

Final Progress Report from the Royal Shakespeare Company: Open Stages 2011-12



The RSC Amateur Ensemble on stage at The Courtyard Theatre with RSC practitioners

Open Stages has proved to be a ground-breaking project. Over a two year period, it has reintroduced professional theatre to its amateur roots and has engaged the amateur sector with modern professional theatre. The RSC and our partners have rediscovered a whole sector of theatre making unknown to many professionals or considered irrelevant, parochial and unfashionable by others. What our practitioners and partners discovered was a grass-roots movement of theatre-making far larger and far more vibrant than anyone outside it could have guessed.

Amateur theatre's long-standing disconnection from the professional mainstream has been both its greatest strength and its greatest challenge. The closure of town repertory theatres, replaced by larger regional theatres, meant less room for local non-professional theatre. Amateur theatre has developed as a robust, self-reliant, popular theatre scene unmoved by the politics and fleeting fashions of subsidised funding. A theatre that is connected closely to the audience from which it's members are drawn. Amateur theatre is a theatre for the people, by the people.

The isolation of amateur theatre, however, means that many amateur theatre companies have not experienced many of the exciting innovations in theatre practice that have shaped modern professional theatre and that inform much of what happens in the modern rehearsal room. The most exciting element of the Open Stages project has therefore been the many ways it has put high quality professional practitioners in the same room as committed experienced amateur theatre-makers. The power of simple concepts, exercises, games and techniques to transform a performance, or production, were clear to all participants and practitioners.

For amateur theatre-makers the process of introducing new practices and new ideas has only just begun. Some amateur groups remain to be convinced, and the cultural gap between professional and amateur theatre-making remains substantial. For them, only continued work will prove professional theatre's commitment to the work of amateurs. For others, Open Stages was just a glimpse of new and exciting ways of making theatre. For some it re-affirmed the approach they were already taking, endorsing their good work. For many though it was a spring board, and armed with renewed energy and new ideas they have begun a quiet revolution amongst the village halls, school gyms and community centres.

Below are some of the findings from the extensive feedback we received. Our experience on the project has been incredibly positive and this has been endorsed by feedback from participants, partners and practitioners. However we always described this as 'the project we do to find out what the project is we should be doing' and we still have much to learn. I have therefore tried to honestly assess where things could be improved or changed in the future.

This report draws on the feedback gathered from both informal and formal feedback processes including:

- An online survey of leaders of amateur companies
- An online survey of individual participants
- A Partner theatres' feedback day at the RSC
- A Practitioners' feedback day at the RSC
- Partner theatres' project reports
- *Pericles* participant interviews
- Ad-hoc feedback and internal evaluation.

Partner Theatres and Training Partners

It's been exciting to work with such a variety of amateur groups – all with great ideas, ambition and knowledge. We've made links now that mean we have become a focal point for advice and pooling of resources both technical and creative. We really feel that this is the just the beginning; the beginning of more partnership working and collaborative opportunities for us.

Andrea Bath, Executive Director & Chief Executive, Questors

We originally planned for eight professional partner theatres in the regions, however – given the number of amateur groups involved, their geographical spread and the availability of further funding through the World Shakespeare Festival – ten were recruited from across the UK to support the

amateur groups involved. These partner theatres hosted skills exchanges for amateur participants and ran showcases of the Open Stages productions. Each was twinned with a theatre training institution to support the skills development element of the project. These relationships created real partnerships between professional and amateur theatre at a regional level. The partner theatres and training partners were as follows:

- **National Theatre of Scotland & Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama** [now the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland]
- **The Lyric Theatre**, Belfast & **Queen's University**, Belfast
- **Contact Theatre**, Manchester & **Manchester Metropolitan University**
- **The Sage**, Gateshead & **Northumbria University**
- **Royal Shakespeare Company**, Stratford-upon-Avon & **Birmingham School of Acting**
- **New Wolsey**, Ipswich & **Rose Bruford College**
- **Hall for Cornwall**, Truro & **Dartington College**
- **The Nuffield Theatre**, Southampton & **Rose Bruford College**
- **Questors**, London & **Rose Bruford College**
- **Sherman Cymru**, Cardiff & **Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama**

The involvement of the regional theatres was essential to the success of the project, offering regional support to the amateur companies. It also broadened the engagement of professional theatre in the project bringing more professional organisations into contact with amateur theatre. The amateur companies involved were exposed to a more diverse group of theatre practitioners and models of practice than they would have been if the RSC had been the only professional company involved.

Open Stages allowed us to tap into a community that we had previously engaged with primarily through the hiring of our spaces. The programme allowed us to inspire risk taking and raise aspiration among the companies while forging a link with a vital part of the contemporary British theatrical landscape. The relationships built and the insights gained have proved valuable and exciting to all parties involved.

Russ Tunney, The Nuffield Theatre

Different partner theatres faced different challenges in their new found partnerships with amateur companies, and it is important to acknowledge that some partner theatres were more suited to fully engaging with the project.

