

# Research keynote – LTG national conference 2025.

Please find the slides for the keynote. We are asking for your help.

We are interested in **stories of change** - in particular, how you are including more local people in your theatres (as theatre-makers and audiences). This could be anything - from festivals to new buildings; from working with other local groups to new partnerships; to outdoor performance to changing the repertoire.. And so much more.

We also discussed **mapping theatre** in your area – where it happens, and who makes theatre, and exploring links and collaborations across the amateur, professional, youth, and community theatre sectors.

Please drop us an email to say you're interested, and we'll get back to you.

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Anne-marie Greene: [anne-marie.greene@york.ac.uk](mailto:anne-marie.greene@york.ac.uk)

<https://localtheatres.wordpress.com/>



# Theatres and Local Communities

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Helen Nicholson, Royal Holloway, University of London

Anne-marie Greene, University of York

Kay Hepplewhite, University of Sunderland

# What do we know? (2017)

Amateur theatre contributes to the creative and cultural life of the nation, providing creative opportunities and sustaining the national repertoire of plays (and playwrights), including new writing.

Amateur theatre contributes to the social life of the nation, increasing wellbeing, strengthening feelings of belonging and creating resilient communities.

LTG member theatres have deep roots in their local communities, with loyal membership often over generations and strong bonds between people and places (including its heritage and beautiful theatre buildings).

## THE ECOLOGIES OF AMATEUR THEATRE

Helen Nicholson, Nadine Holdsworth & Jane Milling





ROUTLEDGE FOCUS

# Theatre in Towns

HELEN NICHOLSON, JENNY HUGHES,  
GEMMA EDWARDS, AND CARA GRAY



## What do we know? (2023)

<https://creativetownsresearch.wordpress.com>

- A healthy cultural life in towns is best sustained by a 'hybrid' approach, when amateur, professional, youth, and community theatres work together.
- Collaboration between the town's creative communities and Little Theatre Guild reimagines amateur theatres as places of creative experimentation, apprenticeships, and spaces for Research and Development.
- Theatres are beacons of hope that connect and communicate a town's cultural life, histories, and identities. They are spaces where townspeople can re-imagine their towns for the future.

# Theatres in towns and small cities also face challenges (2025)

- Many places have changed over the years, and attracting new people from different local communities is often a challenge for theatres (including LTG theatres).
- Professional theatres are struggling to attract audiences for plays and new writing.
- The theatre industry is currently facing skills shortages and gaps in technical, operational and production teams, which affects particularly touring.

Research led directly to Local Touring Theatre Alliance  
(established 2025) <https://localtheatretouringalliance.com/>



Arts and  
Humanities  
Research Council

Local Theatres:  
Participation,  
Inclusion, Imagination  
(September 2024-  
November 2026)

## Research Team

Royal Holloway, University of London.  
Professor Helen Nicholson (research  
lead), Professor David Gilbert, Dr Cara  
Gray, Dr Yvonne Robinson.

University of Sunderland: Dr Adelle  
Hulsmeier, Dr Kay Hepplewhite

University of York: Professor Anne-marie  
Greene

Royal Central School of Speech and  
Drama: Professor Selina Busby, Dr  
Sidonie Carey-Green



# Local Theatres: Participation, Inclusion, Imagination

This research aims to understand the value of theatre to local people, including

- supporting new writing that tells local stories;
- sharing inclusive approaches to rehearsals and theatre-making, including youth theatre;
- investigating how producing and programming might attract a wider local demographic to the theatre;
- Exploring how theatre buildings are used in ways that are welcoming and inclusive.







# Four deep-dive Case studies

- Slough (Made in Slough Community Play, 2026)
- Young Londoners (Domnar Local, 2025)
- Coastal towns (Made in Hastings. The Stables Festival 2026)
- Sunderland, National Theatre Public Acts; Theatrespace; mapping Sunderland's theatre.

Addressing: skills agendas/ local careers; local stories; regional inequalities; role of local authorities; effects of place-based cultural policies; local, regional, national partnerships.





