



NORTH STAR



North Star was commissioned as a signature event in the Belfast 2024 calendar. The project encapsulated what Belfast 2024 aimed to achieve, through a sense of belonging, celebrating the city's history, reflecting on the present and shaping its future, showcasing some of the city's top artists.

North Star's Engagement programme encapsulated a Creative Writing project, involving 100 young people contributing to an immersive live music performance, inspired by the historic speech given by orator, writer, and abolitionist, Frederick Douglass in Belfast in 1845. Creatively led by Kwame Daniels, with an array of Belfast's creative talent and expansive engagement programme, North Star reached a diverse range of audiences and young people across the city, and gave a vital platform for artists, and young people, amplifying the voices of underrepresented communities in Northern Ireland and beyond – especially needed with the backdrop of 2024's social unrest in relation to anti-immigration and racism which continues today.

Reflecting upon the theme of 'home', Grammy Award winner Kaidi Tatham, award-winning poet Nandi Jola, rising stars Leo Miyagee and Winnie Ama and special guests Ivor Novello nominee Hannah Peel and Colin Salmon worked together, inspired by almost 100 young people to produce an immersive live spectacle of music, art and literature, rooted in the city's Black cultures. The showcase, inspired by the historic speech given by orator, writer, and abolitionist, Frederick Douglass in Belfast in 1845, premiered over two nights in one of Belfast's most iconic venues' Belfast Telegraph Building.

Belfast 2024 was a year-long celebration of home-grown culture featuring over 20 largescale, ambitious and exciting events, theatre, dance, music, and art. Produced by the Belfast City Council, it developed a programme of new work through innovative co-design and partnership models with city stakeholders, the creative sector, and its citizens. The £5.9million investment and vision for the year was to create a vibrant, exciting and engaging programme of new work, to build a better understanding of identity and Belfast's place in the world through creative and cultural interventions and experiences.

Belfast 2024 created shared, memorable moments and experiences that brought the city together. It championed civic participation by fostering a sense of belonging, creativity, and active citizenship. Audiences and artists described feeling part of something larger than themselves – a city, a movement, a community, a shared experience, a moment they will never forget.



Paul Oakley Stoval (Original cast of Hamilton) with Great Grandson of Frederick Douglass, Kenneth B Morris, his daughter Nicole Morris at Blessed Trinity College. (Macy Stewart Photography)



North Star Creative Writing Programme - Tara Lynne O'Neill working with pupils at Lagan College (Macy Stewart Photography)



North Star Event – Carrie Davenport Photography

With 'People, Place & Planet' at the core of the guiding Principles for Belfast 2024, all work commissioned shared values of collaboration and co-design, new work, our shared planet, future thinking, and public space.

As a leader in innovate arts and facilitation for over 25 years, we at Bounce Culture were comfortable, pulling from our extensive experience and network of contacts to design our North Star Creative Writing programme, collaborating with Creative Writers, Fighting Words NI and the Creative Schools project, (Education Authority and Arts Council Northern Ireland.) We co-designed and facilitated a creative writing programme with Key Stage 3 pupils in four secondary schools as well as members of the community group, Diverse Youth NI. The school communities represented different areas of Belfast, as well as a diverse social, economic, political, cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Over the course of six workshops, pupils explored their perceptions of and feelings about Belfast and experimented with a range of creative writing and spoken word techniques.

Douglass, considered a fugitive slave at the time delivered a landmark speech in Belfast, declaring, "wherever else I feel myself to be a stranger, I will remember I have a home in Belfast." Nearly 200 years after the event, we posed the question;

**DOES
BELFAST
FEEL LIKE
HOME
TO YOU?**



“.. a night when
the **visible** and
the **invisible**,
the **tangible**
and **intangible**
came together, as
North Star **shone**
over Belfast..”

Irish News

It Mattered

Song lyrics and project themes around Home took on extra significance, culminating in a spectacular showcase of music, art, and literature, celebrating the long-standing presence of Black culture and anti-racist activism in Belfast. The response to Douglass's powerful quote and this seemingly simple question became more pertinent in light of the racist and Islamophobic attacks in Belfast, during the preceding summer. and the ongoing social unrest around 'anti-immigration.'

North Star reached a larger and more visibly diverse audience than anything we have done before, in terms of age, gender and ethnicity.

North Star was widely recognised as innovative and deeply impactful, not only in Belfast but across the Irish and African diaspora. The collaborative design of the project brought a fresh energy to our thinking and practice; an outcome reflected in feedback from pupils and teachers alike.

Participants shared extremely positive feedback. North Star :

- ▶ Developed confidence - sharing with each other and speaking up in front of teachers and facilitators and having their voices publicly platformed
- ▶ Enabled us to explore new ideas - being asked to think about subjects they have not thought about before
- ▶ Explored how we experience, think and feel about the place we live in - able to place historical events and people in new ways in familiar environments



"Its emotional investment in the persons and performances of artists and young people, and the themes of all the work, was obvious. "

quarto collective

Quarto's research also found that pupils who might struggle with the way literacy is taught and what is expected of them in the curriculum were freed to explore and communicate their ideas without being judged and found wanting. Feedback articulated how young people had fun, interacting with and instructing facilitators, all benefitting, allowing pupils to lead discussion.

"Despite local resources for Black history and culture being non-existent, North Star enabled all to learn about Our Collective Heritage through Frederick Douglass."

