

Amateur Theatre: Policy Briefing



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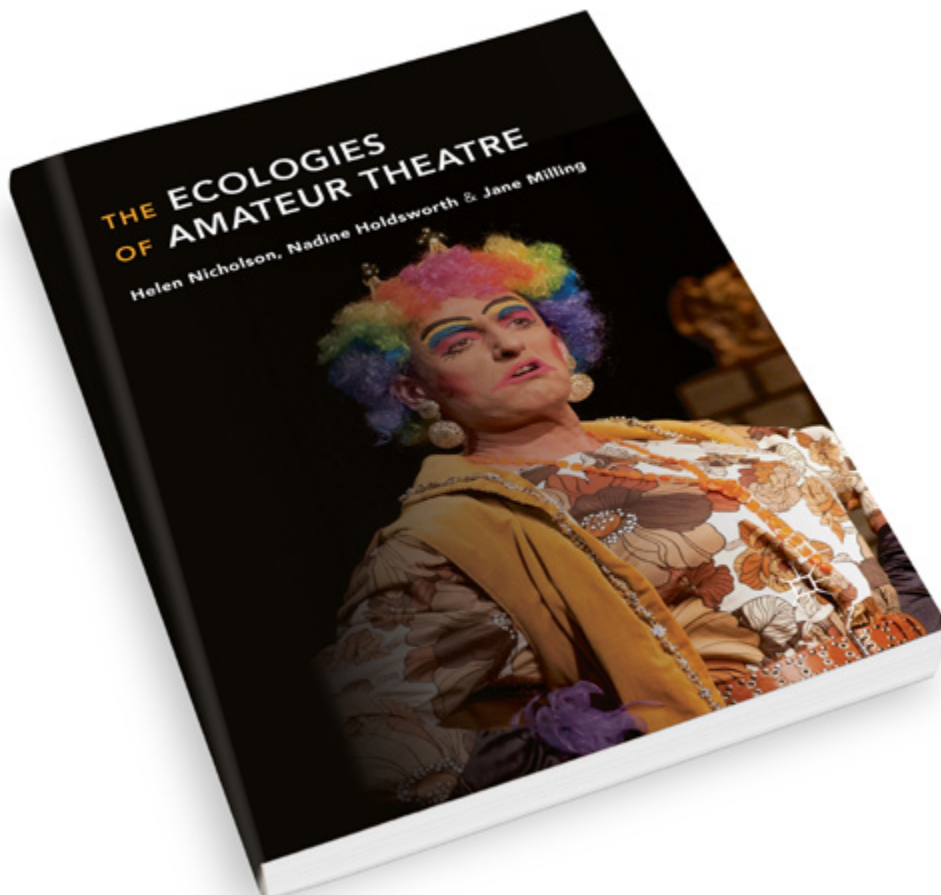
AMATEUR THEATRE: POLICY BRIEFING

There are over 2,300 drama and musical theatre companies in England that are affiliated to amateur theatre organisations, more than 3,000 smaller-scale youth and unaffiliated societies, and together they stage over 10,000 productions a year. In addition, theatre is made by people in social and community organisations, including faith groups, women’s organisations (WI, Townswomen’s Guild), LGBT+ communities, young farmers and in workplaces (shops, factories, hospitals, airlines and the military). Amateur theatre companies play a vital role by offering people from many backgrounds and circumstances creative opportunities to make and experience live theatre in all areas of the country.

Amateur theatre companies value their autonomy and recognise that direct funding from Arts Council England and other public bodies would require them to meet specific criteria. Not all amateur companies will wish to expand their horizons. There is also a prevailing sense that amateur theatre has been ignored and sometimes derided by policy makers, local authorities and theatre professionals, particularly in towns and villages with little connection to London or other major cities.

Our award-winning book, *The Ecologies of Amateur Theatre*, was based on a four-year study of amateur theatre in England, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research

Council. It shows that amateur theatre brings extensive social, creative and cultural benefits to the people and communities it serves, contributes to the creative economy and sustains the nation’s theatre repertoire. The energy of the sector remains an untapped resource. One clear channel to support creative people and cultural communities is via partnership and collaboration between amateur and professional theatres, and other publicly funded organisations. With wider recognition, the amateur theatre sector has potential to deliver strategic ambitions identified in Arts Council England’s Strategy for 2020–30, Let’s Create, and inform its delivery.



FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Outcome One: Creative People

Everyone can develop and express creativity throughout their life.

Summary of Research Findings

Amateur theatre is a passion and is often a life-long interest, shaping people's lives through the annual cycle of productions. It offers creative opportunities for young people, sociable activities for families, activity in retirement, and is an interest often described as 'just for me'. Contrary to the dominant stereotype, amateur theatre is often populated by a broad social demographic, and it is a particularly successful model of intergenerational creativity. The companionship and sociability of amateur theatre sustains people through difficult as well as happy times. Our research showed that amateur theatre contributes to the wellbeing of individuals, reducing social isolation and loneliness.

