



Profile

David Jubb

Born in 1969, David Jubb studied at Bretton Hall College of Education, Bristol University and the famous actors course of the Central School of Speech and Drama. After serving as a director at The Lion & Unicorn Theatre and the independent artist production agency Your Imagination, he took the post of artistic director at Battersea Arts Centre in 2004. Also, from 2012 to 2015 he served as chairman of the London Theatre Consortium, a group consisting of 14 theatres.

Battersea Arts Centre

The historical town hall of the south London borough of Battersea was repurposed in 1979 as an independent community arts centre. BAC opened in 1981 as a community centre and theatre with theatre director Jude Kelly as its first artistic director. The Centre's running costs are largely covered by Arts Council England and the expanded borough of Wandsworth. When BAC faced the threat of closure in 2007 due to cuts in the borough's budget, the then Prime Minister Tony Blair raised its plight in Parliament, saying that it should be preserved due to the importance of its contribution to the local community, and thus helping to ensure its survival. No fewer than 100,000 people a year passing through BAC's doors where typically 650 performances of all sorts are staged every year, and some 5,000 children and young people a year participate in workshops.

<https://www.bac.org.uk/>



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Battersea Arts Centre (BAC) is located a short walk from the major London rail hub of Clapham Junction. The Centre occupies an historic brick-and-stone building opened in 1893 as the town hall of the south London borough of Battersea, which was repurposed in 1979 as an independent theatre and arts centre. Since 2004, theatre producer David Jubb has served as its artistic director. Since then, together with the former artistic director Tom Morris, Jubb and BAC have drawn attention by pioneered a method of creating arts works it dubs Scratch, which draws local people, from adults to children, to initiate and pursue creative activities at BAC, effectively forging an entirely new type of community-oriented public theatre. Despite a fire that destroyed 30% of the building in 2015, the Centre has remained active and aims at a complete recovery to its former state of facilities and activity by 2020. In this interview, Jubb talks about his vision of new roles for a public theatre and theatrical production under his BAC motto “to inspire people to take creative risks to shape the future.”

Interviewer: Nobuko Tanaka

What drew you to theatre in the first place?

Well, I don't really like theatre, because in the UK a lot of it is very conventional. While I was growing up, everything about theatre was a very stiff and awkward experience and I found it really boring most of the time and hard to enjoy. It's such a weird thing, sitting down and watching a group of people who are pretending you are not there. And you can't make any noise and sometimes it's hot and stuffy, and if you don't like it you can't get up and walk away.

So I found theatre to be a very difficult experience, and actually it took me a while to find artists in the UK who were making non-stiff theatre that was more interesting, and in which they were talking directly to you and your presence could affect the show. That felt more like a creative dialogue; more like a live experience. At that point, particularly in Bristol, where I went to university after Bretton Hall College of Education (near Wakefield in West Yorkshire), I started to see things by companies that were creating live work, so it felt like your presence meant something. It was then that I started to think theatre actually has something more useful about it, and more interesting and more entertaining. I think one special thing theatre has is its “liveness,” so you stand and look straight into the eyes of an audience member and they look back. In that live exchange there is a potential for anything to happen, and if theatre doesn't

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do that it seems to me it's pointless.

So ironically, although you didn't like theatre at first, you are deeply involved with it now.

Yes, I suppose it's like a love-hate relationship. I was so frustrated, but then I started to see works that I felt had a risky edge, so there was a genuine tension in the room.

There is a great artist (playwright, theatre director and performer) in the UK called Chris Goode and he's got something he calls the "cat test." At BAC we actually have a cat, so we can do the test.

The idea is that if a cat walks onto the stage in the middle of a show and all the actors pretend nothing is happening, that means the theatre is dead because obviously the cat is the most live thing in the room and anything can happen. And the audience know that, so inevitably they're going to be transfixed on that cat. However, if the actors bring the cat into the action and it becomes part of the evening, then it's a live theatre show.

We as audiences always love it when something goes wrong, so if an actor is able to engage the thing that's gone wrong in the act of performing, then it's so much more exciting. It reminds us all that it's live — that we're all alive!

