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Regional Theatres as Placemakers: COVID Recovery, Communities of Practice, and Sense of Place

Rosemary Napier Klich

Abstract

Regional theatres not only serve but build communities, providing social relations and sense of 'place' in a shifting cultural landscape. This article builds upon the findings of the research project *Theatres Beyond the Stage: The Recovery of Regional Theatres as Placemakers in the East of England*, which examined the relationship of four regional theatre venues to audiences and local communities in 2022 and 2023. This article explores how regional theatres have offered communities an antidote to an epidemic of isolation through building 'communities of practice'[1] and serving a vital placemaking role, with theatre sites and venues becoming much valued and meaningful places.

Following a summary of the *Theatres Beyond the Stage* research, this article offers an account of the ecology of regional producing theatres, locating the partner theatres in the East of England within a national network of mid- and large-scale producing theatres. It considers the civic role of these theatres and their contribution to community recovery, suggesting that theatre users form 'communities of practice'. Through community of practice processes (engagement, ethos, shared repertoire, imagination), regional theatres become placemakers; drawing on theories of placemaking and 'sense of place', this article argues that regional theatres are sites imbued with meaning. The article concludes by suggesting that given current sector challenges, it is ever more important to acknowledge regional theatres as community builders and placemakers, roles that have not only been revealed but dramatically emphasised by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Regional theatre; placemaking; COVID-19; pandemic; community-building; theatre venue; audience attendance; touring theatre; mid-scale theatre; producing theatre

1. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

Introduction

Regional theatres are more than venues or auditoriums; they are placemakers and community hubs that build social relations. They play a central role within the cultural landscape, not only facilitating exploration of regional cultural identity but helping to shape and define it. The article considers the role of theatres that are the largest arts provider in their region, examining their relationship to the communities in which they operate, their role in community recovery from COVID-19, and their vital role as social spaces. Drawing on theoretical perspectives from regional studies, community building, and placemaking, this article builds on the findings of the author's 2022–23 project *Theatres Beyond the Stage: The Recovery of Regional Theatres as Placemakers in the East of England (2022–23)*. The 2022 project report considered the impact of the pandemic on regional theatres approximately a year after venues first opened their doors again following the COVID-19 lockdowns.[2] The project involved collaboration with three regional theatres in the East of England: The Mercury Theatre in Colchester; the New Wolsey Theatre in Ipswich, and; Queen's Theatre Hornchurch. A later iteration of the project was undertaken with Norwich Theatre in Autumn 2023. While the driving focus of the research was to provide insights into audience patterns and priorities in the wake of the pandemic, additional findings revealed the vital role that regional theatres played in community recovery, the meaning and value of regional theatres to their users, and their capacity to make 'place'.

Theatres perform a traditional placemaking role, with bars, restaurants, and hotels relying on regional theatres to fuel the local economy. However, as Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa Nicodemus argue, placemaking is not solely about economic contribution but also about 'bringing diverse people together to celebrate, inspire, and be inspired'.[3] The concept of 'placemaking', is explained by Cara Courage as having shifted from a focus on urban planning and design to focus more on 'public space and human activity – what happens in these spaces, why, how, and with and by whom, and not'.[4] Courage suggests that the 'pandemic is anti-place: in particular, it is counter to the particular urban design of collective occupation, and has created a fear of human proximity and taken from us our familiar collective experiences and sites of serendipitous encounter in the public realm'.[5]

Amid this experience of 'anti-place', regional theatres, the activities they have offered and the spaces they provide, have performed a vital placemaking role, helping to heal and build communities in the wake of the pandemic. Regional theatre staff and buildings, the cafes, foyers, and studios, as well as the auditoria, bring people together and provide 'sites of serendipitous encounter in the public realm'. Participants' engagement with the theatres has created patterns of interaction and 'structures of association',[6] forming attachments that go beyond the physical building to imagined communities, articulated in this article as 'communities of practice'.[7]

2. Rosemary Klich and James Rowson, *Theatres Beyond the Stage: The Recovery of Regional Theatres as Placemakers in the East of England* (Project Report, University of Essex, 2022), https://repository.essex.ac.uk/33674/ (accessed November 22, 2024).
3. Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa Nicodemus, 'Creative Placemaking: Reflections on a 21st-Century American Arts Policy Initiative' in *Creative Placemaking: Research, theory and Practice*, eds. Cara Courage and Anita Mckeown (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2019), 11–27 (22).
4. Cara Courage, 'Introduction: What Really Matters: Moving Placemaking into a New Epoch', in *The Routledge Handbook of Placemaking*, eds. Cara Courage, Tom Borrup, Maria Rosario Jackson, Kylie Legge, Anita Mckeown, Louise Platt, and Jason Schupbach (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2021), 1–8 (4).
5. Ibid., 2–3.
6. Ronald Lee Fleming, *The Art of Placemaking: Interpreting Community Through Public Art* (New York: Merrel, 2007).
7. Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning.*

Following a brief summary of the *Theatres Beyond the Stage* research project, this article offers an articulation of the regional theatre ecology in the UK within which the partner theatres operate, particularly with regard to the network of mid-scale producing theatres that are the only or biggest arts organisation in their region. Definitions of regional theatre and regionalism are examined, and the capacity for regional theatres to promote regional identity suggested. The article then considers the civic role of regional theatres and their contribution to community recovery during and after the pandemic, before arguing that these theatres provide important social infrastructure that facilitate 'communities of practice' as introduced by sociologists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* and later expounded by Wenger.[8] The social practices and relations implicated in communities of practices, such as engagement, ethos, and a shared repertoire, imbue the theatres (not just the auditoria but the site and peripheral spaces) with meaning, turning venue space into valued place. Drawing on theories of placemaking and 'sense of place', this article examines how theatres 'make place' and constitute vital regional placemakers. Finally, a plea is proffered for recognition of the significance of the placemaking role of regional theatres in light of an evolving regional theatre landscape; in the face of a 'cost-of-living crisis', 'recruitment crisis', 'touring crisis', and 'programming crisis', regional theatres play a crucial placemaking role, facilitating social relations, communities of practice, and sense of place.

Context: Theatres Beyond the Stage, 2022–23

In July 2020, the UK's House of Commons Select Committee overseeing the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) published its first report on the impact of COVID-19 on the cultural sector. They published written evidence from 585 organisations and networks that provided accounts of the immediate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their organisation over the previous 4 months.[9] At that time, a number of regional theatres had already gone into administration[10]; some as a direct result of having no income from tickets, hospitality or venue hire during lockdown; others a combination of COVID-19 measures and fragile finances pre-pandemic. The immediate closure of theatres and productions meant loss of box office and ancillary income, increased costs for capital projects, concern about staff and freelancer welfare, and expected loss of audience confidence.

