

# *Time for Repair:* **A conversation about theatre & the future**

**An Open Space event**  
**Hosted by Battersea Arts Centre and Improbable**  
Held online 29<sup>th</sup> May 2020  
(third event in a series of four)

## **Collected Reports**

*Improbable*

**BATTERSEA  
ARTS CENTRE**

# Overview

On Friday 29th May 2020, Battersea Arts Centre and Improbable hosted an online Open Space conversation. This was the third in a series of events held by Battersea Arts Centre & Improbable in response to performing arts and the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Around 100 people attended across the course of the 2.5 hour conversation.
- Around 30% of participants were artists or makers; 30% producers or programme managers; 30% designers, writers or directors; and 10% administrators or funders.
- Around 30% of participants described themselves as being in senior management or leadership roles, 30% as mid-career, and 40% as early career.
- Participants attended from across the UK and included Band 1, 2 and 3 NPOs, Arts Council England and other funders.

The agenda was set by the participants as a group at the start of the conversation. Four main themes emerged across the sessions called:

## **Thinking radically**

- Changing the mindset
- How can we make theatre a more radical, exciting offer than before?
- What does producing look like now and in the future?
- Thinking even bigger: imagining new futures + structures
- What do we mean by risk-taking?
- What do people want?

## **Sector support**

- How can we stop the sense of buildings vs freelancers that feels like it's bubbling up at the moment?
- Am I going to have a job at the end of this?
- What can mentors do for young directors?
- How do we resource space for longer-term thinking when the crisis feels so immediate?

## **Access and inclusion**

- How do we make work for people with no access to technology?
- How we do engage with our communities moving forward, making theatre from them and for them?

## **Artistic practice**

- Let's stage the loss of having a stage
- Are theatre building essentially the new found spaces?
- How can we honour the earth through our work?
- It's always been better outdoors

This document contains the reports from this event – the reports have not been edited or curated in any way and are presented as they were at 6pm on 31<sup>st</sup> May 2020. We hope that these ideas, provocations, themes and questions may be picked up by participants at (or organisers of) future events.

For information about future BAC and Improbable events visit [www.improbable.co.uk](http://www.improbable.co.uk) or [www.bac.org.uk](http://www.bac.org.uk).

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## How do we make work for people with no access to technology? (Sharon Eckman)

How do we make work for people with no access to technology?

What about the people who cannot do all the technology? Who don't have access to any tech let alone Zoom? - how do we make work for them???

The tension between 'great, it's all online and accessible' - and that not being true for lots of people

Also not assuming who those people are - affecting young people without internet as well as elderly, for example

This moment feels exciting for 'tech savvy' people

We are giving work away for free but maybe not to those who need it most?

Where does the responsibility sit? Can we do something that doesn't mean have to find lots of funding or unsustainable types of outreach - not every artist can do this - so how do the problems get solved?

What about connecting people creatively over the phone?? - for example 'All Change Arts' based in Islington - doing dance classes over the phone (we think!) - also we've heard of a conference call (easy access) book club over the phone

The ideas can be exhausting and massive though

Paines Plough - phone performances; Slung Low community art gallery - nice tangible ideas

Suggested reading of Slung Low's latest blog

Post - what can we do with post????!!! Interactive storytelling?? We're not sure but feels exciting - receiving something tangible! - sensory storytelling etc.?? - arts packs

How do we fund things???

1927 - Margate - working with a local school making artworks

Andy Smith BAC project - people suggested places where they'd want him to do a performance - led to something in a living room in Derbyshire - remote artwork

What is our role right now?? Purpose - and then form...

Is the job of theatre the same anymore???

Why will people want theatre/art now?

This situation has drawn attention to extreme isolation people are living in ANYWAY - and the tiny scrap of interaction people have had has been taken away - how can we find ways to support them and connect with them - we can play a role in connecting people in a practical way (like learning how to use certain social media etc.) for people who already had so little resource - using projects to link people up online - teach access to technology which could support people's lives more broadly

This situation has connected us more to our communities - if this has made us come closer, we as artists have more 'ins'

How do we get people the tech?????

how have people been accessing art/entertainment without IT?

Perhaps contact library networks? - they are big on digital education -

people who aren't being supported properly - we can offer creative and practical solutions through creativity

Where are the lines around safeguarding when it's your neighbour??

storytelling and clever questioning - theatre skills - can be a great resource!!!

As artists how do we do this?? As well as being good neighbours! "I still want to be the artists that I am - while I work with the community etc. - want to nourish my own artistry"

Also - what are we as artists trained to do or not? There is a temptation to support without the skills etc. - making sure people receive what they actually need or want - being aware that there are orgs who do this stuff

Methods: post, phone, socially distanced in person, zoom etc., physical artworks - and being hopeful we can be back in a space!!!

Also - how useful is some of the stuff and who are we doing it for??? - much as it's nice to do things now - how about the future???

is our current desire to 'do something' a howl of protest when actually we have to stop and plan for the future??

Maybe this is a conversation to have 5 months down the line...??

Artists are so resourceful

Let's not forget that NPOs are resourced which is why they can do amazing things!

Seek out resource from those who have it (not necc. theatre) - and also who may be doing things at this time which we have skills for and can get paid for - help other (non theatre) networks

BAC Create course - something you have to be referred to, potentially quite isolated, different creative activity each week - sending out packs with materials and instructions for the activity, and suggestions - 'listen to your favourite piece of music while you do this' - people can do it in their own homes, but with a collective activity, knowing others are doing it.

