Outspoken art of a secret language

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The Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) has awarded a grant of £69,400 to Manchester-based Initiative Arts to produce a lasting archive and exhibition about the endangered language of Polari.

Led by Polari Mission, the project will explore artistic responses to the little-known language and its long history. Gay history and heritage is often non-explicit in archives, and artists Jez Dolan and Joseph Richardson plan to investigate how LGBT people can access their sometimes oblique stories through oral history archives, using their findings to inspire new visual work.

Alongside the research and exhibition, to be held at the John Rylands Library in Manchester from August 2013, a range of different activities include an immersive event at Manchester's Contact Theatre on 9 February 2013, and a conference during the exhibition to explore Polari's history and legacy through workshops, talks and readings.

Two project leaders will undertake a five day research visit to three archives in London: the Hall Carpenter Archive at the London School of Economics, the British Library's National Life Stories project and the Millthorpe Project at South Bank University. Oral history training, led by North West Sound Archive, will be provided for the two leaders and four volunteers who will be recruited from the LGBT community. The existing Arts Council funded Polari Mission website will be expanded and enhanced to provide detailed online information, images and documents for everyone to use.

Polari was first heard as long ago as the 11th century as Thieves' Cant, part of an underworld culture to disguise illicit behaviour. It then surfaced as a distinct subculture in the 17th century in the way mollies, or men who dressed up in feminine costume for fun, communicated with one another.

"The molly houses were social spaces that had their own distinct performative culture, with lots of singing, dancing and dressing up to let off steam," explains artist Joseph Richardson. "The mollies were a very bold and creative bunch who coined many of the words we see in Polari today. Polari was used as a disguise but it was also about creating identity and was used in a playful way just for fun."

The language has many influences and cultural crossovers, including Italian, Yiddish, Romany gypsy, Cockney rhyming slang, and the slang used in travelling circus and fairground communities, but its growing use ironically started its decline.

It reached its apogee in the 1960s on the radio programme Round the Horne, through the characters Julian and Sandy, two out of work and explicitly camp actors who spoke in Polari. But this meant that people outside gay culture started to understand it. Polari lost its impact and fell out of use.

"Polari is a crucial but little-explored and misunderstood part of LGBT history." says artist Jez Dolan. "We have had generous help from the linguist Paul Baker, the acknowledged expert on Polari. It's one of the top ten endangered languages of the world, and there's a clear need to document its influence and connect LGBT people with their heritage."

Sara Hilton, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund North West, said: "We at the Heritage Lottery Fund are proud to be supporting this project that will shed a light on this relatively unknown heritage story. Polari has been around for many

years and forms an important part of LGBT history and identity. Polari Mission will explore and share the origins of the language, how it has evolved over time and its legacy in local communities."

Further information

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