The research project *Theatres Beyond the Stage: Recovering the Placemaking Role of Regional Theatre in the East of England*, investigated the ongoing impact of the pandemic and other circumstances on regional producing theatres in the East of England from Spring into the Autumn of 2022 with the project report published in October 2022. The project initially developed from a previous project, the ESRC-funded *Freelancers in the Dark: The Economic, Cultural, and Social Impacts of COVID-19 on Theatre Freelancers*.[11] A key area within the

8. Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

9. House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, *Impact of COVID-19 on DCMS Sectors: First Report*, 2020, https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/2022/documents/19516/default/ (accessed November 15, 2024).

10. Theatres Trust, 'Theatres at Risk', https://www.theatrestrust.org.uk/how-we-help/coronavirus-crisis/theatres-in-crisis-due-to-coronavirus (accessed May 3, 2023).

11. Holly Maples et al., *Freelancers in the Dark: The Economic, Cultural, and Social Impacts of COVID-19 on Theatre Freelancers* (Project Report, University of Essex, 2022), https://repository.essex.ac.uk/32639/1/Freelancers%20in%20the%20Dark%20Final%20Report%202022.pdf (accessed November 22, 2024).

findings of *Freelancers in the Dark* addressed freelancers' relationships with the organisations that employ them and how this varied on a regional level; freelancers in certain locations felt better supported by regional venues than freelancers in other areas.

The focus of *Theatres Beyond the Stage* was not on the financial impact of the pandemic on theatres, which was devastating and relatively well documented, but on the relationships between theatres, their audiences, and communities, and the recovery and regrowth of this relationship. The project responded to the specific concerns of the partner theatres, who were interested in developing a nuanced understanding of their audiences and local community perspectives including how they were feeling about coming back, who was not coming back, and why. The 2022 iteration of the project, working with the Mercury Theatre, The New Wolsey, and Queen's Theatre Hornchurch, included a survey of theatre users with 2336 respondents, focus groups with a total of 130 participants, observation, and three 'creative commissions', where professional photographers local to each of the three theatres were invited to respond to the project themes. The 2023 iteration of the project was undertaken with Norwich Theatre; the survey of theatre users had 1831 respondents and the focus groups included 42 participants.

The findings presented in the 2022 report offer a profile of audience patterns and priorities, revealing the regularity of theatre attendance as impacted by the pandemic, audience attitudes and priorities as they return to theatregoing, and interest in digital theatre content. However, other findings emerged through thematic analysis of the qualitative data around how the 172 participants spoke about their sense of connection to their theatre; not only those very regular theatregoers, but also those who would purchase tickets less often, for example only once or twice a year, still spoke of a sense of pride and belonging towards the theatre. Whether it was their participation as children or parents in outreach events, the memory of a particularly impactful production, their use of theatre foyers as social spaces, the position of the theatre as physically or symbolically central to the city/region, the rituals of attending events with friends, or the value placed on community productions and events, participants expressed a deep sense of connection to their regional theatre venue. Awareness of the theatre's precarity during the pandemic was apparent, and this potential loss revealed the scale of concern and care participants felt.

Regional Theatres in the UK

In the UK, the term 'regional theatre' is commonly used to refer to theatre that takes place outside of London. While in Australia, 'regional theatre' is often conflated with 'community theatre',[12] in the UK it tends to be used to describe professional, subsidised or commercial theatre that takes place outside of the national capital. There are, however, nuances across regional theatre that a simple definition of 'not in London' fails to acknowledge, for example, there are lines of variance

12. For a comprehensive explanation of the impact of the pandemic on regional community theatre in Australia see Jacqueline Burgess, Jo Loth, and Saskia de Klerk, '"The theatre was dark": exploring regional Australian theatre's resilient response to COVID-19', *Regional Studies* 58, no. 6 (2024): 1282–94.

around size and scale of operations, and metropolitan and rural contexts. While theatre in Manchester may be considered 'regional' in relation to London, it may also be considered a 'centre' in its own right, with its own periphery of regional relations. As such, the term regional theatre often requires further qualifying terms such as small-, mid-, or large-scale, town-centre, rural, county-town, or metropolitan, and regional theatre venues may operate in cities, towns, and villages.

The 2022 *Theatres Beyond the Stage* research partnered with mid-scale, producing venues that are the only producing theatre in their immediate region, part of a network of regional producing houses that play a pivotal role across the national theatre system. In 2020, a group of 16 of these mid-scale producing theatres jointly submitted evidence to the DCMS on the impact of COVID in 2020.[13] These 'midscale' regional producing theatres were:

13. DCMS, 'Written Evidence Submitted by Mid-Scale Producing Theatres', 2020, https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/6991/html/ (accessed December 15, 2023).

Derby Theatre
Exeter Northcott Theatre
Hull Truck Theatre
Mercury Theatre, Colchester
New Vic Theatre, Newcastle-under-Lyme
New Wolsey Theatre, Ipswich
Octagon, Bolton
Oldham Coliseum
Queen's Theatre Hornchurch
Stephen Joseph Theatre, Scarborough
Storyhouse, Chester
Theatre by the Lake, Keswick
Watermill Theatre, Newbury
Watford Palace Theatre
York Theatre Royal
Yvonne Arnaud Theatre, Guildford

These theatres describe themselves as:

> organisations that produce our own work in venues from 200–800 seats across the country. As well as being part of the national theatre ecology, we draw our distinctiveness from the fact that each of us operates in a specific community where we are typically the only or largest arts provider. This brings a community and placemaking as well [as] artistic and audience responsibilities.[14]

14. Ibid.

This placemaking function extends beyond the town or city in which these theatres are based. Though serving the local community is of course an important aspect of their remit, the 'specific community' that each of these theatres serves includes audiences and participants across the region; the community extends beyond the immediately local to the regional. This is evidenced not only in the postcodes of their regular audience members but also in the *Theatres Beyond the Stage* interviews and focus group conversations.

The *Theatres Beyond the Stage* theatres are the main producing theatres across the counties of Essex, Suffolk, and Norfolk in the East of England. Surprisingly, given the population density, though there are many receiving-house venues, there are no producing houses in South East and Central Essex. The partner theatres are the only producing theatres in a large geographic region; for theatres like the Mercury Theatre and the New Wolsey Theatre, their catchment covers both rural and urban areas, reaching from coastal towns to market villages. The Mercury Theatre is in Colchester, a city of just under 200,000

people and is the only producing theatre in Essex. The theatre's main auditorium has a capacity of 540, and a recent £14.2 million renovation project has allowed the theatre to expand its participatory work; the original 1972 building's foyer space was rebuilt to include a new café bar that remains open throughout the day, a new rehearsal room, community space, offices, production space, and dance studio.

