



# **SOME KIND OF MAGIC**

## **AN EVALUATION OF THEATRE SANDBOX 2010**

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# CONTENTS

## 1

3 *Executive Summary*

## 2

6 *Introduction*

- 7 2.1 Structure of the Report
- 8 2.2 Background to Theatre Sandbox
- 10 2.3 The commissions
- 16 2.4 Evaluation approach

## 3

17 *Theatre and Technology*

- 18 3.1 Elegant simplicity
- 20 3.2 Building confidence
- 22 3.3 Touching the intangible: hi-tech and lo-tech
- 22 3.4 The rare value of not knowing
- 24 3.5 Audiences and marketing

## 4

*Community & Relationships*

- 26 4.1 Community and corpus
- 28 4.2 The online community
- 29 4.3 Artist and technologists
- 30 4.4 Artist-venue relationships
- 32 4.5 Mentoring
- 33 4.6 The venue community

## 5

*Structure and Process*

- 34 5.1 The introductory workshops
- 37 5.2 Selection process
- 39 5.3 Budget
- 39 5.4 Timing and timescale
- 41 5.5 Salons
- 42 5.6 Access and inclusion
- 42 5.7 Production and management
- 44 5.8 Profile and PR

## 6

*Looking Ahead*

- 45 6.1 Future Plans
- 46 6.2 Points for Development

## 7

48 *Conclusion: Why invest?*

## 8

50 *Annex One: Interviewees*

## 9

51 *Annex Two: Word Cloud of Successful Applications*

## 10

52 *Annex Three: Bibliography*

## 11

53 *Annex Four: Image Credits*

# 1

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In November 2010, NESTA identified Britain's ten creative innovation hotspots, those cities that have the highest concentration of creative industries and innovation activity relative to the local economy (NESTA 2010). These are places that catalyse innovation by cultivating collaboration, building bridges between diverse sectors, and fostering networking and knowledge sharing. It is no surprise then that Theatre Sandbox, an initiative in which these catalysts are deeply understood and embedded, was developed in Bristol, one of the ten innovation hotspots.

Theatre Sandbox is a national commissioning scheme for theatre makers to research and develop experimental performance works that use pervasive media technologies. Designed and delivered by iShed and funded by Arts Council England, the scheme awarded six £10,000 research and development commissions to theatre companies supported by a national network of venues across England.

Theatre Sandbox is all about discovery, testing and playful exploration without any pressure of an end outcome. This focus on artist development – freedom to play balanced by structured support – is important, rare and deeply valued by everyone who took part.

For artists and venues alike, Theatre Sandbox demystified pervasive media technology and built considerable confidence in using it. So much so that while some projects incorporated existing technologies into their work, others rapid prototyped entirely new solutions. Yet unanimously, it is always the idea and the story that come first: technology is an enabler for the story to be told, the facilitator of the experience, not the experience itself.

All projects received expert support from technological advisors who avoided jargon and were enthused by the process of theatre making. For each team, the R&D process was characterised by a distillation and simplification of ideas, often in response to technological affordances. Technology choices were focused and research questions honed:

*“By the end of this process we might have the right questions, or the cleverer questions.”*

Although there was no requirement for a performance or final outcome, deep attention to and care for the audience experience was common to all the commissions. Theatre makers have an innate understanding of and concern for ‘user experience’ and service design. Participating in Theatre Sandbox provided venues and artists an opportunity to extend their audiences through developing and promoting new strands of work.





For many involved, the aspect of the project that most delighted them was the opportunity to develop new relationships with other venues and artists. With its emphasis on collaboration and knowledge-sharing, Theatre Sandbox has built a community of diverse artists, producers, technologists and researchers linked by a thirst for discovery, a spirit of openness, deep generosity, and a meticulous quest for excellence. Theatre is a collaborative art, and theatre makers are used to building trust rapidly between strangers to form communities working on new projects. From this angle, the strength of the community built by Theatre Sandbox might come as no surprise. Yet it is remarkable that a community was created so quickly and powerfully over such a geographic spread and range of practice, artistic focus and technological experience.

Perhaps inevitably, connections between artists involved, and between artists and their host venues, are more developed than those between host venues. Nevertheless, Theatre Sandbox has created a nascent network of venues with an appetite for developing expertise in programming, commissioning and co-producing work using digital technology.



There is considerable interest among the current cohort of venues and artists to find a life for the work beyond the initial R&D: a shared ambition to keep exploring the technology, to take the work developed into full production, and to grow the *"exciting fruitful partnerships"* created by the scheme.

Theatre Sandbox's reach extends further than the six companies that received a commission and their host venues. The scheme launched in April 2010 with a series of five workshops across England attracting 275 theatre makers curious about digital technology. As well as introducing the scheme and the technologies, these workshops have encouraged participants to find out more about pervasive media and use it in their work. Throughout the duration of the project, effort has been put in to disseminating and sharing discoveries and understanding to the wider theatre community through blogs, a PR campaign that has led to national press and broadcast features, and a showcase event held in Bristol in November 2010.

Although Theatre Sandbox is a brand new initiative, albeit building on the success of sister project Media Sandbox, its delivery has been exemplary. There are, of course, points for development and refinement, but these are remarkably few. The iShed team has been praised for their adept brokering of relationships between artists and technologists; their knack of putting together a sparky mix of people and expertise; the guidance they provided artists in selecting technology solutions; their warmth, generosity, and responsiveness; and their willingness to go 'above and beyond' in their commitment to making it work.

Theatre Sandbox is intensive in terms of time, process and investment. That intensity has paid off. It has succeeded in cultivating the kind of artistic excellence that is at the core of Arts Council England's new ten-year strategy, enabling theatre makers to create, *"the bravest, most original, most innovative, most perfectly realized work of which [they] are capable."* (Arts Council England 2010).

In its delivery of Theatre Sandbox, iShed has raised its status as a national leader in delivering collaborative R&D projects that bring together digital technology and outstanding art. In both process and outcome, in creating a community of theatre makers and venues excited about using technology and confident in their ability to do so, in supporting the early development of six high quality theatre ideas, in building knowledge and disseminating it, in encouraging collaborative learning and innovation, and in extending its geographic reach and its expertise into new domains, iShed has attained – and surpassed – all it set out to achieve in Theatre Sandbox.

***"The most prominent feeling about Theatre Sandbox is one of great pride and achievement – an incredible range of brilliant work was created by what became a true community of artists." (Steiger 2010).***

# 2

## INTRODUCTION

*"It does feel like we are breaking new boundaries and creating theatre for the future and although we might not know exactly what we are doing, it is done in the spirit of collaboration and curiosity." (Artist)*

From the pursuit of a lost unicorn in a West London shopping mall... to an intimate treasure hunt through unreliable memories told in miniature. From a sonic maze inspired by ancient epic narrative... to visions of a future Soho appearing on a map that draws itself in real time. From dynamic captions responding live in the moment to an actor's pitch, volume and timing... to a performance experience stretching over two weeks, woven deep into the fabric of daily life. The six Theatre Sandbox commissions represent a vast diversity of practice, artistic focus, use of technology, mode of presentation, and content.

What links the commissions is their adept blending of leading edge technologies with theatrical storytelling. Some have used existing but emergent digital technologies, applying them in new, theatrical contexts. Others have started from scratch, inventing and rapid prototyping entirely new technology. The technologies, software, equipment and platforms they have used (and in one or two cases developed) include RFID, Microsoft Surface Tables, QR codes, Mscape, GPS, projectors, social media, SMS, UHF transmitters, 'RAVES' (reactive audio visual entertainment system), NuRaves, and good old-fashioned smoke and mirrors.

Six small theatre companies have been advised by experts from major firms, including Microsoft, Nokia, and the BBC, and have been supported by a national network of venues committed to exploring the leading edge of digital technology in theatre. Test performances have taken place inside traditional theatre spaces and outside them. And always, unfailingly, consideration for audiences has been at the heart of the work.

The vision, ambition and inventiveness of the commissions are matched by that of iShed in devising the scheme: *"It's crammed with innovation"*. This is an action research project that has been delivered with intelligence, imagination and grace. Despite the experience and success of sister R&D initiative Media Sandbox, and its track record of bringing artists, researchers and technologists together to collaborate and innovation, for iShed, Theatre Sandbox was a step into the unknown. It was its first project of this scale, working with a national network of six partner venues and extending the technological innovation approach of Media Sandbox to a new cultural domain.

This evaluation seeks to tell the story of Theatre Sandbox as a whole, to explore the creation of a community of diverse artists, technologists and researchers linked by a thirst for discovery, a spirit of openness, curiosity, and deep generosity, and a meticulous quest for excellence.



## 2.1 STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

**T**he remainder of this section provides background information on Theatre Sandbox, introduces the six commissions and explains the mixed-methods evaluation approach.

Section 3 explores the interplay between digital technology and live performance, reflecting on the R&D process, tracking how research questions were refined over the course of the project, and considering how emergent technologies influence the processes and outcomes of theatre making, and how they mould thinking about audiences and marketing.

Section 4 is devoted to aspects of the community created by Theatre Sandbox, examining the impact of the networks of theatre makers and venues, the online community, the relationships between artists and venues, the relationships between artists and technologists, and mentoring relationships.

Section 5 goes on to look at aspects of the structure and delivery of the scheme in terms of the six commissions: the selection process, budget, timescale, salons, PR and management of the scheme. It also provides data on attendance at and responses to the five introductory workshops held across England in April 2010.

Section 6 notes existing future plans within the Theatre Sandbox and identifies points for consideration in planning future editions of the scheme.

