



# Making New Theatre Together

The First Writers' Group at the Royal Court Theatre  
and Its Legacy within the Young Writers' Programme

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The reconstruction of the Royal Court between 1996 and 2000 saw the theatre relocated to the heart of London's West End. The Court's delayed return to Sloane Square, along with the arrival of Ian Rickson as the theatre's new artistic director (1998–2006), allowed for a period of reflection and adjustment as the theatre approached the new millennium. Under Stephen Daldry's leadership (1992–1998), the Royal Court enjoyed one of the most successful periods in its history, with new plays by exciting young playwrights such as Sarah Kane, Joe Penhall, Mark Ravenhill, and Rebecca Prichard all contributing to what was hailed as the “renaissance of new writing.”<sup>1</sup>

Through Rickson's appointment, the Royal Court returned to Sloane Square with new intentions that rejected the “stack 'em high, sell 'em cheap” 1990s paradigm, which saw around fifty new plays produced for short runs in the Court's Theatre Upstairs between 1994 and 1997. Rickson's administration replaced it with a more considered culture of growth and development for new playwrights at the theatre.<sup>2</sup> The rebranding of the Court's long-standing Young Peoples' Theatre as the Young Writers' Programme (YWP) and the subsequent relocation of that initiative to a building adjacent to the Royal Court known as the Site proved to be an early sign of Rickson's aspirations for a more unified theatre. Launched in 1998, the Young Writers' Programme sought to focus the Court's work with young people on playwriting, and this implemented what Catherine Love calls a “culture of development” that, importantly, aligned with the Court's identity as a writers' theatre.<sup>3</sup> In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the Young Writers'

Programme provided the foundation to the careers of playwrights such as Lucy Prebble, Duncan Macmillan, Polly Stenham, and Mike Bartlett, and those writers, in turn, featured regularly on the stages of the Royal Court and in British theatre more widely. The inception of the Young Writers' Programme, therefore, went on to provide an unsurpassed model of success for the Court that has since proved invaluable to the theatre's production of new plays by new writers.

The achievements of the writers who have emerged out of the Royal Court's Young Writers' Programme can be measured through the production of their plays in the United Kingdom, the United States, and across Europe. In addition, the work of the Court's International department, headed by Elyse Dodgson, has ensured that the theatre's work with writers has become a truly international endeavor. But in spite of the YWP's significant accomplishments in its fourteen-year history, academic engagement within this area of the Court remains limited. Indeed, it is only Love's 2015 article that has looked to bring some much-needed focus and scholarly analysis to what she describes as the "overwhelmingly successful" structure of the Royal Court's Young Writers' Programme.<sup>4</sup> But the YWP is not the Royal Court's first attempt to provide an infrastructure that would offer support for a new generation of playwrights at the theatre. Such ambitions can be traced back to 1958, two years after the English Stage Company first began its residency of the Royal Court, where a writers' group was first established by George Devine in an attempt to further relationships between the Royal Court and a number of aspiring young playwrights of the time. In contrast to the Young Writers' Programme, whose history, as I have noted above, is in the early stages of academic analysis, the purpose, practice, and impact of the first Writers' Group at the Royal Court can be largely comprehended from the recollections of that time in the autobiographies of the group's members and through many of the publications on the history of the Royal Court.<sup>5</sup>

It is the purpose of this article, therefore, to revisit what should be regarded as the first attempt to bring a new generation of young playwrights to the Royal Court, through the Writers' Group in 1958, and to place the group's inception, methodology, and legacy within the contemporary context of the Young Writers' Programme. The article draws on existing information on the first Writers' Group and combines it with original insights from theatre practitioners who have worked closely with the Royal Court, such as William Gaskill (artistic director, 1965–1969), Ola Animashawun (director of the Young Writers' Programme, 1998–2008), and Simon Stephens (Young Writers' Programme writers' tutor, 2001–2005) to create a new analysis of the Royal Court's long association with young writers.

As I have already suggested, the objective of the Young Writers' Programme—to provide support for the next generation of playwrights for the Royal Court—shares some fundamental commonalities with the earlier initiative implemented by the theatre in 1958. This article developed out of an interview that I conducted with the late theatre director William Gaskill, which took place in January 2015, just over a year before Gaskill's death, in February 2016. It is through this interview that I started to reconsider both the purpose of a writers' group within a theatre such as the Royal Court and the impact of such initiatives on their participants. I had arranged to meet with Gaskill initially to discuss his involvement with the origins of the Young Peoples' Theatre, which Gaskill had pioneered along with Jane Howell, in 1966. However, as our conversation evolved, it became evident that much of our hour-long dialogue would be focused on the beginnings, methodology, and legacy of the Court's first Writers' Group. Indeed, it is upon these three aspects of the Writers' Group—its beginnings, methodology, and legacy—that this essay builds, as it reflects and engages with the origins of a notion that remains fundamental to the approach used by the Royal Court in its work with new playwrights, today. It argues that the Writers' Group was set up by George Devine to proactively source new writers for the Royal Court in an attempt to replicate the early success garnered by John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*. However, what emerged instead was a group of writers who were far removed from the autonomous process of writing a play, as demonstrated by John Osborne, and instead driven by mutual support, collaboration, and community that carved an unexpected legacy for the group's participants and the Royal Court in the decade that followed. In positioning this argument within the context of the Young Writers' Programme, this article is able to confirm and expand previously established parallels that have been made between the Royal Court of the 1950s and the theatre in the 1990s. Further, it begins to articulate and elucidate the competing models of success that functioned across two generations at the Royal Court, as the theatre looked to build and sustain its reputation as a leading producer of new writing in the United Kingdom.

