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All the world's

Open Stages is Britain's biggest amateur theatre project, a hugely ambitious scheme to bring the professional and amateur theatre worlds together. It is a learning project but, as the Royal Shakespeare Company's Ian Wainwright tells **PAUL STANISTREET**, it is not only the amateurs who are learning

The amateur and professional theatre worlds have grown apart over quite a long period of time,' says Ian Wainwright, the producer for the Royal Shakespeare Company's Open Stages project. 'We're quite distant cousins now. This project is about changing that course and bringing us back together.' Open Stages represents an unprecedented collaboration, involving the RSC and Voluntary Arts, regional and national theatres, national amateur theatre umbrella bodies and

amateur theatre groups from across the UK. As the Royal Shakespeare Company marks its fiftieth birthday, amateur companies from every corner of the country are preparing their own Shakespeare-themed productions, in community centres, village halls, disused swimming pools and ruined castles, with almost 300 taking place in 2011 and 2012 under the Open Stages banner. The huge array of projects includes a *Star Wars*-inspired *Twelfth Night*, a production of *The Merchant of Venice* in the style of eighties TV series *Minder*,

an all-female version of *Hamlet* and the Royal Navy's own theatre group's production of *Much Ado About Nothing* performed at their base in Portsmouth. The project culminates in a national celebration of amateur Shakespeare with a selection of participants invited to perform their productions at the RSC in Stratford-upon-Avon as part of the World Shakespeare Festival. The celebration is important, but more important is the opportunity for amateurs and professionals to learn from one another, a process from which



Open Stages lighting workshop led by former RSC lighting practitioner, Trevor Wallace

a stage

all the partners in the project stand to gain, Ian says.

'It's very much a learning project,' Ian tells me. 'We're keen that the amateur theatre makers come out of the project knowing more than when they came in and that they've developed their theatre practice throughout the project. But we don't want to characterise it as a project where we tell the amateurs how they should be doing it. That's not what we planned to do. A lot of this project is a voyage of discovery. It's about us finding out more about one another. It's about amateurs finding out how professionals make theatre, that's the more obvious side of the project, but, just as important, it's about us finding out how amateurs work.' The project has organised a series of 'skills exchanges', hosted by partner theatres around the country, bringing together professional practitioners from the RSC and amateur theatre makers from participating groups. The aim is to share

some of the skills and ideas of professional theatre with amateur actors, technicians, stage managers and directors, as well as allowing professional theatre practitioners to find out more about the work of those making theatre in the amateur sector.

It's very much a two-way process, Ian explains. The amateurs are keen to learn, keen to collaborate, but they also have wide experience, real expertise and, often, things they can teach the professionals. 'It's not a case of us saying, "This is how you should be making theatre". It's a case of us saying this is how we make theatre, these are the skills we use, these are the tools we have, if you want to take them, use them and make your own kind of theatre. We're not interested in dictating what theatre they make. Most of the workshops are about taking an interesting idea and running with it. It's the idea of giving someone a fishing rod rather than a fish. Take that idea and develop it, use it in

your productions. The amateur companies are hungry for this stuff. They want to know where they can find out more, where they can get more training. We've been surprised by how open and generous they are in workshops, and many people have never been in workshops before. But they've been brilliant, in some ways easier to work with than young people because you don't have to go through a process of convincing them this is a good idea. They come straight in saying, "I really want to do this", and they are making lots of theatre, so rather than store it away until they need it, they are using it now, playing with it now. The easy thing to forget with the amateurs is who they are. They are only amateurs in making theatre, they are professionals at doing lots of other things that we aren't. We find them incredibly well-organised, incredibly motivated and very sensible in the way that they approach their work, sometimes in ways that we aren't.



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Open Stages movement workshop led by the RSC's Kate Sagovsky

In professional companies the art will come first, in amateur companies the organisation of that will come first. They have to be very on the ball, very good with their finances. We do too, but those are the traits we really admire in them. They are very resourceful. It's very easy to forget until you meet them that they are very capable individuals that you are working with.'

