



Making Theatre with the Royal Navy



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Making Theatre with the Royal Navy

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I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the people who have contributed so generously to my research by welcoming me to rehearsals, providing me tickets to see shows, agreeing to be interviewed and chatting to me about your experiences making theatre with the Royal Navy Theatre Association – thank you.

Cover image:
The RNTA's production of *Much Ado About Nothing*, 2012 photo: Pam Johns

Below:
Collingwood RSC's production of *Snow White*, 2009 photo: Pam Johns

Notes

1 Grant Ref AH/K001922/1



Executive Summary

- The Royal Navy Theatre Association (RNTA) and individual Royal Navy theatre groups provide a vehicle for serving and retired personnel, Ministry of Defence staff, their family, friends and members of the local community to create theatre in a supportive and friendly environment. It enables a multi-generational group of participants to maintain an interest in theatre and to experience the challenge of staging full-scale productions for an audience.
- Involvement in RNTA theatre groups feeds in direct and indirect ways into members' professional and personal lives through the development of a range of theatre-specific and transferable skills such as confidence, project management, team-work, communication and presentation skills. Participation also provides a social outlet and has the capacity to generate lasting friendships and loyalty to a particular group.
- The annual Spring Festival enables the groups within the RNTA to compete against each other in a number of categories judged by an experienced Adjudicator, with a view to raising standards of production. The Festival and Awards' Night provides an opportunity to support and celebrate achievement within individual groups and the RNTA as a whole.
- Participation in the Royal Shakespeare Company's Open Stages programme has facilitated increased collaboration between RNTA groups and inspired them to take new creative risks in staging outdoor productions of Shakespeare. Involvement in Open Stages brought the RNTA an enhanced public profile locally and nationally.
- The Royal Navy benefits from RNTA activities through its provision of positive recreational activity and the development opportunities provided for serving and retired members. RNTA productions also provide opportunities for public engagement and the development of community relations in and around naval bases.



The RNTA's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 2014 photo: Pam Johns

INTRODUCTION

This report documents findings from a study of the Royal Navy Theatre Association (RNTA), conducted as part of the research project *Amateur Dramatics: Crafting Communities in Time and Space* (July 2013- January 2017), funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council as part of its 'Connecting Communities' programme. After receiving Ministry of Defence (MOD) approval, the RNTA affiliated as a research partner on the *Amateur Dramatics: Crafting Communities in Time and Space* project as it was keen to understand further the role and function of amateur theatre activity for individuals, naval bases, the Royal Navy and the wider community. As Commander David Grindel, then Chairman of the RNTA, stated: 'Clearly we have a strong interest in the outcome of the research; particularly in its examination of the relationships between those involved in RNTA activities, the wider Royal Navy and the local communities within in which Naval establishments exist'.²

This report does not evaluate the creative outputs produced by the RNTA, but assesses the contribution the RNTA makes through the creative opportunities it enables and supports. Specifically, the report addresses the following research questions:

- Why do people get and stay involved in RNTA theatre groups?
- What do people gain from their involvement in the RNTA?
- How does the annual competitive Festival contribute to RNTA activities?
- How has participation in the Royal Shakespeare Company's Open Stages Programme (2012-2016) extended the work of the RNTA?

- Who are the audiences for RNTA shows and what motivates their attendance?
- Does the Royal Navy benefit from RNTA activities?

This report is based on the following research activities:

- Observations of rehearsals and a range of performances including pantomimes, Spring Festival shows and summer productions of Shakespeare produced as part of the RSC's Open Stages programme.
- Semi-structured interviews with 12 RNTA members.
- Two on-line questionnaires directed at members of the RNTA and the wider naval community administered via Survey Monkey.
- A review of available documentation including posters, programmes, letters, Adjudicator reports and reviews.
- Two audience questionnaires.
- Attendance at three RNTA Awards Ceremonies
- Serving as the RNTA's Drama Adjudicator for the Spring Festival 2016.

What is the Royal Navy Theatre Association?

The RNTA was established in 1985 as an umbrella group for theatre companies who are active on naval bases. RNTA companies involve serving personnel, Ministry of Defence (MOD) staff, their family, friends and local members of the community. Members are able to participate in these activities without paying a subsidy due to Royal Navy support, which includes the provision of rehearsal and performance space, storage facilities and Navy personnel ensure efficient security on performance nights. The RNTA 'exists to enhance the confidence, team-working and

leadership qualities of service and civilian personnel through the medium of drama and to foster good relations between those of different backgrounds relating to the Service'.³

The RNTA annual calendar commences with the Spring Festival; a summer production that, since 2012, has been in association with the Royal Shakespeare Company as part of its Open Stages initiative and culminates in pantomime season in late November–early December.⁴ Over a number of years Royal Navy theatre companies have been dwindling and the RNTA is currently dominated by three groups located in and around Portsmouth, with another located in Gibraltar.⁵ Each of these theatre companies has a rich history and a slightly different character as outlined below:

The Admirals' Players (formerly known as the Victory Players), founded in 1998, rehearse and perform in Fisher Hall at HMS Excellent, Whale Island, Portsmouth. One of the RNTA's smaller groups, it is known as a more establishment-based group comprised of a mixture of Naval and Civil Service personnel (current and retired) and their families. The company puts on an annual pantomime and participates in the RNTA Spring Festival, for which it produces a varied repertoire of farces, murder mysteries and comedies.

Collingwood RSC rehearse and perform in Millennium Hall at HMS Collingwood, Fareham, Hampshire. It has existed since the establishment was built in 1939 and is the largest of the RNTA theatre groups. It has strong participation from the local community and whilst it draws some people from the Navy and MOD (current and retired), it generally has less people directly involved with HMS Collingwood or the Royal Navy than the other groups. The company puts on an annual pantomime and participates in the RNTA

Spring Festival, where it has developed a reputation for its productions based on Sir Terry Pratchett's Discworld series.

Sultan Theatre Group rehearse and perform in the Brunel Theatre at HMS Sultan, Gosport, Hampshire. The group consists of a mixture of Royal Navy serving members, MOD civil servants, friends, family, civilians and children from within the local area. The company puts on an annual pantomime and participates in the RNTA Spring Festival, for which it often produce musicals such as the recent *Honk!*, *Little Shop of Horrors* and *Guys and Dolls*.

