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For Love or Money?

Collaboration Between Amateur and Professional Theatre in the Royal Shakespeare Company's Open Stages Programme



Arts & Humanities
Research Council



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Researchers

Professor Helen Nicholson

Royal Holloway, University of London, Principal Investigator

Professor Nadine Holdsworth

University of Warwick, Co-Investigator

Dr Molly Flynn

Royal Holloway, University of London, Post-Doctoral Research Assistant

Cover image:

Romeo and Juliet at Rugby Theatre. Photographer: Martin Pulley

Below:

2013 Open Stages Director's Weekend, courtesy of the RSC



Executive Summary

- The amateur arts are taking on new significance in the twenty-first century British context. Innovations in technology and new methods of distribution have offered amateur artists unparalleled opportunities to connect with one another and with the leading practitioners in their discipline. This shift can be observed in the increased visibility of amateur creativity in mainstream media (*Great British Bake Off*, *The Choir*, etc.) as well as in the rise of interest in community crafts like life drawing, knitting clubs, and others.
- In the performing arts, the changing face of amateurism is evidenced by the number of nationally subsidized professional theatres that have taken to incorporating amateur and non-professional performers in their work. The Royal Shakespeare Company's Open Stages initiative is one of the most ambitious examples of an extended collaboration between amateurs and professionals. In the Open Stages programme, uniquely, the RSC works with members of established amateur theatre companies.
- Between 2011 – 2016, the RSC engaged thousands of amateur theatre-makers in workshops and skills exchanges. Some of those amateur theatre-makers continue to collaborate with RSC artists in other capacities and thereby contribute to the blurring of boundaries between the spheres of amateur and professional creativity.
- By sharing their practical and cultural resources with amateur theatre companies across the UK, the RSC offered amateur artists new access to the types of performance techniques commonly used in professional rehearsal rooms. Additionally, recognition from the RSC provided many of the programme's amateur participants affirmation that their work is of value and plays an important part in shaping perceptions of theatre and of Shakespeare in our culture.
- Since the RSC began their work with amateur theatre-makers in 2011, the company has produced two full-scale productions featuring amateur actors onstage. The individual artists involved in Open Stages as professional practitioners have found their work with amateurs inspiring, challenging and eye-opening. The RSC continues to seek new ways to build meaningful relationships between amateur and professional theatre-makers across the UK.
- Collaborations between amateur and professional theatre-makers challenge cultural assumptions about the value of theatre and community arts. As a groundbreaking initiative, the RSC's Open Stages asks artists, academics, and policy-makers to take note of the significant contribution amateur artists make to the performing arts in the UK. It also invites professional-subsidized organizations like the RSC to examine their own relationships to their communities and consider how best to encourage participation and engagement across the performing arts sectors.

Introduction

For Love Or Money? Collaboration Between Amateur and Professional Theatre (January 2016 – January 2017) is a year-long research project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).¹ The project explores the relationship between the spheres of amateur and professional theatre making, an area that has, until now, received very little critical attention from academics.² The initial impulse for this study arose from the first AHRC funded project entirely focused on amateur theatre, *Amateur Dramatics: Crafting Communities in Time and Space* (2013 – 2016).³ In the course of our research into the rich and under-researched area of amateur theatre, it came to our attention that the boundaries between amateur and professional theatre making are often more porous than is commonly thought. Our study suggests that amateur creativity and voluntary participation in the arts are taking on new significance in the twenty-first century context.

As Charles Leadbetter and Paul Miller point out in their 2004 study, non-professionals have made major contributions to numerous industries in recent years. From music to astronomy, from programming to blogging, unprecedented access to information and technology has changed the face of amateurism since the turn of the century. The costs of creative production are down and paths to affordable distribution have proliferated. These developments have given way to a new kind of ‘do-it-yourself ethos’ evidenced by the rising popularity of local community crafts and arts activities such as knitting clubs and community choirs, and encouraged by the representation of non-professionals on television programmes like *The Great British Bake Off* and Gareth Malone’s *The Choir* in which amateurs work to professional standards. Another example of this dynamic is the British Science Association’s online outreach programmes that solicit both data and research questions from members of the public dubbed ‘citizen scientists’. Likewise, many contemporary theatre-makers are also working in ways that blur the boundaries between producer and consumer and inspire amateur creativity through the use of new technology and increased access to participation. In line with these broader cultural movements towards a repositioning of the amateur in contemporary culture, a number of professional-subsidized performing arts

Open Stages places skills development at the heart of the initiative with the expectation that each amateur production selected for the programme will contain ‘some genuine RSC “DNA”’.



Merry Wives of Windsor at The Inn Theatre Company in Dartmouth, courtesy of the company

organizations have begun collaborative endeavors with non-professional performers in order to establish deeper connections within their regions while simultaneously attracting new audiences.⁴

This report documents the findings of our investigation into one of the most ambitious and high-profile examples of a professional company collaborating with amateur theatre-makers, the Royal Shakespeare Company’s Open Stages initiative. Since the programme launched in 2011, Open Stages has engaged close to 300 amateur theatre companies and over 10,000 amateur participants in workshops, master classes, and mentoring schemes taught by leading industry professionals. With the help of their partner theatres in England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, the RSC is reaching out to amateur companies across the UK in order to illustrate the company’s belief that ‘Shakespeare, and the art of theatre making belongs to everyone, not just to watch but to perform’.⁵ Open Stages places skills development at the heart of the initiative with the expectation that each amateur production selected for the programme will contain ‘some genuine RSC “DNA.”’⁶

Our research analyzes the impact of the RSC's Open Stages initiative. It traces the RSC's involvement in the amateur theatre scene from 2011 – 2016 and charts the process of creative collaboration between amateur and professional theatre-makers throughout the programme. Our methodological approach is guided by the participant-observation model demonstrated in Gay McAuley's groundbreaking study, *Not Magic But Work: An ethnographic account of a rehearsal process*. In her detailed behind-the-scenes analysis of theatre-makers at work, McAuley suggests that, 'an observer who wishes to reach a nuanced understanding of a rehearsal process must continually be asking the same question, as he or she does so, it becomes increasingly clear that what is going on in a rehearsal room is more than the making of a theatrical production'.⁷ Inspired by McAuley's ethnographic approach, we have travelled the country asking our questions to the amateurs and professionals of Open Stages. We have visited rehearsals, productions, and workshops with the artists of Open Stages across the UK from Warminster to Doncaster, from Darlington to Cardiff.⁸

This report details our findings and reveals how their association with the RSC has or has not shaped the way the company's amateur partners rehearse, perform, and conceptualize their own theatre practice. Reciprocally, this study also illustrates how engagement with amateur practitioners has influenced the work of the professional artists employed by the programme and considers the programme's resonance within the RSC more



The Tempest at Shakespeare at the George in Huntingdon (2016).
Photographer: Antonia Brown

broadly. Drawing on rehearsal and performance observations as well as a series of semi-structured interviews with the amateur and professional artists at the heart of Open Stages, this report demonstrates how the RSC brought collaborations between amateur and professional theatre-makers into public discourse in recent years and initiated an important dialogue about the value of theatre and creativity in our culture.⁹

As in any study of this kind, evidence of the programme's impact is best illustrated through consideration of individual experiences and personal narratives such as those woven throughout this report. In Section One, we offer a brief history of Open Stages. Here we describe how the project was conceived, structured, and implemented. Section Two analyzes the programme's impact on its amateur participants. It offers individual examples from participants who found their experiences in Open Stages to be especially influential to the development of their subsequent creative practices. With these cases in mind, Section Two also describes the broader patterns we encountered in our fieldwork and offers analysis of what we observe to be the most meaningful outcomes Open Stages has had for the amateur artists involved. Section Three considers the initiative's significance for the professionals of Open Stages and questions how working with amateurs has or has not come to shape the work at the RSC as a whole. In the conclusion we sum up our major findings and offer preliminary suggestions on how future collaborations between the RSC and their amateur partners might continue to refine the momentum of creative discovery already set in motion by the Open Stages initiative.

