

**A Study of Amateur Theatre:  
Making and Making-Do**

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## Declaration of Authorship

I, Cara Gray, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed:

Date:

## Abstract

This doctoral thesis offers an analysis of the affective communities of amateur theatre. This study is motivated by the need to engage seriously with amateur dramatics as a subject of scholarly investigation, and pays particular attention to the spaces and processes involved in amateur theatre-making that are often hidden from public view. Drawing on research conducted with the Settlement Players, an amateur dramatics group situated in Letchworth Garden City, Hertfordshire, this thesis details empirical research with the group between the years 2014 and 2016. Specifically, this thesis analyses amateur dramatics as a craft and creative practice. It places focus on the people involved in backstage roles as set builders, set designers and costume-makers, aspects of theatre-making that has often been neglected by theatre and performance scholars. This interdisciplinary study foregrounds the backstage work that happens before, after and around a performance rather than the performance itself, and draws on theatre and performance studies, cultural geography and design theory to analyse the amateur theatre-makers' craft. Three empirical chapters foreground amateur dramatics as a process rather than a product, by paying particular attention to the spatial, material, embodied and technical dimensions of the amateur theatre-making over the thing produced - the play, the theatrical set, the costume. It explores how amateur theatre-makers have the capacity to transform mundane, everyday spaces through the process of their creative 'doings', and in doing so can become biographically bound to them; how amateur theatre-makers fashion workspaces within their homes and in doing so create a space in which they can perform their creative identities, outside of the theatre space; and how processes such as repair and DIY characterise the amateur theatre-makers' craft. This research speaks to debates in amateur studies, to scholars in the fields of cultural geography and design whose interests lie in the processes and spaces of amateur creativity, and to the emerging field of scholarly research into backstage work within theatre and performance.

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## Table of Contents

### Chapter One

<b>Introduction: When I first began this project, I didn't know how to use a drill .....</b>	<b>1</b>
The Project: 'Amateur Dramatics: Crafting Communities in Time and Space'.....	4
Reclaiming 'Amateur Dramatics' and 'Amateur Theatre'.....	7
Researching the Settlement Players.....	10
Chapter Outlines.....	11

### Chapter Two

<b>Part One: Conceptualising the Amateur Theatre-Makers.....</b>	<b>15</b>
For Love or Money? Conceptualising the Amateur.....	18
Geographies of Amateur Creativity: Investigating Amateur Creativity as a Process..	30
The Hidden Processes of Backstage Work.....	36
Amateur Creativity as Theatre Craft.....	40
Research into Amateur Craft.....	41
<b>Part Two: Contextualising Amateur Theatre in Letchworth Garden City.....</b>	<b>49</b>
Utopia Visions Arts and Crafts.....	51
Letchworth's Creative Amateurs.....	55

### Chapter Three

<b>My Methodological Toolkit: Researching Amateur Theatre-Making.....</b>	<b>59</b>
Beginning My Research: Meeting Pat and John.....	63
Becoming a Set Builder with the Settlement Players.....	74
Apprenticeship as Method: Learning Whilst Learning To-Do <i>With</i> Creative Practitioners.....	81
Tools of Research: Recording Conversation and Fieldnotes.....	86
Apprenticeship and Storytelling.....	91
A Visual Methodology: Telling a Craft Story Through More Than Just Words.....	96
The Camera as an Introduction.....	97
A Collaboration Between Words and Photographs.....	103
Capabilities of the Camera: Capturing Movement.....	108
Research Methods and Textures of Communication.....	113

### Chapter Four

<b>Theatre-Making with the Building: the Settlement and its Players.....</b>	<b>116</b>
Co-Authoring the Settlement Players' Craft Story: the Settlement.....	116
A History of the Settlement: Telling a Local Story about a Theatre in a Skittles Alley.....	120
Understanding the Settlement Players as Architectural Practitioners.....	125
Section One: Intervening.....	129

Intervening into the Fabric of the Settlement: The Trout.....	129
Section Two: Re-Programming.....	138
Understanding the Settlement Building as a Multi-Purpose Space.....	138
Example One: The Carpark/The Set Builders' Workshop.....	142
Example Two: The Evans Room (Ladies Dressing Room)/The Set Builders' Tearoom.....	147
Example Three: The Kincaid Hall and the Green Room/ A Theatre and Box Office.....	154
Re-Programming in Time and Space: Concluding Thoughts.....	159
Section Three: Learning to Set Build <i>with</i> the Settlement Building.....	160
Theatre-Making and Relationships with a Co-Authored Place: Concluding Thoughts.....	170

## Chapter Five

<b>Amateur Spaces of Creativity: Exploring the (Home) Studio of the Amateur Theatre-Maker.....</b>	<b>171</b>
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Complicating Ideas of the Conventional Studio.....	174
Crafting a Studio in the Home: 'Making Do' with Temporal Workspaces.....	179
Working with Temporality Studio: John's Studio (The Front Room).....	184
A Clipboard as a Drafting Table.....	190
'Living with the Drama': Jeni's Studio.....	193
'Making Do': The Stairs and the Dressmaker's Dummy.....	197
Jeni's Desk: It's a reminder that there is more to me than research and teaching, like colour and ribbon and fabric.....	201
Where Creativity Happens: Concluding Thoughts.....	209

## Chapter Six

<b>Ways of Working: Repair, Problem Solving and Creative Camaraderie.....</b>	<b>212</b>
---	------------

### Section One

Repair as a Process of Making: Understanding the 'Ongoingness' of the Amateur Theatre-Makers' Craft.....	216
--	-----

An Example of Repair: Stripping the Scenery Flats: <i>A Servant to Two Masters</i> .....	219
--	-----

An Example of Repair: Striking the Set for <i>My Own Show</i> .....	225
---	-----

Section Two.....	236
------------------	-----

Repurposing: Set Building with an Adhocist's Sensibility.....	236
---	-----

Example of Repurposing: Building Miss. Wilberforce's House <i>with</i> a Set of Industrial Shelving Units.....	240
--	-----

Section Three.....	249
--------------------	-----

DIY and Creative Camaraderie.....	249
-----------------------------------	-----

'You can have a go at anything': Understanding the Players as DIYers.....	251
---	-----

'Doing-It-With'.....	257
----------------------	-----

An Example of 'Doing-It-With': Painting the Scenery Flats with Stephen.....	258
---	-----

Creative Camaraderie: Concluding Thoughts About What 'Just Works'.....	265
--	-----

<b>Chapter Seven</b>	
<b>Concluding Thoughts.....</b>	<b>269</b>
Understanding Amateur Theatre-Making as a Craft and Creative Practice: Four Themes.....	270
1. Repair, remaking, repurposing: understanding the ‘ongoingness’ of amateur theatre-making.....	271
2. The relationship with the building.....	272
3. Amateur theatre-making in the home.....	274
4. Creative camaraderie: crafting a community through the crafting of a set.....	275
Implications of my Research.....	276
An Attention to Amateur Creativities in Drama and Theatre: Participation and the Audience.....	276
Amateur Performance Space.....	281
Geographies of Amateur Creativity: Geographies of Amateur Creativity: Hobbies, Leisure and Volunteering.....	283
Amateur Creative Spaces and ‘Slow Scholarship’.....	286
‘The Amateur’ and Affective Engagement.....	289
Amateur Creativities and Policy Implications.....	294
Final Reflection.....	278
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>299</b>





# 1

## Introduction:

### **When I first began this research project, I didn't know how to use a drill**

One Sunday morning in April 2015, in a community hall in Letchworth Garden City, I found myself standing with a drill in hand that I had no idea how to use. I was dressed for the part, wearing my boyfriend's old shirt and a pair of ripped jeans (that were ready to be thrown away) and my trainers - faintly speckled with white paint from the week before. Surrounding me were the busied bodies of the other Settlement Players set builders - carrying wood, propping up ladders, scrambling through a cleaner's caddy full of screws and nails. John balanced precariously from the top step of a ladder above me, reaching out to adjust the stage curtains, unfazed by the height. Meanwhile, backstage, I could hear the familiar raspy sound of a hand saw cutting through wood and the scratchy shuffling of feet. My notebook, along with my camera - my 'tools' of research - sat on the side of the stage with the rest of the set builders' coats and bags. I felt confident in using those tools, but not the drill. 'Are you alright?' asked Graham. My ineptness at tool-handling was evidently painted across my face. 'The screw doesn't seem to be going in properly' I replied, 'something seems a bit stuck... or is it the wood, is it too hard? Or is the screw bent?' Graham took the drill, gave it a try and then looked at it again. 'Ah...no you just have it going the wrong way' he said, kindly, 'easy mistake to make'.

'A drill goes two ways?'

When I began this project I wasn't anticipating that I'd learn how to use a drill, nor acquire the skills to seam scenery flats together (I did not even know what 'seaming' meant). I certainly did not expect to build five sets with an amateur theatre

company. However, as I am writing this introduction at the very end of the research process, what I have learnt is that drill bits, hammers, paintbrushes and screws can be integral to a research project.

This thesis explores the often hidden spaces and processes of amateur theatre-making by placing significant focus on the people involved in backstage roles such as set builders, designers and costumes makers. Backstage workers (both professional and amateur) are integral to how theatre is actually *made*, yet they are rarely acknowledged within the academy. In response to this, my study pays particular attention to backstage workers and their processes of theatre-making by investigating the spatial, material, embodied and technical elements therein. Thus, in this thesis I am concerned with theatre-in-the-making by privileging the moments before and after a production, rather than analysing the ‘finished’ product of the amateur performance, or indeed the set or costume. What this thesis seeks to illuminate is how amateur theatre-makers must often make by making do.

This study is partly inspired by the creative turn, or indeed (re)turn, within cultural geography, which I encountered as an MA student (2011-2012). At this time geographer Harriet Hawkins wrote ‘Dialogues and Doings: Sketching the Relationship Between Geography and Art’ (2011) which highlighted the ways in which geographers had, and were continuing to, engage with artistic practices in their research.<sup>1</sup> Her article outlined two ways in which this was being done – firstly through *dialogues* - ‘whereby geographers interpret and analyse art works’ (2011: 464), and secondly through *doings* – referring to the growing body of ‘creative geographies’ in which geographers ‘collaborate with artists or curators to make-work, carry out research, develop exhibitions or practice various different creative techniques’ (2011: 465). This approach informed my MA research, which focussed on working *with* photographer Charlie Jay in order to uncover the creative processes involved in his particular photographic practice, working with a large

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<sup>1</sup> Since ‘Dialogues and Doings’, Hawkins has written widely on the subject of creative geographies, however at the time of my MA, it was still an emerging field (2013, 2017).

format film camera.<sup>2</sup> My intrigue at the ways in which researchers continue to work with creative practitioners, as well as utilising creative practice as part of a research method, has since deepened and inspired my approach to amateur theatre in this PhD. This time my research had a significant focus on the geographies of amateur creativity.

My research for this thesis has been informed by the idea of ‘doings’ and the idea of working *with* amateur theatre-makers rather than researching *on*. As part of my research process, between January 2015 and February 2016, I became a set builder with the Settlement Players, an amateur theatre group in Letchworth Garden City, Hertfordshire. The complication of roles is part of the work of this thesis, with my negotiating roles as researcher and set builder within an amateur theatre group forming an important part of how my research was conducted and how it has been subsequently told.

Interestingly, I was not alone in complicating roles. As part of a crew of amateur set builders trying to professionalise myself as a researcher by undertaking a PhD, I found that there were others that shared this feeling of being at once amateur and, in complex ways, someone with developing professional expertise. Although I was the only researcher at the Settlement, there were others who were negotiating the amateur/ professional divide in other ways. I met Michael for the first time during a Sunday set building session for Georgina Reid’s *Ladies of Spirit* in October 2015. Whilst carefully painting the sashes and grilles of a ‘window’ that had been constructed onstage the week before (all while trying not to get paint on the woven mesh material stapled to the back of the window in place of glass), we spoke about what had brought us both to set building. I asked Michael whether he was, or ever had been, involved in amateur dramatics and whether he will consider acting with the Players, or was it the backstage work that interested him. Rather humbly he told

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<sup>2</sup> Through ethnographic research, I followed the production of Jay’s photo series entitled ‘The Island’, which captured the Isle of Dogs, London during the time of the 2012 Olympic games. Helping him carry his equipment on six o’clock in the morning shoots, and assisting in the setting up of his shots, afforded with the opportunity to follow the embodied, material, spatial and technical dimensions of his practice.

me that acting was actually his profession and that, since leaving drama school, he had performed in the West End and in theatres all over the United Kingdom, as well as appearing in television and film. I told him that I was researching and writing a PhD on amateur dramatics and that I was interested in the backstage work processes of set building, and what goes on before and after a play is performed - unseen by an audience. I explained how this kind of theatre-making has often be ignored in academia. ‘And in the theatre!’ replied Michael. He continued:

As an actor, it’s great to see and be involved in the backstage work and not take these processes for granted... You turn up to a job and you put so much trust in the set builders...trusting that they have done a good job and that the set will work and not break. I wanted to be a part of that. When I can.<sup>3</sup>

What I shared with Michael was that we were both interested in what had been surprisingly taken for granted both inside and seemingly outside of academia. For both of us in particular, being part of the set building group was about learning and understanding, from the inside, what it means to make theatre and be an amateur theatre-maker through ‘doing’. And so, as a result of this, during the process of my research I became proficient in drilling holes for scenery, seaming flats together, wallpapering. None of these skills I expected to acquire when I started my PhD.

### **The Project:**

#### **‘Amateur Dramatics: Crafting Communities in Time and Space’**

My PhD contributes to a wider Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded research project entitled ‘Amateur Dramatics: Crafting Communities in

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<sup>3</sup> Michael, fieldbook notes, 1/11/15.

Time and Space’ as part of the Connected Communities Scheme.<sup>4</sup> The project has been the first fully funded academic study of amateur theatre in the England and has sought to understand the importance of amateur companies to their communities. Despite the scale and scope of amateur dramatics, both playing an active role in the life of many communities and being an integral part of everyday life for many people, there has been almost no academic research on it at all.<sup>5</sup> In addition to this, amateur theatre has received little support from funding councils, charities, local authorities or professional theatres. In light of this, the project sought to take seriously the traditions, heritage, repertoire communities, and craft involved in amateur theatre.

The project aimed to answer questions concerning three themes – ‘community and place’, ‘craft and repertoire’ and ‘heritage and tradition’. These questions sought to investigate, amongst other things, how (and if) amateur theatre companies create, sustain and challenge their communities; the social and cultural significance of amateur dramatics as a craft, creative practice, entertainment and heritage; how participation fosters friendships over time; how amateur theatre is valued as part of a local heritage and how companies evolve, mark and celebrate traditions over time. Given the wide range of amateur activity within theatre, the project was split into three case studies which further defined the scope of the project; giving us as researchers the opportunity to explore these questions through more embodied understandings and closer readings. After all amateur theatre is often very local, and very particular to place. Each of the case studies explored amateur theatre-makers in different contexts, settings and conceptual lenses. However, as a group of researchers from the arts and humanities, all case studies focussed on the social and cultural significance of amateur theatre, rather than collecting statistics that may be more reflective of research undertaken in the social sciences.

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<sup>4</sup>The project ran from July 2013 – December 2016.

<sup>5</sup>The report *Our Creative Talent* (DCMS and Arts Council England, 2008) highlighted that 1.8 million people are involved in amateur theatre across England, and over 21 million people attended an amateur theatre performance in that year.

The project's three case studies included 'Performing Rural Community', 'Amateur Dramatics and the Navy' and 'Amateur Dramatics in Urban Utopias' and each sought to illuminate past and present cultural participation in three different non-metropolitan communities. 'Performing Rural Community' conducted by Jane Milling the University of Exeter, looked at the role of amateur dramatics in the construction, contestation and sustaining of community identity in rural village life in Devon. It questioned, amongst other things, how village theatre groups have managed to sustain their cultural activity over such long periods of time and examined the impact of their work on the perception of a village, and sense of community. Meanwhile, Erin Walcon, (also from University of Exeter) responded to the study by offering a survey of the socio-economic value of amateur dramatics to communities. Walcon recently co-wrote an article with Helen Nicholson entitled 'The Sociable Aesthetics of Amateur Theatre' (2017) as part of her research. In it they explored amateur theatre as a cultural practice, through the sociable encounters and bonds that are made and maintained in amateur theatre through shared experiences.

'Amateur Dramatics and the Navy' conducted by Nadine Holdsworth and Sarah Penny from the University of Warwick, explored the long standing tradition of amateur theatre in the Royal Navy and its significance in sustaining and revitalising naval communities, both at sea and on land. Penny, my fellow PhD student on the project, has drawn on archival research and interviews to explore the historical theatrical events that have occurred on board Royal Navy ships in the twentieth century. Penny's research has placed focus on SODS Operas, ritual performances and concert parties, whilst illuminating the resourcefulness of participants involved in creating theatre despite the limited resources available to them at sea. Meanwhile, Holdsworth's recent article 'Performing Place, Heritage and *Henry V* in Portsmouth Historic District' (2016) discusses the relationship between amateur performance and heritage on land, specifically looking at the Royal Navy Theatre

Association's open air performance of *Henry V* that took place in Portsmouth's Historic Dockyard in 2013.

Finally 'Amateur Dramatics in Urban Utopias', conducted by Helen Nicholson and myself from Royal Holloway, University of London has sought to analyse the role of amateur dramatics in constructed communities including Garden Cities, post-war new town, suburbia and Metroland. The geographical parameters that came with being part of the project directed my research specifically towards Letchworth Garden City, a town that has a significant amateur dramatic past, of which I will explore later in more detail. Since researching for this thesis, this area of study has also been explored by Cathy Turner in her book *Dramaturgy and Architecture* (2015) that explored drama in Letchworth in the early twentieth century.

As a geographer joining a drama and theatre research project, I knew that my interest in this area came from a desire to understand and develop understandings of the spaces and processes involved in amateur creative practice, specifically that of amateur theatre-makers. Thus, my contribution to the wider project has been to conceptualise and explore amateur dramatics as a creative practice and a craft. By focussing on a particular place - Letchworth Garden City - and a particular amateur theatre company within this place, I recognise that creativity is both sited and situated.

### **Reclaiming 'Amateur Dramatics' and 'Amateur Theatre'**

Over the past four years, we as a project have sought to investigate amateur dramatics in its own right. This has meant investigating amateur dramatics in its most traditional sense, exploring locally organised theatre groups who often stage plays in village and town halls, schools, community centres and small local theatres. This focus sits in contrast to, what Holdsworth, Milling and Nicholson highlight as,

a ‘long-held interest’ within the academy to research non-professional actors (usually local members of the community) involved in ‘small to large-scale participatory theatre projects, which are largely initiated and animated by [paid] professional theatre-makers’ (2016: 10). Therefore, we have focussed our attentions on amateur theatre companies who are solely devoted to making theatre, as opposed to amateur performers in professional shows; community theatre led by professional artists, who are funded to engage local people in theatre; or indeed social organisations such as the Scouts or the Women’s Institute who sometimes put on their own productions. However, in the second strand of our project on amateur theatre entitled ‘For Love or Money: Collaboration Between Amateur and Professional Theatre’, Molly Flynn visited participating companies across England and observed rehearsals and workshops involved in the The RSC’s Open Stages Programme. Her recently published article ‘Amateur hour: culture, capital, and the Royal Shakespeare Company’s Open Stages initiative’ (2017) explores this more.

Further to investigating amateur dramatics in its most traditional sense, rather than shying away from the expressions ‘amateur dramatics’, ‘amateur theatre’ or indeed ‘am dram’, we have instead embraced them, whilst seeking to re-evaluate their derogatory associations. The word amateur is a very powerful word, carrying with it many associations that are constantly being challenged. However, when used in regards to theatre and performance, it brings with it a whole other particular set of pejorative associations that are constantly played out in the popular imagination. ‘To call someone an ‘amateur’, Nicholson writes, ‘or to suggest that a performance is ‘amateurish’ is often taken as an insult, conjuring images of the self-congratulatory thespians and poor production values’ (2015: 263). These associations are often played out in popular culture too. Think only of the embarrassingly bad amateur dramatics production of Robert E. Sherwood’s *The Petrified Forest* by the Laurel Players, detailed in Richard Yates’ novel *Revolutionary Road* (1961), later played out again in the book’s film adaptation; or the ‘Legz Akimbo’ amateur theatre company in the comedy television series *The League of Gentlemen*, led by egocentric director/



lead actor Ollie Plimsolls whose narcissistic behaviour compromises every performance.

As a project, we were expecting discussions around the term ‘amateur dramatics’, rather than for example ‘amateur theatre’, ‘local theatre’, or indeed ‘community theatre’. In my research specifically, one of the first people that I met Pat Baskerville, who is a long-standing member of the Settlement Players (actress, director, costume, stage manager, properties, sound and lighting, prompting and publicity), discussed the amateur terminology and the less than kind associations surrounding the term ‘amdram’ during our first meeting. Pat explained to me that a while ago, some of the group, including herself, had discussed alternatives to the title ‘amateur theatre group’, as they were conscious of what the word ‘amateur’ as a prefix to ‘theatre’ or ‘dramatics’ conjured in terms of their repertoire. ‘I have thought in the past how I wish there was a better title for what we do’, she said, before explaining how they had considered referring to themselves as a ‘community theatre’. However, community theatre already came with its own associations and didn’t best describe what they were doing as a group.<sup>6</sup> ‘And then we thought about ‘adult theatre’, she said, ‘but that...well that sort of suggests something else entirely’. We laughed and then Pat continued:

We want to be taken seriously and when you talk about amateur theatre or amateur dramatics, people can think the opposite. We stage a varied repertoire, and we do take it very seriously. But the terms amateur theatre or amateur dramatics make people think of pantomimes and badly done theatre that is painful to sit through... I’m not saying that doesn’t exist, but not everywhere!

The cultural stereotypes and popular imaginings that surround amateur dramatics - competitive prima donnas who get the best parts for every performance by being

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<sup>6</sup> Baz Kershaw describes community theatre as ‘alternative groups aimed to promote radical socio-political ideologies in relatively conservative contexts’ (1992: 18).

part of an amdram ‘dynasty’, repertoires that are tired and perhaps distasteful, and sets that are carelessly put together and a little shaky - have often remained unquestioned and unscrutinised within the academy (and indeed outside of it). However, these cultural stereotypes, and indeed the reluctance to challenge them, can be harmful. As demonstrated by my conversation with Pat, amateur theatre-makers themselves often feel that the theatre that they make is worth more than these reductionist associations. Throughout this project, I have worked with and met many people who strongly identify as ‘amateurs’, whilst not subscribing to the derogative terms that are associated with it. Meanwhile, in the academy, by not questioning these associations, we as scholars fail to understand amateur theatre as an important social and cultural practice that ‘contributes to the making of people, communities and places’ (Holdsworth *et al.* 2016: 11). To accept these stereotypes is to overlook the community building, learning of craft skills and knowledge (obtained over many years of dedication), serious creative inputs, the construction and maintenance of creative identities and camaraderie involved in amateur theatre.

In this way, my thesis aims to contribute the AHRC project’s reclaiming of the word amateur from its derogative associations, whilst aiming to challenge perceptions of amateur creativity and contribute to debates about the cultural significance of the amateur. Throughout this thesis, I use both terms ‘amateur theatre’ and ‘amateur dramatics’ interchangeably

### **Researching the Settlement Players**

The research for this thesis was undertaken with the Settlement Players, who have been an amateur theatre group since 1923. They perform within the Settlement (an adult education centre) in Letchworth Garden City, Hertfordshire. The Settlement Players’ repertoire is characteristic of many amateur companies – they perform with small casts and stage both old and new plays. The Players produce three main productions a year, which are staged in February, June and November. The main

shows usually run over a period of three nights. In addition to this they hold one-act nights in April and September, which usually run for one night only. In addition to this, the Players also take part in drama festivals around the local area.

I researched with the Settlement Players between the years of 2014 and 2016. During this time, I was able to follow and take part in the building the sets for over a year's worth of productions. I began building in January 2015 and finished in February 2016 and over this time, I was able to work on the production of five plays. Four of the plays involved the building of a permanent set on stage at the Settlement, and these were Lesley Bruce's *My Own Show*, Graham Linehan's *The Ladykillers*, Georgina Reid's *Ladies of Spirit* and finally Lee Hall's *A Servant to Two Masters*. In addition to this, I worked on a drama festival set for David Campton's *After Midnight, Before Dawn. After Midnight, Before Dawn*, which involved building a fully collapsible set that was packed up in various cars and a van and taken away to be performed as part of two drama festivals in the surrounding towns of Sawston and Welwyn Garden City. Although I attended all of the productions that I helped build a set for (as well as more productions that I didn't work on, both before and after my time as set builder), this thesis will not examine any of the Settlement Players' finished productions or sets. All of the ethnographic research that informs this thesis happened in the moments before and after the performances and focuses on the processes of making.

## Chapter Outlines

This thesis is made up of seven chapters, three of which are empirical. In the chapter that follows, Chapter Two, I seek to find a way of understanding and conceptualising the contemporary amateur theatre-maker in the cultural environment of the twenty-first century. I look to multiple disciplines from cultural geography, theatre studies, anthropology, sociology and design theory to provide different conceptual lenses for my study. In the second half of this chapter I

contextualise the place in which my study takes place, Letchworth Garden City. Here through historical readings and archival visits I trace Letchworth's amateur dramatic past.

In Chapter Three I explore the methodology that I designed in order to research amateur theatre which brought together an amalgamation of research methods from theatre studies, cultural geography and anthropology. I detail how methods such as ethnography, apprenticeship, storytelling and visual methods allowed me to follow and capture the often hidden creative processes of the amateur theatre-maker. In this chapter I will explore both the methodological ideas and their practical application, whilst preserving an understanding of my methodology as a process of discovery in itself. In addition, I look at the methodological dilemmas that arose whilst trying to negotiate my roles as both researcher and set builder.

In Chapter Four, the first of three empirical chapters, I consider the ways in which the Settlement Players work *with* the building with which they share their name. I shall explore how the process of their theatre-making and craft has the capacity to transform it in imaginative and unpredictable ways. I'll do this firstly, by examining the Settlement Players' intervention into the fabric of the Settlement building claiming small parts of a multi-purpose for themselves. Secondly, I illuminate the ways in which the Settlement Players transform (however temporary) spaces within the Settlement - detailing how a carpark transforms into a set building workshop with the assistance of foldable worktables and surrounding walls and shrubbery; how a dressing room is temporarily used as a set builders tearoom and continuously used as a storeroom; and how a multi-purpose hall is transformed into a theatre with stackable chairs and collapsible tables. In turn, I shall also consider how the materiality of the Settlement building holds the ability to shape and influence their work. In exploring these ideas, I shall highlight the relational interconnectedness between the two: the Settlement building and its Players.

In Chapter Five I explore the home as a space of amateur creativity, discovering what it means when a living room or spare room becomes a studio of amateur theatre-making. Of specific interest to this chapter are the homes of two amateur theatre-makers within the Settlement Players – John, who designs sets and Jeni, who makes and alters costumes. Drawing on interviews, photographs and research visits conducted during my time as set builder, I reflect on the domestic creative spaces of the amateur theatre-maker, illuminating the social and material relationship therein. I explore how John and Jeni fashion workspaces or studios within their homes to work on aspects of the play, away from their theatre space. In doing so I analyse the intersecting embodied, material and technical narratives that weave throughout their creative spaces. I shall explore how, for these two amateur theatre-makers, altering clothes in their spare bedrooms and designing sets in their living rooms can create a space in which they can form and perform their creative identities, outside of the theatre space.

In Chapter Six, the last of my empirical chapters, I return back to the Settlement to draw attention to the set builders' particular ways of working on building sets. I do this by separating the chapter out into three sections, with each section exploring a different aspect of the Settlement Players particular craft. Firstly I shall explore the ways in which the Settlement Players are in a constant state of re-making sets through the continuous repair and maintenance of their materials. Secondly, I explore the Players' resourcefulness and problem solving by looking at the ways in which they inventively repurpose materials and objects to create their sets. Finally, I illuminate how these processes come together to characterise the Players' sets whilst creating a sense of community and a 'creative camaraderie'.

Finally, in Chapter Seven, the concluding chapter of this thesis, I reflect on my research on amateur theatre-making and the contributions that I have made to varied fields, whilst finally proposing some implications arising from this study. Taken as a whole, this thesis contributes to the fields of creative geographies, to the

emerging fields of amateur studies, as well as the understudied area of backstage work within theatre studies.

## 2

### Part One: Conceptualising the Amateur Theatre-Maker

If, as Shannon Jackson observed, the late twentieth century was marked by a social turn in contemporary performance, the amateur turn is its twenty-first-century counterpart (Holdsworth *et al*, 2016: 6)

Amateur theatre continues to be an integral part of everyday life for people across the country and indeed the world. In the joint research report ‘Reflecting on Amateur Theatre Research’ (2016), put together by our combined projects on the AHRC-funded project, it is noted that in the United Kingdom alone, there are over 2,300 affiliated drama and musical theatre groups and more than 3,000 unaffiliated and smaller scale youth groups performing over 10,000 musicals, dramas, comedies and original pieces every year. However, amateur dramatics, quite surprisingly, has been a subject long overlooked by the academy. Published work on amateur theatre, in the past, has primarily focussed on historical accounts. These have included Clare Cochrane’s exploration into the cultural significance of amateur theatre in pre-Second World War Welsh communities, where she looked at how these performances enabled the playing out of cultural identities amongst actors and audience members (2003). Later, in his book *Shakespeare and Amateur Performance* (2011), Michael Dobson investigated the ways in which amateur performance has allowed Shakespeare’s canon to live over the last four hundred years. In the same year as Dobson, theatre historians Judith Hawley and Mary Isbell, and their contributing authors, documented the history of ‘private theatricals’ in their latest collection ‘Amateur Theatre in the Long Nineteenth Century’ (2011). Through this lens, they were able to investigate amateur performances typically performed by the upper and middle classes in the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries. What is made clear, through this collection of historiographical studies, is the lack of scholarly

attention directed towards conceptualising and understanding of contemporary amateur theatre. The central concern of this chapter is to do just that.

Contemporary amateur theatre-makers are, of course, indebted to their predecessors, and I shall begin this first part of the chapter by tracing the amateur figure and their practice over time. Rather than offering a detailed historical survey, the aim is to place today's amateur theatre companies in relation to the past. This section will follow aristocratic amateurs working on their embroidery in eighteenth-century parlours, through to amateurs appearing on *The Great British Bake Off* and becoming YouTube celebrities in the twenty-first century. By doing this I hope to highlight how meanings attributed to the amateur have evolved and been challenged over time. Woven throughout, I shall discuss the work of a surprisingly limited amount of scholars who have conceptualised and defined amateur creativity as a social and cultural practice themselves, through a variety of perspectives. These studies were a starting point for me in my own research - from understanding what amateurism is in its distinction from professional practice, and as a mode of creativity that exists outside of economic gain, as a driving force of the twenty-first century and as an emotional affiliation.

From here, I shall seek to define my own understanding of amateur creativity. Specifically I am interested in how amateur theatre can be conceptualised as a creative practice that can be explored through the processes involved in its making. To do this, I borrow from anthropologist Tim Ingold who has argued, persuasively, that creativity should be read 'forwards' (2011). In his explanation of this idea, Ingold suggests that, while a lot of studies in art and material culture begin by analysing the artefact or 'finished' object and work backwards towards the intentions of the artist, creativity should instead be read by following the ongoing processes involved in its making. This offers a useful theoretical concept through which to examine amateur creative practice, and amateur theatre-making more specifically. To illuminate this idea further, I will discuss how, in the fields of



cultural geography, architecture and theatre studies, scholars have attended to the everyday processes, spaces, materialities and sociabilities of making and production over the ‘finished’ object or artefact produced in their own research.

Building on this work, which has placed primacy on the processes involved in creative practice, I shall turn my attention to recent studies in theatre and performance that have started to attend to the backstage work processes involved in theatre-making. Here, scholars have sought to investigate what has been described by Elizabeth Osborne and Christine Woodworth as, the ‘hidden’ ‘invisible’ or ‘oft-ignored’ work of the ‘people who create theatre itself’ (2015: 10). In doing so they have also highlighted its ‘backstage’ status within scholarly conversations around theatre (2015: 10). In response to this, the limited amount of work in this area, so far, has focussed on the processes of technicians and stagehands working in the wings during the performance itself. In this section I shall discuss these works whilst positioning my own research within this burgeoning, but under-researched, area of study. Finally, I shall situate my work in amongst growing scholarly investigations into the subject of amateur craft that has yet to explore amateur theatre-maker. These studies have started to take seriously the under represented spaces, processes of amateur craft, revealing the binaries between professional and amateur practice as blurred and more nuanced than simply ‘good’ and ‘bad’.

This chapter is formed of two parts. In this first part, as outlined above, I will explore the ways in which I have approached, conceptualised and sought to understand amateur theatre throughout the course of my research. As a geographer approaching this project, it was also important for me to recognise that creativity always happens in place. In her book *Creativity* (2017), Hawkins writes how creativity always has its own particular set of geographies, spatial dimensions and can be understood through looking at the particularities of the local. She writes:

In what ways do we make sense to conceive of creativity as having a geography? Creativity happens in lots of different places, does it matter where? Does the location of creative endeavours make any difference to their content and conduct? Further, does the creative activity affect the sites and venues at which it happens? The answer to all of these questions is yes. Creativity, in short, has a whole set of geographies, and in turn creative practices produce geographies, they make place, shape bodies, subjectivities and minds in those conducting them, and weave together communities and evolve environments (2017: 2).

Therefore, in the second part of this chapter, ‘The Amateur in Letchworth Garden City’ I turn my attention to the context and place in which my research takes place. Following the town’s history through a series of small stories about its conception and design to provide an understanding of how and why amateur creativity has become such an important aspect of Letchworth life.

### **For Love or Money? Conceptualising the Amateur**

Amateur is a powerful word, eliciting strong emotions (Nicholson, 2015: 263)

The word ‘amateur’ is rooted in the Latin word ‘amare’ meaning to love, and ‘amator’ meaning lover. This would suggest, as design scholars Gerry Beegan and Paul Atkinson write, that the amateur is ‘someone who loves what they do and does it for its own sake rather than financial reward’ (2008: 310). Yet amateurism as a practice is often treated with condescension, with ‘amateur’ becoming a derogative term, synonymous with the idea of someone who is naïve or unskilled within their chosen pursuit.

The term amateur has a complicated history. In his book *Amateur Craft* (2015), design historian Stephen Knott presents an insightful history of the word and charts its changing meanings and associations. He notes how, the word amateur ‘has not always required scholarly defence’ (2015: xiii) and that during the latter half of the eighteenth century in Europe, amateurism was associated with aristocratic pursuits such as travel writing, husbandry and scientific discovery. At one time, being an amateur was associated with activities that were undertaken for the love of the activity itself. Leadbeater and Miller, writing about definitions of the amateur, argue that the ‘gentlemanly amateurs of old’ could communicate their ability to spare time and money in pursuit of an activity for its own sake, rather than for a financial reward (2004: 12). Meanwhile, Glenn Adamson writes how aristocratic women spent their time in “accomplishments” such as quillwork, embroidery, and decorative painting’ (2013: 140). He writes how:

If a young lady had the time in which to master such conspicuously wasteful crafts, one could be sure that she was a member of the leisure class (2013: 140)

During this time, the social élite also indulged in producing their own private amateur theatricals, for pleasure rather than profit. These private theatricals often took place in the great country houses of the gentry,<sup>7</sup> where Helen Brooks writes:

[T]he audience was mostly made up of invited guests and where theatrical performances were often part of wider festivities which might include masques, balls, ‘pic-nic’ suppers, and games of cards (2011: 1).

Here amateur theatricals were a way of signifying taste and a means of cultivation and championing self-improvement.

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<sup>7</sup> David Coates’ upcoming PhD thesis titled ‘Private and Amateur Theatricals in Britain’s great houses 1830-1914’ will explore more broadly the issues arising from private and amateur theatricals in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. His thesis investigates amateur theatricals taking place in purpose built theatres and private drawing rooms in both country and city houses. Through these investigations, he highlights the importance of theatricals in the social lives of the middle and upper classes at that time.

Knott writes that conventional and accepted ideas about the amateur were disrupted during the Industrial Revolution in Britain (1750-1850), suggesting that, ‘a more heterogeneous understanding of amateur practice emerged with economic growth and industrial progress’ (2015: xiii). By the nineteenth century, he notes, the changing working culture that the industrial age brought with it meant that a growing middle class had spare time to fill outside of their working day. In the history of craft specifically, this spare time coupled with a greater access to artistic tools, materials and how-to manuals (due to their increased commercial production) signalled amateur practice as an enjoyable, voluntary and most importantly productive pursuit. It was at this time, Knott writes, that amateur practice became more ‘associated with conditions of making (labour)’ than the ‘curiosity or a love of acquiring knowledge’ that characterised the aristocratic amateur (2015, xiii). In photography, for example, as Beegan and Atkinson point out, British photographers who wished to distance themselves from the commercial limitations that beset high street professionals, took on the term amateur to distinguish themselves from other practitioners (2008). Amateur photographers wanted to define themselves as artistic rather than commercial and so practiced outside of the studio. Their interests, as Becky Simmons notes, ‘fell outside professional and financial concerns’ (2008: 31).

As amateur practice grew during the nineteenth century, it increasingly became aligned in opposition to professional practice, an alignment that still very much exists to this day. Knott writes that:

The presumed threat of higher levels of skill among amateur craftspeople sowed the seeds for the dichotomization of amateur practice from professional practice as artisans, craftsmen and artists used the word amateur pejoratively to denote lack of commitment, poor skill and ineptitude rather than doing something for its own sake (2015: xiv).

Here, professional practice accrued associations of ‘expertise, skill and excellence’; associations that, Knott suggests, were tied to its ‘monetary remuneration’ (2015: xvi). Gradually, professionalisation of practice became specialist and exclusionary, barring individuals from participation on account of their education, class, gender, ethnicity and money (Beegan and Atkinson, 2008). Amateur practice meanwhile accumulated a more derogative set of associations that are often still appropriated to it today.

In the case of the theatre, more specifically, Brooks writes how the nineteenth century too signalled the beginning of practitioners recognising themselves as ‘professional’, whilst theatre itself was attempting to ‘define itself as a profession’ (2011: 10). She describes how theatre practitioners, especially actors, were trained and their talents cultivated by senior members of their respective theatre companies. This in turn provided theatre with a specialist, regulated and ‘mysterious’ status. Private amateur theatricals, meanwhile, operating outside of these regulations and training, started to challenge the idea ‘that performance was either ‘mysterious’ or specialist’ (2011: 6).

Contemporary amateur theatre has become differentiated from professional theatre, despite in practice the distinction being rather more blurred than is often thought. One way to understand amateur practice, however, is through its distinction from the professionalisation of creative practice in the nineteenth century. Geographers Tim Edensor, Deborah Leslie, Steve Millington and Norma M. Rantisi have explored how this binary is understood today in their book *Spaces of Vernacular Creativity* (2009). *Spaces of Vernacular Creativity* foregrounds the non-economic values and outcomes of alternative and quotidian creative practices, along with the often marginal and everyday spaces in which this sort of creativity takes shape. In their introduction ‘Rethinking Creativity: Critiquing the Creative Class Thesis’, Edensor et al argue for a rethinking of what constitutes as creativity and ‘who, what and where is considered “creative” (2009: 1). In doing so they set up a clear

distinction between the commercial and professionalised creativity found in the city, and the vernacular, amateur or everyday creativities that they see happening outside of it.

In setting up this distinction, they critique the work of social scientist Richard Florida and his concept of the ‘creative class’. The concept of the creative class was first developed by Florida in his book *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002), which placed focus on the economic value of creative work. Florida’s definition of the creative class revolves around the paid work of the entrepreneurial and cosmopolitan workers, engaged in areas of work such as the arts and cultural sectors, research, science, law and technology. He presents that the creative class choose to live in cities, and what he calls ‘creative centres’, with high concentrations of other ‘creative class people’ (2003: 8). These creative centres are seen to provide the creative class with an ‘integrated ecosystem or habitat’ in which their creativity can flourish (2003: 9). They also create significant innovation and economic outcomes, whilst also acting as validation to the creative class’ own creative identities.

Edensor and his fellow authors are critical of Florida’s commodification of creativity but acknowledge that it became an influential thesis to policy makers and scholars alike. The creative class, they suggest, advocates a ‘geographical specificity’, an inadequate privilege of ‘large metropolitan centres as sites of cultural production’ (2009: 5), which in turn creates a ‘spatial ‘other’ (2009: 1). This ‘spatial other’ relates to amateurs, and can be used to describe suburbia as well as ‘working-class estates, streets, homes, garages, sheds and gardens’ (2009: 12). They suggest that when these spaces are juxtaposed with the dominant narratives surrounding the spectacular creative nature of the metropolitan creative centres, they are often dismissed as ‘cultural deserts devoid of coolness’ and indeed creativity, where what is produced is overlooked and trivialised (2009: 1). Here, the metropolitan is caught up in relation with the non-metropolitan, coolness with the un-cool, and creativity

is caught up in relation with what is thought to be ‘not creative’. To counter this, throughout their book, contributing authors identify a manifold of vernacular creative practices that would be excluded from Florida’s metropolitan creative cities, including music, rural festivals, Flickr photo sharing, community gardening and Christmas light displays. The contributions suggest that it is within this overlooked spatial otherness, the ‘alternative and marginal spaces, and everyday realms’, that creativity can be found; demanding that more attention and consideration be directed towards these spaces (2009: 12).

This important, and also rather optimistic, view provides a critical framework for defining amateurism in the twenty-first century as a practice that is set up in clear distinction from the commercial. Although, as this century progresses, amateurism and its associated and appropriated meanings are yet again becoming troubled and complicated. Amateur practice and creativity has experienced a renewed passion in the twenty first century. Outside of academia, the amateur is part of a new cultural moment. Popular British television programmes such as *Masterchef*, *The Great British Bake Off*, *The Great Pottery Throw Down*, *The Big Painting Challenge*, *The Great British Sewing Bee*, *The Great Orchestra Challenge* and *The Great Interior Design Challenge* (to name a few) have, as put by Knott, ‘thrust[ed] the phenomenon into the limelight in recent years’ (2015: xii). Although the emphasis of these shows has been to create entertainment by way of the alluring prize of becoming ‘top baker’ ‘top potter’ or ‘top sewer’ at the end of it all, these weekly celebrations of the amateur have highlighted the processes of how things are made along with the labour, love, passion, creativity and the devotion of time given to garnering skill sets and craft knowledges over time. Cutaway video segments, integrated in amongst the competitive parts of the shows, give the audience a chance to visit the contestants in their homes, student halls and workplaces away from the competition. The segments allow contestants talk in more detail about their love of cooking, baking, pottery, painting, music or interior design. Stories are often revealed about how they developed a love for their particular practice through a parent or family

member who passed on to them skills and knowledge, or how they were encouraged by an inspiring teacher at school. Home studios and workshops - found in kitchens, sheds, garages and gardens - reveal glimpses into the contestants' other lives, alongside the amateur creative practice being showcased by the programme. This is interesting when we think about amateur practice as being supplemental to the everyday - here is it placed in the foreground of their daily lives. Through their popularity, these shows have assisted in unsettling the often disparaging and derogatory distinctions associated with the words 'amateur', 'amateurism' and 'amateurish' by the level of skill that the contestants bring to their particular craft.

As a result of these shows, many contestants have unsettled their own identities as amateurs by making their particular amateur practice a full time job. From setting up their own restaurants (Masterchef winner Thomasina Miers created the Mexican chain Wahaca), establishing schools and classes, becoming television celebrities, writing books or obtaining columns in popular newspapers dedicated to their particular amateur practice (Great British Bake Off 2013 and 2015 winners Ruby Tandoh and Nadiya Hussain have baking columns in the *The Guardian* and *The Times*, respectively), these amateur contestants have assisted in complicating the idea further that 'amateur' suggests someone who is not quite good enough to be a professional. As Nicholson notes, this emphasis on the amateur in popular culture raises questions about how far distinctions between amateurs and professionals can be maintained in the cultural landscape of the twenty-first century (2015).

Contemporary interest in the amateur and amateur creativity has also been spread by the twenty-first century digital revolution, which has brought with it numerous online platforms. These platforms have also aided in redefining what amateur means. David Gauntlett explored the connective power involved in making, sharing and watching Youtube videos in his book *Making is Connecting* (2011) in which he saw everyday people engaging in a form of 'everyday creativity'. Since Gauntlett's



insightful publication in 2011, the online platform has grown and evolved considerably, whilst becoming ever increasingly monetised. When it was founded in 2005, YouTube was made up mostly of amateur content through the labour of unpaid video makers with little to no professional training, with users often starting out in their bedrooms or kitchen tables producing content in their spare time by filming videos on their camera phones and editing on basic video editing software to little to no audience (Gauntlett, 2011). Since then, many of these self-taught amateur video makers have risen to fame and immeasurable success in their own right, reaching global audiences daily. They have become what the industry calls ‘influencers’, due of their influence over their online communities that they build over time through their subscribers and followers. Similar to many of the contestants from the popular television shows above, YouTubers (or vloggers, a portmanteau of video and blogger) have been able to create a career out of their love and passion for making videos along with the content that they create. For example beauty Youtubers, who began by recording and uploading step by step makeup tutorials in their bedrooms, have now become paid ambassadors of beauty brands and have even collaborated with companies to create their own beauty products. Among a many other things, fashion YouTubers are invited to attend global fashion weeks, book YouTubers work with book publishers to begin and run book clubs whilst a number of Youtubers have written bestselling books themselves. All of this became possible through the assistance of the online platform.

Alongside YouTube, starting a blog, podcast and Instagram account also requires little equipment. A phone, a laptop and a microphone have become the basic tools through which to document, share and curate, amongst other things: photography, interviews, performances, comedy sketches, recipes, illustrations, stories, fashion, interiors and photography as well as reviews and opinions on products, technology, places, books, films, games, plays and current affairs. Online marketplaces such as Etsy (founded in 2005) have allowed makers without any educational or professional training in their specific craft to open up an online shop and sell their handmade

items globally. Sellers are given a platform through which to sell their illustrations, jewellery, ceramic pots, clothing, cards, soaps and wall hangings, meanwhile transforming amateur makers into creative entrepreneurs. Of course, not every contributor of these platforms will turn it into their full time job, as Gauntlett suggests ‘other contributors [...] are entirely unconcerned about reaching a broad audience’, and for them it remains a hobby (2011: 92). However in all cases, these platforms or ‘inventive media’ have shifted relationships with the ‘professional media’, disrupting where people go for their information and entertainment (2011: 95). This shift in relationship is something that Internet critic and writer Andrew Keen comments on in his book *The Cult of the Amateur* (2008). In it, he fears the blurring distinctions between the trained expert and the amateur in today’s self-broadcasting culture as catastrophic.<sup>8</sup>

So what can we make of all this? On the one hand, due to amateur practice being thrust into the limelight, the amateur has become an important figure in the popular imagination. As discussed, popular television shows and the growing use of online platforms and social media have been instrumental in broadcasting and highlighting the skills, processes and spaces involved in many amateur crafts and practices. On the other hand, many of these amateurs have and continue to make money; troubling the associations that amateur means doing something purely for its own sake. In many of the cases, amateurs have become celebrities, or at the very least have been able to pursue their amateur pursuit as a paid job. Here, Edensor *et al*’s clear distinction between the professional and commercialised creatives and the un-monetised amateur or vernacular creative is complicated.

Perhaps then, one way to understand or conceptualise the amateur is to look at it through the work on Pro-Ams (professional-amateurs), namely through the work of Charles Leadbeater and Paul Miller. In *The Pro-Am Revolution* (2011) Leadbeater and

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<sup>8</sup> *Blogosphere*, a magazine founded in 2013 with the catch line ‘a print publication written by bloggers for bloggers’, recently featured an article in their ‘Zoella edition’, which focussed on ‘an investigation into why the mainstream press continue to see blogging as an ‘amateur’ profession’.

Miller highlight the fact that, in the twenty-first century, the ‘relationship between amateurs and professionals is becoming more fluid and dynamic’ (2011: 23). Their concept of the Pro-Am (or the professional-amateur) describes a group of enthusiastic ‘innovative, committed and networked amateurs working to professional standards’ from bottom up, self-organisation (2011: 9).<sup>9</sup> In an effort to define and understand the amateur in all of its different forms, and to show where their hybrid group – the ‘Pro-Ams’ sit in relation to them, Leadbeater and Miller propose a continuum. On the left hand side of the scale are the ‘Devotees, fans, dabblers and spectators’, and on the right are the ‘fully-fledged professionals. In between the two opposing ends of the spectrum, Leadbeater and Miller place (from left to right) ‘skilled amateurs’, ‘serious and committed amateurs’ (‘who take part in public competitions, performances and displays’) and ‘Quasi-professionals’ (apprentices, former professionals and people ‘who earn a significant part of their income from an activity’) (2011: 23). ‘As you move from left to right along this continuum’ they write:

[T]he amount of knowledge, time and money earned from an activity (and invested in it) goes up. Pro-Ams operate in a range somewhere around the third-quarter of the line (2011: 24).

Sociologist Robert Stebbins has also attempted to measure, survey and define amateur practice, through his substantive work on what he coined ‘serious leisure’. Since his research began in 1973, Stebbins has categorised leisure into three forms – casual leisure, project-based leisure and serious leisure. His systematic model, named ‘The Serious Leisure Perspective’ displays these three categories alongside each other in an ascending scale of ‘seriousness’ and commitment, each

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<sup>9</sup> One of the examples that they cite is *The Sims* computer game, where, they note, a vast online community of the game’s players now produce more than 90 per cent of the game’s content. Here, amateurs, working to professional standards, are able to co-create the games that they play.

accompanied with stereotypes and traits.<sup>10</sup> Amateurs (distinguished from hobbyists and volunteers) can be found under serious leisure, and he writes how they are:

[N]either dabblers who approach the activity with little commitment or seriousness, nor professionals who make a living from that activity (1992: 55).

My thesis, however, is not propelled by categorizing amateur theatre-makers along either of Leadbeater and Millers or Stebbins' continuums or models of amateur practice. Whilst both Leadbeater and Miller and Stebbins' work has played an important role in taking seriously and highlighting the amateur practitioner, these conceptualisations of the amateur and their practice do not allow for the material, embodied and emotional experiences that take place. As Knott highlights, there are 'limitations of the sociological method in grasping the full importance of what amateur craft offers its practitioners beyond issues of demography and public funding (2015: xv). In light of this, cultural geographer Hilary Geoghegan's work on enthusiasm has been important to my thinking about amateurism. After finding that the subject of enthusiasm had been largely untouched by geographers, and used by sociologists as a term 'to define a form of organized leisure' (2012: 40), Geoghegan conceptualised enthusiasm as a strong emotional affiliation. Emotion, Geoghegan asserts, 'is central to the way people experience the world' which gives 'rise to relationships between places, people, things and events' (2012: 41). By working *with* enthusiast communities, much of her work has paid particular attention to the affective relationships between people and the material world. Thereby capturing the experiences and spatial implications of enthusiasm.

Recently, amateur practice and creativity has experienced a renewed passion in the academy, and in cultural geography in particular. During the course of researching and writing my thesis, I was afforded many opportunities to meet and engage in discussions with an exciting community of researchers; researchers whose interests

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<sup>10</sup>The Serious Leisure Perspective model can be seen here: <http://www.seriousleisure.net/slp-diagrams.html>

also focus on the idea of amateur creativity and practice.<sup>11</sup> All this signals an energising and growing community of scholars interested in recuperating the term ‘amateur’ from its derogatory associations, whilst countering the often dismissive attitude towards amateur practices, which have often been considered unimportant and unworthy of critical attention.

In the following sections I shall start to explore the ways in which I have attempted to conceptualise and understand amateur practice myself. Firstly, in seeking to understand amateur-theatre as a creative practice that can be understood by the processes involved in its making, I shall look to scholarly work that has explored varied creative practices by investigating the everyday experiences and processes involved.

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<sup>11</sup> In September 2015 inspired by cultural geography’s recent interest in ‘creative geographies’ (Hawkins, 2017) myself and Katie Boxall convened and chaired two sessions at the Royal Geographical Society’s Annual International Conference that encouraged discussions around creative geographies of a different register. Named ‘Geographies of Amateur Creativity: Spaces, Practices and Experiences’, we met and heard papers from geographers whose interests involved, enthusiast communities, knitting, crafters’ material collections (hoarding), urban gardening, making suburban faith, creative writing and amateur theatre. In the same month, the Amateur Drama Research project held an international symposium titled ‘Amateur Creativity: Inter-disciplinary Perspectives’, at the University of Warwick, which invited scholars from various disciplines including media studies, anthropology, visual arts and cultural geography to challenge perceptions of amateur creativity and contribute to debates about its cultural significance. Scholars gave engaging papers that discussed the boundaries between the amateur and professional, everyday creativity, methodological issues, amateur creativity and craft, amateur creativity and subjectivity, making spaces for creativity and the histories and heritage of amateur creativity. These discussions focussed on amateur practices such as craft, filmmaking, scrapbooking and art, as well as amateur practices more directed towards performance (both present and historical) including Japanese Noh theatre, amateur theatre festivals and contests, private theatricals, musical theatre at a girls Jewish summer camp, Ham acting, folk dance, making suburban faith, rural youth theatre and theatricals at sea with the British Navy. In July 2016, ‘Research into Amateur Performance and Private Theatricals’ (otherwise known as RAPPT), an interdisciplinary network of researchers working on nonprofessional performance, ran a conference which invited papers on amateur performance and practice within the community. And later on that year, the HARC Amateur Studies Research Forum at Royal Holloway was established; an informal forum conceived in response to the growing interest in the amateur, dispersed across departments. The first meeting saw different aspects of amateur practice - including amateur creativity in faith settings, amateur family photography, amateur folk dance and amateur theatre - being discussed by scholars across numerous departments. The second asked the question ‘how might amateurs be conceptualised?’ and invited visiting speakers from various institutions and disciplines to assist in addressing the absence in theories of amateurism as social and cultural practice.

