

STROMNESS PLAYS PROJECT REPORT

SSP@50
SCOTTISH SOCIETY OF PLAYWRIGHTS



AN SSP@50 PROJECT WITH STROMNESS DRAMA CLUB
FEBRUARY-NOVEMBER 2024

BY RACHAEL MCGILL, PROJECT PRODUCER



PROJECT BACKGROUND

The project was one of ten SSP50 fellowships awarded by the Scottish Society of Playwrights in its 50th anniversary year to celebrate playwriting in Scotland. The fellowships were funded by Creative Scotland.

STROMNESS PLAYS was a collaboration between professional playwright Rachael McGill and Stromness Drama Club, an active amateur dramatics club founded in 1989. The inspiration for the competition was Rachael's fascination with the minutes of the Stromness Debating Society, which met for 6 decades, closing in 2012. Her grandfather was a founder member and her father one of the last secretaries. The society's minutes, now in the Orkney Archives, are a funny, fascinating snapshot of Stromness people's thoughts on issues since the 50s; everything from 'Old Stromness is not worth preserving' (1966), to 'the experiment of democracy has failed' (1995).



A playwriting competition was open to anyone with an Orkney connection. The challenge was to write a 5-25 minute play. It could have any style, theme, or setting but had to use one of the debate topics

as its title or a line of its dialogue. The plays were judged by Rachael McGill, Graham Garson (Convenor, Stromness Drama Club), Gerda Stevenson (actor and director) and Pam Beasant (playwright).

The competition had 22 entries. First, second and third prize winners received cash prizes while two others were 'highly commended'. These five plays plus five other entries were chosen to be presented as staged readings by actors and directors from the community at a showcase event on 1st November

The Stromness Debating Society ran from 1953 to 2012 and tackled topics such as *Modern man never says what he means*, *It's better to be mad than bad*, and *The popular press is a menace*.

Debating society inspires playwriting contest

Town's debating society topics set to be revived in dramatic fashion

By Tom Groat

STROMNESSES thespians are set to bring back the inventive intellectual wrangling of the town's debating society, all thanks to a national playwright award.

The Scottish Society of Playwrights SSP@50 Fellowship Awards were announced last year to mark the organisation's 50th anniversary, with the intention of creating "innovative, inspiring, boundary-stretching projects."

One of these awards will see professional playwright Rachael McGill partner with the Stromness Drama Club to dramatised the wide ranging and inventive discussions held by the debating society.

Launching under the title Stromness Plays, there will be a competition for aspiring playwrights, playwriting workshops and a showcase event in the town hall this November.

The inspiration for the competition came from Rachael's fascination with the minutes of the Stromness Debating Society, which met for six decades before closing in 2012.

Rachael's grandad was a founder member and her dad was one of the last secretaries of the debating society.

"They're a funny, fascinating snapshot of Stromness people's thoughts on issues since the 50s; everything from 'Old Stromness is not worth preserving' (1966), to 'The experiment of democracy has failed' (1995)," said Rachael, who has been exploring the minutes which are now held in the Orkney Archive.

The competition, open to anyone with an Orkney connection, sets the challenge to write



Rachael McGill.

play, of between five and 25 minutes.

Any style, theme or setting is welcome, but the work must use one of the debate topics as its title or as a line of its dialogue.

A topic list is available at www.rachaelmcgill.com/stromnessplays and in the Stromness and Kirkwall libraries.

There will be up to three prizes of £300. These winners, and other selected writers, will have their play performed by Stromness Drama Club in a staged reading at Stromness Town Hall on November 1. There will be opportunities for those interested in acting or directing too.

Competition entry is free and is done through a form on the website, where you can also find the guidance and rules. The deadline to submit your play is May 31.

Rachael added: "The debate themes are just for fun — we're flexible about what people write and how they write it. It's not compulsory to come to a workshop either — surprise us!"

Competition judges will be announced in April and the winners at the end of June.

Rachael is also set to run two workshops to introduce playwriting techniques, while Issy Grieve will run one for young people.

Ms Grieve, a director with Birsay Drama Group, member of the Orkney Voices writing group and author of pantomimes and short plays, said: "When you let your imagination take over your pencil, lots of fabulous ideas take shape. Turning those ideas into a play, even a short one, is great fun for young writers."

These workshops will be free; you sign up on the website or via email. If you want to attend but can't make the dates, get in touch to book an online session at a convenient time.

Jane Partridge of the Stromness Drama Club committee said: "Stromness Drama Club is always searching for interesting new scripts.

"We're delighted to be working in partnership with Rachael and the Scottish Playwrights Society to give new writers this opportunity to see their work performed."

Anyone who wants more information should visit www.rachaelmcgill.com/stromnessplays, or email stromnessplays@umast.com or stromnessplays@umast.com

proxy votes... begin arriving this week. The seat is vacant following the retirement of James Stockan, who stepped down this month. Orkney Islands Council's chief executive, Oliver Reid, is returning officer for the election. He said: "The work of new po and for postal s on Wed The s new pr March gency p to 5pm



The vote counting will begin in the close of the poll, with a result expected Friday morning, March 29.

Want to advertise Call Julie on 018

The Orcadian, 28 February



STROMNESS DRAMA CLUB PRESENTS



STROMNESS PLAYS

A festival of new theatre writing inspired by the topics of the Stromness Debating Society

'There's no place like home' (December 1953)
'Archaeology will be Orkney's ruin' (November 2009)
'There is no teenage problem' (March 1962)

COMPETITION OPEN TO ALL

Write a 5-25 minute play: any style, theme, or setting - just use one of the debate topics as your title or a line of your dialogue! Debate topics list on the website and in the libraries.

3 x £300 prizes. No entry fee.

Selected writers will have their play staged as a reading.

Under/over-18s judged separately, ages taken into account. **Deadline 31 May.**

SHOWCASE EVENT

1 November, Stromness Town Hall
Opportunities for directing and acting too!

'Feminism has gone too far' (November 1985)
'The internet is a poisoned chalice' (February 2008)

Produced by Rachael McGill, supported by a Scottish Society of Playwrights SSP@50 Fellowship

orkneycommunities.co.uk/STROMNESSDRAMA CLUB/
rachaelmcgill.com/stromnessplays stromnessplays@gmail.com