As Aleks Sierz and Jacqueline Bolton have previously alluded to, it is possible to draw similarities between these two significant periods in the theatre's history, particularly through the models of commissioning and production deployed in the 1950s that were echoed through Stephen Daldry's artistic directorship in the mid 1990s, "a period commensurate in the public imagination with 'the right to fail': the right to take risks, the right to show daring, the right to take a punt on a play despite the playwright's anonymity."<sup>6</sup> But by 1998, Ian Rickson had started to prepare the Royal Court for life beyond Kane, Ravenhill, Penhall,

and so on, and out of this emerged the Young Writers' Programme, a tangible space in which a new generation of playwrights could be supported and developed. From the perspective of George Devine's Royal Court, the 1958 Writers' Group was created for much the same purpose: as a bridge that aimed to connect and familiarize new writers with the Royal Court in an attempt to maintain the theatre's ability to generate a constant output of new plays by a range of young writers.

### **Beginnings: A Paint Shop on Flood Street**

The eventual success of Osborne's debut brought public interest and financial stability in the early years of the English Stage Company's tenure at the Royal Court. But the Court's aspiration to produce a season of work made up entirely of new British plays was yet to materialize.<sup>7</sup> As a result, the theatre's artistic director, George Devine, unwilling to rely on Osborne as the sole contributor to the Court's new writing ambitions, began to seek new plays and new writers through alternative means. Out of this developed the Sunday Night Productions without *Décor*, a financially austere initiative, beginning in 1957, that saw the chosen productions afforded no budget, the actors paid a small amount, and the writers asked to relinquish all rights to their work for just five pounds.<sup>8</sup> Sunday Nights provided aspiring writers with the opportunity to present their work on the Royal Court Stage in a "simple way without scenery."<sup>9</sup> It was through their involvement with the Sunday Night Productions that some of the first members of the Writers' Group were found.

The desire to formulate a Royal Court Writers' Group was first put forward by George Devine in a letter to the English Stage Company chairman, Neville Blond, on January 2, 1958. Here, Devine suggests that "a small group of young writers" be invited to meet regularly with each other and with members of the Court staff.<sup>10</sup> Within the month, the first meeting had been arranged. The limited space at the theatre meant that an alternative location at a paint shop on Flood Street was secured as the group's base, and here the participants "sat on boxes, creaking chairs, anything to hand, in a strict circle surrounded by debris and draughts" as Devine got the first meeting underway.<sup>11</sup> It is a less than glamorous picture and, unsurprisingly, given the working environment, the initial meetings of the first Writers' Group are remembered by those involved as being "tentative and a little stiff."<sup>12</sup> These early impressions were only exacerbated by those present in the room, as emerging young playwrights such as Anne Jellicoe, Keith Johnstone, and John Arden mixed with the Court's core of Devine

and Lindsay Anderson, along with John Dexter and Devine's close friend Michel Saint-Denis.<sup>13</sup> As Gaskill recalls, Devine "didn't really know how to run [the group] or what to say and, although he was a wonderful man, he was often almost shy in his relationships with people."<sup>14</sup>

The early life of the Young Writers' Programme in the late 1990s also suffered some teething problems. The role of the writers' tutor evolved in the 2000s to become integral to the achievements of the program, but prior to that point, the tutor's post had been governed on an ad hoc basis by playwright Nicola Baldwin.<sup>15</sup> With the appointment of Simon Stephens to the role full-time in 2001, a turning point occurred in the Young Writers' Programme that afforded much-needed structure and vision to the initiative. It is because of this that Stephens and his successor, Leo Butler, are often credited for their positive influence "on a generation of young writers."<sup>16</sup>

The writers' tutor figure in 1958 is visible within George Devine's role in the group, but with the artistic director proving unable to provide the vital attributes of structure and leadership to the group, the meetings on Flood Street often lapsed into aimless discussion on the state of the theatre. It became evident that the combination of the paint shop backdrop coupled with the absence of any real vision for the group was not entirely conducive to a successful working environment that would be of benefit to those writers in attendance.<sup>17</sup>

Devine aimed to use the Writers' Group as "a means of creating a more formal structure to which young and promising writers could be invited and where they would come to know other writers and members of the Court staff."<sup>18</sup> For Devine this structure should be regarded as less about honing writing skills and more about networking and community building between young writers and Royal Court staff. The facilitating of these relationships through the Writers' Group meetings can be seen as an attempt by Devine to both safeguard the theatre's future in terms of its output of new plays and further the Court's intentions to function as a writers' theatre. But without any real purpose to the weekly gatherings, within the year Devine's presence was seen as a hindrance to the group's progression, and, as a result, the director, along with John Dexter, withdrew from the group. With no one immediately available to replace Devine, a temporary disbandment of the Writers' Group followed.

