

New Theatre

Roundtable

Directors from Battersea Arts Centre, Fuel, and the National Theatre's Studio discuss their creative principles and how they develop new work

This event took place at Central School of Speech & Drama on 28 January, 2009

Panel:

Purni Morell (PM), Head of Studio, National Theatre

Kate McGrath (KM), Co-director and Co-founder of Fuel

David Jubb (DJ), Artistic Director of Battersea Arts Centre

Chair:

Andy Lavender (AL), Dean of Research, CSSD

Andy Lavender: Thank you for coming, thanks for being here. We wanted in this session to look at how new work, new theatre in performance gets developed, and to think about what it means to run experimental processes. I think Research and Development is an understood term within other industries, pharmaceuticals for instance, but is it understood within theatre performance? If so, what is it? How is it done in an applied way? On the ground? In studios and rehearsal rooms? And what sorts of exploratory or experimental or developmental work are going on at the moment? What kinds of output is it producing?

We have an exemplary panel for this discussion, so without further ado, I'll ask each of them to give a snapshot of who they are and what they do. David, would you like to begin?

David Jubb: Hello everyone. I'm artistic director of the Battersea Arts Centre, which is lovely – if you haven't been, do come along. We're based in a 115 year old town hall, and the organisation's been there for nearly 30 years.

One thing that's important about Battersea Arts Centre, or one of the things it's known for, is its legacy to the arts, in that it's a place where a lot of emergent things happen. Artists often begin or have critical moments of development in their career at Battersea Arts Centre. This is just a very brief snapshot of some of the companies, some of the artists, some of the producers and other cultural leaders who've grown out of Battersea Arts Centre.

Slide show

The mission of Battersea Arts Centre is to invent the future of theatre. We're interested in future forms of work, we're interested in engaging artists and audiences together in dialogue. I was going to talk a little bit about our vision, but I'm only allowed five minutes so instead I've got another multimedia bit.

Slide show

I'm going to give you some facts and figures about BAC, just to contextualise it. We've been going for 28 years. Companies like Complicite, Kneehigh and Improbable Theatre have all had key moments in their development at Battersea Arts Centre.

There are four program strands at Battersea Arts Centre: there's a Theatre strand, a Participate strand, an Event strand and a Space strand. I'm going to

talk more about our Space strand later. But those four activity strands interlink in order to achieve our mission to invent the future of theatre.

We have 350 artists on a brainstorming list; it's a really, really important list of producers, choreographers, directors, designers, visual artists, who help us create the program. We also have in the team ten producers who work across the theatre in Participate teams. So in lots of traditional theatres and traditional spaces, your Theatre team is separated from your Education team. At Battersea Arts Centre the two teams are merged, so if you work in Theatre, you also work in Participation. Before long, we hope that will also be true in Events and Space. So actually we'll have a very broad team: people who have specialisms, but who also work in the other activity areas.

We're based on a one-acre site in southwest London. There are seventy different spaces in the building. Some of them are absolutely tiny, like the old nurse's bedroom in the attic (where the town hall nurse used to sleep), through to a big 800-seater space, the Grand Hall. About 40% of our funding comes from national and local government, and only about 15-20%, depending on the year, from box office. That's quite important as it enables us to take risks. And then we have 200 shows per year, different shows every year, and many of those shows are in development.

There are three principles that we use to achieve our mission. One is, as I've already mentioned, participation. It is, as my colleague David Micklem (joint Artistic Director) would say, 'the writing on the stick of rock' that runs through all of Battersea Arts Centre's work. What I mean by participation is that artists and audiences engage in dialogue, engage in thinking about new ways of creating work. A really specific example is when we develop children's theatre (which we've started to do more over the last two years, and produce it ourselves), artists don't develop that in rehearsal room, they develop it through participation, in classrooms, with school children. So a show is developed over a term, or over a series of terms, in classes with children, through participation with an audience. That's a key principle in the way we work.