Notes

- 1 *For Love or Money? Collaboration between amateur and professional theatre*, Grant Ref: AH/N001567/1.
- 2 Exceptions include, the 2004 report, *The Pro-Am Revolution: How enthusiasts are changing our economy and our society* by Charles Leadbetter and Paul Miller (London: Demos); and the 2012 article 'Reading Pro-Am theatre through a serious leisure lens: organizational and policy-making implications' by Rachel Perry and Elizabeth Carnegie published in *Leisure Studies*, 32:4, pp. 383–398.
- 3 *Amateur Dramatics: Crafting Communities in Time and Space*, Grant Ref: AH/K001922/1.
- 4 For example, the National Theatre of Wales and their 2011 collaboration with the group Wildworks in which 15 professional actors joined approximately 85 non-professionals to perform the 72 hour interactive piece *The Passion* or, Birmingham Opera Company's 2015 production of Michael Tippett's *Ice Break* which included thousands of amateur participants 99% of which had never attended the BOC before and 75% of which were under the age of 35.
- 5 Quoted from the RSC's early promotional materials for the initiative.
- 6 Final Progress Report from the Royal Shakespeare Company: Open Stages 2011–12, p. 6.
- 7 Gay McAuley, *Not Magic But Work: An ethnographic account of a rehearsal process* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012) p. 213.
- 8 For a full list of interviewees, see Appendix A.
- 9 Special thanks are also due to Dr. Jane Milling of University of Exeter whose work on our broader inquiry into amateur theatre in England has made an important contribution to the present study on the impact of Open Stages.

Section One: What is Open Stages and How Does it Work?

“For me personally, Open Stages has been completely life changing.”

- Jane Jones, Theatre in the Square (London)

Open Stages was conceived by former RSC artistic director Michael Boyd in collaboration with the company's director of events and exhibitions, Geraldine Collinge, and RSC director of education Jacqueline O'Hanlon. Michael Boyd recalls that, in his previous posts as artistic director at the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry, the Crucible in Sheffield, and the Tron Theatre in Glasgow, there were clear pathways to creating meaningful connections between the theatre's work and the community at large. As head of the RSC, however, he faced a new challenge in his efforts to generate local engagement, now on a national scale.¹⁰ For Boyd, connecting with the UK's extensive network of amateur theatre-makers presented an answer to one of the most important questions he faced as artistic director of one of the UK's leading arts organizations: how can a national theatre like the RSC maintain local relevance to audiences all around the country?

The project now known as Open Stages began in November 2009, when the RSC invited 65 delegates from voluntary arts organizations to Stratford-Upon-Avon to discuss the possibility of including amateur theatre-makers as participants in the 2012 World Shakespeare Festival, an event staged in connection to the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad. Following this initial inquiry, Open Stages was subsequently developed as a stand-alone, long-term project funded by a generous grant from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. Producer Ian Wainwright was brought on board in 2010 to design and implement the initiative in consultation with representatives from a number of national amateur theatre organizations.¹¹

Later that year the RSC released a nationwide call for applications from amateur theatre-makers, inviting companies to pitch their Shakespeare or Shakespeare-inspired productions to the RSC for consideration. As printed in the Open Stages 2011 call for submissions, 'Amateur and community group is defined for the purpose of this project as a group run by volunteers, and whose participants are volunteers [...] If the group is led or run by someone who is paid to do so you are not eligible to take part'. Unsure how much interest the programme might spark, Ian Wainwright reports that the RSC staff were surprised to receive over 300 applications from theatre groups hoping to participate in the programme which was set to run from 2011 – 2012.

Of the initial applicants, 263 groups were accepted and invited to send delegates from their companies to a series of free 'skills exchanges' hosted by the RSC and by their partner theatres across the UK. At these weekend-long workshops, participants attended classes in acting, movement, and voice as well as stage combat, text, and design. The sessions were taught by local theatre professionals and a core team of artists from the RSC. All Open Stages companies were invited to use the RSC Open Stages logo in their press materials and select companies were chosen to perform at a regional and then a national showcase.

“Open Stages is the project we did to find out the project we should be doing.”

- Ian Wainwright, RSC Open Stages Producer (Stratford-Upon-Avon)

Following the success of its first run, the RSC released a second call for Open Stages applications in 2012. Though a second run of Open Stages was not a foregone conclusion, the initiative was supported by funders Esmée Fairbairn and incoming artistic director Gregory Doran who both felt the project to be an important initiative for the development of the RSC and for the company's amateur partners. With key lessons learned from the original Open Stages project, this refined second version of the programme extended the company's commitment to building bridges between the spheres of amateur and professional theatre making. This revised version of Open Stages was set to run from 2013 – 2016. For the programme's second incarnation, the RSC reduced the number of companies accepted to 100. The decision to decrease the number of participants involved was made in order to give more consistent attention to groups across regions and in an attempt to ensure that every company had the opportunity to work directly with professional artists from the RSC. In the programme's first run, Wainwright reports, some companies chose to use the logo and declare their association with the RSC but were not in attendance at any of the skills exchanges. In the application to the second run of Open Stages, conversely, applicants were asked to tick a box confirming that, if accepted, they would be ready to participate in the workshops and mentoring schemes offered by the RSC.

With key lessons learned from the original Open Stages project, this refined second version of the programme extended the company's commitment to building bridges between the spheres of amateur and professional theatre making.



Pericles at the RSC (2012), courtesy of the company

The skills exchange weekends have been the central pillar to the structure of Open Stages since the beginning. They constitute the most comprehensive contact between amateur theatre-makers and RSC professionals within the framework of the initiative. As Ian Wainwright reports, during the programme's first run from 2011 – 2012, the RSC consciously emphasized their commitment to 'celebrating' and 'showcasing' the work of their amateur partners and was careful not to overstep any boundaries by implying that the professionals employed by Open Stages had been recruited to 'teach' the amateurs how to work. However, throughout the first year of the initiative the RSC found that many of the amateur theatre-makers involved were excited to take part in trainings led by RSC professionals and, if anything, would like to see more formal training as part of the programme. In response to this feedback, the RSC restructured the second run of Open Stages placing more emphasis on the skills exchanges and decreasing the prominence of the showcases within the ethos of the initiative.

The second run of Open Stages was more polished, and began with a directors' weekend in Stratford-Upon-Avon where the amateur directors of each Open Stages production gathered for a series of trainings. This event facilitated important connections not only between amateurs and professionals but also among the amateur participants themselves. Following the director's weekend, amateur artists were also invited to regional skills exchanges that were hosted by one of the RSC's partner theatres. These events offered amateur artists the opportunity to work closely with representatives from other groups in their region and to create stronger connections between local theatre-makers both amateur and professional.

These regional skills exchanges facilitated one of the most important outcomes of Open Stages as some amateur groups who used to function more or less in isolation have become increasingly aware of and connected to other groups in their region.

This networking effect is particularly apparent among the directors from the South East regional group many of whom continue to attend one another's shows and meet regularly as a group to attend professional productions of interest. It comes as no surprise that the South East group has emerged as an especially cohesive one, a case resulting from two important factors. First, many of the directors live and work within an hour of central London. This means they had access to comparatively convenient public transportation options and were able to visit one another's venues with relative ease. The second reason for the unique cohesiveness of the South East group is connected to the region's directing mentor, James Farrell, who sought to keep the group united through regular newsletters, by running additional workshops, and an exceptional commitment to on-site visits.