Battersea library doing travelling library

BBC Bitesize

Local TV channels and local radio network - can we use a few minutes to entertain

(Debbie Bandara) Perhaps those that are not accessing technology are not bothered about it? Are we just projecting our views for our own needs and wants onto others? Going into grassroot communities and engaging with them, rather than sitting behind computers will allow us to understand how to engage with all communities. Going back to our "oldskool" ways such as micro street tea parties, garden picnics, gathering around (social distance in place obvs) in a communal gardens, allotments and create make-shift dos. It seems that human connection is important and technology can be a powerful asset but also a hindrance too....I guess it's getting the balance right.

### How can we stop the sense of 'buildings' vs 'freelancers' that feels like it's bubbling up at the moment? (Lilli G)

**Session Convener:** Lilli G

**Participant names:** Sarah Punshon, Jenny Koons, Lizzie Vogler, Rachel Briscoe, Abbi Greenland, David Greenwood, Lisa Goldman, Sam West, Jade, Molly Sharpe, ChloeTF, Hannah Barker, Andrew Georgia Dale, Ruth Moore, Brian Logan, Dom, Tarek Iskander, Tom Stickland, Will, Monica B, Cathos, Tom Spencer, Lucy Atkinson, Krystina Nellis, Donna Munday, Neil Darlison, Rachel Spence, Nick Sweeting, Ve, Rosemary Lee, Mayou Trikerioti, Pooja Ghai, Ben Mills, Debbie Bandara, Simon Kenny, Mike Bernardin, Sarah Crowden

*Feel free to take notes below!*

---LG - title came from the heart: I've been getting this feeling and it's worrying me, please tell me it's just my bubble!

No, it's real. Set up a freelance network in first week of lockdown and felt abandoned and 'ghosted' by buildings that said they loved us; even while aware of the challenges facing buildings and colleagues in them, still astonished by lack of joining up. Fuel's Freelance Taskforce great idea, but unfortunately it's been set up in a way that means buildings are selecting the freelancers to speak for them! The lack of agency is really problematic.

Started with government setting up divisive financial emergency packages with freelancers and PAYE employees treated separately.

Are there any building representatives in this meeting? Yes!

There are conversations about 'equality of opportunity' in the aftermath/rebuilding post Covid-19, which might be one way to try and think about creating a more equal footing we could discuss?

The Freelance Taskforce letter could have been clearer about the fact that the freelancer will be completely independent.

The Freelance Taskforce is brilliant but as a building we fully support it but it's also put us in this ridiculous position to have to appoint this freelancer and that's been a bit of a nightmare as there is no right way of doing it - I paid a group of freelancers to work out best way to appoint but they've brought it back to me!

Will there always be gatekeepers? Even if freelancers appoint themselves, a small number of people will still be making decisions about who and who will not get the opportunity

Could buildings open their doors more and help set out their 'maslow' "**hierarchy of needs**" and how they are dealing with these - and take much more care to invite in freelancers to contribute to building these back up?(sorry I don't think I captured this properly!)

It was more about how the first response of organisations (buildings, production companies, support organisations) resorted to an unconscious maslow response, dealing with their most immediate and obvious survival things first, which didn't necessarily include freelancers - not as a deliberate or malicious choice. And that we as freelancers need to not be afraid of knocking on the door, pushing it open, and inviting ourselves into the conversations. as the work that is produced cannot be produced without freelancers.

Problems of gatekeepers are real. The government won't need any help in forgetting about theatres. Don't we lose something if we don't have a unified voice? Funding to buildings is multiplied on its way to artists - if a building gets £100k it can give £170k to artists, if gov just gives artists £100k directly, it stays at £100k. Really want us to find a unified narrative to make the case. Is it too simplistic to start with what audiences want/need? (is this right Sam?)

As a freelancer whose never been employed in a building, I don't understand how the money works and gets multiplied. When I am paid to do work by a building I don't see much of that in my bank account.

It's not that all buildings should go - lots of artists want to work in buildings, and many of them are brilliant! But if we need to consider that there will be LESS buildings what does that mean, what will that look like?

Need to think about repurposing buildings, reimagine what they are and do. Ref to David Jubb's blog and his ideas.

But these buildings aren't much good for anything else.



Our sector isn't very good at 'closing things'. Grief very present now. Lots of post-war buildings built 30yrs post WW2 and we struggle to help them move on/evolve/continue to have purpose. A trap? Scared to let go of them.

Woke national service

spend time like national service trying to work out how to save the planet -ecological and arts, social justice

artistic mutiny

Don't know how to solve this, but there is something painful about the difference that exists when a freelancer is engaging with a venue. The freelancer is probably not / maybe not being paid to have the conversation, but you can only speak to a person working from a venue when they're being paid 100% of their wage. This means there's a painful tension in that conversation.

<<< absolutely agree but technically freelancers are on 80% of their income, at least for now, after which we have NOTHING lol

Tom's great idea: can we set up a good news feed?

Is there a way we can collate good news stories - RashDash are just about to launch a blog where people can send examples of generosity and solidarity - maybe if we look at lots of small pictures a bigger picture / bigger pictures can emerge...

The whole system rests on freelancers' unpaid labour, and this situation has starkly revealed & exacerbated that inequity.

Artists stipend? Universal wage?

Does it depend to what extent we are able to embrace a collective philosophy to making our work? Even institutionally (I work at a university) I am sure there is value in organisations hosting more work and gaining mutual benefit for all parties...

Universities, for example, can offer space and even venues, and their students' studies can gain enrichment from collaboration. I know this happens already, but tends to be modelled as a visiting freelance-to-institution relationship, that the university can't always afford, financially.

