



# 18 YEARS OF THEATRE BRISTOL



**2005–2023**

# ENDINGS & BEGINNINGS



A foreword from the first and final caretakers of Theatre Bristol; Seth Honnor (founding Coordinator and then Director 2004–2010) and Emily Williams (CEO 2020–2023).


**An ethos of Theatre Bristol has always been to stay current.** To respond and flex to the changing needs and landscapes both within the cultural sector but also to look outward and consider the social, economic and

environmental contexts that new work is being made in. Working in this way means the organisation can always support artists and creative freelancers in the best way possible.

Joining Theatre Bristol as CEO, three months into the COVID–19 pandemic when the world was unrecognisable, could have been a disaster, but for an organisation used to being reactive, and with care so firmly front and centre – the work to do, whilst by no means easy, was possible.

This reactive, compassion-filled way of running an organisation has been embedded and championed by every single person that has worked for Theatre Bristol and is testament to the teams and Board that have held, designed and delivered our mission over the years. This collective effort has meant that anything is possible.

Theatre Bristol's work is often invisible, quiet and slow. Our work offers a safe and neutral space for artists to talk about discrimination or injustices without fear of rejection. We address power imbalances in the sector and fight for representation and equity. This daily, quiet work; of giving free advice, support, signposting, listening and critical conversation helps keep individuals afloat and creates long-lasting change.



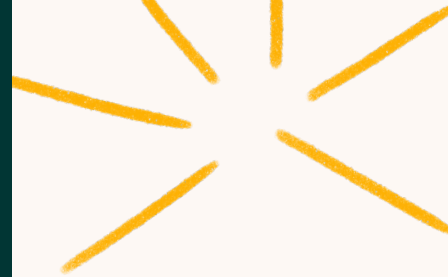
Despite this, due to funding cuts in 2022/23, the decision has been made to close Theatre Bristol. I am deeply concerned that artist support seems to have become less valued, understood and respected within the sector, and especially with those who hold power.

Having been inspired by, worked with and been supported by Theatre Bristol for the 11 years prior to joining the organisation, it is hard to explain the immensity of the feelings I have at being the last CEO. I have learned things working for this organisation that will stay with me forever. I am changed and am better for it. It was genuinely an honour.

The stories you will read in this collection make visible the impact, the commitment and the difference we've made to people's lives, practices, careers and the sector.

This collection and the legacy that Theatre Bristol leaves behind is testament to all the people that have worked and believed in this small but mighty organisation.

**EMILY WILLIAMS**



**In 1998 a recently elected Labour government commissioned Peter Boyden Associates to write a report on the state of regional theatre in the UK. It told a story of regional theatre on its knees. The government agreed additional investment of £25 million a year.**

Most of this money went into regional theatres, but in the south west the Arts Council decided to put a portion into creating "Locality Plans" – strategic plans drawn up in partnership between the sector, Arts Council and local authorities.

In March 2004, after experiencing first-hand the state of the theatre sector as an artist, I applied to be the "Coordinator for the Locality Plan for the Development of Theatre in Greater Bristol".

At interview I persuaded the panel that I could meet nine of their 12 objectives in the plan by creating a website that would allow people to list themselves on the internet and showcase their work. I wanted to create a real map of activity and information on theatre in Bristol that was digital first and bottom up. We launched in 2005 as Theatre Bristol.

We appointed Creative Producers – new roles embedded in the industry at Arnolfini, Tobacco Factory and Circomedia. Their brief was to

help new and emerging talent feel supported and directed. And we were introduced to Open Space Technology – a way for groups to self-organise and take action – we used it repeatedly to open up space for discussion.

In 2007 when the Board of Trustees of Bristol Old Vic announced its closure and the departure of its Director, Theatre Bristol hosted an Open Space Event. Over 200 people came to discuss the future of theatre in Bristol over two days. It was heated and powerful.

What I think was clear to anyone looking in was that Bristol's theatre sector was much more than the Old Vic alone. It was gaining in strength and had become very well networked. So where people

expected to see collapse, actually they saw strength and vibrancy.

Off the back of that event Arts Council granted Theatre Bristol the funds to appoint Peter Boyden to work with Theatre Bristol, Bristol Old Vic, and the now more developed sector, to create a new plan. We consulted with over 200 people and organisations listed on [theatrebristol.net](http://theatrebristol.net) and this plan came to be called "Bristol Live – a performance culture of ambition".

In 2010 I left Theatre Bristol in the capable hands of the then Creative Producers.

When people ask me about the success of Theatre Bristol I say that the most important thing we did was get people to know

each other. We were a product of the time: the dawn of the internet and user generated content, a sector in crisis, and a desperate need to work together towards a stronger future.

It is testament to the subsequent directors and teams that we witnessed such a heartfelt outpouring on social media at the announcement of its closure. Intentionally staying out of the limelight, Theatre Bristol clearly made its mark.

And now, in 2023 I'm co-writing the foreword to an archive at a point of closure for Theatre Bristol due to a decision to disinvest by Arts Council. And I cannot help but observe the contextual parallels to the mid 1990s: a long period of conservative government, and

an arts sector on its knees – maybe not so much as it was, but not enough money to support the organisation that supports the grass roots of the sector.

And so, maybe in five years, Bristol will need another strategic plan for theatre, the process for which will be as important as what is written in the plan.

**SETH HONNOR**



# A BRIEF HISTORY

**Theatre Bristol is an independent organisation founded in 2005 which exists to improve live performance: to make it fairer, more equal and inclusive.**

In 1998 Peter Boyden Associates were commissioned to write a report on the state of Regional Theatres in the UK which resulted in a £25 million investment from the Government. The majority of that investment went into regional theatres in the hope it would filter down and develop the sector. The Arts Council South West Area proposed something different; that a

relatively small portion of the funding should go into the creation of locality based plans for the development of the theatre industry. They worked alongside local councils, established theatre organisations, and theatres, to produce eight “Locality Plans” for the South West. In these early years, a steering group made up of industry representatives, including Arts Council and the Local Authority, supported Theatre Bristol to establish.


In 2005/6 social media and technology revolutionised the way we communicated.

The name, **Theatre Bristol** was Google inspired – a search query that could signpost anyone wondering about theatre in Bristol to all the things about theatre in Bristol. In 2006, with Phelim McDermott’s support, Open Space Technology became a central practice for Theatre Bristol, providing people with the conditions to discuss the challenges they faced and propose and enact the solutions themselves. Theatre Bristol’s ground breaking website was launched which gave visibility and support to people’s practice for the first time, whoever they were.

In 2007 Arts Council England granted Theatre Bristol the funds to work with Bristol Old Vic, and the now more

developed sector, to create a new plan ‘Bristol Live’. This report played a significant role in the development of the sector; Arts Council England committed to funding for Bristol Old Vic and, along with other commitments in the city, forming an incredibly strong and dynamic sector.

In 2009, the organisation was incorporated, and moved to having a combination of staff and external Directors on the Board. Later in 2012, Theatre Bristol saw significant changes as it became an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation securing regular core funding including the employment of part time Artist Support Associates.



Between 2005–2023 Theatre Bristol facilitated important industry conversations, held critical conversations about the state of the sector, commissioned work, produced and collaborated, lead on important sector research and developed art form strategies with a particular focus on Dance and its future in Bristol.

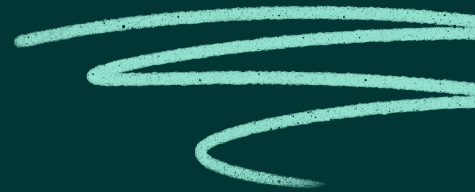
## IT ALSO:

- \* Delivered business development consultancy
- \* Distributed seed funding and bursaries
- \* Offered bespoke COVID-19 support
- \* Delivered business development consultancy
- \* Gathered relevant intelligence used to inform its work and influence others

It prioritised supporting people who experience barriers to participating and working in the arts; giving them knowledge, networks, confidence, and connections that helped them create brilliant, distinctive work and reach people locally, nationally and internationally.

In 2022 Theatre Bristol was unsuccessful with their application to continue being a National Portfolio Organisation from 2023–2026. Along with this, Bristol City Council announced a significant delay on funding decisions for their Cultural Investment Programme until March 2024.

