Rachel Clements and Sarah Frankcom

In Conversation on the Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester

Sarah Frankcom worked at the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester between 2000 and 2019, and was the venue's first sole Artistic Director from 2014. In this interview conducted in summer 2019, she discusses her time at the theatre and what she has learned from leading a major cultural organization and working with it. She reflects on a number of her own productions at this institution, including *Hamlet*, *The Skriker*, *Our Town*, and *Death of a Salesman*, and discusses the way the theatre world has changed since the beginning of her career as she looks forward to being the director of LAMDA. Rachel Clements lectures on theatre at the University of Manchester. She has published on playwrights Caryl Churchill and Martin Crimp, among others, and has edited Methuen student editions of Lucy Prebble's *Enron* and Joe Penhall's *Blue/Orange*. She is Book Reviews editor of *NTQ*.

Key terms: Directing, theatre in the round, design, artistic leadership, representation, community, portfolio career.

THE ROYAL EXCHANGE Theatre, Manchester, opened in 1976 with a theatre built in the Great Hall of the old Exchange building (where trading had ceased in 1968). Five Artistic Directors initially ran it: Braham Murray, Casper Wrede, Michael Elliott, Richard Negri, and James Maxwell. A temporary 'tent' theatre was soon replaced by a distinctive module theatre suspended from the building's columns. This structure, with three audience levels, has a capacity of up to 750, making it the largest permanent theatre in the round in the UK. Like much of the surrounding area, the building was badly damaged by an IRA bomb detonated on nearby Corporation Street in 1996. The rebuilding and regeneration of the theatre – largely funded by the National Lottery – included the opening of a 90-seat flexible Studio in 1998. The Royal Exchange is now an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organization and is one of the largest producing theatres in the region.

Sarah Frankcom worked at the Royal Exchange for almost twenty years. Initially the venue's literary manager, then an Associate Artistic Director, she was Co-Artistic Director from 2008 until 2014, when she became the first sole Artistic Director in the venue's history. Frankcom, then, has been an important figure in the arts scene of the city, region, and country. Co-productions, new work, and a serious commitment to the theatre's 'Engagement' department were key features of the Exchange when she was sole Artistic Director. In November 2019 she left the Royal Exchange to become LAMDA's director. When her departure was announced earlier that same year, I asked Sarah if we could have a conversation to reflect on her work at the Royal Exchange and about her views on the industry, both looking back across her time in Manchester and forward to her hopes for the future. Her move to LAMDA evidences an ongoing commitment to artists' learning and the development of their craft; with this in mind, I was curious to hear her thoughts about how building-based companies can support artists. Since she has directed upwards of thirty productions at the Exchange in the past two decades, I was also interested in how her practice has evolved and in which productions she considered worth remembering and discussing. This conversation took place in the summer of 2019 as she prepared for rehearsals of her final production as the venue's Artistic Director – *Light Falls* by Simon Stephens (2019, designed by Naomi Dawson) – and

  doi:10.1017/S0266464X20000615

Figure 1. The Royal Exchange, Manchester: the Great Hall and the Theatre. Photo: Joel Fildes.

shortly before the appointment of her successors, co-artistic directors Bryony Shanahan and Roy Alexander Weise (Figure 1).

Rachel Clements *How are you feeling about preparing for your final show as both Director and Artistic Director?*

Sarah Frankcom Simon was the first person I commissioned when I came here as literary manager. He wrote *Port* [2002, directed by Marianne Elliott and designed by Rae Smith]. Then one of the first shows that I directed in the big theatre here was his play *On the Shore of the Wide World* [2005, designed by Liz Ashcroft, transferring to the Royal National Theatre Cottesloe]. They were both about growing up in Stockport and different Stockport families. And now he's written the last part of that trilogy [*Light Falls*], which should be the last thing that I do here: it really feels quite curated.

You started working here as literary manager in 2000, so not long after the building had been renovated and reopened. But did you know the theatre before then?

I grew up in Sheffield. When I was seventeen, a friend and I used to come to Manchester by train to buy records. We walked past here and saw that there was a production of *Hamlet* on, which we were studying for our A-levels. We ended up getting banquette seats and watching Robert Lindsay's *Hamlet* [1983, directed by Braham Murray, designed by Johanna Bryant], which was completely amazing.[1] I'd never seen a theatre in the round before. The only theatre that I'd been to was the Sheffield Crucible, which is a big thrust.

I came here in 2000 on the back of giving up being a director. I wasn't getting anywhere with being a freelance director. I'd done some assisting; made a lot of work on the fringe with different kinds of artists; done a lot of work in drama schools. But I couldn't seem to get into buildings to direct, or direct on main stages. Someone suggested that I apply for the literary manager role here. I was very surprised to be offered the job. I came thinking, 'I won't do this for very long. I don't think I'll get on with the people that run the theatre, because they feel like they're very particular.' They were three men [founding Artistic Director Braham Murray, Greg Hersov (Artistic Director since 1987), and Matthew Lloyd (appointed in 1998)]. And Marianne Elliott; we shared an office and became great friends.

