

# STAGING PLACES: TRANSPORT, TOILETS, TIME AND MONEY



## Context

The Society of British Theatre Designers is a professional association that advocates for and celebrates the work of freelance performance designers ( set and costume designers, designers who work with video and other digital media within their practice and designers who make work through leading their own companies) based in the UK who work regionally across the four nations, nationally in the larger houses and opera companies and internationally. A number of our members also combine skills as practicing architects with their scenographic practice and many also work across the education, heritage and events sectors.

We work very closely with our fellow professional associations in lighting, sound, direction, production management, technical theatre, costume making and supervision, and stage management.

We also work in direct and close association with the Performance Design Education Collective (PDEC), representing lecturing staff and students across over 25 courses at HE level throughout the UK.

Our recent exhibition Staging Places : UK Design for Performance and supporting website [www.stagingplaces.co.uk](http://www.stagingplaces.co.uk) sought to shine a bright light on the diversity of practices throughout the UK that constitute performance design from pushing the boundaries of the traditional to redefining what a performance space is ( a city, a mountain, a shipping container) highlighting the innovative leading role that designers play in strategic thinking and creative problem solving to build enhanced relationships with communities, audiences and spaces.

Much of this work has been until now viewed as ‘other’ to main stage building based programming with ‘proper theatre’ being the more established, career and status driven performance making form that these practitioners will largely never have the opportunity to make or more importantly question and re-invent.

## **Regional Hearts**

In parallel to the exhibition we built a series of Regional Hearts around the country, identifying pulses of design talent, linking partner venues and HE institutions with freelance design practitioners via our appointed Design Champions in each region <https://stagingplaces.co.uk/regional-hearts/>

We will be working with Regional Heart: East Midlands in autumn 2020 when Staging Places takes up physical and online residency at the National Centre for Craft and Design, Sleaford, Lincs. Our aim is to build a programme of activity that unlocks and develops new, resilient, regionally based strategies.

## **Invisibility**

The profession of Designer currently has no distinction from Artist in Arts Council England's search fields and categorisations at present – we are literally untraceable through the funding system unless we do it ourselves and ask designers to volunteer that information. It is vital that we change this.

## **Recent victories that cannot be lost**

We recently achieved all model box and assistant costs becoming the responsibility of the engager rather than the freelance designer in the UK Theatre and SOLT collective agreements. This significantly improves the percentage of the fee that remains with the designer and starts to build in financial support, awareness and visible for assistant designers (typically an early career, graduate opportunity) within theatre building cultures. We must retain this contractual shift in order to support the COVID generation of graduates and those that follow after them.

## **Gaps in opportunity – lack of transparency**

The current system of main house engagement is completely lacking in transparency and outmoded in structure based around a UK Theatre contractual model defined by resident design positions of which there remains only one in the country (New Vic, Stoke on Trent) if we exclude houses such as the RSC who have their own house agreements and employ in effect a Head of Design in a managerial role.

This lack of transparency alongside this career choice being largely financially unsustainable in the longer term and without clear career progression opportunities

presents significant barriers to the profession becoming fully representative, inclusive and accessible.

## Performance Design Education

Our relationship with performance design education means that we are hard wired in to the untapped potential of student and early career practitioners who are exposed to and encouraged to practice bold concept development and the development of practical skills which are largely precluded from challenging main stage conventions and building the next generations' sense of ownership.

Opportunities may exist within buildings but they are for the most part conventional and inconsistent resulting in a lost generation of theatre makers stagnating at 8 to 12 years into their professional practice gradually acknowledging that they may never be let in. The opportunity to make ordinary work in these spaces let alone extraordinary work and build collaborations over time as we see in Europe for example, simply doesn't exist. FC Bergman from Belgium is an example of a company given the time and space to grow into large stages from tiny starts. They are very much visually led and tour the world. Work such as this being shown in the UK occupies niche festivals such as International Mime Festival at the Barbican.

