

A person with curly hair, wearing a white long-sleeved shirt and tan pants, is performing a circus-style acrobatic move. They are suspended in the air, holding onto a thick rope with one hand and a wooden pole with the other. Their legs are spread wide in a dynamic pose. The setting is a library with bookshelves filled with books on the left and large windows in the background. The floor is covered with a light-colored mat. The image is overlaid with a yellow and orange geometric design in the top right corner.

UPSWING

CIRCUS BETWEEN THE STACKS

A celebration, reflection and provocation
for presenting circus in libraries

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**“It showed that a library is not just about
reading and studying but capturing the
minds of young ones through imagination.”**

Teacher feedback on school workshop

ABOUT UPSWING

Upswing is a multi-award-winning UK-based contemporary circus company. Founded by Vicki Dela Amedume in 2006, We expand the possibilities of circus as an art form, pushing the boundaries of what it can be and using it to help us shape the world we want to live in.

We use the human body as an expressive tool to entertain, inspire connection, share urgent ideas and tell new stories in extraordinary ways.

Our purpose is to amplify and celebrate the skills, ideas and stories of diverse communities, unite people from different backgrounds and encourage them to discover the potential in themselves and each other.

Difference and diversity fuel our work, we believe that everyone benefits when all life experiences come together to spark new questions and ideas.

Upswing's work is not confined to theatres and festivals; we reach people in unexpected ways, wherever they are.

That might look like a digital trail through a local park, a circus takeover in a care home, a large-scale spectacle on a rooftop, or a bedtime story for families in libraries.

Discovering the extraordinary together

We are passionate about sharing our creative process with people. Our Creative Engagement activities are tied closely to the performance projects we make. By creating opportunities for people to gain skills and have playful, powerful experiences, we in return gain new collaborators that help keep our ideas fresh, our work relevant and our practice inclusive.

Why circus?

Circus is a tool like no other – It has a unique combination of risk-taking, playfulness and collaboration that creates a space for everyone to see the incredible possibilities in themselves and others.



“Upswing has a superb track record as a company doing pioneering work. They are breaking new ground in the world of circus.”

Oona King, Patron

INTRODUCTION

As a leading contemporary circus company, we have an opportunity to make a difference in society and address imbalances of power, both behind the scenes and in our creative projects and choices.

While circus and libraries don't immediately seem like a perfect match, Upswing's purpose fits perfectly with the democratic role of libraries. These spaces are open, free, safe and welcoming. Libraries allow people to explore new things at their own pace in a safe and welcoming environment.

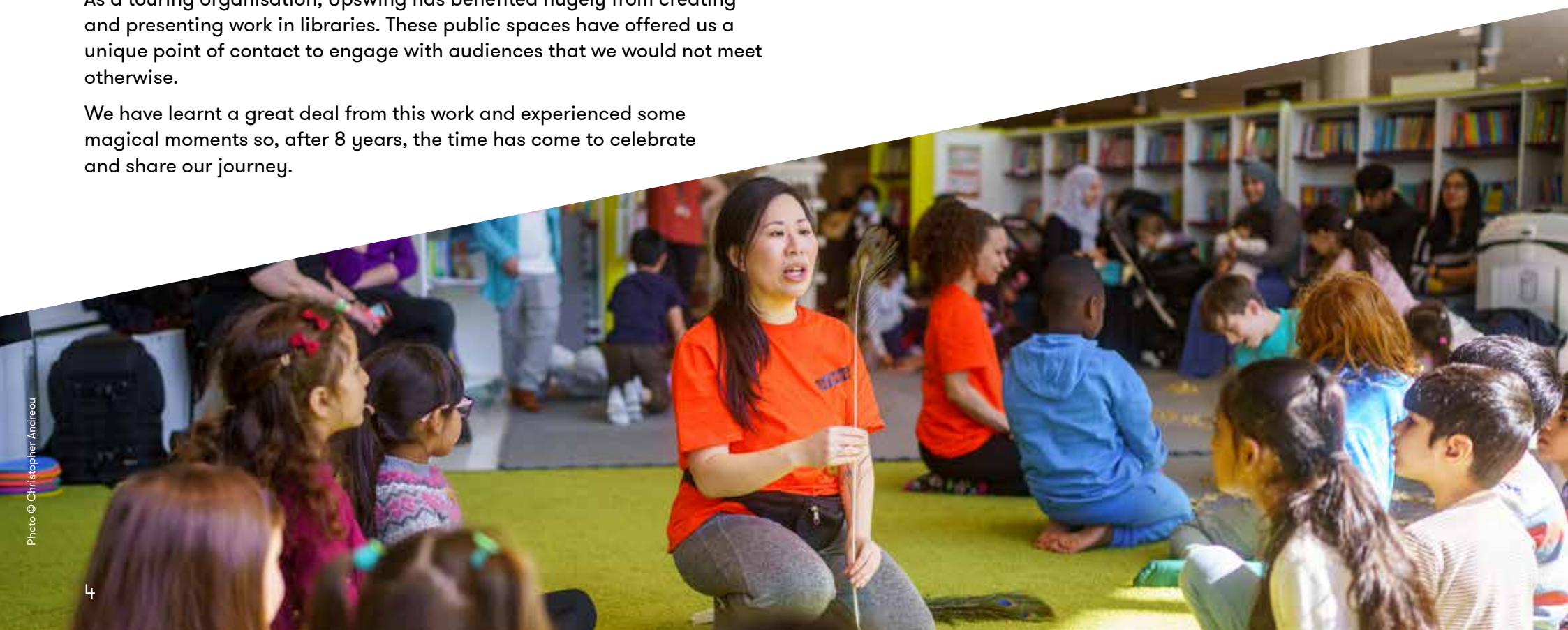
As a touring organisation, Upswing has benefited hugely from creating and presenting work in libraries. These public spaces have offered us a unique point of contact to engage with audiences that we would not meet otherwise.