By creating the Writers' Group, Devine had hoped to systematically source a new cohort of Royal Court writers who would seemingly go on to support other writers, such as John Osborne, in producing work for the Royal Court stage. But his status within the Royal Court together with the sessions' lack of purpose exposed some early flaws in the initial meetings that led to its premature demise. In addition, what Devine had failed to take into account was that

the Osborne model of success—the single authored play with an original, previously unheard voice that would ultimately bring both critical and box-office acclaim to the Court along with the potential to transfer to the West End—could not be easily replicated. Further, the solitude that accompanies the life of a playwright is isolating to some but welcomed by others, and the invitation to take part in a group with other playwrights is not always the most appealing opportunity for a writer. Gaskill explains that “some people thought of their work as individual, which I think is true of Beckett or Pinter, and N. F. Simpson, and that they had nothing to learn from being part of a group.”<sup>19</sup> The Writers’ Group, therefore, split opinion and was the source of some of the earliest divides at the Royal Court.

### **Methodology: Reconceiving the Writers’ Group**

The breakdown of the group was short-lived because the aspirational Gaskill, “in one of his unemployed periods,” took charge of the group following Devine’s exit.<sup>20</sup> At that point, the venue also changed from the draughty paint shop on Flood Street to the “cozy and relaxing Georgian mansion” of fellow group member Anne Piper in London’s Hammersmith.<sup>21</sup>

It was here that, as Gaskill recalls, the relaunched Writers’ Group “very quickly formed itself into a specific group of people who met every week.”<sup>22</sup> With a new leader at the helm, the group expanded to include Edward Bond, who was “very keen and would come every week without fail,” along with Arnold Wesker and Wole Soyinka joining Jellicoe, Arden, and Johnstone as its most devoted members.<sup>23</sup> The group met regularly on a Wednesday evening and quickly developed an ethos that was far removed from Devine’s discussion-based sessions and instead founded upon Johnstone’s belief that “things should be shown happening in the theatre, not analyzed and talked about.”<sup>24</sup> Johnstone’s practice-based work ethic became central to the operation of the group, leading to a format that was largely improvisational in content and focused almost entirely on the physical exploration of the theatre.<sup>25</sup> Gaskill remembers this shift in focus from discussions to practice: “The basis of the group was that we basically did acting exercises, it wasn’t like people read their plays, we had different themes for example one week George Devine taught them the use of the character mask and then I would hold sessions on Brecht . . . and the writers themselves would supply ideas and we would work on them through improvisation.”<sup>26</sup> This move from discussion to practice-based sessions became central to the group as it moved forward over the next two years. It allowed writers to receive “direct

experience [of] what it was like to get up on their feet rather than sit down and write".<sup>27</sup> "The moment anyone began discussing anything, Gaskill, Keith, or another writer would say, 'Go and show us.' And that is how improvisation became [the Writers' Group's] primary tool of exploration. Over the next two years [the group] would become very close and collaboratively develop moments for performance through improvisational means."<sup>28</sup> Both Gaskill and Johnstone scholar Theresa Robbins Dudeck note above how Johnstone's "no-discussion policy" was strictly enforced by the group.<sup>29</sup> But the improvisatory nature of the sessions served as an important catalyst for writers such as Jellicoe and Arden, who were experiencing some difficulties translating their ideas to the page.<sup>30</sup> As is indicated from his above account, Gaskill also introduced themes for the members to explore alongside the improvisational work of the group, as a way of broadening their understanding of theatre. As part of this, Gaskill led workshops on Brecht, and Devine returned with a series on mask work that is now regarded as one of the defining moments of the Writers' Group.<sup>31</sup> The writers, too, were often given responsibility for the sessions and later, as Gaskill's burgeoning directorial career began to affect his attendance, Jellicoe and Johnstone were charged with continuing the group's work in his absence. This insight into the practice of the Writers' Group is significant as it appears far removed from what might be expected from the self-titled "Writers' Theatre" and its work with new playwrights. That the meetings were concerned with the exploration of improvisation and the practical nature of the theatre as opposed to the creation of an environment that allowed writers to hone their playwriting skills is an unusual approach to adopt. In addition, the shared leadership and fluctuating numbers of the group imparted an unusual dynamic to the sessions that offered a sense of communal ownership of the group's work.

The introduction of weekly themes to the Writers' Group became central to the structure and methodology of the Young Writers' Programme as it evolved in the 2000s, as Simon Stephens attests: "Each week I would take a theme, and the theme would be what I considered to be a key element of the playwright's craft, which might be: dramatic action, writing dialogue, writing stage imagery, character, narrative, structure, re-writing, something like that and I would plan the session based on those things . . . and I'd plan a series of exercises based on those themes."<sup>32</sup> Stephens's approach for the Young Writers' Programme, more than forty years after the first Writers' Group at the Royal Court, is driven by what he calls "element[s] of the playwright's craft." As he describes above, the structure of the program is framed by a series of key components that he deems necessary to the fundamental composition of a play, and these are then delivered through writing exercises that the participants are expected to complete.