Competition publicity



STROMNESS DRAMA CLUB PRESENTS

STROMNESS PLAYS

STROMNESS DEBATING SOCIETY DEBATE THEMES 1953-2012

- 09/11/1953: The popular press is a menace.
- 14/12/1953: There's no place like home.
- 11/10/1954: At the present time the USA is as great a menace to world peace as Russia.
- 13/12/1954: The use of scientific power has brought the world more harm than good.
- 12/12/1955: Heredity has a greater effect on character than environment.
- 13/02/1956: In this country we are too fond of sport.
- 12/11/1956: Gambling is a major evil in this country.
- 13/03/1957: The present rate of Isles depopulation need not be deplored.
- 13/10/1957: The idea of progress is a delusion.
- 23/02/1959: World Government is the only hope for the world.
- 27/11/1959: This country is a democracy in theory but not in fact.
- 22/02/1960: The National Health Service is in an unhealthy state.
- 28/03/1960: World communism is inevitable.
- 26/09/1960: Stromness wants nothing.
- 28/11/1960: Christopher Columbus went too far.
- 23/01/1961: We get the culture we deserve.
- 22/01/1962: Britain should adopt planned immigration.
- 26/03/1962: There is no teenage problem.
- 24/09/1962: This country is strangled by tradition.
- 22/10/1962: This country should enter the space race.
- 16/03/1964: The CND march led nowhere.
- 26/10/1964: The United Nations should be wound up as a failure.
- 22/02/1965: Mankind has outgrown the need for God.
- 18/10/1965: This country is too lenient towards its criminals.
- 28/02/1966: Old Stromness is not worth preserving.
- 27/11/1967: There is a case for belief in spiritualism.
- 26/02/1968: Future business development in Stromness will be the crumbs from the tables of Kirkwall tycoons.
- 28/10/1968: Modern man never says what he means.
- 24/11/1969: Orkney's future depends on farming the sea, not the land.
- 23/02/1970: There is no political choice.
- 25/01/1971: This should be the last Burns supper.
- 24/09/1973: The profit motive and social justice are incompatible.
- 28/01/1974: War is necessary.
- 27/10/1975: Social reform can only be achieved through violence.
- 25/10/1976: In the event of separation Orkney should align itself with Shetland and Westminster.
- 26/02/1979: A picture is worth ten thousand words.
- 25/02/1980: The St Magnus Festival is a sham.
- 29/09/1980: Communism cannot wear a human face.
- 03/11/1980: Education is wasted on the young.
- 28/09/1981: The silicon chip is the Devil's invention.
- 26/10/1981: The resources of Orkney are in competent hands.
- 30/11/1981: Love should be the only marriage bond.
- 25/01/1982: It is better to be mad than bad.
- 22/02/1982: The bomb is our safeguard.
- 01/11/1982: No economic theory is worth its social cost.
- 29/11/1982: The present Pope is our best hope.
- 19/12/1983: Technologically-induced unemployment is a blessing in disguise.
- 27/02/1984: The Orkney farmer is the greatest threat to the Orcadian environment.
- 25/02/1985: Feminism has gone too far.
- 25/11/1985: The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.

orkneycommunities.co.uk/STROMNESSDRAMA CLUB/

rachaelmcgill.com/stromnessplays

Some of the debating society themes

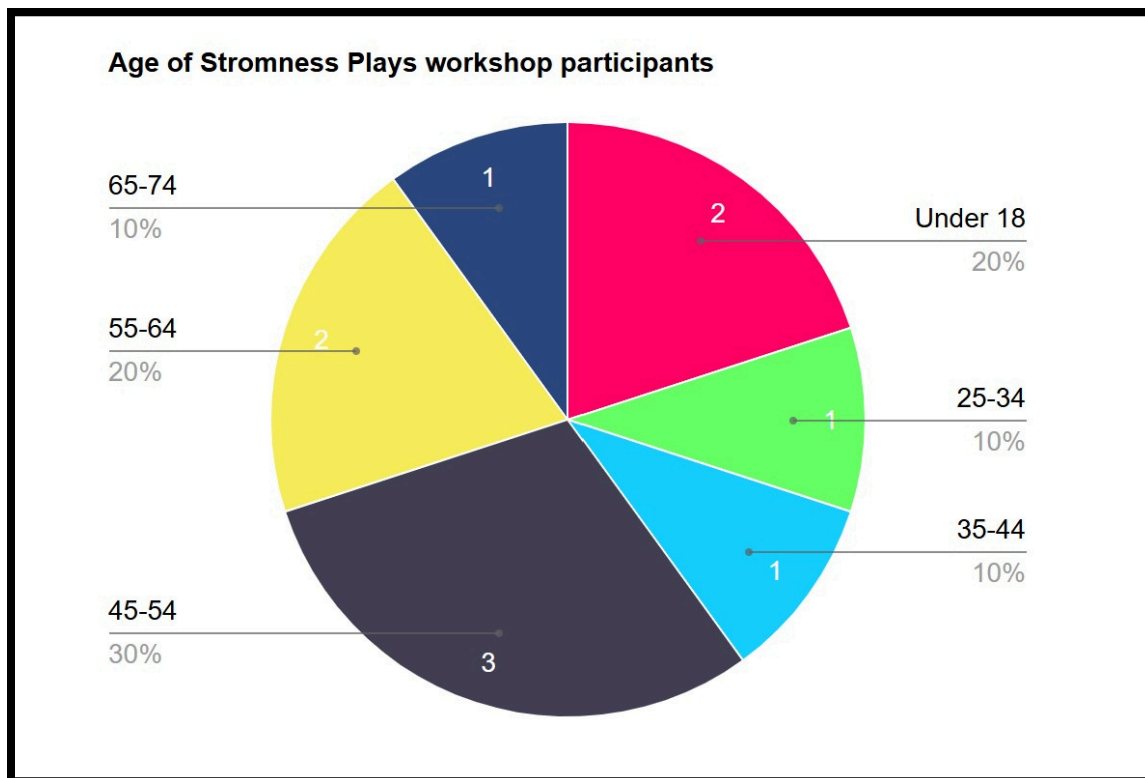
THE WORKSHOPS

Two playwriting workshops, one in Stromness and one in Kirkwall, were run by Rachael McGill in March 24. A young people's playwriting workshop was run in Stromness by Izzy Grieve in March 24. A directing workshop was run by Gerda Stevenson in Stromness as part of the project's prize-giving event in June 24.

Ten people attended the writing workshops. The prize-giving event and directing workshop was attended by 40 people



The workshop participants



male 4, female 6

Went on to enter competition – 3

Went on to direct for competition – 2

Workshop feedback from anonymous forms

- 'I found the whole workshop really useful and I feel more confident now to at least make a start with writing my first play. The whole process was really enjoyable.'
- 'I really enjoyed my two hours. I wasn't sure what to expect but I feel I've learned a lot, probably to cut the fluff out as I know I like to explain far more than I need to and enjoyed the stimulation of the other folk present.'

- 'Very helpful, friendly and accessible, I really felt like I learned something and feeding back with a group is something hard to come by and extremely useful and underrated.'
- 'The most interesting was the opportunity to work in a group of three to develop characters and events. Also the tips, especially about not telling backstory and about tuning in to each character's voice.'
- 'Really great to work in a group brainstorming characters and settings and then subverting them – it really got lots of stream of consciousness going and us ending up with a much better and more dramatic idea than we started with. Nice, informal and easy-going workshop.'
- 'Revealing, enjoyable, challenging and surprising.'
- 'I enjoyed the experience and found it satisfying.'
- 'Next time there could be an offer of follow-up workshops, e.g. to practise writing dialogue.'
- There were no negative comments.

THE COMPETITION ENTRIES AND JUDGING

There were a total of 22 entries from 17 playwrights, 12 female and 5 male.

