

A New Way of Working

practice and process in directive commissioning

Volume 1 of 2

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ABSTRACT

Most approaches to the development of new writing in theatre have focused on the practice of dramaturgical support. This study asks in what ways current directive commissioning practices in theatre are shaping work with and by playwrights, and how playwrights might adapt their own practices in order to work effectively in these contexts. My practice research comprises three plays, all written to directive commissions. The first, *In Fog and Falling Snow*, was a large-scale community production for York Theatre Royal and Pilot Theatre. Staged at the National Railway Museum in 2015, it told the story of the 'Railway King', George Hudson, and the great railway bubble of the 1840s. The second, *Simeon's Watch*, was commissioned by Riding Lights Theatre Company, and toured to community and church venues in 2016. The three-hander play focused on the effects of dementia on a family of sheep farmers. The third, *Everything is Possible*, was another large-scale community production for York Theatre Royal and Pilot Theatre in 2017, commemorating the work of the suffragettes in York. Through autoethnographic analysis of my three case studies I consider the effect of directive commissioning on the culture and practice of small scale and regional theatre, with a particular focus on the practice of writers, and the resulting work. While I present final versions of my commissioned plays as practice research, my thesis examines the development of the projects from conception to production, interrogating the role of institutions in shaping commissions, the impact of audiences and site upon practice, and how gender representation informs the processes of a commission. This thesis proposes that in contrast to traditional models of playwriting, directive commissioning is a public activity, that it operates as a process, and that it is responsive to material and conceptual contexts.

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<https://www.pilot-theatre.com/archive/in-fog-and-falling-snow-2015/about-the-show>

<https://www.pilot-theatre.com/archive/everything-is-possible-2017/about-the-show>

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

Parts of Chapter 4 are based on my paper *Hope with Dirty Hands*, given at New York University's Steiner School *Performing Activism* conference in 2018, and subsequently published in NYU / Steinhardt's peer-reviewed journal, *Arts Praxis* © Bridget Foreman, 2019. The full, definitive, peer-reviewed and edited version of this article is published in *Arts Praxis*, Vol 5, issue 2, pp36-49, 2019
https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/scmsAdmin/media/users/cl1097/Foreman_-_Hope_with_Dirty_Hands_ArtsPraxis_Volume_5_Issue_2.pdf

INTRODUCTION

Research objective

My research considers the background to and practice of directive commissioning in theatre. The specific focus for the research and the practice research is the context of work commissioned from the author in 2014-17, and the three plays that were written and produced as a result of those commissions. The texts of these plays comprise the second part of this submission. This thesis considers the over-arching research question: in what ways are current directive commissioning practices in theatre shaping work with and by playwrights, and how might playwrights adapt their own practices in order to work effectively in these contexts? In addressing this question, I am defining a directive commission as one in which a playwright is directed towards certain constraints of subject matter and/or approach, or is directly instructed to work within such constraints.

Rationale

As a piece of practice research, my enquiry draws extensively on my experience and practice as a playwright; research that examines the models and processes of writing which my current and previous work exemplify. However, although my research is in part experiential, interweaving past and present knowledge and experience, it also looks ahead by theorising the playwriting process on the basis of my practice so that it becomes meaningful in a wider context and achieves a broader analytical

significance. I argue that directive commissioning is emerging as an increasingly common practice, but one that has – thus far – been under-explored as a subject in academic research, is neglected in craft manuals for playwrights, and is absent from mainstream discussions around playwriting practice. As I demonstrate, there is a reluctance to acknowledge the practice of directive commissioning among both commissioners and many writers, and academic research to date focuses, instead, on approaches to dramaturgy. There is not yet a developed exploration of the elision that is occurring between dramaturgical support and directive commissioning, and the impact that this has on the wider theatre ecology. My practice and research address this lacuna. For playwrights and those who work with them, from literary managers and dramaturgs through to directors and other theatre creatives, for commentators, reviewers and academics and for the industry as a whole, including agents and critics, an awareness of the social relations that shape this type of commissioning will inform their understanding of new writing in relation to the contexts in which it is created.

Extant research

My methodological approach is informed by the work of Gay McAuley (*Not Magic But Work*, MUP, Manchester, 2012) and my enquiry examines the process of script development throughout the various stages of the wider theatrical production, and in relation to material contexts such as those identified by Ric Knowles in *Reading the Material Theatre* (CUP, Cambridge, 2004). Informative overviews of the

landscape of modern playwriting, including accounts of influential plays and playwrights, are given in Methuen's *Modern British Playwriting* series. Nicholson, writing of the 1960s, foregrounds the significance of the Royal Court during that decade, while at the same time identifying signals that the age of textual supremacy was coming to an end.¹ Megson charts the rise of alternative theatre in the 1970s, initially bolstered by increased public funding, and then decimated when the arrival of the Conservative government heralded a major policy change.² Milling expands upon the impact of Thatcherite influences upon funding for the arts throughout the 1980s, and the effects of managerial intrusion on the theatre sector as a whole. However, she also highlights the creativity and resilience of individual theatre makers and playwrights in continuing to find ways to work freely and independently.³ Sierz describes the commercialisation of subsidised theatre in the 1990s, the re-framing of the arts as cultural industries and the struggle that new writing (and writers) faced in an age where the box office became the guiding force within mainstream theatre-making.⁴

Statistical and anecdotal evidence as well as data analysis for developments in new writing for theatre over the last decade or so has been provided by The Art's Council's *New Writing in Theatre 2003–2008*⁵ and The British Theatre Consortium's *Writ Large – New Writing on the English Stage, 2003-2009*.⁶ Taken together, these

¹ Nicholson, S. (2012). *Modern British Playwriting: the 1960s*. London: Methuen

² Megson, C. (2012). *Modern British Playwriting: the 1970s*. London: Bloomsbury

³ Milling, J. (2012). *Modern British Playwriting: the 1980s*. London: Methuen

⁴ Sierz, A. (2012). *Modern British Playwriting: the 1990s*. London: Methuen

⁵ Dunton, E., R. Nelson, and H. Shand (2009). *New Writing in Theatre 2003–2008 - An Assessment of New Writing Within Smaller Scale Theatre in England* Commissioned by Arts Council England

⁶ https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Writ_Large_New_Writing_on_the_English_Stage_2003-2009.pdf

reports give an account of the shifts in public policy and funding for new writing in recent years. However, the impact that new writing funding strategies (where dedicated funding has been targeted and is now being withdrawn) are having on the mechanics of commissioning is largely outside their remit, although it is addressed in relation to new writing in Fin Kennedy's 2013 report *In Battalions*⁷ and the subsequent *In Battalions Delphi Study* by Kennedy and Helen Campbell Pickford.⁸

There are a number of significant works within the field of the new dramaturgy, including *Dramaturgy in the Making* by Katalin Trencsényi (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), Trencsényi and Bernadette Cochrane's edited volume, *New Dramaturgy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014) and Mary Luckhurst's *Dramaturgy: A Revolution in Theatre* (Cambridge: CUP, 2006). Jacqueline Bolton's *Demarcating Dramaturgy – Mapping Theory onto Practice* (Doctoral Thesis, unpublished, 2011) also provides commentary on the role of development dramaturgs. While all these works explore the increasing role that is played by literary managers and dramaturgs in the development of new writing, they make less significant engagement with contemporary commissioning practice, and do not address directive commissioning.

In the area of collaborative practice, accounts of key early examples, such as Caryl Churchill's work with *Monstrous Regiment*, from Elaine Aston's *Feminist Theatre Practice: a Handbook* (London, Routledge, 1999), and Sarah Sigal's contemporary examination in *Writing in Collaborative Theatre-Making* (London, Palgrave, 2017)

⁷ Kennedy, F. (2013). *In Battalions*. [online] Available at: <https://www.scribd.com/document/126273288/In-Battalions>

⁸ Kennedy, F. and H. Campbell-Pickford (2014). *In Battalions Delphi Study* [online] Available at: <https://www.scribd.com/document/203083584/In-Battalions-Delphi-Study>

make important observations that inform my consideration of the influence of collaborative models on commissioning practice. Sigal's detailed account is based upon extensive and invaluable interviews and case studies examining the relationship of writing and writers to collaborative practice. Within each of my case-studies, there is a range of relevant significant works that inform and direct my thinking as I build on and extend the work that has been undertaken in these areas, while focusing on the practice of directive commissioning in these particular contexts.

In addressing the craft of playwriting, it is interesting to note that the mechanics of commissioning are not generally considered. While guides or companions to playwriting range from the conceptual to the prescriptively systematic, virtually all take the playwright as the originator of the play. David Edgar's *How Plays Work* presents a technical masterclass that takes the reader through a forensic examination of the anatomy of plays. He proposes, in broad terms, that in writing plays, 'playwrights choose, arrange, and above all concentrate events and behaviours they observe in the real world in such a way that gives them meaning'.⁹ However, he does not consider what might constitute the initial impulse for a play. In *The Crafty Art of Playmaking*, Alan Ayckbourn starts by offering some 'Obvious Rules', of which number 2 is 'Never start a play without an idea', followed by number 3: 'If you don't have the initial inspiration, put down the pen, put the pencil back in the jar, switch off the computer and go and dig the garden instead.'¹⁰ Again,

⁹ Edgar, D. (2009). *How Plays Work*. London: Nick Hern p5

¹⁰ Ayckbourn, A. (2002). *The Crafty Art of Playmaking*. London: Faber & Faber pp6-7

the progenitor of not just the play, but the idea for the play, is assumed to be the playwright. Noel Greig's *Playwriting* offers an intensely practical collection of exercises, mapping a path for the playwright through the landscape of her text. He takes the same starting point for a writer as Brecht: the 'stories being told around us all the time' and their provision of a 'source of riches to draw from.'¹¹ Later in the book, he gives structural exercises for the development of story, but – despite his being the most practical and pragmatic approach to playwriting – he also does not suggest that anyone other than the playwright might contribute to the origins of a play. Published in 2016, Fraser Grace and Clare Bayley's *Playwriting – A Writers' & Artists' Companion* gives insight into dramaturgical processes, and does reflect on the changing commissioning landscape, making reference to commissioners, although it is in these terms: 'The moment of beginning an original stage play is a moment of extreme freedom. An important question to ask yourself before you start is: why do you want to write it? And why now? These are the questions commissioners always want a play to answer.'¹² They go on to point out that 'Freedom can be the most inhibiting thing, creatively'¹³, but the fundamental assumption is that the writer is free to write whatever she chooses, and that that freedom may be both liberating and constraining. In *The Secret Life of Plays*, Steve Waters takes a more poetic approach, describing 'the source of the play, the author's intuitive creativity' as 'mysterious', and, borrowing an image from T.S.Eliot, he observes that 'If a play doesn't have an umbilical cord feeding into that 'dark

¹¹ Greig, N. (2005). *Playwriting – A Practical Guide*. Abingdon: Routledge p22

¹² Grace, F. and C. Bayley (2016). *Playwriting – A Writers' & Artists' Companion*. London: Bloomsbury p76

¹³ Ibid. p77

embryo', it'll be dead on arrival.'¹⁴ He does concede that 'it would be perverse to argue that dialogue with a theatre is not an essential phase in the nurturing of private dreams into public art'¹⁵, but the starting point remains that of the writer's 'private dreams.'

Uniquely, among the authors of playwriting manuals, in *Playwriting – Structure, Character, How and What to Write*, Stephen Jeffreys gives a page to 'The Specific-commission Play'¹⁶, sketching an overview of the likely requirements ('you might be asked to write a play about a specific subject') and pitfalls ('you might end up writing a play more expressive of what the company wants than what you want') of this type of commissioning. He also touches on the commercial dimension, noting that 'it is impossible to write against the grain of a company's point of view when you are their employee.' He recognises that there are potential benefits for writers in that they might be led into areas of exploration that would not otherwise be considered, and that this can prove 'invigorating', but concludes with a warning: 'The danger sign is when artistic directors and literary managers start using the word "development": always remember that plays are never developed: they are written by playwrights.'¹⁷ The unequivocal nature of this assertion, and the oppositional relationship implied between artistic directors and literary managers on one side, promoting 'development', and playwrights on the other, writing plays, expresses perfectly the perceived contention that lies at the heart of directive commissioning. It is

¹⁴ Waters, S. (2010). *The Secret Life of Plays*. London: Nick Hern p1

¹⁵ Ibid. p7

¹⁶ Jeffreys, S. (2019). *Playwriting – Structure, Character, How and What to Write*. London: Nick Hern p217

¹⁷ Ibid. p217

interesting to note that that Jeffreys' book was published (posthumously) in 2019, suggesting that the practice of directive commissioning may just be starting to make an impact within the wider industry, and indicating that my research on the subject may prove both significant and timely.

Approach

This enquiry expands the understanding of directive commissioning as a practice. It considers the rise of directive commissioning, and the causes and effects of that increase, with particular reference to small-scale and regionally-based community productions. It also interrogates the mechanics of directive commissioning in relation to material, political and social contexts, and it looks forward to possible future impacts within the industry.

A simple recognition that all creative endeavour is undertaken within a particular set of cultural circumstances is a given. The issue of the degree of influence that context has on art at the point at which it is created is my field of enquiry. At one end of a sliding scale sits a playwright who writes purely out of her personal interest or desire, expressing themes and selecting subjects with no reference to the expectations of others. This might be viewed as view as a traditional model. At the other end of the scale sits a writer who is - effectively - a gun for hire: someone who writes propagandist material in support and at the behest of a particular position or even regime. Contemplation of these two apparently opposing positions

immediately raises questions of authorship, authenticity, integrity, and the matter of the writer's voice – all of which might be examined through critical textual and contextual analysis.

My approach questions the oppositional binary of those models, proposing that the experience of most writers is more nuanced than that polarised picture suggests, and explores the sub-strata beneath the final playtexts; dissecting the processes of the development of the play, and the operation of those processes within the constraints of the individual project alongside the wider political and funding culture.

For the commissions which I examine through my case studies, I identify a micro-culture of local and even personal factors that define certain parameters for the creation of a new play, each of which has a direct bearing on the process of development. The power wielded by various stakeholders can impact early decisions in terms of subject matter, approach and 'message', which form initial constraints.

These constraints set the terms of a directive commission: a macro-culture of Political and funding agendas, as well as industry and public preferences, that operate as forces upon writing culture as a whole. These are experienced by commissioners and writers within individual projects in hard and soft constraints. Hard constraints can be identified as the generally immovable conditions under which commissioners operate: funding levels, terms and conditions of funding contracts, obligations of delivery etc. Soft constraints are represented by the more flexible frames of reference and the micro-culture within which an individual theatre or commissioning company operates and negotiates the work it produces. Further hard constraints are identifiable in the physical context of many commissions,

whether these take the form of touring constraints (the size of the van determining a limit on the physical dimensions and materials of the set, for example), or the setting of a play within a non-theatrical venue, the size of the cast (which may well be decided in advance of the commission), the capacity for stage lighting or for the use of microphones, and so on. A key feature of the directive commissioning process is the permeability of the line between hard and soft constraints, and the way in which change within the macro and micro cultures can cause constraints to shift from soft to hard or (occasionally) vice versa.

Case studies

My case studies comprise the plays that resulted from three directive commissions I worked to between 2014 and 2017. The first, *In Fog and Falling Snow* (2015), was commissioned by York Theatre Royal and Pilot Theatre. It was a large-scale, site-specific community production, performed in the National Railway Museum in York. The second, *Simeon's Watch* (2016), was commissioned by Riding Lights Theatre Company. This was a small-scale tour, and largely site-generic in that the majority of its performance venues were churches. The third, *Everything is Possible* (2017), was commissioned by York Theatre Royal and Pilot Theatre. Another large-scale community production, the first part of the performance was site-specific, while the second part was performed in the main house of York Theatre Royal.

My experience of writing these plays, and my analysis of the processes I undertook in doing so, led me to consider the interaction between the contexts within which directive commissions operate, the impact upon practice for the writers concerned, and the mechanics and processes of the commissions. These fields define my investigation. Who or what determines the aims of a project or the creative demands of a commission? To what extent do commissioners regard writers as architects or builders within projects? What is the difference between a director's vision and a writer's voice? Does authorship adhere to ideas and subjects, or is it expressed through application? Is it notional or material? Can a commissioning company's ownership of the intellectual and artistic character of a production also extend to the text?

The resulting research is presented through the playtexts and in analysis of three case studies, all of which address my central research question, and in support of which (and with differing degrees of emphasis in each case) I also address the following questions:

1. People: How does the practice of directly commissioned playwriting operate as a means of establishing and maintaining relationships between (and within) theatre-makers and communities?

In addressing this question, I consider the role of institutions in framing directive commissions. I examine relationships (existing and potential) between commissioners and communities (both of location and interest), and the ways in which the making and presenting of theatre depend upon and develop those

relationships. In doing so, I reflect upon the difference – and interface – between communities and audiences, and expand upon the differing nature of theatre that is made for or with audiences and communities. By using the framework of cultural materialism to analyse the experience of writing three plays, two of which were produced with local communities, and the third of which was produced for a community of interest, I consider the ways in which ideology played a part in the commissioning process.

2. Place: What is the role of directly-commissioned playwriting in the articulation and re-articulation of spaces and places?

All three of the plays that form my case studies were site-specific or site-generic. I interrogate the differences between sites, spaces and places in relation to the hosting of performance, and the processes by which public spaces are re-iterated as performance spaces. I examine the intentions of the commissioners in selecting sites, and the ways in which writing to site defined aspects of the commissions. In each case, I reflect upon the primary articulation of the sites (pre-existing historical, cultural and geographic attributes) as well as the subsequent re-inscriptions and re-articulations that the sites accrued through the performance. I also consider the influence of spaces upon the written and performed text and on the processes through which they were wrought.

3. Purpose: How are individuals, communities and other stakeholders affected by engagement and participation in directly-commissioned playwriting?

In considering this question, I ask to what extent work that has been directly commissioned might have instrumental aims, and whether there are discernible outcomes (personal, social or political) for participants and audiences in terms of an increased or deepened engagement with the issues of the plays. I examine the way in which directly-commissioned work can be shaped by representation and diversity as driving forces and as areas of constraint within the commission.

The methods for gathering evidence around these questions include personal reflection from different stages of the process, interviews with practitioners, and analysis of the texts viewed alongside a cultural materialist account of the process of their development / production. I focus in particular on critical incidents within the process that reveal, in a verifiable sense, the interactions between the demands of the commissioner(s) and the creative response of the writer to those demands. As David Tripp has observed, such moments

are not at all dramatic or obvious: they are mostly straightforward accounts of very commonplace events that occur in routine professional practice which are critical in the rather different sense that they are indicative of underlying trends, motives and structures. These incidents appear to be 'typical' rather than 'critical' at first sight, but are rendered critical through analysis.¹⁸

Many such incidents in the commissioning process are typical in that they exemplify moments when pressures combine in such a way that the demands upon the project shift, resulting in new or adjusted constraints that come to bear upon the writer and her work, and revealing common factors and forces at work within the process.

¹⁸ Tripp, D. (1993). *Critical Incidents in Teaching - Developing Professional Judgement*. London: Routledge p24-25

Working back from these critical incidents, I reflect upon both the pre-existing contexts and the resulting negotiations and their outcomes, extrapolating an understanding that enables a theorisation of the processes involved. This creation of theory leads, in Tripp's account of the value of critical incidents, to 'a more general meaning and to indicate something else of importance in a wider context.'¹⁹ That 'something else' comprises both a springboard for further academic research and a proposal for elements of good practice that might be adopted within the industry.

Geographical scope

As is evident from the location of the productions that constitute my case studies, my enquiry is entirely focused on the UK, and while some commentaries that I have referenced on (for example) approaches to dramaturgy draw on practices that extend this reach, there is no intention on my part to allude to any versions of directive commissioning practice in the wider European context or beyond.

¹⁹ Ibid. p25

Methodology

In approaching my enquiry, I have employed a dual methodology of practice and research. My work as a playwright writing to directive commissions extends over twenty years, and I address my research question in the first instance through the process of receiving and responding to three directive commissions, and by writing the resulting plays. The considerations at the heart of my research can only be fully addressed through practice, as the experience of writing under constraint and the outcomes of it as a practice cannot be assessed speculatively or theoretically. I deepen and expand my practical research by analysing the networks of culture that underpin the world of the work, and by reflecting upon process and practice. My research acknowledges a dichotomy between the widely perceived understanding of writing as a largely solitary and instinctive activity, and a writing culture that now requires and institutes collaboration, responsiveness and adaptability, and which – increasingly – expects writers to accept guidance and instruction. The writer's craft is generally characterised as fundamentally private and even mysterious. Working from the starting point of this position, I chart the changes to this model as it has been re-shaped through the rise of new work and new writing, and examine the emergence of an increasingly complex and hardened structure within which many playwrights now operate. I also consider issues of authorship and the writer's voice in relation to this changing culture.

In my research, I am considering the material conditions of the commissioning process, and the ways in which they 'relate to one another in varying degrees of

congruence or conflict'.²⁰ In this I am taking Ric Knowles's starting point that most traditional work in theatre 'operates on the assumption that artistic inspiration transcends what are considered to be the accidentals of historical and cultural context'²¹. With regard to directive commissioning, I challenge this assumption, arguing that far from transcending context, my practice suggests that artistic endeavour is often immersed in it, and even subject to it. In this I am framing my research within Knowles' definition of cultural materialism: 'a model for locating cultural production – including the production of theatre – within its historical, cultural and material contexts'²², and – with regard to constraint - Jen Harvie's observation that 'Cultural materialism focuses on the material conditions of cultural practice and how these conditions affect – and particularly limit – the range of practices possible.'²³ While both Knowles' and Harvie's accounts recognise cultural and material contexts as operative within production and reception, they do not address commissioning as a model. My research extends knowledge of the effect on process of constraint and dynamic constraint arising from contexts and conditions. It uses cultural materialism as a paradigm for understanding the practice of directive commissioning.

My methodology also enables me to reflect on the interior processes of my own practice, considering the extent to which they are defined by the constraints of the commissioning context. In this respect, I take an auto-ethnographic approach to evaluating my practice through applied research. As a useful definition of the terms

²⁰ Knowles, R. (2004). *Reading the Material Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press p11

²¹ Ibid. p9

²² Ibid. p11

²³ Harvie, J. (2009). *Theatre and the City*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan p9

of this, I refer to Norman Denzin's description of auto-ethnography as 'a turning of the ethnographic gaze inward on the self (auto), while maintaining the outward gaze of context wherein self experiences occur.'²⁴ It is in this interconnectivity between the experience of the writer as subject and the processes in which she engages, and the nature of the context within which she works that the auto-ethnographic approach functions. The work itself is the expression of the relationship of the personal to the cultural and the research is undertaken through practice as the researcher adjusts her focus inward and then outward and moves between the roles of participant and observer.

In adopting the twin approaches of cultural materialism and auto-ethnography as investigative research tools, I am aware of potential points of conflict between Knowles's method, that locates and implicates the critic in a position of 'self-consciousness', offering 'a way of thinking other than supposed objectivity and neutrality [-] to the object of analysis'²⁵, and the ability to maintain Denzin's 'outward gaze.' In addressing this tension, I link my reflection upon the internal journey of the playwright's experience of each commission with a simultaneous examination of the material context – and impact of that context - of each case study. While my practice lies at the heart of my methodology, I constantly refer outwards from myself, examining the outer circles of context that inform my practice and experience. This approach enables close analysis of the mechanics of

²⁴ Quoted in Freeman, J. (2010) *Blood, Sweat and Theory*. Faringdon: Libri p183

²⁵ Knowles, R. (2004). *Reading the Material Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press pp-13-14

constraint at each stage of the process, assessing the effect of direct external and material pressures upon the interior practice and experience of the playwright.

Chapter overview

Chapter 1

Historical context and cultural landscape

I begin by identifying the commission of Caryl Churchill's *Vinegar Tom* in 1976 as the starting point for a new model of working for playwrights. Drawing extensively on the work of Luckhurst, Bolton, Aston and others within the academic field, I also make use of reports from within the industry and from cultural, political and media commentaries. This draws together into an overview and presentation of the current context for my research, which considers the cultural, financial and social and material expectations and demands that often come with commissions, and which inform relationships between artists, commissioners, texts and audiences.

My proposition is that changes in the culture, funding and understanding of new writing since the mid-1970s have resulted in a fundamental shift in commissioning practice throughout the theatre industry. My research considers the impact of this shift on the process of commissioning new plays. It examines the way in which writers function within structures of literary development and management and explores the changes in relationships between writers and commissioners. It

challenges the romanticised notion of the playwright as a solitary originator and isolated author. Drawing on interviews with writers and commissioners, it considers whether there is an emerging new model within the theatre industry that reflects the contemporary writer's place and practice within complex industrial processes.

Chapter 2

Case study 1: *In Fog and Falling Snow* - the local space

This chapter gives an account of the commissioning process of *In Fog and Falling Snow* (York Theatre Royal, Pilot Theatre, and the National Railway Museum, at the NRM, 2015). The large-scale community production centred on the story of railway entrepreneur George Hudson, and the great railway bubble of the 1840s. The notion of the local space is explored in terms of the historical, geographical and physical context of the piece. York's tradition of community theatre reaches back to medieval mystery plays, and the nature of the historical development of community engagement with theatre is considered, alongside an analysis of more recent examples of community theatre produced in the city. The chapter also explores the ways in which geographic and physical location informed the development of the play, considering the impact of a local historical story upon the contemporary context in which it is performed: geographically (in York) and physically and culturally, within the National Railway Museum. It examines the ways in which these contexts created parameters and constraints within which the play was developed,

and the way in which tensions arising between institutions, partners and stakeholders as they worked with the aim of building mutually beneficial connections impacted the writing process.

Chapter 3

Case study 2: *Simeon's Watch* - the social space

This chapter considers the development and commission of *Simeon's Watch* (Riding Lights Theatre Company, national tour, 2016). The three-hander play presented the experience of dementia within a contemporary sheep-farming family. The social space under consideration is an expression of a number of human contexts: the societal 'problem' of increasing dementia, the family as a social unit, and the performance venues (which were largely churches) as places of social encounter and support. It particularly considers the tensions arising from the engagement with an emotive subject and the preconceptions and expectations of audiences (in which I include stakeholders, funders, and commissioners and venues). It considers the demands upon the writer of writing into both a topical issue and an 'interested' constituency comprised of venues with their own agenda and regular audiences, as well as the impact of material demands such as marketing imagery and copy. In doing so, it explores the aims and purpose of a commissioned play in relation to its intended audience.

Chapter 4

Case study 3: *Everything is Possible* - the political space

This chapter follows the commissioning of *Everything is Possible* (York Theatre Royal and Pilot Theatre, at YTR, 2017). The large-scale community play told the story of the York suffragettes. The political space it inhabited embraces political history (the fight for women's suffrage), the national and international political landscape, which changed dramatically over the period that the play was developed, and the relationship of the commissioning companies to shared political and ideological positioning. It explores the tensions within a collaborative development process, and the challenge to individuals of creating propagandist work within institutional structures. It considers the extent to which the ability to be creatively responsive is constrained by consideration for public profile. It also examines the effects of considerations of representation and diversity upon the work of an almost entirely female creative team, and a feminist approach to the making of work in a community context. Part of this chapter is based on my paper *Hope with Dirty Hands*, given at New York University's Steiner School *Performing Activism* conference in 2018, and subsequently published in NYU / Steinhardt's peer-reviewed journal, *Arts Praxis*, Vol 5, issue 2 (2019).

Chapter 5

Conclusion

My conclusions are drawn from a consideration of the links between the three case studies and common themes arising from the commissioning processes that they were developed through, as well as the contrasts and divergences revealed by their analysis. I discuss the potential and possibilities for learning that might be applied within commissioning processes and practice arising from my enquiry. I theorise creative practice, reaching back into my initial underpinning of existing scholarship and relating this to my research, discussing comparisons between emerging practice within the theatre industry and established processes of commission and collaboration in film and television, with a particular focus on the counter-balance between creativity and constraint in theoretical and philosophical terms as well as in industry practice. I evaluate and reflect on the findings of my research, returning to my key research questions, and addressing them in summary. I consider the practice of authorship and the distinctive voice of the writer, enquiring whether current approaches to play development create spaces where those voices may be heard, or whether they are more often lost within a cacophony of objectives, agendas and influences. I place these considerations within the context of commissioning practice, and apply the impact of my research to different groups and stakeholders within the theatre industry. Returning to the notion of directive commissioning as a means to fill spaces, I posit whether a new understanding might emerge of the way in which writers operate as part of the processes of an increasingly complex industry, with improved models of commissioning and collaboration. Finally, within the academic field, I look to what further questions might emerge from my research.

CHAPTER 1

Historical and contextual background

Prologue

I met the whole company to talk about working with them. They gave me a list of books they had read.... I left the meeting exhilarated. I'd been writing plays for eighteen years, half my life...All this work had been completely solitary – I never discussed my ideas while I was writing or showed anyone anything earlier than a final polished draft. So this was a new way of working, which was one of its attractions.²⁶

This is Caryl Churchill's account of her first meeting – in 1976 – with the newly-formed Monstrous Regiment of Women, and the play under discussion would become *Vinegar Tom*. At the company's invitation, she subsequently attended a rehearsal for Chris Bond and Claire Luckham's *Scum*. Little did Churchill know, as she noted the 'attractions' of working with the company, and felt 'exhilarated' at the prospect, that she had – in the rehearsal she'd seen – been given a glimpse of something that was to make her fellow writers 'very unhappy and angry'²⁷.

According to the account of *Scum*'s process, 'when the commissioned script arrived from Chris Bond and Claire Luckham, the company felt that it didn't capture what they were looking to show.'²⁸ They addressed this in the spirit of the collective:

'through discussions and improvisations, building on the original script storyline and characters, they shaped the resulting production to their vision.' When Bond and

²⁶ Quoted by Aston, E. in *Feminist Theatre Practice*. (1999). London: Routledge p33

²⁷ Ibid. p33

²⁸ Higgs, J. (2013). *Scum: Death, Destruction and Dirty Washing* [online] Available at: <https://www.unfinishedhistories.com/history/companies/monstrous-regiment/scum-death-destruction-and-dirty-washing/>

Luckham saw the show in performance, they were angered and unhappy at the changes to their work, arguing that ‘in their view they had been ‘commissioned to write a play’, not a ‘working script’.’²⁹ This episode – and the language in which it is framed – is a remarkably useful one to unpick in terms of the issues surrounding current commissioning practice, in particular the rise in directive commissioning.

In Churchill’s account, it is key that she what she was being offered in engaging with *Monstrous Regiment* was ‘a new way of working.’ She relates that her entire working practice up to this point had been ‘solitary’, never even discussing her ideas, and only sharing her work when it was ‘a final polished draft’. There was nothing collaborative about her method of working, and her experience reflects that of most playwrights at that time.