## Geographies of Amateur Creativity:

### Investigating Amateur Creativity as a Process

[C]reativity must be read ‘forwards’, in movements that give rise to things, rather than backwards from their outcomes’ (Ingold, 2016: 7)

Seeking to understand amateur creativity as a process, involves understanding how creativity is part of everyday life. In the introduction to their book, *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation* (2007), anthropologists Elizabeth Hallam and Tim Ingold draw comparisons between creativity and everyday life. In their observations of the everyday, they suggest that there is ‘no prepared script for social and cultural life’, instead, people have to work out ways of knowing and doing as they go along (2007: 1). ‘In a word’ they suggest, people ‘have to *improvise*’ (2007: 1). In much the same way, it is their suggestion that there is also no prepared script for creative practice either. Instead, creative practice is subject to ongoing improvisational movements, in the making, that are both responsive and ever emergent. It is here that Hallam and Ingold posit a way of reading creativity that accounts for these improvised ‘productive processes’ involved in creative practice (2007: 3). Their reading is one that is less about the outcome of practice, than the processes that bring it into being. In this way, they suggest, creativity should be read ‘forwards, in terms of the movements that gave rise to them’, rather than ‘backwards, in terms of its results’ (2007: 3). Since their book, much of Ingold’s subsequent work has developed and explained this way of understanding and investigating creativity further.

Ingold and Hallam were primarily concerned with ‘everyday’ creativity, which in their terms describes unconscious acts of improvisation rather than artistic or craft practices. In his book *Making* (2013), for example, Ingold describes his frustrations with contemporary scholarship in the fields of anthropology, art history, archaeology and material culture studies, where, he suggests, an overwhelming

focus has been placed on the finished, complete or made object – for example the painting, the sculpture, the photograph, or in the case of this thesis, the play performed or the completed set (2013). Ingold asserts that the abundance of scholarly work into art and material culture has subjected the finished object to ‘exhaustive analysis and interpretation’ (2013: 7). When works of art are studied in this way, Ingold writes, the ‘creativity of the productive process that bring the artefacts themselves into being’ is lost and the ‘processes of making appear swallowed up in objects made’ (2013: 7).

For Ingold, the inclination for researchers and writers to begin with, what he sometimes calls the ‘novel object’, abducts it from the processes of practice that it arises from. Instead it follows the ‘novel object’ back through ‘a sequence of antecedent conditions, to an unprecedented idea in the mind of an agent’ (2010: 10). Reading creativity in this way suggests that the novel object is merely the simple reproduction of a preconceived idea or intention in the mind of the artist or maker. This, he suggests, does not take into account the ‘messy practices’ that happen during the making, and abandons the processes and materials of production that the objects emerge from (2013). To remedy this, Ingold has persistently argued that creativity should be read ‘forwards’. This means to follow the ongoing processes of production involved in the artist/maker’s practice that ‘brings form into being’ (2010: 2).

Ingold’s work as an anthropologist was influential to my research in that it provided a conceptual framework for designing an ethnographic study that followed the processes of making. My research, however, is primarily situated in relation to a growing interest in the creativity in cultural geography, which has placed a significant focus on the processes involved in making and doing. As Hawkins notes, there is a ‘need for the geographical analysis of art to attend not only to a ‘finished’ object, but to the sites, spaces and processes of its production, consumption and circulation’ (2010: 808).

Catherine Brace and Adeline Johns-Putra's collaborative study between geography and literary studies sought to '[recover] process as a part of creative making', in favour of studying the finished piece of writing (2010: 399). Through their enquiry into the work practices of a group of amateur creative writers, Brace and Johns-Putra pursued an understanding about how scholars might capture and understand the often-ephemeral creative writing processes such as inspiration, in an attempt to dispel the idea of them being 'elusive and resistant to academic enquiry' (2010: 401). In a bid to recover the processes involved in making a piece of creative writing, they explored the 'assemblage of spaces, objects, materials, technologies, skills and institutional structure that enable the work' by interrogating the creative writers' own personal practices (2010: 400). Finding unpredictableness and magic in their enquiries, they assert that process lies at the heart of creativity, writing that it is:

[T]he means by which the creative dimension of human existence as a way of experiencing the world takes shape' (2010: 402).

A common theme running throughout many of these studies of creative processes is the emphasis placed on the everyday and lived realities of creative labour. These empirical studies continue to dilute the idea of the divine creative genius or visionary stemming from the Romantic movement's celebration of the professional artist. This was a notion of a fiercely independent individual producing original creative works through an intangible force working within or through them. Instead, these studies challenge the idealisation of creativity and de-mystify the creative practitioner and their work by exploring and illuminating the day-to-day hard work, skill, learning, trials, failures, small successes, re-drafting, insecurities and negotiations that surround the production of the creative artefact; which follows Hawkins' suggestion that 'creativity [...] is not just the pursuit or preserve of the artistic genius or a rare talent, rather we are all creative' (2017: 112). Moreover, they highlight the practices undertaken outside of the artistic practice – financing,



marketing, creating/finding a workspace - yet show how these menial jobs are intrinsically related to the artistic practice itself.

In the same year as Brace and Johns-Putra's investigation into the processes involved in creative writing, Jenny Sjöholm's monograph *The geographies of knowledge in (making) artwork* (2010) sought to deflate the often romanticised practice of the visual artist by charting the everyday work processes involved in the making of fine artworks on an 'everyday level' (2010: 13). Sjöholm conducted research with twelve visual artists, who all identified as 'professional' and who had all completed art education at universities or art schools. Although identifying as professional, Sjöholm notes that the artists she chose for her study all subsidised their creative practice with other work, whether that be teaching art at a school or educating in other ways in other art institutions. This was a considered choice by Sjöholm who, in opposition to researching the famous success stories - the Damien Hirsts of the art world - found an interest in what she referred to as 'middle-range' artists. Sjöholm's investigation followed three sites of the middle-range artist's creative production: 'the field', 'the art studio' and 'the art scene', and through interviews, observational visits and the interrogation of their sketchbooks, Sjöholm placed her investigative focus on the 'particularity and mundanity' of their artistic practice (2010: 42).

Particularity and mundanity of creative practice has also been explored in the field of architecture and design. In her books *The Making of a Building* (2009a) and *Made by the Office for Metropolitan Architecture: An Ethnography of Design* (2009b), architectural theorist Albena Yaneva offers a new way of understanding architecture as a process. Through an extensive anthropological account, assembled over three years, Yaneva invites the reader into the architectural offices of OMA (Offices of Metropolitan Architecture, Rotterdam) to follow the work process of the design team responsible for an extension to the Whitney Museum. Yaneva's time at the offices allowed her to take on a pragmatic approach to architectural design, by

observing and recording the fast paced nature of the day - daily meetings, conversations, presentations and visits to the model shop (where architectural models are made).

Yaneva's enquiry sought to dispel the idea of a linear trajectory between the design of the architect and the finished building. Much like Ingold's derision of studies in art and material culture that begin with the finished artefact and follow backwards to the idea in the mind of the artist/maker, Yaneva was driven by what she saw as a tendency within her field to investigate the final products of architectural design - critically and symbolically. She suggests that buildings are often treated as artefacts and design objects 'after-the-fact of their construction' (2009a: 3) and are commonly explored through 'the voices of famous architects through interviews' or through 'profiles of practitioner and patterns of architectural discourses' (2009a: 23). In response to this, Yaneva sought to investigate 'architecture in the *making*' rather than 'architecture *made*' (2009a: 197). She was inspired by studies in the field of science and technology that had produced accounts of science in the making by observing the processes of scientists in their laboratories. By following architects and the visiting designers, engineers, clients and urban planners in, what she refers to as, their own 'architectural laboratories', she sought to describe their daily routines and continuous experimentations with materials, shapes and measurements, as well as how these activities contribute to the ever changing shaping and reshaping of the office floor (2009a: 4).

Theatre and performance, like any other art work or indeed any part of everyday life, emerges from the culmination of multiple processes. As a geographer navigating literature in theatre and performance studies, I found the work of Gay McAuley - a leading authority on space and place with regards to theatre-making - had also placed significant focus on what can be gained by paying attention to the creative processes. Her focus was directed towards that of professional rehearsals (1998, 2012). In her book, *Not magic but work* (2012), made up of mostly observational

ethnographic record, McAuley describes the creative processes involved during the making of Michael Gow's 'Toy Symphony' by theatre company Company B. McAuley spent six weeks as participant observer, documenting the intensive rehearsal period leading up to the very first performance of Gow's never staged before play. McAuley describes the rehearsal room in all its detail, from the stripped and stained industrial wooden flooring, the microwave in the corner, to the atmosphere that was felt at the very first day of rehearsal when the everyone involved in the production meets and shares ideas and visions. McAuley writes that:

The desire to observe and analyse rehearsal is probably a peculiarly modern (or, rather, postmodern) phenomenon, born of the shift in interest from the reified art object to the dynamic processes involved in its production and reception (1998: 75)

McAuley's interest in observing the rehearsal process chimes well with my own ethnographic study of set building (which I shall explore in the next chapter). Taken together, these ideas offer a useful theoretical concept through which to examine amateur creative practice, and amateur theatre-making more specifically, as it provides a way to analyse it as a process rather than a product. I seek to contribute to this work done by scholars over multiple disciplines, by exploring amateur theatre through the ongoing processes involved in its making; understanding it as 'an ongoing movement that is at once itinerant, improvisatory and rhythmic' (2010: 91). Borrowing from Yaneva, I shall look at theatre in the *making* rather than theatre *made* (2009a).

Rather than assessing the aesthetics or representational qualities of the set in performance, my research focuses on the processes of making in backstage work. This positions my research in ways that build on, but are separate from, studies in theatre and performance that have recently investigated backstage labour;

specifically that of stagehands and technicians in American professional theatre. I will continue to address this in the next section.

### **The Hidden Processes of Backstage Work**

Yet beneath the surface of any theatrical production lurks a subterranean world of artists and craftsmen whose labo[u]r has been deliberately obscured from view (Osborne and Woodworth, 2015: 4).

In studies of theatre and performance, the role of backstage work along with the individual backstage workers who participate in this work remains a significantly neglected area of research. When approaching this thesis, I found it curious that so little had been written on this subject, especially considering how backstage workers play a significant role in how theatre is made. Backstage workers, amongst a many other things, construct sets, paint scenery flats, adjust stage lighting, painstakingly sew sequins on to costumes, fix ripped seams, and source props which often requires forensic historical skills (such as finding newspapers from specific eras) to ensure accuracy. Outside of the performance itself, backstage workers also look after and maintain theatre buildings, and others will support the theatre by operating the front of house. Nevertheless, in a many number of historical and contemporary theatrical accounts this sort of creative work is often only mentioned secondary, at best, to the work of the playwright, actor, director or designer. As theatre historians Elizabeth A. Osborne and Christine Woodworth observe:

[T]he individuals necessarily located “behind” the illusion often remain in the proverbial shadows (2015: 10).

In recent years, however, theatre historians have themselves commented on this failure by scholars to engage seriously with the individuals located behind the

illusion on stage. Osborne and Woodworth, for example, observe how backstage work has ‘all too frequently remained “backstage” in the scholarly conversation’; suggesting that this area of investigation is often overlooked by researchers due to the challenges faced when attempting to find, document and interpret theatre ephemera needed to cast light upon the ‘oft-ignored theatre worker’ (2015: 10) and their ‘oft-hidden processes of creating [theatrical] art’ (2015: 13).

In their introduction to *Working in the Wings* (2015), Osborne and Woodworth consider the role of work and labour in relation to theatre. In doing this, they highlight the hidden nature of backstage work that is ‘intentionally disappeared for the sake of illusion on stage’ (2015: 4). After all, they note, theatre itself is an art form of ‘subterfuge, concealment, and illusion’, where the theatrical magic witnessed on stage by the audience is fostered by the work happening in the wings (2015: 2). In most forms of theatre, it is only through technical mistakes that the audience is afforded a chance to ‘glimpse the mysteries behind the curtain’ and it is only then that they are reminded of the workings of the theatrical crafts(wo)man (2015: 2). By understanding the backstage workers’ hidden status in this way - as intentional and an integral part of keeping the illusion on stage alive - it is easy to see how the backstage worker along with their work are often erased, or at least forgotten, by the theatre industry. Theatre historian Christin Essin also comments on this erasure in her article ‘Unseen Labor and Backstage Choreographies: A Materialist Production History of *A Chorus Line*’ (2015), where she refers to backstage workers as a ‘hidden workforce’ (2015: 197). Essin writes that whilst backstage labourers fuel the theatrical machine, they ‘rarely receive notice in contemporary reviews and theatre histories’ (2015: 199). Backstage work, she highlights, is at once visible and invisible. While the efforts of the backstage workers are seen on stage by the audience - stage lighting is moved, sound is played, scenery is shifted - their bodies, she observes, are hidden by the architecture of the theatre. Moreover, unlike the actors who appear on stage and who hold their own identities (both fictional and real), backstage workers’

individual identities are often lost and understood only as a collective labour force.<sup>12</sup>

Read together, Osborne and Woodworth and Essin draw interesting parallels between the hidden status of the backstage worker during a performance, in the theatre industry more generally, and in academic writings and investigations of theatre-making. By introducing these parallels, it is perhaps easy to see why academic researchers face the challenges that they do. How do scholars attempt to explore, document and write about this subject when certain people and their creative processes are often displaced or indeed written out of theatrical narratives altogether?

Recently Essin herself has been propelled by these challenges to look beyond the spectacle of the performance itself. Through historiographical approaches, her work has focussed on recovering and illuminating the embodied work of the technicians and stagehands working within professional American theatre (2011, 2015, 2016). Through retrospective interviews with theatre practitioners who had worked on particular productions and the interrogation of theatre ephemera - scripts, lighting cue sheets, official photography and video recordings of particular productions - Essin has followed the production histories of plays such as James Kirkwood, Jr. and Nicholas Dante's *A Chorus Line* whilst seeking to highlight the local and lived conditions of the people 'who set, shift, and light the stage' (2011: 197). In 'Unseen Labor and Backstage Choreographies: A Materialist Production History of *A Chorus Line*' (2015), for example, Essin draws attention to the actions and bodies of the technicians and stagehands, writing about them in much the same way that a theatre scholar may write about the performing bodies of the actors and dancers on stage. She argues that they are, in fact, involved in their own unseen choreographed performances that are every bit as rehearsed and creative as the ones seen on stage

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<sup>12</sup> Quarantine's performance, *Entitled*, addressed this directly, as performers were the technical crew engaged in a get-in and get-out. <http://qtine.com/work/entitled/>.

- performances ‘of counting rhythms in unison’ whilst moving the scenery and the lighting, both animating and illuminating the stage (2015: 197).

This burgeoning scholarly interest into the backstage activities of theatre productions highlights the potential for meaningful research in this neglected terrain of research. Although I hope that my thesis will contribute to this effort, the works discussed above have foregrounded the investigative and methodological labour of the theatre historian as a researcher. In my thesis, however, I utilise a different methodology which foregrounds the investigative role of the ethnographer as researcher. Instead of relying on archival research and historiographical approaches more generally, my thesis instead places focus on working with amateur theatre-makers to investigate the spaces and processes of their craft. I will explore this more fully in the next chapter on my methodological approaches. Another difference in my work lies in the participants my investigation will explore. Essin’s writing on backstage work focusses on the unseen theatrical work that happens concurrently to the performance itself, as Essin writes, ‘such work, executed above, below, beside, and behind onstage performers’ (2011: 35). This has seen her place significant investigative focus on the processes of the theatre technicians and stagehands who work in the wings. My interest, however, has been directed towards the hidden theatrical work that happens before and after and even surrounding the performance itself, rarely seen by anyone not involved in the show. Much like the hidden work processes involved in rehearsals, that are, as Essin remarks, ‘ideally invisible in performance’ as they disappear into the spectacle - so too do the work processes involved in building a set (2015: 197). Specifically, I have focussed my own investigations on the work of set builders, exploring the everyday, embodied, material, technical and social dimensions of their backstage work, as well as the spaces in which this work takes place.

## Amateur Creativity as Theatre Craft

[C]raftsmanship draws no attention to itself; it lies beneath notice, allowing other qualities to assert themselves in their fullness (Adamson, 2015: 12)

Part of my thesis' aims is to further contribute to the growing body of knowledge about amateur making and design by exploring amateur theatre-making, specifically set building, as a craft practice. Theatre itself is so often talked about in terms of craft. The 'actor's craft' or the 'director's craft' are phrases frequently used to refer to the learning of practical tools and techniques, accumulated during the ongoing process of becoming an actor or director. For actors trained in the Stanislavski tradition, for example, the craft-knowledge might involve, as David Krasner notes, learning emotional triggers, practicing improvisation, exercises in characterization, breathing awareness and advancing vocal ranges (2011). Meanwhile, the director might work on their craft by learning how to react to texts, how to prepare texts for actors and how to communicate their ideas and vision to a group of actors who, themselves, bring along with them their very own distinct and varied knowledges, training and styles, accumulated from their particular craft.

'Craft's position within the arts is a complicated affair' writes Adamson in his book *Thinking Through Craft* (2015: 2). As a cultural practice, Adamson notes how craft is often seen to exist 'in opposition to the modern conception of art itself' and firmly inhabits the condition of the inferior and supplemental (2015: 2). Seen in this light, it is interesting that professional theatre-makers as well as amateurs describe their work in terms of craft knowledge. The director Katie Mitchell, for example, entitled her book *The Director's Craft: A Handbook for the Theatre* (2009). Thus, the word craft in theatre most commonly denotes the ongoing processes involved in building one's own trade through experience and skill - and indeed a commitment to it - whether that trade be acting or directing. In this thesis I would like to think about the craft involved in theatre, specifically amateur theatre, in a different way - as



something that also involves the people who work in backstage roles. To do this, this section will explore scholarly literature that concerns amateurism in craft and design as a way of situating amateur theatre-making, specifically set building, as a craft.

### **Research into Amateur Craft**

Amateur craft's marginalised status has, perhaps, been a result of disdainful attitudes towards home-crafted objects, as design historian Jo Turney notes, they have often been treated as 'everything that is 'bad' in art, design and craft' (2004: 268). Scholars writing from the perspective of art and design and design history have highlighted a reluctance within their field to engage seriously with the subject of amateur craft. Design scholar Andrew Jackson blames academic associations and prejudices surrounding the amateur maker and their work, noting how it is:

[S]eldom legitimated by the attention of the academy, or inclusion in the exhibitions or publications that sustain the discourse of these fields. (2010: 6)

Recently, however, two special editions of the *Journal of Design History* have assisted in signalling a resurgence of scholarly interest in amateur design and making. More than this, they have also signalled the design world's changing relationship between amateurism and professionalism. Designer and historian Paul Atkinson edited one of the special editions called 'Do It Yourself: Democracy and Design' (2006). In it, he conceptualises DIY as a democratising agency, allowing people to gain a sense of creative satisfaction, irrespective of their gender, class, lack of skill or rigorous 'professional' training and formal education. Contributions explored the gendering of home and handicrafts, to the safety and security that do-it-yourself practices promoted through the building of fallout shelters during Cold War America.

Later, Atkinson along with design scholar Gerry Beegan edited another special edition called ‘Professionalism, Amateurism and the Boundaries of Design’ (2008) which explored amateur, vernacular and dilettante practices in modern design through contributions on vernacular architecture and self-build homes. In it, they refer to non-professional designers and makers including amateurs and dilettantes - as the ‘invisible workers’ who continue to work ‘outside of the design profession’ and ‘who are always there in the background’ yet ‘whose presence cannot be ignore’ (2003: 308). The phrase ‘invisible workers’ is appropriated from Arts and Crafts architect Edward Prior’s essay ‘The Ghosts of the Profession’ (1892) which was critical of the professionalisation of architectural practice in nineteenth century. Beegan and Atkinson note how the professionalisation of practice at this time, through institutionalised training and regulation, resulted in the separation between client, builder and architect, where at one time they would have been one person. The distinction they make clear is one of head and hands, with the designer or architect becoming apart from the physical trades and the crafts of making. In turn, they note, this created a legion of ‘invisible workers’, or ‘ghosts’, who ended up working only to advance the reputation of the ‘master architect’, unrecognised for their own work ( 2003: 308). Beegan and Atkinson note how ‘invisible workers’ is an appropriate phrase for describing amateur craftspeople, as they too continue to work away in the background, often unrecognised.

These two contributions to design theory - both the articles contained in these special editions of the *Journal of Design History* and the editorials that frame them demonstrate a timely interest that has been directed towards amateur design and making practice. In doing this, they also illuminate the breadth of research and subject areas that can be defined or collected underneath the umbrella of ‘the amateur’. Since reading for this thesis in order to assist my own conceptualisation of the amateur theatre-maker, I have found research pertaining to the amateur crafts(wo)man existing in a fragmented collection of works, often defined by different categories and numerous terminologies.

This research spans from work on Do-It-Yourself or DIY practices, which, in themselves, have explored everyday home improvement (Watson and Shove, 2008), to canoe building and furniture making (Jackson, 2010), to building ones home (Brown, 2008). DIY has also been explored as an alternative movement that gave rise to artefacts such as fanzines (fan-magazines) - self published, small circulation publications which connect counterculture communities through a homemade, amateur aesthetic that critiques capitalism and mass-production (Triggs, 2006).<sup>13</sup> Within DIY itself, terms such as ‘reactive DIY’, ‘essential DIY’, ‘Lifestyle DIY’ and ‘Proactive DIY’ have been proposed by Atkinson, who has categorised DIY by levels of self-direction and motivation (2006: 3).<sup>14</sup> DIY has also been expanded to ‘DIW’ or ‘Do-It-With’ by Phillip Vannini and Jonathan Taggart, with regards to self-build homes (2014, 2015). They argue that DIY is very seldom a solo endeavour, instead it is relational and entangles itself with other people, historical traditions of making and doing and the affordances of the materials that are used. Other scholars have directed their focus more towards what might be considered as home or domestic crafts such as crochet and knitting. Geographer Laura Price, for example, has explored the transformative power of knitting circles, yarnbombing and community projects in urban life (2015). Meanwhile, whilst developing work on domestic craft further, design scholar Fiona Hackney has suggested the term ‘new amateur’ (2013). Hackney uses this phrase to refer to an informed, skilled and reflexive practitioner

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<sup>13</sup>The subject of fanzines were recently explored in the ‘Fanzines – A Cut-and-Paste Revolution’ exhibition at the Barbican, London (1-30 August, 2016). The exhibition formed part of the ‘Punk London’ festival and explored fanzines from the 1950s to present day.

<sup>14</sup> Atkinson’s descriptions of his proposed DIY categories:

Pro-active DIY-consisting of those activities which contain significant elements of self-directed, creative design input, and which might involve the skilled manipulation of raw materials or original combination of existing components, where the motivation is personal pleasure or financial gain.

Reactive DIY-consisting of hobby and handcraft or building activities mediated through the agency of kits, templates or patterns and involving the assembly of predetermined components, where the motivation might range from the occupation of spare time to personal pleasure (but which might consequently include an element of financial gain).

Essential DIY-consisting of home maintenance activities carried out as an economic necessity or because of the unavailability of professional labour, and which often involve the following of instructional advice from manuals (yet which does not rule out the possibility that such activities may also be creative and personally rewarding).

Lifestyle DIY-consisting of home improvement or building activities undertaken as emulation or conspicuous consumption, and where the use of one’s own labour is by choice rather than need (although professional input, usually in the form of design advice, is often included) (2006: 3).

who, while not necessarily trained as a craftsperson, takes part in everyday activism, and ‘for whom craft is power’ (2013: 170).

Taken together, these works signal an important resurgence of interest in amateur craft. They also highlight the experiential aspects of craft for the craft practitioner. In doing so, they recognise that the many derogative associations surrounding amateur craft (a reason why it has escaped scholarly investigations) are not endorsed by the amateur makers themselves, who continue to make and place value on the things that they make and the physical act of making (Turney, 2004). Amongst this work, however, amateur theatre-making as an amateur craft has yet to be explored, which is where this thesis seeks to contribute.

Half way through my research for this thesis, I came across Knott’s recent exploration of amateur craft in his book *Amateur Craft: History and Theory* (2015). *Amateur Craft* derived from Knott’s PhD research titled *Amateur Craft as a Differential Practice* (2011), and came as a response to amateur craft being an area of study that has, and continues to be, marginalised by the academy. In his introduction, Knott writes:

So often overlooked, amateur craft is more complex, innovative, unexpected, roguish, humorous and elusive than its use as a cover-all term for inadequacy and shoddy work (amateurishness) (2015: xii).

For Knott, this elusive, innovative and unexpected nature of amateur craft, along with the pluralities and complexities found within amateur experience, are a result of its relational and differential status with the everyday experiences of life. Knott explores the subject of amateur craft as a time-space state, which people move in and out of, writing that:

Investigation of amateur craft demands a departure from judging the quality or content of production and a greater consideration of the alternative temporal experiences that arise in the course of making' (2015: 91).

In this way, Knott's work re-affirmed my own position of investigating amateur theatre-making through its processes rather than examining the final object. However, unlike my research which involves working with amateurs, Knott's own research centred around an historical and craft centered anthropological approach, in which he studied the subject of amateur craft by exploring the traces, objects, and literature left behind by amateur activities and resources aimed at amateurs - a Reeves and Sons watercolour paintbox, a Windsor and Newton supplements advertising a seat easel, and pages taken from how-to manuals such as *How to Plan and Build Your Workshop* (Manners, 1977). Through these traces, Knott investigated:

[H]ow surface layers were put together, the materials and technologies used, how the practitioner achieved such effects through varying degrees of skill, and the extent to which such interventions were facilitated by the labour of others (those who made the tool and materials that were relied upon) (2015: 11).

His book is organised in three chapters which highlight the three limitations that Knott believes besets the amateur crafts(wo)man and her or his practice. The first of the three limitations is 'tooling', amateurs have to make-do with inadequate materials and tools; the second limitation is 'space' - amateurs also have to make-do with leftover pieces of space, often working on their laps, in sheds, on kitchen tables; and the third limitation is 'time' - amateur craft's supplemental status to the everyday means that it must happen in the limited hours/minutes/seconds of 'free time', outside of paid work.

Perhaps one of the most important points that Knott makes in *Amateur Craft* is that amateur craft practice is dependent on the routines of everyday life and does not exist in isolation. Amateur craft can often be thought of as an individualistic pursuit, ‘an antagonistic response to capitalism’ or a ‘space of alienation’ (2015: xvii). Yet, as Knott’s study shows, it is actually dependant on many structures and routines of everyday life. This conceptualisation of amateur practice is inspired by Henri Lefebvre’s devotion to understanding and conceptualising the everyday. Knott borrows Lefebvre’s understanding of difference, along with his phrase ‘differential space’, to conceptualise his own understanding of amateur craft as a differential practice. For Knott this suggests an understanding of amateur craft as an ‘alternating feature of everyday life [...] rather than a part-timeism’, something that departs from the conventions of the everyday, yet is also linked to and reliant on it, as well as feeding back into it (2015: 125). Knott notes that,

What is crucial about amateur space, and the labour that inhabits it [amateur practice], is that it relates to other spaces of capitalism like professional space and the spaces of everyday life (2015: 46)

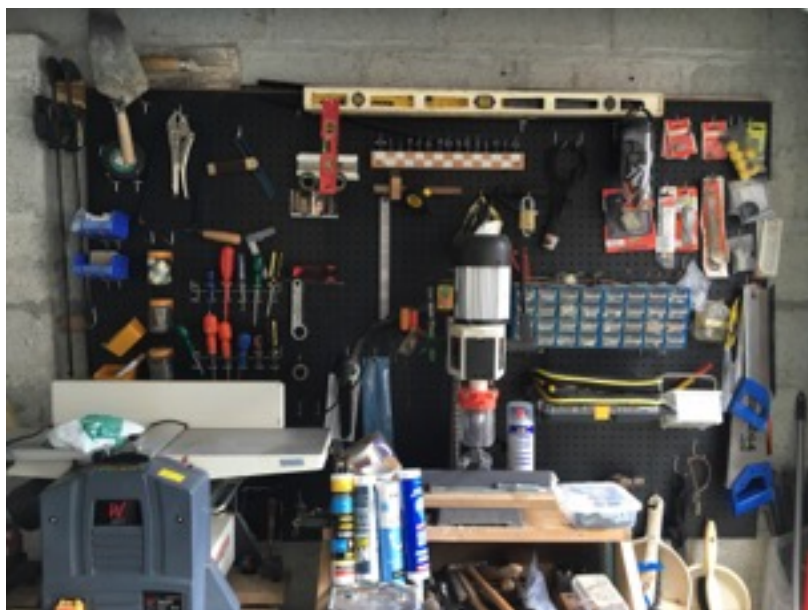
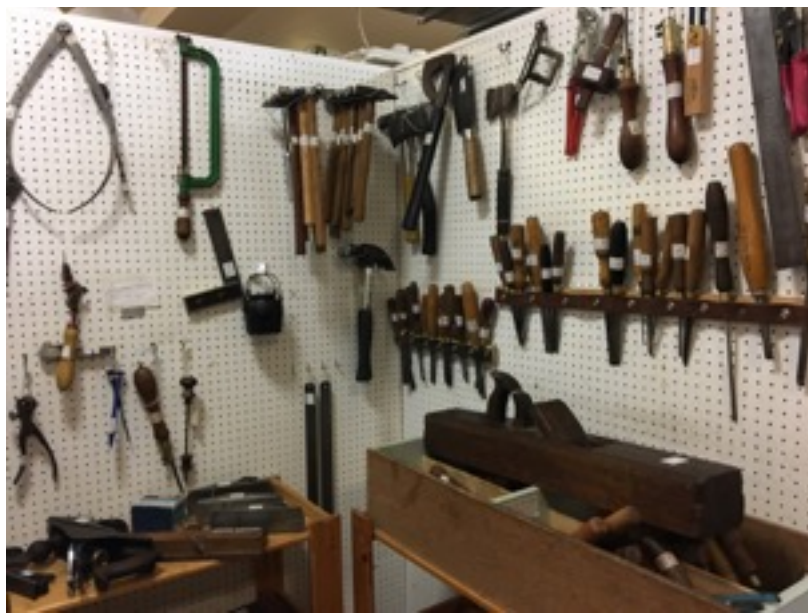
An example of amateur craft’s relationship with the everyday can be found in Knott’s chapter on ‘Space’, (identified as one of the limitations that characterises amateur craft) in which he writes about the humble pegboard and its parallels to other professional spaces of capitalism. The pegboard – a common name for a piece of hardboard wood or plastic punctuated with pre-drilled holes, arranged in a grid structure – has been a staple of many amateur craft practitioners’ workstations since its development in the mid 1950s. With each pre-drilled hole acting as a receptacle for a hook or a clip on which to hang tools, the pegboard provides the amateur practitioner with a means to easily and efficiently undertake the craft job at hand through the clear display of and access to her/his tools. Tools are organised up high (though still in reach), rather than cluttered on the floor, which in turn means that they are safely stowed away from damage and misplacement. The efficiency of the

pegboard lies in the craft practitioner being able to locate and access any given tool at any given time, which in turn creates an efficient relationship between maker and tool - something that Knott believes lies at the heart of amateur craft.

Knott uses the pegboard as an example of the differential quality of the amateur craft practitioners' workstation, drawing parallels between amateur tool storage and the organisation of many retail spaces. When walking into any Do-It-Yourself shop it is easy to see the parallels between the two spaces that Knott highlights, with some DIY shops even using pegboards to display the - albeit packaged - hammers, nails, pliers and drill bits that they sell; usually organised by category for easy navigation by the customer. Knott notes how both the spaces of amateur craft practitioners workspaces (the pegboard) and the retail environment are 'arranged to exaggerate the availability and ease of use to the user/consumer', suggesting that the pegboard allows the amateur craft practitioner to consume her/his own tools (2015: 66). More than this, the parallels between the amateur workspace and the retail environment also stretch to the practices that happen within both. Knott notes how many amateur practitioners' pegboards are characterised by drawn outlines of the tools, put there by the craft practitioner as a way of signalling if a tool is missing or has been lent out to someone. Knott parallels this common practice of outlining to that of stocktaking and stock management, integral within the retail environment. Stocktaking allows retailers to know what needs to be replenished on the shelves and restocked in the shop and similarly, outlining the pegboard is a way for the craft practitioner to create an automatic inventory of her/his tools.

This small example of the relationship between the pegboard and the retail environment is just one of many that Knott weaves throughout his book, highlighting the ways that amateur craft practice and the spaces in which it takes place often 'rehearses the ideologies drawn from their presumed opposites while subtly refracting them in the process' (2015: xvii). This is interesting when conceptualising and exploring amateur theatre as a craft or creative practice. The

spaces and practices involved in amateur theatre-making also rehearse ideologies drawn from professional environments, notably professional theatre. Although there are other places in this thesis where parallels between amateur and professional spaces are made, Chapter Five explores the home of the amateur theatre-maker through previous studies into the professional artists' studio. My thesis is in no way meant to be a comparative study of amateur theatre and professional theatre, rather it explores amateur theatre in its own right, yet inevitably these comparisons arise.



(Top) Picture taken at a second hand shop in Lewes selling used tools, displayed on a pegboard.

(Bottom) Picture taken in my dad's garage showing his pegboard used for tool organisation.



## 2

### **Part Two: Contextualising Amateurs in Letchworth Garden City**

Theatre is always and necessarily local, performance is always and necessarily emplaced, and any study of performance practice must, therefore, necessarily engage with the local and with the experience that comes from being in place (McAuley, 2013: 81-82).

Letchworth Garden City has a history and heritage that provides an important context for this study. Today's thriving amateur scene is in part indebted to the way in which it was founded as a utopian place. There are many detailed accounts and chronological histories that have been written about Letchworth Garden City in the past. (Fishman, 1982; Miller, 1989; Meacham, 1999) It is not my intention to create another one here, however, I think that it's important to introduce and illuminate certain stories as a way of understanding and setting the stage for my research. In this way, I seek to provide an understanding of how and why amateur creativity has become such an important aspect of Letchworth life.

When first approaching my thesis, I was particularly inspired by cultural geographer Hayden Lorimer's article 'Telling Small Stories: Spaces of Knowledge and the Practice of Geography' (2003). In it, he argues for the importance of 'telling small stories' during the process of research (2003: 197). What Lorimer means by 'telling small stories' is to focus particular attention to the localised, personal accounts of everyday spaces, people and experiences; moving towards more attentive and modest engagements with the world. This, he writes, is in favour of more grand and scopic scholarly narratives 'set in the quasi-mythological and exclusive spaces of 'the academy'' (2003: 200). Lorimer suggests that by telling smaller stories, we, as researchers, are able to rescue often overlooked events, as well as the ordinary social lives of people, from obscurity. He writes how

‘particularity and mundanity are [...] the qualities that matter most’, and, by paying attention to these qualities, Lorimer suggests that researchers are able to capture the liveliness of locality (2003: 200).

In this, part two of Chapter Two, I will explore some of the ‘small stories’ that contribute to Letchworth Garden City’s heritage – namely how the aesthetic and values of the place itself ensured that amateur creativity was central to its vision and everyday practice. In writing this short section, I have been assisted by documentations of Letchworth in books written by historians, as well as publications by early residents or ‘pioneers’ who took it upon themselves to chronicle their town in its early days. In addition to these writings, I shall use archival material that I was able to find in The Letchworth Collection (the official archive of Letchworth Garden City). Run by The Letchworth Heritage Foundation, the official archives hold a growing collection of material from Letchworth’s significant past. I visited the archive in the very early days of my research so as to familiarise myself with the town and its history. It was also at this time that I was endeavouring to work out exactly what it was that I wanted to study.

As my research developed, my thesis became less about Letchworth Garden City, and more about telling a ‘small story’ about a very specific amateur drama group within the town – the Settlement Players. However, the small stories that I uncovered in the archive were the starting points of the thinking surrounding what it was that I wanted to research for this thesis, and so are important to include here. In addition to this, they provide context for my research, undertaken in a town that was heralded in its day, by drama critic and early Letchworth pioneer C.B. Purdom, as being a town where theatre should flourish.

In the section that follows, I shall start by tracing some of the history of Letchworth Garden City in order to address the relationship between the town and amateur craft. I will explore how the early architects of the town gave it its Arts and Crafts

aesthetic, which, in turn, provided the material environment in which craft and the everyday were linked.

### **Utopian Visions: Arts and Crafts**

Town and country must be married, and out of this joyous union will spring a new hope, a new life, a new civilization (Howard, 1902: 48)

Letchworth Garden City was the brainchild of Ebenezer Howard, who offered a utopian creation that would bring together both ‘Town’ and ‘Country’ in his book *Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (1898), and later in *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* (1902). Built in 1903 just 35 miles outside of London, Howard’s Garden City was indebted to a tradition of nineteenth-century social reform, where British reformers were questioning community and social organisation at a time of abject urban poverty and miserable living conditions amongst the rural poor. Early settler and editor of the town’s newspaper the ‘Letchworth Citizen’ A.W. Brunt acknowledged Howard’s interest in social reform in his commentary of early life in the town, *Pageant of Letchworth, 1903-4* (1942), writing:

‘[F]or some years his active mind studied the problems created by the rapidly increasing congestion in the large industrial centres and the consequent depopulation of the rural areas’ (1942: 5).

Howard’s response to the problems at the time was to find ways in which urban design might bring together aspects of the country in the hope of a new civilization. It was his strong belief that humanity could live in harmony with nature, in a joyous union, which he referred to as ‘Town-Country’:

There are in reality not only, as is so constantly assumed, two alternatives town life and country life but a third alternative, in which all the

advantages of the most energetic and active town life, with all the beauty and delight of the country, may be secured in perfect combination (Howard, 1902: 45-46).

Howard's emphasis on combining aspects of both town and country meant that the Garden City was conceived as a way of life. The relationship between town and country, however, was not unique to Howard's way of thinking. This idea of combining 'the best of both worlds' had been explored earlier by textile designer and socialist William Morris, who articulated his utopian conception of an English society in his book *News from Nowhere* (2004, first published in 1890). Morris, as well as being a textile designer and artist, was also a visionary thinker and writer. As Fiona McCarthy writes, a 'constant, heartfelt theme of [Morris'] writing is that of a hoped-for improvement in the physical conditions of human life' (2004: 77). In *News from Nowhere*, Morris mixed Marxism with romantic ideals of the past through his storytelling impulse; emphasis was on returning people back-to-the-land. In his pastoral romance, the protagonist, William Guest, wakes up in the year 2102 in a post-revolution and changed London. He first describes how the 'smoke vomiting chimneys' and slums have been replaced by quaint red brick houses with lead roofs and gardens that stretch to the riverbank of the Thames (which are now full of salmon) (2004: 48). He notes how the factories have become workshops for collective craftwork and how the people of the new London now believed in the value and virtue of handwork (2004: 48). Meanwhile, he describes the people as healthy and comely looking, dressed in fourteenth-century dress, in 'materials light and gay to suit the season' as they travel around in wagons, pulled along by horses (2004: 53).

Whilst Howard's Garden City was invented in response to the lack of social cohesion that troubled him and many of his contemporaries (including Morris), his designs were practical rather than artistic. His geometric drawings, which planned the town in a series of ever increasing circles detailed a central park in the centre of

the town, a surrounding glass arcade named ‘Crystal Palace’ (so that people could enjoy the outdoors even in bad weather), a ring of houses with ample gardens, a ‘Grand Avenue’ (a belt of green), another ring of houses and gardens, then factories (Howard’s plan was not to return to a pre-industrial way of life), workshops and markets, and lastly a circle railway which would encompass the whole town. Outside of these series of rings were small holdings, allotments, cow pastures, sewage farms, new forests and convalescent homes. Whilst his writing and diagrams showed order and an understanding of the socio-economic workings of his utopia, they included nothing about how the town should look; as historian Jan Marsh writes, her book ‘was a vision rather than a blueprint’ (1982: 225).

Whilst some mocked Howard’s plans and his re-imagination of country living happily with town and industry, it struck a chord with many Socialist and utopian idealists. These included members of the Arts and Crafts movement who helped to shape the aesthetics of place, prominently through the architecture of the town. The Arts and Crafts Movement (which began in Britain at around 1880) was born from a disdain of the effects of industrial manufacture of the time. Members of the movement advocated a return to traditional crafts, functional and honest designs, and a simpler way of life with an emphasis on protecting the environment. The movement was developed from the ideas of theorist and critic John Ruskin, and Morris who both recognised the importance of creative manual work. At a time when ‘designer’ and ‘maker’ became separated roles through the professionalisation of practice (thereby removing the designer from making), Beegan and Atkinson note how the Arts and Crafts Movement instead ‘encouraged amateur practice, inspiring men and women to produce their own furnishing and decorative objects’ (2008: 308). More than this, ‘unlike many other art movements’ Mary Greensted, a writer on the movement notes, ‘it had a strong social and moral core’ (2012: 7). Members of the movement strongly believed they could improve the everyday quality of ordinary people’s lives by placing importance on community and camaraderie as a unifying force.

The support from the Arts and Crafts Movement in Letchworth came most significantly in the form of architects Raymond Unwin and his cousin Barry Parker, who were chosen for the town's early planning and development in 1903. Unwin and Parker were given, as historian Fiona MacCarthy notes, 'a daunting task of giving tangible architectural reality to Ebenezer Howard's romantically optimistic diagram' (82). However, their agreement of Howard's condemnation of metropolitan growth, strong influence of Morris and their opinion that ordinary people should have the opportunity to live in simple but beautifully well designed houses with gardens, helped to materialise Garden City in Letchworth. In his book 'Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century' (1982), urban Historian Robert Fishman quotes Unwin in saying that 'before there can be a city greatly beautiful [...] there must be some noble common life to find expression' and so it seemed that the Arts and Crafts aesthetic was a perfect fit for the Garden City ideals (1982: 67).

Unwin and Parker's architectural legacy is evident in Letchworth today. The Arts and Crafts style rough-cast walled houses, with red tiled roofs, gables and cottage style windows, punctuating its many tree lined streets – with which Letchworth is so famously associated today - may seem quite quaint and conservative from the perspective of the twenty-first century.<sup>15</sup> However it is important to note that this idealised 'Englishness', at the time of Letchworth's conception, was associated with social reform. As Standish Meacham writes in his book *Regaining Paradise: Englishness and the Early Garden City Movement* (2012) the nineteenth-century, anti-urban sense of 'Englishness' took hold and 'possessed a remarkable power to seduce', turning people to look to the past for inspiration (2012: 3). This included members of the Arts and Crafts Movement including Unwin, who, Meacham notes,

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<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, architectural historian Walter Creese explains in his paper 'Parker and Unwin: Architects of Totality' (1963) how Unwin wanted each street in Letchworth to be planted with a different species of tree 'as giving a sense of identity so that men walking home from their daily labo[u]r could experience the refreshing change of seasons as they occurred' as well to each street (1963: 166).

mythologized the past whilst idealizing it in his plans for Letchworth; specifically taking inspiration from the village in terms of architectural design and social unity.

Since writing this thesis, Letchworth's connection with the Arts and Crafts Movement was recently explored by MacCarthy, in her exhibition on Morris at the National Portrait Gallery, entitled *Anarchy and Beauty* (October 2014 – February 2015). In the section called 'Cities in the Sun', MacCarthy writes how Parker and Unwin's pursuit of the 'romantic vernacular' style in their architecture - 'a poetry of buttresses and chimney pots, inglenooks and sun traps down to the lovingly detailed furnishings and doorbells' - was a style that 'appealed to the freethinkers, the Theosophists and naturists, folk dancers and hand-weavers recorded among the early residents of Letchworth' (2014: 86). In this way, it can be understood that the Arts and Crafts Movement not only influenced the architecture of the town, but was also in part influential in many of the early townsfolk's ways of life. In the section that follows, I explore Letchworth's early creative amateurs, notably Letchworth's first amateur drama group.

### **Letchworth's Creative Amateurs**

'[T]he enormous amount of work entailed by each production is done by men and women who are otherwise engaged for their livelihood' (Letchworth Dramatic Society, 1911).

Early Letchworth was awash with societies and clubs, as Brunt writes in his commentary of the town:

Howard Hall at once became the centre of the social life of the community, and concerts, dramatic performances and socials were of almost nightly occurrence (1942: 83).

Brunt conjures a lively image of Letchworth in his commentary, detailing how the town in its early days was alive with impromptu pageants, drama performances and music recitals, happening in people's houses and gardens both day and night. Brunt notes that 'a happy social element found congenial quarters', especially on the Norton side of town where the artist, C.J. Fox's studio, 'The Den' became a place for 'pleasant musical Sunday evenings' along with many other houses and gardens transforming into spaces for dramatic performances and musical recitals being a very frequent thing (1942: 83). Brunt continues later in his book that 'if it is possible to summarise the character of our early citizens in two words probably "mental alertness" would best express it, and this quality was displayed in all four avenues of Literature, Music, Art and the Drama' (1942: 87).

Drama was an important part of early community life, and both Brunt and fellow Garden City pioneer Charles Purdom dedicated sections of their respective books about early life in Letchworth to it. Purdom, a writer and drama critic, himself established the first amateur theatre group in the town - The Garden City Dramatic Society (later the Letchworth Dramatic Society) - in 1906. Purdom had appealed, in the October 1906 edition of the Letchworth Magazine, for a reformed theatre to be founded in the newly established town, after hailing the town as an environment very much fit for amateur dramatics (Brunt, 1942). Purdom believed that drama was a social art and recognised its place in social enjoyment. In the very same month that the Letchworth Magazine circulated, Purdom's plea was answered and an amateur theatre group formed with other early residents including 'Harold Hare, James Henderson, Alice Hoffman, Jack Dent, Mr and Mrs Murray Hennell, C.F. Townsend, Mr and Mrs R.P. Gossip, and W.G. Taylor' (Miller, 2002: 94).

The group would most notably go on to write and perform a series of pantomimes that satirised the town for social enjoyment. There were three performances of what they named *The Garden City Pantomimes*; firstly in 1909; then 1910; and lastly in 1911. Purdom, along with Charles Lee providing the accompanying music, wrote all



three performances and Mr. and Mrs. R.P Gossop made the costumes and scenery. The pantomimes ‘were not pantomimes at all’ Purdom notes, but were instead ‘gently satirical records of local events’ born out of the perils that came with being a progressive society (1913: 136). These productions provided a platform for the community to look in on itself as Garden City along with its ideals and its townsfolk ‘were turned upside down [...] just for the fun of the thing’ (1913: 136). In her book *Dramaturgy and Architecture: Theatre, Utopia and the Built Environment* (2015) Turner writes more on the pantomimes and notes how the performances came at the expense of ‘the middle-class radicals who were drawn to the garden city’ believing in the ideas of Howard and a better life (the weavers, the freethinkers, the Theosophists) (2015: 59). In so doing these performances acted as a way for the community to come together and laugh at itself, as Cathy notes ‘such laughter had a civic role to play’ (2015: 59).

The civic role that drama could play in Letchworth was of great concern to Purdom and the Society. In the archive, in a box filled with theatre ephemera charting Purdom’s theatrical troop, I found the Letchworth Dramatic Society’s Fourth Annual Report (1910-1911). On one particular page entitled ‘The Letchworth Dramatic Society: An account of its works and a state of its objects’ I found this extract that captures beautifully the spirit of amateur theatre that resonated throughout my research.

The players and workers in the Letchworth Dramatic Society are, without exception, amateurs. The place of the amateur is the practice of the Art of Theatre is now which only needs to be stated to be recognised as legitimate, in spite of popular prejudice that amateur theatricals are usually rather frivolous entertainments designed for the amusement of the friends of the players. As those who work in the Letchworth Dramatic Society understand it, the drama, and the representation of the drama upon the stage, which is **what** is meant by the Art of Theatre is a serious and pleasant pursuit which

is by no means below music and the fine arts in the appeal it makes to the emotions and the imagination; and the playing on the Letchworth stage by the company of amateur players is no attempt on their part to emulate professional actors but is practiced by them in the same spirit as was the amateur performance of music by our great-grandfathers or the amateur practice of our English sports before they fell into the hands of the more professional. The Letchworth Dramatic Society encourages amateur playing for its own sake, believing that is a healthy and enjoyable recreation; believing also that the following by amateurs of the art of playing, for their own entertainment and entertainment of the town in which they live, work of real value can be done, any loss of technical brilliance being made up for by the sincerity and freshness of their work (Letchworth Dramatic Society, 1911).<sup>16</sup>

Whilst the Dramatic Society would only go on to perform until the war in 1914, when they disbanded, a lively community of amateur dramatics still exists in Letchworth Garden City today. At the time of writing this thesis, the town hosts three active amateur theatre groups – SPADS (Song, Pantomime and Drama Society) established in 1937 who perform an array of one-act plays, full length dramas, variety shows and pantomimes; the Letchworth Arcadians, established in 1952 who are a musical theatre and operatic society; and the Settlement Players, being the oldest, established in 1923. In the chapter that follows – Chapter Three I shall explore my methodological approach to this project whilst detailing how I came to research with the Settlement Players of Letchworth Garden City.

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<sup>16</sup> I viewed the Letchworth Dramatic Society's Fourth Annual Report at the Garden City Collection, Letchworth Garden City.

### 3

## **My Methodological Toolkit: Researching Amateur Theatre-Making**

In this chapter I will discuss how I developed a methodological toolkit that I used in the process of my research. When I began my research, I found that there was not only very little previous research into amateur theatre, there was also limited related research into the workings of theatre backstage (both professional or amateur). This omission meant that methodologies for researching set building and backstage work within amateur dramatics were entirely unexplored. For me, this significant absence resulted in, methodologically, an exciting process of discovery. Inspired by ethnographic research methods from different disciplines, my research methods bring together practices in theatre studies, cultural geography and anthropology that shape this thesis. This chapter will trace this process of discovery, and explore the amalgamation of methods that I used in my fieldwork with the Settlement Players in Letchworth Garden City. In tracking this methodological journey, I am seeking to find appropriate ways to investigate the participants' affective engagements and relationships within amateur theatre.

From theatre and performance studies, I have drawn upon methodological approaches to ethnographies of rehearsal processes. McAuley's groundbreaking ethnographic study, *Not Magic But Work* (2012), illuminates the rehearsal process of Company B at the Belvoir Street Theatre in Sydney in ways that are relevant for this study. McAuley highlights the hidden nature of rehearsals, referring to them as the 'private work processes' that happen before the theatrical event (2012: 3). After all, rehearsals usually take place within the marginal spaces of theatres where access is rarely admitted to outsiders or observers. I found that, whilst reflecting on my own ethnography of set building with the Settlement Players, McAuley's reflection on

rehearsals was also relevant to various other forms of backstage work (both professional and amateur) which can also be thought of as forms of private work processes taking place within the recesses of theatre building, unwitnessed by audiences. Inspired by McAuley's study, this chapter sets out a methodology that captures the private and hidden work processes and spaces of the amateur theatre-maker, and it is primarily focused on the set builders.

Building on McAuley's ethnographic study of professional rehearsals from theatre studies, I was inspired by studies from anthropology and cultural geography where researchers have taken on the role of apprentice in research sites that involve creative activity. This methodological approach enabled them to engage in the process of learning to make as a way of understanding particular craftworks. This was an approach I adopted with set builders at the Settlement Players, where I was not only a researcher but also an apprentice set builder, learning from amateurs with years of experience. I shall explore this dual role in this chapter, analysing the ways in which the position of apprentice not only enabled me to learn a new craft, but also identifies how learning *through* craft enabled me to understand and narrate the significance of set building to amateur participants. Geographer Merle Patchett suggests that storytelling is integral to this method, arguing that the 'craft researcher must become an accomplished storyteller whose craft (hi)stories are told in more than just words' (2015, 15). The idea that stories are told in ways that extend beyond words was particularly appealing to me as an apprentice set builder and researcher. Much communication between this group of amateur theatre-makers was non-verbal, and appeared beyond words, and I found that interviews, though useful, could only offer a partial understanding of the experience of making with which they (and I) were involved.

One of the methodological dilemmas that I faced in both the set building workshop and documenting the ethnographic study was how to capture the richness of the experience. This included the stories that might be contained in gestures and in the

process of crafting. Here I follow Patchett's approach to capturing craft stories,<sup>17</sup> and also extend her argument with a discussion inspired by researchers reflecting on their experiences of utilising visual methods, specifically that of photography, in their work. Visual research methods, social anthropologist Sarah Pink writes, 'pay particular attention to the visual aspects of the worlds we inhabit' (2013: 33). They rely on the creation *of* and engagement *with* visual artefacts - including photographs, drawings, paintings, online media and film - as a means to produce and represent knowledge. From the interpretation and analysis of visual culture, as explored in Gillian Rose's well-known book *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials* (2001); to the use of digital video recording as experiential record, as advocated by cultural geographer Bradley Garrett, visual methods (in all forms) continue to grow and evolve across varied disciplinary fields (2011).<sup>18</sup>

By adopting a visual methodology myself, as I shall discuss in more detail later in this chapter, I was not only able to record a process that usually goes unrecorded, but I also became aware of how the act of taking photographs during the set building mornings became interwoven with the rest of my research process. In this chapter I shall reflect on how my camera became an important methodological tool that led me into many research situations and acted as my introduction to the set building group. The capabilities of the camera also helped me to capture textures, colours and embodied practice that would otherwise have been lost in writing, and this form of documentation has informed the writing of this chapter. Finally, this chapter will analyse how the combination of craft and apprentice and visual ethnographic methods came to enhance the embodied nature of my research process.

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<sup>17</sup> Patchett has utilised video recordings as a way of capturing her own craft stories during her apprenticeship with a taxidermist. More on her study will be discussed later in the chapter.

<sup>18</sup> Garrett calls this method 'videographic' work that gives researchers the opportunity to 'depict place, culture, society, gesture, movement, rhythm and flow in new and exciting ways' (2011: 536).