We have learnt a great deal from this work and experienced some magical moments so, after 8 years, the time has come to celebrate and share our journey.

We hope that this guide will provide you with valuable and practical insights and perhaps inspire new partnerships between libraries and circus companies.

“The giggles and the laughter from the children really made my day. Many of these children do not get the chance to access art and theatre and it was very rewarding to see.”

Jackie Hawkins, Senior Supervisor, West Bromwich Town Libraries



CIRCUS AND LIBRARIES: OUR JOURNEY

● 2016

Upswing responds to a commission call out by the Islington Word Festival with **Once Upon a Pillow Fight** (a small-scale sister production to *Bedtime Stories*). The show is presented at **2 libraries** in Islington, London, for **4 performances** to an **audience of 121**.

Once Upon a Pillow Fight shows at Stratford Arts Centre and Upswing creates a kids' corner bedroom installation inside Stratford Library.

We discover that libraries are eager to introduce circus and that families enjoy spending time on the set after the performances. We also test using a **mobile box office** selling discounted tickets to audiences of the library shows.

Upswing's first library show, **Once Upon a Pillow Fight**, tours London libraries to a **total audience of 1,420**.



● 2017

Once Upon a Pillow Fight is presented at Willesden Green library in Brent, London and also alongside *Bedtime Stories* as part of Hull City of Culture 2017.

Upswing returns to Islington Word festival to create another production for libraries: **Topsy Turvy** (a smaller-scale sister production to *The Ramshackle House*). *Topsy Turvy* features immersive design that responds to feedback from the previous year, and explores themes of cooperation and instability.

Co-produced by Islington Word Festival and created in collaboration with Stratford Circus Arts Centre as part of the venue's extended hours programme at East Ham Library in Newham, London. **We engage 240 participants and the show reaches a live audience of 75.**



An **overwhelming 83%** of survey respondents indicated **they would use the library services in the future** as a direct result of seeing the production.

● 2018

Upswing returns to Islington Libraries as part of Islington Word Festival with an immersive storytelling experience: **A for Adventure**, another free family production, co-created with a group of local young mothers during a series of workshops at the library.

The show engages 15 participants and an audience of 120.



In late August, Upswing return to the library at Willesden Green in Brent with **Pitch**, an interactive experience for families supported by John Lyon's Charity. A total of **600 participants** are engaged **over 10 sessions**.

2019

Once Upon a Pillow Fight tours libraries in Nottinghamshire and Surrey with a total of **9 sessions** and **548 audience members** (475 of which were children).



The creative engagement/co-creation period for our new show **Seasons** begins. The **Seasons 'seed workshops'** engage local school children and families with nature activities at the library at Willesden Green in Brent, London. Upswing runs a total of **9 sessions** from September to October.



236 children and **99 adults** take part in Upswing's 2019 'seed workshops'.

2020

Seasons 'seed workshops' continue until March but indoor delivery is interrupted due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

A total of **461 children** take part in the 'seed workshops' from January to March.