Another is something we have at Battersea Arts Centre called 'Scratch: The Ladder of Development'. It's an idea that has been developed over the past ten or more years. At the heart are three basic principles: to take risks and experiment; to gain feedback from audiences and listen and respond to that feedback; and to take time to develop an idea. So you can see at the bottom of this there's various different first ways of scratching a piece of work, starting with a Scratch Night, where an artist will show maybe five, or ten minutes of work at its very earliest stage of development in front of an audience. Then the audience and the artist decamp into the bar, and hopefully the audience buys the artist some drinks, and gives them feedback, and responds, and tells them what they think about the work; or simply just says what they saw, which is sometimes the most useful feedback you can give.

We also have informal pre-show scratches in rehearsal rooms; and we have something called Freshly Scratched where artists who've never performed at Battersea Arts Centre can come and participate in a Scratch Night. That feeds through to a fuller draft of a show, which might be slightly longer. We are trying to get away from the idea that all shows have to be an hour and ten minutes long. And so the scratch performances are just a fuller draft of a piece of work, and the scratches might be followed by a premier, a run, and a tour.

So that's an essential process we use in terms of developing work, and audiences are at the heart of that process. We think in terms of achieving our mission, 'inventing the future of theatre' that it's vital to include and involve and engage audiences.

The third thing that characterises our work is artist/producer collaboration. How can Battersea Arts Centre support and nurture the creative dialogue between the artist and the producer? I won't go through this entire structure, but basically it works from a layer of open access where anyone can come to Battersea Arts Centre and talk to a producer and have a conversation, or we have open house meetings where artists and producers or members of the

public can come and find out about the organisation, as well as the brainstorming group of about 350 artists I mentioned earlier.

Through our supported artist scheme, artists receive anything between one and three years of high-octane support: funding, commissions, love, therapy, and organisational development. This has led to many important (we think) artists and much important artistic development over the past ten years at Battersea Arts Centre. Then we also have a supporting producer scheme, which funds or invests in a producer at a key moment.

Anyway, I won't rattle on. The idea is that we are actively trying to promote that creative dialogue, actively trying to create space where artists and producers can talk to each other and can work towards delivering that mission.

We're also building a 'Home' at Battersea Arts Centre. Within about four months we'll have 24 bedrooms across the building where we can sleep artists for up to six months at a time. Kate is from Fuel, and Fuel are one of our companies in residence, but the idea of Home is that it is the zenith of artist-producer collaboration. We're trying to create a home where people can come and hang out and create chaos and mess.

The final thing I'd like to mention, which I'll be talking about in my session later, is that, whilst these are important structures which are all about relationships between people, we also think at Battersea Arts Centre that there is something essential that has to happen in theatre in terms of that mission, 'inventing the future of theatre', which is in relationship to space, people in space. We think theatre spaces are fantastically limited in what they have become, and there is an enormous job to be done to re-imagine theatre spaces through the eyes of artists: not through the eyes of theatre managers like me, or through architects, but through the eyes of artists who will, and do see extraordinary possibilities in space. So we are currently undertaking a project over about five years to redevelop our space, but not working solely with an architect, but also with artists.

Thank you.

AL: That's great, thank you very much. I have lots of things that we can pick up on there, but I propose that we go straight on and hear about Fuel. Kate...

Kate McGrath: I'm similarly going to try to rattle through, but I don't know if I can talk as fast as David. I co-run Fuel, a producing organisation which, as David said, is based at Battersea Arts Centre. Fuel's been going for about four and a half years, and it was set up by three producers, myself included, who were leaving Battersea Arts Centre. What is Fuel's mission? Our mission is 'to produce fresh work for adventurous people by inspiring artists', which is marvellously vague. It means we can do all sorts of things that we want to do, but I hope it gives a sense of the areas that we're interested in and why we're here talking at all.