How did you get involved with BAC after that?

I fell in love with BAC exactly because of that reason. The building is a former town hall, so it's not a purpose-built theatre, and every room has something wrong with it, so it's not like a perfectly well-equipped black-box studio that's got everything you could want. Really, everything about it is a bit broken in terms of a theatre.

Yet that very brokenness makes it very interesting, and that means artists have to go beyond the things they thought they would do and accommodate the slight brokenness of the room or building, or the lack of theatre facilities. That encourages theatre which works in multiple spaces, and it also encourages artists to think differently about their relationship with the audiences.

In fact, in most of the rooms you have to set up a relationship with the audiences from scratch. That's because in most theatres the audience is sitting in one place, maybe on different levels, and there's a stage, and there's a separation between them — but at BAC it's just rooms. So you have to think where to put the audiences, and what will they be sitting on, and how will we relate to them. Or maybe they won't be sitting, so you just have to make it up as you go along.

Please tell me about BAC. Even when I visited one lunchtime, I remember seeing lots of people there, many of whom seemed to be local residents.

Yes, it's very busy during the daytime, because many artists are always working in the building. Also, there's lots of activity because of The Bee's Knee's, our indoor public play space for under-5s that has regular classes and events, and the youngsters come with their parents or carers (care-givers). As well as all that, people get married here in the building, and we rent out spaces for conferences and meetings — and some people just use BAC as a place to rendezvous together. So it's a space

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for the community to hang out in. I think theatre isn't just something that happens on stage. If you go to someone's wedding, it's very theatrical like a performance; and if you see children at The Bee's Knee's, they are always pretending to be one thing or another ... and that's very theatrical, too. So the BAC building is always quite busy.

One of the things people associate strongly with BAC is the creative method you call Scratch. Could you explain a bit more about what Scratch involves?

The basic idea of Scratch is for artists to share ideas with the future audience members in the really early stages of the development of a project and ask them for their feedback.

So it might be an artist who wants to make a show, but they don't make the whole show, they just make 5 or 10 minutes, just fragments, a little bit of the show. Or they might talk to the audiences about their ideas and what they would like to do and ask them questions, like: "Do you think the story I am interested in is interesting?" ... "Did it make you think of anything?" ... whatever, different questions for different artists for different audiences.

The audience members might be given feedback forms to fill in, or they might buy the artists drinks after the showcase and chat with them at our bar, or they might write them emails ... so there are lots of different ways of feedback. The idea is the artist takes away the feedback, as does the producer — and at BAC we play the role of the producer between them. Both the artists and the audiences are taking some risks — the artist because they are showing something that's not ready and audiences because they're experiencing something that's not ready. We have to host the relationship and look after both parties and make sure it works well. So we help the artists to think of the questions and help the audiences to be brave and go to the artists after the show.

When we were developing that idea about 17 years ago, I asked my long-term friend and the great Japanese artist Kazuko Hohki (the founder of the pop group Frank Chickens) what we should we call it, and she immediately said, "Maybe you should call it Scratch, because it's bit like scratching ideas, testing ideas." And anyway, it was a nice word, too.

This principle originally applied to how to make a show, but now we try to use the Scratch method for everything we do — testing something and trying it, then if it doesn't work out, putting it aside. That's fine because you learn from the failure; you learn what was going wrong.

So artists might present something on the Scratch night and then go away for two months, think about it in their subconscious and return and do another Scratch. Then they might go away for a few months and be back again. Sometimes an artist will make a piece of work over one year or two years, with four or five different Scratch points. When they get to finish the show, the audiences' have their fingerprints on it, too.

One of the exciting things about Scratch is that it opens up theatre for different kinds of audiences, because a show's theme might bring in different kinds of audiences and anyone has the right to be in the show at the beginning and they can watch it

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develop. So, you have a sense of ownership when it's finished.

Do Scratch audiences need to pay to participate?

Audience members pay what they can. They might pay £1, £2 or £3, so it's very low ticket prices. That's because they are taking a risk. If the show develops to be finished, tickets to see it might be £9 or £10, it depends on the scale ... but at Scratch you pay what you can. Anyway, I think the audiences like to be involved and make suggestions.