Originally founded in 1979 as the Wolsey Theatre, The New Wolsey Theatre opened in 2001. The building underwent a £3 million renovation to its foyer and front of house spaces between 2019 and 2020, which included the construction of NW2 which houses an extensive outreach and participation programme that offers various ways for local people to engage with arts and culture, as well as providing support for local arts organisations to develop work. Queen's Theatre Hornchurch includes the 507-seat Main House theatre and the intimate Other Space, a flexible and accessible space in the theatre's foyer for performances of new writing, poetry, and stand-up comedy. Hornchurch is located in the London Borough of Havering, though was part of South Essex until the mid-1960s; technically Queen's Theatre Hornchurch is not geographically 'regional' in relation to London, however it is the only producing theatre east of Stratford in an area that includes the Essex cities of Southend-on-Sea and Chelmsford, with a similar placemaking role to other mid-scale producing theatres located further away from London.

As mid-scale producing theatres, these theatres are part of a regional theatre network that also includes larger producing theatres; this mid-scale group forms a particular sub-set of this wider regional theatre ecology, with similar capacity to connect, cluster, and co-produce. A network of larger-scale producing theatres is identified in the 2020 Brownlee Consulting report,[15] which offers 'A comparative study of the activities and impact of 13 regional producing theatres in England across five years' from 2012/13 to 2017/18. These larger regional producing houses include:

Leeds Playhouse
Birmingham Repertory Theatre
Curve (Leicester)
Nuffield Southampton Theatres[16]
Royal Exchange Theatre (Manchester)
Sheffield Theatres
Theatre Royal Plymouth
The Everyman and Playhouse Theatres (Liverpool)
Chichester Festival Theatre
Royal Derngate and Northampton
Bristol Old Vic
Northern Stage (Newcastle upon Tyne)
Nottingham Playhouse

While a couple of these have audience capacities not dissimilar to mid-scale theatres, most of these are large-scale regional theatres with large auditoriums that seat 800–1300 people. Many of these are building complexes

15. David Brownlee, *Adaptation: A comparative study of the activities and impact of 13 regional producing theatres in England across five years* (Project Report, Brownlee Consulting, June 2020), https://www.royalanddern gate.co.uk/wp-con tent/uploads/2020/ 06/David-Brownlee-Final-Report-for-Upload-June-20.pdf (accessed November 11, 2024).

16. Unfortunately, since that report was written, Nuffield Southampton Theatres has gone into administration and permanently closed.

with more than one performance space of varying sizes and capacities. Norwich Theatre, partner on the 2023 iteration of the research, shares a similar scale to the larger theatre complexes listed above, with their spaces Norwich Theatre Royal, Norwich Theatre Playhouse, and Norwich Stage 2. It does, however, have a different profile in that it does not receive public funding.[17] However, its substantial profile of engagement, education, and outreach activities including a wide variety of workshops, social groups, clubs, and classes, and its recent establishment of Norwich Theatre Beyond, a platform for activities presented outside of the main theatre production spaces in community spaces and site-specific locations, that include shows and companies supported through Norwich Theatre's artistic development programme, means that the theatre performs a central role in regional cultural production.

The history of regional theatre in the UK is well articulated in publications such as Olivia Turnbull's *Bringing Down the House: The Crisis in Britain's Regional Theatres*,[18] which focuses on the journey of regional theatre between 1979 and 1997, though offers a longer historical context, and Kate Dorney and Ros Merkin's edited collection *The Glory of the Garden: English Regional Theatre and the Arts Council 1984–2009*.[19] Dorney and Merkin address key themes in the history of English regional producing theatres and their relationship with the Arts Council between 1984 and 2010. In the opening of their book, Dorney and Merkin assert, 'Asked to sum up their perceptions of the history of regional producing theatres in England since 1984, most people would characterise it as an era of crisis. Unquestionably, crises run like a sore through the period'.[20] However, at the time of their writing, Dorney and Merkin articulate that there was a feeling that regional theatre was 'on the threshold of a new renaissance'.[21]

The publication of their book in 2010 was 10 years after the publication of the Boyden report on The Roles and Functions of the English Regional Producing Theatres, which emphasised inadequate funding and the ongoing crisis in regional theatres. The report presented provincial producing houses as vital art forms that should be celebrated for their regional distinctiveness and excellence. However, the report also outlined the consequences of underfunding for regional theatres as them 'becoming inward looking, territorial, producing poor work and unattractive working conditions, and creating a consequent drain away from theatre on talent and audiences'.[22] Boyden's report resulted in £25 million in additional annual funding for theatre in the UK. Dorney and Merkin explain, 'The post-Boyden windfall has led many to feel that we are, as Kate Kellaway asserts, "on the brink of a new era" with the arrival of new artistic directors determined to reinvigorate regional theatre'.[23] However, the global economic crisis of 2008, and subsequent austerity measures from the Conservative government post 2010, meant that the financial situation for regional theatres was already precarious in the lead up to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The 2016 Arts Council England report, *Analysis of Theatre in England*,[24] highlights that 'Reductions in public funding post-2004 have accelerated since the turn of the decade, driven in particular by

17. Norwich Theatre, 'Friends and Support', https://norwichtheatre.org/friends-support/#:~:text=Norwich%20Theatre%20is%20a%20theatre,changing%20creative%20experiences%20for%20everyone (accessed November 11, 2024).

18. Olivia Turnbull, *Bringing Down the House: The Crisis in Britain's Regional Theatres*, (Bristol: Intellect, 2009).

19. Kate Dorney and Ross Merkin, eds., *The Glory of the Garden: English Regional Theatre and the Arts Council 1984–2009* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010).

20. Dorney and Merkin, 'Introduction', in Dorney and Merkin, *Glory of the Garden*, 1–14 (1).

21. Ibid., 11.

22. Turnbull, *Bringing Down the House*, 203.

23. Dorney and Merkin, 'Introduction', 11.

24. BoP Consulting and Graham Devlin Associations, *Arts Council England Analysis of Theatre in England* (Project Report, Arts Council England, September 13, 2016), https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Analysis%20of%20Theatre%20in%20England%20-%20Final%20Report.pdf (accessed December 6, 2023).

cuts to local authority budgets: existing research suggests that money to NPOs from local authorities has fallen by more [than] 27% (in cash terms) between 2010 and 2015'.[25] The authors of the report assert that those most impacted are the small to mid-scale, regional organisations as they are less able to mitigate the cuts through increased earnings.[26] The report also acknowledges that the reduction in public funding has led to organisations trying new approaches to partnership and revenue generation: 'A significant theme that emerged from the consultation was an increase in collaborations across the sector – driven by both financial necessity and a genuine desire for artistic co-operation'.[27] Before the pandemic, in the latter half of the 2010s, regional theatres were already innovating new strategies for delivering more activity with less funding.

