



A professional support programme for 10 writers to develop scripts in a safe creative way

5 MINUTE NOWAYS

WHAT THE WRITERS SAY

ZOOMING AHEAD WHAT THE WRITERS SAY

In March 2020 as the country locked down and most creative opportunities disappeared overnight, Theatre West decided to use some of its small reserve to fund online readings of scripts-in-progress for writers on our database. We put out a call and over the ensuing months organised almost 20 readings, paying actors a small fee to read the scripts, hosting discussions afterwards and giving written feedback to the writers. It is on this model that we have based the project in this application.

This is what some of the writers said about the original opportunity:

“It struck me that there is something particularly powerful about a female-run company like yours. Because it is self-evident that you, and the actors you select, are kind, mature and supportive women it is much easier to talk honestly about what is working and what isn't, so you don't have to pussyfoot around things and can get straight to what needs to happen next.”

“It was illuminating to hear this piece read out loud. I think a writer can get “too close” to her work, and become less aware of how it comes over to others. To hear it read (especially so well) allowed me to see the play afresh, to get a feel for the pace (need for variation - and being more aware of “saggy” bits) and also spot parts where too much, or too little, is “given” to the audience.”

“I just wanted to email and say thank you for the reading last week. The script has been a bit of a confusing one to redraft because I'm trying to do something a bit complex, but the reading left me with a really clear sense of the next steps, and also very inspired to achieve them!”

“The zoom session led by Alison and Ann was a superb opportunity to hear my script read by professional actors, whilst at the same time providing professional feedback from the Directors of this marvellous theatre company. It has encouraged me to develop my script further. It was a unique experience and I am extremely grateful for the time and professionalism offered to me. Without doubt if you have the opportunity then take up the offer from Theatre West for a script development and reading service.”

“Hearing the script was incredibly helpful - thank you so much, I really appreciate you organising it and the three readers were brilliant.”

“ Theatre West reached out with a great initiative during lockdown to bring writers and performers together. I heard my radio script ‘The Bump’ performed, and afterwards received some very useful feedback from Ann, Alison, and the actors. The comments confirmed thoughts I’d already had about the story and highlighted other areas I could look at. This included how to develop the radio script for the stage, delving further into the main supporting character, and looking at surreal approaches to presentation. It was also just great to make some connections and hear something live again (even if just my own work!). ”

“ I cannot thank you enough for arranging the reading - and with such brilliant and perfectly cast actors! It was so useful and I feel really encouraged ”

“ During lockdown I have been working on the next iteration of a recently redrafted play, *The Ugly Child*, along with Zoom dramaturgy from the director Chelsea Walker. However, the opportunity Theatre West gave me to hear my play read at the current stage in its process was not only incredibly generous but also vital in being able to take the play on to its next draft. A writer can only truly learn the mechanics of their play when they hear it read aloud with actors and to be afforded an early reading in this way was totally invaluable in learning how that play was functioning, and more importantly what I needed to change for it to work. ”

“ I found the zoom session fantastic. It really helped me listen to the voices of the characters and make improvements on storyline/character development within the play. I think hearing the script focused me down to really listen to the actors voice and gain a new perspective on the play. The feedback from actors and south west writers was excellent and I’m now looking to redraft the play with the insights and improvements I gained in the zoom session. ”

THEATRE WEST WHAT THE WRITERS SAY

We approached a few writers who we have previously commissioned to give feedback on their experience of working with the company. This is what they said:

BEA ROBERTS WRITER

“ ... endlessly supportive, granting myself and the other creatives both the practical and emotional support we needed to experiment and create a highly original show.”



I was commissioned by Theatre West in 2014 for their autumn season where I co-devised, wrote and performed *Infinity Pool*. I applied to take part with an audacious concept - to create a play without actors - and had very little idea what the end result would be. Ann and Alison showed enormous faith in me and my vision as an artist and over the next few months they were endlessly supportive, granting myself and the other creatives both the practical and emotional support we needed to experiment and create a highly original show.

