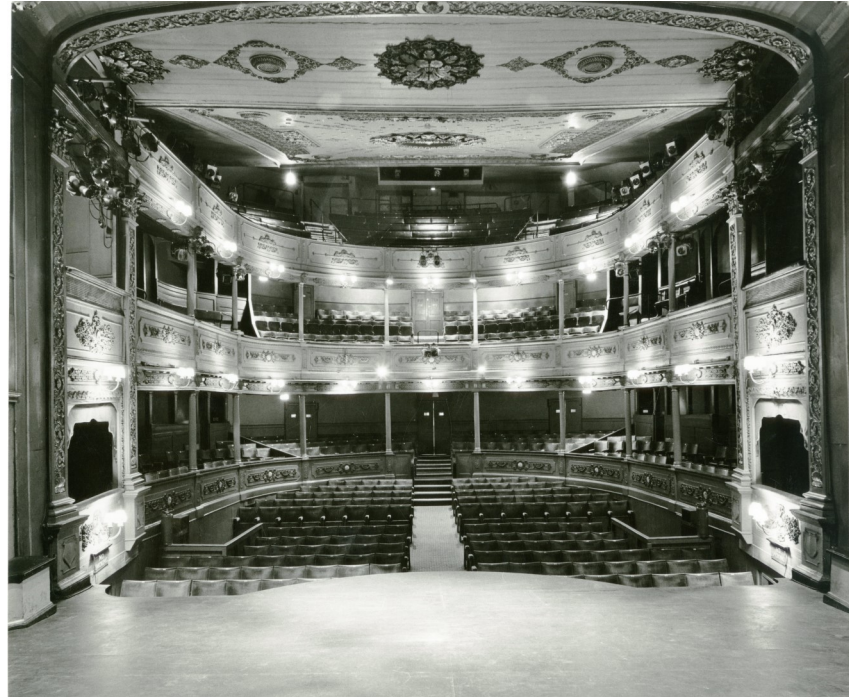


Talking Audiences

An exhibition curated by Kirsty Sedgman



8 November 2019 – 28 February 2020

(excluding 23 December 2019—6 January 2020)

Talking Audiences

Engaging Audiences with Bristol Old Vic from the 1940s to Today

Introduction

In the 1930s, on a flying visit to Bristol, a man walks into a theatre.

This is not the opening to a joke. This was the beginning of a decade-long campaign by London-based critic Herbert Farjeon to save the theatre which is now called Bristol Old Vic. Then known as the Theatre Royal, the building was built in 1766 in an attempt to secure the city's growing prestige by introducing to it the best of London theatre.

Thanks to Farjeon's efforts, which are well-documented here in the Theatre Collection, in the 1940s the Theatre Royal went through a major transformation. After being rescued from sale as a warehouse by a group of local businessmen, the newly-formed Arts Council of Great Britain stepped in and took over the lease. This made Bristol the home of the first publicly-funded theatre in the UK. At the end of the 1940s the theatre was permanently rebranded via a takeover by the Old Vic (London), becoming first 'the Bristol Old Vic Company at the Theatre Royal', and later simply 'Bristol Old Vic' - keeping that name long after ties with its London partner had been amicably cut. Since then, the theatre has built its reputation by variously claiming to be the 'oldest' or 'longest-running' theatre in Britain.

Recognising its national significance has meant that, over the past seven decades, Bristol Old Vic has had to walk a tricky line between what local audiences want to see, and what London thinks is good for them. When London's Old Vic and the Arts Council took over the theatre's management in the 1940s, they installed in Bristol a Management Committee made up of a member of the Old Vic (John Burrell) along with both the Drama Director *and* Deputy at the Arts Council, Michael MacOwan and Charles Landstone respectively. Together with the theatre's Director - initially Hugh Hunt (1946–1949), and later by (among others) Allan

Davis (1950), Denis Carey (1950-1954) and John Moody (1954-1959), and under the Chairmanship of Sir Philip Morris (1946-1971), the initial Management Committee worked hard to carry out the theatre's mission: namely, to 'inspire and carry forward the work of the Old Vic, and make it worthy of the golden blessing of the Arts Council of Great Britain'. From the very first minutes in July 1946, Committee meetings were full of discussions about the need to promote high standards in all their performances.

Focusing particularly on those early years, this exhibition examines the difficulties of establishing a regional outpost of a London organisation in a city like Bristol, which has, according to one of the documents displayed here, 'a rather difficult type of audience'.

