We are concerned, in this paper, to look at a number of models of young people’s theatre in evidence in Britain today. Each model, by virtue of its focus on young people is an example of ‘amateur’, that is to say, non-professional theatre, for like amateurs, young people do not engage in theatre to earn a living or as trained performers. Their purposes are otherwise. And it is the particular purposes of the work that characterise the kind of theatre made by and with young people in Britain. It is true to say that, many of the models developed and currently thriving in Britain, have a relationship with professional theatre, but the nature of that relationship and the particular kind of professional theatre may be significantly different in different models. In order to consider these points we must refer back to some of the history, which has shaped young people’s theatre in Britain. We will reflect upon the influences and discuss a small number of models of young people’s theatre, which we hope, offer a fair representation of the range.

Britain has a modernist tradition of drama, which has permeated the majority of youth theatre practice. The impetus for this development on a significant scale came in the post-war period when the Labour government instigated a number of arts initiatives as part of a strategy for social reform. The fundamental belief was that involvement in the arts was good for you and would improve the quality of life, hence the slogan ‘arts for all’. Whilst there were weaknesses in the strategy, which was naïve and under-researched, it generated a new interest in the arts as a force of social and cultural regeneration. Two initiatives, which have survived from around this time, are firstly the touring of theatre into schools for young people and secondly the establishment of community based amateur theatre groups (Jackson 1993; Ross 1989). Amateur here simply means not professional, as such theatres are run by volunteers on a part-time basis. However they were established as an imitation of mainstream professional theatre and has since emulated the repertoire, organisation, and characteristics of mainstream professional theatre. Such initiatives created a stronger social profile for theatre, albeit as replication of a mainstream professional model. Various pioneers in arts education in schools also practiced and wrote in this period, most notably for Drama, Peter Slade and Brian Way. Slade was concerned with promoting drama as an extension of child-play, a natural human expression which should not be constrained through the prescription of working with the scripted play – an adult construct. ‘Theatre Centre’ one of one of the oldest theatres for children was founded in 1947 (Shellard 1999) and developed by Way who also later significantly developed the drama in schools movement. The next decade saw the birth of Theatre in Education (TiE) Companies. The Belgrade TiE Coventry, the first company was formed in 1965 and marked a new form of theatre for schools, initially established at repertory theatres with a small group of ‘actor-teachers’ who combined skills of teachers and actors. Typically companies created a piece of issue-based theatre and toured this into local

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1 This sense of the word draws upon Collin’s definition of an amateur as ‘ a person who engages in an