Although, as I have pointed out above, the concept of theming each workshop existed within the first Writers' Group, much of the work contained within the 1958 group's meetings was centered on the practical exploration of the theatre. The writing exercises delivered by Stephens in the Young Writers' Programme juxtaposed with the acting and improvisatory exercises present within the first Writers' Group are indicative of the differing approaches to and indeed knowledge of playwriting that existed at the time.

The methodologies of the Writers' Group and the Young Writers' Programme conflict on this account, but they are ultimately driven by a shared goal: to produce a script that could be considered for production by the Royal Court. In the same way that the participants of the Young Writers' Programme were expected to produce a script in the weeks that followed their completion of the course, the members of the Writers' Group, even if their work had been inspired by the improvisations carried out during the workshops, would also go on to develop those improvisations into the form of a script. It was not until the late 1980s and early 1990s that specific structures and guidelines with regards to what Stephens terms the "playwright's craft" began to articulate a more tangible pedagogy of playwriting. This paradigmatic shift in approaches to writing for the stage is reflected in the creation of specific playwriting courses within higher education, such as the renowned MA in Playwriting Studies at the University of Birmingham, United Kingdom, pioneered by playwright David Edgar in 1989, and these courses have contributed to a new understanding of the components necessary to write a play. Through the Young Writers' Programme, the Court, too, had recognized the potential to capitalize on the area of playwriting pedagogy and, with Simon Stephens's tutelage, carved a new model of success at the theatre whereby young writers could emerge through the Young Writers' Programme and the Young Writers' Festival and subsequently onto the main stages of the Royal Court Theatre.

However, this model of success, aligned to Devine's original objectives for the group, differs significantly from what was actually achieved by Gaskill's writers in the 1950s and beyond. With the Writers' Group headed by a director and focused on acting and improvisation rather than writing, a communal attitude and dedication by the group's members to work together generated a sense of unity that was grounded in mutual interests and shared experience: "The group had strength and cohesion because we were all much of an age, of the same calibre of personality and at the same time not too egotistical. We recognized each other's talent and supported it. This is said to be rare among writers. We were extremely careful whom we invited into the group—not from exclusiveness, but because we were aware that anyone too argumentative or destructive would



upset the balance. Unsympathetic people would sometimes come in for a few meetings, but they tended to fall away: the central core was probably too strong for them.<sup>33</sup> Under Gaskill's guidance, and away from Devine's "overawing" presence, the group had gained more focus and it was at this point that membership in the Writers' Group shifted from its ad hoc origins, apparent under Devine, to a strict "by invitation only" policy.<sup>34</sup> This change in policy severely restricted the group's intake for the remainder of its existence, as the selective core members looked inward to protect the group from unwanted colleagues and threats to its potential future.

The exclusion of those who could be seen by the rest of the group to have the potential to "rock the boat" led to accusations of exclusivity from outsiders.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, analyzing Jellicoe's choice of words when describing the policy of the group under Gaskill, it is difficult to understand how such a group could be affiliated with the Royal Court. Adjectives such as "argumentative" and "destructive," alongside phrases such as "upset the balance" and "rock the boat," had already and would continue to be readily applied to the Court's work in the future, including to the plays of some of the group's members. In excluding those playwrights who, in the group's opinion, demonstrated the aforementioned features, a contradiction of the fundamental purpose of the Writers' Group had emerged that effectively prevented a new generation of Royal Court playwrights from having the Writers' Group experience, which had proved invaluable to its original members. Further, as playwright Donald Howarth suggests, there was a growing belief that involvement in the Writers' Group was the only way for a playwright to be programmed by the Court: "I think one of the reasons I went to the meetings was that I thought, 'If I don't go I'm not going to get my plays on. If I do go, I might.' So, I thought, 'I'll go and join in.' I tried hard, but it wasn't worth it."<sup>36</sup> For Howarth, the group "felt like school" and the improvisations made him feel "very self-conscious" and "a fool," which caused him to leave.<sup>37</sup>

Accusations such as this only served to fuel an emerging "them and us" division by the end of the 1950s between those at the Court who were involved in the group and those who were not. Gaskill himself recalls that "nobody liked us," and John Osborne affirms this belief when he describes his view of the group's function as "committee wanking."<sup>38</sup> This, coupled with the confusion as to the exact purpose of the Writers' Group, as a supportive writers' network or as a gateway to the Royal Court stage, only served to strengthen the discord. And while it is without doubt that those members of the Writers' Group had ambitions for their work to be produced by the Royal Court, many of which were realized over the next ten years, it was the sense of community and "the ritual of going to see one's friends" that had evolved into the central function of the first

Writers' Group.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, it is often the social benefits that are remembered by those who have participated in future iterations of writers' groups at the Royal Court. The notion that a playwright could attend a group "every Monday night, after whatever shitty job you were doing for a living" and be with like-minded people remains a vital support to many aspiring playwrights.<sup>40</sup>