As I discussed in the last chapter, this thesis places focus on the exploration and documentation of the processes of amateur theatre-making (set building) rather than analysing the finished product (the set). In line with this, it is my intention to show the process of finding, adapting and amalgamating these methods in an ever-evolving methodology, and as a creative process of trial and error. This approach is advocated by cultural geographers Dydia DeLyser and Bethany Rogers in their article ‘Meaning and methods in cultural geography: practicing the scholarship of teaching’ (2010). In it they call for methodological awareness and articulacy among researchers:

We thus call here not for a dry, disembodied listing of how many interviews were undertaken or which archives were accessed, but, drawing on the potential of performative methodologies, a situated, embodied engagement with how and why we as scholars choose to undertake specific research in specific ways (2010: 188).

DeLyser and Rogers’s emphasis on what they describe as ‘methodological awareness’ requires an understanding of methods as being both the grounding and energising features of research. Yet, as they highlight in their article, methodological concerns, principles, and techniques have often been treated as secondary to theoretical advancement. In their systematic review of (cultural geography) journal articles between the years 2000-2007, DeLyser and Rogers found little focused attention paid to discussions about *how* research is conducted and *why* certain methods and methodologies have been used. This, they note, came as a surprise considering ‘the efforts, in a newer cultural geography, to develop tropes of representation that more fully account for the embodied, contingent, and emotive elements of social, life’ (2010: 187). In light of this absence, they suggest an increased and sustained focus on methodological issues, ‘to show clearly [...] how we came to know what we know, and how it is that we go about doing what we do’ (2010: 186). This emphasis on the embodied and emotional aspects of research is

well suited to this study of amateur theatre, allowing me to take account of the relationships that I developed with set builders and other members of the group. It also offers an opportunity to reflect on how the relationship between crafting and my ethnographic research became intimately related in my work with the Settlement Players.

In line with Delyser and Rogers' reading, therefore, this chapter will explore both methodological ideas and their practical application, whilst preserving an understanding of my methodology as a process of discovery in itself. I shall begin the next section by explaining how I came to meet the Settlement Players, and how the relationships I forged with them informed my subsequent research. I describe in detail how an initial guided tour through the Settlement Players' archive sparked an invitation to sit in on set building mornings and observe. To narrate and reflect on the process, I have included email correspondences and extracts from my fieldbook notes. The chapter moves to explain how this initial invitation to observe backstage work at the Settlement evolved into an invitation to participate in the set building. Here I shall highlight how my research 'tools' (fieldbook, pen, camera) merged with the tools of the build (paintbrush, screwdriver, ladder) as my method took a more creative turn, and I became an apprentice set builder.

### **Beginning My Research: Meeting Pat and John**

The story of how I came to discover, meet and subsequently join the Settlement Players begins back in January 2014 when I made contact with Pat Baskerville, a long-standing member of the Settlement Players. Pat joined the Players in 1987, after moving to Letchworth from East London with her husband John (also a long standing member of the Players, joining the group later in the late 1990s) and their daughter. Pat, originally from London, and John, who grew up in Liverpool, have both been involved with amateur dramatics from a young age. They actually met

each other when John became a stagehand for a society that Pat was acting with in London.

Both Pat and John were to become a central part of my PhD experience and this chapter affords me an opportunity to reflect on, and narrate, their contribution to the research process. After reflecting on our first meeting through the fieldnotes that I took that day, I have been reminded of the ways in which this meeting formed the foundation of my research process, guiding, as DeLyser and Rogers suggest, my ‘specific research in specific ways’ (2010: 188).

My search for current amateur dramatic companies performing in Letchworth Garden City began online, and the Settlement Players webpage was the first result to appear on my Google search. I explored their website, discovering that they had formed in 1923, making them the longest running amateur dramatic company in Letchworth. Interestingly, their home was also Letchworth’s original non-alcoholic pub named the Skittles Inn, which was bought by the Letchworth Settlement (an adult education centre established in 1920) in 1925 and turned into the adult education centre that it is to this day (the history of the Players and the Settlement building will be explored more in Chapter Four). On their website, under a page titled ‘Costume Hire’, I came across Pat’s email address and on finding this I sent her an email introducing myself, the amateur dramatics project as a whole, my interest in Letchworth Garden City and the ‘making’ of amateur theatre. After a short email correspondence, Pat suggested that we meet. She explained that the Settlement Players kept an archive of old memorabilia (posters, set designs, photographs and programmes) at the Settlement, which I was welcome to visit and look through with her. She listed some train times from Kings Cross and suggested that I wear something warm:

**Subject: Visit to Letchworth**

**Date: 28/1/14**



[...] The archives are in the Settlement loft so it's a bit chilly as there is no heating in there! But we can get a cup of tea and a biscuit [...] I have silver hair (not grey!!!), wear glasses, am quite tall and will be wearing my green parka with a fur hood. I also inevitably carry a nice blue plastic shopping bag with a picture on it.

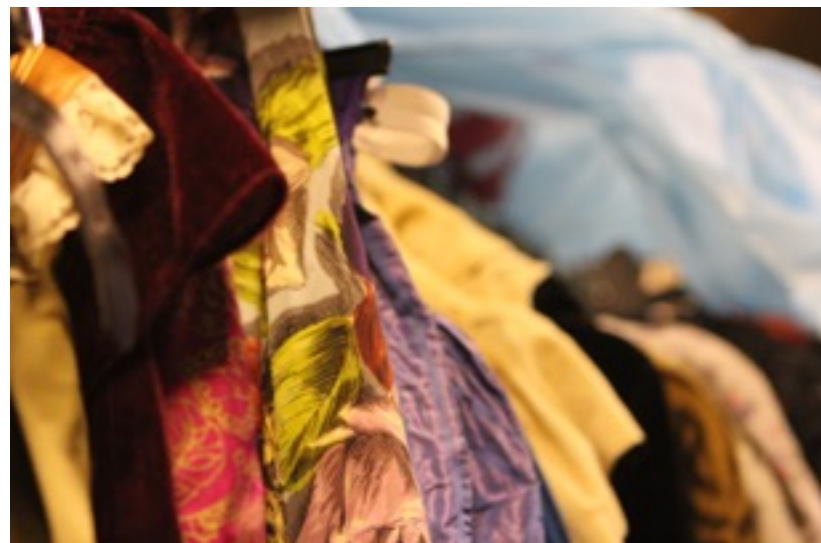
Cheers, Pat

On the 4<sup>th</sup> February 2014, I arrived at Letchworth Garden City railway station and was met beyond the ticket barriers by John, who was waiting to greet me with a clipboard holding a piece of paper that had my name written on it. 'Cara? Great to meet you' he said as I approached him. We shook hands. 'I'm John...Pat's husband. Pat sent me up to get you, she's at the Settlement doing some photocopying at the moment'. As we walked down to the Settlement together, John explained to me how he was, like his wife, a long-standing member of the Settlement Players but that he preferred backstage work to performing. He asked me if I had ever been involved in amateur dramatics (to which I answered no) and enquired about my research. At this moment in time, it was unclear as to which direction my research would go. This visit was, at the time, purely explorative. However, it transpired to be an important and formative part of my thesis as a whole. The rest of this section utilises fieldbook notes that were written after my initial visit to the Settlement, and sets up how my subsequent research methodology came to be.

February, 2014. At the bottom of the leafy Nevells Road we met Pat in the west-facing veranda of the Settlement, underneath the sign that read 'THE SETTLEMENT, Formerly THE SKITTLES INN'. After introductions in Unwin and Parker's Arts and Craft style Stoep - complete with terracotta floor tiles and shiny black wooden benches which hugged the walls of the Settlement - John left and Pat led me through the low front door of the Settlement building which opened into the Common Room, once the main bar of the Skittles Inn. A crowd of people were trying to leave through the

same front door, armed with armfuls of fabric. Pat told me that the Settlement's sewing class had just finished and led me up a narrow, creaky wooden staircase, into the eaves of the Settlement. Once on the landing, Pat unlocked a troublesome door to the left of the stairs and as it opened I was met by an Aladdin's cave. Filled from floor to ceiling with nylon laundry bags in gingham prints, taped up cardboard boxes, wicker baskets and Tesco bags bursting with odd shoes, handbags, silk scarves, yellow dust cloths and ring bound folders. Even the exposed beams that revealed the Settlement's structure had been utilised by the Players as hanging rails and makeshift shelves for their collections of pearl necklaces, satin bags, hats and shoes. Out-of-place filing cabinets hugged both the walls next to the door, which triggered Pat to explain her annoyance at the Settlement management who, she noted, had been slowly starting to colonise the Players' attic space, 'they think we don't notice...well it's hard not to!'.

As we walked further into the attic a door to the right, adorned with a mirror, revealed rails of Victorian dresses, military uniforms (of all sorts), sequinned flapper dresses, fur coats and dinner jackets: the Players' collection of costumes. Jewel-like greens, purples, golds and ruby reds peeked out from underneath plastic bags that were protecting the costumes from dust, 'we have a bit of a problem with moths too', explained Pat.



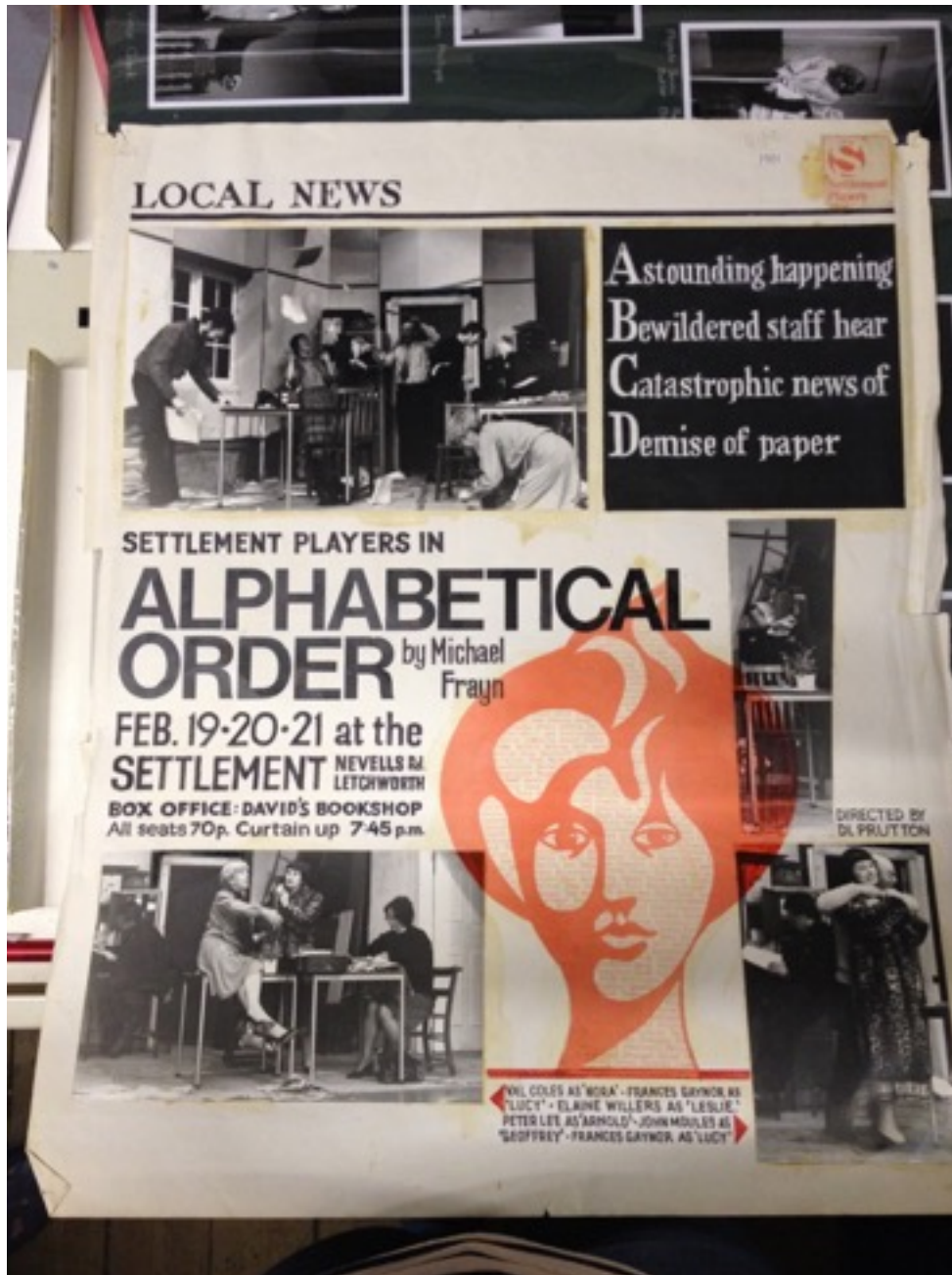
Distracted by the costumes, I failed to spot the set of metal architectural plan chests that sat on the floor next to the costume door. It was here, Pat told me, that the Settlement Player's archive was kept and stored. We found a couple of stools and with Pat leading the tour, I became an archive tourist; together we explored the contents of the archive, one drawer at a time: 'shall we start at the top?' said Pat, as she opened the top drawer of the chest. Unlike the conventional archival process that I had experienced before searching through online databases to request material prior to the visit there were no reference numbers, no archivist checking in and out material, no checking my bags into a locker and Pat told me I could take as many photographs as I wanted. Rather, this was a discovery in an immediate sense, not a planned expedition into the archive. Here, both in the drawers and the space surrounding me, I was met with material untouched by a systemised and categorised database. These were not objects, as geographer Caitlin DeSilvey would suggest, 'behav[ing] appropriately in the archive' (2007: 880).



Each drawer revealed intimate pieces of history of the Players' theatre-making, things that someone thought were worth keeping, 'a lot of it has been donated, people find things at home and leave it with the Settlement, or with one of us... or if someone's died, pieces might find themselves here' explained Pat. In amongst theatre festival score sheets, black and white photographs of actors on stage and newspaper cuttings of local theatre reviews, I found myself instantly drawn to, and enchanted by, the hand drawn and coloured or collaged promotional posters and programmes, advertising old Settlement Players' productions, such as Reginald Arkell and Alfred Reynold's musical adaptation of *1066 And All That*. The handcrafted nature of this poster revealed itself through the faint pencil marks could still be seen behind the penned calligraphic writing, drafting the form and shape of each letter along with its height in relation to the others and the black ink of the bigger letters that spelt out '1066 AND ALL THAT' had smudged, in places, into the white paper that it bordered. Underneath *1066 and All That* was a poster for the Players' 1981 production of Michael Frayn's *Alphabetic Order*, designed to look like a page of a newspaper. The aged and yellowed glue that bordered the collage of black and white 35 mm film press photographs of the Players on stage hinted to the cut and stick process involved in the poster's making.

It amazed me to think that this *single* promotional poster would have been made by hand: its layout meticulously planned; its photographs picked, printed, cut and stuck in place and its text carefully hand drawn on top. Charmingly, a little cut out square of paper with the Settlement Players logo printed on it had been stuck (again, the yellow border gave this away) onto the top right-hand corner of the poster. The four, ripped corner edges of the poster suggested that it was pinned up somewhere and pulled down afterwards, 'they were probably pinned up outside the Settlement on a notice board' suggested Pat. We noted the amount of work that must have

been put into the posters at this time compared to now, Pat told me that they don't make posters like that anymore, 'we just make them on a computer now'.



In one of the drawers we found a scrapbook. Tattered and stained with age, it was filled with hand drawn and painted set and costume designs, all personally curated inside the decorated scrapbook. Set and costume designs from past productions sat side by side with hand written quotes and their

corresponding news clippings which provided hints to a story about the amateur theatrical making of the past, but as Joslin McKinney and Helen Iball note:

Design sketches are expressive but often show scenographic intentions for a production rather than what actually happened. Models and technical drawings ought to provide an accurate record of what appears on stage, but they do not always survive the production process. In any case, practicalities and ‘aesthetic reconsiderations’ may mean that scenographic proposals can evolve beyond the point of the model being delivered (2011: 117).



The design sketches found in the Settlement Players’ archive showed intentions for productions, yet could not show the crafting of the set nor the spaces in which this crafting took place, along with any possible aesthetic or technical reconsiderations made at the time of building. Just as some photographs showed forgotten faces (at one point Pat left the attic in the Settlement to walk up the road and talk to the oldest member of the Settlement Players, Joyce, to ask her if she knew who the

people in the photographs were) the set and costume designs illuminated forgotten processes. Pat admitted herself how valuable it would be to learn and record this information now before it is lost forever, as she could only guess some answers to my questions. There was a recognition, here, over the loss of memory over time what DeSilvey might describe as materialised memories eroding through the passing of time (2007).

The snippets of stories that these scrap books, set and costume designs, hand-made posters and programmes afforded me triggered a desire to know more about the unpredictable and improvisational spaces of the Settlement, and to learn how the pencilled lined set designs that lay glued in amongst the yellowed, aged pages became material manifestations. I wanted to know about the people who drew, the people who built, the spaces in which they made and the small local stories that became attached to the processes of making. However, here in the archive, information about the set designers and the builders and indeed their everyday embodied processes were lost. There were no scrapbooks full of photographs showing the Settlement Players' set builders working on sets and after all, it is often the performers and the performances that are written about and recorded through photographs and newspaper reviews - but rarely, if ever the set builders. It was at this juncture that I considered how the processes of making theatre, in this case building a set or making a costume, are often performed in private spaces and hours unseen by anyone who is not involved.

As a cultural geographer interested in the relationship between craft and place, the hidden and creative spaces of the Settlement appealed to me. The opportunity to explore the private and undocumented world of back stage amateur theatre at the Settlement was reminiscent of McAuley's analysis of the private nature of professional rehearsals:



If public performance is ephemeral and leaves little trace, the private work processes that precede it are even more deeply buried in the past (2012: 3).

McAuley's work made me think about my own research interests and the ways in which I was chasing the private work processes in the hidden worlds of the amateur theatre-maker, and the way in which the making of amateur theatre was another aspect of collective work through a very different form of private work process. The private work processes of the Settlement Players' backstage work were indeed 'deeply buried in the past' and were not represented or documented anywhere in the archive, and so I looked to the Players of the present.

After our morning in the archive, my excitement over the hand painted set designs triggered Pat to explain to me how her husband John designs most of the Players sets. 'You're welcome to come back and see John's designs, he's got a lot of them at home' she said, 'I'm sure he wouldn't mind showing you'. The next month, Pat and I arranged to meet again so that I could see John's designs.<sup>19</sup> At their house, John brought out an armful of A4 blue ring bound folders, bursting full of his hand drawn set designs, notes and cross sections. The three of us sat at their kitchen table with mugs of tea as John took me through some of his past sets, verbally annotating the ingenious technical and decorative elements of every drawing. John explained how for their production of Alan Plater's *I Thought I Heard a Rustling*, the Players utilised a bucket and pipe to create a working sink onstage, complete with a running tap. Later, as we turned to the sketches for the Settlement Players' production of Tennessee Williams' *The Night of the Iguana*, John explained how they built trees out of chicken wire and wood, and how gauze and lights were used to create the illusion of multiple rooms onstage. The sketches also brought up more general reflections about amateur theatre-making. Both John and Pat explained how 'scripts are not sacred' and how flexibility and making-do are key characteristics of building sets. 'You have to work around the challenges', said John

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<sup>19</sup> Research visit conducted 14/3/15

as he flicked through more pages of his hand drawn sets, ‘most plays are written for the West End and so unlike professional theatre companies, amateur dramatics companies don’t have the man-power or technology, so it’s never going to be an ideal situation.’ ‘It calls for a lot of imagination’ added Pat.

This meeting with Pat and John allowed me to gain small yet insightful glimpses into the processes involved in amateur theatre-making. Unlike the silent set designs in the Settlement Players’ archive, John’s sketches came with verbal annotations and anecdotes. I was able to ask questions and these questions initiated John to propose the idea that I come and watch a set building session one Sunday morning. In January 2015 I emailed John taking him up on this offer. The next section of this chapter details how my methodology evolved from this point. Through the assistance of email correspondences and fieldbook notes, I hope to show how an invitation to observe a Sunday morning set build from John, evolved into an invitation to join the set building team. In doing this, I shall also highlight the implications that arose from this change in my methodological approach.

### **Becoming a Set Builder with the Settlement Players**

**Subject: Set building/stage design**

**Date: 5/1/15**

Hello Pat and John,

Happy New Year to you both! Hope you had a lovely Christmas. I am back in London now and was wondering whether you are planning any set building/decoration sessions etc as I would love to attend/observe as many as you feel happy with me turning up to. If you have any planned dates coming up (or even if it’s last minute) I’d like to track these processes if I can. Let me know!

Best wishes,

Cara

**Subject: Re: Set building/stage design**

**Date: 7/1/15**

Cara,

Happy New Year. Hope that you enjoyed Copenhagen and your Christmas break. Over the Christmas period I designed Pat's set for the Feb play. Last Sunday we put up some flats for her to run rehearsals on and check that the exit/entrance locations worked along with some working furniture. She ran a rehearsal on Monday behind closed doors as the Table tennis group was in the Hall. All appeared okay and she will have another chance to have a look at tonight's rehearsal (8-10pm). Next Sunday (11th Jan 10.15am - 1pm) I plan to firm up the flats and start building a bar that she need on the set. We will then be working most Sunday mornings leading up to the show and Pat will be rehearsing Sunday afternoon's 9 (possibly 2-5pm OR 3-6pm) when she will have the whole of the hall. Depending upon how fast we progress I may need to complete some of the set work on a weekday - there are a few people I can call in to help who are available during the working day. We have pencilled in our stage manager, props, costume, prompt, lighting people and are looking for someone to run the sound (just emailed someone to ask them). There is working furniture on the set but we need different pieces to match the period and look - we have emailed out and to see what we can beg, borrow and steal. We will be using the overhead projector to produce the TV Chat Show signs. Publicity is in progress and we need to design a poster/flyer for local libraries, shops etc.

You are more than welcome anytime. If you come on a Sunday you can come back with us between set-building and the rehearsal for a sandwich lunch. If you wanted to stay over and avoid an early start then we have a spare bedroom. There are many options - you could attend the last hour of

the set build and the first half of a rehearsal on a Sunday, which with the travelling might make a shorter day. If you did this 2 or 3 times then you would get a feel for the progress of the show leading up to the dress rehearsal and a performance. Just need to check the Sunday trains as engineering works can throw out your timings sometimes. Give us a call if you want to tie down certain dates and times.

J&P

At the beginning of January 2015, I emailed John to ask whether I could attend a couple of the Players' upcoming set building sessions at the Settlement. We had spoken about the prospect of this happening on one of my visits to his and Pat's house, given my interest in his set designs. John replied and invited me to the next weekly Sunday set building session (11<sup>th</sup> January 2015), which would be held at the Settlement from quarter past ten in the morning to one o'clock in the afternoon. John also invited me to stay for the afternoon rehearsal of Lesley Bruce's *My Own Show*, which Pat was directing, 'as I mentioned you are welcome to come back to ours for a sandwich in-between' noted John.<sup>20</sup>

That Sunday (January 11<sup>th</sup> 2015), I travelled to Letchworth Garden City, equipped my rucksack with my tools for research: my camera, my iPhone to take photographs with, just in case my camera battery died, a large notebook for sketches and notes, a voice recorder for potential conversations and a couple of pens and pencils. It was ten o'clock in the morning, early January, and as I walked through the doors into the hall I was met by a huddled group of people, still wrapped up in their hats, gloves and scarves. The hall hadn't escaped the cold winter chill. I saw John standing in the middle of the huddle holding and looking down at a clipboard, listing the jobs for the morning's set construction:

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<sup>20</sup> John, email, 8/1/15

John: We need to firm up the flats and start seaming them if anyone is up for that... Graham, can you start on constructing the bar today... and anyone else who wants to help out with that? Ah Cara, hello! This is Cara and she's joining us this morning...she is doing a PhD on amateur dramatics ...and the Garden Cities? Well you can probably explain it a bit better than me.<sup>21</sup>

After a brief introduction to my research, no one could really understand why I wanted to watch them build or why I was interested in writing a PhD about them specifically, but all of them were gracious with their time and let me take photos and engage in conversations with them whilst they worked. I set up a workstation on the side of the stage and watched as Graham, Stephen, Jim, Helen, Ivor and John started to construct a living room scene. John explained the premise of *My Own Show*, (more efficiently named by the Players as the 'Feb Play') whilst showing me his pencil drawn designs explaining the final look of the set: a modern New York apartment.

John: It's a comedy, centred around a chat show host called Fay and she gets reunited with her old school friends on the program 'This is Your Life'... did you ever see that show with Michael Parkinson?

I set up a little work station on the side of the stage and watched the set builders from a distance, I asked them, when I could, about their involvement in the group, when they joined, why they joined, do they act as well? I explored the backstage areas with my camera, darting in and around the measuring, drilling and sawing. I was able to meet the rest of the crafts(wo)men and witness some of the craft happening as well as being able to physically map the spaces within the hall. I watched as materials and tools combined with hands as bodies manoeuvred in and out of each other on stage. I was witness to conversations between the Players, some

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<sup>21</sup> All taken from fieldbook notes, 11/1/15

surrounding the set and the play and some more personal: weekend plans, jokes, and general catching up.

After a while watching the set builders, John asked Cliff - a Settlement Player and director of their upcoming festival play (David Campton's *After Midnight, Before Dawn*) - whether I could sit in on a round table audition that was happening in the room next door to the hall. John said that it would be good for me to experience all aspects of amateur theatre. And so, I dropped my tools and walked through to the audition with Stephen, who, as well as working on the set with me that morning, was also auditioning for a part in Cliff's production. Cliff handed me a script and invited me to sit at the table where I watched the auditionees walk in, wrapped up in their coats and scarves, all acknowledging each other like old friends. Some leaned on the radiator, capturing a last bit of warmth before the audition started, whilst others started to find seats around the table that had been positioned in the middle of the room. I sat with my notebook and the script open on my lap. Cliff introduced the play and told us how it was set in a prison in the late seventeenth/early eighteenth century and followed the night of six characters, all of which were awaiting death after being found guilty of witchcraft. I watched as Cliff assigned and reassigned roles to each of the Players auditioning so that they could each try out various roles. After a while, one of the auditionees sitting next to me turned to me and whispered, 'has he missed you out? Do you want me to say something, he's passed you every time?' 'No it's okay' I said, 'I'm just observing'.

After the audition I joined the set builders back on stage, although it wasn't too long before it was time for a tea break. In one of the dressing rooms we sat and drank tea and the set builders asked more about my interest in them. One of the set-builders Jim asked, 'have you got everything you need?' On my train journey back home, I reflected on the morning. Looking through my photographs and my initial notes, I wrote a couple of lines in my field book about the way that I positioned myself and my workstation on the edge of the stage, and how that

created a strange perspective that morning, as though the set building was a performance in itself and that I was the sole audience member.

A couple of days later, after my initial visit to set building as an observer, John emailed me inviting me back the next Sunday, but this time instructing me to bring some old clothes along so that I could join in on the build:

**Subject: Sunday 18th January - Set building - 10.15 to 1pm**

**Date: 13/1/15**

Cara,

Lovely to see you last Sunday; hope that it was useful to you. Tasks for this coming Sunday listed below. If you are coming up then you should bring some working clothes and join in with the build - nothing like taking part to appreciate what is being done. You can have a wash and change here afterwards before rehearsal. If you prefer not to then not a problem. We have had some good news on the furniture front- one of the cast has offered to load some of her furniture which we think will work well. Sorry to miss you leaving the Sunday rehearsal; I was backstage rigging up the telephone, setting up a light for Margaret (props lady) and sorting out some of the masking. Our first stab at a poster attached.

J

This emailed invitation from John to 'join in with the build' would result in the narrative of my methodology changing. It was an invitation that would shape my thesis in a very significant way. This invitation to participate echoed geographer Harriet Hawkins' experiences of working with artist Annie Lovejoy, detailed in her article 'Creative geographic methods: knowing, representing, intervening. On

composing place and page' (2015). Whilst observing Lovejoy's artistic practice as a participant observer, Hawkins describes how she was invited by Lovejoy to make something together, engaging her in the creative 'doings' of Lovejoy's practice. Here, Hawkins notes, her 'ethnography took a decidedly more creative turn' as they collaborated in producing an artists' book titled *insites* (2015: 249). Similar to Hawkins's invite from Lovejoy, the invitation that I received from John changed my role as an observer to one where I could participate in the *making* of amateur theatre, specifically the making of sets. In this moment, borrowing from Hawkins, my ethnography 'took a decidedly more creative turn'.

Excited and a little nervous, the next week I packed my rucksack with my research tools from the week before, but this time with the addition of a pair of old, thinning, ripped jeans that were ready to be thrown away, one of my boyfriend's old shirts and a pair of old trainers to change into when I arrived. As the weeks passed, I started to wear my work clothes to and from the Settlement, unfazed by the paint that generally speckled my hair and shoes after a morning's build. I would return tired, achy and splintered, but always enthusiastic to return the next week. Sundays became a break in my often-sedentary week, usually spent sitting at my computer at home or in the library.

So far in this chapter I have narrated the ways in which I became involved with the Settlement Players from meeting Pat and John, to becoming a participant observer at a set building morning, to eventually being invited to take part in the set building myself. It is perhaps important to note here that much like the majority of the set builders who I built with, I love to make things, however I had no previous experience of set building before my time with them. All of the stagecrafts that I know now are a result of learning to-do *with* the set builders on a weekly basis. In the next section, I shall discuss how apprenticeship, as a method, and my position as 'learner' assisted in the process of my research. Following John's words, there is 'nothing like taking part to appreciate what is being done'.



## Apprenticeship as Method: Learning whilst Learning To-Do *With* Creative Practitioners

Embodiment characterises our experience of the world. It is through embodied relations with the world, tacitly understood, that we accrue practical knowledge (O'Connor, 2007: 126).

Reflecting on creative geographic methods, Hawkins recommends that there should be space made 'for a consideration of what can be gained in the doing and in the course of learning to do' (2015: 3). Hawkins' suggestion is that researchers must spend time reflecting on methods that challenge more normative ethnographic research, to understand better the potentialities and possibilities of focussing on the processes of 'creative doings' through taking part in the doing itself. Hawkins has, herself, engaged in 'the doing' and indeed 'learning to do' through her own research, namely her work with artist Annie Lovejoy, which was discussed previously (2015: 249). Whilst engaging with embodied and practice-based doings, Hawkins notes how she was able to 'engage, research and re-present the sensory experiences, emotions, affective atmospheres and flows of life' (2015: 248). It is this idea of engagement, research and re-presentation that is the focus of this part of my methodology.

Disciplines such as anthropology and sociology offer research into craft practices that have seen researchers engaging with creative 'doings' through the method of apprenticeship. Apprenticeships are roles traditionally given to people who have chosen to learn a trade from a skilled employer or master crafts(wo)man through practical instruction. However, by advocating an engagement in the making through working *with* craftspeople, researchers have taken on the role of the learner as a way of investigating numerous craft practices. A conclusive remark at the end of Patchett's ethnographic study 'The taxidermist's apprentice: stitching together the past and present of a craft practice' (2015), which saw her taking on an

apprenticeship with taxidermist Peter Summers, asks that researchers attempting to witness and describe craft should position themselves as a learner. Here, Patchett suggests a methodology that involves commitment from the outset, to

[A] period of apprenticeship [...] of and with the craft as it is only through gaining familiarity with the particular craft or practice that the most sympathetic method for witnessing and describing it will suggest itself (2015: 16).

Building on McAuley's ethnographic study of rehearsals, the methodology that I used to understand the creative geographies of set building involved the role of apprenticeship. I have been inspired by studies conducted by researchers who have taken on the role of apprentice whilst engaging in the making as a way of understanding a particular form of craftworks. Apprenticeships by scholars, both long (spanning months and years) and short (day classes), in craft practices such as glass blowing (O'Connor, 2006, 2007; Atkinson, 2013), taxidermy (Patchett, 2015) and building (Marchand, 2008), have created a plethora of detailed and compelling ethnographic accounts of craft; recording process, affect, sensation, emotion, and bodily experience. In all of these instances, researchers have become embodied subjects by, as Hawkins writes, 'enrolling [their] bodies in the doing of creative practices' with their bodies becoming central to the research process and 'tool[s] through which research in done (2016: 65).

Anthropologist Trevor Marchand, for example, has made extensive investigations into the learning and practice of craft-skill through long-term ethnographic fieldwork. In his study 'Muscles, Morals and Mind: Craft Apprenticeship and the Formation of Person' (2008) he took the opportunity to undertake building and woodworking apprenticeships with skilled craftspeople. His study stresses the significance of corporeality, noting how his choice of apprenticeship lies with that

of the 'knowing body' (2008: 266). For Marchand, the body has long been underestimated and undervalued as a research tool:

[I]t is with bodies, and not merely words, that people learn, express, interpret, improvise and negotiate - in a word, 'craft' - their ways of knowing in the world (2008: 267).

Throughout his ventures as an apprentice - amongst minaret builders in the South Arabian city of Sana'a; mud-brick masons in Djenné, Mali and fine-woodwork trainees in London (fieldwork through which he earned a City & Guilds Diploma in fine woodwork) - Marchand has used his own body as a tool of enquiry, creating embodied ways of knowing and of sensing the world. He suggests that researchers use their own embodiment in the process of researching craft through the role of apprenticeship, and this means that they gain access to embodied knowledges involved in practices that usually go unrecorded. Marchand's suggestion of the 'knowing body' that is underestimated and undervalued in research, made me reflect on the importance of my own body during the research of this thesis. As my role of observer changed to set builder, so too did my position in amongst the community of makers. As the weeks passed, I found myself following a more creative and practice-based methodology, as my own body became positioned and embedded in the 'field' of my research. As part of an ethnographic research method, the role of apprenticeship provided me with the potential to record and convey daily-lived experiences and embodied practices, with my body acting as a sensory apparatus - adding another 'tool' to my research toolkit

During the course of my research with the Settlement Players, I realised the ways in which my position of set builders' apprentice not only enabled the practical learning of the various theatre crafts involved in set building, but also the ways in which it enabled a different sort of learning *through* craft. Practically, joining in on

the builds challenged me to advance my own accepted skill set through the learning of new techniques and practices that I had never garnered before.

As the weeks passed, I would learn how to hang stage curtains, how to position scenery flats and secure them in place, how to paint an effect on a flat and how to competently use an electronic drill, along with various other stagecrafts.

I also became versed in theatrical names for things and processes - 'flat' (or 'scenery flat' a flat piece of scenery that can be painted and positioned on stage to create a set), 'seaming' (a way of connecting scenery flats together), 'rostra' (a raised platform), 'set strike' (term used for when the set is taken down at the end of a performance run). In addition to these terms, and more interesting still, I learnt nick-names given to areas of the Settlement by the Players themselves, for example 'The Perch' is the name given to the raised platform area, only accessible by ladder (stage right), where the lighting and sound equipment is stored. The word 'Trout' appeared multiple times in my notebook, referring to the mezzanine floor backstage where the Players' building materials and props are stored. I was shown it on my introductory tour of the Settlement and was both asked and guided to it when fetching materials for the build. The word 'Trout' became synonymous with materials and storage to me, and after not studying theatre and performance since my A Levels, I thought that it might be a technical or even short-hand term for a theatre's storage area. Later, I learnt that it was actually a name given to the area by the Players - an in-joke that had stuck, becoming the area's accepted name. Local understandings such as these would become an important part of my thinking about amateur theatre and were a result of my ongoing apprenticeship with the Players. Spending most of my Sundays at the Settlement enabled an understanding of the Settlement Players and their very specific craft, which happens in a very specific place (which will be explored in Chapter Four).

It was also during my apprenticeship as set builder that I was invited, weekly, to Pat and John's house for lunch. These invitations allowed me into their personal space

and afforded me the opportunity to explore other creative spaces, away from the Settlement. These experiences, which I shall explore in Chapter Five, enabled me to recognise the importance of theatre-making to their daily lives. My ongoing presences at the build meant that I was able to meet other members of the Settlement at rehearsals and after parties (to which I was openly invited) – these included actors, directors, stage managers, prompts, Jeni the costumer and Margaret who looks after the properties. I was introduced to members such as Joyce, who joined the Players in 1949 and Douglas whose performance in November 2014 marked his fortieth consecutive season with the Players, and in June 2015 appeared in his one hundredth amateur performance. I was also invited to help out with the front of house team, which gave me a chance to experience the ways in which the inside of a community hall was crafted into a theatre. It was during moments such as these that demonstrated how the position of apprenticeship in research not only enables the learning of craft, but also of learning *through* craft. This is clearly articulated by sociologist Paul Atkinson, who writes, ‘this is where the pedagogy of craft and the craft of ethnography converge’ (2013: 402). I was in a state of learning from the investigation itself through an immersion in the phenomena. The conversations, personal reflections and notes that I made of the whole experience started to ignite both conceptual and practical enquiries further.

In this ethnography of set building, I found that I was following McAuley’s analysis of the rehearsal process. She understood the rehearsal process to be ‘a process of discovery’ where every element is unknown to the people involved in the production (playwright, actor, director) before it begins (2012: 5). I came to understand the set building process in much the same way. It revealed itself as a ‘process of discovery’ in that no one knew exactly what was going to unfold until each set building session finished. And so my methodology was a great reflection of this spirit, a process of discovery in itself.

## Tools of Research: Recording Conversations and Fieldnotes

During the course of learning how to set build, I utilised some of these moments as interviewing time with the Settlement Players. Again, this was another instance of learning *through* craft. Whilst we worked, conversations often evolved spontaneously out of activities, either during construction or taking the set apart. Some of the Players used this time to talk to me about something that they had thought about during the week or something that they wanted to share with me. The nature of the once-weekly build meant that I followed up some of these conversations and reflections with the respective Players, mid-week, over email. These emails would often start with ‘I have been thinking about ...’ or ‘you mentioned... last Sunday that...’, and conversations would continue in that way.

Of course, not all of our conversations revolved around my investigative enquiries. Some conversations during the build inevitably flowed from talk of the set build and amateur dramatics in general, to more personal and sensitive stories and reflections. Sharing personal stories is an integral part of forming relationships, getting to know people and forming trust - a big reason why people join amateur dramatics companies - to form relationships with other people. The Players were usually happy for me to record these personal stories or reflections, but their openness and trust demanded sensitivity. If someone felt that I shouldn’t include something that they said, or were uncomfortable in me doing so, I respected these occurrences unconditionally and would not write them down. As McAuley reflects on her own ethnographic study into professional rehearsal processes:

Writing about rehearsal thus, requires navigation of a fine line between betraying confidences by telling too much and failing to engage with the reality of the practice by telling too little (2012: 8).

Attempting to both engage with and record, fully, the reality of the practice was a trickier feat once I began set building. As my role as researcher and set builder merged, so too did the tools of research and the tools of the build. For example on the first day as 'set builder', John taught me for the very first time how to 'seam' the scenery flats together. This involved the same processes as wallpapering a wall (pasting a sheet of paper and affixing it onto a wall with brushes to prevent air bubbles), in order to connect the edges of the flats together, 'seamlessly'. During the morning of learning a new skill, I found myself in a dance between my roles as researcher and set builder - negotiating the importance between my camera and the paint brush, my notebook and the bucket of paste. Wanting to both capture the experience of practice, but also involve myself in it fully. I remember watching John's steps in precise detail, and locking each visual instruction away in my mind so as to show my commitment as part of the set building group - prepared for when it became time for me to relay these steps in practice.

Becoming a set builder resulted in both the look and the contents my notebooks evolving in significant ways. As the weeks passed, I bought smaller notebooks so that I could fit them into the pockets of my jeans. My original notebook became too cumbersome to carry around the set with me and I became conscious of it getting in the way when put down. Time to pause and take notes became increasingly difficult as my responsibilities onstage increased. What began as pages of neat, considered and well organised observations, turned into a series of rushed, lists, words and sketches, scrawled onto paint dabbled pages with whatever writing instrument was laying around to hand. For example, a small pencil that I found, lying around on the stage floor, became an ideal companion to make fieldnotes and markup wood with. Its cracked and marked exterior illuminated signs of constant use by its previous owner - balancing behind the ear or being trampled on underfoot. However its small size - due to constant sharpening - meant that it fit perfectly in my jean pockets. My hastened notes also started to record more personal reflections. Comments on my aching hands, the coldness of the hall that

morning, a splintered finger, the feeling of inadequacy when not knowing how to use an electric drill and the feeling of joy when accomplishing a project, nestled in amongst my other ethnographic notes detailing immediate observations -

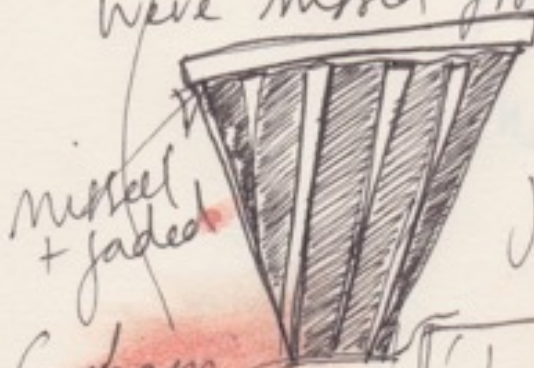


conversations with the Players, tasks undertaken, materials used, funny moments and interesting happenings.



Painted the

★ low (the bits that were missed first time)



missed + faded

John noted them on his list

Graham painted backdrop red



to do

make lists at Munsal

Graham sings work while we work

Ivor asks "are you going to perform any further?"

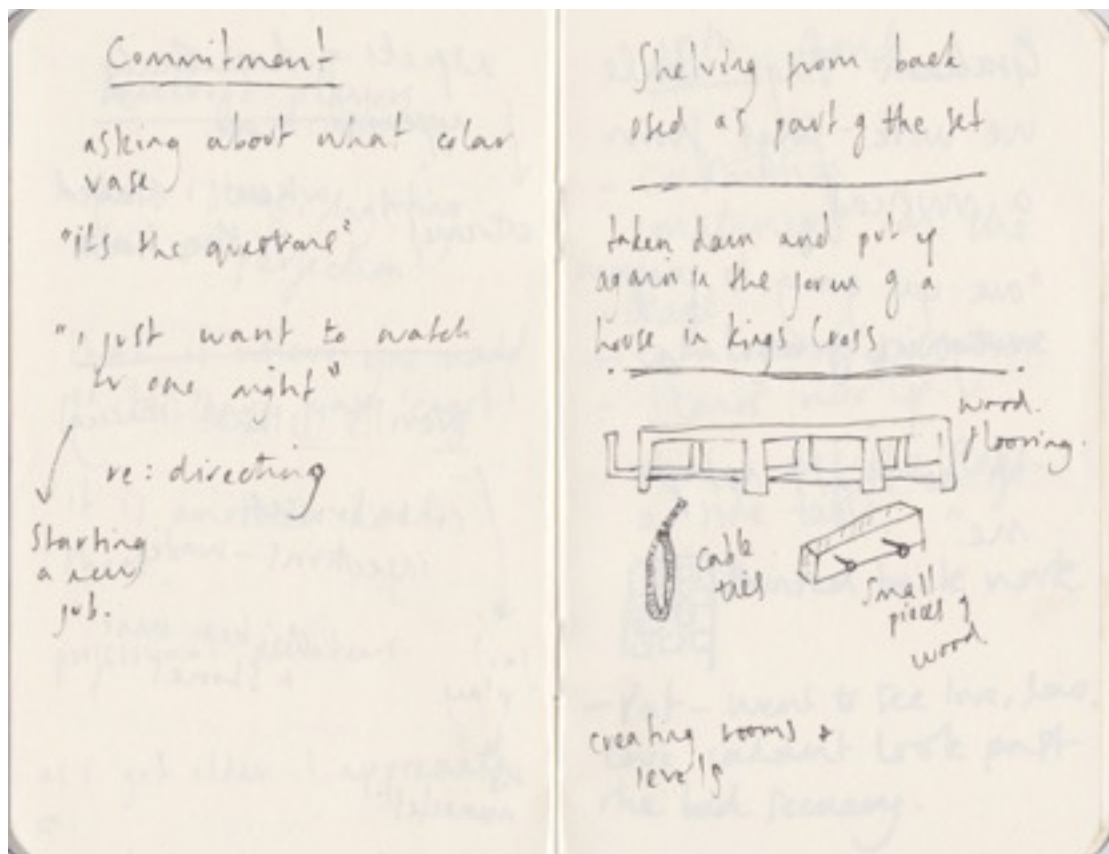
"oh that's not for me"

cheeky

set from every angle

↓

arguing pieces



I became aware of my notebooks and their roles as intermittent reminders to the Players that I was observing them. As the weeks passed, my presence inevitably became more familiar on stage, and often times I would be found without my notebook in hand whilst construction. But it was in the moments, the seconds even, when I believed that I had a quiet moment to reflect on an event that had just happened, that, more often than not, a Settlement Player would catch me in the act. Whilst reflecting on her own observational position in the rehearsal room, McAuley writes about how conversations had with company members such as Richard, who she notes was ‘frequently bemused’ as to what she was constantly writing down, reminded her of the level of consciousness amongst the company that they were being observed by her. She writes:

[H]e would hear my pencil scratching and wonder whatever had struck me as so noteworthy (2012: 77)

I familiarised with McAuley's reflection myself. As I scrambled around the stage or in my pockets for pen to scribble down a thought that had come to mind, a piece of construction that I had just worked on, a conversation that I had just had with another Player, I was often met by an enquiry about how could I possibly have anything else to write down after all the weeks that had passed. 'I always wonder what you're writing in that little book' said Stephen one night at a performance of Graham Linehan's *The Ladykillers*, 'I can't believe you still find interesting things to write about us'.<sup>22</sup> During a dress rehearsal for the April one-act play night (2016), Joanne, an actress with the Settlement Players, commented that I was probably writing a tell-all book about them. I even wrote these conversations down.

In short, this thesis was guided and shaped by my empirical research. The observations, and descriptions of the creative processes and doings of the Players (and indeed my own), along with the day to day occurrences and conversations of our shared Sunday mornings, all captured in my field book notes, acted as entry points, prompting thought and informing my conceptual thinking further. For instance a reoccurring word such as 'ad hoc', used by numerous Players when describing the set building processes at the Settlement, became a lead to explore the world of 'ad hocism', a term coined in 1972 to describe a philosophy and practice of improvisation in design (this is discussed further in Chapter Six). I allowed words, observations and conversations such as this to guide me towards literature and ways of thinking that in turn provided a lens through which explore amateur theatre further. My combined roles as both researcher and apprentice set builder allowed, what geographers Eric Laurier and Chris Philo call, an 'undefined investigation'; a learning from the investigation itself through an immersion in the phenomena, rather than identifying the phenomena beforehand (2006: 353).

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<sup>22</sup> Fieldbook notes, 12/6/15

## Apprenticeship and Storytelling

The act of storytelling or ‘storying’, as Patchett argues, is something that I see to be a key feature running throughout ethnographic studies of craft (2015). What I recognise, here, by storytelling or storying, is a way of recording craft practice by researchers which takes on a considered form and style of narration. This style of writing takes the reader through the evocative and sensory elements of an often experiential research process, linking very closely to the work of anthropologist Sarah Pink’s call for a greater attention paid to the senses in ethnographic research (2015). In this section, I shall address points of connection between my research methodology as an apprentice with storytelling as a form of documentation and reflection.

During my own ethnographic research with the Players, I was drawn to other ethnographic studies of craft that conjured vivid images, smells, sounds, corporeal movements, conversations, thoughts and atmospheres through their careful and descriptive re-tellings of craft practice. This inspired my own documentation and narratives of set building. Patchett’s apprenticeship with taxidermist Peter Summers in her article ‘The taxidermist’s apprentice’ (2015), for example, follows and retells the minutiae of Summers’ work as she watched him set up an avian cabinet skin. From the preparation of his tools to his first incision cut into the Redwing bird, from the way Summers turned the scalpel to the way he moved the bird’s joints, from the order in which he cleaned the bird’s exposed bones to the inversion of its skin - Patchett describes in meticulous detail every detachment, dislocation and pull involved in Summers’ processional process of taxidermy. Patchett explains that the ‘loose-stuffed’ method that Summers used and demonstrated was actually the first taxidermic technique that she had ‘tried [her] apprentice hand at’ (2015: 406). As such, her own experience was allowed to infuse within her descriptions of his practice - clarifying the reader’s understanding of technical terms and invoking other sensory moments in the apprenticeship.

In his article ‘Blowing Hot: The Ethnography of Craft and the Craft of Ethnography’ (2013), sociologist Paul Atkinson reflects on an eight hour glass blowing class in London. Through his experiential ethnographic writing, Atkinson describes his preliminary encounter with the hot glass, the ‘magic’ found in the process of making, the heat and feel of the glass and its movement whilst being shaped in his hands, his awareness of its weight on the end of the pipe, its change in colour as it cooled. Atkinson’s attention is drawn to physicality of the process, and the ways in which his posture changed and his body became more practiced in what he calls, the ‘choreography of making’ (2013: 401).

In a similar vein, sociologist Erin O’Connor has utilised storytelling through her extensive work on becoming a proficient glassblower at New York Glass (2006, 2007). O’Connor spent four years attending glass blowing workshops, seeking to understand and capture the tactic and practical knowledge involved in this specific craft, as well investigating its transmission and developments. Her auto-ethnographic writing conjures what she calls the ‘subtleties of apprenticeship’ (2007: 126). Like Patchett, O’Connor details the step-by-step processes of her specific craft practice along with the dedicated names of the materials and tools utilised. However, during her article ‘Glassblowing Tools: Extending the Body Towards Practical Knowledge and Informing a Social World’ (2006), O’Connor weaves her own corporeal experiences as well as the sounds, temperatures, textures and thought processes involved in her practice, capturing something altogether more personal. Remembering her first pair of shears, she recalls how they felt:

[They] arrived in the mail in March 2005. I remember taking them into my hand, opening and closing them, feeling their well-suited weight and handle design (2006: 178).

O'Connor integrates her 'Fieldnotes' in her analysis, which weave throughout the main text, capturing something all the more intimate. They re-tell compelling conversations held between herself and her instructors, herself and other class members and reflect on overheard conversations happening amongst other people in the studio space. The use of brackets signal O'Connor's workings out - detailing her own personal notes or elaborations on what her instructor has said, for example here, where she uses brackets to make note of the form, shape and the features of each tool, so as to distinguish it from the rest:

Rob continued: "Now these are the tools that we'll be using.' One by one he picked them up, calling out their names, 'The jacks, (large tweezer-like objects), the tweezers (smaller tweezer-like objects about a hand and a half in length), the shears (extra-large scissors), and the diamond shears (scissors with blades shaped as if a diamond could pass through the middle when they're opened), oh, and sorry, the newspaper (a sopping wet folded square from five sheets of the New York Times)." (2006: 179).

O'Connor's uncertainties, anxieties and frustrations are also captured and woven into her writing. At one point she describes her unsuccessful choice of tool with which to work with, something which was soon pointed out to her by instructor, Evan. As a novice, O'Connor explains how she had no 'framework for comparison' to know what would be a good tool and what would be a bad one for the specific job at hand (2006: 179). She tries to remember whether Evan had introduced each tool during their first class together (this was her eighth) and puts it down to being 'too overwhelmed by the studio, the roaring fires, the luminosity, the heat, to notice' (2006: 179).

The descriptive, sensory and storytelling qualities that I found in apprenticeships such as Atkinson, Patchett and O'Connor's inspired my own documentation and writing. Much like the craft practices explored by Atkinson, Patchett and O'Connor,

set building, costuming and amateur dramatics in general, as I have previously argued, can be thought of as craft practices in their own right.

Firstly, by investigating this very particular, private and undocumented process of set building in amateur theatre I hope that the material, cognitive and technical dimensions of the amateur theatre-makers' creative processes will be understood. Furthermore, by including descriptions of my learning as an apprentice and the step-by-step processes involved in building a set I intend to demonstrate how the experience became embodied. Secondly, my time with the Players was very much a visceral process. There was a magic to it, a specialness - something that I could not always put my finger on or describe succinctly through words. In addition to the processes involved in making amateur theatre, my preoccupation with the spaces in which the crafts of amateur theatre happens was aided by related ethnographic research, including Atkinson, Patchett and O'Connor's studies. Their work assisted my thinking about the ways that both the material and affective qualities of making - the texture, movement, sound, smell, temperature, atmosphere, inadequacy, joy, frustration and other voices involved in apprenticeship - can be woven into writing. There is an alignment here with Phillip Vannini's attention to non-representational theory (2005). In the foreword to his edited collection about the methodological re-envisioning of ethnographic research, Vannini acknowledges non-representational research as being attuned to the events, relations, practices and performances, affects, and backgrounds of our lifeworld. Ethnographic writing, writes Vannini, 'should work our words as craftsmen work with their materials' (2005: xi) whilst engaging with and communicating the tacitness of the 'lifeworld in all its mysterious characteristics' (2005: 122).

Methodologically, therefore, my thesis critically reflects on my experiences as an apprentice set builder with the Settlement Players and shapes a narrative from the craft processes that I undertook during over a year of Sunday set building sessions (January 2015 - April 2016). As such, my fieldnotes play a very significant role in the

writing of my thesis. They contain details that evoke the immediacy of the relationships developed in the process and have shaped my understanding of the spaces and processes involved in amateur theatre-making. In the section that follows, I shall draw attention to the use of photography as part of my research methodology.

### **A Visual Methodology: Telling a Craft Story Through More Than Just Words**

At the beginning of this chapter, I described how the Settlement Players' archive revealed remnants of finished sets. The photographs and newspaper cuttings provided images of the final sets with actors performing on them, and scrapbooks filled with painted drawings of sets showed, as McKinney and Iball note, 'intentions for a production rather than what actually happened' (2011: 117). There were no photographs showing set builders building, sets in progress or even the spaces in which the set building took place. The lack of documentation of the process of set building meant that my research mapped uncharted territory; photographing the set building was a way for me to record an otherwise unrecorded process. In this section I shall reflect on the visual methodology I used, and how this enables me to tell this particular craft story, following Patchett who insists that:

[T]he craft researcher must become an accomplished storyteller whose craft (hi)stories are told in more than just words (2015: 15).