Since 2004, when you became the artistic director of BAC, the area has changed a lot. It used to be poor, with lots of social housing, but around that time it was starting becoming gentrified as yuppies moved in. How has that affected your business?

You're right, over the last decades Battersea has completely transformed, but there are still large council estates (social housing projects) and we see one of our responsibilities, and one of the things that makes us get up in the morning, as being to always think about how creativity can have an impact and lead social change — in fact, how theatre and creativity can become really powerful tools for social change. That's still a massively important part of our work. Almost, in a way, I think it's become more important in our work, but that's not necessarily because of the gentrification of some of the area, but because we've been thinking more and more about who's coming into our building, who it's accessible to, who feels welcome — and where it feels like a barrier.

So in the last five years in particular we've worked harder and harder to connect with young people, especially those coming from housing estates. In fact, we run a program called Agency, which provides a creative methodology for young people to think how they can build up their own social enterprise or business.

That program is driven by their desire and their passion and their community. So it's different from the conventional form of arts participation, in which theatres generally say, "We are a theatre, so come and act." Or others might say, "We are an orchestra, so come and play; or we are a gallery, so come and paint." But such invitations, while very nice, are still based on what "we" are doing, and they mean "come along and it will be good for you" — and that's potentially a slightly patronizing invitation.

I think the interesting thing about the Agency program is that it asks you what your idea is and how we can support you to develop your idea. So it uses a creative process to help young people develop their own businesses. It's a partnership in which we are co-creating, we are providing a creative process we call Scratch, in which the idea is to test an idea, then listen to feedback and respond to the feedback and go away and do something else and think about the idea, then come back again and redevelop the idea.

We provide the process, but in the context of the Agency the young person provides the idea. So it's like a kind of co-creating model. It's different from the old arts model, which is: We create and you participate.

It's an interesting shift in culture and it's beginning to be more prevalent in the UK. In the next five or 10 years I think it's going to continue to shift more and more substan-

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tially as we think more and more about how cultural institutions and arts organizations can be creative generators, and supporters and developers, of other people's ideas — as opposed to always thinking it's our production or it's our orchestra or our play and we want you to come along and get involved, but it's ours. And I think that's beginning to shift.

So are you basically trying to open up the theatre in new ways here at BAC?

Right. At the beginning of this conversation we talked about the relationship between the audiences and the artists and how we like to open that up. I think now the actual creative process that happens within arts organizations is becoming more open. I think arts organizations are recognizing it's not just a process that is owned by artists exclusively; everyone is an artist and everyone has the right to use their local arts organization to generate and develop their own idea — not just people we call professional artists.

I think it explodes open the kinds of roles and the things we make. We still make shows at BAC and support professional artists who make shows, but we also help young people to develop all kinds of different businesses, whether they're board games, beauty products, classes for people learning to speak English as a second language. All those have been initiated by young people with us helping them to develop their ideas using the same creative process we use to make theatre. So it's the same Scratch process we use to make theatre, but it's just going with other people's ideas, what they want to create and what's important to them. It's a bit like changing from a manufacturing model of how we produce and make theatre to actually thinking how we do that and why don't we share that process with everyone, then everyone can use that process for the thing they are passionate about.

So it's opening up theatre in the same way newspapers used to be the only source of news, but now anyone can use SNS and report on and share what they are interested in. Do you think that is the type of change that is taking place today?

Yes, it's part of that wider democratization of these different sectors and industries — actually recognizing that lots of different people can do it in lots of different ways.

Are other theatres thinking along the same lines?

Oh yes, definitely, there are lots of different arts organizations around the UK that are involved in the process of opening up and democratizing art. For example, there is the Contact Theatre in Manchester that's been working in a really inspiring way for decades with young people, thinking how they can become involved in the governance and running of an organization like that. There is also an amazing project in Salford, Greater Manchester, at the Lowry (theatre and gallery complex) called the Salford Young Carers Project. That's working with young people who are looking after a parent, sometimes for 20 to 30 hours a week, and helping them to think about who they are and their own identity and their role as a carer (care-giver). So I think there's some inspiring examples and indeed internationally, too. We've been very inspired by examples from Brazil and other South American countries — in fact the Agency originally comes from an idea developed in Brazil, which has got a very interesting set

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of artists doing great work in this territory.

