

ISOLATION AND LONELINESS

BY SALLY ROSE

Part of
Producing Liveness in Interesting Times

the uncultured

What can a producer do to feel less like an island?

Feeling isolated and lonely was quite a frequent state for me when I started out freelancing in 2014, and I found out that others who were working independently seemed to experience this too (there's something in the use of this word "too" – how it sets up a freedom and isolation). I suspected this was partly working remotely from varied locations (understood by many now!), and having no fixed team to be part of. As the role of producer is often centred around collaborative teams and working towards projects which will actively reduce loneliness and isolation in others, it came as a bit of a surprise to me.

I returned to work after parental leave in 2022, and it's been terrifying, brilliant and nourishing, but then recently I had a real wobble with confidence, feeling a weight of responsibility for this role and making my work count, and of course that dawning realisation that I was feeling... isolated. Nearly ten years on it still always helps to be aware of these feelings (even though we may never be able to hear the word 'isolation' in the same way again after the last few years).

I find loneliness manifests through all sorts of situations, like:

- Putting yourself out there, a lot – I experience a mix of extrovert and introvert tendencies (maybe lots of people can relate?!) and sometimes the constant reaching out can be overwhelming in this game: Invitations, pitches, applications, pushing for fair pay, negotiating contracts, networking events, even the essential (and fun!) attendance at shows and events often on your own, can all take their toll. As a producer you may not be putting yourself out there to the extent an artist is, but I think you carry some of that vulnerability, and imposter syndrome never really goes away
- Networking events can bring out that sense of isolation for me – who doesn't dread that old school sense of loneliness of eating/drinking on your own! Networking means you've got to be brave and strike up conversations
- Having no fixed workspace and struggling for laptop battery or wifi in various foyers, cafes, or on trains – maybe late at night
- Feeling unsure who is that buddy/peer/colleague you can call to 'just talk it through with' – often when you're stuck – maybe late at night
- Travelling around a lot, and often being responsible for other's logistics – sometimes late at night (running theme!)
- Feeling a sense of disconnect – at the moment this feeling crops up a lot for me as I'm no longer as able to make it to events, with a small child, but also the past couple of years have limited our time connecting in real space
- And now, working from home – not so available in evenings, being less mobile and feeling less connected

As a producer I value caring for, welcoming, hosting, and helping to create supportive spaces for/with the people I'm working with, but sometimes it can be difficult to prioritise strategies for looking after myself. Once I started to realise that many others were in the same boat, I found it easier to try and tackle, and establishing **Producer Gathering** was one of those ways.

When I sat next to Xavier de Sousa at LADA, as the first resident producers they had in 2014, we quickly struck up a friendship and peer support relationship that was able to tackle some of these feelings and open up ways to support others through Producer Gathering – initially through conversation in groups – and the action of 'gathering' has become increasingly important to me as time has gone on. I nearly didn't apply for the residency, after a really busy period, but a friend/colleague pushed me to, and I thank them for that. We were offered free desk space, keys to the office, printing, phone line and the chance to be part of the team, encouraged to chat to everyone, and were included in the operations of the organisation.

Other strategies that have helped me individually are:

- Identifying a list of people I can call/email for advice – being in dialogue is super important – so also trying to be as open and welcoming as possible to others who may want to contact me (note to self – set up a website, be more visible!)
- Similarly, a buddy system can be helpful – a pre-agreed mutual relationship which takes away any anxiety about taking up someone’s time – you’ll offer it in return. But like anything it requires boundaries to be set and consent to be regained at intervals. Since I’ve returned from parental leave this needs refreshing – I’m open if anyone wants to be that for each other!
- Knowing where to go to for resources and advice that is easy to access (with or without having to talk to anyone) – something Producer Gathering is there for
- Working within teams/organisations, and having collaborators who value talking regularly!
- Gathering a community around you of peers, who become friends, colleagues, admired artists etc. It has been really tough in recent years to maintain some of that connection without the liveness that many of us value so much
- Sitting in a space regularly enough to get to know other folk and stopping to chat (some arts space cafés have been these for me)
- Coaching – some focused sessions gave me confidence and offered support to feel less isolated
- Participating in training and residencies – outside of organisational employment it feels really beneficial to have these experiences for personal development
- Joining memberships can offer community and support e.g. IETM, a-n and a union (BECTU, Equity, UVW)
- At various points finding ways to offer mentoring or support to others – this really can reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation, and offer a way of opening up pathways to others