2 The term ‘professional’ is understood here to denote a full-time, paid occupation. This understanding is explained in The Dictionary of Drama (1988) as the ‘late medieval term for actors who earned their living by performance. They are to be distinguished from the amateur players who performed at new spring and midsummer or harvest festivals, who earned their livelihoods in other ways during the rest of the year.’
schools where they would perform their play to a class and then engage the children in a
workshop. Children might take on roles that engaged them in the situation presented to them
in the play, investigating and making decisions which would have implications for the
characters and situations. Issues might be environmental, racism, youth pregnancy or other
social issues of relevance to young people and society. In its hey-day, so valued was the work
that many Local Education Authorities (LEAs) funded TiE companies to work with their
schools; a handful do today. Drama in schools meanwhile was growing as a forum for
developing personal and social education. It too drew heavily upon role-play. Some
examination syllabuses celebrated Drama as a totally devised and socially committed form, in
which the skills of performance were a minor part, and the study of literature peripheral.
However since the 1980s the arts and education in Britain has been subject to ongoing central
reform. Theatre in schools, TiE and Drama in the curriculum all suffered from a reduction in
funding and support. In schools the emphasis was (and remains) upon ‘core’ subjects and
basic skills. In the professional arts, funding for many socially committed arts work was cut.
However despite over a decade of erosion of support and despite not being recognised as a
National Curriculum subject, Drama has earned a place in our ‘National Curriculum for
English’ which states that children should learn to use drama techniques and conventions such
as role-play or tableaux in order to explore meaning in literature. They should also be taught
to perform and analyse plays to develop understanding of dramatic structure, form,
atmosphere, tension and interpretation of character in order to develop their understanding of
techniques for conveying meaning. Here both aspects of Drama and Theatre Arts are
included. Very recent government reform has ensured that this is also necessary at
examination level for 16 year olds. This has become the fastest growth arts subject in schools
and is now a very popular subject at examination level. Like all subjects, it has become much
more prescribed. This year sees the last of a number of reforms ensuring that all syllabuses for
16 year olds require the analysis and performance of scripted plays in addition to knowledge
and use of different theatre form (and by implication) of related theatre practitioners. At 17
and 18 students are required to understand the cultural context of plays under study (history,
social context, cultural practices), the work of a number of theatre practitioners, how to
analyse contemporary theatre, how to stage and perform scripted theatre, how to devise their
own work and to synthesise this knowledge in both their written and practical work. Even at
examination level however Drama remains a highly interactive process-led experience,
underpinned by values of personal and social development. This current blending of more
directed study of theatre with the social commitment of drama is evident in National arts
policy also. Since 1997 the Labour government has, been actively promoting the arts as a
force of social regeneration. They have a new interest in ‘the wider impact creativity can
have: improved self-esteem; thinking and communication skills; understanding social and
cultural context; abilities that are valued by employers in all sectors of the economy’.
In this light there is support and funding for artists and arts organisations to develop their
partnerships with education and community.
It is no doubt already evident that in Britain we tend to use the term drama rather than theatre
in relation to schools and young people. Historically this has marked a distinction between a
pedagogy which draws upon theatre form (drama), and training in performance skills and the
study of plays in performance (theatre). Drama has signified for us the active involvement of
young people in an imaginary context, which is explored using theatrical form. Young people
are positioned, typically in role, in a constructed imaginary event. Over the recent decades,
with the growth of the range of theatre practices, we recognise the close proximity of drama
and theatre and increasingly each informs the other. Nowadays, whether you were to visit a
Drama class operating within the school curriculum, or a Youth Theatre workshop it is likely
that the strategies you would observe in use, would be interactive techniques or conventions.
These approaches may be focused upon teaching a discipline or upon developing young
people’s active involvement, in role within an imagined world. Theatre and drama have

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3 Rt Hon MP Chris Smith Conference address at ‘Theatre 2001’ 1st March 2001
merged and the distinctions between theatre and drama practice, between professional and non-professional likewise are being challenged.

A number of points should be clear from his potted history. Firstly, most young people in Britain will have some experience of drama or theatre through their schooling. It is probable that this experience will propose drama as a socially significant activity. In many schools pupils will also study and practice plays as performance texts, both legislation and the arts funding system support these characteristics. This leads us to our second point, that young people’s theatre is influenced by the ideology and practice of professional artists because of the funding system for the arts in Britain which funds artists and arts organisations to work with young people. The National Policy for Theatre published last year states, ‘We expect most forms of funded theatre to place education at the heart of their work’ (ACE 2000). The rationale for this is in part informed by the desire to build audiences but is also borne of a recently renewed commitment to the cultural significance of art-making. The consequence is that much youth arts are funded if they draw upon the support and skills of professional artists.

For this reason, there is a strong tradition of Youth Theatres in building based repertory theatres, often run by an assistant or trainee director. In some instances the theatre has an especially dedicated education department and the education officer or director will run a youth theatre as part of the remit of that department. Examples of this type of activity can be found all over the country and this is being further stabilised by the current support of the Arts Council policy and the existence of a national organisation, the national Association of Youth Theatres (NAYT). As one might expect, such Youth Theatres reflect some of the professional values present in the main house theatres, quite simply because their work is performed in purpose built theatre spaces with the easily available professionalism of the host theatre (in house designers, set builders, lighting designers and technical support). The content and style of work may also reflect the values and priorities of the theatre directors. For example at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre (Birmingham Rep), there is a particular emphasis upon new writing for theatre and this is reflected in both Youth Theatre work (The Young Rep) and its education programme. It has three youth theatre groups, which meet regularly for workshops in theatre skills and for rehearsals leading to performance. ‘The Young Rep Showcase’ is a week of performances in the studio theatre, which showcases over eighty young performers in three different productions. Membership of Youth Theatres requires some payment for each session, but this is not a commercial rate. The productions include both devised and scripted plays. Scripted work may be young people’s own work as part of a programme entitled ‘Transmissions’ specifically for young writers aged between 11-25. The scheme is led by established directors and writers who enable young people to develop skills in scripting ideas for theatre. Each student works towards a finished script, which is then presented as part of the ‘Transmissions Festival’ in the summer.

