

UNIVERSITY OF
WESTMINSTER

RADICAL THEATRE: INSPIRING FUTURE GENERATIONS

EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE PACK

SohoPoly



Heritage
Fund

Produced by the Soho Poly with funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund

The Soho Poly

Who are we?

In 1968, Fred Proud and Verity Bargate founded a theatre company called the Soho Theatre. In 1972, it moved into a basement on Riding House Street owned by the Polytechnic of Central London (now the University of Westminster). Here it became known as the Soho Poly and, for twenty years, it was to have a hugely important role on the alternative theatre scene.

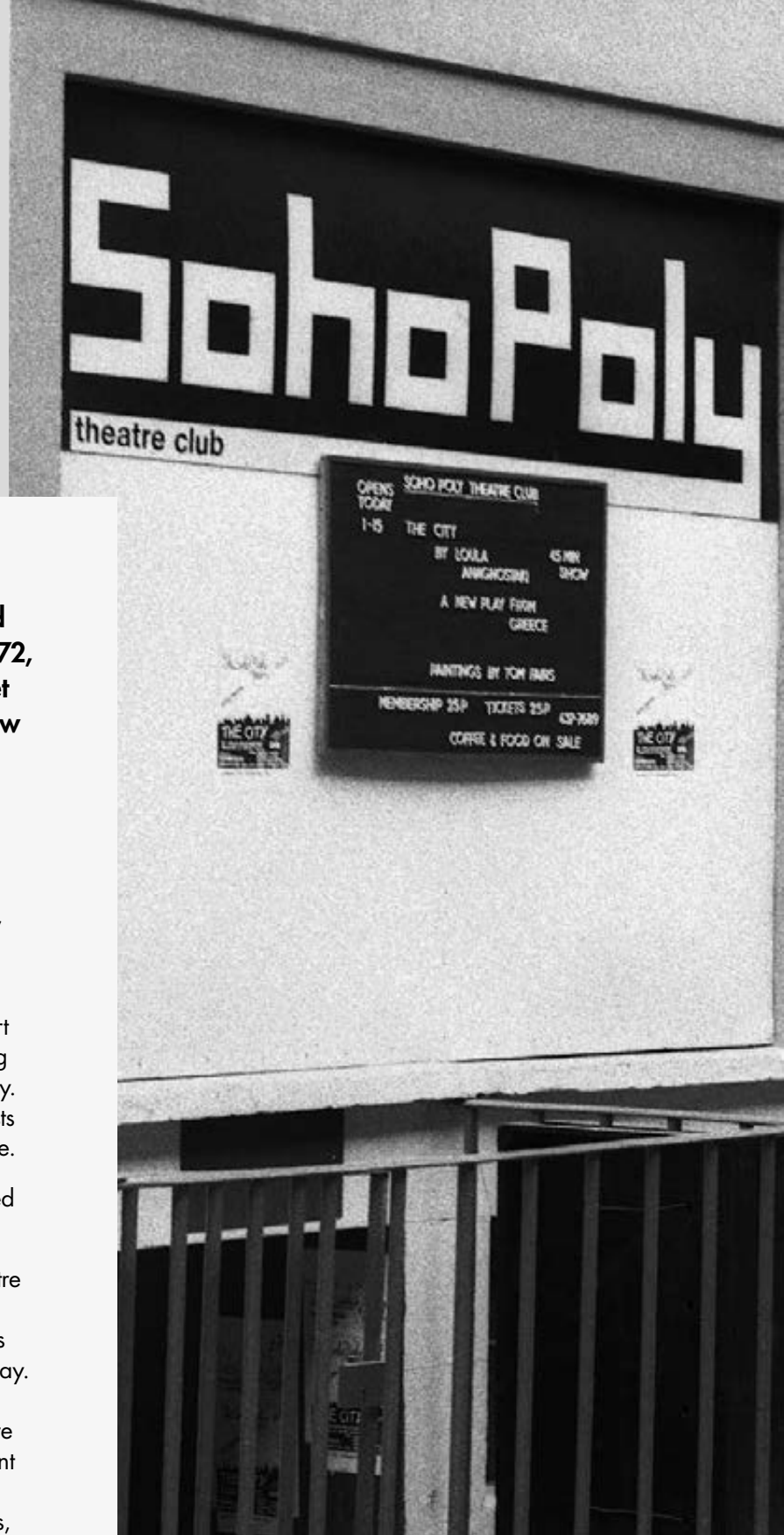
Hanif Kureishi, Caryl Churchill, Timberlake Wertenbaker, Nigel Hawthorne and Simon Callow are just some of those who passed through its doors.

The Soho Poly was a pioneer of 'lunchtime theatre' - part of an attempt to make theatre more inclusive by bringing arts and culture into the heart of the ordinary working day. Lunchtime theatre also offered opportunities to many artists who found themselves excluded from mainstream theatre.

It was a radical space full of change-makers. Plays tackled important political issues around race, sex and class.

Sadly, the basement was abandoned in 1990. The theatre company reverted to its original name and produced work in many other spaces before arriving on London's Dean Street, where Soho Theatre continues to thrive today. Since 2012, however, the University of Westminster has been leading a fundraising project to restore and revive the Riding House Street venue where so many important plays were first performed. In the meantime, our new artistic team has been producing a host of pop-up gigs, poetry readings and theatre workshops.

The Soho Poly has also received funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund for a major oral history and outreach programme. As part of that project, and inspired by the Soho Poly's past, we have produced this pack to help the next generation of theatre makers to think about the type of theatre they want to see in the future.



How to use this pack

This pack is intended for use by teachers and students. Individual sections are packed with interviews, discussion points, activities and practical advice for tomorrow's theatre makers. The sections can be read in any order.

Images:

Left: The Soho Poly
in the 1970s
© University of
Westminster Archives

This page: Emmy the Great
and Jon Ronson (below)
performing at the Soho Poly
© Yaasiin Hossen-saib



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Can Theatre Change the World?

**What impact can theatre have on the world?
Can it actually change anything?**



► TASK: Can theatre change the world?



1 Take a snap vote in your group.
Can theatre change the world? Yes, no or maybe?

Yes No Maybe

2 Read the quotes below. How far do you agree with their sentiments? Which one do you most identify with? Discuss your different choices.

3 Read the text on Plays that Matter (opposite). Can you think of any others?

4 Now vote again.
Has your discussion changed anyone's opinions?

Yes No Maybe

Theatre has incited protest and change. And it will keep doing so.

ALICE, DIRECTOR

I still love theatre but I'm not sure it's as relevant today.

AMIR, DANCER

I go to the theatre to lose myself in a story. Theatre should be about escapism, not politics.

LEE, REGULAR THEATRE GOER

Theatre can change the world if it changes itself.

ELLEN, YOUTH CLUB LEADER

Theatre can show perspectives you might not have considered. By looking at the world through other lenses we open ourselves to greater empathy and understanding.

MIKEY, ACTOR



Gotcha, Soho Poly © Nobby Clark / ArenaPAL

Perhaps a play's worth shouldn't only be measured by the impact it has on the whole of a society? Perhaps it's enough if it affects smaller numbers of people, or even just a single individual?

The actor Phil Davis remembers the powerful impression Barrie Keeffe's play *Gotcha* (1976) made on members of the Soho Poly audience. One woman was so moved by the production – about a boy who is dismissed and ridiculed by bullying teachers at his school – that she burst into tears and locked herself in the bathroom at the end of the show. She only came out when Davis (who played the boy) promised her that the play and performance meant as much to him as it had to her.

