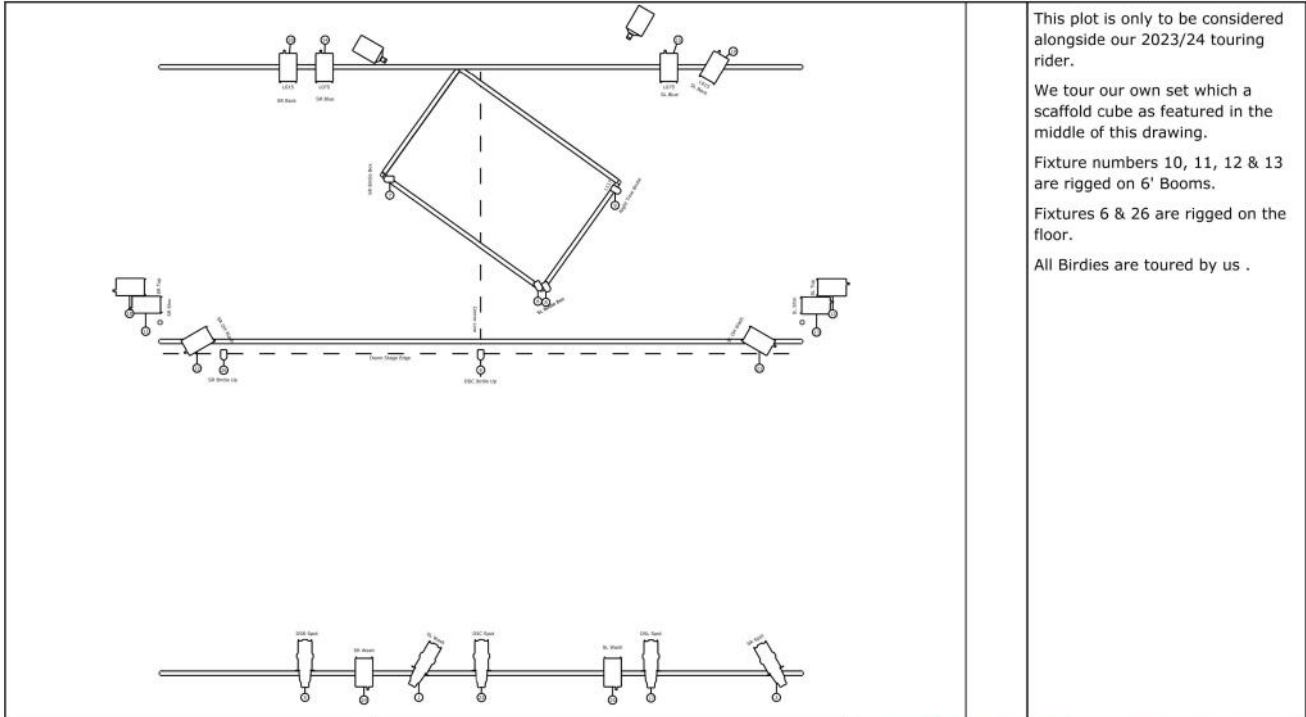
This plot is only to be considered alongside our 2023/24 touring rider.

We tour our own set which a scaffold cube as featured in the middle of this drawing.

Fixture numbers 10, 11, 12 & 13 are rigged on 6' Booms.

Fixtures 6 & 26 are rigged on the floor.

All Birdies are toured by us .

Project		Project location	
	Feel Me		Autumn 2023 - Spring 2024
Lighting designer	Mat Spencer		
Set designer	Imogen Melhuish		
Director	The Paper Birds		
Touring Technician	Fraser Owen		

Symbol key

☐ 650w Fresnel (12)   Source Four Zoom 15°-30° (5)

▭ Touring Birdies (6)   Video Projector (2)

The lighting plot is the design element that gets created last throughout the timeline of devising. It's not until we get into a fully kitted out theatre space that we are able to plot the lights for each scene, accentuating the existing material by creating atmosphere and picking out areas of the stage. We worked with Lighting Designer Mat Spencer to develop the plot. Mat had a difficult challenge: his brief was to be able to light the whole stage evenly in order to create a general wash that could pick out the performers wherever they stood, as well as be able to close in on smaller spaces to create atmosphere and magic. This was difficult because of the nature of the set; having a closed off box with a lid, meant that the usual lighting angles from the rig overhead weren't able to be used. Not only that, but the fact that the walls of the box were actually projection screens also meant that we couldn't have any light spill on to them, as that would wash out the images of the video design. This meant that Mat had to be inventive with how he was able to light the performers inside the box. We opted to use 'birdies', very small light fixtures that have a narrow angle of light that can be focused into very direct spaces.