The Writers' Group offered a unique opportunity for many playwrights at the start of their careers to feel part of something, and what had begun as a writers' group had ultimately transformed into the regular meeting of a close-knit group of friends. Where the group had failed was in their inability to recognize the value of a regular meeting place for young writers "to make new theatre together" in a supportive environment, and as a consequence this had prevented any future opportunity for other writers who could have also benefitted from the writers' group structure.<sup>41</sup>

There is without doubt value in the notion that playwriting groups can provide a much-needed sense of camaraderie in the often solitary life of a writer. But the concept of a group, also, by etymological necessity breeds a sense of exclusivity and elitism and this has been a point of contention and criticism throughout much of the Court's history and specifically in its work with young playwrights. An analysis of the Young Writers' Programme's practices and its influence on the Royal Court more widely, particularly in the mid-2000s, should be reserved for a separate article, but it is important to note here that the exclusion of others, especially those who are perhaps not suited to a group environment, and the consequences of this is an ever-present factor in the history of writers' groups at the Royal Court.

### **Legacy: A Diaspora of the Writers**

Whether new members coming into the group "tended to fall away," as Jellicoe describes, or were pushed out by what Gaskill terms "a certain sort of elitism" within the group is a matter of opinion.<sup>42</sup> However, the primary aim of introducing a select number of young writers to the Court had been a successful exercise. Subsequently, when Gaskill returned to the theatre as artistic director in 1965, he would look to make these writers "absolutely central" to his aspirations.<sup>43</sup> And with a battle against the Lord Chamberlain on the horizon, Edward Bond became a significant Writers' Group alumnus in Gaskill's Royal Court. Gaskill admits, somewhat self-critically, that the censorship struggle overshadowed his commitment to the writers of the group. Nevertheless, the appearance of these writers' work in the programming of the Royal Court, often to the theatre's

financial and reputational detriment, in the decade that follows reveals a legacy that outlives the group itself. Gaskill remembers feeling “very attacked” for his firm commitment to those writers during his tenure of the Royal Court, but the Court’s contribution to the abolition of censorship remains the most significant aspect of his directorship at a time when very few new playwrights emerged out of the Royal Court.<sup>44</sup>

The Writers’ Group continued to run until 1960, at which point the group separated for the final time. Gaskill remembers how: “Things [had] started to happen elsewhere and John Dexter and I went to the National in 1963 but [the group] had died before then. I had also started what we called the ‘actors’ studio,’ which was specifically for actors, it wasn’t a writers’ group, which was almost completely improvisation based.”<sup>45</sup> Jellicoe reveals the reason for the dissolution as simply “the need had past.”<sup>46</sup> Indeed, for writers such as Jellicoe, Wesker, and Arden, the need *had* past, as the objective for the group to facilitate a much-needed link between young writers and the Royal Court had been fulfilled. But as Gaskill explains, it had become clear that “the writers were not going to go on to be successful in the way that John Osborne had been a success,” and despite Gaskill’s efforts to reinvigorate their careers as Royal Court writers during his tenure as artistic director, it was evident that these writers would make little impact on the Royal Court stage.<sup>47</sup> Speaking more than fifty years after the beginning of his artistic directorship at the Court, Gaskill reflects on the notion of success and the early model through which the Court had survived its early life as a result of the production of John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*. Indeed, that type of success would never be replicated through the work of those members of the first Writers’ Group. It is worth noting here, that, somewhat ironically, the model of success first achieved by Osborne can be realized in the achievements of a number of participants from the Young Writers’ Programme, as plays such as Polly Stenham’s *That Face* (2007) and Laura Wade’s *Posh* (2010) brought box-office and critical acclaim to the Court before transferring to the West End.<sup>48</sup> The achievements of these so-called graduates of the Young Writers’ Programme demonstrate the potential of a model of success that had first been identified by George Devine as a fundamental function of the first Writers’ Group back in 1958. Although that initial vision was never fully realized in Devine’s Royal Court, the contribution that the members of the first Writers’ Group have made to theatre both in and out of the United Kingdom should not be measured by their limited success within the confines of the Court itself.

In his autobiography *A Sense of Direction: Life at the Royal Court*, Gaskill describes how the Writers’ Group “had played an important part in all our lives”: “I had started to learn about teaching, which was to become very central