Geographical location of entrants		Orkney connection	
Orkney (Stromness)	6	Born in and living in Orkney	7
Orkney (other) - 6	6	Living in Orkney	5
Nairn	1	Born in Orkney	1
Perth	1	Parent(s) born in Orkney	1
Dundee	1	Grandparent(s) born in Orkney	1
Glasgow	1	Previously lived in Orkney	1
Galashiels	1	Came to Orkney regularly as a child	1

The four judges ranked the scripts based on a mutually-agreed framework that assessed originality/creativity, structure/plot, characterisation and dialogue/language. They also gave

dramaturgical suggestions and indicated whether they thought the script was performable, or would be after some dramaturgical intervention. A lively discussion then followed! To best express the diversity of the scripts and their opinions, the judges decided on a first, second and third prize and two non-monetary awards of 'highly commended'. Five further plays were then selected to form part of the showcase evening.



The Orcadian, 13 June

THE SELECTED PLAYS AND WRITERS

- **Barney Clark, 'The Grass is always Greener on the Other Side'**

A surreal mini-drama of identity that the judges called 'pleasingly surreal, bold and original.'

Barney Clark is a Kirkwall-based teenage writer whose play 'The Grass is always Greener...' is his first work to be performed. This short play is a comic piece about identity and criminal intrigue (also, a penguin pretending to be a chicken). When he's not writing, Barney enjoys listening to and playing music and watching action films. He is inspired by authors such as George Orwell and Philip K Dick.

- **Eilidh Fisher, 'Home Cooking'**

A light comedy full of suppressed emotion that the judges said had 'nice dialogue, some good

lines and a good situation.'

Eilidh is an actor in her twenties. She grew up on the Orkney island of Stronsay, where her parents were doctors. She studied at Kirkwall Grammar School and at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in Los Angeles, and also lived in London. She has featured in the TV series *Call the Midwife*, *The English Game*, *The Power* and *Dope Girls*. Her film roles include *Consecration* in 2023 and *The Outrun* in 2024. This role had a special appeal to her as she had read and loved the book as a teenager. She lives in Glasgow, where she works as a pastry chef between acting jobs.

- **Áine King (first prize winner), 'Plan B'**

A tightly-plotted dystopian thriller about the treatment of criminals in a near-future world. The judges called it 'chilling, moving and memorable.'

Áine is a dramatist, director and designer. An Irish East-Ender, she studied at St Martin's School Of Art, Brighton and RADA. Áine was Associate Director for Otherplace Productions, Brighton from 2008 – 2013. She is now based in Orkney. She performed at the Orkney Storytelling Festival in 2019 and 2020. In 2022 she won the A Play, a Pie and a Pint David McLennan Award for her play *Burning Bright*, performed at Òran Mór in 2022 and the Traverse in 2023.

- **Fiona MacInnes (third prize winner), 'Gambling is a Major Evil in this Country'**

A daft comedy that takes a mundane theme and lets it spiral out of control into a nightmare for the characters. The judges called it 'A very entertaining piece, and the situation entirely believable.'

Fiona was born and lives in Stromness. She has short stories and poetry published in collections, has written a book of poetry, *To Step Among Wrack* (The Orkney Press) and a Novel, *Iss* (Stromness Books and Prints). She has written comedy for several years as well as political comment.

- **Morag MacInnes, 'The State of the Stromness Street'**

A darkly comic look at a future Stromness transformed into a theme park. The judges appreciated its real and fake Orcadian dialect and its 'memorable situation and characters'.

Like her sister Fiona, Morag was born in Stromness. After some years away from Orkney, she now lives not far from Stromness, in Quoyloo. She has been writing short stories, poetry, drama and reviews for many years now, often in collaboration or with community groups.

- **Eilidh McKenzie, 'Female Corpse'**

A clever dissection of feminist ideas in a theatrical setting. The judges said it was 'really well thought out, with a strong situation and theme.'

Eilidh is 24 years old and comes from Perth. She grew up listening to her granny, Maureen Thompson, reminiscing about her childhood on the Orkney Island of Hoy and telling stories of her own father: a diver who helped Ernest Cox salvage the German High Seas Fleet at Scapa Flow. Her granny's love for

Orkney was partly what inspired her to submit a short play to the competition, as well as her own desire to write a play that had been circulating in her brain for far too long. Since January of this year Eilidh has been writing for a young Scottish magazine called Binge Fringe, reviewing theatre at Adelaide and Prague Fringe, and being inspired by people's stories and their methods of storytelling. This month she's excited to start a new job with the Scottish Book Trust and, on the back of her Stromness Plays experience, begin writing the next story.

- **David McNeish (second prize winner), 'Two Pitchforks West of Stromness'**

Four Stromness vignettes depicting moments in different eras through a clever recurring motif. The judges called it 'a clever, entertaining idea with an excellent structure.'

David McNeish is a songwriter, playwright and poet recently relocated from Stromness to Glasgow. He co-founded the St Magnus Way, a long distance pilgrimage route in Orkney and recently launched his debut album of original songs, *Weathering*. His play *Thora* was performed professionally in the St Magnus Festival in 2023. His second play *The Boy Who Thought He Could Swim* was funded by Unlimited and An Tobar and Mull Theatre and performed there in May 2024. He currently has commissions with Eden Court Theatre, Push the Boat Out Poetry Festival and the National Theatre of Scotland.

- **Amelia Porter (highly commended), 'Your Parents Muck You Up'**

A family melodrama about buried secrets. The judges appreciated the 'snappy dialogue and gripping relationship between the two characters.'

Amelia is a 25-year-old aspiring writer currently living in Dundee. They recently graduated from Edinburgh University with an MSc in post-1900 Literature. They fell in love with the creative aspect of writing during their undergraduate degree in English Literature, when they studied playwriting. Amelia is still finding their place as a writer and whilst their work has predominantly been focused on 'real people' dramas, they enjoy experimenting with different forms; they are currently working on a science fiction novel. Amelia's dad is a lover of (Scottish) history and the outdoors and, as a result, they spent many summer holidays in Orkney, which they loved. Fun fact: their dad is also a biotechnologist who sent a piece of Orcadian rock into space!

- **Roger Simian (highly commended), 'Stromness Wants Nothing'**

A bittersweet comedy about family relationships and attitudes to home. The judges appreciated its control of 'emotion, family context and love' and its 'good dialogue and wit.'

Based in the Scottish Borders, Roger Simian is the son of a Stromness lass and one of the grandsons of long-time Orcadian editor, Gerald Meyer. His short plays have been performed throughout the Borders. His film collaborations with Sarahjane Swan, under the name AvantKinema, have screened around the world.

- **Barbara Stevenson, 'What Do We Do Now?'**

A deftly plotted farce that the judges called 'funny, involving and well worked out.'

In 2014, Barbara bought a cottage in Quoyloo, Orkney, moved there permanently in 2015 and soon after joined the Stromness Writing Group. She has had five books published with independent publishers, mainly historical fiction and fantasy. She's previously had short plays put on in the Tron Theatre in Glasgow and in 2023 won the Scottish Association of Writers' Helensburgh Shield for a one-act play.

THE PROJECT LAUNCH EVENT

The Orcadian, 20 June

Winning playwrights due to be announced

THE WINNERS of a Stromness playwriting competition will be revealed this Sunday, June 30.