Spain agreed UBI today

I personally can't really see any other solution other than UBI. Particularly important because this would go some way to addressing some of the inequities elsewhere in the industry e.g. disabled artists, working/benefit/criminal class artists. but also those inequities are being perpetuated anyway elsewhere! I don't have the answer to convincing tptb but that's my thoughts

The inequality between buildings and freelancers who make up 70% of workforce and make the art has been exposed by this crisis - but it's not unique to our sector, it just feels like it is. Some disagreement about this - the particular structures of the theatre sector that reinforce these and the erosion/loss of salaried posts for artists in regional theatres over recent years - loss of associates, literary managers, resident designers etc.

What can we do to really value artists again and their roles?

Artistic Mutiny worth exploring on Facebook; organisation advocating for arts to "Be More Pirate" including no more than a 4:1 salary differential.

2: 1 differential? No artist to be paid less than the average salaried staff?

ADs declaring their salaries might not hurt - oddly I think it's only a very small number of elite orgs where the 4:1 would be exceeded.

I wonder what an imaginative/speculative model of some of these structures might look like?

<as feedback for Improbable: would be good to do notes here and then export, rather than switching between windows>

Another useful thing for notes: freelancers on boards!

And one other note to share is that Arts Council currently has a survey on the impacts of this - covering both orgs AND freelancers. Worth doing if anyone hasn't: [buff.ly/3epwTkp](http://buff.ly/3epwTkp).

The new Key Workers of the cultural industry - Rethinking who they are in this time.

Agree with Will. Chief Executives declare salaries (I think ADs do already) and Board Members also (as the super-rich predominate on many boards making them unreflective of communities everyone talks about trying to reach)

Theatre needs to be more working class.

admin top heavy in the larger buildings - all on payroll so less money for the actual makers

### **redistribution!**

Is there going to be a new curveball once the government forces employers to pay 1/4 of the furlough, and will that put us all in the same boat of freelancing very very soon?

It's brilliant how vocal Sonia and others are on this. I do agree with Sam that we need to stand together as much as humanly possible.

Narratives and framing key - currently very short-term case making still dominating advocacy conversations to government. If/if no government settlement for the arts forthcoming in the next few weeks then given the drop off in SEISS and furlough scheme change coming up we are going to see much more hardship and restructuring etc....

That was for notes repeating (some of) my notes

This is a very tiny thing and short term thing for now and one piece of a much bigger picture of responsibility that people like me (Furloughed producer on salary) have including lobbying government but I'm working with a freelance artist to set up a mentorship scheme between furloughed theatre staff and freelance artists (in the broadest sense) where the freelancer comes with a specific task/query/problem that they need support on and we set them up with a furloughed staff member with the appropriate experience to have that conversation. I'm hoping this will contribute towards keeping lines of communication open, reminding us of our interdependence and offering some hands on support for freelancers. I'd love to hear your thoughts (it's an evolving idea and people have been giving really amazing feedback to help shape it) or for anyone who wants to get involved! Drop me a line [mollysharpeproducer@gmail.com](mailto:mollysharpeproducer@gmail.com)

Representation in buildings... different designers on boards

A note re need to talk about representation in buildings - and how important artists are and specific artist - related roles. including on boards!

There is a real sense of how co-dependent venues and freelancers are. They both support the ecology of a new way forward for theatre, children's theatre, dance, digital, music etc. All play a vital role in engaging communities and bringing them into venue spaces. As a freelance, I am constantly listening to the needs of communities and keen to always share with venues in terms of diversity and inclusivity. I am still figuring out the best way to make them see how many more new audiences they could engage with and generate a different approach to work they produce. But this should also be financially valued as well, happy to hear thoughts via email Debbie Bandara ([hello@forest-tribe.com](mailto:hello@forest-tribe.com))

## Changing the mindset (Sarah)

**Session Convener:** Sarah Crowden

**Participant names:** Sam Dunstan, Dean Hutchinson, Ruth Moore, Debbie Bandara

Why are the arts perceived as 'elitist' on the one hand and actors as 'leftie luvvies and rich on the other? This damaging mindset (endemic everywhere) must be changed. But HOW???

Arts brings in 10.8 billion to the government, supporting the hospitality industry. The Arts are unique, and aren't able to be shoehorned into a 'one size fits all' model. There are many who view arts practitioners as standing with their hands out for subsidy. How can this mindset be changed?

We as practitioners know that the arts are organic and each genre feeds into and supports the others.

Key word is understanding as the finances, economics and models we use in theatre are unique to us. The Government and population don't understand these things.

Inclusion

Value for Money

Skills have been diluted by the 'let's all have a go at this easy option' mindset

Relevance over excellence

Emphasize vocational element - the signing up to, in many cases, a life of hardship

If it's all about the money, then surely letting theatre die would be misguided in the extreme

Silver Lining: Live performances being streamed with opens up access to new people/audiences. Although it is a struggle for theatres to curate and the technology needs are vast.

50% of people in Yorkshire don't attend the theatre (possibly too low a percentage)

Use it or lose it??? How much do people care about their local theatres?