To begin with, I also couldn't see what the opportunities might be in the building. But there was a new studio space, and they didn't really have a new writing policy – there had been a period where the new writing had kind of been run down a little bit. There seemed to be an audience with a healthy appetite for new plays, which I was quite surprised by. So, actually, there was an immediate opportunity to build something up from scratch. And it was a great time to come to Manchester. I was thinking that the other day: Manchester is so different now. The rebuilding and reopening of the Royal Exchange post-bomb and the 2002 Commonwealth Games and the repurposing of the city centre . . . It was just at the beginning of all of that. It felt like a lot of beginnings were

happening in the city, and it felt like a place where you could make a mark.

But they were very clear when I came here as literary manager that I would never direct: I was absolutely there to facilitate. I really liked that; I've always been interested in other people's work. So it was a few years before I got a gig here. I directed a few readings, and I'd made a main-house show at the Crucible, and quite a few shows in London – and, even then, I directed here when, and if, none of the rest of the team wanted to do the plays. But I think that understanding and working with the part of the theatre company that's supporting the development of artists was a good way to start a relationship with the company. I did the literary management role, then became an associate here. I had a bit of time away from the company, and when I came back I was made an Associate Artistic Director [in 2004], which gave me a place in the artistic directorate, and the running of the theatre. Not much of a vote, but a place at the table. And then [after being Co-Artistic Director from 2008 to 2014] I've had five and a half years as the sole Artistic Director.

So early on, you were developing an understanding of what works in this space and what you can do with its programme, rather than focusing on a single project. What did you learn, and what stands out?

We did an early version of the Bruntwood prize, developing a relationship with a sponsor who's been amazing.[2] They've absolutely supported new work development in this theatre, but they've also been amazing for the city, I think.[3] Regional buildings are fascinating places because while they all have some shared characteristics, each one is different. What was clear at the Royal Exchange was that there was this great and passionate belief in what a theatre needed to do in its main house, and about how a theatre needed to serve its audience with a certain really polished, really particular kind of play. All of the other things that a theatre needed to do were in service to that. So its community and educational work and its new writing were just adjuncts. And I think my initial experience stood me in good stead when I had more influence within the organization: the biggest change that I think I managed to put into action was that the community and educational work had to be as central as the work that we produced in the big theatre. You can see that's happened in all the other regional companies too, but I think we were a little bit ahead of the curve.

When and how was that starting to happen?

I joined the Royal Exchange around the same time as Amanda Dalton [initially, in 1999, as Education Director], and we were great partners in crime.[4] The relationship between talent development, artist development, creative learning, and engagement and audiences – I would say we were developing that from about 2002 to 2003. Amanda and I see a lot of that work as being artist-driven and artist-made rather than participatory opportunities, and worked to shift the theatre's culture around that. It was a very slow process. This building is a huge operation; there are a lot of people that work here who are involved in the business and the operation of it. Getting them all excited about working with young people and supporting the Young Company, or supporting artists at the beginning of their career and making rehearsal processes open for young theatre artists who are training, took a lot of chipping away at. Amanda was probably better – she was patient, and had lots of quiet conversations. Whereas I banged the table and said, 'This is what we're doing. We have to! We've got to be more open!' I think a combination of those approaches started to really shift things.

So were there moments where you thought, 'This is working well, we're doing the work that we're all behind, we're heading in the right kind of direction'? And if so, what made that possible? What helps a building and an organization run well?

That's a big question. We did a big reorganization of our resources in about 2013. We moved, I would say, to make a more equitable relationship between the investment that we put into developing projects and artists and the investment that we put into realizing the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X20000615 Published online by Cambridge University Press