Plays that Matter

Here are some examples of plays that many people would say have effected change in different ways.

Deep Cut (2008)

In 2008, a play at the Edinburgh Festival explored the unexplained deaths of many young soldiers in training at an army barracks. Audiences could sign up to a petition after they saw the show, calling for an investigation. It worked:

"Following the extraordinary (if somewhat unexpected) success of the play *Deep Cut* at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, the families of the young people who died at *Deepcut* have decided to mount, for the first time, a formal campaign for a public inquiry into the deaths."

(Des and Doreen James, the parents of Private Cheryl James who died from gunshot wounds in 2005.)

Hedda Gabler (1891)

Henrik Ibsen was a Norwegian playwright. This play showed how disempowered women were in society at the time. Going to the theatre was one of the few things women could do without a male chaperone, so after matinee performances they gathered and discussed the issues. These women decided to march on Oslo Town Hall and demand the right to vote for women.

The Colour of Justice (1999)

In 1993, black teenager Stephen Lawrence was stabbed to death in a racist attack by a gang of white youths. The police investigation failed to provide sufficient evidence to convict. The Tricycle Theatre production 'performed' the findings of the public enquiry into police failings. It drew much attention to the report, encouraged people to join debates and discussions after the performances and led to wide-spread calls for reform.

Sus (1979)

Barrie Keeffe's play *Sus* was first performed at the Soho Poly. The play focused on a highly contentious law that allowed the police to stop and search people on 'suspicion' of being about to commit a crime. It disproportionately targeted black communities. *Sus* was later performed outside in front of large crowds at Rock Against Racism concerts and became part of the fight to repeal this law, something that happened in 1981. Nevertheless, the play remains deeply relevant today.

The Soho Poly 1972 - 1990

Read the following thoughts from people who worked at the original Soho Poly 1972-1990.

Which ones feel most relevant today?
Are there any that really speak to you?
Are there any questions you would like to ask these theatre makers in return?



“

It was a really good opportunity for young writers, because you could write a 50-minute three hander and they would put it on and people would come and see it and critics would come and see it...

If I became a writer it's because they gave me opportunities to see my work produced for the first time...

When you're at the beginning of your career what you really need is to hear actors saying your lines.

Hanif Kureishi, writer



“I loved the fact of people coming from wherever they were working, and it was a lot of local people who came...

I don't know how much it was, a quid maybe, something like that? A very small amount of money. This was the epoch of theatres like that... it was a sort of a movement, this radical fringe theatre movement...

There was a sense of things happening. It was a very happening place.

It was kind of like Brecht's idea of a perfect audience, everybody was very wide awake and very focused on it.”

Simon Callow, actor

Image above: Simon Callow (right) in *Soul of the White Ant* at Soho Poly 1976
© Nobby Clark / ArenaPAL

Left: Hanif Kureishi
© Kier Kureishi



“

Everything had to be tailored to within the limitations of what we had.

**Angie Hill,
former stage manager**

Image left: Fred Proud, 1973

Below: Harriet Walter in *Three More Sleepless Nights*, Soho Poly 1980
Both images © Nobby Clark / ArenaPAL

“

This space became my life, because it demanded total commitment.

If you were an up-and-coming actor, or even an established actor, it was good to be seen, even in a lunchtime or fringe show. If you got good reviews, that would lead you to some very nicely paid television, film or other theatre work.

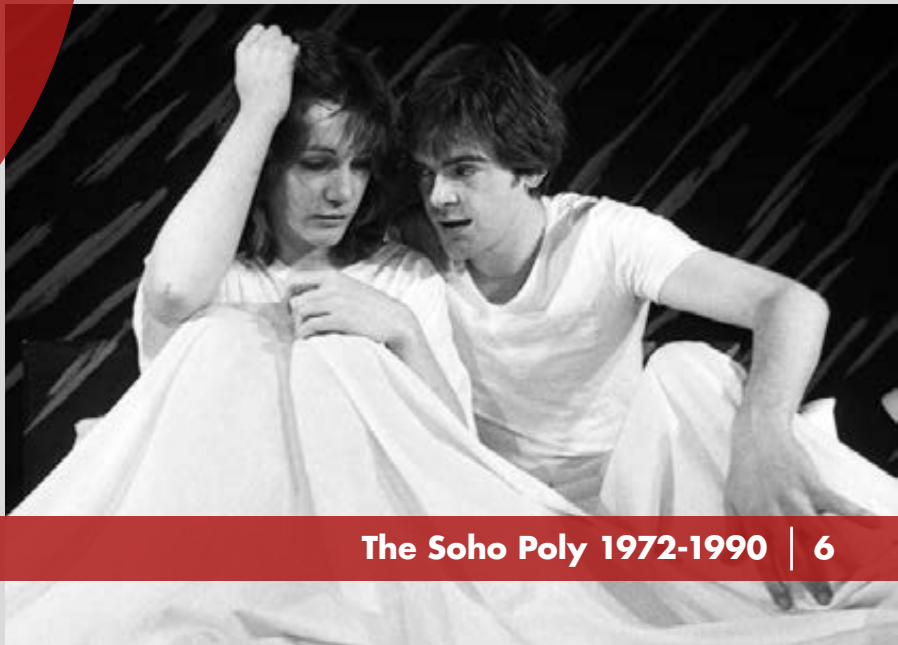
I wanted to attract people into the theatre to see something extraordinary, who've never been to the theatre before.

**Fred Proud,
former Artistic Director**

“It felt rather extraordinary to be doing a full-blown play here with people coming in with their lunch...

So lunchtime theatre was breaking the mould about how long a play should be. But are you buying your theatre experience by the yard or are you buying into the quality of the play?

Harriet Walter, actor





“It doesn’t look like a theatre at all, it looks like a basement flat, but there was something kind of magical about it to me...

You felt, as a member of the audience, that you were in it. You felt like you were sort of part of the play, an extension of the set in some way...

The Soho Poly was like my family. I felt immediately welcome and after I’d done one play here I knew I’d come back.

It was a good time to be a working class actor, because all these jobs were coming up and all the posh kids were complaining that they didn’t have a cockney accent and they couldn’t get a job.”

Phil Davis, actor



Janet Amsden © Steve Lawton

“There was not one place to match the Soho Poly...

Everybody was held by it. There was no separation, everybody was together.”

**Janet Amsden,
actor and writer**

“By day you’re sorting out lots of practical problems and perhaps choosing a play, getting casting organised, etc. And then you’re coming down and maybe taking the tickets and selling the wine and sorting out the problems that arose all the time. In that sense it was the typical life of a fringe theatre of that period.

A space that’s difficult is also potentially very creative.”

**Brian Stirner,
former Associate Director**

“A lot of the actors, they were not even actors. They were people who we brought from the community to get involved in the arts...

You want to help the community, you go into your community and educate them...”

Jamal Ali, writer

Below: Paul Barber,
Roger Allam and
Stuart Barren in *SUS*
Soho Poly, June 1979.
© Nobby Clark / ArenaPAL

**“I think at that time
there was a very
positive movement in
the world for change.”**

Ann Mitchell, actor and director



“

**I came from a working class
background, so we were outsiders
in the generality of British theatre...**

**I suppose the class struggle, very
old fashioned now though still
there, was at the basis of why we
wanted to make work...**

**Sue Dunderdale,
former Artistic Director**

Future Theatre

What do we want theatre to be in the future?

We asked teenagers in East London and these are some of the words they came up with.



► **TASK 1: How to make change happen.**

Pick 3 of the suggestions opposite – the ones that you think are the most important.
Now write a few words or ideas about how you might make these changes.
What are the challenges? Are some changes easier to achieve than others?

