

There is Such a Thing as Society

The Opportunities for the Arts in South East England

On arriving

I have been working in the South East for six years now, mostly in the Home Counties, with a large part of my energies dedicated to exploring how we might encourage the most people to make the best art that they can, amateurs and professionals, potters and poets. This has been a challenge, as much to do with considering the particularity of the South East, as about how to encourage new producers, develop new models and form new partnerships.

Before I arrived I think it is fair to say that my view was that the region would be entirely made up of stock brokers and wealth. This, of course, is no truer than imagining Yorkshire to be full of whippets and poverty. But it said something of my, and others', assumptions – “old fashioned”, “out of touch”, “privileged”, “complacent” – about the place in which I was coming to work. When I spoke to others of going to work in Surrey I met with a mixture of disdain and incredulity. Nationally, few people were going to care if I was successful.

Having now spent time in the communities of Surrey, Sussex and Buckinghamshire I have found, just as everywhere, that there are indeed affluent ‘gated’ communities but there are also butchers and bakers and candle stick makers with the same concerns, aspirations and values as the rest of the country. I have found the most radical of former mining communities in Kent, centuries-old, temporary migrant communities in the watercress meadows of Hampshire and many good and purposeful people everywhere trying to make sense of the world in which we all find ourselves.

And there are things particular to these communities which have required different thinking and responses. There have been challenges. I have tried to unlearn the things I thought I knew, listened and tried to hear, explored what might be and played. What follows is unscientific. They are observations from the past five years that will, no doubt, be contradicted and challenged as I continue to discover things about the region and myself. Writing them down has helped me make some sense of it all, encouraged me to look for patterns and contradictions. I hope that they are useful to others.

Heard and seen

There is little sense of a regional ecology. This makes it hard to share ambition or collaborate. People identify with a street or a town but ‘the South East’ means far less than, say, the

Midlands or the North East. I don't know whether it is true but I heard that the North West Development Agency ran a campaign under the banner 'It's grim down south'. Which says more about their perception of us than it does about them. A recent TV programme suggests that seven of the top ten places are in Surrey. Yet there is something hollow in the boast. Many of the criteria used are based on salary levels, crime figures, quality of air, etc. My own perception is that these are some of the poorest communities I have worked in. Not economically, but spiritually, socially, culturally. In my early times here I would joke that I had moved from a post-industrial community to a post-community community. Not entirely true, but you get the idea.

One truth is that the region remains the heartland of the Conservative voter. The party leader and most of the Shadow Cabinet have their constituencies in the region. I am hesitant to extrapolate too much from this but it might suggest that community is based on individual freedom and choice rather than shared ambition. What is true – and this may have nothing to do with politics – is that the regions' local authorities have less of a community development agenda, there are few partners and precious little resources to encourage communities to imagine how they might grow and develop to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

It is impossible to ignore our proximity to London. Much of the South East is made up of 'commuterties'. People are used to travelling. They are prepared to seek out the things they want wherever they are rather than working at ensuring that they exist locally. There is often a service mentality – 'If I want something I go to it and buy it' rather than 'How might we make this happen locally?' Research tells us that most people want a theatre they can access. Not because they will use it but because of the imagined life style this suggests. London offers the illusion of culture without the need to go to it. Some people do pay the £250+ it costs a family of four for an evening at the theatre in London but the majority will be comforted by the thought that they could go if they wanted. The result is that there are fewer champions for theatre locally. London also acts as a magnet for talent, all the more so if you are young and hungry. The market place is there, the networks, the media and the widest range of opportunities. To be honest if I was 21 and setting out in the arts I would head for the city.

There is a distinct gap between the infrastructure for production and presentation. Much of the region's *presentation* infrastructure is supported by local authorities who will often measure success by volume. Meanwhile *production* is, by and large, supported by Arts Council England with their emphasis on innovation and quality. This leads to an uneasy relationship between two

partners serving different agendas in which neither is responsible for the success of the other. Hardly a marriage made in heaven.

There are few places of encouragement for new artistic talent in the region. The region lacks a stable production infrastructure. This seems to be an accident of history and whilst there are individuals and companies working to make things happen, new initiatives face, more than most, the need for dramatic results. I have heard senior officers talking about the desirability of 'quick wins' and 'low hanging fruit'. It takes strong leadership, committed partners and a huge amount of faith to allow things to grow at their own pace.

Many of the younger staff in my own organisation believe that their next job will probably be in Manchester or Newcastle or Italy, because that is where the resources, partners, opportunities and profile are to be had. This perception, of the region as something of a cultural desert, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Without a 'scene' or strong identity attracting and retaining talent is a major challenge. We can only be as good as our collaborators.

Tried and tested

We have responded to these circumstances in a number of ways, mostly intuitively, testing assumptions and attempting to find order in it all. None of it is original; I have borrowed, imitated and developed others' thoughts.

