

STEEL

IMPACT REPORT 2025



THEATRE
BY THE LAKE

Photo by Grant Archer.

THE CAST

Suraj Shah | Kamran

Jordan Tweddle | James

CREATIVE TEAM

Lee Mattinson | Writer

Liz Stevenson | Director

Simon Kenny | Designer

Mark Melville | Composer/Sound Designer

Jessie Addinall | Lighting Designer

Kieran Sheehan | Movement Director

Mark Macey | Assistant Director

Phil Geller | Production Manager

Sarah Goodyear | Company Stage Manager

Jamie Walsh | Producer

Colin Brind | Steel Community Choir MD

“A REAL TRIBUTE
TO THE SPIRIT OF
WORKINGTON.”



Northern Arts Review

We are thankful to the late Jim Askew, and David & Sue Thomas, whose generous support made **Steel** possible.

Photo by Chris Payne.



The story of Steel brings us immense pride.

As a project, it marked the further development of our community touring model and served to underline the cultural value and social resonance of taking work with a profound sense of place into the heart of local communities.

The extraordinary impact of **Steel** has been clear to see, not only its progression to a national tour in 2025, but in captivating audiences at community venues across Cumbria.

We believe this production exemplified the power of theatre to tell important stories, fostering the spirit of community, and creating meaningful dialogue around a subject, particularly in areas like West Cumbria, where local representation in the arts has long been overlooked.

From its inception, **Steel** was a deeply rooted and community-driven project. Commissioning Workington-born playwright Lee Mattinson and working in consultation with local communities throughout the production process ensured **Steel's** authentic connection with place.

This extended to the formation of the Steel Community Choir in Workington, and its inclusion in the live production - a great example of deep engagement within impacted communities.

The result was a production authentically born of place that spoke directly to its audiences - the impact of **Steel** is undeniable.

We are proud to be uniquely positioned to create work that speaks to the people of Cumbria and beyond. **Steel** has proven that there is both a need and a hunger for this kind of theatre, and we are eager to continue building on this success.

Thank you to everyone who contributed to making **Steel** a success.

Liz Stevenson

Artistic Director & Joint CEO
Director of *Steel*

Simon Stephens

Executive Director & Joint CEO



INTRODUCTION

Theatre by the Lake (TBTL) commissioned **Steel**, written by Workington-born playwright Lee Mattinson, in 2021. This production, deeply rooted in the lived experiences of the communities in post-industrial West Cumbrian towns, successfully reflected themes of industrial decline, class identity, and LGBTQ+ representation.

Steel represents TBTL's approach to commissioning new work, with an emphasis on telling original, local stories that platform Cumbrian voices and talent. **Steel** also marked the first commission supported by the community touring model, a commitment to tour professional productions to communities facing barriers to accessing professional theatre and the arts.

Through a robust research and development (R&D) process, community engagement, and supported by a community tour, **Steel** resonated powerfully with Cumbrian audiences and received strong national critical acclaim. **Steel** exemplifies TBTL's mission to create and share great theatre that tells stories, builds communities, and celebrates our place, while furthering our vision of enriching lives through theatre both locally and nationally.

PROJECT AIMS

- Excellence and Innovation: Produce a high-quality theatre production that receives local and national acclaim/recognition.
- Enjoyment and Wellbeing: Provide an entertaining and meaningful experience for audiences and improve the wellbeing of participating communities/participants.
- Creating Communities: Strengthen relationships through workshops and community touring, and establish a choir to co-create a song for the production.
- Pride in Place: Tell an original Cumbrian story that resonates deeply with audiences and involve communities in the development of the play.
- Developing Local Talent: Celebrate Cumbrian talent and give their work a national platform.
- Sparking Curiosity & Reflection: Hold conversations/promoting meaningful dialogue about identity, heritage, and belonging.
- Profile Raising: Enhance TBTL's regional and national reputation and promoting our vision.
- Platforming Underrepresented Voices: Platform LGBTQ+, global majority and working-class experiences and sharing a West-Cumbrian story with the nation.





Illustration by Emily Ford.

CREATIVE PROCESS & LEE MATTINSON'S VISION

In accordance with TBTL's new approach to commissioning work that resonates with local Cumbrian communities and their lived experiences, Liz Stevenson (Director) and Lee Mattinson (Writer) sought to ensure **Steel** was deeply grounded in the communities it represented.

Mattinson, inspired by his upbringing in Workington, sought to capture the "chaos of West Cumbria" and its stark contrast to the commodified Lake District.

