



## Chris Elwell

Artistic director, Half Moon Young Peoples Theatre

Thanks to a £100,000 grant from the Hamlyn Foundation, the Half Moon Young People's Theatre is organising an unique collaboration between established playwrights and young people.

### Tell us a little about your career before Half Moon

Immediately before Half Moon I spent four years as a lecturer at the Central School of Speech and Drama, where alongside Sally Mackey, I created what was then a cutting-edge new degree in Drama Education. I also established the MA in Theatre Education and delivered PGCE in Secondary Drama. The BA course, which was about arts education delivery and theatre making for young people, drew on my experiences of the previous seven years as Head of Community and Schools for English National Ballet, and as the deputy in the Education Department at the RSC. I suppose my passion for learning comes from my early career as a special needs and drama teacher, which included a year in Bootle, Merseyside and a longer stint in London where I taught a rather feisty 11-year-old Ronnie O'Sullivan.

### What made you tackle the job at Half Moon?

I think it would be fair to say that when I first arrived at Half Moon, it was in a bit of mess financially and creatively – making four people redundant on day three, for example, is one hell of a learning experience – but what a great opportunity and personal challenge to take on. Since then we have opened up as a new venue (ten years ago Half Moon's theatre wasn't open to the public) and more recently purchased the building from the local authority – the biggest cheque I have ever written! We have developed new ideas and challenging work which genuinely connects with the communities we sit among, including our pioneering work for early years, unique integrated theatre in English and British Sign Language and work for teenage audiences.

### What prompted the idea for Exchange for Change?

It's about providing a space to exchange ideas, and to generate change in the work being produced in the sector. The best theatre for young people emerges from collaboration and a space for artists across different disciplines to explore, exchange ideas and create new work. This collaborative approach can respond to the ever-changing world of young

people. Our work across the age spectrum, from the very young right through to young adults, has a track record of offering quality, challenging productions, working with emerging diverse artists, reflecting the broad communities of young people and their families that live and work around our home base – urban inner east London.

### Do you think there's not enough new writing coming on stream for young people's theatre?

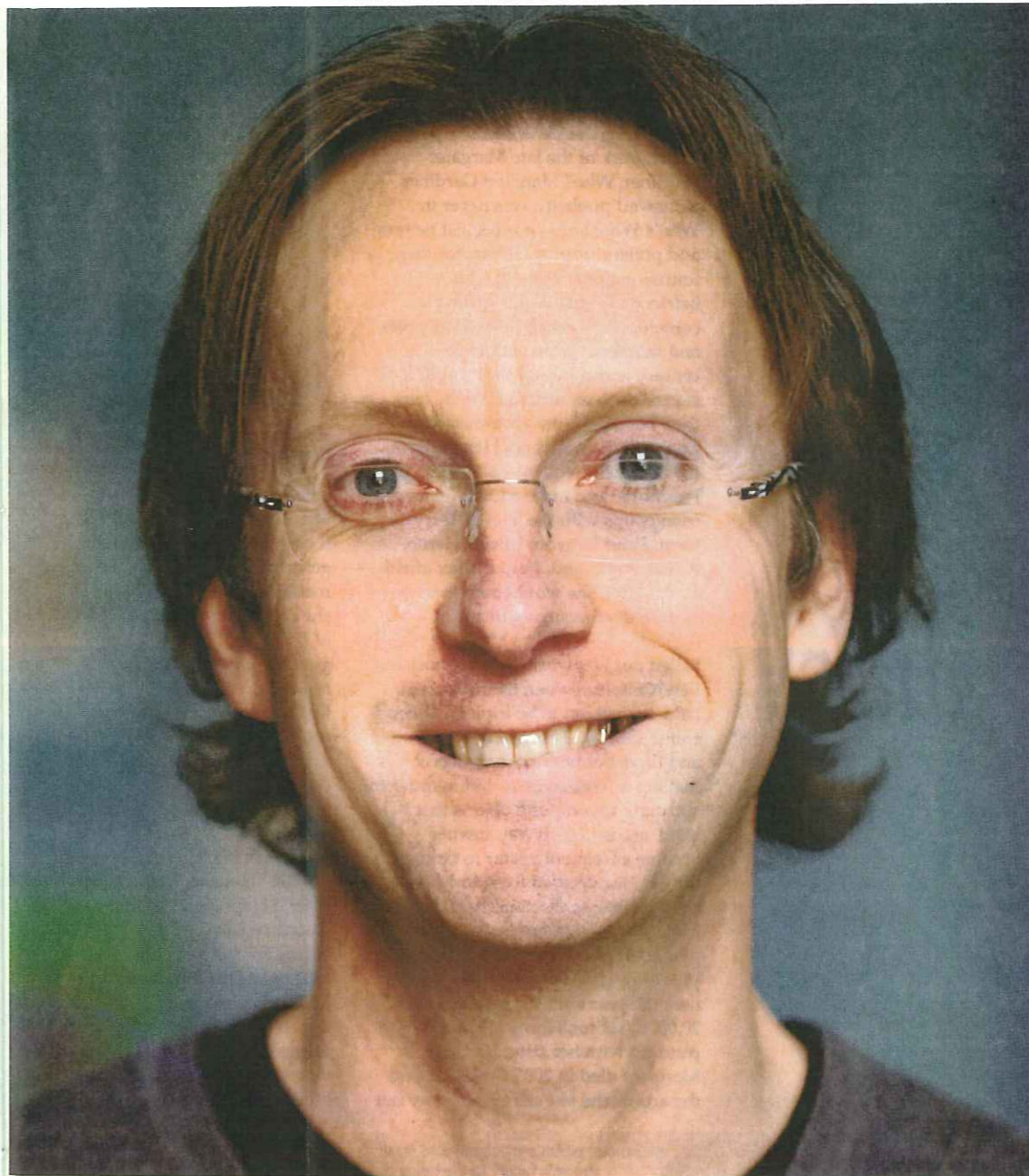
While there are small pockets of excellence, there is an over reliance on the familiar – the adaptation of popular books, fables and fairytales for the young, or plays about drugs, drink, abuse and so on for teenagers. What is important, is mining into real worlds, human stories, real relationships, where the ordinary becomes important, where gun crime or sexuality is explored because it is part of everyday life and not because it is a buzz issue to be explored. A teenage mum with a 3 year old was excited after seeing a recent play of ours for under 5s, simply because it was about her. Exchange for Change aims to promote diversity, create new challenging plays and develop emerging artists.