It was exactly, in part, this compartmentalisation of the various different components of theatre-making that the new theatre collectives such as *Monstrous Regiment* sought to break down – and with it the familiar hierarchies (particularly related to gender) that structured conventional theatre production. According to the *British Alternative Theatre Directory* (1982), *Monstrous Regiment* ‘wanted to be able to shape their own work’ and their own publicity stated that ‘policy-making and practical tasks are shared by all’.³⁰ This is the important second point to note; that there was a drive by the new theatre collectives to break the mould of the traditional theatre, to claim some measure of control for artists (mainly performers)

²⁹ Hanna, G. (ed). (1991). *Monstrous Regiment – A Collective Celebration*. London: Nick Hern pxxxv

³⁰ Higgs, J. (2013). *Scum: Death, Destruction and Dirty Washing* [online] Available at: <https://www.unfinishedhistories.com/history/companies/monstrous-regiment/scum-death-destruction-and-dirty-washing/>

and that that some individual roles (including those of writers) would be subsumed by a collective responsibility. The claiming of that ground is evidenced by the fact that company members gave Churchill ‘a list of books they had read’. The message was clearly ‘this is where we’re at – get yourself to the same starting point as us.’ Gillian Hanna addresses the question of the place of the writer in *Monstrous Regiment*’s thinking directly: ‘Why should the writer be God? Wouldn’t it be more democratic to write scripts collectively? If you were in a collective, how could one voice represent the ideas of a whole?’³¹ In practice, the loosening of hierarchical chains, and the embracing of collaborative practice was often expressed, however, in ideological broad brush-strokes that left much room for misunderstanding. In the above example, what constitutes a ‘practical task’ to be ‘shared by all’ is open to a number of interpretations. Certainly, it seems unlikely that Bond and Luckham had anticipated that writing plays might be an endeavour ‘shared by all’.

Thirdly, it is clear from *Monstrous Regiment*’s account of the development of *Scum*, that the defining vision for the piece derived from the company and not the playwrights. While describing it as a ‘commissioned script’, they nonetheless ‘felt that it didn’t capture what *they* were looking to show’, and worked to ‘shape the resulting production to *their* vision’ (all my italics). Specifically, *Monstrous Regiment* cited the play’s ‘political themes, dimension of character and theatrical representation’ as not having been captured (by the playwrights) to the company’s satisfaction.³² Of particular interest in this statement is that the play’s ‘political

³¹ Hanna, *Monstrous Regiment* pxxxiii

³² Higgs, J. (2013). *Scum: Death, Destruction and Dirty Washing* [online] Available at: <https://www.unfinishedhistories.com/history/companies/monstrous-regiment/scum-death-destruction-and-dirty-washing/>

themes' were a point of contention. This dispute was not purely stylistic; it went to the play's heart, and it drove a separation between the voice of the play and the voice of the playwrights. Fourthly, and as a result of the progress of their play through rehearsal and production, Bond and Luckham draw a clear distinction between being 'commissioned to write a play' and being asked for a 'working script' – the implication being that a 'working script' is a legitimate piece of material to be subjected to the company's development processes, while a commissioned play should not be. In contrast, Monstrous Regiment describe *Scum* as a 'commissioned script', but draw no such distinctions in terms of how it should be treated.

Lastly, it is important to note that – in the absence of clear communication and shared understanding - emotions and feelings become driving forces. Bond and Luckham, while feeling 'very *unhappy* and *angry*' argued that '*in their view*' they had been commissioned to write a play not a 'working script'. For their part 'the company *felt*' that the play didn't meet 'their *vision*' (all my italics). For everyone involved, the process of working on making a piece of theatre is personal and subjective, it is bound up with convictions, and it is intensely emotional. Hanna concludes that in looking for 'a collective relationship with the writer', the company learned that there was no 'recipe for what that relationship might be.'³³ They had intended to enter into a collaboration, but they had in fact stepped into a minefield.

In summary, this moment of theatrical history can be regarded as a critical incident in a re-framing of commissioning practice: it presents a new way of working, it

³³ Hanna, *Monstrous Regiment* pxxxiii

models a collaborative approach to the writing of scripts, it casts the commissioner (rather than the writer) as the originator of ideas for new plays, it exposes confusion around what it means, practically, to 'commission' a script, and it acknowledges that there are deep emotional – as well as professional - forces at work within the process. It prefigures the way in which – in today's commissioning culture - writers can be divided by their reaction to and understanding of their practice being opened up to other voices and influences. It also raises questions in terms of commissioning practice today, and the extent to which these areas are being engaged with rigorously and systematically in contexts where collaborative practice is considered a norm.

Playwrights at work

Before consideration of the more immediately historical context within which this critical incident sits, it is worth noting that the longer view indicates something of an ongoing vacillation in the way in which text, authorship and the relationship between the two have been viewed. Paul Yachnin, writing of Ben Jonson's coining of the derogatory term 'stage-wright' describes playwriting as a profession as 'antithetical to what Jonson viewed as the higher calling of poetry'.³⁴ Terms such as 'playmaker' even the now neutral 'playwright' 'tended to be pejorative, combining the frivolity of "play" with the social degradation of manual work'.³⁵

³⁴ Yachnin, Paul (1997). *Stage-Wrights: Shakespeare, Jonson, Middleton, and the Making of Theatrical Value*. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia pxii

³⁵ Ibid. p51

That the word 'work' is used to denote both the labour required to make something, and the 'work' that is made illustrates - in literary contexts - the complex relationship between text, author, and, as Foucault observes, 'the manner in which the text points to this "figure"'³⁶ of the author. In fact, Foucault's proposition that 'the word "work" and the unity that it designates are probably as problematic as the status of the author's individuality'³⁷ speaks into a time where the received notion of authorship remains and retains the sense of the individual as author, a conceit that derives only from the 18th and 19th centuries. In her account, Paulina Kewes contends that 'in Shakespeare's time, the identity of the author was generally unknown to his audience and often to his readership'³⁸, going on to identify 'the rise of the idiom of individuality'³⁹ as a development of the 18th century, and noting that 'after the Restoration, collaboration between (or among) professionals, which had been widespread in early seventeenth-century theatres, virtually disappeared'⁴⁰. This shift also marks a change in the way in which the act of literary creation became viewed, with 'the ideal of composition as an act of inspired creation contrast[ing] sharply with the notion of composition as a process in which to use the works of others'⁴¹ and one which can be regarded as 'legitimate'⁴². While she concludes that this has resulted in 'the rise of solo authorship as the artistic and critical norm'⁴³, this study proposes that the rise in directive commissioning re-directs creative practice

³⁶ Foucault, M. in Rabinow, P. (1984). *The Foucault Reader*. Penguin, Middlesex p101

³⁷ Ibid. p104

³⁸ Kewes, Paulina (1998). *Authorship and Appropriation – Writing for the Stage in England 1660-1710*. Clarendon, Oxford p1

³⁹ Ibid. p2

⁴⁰ Ibid. p8

⁴¹ Ibid. p8

⁴² Ibid. p8

⁴³ Ibid. p9

away from individual ‘acts of inspired creation’ and towards collaborative processes of the kind that Foucault predicts in his assertion that ‘as our society changes...the author function will disappear’ and ‘texts will once again function according to another mode...which will no longer be the author, but which will have to be determined or, perhaps, experienced.’⁴⁴ While it is beyond the scope of this investigation to expand further upon the notion of authorship in relation to playwriting, it is worth noting that the lack of specificity in Foucault’s description of ‘another mode’ or Churchill’s ‘new way of working’ points to the difficulties of describing processes that so profoundly challenge the modern construction of authorship and the idea of playwrights as autonomous authors.

Surveying the scene

Twenty years before Caryl Churchill’s meeting with *Monstrous Regiment*, The Arts Council of Great Britain’s New Drama Scheme awarded regular subsidy to the Royal Court Theatre, described by Artistic Director George Devine as ‘a place where the dramatist is acknowledged for what he [sic] is – the fundamental creative force in the theatre’.⁴⁵ At the time, there was an awareness that a play is – at least in part – a technical creation. Rebellato quotes J.B. Priestley describing a ‘good dramatist’ as one who ‘work[s] on two different levels of his [sic] mind...the warm-imaginative-creative-deep level and the cold-crafty-technical-upper level’.⁴⁶ Priestley goes on to

⁴⁴ Foucault, M. in Rabinow, P. (1984). *The Foucault Reader*. Penguin, Middlesex p119

⁴⁵ Rebellato, D. (1999). *1956 And All That*. London: Routledge p77

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* pp74-5

observe that 'a good play needs both', and there seems to have been no question but that a playwright would be capable of delivering on both counts. Moreover, the creation of a play was not expected to be a protracted process: Noel Coward and John Osborne frequently wrote plays in a matter of days - and it was an isolated activity, Osborne describing his playwriting as 'a solo dash [...] fuelled by a reckless untutored frenzy.'⁴⁷ The solitary, unbridled energy of this approach stands in marked contrast to development processes favoured and facilitated by today's commissioners.

By the late 1990s, the foundations of a new industry of professional literary management had been put in place, described by Mary Luckhurst as 'a silent revolution', which is 'transforming theatre cultures'⁴⁸. I contend that the model by which this transformation has been achieved might be viewed rather as evolutionary than revolutionary, in that the seeds of change are evident from the mid-1950s, and the first dedicated Literary Manager in the UK was Kenneth Tynan, appointed to the newly-formed National Theatre in 1963. This evolution had been triggered by the demand for accountability that accompanied the introduction of state funding, first by the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts,⁴⁹ and then by the Arts Council. It has also been driven by the perceived preferences of audiences, as well as the box-office led response from theatres that were subsequently subject to commercial imperatives, as a result of changes in funding policies. Through the

⁴⁷ Ibid. p76

⁴⁸ Luckhurst, M. (2006). *Dramaturgy: A Revolution in Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press p264

⁴⁹ See Barker, R. and T. Cornford in Pitches, J. (ed). (2019). *The Great European Stage Directors*. Vol. 3, p136

1980s and 90s, audience figures for new writing in main houses were falling (from 61% of capacity in 1982 to under 50% in 1985, and for the rest of the decade).

Between 1985 and 1990, the percentage of new work in main house productions dropped from 12% to 7%.⁵⁰ David Edgar posits that this falling off 'was explained by critics, and, increasingly, directors as a function of a decline in the quality of new plays and the competence of their authors'⁵¹, with the result that 'there was a growing belief, among directors in particular, that new work had run out of steam'.⁵²

One response to this was that mainstream theatre looked to the practices of alternative theatre, where ensemble and collective methodologies were increasingly favoured over a traditional writer-led model. Writing of this period, Jane Milling has observed that 'the recurring enlightenment myth of individual genius was rarely borne out in the process of playwriting for the theatre.'⁵³ In 1991 Michael Billington went so far as to declare that 'new writing for theatre is in a state of crisis'.⁵⁴

Understanding the nature of this crisis of confidence is key to assessing underlying factors in the rise of directive commissioning.

The more widespread arrival of the literary manager is an important feature in the changing landscape at this point. Many writers responded to the paucity of support and diminishing offers of new commissions coming from theatres with a refusal to stop writing, with the result that theatres began to receive unsolicited scripts in increasing numbers. Before the late 1980s, there had been just three theatres in the

⁵⁰ All figures quoted by Edgar, D. (2013). *Playwriting Studies: Twenty Years On*. Contemporary Theatre Review 23:22 99-106

⁵¹ Edgar, *Playwriting Studies: Twenty Years On* pp99-106

⁵² David Edgar, quoted by Sierz, *Modern British Playwriting: the 1990s* p54

⁵³ Milling, *Modern British Playwriting: the 1980s* p91

⁵⁴ Quoted by Milling, *Modern British Playwriting: the 1980s* p57

country that employed literary managers: the National Theatre, the Royal Shakespeare Company and the Royal Court. Now staff were being appointed who could read and respond to the flood of new work, and as increasing bureaucratisation under the transformation to the creative industries tightened its grip on the arts in general, literary management became as pervasive as theatre management. In 2009, the Arts Council's *Theatre Assessment* report by Millman and Myers gives an overview of the impact of literary management on writers and new writing. The report notes that 'One particularly complex area of discussion focused on whether the move towards collaboration, and more multi-layered processes, supported or marginalised the writer.'⁵⁵ Some writers felt that this development had 'opened practice up, and had taken new writing away from the wings and into centre stage'⁵⁶, while others felt they had 'become victims of these processes, depending more than ever on approval from an artistic director, a dramaturge or *some other voice of authority*'⁵⁷ (my italics).

Writers who had previously operated independently, were increasingly being asked to engage in development processes under the watchful eye and guiding hand of literary managers and dramaturgs. *Theatre Assessment* records 'the growth of the dramaturge and the role of dramaturgy as a major change.'⁵⁸ The administrative and creative structure of theatres was becoming peopled with staff whose responsibility was to ensure that the correct targets were being met and objectives were being delivered. Artistic product and processes were carefully managed. The report noted

⁵⁵ Millman, A. and J. Myers (2009). *Theatre Assessment*. London: Arts Council England p76

⁵⁶ Ibid. p76

⁵⁷ Ibid. p76

⁵⁸ Ibid. p76

complaints about ‘the producer role intervening rather than supporting the writing process’, and a resulting ‘confusion, particularly around the issues of the ‘well-made play’ and the role of the writer.’⁵⁹ While it might be possible to dismiss some of these concerns as reluctance on the part of writers to embrace new ways of working, perhaps the most telling finding of the report – in the light of the concerns of writers – was that ‘while there had been a growth in the development of writers there had been a reduction in the amount of work commissioned and produced.’⁶⁰ The value of art was being measured by its instrumental effectiveness, and the work that playwrights produced became a key mechanism of the delivery strategy of commissioning organisations. Viewed with hindsight, it is not surprising that the natural next step was for theatres to tighten their control over what was being written by playwrights.

Managing the muse

The move towards directive commissioning was facilitated at both ends: at the point of commission, but also through the training and management of playwrights. As Milling observes, ‘the rhetorical construction of the arts as an industry and debates around the economic value of culture had increased a sense of professionalisation of playwriting.’⁶¹ Both the newly-defined industry and the academy responded by providing professional training for playwrights. In 1989 the University of Birmingham

⁵⁹ Ibid. p76

⁶⁰ Ibid. p74

⁶¹ Milling, *Modern British Playwriting: the 1980s* p91

established an MA in playwriting, under playwright David Edgar. He maintained that the course was modelled on the practices of existing writers' groups⁶², but nonetheless it formalised and placed into a pedagogical context what had previously existed as a largely informal system of peer-support. Similar courses at other universities followed. At the same time, the role taken by literary managers in theatres was being extended from that of responsive script-readers to practically-engaged dramaturgs, with wide-ranging powers.

If it were as simple as theatres requiring extra staff to sift through manuscripts and identify the best new plays to take forward to production, the prevailing culture of new writing would not have altered significantly. In fact, a seismic shift had occurred at a deeper level, with safe programming suggesting the industry had lost faith not just in new writing, but in writers. The increasing preference of theatres to produce musicals and adaptations of novels rather than new writing⁶³ sapped the confidence of both writers and theatres. 'It's the discouragement, really – more than the lack of money', Peter Hall explained. 'Many theatres up and down the country are suffering from a loss of nerve because they feel that the government and the Arts Council are no longer supporting them.'⁶⁴ This loss of nerve prompted, in turn, a loss of confidence in writers' abilities to create work that might help theatres to address this problem. With notable exceptions, writers seemed no longer to be trusted in any way that George Devine would have recognised.

⁶² Edgar, *Playwriting Studies: Twenty Years On* pp99-106

⁶³ As evidenced in the Arts Council's 1985-1986 *Cork report*

⁶⁴ Quoted in Peacock, D. (1999). *Thatcher's Theatre: British Theatre and Drama in the Eighties*. London: Greenwood Press p52

If the old voices weren't to be trusted, new ones needed to be found, and public funding in the 1990s supported the drive to discover not just 'new writing' but new writers. While new – or 'emerging' - writers might have a good sense of what Priestley called 'the warm-imaginative-creative-deep level', they were considered likely to need help with 'the cold-crafty-technical-upper level'. This was one of the tasks of the literary managers and development dramaturgs; to help inexperienced writers to craft their plays by bringing the required tools of theatrical projection to the distinctive voice of the emerging writer. Alex Chisholm describes her appointment to the West Yorkshire Playhouse as Literary Manager in 2001 as 'part of a wave of new literary appointments around the country, which has seen the numbers of us literary folk [...] swell from a mere handful to hundreds'⁶⁵. During her time at the WYP her aim was to help the playwright 'to understand what they're doing with structure, understand what they're doing with character and [to] work out if that is, in fact, what they want to do'⁶⁶. That the expectation of literary managers is that writers may not only lack the technical grip to 'understand' key aspects of their work such as character or structure, but also that they may not even be clear about their intentions for the piece, marks a significant shift in attitude and paves the way for a less open approach to commissioning.

⁶⁵ Chisholm, A. (2012). 'The End of 'New Writing'?' *Exeunt Magazine*. [online] Available at: <http://exeuntmagazine.com/features/the-end-of-new-writing/>

⁶⁶ Quoted by Bolton, J. (2011) *Demarcating Dramaturgy – Mapping Theory onto Practice*. (Doctoral Thesis, University of Leeds)

The increased professionalisation of literary management, and the perceived decrease in the professional skills and standards of playwrights ushered in the age of 'New Writing', defined by Aleks Sierz as:

a distinctive genre of contemporary work which is often, although by no means exclusively, written by newly arriving or young playwrights, and characterised by the distinctiveness of the author's individual voice, the contemporary flavour of their language and themes, and sometimes by the provocative nature of its content or experimentation with theatrical form.⁶⁷

Early and bold hits by writers such as Mark Ravenhill and Sarah Kane fed an appetite not just for more writing by those writers, but for more writers of that ilk. As Jacqueline Bolton has observed, theatres and companies began 'to redirect their focus from *emerging* playwrights to *potential* playwrights' (my emphasis), who

don't know who they are, they don't go to the theatre and they've never written a play. But if you give them an opportunity, they might discover that they've got an extraordinary talent.⁶⁸

Rebellato notes the mushrooming of a new breed of writers' groups which – rather than writers representing writers at grassroots level – were constructed by new writing theatres (such as The Royal Court and Soho Theatre), with the express aim of 'diversifying the overall pool of writing talent in British theatres'⁶⁹, and operating under the control of literary managers. Literary management became 'a major cultural industry'⁷⁰ within the larger cultural industry of theatre, underpinned by a political agenda articulated by Luckhurst as 'the desire to empower particular

⁶⁷ Sierz, *Modern British Playwriting: the 1990s* p54

⁶⁸ Graham Whybrow, quoted by Bolton, J. *Demarcating Dramaturgy*

⁶⁹ Rebellato, D. (2013). *Modern British Playwriting 2000-2009*. London: Bloomsbury p73

⁷⁰ Luckhurst, *Dramaturgy: A Revolution in Theatre* p202

constituencies of writers' and connected to 'wider political issues of audience access and participation.'⁷¹ This begins to suggest that the remit of literary managers was being extended from that of advising on playwriting technique to influencing culture and acting as gatekeepers in their role as commissioners.

Interaction with writers lay at the heart of most literary management positions, and negotiating these delicate relationships, and the commissions that grew out of them, remained the primary focus for many literary managers. In 1996, the National Theatre hosted a four-day conference on *Developing New Writing*. The report refers to a 'rigorous, supportive and nourishing dramaturgy', but also notes the need for 'more effective dramaturgical methods.'⁷² In 1997, the New Playwrights' Trust organised a conference on *Commissioning the Future*, possibly hoping that facilitating the event would place the concerns of playwrights at the centre of the debate. It appears that in their sharings, the sector as a whole was – to a large extent – making it up as it went along, and attempting to reconcile tensions within an embryonic system. Órla O'Loughlin, while Artistic Director of Pentabus, described the focus of the literary manager as first and foremost 'the writer's own voice. What are they trying to say? We don't want to inform that in any way, we just want to open the channels for them to be able to say it, clearly and effectively.'⁷³ This is echoed by Alex Chisholm: 'an original new play has come into being because of something that playwright wants to do, wants to say, or had a vision of [...] It is important to keep in your mind that this play is from them.'⁷⁴ At the same time,

⁷¹ Ibid. p208

⁷² Jonathan Meth, quoted by Bolton, J. *Demarcating Dramaturgy*

⁷³ Quoted by Bolton, J. *Demarcating Dramaturgy*

⁷⁴ Quoted by Bolton, Ibid.

there is 'a sense of pastoral responsibility towards playwrights and playtexts'⁷⁵ and, significantly, the language used is frequently that of the nursery: nurturing and developing new work; encouraging, supporting and protecting writers. The hierarchical relationship between writers and commissioners was becoming embedded in practice: Chisholm points to the worrying emergence of an 'ideal' of the new writing play: 'this sense of what makes a good play has crept into the way workshops are run, courses are structured, feedback is given and, most damaging, into the very heart of relationships between producers and artists.'⁷⁶ Following fundamental changes in attitude, and the establishment of a hierarchy between writers and commissioners, particular, stylistic expectations were now being placed on writers.

For their part, writers had been enraged for some time by the lack of meaningful commitment shown by theatres. In 2003 the online theatre magazine *Encore*, painted what Rebellato describes as 'a bleak, angry picture':

Writers know that there is no vision at the heart of [the Royal Court]. Vision means a strong sense from the leadership of what type of writing they love and want to promote. Vision means [...] knowing what writing does, understanding its mysterious value. Vision can be artistic, it can be political; under previous reigns it has been both. But looking at the work over the last few years, can you honestly say there is a sense of a theatre in love with the work it produces?⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Chisholm, A. (2012). 'The End of 'New Writing'?' *Exeunt Magazine*. [online] Available at: <http://exeuntmagazine.com/features/the-end-of-new-writing/>

⁷⁷ Quoted by Rebellato, *Modern British Playwriting 2000-2009* p67

The language here – of love, of mystery, of vision, of value – both evokes and plays into the romantic notion of the writer, while also pointing to the gulf that writers were experiencing between their understanding of their craft and the restrictions of a highly managed development system, that many were clearly struggling within – or resistant to. But Sierz, writing of the 2000s, points to the problematic relationship between the commissioning framework and the work that is produced: ‘if you can blame playwrights for failing to write [different kinds of] plays, you also have to hold theatres to account for neither commissioning them, nor taking steps to widen their rather narrow repertoire of plays.’⁷⁸

Managing risk

The old mistrust that theatres had of writers was being reciprocated. There had been a fundamental breakdown in two key areas which go to the heart of how theatre is made. In the rehearsal room, there is an understanding that genuine creativity and collaboration is dependent upon the exercise of trust and the embracing of risk. But in the larger theatre ecology, that crucial understanding was being lost. Every area of new writing now became associated with risk: the risk that the writer would not deliver a script which is technically sound, or that the script would fail to serve the needs of the various stakeholders (the ethos or remit of the commissioning theatre or company; the audience; the funders etc.). The risk of taking forward to production a script that would prove unappealing at the box office,

⁷⁸ Quoted by Rebellato, Ibid. p72

or attract poor reviews. The financial risk being taken on new writing began to assume terrifying proportions: one or two mis-judged shows could sink a small company.

In the heady days of the 1990s, the revival in new writing had 'remained in the risk-free spaces of state-subsidised new writing theatres'⁷⁹. As the commercialisation of formerly-subsidised theatre progressed, funding was directed to new writing as opposed to production. Surveys of writers conducted for The ACE *New Writing in Theatre* Report of 2009 (the *Dunton Report*) revealed that during the period covered by the report (2003-2008), 'some were concerned that the Arts Council see investing in a new writing development programme as a less risky venture than taking a chance and investing in a full production which contains new writing.'⁸⁰ Despite ongoing investment in new writing, the decade was regarded by some playwrights as 'one of challenge and decline'.⁸¹

As the world-wide financial crisis deepened in 2007 and beyond, funding for the arts was stripped back under the austerity policy and for many theatres and companies any last vestiges of the safety net fell away. Even where funding remained, the work was becoming more cautious: in 2009, lamenting the increasingly safe contours of the emerging theatrical landscape, Lyn Gardner asked 'What is subsidy for, if not to encourage risk?'⁸² For unfunded or under-funded companies, that risk fell squarely

⁷⁹ Sierz, *Modern British Playwriting: the 1990s* p56

⁸⁰ Dunton, E., R. Nelson and H. Shand (2009). *New Writing in Theatre: An Assessment of New Writing Within Smaller Scale Theatres in England*. Arts Council England [online] Available at: http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication_archive/new-writing-in-theatre/

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Gardner, L. (2009). *The Guardian*. 27 April

upon theatre makers. Touring companies found themselves having to manage both their own risks and the risks as perceived by receiving venues. Box office splits became increasingly unfavourable to visiting companies touring new writing, and even gave way to straight hires. For those venues, the risks were potentially long term. Órla O'Loughlin, heading up Pentabus – a touring company – faced this repeatedly. 'When they say they can't take a risk on new writing, what they're really saying is that they can't risk their audience.'⁸³ This risk-averse climate extended deep into the most critical and personal areas of theatre-making. Graham Whybrow, speaking while he was Literary Manager at the Royal Court, highlighted a largely hidden problem:

Working on new plays is a sophisticated, demanding task and you have to remember that there are high-profile directors who regard new work as such a risk to their reputation that they won't take it on.⁸⁴

The effects of such nervousness were felt even by a writer of Tom Stoppard's status. In 2002, he observed that many regional theatres 'can't afford to put on new writing as often as they did. I remember when it was of interest. Now it's just a risk.'⁸⁵ The only way to mitigate these risks, and yet to hold onto the principle of new writing, was for commissioners and producers to exert as much control as possible over what was being written. As a result, managing risk became – increasingly - about managing writers.

⁸³ Quoted in Dunton, E., R. Nelson and H. Shand *New Writing in Theatre*

⁸⁴ Quoted by Luckhurst, *Dramaturgy: A Revolution in Theatre* p230

⁸⁵ Quoted by Sierz, A. (2003). 'Art flourishes in times of struggle: Creativity, Funding and New Writing'. *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 13:1, 33-45

Cutting both ways

The foundations for directive commissioning are sunk in the rise – and fall - of new writing. It has already been identified that the combination of funding strategies and allied Political and social agendas contributed to the emergence of a new writing industry, populated by professional literary managers and served by new, emerging and even potential writers. The way in which writers experienced the culture of ‘management’ of their work is a subject touched on by both Bolton and Luckhurst in their respective analyses of dramaturgical practice. Writers’ surveys undertaken as part of the research leading to the 2009 ACE-commissioned reports into new writing across mainstream and smaller scale theatre, reveal a number of emerging factors. The first is that there is a division between experienced and less experienced writers in terms of the way in which they view key aspects of development. Younger – or newer – writers were often delighted to be given funded opportunities to develop their craft: ‘you got a room and a computer and eight weeks and you were paid. There was no stipulation...you could discover if your idea worked...That was brilliant.’⁸⁶ One of the findings of the *Dunton Report* was that ‘literary and dramaturgy departments have developed imaginative and robust schemes to develop the work of inexperienced writers.’⁸⁷ But structures that had originally been put in place in order to support new writers were now being applied across the board, and for more experienced ones, the benefits of such approaches were often perceived as questionable: ‘The workshop...was an interesting and informative three

⁸⁶ Focus group member, quoted in Dunton, E., R. Nelson and H. Shand *New Writing in Theatre*

⁸⁷ Dunton, E., R. Nelson and H. Shand *New Writing in Theatre*

days. In terms of moving the play forward or developing relationships it was less than useless.⁸⁸ While more experienced writers struggled to adapt themselves to new models of working being imposed on them, emerging writers often engaged more readily with the development process, but with varying 'success' in terms of what was written. Some of the influences were external: as Jack Bradley comments, 'the creation of small black boxes and reduction of funding has meant that people have got used to writing affordable plays, with three people in a single room.'⁸⁹ But the internal expectations of the process of development brought its own dangers, including 'a concern that [...] writers [...] could be trapped by the narrow confines of what they were asked to write about, and all too often fed little more than an appetite for the "new".'⁹⁰ The significant part of Rebellato's observation here is not the perennial 'appetite for the "new"', but the fact that writers were being 'asked to write' within 'narrow confines'. This points towards a future of directive commissioning, as well as indicating that one feature of such an approach will be the requirement to work within constraints.

Another factor deriving from the *Dunton Report* and elsewhere is the quantity of anecdotal evidence from writers and some literary managers suggesting that – despite commitment, ambition and the best of intentions - the development process can have a seriously detrimental effect on both plays and playwrights. Alongside Rebellato's description of writers as 'trapped', Chisholm recounts having 'more than once seen development processes squeeze the very life out of a play'⁹¹, while

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Quoted in Sierz, *Art Flourishes in Times of Struggle* p43

⁹⁰ Rebellato, *Modern British Playwriting 2000-2009* p73

⁹¹ Ibid.

director Jo Combes warns that ‘when plays go through many drafts, it’s easy to lose sight of what the original seed was; the thing that really excited you.’⁹² While more experienced writers may feel stifled by the level of intervention they experience within development, some younger writers come to depend on it, and write ‘anticipating a development process.’⁹³ The authors of *Writ Large* found evidence that ‘a “treatment culture” of continuous play development makes it harder for playwrights to write independently and present finished scripts.’⁹⁴ The report observes (with some understatement), ‘the old model of commissioning a writer to write their next play, receiving it and putting it on is clearly a less common occurrence.’⁹⁵ The significance of this shift in practice seems to be viewed with some ambivalence even by those who have ushered it in. Jacqui Honess-Martin, Literary Associate at the West Yorkshire Playhouse, recounts an occasion on which the question of whether any of the theatre’s programming team had – in their entire professional experience – seen an unsolicited script go on to production, ‘and within the room...there’s probably over 100 years of experience – various different venues, different places, we came up with *one* example where that has ever happened.’ Confirming the almost mythological status of this example, she added, ‘None of us were working on it...we know it happened.’⁹⁶ Graham Whybrow admits to having believed at one stage that ‘people wrote plays and theatres put them on. Surely?’, and explains his drive while at the Royal Court to ‘disentangle’ writers from a complex development process:

⁹² Quoted by Dickson, A. (2009). *The Drama Factory*. The Guardian, 16 Dec

⁹³ Graham Whybrow, quoted by Bolton, J. *Demarcating Dramaturgy*

⁹⁴ British Theatre Consortium (2009). *Writ Large*. Arts Council England

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Honess-Martin, J. Interview with Bridget Foreman, 21 May 2018

[...] this creepy, slightly insinuating and paternalistic, nannyng, top-down ethos [...] infantilising the writers to such a point that they will crawl in like babies, sicking up their first drafts like spinach and asking you to sort it out. It's lamentable.⁹⁷

Sebastian Born, Whybrow's successor at the Royal Court, concurs, though in more measured tones:

Some people feel that a play isn't worthwhile unless it's been through twelve drafts. I completely disagree. The best situation is when someone sends you something that is good, and you do it. Plays die if they're handled too much.⁹⁸

While statements such as these reveal the polarity of opinion surrounding the value of development, the problematic ratio of scripts developed to scripts produced contributes to a suspicion that development may be seen as an alternative to production.⁹⁹ One of the writers surveyed for the *Dunton Report* asked 'why am I sitting down every morning at the computer? The only thing that makes a difference is having a play performed...until it's on that stage in front of an audience, it's not a play.'¹⁰⁰ For director Roxana Silbert, 'commissioning that doesn't lead to production is useless.'¹⁰¹ What playwrights used to learn through having their work produced, they are now expected to glean as they go through the development process: 'interactive systems', 'critical interventions', 'multi-layered processes', 'new collaborative methods' and 'complex and interventionist methods of working'. They may be helped in 'developing an idea to the point of commission' but if they fail to

⁹⁷ Quoted by Bolton, *Demarcating Dramaturgy*

⁹⁸ Quoted by Dickson, *The Drama Factory*

⁹⁹ *Writ Large* gives the following commission to production rates from 2003-2009: National Theatre – 5:1, RSC – 4:1, Royal Court – less than 50%. British Theatre Consortium, *Writ Large*

¹⁰⁰ Writer, quoted in Dunton, Nelson & Shand, *New Writing in Theatre*

¹⁰¹ British Theatre Consortium, *Writ Large*

cross that line, and don't make it as far as production, the final stages of their development are literary rather than theatrical.

