

“ You are the topic. You are the centre. You are the occasion. You are the reason why”

A Study of the Key Strategies Employed by Four Contemporary UK Theatre Companies to Cultivate and Develop Audience Engagement

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## **Table of Contents**

### **Acknowledgements**

<b>Abstract</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Engaging with Communities across Wales: National Theatre Wales</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Making Theatre Accessible for a Young Welsh Audience: Theatr Iolo</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>New Strategies for a New Audience: The Royal Court Theatre</b>	<b>79</b>
<b>Redefining Theatre and Education: Splendid Productions</b>	<b>104</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>129</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>133</b>

## **Acknowledgements**

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Back in 2021 when I began working on this thesis the thought of writing 40,000 words seemed such an enormous task, but like all enormous tasks you realize it becomes much more manageable and enjoyable if you surround yourself with people who will help to guide you and perhaps more importantly to inspire you. Key to both this guidance and inspiration were Dr Marta Minier and Dr Michael Carklin. Their support, knowledge and patience have been invaluable and both of them have made, what at times seemed a Herculean task, manageable and enjoyable.

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A thesis of thousands of words started with a single word and to everyone who engages with theatre this work is for you.

## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the role of four contemporary UK theatre companies, National Theatre Wales; Theatr Iolo; The Royal Court Theatre; Splendid Productions; and the strategies each of them employ in reaching out to and engaging with potential audiences. The background and origin of each of these companies is key to how they have developed, evolved and have made a significant contribution in making each of the companies and the work they produce unique. An ever-changing society has required an ever-changing range of strategies in order to produce work that is both relevant and meaningful to a contemporary audience.

Incorporating evidence from publications, reviews and practitioner interviews the research study highlights how theatre audiences have significantly changed and how the four companies are challenging the traditional view of what is theatre. Each of them explores a variety of strategies, which go beyond simply buying a ticket and sitting in traditional theatre-watching actors on a stage. They recognize that in order to engage with audiences theatre must sometimes be taken to the audience and that engaging with the education sector is key to ensuring that theatre will continue to flourish with future generations.

# Introduction

## Focus of this study

The focus of this study is to examine four contemporary theatre companies – National Theatre Wales, The Royal Court Theatre, Splendid Theatre and Theatr Iolo – and the different strategies they employ to engage with their audiences. When setting out to explore this, the question of how to define audience engagement inevitably arises. For each of the four companies involved in the study, the definition of audience engagement would be much more complex than merely wanting audiences to enthusiastically watch their work.

Undoubtedly, audiences, especially in London, are engaging with theatre. In May 2023 for example, Statista observed that “Overall, attendance at theatre performances in the UK’s capital was roughly 16.4 million in 2022, the highest figure reported over the period considered” (Statista 2023). But what do we mean by ‘engagement’ beyond audiences attending shows? For this study, I take engagement to mean the way that theatre companies develop and nurture audiences rather than the ways that audiences engage with specific performances. This thesis shows that these four companies employ a wide range of strategies to attract and serve audiences beyond merely staging performances.

Ways of measuring a theatre’s reach can be seen, for example, in ticket sales, social media shares indicating a general enthusiasm, a positive response at the end of a show and a solid return of patrons, show after show, and season after season. If each of the four companies are to survive in an increasingly difficult climate both economically and for the arts in general, they must acknowledge the above points play a pivotal role in maintaining and growing audiences. However, a further important way of considering engagement is the way that the four companies interact with (potential and existing) audience members more broadly, nurturing a two-way relationship. Throughout my research it was apparent that each of the companies was constantly looking to employ strategies to widen their audience appeal and to develop and empower audiences. Each of the companies agreed that to increase their audience engagement they needed to know their audience demographics. This was more challenging than it initially

sounds because with each show the audience would potentially change, for example Splendid's touring production of *Woyzeck* would be aimed at a different target audience to their production of *Midsummer Mechanicals* based at Shakespeare's Globe for a six-week summer season. National Theatre Wales's immersive production of *The Persians* was aimed at a different target audience to their three-day interactive production of *City of the Unexpected*.

Each of the companies realised the importance of their name being associated with a specific brand. For example as a teacher with a limited budget I am highly likely to re-book Splendid for a workshop because I know they are value for money, the content of their workshop/production will hit key exam criteria plus the learners will engage with them. They also understood the importance of constantly reviewing how they could make their brand relevant to contemporary audiences. Undoubtedly utilizing social media marketing to allow content to reach new and potentially well-matched audiences was beginning to feature more prominently. The Royal Court Theatre has employed a range of marketing opportunities using this format and certainly during the pandemic had used social media to keep engaging with audiences through initiatives such as their Living Newspapers. Splendid's online presence is concise and tailored to the type of content, which is generally applicable to teachers and students, whilst a smaller company like Theatr Iolo has a lesser online presence primarily due to a smaller budget.

The one area, which was key to each of the company's engagement strategies, was the core belief that fostering community partnerships was pivotal to successful audience engagement. Each of the companies has developed significant and successful initiatives in this area. They all recognized the need to develop educational links with schools and colleges with work specifically designed to appeal to this target audience. Two of the companies, Splendid and Theatr Iolo tended to focus on this area. National Theatre Wales and The Royal Court Theatre have sought to develop wider community links in addition to developing educational links. But the question also arises whether a company can spread itself too thinly. Should a company focus on a specific target audience and seek to continually develop and nurture links with them?

## **Position as a researcher and why the companies were selected**

I started my teaching career in 1982. My first teaching post was at Y Pant Comprehensive School, based in south Wales. I was appointed as Head of Drama with responsibility for establishing and developing the department. Over the twenty years I taught at the school the department flourished, GCSE and A' level drama and theatre studies was introduced, along with drama for every learner at Key Stage 3. The department also offered a wide range of extra-curricular activities and established links with a number of organizations, for example the BBC and the National Youth Theatre of Great Britain. Estyn rated the department excellent and the department was described as a "model of its kind".

In 2002, I became Head of the Performing Arts Faculty at Treorchy Comprehensive School, in the heart of the south Wales valleys. Once again my brief was to develop a performing arts faculty. Based on the model I had already established I was able to create a vibrant and thriving department, where drama was taught throughout all the key stages, with a large uptake of students at both GCSE and A' level. The results were consistently above the national average and the department was considered one of the most successful in Wales.

In addition, I also became an examiner for GCSE and in 1990 was made principal examiner for each of the three components. This role involved training examiners, writing exam specifications and providing training for teachers. Over the years as the subject has grown I am now principal for GCSE WJEC/EDUQAS drama for England and Wales. I am currently developing GCSE drama as part of the new curriculum for Wales. I also deliver training for teachers for a number of different organizations on how to improve their outcomes when teaching A' level and GCSE drama.

My vast experience as both a teacher and examiner has given me a unique insight into what engages an audience. The ability to engage with your target audience is key to successful outcomes, whether the audience is the student in the classroom or teachers who want to improve their teaching strategies.

When considering which companies to base this study on I was immediately drawn to the four chosen. As a teacher, I have worked closely with each of them and have experienced the spectrum of approaches they use to engage their audiences. Each of the companies is different in their approaches and to some extent the target audiences they want to engage with.

Two of the companies, Splendid and Theatr Iolo primarily create theatre for young people. National Theatre Wales and The Royal Court Theatre, while still recognizing the need to attract younger people, also want to appeal to a much wider audience. What became apparent when interviewing staff from each of these companies is that the actual play is a very small part of the whole engagement journey. It is about nurturing the audience and making them a part of the journey. It is about educating the audience in the broader sense. Intrinsic to the strategy of each of these companies is engaging with specific communities often as part of their social and cultural mission. This engagement does not always translate into ticket sales but specific projects within the community can, as the research indicates, have a significant impact.

The research also highlights how each of these companies recognizes the importance of employing a range of education strategies to further develop links between schools and the four companies. As a drama teacher each company's approach to drama and theatre and the impact it could have on young people are an area of great interest. I have had experience of each of the four companies as follows.

Having worked extensively with Kerry Frampton of Splendid Theatre, I knew that specifically engaging young people and inspiring them to create their own theatre was at the heart of their mission.

In my experience as a teacher, Frampton's workshops were always engaging. Why? Primarily because she knows and understands her target audience, her research into her source material is detailed and she keeps things simple and fun. Inevitably, young people leave the workshops inspired. When they then



watch a play performed by the company they can relate to the techniques and see their impact in performance.

I saw first hand how theatre could engage a community when I worked with National Theatre Wales on their production on *Tonypandemonium*. For both my students in our local Tonypandy comprehensive who performed in the play and the population in the wider community it was a totally immersive experience. For six weeks the company engaged with the community and the community engaged with them. The end result was a quality piece of theatre but more importantly an enriching experience. In the early years of the company, as the research shows, this model was successfully replicated with communities across Wales.

My involvement with Theatr Iolo was primarily because I had worked with their then director Kevin Lewis. I found this company particularly interesting because of the way they constantly kept evolving. Initially they worked with schools but that was not always the main focus of the company because for a while they also excelled in the area of theatre for babies and very young children. Theatr Iolo is a relatively small company, although over the years it has made a significant impact particularly in South Wales. I was drawn to this company because of their tenacity in continually evolving and identifying target audiences whom they knew they had the expertise to engage with.

I choose to include The Royal Court Theatre because as a teacher I thought their ground work on making diversity a relevant issue for exam boards to consider could have an impact on many young people whose first encounter with drama and theatre is within the school environment. But what I found particularly interesting about this company was that since their inception their focus on developing new writing has never wavered. As an educator, I was constantly looking for new plays that would engage and enthuse learners and they as a company are working with writers whose work is relevant to contemporary society.

Although I had worked with each of the companies within different contexts, I knew their target of their audience engagement certainly within a school context was not purely financially driven. For example Splendid Productions does not receive Arts Council funding, which allows the company the greater creative freedom. Kevin Lewis did an on site workshop free of charge because we were taking a significant number of students to watch the production of *Adventures in the Skin Trade*. Not every company has the financial luxury to offer this kind of opportunity but as a teacher these small offers of goodwill immediately spark a greater interest in the broader spectrum of their work. With every production I was involved in with National Theatre Wales I felt my role, however small, was intrinsic to the success of the final product. I knew from an educational perspective each of these companies had a product which a wider audience and I would find engaging because they tried to make us part of the journey.

### **A background to each of the four companies**

National Theatre Wales, The Royal Court, Splendid and Theatr Iolo have each developed in different ways and although many of their core beliefs are similar, each company aims to engage with a very specific audience. Each company has developed a range of different strategies to engage with potential audiences whilst still ensuring their core values remain intact.

“Before George Devine’s emergence it is fair to say that the British theatre seemed stuck somewhere in the late ‘20s and the empire.” (Little2007,p.16) This comment by Arthur Miller (1956) sums up the impact the **Royal Court Theatre** had on a new and emerging theatre scene in 1955. Ruth Little, in the introduction to her book *The Royal Court Theatre Inside Out* (2007,p. 9), writes: “The Court is a theatre, but it is also an argument – a shifting structure of contrasting and connecting perspectives in constant evolution”. This definition could almost serve as the Royal Court’s mission statement. From its first inception as a “writer’s theatre” with John Osborne’s play *Look back in Anger* (1956) it has continued to champion new writers. Sixty-five years on from that landmark performance, which changed the face of British theatre, it still stands at the centre of a vigorous, renewed culture of playwriting. This focus on new

plays and emerging new playwrights ensures that their actual mission statement – “To actively seek out, mentor, nurture and place on our stages writers and artists from the widest possible pool of talent and ensure their work reaches audiences across London, nationally and internationally” – is met. However, by continually seeking out work that is fresh and relevant the theatre is ensuring that it is engaging with a contemporary audience. But like many theatres, it realizes the need to employ a wide range of strategies to creatively engage with diverse and future audiences. Like several companies, the Royal Court has harnessed the power of social media in reaching potential audiences. The marketing company SPEKTRIX (2013) commented:

In between the necessary tweets letting people know about ticket availability and special discount, the Royal Court has perfected the art of Content Marketing on its Twitter Feed. For *Routes*, a play about immigration in Britain, the Royal Court became a source for news on immigration. By doing so, they could attract people based on their interest in the issue, not just people who are interested in theatre.

The Young Court, established in 1966, has proved to be an effective way of engaging with potential youth audiences. It exists to encourage young people to access the building and to create pathways into the theatre industry through providing new writing.

It exists to encourage young people to access the building and to create pathways into the theatre industry through providing new writing, performance and producing opportunities. The Young Agitators programme seeks to “integrate young people in to the heart of the Royal Court, building a deep knowledge of our work, encouraging Arts activism, supporting the development of emerging theatre makers and providing pathways into the industry” (Royal Court 2018). In addition, their extensive education programmes with students 14+ which include touring productions, workshops, theatre tour, discounted tickets are just some of the effective strategies the company uses to engage emerging new audiences.

But in keeping with Ruth Little's statement – “an argument – a shifting structure of contrasting and connecting perspectives” – the Royal Court has embraced the need to reflect a “shifting and contrasting” society from working with exam boards and challenging them on key issues like decolonizing the curriculum. Examples range from The Boys Project, which sought to work with young men from council estates from across the country to engage with them in a political and arts context; to the recent on-line initiative The Living Newspapers inspired by the radical history of the Federal Theatre Project, a US arts project in the 1930s, not to mention its international work.

The theatre has used a range of effective strategies to engage cross sector, diverse and previously marginalized groups. However, these diverse and wide ranging projects have to be funded:

Less than half of our annual income comes from Arts Council England; the balance must be found through ticket sales, commercial activities and fundraising. To sustain our work and to continue identifying and developing new writers, we need to secure £1.5 million from the private sector each year.

(Trusts and Foundations- Royal Court Theatre)

The harsh reality is that without engaging audiences there is no future but holding onto its *raison d'être* and commitment to protecting free speech is becoming increasingly complex.

In 2000, a new study published by the National Foundation for Educational Research, highlighted that the majority of pupils had little or no opportunity to take part in drama or dance; many when interviewed commented that their arts experience whilst at school had very little impact on them. Many saw both drama and music as being “elitist” and felt they were not “relevant to them” (National Foundation for Educational Research 2020). This was the situation that provided the backdrop when **Splendid Theatre** was formed in September 2003. Since then it has grown speedily and prides itself on creating “high quality, professional, political theatre with theory based practical workshops for young people across the UK”. (<https://splendidproductions.co.uk>)

As their target audience is primarily students from wide ranging backgrounds and with different experiences of drama and theatre, Kerry Frampton, the artistic director and founder of the company, realizes the importance of “hooking their attention and engaging with them right from the outset” (Frampton 2022). Their specialty is merging techniques from a range of different practitioners with their unique style and highlighting how these methods can be used to create engaging and meaningful work, which has relevance to contemporary society. Their work consistently receives positive responses from the teaching community:

Splendid are not only inspirational but students access to some very difficult skills and texts, which challenge and engage them in a delightful way. Splendid are really serious about helping people, young and old understand and engage with theatre using their own trademark creative style (Dawn Elliott, Head of Drama)

It is this “trademark creative style” which has proved so successful in engaging their target audience year after year and ensuring they remain one of top theatre companies used by schools right across the UK.

Although Brecht is one of their major influences, there is inspiration from other theatre makers and styles as well:

The joy and interactivity of the classic British pantomime, the economy and beauty of Edward Gordon Craig, the exaggerated characterization of Steven Berkoff, the anarchy and craft of commedia dell’arte, the simple relationship between actor and audience described by Peter Brook as “Rough Theatre” and the emotional truth and precision of Konstantin Stanislavski. Our attitude is, if it works we will use it.

Kerry Frampton (Online workshop 2021)

The company prides itself on interpreting classic material for contemporary young audiences and has a very clear vision of specific audiences they are generally asked to engage with. They are primarily aged between fourteen and twenty-one and are drawn from every socio-economic background. Most of the time, they will have had much greater experience of consuming television, film and internet-based entertainment than watching live theatre and may not have any prior knowledge of the piece or specific context for what they are about to see. This understanding of their audience, coupled with detailed artistic intentions, ensures that Splendid’s performances are always “rigorously clear

and precise, and the meaning and effect of each moment put before the spectator is discussed and decided in advance” (personal interview 2022).

From the mid 1970's it had been the policy of the Arts Council of Wales to see a TIE company established in each of the counties of Wales. Action Pie was the resident company within South Glamorgan but within ten years both the name and structure of the company had changed. Like Splendid, **Theatr Iolo** refutes the idea that they are a Theatre in Education company but instead define themselves as a company that creates theatre for young people. In 2007 Roger Wooster explored the development and challenges for each of the eight leading TIE companies from across Wales. He firmly puts Theatr Iolo 'at the other end of the TIE scale' as the then director, Kevin Lewis notes the difference between their work and a company like Theatr Powys, which he feels produces TIE “in the purest sense” Wooster, 2007, p. 114) because of the way the company works with small groups in whole day participatory programmes. Over the years the company has developed a number of groundbreaking initiatives, which continue to attract audiences, and as a result has made Theatr Iolo one of the leading Welsh theatre companies.

In *National Theatres in Context*, Anwen Jones (2007) charts the long and complicated journey in establishing Wales's own national theatre. The vision, first initiated in 1879 when a prize was originated in the National Eisteddfod “to promote dramatic interest in the country's national life” (Jones 2007, p.130 ) which eventually led to the company's actual inception in May 2009. National Theatre Wales define their vision:

We bring together storytelling poets, visual visionaries and inventors of ideas. We collaborate with artists, audiences, communities and companies to create theatre in the English language, rooted in Wales, with an international reach. You'll find us around the corner, across the mountain and in your digital backyard.

(National Theatre Wales <https://www.nationaltheatre.org> accessed 02/10/22)

Its mission statement clearly sets out its *raison d'être* as a theatre for everyone in Wales. Even though debate raged prior to its establishment whether it should be

homed in a permanent base, its approach to site-specific performances has ensured that it is accessible to communities and audiences across Wales.

The 80+ productions have been staged on trains, military training ground, beaches and mountain, in warehouse, nightclub, cricket schools, tents, village halls, schools, aircraft hangers and libraries, all over towns like Barmouth, Laugharne, Rhyl and Aberystwyth, online and in apps from Swansea to Tokyo. ((National Theatre Wales <https://www.nationaltheatre.org> accessed 02/10/22)

The company's core belief that theatre is a tool to bring people together and the recent creation of two roles – Audience & Communications/Content Coordinator – which focus on the contribution to the delivery of a brand-led, audience centered communications confirm this belief. Their strategy is focused on raising the profile of NTW: growing audiences and deepening engagement. The company specifically wants to engage with new audiences, reinforcing their commitment to using a variety of strategies to communicate with potential audiences.

Each of the four companies discussed in this introduction uses different approaches for engaging with audiences, each of them uses different funding strategies, each of them is potentially appealing to different target audiences. What these companies have in common is a desire to engage with audiences, not simply for “cultural reasons”, to cite Brecht, (Bennett 1997,p.22) but to reinvigorate audiences and to use theatre as a tool to deal with issues of the time. Possibly each of these companies is moving towards a type of theatre envisaged by French performance artist Jean-Jacques Lebel. Writing in Paris in 1968, during a revolutionary atmosphere he made the connection between the creative and the political agenda explicit

No more theatre or expensive spectacles for a passive audience of consumers – but a truly collective enterprise in political and artistic research. A new type of relationship between the “doers” and “lookers” is being experimented with. (Freshwater,2009,p.57)

From the Royal Court's continued commitment to support writers whose work resonates with audiences across the country, to Splendid's commitment to creating theatre with minimal resources which is accessible to everyone, to Theatr Iolol's mission of challenging and changing preconceptions of theatre in

Wales and NTW's mission to place community at the heart of its theatre making, each of these companies are exploring the relationship with "the doers" and "lookers". Kirsty Sedgman further explores this changing relationship in *The Reasonable Audience* (2018) She notes if theatres want to attract a more diverse audience then they have to change the rules.

Undoubtedly the relationship between 'the doers and the lookers' has changed significantly over the years. By creating a less restrictive environment and catering to the needs and wishes of a more representative audience, theatre might finally scrub itself free from the taint of cultural elitism and become a space where people – all people – can truly feel at home.  
(Sedgman 2018, p. 10)

The study of these four companies explores what strategies each of these companies have used and how successful they are in both attracting audiences and breaking down "the cultural elitism" (Sedgeman 2018) , which has long plagued theatre.

### **Some Contextual Examples of Audience Engagement**

Although the research focuses on strategies used by four contemporary companies when considering how theatres engage with audiences it is helpful to look briefly at some critical perspectives from selected vantage points from theatre history to highlight how this relationship has been negotiated.

One useful perspective on engaging with audiences that is useful for this study can be found in the work of Jerzy Grotowski, particularly because audience relationship was so key to his explorations. When introducing his theatrical concept of Poor Theatre, Grotowski rejected the idea that theatre should try and match the spectacle achieved in film and television; he believed theatre had become too infected with extravagant technical effects: "Theatre can exist without costume, make-up, without autonomic costume and sound effects" (Grotowski 1968, p. 19). He believed the primary element of theatre is the relationship between actor and audience: "It cannot exist without the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct "live" communication" (Grotowski 1968, p.19).



Whilst Grotowski questioned and redefined the relationship between actor and audience, this complex relationship has been at the heart of theatre since its origins. Theatre has always played a pivotal role in Western society, from its beginnings in Ancient Greece where it flourished between 550 BC and 220BC. Susan Bennett notes in her book *Theatre Audiences*:

Greek theatre was also clearly inseparable from the social, economic and political structures of Athens. Its social importance is apparent simply from the size of the auditorium (Bennett 1997, p.2)

Indeed in his *Doctrine of Mimesis*, Plato (Melberg, 1995, p.10-50) argues that theatre and poetry as a representation of reality are an illusion and therefore deceptive. Theatre, he believed, was political and therefore dangerous.

Fast forward, from 220BC to the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the revolution that the works and methods of Bertolt Brecht brought to theatre. Brecht (Brecht 1977, p.51) wanted to challenge audiences; he famously stated that for theatre audiences at that time 'It is an illusion of sitting in front of a keyhole. That being so it ought not to applaud till it starts queuing for its hats and coats'. Walter Benjamin, the German philosopher, describes Brecht's epic theatre as an approach targeting those "who do not think unless they have reason to" (Benjamin 1973). As Benjamin further states "Brecht is constantly aware of the masses, whose conditioned use of this faculty of thought is surely covered by this formula. His effort to make the audience interested in the theatre as experts – not at all for cultural reasons – is an expression of his political purpose" (Benjamin 1973)

Susan Bennett, commenting on this idea states:

The idea of a theatre engaging an audience for other than 'cultural reason' was one which not only made clear theatre's diminishing importance and failure to connect with the issues of the time, but further revealed theatre as a social institution supported by and reflecting the dominant ideology. (Bennett 1997, p.22)

Both Plato and Brecht realized the full potential and power a theatre audience has; once engaged, a theatre audience becomes a formidable force, and therein lies the conundrum: in order to unleash this power how do theatres engage with their potential audience?

A brief glimpse at the history of theatre acknowledges how pivotal this relationship between actor and audience is but a study of contemporary work highlights its complexities and fluctuating nature. Matthew Reason considers Jacques Ranciere's discussion of how the negative perception of a passive spectator results from two factors:

Firstly, [...] the opposite of knowing, which is located in doing; secondly, that viewing is the opposite of acting – the spectator remains immobile in her seat, passive. To be a spectator is to be separated from both the capacity to know and the capacity to act. (Reason 2015, p. 272)

Does an active audience equate to a good audience and a passive audience a bad one? Does an active audience suggest they have been empowered by the performance? Helen Freshwater suggests that “the belief in a connection between audience participation and political empowerment” is one of the most “cherished orthodoxies in theatre studies (Freshwater 2009,p.3) Certainly some of the best examples from the performances by the four companies would confirm this statement.

To further develop an insight into theatre audiences, it is useful to consider the work of Susan Bennett and Helen Freshwater who analyse the social and cultural background against which theatre audiences have flourished and declined

The idea of a theatre engaging an audience for other than “cultural reason’ was one which not only made clear theatre’s diminishing importance and failure to connect with the issues of the time, but further revealed theatre as a social institution supported by and reflecting the dominant idea. (Bennett 1997, p. 22)

It is also important at this juncture to consider how we would define engagement. The research illustrates that although each of the companies wants their audience to be engaged with their work in the broadest sense i.e. to take an interest in their content, they also recognize their engagement strategies should “(be) something that successfully inspires the action it was designed to instigate; but secondly it is also about what the attendee wants and what they walk away with after the event is over” (Scott 2016).

The work of each of the four companies, National Theatre Wales, The Royal Court, Splendid and Theatr Iolo involved in this study is not exclusively participatory and for many of their performances it could be argued that the audience is 'passive'. However, the methods used by each of the companies to engage with their audience and to present a product, which is meaningful to them, go some way to redefining the phrase 'passive audience'. Whilst the audience is not engaged in some form of participatory relationship with the production throughout the performance, as for example with an immersive company like PunchDrunk, the engagement methods used by these companies ensures the audience has 'bought into the production' prior to the performance. This could involve engagement strategies from sitting and chatting to the local community, a method used extensively by NTW or a workshop with a specific year group prior to the performance, an engagement method used by Splendid. Through a variety of different strategies, each of the four companies engender a sense of ownership in their respective audiences which goes some way to alleviate 'passive' in the sense of simply buying a ticket for an unknown product.

Both Bennett (1997) and Freshwater (2009) question how theatre can impact an audience and explores the power of theatre to influence, impact and transform. Freshwater cites a number of companies who are redefining their relationship and engagement with their audience. For instance, she notes how Blast Theory continues to design disturbing and unsettling work.