Within theatre and performance scholarship there is a long tradition of talking *about* audiences: who we think they are, why we think they come to the theatre and what we think they want. Up until now, though, we've not been very good at talking *to* them. My British Academy-funded research has combined research in the archives with interviews with today's spectators, to find out what audiences over the years have actually been saying about the theatre and its productions. In this exhibition you can see some of the quotations about audiences set alongside quotations from audience members themselves. This shows that audiences have *always* been talking - we just haven't necessarily been listening.

PHOTOGRAPHS ABOVE CABINET 1: Awaiting an Audience

1. Photograph of sheeted seats, summer 1951. Photographer unknown

BOV/P/000759/11

A poignant image of the empty auditorium of the Theatre Royal, Bristol, commissioned by the theatre in Summer 1951. The vacant seats are covered in white sheeting for renovation works, which included improving the rake of the Dress Circle and some re-gilding of plasterwork decoration.

2. Photographs by Derek Balmer of the empty auditorium and stage, 1970

BOV/P/000757

Two photographs of the auditorium of the Theatre Royal, Bristol, one looking from the dress circle towards the stage and one from the stage towards the dress circle. Looking at these images evokes the anticipatory thrill of the pre-performance moment.

3. Photograph of bench seats, summer 1951. Photographer unknown

BOV/P/759/13

Photograph of the eighteenth-century bench seating in the Theatre Royal, Bristol, which is still preserved today in the Upper Circle (formerly known as the Gallery) of the Bristol Old Vic auditorium.

CABINET 1: A Difficult Type of Audience

4. Photocopy of a photograph (c.1900) of King St, with the Theatre Royal, Bristol in the background

BOV/P/000763

5. Programme: What is the Bristol Old Vic?

PR/71/1

Back cover of a 1946 Bristol Old Vic programme, featuring introductory text about the mission of this brand new company – a ‘joint venture’ between the Arts Council of Great Britain and the Old Vic and Sadler’s Wells organisation, set up after three successful years of the Arts Council’s involvement. Note the emphasis on this theatre as ‘a new venture of high endeavour’ and the stated aim of making Bristol Old Vic ‘a national theatre for the South West of England’, with the hope of gaining ‘a wide audience drawn from every sphere of life; a loyal, but not an uncritical audience’.

6. The ‘curious programme cover’, designed by Edward Bawden, for the new Bristol Old Vic Company at the Theatre Royal, 19/2/1946

PR/71

Front cover of a 1946 Bristol Old Vic Company programme, which was designed by Edward Bawden: a leading figure in the post-war Arts and Crafts design movement. This programme contains information about *The Beau Stratagem* by George Farquhar, which was the very first production that was held at the newly reopened Theatre Royal, and was directed by the Bristol Old Vic Company’s inaugural Director Hugh Hunt.

7. Letter, dated 22/12/1949, from Allan Davies about Bristol Old Vic's programme design

BOV/7/3/1/1

Original letter sent from Allan Davies to Philip James at the Arts Council, sent at a time when the theatre had been closed for seven months for emergency fire-safety renovations. An unforeseen delay led to worries that the theatre may never reopen – but thankfully in January 1950 the Bristol Old Vic Company were again able to throw open the doors to the Theatre Royal and recommence performances. In this letter Davies asks if this might be a good opportunity to reconsider the design, which appears on the front cover of every single programme from July 1946 until the early 1960s, when the association with the Old Vic (London) ceased. Davies' reasoning is that the cover feels like it may be a bit 'putting-off' for Bristol's audiences, which he believes desires a 'more down to earth than experimental' style.

8. Large-text quotation taken from Davies' original letter above

This quotation reads: '... we are steadily gaining a permanent hold on a loyal and continuous audience – I think, however, it is not an audience which can appreciate our curious programme cover.'

9. Letter, dated 11/08/1958, from Barbara Fox about Peter Shaffer's play *The Salt Land*

BOV/7/3/1/1

Original letter sent from the playwrights' agent Barbara Fox to Charles Landstone, who took over from Michael MacOwan as Drama Director of the Arts Council in 1947 and remained on the Management Committee of the Theatre Royal. Landstone has in a previous letter been enquiring about producing Shaffer's *The Salt Land* at Bristol Old Vic, to which Fox responds by quoting from a letter sent to her by John Moody, then Director of the theatre, in which Moody suggests that Bristol is not the right kind of audience for this play.

10. Large-text quotation taken from Fox's original letter above

This quotation reads: 'Although Bristol has a certain reputation for being adventurous, we have to do it very tactfully as our public is nothing like a London Art Theatre.'