Vision and voice

The *Dunton Report* revealed that many playwrights understood the dangers and distractions of over-development. They feared that 'multi-layered processes' would result in writers being marginalised, and that their scripts would start to 'lose the unique voice of the writer', though there was also a concern that that voice was not considered intrinsically important: the second most strongly agreed with statement in the writers' questionnaire was 'the playwright's individual voice is less valued than it was five years ago.'¹⁰² A detailed analysis of what constitutes the voice of the writer is outside the remit of this study, but a simple consideration is the extent to which the writer's voice is expressed through what they are saying as well as how they say it. These questions become acute in relation to directive commissioning: what might be the effect within the process where subject, theme and concept may well come from the commissioner, and even the writer's text may be regarded as an open document?

Simon Stephens has spoken enthusiastically of working on a piece (*Three Kingdoms*), where he did not consider his role to be strictly authorial. Working alongside a director, designer and two dramaturgs,

¹⁰² Dunton, Nelson & Shand, *New Writing in Theatre*

I knew this text rather well because I'd written it. But my understanding of it and my word on it was by no means final...I wrote new sections in the wake of their suggestions or my responses to rehearsal...sometimes I would be writing to their command. I loved this. It felt like being a writer on Tin Pan Alley or a Hollywood Studio.¹⁰³

In referencing the film industry in this way, Stephens highlights differences between the practices of screenwriting and playwriting, while at the same time suggesting that being prepared to work in new ways could be enjoyable and stimulating for the writer. In accepting that his word on the text 'was by no means final', he allows for a shared creative responsibility for the development of the piece, as well as recognising that its construction is an evolving process.

In considering development within the film industry, Ian Macdonald has coined the term 'the screen idea', describing it as 'a term which names what is being striven for, even while that goal cannot be seen or shared exactly.'¹⁰⁴ In the commissioning process in theatre, it is often just such a nebulous abstraction that is the originating impetus for a project, and means that whereas a yet-to-be-written play once resided possibly entirely within the mind of a writer, it is now frequently a concept that is passed around a creative team in a process that is comparable to the acting game where an invisible object is handed around a circle, its purpose only discernible through the quality of the mime employed by the actor who passes it. Macdonald argues for the necessity of the screen idea in order 'to re-conceptualize our understanding of what happens during the development of a film.'¹⁰⁵ It is a formal

¹⁰³ Stephens, S. (2012). *Three Kingdoms*. Interview by J. Bolton London: Methuen Drama Preface

¹⁰⁴ Macdonald, I. (2013). *Screenwriting Poetics and the Screen Idea*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan p4

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. p1

response to the dynamic nature of development, and a way of placing the product at the centre of the process, without an attribution of ownership, and in order to include a number of voices. The possibility of an equivalent and openly-acknowledged 'stage idea' does not yet exist with regard to commissioning in theatre, and where it occurs in practice, it is through successful collaboration rather than as a structural component of the process. This begins to suggest that there are ways in which the demands of directive commissioning might disrupt existing models and call into question or adapt the processes associated with them: a stage idea could be formulated and expressed in its early stages through commonly-occurring documents such as briefs, pitches, synopses, contracts etc., making it a concept emerging from a reframing of established practice, then developed as the commission progresses to script and production.

Reading the past

The traditional model of theatre-making is usually practiced as a two-stage process in which the writer delivers a play and the director stages it, at which point the whole machine of production comes into play to deliver the *mise-en-scène*. There is, nonetheless, an elasticity within the creative process as it is expressed by Gay McAuley as four distinct phases of the director's task:

1. Rehearsals
2. Transferring the work to the theatre

3. 'Upstream of this...a much longer period of more intermittent reflection, pondering the nature of the production to come, applying for funding and making decisions about casting and design.'
4. Final phase when the production is up and running.¹⁰⁶

It is worth noting that even in the slightly amorphous description of phase 3, the considerations are all to do with the nuts and bolts of the theatrical delivery of a text: in McAuley's model, the director's role does not extend back to the first, development phase of the script, but lays out – in clear stages – the scope of the director's task in relation to taking the play forward into its second phase. Where there is no separation between the context of writing and the context of production – as in the case of directive commissions - the two phases at the very least overlap, and may in fact even be regarded as a continuum in which the influence is reversed: the culture and constraints of production (or, more accurately, projected production) engender the play. This disrupts the chronology of the conventional relationship between writing and production, playtext and performance, and it also untethers the text from the fixedness of its first phase, resulting in an apparent temporal and contextual fluidity. Such fluidity may be regarded as creatively liberating, and the pursuit of it has resulted in a range of non-traditional, collaborative and devising processes. In cases of directive commissioning, re-consideration of the models by which the relationship between commissioned writing and production are understood, might deepen understanding of the effect of the processes involved.

¹⁰⁶ McAuley, G. (2012). *Not Magic but Work*. Manchester: Manchester University Press p187

In one form or another, the two-stage process has traditionally dominated mainstream theatre. When the materiality of the work of production as a whole is considered, it may be more accurate to describe this as an extended process: linear and sequential, but originating with the writer. In visualising this model, the layering of the process's concurrent stages and overlaps become evident.

In the traditional model, the script is passed from the writer to the director in order that it can be rehearsed. There may be some cuts and minor adjustments to the text, but there are usually no substantial changes to the rehearsal draft.

Fig. 1 – Traditional model:



In collaborative models of theatre making, early conversations are often shared, planning and the laying of some dramaturgical foundations may be undertaken, and the work is then taken forward in the rehearsal room. In this model, the 'stage idea' – the shared creative concept of the script - is developed collaboratively, primarily by the writer and director, with the process then opening up to include performers and other creative artists (e.g. musicians, designers, movement directors, lighting designers etc.). The progress of the work is likely to include a phase in which the text is developed or devised, often with a degree of collaboration, and one following

(though overlapping) where it is rehearsed. There may be variation in the extent and duration of overlaps between the three phases, but the writer and the director generally share a starting point.

Fig. 2 – Collaborative model:



In the directly-commissioned model, the commissioner (most often the director) originates the idea for the play, and brings a writer on board, often when significant and defining production decisions have already been made, creating constraints that the writer must work with.

Fig. 3 – Directive commission model:



The directly-commissioned model differs from the collaborative model in a number of ways. The play remains a solo-authored piece (or what is understood as

such); it is not devised, and the script is not regarded as a working text that might form the basis of developmental work through rehearsal. The practical tasks of production are not (in the Monstrous Regiment phrase) shared by all: assigned roles (eg of director, designer etc.) remain distinct. But the most significant difference between the directive model and the traditional and collaborative models is the fact that the writer is not part of the initial stages of the process.

Not reflecting, but projecting

In 2009, *Writ Large* reported that

[...] despite the generally accepted notion of the 'open brief' for writers under commission, some theatres are moving towards a model where playwrights' ideas might be examined in advance of writing. This...indicates a shift towards theatres being in the driving seat as to what gets written rather than simply responding to writers.¹⁰⁷

This finding acknowledges the crossing of an important line in the journey towards directive commissioning. To the extent that good practice has developed within literary management, the key notion of reflection has been universally accepted as – at the very least – a starting point when engaging with writers and their work. In their *Writers' and Artists' Companion*, Fraser Grace and Clare Bayley (both playwrights themselves) advise that dramaturgy is 'at its best [...] a process of making the play fitter and more itself, *through having it reflected back to you*'¹⁰⁸ (my

¹⁰⁷ British Theatre Consortium, *Writ Large*

¹⁰⁸ Grace, F. and C. Bayley, Clare, (2015). *Writers' and Artists' Companion*. London: Bloomsbury p235

emphasis). In the move towards directive commissioning, it has become more common for the starting point for play development to be *projection* rather than *reflection*; rather than reflecting the play back to the playwright, the process projects the intentions of the commissioning theatre or company onto the playwright's practice. 'The boom in literary managers and dramaturgs', writes Luckhurst, 'points towards a greater concern for product and for matching the 'right' product with the 'right' audience.'¹⁰⁹ I propose that practice has moved beyond a process of matching, and into a phase where the commissioning of many plays has become made-to-measure.

Jacqui Honess-Martin, outlining the commissioning process at the West Yorkshire Playhouse in 2018, describes it as 'bespoke' and places the impetus for new writing firmly in the hands of the theatre. 'We tend to think if there's a story we want to tell, what's the best way of telling that story?...Do we need to commission something new?...And then...who is the right writer to work on that?'¹¹⁰ She goes on to describe as standard a process in which the subject matter ('the story we want to tell'), the means of telling it ('what's the best way of telling that story?'), and the approach ('when we meet that writer, we bring an agenda to the meeting') are determined by the theatre. She places emphasis on the importance of hiring 'the right writer' 'who understand[s] the way that we work' and who will use 'the right language' for the theatre's audience. She is sometimes actively looking for writers of a particular age, gender, or ethnicity, or who have experience of the subject that is being written

¹⁰⁹ Luckhurst, *Dramaturgy: A Revolution in Theatre*

¹¹⁰ Honess-Martin, J. Interview with Bridget Foreman 21 May 2018

about. And at the end of that process ‘then you think, “whose voice am I excited by?”’. What Honess-Martin is describing here – from the perspective of the commissioner – is the almost entirely unacknowledged practice of directive commissioning.

Writing the future

At the point at which much of the existing research into new writing was conducted, what had started as innovation in the field of literary management had become standard practice, and the development industry seemed so established and accepted that it was almost unimaginable that – in mainstream subsidised theatre - the pendulum could swing back. The 2009 *Writ Large* report noted ‘a ubiquity of literary departments at all levels of theatrical activity’.¹¹¹ A decade on from that moment, the ground is shifting once again, opening up a space which directive commissioning is starting to occupy. As it does so, it prompts questions around its significance in relation to its origins. Where the financial constraints are such that there is no option not to take a directly-commissioned play into production, might the practice begin to address the imbalance between commissioning to production rates that characterised much new writing? Does directive commissioning have the potential to be more than a pragmatic and reflexive response to changing circumstances? How might a deeper understanding of the constraints within context and production affect the approach and practice of playwrights? The case studies

¹¹¹ British Theatre Consortium, *Writ Large*

that follow turn a critical lens onto directive commissioning, and consider its future as a new way of conceptualising the work of playwriting.

CHAPTER 2

Case study 1: *In Fog and Falling Snow* – the local space

Introduction

In this case study, I consider the role of institutions in the shaping and process of directive commissioning, and analyse the nature of emerging constraints within a project, arising from the dialogue between institutional partners. This chapter unpacks and explores the processes by which the initial – and emerging - constraints of this commission directed my practice as I undertook the work, and it also considers the material contexts that underpinned some of these constraints. All three of my case studies involve writing for particular communities, so some consideration of the notion of community is important, and I examine what community theatre means in this setting. An overview of the influence of geography, locality, spaces and the built environment deepens the understanding of the requirements of writing into a physical context. The staging of a piece of theatre in a museum setting raises questions around the relationship of fiction to history, and how comfortably both sit within a heritage frame. Finally, I reflect on how the dynamics of power and profile that come into play when institutions and artists collaborate affect the process of individuals, the nature of the project itself, and the practice of directive commissioning.

In the late summer of 2014, I was asked by Damian Cruden, the Artistic Director of York Theatre Royal, to co-write a large-scale community production centred around

the subject of the railways in York. The size of the project was such that it was to have two writers attached to it, and three directors.¹¹² My co-writer, Mike Kenny, and I knew each other very slightly but had not worked together previously. I had some experience of co-writing; he did not. The producers were York Theatre Royal and Pilot Theatre, working in partnership with the National Railway Museum in the city, where the play was to be staged the following summer. In considering the role of dramaturgy in relation to individual institutions, Katalin Trencsényi has identified its capacity for ‘shaping the organisation’s image and its role in the community’.¹¹³ My analysis of the commissioning process of *In Fog and Falling Snow* acknowledges and extends this by applying it to multiple organisations, each of which has aims and agendas that both combine and compete within the partnership. The question of how a directive commission is shaped by those agendas and the institutions they derive from is addressed through my examination of this commission.

Setting the stage

Starting points

From the outset, it was intended that *In Fog and Falling Snow* would be performed in the National Railway Museum, with a number of factors influencing this decision. Some were pragmatic: the closure of the Theatre Royal in 2015 for a major capital refurbishment created a situation in which the management was anxious to continue making work despite being unable to do so in the theatre’s regular spaces.

¹¹² Damian Cruden, Artistic Director of York Theatre Royal; Juliet Forster, Associate Director of York Theatre Royal; and Katie Posner, Associate Director of Pilot Theatre

¹¹³ Trencsényi, K. (2015). *Dramaturgy in the Making*. London: Bloomsbury p30

In developing an existing partnership with the National Railway Museum¹¹⁴, the collaboration answered needs on both sides, and offered opportunities for audience-building: each had a distinct constituency which could be reached and engaged by the other through the partnership. The museum was also keen to re-frame the public understanding and perception of its collection, bringing to the forefront the human and social dimensions of railway history, and to transform the way in which it engaged with the public.

A common factor across large-scale community productions in York has been the siting of performances outside traditional theatre venues. This is in part a practical solution to the technical challenges of staging shows with casts of around 200 people. But it is also an expression of the way in which the productions are rooted in both the life and the environment of the city. The medieval Mystery plays were staged on wagons in the streets¹¹⁵, and the majority of the productions of the *York Mystery Plays* in recent times have been performed in open air public spaces, or (in 2000 and 2016) in York Minster. The venue for the 2012 *Mysteries* was Museum Gardens, while the 2014 community production, *Blood and Chocolate*, was performed in promenade in the streets of the city centre.

¹¹⁴ In 2008 YTR staged *The Railway Children* in the NRM. This collaboration offered an opportunity to re-stage that production in 2015, and to create a further piece to stand alongside it.

¹¹⁵ A tradition maintained by the York Waggon Plays, which are staged annually and are entirely amateur. They are a separate event to the large-scale 4-yearly cycle of York Mystery Plays.

Community

The origins of the term 'community theatre' lie in the flowering of alternative theatre practice of the 1960s and 1970s. The term implies an approach that both reaches out and seeks to enclose; that speaks the language of inclusion and participation. While there are numerous models of community theatre, in the UK the term usually indicates a piece of work that is made either for or with a 'community', a broad definition that raises as many questions as it apparently answers. Such is the complexity surrounding the term 'community' itself, that there is a reluctance among some sociologists to attempt meaningful discussion around it. Eric Hobsbawm complains of it being used 'indiscriminately and emptily'¹¹⁶, while Peter Wagner cautions that 'community has a transcendent nature and cannot simply be equated with particular groups or a place.'¹¹⁷ More fundamentally, the concept of community seems to grow from the individual's search for belonging; it is a compelling idea, an imaginative construct that straddles notions of time. It evokes nostalgic images of earlier, simpler ages, where people were less mobile and more neighbourly. It is rooted in what feels like an irretrievable past, but the yearning for it, and attempts to recreate or rediscover it are present endeavours. Both conceptual and constructed, its clearest temporal location is some time in the future - a utopian ideal that shapes itself while it is yet to be achieved. According to Delanty, it is 'expressed in an active search to achieve belonging'.¹¹⁸ Whatever the qualifying terms, communities are – by definition – communities of inclusion:

¹¹⁶ Hobsbawm, E. (1994). *The Age of Extremes*. London: Michael Joseph p428

¹¹⁷ Quoted in Delanty, G. (2003). *Community*. Oxford: Routledge pxii

¹¹⁸ Ibid. p153

geographical communities, communities of location, communities of dissent or resistance, communities of interest, of identity, of circumstance all capture 'elements of inclusion and exclusion, pointing towards those who belong together, and those who are held apart.'¹¹⁹

Cultural institutions use community as a touchstone; as a way of underpinning what they offer and who they offer it to. They frequently depend upon the support of their constituency, and work hard to enable audiences to feel a sense of connection and ownership. Much cultural activity – particularly at a time where public funding is tethered to evidence of inclusivity - aims to improve access and participation, increasing levels of inclusion and pushing or crossing boundaries in order to do so. One result is that community arts projects often create what Zygmunt Bauman has described as 'aesthetic communities' which 'conjure up the "experience of community" without real community, the joy of belonging without the discomfort of being bound.'¹²⁰ Bauman's identification of the aesthetic community is an important one when considering the various communities that might be participants in community theatre. In his framing, 'sometimes an aesthetic community may be formed around a one-off recurring festive event', forming 'transient...friable and short-lived'¹²¹ bonds between participants. What this indicates is that there are situations – the making of community theatre being one such – where entire communities may construct, co-exist and coalesce, even on a temporary basis.

¹¹⁹ Day, G. (2006). *Community and Everyday Life*. Abingdon: Routledge p2

¹²⁰ Bauman, Z. (2001). *Community – Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*. Cambridge: Polity Press p69

¹²¹ Ibid. pp70-71

Community theatre

In relation to community theatre, Steve Gooch supports Bauman's understanding of community as a process rather than a state, observing that community theatre

is not a description of a particular kind of product or show, nor implies any particular aesthetic model, but refers rather to the process behind the work, to the relationship of a company's work as a whole to its community and to relations of production within the company itself.¹²²

This understanding of community theatre as being defined by its relationships and working processes rather than its product is key to the analytical approach of this chapter, and to the influence of process upon the shaping of work by and with playwrights. Lois Weaver describes community as 'like a coalition. It's a group of people who come together for a particular period of time to do a thing and then that's it... It doesn't last forever – that's the key.'¹²³ This opens up the possibility that while a project such as *In Fog and Falling Snow* both draws on and draws together discrete pre-existing communities, it also creates a new aesthetic community, formed through engagement with the project. Ann Jellicoe, one of the earliest community theatre practitioners, has observed that 'this opportunity for friendly co-operation over a long period stimulates and helps to unite a community.'¹²⁴ Taking the two together might suggest that engagement with community theatre can result in the creation and renewal of community. Directive commissioning is a means by

¹²² Gooch, S. (1984). *All Together Now – An Alternative View of Theatre and the Community*. London: Methuen p75

¹²³ Interview in McAviney, C. (ed). (2014). *Performance and Community – Commentary and Case Studies*. London: Bloomsbury p30

¹²⁴ Jellicoe, A. (1987). *Community Plays: How to Put Them On*. London: Methuen p46

which institutions can both invest in and demonstrate a commitment to the value of community and their relationship to it.

Beyond the Mystery Plays

In York, a tradition of community theatre goes back to the Middle Ages, with the historical *York Mystery Plays*, performed in the city from the mid-14th century until their suppression in 1569, and approximately every four years since their revival in 1951. The purpose of the medieval plays was both didactic and spiritual: they sought to educate and inform, to nurture intellectual understanding, but also to effect inner transformation. A modern interpretation might be that of bringing meaning to the life of the individual and enriching the life of the community as a whole. In 2011 York Theatre Royal and Riding Lights Theatre Company (based in the city) collaborated on a community production of Anthony Minghella's *Two Planks and a Passion*, then on a spectacular large-scale co-production of the *York Mystery Plays* in 2012. It was clear that there was an appetite for further productions that drew on large-scale community casts and professional theatre production, so *Blood and Chocolate* was commissioned in 2013¹²⁵, followed by *In Fog and Falling Snow* in 2015, and *Everything is Possible* (case study 3) in 2017.

One result of this tradition of community theatre in York is that deep in the DNA of the city, there is an understanding of a certain type of performance as being publicly owned and practised. In the case of *In Fog and Falling Snow*, the community it engaged with was primarily geographic. However, in addition to the location of the

¹²⁵ Written by Mike Kenny and produced by York Theatre Royal, Pilot Theatre and Slung Low.

production, in York, there were communities of interest intersecting with this geographic articulation, and with strong connections to the institutions involved. The subject matter - of the city's relationship with the railways – connected with former and current employees within the industry. The performance venue – the National Railway Museum – brought its own constituency of prospective participants in employees and enthusiasts. The city's history of large-scale community performance facilitated by York Theatre Royal has created a core of participants for whom taking part in these projects has become a major and much-enjoyed commitment, forming and re-forming an aesthetic community with each production. The edges of this community are elastic and expand to include and engage people who may have little commitment to theatre but are interested in or associated with particular subject matters. The community company of over 1000 local participants for the *2012 York Mystery Plays* included many members of local churches and faith groups. The participants of *Blood and Chocolate* included people who had been employed in the chocolate industry. Members of both these expanded communities went on to participate in *In Fog and Falling Snow*, which, as described above, brought its own community. As Ann Jellicoe observes, 'Communities need community events to continually refresh them...Community plays...are one of the most successful and all-embracing community events.'¹²⁶ Each of these projects has re-configured the aesthetic community, with members creating a new dynamic through the act of engaging with theatre.

¹²⁶ Jellicoe, A. *Community Theatre* p47

Initial constraints

The specific context of the partnership between the three co-producing institutions delivered the most striking element of the commission: that the hard constraint of the setting and the staging of the piece was decided before the writers were engaged. The first half of the play was to sit within the museum, placed in and around the collection. For the second half, the audience would enter a large tent on the museum site, in which a 1000-seat theatre space would be constructed, in traverse, on either side of a working train track. For the audience, each of these settings brought their own character, and raised hugely differing expectations of what might be experienced within them. The physical space of the museum was vast, busy, acoustically difficult, and lit by daylight (which it was impossible to black out). It was largely filled with a collection of locomotives and carriages from over 180 years of railway history. There were information boards, play areas, cafes, signage; a visual cacophony that was anathema to the focused eye of traditional theatre spaces. In total contrast, within the theatre tent, a conventional performance space was to be constructed, with lighting, sound, masking, a more favourable acoustic, and a design for the play that was not competing with a distracting landscape, and which was – unlike the museum space – intended to be as fully theatrical as possible. The hardest constraint of the commission was the site itself, which defined the physical and dramaturgical structure of the piece: rather than finding a setting for the play, the play had to be formed around the settings it was to inhabit, meaning that the given starting point for the piece resulting from the commission was structural rather than notional: the space rather than the idea.

This hard constraint gave rise, in turn, to others. Appreciation of the contrast between the two settings motivated the suggestion from the directors that the two halves of the play should be separately authored. It was envisaged that the first half of the piece, staged amidst the museum's collection, would comprise a series of stand-alone scenes that might provide social context for the main narrative, which would be performed in the theatre tent in the second half. This proposal, that defined both what the play might look like in structural terms, and the writers' processes in delivering it, was a major part of the earliest conversations within the commission.

As will be seen from this account of the immediate context of the proposed production, the writers were working with non-negotiable starting constraints of scale, subject, structure and location, making up the major building blocks of the directive commission. The cast of the show would include one or two professional actors in lead roles, with a community cast of around 200. Although there was an audition and workshop process, there was a guiding principle that no-one who wanted to participate would be turned away, so the play needed to deliver performance opportunities for approximately 200 people of all ages and abilities.

While *Two Planks and a Passion* and the 2012 production of the *Mysteries* had been productions of existing texts, *Blood and Chocolate* had introduced the model of commissioning a new play based on the unwritten or little-known history of the city. For this production, the subject matter was – in broad terms – to be mined from the history of the railways in York. The performance location, the National Railway Museum, was also the major archival research resource for the subject matter. More

nebulously, the production also had to sit within a tradition of community performance that, while often using history as a starting point, was at the same time an expression of the life and people of the contemporary city. These areas of hard constraint defined what the piece was to be and comprised the prescriptive elements of the commission.

The soft constraints were more open to discussion, but – from a writer’s perspective – were possibly more distracting. The original proposal from the three directors commissioning the piece was that the play could take the form of a version of *A Night at the Museum*¹²⁷, where a group of children would get locked into the National Railway Museum at night, encounter people from down the ages in the first half, and that the threads would be drawn together into a play in the second half. The suggestion was that the writers take one half each. However, it became clear very quickly through discussion with Mike that there was a desire – from our perspective – to work much more collaboratively, for both writers to write across the entire piece, and for the whole thing to hold together dramatically as a single play with dramatic unity, rather than a heightened museum experience in the first half and a play in the second.

Challenging the commission

This moment of the process reveals that there are areas within a directive commission that can open up as negotiable. In deciding to write collaboratively, and by proposing a coherent, integrated narrative across both locations, we were

¹²⁷ 2006 20th Century Fox family comedy adventure movie, directed by Shawn Levy

pushing back against the directors' suggested approach. In this instance, both writers were experienced, and had worked with the directors previously, factors which probably strengthened our position. A further result of challenging this aspect of the commission was that we also increased the difficulty of the task we faced. Whatever proposition the play made in its first half, had to be resolved in its second – where the performance context was unrecognisably different. Our aim was now to write a play in which the story had to grow out of the collection of the museum, then be removed from it, placed in a theatre space, and somehow – ultimately - replaced back into the museum (in the audience's mind) in a way that re-defined their understanding of that museum. This pushing together of the two environments of theatre and museum was the material expression of the collision of two approaches to story-telling, and as Mike and I spent time in the museum, exploring its collection and archives, and talking with curators, we realised that we were going to have to adjust our practice and adapt our instincts as theatrical storytellers if we were going to construct a piece of theatre – drawn from history - that could sit with integrity within a museum setting. We had to discover a way to hold these two worlds together in one piece; to find the means by which we could create a play which would operate successfully on both these stages.

Background and context

Playing with the past

From the earliest discussions surrounding the project, there was an understanding that in bringing together the worlds of theatre and museum, we were opening up a discourse between two differing languages. While there was initial enthusiastic engagement on both sides, it soon became clear that there were also tensions and challenges, many of which were expected to be resolved or addressed by the script. In an early press interview, Cruden had stated that ‘one of the things we're hoping to achieve is for the community to look at the NRM in a different light and to look in a different way at how it works.’¹²⁸ Here, he yokes together ‘the community’ and the museum, placing the theatre as the interface between the two. The project is to work as a means of reframing the terms on which the community engages with the museum, giving the play a clearly instrumental aim that informs the commission: it will not only sit within the museum space, but must work to transform the way it is viewed. Within the journey of the commission, it’s significant that this early ambition for the project doesn’t acknowledge that theatres and museums tend to tell different stories in very different ways, a factor that would come increasingly into focus as the writing progressed. Anna Farthing suggests a common means and a common end: ‘Museum curators and historical dramatists both work in the field of interpretive arts. Both create narratives from evidence in order to communicate

¹²⁸ Cruden, D. *Interview*, Yorkshire Evening Press, 23 January 2015

with the public.’¹²⁹ But the apparent similarities indicated here belie fundamental differences, the nuance of which are much more delicate than any supposed binaries of ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ or ‘truth’ and ‘lies’. Is it the case, as Paul Johnson suggests, that ‘museum theatre can have the authenticity of history, but that may well clash with the authenticity of fiction’?¹³⁰ Johnson proposes that differing authenticities may be unreconcilable, while Della Pollock suggests that the drawing together of apparently opposing ways of understanding may actually be the mechanism by which history can be constructed: ‘Is there a space between fact and fiction from which to make history?’¹³¹ This image of a space of intellectual and imaginative openness within which narrative can grow is echoed by Rebecca Schneider: ‘it is as if [theatre and history] are coming to the question of “what happened?” from opposite corners of the earth to meet in the vexed and overlapping middle’¹³², though her acknowledgement that this middle ground is ‘vexed’ points to myriad questions of origin and destination: where does history reside? In facts and artefacts? In our perceptions, our perspective, our feelings? These questions sat within a larger endeavour, described by Cruden as that of ‘looking at how narrative is explored in a museum and how it's explored in a theatre, and there's lots for each of us to learn.’¹³³ Though practical constraints dominated the early stages of the commission, this relationship between museum and theatre came to frame the research and thinking that Mike and I undertook.

¹²⁹ Jackson, A. and J. Kidd (eds). (2011). *Performing Heritage - Research, Practice and Innovation in Museum Theatre and Live Interpretation*. Manchester: Manchester University Press p.104

¹³⁰ Ibid. p59

¹³¹ Pollock, D. (1998). *Exceptional Spaces: Essays in Performance and History*. Chapel Hill: UNC Press Books Introduction

¹³² Schneider, R. (2014). *Theatre and History*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan p69-70

¹³³ Cruden, D. *Interview*, Yorkshire Evening Press, 23 January 2015

One of the challenges of creating a play for performance in a museum setting was avoiding any similarity to what Jackson and Kidd identify as a genre of performance loosely termed 'museum theatre', covering a variety of expressive forms and sharing a tendency towards generalisation and illustration, as well as a likelihood that such performances are add-ons to the museum visitor experience rather than situated at the heart of it. Common to all variants on museum theatre is the fact that visitors to museums do not (generally) arrive with the intention or expectation of viewing theatre. They may, unexpectedly, encounter performance within the museum; they may be asked to transform themselves instantly from museum visitor to theatre audience member, and they may choose whether or not to effect that transformation, but primarily they are visitors to a museum. If they encounter performance, a delicate re-negotiation of the 'contract' between spectator and space has to be undertaken simultaneously with the performance itself. In theatre, the terms of this contract are established at the box office. On this level, *In Fog and Falling Snow* would not challenge the expectations of the audience, in that they would already have entered into the contract by purchasing a ticket for a play: they were not museum visitors who had had a piece of theatre sprung upon them. However, nor were they entering a neutral theatre space where the world of the play was constructed within a defined playing area, demarcated from an auditorium. While they were not encountering unexpected theatre in a museum space, they were being asked to engage with a theatre performance in a surprising location, where there was a risk that 'the mode of spectatorship required...is invariably

infused with the spectacle of the museum itself.¹³⁴ In order to avoid a passive retreat into the past, the play needed to animate the dynamic relationship between the community's past and its present. At a time when the impact of economic collapse on ordinary people was being felt, when almost inconceivable levels of financial mismanagement and corruption resulted from corporate and individual greed, and when the debate surrounding the proposed HS2 (high speed railway) construction was replaying the arguments around the creation of the railway network in the 1840s (such as public opposition to a line being laid through Stone Henge!), *In Fog and Falling Snow* had the potential to draw the past into the present.

The placing of the audience within the historical story also had a physical expression, as – in the first half of the show - they moved from place to place, continually reconfiguring their relationship with the settings and finding their place in the story and in the space. Jenny Kidd describes the effect of removing performance from the restricting context of fixed seating and sets: 'each scene can create its own space, either contracting to a central or remote area or expanding to fill all available space. The action 'breathes' and the audience itself becomes a major scenic element.'¹³⁵ In spite of the many challenges of the setting of the first half of the show, it also provided an opportunity to immerse the audience in the materiality of the piece.