After debuting in the Theatre West season, *Infinity Pool* went on to complete a sell out run at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe where it garnered huge critical acclaim and earned us a Total Theatre Award nomination. This show became a springboard for me as a writer and after the Edinburgh run I was invited to take part in attachment schemes at the National Theatre Studio and the Royal Court, performed on BBC

Radio 3's *The Verb* and had many other meetings with theatres and TV companies interested in future collaborations.

Without Theatre West this vital step in my artistic progression would not have happened. It's due to Ann Sitddard and Alison Comley's bravery, imagination and endless patience that the play was ever given space to grow. I hope they receive the funding they deserve to enable them to continue to take chances on new artists and odd ideas.

Bea Roberts, commissioned by Theatre West in 2014 to write *Infinity Pool*, who has since gone on to win a Theatre 503 Playwriting Award, be a finalist for the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, a recipient of the JB Priestley Award from the Royal Literary Fund and, in 2018, won a UK Theatre Award.

SAMUEL BAILEY WRITER

“I had been working loosely with Bristol Old Vic for a couple of years ... but they could not offer me my first production. It was Theatre West that gave me that chance, and I’m eternally grateful to them for it..”



The theatre ecology of Bristol needs a company like Theatre West to make sure writers from that region are getting those important first opportunities to create new writing. Bristol is very good at supporting new work devised by companies, but to my mind Theatre West are the only company seeking out and commissioning new playwrights. Receiving my first commission and full production from Theatre West was invaluable to not only developing my artistic practice, but for the first time it also gave me a sense that I could actually pursue it professionally. Bristol has a huge array of creative talent, working in a number of disciplines, but Theatre West's nurturing and development of young playwrights from the South West is quite unique. I had been working loosely with Bristol Old Vic for a couple of years, and had rehearsed readings staged in their studio space, but they could not offer me my first production. It was Theatre West that gave me that chance, and I'm eternally grateful to them for it.

Since working with Ann & Alison I have gone on to be a part of The Old Vic 12, a prestigious scheme, residency and commission attached to The Old Vic theatre in London, I've received my second Bristol-based commission from Tobacco Factory Theatres for Champ, which ran in the Wardrobe Theatre in November 2016 and have received a Peggy Ramsay Award and MGC Futures grant to support my career development. Without being given the time and space (and money) by Theatre West to write that first play, I can confidently say these things may never have happened. The process was a huge learning curve but was well supported throughout the first script meetings & working with a dramaturg (with whom I still have a working relationship), to the final production. I was paired with a young, exciting director (we have gone on to make a short film together that has screened internationally at film festivals) and I'm very proud of the piece of work we made.

Samuel Bailey, commissioned in 2015 to write Coastal Defences, has since gone on to win the 2019 Papatango New Writing Prize, be selected as one of Old Vic 12 and the Orange Tree Writers' Collective.

LUCY BELL WRITER

“It is impossible to overstate that no one else is doing what [Theatre West] are doing for SW (particularly Devon) writers in terms of fully producing an extended run and getting them on a pathway to success.”



Theatre West commissioned me to write a short play (Astronoids) and then an hour long play (Are You There?) for their 2016 Moving On season. This was my first play commission (I had previously self-produced or had work produced without a writer's fee) and has paved the way for three more commissions since. I am reworking the latter play for a future life.