► **TASK 2: What do you really care about?**

What do you really care about?
What does *everyone* in your group care about?

Put 10 pieces of paper across the floor with the numbers 1-10. One of the group is going to read out the following prompts:

- LOVE
- FAMILY
- POLITICS
- CLIMATE CRISIS
- FASHION
- MUSIC
- EDUCATION
- MONEY
- POWER

As each prompt is read out, everyone should move up and down the 1-10 scale depending on how passionately they feel about the word read out. 10 means you really care. 1 means you aren't bothered. Do the exercise in silence. And make sure no one is being judgmental of anyone else.

Now add some of
your own prompts.
What things matter to you?



Has the theatre you have seen addressed these issues?
If not – is it time to make theatre which does?

Future Theatre: Sustainability

How do we make sure that theatre is sustainable, and only impacts positively on our planet?

► **TASK 1: Write a list of 10 ways in which creating a piece of theatre might impact the planet.**

For example, creating rubbish, or using fuel to transport the set around the country.

- 1: _____
- 2: _____
- 3: _____
- 4: _____
- 5: _____
- 6: _____
- 7: _____
- 8: _____
- 9: _____
- 10: _____



Images:

Right: Stuart Heyes

Opposite page: *Bicycle Boy*
directed by Helen Eastman



We chatted to Stuart Heyes, sustainability lead at Fuel Theatre about his job:

You are the company's sustainability lead. What does that mean?

What it means, in general, is making sure that we hand on our planet in a better condition than we found it to the next generation. What does it mean for the company? It's definitely not just about carbon, and not even just about the climate crisis. It is far more important than that. It's about living in harmony with the world, not exploiting it.

And one of the main vectors that we have for doing that is to love rubbish - to fall in love with our waste. All creative projects create waste. The act of designing creates waste. If I cut a beautiful leaf out of piece of paper, the remains of the piece of paper are left on the floor, and I could either choose to forget about that or I could preserve them. And if I preserve them then they can be used in the future.

How did you become passionate about this?

I've always had a real interest in using things for purposes other than that for which they were intended, and also for looking at an object and imagining what else it could be - seeing the latent potential for redesign and reuse in everything.

What's the biggest challenge?

One of the challenges of sustainability is getting over the idea that it is going to be either straightforward or enjoyable. Often, in an attempt to make it easier to swallow, people say, 'look at all the other benefits, all the upsides', and that it's all smiley. The truth is that, from my point of view, sustainability is about embracing inconvenience. Because it's the desire to make everything convenient that got us into this mess in the first place.

For example, in theatre, we are often working to deadlines – the deadline of the actual performance being the biggest. And as deadlines approach, it's very natural to start cutting corners and making last minute choices. As time runs out, the quality of sustainability decisions gets worse – people start buying or chopping or sourcing in dafter ways. That's something we all need to try and avoid.

Future Theatre: Disability

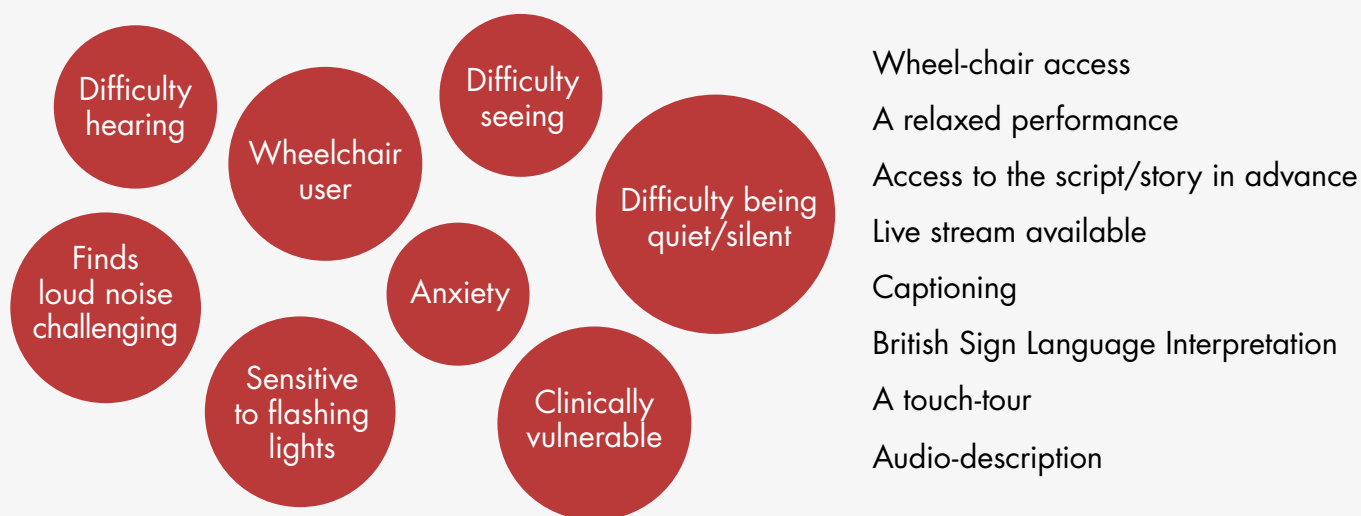
How can we make sure disabled artists, creatives and audience members can fully participate in theatre?

Image: *Blood Wedding*
Graeae Theatre, 2015
© Viktoria Begg



► TASK 1: How can we help theatre makers and audience members overcome barriers to participating in performances?

Look at the diagram below. On the left are some physical or neurological differences that may cause difficulties in particular environments or situations. On the right are positive actions that theatres can take to prevent these from becoming a barrier to participation. Can you link the bubbles on the left to the solutions on the right? Can you think of any other ways in which theatres might adapt to encourage full participation?



Remember that some people may have multiple needs. How might that make designing adaptations more challenging?

The Social Model of Disability

says that disability is caused by the way society is set up, rather than by a person's impairment or difference. The model encourages individuals and organisations to look at ways of removing barriers that might limit the full participation of disabled people.

► TASK 2: Write a list of 5 ways to support accessibility and participation in theatre.

Below are some of the main UK theatre companies that support disabled artists in making work. They all focus on accessibility in different ways. Read the text and research the companies via their websites. (See Further Resources for links.) Now list at least 5 ways in which they support accessibility and participation.

- 1: _____
- 2: _____
- 3: _____
- 4: _____
- 5: _____

The Graeae Theatre Company was founded by Nabil Shaban and Richard Tomlinson and has spearheaded the effort towards the inclusion of disabled and deaf actors and writers since their first performance of *Sideshow* in May 1980. The company focuses on intensive training initiatives, empowering workshops geared towards young artists, and accessibility in terms of language; the actors practice a mix of audio descriptions and sign language. Their current projects stretch from *Night of the Living Flatpacks*, a series of five 15 minute audio dramas broadcasting on 20 UK radio stations, to their production of *Oliver Twist* which has been adapted to include integrated creative sign language, audio description and captioning.

Quiplash is a company run by Amelia and Al Lander-Cavallo, which works with theatre companies to encourage LGBTQ+ and disabled inclusion and representation. The company offers consultations for theatres, runs workshops and training sessions and creates performances. They are Associate Artists at Brixton House and have worked with other inclusive theatre companies such as the Birds of Paradise Theatre. Quiplash fights for the inclusion of queer disabled voices in the world of theatre.

