

A message from David Byrne

23/09/2024

Fellow Playwrights,

First, sorry it's taken me so long to write.

I took up the Artistic Director job at the Royal Court now nine months ago. Since, like all leaders running national institutions, I've been focused on finding solutions to a set of seemingly impossible challenges. One day, likely years from now, I'm sure I'll write about this remarkable period which has tested me like no other, but not today. Today, I want to talk about you.

The outlook for playwrights around the country is bleak. In private conversations with writers, while solutions seem far from easy, the challenges are clear to articulate.

The emotional contract that once underpinned the relationship between new writing theatres and playwrights is coming undone. Few new playwrights truly believe that sending a play cold to a theatre really is a viable route to a career anymore – and nothing has replaced it. The drawbridge is up. The open routes that once filled stages with new talent feel blocked.

Trust between artists and institutions sits at an all-time low. We're not just speaking a different language but – worse – often not speaking at all, during a time of heightened risk of censorship when dialogue should be essential.

All the while, seemingly endless rejection closes the doors on even the most basic of opportunities. It just doesn't add up anymore. Not just that the money isn't enough (it's not), but the time and energy it takes even to try is running out.

Isolation is everywhere. Many playwrights are confined to their bedrooms, their desk often

their beds – the same place they eat, sleep and dream. Their main professional network exists online – which, at its worst excess, creates a culture of self-censorship rather than encouraging artistic adventure. Playwrights, who should be bold and brave, are increasingly nervous of making art that isn't instantly appealing to the loudest voices.

These are big challenges. But they're also why I wanted this job.

I interviewed to become the Artistic Director of the Royal Court with the ambition of bringing together a team who'd spend the next decade working to fundamentally transform the culture of playwriting in this country.

During the past nine months the foundational work has begun. I've met with and listened to writers to understand the problems; and met with theatres and organisations around the country who support writers to ensure we best complement their offers. I've worked to assemble a team who get the challenges also

– and, in the case of our new Associate Playwrights, a team who have lived them first hand.

Today I'm writing to you for the first time, as the real work towards that mission begins.

The whole team here at the Royal Court is working flat out make it happen, but we're going to need your help. **It's time for the Royal Court Theatre to enter the group chat.**

1.

Introducing The Writers' Card

To respond to these crises in playwriting, today we are opening membership of the English Stage Company for the first time since censorship ended in England over half a century ago.

Membership of the Royal Court / English Stage Company was originally a means of

protecting playwrights from the Lord Chamberlain's censorship laws – allowing them to create their bravest work – and allowing audiences to see it without risk of prosecution. It represented a real promise of artistic freedom and solidarity.

Today, our ambition is that this, The Writers' Card, will act as a lightning rod, bringing together the playwriting community to respond to this new set of challenges.

For Writers' Card members, the Royal Court will open up new opportunities, resources and even our whole building. We'll bring together every partner we can find, every penny we can get our hands on – all focused towards supporting, encouraging and creating work made in the cast of our legacy for audiences of the future.

Not a scheme or a programme, this is an experiment towards a new way of us working. The Writers' Card is an offer, an invitation and a promise – all designed to put the Royal

Court at the service of writers.

While free to join for everybody, membership of The Writers' Card is dedicated towards those writers who share the often-challenging artistic values that have always sat at the heart of the Royal Court's mission.

Perhaps more than ever, we need an emboldened artistic community which embraces the right to fail and supports fellow playwrights even in the face of failure. We need playwrights to be able to come together in good faith, in a community that contains dissonant and conflicting views, makes space for forgiveness, and builds an appetite for work which genuinely pushes ahead of public taste.

These ideals can feel dangerous. Hard to embrace, inevitably complicated, they are often difficult to defend and easy to assail – sometimes asking us to protect those who sit in direct opposition to our own beliefs.

But every generation must fight to hold on to these values and ideals. It's our time now, and this community can be the vanguard.

2.

So, what will The Writers' Card give me?

For artists who want to build community around this promise, we're going to provide resources and opportunities to bring us together all towards supporting this work being written.

This activity falls broadly under two headings.