In Section 7, the conclusion briefly explores how the experience of Theatre Sandbox – its successes, its processes, and its discoveries – relate to very recent publications on innovation and creative places and to Arts Council England's new ten-year strategy (Arts Council England 2010).



## 2.2 BACKGROUND TO THEATRE SANDBOX

Theatre Sandbox is a national commissioning scheme for theatre makers to research and develop experimental pieces of performance that use pervasive media technologies. In 2010, the scheme awarded six £10,000 research and development commissions.

Funded by Arts Council England, through Grants for the Arts, and supported by the Cultural Leadership Programme, Theatre Sandbox was devised and delivered by iShed, a Watershed venture that facilitates innovation, collaboration and partnerships between the computer technology industry, artists and creative companies. The scheme extended and built on iShed's two years' experience of delivering Media Sandbox ([www.mediasandbox.co.uk](http://www.mediasandbox.co.uk)), a research and development (R&D) scheme for creative companies working in pervasive media.

The scheme was produced by Katie Day, Artistic Director of The Other Way Works, employed by iShed through the support of a one-year Cultural Leadership Programme Peach Placement. Katie's delivery of the scheme was supported by Watershed, iShed and, in particular, by Clare Reddington, Director of iShed and the Pervasive Media Studio.

Theatre Sandbox set out "to grow an active community of peer learning and development" through "a structured programme of commissioning, mentoring, work in progress performances, knowledge exchange and PR/promotion" and linking "individual artists and institutions to cutting-edge research to produce new forms of interactive, immersive and inclusive experience" (iShed 2009).

Working with partner theatres across the UK, the scheme was launched through a series of five introductory workshops across the UK to introduce pervasive media technologies and support potential applicants in developing ideas. In total, 96 applications were received, from which 12 were short-listed for interview. The six successful commissions were selected on criteria including the strength of their theatrical ideas ('a good idea told well'), clarity of research questions, potential to benefit from the scheme, openness to collaboration and partnerships, and track record. Familiarity with technology was not a prerequisite and indeed the six commissioned groups had a broad range of experience in terms of using technology in their work. What they shared was a hunger to learn more and an open, innovative approach to research and discovery.

### WHAT IS PERVASIVE MEDIA?

As computers and phones get smaller, more powerful and stay connected to the internet almost all of the time, Pervasive Media sits at the intersection of mobile computers, media technology, networks and sensors. From gaming to outdoor displays, performance to public transport, pervasive media is delivered into the fabric of everyday life: sensors and networks use context-rich information (like location) to deliver experiences that are designed to fit the needs of people, delivering the right thing in the moment, wherever they are.

## Each commission received:

- £10,000
- Support from the Theatre Sandbox Producer
- Technology support brokered through iShed's network (£800 for equipment and £2,500 for technology consultants)
- Access to a panel of industry advisers
- Pairing with a theatre venue for an early stage pilot performance
- Three collaborative 'salon' workshops in Bristol (four days in total)
- Promotion through a national PR campaign, including a short project documentary
- The opportunity to present at the final Theatre Sandbox Showcase
- An online collaborative workspace (Basecamp) and blog ([www.theatresandbox.co.uk](http://www.theatresandbox.co.uk))

## Theatre Sandbox ran over nine months, March – November 2010:

**March:** Announcement of scheme and workshops

**April:** Five introductory workshops held across the UK

**30 April:** Deadline for submissions

**May 2010:** Interviews with shortlisted teams

**June 2010:** Commissions announced

**July – September:** Three-month development process for the six commissions

**September – October 2010:** Six early stage test performances

**12 November 2010:** Theatre Sandbox Showcase, Bristol

## The scheme was supported by an advisory group, comprising:

Alison Gagen, *Arts Council England, West Midlands*

Lyn Gardner, *The Guardian*

Jessica Hepburn, *Lyric Hammersmith*

John McGrath, *National Theatre Wales*

Kenton O'Hara, *Microsoft Labs*

James Richards, *BBC*

Nina Steiger, *Soho Theatre*

Phil Stenton, *Calvium*



## 2.3 THE COMMISSIONS

The six commissioned theatre makers and projects are:

**Analogue:** Living Film Set

**Ed Collier & Melanie Wilson:** The Unicorn

**Mind The Gap:** Sonic Maze

**Proto-type Theatre:** Fortnight

**Duncan Speakman & Uninvited Guests:**

Give Me Back My Broken Night

**Tin Bath:** You're So Happy I Want To Die

One-line descriptions do no justice to the depth of work produced by the six companies, but this evaluation, looking at cross-cutting themes, does not include project case studies. A richer evocation of the individual projects is provided by the short documentaries on each of the commissions at DShed, Watershed's online showcase:

<http://www.dshed.net/theatre-sandbox-2010>

### ANALOGUE: LIVING FILM SET

*Hosted by The Junction*

A treasure hunt using scale models and an interactive surface table to navigate the story of the disappearance of a father.

[www.analogueproductions.co.uk](http://www.analogueproductions.co.uk)







## **ED COLLIER & MELANIE WILSON: THE UNICORN**

*Hosted by Lyric Hammersmith*

An audio led fairytale adventure on the high street for children.

[www.chinaplatetheatre.com](http://www.chinaplatetheatre.com) [www.melaniewilson.org.uk](http://www.melaniewilson.org.uk)





## MIND THE GAP: SONIC MAZE

*Hosted by Contact*

A maze of siren sounds using headphones and GPS to trigger sounds and tasks, creating a shared, group performance experience based on Homer's Odyssey.

[www.mind-the-gap.org.uk](http://www.mind-the-gap.org.uk)

# PROTO-TYPE THEATER: FORTNIGHT

*Hosted by Bristol Old Vic*

A two-week long performance experience located in the spaces, technologies and occurrences of our daily lives.

[www.proto-type.org](http://www.proto-type.org)







## **DUNCAN SPEAKMAN & UNINVITED GUESTS: GIVE ME BACK MY BROKEN NIGHT**

*Hosted by Soho Theatre*

A performance walk through Soho, London with a networked projected map that draws before your eyes in response to your ideas for the future of Soho.

[www.duncanspeakman.net](http://www.duncanspeakman.net) [www.uninvited-guests.net](http://www.uninvited-guests.net)





# TĪN BATH: YOU'RE SO HAPPY I WANT TO DĪE

*Hosted by mac*

Development of interactive dynamic captioning for a new two woman comedy.

[www.sophiewoolley.com](http://www.sophiewoolley.com)



## 2.4 EVALUATION APPROACH

This evaluation of Theatre Sandbox focuses on understanding its value as a developmental process. It explores the impact of the scheme on innovation in artistic practice, interdisciplinary collaborative working and the integration of digital technology and live theatre.

### Aims

The evaluation aims to:

- explore what does and does not work in terms of structure and process, to inform future years;
- understand whether and how the community peer learning model, developed for Media Sandbox, works in a nationally distributed scheme;
- understand whether and how the community peer learning model works in the theatre sector;
- assess the impact on participants and venues; and
- identify opportunities for development of the scheme.

This evaluation does not seek to provide a detailed case study of the journey of each project but a rather to provide thematic analysis and overview of common experiences, discoveries and learning across Theatre Sandbox as a whole.

### Methods

Given the aims of the evaluation, a predominantly qualitative approach to data collection and analysis has been taken, supplemented by some basic quantitative methods. Data collection took place July – November 2010.

### Qualitative methods:

- 19 semi-structured interviews with 26 Theatre Sandbox participants (artists, host venues, iShed team and advisory group members)
- Documentary analysis of Theatre Sandbox Grants for the Arts proposal, applications to the scheme, selection interview notes, websites, blogs, Twitter feeds, videos and online workspaces
- Observation of three salon workshops, July – September 2010; test performances of Fortnight and The Unicorn; and Theatre Sandbox Showcase, November 2010

### Quantitative methods:

- Analysis of iShed's evaluation and monitoring forms, completed by participants in the five introductory workshops
- Follow-up online survey of workshop participants six months later (October 2010)

Qualitative data has been analysed thematically; some basic descriptive quantitative analysis has been applied to the survey data. Quotes from artists, venues, advisory group members and the iShed team have been anonymised throughout.

Audiences are at the heart of Theatre Sandbox, for both the artists and the venue partners. Although each project solicited audience feedback on their test performances, this evaluation does not draw on that data but rather focuses on the design, delivery and impact of the scheme as a whole.