The Birds of Paradise Theatre Company, founded in 1993, is the first company in Scotland to give active employment to disabled and non-disabled actors, and, as of 2012, is the first professional company in Scotland to be led by someone with a disability. A major goal of the Birds of Paradise Theatre is to open the doors for future generations of disabled actors, and to shine a light on the under appreciated talent of those in theatre who have disabilities. The company also offers training and consultation which aims to stretch the Birds of Paradise Theatre's vision of inclusivity to every corner of the arts sector.

Taking Flight Theatre is a Wales based organisation and company which was founded in 2008 by Elise Davison and co-founder Beth House. The company works with D/deaf and disabled actors, and travels around as a theatre company, performing in theatre houses as well as outdoor venues. One of their current projects entitled *The Anti Fun Ministry* engages with other festivals by scheduling times for the *Taking Flight AntiFun Ministry* to march through and stamp out all the silliness (the ministry will NOT be funny at all). The goal of the Taking Flight Theatre company is to embrace bold and unusual theatre in an engaging and inclusive environment.

Oily Cart Theatre originally began in 1981 as a children's theatre company. When they were asked to perform for a school for disabled children they reoriented their goals to display theatre which specifically engaged with children with disabilities. Performances are interactive and provide a variety of sensory engagement; their shows include smell, touch, light, music, sound, and movement to stimulate different elements of our senses. They aim to prove that anyone can enjoy theatre.

Future Theatre: Neurodiversity

As society's understanding of neurodiversity grows, how can we make sure theatre and theatre making are accessible to all?

We chatted to Vijay Patel. Vijay is a performance artist, writer and neurodivergent access consultant. He crosses forms from live art, performance art and queer club/cabaret.

Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity describes the idea that people experience and interact with the world in different ways. There is no 'right' way to be, and differences are not viewed as deficits.

A person might be described as being neurodivergent if the way they learn, behave, or experience the world is different from what is considered 'neurotypical'.

Conditions such as ADHD, autism and dyslexia are common forms of neurodivergence.

How do you think the industry can help remove barriers for neurodivergent theatre makers?

I think it's about people's attitudes. And here I always talk about the social model of disability. Once we understand that, we can start looking at disability and neurodiversity in completely different ways.

For more on the Social Model of Disability see information on page 14.

We can ask if the people we work with understand the needs of disabled and neurodivergent people. We can ask if we need to alter our building to make sure people can access it fully. These environmental barriers are quite significant for neurodivergent individuals. There might also be sensory barriers not related to the physical building – spaces where there are loud noises or lots of people.

And we need to take the pressure off the neurodivergent individuals themselves to have to explain their needs.

This is why I advocate for access riders. Personally, they are a great tool for me. They mean I don't have to explain myself constantly to people. I'm like, 'just download my access rider, read that, and you'll know most things you need to know'.

An access rider is a document that outlines your disability or access needs to let people you work with know how to ensure you have equal access to work.

And these are basic requirements. I'm not asking for 'x' amount of money. I'm not asking for huge things. I'm just asking for the ways in which we work to shift a little bit, or to think about some extra provision that you could have available for me, in case I need it.

If we can create more opportunities for neurodivergent people to have a voice within organisations - to say 'these are my suggestions about how you can make things better' - hopefully we can make a much healthier working environment.

But it's constant work. There has to be constant action happening. And people shouldn't be afraid of getting it wrong. It's fine to get it wrong. We just have to say, 'okay, how do we move forward?' Because trying is better than nothing.

“



I think it's about research, it's about understanding, it's about talking amongst teams. And it's about talking to other neurodivergent people... about how to make your organisation better.

Vijay Patel

Left: Vijay Patel
© Holly Revell

► **TASK:** Read the interview with Vijay Patel on these pages. Now think of three ways your school or youth theatre could be more welcoming to neurodivergent theatre makers and audiences.

1:

2:

3:

Future Theatre: Look and Feel



When new theatres are built, how do we make sure they are accessible and welcoming? What kind of spaces should theatres be?

Many new theatres aim to be a 'public living room'; a place where people can meet, connect and spend time even if they are not coming to see a show. How can we make these spaces appealing to people who might not traditionally feel welcome in a theatre?

Above: Brixton House Theatre

Traditionally, theatre interiors were ornate and elaborate buildings, often decorated with red curtains, murals, sculptures and fancy chandeliers. One of the best-known theatre architects was Frank Matcham and his theatres were opulent and beautiful.

Modern theatres are often much plainer. The architect who designed our National Theatre, Denys Lasdun, wanted it to be a blank canvas so that audiences focussed on the actual performance not the décor around it. Lasdun also referred to the foyer spaces at the NT as 'the fourth auditorium'. These spaces are open throughout the day to ticket holders and visitors alike. They help encourage social interaction and a sense of participation in the life of the theatre.

It is also essential that new theatres are fully accessible for all theatre-goers. This is a legal requirement, but also an opportunity to create welcoming and inclusive environments.

CASE STUDY: Brixton House

Brixton House theatre, which opened in South London in 2022, is the new home of Ovalhouse Theatre. Previously located in Kennington, Ovalhouse had a long history of radical and inclusive community theatre. However, in order to help the theatre expand, and to address accessibility issues, Lambeth Council offered it a new site. As well as its two auditoriums, Brixton House has recording studios, workspaces, and rooms for rehearsal and outreach activities. Crucially, in the new building, there is now full accessibility, not just for audiences but also in all backstage areas, including wheelchair accessible lighting rigs.

Former Artistic Director Gbolahan Obisesan described the theatre's aims to us like this:

We have a large constituency of people to cater for, including people with disabilities and other needs, who we want to incorporate into our thinking in an intentional manner and through active consultation. We can be proud that our building is designed to be energy efficient, but it is also designed for wheelchair users to be able to get around easily, as well as to operate and rig our accessible lighting grids. Our aim is that people with disabilities or neurodivergent needs can feel comfortable in the spaces we have. It's important to me that our building is a safe space with an inclusive infrastructure, and that all our staff have the training required to respond to any sort of request at any given time.

We want everyone to feel welcome walking through the door. Our staff team is representative of our community and if they are from a particular country or speak another language, that might be indicated in their staff name badge. We also want people fluent in British Sign Language to be very much part of our staff team.

We're trying to do everything we can do to provide a positive and welcoming experience for people with different lived experiences when they encounter Brixton House.

► TASK: Design a theatre foyer space.

A foyer is usually the first thing someone encounters when they enter a theatre. It can set the tone for the whole building. In groups, or individually, consider the following questions:

- 1** What is a theatre foyer for?
Jot down as many possible uses as you can.
- 2** What might be in your foyer?
A café? A gallery? Places to plug in laptops?
What other ideas can you generate?
What would make the space welcoming?
- 3** How might your foyer be made fully accessible?
- 4** Think about colours and textures.
Make a mood board by collaging or using Pinterest.

Brixton House foyer



Future Theatre: Ethnic Minority Participation*

Diversity in the arts refers to the belief that the make-up of organisations, and the work they produce, should be representative of the backgrounds and lived experiences of all people in our society.

A diverse workplace might include people of different sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnic background, religion, financial status, age, disability, or neurodiversity. In reality, however, many people continue to face greater barriers to participation than others.

Ethnic minority representation is one major area of concern. For example, a 2018 report commissioned by Arts Council England concluded that people from ethnic minority backgrounds were presented with extra obstacles due to economic and time pressures, and concerns about feeling uncomfortable or out of place.

How can we remove such barriers to equitable and diverse participation in our industry?

*'Ethnic Minority' is the current term used by the UK government to describe all ethnic groups except the white British group. But not everyone will agree with the way people are referred to. Some people prefer to use the phrase Global Ethnic Majority (or variations of this) to draw attention to the fact that white people are in the minority when considered globally.