The 'game mechanic' central to most of their work ultimately encourages reflection upon '(t)he process of engaging with strangers and trying to find a common cause with them'. (Freshwater 2009, p.72)

Like Blast Theory, all four companies would agree their *raison d'être* is to "engage with strangers and find a common cause" (Freshwater 2009, p.72) with them. Like Blast Theory, each of the four companies has engaged with a variety of methods to achieve this aim. They are part of the theatrical revolution that is constantly redefining theatres' relationship with their audience. Bennett explores the numerous cultural and sociological factors that have allowed theatre companies through the centuries to control the status quo with issues ranging from censorship to timing of a production, ticket cost to how an

audience will actually get to a theatre. Inevitably all these issues have been controlled by the middle and upper classes; the four companies all acknowledge that for many communities the above are prohibiting factors coupled with the idea that theatre for many is a place for “posh people” (*The Guardian* 2011). In 2011 Joshua Conkel on his *Youngblood Blog* caused a heated debate when he argued that theatre was still the preserve of the privileged and literally a “class act”. Taking theatre to their audience, providing free and accessible tickets and by familiarizing themselves with issues and stories which are resonant with their target audience have allowed these companies to challenge the status quo and engage with a wider and more varied audience.

The fundamental need for theatre to change to appeal to a wider audience is the pivotal argument of John McGrath’s *A Good Night Out* (1996) in which he traces the origins of community theatre from the Blue Blouse theatre group (1919-1928) through to the work of Dario Fo and traditional working men’s clubs. He analyzes the content of what made the work presented by these companies/venues appealing and relevant to audiences beyond the middle and upper classes. McGrath noted a number of different strategies that were employed to make the work appealing to a wider audience. These ranged from performances, which presented work, which had directness as opposed to obliqueness, variety e.g., music/song, immediacy in reflecting issues close to their lives, localism and a sense of identity with the play/performers:

I’m not saying that the working classes are incapable of appreciating great art in the bourgeois tradition. They may well be, but if a theatre company wants to speak to the working class, it would do well to learn something of its language, and not assume that the language of bourgeois theatre of the twentieth century is all that is worthy of being expressed.  
(McGrath 1996, p. 59)

In the preceding years numerous companies have emerged and realized the wisdom of McGrath’s words, and certainly the four companies involved in this study adhere to the formats creating work appealing and relevant to a wider audience. All four companies also realize that by deconstructing the classics of theatre these too can be made relevant and meaningful to a contemporary audience.

In both her studies, *Locating the Audience* (2016) and *The Reasonable Audience* (2018), Kirsty Sedgman analyses the role and behaviour of contemporary audiences. Sedgman collaborated with National Theatre Wales from its inception and over a two-year period. She studied, through a range of interviews and surveys audience reactions and analyzed the language they used whilst describing their thoughts, feelings and opinions based on two specific productions: *For Mountain, Sand and Sea* (2010) and *The Persians* (2010). One of Sedgman's many conclusions is that "access" and 'opportunity" means more than simply bringing cultural events into regional spaces and making tickets prices affordable. Through listening to audience and community voices, "the audience becomes an essential part of the live event, and [...] the lasting community within which the work grows and develops" (John E McGrath, 1996 p. 45). Sedgman's research played an important role in developing and structuring future NTW productions. Perhaps partly thanks to Sedgman's research, the artistic directors at NTW realized that the best indication of how to make productions successful was to listen to an audience.

So here is my final advice. *Hear audiences out*. Try not to dismiss divergent responses as not-our-audience, because they *were* your audience, actually, in that they were there, they showed up for you. Talk to them; find out more. Allow them to speak. Because there will always be people, won't there, who judge a performance according to different parameters. (Sedgman 2016, p.166)

In *The Reasonable Audience* Sedgman analyses "theatre etiquette" and "behavior policing". She examines the "traditional' behavioral expectations and explores what the act of sitting quietly means to an audience. Sedgman notes that "good audiencing' are intertwined notions of manners, respect and aesthetic value that have their roots in history" (2018, p.20). She discusses how the breaking-apart of 'high' and 'low' art from the 19<sup>th</sup> into the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought about a change in how an audience engages with a performance. Citing Baz Kershaw's 2001 article, "*Oh for Unruly Audience!*", the core of Kershaw's argument is that the nineteenth century brought a new deference to cultural power, with spectators who were once willful and enfranchised being subject to control. Sedgman study, I felt, was key to understanding audience engagement during a performance, can audience

engagement simply be measured by an audience which sits in absolute silence? Sedgman raises many pertinent points to consider; one eye-opener to me is that “the measure of “normal (behaviour)” is defined by non-disabled people’s experiences.

There are a lot of cultural spaces, spaces which are supposedly public, that have an invisible fence around them. If you happen to find yourself with the right equipment, you’ll have vaulted the fence repeatedly and with ease, to the point you don’t even notice it’s there (after all, it’s invisible). But factors like access requirements, income, class, education, race, gender (to name a few) mean there are loads of people who don’t feel like they can just breeze into these spaces.

(Jess Thom 2016 cited in Sedgman 2018, p.177)

This view is pivotal to any theatre company who truly wants to be inclusive in their audience engagement. Throughout the study I observed what strategies each of the four companies had in place to engage with and help people over the “invisible fence”. Undoubtedly each of the companies have made this a priority, placing specific groups at the forefront of their planning and belief that theatre must literally be for everyone.

Two of the companies involved in the study – Splendid and Theatr Iolo –target their work primarily at young people; both companies refute the label of Theatre in Education as a means of describing their work. In her study *Theatre and Education*, Helen Nicholson (2009) traces the roots of TIE in the UK, noting that its primary objective was to use theatre as a tool to explore ideas, feelings and values. The emphasis was less on the acting and creating theatre but rather to present “real life scenarios” and create a debate around the issues that arose from these plays. Inevitably these scenarios were politicized and rooted in left-wing ideology.

Nicholson notes how a shift in the social, political and cultural climate in the 1980s not only in the UK but also across the world changed the way TIE was perceived, losing much of its political impetus. Nicholson cites a specific production, *Questions Arising in 1985 from a Mutiny in 1789* (Cardiff, 1985) by Action Pie. This production drew parallels between the miners’ strike and the mutiny on the Bounty. The director Geoff Gillham claimed

Theatre should be treated as a rational, scientific process and that, as such, it should lead young people to understand ‘the objective laws of human behaviour as they pertain to how people come to rebellion’.  
(Nicholson 2009, p.34)

Following this controversial production, Action Pie had its public funding withdrawn. Interestingly, Theatr Iolo rose from the ashes of this former company but this period also marked a change in the way drama was taught in schools and universities. A more sophisticated generation was beginning to emerge and Nicholson outlines the complexities of creating theatre for young people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century but ultimately acknowledges that the very best contemporary theatre education “has, at best a richness and complexity which is multifaceted and textured” (Nicholson 2009, p.80). Both companies – Splendid and Iolo – follow the model Nicholson discusses; battle for the imagination, the process of imagining and the social imaginary of place, which she believes helps to create theatre which is multi-faceted but inspires young people to create their own idea of what theatre means to them.

Although the Royal Court and NTW does not produce work exclusively for young people, the education departments play a pivotal role in engaging with these communities. Similarly to *Theatre and Education*, Mark Crossley in *Contemporary Theatre and Creative Education* (Crossley 2021) outlines the political climate, which helped to foster the emergence of TIE in the 1960/70s. Crossley also charts the rich and diverse changes in theatre education, which has taken place over the years. He looks at a variety of companies across the UK and their contributions to these changes. He cites a number of projects by Royal Court, NTW and Theatr Iolo as having particular significance in employing strategies, which have been successful in engaging with children and young people, and having a significant impact on the curriculum.

Much of the success of how theatres engage with audience is inextricably tied up with the political, social and cultural conditions. David Pattie explores the changing fabric of British society in the 1950s and how post war the country was in restless and ripe for change and the resulting culture wars between the old way of life and new emerging young talent. In his introduction to *Modern British*

*Playwriting: The 50s* (2012) he analyses the political, social and cultural conditions which created seismic changes in British and world theatre primarily through the emergence of the Royal Court and their commitment to fostering new talent.

None of the play's insights... was particularly original. 'We, have indeed {heard it all before}],' Tynan pointed out, 'in novels and essays and works of philosophy; but not (and this is the crux of the matter in the theatre' in raising these contemporary issues. In raising these contemporary issues, *Look Back* revived the tradition of the state of the nation play...Thanks to *Look Back* from 1956 on, drama rivaled, even surpassed, fiction in its ability to unlock contemporary reality. (Pattie 2012, pp.149-150)

This paved the way for theatres to engage with a previously untapped audience as well as for the emergence of new theatres and companies. The National Theatre was established in 1963 after a struggle for over a century to establish one. Wales had an equally long struggle to establish their own theatre reflecting both the society and culture of Wales. Lisa Lewis's study *Performing Wales* (2018) looks at the different areas of tradition and culture which are intrinsic to the nation's identity and the place of the NTW which was established in 2009 as part of the Labour/Plaid Cymru coalition towards an inclusive 'one Wales'. Whilst Anwen Jones's *National Theatres in Context* (2007) charts the origins of Wales's national theatres and the complexities Wales has encountered due to being a small country but with two languages.

In 2007, Tony Blair, in a speech promoting the arts stated

I said that we would make the arts and culture part of our "core script" in other words, it was no longer to be on the periphery, an add-on, a valued bit of fun when the serious work of government was done; but rather it was to be central, an essential part of a new different changed Britain... (Blair March 2007)

Indeed, government funding for the arts doubled from 1997, offering free or subsidized tickets to theatres. Helen Freshwater notes in her book *Theatre and Audiences*:

... contemporary British performance [...] has seen an extraordinary increase in the use of audience participation since the turn of the millennium. My responses to the performances I describe are strongly influenced by the British political scene. Since New Labour's election under Tony Blair in 1997, we have seen ongoing governmental interest in



the concept and potentials of participation, reflected in the public policies which aim to increase the electorate's engagement with the democratic system and local government and in education and arts policies directed at widening participation and reaching new audiences.

(Freshwater 2014, p.4)

Writing in 2022, when the country is recovering from a pandemic, theatre is in a perilous state. A recent report states that recovery of theatres across the UK is "uneven" with ticket sales and revenue in the UK continuing to be "far below the equivalent levels in 2019" (The Stage May 20, 2021). Many theatres now realize they are in survival mode; now more than ever they have to find ways to engage with a wide-ranging audience. What methods/strategies should they employ to ensure their survival but perhaps more importantly to ensure that the arts are given the status and value they deserve?

Theatre is the place where the life of a society is shown in public to that society, where that society's assumptions are exhibited and tested, its values scrutinized, its myths validated and its traumas become emblems of its reality (McGrath year 1996, p.83)

The study of these four companies questions what strategies each of these companies have used and how successful they are in both attracting audiences and breaking down "the cultural elitism" (Sedgman 2018) which has long plagued theatre.

## **Methodology**

A range of methods have been utilized for this study. The research has been qualitative as it has focused on strategies, tools and wider attitudes with regard to how different companies engaged with potential and existing audiences.

**Observation** has been key to my analysis. Much of the research within this thesis came from my involvement with the companies as a drama teacher, of many years' experience which has allowed me to experience first-hand how they worked and the effectiveness of the strategies used to engage audiences. One of the key advantages of this method was that the engagement was viewed in an organic and natural environment. As a participant I was able to gauge my own engagement with the material provided; e.g. in a workshop situation I was also able to observe the engagement of other participants and how they responded/engaged to specific stimuli. As an educator I was able to observe and

monitor how successful specific resources were when linked to an exercise, e.g. the resources produced by Splendid had been carefully constructed to fulfill the brief for specific sections of the A' level specification. The information was presented succinctly; it was relevant, highly visual and the language or terminology used was accessible to the age and ability.

The observation method also allowed me to detect patterns of behaviour e.g. within a workshop situation or viewing a production I was able to observe which aspects consistently engaged an audience, e.g. I viewed the performance of *Tonypandymonium* (2013) on a number of occasions and watched the audience reaction to specific parts, which was very informative, even though my main perspective is the engagement strategies of the companies themselves. Inevitably the reaction was spontaneous and surprisingly considerably homogeneous across the auditorium as far as physical reactions are concerned. This is understandable as the play *Tonypandymonium* was written for a specific audience within a specific location. The playwright Rachel Trezise knew her audience and the type of language, character, location, content which would appeal and engage them.

As part of the focus group organized by the Royal Court Theatre I was able to participate in discussions regarding market, political and educational research linked to how theatres and educational establishments could engage with a wider and a more diverse audience. The focus group consisted of individuals representing various arts/educational organisations so I was able over a number of months to listen to a wide range of opinions within a free-flowing and interesting discussion. This proved invaluable as the participants ranged in age, background and experience and resulted in a wide range of responses during each meeting. As participants were given the opportunity to ask questions of each other it lessened the impact of bias and allowed the panel to focus on the key issue of audience engagement.

Much of the information included in my research was gleaned through research **interviews** undertaken by me with key figures from each of the four companies

and other individuals who had been directly involved with them: Lisa Maguire (Executive Producer, NTW), Rachel Trezise (freelance playwright), Kevin Lewis (freelance director, former Artistic Director of Theatr Iolo), Lee Lyford (Artistic Director, Theatr Iolo), Barry Slack (former Board member of Theatr Iolo, former Director of Performing Arts, Whitchurch Comprehensive), Karen Walters (former Director of Performing Arts, Barry Comprehensive); Romana Fello (Participation Manager, The Royal Court), Nikki Perrott (Marketing Manager, The Royal Court); Kerry Frampton (Founder and Artistic Director, Splendid Theatre). Interviewees were selected on the grounds of their work duties being directly relevant to audience engagement and development or who have had direct involvement in a pivotal project or have held a wider advisory role with one of the companies. Each of the interviewees was given information about the background to the study and how the information would be used. Their consent was formally requested and received. The interviews were audio recorded and I decided not to present a formal questionnaire but to utilize a semi-structured interview format to give each individual the freedom to discuss any area linked to engagement, which they felt was relevant.

This allowed me to hear a variety of different views on more or less the same questions. The majority of interviews were semi-structured. This type of interview allowed me to focus on key questions for each interviewee, e.g. what are some of the key strategies the company has used to engage with young people. How have they affected audience numbers? This allowed me to compare and contrast the information received in each interview. However, this type of interview also availed me the opportunity to remain flexible and pursue other important information and questions that arose.

The interviews with individuals not directly involved with the different companies were unstructured. These proved invaluable as they allowed the participants to give important background information and focus on areas which they deemed important e.g. Walters and Slack were able to comment from a teacher's perspective on how successful a specific project was. This type of interview allowed them to discuss their differing opinions and positions. For

instance, Rachel Trezise discussed her lack of playwriting experience but used as her starting point the actual location where she had grown up.

**Background research** as a type of secondary research proved invaluable in securing background information. It enabled me to garner information regarding the historic and current background between audiences and theatres. This allowed me to give the research context and to examine the scope of relevant research about audiences and creative engagement and education activities by companies. Research on the origins of the companies gave an insight on how they had evolved and changed over the years and how their initial philosophy had influenced their approach to audience engagement. Websites and social media gave information regarding past performances and up to date news about current projects and changes to roles within the company. These were vital resources as much of the research was completed through the pandemic when reaching theatres was particularly challenging. Websites also allowed me to explore the various companies that the four theatre organisations used to promote their work.

I also explored a number of **primary sources** from the sector. Reports from Arts Council Wales and England gave information regarding funding and how it would influence strategies pertaining to audience participation and engagement. Annual reports from the companies gave important information on how funding was used, past projects and future direction. Newspaper articles were also useful in looking at reviews from past productions and how audiences responded to them. Live performances, performance texts, resources, film/video provided me with the opportunity to view and analyse specific elements and characteristics and what strategies were employed to engage with different audience demographics.

This introduction has introduced the four companies that are the focus of my research, offering some contextual and historical perspective. It has also engaged with key issues about audience and engagement, and outlined my methodological approaches. This provides a basis for the following chapters,

each of which explores the companies and the different strategies they use to engage with audiences in greater analytical detail.

## **Engaging with Communities across Wales: National Theatre Wales**

### **Origin and profile**

An article in *The Guardian* published in 2019 discusses the role of a national theatre, observing that a country's national theatre is not just a building that puts on plays but it is also a symbol for that country's values. The word *national* implies that it reflects that country's identity. Like all national theatres, the National Theatre Wales grew out of a political context. In the case of Wales, it was the creation of the National Assembly, which provided the impetus. Certainly before its launch in 2009, there were fierce differences and disputes as to what form this identity should aspire to. Anwen Jones in *National Theatres in Context* (2007) charts this long and acrimonious journey. Its roots were firmly based in the National Eisteddfod, which had been part of the cultural landscape since 1176, with the National Eisteddfod of Wales as an organization tracing its history back to 1861. Whilst the Eisteddfod was the springboard, Jones observes that once launched, the new national theatre institution would need to carve out its own identity:

It was clear that the new national art form would not confine itself to this familiar cultural forum but would carve out its own identity and occupy an independent territory negotiated by means of its interaction with its audience (Jones 2007, pp.152)

However, finding both its identity and an independent territory would prove problematic. The M.P. Llewelyn Williams (1906) noted that the Welsh nation had previously had no fiction nor drama showing the nation as it truly was and he questioned how the nation would respond to this "mirror to life" which he felt a national theatre would become. However, his declaration – "One thing is certain. The national life of Wales will never be the same after this" (Jones 2007,p157) – a powerful statement that acknowledges the power a national

theatre could have on the nation. The question of image and identity was to prove even more complex when in 1914 further contradictory views arose between two distinct camps, those who welcomed a more liberal vision of modern Welsh drama and those who “[w]ho sought to protect the perceived religious and moral purity of the non-conformist Wales of the recent past” (Jones 2007, pp.161).

Another key issue, which proved complex when considering a permanent location for a national theatre, was the geography of Wales. In 1932 Owen Rhoscomyl put a proposal forward for a portable travelling theatre, but the logistics of this venture would prove too costly. Similarly, a call to build a number of suitable theatres with the hope that one could be the national playhouse proved fruitless.

The National Theatre of Scotland established in 2006 under the artistic direction of Vicky Featherstone, was to provide the model for NTW. There are many similarities between the two companies, as both evolved as a result of devolution; unlike their English counterpart, neither is housed in a permanent building. Perhaps it is Featherstone’s vision of believing that good theatre should begin at home that provided the inspiration for the creative values of NTW: “it should explore the psyche of the nation and when that work is created well, it will be universal” (The Scotsman, 2004).

NTW was finally launched in 2009 as a parallel company to Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru, the Welsh language national theatre of Wales founded in 2003. A peripatetic company, its vision is to “[c]reat[e] extraordinary experiences: for Wales and the world”. It is well known for using a range of different locations and collaborating with artists, audiences, communities and companies to create theatre in the English language but rooted in Wales. Exploring place through theatre, its approach to creating theatre is pioneering in Wales. Their inaugural season began in March 2010, with their first year marketed as “a theatrical mapping of Wales”. This took the form of 12 shows over 12 months with a bonus thirteenth production. The productions varied in geographical location,

production process and aesthetics but they did traverse the length and breadth of Wales. In addition to using professional collaborations, they were also developing a record for engaging with local people both in the making and performing of their shows.

In November 2021 I interviewed Lisa Maguire, then Executive Producer, who originally joined the company in 2013. Whilst discussing the different strategies the company uses to engage with audiences, she commented that although the company uses methods, such as geotargeting marketing to place advertisements, what makes the company unique is that they are constantly moving around and changing location. This has a significant impact on how they engage with audiences:

We are always sort of starting from scratch to a certain extent with audience development based on the place and the project. Obviously we are now coming up to twelve years old so we have some data we can call on, maybe people will remember us from a prior project but we are not able to be going back to the same place year on year necessarily so we are still always trying to make quite a big splash and that might be through like, outdoor poster campaigns or print or the digital work but then balancing that more with the community contact and reaching out to the right people and if there is any particular angle with a show like if it was for families that would dictate a certain approach.... We have to take a slightly more festival, kind of event type, approach whereas people who are making shows in venues week by week they've got an existing audience, which they are always just building upon. (Maguire 2021, personal interview)

One of the primary ambitions of the company from its inception – and enshrined in its articles of association – is attracting new attenders to theatre. As Maguire explained, this is not about attracting huge audiences but engaging with new audiences and encouraging them to make their first connection with theatre, which arguably is more difficult and complex.

One of the key strategies the company uses to help achieve this ambition, which has proved particularly effective and has been used in a number of projects, is a “community promoter”. The choice of individual will depend on the project but the key criteria are knowledge of the community where the project is based, the

ability to engage with individuals, belief in the project as opposed to prior engagement or knowledge of the arts. This role involves making people aware of the project through a range of means, for example setting up stalls in the local supermarket or the local club, allowing potential audiences the opportunity to buy a ticket immediately. The company feel this approach contributes to making the event more accessible to people taking away potential barriers, but it also helps to generate an air of excitement, capturing the spirit of a specific locality.

We don't necessarily put the emphasis on the theatre; we are talking about their experience overall of going somewhere and what your night out would be like. The NTW show was called *A Good Night Out in the Valleys* and we've always tried to capture a bit of the spirit of that, like if you are coming to a NTW show you know all aspects: front of house, music, food, drink, all the stuff which would make it a fun evening as well as the show... We try to entice them but on the other side it's removing as many barriers as possible so in terms of price points, we are really attuned to the local area and what people are used to paying for things there and we think they can pay. We don't want the price to be a problem, also how people buy tickets. (Maguire 2021)

### **Engaging with the community**

'You can look at a nation through history, through identity, but really what we thought what a nation is is a place - so let's explore what place means" (Blandford quoted in Sedgman 2016, p.39). Blandford's comment is made in the context of performance and post-Devolution national identity, something that was at the core of NTW's early explorations. For the NTW, the exploration of a place inevitably involves the community and following a European theatrical heritage, which dates from the medieval period, the local populace occupies many of the key roles.

Its first production, *For Mountain, Sand and Sea* was a promenade style experience based on Barmouth's particular geography, where the production was based. As part of an immersive experience, audiences were guided around the town and "stumbled" on a number of vignettes "performed" both by international performance artists and residents. For instance, the village hall was the first port of call, where the WI were making tea for the participants. Kirsty Sedgman, who studied the impact of this first production by NTW on audiences,



notes in her research that 53% of audience members chose to watch the production out of creative interest, 42 % out of curiosity as opposed to 33% who classed themselves as a “Theatre Lover” (Sedgman 2016, pp.80). Obviously this is a snapshot of a small sample from one production but it is interesting that this particular type of production initially appealed to a range of different types of spectators. What percentage of an “out of curiosity” type of audience would go to a conventional theatre, buy a ticket and watch a production they’ve never heard of performed by a new company?

A study by Arts Council Wales in 2011 reported that only 7% of the UK population were “highly engaged” with theatre (Arts Audience Insight 2011) In the light of this percentage 42% seems particularly impressive for a new company performing a new play. What the NTW had achieved with this first production were the first steps in making theatre available and interesting to a wide range of people not simply the “Theatre Lover.” It’s also worth noting that, in spite of a rich operatic tradition and a vibrant amateur dramatic tradition, theatre had never been a dominant force in Wales with attendance rates in 2011 lower than in other areas of the country. ( Sedgman, 2016 pp.145) The company would use Sedgman’s data and observations and reflect how this style of production could increase audience attendance and stimulate interest in theatre. Sedgeman’s research further reveals that a significant percentage attended the event because it was about the history of Barmouth; it reflected their identity and even though a percentage of participants questioned how successful this portrayal had been, the company had achieved one of its initial aims of exploring the culture of a specific location.

In her book *Performing Wales*, Lisa Lewis (2018, p.100) discusses the NTW philosophy of “[p]articipation in theatre as a democratic project and a crucial step in the evolution of the audience participant’s relationship with the performance event and the company as a whole”. She goes on to discuss how this philosophy was put into action in the production of *Tonypanymonium*, where community was at the heart of the experience. My own involvement with the company was initially through collaboration on the production

*Tonypandemonium* in 2013. Written by Rachel Trezise, who lives and has grown up in Treorchy, the play reflects a dysfunctional mother/daughter relationship spanning over the decades. Originally, John McGrath, the artistic director, planned to open the play in Cardiff. However, it was decided the production should be staged at the Parc and Dare Theatre as part of a residency by the NTW to celebrate the theatre's centenary celebrations. Although the majority of the company's productions had been site specific, the decision to choose and celebrate this particular regional theatre is interesting.

The Parc and Dare has been at the cultural heart of the local and wider community since it was built in 1913 when workers of the Parc and Dare collieries funded the building by donating a penny from every pound of their wages. The local communities are proud of this heritage and the theatre has played a significant part in their lives throughout the decades. From watching pantomimes, taking part in school productions, amateur dramatics or simply enjoying the latest blockbuster, the majority of the population value the Parc and Dare and consider it their theatre. The company acknowledged this heritage and the sense of ownership it engendered; they also acknowledged the sense of ownership and pride the community felt with Rachel Trezise's success as writer. Both these factors nurtured a sense of confidence, which significantly contributed to the wider, and the local community engaging with this play in this theatre space.

During my interview with Lisa Maguire, we discussed the different types of strategies the company uses to engage with audiences. Her response indicated that the NTW had various different ambitions depending on place and production. With *Tonypandemonium* the company's primary objective was to meet local people and engage with them. The key strategy was literally "on the ground":

We were resident in Treorchy for five to six weeks in the lead up to this production, we spent a lot of time marching up the high street going into all the businesses and reaching out to all the community groups in the area as well as obviously the school and we obviously utilized our relationship with the Parc and Dare. (Maguire 2021)

Maguire went on to explain that this would differ from an approach used by a company like the Royal Court as the NTW can literally make their shows “anywhere although primarily in Wales” (Maguire 2021). This approach allows the company to engage with and work with local partners. Maguire describes this as a ‘grass roots, contact to contact approach’. Using this approach the company’s primary focus was *not* to engage with “thousands and thousands of audience in terms of the run and capacity” but to meet with and engage with the community in general as opposed to just selling tickets to a show. Paradoxically this “hands on” approach resulted in many of the local population returning to see the production on more than one occasion.