Helping people to understand the benefits (Dean)

Campaign to show the arts in general are a civic benefit (Dean)

'We're not all snowflake luvvies' (Sam)

How EVERYTHING is used in a creative way (Sam)

Ability to engage. (Dean)

'Creative Calling' - Chase Jarvis (Photographer and Artist) referenced to investigate

Outcome: Get the campaign going

Slow realisation

Access to arts (Sam) - more interest in online content and music on the street

Wake them up

Make it as easy as possible to buy (Sam)

Grow the interest

Pay What You Feel it's Worth (Ruth) Cambridge Junction (her organisation)

marketing team increased engagement with this tool, and signed many who couldn't believe it was so cheap

Setting the mindset up

West End closing - people were surprised that this happened (Ruth)

Few representatives on Cultural Task Force from Regional/Fringe Theatre (Sam)

The unique models we have to run on (Sam)

(JayeK) - black screen on tv channels to show the arts are dead - 2 minutes of silence. Illustrating the gaps

90,000 hours of content repeats (Sam)

Once there's no tv - then hit them with the campaign (Ruth)

I like the idea that the performing arts might be in a better position to plug the gaps - as Ruth mentioned - we can make it quicker than TV and Film maybe? Are there any opportunities to be had in this? (JK)

## **Who's mindset do we change?**

Government - keepers of the cash

Public - keepers of the culture

## **What small change can we do today to change the mind of these groups?**

In organisations, the vision can be restricted with a short turnaround fueled by making a profit or money-driven/ project driven. Perhaps the entire funding structure needs a re-think to allow creativity to flourish and it will pay dividends. If the mindset can allow things to slow down and see what is meaningful in terms of theatre work. There is a disparity between the funders and the artists. There must be a way of encouraging funders not to lose touch with artists.(Debbie)

It should be possible to change the government's mindset by campaigning and emphasising that losing such a large and lucrative revenue stream would not be beneficial to getting the economy back on track. Therefore some kind of campaign is definitely the way forward. Do please keep in touch. Theatre will return. There is hope.

## **How can we make theatre a more radical, exciting offer than before? (Helen G)**

**Session Convener:** Helen G.

**Participant names:** Kit Baker, Debbie Bandara

There was a lot of discussion about the lack of opportunities to create work in established non-profit theatres, particularly regional repertory theatres.

In the US, some theatres have created dedicated programming streams that foster the work of independent theatre artists in various ways. The kinds of artistic and career development opportunities they offer are not necessarily new, they've been happening for a long time in lots of places. They are included here in the hope that they could provide fodder for UK artists and administrators who are working towards the creation of more open and inclusive models for developing more radical, exciting productions at high levels.

- Off-Center is an arm of the Denver Center for the Performing Arts (DCPA) created in response to the need to provide a more robust offer for younger, more diverse audiences. It grew out of DCPA's involvement in the EmcArts Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts (Case Study: <https://bit.ly/3eBtcbj>). It was established as a "test kitchen" in 2010, and grew bit by bit (DCPA is like a big ship, it takes a long time for it to change direction) as it developed productions that appealed particularly to millennials which were more radical than what the audience surveys were telling them to do (<https://bit.ly/3dkzYSF>).

- Central to Off-Center's growth is the leadership of its curator, Charlie Miller (<https://bit.ly/2XKfZWV>)

- Off-Center has created dozens of jobs for theater artists who are pushing the envelope and previously had not worked for DCPA. For example, the Artistic Director of an independent theatre company in nearby Boulder has been hired by Off-Center multiple times as performer and director - most recently as one of two Colorado-based assistant directors for Off-Center's most ambitious project yet (<https://bit.ly/36OaU48>).
  - This August, Off-Center was preparing to open that ambitious project, an immersive performance installation created by David Byrne in collaboration with writer Mala Gaonkar, a health researcher (<https://theateroftheminddenver.com/>). 16 audience members would be admitted at timed intervals into a warehouse to be guided through different rooms that would trigger the brain's innate ability to make things up. In other words, social distancing was unwittingly baked in to the format.
  - Off-Center has either presented or facilitated gatherings of local artists where they can hear presentations from artists working in a variety of fields, for example a game researcher and LARP pioneer from Finland (<https://www.denvercenter.org/tickets-events/mixed-taste/>).
- New York Theatre Workshop has been running Artist Workshop programs for decades, notably the Usual Suspects and Suspects Abroad (<https://bit.ly/2Bb1Udl>)
- The Lincoln Center Directors Lab is a more conventional "gateway" program for emerging theatre artists (<https://www.lct.org/explore/directors-lab/>)

The economic impact of COVID-19 may be providing new opportunities for theatre artist-entrepreneurs to create radical, exciting new work in affordable new spaces as more shops and spaces become vacant and occupancy can be negotiated with landlords seeking to keep their properties alive and competitive (and adjacent businesses seeking to rebuild their customer base). For example, work could be developed in a pop-up rehearsal studio in a shopfront. Curtains could be pulled shut whenever rehearsals need to be conducted out of the public eye. Socially distanced viewing spots could be marked out on the pavement if necessary.

### Let's stage the loss of having a stage (Wolfgang)

*No report.*

## Are theatre buildings essentially the new 'found spaces'? (Gemma B)

**Session Convener:** Gemma, Debbie Bandara

**Participant names:**

Hello

I'll be here in a bit

My main thought is that theatres won't be really functional for any other use, so it seems crazy to think of them not being used for art of some kind.

Is the idea of rent the issue?

Theatres are civic spaces, and my thoughts are how should these spaces offer a sense of 'duty of care'? How can the spaces be improved rather than returning back to its old ways? A new purpose?

## What can mentors do for young directors? (LPW)

**Participant names:** Debbie Bandara, Megan Brewer Sarah Crowden

What can experienced directors do to help emerging directors get through this time? What do people need to move forward?

Having a space to consolidate knowledge gathered over the years to pass on.

Offer insight for how best to steer into different trajectories into the theatre world.

If you've got something to say, provide a platform and allow that to happen.

Acknowledge that it's tricky for some to get through doors.

Start out without assuming that your route is the only way forward - everyone has different hurdles.

Don't lose sight of the fact that if you have a story to tell, that form of expression is important to share with the community.

If you're thinking in terms of a mentoring scheme, pairing people who have similar artistic aesthetics together can be helpful - matching a physical theatre director with an emerging physical theatre director will be more fruitful than matching a musical director with a physical theatre director.