# 3

## THEATRE & TECHNOLOGY

For everyone interviewed for this evaluation, unanimously, it is always the story, the idea, art that comes first. Technology is an enabler for the story to be told; the facilitator of the experience, not the experience itself. Yet inevitably there is interplay between content and technology; to delineate too sharply between the two is to create a false binary. For one artist, taking part in Theatre Sandbox drove home in a completely new way Marshall McLuhan's dictum:

*"the medium does very much shape the message  
– I now totally get it!"*

For some, the revelation of taking part in Theatre Sandbox was that digital and pervasive media is, in essence, simply another tool, another part of the kit, just like lighting, sound, set, props or costume. For others, technology is a game changer, creating a new kind of theatre:

*"digital affords and has potential to encourage interactivity  
and to work in new ways. Technology can take you out of  
your everyday reality and open you up."*

Like every other aspect of theatre, pervasive media is a tool that can either be revealed as part of the mechanics of theatre and integrated into the aesthetic of a piece or it can be hidden to create a subtle magic. There are examples of both approaches in these six Sandbox projects. Either way, it is crucial that the two, technology and live performance, are integrated. Consensus was that in Theatre Sandbox, each project was successful in achieving this integration:

*"congruence of medium and message – nothing  
superfluous or gimmicky – the right tech for the  
right thing."*

In retrospect, the projects involved more technological innovations than iShed had anticipated, rather than integrating known technologies into their theatre practice. *"In reality you develop the technology to solve that particular problem - sometimes you have to completely invent it - that was a surprise! Even where we thought there would be an easy solution, in the end we tackled the more difficult path."* (iShed)

## 3.1 ELEGANT SIMPLICITY

All six pieces started out hugely ambitious and artists have been delighted and surprised by the realisation of that ambition, if in often unexpected ways. A huge distance was travelled by all six groups, over a very short space of time:

*"There was this incredible ambition for the piece. It's grown from absolutely nothing, from a proposition in one sense almost far-fetched, to one that actually exists. Yes there were elements that didn't work but this form didn't exist at all six months ago." (Venue)*

For each of the projects, the R&D process was accompanied by a distillation and simplification of ideas, often in response to the limitations and possibilities afforded by the technology. As one interviewee observed, it was a classic 'diamond' divergent-convergent thinking process: an explosion of ideas and potential, followed by focused editing, selection and refinement to a point of 'elegant simplicity'.

*"At the beginning there was a swell of ideas and one by one they fell away and they got to the things that really mattered. The project became uncluttered by technology. They became interested in how they could enhance the audience's experience rather than show off about the technology."*  
(Venue)

When we set off to do research there were too many choices, it was overwhelming, so we needed to have a process to find out the questions that we needed to answer." (Artist)



The six projects each went through a similar process illustrated in the following extended quote from Tin Bath:

*"We started off with big questions about making captioning live and over the months have had to refine down our search and address much smaller questions such as how many words should we make "live" (able to shift according to vocal tones) using a new piece of programming. Leaving aside all of the issues of how it should look and the design of the movement and text and just purely focusing on the basic question of how much to animate in a simple way.*

*"We have certainly focused our questions and our field of inquiry right down to these main questions: How much and in what format can we respond to the live nature of performer's delivery and voices? What is the best operating system for captions and why? How can it help us achieve our aim of responding live and being adaptable to the different rhythms and dynamics on stage? How do we develop a new captioning language that enables deaf and hearing people to understand subtler emotions in the voice without being patronising or image heavy? What are the rules of this language?"*

Some groups faced a quandary over the order in which to do things: should they spend time developing the artistic content of the piece or focus on exploring and developing technological solutions? Each – the art and the technology – iteratively influence, shape and determine the other. For Analogue, working with technology threw up a series of Catch 22s, which they document in their blog: it was difficult to make decisions about, say, software, before they had certain hardware available (*Jarvis 2010*). Whilst in some ways it might have been easier to know from the start what equipment or technology would be available, the not-knowing meant that often novel solutions were devised.

Artists are still puzzling over which, if any, is the 'right' order in which to work, but two things are clear: the artistic idea must always lead the technology, not the other way round, and it would have been useful at an early stage in the process, perhaps at the first salon workshop, to have more opportunity to play with and explore pervasive media technologies.

Vacillations over the right order did not, though, impede the clear desire to get things out and tested:

***"For us it was very much about rapid prototyping. We wanted to get something off the ground, to see how it worked, rapidly. It wasn't about getting super-stable technology. It was about to get it into use." (Artist)***

At the same time, that test had to happen in the right artistic context: *"Seeing [the technology] in context of a coherent structure was more use than trying a more stable technology in a tiny fragment."*



## 3.2 BUILDING CONFIDENCE

For artists and venues alike, Theatre Sandbox demystified pervasive media technology – the possibilities and problems – and built considerable confidence in using it. It's worth citing several interviewees to express the extent to which this was felt across the cohort:

*"I've discovered that if you're open and prepared to try and test, [the technology's] not as scary as you think it might have been. The idea of the technology for me and the venue was perhaps the most daunting aspect of the project but the way the project was set up – trying and testing – removed some of the fear. It's worth just diving in head first. Try to be fearless: from that really interesting things emerge."*  
(Venue)

*"I'm less afraid of working with pervasive media than I might have been in the past."* (Artist)

*"Theatre Sandbox has pushed us forward into making much more diverse work. Made me more aware and less afraid of dealing with pervasive media."* (Artist)

*"It's made me feel less intimidated by technology and more aware of the process of participation rather than observation – there have been some tangible discoveries around that".* (Venue)

*"It's exposed questions around producing etc. in a very productive way. We've been forced to ask cleverer questions about how why we might use technology, what the potential of theatre and/or art is beyond the borders of entertainment or intellectual interest."* (Artist)

*"It's taken the mystique out. A lot of people make new technology an exclusive club and Theatre Sandbox makes me realise it's not that different. You work it out. Just because something is new, you don't need to throw out the old. Actually, don't be afraid."* (Venue)

Venues say that they are more confident in programming and commissioning new work using pervasive media and feel more equipped to give effective support to artists working with new technologies. As important as developing understanding was getting to grips with a new technological vocabulary and building expertise in having conversations with technologists and knowing the right questions to ask.

Artists were in some cases surprised by the time it takes to develop new technological solutions or adapt existing ones. They were also overwhelmed by the myriad of different ways to approach a problem and how fractured the field of pervasive media is. They were surprised to discover that there is no single 'expert' but rather individuals working in distinct yet interlinked fields and disciplines:

*"I was surprised how soupy and muddy the process of dealing with technology is and how everybody, even when they are specialist in technology, is in the dark and the larger map is made up of lots of tiny bits of input from lots of different people. There aren't any people who have answers to cross-cutting questions – lots of people have tiny pieces of information."* (Artist)

*"We are outside of the bounds of what we know is possible or even the bounds that other people have knowledge of. I was surprised that the technology is less advanced than we thought it would be."* (Artist)





### 3.3 TOUCHING THE INTANGIBLE: HI-TECH & LO-TECH

*"Hi-fi and lo-fi: how that worked was a real surprise. They fitted really nicely." (Artist)*

Two projects in particular, Fortnight and Living Film Set, blended emerging technology with 'lo-tech' handmade, bespoke or crafted items. The use of tactile, handcrafted and every objects provided ways of concealing the technology from audiences whilst deeply grounding the experience in the senses. For audiences, this added an element of charm, even of tenderness. It is interesting to see this relationship between the handmade and the digital, which is evident in fields such as book publishing and specialist music labels, extend into theatre:

*"I think theatre does sometimes struggle with the use of very overt digital technology (e.g. a big screen – it kind of changes the medium to an extent). The nice thing about pervasive media is it can be invisible, part of a real object in the real world. It doesn't have to look digital." (Artist)*

### 3.4 THE RARE VALUE OF NOT-KNOWING



Theatre Sandbox is all about discovering, testing and playful exploration without any pressure of an end outcome. This focus on artist development is unusual: "This is rare in the UK theatre circuit. Financial pressures create an environment where things need to have results." It was also something that made the scheme very attractive to artists looking to break new ground in their work: "It can be quite hard now to start taking risks with the kind of work that you want to do if you're well known for a particular kind of work." At the same time, the approach challenged artists used to focusing on the end point:



*"It made me realise that the theatre industry is very goal orientated. We are used to striving for product and we feel like we are cheating if there is not a show at the end of it. It took a lot to try not to panic about finding an end product and just to enjoy the process and not to worry if it wasn't perfect. However, I would still like to see what we have discovered pushed further and used within a show context next year."* (Artist).

Getting to grips with digital technology and pervasive media has influenced participants' theatre practice in other ways too. For some of the groups, Theatre Sandbox offered a welcome opportunity to shift between their usual roles of performing, writing, devising, directing: *"Theatre's quite a structured process and it's quite hierarchical with firm roles, but our roles were more fluid in this."* And, *"In this we were all in the roles of director, dramaturg, performer – it completely changed our working dynamic."*

Showing work at such an early stage was challenging: *"the idea of putting it in front of audience before it's ready has been really difficult"* and, from another artist, *"we all struggled with how do you expose work that is fairly raw... that you're expected to 'fail' quite a bit."*

However, the approach brought tremendous freedom balanced by structured support, an equilibrium that fosters innovation through improvising with technology:

*"The beauty about Theatre Sandbox is the accidents, mistakes and not-knowing that takes you in new directions – so there's something to be said for incoherence, ignorance."* (Artist)

*"This is both the most formal and the most experimental and outward facing R&D project I've been involved with."* (Venue)

## 3.5 AUDIENCES & MARKETING

Common among all the commissions was a deep attention to and care for the audience experience. In other words, theatre makers have an innate understanding of and concern for what in commercial digital and other fields is 'user experience' or 'service design'. As one venue interviewee noted, in making this work, it is as much about thinking through the audience's journey as the actor's journey. Another observed that, *"The idea that you have to look after your audience becomes really important in a piece that involves interactivity and tasks and responses. The project re-emphasised that for me. Also that you have to trust your audience. Give them time and space to figure it out."*



Early in the evaluation process, I used Wordle to generate a word cloud using the text from the original six successful proposals (Annex Two). In effect a word cloud is a quantitative interpretation of verbal data, expressed visually. It is an unsophisticated, but visually effective tool that conveys key terms in verbal data. The more often a word appears in a text, the larger it appears in the word cloud. For these proposals the most dominant word by far was 'audience'. Other frequently used words were: 'technology', 'new', 'experience', 'theatre' and 'work' (which was far more dominant than its partner 'play'). Despite the fact that there was no requirement in the scheme for a performance or final outcome, this focus on audience was a thread that ran through all the projects.