This community engagement was further developed with the decision to cast two of the key roles – Danielle1, Danielle 2 and a chorus of further Danielles – using students from the local comprehensive school, where I taught. The school, a two-minute walk from the theatre, over the years had established a strong relationship through using the venue for school productions, concerts, eisteddfod etc. Whilst the theatre struggled to sell tickets for many professional organizations, attendances for school events were usually a sell-out. This could be attributed to a key factor: parents, relatives, friends will support the child who is performing, but during the period I taught at the school I observed something interesting. School events and events using local participants e.g. amateur actors or professional local writers such as Frank Vickery, were guaranteed a sell-out performance. This could be attributed to a strong loyalty factor even from attendees who would not traditionally class themselves as “theatre goers”.

Certainly there is a strong curiosity factor, but undoubtedly audience members revel in the opportunity to identify with characters, situations, locations and dialogue, which represents their experience. Each of the locations in *Tonypandemonium* were recognizable to the majority of the audience, for example “Kitchen in a Terraced house in Tonypandy 1987”, “East Glamorgan Hospital”. The linguistic structure of the dialogue and the use of colloquialisms

mirrors the speech of the area where the play is set. The characters are instantly recognizable, hormonal teenager, neurotic mother. John McGrath, when discussing the elements which contribute to making theatre more interesting to a working class audience emphasized “localism, not only of material, but also a sense of identity with the performer” ( McGrath 1996, pp. 58). The choice of actors all from the local/ surrounding areas further enhanced the production’s appeal.

The production played to packed houses and the company succeeded in creating a “buzz” around the area which had people clamouring for tickets. The theatre, a traditional proscenium arch stage, had been completely transformed. The familiar red velvet seats had been boarded over and a theatre in the round acting area had been created. The whole acting-area looked totally chaotic, reflecting the world of the play but this adaptation allowed a mingling of audience and actors, further enhancing the style where speeches were presented in the style of stand-up routines, audiences joined in karaoke numbers and listened to whispered confessions through microphones.

And the audience loved it. Playing to packed house every night – a mix of Treorchy folk who spotted every reference and others who were in town for the first time in their lives-the production was bold, messy, raucous, moving and a lot of fun to spend the night with (McGrath 2014)

Lisa Lewis discusses how this “subversion” of a traditional Edwardian, proscenium theatre and the absence of a divide between stage and auditorium had “.... The effect of bringing the community and performance space itself far closer together in a conscious theatrical representation of the performance as a product of the community” (Lewis 2017, pp.103).

Through a detailed understanding of the community the company had commissioned, cast and produced a play, which reflected their identity and engaged with a diverse audience. However, *Wales Arts Review* felt the very elements that had engaged audiences were the elements that failed the production.

It is this familiarity that is the key problem with *Tonypandemonium*, it speaks honestly, but fails to offer its audience anything new that might challenge common assumptions and misconceptions about life in the Rhondda (Morris 2013)

Therein lies the conundrum: is it better that an individual engages with theatre and feels they have had a worthwhile experience or should NTW focus on what the review considered key to their further development?

National Theatre Wales should pay as much attention to the development of their craft, as to the development of the new audiences it has discovered across Wales (Morris 2013)

The company used a similar formula to *Tonypandemonium* with another production which successfully engaged with a local community and audiences alike. *We're still here*, in conjunction with Common Wealth, was a site-specific production, staged in the Byass Works, a disused recycling plant on the outskirts of Port Talbot. Written once again by Rachel Trezise, it was a verbatim play based on interviews with steelworkers, union representatives and the people of Port Talbot. The plant was threatened with closure in 2015; this steel works over the centuries had played a vital role in the economy, and is intrinsically linked with the spirit and unique character of Port Talbot. The story made headlines around the world and a campaign Save our Steel was started to raise awareness and captured the spirit and uncertainty of the time. The artistic director, Kully Thiarai, commented that the production was initiated

Through talking to the steelworkers, the unions and the people of Port Talbot. It is our response to a moment in time, a moment when questions about the nature of work, what it means to be working class and the impact of globalization on our daily lives feel very immediate and real. (Thiarai 2017)

This production, like *Tonypandemonium*, captured the identity and spirit of the area. Once again the decision to use local actors and members of the community gave the voices authenticity, capturing the linguistic patterns. The promenade production did not primarily focus on traditional story-telling but focused on unexpected experiences, ranging from taking part in a union meeting, the reading of the 750 names of workers who had lost their jobs read as a memorial,

voices of the past presented as ghosts. Before the play was written, research indicated the youngest members of the workforce and the majority of a potential audience had little knowledge or memory of the history of the steel works when it was at its peak and was not particularly interested in this aspect. As a result of this research, Trezise changed her original idea: "... they couldn't be angry at losing something they never knew they'd had. But they were angry at what was happening to them at present" (Trezise 2015). As she was writing the play significant changes were happening e.g. offering a deal should the workers accept pension reform and the play reflects this sense of urgency and the dilemmas of the workforce and their families. Once again the content resonated with and reflected the local community but its focus on the implications of globalization engaged a wider audience.

Trezise's involvement with NTW initially began when Julie Barclay, an actor with No Fixed Theatre Company read *Fresh Apples*, Trezise's first novel and felt the subject matter could be adapted into a play and contacted John McGrath. In the initial meeting, McGrath felt *Fresh Apples* could not be developed but gave Trezise support to write some new material. *Tonypandemonium* was Trezise's first play and developed after she sent "a flash fiction" piece to McGrath who loved the idea and Trezise was encouraged to develop this idea into a full length play.

Interestingly, Trezise had not been to the theatre since she was a child and was not versed in how to structure a play for an audience. When I asked her if she wrote the play specifically to engage with a valley audience, Trezise replied "no I didn't have any conception what a theatre audience would be like" (Trezise 2021). As with all her work she writes for herself and the references which the audience found funny is because she herself possesses a "valley sense of humour". In her words "everything just came together; living in Treorchy, the school's involvement, being in the Parc & Dare. It won't have been the same without all that" (Trezise 2021, personal interview). Apart from the characters and subject matter she felt the accents were key to engaging with an audience. Such was the NTW commitment to this aspect that when the casting list came out

it stated “extra points for a Rhondda valley accent. How often would you see that” (Trezise 2021, personal interview).

In 2015 McGrath drafted Trezise in to work alongside Common Wealth Theatre, whose style of working is purely verbatim based on interviews with members of the community. However, he felt this project needed the skills of a traditional writer to shape the testimonies and so Trezise was involved with interviewing the relevant individuals, taking their stories and weaving them into the final product. I had a lengthy discussion with Trezise on whether she felt her plays would be as successful outside of Wales, Trezise hoped “they would but felt in reality probably not” (Trezise 2021, personal interview). Although the play has not been professionally produced outside of Wales Trezise has created an environment that is underrepresented in theatre and has the power to engage and resonate with audiences across the UK.

*Cottonfingers* (2019), another successful collaboration with NTW, originally started as a ‘love letter to the NHS to celebrate it’s 70th birthday’. This work focused on the social and political upheaval at the time of the historic referendum of the 8<sup>th</sup> amendment in Ireland as opposed to engaging with a specific audience in a specific location. From my in-depth discussion with Trezise I got the impression that the focus of audience engagement varies depending on style of the play. This was illuminated when I asked her whether she considered the NTW’s ability to engage with their target audience as one of their key strengths. Although her engagement with companies had been limited she responded with a resounding ‘Yes’. She went on to develop this response by commenting that prior to the play *Tonypandeonium* premiering, the company had spent a month in the area getting to know people and just going around chatting and meeting the locals.

The audiences Trezise writes for recognize her characters as belonging to their world and although some critics may argue that some of her characters are “two dimensional” ( Morris 2013) undoubtedly they are one of the reasons why her plays resonate with people who will not normally go to the theatre.

Once this thing called theatre has been reappropriated by the working class, it will respond in a lively, intelligent and critical way. The people will make the direct comparison between what you are showing and their experience of life. (McGrath 1996, pp.76)

Perhaps one of NTW's most ambitious community projects was their reworking of *The Passion* (2011), staged in Port Talbot and the finale to their launch year to 2011. *The Passion* story took place across the town, with the people of Port Talbot as its cast and crew. 1,000 community volunteers supported it, and over 22,000 people came to the town to view aspects of the production. It was an epic piece of theatre experienced over 72 hours in real time and space. Its various sites could be accessed both by payment or completely free, but what is interesting is the various other platforms that were used to engage and stimulate interest amongst audiences: an online feed, through posters and leaflets, via YouTube, through tweets and live streaming and through rumour, conjecture and whispers. The company used every method to engage with a 21<sup>st</sup> century audience but more importantly many of who would seldom enter a traditional theatre.

Reflecting and building on its hallmark style, the production used key locations throughout the town familiar to the local community but given wider significance to a wider audience. These included a dead space under the M4 which once was a street and a tight knit community, a social club (an integral part of any Welsh community), and the beach overshadowed by the steel works, two iconic images, which are synonymous with the area. Although the story was structured around the biblical story of the Passion, Owen Sheers, the writer, commented

Rather it is the story of *The Passion* as reflected through the prism of Port Talbot today; since the 11<sup>th</sup> century, *Passion* plays have been community performances that have used the local to convey the universal. (Sheers 2011)

As with previous NTW productions, the story was based on interviews with people from the town and these interviews shaped the characters for the play.



Adele Thomas, the project associate director for *The Passion*, commented “I pretty much talked to the entire population of the town and fed their stories back to Owen and Michael”. (Interview Walesonline 2013)

In addition, Port Talbot born actor Michael Sheen played the key role of the teacher, whilst Welsh band Manic Street Preachers provided the music and unbeknownst to them the action for one of the key scenes based on the Last Supper. Wales has always had a strong participatory arts tradition from the origins of the Mari Lwyd through to Gymanfa Ganu and working men’s’ club pantomimes; the appetite for getting involved in the arts has always been inherent in the Welsh nation. Perhaps due to poverty, a fear of the unknown or a perception that theatre is primarily for the “middle classes” a large percentage of the population would not attend a traditional theatrical performance. *The Passion* was a remarkable piece of theatre but the NTW achieved engagement with a huge audience. This production had once again highlighted that by taking theatre to the people, by making the story and characters relevant but more importantly involving them then audiences will engage and participate. However, this production had wider implications for the town by making the wider population aware of Port Talbot with one business owner commenting

I think the main thing it’s done for us is make people aware that we are here.....Maybe the fact we’ve had more visitors during the last year is people have heard about us through *The Passion*.  
(Walesonline 2013)

In many ways *The Passion* proved the ideal model for engaging both community and audiences. According to a review for *The Guardian*, it was “like watching a town discover its voice through a shared act of creation, (making) Port Talbot one of the happiest places on earth” (Lyn Gardener 2011)

The newly launched company had undoubtedly sealed their position not just as a company, which staged exciting and innovative work, but also a company that placed community at the heart of their work. Its approach to theatre was proving an intoxicating mix in attracting critical approval from traditional theatre

audiences but its approach reiterating Featherstone's philosophy – namely that good theatre should begin at home – was attracting a new audience.

The model used for engaging both the community and attracting a wide audience which proved so successful with *The Passion* was implemented with the NTW' production of Roald Dahl's *City of the Unexpected* (2016); a celebration of Cardiff born author Roald Dahl and his books and characters. Staged across Cardiff in September 2016, 120,000 people attended Wales' largest cultural event. The production ranged from large-scale events to intimate performances staged across the city in streets, shops, public spaces, iconic buildings and parks. With over 7,000 people performing, making and volunteering it was a massive feat of organization overseen by creative director, Kully Thiarai and directed by Nigel Jamieson, who had masterminded the opening ceremony of the Sydney Olympics. When appointed to the post of creative director, Thiarai had a clear vision for the company, to give a voice and vision to Welsh communities who are often overlooked and prompt them to use the arts to realize their ambitions. *City of the Unexpected* allowed a wide range of companies and organisations to participate and engage in this unique event.

A website was initially set up so the general public could register their interest in the various roles, additionally emails were sent out to schools outlining the structure of the event and how you could participate. The focus of the event was Roald Dahl, a popular children's author born in Wales in 1906. The popularity of his work meant that students were immediately interested and quickly became engaged. As a school we were given specific guidelines to follow e.g. the number of students that could participate. Each group was allocated a role and two rehearsals; one at the school, which gave them an overview of the project, their role and direction on how to approach it.

The second rehearsal was based in a venue in Cardiff where the students interacted with a variety of other groups involved in the same section, *Fantastic Mr. Fox*. Although the direction was loose both workshops had instilled excitement and enthusiasm in the participants, reiterating Jamieson's vision that

“the event was aiming to capture the spirit and imagination of Dahl’s work as opposed to reenacting it” (Gardner 2016)

When Sedgman (2016) questioned audiences why they had gone to see *The Persians* (2010), almost every respondent who rated the production used positive words like “unique”, “special” and “intriguing”. Anecdotally, this seemed to be the response from the majority of audience members and participants who took part in *City of the Unexpected*. The company used a variety of methods to engage audiences, many of whom were children. There was a significant emphasis on visual elements in addition to performers in costumes, the city became the backdrop and was dressed accordingly.

The attention to detail was superb e. g the historic wall of animals adapted to represent scenes from Dahl’s novels to thousands of umbrellas decorated to resemble giant lollypops transforming a grey, concrete multi-storey car park to resemble a room in Willy Wonka’s factory. Technology played a key role in the success of the event; as with *The Passion*, journeys of characters could be tracked on phones, and social media was used to alert audiences where a character or a specific event could be discovered. EParrots hidden on lampposts called out to passers by, in voices created by teenagers from across South Wales. The event presented an opportunity to engage with pupils as scientists, as readers, as performers and as teenagers. Undoubtedly the advanced technology made a massive contribution to the event but more traditional devices were also used, storytellers positioned in specific locations read or retold extracts of Dahl’s stories, Welsh choirs popping up in unexpected places. Whilst planning the event both Jamieson and Thiarai felt the event had engaged with people on the fringes of society or those individuals who are often forgotten because they are often the heroes in Dahl’s books.

Like much of the company’s work it was a unique experience, which would never be repeated. However, the event highlighted the company’s philosophy of creating unexpected theatre for Wales and the world and undoubtedly the event had an economic and social impact for the city and beyond. Whilst interviewing

Lisa Maguire I asked her whether the company, when developing a new project always had a specific audience they wanted to engage with. She explained with specific projects like *Tony and the Demonium* (2013) and *We're Still Here* (2017) the focus was very much on engaging with the community. Projects like *The Persians* (2010) engaged with a wider audience borne out by statistics quoted by Sedgman. The production was staged for 8 performances with a capacity audience of 120. Sedgman notes:

Unlike my first case study, then, *The Persians* did not seem to attract many local people who had chosen to attend the production impulsively: because it was on and sounded interesting ...In fact, it is interesting that people who considered themselves to live locally were least likely to have heard about the event through word of mouth.  
(Sedgman 2016, pp.128)

Unlike many of the company's other projects no local people were drawn into artistic roles and although the performance took place in a location synonymous with local history, *The Persians* was not about the history of the place. In Sedgman's view, "The publicity was very poor. I did not come across anyone else who knew about it and I mix a lot and am local" (Sedgman 2016, pp.128). In an interview with Sedgman (2016), the director Mike Pearson expressed his surprise at how quickly the production had sold out and regretted that more local people had been unable to attend. (Sedgman 2016, pp.128).

In 2014, 4 years after *The Persians* the company staged *Mametz* (2014) in an equally remote location. Inspired by Welsh writer Owen Sheers' poem *Mametz Wood* (1974) the production was a large-scale, site specific production which drew on written material by the poets who had fought in some of the bloodiest battles during the First World War. During our interview I asked Lisa Maguire whether *Mametz* had also played to a relatively small, select audience.

*Mametz* is interesting. It kind of stands out on its own, because with many of the outdoor work because it's experimental they have fairly short runs but *Mametz* did have a proper two and a half week theatre style run... we did have to cast the net wider to get the sort of audience numbers we did and it was almost a total sell-out with 250 people a night. (Maguire 2021, personal interview)

The geography reports from the show reveal that the majority of the audience had travelled from across the South Wales corridor, Mid & West Wales and even North Wales.

We really leaned into the WW1 story and the Welsh story ..... A bigger show and a bigger Welsh story – it was kind of universal. The stories in the show, there are soldiers represented from North Wales, West Wales as well as the South Wales Brigade so I think it was one of the really good examples of us actually telling a Welsh story that connected Wales rather than speaking to one specific community which obviously we'd done really powerfully in places like Port Talbot or Snowdon. But *Mametz* was one of those that hit a lot of different people for different reasons. Some people would have come because of the company or the experience but some people came for the story of WW1, some people came because of where it was in that part of the world so [there were] lots of different triggers.

(Maguire 2021)

In the interview Lisa Maguire spoke about the early days of NTW where before the main production the company would go out into the community and work on another project called “an assembly”. The primary aim of this was to “pre meet people and warm them up for the production which would follow allowing the company to reach out to community leaders and community “gate keepers”. Inevitably the Pandemic has had a massive impact with the way the company now engages with the community, but Maguire explained the company had always adopted “a strong digital first approach” which is the “flip side of putting the content out and seeing who wants to engage with it”. This approach, although not as “bespoke” as working with specific communities, allows the company to explore and engage with a wider audience.

### **Technology**

In March 2010, NTW launched what was believed to be a first for an arts organization. The artistic director, John McGrath unveiled the opening programme to a global audience via a live webcast from Cardiff. He believed that this approach meant that actors, directors and artists across the world would be aware of “this new country” (McGrath 2010) which he believed Wales had become since Devolution. He also used this innovative launch to reiterate, that

the company wanted to be digital from day one (McGrath 2010). The NTW community website was also set up at the time of its launch. At this time online sharing was at an early stage but the company pre-empted the significant importance of its role and set up The National Theatre Wales Community to build an engaged community and develop a culture of sharing and discussing NTW work and their own. McGrath wanted responses/comments/ideas from participants about the type of work it should commission, with actors and writers about policies, and to provide an egalitarian platform where the community could help and contribute to company policy and decision.

An offshoot, *Young Critics Group*, aimed at 13-25 year olds allowed individuals to blog their responses to productions inviting discussion with both audiences, actors and the work creators. As a teacher, I found this initiative both innovative and helpful. Both the GCSE and AS/A' level drama specifications were moving in a direction where students were awarded in the written exam for expressing their views on different aspects of the performance and their response as a member of the audience. To achieve marks within the top band responses needed to display "Perceptive analysis and evaluation" (WJEC GCE). The Young Critics group encouraged students to interact with a wide range of diverse and different opinions but more importantly it helped them to formulate and develop confidence in their own opinions. It helped them to consider and structure a response that was perceptive within a safe and nurturing environment. More importantly it provided students, particularly from deprived or isolated communities the opportunity to interact with business professionals and to make their voices heard. By engaging with a young community the vision of this initiative would also ensure the next generation would have an input into the revitalization and continued growth of the arts in Wales.

The effects of the pandemic have highlighted the importance of technology in helping many businesses survive. Theatre companies have had to explore the digital potential in reaching and engaging with audiences and in 2020, NTW in partnership with BBC Cymru Wales & BBC Arts, realized a new digital programme of work designed to connect audiences, communities and theatre

makers with opportunities to create and experience, live innovative theatre delivered via a digital stage. The project focused on six rehearsed readings of homegrown work, alongside contemporary classic titles. These digital innovations allowed the company to keep in contact with its audience while also exploring new avenues using digital technology.

One such project developed in the midst of the pandemic involved an invitation to individuals involved in the arts to pitch an idea focusing on various aspects of life in Wales. One such collaboration was with Rhondda born performance artist Rhys Slade-Jones. The broadcast was called *Pull up a Pew* (2020) and Slade-Jones spent five days walking sections of Offa's Dyke carrying two chairs adorned with hand-crocheted covers. The chairs represented thrones Totems offered to those who were denied a funeral service during the pandemic. The journey also explored the nature and rituals of grief and the ways in which traditional crafting skills, handed down over generations connect us to our past. Similarly *Possible* (2021) written by and presented by Shon Dale-Jones created as a digital experience explored the nature of love. Reviewing the play for *The Guardian*, Lyn Gardener commented that it "captures a precise moment with sharp clarity...Dale Jones makes us consider more deeply what the last year has been like for us" (Gardner 2020).

In her interview Maguire explained how the current audience team are focused on stories and using the stories behind the shows to engage and inspire audiences. The stories of Slade-Jones and Dale-Jones are just two examples of how NTW used a story telling approach and technology to respond to an unprecedented situation and produced work which sought to engage with the mood of the nation, and the predicament individuals found themselves in. At the same time, it also allowed the company to explore and employ new technologies, work with a previously undiscovered range of artists and engage with a new audience or demographic for example communities of age or kind. Maguire reiterated although this digital approach had proved invaluable throughout the pandemic the company had used this approach when it was unusual even though

it has now become “the norm” with the majority of companies using a digital platform to engage with potential audiences.

Right from its launch the company seized the initiative with its use of technology and this continues to be a key focus, placing “digital ambition at the heart of their vision for a twenty first century theatre” (Financial report 2019). NTW want to pioneer on-line initiatives grounded in a user led community.

Within this financial report the company acknowledges its obligation and its public benefit, stating its entire operational system is set up to be open and to engage with the public. Their online presence, which aspires to be a leading National Theatre web resource, is designed to be interactive and develop a conversational relationship with the public and work as an important resource engaging with past and future audiences.

Engaging with potential audiences and developing different strategies to achieve this is key the company’s vision. Perhaps one of their most innovative achievements is TEAM, NTW’s pioneering model of engagement. Principally funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, whose mission is to help people overcome disadvantage and lack of opportunity so they can fulfill their potential and enjoy a fulfilling and creative life, it is a local, national and international movement to act as a change in the arts. TEAM members are the company’s leaders within the community; they are responsible for creating, inspiring, performing, teaching, writing, organizing, running projects giving feedback and making decisions on the future of the NTW. It is free to join and open to anyone over the age of 16 from any background. The model has also been used as a case study within Arts Council England’s *Cultural Democracy Guide* (2018). The guide notes:

The wealthiest, better educated and least ethnically diverse 8% of the population forming the culturally most active segment of all. Similarly, 43% of ticket sales of National Portfolio Organisations go to a group of frequent attenders and although Creative People and Places have made great strides in this area, the division between the two approaches is significant. (Cultural Democracy in Practice, 2018 pp.10)



TEAMS is an integral part of the company, and serves to illustrate it is a different kind of national theatre that has a relationship with the communities it serves, it is their approach to engagement. The Audiences Team focuses on how to get potential audiences actively involved, working closely with the Collaboration Department. In many respects these departments work independently from the actual productions but their role is to engage people with theatre but also to encourage people across Wales to become involved with the arts. This includes leadership and activism work with the aim of up skilling people within their own communities, skills that include developing the spoken word, music and comedy.

The TEAMS network is made up of 1,000 individuals from across Wales and these are represented by a panel who have a significant input into the running of the company e.g. programming decisions, recruitment and the strategic direction of the company. As Maguire states 'They have a real say in *their* National Theatre' (Maguire, 2021, personal interview). The TEAM panel is invited to the first night of a production, this event is free and the company also works with people who might not be able to afford a ticket. The company explains to the audience they are the first people to see the show, their feedback is invaluable and they are encouraged to share their feedback on social media. This approach is also beneficial for the company.

Sometimes we are making these extraordinary shows and we are not really sure what the audience are going to do. *Mametz* is a really good example of that, the free first night of the team social we learnt so much from them about the project. It was a very generous audience that was very emotionally engaged with the show and much more forthcoming than perhaps a paying audience is, they were so invested.... We learn some stuff from a practical point of view but we also learn about the story beats and how people connect with it and that's just invaluable. But hopefully what we also saying to people that they are a part of it. (Maguire 2021, personal interview)

This process has resulted in the company making massive changes to a production based on audience reaction and feedback. A good example of this was the free first night of *We're Still Here* (2017):

We made it in this massive warehouse and we had all these ideas of what the audience would do at certain moments because they had to move along the warehouse. On the free first night we discovered that everyone went a totally different way. We had to change loads of things to get people going in the same direction. We learn some stuff from a practical point of view but we also learn about the story beats and how people connect to it and that's just invaluable. (Maguire 2021, personal interview)

The role of the audience in the initial decision-making and gauging their reaction to a project is becoming increasingly important to the company.

A recent project involving both National Theatres (NTW & Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru), directed by Mathilde Lopez, based on a multilingual production of French playwright Fabrice Melquiot's *Petula*, worked with a young audience from the beginning of the project. In this first major production since the pandemic, *Petula* – an adaptation of Fabrice Melquiot's play – was developed to be performed in Welsh, English and French.

What a glorious mix – For our national identity is very much a confused one: in-flux ever evolving ; an officially bi-lingual nation with many other languages spoken within our boundaries: post Brexit; fresh out of battling a global pandemic. Like Pwdin we are all struggling with who we are. (James 2022)

A panel of bilingual young people were recruited; they were involved in rehearsal twice a week throughout the making of the project. Their function was to give the director continuous feedback on areas involving content and its relevance to young people, the effectiveness and impact of language and images used for posters and programmes. This approach ensured that the audience was genuinely informing the project so that young people could have significant input into the production's creation and shaping the message. The focus of this approach is ensuring the production spoke to young people and therefore engaged with a bigger proportion of young people as a potential audience.

Lorne Campbell, the current artistic director of NTW states in the *Welsh Arts Review* (2019):

Building new audiences for theatre in Wales and making it relevant to more people is essential. Engaging, consulting and empowering young people as part of the theatre-making process not only enriches our work, it also generates new creative pathways to support their well-being, and maybe even inspire the next generation of theatre-makers.

However, this approach is part of the company's wider strategy to develop opportunities to involve audiences in their decision-making and reflect their views to a greater extent. This underlines the company's commitment of attracting new attendees and ensuring that potential audiences realize theatre is for everyone.