How do we ensure opportunities get advertised and put out to a wider community rather than just within smaller personal circles?

How do we capture directors who are emerging later in life? Emerging  $\neq$  young.

Making sure we share this information in open spaces. Zoom can be very exclusive, so how do we open this open to everyone to access this wonderful information?

How can we be accountable for our actions so we are generating and helping others?

Director's Lab West Connects has been a great model for open access:

<https://www.directorslabwest.com/>

Making sure to reach out to different communities with different needs, visible and invisible.

Acknowledge that no one knows what things will look like going forward. It's okay that we're in a grieving process - this is unlike anything that has ever happened before. A collective grieving is okay.

Mentoring is a great way of allowing for people to find different directors to go from there.

Another way of thinking about this might be not so much a mentor/mentee model, but a skillset-pooling/peer sharing model. The Ensemble I run in Norwich has been working every week online since mid-March, and one of the things that was actually part of our philosophy already got reinforced by lockdown - that any of the participants can take over a session and share or propose an exercise that they enjoy, but which others of us might not have been aware of.. IN my French work we used to call this La Journee du Passeur. It's a very collectivising and empowering culture.

I wonder whether it might also be important to think how best this time can be used. What can a director (any director) usefully learn or practice during this time? Script reading and analysis are excellent uses of digital time. Drawing sets for fantasy productions (or making them with lego :- ) ) etc.

Tchuuss :-)

Equity has a Directors Committee of course - thoughts from them?

Also, connecting with your own artistic practice and providing safe spaces to allow ideas to flourish - where can emerging (young and old) directors find such honest places? The techniques to deliver new work is shifting all the time and more so now, so how do we support this change for others? (Debbie)

### What does producing look like now and in the future (Anna Pool)

Is this the current outlook?-

Wait until it's open again to remake our cancelled projects

But what if they don't re-open? Or at least not in any previous recognisable way for a long time to come?

This could be a return for outdoor theatre, site-specific, re-purposed spaces and small companies moving in to larger spaces. (A potential means of audience growth if we discover new ways of attracting people to drama)?

What are the models of producing houses that could be the best in the post-corona world? Is something like the National Theatre of Wales model the best? No building eating up costs but able to be flexible and move dependent on project.

Coronavirus has highlighted just how much the funding model needs to change in the UK. Although we are very grateful to ACE for its short term loan grants to individuals etc, the redistribution of money from all other funds has meant that there is much less funding for actual making of work at this time. We need funding for



much needed R & D work, in the immediate term perhaps to find new ways of making theatre at this time but also for the future. The previous models of subsidised funding has always be product driven rather than research driven meaning that the time to create more meaningful, and in the long term, more innovative work has never been there. A shift towards this way of thinking would be beneficial.

Coronavirus will affect every aspect of producing now- how will this affect insurance, audience, risk and things like incorporating social distancing into set design etc if necessary? There may always need to be multiple plans to make things viable which will affect the long term "product".

## How Can We Honour The Earth Through Our Work? (Kit Baker)

**Session Convener:** Kit Baker, Debbie Bandara

**Participant names:** Kit Baker, Debbie Bandara, Laura ?, Rosemary Lee

Intro: A few years ago I had a conversation with a friend who was telling me that his work on environmental issues was shifting. Before then, he had been focusing on advising corporations on how they could become greener and facilitating research by artists who were making work around climate change. He told me that the Standing Rock protests had led to a sea change towards environmental activists working with indigenous peoples. Could the same kind of shift happen in our work in theatre - or in general? Whether or not we follow suit and collaborate with Indigenous artists on performance or art projects, could we change direction and sharpen focus on how our work might contribute to all of us taking better care of our environment?

Possibly looking at the organsational structure and making a concerted and conscious effort to reduce carbon footprint, recycle set and production, connect to power running from green energy sources etc. Artistically, can we encourage an underlying universal aim to create an "environmental - conscious" case similar to our "diversity" case? Perhaps this might shift to a stronger focus across the whole sector. Perhaps each board should have a clear environmental representative that will deliver clear strategies for their organization and relay back to Arts Council etc.? Perhaps this already exists? (Debbie)

Climate Activists have pointed to the way masses of people suddenly changed their behavior in response to the global threat of COVID-19 as the kind of mass action they've been trying to inspire for decades. Are there ways in which we as theatre workers can take advantage of the increased global awareness of the way collective changes in behavior might advance much-needed climate action?

A major obstacle is indifference. How can we get people to care about theatre, dance etc. at a time when it's not getting any easier to make any kind of work? Not to mention asking people to make more personal sacrifices when they are struggling to get by and the COVID-19 crisis shows few signs of being over anytime soon.

Community-based projects in which one group of participants is engaged as creative collaborators over an extended period of time may be the best framework for theatre to play a role. Equally, the best way for theatre to do so may be to make theatrical projects in unconventional public contexts rather than in traditional theatre spaces. A recent example is a parade devised by Blast Theory commissioned by a museum in Philadelphia to commemorate lives lost in the city in the 1918 pandemic. (<https://www.blasttheory.co.uk/projects/spit-spreads-death/>)

There have been some promising collaborations with Indigenous artists on performance and activism which have been getting more and more visible and impactful. Native artist Gregg Deal created a performance as artist-in-residence at the Denver Art Museum that responded to the US government's re-starting of the oil pipeline plans that had led to the Standing Rock protests. (<http://greggdeal.com/Supreme-Law-of-the-Land>). Deal's viral poster created in response to COVID-19, "Protect Our Elders", was projected on a Brooklyn skyscraper in an emergency campaign organized by art curators and public health curators around the world (<https://amplifier.org/portfolio-posts/gregg-deal-protect-our-elders/>) (<https://www.instagram.com/p/CAgyblulPj3/>)

## **Think Even Bigger: Imagining NEW Futures + Structures (Jenny Koons)**

How can we imagine bigger and more imaginative structures for creating and dreaming about our future? Often I'm finding our conversations go back to the structures we know and are a part of already. How do we dream even bigger?