¹³⁴ Helen Rees Leahy in Jackson, A. and J. Kidd (eds). (2011). *Performing Heritage - Research, Practice and Innovation in Museum Theatre and Live Interpretation*. Manchester: Manchester University Press p33

¹³⁵Jenny Kidd in Jackson and Kidd, *Performing Heritage* p208, quoting Richard Schechner 1994:xxix

Process and practice

Impact on practice

In the same way that the audience itself becomes a kind of setting, the curation of artefacts within a museum's collection provides a narrative. Sometimes the nature of the story being articulated is as much an artefact as the items within the collection, and the work of a curator may be to preserve, deepen or expand that narrative. Phil Smith draws attention to the importance of the surreal in museum and heritage sites; the way that objects and artefacts which would never in reality have been placed side by side construct their own surreal narrative. Such juxtaposition is 'vital to the production of the museum...show[ing] relationships that cannot otherwise be seen.'¹³⁶ As we researched and wrote the play, we recognised the potential for disrupting the established relationship between spectator and display, and for exploring the surreal in dramatic terms: setting an apparently naturalistic family scene within the hollowed-out belly of a locomotive became an image of the way in which the industry absorbed the lives of working people, while a genteel soiree of female investors balanced precariously on the coal heap of a speeding train, apparently unaware of the danger of their situation. The effect of this layering was to create a flow of meaning between the physical context of the environment, the accumulated meaning of the artefacts, the action of the play, and the relationship of the community performers to the setting as well as to audience members, who were an expansion of that community. As writers, the means by

¹³⁶Jackson and Kidd, *Performing Heritage* p166, quoting Kishenblatt-Giblett 1998:3

which we came to understand the potential of this flow of meaning was through interaction with the environment of the museum, and the many hours we spent within it. The NRM's archive and library is set within the museum, and for much of the writing period, Mike and I chose to write together there rather than separately in our homes. This was a definite departure - unique to this project - for both of us, but the change in our practice facilitated our collaboration in practical terms, and enabled proximity to the locations we were writing into. It also resulted in a situation where we had a deep understanding of the site and the spaces within it, and had spent many more hours in them than the directors had. At a factually objective level, the show would never have been made without the existence of that site and the questions that arose from it. At an intuitive level, what we discovered was the way in which extended interaction with a site during a commission can thicken and enrich the relationship between site, text and performance.

Whose story?

Accepting that there were influences that were not purely artistic or even aesthetic acting upon the decision to stage *In Fog and Falling Snow* at the NRM, the commission presented a stimulating range of challenges and opportunities. It demanded that the play grow not only out of the history of the railways, but also out of the collection. The performance areas were vast spaces, with very large objects inhabiting them. The collection did not act as a backdrop to dramatic action; it was an active and attention-grabbing participant, dwarfing anything one might place against it. It rendered it impossible (in the first half of the play) to separate what we were seeing from where we were seeing it – so the placing of scenes had to be

considered very carefully. Where something was presented may have - through contrast or counterpoint – spoken more loudly than the scene itself. In writing very specifically into the space, this became one of the demands of the scripting rather than the staging. Moreover, while the museum curators were keen that the play should enable people to view and experience the collection differently, the museum had interests and legitimate concerns and priorities, such as the importance of remaining a family-friendly attraction. So as writers we had to resist the temptation to excavate too deeply the underbelly of the museum’s stories or to fundamentally challenge the narrative of what might be regarded as a simplistic celebration of the railways.

At the same time, there was an expectation on the part of the Theatre Royal and Pilot Theatre that we would deliver a piece with theatrical ambition, and storytelling on an epic and dramatic scale. Damian Cruden, as one of the directors, was interested in the darker histories inexplicably bound up with the rail narrative, such as the use of trains as a means of transporting millions to their deaths during the holocaust, or the ongoing legacy of asbestosis in York. These stories are not told within the museum, and they were never going to be acceptable to the museum as subject matter for the play. However, their absence within the museum narrative pointed us to other absences, and to an appreciation of the power of absence: that there can be compelling stories told by the gaps in a museum’s collection, of what has been obscured, denied or written out of history as it is being presented.

This realisation led us to the story of George Hudson, who is precisely one of those absences. Hudson was an entrepreneur and giant of railway history who is virtually

unmentioned and unrepresented within the collection. The possible explanations for this absence became the impetus for telling the story. The controversy surrounding Hudson centres primarily on his role in the infamous Railway Bubble of the 1840s, a devastating national economic collapse that wiped out half of the UK's GDP. Hudson was made a scapegoat – and an easy target as someone who came from the wrong side of the tracks before the tracks were even laid – for mismanagement and corruption throughout the industry and the business world of the day. Although his disgrace offers one obvious explanation for the way in which he has been airbrushed out of history, his legacy is undeniable: the railway network that still exists today is very largely his. The prosperity of railway cities – and York in particular - grew out of his vision and industry. He has been described – for better or worse – as the first capitalist.

The museum curators were keen for his story to be told. They have almost nothing within the collection relating to Hudson: he died bankrupt and virtually penniless, having been, at one stage, one of the wealthiest men in the country. His possessions were sold to pay his vast debts, so there are no personal items remaining. His portraits were taken down from public buildings, and his name was removed from the street named after him. His is a story of boom and bust, of rags and riches. There is vision, greed, deception, despair; it is both dramatic and intensely human. For the museum, it took the spotlight off the mechanics of locomotives and placed it on the social and industrial impact of the railways. It demonstrated the enormous scale of that impact on the nation – then and now. It had the potential to redefine the museum as a critical medium for understanding our national identity and prosperity,

rather than a shed with a few engines which might interest train-spotters.

For the Theatre Royal, there was clearly a local interest story at play – and plenty of scope, with a narrative of this size – to accommodate a community cast of upwards of 200 actors. But for them, the production needed to have its eye on the present; to make connections that would challenge the audience to consider issues in today's world. And ultimately, the piece had to be attractive to audiences. The mechanics and repercussions of a huge Ponzi scheme might make a compelling small-scale show for an interested adult audience, but it would not deliver what the Theatre Royal needed. An early concern of the directors was that the story had to wear a human face, and it had to be accessible to a broad audience. From Pilot Theatre's perspective, that audience had to include young people, who make up the company's audience, and representation of those young people as characters with agency within the play was also essential. In terms of the commission, and what the writers were being asked to deliver, these demands represented the sharp end of the collaboration between three institutions with distinct and often diverging ambitions for the project.

Impact on process

In a directive commission, where the subject is not of the writer's choosing, that writer has to discover her place and her voice within it in order to build a relationship to the material. In a situation where two writers are put together and are being asked to write on a subject that has been given to them, discovering a shared voice is an additional challenge. Two writers approaching the same subject

matter would almost certainly find markedly different ways into it and would write to different themes. In the case of *In Fog and Falling Snow*, even once we had decided that the play should be built around the story of Hudson, Mike and I also had to discover a focus for our shared understanding and perspective on the story.

In the event, as we considered the story of Hudson, discovering a mutual perspective proved easier to negotiate than the practical challenges of allowing the story to emerge strongly from a physically and narratively fragmented first half. The desire on the part of the writers to deliver a coherent and cohesive theatrical experience from the start of the play threw up a plethora of difficulties. It was a given that an audience of 600 would move through a number of locations within the museum in the first half, broken down into groups of 60. A carousel structure to this promenade meant that six scenes had to be viewable in any order, and that they could not feature any of the same actors or characters. Additionally, the five journeys between the scenes and the scenes themselves had to be timed exactly to ensure that everyone moved on at the same moment. The logistical issues became – very quickly – the defining drivers of the first half, and the list of constraints under which the play was to be written was both changing and growing.

At the point at which the writers presented a detailed treatment for the play, the instruction came from the directors to start the writing with the second half. This went against the usual writing practices of both writers, but reflected an ongoing conviction on the part of the directors that the dramatic weight of the piece would be carried by the second half, while the first half would comprise a more flexible smorgasbord of scenes. The other clear requirement from the directors was that a

small scene which was proposed for the first half should be expanded into a second strand for the entire play, intertwined with Hudson's story. The subject matter for this strand was entirely fictional, though placed within an historically accurate context. It also featured a contentious issue for the curators of the museum: the highly unlikely scenario in which an adolescent girl might work on the footplate of an engine in the 1840s. This storyline epitomised the differing perspectives at play in the project: the museum's curators did not dismiss the storyline out of hand, but they contested that there were a number of barriers to this situation. The directors saw it as surprising, human, a good contrast to the Hudson story, and likely to appeal to young people. The writers were then faced with the challenge of how to re-balance the play to allow for a major new element, as well as how to deliver this new storyline in a manner that was both dramatically effective and historically feasible. Finding a meeting point was essential to developing the narrative of the play. A critical moment that helped us to establish a principle for engaging ethically with potential conflicts such as this one occurred when one of the curators suggested that the question in the minds of both theatre makers and museum professionals should not be 'did it happen?', but '*could* it happen?' This simple key opened a way through potential deadlocks, as well as a means defusing possible tensions arising from them. As Rebecca Schneider concludes:

If the historian's aim is to untangle the forgetting from the remembering, or to distinguish the fake from the real to get at a true story, and the theatre's...aim is to confuse the borders again to truly tell a story, the best way to do **either** might be to acknowledge the ways in which the theatrical and historical are at moments, profoundly and fundamentally co-constitutive.¹³⁷

¹³⁷ Schneider, *Theatre and History* p77

The understanding of history being composed as much of gaps as it is of record, and that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, came to underpin our thinking as we moved forward with the project. We were learning that just as we were framing a performance to inhabit the physical spaces of the museum, we were creating story that stepped into the spaces in the historical evidence. What distinguished this in practice from the process undertaken with the writing of any history play was the context in which it was to be performed: we were answerable not only to our inner editors, or sense of responsibility towards handling historical source material with integrity, but to the curators of the museum, and the authority of the space itself.

Impact on the script

As a result of following the directive to focus on the second half first, and the constantly changing demands being placed upon the first half, when the first draft was submitted, there was a partial first half and a complete second half. But the approach taken – of starting the writing with the second half – meant that the crucial parameters and objectives of the play as a whole had not been tested, examined or defined, and as a result the issue of the institutional differences between museum ‘story’ and theatre ‘story’ came firmly back into the frame. The directors decided that the character of George Stephenson (well represented within the museum and regarded as ‘the father of the railways’) would act as a good foil to Hudson. Historically, the two men ground no axes, but the instruction was to set each of them up as representatives of two different perspectives on history, story, and the ways in which we choose to engage with both. Stephenson is – in this

proposition – the ‘clean’ story: he represents a kind of ideology, a hero of engineering, a vision we continue to celebrate today. Hudson, on the other hand, is all muck and brass; he stands for the unpalatable version of events – the seamier side of history – the part we would rather ignore, forget or bury. Stephenson died fairly early in Hudson’s career, but the directors wanted both men to be present throughout the entire piece, standing outside it as well as within it – out of time – and placing the debate clearly before the audience. Stephenson (in Cruden’s words) ‘represents the curators’, telling the story the public wants to hear. The implication, perhaps, was that it takes the courageous insistence of theatre to place Hudson firmly back at the heart of the narrative. Cruden’s conviction about this seems to suggest that he wanted the play to offer a critique of the museums sector’s position in relation to the telling of history:

The question is what story do we want to hear in our museum? Warts and all or the clean cut railwayman's story of endeavour and a new world order? If we want Hudson's story then we want our history to be rich and complex able to instruct/warn us of those traits in ourselves that we often avoid recognising, surely the point of history is to learn from it and museums have a responsibility to give us the right material and story tellers to tell the right stories.¹³⁸

It appears from this that he intended that the stresses of the internal institutional dialogue should be pulled into the text of the play, presenting the audience with a discussion about the responsibilities of museums in engaging ethically with the past, and proposing that storytellers maintain moral authority by telling the ‘right’ stories. But while, for Cruden, the setting of the play within the museum offered an ideal platform for this debate, it also restricted the extent to which such issues could be

¹³⁸ Cruden, D. *e-mail to Bridget Foreman*. 4th February 2015

robustly engaged with. Juliet Forster observes that ‘when the context is so hugely influencing on what the play’s really about – its nature is being so prescribed by that – then the message gets watered down’, concluding that ‘the context and the setting of sites, and the history that might be associated with them, can be really limiting.’¹³⁹

As the script moved towards a second draft, there was also pressure from the directors to make adjustments to the fictional strand of the play. Different members of the core creative team of writers and directors had their own reasons for wanting to direct the story one way or another, and there was disagreement between the directors, resulting in conflicting and confusing script conferences. In theory, the three directors carried equal weight within the project. In practice, Cruden assumed the role of lead director, but since this was unacknowledged, the lack of any clear lines of authority resulted in clumsy communication and confused decision-making. He was keen to alter the essential cause of the train crash so that it played into the understanding of safeguards which the railway manuals demand ‘in fog or falling snow’. (It is worth noting at this point that the title had been changed by Cruden from the original title of *Steam* to *In Fog and Falling Snow*: a mis-remembering – much to the annoyance of the NRM curators - of the actual term, ‘in fog **or** falling snow’, which appears throughout railway manuals from the steam age.) In attempting to make the causes and circumstances of the crash (which was the central event of the play) support this new title, Cruden was suggesting a total unraveling of the second story strand. He also proposed killing off the young girl who

¹³⁹ Juliet Forster, interview with Bridget Foreman, 30th June 2016

was the emotional heart of the piece, a suggestion vehemently (and successfully) opposed by the writers.

Underpinning the majority of these conflicts around the narrative of the play was the fact that – in addition to the confused dynamic between the three directors - there were no clear terms for the role of the writers within the commission, or the extent or limitations of their artistic control. While the project had started with some well-defined constraints that made the commission directive, the draft-to-draft (and within draft) handling of the commission resulted in the writers being increasingly issued with instructions. For the writers (or ‘word bitches’, as Mike named us in a moment of frustration) it was a struggle to make the script both fit and serve issues and constraints that were developing or emerging on a weekly basis. The re-writing process was – in scripting terms – more akin to fire-fighting than making carefully considered changes, and we were too tasked by it to realise at the time that what we were wrestling with on a broader level was the essential question of authorship, and of what the expectations, requirements and terms of this type of commissioning actually are. When the title was changed by Damian Cruden to one that appealed to him at a poetic level, the mechanics of the plot had to be adjusted so that the script made some sense of it; the play’s action was being materially altered in order to serve – and to justify - the new title. The directors’ decision to insert Stephenson as a character was an attempt to turn an implied debate about the nature of how history is related into an explicit one, and space had to be opened up within the structure and the scenes of the play to accommodate him. The insistence that the second half of the play be written before the first resulted in a first half that was deeply

compromised by the writers' inability to work according to their established process and practice. Although the choice of story and the development of plot and subplots had come largely from the writers, the decisions about the direction that individual storylines took, and even the way in which the writers were being asked to work were being taken by the commissioners. In dramaturgical terms, the task for the writers was to regard the text as a framework within which there was space for expansion, contraction, and insertion. While this required us to be flexible and nimble (on two occasions, in the midst of rehearsals, we were sent into a side-room for half an hour to re-write and deliver new versions of scenes), it also necessitated a level of dramaturgical rigour and lack of bias that enabled us to advocate for the script when the tumultuous nature of the process threatened to overwhelm it.

Pressures at work

These tensions and demands were the result of both internal and external pressures. In the absence of dedicated dramaturgical support, the facilitation of the commission fell into the hands of the directors. Where the role of a dramaturg or literary manager would be to develop the play and support the writer(s), the field of responsibility for the directors was much wider. All three directors were focused on the delivery of a complex piece of performance and were constantly seeking to solve the problems of the production through manipulation of the text. Juliet Forster points to the compromised position in which directors can find themselves:

You're always reading a script with two different heads on: from a director's point of view you're reading it in terms of what you want to put on stage, how you might do it...you're also reading it from an audience point of view:

what are the audience getting from it, what are they seeing in it, what's the space that's been left for them?¹⁴⁰

This is echoed by Katie Posner, who speaks of her preference for working with a dramaturg, because 'the director will try and make the show, and they'll push it in the way that they're thinking of it visually, and sometimes that's not always the best thing.'¹⁴¹ She goes on to reflect on her time working in York with Pilot Theatre, commenting that 'I don't think I've ever worked with a dramaturg here – that doesn't exist. No-one's got the money here.'¹⁴² This acknowledgement that there is an inherent conflict between the way a director and a dramaturg approach a text exposes the vulnerability of the process of directive commissioning in a regional and small-scale context. The absence of a structured approach to the handling of the commission was a key factor in the process of *In Fog and Falling Snow*, where the directors' notes on the script were often directed towards the solving of a directorial or technical problem rather than being focused on the dramaturgical development of the play. Additionally, in a situation where there's a risk that 'directors feel that they have to make their mark on the making of a new piece in some way'¹⁴³, their stake in the project is even higher if the idea for the piece has originated with them or their institution.

Jacqui Honess-Martin, speaking out of her experience of working with larger and better-funded organisations, points to the potential for success of directive commissioning: 'when it works really well, that model of commissioning to a theme,

¹⁴⁰ Juliet Forster, interview with Bridget Foreman, 30th June 2016

¹⁴¹ Katie Posner, interview with Bridget Foreman, 20th November 2017

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Juliet Forster, interview with Bridget Foreman, 30th June 2016

or to a title, or to whatever else, pushes people and gives people new challenges and is really wonderful'¹⁴⁴, but she goes on to highlight the pressure of working in this way when there is a lack of adequate time:

you get into those places of real tension and conflict and where the wheels have started to turn, the show's been announced and the writer is then in a place where they have to deliver what they're being told to deliver, and that's really difficult, particularly if the parameters of that project haven't been outlined clearly from the beginning.¹⁴⁵

The conditions under which *In Fog and Falling Snow* was commissioned conforms exactly to this description. Time and timing are critical components within the commissioning process: the fact that the script was being written in the immediate run-up to the production meant that both the material contexts of production and the writing of the play were in a dynamic state of flux, and tied to one another in interdependence whilst neither was anchored. Moreover, the production was not the final horizon for the directors. They were also – as co-producers - negotiating relationships between the companies they represented, as well as managing the evolving collaboration with the museum that was to continue long after *In Fog and Falling Snow* had closed.

It's important to acknowledge the impact of the complex relationships at the heart of the project, between cultural institutions with vastly differing functions. Both YTR and the NRM were under immense pressure to make the project successful: the National Railway Museum was taking risks on its reputation by hosting a huge event over which it did not have total editorial control. For the Theatre Royal, it was critical

¹⁴⁴ Jacqui Honess-Martin, interview with Bridget Foreman, 21st May 2018

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

that the production was a financial success. Both institutions were operating outside familiar working practices (and, in the case of the theatre, environments), and staff from both organisations were to a large extent making it up as they went along on a daily basis: on any given day, decisions such as what the museum would allow in terms of how individual pieces within the collection were used in performance, could have a material effect on the direction, on rehearsal, on staging, and on the script. For the institutions involved, collaboration represented a risk of loss of identity as much as an opportunity for recalibration. The immense scale of the project increased the pressure upon both individuals and institutions, and its success depended to a large degree on the ability of the script to deliver what both organisations required. As a result, the writers' role became almost entirely functional in service of the project – or the most powerful voices within it.

Conclusion

It could be argued that the commissioning process of *In Fog and Falling Snow* was so unusual that it can hardly be regarded as instructive. It was immensely complex, it was at times contradictory, situations arose through circumstance rather than design, it was hugely ambitious, it was particular to one city and to one location, it was – in many ways – born of necessity, and was in every sense so bespoke and unrepeatable that its lessons could not possibly be applicable in other contexts.

However, consideration of this case study addresses my research question at a number of levels. It reveals some of the reasons for the rise in directive commissioning, as well as how such commissions are managed. Collaboration between arts and cultural institutions is increasingly common; reductions in public funding and a growing requirement for arts organisations to raise participation levels and reach new audiences, means that partnerships and collaborative projects are an attractive way to maximise impact and to stretch further what subsidy there is. But between the visionary optimism of funding application narratives and the point at which an audience might encounter an interesting hybrid of artforms, a deeply challenging if also stimulating creative process will have been undertaken, with the greatest pressure being felt by those closest to the point of production.

This case-study also explores the impact of site on the structure of the work and the process of writing, highlighting the way in which site can lead and define major constraints within the commission. Site specific productions, hitherto regarded as largely the preserve of various forms of alternative performance, are becoming mainstream. There are a number of reasons that could account for this: the rise in festivals, where performance events are situated in such a way that a city or location is vivified and inhabited; new technologies that enable audiences to see and hear performances in unusual or inaccessible sites; the popularity of so-called 'immersive' theatre and the crossing of boundaries between audience and performer. All of these favour site-specific work, which is often well-served through directive commissioning, but which also represents a powerful force in the shaping of the commission.

By virtue of its scale, community theatre productions are a key indicator of the rise in directive commissioning in mainstream theatre. The financial challenges facing regional theatres drives an imperative to develop closer relationships with local audiences, both as participants and as audience members. York Theatre Royal has been at the forefront of understanding that community productions can play a key part in drawing people into the life of the theatre and giving them a genuine sense of belonging, but other theatres are following. In 2017 Slung Low produced *Flood*, a huge site-specific community production, as part of Hull's year as City of Culture. In 2018 the National Theatre's *Pericles*, featuring 200 community performers, brought community productions firmly into the mainstream, and in 2019 there are large scale community productions being staged by theatres including Derby Playhouse (*The Jungle Book*), Theatr Clwyd (*The Mold Riots*), Nottingham Playhouse (*Coram Boy*), and the Queen's Theatre, Hornchurch, which is collaborating on a community musical with the National Theatre. Being willing to work within the constraints of a directive commission is a skill that will be looked for increasingly in playwrights working in this area, who will also need to develop an understanding of the potential dramaturgical tensions within this type of commission. The same financial pressures that are encouraging theatres to scale up in terms of certain types of production are also necessitating a scaling down in other areas, and the rise in a culture of development and the acceptance of the role that dramaturgy and dramaturgs take in the commissioning of new work has created a situation where many theatres and theatre companies are following a development model without the resources to do so effectively. The result is that dramaturgy and script development is being undertaken by directors, as was the case with *In Fog and Falling Snow*.

In considering how the directive commission of *In Fog and Falling Snow* shaped the play and the writers' approach, there are a number of key conclusions to be drawn. The coming together of three institutions created a powerful but disparate and at times divided commissioning body, each of the institutions bringing a different perspective and agenda to the project, and each one prey to differing vulnerabilities within it. Apparently abstract concepts of history and theatre proved to be embodied in both institutions and people, and the strains this put on the collaborative aspect of the contextual underpinning of the project became as much a material force within the process of the commission as the site-specific demands, with a direct impact on the practice of the writers and on the work that was made. Individual voices carried different types of authority. As writers, our approach to constructing a theatrical narrative was constrained by our interactions with a context that interrogated it in historical terms. This was frequently in tension with directors whose theatrical ambitions for the piece were sometimes at odds with what the curators felt they could endorse. The results can be seen within the script: a supernatural dimension included in order to facilitate the presence of Stephenson where history does not, unnecessary plot twists that open up areas of possibility in order to allow for events where there is little historical likelihood of them happening, repeated areas of compromise or accommodation. Many of these are the result of conflicting feedback and notes from the three directors, and the unacknowledged and unresolved hierarchy between them, resulting in a need for the writers to de-code, evaluate and prioritise notes before responding to them. An unanticipated outcome of the commission was the way in which the competing identities and aims of the institutions involved fought for expression within the play

itself, and this conflict extended to the experience of the writers, pulled between the positions of the institutions. The management of the process of large-scale directive commissions is an area for consideration around models of best practice that clarify and codify roles and responsibilities for writers and directors, so that there is a buffer between the practical demands of the work and the dramaturgy and shaping of the work arising from the commission.

CHAPTER 3

Case Study 2: *Simeon's Watch* – the social space

Introduction

Through this case study, I consider the way in which anticipated audiences and the site in which they encounter the play can inform a directive commission. I examine the connection between a company's ideology and its audience, analysing the processes by which subject matter is selected and a commission is framed. Building upon my consideration of the influence of site upon *In Fog and Falling Snow*, this chapter addresses the way in which subject and approach intersect with site, creating specific contexts within which the work will sit, and how the writer engages with those conditions. It reflects upon the social space as it is manifested in rural locations and communities, and the influence, within the commission, of an audience that has a deep connection to the sites of performance. It considers how text can respond to terms of the commission in relation to lived and dramatic space in site-generic theatre, and examines the impact on the text of writing for performance in church and community settings. The subject of the increasing interest in dementia as a subject is addressed, with some examination of the complexities surrounding approaches to the subject in both everyday life and through artistic and therapeutic approaches. In conclusion, I reflect upon how the various needs of audiences – including funders and stakeholders – inform the process of a directive commission.

Simeon's Watch was commissioned by Riding Lights Theatre Company, and toured to church and community venues across the UK in autumn 2016. The origins of the commission lay in a project that the company was running with the aim of helping to restore relationships and improve communications between people with dementia and their families and carers. The initial approach had been to develop a methodology through practical drama-based workshops, but this expanded to include the commission and tour of a new play around the subject of dementia.

Setting the stage

The project

Initially, the project had been conceived as a series of workshops (and the subsequent writing of a play) through which the company hoped to explore, develop and eventually disseminate a theatre-based practice that might improve communication between people with dementia and their families and carers. Since I also have a background as a practitioner, the terms of the commission required that I participate in the workshops as a form of research that would serve the project as a whole as well as informing the writing of the script.

In the ethical minefield of dementia care, it has been widely accepted that people with dementia should not be deceived, nor permitted to persist in delusions,

because the truth is owed to them as much as to anyone who is not experiencing dementia.¹⁴⁶ Failing to challenge and correct – while acknowledging that this should be done kindly - has even been referred to as ‘collusion’¹⁴⁷, and can result in situations where people with dementia are challenged, corrected and informed that they are mistaken, increasing the dementia patient’s sense of confusion and disorientation. Psychologist Oliver James has brought the SPECAL method to public attention through his book on the subject, *Contented Dementia*.¹⁴⁸ The SPECAL method ‘treats dementia as a disability and works positively with it, rather than trying to ignore or defeat it’¹⁴⁹, and for followers of the method, which informed our approach, accepting and agreeing with whatever was said ‘was not a simple matter of crude deception...Rather it was a case of taking up clues’ given by the dementia patient.¹⁵⁰ Given that the perceptions of the person with dementia are rooted in actual memories, the SPECAL method ‘was not planting false memories or supporting delusions’, but ‘was nurturing the rich and immutable truth of the person’s actual past experiences’.¹⁵¹ Engaging with and exploring a theatrical expression of this approach was one of the key constraints of the commission.

The principle of accepting and building is familiar to any theatre practitioner who has participated in improvisation. In this context, Keith Johnstone writes extensively of the destructive power of blocking: ‘a block is anything that prevents the action from

¹⁴⁶ See <https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/about-us/policy-and-influencing/what-we-think/specialised-early-care-alzheimers-specal> for an overview of the Alzheimer’s Society’s objections to the ‘systematic deception’ of SPECAL.

¹⁴⁷ Hodgkinson, Vicky (Alzheimer’s Society) - *email* 4th October 2016

¹⁴⁸ James, O. (2009). *Contented Dementia*. London: Vermilion

¹⁴⁹ <http://www.contenteddementiastrust.org/what-is-the-specal-method/>

¹⁵⁰ James, *Contented Dementia* p 37

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.* p38

developing, or that wipes out your partner's premise.'¹⁵² What in the rehearsal room is a premise may be – when offered by a person with dementia – an expression of belief, a revelation of emotional state or a reflection of understanding. To make an offer at all may place that person in a position of vulnerability. For another person to accept the offer and develop the conversation opens the lines of communication, while to correct or counter may close them down. Johnstone notes that 'bad improvisers block action, often with a high degree of skill. Good improvisers develop action.'¹⁵³ The risks of blocking can extend beyond individual exchanges and affect the nature of the relationship between the two improvisers: 'Blocking is a form of aggression'.¹⁵⁴ In early discussions around the approach of the project, and the proposition that we intended it to explore, we considered that if that if blocking and even aggression is experienced by someone with dementia, there is potential for unintentional but profound damage to relationships. We also conjectured that accepting and building introduces an element of playfulness which could act as a powerful antidote to the conflict and stress that so often characterises interactions and relationships between people with dementia and their partners, families and carers. The premise of the project was that the skills and experience that we could bring as theatre practitioners would enable us to develop a simple, transferable approach which – at best – could significantly improve the quality of communication between people with dementia and their families, and – at the very least – would create opportunities for playful interaction, relieving the strain on relationships. The play that was being commissioned from me was viewed as a means of expanding on,

¹⁵² Johnstone, K. (1981). *Impro - Improvisation and the Theatre*. London: Methuen p97

¹⁵³ Ibid. p95

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. p93

exploring and disseminating the project's proposal, so the commission initially laid out an area for exploration rather than a list of constraints.

Dementia

The choice of subject and the impetus for the project was twofold. First, public awareness of the apparent rise in dementia was increasing. In the UK in 2019 there were 850,000 people living with dementia, while 24.6 million – 38% of the population – had a close relative or friend who had the condition. The cost of dementia to the UK is set to more than double, rising to £55 billion by 2040.¹⁵⁵ At the point when the plans for the project were being made, in 2014, it was evident that dementia presented a huge challenge to health and social care services as well as to individual families. While much scientific research was being undertaken, there was – and is – no cure and little that can ameliorate the symptoms and progress of the various forms of dementia, and a cultural space opened up, as writers and artists turned their attention to the subject. Over the last few years, novels have proliferated: *Still Alice* by Lisa Genova (2007, the film version in 2014, and the stage adaptation in 2018), *Elizabeth is Missing* by Emma Healey (2014), Matthew Thomas's *We Are Not Ourselves* (2014), and *The Wilderness* by Samantha Harvey (2009) are the best-known. Memoirs also hit the best-sellers list, including *Where Memories Go* by Sally Magnusson (2014) and *Keeper* (2010) by Andrea Gillies. In the theatre, plays examining dementia were being presented at the Royal Court (*Plaques and Tangles* by Nicola Wilson, 2015) and even in the West End (*The Father* by Florian Zeller

¹⁵⁵ <http://www.dementiastatistics.org>

transferred from The Ustinov Studio, to the Tricycle and finally to Wyndham's in 2015). Small scale companies were also tackling the subject, with productions such as Eastern Angles' *Once Upon a Lifetime*, which toured Suffolk care homes in 2014 and New Perspectives' *Finding Nana* (by Jane Upton) in 2017-18. Artists were discovering that dementia was a rich topic, yielding fruitful areas of exploration. In art forms that are concerned with structure, revelation and character, the disintegration of these components represented both a challenge and an opportunity to the maker, suggesting forms that replicated the processes of the disease. Considering the dramaturgical possibilities that the subject presented became part of the discussions around form for *Simeon's Watch*.

Many writers cited familial connections and a desire to create work in order to process their own feelings and to combat the helplessness they experienced in the face of the disease in a loved one, and this personal link was the second factor underpinning Riding Lights' decision to address the subject of dementia. The Artistic Director's father had been living with Alzheimer's for many years, and the experience of spending time with him had given Paul Burbridge (the AD) personal insight into the difficulties surrounding communication. I had also been made aware of this through conversations with a member of the Board of Riding Lights, a GP, who had suggested that improvising with people with dementia might be an interesting and fruitful area to explore. In picking up the subject, the company was also building on previous projects it had undertaken that had been based around inter-generational story-telling, and through which contacts had been made with local care homes.

Ideology and approach

Although most of the constraints of this commission developed and emerged over time and in response to the unfolding process, one that was clear and distinctive from the start relates to the ideology of the company. Riding Lights' decision to engage with dementia can be seen as part of a wider creative response to an increased public and macro-cultural awareness of the subject, as well as a response to the micro-culture of social, personal and professional influences already noted. What marked out the company's approach, however, was a conviction that within all the various terms of reference used to attempt to understand dementia (medical, scientific, social, cultural, psychological, physiological etc.) there is also a spiritual dimension to the issue. Riding Lights is a company with Christian roots, and in recent years the backbone of the company's regional touring has comprised productions that are taken into church and community venues, at the invitation of, and in partnership with local communities, which are usually centred around churches. Despite the rapidly-ageing church population, dementia is an under-addressed issue in many Christian circles, and one of the aims of the project was to take this discussion into communities where people might be facing the particular challenges of reconciling their faith with the experience of dementia.