I wanted to talk just a little bit about why we've chosen those words in our mission statement. By 'fresh' we mean original, surprising, live, connecting with its audience, combining different art forms, and being performed in unusual spaces. Those are some of things that characterise the work that we do, an ethos that we share with BAC.

'Adventurous' is a word we apply to our audience, by which we mean that they're risk taking, they're curious, and they are empowered. That's a very important thing for us: you don't have to be adventurous to come and see a piece of work by Fuel, but hopefully you should feel as if it has been an adventurous experience afterwards. Our audience is diverse: all different ages, and from all over the UK and internationally. They're exploratory, and they're fun loving, because we do like to try to make work that people actually like to see.

'Inspiring' – by that we mean artists that inspire us, that inspire audiences, and also artists that we inspire in some way. Artists who see the world in a different way, who connect with their audiences, and who play.

So I think you can see that a lot of the language is similar to BAC and influenced by that. I'm going to talk quickly about the three different ways in which we try to achieve that mission as well. One is by supporting artists, particularly by producing their work. We work with some artists on everything that they do, and some on specific projects. We provide producing support that includes strategic development and also creative support, as well as a lot of essential things like general management, production management, marketing, fundraising, finance, administration... all of those things which make placement development possible. We are really trying to develop the relationship we have with existing artists, but also introduce new people to the group. We also try to instigate ideas, so we produce a strand of more curatorial work, commissioned projects. The idea of that is about us provoking and instigating ideas, so creating a provocation to artists, a framework to experiment, a context to help audiences connect with work that they might not otherwise experience. We aim for those things to be quite unexpected, to happen in unusual places, perhaps go out to find an audience rather than asking an audience to come to us. And we try to create a home, similar to BAC.

We've also been the producer for the Lyric Hammersmith for the past two and a half years and alongside the main work, we created the development program there: residencies, labs, opportunities to show work in progress. And we have lots of different partnerships with other venues and arts organisations – some small, some large – and work with them in different ways to create temporary or permanent homes for artists.

A few quick facts and figures. We'll be five this September, and by then we'll have produced 50 pieces of new, live work for over 150,000 people in audiences. Our projects happen in all sorts of places: an installation in a basement in Brighton that actually had a live horse in it; a mid-scale physical theatre piece that toured internationally; a site-specific piece in a disused state building; and an army of women storming Trafalgar Square under

helicopter surveillance. I can tell you more about any of those if you want to. And we work with lots of different artists.

So, audiences. We do shows for one person at a time, or audiences of over 2,000 people – really different scales. The piece of work for one person at a time is obviously financially completely unviable, but credible. The piece of work for over 2,000 was also completely financially unviable, but brilliant. And at the moment more than 130,000 people have seen our work, and 2,000 people have participated in workshops, so again that participation strand is really important, although a lot of the work that we do is, in itself, participatory anyway.

We've worked with lots of key partners, and I might be talking about that later in my group session: how, as an artist or independent producing organisation, you need to form relationships with partners in order to develop work over a period of time. Some of the artists and companies we have worked with include: Will Adamsdale, Blind Summit, Marisa Carnesky, Gecko, David Harradine/Ged Barry/Jo Manser, Mark Murphy, NIE, Patter, Stephen McNeff, Peter Reder, David Gale, Melanie Wilson, Uninvited Guests, Sound&Fury, David Rosenberg, Clod Ensemble, Inua Ellams, Fevered Sleep, and The Future is Unwritten.

In terms of the future, what we're interested in is the question of how we might continue to make new work. We want to start relationships with emerging artists we believe in. We want to develop new projects brought to us by established artists. Often when artists and companies get a bit more established and onto some kind of circuit, it's difficult to step off that and try something new. One of the things we're trying to do is find ways to help those people to step out of their normal development process and experiment.

We also want to instigate curated, publicly accessible performance projects, and finally, to spread the work more, because although it's really important to develop work really well, once you've made it you need to make sure lots of people can see it and offer as much access to it as possible. Often you can

spend a huge amount of time developing work, and then it doesn't go to nearly as many places as it could.