to my work, and the writers had explored new approaches to theatre and, more important, had shared creative experiences with friends. To others outside the group it sounded pretentious and cliquy, but to us it was a warm and fertile time.”<sup>49</sup> Gaskill’s account recalls how writer after writer from within the group had “been savaged by the critics” and how he would often have to fight for the writers against the opposition of George Devine and Tony Richardson.<sup>50</sup> But as the director highlights above, the group’s “shared creative experiences with friends” had become an influential feature of the group’s limited life. For reasons grounded in those experiences within the Writers’ Group and in what Gaskill terms as a “diaspora of the writers,” many of the Writers’ Group’s core membership left London in the 1960s and early 1970s to fulfil newfound aspirations: “They all went off to do things that were community based: Ann Jellicoe went to Dorset and did work *in* communities, made plays in communities, very successfully, John Arden went to Ireland, Keith Johnstone went to Canada and started *Theatre Sports* and so the work sort of went towards a community based life.”<sup>51</sup> The sense of what Gaskill terms “embattled community” that was first realized at the Royal Court more generally and then developed through the work of the Writers’ Group had caused a number of the group’s original members to consider the potential of theatre beyond the stages of the Royal Court. By 1966 a Schools Scheme at the Royal Court had been developed, and out of this came the Young Peoples’ Theatre, which served as an important stepping-stone particularly for the likes of Bond, Jellicoe, and Johnstone between the Royal Court and their later community endeavors. Bond and Johnstone worked closely with the young people involved in this initiative and led a number of workshops both for the Schools Scheme and Young Peoples’ Theatre. With Johnstone continuing to focus his workshops on improvisation, Bond offered sessions on the representation of violence in the theatre, alongside the Court’s production of *Saved*.<sup>52</sup> Bond’s work here signifies the beginning of a decade-long relationship with the Court’s outreach program that culminated in the premiere of his play *The Worlds* by the Scheme’s youth theatre company the Activists in 1979.<sup>53</sup> Jellicoe also wrote for the Schools Scheme, and her play *The Rising Generation* (1967) was produced by the Scheme and included a cast of more than 150 young people aged twelve to seventeen.

By 1975 Jellicoe had moved to Dorset in South West England, where she established the Colway Theatre Trust, a company designed to explore and develop plays in the community.<sup>54</sup> In the previous year, Johnstone too had relocated from London to take up a visiting professorship in Canada. Following his move to Canada, Johnstone developed his teaching of improvisation and, significantly, the theatresports form. Theatresports—an improvisational game

inspired by British pro wrestling in which teams of improvisers battle against each other for points and audience approval—has taken form across the world. In the same way as many other more conventional sports, Theatresports encourages team building, participation, and spectatorship, which in turn encourages social interaction with a community. John Arden, whose plays were “box office disasters” at the Royal Court, had also begun working outside of London by the 1970s. Settling in Galway, Ireland, Arden contributed “frequently to community drama” and along with his wife, actress Margaretta D’Arcy, founded the city’s arts center.<sup>55</sup>

The benefits of “sharing creative experiences” during their time in the Writers’ Group at the Royal Court had exposed the group’s members to the benefits and possibilities of theatre. It is by no means a coincidence that many of the group’s original members, galvanized by the feeling of camaraderie attained during that period as young writers, went on to pioneer projects in the community. Their success should not, therefore, be measured against that of other Royal Court writers, as their achievements and contributions to the field more widely exceed the boundaries of the Royal Court and the West End.

## Conclusion

The mass production of new plays by new writers at the Court in the 1990s has seen critics and academics alike quick to draw close links between the Royal Court of the 1990s and that of the 1950s. As this article has uncovered, the commonalities between the two periods can also be extended to the Court’s attempts to attract young writers to write for the Royal Court stages. Being in the fortunate position to now engage with the work of the first Writers’ Group at the Royal Court retrospectively can lead to some disgruntlement that the group disbanded without any discernable attempt to preserve this unique feature of the Court’s work for future playwrights. Indeed, the landscape of British theatre in the years that followed could have been significantly different had this feature been properly managed and developed in the way that the Young Writers’ Programme was forty years later. Instead, due to Gaskell’s fierce loyalty to those members of the first group, the Royal Court of the 1960s was largely concerned with the production of those writers and, as a result, garnered little commercial success for the theatre during those years. It was not until the creation of the Young Writers’ Programme that the full potential of an environment that could be used to support and stimulate new writers was fully seen to benefit the Royal Court. Through the Young Writers’ Programme, the outline of the model

of success first represented by John Osborne in 1956 can be applied to writers who have emerged through the program, such as Laura Wade, Jack Thorne, Lucy Prebble, and Duncan MacMillan, who began their careers as participants on the program and have gone on to see their work produced at the Royal Court, the West End, and beyond. Ultimately, Devine's desire to find additional playwrights to follow the successes of John Osborne failed to materialize, but the achievements of those writers occurred beyond the Writers' Group and beyond the Royal Court. Instead, a new model of success was made as a result of what had occurred in the Writers' Group that was far from the theatre's intentions. The group had facilitated, and consequently the participants had benefited from, the togetherness that a community-based environment had provided, and ultimately, for those involved, this would come to be an inspiring experience that would influence their career choices as artists in the future.

Upon Gaskill's death in February 2016, one obituary described Gaskill as "a fighter who always stayed loyal to the writers in which he passionately believed." Whether that was with Bond and his battle with the censor or Jellicoe and her experimental style, the director was steadfast in his support.<sup>56</sup> The first Writers' Group at the Royal Court is often analyzed by its members' contribution in terms of plays to the theatre. But to examine this period in Court history in such a way overlooks what was really achieved and does not accurately represent a key feature of the Court's early work with young writers. Through their participation in the Writers' Group, these writers were made aware of the value of community and the place of theatre within that, and how this can often lead to opportunities and possibilities that spanned far beyond the walls of the Royal Court.