In June 2023 after a period of business scoping the Board of Directors made the decision that it was no longer tenable to continue and on the 10th of July 2023 announced the intention to close the organisation.



# A COLLECTION OF STORIES

By people that connected with  
Theatre Bristol over its 18 years.

**// I am from Bristol originally,** but moved away for studying and work as a secondary drama teacher. I returned to Bristol in 2013, newly freelance after 10 years in teaching. I met with a Theatre Bristol Artist Associate. It felt like they had their finger on the pulse of who was who, what was what and where was where in terms of live arts in Bristol. And the generosity with which they shared that knowledge was vitally helpful to me.

10 years ago I was working out what skills I had as a theatre maker and facilitator, and where I could best start to apply those skills, newly back in Bristol and a recent single parent to three children under 10.

Theatre Bristol helped me get Brave Bold Drama established, no doubt about it. It also built me up as a performer. There were these brilliant evening sessions around 2013–2014, curated by a Theatre Bristol Associate Artist, called Practising Ensemble, where you got to work practically for three hours on just one idea or method. Through that I started to realise that I could hold my own as a performer. I didn't go to drama school, I have an MA in Drama and Theatre but that was pretty academic, not so much practical. But the Practising Ensemble session made me feel welcome, and I felt I fitted in, and had something to offer as a performer. It gave me confidence to believe I could do this...Theatre Bristol,

even in their last few months of operating, have been hugely supportive in a very useful, practical and emotional way to us as a company and me as a person. Last month I was in the unenviable position of being moved out of the workshop space we had been working out of as a company whilst at the same time being moved on from the home I've lived in with my children for the last 10 years.

There's a lot of clique and fake friendliness in the arts. Often, you know deep down people don't really care whether you thrive or go under. They just say nice things to your face but never actually take any action to help you. Theatre Bristol don't play that way.

They say what they mean and they back it up with action and they care. My colleague and I talk about 'legends'. Very occasionally in this game we meet people who actually believe in our work, want it to thrive and give the best of themselves when they're working with us. We call them legends.

Theatre Bristol are legends.



**GILL SIMMONS**

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**I am not sure I would be making work now, if I hadn't had a helping hand from Theatre Bristol** when I founded Unchartered Collective seven years ago. An informal coffee with one of your artist support folk is an enduring friendship and source of crip solidarity. And it was only when I worked with one of your artist support folk on my ACE application that I got the funding to run my first solo R&D (this was my third application attempt and if I'd not gotten it I think I would probably have given up).

Since then, the projects have come thick and fast and I feel very lucky to be part of a community of artists making work with and around creative access. Although I've not needed to engage support from TB in the last five years, I know I wouldn't be here now, without that initial support.

Thank you.

**RAQUEL MESEGUER ZAFE**



**// Theatre Bristol has been a beacon of light** in otherwise dark times. We're so sorry you've been forced to turn that light off. Thank you for having us along for part of your incredible journey and we hope our paths continue to cross.

**ASH BOWMOTT AND  
LAURA SWEENEY**

**// Had it not been for Theatre Bristol** I don't believe I would have had the courage to truly begin my creative journey, so thank you.

**A/W PROGRAMME  
2022–2023 PARTICIPANT**

**//**

**Theatre Bristol has been part of my Bristol landscape since I moved back here in 2011.**

I've been so impressed by the imaginative range of ways you've offered to support artists, inform and generate community. It was amazing during the pandemic to feel the community pull together and get info about how we might stay afloat. Our industry needs hubs and points of contact like this to develop. Theatre Bristol has inspired my approach to an artist development role

I've been doing this year at a circus centre in Sheffield. Often without realising, I was drawing on your work as a point of reference and source of ambition and excellence.



**MADDIE**

**// I've worked with Theatre Bristol for a little while now as an ASA and I have absolutely loved it.**

I have loved all my artist support sessions, without exception actually. Being privy to people's creative ideas, supporting them through funding applications, all of that, and all of the other requests in between, has been so wonderful and I felt so privileged to have that role. And also to be working with such a fantastic team, so caring and so, what's the word, I guess 'rigorous', in delivering the best program we could deliver.

There have been lots of highlights for me throughout my time here at Theatre Bristol, but a more recent and very poignant one has been Greater Expectations. During that last meeting, which was focused

around class and working class experience of being in the Arts, our speakers spoke so passionately and were so vulnerable in what they shared, and it was so moving, and a few people who had attended said that it was the first time they didn't have to code switch in a theatre setting or with other theatre colleagues and the first time they felt seen and it felt like they were coming out as working class artists in a predominantly middle class sector, and some of those people went on to collaborate with each other. I just found that so special because for me that's what Theatre Bristol is about, like holding that space, and I felt very proud to be part of the team that was able to deliver that, and those memories will stay with me.

**AISHA ALI**  
**(TRANSCRIBED FROM VOICE NOTE)**

**// This opportunity is invaluable.** In a city that is desperately lacking in resources for artists and especially lacking producers, Test Run has allowed many artists to begin their professional relationship with a producer. I think it's such an important offer and will help shape the future of Bristol arts ecology.

**TEST RUN 2022–2023**  
**PARTICIPANT**

**// Test Run is a fantastic idea** that has helped me build two new relationships with a Bristol artist and company. There is such a massive need for this sort of short term, paid time to kickstart a relationship between Producer and artists if we are to support new work in the city.

**TEST RUN 2022–2023**  
**PARTICIPANT**



A vital organisation with a very practical approach to supporting and championing artists and workers in the arts in Bristol. I think the free support offered, particularly to freelancers but to everyone, is so valuable for building confidence and breaking down the arts culture assumptions that you should be 'in the know' when you start out, or even five years in.

The arts is so sprawling and so varied that there is no one way to do things, and Theatre Bristol recognises this and pools resources, connections, insights, to create a really comprehensive knowledge base for the arts in Bristol. Theatre Bristol also recognises that support can come in lots

of different forms and doesn't always have to be super formalised – courses and talks are fantastic, but so are lower pressure, accessible events like coffee mornings. It really opens up inroads for people who don't know exactly where they sit in the professional arts world yet.

**A/W PROGRAMME  
2022–2023 PARTICIPANT**

// **Theatre Bristol has been an integral part of my sense of belonging to the creative practitioner network in Bristol.**

I moved here 1.5 years ago from West Wales, so that I could discover a new and motivating network of musicians and theatre makers. The coffee mornings, the monthly newsletters, and some email exchanges with the team have been so helpful to me, to keep my inspiration and motivation going in a sector and industry that is often hard to navigate

as a newcomer. The resources such as 'Demystifying Project Grants' in particular have been absolutely fantastic, and I'm not sure where I would be in my career path right now without having been introduced to Theatre Bristol. Thank you.

**SUZI MACGREGOR**

**// Theatre Bristol has been wonderfully supportive** during my journey to getting my own work made and seen. Through regular discussions with the Artist Support Producer and also meeting his relevant contacts within the industry, Theatre Bristol has helped steer me through choppy waters and avoid countless pitfalls.

**SAIKAT AHAMED**  
(COME AND PLAY)

**// My first experience of Theatre Bristol** was going for a one-on-one advisory session with Simon Day, (Artist Support Producer) when I first moved to the city. The meeting provided me with several jumping off points for the development of my practice and ever since they have acted as an invaluable source of advice and support.

**JO HELLIER**  
(COME AND PLAY)

**// I had some support with Karla when I first moved to Bristol after having worked and lived in Wales since graduating.**

I was feeling really lost in my career, missing my networks and it was all starting to take its toll on my mental health. Karla was amazing – and having a one-to-one session to map out my thoughts was so helpful. She encouraged me to apply for a Developing Your Creative Practice grant – and I was successful in my application. My work has now completely shifted and I’ve had time to focus on my own practice – which resulted in writing my first play (which is going into R&D in the autumn). None of this would have happened if it hadn’t had been for Theatre Bristol.

I also had some support during lockdown from Alex and then later Amy – who both helped me think through some other projects, ways of working and kept me motivated even though times were difficult. I feel so deeply grateful for all of the support I’ve had – and sure there are numerous other artists whose careers and personal life have been changed thanks to the hard work, generosity and care from the team at Theatre Bristol.



