

Shop Front Theatre

ARCHIVE 2009 – 2022

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*except where indicated



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Introductions

Shop Front Theatre

In 2009 Theatre Absolute founded the UK's first professional Shop Front Theatre, in Coventry's city centre. Taking over a disused fish and chip shop, and supported by Coventry City Council, they turned it into a thriving lo-fi community space which welcomed and nurtured artists, dancers, writers, poets, activists, film-makers and more. It became a beacon for new performative works, experimentation and dialogue.

After running for over a decade the project closed its doors in 2022 before the building was demolished.

This publication hopes to capture some of the spirit of radical adventure surrounding the 13 year-long project and to inspire other artists to take chances and be open to opportunities offered by unexpected places, collaborations, and partnerships.

Where you see ► READ MORE ONLINE
visit theatreabsolute.co.uk/shop-front-archive

Theatre Absolute

Theatre Absolute creates performative work that takes risks and is radical and disruptive. Driven by the shared artistic vision of artist-producer Julia Negus and writer-director Chris O'Connell, they collaborate across disciplines to explore how they can make narrative.

By working with writers, dancers, poets, visual artists and more, they strive to make relevant and experimental work for performance. They have been creating professional work for nearly 30 years, forming in 1992. Early work was written and led by Chris, whose plays included the Time Out Live and double Edinburgh Fringe First award winning Street Trilogy (*CAR, RAW, KID*).

Their 13 year-long Shop Front Theatre project offered them a unique base from which to go on an incredible journey allowing them to reflect and act upon their role as artists and theatre-makers within the community and coming to believe that artists, participants, and audiences should be considered active citizens not consumers. They will be taking this ethos forward into future work.



Julia Negus
and Chris O'Connell
Shop Front Theatre

above
2009

right
2022





The life of the artist, and often Arts organisations, is one of punches and rolling. The punches are seldom welcome, but we can choose to roll well. This extraordinary phase in the life of Theatre Absolute is a story of rolling beautifully well with, and for, our times.

My relationship with shops in Coventry goes back to my childhood, when I came in on the bus with my mum, maybe twice a year, for school shoes and a quarter pound of toffee which I'd attempt to get through on the bus home, so my brothers didn't blow my privilege. A privilege only bettered by returning to the same shopping destination, not as a consumer or a customer, but as a writer, performer, dramaturg and mentor on a number of Shop Front Theatre projects.

Shop Front Theatre has been a powerful place to be supported and inspired not only to do what you do, but to do what you have not yet done, to do more than one thing, to move beyond traditional ideas about what it is to be an artist. It is the story of all of us, of what has happened in and to the Arts and artists and to society over the last 13 years. There are many lessons to be learnt from it and from these pages. Here are six to get you started.

opposite
Are We Where We Are #4: Under The Carpet
written and performed by Sarah Woods
2017

Foreword

By Sarah Woods – playwright, teacher & activist

ONE: Value

This is a space where the neoliberal model of what a shop is is turned on its head. In a world of marketised art, this enables us to value things beyond the monetary, like sharing, wellbeing and equality.

TWO: Holding Space

During their time at Shop Front Theatre, Theatre Absolute moved from taking centre stage to holding space. This shift is at the heart of what we need to do as artists, as we hold space for marginalised voices, less heard stories and difficult conversations. Spaces like this – spatial or temporal – enable us to step out of the everyday while staying connected to it.

THREE: Relational

Throughout history, the West has tended to give more attention to things than to relationships but, every now and then, seeing things more as connected systems comes to the fore. At Shop Front Theatre, we see how this thinking shift enables relational art to blossom, art that is in relationship with rather than free from community and society and the possibility of change.

FOUR: Stitching

From the outside, many of the processes described here can look like straight lines when they're actually a series of stitches: circular movements forming new connections as people, activities and possibilities are threaded together. Yes, there is often linear progress, but the process at work is iterative and layered.

FIVE: Care / Values

Underpinning all this are values of social justice, freedom, creativity, altruism and benevolence. Working in this space infuses us and our co-creations and everyone who connects with them with these same values.

SIX: Borders / Membrane

We tend to think that there are boundaries between things, borders that hold people and ideas and behaviours in or out, but borders are always messy and blurred. At a cellular level, the semi-permeable membrane around each of our cells is in constant relationship with its environment. Life, we increasingly remember, is flow: across disciplines and roles and genders and territories. As artists and audiences at Shop Front Theatre have experienced, the more we reject the binary, the better we can work with complexity and enable diversity.

Theatre Absolute's adventure with Shop Front Theatre beautifully catalogues a journey which an increasing number of artists are making – from traditional art forms to relational and values-based work. While the end of the Shop Front Theatre project is being brought about by a knock-out blow of literal destruction, it feels like it's also time for Theatre Absolute, and all of us, to roll again. Carrying all that we have seen and made and shared and learnt.

And to watch what Theatre Absolute do next. They will continue not just to show us the way, but to take us with them.

Transitional Moments

By Chris O'Connell and Julia Negus, Theatre Absolute

Ever since Theatre Absolute was founded in 1992, we have always kept ourselves open to change, or more specifically, to what we've come to recognise as transitional moments. We haven't fought those moments, sometimes we've barely seen them coming until very late, but we've always ended up in a new and stimulating mindset as artists.

Starting out through the early/mid 90's, we made work as a company to understand how to make work as a company. Some of that work was good and some okay, but essentially we learnt how to 'be' as two artists driving a vision. That vision though was sort of safe, and wasn't entirely formed or particularly well articulated. It took a first major transition into work made at the turn of the century and into the early noughties through *CAR*, *RAW*, and *KID*, written by Chris and directed by Mark Babych to introduce us to a new mindset

and a sudden burst of work that was unlike anything we had done before. Raw, poetic, stylised, angry, dystopian, loud, it was, if nothing else, a vision: this is what we want to say about something, and the way in which we want to say it. It was a transition into the bolder possibilities of theatre, and the work took us to success in Edinburgh, Europe, America, and later works such as *Hang Lenny Pope* and *cloud:burst*, all very much driven by a similar heightened approach to the storytelling, continued through into the mid 2000's.

By 2008, we had been touring this kind of work for nearly 10 years. Anyone who was touring back then, and even now, will understand how hard that market is. We found increasingly that the work we wanted to make was getting harder to tour - financial pressures on venues, aesthetic choices by venues, and so on. It's the way things work. Beneath the

surface was an emerging ennui, we were wearing ourselves thin. So came another transition, the boldest yet.

In 2008, Chris' play *Zero* toured the UK. Oracle Productions in Chicago read about it and bought the rights to create their own production. Travelling to Chicago, Chris knew some things from the internet, but not much about the company. It grew more mysterious when he arranged to meet up at the rehearsals of the play. There was no obvious theatre in the street, only shops. Across the road was a small unassuming shop with the word ZERO blazoned across its front window.

“A space that belonged to the myriad user groups and artists in the city as much as to us.”

Pushing on the door, Chris met Ben, Brad and Aaron, and a host of other inspirational theatre makers who were at the forefront of a movement in Chicago, called Store Front Theatre. The space that Oracle were working in was bare, unkempt, unconcerned with fussiness, and from memory,

“Art should always be radical.”

seated perhaps 50 or so people. He learnt over a week there how they, and a host of other companies we were working in the district of Lakeview, taking over disused shops/stores and using them to make theatre. Long term. To embed themselves, not just as pop ups for a few weeks, but to challenge the power base of the downtown Loop area where 'proper' theatres lived.

It was an inspiring and formative experience – artists don't have to play to the market or make the work they think they need to make to get their work seen, artists must create the market, but which in this case was kind of anti-market, an artistic vision not driven by profit margins or safe artistic choices, or putting multiple bums on seats! The venues these guys were creating in Lakeview were like civic theatres – it was for the artists and the people, not the market.

Art should always be radical.

Returning to Coventry, we responded to this next transitional moment by hunting down and securing a disused local authority owned shop on the corner of City Arcade and Queen Victoria Road. It was an old fish and chip shop, it was 2008, the financial market had collapsed, there were empty shops everywhere. Julia persuaded Andy Jack, Coventry City Council's head of property management, to let us have the space for an initial 18 months, rent free. He said he wasn't a theatre man, but he was open minded. He said yes.

We had very little money, we'd never worked in, run, or been responsible for a space before. It was right time right place, but equally a hunch, a sense that Chicago had taught us that we were ready for real change, to work in ways we would never have thought of, to discover who our audience actually was, to better understand what accessibility and access to the Arts actually meant/means, and to interrogate our qualities as artists. With just six theatre lights, a bunch of chairs and a scuzzy carpet, we were ready for a cultural provocation that would challenge the orthodoxy of theatre making in Coventry.

That's how we've ended up making this archive. After 13 years at the Shop Front Theatre, a new transition faces us. The building will be knocked down – there's not much we can do about that. What

is perceived by some as progress, is lamented by others, yet we have the same sense as with other turning points: it's time.

This was an amazing project to be part of, it evolved into a space that belonged to the myriad user groups and artists in the city as much as to us. It was a space for emerging, mid-career and established artists to work, it was a space in which professional and non-professional boundaries gleefully blurred, a space where we commissioned and produced our own work, and the work of many other writers, who weren't even writers but who were performers, and some who were performers and not writers, and some who were neither.

We said yes to pretty much anyone who knocked on the door to ask if they could use the space themselves, we made friends with non-Arts organisations who used the Shop Front Theatre on a regular basis, and over 13 years we've hosted so many events, theatre productions, gigs, conferences, workshops, craft fairs and more, that we aren't sure we can remember them all!

As you read on, you can get a sense of what might perhaps be described as some key events/productions, or moments/interventions that really stuck with us, and the absolute treasure trove of experience we have gleaned from life at the Shop Front Theatre, 2009-2022.

Key Moments

2009

- Nov **Get keys to the empty fish & chip shop**, Theatre Absolute take possession of the space and Shop Front Theatre is born.
- Dec **A Christmas Carol**, first of many very popular **Lamplight Readings**.

2010

- Feb **All The Things I'd Do For You**, first Work in Progress.
- Mar **Writing Gym**, first set of writing classes.
- June **All The Things I'd Do For You**, first full public performance.
- Aug **City Stories**, first use of City Arcade space outside the Shop Front Theatre.
- Oct **A Tell Tale Heart**, first external promenade performance.
- Nov **Breathe**, first time cast, Front of House staff, and audience merge.

2011

- Apr **The Wedge**, first time a writer from a Writing Gym moves into public performance at Shop Front Theatre.
- July **Coventry**, beginning of a new way of working – and a shift in aesthetic for Theatre Absolute – fully informed by the Shop Front Theatre's space and ethos.
- Oct **TKO**, first schools project.

2012

- Apr **WI Goes Pop**, first handmade artists/craft pop up.
- June **Arcade**, first piece of work intentionally made for a much smaller audience than capacity allows.
- Oct **Theatre Absolute lose their regular Arts Council England funding**, their application to become a National Portfolio Organisation having been rejected.

2013

- Mar **Always**, first digital collaboration.
- Apr **Shop Talks**, start of a series of talks to foster cross-disciplinary discussion, inviting practitioners from non-theatre backgrounds to discuss their practise.

2014

- Mar **Powder**, start of commissioning work in **100** series, first commissioned writer.
- First partnership with the Herbert Art Gallery & Museum.**
- Apr **For The Fallen**, first commissioned film-maker.
- June **@38** writer support launches.
- Begin two-year Esmee Fairbairn funded programme of writing**
- Nov **Shoot Festival**, start of a strong working relationship with Shoot Festival and where Theatre Absolute meet movement artist Marius Mates launching a long-term collaborative partnership at Shop Front Theatre.

2015

- Mar **The Visible Maker**, first showing of work merging textiles and performance with digital.
- Sept **Late Night Shopper**, first cabaret showcase of writers, performers and musicians.
- Nov **People**, first Shop Front Theatre commission for Theatre Absolute, creating a piece for Coventry Citizens Advice.

2016

- Feb **New writer programme**, in partnership with West Midlands Probation Service.
- Mar **TRAUM**, first performances of a cross-disciplinary collaboration with international break dancers using sampled sound and text.
- Oct **The Time It Takes**, first time audience participation is planned as a full part of the performance.

2017

- May **Are We Where We Are #1: May Utang**, written and performed by Jules Orcullo, first in a series of nine pieces performed over two years.
- June **Are We Where We Are #2: I am Here**, written and performed by Laila Alj.
- Oct **Are We Where We Are #3: Where I Live and What I Live For**, written by Rabiah Hussain, performed by Raagni Sharma.
- Are We Where We Are – Student Briefs**, first time briefs to perform at Shop Front Theatre were issued to students on Coventry University's BA Theatre and Professional Practice.
- First time Justine Themen directs at Shop Front Theatre.**
- Nov **Are We Where We Are #4: Under the Carpet**, written and performed by Sarah Woods.