Over the course of my ethnographic study of set building with the Settlement Players, my cameras became constant companions and integral components of as my research toolkit. Tracing the spaces and processes of amateur theatre-makers involved an extensive use of the visual documentation, specifically through photography. As my research unfolded, the act of taking photographs became entwined with my research, generating thought and subsequent writing processes.



The photographs that are woven through this thesis were, for the most part, taken by me (unless stated otherwise where they have been taken by members of the Settlement Players themselves) and have become important to how this thesis is presented and communicated, here in print. What follows is in not a comprehensive survey of visual research methods, but rather an exploration of how visual methods have afforded me an affective engagement with the spaces and processes of theatre-making at the Settlement. My mode of storytelling throughout this thesis is partly through these photographs and so this approach has enabled me to tell the Settlement Players' craft story through 'more than just words'.

### **The Camera as an Introduction**

Social anthropologist Sarah Pink suggests that 'the camera can lead us into fieldwork situations as our photographic practices themselves are interwoven with the whole sets of relationships we build during research' (2007: 74). In her book, *Doing Visual Ethnography* (2007), Pink dedicates a section to 'Getting started: taking the first picture' in which she demonstrates how the process of taking photographs is often a way of initiating research and establishing relationships with informants (2007: 72-74). She describes how, when undertaking ethnographic research into women performers in Spanish bullfighting culture, she became grateful for her role as 'photographer'. As an unaccompanied women attending bullfighting events, unable to engage in any detailed conversation with the people around her as she was still learning the language, Pink's role as photographer provided her 'with an appropriate activity to engage in at the beginning of [her] research' (2007: 74).

Similarly, photographer Dona Schwartz found that the act of taking photographs, or 'making photographs', lead her into fieldwork situations; serving as 'an important means of entering into the social life of the community' (1989: 124-125). In her article 'Visual Ethnography: Using Photography in Qualitative Research' (1989),

Schwartz charts how the camera became an important tool for informal introductions during her research into the changing nature of Waucoma, a small farming town in Iowa. Upon her arrival to the town, she began her research by mapping the physical surroundings with her camera. By photographing landscapes and the town's buildings she made both her presence as well as her presence with a camera visible to the local community. Over time, Schwartz found that people would approach her to ask her questions, as they tried to understand her reasons for photographing their town. She notes 'their responses took one of two forms: they expressed surprise that someone found Waucoma interesting or important enough to study; or they told me how worthwhile my effort seemed, considering the interesting history of the town' (1989: 125). Photography became a reason to strike up conversations, an understandable task orientated activity that not only introduced the community to Schwartz the photographer and researcher, but also to 'her activities and her aims' (1989: 124-125). She goes on to note how these questions, directed by members of the local community, turned to understanding, which then turned into familiarity with the people she encountered. As she became known to the members of the community, they began to allow her to turn the camera in their direction, even expecting her to turn up to community events with her camera in tow.

Both Pink and Schwartz's work highlight the potential for a relationship between the camera and the research process. The process of 'making photographs' can contribute to the relationships that form and are built through the research itself. Much like in Pink and Schwartz's work, photography was interwoven with my own research process. Firstly, my camera served as my introduction to the set building community. By the end of my research, the camera had come to symbolise my role as researcher amongst the Players. 'Are you really taking a photo of that' ? became a familiar question regularly asked by the rest of the set builders as I pointed the camera towards a new piece of furniture that had been placed on stage, or at someone's fingers as they loosened screws. But before I was invited to be a member

of the set-building team, taking photographs was an activity that I could engage with easily. Finding myself propelled into an unfamiliar place, observing an unfamiliar activity conducted by people I had only just met, the camera gave me a job to do during my first set building morning at the Settlement.

After leaning for some time up against the stage, on which I had crafted a small workstation, watching the Settlement Players actively sawing, painting and drilling - I felt as though I was a lone audience member watching a performance of bodies making, doing and constructing. My static presence was broken only by my hand as it scribbled observational notes into my fieldbook, as I spoke to and asked questions to the Players on stage. It felt too intrusive to me, at this point, to reach for my camera and start taking photographs of them all whilst they built. Although I had met John previously, that morning had been my very first introduction to the rest of the Settlement Players' set building team. In my hesitance, I directed my camera away from the Players and much like Schwartz's own choice to photograph the ecological and architectural features of Waucoma at the beginning of her research, I started to map the unoccupied spaces of the Settlement. I began by first focusing my camera towards the architectural features of the Kincaid Hall: the Arts and Craft style half-moon fireplace in the corner of the hall, adorned with jewel like tiles in hues of blue and green, the worn parquet flooring that reminded me of sitting on my primary school hall floor for assembly, and the green curtain at the end of the hall that concealed rows of stackable chairs and collapsible tables.



After I felt comfortable that the Players had seen me with my camera, I ventured through said doors into a small vestibule and then off into the ladies dressing room named the 'Evans Room' after a late Player Diana Evans (a brass plaque with her name on adorned the door). Here, I began by taking photographs of the room from all sides and then followed up by capturing its features in more detail: the mismatched arrangements of furniture, a gingham curtain concealing an empty rail of coat hangers and a wooden trolley holding mugs, a plastic washing up bowl and a kettle. From a door at the back of the dressing room I was able to move through to a passageway leading onto the stage through an opening on the right, and into a toilet through a door on the left. Further on (and as far as I could make out - behind the stage), an open door to the left of me revealed another dressing room - the 'Elson Room', named after another late Player John Elson. Here I focused my camera towards an ornate gilded mirror and yet another gingham curtain, this time concealing shelves crammed full with folded patterned fabric.

From the men's dressing room and then on again further, down the passageway onto what looked like a storage area - stacked with ladders, wood and other building materials. The photographs taken that morning made up a collection that mapped and documented, for me, a place I was not sure when, if, or how many times I would be invited back to. At the time, I was not exactly sure what I was looking for in this documentation, however having the camera in my hand gave me a purpose.

As my role of observer merged with that of set builder, I continued to photograph the Settlement building. Yet, my new role as set builder afforded me to photograph what was happening on stage too. As weeks passed by, and I became more confident that my camera wasn't making the other Players uncomfortable, I would stop returning it to its case in my bag every time I took a picture.



Instead, I started to carry it around the stage with me. If I had painting to do, I would collect my bucket of brushes in one hand, the paint pot and dust sheet in the other, and clenched underneath my arm would be a camera. Weekly, my cameras could be found balancing carefully on various pieces of furniture, rungs of ladders and paint pots until I moved onto the next job. Yet inevitably, once consumed by a job, I would leave it somewhere. ‘Don’t forget your camera’ or ‘you nearly left this behind’ became a familiar call at the end of a set building session. I would regularly look up to find one of the Players with my camera held in their outstretched hand. Much like Schwartz noted of her own experience in Waucoma, the camera became an expected part of me being there.

### **A Collaboration Between Words and Photographs**

The use of visual methodologies, especially that of photography, as part of any research project does not come without its concerns. Assumptions of objectivity, selectivity and detachment of experience all contribute to the problematic nature of visual knowledge. As a photographer utilising visual ethnography, Schwartz questions the truth-value ascribed to photographic images, especially when treated as objective, formal records, used to reproduce an unbiased reality. She posits that researchers must be careful when using photographs in and as part of a research methodology, and have an understanding of ‘the convention-bound processes of both image making and interpretation’ (1989: 120). Image making, the physical act of taking of a photograph, is a selective process where the camera is pointed towards whatever subject the photographer feels worthy of capturing. In his book *The Nature of Photographs* (2007), photographer Stephen Shore describes this process as one of choice and order, he writes:

Where a painter starts with a blank canvas and builds a picture, a photographer starts with the messiness of the world and selects a picture. A photographer standing before houses and streets and people and trees and

artifacts of a culture imposes an order on the scene - simplifies the jumble by giving it structure. He or she imposes this order by choosing a vantage point, choosing a frame, choosing a moment of exposure, and by selecting a plane of focus (2007: 36).

For Shore, the photographic frame can be seen as omitting aspects of the world from the view that would have otherwise been seen by the photographer's eye. This is interesting when thinking about Schwartz's questioning of the truth-value of an image in research, something that is complicated further when someone other than the photographer views the photograph. Schwartz refers to this as the 'dynamic interaction between the photographer, the spectator, and the image' where the spectator actively generates their own multiple meanings, definitions and interpretations of the image's content (1989: 120). Some of the images in this thesis have been shown to various 'spectators' already. I have, for example, included photographs from my research in PowerPoint presentations, used to accompany multiple conference papers that I have given to academic audiences; in a short article I wrote about set building for the *Contemporary Theatre Review* as well as various other informational and report booklets created for the Amateur Drama Research project.<sup>23</sup> However, in these instances the photographs were always accompanied by my words, both spoken and written; words that told stories of the Settlement Players, their spaces and their processes of theatre-making. Lingering in the background behind me on a projector screen, or on the page without 'figures' (although this sometimes cannot be helped when abiding by academic formats), it has always been my intention that the photographs, taken during my research process, become an integral part of the craft story being told - in collaboration with my ethnographic field book notes and writing, rather than in addition.

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<sup>23</sup> I wrote a short article called 'Crafting a Local Story: Set Building with the Settlement Players' that was included in the a special issue of the *Contemporary Theatre Review* that focused on amateur theatre. The short piece was part of a section that I co-authored with Sarah Penny called 'Materialities of Amateur Theatre'. See: Penny, S. and Gray, C., 2017, 'Materialities of Amateur Theatre', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, Vol. 12, No. 1, pp. 104 - 123.



In their beautiful book *Visible Mending: Everyday repairs in the South West* (2013), and later in their article '21 Stories' (2014), geographers Caitlin DeSilvey and James Ryan offer a helpful insight into the collaboration between words and photographs through their own collaboration with photographer Steven Bond. From 2010, together, they spent two years visiting the workplaces of repairers, menders and fixers around the South West of England, whilst recording and capturing each one's particular aesthetics of repair. From a hardware shop in Hayle, Cornwall to a typewriter service workshop in Bath, Somerset, they write:

We travelled with a camera, and with our notebooks, a geographer and a photographer. We came away with images, and with words (2014: 657).

The result was a collection of intimate portraits, or records of repair. Through the thoughtful assemblage of Bond's photographs and DeSilvey and Ryan's accompanying short essays, both book and article allow glimpses of the menders, materials, tools, machines and processes involved in the practice of repair; captured through both a visual and narrative attention to detail. The unannotated photographs show the working hands of menders clasping tools and materials, cluttered work surfaces littered with cans of Brasso and sawdust, organised pegboards dappled with shadow and light from workshop windows and forgotten shelves holding out of reach and equally forgotten items; whilst the essays tell small stories of the menders and their workspaces, and in turn DeSilvey and Ryan's own experiences of being in those particular spaces. Observational notes, made at the time of their visits, merge seamlessly with reflections of the photographs themselves as they evoke, what photographer Nick Hand writes in the 'Foreword' to *Visible Mending*, 'the smell [of] the inks and oils that surround them' (2013: 11). DeSilvey and Ryan compare the spirit of their collaboration to the one between writer James Agee and photographer Walker Evans who, in 1936, collaborated to document the lives of sharecroppers in Alabama during the Great Depression. In Agee and Evans'

subsequent book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), made from an assemblage of Agee's words and Evans' photographs, Agee writes in the introduction that:

The photographs are not illustrative. They, and the text, are coequal, mutually independent, and fully collaborative (Agee in DeSilvey and Ryan, 2013: 146)

Bond, DeSilvey and Ryan's work shares this collaborative spirit, both between photographer and writer and between photograph and words; their intention is for the words to both inhabit and illuminate the 'peculiar space created by each photograph' (2014: 657). The collaboration between words and photographs in *Visible Mending* becomes apparent in various forms. In some cases DeSilvey and Ryan's words tell stories of the practitioners repairing processes, with essays that begin by asking questions around what certain materials are and how they are going to be used. These questions are then sometimes followed by observations of process; descriptions detailing the transformation of materials through the swift twist of hands sit alongside Bond's intimate photographs showing the very same hands at work. In some of the essays DeSilvey and Ryan describe the material form of the workplace in minute detail, the size of the room, the colours of the walls, where machines are positioned, how tools are stored and where the practitioners meet the customers, as well as cataloguing particular things that they noticed, handmade labels and signs, lonely shoes, bits and bobs. Others record DeSilvey and Ryan's own felt encounters with the workplaces, draughty windows and the feeling of being crowded in a small room, as well as conversations had with both the repairers and some of the customers seeking to mend their broken objects; personal stories of repair told through other people's words. Bond's photographs, meanwhile, capture some of the minute details recorded by DeSilvey and Ryan, visually, whilst others tell their own stories; new things, colours, people, materials, atmospheres and spaces are left on the page for the reader to explore for themselves.

It is clear from DeSilvey and Ryan's work that photographs offer space for contemplation and thought. Some of the words written by DeSilvey and Ryan are lead by Bond's photographs, triggering their memories and enabling reflections of things or spaces that were seen, or unseen, recorded, or left unrecorded in their notebooks. During the essay for 'Star Shoe Repairs (Redruth, Cornwall)', for example, Ryan uses Bond's photographs as the main focus of his essay, noting:

There is so much to look at in this place that it is hard to remember all the details; the photographs show things noticed and forgotten but also things not seen at all at the time (2013: 67)

For Ryan, the set of photographs taken at Star Shoe Repairs enabled a reflection and (re)discovery of the 'multi-sensory and visually rich qualities of such workplaces', through the playful 'miniaturised landscape[s]' that Bond's photographs captured or rather conjured 'by the frame imposed by the camera' (2013: 67). DeSilvey, too, acknowledges the way in which Bond's photographs acted as a trigger - not only reminding her of things noticed and forgotten, but also 'pull[ing her] into the tone and the texture of the place' (2013: 115). Ryan and DeSilvey's acknowledgement of Bond's photographs in their writing is where a collaboration between words and photographs is realised, or rather the process of collaboration is illuminated. These instances suggest a reflective process, happening after their collective visits to the workplaces. A process where time was allowed to explore and (re)discover the things, spaces, shapes and colours captured in the photographs, to reflect on the experiences and memories of being in those spaces, and to be pulled 'back into the tone and texture of the place' by the images themselves (2013: 115).

Reflecting on my own writing process, whereby I surrounded myself with visual aides - printed out and stuck on walls around the vicinity of my computer, or laid

out on my desk - my photographs played an important role in a similarly reflective and collaborative process. They, too, reminded me of the visually rich qualities of the Settlement and the multi-sensory nature of set building with an amateur dramatics group. My own miniaturised landscapes pulled me back to the texture and tone of the Settlement, the colours, the light and the things that came to characterise the Settlement and that became so heavily tied up with my experience of it. Writing on performance research, theatre scholars Adam Ledger, Simon Ellis and Fiona Wright draw attention to the ‘quality of contemplative gaze and deliberation’ that photographs as documentation allows – two things that are not possible during a live performance (2011: 166). In much the same way, the static nature of the photographic frame in my research allowed me to both contemplate and deliberate on the, often fast paced, physical experiences and processes involved in set building with the Settlement Players.

### **Capabilities of the Camera: Capturing Movement**

When thinking about the capabilities of the camera in research, it is perhaps useful to first outline my own capability with the camera. Unlike DeSilvey and Ryan, I took my own photographs alongside documenting, in notebooks, my experiences of the spaces and processes whilst set building with the Settlement Players. Unlike Bond, I am not a professional photographer. My last formal training and study in photography was during my A Levels and since then I have taken photographs as a hobby - which is very much in keeping with the spirit and aesthetic of amateur theatre and the way in which it is captured in this thesis.

During my research I mainly used a point and shoot camera (specifically the Sony Cyber-shot DSC-H300). Its compact size made it easy to transport to, from and most importantly *around* the Settlement. The automatic focus setting, comfortable grip and easy to navigate buttons made taking photographs during the process of set building quick and manageable. Other times I would also use a digital SLR

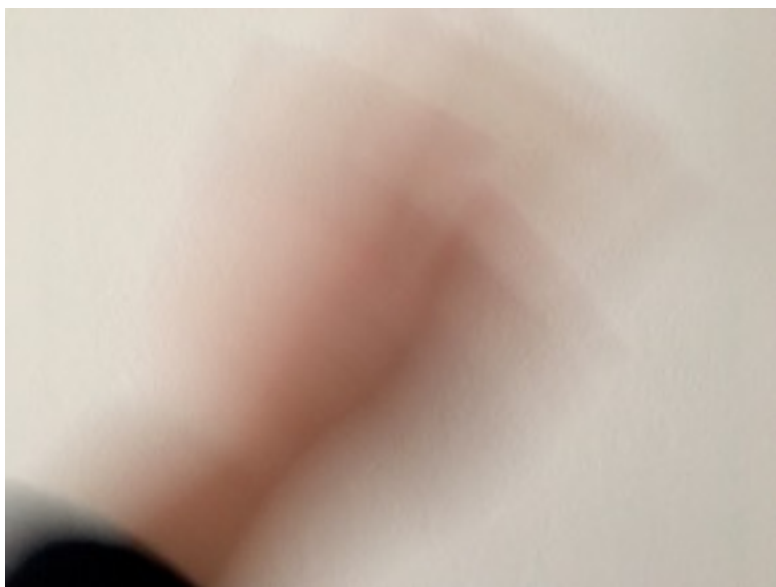
(specifically the Canon EOS 550D). The images that this camera produced were noticeably different from the point and shoot camera, especially in terms of the picture quality being undoubtedly clearer, yet it took more work (and so more time) to focus and adjust settings to lighting. I also, at times, used the camera on my iPhone. My phone was always close to hand, and a lot of the time with me in my pocket. It became an invaluable tool during times when, for example: my other camera's memory card became full mid-way through a set building session, my camera ran out of battery, or my camera was not immediately to hand and I needed to capture something instantly. The simplicity and functionality of the iPhone's camera means that it focuses quickly and adjusts to light well.

On my weekly train journeys back to London, after a morning's set building session (or sometimes after an afternoon's rehearsal), I would reach for my camera and look through the images that I had taken that morning. Reflecting on the build, the images helped me piece together the lists, words, quotes, arrows and sketches that stamped the pages of my field book notes. With the aid of the photographs, I expanded on these initial fieldnotes, writing more detailed descriptions of the events that took place that morning. These notes formed something of similar to what Pink calls a 'reflexive diary', a useful tool when carrying out visual methodologies (2007: 72). For Pink a reflexive diary is a way of tracking 'the development of one's photographic practice' whilst acting as a reminder to the researcher of 'the intentions and ideas that informed taking each image' (2007: 72). It was during these reflective moments that I found my own embodied experiences captured within the distorted and blurred photographs that I inevitably took during the course of my research.

Finding blurred and distorted images was a regular occurrence due to the physical nature of set building and the lack of time that I had to take photographs during the build. Clicking through the reel of images, I was often confronted with out-of-focus yet familiar scenes: fleshy blurs and fuzzy arrangements of colour. Although I

deleted a lot of the distorted images as I took them, forever conscious that my memory card was but one picture away from becoming full, some survived the cull, unnoticed. Once uploaded onto my computer, sorted into files (named firstly after the date on which they were taken) and then resorted into other files (this time named after the spaces in which they were taken or their subject matter: ‘the hall’, ‘the dressing rooms’, ‘set strike’, ‘shelving as a set’, ‘seaming the flats’), the blurred images became a part of that particular file’s story. Often sharing the same tonal qualities to their counterparts and unnoticed whilst viewed as thumbnails. As I started to revisit the photographs during the writing up process of this thesis, coupled with my fieldbook notes that were aided by them, the blurred photographs started to remind me of my movements, as well as the movements of the other Players. It was during these reflective moments that I found my own embodied experiences captured within the distorted and blurred photographs that I inevitably took during the course of my research.

Furthermore, some of the images captured my own body, or parts of it, through shadows cast on the surrounding stage flats onstage, a result of the unforgiving stage lights above. In her article ‘Urban photography/Cultural geography: Spaces, objects, events’ (2014), geographer and photographer Mia Hunt considers how, the during the process of making images, there is the potential of capturing our own bodies whilst caught up in our engagement with the everyday. This, she writes, reminds us of our own visual and sensory embodied experiences. One photo, in which I tried to record the result of one of my first ‘seaming’ jobs, also captured a shadowed reflection of my legs and the ladder that I was standing on; whilst another photo, in which I tried to record the multiple painted and wallpapered layers of a scenery flat also captured the curls of my hair (which was generally tied up in a paint streaked bun).







Just as Bond's photographs pulled DeSilvey back to the tone and texture of the workplaces that they visited together, these particular images pulled me back to the Settlement and the physical processes involved in set building, along with my own embodied research process - the shaky legs that I would experience whilst at the top of a ladder, hanging stage curtains or seaming or painting the scenery flats, and the increasing ache that I would feel in my hands after a morning of stripping old wallpaper off a stage flat - not at all used to the manual work. Furthermore, it was also the images that I wasn't able to capture that reminded me of my embodied research process and the fact that it was impossible to capture, fully, the Players' processes through the camera, compared to if I carried on with an observational role.

### **Research Methods and Textures of Communication**

I am drawn to the visual, both in and outside of academia, and I am fascinated by the ways in which people use images as a way of communicating. As Schwartz and Ryan assert in their book *Photography and the Geographical Imagination* (2006), 'through photographs, we see, we remember, we imagine: we 'picture place' (2006: 1). As I have shown, in the collaborative work of DeSilvey, Ryan and Bond, photographs can tell their own stories, however whilst collaborating with words they can also inhabit and illuminate each other. The camera became a tool for me to capture and communicate what I found difficult to explain, fully, through words. For example the very specific colours, textures, patterns, fabrics, materials and light that I experienced through the weekly event of set building with the Players. In her article 'Urban photography/Cultural geography: Spaces, objects, events' (2014) Hunt posits that image making is bound up with our experiences of space. She focuses on the practice of doing photography, suggesting the potential for photography and visual methods to act as part of a more-than-representational approach to research, whereby 'feelings, textures, and experiences of place can be complemented and enhanced by an exploration through the lens' (2014: 165). Hunt writes that once

captured and communicated, the photograph's material richness and visual qualities, irrespective of artistic merit, can perform as something more than illustrative, she writes:

[P]hotography may help evoke feeling of place. This is documentary of another kind: one which complicates the relationship between portrayal and knowledge. These images are not only evidential but also depict atmosphere and emotion (2014: 165).

Through using photography I was able to capture the textures and colours that characterised set building with the Players at the Settlement. In this way, my research methods intend to dispel the assumptions of detachment, distance from experience and objectivity associated with visual knowledge and the use of photographs in research. This underlines the relationship between visual methods and embodied research, challenging assumptions that they are opposites. The use of photographs in this thesis has helped to complement the embodied nature of my methodology - there was reciprocity between the two. As geographer Mike Crang notes, researchers should 'think about [visual methods] as a way of (also) touching and connecting, rather than (only) detaching and representing' (2010: 222).

In this chapter I have reflected on the research methods I have used. In doing so, I hope to have shown how the methodological decisions I made evolved throughout the course of this thesis. As the role of participant observer transformed into an apprentice set builder, I found that my choice of methods became a process of discovery in themselves. As an apprentice set-builder, a combination of photographs and field-work notes enabled me to capture particular moments of engagement. In telling such a 'small story' about amateur dramatics through the Settlement Players of Letchworth Garden City, the photographs that appear throughout this thesis offer an opportunity to visualise the spaces and processes involved in the making of theatre, as well as the way that the paces both onstage

and off, change over time. I wanted to capture the magic of the event, and communicate, in some way, my experiences through the weekly event of set building with the Players, along with the very private world in which I became enveloped for those couple of hours on a Sunday morning.

I have decided to let my photographs run alongside the text throughout this thesis, without figures, much like Bond's photographs next to DeSilvey and Ryan's text in *Visible Mending* (2013). It is my hope that they tell their own stories.

## 4

### **Theatre-Making with the Building:**

#### **The Settlement and its Players**

Stephen: the Settlement building and how we use it make it an interesting place... it certainly isn't just a building'.<sup>24</sup>

To story [craft] is also to recognise that it is co-authored (Patchett, 2015: 15)

#### **Co-Authoring the Settlement Players' Craft Story: The Settlement**

Buildings, and how they are accessed, are an important and significant factor of amateur theatre; it is the performance and backstage spaces that determine where and when theatre-makers 'make' theatre. Some amateur theatre companies have access to their own theatre buildings in which to prepare and perform with facilities such as dressing rooms, set building workshops, costume and prop stores and studio spaces. Other companies utilise multi-purpose buildings, community centres, churches and school halls, for example, and this means that space is shared with other societies and groups. There is no singular experience and each amateur company develops their own ways of working in the spaces available to them. Amateur theatre-makers often spend significant time in places in which they rehearse, perform, build sets or make costumes, and have particular relationships with their spaces.

In this chapter I will investigate the affective and material relationships between the Settlement Players and the Settlement, the building in which they perform and build sets. The focus of my attention is primarily the set builders, as it was through my relationship with them as an ethnographer and apprentice set-builder that I

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<sup>24</sup> Stephen, interview, 3/5/16

began to understand the relationship they had developed with the building over years of working within it. I became interested in the Settlement building as integral to their experience, and an important part of the narrative of the set-builders. Reciprocally, the Settlement Players leave their mark on the building, becoming part of its biography. This chapter will consider the Settlement building itself as an important co-biographer of the Settlement Players' 'craft story'.

In developing an idea of the building as a co-biographer in the life of the set-builders, I am inspired by Patchett's idea of a 'craft story'. Patchett uses this phrase to illustrate how that craft is always a co-authored process. She suggests that craft is never solely autobiographical or dependent on the agency of the individual craft practitioner, but argues that craft practice entails a 'synergy, or relational interconnectedness' between practitioner, tool and material (2015: 15). Here she emphasises the working *with* aspect of craft, for example how practitioners works *with* both the affordances of their tools and the energies of their materials when creating something. In Patchett's study, this involves creating a taxidermy bird. Building on Patchett's understanding of the synergies involved in craftwork, I am interested in exploring how the Settlement as a building might also be a co-author in the set-building process, in which the craft is taking place.

In this chapter I will consider the ways in which the Settlement Players work *with* the building with which they share their name. I shall explore how the process of their theatre-making and craft transform it in specific ways. In turn, I shall also consider how the Settlement building holds the capacity to shape and influence their work – in Patchett's words, to 'guide the[ir] craft performance in certain directions' (2015: 15). In exploring these ideas, I shall highlight the relational interconnectedness between the two: the Settlement building and its Players.

My conceptual guide in this chapter is the idea of architecture as practised, an idea that I shall use to understand how the Settlement Players' particular craft story is

co-authored with the Settlement building. Thinking about architecture as practiced shifts focus away from thinking of a building as a purely finished artefact or a physical signature of an architect or designer. Rather, as geographers Jane Jacobs and Peter Merriman note in their article ‘Practicing Architectures’ (2011), it focusses attention on a building as it is experienced, as something that is ongoing and in a constant state of change. This way of thinking aligns with the overarching focus of this thesis in which I am considering amateur theatre as a process rather than a finished product. In addition, it introduces a helpful perspective of thinking about the Settlement Players as instrumental in this process. As I will discuss more, later in this chapter, Jacobs and Merriman might refer to the Players as ‘everyday designers, or at least re-designers’ of the Settlement, ‘intervening in the fabric of [the] building’ whilst ‘re-programming its planned activities’ as they *make* theatre (2011: 261). Building on their work, I will explore the affective and material relationship between the Players and the Settlement building in three ways.

Firstly, I will examine the Settlement Players’ intervention into the fabric of the Settlement building. I do this by using the specific example of the ‘Trout’, a part of the Settlement building that was given to the Players during the building’s expansion in 2007. The Trout can be found on the mezzanine floor backstage, and is utilised as a repository for the Players’ tool, material and property collections. I demonstrate, through descriptive ethnographic field notes and interview excerpts, the ways in which the Players have physically claimed this space through intervening with the material matter of the building.

Secondly, as the Settlement itself is a multi-purpose building, housing many other recreational and educational societies and groups, I will explore the ways in which Settlement Players re-programme (however temporary) parts of the Settlement building’s planned activities. I do this by examining how workspaces are often created and improvised through the creative processes and materials of the Player’s craft. I will examine three spaces of the Settlement, uncovering how a car park is

utilised as a set building workshop, how a dressing room turns into a set builders tearoom, passageway and storeroom for the Players' furniture, and how a community hall is transformed into an auditorium (complete with box office and bar). In doing so I shall consider the ways in which people involved in amateur theatre have the capacity to transform mundane, everyday spaces through the processes and materials of their doings.

Thirdly, and finally, this chapter will consider how, in turn, the materiality of the Settlement building affects and dictates the way that the Settlement Players are able to build sets and make theatre *within* it. I will consider how there is not a 'how-to' manual detailing how to make theatre in the Settlement, and how instead the Settlement Players must develop an embodied understanding of how to work *within* it. Here I shall conclude by realising the relationship between the amateur theatre-makers and their building as one that is cyclical and interconnected, rather than one way. It is my hope that this chapter will also act as an introduction to the reader of the Settlement spaces that I experienced through my time researching and set building with the Players.

However, before all this, I shall begin this chapter by telling a short history of the Settlement building and the Players in order to provide the reader historic context to the on-going nature of their affective relationship. I have included an annotated map of the Kincaid Hall to guide the reader through the spaces of the building, and in doing so reveal the manifold spaces of the Settlement Players' amateur theatre-making, both past and present.

## **A History of the Settlement:**

### **Telling a Local Story about a Theatre in a Skittles Alley**

Theatre is always and necessarily local, performance is always and necessarily emplaced, and any study of performance practice must therefore, necessarily engage with the local and with the experience that comes from being in place (McAuley, 2013: 81-82)

To understand the Settlement building as a co-author or co-biographer of the Settlement Players craft story, it is perhaps first important to understand their collective history. In *Performance and the Politics of Space* (2013), McAuley's chapter titled 'What is Sydney about Sydney Theatre?' reveals the site-based nature of all theatre practice. In it she writes that 'all theatre is site-specific' in that 'the building, its history, its location... and the organisation of the performance spaces housed within it are an integral part of the content of the work created there' (2013: 97). Before I discuss the ideas around architecture as 'practiced', in this section, I shall narrate the history of a building and an amateur theatre group that would go on to share a name.

The building that is known as the Settlement, today, was built in 1907 and was designed by the town's early architects Parker and Unwin. The building is characterised by their Arts and Crafts influence. Its white roughcast walls, framed by black wooden panelling, nestles in amongst overarching trees and shrubbery at the bottom of the leafy, tree-lined Nevells Road in Letchworth Garden City. The listed building is now an independent adult education centre, but in its former life was a non-licensed public house, named The Skittles Inn, financed by two Garden City directors, Edward Cadbury and Aneurin Williams. Marsh notes in her book *Back to the Land* (1982) that whilst 'associating drink with city slums and deprivation, Letchworth pioneers were nearly all teetotal' (1982: 232) and so The Skittles Inn kept the town alcohol free by only serving Bourneville's Drinking



Chocolate, Cydrax and Sarsaparilla. The Skittles Inn acted as a meeting place for many of Letchworth's progressive societies as well as housing a skittles alley, a reading room, meeting rooms, a bowling green, a billiard room and the early collections of the Letchworth Naturalists' Society's stuffed birds. The progressive societies are now long gone but the Settlement still acts as a meeting place for the many arts and crafts societies, language and fitness groups; all encouraging hobbies, skills and friendship.

As I explained in chapter 2, my very first visit to the Settlement was where I encountered the Settlement Players' archives with Pat. It was during this visit that I came across a commemorative golden jubilee programme, titled *History of the Players* that was dated 1973. Pat said that I could take it home with me to learn more about the Settlement Players and their history, 'it probably has everything you need to know in there' she said.<sup>25</sup> Its ageing pages, punctuated in places by orange rust from the staples keeping it together, chronicled the history of the Settlement Players from their establishment in 1923. A lady called Miss Inge Horwood, who was a local journalist of the time, had written the programme, and through her words I learnt how the Players predate the building that is physically known as the Settlement today. As an adult education centre, the Settlement once operated transiently from various different rooms in Letchworth. Amongst courses in English literature, geology and music, Horwood describes as the Settlement's first warden James Dudley decided to establish his own drama course in the town that was, she notes:

[A] small oasis of dramatic activity in a part of the county which rarely heard "the creak of the boards" or caught the aroma of grease paint (1973:1).

She continues that:

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<sup>25</sup> Fieldbook notes, 14/3/14

In the Garden City, however, frequent visits by touring companies only seemed to whet the appetites of residents, who were slow neither to join nor to watch the performances of various amateur play groups. So when Mr. James Dudley, first Warden of the recently opened Adult Education Centre the Settlement decided that the time had come to establish a drama course there, the idea fell upon fertile ground (1973:1).

Once established, the Settlement Players operated as transiently as the Settlement itself, nomadically performing in various village and cooperative halls in and around Letchworth.<sup>26</sup> They continued like this until they finally came to call the old ‘non-tox’ pub their home in 1925, when the Settlement bought the premises. Here, Horwood notes, the Players set about crafting a stage and indeed a theatre, atop what stood before a skittles alley. As Jacobs and Merriman might suggest, it was at this point that the Players started to ‘re-programme’ the Settlement’s ‘planned activities’ (2011: 261):

Surveying their new domain, the Settlement Players seized upon the former bowling alley as the best situation for a stage and made arrangements for the erection of a temporary platform over it in the event of a production. Audiences were squeezed into the adjoining Green Room, which could be made to seat as many as 100 spectators. An early “Citizen” reviewer was pleasantly surprised by the result achieved, noting that though the Little Theatre consisted of ‘Two rooms which were evidently designed with the express intention of not being a theatre’ none the less the effect was “as comfortable an auditorium and stage as could be expected” (Horwood, 1973: 3)

I was able to hear about the Players’ performances in the Green Room at first-hand one afternoon after set building when I visited Joyce, the oldest, and now

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<sup>26</sup> Horwood notes how they also performed at a local psychiatric hospital in nearby Arlesey.

honourable, member of the Settlement Players. Joyce, who turned ninety in 2017, has appeared in over one hundred productions at with the Players as well as working backstage in various roles such as props, director, costume, prompt, and stage manager. She told me that she joined the group when then had a youth group (in the 1940s) and moved into the adult group when she was between seventeen and eighteen. As I walked into her Arts and Craft style house which was one of the original Letchworth houses, (it even has a plaque outside the door), it was particularly striking that the walls leading upstairs were adorned with framed promotional posters of past Settlement Players' plays, which seemed to fit the architectural style of her house. As we sat in her living room, Joyce reminisced about the re-programmed room that the Players once had to make-do with. She described to me how the erected stage in the Green Room was flat with only two or three steps raising it from the floor where the audience sat, and how the dressing room was a simple curtain behind which both men and women Players had to change. Joyce noted too, how the prompt sat in a small balcony in the room, visible to the audience, and so was not able to get down until the full performance was over. 'But then Mr. Kincaid from Spirella donated £5000 and we were able to build the hall' Joyce added, 'we felt really good'.

As Joyce recalled, it was in April 1956 that the Settlement Player's story changed and their temporary stage – a re-programmed bowling alley - was turned into a permanent one. Horwood details this change in the jubilee programme, proceeding to explain how the Players' small performance space in the old skittles alley - which also doubled as a lecture theatre - was replaced by the completion of a new purpose-built theatre. As Joyce mentioned, this addition to the Settlement building was made possible from the money left to the adult education centre by Mr. William Wallace Kincaid, who was the late Spirella corset company director.<sup>27</sup> This was a fact that was widely reported on in the local newspapers at the time.

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<sup>27</sup> The old Spirella corset factory still stands at the opposite end of Nevells Road (from the Settlement) today. It was once hailed as the 'factory of beauty' with landscaped gardens, baths, showers, gymnastics classes, a library and a bicycle repairs. The restored Spirella factory is now a business centre which hosts conferences and social events.

Newspaper clippings that I found in Letchworth Garden City's official archive spoke of Kincaid as a great admirer of Ebenezer Howard, and shared his vision of a Garden City. They also detailed how Kincaid bequeathed £12,000 in to the inhabitants of Letchworth with the instruction that it was put towards 'vocational industrial' and adult education, and so it was decidedly shared between the both the Letchworth Civic Trust and the Settlement. After this, Hugh Bidwell, a local architect and son of an architect who was a pioneer in Letchworth Garden City (his father was responsible for designing Letchworth's town hall and Broadway Cinema) was given the task of designing a 'multipurpose hall and stage there' (Horwood, 1973: 15). His architectural design resulted in both material and immaterial production, as he created an active building that opened new opportunities for the Settlement's groups and societies.<sup>28</sup> Bidwell's building offered of a multi-purpose hall that accommodated a both a stage and a dressing room. A newspaper article, dated April 1956 describes this moment as the 'end of a long period of "cramp" for the Players:

What the members have long wanted, and of recent years positively needed, they will at last have. Kincaid Hall, to be opened on April 28, will seat nearly 200. It will have a good-sized stage and dressing room; and what was the old stage room will become as foyer of extension, as needed. So now the Settlement will not have to migrate when it wants to show its paces to the Letchworth public [...] From May 30 to June 2 the Players will air the stage with their first full-scale Kincaid Little Theatre production. The hall itself, cleverly married to the old hall, is a pleasantly simple design, which will be enhanced by a bold but harmonious colour scheme. And, fittingly, a lot of voluntary thought, time and labour will have been put into it. The whole of

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<sup>28</sup> A newspaper article celebrating Bidwell's Rotary Club presidency (dated 1966) sings of Bidwell's commitment to the town, making note of his contributions to Letchworth through the buildings he designed, such as the 'extension to the Letchworth Youth Club, St. Paul's Church hall... and the cemetery's room of remembrance'. Along with his more physical contributions, furthermore it celebrates his chairmanship of the town's Round Table organisation and of the Little Theatre Drama Festival Committee. Being 'closely linked with the town's amateur dramatic activities'. Garden City Collection. Letchworth Garden City. (LBM3056.49.154)

the week following the opening is given over to evenings of entertainment. This will be your chance to have a look at this addition to the social life of Letchworth.<sup>29</sup>

Soon after the hall was built, Horwood notes how the Players rallied around to accrue materials with which to furnish their new theatre:

Players set about equipping it with flats, a lighting panel with dimmer and full stage lighting at once. Donations, and there were many, included a curtain with curtain runners (1973: 15).

Through Kincaid's communitarianism, coupled with Bidwell's multi-purpose architectural design, the Settlement Players' temporary stage on top of a skittles alley was turned into a permanent performance space. It is on this very same stage that the Settlement Players perform and make sets today. The last major change that has happened the Hall since its completion in 1956 was the extension in 2007. In 2007, the Kincaid Hall was extended out towards the carpark from the back of the stage. The extension provided the Players with another dressing room (which is now the male dressing room), a backstage corridor which means that the two exists off stage are connected (before the exit stage left led straight into the carpark), a mezzanine floor for the storage of tools, materials and props and a small vestibule next to this to store bigger materials and tools – ladders, scenery flats.

### **Understanding the Settlement Players as Architectural Practitioners**

In *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation* (2007), Ingold and Hallam posit the question of why, when we think of a building, is it only the architect that we celebrate when we do not 'celebrate equally the creativity of those who subsequently use the building in the course of their own lives?' (2007: 4). Recent scholarship has drawn

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<sup>29</sup> Newspaper dated 6/4/1956. Garden City Collection, Letchworth Garden City. (LBM4074.8.11)

attention to this ‘practiced’ and ongoing nature of architecture by considering what happens after a building is ‘made’. They shift the focus on to the people who shape and influence the buildings they inhabit, however temporarily. In this section, I explore these conceptual ideas a little further in order to understand Settlement Players as architectural practitioners.

In ‘Practicing Architectures’, Jacobs and Merriman cite Loretta Lee’s work as acting as the catalyst for social and cultural geographers to engage with buildings in ways that move beyond analysis of their symbolic meanings, towards more practical and affective understandings. Lee’s article ‘Towards a Critical Geography of Architecture’ (2001) called for researchers to move towards a ‘more active and embodied engagement with the lived building’ (2001: 51) whilst paying attention to the ‘embodied practices through which architecture is lived (2001: 53). Jacobs and Merriman’s contribution, ten years on from Lee’s article, discusses the ways in which scholars have since responded to her call by embedding ‘architecture in practice’ (2011: 211).

They suggest that a ‘practice turn’ in social and cultural geography has seen researchers reshaping the geographies of architecture by ‘attending to activity, action, embodiment, as well as shared practical reason’ (2011: 212). This has been done through non-representational and multi-sensory readings, with scholars thinking about the ways in which architecture is encountered and experienced. In this way, geographers have also sought out the performative aspect of architecture, whilst capturing what happens within:

[T]he diverse experiences, attachments and dwelling practices of inhabitation in different kinds of building and the entwined co-production of buildings and inhabitants (2011: 218).

In a hope to animate architecture further, Jacobs and Merriman propose a shift of focus away from thinking about a building as the finished artefact of human ‘doing’ or a physical signature or accomplishment of an architect/designer, towards thinking about it as practiced, ongoing and in a constant state of change. They suggest that ‘the stable architectural object (architecture-as-noun) is actually the effect of various doings (architecture-as-verb)’ (2011: 212). This way of thinking is reminiscent of Yaneva’s work that considers ‘architecture in the making’ rather than ‘architecture made’ (which I discussed in Chapter Two) (2009: 197). Yaneva is similarly critical of buildings being treated as the final and finished artefacts of architectural design, only analysed for their stylistic or representational merits. However her focus was directed towards the dynamic and everyday processes of design and making, along with the human and non-human networks, involved *before* the construction of a building. Jacobs and Merriman’s focus, meanwhile, is towards what happens *after* construction. After all, buildings never remain the same and ‘as the architect might wish - forever unchanged’, as Ingold and Hallam write, they are instead ‘continually modified and adapted to fit in with manifold and ever-shifting purposes’ (Hallam and Ingold, 2007: 4).

Jacobs and Merriman’s understand the ongoing nature of a building through the everyday adjustments by different ‘architectural practitioners’ who shape and inhabit the spaces within (2011: 211). Whilst not denying the importance of the ‘two very potent kinds of architectural practitioners: the designer/architect and the occupant/user’ (2011: 211), Jacobs and Merriman introduce further potential practitioners involved in subsequent building work of a building’s life; positing them as ‘everyday designers, or at least re-designers’ of the building (2001: 216). They list examples including ‘builders, demolishers, conservators, maintenance workers, DIYers, home-makers, cleaners, artists, vandals’ (2011: 211). What Jacobs and Merriman suggest even the most modest and dissipated engagements with a building can have an effect. Whether that be:

[I]ntervening in the fabric of a building (knocking a door through here, changing a window there, wall-papering everywhere) or re-programming its planned activities (using a study as a bedroom, a dining room as a lounge, a former factory as an art gallery, a window to suicide by) (2011: 216).

Following this, in their article ‘Architectural Enthusiasm: Visiting Buildings with the Twentieth Century Society’ (2013), Ruth Craggs, Hilary Geoghegan and Hannah Neate, extend this list of architectural practitioners by suggesting another very different category of agent - the architectural enthusiast (2013). Citing Jacobs and Merriman, Craggs *et al* posit that other scholars might usefully analyse other potential architectural agents involved in the ‘ongoing building work of architecture’ rather than the obvious ‘architect, planner, politician, tenant and conservation officer’ (2013: 893). Their ethnographic study of the architectural tours of UK based architectural conservation group - The Twentieth Century Society - sought to understand the shared emotional relationships between people (the guides and the followers) and the buildings that they engage with. The subject of enthusiasm was a way of rethinking architectural space. Their research revealed that through participating in volunteer-led architectural tours - ‘visiting, exploring, understanding, and caring for buildings’ (2013: 879) - architectural enthusiasts found themselves becoming architectural experts and ‘active agents’ whose practices shaped and transformed, if ever so slightly, the buildings that they visited (2013: 889).

An example from Craggs *et al*’s ethnographic work illustrates how, during a visit to St Anselm’s Hall Chapel, Manchester, the touring architectural enthusiasts engaged in the act of ‘doing building work’ by subtly rearranging the building’s contents (2013: 889). Craggs *et al* note how after the tour members came across a framed calligraphy commemorating the artists, craftsmen and workmen who constructed the visited building - they were both excited and surprised whilst remarking at its significance. Frustration was felt towards its placement - ‘to appreciate the detail of



the frame involved bending down to the floor to get a closer look' and so when it came time to move on to the next with the tour, the members placed it back in a more obvious position. Craggs *et al's* example highlights the way in which 'architecture continues after its initial construction' (2013: 881) through a 'continuum of engagements with the built environment (2013: 893). Even if these are though temporal active engagements - physical, intellectual and interpretive - such as the ones enacted by architectural enthusiasts.

What is clear from both Jacobs and Merriman and Craggs *et al's* work is that there are multiple people who are actively engaged with a building's design. Their approach to a building as something that is ongoing and in a constant state of change, helped me think about the ways in which the Players have (as detailed in their shared history), and continue to, intervene and re-programme the Settlement building through their amateur theatre-making. What follows is an ethnographic walk-through of the Trout. Here I detail, with the assistance from some of the Players, how they have intervened with the material matter of the building.

## **Section One: Intervening**

### **Intervening into the fabric of the Settlement:**

#### **The Trout**

If you exit the stage, stage left and walk towards the back of the building you will pass through a velvet curtain into a small vestibule. In front of you, stacked against the wall, you will find ladders of all sizes; to the left, a stairway down to the dressing rooms; and if you turn right - past a dustpan, a brush, a whiteboard, and a bucket peppered with remnants of dried shards of paint and pieces of wallpaper - you'll see a pair of fire exit doors which lead out into the Settlement's car park. Opposite the fire exit doors are a set of stairs that lead up to a mezzanine floor affectionately

named the 'Trout', used as a space to store the Players' building materials and props.

Here, a (mostly) clear narrow catwalk of floor space runs through a collection of remnants from past shows and promises of future ones. The walls up here are hardly visible because of the many shelves, cupboards, props and pieces of wood of various sizes that cover each side. John explains to me that during the extension to the Kincaid Hall, the Settlement Players were gifted more storage space, an extra dressing room and a means to walk around backstage without being outside in the car park:

The Settlement [the organisation who operates the building] wanted to open up the ceiling space in the main hall which was at the time boarded over, and so we stored furniture in this roof void. Also there were two outbuildings where the Garden Room [a room designated for classes and group hire) is and in one of the buildings we used to store wood. So when the building changes took place we lost two storage areas but the Settlement kindly organised the backstage extension that included the extra dressing room.<sup>30</sup>

At the top of the stairs and to the left is a set of kitchen units where cupboards and drawers, above and below, are used to store the Players' smaller building materials. The kitchen worktop that sits in between (resting on top of the bottom cupboards) acts as a worktop for the preparation of tools (drills, drill bits, tool boxes). John tells me that before the extension, these same kitchen units used to be installed in what is now the Evans dressing room. The dressing room was the Players' only backstage space up until 2007, and so was used as a workshop too. The kitchen units were, again, used for storage 'but with less bits that we now have on the Trout now' John

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<sup>30</sup> John, interview, 16/4/16.

explained. 'When we got the second dressing room with the backstage extension we moved the kitchen cupboards up here'.<sup>31</sup>

The top cupboards are completely occupied by smaller building materials. An old Sainsbury's golden syrup glass jar marked with a sticker labelled '3 inch nails', written in pen, sits on top of an old tin where the words 'roasted fresh blue mountain COFFEE' can just be made out underneath thick black pen lines marking its new contents: '2" NAILS'. Next to these sit washed out jam jars of various sizes, boiled sweet tins, 35mm film cases and Tupperware boxes stacked on top of each other, each containing their own assortment of odd, unsorted nuts, bolts, screws and pegs. In the cupboard beside this one: industrial staplers, masking tape in various colours, an assortment of pens and pencils in a pot - and on the door, a map of the Trout, printed on an A4 piece of paper, is stuck on with masking tape. The map shows where things are kept; yet inevitably, over time certain materials and tools have escaped this predetermined inventory.

Below, the cupboards are stacked high and deep with pots of paint, splattered with the colours of their contents, the lids are sealed shut by dried paint. Balancing on top of the paint pots are some handmade polystyrene stencils used for creating wallpaper effects on stage, a bucket of paintbrushes of various sizes, densities and shapes and a couple of old ice cream tubs used for decanting paint into for multiple painters. Further along - a drawer dedicated to rope and further along from that - two metal drawer cabinets stacked on top of each other.

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<sup>31</sup> John, interview, 16/4/16.



The gun-metal-green paint of the cabinets has flaked away over time, chipped in places. Signs of wear can be seen around the edges of the drawer compartments where the continuous action of push and pull has taken its toll over the years. Every drawer varies in its colour and design - some are mustard gold, some are blue with moulded half-tent-like handles, some are brown with loop handles. Peeled and worn labels - white and rectangular stickers, tape, a piece of card that looks as though it was typed on a typewriter slotted into one of the drawers' specially moulded label compartments - all hint to something more theatrical than the labels found in the in kitchen cupboards: 'CURTAIN POLE RINGS', 'PULLEYS', 'CURTAIN HOOPS AND RUNNERS'.

On the right hand wall, opposite the kitchen units, are a set of industrial shelving units that hold the smaller pieces of softwood, MDF and hardboard used for constructing sets. The larger pieces along with doors, signs and tables are stacked up against it. John tells me that an ex-member of the Settlement Players called Peter sourced the metal shelving units, 'if I remember correctly the metal units were being thrown away by his company when they purchased new industrial racking'. John explained that Peter later moved to Australia with his wife Claire, '[they] put a lot of effort into the players - acting, directing, set builders, lighting, sound, scene painting etc. It was a sad day when they left'. On the shelves, some of the 2x1 inch pieces of wood - of which John pointed out as being a basic set building staple, 'we always need certain basic supplies, i.e. 2x1 wood, hardboard... which someone often picks up on and organises' - can be seen along with 1x1 inch and 2x2 inch pieces of wood. Each piece, peppered with drilled holes, an indication of their continual re-use in re-making.

Further on, into the almost cavernous realms of the Trout is another storage space allocated to the Players' properties. Every nook is filled with an assortment of plastic flowers, lampshades, hard hats, old telephones, lifting weights, lamps, coconut shells and wires.



During a tour of the props with Margaret, who has been the props lady since 1992, she explained to me how after the extension was built in 2007, this section of the Trout was a fought after space amongst the Players:

Yes you see they built this for me because I showed them all of the boxes [of props] I had. I had loads of these boxes at home and I thought right! I'm going to have it [this section of the Trout] and then someone thought that he could have half of it for his tools - I can't remember the name of the man - and I said 'you're joking, this is mine!' And so I came in for two days ...that was two years ago now... two full days and I thought 'I'll take everything out'... and it was at a time when the stage was completely bare, and so I took everything, everything! And laid it out ... I just put them down like that and then I put them into these boxes and I labelled everything... Now we've got all of this and we're amateur don't forget. And there's nothing really amateur about this, is there.<sup>32</sup>

A crisscross wooden shelving structure intervenes with the fabric of the left hand wall. Margaret had these shelves constructed after the extension was built. The shelving holds blue plastic open-top storage boxes (two deep to the wall). The boxes are numbered and marked with coloured paper (blue, red and green). Laminated pieces of paper - stapled to each of the down facing wood frames - list the corresponding number and colour's with their accompanying contents.

Colour: Green, Number:

4. Coffee Pots;

5. Tea Sets;

6. White Tea Set & Pot;

7. Mugs;

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<sup>32</sup> Margaret, interview, 5/3/15

8. Coffee Sets;
9. Plates, Bowls, Cutlery;
10. Matching Plates & Bowls, Cups & Saucers;
11. Rehearsal Crockery;
12. Dinner & Side Plates, White Gold Rim.

‘I have some bottles in there’ she noted:

I’ve got lovely clocks, I’ve got chess sets and things like that, a club to knock someone over the head, baskets for flowers if I ever want to do a big arrangement. This just got left here when we did a play about camping, these are my slop buckets... Pans, utensils, mats - if you think you may use them - saucepans you never know when they’re going to be needed... These are champagne glasses in here and of course we didn't always drink champagne out of the long flutes, we used shorter glasses. [Pause] see someone's been here and put a whisky glass in with the champagne glasses! I'll have their guts for garters! Where are the whisky glasses? Ah number six.

The existence of the Trout itself was a result of the Settlement (the organisation) intervening with the fabric of the Settlement building. In the process of wanting to open up the hall space and build a new room for Settlement classes, the Players were left with insufficient storage space. As a result of this, the Settlement built them an extension of which the Trout was a part. From here, the Players set about claiming this space, threefold. Firstly, the Players physically intervened in the fabric of the Trout by moving and constructing the kitchen cupboards that previously inhabited the dressing room; assembling a set of donated industrial shelving units; and building a new, purpose built wooden shelving stack and affixing it onto the walls. Secondly, the materials of their craft that inhabit this space continue to mark it as one of their theatre-making. Lastly, the name of the mezzanine – the ‘Trout’ suggests that they claimed the space for themselves, marking its significance to



them after its construction. As I have mentioned previously, when I first heard the Players refer to this mezzanine floor as the ‘Trout’, I thought that it might be a technical name for storage in theatre. However, after having a conversation with John, and fellow set builder Helen, they revealed how the name originated as a joke, which has stuck ever since:

John: After we had the extension, we needed to name that area so that people knew where we were referring to.

Helen: I’m sure you heard the story that it was me that named the Trout... Basically I am a zoologist at heart, it’s what my degree was in, and when the extension was built I jokingly said ‘well we already have a perch maybe we should call it the trout’ and it stuck.<sup>33</sup>

In the next section, I move on from the Trout to explore how the Players share spaces within the Settlement with other groups and societies. In doing so, I illuminate how the Players re-programme the spaces within the Settlement building, which are not entirely designated to them, through their theatre-making.

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<sup>33</sup> Fieldbook notes, 1/1/2016.