In people's blood

There are around 5,000 amateur theatre companies in the UK, with over a million people taking part in amateur productions, figures that amazed Ian when he began to plan the project. 'It gives you an idea of the scale of it. There are 13 amateur companies within two or three miles of us here in Stratford, amazingly so. This work is going on everywhere. The really exciting thing for us, and for any professional theatre, is that performing is something that is in people's blood, in people's DNA. Human beings want to perform. It's not just a job, it's not just a calling for some specific individuals. This is something human beings do, they tell stories to one another, they perform stories to one another and there is a want to do it. Whether people are paid or not, there is a desire for

that to happen. A lot of the companies we are dealing with date back a long way. I think our oldest group was formed in 1911, and I think there are a lot of older theatre companies as well. They're part of a bigger, longer tradition, which goes back to mystery plays, Mummers plays, that kind of idea, so they are part of a history of people making their own theatre, as people always have done. There was amateur theatre before there was professional theatre.

'Our roots lie in a theatre people made themselves, within their village, within their settlement, going back in time – there's a proud heritage with that. That's why we've been keen to use the word "amateur" and not shy away from that. The word amateur in all walks of life is quite often thrown at people as an insult and we want to take possession of that word, and turn that around. We see it as people doing something for the love of it, doing something because they enjoy it. People are interested in making the best theatre they possibly can, and amateur theatre companies are interested in being as good as they possibly can be. That's the other interesting thing in interacting with amateur theatre companies, the commitment to making that as good as they possibly can do, quite often on limited resources. So the idea of us engaging with

these companies, working with them rather than simply offering them a showcase, rather than simply saying come and perform on our stage – which we are doing – it's also to get in amongst them, and theatre has always found that the best way to find out about people, to get to know people, is to work with them, and that's what we do with this.'

Resurgence of interest

Ian agrees that there has been a resurgence of interest in the amateur arts, but he argues it is largely among the professionals. 'The interesting thing is that *we've* got interested in it again. The amateur community has always been doing this work. We've rediscovered them.' Theatres have a good track record in working with young people, he says, but in recent years professionals have turned their minds to working more widely within their local communities, particularly with disadvantaged or 'hard-to-reach' groups. 'We've been very successful with that kind of work. We started to think, wouldn't it be great if these projects encompassed everyone in our communities. There's been lots of that happening, large-scale community productions. And what we were finding was that a lot of the people who got involved were doing theatre all the



time, loved theatre and actually had huge amounts of skill, huge amounts of experience in making theatre. We rediscovered them. They've always been there.

'I think theatre had been, for a long number of years, quite dismissive of the amateur world, a lot of the time because it didn't understand the amateur world. I think in return amateur theatre thought, "They're not interested in us, we'll go our own way". That dates back to when the old rep theatres started to disappear. In the day of rep theatres, amateur companies and rep theatres would work quite closely with each other, simply because rep theatres couldn't afford to have a season that ran all the way through. There would be an amateur season and a rep season and most towns in Britain had a rep theatre. When those rep theatres started to disappear and variety started to disappear, theatre reorganised itself, the Arts Council came in, and brilliantly supported the creation of regional theatres. The amateurs were very much left out of that moment. But the brilliant thing about the amateur communities is they are fantastically resilient, they are incredibly resourceful, they don't let anything stop them, so without any funding they carried on and we moved away.'

