

Pathways

An action research project to map
new writing in the South East
region

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1. INTRODUCTION	3
1.1 What is Pathways?	
1.2 Who is the research for?	
1.3 How was the mapping approached?	
1.4 How was the research conducted?	
1.5 What will be the criteria for success?	
2. IS THERE ANYBODY THERE?	7
2.1 Writers in the region.	
2.2 Producers who work with living writers.	
3. BRIGHTON: WHERE ELSE?	11
3.1 New writing profile of regional venues.	
3.2 Working at a sub-regional level.	
4. WHAT'S HAPPENING AND WHAT'S NOT?	19
4.1 Training for writers.	
4.2 Professional Development.	
4.3 Cultural Diversity and New Writing.	
4.4 Third sector activity; writers in education, healthcare, community, regeneration, business.	
4.5 The Funding System.	
5. TIME TO MOVE ON / RECOMMENDATIONS	26
5.1 Risk management.	
5.2 Areas for specific consideration.	
5.3 Towards centres of excellence and a curated network.	
5.4 Production, process and context.	
5.5 New funds and their implications.	
6. APPENDICES (available on request)	
6.1 <i>New writing potential? Pitchy Breath.</i>	
6.2 <i>Original research checklist.</i>	
6.3 <i>Venues.</i>	
6.4 <i>Companies.</i>	
6.5 <i>Local authorities.</i>	
6.6 <i>Deprivation Index.</i>	

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 What is Pathways?

Pathways is an action research project taking place in the South East Arts region between April 2001 and August 2002. The title for the project is reflective of its central aim; that of mapping the interconnectivity of people, organisations and activity around new writing for performance media.

In attempting to draw a regional map of new writing activity, the research poses some key questions:

- Is there an infrastructure for new writing in the old South East Arts region?
- What is it?
- How do writers and those wanting to work with writers gain access to it?
- What are the gaps in provision and how might they be addressed?

Pathways is the route through which questions pertaining to the development of a sustainable and inclusive new writing sector are asked; the responses analysed; the information disseminated.

The intention of Pathways is to be a catalyst for dialogue between writers, producers, educators, health workers, business and the community in the South East of England; to provide the bit that makes linking more possible. The research has an active dynamic, rather than simply a gathering of information to update and enrich current knowledge. Thus the spirit of the research is to stimulate engagement with the processes of commissioning, development and production of new writing in a broad range of contexts; creating an atmosphere in which new opportunities for writers and those who work with them might grow.

1.2 Who is the research for? (See appendix)

Commissioned by the Drama Department of South East Arts to support regional changes connected to the National Policy for Theatre in England, the research to date has concentrated on live theatre and the development of writers' work in this context. Some contact has been made with TV and film production companies in the knowledge that many writers work across the media.

A primary incentive for writers to connect with Pathways is the inclusion of their personal information in **writernet's** online database, giving South East writers a national/international outlet for their career details. For producers and those involved in the training and development of writers, the benefits include wider circulation of their information and communication of their interest in hearing from writers.

One of the simple but significant effects of Pathways is to embrace data protection. This means that every writer who returned the Pathways questionnaire has actively selected to make their details available to personnel and organisations working in related fields.

1.3 How was the mapping approached?

In order to achieve a deeper cartography of the region, any segmentation for the sake of managing the research would need to be of a broad and fluid nature. Five mini-maps were created under the headings of:

- Geographical Map
- Diversity Map
- Art Form Map
- Third Sector Map
- Future possibilities Map.

The selection of these groupings precipitated the creation of a central image for the research: that of a moving Venn diagram; envisaging a three-dimensional map that would allow the intersection of any of the mini-maps at any point. The vital methodological question then became 'how can Pathways be a catalyst for the movement towards grouping and intersection?'

1.4 How was the research conducted?

A combination of 'soft' and 'hard' information was gathered by questionnaire, email and Internet; followed up by telephone conversations with Venue Managers, Arts Development Officers at local councils, Writers' Groups, Amateur Dramatic Societies, Producing Companies and interviews with representative organisations. (*See appendix for breakdown of contacts*). Using the five mini-maps as a guide, contact was made with national and regional gatekeepers of information: Literary Agents; The Writers' Guild; Society of Authors; New Producers Alliance; Arts Development Officers; a wide range of regional writers networks. The definition of writer when contacting gatekeepers was taken to

be as broad as possible within the sphere of writing for performance. For example, we sought to include contact with devising theatre companies and Live Art forums, such as the New Work Network. The thinking behind this was to both encourage the potential for new intersections on the future map and to also recognise that language, the raw material of writing, is ever evolving.

The conversations and channels of communication explored within the remit of this project took place both online and in the field.

Online, Pathways provides searchable information about writers in an easy-to-find format

The person-to-person dialogues with venue managers, producers, arts providers, educators, and Arts Development Officers provided a more direct opportunity to assess the state of the art.

On the ground, Pathways is a provocation for new writing to be at the forefront of the cultural industries agenda.

The analysis of formal and informal conversations form the backbone of this report. Response to written questionnaires was low, but this was only used as a preliminary step. We knew that what we wanted to achieve would require relationships rather than paper. In the case of Arts Development Officers, for instance, only 2 questionnaires were returned out of a possible 41. This pattern was replicated across the entire sector. Much of this can be explained by overburdened workloads; however, a certain amount of wariness and polite indifference was also encountered. This was largely overcome once the value of the project was explained. In addition, an introductory leaflet in the form of a postcard has been widely distributed to venues, amateur societies and writers' groups to encourage ongoing contact and development of the project.

1.5 What will be the criteria for success?

Three areas were identified:

- Influencing policy
- Creating and encouraging a more joined up approach to the identification, nurturing, development and production of new theatre writing
- Fostering better awareness of learning and employment opportunities and ultimately creating more work for writers.

It is not expected that Pathways will directly provide employment opportunities. However, the report argues for the sustained and interconnected development of new writing as the only viable approach if the capacity building that has been taking place over the last two years is to have lasting value. Despite the vigorous activities of a cluster of new writing theatre companies, the overall picture for the employment of writers in conventional theatre contexts is still limited. With this knowledge, any enterprising strategy for the future of new writing in the South East should identify potential areas for growth and support the people who are engaged in a joined - up approach. It is hoped that Pathways will be a core component of the body of information and understanding that will enable effective decision making by all the stakeholders, and in particular by the regional Arts Council.