Addressing definitions of 'region' and 'regional' may assist in developing an understanding of the role of theatres within a regional context. Region suggests an area defined by geographic boundaries; in England, counties are grouped into nine regions based on previous 'government offices for the regions'; this regional-level geography is still required for statistical purposes.[28] However, 'region' can imply commonality beyond geography; Louise Fawcett explains that 'regional' can denote commonality of experience or practice.[29] Fawcett outlines that while one interpretation of the term region may indicate no more than a geographic reality, seen from a different perspective, region may denote 'zones' based on groups whose members display some identifiable patterns of behaviour. Another approach says Fawcett, 'likens a region to a nation in the sense of an imagined community: states of peoples held together by common experience and identity, custom and practice'.[30] Most regions 'share some or all of these characteristics, though often in different quantities and combinations'.[31] In referencing 'regional theatres' in this article, regional refers to both geographic and 'imagined community'. While they are all in the East of England, they each offer a centre for a regional community that is both geographic and related to county (Essex, Suffolk, Norfolk), and based on common identity. It is the interrelation of geography and identity that suggests 'regionality' and links to the notion of 'place' explored later in this article.

Stenner and Smith suggest a definition of regional that indicates both a malleable spatial approach to geographical and cultural clusters and a reaction to globalisation and homogenisation (to the dominance of the 'centre').[32] They approach regionality from two key angles, addressing culture that is 'representative of a region' and 'that takes place in the regions'.[33] This approach is effective in application to defining regional theatre; the term 'regional theatre' refers to practice that takes place within a region as well as practice representative of a region; both work that may tour from elsewhere but specifically designed to take place within and speak to a regional context, and new works made by regional artists or with a regional agenda. In the promotion of regional agendas, artists, or geographies, regional theatre can be positioned in opposition to the homogenisation that stems from dominance of the 'centre'. It may also contribute a degree of 'regionalism', the aim of which is defined by Fawcett as 'to pursue and promote common goals in one

25. Ibid.,14.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid., 35.

28. Office for National Statistics, 'A Beginner's Guide to UK Geography, 2023', https://geoportal.statistics.gov.uk/datasets/d1f39e20edb940d58307a54d6e1045cd/about (accessed 22 November, 2024).

29. Louise Fawcett, 'Exploring Regional Domains: A Comparative History of Regionalism', *International Affairs* 80, no. 3 (2004): 429–46.

30. Ibid., 432.

31. Ibid.

32. Rachel Stenner and Adam James Smith, 'Introduction: Print Culture, Agency, Regionality', in *Print Culture, Agency, Regionality in the Hand Press Period*, eds. Rachel Stenner, Kaley Kramer, and Adam James Smith (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 1–24 (7).

33. Ibid., 4.

34. Fawcett, *Exploring Regional Domains*, 433.

or more issue areas'.[34] Understood thus, Fawcett explains, an initial manifestation of regionalism may involve 'promoting a sense of regional awareness or community'.[35] This capacity for regional venues to 'promote a sense of regional awareness or community' will be further explored in the latter half of this article, which argues that regional theatres not only offer regionality but undertake an important placemaking and community-building role and foster a sense of place.

35. Ibid.

Regional Community Recovery and the Civic Role of Regional Theatres

During the worst of the pandemic in 2020 and 2021, there were numerous voices in the public sphere championing the civic role of theatres, suggesting a renewed emphasis on their contribution as civic entities. 'Theatre is having an identity crisis', wrote Anthony Biggs, Artistic Director of the Playground Theatre in London, for the Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities in April 2021.[36] Biggs suggests, 'In the absence of performances, theatres have had to find new and innovative ways of engaging with our communities, with many taking on a greater civic role to support those worst affected'.[37] While bigger civic theatres have greater resources to perform this civic role, Biggs argues that it is those smaller organisations already embedded directly within their communities that can most readily affect change and nurture empathy. Director and dramaturg Dan Hutton, writing in *The Guardian*, suggests that the reopening of theatres after lockdowns offered 'the opportunity – and the means – to build a truly civic theatre'.[38] Hutton explains, while there are still a handful of theatre venues in the UK that specifically use the term 'civic' (eg. in Barnsley, Gosforth, Trowbridge, and Stourport), theatre culture has been at risk of losing sight of what the term means in practice. However, in a post-lockdown world, theatre is an art form uniquely placed to fulfil civic function: 'theatre's shared experience, its melding of time, space and human emotion, can be the scaffold that holds up any civic mission it might wish to fulfil'.[39]

36. Anthony Biggs, 'The Civic Role of Theatres', Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities, April 24, 2021, https://www.torch.ox.ac.uk/article/the-civic-role-of-theatres (accessed November 12, 2024).

37. Ibid.

38. Dan Hutton, 'Civic Life is Under Assault – Theatres can Play a Vital Role in Restoring it', *Guardian*, June 21, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2021/jun/21/theatre-change-civic-function-dan-hutton (accessed November 15, 2024).

39. Ibid.

At the time of the *Theatres Beyond the Stage* report in Summer 2022 and in the later iteration of the research in Autumn 2023, it was revealed just how significantly the partner regional theatres contributed to community recovery during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. This contribution has at times been on a fundamental, material level, with some regional theatres transforming into food banks during lockdown, redeploying the logistical skills of theatre workers to get food to the vulnerable, and/or providing warm spaces during a cost of living crisis. They have opened their spaces to knitting clubs and support groups. The Mercury Theatre works with a local food bank, is a designated warm space, offers discounted meals to pensioners, free holiday programmes for children, and offers discounted rates for office workspace. The qualitative data also revealed the valuable role that regional theatres have played in helping people reconnect after COVID and recover quality of

life, wellbeing, and community. For many participants, regional theatres were an antidote to an epidemic of loneliness, disconnection, and isolation.

There exists a sizeable body of scholarly work considering the civic role of theatres.[40] The 2023 book *Theatre in Towns*, by Helen Nicholson, Jenny Hughes, Emma Edwards, and Cara Gray, is the first substantial publication considering the civic role of theatres within towns.[41] It examines the creative practices and artistic repertoires of theatres in 'coastal towns, market towns, new towns, commuter towns, and post-industrial towns'[42] in England, and makes an important contribution to discourse on the civic role of regional theatre. The authors identify that theatre and performance studies is 'dominated by analyses of performance that takes place in cities'[43] and they identify a number of substantial studies that address the performance culture of cities specifically.[44] However, there is limited research that explicitly addresses theatres in towns.[45] Locating theatre in towns within wider cultural economies and contexts of economic austerity, the UK Conservative government's 'Levelling up' agenda, which aimed to targeting geography-based inequality, and social fragmentation, the book explores case studies of theatre practice in Wigan and Leigh in the North West, and Hastings and four small towns in the South East (Farnham, Chesham, Slough, and Wallingford).