With funding, the professional theatres were able to take more risks, and look to other countries, and other traditions, for inspiration. As a result, professional and amateur theatre grew further apart. Many amateurs taking part in the skills exchanges were surprised at how physical the process of professional theatre-making is now. 'One of the most exciting things about the project has been passing on those developments to groups who have not had a lot of contact with professional theatre,' Ian says. At the same time, when it comes to Shakespeare, amateur and professional companies share many of the same problems – making the plays accessible, making the language understood, and so on. It's in the RSC's interest to share its skills, its experience, with amateur and professional companies alike. 'Most people's first experience of Shakespeare is not the RSC,' Ian says. 'It's either a small theatre company that comes to their school, it's their local regional theatre or it's an amateur company. And we want that experience to be as good an experience as it possibly can be. They're brilliant stories, fantastic plays, but how do you bring them to life? We have amassed a huge amount of experience and the practitioners here are incredibly skilled. There are a lot of things that can be passed on, ideas, concepts and skills. It is in our interests for anyone's first experience of Shakespeare to be great.'

Live performance

Another key idea that Ian want to impress through the project is that 'theatre belongs to everyone'. 'Actors are incredibly well-trained now; they are very physical, which can be quite daunting. People can think, "These are the professionals, we'll leave it to them". We don't want that to be the case. We want people to feel that they can perform Shakespeare, and they can perform theatre. That's how we avoid theatre becoming something we find in a museum, an elite art form only a few go to see and only a few perform. We want it to be an open-access art form that everybody takes part in. We don't want people to think that you get to a certain age and then you have to sit down, shut up and watch the professionals do it. We want to say to those people, you can continue making theatre for the whole of your life. And we benefit from that. If someone is making theatre then the chances are they will go and see theatre. We all benefit from that, and live performance has never been more valued than it is now. You can't download a live performance because even if it was recorded live you are not seeing it first-hand. It is untransmittable by the internet, by a computer, you have to be there.'

'The RSC is an incredible resource. It is one of the world's largest theatres. It has an incredible reputation. I think it's important that we open up this resource. The idea is that we make the resource that is the RSC available to as many people as possible. Logistically

everybody can't be here, everybody can't perform on the stage, our practitioners can't work with everyone, but what we can do, by opening our theatre up and opening our resources up, is let people see what we do and the amount of work that goes into a production, and they value then what we do. It also means that we touch more people than can just come and see our shows here. In all the shows that are taking part in Open Stages, all those just under 300 companies, because we have run a skills exchange with members of those companies, there's a little bit of RSC DNA in all of them. We've contributed just a small amount to each one of those productions – maybe the way someone says a certain line, some productions will have changed the whole way they rehearse because of the work they've done with us, in other cases it will be just one individual who has thought, "I'll just change the way I approach this" – we will have touched all those productions in some way. I think that's sharing the resource. Otherwise people will start asking why are you here, what is this theatre for. If we can enable more people to do theatre and enable more people to understand and perform Shakespeare, then we are sharing that resource, and there's a good reason for the RSC to be here.'

The project ends next year but Ian expects the spirit of collaboration to endure long beyond it. 'We've learned so much so far. There will be some kind of continuing engagement though we're not sure what shape that will take. The interesting thing is that the ball is rolling now and there is so much interest. It isn't just us. Lots of theatre companies are looking at how they work with amateurs and how they work with their wider communities. When we come to the end of this project we don't want to put it all back in the box. It will be part of the continuing development of our work and certainly our partner theatres, quite a lot of whom were already doing some work, will look to continue these partnerships with amateur companies. It's a growth area in the way we work. There's a kind of feeling around it. There's been a resurgence of interest in people performing, through things like *Britain's Got Talent*, those kinds of television shows. The interesting thing about theatre is you can't do it on your own and you can't do it in five minutes. It is a collaborative art form that needs you to band together with a group of people and work together about as closely as you possibly can and take a big risk together in getting up on stage. There's something fantastic about the comradeship of doing that, there's something incredibly healthy and community-building about that idea. Everybody takes a role, somebody is building a set, someone is doing lights. Theatre has a place for all those personalities who all have to have their role in order to be able to pull off this thing. There's something very healthy about theatre working in that way. That's what we found in working with young people and there's no difference in working with adults.'