

Volunteer-led Theatres

The Stables Theatre, Hastings



This report highlights the research conducted with the Stables Theatre as part of the AHRC-funded research project, *Civic Theatres: A Place for Towns* which took place between 2021 – 2022.

Civic Theatres: A Place for Towns

The research aim was to explore the value of theatre to towns and townspeople. Cultural activity in towns has been overlooked, and the research provided an opportunity to generate new insights about the role of community, professional and amateur theatres in towns across England.

We aimed to initiate a national conversation about the cultural value of theatres in towns across England.

Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), the research was designed to involve a wide range of amateur, professional and community theatre-makers and other townspeople in this conversation. By visiting archives, witnessing rehearsals, attending performances, conducting interviews, facilitating focus groups and joining a range of creative events we were able to hear about theatres from people who live in towns, to learn from townspeople about their distinctive qualities, to reflect on legacies from the past, and to understand today's opportunities and challenges.

The project was a collaboration between researchers at Royal Holloway, University of London and the University of Manchester. Our research partners were The National Theatre, the Royal Exchange Theatre

(Manchester), The Little Theatre Guild, with Tribe Arts as collaborating organisation. As the research evolved, we developed new relationships with theatres and cultural organisations across England, including the Stables Theatre in Hastings, East Sussex.

Working with the Stables Theatre

The Stables Theatre became a key case study theatre during our research. It allowed us to explore and capture what it means to be a theatre completely run and led by volunteers, while also allowing us to consider theatre's relationship with English coastal towns in the 21st century.

The narrative of 'change' surrounded Hastings at the time of our research - with continued visions to regenerate



ROYAL
HOLLOWAY
UNIVERSITY
OF LONDON



the town - for example through the Hastings Town Deal, Historic England's High Street Heritage Action Zone and continued arts and culture led strategies. Alongside this, the Stables Theatre was also going through a period of 'change' - opening up its doors to encourage greater participation in the town.

Research with the Stables involved attending performances (including Michael Punter's *The Incident at Marshfell* and David Charles Manners' *Here at Last is Love*); visiting the theatre's archive and touring the building and its history with Sue Dengate, the Stables Theatre archivist; and ongoing conversations and interviews with the current Chair of the Stables Theatre, Neil Sellman. In October 2021 we (Dr Cara Gray and Professor Helen Nicholson) also facilitated 3 workshops with people involved in the running of the theatre in some way.

Participants included volunteers who offer their time, skills, knowledges, ideas, and creativity to the theatre: in front of house roles - contributing to the day

to day running of the theatre by welcoming audiences, working in the box office and on the bar; and those involved in producing the Stable's amateur productions in creative roles including acting, writing, set design, set building, stage management, directing, lighting and sound, costume, props and photography. We also spoke to local theatre-makers (directors, writers, actors) who have started to use the Stables Theatre as a space to rehearse, workshop and perform their own work.

Through the generosity of the Stables Theatre - the time given and the stories shared - what follows are a selection of highlights from the research:

Volunteering as Care and Creativity

- The Stables Theatre holds an important place in the cultural life of Hastings, and is an example of how theatre in towns is often kept alive by volunteers.

- Volunteer-led theatres provide local spaces of care - to socialise and feel useful - for volunteers who love theatre, and for those who don't think they are 'theatre people'.
- In some towns, volunteer-led theatres might be the only theatre that exists - providing affordable entertainment to residents, but also creating creative opportunities for townspeople to take part and make theatre themselves.
- Volunteer-led theatres provide local spaces for creative experimentation, taking risks and just 'giving it a go'.
- The Stables is a place where people bring skills and ideas from all areas of life: where people have re-engaged with theatre-making after retiring from it professionally, or where careers in theatre are getting started - developing both creative and social skills through informal apprenticeships.
- Volunteer-led theatres sit within - and connect with - wider networks of creative voluntarism in towns. Volunteers are intrinsically woven into the everyday cultural and creative fabric of Hastings: for example volunteer-run newspapers, gardens, galleries, and festivals.
- Volunteers act as important custodians and stewards of both their theatre companies (theatre-making, admin) and their theatre buildings (maintenance, fundraising).