We asked actress Alicia McKenzie 'what do you think would help increase ethnic minority diversity in theatre'?

The first thing we need to have is more diversity in decision-making roles.

If there was more diversity on theatre boards, among producers, in other top positions – and also amongst the reviewers and critics who decide what's 'good' and what should be put on – that would help to increase diversity in theatre in general.

Another element of it is really valuing cultural heritage and diverse backgrounds in the arts. What theatre looks like in the Caribbean, the kind of performance that I grew up with, is very different to the kind of things that'll be on in mainstream theatres. So maybe there's something about bringing that style of performance into British Theatre as well.



“

I always remember that song in Hamilton: 'I want to be in the room where it happens'

Alicia McKenzie

▶ TASK 1: Thinking about casting.

One of the most important things that any theatre company can do to address the need for increased diversity is to think hard about how plays are cast. Consider the following questions:



- ▶ **Why is it important for audiences to see themselves represented on stage?**

- ▶ **Should someone's ethnicity or cultural background be relevant when they audition for a role?**

- ▶ **Should we always cast the best actor regardless of ethnicity?**

- ▶ **Are there any plays where we need to be conscious of ethnicity when casting?**

- ▶ **Should we positively discriminate to increase ethnic minority diversity on stage?**

Divide into groups to discuss one or more of these questions. Make a note of points of disagreement, but always remember to be respectful to those who have different opinions.

The questions in Task 1 relate specifically to issues of ethnic minority participation and representation, but similar issues arise with regard to people who might identify, for example, as LGBTQ+, disabled or neurodivergent.

These days, many theatres include a diversity statement on their website. Here is an example from the National Theatre:

We believe the National Theatre should as far as possible reflect the diversity of the UK on its stages, in its workforce and in its audience reach. Our ambition is to achieve greater diversity in the areas of gender, race and ethnicity, disability, sexuality, socio-economic background, faith and age.

nationaltheatre.org.uk/about-the-national-theatre/diversity

▶ TASK 2: Research your own case study.

All theatre companies need to think hard about diversity. However, some companies are specifically dedicated to the representation of particular groups that may have struggled, or continue to struggle, to have their voices heard. In groups, or individually, carry out a research project into one of these 5 theatre companies in preparation for a short presentation:

Tara Theatre

New Earth Theatre

Talawa Theatre Company

Eclipse Theatre

Tamasha Theatre Company

Consider the following questions in your research:

- ▶ **How and why was the company formed?**
- ▶ **What is the company's aim?**
- ▶ **Which groups does it represent and hope to reach?**
- ▶ **How do its past and current productions demonstrate its commitment to its goals?**
- ▶ **What can we learn about the company from recent reviews of its productions?**

Future Theatre: Queer Spaces

We chatted to playwright Tom Wright about how we can make theatre a welcome space for queer artists.

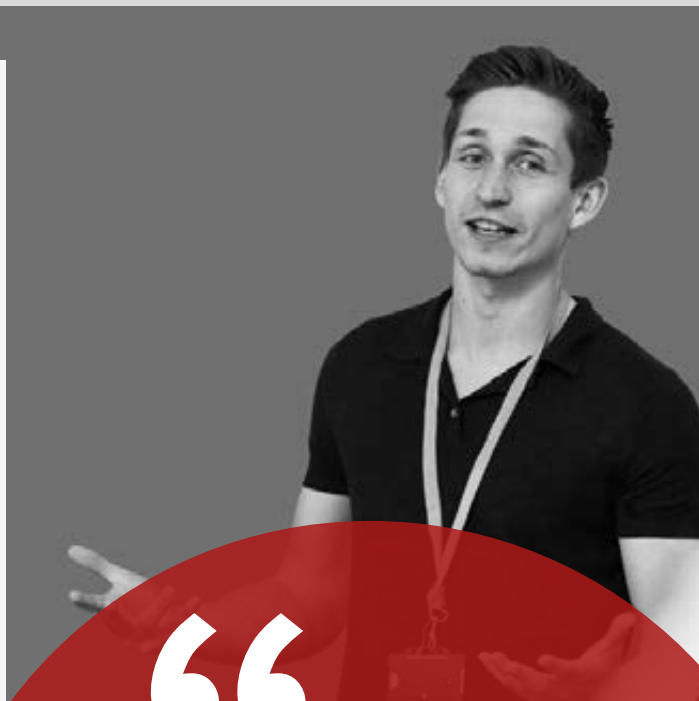
How can we best support and empower young queer artists?

One gift of queer art is that by celebrating the richness of our queer experiences, we empower all audiences to live more freely. To enable this transgressive and imaginative work to be made we must be open and flexible to 'queer' ways of creating theatre.

This goes beyond important practical considerations like gender-inclusive spaces, and includes encouraging diversity of thought, or even reimagining the physical form such work might take.

One of the key differences between queer artists and those from other protected backgrounds is that we are very rarely born directly into our community. As we discover who we are as young LGBTQ+ people in a heteronormative world we have to seek out people who share and affirm our experiences

Despite this need for community, there is currently no regularly funded theatre organisation dedicated to connecting and supporting LGBTQ+ theatre artists. In order to empower young queer artists we first need to connect them and create spaces where they can be their authentic selves.



“

Queer artists of all kinds are seeking and instigating new ways of being proudly different and subversive.

Tom Wright

What do you understand by 'queer space'?

There has been a lot of recent debate as to what a 'queer space' is and should be. But most would agree that it's a physical place created by and for queer people to inhabit uniquely as themselves. The main ambition of any queer space is to build an alternative way of being that's non-hierarchical and contains a plurality of voices and queer experiences, safe from fear of violence or ridicule.

Why are queer spaces important, and how have they been important in your own work?

In my own work, I have always prioritised collaborating with other LGBTQ+ artists. Through creating a safe space in rehearsals these artists often feel comfortable in sharing personal experiences and having enlightening conversations about things that matter to us. This exchange of ideas then gives the work more depth and clarity.

We have also built a loyal LGBTQ+ audience, working in performance spaces where audiences members can feel free to show up as themselves, as well as respond to the work in ways they see fit, without fear of prejudice. Creating work directly for my community is hugely satisfying and inspires me to be a better artist.

Interestingly, when you make work so specifically for your target audience in this way, you soon notice that other audience members are attracted to this specificity. In this instance that means allies also feel empowered and excited to join in and learn about lives different than their own. Even seeing themselves in some of the universal emotions and experiences.

There are some that believe that being ghettoised to a 'queer space' will limit the scope of your audiences, just like being called a 'queer writer' might limit the scope of your career. But there's extraordinary diversity in queerness and so many queer stories that haven't been told. In an industry where audiences are crying out for new stories, this can only be a good thing.

What are your hopes for the future of theatre?

My hope for the future of theatre is that we can free ourselves from restrictive ideas of what theatre can be. How it typically has been made and by whom. I hope that we can collectively realise - just as there are endless possibilities in life - there are in fact ways of sustaining our industry other than the current, failing but prevailing, systems. This is where queer people are uniquely placed to think outside of the box and to inspire others.