Other Youth Theatres have been established still following a professional model, but run by arts organisations, such as The Custard Factory in Birmingham and Playbox in Warwick where Youth Theatres were begun and have grown in a number of neighbouring satellite areas. Playbox Young People’s Theatre is independent of a professional theatre but still reflects the production values of professional theatre and predominantly works with scripted theatre or interpretations / adaptations of texts for children, occasionally with scripts commissioned for young people. Workshops, productions and the theatre space are funded from a mixture of grant-aid, project funding and fees. Recently Playbox received a lottery grant to build a purpose-built theatre for young people and this has prompted closer links with the neighbouring Royal Shakespeare Theatre enabling education work to happen outside Stratford. The space also acts as a venue for touring professional theatre, for example from the Royal National Theatre in London. The model then is of a training ground for professional theatre. The most prestigious youth theatre is the National Youth Theatre housed at the Royal National Theatre and where young people audition to join and perform in this
theatre. Most young people who belong to youth theatres do not do so with a view to becoming actors, although of course there are always some exceptions. Kenneth Branagh for example, has often asserted that his passion for theatre and especially for performing Shakespeare came from his years with performing his plays with Nottingham Education Authority’s Youth Theatre.

Other models of youth theatre, often experimental, are to be found in more independent environments. Freedom from a professional theatre and its model enables groups to address more locally defined needs, to explore processes and ideas with less constraint. Such groups may remain in an experimental workshop ambiance only seeking to perform when the need emerges from the group. These groups are generally influenced by one or two professional or educational practitioners. Where such practitioners are professional artists, they tend not to be mainstream performers but those who work and train with small-scale, experimental theatre companies, outside of the traditional theatre school ethos. Often their influences are not British in origin, but rather European with performance styles stemming from Barba, Kantor and Grotowski. Albeit experienced second hand, these influences reach young people through liaisons with such artists, or occasionally in schools through working with teachers whose university training led them to encounter such theatre forms.

Local to us in Coventry there are two notable youth theatre groups who fit this general description, the first being St Finbars Youth Theatre was establishe
d almost a decade ago to address locally defined cultural needs of the large Irish community in the city. St Finbars comprises second and third generation Irish children and is concerned to explore both the Irish culture and traditions of this community and their relationship to a contemporary multi
cultural Coventry. The work has been facilitated by local professional artists and funded in part by the city Council and in part from project funding awarded due to the involvement of professional artists. An adult community (amateur) group also works to a similar model.

The city is also home to a fiercely independent young people’s theatre group Bare Essentials. This company was set up fourteen years ago by a local professional performer who was herself influenced by the theatre of Eugenio Barba and by a commitment to devised work, developed from personal stories. Under her guidance the group has developed a particular style of devised work in which stories and myths are explored at a personal level and wound together to create performance work. The group makes one piece of work a year generating material over the period of a whole year at its weekly evening workshop. It prides itself upon using only the ideas of the young people and developing work through lengthy improvisations which develop out of physical training into a ritualistic exploration of an agreed idea. The group has also managed itself much as a small-scale company, with older group members taking a responsibility for a particular aspect such as applications for small amounts of budget funding for projects. Whilst the impact of experimental artists in youth theatre work is commonplace, Bare Essentials are not typical in their collaboration for over a decade with the same artist and in their self-management. In part due to these characteristics, the company has, for the past three years been part of a rare, funded, experiment between a repertory based theatre and other small-scale companies where it has received advice and support to develop more artistic autonomy and access to professional resources, a little like a small experimental professional theatre group. Independent youth theatre groups like these increasingly demonstrate good production values, usually due to the level of funding given to the professional artists working with them.

Young people’s theatre is also thriving in schools where the tradition is strongest. Many secondary schools (11-16/18) have an annual school play in which all pupils are invited to audition to perform, whether they have chosen to study drama at examination level or not. Typically this has been of scripted theatre performed by pupils of all ages, directed by a Drama or English specialist. Work might include popular musicals, if the school has a strong tradition of music performance, or classical plays such as those of Shakespeare, or ‘home
grown’ plays written by or devised with the teacher responsible. School plays have long been
seen as an important opportunity for pupils of all ages to work together with staff for a common purpose. Involvement in such a social activity is often considered as significant as the actual finished performance and it is unusual, even for a school that does not offer drama at examination level, not to create an annual production of some kind.

