

RIVER LAND BY THEATRE ALIBI (2022)

A CASE STUDY OF A SMALL-SCALE COMPANY WORKING WITH THE THEATRE GREEN BOOK FOR THE FIRST TIME



This Case Study has been written by Siobhan Bauer and Roberta Mock (Royal Holloway, University of London), in partnership with Theatre Alibi. It is one of the outcomes of the ‘Transitioning to Sustainable Production across the UK Theatre Sector’ project, which was funded by the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre (PEC) and Arts Council England (ACE).

It is intended to be of use to other small-scale theatre companies (especially those making performances for non-theatre spaces) that are either thinking about using, or starting to use, the Sustainable Productions volume of *The Theatre Green Book*, as well as those who work with them. For this reason, this Case Study attempts to identify the “challenges” encountered by Theatre Alibi, as well as how they responded to these challenges and what they learned from them.

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ABOUT THEATRE ALIBI



Theatre Alibi are contemporary storytellers who make theatre that moves freely between the intimate and the epic, for audiences of all ages. The company has been making community-focused work from its South West base at Emmanuel Hall in Exeter since 1982, and frequently tours locally and nationally to schools, village halls, and theatres.

Their productions are marked by a passion for the live event, including: actors as storytellers who are absolutely present with their audience; live music; a delight in revealing acts of transformation that would often be confined to the wings; and a level of inventiveness that allows them to embrace action that might seem to be unstageable. The company integrates a wide variety of art forms into its work. Recent productions have featured animation, film, puppetry, photography and music both live and recorded.

River Land was funded by Arts Council England, the Garfield Weston Foundation and Exeter City Council.



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WHY THE THEATRE GREEN BOOK (& WHAT IS IT)?

The Theatre Green Book is a 3 volume open access publication that can be [downloaded for free](#). The first volume focuses on making *Sustainable Productions* and was published in March 2021.¹ Its purpose is to draw together guidelines for good practice and to set out collective standards in order to facilitate change in response to climate crisis. Created by Renew Culture and sustainability engineers, Buro Happold, led by the Theatres Trust, Association of British Theatre Technicians (ABTT) and UK Theatre/SOLT, and developed with and supported by all the other leading UK theatre bodies and sustainability organisations, it was created with a broad coalition of UK theatre-makers, including freelancers, venues, companies, and producers.

Theatre Alibi was already questioning how, as individuals and as a company, they could further align their personal views around the climate crisis with their professional practice. Its resident Production Manager, Rachael Duthie, attended the [Greening Theatre](#) event held at the Bristol Old Vic on 2 December 2021. Here, she began to find out about how *The Theatre Green Book* might enable Theatre Alibi to begin embedding decarbonisation and circular economy principles more systematically into their production work. This subsequently led them becoming one of the three theatre companies trialling the *Green Book's Sustainable Productions Volume* as a Case Study for the [Transitioning to Sustainable Production across the UK Theatre Sector](#) research project.²

The company were excited to learn more about how attempting to meet the *Green Book's Baseline Standard* could help them transition to making more environmentally sustainable performances. To meet Baseline Standard, **50% of each category of materials used in a show (that is, set, props, costumes, and technical equipment) should have had a previous life and, after the show, 65% should be recycled or reused.** *River Land's* Designer, Ioana Curelea, was already working with *The Theatre Green Book*, as well as teaching its principles to MA Theatre and Design students at Wimbledon College of Art.

The choice to become an early adopter of *The Theatre Green Book* consciously reflected both Theatre Alibi's values and the subject matter of *River Land*. They shared the fact that they were working with the *Green Book* with audiences via publicity materials, on their website, in media interviews, and in post-show and community discussions.

¹ The other two volumes are about *Sustainable Buildings* and *Sustainable Operations*, and they were published a few months later.

² *River Land* is the "small-scale" Case Study. The other two Case Studies are: Royal Shakespeare Company's *All's Well That Ends Well* (a "large scale" production) and National Theatre of Scotland's *Exodus* (a touring production).

As avid communicators who believe strongly in the powerful role arts can play in education, Theatre Alibi's participation as a *Green Book* Case Study was also motivated by a desire to share insight with wider audiences, including other theatre-makers. Finally, as a funded National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) of Arts Council England (ACE), using the *Green Book* could help the company demonstrate how it was working to meet ACE's "Environmental Responsibility" Investment Principle.

Importantly, *River Land* was not explicitly about climate crisis. Its director, Nikki Sved, says that that the company "wanted to allow people to properly connect to the subject in a fresh way. I never wanted to be preachy and I'm always very dubious about how well theatre and the arts actually do tell those stories and whether it is better to be hearing directly from scientists". For Theatre Alibi, *River Land* was a story about the climate crisis set in their local neighbourhood. The place, community and environmental concerns were entirely intertwined, providing a more immediate way of relating to the crisis.



Audience feedback for *River Land* (2022), Emmanuel Hall. Photographer: Siobhan Bauer.

THE PRODUCTION

River Land was performed between 1 – 10 July 2022, in Emmanuel Hall in St Thomas, which is a neighbourhood within the city of Exeter in Devon. This 1920s church hall had been Theatre Alibi's base since the company's founding exactly forty years ago. For *River Land*, it was transformed by the company to create a sensory theatre performance that explored historic experiences of local flooding and fears for the future.

The show was made for adults and children of 8 years and older. *River Land* included live music, and was performed traverse style with audience members facing each other. The narrative revolved around the intergenerational story of Walter, who carries with him vivid memories of devastating floods that took place in St Thomas in 1960, and Ellie, who worries about global floods to come.