The first focus is the creative act of writing itself. The putting of pen to paper, fingers to keys. From today onwards, every weekday, we're inviting you to make the Royal Court your writers' room. With the library now open, we're putting in extra plug sockets, changing the playlists and extending our opening hours.

We're offering a playwrights-only secret bar menu beginning with coffee, tea and soft drinks for just £1, removing any guilt of stretching out a single diet coke for four hours (I have personally had sleepless nights of putting various independent cafes out of business doing just this). You'll be able to print your script for free – because nobody has a printer in their home anymore. We're even offering to hold your mobile in a lock bag at box office to help you unplug and focus. A service I'm sorely tempted to use myself.

There's more. A monthly Playwright Canteen will bring writers together, to mingle with each other and the Royal Court team, have lunch and make big plans. And for those playwrights who can't afford to come and write with us during the day, we're opening up our paid writers' support – making half our paid writing weeks each year available via lottery for the first time.

Naturally, the second is a focus on the craft, career and community of playwriting. Practical resources which were previously available to

just a handful of writers every year will be accessible to all Writers' Card members. These will include attending workshops, joining us for free post-show drinks, accessing one-to-one surgeries, live podcast recordings, and hearing directly from inspiring writers. Throughout the year, we'll also host private discussions and debates on the biggest issues facing writers today, where meaningful dialogue and honest disagreement are cherished.

It's too much to list every detail here, and I'd encourage you to have a look through our website and take a look as to what's on offer.

This is not going to solve all the problems we have, and we're bound to fall short and ourselves need forgiveness. But it's a first step. And if you think there's something we've not thought of which would help, we'll listen as we grow this offer year-on-year.

What we've got is some ideas and a lot of energy. What we're missing is you.

So sign up to The Writers' Card, let's work to make it possible together.

From me but on behalf of the whole team here, with hope and with anticipation,

David.

3.

P.S. A note on Open Submissions

Alongside all these new ideas, we're working to strengthen the old ones – recommitting to the foundational promises of the Royal Court, starting with Open Submissions.

Since the pandemic, institutions around the world have closed their open submissions for new scripts. And we know that many of the opportunities that survive can feel like opaque processes with long waiting times for little reward.

Today we're one of the few theatres left where anyone, year-round, can send an unsolicited script and know it will be read and considered seriously for production. It's a radical promise and an electric possibility. It's how, in 1980, Andrea Dunbar's first play, written on the pages of a school exercise book in green biro, made its way to our stages. It's a central part of our DNA. (Can anything be actually *central* to DNA? It's likely time to admit that I don't know how DNA works.)

Anyway! We want the promise Open Submissions to be at the heart of everything we do. Reading plays voraciously and transparently, with clear communication with writers about where their work sits and how it has been considered. So today we're also announcing two further experiments.

First, we're investing further in this route to our stages, reducing the turnaround time to get feedback, a response or an expression of potential interest. From 2025, it's our aim that response times will be just three months. And, if we think we're going to fall short on this

timeline, we'll communicate that clearly with you. We're setting the ambition.

And second, we want to make a greater commitment to the most exciting plays we read, even – perhaps especially – the near-misses for our programme. We're going to host a new Open Submissions festival where Royal Court audiences and theatres from across the country can share in the promise of the best new scripts we're reading each year – with our artistic teams championing them to be picked up for production.

Together, re-establishing that the best way to get your work onto the stage of the Royal Court – or on other stages across the country – is to simply Send Us Your Script.

4.

P.P.S. For Fellow Theatres and New Writing Companies

Many of you will have had conversations with me about some of these ideas as I've travelled around the country this past nine months – generously sharing your own insights, ideas and ambitions.

As I've written, for us this is the beginning of an experimental year – trying and testing different ways of working, seeing what floats and what sinks.

I'd love the future of The Writers' Card to be national and international. For us to partner and link up more with those working and championing writers everywhere. If you'd like to discuss the insights we receive from this pilot year, and/or discuss being a partner with us in future, we'd love to begin that conversation.

Drop an email through to literary@royalcourttheatre.com to begin the conversation.