ROYAL
HOLLOWAY
UNIVERSITY
OF LONDON



Coastal Towns

- Volunteer-led theatres are an important part of the mixed cultural economies of towns - particularly English coastal towns who are increasingly being encouraged to brand themselves as creative destinations through cultural and arts led regeneration strategies (e.g. the establishment of art galleries).
- The seasonal and daily rhythms of coastal towns mean that the focus often lies on the daytime visitor economy, but volunteer-run theatres like the Stables Theatre contribute to the cultural life of residents who live in seaside towns throughout the year.
- Volunteer-led theatres sit within networks of the wider Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector. In coastal towns specifically, locally led groups are tackling and solving local issues (health, the environment and the housing crisis) through bottom up

initiatives. We found examples of this in Hastings in community land trusts and commons - that develop land and buildings (homes, pubs, gardens, retail) on behalf of their communities through community ownership models - protecting community assets in perpetuity. These specific examples spoke to how many theatre buildings - like the Stables Theatre - were built/renovated and/or are maintained and run by volunteers.

Towards a 'Hybrid Theatre' Model

- What could be described as a 'hybrid theatre' model is emerging at the Stables, where amateur/volunteer, community and professional makers not only share space but sometimes experiment with making theatre together.
- Our research found that the potential for future mutual learning and exchange - amongst theatre-

makers at the Stables - was seen as positive.

- New ways of working at the Stables Theatre continue to complicate the, often unhelpful, formal distinctions between amateur and professional theatre(s).
- For example, the many people who audition and perform in the Stables Theatre's own productions have or continue to act as paid professionals at other times, or have trained professionally at some point of their life.
- The Stables is creating a space in Hastings that supports new and multiple forms of theatre-making and repertoire - producing their own Stables productions while also receiving other amateur and professional theatre makers; facilitating new writing competitions and open calls; and hosting festivals (Hastings Pride, Hastings Fringe, Hastings Theatre Festival).



**ROYAL
HOLLOWAY
UNIVERSITY
OF LONDON**

- The Stables shows that volunteer-led theatres can also become an important resource for local professional theatre makers, supporting them and their work and offering space to rehearse, workshop and perform.
- The Stables is creating a space in Hastings that supports new and multiple forms of theatre-making and repertoire - producing their own multiple Stables productions while also receiving other amateur and professional theatre makers; facilitating new writing competitions and open calls; and hosting festivals (Hastings Pride, Hastings Fringe, Hastings Theatre Festival).
- Volunteer-led theatres can act important hubs in their communities outside of performance times. Acting and painting workshops, art exhibitions, film festivals and toddler groups are just a handful of activities that take place at the Stables.

Theatre in Towns:

For more information on the *Civic Theatres: A Place for Towns* project, visit our legacy website:
creativetownsresearch.wordpress.com

Read our co-authored book *Theatre in Towns* (2022), available as a free ebook:
taylorfrancis.com/books/oa-edit/10.4324/9781003308058/theatre-towns-helen-nicholson-jenny-hughes-gemma-edwards-cara-gray

This report borrows from chapter four of the book: 'Volunteer-Led Theatres: Meshworks of a Coastal Town', which focusses on the Stables Theatre and Hastings.

A special thank you to:

The Stables Theatre, particularly Judith Appleyard, Carrie Beeson, Elliott Davis, Sue Dengate, Annie Edwards, Dominique Gerrard, Dee Harvey, **June Hills**, Patrick Kealey, Julie Keeler, Chris Lacey, David Manners, **Lynda Morson**, Peter Mould, Michael Punter, **Jonathan Reed**, Jane Richardson, Maxine Roach, Neil Sellman, **Janet Taucher**, Christine Warrington, Jenny Wiles, Linda Willard, Mike Willard and **Jackie Woollaston** who have all contributed to the research in multiple ways.

An added thank you to Peter Mould for the photograph of the Stables Theatre exterior, which also features in the book. All other images by Cara Gray.



**Arts and
Humanities
Research Council**



**ROYAL
HOLLOWAY
UNIVERSITY
OF LONDON**



ROYAL
HOLLOWAY
UNIVERSITY
OF LONDON