

**PRESS RELEASE  
THURSDAY 23 JULY 2020**

**PHOTOGRAPHER HELEN MURRAY RELEASES NEW PHOTOGRAPHY  
SERIES OUR EMPTY THEATRES**

- **Pictures from 22 empty theatres**
- **Over 100 quotes from across the UK theatre industry**
- **See the exhibition [here](#)**

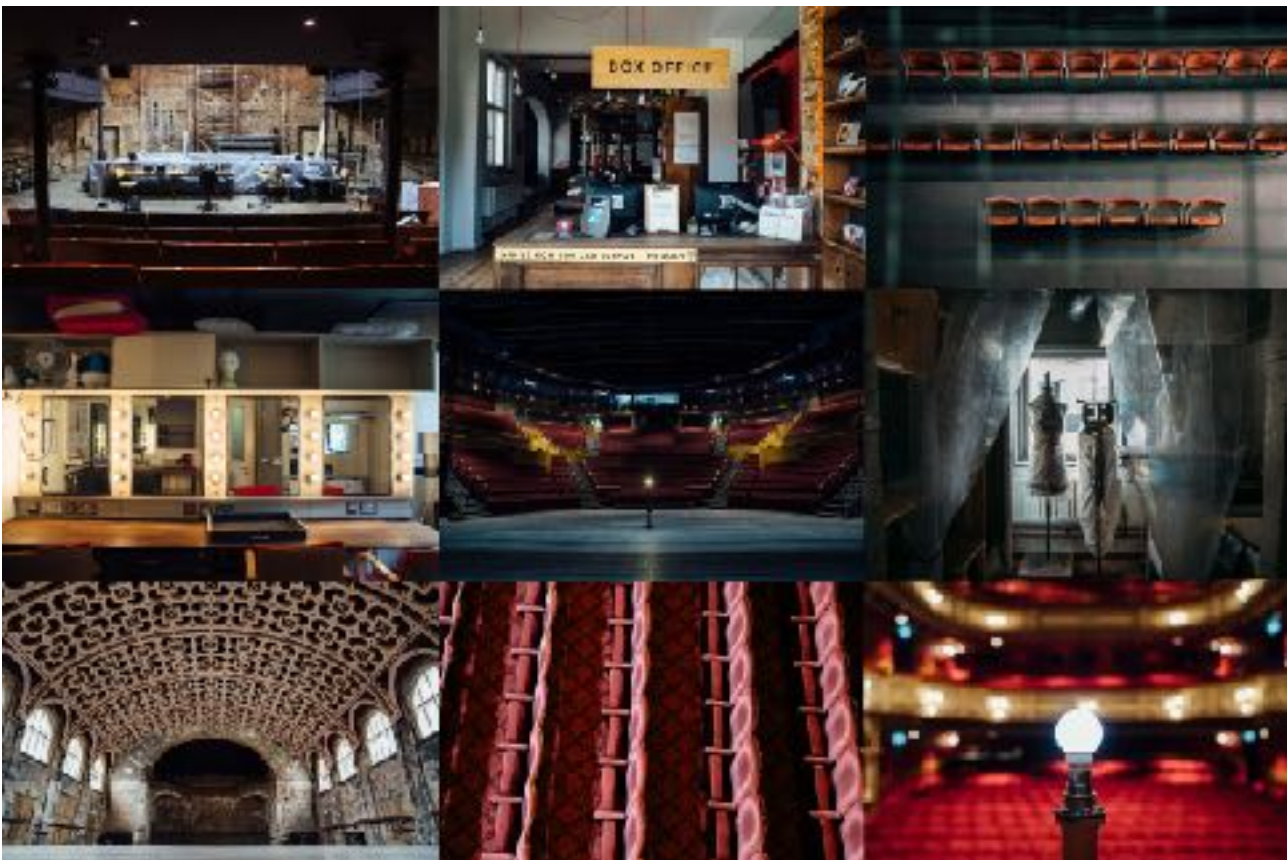


Photo: Top row left to right - The Almeida, Bush Theatre, Liverpool Everyman  
Middle row left to right - Royal Court, Leeds Playhouse, Young Vic  
Bottom row left to right - Battersea Arts Centre, The Criterion, Lyric Hammersmith

Photographer Helen Murray releases *Our Empty Theatres*, a photography story featuring 22 empty theatres and quotes from over 100 members of the UK's theatre community responding to Murray's photos which were all taken during lockdown\*.

Murray's photography series took her to theatres in Leeds, Liverpool, London and Manchester. As part of the project Murray contacted those working in theatre from wig makers to designers, to writers to front of house staff asking them for their response to our empty theatres.