Mat also incorporated a lot of side-light, lamps fitted on 'booms' (or scaffold poles), on the side of the stage that highlight and capture the performers as they move and dance.

Overall, the lighting design is very simple, using only a small selection of lamps. This is intentional as it makes it easier to tour into different venues and rig and focus quickly and efficiently.

Video Design

Whilst the set design was evolving, collaborative discussions with Video Designer, Ben Glover were also underway. He was able to input and comment on the set design as it developed and consult around what would work effectively in relation to the video design; which sides of the box would we project on to, how many projectors would we need, where would they be placed, and what kind of resolution and specification of projector did we need?

We opted to run two rear throw projectors from the back of the stage, one would be mounted on a small scaffolding pole as a stand, and one would be floor mounted. The TV's would be placed across the stage and be a range of different sizes. In total we have 5 screens across the stage.

As the scenes and material for the show were devised in the rehearsal room with the cast and directors, regular updates were fed to the design team. Ben would respond to specific briefs; for example, a 'Fortnite' inspired video game scene where it appears as though the performer is running through the video game landscape. Or the more abstract concept of 'glitching', a visual motif used to represent the tech element of the show. Some of the video content was produced quickly in response to the script, eg, a text message pops up that helps drive the story or the meaning forward. Whereas some of the content allowed for more creativity, such as the backdrop for the repetitive sequence at the end – the style of the video design here helps build the tension and fuse the two narrative strands of 'story' and 'empathy' together.

Costume Design

Original costume designs by Imogen Melhuish.

Imogen Melhuish's costume design brief was to draw up outfits that the cast would wear throughout the whole piece. They needed to be able to move and dance without being restricted, and they had to allow the cast to multirole and play both the character and themselves.

First a colour palette was drawn up—this then set the tone for the sourcing that followed. Imogen also had to work in line with our pledge to mount a sustainable production where a minimum of 50% of our materials were recycled, and so much of the costume was sourced on Vinted.com

Sound Design

Once scenes had begun to be devised, we were able to give clear briefs to Sound Designer, Fraser Owen. The sound design is constant throughout the whole play – there are only a few scenes or moments within the show that don't use sound. It was Fraser's job to make both soundscapes and compose music, he was responsible for accentuating the onstage action by creating the atmosphere, and setting or placing scenes; for example, in the 'transport' scene, we see the performers physically make their way along a journey on different modes of transport and the sound design supports each strand of the journey, anchoring us to the airport or the ocean, or the train station etc.

Fraser's process included providing us with 'reference tracks' to use in the rehearsal room. He would compile Spotify playlists of music with different moods, such as 'Panic/Fear' or 'Nostalgia/Memory'. We would use these tracks while we were making scenes in the rehearsal room, and then he would take those track ideas away and use them to spark or influence his writing of original pieces to underscore our scenes.

Phone Interaction

An ambition for the show was to involve interaction with the audience as part of the performance. We wanted to be able to monitor if they felt empathy and how their levels of empathy may or may not change throughout the performance.

We explored how to interact with audiences. We first used a polling tool called 'Mentimeter' to interact. It was simple to use and allowed us to collate data and then present it back on a screen. But it felt a bit limiting in its design and we wanted a less 'corporate' feel. We began to develop our own tool to allow us to communicate with audiences, utilising their phones. We commissioned a bespoke website that would display the questions to audiences and send the data back to

the show via a data visualisation programme called 'Isadora'. Video Designer, Ben Glover then designed the data to display on stage in line with the rest of the visual design.

Throughout the performance, audience answers are collected anonymously and displayed back live on stage during the show. The anonymous data is then stored securely where it can be analysed and we can see if people's empathy levels change or move throughout the show.

Theatrical Techniques

Dance and Movement

Our ambition was to make a completely non-verbal show; this meant that we would rely heavily on movement and dance to tell the story. We worked with choreographer Munya Muchati to develop the physical style for the piece. There are two main dance scenes within the show that were entirely choreographed by Munya. The rest of the scenes were choreographed by the cast themselves. Under Jemma McDonnell's direction, the cast would begin to explore and play with different movement techniques and choreography to explore a given brief, such as 'aeroplane movement' or 'queuing'. Once they had generated a lot of rough material they would begin to refine it and polish it to convey what Jemma needed each scene to do. For example, a walking scene that shows the breadth of landscapes that refugees encounter as they journey.