2. IS THERE ANYBODY THERE?

2.1 Writers

The logical starting point for the mapping exercise was to contact writers resident in the region themselves. This would be a route to understanding the relationship that writers have with their local area and also the nature of their work.

Starting with the data readily available, writers were contacted through Writernet's subscriber base, newsletter and website and Theatre and Beyond's database. Other organisations holding information about writers in the region include:

- Writers Guild of Great Britain
- Society of Authors
- TAPS
- NAWA / Artscape
- Performing Arts Lab.
- Hotbed (New Venture Theatre, Brighton)
- Writers In Touch
- GLAM
- Pier Playwrights
- The Complete Works
- University of Sussex
- Sussex Live Literature Development Agency

These organisations were willing to mail their membership and publicise Pathways. Writers were invited to send a completed questionnaire detailing their writing experience or to send a c.v. All questionnaires were accompanied by a monitoring form, which most returned completed. Writers who sent in their details are now entered in a searchable database on Writernet's web site. (<http://www.writernet.org.uk>)

Even with the incentive that inclusion in the online database could enhance employment opportunities, only around 100 writers submitted their details. Coupled with additional information about numbers of writers taking advantage of professional development opportunities available in the region, it is tempting to speculate that there is perhaps a lower number of writers actively seeking to promote themselves professionally, than initially expected. Of the writers who did return their details, the research forged new links with members of the Writers Guild and Society of Authors and identified a few writers who have notable experience in theatre writing for young audiences.

With few exceptions (for example John Retallack, Company of Angles and Jyll Bradley, Amy Roadstone productions), their expertise has not led to commissions with regional companies. Resources on the doorstep are not being used by the regional companies.

2.2 Companies

The following records of conversations with producing companies is not intended to be exhaustive, but rather represent a series of snapshots highlighting approaches to New Writing across the region. (For a comprehensive list of companies and venues contacted see appendix).

These company models are designed to illustrate ways of working. What follows is neither an endorsement nor a critique of the work. Bear in mind there may be only one or two people working; often under or unpaid.

Channel Theatre is the largest community-based touring company in the region. Their work encompasses a commission for last year's annual tour from an established playwright Judy Upton; the setting up of an East Kent Writers Group to support playwrights in the area and workshops in schools and with amateur organisations. The focus on touring work out of theatres into village halls and community centres along with regular arts centres, conditions the type of writers and plays that they commission. Writers "must be recommended by a number of reputable sources, with a good track record but not necessarily experienced." The "writer must share the views and aspirations of the company...". Scripts are read "only with a view to commissioning work."

Spanner in the Works was formed by two resident writers Tony Coult and Darren Rapier and therefore hardly ever commission externally. The main focus of their work is workshops in schools, hospitals, community groups and business, from which productions are sometimes realised. The company is based in Sidcup and their work spans several art forms including video, film and theatre.

Changeling Theatre Company based in Rochester are another company who employ a resident writer. They have a youth group, an adult group and they tour 3 new plays a year. They are in a position to read unsolicited scripts and reckon on a response time of 3 months.

The Hungry Grass in Brighton & Hove tour “political” plays (in the broader sense), though not issue-based, and tour for up to 2 months after a rehearsal period of 4 weeks. They commission and tour every 18 months to 2 years. After a conceptual debate they set about finding a writer that can deliver their ideas on a topic. The work is small-scale (i.e. less than 440 seats) and takes them to conventional theatres and arts centres as well as village halls.

Zygo was formed by director Andrea Brooks to “produce vibrant, living theatre that is contemporary in nature”. This has led them in a short space of time to workshop several new plays including “Sugared Grapefruit” by first-time writer Ed Harris. They recently undertook a national tour of “Julia Pastrana” by Sean Prendergast—a pioneering form of “theatre-in-the-dark”. First seen at Battersea Arts Centre, where they also have links into the writers group, Zygo have seeded this into a full-scale production supported by Arts Council England. It is Andrea’s contention that writers in the South East don’t have a regional identity, in the same way that North Eastern writers, for example, do: writers in Newcastle can approach Live Theatre or New Writing North to develop their work.

The work of **Theatre and Beyond** attempts to provide some of the connections between writers and production. After 4 years of operation and 3 New Writing mini festivals as part of the International Brighton Festival, TAB is about to launch itself on a regional tour in 2003 with its own model for touring new writing. This entails building a momentum through diversification of new writing activities: workshops, laboratories, productions, showcases and writing 'slams'. The pilot for this project was the successful clustering of a range of new writing activity during the Brighton Festival. Over three festivals, TAB encouraged audiences to engage with the process as well as the product of theatre making; the work serving an ever expanding 'community of interest'.

Ajtc was formed by two actors commissioning a playwright with an A4E award – the piece “Beside Picasso” by Brian McAvera has since picked up awards at the Edinburgh Festival, played at National Theatre, but despite this profile, struggled to get enough dates booked for a national tour. Moreover, even with the efforts of a tour booker and excellent national press reviews, when we spoke they still only had 6 dates in their diary. By contrast, their two-man version of “The Tempest” has been completely sold out. This is a succinct and typical story of the difficulties inherent in making new work. On a brighter note, as a direct result of their work at Edinburgh, David Rudkin is keen to write their next play. It will be interesting to see if a more renowned playwright will make a difference to the tour booking.

Theatre Exchange, who have recently moved to Caterham after years at the Thorndike Theatre, Leatherhead, are in the process of evolving their working practices and artistic policy. After years of devising shows with director and actors, they have come to recognise the value of a writer's input, and are moving away from workshop-based performances to commissions. (Recent writers include David Rowan and Paul Williamson.) They are currently looking to meet up with writers who have experience of working with young people.

Stop Gap Theatre through their long association with Yvonne Arnaud, Guildford have produced or co-produced 8 new plays since 1997. They have developed an ensemble approach to new writing with regular collaborators feeding into the development process at an early stage. (See appendix 4 for further details)

Finally, **New Vic Workshop** has been making new drama for the number one touring circuit over the last three years. They are perhaps the most commercial of the new writing companies in the region, working in partnership with established national touring organisations. New Vic have just launched their second commissioned production, "Gilbert Harding Is Unwell", by Leonard Preston. New Vic's approach to commissioning is usually to have an idea for a project and *then* to find a suitable playwright. They have a range of work in development and regularly bring a company of actors together to read plays that interest them.