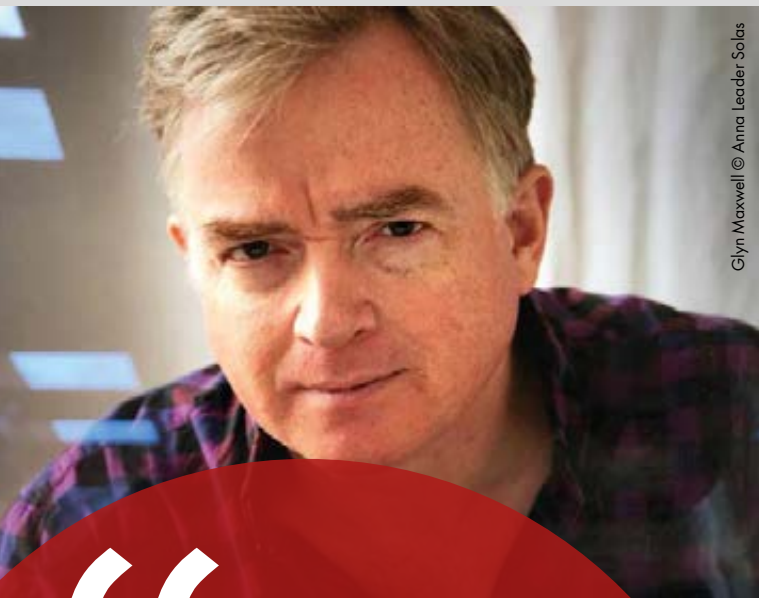
► **TASK: Research an early play addressing LGBTQ+ experiences on stage.**

Shockingly, homosexuality in the UK was only legalised in 1967. Then, in 1968, theatre censorship was abolished. Before that all new plays had to be checked in advance by the Lord Chamberlain. Suddenly, it was possible for writers to address LGBTQ+ experiences directly on stage.

Conduct a short research project into one of the plays to do this and explore the impact of the play's first production. Good places to start are the Queer Theatre History pages of the Stratford East Theatre website, the Gay and Lesbian pages of the Unfinished Histories website, and the online magazine Drama and Theatre. (See Further Resources page for links.)

Community Theatre

Youth, amateur and other community groups are often where people have their first experience of theatre. They can also provide opportunities for people to come together and be creative at all stages of life.



Glyn Maxwell © Anna Leader Solas

“

All you have in common is that you're doing it for love. Which is great, because that's the best part of anything

Glyn Maxwell

We chatted to poet Glyn Maxwell and Ellen Havard, Senior Youth Worker at Newham Council, about what makes these forms of theatre so important.

Why is amateur/community theatre important?

GM: Partly because it brings the telling of stories old and new to people who might live a long way from any professional theatre, or people for whom professional plays are out of their reach economically. You will find many famous actors and directors who got their start as kids in youth, amateur or community theatre.

How is it different from working with a professional company?

Amateur actors aren't being paid, so you have to be aware of their wider situations in terms of family, work, health, age, and the distance they have to travel to take part. Also, in professional companies you would probably assume a certain level of talent, ability, competence, discipline. You will often be amazed by the levels that can be reached in amateur theatre, but you should also be charitable towards the natural, untrained level of some participants. In a professional company your obligations to everyone else are underwritten by a contract. In amateur theatre they are based upon an understanding of the time each one of you is giving to the enterprise purely out of love, passion, curiosity and friendship. Amateur theatre is a famously good place to make friends. I made some for life there.

Who can get involved in community theatre? Is it just for actors?

No! Absolutely ANYONE who can bring something useful to the putting on of a play is embraced in amateur or community theatre – actors, directors, stage designers, stage managers, set builders, set painters, technicians, composers, costume, sound or lighting designers, marketing people, and – once the play is in performance – folks who run the box-office, the front-of-house, make coffee, sell programmes, keep the bar open, and people who know their way round publicity and social media.

“

Being part of making theatre, is a great way of saying ‘yes’ more.

Ellen Havard



In the last few years, everything’s been quite difficult and challenging. What has youth theatre been able to do to help people through this weird time?

EH: At the beginning of the pandemic, I was the director of Southwark Playhouse’s Youth Theatre. And when we were all on Zoom it was just about coming together and being silly. Because life suddenly became small and scary, and quite boring. Being able to come together and be playful was just so essential. Professional theatre is often slow to respond to the world and to events. It can take a long time to write a play, to get the money together, all of that. Youth theatre was one of the ways to get people creating throughout and capturing moments.

What would you say to someone who wants to get involved in youth theatre but doesn’t see themselves as an actor?

That was like me too, then, and there’s definitely a place for you! I guess it’s about talking to whoever the leader is of a particular Youth Theatre. I work quite closely with Theatre Royal Stratford East and they’ve run a young technicians programme for example.

Can theatre change the world?

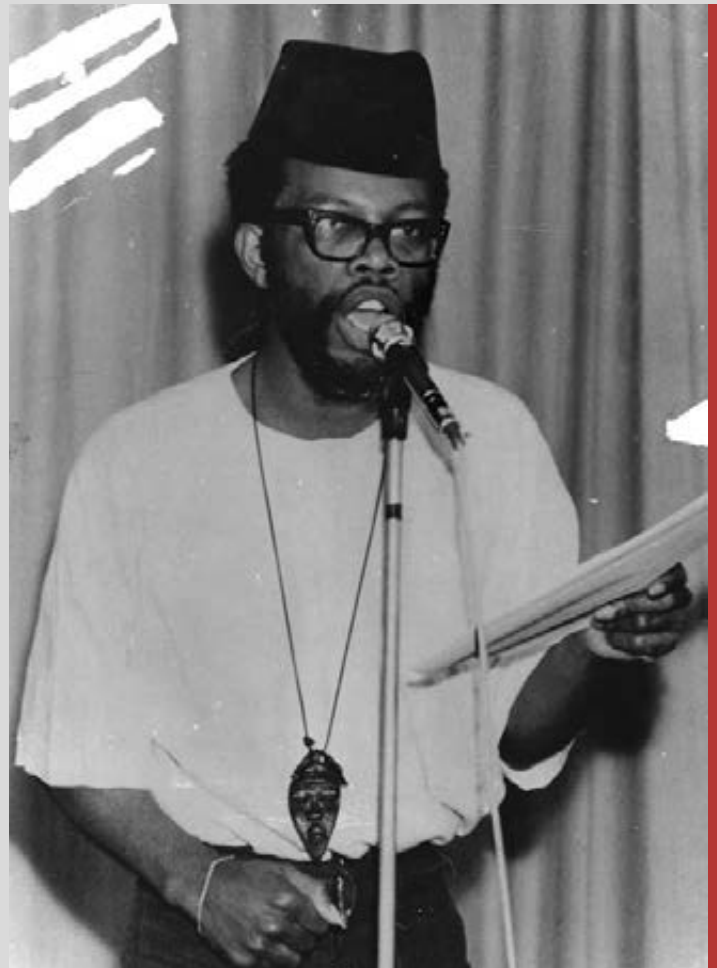
Yes. But so many people don’t think theatre is for them. Too often, the people who need to change the world aren’t the people making theatre. Theatre can change the world if theatre changes itself.

► TASK 1: What do you understand by the term ‘community’?

Do you feel you belong to a particular one? How would you describe it? Is it defined by geography, culture or religion, a particular interest, or something else? Are there several communities that you belong to?

► TASK 2: Research youth, amateur or community theatres in your area or nearby.

What are their objectives? How do they define their community or communities? Do you feel you are included in these descriptions? Are there any barriers to participation? Would you consider joining?



Dark Days, Light Nights, Soho Poly, 1976, written by Jamal Ali (pictured) starred many non-professional actors, drawn directly from the local Brixton community that the play’s subject matter addressed.

