



Amateur Dramatics: Crafting Communities in Time and Space



Arts & Humanities
Research Council

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Amateur Dramatics: Crafting Communities in Time and Space

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We can be reached via our website, www.amateurdramaresearch
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Introduction

This report documents some of the activities and interim findings of the research project *Amateur Dramatics: Crafting Communities in Time and Space* (July 2013- January 2017). Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) as part of its 'Connecting Communities' programme, it involves six researchers from three different universities (Royal Holloway, University of London; Exeter and Warwick).

The research investigates three main questions, each of which addresses community participation in the past and present:

1. How does amateur theatre contribute to sustaining, challenging and revitalising communities?
2. What is the social and cultural significance of amateur dramatics as a craft, as a creative practice, as entertainment and as heritage?
3. How does amateur dramatics illuminate questions of time (work and leisure time; longevity of amateur companies; amateur theatre as a life-long commitment)?

As well as contributing to different local communities, amateur theatre is, in itself, a community and a collection of communities. As academics in the arts and humanities (rather than the social sciences), we are particularly concerned with the artistic and cultural aspects of amateur theatre. Our research starts with an interest in the process of making, auditions, the repertoire, rehearsals and the audience. From this we can begin to understand the relationship between community and creative practice. We have designed the research to recognise the knowledge and expertise of those involved in amateur theatre, many of whom have deep and long-term connections to amateur theatre-making. At the end of the project, we will bring our findings to the attention of those who have widely ignored amateur theatre-makers in the past, including professional theatre, cultural policy-makers and academics. Our research will be fully documented in a book, jointly authored by Helen Nicholson, Nadine Holdsworth and Jane Milling, *The Ecologies of Amateur Theatre* (Palgrave, 2017).

What's in a name?

In describing the research project as a study of 'amateur dramatics', we were aware that we would prompt debate and controversy. We have not been disappointed. Some people are offended by the word 'amateur', preferring 'local' or 'community' as a prefix. Others take exception to the word 'dramatics', regarding it as old-fashioned, and would rather that we used the word 'theatre' as a way of including musical theatre as well as scripted plays.

Unlike amateur dramatics, community theatre has been well researched, described by Baz Kershaw as 'alternative groups aimed to promote radical socio-political ideologies in relatively conservative contexts' (1992, 18). Although this definition may have softened over time, community theatre (or community-based theatre as it is known in North America) is widely associated with theatre that is led by professional artists who are funded to engage local people in theatre, often developing new productions that reflect their community's stories. Most amateur theatre does not have these radical intentions, yet there is a strong history of community participation in amateur theatre that makes a real difference to people's lives.

By using the term 'amateur dramatics', we aim to confront the stereotypes that are sometimes associated with it. Amateurism has become a by-word for poor-quality work, and a recurring theme in our interviews is that amateurs resent the negative associations of the word. By maintaining our focus on the 'amateur' in amateur dramatics (or theatre, if you prefer), we are opening questions about how, where and why people make theatre for the love of it.

Where and how is our research taking place?

Our research is primarily focused on amateur theatre in England. Given the wide range of amateur activity in theatre, it has been necessary to define clear geographical parameters for this research project. It is also focused on amateur dramatic companies that are solely devoted to making theatre (rather than amateur performance in professional shows, community or applied theatre led by professional facilitators, social organisations who sometimes perform such as the WI or Scouts). We have conducted conversations across England, meeting adjudicators, amateur performers, directors, wardrobe supervisors, set and props-makers, venue managers and chairs of local organisations. We have attended performances in many different settings, in theatres, village halls, community centres, churches, memorial halls and on the docks. We have encountered amateur companies from diasporic communities whose performances tell stories from different parts of the world; companies that are linked to workplaces; small amateur groups that serve their own local village, and large ambitious amateur companies that run highly professional venues.

Our three case studies investigate amateur dramatics in *constructed* communities, that is communities that were conceived to fulfil particular social and institutional functions (military bases, naval ships), or designed as utopian imaginaries of urban life (garden cities, post-war



‘new’ towns and suburbia) and rural villages undergoing a process of reconstruction from organic communities to commuter dormitories. These form the backbone of our research, allowing us to become deeply embedded in amateur theatre communities.