Unlike the commission for *In Fog and Falling Snow*, the *Simeon's Watch* commission included an ideological dimension, demonstrating the way in which the constraints of a directive commission can reach beyond areas such as subject matter and scale and into an expectation that the writer will deliver a piece that expresses the ethos of a commissioning company. This may be in terms of a particular political or

ideological position, a commitment to a certain way of addressing an issue, or (as in this case) a perspective founded on faith or conviction. For both the writer and the commissioner, establishing that there is a shared position, or at least a level of sympathy, is a critical starting point for the terms of the commission. This is, however, delicate territory: more than technical or practical constraints, ideological constraints can represent a challenge to the voice of the writer and the notion of authorship. They can also be far from straightforward to negotiate, navigate or even stipulate, as the interaction of ideology with subject matter is a variable, nuances of differing political or theological perspectives may emerge from the writing rather than being placed within it, and both writers and commissioners may be unwilling to send out work that bears their name if they feel that it misrepresents their position. In the case of the commission for *Simeon's Watch*, I had a longstanding relationship with the company, and had written for them many times previously, so this particular constraint was one within which I had worked before, but the way in which the ideology of the commissioning company framed my approach to the subject was critical to the creation of the play.

While an objective definition of dementia is that it is 'a broad term used to describe a number of different conditions affecting the brain'¹⁵⁶, in the vast majority of non-medical accounts of dementia (whether fictional or factual), the overwhelming narrative is subjective and abstract, and is one of loss: most heart-breakingly and bewilderingly, loss of self. The sense that dementia can somehow erase a person's

¹⁵⁶ Alzheimer's Society (2019). *About Dementia* [online] Available at: <https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/about-dementia>

deepest identity inevitably raises questions of what the self comprises and where it resides. Even the titles of some of the works previously cited are rooted in a vocabulary of time, place and loss ('missing', 'go', 'still', 'keep', 'where', 'finding'), suggesting that there is some mysterious location to which what is essential and distinctive about us disappears when dementia has done its worst. The metaphors focus on absence and departure; on the attempt to hold onto ourselves or those we love, or they suggest disorder and chaos; becoming lost in a 'wilderness', or a 'tangled' existence. The ability to escape or to return seems bound up with the capacity for memory, and the basis of much reminiscence work undertaken with people with dementia¹⁵⁷ implies that a person's identity or selfhood resides in their memory bank, and that as long as memories can be accessed or retrieved – even in the slimmest of forms - their identity remains.

Riding Lights brought a double perspective on this to the commission, growing out of the project as a whole. The first was that as theatre makers, the approach of the play was that it should address the experience of the condition in ways that were not literal or medical, but employed the tools of theatre: metaphor, image and language. The second key perspective was that the play should engage with the subject at a spiritual level, submitting that when we view the problem of loss of identity purely existentially, there is a risk that we deny ourselves (or are reluctant to enter) the space in which we can consider more deeply the impact of dementia on what people of faith understand as the soul. Biological explanations of the physical fusing

¹⁵⁷ See Pam Schweitzer's extensive work on Reminiscence Theatre, as documented in Schweitzer, P. (2007). *Reminiscence Theatre*, London: Jessica Kingsley

together of the brain's neural pathways do not engage with what is essentially a metaphysical question, and many accounts of the progression of dementia search for a language with which to explore the mystery of what constitutes the self, often resorting to 'the soul' as the best fit for something that remains inexpressible. The spiritual response to the purely medical understanding of dementia considers that human beings are more than simply physical entities, and that their immaterial part cannot be 'lost' or eradicated since it exists in relation to the divine: a Christian understanding is that an individual's identity is not found in their circumstances, history or genes. As Archbishop Justin Welby put it, when commenting on the discovery that the man who had brought him up was not, in fact, his biological father, 'I find who I am in Jesus Christ, not in genetics, and my identity in him never changes'.¹⁵⁸ In this framing, a person with dementia cannot be 'lost' when they lose their memory, their ability to understand the world in the same way as those without dementia, or to recognise other people or themselves: for the Christian, their understanding of their human identity is external to and independent of any aspect of their physical or psychological existence.

It was in this theoretical context that *Riding Lights* commissioned a play from me: it was intended to enable people to think differently about dementia, and about its power; to make a positive contribution to the debate rather than playing into fears surrounding diagnosis or re-enforcing familiar narratives of loss and alienation.

Interestingly, however, this positivism was in tension with another set of fears

¹⁵⁸ Welby, J. (2016). *Archbishop Justin Welby's Statement on his Father* [online] Available at: <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/5704/a-personal-statement-from-the-archbishop-of-canterbury>

particular to some within the faith community. Jacques LeGoff observes that 'Judaism and Christianity, both firmly anchored historically and theologically in history, have been described as 'religions of remembrance' (O.G. Oexle 1976)...the Holy Book on one hand, and the historical tradition on the other, insist, essentially, on the necessity of remembrance as a fundamental religious activity.'¹⁵⁹ LeGoff quotes extensively from both the Old and New Testaments, pointing to the repeated commands to remember God's laws, actions, faithfulness etc., while Anne Davis Basting points to 'the Judeo-Christian roots of concepts of memory and forgetting, in which *forgetting* God's teachings is akin to abandoning God and to being abandoned by God in turn.'¹⁶⁰ For many Christians, whose practice of their faith is rooted in daily bible reading and prayer, the prospect of losing the ability to read or to communicate is profoundly distressing in spiritual terms. Additionally, in the Christian evangelical tradition, salvation is often seen as contingent upon understanding and accepting the gospel message: it can be seen as an intellectual qualification, in contrast to the sacramental understanding of more Catholic traditions. The challenge to faith that dementia can represent for some Christians is therefore far deeper than the comparatively straightforward questions of suffering that accompany any serious illness. If dementia can erase the foundations of faith by destruction of memory and intellect, then it follows that it might also jeopardise the salvation of the individual. In engaging with the subject of dementia, Riding Lights

¹⁵⁹ LeGoff, J. (1992). *History and Memory*, trans. Clamen, E. & Rendell, S. New York: Columbia University Press p68

¹⁶⁰ Davis Basting, A. (2009). *Forget Memory – Creating Better Lives for People With Dementia*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press p21

was stepping into complex territory in which known, unknown and unknowable aspects of the condition were to be addressed through the commission.

Dead ends and new directions

In comparison with *In Fog and Falling Snow*, the development phase of *Simeon's Watch* was much more extended, with the result that the constraints of the commission evolved alongside the changing shape of the project. Originally, the intention had been to prioritise the workshops as the context for exploration of our approach, and to follow these with a play that drew on the resulting learning and experience. However, putting together a group of workshop participants proved immensely difficult, and while we continued to attempt this, the company received the news that it had been unsuccessful in securing funding for the wider project. As a result, the focus started to shift, as the proposed play moved into the centre of the project, with the workshops as satellite events. This fundamentally altered the relationship between the research phase and the writing phase for me as the writer, as I had previously expected to participate in the workshops, to evaluate the success of the improvisatory approach, and to model it dramatically through the play. In response to changing circumstances, I had to adjust my research methods in the direction of individual interactions and written sources.

Two further critical incidents affecting the commission occurred during the course of 2014. The first was the offer of private funding from a family that was facing dementia and was convinced that Riding Lights had a valuable contribution to make in the public sphere. The funding underpinned the production and tour of the play

and came with no conditions attached, but it was given with an unspoken expectation that the project would deliver a constructive contribution to practice and debate around dementia care. While this was entirely in accord with the aims of the project, it exposes the possibility of a problematic aspect to philanthropy, where tensions may exist between the tacit expectations of the donor and the money that they give. In this case, there was a sense that for the donors, the funding represented a form of resistance to the disease, and therefore carried an emotional loading that was passed on to us as theatre makers: as if the play might stage some kind of intervention in the devastating situation with which they were faced, that medical or scientific approaches could not. This personal agenda – no matter how buried it seems – can represent a characteristic of philanthropy that brings added dimensions and considerations to the process of commissioning and creating work.

The second critical incident was a workshop we held with younger people (mostly aged between 18 and 25, but with one child of 11) who had experience of dementia in grandparents. This was revelatory, proving that the aim of making the project inter-generational had abundant potential. From the point of view of my research for the play – which was resolving into a family drama of some sort – it opened a rich seam of warmth, playfulness and humour. The workshop revealed that young people did not carry any sense of responsibility for their grandparents, nor feel the need to protect them from potentially embarrassing situations. They continued to find joy in the relationship, and relished the care-free and unself-conscious approach to life that their grandparents often exhibited. The leapfrogging of the middle generation, where – along with partners – the most stress on relationships seems to be

experienced, suggested ways in which the aim of creating a play with a positive approach towards dementia might not be too much of a stretch.

One of the key effects of these incidents in terms of the commission was a widening of the play's intended appeal. The purpose of the planned workshops had been to engage with people with dementia and their carers, in order to understand their experience and represent them and it in the play. At the point where we lost the majority of the workshops, the intervention of the project's new funders brought into the process people who were not yet dealing with profound communication difficulties, but who were confronted with a devastating diagnosis, while the workshop with young people opened up an inter-generational dimension in our approach to the subject. Both of these had direct effects upon the resulting script, and expanded our sense of the play's potential audience.

By the autumn of 2015, the open discussions of the early phase of the commissioning process were resolving into soft constraints, arrived at through agreement between writer and director. While we were committed to presenting the almost carefree relationship that might be constructed between a grandparent and grandchild, we nonetheless felt that it was incumbent upon us to represent the more pressurised experience of the missing generation, so the play became a three-handed family drama. With delays in the process meaning that the tour was now scheduled for the late Autumn the following year (rather than Spring), I proposed embedding the dementia issue in a family Christmas show, and placing it at the heart of a story of surprise, reversals and hope. This final piece in the jigsaw of the directive commission highlights the place that chance can play in the development

of new work. Key events and critical incidents helped to shape the constraints of the commission: the failure to secure funding, followed by the offer of philanthropic funding that gave an element of artistic freedom, but brought with it unstated expectations; the inability to run the planned workshops and the surprising impact of unanticipated work with young people; programming pressures being experienced by the commissioning company resulting in an opening up of previously unconsidered plot directions; all these came together to set the play on a new path.

Developing constraints

As the project developed, the terms of the commission became clearer, and the constraints harder. The subject of dementia was now required to be embedded in a narrative that was rooted in the rural, referenced the Christmas story, and that was accessible to a large age-range. While the script was still in the early stages of development, progress on marketing the show (image, design and copy) was moving fast. After extensive discussions, it had been concluded that audiences might be deterred by the prospect of a potentially difficult evening watching a play about dementia, so the decision was taken to present the piece as warm, accessible and seasonal, and to avoid all mention of dementia as a subject, or a word, placing the focus instead on the idea of a family facing the change and challenge of ageing. Accordingly, the play was given the tagline *A puzzle in the family at Christmas*, requiring adjustments in the writing that reflected the shift in tone as well as a lowering of the recommended age-range of the audience. With the material forces of marketing running ahead of the script – as is often the case with new writing at small scale – some aspects of the script were now being written in response to

promotional copy, demonstrating the power of the commissioner's understanding of their anticipated audience, and the need to appeal to it, which can override the agreed terms of a commission.

Background and context

The rural space

Although the intentions for the piece derived from collaboratively-developed ideas, the creation of the actual story of the play was in my hands. When considering what the play might comprise, and the various Christmas narratives that might inform it, I was drawn to the story of Simeon, who appears in the bible as an very old man to whom it has been prophesied that he will not die until he has seen his salvation – that is, the Christ child.¹⁶¹ The idea of an elderly person, apparently ready for death but clinging on, with a vision that might appear fantastic or erroneous to others, struck me as a powerful basis for a character experiencing dementia. The funding that had rescued the project had been offered by a farming couple who had supported the work of the company from its inception. An arable and dairy farmer all his life, the husband, who had been diagnosed with early-onset dementia, retained a deep knowledge of his livestock and of farming practice, even as other things were erased from his memory. Lifelong church members, they were also faced with questions of the nature of faith in the midst of such uncertainty.

¹⁶¹ Luke 2: 25-35

Undoubtedly influenced by contemplating their situation, in the character of Simeon, I hoped to present a shepherd for and of our times: a sheep farmer whose dementia increases the stresses upon his family's already difficult life, whilst at the same time drawing him to apparently inaccessible places in his memory and imagination.

The agricultural context for the story also provided a strong connection with the communities the show was likely to visit: Riding Lights' long history of touring to local churches and communities made that touring circuit an obvious choice for *Simeon's Watch*, and churches in rural locations frequently serve as a social as well as a spiritual focus, providing a high level of practical support underpinned by a deep understanding of the challenges faced by those living in rural locations. This is a relationship with its roots deep in the land and in history. As Jo Robinson observes:

there is...a long-established history of dramatic engagement with the pragmatic and political reality of the rural...in the medieval mystery plays of the Corpus Christi cycles...before the performance of the Annunciation to the shepherds, the actors playing these characters reminded their spectators of the practicalities of working life in the countryside...the shepherds of the Townley 'Second Shepherds' Play' complained to their audience of the realities of rural life: livestock disease, physical hardship, enclosure and unhappy marriages.¹⁶²

The writers of the medieval mystery plays found in the shepherds a means of connecting earth and heaven: by emphasising the shepherds' humanity they affirmed the proximity of God to man as presented in the Christmas story and gave audiences what we might today describe as a sense of ownership and participation

¹⁶² Robinson, J. (2016). *Theatre and the Rural*. London: Palgrave p5

in the story. It was exactly this sense of connection that we intended *Simeon's Watch* to forge with its audience.

The population in areas that are designated as rural is increasingly an ageing one. Arts Council England's 2018 report into *Arts, Culture and Rural Communities* notes that 'The proportion of the population from older demographics is increasing in rural areas and this is combined with significant migration to rural areas from urban areas, particularly from older age groups.'¹⁶³ The same report describes the 'range of different types of places' defined as rural, 'including remote upland farmsteads, coastal communities, small market towns and commuter villages.'¹⁶⁴ In their *Rural Evidence and Data Review* (2019), ACE expands on these geographic articulations of the rural by considering location alongside population density and distribution figures. What can be deduced from this is that the experience of living in a rural community may be isolating as well as comparatively unsupported in terms of services and infrastructure. A study undertaken by the School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Studies at Plymouth University examining the anticipated impact of dementia in rural locations identified specific areas of stress and concern that were likely to be experienced by people in farming communities compared to the general population. These included isolation, fear of what might happen to the farm and additional stress and financial pressures on the wider family:

Farming and the farm itself are more than merely business interests; they are an important part of lifestyle and identity. There is therefore justifiable fear

¹⁶³ *Arts, Culture & Rural Communities – how the Arts Council works in rural England*. Arts Council England. 2018

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

that a diagnosis of dementia can lead to the loss of the farm, the home and everything that is familiar.¹⁶⁵

The rising age of regular church-goers is also well-documented, including by the Research and Statistics department of the Church of England, who reported in 2010 that the average age of churchgoers was 61.¹⁶⁶ By 2016, 31% of churchgoers were aged 70 or over, and the Diocesan Worshipping Community age distribution showed the highest proportion of over 70s in rural dioceses compared with urban ones.¹⁶⁷ In commissioning terms, it became important that the play delivered clear points of contact that spoke into the experience and perspective of the anticipated audience. It was also critical that this imperative worked in both directions; that is, that the play was booked into venues that would attract an appropriate audience for the piece, and that the marketing to both venues and audiences was correctly targeted.

Both pastoral and personal

Literary criticism has consistently described a model in which urban characters retreat to the countryside or are forced into exile there, where they learn the lessons that city life cannot afford them. In the traditional pastoral model, the rural life is presented in idealised terms, intended to appeal to an urban audience or readership, and it is notable that the pastoral world is frequently a transitional one,

¹⁶⁵ Gould, A. (2017) *Rural Dementia – We Need to Talk* [online] Available at: <https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/news/rural-dementia-nil-we-need-to-talk>

¹⁶⁶ Research and Statistics Dept., CofE's Archbishops' Council, reported in *The Daily Telegraph*, 22 Jan 2010

¹⁶⁷ Church of England *Statistics for Mission* report, 2016. While this research only applies directly to Anglican churches, the same patterns are played out across the other denominations (such as Baptist and Methodist) that make up Riding Lights' regular tour venues.

enabling the return to a more sophisticated life, informed by the lessons of the pastoral sojourn. With reference to this literary and theatrical pattern, Jo Robinson observes that 'the rural often stands for a particular kind of 'otherness', to be visited and returned from, perhaps transformed.'¹⁶⁸ In *Simeon's Watch*, however, the overarching location is entirely rural, and the characters are firmly and inescapably rooted in the realities of rural life. Nonetheless, that sense of discovery and transformation given by the experience of encountering nature unmediated remains a theme. The first half of the play is located in the farmhouse, as daily life becomes increasingly difficult for all the characters, and the financial, emotional and practical pressures increase. Simeon yearns to be out on the hills, and finally makes his escape, leading the other characters – and the audience – to the hillside and the transformative second half. The play connects with the mystery play tradition of rural biblical characters and with the Arcadian concept of rural retreat as a transformative experience. Research into sheep farming led me to *The Shepherd's Life* by James Rebanks,¹⁶⁹ with its accounts of brief but detailed notes kept by shepherds on their flocks. In the play, Simeon's notebooks - extracts from which form 'Time Check' links between scenes - mark the passing of time and the growing distance between the note-taker and his connection to his former life. In the first Time Check, the notebook connects Rina to her father (Nathaniel), who has recently died.

Time Check 1

¹⁶⁸ Robinson, J. (2016). *Theatre and the Rural*. London: Palgrave p7

¹⁶⁹ Rebanks, J. (2015). *The Shepherd's Life*. London: Penguin

RINA HOLDS A TATTY NOTEBOOK, FROM WHICH SHE READS

Rina: Autumn. Ewes 175, 186, 185, 173 - lambs removed and ewes recovering in lower pasture. 169, flystrike, treated with antibiotics. Ewes 168, 169 sold to Jacob Darke. Tups (including new tups 86, 81, 84) presented to ewes for breeding, and wethers separated off for fattening. Late Autumn. Wethers to slaughter.

SHE CLUTCHES THE BOOK TO HERSELF AND WEEPS

Oh, Dad...

In the final Time Check, Simeon struggles to make any sense of the notes, his own connection to them, and to his son in law (Nathaniel).

Time Check 5

Simeon: Autumn. Ewes 175... Lambs and ewes. 16..., flystrike, tret. Tups shown to ewes... Wethers. Feeding for fat. Late Autumn. Wethers to slaughter. Weather...wet weather. Get foot rot. Lambs and ewes. You...you...if you were the only girl in the world...

Winter. Hay the sheep. Ewes dead. The snow done that. Snow. Late winter - late. Nate. Nate...

HE OPENS THE FRONT OF THE BOOK

'Nathaniel Cammish. High Top Farm.'

HE TURNS A PAGE BACK

'Simeon Bell. High Top Farm.'

HE FROWNS¹⁷⁰

These Time Checks give detail to the working lives of the characters, grounding the action in a life of toil and repetition – the ‘livestock disease’ and ‘physical hardship’ of the *Second Shepherds’ Play*. They also reflect the lives lived by many audience members, contributing to ‘the relationship with the audience [that] provides the theatre event with its rationale’.¹⁷¹ The rural, and the rural audience, were major influences upon the play at every point: from the farmers whose own experience both funded and informed the project, to the rural setting of what Robinson describes as ‘both a geographical and conceptual landscape’¹⁷², through to the physical locations and venues of the tour. In contrast to *In Fog and Falling Snow*, where the show had been made *with* a local community, *Simeon’s Watch* was a piece of theatre made *for* communities which were sometimes local, sometimes communities of interest, and sometimes both. The show also fulfilled the third category of community theatre (work that is made *with, for* or *to* a community) in that it toured *to* community venues. This touring *to* element conforms to Robinson’s definition of rural touring, where ‘performances take place in a space...which is more familiar to the audience than to the performers, and in front of an audience who

¹⁷⁰ Foreman, B. (2016). *Simeon’s Watch*.

¹⁷¹ Freshwater, H. (2009). *Theatre and Audience*. London: Palgrave Macmillan p2

¹⁷² Robinson, *Theatre and the Rural* p59

know each other.¹⁷³ This relationship of audience to space became a key factor within the writing of the play.

The physical space

Simeon's Watch was created and commissioned as a touring show, playing for single performances in community venues, which were usually churches. While this was in large part determined by the *modus operandi* of the commissioning company, there was also a dramatic, artistic requirement for the play to sit comfortably within those performance spaces, and to speak into the vernacular of the location. The commission demanded a piece that could speak the languages (codes, signifiers) of both theatre and church, and enable the audience to receive the play bilingually. This was in part a challenge to the visual and material aspects of production, design and direction, but it also presented a juxtaposition that needed to be expressed within the script, and one that familiarity with the work of the company enabled me to approach.

The debate around space and place in theatre is lively and populated with divergent terminology. The proposition in Peter Brook's seminal work that there could be such a thing as an 'empty space'¹⁷⁴ has been argued over and refuted, for example by Chris Goode, who aligns himself with John Cage's assertion that 'there is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time.'¹⁷⁵ Brook himself develops his earlier

¹⁷³ Ibid. p67

¹⁷⁴ Brook, P. (1968). *The Empty Space*. London: Penguin

¹⁷⁵ Goode, C. (2015). *The Forest and the Field: Changing Theatre in a Changing World*. London: Oberon Ch. 1, quoting Cage, J. (1978). in *Experimental Music in Silence: Lectures and Writings*. London: Marion Boyars p8

argument by acknowledging that his quest to discover an 'empty' space in which to make theatre was a reaction against making and seeing work that 'has always been within a context. The context is either geographical, cultural or linguistic, so that we work within a system.'¹⁷⁶ Goode contends that Brook's response in the 'staking out of an empty space' may be 'blandly attractive', but 'there is something terrible going on: because nobody lives there.'¹⁷⁷ This is an instructive debate in the consideration of understanding how the interaction between a piece of performance and the physical space in which it is performed can result in thick and complex layering of meanings. When a piece of theatre not only sits within a site but accrues that site's significance, it can engage the audience in an effective and affective conversation. Goode has indicated that 'the experience of an audience may have much to do with the idea of a particular 'place', especially one they know.'¹⁷⁸ He goes on to reflect on the nature and character of churches as representing a 'space that, viewed secularly in formal terms at least, could serve simply as a site for community gathering, the circulating of information, the celebratory enaction of lives shared.' However, he concludes that 'their meaning is defined in practice not by their appointed custodians but by their users, and not in abstraction but in the enaction of...that useage.'¹⁷⁹ If we view this in Brook's terms, we can conclude that a church presents a context, and represents a system.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid. Ch 1, quoting Brook, P. (1987). *The Shifting Point: Theatre, Film, Opera 1946-1987*. New York: Harper & Row p124

¹⁷⁷ Ibid. Ch.1

¹⁷⁸ Ibid. Ch.1

¹⁷⁹ Ibid. Ch.1

The physical space of a church building is not neutral to performer or spectator: it is designed as a sacred space, and even when other activities take place within it, they are set against a backdrop that is purposed – and used – for communal acts of worship. As Mike Pearson observes, ‘Religious buildings are freighted with history, with established routines of observance, with atmospheres of piety.’¹⁸⁰ If we consider a church within the framework of Elam’s spatial codes¹⁸¹, the fixed and semi-fixed architectural features of the space itself tell the stories of the Christian faith: altars and crucifixes evoke sacrifice, sanctuaries speak of holiness, architectural grandeur imitates the grandeur of heaven. Wherever a performance of *Simeon’s Watch* was performed, these physical features were untouched, and the spiritual function for which the building was purposed remained while the performance was grafted onto it. Cathy Turner bemoans the fact that ‘architecture is often considered as though we can separate the meaning of buildings from their habitation.’¹⁸² In addition to their architecture, and rather more prosaically, churches are cluttered with the paraphernalia of functionality: heaters and speakers, microphones, stacks of additional chairs, hand-crafted banners, flower arrangements; a visually chaotic story of the life lived within the space. Sarah Grochala observes that ‘at the heart of Elam’s spatial codes is an understanding of lived space and dramatic space...standing in a dialectical relationship to each other.’¹⁸³ The notion of a lived space also implies a historical perspective: churches exude a connection to the past, some through

¹⁸⁰ Pearson, M. (2010). *Site-Specific Performance*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan p64

¹⁸¹ In *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (2002), Keir Elam proposes that dramatic space is defined through four spatial codes: architectural, interpersonal, scenic and virtual.

¹⁸² Turner, C. (2015). *Dramaturgy and Architecture: Theatre, Utopia and the Built Environment*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan p2

¹⁸³ Grochala, S. (2017). *The Contemporary Political Play – Re-Thinking Dramaturgical Structure*. London: Bloomsbury Academic p144

their antiquity, and their semi-fixed features of memorial tablets, books of remembrance etc., and all through the significance of their role as mediating contexts for life rituals such as baptism, marriage and death, as well as the weekly rite of people gathering together and self-identifying as a community with a sense of its own history. All these elements also carry additional personal significance to the spectator who regards the space as 'their' church. In such familiar surroundings, it may become difficult for them to make a distinction between the communal experience of participation in an act of worship, and that of watching a theatrical performance, meaning that the meeting point of Grochala's lived space and dramatic space is situated not solely in the physical place of performance, but also in the experience of the audience and the individual spectator.

Any design for a piece of theatre to be performed in such spaces has to accept the canvas against which that design will be seen, allowing room for the additional layers of understanding that will result. Gay McAuley describes space as 'crucial to understanding the nature of the performance event and how meanings are constructed and communicated'.¹⁸⁴ The set for *Simeon's Watch* was compact: a claustrophobically small domestic setting (opening up to a simple hillside in the second half) that provided a focused context for the performance, but which sat – physically – within the larger space of the church or hall. That larger space – which changed every night – told its own story and spoke its own physical language: of history, community, iconography and function, and was often visible throughout the

¹⁸⁴ McAuley, G. (1999). *Space in Performance – Making Meaning in the Theatre*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press p278

performance. Thus the play was presented at every performance within two frames, the physical relationship between which expressed a psychological expectation: that the play being presented would sit within the cultural and (in the case of churches) spiritual framing with which the audience arrived. Bennett, similarly, identifies two frames for theatre performed in non-traditional venues:

the outer frame contains all those cultural elements which create and inform the theatrical event. The inner frame contains the dramatic production in a particular playing space. The audience's role is carried out within these two frames and, perhaps most importantly, at their points of intersection.¹⁸⁵

These points of intersection occur when the audience member's response to the play and the setting connects with their wider understanding of life. Clifford McLucas characterises this matrix as starting with 'the host and the ghost' as an expression of

the relationship between place and event. The host site is haunted for a time by a ghost that the theatre-makers create. Like all ghosts it is transparent and the host can be seen through the ghost. Add into this a third term – the witness, i.e. the audience – and we have a kind of trinity that constitutes the work.¹⁸⁶

In the case of *Simeon's Watch*, the audience was usually largely comprised of the congregation of the church that was hosting the performance. As such, they were people who not only knew each other but who shared deep connections and a willingness to engage emotionally with one another. Additionally, this audience brought a web of expectations that embraced the theatrical, cultural and spiritual; what Bennett describes as 'a horizon of cultural and ideological expectations.'¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ Ibid. p139

¹⁸⁶ McLucas, C. 'Ten Feet and Three Quarters of an Inch of Theatre' in Kaye, N. (2000). *Site-Specific Art*. London: Routledge p128

¹⁸⁷ Bennett, S. (1997). *Theatre Audiences*. London: Routledge p98

From the perspective of the performers at such an event, the audience comes primed with ties of friendship, shared values, faith and community. But they will still represent breadths of perspective, and varying degrees of experience of and participation in theatre and other art forms. For some audience members of Riding Lights shows, the company's work is their only contact with theatre, and they engage with it because it offers cultural, social and spiritual affirmation. Others are regular consumers of all kinds of culture, for whom the spiritual element is just part of a wider appreciation of the creative approach of the company.

Process and practice

Space and text

The directive commission of *Simeon's Watch* illustrates the way in which a single key principle can act as a guiding constraint from which others follow. The ideology of the commissioning company determined the touring circuit and core audience for the production, and these elements of site and audience emerged as areas that the text was written out of and into.

The opening of the play deliberately draws upon the power of the intersection between the two frames, acknowledging that the spectators may – at least in part – identify themselves primarily as a congregation rather than an audience. Placing the opening scene in a church, Simeon first appears speaking at the funeral of his son-in-law.

Scene one

A FUNERAL EULOGY. SIMEON STANDS WITH HIS BIBLE OPEN. WE MAY BE DIMLY AWARE OF THE STAGE AROUND HIM, THE INTERIOR OF A SMALL COTTAGE. HE IS MID-SERMON

Simeon: Time's a curious thing. Up here, on these hills, we understand how you can live in the past and the present at the same moment; how you can be wearing a groove in the same path your grandparents trod - and their grandparents before them. You sense the past in your own body as you mend a wall or cut hay. And then, something like this happens, and we're reminded that time can both stretch and stop. That there are endings, unforeseen ones, and that it is up to us to make the time we're given count for something.

Time never hung heavy for Nathan. He filled it with purpose. He used it with care. And he gave it with generosity. I think of the freezing morning before a long day's work when young Rina decided she were going to learn to walk. You won't remember it, Rina, but Nate left his hot tea and his warm porridge on the table and he walked you up and down and up and down the yard, setting you on your feet

time and time again. And I look around this chapel, and I know that every one of you can think of an occasion, I'm sure, when Nate did the same for you - when he put aside his own concerns and took up yours - cheerfully, graciously, as if he had all the time in the world. Though, as it turns out, he didn't.¹⁸⁸

In writing of a theatrical performance in a chapel, Mike Pearson suggests that 'extant practices suggest a dramaturgical structure, as performance adopts the practicalities of the chapel.'¹⁸⁹ Simeon's opening speech appears at first to be located within the outer frame of the church space, before drawing the us into the inner frame, where the dramatic action of the play is located. It provides a bridge for the congregation / audience to cross from their own world into the world of the play. It gives them a familiar entry point, where they are directly addressed – cast by Simeon as the family and friends gathered to mourn Nathaniel. As Simeon's focus moves to Rina, the audience is drawn fully into the lives of the play's characters, and a world that, while familiar, is distinct from their own.

Considered as a whole, the arc of the play takes on a particular resonance when viewed against its setting in a church. Where – in a different performance context – Simeon's journey through the play might be regarded as a progress towards increasing confusion and death, in a church the space becomes – as Gay McAuley proposes – 'a dynamic player' rather than 'simply the background to, or neutral

¹⁸⁸ Foreman, B. (2016). *Simeon's Watch*

¹⁸⁹ Pearson, M. (2010). *Site-Specific Performance*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan p63

container for, actions'¹⁹⁰, with the result that Simeon's departure from the 'real' and domestic world seems to draw him closer to heaven. So while the site-generic setting informed some aspects of the writing at the point of commission, it also created a commentary upon the play at the point of performance, providing a context within which aspects of the play's significance were altered.

