Good Morning everyone. I am Mandy Medlicott, this is Dave Danzig and together we are the Grand Theatre of Lemmings. Alongside our Community arts work in Tendring that includes 10 years of the Harwich Children’s Carnival, the Manningtree Beach Bash festivals and last year producing Danny Boyles ‘Pages of the Sea’ on Clacton’s West Beach, we have been working as a traveling theatre company for over 30 years.

We have performed throughout the world from Clacton to Chongqinq (in China), from Jaywick to Jerusalem; playing to audiences at festivals, on the street and in theatres. It is due to this itinerant theatrical life style that the original idea for “Resorting to The Coast” came into being, when our passions for theatre, heritage and community engagement collided.

So a bit of background. In 2014 we inherited the ‘Smallest Theatre in The World’, a two-seater theatre perched on the sidecar of a motorbike. Dating from the 1970’s, it was made by Marcel Steiner a comic genius who worked with the legendry Ken Campbell and starred many well known actors early in there careers, such as Bob Hoskins, Michael Elfick and Sylvester McCoy (the 7th Doctor Who). The concept is to take two volunteers and put them inside the theatre and then do an entire show, just for them (and of course the 200 people who gather outside). Dave joined the Marcel, for a couple of years in the 1980’s and Robin Hood was first show he performed in, at the opening of the newly refurbished Piazza in Covent Garden. It was part of the regeneration of the area, which helped it develop into the tourist destination it is today.

After Marcel’s death The Smallest Theatre came into the hands of Liam Rich at Chelmsford District Council who asked us to help restore it and get it back on the road. When we picked it up, it was in a very sorry state of disrepair, bits were missing and the motorbike was derelict. So we applied to Heritage Lottery Fund to bring her back to life and to produce an online archive, in which we chartered her theatrical journey around the UK and over to America. It was a fascinating window onto the life of modern day troubadours’

Once restored we took the Smallest Theatre back on the road with a performance of King Kong touring to schools, on the streets and in village locations around rural India, yes India!

Around this time I came across a book called “Vagabonds and Fools” which tells the history of the 18th century theatrical troupes that traveled our country roads, carts piled high with costumes & props. At the same time I was also reading one of Norman Jacobs fabulous local history books about Clacton. Who wouldn’t be intrigued by “the Stratosphere Girl” a 50 year old one-legged high diver! From these two books the idea for the project began to develop.

I was specifically interested in how to engage young people with their heritage, and make them feel proud of where they live. As a company we believe that taking part in any arts project can have a transformative effect on young people. Creating these opportunities is at the heart of our work. So in March 2015 we approached Paul Gilman, funding officer for EEC with this proposal:

*“Hi Paul, we would be interested in looking at the history of the seaside and itinerant performers on our coast-line, during the resorts heyday. We would also be interested in exploring, creative and engaging ways that we could  deliver this learning, including ‘apps’, social media and film etc.*

*This would possibly include looking at the viability of using live performance to regenerate our sea side towns, in the same way that re-establishing the busking pitch in Covent Garden in the 1980’s helped to regenerate the old market. We would also envisage a training element, which would deliver performance skills workshops for young people and in the long term could possibly make a performance space in each resort, sustainable.”*

In April 2015, Paul replied:

*“That sounds great Mandy and quite timely. We did a project a few years ago on the built environment of the resorts, so we encountered the social history and the entertainers such as the ‘pierrots’, but couldn’t really look into them in any great detail. So lets get together and see if we can make this happen.”*

So in partnership with Essex County Council we applied to the Heritage Lottery and were delighted when we received funding to do the R&D phase of “Resorting to The Coast” and went on to discover the vast array of entertainers that travelled to perform in our resorts.

Our task was to look at the growth of our five seaside towns and the entertainers that followed. Specifically, the stories of the extraordinary performers, including minstrels, pierrots and concert parties that flocked to our coastline once our resorts were established.

We were intrigued to learn of performers who headed to our coastline looking for work and ended up staying for years, becoming local legends. In the 1920’s Clown Bertram started off doing shows to children sitting on a carpet and ended up having a 1,000 seat theatre built for him on Clacton Pier which he filled three times a day with crowds queuing all the way back to the road.