Participating in Theatre Sandbox provided venues and theatre companies with an opportunity to extend their audiences through developing and promoting new strands of work and reaching out to new communities:

*"There's real potential to engage audiences who might not go see a play but would be interested in a game."*

Wary of the risk of alienating audiences with 'tech wizardry', venues were keen to ensure that the work extended beyond what might be considered the 'natural' audience (characterised by interviewees as young, urban, affluent professionals) for experimental digital work to audiences that are diverse in many dimensions (age, ethnicity, socio-economic background).

In some cases, audience development was key to successful testing of the projects. Tin Bath, for example, showing their work at mac, spent about a third of their time in Birmingham on outreach work meeting with the Deaf community there. And, indeed, inherent in Tin Bath's research is an artistically-rooted desire to improve accessibility of theatre performances for Deaf audiences and in this way, through technology, grow audiences.

It was recognised that the kind of experimental work typical of the Theatre Sandbox projects needs to be promoted in new ways: *"Marketing it is more complicated than marketing a play. It's a different ask of an audience, especially when showing work at such early stages."* (Venue)

And, although marketing might mention the technology, *"pervasive media is a word that's useless to an audience."*

Duncan Speakman, interviewed by Maddy Costa for The Guardian sums it up:

*"You don't say to people: come and see this pervasive media work. You say: come and see this piece of theatre – it's magic."*  
(Costa 2010)



# 4

## COMMUNITY & RELATIONSHIPS

### 4.1 COMMUNITY & CORPUS

By its very nature, theatre is collaborative, and theatre makers are used to building trust rapidly between strangers to form communities working on new projects. From this perspective, the strength of the community built by Theatre Sandbox might come as no surprise. And yet it is remarkable that a community was built so quickly and strongly over such a geographic spread and range of practice, artistic focus and technological experience. This was a very time-limited project, with only a handful of opportunities for artists to spend time with each other, the advisory group and network of venue representatives.

All of the interviewees in this evaluation reflected on the strength of peer support, collaborative learning and exceptional warmth and generosity of spirit within the group: *"I felt a real sense of support and a fantastic feeling of relief that people were going through the same problems and struggling with the same questions that we were. It was also great to feel part of other people's projects, watching them take shape and asking pertinent questions to help them develop their work. It always felt a very supportive environment, non-competitive and with a huge variety of technical experience and knowledge. As a group it felt like we were all learning together and nobody was made to feel stupid."* (Artist)

*"There was never the feeling that we were on our own."* (Artist)

Artists came to the project with a variety of levels of prior experience with technology. This was a very positive aspect of the community in terms of knowledge exchange. In particular, several artists acknowledged how helpful input and advice from artist Duncan Speakman had been in developing their work.

For many the opportunity to develop new relationships with other venues and artists was the aspect of the project that most delighted them:

*"[I was most impressed by] how supportive all artists have been to each other. How they've formed peer network and worked with each other."*  
(Venue)

*"[The best thing is] the network of people, the community we've set up of both artist and technologists who have a similar creative vein to ourselves."* (Artist)

Venues expressed similar sentiments. In a meeting of venue representatives, the feeling was unanimous that the 'best bit' was building a new relationship with a company. In particular, venues welcomed the opportunity to work intimately with the projects, to be more than 'just money and a logo':

*"What's been refreshing has been that we've been involved right from the beginning. It's been a lovely opportunity to do that and a reminder to keep doing that in the future."*

It is extremely unusual for six new theatre projects to be developed exactly in parallel in this way and this aspect both helped forge a strong community and lent muscle to the project as a whole. As a member of the advisory group observed, *"It's great to do it as a corpus... gives it loads more coherence, more gravitas... none [of the projects] would be as strong on their own."*

The strength of the network is, to a large extent due to iShed's open, generous approach and its team's experience in building communities. At the same time, the fact that everyone was at a similar starting point in launching into unknown territory also helped in community building:

*"One of the best things has been interacting with other companies... people whose work I've been interested in for a while but hadn't had a chance to meet. It's nice to meet them on a level when we're all slightly like fish out of water!"* (Artist)

The tight timescale of Theatre Sandbox (discussed elsewhere in this evaluation) combined with the geographic spread of the commissioned artists and host venues did, to an extent, limit community building. Artists, venues and the advisory group all regretted that they were unable to see all six test performances. One artist's comment typifies responses in almost every interview:



*"The nature of the scheme meant our projects all became quite segregated and unfortunately we were not able to see each other's projects. I was not around for any of the other tests, which was really frustrating as I was so excited to see them."*

Time will tell whether these relationships last and, if so, how they develop. However, there is very much a sense among both theatre makers and host venues that the group created is by no means a here-today-gone-tomorrow 'pop-up' community. From many respondents there was a sense of continuity in the relationships, that Theatre Sandbox was just the start of something:

*"There were lots of really interesting conversations (with venues and other artists) that went beyond the scheme – something has developed that will continue." (Artist)*

And for one company, their technologist collaborator had become *"an important part of the company"*.

## 4.2 ONLINE COMMUNITIES

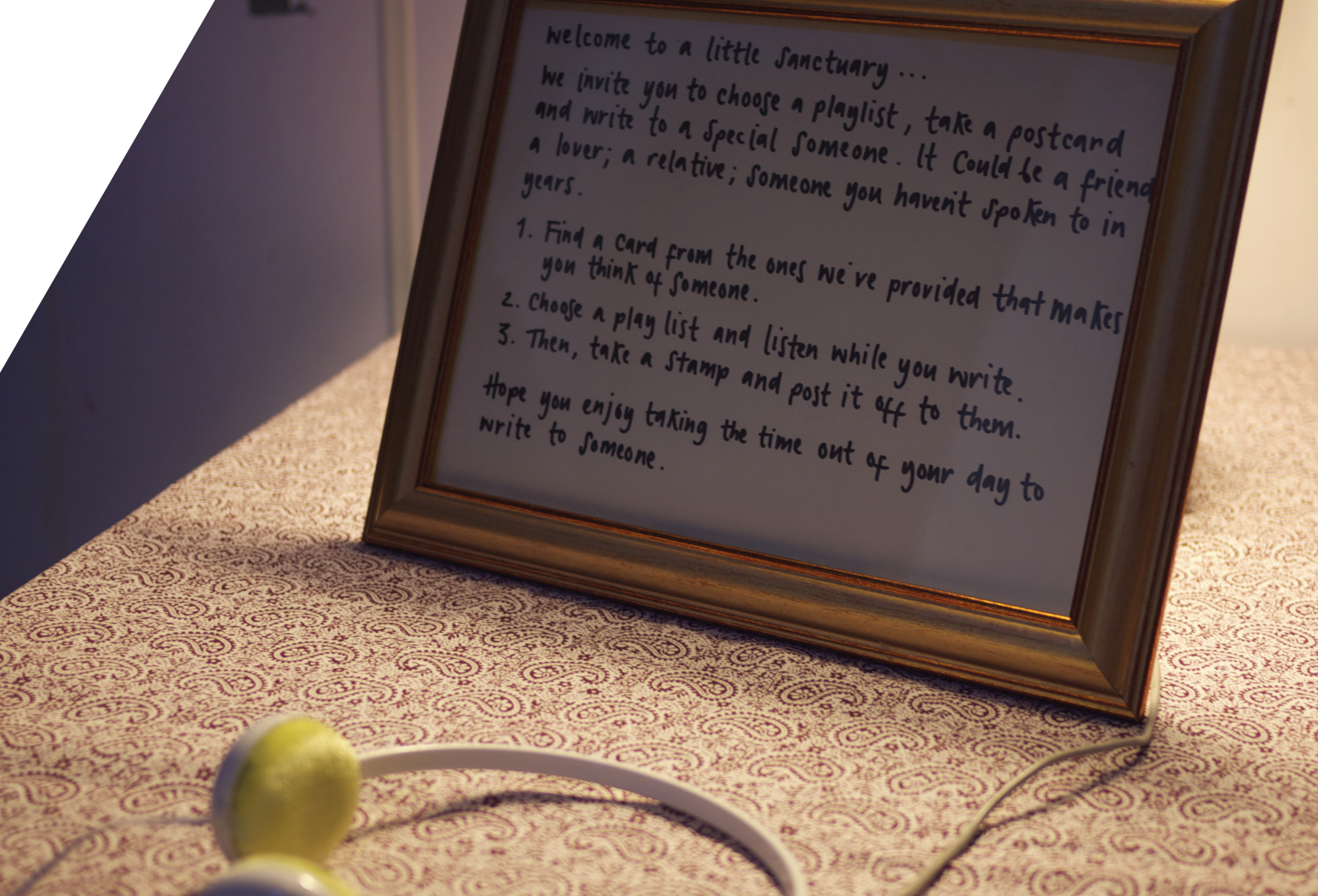
Among artists interviewed there has been a mixed response to the online community tools (Basecamp and blogs) used in Theatre Sandbox. Basecamp was felt to be unwieldy, even among those artists already familiar with it: *"I would have liked more interaction – Basecamp felt like a foreign solution. I found it an absolute nightmare – and I've used it before!"* Venues, however, were happier using Basecamp. For future iterations, artists suggest the use of video diaries and Skype to keep in touch with fellow participants (*"I personally feel I respond far better to the immediacy of these formats"*), together perhaps with a private blog in which ideas and issues could be shared and discussed.