The Sage had only a small number of groups in the north east, but as a venue specialising in music have no resident theatre makers although excellent spaces. As a primarily 'receiving' theatre, Hall for Cornwall had fewer theatre-making professionals to participate in skills exchanges although were able to draw on their regular freelancers.

It became clear that Open Stages was most doable for the producing house partner theatres with well-resourced education departments and access to theatre practitioners. Even then Contact faced a significant challenge, working with over forty groups – making a genuine relationship difficult with each group and occasionally testing Contact's resources. Relationships were most productive when the number of groups attached to a partner theatre was twenty or fewer.

The Nuffield Theatre, a producing theatre with a strong education department, working with reasonable number of groups, were able to visit groups in their own venues prior to performance to run workshops and meet the participants.

Questors, the only non professional theatre involved, more than justified their selection offering large amounts of workshop space, a well resourced theatre plus very useful insights and advice on the amateur sector. Understandably the RSC needed to supply professional practitioners to see Questors' groups in their own venues.

The National Theatre of Scotland had to contend with a wide geographical spread – but, after consulting its groups, ran a fantastic training residency event rather than a showcase, which has proved to be a watershed moment for the relationship between amateurs and professionals in Scotland. This offered a real alternative to the showcase and gave us much food for thought for the future. They, like many of the Partner Theatres, pioneered a brand new relationship with amateur theatre through Open Stages.

Open Stages has reconnected us to our surrounding community and enabled us to really push the boundaries of performance. It has raised our profile nationally and been a fantastic opportunity for us to impart what we do well and learn new practices at the same time. Although this has been a fledgling project, it really does have the scope to develop into a long-lasting and fruitful partnership between the amateur and professional world. Several of our participants are now engaged on other projects and this is really a testament to the impact and legacy of the project.

Abbie Wilcox, Contact Theatre

61% of the surveyed participants found their partner theatre to be supportive or very supportive – a figure that could be improved through better communication and feedback. This would be possible with fewer groups per region. One unforeseen challenge was the partner theatres' turnover of staff. At least four of the partner theatres had to change Open Stages' key contact mid-project as staff moved on or advanced. This is not unusual in professional theatre but was tricky for the groups in their region and it took time to induct the new project leader. It would have been useful to have formally named a lead practitioner *and* administrator at each partner theatre for greater continuity.

More regular gatherings of group leaders/directors would aid communication, training and the coherence of the project.

The primary input from training partners was at the skills exchanges. This input, along with the skills offered, gave amateur participants an insight into professional theatre training not usually accessible. It also offered the training partners an understanding of amateur theatre and is helping to inform the future development of courses – Rose Bruford, for example, is exploring a theatre course directly targeting amateur theatre-makers.

Although we felt that training partners were necessary in establishing Open Stages, we do not propose to further all of the relationships made if the project continues. The skills that each training partner could contribute varied, and some had more to offer than others. Although the contribution of some training partners was fantastic, with several actually hosting the skills exchange events, managing so many of these relationships centrally from the RSC was logistically challenging and not necessarily of mutual benefit. Training partners in the future will be brought in as needed by the partner theatre.

The mutual engagement between the Lyric and the amateur theatre movement in Ireland presented a terrific opportunity to explore and share good practice (and get to know each other into the bargain!) but to have the benefit of the experience and expertise of the RSC was, quite simply, a chance not to be missed.

The Groups

As an ageing group, we were in danger of 'fading out' and had for some years talked of the absolute necessity of recruiting more younger members, with no success. From the outset, this then was our main aim in taking part in Open Stages... we did succeed in doing this: we have now 10 new younger members, many of whom took part in our November 2012 production.

Open Stages participant

At the onset of Open Stages, we set an ambition of working with a minimum of 50 amateur companies on productions. We actually received over 300 'pitches', of which 263 fitted our criteria of being a genuine amateur company – *led, run and comprised of volunteers* proposing a *Shakespeare or Shakespeare-themed production* (we excluded applications from school groups, commercial youth theatres and companies describing themselves as semi-professional).

These 263 groups had approximately 7,200 members taking part in Open Stages productions in total. Of these we worked directly with approximately 3,000 through workshops and events. These individuals ranged in age from 6 to 90 years old, with an estimated third under the age of 25. They had been involved with amateur theatre for an average of 18 years, although 23% of those surveyed had become involved specifically because of Open Stages. The oldest of the amateur groups was formed in 1910 (the average had been in existence for 37 years) with 4 groups created specifically for Open Stages. Only 123 of these groups belonged to amateur umbrella organisations, and 57% of surveyed participants were members of more than one group – a relatively new trend that points towards local ecosystems of amateur theatre rather than individual isolated groups.

For some groups Open Stages offered simply RSC recognition their regular programme, or one off production, of Shakespeare through branding plus some quality free training for members of their company. For others it was the catalyst for change and an ambitious programme of work or large scale production. For many it allowed them to try Shakespeare for the first time.