### **Education**

Primarily due to its model the company have made a decision not to have a discreet education department but want to explore different ways to engage with young people in a variety of ways not just within an educational environment. Throughout 2022, the company is developing a young people's strategy, which is not focused only on schools but on young people influencing the decision making and on informing young people how they become involved with the company through apprenticeships. Although the company does not have a specific schools' officer, the inclusion of two former teachers in the Collaboration Department ensures that material is produced in line with current educational trends e.g. resources around productions are created so as to reflect strategies for the new creative curriculum. The inclusion of NTW productions *The Radicalization of Bradley Manning* (2012) and *Mametz* (2014), both on the WJEC A' level exam syllabus, has ensured the company's work engages a young audience. Accompanying videos on a variety of areas e.g. how the shows were made, not only provide an insight but are an invaluable educational tool for both teachers and students.

This fluid approach allows the company to employ a variety of different methods according to relevant productions. Schools were prioritized as a target audience for the tour of *Petula*, with tickets capped at an affordable price in an attempt to engage with more students.

We sort of play it by ear on project by project basis....Certainly if we are working a community like Merthyr or Port Talbot we will always reach out to the schools and certainly we would be trying to get them through the door and look to run things like workshops and Q &As ... Our job is to transform people's ideas about what theatre can be and if that means they start visiting their local theatre then that's a trigger that we have set off. What we are not so good at because we just can't because of our model is that ongoing, sustained contact like some schools might have with the Sherman or Theatr Clwyd because we are not always in the same place. But I think if we have turned a switch on in people's heads the we have done our job. (Maguire November 2021)

This approach offers a more meaningful engagement both from a students' and educational perspective, where the company will tailor-make a resource relevant and meaningful and linked to an actual production they will view, e.g. a series of workshops based on *Mother Courage* in selected Merthyr comprehensive schools. Alternatively students are included to play key roles in productions through a variety of rehearsals; for example students from Treorchy Comprehensive School in *Tonypanemonium* were cast in two of the lead roles and a further 12 girls were used as the chorus.

### **Funding**

The report of the Trustees and financial consolidated statements for the year ending 31<sup>st</sup> March notes, "Excellent financial management continues to ensure that budgets are adhered to and targets adhered to with funds generated for reinvestment" (Trustees Report 2019). It reviews the company's financial situation by reiterating its objectives and mission statement. Engagement with a wide variety of audiences from across Wales remains pivotal to the company's vision of establishing a truly national theatre. It acknowledges that the people and places of Wales are an essential part of NTW's DNA and future developments included investigating a variety of people and places with stories to tell and helping people to connect with each other differently.

The report also establishes its production goals by acknowledging the need within a three-year cycle to mount productions, which engage specifically with children/families or for/with young people. The report to trustees outlines the

company's achievements and performances for the year ending March 2019. A substantial part of this programme was based on works celebrating the 70th birthday of the NHS, one of the truly great ideas to come from Wales and 114 performances were presented live across the country and online, achieving significant media coverage.

A report for the National Assembly of Wales on behalf of The Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee (2016), cites the NTW as a model of good practice in its approach to increase non-public funding and how it is distributed. According to the report, since its inception the NTW has leveraged over £1.7 million from trusts and foundations from outside Wales. Their lean business model and level of core ACW grant compared to other similar arts organizations in Wales, led an independent report to comment that the company were "punching above their weight" in its rate of return. By utilizing a number of grants from organizations e.g. 1418 NOW, London 2012 Cultural Olympiad, and The Space, the company has ensured funding support for artistic activity throughout Wales.

This funding was spent on the local economy and employment creating a significant cultural experience for many people. This funding and careful management have allowed large-scale events like *City of the Unexpected* (2016) to engage with and enjoyed by a significant percentage of the population of South Wales. This reinforces their pledge and response to guidance from the Charity Commission on public benefit regarding one of their key aims and objectives when planning future activities;

National Theatre of Wales belongs to all the people of Wales, regardless of age, location or theatre going habits. The company aims to nourish and inspire all the people across Wales and to link the nation with World Class theatre making and cultural aspiration. [...] Our entire operational system is set up to be open and engaged with the public. (Report of the Trustees and Consolidated Financial Statements for the Year ended 31<sup>st</sup> March 2019, pp.5)

Additional funding secured from organizations like the Paul Hamlyn Foundation has allowed the company to engage with specific groups of individuals. This funding awarded £400,000 to the TEAM programme and will support the next,

four-year phrase of the NTW TEAM's work in Pembrokeshire and Wrexham. This is one of TEAMS biggest projects to date and

One that engages the communities of these areas in a bespoke programme of empowerment, leadership, creative activism and intensive long term engagement, leading to a full-scale NTW production in each location. (nationaltheatreofwales.org)

This funding has allowed the company to launch a range of events starting in April 2018 with a launch party. Other events included a creative writing workshop at Berwyn prison, an *Art of Protest* workshop allowing the young people of the area to share their views through creativity and to celebrate National Tell Your Story Day the company and volunteers worked with members of the homeless community allowing them to tell their own story. The aim, the community has decided, is that material gathered from these events should form the basis of a full scale show made and staged in Wrexham on the subject of homelessness.

In *Locating The Audience* (2016), Sedgman discusses a speech made in 2014 by Savid Javid, the then minister of culture, where he asked cultural providers to make what they do accessible for everyone. Sedgman comments that making theatre accessible to everyone is not simply about making tickets affordable or even free, it is about changing the perception of what going to the theatre means. "It means being aware of the impression, shared by a lot of people, that they are not the appropriate kind of person for certain cultural activities' (Sedgman 2016, p. 163). This funding and work will hopefully go some way towards challenging this conception allowing individuals to engage with cultural activities but on their terms.

## **The Future**

National theatres have faced enormous challenges as they respond to and accommodate changing, social, cultural and economic conditions. Globalisation, migration, devolution, multiculturalism, identity politics, multilingualism and new technologies have had a profound impact on the meaning of the nation (Holdsworth 2010, pp.38)

Undoubtedly, National Theatre Wales has and will continue to face these many challenges. In 2009 Dai Smith, Chairman of the Arts Council of Wales at the time, commented

We have been putting our toes in the water for too long. It was inexcusable, outrageous that we did not have a national theatre for Wales. It may 100 years late, but better late than not at all.

NTW has grown and developed since its inception and is responsible for some significant and ground-breaking productions across Wales. However, is the concept of any national theatre now “a meaningless label, an anachronistic, exhausted ideological construct” (Klaic 2008, p.217) Is NTW identity in danger of being lost or swamped by external forces? A poll held in 2021 indicated that 40% of the Welsh population would vote in favour of independence as opposed to 20% in 2018, suggesting that the population is embracing their identity and for many cultures is an integral part of that identity. Until 2013 the National Theatre of Great Britain had never produced a play by a Welsh playwright. This emphasizes the importance of having our own national theatre which reflects the identity of Wales, celebrating not only its rich cultural heritage but contemporary writers.

Reflecting their audiences’ identity will continue to be pivotal to the company’s development. The creation of a new role, Audience and Communications Co-coordinator, who is responsible for raising the profile of NTW; growing audiences; deepening engagement; and building awareness of their brand and values. Since its origins the company has made significant inroads in engaging with potential audiences through a variety of initiatives, undoubtedly although there will be challenges the NTW is now established as a key part of Wales culture.

## **Making Theatre Accessible for a Young Welsh Audience: Theatr Iolo**

The company provides the best of theatre, making it widely accessible to young people to stir the imagination, inspire the heart and challenge the mind. Working with ideas from children, teachers and artists, Theatr Iolo is committed to developing as well as challenging practice in theatre and education

{Mission Statement}

### **Origin and profile**

Theatr Iolo was created over 30 years ago and is regarded as one of Wales' leading theatre companies. It is interesting to view the origins of the company in the light of how theatre in education developed in schools in the 1960s/70.

Helen Nicholson charts its history and development prior and during this period:

It was the social and egalitarian ambitions of progressive education that particularly appealed to those working in state schools in the United Kingdom, rather than its impact on children's acting or on neo-avantgarde art. (Nicholson 2009, pp.16)

She goes on to discuss how early TIE companies, like the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry, made a concerted effort to distinguish between commercial theatre and its conservative practices and this new form of theatre designed specifically to engage with young people: "This theatrical pedagogy sought to encourage young people to encourage young people to participate in theatre as a learning medium and as a vehicle for social change" Nicholson 2009, p.19).

The original TIE company in South Glamorgan was *Action Pie*. Barry Slack (former head of Drama at Whitchurch Comprehensive) remembers the early days of this company in the 1970s.

They were quite sort of left wing, well they were very left wing. They were all members of the Workers Revolutionary Party. They fell into the typical TIE company of the 70s hard edged and political. (Slack, 2022, personal interview)



Although the work they produced was interesting e.g. a series of lessons focused on the mutiny on the Bounty there was an overt political bias and strategies employed encouraged students to take action against authority. Eventually, due to a dispute with the Local Education Authority (LEA) funding for the company was cut, but the authority realized the value of TIE and drama, which was beginning to develop as a discreet subject in schools across the county. In 1980 a committee was set up comprising members of the Arts Council, Equity, Teachers Unions and a selection of theatre directors. Their brief was to create a new theatre – a new TIE company, Theatr Iolo. Kevin Lewis, the original director of Theatr Iolo commented,

It's a bit unusual for a company to be set up by a committee but I suppose it was because there was a history of a company in the South Glamorgan area since the 70s and they were keen to maintain this. (Lewis 2021, personal interview)

The changes in the role and function of a Theatre in Education Company seen in this local authority reflect the shift in paradigm in how theatre in education was viewed nationwide:

On a practical level, as the traditional landmarks of politics were re-negotiated during the 1980s and early 1990s the function of education and the social role of theatre were once again subject to critical review. In education, this period was characterized by a call to return to the “basics” of traditional teaching methods after decades of what the political Right regarded as the failures of the progressive and child-centred education. Obviously this meant that TIE, which was based on experimental learning, came under fire. (Nicholson 2009, p36)

In the early days of its existence the company worked closely with a panel of teachers and English/drama advisers who had a significant input into the type of work the company produced, ensuring it adhered closely to the needs of both students and teachers. Members of the panel would attend and give feedback throughout the rehearsal process on how they felt the content, language and ideas would engage the target audience whilst still meeting an educational agenda. This approach was certainly progressive for the period and interestingly it is an approach which NTW have adopted and developed, specifically with their latest project *Petula*, in order to enhance engagement with potential audiences.

Since its creation, Theatr Iolo has been at the forefront of theatre for children delivering performances and workshops to babies, children, teenagers, parents, pupils and teachers across Wales, the UK and internationally. Perhaps what makes Theatr Iolo unique is the specific age range of its target audience 0-16. The company aims to create work for children and young people, which help them to make sense of the world around them and their place within it. They employ a range of freelance artists, writers and creatives and the work is presented in both Welsh and English. Theatr Iolo are a PIPA company (a Parents and Carers in Performing Arts Charter partner). This implies that they strive towards creating a more family friendly working environment. PIPA campaigns to enable and empower parents, carers and employers to achieve sustainable change in attitudes and practices in order to attract, support and retain a more diverse and flexible workplace. And places of entertainment

On their website the Theatr Iolo company state their core values are: Trust, Ambitious, Collaborative and Creative. They want their audiences to feel challenged and given the opportunity to explore relevant issues. The company also emphasizes the importance of reaching as many young people/children as possible particularly those that have not had access to live theatre. The work is diverse representing children from all backgrounds and life experiences, aiming to remove barriers to attendance and striving to offer genuine and inclusive opportunities.

### **Education**

Although Theatr Iolo works primarily with a young audience it is important to question whether they would class themselves as a TIE company. Certainly when Kevin Lewis became artistic director in 1987 he inherited a company, which was formed primarily as a TIE company. Helen Nicholson (2011) offers a useful delineation of the terms *theatre education* and *theatre for young audiences*:

Theatre education involves professional theatre-makers working with young people in all kinds of educational settings and learning environments, including schools, hospitals, theatres, museums and heritage sites. This work may be undertaken by freelance practitioners or

those who work for companies that specialize in theatre education or they may be part of a bigger theatre or cultural organization. (...) *Theatre for Young Audiences* involves professional performances that are particularly designed for children and family audiences within the cultural sector. (Nicholson 2011, pp. 86-87)

In an interview Roger Wooster (2007) asked Lewis in what ways had the TIE practice of the company changed or developed in recent years.

We regard ourselves less and less as a TIE company and more as a theatre company that goes into schools and from which teachers can extract educational value. (...) In the end our educational aims are educational in the widest sense of the word. The company just wants to bring good theatre to the children in whatever forms that might take, and that will in a way reflect their lives and the lives of other people. (Wooster 2007, pp.106)

Clearly, Lewis at this point was aligning the company to Nicholson's, *Theatre for Young Audiences* definition and raises the question does it affect the way you engage with your audience and if so how?

In 2014, as head of a performing arts department, I established links with Theatr Iolo. As part of Dylan Thomas's centenary, the company had taken one of Thomas's lesser-known works *Adventures in the Skin Trade* and adapted it for the stage. The local theatre, the Parc and Dare, had included one evening performance as part of their autumn programme. The production would tour across Wales culminating in a production at the Sydney Opera House, making them the first Welsh Company to achieve this. The annual review report 2013/14 stated, " ... A great achievement, which illustrates not only the international regard for its work but also the company's skill in forging ambitious partnerships".

Kevin Lewis, the artistic director, approached the department and asked if we would be interested in a workshop exploring the play. In 2013/14 the company had responded to the shift in focus from presenting views in a school context, following the Art's Council Investment Review. Greater emphasis would be placed on the company visiting schools to present their work as opposed to schools visiting a theatre. The company would continue to use its contacts and

work with schools when and as appropriate, as the opinion of young people was deemed valuable at an early stage of researching productions and working with them on marketing.

In 2004, Lewis discussed with Wooster the company's relationship with schools and what developments he would like to see. At that stage he felt the relationship could be improved if the company could get more schools on board. He felt by making the decision to do " 'challenging' things - things that are slightly different" schools were reluctant to book the company. They were more likely to book if the work the company produced had links to the exam syllabus. Lewis also felt the cost, even with subsidies and the logistics of the school day made it difficult to engage with school audiences. He also made it clear that the company were investigating strategies to overcome these issues, citing a European model where a play is taken into a classroom and lasts the duration of a lesson. Lewis commented

In a way it goes back to some of the old TIE things, when you go into a classroom and give them things to do. So secondary schools are really hard to access. We did a Charlie Way play last year - it ran about an hour and ten minutes - and if kids arrive late then you run up against all those things... We ended up by doing it in smaller groups in drama studios - it just seemed a lot better than having massive great audiences. (Wooster 2007, pp.110)

The two workshops relating to *Adventures in the Skin Trade* lasted two hours and each session comprised of two groups of 40 GCSE & A 'level students. Both groups remained focused throughout and found the sessions engaging and inspiring, igniting their interest and curiosity for the forthcoming production. In keeping with Lewis's philosophy the primary focus of the workshop was based on artistic aims as opposed to educational ones and this resulted in a highly productive outcome for the students. Enhancing both their performance and knowledge skills, this proved to be the ideal target audience, relatively small groups in a drama studio.

From early interviews (2004) it is apparent that Lewis did not feel that workshops were generally an effective way of engaging a young audience. When

asked whether the company had a policy about the use of workshops, he responded,

No. At some point I just got fed up with struggling with workshops and started to think I just want to start concentrating on the play; letting the play speak for itself and doing the resource material...I think we got into the trap of thinking that because we had always done workshops because the schools kept asking for workshops and then you've got sixty kids in there and it all becomes meaningless. (Wooster 2007, pp.113)

Later in the interview, he does acknowledge that with smaller groups with specific skills, e.g. GCSE drama groups, workshops can be an effective method. Reflecting on the workshop and how it enriched the students' experience of the performance and having observed numerous workshops with large groups and various levels of student engagement I can understand and appreciate Lewis's methodology. However, from a teacher's perspective the issue is more complex: is it financially viable to offer a workshop to 20 students as opposed to 60?

In the evening, the group went to see the production in exactly the same venue where the previous year NTW production of *Tonypandemonium* had played to sell-out audiences for six nights. The only audience for this performance was the school students. The production itself was of a very high standard, and in many aspects reflected the haphazard and bizarre style of *Tonypandemonium*, but for some reason this production did not resonate with potential audiences. The theatre later discovered unopened boxes of flyers advertising the production had been locked in a cupboard and discussing this with Lewis he felt it would have made little difference in engaging with potential audiences.

In *Locating the Audience*, Kirsty Sedgman notes "Community engagement has played an important part in National Theatre Wales' policies with the word 'community' featuring sixteen times in their 21-page draft strategic plan (2009)" (Sedgman 2016, p.43). Whilst noting the term is left "deliberately open" she quotes NTW former director John McGrath, who clarifies what underlies their work.

A fundamental principle of community. Our goal at NTW is that while everyone will have a differing level of engagement, everyone who gets involved in NT, whether that's by buying a ticket, reading about us online,

working with us creatively, or simply being interested in theatre in Wales, should have a range of differing ways to deepen their involvement should they want to, and should have ways to contribute actively to the development of the company (Sedgman 2016, pp.43).

The community engagement fostered throughout the month prior to the production of *Tonepandymonium* paid dividends in engaging potential audiences, but the reality is that a small company like Theatr Iolo has neither the resources nor financial capabilities to achieve this. The students however were totally engaged and invested in the show, primarily due to the workshop. Perhaps this underpinned Lewis's view, for a company like Theatr Iolo small groups in small spaces as opposed to massive audiences in large venues provide the most effective audience engagement. The workshop also highlighted how direct contact with young people can have a positive impact on the marketing of a production. Apart from the workshops, the company also employed a variety of other strategies, which they felt could be successful in engaging potential audiences

When we did *Adventures in the Skin Trade* we did a scheme where we got local schools to promote it, one of the schools a group of students promoted the production ... the young people printed tickets to other students in the school and we advised them on how to market the show. (Lewis, December 2021, personal interview)

Audience numbers throughout the tour tended to reflect the pattern at the Parc and Dare, apart from one venue Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff. This is where the company is based, where their work is known and highly regarded. The complex reasons why audiences choose to view a production is explored by Bennett: choice of venue, play and director can all have a significant impact on how and why an audience will choose to engage.

Already it is evident that issues such as cultural background and selection play significant parts in constructing these roles and, indeed, in getting audiences into theatre. In circumstances of the theatre visit, the spectator takes on his/her role (s) before the performance *per se* begins. (Bennett 1997, pp.123)

Certainly making a brief comparison of audience numbers it seems apparent that familiarity with a company, playwright and production will have a significant impact on audience engagement and audience numbers.

The company values its relationship with schools employing an education officer whose function is to engage with schools using a variety of methods. Their role is to liaise with schools, initiating projects and when appropriate leading the pre and post workshops, creating the relevant resource pack. Lewis reiterates they work hard on creating packs that are succinct and relevant, “In fact, there is so much resource material around for teachers that you don’t want to overburden them. In a way it’s better to find six or seven really good ideas that are succinct and they might pick up one or two” (Lewis 2007, pp.111).

Lewis’ philosophy regarding resources is closely aligned to American researcher and author Jeanne Klein who suggests

Pre-performance learning has the potential to remove all surprises from the production and result in the experience becoming a ‘comparative exercise of previously learned information’.

Although I provide teachers with study guides for every production as they’ve come to expect, I actually hate them, because I personally want theatre to astonish me.... Instead, I believe all understanding should come from the production itself and not a study guide. (Reason 2010, pp.113)

Like Klein, Lewis is pragmatic, realizing that if you are presenting a theatrical package to schools then resources are an essential part of the package. As with the content of the production the content of the resource is relevant and engaging. The company’s delineation between a TIE company and a company that produces theatre for young people is further illustrated by their approach to resource packs. They don’t identify links to Learning Objectives of the National Curriculum as they feel the teacher is equipped to make those links. Lewis emphatically stated

What I’m saying is we are a theatre company. We produce plays. In the same that a children’s writer doesn’t get asked by their publisher ‘What are the aims of this book?’ (Wooster 2007, pp.111)

During the company’s inception in 1987 and Lewis’s tenure as artistic director there has been a significant shift in how theatre and education is viewed. One of the central arguments in Nicholson’s *Theatre and Education* (2009) is that

The application of professional theatre to educational contexts is always dependent on the social, cultural and political climates in which it takes place.

(Nicholson 2009, pp.23).

She goes on to discuss how the optimism of the 60s & 70s began to wane and a number of changes took place in the 80s and 90s, e.g. a right wing government under Margaret Thatcher, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the demise of Communism “... had significant repercussions for TIE and other forms of educational drama” (Nicholson 2005, p.23). Reflecting on the company’s evolution it is apparent that the company’s decision to have a wider remit than purely a TIE company is not only reflective of a nationwide shift in perspective but has led the company to reassess the terms “educational drama/theatre” and as a result they produce a wide range of work engaging with a variety of different audiences.

A key part of the company’s audience engagement strategy is their work with babies and toddlers. I asked Lewis how the company had begun to develop this work.

That probably happened in 2003, we were always touring to infant schools, to 5 year olds and sometimes the nursery kids would get brought into the shows and they’d be a bit overwhelmed by going to the hall and there being a big number of other children. I remember just talking to nursery teachers and whether we could do something just for nursery. We did our first project for nursery schools in 2003 and brought Sarah (Argent) in as director as she was interested in this area. It went really well and we were invited to various festivals. The nursery work really developed and because it is under 5s there was an audience of children who weren’t at school yet and certainly theatres at weekends and during the week would get audiences for that age group as people are looking for things for their children to do. (Lewis, December 2021, personal interview)

Initially they were one of the first companies to develop this type of work and their work is now renowned throughout the UK. Productions that include *The Baby Show* and *Baby, Bird and Bee* are structured to engage with a specific audience between the ages of 6-18 months clearly stating no children older than



18 months. The information on their website regarding these shows is clear, precise and engenders a sense of expertise, knowledge and security.

If you have a baby or young child who is older than 18 months and who has a disability and/or developmental delay, please get in touch with us to talk through whether the performance would be suitable for your child. The creative team are experts at making work for young people and happy to talk to you about the performance in more detail.  
( [www.theatriolo.com](http://www.theatriolo.com))

This brief paragraph reassures potential audiences that the company has an understanding of their target audience and as a result would be more likely to engage with them. Both the location and content of these types of shows are carefully chosen and crafted.

*Baby, Bird & Bee* is a celebration of the outside world and is performed in gardens, outdoor spaces and theatres. The show consists of a 25 minute performance followed by 20 minutes of 'Stay and Play' time for babies and their families. Audiences are invited to sit with their baby whilst the new gardener goes about their work, planting and watering in their beautiful garden, focusing on a sensory experience. Its power to engage with its target audience has ensured this production has been revived on a number of occasions, however its first performance after lockdown fulfilled an important function. The current artistic director, Lee Lyford emphasized why this show is important:

Lots of babies born during the last eighteen months will have had limited opportunities to explore the world around them. *Baby, Bird & Bee* is a wonderful opportunity for parents and babies to enjoy a performance together, safely spend time with other families and to explore the world beyond their home. ( [www.theatriolo.com](http://www.theatriolo.com) )

*The Baby Show*, in conjunction with the Unicorn Theatre, London highlights the company's ability to gauge and respond to the demands of a target audience. Theatre made specifically for babies is still relatively new and Theatr Iolo are emerging as leading practitioners, understanding the detail required to ensure maximum engagement with a potentially difficult and demanding audience. The Unicorn Foyle studio is transformed into a garden with one review commenting "The conceit of the (mostly) sleeping baby on stage helps to create a remarkably calm atmosphere, given that there are 14 other babies in the room. Argent and Lewis have made a gentle show that captivates while avoiding the dreaded over-

stimulation” (Lydia Davies 2016). Pre-performance the reviewer wonders how this show will engage with an audience of toddlers and babies but crafted so there is no reliance on narrative but a series of familiar sounds, actions and sensations based on the elements cold, heat, wind and rain. The show’s simplicity and for its audience “every mundane discovery is a drama, full of delight” led one parent to comment “Apparently the magic of theatre works at any age. Baby Show was the perfect way to launch a theatre-going habit”. (Lydia Davies 2016)

In our interview Lewis explained that a lot of work which is used to engage babies is primarily sensory play but the work Argent is interested in developing has a narrative and is essentially a piece of theatre. The structure of their latest production, *Scrunch*, has been carefully crafted and researched and revolves around one character at Christmas. The show has strong visual images, repetition, clowning, singing and audience participation in addition to sensory elements. Lewis further commented that much of the success of these shows comes from careful observation of this age group, research and a study of child psychology e.g. research has shown the type of music this age group responds to is Shostakovich which is used in the show. Colour is kept primarily to just red and white.

Amazingly enough they just and watch .... We work to make it a really calm experience unlike television, which is all a bit manic. Just by looking at them there is communication. Babies do various gestures and I might notice a baby in the audience doing something and I will copy it. Even though the show is structured there is an element of improvisation and clowning, which I’ve always been interested in. (Lewis 2021, personal interview)

The company has also championed intergenerational projects, working on the premise of how a young child and an older person have both similarities and differences, “What can an older person learn from an child and vice versa? How can their lives be mutually enriched by a series of creative encounters?” (Argent 2021, pp.207). One such project developed by Lewis and Argent was based on a storytelling project based on *Little Red Riding Hood*, working in a nursery and with old people from a day centre lunch club. Lewis as the storyteller Tomos, has

forgotten his stories and asks the children to help him tell it. He also has a suitcase full of objects to help him, but when he opens the suitcase up the objects have disappeared, so the old people and children join forces to help him find them. In his book, *Contemporary Theatre Education and Creative Learning* (2021) Mark Crossley comments that using this model to engage with different and specific generations offers significant benefits ,

Returning to the concept of ladders of participation, such intergenerational practice affords the opportunity to experiment with transitional models of authorship, utilizing the enculturated knowledge and skills of the older generation. The vulnerabilities within each generation (stemming perhaps from a lack of generational interaction or artistic experience) may, if carefully facilitated, open up new shared understandings... (Crossly 2021, pp.207).