Commenting on the series photographer Helen Murray says;

*“Over the course of lockdown I set myself a challenge to create a project that responded to it but that also told a photographic story of its own. I kept coming back to our empty theatres – these spaces that were now without life, without people and without stories.*

*I visited and captured a total of 22 theatre spaces in London, Leeds, Manchester and Liverpool. Shooting this series has been sobering. Going back to into these spaces that I know so well and being met with total silence. No background noise, no chitter chatter, no infectious laughs bellowing out of a rehearsal room, just complete silence. The stark opposite of what they should be. In the forefront of my mind throughout shooting was what are these buildings are without all the glorious, wonderful, different kinds of people that inhabit them, from the army of freelancers to the permanent staff, to the ushers, box office, bookshop, stage door, café & bar staff, volunteers, community & audience members?*

*I wanted to contact these people to ask them ‘what do our empty theatres mean to you?’*

*As the theatre sector continues to face uncertainty I hope the series serves as a reminder of why we must fight to fill these buildings with the people that make them thrive and not forget those who have been underrepresented in the past.*

*My photos are a love letter to not just the theatres themselves but to the people, artists and communities who give these buildings life.*

*I invite you to share what #OurEmptyTheatres means to you.”*

Gloria Akpoke, a young company member at Manchester Royal Exchange said;

*“To me empty theatres are bodies without a heart beat. Empty theatres are places where magic has been taken from our mundane world. It means a place that once shared laughter, sadness, love and every emotion through story telling has now been silenced. An empty Theatre is like creating a microphone and not letting anyone use it to sing. An empty theatre means we starve ourselves of stories that bring us comfort, magic, wisdom and unity. An empty theatre is everything it was never created to be.”*

Writer James Graham said of the series;

*“These disquieting images of quiet theatres are vital in reminding us of what was the longest ever period of closure, creating the most serious existential threat, to one of the oldest human activities we have. What I feel most when I see these heart-stopping images isn’t sadness, strangely. What I feel overwhelmingly is hope. These spaces are waiting for us to return...”*

The full series is available now on Murray’s website <https://www.helenmurrayphotos.com/galleries/oureemptytheatres>

## **Ends:**

## **Notes to editors**

\*All shoots were carried out within Govt lockdown guidelines.

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Press gallery to download images - [https://www.dropbox.com/sh/n0r4bo3bpftksj6/AAA-I2A-Jjy2k\\_nal0R5T3aX9a?dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/sh/n0r4bo3bpftksj6/AAA-I2A-Jjy2k_nal0R5T3aX9a?dl=0)

Social media hashtag #OurEmptyTheatres

## **Biography**

Helen Murray is a theatre photographer originally from Derry, Northern Ireland. She’s shot over 250 shows in London and across the UK. Helen was chosen to receive The Theatre and Technology

Award's Best Production Photography Award in 2017. During lockdown she has also released her portrait series 'Widening The Lens' in support of The Act For Change Project which can be viewed here - <https://www.helenmurrayphotos.com/galleries/widening-the-lens>

### **Theatres include**

The Albany  
Almeida Theatre  
The Criterion  
Battersea Arts Centre  
Bush Theatre  
Donmar Warehouse  
Gate Theatre  
Hampstead Theatre  
Kiln Theatre  
Leeds Playhouse  
Liverpool Everyman Theatre  
Lyric Hammersmith Theatre  
The Royal Exchange  
Roundhouse  
Royal Court Theatre  
Shakespeare's Globe  
Soho Theatre  
Theatre 503  
Theatre Royal Stratford East  
Unicorn Theatre  
Yard Theatre  
Young Vic

### **A selection of quotes from the series.**

*"As a designer, theatre buildings become part of the creative team. Collaborators. We discover their strengths and their weaknesses, how best to harness their potential, try to show them in their best light. They must miss the daily massage of thousands of footsteps, the subtle drone of brains whirring and the collective warmth of an audience's breath. I think perhaps they feel as bereft of us as we do of them."* Lily Arnold, Designer

*"Empty theatres to me mean anticipation. Those brief moments where the space might belong to anyone. It could be everyone's - it's the audience's, the actor's, the designer's, the usher's. And in that anticipation those theatres belong to all of us. I'm waiting for that feeling again."* Rachel Bagshaw, Director & Artistic Associate, Unicorn Theatre

*"My first proper theatre experience was seeing 'East is East'. It was a revelation and the first time I felt represented in a story I could truly connect with. When I saw Complicite's 'The Street of Crocodiles' it made my heart burst. Brave, inventive, original theatre. I long to experience that again soon."* Shaheen Baig, Casting Director