One particular physical technique that we use in the play is influenced by 'Visual Vernacular'. *"Visual Vernacular is a unique physical theatre technique, with elements of poetry and mime, primarily performed by Deaf artists. This powerful story telling style combines strong movement, iconic British Sign Language signs, with gestures and facial expressions, to capture the world in all its visual complexity."* (Extraordinarybodies.org.uk) We wanted to use this style as a technique because of its storytelling capabilities, it is able to take audiences on a journey and really focus in on narrative.

As a company we use **Movement** as one of the 5 Key Ingredients of our work – in 'Feel Me' there is much more movement than in any of our other shows. This was an artistic decision as our theme is a global one, spanning different continents and different languages. We wanted to present the story using as much physical and gestural language as possible in order for the play to be experienced by non-English speakers.

**Example of reference video for 'visual vernacular' inspiration.
Click the Youtube image to play video:**
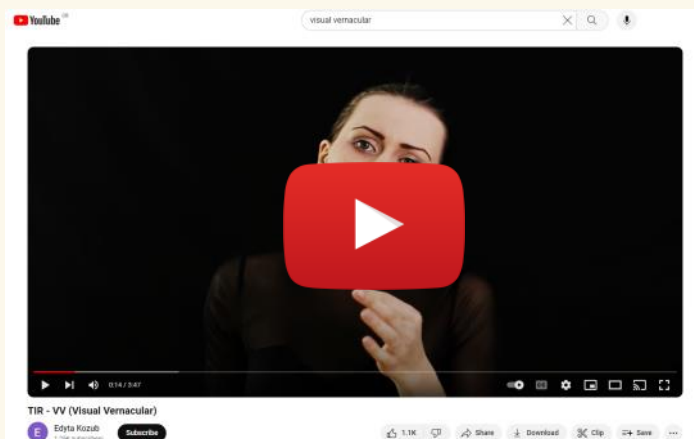
Direct Address
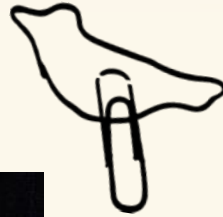
A technique that is often used in The Paper Birds' work is direct address. Often in the world of our plays, there is no fourth wall, meaning that the performers on the stage show their awareness of the audience and directly address them. In 'Feel Me' this actually goes one step further, by inviting the audience to interact with the performers and vote via their mobile phones on the questions posed.

Mostly when the performers address the audience they are 'playing themselves'. By this we mean that they are not in character, but instead they are talking naturally as they do in real life. We call this 'non-acting', and as a performance technique it is actually quite difficult to do authentically! We use non-acting a lot in relation to our key ingredient of **Exposing the Method**. In 'Feel Me' the performers reference the making of the show in a non-acting style; they point out that they have personally made the show, they have collaborated with other artists and academics and steering groups and they even show some of their collaborators on the screens.

Playing the Same Character

Throughout the show the performers interchange who is playing the 'main' character. There are movement sequences where they move in unison as well as where they fracture and splinter off. They set up the convention that the blue backpack belongs to the character, so when they are wearing it, that is the performer who is playing the role. They also incorporate a repetitive physical gesture for the character, a mannerism where they touch their ear.

At The Paper Birds we use the convention of playing the same character often within our plays; it relates to the Key Ingredient of **Character and Narrative**—where typical characters and storylines are presented to an audience, but often in a non-naturalistic way.

Company Intentions

Here are the key intentions that Directors Jemma and Kylie were trying to achieve:

- **To create a small scale touring show that explores empathy as a theme.**

- **Create a set and video design that can transport the characters and the world of the play to many different locations.**

- **To tell the story of an 'every-person' who has been forced to flee their home, and explore the theme with as little verbal language as possible.**

- **To make a thrilling and visually stunning piece of dance-theatre.**

- **To make audiences think and question their own levels of empathy towards different communities, and consider why they might have more or less empathy for certain groups of people.**

- **To physically monitor audience's levels of empathy throughout the show; do their empathy levels change at all?**

Key Ingredients

*'Feel Me' predominantly includes 4 of the **5 Key Ingredients** of The Paper Birds' work.*

Movement – Movement runs all the way through the piece and is used to tell the story and communicate to an audience without using words.

Character and Narrative – The storyline of 'Feel Me' is simple, but the way in which it is told is fragmented and episodic. We see snapshots of the character's journey, but we need to work hard as an audience to fill in the gaps.

Exposing the Method – Throughout the piece the cast regularly address the audience and at the close of the play, they comment on their own devising process, admitting that they have crafted and edited the performance for us – they have filtered the content.

Motif – There a few motifs that run throughout the play. 'Glitching' is a visual motif that features in the video design. 'Technology' is another that runs throughout – it is part of the design, the cast use iPhones throughout, the audience interact via phones. And there is a signature movement that repeats as a motif – the 'stamping' action that repeats throughout.