2021

Our new live production **Seasons** is created – connecting inner-city children to nature in a fun and playful way. Supported by Spark Arts, Kensington and Chelsea Festival, and Brent Borough of Culture, **Seasons** tours throughout the year to libraries, museums and public spaces in **London, Nottinghamshire and Bristol**.

Seasons creative engagement programme resumes with **schools and family workshops** in **Brent** libraries.

Upswing runs **Seasons** poetry and writing workshops with local poet **Miss Jackie** in Wembley and Willesden Green Libraries. We run workshops for schools with a total of **136 local schoolchildren** taking part, and **2 family workshops** with **36 children** and **21 adults** participating.

Our free online activity hub **Seasons Digital** is launched. The hub includes audio stories and videos that connect children to nature from wherever they are.

Our new library show **Seasons** tours the UK with a total of **60 shows** and an estimated audience number of **1,607**.



OUR APPROACH

Upswing have been collaborating with libraries since 2016 to deliver alternative, creative experiences. Whether it's a live performance or an interactive workshop, all of our work in libraries is centred around encouraging families to play, discover their local community libraries and spend valuable quality time creating and learning together.



Our work with libraries began when we responded to a call out from the Word Festival in London.

When they selected our proposal to create a circus family show for libraries, we jumped at the chance to explore new ways of working. But it also raised a lot of questions. Would the library staff know anything about putting on a circus show? Would we end up having countless meetings about health and safety? Would our work be disruptive in this environment?



Photo © Marcus Hessenberg

The environment we entered couldn't have been more welcoming. We were met with a palpable hunger for something new and a team that wanted to make this project work no matter what.

'Islington's WORD Festival brings arts, libraries and communities together to celebrate words and their power to transform lives. It is delivered through a programme of specially commissioned arts projects, designed to encourage residents of all ages across Islington to develop their enjoyment of reading, writing and freedom of expression. In 2016, to support WORD's aim to engage young families, Upswing created a special version of *Bedtime Stories* at Finsbury Library, inviting young families into a free magical immersive story time experience, snuggled together on pillows and mattresses amongst the library book stacks. Families enjoyed a wonderful imaginative show together and children were encouraged to be adventurous and have fun, playing safely with the performers amongst the pillows, before choosing storybooks and settling down to read together as a family. For many of the young families this was their first experience of live circus and of their local library - a fabulous, positive and playful introduction to what a love of reading, stories and adventure can offer.'

Suzanne Lee, All Change, Creative Producer of WORD Festival 2012-2023

The Islington Word team alongside festival producers All Change have commissioned all sorts of alternative, creative experiences for their libraries, illustrating a wider shift in the remit of libraries and what they can offer. No longer are libraries stigmatised as quiet, strict, stuffy establishments - they are evolving into open community hubs with expanded technology and arts provision to create new routes into learning. They have started to act as bridges to culture, enabling cultural organisations to reach more people.

For this commission we adapted our touring family show *Bedtime Stories*, to create a library specific version, *Once Upon a Pillow Fight*. that played for free in local libraries in the week leading up to the show. This 20-minute version, watched from comfy beds, was full of audience participation. A soft play area of mattresses, pillows, quilts and soft toys, reminiscent of a child's bedroom, set the scene for an adventurous journey into acrobatics and storytelling. Families were invited to take off their shoes and learn tricks and games with the two characters, before getting into bed and taking part in a magical adventure through the library stacks. It even had a pillow fight thrown in for good measure. The show ended by encouraging parents and children to stay and read together.

82% of the audience told us they would come back to the library after seeing the show.



As a touring company, this work enabled us to embed ourselves in the local community and find new audiences. Libraries are at the heart of the community, welcoming a real cross-section of the public. They serve as a gathering point for people of different ages and backgrounds allowing us to meet a wider range of people than we could ever meet without these kind of partnerships. Libraries give us the potential to meet people without the barriers of arts institutions and thus are a brilliant access point.

57% of attenders for *Once Upon a Pillow Fight* were medium or low arts engagers.

We started this process with questions and we ended the process with new questions. Could libraries play a central role in encouraging new audiences to discover and enjoy live performance? Could performing in libraries develop brand new audiences for Upswing? We took our learning into the continued tour of *Bedtime Stories* and in Stoke-on-Trent, with our partner venue Victoria Hall, we tested a new model and installed mobile box office

points in the libraries to sell £1 tickets for *Bedtime Stories* to audiences of Pillow Fight. This resulted in over 300 tickets being sold.

