

## DCMS Jerwood Creative Bursaries Programme pilot case study:

### Aaron Wright



**Placement:** *Programme Coordinator, LADA (Live Art Development Agency)*

**Current Job:** Programmes Manager, LADA since 2012, recently appointed as Artistic Director at Fierce Festival, Birmingham, he will take up his post in April 2016

**Other jobs:** Before taking up his placement at LADA, Aaron did internships with a number of organisations including Fierce Festival, Capsule, the BBC and Maverick Television.

Aaron joined [LADA](#) (Live Art Development Agency) as Programme Coordinator in 2010 through the [DCMS Jerwood Creative Bursaries](#) pilot scheme, and has recently been appointed Artistic Director of [Fierce Festival](#), an international biennial of cross-art form performance in Birmingham.

Aaron believes that he is only where he is today because of the diversity schemes he was able to take advantage of during and after his education. Aged 16-17 Aaron received an Education Maintenance Allowance to continue studying in 6<sup>th</sup> form, before attending a summer school at Birmingham University. He subsequently became the first person in his family to go to university.

After completing a BA in English and Drama in 2009 supported by a full maintenance grant, Aaron carried out two short unpaid media internships in Birmingham, working part-time evenings and weekends in retail and box offices to support himself. Living at home and struggling with the lack of job opportunities in Birmingham, Aaron spent a year trying to find a way to move to London but could not afford to relocate without a full-time paid job. However, this changed when he came across the DCMS Jerwood Creative Bursaries Scheme offering paid jobs in the arts; *“when this opportunity presented itself I realised it was one of a kind - the opportunity to pursue an entry level job in London - the arts capital - which would have been financially impossible without this scheme.”*

As Programme Coordinator at LADA, Aaron grew in confidence and broadened his knowledge of the live art sector, developing meeting and communication skills, as well as key organisation and admin skills. With few jobs in the niche of live art, he was well positioned for the future, however it was Aaron’s immeasurable contribution to LADA that saw his contract extended and the offer of a permanent role followed.

Over the past five years at LADA, Aaron has co-curated international programmes of live art and has worked as a guest curator and consultant programmer for the National Theatre, The Arches and Cambridge Junction, as well as co-producing club night Knickerbocker at The Yard Theatre. Aaron also works as producer for the performance artist The Famous Lauren Barri Holstein and is a member of the Steakhouse Live collective, and a trustee of Birmingham Contemporary Music Group. Described as 'irreplaceable', Aaron has had a significant impact at LADA; *"Aaron has helped transform many aspects of our projects and initiatives, in particular the annual DIY professional development programme, which has significantly grown in scale, impact and reputation due to Aaron's vision, networks and coordination. LADA is delighted that Aaron will continue to work within and support the Live Art sector, though we are of course very sorry that he will be leaving us."* (CJ Mitchell, Director, LADA)

Aaron comments: *"After five exhilarating years I can't fully comprehend that I'm actually leaving LADA. There couldn't have possibly been a better place for me to develop my networks, skills and experiences for curating and producing Live Art. LADA has fundamentally shaped my work ethic, and these values will permeate all my future endeavours. As a part of the formidable LADA team I've worked with some of the world's most brilliant artists and I look forward to taking this work forward in Birmingham with Fierce Festival. Thanks for having me, it's been a trip."*

LADA also benefitted and developed as a result of the programme, restructuring their staffing and informing their recruitment strategies. Before Aaron came on board, they were reluctantly using unpaid interns and were looking at ways to change this practice. In 2012 LADA announced that they were creating a new Traineeship award: *"This will probably be a 9 month position, for 4 days/week, and we plan to mirror many of the goals and aspirations of the DCMS Jerwood Creative Bursaries in the recruitment criteria and having the award develop a professional career in the arts."* LADA's Director CJ Mitchell goes on to say: *"In both cases, the scheme has been invaluable for us - connecting us to Aaron and helping to inform thinking around our new Traineeship."* A few years on, LADA's first trainee, Katy Baird, turned out to be brilliant and they kept her on; she has now been there for three years. LADA have also developed a relationship with Roehampton University and now offer three month paid internships to their graduates.

Aaron is set to return to Birmingham to take up his position as Artistic Director for Fierce in April 2016. Fierce's Artistic Directors Laura McDermott and Harun Morrison were Aaron's mentors on the DCMS Creative Bursaries Scheme, and from this he volunteered at the Festival, forged a working relationship with the team and was invited to join the Board. This meant he was perfectly positioned when the Artistic Director role came up. Aaron is full of enthusiasm: *"I'm thrilled to return home to the West Midlands and take the helm of an organisation that has been a huge source of inspiration to me. Working at LADA, the world's leading advocate for Live Art, has given me the best possible experience, expertise and networks for this new role. After Laura McDermott and Harun Morrison's visionary tenure, Fierce is well and truly on the map as one of the most exciting, provocative and playful festivals of Live Art in the world. I hope to continue Fierce's history of premiering radical international work in the UK, whilst supporting more established UK practitioners, in turn contributing to a healthy national Live Art scene. I'm eager to grow large local audiences for Fierce without compromising its agenda of staging boundary-pushing art. Fierce, at its core, is an agitator unwavering in its interrogation of the status quo. I can't wait to see where it might mislead us all next."*

Eileen Evans, Co-Chair of the Board of Trustees for Fierce Festival welcomes Aaron to the team: *"On behalf of the Trustees, I'm delighted to appoint Aaron Wright as the new Artistic Director of Fierce Festival. We were struck by Aaron's passion and ambition for Fierce and the city of Birmingham. A dynamic curator and*

*agitator, Aaron's deep relationship with UK and International Live Art ecologies and commitment to their future really shone through. Building on Laura McDermott and Harun Morrison's successful tenure and Fierce's track record of nurturing young, inspiring leaders, the board are committed to working with Aaron to grow Fierce in new and exciting directions."*

Reflecting on the DCMS Jerwood Creative Bursaries Scheme, Aaron feels that being part of it is a badge of distinction. He sees how it is encouraging all types of diversity in the sector, including age – he recently attended a leadership course in Birmingham and was the youngest in the room and felt very confident in being there. Aaron describes how the programme instilled the value of networking and the need for professional development from the very outset. He also notes how unusual and helpful it is to have access to such a wide network so early in your career and he is still in touch with many bursary recipients from his cohort. The programme established their careers and he feels very fortunate that of his cohort group, none of them have been out of a job since. Once he is at Fierce, and wherever he works, he wishes to instil the recruitment ethos of the programme and will ensure he gives opportunities to people who are in the same position as he once was.