

## PRACTISING COMMUNITY AND PERFORMANCE

### IN OUR SITES

The writer's role in place-making theatre with, by and for communities

A personal view by Sara Clifford

#### Prologue

*Our Dancing Feet*, one of the most successful of the large scale site specific participatory pieces I have been creating for the last ten years, was based on stories collected from people who used to go to the Regent Dance Hall in Brighton during the 1950s and 60s. During the dress rehearsal, one of our participants and storytellers was watching and listening, waiting for her cue, along with the other intergenerational dancers. I was sitting with them, and I saw her suddenly sit up, astonished – 'Oh my God!', she said. 'That's me! That's my story!'

Even though I had run the script by her for approval a couple of months before, she was so excited and, indeed surprised, to hear her story being told in this way, that it only confirmed my faith in what I was trying to do: to somehow be the transmitter of untold stories, sometimes drawing on verbatim text, structuring a narrative and retelling it to both the storytellers and their friends and families, and a wider world – whilst also making great theatre with wonderful creative colleagues.

Over the course of these projects, I have often reflected on what that process is and how to make sure I am respectful and true to those generously given stories, whilst also ensuring that there is a gripping and well told story for an audience.

This chapter is an attempt to understand that process.<sup>1</sup>

#### Introduction

Following twenty five years of socially engaged practice working with young people, intergenerational groups, women prisoners/ ex-offenders, hospice patients and communities based in areas of high deprivation, since 2012 my theatre writing work has developed as a particular way of working that has become a reproduceable model: that aims to create theatre that tells a community's story and locate it in a place that is local and not a traditional theatre space; to engender ownership in that community, who are therefore be more likely to engage, participate and be spectators in both the process and product; to offer opportunities for all to experience that art; and to contribute to making places that people want to live, work and play in.

To achieve this, I created a company, Inroads, and I take an unusually active role for a writer, initiating the project, and leading the research through creative workshops that then inform the script, operating as Artistic Director of the company, but also as a Creative Producer and Outreach *animateur*, and bringing in highly experienced creative teams for each funded project.

Using case studies and script extracts of such projects as *The Port, the Beast and the Traveller*, inspired by the Dieppe raid in 1942, performed at Newhaven Fort in 2012; *Our Dancing Feet*, about social dancing in the 50s, performed in a modern dance club in Brighton and in the Winter Garden in Eastbourne (2013 and 2014); *Home Fires*, about the impact of World War One, again set in Newhaven Fort (2015); *Vacant Possession* (2016), co-created with poet Clare Best and performed in Swan House in Lewes, intertwining one family story with the history of the house and Lewes; and the upcoming *Two Pairs of Eyes*,

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.inroads.org.uk](http://www.inroads.org.uk)

again at Newhaven Fort in 2022, this chapter will explore and reflect on this unusual role as the writer in this now established model, of rooting the project in the local community, collecting local stories, memories and writings, running workshops with various community groups, and including local community groups in the final performances, with a script that I write, informed by this research.

I will explore the role of cultural memory, its transmission and place in this theatre work, and how I draw on my interests in theatre, storytelling, social/local history, maps, 'walking literature' and psychogeography, visual/musical influences, in order to explore the complex inter-relationship of place and community, potentially with the power to challenge our perceptions of culture and society.

'Community' and 'participation' can be tricky words, and particularly in relation to theatre, where it is still often seen as amateur and/or low quality. "Community" sounds 'warmly persuasive' as Raymond Williams describes<sup>1</sup>, but can be as exclusionary as it is inclusionary, and can cover anything from a shared religious or cultural heritage to vast swathes of society. For the purposes of this chapter, I intend a group who share common interests, particularly around where they live and/or work – this is explored in greater depth below.

Many of these issues are explored elsewhere in depth by writers and academics, some of whom are listed in the bibliography, and I am indebted to both Chrissie Tiller who ran the MA in Participatory Arts at Goldsmiths College; and Dr. Selina Busby, Professor of Applied and Social Theatre and Course Leader for the MA in Applied Theatre at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, for their inspiration and guidance over the years; as well as Dr. Kate Aughterson and Dr. Jess Moriarty, who run the Creative Writing BA at Brighton University, and where I was Writer in Residence with Clare Best in 2014/15.

## **Placemaking**

This is a phrase that is often used in theatre and other social initiatives at the moment and can also be a slippery term. I use it in this context to denote the way theatre and participatory arts can, almost literally, 'make a place', putting it on the map, creating collaborations with local communities, and, crucially, finding a space in that community to create a sense of belonging. Since Covid times, this has seemed particularly important.