We are collaborating with people in all our research sites, and based on the understanding that research is most productive when it uses creative research methods as well as more conventional interview processes. Our website and blogs are one way to include different voices and practices, and our toolkit for amateur researchers is designed to encourage collaboration. Amateur theatre is about making and doing as well as talking, and we are trying to capture this in our ethnographic research methods.

We are finding that the research invites new ways of thinking about how amateur theatre is archived, and how its histories have been documented. Many amateur theatres are in themselves archival spaces, and the homes of enthusiastic amateur theatre-makers often hold both cultural memories and personal archives. New archives are created on social media, offering insights into audience responses.

Why now? Amateur Creativity in the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries

We are taking the long-view, looking back to the early days of the twentieth century to understand how amateur theatre has evolved. We have found that in the first decades of the twentieth century amateur theatre was part of a utopian vision of community, a place where people of different backgrounds and interests might come together in a shared and sociable creative endeavour. At the time the divide between amateur and professional theatre was far less acute than it now appears, and many leading actors, directors and playwrights were happy to show support for amateur theatre. The separation of amateur from subsidised theatre came with the creation of the Arts Council of Great Britain in 1946, when ‘doing it for love was now not the same as doing it for not-for-profit’ (Cochrane, 2011, 138). Traces of this attitude towards amateurs remain today; there are few national records of amateur theatre (the V&A archive excludes amateur theatre from its collections, for example) and the Arts Council England’s strategic plan *Great Art and Culture for Everyone 2010-2020* pays scant attention to amateur arts.

Amateur creativity is enjoying renewed vitality in the twenty-first century, reflecting deep cultural changes. Amateur performers, critics, authors and musicians can reach global audiences through blogs, youtube, ebooks and many other forms of social media, a cultural practice set to increase as digital technology becomes increasingly accessible. There is a revival of interest in folk art and craft, with some amateur bakers, knitters and gardeners becoming TV celebrities and others turning their skills to guerrilla performance, slow art or political activism. Following this trend, there is also a renewed interest in amateur theatre from the professional artistic communities, demonstrated most vividly by the Royal Shakespeare Company through their *Open Stages* programme, the first large-scale intervention of a professional theatre company in the amateur theatre scene. This suggests that divisions between amateur and professional may be an outmoded frame for thinking about the interrelation between theatre sectors in the twenty-first century.

What are we learning?

At this mid-point in the research project (February 2015), our initial findings are taking shape, and we are currently drilling down into the detail of our research before we reassess the bigger picture as the project develops. We are working on our findings in three key areas: amateur drama and heritage; the cultural economies of amateur theatre; craft, creativity and labours.

Amateur Drama and Heritage

Amateur theatre is embedded in cultural heritage, and plays a part in many local and national heritages across the world. Each amateur theatre company has its own heritage, where traditions and ways of working are passed on from one generation to another. We are investigating how amateur theatre is reflected as part of a tangible and intangible heritage. This is appropriate for amateur theatre; tangible heritage refers to physical objects, buildings and artefacts, whereas the intangible heritage is found in the practices, rituals, repertoire and oral traditions of amateur theatre.

The tangible heritage of amateur theatre is often captured in the archives, props, costumes and other materials created and preserved by companies and individual amateur theatre-makers. This heritage is preserved in books, films, websites, theatre galleries, posters and programmes (including descriptions, images, logos and branding). This material culture is used to create and sustain stories and histories about an amateur theatre company, and celebrates a company's heritage.

Amateur theatre reflects the cultural heritage of a place and is part of the heritage of a workplace. Annual pantomimes often have a local inflection and jokes are recognised by audiences.

This can last for generations. For example, when we re-enacted Letchworth's Second Garden City Pantomime (1911) with the current cast, the process shed light on contemporary cultural policy in the city. The pantomime satirised the 'arty-party' who wanted to impose 'high art' on local people in 1910, a position that still resonated with amateur actors in 2014. Other productions directly engage with cultural heritage through the use of specific stories, histories and places. The Philippine Theatre UK's *The Enchanted Bird* (2014) adapted a classic Filipino folktale.



The Enchanted Bird, The Philippine Theatre UK.

Sometimes heritage is intangible, and remains undocumented. This is the heritage that resides in the collective memories of participants. In the Royal Navy, for example, there are performance rituals such as crossing the line ceremonies at the Equator, as well as songs and SODs operas that sailors remember performing on board ship.