Putting our artform in a library generated deep joy for us, the library teams and their users, as we transformed spaces really quickly with a new and unexpected experience. It was magical to see our art form – the sets, props, sound, lights and the movement of bodies in space – collide with the ordinary setting of the library. We were met with excellent energy from the library services who were hugely committed to opening their doors and offering new and extraordinary experiences for their users. We quickly discovered how play and movement allows families to engage in literacy with more than just their heads. With this strategy, participation and audience development sits hand in hand with our artistic output, not a separate strand of work, and each makes the other stronger.



“Upswing is a company that began on the street. In recent years we have moved to produce more work in theatres where the opportunity of being able to work with lights and sound in physical spaces devoted to the creation and enjoyment of performance has been great, but we have not forgotten our roots. There is a thrill in making work for spaces where we meet people on more shared ground, space where we need to work carefully and creatively to build a world that will immerse and engage people who were perhaps not expecting or anticipating the experience. Libraries, like theatres and other dedicated arts spaces, have an important social role as a place of gathering and connection. It has been a pleasure and a privilege to explore and test the creative opportunities as well as meet and work with people we would otherwise not have met in more traditional performance spaces.”

Vicki Dela Amedume, Artistic Director, Upswing

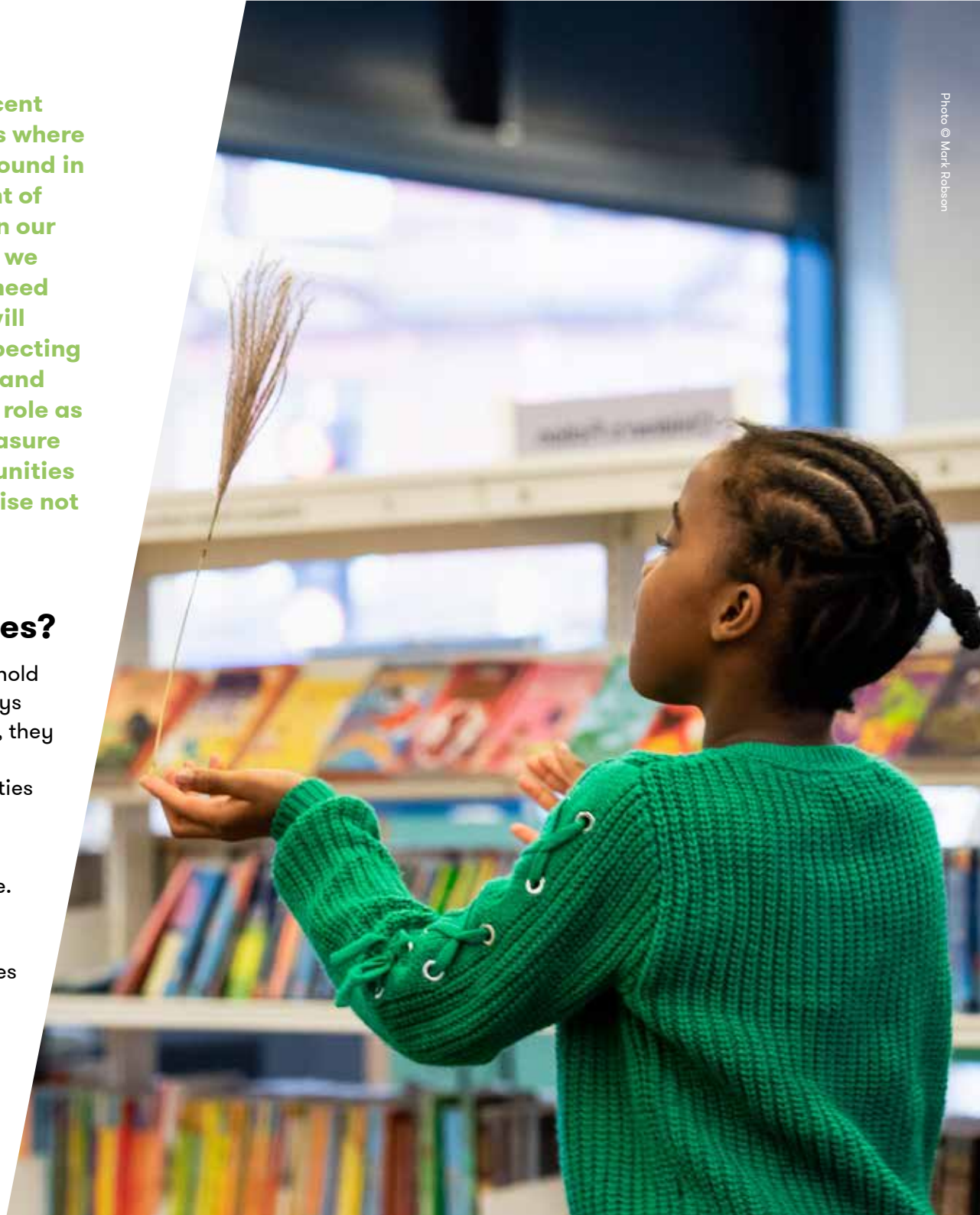
Why does circus work so well in libraries?