2018

- Jan **Are We Where We Are #5: Yellowstone**, written and performed by Chris Thorpe.
- Feb **Are We Where We Are #6: Choke**, written by Chris O'Connell and performed by Matthew Wait and Graeme Rose.
- Mar **Shop Front Festival**, Shop Front Theatre inspires, and is the hub of, a Theatre Absolute curated festival running in 30+ city centre shops and businesses.
- Apr **The Women's Quilt**, demonstrating the power of exhibition.
- Sept **City Voices**, writing development programme in partnership with Coventry City of Culture 2021.
- Oct **Are We Where We Are #7: The Things We Tell Ourselves**, written and performed by Cristina Catalina.
- Are We Where We Are #8: Don't Cry For Me**, written and performed by Stephanie Ridings.
- Nov **Are We Where We Are #9: Sphere**, seven writers and non-writers perform in cabaret style. Featuring work by Ola Animashawun, Amy Kakoura, Demi Oyediran, Kimisha Lewis, Raef Boylan, Laura Nyahuye, Ashley James Brown.

2019

- Oct **Shop Front Theatre celebrates 10 Year Anniversary**
- Nov **Humanistan #1: Utopia**, first in a planned series of eight commissions under the banner of *Humanistan*, later halted by Covid. Written and performed by Amahra Spence.

2020

- Mar **Humanistan #2: Shift**, new work by Jamaal O'Driscoll, Marso Riviere, and Marius Mates; sadly cancelled three days before opening due to Covid 19.
- May **Meanwhile**, use of Shop Front windows as external art gallery space to explore the effects of the pandemic.
- June **Theatre Labs**, first time we handed over the keys with some funding and mentor support for seven local artists.
- Sept **The Writing Box**, a new way of reaching people during lockdown, via postal writing tool kits.
- Nov **This Is For You**, five local poets are commissioned to exhibit pandemic response work in the Shop Front Theatre windows.

2021

- Apr **Olwen Wymark Award**, Theatre Absolute commended by the Writers' Guild of Great Britain for their exceptional encouragement of new writing both at Shop Front Theatre and during the pandemic.
- June **Mademoiselle F**, Shop Front Theatre reopens with its first performance since Covid.
- Aug **Humanistan #3: A Life With PIP**, first live and broadcast piece, written and performed by Stephen Lightbown.
- Nov **Humanistan #4: The Only Way Out Is In**, first one-to-one work at Shop Front Theatre, devised and performed by Sharron Devine.
- Dec **The Show Windows**, part of Coventry City of Culture 2021, Shop Front Theatre hosts window exhibitions with partners including the Government Art Collection, the Craft Council, and the British Museum.

2022

- Mar **Generous anonymous donation** funding for creation of: **Coventry Local Artist Development Fund** offering development opportunities for 26 local artists; three **Writers in Residence**; and support for the activities around closure of Shop Front Theatre.
- June **Closure announced for December 2022.**
- Nov **Shop Front Theatre closes**, having delighted and challenged Coventry audiences and supported local artists for 13 years.

1

The Space

**“A brilliant
exemplar of what
Arts and culture
can be.”**

The concept of Shop Front Theatre – and its execution – was ahead of its time. Theatre Absolute conceived of a different kind of theatre space – informal, democratic, generous, inclusive, non-judgemental. A brilliant exemplar of what Arts and culture can be; a model too for our wider society.

Imagine if this long-form experiment was adopted and adapted around our country. Unused retail units opened up for artists and communities to come together around theatre and its power to start a conversation.

Imagine one becomes ten, and ten become one hundred. And in every town and city, spaces are repurposed as hubs for creative practice. Imagine the impacts on our towns and cities. And in turn what this might do to our nation.

Imagine.

David Micklem
Writer and Arts Consultant



A new way of working.

In 2009 Theatre Absolute embarked on a new way of working, finding an escape route from the touring treadmill of the time, having been inspired by a visit to a project in Chicago which was reinvigorating artists, civic space, and communities.

Shop Front Theatre was born: the new space's flexibility and Theatre Absolute's open-hearted approach to running the venue saw it quickly evolve into a welcoming home for Arts and community organisations right across the city to tell their stories not only through theatre, but through dance, music, poetry, textiles, film, and exhibitions.

opposite
Far From The Sea
written by Steve Waters
designed by Lydia Denno
2014

1 The Space

We'd been successfully touring our own work for years, and won awards for it, but we were exhausted and felt trapped in an unfulfilling cycle; we weren't feeling connected to audiences. We thought there had to be a different way.

When we found Fishy Moores, a disused chip shop in City Arcade, was available as a space we immediately thought it would be a great 18-month project for us to help us to continue exploring my work from simple fixed premises.

We saw it could be an artistic provocation to the city, to say we can be a civic theatre in a different way and we will look very different to other theatres.

We never imagined that the project would last 13 years, becoming a home for so many people across the city and changing our artistic direction.

Chris

opposite
Zero

written by Chris O'Connell
The North Wall, Oxford
2008



1 The Space

The initial idea was to challenge ourselves as theatre makers, taking away everything theatre often relies on and keeping only what is essential to tell great stories – a space and actors. Some people might see the space as being limited in what it offers but we always felt we should use what we had and wish for no more. In many ways that was a liberation, and an invitation to unleash artistic creativity while focusing on content.

Having the freedom to commission, create, develop, and nurture exactly what we wanted, with a different sort of commercial imperative to other spaces, was brilliant.

Chris



Are We Where We Are #2: I am Here
written by Laila Alj
2017



Working to open the shop on my student placement was such an amazing experience. Getting the space ready, finding chairs, flyering and chats with Julia and Chris. It felt like something special was being built and looking back over the past 13 years, we can say without doubt it has been!

Theatre Absolute made something incredible and along the way they made sure everyone felt a part of, and was welcome within, Shop Front Theatre.

Dom Watson

Are We Where We Are #1: May Utang
written by Jules Orculo
2017



I hold the honour of being one of the very first actors to work in the Shop Front Theatre all those years ago.

Having previously performed with Theatre Absolute in their Street Trilogy and toured extensively throughout the UK and Europe I found myself in a weeklong workshop with a script in hand performance at the end of the week. In an old chippy in Coventry!

Despite working in theatre for over two decades I still feel at times intimidated by the traditional theatre space. The Shop Front Theatre, during rehearsals and performance, put me at ease (who doesn't love a chippy?) and allowed me as an artist to explore without fear of failure. Theatre Absolute's support for local writers, actors, and artists has been nothing short of phenomenal.

Paul Simpson

Are We Where We Are #1:
May Utang
written by Jules Orculo
2017

I had such a good time working on *All The Things I'd Do For You*. The rehearsal period was fantastic and it was great to be in Shop Front Theatre all the time, making it feel like it was our home. The space was lovely to play because of its relationship with the audience and it was just a lovely atmosphere to create work in. I am honoured to have been in the first production there.

Jonah Russell
▶ [READ MORE ONLINE](#)

Jonah Russell
All The Things I'd Do For You
written by Chris O'Connell
2010



TKO was the first time we'd worked with schools directly. We worked with teenage boys from a local school, exploring *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* by Alan Sillitoe through writing and with Olympian David Moorcroft supporting with his memories of 'not being academic' but being very successful in other ways.

I remember one young man hiding in the cupboard, he was so scared to read out his piece, but after everyone else had finished their pieces he crept out and read his while we 'grown-ups' all silently wept!

Julia



Posters for workshops
TKO, 2011 and
3 Day Creative Workshop, 2016



I performed at the Shop Front Theatre in *Far From The Sea*. I remember feeling so at home during rehearsals in the ex-fish and chip shop, and being aware of our prospective audience / subject matter walking past the windows every few moments.

The space perfectly suited the question posed by the play: "How do you create a city?" In fact the Shop Front Theatre felt like another character in the play: 'Coventry' as played by glass, concrete, wood and metal. It not only played host to our ideas, but also prompted further ways in which we might engage with the audience, and mirror it, at the same time.

Richard Earl
▶ [READ MORE ONLINE](#)

Richard Earl and Cristina Catalina
Far From The Sea
written by Steve Waters
2014



What made Shop Front Theatre special for me is that they got a diverse audience for the rehearsal let alone the performance. Kids knocking on the window, mums and babies having a cup of tea on the sofas and a homeless guy asking you questions whilst you stagger through your monologue.

Theatre Absolute is the only company I've worked with that truly bursts the bubble between the public and the world of theatre.

Matt Wait

We really did use everything at our disposal. For one show, to get exactly the right lighting effect, we timed the sunset so we knew at which precise time the glow would come through the window. In another show the action went outside the space and onto the Pelican crossing opposite. An actress had to chase an actor across it, and on one occasion a bystander tried to stop him for her.

I remember a shoplifter doing a runner, taking a shortcut via our open emergency exit at the rear. In my memory, he suddenly realised he was crossing a live performance and instantly went into cartoon-quiet-burglar mode, you know, with that 'slow big steps, holding a bag of swag on his back'!

Chris

left
Demi Oyediran
Are We Where We Are #9: Sphere
2018

right
Matthew Wait and Graeme Rose
Are We Where We Are #6: Choke
written by Chris O'Connell
2018





Walking into Shop Front Theatre is an experience in itself.

There's the normality of the outside world on its doorstep. People shopping, grabbing lunch, pushing prams, guiding children. And you're a part of it.

But when you step inside, you get to watch it from the window instead. To think and feel about how it exists both

within and without that space. And the normality of the world suddenly becomes mesmerising.

That is my memory of Shop Front Theatre. Feeling both part of the outside world, but also, just for a moment, like I'm watching the power of it from afar.

Rabiah Hussain

Raagni Sharma
*Are We Where We Are #3:
 Where I Live and What I Live For*
 written by Rabiah Hussain
 2017

Theatre Absolute approached me about window treatments for their new venue, which had two huge glass windows and entrance doors that we needed to consider on a shoestring budget.

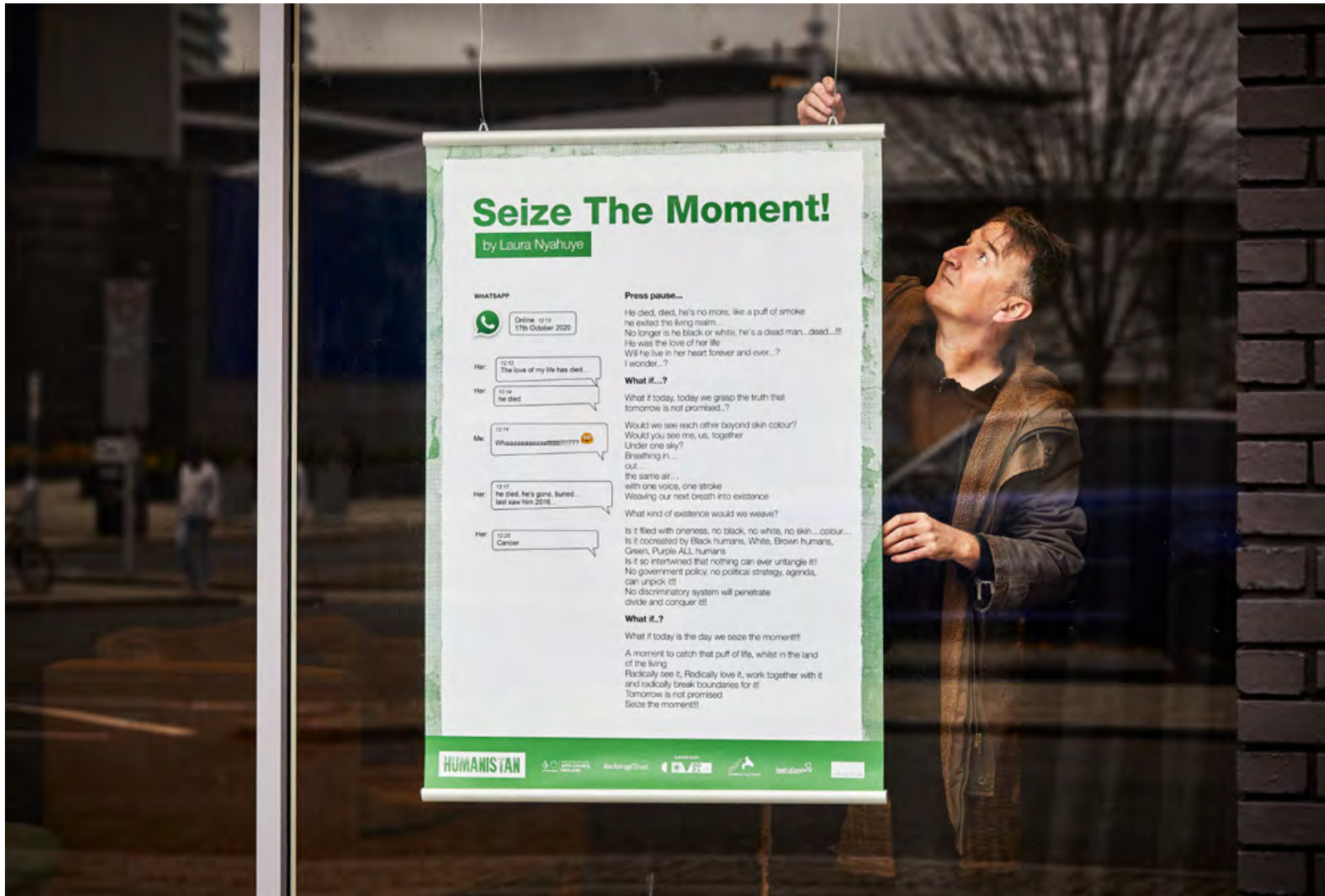
Vinyl window wraps would block out all the light and look great from outside, but we realised we'd be losing something; it would look like a closed shop (figuratively and literally what they were trying to avoid) and people passing by wouldn't be able to see in.