The public blogs served two purposes that at times were at odds with each other. On one hand they functioned as public-facing promotional tools, generating anticipation and excitement among potential audiences. On the other, they provided a forum where artists could air technical or creative sticking points and gather feedback from other community members. For artists there was a tension between these two functions

Several found the imperative to write regular blog entries an artificial straightjacket that was insensitive to the native rhythm of each project: *"It was a chore. I found it a bit 'sausage-factory'"*. All were enthusiastic about writing blogs: what was difficult was an external blogging schedule that didn't relate to the commission itself.

Despite this, venues, iShed and the advisory group, as well as the artists, found the blogs valuable in keeping current with the progress of each commission. iShed noted that, perhaps because participants are more geographically dispersed, there has been more engagement with the project blogs than the sister project Media Sandbox, where participants are drawn principally from the Bristol area.





## 4.3 RELATIONSHIPS WITH TECHNOLOGISTS

*"The technologist seemed to understand where we were coming from straightaway."  
(Artist)*

All projects reported strong support from their technological advisors. In their appreciation of the ease of these relationships, some contrasted it with the friction often encountered in traditional artist-technician roles within theatre.

Artists valued meeting technologists who are interested and excited by their work, who avoid jargon, understand artistic creativity, and who recognise that the learning process could be two-way:

*"Technologists: they've been brilliant right from the start – I haven't felt like a nit at all! They've totally understood what we've been trying to do".*

*"They were very easy to work with. Lovely, approachable and explained things very clearly. They were happy to take the time to show me how things worked and were able to explain it in layman's terms so I got a far better understanding of it. [The technologist brought] enthusiasm, essential technological knowledge and a different perspective on the work, all of which was incredibly helpful."*

## 4.4 ARTIST-VENUE RELATIONSHIPS

The strength of the relationships between artist groups and their host venues varied across the scheme. For some, the relationship was extremely positive, exhibiting a shared commitment to making the project work. In at least one case, a venue has taken on another of the company's productions, outside of Theatre Sandbox but as a direct result of being involved in the scheme. Artists also enjoyed forging new relationships through Theatre Sandbox:

*"It turned out to be really good to work in a city, and a venue, that we didn't know." (Artist)*

Unsurprisingly, those relationships were best where a venue team and theatre company had strongly shared artistic interests.

Whilst in general the relationships between a host venue's lead producer and the theatre company were strong, in some cases it proved tricky to build relationships with the wider venue team: *"I'm very much bought into this but one of my challenges has been getting the rest of the organisation to understand it." (Venue)* *"I was surprised by how hard it has been to get internal team to understand completely what's going on and what we're doing." (Venue)*

In two cases, artist teams were proactive in building relationships with staff across the venue where they felt insufficiently embedded with the wider venue.

Some of the artist-host relationships can genuinely be described as collaborative partnerships; in other cases despite both artists and venue wanting a more collaborative relationship, the host venue functioned as little more than a space: *"I don't feel we did get the support we were hoping for from [the venue] and I don't think they really fulfilled their role within this process." (Artist)* In part, this was due to the timing of the scheme, discussed earlier in this evaluation: *"Because the scheme was during the summer a lot of the staff went on holiday at various points and sometimes it felt like we had been completely abandoned. We were never made to feel very welcome in the building and no-one was properly introduced at the start of our residency so it always felt a bit like we were intruders." (Artist).*

Another company felt the same: *"I didn't feel connected to the venue. Didn't feel like we were doing a show with the venue, but rather doing a show with [the venue's lead]. When they were there, they were very involved, very present, very committed to the project. The particular collaborating producer was really committed but perhaps because it didn't have a full performance outcome, it didn't have the support of the whole venue".*

Other artist-host relationships were unequivocally positive: *"We love [the venue]. We had a fantastic relationship with them."*

*"It's the most cared for we've ever felt at a venue. [The venue's producer] was going beyond all of our expectations." (Artist)*



And from another artist team: *"The venue's fantastic. What was lovely was that there was a trust from the venue that we could run with, when we needed to run with it. The technical support was unparalleled. That was such a brilliant relationship. They came on that journey with us very much, the whole team and the venue. Flexibility, openness, responsiveness to us. Very positive. The venue's technical crew welcomed the opportunity to play too. It was mutual."*

This response was mirrored by the venue: *"We really did become collaborators in terms of our technical team – they were delighted to be let loose on lots of new technology. It felt like it was being made for the venue – that side of it worked brilliantly."*

***"A building full of people who really want to play – which is just great!"***

And from another theatre company: *"[The venue's] been great, really supportive. [The producer] has been brilliant, getting their teeth into it as much as they've been able to. They've been unremittingly enthusiastic."*





## 4.5 MENTORING

Artists found discussions with advisory group members at the salon events very fruitful in terms of exploring, developing and clarifying ideas as well as learning more about technology options. They provided contacts and advice, acting as sounding boards and translators.

Connections with the Pervasive Media Studio community at the salon workshops were equally valuable and in similar ways: *"The resource of the people [at the Pervasive Media Studio] is so incredibly important [to the success of the scheme] – i.e. people who are interested in art, used to talking with artists, people with a really can-do attitude."* (iShed)

In both cases, individuals were generously investing their knowledge, expertise and enthusiasm into the scheme.

Whilst some members of the advisory group have acted more as consultants to the scheme than as mentors to individual projects, others worked actively with particular projects, developing technology solutions or brokering contacts with other technologists. This was extremely valuable:

*"[The advisor] was fantastic. We couldn't have done it without him."* (Artist)

However a structured mentorship pairing of advisors and artists did not happen as originally envisaged, and both artists and advisors agree that in future a slightly more formal mentoring relationship would be beneficial, as would dramaturgical mentors working with the artists alongside technology mentors.

The advisory group also played a wider role in advocacy for Theatre Sandbox, extending awareness of the scheme among a wide network of technologists, researchers, academics, big business, and cultural institutions.

## 4.6 THE VENUE COMMUNITY

For venues, Theatre Sandbox has confirmed, *"We want to do it. It's the future."*

Curious about the potential for digital technology to transform theatrical performance, or already exploring that potential, the six host venues could see clear benefit in getting involved in Theatre Sandbox: an opportunity to develop their digital expertise and to support a network of pioneering practitioners interested in the same field. The fact that there was a financial support from Theatre Sandbox for the venues made getting involved risk-free.

Taking part in Theatre Sandbox has already developed expertise and confidence at venues:

*"The learning curve was so brilliant from this project that I'm already developing another project – I'm giving notes, feedback, facilitation in a much better way due to what I've learned through this project." (Venue)*



Other pervasive media projects are underway at venues as a result of their involvement and exploitation of digital opportunities – including commercial opportunities – is increasingly becoming core to their business plans.

However, at least through the three month R&D process that forms the core of Theatre Sandbox, the community of venues has not yet developed to the same extent as the community of artists. In part, this is due to logistical challenges of geography and timing. There is, though, a significant desire among the venue partners to build closer relationships with each other, explore opportunities for co-production and grow the network for the future.

It is likely that, in exploring potential for a second edition of Theatre Sandbox, this nascent peer group of venues will develop and strengthen. At the same time, there is a need to review and clarify the expectations of venues' involvement and to build in ways to develop the community of venues as strongly as the community of artists.

# 5

## STRUCTURE & PROCESS

This section looks at design and delivery of Theatre Sandbox: the introductory workshops, selection process, budget, timescale, salon workshops, access, PR and management of the scheme.

### 5.1 THE INTRODUCTORY WORKSHOPS

**T**heatre Sandbox launched with a series of five introductory half-day workshops at theatres in Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, London, and Manchester. Attracting 275 participants, these workshops introduced pervasive media technologies, explained the format of the scheme and provided opportunities to develop an idea into a Theatre Sandbox proposal.

Of the 275 participants, 224 completed an evaluation and monitoring form produced by iShed. Data from these forms reveal that (of those who answered monitoring questions):

- 53% of participants are male; 47% female;
- 2% of participants consider themselves disabled;
- 89% of participants describe their ethnic origin as white British, white Irish or from another white background; 4.5% describe their ethnic origin as mixed or 'any other ethnic group'; 2.2% Black British or Black African; 2.2% Asian; and 1.3% Chinese; and
- participants range in age from 22 to 64 years; 36% are aged 22 - 31 years; 33% aged 31 - 40 years; and 31% are aged over 40 years.

A neat 50% of participants were freelancers and 50% were from an organisation. The majority of the organisations (99) have fewer than five employees; and 12 have 6-25 employees. Four of the organisations have 26 - 50 employees, and five have more than 50 employees.

The forms asked participants about the value of the workshop:

- 59% said that they 'learnt some things';
- 65% said that the workshop inspired new ideas; and
- 74% said that they 'met interesting people'.

Overall satisfaction with the workshops was high: 93% were satisfied, with over a third (34%) 'very satisfied' (the highest score on the form).

As part of the current evaluation, workshop participants were invited to complete an online survey in October 2010, six months after the workshops took place. Fifty individuals (18% of the original participants) took up the invitation. In this follow-up survey, freelancers were slightly more heavily represented (57%) than organisations. This may indicate that organisations were represented by more than one individual at the workshops but



that only one representative per organisation completed the follow-up survey. Participants from all five workshops responded, with the largest number of responses (17) coming from those who had taken part in the London workshop.

Of follow-up respondents, 57% submitted an application to Theatre Sandbox. Of those who didn't apply, just under half (45.5%) decided that the scheme wasn't for them. For a further 36%, the timing wasn't right. 9% didn't feel confident with the technology and another 9% couldn't find a collaborator.