## Section Two: Re-Programming

### Understanding the Settlement Building as a Multi-Purpose Space

We will not be able to use the stage/hall this coming Sunday as there are ballet exams. Apologies, I should have checked it before setting the date rather than afterwards. The stage/hall is also in use the following Sunday so the set building session will now be on Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> July at 10.15am. See you then (or even earlier at the Players AGM on Weds 13<sup>th</sup> July), J.<sup>34</sup>

In 'Creativ\* Suburbs: Cultural 'popcorn' pioneering in multi-purpose spaces' (2010), Alison Bain discusses the idea of multi-purpose and improvisational space through her work on vernacular suburban creativity. In a bid to re-imagine creativity and its stimulus, Bain looked at the under-appreciated and 'seemingly unspectacular' spaces of suburbia, in favour of the 'spectacular spaces of urban creativity', proposing that these variegated spaces be valorised and 'less readily dismissed as uninteresting and technically and conceptually naive' (2010: 74). In doing so, Bain found multi-purpose buildings and the improvisational spaces within - churches and halls doubling as performance venues, libraries housing artist's workshops and coffee shops exhibiting artworks - each highlighting examples of creative opportunity being fostered by a shortage of formal cultural buildings. 'Improvisational space', Bain explains, is a 'space that is changeable, malleable and affordable, that encourages spontaneous and intuitive activities, and that supports different work arrangements' (2010: 65). As opposed to the 'completeness and closure' found in most formal spaces, the lack of purpose-built cultural buildings encourages unpredictable new uses of space, possibility and potential (2010: 74).

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<sup>34</sup> Email from John to the set builders, 6/7/16.

Bain's concept of multi-purpose and improvisational spaces offers one way to analyse the Settlement - an adult education centre offering a programme of academic and recreational courses as well as occasional lettings for private and community events - along with the Settlement Players' as re-designers. Although the Settlement Players have access to two small changing rooms, storage spaces for building materials, props and costumes, a stage to perform on and a hall in which to create an auditorium, on one of my first visits to the Settlement Jim reminded me that the Settlement is not the Settlement Players' property indefinitely. They rent these spaces by paying an annual membership fee of £21 with £18 going to the Settlement, 'we could be told to leave at any point... but we are very lucky to have this'.<sup>35</sup>

During my time with the Players I experienced constant reminders of the Settlement's multi-purposeness. On my very first visit to the Settlement, (before I visited the archive with Pat) John offered to show me where the Settlement Players perform. As we walked from the main building, under the covered walkway, to a building adorned with a plaque reading 'Little Theatre', John sighed. 'Let me just check if there's someone using the hall'. He walked through the front door, only to return a couple of seconds later with an apologetic look on his face. 'I'm sorry' he said, 'I think it's an aerobics or yoga group using it now so sadly I can't show you'.<sup>36</sup>

Emails from John circulated weekly with set building jobs for the week ahead. Sometimes they would include alterations to dates, time and rooms of rehearsals, set builds and strikes - a consequence of another group's activities or a private booking of the Kincaid Hall:

Cara, Happy New Year. Over the Christmas period I designed Pat's set for the Feb play. Last Sunday we put up some flats for her to run rehearsals on

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<sup>35</sup> Jim, fieldbook notes, 11/1/15

<sup>36</sup> Fieldbook notes, 4/2/14

and check that the exit/entrance locations worked along with some working furniture. She ran a rehearsal on Monday behind closed doors as the table tennis group was in the Hall. All appeared okay and she will have another chance to have a look at tonight's rehearsal (8-10pm).<sup>37</sup>

The set has now started to come alive. Many thanks for all your hard work in getting it to this stage. For the final set building session before the show we have a few tidy up jobs and a bit of painting. If you are free then see you Sunday morning. Please note that we will not be striking the set on the 14<sup>th</sup> June for two reasons:

1. There are ballet exams in the Hall that day.
2. The Settlement has an Open day on Friday 19th June when we will open up the doors and show people around the stage area.

The set strike will take place on Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> June at 10.15am

Have a great weekend.<sup>38</sup>

The Settlement Hall is in use the next two Sundays (private hire), so we will not be able to get in and do any work. Hope to see you at the “God of Carnage” this week. If not, I will email to let you know when the next set building sessions are. J.<sup>39</sup>

Each email was a reminder of the Settlement operating as a multi-purpose space and its mobilising possibility and potential for the multiple groups who occupy the spaces within. Even when the Kincaid Hall was available for set building, a reminder of *other* claims to the Settlement were affixed on notice boards. Notice boards pinned with photographs of decorated cakes, printed news and announcements whilst A4 advertisements for language courses scattered the white

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<sup>37</sup> Email from John, 7/1/15

<sup>38</sup> Email from John to set builders, 6/6/15

<sup>39</sup> Email from John to set builders, 14/6/16

painted brick walls of the Kincaid hall. One piece of paper read ‘Please would parents of dance students respect the disabled, tutor and staff allocated spaces in our car park, Thank you’. Even the pin board in the Evans dressing room had a notice reminding users that the space ‘is used for meetings (outside of Settlement Players meetings and rehearsals) and so ‘please could you leave the room as you find it, clean and tidy. Many Thanks, Manager’.<sup>40</sup>

It was rare to see anyone else from the Settlement during a set building morning, however, one morning a lady who worked in the main office, along with a cleaner, asked us not to step on the hall floor because they were cleaning it after a private party the night before. Another week a cleaner left just as the set build began. Tartan fabric bunting hung from the hall ceiling – the remnants of a Settlement Burns Night celebration. All these instances marked the Settlement, and more precisely the Kincaid Hall, with *other* bodies along with their ‘different work arrangements’ (Bain, 2010: 65). Through its multi-purpose nature, the Settlement building revealed itself as a potential co-biographer of numerous amateur, leisure and social groups’ stories, as their particular activities transformed the hall from a ballet studio, to a table tennis or party venue weekly.

Working in and around these other groups is an important aspect of how the Settlement Players work. The Settlement’s multi-purpose accommodation means that space is therefore limited and demand on time is a practical issue effecting where and when the Settlement Players’ activities can or cannot take place. However, as each week that I spent set building with the Players passed, my interest focussed more on how the Players themselves actively created their own improvisational spaces within the Settlement building. The multi-purpose element of the Settlement became magnified through the multi-purposeness of the spaces used by the Players themselves. ‘Space’ Bain notes ‘is central to the creative and to the improvisational process’ (2010: 65). As the Players worked towards each

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<sup>40</sup> Fieldbook notes, 18/1/15

production, I too became interested in how the improvisational processes of the Players were both triggered by these spaces as well as being an active factor in transforming the spaces within Settlement.

In what follows are detailed accounts of three spaces of the Settlement building that I was able to witness being re-programmed by the Settlement Players. Firstly I explore how a car park is utilised as a set building workshop, secondly how a dressing room is turned into a set builders' tearoom and thirdly how a community hall is transformed into an auditorium (complete with box office and bar). Through these three examples I came to notice how the Players act as re-designers of the Settlement through, as Jacobs and Merriman would suggest, 're-programming its planned activities' (2011: 261).

### **Re-Programming Space Example One:**

#### **The Carpark/The Set Builders' Workshop**

The Settlement Players' lack of designated work space - or indeed a purpose built workshop - means that the Settlement's car park, an otherwise mundane space, is often used as a space of sawing, drilling and stripping wood by the Players. In this section I focus attention on how multiple spaces within the Settlement were re-programmed.

When major construction started to take place on the festival play, David Compton's *After Midnight Before Dawn* - alongside the permanent set for Lesley Bruce's *My Own Show* - I watched, for the first time, how the Players transformed the car park into a workshop for scenery construction.<sup>41</sup> The crossover time of the two plays meant that workspace both onstage and backstage became limited. The stage (often used for construction) was occupied by a nearly finished set, and the

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<sup>41</sup> Taken from fieldbook notes, 15/2/15.

only other workspace that I had seen utilised previous to this was the small vestibule backstage, and when space was really scarce - the Trout.

As work on the *My Own Show* set, on stage, started to ease and come to an end, we broke off into two groups to simultaneously work on both. I volunteered to finish off the last painting jobs on stage which involved covering the centimetres of wood that were missed the first time around (subsequently noted down on John's 'to-do' list). I knelt on an old white sheet, covered in various colours of dried paint, as the rest of the *My Own Show* group busied themselves by sorting out the stage lighting and hanging the last pictures on the flats that made up the living room walls. One by one, as each person finished their jobs, they left the stage to join in on the festival build outside. With each of their exits, voices, laughter, and the sound of sawing and drilling, backstage, began to grow louder.

I wandered backstage to find the fire escape doors had been opened out and folding worktables had been set up around the car park. The surrounding shrubbery was being used as makeshift worktops for cutting wood and the exterior walls were being used to prop up flats for painting and assembling. A cleaners' caddy filled with nails and screws sat on the tarmac floor, as Ivor and Stephen drilled hinges into the fully collapsible, festival set. The car park was alive with activity, 'ah Cara, do you need another job to do?' asked John. I picked up a stripping knife and started to strip the wallpaper and paint of past plays off a tall sheet of plywood needed for the festival set. I balanced the sheet of wood strategically on top of a bucket that was simultaneously propping it up and catching the flecks of paper and paint as they fell from its surface. At one o'clock, the end of our set building morning, John brought out the dustpan and brush and started to sweep up the remnants of our activities that morning (just as he would inside) from the tarmac floor: the dust from the drilled holes and the wood shavings along with the fragments of wallpaper that missed the bucket.





The director of the festival play, Cliff, drove into the car park at that moment and parked his car next to John - returning the car park back to its primary namesake.

This example of the Players re-programming the carpark into an improvised space of set construction was certainly not a rare occurrence. The carpark-turned-workshop continued to, when the weather was dry, regularly be used throughout my time set building with the Players. During the construction of Georgina Read's *Ladies of Spirit*, black wooden chairs were painted brown and left outside to dry - huddled on a white sheet of fabric that had been laid out on the car park floor. Later, during the last weeks constructing Graham Linehan's *The Ladykillers*, Stephen and I carried out a couple of collapsible tables, positioning them on the tarmacked floor and set about sawing a piece of wood to support the staircase that was being built onstage. I noted in my fieldnotes how the wood was too big to rest comfortably on the tables and how they became lost below it. 'I held the wood with both hands whilst securing and steadying one of the tables with my foot - we were on a slight slope', I wrote, highlighting the imperfect floor of our improvised workshop.

What is clear from these two occurrences is that the planned activities of the car park, as a space designed to house vehicles, is re-programmed by the Players, out of necessity, by the improvised arrangement of foldable workbenches, a cleaner's caddy full of screws and inventive uses of the surrounding shrubbery and exterior wall. In these temporary moments of transformation the car park becomes a workshop, only to exist again as a car park once the Players have packed the tools away. However, as the following two examples of the dressing room and Kincaid Hall show, the Players transformation of these rooms take on multiple layers of re-programming.



## Re-programming Space Example Two:

### The Evans Room (the Ladies Dressing Room)/The Set Builders' Tearoom



On Sundays, from eleven o'clock until quarter to twelve, the 'Evans Room' (the ladies dressing room), named after a late Player called Diane Evans, became a set builders' break room. My fieldbook notes below, record one of many midday respites from a morning's build:

May, 2015. John shouted 'break time' which was met by excitement from the rest of us. Everyone dropped their tools - including my research tools - and chairs from the stage were brought in and moved around as Pat wheeled in the tea trolley in and asked, 'Tea? There's coffee there...is that enough milk, Cara?' The top shelf of the trolley is filled with cups, a packet of teabags secured with an elastic band, a Tupperware flask filled with milk (brought from home by Pat and John), and a bag of instant coffee. And below this, a biscuit tin and a plastic bowl for washing up the cups afterwards. We sit in our patched jeans and muted and worn novelty tee-shirts, contrasting oddly against the bright blue-green hues of the walls and the embroidered patterns of the mismatched chairs, the dresses of future shows and the remnants of past shows: a glove, a can of hairspray, a wireless. Talk turns

from the build to more pressing matters - how Stevenage Football Club had played the day before and how far Graham had got with planning his summer holiday by train. Jim tells me that he went to see a production by the Bancroft Players, an amateur group from the neighbouring town of Hitchin. ‘Their stage, lighting...its perfection...that is where you would go to learn your ‘craft’ he said, it's on another level there’. He called them “professional amateurs”.<sup>42</sup>

The Evans Room also acted as a passageway from the stage through to the back toilet where we cleaned our paintbrushes - heavy with paint from the morning's build. It also acted as a storage room for props, furniture and costumes. Chairs and other furniture would appear and disappear weekly as pieces were brought on and off stage, returned and retrieved to and from the homes that they were borrowed from. Dirty boots, flecked with paint were constantly trodden back and forth through this room, diminishing any image of glamour that a dressing room may conjure.

In her book, *The Actor in Costume* (2010), theatre scholar, Aoife Monks explores the dressing room through the actor's body and costume, realising it as a room where transition and change takes place, ‘a third space between the stage and the real world’ (2010: 13). Monks accounts a history of painters and photographers entering the actors' dressing room with a desire to capture the alluring ‘disorientating qualities of this third space’, away from the beauty and skill seen on the stage (2010: 14). She considers the enticing qualities of the actor's dressing room, backstage, where one may seek to discover the ‘magic’ of theatre, but is instead confronted with ‘the everyday routine labour of being an actor: the graft and repetition that exists beneath the seemingly spontaneous spectacle’ (2010: 17). Here in the ladies dressing room of the Settlement, I was instead confronted (albeit, temporarily) with the everyday routine labour of being a set builder and the intricate webs of memory,

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<sup>42</sup> Fieldbook notes, 17/5/15

objects, people and place. It was a room in which I saw Jeni, the Settlement Players' costumier, make quick costume alterations on Stephen - who was both an actor and set builder in *The Ladykillers* - in amongst a scramble for the tea cart over our break; where discussions about lighting and sound would occur over a box of biscuits whilst we rested - sitting on the furniture of past and future shows - covered in wood shavings from the morning's build.

I developed an ongoing fascination with both of the dressing rooms during my Sunday set building mornings at the Settlement, and with this fascination came an urge to photograph them. It started as an aesthetic appreciation of the jewelled colours and worn textures of the mismatched furniture. The ruby red armchair with its cabriole legs; the light wood armchair with bent arms and leaf patterned fabric - its worn back covered with what appeared to be a floral pillowcase; the dark wood bookcase filled with play books (a curation of props resting on top); the turmeric-yellow corduroy armchair; and the love seat with its dark wooden frame and chipped arms - covered in a pea green fabric, bunched and worn to white in places. It was finding these (growingly) familiar pieces - sitting against a green/blue background of the painted brick dressing room walls, commercial-standard dark green carpets and blue gingham curtains (used to conceal costume rails and shelves filled with fabric) - that drew me away from the build and into the dressing rooms week after week.

In Monks' article 'Collecting Ghosts: Actors, Anecdotes and Objects at the Theatre' (2013), she examines the 'familiar trope of dressing room images that shows us the actor emerging out of the chaos of things' (2013: 152). Unlike professional theatre where an actor may occupy a dressing room for weeks, months or even years, at the Settlement a play runs for only three nights.



This means that an actors' time spent in the dressing room is fleeting rather than continuous. This was reflected in my photographs which were void of actors emerging from letters, sentimental gifts and drawings of inspiration and their 'collections of objects and cards from well-wishers - and most prominently from other star actors', which Monks attributes to a circulation of professional identity and status within the theatre (2013: 152). Instead, my collection of photographs captured an ongoing arrangement of furniture and things.

They showed a room affected by what was happening elsewhere in the Settlement - by what was borrowed for the set and what was not needed and so stored there, ready for its next debut on stage. For example the bookshelf in the Evans room - used to hold the Players' theatrical books, scripts, miscellaneous objects and mugs during tea breaks - was called to the stage during Jim's production of *The Ladykillers*. It was my job to clear the bookshelf of its contents:

May, 2015. Brecht, Ibsen, Beckett, Chekhov, Shaw - some of the names that marked the cracked and worn spines of the Players' collection of play books which I piled on top of each other and stacked against the back wall of the Evans Room today. I was given the task of emptying and fetching the bookshelf from the dressing room. We needed it to dress Mrs Wilberforce's living room as the one that was already sat onstage wasn't right (I think it was too big and we don't have enough old looking books to fill it). This one has two shelves and a small cupboard below - concealed by two small doors. I started taking the fragile looking books out one by one - some held together with aged and yellowed tape. As Ivor walked through the dressing room on his way to the Trout, he informed me that it was okay to take them out in handfuls, 'you'll be there all day' he said.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Fieldbook notes, 10/5/15





The rejected bookshelf was moved into the dressing room, taking the place of the one before, and continued to stay there after the production had finished. The bookshelf, with the cupboard, was brought out again for David's production of *Ladies of Spirit*. Chairs were the most striking pieces of furniture to appear and then disappear from my dressing room photographs (only to appear again in my photographs of the set). The two dusty pink armchairs were used to dress Mrs. Wilberforce's living room for *The Ladykillers*. And, before this, the ruby red chair with the cabriole legs was used on the set of *My Own Show*, however - along with the blue square sofa - they were later thought not fit for the era of the living room and so returned back to the dressing rooms.<sup>44</sup> The blue sofa was a welcome return to the dressing room, as our tea breaks were quite cramped without it.

Through the set builders' theatre-making, the Elson room becomes more than just a dressing room. What I found most interesting was the fact that the dressing room actually spends more time being something else - more than its designated and planned purpose. The Settlement Players call it the dressing room yet, most of the time, it is utilised as a constant store room, illuminated by the movement of furniture in and out of it on a weekly basis; a break room for around an hour on a weekly basis; and a passageway when access is needed to backstage areas. I even witnessed it being used as a read through space and an audition room for other members of the Players. These subtle movements - a chair here, a sofa there - and multiple interactions with and *within* the space constantly transform it from a dressing room into a multi-functional space; re-programmed and adjusted by the Players everyday theatre-making.

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<sup>44</sup> Later, the blue sofa was called up again, this time for *Ladies of Spirit*.

## Re-programming Space Example Three:

### The Kincaid Hall and the Green Room/ A Theatre and Box Office

Directly opposite the stage is the Green Room that was part of the original Settlement, before the Kincaid Hall was built onto it. It can be entered via its own entrance outside, or through a door behind the green curtain that is always pulled across. Wooden beams line the ceiling above it until the point where the original building (1907) meets Hugh Bidwell's Kincaid Hall (1956) and the wooden beams are replaced by metal beams holding up stage lighting. At this juncture, between old and new, hangs a portrait of the hall's benefactor, Mr. Kincaid.<sup>45</sup>

The Kincaid Hall was also a space in which multiple activities and re-programmings took place. During a performance run the otherwise empty hall needed to look and feel like a theatre space. During the last weeks of set building for *My Own Show*, John invited me to help out with the front of house, selling programmes for the show. I arrived to find the Kincaid Hall transformed from community hall to theatre with seating, a bar, a box office and a refreshment stall of drinks and sweets. The partition wall between the Hall and the Green Room, that I had not realise existed, was moved to one side opening up both rooms to create one big continuous space. The Green Room curtain was drawn too, and the chairs that were stacked and stored behind it were lined up, covering the wooden parquet flooring, in ordered rows from the front of the stage towards the back of the hall creating seating for the audience. I recalled how during the set building of *My Own Show*, Cliff held an audition and numerous rehearsals in the Green Room for the festival play *After Midnight, Before Dawn*. The screams and shouts from the actors' rehearsals in the Green Room could be heard on stage as we built the set.

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<sup>45</sup> Fieldbook notes, 12/4/15



The Green Room turned lobby/box office was lined with foldable tables and a few more of the stackable chairs, each acting as a different sales point. I took my seat at a table with a box of printed programmes and a Tupperware box full of change. Roy sat to the right of me and closest to the entrance. He was greeting the audience and selling tickets to the show. To the left of me sat a box of glasses and Stephen who was filling up a couple of glass jugs with orange juice. Stephen was on refreshment duty, selling soft drinks and various chocolate bars arranged on a trolley that had been wheeled in. In front of me, a bar (made by the Players and usually dismantled and stored on the Trout) had been set up where Ivan was selling beer and wine. A couple of chalk boards sat next to the bar with a list of beer and wine, handwritten at the top were the words, 'To Beer or not to Beer?' And 'Vins de Plays'. More of the same foldable tables had been positioned at the back of the hall, behind the last row of chairs creating a sound and lighting desk for Rob and Graham to work on. The sound and lighting deck was brought down from the 'Perch' and was set up with a laptop. An annotated script and typed and handwritten pieces of paper with sound and lighting queues littered the desk space around the deck. Headphones and cables had also been transported down from the Perch in a red plastic storage bucket that sat underneath the table. John later explained how there were restrictions to this way of working:

I would love to have a lighting/sound box at the back of the hall but my attempts have all failed (cost and usage per year reasons); so we have the process of getting all the equipment out each time for shows and rehearsals which is a real pain and bad for the equipment being continually moved and sockets being re-plugged [...] Currently we are building trolleys for the lights and sound equipment but this still requires re-plugging each time and so weakening sockets and cables.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> John, interview, 12/7/16



These same foldable tables were brought out during rehearsals and set in the middle of the hall for the director, stage manager, Margaret (the props lady) and anyone else who happened to be there to watch and scribble notes, feedback and changes onto scripts bound in folders. At the set strike of *My Own Show*, the foldable tables were used to accommodate sandwiches, cakes and chocolates. After a busy morning of dismantling the stage and sorting and storing all of the material back onto the Trout, we took our tea break in the hall instead of the dressing room. Generally everyone involved in the production turns up for the set strikes, not just the builders, so there were more of us than a usual Sunday. The tea trolley was wheeled out and the kettle sat on a constant boil down on the parquet floor while we hovered around the table of homemade and shop bought cakes brought in by various members of the cast, ‘that’s five teas! And how many coffees? Guys, how many coffees?’ That afternoon I made this note in my notebook:

A lot of things in the Settlement can be found wheeling around on various wooden trolleys - tea, coffee, biscuits, sweets to be sold at productions, props backstage... nuts and bolts in old hard boiled sweet tins and screws in Tupperware when building and ‘striking’ the set.<sup>47</sup>

The foldable tables and trolleys acted as transformers - vehicles that transformed parts of the Settlement into different spaces at appropriate times. Just like the foldable worktables and the cleaners’ caddy, they assisted in the re-programming of the Settlement’s activities by denoting improvisational and imagined spaces: a workshop, a tearoom, a bar, a technical station and a director’s desk. The mobility found in the trolleys reflected the Players’ own movement and the non-permanent nature of their theatre and the way in which they inhabit the Settlement’s building.

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<sup>47</sup> Fieldbook notes, 22/2/15

## Re-programming in Time and Space: Concluding Thoughts

At first glance, the Players' use of the Settlement building might seem a simple one – they have dressing rooms to dress in, a stage to perform on, and backstage areas in which to store building materials and props. However, week after week, I was able to witness how imaginative and unpredictable work spaces were often crafted through the Players' theatre-making. What is clear from the three occurrences discussed in this part of the chapter – the car park, the dressing room and the Kincaid hall – is that the Players' are involved in multiple 'improvisational processes' which re-programme the spaces of the Settlement building (Bain, 2010: 65). Firstly, through the materials and tools of their craft they are able to re-programme the function of spaces within the building. From using foldable tables to transform a car park into a workshop and an empty hall into an auditorium with a box office and lighting/sound station, to using trollies to turn a dressing room into a set builders tea room. Secondly, the Players re-programme the Settlement through the activities of their theatre-making. Spaces are utilised for purposes other than their planned activities, for example the dressing room is used as a storeroom, a break room and a passageway, as the Players' manoeuvre and interact within the space. Finally, what the three examples illuminate is that the Settlement Players are not only re-programming in space but they are also re-programming in time. Spaces within the building exist in their re-programmed forms for as long as the Players are using them and revert back to their original planned activities once the Players have packed their tools and tea away.

## Section Three

### Learning to Set Build *with* the Settlement Building

We have been here a long time and have therefore established procedures and patterns for the way we work. The building does have its quirks and it sometimes seems that we have processes that people need to learn/use to get things done.<sup>48</sup>

In the previous sections of this chapter, ‘Intervening’ and ‘Reprogramming’, I considered the Settlement Players as everyday re-designers of the Settlement, affecting its spaces both physically and temporally through the processes of their theatre-making. In this section I will explore the reciprocity of this relationship by considering how the very specificities of the Settlement building shapes how the Players practice their craft within. By also considering this approach, between the amateur theatre-makers and their building, I shall show that the relationship is cyclical and interconnected. To do so I shall consider how the Players must learn to work *within* and *with* - a building that has no ‘how-to’ manual.

How-to manuals, practical guides, and dedicated magazines are common popular resources for amateur theatre groups. Typing ‘theatre’ into an Amazon book search will bring up a myriad of different manuals and practical guides directed towards amateur theatre-makers. The Phaidon Theatre Manual series, for example, provides a series of paperback books (under ten pounds) which cover most aspects of theatre-making, including stage management and theatre administration, lighting and sound, costume and makeup, directing a play and stage design and properties. Each one acts as a clear, concise and practical resource (free from theory) for people

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<sup>48</sup> John, interview, 14/11/16



working in ‘non-professional theatre’ including amateur dramatic and operatic societies. Organisations such as the National Operatic and Dramatic Association (NODA), who aim to support the amateur theatre sector by providing advice and support to amateur theatre groups, also provide a selection of NODA affiliated technical books to buy on their website, as well as circulating helpful online guides written by contributing amateurs.<sup>49</sup> Titles such as *Teach Yourself Amateur Theatre* (2007) by Nicholas Gibbs promises to offer a comprehensive and illustrated guide to everything from dealing with first night nerves to lighting and staging. In addition to this, and after a quick search on YouTube for videos about amateur theatre, it appears that this platform too is being used as a space where amateur theatre-makers make and share practical videos on, for example, how to construct a scenery flat.<sup>50</sup>

During my time researching and building sets with the Settlement Players, how-to guides and manuals were not resources that were used to assist with theatre-making. My constantly merging roles as both researcher and set builders’ apprentice afforded me the opportunity to witness first-hand how theatre-making craft knowledge is instead learnt through and in the ‘doing’. Similar to many amateur craft practitioners, such as the ones explored in both Roni Brown (2008) and Vannini and Taggart’s respective works on self-builders, rather than acquiring skills from prior, and more conventional or formulaic ways of learning, the building skills at the Settlement ‘instead, arise from intuition, observation and from learning as they go’ (Vannini and Taggart, 2014: 278) and what Brown describes as ‘local knowledges’ (Brown, 2008: 361).

However whilst I was learning from the Players’ on how to set build (for example how to seam flats) I thought about how the Settlement as a building does not come with instructions for use, or a particular set of knowledges that must be internalised

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<sup>49</sup> The NODA website: <https://www.noda.org.uk/about-us> and an example of one of these guides titled A Guide to Musical Direction in Amateur Theatre by David Gilson: [http://noda.org.uk/writeable/custom\\_uploads/nodamd\\_guidance.pdf](http://noda.org.uk/writeable/custom_uploads/nodamd_guidance.pdf) (accessed 1/2/2017)

<sup>50</sup> For example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=287RvTRzpk> (accessed 1/2/2017)

before working *within* it. I found that I was learning how to interact *within* this specific building through observing the Players' manoeuvrings. What became apparent from these observations was that the Settlement building holds the capacity to shape and influence their work – in Patchett's words, to 'guide the[ir] craft performance in certain directions' (2015: 15). McAuley has explored this relationship between theatre-makers and their building in her chapter 'What is Sydney about Sydney Theatre?' in *Performance and the Politics of Space* (2013). In it she illustrates the implications that arise from the material realities of theatre buildings, revealing the site-based nature of all theatre. McAuley focuses on, what she terms, the 'performance spaces' of the theatre (being 'the stage and the auditorium as a single unit') and considers that places of performance – buildings, their histories, their facilities and constraints - are just as important as the spaces of performance (the fictional spaces created on stage) (2013: 81). To illustrate this, McAuley studied three theatres built in adaptive re-use buildings – the Belvoir, the Stables and the Wharf. She suggests that the material realities of theatre buildings affect both the audience and performers' experiences; the material realities being 'fundamental to the work that is created, the creative relations between the artists making the work, and the nature of the theatre experience for spectators' (2013: 92). To illustrate this, McAuley notes how the intimate size of the theatres in Sydney and the close proximity between where the auditorium ends and the stage begins facilitates an often close and direct relationship between the audience and the actors. Furthermore, she notes how the thrust stage – a characteristic of all the theatres she studied – removes both the use of stage curtains and the presence of wings, meaning that scenery and properties cannot be easily moved on and off the stage during a performance. This, McAuley suggests, has resulted in directors, designers and playwrights having to 'learn through trial and error how to work with this kind of performance space' by, for example, adopting the use of minimal sets (2013: 94).

Whilst McAuley's focus is on performance space and the ways in which theatres affect and shape what happens on stage, her work provides a useful insight into the ways in which theatre-makers must learn to work with their buildings. In the following ethnography, taken from my fieldbook notes one morning in February 2015 whilst retrieving the stage curtains from underneath the stage where they are stored, I explore how backstage workers are also shaped and influenced by the building they inhabit. What I realised in this mundane moment captured in my fieldbook was that there was no how-to-manual directing how the Players, and myself, should specifically retrieve the stage curtains. Rather the Players bodies were attuned to the specificities of the Settlement building itself. What I shall consider with this example is how the Players theatre-making craft knowledge is not only learnt within the building but is learnt, overtime, *with* it through every day embodied engagements.

### **Example of Learning to Build with the Settlement: Retrieving the Stage Curtains from the Trapdoor<sup>51</sup>**

February, 2015. John took a small key-like instrument from the shelf at the back of the stage - beside the opening which leads to the Trout - and hooked it into a small hole in the floorboards below. A small square, cut into the floorboards, lifted away from the stage to reveal a fully lit underground passage, spanning most of the length of stage, width ways. I hadn't noticed this trapdoor up until this point, but it was here that the black stage curtains were stored. After the set strike of *My Own Show*, we started to prepare the stage for the annual evening of one act plays that the Settlement Players stage in April. The night usually consists of that year's festival play (so that the home audience can see it) along with two one act plays, where other members of the group are given a chance to direct. This year's festival play

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<sup>51</sup> Fieldbook notes, 22/2/15

was *After Midnight Before Dawn* and so we were preparing the stage for the simple and portable set which called for more of the blackout stage curtains to be put up, behind and around it.

We gathered around the trapdoor as John asked who would like to volunteer to go down through and pass the curtains up from underneath the stage: ‘Okay, we’ve got a job for two people. Does anybody want to go down and pass the curtains up?’ ‘Well you’re the only one small enough to get down there, John’, joked Graham. ‘Okay, I need someone else to help...Cara?. Would you like a go?’ asked John.

I agreed - excited for the chance to see this subterranean world of the Settlement - but not before Rob brought out the vacuum cleaner, detached the floor nozzle and started to vacuum the dust around the border of the trapdoor. After a few minutes of housekeeping, John jumped down through the trapdoor with ease and then hoisted himself back up again to demonstrate how I should lower myself down. ‘Just put a hand on each side to support yourself’ he said. I followed his lead, sitting on the edge of the floorboards, with my legs dangling through the trapdoor. I then held my weight with my arms until my feet touched the concrete floor below. The small underground passage was lined with red brick and lit by a couple of wall lights. The passage could only fit two people comfortably and once below, the only way to manoeuvre was by crawling and kneeling. ‘You can either go down to the back and pass the curtains to me or you can stand in the trapdoor and pass the curtains up. Which one do you feel comfortable doing?’ asked John. ‘Hope you don’t mind, it’s very dusty down here’. I crawled half way down the passage, past the stage blocks and stairs that were also stored down there, before turning back and volunteering to stand in the trapdoor (my dislike of small spaces helped this decision). I brushed off the

two thick patches of dust and dirt from the knees of my jeans as John manoeuvred his way past me, towards the back of the underground passageway. The faded, worn out denim knees of his jeans showed signs that they had been scraped along this floor before. They signalled that this back and forth movement - retrieving the stage curtains from under the stage - was something that he had done many times. This permanent wear through an on-going engagement *with* and practice *in* this environment, provided a material trace of the synergy between the building and John's gestures. Unlike the dust on my knees, it could not be brushed off.

From the back of the passageway John wheeled towards me what looked like an assemblage of three or four odd pieces of wood, seamed together and laid flat, with four 'spinner' wheels attached to each of the contraption's four corners. The 'trolley', as he called it, acted as an ingenious piece of mobile storage for the stage curtains. It allowed the stage curtains - which laid on top in a flat, neat pile and covered in a hessian sheet to keep the dust off - to be wheeled to the far end of the passage for storage and then wheeled back again to the trap door for easy portability onto the stage- transforming this otherwise static storage space under the stage into a mobilised passageway.<sup>52</sup>

'I'll let you know what size they are as I pass them up. This one's ... small!' John passed the first curtain to me from the pile on the trolley. Crouched down, he balanced his weight from one foot to the other, swaying from the trolley towards where I stood in the trapdoor.

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<sup>52</sup>This ingenious device instantly enchanted me. The three or four pieces of wood, four wheels and a hessian bag suggested a one-off solution for a particular task at hand. In a later conversation with John and Rob, they revealed to me how the trolley was especially designed for the job of curtain storage in the trapdoor:

John: I suspect that David Fyfe may have organised the trolley. Not sure we have talked about David, who died a few years ago, but he was a kind and generous man who did a lot for the Players.

Rob: Yes, I'm fairly sure that David Fyfe was the mastermind behind the trolley... Previously the curtains were kept in David's business; Letchworth Hill Laundry. They were bought by the Letchworth Little Theatre drama festival and just used for that, initially. At the time the Players continued to use the old "Festival Greys" which were stored and folded up in a cupboard.

(Fieldbook notes, 14/5/16)



I collected the curtain carefully with both hands, half emerging from the trapdoor. 'This one's small' I called out to Rob, Graham and Helen onstage, echoing John's words, as I passed the stage curtain into their hands. Right hand, over left hand, over right hand - I hoisted the curtain up onto the stage by way of this continuous motion. The stage looked empty compared to how it had looked when I arrived that morning. Fey's living room had been completely dismantled and stored away during the morning's set strike. Most of the actors from *My Own Show* that had come down to the Settlement to help with the strike had left. All that was left on the stage were a couple of ladders (that had just been used to take down the existing stage curtains), the vacuum cleaner, a blanket and on top of that, two piles of curtains waiting to be hung. The piles were a way of organising the stage curtains by their two sizes: long and short. The long curtains - used for a full-length blackout sat on the left, and the short curtains - used for covering the tops of flats or other pieces scenery, on the right.

The curtain bunched together in my hands. 'Try not to let them catch on the sides', John called out from below. I looked down to find the curtain in my hand scraping the edges of the trapdoor as I helped it along. I quickly pulled it back towards me. I must have looked up at this point with an air of helplessness because Graham started to gesture to me an action. He cupped his arms together and told me that by doing this, I would prevent the curtains from catching on the edges of the trapdoor. 'We need to preserve them as much as possible... that way they don't get dusty either' he added. Graham's gesture was a way of showing me how to manoeuvre the material through an environment that could possibly damage it. The rough edges of the trapdoor were likely to pull threads from the curtains (my hands were a sign that this was true, ever so slightly splintered and scratched in places) and so I mimicked this pose shown by Graham, by cupping my arms around the curtain. This did prevent the curtain from catching on the edges of the

trapdoor yet the curtain was now static unless the set builders above pulled it through my arms. ‘Yes, that’s it, but keep it moving’ said Graham. Helen walked over from the pile of curtains, thought for a moment and then developed Graham’s cupping action by gesturing another. ‘Now try this’ she said as she started to spin her forearms, clockwise, around each other slowly. I added this motion, trying to find a rhythm. Negotiating where the sides of the trapdoor were so as not to knock my elbows in the process. Slowly at first, but eventually creating a fleshy mechanical loop that acted as a channel for the curtain to run through. The curtain started to escalate it into Helen, Graham and Rob’s hands.

Whilst on the outside this activity, recorded in my fieldbook notes, could be read as a simple mundane moment in the Settlement Players’ everyday, it provides a fascinating insight into the Players’ particular ways of working *with* the Settlement. The moments when John showed me how to jump down into the trapdoor with ease to Graham and Helen guiding my movements therein, are examples of the Players’ ‘local knowledges’ of how to work with this specific building (Brown, 2008: 361). These knowledges have been learnt and developed overtime by their ongoing embodied engagements with the Settlement building, through what Jacobs and Merriman would suggest as ‘being-in architecture’ (2001: 213). As architect and theorist Juhani Pallasmaa notes in his important book *Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (2012) we do not only experience architecture through our eyes, ‘a series of retinal images’ (2012: 67) but with our bodies too. Through ongoing encounters and confrontations, ‘we remember through our bodies as much as through our nervous system and brain’ (2012: 49). The ongoing engagement by the Players’ with the trapdoor has meant that over time they have developed choreographed movements *with* the building in order to store and retrieve their stage curtains.



However, these learned ways of working with the building are challenged when alterations are made to the Settlement space. Interestingly, due to the multi-purpose nature of the Settlement, these changes are often out of the Players' hands. In later conversations with John and Rob, they explained to me how they used to access the curtains via a different part of the Settlement:

Before we had the backstage extension built you could get to this section [under the stage] from under the stairs opposite what is now the toilet. The steps were bolted in place but had wheels on and could be moved away when unbolted. You could then wheel the trolley out into the dressing room and have good access to the curtains. When the extension was built the stairs were trapped in by the builders, who did not appreciate that the steps could be removed. Rob then cut a hole in the stage floor to make a trap-door for us to access this area which is what we now use.

Interestingly, as discovered earlier in this chapter, the extension was built for the Players as a result of the lack of storage space that was afforded to them. In the process of constructing the extension the builders cut off access to the storage space under the stage. This in turn meant that the Players' had to re-learn how to work with this space. Interestingly, the Players' also had to physically intervene in the fabric of the building so that they could continue to use this storage space as they had planned. There was no how-to-manual informing the Players, they had to use their intuition and knowledge of the building to do this. This particular mundane moment of retrieving curtains from underneath the stage illuminated to the capacity of the Settlement building in shaping and influencing their work – in Patchett's words, to 'guide the[ir] craft performance in certain directions' (2015: 15).

## Theatre-Making and Relationships with a Co-Authored Place: Concluding Thoughts:

In this chapter I have borrowed from Jacobs and Merriman and considered the Players as *other* ‘architectural practitioners’, contributing to the ongoing building work of the Settlement building (2011: 211). In doing so I have also considered that theatre spaces are experienced and practiced by more than the actors performing on stage and audience members in the auditorium.<sup>53</sup> In the first two sections of this chapter I have illuminated specifically to the ways in which backstage workers have the capacity to transform spaces through the everyday processes and materials of their craft. Firstly they intervene into the fabric of the building to claim spaces for themselves. Secondly through their materials, tools and ‘improvisational processes’, they re-programme, albeit temporarily, the buildings planned activities (Bain, 2010: 65). In the last section I have explored the reciprocal relationship between the building and the Players’, and how amateur theatre-making, as a craft practice, is situated and affected by the space in which it is happening. Through these three approaches I return back to Patchett’s idea of a ‘craft story’, where she illustrated how craft is always a co-authored process that holds a ‘synergy, or relational interconnectedness’ between practitioner, tool and material (2015: 15), and suggest that buildings (in both space and time) can also be understood as co-authors of amateur theatre-makers’ craft stories. Just as an amateur theatre-makers as craftspeople must work *with* both the affordances of their tools and the energies of their materials, they must also work *with* the buildings in which they make.

In the chapter that follows, Chapter Five, I move out of the Settlement building and into the homes of two Settlement Players. Here I shall explore what it means when amateur theatre-making spills out of the theatre building and into the home.

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<sup>53</sup>However, actors and audience members could also be considered important ‘architectural practitioners’ of theatre buildings.

## 5

### Amateur Spaces of Creativity:

#### Exploring the (Home) Studio of the Amateur Theatre-Maker

How do you work? How many hours? Locale? Lighting? Room with a view? At home? Coordinates, please. Clean and tidy? Sitting? Standing? Coffee cups? Is that tea? Minimalist? Scattered? What's your equation? Type A plus A plus A? A-B? Creatively sprawled? In a rush? Feel like you need to tidy up—maybe you shouldn't. Map it out [...] Turn your camera on your workspace. Please, don't stage it. Don't clean it (a messy desk does not equal a messy mind). Don't make something you or your work is not [...] To an extent, our work space, work schedule, surroundings and routine reflect the work we produce. (*From Your Desks*, Donnelly, 2009)

*From Your Desks*, a project started in 2009 by writer and photographer Kate Donnelly, is an online collaborative platform that invites creative practitioners from painters, ceramicists, designers, cartoonists, illustrators, filmmakers, writers and photographers to submit photographs of their workspaces.<sup>54</sup> Along with accompanying text from the artist as well as small interviews conducted by Donnelly, these intimate portraits show where creativity happens, with many of the images displaying less conventional and often temporal workspaces. Photographs capture school desks, kitchen tables and collapsible drawing tables in the corners of living rooms, scattered with the tools and materials of their practice—acrylic paint mixed on sheets of newspaper, piles of sketch books propping up plant pots, open sketch books next to open laptops and cutting mats scattered with pens and toast crumbs. Alongside these, other personal items, such as books, gifts, illustrated postcards, limbless mannequins and plastic dinosaurs, act as reminders of places and people that inspire their practice. As a long-time follower of Donnelly's project,

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<sup>54</sup> See: [www.fromyourdesks.com](http://www.fromyourdesks.com) (accessed 3/4/14)

these less conventional and often temporary studio spaces ignited my fascination with the lesser-appreciated realms of the creative pursuit. They highlight and offer insights into a potential reciprocity between the creative and domestic realms. This relationship between creativity and home is increasingly evident in the twenty-first century, where visual platforms such as Instagram and YouTube have allowed the personal sharing of creative spaces.<sup>55</sup> ‘Studio vlogs’ and ‘a day in the life of...’ videos of YouTube, where an artist may capture their creative practice and space, have assisted in unveiling these less conventional spaces further. Inspired by Donnelly, I focus here on the creative workspaces of amateur theatre-makers.

In this chapter, I shall move focus away from the spaces of creativity found in the Settlement building, where my apprenticeship as an amateur set builder took place. As I worked with the Players, I discovered that the domestic spaces of the amateur theatre-makers’ homes also served as spaces of amateur creativity. Often they seemed more elusive spaces, crafted out of necessity in amongst the business of everyday life. As I discussed in the previous chapter, space and time are significant factors determining where and when the Settlement Players can work on a production. The lack of dedicated space, allotted time or suitable equipment (such as a sewing machine) to work with at the Settlement means that a lot of production work must be done outside of the Settlement building. In this chapter I shall explore the homes of two amateur theatre-makers: John, a set builder, set designer and technician; and Jeni, a costumier. I focus here on the home and the creative spaces that lay within. Specifically, I explore where John designs sets and where Jeni makes and alters costumes. Drawing on interviews, photographs and research visits (recorded in my fieldbook), conducted during my time spent as a set builder and researching with the Settlement Players, I shall uncover the very personal

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<sup>55</sup> A recent hashtag on Instagram - ‘marchmeetthemaker’ has enabled creative practitioners (including illustrators, ceramicists, jewellery makers, knitters and embroiderers) to take part in a global sharing of personal creative processes and spaces. Throughout the month of March, the hashtag was accompanied by daily themes which directed participants towards post ideas. These themes included: ‘work clothes’, ‘sketchbook’, ‘inspiration’, ‘raw materials’, ‘tools’, ‘work in progress’, ‘where’ (the towns and cities in which they make), ‘how it is made’ (their working processes), ‘photography’ (how they photograph what they’ve made for social media) and ‘workspace’.

spaces in which amateur theatre-makers contribute to the making of theatre outside of the theatre building.

There have been several studies of the domestic and studio spaces of creative production, but the homes of amateur theatre-makers have yet to be addressed. However, whilst contributing to current cultural geographical ideas emerging within the growing field of work on creativity, Hawkins has recently explored the ‘trend for the movement of creative production and consumption beyond specialised spaces’ such as the studio (2017: 71). In response, this chapter considers the creative workspaces of amateur theatre-makers, illuminating the social and material relationships therein to discover what it means when the home becomes a workspace, or a ‘studio’.

I shall begin by exploring current work on the artist’s studio as a way of conceptualising the amateur theatre-makers’ workspace, before introducing the work of geographer Alison Bain (2004, 2007). Bain’s research into both female and male professional artistic practice found that the artist’s studio is a situated space for the construction and maintenance of artistic identity. Her analysis illuminates the challenges that are faced when a conventional studio space is not easily obtained. She did this through extensive interviews with artists. In doing so, Bain found that the temporality of a studio within the home is often challenging to an artist’s self-perceived identity, authenticity and commitment to the wider art world. For these artists, she noted that they must fashion a creative space in amongst possible everyday inconveniences, notably, having to locate a workspace within a domestic environment. As a result she identified that some artists must ‘make do with working in pieces of space’ (2004: 183). When I began my research visits, I assumed that Bain’s idea of ‘making do’ with a domestic space rather than a specialist creative workplace was equally applicable to amateur costume-makers and set designers. However, as I shall make clear in this chapter, their creative doings and identities as amateur theatre-makers are not governed by the spaces in which they work. Rather, it is the creative activities that govern and define their

domestic spaces, and it is through these spaces that their creative identities are constantly formed and performed. Finally, I explore the home as a repository of these creative doings, where leftovers and experimentations of Jeni's creative practices decorate the spaces within.

By addressing the domestic spaces of creativity used by amateur theatre-makers, I hope to contribute to wider debates in cultural geography where both creative production and consumption are taking place outside of specialised spaces. This work destabilises the conventional idea of the professional artists studio in the twenty-first century, but, as I shall demonstrate, it also has implications for how the creative activity of amateur theatre-makers might be understood. In her discussion of the 'post-studio' age, curator Caitlin Jones asks 'what happens when a studio in question is simply a laptop in an artist's kitchen or the local coffee shop?' (2010: 117). In this chapter I will follow Jones by asking what happens when a design studio is simply a clipboard on a floral-patterned sofa or a small patch of empty desk in amongst academic papers.

### **Complicating Ideas of the Conventional Studio**

In 'Art Studio' (2011), geographer Stephen Daniels considers the art studio as a pivotal space in artistic production. Whilst examining the complexities of the studio, Daniels points out that the studio outside of the creative capital is an unexplored territory, a territory that geography as a discipline is well positioned to survey. He suggests that

[M]icro-geographies, of rooms and the spaces within rooms, and their role in macro-geographies...could clearly be extended to studio spaces, particularly with attention to their articulation of craft skills, technologies and materials (2011: 137).

He proposes that by researching the art studio, geographers can ‘prompt’ research on other spaces of production, whilst suggesting examples of a photographic studio and a map drawing office. So why not the *studio* of the amateur theatre-maker? Before exploring the studio of the amateur theatre-maker, it is perhaps important to first understand the conventional studio space in a hope to challenge it further.

Socially and culturally, the contemporary studio of the creative practitioner has remained a privileged site of scholarly investigation, where scholars go to seek out the materialities and sociabilities of creative practice (Bain, 2004, 2007; Daniels, 2011; Sjöholm, 2012, 2013). The idea of the artist's studio brings with it many conventional characterisations, including what it should look like, where it should be situated and how it should function. These conventions are often replayed time again and have become part of the popular imagination, in turn creating an almost fetishised idea of where creativity takes place.

In his widely influential essay ‘The Function of the Studio’ (1979), conceptual artist Daniel Buren - whilst critiquing and examining the relationship and tensions between art and its place of production - highlights the conventions of what he sees as the archetypal studio(s).<sup>56</sup> He introduces the essay by asking the reader ‘what is the function of the studio?’ Immediately answering this question by positing three suggestions:

- i. It is the place where work originates.
- ii. It is generally a private place, an ivory tower perhaps.
- iii. It is a stationary place where portable objects are produced (1979: 51)

After this, he presents the reader with another question, ‘what does it look like, physically, architecturally?’ (1979: 51). Again Buren answers, but this time he outlines two very specific and conventional studio types. The first being a

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<sup>56</sup> Buren, himself, is very skeptical, almost damning, about the idealized and romantic notion of the studio and its function.

traditional European form, characterised by high ceilings (in brackets, a ‘minimum of 4 meters’), natural lighting by north facing windows and sometimes a balcony (1979: 52). The second being the American type, usually a warehouse or loft space that has been reclaimed for the purpose of artistic production, with an abundance of wall and floor space is usually lit by electricity both day and night. Buren’s essay presents the studio as a unique and almost magical, untouchable space of creative production, as he posits ‘the studio is not just any hideaway, any room’ (1979: 52).

After reading Buren I questioned whether in theatre practice, studios of artistic production had been examined in much the same way. Darwin Reid Payne’s book *Theory and Craft of the Scenographic Model* (1985) does just this in a section dedicated to set conventions of the ‘The Scenographer’s Work Space’. Much like Buren, Payne sets out a list of what he sees as the conventional work patterns and workspaces of a scenographer. He refers to these workspaces as ‘studios’, asserting that these studios ‘could be expected to have certain features in common’ (1985: 5). In nine points, Payne sets out the *needs* that are most certainly found and expressed through the majority of scenographers’ workspaces:

1. A place to think, make rough sketches, confer with others concerned with the production.
2. A place to make finishes sketches; watercolour, pastel, pen and ink, etc. (with a water supply near this area if possible).
3. A place to create and experiment with models and to be able to work with three-dimensional materials.
4. A place to make large-sheet working drawings (a drafting table)
5. Storage areas for reference books (shelving); file clippings, catalogues, etc. (file cabinets); working drawings (flat files); sketches and set drawings (flat files or racks); drawing materials, drafting supplies, model materials (shelving, chests); finished models (shelving); slides and projection (slide files).



6. Display areas for current ideas, notes, schedules, etc, near working areas (bulletin boards).

7. A projection screen on which to show slides and a permanent setup for projector.

8. An all-purpose worktable on which to lay out work in progress, draw up full-scale details, etc.

(All the areas should have general lighting from the studio's overall illumination, but should also have specifically directed light sources in each individual area.)

9. And, although not an absolute necessity, provision for refreshment - an area for coffee-making, etc. - and marginal entertainment - phonograph, radio. A scenographers spends a great deal of time in his studio, although it is a working place, it should be a comfortable as he can make it (1985: 6).

Payne accompanies this list of conventional *needs* with diagrams showing cross sections of the typical scenographers' workspace, along with more lists of suggested contents including worktables, drafting tables, desk lamps, shelf storage, filing cabinets, projection screens, bulletin boards, architectural drafting cabinets, bookshelves and pegboards adorned with tools. The way in which these lists are arranged around Payne's diagrams help to signify specialised workspaces conducive to a certain type of work - whether that be drawing, model making, thinking, archiving or painting. Furthermore, Payne stresses the need to 'keep areas which have different working requirements separate' (1985: 7).

Both Buren and Payne are similar in acknowledging the creative practitioners' studio as a fixed, stationary and physically structural form. They both describe a walled chamber of creativity, functioning as a specialised and separate space for the production of art, and only that. Although not identical in appearance, the conventions that are laid out signals them as spaces where creative production takes places - this where paintings are painted, where this is where sculptures are sculpted, this is where theatrical sets are designed. In turn, these specialised spaces

of creativity, ‘conditioned by certain traditions of studio discourse and representation’, as geographer Jenny Sjöholm writes, can often become fetishised and can indeed serve as aspirational spaces for creative practitioners (2012: 21). Often, these spaces are thought of as an essential requirement and a marker of success, dedication and commitment to their practice

In the twenty-first century, however, there is a need to destabilise and complicate these conventional understandings of the archetypal studio (and indeed the replaying of them) in order to think about creativity as a more fluid process that is not confined by the conventions of specialised spaces. If the studio is somewhere that ‘should be primarily approached as a workspace’, as Sjöholm would suggest, then it shouldn’t matter where it is, what it looks like, how temporary it is, or, in the case of this chapter, if it belongs to the amateur (2013: 5).

Recently, commentaries on the geographies of creativity have highlighted the ways in which specialised spaces continue to be challenged. In *Creativity* (2017), Hawkins considers the erosion of specialist spaces and practices of creative production. She suggests how this erosion has come as a result of the ‘evolving traits in creative practices’ and digital spaces (2017: 71). One example of this can be explained through the current day accessibility of digital software and technologies. As a result of this, Hawkins notes, a bedroom can become a recording studio where music can be produced and consumed outside of the music industry. In another example, Hawkins paints the picture of a woman running her own handmade jewellery business from a computer in her home. It is late at night and in between attending to her children, she answers customer emails, packages up orders, and photographs the jewellery she has just made, ready to be uploaded to her online shop. Meanwhile on Instagram, she shares photographs with her followers of her spaces of making around the home. In both of these examples, Hawkins highlights the negotiation of creativity in the home where space is made for creative production outside of specialised and separate spaces of production – in these cases the recording studio or the workshop.

What these examples also place emphasis on are spaces of creative economic production *for* consumption, whilst illuminating the work of entrepreneurial ‘pro-amateurs’. I would argue that amateur spaces of creativity in the home, which exist *outside* of the creative economy, are just as important to look at through this lens. And if taken seriously, as I will hopefully highlight in this chapter, an exploration of amateur spaces of creativity can also challenge ideas around specialised spaces and conventional understandings of creativity. Additionally, by investigating in this way, it further proposes an interesting way of understanding the creative activity of amateur theatre-makers.

Before moving onto empirical accounts of Johns and Jeni’s home studios, in the following section, I explore, more, the negotiations that are had between domestic spaces and creative production. I shall do this by first introducing how I came to think about the amateur theatre-makers’ home as a space of creative production by narrating my first visit to Pat and John’s house. I will then discuss Bain’s research into the home studios of professional artists in more detail, and how this work first helped me think about what I had witnessed at John and Pat’s house.