Eventually we decided on inner black curtains to control the light inside when necessary and form a backdrop to hanging posters which could be swapped easily and cheaply.

I couldn't know back then that those windows would become quite so important to Theatre Absolute – they weren't just a promotional space, they became a gallery for all sorts of art and poetry as well as the imagery that I designed for their shows and events.

Andrew Moore





I always read the poetry on the windows and pillars when walking past. It was a wonderful way to share the words of local poets.

Emilie Lauren Jones
Coventry Poet Laureate 2021 – 2023

Meanwhile
poetry by Laura Nyahuye
2020

The Shop Front Theatre's windows hosted exhibits on loan from the British Museum, Crafts Council and the Government Art Collection as part of *The Show Windows*, a city-wide exhibition programme from Coventry City of Culture 2021 and Coventry BID.

The Show Windows
Crafts Council
2021

Julia





When Theatre Absolute actually realised the Shop Front Theatre in 2009 it felt to me at the time as the most perfect and indeed timely response to the recession brought on by criminally behaved bankers! Honest, personal, brave and inclusive. I've loved it for over ten years!

The Shop Front Festival was a chance to platform all that Shop Front Theatre stood for in Coventry and to support the city's advance programme for City of Culture 2021. I'm not sure Theatre Absolute wanted or needed the exposure of a Festival but they saw the reasoning behind it and produced a challenging and radical supporting programme.

Shop Front Theatre was surely one of the radical elements that led the judges to make the City of Culture award to Coventry.

Alan Rivett

[▶ READ MORE ONLINE](#)

When we curated the Shop Front Festival in 2018, in collaboration with independent Artistic Director Orit Azaz and Outdoor Arts producer Lou Lomas, it was the UK's first ever Arts festival to take place entirely in shops and shopping precincts.

Over two days, there were 60 sold out performances and happenings inside 38 empty and inhabited shop spaces as well as outside in precincts and public spaces. Footfall in the city centre was 20,000 above the previous weekend, and 5.4% above national average, as people gathered to experience the Arts.

Across the city centre, more than 12,000 people attended indoor and outdoor events getting a taster of what Coventry's year as City of Culture in 2021 might look like – a festival where local communities and artists as well as international performers would be involved and create work and artistic opportunities for people across the city.

Julia

above & right
Shop Front Festival
2018





City Arcade itself was a physical home to many brilliant independent businesses and organisations many of whom have become friends. Our neighbour, Raj, was amazing; he was a keyholder for us and was always so helpful and supportive.

Julia

The Unfinished City was a collaboration with six Coventry musicians creating a new 'work-in-progress gig theatre performance' written by Chris to be performed on the iconic staircase outside of Shop Front Theatre. It was the finale of the Shop Front Festival.

Julia

above
Raj leads *The Q* by Talking Birds
Shop Front Festival
2018

right
The Unfinished City
written by Chris O'Connell
Shop Front Festival
2018





left
Are We Where We Are #2: I am Here
written by Laila Alj
2017

below
The original sign from Fishy Moores
chip shop having been in use at
Shop Front Theatre for 13 years

Over time, the balance between the operational requirements of running the Shop Front Theatre – supporting other people in their delivery – started to outweigh our ability to maintain our own practice.

It's financially and emotionally tough running a venue, especially in the way we did, where it's mainly project funded.

We know there's a different future for us now. So it's sad, but 13 years isn't a bad run is it?!

Julia

We knew that City Arcade was slated for demolition as part of the City Centre South redevelopment project, and we know and appreciate that city centres need to innovate and change. But the timings were particularly piquant; the Notice of Eviction arrived in the mail in May 2021, two days after Coventry had officially opened its year as UK City of Culture.

Chris



② Work

**“A challenge
to the status quo.”**

We were more interested in getting the artists' stories shared than in the traditional performance polish; so we would happily support performers to read from scripts if that was what they needed to do. I think some traditional audiences found that quite a challenge to the status quo – the fact that we accepted that as a performance.

Chris



The classic empty space.

Shop Front Theatre was the most basic of set ups – the classic empty space. Two sides of the space were plate glass windows, albeit with curtains available, and there was often noise from upstairs (martial arts gym) and outside (enthusiastic skateboarders). But far from any of this being a constraint, many artists found the space very freeing – being so stripped back made people concentrate on the essence of what they wanted to convey.

There were performances and exhibitions in every kind of layout you can imagine: cabaret, in the round, traverse, thrust, straight on, 1:1 site specific, promenade. Some performances made use of the arcade itself outside and its upper gantry as well as the zebra crossing. The actual windows and entrances and exits were often called upon for intentional dramatic effect.

Over its 13 years, every inch of the Shop Front space was used for performance – even the tiny cleaning cupboard!

2 Work

It's important to remember that when we started up we had no real annual programme budget, so we created performances for one actor to read aloud from classic texts. We called this the *Lamplight Readings*. The first one was *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens.

We provided food and a story over the lunch time for families. They always felt magical, especially the two shows on Christmas Eve.

And we created *Late Night Shopper*, which was a monthly showcase of artists from all sorts of disciplines – so much fun!

Julia

John Flitcroft
*Lamplight Reading:
A Christmas Carol*
2010



Right from 2009, when we took over the shop and I started to write *All the Things I'd Do For You* to be performed there, you can see my writing begin to shift and be informed by the space.

Shop Front Theatre freed us from the accoutrements of traditional theatre,

and for a long time we referred to this as anti-theatre. I wrote the piece intending it to be performed absolutely totally stripped back and with no pretensions, like the Shop Front Theatre space itself.

Chris

Kate Ambler and Jonah Russell
All The Things I'd Do For You
written by Chris O'Connell
2010



For *Arcade* in 2012 we reconfigured the space to be a café with 20 audience members sat within in it as the performance unfolded. We had realised that one of the great beauties of Shop Front Theatre was that, with less pressure to get audience numbers through the door, we could really concentrate on audience experience and artistic intent.

We brought the inside out and the outside in, to the extent that we had two characters written in who walked down the arcade and stopped outside to do their hair in the window which, for the characters inside, added a memory trigger within the story. We also incorporated spaces exterior to the Shop Front Theatre into shows including *City Stories* and *A Tell Tale Heart*.

Julia

left

Arcade

written by Chris O'Connell
2012

right

The original sign from Fishy
Moores chip shop



I remember well the show that was set in a cafe. Weirdly the scene that stays powerfully in my mind was the scene on the road outside, where we couldn't hear the dialogue so just watched the actors heatedly talking, through the glass. People watching, but feeling connected to their experience.

Cathryn Thompson



Performing at the Shop Front Theatre you could feel at once both very intimate with an audience and disconcertingly conspicuous to passers-by. In a way it was the theatre for unexpectant onlookers. I remember, in *Arcade*, the play spilled out onto the street outside and the audience could only guess what was being said by me and my co-performer, Katy. I also loved trying to blend in as an audience member before *Always* started and how different it was as a space in which to work. Powerful memories.

John Flitcroft

Chris' work always has a truly authentic working class voice, with beautifully drawn, genuine and fulfilled characters – so much so that when I performed in *Arcade* and the action, a scene containing a disagreement between the characters, spilled out onto Corporation Street I was asked by a passer-by if I wanted them to 'sort my boyfriend' out!

Shop Front Theatre was literally immersed in Coventry's community; it was about its community, for its community, and loyal to its community, encouraging mentoring and providing a space for local writers and theatre makers.

Katy Stephens

[▶ READ MORE ONLINE](#)

above
John Flitcroft and Katy Stephens
Arcade
written by Chris O'Connell
2012

right
original signage from Fishy Moores
chip shop



2 Work

We developed ways of including the audience more, to make a richer experience for everyone. Post-show discussions became part of the event, not an add-on. It was very rare to see an audience member leave, in fact I often wished we could have a discussion after every show as everyone enjoyed them so much.

Chris



Post-show discussion
Are We Where We Are #1: May Utang
written and performed
by Jules Orcullo
2017



By 2016, Shop Front Theatre had enabled us to test fully handing over control to the audience. In *The Time It Takes*, we planned audience participation as an integral part of the performance as the audience and actors communally read out junk mail. It was like some sort of 70s happening, with shows sometimes running to almost three hours depending on how keen the audience were to keep going!

Chris

Post-show discussion
Humanistan #3: A Life With PIP
written and performed
by Stephen Lightbown,
interpreted by Karen Ward
2021



left, above & overleaf
The Visible Maker
A live craft performance
by Julia O'Connell
2015

overleaf
with Ashley James Brown

Shop Front Theatre empowered people to take ownership of the space and this enabled us to learn so much from other artists. For example, *Always*, in 2013, was the first time we – tentatively – used new digital technology in our work. With the support of creative technologist Ashley James Brown, we were able to project films onto the walls, in the cupboards and on the ceilings.

Then in 2015 one of my favourite collaborations, *The Visible Maker*, built on that experience as

Ashley helped turn my manual Singer treadle sewing machine into a piece of live digital art.

We created bespoke coding that would release captured audio and visuals via the foot pedal of the sewing machine whilst I treadled it in performance.

The show completely sold out over its run and appealed to a range of audiences – those who were theatre makers, some who were interested in craft and others who worked with new tech.

Julia



NO UNDER 18 YEARS
OPERATE
WITHOUT
SUPERVISION.

2 Work

Julia did a show about my mum, using her Nannar's treadle sewing machine which mum taught us to use. It was a wonderful show and it made me cry. Lovely memories.

Carol Murden

rehearsal
The Visible Maker
A live craft performance
by Julia O'Connell
2015



Theatre Absolute have always been an absolute joy to collaborate with generally and co-directing the wonderful *Breathe* at the Shop Front Theatre in 2010 was no exception. They facilitated a seamless performance of a variety of different voices, empowering both actors and directors to shine whilst creating an exceptional and whole piece of work. The warmth from the audiences was enhanced by the intimacy and community feel of the Shop Front Theatre; it will be missed.

Rachel Brogan

Demi Oyediran
Breathe
written by Chris O'Connell
2010



It was always good to take Drama students to Shop Front Theatre – they always came back full of enthusiasm for what they saw and heard and loved the intimate and friendly atmosphere.

I have seen many productions there... only appearing in one – *Always* – because I was the only fat git with a suit who could turn up at short notice on a Sunday for a film shoot.

David Prescott

John Flitcroft in front of film of David Prescott
Always
written by Chris O'Connell
2013

When I look back to how we put together the 100 work, responding in 2014 to the centenary of WW1, I can see the roots of both *Are We Where We Are* and *Humanistan*. Consisting of multiple pieces, it was developed in partnership with the Herbert Art Gallery and saw us start commissioning artists from different disciplines around a theme.

Powder was written by Richard Walls, who was the very first person to knock on our windows when Shop Front Theatre first opened, and so it was lovely that he became our first commissioned writer in the space. *For the Fallen* was our first film commission for Shop Front Theatre, made by Jason Langdell, and Julia created *A Kiss from France* – a textile exhibition that depicted the families and their correspondence with the soldiers away from home.

Chris

Miriam Edwards
Powder
written by Richard Walls
2014





In June 2010 I was about to set off for a theatre internship in the US, when I happened to pass by the Shop Front Theatre. It seemed to me that some greater power must have dropped it there by mistake. I knocked. The door seemed to open immediately. It was Chris O'Connell. I said a few things, he said a few things. Then I blurted out that I wanted to write for the theatre. But before Chris could get too encouraging I told him I was leaving the country for six months. I told him that prior to leaving the US in December I would write to him and explore how I might get involved. Best letter I ever sent.

