

Chesca Joy

OBITUARIES MAY 28, 2024 BY NICK SMURTHWAITE

Founder and artistic director of Imagine If theatre company who empowered people in the prison system and others through the arts



Chesca Joy. Photo: Nick Greenfield

Writer, performer and producer [Chesca Joy](#) was passionate about improving disadvantaged people's lives through arts-based interventions, workshops and productions. She started out as a performer and began writing plays based on her own experiences.

In 2015, aged 25, Joy founded the groundbreaking Leeds-based theatre company Imagine If to bring about active change in people's lives through theatre rooted in real stories. Among others, she worked with young people with a history of addiction and mental health issues, but was probably best known for her work in the criminal justice system, delivering arts-based interventions to support people newly released from prison. She used her working-class roots and first-hand experiences to inform her theatre and film making.

Deborah Dickinson, a trustee of Imagine If, said: "Chesca was the company – its heart, soul and essence. The success of Imagine If was testament to her fearless spirit, determination and relentless pursuit of active change. She founded the company because she wanted those with challenging lived experiences to be not only heard but empowered to shape their own narratives."

Her first full-length play, [You Forgot the Mince](#), toured prisons and theatres across the UK from 2016 to 2017, including a run at Edinburgh Fringe. She wrote and toured two other full-length plays, *Jadek*, a semi-autobiographical story of Chesca's relationship with her Polish grandfather, and *My Old Man*, which blended live and digital performance, touring the UK in 2021.

Imagine If toured seven productions to 66 prisons, theatres and community centres, reaching nearly 20,000 people who would not otherwise have had access to high-quality theatre, and raising awareness of domestic abuse, post-traumatic stress

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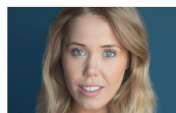
disorder and other issues. The company often continued to support offenders when they were released into the community, contributing to their rehabilitation.

She employed people with convictions alongside professional theatre creatives to influence, shape and co-design projects. *Is Anyone There?*, performed outdoors at Slung Low in Leeds, was an example of this, with six out of the eight cast members being ex-prisoners. Joy recently finished making *Ain't Nuff Time*, a digital performance for prisoners, which previewed at Hyde Park Picture House in Leeds. One of the ex-offenders who worked on the film said: "I have never done anything so validating."

In an interview about her work with prisoners and ex-offenders, Joy said: "If I can do my little bit to help them express themselves through watching *You Forgot the Mince* or performing with us, or devising a script themselves, then I have given them hope. Hope to change. Hope to seek help for their issues. Hope to not repeat their pattern of abusive behaviour."

Chesca Joy was born on August 2, 1989, and died on May 1, aged 34.

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