11. Photograph of audience in the Bristol Old Vic auditorium by Bob Willingham, 1996

BOV/P/000754

12. Letter dated 1/10/1947 from K. Clark to Hugh Hunt

BOV/7/3/1/1

Letter from Kenneth Clark, Chairman of the arts panel for the Arts Council of Great Britain, written to Hugh Hunt acknowledging Hunt's previous letter to Charles Landstone. It concludes with the praise: 'I am delighted to hear how very well the season has started – it must be very gratifying to you to know that your work is so appreciated by a rather difficult type of audience' [emphasis added].

13. Bristol Old Vic Newsletter dated May 1951

BOV/8/1/2/2

Front page of a two-sided newsletter sent out every month to the members of the Bristol Old Vic Theatre Club. The first page is usually filled with text written by the theatre's Director, addressed to Club members to encourage and thank them for their continued support and to give them some privileged insights into the running of the theatre. In this newsletter the Director Denis Carey begins with a description of the life of the Company in the middle of rehearsing a new production: 'It's eight o'clock in the morning, and my brain is like a dried lemon. I tell you the hour in case you might imagine, as many people do, that actors lead a frivolous and indolent existence'. The Director's column was often witty and tongue-in-cheek in this way, but also full of fascinating details about the shows themselves – as well as genuinely heartfelt thanks to the Club for their ongoing support. This particular column closes with the paragraph: 'I have been amazed at the unselfish help and devotion that is offered by [the Committee] towards this theatre they love, and which they mean to keep alive'.

14. Large-text quotation taken from Carey's newsletter column above

This quotation reads: 'We love having letters, whatever they say! Throw brickbats or bouquets, give me a list of plays for next season, send me a criticism telling us how bad we are, but please *write*.'

So audiences did...

15. Photograph of the Dress Circle audience in the Theatre Royal auditorium, c.1970s (unknown photographer)

BOV/P/770

CABINET 2: Audience Response

Top Shelf: *Of Mice and Men* (1951)

A selection of production photographs and quotations from audience letters, relating to the 1951 Bristol Old Vic Company production of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, directed by Denis Carey.

16. Production photograph by Desmond Tripp, of Laurence Payne (George) and Michael Aldridge (Lennie) staring into the distance, 1951

BOV/P/58/7

17. Large-text quotation taken from a letter sent to the theatre by an audience member in October 1951

KS/BOV/195110/AC1

The quotation reads: "Mice and Men" is terrific in its human understanding – and as you say in the latest newsletter, the play is almost unbearably poignant – it certainly extends our nerves and mental fibres to the full!

18. Production photograph by Desmond Tripp, of Frank Singuineau (Crooks), 1951

BOV/P/58/16

19. Production photograph by Desmond Tripp, of the cast, with typed caption used for publicity, October 1951

BOV/P/58/4

20. Production photograph, by Desmond Tripp, of Laurence Payne (George) and Newton Blick (Candy) standing over the body of Sheila Burrell (Curly's Wife), 1951

BOV/P/58/9

21. Large-text quotation taken from a letter sent to the theatre by an audience member dated 23 October 1951

KS/BOV/195110/AC2

The letter in its entirety reads: 'I feel that I must write to congratulate you on your latest masterpiece "Of Mice and Men", though I hated every minute of it. It was so obvious from the moment that Lennie and his little friend appeared on the scene that their life together could only end in tragedy that the whole play was impregnated with impending doom, which I simply loathe. The poignancy of the last scene lingered long after I had left the theatre. It was superbly acted, but why oh why must you choose such morbid plays? "The Kreutzer Sonata" was bad enough, but this is ten times worse because it is convincingly realistic and true to life. But I like plays with happy endings. Thank goodness for "Love's Labour's Lost".'

22. Production photograph, by Desmond Tripp, of Laurence Payne (George) and Michael Aldridge (Lennie) sitting on a log, 1951

BOV/P/58/17

23. Large-text quotation taken from a letter sent to the theatre by an audience member, dated 14 November 1951

KS/BOV/195111/AC1

The quotation in full reads: 'In these days of plays that are mere superficial trifles – plays that are hard to remember after a few days – what a joy it was to see a "strong" play. So perfectly acted and produced. Please give us more "strong" plays at the Theatre Royal - I know plays of this sort are hard to find but a very large number of the public want them!'