It is notable, however, that not all of our respondents experienced the same sense of support and community through participation in the programme. For example, one director we spoke to felt she was at a disadvantage for having been incorporated into the South East regional group (which she referred to as the 'London Group'). Based over 80 miles north of London, this director had the impression that the distance between her group and the city meant that she and her cast received less attention from their directing mentor, and no on-site visits from RSC staff. The isolation she describes may not be representative of the majority of respondents included in our study. However, her experience



Llanymech Amateur Dramatics Society rehearses *Twelfth Night* (2016), courtesy of the company

does speak to an important point, which is that Open Stages functioned differently in different regions.

Many of the regional discrepancies in the administration of Open Stages resulted from variations within the RSC's partner theatres. Each of the company's partners faced unique challenges that depended on the number of groups assigned to the venue, the geographic location of those groups, and the previously established administrative infrastructure within the organization. For example, The Questors in Ealing was the first RSC partner theatre to host an Open Stages skills exchange weekend and the system they developed for organising the event was so successful it was later adopted by the RSC for future workshops in other locations.¹² The Questors was the only non-professional venue recruited as a partner theatre. The company's in-depth knowledge of the amateur theatre sector in combination with their organizational strengths were among the factors that made The Questors an especially effective partner for the programme.

Dundee Rep Theatre, the RSC's partner theatre in Scotland, faced a very different set of challenges. Dundee had far fewer amateur groups to oversee than The Questors but their groups were based across the country. For this reason, Dundee's directing mentor travelled to each company individually to conduct skills development workshops rather than attempt to gather them all in one place. The large-scale and ongoing nature of the Open Stages endeavor turned out to pose a struggle for some of the company's other regional partner theatres. Staff turnover, unreliable communication, and changes in organizational leadership at certain venues

meant that access to workshops and other resources were not evenly distributed to Open Stages amateurs in every area. As a ground-breaking collaboration between amateur and professional sectors, such complications are perhaps inevitable and have been considered by the RSC in planning future projects.

These organizational challenges have been taken into account in the present study. However, our research remit is not to dissect the programme's administration but rather to uncover the creative impact that lies at the core of the initiative. By focusing on the interactions between amateur companies and the RSC staff, our research aims to decipher the mechanics of exchange facilitated by the project. It highlights the different bodies of knowledge that are developed in both the amateur and the subsidized theatre making contexts and suggests that these different but overlapping types of expertise are what make Open Stages an especially generative vehicle for creative discovery. In the following two sections, this report seeks to untangle the intricacies of these two bodies of knowledge and explore the mechanics of how they are exchanged via the Open Stages activities.

Notes

- 10 As described by Michael Boyd in an unpublished interview conducted by Molly Flynn, 24 June 2016, London.
- 11 For more on the early formation of the project see a blog post written by voluntary arts advocate Robin Simpson on April 27 2011 <<https://culturalplayingfield.wordpress.com/2011/04/27/rsc-open-stages-takes-shape/>>, accessed 29 July 2016.
- 12 As described in an unpublished interview with director/designer Alex Marker conducted by Molly Flynn, 2 February 2016, Ealing.

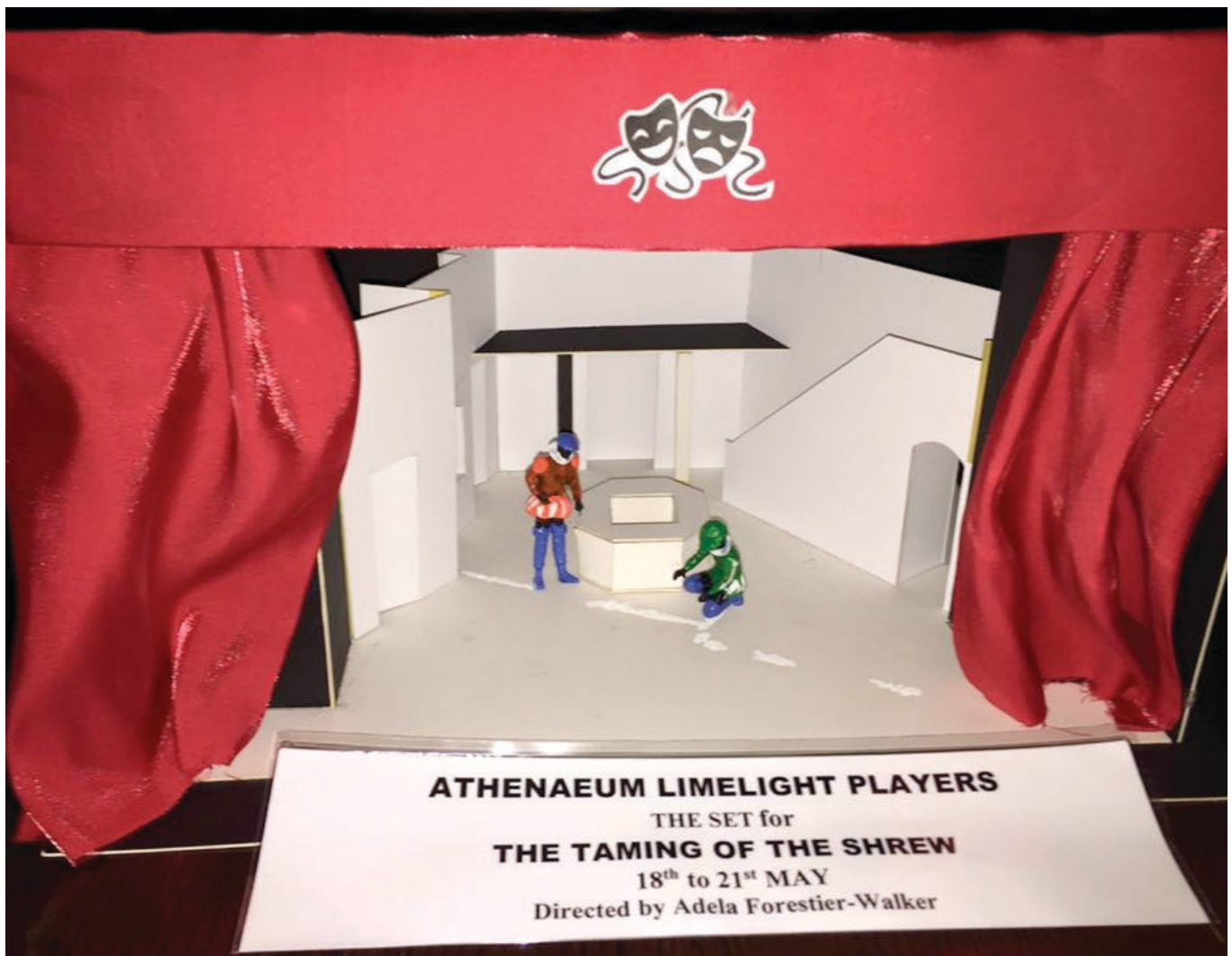
Section Two:

Transmission from the RSC to the amateurs of Open Stages

The RSC's amateur partners have a wide range of training and experience. For some participants, the Open Stages skills exchanges constituted their first encounter with the kind of physical, vocal, and performance techniques commonly taught in professional theatre training programmes. Meanwhile, other participants already had significant experience in formal theatre training before their involvement with the RSC either in college, university, or through private studio workshops. Keeping their diverse histories of training and experience in mind, we asked each of our respondents to recall their involvement in the Open Stages skills exchanges. We inquired into whether there were specific classes or exercises that participants found to be especially effective, and questioned how the actors and directors in attendance managed to integrate these experiences into their subsequent production processes.