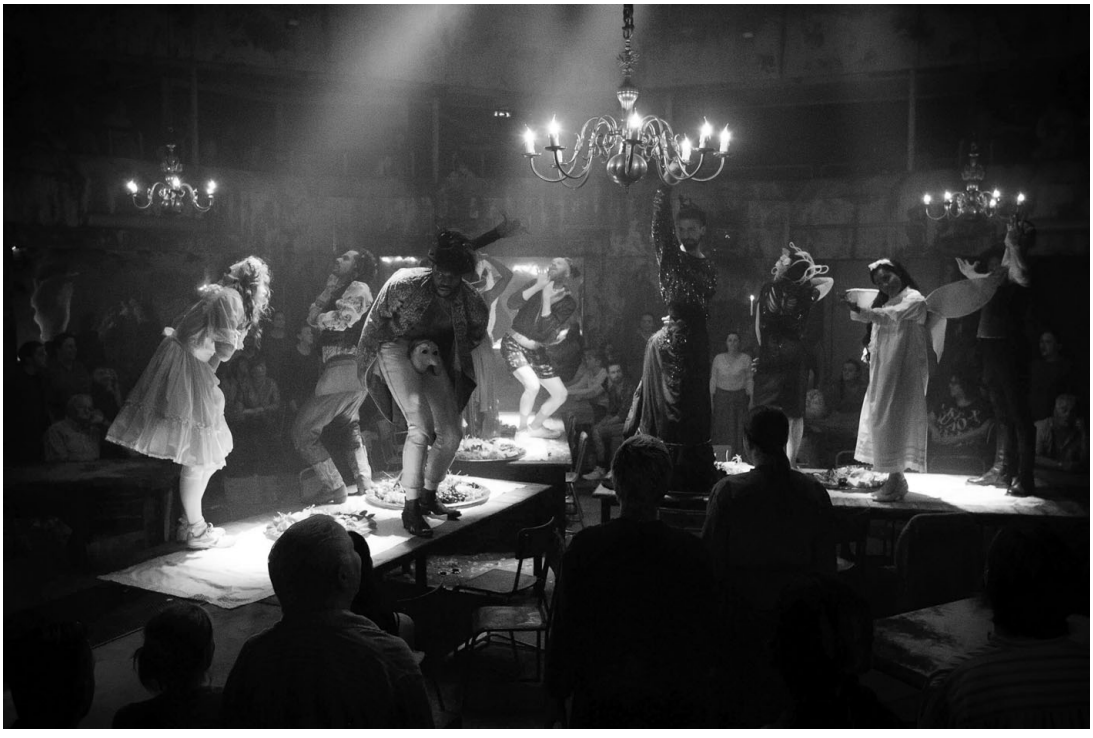

Figure 2. *The Skriker* (2015), directed by Sarah Frankcom, Royal Exchange and Manchester International Festival. Photo: Jonathan Keenan.

work on stage. We created more opportunities to commission at scale and to create the right kind of support and conditions that were specific to artists, to work in the ways that they wanted to work.

And we created a strand of programming called 'Adventure' that allowed us to work in different ways. The first one was Caryl Churchill's *The Skriker* [2015, directed by Frankcom, designed by Lizzie Clachan] that we did with Manchester International Festival, which meant that we could completely reconfigure the main house and look at the possibilities of what the theatre could do if you took the seats out and almost created an installation in there (Figure 2). The second involved Mark Storor coming and making a participatory project called *Little Sister* (2016). But actually, that project was as much about him coming and working with our whole company as about the performances.

Everybody in the company, across all departments, went through the same series of workshops as the participants. The last one that happened was a huge commissioning project called *The Mysteries*, with Chris Thorpe [2018, directed by Sam Pritchard, designed by Rosie Elnile]. When I see the kind of ambition and the range of those projects, I do feel like they could only have happened out of this building. They're making us ask questions about form, they're making us find and explore new relationships with audiences, and they're making us think much more carefully about who's in the work and whom it's for.

So things started to feel like they were shifting properly round about 2013–14. In any regional building, you can't go very far ever without asking 'Have we got enough people to come and see the work?' The sums don't add up otherwise. But I asked for some basic facts about who was buying tickets here, and the statistic that I really noticed was that more women than men bought tickets. I had a conversation with someone who worked in box

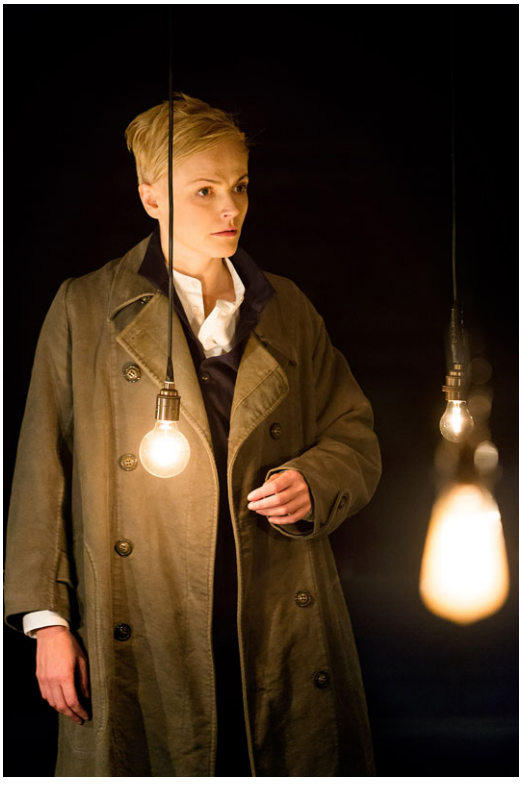

Figure 3. Maxine Peake in *Hamlet* (2014), directed by Sarah Frankcom. Photo: Jonathan Keenan.

office who said, 'Yes, women buy tickets, but they'll only buy tickets for the things that they can bring their husbands to,' which I thought was a limiting way of looking at it.

So I started to think about how you would rethink programming just by considering that fact. *Hamlet* [2014, directed by Frankcom, designed by Amanda Stoodley] was amazing because we pursued that thought through it; I wondered what happens in the gesture of putting someone in something – in this case, Maxine Peake as Hamlet (Figure 3). It feels like it's speaking to women in a very particular way and the effect was phenomenal. It sold out before it had opened, and a lot of people came who hadn't really engaged with the building before. But it also gave us a really strong sense that women want to see themselves in the work, and they will get behind and they will celebrate the bits of the programme that feel like they are female-centred; and that's something that I feel very confident about now. That figure has gone up, too – I think it's 59 per cent of people buying tickets are women. We've picked apart some of the behaviours and the demographics in terms of age, and how they attend, who they attend with, what their feedback is, and that's shifted too. They've got younger, but also they've moved from being women who come to one-off things, to women who are coming to more than two things a year, and come in groups. I suppose I felt like I had a hunch about something and it was borne out by what happened.