Of those who were unsuccessful, 17% went ahead with their project anyway and 38% intend to proceed with their project in the future. Those projects include trials to develop a multi channel in-ear monitoring system providing actors with interactive cues from a pre-recorded script; a city-based project using mapping and QR codes; a work in progress taken to Forest Fringe summer 2010; a theatre work using social networking media; and a collaboration by eight emerging refugee and African Diaspora artists, an immersive theatre experience featuring digital visuals and sound.

Both the original monitoring and evaluation form and the follow up survey asked respondents to assess their familiarity with digital technologies prior to the workshop. The follow-up survey invited them also to assess their familiarity six months later. The results are provided in the table below.

Participants' levels of familiarity with digital technologies	Evaluation & monitoring form: Levels prior to the workshop	Follow-up Survey: Levels prior to the workshop	Follow-up survey: Levels six-months later
No experience at all	4%	10%	2%
Just beginning	29%	27%	29%
Fairly comfortable	35%	24%	28%
Confident user	14%	14%	14%
Confident user & producer	18%	25%	27%



In improving participants' knowledge of and confidence in pervasive media, the workshops appear to have had a small impact across the board, with most impact on those with limited prior experience, i.e., those moving from 'not experience at all' to 'just beginning' or from 'just beginning' to 'fairly comfortable'. However it should be noted that those with no experience at all of digital technologies prior to the workshop were represented more heavily in the follow-up survey than in the original evaluation and monitoring form, which may have biased this result.

The workshops, in the main, have encouraged participants to find out more about pervasive media and use it in their work: 32% developed proposals for theatre using pervasive media; 20% have started developing new theatre projects using pervasive media; 18% made a new contact or collaborator as a result of the workshops; and 28% have followed Theatre Sandbox via the project blogs.

The most useful aspect of the workshops was learning about how other theatre makers are using technology (for 54% respondents), together with developing new ideas (36%) and finding out about new technology. Networking was of value to 26% of respondents. The strong contrast between these figures and responses captured in iShed's evaluation and monitoring forms distributed on the day.

Host venues valued the opportunity to make contact with a wide range of artists and technologists and many responses to the workshops were warmly positive:

*"I thought it was a fascinating day and a great way of enriching ideas of those people that were chosen to develop their ideas on the day. It was also interesting to find out what ideas other people had."*

*"It was brilliant!"*

However, there were three areas in which participants felt the workshop could be improved:

- more demonstration and explanation of pervasive media technologies
- remove the element of pitching ideas to be developed in the workshop
- more opportunity to choose which groups/ideas to work with and/or to move around to different discussions

Across the board, participating theatre makers called for more explanation of pervasive media technologies, more practical demonstrations, and concrete examples of technology in action, preferably from specialist contributors.

Whilst the workshops deliberately focused on developing theatrical ideas, and the rationale for that was clear, the feedback shows that participants were eager to be exposed to the range and potential of the technologies available: *"A bit more of the science stuff up front would've been good"*.

The pitching format was felt by many to have introduced an unwelcome and awkward competitive aspect to the workshops. This atmosphere then bled into the working groups: *"In terms of the 'pitches' at the workshop resulting in groupings, some difficulties arose. Many found it difficult to offer up their ideas for potential scrutiny; others were less than supportive of the ideas being discussed and offered alternative ideas which seemed unuseful to the presenting artists. A trust hadn't been established between participants before ideas were shared/discussed/scrutinised/offered over to strangers with whom they'd never met."*

Artists also felt restricted by being arbitrarily allocated to groups rather than having the freedom to choose which ideas they wanted to work on and/or to move between groups in the style of Open Space Technology. Many artists commented on this. To quote just one response, which exemplifies the feelings of many of the participants:

*"Event design could have been improved. Too many people and then arbitrarily pushed into collaborating groups to work on ideas that we weren't necessarily interested in, with strangers with too little time to get to know, and not enough facilitation for those who weren't experienced in this kind of conversation."*

Participants also asked for more time in the workshops to work on ideas, more opportunity for personal feedback, more networking or community-building opportunities at the event and afterwards (e.g. through social networks), smaller numbers of participants (many respondents found their workshop crowded), and more pervasive media technologists to be on hand to work with participants. These two last points are related: *"The number of people in attendance meant that the two technologists were overstretched in terms of moving around the groups, and their input could only be offered for two minutes at a time."*

Surprisingly, given the intent – and outcomes – of the scheme, many participants felt that the workshops restricted, rather than expanded ideas. Again, to cite just one typical comment: *"There seemed to be a fairly defined idea of how pervasive technology was to be used in the context of a 'theatre piece' – and as a result genuine scope for experimentation and innovation felt a bit restricted."*

It seems that these were issues more of message rather than intent; communication in the workshops of the purpose of the scheme could be refined. This interpretation is supported by the fact that in the follow up survey more than one respondent felt in retrospect that they had misunderstood the level of technological integration Theatre Sandbox was asking for: *"I was pushed for time, and I thought my application wasn't pervasive media enough for what you were looking at, only to realise subsequently on seeing the winning entries that it was!"*



Despite these points, overall the workshops were positively received and succeeded in their primary aim of introducing and clarifying the scheme:

*"I think the workshop was a necessity in learning how the commission would work; understanding the grounds on which the relationship between artist and technologist would work i.e. it would be a meeting of minds and not the technologists doing their thing and the artists another thing."*

*"The workshop process was important to explain the scheme and explore relevant projects and I found these sandbox workshops really useful, in this case if only to dissuade me from making an application."*

*"It's a great scheme, the thinking and structure behind it are brilliant. The workshop was just what I needed to introduce me to some of the developments."*

## 5.2 SELECTION PROCESS



In their applications for a Theatre Sandbox commission, theatre makers were asked to indicate which venue they would prefer to host their project. These choices were often influenced by existing relationships, geography and shared artistic concerns.

The result, however, was to create competition among artists for venues and likewise among venues for artists, leading to "challenging negotiations" and a delay in the final announcements.

The ultimate pairings of artists and venues were, in the main, felt to be very positive: new relationships were forged and companies and theatres enjoyed working with previously unknown collaborators. Yet, whilst artist teams enjoyed working in new cities, the pairings did, in some cases, put pressure on budgets and time due to travel distances between a company's home base and the host city.

It was agreed by all interviewees that the process of linking artists and venues needs to be refined in future editions of Theatre Sandbox. In addition, selection would benefit from there being a consistent panel for all interviews.

A very positive aspect of the selection process was the involvement on the interview panels of Alex Browning, a member of Contact's Young Programming and Producing Team: this was an opportunity for Browning to develop his interest in the meeting points of digital and theatre and brought a valuable new angle to the panel's questions and observations.

## 5.3 BUDGET

Overall the budget was felt by both artists and venues to be sufficient for the scale and purpose of the project.

For venues, the financial contribution from Theatre Sandbox enabled them to

*“do what we needed to do to make the project work,”*

in particular in investing in R&D that does not have fixed output, i.e. a show, *“we tend to invest cash in R&D only in those projects that we know are going to happen.”*

However, the fact that many of the artists were working in cities away from their main company base put pressure on budgets: in one case, 30% of the budget was taken up with travel and accommodation. The cost of travel in such a geographically dispersed scheme needs to be considered carefully in future iterations.

Among artists, there was some confusion about budgets, in particular what financial support was available for technology and technology consultancy support (£800 and £2,500, respectively, on top of the £10,000 commission), in addition to ‘hidden’ or non-financial support, such as the documentaries and PR. Whilst the intention of the iShed team was to be flexible and responsive, the upshot was misunderstanding. The need for transparency was recognised by the iShed team, who quickly responded with clarifications on the full value of support available. Artists and the iShed team agree that this information should be made clearer right at the beginning of the process in future years of Theatre Sandbox.

## 5.4 TIMING & TIMESCALE

Three aspects of timing and timescale were raised in interviews: the lead time between commissions being awarded and the start of the R&D process, the three months allocated to R&D, and timing in terms of where the project fell within the year. For artists and venues alike, these three factors, singly and in combination, put unhelpful restrictions on their involvement in Theatre Sandbox. These challenges were amplified by the fact that most of the artists were working with venue partners in cities at some distance from their company base: *“I think our biggest problems were lack of time and living in different cities”.* (Artist)

There were just a few weeks between companies being notified that they had received a commission and the start of the R&D process. For several of the artists this caused problems, as portions of their time were already committed to other projects. Fitting a new project in alongside these commitments at very short notice was a challenge: *“As we were so late in finding out about the award it meant that I had to take other work and I have been slightly frustrated about having to juggle the two.”* This was compounded by the fact that the project ran through the summer months, July – September, when several of the artists had Edinburgh commitments. For companies scheduling

rehearsal, performance and touring schedules often six months or more in advance, a longer lead time would afford them opportunity to plan and to devote more time to the commission.

It should be stressed that the constrained timescale did not compromise companies' involvement in the project – they were acutely aware of the rare opportunity being offered and were eager to squeeze as much out of it as they could – but it did mean that to realise the value of the scheme within the timescale and alongside other commitments, the artists found themselves under considerable pressure.

The three-month development phase for Theatre Sandbox was based on the Media Sandbox model. This meant the projects were rushed and limited the scope for learning and development: *"I'm cool to work quick but I haven't learned as much as we would have done if it hadn't been at such a breakneck speed."* (Venue)

Whilst some acknowledged the value of a compressed process in terms of focusing on what is most important, the universal feeling is that three months is too tight a timescale for theatre makers. A longer R&D phase (most suggested six months) would afford more time for technology solutions to be developed and tested through a number of stages, alongside working on other projects. Six months would also give more time for artists and venues to get to know each other, build collaborative partnerships and let ideas gestate as well as time to see each other's test performances.