An event at the Town Hall will begin with this announcement, and continue with a call for help to bring them to life on stage.

Stromness Drama Club previously asked folk to submit their short plays, inspired by topics covered by the Stromness Debating Society.

People will be able to sign up to direct or act in an event set for November 1, which will comprise staged readings of the winning plays and selected others.

The final element of

Sunday's event will be a directing workshop with Gerda Stevenson. All those interested in learning about directing, and how to approach it, are welcome to stay for this.

The event is open to anyone with an interest in drama — not just writing or just those that submitted competition entries.

Stromness Drama Club is looking forward to seeing a good crowd in attendance to congratulate the winners and get people signed up to take part in the November event.

Any queries can be directed to stromnessplays@gmail.com

Launch publicity

Stromness Drama Club and Stromness Plays present

Fancy yourself as a director?

Or an actor?

Want to find out about the winning plays?

Come along to the



Prizegiving ceremony

Sign up on the day to act or direct

Directing workshop with Gerda Stevenson (optional, all welcome)

Refreshments

4pm-6.30pm

Stromness Town Hall

www.rachaelmcgill.com/stromnessplays - stromnessplays@gmail.com

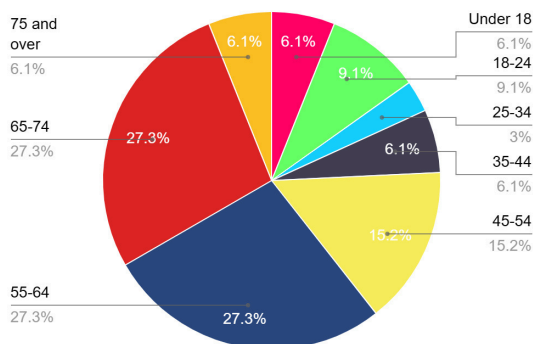
This event was suggested by the Stromness Drama Club, as a combined prize-giving ceremony and actor and director recruitment event. We also used it to gather people's ideas about theatre in Orkney.



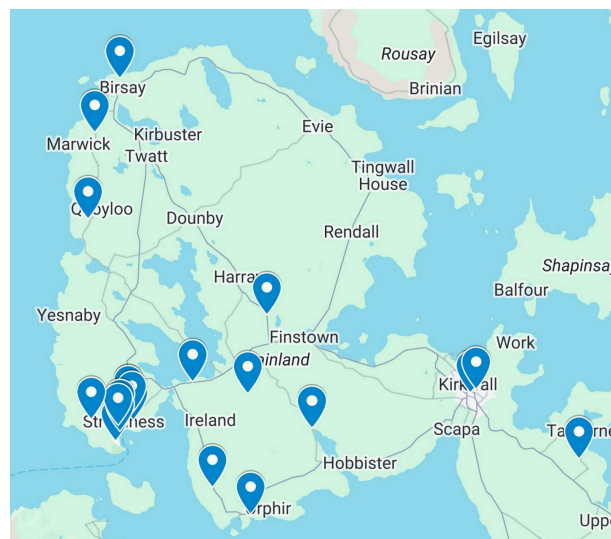
Some of the writers who entered hearing the results