You have to be relevant to the city that you're in. That's not about doing endless plays about Manchester, but about putting your finger on some of the things that are happening within your city and asking: What are the immediate concerns of the people in your audience? And to do that, you need to have a different kind of conversation with your audience; brokering a connection or a relationship is important.

Have there been particular pieces that you've made or programmed where you've felt like that's worked?

After the Arena bomb [on 22 May 2017, when 22 people were killed and hundreds injured – many of them children and teenagers – in a suicide bombing attack in the Manchester Arena's foyer after an Ariana Grande concert], when the tributes in St Ann's Square [just outside the theatre] were there, a lot of the street pastors and counsellors were working out of our hall. It was a strange and kind of amazing week in Manchester, and we saw and felt the impact very particularly on our young company. I knew that we needed to make something that felt like it held people, and we talked a lot about commissioning something quickly.

But I was drawn to [Thornton Wilder's] *Our Town* [2017, directed by Frankcom, designed by Fly Davis] because I felt we needed to hold people in kind of a very quiet celebration of the ups and downs of life and life cycle, but also very particularly via the imagination of a twelve-year-old girl. Because that really was the thing that got massively harmed, I think, more than anything. It's complex, but I think there were a lot of girls who felt

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X20000615 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 4. Nora Lopez Holden in *Our Town* (2017), directed by Sarah Frankcom. Photo: Stephen King.

very vulnerable (Figure 4). And *Our Town* was interesting because you start out saying 'This is why we're doing it' and then you make the piece of work and . . . it's not like you've forgotten why you're doing something, but you just get on with making a show. So I was overwhelmed with the response to it. It felt like it allowed people to come together in a certain kind of way. We integrated a choir in it, a different choir singing during the interval of each performance. It felt like it allowed people to revisit that event in a way that meant they could talk about it with some perspective, actually.

Did the Young Company exist before you started working here?

Not really. And they've grown: we have a large Young Company and a Company of Elders that are both a big part of the organization now. The relationship and the conversation between the Young Company and the Company of Elders has grown too. We've developed ways of working inter-generationally (Figure 5). We do a piece of work each year that brings them together; the work comes out of their conversation, their dialogue. So I suppose having the resident companies has been a shortcut into stuff that's going on for people.

Have any other projects particularly captured the city?

Scuttlers, in 2015, by Rona Munro [directed by Wils Wilson, designed by Fly Davis]. Rona and I had done an adaptation of *Mary Barton* a long time ago [in 2006], and she'd been very taken with what she'd found out about Victorian gangs. The whole process of her writing *Scuttlers*, and our curation of the process, was about how you access history within the city. Manchester has brilliant archives; it's got brilliant things in collections. *Scuttlers* followed a trail through things that we found at the Police Museum, the Working Class Movement Library, and the People's History Museum. Rona kind of followed a case through them. And celebrating those young people in

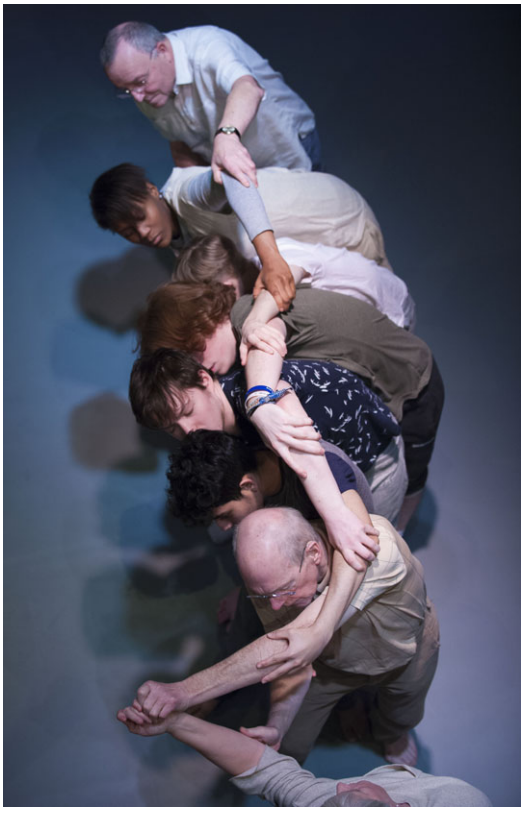

Figure 5. *The Space Between Us* (2017), directed by Andrew Barry with Christopher Owen, a collaboration between the Elders Company and Young Company. Photo: Joel Fildes.

Victorian gangs, eighteen months on from the Manchester riots [of summer 2011], in the aftermath of the inquiry into them, felt like it was a real opportunity to look at some of the driving factors.[5] The piece looked specifically at what had affected young people and why the scuttler gangs had been such a big thing at a particular time when Manchester was developing as a city. Of course you never know, but that felt like it was the right thing to be doing at exactly the right time.