3. BRIGHTON: WHERE ELSE?

3.1 Venues

There are only a few venues willing to enter into partnerships with regional producing companies or daring to have distinctive programming policies that might initiate change in their local market. But it must be borne in mind that arts centres operate a mixed ecology, often with only one particular art form specialism. This is likely to be greatly determined by the passion of the individual programmer, working to overcome the challenges of a grossly under funded infrastructure.

In the current market, branding is all. Where a venue has a clear and distinct programming policy, over time it can find its audience.

In this context, **Riverhouse Barn** at Walton-on-Thames is one of a number of venues that is clearly committed to New Writing, but is having to find different ways of getting their audience through the door. Market forces has pushed their programming away from one or two-night performances by touring companies to more literature-based programming. However, they have maintained relationships with several established professional theatre companies and a link with two local amateur dramatic societies. **Cartoon de Salvo** is currently in residence developing work with young people and adults. In addition, a writers group has been set up and the local Book Club has a scheme whereby members are invited to read novels relevant to work being presented, before coming to see a performance.

The Astor Theatre in Deal has a small amount of Southern & South East Arts funding to present drama and is committed to maintaining and developing its audience. The Astor is a 200-seat cabaret style venue - they were pleased by the response to a new play by Jamie Wilson, "txtlife", and are eager to book more work in this vein. They are prepared to support companies they are interested in by offering free rehearsal space or similar. In total their drama output amounted to four single performances in the period between May and August of this year. A "Blackey'd Susan" weekend in June (the story is set in Deal) culminated in a specially commissioned performance of a play performed by a mix of amateur and professional actors.

Programmer Helen Cundy at **Cranleigh Arts Centre** perceives that she is hampered by an aging demographic and is finding it hard to move away from traditional programming. However **DreamThinkSpeak's** promenade deconstruction of "Hamlet ,Who

Goes There?", 'did well' (the audience are taken on a journey through the foyer and backstage of the theatre before ending onstage for the final scenes); suggesting that special events might be a way forward for her. They are looking to commission a play for young people in the near future.

Of the larger venues the **De La Warr Pavilion** deserves special mention for its summer festival of events "jour de Fete", utilising the space both inside the theatre and outside on the terraces. Their consultant programmer Linda Lewis has assembled an autumn season that includes companies as diverse as Out of Joint and Brighton based Zygo. They are closing for major refurbishment in 2003, supported by funds from the National Lottery, with no date as yet, set for the re-opening. As Director of Visions, the festival of Visual Theatre, Linda Lewis is connected to increasing the profile of visual theatre in the region. Bexhill-on-Sea has clearly benefited from dual role of festival director and venue programmer, bringing new and adventurous work to a venue that was in considerable difficulty. "Jour de Fete" was also notable for the high proportion of free events.

Chichester Festival Theatre is one of the two producing houses in the region (the other being the **Yvonne Arnaud**). Chichester's recent new commission - "Song of the Western Men" by Christopher William Hill was at the Minerva Theatre. The potential for Chichester to develop its capacity to commission and work in partnership with other organisations will hopefully emerge as the new Artistic Directorship initiate changes in the programme and profile of the theatre. The recent public discussion about the future of Chichester Festival Theatre seemed to hint that the most viable route for the development of new work would be through a permanent acting ensemble; thereby absorbing the costs of actors engaged in new writing projects for the theatre in to the running costs of other productions.

Farnham Maltings, through Theatre Review money, have managed to double their drama output from six to twelve performances - an average of one performance a month! This is not to belittle their achievement, but does demonstrate very graphically the state of drama in the region. On the other hand, the arrival of Gavin Stride as new Director (from New Perspectives) may be ample demonstration of the difference individual expertise can make....

Chequer Mead Theatre, East Grinstead is home to Ono Theatre Company. During the period of June-Sept this year their drama output was very low, with only a single amateur performance.

However, in October, the Language of Women Festival will include some drama alongside literature and poetry events. Like the Riverhouse Barn, the Chequer Mead Theatre is linking new writing to literature events and targeting an audience that is interested in the programme umbrella. In terms of audience development, this is an interesting model and it will be interesting to gain further details of audience attendance at this event.

The Artslink Theatre in Camberley had to cancel a performance of a new work by a local writer when no one turned up to see the show. This has meant that although there is a certain amount of will to programme new work, they will be very careful in the future. The theatre is currently planning a production with Camberley Community Theatre Company where a writer will be involved.

St Mary's in the Castle, Hastings host mainly music programming and is undergoing an administrative reorganisation following the departure of their Director. Mark Courtice, formerly of the Theatre Royal, Brighton is at the helm currently as Interim Director. St Mary's has, in the past, hosted developmental work from Steve Gooch's company Freehand and is open-minded regarding future drama programming. Mark has seeded a new writing collaboration with Theatre and Beyond, which will be part of the programme passed on to his successor.

Miskin Theatre in Dartford is undergoing a major administrative overhaul and their programmer Suzanne McPherson had only been in post for three weeks at the time of speaking. Their main focus is contemporary physical theatre – a case of a venue choosing to specialise in a particular form and this being an effective marketing tool. The downside of this approach is that market forces do not usually support risk taking. If all programming is left to market forces, the trend towards physical theatre and stand-up comedy is likely to accelerate and dominate venue programming even further.

Komedia in Brighton is another venue that knows its market very well and plays to it. The downstairs cabaret bar is host to stand up comedy and music, whilst the theatre is a major player on the small scale touring circuit, hosting Arts Council New Writing tours (e.g. ATC, Red Shift, Paines Plough) and physical theatre. They also programme Sunday night showcase performances by Brighton based companies to try out new shows and test work-in-progress in front of an audience. These events are generally well attended. In the light of this, it is interesting to note that a venue so clearly committed to drama and New Writing will not be using its Theatre Review money to commission and develop its own work. Their Artistic Director, David Lavender said that they do not feel able to

take the risk in commissioning new work that incurs costs in terms of time and money, then not knowing whether the product at the end would be something they would want to stage. Clearly they feel that they have “had their fingers burnt” in the past and do not want to go down that route again.