<https://www.toneelhuis.be/en/artists/fc-bergman/>

For this year's graduates the devastating impact on them of final projects being quite literally abandoned on the day lockdown was announced continues into a graduate career path that was broken before COVID, doesn't exist now and more importantly shouldn't in the future.

Research partnerships via AHRC with HE institutions are more vital than ever.

<https://ahrc-blog.com/2020/05/22/coronavirus-an-outbreak-of-creativity/amp/?fbclid=IwAR1ZxvgWM5uS3jWLgSG-X0wMHh8Ec8vu04POE0UD40LQLCA0iOIIH0iKfAw>

## ACE Emergency Funds impact

We have seen a successful upsurge in engagement with this funding process by the simple fact that designers were mentioned as being entitled to apply for emergency funding in the current situation,

For many £ 2 500 could represent 1/8<sup>th</sup> of their income or more over a calendar year BEFORE deducting overhead costs such as studio rent, software licenses, assistant and unclaimable travel and subsistence costs that truly reflect what is needed to do the job.

For many a net income of £ 15 000 a year in the subsidised sector currently represents a successful career and is likely to be needed to be supplemented by a second source of income.

Average length of a working day with travel – 10 hours, average number of days 5 -6.

Nonetheless, many early career designers in particular but not exclusively, did not qualify for this fund or for self -employment support because the organisations they have worked for are not of sufficient calibre and/or they have had to supplement meagre design incomes with zero hours PAYE contract work in bars, restaurants etc.

## The road to recovery

COVID 19 is an opportunity to open up (in a controlled manner) every orifice of theatre spaces possible and rigorously scrutinise and play with their potential publicly and as co-working spaces.

Designers are in a unique position to offer you their support on this as creative and visual thinkers as opposed to the broader definition of artist or creative practitioners because what they think about always has to translate into something that functions practically.

This is a real opportunity to redefine how you think about your civic and creative roles as keyholders to these spaces and how you value and invest in the freelance designer as an experienced visual thinker who can posit creative solutions in response to the restrictions that this road to recovery will encounter.

Now is the time to fully embrace the 'other' work that exists beyond your walls and to celebrate and recognise that ground up expertise as being the 'proper theatre' at the core of your organisations and your communities.

It's time to tip old structures on their head.

We need to hard wire the presence of designers into theatre boards so that they become brave and radical new think tanks that include locally embedded designers and visual practitioners as a key part of their profile demographic – NOW IS THE TIME to have this intelligence at the table and for this input to be recognised as a consultancy and expertise cost that has parity with salaried roles in these meetings accordingly.

### **Katrina Lindsay, National Theatre**

There are 12 NT Associates from various disciplines - directors, writers, actor, lighting designer, sound designer, set and costume designer (me). Directors are the majority.

As Associates across the board I would say it is our role to listen and respond to various provocations presented to us by the NT - Rufus and Lisa - around areas to do with programme scheduling, mission statement, script meetings or any NT strategic elements that they might be grappling with. The aim is to hear our various thinking and discussions around these areas, which are all minuted, so we can give our individual thoughts, as practicing freelancers in our fields, who have had differing associations with the NT over the years. Coming from different disciplines we each have our thoughts and angles that relate to these areas but ultimately we were brought on as Associates because of what we might contribute as individuals not necessarily related to our discipline, mainly to do with our experience with the NT and possibly how we think.

I was probably brought into the Associates due to my long standing link with Rufus - as one of his earliest collaborators, having formed a company together when we were both starting out and with us having made over 25 years of shows as director/designer alongside my other work designing shows at the NT and elsewhere.

In my role as Associate I also help to lead design forums to open up a discussion with the building and designers ( set and costume mainly) around working practice from both sides. This is hopefully also a place for designers to commune and feel part of a community whilst we all tend to operate in isolation in our studios, it can be one of the

moments we can come together during our busy working schedules. I have also been on the select committee of sifting through the NT design bursary portfolio applicants, choosing the final two with another designer Bunny Christie. These two bursaries are for emerging designers to be able to spend a year at the NT on salary whilst they can shadow the various work going on within departments and productions in creation.