I am currently watching this process happen in Newhaven in East Sussex, a recent recipient of Government 'levelling up' funding. Inroads have previously created several shows here and there are now an increasing number of local arts initiatives, such as the Newhaven Festival and Haven Young Creatives; the Tidemills project; the opening of a quayside café, the Sidings, where ad hoc performances can take place; and, through a working group, starting to create a cultural strategy for the town, with the coordination of a Creative Producer and the input of a dedicated group of artists and community development workers. Nationally, and encouraged in this by Arts Council funding, the arts are being recognised as a catalyst for regeneration and for wellbeing, other recent examples being the socially embedded Slung Low in Leeds, and the new East Quay cultural space in the tiny town of Watchet in Somerset: placemaking in action..

And also because, it would seem, that theatre has left the building.. This offers outdoor, immersive, accessible theatre that is often free and local, in a space everyone already knows and then sees reimagined.

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<sup>1</sup> Williams, Raymond. "Community." *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. Revised Edition. NY: Oxford University Press, 1983.

### **What is a writer anyway? Starting to theorise and apply the model**

Alongside my theatre work, I teach Writing with Communities and Dramaturgy in Higher Education at BA and MA level, as well as other scriptwriting courses such as the Arvon Foundation, and I have been able to place my own work within the context and framework of some of the writing that has been undertaken on this.

In 2015, as Writer in Residence at Brighton University, I published an Arts Professional article in which I argue that all theatre is community theatre: that if we say there are different audiences and different kinds of theatre, we are failing at the very basic level of what we mean by theatre and accessibility.<sup>1</sup> When I teach, we spend some time examining 'community', and I draw on some key texts to frame the following questions:

- When is 'community' exclusive as well as inclusive?
- Why is this named 'community theatre' or similar? How or why is it similar or different to mainstream theatre?
- Whose narrative do we usually hear? Is this changing?
- What are the aims and benefits of this work?
- What are the challenges?
- Who is the audience and where does it take place?
- What groups are we talking about – why are they referred to as 'communities'? People may belong to more than one community...
- Who decides these names – what does it mean, does it mean a minority, something other than the dominant culture?
- We are exploring group issues- this is not therapy – we can create a safe space and basic ground rules but professional partners are crucial

### **SITE SPECIFIC WORK**

For me, the site specific or site responsive element of creating theatre with communities is crucial. Inspired by *Performing Site-Specific Theatre: Politics, Place, Practice (Performance Interventions)* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) ed Birch, A and Tompkins, J, *Chapter One, The 'Place' and Practice of Site-Specific Theatre and Performance* (Tompkins), I have inferred the following questions:

- How can site or place engender stories for performance?
- How does it shape the ensuing story or performance?
- How can we respond to (a) site through performance?
- How can we tell a community's story through place?
- What are the different ways that 'site' can be interpreted?
- What are the different ways that 'performance' can be interpreted?
- What is the tension between site (host) and performance (ghost) ?
- Indoors or outdoors and how this affects the material and my writing process

Phil Smith's book, *Making Site-Specific Theatre and Performance: A Handbook* ( Macmillan International and Red Globe Press, London 2019), *Chapter One, Why Make Site Specific Performance?* has helped me develop a further range of questions:

- Imagine the range of spaces /places available – eg confined spaces, open spaces, disused spaces, heritage spaces, military spaces, shopping spaces..

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/magazine/284/article/what-community-theatre> ( accessed August 2022)

- Understanding the space and its history – this is not an empty space, what has created this space? What is the archaeology of a space, and what is actually present? What is missing?
- Address it as a living system – sound, materials, time of day. The site as active player, not a blank page
- How can you interact with this space?

As a playwright therefore,, I argue that we must constantly explore some overarching questions when involved in this work:

- How do I respond to the challenges and ethics around class, diversity and inclusion and participation, particularly when working in a monocultural working class area of deprivation?
- How do I honour people's stories and checking that they have been respectfully used, whilst also aiming for the most interesting story and highest quality theatre?
- How I am transmitting those stories as a writer, the craft of scriptwriting from the material?

## **WORKING AS A WRITER WITH, BY AND FOR COMMUNITIES**

### **Background and influences**

My writing career started relatively late and followed work in fringe theatre as a stage manager and director, and in community arts as a workshop leader and a Theatre in Education actor/teacher. Between 1989 and 2007, I followed a more traditional route as a writer: my first play, *Some Sunny Day*, telling the untold story of women munition workers in World War Two (my first example of integrating factual stories with my own narrative) - was selected for development by both the Soho Theatre and Paines Plough.