# Producing Local Theatre: Serving a Wider Local?

# Springboard Festival 2025

# Professor Anne-marie Greene

## Artistic Director, Criterion Theatre

**AG** by Anne-marie Greene

Saturday 10th -17th May  
Tickets £10/£5 Under 25's



# Springboard as a Creative Community Hub

## One-Act Plays

Short-form theatre pieces primarily from local writers

1

## Music & Film

Local musicians and filmmakers showcasing original work

3

## Poetry & Spoken Word

Performance poetry with enhanced dramatic elements

2

## Visual Art & Literary Discussion

Exhibitions and literary conversations about local themes

4





# Representation and Diverse





# Local Themes and Stories



## Cultural Heritage

Local landmarks  
Scientific discoveries  
Green Spaces



## Social Issues

Migration experiences  
National Front protests (1980s)  
Youth gang prevention  
Knife crime reduction



## Personal Narratives

Trans and queer identities  
Food and family traditions  
Care system experiences  
Refugee journeys



## Developmental Approach to Creative Work

### Recruitment & Assembly

Bringing together diverse artists from across with no previous theatre experience but strong to local communities.

### Material Creation

Developing original works that reflect local perspectives, with an emphasis on authentic artistic quality.

### Skills Development

Providing training in theatrical techniques, collaborative creation, and performance skills through regular workshops led by experienced facilitators.

### Performance & Legacy

Presenting polished work at the festival and creating pathways for continued artistic development and community engagement beyond the event.

# Impact and Legacy

10%

Youth Audience

Double the regular season average

40%

New Artists

Performers new to our theatre space

2

Legacy Programmes

Poetry and playwriting workshops created





## Challenges and Limitations



### Volunteer Resistance

Limited engagement and some poorer than desirable attitudes from regular company members suggests resistance to new initiatives



### Resource Burden

Complex production requirements stretched technical resources, machine to their limits



### Financial Model

Lower profit margins with 67% audience versus the 75-75-80% mark average across the year.



### Support Structures

Insufficient guidance for artists unfamiliar with processes

# Key Takeaways and Next Steps



# Local Theatres

## City of Sunderland



This is our city

Riverside  
Sunderland

Sunderland  
City Council

Tolent

European Union  
European Regional  
Development Fund

LEVELLING  
UP

HM Government

kay.hepplewhite@sunderland.ac.uk  
with Adelle Hulsmeier



# Mapping the ecology of local theatres





# WHAT DO WE MAKE IN SUNDERLAND, NOW?

What do the Mack'ems mack, now that the shipyards have closed?  
Well, we mack cranes and lifting frames  
So when people aim to mack something new  
We can mack what they need to see it through.  
We mack cars,  
We mack the beer in our bars  
We mack places for people to grow their ideas  
We mack the guts that you need to craik on when it knacks  
We mack pink slices  
We mack great coffee  
We mack a stadium roar  
We mack beautiful shores to explore  
We are one of those places  
where people mack spaces  
for other people to be themselves.  
We mack community  
We mack memories  
We are mackin' our identity  
We are creating a future where  
You can mack new beginnings.  
We're building the bridges.  
We're building the new buildings  
to meet old friends in.  
Soon, we'll be mackin' the next generation of storytellers  
We've not been awaiting a reinstating:  
we are the Mack'ems, and we are still creating.

By Helen Wilko, with contributions from the community of Sunnyside

The urban  
pioneers,  
creatives and  
entrepreneurs  
of Sunderland  
are building an  
exciting city  
neighbourhood  
in Sunnyside.



Sunderland City Council  
City of Sunderland  
Business Festival  
TOWN.  
#FollowingTheFutureCity #Sunderland2024





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GROUP

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LLOYDS BANK STILL  
OPEN FOR BUSINESS



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See you there with a  
designated space  
for your business  
and your people  
to thrive



# Culture changes: LTG as part of local theatre ecosystem (2025)

- Young People: Generation Z's social and cultural lives
- Audiences: late booking; more risk averse on repertoire, particularly for new works (professional theatre)
- Professional theatres need smaller performance spaces and spaces for festivals, R&D
- A joined-up strategy for audience and skills development across the sector
- And so much more..





# How can you get involved?

Stories of success, opportunity, collaboration, partnership, and change.

new writing that tells local stories;

approaches to rehearsals and theatre-making, including youth theatre;

how producing and programming might attract a wider local demographic to the theatre;

how theatre buildings are used in ways that are welcoming and inclusive.

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