I am also a member of the Linbury Prize for Design committee.

Really the capacity I have as a design associate is mainly discussing the internal workings and how the NT through its philosophy and mission statements reaches as wide an audience as possible.

### **David Shearing – SBTB Committee Member and Queens Theatre Hornchurch Board of Trustees**

In June 2018, after 10 years living and working in Leeds as an artist creating design-led performance practice beyond theatre buildings, I returned to my hometown of Hornchurch in Essex. I attended a D&D satellite event led by the Queen's Theatre Hornchurch discussing the arts ecology of the area, a weekend event attended by both Executive Director Mathew Russell and Artistic Director Douglas Rintoul. After the event, the Mathew reached out to me to have further discussions with the team and was eventually invited to join the board of trustees.

I joined the board in September 2019, having had a connection to the charity in the 1990s as part of the youth theatre programme. During the past 15-years I have made work with various arts organisations around the country, this was the first time I was actively invited to share my skills and knowledge as a practicing artist at a decision-making level. This is my first position on a board, and first time holding a sustained relationship with a theatre building and charitable trust. I have often felt frustrated as an artist as to how theatres listen to creatives who make work on the fringes, such as with communities or in unusual contexts beyond their own artistic visions, having in the past been told 'we are a building-based theatre'. I am acutely aware of how local artists can feel about organisations that seemingly hold significant assets and resources.

The invitation to join the board came at an important time for QTH as it continues an essential period of transformation, both in infrastructure and artistic ambition. As an artist I have been continuously encouraged to share my voice and be part of important decision makings and to steer the organisation through a complex period. Earlier in the

year was invited onto the interview panel for the Director of Havering Changing, the new CPP for the borough with QTH as lead consortium member - an important area of development and learning for the trust. During the lockdown period, I have been activity engaged in weekly board meetings, and now as the reality settles in, we need to deal with the new realities of the theatre reopening -this will need both executive and artistic imagination<sup>1</sup>. As an artist-designer I have worked in theatre buildings in unusual ways, such as The Lowry's Week 53 festival (2016, 2018), transforming their spaces into alternative theatre venues and event spaces. As we begin to a look toward reopening, I hope I can inspire the leadership teams in unlocking the full potentials of space by supporting and questioning important decisions and for them to inspire their creative teams to tackle the challenge.

The QTH has establish an inspirational hub through their Outer Limits network for outer East London and Essex creatives. I have seen first-hand the personal connection Doug as artistic director has given this essential resource for the area. The most important action a venue can do is to listen to local artists and creatives and this network, now digital, has been a lifeline for discussion and connection during this time. As we rebuild, we will have important questions to ask about how we exploit this moment for significant change. These changes concern the importance of a local creative network, and in particularly for outer east London and Essex; how class and social economic background plays a role in having a voice in sustaining a creative ecology in the region - issues I am acutely aware of. My role as a designer, at times has been to ask the silly questions<sup>2</sup>, and at every level this has been encouraged, to make sure we have covered the best possible range of perspectives. The theatre has limited resources and capacity, but this role has inspired me to support and contribute to the arts ecology of the area and through the theatre. The empowerment of artists is fundamental to a rich, diverse and imaginative future, and I proud that the Queen's Theatre Hornchurch is leading in this vision.