The Mysteries came out of a conversation that Chris Thorpe and I had about our concern about the increasing amount of public space in this city owned by private companies and the bigger question of 'Who owns the land?' and 'What are our rights to the land?' from things like the Kinder Trespass, all the way through to some of the rampant property development that we've seen recently. We were also interested in a classic text, William Cobbett's *Rural Rides* [written in the 1820s], as an inspiration and mechanism. Those conversations began before the Brexit vote happened. But it felt like the journeys that were made in order to research and develop the plays spanned pretty much the journey with and of Brexit, and in the lead-up to leaving. So *The Mysteries* felt like it was picking up on something. But in terms of capturing the city – it's not like there have been lots of very explicit conversations. It's more like water divining – it's undercurrents.

How has the main theatre programming shifted in the time you've worked here?

In two main ways. First, it felt important to me that we opened the doors to different practice and different artists. Prior to me being totally responsible for the curation of the programme – we do it as a team but it is a singular vision, I guess – curiously, not many people had made much work in that space because, for such a long time, the same small group of directors worked in there.[6] There was an unhelpful kind of progression route. You had to do a play in the studio before you could do a play in the main house, and the assumption was that a director under thirty simply didn't have enough experience to be able to handle the main house.

But based on my own experience, I thought, 'Actually, nothing can prepare you for it.' People had to be able to just come in; this building needed to be a first-job place, rather than for someone who's mid-career, because I felt it would be more exciting to be looking after that. We have a lot of experience in this building, and we've got resources, so we should be directing that towards really nurturing and looking after people. It feels much better for us to have a mission which is about being at the beginning of something, like the beginning of someone's journey with making work at scale. So for me that was about getting early work from people like Polly Findlay, Blanche McIntyre, Jude Christian, Bryony Shanahan, Matthew Xia, and Jeff James.

The other thing I've done is to try to diversify the programme because we recognize that

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X20000615 Published online by Cambridge University Press

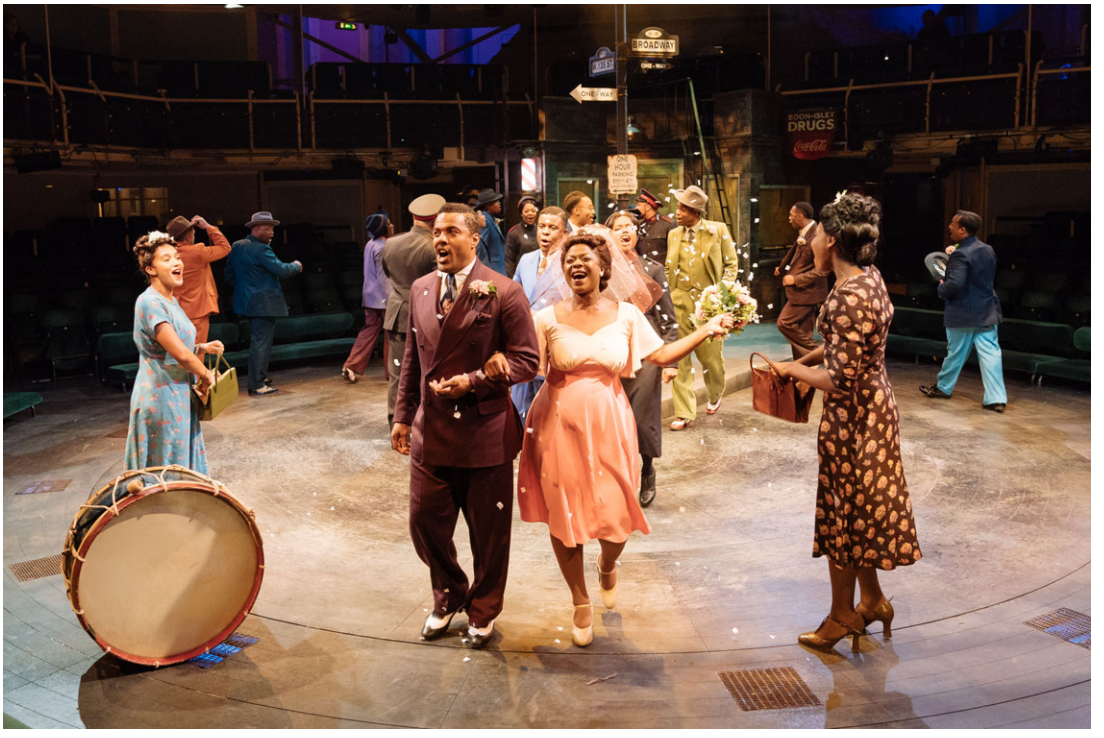

Figure 6. *Guys and Dolls* (2017), directed by Michael Buffong, Royal Exchange and Talawa Theatre Company. Photo: Manuel Harlan.

we need to be making work that is speaking to the widest range of different kinds of people. We've had really good partnerships with Graeae,[7] and with Talawa.[8] Having those relationships with companies is key, again because it's really important to share our resource. For example, we got the rights to *Guys and Dolls*, and I asked Michael Buffong if he was interested in making it, and he said, 'I'm only interested in making it if we can relocate it to Harlem.' And because we're a theatre of size we got that permission. I don't think that permission would have been granted if it wasn't happening in this building. So having creative partnerships with companies who are now starting to work at scale has been important (Figure 6).

How has your own directing practice been shaped by this building or changed over the last few years?