Another leading BAC project is called Create Course. Please explain something about that.

Yes, it's very simple. It's based on something called the Alpha course in the UK, which is actually a 10-week Church program that encourages people to become Christians. I am not a Christian, I am an atheist, but what's interesting about the course is that it doesn't tell people about the Bible or scriptures; it starts by asking them questions. So, it gets a group of people together and asks them what they believe, or whether they have any beliefs, or when was the last time they felt they believed something? Then people start to have conversations and open up because they aren't being told they have to read something and believe something and swallow this or that. Instead they're being asked what they believe, and so on.

There is actually a little 90- or 100-page book called "How to Run an Alpha Course" which gives churches the tools to create an Alpha course, and I was quite inspired when I saw a documentary about it on TV, and I was interested in the Church shifting its stance from telling people to asking people.

So we thought we would take the same approach with the Create Course by basically shifting from the model of getting people to come in to act or paint, and saying we will teach you how to do it, to a model of basically asking people about creativity: Do you feel creative? When was the last time you felt creative? What helps you to feel creative?

Actually it becomes the methodology for a course to start to enable people to think about creativity not just in artistic disciplines, but in everyday life — in the kitchen in terms of looking after your children, in terms of your professional work, in terms of thinking about creativity in every aspect of your life.

So, this Create Course has become a really fabulous 10-week program in which we work with lots of local people and it creates an amazingly powerful bond between the people. I've never been on Alpha course, but I suspect that the same kind of spirit comes out of people because they begin to feel empowered. I think there is a really strong link between your own creativity and your own agency — as in your own desire, and willingness, to want to get on with something and make something happen. I think when you are creative it's an incredibly important part of that, and we've noticed that the Create Course is an incredibly important way to get people's enthusiasm going for whatever it is they want to do. So, that's the Create Course.

If you find someone's hidden talent this way, how does it feed back to you as the artistic director of BAC?

Well, we also do a program called Agents of Creative Change, which puts together artists with people working in the public sector or the third sector. So it's people usually working for local charities or the local government and they've got a particular challenge they're trying to tackle and the Agents of Creative Change program encourages them to tap into their own creativity to make change happen. The partnership with the artists is just to help them do that, to think about their own creativity and how they get hold of it.

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A really good example is a woman called Barbara who has worked in the criminal justice system in the borough of Wandsworth for 25 years. She is an amazing Polish woman, a creative and thoughtful individual. Now like lots of other boroughs in England, and probably around the world, Wandsworth's statistics show a surprisingly small number of people commit a surprisingly high proportion of its crime. So they are repeat offenders, often people with drug issues and drug offenders in a repeat cycle of crime, and these are Barbara's "clients" as she describes them.

She wanted to find a way to break the cycle, so she worked with an artist called Tassos Stevens from Coney (interactive theatre makers, creating games, adventures and plays), and the idea they came up with was to create an app that would work on her clients' phones. The idea of the app was to use cognitive behavioral techniques to try to retrain behavior — but to use a story to do that. So the app uses avatars and characters and the story so that when a client feels they are about to commit a crime they can use the app to retrain behavior because the story will show the likely consequences, which will usually not be good. I think that's a really creative solution to the issue and she has now secured some funding and she is developing that app into a full prototype to be used.

In a way, just like an artist scratching an idea in a theatre space, she has creatively thought about that challenge she wants to tackle and scratched some ideas and she is now creating a full version of her idea.

So for me that's just like an artist making a piece of work, it's just that the work has a different set of ambitions or aims and I don't see any conflict between those two things. We can still happily and comfortably help artists to develop shows in spaces for audiences to enjoy and be inspired by. But equally, we can inspire and support creative people like Barbara to have ideas and create those ideas in their own context or setting.