David Shearing - Artist / Designer (STBD Committee Member)  
[www.davidshearing.com](http://www.davidshearing.com)

*'In the short time David has been a Board member at QTH, he has already made an invaluable contribution. His unusual and wide-ranging depth of experience and perspective across design, producing, cultural strategy, education and venue*

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.vooruit.be/en/nieuws/291/\\_IM\\_POSSIBLE\\_FUTURES\\_/](https://www.vooruit.be/en/nieuws/291/_IM_POSSIBLE_FUTURES_/)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cause4.co.uk/blog/what-do-arts-organisations-need-their-trustees-times-crisis>

*management etc, combines brilliantly with his in-depth knowledge and understanding of, and passion, for the local area.*

*David has made consistently different, considered and perceptive contributions to a range of Board and Committee members, demonstrating careful preparation and thought in doing so, but equally importantly outside of meetings: for funding applications, in interviews, at varying events and in inspiring mentoring too.*

*Like all theatres, in respond to the COVID-19 crisis, QTH is needing and wanting to reimagine itself now and into the future, and creative imagination, innovation and challenge will be absolutely critical to this. As such, there's never been a better time to have an acclaimed artist like David on our Board and we're so pleased it's possible.'*

Mathew Russell  
Executive Director  
Queen's Theatre Hornchurch

## **NEIGHBOURHOODS and COMMUNITIES**

We have, of course, seen neighbourhoods and communities embrace their own creativity and support for one another in prolific ways, sometimes already strategically supported in that by companies such as Slung Low.

We have an opportunity to harness and recognise that now and build our wayfinding mechanisms to and from theatre buildings working with designers and community based artists.

To do that we need a two pronged approach of taking work to them but also bringing them to these story houses that theatre buildings can and should become, the difference being that the storytelling can and should begin from the moment they walk out of their front door or look out of their window. Within these imposing theatre buildings they may now have a more personalised experience for a shorter period of time as a small group that is carefully marshalled in and out.

Neighbourhoods have come together to project movies onto sheets or sides of houses that everyone can see from their bedroom windows – why can't this be an aspect of a theatre performance delivered through live streaming?

## **TRANSPORT AND TOILETS**

Tim Meacock ' before I designed anything we had to work out where the toilets would go', Pagliacci for Scottish Opera staged in a big top in Paisley, Scotland

<https://stagingplaces.co.uk/designers/tim-meacock/>

Guided walking and cycle routes are narrative performance spaces as are buses and trains – restrictions can be imaginatively enforced as part of the narrative.

Toilets will be necessary and we need to start with where they are and how they are managed.

We are used to moving large numbers of people through them over very short time frames. Some theatre buildings' facilities are exemplary. Going to the loo safely could be how someone enters and appreciates your theatre building or temporary venue for the first time – it may be all they do on this first visit. It may also be what brings them back.

THEATRE BUILDINGS WERE BECOMING CIVIC, DESTINATION SPACES with good toilet facilities and well managed refreshment spaces capable of dealing with capacity over very restricted time frames. We can build on this knowledge and expertise to work with social distancing restrictions.

## **WAYFINDING**

TOWNS - A Town Explores a Book is an initiative from St. Leonard's On Sea now in its second year where the majority of engagement has had to take place in lockdown and HG Wells' The Time Machine has existed in miniature domestic imaginings of other worlds shared over social media alongside the telling of the story.

The project exists from March to July allowing time for it to become embedded in the local psyche.

<http://atownexploresabook.com/>

CIVIC SPACES – Access and inclusiveness in libraries and public spaces leaves many theatres standing. Through using these spaces for performance we can reflect a wider demographic within our communities. As theatre-makers as well as audiences we can broaden our experience, respect and understanding of one another which hasn't been fully achieved within the silos of theatres.

Nerissa Cargill Thompson, Loud and Proud Arts

<https://stagingplaces.co.uk/designers/nerissa-cargill-thompson/>

WAYFINDING routes to theatre buildings, particularly for panto season can re-imagine town and cityscapes, utilising retail and commercial spaces – the outdoor market, the car show room etc.- places of worship, billboards and lamp posts.

## **ZERO WASTE and ARTISAN ecologies for theatre**

We need to celebrate a local ecology by utilising it to make theatre - the restaurant trade model – locally sourced materials and craftsmanship used and applied inventively to quality performance making. Supporting it becomes desirable .

The materiality of theatre -making in buildings is essentially exactly the same as it has been for decades.