Originally known as The Naval and Dockyard Theatre Club, and then the HM Dockyard Drama Group, the Gibraltar-based Trafalgar Theatre Group began in 1952 and over the years has produced a diverse repertoire including pantomimes, musicals, farces and contemporary new writing. The company is well integrated into the amateur theatre scene in Gibraltar. It performs at a number of venues including Inces Hall, HMS Rooke and St Bernard's Church and participates in the Gibraltar Drama Festival as well as the RNTA Spring Festival.

Notes

- 2 Letter from Commander David Grindel to the author, 7 March 2012
- 3 Royal Navy Theatre Association mission statement.
- 4 Prior to Open Stages, the summer productions had focused on productions of Sir Terry Pratchett adaptations by Stephen Briggs performed at the New Theatre Royal in Portsmouth. These have included *Mort* (2003); *Masquerade* (2006); *Men at Arms* (2008) and *Jingo* (2011).
- 5 Earlier examples of theatre groups on naval bases include The Daedalus Players based at the Royal Naval Air Station at HMS Daedalus in Lee on Solent in the 1970s. Culdrose Theatre Group based at the Royal Navy Air Station Culdrose near Helston in Cornwall is also a member of the RNTA.



Admirals' Players rehearse *Little Panto on the Prairie*, 2014 photo: Nadine Holdsworth

KEY FINDINGS

SECTION ONE:

Why Do People Get and Stay Involved in RNTA theatre groups?

There are many reasons why people participate in amateur theatre supported by the RNTA. Many people get involved through family, friends and colleagues, but some groups do actively recruit through their websites, programmes, Facebook pages and adverts in internal Navy publications such as *Daily Orders*. The Admirals' Players have participated in the bi-annual Family Day at HMS Excellent and have found this a successful method with seven new members recruited in 2014, 'which for a company that's only got about 40-odd is really good'.⁶ Whilst people tend to stay allied to one particular RNTA theatre group due to their work-place connection, the location, the friendships they have established and a sense of loyalty to their group, there is some evidence of cross-fertilisation as people join other groups in order to experience different types and scales of production. In common with amateur theatre companies across the country, the groups are multi-generational with a good gender mix, but racial diversity is marked by its absence and this is something the RNTA may wish to consider further in the future.

The RNTA groups provide an opportunity for people to continue with an interest in theatre ignited at school or via youth groups. Joseph Anderson, who first appeared

in the Admirals' Players pantomime *Little Panto on the Prairie* in 2014, reported that 'He enjoyed acting at school (his last panto was Ali Baba in 1997!) and he is thrilled to be able to rejuvenate his interest in dramatics within the service'.⁷ Others get involved after watching shows such as Andy Wright who recalled the 'family tradition' of watching Collingwood RSC pantomimes and Megan Mullins who explained that she 'used to go and see the pantos Collingwood put on with my grandma...and one year after the show ended I asked if I could be in the next one'.⁸ Others get drafted via support for family members – most typically, parents dropping off children gradually find they are asked to help out and stay. Stephen Johns traced his twenty-year participation with Collingwood RSC via dropping off his five young children who 'needed an outlet'.⁹ Some participants take part in amateur theatre because it is a different kind of work from their day-job, with one member stating 'It challenges you in ways that my job doesn't' (*MOD Civil Servant, Survey Monkey response*) and several spoke of the appeal of doing something 'fun' as an escape from the stresses and strains of their day jobs. As noted on the Sultan Theatre Group's website 'For all of us, acting is a hobby, our way of escaping the 'real world' and having a bit of FUN'.¹⁰

Respondents also stress the appeal of taking on new challenges, pushing themselves to do something out of their comfort zone or to do bigger and better productions. Above all, there is a palpable sense of thrill that comes from the experience of starting with a bare script, which through effort, teamwork and the injection of various levels of creative input becomes a production.



Collingwood RSC's production of *Witches Abroad*, 2014 photo: Pam Johns



The RNTA's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 2014 photo: Pam Johns

“It’s the challenge. It starts with a script and out of that script you get a cast. You get an idea of what set you need, what props you need, what costume you need, what the make-up has to be, where the lighting’s going to go, where the sound is going. And for me personally, it’s making sure all of the people and everybody involved come together and at the end, on opening night, it’s there. That’s the challenge.¹¹”

A primary motivation is the chance to meet people with a shared interest and opportunities for social interaction. A number of respondents stressed how theatre was a useful outlet for those who did not gravitate towards the numerous sporting activities offered by the Navy, as Emma Thomas put it, ‘I wasn’t tremendously sporty so I didn’t go off and meet groups of people by joining a sports team or sailing, so this was something that I enjoyed doing’.¹² The social side is a particular driver for serving personnel who experience moving to different establishments as the local theatre group is viewed as a relatively easy way of meeting people and integrating into a new place. As one member put it, ‘Enjoyed doing theatre at school and this was a good option for meeting new people within my new establishment’ (MOD Civil Servant working in NCHQ, Survey Monkey response).

“I found it very easy to integrate into the group and I think that is because of the RN connection. Most of the cast and crew for our last production were either serving forces, ex-forces or civil servants and those who weren’t were family of those who were’ (MOD Civil Servant working in NCHQ, Survey Monkey response).”

In addition, retired members of the service have spoken warmly of how amateur theatre facilitates a ‘*continuing naval association*’ (retired naval officer, Survey Monkey response), as Rob Wickenden explained: ‘23 years in uniform ended in 2011; I stay in touch with the RN through the RNTA’.¹³ Others value the opportunity to meet those from backgrounds and roles that they would not usually encounter. Tim Stoneman notes how the RNTA ‘brings together a number of people, which the Navy doesn’t always do...it brings together civilians and military in a social environment...it’s a set-up where you can have fun with people that you wouldn’t necessarily ordinarily associate with’.¹⁴

In an environment where hierarchy is clearly marked and performed in everyday encounters, as well as in professional life, the chance to function in a way that collapses hierarchical lines is notable. Talking about his experience writing and directing the pantomime *Scrooge* for the Admirals’ Players in 2013, Joe Allan spoke at length about how his initial trepidation at directing older members and senior figures in the establishment soon gave way to mutual respect for their shared commitment to putting on a good show.