AL: Thank you very much. Some overlaps with some of the principles that David was talking about, and some new stuff as well. But before we get to any of that, over to Purni.

Purni Morell: Hello, I'm the head of Studio at the National Theatre. The National Theatre, as you know, is on the Southbank, and it has an annual turnover of about 26 million. It has three large auditoria, and we're definitely part of the mainstream rather than part of the experimental end of theatre in this country. So not everybody knows that in a separate building next door to the Old Vic, we have what's called the National Theatre Studio, which has been various things over the course of its life. It started off in the 1980s. It was founded by Peter Gill as a place where actors who were in the National Theatre Company could come and try out ideas – so people who were in a show who wanted to try out a particular part or take voice classes, or explore something with other people in the company could come down and have a play.

We have a building that has, at the moment, three large-ish workshop spaces and, on the top floor, five rooms for resident artists. Over the course of years, the purpose of the studio has changed I think from a playground into a place which is aiming to find the new generation of top talent for the National Theatre to work with in the future. I sometimes think that part of my job is to look for the people who might not be ready to be work at the National right now, but who might in ten years time be part of our family. One of the things that we're trying to do is develop our relationships and conversations with those artists early, so that when they come to be directors in the Olivier or playwrights who are writing for us, we know them a little and we don't have to start the conversation from the very beginning.

So we do three things, really. Firstly, plays that are going to be produced at the National Theatre that need a bit of extra development before they go into

rehearsal, that need, for example, some questions unlocked that will influence the decisions that are made about casting or that are made about design. Those sorts of things you can't change your mind about after a certain point, we use the studio to play with. So a lot of the work that is in the studio won't come to the National Theatre stage for another year or two, but most of that strand of work isn't particularly speculative. It's work that we know, pretty much, that we're going to produce, it's just a question of how.

The second thing is finding the new generation, or the new artists for us to work with, people who might come and work with us in the future and also people abroad. That's a strand I'm increasingly excited about working on because I think that in Britain we're particularly strong on certain kinds of theatre, particularly in the mainstream, but we're bad at others. For example, playwrights from Britain are produced around the world, but in terms of design or choreography, we're far less regarded internationally than artists from other countries. So I'm quite interested in using the studio as a place to compare the best work from lots of different countries and theatre cultures, and to try to elevate our ambition for the work that we can make ourselves.

The third thing is about seeding new projects, but that's by far the smallest part of our work funnily enough. I tend to think in terms of people rather than in terms of productions, though occasionally the people you invite in will produce something good, and a big part of what I end up doing is being the arbiter of when to say 'this is no longer an experimental project, this is now something that we might actually want to produce'.

All of this is done outside of any public interaction. No audience is ever invited into the studio, and one of the reasons for that is that we're not trying to develop projects in the way that David's talking about, and Kate, which is where the value of having an audience feedback is really to test out whether or not the thing you think is working is working. We're dealing a lot of the time with projects that are happening earlier than that stage, when ideas are very nascent, and when you've got a hunch that you want to follow. I'm a firm believer that in a lot of creating, feedback is not helpful because you can very

easily (particularly more experienced artists) find yourself following feedback rather than taking the time to explore properly what it is that you want to do.

Over the course of a year, about 900 people work at the studio, on average for a week each on different projects. The projects are usually led by a director, or a choreographer, or a writer, but they will have lots of actors in them as well. Our actors are drawn from the National Theatre Company, but we do get in extra actors when we aren't able to cast from the company.

I did a pie not so long ago, and I think we worked out that only something like 40% of the projects that we work on go on to be produced anywhere at all. And of those about another third are produced at the National Theatre, and the rest will trickle through into other theatres. So a lot of the work that goes on in a lot of the theatres around the country has had some involvement with us at an early and quite private stage. Our operating budget's about one million, which covers running the building and various people's salaries, and then the actual budget that we have to make new work or to give to support projects is in the region of about £300,000. So if you imagine that a third of that roughly translates into some form of success, we're really in a very privileged position, because we're able to take on people at a very early stage, without any real expectation of return.