Responses to this line of questioning were varied but, there were certain patterns of note that offer insight into how the legacy of the Open Stages skills development is playing out in amateur rehearsal rooms across the country. The most significant and controversial import from Open Stages into the practice of amateur theatre-making has been the introduction of physical and vocal exercises as well as rehearsal techniques involving improvisation and semi-structured exploration. For example, we were told repeatedly throughout our fieldwork that many amateur actors were resistant to participating in vocal and physical warm-ups during rehearsals. Numerous directors reported that even a brief warm-up at the start of rehearsal could make their actors feel uncomfortable. Improvisation and physical exercises are sometimes thought, we have been told, 'luvvie dovie' and 'actory,' something amateur theatre-makers do not engage in because they are 'practical down to earth people who just do this for fun'.¹³

In our visit to the mid-sized Midlands organization Rugby Theatre, for example, director Rob Sloan reported that since participating in Open Stages he begins every rehearsal with



Design model for *Taming of the Shrew* at Athanaeum Limelight Players in Warminster (2016), courtesy of the company

a series of physical and vocal exercises meant to increase focus and generate energy among the cast.¹⁴ According to Sloan, actors at his theatre understand that this is an important part of his production process. If they have an aversion to such activities, Sloan told us, they refrain from auditioning for his shows. This was confirmed in a subsequent interview with one of the actors in Sloan's latest production. An actor in his mid-twenties who also works as a school teacher informed us that though he was resistant at first, he has since become accustomed to Sloan's rehearsal style and has even begun to enjoy the warm-ups as long as they do not last too long.

“ It felt very welcoming, very exciting, and the workshops were tremendous. ”

- Anton Jungreuthmayer, Pirton Players (Pirton)

Questions about time and the efficacy of the exercises taught in Open Stages often arose in our conversations with the RSC's amateur partners. Most of the Open Stages amateurs we spoke to found the physical and vocal exercises they encountered in the skills exchanges to be of great interest. The challenge of integrating these rehearsal techniques into their own creative processes, however, was not always simple. Many of our respondents pointed out that professional actors at the RSC rehearse a new production full-time for weeks whereas amateur companies rarely meet more than once or twice a week for rehearsals that usually last around two to three hours. Some participants struggled to find time to integrate a process of experimentation into their rehearsals even if they were so inclined.

According to producer Ian Wainwright, 'One of the challenges [of the programme] was that some participants in the workshops had a tendency to see any exercises, technique, game they did in the skills workshops as 'warm up' activities not a rehearsal technique. The other was that some of the amateur participants would regularly and understandably hold up 'limited rehearsal time' as the barrier to doing anything different from their usual practise. Our case was that the techniques on offer saved time. E.g. a game or exercise can solve the running of a crowd scene far more effectively than individually blocking/choreographing each crowd member. That one of professional theatre's (from the RSC to a studio theatre's) chief expenses was an actor's time. We therefore needed to use it efficiently. However we did feel that over time as trust grew between us and people tried out the techniques they became more receptive and this became less of an issue'.¹⁵

In accordance with Ian Wainwright's assessment, some of the Open Stages participants included in our study found that creating an open space for discovery in their rehearsal rooms did indeed conserve time in that it facilitated a deeper and more meaningful connection between an actor

and the text. Despite these differences in reception, our research suggests that the majority of amateur directors involved in Open Stages continued to seek out ways of adjusting and amending the exercises taught at the skills exchanges in order to effectively incorporate them into their rehearsal processes.¹⁶ There were a few selected exercises that proved especially useful to the RSC's amateur partners and were mentioned repeatedly by respondents asked to recall the most influential lessons of the sessions.

One of the exercises frequently mentioned by our respondents was taught by Open Stages acting coach Annie Tyson. In our conversation with Tyson at RADA where she teaches when she is not working with Open Stages, Tyson described the structure of the session as follows: after splitting the group into pairs, Tyson would distribute a short dialogue of 4 – 5 lines to each pair. Everyone had 5 – 10 minutes to rehearse in their pairs before performing in front of the group. After performing their mini-dialogue Tyson offered the pairs alternative scenarios. She asked them about their relationships to one another and directed them to perform the dialogue again. This exercise made a big impression on the amateur participants included in our study. They found it an efficient approach to demonstrating how the same simple text can take on vastly different meanings depending on an actor's objectives and intentions.

A second exercise from the skills exchanges often brought up in our conversations with the amateurs of Open Stages came from the movement workshops taught by freelance physical theatre director Gary Sefton. In this exercise, Sefton directed a group of actors to read a scene while simultaneously imagining that they were standing on a block of ice or a disc, floating on the surface of a body of water. In order to 'remain afloat', participants had to ensure the weight of the group was always evenly distributed across the



Midsummer Night's Dream at Rugby Theatre (2014).
Photographer: Martin Pulley



Workshop with RSC voice and text coach Michael Corbidge

suspended playing space. This approach helped amateur directors conceive of a stage picture as an organic whole by drawing attention to the position of every actor in relation to one another. Such an exercise also requires actors to be conscious of the space around them and encourages greater proprioceptive awareness.

The third rehearsal approach mentioned with the greatest frequency was one taught in the classes of RSC voice and text coach Michael Corbidge. In this exercise, one participant holds a page of text and is directed to whisper the lines one by one into the ear of his or her stage partner. The second performer is asked to deliver the text being whispered into his or her ear while also performing a physical task determined by Michael Corbidge, push-ups was one example mentioned a number of times. This type of exercise is designed to circumvent an actor's impulse to interpret the meaning of the text. It encourages an actor to step beyond literal methods of text analysis by unlocking his or her embodied relationship to the text.

Each of these three exercises, as well as many others taught in Open Stages skills exchanges, are specifically devised to invite artists into a creative process of play. They provide pathways into improvisation and ask participants to embrace the unknowns of acting and reacting in the moment. This, according to RSC actor Maya Wasowicz was the primary goal of the Open Stages skills exchanges. 'I hope the main thing people learn is that there's no right way of doing anything. That you come with a choice, you make a bold choice. You offer it and you have a dialogue hopefully with the director. You play, you've got to keep playing and keep being prepared to fall on your face. I think people see professional theatre and they think these guys are, you know, really good. We're never going to get to that level. But actually we all come in

not knowing what the hell is going on and it's a process of play and discovery to reveal the text'.¹⁷ As Wasowicz describes here, the Open Stages skills exchanges are designed to offer participants practical approaches to provoke a sense of playful spontaneity in the production process.

The capacity to 'play, to keep playing, and to be prepared to fall on your face' speaks to the most noticeable pattern we uncovered in the process of our research into the efficacy of Open Stages. In our conversations with the RSC's amateur partners there was one experience, one reflection that appeared again and again. More than the skills exchanges and more than the individual exercises taught, our respondents reported with remarkable consistency that their association with the RSC offered new affirmation and validation to the work many of them had already been engaged in for years if not decades. As almost every single respondent phrased it, inclusion in Open Stages gave participants an increased sense of confidence. It is our contention that this new-found self-assurance described by almost every one of our respondents is directly connected to an artist's ability to generate spontaneity and embrace the unknowns of creative practice. In other words, the affirmation that Open Stages amateurs experienced through their work with the RSC is itself a vital element of the chemistry at play in the development of great theatre.