The book explores topics such as localism and participation, the relationship between volunteer-led theatres and towns, and the exchange between large city-based and local theatres. The civic runs as a theme across the chapters, though Jenny Hughes's Chapter 'Making a Civic Spectacle: Towns for Rent' specifically addresses the role of theatre in the civic culture of towns by exploring the 2021 production *Rent Party* in Wigan. Hughes explains that the civic role of theatres is not unproblematic; civic cultures can be exclusionary and disruptive. Hughes argues that the recent 'turn to the civic' is occurring within a context of 'Levelling up' that provides symbols and narratives of change, whilst failing to actually address inequalities.[46] In this context, Hughes argues that the hopefulness and optimism associated with civic culture constitute what Lauren Berlant identifies as 'Cruel Optimism'. Hughes explains,

> The promise of renewal in the turn to civic culture, accompanied by investment packages that do not match the amounts stripped from local authority arts budgets over time, feeds a condition of cruel optimism. As towns emerged from the global pandemic of 2020, and as we undertook the research for this book and met communities, public services and a cultural sector exhausted by a sustained period of pressure, the potential for cruel optimistic scenarios seemed all the more acute.[47]

Hughes further explains how the frame of the civic 'is underpinned by obscured histories of inequity and violence, rooted in legacies of colonialism', raising questions about the genuine inclusivity of civic-minded practices.[48] Rather, Hughes promotes the type of civic spectacle

40. Marvin Carlson, 'The Theatre as Civic Monument', *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 1 (1988): 12–32; David Wiles, *Theatre and Citizenship: The History of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Jan Cohen-Cruz, *Remapping Performance: Common Ground, Uncommon Partners* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Ananda Breed and Tim Prentki, eds., *Performance and Civic Engagement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Sarah Bartley, 'UK People's Theatres: Performing Civic Functions in a Time of Austerity', *Research in Drama Education* 26, no. 1 (2021): 171–186; and amongst many others.
41. Helen Nicholson, Jenny Hughes, Emma Edwards, and Cara Gray, *Theatre in Towns* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2023).
42. Ibid., 8.
43. Ibid., 4.
44. Michael McKinnie, *City Stages: Theatre and Urban Space in a Global City* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017); Jen Harvie, *Theatre & The City* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); and Nicolas Whybrow, ed., *Performance and the Contemporary City* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
45. Nicholson et al., *Theatre in Towns*, 4.
46. Ibid., 48.
47. Ibid., 46.
48. Ibid., 43.

represented by *Rent Party*, which brought artists together to share stories and deployed form, content, and touring practice that subverted 'practices of institutional culture' and sensitively and critically interacted with local performance networks'.[49]

49. Ibid., 61.

The partner theatres for *Theatres Beyond the Stage* share similarities with the case studies of theatres in towns examined by Nicolson, Hughes, Edwards and Gray, and play an important civic role, particularly in the way that they bring national and regional work under one roof and create dialogue around the relationship between these perspectives. These theatres offer a plethora of outreach and engagement workshops, responding to local needs as articulated through community consultations, as well as championing regional artists and supporting emerging and minority voices. Like Hughes, in undertaking the *Theatres Beyond the Stage* research in 2022, spending time in foyers with managers and staff of The Mercury, New Wolsey, and Queen's Theatre Hornchurch, the effort and toll of these theatres delivering vital social services seemed acute; staff were working to deliver vastly more with considerably less. However, even if one were to question whether responsibility for these services should indeed fall on the shoulders of an already exhausted theatre sector, the passion and drive of theatre staff and their existing links into and embeddedness within local communities, has meant they have been, and continue to be, exceptionally well placed to move with agility and speed to respond to community needs.

Hughes' chapter and others in *Theatres in Towns* focus on one or more case study of civic process within a particular theatrical production. The *Theatres Beyond the Stage* research, however, focused more on the audience's sense of their relationship to the venues themselves, to the building and institution, rather than on their civic engagement in particular creative practices. An aspect of this relationship that was strongly articulated in the research findings in both 2022 and 2023, was the participants' sense of loyalty and 'community'. In the experience of their users, part of the civic provision of these regional theatres involves the facilitation of social spaces and interactions.

50. Thematic analysis of focus group transcripts with 172 participants suggested numerous mentions of the theatres being a 'cultural hub', a 'community hub', 'a community', and of the importance of users' participation in workshops, classes, clubs, and other education and engagement initiatives as a 'social' and 'community' experience.

Regional Theatre Communities of Practice

Within focus groups across the four theatres in 2022 and 2023, there was evidence not just of the participants' emotional and cultural connection to their regional theatre, but of the theatre's role as central to their experience of community; as a site where community is not only visible and manifest but created.[50] Theatre scholars have articulated various ways in which applied and participatory theatre practice can build communities.[51] However, this analysis responds to the findings of the qualitative research in *Theatres Beyond the Stage* which considers the venue itself, the building and the bodies that inhabit it, as well as the outreach and engagement activities (workshops, clubs, classes) it houses, as a centre of community building and site of belonging, rather than the theatre practices it facilitates, though it is recognised that these elements

51. For example, Helen Nicholson, *Applied Drama: The Gift of the Theatre* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); James Thompson, *Applied Theatre: Bewilderment and Beyond* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008); Selina Busby, *Applied Theatre: A Pedagogy of Utopia* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

are deeply entwined. In order to analyse and theorise the nature of the sense of community that participants said they experience, and particularly of their sense of 'belonging', it is useful to turn to the concept of 'communities of practice', an idea that developed within scholarship of social learning by Lave and Wenger in the 1990s.[52]

The concept of communities of practice has been widely deployed in discussions of knowledge management in large, formal, organisations and companies, describing informal and often spontaneous communities of individuals who form around a shared interest. Communities of practice are people who engage in 'collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour'.[53] In addition to the manifestation of communities of practice within office workplaces and corporate organisations, communities of practice have been identified and analysed in the form of volunteer groups,[54] research groups,[55] and online communities[56] amongst others.

Wenger explains that communities of practice focus on learning as social participation, which he describes as an 'encompassing process of being active participants in the *practices* of social communities and constructions of *identities* in relation to the communities'.[57] Communities of practice form around our home, in our hobbies, and at work; 'we belong to several communities of practice at any given time'.[58] Wenger offers three key dimensions in the formation of community coherence: mutual engagement (the actions and practice that people engage in together), a joint enterprise (the interests, problems, and topics that motivate people, the ethos), and a shared repertoire (resources for negotiating meaning built over time such as concepts, tools, stories, rituals).

In regional theatre communities, 'engagement' manifests in the practice of theatregoing and participation in events and workshops. Wenger reminds us that engagement not only involves talking and doing things together but that these activities, the ways in which we engage with the world and each other, profoundly shape our experience of who we are.[59] In addition to direct engagement with the core activities of the theatre, theatre audiences and participants described engagement through shared social activities in the theatre foyer including whilst waiting to collect children participating in workshops. Ethos was suggested by participants in various ways, for example, in respect for actors and the expectations of audience-ship, a motivation to 'support local arts organisations', a belief in the cultural and social value of arts generally and theatre practice specifically, and enjoyment of togetherness with others. The 'shared repertoire', the 'resources for negotiating meaning'[60] for regional theatre communities is the body of work collectively experienced. In the *Theatres Beyond the Stage* conversations and focus groups, strangers bonded over remembered shows, historical high-points, and experience of stand-out events; participants imagined themselves into this community, bounded by the repertoire of theatre-going practices.