On the top floor we have five rooms and every year a resident playwright installs him or herself in the biggest, nicest room and writes things. There are no applications – it is by invitation. The other four rooms are allocated, sometimes for two weeks, sometimes for twelve weeks, to a combination of writers, composers, choreographers, directors, really as an endorsement of our interest in what they're trying to do and not necessarily on the understanding that they will produce a piece of work. Our rules of engagement with everybody is, 'If you produce something, we would like first refusal on it. But if you don't produce something, we're not going to ask you what you've done with the time or the money.' We think that by the time we get to the stage where we want to invite someone to be working at the Studio, we trust them to be the masters of their own project, and we don't tend to get

involved particularly, unless I'm asked directly for some dramaturgy, or for some advice or some suggestions, which I then give or I get one of my colleagues at the National to come and help with. We occasionally do showings, but very rarely. It's something the Studio used to do a lot more, but now I would say we do showings for just under a quarter of what we do. I suppose we're a private club, but in the best sense, which is that we want to invite people to come and make mistakes and do the things that they're embarrassed to do elsewhere, and ask the questions they're embarrassed to ask, to see whether or not we can't help them move forward.

AL: Great, thank you very much. So you've all described different sorts of development processes and different models whereby artists either get involved or generate stage work. Does any work now ever get produced without development? Or does this mark a complete sea change? Because I suppose the older model would be that you have your idea or you write your script and you get the money and then you just produce it. Does that happen any more?

PM: Yes, I think so. I fully encourage people *not* to develop unless they absolutely have to. I think it's a misapprehension that development improves work. It can, and when it's done properly it does, but I certainly don't think it's a substitute for doing your homework before you start.

KM: I think because we don't have a building we tend to respond to a particular artist, or group of artists' needs in terms of process. We don't really have to stick to a plan or a pattern. In fact, part of the joy of that is that we work in completely different ways with different people, and some people really don't like to work in front of an audience until it's perfect. We don't say that they have to. And some people really, really value that and find it really useful. Some people are very particular about what stage that's useful. We're actually showing some work this weekend at BAC that is at a very early stage – in the middle of trying to work out what it is. But we're going to show a bit anyway, because that particular artist finds that very helpful. And yes, there are some people that we work with who aren't interested in development.

I think for most of the time, the artists that we want to work with want to try out stuff because they're trying to do something and they don't know what it is yet.

It may be to do with whether you're working from a pre-existing play, with a designer who's going to create a model box, and a casting director who's going to get you great actors. I produced a play very like this last year, and I don't do that very often, and it was extraordinary because it was very straightforward from a producing point of view. There's the play, it's written down, it's published, really good. There's the designer, he's made the model box, there it is. Just have to build that. And here's a list of characters, and we need good actors, and there's a casting director who's suggesting some people and would get some of them. And then they all turned up and they read it on the first day and they rehearsed it. And it was great! It was fantastic. But I don't normally make work like that. Normally when I start making work, we don't know what it's going to be, and that's when development is useful, because it might not be a good idea, and it might only take a week to find that out.

AL: And then it can be bashed or dropped or...

KM: Well it doesn't really get bashed. It tends to be pretty obvious to everyone.

AL: ...evolve?

KM: We don't do a lot of 'project bashing'. Sometimes they morph into something else. Sometimes it's the wrong group of people. Sometimes it's the wrong time and it feels like it's not a priority for the artist, that they've got another idea they want to do more. There are all sorts of things that can happen, but it feels like it's different for different people.

AL: How about you, David? Do you produce stuff that comes fully conceived?