Although the company distinguishes and identifies with theatre for young people as opposed to a TIE, they have had significant input into the new curriculum for Wales, *Successful Futures*. The Expressive Arts draft of the document recognizes the impact the Foundation Phase has had upon the curriculum design.

The Foundation Phase is the statutory curriculum in Wales for three to seven year olds with creative development as one of its seven areas of learning. In its outline the first statement reads: "It encourages children to use their imaginations and to be creative, making learning fun and more creative". (Crossley 2021, pp.112)

Creative practitioners, including Theatr Iolo, were central to its evolution. Lewis and Argent were invited to present work at a number of conferences, which included a number of ministers including the first minister. Their passionate belief and shared commitment was that changing early years education could change society and impact on the development of a child. In Lewis' own reflection:

When I started in theatre I wanted to change the world and when we were doing these conferences we were talking to the First Minister and they were seeing our work and it felt like we were being up there being heard. (Crossley 2021, p.112)

Whilst an Arts Council seminar *The Quality of Children's Theatre* in 2002 noted from a variety of testimonies that theatre for young people lacked "quality, respect and investment" (Reason 2010, p.33), the Welsh government involvement with Theatr Iolo is a clear acknowledgement of both the quality and impact their work has engaging children and young people.

From the beginning Theatr Iolo has played a significant role in providing training and resources for teachers. Although this work is intrinsically interwoven with their work with students and schools, the company has played a pivotal role in helping to develop drama as a discreet subject especially throughout the 1980/90s. Two former heads of department, Barry Slack (Whitchurch High School), and Karen Walters (Barry Boys), began their teaching career in the 70s and both recall the distinct lack of resources available to newly appointed drama teachers:

There were no resources, no schemes of work just very general units of work suggested by the English Department. Theatr Iolo started running courses specifically for teachers and gave us some great resources on which we could begin building schemes of work (SOW) but they also ran courses which were exam related which proved invaluable especially as training for drama teachers during this period was almost non-existent. (Slack 2022, personal interview)

The company is also closely linked to a ground-breaking initiative which began in 1989 and is still flourishing today: -a 2 day residential drama course designed specifically for the teaching of drama. After the Education Act of 1988 and the introduction of the National Curriculum for England and Wales, funding became available for subject specific training INSET. South Glamorgan LEA in consultation with teachers instigated the course, in which Theatr Iolo have played a pivotal role. As Lewis stated in our interview, "Pretty much from when I started we were asked to do inset for teachers and the drama course attending that as practitioner and running some of them meant we kept in touch with secondary school teachers." (Lewis 2021, personal interview).

The aim of the course continues to focus on areas, which will enhance the teaching of drama and reflect a changing curriculum. From 1989- 2019 the company provided a range of courses aimed at engaging with teachers and

addressing current issues including *Delivering Drama in the National Curriculum*, *Performance Skills at KS4/5*,<sup>1</sup> and *New Challenges in the Teaching of Drama at KS4/5*. Apart from providing invaluable material the company were able to engage with drama teachers and showcase their wide and varied repertoire of work. As a teacher I found these specific courses invaluable, the course also allowed me to make links with company, which resulted in a thriving relationship between my department and the company. Perhaps the company's most significant contribution is from 2017-2019 when the future of the course was threatened to end due to cuts by the Local Education Authority, Theatr Iolo offered to support it by offering significant funding. Reflecting on their mission statement every aspect of it is fulfilled with their contribution to this unique course.

Both Slack and Walters were unequivocal on the role the company has played in developing drama not just locally but across Wales:

Because we kept getting them into schools they were absolutely pivotal in helping to raise awareness of the subject and helping both senior management and students to see that drama was a subject in its own right. I'm convinced that drama developed more and more in my school because of the support of Theatr Iolo and the way both the productions and workshops engaged the students. Certainly in 1988 when the National Curriculum was introduced and drama once again had to justify its existence as a subject without the support of the company and the meaningful resources and work they produced both I and the subject would have struggled. (Walters 2022, personal interview)

Both teachers believe the impact of the courses and the company's presence in schools had a great influence not only on what was taught but how it was taught.

Suddenly we were getting leading practitioners on the course like Jonathan Neelands and I would include Theatr Iolo. Their work and methods were invaluable in helping drama teachers organize their departments and also we were getting new resources all the time, which was changing the way we taught and how we engaged our students. (Slack 2022, personal interview)

For a number of years, both Slack and Walters have served on the board of trustees of Theatr Iolo, representing teachers and the education sector. They both witnessed the evolution from traditional TIE company in the early 1980s to

a thriving company producing relevant and engaging theatre for young people and wider audiences.

Of course later on the Welsh Arts Council not LEAs (Local Education Authorities ) funded them. They were only one of 8 companies chosen across Wales to receive this. This funding gave them the scope to develop projects not just for young people but also for a wider audience. (Walters 2022, personal interview)

The interview with Slack and Walters whose careers were intertwined with the evolution of Theatr Iolo highlighted the considerable contribution this company has made to education and in developing quality theatre for young people. Helen Nicholson, in her summing up of what constitutes a successful collaboration between theatre and education comments.

Part of the ambition of this book is to celebrate the inventiveness of theatre makers whose practice, though often invisible to the wider theatre-going public has a profound influence on the young people with whom they work. It is also important to acknowledge that theatre makers have been particularly adept at finding inventive ways to work within the different institutes and cultural organisations. This means that in its most adventurous manifestations, theatre that is linked to education is never a compromise between two different value systems, but presents everyone involved with creative opportunities and artistic challenges. (Nicholson 2009, pp.79)

Undoubtedly Theatr Iolo has found a variety of inventive ways to work with different organisations. Their engagement and work with teachers and students have provided a wealth of meaningful creative opportunities and artistic challenges.

### **European Links and Other International Links**

In 2007, Kevin Lewis explained to Roger Wooster his initial vision for his career :

I also wanted to be in an experimental theatre company, basically, and I went to Teacher Training College, and I like young people and I ended up working for a young people's theatre in education company. I actually realized that you can be very experimental in those companies *and* you can have an audience (Wooster 2007, pp.112).

A study of the company's work with young people indicates a strong European influence, which veers towards experimental, and the need to explore a wider

canon of work to engage with and challenge audiences. Lewis and associate artist, Sarah Argent confirmed

We are passionate in our belief that theatre at its best can transcend national and cultural borders and communicate to human beings wherever they are gathered, with young's people's lives being enriched to the best of world theatre. (Crossley 2021, pp. 275)

Since the early 1990's the company has been involved with ASSITEJ (Association Internationale du Theatre pour l'Enfance et la Jeunesse), the International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People. Lewis cites a seminar organized by ASSITEJ, which made the company reconsider their approach to resource material. One of the strategies they employed was the use of a "sensory work pack" e.g. in a show for under fives a teapot featured in the show, a teapot with objects placed inside and carefully wrapped up was given to school for the children to explore after the show. Lewis feels this is a particularly effective way to engage specific audiences e.g. children or audiences in special schools.

A European influence can also be seen in the way the company decided to approach performances and workshops, Lewis references a two hander Danish play which takes place in a classroom, which relies on "good acting", minimal set and the students are involved from the outset. This model is used in Europe primarily because it works around a lesson structure, causes minimal disruption, reduces cost and engages an audience because they are involved from the outset. This was felt to be a more effective approach providing a more meaningful experience for young audiences, but Lewis acknowledges that this could be a risky strategy when initially trying to engage with schools:

I realize that in a sense we have set ourselves a difficult task. In some cases we have chosen to do "challenging" things - things that are slightly different. When you say "oh this is a Dutch play", they are not actually interested if it is from Holland. But if you said, "We're doing Under Milk Wood and that's on the syllabus" they'd be more interested. So some things have not sold as easily as we might like. (Wooster 2007, pp.109)

Both Lewis and Argent acknowledge their early involvement with ASSITEJ challenged their perception of how they engaged with theatre for young people. They note in the early 90s, in Britain much of the work tended towards

naturalism, placing a child or young person firmly at the centre with whom the audience could identify. The work produced overseas, particularly mainland Europe, was “overtly theatrical, exploring elements of the surreal and the poetic” exploring other points of identification beyond the child. Observing “Non-Verbal work also seemed to feature more as well as work for young pre-school children even babies” (Crossley 2021, p.275). There is little doubt that their involvement with ASSITEJ during the early days changed the focus of the company’s vision and shaped how it engaged with young people.

Whether it was classed or not it was classified as theatre in education (TIE), much British work had an educational slant, while the majority of artists in countries such as Denmark and Belgium regarded their role as being simply to expose young audiences to artistic experiences. (Crossley 2021, pp.275)

In particular their work with European and worldwide companies has had a significant impact on developing their work with babies and very young children. Argent began leading the creation of this work and acknowledges it was influenced by the aesthetic, the pedagogy and the creative practices of the work she had seen and the companies she had met. Both Argent and Lewis have collaborated with a number of worldwide companies, artists and playwrights allowing their work to be showcased on a worldwide stage.

A particularly successful venture has been with ThinkArts in Kolkata, India, based on Argent’s research into and productions for audiences aged between six and eighteen months developed touring theatre productions with three Indian artists. In 2020, Theatr Iolo launched a Young Playwrights ‘Competition for children/young people between the ages of 7 and 16, which was highly successful. This year the company has widened the scope and in conjunction with ThinkArts and Vaishali Bisht, co-founder of the *Hyderabad Children’s Theatre Festival* has opened the competition up to young people in India. The remit is to produce a 10-minute play that will engage an audience the same age as the playwright. Throughout the decades the company has continued to utilize the strategies, content and style they have observed through their connections with ASSITEJ:

Being part of ASSITEJ and being exposed to international influences and practices has had a huge impact on the theatre we made for children and



young people. It has made the work richer, more diverse and fundamentally more interesting. Many elements of childhood are the same across the globe even if the context is different: growing up, friendship, family, the power of story to make sense of and also celebrate the world. (Crossley 2021, pp.276)

## **The Future**

In 2018, Lewis left the company although maintains links primarily through his work with the baby and toddler audience. Lee Lyford was appointed as the new artistic director.

The main change, and it sort of happened before I took over, but I know Theatr Iolo used to predominantly tour into schools that is what they did as did many of the other children's theatre companies in Wales and it was very clear when I interviewed for the job that that wasn't the directive for the Arts Council anymore and it was for schools to visit venues which I agree with in principle, I really agree with. (Lyford January 2022, personal interview)

Lyford acknowledges that the previous model of visiting a circuit of schools did allow the company to build relationship and without this structure it becomes more difficult to maintain relationships with specific schools and encourage them to see the company's work in a specific venue. Although funding is available through the Arts Council Go and See initiative, a grant that can be used to fund visits to high-quality arts events in theatres, galleries, arts centres and other venues, Lyford felt this was still not being capitalized on, as it offers the ideal opportunity for schools to experience live theatre and endorses the Arts Council vision of how students should primarily engage with the arts especially in light of the new creative curriculum for Wales.

I think there's being aware of it and really being aware of it. This (funding) needs become part of the culture of the planning and at the moment I don't think it is. I'm not really sure why it isn't. (Lyford 2022, personal interview)

Lyford acknowledges that the premise of the initiative is an effective way for companies to engage with potential audiences and observes that it is a particularly effective model when a company works in partnership with the school guiding them through the process. It is worth noting that if schools apply

for a Go and See grant, which allows students to engage with theatre they cannot apply for Go Creative grant, which has a remit of “allowing teachers the opportunity to work with a Creative Practitioner to experiment with combining creative pedagogy and artistic practice to bring about new and fresh approaches to learning” (Arts Council of Wales).

Undoubtedly both the funding and educational landscape has significantly changed since the early days of Theatr Iolo. Lewis remembered,

When I started the company was free to schools so the shows got booked up really quickly and we had our regular schools and I suppose because we were working so much in the schools we'd be talking to teachers and pretty much when I started we were asked to do INSET sessions for teachers. We did a whole lot of stuff on Shakespeare and practical ways of working with Shakespeare for teachers so again these were ways of keeping in touch with teachers. (Lewis 2021, personal interview)

Ironically an abundance of theatre companies competing for the attention of teachers and offering unique opportunities to engage with students, a variety of funding systems and an Expressive Arts curriculum which includes six subjects has made it more complex for companies like Theatr Iolo to engage with schools both as a TIE company or as theatre for young people. Lewis recognizes that during the early days of his tenure the dearth of drama training/material and the generous funding gave companies an abundance of opportunities to engage. Even though schools and teachers guided the work of the company they also had the flexibility to develop and diversify their product and philosophy.

In 2019, the company under the new team toured six different performances to a variety of venues under the direction of Lyford and other co-productions. These included *Pen-blwydd Poenus Pete*, a Welsh language production which was targeted at Welsh speaking/Welsh learning families and school groups, and a solo performance, *Transporter*, developed with young people in Newport and written for ages 11 to adult. However, the company's work was halted by the onset of the pandemic and this has raised difficulties but also opportunities for the company to explore different strategies for engaging with audiences. Theatre companies used a variety of online technology initiatives both to raise

funds and remain prominent to audiences and whilst the company also used this strategy, Lyford (2022) commented “Without really good finances and kit it’s really hard to make that sort of work sing”.

The online work he feels did not reflect the quality of their usual work but a grant from the Cultural Recovery Fund Capital Money have allowed them to explore different creative avenues. The funding allowed them to purchase an exhibition trailer, which the company converted into an outdoor theatre space:

That’s what the majority of our work has been in the last year. We made a show with a company called Kitsch & Sync who are primarily an outdoor company, mostly walkabout but they are a theatre company but they do a lot of walkabout and they do a lot of festivals . We made a show called *Hoof* about a tap-dancing reindeer, we made it very, very quickly in the second lockdown. At that point when they said no one could have Christmas it was opening then and because all the theatres were closed we were offering a Christmas experience outdoors... None of this was in the plan when I took over but in a way it’s very similar to the model of going into schools. (Lyford January 2022)

This initiative has allowed the company to perform in a variety of different venues ranging from schools, community centres and theatre car parks presenting a unique opportunity to engage with new audiences from a range of diverse and varied communities. As Lyford puts it: “In a weird way, as difficult as everything has been, it’s been quite fortuitous for us. I think we’ve discovered and made links with schools, venues and people we won’t have done” (Lyford January 2022). This style of performance of taking their own stage to a venue allows the company to control the space ensuring a unique theatre experience, rich in production values as opposed to simply performing in a space where facilities e.g. lighting will vary from venue to venue. “It’s a beautiful thing this trailer and when it opens up there is the most gorgeous theatre set” (Lyford January 2022).

Although a 20 minute play about a reindeer may seem a simplistic situation to reviving the company’s renewal in a post-pandemic Wales, what this production and the trailer did underpin is that Theatr Iolo understand their target audience

and what elements of theatre production are required to engage with them. One review of *Hoof* stated:

There are lots of questions for theatres to answer, post lockdown. With this collaboration between Theatr Iolo and Kitsch & Sync, *Hoof!* -- the family show on a Wales-wide mission to revive outdoor theatre -- has the answer. How to ease nervous audiences back into theatre-going. (Buzz 2021)

The review goes on to praise the structure, the technical elements and the collaboration between the companies, but the innovative staging is the element, which truly allows the company to engage with audiences across Wales:

Not only that but taking the reinvention of new-normal theatre even further, the whole show is staged within a recently repurposed exhibition trailer. Now a moving theatre, complete with solar powered battery that makes the tour as eco-friendly as possible. (Buzz 2021)

Throughout the company's history they have been based at Chapter Art's Centre in cCentral Cardiff. Both Lewis and Lyford acknowledge that there are both advantages and disadvantages to this. Lewis states that a production staged at Chapter would "pretty much sell out" but develops this response by stating that it was the company's responsibility to liaise with schools and market the event. Lyford response reiterates this but states that although the company is based there they also utilize Cardiff's two other main venues, Wales Millennium Centre and the Sherman:

Chapter is a very strong partner of ours but we tend to go where we feel the work will fit best... The relationship is slightly different in all of those venues. If you're in Chapter you are kind of marketing it and managing it yourself, the Sherman there is a different type of support because there is more infrastructure for that because that is what they do and the same with the Wales Millennium. (Lyford 2022, personal interview)

Lyford also felt that being a touring company and utilizing a range of different theatres both in the vicinity and across Wales allowing the work to reach and engage with a more diverse audience than simply performing consistently at Chapter and ensuring engagement with a consistent and regular audience. Both past and artistic directors acknowledge how the Arts Council funding, has had a significant impact on shaping the company both in its structure and

content of work although as Lyford observes the cultural contract just underpins what the majority of theatre companies believe e.g. giving value for money, addressing diversity and minority voices. One of the central aims of the funding is to ensure, “More people from places of least engagement experience and are inspired by the arts and become regularly engaged as audiences and participants” (Arts Council England, Creative Places and People).

A study of the company’s work shows a fulfillment of those criteria throughout the decades. The vast catalogue of work shows how the company has adapted both the content of the work and the approach has evolved as both society and the economic climate has changed significantly. The board of trustees is well diversified in terms of age and dynamic in terms of composition and whilst some are from an arts background, the range of professions and experiences ensures that proposed projects are discussed with a participants with a range of specialisms reflecting a broader appeal.

The interview with Lyford highlighted the difficulties the company has faced over the past two years but it also highlighted the significant steps the company has embarked on to develop the work and engage with new audiences. Although Theatr Iolo collaborates with a number of companies across Wales and England on co-productions its core team is comprised of four. Although one of the team is responsible for communications and engagement ensuring potential audiences are aware of the company’s work, I asked Lyford if anyone whose primary responsibility was to engage with communities.

That’s the missing link in the organization if I’m honest so on our list of priorities of things we want that’s what we want but we are a very small team there’s only four of us we’re a very small team. There is some outreach, which is more about engagement, but predominantly it’s about marketing and comms. It is a very small team especially for the amount of work we put out but the thing we really want is a creative learning community engagement person. I also think that would feed the work and support the work and help make it more sustainable actually. (Lyford 2022, personal interview)

In 2007, Lewis was asked during an interview with Roger Wooster how confident he was about the future of the company. His response was “pretty

confident. We've always been a company to go down interesting routes". He goes on to discuss that although the company has meet challenges like losing their funding in 1992, they've always found a way to continue and make work that engages with audiences. Since Lewis' departure the development of the company under Lee Lyford has undoubtedly been severely hampered by the effects of the pandemic. This has had an impact on the company's development and this is highlighted in Slack's view: "they haven't established a real new identity as yet" (Slack 2022, personal interview).

It is apparent that Lyford has a clear vision for the company developing innovations created during the pandemic, focusing on "creating high quality experiences that are stimulating, surprising and meaningful for children and their adults" with a tour in this aAutumn 2022, *Owl at Home* aimed specifically at a 0-3 audience. The company is also producing more work which is bi-lingual or through the medium of Welsh. Spring 2023 sees a joint production between Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru and Theatr Iolo, in association with Pontio: tour a bi-lingual touring production, *Pijin / Pigeon* . By reaching out to a corporate sponsor they hope to produce more free activities, digital content and free creative learning play packs to families in need.

Over the years the work Theatr Iolo has produced has reflected its values and has been of trust, ambitious, collaborative, creative and authentic. As the company moves into a new era it is and it is these values and high quality productions , which will hopefully continue to attract future generations.

## **New Strategies for a New Audience: The Royal Court Theatre**

“Before George Devine’s emergence, it is fair to say that the British theatre seemed stuck somewhere in the late ‘20s and the Empire. To the foreign eye every play was more or less the same one, I suppose because the mannerisms were as fixed as Japanese Kabuki. To have swept all that crockery away took a mighty arm.” Arthur Miller

(Little & McLaughlin 2007, pp.16)

### **Origin and profile**

There can be no doubt that the emergence of the Royal Court Theatre in 1956 changed the course of not just British but world theatre. Its inception also changed the way audiences engaged with theatre and how theatre engages with audiences. To understand its contemporary methods it is important to look at the background and how its origins still plays a vital role in audience engagement and participation.

In their book *The Royal Court Theatre Inside Out*, the authors Ruth Little and Emily McLaughlin chart the rise of this extraordinary theatre and the impact it had on British and world theatre. The origins of the theatre can be traced back to 1888 when it was simply known as The Court Theatre and became famous for its season of George Bernard Shaw plays and modern British and European plays under Harley Granville Barker. Between 1935 and 1955 the theatre had mixed fortunes including being used as a cinema and damaged by bombing in 1942. During this period, George Devine along with Michel Saint Denis and Glen Byam Shaw worked on a number of theatrical initiatives including the London Theatre Studio and the Old Vic Theatre School. It was his dismissal from the latter that led him to collaborate with Tony Richardson. Little and McLaughlin write: “Conscious of the theatre’s association with Shaw and new drama, Devine begins to formulate a ‘scheme’ to run it and present contemporary plays and non-commercial ‘living drama” (Little & McLaughlin 2007, pp.15).

In 1955 after a series of complicated negotiations and an Arts Council Grant of £7000, Devine announced the creation of the English Stage Company. In the first draft of his unfinished autobiography, Devine wrote of his mission:

I was not strictly after a popular theatre ... but a theatre that would be part of the intellectual life of the country.... I was convinced the way to achieve my objective was to get writers, writers of serious pretensions, back into the theatre. This I set out to do. I wanted to change the attitude of the public. George Devine (notes from his unfinished biography )

The same year the ESC was created, Devine read a new play called *Look Back in Anger*. Completed in six weeks and rejected by approximately 25 managers and agents, *Look Back in Anger* – written by a young actor John Osborne – was one of 700 plays received in response to an advertisement placed in *The Stage*. “The play caught everyone – including Devine – completely off guard and its immediate acceptance for his opening season changed the future of modern theatre history” (Little & McLaughlin 2007, pp.20.).

There is no doubt that the changing cultural and social landscape of Post-War Britain has contributed to these theatrical developments. Graham Whybrow (literary manager RCT 1994-2007) commented,

By the post war social and cultural change that quite empirically shifted its remit and policy and made it conscientiously search for new voice, new playwrights and new social worlds that hitherto hadn't been seen on stage. (Little & McLaughlin 2007, pp.20.)

A cultural and social revolution was beginning which would undoubtedly have an impact on the type of audience theatres would attract. The launch of the Royal Court coincided with Brecht's visit to London with his company The Berliners Ensemble According to Viv Gardner, the visit of Brecht, had

[b]oth directly and indirectly an enormous impact .... It coincided with a period of increasing politicization. The theatre was ready for a change in dramaturgy, and Brecht's consequent introduction of the “didactic play” certainly seems to have been catalytic in bringing about such a change. (Theatre Archive Project 2004)

Bennett notes how Brecht wanted to change the relationship between the audience and the play and how they engaged with theatre:



His ideas for a theatre with the power to provoke social change, along with his attempts to reactivate stage-audience exchange, have had a widespread and profound effect not only on theatre practice, but also on critical responses to play and performances ... Brecht's epic theatre looked above all to change conventional modes of production and reception.

(Bennett 1997, pp.21)

Theatre, like society, was changing both in form and content. Although Osborne's play and the Court's production was very different in style from Brecht's works, and Osborne himself described it as a "formal, old fashioned play" it was revolutionary for a number of reasons.

In an article published in 2017, Dan Rebellato explores how *Look Back in Anger* impacted on audiences, sharply dividing British theatre into before and after. The actual setting was in such stark contrast to the glamorous high society locations of many of the plays of the 1940s, the pokey attic room filled with smoke and common place items like an iron board stifling and oppressing the characters and the effect Rebellato writes: "The audience at the Court on 8 May 1956 felt insulted, skewered, thrilled or inspired" (Rebellato, 2017) But the impact was far greater:

But the most important change wrought on British theatre by John Osborne's example is the idea of a new play being a way of putting contemporary society on stage for pitiless appraisal.... its influence is clear and sharp in the freedoms British playwrights have to confront and challenge the attitudes, beliefs and practices of our own age.

(Rebellato, 2017)

The impact of Osborne's play on new and emerging playwrights is evidenced throughout the first phase of the Royal Court's programme from 1956 to -1960. It was a programme that championed new works from playwrights of working class and diverse backgrounds, experimented with different design aesthetics, revisited and reinterpreted plays by established writers. Devine had begun to achieve his initial aim of getting new and serious writers back into the theatre with a focus, along with Brecht of changing the attitude of the public. Twenty five years on from those groundbreaking occurrences, has the Royal Court sustained Devine's vision, changing audience perceptions and attitudes towards theatre?

Over the years has the Royal Court successfully engaged with audiences from different strata of society, championing new works and initiatives, reflecting the changing cultural and social landscape. McGrath, however, comments that the Royal Court had lost this vision and has reverted into becoming “equally respectable, conventional and pernicious” (McGrath 1996, pp.9). Over the years has this bastion of innovation lost its way, no longer engaging with new and diverse audiences?

In August 2021 the company made a decision to reimagine the area of participation work and define a clearer area of strategic direction. This decision was made as a result of lockdown and a realization that

With the gap ever widening between the most privileged and most vulnerable in our society, we are faced with a need to re-think and re-focus our work to ensure our programme best serves a new ‘cultural’ landscape. (<https://royalcourttheatre.com>)

In October of 2021, the programme was renamed as Open Court, to underpin the vision of opening the Royal Court to everyone with the hope of sparking creative potential. This vision of engaging with a more diverse and varied audience is underpinned by eight key principles, which changes and builds on the way they communicate with audiences but which also changes the impact theatre can have both on the individual and wider society. Changes to strategies and approaches were implemented in 2013, with the first Open Court with writers being given the keys to take over the theatre. In 2016 the Young Court was founded to look at different ways to engage with young people from diverse backgrounds. In 2020 the Open Court: Climate Emergency was programmed.