Being a member of a community of practice is not necessarily something that members will be aware of[61] and membership may take different forms ranging in scale from full participation to occasional or more

52. Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning*.

53. Wenger, *Communities of Practice*.

54. Joel Iverson and Robert McPhee, 'Communicating Knowing Through Communities of Practice: Exploring Internal Communicative Processes and Differences Among COPs', *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 36, no. 2 (2008): 176–99.

55. Lise Degn, Thomas Franssen, Mads P. Sørensen, and Sarah de Rijcke, 'Research Groups as Communities of Practice', *Higher Education* 76, no. 2 (2018): 231–46.

56. Catherine Lejealle, Sylvaine Castellano, and Insaf Khelladi, 'The Role of Memers' Lived Experience in the Evolution of Online Communities Toward Online Communities of Practice', *Journal of Knowledge Management* 26, no. 8 (2022): 1968–84.

57. Etienne Wenger, 'Social Theory of Learning', in *Contemporary Theories of Learning: Learning Theorists . . . in Their Own Words*, ed. Knud Illeris (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2009), 209–18 (210).

58. Wenger, *Communities of Practice*, 6.

59. Ibid., 173.

60. Ibid., 82.

61. Igor Pyrko, Victor Dorfloer, and Colin Eden, 'Thinking Together: What Makes Communities of Practice work?' *Human Relations* 70, no. 4 (2017): 389–409 (392).

peripheral participation. Wenger and Lave explain that it is through peripheral participation that newcomers become included in a community of practice.[62] Some of the qualities that indicate that a community of practice have formed, according to Wenger, that have particular pertinence to the regional theatre communities include 'shared ways of doing things together', 'rapid flow of information', 'knowing what others know, what they can do, and how they can contribute', 'mutually defining identities', 'local lores, shared stories, inside jokes, knowing laughter', 'jargon and short cuts to communication', 'a shared discourse', and 'substantial overlap in participant descriptions of who belongs'.[63]

62. Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning*.

63. Wenger, *Communities of Practice*, 125. Wenger lists 14 indicators that a community of practice has formed; the eight listed here have the most relevance to regional theatre communities.

Wenger suggests that experiences of 'belonging' to a community or social learning system can take various forms at various levels.[64] A key mode of belonging articulated by Wenger is:

> imagination: constructing an image of ourselves of our communities, and of the world, in order to orient ourselves, to reflect on our situation, and to explore possibilities … thinking of ourselves as member of a community such as a nation requires an act of imagination because we cannot engage with all our fellow citizens. These images of the world are essential to our sense of self and to our interpretation of our participation in the social world.[65]

64. Etienne Wenger, 'Communities of Practice and Social Learning Systems', *Organization* 7, no. 2 (2000): 225–46.

65. Ibid., 227–8.

Participants' sense of belonging was evidenced through mutual engagement and through the way they described this engagement as personally significant. They felt a sense of belonging to a community that includes not just their fellow workshop participants or immediate audience members, but also theatre staff and stakeholders. Theatregoers engage in conversations with theatre staff prior to performances in the bar or following workshops; theatre staff encourage this dialogue through both formal mechanisms (e.g. Norwich Theatre's 'Creative Conversation') or through more informal means; at the Mercury Theatre and others, theatre managers and staff are a visible and approachable presence in the building, chatting with audiences and greeting participants.

Belonging is also indicated in the way that participants speak to their sense of community as constructed through this engagement, an imagined community 'held together by common experience and identity, custom and practice'.[66] Participants spoke of having 'pre-show rituals', meeting their 'theatregoing friends' in a specific place or sitting at the same table in the bar. In its broadest manifestation, a community of practice includes not only those audience members attending the same show or participating in the same class, but all audience members, participants, and stakeholders implicated in the social world of the theatre. However, participants may also engage with smaller communities of practice that form around more specific practices. For example, The New Wolsey theatre hosts the Suffolk Refugee Sewing Club and the Unscene Singers, an accessible singing group for people with visual

66. Fawcett, *Exploring Regional Domains*, 432.

impairment; members of these communities of practices spoke of them as support structures and social networks.

Regional Theatres and Making Place

Theorisation of communities of practice suggests that community is not fixed or finite, but in process, formed through social interactions. This sense of community as imagined and built through social practices reflects and connects with the theorisation of community space, and indeed space itself as epitomized in the works of Henri Lefebvre[67] and Doreen Massey.[68] Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* with its axiom '(Social) space is a (social) product',[69] is widely credited as a crucial text in facilitating the spatial turn in social and cultural studies. Various scholars engage with Lefebvre's writing in their explorations of space in theatre and performance. Gay McAuley's seminal *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in Theatre* dialogues with Lefebvre's work at various points as it explores the relationship between the real space of the theatre and the fictional places evoked in performance.[70] David Wiles in *A Short History of Western Performance Space* draws on Lefebvre's cultural geography in his exploration of theatrical performance as spatial practice shaped by social structures.[71] Chris Morash and Shaun Richards engage with Lefebvre from the outset of *Mapping Irish Theatre: Theories of Space and Place*, deploying Lefebvre's perception of space as they 'chart the establishment of an Irish sense of stage space- and its various vicissitudes' with reference to key plays and productions that, they suggest, 'can be seen in new configurations when subjected to a theorised spatial analysis'.[72]

The texts mentioned above are an example of a substantial body of work that indicates the spatial turn within theatre and performance scholarship, exploring the overlap of both real and fictional place, the integration of stage and audience space, and representations of place and its implications for culture and identity. Their focus tends to be on the manifestation, representation, and creation of space within the framework of a playtext, performance, or within the auditorium, whereas placemaking discourse considers the function of the theatre building and institution within the fabric of its built environment. Placemaking as a concept has no single agreed definition, though refers to, as suggested by Pierce, Martin and Murphy: 'the set of social, political and material processes by which people iteratively create and recreate the experienced geographies in which they live [...] Place-making is an inherently networked process, constituted by the socio-spatial relationships that link individuals together through a common place-frame'.[73] The 'socio-spatial relationship' of theatregoers and theatre users, who are connected through common engagement with the place of their regional theatre, involves the networked development of the theatre's community of practice.