“I was in a room with all these major authorities and it was intimidating, and as soon as I opened my mouth to say, “Right we’re starting,” everyone sat down and listened and I was the authority in the room! And I was like, “Should I be telling all these Commanders off for not standing in the right place or not saying the right lines correctly?”... they are very, very respectful but to have someone who is maybe 15 or 20 years younger than them telling them what to do, I think for them to actually allow someone to do that I think is quite amazing.¹⁵”

Dwindling numbers of Royal Navy and MOD personnel in some groups is a cause for concern. The policy of ‘encroachment’ insists that 51% of a group’s membership is either serving service personnel or serving MOD personnel and their families, and this limits the number of people outside the navy who may join. A few key reasons have reoccurred in discussions and survey responses about why people are not inclined to get involved in RNTA groups. The primary reason cited was the issue of visibility and the fact that the theatre had a low profile on naval bases. A view typified by the following response: ‘People don’t know it’s there’ (anon, Survey Monkey response). Others referred to the pressures of increased workloads necessitated by



Costumes for the Admirals’ Players production of *Little Panto on the Prairie* hanging in Fisher Hall, 2014 photo: Nadine Holdsworth

concentrated training periods and changing expectations in terms of working hours, which left little space to devote to extra-curricular activities, especially those that demand a sustained commitment. Equally, serving personnel traditionally have two–three year postings and then move on to another establishment, which makes continuity challenging. Also, compared to previous years, far fewer people live on naval bases, which makes it harder to leave the base for domestic commitments and then return for early evening rehearsals. Speaking of her early involvement with the RNTA, Emma Thomas describes that:

“For me it was something to do that was within the area where I lived on the base, or within the unit in the wardroom, the places I was working, and therefore going along to enjoy the drama club was something that I could do. It was still in a work-based environment and it was a way of occupying my time. Whereas perhaps if I was living out in my own house I might have had other interests.¹⁶”

Others felt there was an increasing emphasis and resource directed towards sport that led to a drop-off in participation in other activities. Several pointed to issues of perception around what amateur theatre entails, ‘because we all know in colloquial language amateur means not very good’.¹⁷ Others thought ‘It is seen as slightly effeminate making it difficult, especially for the younger sailor to take himself out of his normal social area’ (anon, Survey Monkey response). Some felt that people dismissed theatre as ‘just not for them’ (anon, Survey Monkey response), as Stephen Johns admitted, ‘It’s not everybody’s cup of tea’.¹⁸ What is clear is that the RNTA and healthy RNTA theatre groups rely on a number of extremely committed individuals who are prepared to act as creative catalysts, committee members and dedicated members of cast and crew.

Notes

- 6 Interview with Roger Mitchell, 24 April 2015
- 7 Joseph Anderson biography, programme note for the Admirals’ Players *Little Panto on the Prairie*, 3rd–7th December 2014
- 8 Interview with Andy Wright, Chichester, 27 September 2016 and Interview with Megan Mullins, Gunwharf Quays, Portsmouth, 23 April 2015
- 9 Interview with Stephen Johns, HMS Collingwood, Fareham, 3 February 2014
- 10 www.sultantheatre.org.uk/join_us.html (accessed 14 December 2016)
- 11 Interview with Stephen Johns, HMS Collingwood, Fareham, 3 February 2014
- 12 Interview with Emma Thomas, HMS Excellent, Whale Island, Portsmouth, 17 July 2015
- 13 Rob Wickenden biography, programme note for the RNTA’s *Macbeth*, 15th–18th July 2015
- 14 Interview with Tim Stoneman, HMS Collingwood, Fareham, 3 February 2014
- 15 Interview with Joe Allan, HMS Collingwood, Fareham, 3 February 2014
- 16 Interview with Emma Thomas, HMS Excellent, Whale Island, Portsmouth, 17 July 2015
- 17 Interview with Tim Stoneman, HMS Collingwood, Fareham, 3 February 2014
- 18 Interview with Stephen Johns, HMS Collingwood, Fareham, 3 February 2014

SECTION TWO: What Do People Gain from their Involvement in the RNTA?

Involvement with RNTA theatre groups feeds in direct and indirect ways into members' professional and personal lives.

Theatre Knowledge, Craft and Skills Development

Amateur theatre making involves different kinds of creative participation and is dependent upon individuals using diverse abilities and skills to make up the full backstage and onstage team for every production. With production processes at the heart of amateur theatre activity, part of the satisfaction of participating in amateur theatre is due to how people are able to adapt, learn and share different knowledge and skills, both on stage and behind the scenes. There are members of RNTA groups who trained and sometimes worked in a professional theatre capacity (as performers, stage managers, choreographers, singers and fight directors) but who have decided against the precarious working life of a theatre professional. Hence, RNTA activities give them a vehicle through which to maintain this creative aspect of their identity, whilst at the same time giving other members the benefit of their experience in various aspects of stagecraft. As Chris Blatch-Gainey, an experienced stage combat practitioner, illustrates,

“ We did *The Three Musketeers* a couple of years back which was my idea, but the company itself hadn't done any fighting on stage so the big push for the company was saying “We're going to do this and we're going to do some fighting and you're all going to be trained”.¹⁹ ”

Others are at the beginning of their careers, and use the opportunity to work with RNTA companies to develop aspects of their craft with a view to embarking on further study, training and/or a career in the profession. There is a strong commitment in the groups to bringing in young people with a view to 'nurturing talent, guiding and advising them'.²⁰ This commitment is felt and appreciated by the younger generation as Ben Gainey comments: 'They've seen you grow up. They encourage you to push what you can do, to develop your skills set, to try new things'.²¹

Many RNTA members recognise how their participation has increased their general knowledge of theatre and stagecraft, for instance one member expressed their enhanced understanding of 'Stage skills (voice projection, spatial awareness, teamwork)' (Retired Officer, Survey Monkey response). Lucy Sheppard and Andy Wright stressed how Collingwood RSC and summer productions had fed into their formal education in theatre.²²

“ It's certainly made me aware of how much is involved in just something as small as an amateur



Collingwood RSC's costume store, 2014 photo: Nadine Holdsworth

dramatic group and then it gives you a real sense, when you go and see the big productions, of exactly how much work goes into something like that.²³ ”