### **Crafting a Studio in the Home: ‘Making Do’ with Temporal Workspaces**

My attention was first drawn to the home and its potential spaces of creativity after my very first visit to John and Pat’s house. Early on in the project, Pat invited me around to their house for lunch and to have a look through John’s set designs (this meeting was detailed more in Chapter Three). Although the purpose of my visit was to look through John’s set designs, whilst there I could not help but notice clues to their amateur dramatic identities which scattered around their domestic space. It was at this point that I realised that the creative practices of the amateur theatre-maker rarely stays put in the theatre building (or the space of performance), but

rather, as Hawkins writes, they ‘profuse the home with materials, ideas, resources and inspiration’ (2017: 74; see also Gray, 2017).<sup>57</sup>



February, 2014. In their open plan kitchen/dining room, washed bottles were ready to be taken to the Settlement to be used as props.<sup>58</sup> They told me that Margaret, the props lady, is always on the lookout for specific drinks bottles and so whenever they have a type that she may not have they’ll always make sure to keep them. On the kitchen counter a couple of pieces of the Settlement Players’ ‘Theatre Club’ admin were piled up. Meanwhile, a well loved Samuels French’s *The Guide* - listing the cast and story details of around 2000 titles for amateur theatre companies to perform - laid open on the kitchen table. Its broken spine and dog eared pages signalled its ongoing use. Pat explained to me that she was choosing a play to direct. ‘It can be

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<sup>57</sup> Hawkins’ quote here is taken from her analysis of my own work in her book *Creativity* (2017). In *Creativity*, I contributed a short piece of writing entitled ‘Domestic Spaces of Creativity: The Amateur Dramatist’ which detailed my first encounter with John and Pat’s house and my subsequent thoughts around domestic spaces of creativity (specifically that of the amateur theatre-maker). However, many of these ideas have been developed since I first wrote it in 2014.

<sup>58</sup> Fieldbook notes, 14/2/14.

hard sometimes’ she said ‘a lot of these plays call for big casts and specific amounts of female and male characters of various ages, but in amateur theatre you can’t guarantee that you’ll get that cast’.

As the kettle boiled, I took a seat at the kitchen table and looked at the bookshelf next to me. Made up of varying sized compartments, one half of the bookshelf reached the ceiling, whilst the other half was shorter, making space for photographs to adorn the wall above. Framed photographs of family holidays with their daughter, theme park ride souvenirs and a collage made up of Stevenage F.C. season tickets (John and his daughter watch them most Saturdays), all hovered above *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* and actor, Kenneth Brannagh’s *Beginning*. A book on the history of London sat in another compartment, Pat told me that their daughter bought it for them and that she likes to look at it and remember her childhood. She took a photo album off the bookshelf and showed me pictures of her performing on stage, ‘that was a while a go now’ she added, ‘I don’t perform anymore. I started to get the fear of not being able to remember lines and that was it’. John brought down some of his folders, filled so with set designs, sketches and notes for us to look at, but not before place mats were laid out and sandwiches were eaten.

When first thinking about the potential porosity between the domestic and creative spaces (which was inspired by my visit to John and Pat’s house), I looked to Bain’s work in a hope to conceptualise what I had observed. Bain has developed significant empirical research in recent years that has paid particular attention to the role of space in artistic production. In turn, her work has also highlighted the intricacies of personal experience that relate to this kind of space. Specifically I was drawn to two pieces of her work whereby the home was a central space of investigation. In both ‘Female artistic identity in place: the studio’ (2004) and ‘Claiming and Controlling Space: Combining heterosexual fatherhood with artistic

practice' (2007), Bain explores the negotiations and challenges that take place when a conventional studio space (much like the ones described by Buren) cannot be obtained or indeed maintained because of temporal requirements of their everyday.<sup>59</sup> Bain's research into the spatial practices of both female and male professional artists details how many artists with families cannot afford, in both time and money, a space of their own to make. She highlights the way that artists in these positions must, out of necessity, make do with creating temporary workspaces in their homes.

In her study of female artists, Bain exposes the process of 'making do with leftover space' (2004: 183). Whilst some of the female artists that she interviewed were able to create their own separate and private spaces away from the main body of the house - in converted garages, renovated basements and shed like structures in the garden - many had to 'make do' with creating studio spaces within the home itself. In these cases, Bain detailed how artists worked in spaces 'that accommodate[d] different kinds of activities quite unrelated to the production of art', for example using a dining room or kitchen table as a makeshift painting surface (2004: 188). Here, the domestic and creative realms were in a constant porous state - where the cooking or burning of food in the kitchen was allowed to mix with the chemical smells of art materials. Bain describes how the artists who had to 'make do' felt that the limited spatial separation from the interruptions of everyday life - what she refers to as the 'demands of domesticity' - compromised their practice and what they saw as their commitment to the wider art world (2004: 186). She furthers this point in her study of male artists, who she found struggled with the 'temporal requirements of fatherhood that encroach on their role as artists' (2007; 258). Again, some of the artists that she interviewed were able to set up specialised studios in the home that gave them complete spatial reign (converted garages, sheds and basements, to whole floors of houses and even houses architecturally designed to

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<sup>59</sup> Interestingly, Bain notes that many of the artists in her study aspired to have studios that looked and functioned in the same way as the ones described by Buren. She writes: 'elements of both of [Buren's] studio models can be detected [...] in many of the studios that contemporary visual artists have either sought, or aspired, to create for themselves' (2004: 174).

suit artistic needs). However, many had to ‘make do’ with creating temporary studio spaces in rooms not intended for artistic practice. Bain details how the artists that had to ‘make do’, set about transforming their master and second bedrooms into environments conducive to artistic practice through the performance of rituals. These rituals, Bain describes, were used to ‘give [the space] life and meaning’, and included such things as locking the door, playing music and decorating the walls, albeit temporarily, with inspirational pictures (2007: 255). Without permanent and formal workspaces, Bain notes how these artists started to doubt their artistic identities.

In both studies, Bain asserts the studio as a hard won resource that provides a sense of a validated and reinforced artistic status. What Bain’s work has emphasised is that the studio is not only a space where works of art are made, but it is also as a situated space for the construction and maintenance of artistic identities. And so, if a creative practitioner does not have a permanent conventional studio space then often their perception of their own creative identities are negated. As Sjöholm remarks in her own study of the artist’s studio:

To have a studio is to communicate your serious commitment to yourself and to a wider art world... the construction of an artistic identity is thus highly placed (2010: 123).

If they must ‘make do with working in ‘pieces of space’ as Bain suggests – whether that be at their kitchen table, in their bedroom or even at a café or in a library - then their self-perceived artistic identity, authenticity and commitment to their practice is challenged (2004: 183). As I will show in this chapter, John and Jeni’s studios in the home share many characteristics with the professional artists in Bain’s study who had to make-do – sharing their creative space with the demands of domesticity. Interestingly, however, what I came to realise, after spending time with John and Jeni, is that the act of ‘making do’ and crafting a temporary studio within

the home is often a choice and allows them to perform their identities as amateur theatre-makers.

### **Working *with* a Temporary Studio:**

#### **John's Studio (The Front Room)<sup>60</sup>**

The first amateur theatre-makers' studio that I examine in this chapter belongs to John. John and Pat's home was somewhere I was very much present throughout my research. During the lead up to the production of *My Own Show*,<sup>61</sup> Pat, who was directing the play, would schedule rehearsals at the Settlement on a Sunday afternoon, usually at around three or four o'clock. I was invited to all of the rehearsals and although my investigative focus was not on the performance itself, rehearsals were a way for me to meet other Players and experience the 'other' workings of producing a play at the Settlement. Afternoon rehearsals with Pat meant that after a morning of set building John, which finished at one o'clock, Pat and John would kindly invite me around to their house for lunch inbetween. Their house is within walking distance of the Settlement building and so after a morning of set building, John and I would check that everything was locked up at the Settlement (as well as making sure that the heating was turned on so that the Kincaid Hall would be warm for rehearsals) before walking back to their house for a sandwich or cooked lunch. I was very privileged, in these moments, to catch glimpses of their everyday lives in their home - visits from family members, domestic chores - as Pink writes in her book *Home Truths* (2004):

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<sup>60</sup>This section is taken from my fieldbook notes taken on 11/4/15. However, it is also made up of subsequent conversations and interviews from other dates - these will all be signalled by new footnotes. The photographs taken of John's front room were all taken on the 11/4/15.

<sup>61</sup> Set building and rehearsals for *My Own Show* ran, weekly, throughout January and February 2015. *My Own Show* was performed at the Settlement over three nights - 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> February 2015.



[B]y simply stepping into the intimate context of a domestic world I became involved in narratives, practices and sensory experience that were not usually available for public view (2004: 1).

Spending extended periods of time at their house also afforded me with the chance to experience the subtle negotiations of John and Pat's creative and domestic spaces. As already highlighted in Chapter 3, the materials of John and Pat's creative practice can often be found scattered around their home. However, John's studio in the home – the space where he designs and draws sets – is not so easily found.

I first witnessed John's studio in April 2015, after a one-act play night at the Settlement.<sup>62</sup> John and Pat had kindly invited me to stay at their house for the night to save my late night journey back to South London after the performance (and the after party), and my early morning journey back the next day for set building. The morning after the performance I woke up in their spare room to the sound of my phone alarm, closely followed by a knock at the bedroom door from Pat who, upon opening, handed me a cup of tea and told me that breakfast was downstairs when I was ready. After I showered and changed into my working clothes for a morning of set building, I made my way down to the kitchen/dining room for breakfast to the familiar sound of the kettle boiling.

As I walked down the stairs, I was greeted by a beam of early morning light that reached into the hallway from the room in front of me. I had walked past this room every Sunday afternoon whilst visiting Pat and John's house for lunch yet I had never really taken notice of it before. Our lunches usually took on an almost ritualistic routine. John and I would take our shoes off by the door to the sound of the kettle being switched on in the kitchen. The comforting sound of the kettle

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<sup>62</sup> The one-act play night took place on the 11<sup>th</sup> April 2015. It comprised of Cliff Francis' production of *After Midnight, Before Dawn*, which was the Settlement Players' festival play. In addition to this, Helen Faulkner made her directorial debut by staging two short plays by Jean McConnell - *Doggies* and *Cupboard Love*.

signalled a respite from a cold hall, manual labour and plenty of splinters.<sup>63</sup> We would shout ‘hello’ to Pat and after a quick change out of our building clothes, we’d make our way straight through to the kitchen-dining room (past this room) to eat sandwiches and discuss the progress of the morning’s build and how our weeks had been. That morning, out of the rhythm of the Sunday lunchtime ritual, my attention was diverted by the room with the light - a part of John and Pat’s domestic world that was unknown to me. At breakfast, I mentioned the sunlight that seemed to flood their house in the morning, which prompted an invitation to see the room with the light. Such a seemingly passing comment over breakfast ended up revealing an important space of John’s theatre-making - his front room.



Through the door, a dark wooden framed sofa lined the wall in front of me. Next to that was a matching chair with the same brown floral patterned fabric. On the opposite wall, a decorative wooden framed fireplace mirrored them both. The room’s contents - a dusty pink swivel lamp with a gold stand, a stereo, a portable

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<sup>63</sup> ‘Sound’, Pink writes, ‘whether intentionally created or not, is inescapably part of the home’ (2004: 69).

radio, a dark floral footrest, a small palm plant in a woven basket, photographs of family members, an elephant ornament, a horse ornament, ceramic flowers and red candles in silver candlestick holders adorned with pine cones. The warm yellow walls were punctuated with framed prints and pictures and a pair of speakers. Polished, neat, and tidy, as you would expect a traditional front or 'best' room to look, it was a conventional scene of domesticity. John explained to me that this room was part of the original building and that used to be the main living of the house. John and Pat extended their house from the back of the kitchen/dining room towards the back garden when Pat's elderly father to come and live with them. However, when he died, they relocated the main living room to the back of the house and into the new part of the building. John explained that this room was now referred to as the 'music room', and that it was also the room in which he likes to design sets for the Settlement Players' productions.

John's revelation of his creative space intrigued me. On appearance alone the music room gave the impression of a completely domesticated space, devoid of any creative activity. There were no stage plans or set designs hanging on the wall, no shelves full of reference books and no drafting desk set up in the corner, scattered with working scenic models or instruments of design. Reid's conventions of what a scenographer's studio should look like had no place here. The lack of desk or drawing tools conducive to set designing was indeed made more apparent by the room's arrangement of domestic living. There were no lasting signs of his creative practice, however, when John talked me through the space, he began to reveal the elements of his rather elusive and temporal studio space.

John explained to me that because the centre of the room is open, uncluttered and spacious, it gives him a feeling that he can create something within it. He pointed to the music player, which was resting on the floor next to the French windows, as an item through which he can create a mood to work to. 'I can play music to suit my mood, but as I concentrate it becomes just a background ambience' he added. This

is also where the room got its name. He then pointed to the dusty pink and gold floor lamp in the corner of the room, at the side of the sofa and described how, at night, it gives him light to work from whilst leaving the rest of the room in a warm glow. When John talked me through his creative space, it seemed to me that it was the light was most important to him:

I feel that I use the room in a similar way to an artist as I am completing a technical drawing or a picture of the set. It is really important to be in an inspirational area with light.



John pointed out how the French doors, leading out onto the garden and paved patio, are a constant source of inspirational light, ‘especially when the sun shines and the room is flooded with it’ he gestured. That morning I was able to experience this light first hand. As the fresh, early morning winter sun moved around the room, reaching slowly through the patio doors, it created a playful assemblage of shadow and light on the carpet and walls. I could see how a flush of light could transform this otherwise commonplace scene and I immediately wanted to take a

photograph of it (but not before I asked John if it was okay to do so). I left John in the music room and fetched my camera from my rucksack, which was hung up in the adjoining hallway. Pink describes the privileged feeling of being allowed access in other people's homes and how they appear as 'almost exotic sensory spaces where others live strange lives' (2004: 1). That morning, I familiarised with Pink's sentiment as I darted back into the room, worried that John might just change his mind. As I took some photographs, directing my camera towards the French doors and the light that had caught my attention that morning, John talked more about the room's conventions and how they make it conducive to his creative work:

You see it's the light that I love about this room. It makes me want to do creative work. It's far enough away from the kitchen and living room that I can play music as loud as I want and Pat won't mind... I find it easy to put my imagination to work here.



What was clear from John's brief tour of his studio that morning is that permanence and separateness are definitively *not* characteristics of his creative

workspace within the home. His studio rather appeared in his description of it. Sound (music) and light (both natural from the windows and artificial from the lamp) are both integral components of John's studio and help to create, what he refers to himself as, a certain 'ambience' that he likes to work with. And yet, both of these qualities are very much temporary. Music can be turned off, whilst natural light moves and catches the house in different ways, at changing moments of the day, month and year.

### **A Clipboard as a Drafting Table**

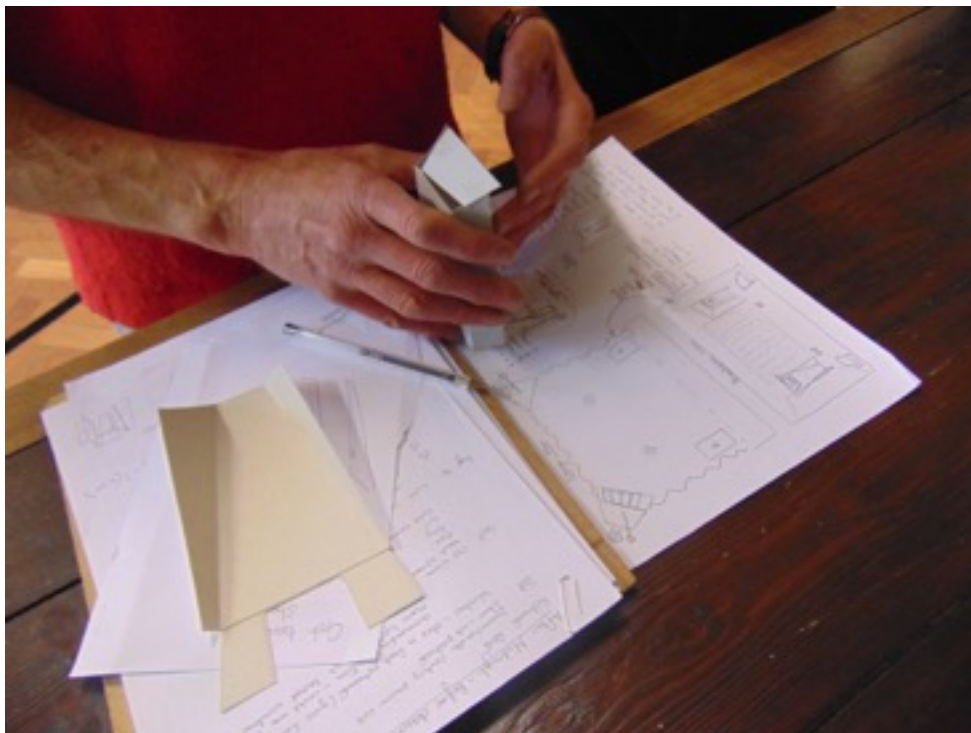
Whilst John talked me through the space that he recognises as his studio, what was perhaps most obvious was the lack of a desk or drafting table, on which to draw his set designs. When later describing the processes involved in his practice, John revealed the temporary nature of his drafting desk, and how he likes to draw on A4 sheets on paper, attached to a clipboard. 'The first stage of the set design is to produce a rough diagram or picture of a layout which I then use to create the formal design', John explained, continuing that:

I will sit down with a blank sheet of paper and create a rough plan starting with all the doors, windows, entrances and exits. This will go through revisions until I have something I am happy to formally draw up to scale. The rough diagrams may evolve over a week with tweaks until all ideas and problems have been reworked to a satisfactory conclusion. Typically this is done on an A4 sheet/s of paper attached to a clipboard and may be done in the music room or in other areas of the house.

Although the 'music room' is the room that John prefers to conduct his creative work in, as John detailed, his clipboard becomes a device that allows him to transform any room in the house into a studio. Whether he is sitting on the sofa in the music room, or at the kitchen table, John's portable desk enables him the

freedom to draw outside of the limits and constraints of spatial formality, depending on where in the house he feels would benefit his creativity in the moment. In this way, the clipboard posits a story of John and his processes, highlighting what Sjöholm suggests as the ‘intimate reciprocal relationship between [his] creation of art and the production of [his] workspace’ (2013: 24).

Interestingly, John’s humble, light-wooden clipboard with metal spring clasp can also be seen at almost every Sunday morning set building session. For me it became synonymous with John - an integral part of his identity and a material clue to his role within the Players. It commanded attention when in John’s hands as he briefed us set builders on the ‘jobs for the day’; invoked curiosity when passed around the set builders and provided reference for the build when propped up against the stage. The clipboard’s tattered edges and marked surface functioned, not only as a desk on which to design sets on in the home, but also as a vehicle to transport his plans to and from the Settlement.



John and Pat's home facilitated a constant exchange of people and materials to and from the Settlement. Rehearsals and read throughs happened in the living room when the Settlement was otherwise booked, whilst chairs and other furniture appeared and disappeared weekly as pieces were borrowed, returned and retrieved. At one point a bed sheet was washed and aired to remove creases - ready to be tried out onstage as a projection screen. The clipboard added to this list. What I found particularly interesting about the choice of John's desk lay in its materiality. The capability of the clipboard's components - namely its metal spring clip - offer temporariness. Unlike a sketchbook, which holds a relative permanence and structure within its bound pages, the clipboard - with its metal spring clip - allows the clipping and unclipping on pieces of paper. Brought back from the Settlement, in John's backpack, his sketches would sometimes return from the build with added notes and ideas from set builders and directors. These notes scattered the pages of John's sketches and measurements - the pen marks from the other members of the Players intervening with John's pencilled lines, hinted to a wider amateur dramatics community and his place within it. Just as Daniels suggests that the artists' studio is an integral part of the wider art world, here through the set builders' notes, John's home studio appeared as an integral part of a wider world of amateur dramatics, connected to the Settlement through ideas, creative visions of the other Players (2011).

As an amateur theatre-maker, economically, John cannot afford to seek out a separate and specialised studio space for his set designing and other creative work, however John's temporary studio is a choice. Interestingly, during subsequent conversations with John about his creative spaces, John mentioned how he has experienced another kind of 'working' within his home. He explained how a couple of years ago, he conducted paid bookkeeping work for a small training company:

In my last job I worked from home... we converted the third bedroom into a workspace with a computer set-up. Within reason I could work when I liked



and sometimes I would take time off during the day and then work in the evening. However, I still felt that when I closed the workspace door, I left the office and the job behind me.

Interestingly, John used a system of control and organisation to compartmentalise his paid bookkeeping work from his domestic space, similar to the male artists in Bain's study who, she notes, felt the need to put both mental and physical barriers between their home and their artistic 'work' environment (2007). The third bedroom is still equipped like an office with a large desk, overhead storage, a computer and ample space to design and make. A room that he could easily organise to accommodate his artistic needs; that he could cut off from the rest of the house and call his own, but chooses not to. Unlike his paid bookkeeping work, his creative work is not controlled and compartmentalised to a separate or designated room in the house, instead his creative work is allowed to happen within throughout the house, temporarily transforming his living room and kitchen dining room into his studio.

As Bain suggests, artistic practice within the home is not a singular experience (2007). Studios are particular to practitioners and their individual spaces. In the next section I move on to explore Jeni's home studio where she conducts her costume making and alterations for the Players. Her studio space is different to John's in that it is not so easily packed away. Instead her tools and materials are allowed to profuse her home, even permeating her space of paid work.

### **'Living with the Drama':**

#### **Jeni's Studio**

I met Jeni at a performance of William Shakespeare's, *The Taming of the Shrew* at the Settlement in November 2014.<sup>64</sup> Pat and John introduced me to Jeni at the bar

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<sup>64</sup>The Taming of the Shrew ran for three nights at the Settlement 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> November 2014. I attended on the 13<sup>th</sup>.

before the play began, and mentioned that I was interested in backstage work. Jeni introduced herself as the costume designer with the Settlement Players and invited me to talk to her about amateur dramatics. After an email exchange, I went to meet her at The London School of Tropical Medicine where she is a full time lecturer.<sup>65</sup> In a meeting room we sat and talked about *The Taming of the Shrew* performance from a couple of weeks before, and how ‘nine lines of script is all that we had for one of the costume changes and that involved corsets and lace’. Jeni told me how she joined the Players in 2011 and started working on the wardrobe during her second production, which was Robert Bolt’s *A Man for All Seasons*. She talked me through the basic demands of being a costumier for an amateur dramatics company. ‘The director will usually have a clear vision’, she explained:

So it’s about taking this and then seeing what’s available [in the costume cupboard or through other amateur companies who loan out their costumes], if its not available, how much will it cost to get it, and then seeing if the actors can actually act in things...the actors need to be comfortable.

She told me how she always tries to work out how much a costume will cost against the seats that will be sold on the night, and how sometimes when the costume alterations are too big, Pat will post requests on notice boards at the Settlement to recruit sewers. We started to talk more about the material and technical dimensions of her creative process and she detailed the ways in which she asserts her own creative input - for example differentiating characters’ personalities through colour choices. As we spoke about lace, corsets and the tricky alteration of nineteenth century military uniforms, I couldn’t help but notice how Jeni’s work setting dramatically contrasted the place where we had met the previous week. In much the same way, the university’s polished corridors, clinically sparse classrooms and the white meeting room, where we talked, couldn’t feel further away from what I assumed to be Jeni’s spaces of amateur theatre-making – the dusty, moth ridden

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<sup>65</sup> I met with Jeni on the 26<sup>th</sup> November 2014 at the London School of Tropical Medicine. The subsequent writing is made up of fieldnotes taken on the same day.

Aladdin's cave of fur coats, beaded Flapper dresses and costume pearl necklaces. Yet, as we started to talk more about the material and technical dimensions of her creative process, it became clear that she does most of the costume work at home. Jeni explained that because of the lack of suitable space or equipment (notably a sewing machine) to work with at the Settlement, along with the coldness of the attic space, she tends to do a lot of the adjustments and creative elements at her house:

I would say that there is definite overlap between the 'artistic space' of the theatre and my domestic space.<sup>66</sup>

After our meeting, Jeni and I stayed in touch over email and would regularly see each other at the Settlement. Jeni would often visit on a Sunday to source costumes from the wardrobe, and measure up the set builders who were also performing in a production. Costumes would often be hung around the hall whilst set builders dropped their tools and tried on hats and jackets over their work clothes, before returning back to their painting, drilling, sawing duties on stage. From my first meeting with Jeni, our conversations would frequently revisit the subject of the potential studio of the amateur theatre-maker at home.<sup>67</sup> It was a subject that Jeni herself became interested in exploring herself. However, unlike John's domestic spaces of creativity that I was able to witness first hand, I never actually visited Jeni's house.

In seeking out Jeni's studio, I was inspired by Pink's method of 'participant produced images', as discussed in her book *Doing Visual Ethnography* (2013: 96).

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<sup>66</sup> Jeni, email, 6/1/15

<sup>67</sup> During the course of my PhD, Jeni has actually written about her domestic spaces of creativity herself. For the 'Researching Amateur Theatre' event, which took place at Royal Holloway (17/9/16), I was asked to put together (along with my friend and fellow PhD student on the project, Sarah Penny) an exhibition which touched on the four elements of our collective research during the project: 'heritage', 'archive', 'placemaking' and 'creative spaces'. For 'creative spaces', I created a small installation named 'Jeni's Desk', which was inspired by the research in this chapter spaces' (see: <http://amateurdramaresearch.com/updatesnews/> for blog posts on the exhibition with photographs of Jeni's desk). To accompany it, Jeni wrote a small piece called 'Living with the Drama', in which she detailed what it is like to share a home with the costumes for an amateur production. A lot of this was made up of thoughts that we had discussed in our conversations of making in the home, and so this section of the chapter borrows its name from her piece. In addition to this, Jeni contributed a piece of writing called 'The Costume's the Thing!' for a section of a special edition of the *Contemporary Theatre Review* that I co-edited with Sarah Penny called 'Materialities of Amateur Theatre' (2017).

Drawing from this method, I asked Jeni whether she would be able to take photographs of her creative spaces within the home, and send them to me in an email with a small explanation attached to each one. Through her camera I was afforded with the chance to encounter the spaces of her costuming process in her domestic environment. As Pink writes:

Participant's photographs often allow the researcher access to and knowledge about contexts that they cannot participate in themselves' (2013: 96)

The photographs that Jeni sent me were not always in focus however I have still included them in this chapter as they acted as important points of reference in our email threads, which acted as a space for discussion. Photographs allowed some close examination and appreciation of the subtleties of the image. Over time, Jeni's emailed photographs and text allowed multiple spaces to be realised through her own contemplations. Her accompanying writing gave the photographs a sense of movement, as she described her own bodily movements from space to space. I felt that even though I wasn't physically present at her house, we were collaboratively understanding and encountering these spaces together through a process of exchange. Jeni's freedom of her own camera also allowed discussions to evolve over time. As well as her creative spaces, the photographs came to include photographs of projects that she was working on at that time; projects for the Players as well as her own personal sewing endeavours. This also highlighted how Jeni's creative spaces within the home are utilised beyond the labours of the Settlement Players. In this section, I will explore Jeni's studio of amateur theatre-making in the home and explore the ways in which she must, as Bain would suggest, 'make do with working in 'pieces of space' (2004: 183).

## **‘Making Do’:**

### **The Stairs and the Dressmaker’s Dummy**

Jeni lives in Baldock, a town close to Letchworth. Although she lives alone and has free spatial reign of the house, she describes her house to me as small, with very little storage and no room set aside for her creative work. This makes costuming difficult at times, especially if the cast of the show is big. When I first emailed Jeni, asking her to explain where she works on the Players’ costume in her house, she explained that her creative practice is not confined to one separate dedicated room, rather her costume making studio exists in multiple spaces around her house namely her living room and spare room. In a later email, Jeni wrote about how a lot of her work has recently migrated to her kitchen; similar to John, Jeni cited the light as being inspirational in this room and that she enjoyed sitting at the kitchen table. ‘Only the bedroom and bathroom are safe’ she explained, ‘apart from them, a production can take over my whole house!’<sup>68</sup>

During a production, even Jeni’s staircase transforms into a workspace for her amateur theatre-making. Jeni told me that she regularly has costumes hanging from the staircase (which is situated in her living room). It becomes a space to hang costumes when she needs to make adjustments, mend items of clothing and take up hems during a production. The ‘making do’ aspect of this set up was illuminated when she explained how ‘it’s a matter of working on the floor or hanging them from the stairs with coat hangers for something like a hem’.<sup>69</sup> As shown in the photograph that Jeni took (see page 199), although ‘a bit blurry’,<sup>70</sup> her staircase is a spiral, metal structure consisting of exposed steps with raised edges that affords the hanging of coat hangers. This enables Jeni to work on costumes from a comfortable height. However, the placement of the staircase in the living room presents

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<sup>68</sup> Jeni, email, 27/4/15.

<sup>69</sup> Jeni, email, 3/3/15.

<sup>70</sup> Jeni, email, 19/3/16.

problems when she wants to use the living room for its primary purpose - relaxing and watching television. She explained:

Fortunately, these are just running repairs – lost buttons, bits of lace collars that need reattaching etc. They can be done quickly and the costume dispatched back to the dressing rooms. Even so, while they are hanging from the bannister rail, they put one of the arm chairs out of action as they drape down in front of it, obscuring the view of the TV and anyone else in the room, as well as being a constant reminder of things that need doing.<sup>71</sup>

For bigger jobs, Jeni described how she often has to live with a dressmaker's dummy in the middle of her living room. Before the Settlement Players' production of *The Taming of the Shrew*, Jenny requested a dressmakers' dummy at a Settlement Players' annual general meeting (AGM). She explained how the dummy sat in the middle of her living room for weeks whilst she made different 'skirts' for the character Katherine's wedding dress:

The only way I could think of to do that, was to find a wedding dress-like costume of the period and create two net over skirts, one normal and one torn, with dead leaves pinned to it, attached by press studs for easy switching between scenes. I started off with transparent press studs, so they didn't show, but soon realised my mistake – not only could I not find them when I dropped them on the carpet while trying to attach them, I couldn't see them on the costume either! Which completely defeated the object of the exercise – a quick change.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Jeni, email, 27/4/15.

<sup>72</sup> Jeni, email, 31/8/16.



(Top) Jeni's stairs in her living room covered in costumes. Photograph: Jeni Gosling. (Bottom) The dressmakers' dummy in Jeni's living room. Photograph: Jeni Gosling.

Although most of Jeni's costuming involves small alterations, during the production of Lee Hall's *A Servant to Two Masters*, she had to craft a colourful harlequin costume for the character of the fool. After realising that most of the harlequin costumes in local amateur costume departments were black and white, she found some colourful diamond patterned material online and set about covering a coat from the Settlement Players' own costume wardrobe.<sup>73</sup> During this time, Jeni sent me photographs of the harlequin's jacket during the processes of its making. These photographs illustrated the cumbersomeness of the dressmaker's dummy itself, as it sat prominently in the centre of Jeni's living room, adorned with the brightly coloured, satin costume. The shiny blues, oranges, yellows, greens and pinks of the jacket, contrasted against the dustier textures and tones of green, pink and brown of Jeni's curtains, carpet, sofa and wallpaper - illustrating the reciprocity of her creative practice within the home.

Jeni explained to me how she moves within the house during her costume work, often taking her sewing kit from her work desk upstairs, to the staircase and downstairs to the living room. The size of her house makes these movements difficult at times, especially when material traces and clues of her work are left behind. 'I definitely do notice the dummy when I have it at home', she explained:

[M]y living room isn't very big so it's hard to miss! But it is VERY helpful to have it to put clothes on and keep them stable while working on them.<sup>74</sup>

More than this, the material traces of her craft can also compromise her movements in other spaces, outside of her home. When Jeni brings costumes back to her house from either the Settlement wardrobe (or borrowed from another amateur company), they often take a short refuge in her car. She described to me they can evoke 'the

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<sup>73</sup> Jeni regularly sources costumes from the costume wardrobe at the nearby Barn Theatre in Welwyn Garden City. Their theatre houses multiple rooms filled with a substantial collection of costumes. During our first meeting, Jeni couldn't conceal her excitement when describing how the costumes were segregated by eras and male and female costumes.

<sup>74</sup> Jeni, email, 19/3/16



smell of a jumble sale’, whilst in transit from the wardrobe to her house, and from her house to the stage, and how sometimes her car gets so full that there is often no room for anything else, including her shopping or anyone else:

[I]f the back seat is loaded up as well as the boot, there’s always a danger an inquisitive thief, (on his way to a fancy dress party?) might break in and steal it all.<sup>75</sup>

Unlike John’s materials and tools - his clipboard, A4 sheets of paper and a pencil - that can easily be stored away, as shown in her photographs Jeni’s tools and materials of making are far more cumbersome and messy. Whilst John can pack away his temporal studio, leaving a scene of complete domesticity, Jeni’s tools and materials of making instead pile into her domestic space. The dresses hanging from the staircase, the dressmaker’s dummy taking up residence in the living room, and the transparent press studs and sequins that get lost in the carpet (all waiting to be vacuumed up) are all material clues to her creative practice. In Jeni’s words, she ‘lives with the drama’.

**Jeni’s Desk: ‘It’s a reminder that there is more to me than research and teaching, like colour and ribbon and fabric!’**

When Jeni is not lecturing in London she sometimes works from home. As a result of this, she has a desk set up in her spare room, in the upstairs of her house, for her academic writing. In early conversations with Jeni about her home studio, she revealed to me that her academic desk also doubles up as an ‘artistic space’ for costume altering. She sent me a photograph which showed the desk and its negotiating roles as both study and studio.

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<sup>75</sup> Jeni, email, 4/3/16



Jeni's Desk. Photograph Jeni Gosling

Covered in piles of reference books, academic journals; loose papers, files of papers and notebooks; yellow Post-it notes, USB sticks and loose pencils and pens scatter the desk's surface. Meanwhile, surrounding the desk above, a hole punch and stapler can be found on the windowsill, whilst a satchel bag rests on the teal office chair below, filled with more papers and files. All these things mark this desk as a space of academic work - of thinking, reading and writing. A copy of *Isis* sits splayed open on the side (a scholarly journal commenting on the history of science, medicine and technology) indicating Jeni's field of research. However, in the middle of the desk, nestled amongst the tools of an academic, sits a sewing machine.

Accompanying the photograph Jeni noted underneath:

On my desk I have my mother's old sewing machine... not quite a treadle machine, but a pretty old vintage! And I've found that it's much more useful to have it out permanently, rather than keep taking it out of its bag when I

need it, so that sits permanently on my desk upstairs. I pull it forward when I need it and push it to the back when I do my academic work.<sup>76</sup>

Jeni's mother's old sewing machine juxtaposed with her academic journals illuminates the spatial negotiations that take place between her unpaid-creative work and paid-academic work. Jeni's desk, to borrow from Bain, is 'not originally intended for artistic use' (2004: 184). For the artists in Bain's study, working in a space such as this was challenging, especially when 'the previous function of the space [...] left an imprint', conditioning 'understandings about what activities are deemed acceptable' (2004: 184). For Jeni, the two functions of her desk and indeed spaces (both academic, and paid, and creative, and unpaid) are continuously entwined with one another, conditioned by the materials of both her academic and creative work. However, instead of finding this space challenging, Jeni explained:

I like it, it's a reminder that there is more to me than research and teaching, like colour and ribbon and fabric! And potential. I think I'm a frustrated dressmaker and the costumes give me an outlet for that. I usually have various projects on the go in between productions.<sup>77</sup>

From these visual studio tours and interactions with Jeni, I learned that whilst she is indeed working within, what Bain would call, 'spaces that accommodate different kinds of activities quite unrelated to the production of art', there is also a feeling of relief that comes from this act of negotiating between her academic and creative work within the home (2004: 188). In a later conversation between Jeni and I, sparked by the photograph and description of her desk, she explained to me how having her creative work profuse her home and work space is a reminder of her

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<sup>76</sup> Jeni, email, 6/1/15.

<sup>77</sup> Jeni, email, 6/1/15.

creative identity (something that she likes to remember), and affords respite from her brain based work as an academic:<sup>78</sup>

Cara: I've been thinking about the act of 'making do' and compromising space [...] I loved what you wrote about you mother's old sewing machine, and it being a reminder that you're more than academic work. Would you say that you do have to compromise then, but that in the act of compromising and making do with working on your 'academic' desk, it sort of acts as a reminder of your creative interests and your role as a costume maker... is that how you understand it?

Jeni: Yes I do have to compromise, of course, as this is just a hobby for me and I have to earn my living in a different occupation and environment. In terms of space I compromise in the sense that I don't have a large space or room set aside for creative work... But yes, that does sound right. It is a reminder of my interests, but also a counterweight to my brain based work as an academic. It is a practical activity which is creative in process and creates an end product, which academic work doesn't always. It can be sedentary too - sitting and sewing, but it's also active - getting up to press a seam, moving from hand sewing to the machine, standing up to cut things out...it's a definite reminder.

For Jeni, in the moments when her work desk temporarily transforms into a creative workspace - through the tools and the processes of her craft - she is allowed to perform her identity as a creative practitioner, a costumier, and a Settlement Player. Interestingly, this feeling wasn't just isolated to her theatre-making pursuits. From further conversations with Jeni, it became apparent that her whole house is a space in which she feels she can pursue, not only theatre-making, but also other creative practices such as knitting and embroidery. Jeni revealed that

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<sup>78</sup> Jeni, email, 13/4/15.

she usually has multiple projects on the go at any one moment. Accompanying the pictures of her creative spaces within the house, she also included these photographs and descriptions of her other projects:<sup>79</sup>

I have about five other projects on the go at the moment! Two are knitting projects and the others are sewing. I'm at the beginning of an A-Z sampler, which is decorated with flowers and I am also attempting a picture using cross stitch which is incredibly detailed and will probably damage my eye sight by the time it is finished! Both of these are kits that I picked up in the local wool/sewing shop when I was in there looking for something to do...I can sit and do whilst watching television...or rather listening to the television...and makes me feel more productive and that I'm not wasting an evening just slumped in front of the TV!

[Jeni on a patchwork blanket that she in the processes of making at the time of writing] I'm also working through a part-work magazine called Sew and Stitch. I think there are 90 issues and I've just received 71 in the post. I got very behind last year, but made a big effort to catch up over Christmas. I did a lot whilst I was listening to the whole of War and Peace being broadcast on Radio 4 on New Year's Day and gave myself tennis elbow!

A couple of years ago someone called Rachel, who lives in Letchworth, advertised embroidery lessons, so I went along to that, because it seemed fun, and made a needle case. For about three Christmases after that a small group of us spent several weeks in her summer house sewing Christmas decorations (including a heart with a cross stitch reindeer which I did slightly wrong - I missed a stitch somewhere - and it looks like he's frowning! He's quite sweet.) While there Rachel had some quite old sewing books out and there was a picture of a cushion cover made out of strips of

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<sup>79</sup> Jeni, email, 3/6/15.

ribbon sewn together, so I hustled off to John Lewis and found some nice ribbon and made one of those. I don't have an obsession with cushion covers, honest!

What Jeni revealed in these descriptions of her creative projects, is that her home is also a space of creative exploration and safe experimentation. She explained to me further that whilst she doesn't have the courage to join the local embroidery guild, because it is 'far too intimidating', her home is a space which enables her to 'build [her] confidence with different stitches and material'.<sup>80</sup> Sjöholm writes about the studio as a site of creative experimentation where artists can try new things through engagements with materials and processes that work between predictability and surprise:

The studio invites exploration and trial and error based practice and learning, which is practiced through bodily labour and movement - through material exploration and engagement. The explorative practices taking place in the art studios can open up new and unplanned learning and progressive moments (2010: 139).

Clues of Jeni's creative experimentations can be found around her house, sometimes decorating spaces such as the mantelpiece in the living room, where a string of embroidered bunting hangs. Twelve panels 'one for each month', she tells me, 'with a sprig of flowers related to each one'. One is a bright red poppy with a couple of ears of corn, another is clover and forget-me-nots, 'that was a real labour of love and took some designing!' (see page 207, 211). Other 'small projects' leave their mark around the house as useful household items: a hot water bottle cover; an ice bag 'for when I injure myself training' and a embroidered draft excluder for her front door, all made from two foot material squares that she picked up from a favourite fabric shop of hers in Baldock.

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<sup>80</sup> Jeni, email, 3/3/15.



(Top) Patchwork blanket that Jeni was in the process of making during writing this thesis. Photograph: Jeni Gosling. (Middle) Floral bunting that Jeni made for her mantelpiece. Photograph: Jeni Gosling. (Bottom) Christmas ornaments made by Jeni. Photograph: Jeni Gosling.

To understand Jeni's displays in the home further I looked to the work of scenographer Vesela Kucheva who explores how the decoration of a domestic space is often performative. In her article 'Scenography at Home' (2013), Kucheva suggests that 'maybe we are such things that scenography is made of. And we also live in them' (2013: 3). The relationship between scenography and home is explored through an example of a time when Kucheva's cousin brought a friend over to her house. The cousin explained to the friend that Kucheva was a scenographer, the friend then replied with 'yes, I see, one can tell by her house', which beckons Kucheva to ask the question 'could one really tell by this place what my field of work is' (2013: 2). The paper continues to look at the performative character of the home and the ways in which identity is often performed through the decorative choices that the owner may make. Kucheva ponders, 'what wonders could there be in an 'ordinary' home that's full of objects and colours and moving things and things that make sounds and clothes that are costumes and people who act' (2013: 2-3).

As an example of this, Kucheva examines her front room, a room which acts as a studio, a bedroom, a workshop and 'a place for stretching and dancing, drying clothes in the winter' (2013: 2). She lists the considered touches that can be found in this multi functional space: earth coloured fliers taped to the window; multi-coloured spices in the kitchen that are there for their aesthetic merit, rather than their potential to transform dishes; and curtain-less windows for visitors to view the sunset (all hinting to her occupational eye). As well as these aesthetic considerations, the more obvious clues to her work are described:

[T]he big-eyed paper puppets that (for lack of another studio) I keep in my house, the hat cathedral, a representative of the kind of models that I like too much to throw away even after the final versions have been built (2013: 2).



For Kucheva the evaluation of the decoration of her own space illuminated for her the way in which any sort of domestic decorating has a performative character, in that there ‘will always be an audience simply because a home is a home only if there is someone living in it’ (2013: 3). These displays of Jeni’s experimentations, or indeed the ‘end products’ of the experimentation process - the cushion covers, blanket, decorative bunting and the draft excluder - coupled with the unmade materials and tools of her theatre-making, draped around her house, not only reaffirms her home as studio space but one that that can also understood as performative of her creative identity.

### **Where Creativity Happens: Concluding Thoughts**

Bain writes that ‘where creativity happens matters to how it is expressed and to how it is understood’ (2009: 73) In this chapter I sought to find out what it means when a home becomes a studio. For both John and Jeni ‘mak[ing] do with working in pieces of space’, as suggested by Bain, is a characteristic of both their studios in the home. (2004: 183) Out of necessity, they must craft creative spaces within their everyday lives and domestic spaces. Both studios manifested themselves in different ways. John’s studio was not so easily found and was more temporal, relying on the inspirational natural light from the French windows and music to set the mood. Whilst his clipboard – a tool on which to draw – is easily shelved away. Meanwhile Jeni’s tools and materials of making instead profuse her whole house, leaving lasting clues to her craft.

The professional artists in Bain’s work found that temporality and the process of ‘making do’ with pieces of space, by having to compromise and set up a studio in the home, challenged their self perceived identities as committed artists. By exploring the amateur theatre-makers’ workspace, through this lens, assists in understanding how amateur creative identities are often formed. Spaces typically

associated with everyday domestic doings become spaces where one can trace the materialities of theatre-making, and seek out the material clues of artistic production, in amongst the other personal biographies that live alongside them. The material traces that are left behind from their creative doings – the sewing machine, the sequins in the carpet and the set designs, hole punched and safely archived away after the build in folders – articulate Jeni and John’s identities as amateur theatre-makers and their commitment and enthusiasm to this, away from the theatre building.

Unchallenged by ideas and ambitions for more conventional and specialised spaces of creativity, John and Jeni are instead allowed to form and perform their creative identities whilst negotiating their domestic and creative spaces. For Jeni, the material remnants and tools of her costume making in progress, scattered around the home and indeed compromising her space, reminds her that she is more than her professional job - her identity as an artistic practitioner, a costume designer, and an amateur dramatist. Similarly, John and his identity as a set designer and amateur dramatist is not governed by the space that he is working in, rather the temporal nature of his studio is a choice and it is the doing - the drawing - that transforms his space at that particular moment in time. From the exploration of Jeni and John’s home studios, I have shown that the creative processes and materials of amateur theatre-makers have the potential to transform their personal and domestic spaces. This allows them to perform their self-perceived artistic identities as creative practitioners and amateur theatre-makers away from the theatre building. Through ‘making do’ they can also be seen as ‘making self’.

In the chapter that follows – Chapter Six – I move empirical focus back into the Settlement building, and explore the set builders’ particular ways of working on a set. Here I shall explore significant processes of the Settlement Players’ theatre-making, along with the materials and tools used. Through fieldbook notes and

photographs taken during my time set building, specifically, I look at how repair, re-purposing, DIY and a ‘creative camaraderie’ characterises the Players’ sets.



(Top) Jeni's bunting daffodil embroidered panel. Photograph: Jeni Gosling.  
(Bottom) Jeni's bunting, poppy embroidered panel. Photograph: Jeni Gosling.

## 6

### Ways of Working:

#### Repair, Problem Solving and Creative Camaraderie

June, 2015. ‘It looks amazing doesn’t it’ I exclaimed with pure joy as Graham and I stood together during the interval tonight [*The Ladykillers Show*]. I had just taken John’s mum across to the Common Room for a hot drink and on the way back to my seat in the hall - in amongst the bustle of people mingling and stretching their legs - I bumped into Graham. We talked about the first half of the performance and then about the set that we had both spent weeks working on. I told Graham how I couldn’t get over how wonderful it looked, especially with the added elements of lighting, props and the actors in costume. ‘It just works, doesn’t it!’ said Graham as he sipped on his pint. ‘It does’ I agreed, ‘especially considering it was built over a month or so of Sunday mornings.’ After a brief pause in our conversation, as we let people pass by us to get to their seats (we were stood in one of the ‘aisles’ that was created tonight in the hall, by the arrangement of stackable chairs acting as an auditorium), Graham added:

You see the lighting and the sound, and the set more importantly, all those things you would think...well...you would think that they would be the negative parts of the performance, because we *are* an amateur group and that’s what people might expect, something ‘bad’ ... but it isn’t like that at all, it works. And that is another thing... people choose to come and see our shows and also come and perform at this level...there is a loyalty to that, there is. It is similar to what we talked about a couple of weeks ago, about the lighting and potentially spending a lot of money on getting new ones...more

professional lighting. As soon as you change something - like the lighting - you have to change everything else otherwise they won't 'fit'. It's a community hall, you have to remember that.<sup>81</sup>

In writing this chapter, I was inspired by the above excerpt from my field book notes, in which I recorded a conversation with fellow set builder Graham during the interval of the closing night of the Settlement Players production of *The Ladykillers*. Graham's insights made me reflect on my existing fieldbook notes, at that time, whilst directing my research, intrigue and attention thereafter. It made me question what made the Settlement Players' sets special and particular to them as amateur theatre-makers, and, more specifically, to them as Settlement Players. In their article 'Professionalism, Amateurism and Boundaries of Design' (2008), Beegan and Atkinson suggest that 'amateurs develop ways of working and aesthetics that exist outside of those approved by experts' (2008: 307). In this chapter, I shall follow Beegan and Atkinson's suggestion by reflecting on the building processes of the Settlement Players set builders, in a hope to capture their particular ways of working on a set, whilst illuminating what makes the Settlement Players' sets, in Graham's words, 'just work'?

In this chapter, formed of three parts, I seek to investigate the Players' hands on approach to and, as Ingold would suggest, the 'Messy practices' involved in amateur theatre-making, particularly that of building sets (2013: 59). Through the use of my ethnographic fieldbook notes, along with photographs taken whilst set building, each of the three sections explores a different way of working. Additionally, each section has its own conceptual guide.

Firstly, I have been inspired by researchers from the fields of cultural geography and design who have reflected on the processes and aesthetics of repair. Developing on Pink's suggestion that repair should be understood as a form of re-making, I

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<sup>81</sup> *The Ladykillers* ran at the Settlement for three nights - 11th, 12th, 13th June 2015. The fieldbook notes here are taken from a performance night 11/6/15.

shall explore the ways in which the Settlement Players are in a constant state of re-making sets through the continuous repair and maintenance of their materials. By looking at the ways in which the Players care for their limited supply of materials, I hope to illuminate the ‘ongoingness’ of the amateur theatre-makers’ craft, as they assure that the life of their building materials goes on. Specifically, I shall look at two examples of repair as re-making. One involves the stripping of scenery flats, whilst the other details a set strike and how every material, down to the bent screws and tarnished hinges, are meticulously and carefully unscrewed, unstuck, unfixed, and stored away back on the Trout, ready to be re-made in the next set.

Following this, in the second section, I shall explore the Players’ resourcefulness and problem solving by looking at the ways in which they inventively repurpose materials and objects to create their sets. In order to understand this further, I look to work on ‘ad hocism’, namely that of writer-architects Charles Jenks and Nathan Silver, who explored the term in their book *Ad hocism: The Case for Improvisation* (2013). Ad hocism, as I will discuss more later on in this chapter, moves beyond formal rules of design. Instead, doing something ‘ad hoc’ embraces everyday improvisation as a way of doing, designing and making things – for example using a jam jar as a drinking glass, a wine bottle as a candle holder, a knife as a screw driver. Specifically I look at how the industrial metal shelving units, used to store wood backstage on the Trout, was unmade and then remade again, onstage, to form the foundations of Miss Wilberforce’s house in their production of *The Ladykillers*.

In the last section I will explore the idea of a ‘creative camaraderie’. Craft is often talked about through the figure of the sole crafts(wo)man, yet this would not accurately describe what I experienced set building with the Settlement Players. In this section I shall draw from Vannini and Taggart’s idea of DIW (‘doing-it-with’) as an alternative (or expansion) to the widely used term DIY (‘do-it-yourself’) (2014; 2015), a distinction that I shall expand on later. Their ethnographic work, which explored the building practices of non-professional, off-grid self builders,

illuminated the fact that, when we make, we very rarely make alone – whether that be with each other (family, friends), with materials or with the landscape on which we make. Here, I discuss how my experience of painting the scenery flats for Georgina Read’s *Ladies of Spirit*, with fellow set builder Stephen, helped illuminate the ways in which the Players work together, with varying degrees of abilities, skills and personal visions, as well as commitments outside of the build. Taken as a whole, these three sections bring together debates and practice that relate to the processes of making, and clarify the place of the amateur set-builder within the wider field.

## Section One

### Repair as a Process of Making:

#### Understanding the ‘Ongoingness’ of the Amateur Theatre-Makers’ Craft

Repair, fixing, mending and maintenance are often thought of as routine and mundane practices, frequently carried out in spaces hidden away from view. This means that they often fall outside the radar of scholarly exploration or even recognition. Yet, the practice of repair is a necessary part of everyday life, as technology scholar Steven J. Jackson writes ‘the world is always breaking; it is in its nature to break’ (2014: 223). Arguably repair has been ignored due to the twenty-first century’s emphasis on mass production where everyday items are often made cheaply (frequently with a low life expectancy) and are easily acquired and replaced.<sup>82</sup> The movement away from repairing, recycling or reusing has meant that phrases such as ‘fast fashion’ and ‘throwaway culture’ have become part of the vernacular, emphasising the changing relationships between people and their things.

In her book *Sustainable Fashion and Textiles: Design Journeys* (2008), sustainable design scholar Kate Fletcher highlights how in today’s contemporary consumer culture, mass-produced products are often presented as finished or ‘complete’ and ‘closed’ entities. She writes how they often ‘offer us the promise of something better than we could make ourselves’ (2008: 187). Fletcher suggests that these impressions of completeness, coupled with the professionalisation of skills (both designing and making), have dissuaded consumers from altering, maintaining or repairing their ready-made goods (2008, 2016). Subsequently, she writes, this has

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<sup>82</sup> A recent article in the Guardian stated that £800 worth of electrical goods are chucked away every year from British households, and that many of these items (along with other household goods such as furniture) could escape their premature deaths with the help of simple repair. Accessed 7/7/17: <https://www.theguardian.com/money/2017/apr/15/repair-cafe-fix-yourself-laptop-save-fortune>



lead to a generation of deskilled and inactive individuals who have been distanced from creative practices such as repair (2008).

So, when something breaks, tears, dents, chips, looks a little worn or has been used too many times, is it is all too often thrown away without thought. In their work on sustainable fashion, Angharad McLaren and Shirely McLauchlan note how the impulse to repair and maintain, or indeed seek out a repairer or mender, is unlikely when something can be bought and replaced at little cost (2015). DeSilvey and Ryan refer to this as a ‘consumption conundrum’; used to describe the deliberation that one must go through when an everyday item breaks (2013: 147). The consumption conundrum begs the questions - should I buy a new one, or should I instead find someone who can fix it? This conundrum is exacerbated still when fixing the item might cost more than buying a new one. In these instances, they suggest, repair can often be seen as something which is ‘a lifestyle choice (and a luxury) rather than a necessity’, and a signifier of the practical, sentimental or emotional values that people place on their material things, in order to enable them to live on (2015: 148).

In this way, repair can be understood as a process existing outside the market of consumption, through which the life and biographies of material things and objects are extended. The choice to repair, maintain, reuse, recycle and repurpose something rejects the assumed ‘closed’ and ‘complete’ nature of things, as previously highlighted by Fletcher. Instead, it presents an alternative understanding that things are actually incomplete and ongoing. In some cases - mobile phone repair for example - signs of the repair process are expected to disappear with the broken thing appearing as new (Kimble *et al*, 2015). However, geographers Stephen Graham and Nigel Thrift, in their own exploration of repair in the modern city, posit that ‘repair and maintenance does not have to mean exact restoration’ (2007: 5). They write that when things are allowed to continue to function through a many number of repair processes such as a ‘bodged job’, an upgrade, the cannibalisation

and recycling of materials, or a complete rebuild, ‘what starts out as repair may soon become improvement, innovation, event growth’ (2007: 6).