Amateur theatre is unique as a creative activity in that it involves multiple crafts (designing and sewing costumes, painting and building sets, sound and lighting design) as well as performance skills, suiting people with different talents and skills. Informal systems of apprenticeship with experienced amateurs offer opportunities for young people to gain first-hand experience of backstage crafts. Some performers, choreographers and directors are professionally trained, and others lend their professional expertise as electricians, accountants, carpenters, painters and decorators, hairdressers and so on to amateur theatre, where they find creative outlets for their skills. Many amateurs are expert in finding ingenious solutions to complex production problems on a limited budget and are skilled at recycling resources.

Amateur theatre companies often run their own youth theatres, filling a gap left by cuts to local authority budgets. Yet there is limited CPD for professional youth theatre directors working in the amateur sector. There is an appetite in the amateur sector to extend their skills by learning from professionals, but so far this has been largely confined to the most successful companies, to those with funds and people with existing cultural capital. Professional theatre-makers leading community programmes usually prioritise marginalised groups and sometimes actively exclude members of amateur theatres.

Recommendations

1. Nurture new talent by incentivising professional theatres to support amateur youth theatres (low-cost tickets, skills sharing workshops, mentoring) and reduce barriers to progression from youth and amateur theatres to professional training.



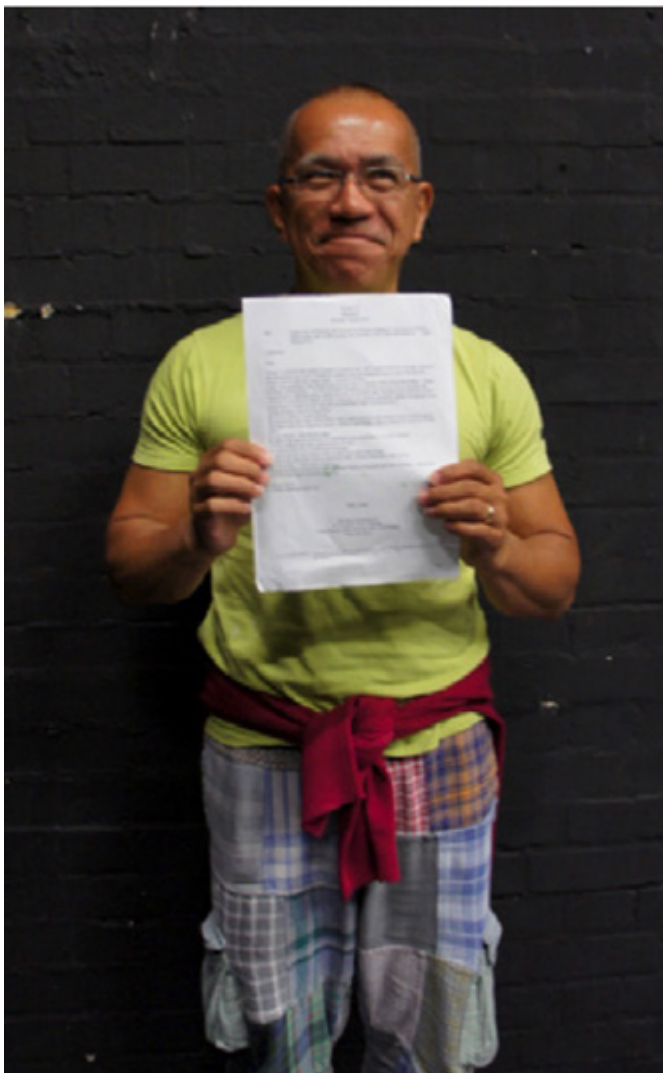
2. Incentivise publicly funded Continual Professional Development for youth theatre directors to share skills and raise quality.
3. Incentivise professional theatre-makers to engage in skills-sharing with the amateur sector through training, workshops and other forms of creative collaboration. This includes directing, design, performance and other back-stage work, and extends to administration and management of theatre buildings, including training for marketing, box office and front of house staff as well as the management team of amateur theatres.
4. Recognise and value existing talent in the amateur sector through shared activity with the theatre industry (e.g. amateurs attending and reviewing R&D and professional productions; showcasing amateur work on the professional stage; agents and casting directors attending amateur productions; collaboration between amateur and professional backstage crews).
5. Encourage progression from professionally led community programmes to amateur theatre. These interventions are often short-lived, and many people who have been inspired would like to continue to make theatre. Greater collaboration could create a more inclusive amateur sector and extend cultural horizons in ways that are mutually beneficial.
6. Support local and national campaigns to raise awareness of the social, creative and emotional benefits of amateur theatre-making to raise its profile and status.

Outcome Two: Cultural Communities

Villages, towns and cities thrive through a collaborative approach to culture.