I went on to write nearly twenty plays, both short and full length, for various theatre companies and traditional theatre spaces, usually the 'black box' space with all the restrictions that implies in terms of cast numbers and, perhaps, narrative vision.

By 1998, I was a finalist for the International Susan Smith Blackburn Award for *A Thousand Days*, a play about the Plague and the English Civil War, exploring the history and betrayal of the Left, and I felt confident about this style of exploring history and untold stories.

Alongside my writing work, I continued to create and facilitate work with community groups, including work with Donmar Warehouse, the National Theatre, Clean Break, London Bubble, Spare Tyre, Magic Me and St Christopher's Hospice.<sup>1</sup>

### **A change of direction**

In 2006, I encountered Wildworks' *Souterrain* <sup>2</sup>, a version of Orpheus and Eurydice, at Stanmer Park in Sussex and it revolutionised my practice: here was a way of combining all my interests: history, live music, communities, participation, untold stories, myth and psychogeography. The company spent time researching and developing the piece with the villagers of Stanmer, who created installations about memory and loss, taking part in tableaux outside their cottages as we promenaded through the space, following Orpheus in his search, and ultimately watching Eurydice being washed clean of her memories.

At one point, we were asked to choose either something we wanted to remember or something we wanted to forget (linked to the theme of the myth of loss and memory), and we wrote these short memories on luggage labels and added them to vast installations in barns along with everyone else – an incredibly moving and simple way of engaging an audience to participate with these deep themes, themes which I discovered recur often in this

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://saraclifford.com/writing>

<sup>2</sup> <https://wildworks.org.uk/projects/souterrain/>

community place-making work. Bill Mitchell of Wildworks described finding the *genius loci* of the place, and called it 'landscape theatre'.<sup>1</sup>

I fell in love with this way of working and determined to find a way of making this work. Over the next couple of years, whilst still working for Creative Partnerships, starting to teach in Higher Education, raising a family and learning international influences via the Fence network of writers, I was able to develop and refine my practice.

Having moved to Sussex - partly to be near my partner's family, as he grew up in Newhaven - one day I went to Newhaven Fort on a family outing, and thought again what an amazing performance space it could be. I approached Arts Council England who put me in touch with Dave Reeves at Zap Art, who was himself planning a project in Newhaven- this was to become the fabulous French Generik Vapeur street theatre show, *Newhaven Coromorant*,<sup>2</sup> in 2011, with performers with blue faces storming the main street of the town with a lorry with massive speakers blaring French rock music, ending on the beach where local people had been trained to abseil down from the cliffs. What's not to like, I thought?

### **Development of Inroads**

Inroads works with, by and for communities who might not normally take part in the arts, particularly in Newhaven, an area in East Sussex of social/economic deprivation, identified as having a very high Multiple Deprivation Average (IMDA) in a 2019 survey by the Sussex Community Foundation (low arts engagement),<sup>3</sup> and we explore local and current themes particular to that community /location. In the ten years since 2012, working initially in partnership with Zap Art, Inroads has created eight site responsive pieces of work, from the history of a house and the transitions within a family (*Vacant Possession*): to a World War One story at Newhaven Fort (*Home Fires*); to stories of a dance hall or a disco (*Our Dancing Feet*), encompassing small and large, indoors and outdoors locations, and exploring themes such as war, memory and loss. Alongside this, Inroads has produced other projects such as *Twelve Angry Women* and *Breaking the Silence*.<sup>4</sup>

All projects are publicly funded, mainly through Arts Council England, but also Heritage Lottery Fund, local authorities, local trusts, plus always a donation from my fee; and also support in kind from local and town councils, venues and community organisations. So far, each of the large-scale productions has been completely free for audiences, in recognition of the needs of the local community and to prioritise accessibility.

Elsewhere, I have also worked with international participants who have come up with very exciting project ideas and locations, such as a heritage project at a Romanian castle, a French-Canadian language/ heritage project, a Chilean family/national story, the intergenerational story of a Portuguese village, and a Southern States line-dancing musical based on the writer's family and local community. The stories can be funny, moving and inspiring, but all draw inspiration from the location and the community, and I have very much enjoyed this role in triggering ideas.

We already know, therefore, that this can be rolled out across different spaces, communities and cultures, and we have indeed adapted existing shows for different spaces. As an

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z3loGY3Szk&t=37s>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2011/jul/20/newhaven-cormorant-theatre-review>

<sup>3</sup> [https://issuu.com/sussexgiving/docs/sussex\\_uncovered\\_2019](https://issuu.com/sussexgiving/docs/sussex_uncovered_2019)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.inroads.org.uk/performance>

example, *Our Dancing Feet*,<sup>1</sup>(2013 and 2014) a large scale site specific show about social dancing in the 50s was based on writing/dance workshops with an intergenerational group, and interviews with older residents in Brighton. I then wrote a script which was performed by a core of 5 actors with around 70 community participants/dancers. It was produced first in a modern nightclub in Brighton and then restaged in Eastbourne at the Winter Garden, with new material and references for that location. This demonstrated that this is a transferable way of working that can be rolled out in other locations - whether as the same show or using the model to create a new piece with a community.