Crossing the Line ritual



Amateur theatre is also part of an intangible heritage as it provides cultural spaces where people meet, sustain friendships, families and community ties. Often a life-long interest, it plays an important role in the emotional lives of participants. In one interview, a father talked about how amateur theatre has provided a vehicle for him to sustain a healthy relationship with his daughter in the midst of a family breakdown, and in another a life-long amateur performer said that performing helped him overcome grief. Some amateur actors become recognised in their communities for the roles they play, and this becomes an important part of their identities and feelings of belonging.

The cultural economies of amateur theatre

We are looking at the relationship between the material circumstances in which amateur companies exist and make theatre, and the cultural performances and repertoire that these groups curate and create. We are thinking about the cultural economy in terms of 'hard' economics (audience numbers, turnover, buildings) as well as the values embedded in the processes of theatre making. Most amateur groups in England are economically viable, and many are able to contribute to the refurbishment of performance spaces like community halls, or to raising large sums for charity. The circulation of earnings from audiences, sponsors, and advertisers back out into broader benefits for the local community is underwritten by a gift of cultural labour engaged in for pleasure. This circulation is an important component of what drives many amateur theatre groups, and underpins their charitable status.

The cultural economies of amateur theatre are also closely inter-twined with the economics of professional theatre. Links between professional, commercial and amateur national associations NODA and LTG seem to be returning to the more cooperative spirit of the early twentieth century, when the British Drama League was a major force in the campaign for a National Theatre. LTG has become a member of UK Theatre, and works closely with the Theatres Trust in the preservation of theatre buildings. Chris Jaeger, Artistic Director of the Swan Theatre in Worcester, described the impact of amateur involvement on the theatre he oversees. The Swan Theatre's origins are directly linked to the amateur sector – in fact, the theatre was built by amateurs in 1965. The Swan theatre's financial solvency is currently directly linked to amateur bookings, estimated at about 1/3 of the yearly turnover. A similar picture emerges for smaller scale theatres and arts centres around the country. Professional theatre also supports amateur venues directly and indirectly; amateur-run buildings programme touring shows, and screenings of NT Live are a major source of income in amateur theatres outside London. Professional playwrights from Shaw to Godber, from Ben Croker's pantomimes to Jessica Swale's *Bluestockings* (2013), find the income from amateur performance rights can exceed that earned from professional theatre and have spill-over effects in the wider visibility and cultural significance of their work. All this suggests that the boundaries between amateur and professional theatres are rather more flexible and porous than has been assumed.

The repertoires of amateur theatres have evolved over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in relation to regional theatre and touring circuits. The LTG has recently

commented that restricted licensing has meant a more limited repertoire is available to amateur groups. Yet this has also ensured that there has been continuity in the performance of a twentieth-century canon in the regions (Priestley, Shaw, Rattigan, Brenton, Daniels, de Angelis), as cuts in subsidy has meant regional reps have become less able to produce this work. Amateur repertoire is also closely linked to developments in film and television. The financial success for amateur groups of productions such as *Brassed Off* or *Calendar Girls* was undoubtedly linked to audiences' recognition of the stories from the films. This is not a new phenomenon; there was a rash of amateur productions of J.B. Priestley's *Laburnum Road* in 1937, following not the play's premier in 1933, but the film's release in 1936. Where amateur production interacts less readily with commercial or subsidised theatre is in the rise of devised, physical or multimedia performance, although some of the newer, or re-invented, societies have deliberately pursued a different aesthetic that is in dialogue with these modes of performance. For example, Moretonhampstead Variety Group's *Alice* (2013) turned the parish hall into the 'Museum of Improbable Objects', a neo-gothic immersive installation, within which the pantomime was staged.

The cultural values of amateur theatre societies are expressed not only in their formal cultural activities – the rehearsal, the choice of repertoire – but also in the informal culture of societies, those experiential elements that characterise amateur theatre, such as friendliness, local knowledge and cultural leadership. For most groups, 'friendly' is the first adjective they use to describe themselves in publicity material. Within the working practices of groups, members participate in a complex mix of sociabilities, from intimate connections forged within performances to the companionship on a shared task in the workshop. The plays selected for performance frequently reflect upon friendship, see for example the popularity of *Steel Magnolias*. This concern with friendship was likewise the subject of much of the new writing for amateur groups from the 1920s and 1930s from authors like Ida Gandy, V.E. Bannisdale, F. Austin Hyde or Olive Popplewell, names lost to us now, but widely produced by companies in their day. It is perhaps not surprising that a large part of the repertoire of the groups celebrates or moralises on friendship, since it is the desire for social connection that most frequently attracts members and that facilitates, and is perpetuated by, the work rate of groups in the regular cycle of rehearsing and producing.