Once there is a gap in programming - particularly digital programming - is theatre able to fill that gap as we can produce faster than television and film? Is serialized theatre a potential answer for this?

What do we need to preserve about theatre that makes digital theatre "theatre" rather than film? Sending out packages of 'stuff' so that people feel a physical connection? Elements that make it feel more live and interactive?

Our title encompasses a space and an action: theatre is a physical space and the act of gathering. Since the first part can't happen right now, what can we do to expand upon the second?

Our job is to reinvent ourselves constantly in the best possible sense.

What do we do when the way we've always done things is no longer available?

What is the necessary structural change that allows us to move forward?

How do we enable experimentation during a time when we're in a bit of emotional gridlock/lack of creative spark?

Finding the space to experiment might be a helpful first step.

The infrastructure that usually serves as a foundation for theatre has disappeared overnight - once that has disappeared, what is working? What is missing? How do we bring that back?

In US, thinking about bringing back genuine rep companies.

We have an opportunity to fully embrace and interrogate the idea of who can physically get into these buildings and see our work.

Intersection of game design and theatre.

What are you dreaming about right now, both in this moment and beyond this moment?

- Missing the collective experience of theatre
- Collective experience that is accessible for everyone (streaming allows for more access, particularly those who do not have physical access to theatres)
- Removing divide between movable parts (actors, directors, choreographers, designers, etc.) and parts that live in a specific company (exec director, marketing manager, etc.). Moving towards a more collective artistic community rather than having community compartmentalized by structures of theatre companies.
- Democratic, inclusive way of engaging others with conversation and a better way of running institutions
- Better communication channels and transparency (especially with buildings/established companies)
- Taking big artistic risks without them feeling like risks - or being able to reframe them as something other than "risk" so that they are invited or even celebrated rather than being considered deal-breakers
- Arts patronage: orgs funded rather than individual artists. Can we have a direct relationship between communities and artists? Town appoints a panel who appoints an artist who is on salary from the community to be the resident artist? Panel would be reflective of the demographics of the community. Having artists employed by municipalities etc.
- Facilitator based in community who can draw creativity out of the community: instead of channeling a voice, giving the individuals in that community a way of sharing their voice themselves.

Be clear whether you're trying to serve art, artists, audience, communities, etc.

With big organizations, things take a while: change is slow. Having an AD in position for 20 years is a problem, but switching staff too quickly can also cause projects/initiatives to get dropped. Rotation system for leadership?

Civic Practice: community is engaged from the start, with a facilitator helping things along. Community performs/is part of the final culmination of the art.

Who is part of process as it develops? What do we mean when we say it is "open?" Should we think about renaming buildings and theatres? Moving away from convention of naming things after big donors. How do we make sure that names come from people who don't come from people who feel entitled to that space at the moment? Having the communities tell us what name would make the space feel welcome and inclusive. What translates to our communities? See Kiln Theatre name change.

Call it a space/hall/etc. rather than a theatre or arts center or other terminology that can make it feel imposing.

Storyhouse Chester - name makes it feel like a space for gathering and communion. And now they are operating as a soup kitchen!

Theatres in the United States moving towards transforming into spaces that the community needs: shelters, etc. If the thing that the building does (theatre) is not possible in the foreseeable future, what is that space for in the interim?

Some theatres in UK moving away from "Royal" in title, but also many communities hanging tighter to names that denote the city or area they serve (such as Bath, etc.).

Theatre is a container for civic gathering. What are other imaginative terms for what we do? Would those invite more people in?

Looking at short-term uses, projects, and ideas as well as longer-term. Can we imagine things that could happen now, or in two months, or five as well as what happens when we can open on a larger scale? Would looking at a single project or idea help us to look at wider systems?

Two mindsets: reactive (make decisions as information comes in, in small four-month or so chunks at a time) and proactive (if we can't open for another year, who do we want to be in a year?).

A lot of larger orgs in UK just focused on survival right now rather than the differentiation between these conversations.

Do we do one big show? Lots of smaller shows? Do we open the bar? Etc. Each org is asking and answering different questions based on their current and projected needs. What do we do with theatres that are difficult to transform into other spaces in the long-term?

Anxiety over theatres plugging gaps in long-term; worry that spaces/artists can't be 'fix-alls.' E.g. theatres can allow students and teachers in to use as extra space when needed, but don't have the capacity to serve as schools.

### How do we resource space for longer-term thinking when this crisis feels so immediate? (Rachel Briscoe)

**Session Convener:** Rachel

**Participant names:** Lucy, David, Kate, Gemma, Lizzie, Zak, Will, Lizzie, Debbie

*PLEASE WRITE YOUR OWN POINT BELOW SO NO ONE HAS TO DO ALL THE TYPING.*

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This was why I called the session:

It seems to me (Rachel) that being able to think long-term is a privilege.

By which I mean that being able to think long-term means you have bandwidth: your energy has not been consumed by immediate needs like:

- making sure you have enough money for rent and food
- making sure the people who depend on you for care are ok
- dealing with a world structured to benefit white, able-bodied, cis-gendered people

This means that the people who are thinking long-term are not representative of the arts, or indeed of wider society.

This is reinforced by things like the government's taskforce (perhaps the most official vehicle of longer-term response) which is predominantly white, male, privileged - the 'white knights'.