Whilst we continue to be driven by inclusion and access and uphold Arts Council England’s Let’s Create Strategy, libraries have always been experts in this. With most libraries having moveable stacks, they are used to rearranging their spaces and making space for interventions and events. They are at the heart of their communities and we can learn a lot from their processes of engagement and benefit from their established connections.

As a company without a base, we can make the library our home. A temporary residence that enables us to grow our reach, and extend and employ our resources. Libraries are hyper local and the knowledge pool of staff is invaluable in supporting companies to reach out to schools and other targeted community groups.

“You meet everyone in a library. It is the closest we will get to meeting people in their homes.”

Camille Ben Soussan, Executive Director, Upswing



By partnering with libraries, we are able to offer communities arts, theatre and culture on their doorsteps with most families living within walking distance to their local library. These events spark imagination and creativity, stimulating visitors and inspiring them to explore new ideas and possibilities.

The ability to explore language and knowledge physically, use movement to express yourself and be creative with the written word reframes how children, families and schools view both the possibilities of learning and of libraries. A circus approach is a physical way into language and learning which is highly inclusive, meaning all students can succeed. Circus acts often require skills such as physical coordination, teamwork, and discipline. Libraries can provide educational opportunities for participants to learn these skills. Circus programmes can also promote creativity, problem-solving, and self-expression, fostering a well-rounded learning experience that has a positive impact on academic, social, physical and mental wellbeing and development.

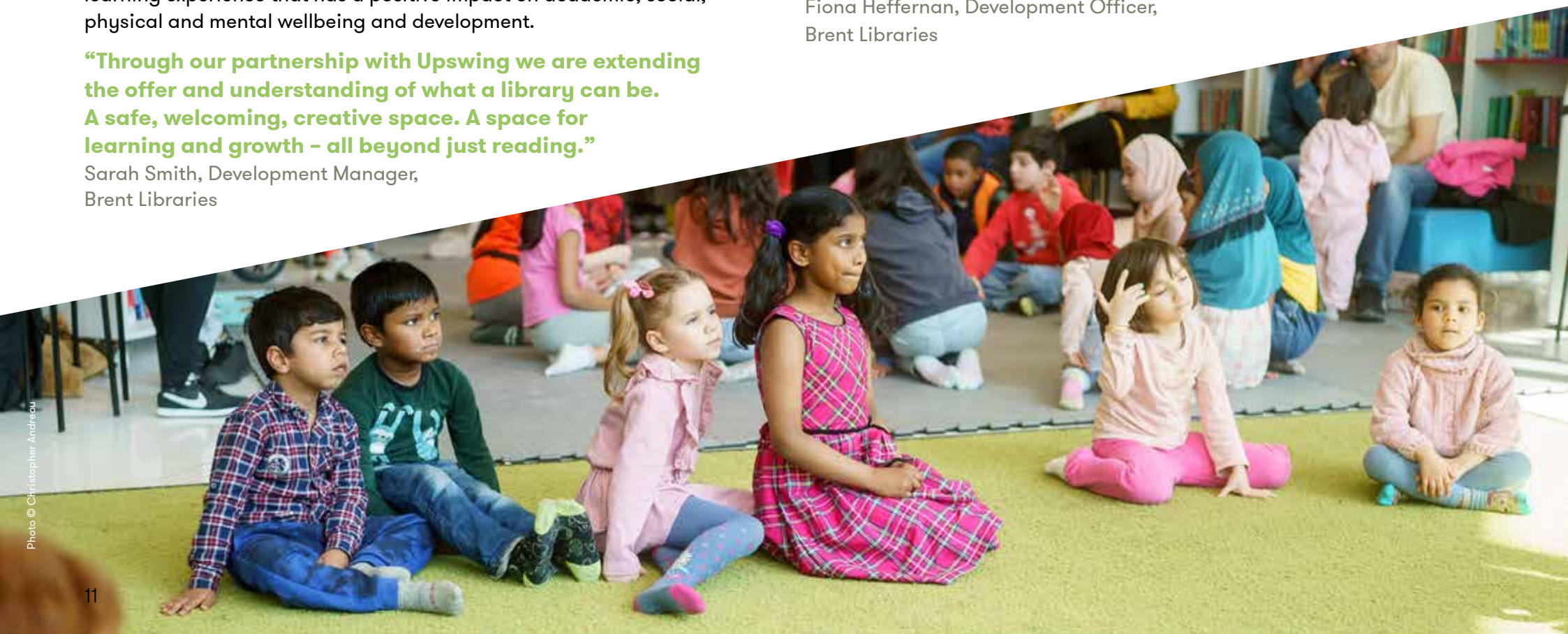
“Through our partnership with Upswing we are extending the offer and understanding of what a library can be. A safe, welcoming, creative space. A space for learning and growth – all beyond just reading.”