Richard Walls

► [READ MORE ONLINE](#)

A Kiss From France
by Julia O'Connell
Exhibited at the
Herbert Art Gallery & Museum
2014

2 Work

Ten years into our time at the Shop Front Theatre, the nature of the work and performances that we were making had started to clearly transition from the singular voice of Chris as the company's writer, to a multitude of voices who were commissioned to respond to provocations from the company. The first of these was *Are We Where We Are*, followed by *Humanistan*.

Julia



Are We Where We Are #2: I am Here
written and performed by Laila Alj
2017



Are We Where We Are was inspired by Henry David Thoreau's book *Walden: A Life In The Woods* in which he writes, '**We are not where we are, but in a false position**'. Around 130 years later, Thoreau's provocation is quoted by a character in Paul Auster's 1983 novella *Ghosts*, as one man searches for meaning in a life that seems to have stalled and begun to fall apart.

These two instances of the same quote became a stimulus for artists commissioned for 15 new pieces for performance, as they grappled with the notion that, here in the 21st century, we are arguably not where we are, but in fact, somewhere else. It felt apt as the advanced societies we have created spin in seemingly daily chaos. It felt apt when, here, today, one considers the qualities and complexities of justice, equality, race, citizenship, nationhood, isolation, inclusion, the list goes on.

Chris

[▶ READ MORE ONLINE](#)

*Are We Where We Are #4:
Under The Carpet*
written and performed
by Sarah Woods
2017



Humanistan intended to create multi-commissions and performances responding to 21st century life throughout 2019-2022; Covid may have changed its format along the way, but its outputs and central theme remained the same.

The definition of 'istan' means land, country, place; so *Humanistan* – human country – set out to forge meaningful connections that challenged division and isolation in society and celebrated our humanity.

Humanistan was inspired by both the words of Benjamin Zephaniah: **'What are you prepared to give up for a more equal society?'**

and by the words of François Matarasso who says, **'societies belong to people, not governments. They are built through relationships, not treaties, (they are built) in what we DO, not what we say.'**

We were all born to live in this place called *Humanistan*. Sometimes, too often, it's so hard to spend time there.

Shop Front Theatre, and its open-hearted ethos, was the perfect place to try harder.

Chris
▶ [READ MORE ONLINE](#)

As the designer for *Are We Where We Are* and *Humanistan*, the sheer number of productions involved meant that I got to explore the Shop Front Theatre again and again. Every time I thought I'd got the measure of the space, it would surprise me again.

Both seasons of work challenged us to look afresh at the world, and invited us to change things that we felt were not right. The design had to provide a holding frame and logic for the pieces even before they had been written: something that could grow and change to accommodate and showcase each piece as it arrived. Something that offered a kind of iterative or cumulative understanding of each piece within the arc of the whole season, deepening and enriching the experience for returning audience members each time.

For me, stories are our bulwark against fear and uncertainty, our way of testing things out, our insight into how other people think or respond: they nurture us in our determination to do things better. With its rich and varied provocations over the years, the Shop Front Theatre gave us the stories, community and courage to do just that.

Janet Vaughan
▶ [READ MORE ONLINE](#)



left & right
Are We Where We Are #5: Yellowstone
written and performed by Chris Thorpe
designed by Janet Vaughan
2018

2 Work

The Shop Front Theatre was a space for thoughts to be provoked, a space for community, a space to be outside (& yet located in) the ordinary, a place for stretch and growth.

Being asked by Theatre Absolute to direct *Where I Live & What I Live For* by Rabiah Hussain was an acknowledgement of me as an artist outside the scope of my work at the Belgrade Theatre, where I was largely intent on supporting the growth of others – so a space to enter and grow for myself was hugely appreciated.

The piece itself drew parallels between the micro-aggressions experienced by a second generation Muslim woman, and the overt racism experienced by her father before her – a powerful question mark over how far we have (or haven't) travelled in race relations. A big question asked of a diverse audience in a small fish and chip shop in Coventry.

How great would it be to ask the question in shop fronts across the country?

Justine Themen

opposite

Raagni Sharma rehearsing
with Director Justine Themen

Are We Where We Are #3:
Where I Live and What I Live For
written by Rabiah Hussain
2017

I have loved seeing experimental theatre and new writers at Shop Front Theatre. It has been so exciting to have a venue so close to home where I could see local writers in particular, but also those from further afield, exploring ideas and pushing the boundaries of theme and form.

One of my favourite pieces was *Where I Live and What I Live For* by Rabiah Hussain, which really hit home the realities of micro-aggressions, submerged narratives and language around race in Britain.

Shop Front Theatre has been such an asset to Coventry and from a humble and slightly unlikely physical space, has really punched above its weight in the city, giving a platform to voices that wouldn't otherwise have been heard, acting as a home for questioners and critical thinkers and being a welcoming and generous resource for all creative voices.

Stella Backhouse





Shop Front Theatre was a vital space pushing back on many of the things just not there in mainstream civic theatres, systems, structures and Arts leadership. It was a brave and hopeful idea, inclusive, bridging gaps between communities and artists, it understood the importance of working together across sectors and vitally it listened. It listened to Artists and communities; allowing and trusting them to lead.

Being commissioned to make work in the space was a dream project as a site-responsive maker; I know

the work I created, *The Only Way Out Is In*, and the *Humanistan* provocation itself will stay with me forever and continue to always percolate into my practice!

Brilliant leaders support and shape others to lead, they share the power, the space, the keys and they are aware of their privilege; I thank Theatre Absolute and Shop Front Theatre for their bravery and kindness and for doing all of those things.

Sharron Devine
[▶ READ MORE ONLINE](#)

Sharron Devine
Humanistan #4:
The Only Way Out Is In
 devised by Sharron Devine
 2021

I had the honour of performing my piece *A Life With PIP* as part of *Humanistan*. By far and away this was one of my favourite commissions and projects to be involved with. Theatre Absolute were such a dream to work with and I learned so much from my week spent in Coventry. My main memory was smiling, a lot. The Shop Front Theatre was such a magical and special place and I'll always be grateful for being given the chance to be part of something so fabulous. That time will stay with me for many years to come.

Stephen Lightbown

Humanistan #3:
A Life With PIP
 written and performed
 by Stephen Lightbown
 2021



3

Artist Support

**“Nothing ever ends
that has given itself
to so many.”**

It's a brutally cold January evening. Through the shop-front glass, we five figures are silhouetted in the red glow of a portable gas heater, sofas pushed together, coats draped around shoulders. There's a plan brewing – soundscapes and provocations flit through the air between us.

It's my first time making work here in a long time – the city has often felt like too many contradictions – but something about those hours hold new possibility, and my capital-city shell can soften enough to breathe again. It could be the space – vast and intimate in equal measure, ever changing. More likely, its architects – dark-humoured and playful, dedicated to the potential that risk and trust allows.

There are years and friendships to come – mythologies, songs, cityscapes debated, late-night rehearsals, touring shows. Plans in the glow of a 2am airport waiting room, made real among the chalkboard pillars.

For a space so bound to this unfinished city, change was always fated, but nothing ever ends that has given itself to so many. I hold the space, and all of its people, consistently in my art and my highest thought.

Amy Kakoura



Yes. Yes. Yes!

As Shop Front Theatre developed, Theatre Absolute made a very intentional decision to say YES to as many people as they could who wanted to use the space for something artistic. By saying YES to all sorts of people, the company started to understand the Shop Front Theatre space as being at the heart of the Arts ecosystem in Coventry, and to appreciate the responsibilities that brought: to enable and encourage others to access the space, to support and highlight emerging and unheard voices, to challenge the norm. YES!

opposite
Amy Kakoura
Are We Where We Are #9: Sphere
2018

Artist Support



We really let ourselves be open to being informed and affected by other people; we would literally have people knocking on the door, asking how they could access the space. So we stopped ploughing our own furrow, and let people in to simply see what would happen.

We found ourselves moving organically from Shop Front Theatre being a host venue to being a shared

space, and gradually this changed our artistic practice. We moved from co-existing to co-creating.

The ability to work in a cross-disciplinary manner and learn from others was a real privilege of having Shop Front Theatre. Other artists coming in ignited imaginations and much of the work challenged people's perception of what 'theatre' is.

Chris

Random String Festival
curated by Ludic Rooms
2018

It was brilliant to see artists test themselves in a supportive environment. In *Sphere*, the finale of *Are We Where We Are*, seven writers and non-writers performed in cabaret style, some taking their first steps in performance.

Julia

Sphere featured work by Ola Animashawun, Amy Kakoura, Demi Oyediran, Kimisha Lewis, Raef Boylan, Laura Nyahuye, and Ashley James Brown.

Laura Nyahuye
Are We Where We Are #9: Sphere
2018





I started off writing for performance at Shop Front Theatre with the love, encouragement and support of the wonderful Julia and Chris who have wholeheartedly supported and platformed a generation of artists like me. Thank you for serving our city so brilliantly and authentically.

Navkiran Kaur Mann

People

written by Chris O'Connell
commissioned by
Coventry Citizens Advice
2015

Shop Front Theatre has played a vital role in my career... it gave me my first-ever writing commission and offered me my first experience writing & performing for theatre which led on to my first radio play – commissioned by BBC Radio 4.

Being part of the ensemble for *Sphere* in November 2018 will always be a highlight memory for me. I made some lovely and talented new friends, learnt about writing for theatre, and was involved in a very cool and unique live performance. I also gained some last-minute editing skills that have come in handy since.

Raef Boylan

▶ [READ MORE ONLINE](#)



Raef Boylan
Are We Where We Are #9: Sphere
2018



I have a huge and varied collection of memories associated with the Shop Front Theatre space. I've attended events there; theatre, music, meetings, workshops, shoots. I went to my first adult writing development course there. I've photographed and recorded someone hooking tomato plants up to synthesisers there. I've played a gig with my band there. I've attended rehearsals, hung artwork, fallen asleep, stolen and returned books, made coffee and spent a week alone in there with a severe case of creative block.

A wonderful space that enabled wonderful people to do wonderful things in a not so wonderful city.
I didn't know this place existed until I joined an acting programme through the Belgrade Theatre. Since which point, I've been able to visit the shopfront on numerous occasions for various performances and events. A great space to be creative.

Jas Singh

For me it's been a constantly changing hub of activity and a space always open to and supportive of the spirit of creativity. I'm glad to have been in the city at the same time as it.

Shop Front Theatre was an important part of Coventry's cultural scene. I integrated with my network of Coventry Arts organisations there, and I can't imagine my career without it.

Wes Finch

Jazz Moreton

Getting Through This
Donna Bridgewater
2021



I remember being an intern at Shop Front Theatre and learning so much about directing, producing and performing during the first iterations of *TRAUM* and *The Visible Maker*. Honestly such an awesome time. It taught me not to be afraid to be experimental in my theatre making, to just TRY things, because that's the best way to make discoveries. It taught me to believe in my craft, and that I was better than I thought I was at the time.

I remember how Theatre Absolute gave opportunities to so many that needed them, new and exciting but cash poor artists that you believed in.

Theatre Absolute are, and Shop Front Theatre has been, a shining beacon in the city – of hope, love and how communities should stick together to support one another.

Charlie Ingram
[▶ READ MORE ONLINE](#)

Tech set-up
The Visible Maker
 A Live Craft Performance
 by Julia O'Connell
 2015

Shop Front Theatre closed after 13 years of putting culture exactly where it should be – right at the heart of everyday life. It did what it set out to do and more. A brilliant place to play.

Chris Thorpe

Are We Where We Are #5: Yellowstone
 written and performed
 by Chris Thorpe
 2018



Artist Support

Shop Front Theatre has had a significant impact over my growth as a breaker as well as helping me merge theatre work within my practice. I've also developed writing skills and ways to express my thoughts on paper which later solidify into movement. Without Theatre Absolute's flexibility to working with artists from all walks of life, unique responses such as *TRAUM* and *Shift* wouldn't have been possible.

I will be forever grateful to Shop Front Theatre and the team behind it – it really helped artists like myself, who are struggling to find a place where they feel like they can belong.

Marius Mates

The Shop Front Theatre became a fertile ground for merging art forms and disciplines and I think we all, artists across the city, were made stronger by that diversity and cross fertilisation.

Chris

Marius Mates
Noesis, Moving Spaces
Theatre Lab – work in progress
Shop Front Festival
2018





Shop Front Theatre was the first theatre I visited in Coventry: I have performed in it, I have worked in it, and I am now part of Theatre Absolute's structure [Beth has now become a Board Member of the company]. From delivering spoken word to sitting outside in the cold at a makeshift box office it is an absolute honour to be a small part of its history.

Beth Kiddie

The Unfinished City
written by Chris O'Connell
Shop Front Festival
2018

Gradually, we felt the shape of our artistic practice in the Shop Front Theatre take form: we would commission, nurture and support new artists and new collaborations. *Are We Where We Are* really solidified that form. We commissioned 15 pieces of new work on this project and, determined as we had been and remain, to address the lack of representation we felt in contemporary theatre practice, over 50% of those pieces were from female voices.