Beyond the individual, there are ways we can encourage the sector to support us

- Producer Gathering recently took on a new lease of life, supported by Marlborough Productions and Arts Council England South East responding to a consultation with independent producers in the region who remarked on the lack of developmental opportunities and again, feelings of isolation. I am working on Producer Gathering for one year, and the idea is this becomes a rolling one year contract for a new producer to keep this support structure in place and make it relevant to current needs
- I hope funders will start to support individuals more, it's always felt tough to receive development support as a producer – I benefited from Arts Council England's Developing Your Creative Practice and there is no doubt that time to invest in your own practice can help to feel less isolated, more valued and visible
- I hope one day we can establish an 'alliance' of sorts across the cultural sector to support people working as producers and to maintain a network and support structure
- It makes a real difference to have a place to be welcomed, comfortable and to be able to plug in and work. I've experienced this at other people's homes (nod to SOUP-ing (Some of Us Producers) project led by Emily Coleman, Ruth Dudman and Lucy Moore in 2013), organisations (LADA, The Marlborough Theatre) and in a shared studio with other freelancers – where I felt most settled
- Working in organisations as a freelancer I've realised the stark differences between me and employees, not least with liability and employment rights/benefits. I observed that part of an employed person's time is spent in meetings – and whilst sometimes these are lengthy and inefficient, they do also allow for a particular way of talking, communicating and getting your voice and ideas heard – including influencing ways orgs are run. In fact just having time to chat informally making a cuppa, for example, is a significant part of team building and finding out the inner workings of a place – which you can miss out on working independently
- As a freelancer in an organisation it can also feel incredibly lonely sometimes – being included in how an organisation is operated, run, managed is really important – you don't want to be offered a desk in the basement and never thought about again, but as always there is a time balance to strike for contributing to the fabric of an organisation, which is unpaid time
- Organisations can do more to help combat feelings of isolation for the independent community of artists and producers – paying independent workers to be part of decision making, as advisory boards, as trustees on Boards and associate schemes – all could be a good step (*See The Uncultured's own **Freelance Supporters Menu** for detailed thinking on these ideas*) and offering space and support to gather – something that can't be overestimated in its capacity to support

Something I try to hold dear is that we are a strong collective and creative group, and I am part of that whole. So even when you're feeling most lonely, disconnected and isolated – do make contact with someone else in whichever way feels possible, and invariably it'll help to shore you up. Try acting as your own ~~time~~ support manager and mentor, and reach out when you need it.

This work was commissioned by The Uncultured as part of their project, *Producing Liveness in Interesting Times*.

Producing Liveness in Interesting Times is a collection of writing, thinking and cheat-enabling works by Live Art and Performance Producers and Producer-adjacent arts workers who are working in the UK.

To explore other writings from *Producing Liveness in Interesting Times*, visit:
the-uncultured.com/pliit

Made with support from Battersea Arts Centre, Theatre Bristol and funded by Arts Council England.

Special thanks to all of the contributors; those who attended our LADA DIY: Doing, Undoing and...doing again; Shit's Hit The Fan bursary recipients Beccy D'Souza, Natalie Chan, Rafia Hussain and Siân Baxter; Alan Lane; Eve Veglio-Hüner; Kate Craddock; Book Works; The New Wolsey Theatre, Ipswich; Producer Gathering; Regan Mott; Rob Sweeney; and Tracy Gentles.

the uncultured

The Uncultured (Ashleigh Bowmott + Laura Sweeney)
are arts independents working collaboratively
to produce, curate, facilitate and advocate.

the-uncultured.com
[@_TheUncultured_](#)