In recent years a number of secondary schools have bid successfully to have a theatre space built on their school site. Such semi-professional theatre spaces are run as community venues for arts performances and take touring theatre companies as well as providing a performance venue for curricular and extra-curricular work. In many instances the schools concerned will employ a technician usually on a part-time basis, but not an artistic director. That role, if it is exists at all, will be provided by the drama teacher of the school where the theatre is based. One such example of this is Dovehouse Theatre in Langley School in our locality. The Head of Drama is now on a split post, and part of his time is devoted to the running of the theatre. In this school the theatre was paid for by the Local Education Authority (LEA), the remaining sums for the lights and the raked auditorium purchased by the vigorous fundraising efforts of the parent teacher association. As a result of the theatre development the school is now applying for ‘Performing Arts College Status’, which can result in a large injection of money which can be used to enhance existing provision and buy in additional artistic expertise. The award requires major fund-raising by the school to match government investment. Often such theatre spaces are funded by National Lottery money, which includes a statutory community remit as well as serving the school in which they are based. They further increase the small scale touring circuit for professional theatre companies specifically those who are dedicated young people’s theatre companies. Many actively seek work of social significance to young people. Recently one school was able to host a number of performances of a professional piece of theatre telling the story of Jewish holocaust survivors in its new theatre space. The piece was supported by a talk and all pupils in the host school who were studying the Second World War came to see the performance and a follow-up talk led by a holocaust survivor whose story was told in the play. Here theatre was enhancing understanding of history, of moral issues and of dramatic form. For the young people at that school and the people in that community, young people’s performance work is enhanced by being presented in a professional type theatre space and in existing in a programme alongside professional work. The recent emphasis upon a denser content for drama examination syllabuses for 17-18 year olds is likely to encourage the performance of more plays, both students own work and professional theatre. Additionally Arts Council promotion of a closer partnership between professional arts agencies and schools has culminated in a culture of ‘Performing Arts College Status’ awards but also a new ‘Arts Mark’ scheme whereby the quality of performance work and the involvement of artists in schools is recognised and approved, but no funding is given. Schools therefore are increasingly embracing opportunities to develop high production values and performance skills in their work, alongside a commitment, of some sort, to the social significance of communal art-making and possibly also to the kind of material they explore. The presence of a theatre space in the school will naturally see an upturn in the amount of theatre that is produced by that school and in the locality. A semi-professional theatre space may encourage a copycat mentality of the professional mainstream popular British theatre business. Some of the work shown in these well-equipped spaces will be amateur productions of current and past West End Musicals available under the Performing Rights Society for amateur performance. The large casts have made them mainstay repertoire for schools, youth theatres and youth drama groups. But likewise these new theatre spaces may also emphatically celebrate local youth and community arts. The current programme for Dovehouse Theatre for example includes a Professional Theatre, and Cabaret programme as well as a thriving Community Arts Programme, which features the schools, own Drama Groups.

Examples remain of school theatre devised by teachers and students in response to an agreed stimulus, typically one of social significance. Here the process of the work and the investment of all participants tends to be the priority. One school, in our locality has been awarded funding to develop achievement in a socially deprived inner city area. This school has decided to use a significant part of this money on developing drama precisely because of the socially
committed approach of drama teaching at the school which is proven to build pupils’ self-esteem and sense of achievement. Students involved in drama perform scripted plays as well as devising theatre but teachers explore both kinds of performance work from the premise of engaging young people in the material and ensuring their investment in the work. Scripts may be adapted or interpreted to emphasise a reading which has resonance for the young performers involved. The process in this school is characterised by on-going negotiation by the teacher with the whole group to support the pupils collaboratively taking shared responsibility, initiative and ownership for the work they make. The teacher is at pains not to impose or direct work in a prescriptive way, but to help the pupils to recognise the effects of a particular use of form, content or resolution. This tradition is grounded in some Drama in Education practice of past decades where the process was central because the personal and social needs of the young people were regarded as more significant than any understanding of theatre form or learning of performance skill. This practice can be found in some schools where the social deprivation of the catchment area dictates such a priority for drama. However this is not the only approach to drama in schools with social problems. In another school in our region a drama teacher uses theatre form as the discipline through which pupils train and learn how to achieve. Again the ethos of the drama room encourages tolerance and support of all individuals and the drama teacher is just as concerned about the social health of his pupils as the quality of performance work. However pupils are taught from age 11 skills of performance. For example when they enter the drama space, in order to signal readiness pupils are conditioned to adopt the neutral pose used by Theatre de Complicite (feet slightly apart, arms by the side and head slightly down) and practised by many professional artists. This year 14 year olds in this school studied Theatre of Cruelty through practical workshops and later devised an experimental version of Shakespeare’s Pericles for a drama festival. The school boasts two ‘theatre companies’ one for 11-14 year olds and one for 14-16 year olds and both create a production a year, usually of scripted theatre albeit interpreted to enable experimental exploration of the text. The establishment of school theatre with a ‘theatre company’ of pupils emphasises the relationship to professional theatre, but of experimental theatre traditions. For the pupils in this school it is not the verbal negotiation which dominates the devising / staging process but the collaborative engagement in theatre-making with a director-like drama teacher. Multiple possibilities are available to young people and their teachers / artists about the kind of theatre/drama work they make and this is informed by the needs and interests of the particular group of young people and the skills, experience and taste of their adult mentors (artists or teachers). In any one region of Britain there will be different models co-existing.