I have also taught this model on all my Writing with Communities courses over the last ten years and seen people take it and absorb it and create their own work, having mentored people to plan and create projects in the UK - for example at Lumb Bank, Ted Hughes' house and its cotton mill heritage; a Victorian operating theatre production of *Frankenstein*; and, in 2021, Rottingdean Windmill with Dorothy Max-Prior, who said that the model:

*"became the start of the research for a site-specific sound installation incorporating spoken word,... set in the windmill, enjoyed by over 1,000 people during the festival....Sara kick-started this new direction for me as a solo artist and writer working in outdoor arts and site-specific performance"* ( private email)

### **The model of work**

Therefore, rather than just a show or performance, I now see this as a **transferrable way of working**: a model of engagement with communities, that we have now rolled out over ten years, rooted in my thirty years experience of applied/community theatre writing and directing – that is, oral histories, creative workshops, written script, mixed professional/non-professional cast performances, which originally began as a meeting point of theatre and outdoor arts, combining elements of both, whilst maintaining a narrative that all the audience follow and aiming to diversify our audience to include all under-represented groups.

This model of a writer creating and producing narrative-led site-specific work with communities, is a highly specialised way to write and tour with myself /Inroads operating effectively as both a writer and animateur. It would seem that only a few companies work with writers in this way, including early Kneehigh, Periplum and Wildworks, and even then the text may often be devised or a fractured narrative.

But what is process that I go through? What is the process of transforming the material and the ethics associated with that? Am I, in effect, an animateur?

When we started to think about my first Newhaven show, I did the following, the first steps in creating the subsequent model, so here I have tried to break down the process.

### **Making the show**

#### **The first show and developing the model: The Port, the Beast and the Traveller, 2012<sup>2</sup>**

All of these elements can be traced in subsequent shows:

#### **Research:**

- Discovering the story – initial thoughts were what role might fishing stories play?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.inroads.org.uk/our-dancing-feet>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.inroads.org.uk/the-port-the-beast-and-the-traveller>



- But then interest from the community in a story about the disastrous Dieppe Raid of 1942, to link with the anniversary in 2012, and the importance of this to the town. The local council were keen on this idea, and offered funding and support.
- Themes – love, loss, memory, the changing landscape, the history of the town
- My partner's local history eg the 'Blood Tunnel' and 'Giddy Tunnel' at the Fort when it was disused, something that all local residents knew about and played in as children
- Research at the Newhaven Museum, at that time a somewhat chaotic assemblage of scrapbooks and artefacts and a very knowledgeable curator, Peter Bailey, MBE.
- With initial funding, I went to Dieppe and the museum there, to imagine the battle from the French and Canadian side
- Grassroots preparation and meetings- Key partners at the Hillcrest Community Centre, local artists who are now friends and associates; Sussex Community Development Association (SCDA); and Andrew Bishop, who used to pilot/navigate the Newhaven Ferry, who contributed some verbatim text.
- Initial workshops and story gathering – what kind of stories are there and who is telling them? The knitting group, art group, dance group and also working with oral history professionals to collect these stories in the most effective way.
- Politics of Newhaven at that time – the unpopular building of the Incinerator, and the Fort threatened with being sold off – how these local politics find their way into the piece

### **Importance of public engagement**

- Creative workshops and how these worked – these were art, writing, drama and dance workshops and I used some of the material in the final piece
- Costume and hair of the 40s, by GladRags and Sussex Swing
- Music of the 40s workshop, Dorothy Max Prior and Veronica Stephens
- Talks by local historians and academics including Dr Jenny Flood and Kevin Gordon
- The Keep /East Sussex Records office
- Storytelling event with Guesthouse Storytellers
- Schools workshops – writing and drama
- Core professional cast amplified by large local cast

### **Narrative decisions**

- Following Wildworks' inspiration and using a strong myth based story/ magical realism as scaffolding, I chose the story of Odysseus who went missing for 70 years while his wife waited for him.
- Finding the resonant story ie how did this resonate with the stories we had collected?
- How I then made all this into a play narrative – who should be in it, what stories are we hearing - capturing the atmosphere
- Including personal stories – I later drew on elements of my own family stories for *Our Dancing Feet* and *Home Fires*.
- Live music
- Promenade
- Cinematic – focusing on close up scenes between actors, then pulling the audience's attention to the setting of the landscape
- A story that everyone follows together
- Ghosts of the past that are always there- our younger selves as theme, something that I have explored in other plays too, so my own interests as a writer
- Initially outdoors – partly because of the street arts influence