Placemaking as a strategy has been theorised and promoted within urban planning and design and, like the civic role of theatres, the

67. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).
68. Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994); Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005).
69. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 26
70. Gay McAuley, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in Theatre* (Ann Arbour: University of Michigan Press, 1999).
71. David Wiles, *A Short History of Western Performance Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
72. Chris Morash and Shaun Richards, *Mapping Irish Theatre: Theories of Space and Place* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 4.
73. Joseph Pierce, Deborah G. Martin, and James T. Murphy, 'Relational Place-Making: The Networked Politics of Place', *Transactions – Institute of British Geographers* 36, no. 1 (2011): 54–70 (54).

deployment of placemaking in shaping regional agendas, infrastructure, and investment is not uncontroversial, with critiques of placemaking wary of 'top-down' implementation, asking who is doing the placemaking, for whom, with what purpose, and who such strategies can exclude. Some argue that placemaking leads to gentrification or that its connection to concepts such as 'revitalisation' or 'renewal' 'suggest a progressive upscaling and improvement that conceals legacies of displacement'.[74] Others argue that placemaking is the solution, not the problem, and that placemaking is successful and inclusive when co-created; Courage asserts that if local people are not on at least an equal footing with designers and those involved in the placemaking processes, then it is not placemaking.[75] As a means of understanding the social function of regional theatres and the experiences of community belonging and cultural meaning they build, placemaking is a useful framework when deployed alongside additional theoretical perspectives that consider the experience of 'sense of place'.

Here, the emphasis is not on the successful implementation of placemaking or 'creative placemaking' practices.[76] Rather, building on the *Theatres Beyond the Stage* findings and considering Cara Courage's assertion that the pandemic is 'anti-place', the focus here is on how participants' descriptions of their sense of belonging and community reflect their 'sense of place' (as such, successful implementation of creative placemaking practices by the theatres and their partners is somewhat implied). Shmuel Shamai and Zinaida Ilatov define 'sense of place' as 'a combination of both the physical (environmental) and personal/social interaction in the place' as well as a social phenomenon; 'in essence, people confer meaning on the environment'.[77] Considering a broad range of definitions of a 'sense of place' from other scholars, including as influenced by forces such as culture,[78] and interacting social relations,[79] James Cantrill suggests that those interested in the construct agree that 'a sense of place is the perception of what is most salient in a specific location, which may be reflected in value preferences or how that specific place figures in discourse'.[80]

Place, in geography and placemaking discourse, is often defined in relation or comparison to space. Yi-Fu Tuan in the influential *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* explains that place is less abstract than space:

> What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value [...] The ideas 'space' and 'place' require each other for definition. From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa. Furthermore, if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place.[81]

Elaborating on the idea of place as pause in movement, Tuan suggests 'pause makes it possible for a locality to become a center of felt value'.[82]

74. R. Alexander and Lisbeth A. Berbary, 'Placemaking as Unmaking: Settler Colonialism, Gentrification, and the Myth of "Revitalized" Urban Spaces', *Leisure Sciences* 43, no. 6 (2021): 644–60 (644).
75. Cara Courage. 'The Art of Placemaking: Artists and Communities Are Key to Creating the Places We Need', *RSA Journal* 1 (2023): 44–6 (44).
76. Creative placemaking, is a subset of placemaking. The term was originally articulated by Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa who explain, 'Creative placemaking animates public and private spaces, rejuvenates structures and streetscapes, improves local business viability and public safety, and brings diverse people together to celebrate, inspire, and be inspired' (Ann Gadwa and Anne Markusen, *Creative Placemaking for the National Endowment for the Arts* (White Paper, 2010) https://creativelandtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/NEftA-Creative-Placemaking.pdf (accessed April 22, 2025).
77. Shmuel Shamai and Zinaida Ilatov, 'Measuring Sense of Place: Methodological Aspects', *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 96, no. 5 (2005): 467–76 (468).
78. Lawrence Grossberg, *We Gotta Get out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
79. Leo Zonn, *Place Images in the Media:*

Portrayal, Experience, and Meaning (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1990); Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*.

80. James G. Cantrill, 'The Environmental Self and a Sense of Place: Communication Foundations for Regional Ecosystem Management', *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 26, no. 3 (1998): 301-18 (303).

81. Yi-Fi Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 6.

82. Ibid., 138.

83. Massey, *For Space*, 365.

84. Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*, 154.

85. Gay McAuley, *Space in Performance*, 41.

Tuan's idea of location transformed into place through the endowment of value has had longevity and influence. Doreen Massey acknowledges the definition of place as space ascribed or endowed with meaning,[83] though echoing Lefebvre, insists that place is not clearly enclosed or bounded, but can be 'imagined as articulated moments of networks of social relations and understandings'.[84]

There is nuance in the associations of place and placemaking across the four theatres involved in the research, as each facilitates different communities of practice and has particular material, social, and cultural characteristics. For example, participant articulations of experience at Norwich Theatre Playhouse reference the vibrant culture of the large bar, the proximity to Norwich University of the Arts and the presence of students in the building, the programming of 'local' talent and narratives, and a sense of the theatre as 'safe space', easily accessible and welcoming from the street. Norwich Theatre Royal, however, evoked reference to pre- and post-show rituals, a sense of 'occasion', and memories of large national touring shows attended with friends.

At The Mercury and The New Wolsey, recent large-scale capital projects have transformed the entrance to the venue and availability of engagement spaces, enabling the theatre to host new education, participation, and project development initiatives. The foyer space at The Mercury is a bustling hospitality and social space both within and outside large doors that barely separate the theatre space from the high street. The recently built NW2 at the New Wolsey, a large engagement space, is connected to the main theatre building by the Theatre Square, a new landscaped outdoor performance space, and this new space, and its identity as a producing theatre in proximity to large, receiving house, entertainment venues in Ipswich, impacts users' sense of it as community and regional place. At Queen's Theatre Hornchurch, participants spoke of the theatre as a place that brings together people from diverse backgrounds, the variety of activities such as quiz nights, exercise classes, social dance clubs, and intergenerational connection, with generations of the same family engaging with the theatre.

It is through the mechanisms of communities of practices that the theatre's place-ness comes into being; the theatre users, through their engagement, joint enterprise and ethos, and building of a shared repertoire of activities and experiences over time, imbue space with meaning, turning venue into place. This experience of place is not limited to an exploration of place inside the auditorium, within a play or production, or a creative workshop, but is built through the social relations expressed in rituals of arrival, the co-habiting of the theatre's peripheral spaces, and remembered experiences. In this facilitation of place, regional theatres further provide a remedy to the anti-place of the pandemic. Regional theatres are sites of social relevance; buildings that, as Gay McAuley articulates, are 'not fixed and immutable but a dynamic and continually evolving social entity'.[85] Regional theatre venues are meaningful places, porous and responsive, and vital civic infrastructure.