**ANONYMOUS**

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**I first heard of Theatre Bristol in 2012, 14 maybe, when they were advertising a Writer in Residence**, which was a writer who would essentially be attached to Theatre Bristol to think and muse around the theatre sector and I thought that was really exciting because instead of the notion of a reviewer, it was a much more complex and subtle way of thinking about how criticism could sit alongside making. So I applied for that job, before I even lived in Bristol, and I did not get it, but it meant that I got to see the office and meet Sarah, Mel and Tanuja, which was great.

And then four years later or so, I moved to Bristol and I really wanted to work with

Theatre Bristol and actually at that time I really needed an artist support session because I didn't know anyone and it just felt like the kind of place, that when you're landing and arriving in Bristol, you could be held and meet people and be connected and sort of say, 'I don't know how to connect with people' and there was a network for doing that.

I recently saw Ania Varez who I remember I did a support session for very early on when I was first an Artist Support Associate and she was saying how we'd spoken right at the beginning of her journey as an artist and she really didn't know what was going on, and then from that I ended up supporting her as

a dramaturg on her amazing project 'Guayabo' about grief in relation to what's happening in Venezuela, and then we ended up being Leverhulme scholars together, and now we're very good friends and colleagues, and she's developed into such an amazing artist and I recently wrote a reference for her DYCP and it was nice to be able to say, 'I've known her however many years now, four years, five years' all through Theatre Bristol.

And then obviously when I got very sick it was Theatre Bristol that stepped up and created a job I could do, which has meant the world to me.

**CAROLINE WILLIAMS**  
(TRANSCRIBED FROM VOICE NOTE)

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**Theatre Bristol is a hugely valuable resource within Bristol.** Particularly in the last few months the offer of support has been the only support of its kind that I could access as a way of navigating a change in direction in my practice at a fairly advanced stage in my career.

**RECIPIENT OF ARTIST  
SUPPORT 2022–2023**

**// My name's Lucinka Eisler.**  
**I worked as an Artist Support Associate** quite a few years ago now, probably I think about seven or eight years ago. I worked with Katie Keeler and Mel and Jo Bannon and Tanuja was on sabbatical that year, and Sarah, of course. I just didn't want the opportunity to go by without saying that Theatre Bristol was just by far the best employment experience I've ever had. It was the experience where I understood what it is to feel genuinely cared for, valued, respected, and kind of therefore really inspired to do well in the team. I think Theatre Bristol is like the honesty box of employers, because you're trusted, you want to do well, you want to contribute, you want to get it right, but not because you feel pressured, but because you feel that what you do will be valued, and will have impact.

And that was everything from scheduling to payment, to the freedom to set your own hours, to being frequently asked, 'are you sure you're not going over your hours?' to just being generally engaged with working with people who are curious. And just generally, really, really brilliant.

It was in the context of a challenging period in my life, it was just like a regular oasis of incredible happiness. The minute I walked into that office I just felt light.

And I deeply valued the work with all of the artists, doing sessions with artists, and being able to listen to them, and learn from them, and offer something where I had the first clue what to offer, not always knowing what to offer, but feeling like actually just the meeting was of

value. And again understanding that with an employer that creates that space for its employees, really holds space for its employees, it allows you to hold space for the people the organisation works with.

And without naming names, I have for many years worked in another organisation that hasn't had the capacity to do that in the same way for lots and lots of reasons, being a very big organisation, and I don't know if it could work in the same way on a bigger scale, but I really see, I have seen the opposite end of the scale. And that experience at Theatre Bristol has constantly inspired me to also within that organisation, the other one that I have worked with for a long time, that I also deeply value and care about, even though it's been very difficult, it's my experience at

Theatre Bristol that helps me navigate that experience and work out how to work within that space and how to try, from within, to also contribute to a changing culture.

Anyway, that's a lot of words, but really I just want to say thank you, and I'm utterly gutted that the organisation isn't going to continue, just knowing what it has given to so many of us over the years. But also think that the influence of Theatre Bristol will go on for generations, because the influence of these things does not disappear overnight. It will never disappear. So thank you and just hats off to everyone who's run that organisation. I think you're all amazing. Thank you. Bye.

**LUCINKA EISLER**  
**(TRANSCRIBED FROM VOICE NOTE)**

**// Tanuja from Theatre Bristol was the first person I ever met with to talk about the possibility of actually being an artist.** It was the first 'professional' meeting I'd had since leaving university (with a theatre degree and not much of a clue about anything else.)

I'm from a working class family, the first to go to university, and then to top it off I did an arts degree in contemporary theatre..! I had ideas, I had ambition, I had work I wanted to make, but I had no real clue about how to go about any of that. I had no one to ask about how any of this worked, how to transition from the safe atmosphere of experimentation as a student into the scary professional arts landscape. How to become like the artists I so admired, how

to get a gig at the places they showed their work at, how to make any money to pay my rent, how to keep going, and keep making work. All of it was baffling, perhaps purposely designed to serve people in the know. And I knew nothing.

That was what Theatre Bristol gave me in that first meeting and many others. Knowledge. And knowledge is power, cheesy but true. Theatre Bristol gave me the inside track, a non-judgemental and honest response to naive questions, a place to dare to say out loud what you wanted to do and not be laughed at or dismissed. A place to be treated as an equal, as if you were already on the path to what you wanted. They treated me as an artist and slowly I became one.

I can't attempt to measure what that meant. What that meeting allowed and what would have happened if it wasn't available. I might have just quietly backed away, confounded and confused and convinced that this wasn't for me. I am heartbroken to know that soon that opportunity won't exist. It is a sad and perilous time for artists and the loss of Theatre Bristol will be felt by many generations of artists to come.

**ANONYMOUS**



**// An absolutely amazing resource** that is a go-to place for support, information, jobs and other practitioners. An amazing organisation that has helped so many creatives.

**A/W PROGRAMME  
2022–2023 PARTICIPANT**

**// I feel comforted knowing that I have started to establish connections with Theatre Bristol,** because I feel like they genuinely would know how to help me, and take me seriously in my pursuit of a self-sustainable artistic career.

**RECIPIENT OF ARTIST  
SUPPORT 2022–2023**



// An amazing organisation, that is needed, there will be a big gap and space without Theatre Bristol, they are connectors to theatre, they are relatable, qualified, inspiring and supportive. Other organisations like Theatre Bristol don't exist. They make real time for individuals to help them, and platform and support artists of all disciplines.

**A/W PROGRAMME  
2022–2023 PARTICIPANT**

// Theatre Bristol is very welcoming and willing to share their expertise freely.

**A/W PROGRAMME  
2022–2023 PARTICIPANT**

// 14 years ago I had a coffee with a member of staff at Theatre Bristol. I had recently graduated and applied for a role here and not been successful, but this staff member reached out and asked if I'd like a coffee/support session. In that meeting I was treated as an equal, like I had worth, and they encouraged me to start calling myself a producer. I left that meeting feeling like I was a part of the sector, and that meeting has influenced my entire career and my approach to others. It is hard to put into words, given that history, how it feels to be the custodian of this organisation at this time.

**EMILY WILLIAMS**

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**When Theatre Bristol first started and Briar was at the helm, she was driven to invest creatively in the thriving Bristol circus and street theatre sector.** Theatre Bristol created weeks of subsidised workshops and 'What If'—creative residencies where people could apply to try new ideas and be mentored/work with amazing, world class directors/dramaturgs/creatives from companies such as Complicité, DV8, Wildworks and many others.

This was the most thriving time for our community and upped our games considerably. We benefited so much from the creative investment and opportunities that came from that time. After Briar left no-one in Theatre Bristol really invested in us in the same way but I still think back to how fertile that time was. It would be amazing if something like this could happen again for the new generation of circus/street performers in Bristol.

