**Interview with Jane Gibson, Chief Executive Make it York:**

*Can you describe the role of Make It York with regards to cultural life within the city?*

Make It York has more of a development role rather than in a ‘doing culture’ role, culture is done by many organisations in York: by the volunteering and community sector, by individual artists, by the National Portfolio Organisations of the Arts Council, for example York Theatre Royal, York Museums Trust and Pilot Theatre. It’s done by health organisations, it’s done by education. But a role that we can occupy is Make it York helping to coordinate things, for example working with the Cultural Leaders Group on the emerging cultural strategy; we can organise things like the Culture Awards to celebrate culture (we’re holding it in November) and we can certainly be involved in strategic conversations with things like creative industry development and any sort of cultural development ~~roles~~ initiatives that are going on. Sometimes we do organise things ourselves, like the Culture Awards, but largely what we are is a strategic development organisation and we work closely in that context with organisations like the Cultural Leaders Group and City of York Council.

*That sounds really interesting! Leading on to the next question, what do you perceive Make it York’s purpose and influence to be within the city?*

Make It York is just under 3 years old and when I set it up with colleagues and stakeholders it was really very straight forward. I worked out why you’d be in York. You’d be in York because you’re a business- we have about 8,000- you’d be a student- we have 21,000 a year- you’d be a resident- we have 200,000- or you’d be a visitor, and we have just under 7 million visitors per year. When I first moved to York there were quite a few organisations that were all developing and promoting York to these four market segments. So based on experience of organisations like the Newcastle Gateshead Initiative, I set about creating Make it York. I was already Chair of Visit York so I saw that the work that Visit York was doing was fantastic, but by combining the business element and the cultural element with tourism you really get the best of both worlds. So Make It York’s purpose is to promote and develop York and it’s done under one roof rather than via lots of different organisations.

**M:** *So in which ways do you personally perceive the value of the Mystery Plays to be when considering things such as tourism?*

Well, the value of the Mystery Plays to me is very strong because I studied drama at Hull University and we studied the Mystery Plays as part of my course, so I’ve always known that the York cycle is the most well-known of the cycles because there are 42 still in existence in the British Library in the Yorkshire dialect. So having studied the York cycle, when I moved to York in 2008, I wasn’t really connected to York even though I’m from Yorkshire. I had no way into the city because I wasn’t a mum and I wasn’t running my cultural development business anymore because I retired from running the business when I moved to York. So I didn’t know anybody and I found it quite difficult to fit in. And then I started to volunteer in the Mystery Plays 2012 at the end of 2010 and that really has catapulted me into the social and cultural life of York when I previously hadn’t known anybody. So I owe the Mystery Plays big time. But I had always known about the Waggon Plays and I knew York staged large-scale productions so I got my hands dirty and volunteered on one, and I also chaired the Advisory Board but I also volunteered most nights backstage in some capacity.

**M:** *What did your volunteering backstage entail?*

I helped out because my background is in drama and because I used to work in professional theatre. I miss theatre so I was just hanging about being helpful if I could. I also looked after the corporate sponsors so I would make sure that they were all well looked after, and as I say just hanging around backstage smelling the grease paint and remembering what it is like to be a theatre maker as opposed to just be in a producing role.

**M:** *And what do you perceive the value of the Mystery Plays to be with regards to business development?*

It’s part of our cultural heritage back-catalogue and it means a lot of things to a lot of people. So I think there are 2 answers to that. First that they are important to York’s reputation as a cultural city and certainly connections with, you know, Judi Dench for example; lots of people have heard of Judi Dench therefore lots of people have heard of York and the Mystery Plays so it’s a way of getting York better known which is good for business. And the second reason is because so many volunteers are required in the Mystery Plays’ productions because it is a largely voluntary-led endeavour. All sorts of experience for individuals comes out of volunteering which has a knock on effect in making citizens more up-skilled in York, which if they’re already in business it’s good, or they may think about starting a business because of the confidence and skills they got from volunteering on the Mystery Plays.