Age of attendees

Age of launch event attendees

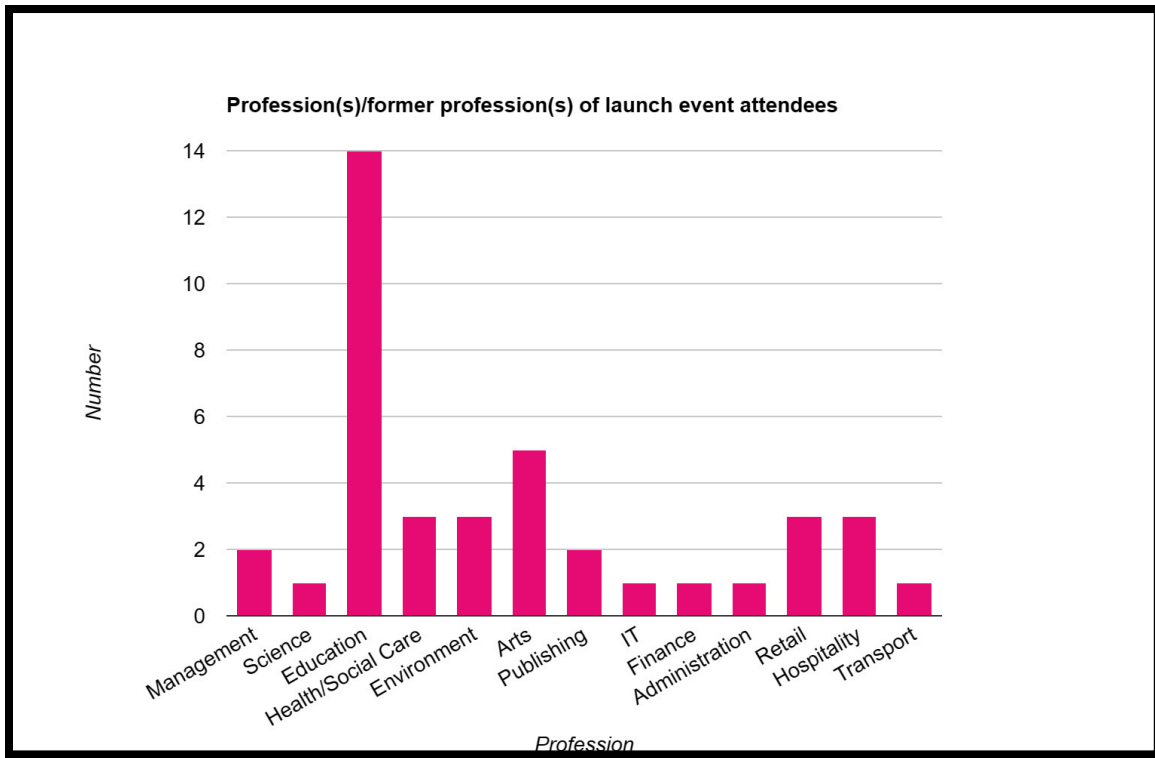


Postcode of attendees



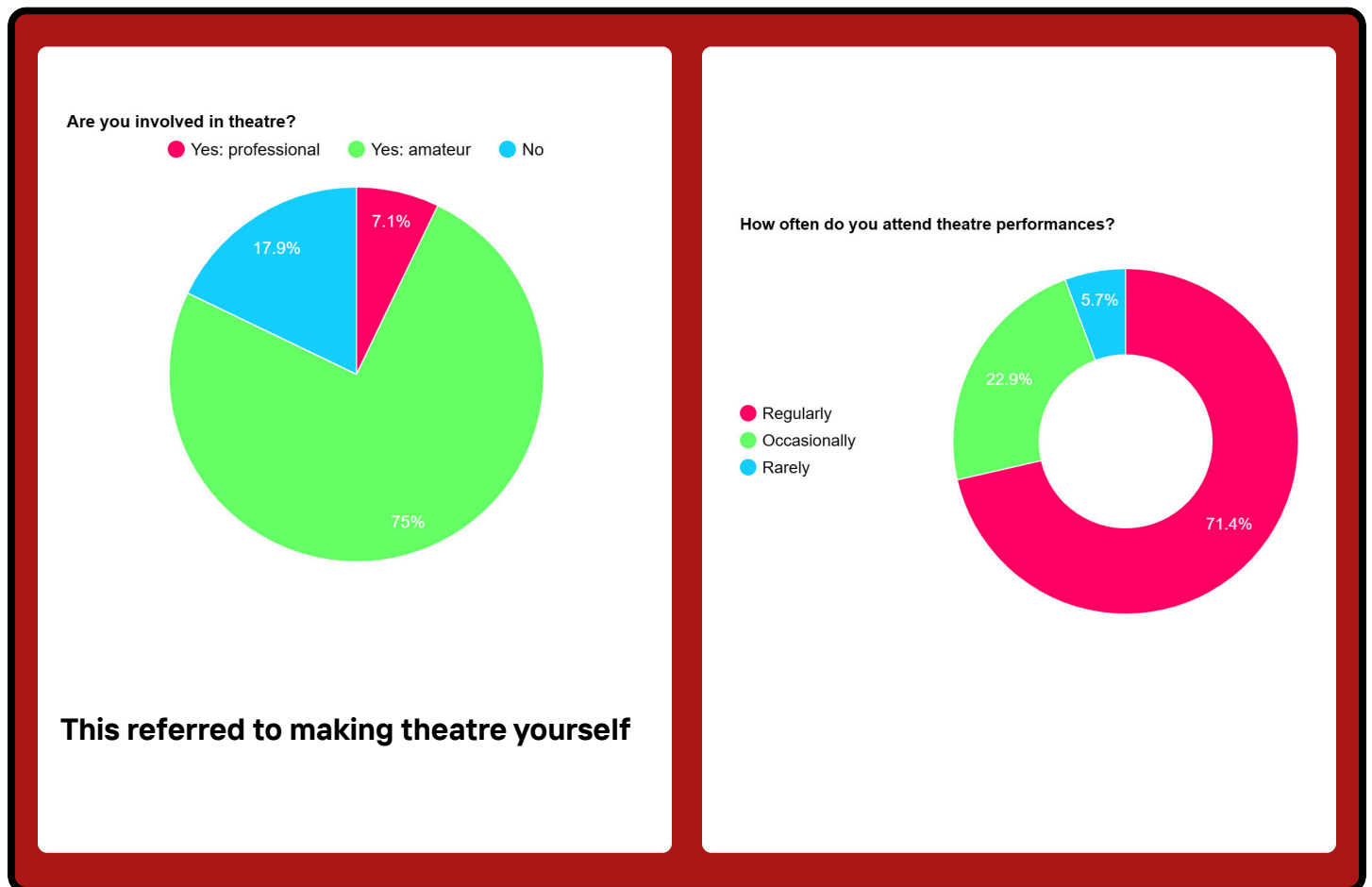
This sort of community activity attracts a middle-aged to older demographic: 76% of attendees were over 45 and 61% over 55. Although the competition was open to young people and one young writer and two young actors were involved in the project, the subject-matter meant it was not really aimed at them. There was also another Stromness Drama Club project for young people taking place at the same time.

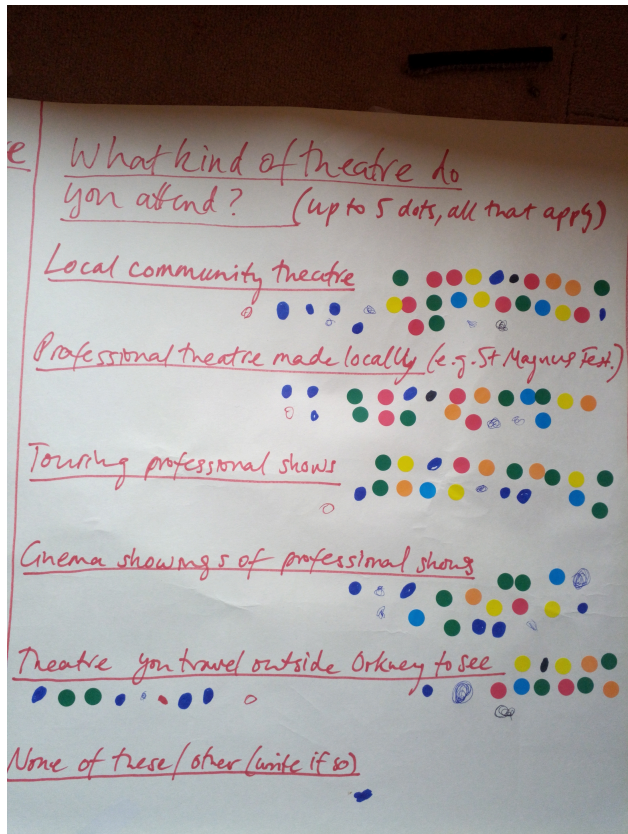
Unsurprisingly, most people were based in Stromness, but some people did travel from elsewhere on the Orkney mainland.



A large proportion of people involved in community drama or with an interest in theatre in Orkney are teachers or retired teachers.

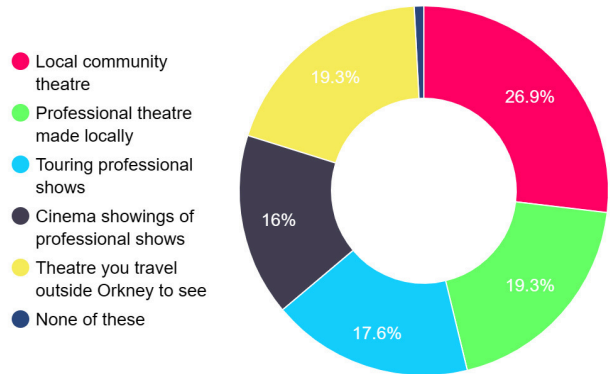
People were asked about their involvement in and attendance of theatre.





For types of theatre attended, people could select more than one option.

What kind of theatre do you attend?



Nearly everyone attended some sort of theatre, with the largest proportion being for local community theatre, unsurprisingly as that's what is most available in Orkney. A fairly large percentage of people (19.3%) leave Orkney to see theatre, suggesting that just because people live in a place with little professional theatre provision, doesn't mean they don't want to access it.

Launch attendees were also asked for their ideas about theatre in Orkney.



Suggestions included:

- Could we sustain a local rep company?'
- More interaction between local and incoming drama'
- Paid employment for local creatives
- Supporting youth theatre
- Opportunities for all ages
- Confidence-building
- Support from public bodies
- Encourage coming together to share ideas
- Showcase local talent at all levels
- Engage people
- Educate
- More opportunities for youth
- Cross-generational working
- Community engagement



Fiona MacInnes receives her prize from Graham Garson of Stromness Drama Club



An Orcadian journalist attended the launch event and interviewed participants.