### You are also hoping to encourage established writers to write specifically for young audiences. Is this about getting people to take the sector more seriously?

Each year of the 3-year scheme will we see an established playwright participating who has not written for the target age range. This year it is Tanika Gupta (Meet The Mukherjees, White Boy, Sugar Mummies). Many excellent writers probably have never even thought about writing, for example, for under 5s, or simply haven't been asked. We collaborated with Paines Plough on a scheme, Fun Size, a couple of years ago where Mark Ravenhill, Abi Morgan and Dennis Kelly among others we given the task of writing for under 8s. I think they found it quite a challenge – mainly because a young audience is so honest. If it isn't working, they will tell you! Tanika's work is gutsy, bold and rooted in detailed research. By being inside our world, a writer like Tanika will play a big part in changing perceptions of the theatre for young people's sector.

### Who is the festival day aimed at?

The festival day is aimed at the broad theatre sector – makers and programmers. We are hoping that at least one of the pieces will be taken up as either a co-production or commissioned fully by partners in the sector. Most importantly, we



will also have the ninety 3 and 4 year olds in the audience with whom all the artists have been working. They are very important and we will be following up their experience the day after the festival by revisiting their nurseries when we will really find out if the work was any good!

### How will you disseminate the results?

Each performance will be followed by discussions about the processes involved, with the day culminating in a provocation session framed by guest hosts, exploring diversity, art-form development and how engagement changes practice. We are working with the Centre for Excellence in Training for Theatre at Central School of Speech and Drama (CSSD) who have provided funding to allow a video artist to document the development processes and the individual journey

of each artist. The resulting DVD will be also be used as a tool for vocational performing arts training and learning.

### What will success look like?

Three new pieces of theatre for under 5s developed into full productions being presented on national tours would be great. Nine enthused, enriched artists who want to work more in the young people's sector, acting as role models for future artists, would be fantastic. Ninety under 5s who recognise their role in the development of the work and have been moved, excited and challenged by their experiences, is most important.

The festival day is at Half Moon – [www.halfmoon.org.uk](http://www.halfmoon.org.uk) – on July 16th. Details from [exchangeforchange@halfmoon.org.uk](mailto:exchangeforchange@halfmoon.org.uk) or 020 7265 8138