- Experienced director – we were very lucky to have a fantastic director, Clare Raftery of Periplum, <sup>1</sup> able to work with this unusual combination of outdoor arts and script, using only the natural acoustics and no mikes. Terry O'Donovan took on this role for *Our Dancing Feet* and *Home Fires*, and Nicola Blackwell for *The Tribunal*, arguably a unique combination of skills and experience.
- An extremely experienced producer, Veronica Stephens for Zap Art, now permanently closed.

### **Narrative form**

Via Veronica, I started to learn about street arts, and, ambitiously, we aimed to create the meeting point of street arts and theatre. Street arts is of course about being accessible to a wider community than would ever be found in the average theatre, and I was excited and drawn to a new way of working that fitted with my desire to work more directly with communities and still write. What would this hybrid look like?

This took me back to *Souterrain*. I was always interested in narrative, and although companies like dreamthinkspeak and Punchdrunk were, and are, making more post dramatic stories with individual responses, I wanted to tell a story that everyone would experience, following essentially the same narrative – all part of that spectrum of inclusion where all points of entry and ownership are ok, creating with, by and for, not proscriptive.

### **Writing process**

So what did I actually do as a writer?

I read all the oral histories and all the historical research, and I knew I wanted to create a story based on a myth, as Wildworks had done. My initial draft tried to put everything in – it was a procession through the high street, stopping at all the historical points and telling the story – way too basic and pretty rubbish as a narrative, but maybe an essential part of the process.

With the support of the Town Council, I then decided to focus on the Fort, its role in the 1942 raid and the terrible sense of loss associated with it, in both Dieppe and Newhaven. There are enough people in the town old enough to remember it, and so I got some direct stories about that experience.

At the same time, there was a sense that Newhaven itself was in peril: the Fort might be sold off in this ward with the most economic deprivation; while many people, even those who lived there, seemed to see it as a dumping ground, for the incinerator for example, despite local opposition, and the 70s ring road killed off many town businesses– a local joke is that when people arrive on the Ferry, they ask where the town centre is – but this is it! And very different from the uber French town of Dieppe. And so they hightail it to Lewes and Brighton... <sup>2</sup>

I wanted to contribute to a sense of pride in the town and its history –and it's safe to say that my partner's 'mixed' experience growing up here contributed to this. There is a strong sense of community with people who have tried hard to make things work, such as the Hillcrest Centre and local artists such as Carol Havard tirelessly working with local young people. <sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.periplum.co.uk/content/home/>

<sup>2</sup> Since writing this chapter, Newhaven has been the focus of many levelling up initiatives, which are starting to change the atmosphere of the town <https://newhavenenterprisezone.com/creative-newhaven/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://art-techniques.co.uk/>



But I also wanted to make something of very high quality – a story that would make people laugh and cry and interact in the way that *Souterrain* had.

At this point, as seems to often happen I now realise, a key interview came my way: someone put me in touch with Ben Franklin, aged 90-something, and a survivor of the Dieppe Raid, who was happy to talk to me about what happened. He agreed to be recorded, and indeed I used his verbatim text in the script, see below. It was slightly edited and juxtaposed with the rest of the script narrative, and he agreed to his words being used in this way. As the quote goes, ‘When an old person dies, a library burns down’<sup>1</sup> and I felt this very strongly with Ben – his story is now preserved in the script, a live action record of a terrible event that we might struggle to understand now.

**MUSICIAN LEADS ON ROUND, BILL IS ABOVE US  
GHOSTS APPEAR ON THE HILLSIDE**

*I didn't know then that they were under intense fire.... Anyhow, I went ahead and did what I had to do which was to land and I before I got there I found what I thought was a raft but it turned out to be an upturned landing craft, it was floating about in the water with lots of men hanging onto it..*

*Well, we got a line or two to these men and started to pull them away from the beach. We did fairly well, when suddenly all hell let loose. I found out later it was a bomb or a shell that fell close to us, and it exploded and we were knocked sideways, I was hit on the head*

*It was a piece of shrapnel which fell out of the sky...I thought I'd lost the top of my head altogether. I put my hand up very, very gently, to feel how much I was bleeding. I looked at my hands, there was only a tiny, thin trace of blood. I thought "My god, I can't understand this, what's happened. My head was intact- but I thought I'd lost the top of my head.*

*We drifted about for some while and then, I can't remember...*

**IN THE DISTANCE, THE LAST POST PLAYS.**  
*From The Port, the Beast and The Traveller (ibid<sup>2</sup>)*

From this, I had the idea of the soldier who has been away 70 years, and then from this magical realism element, the story suddenly fell into place: that way I could combine the experiences of those who had been at Dieppe with those left here – the twist being that Bill has forgotten the last 70 years and is now remembering and rediscovering Newhaven; whilst his wife, Penelope, who has waited for him all these years, embroidering, is aged nearly 90 and slipping into dementia and forgetting him. – the theme of memory and loss permeating the whole piece.