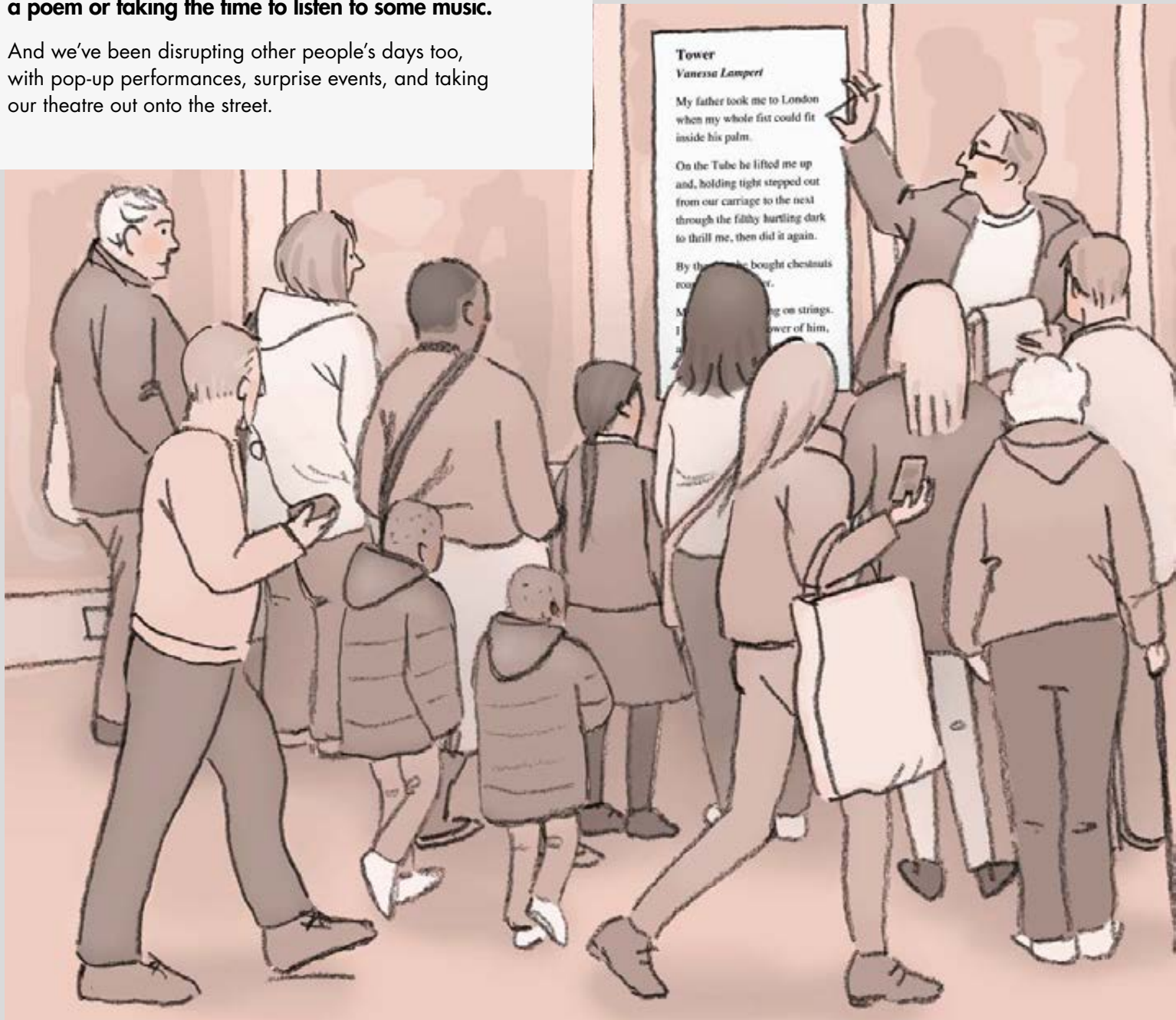
Disrupting your Everyday

The Soho Poly was known for its lunchtime theatre. People could see a play in their lunchbreak. Their day was interrupted – or disrupted – by a piece of theatre, which made them stop and think.

We believe that everyone's life is enriched by the arts, so we've been running a campaign to get people to do one cultural thing in the middle of their day. It might be as simple as reading a poem or taking the time to listen to some music.

And we've been disrupting other people's days too, with pop-up performances, surprise events, and taking our theatre out onto the street.

Recently, we surprised shoppers on London's Oxford Street with poems in the windows of stores.



► TASK 1: Can you disrupt your own day?

If you were asked to disrupt your own day with something artistic, cultural, or just different to normal, how might you go about it? Are there specific events or activities you would choose? Where would you seek them out? Or could you just do them yourself (read in a cafe, watch a busker play an entire song, knit in a park, chase down a poem online)? Try and make a list of 7 things that you think you would enjoy, but that you rarely make time for, and see if you can actually do one every day for a week.

Of course, not everyone likes the idea of disruption. Do you find it a positive word? Perhaps you prefer the idea of routines. If so, is there a way you could build joyful activities more regularly into your weekly schedule?

1	2	3	4
5	6	7	

Post your most interesting or satisfying experiments on social media with the hashtag #DisruptYourEveryday

► TASK 2: Can you creatively disrupt someone else's day?

One of the core philosophies of the new Soho Poly is rooted in the desire to inspire people to create their own events and activities, and pass these on. This idea of encouraging others and acting as a catalyst is part of our guiding ethos.

- 1** How might you creatively disrupt someone else's day? Or surprise those around you in a positive way? Have you got a skill you can use, or even pass on?
- 2** When would be a good time for a creative disruption? The Soho Poly produced its plays at lunchtime to encourage people to bring theatre into the heart of their working day. Consider who your 'audience' is and when (and if) they might value a change to their normal routine.
- 3** Where would your creative disruption take place? Might you have suggested something different a few years ago, before the changes brought about by Covid 19? Afterall, not everyone likes to spend time in small indoor spaces these days!

What Next?

Designing the theatre of the future

If you're reading this pack, then you could be one of the next generation of theatre makers. What are your dreams for the future? Do you think theatre still has a role to play in making a better society? What would your Future Theatre look like?

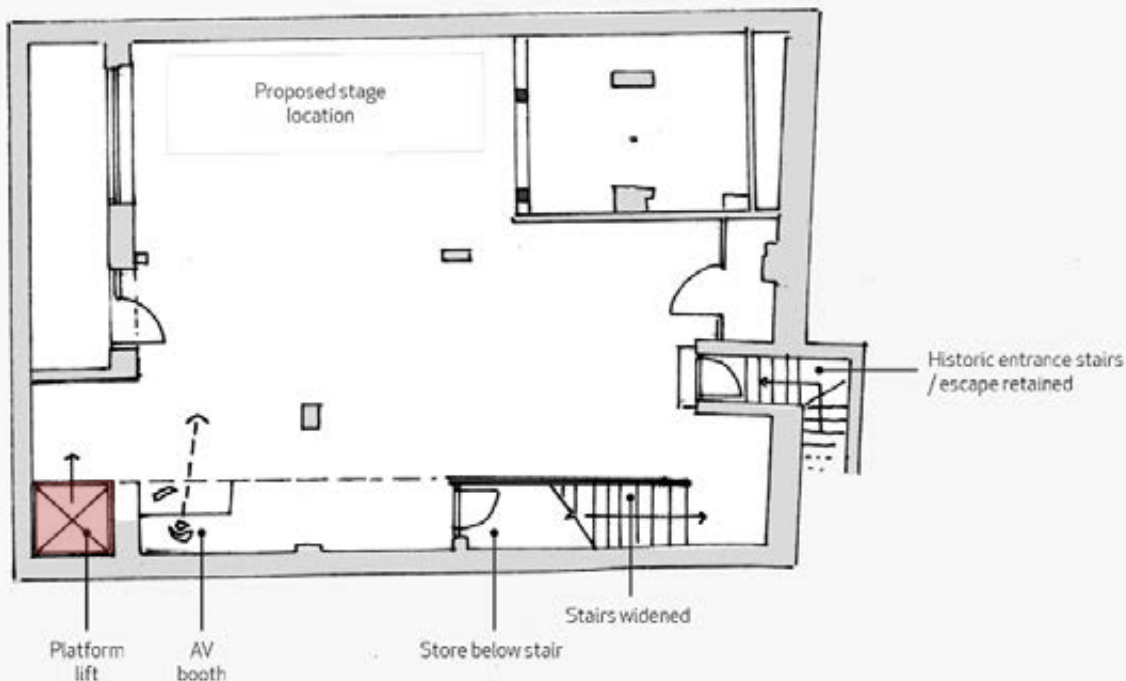
► TASK 1: Design your own theatre.