I hope the main thing people learn is that there's no right way of doing anything. That you come with a choice, you make a bold choice. You offer it and you have a dialogue hopefully with the director. You play, you've got to keep playing and keep being prepared to fall on your face.

Involvement in Open Stages also inspired many of our respondents to take new creative risks and face unprecedented artistic challenges. For example, Rob Sloan at Rugby Theatre, mentioned above, reports that since participating in Open Stages he no longer blocks his productions but instead encourages his actors to discover their own motivations for moving through the space throughout the rehearsal process. When we visited a rehearsal of Rugby Theatre's *One Man Two Guvners* two weeks before opening night, Sloan warned us that the staging might look 'a bit of a mess'.¹⁸ However, when the rehearsal began the actors entered the space with energy and curiosity. They appeared to approach each moment with a playful sense of spontaneity and an enthusiasm for embracing the unknown. In other words, Sloan's actors came into their rehearsal ready to play, to keep playing, and were prepared to fall on their faces.

Sloan is one of the Open Stages directors who had had quite a bit of contact with professional theatre practice before joining Open Stages but, nonetheless, found the programme to be an important inspiration to push his creative practice forward, to try new approaches, and encourage his actors to pursue their own paths of creative discovery. The majority of Open Stages amateurs included in our study agreed that the programme offered them access to a new sense of confidence in their work and that it was precisely this confidence that encouraged them to follow their own creative instincts and pursue previously unexplored paths of artistic expression.

In fact, there are many Open Stages companies who had never staged a Shakespeare play before their involvement in the initiative. Numerous directors included in our study report that it was the support and interest from the RSC that offered them the initial inspiration and conviction necessary to begin working with Shakespeare's texts in the first place. For example, the Royal Navy Theatre Association (RNTA) is one group who performed Shakespeare for the first time in their 2012 Open Stages production of *Much Ado About Nothing* staged alongside the iconic HMS Victory in Portsmouth Historic Dockyard.¹⁹ Following the success and popularity of the production the RNTA has staged an open-air Shakespeare production every summer since the start of their association with the RSC and their involvement in Open Stages. Such groups are an excellent example of the success of Open Stages and its effort to promote the RSC's investment in the notion that Shakespeare belongs to everyone, 'not just to watch but to perform'.²⁰

Involvement with the Open Stages programme also brought many amateur companies unprecedented publicity, raising

their public profile both on a regional and, occasionally, a national scale. Theatre critics from leading national news organizations took notice of the initiative lending greater credibility to the artists and organizations involved. Many respondents included in our study cited permission to use the RSC brand and the Open Stages logo as an especially influential factor in this process. As Colette Holmes of Abbots Langley players described it, 'the buzz' around her company's Open Stages production of *The Herbal Bed* encouraged exceptional engagement, interest, and participation within the community.²¹

The energy or 'buzz' generated by participation in Open Stages also motivated a number of participants to establish new connections between their work as theatre-makers and their engagement in their communities more broadly. For example, since her involvement in Open Stages director Pam Johnson from the Llanymynech Amateur Dramatics Society (LADS) on the border of Shropshire and Wales has begun offering free talks on Shakespeare's plays at her local library's 'Learning at Lunchtime Programme'. Additionally, she and her colleagues from LADS are now engaged in paid work on a project organized by the local cinema in which they teach a series of workshops to secondary school students who are creating a film project about *Macbeth*.

Director Geraldine Watson of the Cardiff-based group Everyman has begun a series of education outreach initiatives since her involvement in Open Stages. She and some of her colleagues from Everyman have begun offering both free and paid workshops to students in the area and are currently designing a more formal programme that they plan to offer to local schools. Notably, at the time of writing, Watson is also in the process of directing the world premiere of a new



The Royal Navy Theatre Association's *Much Ado About Nothing* performed in front of the HMS Victory in Portsmouth (2012). Photographer: Pam Johns



Measure for Measure at Everyman Theatre in Cardiff (2015), courtesy of Cardiff Camera Club. Photographers: Gavin Bray and Royston Lee Leonard

play written by the RSC's Michael Corbidge. Set to open at Chapter Arts Centre in Cardiff in May 2017, their play entitled *Reduced Womanhood* stages six monologues all performed by local women. Having worked with Everyman and Geraldine Watson in his capacity as an Open Stages tutor and continued his collaboration with the company advising on subsequent productions, Michael Corbidge was sure he wanted Watson to lead the project. In recent correspondence about the collaboration Michael Corbidge writes, 'I know she will pull out all that's possible and really excavate, mine, and dredge the work. I'm thrilled it's being performed by such an amazing cast'.²² The development of this project is further evidence of the two way transmissions between amateur and professional theatre artists facilitated by Open Stages as the play and its work-in-progress production makes an important contribution to the creative practices of both director Geraldine Watson and playwright Michael Corbidge.

These are a few of the examples that have emerged throughout our research that testify to the immense impact Open Stages has had for many of the programme's participants, in addition to the communities where they work. As this report illustrates, almost all of the amateur companies involved in Open Stages were already engaged in active artistic practices before their acceptance into the programme. Nonetheless, through their involvement with the RSC, Open Stages participants gained access to an alternative body of knowledge developed and maintained by professional and subsidized theatre practitioners. This body of knowledge includes exercises designed to promote skills development and practical approaches to rehearsal and production such as those described above. The utility of these approaches varied to some degree according to the particular financial and creative circumstances of each company involved in the programme but, nonetheless, did constitute an important transmission of knowledge and experience from the RSC professionals to the amateurs of Open Stages.

Despite these influential factors, our research clearly indicates that the most apparent, significant, and consistent impact Open Stages has had on the creative practices of its amateur participants is directly connected to the increased confidence described in almost every interview included in this study. This confidence is, in part, derived from a rise in competency for many of the amateur artists involved. The skills development promoted by Open Stages offered participants the motivation and resources with which to improve and expand their own creative practices. Still, it is important to note that the vast majority of our respondents report that the confidence they gained was derived not only from the skills exchanges and the practical approaches to production shared but partially, and sometimes primarily, from the fact of their formal association with the RSC. It was the recognition from 'one of the most prestigious companies in the world'²³ that invited the programme's amateur participants to take a leap of faith into the creative unknown.

Based on these research findings, our study points to the potency of what Michael Boyd described as the 'straightforward redistribution of cultural wealth' facilitated by Open Stages.²⁴ That is to say that, because our society has come to a collective consensus that what the RSC does is of value to our culture, the organization was then able to, in a sense, reallocate some of that cultural value by sharing it with Open Stages amateur participants. In this way, the RSC's involvement with amateur companies provided affirmation that the time, the labour, and the dedication they commit to their productions is of value to our culture. To many of the programme's amateur participants, the chance to use the RSC brand and the Open Stages logo in their promotional materials represented a vote of confidence from an institution widely regarded as a national treasure. For the majority of participants engaged in the



Pericles at the RSC, courtesy of the company

programme, Open Stages functioned primarily as outside confirmation of something they already knew to be true – that amateur theatre matters.

Many respondents included in this study made a point of highlighting how they were treated with respect by the RSC staff, despite expectations to the contrary. The chance to perform on the RSC stage stood out for many of our respondents as an especially memorable and validating opportunity.²⁵ By sharing their space, their resources, and their best performance practices with the amateurs of Open Stages, the RSC opened a door to ongoing collaborations between amateurs and professionals. Of course it is up to the individuals on either side of that door to choose how best to proceed. Nonetheless, our research indicates that it was, in many ways, the simple act of having it opened in the first place that has had the greatest impact on the amateur theatre-makers of Open Stages.