**ANONYMOUS**





**// Our partnership with Theatre Bristol has enabled Circomedia to include lively and diverse professional and emerging dance in our venue's performance programme. With their support, young people in our local partner schools have also accessed quality dance movement education as well as being inspired by shows. Theatre Bristol plays a vital role advocating for dance in the city and supporting the development of new and exciting work.**

**JUDE HUTCHEN  
(COME AND PLAY)**

**// I'm really grateful that Theatre Bristol exists, and that Theatre Bristol keeps offering various and useful opportunities and help to creative freelancers. The newsletter is always a good read, with clear warmth and personality. Thank you for existing and being fab!**

**RECIPIENT OF ARTIST  
SUPPORT 2022–2023**

**// I loved meeting other Bristol artists – as a newcomer to the city it's the only space I could find that actually welcomed me.**

**A/W PROGRAMME  
2022–2023 PARTICIPANT**

**// I found a place of belonging. We are not separate from our experiences, and this was the first time I'd heard many of our shared experiences spoken out loud and given space. Hearing others' stories helped me feel less of an awkward outsider & more accepting of myself & my responses to cultural policy & politics.**

**GREATER EXPECTATIONS  
2023 PARTICIPANT**

**// I have never seen or been to an event discussing working class artists before, and it was an amazing experience to meet other working class people working in the arts and talk about things that I have never openly discussed before. It helped me feel that there are other people feeling similar things to me, and that my experience is shared by others.**

**GREATER EXPECTATIONS  
2023 PARTICIPANT**

**// Hi, it's Laura Drane here just leaving a quick note to tell a little bit of my story with Theatre Bristol.** I think I first met Theatre Bristol when I was working for a small organisation that needed a host body to take on a potential funding bid and Theatre Bristol said yes to that, and I think I was fairly amazed because of course funding is competitive and people were sort of against the idea of working collaboratively or being an open host for those kind of things it felt at the time. So, I remember getting the train over from Cardiff to Bristol and going to the offices at The Old Fire Station and I'm pretty sure getting Sarah Kingswell to sign the thing that needed a sort of physical format to be sent off to whatever it was for this funding bid. I don't think they got the money for it actually, but I do remember that

being the first moment I think that I'd really interacted with the organisation.

The story from there meanders all over I suppose. I'd admired Theatre Bristol for a very long time and been well aware after that point of the sort of open model and the hosting and support that the organisation provided for artists and companies, and the capacity building across the sector. And Theatre Bristol also did a pretty seminal piece of work for the Arts Council of Wales which was called 'What Works Wales', which was a big review in 2017-18, I think it was, into the organisation and how lottery funding was being used and what was needed for independent artists and companies across Wales at this point. So they hosted a series of roadshows and various

other things and that was a really important piece of work that I think still echoes today across Wales.

In the time around that as well, I had noticed that Mel was about to go off on maternity leave and had thought that it might be an interesting proposition to put myself forward for Chief Exec on an interim basis and did do all of those interviews and got offered the job which was amazing! So as an independent Producer, to be able to have three days a week which I'd never done before in this way, but to have three days a week of year-round work, for give-or-take a year, at a pretty important point I think, when Mel was off on maternity leave before Emily started, but to try and sort of solidify the base of the organisation and think about what its next steps might be in

business development terms and various other pieces. I really enjoyed it, I thought it was a great challenge, really interesting and I hope it was of use to the organisation at that point as well.

I suppose it's a very long way of saying I can't believe this is it. And I really hope that there is a legacy and I know you'll have thought a lot about that and how the legacy will be managed going forward. Wishing you all well, especially staff, Emily, board, in this moment and the transition and whatever comes next, like I say, for the legacy and for each of you as individuals. Hwyl fawr, as we would say in Welsh, go well, and then yes, see you all soon. Cheers then, bye.

**LAURA DRANE**  
**(TRANSCRIBED FROM VOICE NOTE)**

**// I know that there are thousands and thousands of audience members and participants of arts activity I've pursued and had funded over the last 15 years of my life in Bristol that would never, ever have happened without the belief and support of Theatre Bristol. Their support was part of me accumulating knowledge, confidence, self-identity and philosophies/values (and contacts) that developed my career.**

I never would have got my first ACE funding, never would have realised what kind of writer-practitioner I was, never would have known how to fund Hefted (twice!), never would have gone to Korea and made the show with Sita, never would have gone to the Digital Theatre IETM in Amsterdam and on and on and I'm just one person in 15 years. ACE and BCC are so unbelievably short-sighted. It's bewildering.

**DAVID LANE**

**// I highly value the professional, friendly, supportive and responsive approach that Theatre Bristol takes in its support for the sector. I feel like Theatre Bristol has its finger on the pulse in terms of what Bristol freelance live performance artists need – and then they do something about it! Theatre Bristol supports the sector from within and because it doesn't produce its own work is able to remain neutral – so important!! It's a massively refreshing approach and Theatre Bristol is honestly a reason I have stayed in the city as there are so few organisations out there doing this sort of work in the UK.**

**A/W PROGRAMME  
2022–2023 PARTICIPANT**

**// As an Associate Producer at Theatre Bristol I had a base and access to knowledge about the local and regional arts world. They were generous with their time, offered advice, acted as sounding boards, and gave useful contacts and suggestions as to who was the right person or organisation to talk to. Working at Theatre Bristol was a door opener, and was somewhere I could develop my relationships with artists including Lisa May Thomas, Liz Clarke and Mehmet Sander. I am now working as Senior Producer at MAYK.**

**RUTH HOLDSWORTH  
(COME AND PLAY)**

**// If Theatre Bristol didn't exist the ambitious, vital, and radical work they support would also cease to exist – work cannot survive without others creating a context in which it can thrive.**

Theatre Bristol's support enabled us to think about the care and wellbeing needs that surrounded a project that was so ambitious.

**SELINA THOMPSON**

**// The Producer Surgery was very helpful indeed – leaving me with an overview of my potential, actions to take, and now I have a much better chance of supporting my own income with producing for others.**

**PRODUCER SURGERIES  
2022–2023 PARTICIPANT**

**// I am now part of the Bristol Theatre Parents WhatsApp group. I have made a few friends through the group and we're planning on supporting each other with child care swaps at Edinburgh Fringe.**

I feel I have a stronger network of theatre parent friends in Bristol and somewhere to go for advice/support. It is so useful to have a network to discuss things like reasonable access costs with, before going to an employer.

**BRISTOL THEATRE  
PARENTS NETWORK  
2022–2023 PARTICIPANT**

**//**

**In a time of uncertainty and lack of support in the arts sector, Theatre Bristol has been a great platform of assistance for artists.**

The organisation's website became a valuable resource hub, regularly updated with crucial information and resources. It helped me as an artist with a sense of guidance and empowerment to navigate my career.

Having attended some of their art events, I really got to appreciate the creation of an

environment which respected artists' time and commitment, making it a space to be heard.

Usually their socials have so many exciting events, opportunities, and innovative collaborations, which has given a sense of community and encouragement.

Thanks a lot.

**SEBASTIAN MORALES  
CASTILLO**

**// It feels like a lifeline—a really important organisation thinking critically and strategically about the support that most need to be in place for a thriving theatre and performance community in Bristol and beyond. Your ability to make connections, provide introductions and support people who may be facing a range of challenges in their career – is unparalleled.**

**A/W PROGRAMME  
2022–2023 PARTICIPANT**

**// I found my job of the last 3 years through the Theatre Bristol newsletter. This might seem simple, but it has completely reshaped my career plans and goals.**

**HANNAH**

**// Theatre Bristol provides crucial support to artists when it has never been needed more. With their kind and caring approach, the team truly listens to the needs of the creatives in Bristol and does their very best to address them. Their work is essential and I am so appreciative for how they have helped my development.**

**RECIPIENT OF ARTIST SUPPORT  
2022–2023**

**//**

**I joined an arts organisation in Bristol last summer, from a different part of the country and a different sector. Theatre Bristol’s online information was really helpful for me in orienting myself in the performing arts scene in Bristol, and provided a strong sense of connectedness even as I had yet to build my networks. I attended an online training session on applying for ACE funding organised by Theatre Bristol and it helped me to feel less bewildered by the process. I am now applying everything I learnt from that session to the grant bid writing that I now do in my job.**

I had always intended to engage more with Theatre Bristol, including at the coffee mornings, but the timing didn’t work out. Despite this, I felt reassured knowing about the work they were doing and the support that they could offer a small theatre organisation such as ours. I was especially reassured by their work on inclusion, fair practices and wellbeing. It felt like they were a champion for theatre makers of all backgrounds in the city. Their closing is a real loss to the arts scene in Bristol and I am sorry to see them go.