Along with other characters, including a business man selling off the town, a family member searching for his lost family history and a young person from the town so disillusioned he is about to leave for ever, I was able to write a powerful story, that revolved around whether Bill would find Penelope in time before she forgot him forever.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/831934-when-ever-an-elder-dies-a-library-burns-down>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.inroads.org.uk/the-port-the-beast-and-the-traveller>

Bill finally finds her, and they have a last dance on the parade ground, before we realise that she has forgotten him forever and she is led off by her carer.

### **Being in rehearsal, the role of the actors and the director – and the space**

The production was a great success – around 250 local people came over two nights, following the show around the Fort, laughing and crying along with the story.

We used the whole space, moving the audience around the Fort, following the narrative and working in different spaces: the playground, a chair on a battlement of the Fort, up on the cliff looking out over the sea, the large Romney Hut, but also going into hidden spaces seeing installations, including Penelope singing a young woman dancing with members of the audience, and another young woman playing violin for the shrines of memory created within the tunnels, all unbearably moving – and then re-emerging to follow the narrative again as continued the promenade, led by costumed stewards.

The acoustics of the Fort were such, that we did not use amplification, and Clare was able to direct the actors to use the landscape and existing structures to bounce their voices back to the audience.

Other reproduceable elements of this show included:

- Recordings of the original stories and finding ways of presenting these eg in a soldier's hat or a dancing shoe
- Violinist as guide around the Fort, being led musically
- Young people playing soldiers and stewards
- Mixed age dance group dancing on the parade ground
- Creating installations about local people with the community
- Children's choir singing Run Rabbit Run
- Drop in art workshop on the night with extracts
- Community cast playing ghosts, soldiers
- Local bugle player playing the Last Post, watched by the soldiers' ghosts
- Extracts from community poetry printed out and hung on walls
- Community Art work hung on walls
- Local Photos hung on walls
- Local brass band playing

We were even lucky enough to have the Ferry arrive below us in the port – the 'Beast' of the title (*The Ferry comes in like a beast seeking sanctuary (ibid<sup>1</sup>)*) at a key point in the story, something some people thought we might have arranged – if only!

The cultural memory of the town is embedded in this story, a story that can be passed on from the older generation who remember it to the younger one who have never known war, and hence the importance of intergenerational work.

With the Fort as the site, originally an Iron Age fort and so a military space for thousands of years, we were mapping the psychogeography: what happened here, how do we echo it in a military fort and how do we disrupt it? How does the shape of the structure and the steep landscape support the narrative of the story – when are we outdoors, when are we high up, when are we indoors – when are we looking close up and when are we seeing something from far away and how does this impact on the narrative and the way we lead the audience

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.inroads.org.uk/the-port-the-beast-and-the-traveller>

around? I found that once we were in the space, I was shaping and rearranging the story to fit that landscape, responding to the space with the story.

We wanted to reinforce the importance of storytelling and local history for a community – and in this case, a socio-economically deprived community with very low arts engagement, at least at the time – and how to create theatre from that that resonates and engages: this is your space, your place, we are putting you on the map.

We trailed the show at the local Fish Festival, with a stall and an actor reading local stories; ran the associated talks and workshops in the run up, including developing and rehearsing material with the community participants; and we had an opening event on the first night and invited the mayor, making sure that this was an important local event that was valued and acknowledged. With free bookable tickets, everyone's friends and family came, and despite a professional theatre colleague telling me that this was 'not a real audience', we were pleased and proud that so many people came to support the cast and the show.

Nothing like this was happening in Newhaven in 2012, and audiences were surprised and delighted, not least by the quality and reach of the production.