Group members included mobile phone salesmen, librarians, psychiatric nurses, used car salesmen, estate agents, primary school teachers and bin men. 57% of those surveyed were in employment, with 18% retired, 10% self-employed, 9% in education and 5% unemployed. Although the majority of participants were from the relatively affluent ABC1 economic groups, 12% were members of C2DE groups (the three lowest socio-economic groups in society).

A surprising discovery was the prominence of military groups, with the Royal Army, Navy and Air Force all having a long and prolific history of amateur theatre. These groups are mostly centred around military bases but are in decline as the armed forces reduce in size, close bases, and outsource much of their logistics to the private sector. The RAF's Theatre Association performed an extract of *Return to the Forbidden Planet* at the RSC after practitioners travelled to their base to conduct a series of workshops. The Royal Naval Theatre Association performed *Much Ado About Nothing* in front of HMS Victory and at the RSC, supported with workshops from the Nuffield Theatre. Army veterans suffering from combat stress formed their own theatre company to perform *Henry V* in the West End and the Old Vic Tunnels after working with the RSC's team of practitioners.

Communication with amateur groups was always a challenge – a frustration also faced by partner theatres and a common problem in the sector according to the amateur umbrella organisations we

spoke to. Often, a group's contact was the most senior member e.g. the chairman, and not always the most familiar with regular e-mailing, or the contact didn't forward information to fellow group members passing on information in committee or by word of mouth, or not at all. In some cases, the initial contact became inactive, retired, or left the group without letting us know. This meant that sometimes information took time to circulate and often important information on logistics or ethos of the project did not get through to the right people.

It also would have been very useful to have developed a full contact database of all participating individuals from the start of the project, enabling us to get in touch with all participants not just the group leaders. Perhaps a regular email newsletter would also help the flow of general information.

We soon realised the importance of social media in reaching out to as many amateur theatre-makers as possible, with the Open Stages Facebook drawing over 1000 members able to share details of their work as well as learn about ours. With the RSC's own website too packed with projects and productions to feature Open Stages constantly on its home page for two years, social networks seem to offer a better way of communicating.

Skills Exchanges

The skills exchanges have had an enormous impact on the actors over the last several months, and they continue to regularly ask me when they may be visited by the team members again.

Open Stages participant

Following a pilot skills exchange in Stratford-upon-Avon in late 2010, each partner theatre hosted a skills exchange event in collaboration with training partners between April and September 2011.

The RSC's Open Stages team travelled 5,054 miles between April and September 2011 running 22 skills exchange days, delivering 638 hours of workshops, meeting and working with over 3,000 amateur theatre-makers across the UK. We also delivered four days of workshops each at the National Student Drama Festival and the National Drama Festival Association on Guernsey as well as sessions at the Drama Association of Wales Summer School and the National Operatic and Drama Association Summer School at Warwick University in both 2011 and 2012.

Each skills exchange included workshops on voice, text, movement, acting, directing and design as well as sessions on stage management, lighting and sound led by practitioners from the RSC, partner theatres and training partners. These workshops established a legacy of skills development for amateur theatre, as well as ensuring that each Open Stages production contained some genuine RSC 'DNA'. The producing partner theatres were able to offer the input of artistic and or associate directors and artists plus technical staff which not only enhanced the quality of the events but also diversified the input from professional theatre and prevented the impression of a one monolithic RSC way of making theatre.

Superb. It will considerably increase my ability to engender enthusiasm for Shakespeare in my fellow amateurs, and also stimulate their desire for self-improvement in their acting skills.

Open Stages participant

The skills exchanges proved incredibly successful – 91% of surveyed participants had their expectations met or exceeded by the skills exchanges. 94% rated the sessions as 'good' (11%), 'very good' (32%) or 'excellent' (51%). Movement, voice and text sessions had a very positive impact on enhancing skills and confidence, as did sessions on technical and design (which were initially areas of

weaker skills). Skills exchanges proved to be very popular, and feedback from participants expresses a real appetite for more – 97% found it ‘useful’, 98% found it ‘enjoyable’ and 87% thought it would be of great use in the future.

We were overwhelmed by the workshops offered by the practitioners and really appreciated the time taken. We have also definitely taken on board what we learned and continue to share it with our membership.

Open Stages participant

Skills exchanges proved as much of a learning experience for professionals as amateur theatre-makers. Participants challenged our idea of who performs amateur theatre and who has a passion for Shakespeare – from a scientist directing *The Merchant of Venice* to a Polish cage-fighter playing Romeo. We discovered a real appetite for skills development, a genuine drive to make the best theatre possible and an impressive openness and eagerness for new techniques. Interestingly, only 18% of those surveyed felt that their groups had the financial capacity to take on professional practitioners themselves. For many, this was their first contact with professional theatre practitioners of any kind, an experience which participants found overwhelmingly positive. We also discovered many professionally trained amateurs either resting or following other career paths. Open Stages were very happy to endorse their participation in amateur theatre, something both sectors can only benefit from.

I went back to my work in the second hand bookshop this morning with a strange sensation that I was physically still 'in' Shakespeare's text! The weekend has had an utterly transformative effect on my whole approach to Shakespeare.