We would like to conclude our piece with a closer look at a particular example of a young people’s project in which, as we said earlier, Theatre and Drama merge and the distinctions between theatre and drama practice, between professional and non-professional are

the EDEXCEL GCSE examination syllabus which the school teaches requires students to be examined on devising and staging scripted theatre.

Colmer’s Farm school in Birmingham, the school cited here, has received funding as part of a ‘Talented and Gifted’ national programme to develop achievement in inner city schools. One project funded by this initiative involved a group of 14 year olds visiting the Royal Shakespeare Theatre and Education department to see the way Shakespeare’s plays are staged, then working with a university tutor at Warwick University, as actors, before taking these ideas and devising their own version of the play. Although professional models were shown to the young people they were positively encouraged to reject these models and develop their own.

More contemporary Drama in Education practitioners and writers include Cecily O’Neill, Gavin Bolton and Jonathan Neelands.

Harris Cof E School, Rugby.
challenged. This a performance project of The Children, a new play written by Edward Bond for young people in which the young people are the protagonists and take the major responsibility for the text. They perform alongside two professional actors who also serve the rehearsal process as actor/teachers. Bond is a dramatist from the playwright’s theatre, The Royal Court and thus the project embraced the strong literary tradition of theatre as a realisation of the work of an established playwright. However Bond’s work is underpinned by his commitment to social change and this play was written specifically for adults and young people to perform. The project was realised by Classworks, a theatre company which undertakes both youth theatre and professional work. The argument of the play is concerned with our social responsibility, as adults to children in a society which fails young people. Each project spanned a week of intensive work between Classworks and each group of young people (13-17 year olds). The tour lasted six months and involved work with twenty different schools and a number of youth theatres. The aim of the project was for the young cast to be in control of their performance. This was achieved by developing a sequence of activities, which might more commonly occur in devising processes, but which were informed by the concerns of the play.

In order to explain this clearly we will now discuss a moment in the play. This moment was one in which the young people in the play recognised that they were complicit in a tragic event and they decided that they could no longer stay in their home area and were forced to run away. The challenge to the adult company was to enable the young performers to recognise this moment and to engage in it personally, to live through the decision making process rather than to rehearse a directed scene as they might typically do in a school play where the vision is the director’s alone. The young performers considered their response to the text personally. After a brief discussion of personal experiences of running away or thinking about it or discussing a friend who had actually run away, each member of the group took just one phrase from the text, which resonated for them personally. As they worked on the scene, they could say the lines in any order, which kept spontaneity and forced the young performers to listen to each other. They began in one corner of the room and improvised using their text. A few key words and accompanying gestures were agreed as signals, and when any individual spoke one, the company would repeat it in unison and echo the gesture. These words were questions about running away such as ‘where’ or ‘when’. If one particular phrase, ‘Let’s go’ was spoken, they would run the full diagonal of the space. They experimented with different attitudes suggested by the actor/teacher who proposed a response e.g. defiant, exasperated, resigned, frightened etc. In this way the young performers actively experienced different reactions to the idea of running away and were able to discover their own personal response. This spontaneity extended into the performance of the play.