### **Engaging with New Writers**

“Thread and embed new writing & writers: all work delivered through this lens, writing as a process in its own right”

(Open Court, 8 key principles)

George Devine’s vision had been to create a ‘writers theatre’ (Little & McLaughlin 2007, p.19), which he believed would appeal to a whole new audience, and reflect a changing society. Over the past 65 years the Royal Court has remained

true to this vision, continuing to develop and nurture new talent and introducing new initiatives, which reflect different sectors of society. The company's diversity and representation policy states that innovation and new voices are at the heart of the Royal Court, the aspiration is for the theatre to become a proven place of opportunity for all with diverse plays and to encourage renewed and inclusive public engagement. As a theatre working in an international context it aims to produce writers and ensure their work reaches and engages communities across London, nationally and internationally.

Although linked to their education engagement, the development of script-based work is introduced through a number of school-based projects. For example, in 2018 the Royal Court engaged with twenty girls, many from different ethnicities. The project, *Shine*, was based in a London Comprehensive school and supported the students in writing monologues based on or inspired by their own life experience. In chapter 5, *Border Crossings: Twenty First Century Theatre Education*, Romano Fello, Participation Manager at the Royal Court reports "The girls had an open remit, they could write about anything. You see so much about their upbringing. They are Year 7 but the subjects are often older than their years" (Crossley 2021, p 205). This approach to writing and hearing the voices of individuals is another strategy the company uses to engage with marginalized communities. At present the company works with 5 different Satellite Writers Groups.

The Synergy Writers Group, which was run in partnership with Synergy and Theatre 503, worked with 10 ex-offenders. The project ran for 10 weeks and the work was directed and performed by professional actors. A number of theatre trips were organized for the group to sustain engagement with the work. The Hackneys Writers Group focused on the work of 30 young people from a number of local schools. A selection of the work was chosen and developed over a week into a longer play. The final pieces culminated in a performance by professional actors at both the Royal Court and Hackney Empire. Windrush Writers Group made up of seven writers of Caribbean heritage, created two-minute monologues and performed on the day of celebration. Some of the

writers were encouraged to perform their own work. Queer Upstairs, a writers group, was developed in response to Stonewall's 60th anniversary, but developed to being a celebration of queer stories as a central narrative on stage. Arts 4 Dementia works with people with dementia and their carers. The aim is to develop stories based on objects and images. Their stories will eventually accumulate in a short play. Although each of these groups are engaging with a relatively small audience sector, they are allowing marginalized groups to have their voices heard.

Over the years the Royal Court has shown an unwavering commitment to nurturing the work of new writers. In his response to a critical Art's Council report on the Court in 1967, William Gaskill made clear,

In its policy of taking risks, not only on writers, but also on directors and actors, it must often fail and be open to criticism .... Where the Court does fail is when it does not have a commitment to writers ... And the history of the Court is the history of those writers. Not really, I'm afraid anything else. (Little & McLaughlin 2007, pp.88)

One of the Court's current projects which continues to meet this vision is The Introduction to Playwriting Group. This is an opportunity for writers with little or no experience but with raw talent to think more deeply about writing for theatre alongside their peers, guided by experienced, produced playwrights. This course gives an insight into the approach and practices of one of their leading playwrights over the course of eight sessions. In addition to this course, they offer an annual Long Form group, who meet weekly over the course of 6-9 months. This course focuses on writers who can already write and allows them to develop their craft. It encourages them to think about what it is to be an artist in contemporary society and how best to deploy their skills and power as a playwright. The Script Submission receives over 2,000 unsolicited scripts every year. The literary office reads and considers each of these scripts looking to find exciting new work, which offers a unique perspective on the world.

In 1994, Stephen Daldry recalls that when he was interviewed for the role of artistic director at the Royal Court:

I argued that the Court needed a policy that focused on European as much as British writers ... that we should explode the little England mentality which had dominated our new writing theatres. (Aston & O'Thomas 2015, pp.16)

This view was acted upon and supported by Daldry, and Elyse Dodgson founded the International Playwrights Programme in 1996. Since 1996 and Daldry's initial vision, the programme builds and develops the theatre's relationship with writers not just from Europe but from around the world. Through long-term writers groups, international residencies and major productions, The Royal Court has worked with writers from more than 70 companies writing in over 40 different languages. It has led the way in connecting British theatre with international artists and theatre in different traditions and cultural contexts.

The wide and varied opportunities to engage with new writers constantly offer new ways to communicate and engage with audiences. The theatre is dedicated to giving the best writers a platform for new and inspiring work. With over 120,000 people visiting the theatre each year, it allows audiences to engage with challenging but inspiring work. Roy Weise, currently co-Artistic Director of Royal Exchange, commented in 2016:

I think audiences like coming to see new writing because we continue to have a thirst for new narratives. The Royal Court audiences like to be challenge. They know it's not confetti and pyrotechnics when they come here. People want to know what life is beyond their experience and surely it's not all Hamlet and Chekhov. (Weise 2016)

The Royal Court approach to how they produce and market new work differs significantly from many other theatres. Lisa Perrett, the marketing manager at the Royal Court, explained how this process begins:

What we are trying to do with campaigns is really think of the ways we can show people what the Royal Court and specific productions are about. I think the really interesting thing about the Royal Court is that because it's new writing we don't know what the final product is going to look like until we open. In previous things I've worked at I've had more than an inkling of what the show is going to look like or what the final product will be. But with the Royal Court we are on the same journey that the

writer and the creative team are on and we try to make the audience be part of that journey as well (Perrett 2022, personal interview)

Perrett and her team therefore have to employ different approaches in marketing new work to ensure that it engages with potential audiences from the inception of the project:

We show what we know from the rehearsal rooms, giving them little sort of tidbits as the show is being developed which is really interesting. It's a challenge but it's also really exciting. (Perrett 2022, personal interview)

Although this reflects the Royal Court approach to producing, developing and marketing new work as a holistic process, Perrett acknowledged that although this was an exciting approach, it could prove difficult depending on the work that was being performed.

At the moment, *The Glow* by Alistair McDowall is on at the theatre and that is a Sci-Fi piece of new writing, it's very "other worldly", you think it's going to be one thing and then it takes you to a completely different place. Although a joy to work on but also difficult because there is a lot that we can't give away, surprises happen. I think we definitely knew with this show it was a return to what people love about the Royal Court because Alli's shows have been on at the Royal Court before. He resonates with what we call our "core audience", the people who come to the Royal Court regularly at least 1-5 times a year. (Perrett 2022, personal interview)

This 'core audience' plays a significant role in supporting new works, a significant number of these plays over the years have changed the theatrical landscape both nationally and worldwide.

What we're fighting against is the idea that there is a "Royal Court play". At the time we hope our readers recognize our readers recognize the project of the theatre enough to go yes this is something of interest (Stephens)

Through the whole process from reading a new play through to its marketing, the Royal Court not only strenuously upholds Devine's initial vision but its *raison d'être* of championing new writing will always remain a major factor in how the theatre engages with audiences.

Because it is the writers' theatre we see the work from first draft of the script until it is up on stage that can entail many different drafts and many different changes up until the night of opening and that's a very exciting environment to be around. (Perrett 2022, personal interview)

## **Engaging with the Education Sector**

“Making the theatre and influencing the education sector to become more reflective of our society: creating viable pathways into the theatre industry and interrogating recruitment processes”

( Open Court 8 Key Principles)

In 2017, The Royal Court Participation Department led by Romana Frello contacted the five main exam boards (EDUQAS; WJEC; AQA; OCR; PEARSON). After close scrutiny of each board’s drama GCSE/AS/A’ level specifications and exam papers the company felt there was a significant gap between the industry and formal education. The process began with the artistic team at The Royal Court answering questions from the A’ level papers as to how they would direct or design a play in a professional capacity rather than to pass an exam. The aim of this experiment was initially to begin a conversation across the sectors and ultimately the Department of Education on the value of the arts in schools and how to create meaningful qualifications within formal education, which established direct links to the current industry. The ultimate goals, however, were to increase access to the arts, encourage and engage more young people to study arts subjects at exam level and to develop greater diversity within the industry.

In line with the company’s policy to encourage and influence new writing and engage with a more diverse audience it was felt that the exam specifications needed to embrace texts by female and diverse playwrights. These findings led to a symposium, which sought to engage with exam boards, teachers, industry representatives and young adults and develop a dialogue around 4 key areas :

- The future of drama education
- The current curriculum: challenges and opportunities
- A future workforce for the creative industry
- Diversity, representation and access for drama.

Since the symposium in 2017 and using evidence gathered around those four key areas, The Royal Court has developed and forged links with a number of key

bodies including the London Theatre Consortium, Royal Shakespeare Company, Beyond the Canon and The Cultural Learning Alliance to discuss and take action. These groups along with representatives from exam boards, drama teachers and the RSC Youth Advisory Board have come together to discuss how to engage a diverse society with theatre and with the arts through education and which strategies should be employed to

[e]nsure everyone within the education system and theatre industry has access to resources, plays, dance works and more that represent their heritage. This way people can feel seen, learn about other cultures and come together to celebrate and enjoy our diversity. (Royal Court Theatre, Curriculum Working Group, 2020)

The need to present a more diverse arts curriculum became the focal point, honing in on the choice of texts offered by the Exam Boards for the written component at GCSE/A' level. As with their initial findings it was felt the texts previously and currently offered focused on a narrow selection of playwrights, which did not reflect the diversity of contemporary Britain.

I didn't feel represented in drama ... I grew up being taught by a white male drama teacher teaching texts from white men. I am not that and it was hard to connect with it. In order for theatre to survive, we need to show that there are people like them in all roles. This way it can continue to have a life after this current generation. (Royal Court Associate Young Agitator, 2020)

The Curriculum Working Group established a dialogue between educationalists and representatives from the arts industry, which allowed questions and perspectives to be seen and discussed, for example the considerations when choosing a set text, government requirements, and how theatres can engage with and support teachers and students. However, it also reinforced the need for all organisations to unite and work together to protect the arts within the curriculum. The number of schools and colleges that offer drama as a subject both at KS3 and at GCSE/A 'level is declining. The number of students taking drama has seen a decline of 30% since 2010 when there were 81,592 entries for the subject compared to 56,739 in 2021 .The number of entries for A' level have declined 43% from 2010 (Cultural Learning Alliance 2022).



Due to current political ideology the arts are being marginalized and teachers are under increasing pressure to achieve a significant percentage of top grades if the subject is to remain viable. This inevitably would have an impact on future theatre audiences and the findings of the group consolidated the need for all interested bodies to work together and engage with teachers and students across the country. However, the focus of the original aim “influencing the education sector to become more reflective of society” did produce results.

The need to develop a more representative drama curriculum was acknowledged. In June 2020 the five main exam boards in England offered 27 set texts between them for students studying GCSE Drama, only one of these texts was by a Black author. 61 texts were offered at AS/A’ level only 2 were written by Black, Asian and ethnically diverse authors. By June 2021 significant changes had been made with all the boards making the commitment that texts by a range of ethnically diverse playwrights would begin to be in place by September 2022. In addition The Royal Court made a commitment to work with and support the exam boards and teachers by producing work packs on specific texts, producing lists of texts by ethnically diverse playwrights, providing online workshops/podcasts in conjunction with companies such as Beyond the Canon. All parties agreed by involving teachers in the creation of supplementary and support material could have an impact in encouraging schools to select representative texts. This has resulted in all boards making significant changes to their set texts. EDUQAS has introduced 15 new texts to their drama curriculum. Ffello commented on these changes.

We’re pleased EDUQAS has made the commitment to make these changes. The addition of texts by playwrights from the global majority and LGBTQ+ communities to their suggested Non-Examination Assessment and set texts lists for GCSE and A Level are a welcome step on the journey towards decolonizing the curriculum. We look forward to supporting EDUQAS further with their commitment to an inclusive specification which promotes dignity and belonging for all students. (Ffello 2022)

The Curriculum Working Group is just one strand of the varied education programme the Royal Court employ to engage with teachers and students. In his book *Contemporary Theatre Education and Creative Learning*, Crossley discusses

the role of Theatre in Education, charting its roots from the 1970's to how it is perceived today.

For some it is misunderstood methodology, in need of re-energising, whereas for others it is a legacy to be noted at a distance, partly due to the weight of its traditions which bring with it a degree of anxiety and partly because many are not trained in its methods and feel at home constructing their own methodology. (Crossley 2021, pp.133)

In discussion with a variety of theatre makers from across the country who work with young people, the role of Theatre in Education and how it is perceived proved to be controversial. "TIE has been a slightly dirty word. I think there needs to be a resurgence of the term and that way of working" (Crossley 2021, p.132). Ffello goes onto explain how the term has been reframed or rebranded as creative learning, participation or community engagement:

We were Young Court and Beyond the Court. We wanted to bring those two together, so now its Participation. It reflects trends of terminology. Participation works for us now. (Crossley 2021, pp.176)

The Royal Court recognizes, like the majority of theatre companies that the teaching of drama and its position within the curriculum is constantly evolving and changing. The focus on participation has led the company to develop an extensive education programme allowing them to engage with young people and teachers across the country. The work with teachers enables the company to diversify the teaching of drama and make the work in the classroom current and representative, giving teachers the support and resources they need. The programme includes school residencies, bespoke projects requested by schools, student study days, resource packs, teachers' CPD which covers a range of topics from practically exploring the written exam to teaching history and science, through drama and teachers' forums which focus on a range of issues from discussion about the lack of female playwrights in the drama curriculum to the urgent need for the arts industry to engage with senior leadership teams in schools to discuss the value and unique position of the arts within the school curriculum. In *Contemporary Theatre Education and Creative Learning* (2021) Ffello notes that with the decline of the arts within schools, theatre has a responsible to provide accessible opportunities for younger audiences.

It's really important in this climate when young people have less opportunities in schools that we provide the opportunity for young people to access theatre. But we should not take the place of drama in schools. (Crossley 2021, pp.234)

The participation education programme has allowed the company to engage with a range of organisations, initiating discussion to implement change. Its wide-ranging educational activities as well as providing much needed support to teachers, engages with students from a diverse range of ethnic and social backgrounds. They are providing a range of opportunities to engage with a younger audience. Nicholson notes that that this has always been the role of theatre education, "theatre education practitioners have always undertaken radical experiments in theatre form, and the twenty first century is no exception" (Nicholson 2009, p. 80). She goes to conclude that the current renewed interest in innovative modes of theatrical expression, like the type currently offered by the Royal Court, has the power to transform. As she states,

Contemporary theatre education has at best, a richness and complexity which is multifaceted and textured. Taken together, these innovations in theatre education suggest that young people can be active makers of meaning, creating theatre as they would like life to be rather than reproducing the theatre as it already exists. (Nicholson 2009, pp.80)

The Royal Court participation programme is allowing young people to create and engage with a theatre that is relevant to them whilst reflecting a changing society and the challenges it presents. With the government currently withholding the promised arts premium of £90 million and at present failing to maintain plans for £500 million Youth Investment Fund that will support youth centres to provide extra-curricular arts activities, the participation programme is providing a lifeline for many young people. The question is can this successful model be implemented in theatres across the country and links established nationwide. Nicki Perrett, the Marketing Manager at the Royal Court, plays a pivotal role in ensuring the work, predominantly by new writers or groups, engages with a wide and diverse community and from past experience thinks a learning department is the way forward. During our interview Perrett commented:

I was at the National before I was here and they also had a learning department, which is similar to what the Open Court is at the Royal Court. It's really helpful to have an engagement department who normally deals with engaging with the community and with different groups and building a relationship with them. The way we can supplement that is through ticketing offers and through different promotional materials to entice them to come to the theatre whether it's the first time or whether they are a regular theatre goer. (Perrett 2022, personal interview)

The Open Court department is specifically responsible for projects involving community outreach, schools and education. They develop education packs for different shows, which they distribute to schools and manage school bookings. This department also manages workshops and what the Royal Court call 'encounters' with different school groups.

There are lots of areas for school children to think about when they come to the theatre especially if they are from a deprived area. The physical act of coming to a theatre like what do I wear? Where I go? So they've created a brilliant programme called Encounters where there is someone from the Royal Court who is their touch point when they arrive at the theatre. They make sure they are comfortable with the space, they are watered and fed, they know where they are going and can ask questions about the theatre and about the show. I think that's really created an atmosphere of calm in what could potentially be an intimidating environment. (Perrett 2022, personal interview)

The Marketing Department facilitates this work by ensuring the Open Court has an allocation of free or discounted tickets. For every show they have a strategy to release more affordable or accessible tickets in order to encourage young people to come to the theatre and give them a positive experience.

### **Young Agitators**

"Ignite the creative potential in everyone: working across communities and with young people" ( Open Court: 8 Key Principles)

The Young People's Theatre Scheme was initially created in 1960. This was in response to the English Stage Company 1955 manifesto statement that one of its aims was "to encourage children to develop a genuine enthusiasm for and critical appreciation of good theatre". Over its 65 year history the Scheme has evolved,

changed and developed. In 1991 it became the Young Writers Programme focusing on developing and nurturing new talent, but also about reaching out to the wider community. Elyse Dodgson, director of Young People's Theatre 1985-1992 had a clear vision of what she wanted to achieve:

I wanted drama to change people's lives.... I got the job on a very specific agenda about race, gender and class. My motto at the time was, "Encourage the potential of many and the excellence of the few. (Little & McLaughlin 2007, pp.136)

This initial commitment to engage with younger and more diverse audiences evolved in 2018 into the Young Agitators initiative. The group comprises of 30 young adults between the ages of 16 - 23 who can apply annually to be part of the scheme. The initiative is specifically aimed at individuals who are interested in routes outside of performing and seeks to develop a knowledge of the work of the theatre, encouraging arts activism, supporting the development of emerging theatre makers and providing pathways into the industry. Involvement in this project allows the group to explore in detail the process of the page to stage creative journey using specific plays as case studies.

One of the group's remit is to "agitate" ideas which has resulted in an initiative, "Big Ideas", that offers the public to creatively engage with the intellectual ideas presented in and around plays in the season. The "Big Ideas" workshops can take many forms, working in conjunction with specific plays and initiatives. In 2018, International Women's Day was the focus of a series of free and open workshops created to empower women in the arts, champion the female leadership and to explore the current state of creative to affect change. Inspired by the play *The Fall*, which deals with the effect as colonialist and patriarchal icons are dismantled across the world, the Young Agitators called out to young people between the ages of 10-25 to gather material such as installation, poetry and video discussions for an event called *The System*. The aim was to initiate discussion around ideas such as the different systems we belong to or imposed through various socio-political systems such as class, race, education and gender.

It was also an opportunity for Young Court playwrights to submit plays based on the provocative statement “is no system better than a bad system?”.

For every show the company has a target audience they would like to reach, with the marketing department setting themselves audience targets as part of their audience development strategy:

It’s very important to the Royal Court and to me and to me specifically it’s something I’m very passionate about is developing our audiences and attracting people who previously have felt they don’t belong in the theatre or it’s not a welcoming place for them, encouraging people to come to the theatre for the first time, or engage with theatre in any way when previously they felt it’s not the place for me. (Perrett 2022, personal interview)

The 16-23 age range of the *Young Agitators* represents one of the key target groups the marketing department are focusing on. Listening to the group’s views and opinions on how best to engage with this potential audience they have introduced a number of approaches:

We try and target under 27 audiences so young people specifically to try and engage with theatre and we do that that through Open Court and also through having ticket offers for under 27s. (Perrett 2022, personal interview)

To celebrate World Theatre Day 2022, and as part of the Drama and Theatre and Education Alliance “Seize the Day” campaign, the Royal Court released 200 free tickets for *For Black Boys Who Have Considered Suicide When The Hue Gets Too Heavy*. The purpose of this initiative was designed to encourage young people under the age of 27 who may not have been to the theatre or the Royal to see this show, which was specifically chosen to appeal to this demographic. This initiative is also part of a project to engage with low-income earners in the immediate area.

We have been making more effort to connect with people within our local area that come from a low-income background. It’s part of a project we are working on independently and for example we just announced a new show which is opening in March called *For Black Boys Who Have Considered Suicide When The Hue Gets Too Heavy* which is specifically wanting to attract young black men so that’s going to be an interesting challenge for us because you would assume they won’t live in Chelsea so that’s a show I’m really excited to be working as it’s going to be a

challenge to make the space comfortable and welcoming, not just for our core demographic. (Perrett 2022)

The Young Agitators programme continues to grow and evolve working closely with the participation and marketing team. This initiative is helping to ensure the theatre continues to develop and deliver work that is relevant to a diverse, young audience. It is also helping to ensure that potential audiences are aware of the work and are motivated to engage with it.

### **Engaging through Social Media/Technology**

In *Theatre and Social Media*, Patrick Lonergan discusses the massive impact technology has had on the theatre industry both in its approach to production and outreach to a wider audience. He cites an early example from 2007 *Free Outgoing* by Anupama Chandrasekhar, which examines social media and the impact it can have on lives and communities.

Many plays about young people and social media thus have an educational function, seeking to encourage teenage actors and audiences to explore the issues of online safety and privacy. (Lonergan 2016, pp.40)

Although this approach to social media is now a strong pattern in plays, *Free Outgoing* first staged at The Royal Court engaged audiences and opened up the range of possibilities and opportunities on how social media can be used to enhance creative production.

The range and impact of social media and technology reaches far beyond actual production values and is now used as a major force and essential tool in reaching and engaging audiences and promoting the work of a theatre. The Royal Court has a dedicated Digital Marketing Manager, whose role is to work with the Head of Marketing and Sales to develop and progress the Royal Court's digital marketing strategy. The focus of this role is to lead on areas including website development, optimizing paid and organic digital marketing channels, to promote a brand presence through digital and developing the company's digital marketing reporting capabilities. The role also involves utilizing data to understand data and the theatre's audiences and the impact of the work on them. Promoting "the brand and content of the Royal Court"

(<https://royalcourttheatre.com>) is essential to the role. The focus of this involves leading on a new 'always on' digital advertising campaign focused on brand, to profile the work happening beyond the work on stage e.g. Participation Department, Bar and Kitchen, to inform of future of campaigns, increase return on investment (ROI) and better understand the audience.

Like all contemporary theatre companies, the Royal Court has an extensive online presence on digital platforms, including Youtube Studio and the Royal Court's Youtube accounts. The company wants to develop and oversee an integrated email marketing strategy to maximize ROI of mailing lists, including increasing subscriptions, monitoring engagement, overseeing segmentation, setting up experiments and using email to create and build specific email campaigns. Increasingly schools and other education groups are using streaming and online resources and this is another key area which the theatre is keen to develop and engage with. As digital resources are becoming more significant, the role of Digital Marketing Manager involves close collaboration with content providers such as filmmakers and photographers to ensure there is high quality content for online platforms. The position has a discreet function involving keeping up to date with the latest trends and best practices in online marketing and analytics and undertaking research and learning as part of the company's ambition to remain at the forefront of digital communication within the sector.

Like all the roles within the company, The Digital Marketing Manager is expected to be part of an integrated team and actively contribute to the development of innovative ideas and new initiatives as part of the Royal Court's key ambitions to push boundaries and experiment with new ways of working.

Marketing Manager, Nicki Perrett, explained in an interview with me, the variety of media methods the company uses to engage with potential audiences:

The way that we engage people through email marketing is a real big draw for us and also social media. We differentiate between paid and organic, so ads are what we pay for on social media, organic is freely posting on our channels and audiences can engage with that organically. We do lots of other digital marketing so any 'pop up' ads you see as you are browsing through the Internet and ads you see on specific websites.



We also produce all the video content that you see on Youtube, the trailers and behind the scenes videos that all comes from our department. What we try to do with campaigns is really think of ways to show people what the Royal Court is about. (Perrett 2022, personal interview)

The pandemic had a significant and potentially devastating effect and theatres were forced to consider new and innovative methods to reach audiences. The digital agency *Substrakt* organized a roundtable to reflect on the different ways organisations had responded and the lessons they had learned after a year of going digital. One of the initiatives tested by was experimenting with different pricing models. *Substrakt* found that:

The notion of monetizing digital content posed its own set of questions to many organisations. How much are people willing to pay for a digital experience? Should we offer free content to help people navigate through these tough times? How can we replace the income lost from in person experiences without putting people off? How can we maximise donation revenue? Is a 'Pay what you feel' model too risky? How can we avoid devaluing our offering while making sure audiences are engaging with content. (Mason 2021)

Holly Conneely, Head of Marketing & Sales at the Royal Court shared their tiered approach to their online festival, *My White Best Friend (and Other Letters Left Unsaid)*. This decision helped to increase accessibility but in addition allowed the theatre to gain “an understanding of audiences choices, expectations and levels of engagement”. By offering both a £12 and a £5 ticket for those on a lower income, the Royal Court were able to gauge people’s appetite to pay for content, in addition to how much they were willing to pay (encouragingly, over 80% chose to pay £12). This informed the pricing model for another digital project, *The Living Newspaper*, which was originally intended as an in-person experience but rebuilt using digital content. The research found “the dynamic and flexible nature of digital has rewarded a test-and-learn environment with organisations trialing different approaches, gaining quick response feedback and optimizing their content accordingly.

This was borne out by the Royal Court observations based on *My White Best Friend* selling out in advance. It raised the question over how they could increase audience capacity for each performance without compromising the technical or

artistic output. The theatre tackled this by having a daily regroup to reassess the previous night's performance before releasing an appropriate number of tickets each day. Inadvertently, Conneely commented, as a result of this approach the Royal Court had "accidentally created a sense of an event by taking it one day at a time, the hash tag #MyWhiteBestFriend went viral in London, that week". (<https://www.culturehive.co.uk>) The company observed how the quick reactive decisions enabled by digital can enhance the overall audience reach and awareness of the event.

In July 2021 it was announced that The Royal Court was selected as one of 46 Global Arts Organisations to participate in the Bloomberg Philanthropies Digital Accelerator Programme. The fund is allocating £25 million pounds to help non-profit organisations stabilize and thrive in the wake of the Pandemic "through strategic improvements to their technology infrastructure" (Bloomberg,2021) Recognizing that digital adaptation is critical for the non-profit cultural sector to remain competitive and fulfill its potential, the fund will be dedicated to help invest in tools and training. Compared with the National Theatre and some regional theatres such as The Curve Theatre Leicester, the Royal Court's streaming of productions has been limited primarily through lack of funding. *Seven Methods of Killing Kylie Jenner* was originally premiered at the Royal Court in 2019, the funding from Bloomberg allowed the company to stream this production for 3 weeks in March and April 2022. This ability to stream past productions is helping to achieve the company's aim to reach specific audiences whilst dealing with programming issues.