Many members value the opportunity to learn about and carry out specific roles such as directing, set building, writing scripts, producing and choreography, with many recognising how their capacity to undertake such roles is facilitated by informal systems of apprenticeship whereby those more experienced have passed on their knowledge via shadowing or co-production. For instance, members have to serve twice as Assistant Director prior to taking on a full directing responsibility at Collingwood RSC. Writing of their experience co-directing the 2015 production of *Macbeth*, Lisa Allan and Bob Bell drew attention to how: 'the “Ying and Yang” approach we have adopted has hopefully created something better than either of us could have done on our own – each having strengths in different areas and bringing very diverse experiences to the project'.²⁴ Many people referred to their 'sense of pride and achievement' in bringing full productions to fruition and feeding off the audience's enjoyment of what they had produced.²⁵

Personal and Professional Development

Participation in amateur theatre contributes to personal and professional development. It provides a safe space for people to explore and express different dimensions of their identities that may not have an outlet in their professional or domestic life. As Emma Thomas stated, 'I actually believe people have lots of different sides to them and [in the theatre] it's just a different side of me that doesn't normally come to the fore in my work environment'.²⁶ Equally, Robin Sheppard, a landscape designer by trade, who has played the dame in the past nine



Collingwood RSC's production of *Snow White*, 2009 photo: Pam Johns

out of twelve Collingwood RSC pantomimes, spoke about his passion for performing outrageous pantomime dames and sometimes surprising his clients.²⁷

The process of bringing a production to life is an exercise in project and budget management. Those serving as directors and producers have to ensure that the various aspects of the production come together through an effective rehearsal and production schedule, which ensures that the performance elements as well as the publicity, set design, costume, props and technical aspects are all ready when required. During observations of pantomime rehearsals at Admirals' Players and Collingwood RSC it was clear that there were several teams working in parallel on rehearsing scenes, choreography, costume assembly, props making, technical plans and programme design. With each aspect demanding concentrated focus, creative input and collaboration due to the limited time available each week to make the show happen. The pressures of time are acute and when the groups meet tasks and objectives for the session have to be clearly identified and rigorously adhered to. In addition, making theatre on and for naval establishments has particular logistical requirements as companies have to negotiate the

demands of security for their members and audience.

During interviews and questionnaire responses, people have consistently stressed how their involvement in amateur theatre improved their organisational, communication, team-work, presentational and inter-personal skills.

“ ‘Personally, I think my involvement has enhanced my leadership, organisation and people skills. I also have developed more self-confidence’ (Serving MOD, Survey Monkey response). ”

An overwhelmingly common response centred on increased confidence. One person admitted ‘*Meeting all the new people was very scary for me so being with the RNTA has helped me a lot with my confidence*’ (Anon, Survey Monkey response) and Joe Allan stressed how the confidence he has gained as a writer, performer and director with the Admirals' Players and Collingwood RSC has had extended benefits as ‘*it gave me the confidence to do other things, stuff that I would never have done beforehand if I hadn't have done it*’.²⁸

Those who have not participated in amateur theatre activities within the RNTA also recognise the value of these transferable skills, with one respondent claiming that

involvement ‘Nurtures their leadership and management abilities’ (Anon, Survey Monkey response) and another stating that ‘Their teamwork, presentation and memory skills are all challenged and honed’ (Anon, Survey Monkey response). Indeed, the contribution made by theatre in this regard was recognised in 2009 when Margaret Seed, a leading member of the Trafalgar Theatre Group was given the Governor’s Gibraltar Award for her outstanding contribution to the community. The spokesperson for the award stated ‘She has encouraged many young individuals in improving their confidence and potential and developing their interpersonal skills’.²⁹

Some participants see a correlation between the roles they undertake in the Navy and their theatre activity, with one respondent stating, ‘My background as a Royal Navy electronics engineer provided me with background knowledge to equip me to deal with the technical aspects of theatre’ (Anon, Survey Monkey Response). Others make a direct connection between the demands of theatre-making in amateur contexts and the values and ethos of the Navy: ‘The RN values leadership, teamwork and a sense of comradeship, all of which lend themselves to producing theatre’ (33 years service as rating and officer in the Royal Navy. 15 years service as Retired Officer Grade in MOD Civil Service, Survey Monkey response).

The attributes associated with amateur theatre making such as showing initiative, teamwork, organisational skills, problem solving, project management, leadership are ones valued by the Navy and some members connect this to ambitions for promotion.

“To develop self-confidence, teamwork and a sense of pride in what you do, and all the things that people are looking to develop in a service career or that are useful in carrying out your duty, you can enhance those attributes in that environment [theatre] as much as any other.”³⁰

People have also directly attributed better performance in the workplace with their amateur theatre activities due to their increased self-assurance and ability to work with others, often of different ranks, constructively.

Members of RNTA groups describe how making amateur theatre within Navy affiliated groups, demands a particular level of commitment and places certain expectations in terms of the quality of the finished product. This is equally true of those who have had service careers such as Chris Blatch-Gainey who suggested that ‘...if you’re in the Navy or you’re ex-service, MOD, you have this loyalty...and that’s the difference. So you tend to go that little extra step more than you would do...It’s a discipline, it’s a dedication. You’re going to do this so let’s do it and do it the best we can’ and community members who spoke of the importance of making theatre under the badge of the Royal Navy and the need to ‘do them proud’.³¹

Social Relations and Communities of Care

Being a member of an amateur theatre company has the potential to generate a pronounced sense of group identity, affiliation and loyalty. Speaking of the intensity of this attachment, Robin Sheppard declared ‘I love Collingwood...I’d never let them down if they needed me’.³² This connection is embedded during twice-weekly rehearsals, but is enhanced through other means such as common logoed show t-shirts, Facebook groups and social events. Feeling part of something goes a long way to explain the strong volunteer ethos that drives people to turn up, even when they’re not involved in a production, to man the box-office, do front-of-house duties and serve refreshments – they are demonstrating their investment in, their belonging to, a community of care.

When speaking of their RNTA involvement, many stress the importance of fun, friendship and camaraderie.

‘I enjoy the camaraderie of the group of people that get together as it starts, you’ve got the script and you’re all learning your parts and that camaraderie grows as you develop in a production together’.³³

As people rehearse, build sets, design and make costumes and props together they often embark on a range of social exchanges from witty banter, sharing stories and off-loading everyday grievances. By working together in this way people build the foundations for and reinforce social bonds that enhance their lives in numerous ways. One member pointed to how participation in amateur theatre has enriched their social life and enabled them to achieve a more healthy work-life balance, ‘My activities outside of work and home life have certainly increased and I attend more social events as a result of a wider network of friends’ (serving MOD, Survey Monkey response).

