

**STAN'S CAFE'S OPEN SPACE  
WEDNESDAY 8TH NOVEMBER 2017**

**SESSION REPORT:**

**The future of East Meets West – what do you want it to look like?**

**Convener:** Gareth Nicholls (from Little Earthquake)

**Group:** Those who contributed to the conversation include: Laura Killeen; Tina Hoffman; Roisin Caffrey; Vita Fox; Amy Victoria Taylor; Catherine Butler; Alison Gagen; Craig Stephens; Jenny Smith; Thomas Wildish; Vimal Korpai; plus others (sorry if we didn't get a chance to introduce ourselves!)

**Background:** East Meets West is a network that aims to reduce barriers and encourage collaboration between and within the East and West Midlands' independent theatre-making communities. After an inaugural two-day symposium in July 2017, we're exploring what the future of East Meets West could be.

**Conversation:** We had a big sprawling conversation. Below are some of the key points:

It was reaffirmed that something like East Meets West is needed within the region, especially since MidPoint [a network for theatre-makers in the West Midlands that ran for about 8 years] seems to have fizzled out. Alison spoke about it being important to know about and acknowledge the history of Midpoint so we can build on its legacy.

The opportunity to use the network to increase efficiency across the region came up quite a lot:

- A collaborative contact database of who is working in the region and the skills they can offer – need to look into the data protection implications of this;
- An opportunity for lots of companies to meet new collaborators all at the same time (Roisin mentioned that James Yarker from Stan's Cafe had been invited to observe auditions at Leicester Curve with a view to meeting new potential collaborators).
- The East Meets West Facebook Group is starting to be considered a valuable asset, but obviously can't be accessed by people not on Facebook. What is lacking is something like the MidPoint user-generated newsletter that anyone can sign up to. An East Meets West version of this is currently being planned.

There was a lot of talk about how venues might benefit from a more "joined-up" network:

- Encouraging venues to collectively lift 'exclusion zones' using the idea that "artists travel, but audiences don't". Roisin suggested that venues may be informed by scale when deciding if this was appropriate (for example, it might be fine for independent studio work, but riskier for main house work). Alison stated that venues should be capturing the postcode data evidence to make sound decisions about this.
- The idea of setting up some kind of Midlands touring consortium / network similar to the House model was raised. Can we use learning from other touring consortiums? What works? What remains a challenge?
- What about a scratch night touring circuit that allows artists to test their work at different venues over a short period of time. Could be a good way to get work in front of different artists and programmers (if not members of the public). Also, could provide a level of match-funding from those schemes that offer a small fee. Something to speak to the In Good Company / Pilot Nights / Tetrad teams about?

### Artist and Programmer relations:

Opportunities for artists to meet with programmers seems to be a key thing people want. Gareth spoke about the need to do this in a way that is constructive and useful for everyone, and also the need to protect programmers from being bombarded. Cat spoke about an event she went to called 'Circus Incubator' which achieved this successfully: there were 20 programmers and only 20 artists. Each programmer was paired with an artist and they spent a quality hour with one another. The rules were there was to be no selling of work, and no assumption that any work was to be programmed off the back of a conversation. It was nothing more than a chat. At the end of the hour each couple fed back to the rest of the group and introduced their partner. Cat – I might ask you more about this if that's OK?

### Thoughts on geography:

- The Midlands boundaries are pretty arbitrary. Is East Meets West just a good branding-thing or can it actually deliver on its promise to reduce barriers between the East and West Midlands?
- Surprising how different the areas can be even in the same region – different infrastructures, different levels of audience engagement, different amounts of artist support.
- There was an interesting discussion around a perceived psychological barrier about travelling from West to East and vice versa. How do we overcome this? Signpost travel times / distances? Indication of cost? Car pooling? There was an acknowledgement that it is much easier if you drive as public transport across the two regions isn't great.
- The point was raised about there being no Easties at the Open Space event despite the invitation being offered. East Meets West is only five months old – is this something that will improve with time as more levels of communication open up?
- To overcome the psychological barrier, do people need to understand clearly what is in it for them? Why should they engage with what is happening in the other region if it doesn't have an impact on their career?
- Is it about habit? When people are more used to crossing the border, the psychological barrier might dissipate. Therefore we need more opportunities like symposiums, open spaces and workshops to encourage this habit.
- What is "local"? Who are our "local" collaborators? If using an ITC agreement and employing somebody from the opposite region, you'll still need to pay touring allowance etc. This led to a conversation about encouraging a region-wide robust policy of employing from a more local talent pool.

### A network to support audience as well as artist development:

- How does East Meets West help audience development was a question raised but not fully explored. Maybe there were some conversations in the Low Audience Numbers conversation that could tie in here? We reiterated the observation made at the Symposium that "artists travel, audiences don't" and that maybe this is a good guiding principle. The network is about helping artists to access the audiences across the region by touring more rather than expecting an audience member from Wolverhampton to travel to Derby Theatre.

### The ambition of East Meets West:

A nice conversation about how it is great to have ambitious plans for East Meets West, but it is also important to remember how valuable the little things are that can often go undervalued: having the opportunity to just meet other people from a different region who are facing the same challenges; the value in opportunities to see the human side to those who we perceive as having power, and realising that "we're all on the same team".

Some other things that came up:

- More opportunities to collaborate, play and get to know one another without the pressure of having to produce a piece of work would be valuable (play dates – similar to Stan's Cafe's gift sessions but with different people leading each time). An opportunity to diversify the people, skills and influences that artists are exposed to?
- This network can be for other people as well as artists: programmers, general managers, producers, admin interns etc.
- Could there be a "What's On" hub for all theatre happening across the East & West Midlands?
- What joint heritage do both regions share? Industrial and de-industrialisation. Both have rural areas. Can these be used to unite the two regions? Commissions on these themes?

So, lots to think about! Thanks to everyone who contributed. And thanks to Stan's Cafe for making it all happen.