So, whilst repair can be understood as a process through which the lives of things are allowed to live on, repair can also be understood as a process through which new things are made. This has lead Pink to posit the question, ‘what, if any, is the difference between the mender and the maker?’ (2013: 13). In her prologue to *Visible Mending* (2013), Pink utilises Ingold’s definition of the *maker* as ‘the master of improvisation, of making do with what is at hand’ to propose her own definition of the *mender* as someone ‘who brings together what is needed to re-make whatever is at hand’ (2013: 13). Pink suggests that;

If we see making as an ongoing process, in which multiple people potentially participate during the biography of an object or thing, then it is never a definitively completed act. It is indeed the way that things are mended and melded by their subsequent human carers that defines their status as emergent, as changing objects or processes. They are never restored to what they were before, but are remade to emerge as something else, and to enter the future (2013: 13).

Whilst Pink’s proposal of repair as a process of making, or indeed remaking, is only discussed in a short (a page and a half) prologue to *Visible Mending*, she presents an insightful lens through which to look at the Settlement Players set builders and their particular ways of working. Pink notes that:

[T]hese remakings (rather than restoring) often fall behind the horizon of the human eye, and are sometimes so mundane that they are not even spoken about (2013: 13).

When reflecting back on my fieldbook notes, I captured numerous mundane moments involved in set building, from cleaning stage lights to dismantling a side table. Many of these moments were scattered with iterations of Pink's repair, and viewed collectively, these iterations illuminated repair as a significant process of the Settlement Players' theatre-making. Specifically, in this section, I draw upon two ethnographic examples to highlight how the amateur theatre-makers re-make through repair. Firstly, I record the process involved in repairing scenery flats, so they can be re-used in subsequent productions. Secondly, I explore repair as 'un-making' through the careful dismantling of a set; where every material is unscrewed, unfixd and unstuck ready to be re-made in future productions. Through both of these approaches I hope to understand amateur theatre-making, specifically set building, as an ongoing practice that is never complete or closed.

### **An Example of Repair:**

#### **Stripping the Scenery Flats for *A Servant to Two Masters*<sup>83</sup>**

January, 2016. 'We're trying to strip the flats back as much as we can as we go along, if you'd like that job?' asked John, as I changed into my old trainers on the side of the stage. As I tried to coax my heel tab out from underneath my heel, John disappeared for a while and returned with a pair of well used, paint spotted scrapers. One had a bendy wide blade with a wooden handle and the other was a more heavy duty with a sharp blade that looked like it might cut with the lightest touch. 'I'll be back with some water and a cloth in a minute, just hold on there' said John. He returned with a bucket (that we usually use to collect rubbish on stage) filled halfway up with warm soapy water and a blue gingham washcloth, threadbare in places. Before I arrived, John had lined the bottoms of the flats with the paint

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<sup>83</sup> *A Servant to Two Masters* ran at the Settlement for three nights - 25th, 26th, 27th February 2016. The fieldbook notes here (with accompanying photographs) are taken from a set building morning 17/1/16.

stained white sheets that we usually put down to protect the stage floor from paint. This was to catch the debris from the flats that we were about to strip. 'Don't worry too much, we can always Hoover it afterwards' he reassured.

John knelt down and I watched as he brushed the flat with his hands at first, feeling for loose edges of paper and paint that would easily peel off. He caught one under his fingertips and it peeled all the way up past his reach, until it broke off and fell in his hand like a limp ribbon. Other more delicate loose edges ripped off as soon as they were pinched, 'these pieces need to be scraped off I think' said John. He dunked the washcloth into the bucket and let it soak in the warm, soapy water for a few moments before bringing it back up and ringing it out. He started to wipe down a section of the stage flat with the cloth, explaining how it would loosen the layers of paint and paper. 'Oh it's like using a steamer', I comment, 'yes, same idea but just more work!' John replied. After letting the damp patch of flat dry a little, John picked up a scraper and started to scrape upwards, hoping to wedge the scraper in between the paper and the flat, although sometimes it missed and glided over the top. When it caught, I noticed how the paper fell from the flat's surface in little damp, confetti like pieces, and settled on the sheet below. 'You can see how this takes a bit of time, but it's a job that needs doing...sorry if it's a bit boring'.

I followed John's lead. First, by feeling for loose edges of paper. I found them mostly along the edges of the flats, where they had been seamed together with long strips of wallpaper. Here the paper pulled away easily, taking with it multiple layers underneath. Layers upon layers of seams. After wetting the washcloth in the bucket that, by this point, was filled with shards of paper and paint that had settled on the water's surface, I started to dampen the flat before waiting a couple of minutes before scraping. I took the sharper of the two scrapers and started to scrape away at the flat.



With one upward gesture the blade pushed to one side. As I looked closer I realised that the whole thing was being precariously held together by bits of sawdust and paper that had wedged themselves into the gaps where the screw attaching it together should have been. I wedged it back in whilst trying not to cut my fingers.

As I started to scrape, I realised that the flat itself was not perfectly flat. It bent slightly in the middle. In some places the two edges of the blade caught the wood where the bend dipped. The middle of the blade hovered over the deepest part of the bend and so I contorted my wrist to try and make it work. I also underestimated the blade's sharpness and with the constant dampening of paper, paint and the wood below, the wood became susceptible to damage. At one point I scraped upwards and the blade of the scraper got caught in the wood below, lifting a sizeable chunk of surface layer away from the flat. I dislodged the blade and pushed the piece of wood (attached by a sort of hinge) back into the dent that it created, hoping that no one would notice. Signs of repair gone wrong.

I striped layer after layer of paper and paint away, only to be confronted with another and then another. The scenery of past sets revealed themselves for minutes, if not seconds. The painted wooden panelling effect that had been painted during the previous production of *Ladies of Spirit* could be seen at the surface of many of the flats that had been set up on stage, so too could the burnt ochre colour that Stephen, David and I had painted a couple of months ago for the same play. With some scrapes I started to see patches of bare wood in amongst the layers of red, black, burnt orange, light orange, sky blue, green, white and brown - a never ending excavation of colour and texture.



At the edges of the flats, I was reminded of the process of seaming the flats together and the frustrating moments involved - not aligning the paper equally over the two edges, air bubbles appearing no matter how much you brush them out, putting too much or too little paste on and it slipping and falling off the flat.

These fieldbook notes record a morning of set building for the construction of the set for Lee Hall's *A Servant to Two Masters*. As the morning progressed, John later explained to me that slowly over the years the set builders have been trying, as best they could, to strip the scenery flats down to their original state. Used and reused again and again as landscapes, interior walls and exterior walls, the scenery flats are a main and constant component of the Settlement Players' sets. Due to their constant use in this way, the build up of paper and paint used to decorate sets overtime leaves the flats' surfaces uneven and harder to work with. Because of this they become increasingly heavier, thicker and more textured with every show. 'We've been trying to repair every flat back to what it was, or as close as we can, as we go along' John explained, 'we're slowly getting there though...Rob has stripped a lot of them already'.<sup>84</sup> John acknowledged that this job was a 'boring' part of theatre-making, however it was a job that needed to be done for the theatre to keep going. It was interesting how John used the word repair here to signal what we were doing. Repair in this case was a process of maintaining the surface of the scenery flat so that it could be remade later, through processes of re-painting and re-papering for the next show. Through this process, the scenery flats emerge, as Pink writes, as 'changing objects [...] never restored to what they were before', but instead 'remade to emerge as something else, and to enter the future' (2013: 13).

Curiously, as John and I set about stripping back the multiple layers of colour and material, I was able to witness the painting and wallpapering jobs, of previous shows, undertaken by the set builders. These past iterations of repair and re-making

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<sup>84</sup> Fieldnotes, 17/1/2016.



illuminate the ‘ongoingness’ of the Settlement Player’s theatre-making. The scenery flats are not closed structures, used only once, but are used and reused time and time again. Past productions survive in these mutable structures. As DeSilvey would suggest, they leave behind ‘traces of labour and use’, which ‘animate these materials and propose an empathetic connection with the people who made and handled them’ (2007: 417).

In the next example of repair as a process of the Players’ theatre-making, I move away from looking at it as a process of maintaining, or specifically stripping back to be re-made later, and focus on ‘un-making’. Here, I use an example of a set strike where everything is meticulously dismantled all the way down to the last screws and nails, which are unscrewed and stored away ready to re-make the next set. Through this example I reveal un-making as an important process of repair, where the lives of the materials are allowed to be reused in future productions.

### **An Example of Repair as Un-Making: Striking the Set for *My Own Show*<sup>85</sup>**

I arrived this morning to find both Jim and Joanna sat and kneeling in middle of the stage, dismantling the side table that I has finished painting only a week previous. Jo was one of the actresses from the all female cast of *My Own Show* and she had come down to the Settlement that morning to help with the dismantling of the set. As is customary with a lot of amateur theatre groups, everyone involved in the Settlement Players’ productions, along with anyone else who can spare a Sunday morning, are invited along to help strike the set. Although, as Stephen divulged to me later, ‘some people who act with us forget about the less glamorous jobs like the set strike, they’re only here to perform and they don’t see this as their job’.

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<sup>85</sup> *My Own Show* ran for three nights - 19th, 20th and 21st February 2015 at the Settlement. The set strike for *My Own Show* took place on 22/2/2015. My account here is taken from my fieldbook notes written on the same day which included conversations and happenings. The accompanying photographs were taken on the same day.



It was strange to witness the Kincaid Hall bustling with the busying bodies of not only the set builders and technicians, but with the performers, the stage manager, prompt and director too. Everyone was dressed in their old clothes and some of the cast had brought with them biscuits and cakes for the tea break. I could not put my finger on why it seemed quieter that morning than a usual set building session, I questioned whether the hushed air that filled the stage was down to tiredness from the after show party the night before, or sadness because the production had come to an end.

I volunteered to help Jim and Jo with the table, ‘if you can find a screwdriver somewhere that would be great’ said Jim ‘they might all be taken though’. I found a screwdriver on top of a wooden trolley that had been stationed on the side of the stage.<sup>86</sup> The screwdriver sat next to a display of various containers and materials: a tarnished boiled sweet tin was filled with small nails of all sizes and an old can of marmalade was packed with pegs that had been collected from the curtains (or ‘tabs’) which masked the stage during *My Own Show*. Pegs are usually used at the Settlement as a way of attaching the sides of the stage curtains together; ensuring that they don’t uncover the backstage areas by falling away from each other during a performance. Next to these receptacles were an arrangement of doorknobs, hinges, pins and more screws, all organised by category in small, neat piles.

Before I helped Jim and Jo dismantle the side table, I took a couple of pictures of their progress so far, before quickly swapping my camera back for the screwdriver. ‘Is this really interesting?’ asked Joanna jokingly, yet also inquisitively:

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<sup>86</sup> The same trolley is usually used by Margaret to store the props during a performance, though during the set strikes it frequently became utilised as a means to collect materials from the set and transport them back onto the Trout and backstage.

I suppose it is an important part of what we do...this is your first strike isn't it? Ah so you're seeing this for the first time...isn't it amazing how quickly it all comes down in the end.

As Jo said this, I looked around and noticed the full extent of just how quickly the set was being dismantled. Surrounding us, the walls of Fey's apartment (the protagonist of *My Own Show*) were slowly disappearing. From stage left to stage right, the flats were being detached from one another. The seams were being sliced and the flats were being carried and stacked up against one of the back walls (stage left). Fey's bar was also in the process of being disassembled, piece-by-piece, by Rob and Tracy (the stage manager for *My Own Show* Tracy). There was no smashing, ripping or breaking; instead the whole structure was being *carefully* unscrewed with an electric drill, returning it to a pile of its material components.

I joined Jim on the floor, crossed legged, and started to unscrew the screws affixing the legs to the tabletop. Meanwhile, Jo stood crouched over, keeping the table steady by holding its legs (the table was turned upside down with the table top facing the stage floor). Both legs had been attached to the tabletop by regular hinges that you might find on kitchen unit doors or a collapsible table. Both affixed at a ninety-degree angle. Each hinge comprised of six parallel holes and through each hole was a screw, ready to be removed. The hinges showed signs of age and use (and indeed re-use); tarnished by oxidation and stained by streaks of paint - a mixture of brown, black and white.



Some of the screws came out with ease, whilst others just wouldn't dislodge. A couple had been screwed in too far during the table's construction and so had become wedged in between the wood and the hinge at an awkward angle. Meanwhile, the crossed head of a crosshead screw had worn away to the point that the screwdriver slipped out of the groove with every turn.

Jo got called away backstage to help with the flats, and so Jim and I alternated between the roles of unscrew-er and wood holder/supporter - swapping when we felt defeated. Slowly, it seemed, we were left with two pieces of wood attached at a right angle. 'Maybe if I stand on this end' I said as I gestured with my foot. I stood on the plank as Jim levered the other, pulling it towards him to try and break it loose, though as carefully as possible so as not to break the wood.

'It's sad really... taking things you've built apart' said Jim. He recalled a wooden horse that John had designed and built for a play the previous year:

John said we had to take it apart... I said that we should have kept it. But it's easy to say that about a lot of things that we make. You do want to save parts of the set sometimes... we've made some really great ones. But there just isn't the space to store it all here.

I recall this very horse myself. During my first visit to the Settlement, John tried to give me a tour of the Hall and show me where the players perform but due to yoga class, which was taking place in the Kincaid Hall, he could only show me the backstage areas. We entered the hall via the door backstage. John led me up the steps next to the ladies dressing room (opposite the toilet) and through some black curtains that had been hung to conceal the backstage areas from the audience. I remember this moment vividly, feeling as though I had just been permitted into a secret, enchanted

space. The stage shutters were pulled to and I could hear soft voice of the yoga instructor on the other side in the hall. It felt more like a room than a stage, a room with no windows, just black curtained walls, stage lights and a wooden horse. The horse stood centre stage and, although I didn't comment on it at the time, I assumed that it must have been bought, borrowed or hired as a prop. The horse had stayed in the recesses of my mind until Jim brought it up that morning. He said, 'it's now just in bits back there. Parts of it might even be in this set!'

Before the tea break, we sat there on the floor, next to our varying piles of screws, nails, hinges and scraps of wood. More piles of materials surrounded us on the stage, ready to be collected up and stored away carefully in old jam jars, sweet tins, cupboards, on shelves and under the stage. I started to sort the screws into the cleaners caddy, placing them into the various compartments - with labels specifying what size screw should live in each.

From reflecting on these fieldbook notes a set is revealed as an interesting product of amateur craft, especially if compared to - for example - the products of Jeni's embroidered craft, which I discussed in the previous chapter. Jeni's floral bunting, Christmas decorations and draft excluder - once made - live on as decorative elements of her house. By contrast, a set is only useful, and so only exists, for as long as the play is being performed. As soon as the production run ends, a set ceases the need to exist and so is taken down. As a result of limited funds, access to venues and audience numbers, the time that a production runs, in amateur theatre, is often short. Because of this the temporal characteristic of a set is inevitably exaggerated. A professional theatre production might last for months, if not years; however, at the Settlement a production lasts for a maximum of three nights. Set-strikes are of course commonplace in all theatre, although at the Settlement it plays an important role in their theatre-making.





At the start of my thesis, I considered that amateur theatre-makers - as amateur craftspeople - are beset by time, space and materials (Knott, 2015). Through the Players' meticulous processes of un-making - dismantling, unsticking and unscrewing - the set is a requisite to manoeuvre around both spatial (the lack of storage space within the Settlement) and financial (lack of funds to purchase new materials) constraints.

John told me that there is just not the space at the Settlement for old sets, in their completed forms, to be kept. Spending time in the Settlement, it is hard not to notice that every spare bit of space is utilised for storing the materials and tools of their theatre-making. Materials including screws, pegs, nails, nuts, bolts, hinges, paint, stencils, rope, wood, door frames, doors and fireplace surrounds fill every corner and crevice of the mezzanine floor; stored away on shelves and in cupboards, sorted in boiled sweet tins and old cans of marmalade. Meanwhile stage curtains, fabric, and rostra can be found hidden away underneath the stage and in the recesses of the dressing rooms.

This stock of material with which to build sets is hardly ever thrown away and is neither replenished nor replaced by new materials after they have been used. Recorded in my fieldbook notes were signs that the materials had been used in previous sets. For example the hinges, tarnished by oxidisation and stained by streaks of paint, showed signs that this wasn't their first time in a set, and neither was it their last. As Jim commented on the fate of the horse, 'it's now just in bits back there. Parts of it might even be in this set!' In fact, it was a rare occasion if new materials were bought and sourced for a new set. For example, during the set construction of *The Ladykillers*, I witnessed the surprised faces of a couple of Players when a new piece of standard hardboard was bought to construct a set of stairs. 'This is a special occasion' said Stephen jokingly, as we took it out into the

car park to cut to size.<sup>87</sup> The pressure was on us to not make a mistake in our cutting - made even more difficult by the bent teeth of the old hand saw.

Some of the Players that I spoke to find this way of working frustrating at times. Graham admitted that ‘the re-use of everything does get a bit much at times, especially when screws and the like are so cheap’.<sup>88</sup> Ivor seconded this, when describing to me how he often feels frustrated when trying to find the right length of used timber from the Trout. He explained that the pieces are always either too short or too long. However, Ivor did acknowledge this as a ‘make-do and utilise exercise to minimise costs and storage requirements’.<sup>89</sup> Whilst recognising this process as a money saving exercise, others in the Players’, including Jim, found it to be a creative part of their theatre-making:

Firstly as a chairman I have to applaud any measures that save us money. By reusing, repairing and recycling the resources that we have must save quite a lot over the years. Then, with my more creative hat on, I must say that I’m just as pleased because this philosophy encourages all of us to be as creative as possible with the resources that we have and this is reflected in what we do. It makes us think harder about what is possible.<sup>90</sup>

Unlike DeSilvey and Ryan’s suggestion that repair in the twenty-first century ‘is often a lifestyle choice (and a luxury) rather than a necessity’, for the Players this process of un-making, as a form of repair, is indeed an necessity and an essential part of how they keep their theatre going (2013: 148). By understanding un-making as a form of repair we begin to unravel the ongoing repair processes involved in amateur theatre-making, where sets are in a constant cycle of unmaking and

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<sup>87</sup> Fieldbook notes, 24/5/15

<sup>88</sup> Graham, interview, 26/7/16

<sup>89</sup> Ivor, interview, 26/7/16

<sup>90</sup> Jim, interview, 11/1/16

remaking. Here, the set builders can be understood not only as makers but also menders who, Pink suggests, bring ‘together what is needed to re-make whatever is at hand’ (2013: 13).

## Section Two

### Repurposing: Set Building with an Adhocist's Sensibility

Everything can always be something else (Jenks and Silver, 2013: 27).

'We have a very adhoc way of doing things here' was something that John said to me on one of my early set building sessions with the Players.<sup>91</sup> He said this to me after we both overheard Graham and Helen backstage discussing what piece of wood should be used to construct part of the festival set *After Midnight, Before Dawn*. After some time searching through the Players' collection of wood, propped up against the back wall next to the fire escape, I heard Graham exclaim 'as long as it's higher than me then it'll work'.<sup>92</sup> I quickly wrote this moment down in my book, with the word 'adhoc' marked against it as a sort of key. The word adhoc would become a word noted down many times in my fieldbook, as a word that the Players continuously used to describe their theatre-making.

The process of doing something ad hoc, "'for this" specific purpose', has been explored, most notably, by Jenks and Silver in their important book *Adhocism: The Case for Improvisation* (2013: 16). Jenks, a critic and landscape artist, had coined the term 'adhocism' earlier in 1968, as a term to denote repurposing design.

Born from the conjunction of ad hoc, meaning "for this particular purpose", and ism, shorthand for a movement in the arts (2013: vii).

*Adhocism*, first published in 1972, acted as a sustainable and subversive manifesto for design and architectural practices of the time. It troubled the idea of a

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<sup>91</sup> Fieldbook notes, 15/2/15

<sup>92</sup> Fieldbook notes, 15/2/15

standardised and institutionalised creativity, and rather foregrounded, as Craig Martin notes, the ‘localised immediacy of need’ that anyone could take part in (2016: 88). Adhocism means to work with what is familiar to hand, and readily available, rather than working with something that is both removed in space and time (Jenks and Silver, 2013). It is a way of doing that is at once reliant on both urgency and purpose, rather than a ‘random, undirected and haphazard action’, and is a way of dealing with a problem through a ‘general and loose approach...rather than a tight and systematic one’ (2013: 16). Doing something ad hoc, in short:

[I]nvolves using an available system or dealing with an existing situation in a new way to solve a problem quickly and efficiently. It is a method of creation relying particularly on resources which are already at hand (Jenks and Silver, 2013: 9).

In their book, Jenks and Silver explore multiple examples of adhocism in processes of everyday life, from advertising, photography, city planning and architecture, to literature, film, cooking, medicine and sex. Interestingly, in one particular section of Silver’s chapter, ‘The Adhocist Sensibility’, he focuses his attention on the art of theatre, specifically on the performances therein. What Silver notes is that ‘performance has always depended upon improvisation and the use of props as resources’. In particular he uses the example of Charlie Chaplin in the film *The Gold Rush* where ‘Chaplin’s cane was constantly being pressed into service as a back-scratcher, a pool cue, a leg-tripper, a stick to save someone from drowning, etc’ (2013: 143). For Silver, Chaplin’s prop is used as an extension ‘that externalises the self in a way that can seem magical’ (2013: 143). He goes on to use the example of Keith Johnstone’s Theatre Machine theatre company (a touring improvisation group), where performances relied heavily on the improvised relationship between the actor and props during a continuous sequence of improvised scenes. Silver details how Johnstone would give instructions for the beginning and end of the scenes. From here, the performances relied on the actors’ abilities to travel from the

beginning of the scene to end by way of their acting skills, coupled with their immediate and ready to hand resources including ‘props, mime and language’ (2013: 145).

Curiously Silver’s preoccupation with adhocism in theatre lies only with the use of props to enhance the performance itself. The props are ‘made to come alive *ad hoc* with an actor’s happiness or doom’ (2013: 143). However, what I found interesting here is the actors ability to use one prop in a multitude of different ways. For example with Chaplin, he prescribed multiple unexpected jobs for the cane. Meanwhile in Jenks’ section of the book, he reflects upon how the habitual meanings prescribed to things are often done so by the designer or manufacturer onto the products that are consumed, for example how a knife is sold to cut or spread various foods and a toothbrush is bought as a means to brush teeth. When these examples are unsettled or displaced - ingenious problems can be solved. Jenks proposes the simplest example of a knife being utilised as a screwdriver, or a toothbrush being used as a tool to clean typewriter keys. There are many times that I can recall using a knife, coin or house key to unscrew a many number of things at home when I have found it too much of an effort to track down a screwdriver. Similarly there have been many instances at the Settlement where I have used the same objects to dislodge a well-sealed lid off a can of paint. These familiar, everyday occurrences attest to the way in which people approach the world *ad hoc*, intuitively repurposing and reconfiguring things for practical purposes.

Reflecting on my research so far, the Settlement Players have demonstrated that ‘everything can always be something else’ (Jenks and Silver, 2013: 27). By utilising collapsible worktables, a cleaners caddy filled with nails, the surrounding bushes and exterior walls of the Settlement building, the Players create an ad hoc workshop in their car park whenever the space in the Settlement is too cramped to work. This ad hoc sensibility also extends to the way in which the Players repurposes a community hall into a theatre, with stackable chairs making an

auditorium and collapsible tables creating a bar area, a box office and a lighting and sound station. John and Jeni's home studios also demonstrate how this ad hoc sensibility extends outside of the Settlement space. The main focus of this section is to reveal how the Settlement Players physical processes of building a set share an ad hoc sensibility of resourcefulness and re-purposing, illustrating what geographer Craig Martin refers to as, the 'transformative potential of material things' and 'their openness to becoming something else' (2016: 80).

To illustrate this, I will use my fieldbook notes that record how the Players repurposed a set of industrial shelving units - usually used to store wood backstage on the Trout - into the main frame structure for the multi-level set for the Settlement Players production of *The Ladykillers*. This particular set was to become the most intricate and ambitious set that I worked on during my time set building with the Settlement Players. It was a complex, multi-level set that depicted the protagonist Miss Wilberforce's house in Kings Cross, London. On the stage floor level was a living room comprising of a large cupboard space with working door built into the set (centre stage) for the actors to hide in as well as three exits and entrances: a self-standing door frame acting as the front door; an opening for the unseen kitchen, and a working door alluding to a downstairs toilet. A set of working stairs lead up to a landing space where a corridor alluded to various other upstairs rooms including a WC and Miss Wilberforce's bedroom. Miss Wilberforce's spare bedroom (again centre stage, but above the living room), meanwhile, could be accessed through a working door to the left of the stairs that was designed to fall back into a shut position when opened. The spare room also housed a set of French windows (at the back of the set) through which actors could exit onto a concealed fixed ladder. During conversations with the Players afterwards, many of them referred to it as their favourite set to date, citing firstly its scale, and secondly its many mechanical elements (the whole set shook on cue, lights and picture hangings swayed, hidden LED lights flashed and hidden speakers on stage all created the effects of a train going by).

## Example of Repurposing:

### Building Miss. Wilberforce's House *with* a Set of Industrial Shelving

#### Units<sup>93</sup>

April, 2015. This morning I was met by an empty stage and the sound of clanging and feet scuffling backstage. I say empty - it was empty of people - but laid out on the floor were rows of long orange metal bars. After packing my coat into my rucksack and dropping it on the side of the stage, I ventured backstage to find that the last of the industrial metal shelving unit was being dismantled. 'Ah just in time to help with the last pieces' someone exclaimed as I realised what was happening.

I helped carry the last of the long pieces of cold metal - awkward to dismantle and even more awkward to manoeuvre - down the steps of the Trout and through the small doorway to the stage. 'Up a bit, this way a bit...have you got that?' asked Ivor, reassuringly. 'Just place it down on the floor with the rest of them' called out John, 'yep that's fine'. A hollow clang sounded as it dropped. Joining the other pieces of metal shelving that had been laid out on the stage floor in order of size like an unpackaged flat pack delivery from IKEA. The pieces of metal shelving were ready to be re-assembled in their, albeit temporary, home, though this time their form and use had changed.

We started to assemble the frame - the interlocking parts made the initial construction quite simple, though the loud clanging sounds that were made when the parts met and the heaviness of the cold metal gave me the fear that my fingers might someone become trapped or lost in the process. Piece

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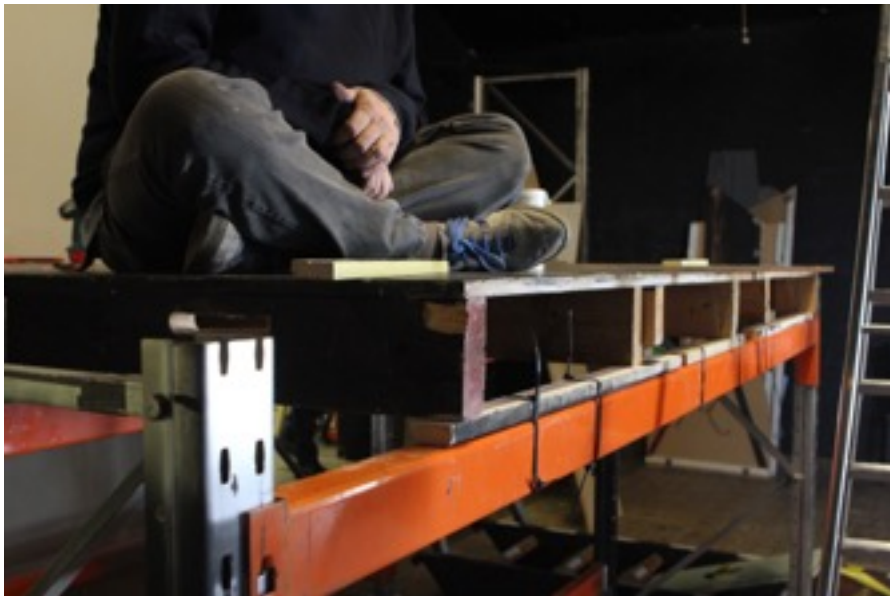
<sup>93</sup> Fieldbook notes, 12/4/15



by piece, the orange beams were affixed across ways, with both ends attaching to the silver frames or 'braces' via an interlocking system. The system involved the 'tongues' of the orange beams, fitting into the 'grooves' of the metal braces. I volunteered to attach one of the first beams, along with Helen. We lifted the beam, sliding it up against the brace - making sure we were holding the beam at the same level. It was hard to tell without counting each hole and comparing, but with help from the other Players judgement and a spirit level we matched the grooves with the holes and then lifted the beams up, slightly, above the holes ready to push down after a count (the tongues affixed downwards). It took a couple of pushes. With all of our weight directed to the palms of our hands we pushed a couple of times and finally the beam was attached. The frame quickly materialised, looking almost like a cage from afar. Backstage, the Trout was left in a mild chaotic state - the wood that had previously been stored on the metal shelves were now stacked up on top of each other and against the wall where the shelving once stood.

Rows of rostra were arranged on top of the shelving structure to create the flooring of Miss.Wilberforce's spare room, and a surface for the actors to stand on. A couple of us went up to the Trout to source small pieces of wood, which was a task considering the piles upon piles of wood which sat on the floor, unorganised due to the lack of shelving.

Cable ties were tied, at intervals, around long pieces of wood that stood underneath the rostra and above the shelving. Small pieces of wood were then placed tightly between the rostra and the wood (attached to the shelving via cable ties) and drilled into the rostra to create a support at various points. The small pieces of wood were modest and uneven in shape and chipped in places.



They weren't intentionally small in size, instead they were a result of many years of cutting up bigger pieces - clues to this could be seen in the already drilled holes and the measured crisscrossed pen marks that decorated the wood. As I picked the right size screw from the cleaners caddy, decided which drill bit was appropriate for the screw and worked out how to change the direction of the drill, determining whether it screwed or unscrewed (I had never used an electric drill until this point) and started to make my way down the rostra, drilling the small pieces of wood into it.

Week by week, as new layers of the set were added, fixed, screwed, tied and built onto it - the stage flats, stairs, doorways, windows and flooring - the metal shelving started to disappear within in amongst the patchwork of coloured flats that made the set. The only clues of the shelves existence in the set could be seen when the cupboard door was open, revealing the orange cross bars, but even these were covered by curtains and painted black by Stephen and I towards the end of the build as my fieldbook notes detail:

April, 2015.<sup>94</sup> I kneel on the sofa to rummage through the piles of material stored tightly on the shelves at the back wall of the men's dressing room. It smells like a charity shop. I'm here to find some black curtains to mask the bars below the stage. There aren't any black ones left as there has been a lot of masking needed for this set so I chose some dark blue ones instead. A maze has been created by curtains on the sides and the back of the set so that the actors' entrances and exits aren't given away. It's an ongoing job that I have been working on as it seems that every time a curtain is moved to conceal a certain part of the stage, it in turn reveals another part. I chose to walk back onto the stage through the fabric labyrinth that has been created, and so feel my way through with my free hand (the other holding the fabric).

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<sup>94</sup> Fieldbook notes, 26/4/15



Stephen and I are working underneath the set today. It's our job to mask the orange bars of the metal shelving frame so that the audience can't see them when the cupboard door is opened. We share the low cupboard like space with a large set of speakers that Ivor, John and Rob are testing sound effects on. The sound of an old steam train rattles the whole set as we work. I wish I wore more elasticated trousers as the denim is not forgiving on my legs as I bend - my knees start to ache from crawling around. Hunched over, we start to disguise the industrial shelves by painting the orange cross beams black - though only where the audience can see. 'It's all an illusion isn't it' says Stephen. After one coat I go out into the hall to check what can be seen (at the moment it doesn't stand out too much - in amongst the patchwork of painted flats from previous shows and odd pieces of wood. It looks like a ramshackle shack from a fairytale - a made from the remnants of a shipwreck or something). However it needs another coat, an orange hue can still be seen underneath the black paint. In the meantime (whilst we wait for the paint to dry) we tie some rope along the beams at the back to create a line for the curtains to hang over. It takes a while to attach the rope as the smooth surface of the beams don't create enough friction for the tied rope to stay in place. The weight of the fabric pulls the line every time. 'Do you know any knots?' asks Stephen. Neither of us do so after many attempts to style knots that stay and can be tightened. We have an idea to paint strips of the beams so that when it dries it creates a friction for the rope to stay.

As the weeks passed, I watched the metal shelving transform from a means to store wood into an integral part of *The Ladykillers* set. I thought about how, when constructed backstage on the Trout as shelving for the Players' two-by-four pieces of wood, these bars of orange metal became almost unnoticeable to me, or rather taken for granted. As a shelving unit, I had spent weeks scrambling through it, reaching to take wood off it, walking past it to retrieve other building materials elsewhere on the Trout, standing next to it whilst talking to other Players and

leaning up against it when letting other set builders pass me on the Trout's narrow walkway. To borrow from Jenks, the industrial shelving unit's 'habitual meaning [became] confirmed everyday', almost to the point of un-recognition (2013: 65).

When brought onstage, the industrial shelving units became so much more than their primary use or indeed what its producers or designers foresaw of it. During the production of *The Ladykillers*, its standardised meaning shifted and its potential function was realised as a fundamental part of the set. Without the shelving, the levels of the set could not exist, which was in turn an integral component of the performance itself. I was not alone in my own amazement as I watched the set of industrial shelves disappear into Miss.Wilberforce's house. Stephen would later recall his own surprise at the metal shelving being used in the set when I asked him how he felt about the resourcefulness of the Players:

I remember vividly the November 2011 set, *A Man For All Seasons*, as it was the first show I had a major part in. The set required a raised walkway at the back, and even now I am amazed how we disassemble the shelving backstage, move huge amounts of scenery and wood about and reassemble it all on stage. And then at the end of the show, for the whole thing has to be done in reverse.<sup>95</sup>

As mentioned in Chapter Three, the shelves had been donated to the Settlement Players by an ex-Player called Peter, who has since emigrated to Australia. John told me how that the engineering firm that Peter used to work for were throwing away these storage shelves. Peter rescued four end pieces and a number of cross members for the Players. Interestingly, John later informed me that when the shelving units were donated to the Players, it was always their intention to use them for the purpose of creating sets:

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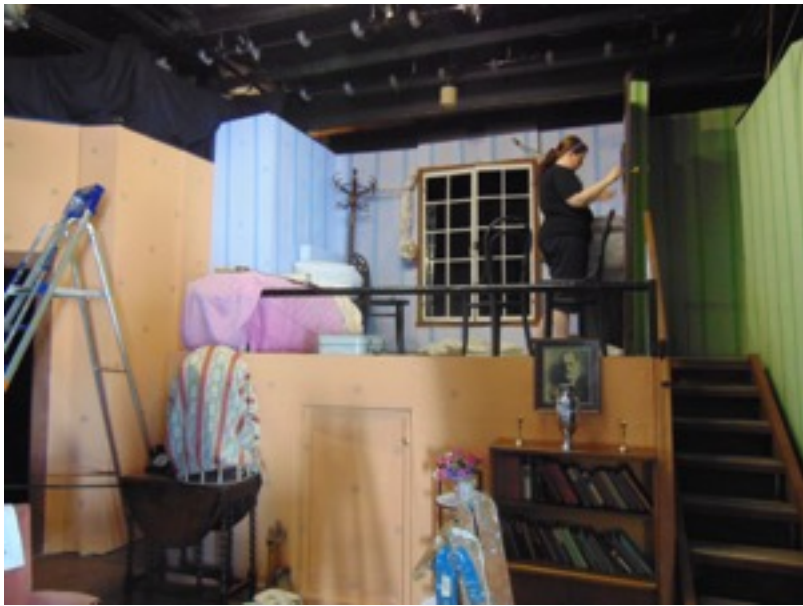
<sup>95</sup> Stephen, interview, 19/6/15

The idea was always to use them as platforms on the stage but whilst not in use they help with storage on the Trout.<sup>96</sup>

I was surprised to hear that when they acquired the shelving units, their first thought was to use them in their sets rather than as storage. This ‘displacement of habit’ by the Players signals their inherent inventiveness in recognising the value of discarded items. In addition, the Players don’t just store these shelving units away between productions, only to be used again in another set, but they are instead affixed on the Trout to solve the spatial constraints and storage limitations faced by the Settlement Players. As discussed in the last section, amateur theatre companies are beset by a lack of space, time and materials (Knott, 2015). Whilst the shelving unit’s habitual meaning, as a means of storing, was an afterthought for the Players, it was also an ingenious problem solver. In re-purposing the shelving units, the Players’ illuminate the exciting possibilities of doing things ‘ad hoc’ by re-purposing existing resources, when trying to solve immediate problems.

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<sup>96</sup> John, interview, 9/4/16





## Section Three

### DIY and Creative Camaraderie

Helen: I like the camaraderie of teamwork which produces a set.<sup>97</sup>

Craft practice is often perceived through the figure of the sole craftsman, where the thing that is made - the taxidermy bird, the wooden chair, the embroidered pillowcase, the woven wall hanging - is a result of their independent expression and work. Richard Sennett, for example, writes in his introduction to *The Craftsman* (2008) how the '[c]raftsman summons an immediate image' - an elderly man, surrounded by his tools and the 'fresh smell of wood shavings' as he 'bends over his bench to make a fine incision for marquetry' (2008: 19). In amateur craft too, this perception is often replayed. In scholarly explorations of amateur craft, attention has frequently highlighted the processes and products of individual makers and their particular practices - for example the furniture maker who labours alone in her outhouse-turned-workshop, or the solitary carpenter who makes wooden sea kayaks in his converted garage - both conjured in design scholar Andrew Jackson's exploration of the amateur maker (2010). Although the craftsman is seen as an individual working on their own artefact or object, recent scholarly explorations of amateur craft have also illuminated the sociability of craft practice. They highlight how some craft is undertaken by people physically working alongside each other, such as the Women's Institute (Hackney, 2013), and also in virtual space through the imaginary (blogs, forums) communities of interest (Carpenter, 2011, Gauntlett, 2011). However, this imagery is something that would not accurately describe the amateur theatre-making that I experienced with the Settlement Players. In response, this section draws on Vannini and Taggart's understanding of the relational practices involved in off-grid home building, where amateur builders take it upon themselves

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<sup>97</sup> Helen, interview, 14/1/16

to build their own homes, but not without the help and guidance of their friends and families who invest their own time and skills. Their suggestion that ‘it always takes a village to raise a barn’, struck a cord with how I was starting to understand the Settlement Players’ own craft (2014: 271). In this section I hope to highlight the creative camaraderie involved in amateur set building, where the thing that is made the set (and then the production itself) is the result of many hands and minds at work.

But first, I shall explore the set builders’ craft through work on DIY. As Jackson observes, ‘most often, within the English-speaking world, amateur making is discussed under the rubric of do-it-yourself, or DIY’ (2010: 7). As highlighted in Chapter Two, the phrase DIY can itself be attributed to many varied amateur making activities and is often used to denote an ethos or attitude towards making as well as an aesthetic expression. However it is perhaps most traditionally understood as a way of explaining creative material practices of homemaking, where the homeowners themselves undertake decoration, renovation and maintenance rather than relying on professional builders and decorators. Although traces of the expression do-it-yourself have been found prior to the 1950s, historian Steven Gelber notes how the phrase became more commonplace during the mid-century with the expansion of homeownership and suburban living (1997). Since then the term has become part of the vernacular for ordinary home improvement, and, as Matt Watson and Elizabeth Shove explore in their own analysis of DIY, in the UK specifically it has remained a steadily growing cultural phenomenon (2008). They highlight it as an important area of craft consumption today, where consumers are ‘actively and creatively engaged in integrating and transforming complex arrays of material goods’ themselves (2008: 69). It is no surprise then that when B&Q, one of the UK’s leading home improvement retailers, launched their website in the early 2000s they choose the domain name [www.diy.com](http://www.diy.com).<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> B&Q was established in the 1969 under the full title of Block and Quayle with their first shop in Southampton in an old disused cinema. At a time when building supplies had to be sourced from builders’ merchants and hardware stores, Block and Quayle saw an opening in the market to provide cheaper products, longer opening hours and a broader product range to a burgeoning group of DIYers.

## **‘You can have a go at anything’:**

### **Understanding the Players as DIYers**

In his article ‘Do It Yourself: Democracy and Design’ (2006) design scholar Paul Atkinson describes DIY in terms of democracy, as a:

[D]emocratic design process of self-driven, self-directed amateur design and production activity carried out more closely to the end user of the goods created (2006: 1)

Here, Atkinson places focus on DIY as both a productive and creative ‘design activity’ which releases people from the ‘grip of professional tradesmen and skilled artisans’ (6). He argues that DIY acts as the ‘antithesis of the prescribed design of the mass marketplace’ and the recognised cycle of designer - producer - consumer (2006: 1). Meanwhile, DIYers are allowed to actively engage, directly, with many elements of the design process, positioning themselves as creative agents rather than passive consumers. In this way, DIYers establish their own ways of working that reject prescribed design rules, in turn forming self-identities as creative makers and designers. This degree of freedom, he writes, allows DIYers to make decisions and to take part in an activity that may challenge notions of gender, class and the need for skill, specialisation and professional training. When first attempting to conceptualise the set building process, DIY was a practice that I first looked to as a way of understanding the set builders’ ways of working and craft.

The democratising agency of DIY, as highlighted by Atkinson, spoke to what I saw in amateur theatre-making more generally. During my time with the Players, I was constantly reminded of the freedom that was felt within the group to, in Jim’s words, ‘have a go at anything’. ‘We know that we’re not Hollywood actors, very few people are’ Jim explained to me one Sunday morning before set building began.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Jim, fieldbook notes, 15/2/15

It was a cold but sunny February morning and Jim and I were sat underneath the covered porch of the Settlement, waiting for John to arrive with the keys. Jim would often come to me with helpful insights into the world of amateur dramatics, usually something that he had thought about over the previous week and would casually drop into a conversation when we spoke about my research. ‘But there is a freedom to that’, he continued:

In amateur theatre you have more freedom to try out whatever you like...It’s more creative when you think about it. Writing, set building, directing, acting, doing the costume...the technical side of it, sound, lighting. You can design a set if you volunteer... you can have a go at anything. You can’t say that for professional theatre where you’d be stuck in one role. You spend time training to be one thing or another and that’s it. Of course some big actors go into directing, but they will probably never get behind a camera.

‘Or build a set’, I added, ‘yes or build a set’, Jim replied. It was interesting to hear Jim’s distinctions between the amateur and professional practice in this way. For Jim, being part of an amateur theatre group meant that, unbound by professionalised and specialised training, he could actively engage with many elements of the theatre-making process. As well as being a set builder, Jim (at the time of my research) was in his second year as Chairman of the group, where he had been working on developing the Players’ website and setting up an online box office/ticketing service. He is a regular actor, performing in both the main Settlement productions and festival plays, as well as having directed three shows (one of which was *The Ladykillers*, as explored previously in this chapter). In addition to all this, Jim has taken on the role of stage manager and, on the rare occasions when he is not involved in a play, he told me ‘you’ll find me front of house, working on the bar or something’.<sup>100</sup> The same could be said of numerous Players with multi-faceted creative identities within the group. During my time with

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<sup>100</sup> Jim, interview, 9/1/16

the Players I witnessed Stephen and Helen taking on their very first directorial roles. The one-act show nights, which take place in April and September at the Settlement, are catered towards members of the group who want an opportunity to try out directing for the first time. ‘I think I’ve done everything’, Helen told me:

Set building, lighting, sound, acting, stage management, curtains. I’ve not done props solo, that’s Margaret’s department, but I’ve helped source and make props... I may have to give stage design a go if John fancies a break.<sup>101</sup>

For many of the Players, the freedom to participate in whatever role they wanted within the group, irrelevant of specialised skills, knowledges or previous experience, was very much a defining characteristic of amateur theatre-making, evoking the DIY attitude that Atkinson posits in his exploration of the subject (2006). As put by Helen, when describing to me how she felt after joining the set builders in 2007, ‘it didn’t seem to matter that I wasn’t good at woodwork or electrics’.

In addition to the democratic agency of DIY practice that I saw relating to the Players theatre-making more generally, I also found that the material processes associated with the more traditional understandings of DIY speaking to the physical processes involved in building a set. Out of the three main shows that were staged at the Settlement in 2015, two of them required creating a domestic interior for a set. The construction of both Fey’s living room in *My Own Show* and Mrs Wilberforce’s living room, spare bedroom, stairs and landing in *The Ladykillers* involved building and decorating processes that conformed to what Gauntlett would describe as the mainstream notion of DIY:

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<sup>101</sup> Helen, interview, 14/1/16

[A]ssociated with everyday home improvement - putting up shelves, assembling flat-pack wardrobes, and fixing drainpipes oneself, without professional help (2011: 49).

During these two productions, we set about recreating domestic scenes away from our own homes. By bypassing the hiring of specialised, professional bodies - much like everyday DIYers - we were creating fictional scenes of domesticity by exercising popular Do-It-Yourself practices that would usually be associated with everyday home improvement. We painted (albeit fake) walls and window frames, and attached doors onto door frames with hinges. We then hung pictures onto the walls with nails, arranged furniture, built furniture and put up shelving. At one point, we even wired up a working telephone onstage so that it would ring on cue. Further still, I found that the more traditional forms of stagecraft also utilised forms of mainstream DIY. The act of hanging stage curtains in order to ‘mask’ the stage, for example, uses the same hook and loop fastening system that would be employed when hanging fabric or shower curtains onto a rail at home.<sup>102</sup> Meanwhile, ‘seaming’ the flats together, in order to create one seamless background onstage, uses the same materials, tools and step-by-step processes that one would use to wallpaper walls in a domestic space. During my first morning as a set builder, I arrived onstage to find a bucket filled with wallpaper paste mix, a wide brush, a shaky foldable table and an equally shaky ladder, which had all been set up in preparation for the morning’s build. John asked me if I’d like to ‘give seaming the flats a go’ and followed up this question by asking, ‘have you ever wallpapered a wall before?’<sup>103</sup>

January, 2015. ‘Try and keep the sheets of paper at the edge of the table and brush towards you like this... so the paste doesn’t get on the table’ said John as he began to cover the strips of white paper with wallpaper paste. The

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<sup>102</sup> Masking is a process whereby stage curtains are hung up around the set in order to obstruct the audience's view of the backstage area.

<sup>103</sup> Fieldbook notes, 18/1/15

strips were too long for the table and so John pasted one half at a time, feeding the other half onto the floor. I watched intently as he dabbed the brush into the paste even so slightly, ‘you don’t want to use too much paste, but not too little either...and make sure it’s as smooth as you can get it...we don’t want any bubbles’. When the paper was completely covered, John carried the pasted strip to the first set of flats that needed ‘seaming’. He climbed the ladder and pressed the top of the paper against the top of the two flats, covering the gap between them both. When this was aligned, he used a thick, soft bristled brush to perform quick, firm brushstrokes from the middle towards the edge of the paper, following the gap all the way down to the bottom of the flats. ‘You need to brush like this’ he explained, ‘and make sure there is no air trapped underneath...so it doesn’t bobble up...and you just do this all the way down, making sure its smooth and that its covering the gap... and if it’s a bit too long like this, just use this knife to cut the bottom off... Do you want to take over now?’

Interestingly, many of the Players signalled more traditional forms of DIY skills as the ones that they rely on to build a set. Graham told me that when he was younger, and newly married, he refurbished a house and through this he has learnt ‘how a lot of jobs are do-able’.<sup>104</sup> John, who has learnt a lot of his theatre-craft from working with amateur groups from an early age, even cited home DIY as a reference point for building a set.

All of these processes, in turn, created temporary scenes of home improvement onstage. The photographs that I took on a weekly basis captured the stage appearing as a room in a house, under renovation or in the process of being decorated.

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<sup>104</sup> Graham, interview, 27/6/16





The stage became a space littered with step ladders, battery powered drills, paint pots and lids, tins of screws, clips and pins, hammers, screwdrivers, and paint brushes resting on old painted splattered sheets that were put down to save the carpet that covered the stage from stains. At the end of every set building session, one of us would bring the Hoover in from backstage and Hoover the carpet that covered the stage. All of these processes, that are conventionally associated with DIY home improvement and maintenance, when performed on stage, translated as processes integral to building a set.

What is clear is that the Settlement Players set builders share many characteristics and traits with the most traditional or conventional understanding of the DIYer. However, as my research developed, I realised that perhaps a better way to understand the Settlement Players set builders processes is through the expression ‘doing-it-with’, coined by Vannini and Taggart in their exploration of Canadian off-grid builders (2014; 2015). The next section will explore this more.

### **‘Doing-It-With’**

In a hope ‘to transcend the typical characterisations of creativity and the occasional characterisations of DIY as an individualist expression’ (2014: 281), Vannini and Taggart’s work highlights the way in which craft practices that may at first appear to be acts of ‘DIY’ or Do-It-Yourself are ‘in most cases, really nothing but DIW - doing it with others’ (2014: 268). An example of this would be the fact that most people who undertake forms of DIY will often refer to outside sources for assistance, whether that be found in reference books, how-to YouTube tutorials, websites or online forums. However, Vannini and Taggart’s examples stretch further than this, suggesting that self-builders often engage in relational practices, ‘becoming entangled with others, historical traditions, with space-specific resources, and with the affordances of the materials they utilise’ (2014: 267).

In this way, DIW or ‘doing-it-with’ presented a useful lens through which to look at amateur theatre-making as a craft practice that is anything but a solo endeavour. So far in this thesis, I have highlighted the entangled nature of the Settlement Players’ set building processes, and the way in which they collaborate with non-human actors such as space and materials. In Chapter Four I considered the ways in which the Players work *with* the Settlement building, realising it as an important co-biographer of their craft story. Meanwhile, in the previous sections of this chapter, I explored the ways in which they make and re-make with the affordances of the materials that they have to hand.

Further to this, Vannini and Taggart’s rejection of the image of the self-sufficient, self-reliant and individualistic DIYer came from a feeling that it did not ‘accurately describe [off-grid] builders in all their nuances’ (2014: 271).<sup>105</sup> On reflection neither did it accurately describe the amateur set builder. As I looked through my fieldbook notes from the Sunday set builds, instances of the Players’ entanglements with ‘others’, or indeed each other, became apparent. The extract from my fieldbook that follows details the way in which Stephen, David and I painted scenic effects on to the scenery flats together for *Ladies of Spirit*, highlighting how our own improvised paint strokes became entangled with one another’s.

### **An Example of ‘Doing-It-With’:**

#### **Painting the Scenery Flats with Stephen and David<sup>106</sup>**

October 2015, Today, Stephen and I volunteered to paint the flats that are going to act as the walls of a headmistress’s office at a private school for young ladies in Gibraltar. John briefed us on what painted effect he wanted

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<sup>105</sup> They suggest, for example that ‘home-building was, historically, much less dependent on informal business structures and more reliant on cooperation between individuals, family members, and the local community’ (Vannini and Taggart, 2014:280)

<sup>106</sup> Fieldbook notes, 25/10/15

us to create on the flats. He envisioned walls that looked aged and a little bit beaten over many years of wear and tear - 'as if they hadn't seen a fresh coat of paint in a long time' he said. In addition to this, John has prepared a small painting on a folded piece of paper, which he had laid out on the side of the stage (amongst the to-do list for the day, pencil lined set designs clipped onto John's clipboard and a Wilko paint colour chart). This painting was a sort of guide that showed John's vision for the look of the set - a cross section of a flat - the top half of the painting was covered in a burnt yellow/orange colour (noted in pencil as 'Yellow Ochre'), while the bottom half was painted brown (noted in pencil as 'Burnt Sienna') and decorated with dark brown and white lines creating the effect of wooden panelling.

Stephen and I shared the pot of the "Yellow Ochre" paint that had been bought especially for *Ladies of Spirit*. We discussed and agreed that he would start painting the right hand flat, I would start on the left flat and our plan was to meet in the middle. I carried (manoeuvred with difficulty) a ladder out from backstage so that I could reach the top of the flat. A window had been constructed in the middle of my flat and so I had to start up high. We chose our brushes from the brush pot and Stephen decanted some of the paint from the big pot into a Starbucks paper cup to take with him to start painting. I balanced the big pot on the top step of the ladder - envisioning it falling/ being knocked off with every step up that I made.

At the top of the ladder, John busied past us, attending to other aspects of the set. I told him in passing that the pressure and responsibility of doing the paintwork for the set was making me feel slightly nervous. It is in moments like this on set that personal responsibility crosses the mind. I can hear the audience now, 'the play was great but oh dear, who painted that wall?' John had told me previously that some audience members tend to notice parts of the set and will comment on details (good or bad) after the

performance. I had witnessed John at rehearsals, many times, walking around and viewing the stage from every possible angle of the hall. Writing notes on a scrap piece of paper titled 'Jobs to do'. This is the list that informs the next set building session. Scribbled down observations highlighting, for example, parts of the set - flats, furniture etc... - that may have been missed during painting, and stage curtains that could do with being moved an inch or two to fully blackout the backstage areas. Today was my first foray into painting on set 'properly'. This wasn't like painting the door white and the bar black for *My Own Show*, they were more straightforward. This time I had to create an effect.

Neither of us talked about how we were going to approach the painting before we started, which seems funny now on reflection. Stephen and I both had our own ideas and understanding of what John wanted from us when he asked us 'could you make the walls look worn in, but still cover the walls with paint completely'.

I started by pushing my brush into the flat whilst I moved the handle of the brush back and forth. This intensified the paint in the middle and faded the paint surrounding it. I started to cover the surface through a series of, what I can best describe as, swirls and zed actions. I had little idea about what I was doing, I was improvising - it was just a series of improvisations - a feeling that this way of brushing may create the right effect.