Are We Where We Are illustrated the importance of representation; the stories that came out of the commissions felt unusual and very real. The big conversations the provocation opened up and that arose during the integral post-show audience discussions were of a different timbre.

Julia

rehearsal
***Are We Where We Are #8:
Don't Cry For Me***
written and performed
by Stephanie Ridings
2018





When I first moved to the area, Shop Front Theatre was one of the first places I saw a show. I loved the place and ethos instantly and wanted to be a part of what was going on there. I have been lucky enough to not only be commissioned and perform there but become an Associate; I can't tell you how delighted I was to be asked to be an Associate, it felt like I really belonged somewhere which is rare as a freelance artist.

Stephanie Ridings

left

**Are We Where We Are #8:
Don't Cry For Me**
written and performed
by Stephanie Ridings
2018

right

**Are We Where We Are #1:
May Utang**
written and performed
by Jules Orcullo
2017



4

Community

“The productions in the space itself have consistently reflected the values of the City of Peace and Reconciliation.”

I have hugely appreciated the presence of the Shop Front Theatre in the City, and Julia and Chris' contributions in particular. The productions in the space itself have consistently reflected the values of the City of Peace and Reconciliation, reinforcing that identity through the Arts in the heart of the city.

The Very Revd John Witcombe MA MPhil

Dean of Coventry

[▶ READ MORE ONLINE](#)



Total commitment.

Theatre Absolute's commitment to the Shop Front Theatre being inclusive and welcoming was truly borne out over its 13 years. Many and varied individuals and organisations used the space: from musicians, poets, and artists, to tiny charities, Coventry City Council, and the city's two universities – everyone seemed to be able to make the space their home, and have it just as they wanted it to be.

Partly it was the space's simplicity that led to its flexibility but it was also Theatre Absolute's dedication to enabling anyone to have a go, to give things a try – to feel that they *could*.

Community

We didn't want to hog the space so we tried to say YES to anyone who approached us needing it. As result, the space transitioned into one that was not Theatre Absolute's space but the community's. Many of our 'hires' turned into partners and collaborators, as did some of the audiences.

We wanted people to feel welcome and able to create and contribute, not simply consume what was being offered to them; what started as an opportunity for us became a way of making opportunities for others.

Chris



Getting Through This
Donna Bridgewater
2021



Over a decade of popping in and out of the space for various lengths of time making or seeing work, with Theatre Absolute, Talking Birds, *F13*, *Pecha Kucha*, events and workshops – working, talking, creating, sharing and eating with others. So much conviviality, dreaming, politics, building, gossip, warmth, friendship, and the overwhelming sense of belonging.

Janet Vaughan
Talking Birds
[▶ READ MORE ONLINE](#)

Disorder Contained: a theatrical examination of madness, prison and solitary confinement
Talking Birds with the Centre for the History of Medicine at the University of Warwick and the UCD Centre for the History of Medicine in Ireland, Dublin
2017



above
Shop Front Festival
2018

left
Humanistan #1: Utopia
written and performed
by Amahra Spence
2019

Shop Front Theatre closing is such a loss – to Coventry, the Midlands and the sector. Not just because regeneration continuously extracts value and then decimates cultural infrastructure, but because Theatre Absolute made Shop Front Theatre a caring, attentive, supportive space for artists in a region that is hard to come by.

Amahra Spence

Shop Front Theatre was like home to me, a place of love and encouragement. I am so thankful for the wonderful opportunities and support it offered.

Lou Lomas

4 Community

Shop Front Theatre was an integral part of Coventry's bid to be UK City of Culture 2021. When you are bidding for a title such as City of Culture, stories that are unique are critical – being home to the UK's first dedicated Shop Front Theatre, and the values of welcome and access that it represented, were at the bid's core.

The theme of *Underground*, which ran through the whole bidding period, was also born from Shop Front Theatre.

Shop Front Theatre was a fantastic space where I spent many hours, and its legacy will continue within all of those who found it safe, welcoming and inspiring.

Laura McMillan

[▶ READ MORE ONLINE](#)

Underground

A city built on a hidden river has been the birthplace of new movements, myths and legends. From Lady Godiva's silent journey of revolution to the creation of 2-Tone, Shop Front Theatre and the Green Party, Coventry has found space for subcultures, peaceful protest and new ways of experiencing the Arts.

Excerpt from Coventry's Initial Bid, submitted to the City of Culture judges in 2017.

Laura McMillan gets in line
The Q by Talking Birds
Shop Front Festival
2018





One of the things that, in retrospect, shows how the company's thinking about the space changed was that we used a Theatre Absolute specific logo from 2009 – 2012 and after that we used a Shop Front Theatre logo. I think this reflects the fact that the space became more 'community owned' than 'company owned', with Theatre Absolute's logo only being used for their own productions.

Andrew Moore

shop front theatre
city arcade

AWARD WINNING ROCK AND THEATRE PHOTOGRAPHER
IAN TILTON
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In 2013 we ran a series of public talks to foster cross-disciplinary discussion, inviting practitioners from non-theatre backgrounds to discuss their practice. We thought it would be a great way of encouraging in new audiences and opening up fresh conversations.

The series launched with music photographer Ian Tilton who was, even then, very well-established having captured many of the biggest bands of their day including The Stone Roses, Nirvana, and Iggy Pop.

Julia

left & right
A selection of posters for events at Shop Front Theatre 2009 – 2021



Shoot Festival in 2014 was where we met movement artist Marius Mates, and that started a long-term collaborative partnership with him at Shop Front Theatre. During 2015/6 we entered into a cross-disciplinary collaboration with him using sampled sound and text to create *TRAUM*.

Chris

My husband Kevin and I took my Bulgarian classmate Ina to watch the dance piece with the two young men that was about loneliness and identity. It was intimate and careful and deep and moving and at times intense. We all loved it. The power of the piece and the experience of sharing watching the performance together, and the conversations it provoked afterwards, cemented our friendship which still, many years after Ina returned home, continues.

Cathryn Thompson

Dimitar Goranov (behind)
Marius Mates
TRAUM
2016

Shop Front Theatre saw some lovely commissions for Theatre Absolute. In 2015, *People* was created for Coventry Citizens Advice's 75th anniversary, and in 2016 we worked in partnership with West Midlands Probation Service to launch a new writers programme here.

Julia

People
written by Chris O'Connell
commissioned by
Coventry Citizens Advice
2015



4 Community

Shop Front Theatre enabled professionals and amateurs to come together in acts of community creation, commemoration, and celebration. One event that will stay with me forever was when we exhibited the Women's Quilt in 2018.

We put together an expert panel session and the discussion afterwards opened up personal and important conversations in a safe space. I felt the space, and Theatre Absolute as custodians of it, had a great and powerful responsibility – to the women who had been murdered, to the women who had made the artwork, and to the audiences who came to stand in solidarity.

The exhibition and panel felt very truthful, and I wondered if it was perhaps more truthful than theatre.

Julia

Theatre Absolute has always shown an interest in our work at Coventry Refugee and Migrant Centre (CRMC) and supported our client group, offering invitations for them to join textile, writing and theatre workshops.

The warm atmosphere at Shop Front Theatre made it easy for our clients to access and get involved; it also influenced our choice to stage a production of *The Bundle* there during Refugee Week in 2019.

The informal, friendly space was perfect for the show, performed by a cast of two and telling a truly moving story about the hostile environment of immigration law created by the UK government which makes life difficult for refugees and asylum seekers to integrate into society.

Jan Malatesta
CRMC

► [READ MORE ONLINE](#)

Hope For The Community CIC held two Writing Gyms at Shop Front Theatre specifically for parents of autistic children, led by Theatre Absolute. We wanted to provide the parents, who attended our Hope Programme courses, with the opportunity to come together and through art and drama, voice and express the emotional and social challenges that they face and overcome.

We evaluated change in the parents' positive mental wellbeing after attending the Writing Gyms. There was significant meaningful change, with parents feeling more relaxed, more optimistic, and thinking more clearly.

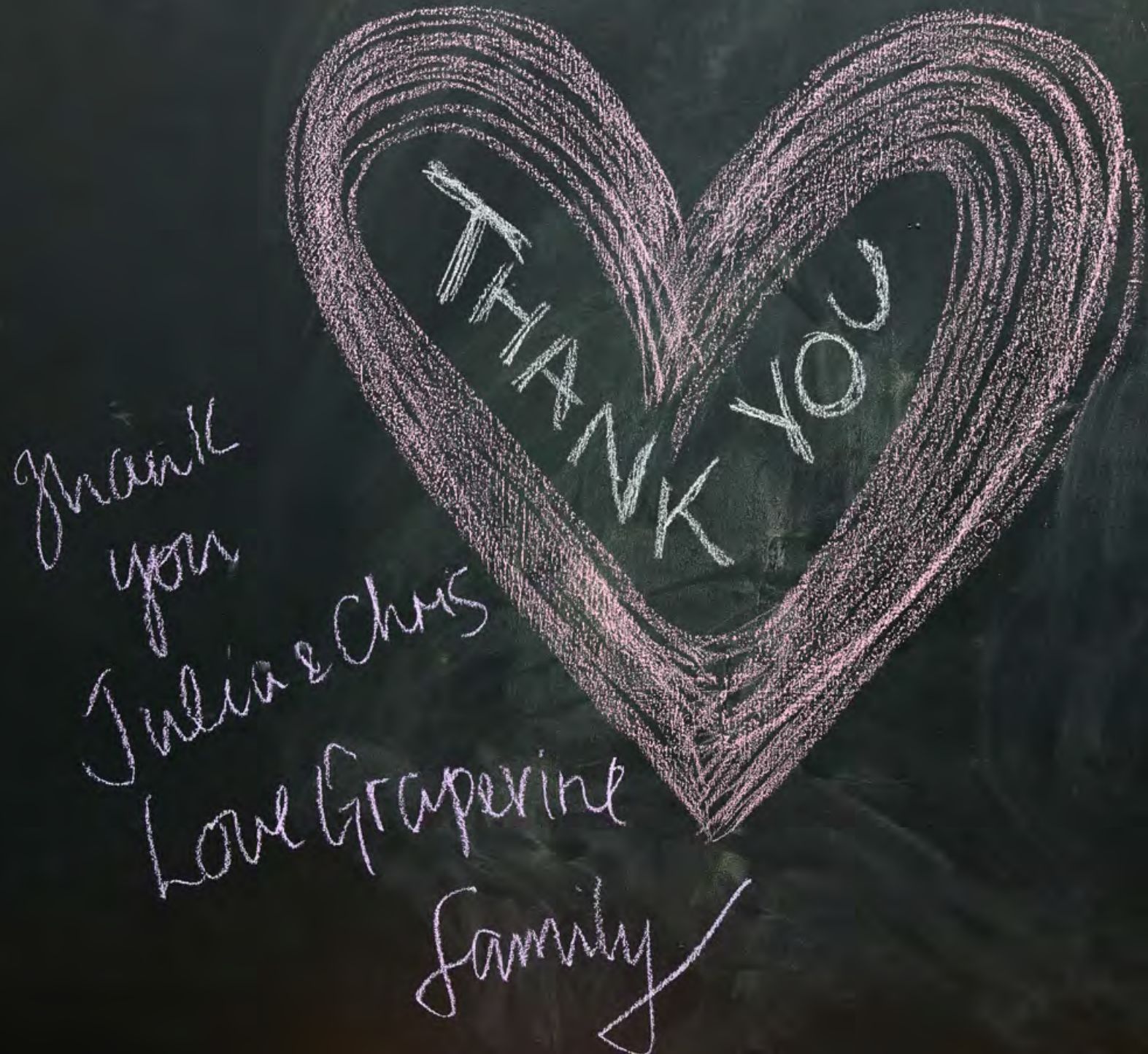
I have no doubt that the relaxed and welcoming atmosphere of Shop Front Theatre helped this positive change.

The team at Theatre Absolute and the Shop Front Theatre space were a springboard for us to combine mental health support with Arts for the first time. Our follow-on joint work included showcasing our Gratitude Wall as part of the Shop Front Festival.

Gabriela Matouskova FRSA
& Professor Andy Turner (Coventry University)
Chief Executive Officer
& Founder – Hope For The Community CIC
► [READ MORE ONLINE](#)

opposite
Humanistan #4:
The Only Way Out Is In
devised by Sharron Devine
2021





left
Message left on the blackboard wall
Shop Front Theatre
2022

right
Rishard Beckett relaxing during a
Grapevine Swimmers Social event at
Shop Front Theatre
2019

As Shop Front Theatre became pivotal in the Coventry Arts ecosystem, we were delighted to work closely with Coventry University's BA Theatre and Professional Practice – offering space for their students to create and perform, providing mentoring, and offering provocations.