Conclusion: Protecting, Supporting, and Valuing the Placemaking Role of Regional Theatres

Regional theatre venues are contributing to placemaking by forming sites of public and social place that build relationships and invite experiences of belonging. However, these theatres continue to face various threats, with the mid-scale theatre ecology reportedly at a 'tipping point' in terms of survival, with some describing a fate of 'managed decline'.[86] Regional venues face a lack of touring content, labour shortage, and dramatic increases in running costs. An additional challenge is that audience habits have changed and the proportion of the general population partaking in arts and cultural activities has continued to decline across 2022 and 2023.[87]March 2024 Audience Agency *Cultural Participation Monitor* figures show audience numbers as 'levelling off below pre-pandemic levels, offering no relief from the raised costs for cultural organisations' and, while 6 months later the country has seen a change of government and decreases in inflation and interest rates, audience numbers in the second half of 2024 have not improved.[88] It is in this context, that the role of regional venues in enriching and building local community has been thrown into vivid relief.

Like all theatres in the UK, regional theatres are still in the midst of the fallout from Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and the cost-of-living crisis. There are various reasons, however, why regional theatres, particularly mid-scale venues in smaller cities and county towns where often they are the major or only arts centre, face a number of specific challenges. Regional theatres have a limited audience catchment. While they work tirelessly to coax new and young audiences through the doors, the size of their demographic is inevitably limited by the size of the city and regional towns. Additionally, the theatre industry in the UK is facing a labour shortage of production, technical, and other specialist roles. The sector saw a skills drain during the pandemic, as freelance and precarious workers turned to other industries for a paycheck and stability. In the first 6 months following the first national lockdown, 30% of workers in the music, performing, and visual arts sectors lost their job.[89] At the 2023 Future of Theatre conference organised by *The Stage* at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, various speakers attested to the decimation of the workforce. For regional theatres outside of metropolitan areas, this labour shortage is even more pronounced, as the pool of workers with the specific skills required is more limited in regional areas where there may only be one theatre at which they can find employment.

The cost-of-living crisis and increased prices for energy and materials continue to stretch regional theatre budgets. In an interview with *The Guardian*, the Mercury Theatre's Executive Director Steve Mannix explains that the theatre's 2022/23 panto brought the biggest audience they have ever had to see a show, with ticket sales at 94%, but it was also the most expensive, with materials for building sets rising by 30%, and their annual energy bill increased more than threefold, from £38,000 to £120,000.[90] A year later, the situation has not improved; the cost of the materials and sets for

86. Amanda Parker, 'Managed Decline: is this the Fate Facing Mid-Scale Theatre?' *The Stage*, June 12, 2023, https://www.thestage.co.uk/opinion/managed-decline-is-this-the-fate-facing-mid-scale-theatre (accessed November 22, 2024).
87. The Audience Agency, 'Cultural Participation Monitor', Summer 2023, https://www.theaudienceagency.org/evidence/cultural-participation-monitor (accessed December 10, 2023).
88. The Audience Agency, 'Flatliners: Are audience numbers finally on the move? Analysis of Cultural Participation Monitor, Sept 2024', October 2024, https://evidence.audienceanswers.org/en/evidence/articles/flatliners (accessed May 2025).
89. See, Dave O'Brien, Gwilym Owen, Mark Taylor, and Siobhan McAndrew, *The Impact of COVID-19 on Jobs in the Cultural Sector – Part 2* (Project Report, Centre For Cultural Value, 2021), *https://www.culturehive.co.uk/CVIresources/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-jobs-in-the-cultural-sector-part-2/* (accessed December 10, 2023).
90. Esther Addley and Harriet Sherwood, '"It's Really Desperate": Cost of Living Crisis Spells Bleak Times for British Arts Venues', *Guardian*, October 22, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2022/oct/22/its-really-desperate-cost-of-living-crisis-spells-bleak-times-for-british-arts-venues (accessed November 22, 2024).

2023/24 rose by 40%. The costs of bar stock, catering, salaries, and minimum wage have all increased, with no increase in grant income. It is, for Mannix, 'The most serious he's ever known it' though unlike during lockdown, the threat is not as obvious.[91] Regional theatres are understandably hesitant to pass this financial burden on to audiences already feeling the squeeze of the cost of living crisis. Rising costs are increasingly going to hurt as local councils are withdrawing arts funding; for example, Suffolk County Council announced it has withdrawn core funding to the Art and Museum sector organisations from April 2025.[92]

Adding to the challenges of increased inflation and the cost-of-living crisis, UK theatre is experiencing what, at the Future of Theatre conference, was called a 'touring crisis'. Chief Executive of the ACE, Darren Henley acknowledged some of the challenges in mid-scale touring, that it is currently considered too risky for producers, and he acknowledged that research needs to be undertaken by the Arts Council to explore better ways to support and mitigate the risks of mid-scale touring.[93] This situation for mid-scale touring pre-dates the pandemic and relates to a much longer history of decline. The 2016 Arts Council England report acknowledged that mid-scale touring had become 'near unaffordable'[94] and that there was a 'dearth of attractive middle scale shows',[95] though in 2018 subsumed the previously ringfenced support for touring into their general grants. There is widespread acknowledgement across the sector that the midscale touring system is broken; director Emma Rice of Wise Children explains, 'It feels like touring theatre was held together by spit, love and madness [. . .] Then the pandemic snipped it, and there's not much to glue back together'.[96]

Despite these ongoing challenges, all four theatres involved in the *Theatres Beyond the Stage* research continue to champion innovation; while there may be a notable presence of tribute concerts and commercial shows in the 'what's on' listings, these theatres are developing new modes of co-production, co-commissioning new writing with other regional theatres, developing 'associate' models with theatre companies and artists, and finding innovative solutions through clustering and networking with other similarly sized and positioned venues. Additionally, theatres are increasing their outreach and engagement work, enhancing their civic roles and developing their venues into thriving communities of practice. For regional theatres facing various crises, recognising the role they perform as hospitality providers, wellbeing services, community builders, and regional placemakers may be crucial to their futures.

91. Steve Mannix, roundtable discussion at the *Theatre After COVID* conference, Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, London, UK, November 4, 2023.
92. Suffolk County Council, 'More Public Money for Adult and Children's Care, but Difficult Decisions are Needed to Balance the Books', January 3, 2024, https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/council-and-democracy/council-news/more-public-money-for-adult-and-childrens-care-but-difficult-decisions-are-needed-to-balance-the-books (accessed November 22, 2024).
93. Darren Henley, The Future of Theatre conference, Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, London, UK, March 29, 2023.
94. BOP Consulting, *Arts Council England Analysis of Theatre in England*, iii.
95. Ibid., 4.
96. Emma Rice in Tim Bano, 'Rough Road: Can Theatre Steer the Touring Sector Away from Disaster?', *The Stage*, July 7, 2022. https://www.thestage.co.uk/long-reads/rough-road-can-theatre-steer-the-touring-sector-away-from-disaster (accessed January 10, 2024).

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