That the scheme ran over the summer period, when theatres are traditionally 'dark', was in some regards helpful. In venues where space is at a premium, working over the summer meant that artists had more access than they might have done in other seasons. On the other hand, many of the artists were busy preparing for and attending Edinburgh, and venue staff were on holiday, which limited in some cases the support received by artists as well as the extent to which the whole venue felt involved in the scheme.





## 5.5 SALONS

The artists, advisory group members, venue representatives, and iShed team met together over the course of the scheme at three, monthly 'salon' workshops in Bristol. The first salon was held over two days, with an evening networking dinner. The other two were each held over a single day. The first day was facilitated by Gill Wildman from Plot [www.plotlondon.net](http://www.plotlondon.net). Jo Reid, from Calvium, was a guest speaker at the second salon. All the artist groups were represented at the three salons, and some advisory group members also made it to all three events, but not all venues were represented each time. The workshops gave participants the opportunity to discuss ideas, explore opportunities for collaboration and innovation, meet with Pervasive Media Studio residents, and talk with technology advisors.

Whilst the artists very much valued the salons as a chance for "*clarifying conversations*", from their perspective, the events need rethinking in terms of timing (i.e. where they occur in the overall process), length, content and structure.

Artists have called for more technologists to be present ("*if we're going to have six commissions, we need six technologists*"), especially in the first session, to work with them in understanding what is available. Although iShed deliberately chose to start with the ideas rather than the technology and tools, it would also be useful to have more technology 'kit' available in the sessions to demonstrate and spark ideas. In addition, a technology glossary would be helpful (and, perhaps, could be compiled collaboratively by the community involved in this inaugural Theatre Sandbox) as a reference point for artists learning rapidly about a completely new field. Alongside the technological development, artists have also requested more time in the workshops for dramaturgical development.

Artists were frustrated by the format of the first workshop, in which they found themselves repeatedly having to explain and re-explain their projects to technology advisors with only a very short time for feedback before they had to present their ideas again to a new advisor. This was "*sticky, uncomfortable, we found ourselves vying for attention*". They acknowledge, though, that the iShed team was very responsive when they raised this as a problem. A more general and related point about the workshops was a desire for more unstructured time with each other to discuss ideas, rather than so much time spent presenting progress updates on their projects.

Venues have proposed that the sessions have a clearer agenda in advance, so that they would know which were the most appropriate for them to attend. Rather than being invited to all the salons, venues have suggested that it would have been more beneficial to have a specific day when all the venues attended and shared ideas.

On the positive side, the workshops prompted new ideas, enabled artists to discuss insights and challenges, and built a strong community through shared experience. Artists particularly valued the talk given by Jo Reid from Calvium, who spoke in the second salon on developing ideas, usability testing and research methods for gathering feedback.

Venues valued the salons too: "*Time to talk to other venues was really useful, to have that insight into how other venues were working.*" However, despite the chance to meet at the salons, others "*felt a little bit isolated as there could have more facilitated connection between venues facing the challenges of geography and busy-ness*". Some venues were unsure of what they input or received from the salon days, feeling that the meetings were more useful for the artists than themselves. There have been suggestions that the salon workshops could move around the network, rather than always being hosted by iShed.

## 5.6 ACCESS & INCLUSION

In two of the Theatre Sandbox commissions, aesthetics, technology and access are intricately interlinked and core to their ethos.

Tin Bath's research focused on developing a system of dynamic creative captioning that can respond live to an actor's tone, pitch, timing and even emotion to communicate not only a performance script but also the subtext. The aim is to extend accessibility whilst developing captioning as an art form in its own right that is responsive to live phenomena.

Mind the Gap produces theatre by actors with learning disabilities. Sonic Maze, the company's Theatre Sandbox commission, was deliberately designed to subvert instances of oppression by privileging people who are typically marginalised through technology. Crucial pieces of information were delivered by a Mosquito device, heard only by young people, and through an induction loop system, accessible to hearing aid users. To navigate the maze successfully, teams had to include individuals who could hear the Mosquito and the hearing loop.

Access was taken into consideration in delivery of Theatre Sandbox, with communication support (BSL interpreters or Speech-to-Text reporters) provided for all workshops, the Showcase, and Tin Bath's time at mac. The iShed team were praised for their responsiveness and sensitivity to access requirements. However, the structure of the workshops (even after revision) did put limitations on accessibility. The spontaneous nature of discussions, with people speaking fast and overlapping, could be difficult to follow and some sessions ran on too long: structured breaks are essential for communication support, which demands intense focus. In future, such pitfalls could be avoided by providing Deaf awareness or disability awareness training, as appropriate, for all participants at an early stage in the project. This would benefit everyone in bringing them to a common level of knowledge and understanding to facilitate further the collaborative learning that is at the heart of the project.

## 5.7 PRODUCTION & MANAGEMENT

*"They've coordinated something really impressive." (Venue)*

The management of Theatre Sandbox by Producer Katie Day, supported by iShed Director Clare Reddington, was universally praised:

*"The management's been exceptional.  
Incredibly thorough."*

*There's been so much for them to manage – so many layers to the project, so many partnerships, so many aspects, sharings, Basecamps, blogs, ad hoc conversations. I think they've done a really tremendous job." (Venue)*

*"Exemplary. Absolutely exemplary. I can't think of a better place for this project to be coming out of or coming back to. So organised.*

*"I'd do it again and again and again if I could." (Venue)*

The artists felt the same. In fact, time and again interviewees described the iShed team as 'exemplary' or 'exceptional':

*"They were excellent, really great. They were exemplary. They have a really 'can-do' attitude. They have a lot of knowledge of technology, a lot of contacts. They were good at focusing us.*

*Wish we could have seen more of them; that would have been really helpful." (Artist)*

Specific feedback recognized the iShed team's strength in brokering relationships between artists and technologists; their knack of putting together a good mix of people and expertise; the guidance they provided artists in selecting technology solutions; their warmth, generosity, flexibility and responsiveness; and their willingness to go 'above and beyond' in their commitment to making it work. Artists valued the regular contact and 'checking up' that maintained momentum and reminded them that someone was looking out for them and their project. Also important was the balance – crucial in any creative process – of structure and freedom.

Both artists and venues praised Katie and Clare's very clear articulation of the scheme, their understanding of the R&D process and their frequent reminders that artists were working towards a prototype, with frequent iterations and small tests, not a finished show or 'final performance'.

The core role of a Theatre Sandbox Producer with a strong theatre background (as is the case with Katie Day) was crucial. It was important in terms of design, relevance, understanding and legitimacy of the project within the professional theatre community that the project lead came from a theatre background. This role should continue if the scheme runs again. However, venues and artists agreed that the project would benefit from a digital producer working alongside the lead producer to work on technology specifications and applications and act as a translator and facilitator of the relationships between artists and technologists.



## 5.8 PROFILE & PR



*"There's definitely a sense that they were trumpeting this beyond our little word. I keep hearing from people I don't know, 'oh I know who you are because of Theatre Sandbox'. It's good at promoting us as companies." (Artist)*

Venues and artists have valued the high profile of the scheme. Theatre Sandbox has featured in both trade and general press, online and offline, including The Guardian, The Stage, and [broadwayworld.com](http://broadwayworld.com).

Tin Bath's test performances at mac were featured on BBC2's See Hear. This 10-minute segment has enabled the company to communicate their project to venues and attract interest in their work from major London theatres beyond the Theatre Sandbox network: *"it felt like a risk to open our work to TV so early in the process, but it paid off."* And of course, within the project itself, for each of the theatre companies, there was tremendous value in raising their profile among the six partner venues.

Theatre Sandbox produced short documentaries on each of the six projects. Online at DShed, these are a valuable publicity resource for companies and venues, alongside the less formal project blogs and Twitter stream. The documentaries were presented at the Theatre Sandbox Showcase at Watershed in November 2010, alongside two panel discussions with the artist teams. The Showcase itself attracted 196 delegates including researchers, journalists, technologists, theatre makers, commissioners and representatives of funders and major theatres.

The scheme achieved its stated aim of boosting iShed's national status as a leader in delivering collaborative R&D projects integrating digital technology and outstanding artists:

*"It's a very outward looking project. It's punching pretty hard nationally, taking risks, raising the profile of what [iShed's] doing and applying it more to making art and increasing their connections." (Venue)*

# 6

## LOOKING AHEAD

### 6.1 FUTURE PLANS

There is considerable appetite among the 2010 Theatre Sandbox cohort of venues and artists to find a life for the work beyond the initial R&D: a shared ambition to keep exploring the technology, to take the pieces developed into full production, and to develop the *“exciting fruitful partnerships”* created by the scheme. Indeed, from the beginning, for many of the participants a future life for the projects was one of their markers of success for Theatre Sandbox as a whole.

One interviewee counselled against feeling an obligation to take all six commissions forward: in an R&D process such as this, it was acknowledged that perhaps not all projects would result in work that could become viable full-scale productions. In some cases, the particular challenge will be one of scalability; in others, the ideas just might not work out in practice. Nevertheless, and perhaps remarkably, there does seem to be genuine interest in developing each of the six pieces in some way.



At the time of the evaluation interviews (October – November 2010), several of the artists had follow-up meetings booked with venues to discuss options for developing full productions. Some also had attracted early interest in their work from venues outside the Theatre Sandbox network. In some cases, artists are continuing to work with the technologists they met through the scheme to develop both the technology and the theatrical content for further tests.