In 2017, the students were a component part of the *Are We Where We Are* programme. We offered them the same provocation as we had offered our commissioned artists, teamed them up with other local artists, and they had to create pieces to perform to the public in response as the opening part of the programme.

It was interesting, as often the students hadn't experienced this kind of space and had very traditional ideas of what a theatre and performance might be. Shop Front gave them food for their imagination.

Julia

Photo: Iva Dyke



Grapevine's relationship with Theatre Absolute is built on trust, mutual respect and dare I say it love. We used the space as a community living room where 100's of local people gathered to dream big, grow ideas, share food, debate and co create. A decision-making space minus the long tables and uncomfortable chairs. A space with heart and adaptability, with stewards who said yes to the strangest of requests.

Mel Smith
Deputy Chief Executive Officer – Grapevine
[▶ READ MORE ONLINE](#)

Community

We had the great pleasure of making, sharing, and seeing work at the Shop Front Theatre over the years, including staging a production involving 30 young people and a gigantic puppet baby! This unique space not only curated innovative performance practice, but it inspired artists old and new to try new things and more than anything reached out into its community to make it truly inclusive.

Sarah Worth
Executive Director
Highly Sprung Performance

Highly Sprung leading a flashmob
in Broadgate, Coventry
Shop Front Festival
2018





The Centre for Television Histories (University of Warwick) had two residencies at the Shop Front Theatre, for our project *Ghost Town: Civic Television and the Haunting of Coventry*, in 2018 and 2022. The nature of the theatre's flexible and welcoming space meant that we could create an exhibition which was open to all, and in which people felt able and welcome to sit and chat and share their thoughts with researchers.

This enabled us to develop a radical new way of connecting people, place and archive together and has led to new research being published and our research methodology being shared all around the world. Shop Front Theatre transformed how we work and how we engage people in our local community with our research. I am forever grateful for this.

Professor Helen Wheatley
Co-Founder, Centre for Television Histories
University of Warwick
[▶ READ MORE ONLINE](#)

My first experience of Shop Front Theatre was when we were hosting our Pint of Science events there. I had only just joined the University of Warwick and it was a wonderful introduction to the spirit of Coventry: welcoming, informal, creative, and curious. When looking for places that we could engage with audiences in a safe, welcoming and inspiring atmosphere, Shop Front Theatre always stood out as a perfect example of how to make people feel at home.

James Brown
Public Engagement Team
University of Warwick



left
Shop Front Festival
Windows on the World
by Glenn Noble and Adrian Palka
2018

right
Meanwhile
artwork by Lisa Franklin
2020

4 Community

800 people came to the first pop up craft fair, and we made £190, which was a lot back then. But that evening someone put their boot through the glass front door and we had to spend £500 on getting new glass – the swings and roundabouts of running a venue!

Julia

WI Craft Fairs

Setting up, packing away

Lots of customers, hooray!

Fun and laughter, good times had

A tap in the toilet, so glad.

Dressing the window, so much fun,

A trip to the Pound Shop,

And now we're done.

Ellie's jam, Charlotte's stitching,

Sophie's makes and Tracie's knitting

And with Julia clicking away on the door,

Who could have asked for much more.

Sophie Taylor

Shop Front Theatre really had the community right at the heart of it. The Earlsdon WI committee, including the amazing Charlotte Reed, no longer with us, approached Theatre Absolute with the idea to hold a pop-up event – and their enthusiasm for it was just incredible; they even organised the amazing posters to be produced!

As well as being a sale we had a talk from artist Stewart Easton and invited a local publishing house to take part; hundreds of people attended.

You knew an event at Shop Front Theatre was where the interesting and talented people were going to be. And it will always serve as a reminder of happy times with Charlotte, who was also a dedicated Theatre Absolute Board member.

Vanessa Pearce

[▶ READ MORE ONLINE](#)

The truly wonderful thing about Shop Front Theatre was its ability to transform and meet the needs of any audience. In the WI's case this was not a theatre audience, but an audience invited from the pavement outside to enjoy the handmade and home-crafted goods from Coventry residents. The space allowed us to have our own 'shop front' for a day, to showcase our goods, meet new customers and become a bonded group of makers.

The space was and always will be special; joyous memories were made there, especially with Charlotte Reed who always made sure we were all colour coordinated, ship shape and Bristol fashion.

The opportunities that Shop Front Theatre gave us; confidence, reach, exposure, friendship, networking will never be forgotten.

Ellie McCann



5

Writing

**“Writing
needs space,
mental and
physical
space.”**

Writing needs space, mental and physical space. Shop Front Theatre has always been an incredibly important space for writers in Coventry and the surrounding region.

Vanessa Oakes



Focussed on new writing.

With Theatre Absolute always having focussed on new writing, it wasn't surprising that Shop Front Theatre became a beacon for writers and new work. The stripped back nature of the space, and the potential to explore without pressure, meant writers of all levels thrived there under Chris and Julia's warm encouragement and expert guidance. So much so that the company were supported by

Esmee Fairbairn Foundation to run its @38 writing and mentoring programme, one feature of which was The Writing Gym – informal writing workshops led by Chris for writers of all ages and abilities. Indeed, their production of *The Wedge* by Naomi Said, in 2011, emerged from this relationship, as Naomi was one of the first attenders at the regular Writing Gym sessions.



Research and development underpins everything. To achieve a high-quality theatre experience, new work must feel like it has had time to grow and breathe. Writers need to be setting the agenda of what's seen on stage.

Chris

When I retired from a long career in Social Services, I visited Shop Front Theatre for writing support. My chief memory is being mentored by Chris, working on a dramatic monologue, cutting the fat, making it more vivid and then working on it with Chris and an actor, Peter Cann, to bring it to a small invited audience. The whole process was so respectful, questioning, inspiring, a really rich experience.

Frank McMahon

above
Script meeting
Are We Where We Are #6: Choke
2018

right
Kimisha Lewis
Are We Where We Are #9: Sphere
2018



5 Writing

I remember in 2014 joining the writing group at Shop Front Theatre and engaging in the Your Story programme for writers over 50. From the very start we as a group were encouraged to put pen to paper and write about various subjects. This was a great way of getting the creative juices flowing.

I wrote a piece about a young Welsh boy being rescued by his father after he got stuck up a tree. It was a lot of fun working on the piece and then more fun when I had to perform it in front of an audience at Coventry University. Fond memories indeed.

John Starkey

Writing Gyms were one way to connect with artists, both emerging and established. I loved hosting them right from the very start. Everyone has a story to tell. We had the expertise and the experience to support people in telling it, and Shop Front Theatre gave us all the space to share it.

Julia

Ashley James Brown
Are We Where We Are #9: Sphere
2018





Pillar Poetry, which turned an awkward feature of Shop Front Theatre into something brilliant, was a result of one of our Writing Gym members sending us a bit of her work to look at.

Shahnaz Akhter's poem was so wonderful we decided we had to display it somewhere and so it was written on the pillar.

People loved the poem on the pillar so much we turned the idea into an open competition with a £250 prize judged by Writing West Midlands. We were always open to ideas and opportunity!

Julia

I still remember experiencing the Shop Front Theatre space for the first time – it's a sense of familiarity and also a sense of wonderment; because the space never stayed the same, each realignment brought new experiences and memories.

My first memory is the play for Peace week, where Theatre Absolute gently encouraged me to write my own piece and explore my voice as a writer. When illness struck, a gentle message from them encouraged me back to a space where I would re discover my love of writing.

I sent a shy email to them with my first ever poem (a form I had never thought I would explore). Their encouragement and championing of my poem gave me the courage to explore this new form, one I did with them again for *Humanistan*.

Like the space, Theatre Absolute encouraged you to explore, transform and reimagine yourself creatively. They not only transformed the theatre space of this city, but also that of this writer.

Shahnaz Akhter
▶ [READ MORE ONLINE](#)

Shahnaz Akhter is a great example of someone who attended Shop Front Theatre for a Writing Gym and flourished. In fact, her brother came to watch her do a rehearsed reading having not been to the theatre before. He loved it.

Chris

opposite
Meanwhile
poetry by Shahnaz Akhter
2020

5 Writing

I loved seeing one of our writers trying stand up comedy – what a great opportunity to test yourself!

Julia

I am so grateful and wonderfully appreciative of the brilliant and unique thing that Theatre Absolute did with Shop Front Theatre, which was to make space for creatives to create the dramatic landscape they wanted to create. Free from constraint. No dogma, no rules, no right or wrong – but simply empowering all who sailed to be inspired.

In my case they gave me license to dare to be who I secretly yearned to be and supported me to lean in hard on my funny bone.....and I loved every second of it. Thanks to the force that is the spirit of the Shop Front Theatre, I can live quite happily knowing I have no regrets but instead, a vivid memory of the sight of lots of happy, warm (though slightly bemused) smiling faces on a cold November night in 2018.

Ola Animashawun

Ola Animashawun
Are We Where We Are #9: Sphere
2018



5 Writing

When coming to a place from somewhere else, at times it can feel like you have left a piece of yourself behind. Shop Front Theatre provided a place for me to come home to myself. First as an audience member and then leading the discussion after *Utopia*.

Finally in 2019, after watching the wonderful work of others in that magical space for a decade, I decided to attend the City Voices workshops. Saturdays at Shop Front Theatre were an oasis for me.

This led me to write *Weaving Coventry*, a poem commissioned by Coventry City Council and written specifically for Coventry's Upper Precinct water rills. The support given to the project and me by Julia and Chris was immeasurable.

Kim Hackleman

[▶ READ MORE ONLINE](#)

City Voices was a writing development partnership between Theatre Absolute and the Coventry City of Culture Trust as part of the Coventry UK City of Culture 2021 programme. It was a natural progression from the Writing Gym and our writer/mentor support, that the Trust commissioned us to establish a city-wide writers' group that could feed into the artistic programme of the City of Culture year. Writers from this initiative have gone on to secure commissions with the RSC and BBC radio drama amongst others.

Julia

Detail from *Weaving Coventry*,
a poem by Kim Hackleman
Upper Precinct, Coventry
2020





Enabling writers to use Shop Front Theatre as a retreat has been incredibly rewarding. It's amazing what a bit of time, space, dramaturgy, and funding can do for someone and we were very grateful to receive a generous anonymous donation that allowed us to do this in 2022.

Chris

left
Polaroids by Adele Mary Reed
Katie (Tom) Walters, Angela Mhlanga
and Sujana Crawford
Writers in Residence
2022





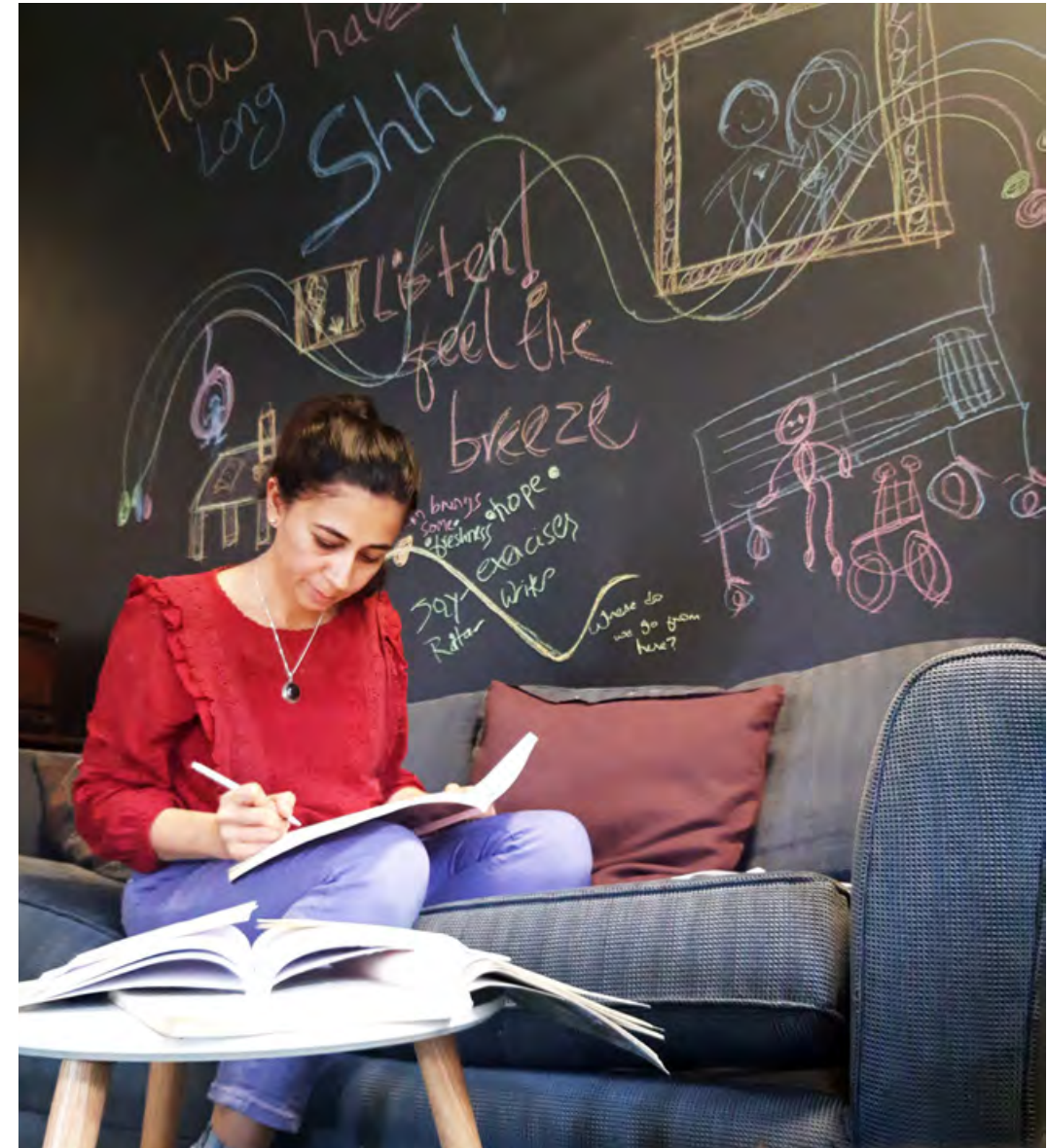
I originally came to Shop Front Theatre having just gone freelance and was really unsure about whether I could go it alone. Julia and Chris were so welcoming. They really helped me to get started and I haven't stopped working since.