*There have always been stories, there will always be stories. Plague, war and pestilence will not stop them. And there are stories yet to be told. This is a time to reflect, recalibrate and reorganise. When we return we must give a voice to those that have been ignored and shut out for too long. To tell stories is to be human; we need to reflect the full spectrum of humanity."* Paul Chahidi, Actor

*"Silence"* Nicola Chang, Composer & Sound Designer

*"It's majesty and humility of an empty space, that yields such promise for collaborative artistry and communication with an expectant audience. It is the love of this endeavour and the connection between people - those who work on a project, in the building, or come to bear witness to it, that*

*keeps me longing for all our theatre spaces and rehearsal rooms, regardless of scale, to reopen their doors and restart the facilitation of collective thought, breath and response, day after day, and night after night.*" Nicole Charles, Director

*"The only space that takes a genuine chance on a newbie."* Rachel De-Lahay, Writer

*"Empty theatres to me are like empty chocolate boxes. Gorgeous but with all the joy gone. I want them back."* Rhiannon Handy, Front of House Staff, Royal Court

*"An empty space where the communal vibration of our voices rise no more."* - Hazel Holder, Voice & Dialect Coach

*"How we try to live well and know what living is, whilst enduring this dystopia; calling for hope so that these empty spaces can be full of life again and we will know what living truly is."* Martin Fox-Roberts, BSL Performance Interpreter and Drag Queen - Maria Hurtz

*"Breaks your heart to see these spaces that usually are a hubbub of connection and community so vacant and empty. Makes me realise the power of performance to put a room full of strangers - With different faiths, beliefs, ethnicities, politics all into one room - to laugh and sob together - feels like magic. Hopefully now seeing it so empty, we can start to imagine what it would be like so filled, and how can we fill these spaces in the most inclusive way we could imagine."*  
Kane Husbands, Artistic Director, The PappyShow

*"Not all theatres and venues are closed, work continues. But for those that are closed, empty theatres are like two voices on my shoulder - one ask insistently 'when will we open?', the other whispers 'stop, pause, reset - let the emptiness be the change we want to see". We can refill with a newness never before seen but imagined by many of decades - where equity comes first in our structures and ways of working. The doors can open to those who have been standing outside for too long. We need them. I hope we let everyone in."* Stella Kanu, Executive Director, LIFT

*"There aren't many things more lonely than a canvas without paint. So too is a theatre without people."* Malachi Kirby, Actor

*"The theatre seems empty yet filled with memories, their echos haunt. Condensing the emotions and energies therein from all the crew, staff, performers and audiences of the past. Getting ready to embrace these yet again soon."* Aya Nakamura, Theatre Maker & Puppeteer

*"The stillness breathes a thousand words"* Rajha Shakiry, Set Designer

*"I miss the worlds and opportunities theatre brings. So many different backgrounds, creatives and opportunity. I wouldn't be who I am without it."* Tia Shury, Wigs, Hair & Makeup Designer

*"To me, our empty theatres means there's a lack of opportunity to be represented, for our audiences to see the beautiful make up of our world through stories, for kids, like my younger brother, to see and feel there is possibility for them too...."* Gurjeet Singh, Actor

*"Right now I feel haunted by these pictures, a ghost light has become ghostly. But I'm trying to be excited too, at the promise of the conversations we've had in the last few months, and the certainty of a future."* Jack Thorne, Playwright

*"A theatre is never totally empty. There might be a ghost, or a cat, maybe a lizard coming to have a look. There is also on stage the imprint of past performances. Look carefully, you'll see them. Listen more carefully, you might hear the audience, laughing, gasping-attentive. And then, hovering, tentative, the play now in the imagination of a writer, words waiting in the wings. Watch: that empty theatre is a geological slice of time: past and future overlap. Only the present seems empty."*  
Timberlake Wertenbaker, Playwright

*“Empty theatres mean to me, all the people theatre has ever excluded. All the seats I paid for and couldn't sit in, because my disability meant I couldn't reach them. All the seats I didn't even strive for, because I didn't feel welcome. The emptiness caused by the absence of women, of black faces, of working class voices. The bums of non-Londoners stranded on Megabuses and delayed trains. Theatre is about collaboration and communities: people gathering to tell stories around the campfire in the dark. We are nothing without each other, and no number of Zooms or live streams can replace the magic created when people occupy space together. So the sight of empty theatres fills me with profound isolation and fear. But let's make sure that when we fill them up again - and we will - that there is space for everyone. Else they will be forever half-empty, no matter how many tickets are sold.”* Naomi Westerman, Playwright