**KIERANN SHAH**

//

**Theatre Bristol have been an essential part of my rebirth and rebranding as an artist coming out of the pandemic.** I decided to switch specialties moving into Audio Description. Their Artist Associate advised and guided me through the DYCP application process leading to a successful pitch. They were then brilliant at promoting me as an AD and supporting my initial steps working with local companies and venues. They also gave me a platform to spread word about Audio Description at their wonderful series of events, Greater Expectations, and make strong connections with industry through their peer programme, Common Ground.

Many of the connections and opportunities that I have now, I would not have were it not for Theatre Bristol. I am extremely grateful for all their support and encouragement in starting out on a new creative journey. I feel incredibly sad that others will not have this kind of support available to them in taking a risk with something new.

**CHARLOTTE WHITTEN**



//

**I first heard about Theatre Bristol whilst job hunting in preparation for leaving a career of 14 years in Education.**

I explored their website and felt excited and moved by their work and vision, and could see myself as a good fit. Luckily, they did too, and I got the job! Five years on, and having worked with several iterations of the team, I still truly believe in the work we have done together, but my overriding experience has been one of care. Through various personal (and global) events, I have always been treated with the utmost care and respect, and it really says something about the organisation, that this has held true through the

three different Chief Execs and the three different line managers that I've worked with. Theatre Bristol has set the bar incredibly high, and I hope to be able to take this magic with me into future roles and organisations.

**ELLA BEST**





**// I'm a musician with no theatre experience and came to Theatre Bristol for help with my rock opera Tintagel.**

Saikat was the first person I spoke to, during the pandemic, via Zoom. He helped me put a theatre script together, read and critiqued it – giving me lots of ideas on taking the action forward, audience perspective, and raising the stakes in conflict. One of the coolest aspects of working with Saikat is how familiar he is with Arthurian legend and Tintagel specifically. That really helped with the importance of the magical perspective running through the piece.

My intention was to try to perform Tintagel the Rock Opera with my band. Unfortunately, the bass player I usually work with has started a funk project that is keeping

him busy and the drummer we played with is involved in an improvisation group that occupies all of his time. Luckily, Kat Lyons was putting on the workshop 'So, You Want to Make a Solo Show?' at Theatre Bristol. They explained in depth how they were able to convert their poetry into a one person theatrical piece. Kat was very specific on the technical aspects of pulling this off. This really helped me to fashion Tintagel from being a band project into a solo project.

Later, when I was seriously thinking that Tintagel was getting close to perform, I met with Aisha. They gave me the encouragement that Tintagel was ready to go. Aisha gave me suggestions about how the rock opera could be launched and how to gather audience feedback to make the show

stronger. This gave me the impetus to book the show into the South Bristol Arts Trail this year to launch it in September.

I met Emily Williams when I started attending the monthly Theatre Bristol coffee mornings. These were a huge help to me in building my understanding about how theatre works. Emily was also incredibly supportive and encouraging. She has put me in touch with Carn to Cove in Cornwall and the National Rural Touring Forum. Both organisations will hopefully help me realise my ambition of touring my show.

It really is unfortunate that Theatre Bristol cannot continue to assist and skill artists wanting to break into theatre. I feel that there will be a yawning gap now – people wanting to find out how to get into theatre will no longer

have the valuable resource to make this happen. I am deeply grateful to everyone at Theatre Bristol who has helped me in the journey of making Tintagel the Rock Opera a reality.

**GUY MALKERSON**

**// Brilliant, amazing resource. You support the arts in such a practical way. Thank you for being there! Keep up the good work.**

**A/W PROGRAMME  
2022–2023 PARTICIPANT**

**// Theatre Bristol ran some Action Learning Sets (ALS), and I was lucky enough to get a place on one.** It was a pinnacle point in my career, just as my freelance practice as a Producer was taking off, but the work-life balance and loneliness of being a freelance Producer was kicking right in. I didn't know what an ALS was until I saw applications open for it. I didn't know coaching was a thing either. It changed my life. I know people use this phrase a lot, and it really did. I had a peer network for the first time. Coaching is such a valued part of my practice now too.

It showed me brilliant people I respect being vulnerable and authentic and seeing the power in that. I had never experienced a space like this before. The learning in the sharing, the active listening, the open questions. These skills have served me ever since and are the bedrock of how I produce to this day. When my path crosses with my ALS cohort to this day I feel such a deep sense of love and gratitude for them and what we shared together. A precious moment in time that has rippled out ever since.

**KATE MCSTRAW**

**// Theatre Bristol mentoring with Deasy Bamford enabled me to apply for DYCP from the Arts Council England.**

As a dyslexic and somewhat anxious late-emerging poet, I found the application utterly overwhelming. As a direct result of the mentoring support via Theatre Bristol, I applied and was successful in receiving the full funding. The DYCP grant has changed my artist trajectory, as it validated my creativity and gave me access to resources and time for research and development. Consequently, I am progressing with my writing and performing, currently finalising a brand new manuscript.

**AGATA PALMER**

**// Theatre Bristol was incredibly supportive in my Arts Council England: Developing Your Creative Practice application.**

Their feedback and advice concerning my successful DYCP "Writing for Puppetry" project, enabled me to explore puppetry in 2021–22, and has made my practice more sustainable – enabling me to work with theatre companies, such as Green Ginger and Pickled Image. Their work and support is hugely appreciated by so many. Thank you.

**MATT GIBBS**



**// The seed funding and support from Test Run helped me secure a relationship with a Bristol producer who has since supported me to write an Arts Council Project Grant for a tour and outreach project: Tam Lin Retold.** The initial couple of days gave us enough time to confirm that we wanted to work together and allowed us to formulate a strategy and direction for the project. As I had some time to invest into creating this project, but

relatively little experience, it was incredibly valuable to have her insight and guidance to get the ball rolling. Her connections with venues has meant that we have 19 venues booked this summer/autumn and another leg in Spring 2024. I wanted to express how grateful I am for Theatre Bristol facilitating this relationship with Test Run funding – we couldn't have achieved what we have at this point without it!

**TEST RUN 2022–2023  
PARTICIPANT**

**// It was really amazing to receive a TB Agents Reimagined grant from Theatre Bristol.** Of course, I was so lucky to get the chance to attend an event I really wanted to go to, without worrying about the financial impact, and the event itself was brilliant and has led to much creative thinking, discussions and ideas. But as well as that, the experience of being successful with an application at this stage in my creative career was really positive. All the interactions I had with Theatre Bristol was great. Thanks so much!

**TB AGENTS REIMAGINED  
2022–2023 PARTICIPANT**

**// The opportunity has allowed me to develop exciting new relationships with two brilliant artists in the city where I live.** As a freelance Producer, I have found it challenging to maintain more than 25% of my paid work in Bristol partly because the artists I have wanted to work with in the past don't have any 'start up' cash to pay for us to work together. As I'm not at a point in my career where I can take on unpaid fundraising to fund my own role, Test Run has offered some time to support artists to write applications.

**TEST RUN 2022–2023  
PARTICIPANT**



**// Theatre Bristol enabled Circus City to happen for the first two years of the festival.**

If Theatre Bristol did not exist I would notice that there would be a lack of an organisation that is very well informed, very capable and able to take risks on behalf of artists. Theatre Bristol is able to feed down the knowledge and experience they have and make themselves available to artists.

## **CIRCUS CITY**

**// Being able to pay a Producer for their time, pay for my own time, get space to dream up new ideas and be creative without fear of money or sustainability has been incredible.** I've been able to focus on my work and potential future in a way I've not been able to previously due to my disability. Test Run has allowed me to dedicate time to a Producer. This has meant I have hope and specific plans for the future that I didn't previously.

## **TEST RUN 2022–2023 PARTICIPANT**

**//**

**When I was first considering moving back to Bristol, Theatre Bristol were one of the first organisations I contacted asking for a cup of tea.** This conversation was transformative, the person I spoke to gave me the confidence to try out life as a freelance Producer and almost nine years on I haven't looked back. I'm now back working full time for an organisation I love, but in those first couple of years of freelance life, Theatre Bristol were instrumental in my career. They introduced me to artists I ended up working with, gave me the opportunity to be an Associate Producer with them for six months, gave me access to hot desking space &

provided countless cups of tea & moments of advice that to this day I cherish.