I've been part of the City Voices group and had amazing commissions resulting from that as

well as really top notch training and workshops. I've had the privilege of doing a Theatre Lab residency and this has been so useful getting my play ready to tour. Theatre Absolute have been a font of knowledge, a tower of strength and cheerleaders from the start.

Alexandra Johnson
Theatre Lab resident, June 2022
▶ [READ MORE ONLINE](#)

Alexandra Johnson
Theatre Lab resident
2022



The beauty about the writing residency was that there were no set expectations. I was to slow down, let my mind wander. Write as much or as little as I wanted.

The way Shop Front Theatre was set up, with its massive windows and empty walls, it was next to impossible not to indulge in a bit of people watching. One of the windows faced Argos, and there was something theatrical about watching people walk in empty handed, but return with various sized boxes. More than once I found myself wondering what an 'Argos of emotions' might look like.

I am always amazed by just how much of life only comes into focus/ makes sense after we've had a chance to reflect on past events. In recent times, many of us have lost their stillness. This very sense of turbulence and loss I wanted to capture in my writing, and having the time and space allowed me to do just that.

Sujana Crawford
Writer in Residence, August 2022
▶ [READ MORE ONLINE](#)

Sujana Crawford
Writer in Residence
2022



left & above
Angela Mhlanga
Writer in Residence
2022



My writing residency week with Theatre Absolute was creative bliss, an opportunity to breathe, think, mull over and gaze at passers-by bypassing the Shop Front Theatre's windows.

Instead of desperately trying to churn out an idea, the pressure eased through exploring and working in every corner of the space, writing on the walls, moving furniture and setting scenes, playing with the natural light pouring in through the big shop window and singing the dialogues of characters I was imagining.

I went back to basics and reignited the playfulness within me for storytelling. I remembered it really is okay to try and trust the process.

Angela Mhlanga
Writer in Residence, June 2022
[► READ MORE ONLINE](#)

6 Covid

“The pandemic experience has written itself into future plans .”

The pandemic experience has written itself into [Theatre Absolute's] future plans by further highlighting the inaccessibility of many cultural spaces and places to the team. These plans involve short-term residencies in other public spaces around Coventry alongside some form of digital and online delivery. Alongside this comes a desire to act and make work with greater care and compassion for themselves as theatre producers, and for others.

**Culture in Crisis: Impacts of Covid-19
on the UK cultural sector and where we go from here**
Centre for Cultural Value, February 2022



A haven of hope.

The tragedy of Covid deepened Theatre Absolute's belief in the power of, and need for, Art to support mental health. They worked hard to maintain the Shop Front Theatre space as a haven of positivity and hope which continued to connect people while face to face life was so difficult and despite being closed to the public.

Work, including poetry created through the City Voices programme, was made visible as the large street-facing windows were turned into a changing exhibition space, engaging passers-by with poetry as well as film, photography, and textiles exhibiting the work of city-based artists such as Jonny Nicholds, Neil Catley, and Donna Bridgewater.

The space was also used by Theatre Absolute to assemble and despatch by post Writing Boxes, funded by the Heart of England Community Foundation's 'Doing Things Differently' fund, to send people the possibility of moments of reflection and imagination through responding to prompts.

Later, local artists were offered the keys to the Shop Front Theatre for sole access along with a small bursary, to find some peace to think and work. Some time for reflection.

📍 Covid

After the success of *TRAUM* in 2016, we had commissioned Marius Mates, Jamaal O'Driscoll, and Marso Riviere to create *Shift* as part of our *Humanistan* programme in 2020 but sadly Covid saw all performances cancelled.

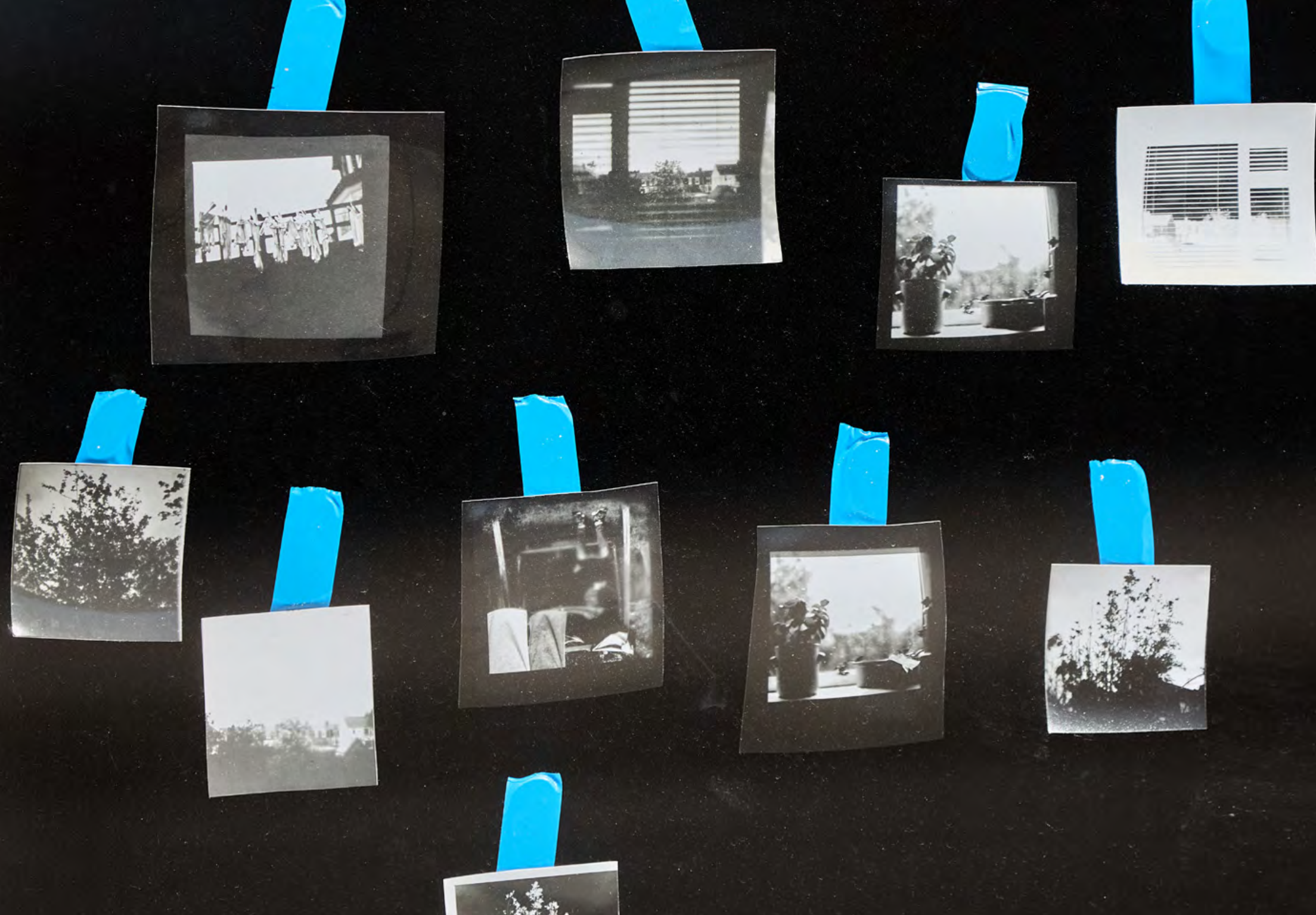
Our space was very small, and we did not want to endanger anyone, so with a heavy heart we shut the doors on Shop Front Theatre on Friday 13 March 2020, making the decision to cancel around 16 sold out performances, and did not re-open them to the public until 9 June 2021.

Julia

Obviously, it was a time of great change for everyone, professionally and personally. Transformative in every sense. But it reaffirmed our commitment to supporting our community – our artists and professional theatre makers and our audience.

Our initial priority was a) the wellbeing of the artists and theatre professionals who would not see their work come to fruition in Shop Front Theatre and were facing an uncertain future, especially financially and b) exploring ways in which Shop Front Theatre, Julia, Lisa Franklin – our then Project Coordinator – and I could still support the general public given the restrictions in place.

Chris



opposite
Meanwhile
detail of artwork by Chris O'Connell
2020

Covid

One of my proudest writing achievements is being commissioned to pen a poem for display in Shop Front Theatre's windows during the Covid-19 lockdowns. It granted me the opportunity to directly address my city as they passed by, at a time of serious isolation and need for hope. It was an honour I couldn't turn down.

All of the poems in the project looked amazing hanging in the windows, something to read when trudging home loaded down with 'essentials' shopping – a true exhibition of poetry as art!

Raef Boylan
▶ [READ MORE ONLINE](#)

Meanwhile
poetry by Raef Boylan
2020



We worried about our audiences, who are much more than 'bums on seats' to us. We had to think about reaching people in new ways, so we secured funding to create a Writing Box, getting it ready for Autumn 2020 by safely assembling items at Shop Front Theatre and posting out to audiences.

We wanted the kit to be full of writing ideas to inspire and distract people – just like a Writing Gym but at home. People could use the exercises and prompts to take a moment to slow down and be with their imagination, hopes and dreams.

Chris

The Writing Box
created by Theatre Absolute
2020



This Poem Is For You

by Andrea Mbarushimana

Cheer up, it might never happen
won't cut it while it's happening
but just seeing you is a tonic
your eyes crinkling
bright, sore sometimes
or brown veined with scars like tiny
rivers emptying into a black sea
what a new smile you're wearing?
warmth that could melt a Russian winter
never mind if your teeth aren't quite straight
sometimes you're tiny and your teeth are tiny
Sometimes there are gaps where teeth are
seeing you smile is looking
where the sun is always
are you warm enough?
get enough of
do you find what
you have

i did a Theatre Lab residency at Shop Front Theatre which gave me sole access to the space with some supporting funding. Eole, 1.5 years old at the time, took part in the residency with me. It was extraordinary, we just experimented and played without limits. For a long time, Eole's baby graffiti stayed on the window of the shop front theatre. As new creative comes to the city this definitely fed our craving for belonging and our sense of being valued as political subjects. This is such a beautiful memory which encompasses all the feelings and emotions i have with regard to the space, so generously created and shared by Theatre Absolute so artists could transform.

The existence of Theatre Absolute and Shop Front Theatre greatly supported my transition as an artist in the UK and i have had a very tender relationship with the space. When i heard the news that the space was closing my heart squeezed.

melissandre varin
▶ [READ MORE ONLINE](#)



left
Meanwhile
poetry by Andrea Mbarushimana
2020

right
Meanwhile
textile artwork by Julia O'Connell
2020

Re-opening such a special space with *Mademoiselle F* following Covid was a huge honour and privilege. We were having to quickly learn new ways of making and sharing theatre with a live audience whilst keeping everybody safe. It was at times hugely stressful but thanks to Julia and Chris's constant support it was also exciting and empowering for the whole team. It felt like we had come home. The show later performed at The Belgrade and I doubt that would have happened without the preview shows at Shop Front Theatre.

Vanessa Oakes

photo: Anand Chhabra



I have great memories of directing *All Is Well* (2017) and *Mademoiselle F* (2021) at the Shop Front Theatre. It was a great space to use – open, friendly and accessible and is one of those spaces that can so easily be transformed into something unusual and unexpected for the audience.