Middle Shelf: *Julius Caesar* (1962)

In 1962 Bristol Old Vic set up a new venture: a touring company called Company 3 which would deliver high-quality productions with a multicultural cast in a range of venues, including schools, community centres, and prisons in the South West. This shelf features a number of items that relate to their first production: William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, directed by Tony Robertson.

24. Programme for *Julius Caesar*, 1987

BOV/3/4/186/1/3

25. *Julius Caesar* tour schedule, 1987

BOV/3/4/186/1A

A list of places and dates for the production, which was programmed at a variety of different venues around the region: ranging from drama groups to a Christian family centre to a shoe factory.

26. Information sheet, 1987

BOV/3/4/186/13

An information sheet produced for prospective venues giving key details about the new company. It states: 'COMPANY 3 aims to encourage an approach to theatre that reflects a society that is truly multi-cultural [...]. COMPANY 3 will aim to support and add to existing theatre provision by taking its work out to as wide an audience as possible, and welcoming that audience back into its home base'. This was part of a push to widen participation by engaging people from marginalized communities with the theatre.

27. Anonymised copy of show report T10, 1987

BOV/3/4/186/1/3

Show reports like these are used by a company to record impressions and observations of audiences' responses, as well as notable technical or performance issues that commonly occur in live events. These are another way in which we can begin to understand how theatre-makers have talked about audiences over time. Here the report discusses the company's perception of how inmates at a local prison responded to the show: a 'very intelligent audience' who gave the cast 'our first standing ovation'.

28. Anonymised copy of show report T1, 1987

BOV/3/4/186/1/3

This report discusses a show that took place in a school hall, where the children were 'very attentive' and 'enjoyed [the] show very much'.

29. Anonymised copy of show report T3, 1987

BOV/3/4/186/1/3

This final report discusses a show that took place in the sports hall of a youth centre for an audience of a 'rough girls school', where audiences were 'very rowdy' but still 'interested in the show'.

30. Anonymised letter from a school teacher, 1987

KS/BOV/198703/AC1

An anonymised excerpt from a teacher at one of the local schools to which *Julius Caesar* had toured, thanking the organisers for giving their pupils the opportunity to see the play. For many of these girls, the writer says, this had been their first encounter with Shakespeare – and had left many of them eagerly looking forward to the next. Sometimes as historians we may not have letters from the audience themselves, so we need to rely on second-hand accounts like these of their behaviour and response.

31. Production photograph by Desmond Tripp, of *Julius Caesar*, 1987

BOV/3/4

32. Production photograph by Desmond Tripp, of *Julius Caesar*, 1987

BOV/3/4

33. Anonymised letter from a school pupil, 1987

KS/BOV/198703/AC2

An anonymised letter written in beautiful handwriting by a pupil at one of the schools to which *Julius Caesar* had toured. This is the only instance in the archive where one of the young audience members themselves has written in about *Julius Caesar* – in this case, probably prompted by the pupil's special status as a student guide and helper to the cast during their time at the school.

34. Review of *Julius Caesar* in *The Times*, dated 26 February 1987

BOV/3/4/186/1/3 (Box 299)

A newspaper review of the COMPANY 3 production written by Irving Wardle, the Drama Critic for *The Times*. Highlighting the difference between audiences' praise for the production and the value systems of a professional critic, this review criticizes the production for coupling its 'multi-ethnic casting with so many other divergent elements'. Wardle concludes by stating: 'As a show it is only fitfully impressive, but it is a hopeful sign of better things to come'.

Bottom Shelf: *The Caretaker* (1962 and 2017)

In 2017 Bristol Old Vic produced a brand new production of Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker* – nearly fifty years after it had first appeared on the stage at the Theatre Royal. The quotations are taken from audiences' responses to this recent production, which Kirsty Sedgman collected via a post-show questionnaire. The images however are taken from the Theatre Collection's archives, photographed during the initial 1962 production that was directed by David Phethean.

35. Production photograph by Desmond Tripp, of Daniel Moynihan (Mick), 1961

BOV/P/000180/1

36. Large-text quotation taken from audience response to post-show questionnaire, 2017

KS/BOV/QQQ/CT22

This quotation reads: 'I was absorbed throughout, loved everything about it from the stunning set to the casting of the characters... it's the first Pinter play that I've seen and his style completely appeals to me... I'm not academic but I just got it!!'

37. Production photograph by Desmond Tripp, of John Somers (Davies) and John Woodvine (Aston), 1961

BOV/P/000180/6

38. Large-text quotation taken from audience response to post-show questionnaire, 2017

KS/BOV/QQQ/CT361

This quotation reads: 'The actors did their absolute best orally, physically, kinetically [their movement]. But I simply hated the play. I had a feeling of being locked into my seat, into the presence of 3 people I disliked involved in a manipulative power play.'

