

ROUTLEDGE FOCUS

Theatre in Towns

HELEN NICHOLSON, JENNY HUGHES,
GEMMA EDWARDS, AND CARA GRAY



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Theatre in Towns offers a contemporary perspective on the role of theatre in the cultural life of towns in England. Exploring volunteer-led, professional and community theatres, this book investigates the rich and diverse ways that theatres in towns serve their locality, negotiate their civic role, participate in networks of mutual aid and exchange, and connect audiences beyond their geographical borders.

With a geographical focus on post-industrial, seaside, commuter and market towns in England, the book opens questions about how theatre shapes the narratives of town life, and how localism, networks and partnerships across and between towns contribute to living sustainably. Each chapter is critically and historically informed, drawing on original research in towns, including visits to performances and many conversations with townspeople, from theatre-makers, performers, set-builders, front-of-house volunteers, to audience members and civic leaders. *Theatre in Towns* asks urgent questions about how the relationships between towns and theatres can be redefined in new and equitable ways in the future.

Theatre in Towns brings new research to scholars and students of theatre studies, cultural geography, cultural and social policy and political sociology. It will also interest artists, policy-makers and researchers wanting to develop their own and others' understanding of the value of active theatre cultures in towns.

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1 Theatres in Towns

Places of Hope and Experiment

Jenny Hughes and Helen Nicholson

While we were researching theatre in towns for this book, a performance was taking place across Europe. Little Amal, a giant child-refugee puppet, began a walk from Gazientep in Turkey, close to the Syrian border, a city that had become home to half a million refugees during the ten-year-long war. Little Amal travelled more than 8000 kilometres between June and November 2021, visiting over 70 towns, villages and cities, before ending her journey in Manchester in the UK. *The Walk* was co-produced by Good Chance Theatre, a company founded as a creative response to the Calais refugee camp in 2015, in partnership with Handspring Puppet Company. Her walk created spontaneous moments of encounter across the streets, squares, neighbourhoods, and civic and cultural institutions of Europe, with more than 875,000 people gathering to watch, accompany or stage choreographed acts of welcome. Evoking strong emotional responses everywhere she walked, the performance materialised a chain reaction of support and care.

We met Little Amal twice on her walk. First, at the National Theatre in London, and then in Wigan, a town close to Manchester. On a sunny afternoon in London, she was greeted by members of the Public Acts company, the National Theatre's programme of new works created in partnership with theatres and communities across the UK. Lifting candles above their heads, the cast of the inaugural Public Acts production, *Pericles*, sang to Little Amal from the theatre's balconies. *I am my own way home* (composer Jim Fortune, lyricist Chris Bush) is a haunting song that captures the joy of finding a home after the pain of loss and abandonment. A few weeks later, on a cold and rainy day in Wigan, we followed Little Amal's walk through the Wigan Pier quarter, where she met the Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, danced with the youth group, WigLe Dance, before heading to a conference centre where local groups presented her with

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a quilt and read her stories. Along the way she enjoyed performances by a community choir and Wigan Youth Brass Band, and listened to a poem performed by local poet Louise Fazackerley, who wore an elaborate dress made of recycled packaging from Wigan family business, Uncle Joe's mint balls.

'Amal', the Arabic word for hope, is an appropriate name for a performance designed to transform negative narratives associated with the 'refugee crisis' into small acts of welcome, rooted in the affective and social relationships of places and communities. Little Amal was a response to adversity characterised by hopeful forms of collective and creative action, and this resonates with the research that led to this book. Our research in towns across England took place at a significant moment of time. Starting in 2020 when theatres were closed due to the global Covid-19 pandemic and concluding in 2022 when most restrictions had been lifted, it coincided with a period of intense challenge for towns, leading many theatres and cultural organisations to pause and reassess their priorities. On a national scale, health and related inequalities within and between towns and cities became sharply visible, with commentators powerfully pointing out how these are embedded in longer histories of poverty, racism, and colonialism (Bump et al, 2021). Keeping Little Amal in mind, in this opening chapter we draw on hope as a metaphor to explore the affective qualities, material practices, and cultural value of theatres in towns through and beyond such challenging times. Rebecca Solnit's poetic essay, *Hope in the Dark* (2016), argues that hope is intimately related to an impetus to act, particularly in places and times of uncertainty:

Hope locates itself in the premises that we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act ... Hope is an embrace of the unknown and the unknowable, an alternative to the certainty of both optimists and pessimists.

(Solnit, 2016, p. xii)

Throughout our research we – a research team of four – found that the work of theatres in towns balanced responses to local, regional, and global challenges with an openness to re-imagining and re-making what life might become. In this chapter, we present the aims and context of the research and introduce the chapters that follow. As we lay out the terrain of the book, we unfold an idea of theatre as a hopeful, collective, and practical form of action that generates experiences, onstage and off-stage, in ways that cannot be described neatly as optimistic or pessimistic, or aligned with politically Left or Right

perspectives. Instead, mindful of what Solnit calls ‘an untold history of people power’ which intersects with hope,¹ we centre the imagination, creativity, and pragmatism expressed by many of the people we encountered in theatres in towns as we researched this book.

Why theatres in towns?