And there was Captain Web who daily rode his flaming bicycle off Walton and Clacton piers; once landing in a rowing boat full of ladies in their Sunday best and of course the amazing Graham, Russell and Bentley Concert Party who’s legacy to us is the West Cliff Theatre.

We worked in partnership with local student filmmaker Joe Philpot and this is his tribute to Clown Bertram. (Show Clown Bertram film)

Once the ‘Research and Development’ and ‘Heritage Interpretation’ documents were completed, we worked with Giles Tofield on a plan for phase two of the project. With a huge amount of work from Giles and Nicki Spur at Essex County Council, the second phase of the project came together.

In 2017 we recreated a traditional seaside entertainment troupe and took it to all five towns, performing on the beaches or greenswards. Working with Uncle Tacko and his Flea circus, local young people and our own team, we had an all singing all dancing show, which the crowds loved. In 2018 we tendered for the commission for a ‘Seaside Heritage Exhibition’ and were delighted when we won it, as we planned to build an exhibition like no other!!

We wanted to tell the story of when our coastline was like Monte Carlo, full of theatres, dance halls and people dressed in their ball gowns and dinner suites to promenade along the sea front of an evening (can you believe it). We came up with the concept of “The Marvelous Museum of Coastal Curiosities” an exhibition that didn’t just sit inside a library or building, but took to the road to find and engage people who would not usually step into a history event. Working closely with our fabulous heritage groups we gathered, stories, post cards, anecdotes and memorabilia and then learnt story-telling techniques with Mike Dodsworth.

Key to animating the museum was the idea of ‘story telling’ curators. Visitors to our museum could choose an item from the shelves and be entertained with true stories of Elephants bathing in the sea, killer whales in a swimming pool or the days before the railways were built when visitors arrived by steamer from London, and had to be rowed ashore! We also created heritage interpretation boards and a pocket history, which proved to be very successful as a heritage information ‘take-way’ you will find them on your tables.

In year two we brought the seaside entertainment together with the museum, which proved to be a winning combination with the entertainment drawing audiences for the museum as well as giving everyone a taste of what the entertainment would have been like, back in the day.

So, to return to our original concept of engaging young people in our heritage, Josie from Walton lifeboat museum told us about Luke Grint, a 17year old amateur magician with an ambition to become a professional actor. We encouraged Luke to join our team and perform alongside the professional artists. We taught 6 other teenagers to stilt walk and under the direction of ‘Uncle Tacko’ they also became a scratch band.

On the first couple of days they all rose to the challenge and Luke did a small slot in the show, by the end of the tour he was performing a 30-minute magic set twice a day! This story does have a great ending, we were so impressed with Luke that when the tour was over we managed to get him a Skype audition for a professional theatre company, he got the job and has been working as an actor with a company called M&M productions, touring in Scotland ever since.

So where does the project go now? Well there is a groundswell of like-minded people in resorts from Morecambe to Margate, looking at how live entertainment; performance and heritage events can be used to regenerate the seaside. We are partners in ‘Coasters’ an Arts Council project based at ‘Sea Change’ Arts in Great Yarmouth, which is a consortium of ten organisations with the shared ambition of building relationships with audiences in areas of lower engagement, as well as helping transform perceptions of these areas by bringing world class circus and street art work to these coastal towns.

We have also been working together with CVS Tendring, Jaywick Martello Tower, the Harwich Festival and Walton-on-the-Naze Tower, on a ‘Creative People And Places’ bid, which if successful would bring significant creative opportunities to Tendring over a three-year period, so there really is a lot to look forward to.

The ‘Theatre of Lemmings’ are in the early stages of planning a new project where we hope to use theatre and drama presentation skills to give young people the confidence to become Heritage apprentices or junior tour guides so we will be working with the local Heritage Groups again.

We have had such amazing support from all our heritage partners, we have been invited to people homes, built long-term friendships and we really thank you for your openness and generosity. Finally, none of this would have been possible without the continued support of Heritage Lottery Fund and all the good people who buy lottery tickets, so I would like to say a big thank you to all of them.