I'm sad to see Theatre Bristol go, although I'd worked with them less over the last few years they are part of the cultural landscape of Bristol, often providing a vital resource for freelance artists in the city. You will be missed.

And for the part you played in my early career as a freelance Producer I can't say a big enough thank you to Katie, Tanuja, Mel and Sarah.

**HELEN EDWARDS**



**// I started in theatre knowing nothing, with nothing, but what I make. Theatre Bristol launched me.** It's all very well making performance art, but knowing how to produce it sustainably, and to give it the right platform, with the right resources, and the right people listening, is a whole other game. They offered me expert – and incredibly warm and supportive – guidance, and now, I feel like I have landed, and my work will take its rightful place in the world. I actually love Theatre Bristol, right to my fingertips.

**JENNIFER BELL**  
(COME AND PLAY)

**// Theatre Bristol gives us the space in which to stretch our ambition.** Working with the Theatre Bristol team is always collaborative, always supportive and always nudges us that little bit further down interesting and imaginative paths. The focus is on the people, the emphasis is on making the very best of any event, experience or interaction.

**RACHEL MCNALLY**  
(COME AND PLAY)

**//**

**So my name's George and I am the Co-Artistic Director of Ad Infinitum.** We've been based in Bristol now for about five years and when we first got here our company was in a completely different place.

We were growing and didn't know how to manage some elements of that. We'd been focusing on project to project, making theatre pieces, and we do that really well, but our company itself needed to change. It needed structure, it needed systems in place and we didn't know the best way to approach that.

So we came to Theatre Bristol, and we met the wonderful team here, and Sarah Kingswell, and they were incredible, and they helped us put financial and administrative systems in place that we didn't even anticipate, that helped us find a Company Administrator. And our company, little by little, transformed thanks to Theatre Bristol's help.

**GEORGE MANN**  
(TRANSCRIBED FROM VIDEO)

// This is such an important network of people, and so engagingly put together and run by Theatre Bristol. This network has inspired me and allowed me to re-engage with the theatre world having become a parent. The support and advice from this network cannot be underestimated.

**BRISTOL THEATRE  
PARENTS NETWORK  
2022–2023 PARTICIPANT**

// Wonderful to have the opportunity to meet other theatre parents in a warm space where children were welcomed. Thoughtfully curated, with useful discussions and great connections made.

**BRISTOL THEATRE  
PARENTS NETWORK  
2022–2023 PARTICIPANT**

//

I've been General Manager at Theatre Bristol for almost a year and although it's been challenging as we've navigated the closure, I will take many positives from my time in post.

The culture of care for both staff and artists is impressive. I started in the job towards the end of maternity leave, post redundancy, post move to Bristol and post pandemic. I was so grateful to have a phased start to the job, it gave me time to adjust to the change. The Theatre Bristol family reaches far and wide and I'm glad to be part of it, even in this last chapter!

**ISABELLE DRUMMOND**

// RISE Youth Dance has seen lots of support from Theatre Bristol over the years. From financial support called the 'Go See' fund, that allowed us to take young people to see shows, to artists support meetings for CPD.

Whilst not much supports dance in the city, Theatre Bristol tried, as a small organisation to take this on. This meant A LOT to the dance community, even when it was to invite artists to meetings that normally wouldn't get us to be there. It helped us have a voice amidst organisations that don't have dance as an agenda.

The biggest thing that happened was introducing me to different people with skills that could help develop RISE. As a dancer, teacher, I have many skills but to help get RISE to a structured company, which I am now employed through,

I needed help. Through Theatre Bristol, I met Sarah Kingswell, who worked there.

Since leaving Theatre Bristol and working for different companies, Sarah has continued with RISE and forever changed how we run and without her RISE would not be what it is today. Theatre Bristol supported and helped grow relationships that helped make change, growth and the supported RISE and the dance industry in Bristol.

**HELEN WILSON**

**// As soon as I met Katie Keeler and heard about Theatre Bristol I knew I wanted to be part of it.**

Its open door, extended hand and unselfish, unshowy way of lifting others up really stood out. I spent the next two years looking to Theatre Bristol for inspiration, and benefiting from their advice, support and trade secrets while I worked at Arnolfini.

In 2012 I was overjoyed to get the new role of Company Producer, working with Action Hero, Champloo and Firebird – the start of eight wild and wonderful years with Theatre Bristol that stretched and grew my brain, imagination, ambition, friendships, creativity and leadership.

I am hugely indebted to the many people who were part of the Theatre Bristol team and its wider extended family of artists, who together practiced a great reciprocity that meant we all upped our game, striving to make bold art and a better sector. I loved that it tried stuff out, shared what worked, and wasn't afraid to take wrong turnings on the way.

Who I am today is shaped by Theatre Bristol's principles and people who showed a fierce love for independent artists and a belief in multiplicity, generosity and finding real joy in the work, through the tough times as well as the triumphs. May Theatre Bristol's spirit live on.

**MEL SCAFFOLD**

**//**

**Theatre Bristol has supported me throughout my 12 years in Bristol, from my days as an early career performance artist and maker in the city to my current role as the director of Submerge: Bristol International Digital Arts Festival.** What started as an "I wonder if I could produce my own festival" became a reality for me with the support of the organisation.

Without Theatre Bristol, ambitious people wouldn't get the realistic, critical and valuable support that I was lucky to receive.

Theatre Bristol was behind me all the way with bespoke support and face-to-face

mentoring, encouraging me to get to the core of what I wanted to do and what the city needed, and to ask vital questions about the viability and feasibility of my idea. The mentoring was on-going and ad-hoc, and Theatre Bristol helped me throughout my journey as I developed my ideas, structures, festival concept and funding bids.

I know that if I have a tricky question, someone at Theatre Bristol will know the answer.

**MIKE PONY**

**// My Theatre Bristol story is short but certainly sweet.** I was at the start of my career and found it hard to be taken seriously as a Producer by the industry. I decided to sign up for a Producer Surgery in hopes I may be able to receive a bit of advice and have a nice chat, but what I got was not that. What I got was an hour and a half of utter kindness and support, things I didn't think existed in the arts industry based on my experience leading up to that moment. I wasn't just given advice but was helped to make a whole plan for the year ahead. I didn't just have a nice chat but was filled with confidence and hope by a truly fulfilling conversation. This session with Emily undoubtedly changed my whole career.

From there I jumped at every chance possible to be involved

with Theatre Bristol. I was given space to explore artistic relationships with performers through the Test Run scheme. I attended the hugely important Greater Expectations sessions. A particularly memorable experience with Theatre Bristol was a session called Producer Sensemaking in which a group of Producers met to discuss what was needed in the future to help us. I had never been in a room of Producers before and the environment Theatre Bristol created was so brilliant. All my thoughts were valued and I was seen and respected as a Producer for one of the first times.

Without Theatre Bristol, I would not be where I am today. They showed me kindness and acceptance and since, I have been determined to work the same way. Despite the limited

time I got to engage with Theatre Bristol, my gratitude to them, especially Emily, is limitless. The sessions I took part in, the connections I made and the confidence I gained from my involvement are all things I will hold closely as I continue to navigate the industry. An industry now darker without Theatre Bristol.

### **OLIVIA TETLOW**

**// The support for my funding application was invaluable, and I was ultimately successful in my bid (which was my first).** Put simply, I would not have had the confidence or know-how to complete a bid without Theatre Bristol's mentoring support, so thank you so much for all you do, it's so essential in these difficult times.

### **RECIPIENT OF ARTIST SUPPORT 2021**

**// When I was trying to transition from Stage Management into Producing, Theatre Bristol helped me with an artist support session.** I then attended a really good training day on how to book a tour at the Theatre Bristol offices which was so useful to get my head around the financial side of planning and booking a tour. After these things I was left to get on with applying for jobs and finding a way into Producing.

To do this I had to start my own theatre company and produce my first show. I always knew that Theatre Bristol was there to advise me if needed, which was very good to know. Slowly and surely I have grown in confidence as a Producer and I am very sad to see Theatre Bristol go, when I know that others like me would need their support in the future.