Sarah Smith, Development Manager,
Brent Libraries

Partnership working allows both organisations to reach their aims and mission. We were able to bring exciting, new, adventurous activity to the library that animates and highlights the value of libraries to the community, and we were able to share in the deep local knowledge of the libraries to make connections with local schools. Circus activities are a very different offer which give libraries a new way of bringing in schools to engage in their services. Once in the building, children and their families can be signposted to the other services libraries offer and sign them up for library cards. It animates the space and gets them excited about what is possible within a library so they return.

“Through the activities the children become comfortable with the space in a completely different way. They will always enjoy and remember this space and they didn’t have to be the greatest reader.”

Fiona Heffernan, Development Officer,
Brent Libraries



SPOTLIGHT ON SEASONS

In 2019 we secured 3-year funding from John Lyon's Charity to develop a brand-new Circus in Libraries project in partnership with Brent Library Services.

With activities both online and offline, we created *Seasons* to ignite the imaginations of young audiences and help us to look at the world from a different perspective. From family workshops to an online activity hub and touring live show, *Seasons* takes us on a fantastical journey through weather, time, change and balance.

In 2019/2020, Upswing was resident in Brent Libraries, working in collaboration with schools and families thinking about their local environments and ecosystems.

The schools, families and children who took part in the residencies worked with professional artists to contribute ideas and inspiration to the development of *Seasons*.

The residencies included a series of 'seed workshops' for both school and family groups to approach a range of media used in professional productions centred around each season: sights for design, sounds for composition, movements for choreography and objects for manipulation. Children and their families explored each medium with specialist artists and creatively interpreted the natural environment so that their responses could be captured and incorporated creatively in a professional production.

From the residencies we created a new live performance for libraries and an online experience for children and young people that delves deeper into the themes of the live show.

Seasons is a touring piece for libraries and public spaces that adapts to the setting and creates a unique experience for each environment. Immersed in the wild, two acrobats, dig, climb and lose balance in a joyful exploration of the nature in and around us.



A total of **1,607** people experienced *Seasons*.

“Lovely show, felt longing for nature! relaxing and inspiring! Thank you.”

Audience member

“Took us away from a wet afternoon into a happy playful world of the imagination.”

Audience member

“Performance art 4 families in a library is genius.”

Audience member

Alongside *Seasons* the show, we created a digital hub. Working with a spoken word artist, a film maker and a composer, we created interactive audio stories and films that connect families and schools with the natural world and their surroundings.

In 2023 we headed back into libraries to continue working with schools and families through a series of circus movements, acrobatics, object manipulation and creative writing workshops. We used these workshops as research and development for a series of learner resources that we added to our digital hub so that teachers and students could experience this work independently in their classrooms.

“My kids had lots of fun. It is a good opportunity for kids to interact with other kids, help them with their listening skills and they were moving a lot. I really enjoyed how everyone got an opportunity to perform acrobatic movements in a fun way.”

Parent/guardian feedback from community workshop

“The children have said that they now know there is more to the library than just books. The workshop showed them that libraries can be a venue for other fun activities too.”

Teacher feedback on school workshop

100% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that their students were able to be creative in a new space.

93% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that their students got to try new skills.

93% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that their students had an out of the ordinary experience.



93% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that their students developed a sense of curiosity.

29% engaged with Brent Libraries for the first time.

93% of schools engaged with Upswing for the first time.

64% of schools had never engaged with circus before.