THE FINAL SHOWCASE

Seven directors and 21 actors presented the ten plays as staged readings. The productions varied – some had actors off-book and moving around a set, others had actors seated, reading from scripts (and various expressions in between).



The showcase programme

New plays inspired by the topics of the Stromness Debating Society, 1953-2012

Gambling is a Major Evil in this Country (competition 3rd prize)

by Fiona MacInnes

Debate: 'Gambling is a major evil in this country', 12/11/1956, A. Crozier v. W.E. Knight, lost 11-17

Director: Vera Butler

Cast: Rena – Phyllis McLaughlin, Maggie – Vera Butler

What Do We Do Now?

By Barbara Stevenson

Debate: 'Feminism has gone too far', 25/02/1985, Capt. Bewley, E. Janson v. L. Winters, I. McLeod, lost 5-15

Director: Bobby Flett

Cast: Bethan – Cally Bevan, Caroline – Imogen Kerr, Catrin – Sally Bartkowiak, Gary – Erik Knight

The Grass is Always Greener on the Other Side of the Fence

By Barney Clark (age 13)

Debate: 'The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence', 25/11/1985 (minutes missing)

Director: Fiona MacInnes

Cast: Penguin – Gary Jones, Chicken – Sally Bartkowiak, Airport Official - Liam Stewart

Home Cooking

by Eilidh Fisher

Debate: 'There's no place like home', 14/12/1953, W.G Groundwater, E Flett v. G S Robertson, D. A. Eunson, won 13-3

Director: Tanne Shorter

Cast: Mhairi – Lorraine Giles, Leah – Barbara Scollay

Two Pitchforks West of Stromness (competition 2nd prize)

By David McNeish

Debate: 'The Idea of progress is a delusion', 13/10/1957, D.A. Eunson, A. Mackie v. E. Flett, W.E. Knight, lost 7-18

Director: Jane Partridge

Cast: Elizabeth/Louise – Marian Ashburn, George/Adam – John Butterfield, Billy/Tom – Bobby Flett, Mary/Maggie - Melanie Johansen

INTERVAL (20 minutes)

Female Corpse

By Eilidh McKenzie

Debate: 'Feminism has gone too far', 25/02/1985, Capt. Bewley, E. Janson v. L. Winters, I. McLeod, lost

5-15

Director: Graham Garson

Cast: Margaret – Cathy Lyner, Declan – Jethro Soutar

Your Parents Muck You Up (competition highly commended)

By Amelia Porter

Debate: 'Your parents muck you up', 08/12/2008, F.W. Heddle v. J McGill, lost 2-8

Director: Graham Garson

Cast: Father - Graham Garson, Daughter – Elsa McIntosh

Stromness Wants Nothing (competition highly commended)

By Roger Simian

Debate: 'Stromness wants nothing', 26/09/1960, G. Robertson, J. Robertson/E. Flett v. W..E. Knight, won 11-10

Director: Rachael McGill

Cast: Orlagh – Barbara Scollay, Frankie – Marcus Cordock

The State of the Stromness Street

By Morag MacInnes

Debate: 'Old Stromness is not worth preserving', 28/02/1966, D.D Johnstone, Mrs McCallum v. Mrs Skene, K. MacInnes, lost 8-19

Director: Fiona MacInnes

Cast: Karisma – Melanie Johansen, Hamish – Gerry Hodgson, Cheems – Liam Stewart, Visitor - Sally Bartkowiak

Plan B (competition 1st prize)

By Áine King

Debate: 'This country is too lenient towards its criminals', 18/10/1965, J. Flett, C. Steer/Mr McGinn v. Mr Smith, won 9-8

Director: Rachael McGill

Cast: Em – Barbara Scollay, Max – Jethro Soutar, Jonathan – Erik Knight

Stromness Plays Producer: Rachael McGill

Stromness Drama Club Organising Committee: Imogen Kerr, Jane Partridge, Barbara Scollay

Competition Judges: Pam Beasant, Graham Garson, Rachael McGill, Gerda Stevenson

Workshop Leaders: Izzy Grieve, Rachael McGill, Gerda Stevenson

Technical Manager: Mike Partridge **Stage Manager:** Colin Paice **Artwork:** Morag MacInnes

Front of House: Michael McLaughlin, Karen Thomson, Cary Welling, Carol Rae, Lorraine Giles

**Cally Bevan, Erik Knight, Imogen Kerr,
Sally Bartkowiak ('What Do We Do Now?')**

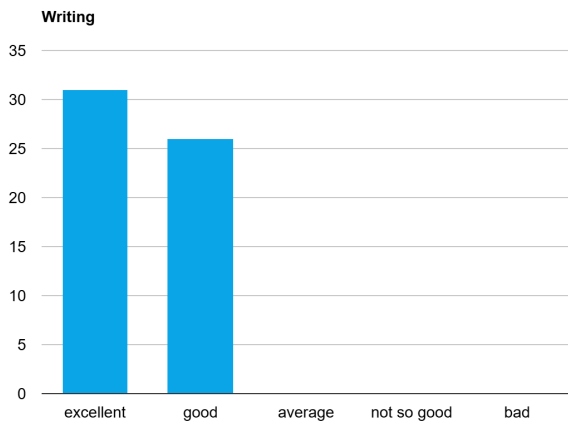


The curtain call

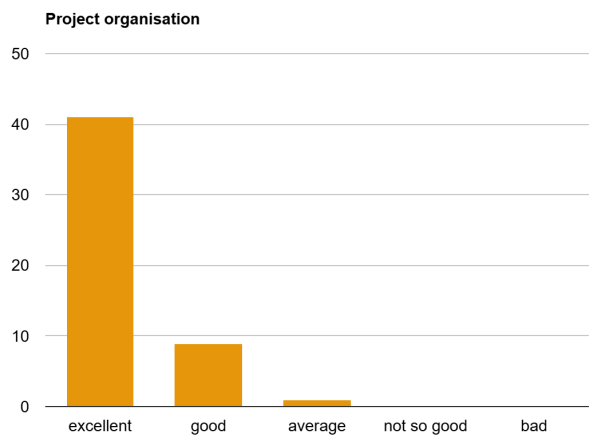
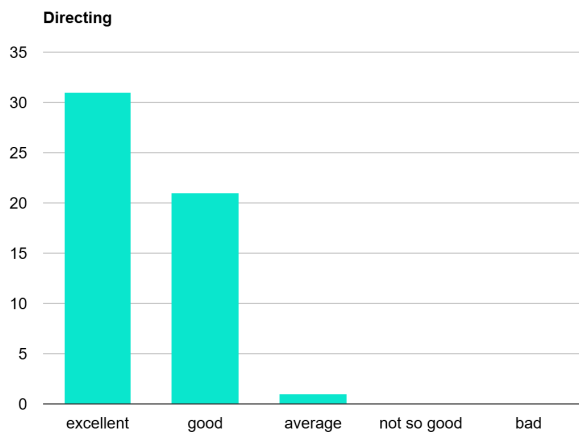
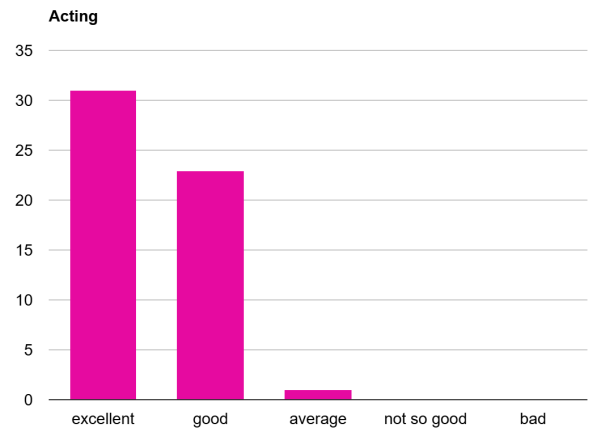


The showcase audience

Stromness Town hall was full, with an attendance of approximately 120 people. Of these, 55 filed in post-show feedback forms.