The whole play was broken down into sections and developed in this way, which ensured an energised, focussed and individualised performance. The young performers discovered how to perform and understand the play by living through its dilemmas. They initially approached the work as an ensemble, which reacted to the situations and problems the play posed. As they progressed through the rehearsal workshop they were encouraged to individualise their responses and thus embarked on their own rite of passage. As one young performer testifies:

We were all treated like adults and I think that’s why I had so much get up and go. We were treated how we wanted to be treated. The week has showed me how strong my personal skills are and I have the confidence to do something as good as this … It has really me made me reflect upon other people and also how I act myself. (Sian aged 15)

The audience for young people’s theatre is typically drawn from the community of the young performers and thus there is a proximity between performers and audience unusual in professional forms. Whilst this was still true for The Children, there were also some who came to see a new play by a reputed dramatist, thus promoting the profile of young people as artists.
In Britain the idea of ‘amateur’

8 theatre suggests inferiority to professionalism rather

than simply a different form of practice. But our young people’s performance work

has a closer relationship to the French and European ideas of amateur theatre. Here

the intended sense of amateur is much more positive. Copeau discusses the significant

rejuvenating quality of the amateur artist upon the development of theatre and the

absolute commitment of such artists who are motivated only by the creation of their

work and not compromised by the constraints of professional theatre 9. Here the

suggestion is that amateur theatre is innovative because it does not follow a

potentially deadening singular training but draws eclectically and experimentally

upon form and process and is a necessary an experimental process of discovery 10.

This is reflected in the actor-audience relationship of youth theatre. Young people’s

teatre practices, like those of community arts in Britain, focus upon the significance

of the work for the performer 11 and are typically performed in contexts where

audiences share that concern.

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8 Note this entry in Hodgson (1988): ‘Amateur Theatre. Theatre in which staff and performers are

unpaid. It is often used as a perjorative term to imply ‘poorly done’ or ‘inexperienced or self indulgent’.’

9 Chaque fois qu’un effort est tente, chaque fois qu’un certain renouveau se fait jour au theatre, a toute

epoque et dans tous les pays, c’est aux amateurs qu’on le doit … It ne faut pas rougir d’etre un

amateur. On souhaiterait volontiers a l’artiste, si grand soit-il, de ne jamais cesser au cours de sa

carriere, d’etre amateur, si l’on donne a ce mot tout son sens: celui qui aime. Celui qui ne se donne a

son art ni par ambition , ni par vanite , ni par cupidite, mais uniquement par amour, et qui,

subordonnant toute sa personne a cette pure passion, fait voeu d’humilitie, de patience at de courage’.

Copeau, Registres 1

10 Barba describes the life-long crafting of theatre as such, see Watson (1993)

11 Hodgson again notes that, ‘ Amateur drama .. is arguably for the benefit of the performer

as much as for the audience and one should remember that drama was originally

performed neither for money nor applause. Early seasonal and folk drama both

secular and ecclesiastical was amateur’.
Authors

Jo Trowsdale is lecturer in Drama at the Institute of Education, University of Warwick, UK. Formerly she was a drama teacher of secondary aged pupils and then an education liaison officer for an arts centre, building an arts activity programme for young people. Currently she trains graduates to teach Drama in schools, a programme which involves her working closely with secondary schools. Her research degree looked at the role of artists in the training of teachers. This work led her to prefer collaborations with artists who facilitate young people’s / adult’s own creativity rather than an instructed training. She is currently involved in two research projects: the first, evaluating the work of artists in primary and secondary schools; and the second, writing a report of the work of a number of local experimental artists who have undertaken an experiment with a repertory theatre to collaborate to develop the range of artistic practice and community involvement in theatre.

Claudette Bryanston is a freelance director and teacher with extensive experience of working with young people in theatre. Formerly she was a drama teacher. She has an MA in Performance from Middlesex University and was a visiting director of acting students for the MFA in Theatre Directing at Boston University (USA). She has trained with small-scale theatre companies and many individual specialist teachers to include both contemporary performance, and physical theatre training. She co-founded Classworks Theatre Company (based in Cambridge) for which she remains the co-artistic director, which specialises in work for and with young people. The professional touring company recently completed a six month tour of The Children by Edward Bond which she directed and a Holocaust Education project And Then They Came for Me by James Still. She is currently undertaking a PhD, a study of the relationship of theatre artists to formal education in a changing culture.