



The Norwich-based company curious directive performed Deciphering for a group of 15-18 year olds at Springwood Academy

Stephanie Street: In 2024, we need to make productions more accessible to younger audiences

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Looking back, 2023 has not been a vintage year. Next year, we must place more emphasis on younger audiences and the future

The older I get, the more reflective December makes me. In my 30s, this month was a whirl of parties, night buses and, in the lucky years, mad, three performance-days for Christmas shows. Now, squarely in the 'late' portion of my 40s, all I seem able or willing to do on these long, slow nights is muse on the year that's been.

The overriding feeling looking back is that it was a good year – for me. For the sector, 2023 has not been vintage: ~~companies knee-capped~~ in the

aftermath of the last national portfolio organisation round; the government pouring still more derision on our industry; the talent drain deepening after work ground to a standstill during the American strikes. I've been one of the lucky ones.

I did more TV jobs this year than in the past eight years combined. I was back on stage in a brilliant company of actors in a smart new play helmed by a director I really wanted to work with. But it's been an embarrassment of riches because none of these came close to my highlight work moment of 2023. It wasn't filming in Antwerp or Belfast, or rehearsing in the Royal Shakespeare Company's London home, but in an immersive performance in a science classroom in King's Lynn.

In 2020, I was in the team creating a new show for Norwich-based company [curious directive](#) (the company styles its name in lowercase), which, according to Lyn Gardner, makes work that is "artistically, socially and technologically inquisitive, and pushes at the boundaries between art and science". We made [Deciphering](#) more than a year ago and in the company was my then-seven-year-old daughter. We play the same character aged eight and 43, in a story about lost and found passion, learning and creativity.

Last month, Jack Lowe, curious directive's artistic director, brought the company back together to revisit the show, looking ahead to performing it at a big international festival in 2024. Also, crucially, we were to perform it where much of the play is set, in an actual classroom.

After a couple of days rehearsing and rediscovering, we found ourselves in Springwood Academy. After two years away from it, we performed the show to an audience of 15-18 year olds sat on benches all around us, wearing wireless headphones that fed them Pete Malkin and Kieran Lucas' spectacular immersive sound design mixed with the dialogue from our mics.

It hardly needs to be said what this piece of work means to me, to be able to tell a story alongside my own child. But this was almost topped by what it meant to be doing it in front of other young people who desperately want and deserve creativity and art. It is astonishing that companies like curious directive prioritise making work for schools like this – even more so that it does it alongside its work on the international touring circuit.

The head of sixth form, an inspiring figure himself, full of energy and optimism, was stunned he hadn't had to pay for this opportunity. I understand why he was stunned. It doesn't feel as if that is how things go any more.

But it absolutely should be. This is the work we, as a sector, should be doing, in 2024 and beyond.