We asked for feedback via various routes, including a Facebook event page, and comments included:

#### **Audience Feedback**

- Great performance –it was almost like standing in the middle of a film with the actors around you at various locations. Great idea being guided around from scene to scene using the young lady musician playing the violin. Loved the dramatic and sometimes quite haunting sound of that. Well done to everyone working on PBT!*
- Brilliant evening .. most impressive.. Hopefully not the last.. Excellent, thankyou*
- Fab!! |Really enjoyed the play, wonderfully atmospheric!! Amazing views! Could see all the time! Thanks*
- Great use of the fort and ferry! Very moving and good to feel involved in Newhaven history*
- Really enjoyed the show. It was evocative, made more powerful by being in the fort. A triumph of storytelling and community spirit. More please..*
- Very touching story about Newhaven. Well put together. Good history telling.*

And from the Facebook page, my favourite review:

*'What a good night last night and a very good story. I've not been to the fort since I was a kid in the good old days. and when newhaven was a busy port and as a kid i remember going out on the tug watching my dad towing in large cargo ship. Now the harbour is a shit hole and the fort might be sold, but i still love newhaven but not the way it's going'*



## 5/ The next ten years - Conclusion and where next?

At the time of writing, I have been exploring new directions for the work whilst still performing and teaching the model: *Two Pairs of Eyes* will be produced by Inroads at Newhaven Fort in May 2022, a promenade and immersive site specific show based on archetypal and local ghost stories, with the established wrap around community engagement model and participation in the show, funded by Farnham Maltings, Arts Council England and the Chalk Cliff Trust; <sup>1</sup>and an oral history project, *Sharing the Limelight*, with Theatre Royal Brighton, funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, telling the history of the theatre in the 50s and 60s, from the perspective of theatre workers and audiences. <sup>2</sup> Both projects are planned with the longer term aim of applying the idea/model elsewhere, rolling it out with similar communities and audiences, adapting the stories as appropriate.

Meanwhile, in 2019, I began a shift of direction when I was Writer in Residence for the South Downs National Park and Applause Touring, when I was commissioned to research and write a new play exploring and celebrating the landscape, people and history of the South Downs. Through applying the same model of public engagement via oral histories and creative workshops, and then writing a script, I wrote, directed and produced a one-woman show, *Cherry Soup*, that toured pubs and community venues across the Park. Using the device of a cherry-seller by the side of the road, the play drew on different stories I had heard, some told through verbatim, some scripted by me, to create a montage of these stories. I did not want this to be a 'heritage' piece, and the script touched on the changing landscapes and populations of the Park, its past, present and future, and how the history of cherries is the history of the South of England, with the storyteller finally revealed to be a

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.inroads.org.uk/about-3-1>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.inroads.org.uk/copy-of-two-pairs-of-eyes>

woman from a migrant fruit picking family come to settle here, bringing their traditional recipe for cherry soup. The play was later recorded for audio podcast and can be heard here: <https://inncrowd.org.uk/writer-in-residence-2019/>.

Following from this, in 2021, I was the lead writer/dramaturg on *The Full Harvest*, one of 10 plays commissioned by Applause to tell the stories of the 7 rivers that run across the Park – these can be heard here: <https://applause.org.uk/about-us/projects/full-harvest/>

Meanwhile, following the roll out model described, as of 2022, *Cherry Soup* has been recommissioned to be adapted for the Chilterns in a new site responsive version, *Sour Cherry Soup*, for the *Chalk, Cherries and Chairs* Festival, 2023.<sup>1</sup>

Through these commissions I started to engage directly with the landscape and, crucially, our relationship with the environment – both of which have made me look at the concept of Ecodramaturgy: the role of theatre in the coming climate emergency and to a change in my practice. In Autumn 2021, I was successful in gaining a Developing Your Creative Practice grant to explore this in more detail, to rethink and develop my practice, and explore this relatively new concept, encompassing environmental themes and sustainable producing practices.

My aim is to integrate this with my existing placemaking/community focused work, asking: how can theatre engage people to make choices around climate change? Following my research, including visiting theatre practitioners & academic hubs, to learn and understand these concepts/ways of working while growing a network of contacts and collaborators, I will write a 'Change of Practice' document as a blueprint for a new approach, my relationship with communities, my teaching, and my approach to future projects.

I have plans for an ambitious project, *Power Source*, that will initially span three communities- Gosport, Hampshire; Amberley, West Sussex; and Tidemills near Newhaven, to create a piece that can then tour to other 'taskscaping' locations and a wider variety of communities, beginning the work of the next ten years. I will focus my inquiry on the theme of 'power': the history of power for different industries, past, present and future and looking ahead to green power; but also what power the people hold, and how they can gain/ regain agency - working particularly in areas of socio economic deprivation, via creative engagement and participatory theatre, make choices for their future for the planet, climate and sustainability: the power source.

Watch this space..