Summary of Research Findings

Our research shows that amateur theatre has a significant role in towns, villages and suburbs that are often not well-served by professional theatres. People travel short distances to take part in amateur theatre, and audiences often arrive on foot and see productions at relatively low cost. Amateur theatres serve as cultural hubs in their communities. The Little Theatre Guild run their own theatre buildings, and in addition to their shows, communities can access a range of cultural activities taking part at the theatre, including craft workshops, early years' play groups, choirs, keep-fit classes, wedding and events hire, and other creative activities. Bringing people into the building erodes barriers to participation in theatre, creating civic spaces, and is one of the measures by which of amateur theatres aim to become more inclusive.



Recommendations

Increasing the visibility of the amateur sector in publicly funded arts organisations would reduce barriers and enable them to learn from each other to build sustainable cultural communities. This might be addressed by the following measures.

1. Incentivising non-building based NPOs to share rehearsal spaces and undertake residences in amateur theatre buildings.
2. Building on the close relationships amateur theatres have with their audiences by inviting amateurs to serve on the Boards of Theatres, attend focus groups about programming and take part in decisions about community engagement.
3. Bringing The Little Theatre Guild and building-based amateur producing houses into dialogue with innovative NPOs such as The Holbeck in Leeds and Farnham Maltings in Surrey to share good practice across both sectors. There are currently 116 Little Theatres in the UK, run almost entirely on a voluntary basis, with many theatres of historic significance.
4. Sharing expertise about access to the profession and audience development. Professionals might learn from amateur theatres that frequently attract people who would not otherwise access the arts (particularly white men from low socio-economic groups). In turn amateurs would benefit from strategies that have successfully widened BAME participation in professional theatre.
5. Recognising amateur theatre as part of local history and heritage by supporting museums, libraries and archives to work with amateur theatre's many archivists to collect, curate and animate this important aspect of cultural and national heritage.

Outcome Three: A Creative & Cultural Country

England's cultural sector is innovative, collaborative and international

Summary of Research Findings

Amateur theatre includes a wide range of tastes and practices, from staging cutting-edge new plays in their own theatre buildings to productions of whodunnits and pantomimes in village halls and community centres. Our research found the boundaries between amateur and professional theatres are more porous than is often supposed, and amateur theatre benefits the country's cultural sector in many ways.

Amateur theatre provides economic benefit to professional theatres and theatre-makers by, for example, employing professional practitioners as workshops leaders, choreographers and musicians; purchasing playscripts and Performance Rights; hiring costume and set; organising live screenings and attending performances. Some regional theatres are dependent on amateur theatre companies who hire their venues, pay for rehearsal space, volunteer as ushers and drink at the bar.

Amateur theatre companies almost always perform scripted plays or existing musicals. The national repertoire of plays is sustained by amateur theatre, benefitting playwrights and publishers. The life of new plays is extended when they reach the amateur market, and some publishers actively promote contemporary plays to amateurs, but this practice is uneven. There is also a dearth of plays with large female casts or innovative one-act plays for the festivals market.

Amateur theatre nurtures new talent. Many people who are now highly successful in the cultural sector – in professional theatre and other creative careers – were inspired by taking part in amateur youth theatres. Others grew up as part of an amateur theatre company and were encouraged by parents or family members as members of amateur theatres to develop their talents. The stereotyping of amateur theatre, sometimes fuelled by professionals, is an unhelpful and major barrier to recognising talent and building more inclusive and equitable theatre industry.

1. incentivising and encouraging amateurs to perform new plays via collaborations based on new writing (e.g. funded events with publishers, commissioning new plays to revive festivals, playwrights' talks, databases, social media, increased availability of Performance Rights etc).
2. Encouraging amateurs to extend their repertoire by working on classic texts and new forms of theatre via partnerships and residences with theatres and theatre companies
3. Promote amateur theatre in publicly funded theatres and cultural organisations by encouraging RFOs to engage with local amateur arts organisations.



The Research Team

Professor Helen Nicholson, Royal Holloway, University of London. Helen's research addresses participatory theatre in community and educational settings. She has published widely on this area, leading research on theatre for young people, the arts in dementia care and amateur theatre. Most recently, Helen led the research for The National Theatre ground-breaking community programme, Public Acts. (h.nicholson@rhul.ac.uk)

Professor Nadine Holdsworth, University of Warwick. Nadine's research addresses contemporary and 20th century theatre, and her books include *Joan Littlewood's Theatre* (2011) and *Theatre & Nation* (2010). As part of Coventry City of Culture she has recently been collaborating with Coventry Cyrenians to explore how arts-based methodologies and gamification can raise awareness of homelessness.

Professor Jane Milling, University of Exeter. Jane has written on amateur and grassroots cultural participation in Gibson and Belfiore, *Histories of Participation, Values and Governance* (2019) and Phillimore and McCabe, *Community Groups in Context* (2016) arising from her work on the AHRC-funded project on Understanding Everyday Participation.



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