The Young Writers' Programme ceased in this iteration following the last Young Writers' Festival in 2012. It has been replaced with writers' groups, which function in a similar way but look beyond the youthful connotations presented by initiatives such as the Young Writers' Programme and new writing more widely following the influx of young writers in the mid-1990s. In his 2011 survey of British theatre, *Rewriting the Nation: British Theatre Today*, Aleks Sierz points out how "new writing is almost always associated with youth," and the Court's decision to conclude the Young Writers' Programme could be grounded in Sierz's assertion. Indeed, it could be argued that new writing's long association with youth has been prompted largely by the Royal Court's own ambitious programming of young writers in the 1990s and the subsequent establishment of the Young Writers' Programme in 1998, which put young writers at the core of the theatre's ambitions. The Royal Court under Vicky Featherstone's artistic directorship (2013–) has created a theatre actively concerned with notions

of identity, representation, and inclusivity, which can be traced through the Court's current infrastructure, its staffing, and its initiatives. The Young Writers' Programme, which focused its attention primarily on writers aged eighteen to twenty-five, could be seen to be restrictive in its reach, acting in contrast to the remit through which the Court functions today. Just as the Young Peoples' Theatre made way for the Young Writers' Programme in 1998, writers' groups, which have hosted participants from eight to eighty years of age since their reintroduction in 2012, continue to provide for the ongoing development of the playwright at the Royal Court today. As Stephen Berwind remarked on the Court's return to Sloane Square in 2000: "Periodically, the Royal Court, like a snake, must shed one skin and emerge in another." Therefore, the Court and its artistic team, to retain its fundamental identity as a writers' theatre, must also continue to challenge and question the ways in which it works with its writers so as to remain central to the future of new writing.

## Notes

1. Aleks Sierz, *Modern British Playwriting: The 1990s* (London: Methuen, 2012), 56. Sierz documents that "following cuts in state subsidy during the 1980s, the 'genre' of new writing was widely perceived to be in trouble at the start of the decade" (54; quotation marks are my own). However, with theatres such as the Bush, Hampstead, Royal Court, and Soho in London along with Edinburgh's Traverse, Newcastle-upon-Tyne's Live Theatre, and touring theatre companies such as Paines Plough and Out of Joint all demonstrating a clear commitment to new writers, important contributions were made to the revival of new writing in the years that followed.
2. Jack Bradley, interview with Jacqueline Bolton, August 29, 2008. See also Ruth Little and Emily McLaughlin, *The Royal Court Theatre Inside Out* (London: Oberon, 2007), 294.
3. Catherine Love, "A Culture of Development: The Royal Court and the Young Writers' Programme," *Theatre Notebook*, 69, no. 2 (2015), 113–24.
4. *Ibid.*, 123.
5. Most notably: Richard Findlater, ed., *At the Royal Court: 25 Years of the English Stage Company* (Derbyshire: Amber Lane Press, 1981), 52–57; Gresdna A. Doty and Billy J. Harbin, *Inside the Royal Court Theatre, 1956–1981* (Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 84–90; Philip Roberts, *The Royal Court Theatre and the Modern Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Ruth Little and Emily McLaughlin, *The Royal Court Theatre Inside Out* (London: Oberon, 2007), 43–44; William Gaskell, *A Sense of Direction: Life at the Royal Court* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 31–41; Arnold Wesker, *As Much as I Dare* (London: Century, 1994), 515. It is important to note here, however, that much of what is known about the Writers' Group is through retrospective engagement with the group's work as opposed to documentation obtained from records made during the meetings of the Writers' Group itself.

6. Jacqueline Bolton, "Capitalizing (on) New Writing: New Play Development in the 1990s," *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 32, no. 2 (2012), 209–25 (214), and Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), xi and 15.
7. In Terry Browne's book *Playwrights' Theatre*, the first publication on the English Stage Company's work at the Royal Court, the author writes, "One persistent problem continued to plague the Company: the lack of worthwhile new British plays." Browne goes on to note how several members of the Court's management had "expressed 'serious alarm' that the Company was as yet unable to announce a new season of plays" and "although over 1,000 new plays had been received, very few had in fact merited production" (Terry Browne, *Playwrights Theatre*, [London: Pitman, 1975], 31).
8. William Gaskell, interview with the author, January 15, 2015.
9. Philip Roberts, *The Royal Court Theatre and the Modern Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 58.
10. *Ibid.*, 63.
11. Findlater, *At the Royal Court*, 52.
12. *Ibid.*
13. It is also important to acknowledge that when discussing the first Writers' Group at the Royal Court, much of the primary source material is available from what has been written and said by Ann Jellicoe. Jellicoe was a central figure in the first Writers' Group and has been the most publicly vocal about her experience during that time of all the group's original members. These accounts can be found in Jellicoe's contribution to Findlater, ed., *At the Royal Court*, 52–57, as well as *Inside the Royal Court Theatre, 1956–1981* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990).
14. William Gaskell, interview with the author, January 15, 2015.
15. Ola Animashawun, interview with the author, June 16, 2016.
16. Dan Rebellato, *Modern British Playwriting, 2000–2009* (London: Methuen, 2013), 68.
17. Irving Wardle, *The Theatres of George Devine* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1978), 199.
18. Findlater, *At the Royal Court*, 52.
19. William Gaskell, interview with the author, January 15, 2015.
20. William Gaskell, *A Sense of Direction: Life at the Royal Court* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 36.
21. Coincidentally the home of Anne Piper was situated two doors down from Devine's home on Lower Mall Street, Hammersmith. Arnold Wesker, *As Much as I Dare* (London: Century, 1994), 515.
22. William Gaskell, interview with the author, January 15, 2015.
23. *Ibid.*
24. Findlater, *At the Royal Court*, 54.
25. These ideas are expanded upon in more detail in Johnstone's *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1987).
26. William Gaskell, interview with the author, January 15, 2015.
27. Doty and Harbin, *Inside the Royal Court Theatre, 1956–1981*, 86.
28. Theresa Robbins Dudeck, *Keith Johnstone: A Critical Biography* (London: Methuen, 2013), 42.
29. *Ibid.*
30. Doty and Harbin, *Inside the Royal Court Theatre, 1956–1981*, 88. Anne Jellicoe's *The Knack* (1962) and John Arden's *The Happy Haven* (1960) both feature extracts that were