### **LOUISE KEMP**



**// I have so many Theatre Bristol stories** as over the years Theatre Bristol has been there for me in many different ways, right from the beginning, getting guidance on writing arts council applications then to brainstorming ways to work with young people who didn't really want to get involved, but they did in the end!

Then a few years on... working there, myself I bought a new jacket and bag for my first day and we had lots of chats about ways that working in the arts could be and should be.

Then to meeting all the amazing artists, some who come up to me now and feel grateful that there was a space and time for them when they needed it. To how I was introduced to their work and then I began to know them better and their ways of working and then just clicking with one in particular when we saw similar approaches within our styles. This year we both turned 50th and we both had fancy parties which we attended and celebrated ourselves and how we met through Theatre Bristol.

**TOM MARSHMAN**

**// It is a holding space for the wealth of artists and creatives working in and around the city, particularly freelancers outside of the main venues.** The support can be specifically tailored to individual needs, but also offering a safe and supportive space for many.

**A/W PROGRAMME  
2022–2023 PARTICIPANT**

**// They are an organisation that always has a finger of the pulse** in terms of knowing the issues that face the people they represent and they are a very agile organisation, responsive to people's situations, they are an organisation sharing advice as it comes out—thinking more than about themselves and being generous about sharing that info with others.

**WIDER SECTOR INTERVIEW  
2020**

**// I had artist support sessions with Aisha Ali which helped me get my DYCP grant.** I don't think I would have got the funding without this support, and the fund has been incredibly formative. I've done workshops and Producer Surgeries and my first encounter with Theatre Bristol was through the Hermit Project online in lockdown 2020—with kind permission to join from bed! Theatre Bristol has always been so kind to me.

**GENEVIEVE DAVIS**



## **Theatre Bristol has been the city's long-term dance partner.**

They've been the friends at the party who spur everyone onto the dance floor. Seeing dance left standing by itself like an awkward teen when the slow songs played, they stepped up and extended a hand. A groundhog day scenario, Theatre Bristol's hand reached out countless times over the years.

\* In **2005** then Director Seth Honnor invited a homeless Dance Bristol into their offices, first at Watershed and then at the Unitarian Church on Brunswick Square, where with the help of a carefully laid dance floor we were able to host Kinesis Youth Dance Company and countless rehearsals and workshops with visiting and local artists.

\* In **2009** led by Katie Keeler, they joined the City Council led Dance Focus group, which aimed to address the lack of strategic support for dance and secure more support for the form from the city's regularly funded arts organisations. This led to four Associate Artists hosted by venues and organisations across the city and the establishment of Testing Ground, a regular works-in-progress sharing, at Circomedia. Crucially, the Dance Focus group received funds for the appointment of a Dance Producer at Theatre Bristol. The Producer role ran from 2010–15 and during this time it supported youth Go-Sees, artist bursaries, match funding and Producer support for artists.

\* Between **2012** and **2016** Theatre Bristol regularly supported the Dance Village programme at Bristol Harbour Festival, contributing to seed commissioning for new site adaptive work by companies and supporting the wildly popular programme of national and local artists which regularly drew audiences of over 160,000 across the weekend.

\* In **2015**, Katie Keeler hosted a series of focused conversations around dance in the city, exploring what support leading to sustainable change for the art form might look like. Dance Futures steering group was set up, recruiting two advocates across 2018 and 19, leading to a successful bid for a two year programme of

residencies, youth and dance and health focused work. Theatre Bristol's Mel Scaffold generously held this work through to her departure.

Dance's challenge has always been securing solid, long term and strategic partnerships with other regularly funded organisations in the city, something the major arts funders have repeatedly expressed a need for—we've been a forever junior. Each time the dance sector has found ourselves languishing alone and flatlining, Theatre Bristol has been there pumping our chest to the beat of Staying Alive.

**KATY NOAKES**



**// Before I moved to the South West I did a bit of research on theatre in Bristol and immediately came across Theatre Bristol.** This was in 2007 at the time of the great Bristol Old Vic crisis and after a couple of emails I was being warmly welcomed into the Open Space meeting at Circomedia that so radically changed the performance landscape in the city, through the generosity of spirit and fearless support from the sector that came as standard with Theatre Bristol.

I've had the pleasure of working with Theatre Bristol pretty much ever since and even though the leadership has changed, that passion and support for the sector and the city has never wavered in all that time. You'll be missed x

**PHIL HINDSON**

**// Theatre Bristol changed the entire course of my life, thanks to an Open Space meeting arranged at Circomedia.**

It was the first time I had attended a Theatre Bristol event and I posted a discussion topic: Who wants to start an artist-led space? Inspired by a background in squatting and temporary autonomous art spaces, I wanted to find other people to share and create with.

I sat down to run the session, one other person turned up, we chatted, I made some notes, we both thought it was a good idea but there just wasn't the interest needed to get it going. The session ended and I went to get a drink.

That was when a series of conversations started with people who had been interested in the idea but were in other

sessions. On the little breaks between sessions enough people came up to me that by the end of the day we had arranged a mailing list, and afterwards met up together to start making things happen and thus began Space Quester, which became Residence, a group of performance and theatre makers that has now existed for 16 years.

Theatre Bristol helped open up the city to me. Through their work I found community, purpose and solidarity. I got to live as an artist in a city that I love surrounded by people I care for. I'm incredibly grateful for everything that has grown from that moment in time, held in space created by Theatre Bristol.

**ED RAPLEY**

**// Theatre Bristol has touched me deeply in so many ways over the 18 years I have engaged with this most beautiful organisation, here's just a few (there are definitely more). Theatre Bristol:**

- \* Regularly offered me a cuppa with a friend/peer/mentor when I felt lost in my career direction
- \* Provided me with an actual salaried position as Artist Support Associate, with actual holiday pay and sick pay and pension contributions (imagine that!)
- \* Gave me an office floor to lie on when trying to work and managing pregnancy pain
- \* Facilitated countless Open Spaces that I attended proffering friendship, thoughts, inspiration, pizza, provocation, belonging, networking
- \* Buoyed me by flying the flag for dance in Bristol, again, and again, and again

- \* Opened up coffee mornings with biscuits and good chat
- \* Meant that I didn't miss out on performances and opportunities through the weekly newsletter and old website
- \* Helped a group of us set up Dance Hub and did it's best to help us keep it going
- \* Managed my budget for one of my largest scale projects
- \* Offered advocacy and was always happy to be included in my Arts Council applications
- \* Continued to run Testing Ground (a dance platform which I set up with Jan Winter) when I lost capacity and saw it into its tenth year!
- \* Equipped me with the skills and knowledge to host Open Spaces
- \* Provided me with pots of welcome/necessary/essential

money for seeing things/  
taking part in things/doing things

- \* Made Dance Futures a possibility which meant so much to many of us dancers in the city
- \* Offered me a working space in which chat, dogs, kids and laughter were always welcome
- \* Helped me to bring together over a hundred Bristol dance artists to talk about survival in my Out of the Box project
- \* Offered me a platform to throw out thoughts that might need to be heard through writing the weekly newsletter
- \* Came to see my shows and were always at other people's shows
- \* Were always up for a drink after a show
- \* Supported me in setting up Baby Office and helping to

facilitate Mothers Who Make and generally gave love and respect and air time for those of us with kids

- \* Made my most ambitious project into a reality by producing it and holding me up. In fact, made many of my projects a reality with constant support and belief in my ability
- \* Always there, a constant, a trusted friend, a family, the go-to when lost or celebrating

I will never stop being gutted that this, one of the most heartfelt and generous organisations imaginable, no longer gets to keep doing what it has always done best supporting Bristol's artists. I will really miss Theatre Bristol and its closing is a phenomenal loss for the city and all its artists. Thanks for everything.

**KARLA SHACKLOCK**

**// Theatre Bristol was a really formative time for me, going from being an artist to... whatever I am now.** What Theatre Bristol gave me was a way to formulate the moral imperative of the role of artists—which had lurked a bit incoherently while I was a practitioner. That is always at the forefront of my mind, particularly the precarity of the industry for artists.

I'm not sure there is a single thing from my time to bring out, other than this odd collection of thoughts which are just personal, and probably not very original— I'm sure lots of people say versions of this.