Understanding the nature of the particular settings in which the final production would be placed was key to the way in which the story was conceived and framed, giving familiar entry and exit points for the audience and allowing for the wider context to speak into the play's narrative. While the commission may have focused primarily on the physical and material constraints of production, the act of writing was undertaken with a constant awareness that I was not only conjuring a fictional onstage world, but also managing that world's interface with an offstage one, which existed in a discrete dimension: that of the 'reality' inhabited and experienced by the audience. Goode posits that 'staged work that is able to apply itself to the specific conditions of the encounter it initiates will cause its audience to feel that the work is, for once, *about them*.'¹⁹¹ Enabling the audience to identify with the situations and the characters of the play was critical to the aims of the wider project, that is, the presentation and dissemination of an approach to communicating with and relating to people with dementia. This was part of the reasoning behind the use of direct address in the play, so that the audience felt that they were being spoken to personally. Again, the setting of the play within a church allowed those passages to

¹⁹⁰ McAuley, G. (Ed.) (2006). *Unstable Ground – performance and the politics of place*. Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang S.A. p15

¹⁹¹ Goode, *The Forest and the Field*. Ch.1

resonate with familiar forms of direct address deriving from the space. And they implied a relationship with audience members in which each of the characters had their own way of speaking. Simeon addresses them as a congregation, for Leah they are the confidants to whom she reveals her feelings about the Knit and Natter group, while Rina casts them as the audience at the Pub's open mic nights. Each of these allots a role to the audience, giving them a stake in the story and allowing them to move between intimacy and distance, identifying and connecting at different levels. But the device also confers separate identities on the space, presenting different lenses through which the narrative – and the subject – can be viewed, and providing the context – or 'frame' - that anthropologist Victor Turner identifies as key to self-examination:

To look at itself a society must cut out a piece of itself for inspection. To do this it must set up a frame within which images and symbols of what has been sectioned off can be scrutinized, assessed, and if need be, remodelled and rearranged.¹⁹²

Voices and views

While the overall theme of the commission changed little over the two years between the initial conception of the project, and the completion of the script, the defining feature of the landscape in which the commission developed was the elasticity of its border, with a range of stakeholders, partners and advisors (including

¹⁹² Turner, V. 'Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality' in Benamou, M. and C. Caramello (eds). (1977). *Performance in Postmodern Culture*, Madison: Coda Press pp 19-32

a steering group) who moved in and out of it at various points. As the play went through the drafting and re-drafting processes, these stakeholders were asked to respond to the script. Observations from the medically-qualified members of the steering group were based on concern that the play should give a realistic picture of the progress of the disease, such as the way in which Simeon's dementia would affect his recall of language (by substituting words rather than experiencing a verbal block). Carers and people with dementia focused more on the nature of the disease. In marketing the show, the company sent a script to the Alzheimer's Society to ask whether they would be happy to endorse and promote the play. The Society's concern was with the communication and perception of the disease, and their comments spoke less into the detail of dementia, and more into the language the play used in relation to Simeon's behaviour:

Page 6 - off on one of his wanders... - can we change this to 'off on one of his walkabouts'

Page 39 - wandering around with no trousers on – can we change to '.....walking around with no trousers on'¹⁹³

The specifics of the Alzheimer's Society's concerns appeared to be twofold: partly semantic, wishing to avoid the sense of aimlessness implied by 'wander', according to Simeon more dignity with the use of the less expressive 'walk', and partly around the play's concept of communicating through accepting and building:

Page 52 – we would not recommend directly colluding with something that isn't true, it would be better for Leah to explore the conversation but avoid buying into what is not true, e.g. Oh, yes – that bottle's all gone. Better to

¹⁹³ Hodgkinson, Vicky (Alzheimer's Society) - email 4th October 2016

say ‘oh yes – its always good when they finish the bottle’ With subtle changes to the text we can avoid collusion but maintain the sentiment.¹⁹⁴

This issue went straight to the heart of the proposal of the entire project, articulating the gap between a creative approach and one entirely constructed around accuracy, and demonstrating the power of marketing within the development process of a piece of new writing: by seeking endorsement, and a wider audience, the company unintentionally expanded the commissioning space and invited further voices into it, who assumed that they had script approval. This event exposes the risk of blurred boundaries and potential tensions that can arise from the differing priorities of individual stakeholders and influences within a collaborative project, especially when the collaboration includes partners from non-creative disciplines.

Eva Gjengedal et al, writing in *Dementia* in 2016 observe that ‘there is not much research available on the way theatre and art in general may increase knowledge and understanding of dementia care’¹⁹⁵, revealing the proposition (from a science-based perspective) that an increase in *knowledge* is what one might expect from theatrical engagement. Theatre makers working with a subject such as dementia are more likely to point to the value of empathetic engagement and a window into the experience of others as the intended outcome for audiences, so expectations that grow from the aims of one field of work can be – in collaborative situations – brought into an entirely different field, with the result that vastly differing, or even

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Gjengedal, E., E. Lykkeslet, W. Sæther, and J. Sørbo (2016). ‘Theatre as an Eye-Opener: How Theatre May Contribute to Knowledge About Living Close to Persons With Dementia’. *Dementia*, May 13

conflicting, ambitions for the product compete. However, in an apparent move away from the proposition of their paper, Gjengedal et al conclude that:

the aesthetic experience, as opposed to reality, is capable of freeing us from personal commitment and /or deadlocked patterns of thought. The work of art has a perceptive function; it becomes an eye-opener that corrects our accustomed way of dealing with the world.¹⁹⁶

That offering of a new perspective was what *Simeon's Watch* sought to bring to the discussion around engagement and communication with people with dementia.

Towards the end of the play, the competing significance of facts versus feelings are given clear expression:

Rina: He's still got that old sweater, then.

Leah: He thinks it's a lamb.

Rina: I know. He thinks he's still a shepherd.

Leah: Half the time he thinks I'm my mother and you're me. He thinks shoe polish is food and the butter's a bar of soap. He thinks he's 19 one day and 45 the next. Why wouldn't that sweater be a lamb?

Rina: If it makes sense to him...

Leah: Then never mind the facts? Is that what you're saying?

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

Rina: No. But maybe they shouldn't matter as much to us as he does. As much as that. Look at him.

Leah: (SIGHING) You're right - he looks happy. Clutching that old sweater! It's like he's been given something at last - and after losing so much.

Rina: I'm not going to tell him it's 100% acrylic. Are you?

Leah: I guess not.¹⁹⁷

Despite their reservations, the Alzheimer's Society acknowledged the play's focus on nurturing Simeon's emotional well-being, even at the expense of factual accuracy:

I am a little torn towards the end of the play as we clearly don't advocate collusion but the way this is written makes me feel that it would be petty to pick on this as it would very much change the last few scenes and that would detract from the positive point made where it is about how Granddad 'feels' rather than what he does.¹⁹⁸

Critically, the improvisatory approach to communication was central to the enquiry of the wider project, and, in dramaturgical terms, was also key to the journey of discovery undertaken by Rina and Leah in the play, so the 'collusion' stayed in the script. The play had not been commissioned by the Alzheimer's Society, nor did the society have any financial stake in the production, so while they were keen to give us their feedback, they concluded 'If you feel you can't make these changes at this late stage, we still do feel more than happy to support the play on our channels', adding

¹⁹⁷ Foreman, B. (2016). *Simeon's Watch*

¹⁹⁸ Vicky Hodgkinson (Alzheimer's Society) - email 4th October 2016

that 'This is a lovely script and I have no doubt that it would play out well on the stage, it covers a very empathic and poignant view of a family experience, the complexity of 'managing' and keeping all the balls in the air, the assumptions we make about what people want without talking to them.' ¹⁹⁹

The consideration of these various viewpoints constituted another critical incident for the play: the perspective of the Alzheimer's Society inevitably raised ethical questions that challenged the final stages of the writing and the overview of the commission. While there is much that can be gained from opening up the commissioning space to collaboration, there is also potential for conflicts to arise between stakeholders, and for that tension to be projected onto the writer, who is then expected to deliver a script that reconciles the differing perspectives of people who have emotional, ideological or financial stakes in the production. However, the navigational endpoint is production, taking the script out of the commissioning space and into the space occupied by performance, where the play engages with a wider audience. Keeping that intended audience in mind - and the contexts in which it would be performed - became guiding principles of the final stages of writing and helped to clarify what the play needed to deliver.

Conclusion

This case study presents some interesting conclusions to aspects of my enquiry,

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

particularly in reference to the practice and process of playwrights. The commission of *Simeon's Watch* was originally embedded in a larger project with overtly instrumental aims, and a focus on a particular constituency: the conceptual impetus was the need of the anticipated audience, and addressing that need was the projected end point. Underpinning this audience-driven approach was the ideological position of the commissioning company, and even when the shape and outcome of the project changed significantly in response to shifting circumstances, these two factors continued to frame the broad terms of the commission. Unusually in directive commissioning practice, the writing of a play was not the starting point, but was anticipated to be one of the results of a multi-faceted endeavour. At its earliest stages, therefore, the commission carried an ethos, but very few hard constraints beyond those of subject matter and likely scale, and as a result, constraints developed over time, through collaboration, and in response to the challenge of retaining and meeting the wider aims of the project even when the scope of it was reduced.

This inversion of the more common commissioning process demanded flexibility on the part of the writer as the whole project was subject to changes in funding and structure. Working responsively to key elements within the process shaped the resulting script in a number of ways: the adjusted timing of the tour led me to the decision to frame the subject in a narrative inspired by the Christmas story; the site-generic nature of the venues prompted decisions about both setting and character (such as making Simeon a lay-preacher) that rooted the play's family in the location and experience of the anticipated audience. The rural geography of the tour and the

architectural, social and spiritual dimensions of the churches that served as performance venues informed the development of the story and the language of the text. They framed the play in terms that the communities of location and interest that comprised the audience understood and related to, and enabled a richly layered dialogue between space, performance and audience in which there was both tension and symbiosis. What this demonstrates is the potential for site and anticipated audience to exert a profound influence on the outworking of a commission, and on the practice of a writer. For the writer, commitment to an audience and openness to the thematic, almost visceral possibilities presented by engagement with space can offer opportunities for expression and exploration even within the terms of a directive commission. Perhaps what this demonstrates is that in situations where the emerging constraints of the commission can be aligned with the exercise of creativity and responsiveness on the part of the writer, the two can speak with a single voice to an audience.

CHAPTER 4

Case study 3: *Everything is Possible* – the political space

Introduction

This case study analyses the processes of the directive commission of *Everything is Possible*, with a particular focus on the way in which gender representation shaped the commission. I explore the circumstances and context around the commission, considering the influence of feminist forms and patterns of theatre-making upon the process of development of the script, as well as my own practice as a writer. I interrogate the progression of the script from first to second draft, and the impact on the play and the production of events leading up to the opening of the show. I also consider the political ambitions of the production, and the extent to which it achieved performance efficacy, defined by Baz Kershaw as ‘the possibility that the immediate and local effects of particular performances might – individually and collectively – contribute to changes.’²⁰⁰ My conclusion raises questions around this notion of change, and the effects of internal debate within the commissioning process.

Everything is Possible was commissioned by York Theatre Royal and Pilot Theatre and produced in 2017. It was a large-scale community co-production, staged partly in a site-specific location, and partly at York Theatre Royal. While giving an overview of the entire commissioning process of *Everything is Possible*, I focus upon three key

²⁰⁰ Kershaw, B. (1992). *The Politics of Performance – Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention*. London: Routledge p1

moments in the development of the play. The first is a three-day period of Research and Development, during and following which the initial constraints of the commission emerged. The second is the response to the resulting first draft, and the discussions and developments that fed into the writing of the second draft, and the final critical moment is shortly before the play went into production, and the re-working of the prologue in response to national and international events.

Setting the stage

Gender

The initial impetus for *Everything is Possible* grew out of a recognition that while most historically-based York community productions had told stories that were overwhelmingly male, the vast majority of the volunteer cast was female. There was clearly a need to find stories that were about women, or that turned the lens onto the part that women played in historical times that were largely dominated by men. It was planned as part of a season at York Theatre Royal ‘programmed...by an all-female group of actors and theatre-makers, looking to address the imbalance in women’s roles in both theatrical work and the industry as a whole.’²⁰¹ That programming group included a handful of female actors, some of them emerging from professionally scaled-back years of child-rearing, who were finding themselves invisible, and that there was very little satisfying work for which they were

²⁰¹ Cruden, Damian, interviewed in *York Press*, 8 Mar 2017

considered suitable. It is significant that for the most part, they had come to acting through small-scale, community and TIE collectives in the 1970s and 80s, where they had experienced collaborative theatre-making and a sharing of roles that had blurred the distinctions between actors, directors and writers. Deeply embedded in their approach to the process of developing this new piece was a determination to work differently and disruptively; to create what Elaine Aston has described as the 'sphere of disturbance',²⁰² derived through feminist theatre practice, which seeks to unsettle 'systems of representation that refuse women the possibility of representing themselves; refuses them agency, subjectivity, identity and so on.'²⁰³ This group of women had identified suffragette activity in York as the basis for a play that might deliver a powerful subject, as well as providing good roles for women of their age. More importantly, however, it represented an opportunity for them to exercise some agency and to work collectively in the way that Micheline Wandor describes when writing of Joint Stock's approach to Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine*:

The desire to democratise the play-producing process springs from a political opposition to the traditional, hierarchy-conscious theatre where individual skills are so fetishized that myths develop: writers are temperamental flowers, actors are intellectual zombies, directors are martinets. Political and alternative theatre challenges the crudities of these myths, by finding ways to encourage responsibility for all stages of the work: for what a play is saying as well as how it is saying it; a politicising of the whole aesthetic process.'²⁰⁴

In addition to Wandor's identification of the content and dramatic language of the play, for the makers of *Everything is Possible* there was a desire to politicise the way

²⁰² Aston, E. (1999). *Feminist Theatre Practice – a Handbook*. London: Routledge p18

²⁰³ Ibid. p19

²⁰⁴ Ibid. p28, quoting Wandor, M. (1979:14)

it was made: the making processes of the piece. From the outset, therefore, the project had an overtly gender-political target in its sights, at which it took aim through subject matter, ethic and approach, the context of the season of women's work, and the democratisation implied by a community production. There was a spirit of change at its heart. It is, however, worth noting that the primary goal at the outset was not Anthony Jackson's 'radical change in the social order', nor even his less ambitious aim of producing 'a change in action, behaviour or opinion, or even just attitude.'²⁰⁵ It was more to do with a reclamation of space within the public domain, and with placing the female voice within that space. The central story was untold, put a clear focus on the actions of women, and would mark the forthcoming centenary of the 1918 franchise in which the first raft of women in the UK received the vote.

Institutions and ideology

In taking the idea for the project to YTR and Pilot Theatre, the women who conceived it found a platform and a means of production. The directors attached to it were both women, as were many of the production team. However, the project was now being placed in the hands of institutions, and as a result, the politics and gender politics of the situation became more complicated. The initial impetus of the project had been a claiming back of creative control on the part of individual actors who were now being asked to relinquish that control to the hierarchy of established organisations.

²⁰⁵ Jackson, A. (2007). *Theatre, Education and the Making of Meanings*. Manchester: Manchester University Press p12

When YTR and Pilot had produced *In Fog and Falling Snow*, they had been unequal partners: there is a significant difference in scale between the two organisations, YTR had put up almost all of the money for the production, and the imbalance in seniority between the three directors (as well as the fact that the most senior was a man, and the other two were women) had contributed to a complicated dynamic, and creative tensions. In contrast, *Everything is Possible* was a co-commission, with both companies having an equal voice in the commissioning process, and there was parity between the directors, who were both women. As Katie Posner observed, ‘there was no hierarchy because me and Juliet were on equal terms in our own organisations, so actually that made a massive difference.’²⁰⁶ There was, however, an emerging issue of power within the project, as the institutions with the money and means for production took on the role of decision-makers; on the one hand appearing to give agency to the women who originated the project, but at the same time re-claiming control in key areas. Critically, I had not been part of the group initiating the piece, but had been brought in at the invitation of the directors. From the perspective of the commissioning companies, the appointment of a writer minimised the risks associated with the scale and profile of the production, but for the group of women who had conceived the show, it challenged the issue of authorship and ownership of both the idea and the text itself. Initial research around the subject of the local suffragette movement had been undertaken by actor Barbara Marten, who quickly developed her own idea for the play and the production. Her work formed the basis of a three day Research and Development

²⁰⁶ Posner, K. Interview with Bridget Foreman, 20th November 2017

period, drawing together the creative team of directors Juliet Forster (Associate Director, YTR), Katie Posner (Associate Director, Pilot Theatre), Barbara Marten, Bridget Foreman (writer), and additional members of the group who came and went, including another actor (Andrina Carroll), the Executive Director of Pilot (Mandy Smith) and Historical Advisor to the production, Professor Krista Cowman.

The aim of the R&D was to enable a sharing of the historical knowledge and research already undertaken, to build a common understanding of what we were aiming to make, and to engage in creative discussion and practical exploration around key themes and characters. But there were also undercurrents of largely unspoken issues that needed to be addressed within the R&D period. Possibly nervous of handing over control, Marten had suggested that she could – in addition to performing in the play – co-write it, and she brought a few scenes that she had written to the R&D. It was understood that the work that she had done needed to be honoured, but the directors were clear in their minds (possibly following the extensive negotiations and accommodations involved with the making of *In Fog and Falling Snow*, with its two writers and three directors), that the play was to be a single-authored piece, and that it should be written by a writer. So one of the aims of the R&D on the part of the directors and writer was that it should reassure Marten that her place as a key member of the creative team was assured, whilst at the same time helping to release the issue of authorship, or at least clarify the role of the writer. While there was a desire on the part of the individuals involved to retain a spirit of collaboration, nonetheless we can see in this the power of the institutions working against the original principles of the project. This tension

resulted (unintentionally) in some of the ideas that Marten had already worked into her concept of the piece becoming accommodations within the commission: her preferred starting point of the play, in terms of both location (within the city) and timeframe, implied a narrative structure that depended on flashback, and the foregrounding of certain characters that Marten felt particularly drawn to, came with an expectation of casting.

The creative execution of ideas that have not originated with the writer is one of the key features of directive commissions. A degree of discernment is required, however, in evaluating the importance of certain ideas, and the agenda that may lie behind them. The provenance of an idea is significant (whose was it? Is there sensitivity around it?), as is an understanding of the thinking behind it (where did it come from?). Is it being promoted for artistic reasons, or out of ideology, or as a result of political expediency? Is it a core idea, upon which the project depends, or is it more peripheral? Essentially, in approaching discussions around ideas, it is helpful to know if they are fixed or moveable, and if they appear to be moveable, what the context of the discussion might be around them.

In addition to the accommodations that emerged from the period of R&D, there were other constraints that arrived as legacies of previous community plays staged by YTR and Pilot: a tradition of outdoor performance (although the majority of *Everything is Possible* was to be staged in the main house auditorium of the Theatre Royal) and the inclusion of a community choir. That the story needed to accommodate a cast of around 150 community actors, the vast majority of them women, was a given, as was the provision of parts for young people and children.

Additionally, there were three (it would later reduce to two) professional female actors who had initiated the project, all of a similar age and casting type, who would lead the cast. Further elements came out of the research and the R&D: a desire to make practical use of silent movies as a cultural reference, and a commitment to ensuring that we were not creating a costume drama, but a play with robust and challenging contemporary and political resonance.

The fact that we were embarking upon a story built around female characters, and within a process that was being led by women, was a key focus of the R&D. There was much discussion of the contemporary horizon of the piece, of feminism as a driving force both in the years leading up to WWI and today, of the advances that had been made, and those that had not. There was some generational spread, from Marten, whose feminism was rooted in a 1970s, northern, working class ethic, to younger women who had grown up in a supposedly postfeminist world, and those in between. Postfeminism has been identified (by Diamond et al.) as ‘the happy creature of neoliberalism’ in that it ‘claims to have absorbed feminist ideas, images and rhetorics while insisting that struggles for social and gender justice are over.’²⁰⁷ In fact, they argue, neoliberalism has delivered

the restoration of patriarchal power, reconstituted less in terms of the family and the state than by the ‘invisible hand’ of corporate capitalism...with disastrous consequences for women, who are the traditional caretakers of children and the elderly.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁷ Diamond, E. Varney, D. & Amich, C. (Eds.) (2017). *Performance, Feminism and Affect in Neoliberal Times*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. p3

²⁰⁸ Ibid. p3

Without articulating it in exactly these terms, we came to understand that even allowing for the range of age and experience within the room, there was much that was held in common: the pressures upon us as working mothers of small children, the lack of flexibility of the industry we worked in, the extraordinarily rare experience of participating in a project that was overwhelmingly female in its operation and outlook. A shocking, but telling, moment for the project was the one in which it emerged that every woman in the room had experienced some kind of sexual assault by a man, revealing the structural, oppressive frame around our experiences as individuals. Moments such as this gave some crystallisation to the thinking within the project that endless discussion could not, and engendered within it a spirit of activism that was to prove highly significant.

Background and context

Feminism

As the play coalesced around the character of Annie Seymour-Pearson, York's only suffragette to be imprisoned for her activities, she came to inhabit the space occupied by what Kim Solga has described as 'problem' women in plays that feature 'a challenging female character at its core, a woman whose resistance to the feminine propriety dictated by her society makes her troublesome.'²⁰⁹ Janelle Reinelt has traced the start of feminist theatre in the UK to Red Ladder's production of

²⁰⁹ Solga, K. (2016). *Theatre and Feminism*. London: Palgrave p39

Strike While the Iron is Hot, noting its relationship to Brecht's *The Mother*: 'in both plays, a central woman character has her consciousness raised and undertakes direct action because of her experience of injustice.'²¹⁰ This exactly describes the journey of Annie in *Everything in Possible*, and the growing ambition of the production in terms of the impact on its audience.

Aston asks us to 'remember that possible women subjects are not necessarily in 'view'...the obscuration of women's social, creative and theatrical histories [means that] finding a subject may be linked to the project of making the 'invisible visible'.'²¹¹ In the case of both *In Fog and Falling Snow* and *Everything is Possible*, the original idea had been subject matter rather than subjects: a play about the railways in York, and a play about suffragettes in York. The initial task for the writers was finding a subject: the identification of central character(s) through whom the story could be told (as the participation of professional actors, anchoring each show, was a given). The eventual subjects of both plays are historical figures who lived in the same city, and whose lives missed overlapping by just a couple of years. George Hudson, scapegoated for the cataclysmic railway bubble, was bankrupted and imprisoned, stripped of his honours, his statues ripped from their pedestals, his portraits torn down and dumped in cellars, his name removed from streets and public buildings that had commemorated him in his heyday. And yet, although he is so little known, there are biographies and other accounts readily available to the researcher. Even when every attempt is made to scrub such a man out of history, he

²¹⁰ Reinelt, J. 'Beyond Brecht: Britain's New Feminist Drama'. *Theatre Journal* 38.2 (1986). p156

²¹¹ Ibid. p160

remains. In contrast, Annie Seymour-Pearson's life is in many ways 'invisible'. The domestic circumstances of her life are recorded on census forms, but there is no public account of her suffragette activities. She attempted in a small way to record her experiences, keeping a scrapbook – largely of newspaper cuttings and agendas from suffragette reunion meetings in later years. There are one or two post cards, and a letter she wrote on prison toilet paper to her husband. But when she died, her obituary in the local paper made no reference to her suffragette involvement, and her notebook, unclaimed by family, was sold on by a second hand bookshop. The only reference to her activities – as part of a wider study - is in Professor Krista Cowman's pamphlet, *The Militant Suffragette Movement in York*²¹², and for the playwright there is therefore a great deal more scope for conjecture than when considering George Hudson. While Annie was not a public figure in the way that Hudson was, the contrast between the two as subjects for community theatre is striking, and is played out in the structure of the two plays.

Process and practice

First draft

Coming out of the R&D and moving into writing, there was a raft of apparently hard constraints around which a script had to be constructed. The initial feedback from

²¹² Cowman, K. (2007). *The Militant Suffragette Movement in York*. Borthwick Paper 110. York: University of York

Juliet Forster on the resulting first draft is interesting in terms of the process of directive commissioning:

You did an amazing job in getting some of the history of the women in York, tied in with the broader landscape, with a large number of characters, with some of the things that we were interested in in R&D being featured, such as the silent movie bit, plus opening outside and then coming in, not to mention writing around 2 professional actors of a certain age and character preference! That was no mean feat.²¹³

There is definite acknowledgement here that the demands the commission was placing upon the writer were extensive, as well as that the writer had responded to those demands in the first draft. However, writing on behalf of Posner (her co-director) and herself, Forster's feedback continues:

We don't feel in trying to hit all our agendas that you've been able to write (even in first draft) the play that you might want to write, and we are very keen that you throw out some of those constraints in this next draft.²¹⁴

This gets to the heart of the potential difficulty of directive commissioning as a method of working: the commissioner has 'agendas' that the writer is 'trying to hit', and in doing so hasn't been (in the commissioner's view) 'able to write' the play that she 'might want to write'. The clear implication is that it is also – at this point – not the play that the commissioners want to read. Yet both the commissioner and the writer understand that were it not for the offer of a directive commission, the writer would most probably not have 'wanted to write' a play on this subject in the first place, revealing a tension at work between the restrictions of the constraints and

²¹³ Forster, Juliet, in email to Bridget Foreman, 12th August 2016

²¹⁴ Ibid.

the potential for creativity that the commission offers, that materially affects the drafting process. As a consequence of my endeavour to implement all of the constraints in the first draft, the script itself provided the means to test them, with the result that going into the next draft, some of those hard constraints became soft, and some were even abandoned. It is also only at this point that the idea of ‘the play that you might want to write’ is introduced, meaning that in a sense, the second draft is such a new departure that it might almost be seen as a new first draft. It could be argued that when working in this way, this layering on and off of constraints may be necessary stages of development. However, if one of the intentions of directive commissioning is to rationalise the process by managing the creation of a script in order to ensure that it delivers what is required of it, then there is evidently a risk that it in fact extends and complicates that process.

At the same time that some constraints were removed, others came into play. Since the R&D, Pilot Theatre had been confirmed as full co-producers, and their profile as a company²¹⁵ meant that Forster and Posner were now ‘re-looking at the use of digital technology...as well as the younger voice in the play.’²¹⁶ While the starting imperative had been to write around older women, now ‘the younger voice’ had to be represented. Forster acknowledges that ‘writing round Andrina and Barbara has stood in the way of this’²¹⁷, and since by now two of the three professional actors were no longer available for the production, the number of actors to be written

²¹⁵ Pilot Theatre’s website states: *We’re committed to creating high quality mid-scale theatre for younger audiences, and will be many people’s very first encounter with this form... We are always curious about our ongoing and changing relationship with technology, and often explore this theme.* <https://pilot-theatre.com/about/about-us>

²¹⁶ Forster, Juliet, in email to Bridget Foreman, 12th August 2016

²¹⁷ Ibid.

around reduced to one (Marten). Constraints around structure were also shifting, as the challenges of starting the play where Marten had suggested became evident.

Forster advised:

You should feel free to let go of Barbara's starting point...as this is forcing the narrative to be a bit convoluted and confusing, and start the play where it feels the story actually emerges from.²¹⁸

This introduces a third force within the process: to the commissioner's 'agendas' and what the writer 'wants' to write, the play or the story itself is presented as an almost autonomous entity – 'it' – that has a voice within its own generation, separate from the voice of the writer. Possibly this is an expression of the shared, collaborative sense of ownership of the story with which the project had set out, but what it also provides is a means of disarming debate over where authority lies within the commissioning process, by giving the play an implied independent status.

As discussions around the first draft continued, a subsequent meeting with Forster focused on form and style. From the outset, we knew that history itself presented us with a dramaturgical problem: we were telling the story of a protest movement that had – ostensibly, at least – achieved its objective. In terms of the story, the ending of the play was a forgone conclusion, but this opened up disruptive possibilities for the form and structure of the piece. Broadly speaking, the first draft of the play had been essentially naturalistic, though the action had played out between 1913 (where the heart of the story took place) and the 1950s, providing a flashback narrative standpoint from which the characters reflected in later life. We discussed this

²¹⁸ Ibid.

naturalism, Forster raising the question of direct address to the audience. I was initially resistant: direct address had been used in other community productions, but these had all been staged in non-theatrical spaces (on the streets, within the collections of the National Railway Museum etc.), where the cast and the audience inhabited the same space, the action frequently emerged from within the crowd, and the relationship between performer and audience was un-mediated. The proscenium arch of the Theatre Royal's auditorium presented a separation and a configuration that I felt was essentially unsuited to direct address. Chris Goode has described direct address as a recognition of space shared between performers and audience and 'a basic courtesy', but one with

a political or ethical component as well as an aesthetic and formal significance. We begin with some acknowledgement of the space we share, because in doing so...we restate the fundamental importance...of being specifically here, and precisely now, and actually together, and of being able to extend our here-and-now into imaginative space.²¹⁹

In fact, the issue of direct address was to prove an entry-level discussion to the deeper challenge – including the political ones as identified by Goode - presented by the attempt to achieve some kind of unity (if not to unify) the different performance spaces of the piece. In relation to the stage of the Theatre Royal, Forster revealed that early design ideas for the show included the possibility of building a small, possibly stepped, thrust into the auditorium, thus breaking the 'wall' of the arch and bringing (at least some of) the action into the audience. This detail reveals a further element within the commissioning process, where (in a complete reversal of usual

²¹⁹ Goode, C. (2015). *The Forest and the Field – Changing Theatre in a Changing World*. London: Oberon Ch. 1

practice in traditionally-produced theatre, where a designer would be asked to design for a script) the writer is being asked (in the drafting process) to respond to the design element of the production, which is already in progress. In response to this, and moving into the writing of the second draft, I concluded that, given an audience, the women I was writing about would not have missed any opportunity to speak directly in furtherance of their campaign. Direct address also bolstered the way in which the women at the heart of the story drove the narrative forward themselves, even at points where – dramatically – they were subject to the actions of male characters: in the mouths of women, direct address became another expression of the play's feminism.

Structurally, Forster was also keen to encourage a more disrupted approach. The 1950s sections of the play (which I had conceived as a way of managing Barbara and Andrina's actual ages, giving the characters they played a flashback perspective to allow for them being much older than their characters' ages in 1913), were rejected – largely because they were neither 'now' nor 'then'(1913).²²⁰ However, she identified a small moment in the first draft, which she described as 'very exciting', where Annie extricates herself from a scene set in the 1950s, in order to place herself back into the 1913 action:

Annie: So what did you do?

²²⁰ This is a clear example of a problem-solving response to a constraint: the central character of the play was a historical figure, whose age in 1913 was 35, while the actor who was playing her was in her late 60s.

Leonora: Nothing - then. I just needed to think. I walked past Somerset House and over the river, and every building I passed seemed so solid and massive and permanent, like nothing would ever change, like it couldn't, no matter what we did. London: all that privilege, all that power, it would be there for ever.

Annie: Hm. If we'd known then...all it took was a few bombs, eh?

AS THEY'VE SPOKEN, A SCENE HAS BEEN ESTABLISHED OF THE INSIDE OF BOW STREET POLICE STATION. WOMEN BEING PROCESSED BEFORE BEING BAILED. THEY ARE DISHEVELLED, BRUISED/INJURED, BUT FAR FROM DISHEARTENED

Policeman: Right then. 76!

Annie: Excuse me a moment.

SCENE 13

ANNIE WALKS INTO THE SCENE

Woman 2: Deeds not words!

Women: DEEDS NOT WORDS!

Policeman: Sit down, please.

Woman 2: Votes for women!

Women: VOTES FOR WOMEN! VOTES FOR WOMEN! VOTES FOR
WOMEN!

Policeman: Quieten down, now.

Woman 2: Through thick and thin

Women: WE NE'ER GIVE IN!