The Hawth, Crawley is another company that will not be using its Theatre Review money to commission. As a local authority venue which used to play host to resident company Shaker Productions (a New Writing outfit), they bemoan the loss of funding that led to the demise of that relationship, but insist that the money awarded from the Theatre Review is insufficient to develop and commission new work. Instead they are looking to ‘support new work’ in other ways (see section on Pitchy Breath Theatre Company above). The Hawth is situated in a culturally diverse area and is in the early stages of planning a co-production with Watermans Arts Centre of a community play. (See notes on Crawley Council for information on a three-year festival of work from the British Asian community.)

Likewise, the **Gardner Arts Centre** is keen to develop new writing projects with suitable companies (i.e. those companies whose work includes elements that make it appropriate for a mid-scale venue) but has to seek creative ways to build partnerships as straightforward commissioning is not financially possible. They are taking a strategic view of their position in a city that now has a host of newly refurbished venues and marking their ground as the venue for work that is 'at the cutting edge'. This season includes Frantic Assembly, Forced Entertainment and the RNT tour of its Transformation season plays.

New Venture Theatre, Brighton is host to a writers group and an annual new plays festival of 10-minute plays, “Hotshorts”. The winner is awarded a week’s run in the theatre; in addition a week is set aside each February to present professional small scale touring work. The Electric Theatre in Guildford is a local authority venue run by professional administrative staff on behalf of a consortium of local amateur societies. Although the work is mainly repertoire, Guildbury Productions, Surrey Women’s Institute and Herald Players have all staged commissioned plays from amateur writers in recent months.

3.2 At a sub-regional /county level:

Kent as a county is notionally supportive of New Writing. This is partly due to the energy of John Rice, Arts Officer at **Kent County Council** and himself a writer. But budgets are miniscule. There are of course, areas where there is little or no activity, but taken as a whole, support for the writers seems better co-ordinated than the rest of the region. There are various initiatives one can point to such as the "**Complete Works**" database that mirrors and predates some of the work in Pathways. Complete Works was set up by a consortium of local authorities to map writers in West Kent – this information, though not widely published due to the Data Protection Act, is nevertheless a valuable resource for those councils involved. Contact with writers is maintained through a regular newsletter, and information on the Pathways initiative has been circulated in this way. There is also "**Kent Arts Now**", published by Kent County Council and distributed via the web and in print.

Ashford Borough Council has no professional companies based in the Borough, but instead works with local companies such as Changeling. It is an affluent rural community that has a lot of active Amateur Dramatic Societies. This pattern of a high density of amateur activity in affluent rural areas is echoed throughout Sussex, Surrey and the rest of Kent. Channel Theatre also has links with amateur groups in the area.

Gravesham Borough Council has no resident professional companies and only one amateur society – Gravesend District Theatre Guild. It is home to Woodville Halls, which programmes mainly popular music. Chicken Shed is starting up a project in Spring 2003 with two local schools and it is hoped that the project will develop further. "A cultural desert" is how Arts and Entertainment Manager Brian Tourle described it...

Dave Cotton, Arts Development Officer at **Medway** was the first to reply to the written questionnaire with details of two local professional companies resident in the borough. They are Changeling Theatre Company and Play on Words both based in Rochester. Because of data protection issues we were unable to gain access information on amateur societies and cultural diversity, which is held on their arts audit database.

Sevenoaks, at the time of speaking, had Stand Up Shakespeare performing in the area, but otherwise no resident professional drama companies. They are part of a consortium that administers the Applause Rural Touring Scheme, which supports local

companies. Here again we see a healthy amateur sector, a lot of which have vibrant youth theatres.

Tunbridge Wells has two resident professional companies – Muzikansky (who specialise in new writing) and Vivid Theatre, a theatre-in-education company run by the Youth Theatre Director of Trinity Arts Centre. Trinity is currently undergoing a change of management and its future direction is under review. Sally Staples, Leisure Developments and Projects Manager of Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, was initially wary and wanted to know exactly how Pathways was going to benefit the council before divulging any information. She would not release data relating to amateur societies because of data protection worries and a concern that the database itself was incomplete.

Surrey County Council Arts Officer – Hannah Faith-Dix was the only other person to respond to the initial written questionnaire and was able to send a full list of all the amateur groups working in Surrey and full contact details and membership numbers. She also listed the four companies working in the County, who are Cartoon de Salvo, ajtc, Stop Gap Theatre and Theatre Exchange.

The incoming Arts Development Officer in **Guildford**, George Longland was extremely helpful, although she said she was finding her new posting a little quiet. She had done the usual round of introducing herself to the local arts community and then waited for the phone to ring with practitioners setting up meetings and striking new relationships – but they hadn't... So she has been setting up meetings herself with local companies Imagination Productions, whose work is in education, and also ajtc, who have received funding to work with young people. The Guildford Book Festival is looking to expand into performance poetry, story telling and writers workshops, but has no specific drama programming.

Jill Coles at **Woking Borough Council** pointed to a high level of amateur drama activity in her area with the Woking Drama Association (WDA) representing the many societies in the area. WDA present their work at the Rhoda McGaw Theatre, which is the studio theatre of the New Victoria Theatre (a commercial touring house owned and run by Ambassadors Group – ATG). The venue has a unique relationship with the local council, whereby the council handles all the administration for the theatre, with the staffing and technical facilities run by ATG. The council hires the theatre for four weeks each year to present professional touring product (mostly one man shows) with the rest programmed by WDA and local dance and drama schools. WDA also hosts an annual amateur playwrighting competition and all of this years' entrants have been

sent information on Pathways. Any culturally diverse work in the borough happens within the local Performing Arts school, Bishop David Brown.

In **Sussex** the picture is a little patchy – responses from Arts Development Officers were generally lower and the separate **East and West Sussex** authorities further fragment the picture. East Sussex County Council has an extremely valuable resource in the ESCIS database, which catalogues community arts activities such as amateur societies, writers groups etc. (<http://www.escis.org.uk>). All the amateur companies from this list have been mailed with details of the Pathways initiative. The few responses returned to date suggest that there is very little New Writing activity in this area, and that most amateur societies rely on repertoire for the bulk of their shows.