It isn't enough to say that people \*should\* be thinking longer-term, or inviting them to - there are structural things which mean some people face enormous barriers to this and other people don't.

So - how can we **resource** a more accurate representation of our society to think longer term?

Is this something the new freelance taskforce can/ will do? If not, how can we make it happen?

The long-term thinking needs to have diverse and inclusive voices, otherwise the future will further exclude these groups. As much as we can only think short-term, we also have to encourage many voices to state what is the best way forward that truly benefits everyone across the board. Also, many in crisis have little or no time to visit zoom meetings etc., so already its exclusive. To have a network of artists who work regionally are then able to listen and work within community settings, I guess this is where we are able to gain a clearer insight into the best ways to support long-term thinking. Perhaps the funding structures should not be 'top-down', but possible a 'bottom-up' approach? This would really shift things forward positively.(Debbie)

### It's always been better outdoors.... (Nathan)

**Session Convener:** Nathan Curry

**Participant names:** Esther Dix, Mike Bernardin, SharonE, Ramon Ayres, Ruth Moore, Debbie Bandara

Venue stages are not open and are unlikely to be open for some time. **What can be seen as positive from this?**

Making and sharing work outdoors, in the public realm has always been powerful, enriching and hugely accessible for audiences.

Is now a moment to celebrate and support the creation of art in public realm- as part of everyday life

Lockdown has already seen various public art experiences:

Clapping on a Thursday

Singing and dancing in the streets

Rainbows at windows

.....people were looking to public spaces for art and communal experiences

Being outdoors with the community is cathartic, healing, celebratory of society..

This is not the end of venues. We love venues. This is about how work can reach and be seen in more places - pop up theatres, theatre in shops, dance in train stations, opera in the park. Venues have a key role to play in the creation of work but why solely on stages

Is it all about the money? Fund it to not require a box office.

Seeing the places we live as theatres - what could happen next?

A pressure to find ways to take theatre online - not really what we want...

There are spaces that can work really well, have social distancing, etc.

Will need audiences to have new attitudes towards what we do, and weather etc.!

The outdoors requires a whole new way of thinking as a directing, dramaturg, the audience relationships, etc.

Shared experience- like corona virus lockdown

Project confidence - we CAN be outdoors in a safe way - vs 'project fear' from the government

The most radical version of the question - where can art take place in the future?  
Where will the audience be?

Message to makers - COME OUTDOORS!

If we aren't providing art for where people are now, what are we doing???

different types of work at different times of year (shorter in winter)

What stories do we tell now? And What stories outdoors?

### What do we mean by risk-taking? (Andrew)

**Session Convener:** Andrew

**Participant names:** Sam Dunstan, Dean Hutchinson, Laura Ryder, Sarah Crowden, Helen G, Abbi Greeland, spunshon, Will, Debbie Bandara, Tom Spencer, Tarek, mollysharpe, krystinanellis, Nick Sweeting, Sebastian Farr

Term risk-taking is used a lot when talking about how to rebuild the industry - as in 'we need to take more risks' - but what does this mean exactly in practice? Can we explore the concepts and language around risk-taking? What risks do we want to take / how might that change post-COVID?

Can be financial, artistic, approaches to people, audience, health and safety, reputational?

Being freelance is a risk in itself.

Risk of audience shrinking if you're too daring - is this real or perceived?

Different perspectives on risk depending on who you are / risk is what you interpret it as?

What's your level of risk in everyday life? What risks do you take in your own work? How do you come up with collective models of risk that everyone is happy with?

Is there a market for what I do?

Discussed personal rationale for initiating a project:

1. Funding / remuneration
2. Concept
3. Audience

If you all three feel right, you should go for it, if 2 or 3 feel right you should consider it, if only 1, it may be too risky

There are similar models in programming, where the more criteria a potential project meets - e.g. themes, representation, accessibility, artists, local links/resonances, affordability - the more appropriate it feels for a venue / audience / place / community. This doesn't necessarily make choices more conservative - you can still push boundaries as long as that's factored into your criteria.

Use smaller spaces for riskier projects, keep larger spaces for less risky projects.

Idea raised that anything you sell should be self-sustaining.

But most theatre has to be subsidised as so often costs outweigh potential income - just depends who is doing the subsidising

Public subsidy was questioned - what would happen if we didn't have any? What would implications be of a sector which had to rely on fundraising from other sources?

We're facing a serious recession: have to move further away from dependence on public subsidy? Go back to models of patronage? What effect would this have on the work? Is all work conditioned to some extent by who's funding it - what are the pros and cons of public vs private?

Invent new models - e.g. immersive theatre used empty buildings from 2008 financial crash and repurpose them as a bar and entertainment space. Why do we have to stick / go back to previous models?

Installation art may take a comeback because it works in a socially distanced way?

Jozara provides support and guidance for performers - <https://www.jozara.co.uk/> - provides career support

Risk has taken on a stark new meaning during pandemic - more people now taking more physical/health risks every day  
Audience will take risks stepping into venues post-COVID

Venues can support artists in small ways to support them to take new risks appropriate for them: e.g. Derby Theatre pay artists for training. Artists must feel security and confidence in order to take risks.

People take risks with other people.

Risk is a financial term used in board meetings. At BAC most shows have to be subsidized, so risk organisation thinks about most day-to-day is reputational / how radical show content is.

All artists take risk - we're taught to be scared of it. But I think it's an exciting word.

Audience risk also important

Possible negative connotations with word 'risk' - there are obviously different levels of risk on a spectrum, but does taking risk with public subsidy seem unpalatable to the public / taxpayers? Is there an issue with terminology in wider discourse about justification for funding the arts? Does it sound like gambling?