We also try to target black and global majority audiences, which have been a real target for us in the last year because we have programmed a lot of shows that specifically tell the story of the black community like *Seven Methods of Killing Kylie Jenner*. A lot of our strategies to attract specific audiences are very dependent on what the programming is. (Perrett 2022, personal interview)

Streaming, this production globally whilst hopefully reaching the intended target audience will also familiarize a wider audience with the Royal Court for a relatively cheap fee.

The theatre uses its website and social media accounts to promote and share projects by different creative teams. *The Living Newspapers* became part of the Royal Court's online programme during 2021. A variety of creative teams produced 15 performances sharing different stories from different local and global perspectives reflecting the effects the pandemic and lockdown. This is just one project, which was used to engage with audiences and remind them of the theatre's presence and philosophy during an exceptionally difficult period in its history.

### **The Future**

"As part of our audience development strategy programme we're always trying to attract a wide and diverse audience" (Perrett 2022, personal interview)

In 1981 John McGrath commented;

In the first lecture I discussed the role of the Royal Court theatre between 1956 and 1970, and suggested that on the whole it was an expression not of a new working class, but of an old middle class trying to renew itself... Also, I argued the "language" of theatre is made up of much more than simply words on the page or even the actions on the stage. (McGrath 1996, pp.18)

Undoubtedly the Royal Court has over the years implemented a number of strategies to reach and engage with an untapped audience, to redefine itself as not simply just appealing to "a small metropolitan group with developing but essentially bourgeois values" (McGrath 1996 p.18). In an interview with *Essential Drama*, Chris Campbell, who was previously literary manager at the theatre was asked how he and the theatre use plays that are strongly framed by their cultural, historical and social context to his advantage when selecting possible new productions. He acknowledged that the geographical location of the theatre, in one of the richest, most expensive areas in the country, does occasionally influence the programming:

We are more than usually aware of the danger of presenting a kind of 'poverty porn' in one of the richest square miles in the world. Very few people walk here from their homes, but it is London nevertheless. We are very conscious of the meaning of putting certain lives on stage here. In our programming meetings we say 'How would this look?'. In the most

basic term: would the audience sympathize with these characters or would they laugh at them. (Campbell)

In our interview I asked Perrett how successful they had been in engaging with a more diverse audience from a variety of backgrounds:

I would say that in my previous experience before the Royal Court I've noticed the same demographic which you can see in most theatres, when I was working at the National it was the same, of a certain age, definitely very white it's something we're all very aware of and it's something we would like to change and it's always front of mind. (Perrett 2022, personal interview)

However, although the company has put in place a number of initiatives, e.g. ticketing offers, Beyond the Court, and a three year residency project in Tottenham and Pimlico to engage with a wider audience (and Perrett states in the interview "it is question we are definitely digging into at the moment"), they still rely heavily on their core audience which mostly comprises of a middle class, middle aged mostly white demography.

If you look at data before the pandemic, not that it doesn't count we just live in a different world now because of the pandemic anecdotally I think it's about one third of theatre going audiences have returned since the pandemic and I think that's around the UK and nationally. Two thirds of that audience haven't returned because they are uncomfortable with being in a crowded space or they prefer a digital offer so we're in the same position as every other theatre in the country in that even our regular core audience hasn't returned to full capacity. So that's something that we have to be mindful of, obviously we want young people coming in, ethnically diverse, newcomers but we also need our core audience to come back. (Perrett 2022, personal interview)

The reality remains if the company wants to continue to offer and develop a range of opportunities to engage with a wider audience the economic climate will play a crucial part in determining its success. In February 2022, the company appointed a Director of Development who is responsible for defining and leading the Royal Court' fundraising strategy. "The role includes leading the development team to provide major sources of income across all income types- individual giving, trusts and foundation, and cooperate partnerships. Personally soliciting and managing high level gifts across all income types to provide long term and sustainable philanthropic giving" (<https://royalcourttheatre.com>). It is

hoped that this additional funding will underpin future ambitions of the company.

One of these ambitions is to continue to develop links with audiences from outside London with data from the past 5 years indicating that only 30% of the audience is from outside London.

It is definitely a goal of ours to engage more with the outer boroughs and the outside of London, it's just as a small independent theatre how do we do that? We're not as big as the National, we don't have a digital offering like they do. We have things in the pipeline we know will appeal to audiences and schools outside of London. Definitely for our department and the Open Court department it's a goal of ours to further our reach outside. Even the writers who have work on our stage they're not all from London they are from all over, so we want to reach audiences that don't have a London postcode basically. (Perrett 2022, personal interview)

The decision to stream one of their most successful productions from 2019 is one strategy the company is using to hopefully engage with a wider audience. The film of *Seven Methods of Killing Kylie Jenner* became available for three weeks from the end of March through to the middle of April costing £10 for a 48 hour rental. The marketing department is fully aware of how the location of the theatre can have a detrimental effect when trying to engage and appeal to a new and diverse audience, which Perrett acknowledged in our interview

The area is definitely a factor and it's something we talk about constantly but unfortunately it's something that we can't really change but it's something that is definitely a barrier to having newcomers coming to the theatre. It's something we that have to actively think about when we put on a specific show that we know and we want to attract people from outside the area. We have been making more effort to connect with people from our local area that come from a low-income background. It's part of a project we are working on independently. (Perrett 2022, personal interview)

Apart from reaching a wider audience nationally, it is hoped this initiative will allow potential audiences to view the company's work whilst realizing it is accessible and relevant to them in spite of its actual location.

From its inception the company has always produced work, which deals with sensitive issues, many are politically nuanced. Within contemporary society this

is undoubtedly becoming more of a challenge. In 2021 two corporate backers withdrew their financial support in the wake of an anti-Semitism row over a character's name, which they felt perpetuated a negative stereotype. Weil, Gotshal & Manges, the theatre's only 'gold' cooperate sponsor said: "Weil strongly condemns any form of anti-Semitism or discrimination, whether conscious or unconscious, and we will be withdrawing our support from the Royal Court" (BBC,2021) The government's independent anti-Semitism adviser, Baron Mann, told the BBC that serious questions about how a theatre which has received more than £10 million pounds of taxpayers' money over the past five years managed the affair. This serves as a timely reminder that engaging with audiences becomes worthless if you inadvertently alienate and cancel another section of audience. It also reminds theatres they are ultimately responsible to both their public and private backers in what they produce and how the work they produced is perceived.

In May 1956, *Look Back in Anger* changed the shape of British theatre.

The date sharply divides 20<sup>th</sup>-century British theatre into before and after; this was the moment, so it is said, when British theatre rediscovered its artistic seriousness, its youth, its politics, its anger.  
(Rebellato 2017)

66 years later the theatre is still causing controversy. In June 2022 a marketing campaign for *That Is Not Who I Am*, caused a social media skirmish about the true identity of the playwright. The play was publicized as being written by a first time playwright when it was actually written by Olivier Award-winning playwright Lucy Kirkwood. People were annoyed because they felt the theatre had tricked them when in fact it was a device used by Kirkwood in a play that wants audiences to question the truth. Apart from being an effective, if somewhat controversial marketing device , it does underpin the theatre is constantly thinking of new strategies to engage with audiences in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and using contemporary methods to achieve this engagement. Undoubtedly the theatre is still producing work, which is challenging audiences but as it has evolved and society has changed it realizes it has to develop a range of strategies to engage with new and diverse audiences. The question is that

whilst the Royal Court has and continues to be brave in its output are identity politics in danger of silencing its unique voice?

## **Redefining Theatre and Education: Splendid Productions**

### **Origin and profile**

Splendid Productions describe themselves as a theatre and education company. Their *raison d'être* is to create challenging, entertaining and politically engaged theatre specifically for a young audience. The company's core belief is that theatre is an empowering and enabling force that should be available to everyone, because everyone has a story that deserves to be heard. The company was created in 2004 with the aim of taking old stories and spinning them into political, thought-provoking theatre using a variety of different methods. At the heart of the company's ethos is the question "What will engage and provoke a young audience?" Kerry Frampton, creator of Splendid Productions, studied Theatre Arts at Breton Hall. As she explained to me in my interview with her, the work that Splendid produces undoubtedly has its roots in the training she received there.

The thing is with Breton it very rarely produced straight actors because my course was the theatre arts which was the acting course but alongside it was the DA course, the Dramatic Arts course and that one was more applied theatre and working in a selection of organisations and more social theatre which is probably more what I've ended up doing.  
(Frampton 2022, personal interview)

Frampton acknowledges that it wasn't just the teaching on the course, which she describes as "experimental" that had a significant influence on her. The work ethos they embedded in the students gave her an insight of the consistent commitment, collaboration and energy that is an integral part of creating theatre that challenges and engages audiences.

We'd be in for twelve hours a day and you get involved, because there was a fashion course so you could get involved in fashion. Or the ceramists and fine artists would do these installations and they'd want actors to get involved. There was this collaboration inherent within the building.



There's just this melting pot of disciplines and people generating their own work. (Frampton 2022)

Another notable influence was one of the lecturers, Mark Tillotson, who had just started working at Breton having studied for a year in France with Jacques Lecoq and Phillippe Gaulier working on street theatre. Frampton explained how she connected to Tillotson as "He understood the improvisation stuff that I really loved" (Frampton 2022, personal interview). For Frampton, discovering *commedia dell'arte*, an early form of professional theatre, which originated in Italy between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, was significant: "Commedia is really important for us as a company. It was more important for me than Shakespeare because it felt like it was theatre that was designed for the people" (Frampton 2022, personal interview).

For Frampton, this style of theatre encapsulated the qualities of what theatre should offer an audience. She explained how the acting displayed a high level of precision and skill, how the company would shift the focus of the story and emphasize specific characters depending on which part of Italy they were performing.

That sense for me of rough, skilled theatre for everyone, that is accessible regardless of how many books you have read. Something where the skill set of the actors means they can say "Aha so we are here, who is the mayor? Who has power? All the little things and all that will go into the work. Also women were in *Commedia*, where in this country we had men writing plays for men. (Frampton 2022, personal interview)

This embodies both Frampton and *Splendid's* approach to the work they produce. The ability to understand an audience and adapt the work according to mood, atmosphere and location plays a pivotal role in how they engage and sustain the engagement throughout the performance.

Alongside the influence of *Commedia*, the study and performance of the works of Brecht have also played a pivotal role in shaping the ethos and work of *Splendid*. Brecht's theories on theatre would play a key role in underpinning *Splendid's* philosophy "to create beautifully theatrical political theatre. Its purpose to engage young people and to encourage them to think about the world they are

in” (www.splendid.co.uk). Using the theories of Brecht has underpinned TIE working practices since its development in the 1960s. Helen Nicholson in *Theatre and Education* reflects that the scripts and practices of these early companies derived inspiration from Brecht.

Brecht’s epic theatre was designed to transform spectators from passive recipients of a consumer culture to critical thinkers of their own oppressions. The dramatic devices and structures in Brecht’s work were, therefore inseparable from the social and political theatre as he saw it. (Nicholson 2009, pp.28-29)

In *Theatre, Education and Performance*, Nicholson charts the history of Theatre in Education; she notes “at the centre of many debates which contributed to the political and artistic revolution which began in the 1920s, and lasted for much of the century, were questions about the social and educative purpose of theatre, and its political philosophy” (Nicholson 2011, pp.45).

It is useful to consider Splendid’s *raison d’etre* as a theatre company in the light of this statement. Can they be classified as a TIE company? Certainly their target audiences are young people in schools and colleges and therefore they could be classed as such. However, if drama teachers were questioned on their definition of a TIE company the majority of them would not place Splendid within this genre. From 1980 until the millennium, TIE no longer has its roots in political activism but rather in educating students the rights and wrongs of an issue e.g. the perils of underage drinking. Frampton certainly refutes the label and a close study of both the company’s background and the work places them firmly in the category of political theatre. Frampton’s work embraces this approach and the company distance themselves from the TIE label and the connotations associated with it.

I’m always a bit offended when people ask are we a TIE company, because TIE is so often bad. With the National Theatre it’s only really this year that they’ve bought in *Curious Incident of the Dog* a proper play into schools other than that it’s been an added on for funding very often, it’s an afterthought. For us it’s issues based and for us/me it is to make work that would happily sit in a theatre, something that can go into school and it is about the quality. It’s about allowing that group of students to be in their space, it’s their territory, they have the power. We set it up and we are like a little magic thing that comes up. It’s going to look beautiful, it’s going to be a gorgeous hour of really well thought through, well executed

theatre that's going to be very alive, very chaotic, that's going to be really mischievous. (Frampton 2022, personal interview)

Although Frampton is unequivocal in distancing the company from the T.I.E. label she does acknowledge and I would agree that there are many successful T.I.E. companies working in schools throughout the country e.g. Big Brum Theatre in Education Company. However, she would argue the role of Splendid Productions differs significantly from companies who describe themselves as T.I.E.

Splendid's philosophy has evolved through influences of Frampton's own background and her training.

With our work we can rehearse it really tightly but it can't exist without the audience so for us it is the political nature of creating work where we are going into places, which might not be able to access theatre with students who never go on theatre trips because they can't. For me it is can we get to the widest audience possible. (Frampton2022, personal interview)

This philosophy coupled with the company's core values of giving "value for money" (Frampton 2022) and producing work of the highest quality which is relevant not only in terms of exam requirements but in terms of making students think about and challenge key issues is undoubtedly why the company are so popular with schools, colleges and audiences nationwide. The simplicity of the staging whilst in keeping with traditional TIE belies the complex and well-thought strategies that underpin the work. John McGrath provides a rationale in *Mediating Contemporary Reality* (McGrath 1996) of the elements required to engage a specific audience. Splendid understands these elements and applies them skillfully when engaging with an audience of young people.

Undoubtedly Splendid's work is influenced by Frampton's background and the work of a variety of different practitioners. Whilst evidence of these influences is apparent in their work, the company has developed a unique style, developed a range of theatrical techniques and become well-respected practitioners within their own right.

## **The Plays**

The company primarily interacts with its target audience through an extensive range of workshops and their creative reworking of existing texts. What is particularly interesting is at first glance the choice of texts would not seem particularly engaging to the 14-21 year olds who form the majority of their audience. For their first production the company chose Brecht's *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Uri* in 2004. This production originated as a result of an exam requirement, which stated students had to view work "in the style of a specific practitioner". Through dialogue with teachers Frampton realized there was a gap in the market for students to see affordable productions of specific texts, which fully embraced a theatrical style.

Although heavily influenced by Brecht's style and techniques this first production allowed the company to develop their own unique style and was a demonstration of how specific techniques worked in performance. In an online Q&A from February 2021, Frampton explains how her working class origins had a direct influence on the decision to use one specific style:

Growing up, theatre wasn't for the likes of me but I definitely would go to Panto. There is something about Panto that has a universal quality, you go and you're not made to feel stupid. You know you're going to have a lovely time. Whether your old or young you know there's going to be something in it for you. (Frampton 2021)

This sense of fun and playfulness is still a key factor used in all of Splendid's productions and goes hand in hand with original techniques developed by the company e.g. tickle and slap, this technique is about manipulating an audience by drawing them in with humour, song or some other entertaining element and then in dropping in the politics. This has a distancing effect "bring them in, push them away" (Frampton 2022).

The first production allowed the company to observe which techniques engaged and provoked an audience reaction. Undoubtedly one of the most successful was the use of puppets: "Later in the show we shot puppets, honestly it broke people, the amount of feeling people had" (Frampton2021). This reinforced Frampton's belief in the concept of non-naturalistic theatre appealing to an audience. It also allowed them to experiment using a variety of techniques, which could have an

impact on their audiences. It is this accessibility of many of techniques, which appeals and engages.

The ability to turn up and transform a space with very little is a skill set which we should be encouraging our students to be pursuing so they understand and this is something that Mike Alfred quotes in relation to Shared Experience - "the world is within us". You can stand one person on the stage and transform us. (Frampton 2022, personal interview)

The majority of their school & college audiences initially attend a Splendid production/workshop with their practical GCSE/AS/A' level with the aim of fulfilling a specific aspect of the exam criteria e.g. how will the specific Splendid style allow them to devise work in a similar vein? The simplicity of the techniques and staging e.g. simple but well designed props used in a multiple of ways. The play's episodic structure that allows a shift of perspective and the use of juxtaposition of argument, style, character trait and technique are all elements which contribute in keeping an audience engaged by showing the same event from different points of view. But more importantly because of the clarity of the work, students can see how they can create and achieve their own theatre using a similar style.

Clarity of political point, story, character, idea, gesture word and staging are paramount to the company's ethos. 'Sieving' is a technique Frampton consistently uses in conjunction with the company's work. Their first production focused their attention on what was not effective e.g. too many costumes and props. Focusing on what truly engages an audience allows them to fulfill one of their key artistic intentions, "To demonstrate theatre in its most simple form: an actor communicating an idea to an audience". This is one method that truly seems to engage their audience, "the demystifying" of a complicated text, its structures, techniques, messages or characters into a production, which is accessible.

Their production of *Medea* is an example of how a complex character which students, on first reading of the play find anathema because of her actions, is presented as heartbreakingly human. Presented as a refugee, an alien, an outcast who nobody cares about. Whilst not justifying her actions, reasons and possible

motives are presented to the audience allowing them to make a more reasoned decision of her actions. The company's recent production, *UBU*, is a reworking of Alfred Jarry's surrealist classic. Power, leadership and ambition are explored using contemporary political figures with the Q&A at the end reinforcing the company's role as educator where the audience is made to consider the UK and world leaders and how they exert power.

### **Social & Political Engagement**

In *The Young Audience* (2010), Matthew Reason, when discussing enhancing engagement for a young audience, comments on the length of a piece of theatre for children which is typically 60 minutes and that 60 minutes is viewed as a "self-contained entity, separated from the rest of the child's life ... if the audience are entertained for those 60 minutes, that is fabulous. But perhaps we should ask for this and more" (Reason 2010, pp.111).

The length of a typical Splendid performance would be around 60 minutes and one of the main aims of the company is to "bring the audience with joy" emphasized by their choice of styles e.g. pantomime, commedia dell'arte, clowning and reinforced by their use of techniques e.g. stereotypical characters, song/music/ dance/puppets. Reason, however, then questions what it is to experience art. Whatever the age of the audience should they expect more from the experience than just being "entertained"? (Reason, 2010, pp.111). Discussing the work of Clive Cazeaux in elaboration of Immanuel Kant's ideas on aesthetic engagement, Reason writes that "experience is not the reception of sense impressions but a form of prospection or questioning. To have an experience is to be in active state of finding out about the world" (Reason 2010, p.111). This sums up Splendid's *raison d'etre*. Certainly they want their performances to engage the senses but at the heart of the company's philosophy is this drive for their audience to think about the world they live in and to engage with social and political that will undoubtedly affect them.

Since the company's conception over 20 years ago, their interest in social politics has underpinned many of the company's decisions, including having control to

play any role; in Frampton's words, "we've always been massive gender benders and because we had control I could play any role I wanted to play and especially those usually played by men" (Frampton 2022, personal interview). For them it is imperative the work is seen by a socio-economically wide audience. Frampton, in an interview, reflects that they have always taken work to hard to reach areas of the country. The company prides itself that they have always made work "that comes to you" (Frampton 2022, personal interview). She feels even territorially that is a "political statement". By a school inviting them to share and use their resources such as space or lighting there is equality. In return, the company believes they produce good quality theatre but the emphasis is on producing good quality theatre, which the students can replicate, telling their own stories but adapting the company's methods.

Their choice of texts, ranging from Greek theatre such as *Antigone*, *Medea*, and *The Oresteia*, through to *Macbeth*, *Faustus* and *Ubu*, are inherently political; focusing on individuals navigating their individual situations and choices in a world that opposes them. By reworking these classic texts and presenting the audience with multiple perspectives for each of the characters, we are forced to consider how the social/political conditions directly influence the character's actions and decisions. Even though much of the company's theatricality was in place from the outset, the company's approach to social politics has evolved since their early work which tended to be more didactic: "In the earlier shows we were slightly heavier footed, draw these links in this way to this specific" (Frampton 2020).

However, over the years Frampton acknowledges the work has progressed, the work is more interactive, the audience is more central and the company now poses more questions than deliver answers. The primary aim of the work is to leave the audience with questions: "By the end, it is not necessarily going to be tied up in a neat little bow.....it might not be satisfying but who said theatre had to be that?" (Frampton 2022, personal interview).

## **Workshops**

Whilst drama remains a popular subject in schools (approximately 60,000 entries at GCSE 2021), budgets are constantly being cut and money for what are perceived as luxuries, such as visiting companies, is scarce. With numerous companies vying for attention it is essential that each company has a unique selling point, provide value for money and are engaging both in terms of their target audience, students and teachers. As an experienced Head of Drama in charge of a relatively small budget I had to research a variety of companies to decide which offered the best value for money whilst fulfilling specific requirements at specific Key Stages.

I became acquainted with the work of Splendid in 2010 as an educator. Teaching GCSE & A' level drama, it was essential to choose styles and different practitioners which engaged the students whilst fulfilling the requirements of the GCSE and A' level specifications and so began investigating their work. My first encounter with Kerry Frampton, the creative director, was through a workshop held in conjunction with the *School's Shakespeare Festival*. This platform was ideally suited to both to the structure of the SSF and the methods of Splendid. Both take old stories with the aim of making them relevant to a new generation of students. The key method is distilling and abridging the original play, selecting key themes and messages, which are relevant to the audience, whilst retaining the integrity of the original text. The structure of SSF requires participants to think creatively using minimalistic staging and inventive use of props. As a touring company, which is self-funded, minimalistic staging is essential both from a practical view point but also as part of Splendid's creative vision. In 2010, 500 schools and over 10,000 students participated in the SSF. Working with a significant number of these centres, Frampton, and by association Splendid, were able to engage with educators allowing them to discover and explore Splendid's unique style.

Frampton believes the workshops play a pivotal role in how the company engages and empowers their audience. They are structured to encourage the participants to take risks, to recognize the power of teamwork and ensemble performance and perhaps most importantly to work hard and to take their own



work seriously. From the outset of the workshop, Frampton's approach to all her work became apparent, "7% words, 38% tone, 55% body language" (Frampton 2014, SSF workshop) with a significant emphasis on strong visual imagery. For the range of participants on this course, from experienced drama teachers to primary teachers with little or no experience of teaching drama, this approach proved to be both inclusive and engaging.

Two simple visuals, "The Balloon of Doom" and "The Kite of Delight" and using post-it notes teachers posted their concerns about how they approached the script and festival on the balloon of doom and their hopes of what they wanted their students to achieve from the experience on the kite of delight. This simple exercise allowed all teachers, many whom were not drama specialists, to engage in a fun but more importantly a secure environment to voice their hopes and concerns. However, this introductory exercise alerted me to one of Splendid's artistic intentions: to demonstrate theatre in its most simple form; an actor communicating an idea to an audience. As the workshop progressed, Frampton broke down the process of how to approach directing one of the abridged plays in a way which would empower the participants allowing them to own Shakespeare's language and stories. However, her approach also highlighted one of the key aims of the SSF: "We challenge teachers' preconceived ideas of their own expertise and their ability to develop new ways of teaching" ([www.shakespeareschools.org](http://www.shakespeareschools.org)).

The company places three deliberate choices at the forefront of their work. They remained focused throughout the rehearsal process concentrating on:

- What they are showing an audience - character/idea/story/opinion/movement.
- Why that should be witnessed or highlighted for an audience.
- How it is done and the most effective technique to help achieve this.

This clarity and precision of vision is key in producing work where the message is clear and engaging for their target audience, primarily young people between the ages of 14 and 21. Frampton, who believes you learn by doing shared a

variety of ideas which Splendid use in their preparatory investigation of the play. The importance of focusing on key areas underpins her approach e.g. what are the indisputable facts? What are the questions we should ask such as what time of day is it? Year? Weather? Why is the crowd chanting? Who is a particular character? Which are the key words that we should focus on? This method allowed the actor/ director/technicians to familiarize themselves with the play but also begins to formulate initial ideas of a creative vision/concept for the production.

Another of Splendid's key techniques is exaggerated characterization, which is used to distance both actor and audience. Using heightened vocal and physical characterization can provide juxtaposition with characters played more realistically. This method can be employed to provide humour; highlight a political point/message to provide contrast. The core belief that as an audience we engage with the message primarily through body language (55%) (Mehrabin 1970) ensures that the company investigates a variety of physical descriptions to ensure precision of movement is employed when creating a character. Frampton recommended *Actions: The Actors' Thesaurus* (Caldarone & Williams 2004), a thesaurus of action words, which the company uses to inspire and to refine the action word until they hit the exact one to help make the action and character come alive. Practical exploration of this task showed the potential of creating characters that can convey a message, emotion, situation, and relationship in a quick and effective way. Furthermore this technique, used to change the rhythm or pace of the play, focuses the audiences' attention, potentially creating "a nodal point" (why each character behaves in the way they do within their social setting).

As the workshop progressed it became apparent that even simplistic techniques like Role on the Wall can be used to create more complex characters and situations:

The next stage would be identifying the archetypes, the contradictions, the moments of choice and the gestus. The actor gets to pick out which elements of their personality are going to be placed before the spectator. That's the exciting bit. Theatre for the brain includes the actor

understanding which bits of their character they want to stage, what gives an audience the most room for thought? Again, making sure that we have dialectics within those choices – but for me this notion helps all characters become more interesting, rounded and real. (Frampton 2020)

It was emphasized that all characters within a play are of importance, a further hallmark of the company's core belief is giving a voice to characters that have been neglected, stereotyped or written out of the original production:

“As a company we are interested in the universal human experience” (Frampton 2021). It compounds the belief that every voice deserves to be listened to, no character is marginalized, and for young people watching a Splendid production this is a powerful message. Role on the Wall, a technique which is often neglected or regarded as “old hat” was explained in a way that educators were reminded that this is a powerful, quick and effective tool for creating and developing all characters. Further exploration of Splendid's work will reveal how this is used to great effect.