Key figures in amateur theatre groups, particularly committee members, frequently take on a wider role of cultural leadership for their locality. While these roles may be differently configured across different scales of

companies, one of the leading reasons that amateur theatre groups close is the loss of a key figurehead or catalyst. For example, Colbury and Ashurst Theatrical Society had run for twenty years but stopped producing in 2013, with the retirement of the chairman Steve Adhern, 'We've run out of administrators... people to run the society.' Catalysing figures in amateur theatre frequently also participate in activating other cultural events within their communities, or hold leadership roles in local government. Three of the core members of South Brent Amateur Dramatic Society are also parish councillors and a Winchester city councillor led the pirate force in the Hursley h'Ams *Pirates of the Isle of Wight* (2015). While Newton Poppleford's Riverside Players *Robin Hood* (2015) had two Sidmouth town councillors on opposing sides of the political fray as Friar Tuck and the Sheriff of Nottingham. Cultural leaders are valued within groups for their energising activity, and beyond for their active crafting of the wider cultural life in a locality. They are frequently widely networked in informally recognised ways, fulfilling an equivalent role but beyond the purview of formal cultural leadership programmes from the Clore Foundation or ACE.



Craft, Creativity and Labours of Love

‘The emotional rewards craftsmanship holds out for attaining skill are twofold: people are anchored in tangible reality, and they can take pride in their work’ (Sennett, 2008)

Craft is at the centre of amateur theatre, and we have found that part of the satisfaction of participating in amateur theatre is because people learn and share different crafts, both on stage and behind the scenes. The twenty-first century has brought a resurgence of interest in craft, perhaps particularly in urban areas. Amateur theatre-makers are often highly skilled craftspeople, and craft is not only part of the heritage of amateur theatre, it is integral to participants’ commitment.

For example, in the Settlement Players in Letchworth, the process of crafting gives volunteers a sense of belonging. The volunteers take pride in being members of the Settlement Players as well as being able to call the Arts and Crafts Settlement building their ‘home’. On Sunday mornings, set building coincides with various rehearsals and auditions, and people dip in and out depending on their other activities. This process instils a greater sense of communal effort. At the end of every set-building morning, everyone feels as though they have achieved something tangible by the time they leave.

Craft is learnt and shared, often through informal systems of apprenticeship. Experienced craftspeople pass on their knowledge to others, by participating in this process we have learnt at first-hand how in which creative practices become embodied and knowledge is passed on:

It’s 10 o’clock in the morning, and I am meeting John and the other volunteers from the Settlement Players in the Kincaid Hall at the Settlement. As I walk through the doors I realise that the hall hasn’t escaped the cold January morning chill. Everyone is huddled around in hats, coats and scarves; John holds a piece of paper listing the jobs for this morning’s set construction. ‘We need to firm up the flats and start seaming them if anyone is up for that... Graham, can you start on constructing the bar today?’ John shows me how to make the paste and how to apply the paper to the flats with various tools. Everyone is catching up and joking about the fact that they choose to spend their Sunday mornings in a cold hall, yet their enthusiasm to be here, amongst friends, and to do good work is apparent. This is my third week of set building and I am conscious of

my desire to do a good job. I am enthused by this work, despite my cold, red fingers and unsteadiness on the ladder - I am dedicated to the process, the set and the Players. Before the session, I spoke to Jim, a member who had been ‘doing Panto’ with another group for the past couple of weeks. He said that returning to the Sunday morning set build was like returning home and that ‘getting back to work’.

Cara Gray, researcher

Craft is creative labour, and some participants report that take part on amateur theatre because it is a different kind of work from their day-job. In Letchworth, for example, a set designer who worked in IT prefers to build a model-box rather than using computer-aided design as it he feels it brings him closer to the craft of making. Other amateurs use their skills as carpenters and electricians as volunteers. There are amateur actors who have trained as professional performers, but have decided against the precarious working life of professional actor. Others are at the beginning of their careers, and use the opportunity to work with well-established amateur companies, such as Questors in Ealing, to develop their craft.