Key reflections on the process, value and outcomes of *Seasons*

The theme of *Seasons* has enabled us to create an improved awareness and appreciation of the beauty of the environment. This connects both with our environmental agenda, Brent Council's focus and mission for a greener environment and schools' priority to be teaching students about the natural world and climate change. Their summer reading challenge was focused on the environment and our work could complement that, building a greater synergy between our work and embedding us further in the location so that it didn't feel like a fleeting, parachute activity. With the wonder of acrobatics, children were able to watch a physical demonstration of plant growth, enabling them to engage in environmental conversations in a new way.



Photo © David Wilson Clarke

Being able to sit in a tent and watch a performance is a different and more unusual form of knowledge exchange than families are used to experiencing at a library. Both the show and the workshops enabled children and families to be part of the experience which created a deeper level of engagement and learning.

“This is teaching children to have more awareness of the beauty of the environment and letting them think about their role and responsibility to maintain it.”

Sarah Smith, Development Manager, Brent Libraries

“Lots of learning for kids. They learned many new skills.”

Parent/guardian feedback from community workshop

Upswing’s contemporary circus practice combines physicality with narrative and this was present in the workshops. Children used movement to express themselves and our artists led a process that was inclusive of all ages, levels and abilities. Learning kinaesthetically gave them an opportunity to be creative with the written word. We observed and had feedback from teachers and parents that children with English as an additional language and/or learning disabilities were able to engage more in this work.

“Special Education Needs children who struggle with academia benefited greatly.”

Teacher feedback on school workshop

This partnership enabled everyone to extend their reach and understanding. Schools made connections with libraries that they hadn’t before. Our unique workshop offer was free for schools to access and in most cases the library they attended was just a short walk away. All these factors made it very appealing for schools to sign up.

“One particular school relationship was enhanced via this project. They have since come back to the library for other programmes and we didn’t have this relationship before.”

Fiona Heffernan, Development Officer, Brent Libraries

Children learnt about their local library. Each workshop began with a talk from a librarian about when the library is open, how many books they can take out, and what other things they have on offer. We were also able to dispel the myth that children only come to the library to read and that there are other exciting opportunities that you can take advantage of.

“I think you’ve changed lots of perceptions of what goes on in a library.”

Roux, Services Assistant, Brent Library

“Some children didn’t know there was a local library before this workshop. The children have said that they now know there is more to the library than just books.”

Teacher feedback on school workshop

[Click here](#) to visit the *Seasons* site and see all the resources made for this project.



Photo © Mark Robson



Reflections from Brent Libraries Development Manager, Sarah Smith

Brent Libraries partnership working with Upswing for the delivery of the *Seasons* three year programme for invited school classes and children and families has been a very rewarding cultural and inclusive experience. The environmental themes have tied into the Council's objectives for:

- **A cleaner greener future** – encouraging a positive relationship with the green outdoors and promoting an awareness of the importance of a green environment for the future
- **A healthier Brent** – encouraging children and families to enjoy informal exercise through walking and other activities in the outdoors
- **Best start in life** – Developing a curiosity in nature and plant life which promotes learning and could lead to a STEM career

The programme provided culture on your doorstep in one of the most ethnically diverse boroughs in the country:

- **19%** white minority groups

- **65%** black, Asian and other minority ethnic groups (the 2nd highest rate, after Newham at 69%)
- **149** languages are spoken
- **45%** of residents were born outside of the UK
- It has one of the highest poverty levels in London.

The tenure of the programme offered an opportunity for many to engage in uplifting new cultural experiences. It has been inspiring for many. I've really liked the focus on the environment and the importance of outdoor informal exercise, and it's provided me with new ideas for programming with a focus on the environment, ecology and sustainability. I felt the programme was also very useful for mental health wellbeing which is of particularly importance given the effects of the pandemic which interrupted *Seasons* programming, but also for the many wars and resulting trauma the world is experiencing. It's been very useful working in partnership with Upswing for the themes highlighted and also exploring new programming that supports these focuses.

DEVELOPING YOUR OWN PARTNERSHIPS

There is so much to gain for all parties from a partnership between contemporary circus artists and companies, and libraries.

“My kids loved the event. I could see big smiles on them and want these kind of events in the library during holiday times often.”

Parent/guardian feedback from community workshop

What do you need to consider when taking circus into libraries?