In terms of my own practice, I completely changed the way that I made my work in about 2012. Totally changed. I wasn't excited by the things that were happening in my rehearsal room, and thought, 'If I'm not excited by the things that are happening, then how on earth is an audience going to be excited by the work that we're making?' Before then, my practice of making shows had been dictated by the building I was working in, rather than by the building supporting me working, so that I felt liberated and felt that it was totally my process. So I changed my own process in order to change the culture of this building, partly so that it could also be more flexible and fluid around other artists coming to make work.

Being really specific, I try not to be tied into making decisions about anything too early. Working and making in the room, co-direction models, working with, and having much more of a close relationship with, a movement director have been critical for me. Before that, I was a director who sat around a table for the first week, got people

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X20000615 Published online by Cambridge University Press

up, moved it, people got off book by week three and then we ran it a few times. It was dull. So I started asking people to learn the play before they started rehearsing. I've done it with quite a few projects: with *The Skriker*, with *A Streetcar Named Desire* [2016, designed by Fly Davis], with *Our Town*. The bit that I always find the most interesting and the most exciting, where I feel like I'm a collaborator in the room, is when you can meet people's eyes, and they're working with each other. Whilst the script is around they can't work with each other, there's nothing going on between them.

In terms of casting, I only work with actors who are excited to be in a room that is a blank piece of paper, and who want to help create and own the whole thing. And I don't think that is the way that I worked before. It's certainly not how I was loosely trained to work – where you had your vision and you were always in control, always in charge. It was liberating for me to say, 'I don't know, we're going to find out!'

Does that way of working apply to the design process as well?

In terms of the design process, there are some decisions that you have to make in advance. But we develop clothes and costumes with an actor through a rehearsal process, starting with a load of stuff in a room and playing. And by being prepared to kind of abandon ideas and throw things out, the design process ends up more like a toolkit, rather than being boxed in to 'Well, this is what we've done', or the presentation of a model box, or saying 'And on this page you're going to be here . . .' or 'This is going to . . .' It doesn't mean it's not been ambitious design. When I did *Death of a Salesman* last year [2018, designed by Leslie Travers], it felt clear to me that in order to keep the fluidity between past and present, and in order to create a sense of witness to a sort of accident in slow motion, the actors needed to be on stage the whole time. And that we needed to know: there needed to be one gesture that told us that we were in a space that was much more his head than an environment that was inhabited in the consciousness in each of the other characters. So we had a kind of great big fucking tree. That's really liberating because it just means that you're immediately giving some really big rules to actors, but within that there's a lot of freedom (Figure 7).

What have you learned from this space and from directing in the round?

My aesthetic has got more and more stripped back and distilled the more work I've made here. I think the round continues for me to be the most powerful kind of space to work in and experience theatre. The big headline is that I believe even more in the collective imagination of an audience. And I've felt increasingly confident that an audience can work hard, can suspend disbelief, and doesn't need logic and the literal. An audience needs the poetic, atmosphere, and identification with human beings at crisis point.

What do you think that artists – whether they're actors, directors, or other kinds of theatre-makers – need to support them? Is it at all possible to generalize about that? And what can a permanent, building-based, resourced theatre offer to artists?

Different artists need different things, really. I think we're a lot better at supporting people now. I suppose what the building offers is a rigorous approach to the dramaturgy of what they're making. Sometimes that's creating and supporting a role, someone comes in externally to be dramaturg on a project. Or working with Suzanne [Bell] who's the dramaturg in the company. The role of literary manager has gone: we don't have a literary department now, we have a new work department, and Suzanne works as dramaturg across new plays and full productions. She doesn't do all of them because it would just be too much.

And has that been a gradual shift from working as a literary manager to dramaturg? What's different?

Suzanne was New Writing Associate, and that's definitely a shift from new writing to

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X20000615 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 7. Don Warrington and Maureen Beattie in *Death of a Salesman* (2018), directed by Sarah Frankcom. Photo: Johan Persson.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X20000615 Published online by Cambridge University Press

new work because I think there is an increasing blur between [types of work] . . . And in my view, everything's new. So, say, we're going to be doing *Macbeth* in the autumn with Lucy Ellinson playing Macbeth [2019, directed by Christopher Haydon, designed by Oli Townsend]. The dramaturgical process [with Bridget Escolme] on that has been as big as if we were making a new play.

So how do you support artists to deliver work and develop their practice?

Thinking in terms of who those artists are, how we've worked with some artists and not with others, there have been a lot of live conversations with a lot of artists where we've never landed the right project. I think the projects that have come about have come about because I've got to know people before we've begun to talk about shows. And we've been excited about the artist's imagination, and there is a project that we're interested in making, or there's something that they've started to talk about that feels like it sits in our programme. But most importantly that it feels like it's offering something new for our audience. And by that I mean . . . I think the best thing that ever happened to me in the entire time that I've been an Artistic Director was an eighty-something-year-old woman at one of our 'You, The Audience' events,[9] saying to me, 'I come here to see the things that I don't know, I don't come here to see the things that I do know.' That really allowed me to flip it round and look the other way through the telescope. There's never any point in us repeating something.

