

Pride march, 1974. Credit: Wikimedia

A new Heritage Fund project might be the last chance to capture the experiences of LGBTQ+ people in Manchester who remember life before the Sexual Offences Act 1967.

The Sexual Offences Act 1967 was a milestone event in the long road to equality for the LGBTQ+ community.

It partially decriminalised homosexual acts taking place in private between men aged over 21 (sexual acts between women had never been criminalised).

Yet this legal landmark – which was only passed in England and Wales – was just a start. And for many men, it led to more prosecutions and discrimination, while some faced blackmail and even danger to their lives.

Manchester-based Initiative Arts' Legacy of 67 project, which today (1 February) announces a £76,200 grant from the Heritage Fund, will share the memories of the people who lived through this turbulent time. We spoke to Jez Dolan and David Dolan Martin from the project about what they hope to achieve.

Where did the idea come from?



Jez (left) and David

Jez: A discussion we had during lockdown while walking the dog – all the best ideas come when walking the dog – was that the '67 Act was a significant historic moment [but what was] the actual impact that it made, particularly on gay men's lives?

> If you were under the age of 30 in 1967, you're pretty old now. A lot of the stories that those people have are in danger of disappearing for good.
>
> *David*

David: Jez had had a conversation with a young guy who said: ‘I just don't get this fuss about this HIV and AIDS thing.’ That led me to thinking: ‘Well, people don’t understand what happened in the '80s. Who on earth can remember what happened in the '60s and indeed the '50s?' If you were under the age of 30 in 1967, you're pretty old now. A lot of the stories that those people have are in danger of disappearing for good.

Your project brings together a lot of elements – oral history, walking tour, theatre – why did you choose this format?

Jez: Oral history will be at the centre of the project and we will train people in oral history techniques. The aim is to work in an inter-generational fashion, so that we've got younger people potentially interviewing older people and those interviews will be archived.

Then it’s taking those stories and giving them a new life [in other] forms, and giving them a wider audience as well.



From the Life's a Drag theatre performance. Credit: Initiative Arts

David: The way that Jez in particular has worked before (with previous Heritage Fund-supported Polari Mission and Life's a Drag) seemed a really good way of getting those stories out. We'd more or less decided what the project might look like in 20 minutes!

Jez: On top of that, some of those (LGBTQ+) stories do exist, but they can be very London centric. They can exclude working class people and certainly people of colour and women.

Why is it important to tell these cultural stories?

Jez: When I've done work with young LGBTQ+ groups and I tell them: 'yes, homosexuality was illegal', they are often like: 'You are joking!'. But it *was* illegal, in my lifetime, and people don't know that because it doesn't get taught in schools.

Also: Manchester has a huge gay population, queer population, and The Gay Village is a very central part of that. But if you are a young queer person and you drop into Manchester from wherever, where do you learn about your history? Where do you learn about your culture?

Is the concept of what history or heritage "is" changing?

Jez: In the evaluations of our projects, people – participants, volunteers – have said: 'This brings everything close. It's immediate. It's about me. I can relate to it and we need to have more of this.'

David: I think there's a general interest in history, which is spreading from being about political history to people's history. I'm thinking of David Olusoga's A House Through Time TV show. That's quite powerful and this project is a manifestation of that. But at the same time, it's a manifestation which illuminates oppression and discrimination.

> Until people can walk down the street hand-in-hand with their partner, wife, husband, whoever, then... we need to keep on doing this and we need to keep talking about it.
>
> *Jez*

Jez: This isn't just history. People are still being beaten up or killed because of who they love, and that's criminal and immoral. Until people can walk down the street hand-in-hand with their partner, wife, husband, whoever, then... we need to keep on doing this and we need to keep talking about it.

You have worked with us for 10 years, has your idea of inclusion changed in that time? What is the best way of running an inclusive project?