Circus takes up space! Whilst it's hugely adaptable and there is magic in taking the extraordinary to unexpected locations, it's not as straightforward as hosting an author talk. You need to get creative about how you can use your space. Which stacks are moveable? Often the children's area of the library has space, but if a performance or workshop is happening it shuts it off to everyone

else, so if you're moving your bean bags to make space, can you set up a small children's area somewhere else so you aren't turning people away?

There's also a different safety risk to circus activities that needs more consideration and risk assessment. For example, if you are doing any acrobatics, what is the flooring like? Do you need to bring in mats? What materials are being used in the performance or workshop? It's nothing that a good site visit and a bit of clever planning can't solve, but it does need this dedicated time, and both parties to be adaptable. At one of our first performances, stacks were covered with plastic. This was due to fear of the books being damaged and demonstrated the risk that was felt by bringing the work into the space.



This could have been avoided if more time was taken to prepare the staff with realistic expectations of what bringing a performance into the library would look like.

Despite a great ambition, it's hard for circus work to reach a high number of audiences/participants in one show/workshop due to the amount of space that is required. For an author visit, libraries are able to bring in a large number of people to sit and listen to a talk, but we are more limited. This makes it hard for libraries to offer opportunities to some schools that have very large class intakes that would not all be able to visit at once.

Top tips for libraries

1 Marketing: How are you going to market this in an exciting and accessible way? You need to work with the company to create a really snappy and clear title that does what it says on the tin so that families and schools know what to expect. A great photo really helps too.

2 Location: Which library in your borough is best suited to the activity? Where do you have a good amount of floor space? Do you have a library with soft flooring? Which libraries are closest to the schools you have good relationships with?

3 Selling your service: Work with the company to include time to talk to audiences and participants about what you have to offer. Can you have library sign up forms ready to distribute? Can you allow a teacher to take out a class set of books to start all students off with book lending?

4 Link with stock: What displays can you create in and around the performance and workshop space to connect with the themes of the work that enables families and students to continue their learning.

5 Flexibility is key: You don't literally need to be an acrobat too, but you do need to think creatively about how to use the space in your library, how to sell a new and different activity, how to staff the library on activity days to welcome and support both the team of artists and the audiences and participants.

Top tips for circus artists and companies

1 Articulating your value: How are you going to explain why libraries should programme you, when it could be much easier to host an author talk and reach more numbers? What do you have to offer?

2 Set a strategy: How can you talk in library terms and build into their aims? What are the current priorities of the local council? This is a great way of developing a project that is appealing for funders as it is deeply rooted in a local community. If your work coincides with performances in other local venues consider setting up a box office in your library. At the very least, meet with the library in your touring locations and tell them about your show and get them to share with their service users.

3 Schedule ahead: Libraries often plan their schedules far in advance, claim your space quickly! A lot works around the school calendar so get to know this. Working over email doesn't put your work in context, so try and find time for planning conversations to happen in person. This is a great opportunity to also look at the space together and work out how your work will sit in this venue.

4 Set Expectations: How do you help the library team to understand what you will be doing? Find out what their experience of live performance is and work out what is similar or different to what you do. Can you share any photo or video footage of what you do to help communicate what it will look like and scale of your work. Make sure you are thinking about how you are communicating with non-arts people - be mindful of terminology that goes unexplained and don't rely on assumptions of shared knowledge.

5 Find your advocates: Work out the right person who can be the champion for your work. Someone who has an understanding, passion for the work and the power and seniority to make things happen as well as an understanding of how it will work on the ground. Spend time in the library and get to know the cleaning and the security staff - they will be your best friend.

CREDITS

This guide was created by:

Jordana Golbourn

For Upswing:

Artistic Director

Vicki Dela Amedume

Executive Director

Camille Ben Soussan

Senior Producer

Daniela Paolucci

Participation Producer

Anna Duncan

General Manager

Sarah Crompton

Digital Communications Associate

Bridie Tyler

With thanks to:

Sherry Neyhus, Upswing Executive Producer
2019-23

Sarah Smith, Brent Libraries Development
Manager

Fiona Heffernan, Brent Libraries
Development Officer

Wendy Levingstone, Brent Libraries
Development Officer

Miss Jacqui, spoken word artist
Anesta Mathurin, Charlene Low,
Workshop Leaders

Sian Foster, Helena Berry, Louis Gift,
Rebecca Solomon and Shane Hampden,
circus performers

Daniel Martin, filmmaker

Paul Williams, filmmaker

All staff at Brent Libraries

Suzanne Lee and all at All Change

Islington Word Festival

All staff at Islington Libraries

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To talk about future collaborations,
please email info@upswing.org.uk



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