The relationship between craft, labour and leisure is a recurring theme in our research. Attachment to place grows through engagement with craft, and loyalties to particularly companies can run deep. Actors who move between different companies to secure the best roles are sometimes treated with suspicion; one long-standing member of the Riverside Players said that this self-interest does not always reflect ‘the true spirit of amateur dramatics’. Back-stage amateurs, by contrast, can be in demand, but often feel more strongly part of one amateur community. A member of the Settlement Players in Letchworth who had been ‘doing Panto’ with another group said that returning to the Sunday morning set-build was like returning home and that ‘getting back to work’.

Amateur theatre contributes to constructing communities, and this is particularly evident in the commuter belt of ‘Metroland’. Commuters living in Pinner reported that they value the opportunity to get actively involved with a local activity, and say that the local amateur scene was one reason why they were attracted to live there. The feeling of community is just as apparent as the material traces of crafting a set, making costumes or acting. To quote the sociologist Richard Sennett (2008), the volunteers aren’t ‘professional’ craftsmen but each are engaged in this practical activity, ‘dedicated to good work for its own sake’.

Where Next?

There is more work to be done. As well as consolidating our research in the areas we have identified here, we will also deepen our understanding in the following areas:

- the craft of amateur theatre: observing audition, casting and rehearsal processes, and analysing who is included and excluded, and how knowledge of acting and directing is embodied and passed on.
- the repertoire of amateur theatre: the endurance of the short play in the many new writing initiatives in amateur theatre.
- the audiences for amateur theatre, and their contribution to the company.
- the significance of membership/participation as a key sustaining life pattern during periods of personal and cultural change.
- how amateur theatre is responding to changing working practices in the twenty-first century.
- the branding, marketing and archiving of amateur theatre today, including the use of social media.

We continue to welcome contributions from amateur theatre-makers, and thank everyone who has generously given their time to support our research.



A Researcher's Toolkit

You can help us with our research

Why you?

Because you are an expert already. Through your participation in amateur dramatics, whatever it may be: performing, making, socializing, directing, singing, dancing, acting, creating, building, focusing, selling tickets, answering phones, fundraising, tweeting, emailing, handing out programmes, or just being there – you already know a great deal. Your expertise is valuable. Can you help by sharing it?

This toolkit gives some suggestions about ways to begin, but you don't have to stop there. We're keen to hear any other stories you might want to share with us too.

Snap it.

Take a photo of one of the following:

- A costume that tells a story.
- A prop that tells a story.
- A set piece that tells a story.

Tell us the story – who made it, how it was used, who wore it? How did you learn to make it?

Write it.

- A mini-history. Can you capture the history of your amateur society on a single side of A4 paper?
- Create a postcard. Describe 'a day in the life' of your amateur company in under 100 words.

Record it. (with someone else)

Interview someone. Take an audio recorder, or a mobile phone, or a laptop. Sit down together somewhere quiet. Press record. Try a few different interviews!

- The person who has been involved with your society the longest.
- The newest or youngest person in your society.
- Someone's story of recruitment/first involvement.
- Someone who has directed or performed in a lot of shows.
- Someone who met their husband/wife/boyfriend/girlfriend/partner through amateur dramatics.
- Someone who never performs – a technician, wardrobe mistress, the props guru.

Record it. (yourself)

Take an audio recorder (or a mobile phone or a video camera), find a quiet space. Set a timer for 5 minutes. Press record. Speak about one of the prompts below. Press stop. Save it. Send it.

Tell us about....

- The worst show disaster.
- The time someone saved the day.
- An unexpected thing you overheard backstage

Draw it.

- Draw a map which shows connections between people in your amateur dramatics group. How can you show the links between people? Where are the friendships, family ties, co-workers? Scan it and send it to us.

Calling historians and archivists

If you have documented the history of your company, we would love to read it. If you have a copy or DVD to spare, please send it to Helen Nicholson, Department of Drama and Theatre, Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham, Surrey TW20 0EX

We can be reached via our website, www.amateurdramaresearch
or by twitter [@amateurdrama](https://twitter.com/amateurdrama).



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