Policeman: I said put a sock in it!²²¹

Taking her cue from this transition, Forster encouraged me to inject more 'Brechtian moments' into the text of the next draft, which I understood as a way of expressing, dramaturgically, the sense that women frequently lead disrupted lives in which they are pulled in numerous directions. By extending Aston's 'sphere of disturbance' thesis, we can identify ways of expanding the sphere beyond the socio-political contexts and patriarchal structures upon which it operates, and observe its impact upon traditional dramaturgical structure and form in much feminist theatre. Such dramaturgical disruptions partly reflect a counter-cultural reluctance - or even refusal - to conform to masculine norms, but they are also an expression of the fact that women's stories are often less complete than men's; more interrupted and – critically – less documented. As I moved into the next draft, abruptions and

²²¹ Foreman, B. (2016). *Everything is Possible*. First draft.

interruptions became an expression of this, and of David Barnett's description of the aim of Brecht's theatre being to change society 'by revealing instability and changeability in what we might have considered fixed and enduring.'²²² This breaking of theatrical conventions was to operate as a disruptive device 'to jolt the audience out of a position of acceptance of the world as it is and to suggest it could be different.'²²³ Such an approach made manifest the feminist perspective that underpinned the project regarding the understanding of women's material conditions in history, and also – as a guiding principle – contributed to a framing of the political approach of the piece as it drew together the past and present experiences of women. Elin Diamond, writing of Brecht's Alienation effect as an invitation to look beyond representation, describes it as an approach that

invites the participatory play of the spectator, and the possibility for which Brecht most devoutly wished, that significance (the production of meaning) continue beyond the play's end, congealing into choice and action after the spectator leaves the theatre.²²⁴

This drive towards performance efficacy became more urgent and pronounced as the production moved closer to performance, and as Political developments re-framed the context of the play, pulling into sharp focus Diamond's

double movement in Brechtian historicization of preserving the “distinguishing marks” of the past and acknowledging, even foregrounding, the audience's present perspective...When Brecht says that spectators should become historians, he refers both to the spectator's detachment, her

²²² Barnett, D. (2015). *Brecht in Practice: Theatre, Theory and Performance*. London: Bloomsbury p84

²²³ Ibid. p84

²²⁴ Diamond, E. 'Brechtian Theory / Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism'. *TDR* Vol. 32 No. 1 pp82-94. MIT Press p86

“critical” position, *and* to the fact that she is writing her own history even as she absorbs messages from the stage.²²⁵

The second draft of *Everything is Possible* took a turn at this point into a piece with decidedly feminist and Brechtian references, and, making explicit the essentially (2nd wave) feminist mantra that the personal is the political²²⁶, propelled the play into a new dimension. What it now demanded of its actors and its audience was a way of engaging with the past as an act not of interest, but of necessity, asking them ‘not to accept the status quo, but to appreciate that oppressive structures can be changed if the will for that exists.’²²⁷ This will to effect change, expressed by the story we were telling and embodied by its characters, began to become a force within the approach of the project.

One of the results of the R&D period on *Everything is Possible* had been an increasing sense of us being drawn as individuals and as a creative team more towards activism in the present time as a theme and potential outcome of the project. As some of the initial constraints fell away, my second draft also moved in this direction. Non-naturalistic elements were constant reminders to the audience that they were being asked to engage and attend to the action rather than absorb it. They were addressed directly, and characters moved openly between speaking to the audience and participating in the action of the play:

Annie: (ADDRESSING THE AUDIENCE) It’s me she’s speaking
to – a while ago, now. I’m sitting in that chair,

²²⁵ Ibid. p87

²²⁶ This expression is unattributable, but see (for example) Hanisch, C. (1969). *The Personal is Political* [online] Available at: <http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html>

²²⁷ Barnett, D. *Brecht in Practice* p3

nodding, smiling. To be honest, I'm not exactly agreeing, but I'm not disagreeing either. I'm doing what I've always done: I'm doing what's expected. Which reminds me - I suppose I'd better offer her more tea. (WALKING INTO THE SCENE) More tea, Edith?

Edith: No, thank you, dear. We must be getting along. The ladies of the Primrose League never rest, you know.

The sense is that the action demands the participation of the characters, forcing their attention away from the audience. It expresses the way in which women are so often pulled in different directions, with multiple demands being made of them. The central metaphor of the play is the way in which Annie's family sitting room is invaded by the political world. In the following section, which precedes Annie's becoming involved with the suffrage movement, her sitting room is first taken over by a meeting of the WSPU, and then by MPs debating the vote on giving women the franchise.

THE SITTING ROOM IS BEGINNING TO FILL WITH MPs,
IN MID-DEBATE. THEY INHABIT IT, AS IF IT IS THE
HOUSE OF COMMONS

William: And what did you speak on?

Mrs Harris: 'A Woman's Place'.

William: Good subject.

Mrs Harris: Oh yes, and I knew it perfect in my front room, when I did it for my sister. Most appreciative, she was.

William: And Coney Street wasn't?

Mrs Harris: My mind went blank. I was sick to my stomach. Hot and cold, dry mouth, wobbly legs -

Evelyn: The stool's?

Mrs Harris: No - mine. Like I said, I was -

William: (WARNING) Steady...

THE NOISE FROM THE MPs STEADILY INCREASES. MRS HARRIS WORKS TO TOP IT

Mrs Harris: Nervous. Distinctly nervous. But the point is, lass, I got through it. I did it. And yes, people shouted at me, and yes, I wished every minute that I was safe in my own four walls, but no bugger - I mean - no *body's* going to hand us equality on a plate, are they?

Not without we stand there, week in week out and demand it, no matter what. You can do it! Say what you said up there. Just maybe without the Scottish accent.

SCENE 6

THE MPs' CHATTER IS OVERWHELMING MRS HARRIS'S
SPEECH. SHE CAN NO LONGER BE HEARD. SUDDENLY WE
ARE IN THE DEBATE - WHICH CAN BE HEARD BY THE
WSPU WOMEN

Speaker: Order! Order!

Anti MP 2: There is strong scientific evidence attesting to
the fact that the mental equilibrium of the
female sex is not as stable as the mental
equilibrium of the male sex.

All MPs: RESPONSE

Anti MP 3: I believe that the normal man and the normal
woman both have the instinct that man should be
the governing one of the two. There is a natural
distinction of sex.

THE WOMEN CLEAR THE WSPU OFFICES AWAY, AND
DISPERSE

Pro MP 2: It is true that the mentality and ordinary
emotions of women are not exactly the same as
those of men -

Anti MPs: There you are! Case closed! Exactly! Etc

Pro MP 2: But men take women's advice frequently, and very often they find it better than their own judgement.

All MPs: CHEERS & JEERS

Anti MP 1: Nothing on God's earth would induce me to vote for giving women the franchise.

Anti MPs: CHEERS

Anti MP 1: I, for one, am not going to be henpecked -

Anti/Pro MPs: STRONG RESPONSES

Anti MP 1: - *henpecked*, I say - into a question of such importance!

Anti MPs: HEAR HEAR!

MABEL AND ANOTHER MAID ENTER THE ROOM. AS THE DEBATE CONTINUES, THEY SILENTLY CLEAN OUT THE GRATE, DUST, AND PUSH A CARPET SWEEPER AROUND. THE MPS LIFT THEIR FEET, HAND OVER ASHTRAYS ETC WITHOUT ACKNOWLEDGING THE WOMEN

Pro MP 1: The fact that we have in this country over 5 million women engaged in earning their own living, over 2 million engaged in industrial pursuits, surely is sufficient argument -

Pro MPs: HEAR HEAR ETC.²²⁸

This device is used throughout the play; an expressionistic mechanism revealing the effect on Annie's life of the political irresistibly invading the personal. At the same time, the personal is layered back onto the political: by conflating locations, verbatim speeches in Parliament given in 1913 are delivered in the presence of women whose menial actions embody and confront the inequality and injustice of the historical context. The worlds of the play fight for territory: there is almost a sense of collision - of a competition for the physical space, that expresses the competing demands upon and within Annie.

Other non-naturalistic devices and styles within the play were written into the second draft of the script: the use of original film footage – confronting the audience with the reality of the events of the play - but layered with live, choreographed action: a reminder of the bleed between past and present, and of their co-existence. In this section, an actual, historical riot is brought right into Annie's sitting room. She has gone to London, where she takes part in a violent protest:

Annie: After that, well, we all knew what we were there for.

PROJECTION OF FILM OF BLACK FRIDAY, AGAINST WHICH POLICE AND WOMEN SCUFFLE. THERE ARE SHOUTS OF SUFFRAGETTE SLOGANS, SFX BREAKING GLASS, POLICE WHISTLES & SHOUTED ORDERS, WOMEN SCREAMING ETC.

²²⁸ Foreman, B. (2017). *Everything is Possible*, final draft

For the first time in all of this, I was really angry.

Suff 6: We broke windows all along Whitehall -

Suff 7: And got as far as the doors to the House of Commons before they stopped us.

ANNIE DELIVERS THE NEXT LINE AS SHE IS GRAPPLING WITH TWO POLICEMEN. THE TEXT ONLY JUST TOPS THE NOISE OF THE BRAWL

Annie: The police had fists and helmets and truncheons.

Suff 4: They were more used to brawling than we were.

Suff 6: Women were being punched, kicked, beaten, dragged by their hair, their breasts grabbed.

A WOMAN SCREAMS. THE GAUZE LIFTS AND ANNIE SHOUTS THE LAST PART OF IT AS SHE IS HAULED AWAY, THROUGH HER SITTING ROOM, WHERE THE SCUFFLE OVERTURNS FURNITURE

Annie: I could taste blood in my mouth. There were women's hats and shoes everywhere. And when they pushed me into the van -

ONE OF THE POLICEMEN PUNCHES HER. SHE FALLS TO THE FLOOR OF HER SITTING ROOM, THEN PRESSES A BLOODIED HANKERCHIEF TO HER EYE AND WALKS FORWARD

TO THE AUDIENCE. SHE POINTS AT HER EYE, AND SAYS
TO THEM:

Obstructing a policeman.

SHE BURSTS OUT LAUGHING, WHICH QUICKLY BECOMES
SOBBING. THE SCENE BUILDS AROUND HER²²⁹

There are a number of different theatrical techniques being used at once here: the naturalistic representation of Annie scuffling with and being punched by a policeman, but set against a tightly-choreographed and highly-stylised riot sequence, performed by a large number of women, which is itself overlaid with original film footage of an actual suffragette riot, while Annie's experience is being shared with the audience through her direct address to them, and the whole scene is played within her sitting room. It is technically complex, but the intention is to deepen the audience's engagement rather than to create aesthetic effect. It is also an example of the feminist approach to theatre-making that has been compared to quilting: a bringing together of apparently disparate parts and styles to create a whole. As they worked, members of the lesbian group Siren had felt constrained by naturalism and felt that rather 'what we needed were slicing techniques, ways of suspending belief, to get the imagination and the emotions operating on many different levels.'²³⁰

Monstrous Regiment, working on Caryl Churchill's *Vinegar Tom*, laboured to 'reclaim the history play from the women's point of view', because the 'simple telling of the historical story...is not enough...our experience is that life is not the simple story, and

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Siren, Interview in Aston, E. (Ed), (1977). *Feminist Theatre Voices*. Loughborough: Loughborough Theatre Texts pp77-101

that you have to find some way of expressing that in dramatic form.’²³¹ *Everything is Possible* engaged with that reclamation by employing representation as a driving force within the commissioning and writing processes.

While the initial idea for the project might have suggested that a piece of feminist theatre was the anticipated outcome, it was the minutiae of the commissioning constraints, of context and of configuration, that resulted in a piece that expresses its feminism – and political purpose – structurally as well as in terms of ‘message’. The journey that the text took through development facilitated a coming together of form and content that was intuitively reached for rather than proscribed, and the construction of which was achieved through the many conversations and compromises, the competition and collaboration of the process. In the re-drafting of *Everything is Possible*, structural choices were being made instinctively rather than as a conscious attempt to emulate any acknowledged feminist form. The female characters who carry the play are both active and articulate, and while the fundamentals of story and character gave these individual characters agency, the constraints of the commission necessitated a narrative approach that was at times almost choral, with large groups of women carrying the story in a manner Aston describes as ‘anti-spotlight’; presenting a group of women (rather than an individual) as the biographical subject.²³² There are moments when this group wrests the narrative from the central characters, with no attempt, as Aston says ‘to hide the ‘seams’’.²³³ With the quality of a blunt relay, these transitions are at times a practical

²³¹ Hanna, G. (1978) ‘Feminism and Theatre’. *Theatre Papers*, 2nd Series No 8, pp10-11

²³² Aston, E. (1999). *Feminist Theatre Practice; A Handbook*. London: Routledge p161

²³³ Ibid. p165

response to the challenge of getting large numbers of people on and off stage, moving between scenes without huge pauses in the action, but they also reinforce the way in which the story belongs to the company and is passed freely around it:

Arthur: Well, it's not required, is it? I'm sure there are things other than being imprisoned that you could do to make yourself useful to 'the cause'.

SHE LOOKS AT HIM. VIOLET AND THE WSPU WOMEN ENTER, CARRYING BOARDS, BROOM HANDLES ETC, AND STAND AT A LITTLE DISTANCE, OBSERVING

Annie: Thank you.

THEY LOOK AT EACH OTHER IN SILENCE FOR A MOMENT

I did miss you too, you know.

Arthur: Really?

Annie: I even wrote to you.

Arthur: I didn't receive anything.

Annie: I never got a chance to send it. It's here.

SHE TAKES A WAD OF TOILET PAPER OUT OF HER BAG

Arthur: Is that what I think it is?

Annie: It's all there was to write on. I was rather pleased with my resourcefulness, actually.

Arthur: I feel even more sorry for the women still in there now I know you've stolen all the lavatory paper.

THE WOMEN LAUGH

Annie: Oh...I didn't think of that.

Violet: Have you two finished?

Arthur: What?

Annie: Yes, we have.

Violet: 'Cause we need to get on.

Annie: Yes, of course. Off you go, Arthur.

HE OPENS HIS MOUTH TO SAY SOMETHING, THINKS THE BETTER OF IT, AND LEAVES²³⁴

This openness, in which the audience is made party to the mechanics of the story, builds what Jill Dolan sees as 'an emotional relationship between those who create for and act on the stage, and those who attend performance with open hearts and minds'²³⁵, suggesting that active engagement on the part of the spectator may be ignited as much by emotional attachment as by critical observation. This understanding aligns with Gillian Hanna's observation that there is a merit in blending Brechtian and Stanislavskian approaches, 'lead[ing] in the direction of both

²³⁴ Foreman, B. (2017). *Everything is Possible*, final draft

²³⁵ Solga, K. (2016). *Theatre and Feminism*. London: Palgrave p61

a new dramaturgy and a revised acting style.²³⁶ In *Everything is Possible*, there are points where the conversation between Annie and the audience almost feels two-way. After she returns from Emily Wilding Davison's funeral, she sits bleakly as original film footage of the tragedy plays.

ANNIE TAKES A SWIG OF HER PORT, AND TURNS TO LOOK AT THE SCREEN. ON A LOOP, THE FILM IS AGAIN OF THE RACE

Annie: Turn it off. I can't bear any more.

IT CLICKS OFF ABRUPTLY. THE WOMEN EXIT. VIOLET & LOTTIE ENTER. THEY START TO PACK AWAY THE PILES OF PROTEST MATERIAL, BANNERS ETC IN ANNIE'S SITTING ROOM. SHE SPEAKS TO THE AUDIENCE

1913, that was. You know what's coming, don't you?

Better than we did.

SCENE 12

THE FAMOUS KITCHENER POSTER (YOUR COUNTRY NEEDS YOU!) IS PROJECTED ONTO THE GAUZE

²³⁶ Reinelt, J. (1986). *Beyond Brecht: Britain's New Feminist Drama*. Theatre Journal 38.2. pp162-3

Annie: The thing is, you can't fight two wars at once.²³⁷

At this late stage in the play, both Annie and the actor playing her have developed a shorthand in their exchange with the audience. Annie knows that they know more than she does, and it allows her to propel the action forward with the minimum of explanation or commentary. It acknowledges Annie's place outside the time-space continuum of the play. It plays – knowingly – into the concept of dramatic irony, and it breaks the rules of traditional dramaturgy. Reinelt sees the effectiveness of feminist theatre as 'demand[ing] the dramatization of personal emotional life, drawing on, to some extent, the techniques of traditional bourgeois realism', while also relying on Epic techniques. She concludes that 'Out of the need to evolve a suitable dramatic form for socialist-feminist drama, a new theatrical style may be evolving which synthesizes older techniques.'²³⁸ Stylistically, *Everything is Possible* is at its most naturalistic in Annie's domestic scenes; the sphere in which she lives most conventionally, then opens up to welcome the community of women (including some challenging and even dangerous characters). This, in turn, exposes Annie to risk; disrupts, destroys and finally transforms her domestic setting, until the action ultimately draws Annie away from home entirely. The last time we see her, she is casting her vote in a 2017 polling station. Not only has she stepped out of her domestic confines, but she has also broken through the veil of history, standing alongside a company of (largely) women, who have set their characters aside and are present in the final scene as themselves, enacting a familiar and shared ritual.

²³⁷ Foreman, B. (2017). *Everything is Possible*, final draft

²³⁸ Reinelt, Janelle, (1986). 'Beyond Brecht: Britain's New Feminist Drama'. *Theatre Journal* 38.2 pp162-3

This sense of ownership of the story was written in part into the text, but was also an outcome of *Everything is Possible* being a piece of community theatre. Many of the more than 150 actors who made up the cast of the show became deeply committed to it both as a piece of theatre and as a statement of position. The play functioned, in many ways, as a personal and public reminder of the importance of political participation, and the acting company's commitment to this message provided the emotional punch of the ending of the show, as the actors became themselves, inhabiting a time and space that belonged to them, and to the audience.

Performance efficacy

The issue of ownership, of considering whose voice the play expresses, became acute in the final stages of rehearsal, as what happened on the global stage at that point pulled the project into focus in a way none of us could have anticipated.

Following the custom established by earlier community plays, the directors had wanted, from the outset, to start the play in the streets. Partly this was instinctive; a gut-level understanding of Peter Handke's assertion that 'committed theater these days doesn't happen in theaters (those falsifying domains of art where every word and movement is emptied of significance).'²³⁹ It was also a way of forging a material connection with the street protests of the suffragettes. Nevertheless, following a prologue, the intention was to take the audience into the 18th century auditorium of York Theatre Royal for the majority of the play. This proposal presented not only

²³⁹ Handke, P. (1969). 'Theater-in-the-Streets and Theater-in-Theaters'. In Cohen-Cruz, J. (Ed.), (1998). *Radical Street Performance: An International Anthology*. London: Routledge pp7-10

considerable practical challenges, but also the dis-spiriting prospect of embodying in one show Christopher's Balme's account of the rise of modern drama in 'transform[ing] the theatre from a rowdy, politically explosive gathering into a place of concentrated aesthetic absorption'.²⁴⁰ Katie Posner, one of the show's directors, expressed this dichotomy as she considered the show's opening: 'I really wanted it to be high-impact and to be meaningful, and actually asking all those people to stand out there and be an active participant and then putting them in a chair and going 'shush' is a challenge in itself.'²⁴¹ It was also obvious that merely locating a part of the play on the streets was not going to generate a performance that acted – in Soyini Madison's words – as 'a subversive tactic to win hearts and minds in their efforts towards a more humane and democratic society.'²⁴² The simple aim of creating an opening for the show that involved audience members would not necessarily result in deeper engagement.

The prologue, fraught with practical and dramaturgical difficulties, was the last part of the script to be addressed. More than any other part of the play, it became almost common property as both directors and I wrestled with how to provide an effective way into the piece. However, as we worked on it, the international and national political landscapes shifted dramatically: first, in November 2016 with the election in the U.S. of Donald Trump, then with the announcement of a general election in the UK to be held on 8th June 2017, just twelve days before the opening night of the show. A global wave of women's protests followed the US election (including in

²⁴⁰ Balme, C. (2014). *The Theatrical Public Sphere*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press p3

²⁴¹ Posner, K. Interview with Bridget Foreman, 20th November 2017

²⁴² Soyini Madison, D. (2010). *Acts of Activism: Human Rights as Radical Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press p1

York), resonating with the protests of the suffragettes: thousands of women marching, banners aloft, demanding gender equality. The connection was potent, and at a late stage in the play's development, the device of a protest provided a dramatically powerful entry point, propelling the 1913 action through a contemporary frame and into a new dimension.

The start of *Everything is Possible* now cast the audience as participants in a street protest, standing alongside agitators at a 2017 women's march, in the shadow of York's medieval Minster. As the audience arrived, there were protest songs and chants, placards were waved, there were genuine petitions being signed by audience members and information about actual charities that support women and girls being distributed. A woman stepped up to a microphone and started to speak. The exact moment at which the play began was difficult to identify. For participants, the line between their presence as individuals and as actors was extremely blurred, until a soundtrack of shattering glass kicked in, and a crowd of 1913 suffragettes, also protesting, appeared. Having initially joined a 2017 protest, the audience now stood shoulder to shoulder with the militant suffragettes of 1913. This was not simply a theatrical device enabling us to step back in time, but an embodied statement of what Solga describes as the '(very feminist) notion that the past and the present are never separate'²⁴³, and an invitation to audience members to self-identify as participants rather than spectators in the action that followed. The site-specific nature of the setting facilitated the journey from one time-frame to another, but also provided an immutable context that allowed the two to co-exist. Jen Harvie has

²⁴³ Solga, K. (2016). *Theatre and Feminism*. London: Palgrave p59

observed of site-specific performance that it 'can enact a spatial history, mediating between the past and the present most obviously, but also between the identities of the past and those of the present and future.'²⁴⁴ The setting that had appeared to cause us the greatest problem, as we had considered how to start the show at an external site and then move it and the audience into a conventional theatre, had – taken in conjunction with the shifting topical landscape - provided us with a conceptual solution.

Conflicts and creativity

At the same time that the nature of the prologue to *Everything is Possible* was becoming clearer, the soft intentions of the play were growing harder in the changing political context. As Boon and Plastow observe, 'what funders usually want is issue-based theatre...which is contained within clearly defined parameters.'²⁴⁵ The shifting parameters challenged such containment, opening up a space in which an unforeseen debate was forced to take place. With the show opening hard on the heels of a UK general election (the result of which was looking increasingly uncertain by the day), we had to speak into the national moment – and to write and rehearse it without knowing the outcome. In a smaller-scale and fully professional production, it might have been possible to be more nimble; to wait for the result and then rehearse a new opening, but with such a large-scale production, featuring non-professional actors, this wasn't feasible.

²⁴⁴ Harvie, J. (2005). *Staging the UK*. Manchester: Manchester University Press p42

²⁴⁵ Boon, R. & J. Plastow (eds.) (2004). *Theatre and Empowerment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press p5

Moreover, the commissioning companies resisted anything that appeared to commit them to any one political standpoint, and this playing into the shibboleth that neutrality is a function of legitimacy meant that - at their insistence - the opening protest had to be written without a party-political position. The first draft of the prologue had represented my own political perspective and persuasion, but I was now required to generalise it so that it expressed frustrations with large P politics, and with a socially disconnected political system, delivering a protest where a sense of perceived (if not actual) disenfranchisement served as an effective connection with the suffrage protests of 1913. The challenge of writing a script that could convey this equivocation was considerable, but it was not the greatest one we were to face.

For Annie, the reinvention of her identity comes with a call to militancy; an issue that divided the suffrage movement, and that the play - through Annie - grapples with. In the final stages of rehearsal, two major terrorist attacks exploded this historical theme of violent engagement into the contemporary debate of the play. The bombing of the Manchester Arena on 22nd May in which twenty-three people died, and the knife and gun attacks on London Bridge on 3rd June, in which a further eight people were killed, thrust the issue of militancy to the foreground, and made it visceral.

Risk and responsibility

The directors became seriously concerned about how the materiality of the opening street protest opening might play out, with its chanting and shattering glass, and

were nervous of anything within the play that appeared to endorse violence. Jenny Spencer has acknowledged the uncomfortable fact that – especially in our 24-hour televised, live-screened age – acts of terror can become their ‘own kind of political theatre’, and can raise ‘unfortunate comparisons to performance art’²⁴⁶, while Jenny Hughes observes that ‘those engaged in war and terrorism have turned to the language and practice of performance and theatre...to legitimize and enact expansive powers.’²⁴⁷ The militant suffragettes used the power of performance to devastating effect. It was the attempt at a public, performative act that led to the death of Emily Wilding Davison under the feet of the King’s horse at the Derby in 1913 – arguably creating the most shocking imagery of the struggle.

Faced with the possibility that the opening of the play might in some way legitimise acts of terror, the directors (under pressure from the producers) proposed abandoning the suffragettes’ chant of ‘Deeds not Words!’, in case it was interpreted as inciting violent action²⁴⁸, and also insisted that qualifying statements be inserted into the text clarifying that for the suffragettes, militancy was only to be employed against property and never against people. As has been indicated by Krista Cowman, the fact that there were no deaths as a direct result of suffragette militant action is ‘something of a moot point given the fact that incendiary bombs and burning

²⁴⁶ Spencer, J. (Ed.) (2012). *Political and Protest Theatre After 9/11: Patriotic Dissent*. Abingdon: Routledge p1

²⁴⁷ Hughes, J. (2007). ‘Theatre, Performance and the ‘War on Terror’: Ethical and Political Questions Arising from British Theatrical Responses to War and Terrorism’. *Contemporary Theatre Review* 17.2.

²⁴⁸ The argument that the suffragettes were terrorists is not considered mainstream. ‘Krista Cowman, a professor of women’s studies at the University of Lincoln, says the suffragettes would have been considered terrorists at the time but not in the same way people would view terrorists today. “The key difference you have to remember, unlike today’s terrorist act, where acts are being committed by people who do have a vote, who are enfranchised, these women were completely outside the system but asked to work within it.” <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-16945901>

buildings are quite difficult to control.’²⁴⁹ However, any historical ambivalence that the play might have reflected around this was being airbrushed by the re-framed terms of the present, as they were defined by the institutions involved. I argued that we could not erase ‘Deeds not Words!’ from history – it was, after all, the most iconic motto of the entire suffrage campaign. But while this was conceded, it was clear that the changing landscape had also shifted the parameters within which decisions were made, and concerns which might at one point have been regarded as artistic were now being cast rhetorically as issues of accountability and even public security.

In order to mitigate against any possibility of confusion between performance and genuine, violent conflict, the 2017 protest developed into a tightly-choreographed flashmob-style movement sequence, with the more disorderly action rooted firmly in 1913, and performed by actors in period costume (including period police uniform). In the decisions that resulted from this debate, the apparent safety of the institutional position and the increasingly choreographed nature of the performance style, it felt as if the prologue’s intended bite had been institutionally de-fanged, and the commissioners’ commitment to the sphere of disturbance had found its limits. But the participants were not subject to the nervousness being shown by the producing companies.

²⁴⁹ Cowman, K. Email to Bridget Foreman. 26th May 2019.

Holding hands with history

As external events affected the process, structures, and working practices of the project, a confluence of internal and external events was impacting participants, igniting a sense of possibility. The dialogue between global events and our theatrical intervention was revealing Alain Badiou's concept of a 'sequence': 'an interrelated chain of historical occurrences that open up the possibility for radical change by historicizing the present and affirming that things are not only as they are now; that this is not the only way to be.'²⁵⁰ Jen Harvie writes in similar terms, but extends the impact to audiences as well as participants, describing community performance as having a distinctive role in 'engag[ing] audiences in negotiating, formulating and changing their relationships to their pasts – and so also their presents and futures.'²⁵¹ Through rehearsals, participants had inhabited the experience of people on all sides of the 1913 conflict. The physical experience of grappling with policemen, of struggling against force feeding, or of restraining someone in order to feed them, the sense of solidarity in linking arms and standing up to violence – even in re-creation, these acts exerted power. In Boal's poetics, the spectator 'trains himself for real action...No matter that the action is fictional; what matters is that it is action!'²⁵² Boon and Plastow assert that theatre that challenges power and asks unsettling questions is 'direct action [that] is at least a rehearsal for revolution'.²⁵³ Many participants started to conduct their own research and chose names for their

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Harvie, J. (2005). *Staging the UK*. Manchester: Manchester University Press p42

²⁵² Boal, A. (1979). *Theatre of the Oppressed*. London: Pluto Press p98

²⁵³ Boon, R. and J. Plastow (eds) (2004). *Theatre and Empowerment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press p10

characters in order to personalise their engagement. A few could even trace relatives who had been suffragettes, and took on their names, re-forging the inter-generational connection. One commented: 'Being involved in the play made me feel close to my ancestors...I felt their ghost or spirit marching alongside me as I marched the streets of York shouting 'Votes for Women!'. What she and others experienced is Haddon's 'coalescing of past and present events into a congruent trajectory'²⁵⁴. This was undoubtedly awakened by the historical story of the suffragettes, but the daily ferment of political events – what was reported on the news and fed onto social media - carried participants forward into a deep engagement with the play's contemporary horizon.

From actors to activists

For participants in *Everything is Possible*, it was among those for whom participation in theatre was a new experience that the impact was greatest. One cast member wrote: 'Being involved with *Everything is Possible* really did make me feel as if I was taking a stand about hugely relevant issues in society.'²⁵⁵ Others concurred: 'The play had a powerful and lasting impact on me...I do feel more of a feminist...more empowered to stand up for what is right as well, remembering all that women have gone through in the past.'²⁵⁶ Anecdotally, it appears that for many cast members, participation in the play constituted a form of activism, albeit one that was

²⁵⁴ Haddon, S. (2015). 'A Rebellious Past: History, Theatre and the England Riots'. *Studies in Theatre and Performance* Vol. 35.

²⁵⁵ Anonymous. (Cast Member). (2018). *Everything is Possible*

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

facilitated by the event itself. It created a sense of empowerment, and it prompted action beyond the theatre in people who were new to activism:

I visited and joined the front line of the anti-fracking camps. There were obvious parallels with *Everything is Possible* and the peaceful protests of the suffragettes, but I was no longer acting...here I was really face to face with the police.²⁵⁷

In making such direct links between her acting and her activism, and the fact that one led to the other, this woman's account points to Boenisch's 'interstice between performing, spectating and living.'²⁵⁸ She shares with many participants the experience of participation as both an end in itself - an act of activism – but also a means by which the practice and habit of activism may be ignited.

Conclusion

In considering how representation shaped the directive commission of *Everything is Possible*, this case study presents the final play as a means of telling the story of the struggle of women to achieve voice and agency through suffrage, but also documents the process of the commission as modelling a way of working that enabled women artists to exercise agency within it. Lisa Disch has described the way in which constitutive representation 'emphasizes that acts of representation help to engender that for which they purport merely to stand', and that in doing so, they

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Boenisch, P. (2017). "'An Actor, but in Life": Spectatorial Consciousness and Materialist Theatre: Some Notes Apropos Althusser' in Fisher, T. and E. Katsouraki (eds) (2017). *Performing Antagonism – Theatre, Performance and Radical Democracy*. London: Palgrave Macmillan p83

make ‘an important breakthrough in linking the politics of representation (cultural, historical and political) to the politics of knowledge and strategies for social justice.’²⁵⁹ Representation forms the link between dramatic content and instrumental aims, enabling participants to connect their engagement with historical events with their involvement in activism.