Venues, meanwhile, will be meeting with iShed in December 2010 to discuss potential co-productions and to consider what a second year of Theatre Sandbox might look like. There is similar enthusiasm among the advisory group to be involved in future editions of the scheme.

A challenge for iShed in designing and raising finance for a future Theatre Sandbox is how to strengthen and consolidate the existing network whilst also opening up and extending the scheme to new venue partners. In terms of structure, iShed will also need to consider how the project might be in a position to support not only R&D but future development of some at least of the projects. Several interviewees made the suggestion that, in a future edition of Theatre Sandbox, provision of follow-on funding would be beneficial, either for a production/co-production or for further R&D. It is important though that this would be entirely separate to the R&D process to avoid introducing what is perceived would be a potentially unhelpful competitive element into an open and collaborative community.

## 6.2 POINTS FOR DEVELOPMENT

Given Theatre Sandbox is a brand new initiative, there are surprisingly few aspects of the scheme that need to be refined. Partly, this is to do with excellent programme design. In part, it is to do with building on lessons learnt through Media Sandbox and Watershed's lengthy experience of artist development. And in part it is due to the openness of everyone involved and the responsiveness of the iShed team: during its course, the project evolved in response to feedback.

The following points are not so much recommendations as starting points for discussion in the design of a future edition of the scheme. Needless to say, the project should retain all that has been identified as working well.

- A less intensive R&D process carried out over a longer period and with a more generous lead time. A six month process would enable artists to plan adequate time and space to devote to the commission, afford more time for the gestation of ideas, and provide more opportunity for relationships to develop and for the community to travel to see each other's work.
- Clarify the purpose of the introductory workshops: the balance between development of ideas, demonstration of technology and introducing the scheme. (This should be easier in a second round, as it can draw on the example of the first edition). Revise the pitching process and allocation to groups to foster collaboration rather than competition.



- Revise the interview and selection process: have a consistent interview panel and explore ways to improve the mechanism for allocating projects to venues.
- Clarify host venues' role as collaborators and what is expected in terms of support.
- Explore ways to involve more venue staff in the project, not just the venue producer.
- Consider how to build a stronger venue network: consider identifying one salon workshop as the one for venues to attend and/or having the salons hosted by partner venues.
- Employ a technical producer to work alongside the lead Theatre Sandbox producer to support artists in identifying appropriate technology support and advice; sourcing, selecting or developing technology; and integrating that technology in their work.
- Provide more grounding in technology at the beginning: Demonstration of kit at an earlier stage, a glossary, and more time to play and become familiar with options.
- Establish more formal mentoring relationships between artists and advisors.
- Revise the structure of the salon workshops to avoid artists having repeatedly to explain their projects. Provide dramaturgical as well as technological development support at the workshops. Ensure there are as many advisors as there are projects at the salons. Consider opportunities for residential salons.
- Expand access support, offering deaf awareness training and/or disability awareness training as appropriate to the cohort.
- Consider a dedicated travel budget allocated in proportion to companies' relative needs for travel and accommodation in order to fulfill their commission.
- Maintain the online community tools but revise the use of Basecamp and allow blogs to be more responsive to the natural timing of each project.
- Explore opportunities to provide follow-on funding for further R&D or potential co-productions and/or more dedicated support for companies to seek further funding.
- Consider how to balance the opportunity to strengthen the existing network of artists and venues whilst also opening it out to new partners for future editions of the scheme.



## CONCLUSION: WHY INVEST?

*"For me it's been really successful. You want to replicate success." (Venue)*

*"We had a crazy idea and through the process we made it happen. We did manage to realise something that was a prototype for the vision that we had."*

*There was some magic in the technology for me. At that point you don't really know how you're going to do it. From fantasy to realisation: there's some kind of magic in that." (Artist)*



On 29th November 2010, NESTA published a report on the creative geography of Britain, identifying ten innovation hotspots, three of which, Bristol, London and Manchester, are cities involved in Theatre Sandbox (Capain, Cooke et al. 2010). Acknowledging how digitization is driving innovation in the creative industries, the paper identifies as innovation catalysts: intense R&D; connectivity between firms, collaborators and external sources of innovation; and a dense web of informal interactions and networking. Its recommendation is that policy-makers develop the strengths of existing clusters by removing barriers to collaboration, designing initiatives that foster networking and knowledge sharing, and building bridges between potentially collaborative sectors. All things that, happily, Theatre Sandbox is already delivering adeptly.

Earlier in the same month, Professor Onora O'Neill, in her keynote 'The Two Cultures Fifty Years On' (O'Neill 2010) at Birkbeck's 'Why Humanities' conference, made the case for funding research initiatives in which the results are unknown *"in the full knowledge that not all will bear fruit and also in the pleasant anticipation that some will have fruits not foreseen or perhaps even imagined when the research was undertaken."*

R&D deserves investment not only for the value it gives those directly involved but also because of the 'spillover' benefits (i.e., positive externalities) that it provides for other companies and the economy and society more broadly: in other words, the social rate of return is often higher than the private rate of return enjoyed directly by the innovators. It is these spillovers that help shape innovation hotspots. Public investment in R&D, such as Theatre Sandbox, in addition to its direct cultural and artistic benefit, addresses the market failure and structural barriers created by a disparity between the social and private rates of return. The potential gains of creative and knowledge spillovers outweigh the cost of the original investment.

It is indeed pleasant to anticipate that Theatre Sandbox will have as yet unforeseen fruits: it is far too early to know at this stage what the ultimate benefits and who the ultimate beneficiaries will be. What is clear is that it is an exemplary R&D project, leading the way in innovative, collaborative practice and in bridging another 'two cultures' of technology and theatre.

So, if Theatre Sandbox is exceptional in terms of R&D, how do its aspirations and successes fit within arts policy? As noted in its original Grants for the Arts Proposal (iShed 2009), the project aligns with the current Arts Council England (ACE) Interdisciplinary Arts and Theatre policies, and contributes to ACE's priority for 2008 – 11 to build the digital capacity of its regularly funded organisations, sharing knowledge and best practice (Arts Council England 2008).

Theatre Sandbox aligns equally closely with ACE's new ten-year strategy (Arts Council England 2010), also published November 2010 (busy month!). Knowledge sharing, responding to the potential of technological change, and the pressing necessity of collaboration are themes that run through the strategy.

ACE's five goals are:

**Goal 1:** Talent and artistic excellence are thriving and celebrated

**Goal 2:** More people experience and are inspired by the arts

**Goal 3:** The arts are sustainable, resilient and innovative

**Goal 4:** The arts leadership and workforce are diverse and highly skilled

**Goal 5:** Every child and young person has the opportunity to experience the richness of the arts

Theatre Sandbox contributes directly to the first, third and fourth goals and indirectly to goals 2 and 5. Moreover, as I hope this report demonstrates, it fosters the kind of excellence that ACE seeks to support:

***"the bravest, most original, most innovative, most perfectly realized work of which people are capable" (Arts Council England 2010)***

Midway through Theatre Sandbox, one of the artists, speaking at a salon event, said of their own work, *"We don't yet know if any of this will work... we have to be brave that none of it might work."* Everyone involved in the scheme – artists, venue producers, technologists, advisors, and the iShed team – were brave in this way. Their courage has paid off.

In process and in outcome, in creating a community of theatre makers and venues excited about using technology and confident in their ability to do so, in building knowledge and disseminating it, in encouraging collaborative learning and innovation, and in extending its geographic reach and its expertise into new domains, iShed has attained – and surpassed – all it set out to achieve in Theatre Sandbox.

*"For me, Theatre Sandbox will be a success if it doesn't end here." (Venue)*



## ANNEX ONE: INTERVIEWEES

Hannah Barker, *Analogue*  
Paul Clarke, *Uninvited Guests*  
Ed Collier, *China Plate*  
Louisa Davies-Foley, *mac*  
Katie Day, *iShed*  
Gemma Fairlie, *Tin Bath*  
Jessica Hepburn, *Lyric Hammersmith*  
Baba Israel, *Contact Theatre*  
Liam Jarvis, *Analogue*  
Joyce Lee, *Mind the Gap*  
Gillian Lees, *Proto-type Theater*  
Bailey Lock, *Lyric Hammersmith*  
Kate Madden, *The Junction*  
Kenton O'Hara, *Microsoft Research*  
Peter Petralia, *Proto-type Theater*  
Clare Reddington, *iShed*  
James Richards, *BBC*  
Amanda Roberts, *mac*  
David Searle, *Mind the Gap*  
Julia Skelton, *Mind the Gap*  
Duncan Speakman  
Nina Steiger, *Soho Theatre*  
Phil Stenton, *Calvium*  
Melanie Wilson  
Sophie Woolley, *Tin Bath*  
Kate Yedigiaroff, *Bristol Old Vic*

## ANNEX TWO: WORD CLOUD OF SUCCESSFUL APPLICATIONS

This Wordle word cloud was created from the texts of the six successful Theatre Sandbox commission applications. The size of the word indicates the frequency at which it appears in the text: the bigger the word the more often it has been used.



## ANNEX THREE: BIBLIOGRAPHY

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## ANNEX FOUR: IMAGE CREDITS

Cover, *as if it were the last time* by Duncan Speakman

Page 4, *Theatre Sandbox Workshops* by Verity Wright

Page 7, *as if it were the last time* by Duncan Speakman

Page 9, *Theatre Sandbox Workshops* by Verity Wright

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