Jan Mein, the Head of Cultural Development at **Eastbourne**, painted a vibrant picture somewhat at odds with the preconception of a sleepy retirement town. Although none of the activity is ground breaking in itself, Jan's positive portrait contrasts sharply with the bleak picture painted by Arts Officers in other seaside towns along the coast. The main theatre activities are centred around the Devonshire Park and Congress theatres, which as well as taking in touring product also produce two plays of their own during the summer directed by Chris Jordan, plus a pantomime at Christmas. On a smaller scale the only venue is the Underground Theatre underneath the Central library. Actor Tim Marriot is working however to develop Eastbourne College as a touring venue; plus Ratten and Cavendish schools have both been awarded Performing Arts status and have appointed a joint development worker to look at future possibilities. Additionally, the Towner Art Gallery hosts performance poetry work.

Lewes has a high level of arts activity with literature and music taking the fore, in the shape of annual festivals. At present, All Saints Arts Centre lacks a permanent management structure and is being kept open by volunteers with the council handling ticket sales. Long term viability is currently being assessed by councillors and interested parties in the area, with the results of a feasibility study due to be presented by the end of 2002, when a decision will be made as to the future. The Regional Literature Centre is being spearheaded by Mark Hewitt, the Literature Officer, has recently been awarded £500,000 funding from the National Lottery towards building costs and an appeal has been launched to match this amount so work can begin in January 2003. The Literature Centre will act as a beacon for all kinds of writing activity and will house

performances/readings and a publishing house, as well as the usual library facilities.

Crawley Borough Council community arts team are based at the Hawth Theatre, which is also home to Pitchy Breath Theatre Company, itself funded from the community arts budget. Kirsty MacKay began Pitchy Breath Theatre in 1995. The first production was an adaptation of Marlowe's 'Doctor Faustus'. In 1998, they added "new writing" to their remit and now aim to premiere at least one new play a year.

4. WHAT'S HAPPENING AND WHAT'S NOT

4.1 Training

Training is provided by a number of universities and organisations. There is a growing understanding and provision for the relevance of arts-based activity to other sectors, especially health, education, business and regeneration.

The Centre for Continuing Education at **Sussex University** runs a range of courses for writers . These include training writers to work in health, education and prison contexts as well as writing for theatre, television, film and radio. Courses are at certificate and post-graduate levels and can progress to MA degrees. The Postgraduate Diploma in Dramatic Writing culminates in a showcase of readings for an invited audience of industry professionals. At the graduation showcase last May, Faynia Williams (course tutor) commented on the academic weight of the research behind the presentation of a play for theatre, screen or radio. Her hope is that the transferable skills developed in the study of the performing arts would gain more recognition within academia, drawing upon the work she does with science students to illustrate her point. She raised the question: 'can theatre practice be used as a model for academic research?'

It is worth noting that this debate is still on-going at Sussex University whilst at Kent, which has a stronger reputation for theatre, there is an MA by Practice As Research course started by Dr Paul Allain at **Kent University**, Canterbury. This year is the first graduating intake of a course designed to enable practitioners to research through practice. The graduating students from the first year include Ridiculusmus who have used the course to 'scratch' their new show and develop a tight script that creates the illusion of improvised comedy.

University of Surrey and the **Surrey Institute of Arts and Design** both have an interest in new writing from the perspective of their performing arts specialisations: dance and music in the case of the former; animation and visual arts in the case of the latter. Neither organisation runs courses specifically geared towards training writers, but they could be valuable partners in the development of writing as a component of other art forms. Surrey University used to be home to the Smartlab Centre, run by Dr Lizbeth Goodman. This research organisation pioneers online international performance projects. Lizbeth Goodman is the author of a collection of plays by experimental women writers and, as such, has an interest in the application of new technology to break

dominant models of practice. In a move all too coterminous with the problems of sustaining innovative organisations within the region, The Smartlab relocated to Central St. Martin's during the last year and is planning a range of 'play box' laboratories for theatre practitioners to investigate the use of digital technologies and theatre. The first 'play box' takes place at Oval House in November with a focus on arts and disability. (see Smartlab web site at www.smartlabcentre.co.uk).

4.2 Professional Development

Lighthouse in Brighton host 'script breakfasts' and a script reading service for screenwriters and Exposure, a new and improved monthly networking event for the independent film and media community in Sussex. Each month they have speakers from the industry sharing their experiences and providing insight into various aspects of film and TV production. Lighthouse script reading service costs £40 per script and admission to the script breakfasts is selective. The film and television department of Lighthouse is headed up by Caroline Freeman. She is aware of the limited resources that Lighthouse has for film development and concentrates her producing activity to shorts and community based projects.

Lighthouse also work in partnership with **SEDA** the regional dance agency to make awards for the Dance For Screen project and to support dancers in the pitching of their work for camera. Although not a prominent feature of regional dance, some dancers do work with text and the nature of physical theatre demands a broad definition of 'writer'. There has been fruitful co-operation between Lighthouse, Theatre and Beyond and Pier Playwrights (the Brighton-based writers organisation) in the distribution of information to writers in the region and this approach is illustrative of the benefit of cross-media approach to information for and about writers.

The newly established **Screen South** organisation is kicking off with its 'Dreamcatcher' programme for film development in the region. The appointment of Gena Feagan in Canterbury to the post of director shifts the Brighton-centric activities of the region. A pitching weekend is taking place in Folkestone for the first round of the project and writers are invited to present their ideas to a panel of professionals. Successful writers will be offered a place on a workshop programme, leading to a showcase later in the year.

Pier Playwrights is unique in the region as an organisation run by writers to support professional development. Pier Playwrights offers a programme of masterclasses and workshops for its members and

builds links to people who work with writers. They also have a script reading service at a subsidised rate and there are script progression opportunities built in to this system. One of these is recommendation to producers of writers who have had a positive response to their script from the reading panel. After almost a year in, the script reading programme has attracted 14 scripts and 2 have come back with recommendations for workshop development. Pier Playwrights organised the 'What if...' conference last June, successfully bringing together a hundred delegates to brainstorm new ways of working together.

If the take-up of generic funds for employment by theatre writers (such as RALP and Arts For Everyone) is an indication then generic access to professional development for theatre writers via initiatives such as Allways Learning and Creativepeople will be a challenge).

4.3 Diverse Contexts

In looking for organisations or 'gatekeepers' of professional development for Black and Ethnic Minority (BME) writers, a conversation with **Vayu Naidu**, who runs her company from Canterbury, revealed no such regional focus. Her knowledge of other regional writers from BME cultures was limited to one.