There is a true opportunity here for a deep clean and a carbon literate training offer for both building based and freelance practitioners that also engages the public.

We are in the business often of making a ‘silk purse out of a sow’s ear’.

Making the whole of the offstage team as well as the onstage team a circular economy of creative thinking and doing does not need or benefit from labels that segregate so called creative and technical teams within a hierarchical, outmoded model of engagement.

We are also in the business of re-purposing existing materials, fixtures and fittings etc. manufactured for another purpose entirely – the public and their employers may truly surprise us with what they can offer to make a production happen with an appeal for resources.

Community theatre often uses the ‘wedding list’ or the ‘what do you have in your attic’ model to resource a production.

Shared Experience would fundraise for their community productions by sending out an itemised list of everything that the production needed in order to happen and put a price against each item so that the person who wanted to donate could specify the item they

wanted to support. When they came to see the show could clearly see it there on stage or as part of a costume.

The community theatre model makes an appeal for stuff eg. fabrics and part of the designer's role is to curate that resource in order that it can be repurposed into a design.

## **UPSKILLING**

How can we experiment and upskill using these theatre buildings as empty machines that new people can learn how to use?

How do they become – access all areas inclusive, accessible and enchanting labyrinths of discovery – as with Battersea Arts Centre's recent production? – available to use from 8am – 11pm

Many freelance creatives use jobs as ushers, bar staff etc. to supplement low freelance income – give them visibility and a voice in these conversations.

How do we remove the fear of these spaces? Practitioners 8 – 12 years out, freelance directors and designers in particular, are stagnating in a dark chasm in which they have moved well beyond small and middle scale touring, some with significant international reputations through working in opera, English speaking theatres in Europe and making their own work for festivals, some not, who have no access to these main stage spaces to be able to feel confident working as freelancers with permanent building based teams and stage mechanics.

When the bigger opportunities and co-productions come up at regional houses, the pattern is to bring in an established London name as designer or director or both.

There is an opportunity here to invest in more locally based talent over a longer time frame thus mitigating risk and saving on travel and subsistence costs.

## **Radical exploration of key set texts**

How can we work with the curriculum to boldly re-imagine staging of set texts inspired by the locality and its resources and expose young people to the opportunities presented by

intersectional, interdisciplinary practices using gaming technologies, AR, VR and Mixed realities?

How can more new practitioners learn what this stuff is and does?

The Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space have just launched a new Common Design Project to give design students and design educators an opportunity to come together and explore their responses to the pandemic via The White Plague by Karel Capek, an international design dialogue and series of responses will emerge that connects emerging designers around the world.

PQ STUDIO: Common Design Project Special Edition - The White Plague

Open Call text: [https://bit.ly/CDP\\_OpenCallText](https://bit.ly/CDP_OpenCallText)

## **KEY POINTS IN THE NATIONAL CALENDAR – establishing new rituals and valued practices of gathering**

**HERITAGE/ Architecture open day – mid September** – can we plan towards this date to open theatre buildings and use them to curate creative responses to COVID lockdown in well manged walk throughs?

**FUN PALACES WEEKEND – 3<sup>rd</sup>- 4<sup>th</sup> October** - in 1961 Joan Littlewood and Cedric Price designed a Fun Palace building – a ‘laboratory of fun’. They imagined a building linked through technology to other spaces, accessible to those who wouldn’t normally go to arts venues or great centres of learning.

Joan said, “I do really believe in the community. I really do believe in the genius in every person. And I’ve heard that greatness come out of them, that great thing which is in people.”

### **The original design said:**

*“Choose what you want to do – or watch someone else doing it. Learn how to handle tools, paint, babies, machinery, or just listen to your favourite tune. Dance, talk or be lifted up to where you can see how other people make things work. Sit out over space with a drink and tune in to what’s happening elsewhere in the city. Try starting a riot or beginning a painting – or just lie back and stare at the sky.”*

**PANTOMIME as political satire re-imagined throughout the whole town/city/region** – eg. Richard George Sander and company's recent open performance at Turner Contemporary – extraordinary period cut costumes using visibly and apparent recycled materials.