The social side of making theatre for RNTA groups is extremely important as different groups mix, mingle and laugh together. The strength of familiarity evident in the level of banter and affectionate mickey-taking during rehearsals. Collingwood RSC and the Admirals’ Players also have extended family dynasties within them and one of the great pleasures of engaging with these groups has been seeing how theatre provides an opportunity for different generations to work together and to hear about the ways in which this has provided an outlet to nurture family relationships. Robin Sheppard and his daughter Lucy spoke of how rehearsals at Collingwood RSC brought them together for two nights a week to do something they both enjoyed and a member of the Trafalgar Theatre Group recalled: ‘The children and I were members from 1997-2001. I just remember how much fun the rehearsals for the pantomimes were and the excitement of being backstage, getting dressed up and made up’.³⁴

Participants in amateur theatre often employ the rhetoric and emotional register of ‘family’ when they talk about their involvement and this was equally the case for the RNTA groups. Joe Allan described how ‘they become like a second family...you build this family’ and Roger Mitchell spoke of the Admirals’ Players as: ‘It’s almost like having, bit of cliché, but a family group there and that’s how a lot of people feel within the group...it’s only a small group, company...so it is like a family there’.³⁵ Relationships within amateur companies often echo the complex interpersonal dynamics of extended family life – the hierarchies, varying roles, allegiances and squabbles. Indeed, several members mentioned their frustration with cliques and ‘internal politics’ within different groups, as well as the impression that some people wielded too much power or were reluctant to embrace change in the repertoire and style of productions. But, at its best, the term ‘family’ speaks to a deep sense of camaraderie and conversations with RNTA members have revealed how amateur theatre’s ability to facilitate active and supportive communities of care has helped people navigate a number of difficult pivotal moments in their lives including illness, divorce and bereavement.

The RNTA groups also demonstrate care through their commitment to charity fund-raising. The Admirals’ Players give all money raised from ticket sales to the HMS Excellent Welfare Fund to support initiatives connected to the naval base and money raised from programmes goes to the Royal Navy and Royal Marines Charity. Collingwood RSC has raised money for a number of causes over the years including the Royal Navy and Royal Marines Charity, the Defence Medical Rehabilitation Centre at Headley Court and the Alzheimer’s Society in recognition of their

connection to Sir Terry Pratchett, who announced he had Alzheimer’s in 2008 and died of the disease in 2015. Trafalgar Theatre Group have similarly raised money for a number of local causes over the years including donating £2000 to Breast Cancer Support Gibraltar in 2013–2015.

Notes

- 19 Interview with Chris Blatch-Gainey, HMS Collingwood, Fareham, 3 February 2014
- 20 Interview with Robin and Lucy Sheppard, Southsea, 5 December 2014
- 21 Interview with Ben Gainey, Gunwharf Quays, Portsmouth, 23 April 2015
- 22 Interview with Robin and Lucy Sheppard, Southsea, 5 December 2014 and interview with Andy Wright, Chichester, 27 September 2016
- 23 Interview with Roger Mitchell, 24 April 2015
- 24 Lisa Allen and Bob Bell, programme note for *Macbeth*, 15th–18th July 2015
- 25 Interview with Ben Gainey, Gunwharf Quays, Portsmouth, 23 April 2015
- 26 Interview with Emma Thomas, HMS Excellent, Whale Island, Portsmouth, 17 July 2015
- 27 Interview with Robin and Lucy Sheppard, Southsea, 5 December 2014. When Robin Sheppard wasn’t playing the dame, he directed the pantomime in 2008 and 2011.
- 28 Interview with Joe Allan, HMS Collingwood, Fareham, 3 February 2014
- 29 Cited in newspaper article written by Mark Viales for the Gibraltar Chronicle, undated, courtesy of Jane Tull.
- 30 Interview with Emma Thomas, HMS Excellent, Whale Island, Portsmouth, 17 July 2015
- 31 Interview with Chris Blatch-Gainey, HMS Collingwood, Fareham, 3 February 2014
- 32 Interview with Robin and Lucy Sheppard, Southsea, 5 December 2014
- 33 Interview with Emma Thomas, HMS Excellent, Whale Island, Portsmouth, 17 July 2015
- 34 Interview with Robin and Lucy Sheppard, Southsea, 5 December 2014 and Sarah, Emma and Edward Weldon cited in a booklet Trafalgar Theatre Group 1952–2002
- 35 Interview with Joe Allan, HMS Collingwood, Fareham, 3 February 2014 and Interview with Roger Mitchell, 24 April 2015



Admirals’ Players rehearse *Little Panto on the Prairie*, 2014 photo: Nadine Holdsworth

SECTION THREE:

How does the annual competitive Festival contribute to RNTA activities?

At the heart of the RNTA calendar is the Spring Festival when the theatre groups compete against each other in a competitive Festival, which is 'intended to stimulate interest in amateur theatre and raise its general standard in the Naval community'.³⁶ Entry to the Festival is open to groups representing a Ship or Establishment of the Naval Service, which can include detached naval units or theatre clubs from Joint Service establishments where Naval Service personnel are assigned. In reality, the same four theatre groups within the RNTA have competed regularly in recent years and many feel that this is regrettable. In an effort to extend the reach of the Festival, the RNTA 'will award start up grants to those establishments who have been unable to enter the RNTF for 2 years or more'.³⁷ Unfortunately, this offer has not led to an increase in participating establishments. Many previous participants still produce theatre but some such as Culdrose Theatre Club focus on the annual pantomime or are unable to commit the resources to compete in the Festival.

The groups select a production to stage and this is performed during the month-long Festival. An experienced Adjudicator sees each production before providing oral and written feedback on various aspects of the show. Modelled on the All England Festival, the Adjudicator is invited to use the guidelines issued by the Guild of Drama Adjudicators (GODA) in providing comments related to the following categories and percentage weightings: Acting (40%), Production (35%), Presentation (15%) and Dramatic Achievement (10%).³⁸ Feedback from the Adjudicator is keenly anticipated and, as Commander Philo, the current Chairman of the RNTA, put it, 'there is definitely a sense of occasion about the whole thing'.³⁹ In addition to providing oral feedback and a written report, the Adjudicator nominates up to three nominees for a series of awards with the winners announced at an Awards' Night, which is held after the RNTA's Annual General Meeting.