Open Stages participant

Indeed, all of our professional practitioners agreed that the companies involved would benefit enormously from more exposure to the techniques of modern professional theatre practice through more intensive skills exchanges and mentoring throughout the project. Our only disappointment was not to work more with the groups throughout the project and that only a small number of participants from each production could attend these sessions. Both these points are something we intend to address in future projects as we feel training opportunities and access to professional practitioners should lie at the heart of any future project if it is to have a sustained impact.

Some sort of regular dialogue with the RSC - quarterly conferences perhaps - would be welcome.

Open Stages participant

See Appendix for a full list of professional practitioners who contributed to Open Stages.

A handbook or handout, either hard copy or online, with the content of the workshop sessions in it would also have been useful for participants most of whom were keen to use the exercises and techniques and pass them on to fellow amateurs unable to attend.

I enjoyed the content of all the skills exchanges immensely and they were very relevant to what we do. As an amateur who has never had any formal training but loves drama and performs a lot in amateur productions and Eisteddfods and festivals, it was incredible to suddenly have access to teaching at this level.

Open Stages participant

Productions

Open Stages gave us the excuse we needed to take a massive risk... Even in amateur dramatics it can be sometimes a little difficult to do something different, but this project gave us the excuse we needed.

Some feedback would have helped us learn more... we had hoped for some critical appraisal and input.

Open Stages participants

We were surprised and impressed with the ambition, energy and imagination of the pitched productions. These included a cheerleader version of *Richard III* in St Andrews, *The Tempest* set in Tesco, a production of *Julius Caesar* set among Loyalist paramilitaries performed on the Shankill Road in Belfast, a 'Star Wars' version of *Twelfth Night* in Huddersfield and *Macbeth* entirely in the Old Scots language. One production, in Ireland, combined two theatre companies in a site specific performance which wove together several Shakespeare plays with a large cast which performed in both Belfast and Dublin. Another production performed in a theatre made entirely of living willow trees.

Across the UK between spring 2011 and the end of 2012 over 260 Open Stages productions took place, playing to an average audience 535 people per production. This gave the project a combined approximate audience of over 140,000 people across more than 1,000 performances, making it one of the UK's largest ever theatre projects.

174 of the 263 productions were works by, or excerpts of, Shakespeare. *Macbeth* proved to be the most popular play with 19 productions. There were 18 *A Midsummer Night's Dreams*, 13 *The Tempests*, 12 *Romeo and Juliets*, 12 *Twelfth Nights*, 8 *Hamlets*, 8 *Much Ado About Nothings*, 8 *The Merry Wives of Windsors*, 6 *The Taming of the Shrews*, 6 *As You Like Its*, 6 *The Winter's Tales*, 6 *Measure for Measures*, 4 *King Lear*s, 4 *Richard III*s, 4 *Pericles*, 4 *Titus Andronicus*, 3 *Antony and Cleopatras*, 3 *Comedy of Errors*, 3 *Coriolanus*, 3 *Cymbelines*, 3 *Julius Caesars*, 3 *The Merchant of Venices*, 2 *All's Well That Ends Wells*, 2 *Love's Labour's Losts*, 1 *Henry IV Part 1*, 1 *Henry V*, 1 *King John*, 1 *Troilus and Cressida*, 2 complete works Marathons and 10 collections of various extracts.

Other productions took inspiration from the canon and included 30 newly-written plays, 6 new musicals and 26 devised productions.

The locations for Open Stages productions were many and varied. They included: 99 theatres (of which 31 are owned by the company), 32 Parks or gardens, 31 Community or church halls, 19 Schools or universities, 18 Arts centres, 13 Churches or abbeys, 11 Castles, 6 Beaches, 6 Pubs, 5 Amphitheatres or outdoor theatres, 5 Stately homes or hotels, 2 Festivals, 2 Forests, 2 Warehouses.

Many companies ran their own venues and it was interesting to note the similarities in the challenges of running an amateur theatre venue and a professional one. Both lament the costs of upkeep and the difficulties of programming that will bring in an audience year on year. All companies, venue based or not, understood and grappled with the financial risks of theatre making and how to offset them. Something the professional theatres recognised immediately. We were interested to

find considerable expertise in the art of producing large scale outdoor work from amateur companies who regularly work this way at stately homes, castles or parks.

There was much to admire in these productions in their ambition energy and talent, although the standard was understandably varied from the very basic to the near-professional. This often depended on the experience of the theatre makers, which varied from those taking part in theatre for the first time to veterans of many productions and some training. We also saw companies taking on Shakespeare for the first time and companies who had been performing his work long before the creation of the RSC. We found not only a genuine passion for Shakespeare work from many participants, but from some of the more experienced groups and individuals a deep knowledge of the text.

For many the strength of the production came from the identity of the participants. Here not being a paid professional became the point e.g. a Falkland's veteran performing the pre battle speech of Henry V or a young man from inner city Belfast as Antony in a troubles set Julius Caesar, or a merchant banker as Shylock in a leafy suburban Merchant of Venice. These productions transcended the boundary between professional theatre and amateur, and spoke of the power of Shakespeare's words in the hands of people for whom they really mean something.