DJ: I think the shift that you're talking about is not a sudden explosion of work and development. I totally agree with Kate: the shift in paradigm is towards a more collaborative model of making theatre. And that's certainly what excites us in terms of process at Battersea Arts Centre, and in terms of the work itself. An example is Kneehigh Theatre, a company most of whose work is devised. Whilst text is an absolutely central part of it, and writers are often a central part, the work is devised. The model is collaborative. It begins with a story or an idea, and then a group of people assemble around that with different skills and start to build that as a piece of work, rather than a more traditional model where, as you say, everyone tends to know what they're doing because an existing text gives you an automatic structure to work around. So I think I agree with Kate completely – a shift in paradigm is actually about people working more collaboratively.

PM: There's an interesting question in that though, isn't there, which is about the difference between development and rehearsal. One of the main reasons we have, as an industry, started to move towards working like that is increased contact over the past 10 or 15 years with artists in Europe who work in that way more, beginning with not knowing anything, to putting something in front of an audience that's finished. But they wouldn't call it development, they'd call it rehearsal, and I think that's quite interesting. I'd love to know what you two think the difference is between those two things. I've got a sense there is something different, but I'm not quite sure what it is.

KM: I think it's to do with whether you have a performance scheduled at the end of it, probably. I agree, that there is a real difference. And actually, often Kneehigh do have performances scheduled and they know that they're doing, say, the *Bacchae* work, but they don't know how. Somehow they're going to tell that story, and it's going to open in six months, or whenever, and that feels to me like the rehearsal process that you were talking about, but a different way of rehearsing. Whereas in I guess the development you were talking about is when people go, 'Let's spend a week or two trying out these ideas and see if it's interesting and if it gets anywhere.'

DJ: And maybe it's just the process of writing something. If you write something you might go off and write it in five nights and it's brilliant, but actually most writers do take a lot of time and thought to get the structure right. So even with a collaborative model of making work, there's a sense of dramaturgy and structure going on, where a group of people is trying to get to something that feels ready to go into rehearsal, which is comparable to a writer with a text saying, 'Right, that's the final draft. Let's go into rehearsal.'

AL: One of the things that strikes me about this is that you've described, all of you I think, systems that would aspire to being artist-centred, but at the same time, you're attempting to be facilitative by creating structures and processes that, up to a point, are quite determined. So how is that balance struck? Does it all really still depend on a great idea by a lead artist? Or does it depend upon a really robust infrastructure that allows development to happen because the structure is right and the collaborations are artfully made, and the team working is carefully calibrated?

DJ: I'm not 100% sure I know what you mean, Andy, but I don't think there's any one model. I don't think there's any one necessary approach. At Battersea Arts Centre a lot of the time we're trying just to enable chaos or mess to happen, and actually that's one of the most important environments that ideas come out of. Then when an idea comes out of the mess, it might need an enormous amount of structure around it, and a really tight schedule, and a really tight group of people feeding into the dramaturgy. And then again, it might need some real mess. Do you know what I mean? I think there's an alchemy in making theatre, or trying to direct a show, or being like we are, facilitators, people trying to support a process. There's never one process, I don't think, certainly in the work that we make.

AL: But it's a more evolved or sophisticated producing culture, isn't it? You've shared your mission statements, there are programs of activity. I mean this is much more sophisticated than the old model of the 'happening': a group of people stumbling together and something comes out of it. So the creativity is on your side as much as on the side of the artists, isn't it?

KM: Yes, well, we're all theatre makers of some kind or another. We have an obsessive thing at Fuel that we're a theatre producing organisation, which means that we need to produce work, and which means that we want to put shows on in front of an audience. We don't want to spend all our time in development, or thinking about making work, or talking about making work. We produce a lot of work. And you know the balance of that is that you have to make sure that what you're making is really good, and it has enough time to develop and it emerges at the right time.