Teachers and school staff were equally as positive about North Star, finding that:

- ▶ facilitators coming in from outside school allowed for working with pupils in different, refreshing and meaningful ways
- ▶ teachers felt increasingly confidence to introduce new and complex subjects into the classroom, recognising that having access to reams of material wasn't always necessary – "all you need sometimes is a question".
- ▶ Facilitation methods expanded teachers' and pupils' ideas about how to write (when writing is for performance it can be about emotion and interaction more than vocabulary and grammar)
- ▶ group leaders committed to adopting new approaches in their own practice

Quarto's Action Research findings continue by stating North Star has demonstrated the clear benefits of time and energy invested into values-led work and long-term, interdisciplinary collaborative relationships, demonstrating what can be achieved through:

- ▶ commitment to young people, particularly marginalised and vulnerable young people.
- ▶ commitment to the arts for their own sake and as means of enriching education, exploring identity and place, building community and supporting social justice.
- ▶ commitment to meaningful change in Northern Ireland, working outwards from the personal to the public.

Audience and participants for North Star involved said:

North Star gave the opportunity for "The power of children to speak honestly and openly. The power of music to uplift. The power of diversity to Unify"

"A reminder that the histories of place are often much richer and more complex than we are taught."

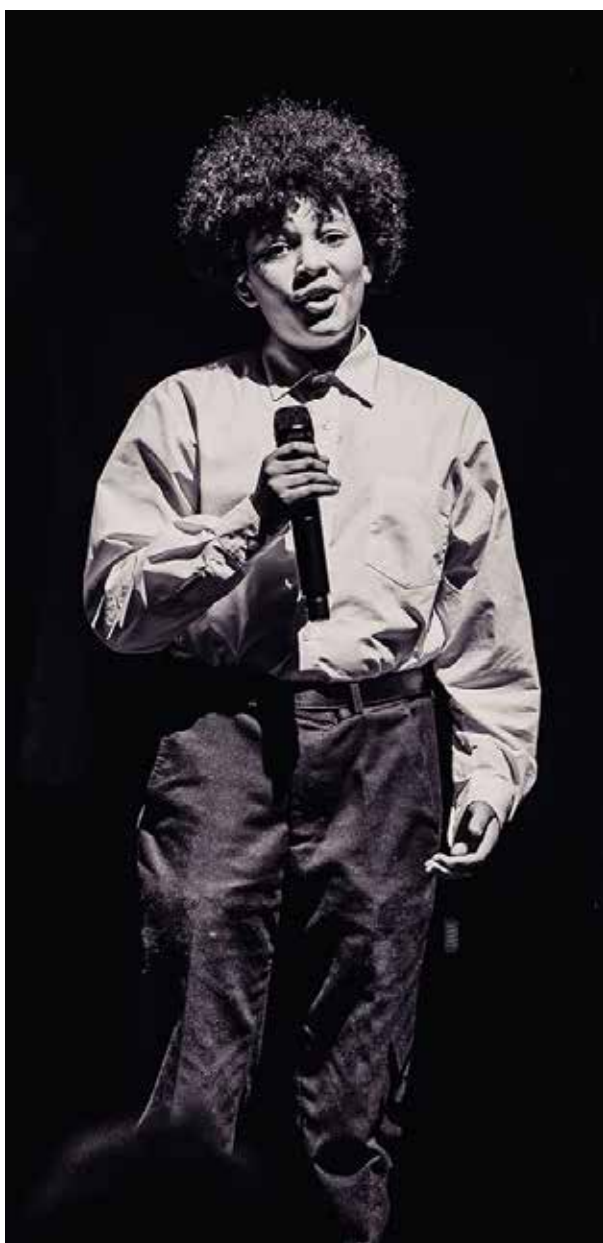
"I found out people's different perspectives on life and how their lives are different to mine".

"It was really important to me to hear the voices of the young people and their version of 'home'; I particularly liked the idea of self being home wherever self is in the world."

With over 9 in 10 of the audience agreeing they:

- ▶ felt welcome and included
- ▶ found the event was absorbing and held their attention
- ▶ felt proud it was happening in their City
- ▶ made them think differently about their city's history and heritage
- ▶ felt connected to others





Beyond the North Star of Belfast

To mark the one-year anniversary of the North Star performances, we are about to re-engage with the same pupils within the four Belfast schools with workshops, titled 'North Star: The Reflection Sessions' with my colleague and facilitator, Ali Curran, (Organisational psychologists and Cultural Specialist,) to celebrate the impact of their work, a year on, while continuing to build content and community of knowledge and creativity.

Given ongoing tensions, isolation and alienation prevalent here and worldwide, their work is ever important and relevant. North Star also contributes to Belfast City Council's work as a UNESCO City of Music, revealing and sharing other aspects of our music heritage; and as soon-to-be hosting city of Fleadh Cheoil, the project has added significance in its potential to present a new and unique iteration of Irish music and culture.

Our North Star, New York partners, Irish Arts Centre facilitated introductions with four schools in which we presented the North Star project. It was positively received, and confirms our belief that 2025 and 2026 presents a special opportunity to progress a unique project along the path it has established, possessing the flexibility to harness subject matters that amplify the unheard and platform the unseen. North Star's legacy is abundant with potential with its links back to Belfast, the island of Ireland and beyond.