The soldiers who are in the Combat Veteran Players have been told 'you can't.' They have had their potential put into a box and locked away upon a return to civilian life, with the label of being too fragile to open. When they began to tread the boards in the CVP, they were no doubt viewed upon a first glance by many (and quite possibly, themselves) as soldiers who were learning to act... but that all changed during an initial visit to the RSC for their first workshop in early 2012. On that day, they became actors who happen to also be soldiers.

Open Stages participants

The unevenness in standard sometimes left the professional practitioners frustrated. Because of the number of groups, it was not always possible to engage with each production and support it as much as we felt they deserved or needed. Although even where productions were less successful, we felt there was a clear potential for good work. This convinced us that the RSC, its practitioners and partners had a real contribution to make in the amateur sector in terms of offering skills and techniques and ideas of modern theatre making.

Open Stages productions performed right across the two year project from summer 2011 to the end of the year 2012. This allowed us to include wide range of productions working on different time scales. Although this made for an epic celebration of Shakespeare's work, so many productions spread over so wider period meant it was easy for the RSC and partners to lose track of productions, or some individual productions to feel out of the loop and peripheral to the project. A more contained time-frame falling after the skills exchanges and before the showcases would give the project more clarity, concentrate resources and aid communication.

Fewer groups would enable us to visit each production and provide the constructive feedback that most amateur groups wanted. We had deliberately shied away from direct feedback, not wanting to set professional theatre, and the RSC in particular, up as judge and jury over amateur theatre. However, most groups were keen to have a professional opinion of their work, in order to improve. Fewer groups would also allow both regional partners and the RSC more opportunities to work with more members of each company, having a greater impact on the groups and their work.

Where a production was not visited by the regional partner for whatever reason there was understandable disappointment. Ensuring all companies received a similar level of support whatever the region is a priority for the project in the future.

The DVD's of each Open Stages production requested from every amateur company allowed us to see far more productions than RSC staff were able to attend. DVD's are never a perfect record of a live theatre experience and cannot replace seeing a show, but having seen many DVDs of our own work and others we were able to get a good idea of the diversity and ambition of productions in the project.

The Open Stages logo on participating amateur company's publicity was very much valued. It was felt by the participants that it drew attention to their work and showed the RSC endorsing the idea of amateur theatres. There was perhaps surprisingly only one complaint from an audience member who thought they were going to see the actual Royal Shakespeare Company!

It was exciting to be able to link our name with the RSC and to feel that ties could be forged between the professional and amateur world without the usual prejudice.

Open Stages participants

Regional Showcases

We don't often get to see more than two or three other local groups' productions so to be exposed to so much other amateur theatre was really good for us.

Open Stages participant

Between May and June 2012, the ten partner theatres worked with the companies in their region to stage a regional showcase of amateur work, with over 200 of the Open Stages companies performing on professional stages (due to demand, the RSC hosted a further regional showcase in December 2012). This meant over 3000 amateur theatre makers performed on the professional stages of the partner theatres. The variety of format across the regions allowed us to find out what worked best in showcasing amateur work.

For some individuals, the showcases fulfilled lifelong ambitions to perform on some of the UK's most prestigious stages (particularly, perhaps understandably at the RSC). For others collaborating with professional teams at partner theatres was the highlight of the project. For many the commitment of so many professional theatres time, spaces and personnel was an impressive example of the professional sectors determination to change the relationship between amateur and professional. For many more the enthusiastic, professional and generous way they were welcomed and dealt with left a lasting impression.

Performing at the Courtyard Theatre for the regional showcase, gave [the group] so much energy and confidence, they were proud of their achievement. The experience continues to have effect, to the extent that we will be exploring a Shakespeare play again for 2014 and will be taking it to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

Open Stages participant

However some participating groups thought that the Open Stages showcases followed the amateur sector's traditionally competitive format – resulting in disappointment when showcases were programmed to demonstrate the diversity of work, as opposed to pieces judged to be 'the best'. These groups saw the regional showcases as 'heats' and wanted a clear 'winner' chosen to go

forward to the 'finals' at the RSC. For them 'programming' the subsequent national showcase in Stratford to demonstrate the diversity of work across the project was therefore an opaque process that smacked of fixing and intrigue. Therefore groups expecting a competition were further confused when we programmed some productions for Stratford before the regional showcase in their region. Indeed the RSC and the partner theatres were surprised by the highly competitive nature of some groups and how much some groups wanted to 'win' a place in Stratford. Although professional theatre is in a competitive market place, beyond box office it has no head to head competitions, particularly in the area of outreach work. It was very clear that the non competitive aspect of the project will need to be, explained more carefully and stressed more directly from the outset in the future to prevent confusion and manage expectations.

[We were] originally led to believe this was a 'qualifying' stage to Stratford, clearly not the case... we never even considered for inclusion in the showcases in Stratford despite our proven credibility.