formulated as a direct result of what had occurred through improvisations and sessions within the Writers' Group. In her 2013 book *Keith Johnstone: A Critical Biography*, Theresa Robbins Dudeck also notes that a project staged as a Sunday Night production by Gaskill and Johnstone titled *Eleven Men Dead at Hola Camp* also "evolved in part because of the improvisational processes [that had been] explored in the Writers' Group" (46).

31. *Ibid.*, 86.
32. Simon Stephens, interview with the author, July 1, 2016.
33. Findlater, *At the Royal Court*, 55.
34. Irving Wardle, *The Theatres of George Devine* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1978), 199; and Doty and Harbin, *Inside the Royal Court Theatre, 1956–1981*, 87.
35. Doty and Harbin, *Inside the Royal Court Theatre, 1956–1981*, 88.
36. *Ibid.*
37. *Ibid.*
38. William Gaskill, interview with the author, January 15, 2015, and Findlater, *At the Royal Court*, 22.
39. Findlater, *At the Royal Court*, 56.
40. Joe Penhall, in Harriet Devine, *Looking Back: Playwrights at the Royal Court, 1956–2006* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), 326.
41. William Gaskill, interview with the author, January 15, 2015.
42. Doty and Harbin, *Inside the Royal Court Theatre, 1956–1981*, 87, and William Gaskill, interview with the author, January 15, 2015.
43. William Gaskill, interview with the author, January 15, 2015.
44. *Ibid.*
45. *Ibid.* The Royal Court Actors' Studio opened in the Jeanetta Cochrane Theatre in London's Kingsway in February 1963. The Studio specialized in improvisation and operated under Gaskill and Keith Johnstone's direction. With improvisation at its core, the Studio, which operated from 1963 until the end of 1965, would build on many of the ideas that had originated in the Writers' Group in the years before (Little and McLaughlin, *The Royal Court Theatre Inside Out*, 73). For a detailed account of Keith Johnstone's work with the Studio, see Robbins Dudeck, *Keith Johnstone*, 58–65.
46. Findlater, *At the Royal Court*, 56.
47. William Gaskill, interview with the author, January 15, 2015.
48. *That Face* premiered at the Royal Court on the April 27, 2007, before transferring to the West End opening at the Duke of York's theatre on May 1, 2008. *Posh* opened at the Royal Court on April 15, 2010, with an updated version of the play premiering at the Duke of York's theatre on May 11, 2012.
49. William Gaskill, *A Sense of Direction: Life at the Royal Court* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 39.
50. *Ibid.*, 40.
51. *Ibid.*, 39.
52. Graham Saunders explores the ethical implications of this event in his chapter "Kicking Tots and Revolutionary Trots: The English Stage Company Young People's Theatre Scheme, 1969–70," in *Ethical Speculations in Contemporary British Theatre* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

## MAKING NEW THEATRE TOGETHER

53. *The Worlds* premiered on the November 21, 1979, and was performed in the YPT's own space known as the Garage by members of the Activists. It was directed by Edward Bond.
54. In 2000, and under the direction of Joe Oram, Colway Theatre Trust was renamed Claque Theatre and its base relocated from Dorset to the South East. It continues to develop community plays across the United Kingdom and the Western world.
55. In his autobiography, John Osborne writes, "John Arden became an in-house joke for box-office disaster" (*Looking Back: Never Explain, Never Apologise* [London: Faber and Faber, 1999], 378) and author unknown, John Arden obituary, *The Telegraph*, accessed September 30, 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/culture-obituaries/theatre-obituaries/9177000/John-Arden.html>.
56. Michael Billington, "William Gaskell: A Fighter Who Stayed Loyal to His Writers," *Guardian*, accessed February 5, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/feb/04/william-gaskell-appreciation-obituary-royal-court-artistic-director-theatre>.