Making this happen in some form this year is vital to generating significant revenue, holding onto an audience and building the new audiences that have started to grow through online and community delivery.

Time wise this is a very important point in our post-COVID calendar of communal celebration and wellbeing.

For many, many designers, this is their only staple source of income in a year.

#### **An average small -mid-scale regional rep producing its own panto**

Set budget :                   £ 10 000

Costume budget :           £ 8 000

Designers Fee               £ 4 750 spread across 3 payments between June and November/December (any costs for an assistant have till now come out of this fee)

**Average freelance earnings from designing full time at a variety of scales across a year after expenses but gross before tax = £ 15 – 16k**

Currently 2/3 of that fee likely to be paid to complete full panto designs which can be used next year and now with a longer lead time to source and build as cost effectively and sustainably as possible.

We have an opportunity to address the balance – invest appropriately in the designer's time to re-think for this year and they will without doubt offer extraordinary solutions on a lower production budget.

#### **PANTO BONDS**

Very practical idea for saving theatre from James Watts.

*'How about British Theatre Bonds, in denominations of £25 upwards, that allow the public to purchase a part of national theatre equity (someone will have to work out how much is needed to keep the smaller as well as larger theatres going)? Each venue selling them gets to keep 25% of the value by agreement and exchange with the Treasury, with 75% going to fund theatres nationwide.*

*Bit like War Bonds during WW1 and WW2.*

*When redeemed after the crisis, you would be entitled to a certificate of thanks, and one free standard rate ticket per £100 invested at a local theatre. I own a brick in Shakespeare's Globe from 1993, why not own equity in it for the present?*

*Thinking off the top of my head, but there's a lot of that happening currently.'*

## **UTILISING EXISTING FORUMS AND STRUCTURES to build leadership skills and confident civic creative voices – eg. Culture Compacts, Culture Partnerships, What Next? Chapters**

A number of us have needed to invite ourselves to these tables but empowering to locate this specialist practice in a wider strategic cultural framework and understand how these regional and national structures can have impact is vital.

**DON'T FORGET THE INDEPENDENT ARTISTS** – they are much lighter on their feet than you can be, hold no particular allegiances and want to make things happen micro – macro.

There is an immense talent pool of lateral thinking that never usually gets offered anything more than the crumbs from the table.

**BETHANY WELLS** – designer, performance maker, architect

<http://www.bethanywells.co.uk/>

Her self generated funding initiatives to help

[https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScT-fdBiu9mPO8oW3I20I\\_RKNz0ZNi120zVlinEliaOv3dEXQ/viewform](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScT-fdBiu9mPO8oW3I20I_RKNz0ZNi120zVlinEliaOv3dEXQ/viewform)

Go Fund Me page - <https://tinyurl.com/y98kow8r>

## **THE FESTIVAL OF NOTHING**

There are, of course, many emergency reasons why we need to do something, but this was the first response of Prague's Councillor of Culture.

<https://www.calvertjournal.com/articles/show/11729/nothing-festival-2020-non-existent-art-shows-helping-czech-culture-scene-in-quarantine>

There are a number of initiatives being instigated around the world by Ministers of Culture.

Reflections and inventive offers from colleagues in the US

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2020-05-19/coronavirus-reopening-theater-future?fbclid=IwAR1OdbCx-uoUI8f-0qX21u-kPo9jgWSIo0a1ior3Qc4pMe4ro-FZX16nCq0>

INVEST IN MAKING BOLD THINKING THE CORE OF YOUR VOCABULARY FROM THE GROUND UP – WE CAN HELP

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Chair: The Society of British Theatre Designers

[www.theatredesign.org.uk](http://www.theatredesign.org.uk)

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[www.fionawatt.com](http://www.fionawatt.com)

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