Professor Mark Evans
Coventry University

above
Mademoiselle F
written by Vanessa Oakes
2020

right
Meanwhile
detail of artwork by Chris O'Connell
2020

**Some days if you stare
long enough, you notice
light, imperfections.
What has become so
familiar, might start to
look a little different.**

Covid

In 2021 we were very honoured to have been commended for exceptional encouragement of new writing both at Shop Front Theatre and during the pandemic and receive an Olwen Wymark Award from the Writers' Guild of Great Britain. It meant a lot to us.

Chris



Graeme Rose
Are We Where We Are #6: Choke
written by Chris O'Connell
2018



So what?

“Its legacy will live on in those who visited or engaged and with those whose lives it irrevocably changed.”

Coventry's Shop Front Theatre, brilliantly realised and run by Theatre Absolute in the old Fishy Moores chip shop, anticipated a yet-to-be-written Arts Council strategy, *Let's Create*, published a full ten years after the Shop Front Theatre opened.

The space, which defied categorisation, brought high-quality and innovative new work to a broad audience, work which often reflected the issues facing those in the city and in the audience (as with the work of Theatre Absolute) and in front of many who likely thought that 'theatre' wasn't for them.

It will leave a huge hole when it closes, but its legacy will live on in those who visited or engaged and with those whose lives it irrevocably changed, occupying a unique and affectionate place in Coventry's history, even more so than the previous occupant of 38 City Arcade.

Neil Darlison
Director, Theatre – Arts Council England



Memories and learnings.

Back in 2009 Theatre Absolute couldn't have imagined just how much the Shop Front Theatre would come to mean to so many people, both personally and professionally, or how the project would change the landscape of theatre in Coventry and elsewhere.

It wasn't easy, the enormous highs came with some tricky lows, but Shop Front Theatre was never just a 'scuzzily-carpeted' venue to Chris and Julia. It was a home, a place for new beginnings, a place for new partnerships. It nurtured new audiences, new artists, new collaborations; it loved, and in turn was loved.

opposite
Matthew Wait
Are We Where We Are #6: Choke
written by Chris O'Connell
2018

🔗 So what?

When Theatre Absolute's application to become a National Portfolio Organisation was rejected in 2012 by Arts Council England (we had been a Regularly Funded Organisation for six years prior), I was really worried, thinking 'If WE don't exist then the Shop Front Theatre project doesn't exist either. We'll have to close'.

But then I remember thinking that our hunch about creating this space WAS right. Perhaps we just hadn't found the right way to articulate it to ACE, how could we have? – it was a space that grew organically over time, its identity and mission wasn't prescriptive and deliberately so.

On reflection the rejection, although tough to take, was almost freeing. I had no choice but to think of ways to diversify our funding for the continuation of Theatre Absolute AND the running of the space (I think we were down to £300 in the bank at one point!).

Julia

After the Arts Council England rejection, we began to increase our hires to other community led organisations and local events, we actively upped our networking in the city, and we were gradually successful in attracting a range of visionary trusts and funders who saw the potential of the Shop Front Theatre and, more importantly, the social value of the space in terms of supporting the work of local artists and creating a non-institutionalised space for the Coventry community.

Julia

Humanistan #4: The Only Way Out Is In
devised by Sharron Devine
2021





left
Minnie Crook
**And When I Remember
That I've Forgotten**

right
Holly Clark
Flappy

**Shoot Festival
2022**



Shop Front Theatre quickly became a hub for freelancers, who I think can easily feel isolated but were always welcome here for a cuppa. The F13 group – a space for Coventry's independent artists / creators / practitioners / freelancers – made it their home for a long time.

One of the things I am proudest of in terms of what Shop Front Theatre achieved is the way in which the space played a very real part in sector development with Coventry. Shoot Festival is a good example of an organisation that has developed and grown through the Shop Front Theatre.

Julia

In 2014, Julia and Chris took a risk on two emerging theatre makers who were hungry to make work in their home city and be a part of the local creative ecology. They held our hand as we applied for funding and produced our first ever festival. It was a learning curve but they were there every step of the way. And for that, we are eternally grateful.

Over the past eight years it has been a joy to collaborate with them on a total of five festivals, welcoming hundreds to see the unique and exciting talent Coventry and Warwickshire has to offer. The Shop Front Theatre has been instrumental to so many theatremakers across the city, the Midlands and wider country. A lifeline for artists led by a courageous duo who gave Shoot Festival its first chance.

Jen Davis and Paul O'Donnell
Co-Artistic Directors – Shoot Festival



In the Noughties, Theatre Absolute toured plays about angry people at the margins, mainly young. They were stuck: frustration exploded in violence. The shows gave them a voice, but nothing changed.

Shop Front Theatre offered change: workshops for all, as well as shows. A Coventry focus. The chance to be noticed, grow and move on. It's been a huge success: the longest pop-up in history!

Not just good intentions, but high production values and dexterity with budgets. All infused with Chris and Julia's passion and care.

I was sad when I heard it was closing. So much that I value looks fragile right now. But in fact, it's evolving again. Let's celebrate the 13 Shop Front years, then look forward, not back.

John Ginman
 Dramaturg, Theatre Absolute 2002 – 2007
 Board Member, Theatre Absolute 2002 – 2011

You, Me And The Refugee
 Strictly Arts
 Theatre Lab – work in progress
 Shop Front Festival
 2018

In 2009, Theatre Absolute were doing *Let's Create* almost a decade before it was a thing. They showed lots of us a more open, generous and exciting way of working.

David Jubb



So what?

It would be easy to measure Shop Front Theatre's success in obvious ways: the number of pieces of new writing, the opportunities created for writers, the total size of all those audiences. But that would miss the real magic.

Outside of Coventry, there are whispers on street corners, blueprints passed hand-to-hand in meetings, rumours spread on secret CB radio frequencies.

Shop Front Theatre is held up as an example of what could happen in our city centres, as an ideal of what theatre could be, as a moment of hope in dark times. Shop Front Theatre may leave City Arcade, but the idea is out there now, and that's how revolutions are started.

Dan Thompson

Shop Front Theatre has been revolutionary for the city, entirely re-shaping how, where and when art happens.

Ryan Hughes
Coventry Biennial

John Flitcroft
Always
written by Chris O'Connell
2013



So what?

I've so many memories of the Shop Front Theatre and the thing that has always been so clear is how open Theatre Absolute are to the artists, writers, performers coming in, allowing them to bring their responses and approaches to the space and the themes and I think that has made for a really rich mix of work.

I will miss the Shop Front Theatre, but it doesn't need to be physically there for Theatre Absolute to continue to create wonderful, meaningful, engaging work – whatever that might look like in the future.

Helen Annetts

[▶ READ MORE ONLINE](#)



Ashley James Brown
Are We Where We Are #9: Sphere
2018



Helen Delaney and Mia McCann
volunteers, Shop Front Theatre
2018

Shop Front Theatre was so much more than a place to volunteer. It has been all about the people I've met and the things I've watched; some performances so resonated with me that they occupied my thoughts for many days. To have been involved, even in a small way, has been a privilege.

Helen Delaney
Volunteer Co-ordinator – Shop Front Theatre



We were always very aware of the privilege we had of running the Shop Front Theatre – of the liberty and freedom it gave us and other artists to experiment, make and perform new work.

Julia

Shop Front Theatre has been at the heart of Coventry's independent theatre scene for so long that it's difficult to imagine the city without it.

Martin Sutherland
Chief Executive
Coventry City of Culture Trust

left
Jeans Anatomy
A live performance by Anne Forgan
2013

right
Amy Kakoura and Graeme Rose
The Unfinished City
written by Chris O'Connell
Shop Front Festival
2018





I have watched with pride how Theatre Absolute developed Shop Front Theatre over the years, including being an integral part of Coventry's City of Culture journey.

The future of Coventry city centre has been completely re-imagined as a result of a challenging context for retail and whilst the revised city centre scheme will now focus on residential as well as a revived retail offer – animation and activation of spaces must remain at the heart of our vision. This is also true of course as we re-imagine our district centres across Coventry.

Theatre Absolute have been true trailblazers and the greatest form of flattery is when others have copied their innovation! I congratulate them on everything that Shop Front Theatre achieved.

Prof Martin Reeves
Chief Executive – Coventry City Council

Carol Whitworth
The Unfinished City
written by Chris O'Connell
Shop Front Festival
2018

Impact

By Professor Jonothan Neelands, University of Warwick

Somewhere along the way the ideas of community and theatre became entangled in a 'culture war' that suggested that only proper theatre, professionally produced in proper theatre buildings had 'real' artistic value. Community theatre was marginalised for its commitment to the social good and including 'amateur' voices and localised stories at the expense of pursuing higher aesthetic standards and value. For many mainstream building-based theatres, outreaching theatre to the 'hard to reach' is still, sometimes necessarily, a secondary consideration to getting bums on seats.

The Shop Front Theatre has been the front line for challenging this exclusive view of theatre and theatres. Fishy Moores became the proper place to do proper theatre. A Theatre Absolute led by two extraordinary socially committed artists for, by and with the people of Coventry. It has always been a place for actively doubting and erasing the boundaries between art and the people in their widest

and most inclusive sense. It has resolutely been 'anti-market' and pro-social in its development.

Theatre Absolute's stewardship of the Shop Front Theatre has never allowed for artistic compromise, dumbing down, or lowering artistic standards or expectations. It has never backed away from theatre's essential reason – to show us how we live and how we might live better together. To entertain of course but also to have the courage to sing about the dark times in our shared worlds. To offer us a penetrating lens into people's lived experiences that focusses and connects with our own daily existences. To nourish empathy as the essential core of democracy.

The theatre of the Shop Front Theatre is both stripped to the essentials and essential to our communal lives. It has been driven by Chris and Julia's restless always unfinished life work to create meaningful and transformational theatre out of its bare essentials – stories, actors and a stage. By their evolving and constant re-imagining of the role of the artist in shaping and changing the world – not just

for a select few but for the many. Including those kids with noses and hands pressed against the windows during performances. Including the real life shoplifter making a mock theatrical run for it across the stage. Including all those voices from the shadows of society whose stories were realised up front and out loud on its stage. Including those whose lives were enriched by the warm welcoming to the crafts of storytelling, writing and theatre making.

“A place for actively doubting and erasing the boundaries between art and the people.”

Over time, Chris and Julia's work has shaped and been shaped by the physical dimensions and location of their theatre and the newly discovered possibilities of a space of re-invention for all. Like Fishy Moores, Shop Front Theatre

became a community gathering space – a place of exchange, of conviviality, of solidarity, of community, of belonging, of nourishment.

Julia and Chris speak of 'transitional moments' during their time in the space. These learning moments led to new practices, new ways of involving and including people. Each moment led to the next stage of moving towards a democratic people's theatre. As this Archive shows Chris and Julia always stretch the boundaries, embrace challenge and change and walk their talk of a democratic and democratising theatre.

Shop Front Theatre's theatre has in their own words moved from being company owned to community owned – the community have become the actors, writers, directors, the visionaries. Production has become co-production. The theatre space is also an active community space – a space to meet, plan activism, offer sanctuary, skills and confidence. Sometimes the concerns of the communities meeting there have responded to, connected with, inspired the themes of the theatre

“The theatre of the Shop Front Theatre is both stripped to the essentials and essential to our communal lives.”

work. It has become a cultural and social co-learning space to exchange skills, create, mobilise and support others.

Shop Front Theatre has made its point and made its mark. A proper theatre pulsing with the DNA of its place, people and artistic ambitions. The bricks will tumble soon. There will be a blue plaque to commemorate on the walls of whatever comes next. The theatre of Shop Front Theatre will continue to move forward based on its founding principles to take edgy, progressive art made out of people's stories and lived experiences to their doorsteps. The new theatre spaces that Chris and Julia create will support local communities to recover and articulate the stories and experiences that matter to them.

To the next adventure.

Shop Front Theatre reminded us that theatre could be anything; it gave us confidence to experiment, to say yes, to think about what we actually needed rather than wanted, and to appreciate the centrality of story.

It also enabled us to follow our own path as artists beholden to nothing but Art.

Of course it will be immensely sad to see it and City Arcade go, both have been brilliant homes for independents. But instinct tells us that Theatre Absolute's future lies in progressing our work in other ways and we're excited to start exploring that.

We will never stop trusting and encouraging local artists to create new work that has a relevance to a place and its community.

Chris & Julia



opposite
Humanistan #4: The Only Way Out Is In
devised by Sharron Devine
2021

Acknowledgements

Over its 13 years Shop Front Theatre had a great deal of support from very many people: funders, partners, audiences, creatives, volunteers, interns, donors, Board members, and our friends and family.

We daren't try to thank everyone here, but we very much hope we thanked people at the time and if we didn't thank you enough we definitely owe you a cuppa and a piece of cake!



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