Open Stages participant

Some groups wanted to perform the whole of their production, as opposed to extracts. Often, this was logistically impossible for partner theatres with many groups, as well as proving difficult to attract a substantial one-off audience for a whole series of amateur productions. In fact for many partner theatres including the RSC finding an audience for these events beyond the groups themselves proved one of the most challenging elements of the project. We discovered that perhaps understandably audiences for amateur theatre were very local to that area and unwilling to travel in any great numbers to see them perform. The professional theatres own audiences were also unwilling to take a risk on an unknown amateur company when faced with the choice of that or professional work.

The organisation, team work and can do attitude of the amateur companies, often handling large casts, was impressive and commented on by many of the professional production teams. This led to many smooth get-ins, techs and rehearsals. For some amateur companies though, expectations of what would be possible at professional theatre in the time available were very high. Learning that what professional theatres regularly achieve on stage takes weeks of technical work was sometimes difficult to communicate, and hard for some amateur companies to understand.

For many of my company this was an eye-opener and I am glad that I could bring them to see how much hard work and dedication goes into a production.

Open Stages participant

We agreed that the RSC presence at the regional showcases could have been stronger and more visible. Although considerable the RSC's team assigned to Open Stages proved stretched in covering all showcase activity in a meaningful way.

Some of the most successful showcases ran a number of short extracts over one or two evenings – generating good-sized audiences and allowing amateur companies to meet and see each others work. These acted as genuine celebrations of the work achieved, for both audiences and participants. Other showcases found a host or compare helped put the work in context. Hall for Cornwall successfully allowed each director to introduce their piece, where as The New Wolsey equally successfully involved their professional company in short individual extracts of their own between pieces. Questors demonstrated their expertise in the sector hosting the most productions (and getting an audience). Questors and the Nuffield both created a set to be used by all groups which proved very successful in performance.

Although showcasing has real value and this time round allowed us to see many amateur companies at work and them to experience a professional venue, any future Open Stages project will focus more on mentoring, skills development and the company's production in its own venue with any showcase being simply a celebration of this work.

National Showcase

I was trying to explain the enormity of it all to a friend of mine who knows nothing of the theatre but is devoted to his patch of vegetables. I told him it was rather like being asked to put his allotment in the Chelsea Flower Show. I think he got the message...

Open Stages participant

Thirteen of the companies were invited to perform in Stratford-upon-Avon as part of the World Shakespeare Festival in July 2012. This national showcase was given an unprecedented profile as part of this national celebration. The Open Stages companies performed alongside the RSC's own productions and the best of professional theatre from across the world including Russia Brazil and Iraq.

Travelling from Edinburgh, Belfast, Cornwall and London, approximately 360 amateur theatre-makers performed on the RSC's stages, worked with RSC technicians and backstage teams, and produced 15 hours of theatre over 5 days. Audiences averaged 250 to 300 for each production, and over 3,000 people saw the 13 productions.

High points of the showcase included an excellent portrayal of Hamlet in The Swan that brought two visiting American tourists (unable to get tickets for a main house shows) to tears. In The Courtyard our own *Much Ado About Nothing* was preceded by an excellent Asian/English production based on the story of Felicity Kendal's family touring Shakespeare around India in the 1960s. In the Swan a genuinely hilarious matinee of Sandy Tosvig's comedy Pocket Dream drew a standing ovation from the audience. In the RST the excellent ensemble play re-injected the Reduced Shakespeare Company's Complete Works with verve, energy and wit to the delight of a late night audience. Our new Dell stage drew large crowds to all the pieces staged there and gave the two weekends a truly festival feel. The afore mentioned Polish/English Romeo and Juliet, and Julius Caesar set in Loyalist Belfast also redefined many audiences expectations of amateur theatre.

There were challenges for the companies too. Transferring the productions many of which had large casts, across the UK with only a half a day to tech and dress is hard work for professionals and amateurs. Playing on existing sets was also a mixed blessing, with one Aztec set RSC production offering two of the companies performing in the Swan the unenviable challenge of transferring their productions on to a raked uneven and wavy edged stage. These challenges were met and overcome admirably by all the companies.

[We were] delighted to be included and amazed at the endless and "on tap" support from the RSC Nothing was ever too trivial or too basic not to be discussed and resolved... it has been a fantastic project and hopefully it will be able to continue. It has achieved so much already for the amateur theatre community.

Open Stages participant

A popular workshop programme accompanied the showcase available to all Open Stages participants.

Everyone who took part will always remember the experience with pleasure; it certainly enriched our lives. We all learnt a great deal and through the workshops and the showcase became a stronger group, full of camaraderie. This helped our actual performances. You will be pleased to hear that you inspired us to do more research and hold monthly workshops to improve our knowledge and skills.

Open Stages participant

Open House

One local legacy for the RSC was Open House. After the success of our original pilot showcase *Open House* we decided to make this an annual event, once again inviting the 13 Stratford-based amateur companies to showcase their work in an evening of extracts and short pieces on The Swan stage. Over 120 local amateur theatre-makers took part in a variety evening of opera, drama, musical numbers and comedy, performing to an audience of 420. The whole evening was hosted by Oliver Ford Davies, an RSC alumnus and Patron of Questors.

