

Meet Theatre@41, a small theatre with big ambitions

by Rebecca Mendoza | 12 November 2021 | Community News

Nestled behind a church on Monkgate is Theatre@41, a completely volunteer-run creative hub and performing arts centre. Jorvik Radio spoke with the charity's Chair, Alan Park, about what makes this theatre unique and why people call it 'York's best kept secret.'

Can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

I moved to York about 10 years ago. I come from a theatre background and have always enjoyed small intimate theatres and I got frustrated that there wasn't anything like that in York. A couple of years ago I came across Theatre@41 and was amazed that I'd never heard of it before. Everyone kept calling it 'York's best kept secret'. I joined the board to help bring more visibility to the theatre and help it become a home for interesting, intimate, small pieces of art.

What type of performances can people see at Theatre@41?

We are really proud of the fact that we offer a large variety of shows. We run theatre productions, musicals, plays and one-act shows with musicians and comedians. We work hard to balance local groups with national groups and performers to provide a good variety.



Performers on the Theatre@41 stage. Photo: Theatre@41

What makes this theatre different from other venues?

I think there is an artistic need for theatre in small spaces. Lots of people think that theatre can only be experienced in large venues. For me personally, that can be a distancing artistic experience. Theatre@41 isn't meant to compete with larger local theatres but offer an alternative artistic experience with small scale intimate theatre and performances.

We also provide a space for people to see something completely new. By new, I mean that it has literally just been created. There are people creating really interesting work for small audiences and York didn't have anywhere where they could go. Some of the shows we put on are designed specifically for small audiences. They would not have been able to come to York had we not been able to give them a home. It's important to me that people can feel connected to what is going on and I think you can get that much better from theatre in a smaller space.

Are the performers all locals?

We've had national tours, critically acclaimed shows and great comedians all come into the theatre this past season. But we've still had local theatre groups perform because we are in York and we want to give local groups a home. We don't want to lose our connection with that.

We also have regular users of the building—York Stage, Pick Me Up Theatre and Once Seen Theatre Company. All of them are local to York and specialise in something different, offering the city and residents unique perspectives.



The entrance to the theatre at 41 Monkgate in York. Photo: Theatre@41

There are a lot of locals who have never heard of Theatre@41. Where is it and how long has it been around?

We are tucked away behind a big church on Monkgate. People walk past our front door and don't even know we are there. We've invested a lot of time and energy as well as put up big signs so people can find us.

In 2000, the venue was purchased from the church and founded as a youth theatre by John Cooper. It remained a youth theatre for many years. After John retired (and has since passed away) it was run by the charity board. At this time, the theatre was being hired out to groups that wanted to put on shows. A few years ago we started to change how we operated and began actively reaching out to groups to put on their performances in our space.

What opportunities are there for people who want to perform but are just starting out?

There can be a lot of barriers to making theatre and we want to remove as many of those barriers as possible. We don't want to be a place that forces people to put down big deposits if they aren't able to.

We want to make sure we are open and accessible to people who are just getting started. We try hard to be flexible and work with people who have good ideas and give them their first opportunity to share their art. We want to be a theatre that is central to the York community and to do that we know we have to help local artists. If you have an idea, let's talk and make it work.



Actors from Just Some Theatre performing in The Killer Question in Autumn 2021. Photo: Theatre@41

Can you tell us more about the transition into what is now Theatre@41?

When I came onto the board in 2018, I wanted to help the theatre build an audience. We rebranded as Theatre@41 in 2019 and started to reach out to small scale touring companies asking if they wanted to perform here and we booked them. We've also invested in a box office and tech for the theatre. What was previously sort of a shell where people could go and perform is now a ready to go venue where touring productions, comedians, musicians and more can arrive and put on a good show.

I became chair in 2020 with the vision of building a programme different from what was already on offer in York. We have just programmed our first season and it has gone incredibly well. There have been loads of different shows and we are about to launch our 2022 Spring programme.

Every industry was affected by the pandemic in some way. What was that experience like for Theatre@41?

When you are running a building, you feel like you are chasing your tail. There is always something that needs doing that sidetracks you. What the pandemic enabled us to do was take a step back and think of what we really wanted to do and what sort of building we wanted to be.

We also realized early in the pandemic that if we wanted to pay the bills and keep existing we would have to change tact and not just wait for people to find us. So we started to actively programme and get performances booked before we reopened.

We were allowed to open in May 2021, but nobody had any shows ready to go because they hadn't been able to meet or rehearse. So we contacted groups outside of York that we had relationships with and who we knew would want to put on a show later in the year. It allowed us a chance to get some bookings and it also gave time for the smaller local groups to get to a place where they were ready to book with us as well.

Since you've reopened, have you noticed any trends in terms of the types of people that come to the performances?

We reckon that 90% of the people that have walked through the door so far since our reopening have never been in the building or have never even heard of us before. Our mailing list has gone from double figures to over a thousand subscribers. I feel that people are finally learning about us.

One thing that is really interesting is that so far we haven't been able to identify an obvious trend in who is coming to the performances. It's not just students, or people of any one age. I think it's because we've put on a varied programme. The demographic of people coming into the building seems to change with every show. For us, it's fantastic to have new people coming into the building.



Alan Park joined the board in 2018 and became Chair in 2020. Photo: Theatre@41

The charity has an impressive list of honorary patrons. How did they get involved?

Before the pandemic we made a conscious effort to reach out to people who we thought had a connection with the venue and with theatre. It wasn't a case of let's just find people. All our patrons had a connection to York and the theatre.

David Bradley grew up in York and was involved in youth theatre groups. He actually knows the building really well and was enthusiastic about York having this community type theatre. Rosie Jones came on board because we have a connection with Once Seen Theatre Company which is run for and by adults with physical and/or learning disabilities. She was interested in their work and what they were doing. Stephen Dolginoff premiered his musical in the building and Felicity Cooper is the daughter of our founder John Cooper. We have several more patrons with different backgrounds. They all offer support and are there to guide us and help us as we need it.

What options are available for people wanting to get involved with the Theatre@41?

We have a newsletter and are on social media. We are also run entirely by volunteers, many of which live near the theatre. Someone can volunteer as an usher, bar staff, or maybe even on an ad hoc basis helping paint a room for example. They can also just knock on the door to say hi and look around.

In a few final sentences, why should people come to Theatre@41? What is your pitch to the world?

You'll see a piece of art that you've probably not seen before. It will be affordable. It will be accessible. And because we're a charity, every penny you spend will go back into the building and into making art for York.

Theatre@41 is located at 41 Monkgate, York, YO31 7PB. You can find more information on their [website](#) and can email general queries to info@41monkgate.co.uk. They are also on [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).

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