According to the RNTA guidelines, 'Appraisal by the Adjudicator is intended to be both a stimulus and a guide to improved performances in subsequent productions and is therefore as much an essential feature of the Festival as the performances themselves'.⁴⁰ The competitive element of the Festival is designed to raise the bar in two ways, by encouraging the groups to pursue the highest standards of production for the Festival entries and via the scrutiny of an Adjudicator whose feedback may be taken into consideration in future productions. According to Chris Blatch-Gainey, the competitive ethos of the Festival is a significant motivator and connects the activities

within the RNTA theatre groups firmly within the values commensurate with the Navy.

“ It's not just for the individual, it's for the group of people around you, and then you have this competition where you're trying to do a good show that beats the next establishment and the other and the other and the other, so you're trying to promote the best of the best, which is really the Navy ethos, trying to produce the best team to do the best job at all times.⁴¹ ”

For individuals and companies, participation and success in the Festival offers a chance to assert their distinction. Emma Thomas spoke of the Festival as 'an opportunity for people to be recognised for their skills' and a 'chance to benchmark her acting asserting that 'it gives you a feeling of satisfaction that something you think of as quite good and entertaining actually is in a wider sphere'.⁴²

The Spring Festival also provides an opportunity for the different groups to see and support each other's productions, when scheduling allows, which enhances the sense of a wider community of theatre makers. As one respondent stated, 'There is excellent support from within our own clubs and also some very healthy competition and genuine support from other clubs as well' (*Serving MOD, Survey Monkey Response*). The Festival is approached in a spirit of what Robin Sheppard referred to as 'friendly rivalry' that can take on its own theatricality as when several members of Collingwood RSC turned up wearing t-shirts promoting their production of Sir Terry Pratchett's *Lords and Ladies* to see *Murder by the Book* performed by the Admirals' Players, one of their rivals for the Spring Festival awards in March 2016.⁴³

This spirit of friendly rivalry is similarly in evidence at the annual Awards' Night, a black-tie social event combining food, drink, extracts from Festival entries, the formal announcement of the nominees and winners of the various awards and concludes with a disco. The different theatre groups gather in packs to celebrate *their* nominees and winners, whilst at the same time acknowledging and applauding their rivals for a range of accolades from Best Actress, Best Director, Best Make-Up, Costume and Wigs to the most coveted of all, the Best Overall Production. This event serves several functions for the RNTA. It officially marks achievement, as individual or collective winners are 'presented with certificates and engraved glasses as a permanent recognition of their achievement'.⁴⁴ It also acknowledges the huge amount of time, energy and commitment shown by all those involved in making the Festival happen. Importantly, all of this happens in front of senior ranking officers who serve as President of the RNTA, most recently Vice-Admiral Sir David Steel (2011-2015) and Commodore Steven Dainton (2015-), who are able to see first-hand the seriousness with which RNTA groups approach their theatre and the range of participants involved.



Joe Allan receives an award for Best Supporting Actor from Commander Philo at the RNTA Awards Night, 2016 photo: Bob Bell

A small number of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with some aspects of the Festival process such as the selection of Adjudicators and the need to ensure appropriate expertise and distance from individual companies. There is also a feeling that in some instances there 'just isn't a level playing field' as smaller establishments compete against larger groups or they are penalised for having a more flat democratic structure that encourages those with less experience to try their hands at directing. The RNTA should provide space to air these concerns and to explore ways to mitigate feelings of exclusion or imbalance in the organisation and operation of the Festival. However, it should be stressed that the vast majority viewed the Festival as a positive way to challenge individuals and groups to achieve the very best productions their group was capable of achieving.

Notes

- 36 Letter to the author from Commander Philo, Chairman of the RNTA, 25 March 2014
- 37 Guidance on the RNTA Festival Adjudication process, dated 18 November 2015
- 38 The All England Festival is a six-month long competitive festival of one-act plays in England, which began in 1919 under the auspices of the British Drama league.
- 39 Email to the author from Commander Philo, 5 April 2016
- 40 Guidance on the RNTA Festival Adjudication process, dated 18 November 2015
- 41 Interview with Chris Blatch-Gainey, HMS Collingwood, Fareham, 3 February 2014
- 42 Interview with Emma Thomas, HMS Excellent, Whale Island, Portsmouth, 17 July 2015
- 43 Interview with Robin and Lucy Sheppard, Southsea, 5 December 2014
- 44 Guidance on the RNTA Festival Adjudication process, dated 18 November 2015

SECTION FOUR: How has participation in the Royal Shakespeare Company's Open Stages Programme (2012-2016) extended the work of the RNTA?⁴⁵

The RNTA companies collaborated and pushed themselves in new creative directions through their involvement in the Royal Shakespeare Company's Open Stages initiative, one of the most ambitious and high-profile examples of a professional company engaging with amateur theatre-makers. When the RSC released a nationwide call for applications from amateur theatre-makers to pitch their Shakespeare or Shakespeare-inspired productions, the RNTA responded with an idea to stage *Much Ado About Nothing* 'set during the return journey of a Royal Marine Unit from Afghanistan in the very recent past' to be directed by Lieutenant Commander Philippa Sargent and staged alongside the iconic HMS Victory in Portsmouth Historic Dockyard.⁴⁶ This production brought together a cast and production crew drawn from the three RNTA groups operating in and around Portsmouth: the Admirals' Players, Collingwood RSC and Sultan Theatre Group.