We have set out to build a regional ecology between producers, promoters and audience. Establishing a regional producers group that includes all the regularly funded buildings and touring companies to explore how we might make better use of our intelligence and resources in the hope we can identify shared ambition. Through this we have delivered *no strings attached*, a light touch scheme to support new theatre makers that invests up to £1000 in ideas. Within this each group is assigned a mentor and of the 22 projects we have supported every mentor we approached agreed and did far more than we had asked of them. Building trust was the precursor to taking risks and getting involved.

Crucially we are working with local authorities to find a shared vocabulary, to identify ways in which we can meet our and their ambitions on community development in places that don't think it's needed. We have looked for parallels between the local authorities' desire to promote their communities, retain youth, feel safer, be happier and our desire to encourage creativity. We work

at saying we think rather than I think in all of our conversations and behave generously. As my mum would say, 'Cast your bread upon the water and it will come back as buttered toast.' With Creative Communities – the project that inspired this book – we have worked together to reach the most and encourage the best work we can in the communities that each authority wanted us to work with.

We are working with seven partners, all with a concern for rural touring, under the banner Southern Comfort to jointly commission and tour new work. This has meant that each partner has had to grapple with the ambitions, culture and time scale of others. But it allows companies to create viable touring circuits in the region.

We have begun to establish international networks and share ideas abroad. Not because 'it would be nice to get out of the country' but to better understand our own practice. By joining Trans Halle Europe, a network of creation centres from across Europe, and developing open, trusting alliances with companies in Vancouver and Toronto we have been able to behave like visitors in our own communities. The relationship with Passe Muraille in Toronto is illuminating. There is no memorandum of understanding or paperwork. We agreed to behave like family... or friends. So in the past year we have hosted a production of theirs and toured it across the South East, and in the spring one of our companies has a three week run in their studio. We have exchanged policies, contributed to business plans, sourced props and images and shared the odd joke. And it hasn't cost us anything.

We have recognised the attractiveness of events. Occasions which are convivial, lack formality, allow for surprise and flow. We have tried to introduce a playfulness in the place, shape and content of the art we make. We distribute our brochure to commuters early in the mornings at the train station in a wrapping with the words 'something to come home to'. This directly led to a surreal encounter with a commuter bemoaning the start time of our first satellite broadcast of *Phaedra* beamed direct from the National Theatre because he would have to rush home from London, thus passing within 2 minutes of the National. Something must be working...

We have worked at harnessing people's desire to make things happen themselves by encouraging the amateur, the new promoter, the part-time critic. We eschew the division between amateur and professional, audience and maker, high or low art and delight in hosting Sugar Craft, a three day festival of cake decorating (which incidentally brings in a hugely diverse

and international audience) or gardening or knitting or events that celebrate all the other ways in which people express who they are.

We develop friendships rather than partnerships. The more unlikely the better because by working with people unlike us we stand a chance of reaching new audiences. So not only Sugar Craft but the Chamber of Commerce, Vauxhall Conference football clubs, the army, U3A, other arts providers, what have you. We have also been mindful of saying no sometimes to possibly obvious partners because they often suggest little more than the putting aside of differences to get more money.

We have tried to create new realities, usually based in some truth. So, for example, we are working with the University of the Creative Arts and Craft Study Centre to brand Farnham as a “craft town” – based on the huge range of craft-based activity that happens here – as a way of promoting a cotemporary image of the town as a place in which the arts are part of the everyday. What surprised us was the enthusiasm with which the community, business and politicians picked up this idea; they even have begun to recycle the idea to us.

I am sure that many of these issues and solutions are not unique to the South East. I guess it is the particular chemistry, the volume of each ingredient that makes for the distinctiveness of each region. I am enjoying the journey of making sense of our efforts. I am hugely grateful to Arts Council England South East – there is a phrase you don’t read often – who took the risk in the first place to ask us to try and find some solutions, to the touring schemes with whom we are working to develop an arts community but most of all to the artists and companies who continue to work tirelessly at making sense of the world for us all.

*By Gavin Stride*¹



¹ Gavin Stride has spent the past 25 years as a director and producer of new theatre, predominantly in non-theatre spaces for new audiences. He has taken work to the National Theatre, Georgia and his production of Independent People was selected for the Reykjavik European City of Culture in 2000. As director of Farnham Maltings Gavin set out to build a creative organisation that supports the artists and communities of South East England in making the best art they can. Previously he was Chief Executive of New Perspectives, the rural arts organisation for the East Midlands, Chair of the Independent Theatre Council until 2007, and the prime mover in establishing Pride of Place – a national advocacy organisation for rural arts. Gavin has an affection for the home-spun, crafts and 1960s Tupperware.