Our starting point is that towns are distinct places and demand perspectives that extend beyond rural or city-focused viewpoints. But towns are notoriously difficult to define, particularly in a UK context where distinctions between towns, cities, and villages can only be understood with reference to complex and contingent layers of history. Unlike many other parts of the world where cities are classified by size and density of population, in the UK, the ceremonial title of city, a title that distinguishes cities from towns, is still conferred by Royal decree. For many rural communities, towns serve as local centres of commerce, entertainment, and civic amenities, and although the medieval practice of granting royal charters to European market towns died out long ago, the historic status of many towns remains widely celebrated as a mark of civic pride. Despite the growth of cities in recent global history, the Office for National Statistics reports that – in 2017 – over half the population of England and Wales (56%) were living in towns. The same report highlights the diversity of towns, with the definition of a town extending from small towns of 5000–20,000 to large towns of up to 225,000 people (ONS, 2019). The Centre for Towns, a non-partisan organisation founded in 2017 to build evidence-based research about UK towns, argued that towns deserve far more attention from policy-makers and researchers than they have received to date. Categorising towns by size of population (small, medium, and large) as well as by type (market, seaside, post-industrial, university, commuter, and new towns), the Centre for Towns makes the case that towns have specific qualities such as cultural, social, and economic hubs. In their Launch Briefing, Wigan MP Lisa Nandy stated:

For far too long towns have been ignored, patronised and labelled ‘left behind’ allowing the assets, skills and aspirations within them to go untapped and unrealised. Those assets are alive and well in towns like Wigan, where protecting the environment and good public services are a priority, and skills, tightly knit communities and a strong sense of shared history and identity are plentiful. With the right thinking, they hold the clue to a better future.

(Nandy, 2017, p. 1)

Despite this argument for a new focus on towns, city status remains an aspiration for many large towns in the UK, attracted by the promise of increased economic productivity and prosperity associated with cities, despite the socioeconomic inequalities that this has also produced. As Lisa Nandy infers, cities have dominated the political agenda, shaping collective understandings of what ‘good’ or productive economies might look like, including creative economies. This is also the case in the cultural sector, with the term ‘creative city’, introduced by Charles Landry in the 1990s and popularised by Richard Florida, allying the creative industries firmly to the kind of entrepreneurship and privatisation of urban space associated with neoliberalism and gentrification of the city (Mould, 2018, p. 155).

Theatre in Towns is in part motivated by a positive interest in how towns might avoid the inequalities associated with an unregulated, market-led approach to theatre and performance which many have observed in city cultures (Harvie 2013, pp. 133–134). Our discipline is dominated by analyses of performance that takes place in cities, with substantial studies addressing the performance culture of cities explicitly (McKinnie, 2007; Harvie, 2009; Whybrow, 2010), but there is surprisingly little research that engages directly with theatres in towns. There are exceptions: important historical research on regional theatre includes theatres in towns (Turnbull, 2009; Dorney and Merkin, 2010; Cochrane, 2011), and towns feature in recent studies of amateur theatre as well as socially engaged theatre (Nicholson, Holdsworth and Milling, 2018; Dunn and Hughes, 2019; Gray, 2020). There is also a significant strand of research addressing theatre in rural environments (Robinson, 2016; Edwards, 2020). By situating our research firmly in English towns, we aim to decentre theatre and performance studies by looking at contemporary theatre from another point of view. In this book we locate theatre in towns within the broader systems of cultural value and cultural economies in which they operate and, by situating our research in England, we have attempted to avoid generalisations about other UK nations. The cultural ecosystems in England’s towns tend to be organically networked, with a mixture of volunteers, professional theatre-makers, and community partners finding ways to work together to create sustainable projects and initiatives. It is important to note that productive collaborations between different parts of the cultural sector, local people, public funders, and business communities have a long and radical history in towns. Labour MP Jennie Lee’s manifesto for the arts in 1965 advocated systems of

funding in which local arts enthusiasts – both amateur and professional – worked with local businesses and local authorities to finance arts projects and events ‘that few local authorities by themselves could afford’ (Lee, 1965, p. 11).

Today’s funding landscape is even more challenging than in the 1960s. In our research we encountered theatres in towns that are at risk and where their cultural assets have either closed or are suffering from long-term neglect or threat of closure. Theatres and cultural organisations that rely on local authority funding were particularly vulnerable in the context of economic austerity, the policy adopted by successive Conservative governments following the financial crash in 2007–2008. Between 2010 and 2018 central government grants to local government reduced by 49.1% and the impact on local authority arts funding was ‘deleterious’ but regionally uneven, with decision-making varying in response to localised priorities (Rex and Campbell, 2022, p. 41). The pandemic further amplified existing socioeconomic inequalities, adding to long-term pressures on resources for health and social care services and, with rising living costs, this context continues to mean that some local authorities find it hard to justify spending their money on the arts. The cost-of-living crisis follows a long period of political turmoil in the UK, associated with the close referendum vote to leave the European Union in 2016 (‘Brexit’). Geographer Philip McCann has argued persuasively that the leave vote in towns and villages revealed a ‘geography of discontent’ fuelled by a sense that the needs of people and places outside of major cities had not been addressed by the political mainstream (McCann, 2020). This period of political turmoil has led to a raft of government-led and influenced initiatives that, during the period of our research, transformed the funding landscape for towns in England. The slogan ‘levelling up’ has been used to describe a major government-led policy initiative that aims to address longstanding inequalities of opportunity across the UK (which has the larger regional differences on multiple economic measures than countries with similar economies). While recognising the potential of such a move, political scientists Will Jennings and colleagues have argued persuasively that ‘levelling up’ is an example of government by ‘political spectacle’ designed to capture votes, and that its internal contradictions ‘may only reinforce socioeconomic divides between major cities and outlying towns’ (Jennings, McKay and Stoker, 2021, p. 307).

Nonetheless, public subsidy for the arts has followed this political trend, leading to what an Arts Council England report on creative high streets has called ‘unprecedented’ levels of investment for cultural