Once again the RSC took a developmental role – running skills workshops for those involved and offering directing, technical and costume support to each group. This further cemented our relationship with our nearest amateur companies and strengthened the developmental collaborative model for professional theatres in working with amateur theatre makers.

Amateur/Professional Collaborations

Often in amateur productions I think that sense of "ownership" or belonging doesn't materialise... we were so immersed for 6 weeks solid [in Pericles], rather than in the dribs and drabs of 2-3 rehearsals a week with our amateur companies.

Pericles performer

Each of the partner theatres consolidated their new found experience of amateur theatre with collaborative theatre-making projects. Led by professional practitioners, these projects saw amateur and professional collaborate to make small-, medium- and large-scale pieces of theatre.

Again the diversity of approach was useful. The New Wolsey created a large cast site-specific 'bling' chav era production of *Romeo and Juliet*, using the whole of Ipswich's town hall. Contact combined a small team of Open Stages amateurs with their associate artists the 'Eggs Collective' and Montserrat Gili (an internationally acclaimed director and facilitator) in a week-long devised project examining our attitudes to Shakespeare resulting in a studio performance. Questors engaged Helen Leblaque (an RSC Assistant Director) to spend a week exploring *Much Ado About Nothing*, culminating in an evening of extracts. The Sage's major production project *West Side Story* received a five-star review in *The Guardian*. Some of the collaborative projects are ongoing and due for performance soon including the Sherman Theatre's.

In October 2012, the RSC staged its first Open Stages production with a cast of amateur actors. As the fourth part of the World Shakespeare Festival's *What Country Friends Is This?* season, *Pericles* was directed, produced and supported by professional practitioners and staff from the RSC, and performed on the stage of The Courtyard. The 30-strong cast was made up of practising amateur

theatre-makers drawn from the hundreds of amateur companies based in the West Midlands. Rehearsals took place every evening over seven weeks at the RSC rehearsal rooms on Arden Street and the production was directed by James Farrell and Jamie Rocha Allen, both Assistant Directors on the wider RSC season, with support from Michael Corbidge and Victoria Williams (voice and text) and Anna Morrissey (movement).

Although rehearsals took place in the evenings (allowing the cast to continue their day jobs) the project resembled as near as possible an RSC process, with professional stage management, production and technical support. After seeing many amateur productions, running many workshops and hosting several showcases, *Pericles* formed the final part of the jigsaw in really getting to know the sector.

Festivals

In giving a very public, high profile platform to amateur groups, the project has and hopefully will continue to improve the reputation of what amateur theatre has to offer; as both an active participant and a member of an audience.

Gary Thomas, Administrator, Drama Association of Wales (Cymdeithas Ddrama Cymru)

As part of engaging the amateur sector, Open Stages branding was given to portions of the competitive summer festivals held by the Drama Association of Wales, National Operatic and Drama Association and the All England Theatre Festival. Doing so allowed us to give noticeable support to the amateur sector, as well as improving the visibility of Open Stages amongst amateur companies. Each of the finalists in the Open Stages category was invited to perform at the RSC in the national showcase.

Involving Open Stages in the amateur sector's competitions allowed us to gain a real insight into the culture of an important area of amateur theatre. Although very traditional the competition element of these events meant we were able to see a high standard of work at each national final and see what amateurs themselves judged to be of good quality work. We were genuinely impressed with the work we saw and although the system of 'adjudicators' was, it seemed to us with no experience of such gatherings, old fashioned, subjective, hierarchical and sometimes entertainingly eccentric – it was fascinating, and created much interesting debate around the work on display.

Participants and organisers greatly appreciated the skills exchange workshops that we introduced into the festivals and it seemed the organisers were genuinely keen to provide more training opportunities at such events.

We greatly appreciated the warmth with which we were welcomed to all these events, we hope to remain in contact with the festivals returning in a training capacity in future years

Media and Press coverage

Open Stages generated over 100 articles in local newspapers, 3 features in the Observer and Observer Magazine, 2 in the Guardian, 4 in the Scotsman as well as articles in the Sunday Times, Evening Standard, Irish News, Polish News, Daily Mail and Sun. As well as coverage on numerous local radio stations Open Stages was featured on Radio 4's Today Programme and even formed the basis of 'Thought for The Day'. Open Stages even prompted the Archers to take on a Shakespeare for

Christmas (this was outrageously later dropped in favour of a money spinning panto!). The coverage was overwhelmingly positive highlighting the popularity of amateur theatre and amateur Shakespeare. It often challenged the stereo types of amateur theatre and in the longer broadsheet articles explored who does amateur theatre and why.

One report in the Daily Mail about an Open Stages participant playing Edmund in King Lear who was actually a convicted armed robber out on parole using Shakespeare and amateur theatre to turn his life around, really challenged perceptions. This was only slightly undermined by reports in several tabloids the following month about his return to prison for shoplifting.