His writing process involved extensive research, including interviews with former steelworkers. Mattinson described his motivation for the play as follows:

"I wondered...what if someone with zero power suddenly had it all? I quickly decided that someone should be a seventeen-year-old lad from Workington; that his sudden power was control of a railway system his ancestors had helped build."

Through multiple drafts, **Steel** evolved into a story of power, love, and identity, intertwining the region's industrial history with personal narratives.



Scan me
to watch
the Steel
introduction
video

Or click the link... <https://youtu.be/dGZJfitXnE>

RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT (R&D) STAGES

The R&D phase was a crucial part of shaping **Steel**, ensuring authenticity in its storytelling. This included:

- National Theatre Studio Generate Programme: Provided a week-long workshop with a movement director and actors to refine the depiction of small-town dynamics and the interracial queer love story.
- Community Workshops: Engaged with 89 young people from Workington Academy, Keswick School, Kirkgate Youth Theatre, and West Lakes Academy.
- LGBThq Carlisle: Consultations with LGBTQ+ young people to ensure accurate representation of queer experiences in rural areas.
- Anti Racist Cumbria: Consultation with Cumbrian young people from the Global Majority to ensure the play was informed by lived experiences.
- Audience Litmus Testing: 86% of young participants agreed that **Steel** reflected their world, particularly in themes of classism, history, isolation, and LGBTQ+ identity.

These stages enabled Mattinson and the creative team to refine **Steel** into a work that authentically resonated with local experiences in West Cumbria, while achieving several of TBTL's artistic aims, particularly those relating to developing local talent, sparking curiosity and reflection, and platforming underrepresented voices.

COMMUNITY TOURING MODEL & IMPACT

Building on the success of community touring with TBTL's production of **Every Brilliant Thing** (2023), an important objective of **Steel** was to reach audiences beyond TBTL and traditional theatre spaces.

In Autumn 2024 TBTL took the production on a self-funded community tour, visiting five community venues, including first-time visits to Florence Mine, Carlisle Youth Zone, and The Carnegie in Workington, and return visits to The Centre in Maryport and Beggars Theatre in Millom.

Through reaching new audiences in their localities, TBTL was able to remove barriers to accessing professional theatre and the arts and bring a story that resonated with the lived experiences of the communities to venues on their doorstep.

The impact of taking relatable, professional theatre to community venues is captured in feedback from Sue McKay, Director of Florence Arts:

"It was wonderful for a small venue like ours to welcome a full, professionally produced and run performance - our venue was transformed with the help of the staff from TBTL who were very patient with us and flexible in working out practical problems."

The audience really appreciated a professional performance coming to their hometown - the tickets sold out well in advance, which showed the enthusiasm for the show. The local subject matter was undoubtedly a draw, and people were talking excitedly as they left about the unique phrases, places and references they spotted. More locally co-created content would certainly be appreciated."

Not only does this demonstrate the need for productions like **Steel** but also shows the dexterity and professionalism of TBTL's technical team and their ability to adapt professional productions and sets to fit unique venues of differing sizes, capacities and specs. We worked closely with venues to understand the needs of their communities and make sure we made the work as accessible and impactful as possible.



Scan me to see what the audience thought!

Or click the link...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xv0DpbaAXFo&t=64s>

COMMUNITY



STEEL COMMUNITY CHOIR & LEGACY

A unique aspect of **Steel** was its integration of a community choir. The Steel Community Choir was engaged at The Carnegie in Workington, and brought together a range of people to co-create a song about West Cumbria with Lee Mattinson and composer Mark Melville.

After a summer of weekly rehearsals, the song was recorded and integrated into the production's sound design. The Choir performed the song live on the Theatre by the Lake stage as part of our 25th anniversary celebration, and later performed the song live for two special performances of **Steel** at The Carnegie. The Choir participants came to see the show at Theatre by the Lake, and some have since become part of our community advisory panel, an example of how theatre can deepen community

roots and create lasting connections that continue to influence TBTL's community engagement to this day.

“THIS PROJECT HAS ALLOWED ME TO FEEL SEEN AGAIN”

FEEDBACK FROM THE CHOIR

Participants shared personal reflections on the transformative impact of the Choir.

“Before this project, I wouldn't say I had good feelings towards Workington. This project made me reevaluate my relationship with the town.”

“AS AN AUTISTIC PERSON, I OFTEN FELT LIKE I DIDN'T FIT IN. THIS HAS BEEN A TOTALLY DIFFERENT EXPERIENCE - I HAVE LOVED EVERY MINUTE OF IT.”