## APPENDIX

### OTHER CASE STUDIES

#### REVIEWS OF ALL SHOWS MENTIONED HERE:

<https://saraclifford.com/writing>

#### 1/ Outdoors, large productions:

**Home Fires** <https://www.inroads.org.uk/home-fires>

Newhaven Fort

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.chilternsaonb.org/projects/CCC.html>

18 - 21 March 2015

*In the early days of the Great War in 1914, the British Empire was, of course, invincible, and it seemed that the fighting would truly be over by Christmas. But the professional army were losing and from now on England would expect all men, young and old, to volunteer.*

*By Christmas, it was clear that the war was far from over - and those at home were beginning to understand it was not something that just happened on the battlefields.*

Inspired by Sara Clifford's and local people's family stories of the Great War, this new site-responsive promenade play draws on text, sound and visual projections to create a haunting story of love and loss.

Written and conceived by Sara Clifford

Directed by Terry O'Donovan

Designed by Gem Greaves

Produced by Veronica Stephens for Zap Art and Sara Clifford for Inroads Productions

Sound Installations by Thor McBurnie

Video Projections by Shared Space and Light

Music by Pat Power

Lighting by Roger Smissen

Choreography by Margret Banks (Studio Tempo) and Matthew Blacklock (Ragroof Players)

Photographs by Ray Gibson

Cast: Nicky Blackwell, Simon Spencer-Hyde, Delme Thomas, Greg Shewring, Evelyn Lockley

Dancers: Studio Tempo, Wrightway Dancers, City College Brighton and Hove, Brighton Belles, Sussex Swing



**2/ Indoors large productions**



## **Our Dancing Feet** <https://www.inroads.org.uk/our-dancing-feet>

***Our Dancing Feet (true, and not so true, tales from the dancefloor)*** was conceived and written by Sara Clifford, about the Regent Ballroom in Brighton and the Winter Garden in Eastbourne, a unique mix of site-specific performance, professional and community performers, script and dance. Supported by Arts Council England

Co-produced by Sara Clifford for Inroads and Veronica Stephens for Zap Art, performances took place at the Oceana nightclub in Brighton 2013, and at the Eastbourne Winter Garden itself in 2014.

*Following the story of a group of friends on a night out just before the coronation in 1953, the play draws on memories of local people and explores this fascinating time of great change. Our Dancing Feet incorporates live music and dance, and is performed by a professional cast along with local dancers aged 13 - 78.*

### **Example of creative writing from participants included in the script Shoreham Academy and Three Score Dance Creative writing ( used in Our Dancing Feet script with permission)**

BABS                    *A sliver of creamy scarlet lip paint, painted across my mouth*

*Toes feeling the dust, touching the wood,*

JOANIE                *I smelt the pungent sweat of the boys in their groups*

*Their brylcreem smell wafting in drifts*

BABS                    *The taste of dead smoke*

JOANIE                *The smell of false perfume that tastes bitter on the air*

### **Example of including verbatim script – verbatim in bold**

JOAN                    *You see, the photo was taken as we arrived at the Regent Ballroom, on the night before the Coronation. 1953. And it brought back so many memories. So, being me, I jumped on a bus and came down to see it – or see where it used to be, you know it was knocked down in the 70s. And there was still a whisper of it around the clocktower, the queue to get in, the excitement, the anticipation, the nervousness.*

*(JOANIE, BABS AND VI COME ON)*

***I can remember when you went on to the dance floor, you had the bar on one side , the band on the far side, and in the centre was the ballroom, with seats all round***

*I even remember what I was wearing.*

*I remember that hot June night at the Regent Dancehall..*

Directed by Terry O'Donovan

Designed by Lucy Bradridge

Choreography by Dorothy Max-Prior

Danced and performed by Matthew Blacklock, Anna Symes and Marion Duggan (Ragroof Players),

Charlotte Dubery and Jean Trend

Commissioned video projection by Shared Space and Light, shown on the roof of Boots, site of the demolished Regent Ballroom

Sound installations by Thor McBurnie

All photographs © Ray Gibson



### 3/ Indoors small productions

#### Vacant Possession <https://www.inroads.org.uk/vacant-possession>

*A site-specific performance in an ancient house in Lewes, weaving through time to tell stories of loss, love and transition.*

Written by Sara Clifford and Clare Best

Directed by Nicola Blackwell

Performed by Matthew Coulton, Helena Johnson, Moir Leslie, Nick Tigg, Clare Best, Philip Willatt and Freddie Willatt.



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The Port, the Beast and the Traveller, Our Dancing Feet and Home Fires photos by Ray Gibson <https://raystoimages.com>

Vacant Possession photos by Cammie Tolou <https://www.cammiet.com>