*It’s certainly interesting to think about it from that perspective. Building on that, what do you perceive the value of the Mystery Plays to be with regards to inter-city partnerships?*

The Mystery Plays and partnerships are very important because nobody owns the Mystery Plays. Nobody in the country owns the Mystery Plays. They are owned by the community of York and no single organisationever stages the productions as it’s just too big a thing to do. So even though the Minster had their production last year (2016), there was still a massive partnership effort required with other organisations, the volunteering community, third sector organisations and professional organisations. So it can only work if it’s a partnership project, and it’s one of our enduring partnership projects so it’s very helpful. The city has to have conversations together about the Mystery Plays because it’s an asset that we need to respect. It brings people to York and it provides pleasure to people therefore we need to have these partnership conversations, so it’s really important.

**M:** *Can you sum up then what you perceive the Mystery Plays to be with regards to York’s culture and heritage?*

It is our culture and it is our heritage and they have been going for a very long time. There might have been a long break after the Reformation, but ever since the 1951 resurgence of the Mystery Plays following the Festival of Britain, it’s a physical and intellectual manifestation of our culture and heritage in the streets or in the Minster and by York’s communities and by volunteering and participation being an absolute bedrock of culture**.** And it is our heritage because they were written a long time ago! I have really fantastic memories of being involved in the Mystery Plays 2012. It taught me a lot about large scale community theatre which I hadn’t been involved in before, and it taught me a lot about the power of volunteering and the importance of everybody in York having a role in things that they own. The Mystery Plays are extremely democratic.

*So in what ways can Make it York support the ongoing development of the tradition of the York Mystery Plays?*

The conversations are already ongoing, where either I or one of my colleagues can be part of steering group conversations. We would never be able to manage the Plays as it would require a much larger organisation than ours to take on the production and we’re not a theatre production company. But in terms of the cultural development of the city certainly, for example, making sure that the Mystery Plays are writ large through the emerging cultural strategy. Make It York has a big role to play. We also have a group of employees who like to get involved in things, whether in a personal capacity we have a sponsorship member of staff who can advise our partner organisations, of which the Mystery Plays is one. We then have private sector companies or high net worth individuals who may be approaching us looking for opportunities to work on things, so I think there’s a number of ways we can support the tradition of the Plays. What we can’t do of course is stage the plays themselves, in spite of my background and how I'd love to do that!

**M:** *Would that be a kind-of dream?*

It would be a kind-of dream, but I think that would quickly turn into a sort-of Jane Gibson nightmare as well! But it requires people who have been making theatre more recently than I have to do that.

*And to what extent is Make It York committed to maintaining the tradition of the York Mystery Plays?*

Make it York is committed to being interested in anything that our partners are interested in, so if the Supporters Trust is interested in continuing to develop partnerships that will deliver the Plays; absolutely we’re interested in that. Like many other partners in the city we are interested in seeing these things happen. We are not underestimating though the scale of the task to create the Plays frequently as it’s a massive task. So we know from the events that we organise e.g. conferences, tourism awards, culture awards- that’s just an awards ceremony on one evening so we absolutely don’t underestimate the task. What Make It York would never do is insist that anybody else get their hands dirty without attempting to help ourselves. But it’s a huge endeavour, an absolutely massive undertaking so absolutely massive respect to the Supporters Trust for keeping that alive.

*Out of interest do you think that the future productions will become much smaller scale, or the trend of the big productions every four years can be continued?*

Each year new energy and inspiration comes along into the city and people want to try the large scale productions like the Minster 2016. There are enough people who have been involved in many of them to be able to advise any of those individuals because it is such a democratic process as nobody owns the Mystery Plays. My next door neighbour could hold the Mystery Plays if they so wish to do so and there are plenty of people around that could advise them on the task ahead! But I think that York’s reputation now is having a fantastic group of people who are heavily involved in community theatre: volunteers. At the latest production at York Theatre Royal, the Suffragettes show, I was sitting alongside an artistic director of a theatre company not far away from here who remarked to me how brilliant the costumes were and how the budget must have been massive for this production because the costumes were so professional. And I had to point out to him that actually the budget was tiny and the reason why the costumes are professional is because they are made by quite brilliant volunteers in York. So we really do have a fantastic group of committed volunteers who want to get engaged in this sort of activity from photography groups, to backstage skills, to making props, to designing and making costumes, to voice work and to acting. And I think York’s reputation as being really strong in community theatre will go from strength to strength. So there’s always going to be somebody, or 2 or 3 people, who are going to sit over a cup of tea or a pint and say ‘I know, let’s do a big production!’.

