Community Participation

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chichester festival theatre

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Community was vital to the establishment of Chichester Festival Theatre, notably through fundraising and donations (Coldstream,46). Similarly, the Theatre on the Fly would not exist without the community, with volunteers helping to build and run the theatre. For some volunteers, such as Bernadette Ward, working on Theatre on the Fly was a formative experience which would inspire a future career in theatre.

Assemble

The Theatre on The Fly was designed and built by Assemble, a multi-disciplinary collective from London. Community is a key part of their ethos, with their projects being built for, and co-operating with, local community (Assemble, 2025).

“It was the first time I ever used a chalk line, a bit of string that has a chalk on it that's used for the mark and in the set. I'd never used them before and I've used them so many times since. I think that was the most important skill I learned whilst I was there.”

Bernadette Ward, build volunteer, interviewed 2025.

Community volunteering was key to the running of Theatre on the Fly and features in lots of people’s memories of the venue. There is a legacy of volunteers helping with temporary venues at Chichester Festival Theatre. Many remember an iconic brother and sister duo, Eric and Joan, who volunteered in the bar and box office supporting productions at The Tent in the 1980s.

“There was this lovely couple, Eric and Joan, yeah, I think he mentioned that they were legendary. They loved the tent with all their hearts. They were brother and sister, an older couple, and they'd made themselves outfits to match the yellow and white stripes. They made them themselves so that they matched it, they just loved it.”

Amanda Mirams Interview 20th March Interviewed by Helena Berry and Katie White.

As well as fostering a sense of community spirit through its volunteering programme, Theatre on the Fly literally became part of the community due to its location on Oaklands Park, it was easily accessible to passers-by. The structure was a spectacle, which drew the attention and curiosity of the public.

John Page, Production Manager for Theatre on the Fly, remembers:

“We opened the doors on the theatre and audiences for the festival theatre would be sitting out there having a picnic so they could watch when we were doing the turn around we sort of deliberately did it like that with the doors open so that people could see.”

John Page Interview 14 March by Katie White

Anna Ledwich, Director of *The Blue Remebered Hills* at Theatre on the Fly, highlighted how proximity to the public even affected performances:

“You know, often you'd be watching the play and something. There'll be kids playing football across the back or people kind of peering through. And that was just sort of part of it, really. There was something quite charming about that.”

Anna Ledwich Interview 4 April by Helena Berry and Katie White

Immersion

Assemble's design brief (WSRO CFT/2/6/4) shows that initially, the ability to have a traverse stage to allow for promenade performance was an essential part of their design. This highlights how proximity to the actors and immersive experience for audience members was crucial to the concept of the Theatre on the Fly. Although the traverse did not become part of the final design, there was a promenade performance at the Theatre on the Fly – the Youth Theatre production of Noah. During the production the youth theatre parade as animals across Oaklands Park as the audience arrived.
Assemble described their design as a 'chameleonic space' (WSRO CFT/2/6/4) neither an indoor or outdoor venue but somewhere in between.

Rebecca and Simon Barrett, whose daughter Jessica performed in *Noah*, were struck immersive nature of Theatre on the Fly.

"All the animals were in the field making their various noises, quite something. So that was a real spectacle. They were all walking up, roaming about."

Rebecca and Simon Barrett interviewed 13 March by Chiara Bradfield

Carnival Spirit

As the name suggests, Theatre on the Fly was less polished venue compared to the main house, lending a more raw, anarchic feel to the productions and events staged there.

Anna Ledwich's production of *The Blue Remembered Hills*, featured adults playing children, highlighted the playful nature of the venue.

'I guess the world of the play was this playground, so it invited that sort of slight, loose and anarchic engagement with it.'

Anna Ledwich Interview 4 April by Helena Berry and Katie White

Part of the fun was working with a new, temporary venue – however working in an outdoor space also came with challenges. Some of the professionals involved remember constant rain which leaked into the theatre, actors falling over, mud, mosquitos and fog. These memories form part of the unique nature of the venue, where things going wrong was all part of the fun!

'I was getting screws out of the ground, going around with a big magnet and picking up the screws.'

John Page interviewed 14 March by Katie White.

'I do remember being out in the rain, you basically spend the whole show sweeping the front of house treads and the ramps and stuff because when people start pouring out, it's going to be wet, it's going to be muddy.'

'We had four giant squeegees.'

Chris Tindall, Theatre Technician interviewed 20 March by Helena Berry and Katie White.

'Actually, there were two of us on Playhouse creatures. One of us had to operate lighting, the other one had to be the on stage. Flyman. There was a chandelier that flew in and out, I think it was, and there was something else that flew in and out. So as part of the fit up, they built a counterweight flying system. So if I remember correctly, it was Chris was dressed up as the flyman. He basically had to kind of sit as nonchalantly as you expect a stage crew person to be, kind of in his because he

had a beard at the time and he had his big, kind of Elizabethan slacks, just leaning on the fly rail, pretend in full view of the audience, but just pretending to be part of the action'

Neil Rose, Theatre Technician, interviewed March 2025 by Helena Berry and Katie White

'I distinctly remember coming in one Monday, and there just being like a mountain of this wet, muddy, stinking clothes that they'd obviously left from theatre on the fly had done a production, and it had rained, so they were just caked in mud, and they left it.'

Loz Tait and Flower, CFT wardrobe, interviewed 6 January by Helena Berry.