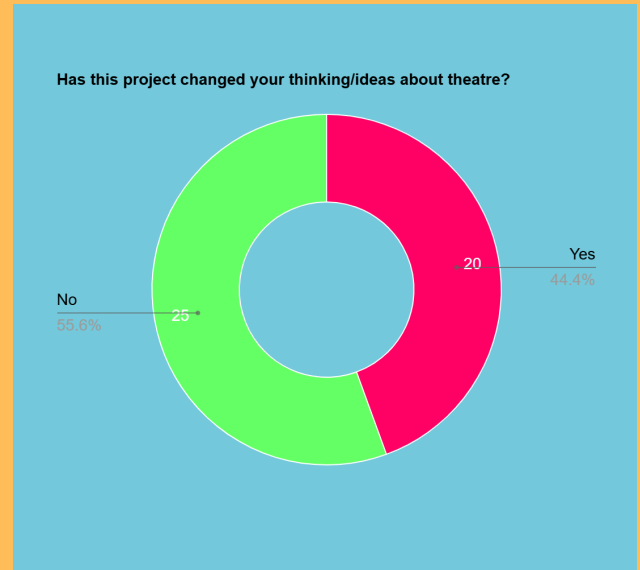
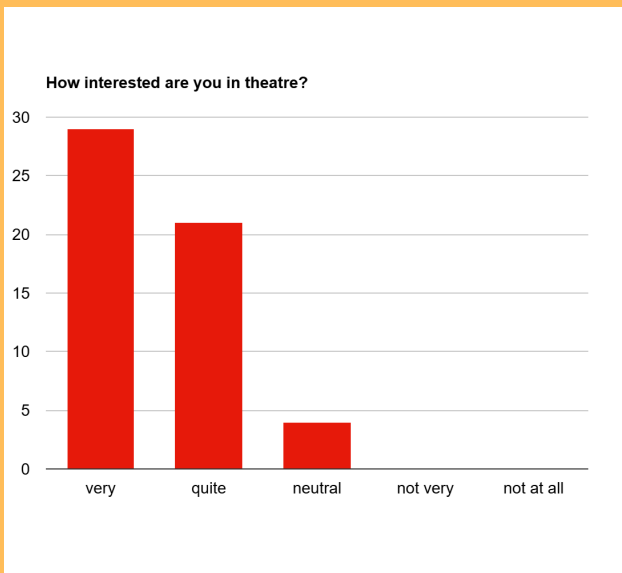


Audience opinions of the overall quality of elements of the event



Audience members commented particularly on the professionalism and variety of the writing and the project organisation.

They were also asked about their interest in theatre and whether the performance had changed their thinking about it.



Those who indicated their thinking had changed were asked to say why. The responses were:

- So many different styles – very stimulating.
- Variety.
- Excellent opportunity for all involved.
- I think it was a great idea to do something like this.
- I loved it!
- Many eye-opening moments.
- Very different seeing a rehearsed reading.
- It doesn't have to be a big polished production.
- Loved seeing contemporary theatre!
- The use of new writing.
- Small is beautiful!
- Due to the variety and scope of the pieces and the way that such a group of works can be presented.
- It showed what can be done.
- Simplicity of production – it works.
- Made me think more about the acting, writing and direction that goes into a play.
- Great to see so much talent, including young writers.
- Enjoyed the energy and experimental approach.
- An unusual approach to new writing.
- The pieces were so brave and tackling controversial issues – it was riveting!

They were asked what they would like to see in the future relating to theatre in Orkney. The responses were:

- More opportunities for workshops across all genres.
- More contemporary plays about issues affecting Orkney and the world.
- More opportunities for youth.
- More shows involving young people/school pupils.
- A similar format again.
- More of the same [x3].
- Give us more – especially serious plays
- More funding [x3].
- Keep the community drama – like Stromness Drama Group – flourishing.
- More panto and lots of plays.
- More little bits and pieces like this throughout the year.
- More classic plays.
- More productions.
- The turn-out and participation here indicate that there's a vibrant interest and future in Stromness theatre.

Any other feedback or ideas (all answers):

- Much fun.
- Fantastic achievement in such a short time.
- Excellent project, need more of this!
- Great evening!
- There was really excellent community engagement at all levels – keep it up.
- There was some involvement of young people but more would be even better.
- Great set of plays. Wonderful to have local writers. Well done!
- Thank you! [x3]
- As a partially deaf person I would appreciate more projection of voices. Pretty good tonight but I did miss bits.
- As a visitor I enjoyed it.

New playwriting showcased



A suite of ten new plays were given their stage debut last Friday. Pictured are cast members from Stromness Drama Club in rehearsal.

By **Issy Grieve**

STROMNESS Drama Club served up a Friday night feast of new plays, showcasing the winners of its writing competition.

Funding, which marked the 50th anniversary of the Scottish Society of Playwrights, brought to Stromness ten short plays penned by Orkney writers. These were ably performed in the Stromness Town Hall to a packed audience.

The joint venture between Stromness Drama Club and Rachael McGill asked playwrights to develop scripts inspired by topics discussed over the decades by Stromness Debating Society.

The plays were wide ranging in genre, setting and character, often bringing aspects of life in and around Stromness to the fore. Although not set in Stromness, Barney Clark's highly comedic play, *The Grass is Always Greener on the Other Side of the Fence*, was hugely entertaining.

Involving a chicken and a penguin, this play by a young writer captured the humour of its characters in an engaging case of mistaken identity.

Another very humorous tale, *Gambling is a Major Evil in this Country* by Fiona MacInnes, was an astutely observed take on the tribulations of running a raffle, with every possible scenario playing out in well-handled chaos.

The classic, whodunnit style of Barbara Stevenson's *What Do We Do Now?* was comparable to the mayhem of an episode of *Fawlty Towers*, and the slight twist at the end was in line with all good whodunnit writing.

Both *Home Cooking* by Eilidh Fisher and *Your Parents Muck You Up* by Amelia Porter, explored young people's relationships with their parents. The former sought the comfort of home when living the student life in Edinburgh didn't quite match up to island life, and the latter explored

the tempestuous relationship between a single dad and his rebellious daughter.

Both plays, although very different in style, grasped the audience's attention.