Veynu Dupha, fellow at Nesta and previously Executive Producer at Nottingham Playhouse, came to Brighton University as part of a day entitled "Are You Doing Diversity?" The day-long seminar was not particularly well attended and regional venues had a particularly poor presence, Mark Everett from the Marlowe Canterbury being a notable exception. The day emphasised the large levels of investment required to make a real and long-lasting contribution to cultural diversity in the theatre sector. Using the Nottingham Playhouse as a model, the speakers discussed ways to influence the attendance patterns of Asian audiences. The key message was time, careful programming, strategic planning and vigorous work on-the-ground. (see Appendix 5 for data gathered on cultural diversity in the region).

The **Eclipse Report**, in which theatre was found to be institutionally racist has made a series of recommendations – some more achievable than others. The impact of these should be found at The Hawth, Trinity Arts Centre, The Gardner and Chichester Festival Theatre. Time will tell.

Certainly there is a need for development of non-urban models of cultural diversity and collaborations such as that between Yellow Earth and Theatre and Beyond) are to be encouraged as part of a

commitment to inward investment of expertise to bring about lasting change.

It will be interesting to monitor the impact of the implementation of the **Disability Discrimination Act**.

Research also revealed a **Refugee Centre** for young men between 16-20 years situated in Ashford, Kent, but as this is a short stay holding centre, there is no specific arts activity focused on this community...

4.4 Third Sector activity

Educational contexts are an evident source of employment for writers (see online writers details). This includes running adult education courses; developing schools' based performance projects; work for social services departments; live literature in libraries. Conversations with writers revealed an interest in developing employment opportunities in this field and, with this in mind, writers should be pointed to arts education databases at Southern and South East Arts, Kent County Council (funded by Inter-reg and therefore containing details of artists interested in working across the channel) and Artscape (the site for writers working in education - NAWE). Several local councils have also indicated that they have or will be doing an audit of artists and arts organisations working in education and it is hoped that this information will be made widely available.

Many theatre companies touring in to the region, as well as those regionally based, offer education workshops to enhance productions. New writing is not a particularly strong platform for this kind of education activity as there is not any DIRECT relationship of playwriting to the school curriculum. Cardboard Citizens employ playwright Jan Maloney as one of two sub-regional co-ordinators covering Hastings and Folkestone (the other being Canterbury and East Kent) for their schools and homeless hostels work. Both Cardboard Citizens and Intrepid Theatre enter schools on the PSHE platform; however, those companies offering devising skills and workshops on established texts or practitioners (e.g. Brecht) are more likely to find a place in the secondary school timetable.

John Rice at Kent County Council is the co-ordinator of Kent **Creative Partnerships** funding. He was approached to explain ways that writers might be involved as an element of the delivery of this programme in East Kent. Conversations were had at very early

planning stages and it would be worth revisiting, now that Creative Partnerships is further along.

Arts & Business South East developed a literature project, enabling the business sponsorship of live literature and books in libraries. Otherwise, writers working in business contexts have tended to be training orientated. Several writers in the region have a good deal of experience of writing for business and there is a growing network of artist trainers who are potential employers. This network is co-ordinated by Arts & Business South East and Madelaine Hutchins, through her work on the Cultural Managers MA at Sussex University. In December Arts & Business are running a networking day, facilitated by a writer, Jackie Wills.

In **community and regeneration**, arts based activities seem to be cross-art form. Companies such as Same Sky (originally started by a writer) create visual and street art events with rural and urban communities. The Scarman Trust runs a Theatre-For-Change project that uses forum theatre techniques to make recommendations on social policy issues. They also run a funding scheme to enable community groups to develop their own projects and they are open to working with writers in the future.

Fireraisers recently performed an excerpt of Polly Wiseman's play 'Bright' at a **Mental health** conference, otherwise regional evidence of arts and health activities is fairly scant. The University of Brighton has a research department, Centrim that conducts training and policy-making projects in health and business using arts-based action research. There is however, a very limited connection between health organisations and performance artists - to the point that the art seems to be missing from the art and health agenda, at present. This may however, be art-form specific and my suspicion is that visual art and creative writing (in terms of autobiography, short stories and novels) tend to be more common in this sphere of work.

4.5 The funding system

successful commissions and lost opportunities.

Writers and companies who have received funding from the Arts Council Writers Awards since August 2000 are:

- Noel Greig (Bursary)
- Diane Esguerra (Bursary)
- David Stuttard (Commission)
- Dawn Penso (Commission)
- Darren Tunstall (Commission)

- Goran Stefanowski (Commission, Resident Playwright Award)
 - Adrian Page (Commission)
 - Brendan Murray (Commission)
 - David Tushingam (Commission)
-
- Actors of Dionysus
 - Theatre Melange
 - Muzikansky
 - West Sussex County Youth Theatre
 - Kingston Theatre Trust
 - AJTC Theatre Company
 - Linda Lewis Productions

Conversation with Charles Hart at the Arts Council, revealed that around 50% of applications from companies to commission a writer are successful. In assessing the application, more weight is attached to the ability of the commissioning company to pay the agreed ITC rates and to work constructively with the writer than the track record of the writer.

Further lost opportunities include the South East Arts **Personal Development** bursaries offering up to £10,000 for more established artists, which received only one application from a writer (Jyll Bradley).

Looking at the published data for regional arts board funding given to playwrights and writer-based projects - in the **Year of the Artist** there were 106 projects in total throughout the South East region. Of these, 14 projects involved writers in performance of which 3 utilised playwrights/screenwriters (the remainder being performance poetry.) **Awards for All** grants for 2000 and 2001 were awarded to a total of 14 performance-based projects, of which 5 appear to have used writers. Thus funding driven initiatives designed to broaden access to the arts and support artists have not been overly utilised by writers.

It might have been hoped that a scheme such as Year of the Artist would help lever interest in the creation of links with business. There do seem to be embryonic avenues for writers of performance to work within business contexts. Most of these are filtered through Arts & Business South East, most recently in their Creativity In Management project. The emphasis is upon the arts as a vehicle for addressing business training needs. Paul Levy, a writer who works predominantly in the business sector, develops plays as 'a critical incident' in the work-place; using the power of drama to challenge thinking and instigate change. Other writers are providing material for actors to role play and/or scripts for business delegates to work

with themselves. Arts & Business also brokers partnerships between artists and business organisations and has a funding scheme to support innovative ways of working together.