Acceptance onto Open Stages meant that the RNTA could send delegates to a series of free 'skills exchanges' hosted by the RSC and by their partner theatre, the Nuffield Theatre in Southampton. At these workshops, participants attended classes in acting, movement, and voice as well as stage combat, text, and design taught by local theatre professionals and a core team of artists from the RSC. The RNTA has always organised workshops as part of its commitment to enhancing the practical skills

of its members, but this took things to a new level. As Stephen Johns, the producer of *Much Ado About Nothing*, noted regarding the benefits of this amateur/professional collaboration:

“ The main thing I've got as a producer from them [the RSC] is the workshops they do...they did one for us and it was brilliant, really, really good, and they had three different teachers come down and they taught different things: voice projection, Shakespearian speech and space awareness. And they were fantastic. We had a day or two days at the Nuffield and again, very good. So you get their expertise, you gain that way.⁴⁷ ”

Recognition and acknowledgement from the RSC via Open Stages offered the RNTA the inspiration and motivation to take new creative risks. This was the first time that the RNTA had tackled Shakespeare and for many of the participants it was their first experience of working with Shakespeare at all or since school. Many relished the challenge and the learning experience. Dene Wood who played Conrade admitted, 'I have learnt so much about Shakespeare, and his influence on modern language...I love it. I'm hooked'.⁴⁸ Tim Stokes, who played Benedick, spoke about how his initial trepidation gave way to a passion for and facility for learning, speaking and understanding Shakespeare verse.⁴⁹ Not only did the RNTA take on Shakespeare for the first time, they embarked on their first open air production in the Victory Arena in Portsmouth Historic Dockyard. As Stephen Johns made clear, it was 'the first time an outdoor theatre show had been put on in the Portsmouth Historic Dockyard, a challenge for us and for them'.⁵⁰

The production happened at a time when Portsmouth Historic Dockyard was developing its range of activities



The RNTA's production of *Much Ado About Nothing*, 2012 photo: Pam Johns

for visitors and the production of *Much Ado About Nothing* opened the new Dockyard at Dusk series. It was a complicated logistical operation to have the RNTA perform in the Victory Arena as it required the agreement and cooperation of several agencies including the Navy, the Portsmouth Royal Dockyard Historical Trust, HMS Victory, the National Museum of the Royal Navy and Flagship, which runs events in the dockyard. The different agencies wanted to ensure that the first foray into theatre would be of sufficient quality; hence the RSC association was even more significant. The chance to use the RSC brand and the Open Stages logo in promotional materials represented a vote of confidence from an institution widely regarded as a national treasure. As Chris Blatch-Gainey put it, ‘You put that logo in the corner of your poster that means something...it’s such a big boost’.⁵¹

The RSC association facilitated the open air staging, the RNTA also hoped it would help broaden their audience base, lead to increased ticket sales and provide helpful ammunition when making the case for continued resourcing from the Royal Navy at a time of financial constraint. Involvement with the Open Stages programme brought the RNTA increased visibility as it unleashed unprecedented publicity, which raised the RNTA’s public profile both on a regional and, occasionally, a national scale. Those marketing Open Stages latched on to the powerful combined axis of RSC and Royal Navy branding and the RNTA production of *Much Ado About Nothing* was referenced frequently in the media including Radio 4’s *Today* programme, Laura Barnett’s article on Open Stages for the *Guardian* and used to illustrate an article by the *Guardian* theatre critic Lyn Gardner on how ‘Amateur theatre should be celebrated, not derided’.⁵² The RNTA was also selected to perform *Much Ado About Nothing* at The Dell, the RSC’s outdoor performance space in Stratford-upon-Avon, as part of a National Showcase of amateur Shakespeare’s drawn from Open Stages on Sunday 22nd July 2012.⁵³ The chance to perform at an RSC space stood out for many as an especially memorable and validating opportunity. The production also received a number of nominations for the *Southern Daily Echo* ‘Curtain Call’ awards and won in the categories of Best Supporting Actress and Best Supporting Actor.

Buoyed by their experience the RNTA applied to be part of the second phase of Open Stages (2013–2016). For the programme’s second incarnation, the RSC reduced the number of companies to 100, but once again the RNTA was accepted on to the programme. This phase of Open Stages has seen Collingwood RSC produce *Henry V* in Portsmouth Historic Dockyard in 2013; whilst the RNTA staged *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in the gardens of Admiralty House, home to the Second Sea Lord, in 2014; *Macbeth* in Portsmouth Historic Dockyard in 2015 and *Twelfth Night* in the gardens of HMS Nelson in 2016. Each production offering an opportunity to take on new challenges for the



The RNTA’s production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, 2014
photo: Pam Johns

cast and stage crew such as the large-scale sword fighting of *Henry V* and the steam-punk styling for the fairies of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. They have also prompted further accolades such as Joe Allan winning the *Southern Daily Echo* ‘Curtain Call’ award for best actor in a Shakespeare play for his portrayal of *Henry V*. In addition, *Henry V* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Macbeth* were all selected for the RSC’s summer programme of amateur and semi-professional productions at The Dell. Whilst, *Twelfth Night* was performed at Leeds Castle on 23rd July 2016 following an invitation from Vice-Admiral David Steel, the RNTA’s former President and great supporter.

Open Stages facilitated a new phase in the RNTA’s output and despite the fact that the Open Stages programme has now ended, the RNTA are still committed to undertaking an outdoor production of Shakespeare in 2017 and possibly beyond.

Notes

- 45 In this section I am indebted to our Post-Doctoral researcher, Dr Molly Flynn and her work researching for and producing the report on the Open Stages programme for the AHRC grant *For Love Or Money? Collaboration Between Amateur and Professional Theatre* (January 2016 – January 2017)
- 46 Programme note for the RNTA’s *Much Ado About Nothing*, 18th–21st July 2012
- 47 Interview with Stephen Johns, HMS Collingwood, Fareham, 3 February 2014
- 48 Dene Woods biography, programme note for the RNTA’s *Much Ado About Nothing*, 18th–21st July 2012
- 49 Conversation with the author, HMS Collingwood, 6 May 2016
- 50 Stephen Johns, programme note for the RNTA’s *Much Ado About Nothing*, 18th–21st July 2012
- 51 Interview with Chris Blatch-Gainey, HMS Collingwood, 3 February 2014
- 52 Laura Barnett, ‘Shakespeare’s am-dram champions: the amateurs joining forces with the RSC’, the *Guardian*, 17 July 2012 and Lyn Gardner, ‘Amateur theatre should be celebrated, not derided’, *Guardian Theatre Blog*, 24 February 2014
- 53 The first run of Open Stages closed in 2012 with ten amateur companies invited to perform their full productions in Stratford-Upon-Avon.

SECTION FIVE: Who are the audiences for RNTA shows and what motivates their attendance?