- Think about where your theatre will be. In a big city? In a rural area? Somewhere in between?
- Who will your audience be? Remember to consider the questions around diversity, accessibility and inclusion discussed in this pack.
- What sort of building will the theatre be? A grand West End-style building? Upstairs in a pub or cafe? Might your theatre be outdoors? Think carefully about who might be included or excluded by the choices you make.
- Will new technology play any part in your theatre? How will you address questions of sustainability?



Above: We wanted to preserve some of the Soho Poly's original look, to acknowledge the importance of its history and original radical/alternative theatre philosophy.

Elevation of the revamped Soho Poly © Rock Townsend Architects



Left: The biggest part of our Soho Poly restoration project involved creating space for an accessible 'platform' lift. In the 1970s and 80s, people with mobility issues would have found it very difficult to visit many alternative theatre venues, which were often in basements or function rooms above pubs. Making the Soho Poly version 2.0 fully accessible was our primary goal.

Plan of renovations to Soho Poly
© Rock Townsend Architects



Above: The original entrance to the Soho Poly
© Nobby Clark / ArenaPAL

▶ **TASK 2: Choose the first three plays that your theatre will produce.**

- ▶ Think about who you expect your audience to be and what they might want. Will you always 'follow' your audience? Or will you try to 'lead' them to new things?
- ▶ How will you get hold of the plays? Will they be old classics or new writing? Or a mix? Which 'voices' do you want to showcase? The plays you choose can be ones that really exist. Or you can invent ideas for plays that you wish existed!

1: _____

2: _____

3: _____

▶ **TASK 3: Write a Press Release or Social Media post announcing your theatre's opening.**

- ▶ What is the name of your theatre?
- ▶ How can you describe it in a dynamic or eye-catching way?
- ▶ How can you quickly describe what is different / important about your new theatre? What are your theatre's values?
- ▶ What plays are you showing – and why would anyone want to come and see them?
- ▶ Include at least one image that sums up something about your theatre and gives people a sense of what their experience of visiting it will be like.

Jobs and Pathways

With students from some of the schools we've been working with, we brainstormed 50 jobs in theatre. Which roles could you see yourself in?



Creative Team

- 1 Director
- 2 Designer
- 3 Lighting Designer
- 4 Sound Designer
- 5 Choreographer
- 6 Writer
- 7 Composer
- 8 Costume Designer
- 9 Conductor/
Musical Director

On stage

- 10 Actor
- 11 Puppeteer
- 12 Understudy/Swing

Technical Team

- 13 Production Manager
- 14 Head of Lighting
- 15 Lighting Operator
- 16 Spotlight Operator
- 17 Head of Sound
- 18 Sound Operator
- 19 Head of Wardrobe
- 20 Hair, Wigs and Makeup
- 21 Stage Crew
- 22 Company Stage
Manager
- 23 Deputy Stage Manager
- 24 Assistant Manager

Creative support

- 25 Dramaturg
- 26 Intimacy Coordinator
- 27 Fight Director
- 28 Dialect Coach
- 29 Physiotherapist
- 30 Casting Director

Management

- 31 Producer
- 32 Accountant
- 33 Lawyer
- 34 Agent
- 35 Finance Director
- 36 Fundraiser
- 37 Investor

Marketing

- 38 Marketing Director
- 39 PR Specialist
- 40 Website Designer
- 41 Ticketing Manager
- 42 Poster Designer
- 43 Photographer
- 44 Social Media Manager
- 45 Theatre critic

Front of House

- 46 Theatre Manager
- 47 Ushers and Bar Staff
- 48 Bar/Catering/
Merchandise Manager
- 49 Cleaners
- 50 Security

► TASK 1: Choose the job that most appeals to you.

Go online and see if you can find any current job adverts.
What qualifications or experience would you need to apply for similar positions in the future?

► TASK 2: Choose 3 of the jobs that you know little or nothing about and carry out a short research project into each.

Further Resources

Explore the links below for more information about many of the areas covered in this pack.

Sustainability

Julie's Bicycle
juliesbicycle.com

National Theatre
nationaltheatre.org.uk/about-us/sustainability

Theatre Green Book
theatregreenbook.com

100 Plays to Save the World
nickhernbooks.co.uk/100-plays-to-save-the-world

Disability and Neurodiversity

A Younger Theatre (directory)
ayoungertheatre.com/disabled-theatre-companies-and-organisations-across-the-uk

Graeae Theatre Company
graeae.org

Quiplash Theatre Company
quiplash.co.uk

Taking Flight Theatre
takingflighttheatre.org.uk

Birds of Paradise Theatre Company
boptheatre.co.uk

Oily Cart Theatre
oilycart.org.uk

Access all Areas Theatre Company
accessallareastheatre.org

What I Don't Know About Autism (play)
nickhernbooks.co.uk/what-i-dont-know-about-autism

Ethnic Minority Participation

Nick Hern Books (directory)
nickhernbooks.co.uk/global-majority-authors

Tara Theatre
taratheatre.com

New Earth Theatre
newearththeatre.org.uk

Talawa Theatre Company
talawa.com

Eclipse Theatre
eclipsetheatre.org.uk

Tamasha Theatre Company
tamasha.org.uk

LGBTQ+ Theatre / Gender

King's Head Theatre
kingsheadtheatre.com

Unfinished Histories
unfinishedhistories.com/categories/gayandlesbian

Stratford East Theatre / Queer History
stratfordeast.com/news/here-and-queer-a-brief-history-lesson-in-queer-theatre

Drama and Theatre online magazine
dramaandtheatre.co.uk/practical/article/five-great-plays-for-exploring-trans-issues

Globe Theatre resources list
shakespearesglobe.com/discover/blogs-and-features/2022/08/19/gender-identity-a-resource-list

Jobs and Pathways / Other

National Theatre
Young People pages
nationaltheatre.org.uk/learn-explore/young-people

Get Into Theatre
getintothetheatre.org/blog/complete-list-of-jobs-in-theatre-industry

Restoring the Soho Poly
westminster.ac.uk/about-us/alumni-and-supporters/support-us/restoring-the-soho-poly

Arts Council Resources
artscouncil.org.uk/developing-creativity-and-culture/diversity

Howlround
howlround.com

National Youth Theatre
nyt.org.uk

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We have attempted to contact and credit owners for all images used throughout the pack. Where there are omissions, please contact us at sohopoly@westminster.ac.uk.

Contact us:

The Soho Poly, c/o Matt Morrison
309 Regent Street, W1B 2UW

E sohopoly@westminster.ac.uk
T twitter.com/thesohopoly

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