“The whole process has been cathartic. The project has allowed me to rest some old demons and reminded me of the good that Workington has to offer. As well of the proud heritage that should be celebrated.”

This experience contributed to enjoyment and wellbeing and connection with place, providing participants with a creative outlet that positively impacted their mental health and sense of belonging.

These findings are reflected in the Steel Community Choir survey, which found that all participants strongly agreed that the Choir was a positive, enjoyable experience, where they could be themselves, and would do it again. All factors that help reduce social isolation and evidence the power of theatre to create communities.

With regards to 'having pride in my place' the net promoter score (NPS) before the Choir was -25 (rated as 'poor') meaning a significantly higher proportion of participants had an unfavourable view of their place than a favourable one. After the Choir project this score was +8 (rated as 'good').

Furthermore, all participants strongly agreed that the Choir project had helped them celebrate their area, and the process made them feel proud of their community.



Scan me to watch the Steel Choir video!

Or click the link... <https://youtu.be/bOnTkyK9eYE>

AUDIENCES

1,683
537
27

AUDIENCE NUMBERS

The production reached a total of 1,683 audience members, including 537 on tour.

The Steel Community Choir had 27 participants, taking part in three live performances. This directly aligned with our goal of creating communities by reducing social isolation and providing accessible theatre.

“IT MADE ME THINK ABOUT MY OWN FATHER WHO LOST HIS JOB AT THE STEELWORKS AND HOW THAT IMPACTED MY WHOLE FAMILY.”

– Audience Member, The Carnegie

AUDIENCE RECEPTION & FEEDBACK

ENGAGEMENT WITH LOCAL IDENTITY

Many audience members expressed appreciation for seeing their town and personal histories represented on stage.

“It was wonderful to see a locally created performance of artistic quality to warrant a performance on any national stage, performed superbly in our local theatre - a real sense of place”

– Audience member at Theatre by the Lake

“A real tribute to the spirit of Workington and should be treasured.”

– Northern Arts Review

This supports our pride in place aim by helping audiences value and celebrate Cumbria’s rich heritage.

The audience survey showed 72% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that **Steel** helped them better understand the place and people where they live, and 84% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that it’s important that **Steel** is happening in their local area.



Photo by Chris Payne.

TOURING SUCCESS

Audiences valued the accessibility of theatre in their local spaces:

"We are full-time carers, and finding the opportunity to travel to the Theatre is hard. Having the opportunity to see a show like this at our local community centre allowed us to come."

– Audience Member, The Centre

This reflects our mission to make and share theatre beyond our venue and reduce barriers to participation.

QUEER REPRESENTATION

LGBTQ+ audiences, particularly younger viewers, found the play deeply affirming:

"This touched me – I have never seen my town depicted in art like this – and the experience of being gay in Workington. It will stay with me for a long, long time."

– Audience Member, The Carnegie

This aligns with our commitment to platforming underrepresented voices and fostering inclusivity.

Photo by Chris Payne.

CRITICAL RECEPTION & PRESS COVERAGE

Steel received critical acclaim, with positive reviews highlighting its emotional depth and powerful performances. These accolades strengthen our profile-raising objective by demonstrating our ability to produce high-quality, nationally recognised theatre.

**"A STORY THAT'S TOLD
WITH EMOTION AND
ENTHUSIASM, INFUSED
WITH A WEST COAST
DIALECT."**

Stagey Lady Review

**"A REAL TRIBUTE
TO THE SPIRIT OF
WORKINGTON."**



Northern Arts Review

**"BROUGHT ME
TO TEARS."**

– Trans audience member,
Carlisle Youth Zone

“BEAUTIFUL AND BREATH-STOPPING.”



The Stage

CONCLUSION: THE IMPORTANCE OF STEEL

Steel was more than just a play; it was a cultural event that amplified the voices of West Cumbria.

By reflecting the lived experiences of local communities, addressing themes of industrial decline and giving voice to underrepresented identities, **Steel** affirmed the transformative power of theatre.

This production fully aligned with TBTL's vision of enriching lives through theatre and ensuring that theatre made in Cumbria is recognised on the national stage.

The success of this production has reinforced the necessity of bringing high-quality, socially engaged work to non-traditional venues.

Moving forward, TBTL aims to build on this momentum, further expanding access to the arts and continuing to champion stories that reflect and resonate with the communities they serve.

To support Theatre by the Lake produce more original Cumbrian productions like **Steel**, please email development@theatrebythelake.com



The Generate Programme

**National
Theatre**

THEATRE BY THE LAKE



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

Photo by Chris Payne.