*Do you think that this level of commitment that you see with community theatre in York is quite unique to York?*

It’s not unique in the sense that community theatre has a standard model, but I think that the ability that we have with our theatre companies like York Theatre Royal and Pilot Theatre Company, and the volunteers who are engaged in Mystery Plays and the Waggon Plays, are an extraordinarily qualified group of volunteers. So I would say that we’re blessed rather than unique.

*So I guess building on the question of maintaining the tradition of the Plays: What partnerships do you consider important in seeing the tradition of the Plays maintained?*

The theatre groups I’ve talked about who are residents in York- e.g. Riding Lights Theatre Company, Pilot Theatre Company and York Theatre Royal. Outdoor productions are involved such as St. Mary’s Abbey (York Museums Trust). There’s a lot of contact with the University of York and York St. John University. Make It York is a partner, and the Dean of York Minster herself who is a strong supporter and is now a theatre producer of real experience. The city centre churches, education partnerships such as with York College, who certainly in 2012 made a lot of the props. The new Cultural Educational Partnership. The Guilds of Media Arts will be really interested. Somebody needs to come forward with a vision, and then partnership won’t be difficult to bring together as there’s so many experienced people. Talking about the Mystery Plays in York; you’re not selling an alien concept. Everybody understands what this means.

*So in which ways do you perceive the Supporters Trust to be of value to the York Mystery Plays?*

That’s an easy one! The Trust is absolutely essential. Because it is a democratic ownership process, the Trust has been the stewards of the concept for some years now and they have absolutely every right and should use their right to be the people that stimulate interest from organisations and individuals to come forward. Because on dark wet Tuesday nights I am not sitting around the table at the Supporters Trust, but they are. Working with the Waggon Plays and working with those partners who are involved in academic and theatrical study of the Plays almost weekly, they absolutely have the right to carry that torch. I think that the Trust should maybe feel that they can create a commission to put out there that they think it’s time for another large scale production, because obviously the Waggon Plays are continuing all the time. To be able to say we think it’s time for a new large scale production. And whether that’s talking directly to the Dean (of York Minster) to see whether she is keen on doing another production next, or speaking to the new executive director of York Theatre Royal it is the Trust that should be having those conversations.

*Would you like to see the large scale productions continued at a fixed every 4 years?*

Definitely, if possible. In terms of the visitor economy it’s very useful to know that things happen in regular periods of time, however the commercial reality of staging something so enormous is also very important. It’s up to the people that feel that they can make a contribution in a particular year to be the ones to say how often they should happen. Ideally- but there is no rule as it’s not the Olympic movement and there can be changes! What’s key is that everyone gathers around to support and promote, and another role for Make It York obviously is promotion and we will all be responsible in all our organisations to make sure that every seat is sold.

*In which ways could you consider engaging young people in the Plays and how may these opportunities be developed within the city?*

Young people already are really engaged with the Plays, both from being onstage and being backstage. The schools in York and York College get involved with anything going on, and also just individual young people who are interested in theatre. There was so many young people in the latest community play Blood and Chocolate for example. There’s a huge committed group of young people in York who are passionate about volunteering and community theatre. And that’s where Judi Dench started!

*Lastly, in which ways do you perceive the Supporters Trust to be of value to the city of York overall?*

Everybody who volunteers their time in York to maintain the culture, heritage and volunteering participation of York is hugely valuable; the Trust are very valued. This is how the world works. The world works by people putting their time into things that they’re knowledgeable and passionate about, and other people really appreciate it. York has got a fantastic volunteering history, and therefore the Trust alongside other organisations is hugely valued. You may not feel like that on a wet Wednesday, but it is a wonderful thing when a group of volunteers say ‘I know, let’s spend a million pounds and make a fantastic play. Let’s celebrate our history.’

*Questions: Melanie McLaughlan*