As our painting started to meet in the middle, across the white paper seam held the two flats together, I questioned Stephen's own improvised technique, 'how are you doing it?' I asked. 'Uh... I'm sort of doing a series of eight pattern, like this'. Stephen showed me his series-of-eight technique and I tried it out myself, it was then that I realised that my method had made my brush look a little bit frazzled and so I lightened my strokes.

We continued to paint like this, Stephen by way of his series-of-eights, me by hybrid of my original technique and series-of-eights, as we talked about things other than set building. Up close both of our efforts appeared to create the same effect, yet as I stepped back to photograph our progress of a morning's work, I noticed that our individual painting techniques had created a completely different effect. The paint on my side was more condensed, where Stephen's technique had applied the paint sparsely. I called Stephen back to have a look too, 'maybe you should go over my bit more and I'll start on the next flat' he said. Meanwhile, David (the director of *Ladies of Spirit*) started to paint a flat on the opposite side to us - but not before asking us what techniques we were using.

As my fieldbook notes illuminate, unlike a lot of other forms of craft, set building is reliant on many people working together to make the same thing - the set. For Stephen, David and I 'doing-it-with' involved painting the flats together. Whilst trying to create an overall effect for the walls of the set, inevitably we were also 'doing-it-with' John's vision of the set (his mock up painting), our multiple skill sets and techniques, our proficiencies with our tools, as well as our own creative visions and interpretations of what the set needed to look like. In turn these created an interesting and un-uniform aesthetic.

This small example of 'doing-it-with', however, was not a unique moment. From the beginning of any set's construction, every person present assists in carrying out the

scenery flats from the backstage area and positioning them on stage. Following this, some builders hold the flats stable whilst others affix the flats together with rope and climb ladders to tie them to the rig above. After this the flats are seamed together, a job usually undertaken done by two people – one who cuts the sheets of paper and one who pastes the sheets and then affixes them onto the flats. Amongst all of this, other builders are painting, constructing and decorating various parts of the set. As John noted one Sunday morning, ‘everyone has to feel useful, everyone here has given up their Sunday morning, some are more skilled than others but you have to find a job for everyone, that’s what we’re here for...we enjoy making’.<sup>107</sup> In short, it would be hard work to build a set alone. Instead, sets at the Settlement are a result of many people working together.

The Settlement Players ‘doing-it-with’ can also be seen as a result of more pragmatic reasons. Stephen, for example, told me how his lack of skill with some elements of set building has meant that there have been many instances where he has spent ages making something, only for someone else to take over and finish it. Meanwhile the voluntary aspect of amateur dramatics, along with its ‘supplementary status in relation to everyday life’ as Knott would suggest, means that a full group of set builders cannot always be guaranteed weekly (2015: 58). Other life commitments, outside of amateur theatre, such as work, birthdays, anniversaries, lack of childcare and holidays can prevent the Players from attending every Sunday morning set building session. In addition to these life commitments, I also noticed how other commitments *within* the group would draw people away from the build. As I have already discussed, amateur theatre allows the opportunity to take part in multiple roles. This freedom brings with it multiple commitments and conflicts of time. Rehearsals, auditions, costume fittings, technical meetings and testing (lighting, sound, visuals) all created conflicts of time and were all reasons for set builders to leave part way through a Sunday morning set building session. These other commitments often mean that specific parts of the sets were almost never worked

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<sup>107</sup> John, fieldbook notes, 18/1/15

on solely by one individual person, instead they might be picked up one week, passed on the next.

By looking at amateur theatre-making through the lens of ‘DIW’, it assists further in challenging the idea of the (amateur) craft practitioner as the sole figure, whose craft product is the direct result of their independent expression and work. In the amateur theatre-making that I was able to be a part of at the Settlement, the collective effort of the group was crucial to making the set. Whilst John designs most of their sets, when the set designs are brought into the Settlement and passed around the other builders, they are interpreted in different ways and are executed through an assemblage of varying techniques, skill sets and proficiencies with tools by the rest of the set builders. As Vannini and Taggart write on the relational quality of off-grid building:

[B]uilding is not an exercise in imposing one’s solitary vision and will on an object but rather a set of practices resulting in numerous entanglements’ (2014: 269).

Further still, whilst being a useful lens through which to think about how the Players construct a set on stage together, Vannini and Atkinson’s idea of DIW or ‘do-it-yourself’ can also be applied to amateur theatre more generally. ‘I love the complete creativity of putting on a play’ Jim told me:

You start off with an idea and that grows. When the actors come together for the first time to read through a play, nobody really knows where it is going. Then together, we work and mould the words on the page to be something much more. Slowly, it takes shape and then the technical people become involved, the set is finished off and painted, the lights and sound effects and everything else come together and, there you have it, you’ve got a show.



Then, when you're ready, you make a couple of hundred people happy when they come and see what you've done.<sup>108</sup>

What becomes apparent with Jim's description of amateur theatre here is that not only are there multiple roles involved in making a piece of theatre - from sound and lighting technicians, props, prompts, stagehands, costumers, set builders, front of house, stage managers, directors and actors - but through the lens of 'doing-it-with' we can begin to unravel the multiple moments of collaboration within these roles, undertaken by multiple Players. This approach illuminates how the Settlement Players are constantly working together to make theatre. In addition to this, by looking at the moments of 'doing-it-with' right across amateur theatre we can better understand the reasons behind why amateur theatre-makers join amateur theatre groups and the togetherness they often feel.

### **Creative Camaraderie:**

#### **Concluding Thoughts About What 'Just Works'**

During the interval at *The Ladykillers* production, Graham told me that, since his retirement, he has realised the importance of being able to walk somewhere to both meet and be around people. Graham signalled that, for him, it is the 'camaraderie' that is the best part of coming to set building mornings. Interestingly camaraderie was a word also used by Helen when I asked her why being a Settlement Player was important to her:

I enjoy the camaraderie and atmosphere of set building [...] I'd always been a bit shy, tending to stay home instead of going out, and after uni I wanted to change that. Meet new people, build confidence [...] I liked drama at school

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<sup>108</sup> Jim, interview, 11/1/16

but felt I couldn't join the drama group because most of the members were the 'popular' kids. People I felt I couldn't talk to, it sounds silly now.<sup>109</sup>

I first saw the phrase 'creative camaraderie' in MacCarthy's book on William Morris, titled *Anarchy and Beauty*.<sup>110</sup> She used the phrase to describe the co-operative effort that went into building and designing, probably his most famous house, Red House (named after its red brickwork). Red House was materialised through the 'gatherings of friends' (2014: 19). MacCarthy notes that from the very beginning, Morris chose the location of the house with his friend and architect Philip Webb, who charged no fee for the design. Later more of Morris' artist and designer friends would come and stay with him for 'working holidays'. During these holidays and weekends, MacCarthy notes how each of his friends would contribute their artistic skills and efforts by, amongst other things, decorating ceilings and furniture, painting murals, tiles and stained glass windows to designing furniture and furnishings, down to copper candleholders and green tinted drinking glasses. All of these things, MacCarthy notes, gave Morris' house its specific character.

The idea of creative camaraderie is rather fitting, given that the Settlement is an Arts and Crafts building and that William Morris was influential in the founding days of the Garden City movement. The themes of friendship and making together that MacCarthy notes in her work on Morris and friends, are also shared by the Settlement Players. Helen told me that being a Player means being part of a family and being surrounded by friends, as well as being a creative outlet. Meanwhile, Jim rather beautifully associated coming to set building mornings and being a Settlement Player to the feeling of 'going out to play with [his] mates when [he] was younger'.<sup>111</sup> He continued:

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<sup>109</sup> Helen, interview, 14/1/16

<sup>110</sup> *Anarchy and Beauty: William Morris and his Legacy 1860 – 1960* accompanied the exhibition of the same name, which explored the life, and ideas of Morris. It ran at the National Portrait Gallery, London (October 2014 -January 2015) and was curated by MacCarthy herself.

<sup>111</sup> Jim, interview, 9/1/16

I'm not a very sociable person. Apart from my fellow Players I don't have many friends. Strangely, in conversation with other players I discover that many of us are the same. Considering that we are actors, most of us are quite shy and retiring. But at the Settlement, no such worries, we all get on so well together and whatever we are working on, it's always great fun... As you can probably imagine, it means a great deal to me to be a Settlement Player. As well as the fun, I get the chance to be creative in an environment that couldn't be more supportive. I love it.

The friendship noted by the many members of the Settlement Players can be neatly summed up with the work of Geoghegan on enthusiast communities where she writes how social interaction is central to community life (2012). As I have explored in this chapter, for the Settlement Players, their sense of community and friendship is not only formed through social interaction, but is also intrinsically tied to making through their ways of working.

John: It has always been a nice feeling to make something useful and put part of yourself into something [...] I just like making magic on stage, it is the collection of people we have that makes it all tick in a space that we know and can use.<sup>112</sup>

Through the limitations of space, materials and finances, the Players have had to find particular ways to make sets, which move beyond more formal and specialised rules of design. In Graham's words, what makes the sets 'just work' can be found in the assemblage of things coming together, both artistically and socially. In conversations with the set builders all agreed that the multiple processes of making-do - repair, re-making, re-cycling, re-using and re-purposing - were all

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<sup>112</sup> John, interview, 12/7/16

characteristics of their particular theatre-making and that they were happy that I had noticed them.

Further to this, as I have illustrated in this chapter, set building isn't just a solo endeavour; instead it relies on multiple hands working together to make theatre. Theatre-making, particularly that of crafting a set, relies on an assemblage of different creative expressions, skills and enthusiasms from a group of people working towards the same thing – a set. Through this lively craft, friendships are built and sustained as the Players are at once engaging with making and each other. Set building for the Players is about being part of the processes of making, and being able to do that with other people, which in turn can be understood as giving a set and a production its special character – this is what makes the sets, as Graham remarked, 'just work'.



## Concluding Thoughts

My research began with a desire to understand the often hidden spaces and processes of amateur creative practices, specifically that of amateur theatre-making. I did this by paying particular attention to the people involved in backstage work - those who have rarely been acknowledged within the academy yet are integral to how theatre is actually *made*. By investigating the spatial, material, embodied, technical and social elements of their theatre-making, I have illuminated how amateur theatre-makers must often make by 'making do'. This concluding chapter will discuss what I learnt throughout the process of my PhD research, whilst addressing its limitations, implications, as well as suggestions for further study.

This thesis did not come without challenges. One of the challenges that I faced when beginning my research was finding previous work on both contemporary amateur theatre and backstage work. As I discussed at the very beginning of this thesis, contemporary amateur theatre has long been ignored by the academy. In addition to this, backstage work, specifically set building, has also gained surprisingly little scholarly attention. Therefore I found myself researching something that had never been researched before, which was both exciting yet challenging. As a result, I had to find ways to conceptualise, research and understand contemporary amateur theatre-making myself, whilst situating my work across multiple disciplines. Related to this, another challenge that I found whilst writing this thesis was that I was communicating it to two different disciplines and two different audiences: cultural geography (my academic background) and theatre studies. Thus, when setting out this thesis I decided to position myself between the disciplinary boundaries in order understand amateur theatre-making as a creative practice and craft.

In doing so, I considered amateur theatre-makers as creative practitioners in their own right. Rather than situating my research in relation to professional theatre, I have explored the intricacies and complexities of their everyday practice by putting amateur theatre-making alongside other geographies of making - both professional and amateur. In turn, what I have contributed to the field of creative geographies is a study that has taken seriously the spaces and processes of amateur creativity. By taking part in the 'doing' of theatre-making, and researching it from the inside, I sought to find out what it means to make theatre and be a theatre-maker. Further to this, my work contributes to the growing field of amateur studies and within the wider amateur turn, demonstrated by debates surrounding the amateur, enthusiasm and vernacular, everyday, lived creativity. Thus, highlighting the need to focus more on the geographies of amateur creativity and the amateur more broadly.

Part of the work of this thesis has also been to challenge the often reductive and derogatory popular notions and cultural stereotypes of amateur dramatics, which have often remained unquestioned and unscrutinised within the academy. The choice to conduct an in-depth, ethnographic study needed to be empathetic to the Settlement Players practice whilst still critically engaging with it. Amateurs and amateur theatre-makers specifically are a new area of study and I wanted to do them justice. Being welcomed into an amateur theatre group gave me a privileged position in which to study this. The four themes that I outline in the next section are taken from my study and consider the intricacies and complexities of their practice.

## **Understanding Amateur Theatre-Making as a Craft and Creative Practice:**

### **Four Themes**

Discussions in this thesis have been guided by three empirical chapters, each of which focussed on a particular area of the Settlement Players' theatre-making. Drawing on these three chapters, in this section I shall identify, recognise and

illustrate four themes that are significant to amateur theatre-making, specifically that of backstage work. These four themes serve as discussion points that pay particular attention to the spaces and processes of the amateur theatre-makers' creativity. Taken together, they help to highlight the social and cultural significance of amateur theatre as a craft and a creative practice, as well as amateur theatre's role in both constructing and sustaining communities over time. They are not, however, a finite list. The themes I capture here arose from telling a 'small story' about one amateur theatre group - the Settlement Players of Letchworth Garden City. I recognise that there is no singular experience of amateur theatre-making, and that each company will have their own particular ways of working and relationships with the places that they make theatre and perform. My research does raise questions that contribute to wider understandings of amateur theatre and will, I hope, encourage more critical engagements with amateur theatre-makers.

### **1. Repair, remaking, repurposing: understanding the 'ongoingness' of amateur theatre-making**

What I have highlighted in this study is the sheer resourcefulness and imaginative nature of the amateur theatre-makers' craft and creative practice. Due to the restricted finances and space, in which to store things, amateur theatre-makers must often make-do with a limited amount of materials and tools. Therefore amateur theatre-makers must find ways of working which move beyond more formal and specialised rules of design and making. In Chapter Six, I explored the Settlement Players' particular ways of working on a set, which revealed how processes such as repair, re-making, and repurposing are integral to the ongoing nature of amateur theatre. Interestingly, with short production runs being a familiar characteristic of amateur theatre (owed to a culmination of costs of hiring a venue, limited audience numbers and people having other commitments outside of amateur theatre - full time jobs, families etc.), sets often spend more time in the making, than they do *made*.

In this study, I detailed the ways in which the Players, during set strikes, meticulously and carefully unscrew, unstick, unfix every piece of the set, and store them away ready to be re-made again in the next production. In addition to this I also illuminated to the ways in which the Players maintain their materials, for example stripping the surfaces of the scenery flats so that they can be re-used in every show. By caring for and maintaining in this way, amateur theatre-makers allow the life of their limited amount of materials – everything from scenery flats, down to screws, nails and hinges – to live on. Amateur theatre-makers assure the ‘ongoingness’ of their theatre-making through the cyclical processes of making, unmaking and re-making again. Meanwhile, by repurposing objects in order to build sets, amateur theatre-makers also demonstrate their problem solving abilities by making-do with what is at hand. In the case of the Players, this can be seen in the ways that they inventively repurpose a set of industrial shelving units (used to store their building materials) in order to create multi-level sets on stage. Amateur theatre-makers’ illuminate the exciting possibilities of repurposing existing resources, when trying to solve immediate problems. They recognise the value of discarded items - whether that is giving old clothes new lives on stage as costumes, or old homewares as props.

## **2. The relationship with the building**

Buildings and access to them are significant factors in how amateur theatre is made - determining when and where amateur theatre-makers can rehearse, perform, make costumes and build sets. As I discussed in Chapter Four, some amateur theatre companies have access to their own buildings in which to prepare and perform with facilities such as dressing rooms, set building workshops, studio spaces, costume and props stores. Other companies, such as the Settlement Players, utilise multi-purpose buildings such as community centres, churches, village and school halls. Amateur theatre-makers often spend a significant amount of time in



the places in which they make theatre. Through attending weekly set building sessions I was afforded the chance to develop an understanding of the potential relational interconnectedness between amateur theatre groups and the buildings in which they inhabit. This in turn highlighted how amateur theatre-groups and their buildings can often become biographically bound to each other through shared histories and ongoing relationships.

My study illuminates how the Settlement building itself is integral to the Players' experiences of theatre-making. I have considered how the materials, tools and processes of the amateur theatre-makers' craft hold the potential to transform (both permanently and temporally) the buildings' spaces in imaginative, unpredictable and often improvised ways. Specifically, I highlighted how a community hall can be transformed into an auditorium, with box office and bar, with stackable chairs and collapsible tables, and how a dressing room can become a space of tea and respite for a group of set builders on a Sunday morning. In turn, theatre buildings also hold the capacity to shape and influence amateur theatre-makers' work in different ways through its material realities. Whilst craft knowledges related to set building are passed on through weekly set building sessions, so too are local knowledges of how to work with and *within* the building.

By expanding on Patchett who suggests that craft is always a co-authored process between practitioner, tool and material, I posit that buildings can also be understood as co-authors of amateur theatre-makers' craft stories (2015). Just as an amateur theatre-maker as craftsman must work *with* both the affordances of their tools and the energies of their materials, they must also work *with* the buildings in which they make.

### 3. Amateur theatre-making in the home

As this study has shown, amateur theatre-making does not just take place in the theatre building. In Chapter Five I explored how amateur theatre-makers' practices often spill out into their personal and everyday domestic spaces. Through limitations of both time and space at the Settlement – a multipurpose building that accommodates many other recreational groups and societies – I found that amateur theatre-makers such as John and Jeni must often work on aspects of the play away from the theatre building. This means that amateur theatre-makers' must regularly craft creative workspaces or studios, out of necessity within their homes.

What I have found in this study is that amateur theatre-makers' studio spaces are varied and take on many forms. Some can often be hard to find because of their temporal nature, whilst others are more obvious. John, for example, chooses to draw on a clipboard, which gives him relative freedom to design sets wherever he chooses within the house. His studio in the living room, meanwhile, relies on the inspirational natural light from his patio windows and music to set the mood. Meanwhile Jeni's materials and tools of making can be found scattered around her whole house, leaving lasting clues to her craft – from the costumes hanging from her staircase and the sewing machine positioned on her academic work desk, to the sequins lost in the carpet.

Unchallenged by ideas and ambitions for more conventional and specialised spaces of creativity, this study of the home has demonstrated reciprocity between the amateur theatre-makers' creative and domestic realms. Their creative doings and identities as amateur theatre-makers are not governed by the spaces in which they work. Rather, it is their creative activities that transform and define their domestic spaces, and it is through these spaces that their creative identities are constantly formed and performed away from the theatre space (and indeed outside of their professional lives). Further to this, through the constant exchange of materials, tools

and people between the home and the theatre building, it becomes a space where they are reminded of their place within a wider amateur dramatic community.

#### **4. Creative camaraderie: crafting a community through the crafting of a set**

What is clear from this thesis is that amateur theatre-making is not a solo endeavour. Instead it relies on multiple hands at work. A theatrical set is an interesting product of craft, as, unlike a very many other crafts, it is not the direct result of one practitioner's independent expression and work. Set building can be understood as an assemblage of multiple hands, minds, creative expressions, skills, proficiencies, commitments and enthusiasms from a group of people working towards the same thing – a set.

Amateur theatre-makers' sense of community and friendship is not only formed through social interaction, but is also intrinsically tied to making through their ways of working. As highlighted in Chapter Six, set building for the Players is not only about being part of the processes of making, but also having the freedom to learn new skills (from each other) and explore new roles within the group (irrelevant of specialised skills or training). In addition to this, amateur theatre productions are often not one-off events, as in the case of the Players; they produce three main productions a year, with additional one act show nights and festival plays. Through this, friendships and communities are built and sustained overtime, as amateur theatre-makers are constantly engaging with making, un-making and indeed re-making with each other.

## Implications of My Research

### **An Attention to Amateur Creativities in Drama and Theatre: Participation and the Audience**

There are wide implications from my research, both inside and outside of the academy. In drama and theatre studies specifically, the inclusion of amateur creativity, as a subject of investigation is an important one. As I discussed in the introduction to this thesis, amateur theatre has a lively place in the social and cultural life of many communities, despite receiving little involvement from funding councils, charities, local authorities and indeed attention from academics. Its marginalised status means that it has often been excluded from scholarly investigation and official histories, yet it has and continues to actively contribute to the ecologies of social and cultural life for many people.

This particular study into the world of amateur theatre is specific in its focus. My decision to study amateur theatre as a craft and creative practice came from an interest in engaging with, and telling a small story about, one aspect of theatre-making in depth - that of backstage workers (set builders, costume and set designers). However it is my hope to inspire further study that builds on my research with a focused attention to the spatial, material, embodied and technical dimensions of amateur theatre-making. What future research might consider are critical engagements with contemporary amateur theatre and amateur theatre-making in order to open up wider understandings of the practice. What is interesting and significant about theatre (both professional and amateur) is that it is a practice that is made up of multiple processes, happening concurrently, which all culminate in the final performance. Whilst I explored amateur theatre as a craft and creative practice, specifically paying attention to set builders and backstage workers, such studies might expand on this by focusing attention to the processes, or micro-geographies, of other practitioners involved in amateur theatre-making; for example

actors, directors, prompts, stage managers, front of house, stagehands and technicians. Others might also look through additional lenses to explore, for example, the gendered nature of amateur theatre.

This thesis contributes to an understanding of the significance of participatory practice within theatre studies, an area of study which values the ‘doing’ and the role of participation in theatre, rather than focusing solely on the performance. There has been much consideration within drama and theatre studies of performance and participation, and how related modes and methods are shaping contemporary theatre in manifold ways (Harpin and Nicholson, 2017). Often participation is framed in terms of ‘immersion’ in the performance event. Immersive theatre for example offers the audience a chance to participate in the performance itself through embodied and interactive engagement with the performers. Immersive theatre as a participatory practice has been explored recently in James Freize’s book *Re-Framing Immersive Performance* (2017). Freize understands it as a form of theatre which offers the audience a ‘chance to do more than ‘just’ observe or study’, instead ‘they offer the chance to interact with, even to become, the object of attention’ (2017: 1). An attention to the amateur in drama and theatre studies speaks to these debates. This particular study contributes to discussions about participatory performance by placing analytical focus on the moments of theatre-making that happen before, after and around the performance, rather than focusing on the ‘finished’ performance itself. I chose to illuminate theatre-in-the-making, and indeed the ‘un-making’, by looking at backstage work and privileging the moments of ‘doing’ and asking what it means to do (and make-do) whilst building and designing sets and costumes and set striking.

This study directs debates towards the relationship between participation and amateur creativity, and accepts that amateur theatre can be understood as a form of participatory process. Attention paid to participation in theatre and performance has been considered in terms of the professional artists’ use of the non-

professional performers (social groups) as collaborators. In relation to performance art, Claire Bishop refers to this participation as ‘delegated performance’ which describes the act of hiring non-professionals ‘to undertake the job of being present and performing at a particular time and a particular place on behalf of the artist, and following his/her instructions’ (2012: 219). Similarly, participation is also a prominent theme in ‘applied theatre’, an umbrella term for when theatre practitioners facilitate education or outreach projects in diverse and non-traditional settings such as prisons, museums and dementia homes. Here participatory strategies are utilised in the process of making theatre. This is often done with participants who are not skilled in theatre arts and to audiences, Monica Prendergast and Juliana Saxton note, ‘who have a vested interest in the issues taken up by the performance or are members of the community addressed by the performance’ (2009: 6). Participation in this context lies in the ‘doing’ of making theatre and is considered as transformative, encouraging social good. As Anna Harpin and Helen Nicholson describe in their recent book *Performance and Participation: Practices, Audiences, Politics*, applied theatre can be understood as:

[E]ncourag[ing] a whole range of social benefits, such as grassroots activism, health education and development activities, where it is assumed that ‘bottom-up’ or ‘people’s participation’ in decision -making processes automatically ensures greater representation and extends civiv engagement and community involvement (2017: 2).

As I have demonstrated in this thesis, amateur theatre is about the ‘doing’ and participating in the ‘doing’ as much as it is about the final performance. People join amateur theatre groups for many different reasons, though these reasons are usually to do with meeting and socialising with other people; learning hands-on skills such as building sets and making costumes; building confidence; making and re-making creative identities; a love of performing and trying out something new. Further, amateur groups such as the Settlement Players spend more time making

theatre than they do performing it, as illustrated in Chapter Six, the Settlement Players' sets spend more time in the process of being made than they do actually made. Similarly, plays spend more time being rehearsed than they do being performed. Although the final performance and look of the set (along with technical elements and costume and props) is taken seriously and is the 'thing' that is worked towards, the 'ongoingness' of amateur theatre along with the love of working on and participating in making something together is perhaps more important. In this way amateur theatre can be understood as participatory in nature, and can speak to work on participatory processes used in theatre in interesting ways; for example, could the amateur theatre-maker be understood as an expert in participatory processes, rather than being addressed by them?

My thesis has also argued that amateur theatre is in itself very distinctive from these other modes and methods of participatory practice. The distinctions lie in the fact that amateur theatre is not about, or does not rely on, outside professional practitioners coming in and trying to 'empower' or shape the experiences of the people who participate. Neither is it the sole purpose or focus of amateur theatre to facilitate social good or act as a force for change. Holdsworth, Milling and Nicholson make a useful distinction between the amateur and non-professional performer, writing that:

Amateurs make theatre for the love of it, often sharing an enduring passion that lasts a lifetime and an enthusiasm that is passed down from one generation to another. Non-professional performers may participate in a single performance or event conceived by professional artists, and community performers work with professional theatre-makers, often focusing on local stories or participants' experiences (2017: 5-6).

Instead, amateur theatre can be understood as a local and everyday, self organised form of theatre that is ongoing, due to the commitment of its members.

Interestingly, an attention to amateur creativity alongside work on participatory processes in theatre studies also potentially speaks to existing debates that seek to survey the role of the audience and their encounters with theatre. Recent research such as Freshwater's *Audience and Theatre* has worked to complicate notions of audiences as passive consumers, realising their role as active participants in myriad ways - from immersing themselves into the performance to thinking about the ways in which audiences personally interpret, get angry, and joke about productions (Weaver in Freshwater, 2009).

My argument in this thesis is that a new attention to amateur creativity within theatre studies allows for the audience's relationship with the production to be reconsidered. During my time set building with the Players my attendance at performance nights was either as a volunteer front of house member or a paying audience member. Over time I came to realise that my position as a member of the cast and crew, and at the same time paying customer, was shared in with many other people in the audience who had either contributed or was connected to the performance in some way. Many of the audience members were often current or previous members of the Settlement Players themselves, along with friends, partners and family members who had been part of the production process - helping build the set or altering costumes; donating furniture from their homes and clothes from their wardrobes; donating props such as instruments or records from their local shops; driving actors, actresses and backstage workers to and from rehearsals and set building sessions; volunteering for the front of house roles (before taking a seat in the auditorium) and helping actors and actresses read through their lines at home. After the production run had finished, many of the audience members could be found at the after show party, and then again at the set strike the next morning. Audience members of amateur dramatics could be understood as keeping the theatre going, involved in many of the processes of making theatre that surround a production - adding to the on-going qualities of amateur theatre.



## Amateur Performance Space

My thesis has illustrated how amateur performance space is often playful, resourceful and in a constant state of change through what I have described as the ‘doings’ of amateur theatre-makers. In this way, attention to the amateur in theatre and performance studies speaks to, and challenges, existing methodologies of addressing spaces of performance. There has been much consideration of performance as a way of thinking about, critiquing and revealing place and space within theatre and performance studies. In turn, performance space has been used to define, describe and interpret the theatrical event itself (Wiles, 2008). However amateurs and their performance spaces have long been overlooked in these debates.

Much of the recent work on performance space in theatre studies has focused on the city, which, as Nicolas Whybrow comments, has ‘superseded the preoccupation in recent decades of arts and humanities critical discourse,’ (2010: 3). Whybrow’s edited collection of writings, *Performance and the Contemporary City*, explores the city as a cultural artefact, where the everyday movements of urban bodies can signal the performative nature of everyday life; acting as examples of encounter, doing, transformation and interaction. The flâneur, for instance, intervenes with the city by walking aimlessly around it in order to defamiliarise, shape and understand it in new ways. This disruptive yet explorative playfulness has a critical outcome, often inciting socio-political change through an embodied experience of the urban. In this way, ‘bodies can be said to both produce and be produced by the city’ and whilst cities construct experiences, the cities themselves become characterised and shaped by a multitude of everyday movements, behaviours, interventions and decisions by people (2010: 3). Cities, in short, are in a constant process of changing ‘like bodies’ (2010: 4). Whilst amateur theatre-makers are not countercultural in the same sense of the flâneur, the work of the amateur challenges the perspective of everyday performances as overtly political. As I have argued in this thesis, amateur theatre makers shape their own performance spaces through everyday, pragmatic

architectural interventions (both temporary and permanent), characterising their spaces through their on-going doings, which can assist in telling smaller stories of social cohesion.

As I have demonstrated in this thesis, on-going, pragmatic architectural interventions of amateur theatre makers happen over minutes, days, weeks, years and even decades, often because of the lack of specialised space in which to make and perform theatre. These interventions often leave lasting traces of performance and theatre-making, adding to the micro-history and biographies of places. Mike Pearson's book *Marking Time: Performance, Archaeology and the City* develops a methodology to be used by other scholars in mapping and evoking micro-histories of performance spaces through a triangulation of 'location, encounter and record' (2013: 15). Sitting between the disciplines of archaeology and performance studies Pearson seeks to explore and determine 'what kind of trace does performance - as an ephemeral, transitional phenomenon - leave?' (2013: 245). Pearson visits numerable sites on foot, around the city of Cardiff where alternative performances and place have converged. Pausing at disused factories, street corners and scenes of crimes, he recollects through fragmented memories, photographs, and personal testaments, juxtaposing the materiality of the city and the materiality of performance and 'employing them as mutually reflexive aides-memoire or mnemonics' (2013: 11).

My argument in this thesis is that a new attention to amateur creativity within theatre studies suggests an on-going attention *to*, and appreciation *of*, particular performance spaces (community, town, village and church halls). Following theatre-in-the-making, rather than attending to 'theatre made' lends itself to understanding performances spaces and how they are biographically bound to people (who make, perform and watch theatre). Amateur theatre companies often have close and ongoing ties with the places and spaces in which they constantly make and perform theatre. In this way, amateur theatres (in whatever form they take shape) specifically

contribute to understanding the micro-histories of places through lasting connections and shared biographies. However it is only through a methodology of on-going attentiveness that many of these traces can be uncovered.

It is also possible to argue that attention to the amateur challenges methodologies that are often associated with spaces of performance. Growing from a frustration with commodity theatre, David Wiles looks to the past to explore a diverse array of performance space which do not adhere to the conventional theatre building. Wiles' frustration lies with the play and the performance space being understood as separate entities, with the play being the same wherever and whenever it is being performed. Instead he believes that 'that theatre worth experiencing [...] necessarily folds together 'place, performance and public'.' (2008: 4). Wiles explores a plurality of western performance spaces - including pubs, galleries, churches, banquets and the street - that have not been accounted for in theatre history. In Wiles' book the amateur is overlooked, as it has been in theatre history more widely, however amateur performance spaces sit well amongst these broad examples. As this thesis has shown, amateur performance space is often unconventional, minimally resourced, has temporal characteristics and strong connections to place. However as this thesis has uncovered, performance spaces of the amateur don't just exist at the time of the performance and that we should look at performance spaces before, after and around the performance itself.

### **Geographies of Amateur Creativity: Hobbies, Leisure and Volunteering**

By paying attention to the amateur in this thesis, I have argued that amateurs are a vital part of understanding the diverse ways in which creativity, arts and culture are experienced and understood. As Hawkins recognises in her book *Creativity*, 'creative practices have the potential to make places and build communities' however 'such debates [around creativity] have come to encompass other kinds of creativity too, including everyday and amateur creativities; such that everything, from collection

gardening to amateur theatrics, is understood to offer means to connect communities and forge senses of place' (2017: 160). An attention to amateur creativity within the field of geography is an important one if we as scholars are to recognise a more critical, generous and diverse understanding of creativity and where it happens - in all of its guises. Whilst the growing field of creative geographies, along with the geographies of making and craft have already started to include stories of the underrepresented amateur along with their processes, spaces and enthusiasms, amateur creativity can also speak to areas of geographical interest such as hobbies, leisure and volunteering; space and the affective and emotional geographies.

Recently, there has been a growing fascination with the world of hobbies, leisure and volunteering. Studies of amateur theatre, and amateur creativity more broadly, contribute well to this call. The amateur theatre-makers in this study, for example, can be understood themselves enthusiastic volunteers, who give up their spare time to make and perform theatre. Scholars in this field have investigated enthusiastic people involved in archaeological societies (Geoghegan, 2009), model railway groups (Yarwood & Shaw, 2010), maritime heritage (Laurier, 1998) architectural societies (Craggs, Geoghegan & Neate, 2013, 2016), and other voluntary pursuits (Smith, Timbrell, Woolvin, Moorhead & Fyfe, 2010). Here, focus has been placed focus on the situated and embodied practices of people who give up their time to pursue various activities without economic incentive. What many of these scholars have foregrounded is the need for, what Fiona M. Smith, Helen Timbrell, Mike Woolvin, Stuart Muirhead and Nick Fyfe call, 'more lively and creative accounts' of the involvement of people in varied dimensions of social action, voluntarism and participation' who are rarely included in academic discussion (2010: 258). In response, many of these studies have illuminated what it means to 'do' volunteering, whilst thinking about it as a practice with experiential, situated, embodied, material, social and emotional dimensions.

By exploring and taking seriously the everyday processes of hobbies and leisure pursuits, scholars have illustrated the ways in which volunteers and hobbyists often contribute to their varying areas of enthusiasm – whether that be technology, science, architecture, model locomotives, maritime heritage - through their diverse knowledges and practices of conservation, preservation and collecting. As Craggs *et al* note in their study of architectural enthusiasts, volunteers across the country are actively running and maintaining sites such as ‘small museums, archives, and industrial heritage sites’, playing vital roles in “doing and making civic geographies” (Craggs et al, 2016: 7). Following from this, it would be interesting to think about how other amateur groups, involved in creative practices, take part in both doing and making ‘civic geographies’ through their enthusiastic voluntary actions. With regards to amateur theatre groups specifically, focus could be turned to how amateur theatre companies provide entertainment, through performance, to communities in places that might otherwise not see theatre due to varying factors such as financial constraints and distance. An attention could also be paid to how amateur theatre companies keep local histories alive through their personal archives, collecting unofficial histories of places through stories of theatre-making - adding to Eric Laurier’s understanding of the field of heritage ‘where multiple understandings of the past are being produced’ that are ‘not just popular and elitist’ but produced by amateurs. And how amateurs keep plays alive by performing repertoires that might otherwise be forgotten or untouched by professional theatre (1998: 21).

Finally, in her article ““If you can walk down the street and recognise the difference between cast iron and wrought iron, the world is altogether a better place”: Being Enthusiastic about Industrial Archaeology’, Geoghegan suggests that the passions and enthusiasms of volunteers and hobbyists in turn create diverse and specialist knowledges and practices that complicate expert statuses (2009). This speaks to the ways in which amateur practitioners must find ways of making and indeed making-do (with materials and tools in time and space) by learning through doing. Further,

it speaks to how these knowledges are passed on through shared practice and what can be understood as embodied archives. What an attention to amateur creativities could bring is an appreciation of these diverse knowledges, exploring the ways in which many creative practices and cultures are preserved and kept alive by the enthusiasm and dedication of ‘amateurs’, who continue to make, study, practice, perform and create through what Geoghegan suggests as ‘the pleasure and joy experienced in doing things’ (2009).

### **Amateur Creative Spaces and ‘Slow Scholarship’**

This thesis illuminates the importance of exploring amateur creative spaces and processes of production that exist out outside of specialised, separate and more conventional spaces of creativity, recognised and associated with artistic production. The discussion here will pick up from the discussion above on what an attention to amateur creativity might contribute to work on performance spaces within theatre studies. The field of cultural geography is adept at exploring spaces of creativity, whether that be the artists studio, the workshop, the gallery or the notebook. Through research conducted in this thesis, multiple creative spaces have been opened up that have previously been overlooked. This thesis opens the socio-spatial nature of amateur spaces for critical scrutiny (especially in places that are shared in multiple-purpose buildings for example), where multiple amateur groups and communities layer spaces with functions and meanings in different ways and times. As Hawkins suggests in the closing to her book *Creativity*; ‘we must ask where creativity happens and ‘attune ourselves to other geographies of creativity [...] creativities that either escape or are willingly overlooked in creative economy discussion’ (2017: 341).

While studies and interest into what Hawkins refers to as ‘other geographies of creativity’ - understood here as the amateur, marginalised, vernacular and everyday creativities - continue to grow within the field of geography, many scholars have

placed focus on and so have illuminated the creative spaces that are made and re-made within the city and urban centres, often through activist intervention. Recent work, such as Joanna Mann's article 'Towards a politics of whimsy: yarn bombing and the city', investigates the potential of yarnboming in affecting the urban environment in ethical, aesthetic and political ways, 'by altering the configuration of sensual appearances' and awakening people to the city around them (2015: 71). Yarnbombing, Mann describes, takes the everyday, 'whimsy' practice of knitting out of the home and into the streets, with 'craftivists' and enthusiasts alike decorating the city by 'stealthily attaching handmade fibre items to street fixtures or parts of the urban landscape' (2015: 66), creating 'micro-political gestures', increasing our awareness and 'attentiveness to habitual worlds' (2015: 65). Meanwhile, Oli Mould's article 'Tactical Urbanism: The New Vernacular of the Creative City' also explores vernacular creative practices in the city through the idea of 'Tactical Urbanism'. Tactical Urbanism's roots lie in 'community-led, activist, unsanctioned and even subversive activities' (2014: 529), where community-orientated initiatives seek to 'change and reconfigure their city and do so without governmental involvement' through practices such as yarnbombing and gorilla planning and gardening (2014: 529).

These studies do much in the way of placing focus on what could be deemed everyday, non-professional processes and spaces of creativity, particularly the impact that processes such as yarnbombing and DIY urban planning have on making and re-making space over time. In addition, they use the city - a place normally associated with the creative clusters and creative classes as a backdrop to challenge and defy the character of these creative practices as 'frivolous and without motive' and in the process 'supersed[ing] these traits with intentionality and utility' (Mann, 2015: 65). However, what this thesis has brought to light is the need to attend to spaces of creativity that exist outside of the city and urban landscape, and that are made and re-made by amateur creative practices that are not always so overtly political or ignited by activist interventions; for example, a

community hall in a town forty-miles outside of London that is made into a theatre four times a year, a carpark used as a weekly set building workshop or a living room .

A community hall, a carpark and a living room are just some examples within this thesis that illuminate how amateur creative spaces are often temporal and hard to find. Following from this, I hope to have also contributed to an appreciation of what spaces and processes can be uncovered through, what geographers Chantel Carr and Chris Gibson might refer to as, ‘slow scholarship’ (2017). In their article ‘Animating geographies of making: Embodied slow scholarship for participant-researchers of maker cultures and material work’, Carr and Gibson write on the growing interest in the geographies of making in which geographers have ‘found points of entry into worlds of working with makers and materials’ by way of researching out in the field (2017: 7). ‘First-hand knowledges’ they write, ‘create richer field experiences. Moreover, they extend an opportunity to welcome different forms of knowledge into the academy’ (2017: 8).

The creative spaces continually made and re-made both within the Settlement building and indeed the homes of Jeni and John that appear in this thesis were only afforded to me through a longstanding relationship with the Players. The multiple theatres, set building workshops, tearooms, auditoriums, box offices, bars, design and costume studios that were (and continue to be) created through the ongoing creative processes of the Settlement Players’ craft were understood through an ongoing and indeed a first hand engagement with the craft of making theatre with them. Spending over a year attending Sunday morning set building sessions at the Settlement enabled me to experience the temporal and often fragile dimensions of amateur creative spaces and how easily they can be packed away and otherwise be missed. If I had visited the Players a handful of times, observing by the side of the stage (as I began my research) there was no guarantee that these



spaces would have revealed themselves. Instead it was through ‘slow scholarship’ that I was able to watch these creative spaces manifest, over time.

The PhD process afforded me this time. Spending a sustained and long-term period of time researching with the Players allowed my roles to change from observer to maker. Time allowed my research to become a process of discovery, where methodological and conceptual ideas were informed (in part) by the empirical research itself. As Carr and Gibson attest, scholarship in the neo-liberal university brings problems for academic studies, similar to the research conducted for this thesis. They write how today ‘productivity and accountability are measured in publications’ meaning that long-term and immersive research is made all the more difficult to conduct because of academic time constraints due to ‘sped-up publication exceptions’ (2017: 7). They write how:

Commitments to the manual work of making, and not just interviewing subjects, are dependent on the need to find ways to make slow scholarship possible to work within and beyond the typical constraints of time and administrative concerns for documented consent, safety, and security as well as to validate the auto-ethnographic, exposing the personal to critical peer review (7).

Slow scholarship speaks well to studies of amateur creativity and making, especially considering amateur practitioners’ relationships with place and their ability to both make and re-make creative work, iteratively over time.

### **The Amateur and Affective Engagement**

In this thesis I have looked beyond derogative associations surrounding the amateur, returning to an understanding of the amateur as ‘someone who loves what they do and does it for its own sake’ (Beegan and Atkinson, 2008: 310). In this way,

and expanding on Knott's ideas of amateur craft being more 'complex, innovative, unexpected, roguish, humorous and elusive' (2015: xii), studies of amateur creativity can offer important analyses of the experiential value of cultural participation. This study contributes to existing work within geography, that looks towards the affective, embodied and emotional dimensions of research (Ahmed, 2008; Pile, 2010; Morrison, Johnston and Longhurst, 2013). It contributes to this varied body of work which shares an interest in accessing the felt and non-representational ways of 'knowing, being and doing' in the world, I have demonstrated an understanding of how creativity and the act of physically making something (sets, costumes, props, workshops, studios, theatres) is intrinsically entwined with love, emotion and affect (Pile, 2009: 6). Whilst uncovering the material, spatial, technical and embodied aspects of amateur (theatre-)making, further study could also attend to a myriad felt aspects of amateur creativity, experienced during the processes of making. Attuning to moments of care, love, happiness, enchantment, excitement and romance, as well as the possible frustrations, insecurity, embarrassment, discomfort and anger.

In this thesis, affective, embodied and emotional dimensions of amateur creativity weave throughout my fieldbook notes, captured conversations with the Settlement Players and small stories of making theatre with them. Capturing, writing up and describing these felt dimensions of research are understood to be tricky and many scholars have turned to ethnography and direct experiences as empathetic methods of accessing such qualities (Pile, 2009). Through apprenticeship and visual methods I have engaged with how bodies must continuously learn to move and work *with* and *within* buildings; how achy hands and splintered fingers cut wood and strip wallpaper, whilst unstable legs stand on top of ladders and hang stage curtains in cold community halls. These affective dimensions of amateur creativity are important in understanding the experiential value of amateur creative practices, where people contribute their time, skills and enthusiasms in do something they love and doing it for its own sake.

Carey-Ann Morrison, Lynda Johnston and Robyn Longhurst prompt in their article ‘Critical geographies of love as spatial, relational and political’, as researchers we need ‘to think critically about love in its entire multisensory, lived, embodied, felt and contradictory guises.’ (2013: 505). In a bid to validate and conceptualise the ‘geographies of love’ as spatial, relational and political, they illustrate how geographers have, in the past, restrained from explicitly writing about affects and feelings in their work - even though most scholars will come across degrees of these elements during their research process. However it is by capturing these affective dimensions, and what Sara Ahmed might call ‘the messiness of the experiential’, that we can fully understand social relationships between people, objects, spaces, places, activities and living things (2008: 10).

As I have illuminated, sets at the Settlement were (and continue to be) constantly made and re-made as part of the on-going craft processes of the set builders. Alongside this, friendships and affective communities are also built and sustained, as the Players are at once engaging with making and each other. In this way, just as I have sought to understand amateur theatre-making (and amateur making more broadly) as a process rather than a product, love and emotion can also be understood as a process, ‘shap[ing] what we do, how we do things, what we do things with, and where we go’ (Ahmed, 2008: 13). In ‘Sociable happiness’ Ahmed writes how the hobby group or fan club ‘make explicit what is implicit about social life’ and that it involves the enjoyment of ‘sharing a direction towards some things as being good’ (2008: 13), she continues, ‘we tend to like those who like the things we like. The social bond is thus rather sensational’ (2008: 11). In this thesis I have illuminated this sentiment through the Players’ shared love of making (un-making and re-making) theatre together. On-going relationships are formed through amateur makers working towards the same thing through their particular ways of working with materials, tools and the buildings in which they make. Further, by understanding making and creativity more generally as a spatial process we can also

start to think about how people's bodies are connected to the (social) spaces in which they make through affective bonds.

In short, by attending to affective, embodied and felt dimensions of amateur creativity, scholars can reveal more what it means to be an amateur creative and an amateur more broadly. As I discussed at the very start of this study, the wider AHRC project has not been shy about using the word 'amateur' in relation to theatre, and in this thesis the word amateur has been liberally used throughout to describe the people who make theatre at the Settlement in Letchworth Garden City. In her recent article in the Guardian titled 'In theatre, amateur is not a dirty word', theatre critic Lyn Gardner posits:

[I]n my own field, some of the most interesting writing about theatre is being done by bloggers who are not paid by anyone to post. But you wouldn't call them amateurs, so why does the theatre industry persist in calling those who don't get paid "amateurs" in such a derogatory manner? (2015).

Gardner's reflection above offers a timely consideration of what it means to be 'amateur' in the twenty-first century. As discussed in the very beginning of this thesis, amateur practice and creativity is experiencing a renewed passion. With this, the cultural stereotypes surrounding the word 'amateur' are becoming increasingly complicated with blurring boundaries between what it means to be amateur and professional. While amateur bakers, potters and sewers become TV celebrities, and bloggers and Youtubers rise to fame and reach global audiences through online platforms, it is important to remember that amateur practices have long roots with many practitioners continuing to make, perform, and design without any recognition. Whilst this thesis has explored the amateur theatre-maker - and specifically the people working backstage - I hope that it has also opened up wider understandings of what it means to be an amateur, and to take part in amateur practices, in all of its guises.

In this thesis, I investigated amateur practice as processes rather than products by paying attention to the everyday spatial, material, embodied and technical dimensions. In doing this, I hope to have demonstrated a more generous, experiential understanding of the amateur, by investigating amateur creativity with the same scrutiny that has previously been paid to professional practice within the academy. What I have found is that amateurs are creative problem solvers through necessity, because they are often limited, as Knott suggests, by space, time and tools. As I have highlighted throughout this study, amateurs have the capacity to transform mundane, everyday spaces through the processes of their 'doings'. Kitchens, living rooms, bedrooms, sheds, garages, community centres, libraries, carparks, gardens, church and meeting halls across the country are just some of the places that are transformed continuously, both permanently and temporally, by amateur practices.

I would also add that along with space, time and tools, amateurs must also make-do with limited materials and resources with which to work, due to financial constraints. Because of this, they find ways of working and doing things that often sit outside of more specialised and formal processes and knowledges. Being limited by materials and space is undoubtedly frustrating at times, however many of the amateur makers in this study felt that by having to make-do, in the long run made them more creative, allowing for more experimentation and ingenuity. It is through the process of having to make-do that amateurs can be understood as skilled practitioners bringing together varied outside knowledges whilst combining them with particular skill sets that have been learnt and practiced in the 'doing', through ongoing and iterative participation. Interestingly these skills are often learnt in relation to, and through on-going relationships with particular places; with amateurs often becoming custodians of buildings, at once caring for them whilst filling them with cultural vitality. Here, amateur creative practice can be understood as offering exciting alternatives to the commodified creative industries.

Of course there can be no one understanding or conceptualisation of the amateur or amateurism, or a set of characteristics that define what an amateur practitioner is, and so it is my hope that this thesis acts as a call for more experiential scholarly studies and understandings of amateur practices - whether that be creative or otherwise.

### **Amateur Creativities and Policy Implications**

There is a range of policy implications related to valuing amateur creativities, with specific reference to amateur theatre and beyond. These implications relate to funding, social value of community spaces, education and apprenticeship. Since writing this thesis, there have been many initiatives within the United Kingdom that have sought to encourage and celebrate ‘everyday’ creativity in order to positively contribute to the lives of people. BBC Get Creative has brought arts and cultural organisations together in order to do this, including the national campaign 64 Million Artists who send weekly creative challenges to people’s inboxes every Monday. Whilst these initiatives are important, it is perhaps also significant to take notice of the self-governed creativity that is taking place everyday amongst amateur theatre groups across the country. Amateur dramatics has long and deep roots in England. During my time with the Players, Stephen helpfully provided me with a spreadsheet detailing the amateur theatre groups in and around the immediate area of Letchworth Garden City. At the time in which he reviewed the local companies, in 2015, Stephen noted sixteen active companies (including the Settlement Players) within an eleven-mile radius of Letchworth, and two more eighteen miles away. These included:

SPADS (Song, Performance and Dramatic Society) and the Arcadians and the Fairfield Players in Letchworth Garden City; the Thespians, the Bancroft Players, the Barton Players and the Pirton Players in Hitchin; the Digswell Players and the Barn Theatre in Welwyn Garden City; CADS (Corvus Amateur

Drama Society) in Royston; Company of Players and the Hertford Dramatic Operatic Society in Hertford; the Stevenage Lytton Players in Stevenage, the Knebworth Players and the Knebworth Amateur Theatrical Society in Knebworth; the Has Beane Players in Watton-at-Stone and the Henlow Players in Henlow.

This extensive list illustrates the scale of amateur theatre companies performing in one very small part of the country, and it is clear that my study of amateur theatre-making with the Settlement Players could be replicated hundreds of times over. In this way amateur theatre-makers can be understood as already being creative, and indeed have been so for a long time. And so it begs the question why are amateur theatre-makers so rarely included or recognised in narratives around the cultural value of creativity.

Widening this discussion further, in a recent document ‘Understanding Cultural Value: The Amateur and Voluntary Arts’,<sup>113</sup> which explored the experiential value of cultural participation, Jane Milling, Angus McCabe, Robin Simpson and Hamish Fyfe illuminate the vast amount of people who actively participate in ‘amateur artistic creation’ through self-organised, volunteer-led activities in the United Kingdom (rather than professionally-led community arts or participatory arts):

Over 10 million people in the UK regularly actively participate in amateur artistic creation across a wide range of art forms and cultural activities. There are over 60,000 participant-driven, self-governed amateur arts groups in the UK. As Our Creative Talent noted, there is a paucity of empirical evidence for the number of individuals who participate in amateur music, art, performance, craft or other cultural activity without affiliation to recognised organisations (DCMS, 2008). Yet amateur arts are frequently

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<sup>113</sup>This was from research conducted as part of part of the larger Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Cultural Value project. See: <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/generic/tsrc/documents/tsrc/reports/EW-Milling---Expert-Workshop-on-Amateur-and-Voluntary-Arts.pdf> (accessed: 20/2/18)

neglected or denigrated by the value structures of formal cultural provision.  
(2014: 3)

As Milling *et al* make clear in their report, although amateur groups do not directly seek government provisions or public subsidy, amateur groups benefit indirectly from government funding of community and civic spaces such as community halls and centres. Cuts to local services mean that multi-purpose civic spaces for communities to utilise are constantly under threat. Amateurs often care and become custodians of these spaces through their ongoing use, and fill them with cultural vitality through their practices. These buildings become spaces for exchanging ideas, skills and stories and where cross-generational relationships are able to form and friendships are fostered - creating a sense of community and often a support from social isolation. Paying attention to amateur creativity and amateur groups in general, through studies which attend to the experiential, lived and everyday, assist in understanding how these spaces play a vital role in sustaining the social life of communities.

Valuing amateur creativities also speaks to educational policy. Since the coalition in 2010, recent education policies in the United Kingdom have meant that creative subjects such as art, design and technology, photography, dance, film, music and drama are fast disappearing from the secondary school curriculum.<sup>114</sup> Many schools are reducing creative as well as vocational options (engineering, tourism) to ensure students gain passes in what are deemed 'core' academic subjects. With academic subjects being seen as the sole way to higher education, coupled with funding pressures and cut backs to resources (many schools relying on voluntary donations) and specialised teachers, creativity within the state education system has been sidelined. It has been reported that between 2010 and 2017 there has been a 28%

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<sup>114</sup> Research conducted by the BBC with over 40% of the secondary schools in the UK reported how creative subjects are being 'squeezed' out: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-42862996> (accessed: 20/2/18)



fall in entries to arts GCSEs.<sup>115</sup> These changes in secondary curriculums will result in many students learning and developing creative skills outside of formal school settings. Whilst national museums such as the V&A are seeking to cater to this absence in school learning through educational programs including artist in residence workshops, amateur groups across the country (particularly amateur theatre companies) provide a more accessible route to this in places where national museums cannot reach. Considering this, it is ever more important to pay attention to amateur creativity and the work that it does in nurturing skill, commitment and decision-making. As demonstrated in this thesis, amateur theatre can be understood as an activity that values learning through *doing* and one which assists in the development of skills through various forms of unofficial apprenticeship (for example: set design and building, costume design and making, sound and light technologies).

To overlook amateur creativity, specifically amateur theatre, is to overlook its vast and varied contribution and potential. This is not to say that amateur theatre is the answer to everything, however amateur theatre, and ‘amateur’ creativity more broadly, needs to be taken seriously and valued as part of a wider cultural ecology.

### **Final reflection**

It was a cold February morning in 2015 and we had just taken our break from set building to have a cup of tea in the dressing room. Whilst the other Players were scrambling for seats, Jim told me how he had just returned to Sunday morning set building with Players after 'Doing panto' with a neighbouring group CADS (in nearby Royston). He explained to me the perils of doing a pantomime, and told me that, whilst he enjoyed the opportunity of meeting new people, he probably

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<sup>115</sup> See: <https://culturallearningalliance.org.uk/gcse-results-announced-today-see-a-continuing-free-fall-in-arts-subject-entries/> (accessed 20/1/18)

wouldn't do it again for a long time. He looked to the other Players and reflected, 'but that's what's great about this place. It's like coming home'.

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