Notes

- 13 Quoted from an unpublished interview conducted by Molly Flynn, 23 February 2016, London.
- 14 A member of The Little Theatre Guild, Rugby Theatre maintains its own 300 seat theatre and produces approximately ten plays a year. In between their shows the venue also hosts visiting productions including plays, opera, and live music.
- 15 As described in a private email from Ian Wainwright to the authors on 11 November, 2016.
- 16 According to a September 2016 survey conducted by Ian Nockolds of Cognisant Research, an outside consultant hired by the RSC, 75% of Open Stages participants say they will continue to use the movement skills they learned through the programme in future productions, 71% plan to use the vocal techniques taught, and 65% will continue to integrate the warm-up exercises they learned by participating in Open Stages.
- 17 Transcribed from an interview with Maya Wasowicz featured in the Open Stages promotional video filmed during a skills exchange weekend at the Lyric Theatre in Belfast and published on Youtube.com on 16 September 2013 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tutkAG-y1rA>>, accessed 29 July 2016.
- 18 Quoted from an interview with Rob Sloan conducted by Molly Flynn, 21 March 2016, Rugby.
- 19 For more on this production see Nadine Holdsworth's article, 'Performing Place, Heritage and *Henry V* in Portsmouth Historic Dockyard' *Contemporary Theatre Review* Vol 26, no 2, 2016, pp. 196-210.
- 20 See note 3.
- 21 As described by Colette Holmes in an interview conducted by Molly Flynn, 25 February 2016, Kings Langley.
- 22 As described in an email sent from Michael Corbidge to Molly Flynn 22 August, 2016.
- 23 Alan Sinfield, 'Royal Shakespeare: The making of an ideology' in *Political Shakespeare: Essays in cultural materialism* 2nd ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994) p. 182.
- 24 Interview with Michael Boyd, 24 June 2016.
- 25 The first run of Open Stages closed in 2012 with ten amateur companies invited to perform their full productions in Stratford-Upon-Avon. This model was revised in the second version of the initiative to give more groups the opportunity to perform in the space. Rather than showcasing full productions, the second run of Open Stages saw amateur groups perform ten minute excerpts from their plays first at their regional showcase and then electing select representatives to share excerpts from their work at the RSC.

Section Three:

Transmission from the amateurs of Open Stages to the RSC

Since the RSC began its ongoing exploration into the relationship between amateur and professional theatre practice via Open Stages, the company has also produced two full-scale professional productions featuring amateur actors in collaboration with RSC professionals. The first was the 2012 production of *Pericles* presented as the ‘fourth part’ of what the company billed as its ‘Shipwreck Trilogy’. In conjunction with its regular season, the RSC presented the play with a full cast of amateur actors and a full crew of theatre professionals. The production was co-directed by Jamie Rocha Allen and James Farrell, who later became one of the Open Stages directing mentors. The cast included ‘an IT consultant, two teachers, a waitress, a DJ, a binman, a mobile phones salesman and a solicitor’.²⁶ Funded as a regular part of the RSC’s 2012 season, the production furthered the company’s mission to engage with, support, develop, and celebrate the work of amateur theatre-makers.

The RSC’s most visible collaboration between amateurs and professionals to date is the recently completed project ‘Dream 16’. This nation-wide endeavor saw the company tour their latest production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* to fourteen UK cities featuring local amateur actors in the roles of the rude mechanicals in each city on the tour. Subtitled ‘A Play for the Nation’, the production also cast groups of local school children as Titania’s fairy train which lent the project additional local relevance in each city where they performed. It is important to note that the decision to audition local companies for the production grew out of a conversation between the RSC’s Casting Director Hannah Miller and Artistic Director Gregory Doran, a fact that speaks to how the company’s pattern of collaboration with amateur artists extends beyond the context of Open Stages. Though some of the companies cast had participated in Open Stages, others had not. Moreover, all the Open Stages companies cast in the production included actors or directors who were new to working with the RSC.

The RSC’s involvement in the amateur theatre scene has generated renewed interest in the company’s work across a wide-range of demographics. Their collaborations with local amateur companies encourages engagement within the communities where they perform and increases ticket sales. According to Michael Corbidge who worked with both the professional and amateur cast members throughout the tour, the production drew a noticeable number of new audience members who had never before attended an RSC production.²⁷ Our inquiry into the impact Open Stages has had on the RSC and the professional practitioners who taught on the programme is less concerned with



Measure for Measure at Everyman Theatre in Cardiff (2015), courtesy of Cardiff Camera Club. Photographers: Gavin Bray and Royston Lee Leonard

the financial effects of the programme than it is with the creative resonance the experience has had for the professionals involved. How has collaboration with amateur theatre-makers and participation in Open Stages influenced the way the professionals of the programme approach their work as both makers and teachers of theatre practice?

Every one of the Open Stages professional practitioners included in our study described their involvement as influential to their work since. Both directing mentor James Farrell and fight choreographer Tom Jordan found the project demanded new vigilance of them as teachers. As Farrell describes the process, to teach a room full of seasoned theatre practitioners who are not subject to the kinds of industry demands that drama students are, means that participants are much more likely to ask difficult questions. Whereas students in a professional theatre training programme might be less inclined to comment when something a teacher says is unclear, according to Farrell, amateur theatre artists often have no problem pushing a teacher towards further explanation when something is not presented in an understandable manner. The request to explain motives or intentions in a newly articulate way, created the space for Farrell himself to gain new understanding of his practice both as a director and as a teacher.

“Genuinely it’s just awoken all kinds of thoughts in me about how we relate to one another, the way we look at the world, about relationships, about what I’m capable of. I’ve been very moved by it. It goes beyond just acting.”

Annie Tyson, Open Stages acting coach – RADA (London)



Shakespeare at the George rehearses *The Tempest* in Huntingdon (2016).
Photographer: Antonia Brown

The professional practitioner with the most prominent presence in Open Stages has undoubtedly been voice and text coach Michael Corbidge. Corbidge describes his work with amateur practitioners as among ‘the most profound experiences of his life’²⁸ and one that has led him to ongoing questions about the division between amateur and professional theatre practice. Michael Corbidge has taught consistently throughout Open Stages and also worked closely with each of the amateur companies involved in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. He frequently teaches workshops and master classes to amateur groups across the country outside of his work with Open Stages and, as mentioned above, in June 2016 he began collaborating with Open Stages group Everyman Theatre on a play of his own which will premiere with an entirely amateur cast next spring.

The effect the programme has had on individuals is clear in the examples offered above. RSC deputy artistic director Erica Whyman was also director of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and describes working with amateurs on the project as the most rewarding thing she’s ever done.²⁹ In terms of the broader connotations Open Stages has for the RSC as an organization, our research indicates that it may be too soon to draw concrete conclusions. When we asked programme producer Ian Wainwright how Open Stages has affected the RSC he drew an analogy with attempts to change the direction of an oil tanker. In other words, it takes time.

Since the original idea of including amateur companies in the Cultural Olympiad first developed at the RSC in 2010, the company has worked with thousands of amateur artists across the UK. The company has also produced two full scale productions featuring amateur artists onstage and hosted an ongoing series of weekend workshops in Stratford developed specifically to meet the interests of the amateur theatre sector. Moreover, the RSC has adjusted their organizational aims to include their renewed commitment

to encouraging and enabling ‘the development of emerging and established theatre-makers’ as well as playing a ‘leadership role in the development of the sector and the cultural life of the country through: the work [they] create; the way [they] engage audiences in it and the sharing and exchange of skills and knowledge with other organizations and artists’.³⁰ Such a statement of purpose makes clear the RSC’s commitment to the company’s continued relationship to their amateur partners and testifies to the momentum the project has gained since it began five years ago.