Distinct from professional theatre, amateur theatre audiences are much more likely to be part of networks of association with amateur company members: family members, neighbours, friends and work colleagues who come to see shows in order to support people they know. There is something fascinating about watching someone known in one capacity showing a different side of their character via their involvement in theatre-making. This idea of relational networks is evident in the make-up of RNTA audiences, which has certain consequences for marketing shows as Roger Mitchell identified in relation to the Admirals' Players:

“ I think we all agree that banners and posters don't actually get bums on seats or sell tickets, it's actually going out there and physically selling them. With the numbers we require for a full audience we tend to be able to get them from the friends and families and work colleagues. So there's no point in us spending a lot of money on banners and posters and things like that because we're not going to get any more audience from that.⁵⁴ ”

An audience survey conducted during the Admirals' Players production of *Little Panto on the Prairie* in 2014 found that 133 out of 144 respondents had found out about the show via a friend, family member or colleague. Equally, when asked about their motivation for attending the show 94 out of 144 stated that they were there to see a family member, friend or colleague in the cast. This figure is all the more striking when considering that the next highest number was 62 out of 144 for people who were motivated by seeing a good show and 49 out of 144 who identified with supporting local amateur theatre. The survey also revealed that this audience is loyal, with 51 out of 144 stating that they come every year and 53 out of 144 saying that they had attended over 4 previous Admirals' Players productions.

Familiarity between the audience and the company leads to a very distinctive viewing experience of insiders willing on and celebrating the achievements of the cast and crew. As one interviewee put it, *'there is probably a different atmosphere because you know that socially the people in the audience are there because they've come to support your efforts as opposed to having great expectations about what they're going to see'*.⁵⁵ In some instances, this familiarity can also lend an appealing frisson to the performance as when a large group of marines came to see their friend and colleague play the villain in *Little Panto on The Prairie*. Their vocal support



Collingwood RSC's production of *Witches Abroad*, 2014 photo: Pam Johns



Collingwood RSC's production of *Henry V*, 2013 photo: Pam Johns

and good-humoured lambasting, which greeted a missed cue, undoubtedly enhanced their and the wider audience's enjoyment of the show.

Interestingly, this pattern was not as clear in the audience survey of Collingwood RSC's production of *Dick Whittington* in 2014, which received a smaller sample of 31 respondents. Whilst 19 out of 31 stated that they had found out about the show via a friend, family member or colleague, their motivation for seeing the show was much more in tune with professional productions of pantomime, with 15 out of 31 stating that they were there for a family day or night out and 12 out of 31 identifying their motivation to see a good show.

“ ‘saw a performance years ago and it was really good, so jumped at the chance to go again. Exceeded my expectations, a great show. Well done all’ (male 35-44) ”

“ ‘great family experience for all ages, our group is aged 4-82’ (female 35-44) ”

This shift in emphasis is notable, not least because Collingwood RSC have worked hard to focus attention on the quality of their shows regardless of the fact they are an amateur group. As Chris Blatch-Gainey insisted,

“ They don't come to see us because we are Navy they come to see us because they want to see the show and know that the company puts on good shows...we've struggled for years trying to achieve that goal and we've now got it. We know we're going to get an audience because they like us and they like the show not because they like the Navy.⁵⁶ ”

Undoubtedly participation in Open Stages has broadened the RNTA audiences as people have come to see shows as a result of the RSC association, the increased publicity and the chance to experience productions of Shakespeare in compelling settings.

Notes

54 Interview with Roger Mitchell, 24 April 2015

55 Interview with Emma Thomas, HMS Excellent, Whale Island, Portsmouth, 17 July 2015

56 Interview with Chris Blatch-Gainey, HMS Collingwood, Fareham, 3 February 2014

SECTION SIX: Does the Royal Navy benefit from RNTA activities?

The Royal Navy benefits from the RNTA in three key areas. The RNTA provides a positive recreational activity for serving members and MOD staff who are able to meet and socialise in a productive and fun environment. It offers an opportunity for people from different backgrounds to mix outside of work, which can feed into increased understanding of different roles and responsibilities. Participants develop and enhance a range of transferable skills that can benefit their service careers.

RNTA productions provide opportunities for public engagement and the development of community relations. Vice-Admiral David Steel recognised:

“ [T]here are few other organisations associated with the Royal Navy which bring together those of the organisation, those retired, civil servants and those from the local communities.⁵⁷ ”

Productions provide a vehicle to invite members of the local community onto naval bases as participants and audience members, as such, places that might ordinarily seem remote and distanced from wider community life become temporarily accessible. There is also a tradition of inviting local community leaders to productions as part of a public relations strategy. Hence, local dignitaries such as the Mayor of Fareham and the Mayor of Havant are regularly invited to attend Collingwood RSC productions and evidence suggests they value the shows and the hospitality they receive. More generally, shows are often reviewed in the local press including the *Portsmouth News* and the *Southern Daily Echo*, which usefully disseminates the wider community activities supported by the Royal Navy.

The RNTA's participation in the RSC's Open Stages programme has been a particularly valuable means of enhancing publicity for the RNTA and, as an extension, the Royal Navy. Following the inaugural Open Stages production of *Much Ado About Nothing* in the Victory Arena, Vice-Admiral David Steel asserted that '*The RNTA may not have been known much outside a relatively small circle of the Naval Family before now but I suspect that this recent production has lifted its profile beyond measure*'.⁵⁸ Royal Navy Command have made sure to capitalise on the public relations opportunity afforded by the open air productions of Shakespeare to host VIP receptions that have taken place on board HMS Victory and at Admiralty House. As Tim Stoneman put it, '*David Steel is very firm that it is a very good way of getting our message out, both within the Navy and outside it; hence his desire to have as many people along to our reception who are in a position to pass that message on*'.⁵⁹ The message being that the Royal Navy is a multi-faceted

organisation with a rich cultural history and heritage that is capable of meeting the intense demands of naval operations around the world at the same time as supporting activities such as those produced by the RNTA.

Notes

57 Letter from Vice Admiral David Steel to Stephen Johns, 22 July 2013

58 Letter from Vice Admiral David Steel to Stephen Johns, 23 July 2012

59 Interview with Tim Stoneman, HMS Collingwood, Fareham, 3 February 2014



Collingwood RSC's *Witches Abroad*, 2014 photo: Pam Johns

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