Although we think about how we do things, essentially if we sit down with someone and they've got a good idea, then we work from there and say, 'Well, what do you need? Do you need to go away and spend three months writing that? Or do you need to be in a room with a composer? Or do you need to be in a room with six actors?' And once we've worked that out with the artist, then we have quite an interesting job of trying to work out what partner organisations might be able to facilitate that process. So, for example, if they say, 'What I'd really like is to do some work in front of an audience,' we might go to David and say that we've got this project and maybe the BAC could do that. If they say, 'I really want to be in a room with six dancers for a week,' we might go to Sadler's Wells and say, 'Are you interested in this project? Could we find a way to do that?' But you're right, the reason we try to find the right partners is that all of these organisations do have programs of development that are more or less flexible. The good ones are really flexible, and they're interested in the artists first and foremost, and finding a way to facilitate what they want do. But there is a bit of dancing around – who can do what and who's got space, and who's got resources, and who hasn't. But that's part of the job I guess: to try to work out what the journey of the piece might be to its opening night.

AL: And Purni, do, you see yourself as a partnership broker?

PM: No, I see myself as an interrogator, I suppose. I feel that what I do is really reactive. I don't have anything to do until someone shows up with an

idea – I'm sure it's the same for you two. And then it's much more informal, in that, as Kate says, you're trying to follow the person, where they want to go, interrogate whether or not they've chosen the right path, and ask whether there is a better way of getting there or perhaps a different destination. But in the end I feel that what I do is really responsive. I'm not looking for a certain artist, and I certainly wouldn't set up a program of development, because I think it just works better if you wait and respond to it. I suppose it depends on what you're trying to end up with; you can sow lots and lots of seeds, and get lots and lots of things sprouting, and hope that some of them grow and develop (and a lot won't). Or you can go for the, 'No, I'm just going to have the one baby (like tigers) and take a lot of time looking after it. The gestation period is going to be really long, it's going to have a long adolescence, and then it'll be a successful tiger...'

What's tricky is to work out how to accommodate both of those approaches, because you don't want to just work on one project for five years, in case that turns out to be crap. But at the same time, you don't want lots and lots and lots and lots of things that never quite develop. I don't know how you hit that balance except by responding to the person that you're speaking to, and hoping that together you can come up with the best possible circumstances 'want to make a show about this,' in the end, it's very subjective. You think either, 'I want to go and see that,' or, 'I don't.' And if you do, then what's the best possible way to make it happen?

AL: One other question before we move on. This is all broadly concerned with theatre, but you've described unconventional timeframes or making work in spaces that aren't necessarily theatre spaces. So in this multi-media, multi-disciplinary networked culture, do you find yourselves most excited by the prospect of breaking out of what seems to be the disciplinary boundary? Is that what you observe happening? It might be a bit different for you, Purni, because your arrangement's slightly different.

PM: No, I don't think it is. I'm not interested in any one specific form. I don't mind what people do as long as they're brilliant at it. That's the thing that

excites me. I get excited when it's someone wants to do something involving text and dance, or someone wants to involve digital media, or someone wants to do something off-site. I really don't mind. What I want is that when I go and sit and watch it, it's exciting and sexy and impressive, and I just want more of it.

KM: I guess I'm interested in work that engages with its audience and that's the reason I work in theatre predominately – because it's a live form and intimate. The work that I am interested in might be in a proscenium arch theatre, or a found space, but it's reaching out to its audience and engaging with its audience. I don't mean talking to them literally but connecting with its audience. Or it might be that part of that is about meeting an audience in a different environment, in a different space, in a different setting, sitting in a different relationship to them, or walking around. We do a lot of site-specific work. We also do a lot of work in black box studios and proscenium arch theatres and so I don't think that the space is the thing so much for me. I think the connection is the thing. What I don't like, and what characterises a lot of end-on, traditional theatres in this country, is work that is really fourth wall and not connecting. And so I rebel against that because I find myself sitting in the auditorium thinking, 'You don't care that I'm here! I'm here watching this, and you don't care. I'm leaving!'