5. TIME TO MOVE ON / RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Risk management

Owing to the time-span of the research, it has been possible to track a changing landscape. The project began during the initial flurry of excitement and optimism surrounding the announcement of new funding for theatre as a result of the Boyden report. Eighteen months later, increased funding does not seem to have had a significant impact on the state of new writing as far as regional venues are concerned. (See section on venues).

Changes made in relation to the post Boyden additional funding should see further developments at the **Mill Studio** at the Yvonne Arnaud in Guildford; writers working in more hybrid ways with other artists at the **Gardner**; culturally diverse writing emerging from a greater investment in South Asian communities via the **Hawth**; an extension to **Theatre Melange**'s research and development in relation to their Summer School, which features international practitioners; and the Spooky Toothed Girl production for **Channel Theatre**.

However, perhaps because these developments benefit writers as part of wider approaches, at the time of writing this report, confidence in both the processes and products of new writing activities seems lower than pre Boyden.

It is possible that the re-structuring of the regional arts board has had a negative impact in this respect; draining energy and focus from the necessary follow-through that the NPTE required. The expectation was to find evidence of increased energy to commission and produce new and diverse work in venues in receipt of a funding uplift. Instead, the signposts for the regional map seem to face in alternative directions.

With energy being focused on the development of writers in the region, it is clear that there needs to be a parallel energy for increased avenues of production and distribution. The disappointing and struggling response from traditional venues to new writing, flags up the need to investigate new locations and context for writers to engage with. If public subsidy is to achieve anything, it must be about enabling risk within a managed environment. Economic pressures on venues means that they are not coming forward as equal players in the risk-taking associated with the production of new work. It is primarily the artists who are left to take the risks in mounting work and then paying for its presentation. This manifests itself in a range of financial

arrangements with incoming companies, the most odious being heavy hire charges for publicly funded buildings.

5.2 Areas for specific consideration

Before moving to a further analysis of need and recommendations for intervention, there are four particular areas requiring engagement, which relate back to the five mini-maps which we used as navigational pointers in our mapping. (The fifth map: new opportunities, is implicit in the recommendations throughout this section)

5.2.1 Third sector development

There is a growing interest in writers creating work in third sector industries: business, health, criminal justice system, economic and social regeneration. Writers based in the South East should by now have realised that conventional, literary management type outlets for their work are incompatible with the infrastructural theatre landscape in the region. So it is important to facilitate the points of navigation that will enable them to engage with new opportunities. The presentation of successful models of writers working in diverse contexts was a core component of Pier Playwrights 'What If...' conference in June 2002.

From the perspective of this mapping research, the What If? conference successfully demonstrated models of creative activity by writers in 'third sector' environments and generated confidence in 'writers doing it for themselves'. This is a welcome departure from the powerlessness of conventional routes for writers seeking production in any of the performing media.

With more companies emerging (often as a result of the Regional Arts Lottery Programme) who are working in the areas of regeneration and social inclusion, it also seems important to provide an arena for writers who have an interest in these fields to learn: a) to appreciate the skills they have. b) the language of other industries in order to fuse new partnerships.

In this way confidence for writers to work in third sector industries will build, while potential employers will be clearer about the benefits that dramatic writers can bring to their spheres of work.

5.2.2 Against homogeneity and formal conservatism

With the exception of the cluster of 'usual suspects' mentioned above, I would say that regional playwrights could be characterised

as primarily conservative in their work and fairly slow to adapt to changes in the cultural climate. Of course, there will always be the individual who, given an opportunity to experience other ways of working, will find their voice as a writer in a newly energised way, but on the whole writers seem to be working within the tried and tested conventions of the 'well-made play'. How to change this, should be an issue at the heart of any recommendations for future development of writers in the region.

We need to develop learning situations to explore an understanding of the relationship of words and language to the nature of self, identity, creative expression, human interaction and transformation. Work needs to be distinctive. Partnerships which bring artists of different disciplines together in a creative exchange need to be forged through artistic trial and error, supported by models of effective practice and mentoring. Let's make a forum in which a dancer works with a writer; vjs jam with text; writers script as a painter paints; artistically driven work rather than context driven work.

5.2.3 The challenges of London

Because of their proximity to London, Surrey, Sussex and Kent are the residential counties of some writers who work primarily outside the region. The South East has no distinct voice, and most writers will send their work to London-based companies in the hope of development with them. There is a strong belief that 'real' work is not available to them close to home.

This ties in with David Lavender's perception of the scripts that arrive on his desk at Komedia as the 'London rejects'. Once a writer has waited two or more months to be rejected by Soho Writers Centre, The Bush Theatre or Hampstead Theatre, then they send scripts to regional outlets. Not only is this demoralising for regional producers, it also reflects a lack of belief by writers that their work can be properly developed at a regional level. This belief is entirely realistic given the landscape of theatre infrastructure in the region, but writers should either continue this approach outside the region, or reconsider how they might better develop work which does correspond to the regional infrastructure....

A conversation with Steve Gooch proposed the possibility for the region to have a stake in a London venue, placed close to the railway link between London and the South East and able to attract national press. Perhaps more needs to be made of connections with venues such as Battersea Arts Centre, who already support new work. Geographic proximity may have less relevance than a shared

aesthetic – and it is unlikely that many “conventional” plays will find production at either the Young Vic Studio or the BAC if consideration is given to what they actually programme. It is small consolation that the relationship of the South East region’s writers to London and the production and showcasing of new work stymie most regions...

There is a 'usual suspects' list of writers whose names occur in a number of contexts; either as selected writers for development courses or as potential writers to commission and produce. These are writers who are in contact with **Lighthouse, Theatre and Beyond, Theatre Melange** and **Freehand Theatre**. How the careers of these writers progress will be interesting to track, as the next stage for them should be production.

How can the profile of regional producers be enhanced? How can the confidence to commission the experienced as well as the emerging playwright, be supported?

5.2.4 Diversity

Sustainable partnerships with companies outside the region need to be given powerful incentives in order to inject new thinking and practice.

The lack of infrastructure to positively address cultural diversity in the region needs addressing and strategic intervention at the highest level.

5.3 Towards centres of excellence and a curated network

5.3.1 Towards centres of excellence

The Chichester Festival Theatre’s newly appointed triumvirate will be capacity building over the next year and could well provide a more mainstream focus for new writing development and production. Certainly it is to be hoped that they will be an important node in a regional network of new theatre writing activity.