Alternative words which could be used? e.g. 'aspiration' or 'challenge'? Or 'investment' - all investments are risky, but the payoffs can be huge.

But are financial words like 'risk' and 'investment' appropriate to describe art - is it just subscribing to a neoliberal view of art as another capitalist structure / only value is financial?

'I have no problem with the word, think it perfectly accurately describes a phenomenon which is generally accepted and not more problematic than any other. You could come up with 100 different words but why change it?



Can be used as scapegoating word - programming more diverse stories may be outlawed as 'too risky'. Used as a catch all?

How do ensure that we don't censor relationship with audiences?

Don't coddle audiences. Trigger warnings show respect for audience. But there's also a lot of patronising to audiences which goes on, assuming shows will be too risky / need to be 'safer'.

Don't want to over explain to audiences - going to the theatre is always a risk, whether people will respond to work or not.

Want to make as safe as possible for audiences to be in the room.

### How do we engage with our communities moving forward, making theatre from them and for them? (Pooja Ghai)

**Session Convener:** (Pooja)

**Participant names:** Debbie Bandara

how do we engage with our communities and open up our spaces.

spaces could be safely opened and people could have a look around to bring gaps between communities and spaces

there has to be a way to bridge these gaps

R & D work on stage and invite people in - keep it local keep it safe. Just allowing people to look around and see a socially distanced play reading maybe as lockdown loosens etc.

food!!! can be a barrier to communities and could be an invitation if there was more consideration of how to help make people feel at home

offer out large spaces to community groups

our community is our audience

community running the theatre - look at how they've been running the pandemic - far better than government!

engage with conversations with our communities

we have an opportunity to re structure to be a unified artistic community and understand our connectedness

it's a civic space- this is yours - it's not just a little play space for middle class people

the world is looking for ways we can connect as human beings

community engagement programmes always sit separately and yet it's the engine room -its integral!

how do we do this?

looking at local groups within the community like libraries who have funding that we can get involved with and find a synergy

Food banks and distribution networks

Local councils and community connector groups can act as partnering agents to connect community groups that might need extra space right now with emptier theatre spaces

working with the local council to explore programmes and opportunities

Shielded groups coming through and out of Covid. How do we engage? Important to remember those groups be it through community engagement.

People's fear of returning to a public space.

How we build in equality of opportunity for audiences and workers. Ways to ensure that the most vulnerable don't get left behind.

## Am I going to have a job at the end of this? (Ruth Moore & Lucas)

**Session Convener:** Ruth Moore

**Participant names:**

I called this session to offer some space for people to worry and maybe grieve a little about the uncertain future of our industry, with other people who are in the same situation.

I just keep reading news articles about how the industry is dead and about how theatre will never recover. I am in the interesting position that I have been on maternity leave throughout this crisis, and I gave birth to my first child on the first day of lockdown, so I have very much been out of the loop!!

I am a venue based producer, and my partner is a sound engineer in a large capacity venue, I can't help myself wondering what will become of us, and what else I'd do if I couldn't do this anymore!

I appreciated the time to really sit with that concern, and come to terms with it.

## What's the point? What would you say to those graduating/studying or considering studying acting?

**Session Convener:** Jaye K  
**Participant names:** Sarah Crowden

Hi

I'm wanting to go to some other sessions but I feel the need to try and harvest the collective wisdom in this 'room'.

I work in a Drama School and I have genuine concerns over the emotional wellbeing and maintaining students enthusiasm for their training/chosen career at this time - especially those graduating this year.

If you would like to leave any words of encouragement, hope or wisdom, that I can share with our students, it would be greatly appreciated.

Just pop them down here.

THANK YOU. Jx

Hi Jaye,

I'm sorry I may miss you, so I'm leaving this here for now. I am a drama lecturer at UEA. We spent the last week of semester and the Easter break reconfiguring our work so that students could still apply many (certainly not all) the skills they had been learning prior to lockdown, All practical assessments were changed so that the mixture of analytical work and actual acting could be assessed remotely. It was heartbreaking, since we were moving towards scene-sharings and ensemble rehearsals.

However, I have to say, once the amended modules had been published and the new workplan set you, the engagement by the students was awesome, and in lots of ways more concentrated, more committed. In fact, I would venture, students have been both more receptive to directing notes and have shown more agency in creating their characters and doing their homework...

I hope I get a chance to join this discussion when it's live and meet a few more people like yourself, engaged with this matter.

Best, Mike :-)

Hi Jaye,

Sarah Crowden from Bat meeting here. I hear anecdotally that some drama schools are offering online tuition which is proving hard to access for some students - those without the technology. It's a lose lose situation. I feel for those who have left drama school in the past two years (a relative among them) who have worked, but haven't yet had time to get established and have therefore fallen through the financial 'safety net'. That said, those young actors that I've worked with over the pst several years possess an extraordinary resilience and 'can do' mindset. They are sanguine about the future, and see themselves in the arts in some capacity in the future, whatever it

holds. Definitely not the misplaced overconfidence of the young. They have a genuine vocation. Heartening. Inspiring. Tell your students to keep going, keep working on pieces, keep their minds and bodies well, and, most importantly, learn how to self-tape. Do contact me via social media if you wish.

## What do people want? (Gemma B)

**Session Convener:** Gemma Brockis

**Participant names:**

Well I'm going to hang around here by myself for a bit and see what happens.

All alone. Looking at a picture of a snail.

What do people want?

I went away and now I'm back. but I want to see people so I'll probably go away again.

What the audience wants is the most important thing, isn't it?

If you make something that they want, that enough people want, you can keep going.

And, when you can't sell what already exists, you need to find new ways.