They also teamed me with a dramaturg (Bea Roberts) who has worked with me on two subsequent scripts, given me a script to direct and become a friend. I have also maintained a supportive, work-sharing relationship with another writer in the 2016 season (Marietta Kirkbride). It is impossible to overstate that no one else is doing what Ann and Alison are doing for SW (particularly Devon) writers in terms of fully producing an extended run and getting them on a

pathway to success. Devon has been hit hard by the closure of the Bike Shed, and TRP only offers new plays a few nights in their Lab Space for self-produced shows. The alumni of TW seasons include many well-respected names including Bea, Eno Mfon (Young Vic) and Sam Bailey (Old Vic 12). Ann and Alison work so hard to support and nurture as many talented emerging new writers as possible, and constantly evaluate how to improve their creative outcomes. In Moving On, most of us enjoyed 4+ star reviews. They play a vital part in a region, and tough funding climate, where artists without their own personal resources struggle to forge careers

Lucy Bell, commissioned in 2016 to write Are You There?, has won the Ronald Duncan Award, two Promax Awards and a Toast of Plymouth Fringe Award.

TOM PHILLIPS WRITER

“... opportunities for playwrights to develop ideas over a relatively long period of time and with the help of fellow professionals are rare and have enabled me to experiment with theatre-making in ways I hadn’t tried before and enhance my own writing practice. ”



For the past twenty years, the company has been a stalwart of the theatre scene in Bristol and the wider region, staging new writing and providing unique opportunities to local writers to develop new work and indeed new ways of working.

Having previously been Theatre Editor for Bristol and Bath arts magazine Venue, I have been familiar with Theatre West’s work since the company’s earliest days and know that its seasons are diverse, innovative, ambitious and of a consistently high quality.

As playwright, I have also received a number of commissions from Theatre West. The company produced my short ten-minute piece ‘100 Miles North of Timbuktu’ in their 2012 autumn season, which it then commissioned as a full-length script for the following year. Similarly, in 2014, Theatre West supported the writing of my full-length play ‘Coastal Defences’, enabling me to work closely with a director on the script for several months

before going into R&D, rehearsals and then production. Such opportunities for playwrights to develop ideas over a relatively long period of time and with the help of fellow professionals are rare and have enabled me to experiment with theatre-making in ways I hadn’t tried before and enhance my own writing practice. Their production by Theatre West has also meant that both scripts have an ‘after-life’ and there is every chance that they will be translated and produced in Bulgaria in the near future.

It is not only new writers that Theatre West supports, of course, and the company’s autumn seasons have provided opportunities for numerous performers, directors and technicians.

**Tom Phillips, commissioned in 2013 & 2014.
Now living and working in Bulgaria.**

MIKE AKERS WRITER & DRAMATURG

“... they have done more to open doors for people who might otherwise not have had the chance to get their voices heard than any other organization in the South West over the last 20 years ...”

Little Pictures by Mike Akers, 2006



I believe that Theatre West are completely integral to the health of the new writing ecology in the South West. Their commitment to providing opportunities to new writers and new writing is second to none and they have done more to open doors for people who might otherwise not have had the chance to get their voices heard than any other organization in the South West over the last 20 years, in my opinion. In my own journey to becoming a professional playwright Theatre West were vital. They gave me my first break in 1996 when Alison and Ann offered to stage a piece of new writing which eventually became my first play 'Holding Hands with Angels.' This was a great opportunity for me and it allowed me to get my work in front of an audience, which for me is a crucial part of the process of developing your craft as a writer. I subsequently wrote several more plays for Theatre West in the early stages of my career and this provided me with crucial opportunities to experiment with form and content and develop my understanding of

structure, narrative and many other aspects of the craft. As my career has progressed I have continued to be involved with Theatre West in supporting the next generation of writers coming through. For example I mentored Samuel Bailey on his play 'Islanders' and he has subsequently gone on to become part of the Old Vic 12 development programme. This demonstrates that Theatre West have a commitment to and an understanding of how to support new writers in the early stages of their careers in order that they can develop their craft and fulfill their potential going forward. Without the Theatre West season in the calendar, there is a significant gap in the South West pathway for new writers to get their work on its feet in a nurturing environment.

Mike Akers, first commissioned by Theatre West in 1996, has gone on to write for Bristol Old Vic, Salisbury Playhouse, Travelling Light, Polka Theatre, Green Ginger, Sixth Sense, Myrtle Theatre Company and many more.