The Gardner is fast becoming a key venue to see challenging new work. It would be exciting for new writing in the region to work with the Gardner Centre as a focus for new writing that is interdisciplinary and challenging in form.

In pursuing a specific market, **Channel** has gained considerable experience in commissioning new writing for rural touring. The company knows its audience and uses processes to enable the

commissioned writer to also embrace that knowledge. Channel Theatre's work with Judy Upton is a model of good practice that could be replicated in other situations.

New Vic Workshop offers an interesting and rather unique model of new writing risk management. As unknown playwrights and untested plays are an unusual choice for a producer to launch on a number one touring circuit. New Vic's success at the box office relies heavily upon the casting of well-known actors in lead roles (Edward Woodward plays Gilbert Harding on tour) and the talents of a strong production team. One of the most significant aspects of the work being done by New Vic Workshop is the creation of new plays for large stages. As most playwrights develop their craft in studio theatres, this is a little explored area and one that could be extremely fruitful, given some of the main venues in the region.

It is interesting to note that in both the case of **St. Mary's** and **Bexhill on Sea**, it is the personal interests of the programmers that begin to make a difference to the outlets for new work. Whilst this is wholly understandable, it also means that development vested in individuals is a factor worth considering if one is aiming at sustainability.

By contrast, the **amateur theatre sector** seems to be the place where risk taking in terms of moving new writing in to production reasonably quickly is possible. Is it possible to bring the amateur sector more fully in to the 'ladder of development' available to regional writers? The Arts Council of England has commissioned an Amateur Theatre and New Writing Guide, recognising that the role of amateur production is a crucial one for many practitioners seeking experience. The guide will be available from The Arts Council of England by the Summer of 2003.

Since the loss of Shaker Productions annual showcase of short plays, there is a gap in the production of 'shorts' as an open opportunity for new writers. **Hotbed** at New Venture Theatre in Brighton operate on the amateur stage. There is no regional professional equivalent, although Channel Theatre has a history of this type of work through its New Stages Programme. Is it time for a 'shorts' programme that targets work for specific audiences and specific contexts?

The region has a strong **literature** bias. Encouraging a vibrant new writing community needs to encourage novelists, short story writers, journalists and poets to write for live performance. Conversations with writers reveal an interest in developing the transitional nature of their skills. They need a context in which to do

this. Arts venues also need to be encouraged to manage potential audience crossover between live literature events and new theatre writing.

New writing in the region has no natural homes. There is need for physical spaces to premiere new writing and attract national and international interest.

5.3.2 a curated network

While it is possible to scrutinise the success of individual models, the potential pathways of recommendation and referral between writers' organisations, producers, venues and funders has a lack of gateways and impetus for dispersal.

The regularity with which gatekeepers of relevant data referred to the Data Protection act, is a cause for concern and a clear barrier to region-wide interconnectivity. It is also indicative of a need to open up thinking beyond the short term and the proprietorial. (In the course of Cultural Industries auditing, it might now be expected that local councils would include ways to request the ability to pass on contact details within the industry).

As an organisation with a national overview and pathways in and out of the region Writernet via its website can be used for tracking and contacting writers and those who work with them, but this will not obviate the need for 'live' gateways to be created in addition to this newly developed one on-line.

So there is also a need for a more curated network of activity.

All the examples cited in 5.3.1 are exemplars of effective practice and can become nodes in a network of activity. But they tend to be self contained models. What is required in addition is an interconnectedness which allows a sharing of risk between different bodies: for those companies unable – or unwilling - to support all points along the axis of writer discovery, nurturing, training, commissioning, experiment, development and production.

Over the next two years, TAB will be aiming to build solid relationships with a small but strategic number of venues in the region that have a proven commitment to the programming of quality drama. TAB believes that for new writing to survive and prosper in the region, an event must be made of it. The aim is to work with the venues on a regular basis to develop both the work of

the writers local to the venue and the profile of the company with audiences.

In essence, Theatre and Beyond is aiming to provide some of the connective tissue that bonds artists, audiences and venues together, but this initiative needs more counterparts if a network of activity is to flourish.

5.4 Production, process and context

Why does new writing feel so vulnerable in the South East? Mostly, it takes time to create a new play: to discover the writer, nurture them; to commission the writer; to re-write the script, rehearse it, find a venue that will offer more than a single performance and then sustain a modest tour that might earn back some of the money invested in the project.

The model of one company successfully delivering all of the above is clearly not working in the South East for the majority of stakeholders - artists, venues, audiences - yet, it is perceived as the main line for professional new writing production.

If there are few ready-made audiences for new plays and the risk in terms of finished product is regarded as high, what can be done to assess risk-taking and remove it as the prime barrier to the healthy development of the industry?

The challenge lies in growing something which allows the axis of work from writer discovery to successful tour to be delivered through collaboration along different parts of this journey.

A model which invests overly in product, negates the role and importance of both the processes which bring theatre about and the contexts in which theatre is made and received. This in turn can lead to work made under pressure, with insufficient expertise and which few people want to see.

Understanding the processes and contexts should not be confined to 'educational' activities, but rather need to inform the way that audiences do and might engage with new writing.

Alternatives need to be investigated and funded at an appropriate level to assess their potential impact.

5.5 New funds and their implications

It is not yet clear how new monies coming into the region following the Theatre Review are actually delivering significantly enhanced opportunities for new writing development and production. Certainly old models which approach risk management by either “cherry picking” in order program product or penalising individual artists attempting the entrepreneurial are still too prevalent.

With the injection of funding provided by RALP and the growth of a few organisations that have a demonstrated commitment to new writing development, there is an uneasy relationship between new opportunities and longevity. RALP funding has enabled one-off projects and organisational development to deepen relationships with writers and to take new writing to new audiences.

But with RALP’s conclusion and the advent of simplified funding applications from 2003 covering national touring, organisations and individual artists, it is clear from the evidence of the Pathways Research that if theatre writers are left to compete for funds with other artists they will not fare well; nor will they necessarily fare better as trickledown beneficiaries from organisational bids.

Any “managed funds” will need to address this vulnerability and support interconnectedness to achieve more ambitious and effective risk management, if the region is to create and encouraging a more joined up approach to the identification, nurturing, development and production of new theatre writing.

If you would like further information, or have any questions or comments that you would like to make, please contact:

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