For 10 years our mission at BAC was to invent the future of theatre, that was our purpose; everything was about the theatre and what happened on stage. However, as we started to develop that over those 10 years, I think we realized that theatre had a lot more uses than just what it did on stage — that creative risk-taking, the performance, and the inherent "liveness" of two people looking into each other's eyes — and the possibility of change happening — meant theatre could be used for a whole wider set of things.

So now our core purpose is to inspire people to take risks to shape the future ... and seeing that in turn, in a circular fashion, might inspire someone to take risks. That can describe the act of making a piece of theatre, but it can also describe what Barbara did to take a creative risk in her professional practice and create that app — putting herself out there on the line, testing that, developing it, and hopefully changing the future in Wandsworth by improving some people's lives by changing those crime statistics.

How actually do you do that, because most public theatres in Japan are just like a box that people come to and see a show without making contact?

Well we do that, too. But I think it's about focusing on the process of what you do more than what you described, which is the transaction — the product somebody

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buys and consumes. That's a perfectly legitimate and important part of theatre, but actually it's just the tip of the iceberg. The big bit of the iceberg is the process that is used — so it's not like we don't do the tip of the iceberg, but we also open up the process for lots more people to recognize that they can also engage with that, too. They can come and see the show, but they can also think about how they could use that creative process for something they want to do. And I think that's the shift for us.

How do you get people involved with BAC's programs, especially those who have had no previous contact with theatre?

Well, if you think about a program like the Agency, we don't expect to find those people in BAC. We research where young people hang out, like around a local chip shop or takeaway or at a community centre, and we go there and meet them there.

However, it's not me, because I am white and middle-class, so we make sure the people who connect initially are from within that community, because it's really important that our staff at BAC include people from the whole community — posh people, not posh people, white people, not white people — because we need to be representative of our whole community.

That is a long journey, and we are not there yet, but we are getting better as we go along. And partly, as we broaden our program, and our definition of theatre culture, more people become interested in what's going on. Then they bring their ideas and gradually they start working at BAC, and hopefully they become staff members and the whole thing just begins to open up.

If you had to identify three key things to make a public theatre a success, what would they be?

(First) Being relevant, which might just mean the shows on the stage, or it might mean programs like the Agency. But being relevant to your community, I think, is incredibly important.

(Second) Being creative, because it's amazing how many arts organizations are not very creative. They have a very transactional view of the way they should conduct their business. You know, the staff teams all work in departments like silos, and they're all separated. It's industrialization, and that model is designed as a way to make cars, so you separate everything out — the paint shop, your production line, the marketing team, the sales team — but when you are creating things, you don't separate things out like that because if you do, you don't discover things, and you don't discover interesting connections between things. So, I think being creative is an incredibly important thing.

Third, I would say being resilient. Being resilient financially is obviously really important; having a financial model that can work and can actually earn money as well as hopefully get grant income where you can. Also having a resilient personality, I would say, so you can deal with change really quickly. So, I would say those are my three keys to making a public theatre a success.

You had a disaster at BAC on March 13, 2015, when a fire broke out that burned about 30% of your building. What caused the fire?

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They never found out. Apparently, they don't find the cause of more than 50 per cent of fires. They know it wasn't arson — it wasn't deliberately started — it might have been an electrical fault. Apparently, the main way they find out the cause of fires is through CCTV, but because it was in the roof we had no CCTV there, we don't know what started it and it was never found out.

After the fire, how did you get the money to start the theatre operating again?

We were insured and the insurance company are paying for the rebuild of the Grand Hall. The insurance company was quick off the mark and really supportive of our plans to adapt the Grand Hall as it's rebuilt. But it has also cost us lots of money because in our insurance package we only had two years' "business interruption cover," so basically we were only covered for the loss of income for two years from the date of the fire on March 13, 2015. In actual fact, however, until the business is properly running again it will be four years.

So we have over two years where we have a gap in our business and we've raised funds from individuals and grant-making bodies and people have been incredibly generous and supportive. We have also tried to keep on earning money. As far as we can, we are still selling tickets and selling food and having weddings, and we rent out the building and do all sorts of events there. I guess it goes back to that point about being resilient, just trying to think about lots of ways in which we can be financially resilient as an organization.