39. Production photograph by Desmond Tripp, of John Somers (Davies), 1961

BOV/P/000180/3

40. Large-text quotation taken from audience response to post-show questionnaire, 2017

KS/BOV/QQQ/CT185

This quotation reads: 'I expect Pinter to draw out the discomfort and this production did just that. Excellent acting and amazing set, almost as if the set was another actor, it wove itself into every scene.'

41. Production photograph by Desmond Tripp, of the whole cast of *The Caretaker*, 1961

BOV/P/000180/7

42. Large-text quotation taken from audience response to post-show questionnaire, 2017

KS/BOV/QQQ/CT327

This quotation reads: 'Because it was embarrassing – I hated it. [...] I want to enjoy something uplifting. [...] I want a story line. I work with people who hoard and neglect themselves. I do not want to see this onstage.'

What does all this demonstrate? That there is no such thing as 'the audience' – only lots of individual audience members, all of whom come in to the theatre with their own expectations, have varying reactions in the moment, and take away with them very different kinds of memories when they leave. For some audiences, a 'strong play' and a discomforting experience is exactly what they want from the theatre – whereas for others, Bristol Old Vic has always been seen as a place to be entertained. What emerges, reading through these quotations, is how similar they are in tone - from the 1950s through to today.

CABINET 3: The Importance of Audience Support

In October 1948, Bristol Old Vic's first Director, Hugh Hunt, drafted an article to be published in the November issue of *Drama*. Here is what he wrote:

'I believe one of the best ways of informing and creating an intelligent audience and of giving it means to voice its opinion is the formation of playgoers' clubs, and it was with the object of forming the nucleus of a good audience at Bristol that we formed the Bristol Old Vic Theatre Club.'

He went on to say:

'The formation of our club took place after our first half-season at the Theatre Royal. The season had been moderately successful, but we had not found a regular audience able to distinguish between good and bad. We were a little doubtful about the response we should get to the somewhat bare skeleton proposition which we presented to the prospective members of our club at the inaugural meeting. We were not offering any concession in prices or privileges in booking - there were no social premises, no club bar in the theatre. Those who professed to be interested were simply being asked to form an association of their own with two objects: firstly, to pledge their support to the sort of policy we were trying to pursue, and secondly, to learn more about the theatre through lectures and discussions, so that they could become better theatregoers and derive greater enjoyment from their visits'.

That 'good audience' Hunt imagined was realised in the form of the Bristol Old Vic Theatre Club: an organization that is still in operation today, and which is now one of the longest-running audience-led organisations in the country providing support and encouragement to a professional theatre.

Reflecting on the astonishing initial local interest, Hunt writes:

‘Our fears lest we should fail to arouse interest were totally unfounded. The first meeting was held in the Theatre Royal on a hot Sunday night in July, 1946. The house was packed to capacity, the overflow from the theatre covered the stage, and there was barely room for the speakers - Mr. Burrell of the Old Vic, Mr. Cyril Wood, Regional Director of the Arts Council, and myself. Outside the theatre about two hundred people had to be turned away. The Club started with a membership of 1,400 and has retained it with little variation during the three years of its existence’.

BOV/8/1/2/2: Draft of an essay included within a letter which Hunt sent to Eric Dehn, Chair of the Club, on 8/10/1948.

Membership of the Bristol Old Vic Theatre Club initially cost a subscription fee of five shillings per year.

While like many such organisations the Theatre Club’s numbers have gradually reduced over the years - due to the usual financial or time constraints, along with a rise in alternative entertainment options - they still operate as an important resource for the theatre: running regular ‘In Conversations’ with theatre-makers about the productions, engaging in fundraising activities, and generally acting as a pool of willing volunteers whenever the theatre needs them. In the words of Emma Stenning (Executive Director 2010-2018), since 1946 the Club has been the ‘guardian angels’ of Bristol Old Vic.