According to Joe Kelleher, the job of political theatre ‘is to oppose the current state of consensus by provoking disagreements of various sorts.’²⁶⁰ Less often considered is the extent to which the work of making theatre can foster an internal as well as external debate, where the intended effect on an anticipated audience results also in unintended consequences and even disagreements between participants, artists, and institutions. One of the effects of the making of *Everything is Possible* was an emerging dialogue between a planned artistic endeavour and the incursion of global events, with the writing of the play as the point at which the debate became focused. Although there were creative challenges that came with the dynamic impact of a shifting political landscape on production and participants, there was also a shared sense of possibility and of being at the forefront of creative and responsive engagement with unfolding events. While Klein and Kunst have observed that ‘artistic processes have become an important part of the artistic production’²⁶¹, analysis of the directive commission of *Everything is Possible* turns that around, demonstrating that forces at work upon artistic production, its contexts, and the

²⁵⁹ Disch, L. in Disch, L. and M. Hawkesworth (eds) (2016). *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press p799

²⁶⁰ Kelleher, J. (2009). *Theatre and Politics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan p7

²⁶¹ Klein, G. and B. Kunst (2012). ‘Labour and Performance’. *Performance Research* p1

circumstances of its making, might exert influences of change on artistic processes, and on institutions, artists and participants engaged in them.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

This study considers the rise in and practice of directive commissioning. At its heart lie three plays written through this practice, and taking an autoethnographic approach, I have examined the ways in which directive commissioning contexts, conditions and practices in regional and small-scale theatre are shaping work with and by playwrights. In this conclusion, I summarise and reflect on the findings of my research, and consider ways in which playwrights and commissioners might adapt in order to collaborate more effectively in future.

Chapter summaries

In Chapter 1, I gave an account of the rise of literary management throughout the theatre industry, and observed that it is now widely accepted and expected that plays should be developed. I suggested that where individual infrastructures do not support dedicated dramaturgs who can undertake this task – notably in small scale and regional theatre - it falls most often to the director, and I argued that although this may at first look like a re-establishment of a former norm, in fact the working relationship has been re-framed.

In Chapter 2, my case study of *In Fog and Falling Snow* demonstrated how internal and external pressures upon institutions underpin and shape directive commissions.

I suggested that partnerships between organisations and the pursuit of multiple objectives can create conflicting aims, and that a multiplicity of voices within a project can result in confused handling of commissions. I also argued that practical and material constraints, such as structure and space, can invert creative processes for writers.

In Chapter 3, I considered how writers might be commissioned to write for a particular audience and within ideological constraints. Through my case study of the commission of *Simeon's Watch* I suggested that in the relationship between audiences and site, the effect on an audience of a theatrical incursion into a familiar lived space has a distinctive impact. I also examined the way in which projects can evolve through phases of research and development, and the impact of sources and conditions of funding on constraints within a commission.

In Chapter 4, my final case study – of *Everything is Possible* – considered the effect of gender representation on the shaping a directive commission, and how changing external events can impact the development of a piece. I demonstrated the impact of theoretical approaches to theatre-making in the scripting stage of the process, and proposed that in responding to context, directive commissions have the instrumental capacity to engender changes in attitude and behaviour in participants.

This concluding chapter continues by reflecting on the significance of my research. I expand on the implications of my case studies, seeking to understand the effect of directive commissioning on process and practice for writers and commissioners. I make a comparison with writing for film and television, considering development

approaches and the concept of authorship in those industries, and asking what theatre might learn from them. I examine the relationship – for the writer - between constraint and creativity in directive commissions. Finally, I apply this understanding to a projection of what the future might hold for directive commissioning, and how elements of best practice could be introduced to enable more effective processes. I consider potential areas for further research which could build on and extend this study, and look to how the training of writers might respond to changing expectations within the industry.

Reading the research

After many years of working in small-scale theatre, the commissions of *In Fog and Falling Snow* and *Everything is Possible* gave me the opportunity to experience and analyse the processes of directive commissions within larger institutions and with co-producers. Considered alongside the commission of *Simeon's Watch*, and my research into the wider context of the industry, this has enabled me to understand how directive commissioning operates within small-scale and regional settings.

Across all three of my case studies, I examine how directive commissions are managed, the constraints under which they operate, and the processes of development that they are subject to. I suggest that they are to a large degree defined by the contexts within which they are produced, and that materiality of the production can become an influence – sometimes even a guiding principle – on the writing of the play. Location, setting, site and design can determine the framing of a

play. Constraints with regard to scale can inform the way in which a subject is addressed or articulated. A particular ideology can require the writer to give the play a voice that may be distinct from her own. A dynamic process can demand a responsive approach, and for writers to work with flexibility and agility. At a fundamental level, the writer will be working to a commission directed by commissioners who are themselves working to instrumental ends.

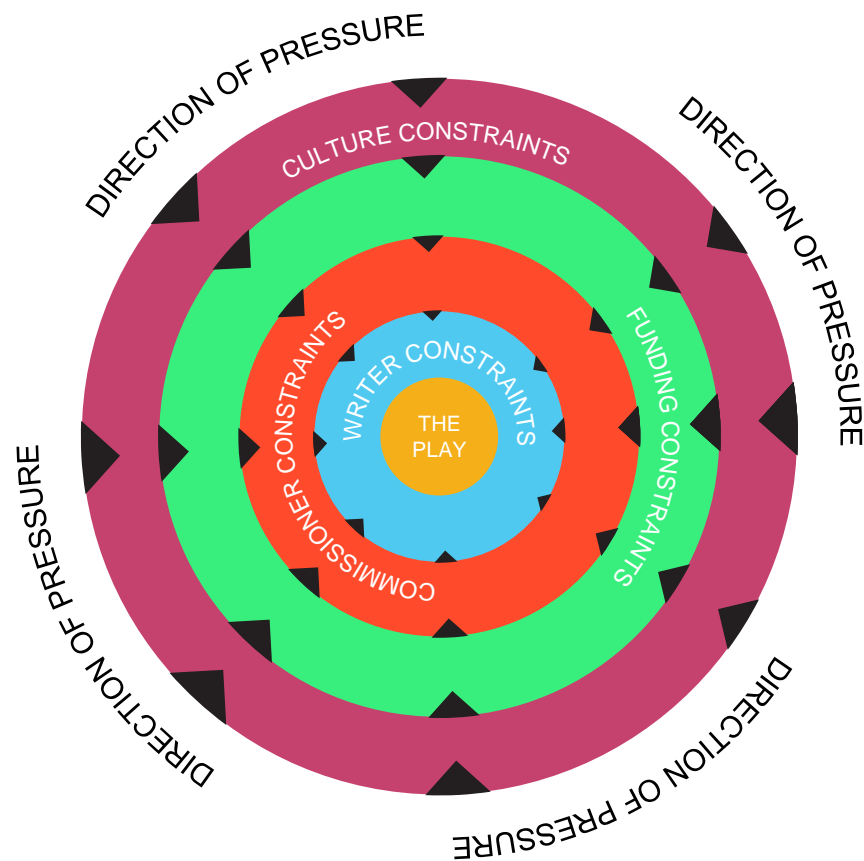


Fig. 4 – Directive commissioning: circles of constraint

Fig. 4 demonstrates how each stakeholder within the directive commissioning processes that this thesis addresses is subject to constraints, which in turn exert

pressure upon each successive participant in the process. Cultural policy around value, subsidy and accountability directly impacts funding levels, sources and requirements. Commissioners are constrained by the scale and terms of funding, and / or by the need for a project to deliver revenue. This results in commissioners giving directive commissions to writers as a way of ensuring that projects deliver across a spectrum of demands. The effect of the pressure is cumulative, as the number of constraints and the range of rationales upon which they are based increases towards the point of production, which is the play itself (at the centre). It is also interesting to note that the subjects of these constraints are generally structures at the periphery of the diagram, then institutions, and eventually individuals at the core. Those closest to the centre of the circle are subject to the greatest number of constraints and are expected to interpret them into a creative commodity, ensuring that the production and the play provide what is required.

I propose that this model expresses a relational structure that represents a significant shift from the traditional notion of playwriting which is still viewed as standard practice. In that somewhat mythologised model, the writer conceives of and writes her play without working within constraints, or works within a supported and supportive process of dramaturgical development. My research indicates that there is now a growing division between writers who continue to make work on their own terms – usually commercially-established writers with significant influence within the industry – and those whose work is made more collaboratively, locally and responsively. I would also contend that the way in which the creation of new writing has been modelled and mediated by major institutions such as the Royal Court has

had an arguably disproportionate influence on the understanding of commissioning and development across the industry, resulting in a situation where smaller organisations, lacking the financial and infrastructural resources of those they seek to emulate, resort to practices that can be ineffective.

As my case studies demonstrate, small-scale and regional theatre are prime exemplars of this situation, where there is no money for literary management, and so the entire process – from commissioning to developing to cutting, editing and restructuring a script – is undertaken by the person who is also tasked with realising the production. It could be argued that this is simply a ‘working back’ of the interpretative role that directors have always taken. But there is a critical difference: where directors develop plays, there is a reversal of the ‘natural’ order, which fundamentally affects the director’s relationship to the text. While a dramaturg or literary manager will be focused entirely on the playwright and the process of development, when a director is placed in a dramaturgical role, there is a likelihood – in Ashreed Sohoeye’s words – that they will be ‘thinking about the production [they can make with the play]’.²⁶² Director Roxana Silbert highlights some of the concomitant risks of this situation, revealing that in this scenario, the director not only becomes a generative force within the process, but also one who wields significant power:

When you work with a new play you’re part of the creation of that new piece of work. Your job is to make it the best play it can be and the best production it can be; once it goes from page to stage it changes

²⁶² Quoted by Bolton, *Demarcating Dramaturgy*

dramatically; for example, you might see that you haven't enough time to do this so you'll add another little scene.²⁶³

There are a number of interesting things to note here. First, that the writer has entirely disappeared from the account; it is, apparently the director's job to 'make it the best play it can be'. Secondly, the two distinct tasks of making 'the best play it can be' and making 'the best production it can be' are both to be undertaken by the director, and have in fact become the same 'job'. Most revealingly, there appears to have been (in the director's mind) an elision between the identities of the playwright and the director: 'you might see that you haven't enough time to do this so you'll add another little scene.' The first 'you' quite rightly refers to the director who has encountered a practical problem during rehearsal. The second 'you' (one might expect) ought to apply to the writer, who may be asked to consider how some re-drafting might help to solve the problem. But in fact, that 'you' appears also to refer to the director, who appears to adjust the structure of the text herself by adding an entire new scene - in order to make space for some action / business / costume change. This highlights the complexity and delicacy of the relationship between writer, director and text, and the risks associated with drawing the distinct and discrete task of development into that matrix. Given the shift in the new writing landscape, and the rise in directive commissioning, understanding the mechanisms that drive the process and practice of working in this way has huge potential benefits, and my research makes the argument for adjusting industry perceptions of playwriting as an activity in the light of this understanding.

²⁶³ Silbert, *Ink Pellet*

A public activity

First, I would argue that while playwriting happens across a spectrum of contexts and conditions, it is no longer accurate to view it as a private enterprise resulting in a public expression. Directive commissioning constitutes a public activity: public and philanthropic funding structures make it publicly accountable from the point of commission, and the constraints that writers work within mean that they are being paid for the way in which they undertake the work, and not simply for its outcome. Directive commissioning has a public function, in that it asks playwrights to write into particular subjects, often with instrumental aims, and to serve specific audiences. It is thus a public practice, resulting in work that has a public form, engaging participants in its processes as well as through performance, extending its audience (in the widest sense) into the practice and structures of its making, and expressing and embodying the aims and ethe of commissioning organisations and companies. As such, the work does not speak with the voice of an individual playwright, but with a public voice.

My research suggests that directive commissioning is currently operating inconsistently and in uneven circumstances, but that it nonetheless offers a contemporary collaborative model that has the potential to bring together artists and organisations in a more joined-up approach to the making of theatre. The practice of directive commissioning gives theatre organisations a way of making distinctive new work that is tailored to their audience and through which relationships can be established and maintained with communities. In this respect,

and in a challenging cultural climate, it offers opportunities to both writers and organisations.

A process

Secondly, in this context, playwriting becomes a sustained process of being commissioned rather than a circumscribed elaboration of a play starting with personal inspiration and ending with submission. Directive commissioning is expansive and collaborative by definition: authorship extends beyond individually-written text, informed by shared ideas and institutionally-imposed constraints. Over the course of a commission, and depending upon the stage of the process, playwrights will need to engage as researchers, collaborators, negotiators, and practitioners, and to understand and respond to funding requirements, cultural policy and institutional identity. For writers, the process of a directive commission is a dynamic and fluid activity demanding agility and a foregrounding of differing forms of engagement at its various stages. I suggest that the fact that it has opened up at a point where there is an increasing (though as yet unequal) representation of women and minority playwrights within the industry also suggests that it stands as a challenge to traditional, more masculine models and structures of playwriting.

In a directive commissioning process, the writer is writing into and in response to her understanding of what is being asked of her. This demands the ability to write within clear constraints, but also to interpret a much less clear accumulation of

expectations deriving from a number of stakeholders within the project. While the intention of the process is to develop a concept that is shared, each member of the group will most likely imagine a different play. Moreover, within any given project, this group may expand and contract, and the authority within the project may shift during different phases of the development process. The dynamism of the process means that the concept itself may change, and the writer will need to demonstrate flexibility in response to this, sometimes having to solve the problems of the process at the same time as delivering the script.

A response to context

Thirdly, directive commissioning is responsive to context, and is a constituent part of wider conditions, embracing the circumstances and constraints of the commission, the unfolding structure of the process and the physical setting and material conditions of production. Any of these are subject to change, and the practice of the playwright, as well as the form and text of the play needs to be reflexive, and to function in a symbiotic relationship with the contexts in which the commission operates. Directive commissions are often – as in the case of all three of my case studies – informed by or deriving from site or physical setting. They are frequently conceived and developed in response to an instrumental need, and they are managed in a collaborative context that extends beyond the rehearsal room and into the furthest reaches of the commissioning organisation.

However, plays that are written through directive commission are so specific in the constraints they are written under, that they are very seldom suitable for production beyond the context in which they are originally made, with the result that they almost never go on to subsequent productions. They also frequently bring together ideas and approaches that form the basis of the commission and that have not originated from the writer. Both of these facts mean that from the writer's perspective it may not feel as if directly commissioned plays represent the playwright's own vision and voice, nor that they contribute to the writer's ability to build a distinctive body of work. On a practical level, the lack of subsequent productions or (as a related factor) suitability for publication means that these often substantial pieces of work have very limited financial return in terms of royalties for the writer.

Authors and authorship

Writers

Even for writers who have flourished within the development system of the last ten to fifteen years, accepting that theatres may want to take the lead in discussions over subject matter is a challenge. At the British Theatre Consortium's *Cutting Edge* conference in 2015, David Eldridge, having defined a writer's play as 'something that comes out of your soul and your heart and your mind' spoke of his horror at having being 'given' a subject and title for a play, and his inability to take on the task,

because ‘it just wouldn’t have been written by me. There was nothing in *here*’ [his heart]²⁶⁴. Speaking at the same event, Laura Wade was critical of what she described as ‘rapid response theatre’ creating the ‘problem’ of theatres putting out a call for plays on certain subjects rather than waiting for the moment ‘when a playwright knows the play is ready’.²⁶⁵ While this approach is clearly distinct from directive commissioning, it shares with that practice the idea that a play’s premise may come from the commissioner rather than the writer. Wade’s belief that rather than engage in either of those methods, theatres might be willing to wait on particular writers suggests that at some levels, and at some theatres, playwrights (or certain playwrights) are still regarded as what Devine described as ‘the fundamental creative force’ in theatre. In answer to a question about why she hadn’t written a play on (for example) climate change, Wade replied ‘because I haven’t had a good idea about it. You can’t force writers into it.’²⁶⁶ This question goes to the heart of the directive commissioning issue: whether commissioners *can* ‘force writers into it’ by asking playwrights to address prescribed issues, and whether – or to what extent – playwrights will feel that they may have relinquished a sense of ownership and authorship of the plays they might write ‘to order’ in this manner.

David Edgar notes the rise of ‘plays written for particular markets’ and theatres ‘becoming increasingly confident in commissioning playwrights to undertake *tasks*’²⁶⁷ (my emphasis). What does this mean for the playwriting community and for

²⁶⁴ Transcribed by Bridget Foreman from notes taken at the British Theatre Consortium conference *Cutting Edge: British Theatre in Hard Times* (2015)

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁷ Edgar, *Playwriting Studies*

the commissioners who seek to commission work directly? There is a reluctance among many writers to regard their writing as a craft, and a willingness to be offended by the suggestion that their skill may lie as much in the execution of developing and writing a play within constraints, as in conceiving of it in the first place. The result is that what some parts of the industry are increasingly asking of writers is inconsistent with the way in which many writers perceive themselves and their practice. This suggests that a re-consideration of the way in which writers operate within theatre ecology could help to move the industry towards a re-framing of working practices in this area.

Stage to screen

Looking to the development processes of film and television might be a useful way of understanding the shifts required in practice and approach from theatre institutions, commissioners and playwrights, in order to map an effective progress from inception to production. Screenwriting is generally understood and practised in much more collaborative and multilayered terms than most theatre writing. Díóg O'Connell stresses the significance of 'understanding the nature of screenwriting as a collaborative activity and setting it aside from other forms of writing'.²⁶⁸ To that end, developing a mutual understanding of process, of its relationship to what is produced, and of its structures is critical. There is, in film making, also an inherent

²⁶⁸ O. Connell, D. in Batty, C. (ed.) (2014). *Screenwriters and Screenwriting – Putting Practice into Context*. Abingdon: Palgrave Macmillan p115

contradiction in the fact that while some of the processes of production draw constituent parts and people together (as in the collaborative approach to much screenwriting), there is also a pushing apart, described by Theodor Adorno as ‘the separation of the labourers from the means of production’²⁶⁹, which is ‘expressed in the perennial conflict between artists active in the culture industry and those who control it’.²⁷⁰ This description presents a structure that closely resembles the tensions expressed by the *Circles of Constraint* model that I propose in relation to directive commissioning. Adorno’s account of the instrumentalism of the culture industry further aligns with many of the fundamental principles of directive commissioning in his proposition that ‘the masses are not the measure but the ideology of the culture industry’²⁷¹. Adorno elaborates on this identification of audience as starting-point rather than end, pointing to ‘technique’, which in ‘art’, ‘is concerned with the internal organization of the object itself, with its inner logic’, whereas ‘the technique of the culture industry is, from the beginning, one of distribution and mechanical reproduction’²⁷². When applied to directive commissioning in theatre, however, this binary model does not allow for the less hardened and more fluid situation that operates in most theatre contexts, for the generally-held desire to endorse the writer’s vision and voice as meaningful, nor for the individual responses of writers to the evolving situation. J.T. Welsch, writing of the rise of professionalisation in poetry points to differences in attitude to the shift being based on ‘whether we experience this as an active or passive shift, as

²⁶⁹ Adorno, T. in Bernstein, J. (Ed.) (1991). *The Culture Industry – Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. Routledge, London p101

²⁷⁰ Ibid. p101

²⁷¹ Ibid. p99

²⁷² Ibid. p101

something either structurally imposed or consciously adopted'²⁷³. This echoes the range of responses in playwrights to the apparent demands of directive commissioning, and their response to them. Welsch concludes that whether professionalisation is 'good or bad' 'might ultimately hinge less on our instinctive reactions to words like "entrepreneurship" or "professionalisation" than on the real opportunities such new language gives rise to'²⁷⁴. An understanding of the ways in which structures that may appear industrial might usefully inform the creative process is one such opportunity. O'Connell suggests that screenplays 'form part of a structure involving phases and stages with many forces conspiring in the building and completion of the structure: political, cultural, economic, etc.'²⁷⁵ For writers and institutions to regard plays (even when unwritten) as an integral part of those phases rather than separate from them - or subject to them - would help to draw the writing process into the heart of each project and give it operative force. In practical terms, fostering an understanding that - in certain contexts – the premise for a play may be regarded as a commonly-held statement of intent – rather than a private piece of intellectual property may give a starting point.

The Why, the What and the How

I suggest that in theatre commissioning, a way of conceptualising that process might be to identify three phases, which are at once sequential and simultaneous: the

²⁷³ Welsch, J. (2018). 'Audit: The Promise of Professionalisation'. *The Poetry Review* 108:3

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ Ibid. p117

Why, the What and the How, all of which should be guided by a shared creative concept, or stage idea.

The Why is the imperative; the driving force and guiding principle of the piece of work. It is the rationale, whether commercial, ideological, artistic, aesthetic, etc., with such considerations operating both individually and in combination. Although the Why represents the earliest stage of development, it is often the most robust as it is frequently articulated in grant applications, mission statements and marketing documents. In relation to *In Fog and Falling Snow*, the Why might be articulated as the need for YTR to make work outside its building, the benefits of re-articulating and connecting with a local community during a time of vulnerability and change, the logic of commissioning a site-specific play that deepens a partnership with other local cultural organisations, etc.

The What is the means of delivery; the vehicle or method of presenting the Why.

The What is often the phase in which the key constraints of the commission are defined: content, scale, cast size, target audience etc. It may also carry constraints in terms of form or style. More challengingly for the playwright, the What may also include various half-articulated or even unspoken expectations. It is also the phase most subject to change as a result of internal or external forces. In the case of *Simeon's Watch*, the What comprised the size of the cast, the scale of production, the nature of the site-generic venues, the character of the audience, the style and tone of the play, and so on.

The How is the mechanism of delivery; the way the commission is written, the detail of construction as applied to the What. The How gives form and substance to the Why. It is the evidence of whether – or not – the Why and the What have been understood and delivered. Within the process, the appearance of the How is the first point at which a product – rather than an idea – can be subject to scrutiny. It is a moment of huge vulnerability: of both risk and opportunity. The How is the words on the page and the staged performance. And while both the Why and the What are embedded within the How, the How will embody the audience experience, and – as the written or recorded account – the record of the work. The How of *Everything is Possible* was the script and its interaction with production, most interestingly in the final stages of the project where both script and staging were subject to change.

In a well-handled commission, these phases form the structure of social capital that underpins the project's development, and operates as a sequential road-map of process. However, they also co-exist, in that they have a simultaneous and ongoing influence within the development of the project as a whole. Operating within a dynamic process, they are also subject to change, as the thinking of the individual members of the creative team develop as they refine and adjust their beliefs in relation to the project. In our process mapping, we can align the institution with the Why; the shared or general beliefs, explored largely through discussion, with the What; and the individual beliefs, being made manifest through the action of writing and production, with the How.

While this analysis of the phases of development of a directive commission seeks to provide a way of understanding how commissioners and writers might engage with

one another, the practice and the process more effectively, a deeper philosophical question remains: that of the relationship between constraint and creativity. The commonly-held perception of creativity is that a significant degree of freedom is a prerequisite. It therefore appears to follow that the likelihood of creativity being exercised diminishes with each additional constraint that is applied. However, my research indicates that the understanding of the notion of constraint requires a more nuanced approach. Patricia Stokes has drawn a distinction between ‘constraints for conformity’ that ‘hinder novelty’, have ‘single correct solutions’, and that ‘preclude the surprising and promote the expected’, and ‘constraints for creativity’ that act as ‘barriers that lead to breakthroughs’.²⁷⁶ Interestingly, even a constraint for creativity initially presents as a barrier. Some writers intuitively understand this: Oscar-winning screenwriter Simon Beaufoy relishes certain constraints: ‘If someone says, ‘well, you can’t do this, you can’t do that, you’ve got that, but no more’, you go ‘Right. How am I going to make this good? How can I do this?’...No matter the constraints, there is creative elbow-room, wherever you look.’²⁷⁷ This is echoed by playwright Mike Kenny: ‘I find restrictions quite liberating, really. I’m quite happy to be given limitations: they’re not limiting.’²⁷⁸ However, both writers can also point to times when the poor handling of a commission has resulted in breakdown rather than breakthrough. Beaufoy observes that in the film industry,

where you sit creatively, you come up with an idea, possibly, or you certainly come up with a script that’s funded huge amounts of money, and then everyone else changes it; *everyone* piles in: producers, commissioning

²⁷⁶ Stokes, P. (2005). *Creativity from Constraints – The Psychology of Breakthrough*. New York: Springer p7

²⁷⁷ Beaufoy, Simon, interview with Bridget Foreman. 30th May 2016

²⁷⁸ Kenny, Mike, interview with Bridget Foreman. 3rd June 2016

editors, directors, actors. They will all have a say – and a big say in the words. And fighting that corner is really difficult.²⁷⁹

Kenny recalls a particularly demanding commission (for a major theatre company) with ‘constantly shifting goalposts. The brief not being clear. The brief being ‘I’ll know it when I see it.’ So you’re constantly serving up different versions that don’t hit the spot...the demands slithered about. The rules kept changing.’²⁸⁰ This kind of experience (and the resulting feeling of failure experienced by writers: Kenny felt ‘I should have been able to negotiate my way through that. In the end, I just couldn’t...it was *awful*’²⁸¹) may well explain some of the general reluctance to acknowledge the growth of directive commissioning. One result of this reluctance is such commissioning is practised entirely subjectively, with vastly varying approaches, and with no common lexicon. What is understood as a ‘constraint’ (if that word is even used) may mean very different things for different people or in different contexts, and at a basic level, it is critical to separate well-communicated constraints for creativity from narrow constraints for conformity, and to understand that a directive commission should not mean one with constantly shifting goalposts. From his own working experience, Kenny articulates the movement from old-style collaborative practice towards directive commissioning. When he started out as a writer, working collaboratively in small-scale theatre, ‘it felt to me like it was all one big conversation in which I made an intervention. Now, I feel more and more it’s like ‘build us this’, ‘it needs to do this and that’.’²⁸² What is clear is that very often writers

²⁷⁹ Beaufoy, interview

²⁸⁰ Kenny, interview

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² Ibid.

do not object to the right kind of constraints, but they fear and resent the wrong kind. For commissioners, knowing the difference is critical to the process and outcome of the commission. When they are enabling rather than hindering the writer, as Stokes concludes, ‘Constraints help develop creativity in beginners and help experts structure and solve creativity problems.’ They ‘clarify and direct the creative process.’²⁸³

The next act

This study has charted the increase in dramaturgy and literary management, and how the resulting culture change they ushered in has had a significant influence on the rise in directive commissioning. In 2019, however, *The Stage* reported that ‘Right now, literary departments are in flux, with their costs being cut. High Tide and Edinburgh Traverse abandoned theirs altogether, while the National merged its literary and studio teams into a new work department.’²⁸⁴ Chris Campbell (stepping down as Literary Manager at the Royal Court, and moving into publishing) warned that ‘Those are big changes if you’re a playwright...writers are no longer as central as they once were.’²⁸⁵ Looking to the future, it seems likely that writers who can develop their practice in order to write to a directive commission may find themselves better able to adapt to the changing situation. Given the present straitened cultural economy, and the demand for ever-increasing levels of self-sufficiency on the part of theatres and companies, it is probable that not only

²⁸³ Stokes, P. (2005). *Creativity from Constraints – The Psychology of Breakthrough*. New York: Springer Conclusion

²⁸⁴ Trueman, M. *The Stage*, January 16th, 2019

²⁸⁵ Ibid, quoting Chris Campbell

practical and financial demands and restrictions, but also factors such as subject matter, style and community participation will become driving forces in directive commissioning in the future. If the current deep levels of prejudice on the part of theatre makers and writers persist, however, and so long as there is a reluctance to engage with it as a practice, it will continue to operate without the vocabulary, common understanding of terms, and guidelines for best practice that could strengthen its effectiveness and improve the creative experience and outcomes for all concerned. How might this be addressed?

Key to a culture change within the industry in relation to directive commissioning will be writers becoming more open about working in this way. Caroline Jester and Caridad Svich interviewed fifty writers for their *Fifty Playwrights on their Craft*.²⁸⁶ When asked about where they found the ideas for their work, Alecky Blythe was the only one to concede that a starting point might be ‘an idea or subject that a producer suggests to me.’²⁸⁷ Morgan Lloyd Malcom’s *Emilia* was one of the biggest shows of 2018-19, starting at the Globe and then transferring to the West End. Lloyd Malcolm (an established but not well-known playwright) has admitted that she had never heard of her subject, Emilia Bassano, before Michelle Terry (Artistic Director at the Globe) commissioned the play from her. She engaged with a collaborative development process with the director, with the result that

we are both working towards a common goal and she’s not playing catch-up a few drafts down the line...the fact that Michelle commissioned this with no script in existence means that everyone has started from scratch...and

²⁸⁶ Jester, C. and C. Svich (2018). *Fifty Playwrights on their Craft*. London: Bloomsbury

²⁸⁷ Alecky Blythe, *Ibid.* p27

therefore I've been able to really draw on people's opinions, research and ideas before sitting down to write.²⁸⁸

This gives an account of good practice in directive commissioning in which the Why, What and How phases are clearly articulated, the writer is made to feel supported but not pressured, and there is a highly successful outcome for writer, commissioning theatre and audiences. Lloyd Malcolm has also happily drawn on ideas that have come from others without feeling that it compromises her authorship.

As playwrights – even if they are pushed into it by changing cultural and material contexts – begin to adjust the way in which they write, and the conditions under which they do so, it will be incumbent upon commissioners to develop best practice in the handling of directive commissions. Growing out of this study, there is further extended research to be done in both the academy and the industry around the processes of directive commission, the relationship between text and production in these commissions, and the role of the writer within them. Definitions of terms, a structured approach in which lines of responsibility and communication are clear and agreed, and a methodology for interrogating constraints could offer fruitful areas for research and development.

There are also less procedural questions to be addressed. Under mounting financial pressure, institutions are becoming become more risk-averse and there is evidence that they are increasingly requiring plays that they have commissioned to be on

²⁸⁸ Lloyd Malcom, M. (2018) *Writing Emilia* [online] Available at: <https://shakespearesglobelog.tumblr.com/post/172380293903/morgan-lloyd-malcolm-writing-emilia-morgan-lloyd>

brand. Add to this the possibility of a directive commission where poor handling may lead to constraints of conformity rather than creativity, and where a multitude of voices are part of the conversation, and there is a risk of writing by committee and homogeneity in the outcome. Christopher Hampton, concerned by the rise in play development, cites Sarah Kane and John Osborne as pioneering writers precisely because their plays upset and disturbed people. 'My fear about all the workshops and creative writing schools and all that stuff is that it takes away those jagged edges that really cut into the audience.'²⁸⁹ Questions remain, and should be engaged with, over whether there is space within the practice of directive commissioning (which is in itself a means of alleviating risk) for writers to create risky work. Allied to this, a deeper enquiry than this study permits into the nature of authorship in directive commissioning would be of interest.

As increasing numbers of writers come through writing courses at universities, the academy has a role to play in how it prepares young writers for life-long careers as playwrights. Many courses are predicated on the pervasive romantic notion that writers write plays and send them to theatres, who produce them. Playwrights themselves, whose manuals are often the textbooks for writing courses, contribute to this myth, sometimes giving an account of playwriting practice that is decades old in its approach. The tools that playwriting courses are giving to young writers need to reflect current industry practice, and equip them for the future. A positive endorsement of writing as both a calling and a craft could allow for more targeted

²⁸⁹ Hampton, C. Interview in *The Stage*. 2nd June 2016

practical training, with modules where students can learn to write to a brief and hone their skills in writing under the terms of a directive commission.

People who work in theatre are resourceful, imaginative problem-solvers, and the practice of directive commissioning is at once as old as theatre itself, and a practical response to the emerging challenges faced by many theatre organisations today.

Despite some unevenness in how it is applied, this study suggests that directive commissioning can offer stimulating and creative opportunities for writers and those who work with them, as well as yet-to-be explored potential for discovering new ways of working in a constantly-evolving theatre ecology.

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