Polari Mission. Credit: Initiative Arts

Jez: From the start, we thought we need to make this as inclusive as possible. And as older, white, cis gay men we're not necessarily the best people to start engaging in a meaningful way with black communities, for example.

And black queer people are still very hidden in lots of circumstances, even somewhere like Manchester, which is why we've partnered with (community action group celebrating LGBTQI people of colour) Rainbow Noir. We want to work alongside them to make sure that what we're doing is open and engaging and not about tokenism.

> On our own, we are not going to make those relationships we want to.
>
> *David*

David: Having been involved in the theatre sector for 20, 30 years, there have been lots of initiatives where people say: ‘we'll programme this because those people, whoever those people happen to be, will like it'. Those initiatives fail time and time again.

It has to be engagement on a strategic level in order that the people you're trying to attract are actually in part responsible for the work that's being programmed.

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Do you have any advice for projects making digital elements effective?

Jez: We need to make as much of the work digital as we can. So, for instance, the walking tour will also be an app and the symposium we will broadcast via Zoom.

David: We’re all a lot more digitally savvy than we were two years ago. I think the main bit of advice is: if you don't know how to do it, you probably know somebody who does. One thing which has helped us with being successful digitally is again to do with partnerships. For example without the support of Archives+ at Manchester Central Library, it would have been very hard to actually get [our] information out there.

What tips do you have for other LGBTQ+ projects applying for funding for the first time?

David: The first thing I'd say is that the Heritage Fund's approach to applications is very, very accessible. The feedback and the support we got in doing this application was extraordinary and very, very welcome.

About the project

Legacy of ’67 will recruit and train a team of volunteers to capture stories of before and after the Sexual Offences Act 1967, recording the social and historical impact of the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in England and Wales.

Elements of the project include:

- oral histories transcribed and made available at Manchester Central Library's Archives+
- a public exhibition at the library, curated by volunteers
- a symposium for activists, academics, artists and historians
- a walking tour of the city, available in both digital and physical format
- a new theatre commission performed at Manchester’s Edge Theatre
- new visual art, which will be exhibited at the library and the Bishopsgate Institute in London

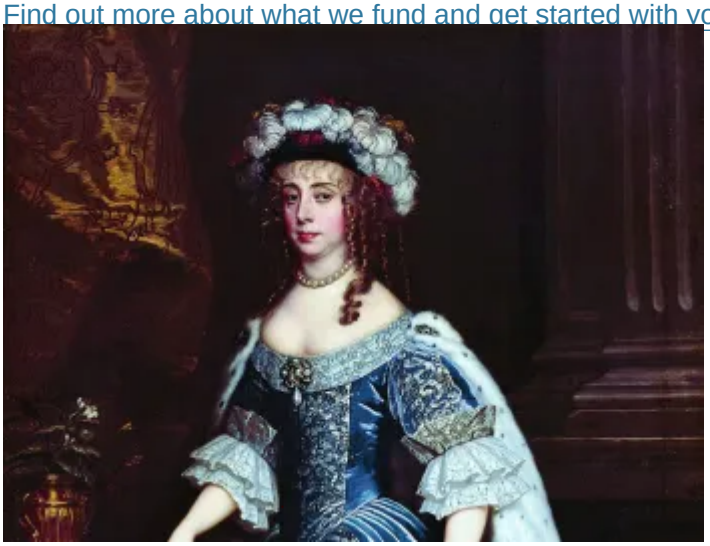
Partners include: the LGBT Foundation, Manchester Central Library and Archives+, Manchester University Gender and Sexuality MA students, supported housing suppliers, Rainbow Noir Coalition, Edge Theatre.

Find out more about Initiative Arts.

Apply for funding

Liz Ellis, Heritage Fund Policy Project Manager for inclusion, says: "As a funder we know that there are many more stories of LGBTQ+ lives to research and share UK-wide. We welcome hearing from more LGBTQ+ networks and organisations who have ideas to explore in future heritage projects."

Find out more about what we fund and get started with your project today.





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