The final element of the workshop focused on one of their pivotal artistic intentions, the belief that theatre can be created with minimal resources and is available to everyone. This is one element of their work which students find exciting and engaging. How with just e.g. a white sheet you can create a variety of characters, locations, and environments, the possibilities are endless. We explored how vocal and physical skills, using random objects in a variety of ways can produce unexpected results and can have a significant impact on the audience helping to focus their attention.

By the conclusion of the workshop it was apparent that Frampton's clarity of vision and her simple yet highly effective methods had made a significant impact on everyone present. From this initial encounter I realized that Splendid was an important addition to any drama exam curriculum.

**Workshops based on exam specifications and working in conjunction with exam boards**

After working on a variety of different projects, in 2001, Frampton started working with the English Touring Company on the Practitioners Unplugged scheme. This tour was pivotal not just in the creation of Splendid but specifically for drama education within schools. The late 1990s and early 2000s saw an upsurge of popularity in the teaching of drama and how it was taught. The exam boards' specifications began placing an emphasis on experimentation, using a range of different practitioners to help develop creativity and engage students. The Practitioners Unplugged tour offered teachers a range of exciting and new techniques in how they approached exam work and drama in general:

I found this whole new understanding of a practitioner when you have to teach it is so completely different, and for me that was when the learning hit. When I joined we developed resources for 5 new practitioners, it was an incredible time. (Frampton 2022)

This tour was significant for a number of reasons, it coincided with changes in the A' level/GCSE specifications, which wanted students to focus on a wide range of practitioners but it also allowed Frampton to recognize there was a gap in the market: "I approached ETC and said you don't offer devising workshops and I think that's becoming a really crucial part of the exam and that's mostly what's my training is in, so we could do devising where you are referencing practitioners" (Frampton 2022, personal interview). She also recognized the importance of offering bespoke workshops tailored towards the individual school's requirements:

We'd go into a session and we would do exactly the same workshop for each group. I thought if you are doing a Stanislavski workshop and they are looking at *A Doll's House* we should have the flexibility to be able to provide a session in a bespoke way. I mostly thought we've got loads of knowledge and there is less and less money available so the least you can do when you turn up somewhere is to hire people who at least know their stuff. For me there was something important about if you are a service offering a session which feels special for that group of students or that teacher, what is it they'd like and for me as practitioner. (Frampton 2022 personal interview)

These early workshops proved to be not just visionary in terms of pre-empting changes to the exam specifications but also established Frampton's name throughout schools and colleges.

Establishing links with exam boards provides a significant platform for all theatre companies to associate with. The majority of drama teachers are eager to work with companies which provide training, within the parameters of the exam specification, are accessible e.g. provide workshops in situ at a reasonable cost, but perhaps most importantly, have the ability to engage and inspire students across the key stages. When considering the wide range of companies, which are available, Splendid Productions has proved remarkably popular in schools for a variety of reasons. Many students choose to base their work on the company, primarily because their style is highly achievable using a variety of techniques e.g. arrangements, song, clowning, tickle and slap, and minimalistic staging. The company is open to using any theatrical technique that will illustrate a point clearly. This gives students the freedom to experiment with a range of different styles although it is strongly influenced by the theatre of Brecht. Students, when using Splendid as the chosen style, are challenged, in the words of Frampton, to produce work which “raises questions, highlights contradictions in the character, the story, society and aim to provoke debate within the audience” (Frampton 2021). This gives them clear parameters on which to base their devised work.

In addition, much of Splendid’s work focuses on creatively adapting existing texts. Learners, as part of the A’ level theatre workshop component, must participate “in the creation, development and performance of one reinterpretation of an extract from a text, using the working methods and techniques of either an influential theatre practitioner or a recognized theatre company” (EDUQAS specification 2022). The company’s back catalogue of plays range from *Medea* to *Wozzeck* illustrates how a text can be “reinterpreted” using Splendid’s style.

The company produces educational packs, which consist of a DVD of a specific production, the adapted script highlighting where the company’s style is used, a detailed work pack which focuses on influences and impact of specific styles highlighting where and why they are used, detailed rehearsal notes focusing on areas such as development of characters, relationships, set design and approach to space, quotes by practitioners that have impacted on the overall adaptation

and pictures of the play in performance focusing on pivotal moments. This pack provides an invaluable teaching resource. It clearly outlines the methodology and process involved in adapting a play; this method can then be extended to reinterpreting an extract from a selected text in line with the exam specification. Furthermore it provides a template for learners to base their devised work or reinterpretation using a specific style, allowing them to produce an original piece. However, the pack detailing the company's approach from initial ideas right through to performance ties into three other stages of the workshop component. Stage 1) researching: this includes looking at a company or practitioner's historical, social and cultural context; their purpose, practice and their artistic intentions; Stage 2) the innovative nature of their approach, working methods, theatrical styles and use of conventions and their collaboration with and influences of other practitioners. Stage 3) reflecting where learners produce a creative log which explains how ideas are created and developed to communicate meaning as part of the theatre making process and the connection between dramatic theory and practice. The company's understanding of their target audience, i.e. young people primarily between the ages of 14-24 and the requirements of educational establishments, enables them to produce resources which are both student and teacher friendly, engaging and are invaluable within a teaching environment.

Frampton believes passionately that exam boards should work together to ensure terminology used regarding specific practitioners is accurate "language like alienation and message is just not helpful for students" (Frampton 2022). She feels by focusing on other key words e.g. arrangements would have a more meaningful impact on students' work. As a company, Splendid refutes the idea that Brecht's work should have a message i.e. should the play be teaching the audience something clear cut, she notes "Brecht abandoned that idea after 5 years" (Frampton 2022 personal interview). Frampton thinks one of the reasons why audiences find their work engaging is because it makes them consider all possibilities of outcome and exam boards should be focusing more on terms like dialectic theatre to encourage students to make more meaningful and engaging work:

The problem with the word “message” is that students feel it has to be teaching us something.... With our current society we have very binary, very message driven young people, it's like 'that's wrong, that's right'. Politics is like that as well. If exam boards put dialectics or counterweight or juxtaposition in content then I think we would have young people who are able to debate and create work that would have nuance rather than this is the thing we want you to think because it's a misnomer and actually I think it would create exciting and engaging work.  
(Frampton 2022, personal interview)

The majority of drama departments inevitably function on a tight budget and teachers have to give careful consideration to what is a good investment when booking a workshop from the range of companies and practitioners which are currently available. The types of considerations include: how could this company have an impact on specific components at GCSE/A' level? Will they engage, motivate and inspire learners across a wide range of ability? How could the material impact on further lesson planning? Are they value for money? Online drama forums consistently recommend Splendid as fulfilling the above requirements. One teacher commented: “Splendid are the best company that tour schools. Students were able to see the standard of performance that could be achieved in their own studio space and get ideas to copy in their own devised work” ([www.splendid.co.uk](http://www.splendid.co.uk)). This quote sums up the company's appeal: their work is accessible to learners, their work is adaptable both in content, methods/techniques, physical space, but perhaps the salient factor and underpinning one of the company's mission statements is 'Socially, political, encouraging young people to engage'.

This engagement is evident from the level of participation throughout the workshop. Learners are encouraged and constantly challenged by the company. This keeps the participants on task but also helps to foster a sense of achievement and ownership in the work produced. Participants are given an in-depth insight into the company's techniques and the process of devising which maximizes their understanding when analyzing and evaluating how the company's style was utilized in their work. This initial workshop can form the basis of a devised performance piece fulfilling the requirements for both GCSE

(Component 1) & A' level (Component 2) in addition to A' level (Component 1) discussed previously.

A pivotal role of the Awarding Organizations procedure is a commitment to produce “high quality CPD for teachers” (WJEC 2022). The content can be based on the requirements of the exam specification, but another important aspect of training is to focus on specific aspects of the exam content. Throughout January 2020 a number of workshops were arranged by EDUQAS/WJEC in conjunction with the company. Prior to the workshops a meeting was arranged to outline the structure and content of the course. An audit of drama teachers indicated they needed further training to refresh their approach to the devising process focusing on the methods of specific practitioners/style and it was agreed this would provide the key focus of the course.

It was interesting to observe the format Frampton used to engage with the participants. The session began with a discussion, which allowed the participants to air both their knowledge and concerns when teaching learners the process of devising. This approach, given the wide range of experience, engendered a relaxed and informal environment and created a “safe space” to ask questions. This session also allowed Frampton to outline some of the philosophy/methods the company used when devising/adapting and which have proved successful. What was significant was the clarity of the information, delivered in engaging manner, whilst giving teachers a wealth of important detail which could be used to enhance their teaching e.g. to read Viola Spolin to help actors to be focused in the present moment and to find choices improvisational, as in real life; to explore *The Clown Manifesto* to inspire new ideas and techniques to engage an audience. The main message, which is key to all of Splendid’s work, was to encourage participants to learn by doing. A three-hour practical session allowed teachers to explore a range of techniques and produce an effective piece of devised theatre.

Throughout the process Frampton took on the role of “teacher” encouraging, cajoling, questioning, praising, and admonishing using whichever tone was necessary to produce a piece of theatre. Without exception the participants rose



to the task and inadvertently became the students eager to show their work and receive feedback.

Analysis of the evaluation feedback indicated that 100% of participants felt the course was worthwhile, fulfilled the need for training linked to the examination specification and was value for money. However, interestingly the workshop and working with Frampton seemed to have engendered a loyalty base with all the participants enquiring about school based workshops/ performances from the company. Apart from the financial implications of these links having a positive outcome for the company, from an exam board stance the courses were deemed successful, as the workshops had fulfilled the objective of providing quality and useful training for teachers. However, more importantly it allowed the company to expand its reach and engage with a new audience base and promote their style of theatre, which is both influential and relevant to the demands of an exam specification.

### **Educational Resources**

In the current market there is a vast range of teaching resources available, many of them specifically aimed at teachers of KS 4 & 5, and focusing on elements of the exam specifications. The Department for Education website states that effective teaching resources are “well-crafted, structured and appropriate for their purpose. Effective resources are clearly written and designed in a way that makes them easy to understand and use. They incorporate deliberate learning supports that help learners understand key concepts” (Department for Education,2022).

One of the company’s bestselling resources are their mind-maps, which reflect the definition of an “effective teaching resource” but also reflect the company’s philosophy that “At the root of everything we do is a desire to connect with an audience” (Frampton 2020). The mind-maps visually encapsulate the lives and works of leading theatre practitioners and principles but they are also a reflection of Splendid’s own unique style. Each workshop led by Frampton is symbolized by simple but highly effective drawings and key ideas on a flip chart.

This style is transferred but in greater detail to the mind-maps. Highly visual, in technicolor drawing the eye to different nuggets of information, witty using cartoons to make complex theories accessible, hand-written which makes the information more learner-friendly. There is a significant degree of complementarity between audiences that watch performances of Splendid's work in performance and purchasers of this product. Having used this resource as a revision aid, you immediately sense the learner is engaging with them, primarily because they associate them with Frampton and the sense of fun, enjoyment but primarily knowledge and questions she brings to the thought process.

### **Online presence**

Since the company originated in 2003, technology has increasingly played a fundamental role in the work of all companies. Certainly the recent pandemic has shown ICT become a major lifeline especially for a company like Splendid who primarily work in schools. As a company that is self-funded Splendid provides the ideal opportunity to utilize online resources and provides the ideal platform to engage with a wide range of new centres, whilst reminding existing contacts of the wide range of material available online e.g. past productions.

One of the first webinars the company offered was an online CPD: A Practical Guide to Bertolt Brecht, which consisted of a 3 hour workshop, a work pack and practical exercises which had been adapted for teachers to use for online lessons. For many teachers this was invaluable, as it provided a wealth of material which was relevant to the adapted exam specifications, but the detailed work pack on Brecht would provide a valuable resource for the future. The cost of the course was £25 and I was struck by the excellent quality of the whole course but also the generosity of the company in making these resources available. Throughout there was a real sense of wanting to engage and work with teachers providing practical and relevant help and guidance.

Helen Nicholson, examining the work of Howard Barker, notes that “theatre that has an educational purpose lacks a spirit of rebellion, that it is characterised by predictability and predetermined outcomes” (Nicholson 2009, pp.78). Reflecting on the course in the light of these words I realized that Barker’s assumption should be questioned. Here was a company, which had taken stock of the current situation and knew teachers were under pressure to provide lessons of sound educational content. The whole course provided that but in addition it was inspiring, thought provoking and gave teachers the opportunity to reflect on methods like Rashomon, Nodol points, and how to create a political scenario using a variety of ideas and devising methods which could be adapted to learners both online and in the classroom but would also provide the framework for learners to create their own version of rebellious and political theatre. This observation could be applied to any of Splendid’s work but in this instance it became more apparent due to the structure and content of the course and the fact it was directed specifically at teachers.

The company have also made their past productions available online, which provides a valuable teaching resource as all exam specifications state in line with Ofqual guideline for assessment objectives: learners must “reflect on their own work and the work of others”; “develop an awareness and understanding of the roles and processes undertaken in contemporary theatre practice” (OFQUAL 2020).

The online performances provide an ideal opportunity for teachers to utilize this resource and to fulfill this requirement. What makes this resource particularly effective are specific moments within clips are flagged up to highlight key methods and techniques which the company use e.g. 3.50 how song is used; 4.35 how we use a simple set in performance. This technique is highly engaging, as learners know exactly where to focus their attention and why and how a technique is used. Teachers can develop this exercise in conjunction with practice exam papers, for example:

*Analyse and evaluate how set was used in two key moments to communicate meaning to an audience.*

*In your answer refer to*

- *Production style*
- *How set was used to create location and atmosphere*
- *Your response to the set as a member of the audience (WJEC/GCSE DRAMA MAY 2019).*

OFQUAL also states: “Specifications must require students to experience live performance, where they are a member of the audience in the same performance space as the performers.” Whilst a live Splendid performance meets this requirement, the effects of the pandemic and adaptations to all specifications means streaming of performances have become key in fulfilling this condition. Viewing the online performances ensures all students and all centres have relatively easy access to quality performances. The performances are further supplemented with a Q&A with the artistic director and actor Kerry Frampton. Work packs give detailed notes on techniques, background to plays. Whilst all of this is a useful technique in a normalized classroom environment, when learners have to engage with online teaching it becomes an invaluable learning tool. The performances are engaging the techniques used are highlighted citing specific examples, the notes are clear and detailed but presented in an appealing format, with relevant information presented in small bite size chunks. All these elements allow the learner to work successfully in isolation, whilst the teacher can further supplement this exercise by adapting past exam papers to accommodate specific elements.

### **Social-media accounts**

A study by of social media trends in 2018 by *downstage.media* highlighted how Generation Z ,17-22 year olds, are the age group who are most influenced by social media. Splendid cites this as their primary target audience. Like all leading theatre companies, Splendid has a visible presence online. Primarily the two accounts they use to engage with followers are Instagram and Twitter. Although there are overlaps both accounts fulfill different functions. Instagram is used to present striking visual images from productions/new material. In addition to being a key marketing tool, teachers can also use these images to engage with

learners, providing a discussion point for looking at performance skills e.g interaction and physicality. It also allows audiences to share their experience of working with the company in a workshop, watching a production and in some small way they are “investing” and becoming part of the company. As one of the company’s artistic intentions is “to develop the relationship between actor and audience in a continually evolving way” this contributes in a small way of audience engaging with actor.

Research by *downstage.media* found Generation Z are more likely to engage with “ephemeral content”; 500 million users now use insta stories every day, the company have used this technique to post rehearsal clips, extracts from shows, images of mind maps and found it an effective tool to engage with their target audience. Splendid’s twitter account @Team\_Splendid tends to have a much broader content than their Instagram account. Following the “golden rules” of Twitter usage, their feed is much more than a conventional marketing tool. Although information regarding shows is posted there is definite sense of the company using posts to engage in dialogue with their followers, e.g. a recent retweet from UCU regarding subsidy cuts for arts courses in England immediately engaged and informed their followers.

Following another twitter rule for good marketing the company retweet interesting things which do not inflate their ego, they consistently use the retweet function to alert followers to things they would be interested to learn and know and to further engage with dialogue with their followers. Splendid’s *raison d’etre* is to create ‘beautifully theatrical political theatre. Its purpose is to engage young people and to encourage them to think about the world they are in’ and Twitter offers the perfect opportunity for the company to highlight this with many of their tweets/retweets. For example there is a retweet from a Guardian article “Bolsonaro may have emergency surgery after hiccups persist for over 10 days”, but the tweet is further developed by a link to their current show UBU, citing one of the characters “dangerous dobbers” and touching on the style “deeply Jarry-esque symptoms” (Splendid @Team-Splendid). This one tweet encapsulates the company’s philosophy and sparks interest in their new

production, whilst giving further information/subject content to those who have already watched the show. It could be described as the perfect tweet engages the audience on a number of levels fusing a contemporary, political item whilst making it relevant to a play written in 1896.

### **The Future**

One of Splendid's USPs is that the company is self-funding and does not receive any grants from the Arts Council; for the past twenty years this stance has allowed them the freedom to produce their own style of theatre without any organizational constraints. Frampton admits that part of this refusal to apply for grants is down to her working class belief that "if you are running a business no one is going to help you out, no one is going to give you a hand out". Frampton truly believes if the work is of quality then people will continue to pay for it but is pragmatic and recognizes that in the current economic climate the current model might have to change, acknowledging that during the period of lockdown (2020/2021) it was probably only the work they were able to produce online that provided financial support and stopped the company from folding.

During our interview I questioned Frampton on how she felt funding would change the company:

All it would change is it would guarantee I could pay my actors and maybe pay them a bit more. We don't charge people for how far away they are from us, we don't charge them for accommodation, it would just give us a little cushion. In rehearsals we don't do any R&D, we don't have time to develop the work we develop it on the road really, so just the ability to take some more time to make sure all the people working with us have all that workshop leading ability, basically it would give us time to invest in what we are doing. (Frampton 2022, personal interview)

The most significant implication of additional funding is that it would allow the company to introduce bursary slots to engage with schools which previously could not afford to fund a workshop. It would also allow the company within a week's slot to perform less shows/workshops but travel to more remote areas of the country, which presently it is financially unviable for the company to visit.

The company's vision for the future is very much grounded in what they have accomplished to date, creating work specifically to engage and inspire young

people. Frampton wants their young audiences to recognize the power of theatre and what it can achieve. She also wants to continue challenging what she sees as the gender imbalance regarding females in traditionally lead male roles:

*Ubu* [their touring production 2022] holds space like a man and when students see that I'm a woman it totally blows their brain because we don't get to see women playing those roles. I feel it's our job to mess around with what they think they know and what they think they can do. (Frampton 2022, personal interview)

The structure of both their productions and workshops are geared towards empowering young people to recognize they don't have to be just an actor which Frampton feels is often 'a passive role' but encouraging them to create work which reflects their own passions and interests: "If you are political make work about what you love and what you care about" (Frampton 2022, personal interview).

Essentially the company will continue to produce work which challenges the status quo and demystifying what Frampton believes is often 'very ancient, very male, very posh, white history' (Frampton 2022, personal interview). Reflecting on the history of theatre and citing *commedia dell'arte* as an example, Frampton believes theatre starts with the people but along the way is 'hijacked and refined' and gradually moves away from the very audience it was developed to engage with. "For *Splendid and me* it is about bringing theatre and going 'you can have this too. It's not just for them this is for us. We can do it, anything we are doing you can do'" (Frampton 2022).

Since their inception the company have evolved into practitioners in their own right, with their own unique methods and techniques. Although *Splendid* have worked closely with exam boards and within a variety of schools and colleges, Frampton feels that as a contemporary company producing political work which deals with contemporary issues they should be recognized in all specifications as 'practitioners of influence'. Throughout the summer of 2022 the company performed at the Globe Theatre. *Midsummer Mechanicals*, a new play written by the company, as a follow up to the play-within-a-play from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This opportunity enabled the company to engage with a wider audience

and Frampton hoped it would cement their reputation as one of leading, contemporary companies, which consistently produces engaging and challenging work for young audiences.

I feel we know what we are doing with an audience, because if you can hold an audience of 400 year 8s who don't know why they are sat in a gym. You learn your craft. Some people don't think we are 'a proper theatre company' because we work in a school setting but that is a political choice. (Frampton 2022, personal interview)



## Conclusion

The final part of this thesis will summarise the different strategies that each of the companies has implemented and how successful they have been in engaging and attracting new audiences.

A 2017 study by Shakespeare's Globe found that half of teenagers had never been to theatre (Source BBC news). This statistic puts into context that theatres still have a considerable way to go in engaging with a younger audience, especially outside of London. I considered this information when reflecting on one of the areas which the study looked at. National Theatre of Wales, Theatr Iolo and Splendid had all made the decision not to house their work at a permanent location but to stage their work in the audiences' chosen location or community. Each of these companies felt that this choice immediately redefined the relationship between theatre and audience. In the interview, Frampton commented that when the company is invited into a school's space the company becomes "the guest". However, when you visit a theatre building and you are a member of the audience you become the guest and are expected to act in a specific way. In the forward to Dario Fo's Comedies, Franca Rame discussed the importance of engaging with audiences within their own environment.

We had to place ourselves entirely at the services of the exploited, become their minstrels. Which meant going to work with structures provided by the lower classes. This is why we immediately thought of the workers' clubs. (McGrath, 1996 p. 35)

The most successful of National Theatre Wales's work is when it is placed in a specific location, this is when they truly engage with an audience. Their recent production *Petula* that was performed at the Sherman Theatre, whilst being an interesting piece of theatre to view lacked the vitality and engagement of work like *Tonyandymonium* or *We're Still Here*, which reflected specific communities. Although the Royal Court reaches a varied and diverse audience through their outreach work attracting the same audience to their permanent home in Bloomsbury, by their own admission is problematic.

The myth that theatre is for “rich” or “posh” people still overshadows theatre and each of the four companies were keenly aware that taking their product out to potential audiences was far more successful in terms of engagement. Inevitably with data showing that a section of audience are reluctant to return to live arts and cultural events (39% April 2022 as opposed to 30% November 2021: Source *The Audience Agency*) in addition to a looming cost of living crisis, the study showed how for each of companies engaging with people in their own environment is pivotal.

The four companies were acutely aware of the barriers, which inhibit audiences from attending a theatre performance. They are acutely aware of their history, their failures and successes, which have molded the company and evolved their pivotal philosophy that theatre is for everyone. The study showed that focusing on a specific target audience was often advantageous for a company, for example Splendid’s work is aimed primarily at young people in schools and college, the audience is *in situ* ready to watch the performance. However, they are faced with the task of how to engage with a wider audience outside of education. The study showed that inevitably the budget has a significant impact when engaging with audiences, for example The Royal Court has to run a number of initiatives to appeal to an audience beyond its ‘natural audience’ but attracts significant funding to help them achieve this. National Theatre Wales’s site-specific work is exciting and attracts a wide audience primarily because of the intensive involvement with the community prior to the performance, but does this work leave a lasting legacy? Theatr Iolo has evolved over the years and has found a niche aimed primarily at a younger audience with a focus on bilingual productions but does this suggest their work will only appeal to audiences in Wales?

One area, which emerged from the study, and one, which all four companies had fostered over the years, was the importance of engaging with community partnerships. Certainly some of the most significant work from each of the companies has developed from this area, for example National Theatre Wales’s

work, which sprung from their partnerships with specific communities. The Royal Court Theatre's collaboration with the various exam boards is another example. Undoubtedly this was strength of each of the companies and was particularly successful in engaging audiences when there was a clear aim in how they wanted to engage the audiences and they wanted the end product to achieve.

As expected each of the companies had developed their use of social media in engaging with audiences. Both Royal Court Theatre and National Theatre Wales have developed quite extensive use of effective social media techniques to engage with audiences particularly through the pandemic. Splendid's use is concise, tailored and specifically linked to engage with work they produce in their productions and workshops. Theatr Iolo appears to be less reliant on their online presence; this was primarily due to financial constraints as opposed to not recognizing its value in engaging with potential audiences.

An interesting observation that I noted whilst undertaking this study is that of the companies, only one, Theatr Iolo, has a specific engagement manager (since 2019). At the time of my fieldwork National Theatre Wales did not have a specific engagement manager but subsequently appointed four personnel who have audience development as part of their remit. The Royal Court have a communication and sales team whilst Splendid consider themselves as a cooperative with each member of the company taking responsibility to engage with specific schools. Perhaps an audience engagement manager would be an important role for every company and whilst gathering data is essential on audience subsets, it is also vital to use this data to connect and meaningfully engage with the real people providing them with a product they want to see. Three of the four companies have constantly changing personnel across each of the production areas whilst only Splendid Productions have kept the same key personnel since their inception in 2003. Perhaps one of the company's routes to success is that potential audiences feel they know the company personally and are willing to invest in it.

The research has shown that undoubtedly each of the companies have

developed a range of strategies that engage with audiences from deconstructing classic plays to appeal to contemporary audiences to presenting new and innovative work. The audience engagement in performance and workshops is evident with each of these companies redefining their relationship with their audience and working towards a partnership where the audience is an integral part of the performance right from its inception. It is likely that each of them face considerable challenges over the next few years, as digital and online theatre is opening up a whole new world of innovation, audience finances will continue to be squeezed, not to mention the ongoing marginalization of the arts in schools and colleges. Each of these factors could have a potential impact on their output. However, I believe National Theatre Wales, Theatr Iolo, The Royal Court and Splendid each offer a unique product, they have proven and successful strategies, they understand what potential audiences want and this will stand them in good stead over the next decade.

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