It may look externally like it's a development of a strand of work but actually there needs to be something fundamentally different in everything that we make. For example, we're doing *Hobson's Choice* now [by Harold Brighouse, adaptation by Tanika Gupta, directed by Atri Banerjee, designed by Rosa Maggiora, 2019]. We've done *Hobson's Choice* before, but we've never told the story of a particular community of people in Manchester, the Ugandan-Asian community in the early 1980s in the Northern Quarter, through the frame of a play. We've never done anything like that, so that starts to become important and interesting.

I'm always interested in why people want to tell a story or why people want to make a piece of theatre, but also I'm interested in whether they talk about the audience. You'd be surprised by how many theatre directors will come and talk about shows they want to make and they never, ever, *ever* think about the audience. And to me it's like, well, what's that got to do with Manchester, and what's that got to do with the audience that don't come to this theatre but live in this city, or the audience that do come to this theatre?

Quite often it's the projects that are the things that feel really surprising that I'm interested in. Like when we did *Persuasion* [2017, directed and adapted by Jeff James, designed by Alex Lowde] (Figure 8). I'd seen quite a lot of Jeff James's early work. And he came to talk about something else but, as he was going, he said, 'Well, of course the thing that I really want to do, but it's kind of . . .' And I was like, 'That's interesting,' because nobody would think that you would want to make that show. And *Persuasion* is one of the best things that we've done because it felt really, really fresh.

I'd say probably the number one reason why I feel it's important for Artistic Directors to kind of move on is because there's only so many connections. For a period of time you can be driving and leading a building, and you shoot out lots and lots of lines to people, and you can harvest some of that, and you can curate and programme it, and take an organization from here to here. But it's really important that someone else comes in who's got a completely different lens. One of the reasons why I thought it's probably time to leave the party now is not because I've run out of things that we can do with the space, but because I can see that there are some artists that I'm not best placed to support, who should be making work here.

Like who? And in what way?

I think probably artists of colour. There's been a really big commitment to broaden the programme and to be genuinely more representative, and I think we've done big transitional work. But I really believe that this theatre's programme will truly transform in terms of representation in a profound, *profound* way, if

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X20000615 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 8. Lara Rossi and Arthur Wilson in *Persuasion* (2017), directed by Jeff James. Photo: Johan Persson.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X20000615 Published online by Cambridge University Press

it's an Artistic Director of colour that's leading the company. There are some artists that won't come here now, probably. But there are artists that may come here when . . . Do you see what I mean? I think that's what I mean.

Or – it sounds like a terrible thing to say, but – I've never been that interested in work for families. That's not to say that I don't think theatre should have a strong family offer, but that's never really interested me. I can see that there is a massive opportunity to make that kind of work in this space . . . Someone should come and really, truly try and make that happen. I just don't think that's me. There's a bit of a perception that Artistic Directors need to be good at everything – and you're not, you have to recognize that you have limitations, and there are areas of enquiry that you have that another person won't have.

Can we turn to what you've learned about the broader industry over the last couple of decades? What's changed in the industry? Have there been areas that have been resistant to change?

There are some things that may feel like they've changed a bit, but I'm not entirely sure that they've completely changed. There's a bit more of a conversation about representation. I've really welcomed the Arts Council putting a lot more pressure on NPOs to report and to make progress against KPIs [Key Performance Indicators] around representation, both within the artists that those NPOs engage with, but also within their core staff.[10] But there's so much further to go. We can get distracted by the fact that there have been some new appointments and there's more visibility, but I don't know whether it's structural or systemic change yet; I'm slightly reserved about that.

Calling out the culture of a lot of the way that theatre is made, whether that's been through No Grey Area and Me Too, and the kind of custom and practice of how work is made – what's acceptable and what's not – is a big thing. When I first started working in theatre there was a huge amount of behaviour that was really hard, and a lot of behaviour that was absolutely about privilege and entitlement. I hope that I leave behind an organization which is a safe, supportive working environment for everybody.

There is a sense – or used to be – that there is a club in UK theatre, that either you're in or you're out of. (I've never been on the inside.) I don't know whether that's quite so true now. But there's definitely that feeling, especially if you make work outside of London. We've made some fantastic work in Manchester that I stand by, but it is more difficult now than ever to get London theatres to engage with the work that we make in terms of finding a longer life for it.

Why do you think that is?

I think London theatres want to pursue their own artistic programming. If you co-produce outside of London, the outside-of-London co-producer . . . Maybe I'd better not say. But I think there's a sense there that theatre that happens outside of London is only any good if it's come from London, and that the stuff that is commissioned and made outside of London is not as interesting. And I just think it's not true. I think our programme's been as interesting, if not sometimes more interesting, than a lot of London theatre. It's certainly been ahead of the curve on quite a lot. I've never been that interested in London, and I've not found London that interesting in the time that I've been sole Artistic Director; I'm much more interested in New York and Berlin. So we've stopped chasing it, because it felt like we were putting a lot of energy into it. Even when we did *Hamlet*, we couldn't get an NT Live broadcast. We had to make our own film, which has been seen by something like 400,000 people, and pursue cinema distribution ourselves. Maybe we've just had to work harder and be more resourceful; maybe that's been a good thing.