Sky Arts' Nation's Best Am Dram

The RSC collaborated with Oxford Films to work on an episode of Sky Arts' major new reality programme. The show involves amateur companies competing over 6 episodes to stage a production for a night in the West End.

The RSC agreed to host and give input into the episode concerning Shakespeare. We used the opportunity to highlight the work of Open Stages and ran eight skills exchanges with the four amateur companies involved, which were filmed. The participating groups used the skills learnt in the workshops to produce four extracts of *King Lear* which were filmed as they performed before a live audience of 350 in The Courtyard with full RSC technical support. The programme was aired in November 2012 (a copy has previously been sent to the foundation. We have also separately sent, in hard copy, an extensive press book of cuttings about Open Stages).

Amateur Theatre Organisations

Voluntary Arts, Little Theatre Guild, National Operatic and Drama Association, Drama Association of Wales (Cymdeithas Ddrama Cymru), and Scottish Community Drama Association all provided invaluable support throughout the project providing us with down to earth advice, practical help, and a strategic over view of the sector. All of these partners will be key to the projects future.

Open Stages is a fantastic opportunity to showcase the creativity and talent in amateur arts groups across the UK. I have been impressed by the RSC's enthusiasm and determination to create a genuinely two-way collaboration in which the professionals have much to learn from the amateurs. I hope our work together on Open Stages will also become a model for how other major professional arts organisations could collaborate effectively with the voluntary arts sector.

Robin Simpson, Chief Executive, Voluntary Arts

Open Stages provided groups with an opportunity to attend top class skills building events and come together as a community to exchange ideas and share work. As a result of the project the Scottish Community Drama Association has been able to develop a close relationship with National Theatre of Scotland built on a common goal allowing any perceived barriers to be taken down allowing us to begin an artistic dialogue that will continue to challenge and grow over time.

Carole Williams, National Drama Advisor, Scottish Community Drama Association

Little Theatre Guild enthusiastically supported and were delighted with the success of the RSC Open Stages Project in 2011-12, having been involved in discussions from the outset. We are

thrilled to learn that RSC wishes to build on this success and look forward to making a real contribution to the continuing project. We positively support the aim of RSC to further cement the links between the amateur and professional sectors of the theatre industry.

Eddie Redfern, Chairman, Little Theatre Guild

Open Stages 2013-16

Open Stages demonstrated the power of grass-roots Shakespeare, confirming and promoting his appeal as the people's playwright. It also demonstrated the need and desire for professional input. As so many people's first encounter with Shakespeare is through seeing or performing in amateur theatre, it became obvious to us that it is in the theatre sector's best interest that these productions are of the highest quality possible.

We are at present applying for funding to continue the work of Open Stages and what we have learnt over the past two years combined with your feedback will form the basis of our plans for the future. We expect to have more news on this front in March.

Thank you to all those groups who took part in Open Stages. Your hard work, commitment, energy, talent and enthusiasm in making theatre purely for the joy of it has been an inspiration to all the professionals involved and we look forward to working with you in the future.

Ian Wainwright | Producer RSC Open Stages| **Royal Shakespeare Company**
Waterside, Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, CV37 6BB
ian.wainwright@rsc.org.uk

My delight in Shakespeare has become even more pronounced, if that were possible. A lifetime of greater involvement is before me!

Open Stages participant

Appendix: List of Practitioners

Over 30 professional practitioners have been involved in delivering Open Stages' skills exchanges, including:

Justin Audibert – Director, RSC
Pete Collins – Director, National Theatre of Scotland
Michael Corbidge – Voice and Text, RSC
Greg Doran – Artistic Director, RSC
Linda Fitzgerald – Stage Management, RSC
Tim Ford – Director, Nuffield Theatre
Tom Gibbons – Sound (Freelance)
Gavin Glover – Puppetry Practitioner, National Theatre of Scotland
Rebecca Gould – Director, RSC
Vince Herbert – Head of Lighting, RSC
Baba Israel – Artistic Director, Contact Theatre
Julian Jones – Head of Acting, Rose Bruford College
Tom Jordan – Fight Director (Freelance)
Struan Lesley – Head of Movement, RSC
Phil MacKenzie – Director, Sherman Theatre
Alex Marker – Designer (Freelance)
Graham McLaren – Associate Director, National Theatre of Scotland
Anna Morrissey – Movement, RSC
P.J. O'Rourke – Director, Lyric Belfast
Keith Osborne – Actor, RSC
George Richmond-Scott – Voice and Text, RSC
Kate Sagovsky – Movement, RSC
Robert Salmon – Director, New Wolsey Theatre
Patrick Sandford – Artistic Director, Nuffield Theatre
Stephen Simms – Head of Acting, Birmingham School of Acting
Mark Simpson – Head of Stage Management, Rose Bruford College
Russ Tunney – Director, Nuffield Theatre
Trevor Wallace – Lighting, RSC
Maya Wasowicz – Actor, RSC
Fiona Watt – Designer (Freelance)
Bill Wright – Head of Voice, Royal Conservatoire of Scotland