AL: David, you have your own building, which is multi-spatial.

DJ: Yes. One of the most exciting conversations I've been involved with over the past six months was with a group of young people, 14-16 year olds from two local secondaries, who'd come to BAC to hang out and do some work with some artists for a term.

It was quite interesting to hear 14 and 15 year olds talking about 'inventing the future of theatre'. It jolts you because you're so used to spewing these lines out that it becomes corporate. But actually what was really incredibly exciting was that this was a group of young people who probably hadn't been to many theatres (certainly not the National or others), and actually were just excited

about performance. And it suddenly made me think about filming stuff on your phone, and YouTube, and the way my daughter interacts with her friends, and it's incredibly performative, and some of it quite theatrical. And I just feel very hopeful for theatre in that mix. I've always felt were fighting a losing battle, and that ultimately theatre is a dying art form. But now I feel that it's probably not. I feel really quite excited about the fact that there's a whole generation who live performatively, and that theatre's potentially quite an exciting thing that can happen anywhere: whether it be in a playground or a church or a building or a room.

One thing I was going to say just to finish off is that I think it's also part of our job to redefine the word 'theatre', because theatre is often understood as a place where certain people go to watch a certain kind of show. And actually a theatre should be a place where people go to hang out. Theatre should be a place where people get married. We are in a town hall and this is our vision for that building: that people do their exams there, they go to youth theatre classes there, they get married there, some of them die there – at least, some of the artists sometimes die there! – you go to shows there, you see all kinds of things happen in that building. There are these incredible spaces in Brazil that are basically art spaces where people hang out. We went to one where 2,000 local people go and eat lunch every day, just in this art space. And of course then seeing performance is part of that.

PM: We're licensed for weddings! On the rooftop deck at the National. They've just gotten themselves a wedding license.

AL: It's a business, as much as anything else. We must remember that too.

Now might be a good time to draw breath and split off into the individual surgery sessions. Could you tell us what you'll be doing in those sessions.

PM: I thought it might be helpful to talk a little bit about how to think about the content of the work and some of the nuts and bolts: whether or not you need development, how to put a team together, when to show, what to show, why

to show, what makes a good idea, and how to get from development to realisation.

AL: One of the things that struck me, speaking previously with Purni, is not developing the whole thing at once, but looking at specific areas, the design of a project, for instance, potentially with a smaller team of people. The other thing I was struck by when we chatted was you saying, 'No need to shine.' Just develop and then the thing will sift and settle. I think that's an interesting perspective.

DJ: I'm very happy to talk about Scratch and artists and producers, but the thing I'm really fired up about at the moment is the idea that space is a crucial contributory factor in terms of developing new forms of theatre. One of the reasons that I think theatre is static and slow and oil tanker-like as an art form is because it's performed in spaces like this, all the time, endlessly. So the artist walks into the space and goes, 'Oh right, so I talk to my audience like that.' How can we create theatre spaces with architects and artists talking to each other in much, much more flexible, sensitive ways? A lot of you may be aware of the big lottery buildings that were built in the last 10, 15 years, where we've spent millions and millions and millions and millions of pounds, and some of them have been very, very successful. But a lots of them – far, far too many of them – look like shopping centres, and feel like shopping centres more than they feel like theatres, more than they feel like places to hang out, to be excited in, to experience culturally. So yes, I'm interested in talking about an architectural process that engages artists to change that.

KM: What I'll be talking about is probably not a million miles away from the things that you might talk about, but from an independent perspective. Different development processes, and how you might structure the development process. Whatever's useful.

PM: We can respond as well. We're used to being responsive. We'd much rather hear what you want us to say, then we'll say that.

AL: Thanks very much so far, Purni, Kate, and David.

Speakers divide into separate rooms for workshop/surgery sessions.

Websites

www.bac.org.uk

www.fueltheatre.com

www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/studio

ENDS