The impact of the programme on the industry as whole, is also apparent. Theatre critics have taken up the topic of collaboration between amateur and professional theatre-makers and are debating the pros and cons in both local and national publications. Thanks to Open Stages and its affiliated projects, a national conversation about collaborations between amateur and professional theatre-makers has begun.³¹ At our recent Research Symposium held at Royal Holloway, University of London in September 2017, *Guardian* theatre critic Lyn Gardner spoke at length about the value of amateur theatre. She discussed the twenty-first century turn away from creating theatre ‘for audiences’ and towards creating theatre ‘with audiences,’ and encouraged amateur theatre-makers to claim their place as artists who make an important contribution to the cultural sector in our society.³² Such statements are significant coming from one of the country’s leading theatre critics and are further indication of how Open Stages and other collaborations between amateur and professional theatre-makers have a broad resonance for artists and audiences in both the amateur and professional spheres.

Notes

- 26 Excerpt from Ian Wainwright’s producer’s notes printed in the production programme.
- 27 The RSC’s records show that 1 in 10 audience members in attendance at the production had never seen a Shakespeare play before, 1 in 20 had never visited the theatre before, and over a quarter of the audience members at the production nationwide had never been to see the RSC.
- 28 Quoted from an interview with Michael Corbidge conducted by the authors at the Little Theatre Guild conference, 8 April 2016, Birmingham.
- 29 Quoted from an interview with Erica Whyman in a promotional video that marks the completion of the project published on Youtube on 22 June 2016 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7cKxeyzMoAg>>, accessed 26 August 2016.
- 30 As printed in the RSC’s summation of its organizational goals and strategic plan, March 2015.
- 31 See, for example, Lyn Gardner’s June 2013 entry on the *Guardian’s* Theatre Blog, ‘Amateur theatre should be celebrated not derided’. <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2013/jun/17/amateur-theatre-celebrated-not-derided>>, accessed 27 July 2016; and Michael Billington’s review of *Midsummer Night’s Dream: A play for the nation*, published on the same site in May, 2016 <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2016/may/23/midsummer-nights-dream-play-for-the-nation-rsc>>, accessed 27 July 2016.
- 32 Lyn Gardner in conversation with Helen Nicholson at the AHRC supported research Symposium ‘Reflecting on Amateur Theatre,’ 17 September, 2016.

Conclusion: Moving Forward

Our interviews with the amateurs of Open Stages included discussion of how the programme could be improved and what would be of particular use to them in future collaborations with the RSC. Amateur companies who are selected for the Open Stages Programme are often highly organized, bringing a professional attitude to their productions and an extensive team of volunteers working both onstage and off. While the majority of participants in the programme readily admit to benefitting from their involvement, many of them also were surprised to find that a company as well-established as the RSC also faces administrative obstacles not wholly dissimilar to those that challenge amateur companies.

A number of participants reported difficulties including sporadic communication with the RSC and their regional partner theatres as well as last minute schedule changes that left some participants unable to attend the skills exchange weekends. Likewise, the RSC reports that it was sometimes difficult for their representatives to maintain clear lines of communication with the company's amateur partners. 'One of the challenges of the project', writes producer Ian Wainwright, 'was simply communicating between two sectors who had over the past fifty years evolved separately and were organized on very different principles. The professional sector with its quick turn over of young staff often communicated in bursts around particular events before going quiet for long periods to concentrate on other projects. The amateur sector conversely often had older long serving members who wanted a steady stream of communication with understandably longer leads into events to organise its member, many of whom had full time jobs'.³³

These challenges in communication were eased somewhat in the programme's second run as the RSC identified each production's director as the primary point of contact in distinction to earlier attempts to navigate the structural complexities of each amateur company's membership. In future collaboration between the RSC and amateur artists, it will be helpful for both parties to establish a more consistent and inclusive pattern of contact such as regular newsletters or online updates. The RSC did maintain an active Facebook page for much of the programme and some of our respondents suggested utilizing the site as a forum for discussion and a more consistent and democratic method of disseminating information about schedules, updates, etc.

The amateur artists included in our study also conveyed a desire for more thorough documentation of the workshops on the part of the RSC staff. For example, numerous respondents said it would have been helpful to receive handouts at the skills exchanges. These interviewees felt

that a print out of the exercises taught would have helped actors and directors remember and return to the lessons learned in the workshops. Of course by documenting the sessions in this way the RSC might run the risk of presenting the exercises taught as a formulaic approach to theatre training. Nonetheless, the notion that Open Stages facilitates a legacy of skills development for amateur theatre depends on the ability of the company's amateur partners to adjust and amend the exercises taught to their individual contexts. Participants agreed that documenting what was taught at the skills exchanges could facilitate more widespread distribution of skills through rehearsals and knowledge sharing events and that greater explanation of the practices shared would assist amateur artists in their efforts to articulate the lessons they learned to their colleagues who were not in attendance at these events.

These were the most concrete set of suggestions we heard from the amateurs of Open Stages about how their experience of the programme could be improved and developed in future collaborations with the RSC. In addition to these practical findings, our research has also uncovered certain complex cultural dynamics at play in Open Stages that we believe offer insight into the benefits of collaborations between amateur and professional theatre artists more broadly. In articulating these intricacies, we would like to return the readers' attention to the RSC's assertion that Open Stages ensures each amateur production in the programme contains some genuine RSC 'DNA' and revisit the question of what exactly is transmitted via the company's engagement with their amateur partners.

As described in Section Two of this report, the most influential effect of Open Stages for its amateur partners has been a heightened sense of confidence. Recognition and acknowledgement from the RSC offered many of the company's amateur partners renewed inspiration to take creative risks and extend their artistic outreach within their communities. As director Jill Cole of Castle Players



Taming of the Shrew at Athanaeum Limelight Players in Warminster (2016), courtesy of the company

in Darlington describes the experience, the fact that her company can now be spoken of in the same breath as the RSC encouraged her to push new boundaries as a director and generated a greater sense of trust between her and her actors. Furthermore, though Cole has been working consistently as an amateur theatre director and drama instructor for decades, she has historically tended to keep her involvement with the group to herself rather than tell her colleagues about it. Since her work with the RSC however, Cole has made the conscious decision to be ‘out and proud’ about her identity as an amateur theatre-maker.³⁴

As discussed in our previous research on amateur theatre, ‘To call someone “amateur” in the theatre or to suggest that a performance is “amateurish” is often taken as an insult, conjuring images of self-congratulatory thespians and poor productions values.’³⁵ The stereotype of amateur theatre-makers as ‘pensioners with too much eyeliner performing plays by Francis Durbridge in draughty church halls’ haunts the creative sector and sometimes hinders artists’ ability to take pride in their work.³⁶ Of course anyone engaged in the practice knows that the diversity of skill and ability in amateur theatre is just as vast as that in professional theatre but, nonetheless, the cultural stigma around ‘am-dram’ as a leisure activity prevents some amateur theatre-makers from sharing their commitment and enthusiasm for their work with people outside of the practice.

The RSC, conversely, is widely accepted as a national treasure, a reputation corroborated by the fact that the company receives one of the highest public subsidies of any arts organization in the country.³⁷ As Alan Sinfield writes, the RSC’s substantial public subsidy, ‘witnesses, of course, to the ideological power of established institutions (the RSC and Shakespeare) in England’.³⁸ Our research suggests that the ‘ideological power’ Sinfield refers to plays an important part in the transmissions taking place between professionals and amateurs in Open Stages. Oddly enough, association with the RSC appears to have encouraged many amateur artists to take new ownership of their work, a result that speaks directly to Michael Boyd’s conception of the programme as one that facilitates the ‘redistribution of cultural wealth’.