Seth articulated part of the vision for Theatre Bristol as imagining the time when it ceased to exist. That it was set up to do a job, and when that job was done, it would

stop—a really attractive and radical proposition. Of course, because Theatre Bristol has always been full of passionate and ingenious people, there have always been ways to make performance tick better in the city by nurturing artists and putting them at the heart of things. But it'd be easy to forget what you have achieved, I think. That your role as a trusted broker between artists and organisations has left a city with a much more porous and healthy performance ecology. That there are no longer just monolithic NPOs and a hinterland of artists with little access to them. That your centering of artists in the conversation about culture has been radical and much admired and copied. That there are lots of ways of seeing Theatre Bristol as having done the job it set out to do.

And of course, that when things end, it is only that particular form that stops, and you'll all individually go on to other brilliant things.

**ADAM GENT**

**// Theatre Bristol is an incredible organisation that has a clear and strategic approach.** They create space that supports artists and organisations, small, medium and large, across the city, working in theatre and live performance. I also think their reach goes beyond that because they are a safe space to work. And also they allow artists that move across different parts of the sector to find a safe space at Theatre Bristol.

**PARTNER INTERVIEW 2020**

**// I think Theatre Bristol does a great amount to support artists, especially freelance ones.** It's also been a huge help to us when we've faced extra challenges, such as staffing issues and acting as a third party arbitrator during complaints processes. I think it's a huge shame Theatre Bristol has lost its funding, as it has often been a voice for artists who don't have the same backing to compete with those promoted by larger theatres.

**A/W PROGRAMME  
2022–2023 PARTICIPANT**

**// I recall Theatre Bristol's much needed arrival on the scene, and especially the Creative Producer programme that Green Ginger was able to access for vital peer support in 2007.** Puppet Place – another organisation I work closely with as a Trustee – has also been the recipient of invaluable assistance, with Theatre Bristol providing remote baseline admin support at a critical point in its development from a conventional management-led model to a flat, artist-led one. Thanks to Theatre Bristol, both organisations are able to

face the current challenges of working in a post-Brexit/pandemic landscape.

Artform advocacy is an essential but overlooked role in our sector. Theatre Bristol did this work admirably, and its closure will leave a massive gap. On behalf of all my colleagues, I thank you for all the hard work over the years.

**CHRIS PIRIE**

**// In 2009 Theatre Bristol and Bristol Old Vic gave me my first official commission as a playwright and theatre-maker, for a play called BUZZARD.**

Bristol Old Vic was in a hibernation phase following a funding and infrastructure crisis; I was in a similar state, wondering whether a creative or artistic life was at all viable for me (yeah, guess nothing much has changed there). I'd written soundtracks and scripts, performed in touring shows, collaborated on everything from stand-up comedy to live art installations, and didn't really know how to define my own practice. But the call to step into BOV's empty building and make stuff happen was truly open – it didn't require applicants to fit into any particular tradition, or theme, or agenda. And I was lucky in more ways than one because commission calls

were rare from Theatre Bristol over the years, it was never a producing house. But whenever they made a callout I know they always looked for ways to make it a living, breathing, responsive process, and that was the case in 2009.

There was a proper alchemy to the combination of Theatre Bristol's open-arms attitude and that moment of crisis in the city's theatre community. For full disclosure, at the time my partner Tanuja was working for Theatre Bristol, recusing herself from the commission selection whenever my project was discussed. But as a result of her work I could see and hear, every day, the difficult questions being asked by Theatre Bristol, I could feel the weight and urgency of the need to address that crisis, yet not fix any solutions to fit one

pattern or another, towards anything that might ostracise or exclude. In 2007 Theatre Bristol had co-hosted an Open Space gathering to discuss the BOV situation and what it meant for the future. The first thing that happened was a succession of stern men stood up and demanded to make statements, completely ignoring the terms and conditions of the event and in that moment I think I properly grasped what the theatre community was up against. Two years later, from the viewpoint of making a show in a struggling theatre, I began to truly appreciate what it took to create a healthy environment that wasn't simply healthy for a few select and established people.

Another memory that sums things up for me: Seth Honnor from Theatre Bristol, speaking at a gathering of writers at

the Tobacco Factory. He was asked pointedly whether writers were 'at the heart of everything Theatre Bristol does'. It was more of a prompt really, angling for a fluffing – but Seth immediately responded “no”. Because, he explained, no specific type of artist was more or less at the 'heart' of Theatre Bristol's ambitions, certainly not to the detriment of any other.

Competitive definitions were far from Theatre Bristol's agenda. I always felt its advisors and producers lived non-negotiably in the real world and understood the pressures of capitalism, they were especially expert in funding but if there was a defining quality to the bulk of what they did, it was best found in one of their unofficial mottos: when you share knowledge, everyone gets better.

I mean, the history of human competition is basically the history of dogs pissing on lamp posts. What seems to be of intense importance one moment is only going to be undone by the next dog to come along. No-one ever really owns anything because in the long run, duh, we're all dead. Theatre Bristol's sharing = better ethos is, amongst other things, extremely Bristol. But it runs counter to the spirit of the times, which is to stamp MINE on as much as you possibly can in a useless little fluster before you shuffle off.

It's intensely difficult to hold a line of care, to keep listening rather than shouting, against the constant panic of that culture. Especially as there's an ongoing demand for artists to justify our work in crude social measurements, which

too often leads to some bizarre behaviours – such as claiming that theatre is socially angelic and can 'change the world' – when of course it has no more nor less that potential than absolutely anything else in life.

I'm listing all these pressures and assumptions because, as a lucky bastard who benefited very directly and visibly from Theatre Bristol's existence, I also saw the true underground magic of what they did: to listen to as many voices as possible and, in whatever way possible, help those people feel part of something. It was an imperfect business, obviously. It couldn't always be about making things happen in concrete terms, and as such it was a wonder that Theatre Bristol survived so long under a funding system that requires constant measurement against stubborn theoretical

checklists. Instead Theatre Bristol's work was behind-the-scenes, sometimes holistic, the outcomes as much about long-term thinking or keeping a conversation alive as they were about nudging things towards the latest political integer and never, ever, about demonstrating power.

That said, I feel if you were an artist working in Bristol, the results of Theatre Bristol's work were utterly tangible – it's just that Theatre Bristol's heartfelt belief was that it shouldn't spend half its working hours marking territory. But it's not as if our principal venues in the city began talking to each other and co-ordinating on a whim. It's not as if theatre makers began to move to Bristol in droves because of the fucking cider. It's not as if a bunch of other organisations around the

city and beyond didn't totally crib from Theatre Bristol's playbook, with Theatre Bristol's blessing. It's not as if it's quick or uncomplicated to foster a culture that says: look, this is a small industry, and often unforgiving, but that doesn't mean everyone has to mimic its failings.

And sure, today we're living through a time where a perfect storm of cuts and denigrations has not only fatally wounded Theatre Bristol, it's meant that making theatre in Bristol is markedly bereft of opportunity, perhaps more so than at any time in the last 20 years. I also feel the frustrations of fellow artists who believe utopia ought to be represented by a defined destination, rather than a journey – who are angry that artist development isn't always about action and that

often, to ensure everyone remains involved and cared for, it requires a good hefty chunk of talk.

But in theory Bristol is large enough to be diverse, yet small enough so that anyone can be part of a conversation. And I remember that BOV crisis meeting back in 2007 with those high-toned and self-important men, that room full of people crying out for a different conversation, the general feeling of dots unconnected. And I know Theatre Bristol listened, and worked to connect as many of those dots as they could. And I remember the folks who came along to BUZZARD and accosted me weeks, months later and said: 'I thought theatre wasn't for me, but I fucking loved that.' And I know Theatre Bristol believed I could help people feel that way – and

crucially, that it was totally legit to have such an ambition, that I wasn't pissing up someone else's lamp post. And I remember and deeply value the talking shops and endlessly recurring arguments and the gripes and moans, as much as the shows and spectacles and celebrations and venues that emerged from all that ongoing, long-winding talk, and looking back I value all of it for one huge and distinctive reason:

Because all you have to do is spend time making theatre in London or Manchester, or plenty of other places, to realise that for a moment, here in this city, there was one profound and priceless difference. Here, you didn't have to feel alone.

**TIM X ATTACK**



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