The second-placed winner in the adult writers' section, *Two Pitchforks West of Stromness* by David McNeish, was a set of five vignettes through time, using the life of the pitchforks to demark the changes in social history. The contrasting pieces expertly marked the lives of those who encountered the two pitchforks.

Two other plays set in Stromness, *Stromness Wants Nothing* by Roger Simian and *The State of the Stromness Street* by Morag MacInnes, were contrasting. In the first, we encountered two siblings preparing for their mother's funeral, exploring the magnetic pull of the diaspora, against those tides that keep us firmly in our communities. The second play saw us in a futuristic Stromness, devastated by global warming and pollution, with tourists still coming to see the lone surviving old Orcadian. A very amusing play.

Female Corpse, by Eilidh McKenzie, was a complex comparison of a strong feminist character in a novel and the actress who played her within the play. This was an excellently written, well-crafted piece of theatre.

The final play of the evening, *Plan B* by Aine King and the overall winner in the adult written plays, was a tense drama. The contrast between the increasingly agitated bees and the tormentor in the play was exceptionally well balanced. The increasing menace left the audience poised on the edge of their seats. An extremely worthy winner.

The ensemble of actors, supported by a creative backstage team and some of Orkneys most able producers, brought this foray into new writing to life on the Stromness Town Hall stage; we look forward with great anticipation to further delights from these writers, actors and producers.

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POST-PROJECT FEEDBACK FROM PARTICIPANTS

- 'I thought I'd put down what it meant writing a play for you and then seeing it actually performed with real people and a real audience.

1 Meeting other writers was energising, as it's a lonely thing to do and most writers are caught between possessiveness about their work and anxiety to get feedback. The best thing in this project was that there was a whole range of age and experience, from 12 to 70, from new starts to experienced committed people. Shy writers bloom in this atmosphere.

2 Seeing your work performed in a raw state is very useful. You realise where you wrote too many words, or forgot about action. Being able to be part of the rehearsals and answer questions was great (even if it was - is that a real person he's swearing at, because I don't want to be sued...)

3 Hearing the audience react is also educating. You see what didn't work. I'd go so far as to say there should be a wee audience at a couple of late rehearsals so the writer can re think things. with director and actors.

4 Collaborative working really pays dividends! It taught me to let my script be more public much earlier - only good comes of that. You get asked such unexpected questions, and imaginative direction makes you see things totally differently.

5 Every single positive comment, from actors and audience, makes me think about writing more drama. I'd say also any negative comments but I haven't heard any except about audibility - which brings me briefly to the benefits for all the new directors and actors involved here - absolutely invaluable for them. They learned what it is to be in front of real people, whether they're funny, how to trust a director and honour a writer ('I loved saying your words', one said) and all the ones I spoke to loved it and wanted to go on, polish performance, use space and props.

In these tough times for the arts, this project gave me hope that people's need to create won't be suffocated. I've got a lot of new ideas and energy, thanks to Stromness Plays.'

(writer, by email)

- 'My brother and I thoroughly enjoyed all of the plays last night. Interesting to see how everybody approached the topic. Thank you so much to you and the two excellent actors. You all did a fantastic job of working the script into shape. I was surprisingly tense sitting there watching it - it's strange hearing your own words acted out - but it worked really well and seemed to go down well too, especially in the second half.

Thanks so much again for all your work on the script and direction. Can't remember if I've mentioned, but I'm doing an MA in Creative Writing with the OU and I've jumped ship from Fiction (which I studied in year 1) to Script. So Stromness Plays has been an invaluable learning experience. One of the reasons I made the change was because of my play being accepted for Stromness Plays.'

(writer, by email)

- 'The process of speaking to Rachael and re-drafting it was the part I really enjoyed, where it was 'let's actually reflect on what I want this to look like.' And seeing it come to life tonight was great fun.'

(writer, interviewed for end of project video)

- 'It was really weird [seeing my play performed], but really good. It's the first thing I've seen that I've written, so that's why I came. It was nice to see it brought to life and also see how the actors interpreted it.'

The interesting thing was how different all the plays were. You're given the same brief but there are so many different options and even people who chose similar debate topics went in such different directions with it. Even sci-fi. I was surprised to see so many different genres. It was a nice collection to be part of.'

(writer, interviewed for end of project video)

- 'There is some [new writing in Orkney], but this is on a different scale...This is by far the biggest plethora of plays to be distributed to us in one go.'

(director, interviewed for end of project video)

- 'The performances are kind of secondary to new directors who've never worked as directors before and new writers. It taps into talent that's already there, and it's great to see it having the opportunity to come forward.'

(actor, interviewed for end of project video)



Liam Stewart in 'The State of the Stromness Street'

PRODUCER'S POST-PROJECT THOUGHTS

- My main concerns before starting the project were that we wouldn't get enough entries to the competition, or entries of high enough quality to make a public showcase, and that amateur actors and directors would not be able to give good enough expression to the writers' visions. Both of those concerns were completely unfounded.
- The response of the writers to dramaturgical support where their plays were selected and to feedback where they were not successful was really impressive: most of the showcase writers improved their plays noticeably when they provided new drafts after discussion with me. I found it rewarding to see what a big difference small tweaks to a script could make.
- We were in fact over-ambitious because we got so many good plays. We performed ten and had more that were of performable quality. Producing ten plays was a stretch in terms of actor and director availability and organisation: we managed it, but some plays had very little rehearsal. To be fairer to all writers, I think it would have been better to perform fewer and to be sure we had enough people with enough availability to rehearse them all a consistent amount.
- the challenges of working with amateur actors and directors are nothing to do with their skill or enthusiasm, but their availability and reliability (inevitable when everyone is fitting the project in around the rest of life).
- Ideally, I would have given the directors more support: the directing workshop would have focussed much more on basic, practical skills and I would have provided a more structured regular check-in arrangement or even a series of training sessions. We talked about mentoring for directors, but this didn't materialise. Assistant directors would be another possibility.
- I think it would also have been good to formalise writer involvement in rehearsals. It was encouraged, but I think it could have been made to feel more of an integral part of the experience for everyone.
- Many people involved in the project told me they thought it should be an annual event. Applying for funding for this to happen in some form would be a possibility, perhaps with a professional partner like the St Magnus Festival.
- I have some other ideas about expanded versions of the project that could happen in the future, and discussions with Stromness Drama Club will continue. These include a cross-generational project combining reminiscence work with writing; a festival combining short plays by amateurs with professional commissions on a locally-relevant theme and a longer training programme for a smaller number of new playwrights ending with a showcase. All would be more ambitious and expensive than this project, involving more people being paid for more hours of work, and whether any of them move forward depends entirely on whether I have the energy and availability to seek new partnerships and put in funding applications.

*"Maybe I will move back here. Keep the house going. I have been feeling it, you know?
Hearing it...Stromness wants me...I think I could really write if I came back home."*

From 'Stromness Wants Nothing' by Roger Simian, Stromness Plays 2024



The Stromness Plays post-show cake

[www.rachaelmcgill.com/stromness plays](http://www.rachaelmcgill.com/stromness%20plays)

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Stomness Drama Club

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SCOTTISH
SOCIETY OF
PLAYWRIGHTS



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