In his analysis of the cultural mythology surrounding the development of the RSC throughout the latter half of the twentieth century Alan Sinfield argues that our conception of the RSC in contemporary culture, ‘intersects fundamentally with our ways of thinking about plays and about ‘the arts’ and political change within welfare capitalism’.³⁹ As Sinfield’s study makes clear, for twenty-first century Britain, the RSC is not only a theatre company. It is also a societal symbol with complex connotations. As an organization the RSC trades in the cultural currencies of heritage, prestige, and received perceptions of what constitutes high culture. Widespread acceptance of the RSC as a national resource is derived not only from the quality of

By shifting popular perceptions of the value of amateur dramatics in contemporary culture, the RSC’s efforts highlight what an immensely powerful resource amateur theatre companies are for their communities and for the country.

the work the company produces but also from its elevated standing in our society as an institution built to, essentially, show ourselves to ourselves as a society with a consistent history of world-class art and innovation coupled with established traditions and historical relevance.

Notably, the vast network of amateur theatre companies in the UK includes many companies with an unbroken history of creative activity for nearly one hundred years. As Michael Dobson clearly demonstrates in his study *Shakespeare and Amateur Performance: A Cultural History*, the performance of Shakespeare by non-professionals is a long-standing tradition in the UK and one that has shaped our perceptions of art, theatre, and the playwright for centuries. And yet, as Dobson observes, ‘the amateur performance of Shakespeare continues to inspire embarrassment, anxiety, and derision’ even today.⁴⁰ It is our contention that by lending their name, their accreditation, and some small part of their reputation to amateur companies across the country, the RSC has led an important step change in the way the value of amateur dramatics is perceived in contemporary culture. In doing so, the company has offered new credibility to the thousands of amateur artists who participated in the programme and has thereby created a space for participants to take increased pride in their work. This sense of pride, or confidence, the knowledge that one’s work is of value, is the primary transmission that the programme facilitated and the one that has had greatest impact on the creative practices of its amateur participants.

By shifting popular perceptions of the value of amateur dramatics in contemporary culture, the RSC’s efforts highlight what an immensely powerful resource amateur theatre companies are for their communities and for the country. Many of the Open Stages companies included in our study run youth theatre programmes that offer children and teenagers a unique space for self expression. Their regular productions draw participants and audiences from across the community eliciting contributions not only from actors and directors but also set designers and builders, gardeners, costume specialists, and countless other volunteer vocations. The amateur companies included in our study are successful and self-sustaining organizations that survive through tickets sales and voluntary participation at every level of the organization. Our research has made clear the fact that the amateurs of Open Stages have a remarkable capacity to mobilize their communities and

an admirable ability to facilitate public engagement. Their commitment to creative participation and dedication to community involvement is an essential element of the unique body of knowledge developed through amateur theatre making. These are precisely the elements of amateur theatre practice that we suggest have been transmitted to the RSC via their association with their amateur partners. By casting local amateur theatre groups in their recent tour of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for example, the RSC found new ways to encourage participation and to connect with communities across the country.

Through their continued collaboration with amateur theatre practitioners, the RSC has initiated an ongoing process of knowledge exchange. Many of the amateur companies involved in Open Stages have subsequently hired RSC practitioners to lead private workshops and masterclasses for their companies thus ensuring continued commitment to skills development in the amateur sector and offering new paths to discovery and income within the professional sector. The programme's amateur participants learn practical approaches to production shared in the skills exchanges and they also gain limited access to the cultural prestige the RSC enjoys as a world-famous arts organization.

For their part, the RSC and the individual professionals employed by Open Stages gain new insight into the vivacity of performance outside the strictures of the industry. As professional and amateur theatre practitioners continue this process of DNA swapping, we as artists, administrators, as researchers and policy makers are called upon to question our own assumptions about the value of theatre, creativity, and participation in twenty-first century culture.

Notes

- 33 As described in a private email from Ian Wainwright to the authors on 11 November, 2016.
- 34 Quoted from an interview with Jill Cole conducted by Molly Flynn, 6 May 2016, Darlington.
- 35 See Helen Nicholson's article 'Absent Amateurs' in *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* (20:3), p. 263.
- 36 See Peter Simkin's July 2012 entry on the Guardian's Theatre Blog, 'Hurrah for am-dram – why it's time to applaud amateur actors', accessed 1 August 2016.
- 37 At the time of writing, The RSC is the fourth largest Arts Council England National Portfolio Organization.
- 38 Alan Sinfield, 'Royal Shakespeare: theatre and the making of ideology', p. 197.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 182.
- 40 Michael Dobson, *Shakespeare and Amateur Performance: A cultural history* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 197



Twelfth Night at Llanymech Amateur Dramatics Society (2016), courtesy of the company

Appendix

Full List of Interviewees

- Bawler, Sarah** – *Director of Youth Theatre* – Everyman Theatre (Cardiff)
- Boyd, Michael** – *Former Artistic Director* – RSC (Stratford-Upon-Avon)
- Brown, Richard** – *Actor* – Shakespeare at the George (Huntingdon)
- Cole, Jill** – *Director* – Castle Players (Darlington)
- Constantinou, Andreas** – *Actor* – Everyman Theatre (Cardiff)
- Corbidge, Michael** – *Senior Voice and Text Coach* – RSC (Stratford-Upon-Avon)
- Farrel, James** – *Director* – Freelance (London)
- Forestier-Walker, Adela** – *Director* – Athanaeum Limelight Players (Warminster)
- Gilmour, Anne** – *LTG Representative* – The Questors Theatre (Ealing)
- Holmes, Colette** – *Director* – Abbots Langley Players (Kings Langley)
- Johnson, Pam** – *Director* – Llanymyech Amateur Dramatic Society (Llanymyech)
- Jones, Jane** – *Director* – Theatre in the Square (London)
- Jordan, Tom** – *Fight Choreographer* – Freelance (Cheltenham)
- Jungreuthmayer, Anton** – *Director* – Pirton Players (Pirton)
- Jurkowski, Michal** – *Actor* – Rugby Theatre (Rugby)
- Marker, Alex** – *Designer/Director* – The Questors Theatre (Ealing)
- Prior, Mike** – *Actor* – Combat Veteran Players (London)
- Rae, Jan** – *Director* – Dulwich Players (Dulwich)
- Scicluna, Androcles** – *Actor* – Combat Veteran Players (London)
- Sefton, Gary** – *Movement Teacher* – Freelance (Brighton)
- Shippey, John** – *Actor/Director* – Shakespeare at the George (Huntingdon)
- Sloan, Rob** – *Director* – Rugby Theatre (Rugby)
- Spence, Kevin** – *Actor/Director* – Doncaster Little Theatre (Doncaster)
- Spencer, Jacqueline** – *Director* – Shakespeare at the George (Huntingdon)
- Thomas, Graham** – *Director* – Athanaeum Limelight Players (Warminster)
- Tyson, Annie** – *Acting Teacher* – RADA (London)
- Wainwright, Ian** – *Open Stages producer* – RSC (Stratford-Upon-Avon)
- Wallin, Susan** – *Director* – Side by Side Theatre Company (Stourbridge)
- Watson, Geraldine** – *Director* – Everyman Theatre (Cardiff)
- Watson, Richard** – *Actor* – Everyman Theatre (Cardiff)
- Windsor-Smith, Jane** – *Actor/Director* – The Inn Theatre and Theatre Hub (Dartmouth)

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