43. & 44. Photographs by Photo Prints Ltd/Bristol Evening Post, of a First Night party for *Trelawny* at the Bristol Old Vic, 12 January 1972

BOV/P/761

In his column for the November 1950 Club newsletter, the theatre's then Director Allan Davies states that the aim of the Club has always been threefold. Firstly, 'to ensure that the greatest possible measure of organised support shall be given to the Theatre; secondly that our lectures shall be of the highest possible standard; thirdly that we shall hold a certain number of social events in order to bring members and the Company closer together'. BOV/8/1/2/2

With this last aim in mind, one of the functions of the Bristol Old Vic Theatre Club was to arrange, cater, and run social gatherings between the Company and its members. First night parties especially were very popular, initially taking place in the Theatre Royal auditorium itself. These two photographs were taken during a special first night party of *Trelawny of the 'Wells'* by George Rowell directed by the theatre's director Val May, and featuring well-known names like Hayley Mills and Timothy West. This particular evening included a reception for the Mayor of Bristol.

45. Bristol Old Vic Theatre Club Newsletter dated Dec 1949

BOV/8/1/2/2

Allan Davies' column reflects on the seven-month period of closure the theatre had just undergone, after a fire assessment forced the organisation to halt performances for necessary renovations. Spiralling expenses caused the Arts Council to take stock, and for a worrying period of time it was considered that the theatre may never reopen. Happily, Davies says here that on Monday 23rd January 1950 'the curtain will rise on the first production in a season of six new plays', to begin with *As You Like It*: 'one of the happiest and most optimistic of Shakespeare's comedies'. He concludes by thanking the Club for their invaluable support, suggesting that the continued presence of a steadfast body of audience members helped to pull the theatre through.

46. Large-text quotation taken from Davies' newsletter column

This quotation reads: 'My thanks go, most warmly, to every single one of you for the tremendously loyal way in which you have held the Club together during these past months of doubt and difficulty. By doing so you have kept the Bristol Old Vic spirit alive in Bristol. More than that, your faith in our theatre has shown the world that the Old Vic's Western baby is growing into a strong and healthy child, which could *by no means* be killed off.'

47. Photograph by the Evening Post, of the Bristol Old Vic Theatre Club

This photograph shows Bristol Old Vic Theatre Club members cleaning the theatre during Val May's directorship 1962–1975.

The photograph includes (far left, third from front) Rodney West, Theatre Manager, and far right (second from front) John Symonds the Assistant Manager, together with members of the Bristol Old Vic Theatre Club, during their cleaning of the theatre during Val May's directorship (1962-1975).

ON STAIRWELL

48. Photographs of architects' impressions of proposed alterations to the Theatre Royal, Bristol by Peter Moro & Partners, 1972

BOV/P/774

49. Magazine extract, 1972

RS/041/0167

This image, by D. Long is an artists' coloured version of the proposed façade by architects Peter Moro & Partners.

These last three images show us one vision of how the theatre could potentially look, had the planned redevelopment gone ahead. For a research project that is as much about theatre-makers' hopes for their audience, as it is about audiences' hopes for their theatre, these images offer a fascinating window into the 1970s vision of what a theatre like this could become: vibrant, bustling, with all seats filled by an engaged and excited audience.

Biography

Dr Kirsty Sedgman is a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow (2016-2020) and Lecturer in Theatre at the University of Bristol. Her specialism is theatre audience research.

Rather than studying performances, plays, or performers themselves, she is interested instead in the people on the other side of the stage. Researching audiences means asking a different kind of question. How do various people experience and find value in the things they see? How are pleasures and disappointments made meaningful within their lives? How do people reach for words to describe experiences we so often think of as indescribable? And what can all this tell us about the role of the arts in society, as well as the relationship between cultural institutions, power, identity, and place?

With articles in journals including *Contemporary Theatre Review*, *Cultural Trends*, and *Theatre Research International*, Dr Sedgman is also the author of two monographs: *Locating the Audience: How People Found Value in National Theatre Wales* (2016, Intellect) and *The Reasonable Audience: Theatre Etiquette, Behaviour Policing, and the Live Performance Experience* (2018, Palgrave). Her work argues that by paying close attention to language use, listening to how people explain and justify their judgments of theatre, we can begin to understand the ways we make sense of (and negotiate our place within) our shared social world.

If you are interested in being interviewed about Bristol Old Vic as part of this project, and would like to find out more about what this research would involve, then Dr Sedgman would love to hear from you:

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Special thanks to the Bristol Old Vic Theatre Club, especially Fran Havard and Ruth Watson, and to Kay Gerrett for the loan of photograph item number 47.

Thank you also to Bristol Old Vic for facilitating access to their contemporary audiences, allowing me to capture reactions to their performances today.

Cover photograph:

The auditorium taken from the stage of Bristol Old Vic, 1970.

Photographer: Derek Balmer. BOV/P/757/8

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