Can we look forward to your role at LAMDA? You've talked recently about some of the ways that you think it might be important to look at drama school training, particularly in relation to who has access to training and what they have access to while they're training. What do you hope you'll be able to do at LAMDA? And how will you know if you've done it?

The industry's changing a lot. For any year group of a drama school's actors, if you look at it just through the lens of 'These are the actors, how many of these people are going to be

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X20000615 Published online by Cambridge University Press

working as actors in five years' time?', you'll find that's probably quite a small percentage. We train a lot of actors in this country and we know that there aren't employment opportunities. But if you take a wider look at a year, and you also look at who are the next producers, writers, directors, educators, facilitators, digital content producers, filmmakers, and so on, and look at drama school training as a grounding for work within the creative skills sector, it starts to be more interesting. My feeling is that I'll know we're doing the right thing in five years' time if we're celebrating the alumni of a drama school for the range of things that people achieve when they leave, rather than just for getting a job at the National Theatre.

In the industry now – this applies to directors, to stage managers, to actors – you need a portfolio of skills, and you will probably have a portfolio career in the creative skills industry. So it's as important to know how to produce and market your own work, how to make your own work, and to see yourself and understand yourself and identify yourself as an artist. There's quite a job of work to be done in terms of how you inspire confidence and create a training that delivers resilient creative individuals with agency, who feel empowered within an industry that can quite often make people feel very passive. So I think it's quite a job. I think it's a really big job.

Will that require ground-up rethinking of approaches to what's going on in teaching rooms, rehearsal rooms, and on curriculums?

Yes, and I think the thing that goes hand in hand with that is how you decolonize the curriculum of drama schools. Because decolonizing some of the central planks of a Stanislavskian acting approach, and some of the European white male texts that are synonymous with a conservatoire drama training, is difficult.

Where are you going to start with that?

Well . . . I think we'll be looking at the drama school resource as an opportunity to be an engine room and a studio to explore what the repertoire of any theatre can be. I think there's probably an increased role for playwrights and for makers and devisers. The dominance of classical texts is difficult, in terms of race, and also for women. The school I'm going to has only in the last couple of years started to have an equal gender split; it used to have a lot more men than women. A lot of those plays don't serve them. So maybe you have to say goodbye to the plays. Or you have to be much more rigorous at looking at what the end point is: what are you getting out of looking at this text, and what are the other texts that balance out working on that text? I think that's really tricky, and I've said previously that it would seem that in a lot of drama schools it's been possible until relatively recently to leave the training, if you are an actor of colour, never having played anybody of your own ethnicity, which I find staggering. I can see how it happens in the current system, but we have to change the system because we're short-changing an awful lot of students. The training has no level playing field, and we need to start by acknowledging that.

Notes and References

With many thanks to Caitlin Gleeson for interview transcription and to the Royal Exchange for images.

1. A proportion of front row 'banquette seats' are sold at a lower price point than most other tickets on the day of performance for shows in the Theatre.

2. Running since 2005, the biennial Bruntwood Prize is a major set of playwriting prizes worth £40,000, split between its (current) four prizes, along with development towards production. For more information, see: <https://www.writeaplay.co.uk/>.

3. Michael Oglesby, the founder of Bruntwood – a commercial property company which owns over one-fifth of Manchester's city centre office space – and the charitable organization Oglesby Charitable Trust, died in November 2019. To date, his organizations have donated over £16m to over 300 charities.

4. Dalton, a poet and playwright, was Engagement Director at the Royal Exchange from 2014 until 2017, when she became an Associate Artist.

5. More often referred to as the 'London Riots', or the 'English Riots' (as multiple cities, including Manchester, were sites of unrest). For further information, see, for example, the LSE-led study avilable at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/46297/1/Reading%20the%20riots%28published%29.pdf>. Rather than a full-scale inquiry, the government formed a Riots Communities and Victims Panel, which delivered its report in March 2012; the government published a response to this in July 2013.

6. For information on productions prior to 1998, see, for example, *The Royal Exchange Theatre Company: Words and Pictures 1976–1998* (Manchester: Royal Exchange Theatre Company Ltd, 1998).

7. Including co-productions of Frederico García Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba* (2017, in a new version by

Jo Clifford, directed by Jenny Sealey, designed by Liz Ashcroft), and Jackie Hagan's *Cosmic Scallies* (2017, directed by Amit Sharma, designed by Bethany Wells), and the appointment of Amit Sharma (associate Artistic Director of Graeae Theatre Company since 2011) as Associate Artistic Director from 2017 to 2019.

8. Including co-productions of Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* (2013, designed by Ellen Cairns), Shakespeare's *King Lear* (2016, designed by Signe Beckmann), and Frank Loesser's *Guys and Dolls* (2017, designed by Sutra Gilmore), all directed by Talawa Theatre Company's Artistic Director, Michael Buffong.

9. For more information about 'You, The Audience', the theatre's action research and audience engagement programme, see <https://www.royalexchange.co.uk/whats-you-the-audience>.

10. See, for example, ACE's 2016–17 Data Report, *Equality, Diversity and the Creative Case* (2018), available at: <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Diversity_report_1617_FINAL_web.pdf>.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X20000615 Published online by Cambridge University Press