River Land began development in 2019, working with the local community in St Thomas to gather their stories of the area. This project was extended, adapted and took several forms (including an audio walk) due to the pandemic, before eventually culminating in a full-scale production as part of the 10-day long St Thomas Festival of Stories, which Theatre Alibi organised.

River Land was attended by nearly 700 audience members during its run.



Emmanuel Hall in St Thomas (Exeter, Devon). Photographer: Siobhan Bauer.

THE TEAM THAT MADE *RIVER LAND*

Winnie Arhin – Performer
Marcus Bartlett – Lighting Designer
Steve Bennett – Performer
Debbie Bucella – Executive Producer
Estelle Buckridge – General Manager (maternity cover)
Annie Chave – Administrator
Hattie Collins – Marketing and Development Officer
Ioana Curelea – Set and Costume Designer
Graeme Drew – Facilities Manager
Rachael Duthie – Production Manager
Somin Griffin-Dave – Sound Designer
Dan Jamieson – Writer
Jess Riley – Design Assistant
Fi Russell – Design Assistant (part time)
Nikki Sved – Director
Emily Walls – Company Stage Manager
Michael Wagg – Performer
Elizabeth Westcott – Musical Director, Composer and Performer
Ruth Weyman – General Manager

Theatre Alibi employ their Executive Producer, General Manager, Administrator, Marketing and Development Officer, Facilities Manager, Production Manager, Director, and General Manager on an ongoing basis. *River Land*'s playwright, lighting designer, part-time design assistant, and one of the performers had regularly worked with the company in the past. All of the other *River Land* team members were working with the company for the first time.



Director Nikki Sved on set at Emmanuel Hall during rehearsals. Photographer: Emily Appleton

WORKING WITH *THE THEATRE GREEN BOOK*

THE PROCESS

Theatre Alibi attempted to follow the guidelines and processes of *The Theatre Green Book* as closely and fully as possible. This began by **setting their Green Book Standard target at the outset of the production process**. Their commitment to meeting Baseline Standard meant aiming for 50% of each category of materials (set and scenery, props and furniture, costumes, and technical equipment) to have had a previous life, with 65% being recycled or reused after the show. New materials were to be sustainably sourced and 100% of plastics either reusable, recyclable or compostable. Products that damage the environment were to be avoided and deliveries minimised.

A **Sustainability Champion** was appointed at the outset to track, guide and support sustainable working. This was Rachael Duthie, who is Theatre Alibi's Production Manager. She was responsible for collating a **Materials Inventory**, which documented both the previous lives and intended afterlives of the items and materials used for *River Land*.

All members of the creative and production team had a **"green production clause"** in their contracts based on the example in the *Green Book's* Toolkit. This made sustainability a "company led ethos" and set the expectation from day one.

The *Green Book* was collectively discussed throughout the entire process at all stages. However, Theatre Alibi found it difficult to always align their own working processes and milestones with those in the *Green Book*. They therefore decided to focus on what the *Green Book* was prompting them to think about, rather than attempting to reproduce its suggested model and production schedule.

Rather than holding a **Green Concept Meeting**, the aim of which was to include makers and discuss with the entire team how they could work together to achieve a sustainable vision, Theatre Alibi incorporated these discussions in their two-day long R&D workshop with the designer present. This had the same effect of embedding sustainability and ensuring it was at the forefront of everybody's mind, including, by this stage, the freelance sound designer who joined the team later due to other commitments. It was also important that this workshop included the performers and *River Land's* writer, who would not necessarily have attended a concept meeting focusing on design.



Theatre Alibi R&D for *River Land*, February 2022. Photographer: Siobhan Bauer.

The *Green Book* suggests holding a **Green Card Meeting**. This is a version of a White Card model meeting during which the team should collectively discuss and assess if the design is on track to meet the production’s sustainability targets. Theatre Alibi don’t usually have White Card meetings, although they combined the Green Card Meeting with their Initial Design Meeting and felt that, with careful chairing, it was useful in helping everyone to create a shared vision. They felt that holding a separate “Green Card” meeting to discuss sustainability would make it feel like an “add on” rather than embedded throughout all elements of the design work.

There were also a number of activities or elements that are not explicitly recommended in *The Theatre Green Book*, or else for productions aiming for Baseline standard, but were part of Theatre Alibi’s experience as a Case Study research partner. The first is that they were assigned an “Expert Mentor” to support them in achieving their target by helping them think through problems, recommending solutions, and acting as a “sustainability sounding board”. This was William Reynolds, who is Artistic Director of Metta Theatre.

The company also had an “Orientation” session at the beginning of the production process, led by the *Green Book* Co-ordinator, Paddy Dillon. Its purpose was to enable the production and creative team to have a better sense of the *Theatre Green Book* and what it might mean to work to the targeted standard. Attended by members of the broader organisation, including the Board, this proved extremely valuable in developing understanding and establishing shared values and expectations.

The completion of **Carbon Literacy Training** (CLT) is a *Green Book* recommendation for key members of production teams aiming for Intermediate Standard. Theatre Alibi was offered this as part of the Case Study project. As a result, 10 members of the team attended CLT and five were awarded a Carbon Literacy Certificate afterwards.³ This included one of Theatre Alibi’s Board members, Jules Offord, who, in their capacity as secretary, pledged to promote a sustainable model for all groups using the facilities of their local Community Hall. This demonstrates how the processes of sustainable theatre-making can have a positive impact for communities beyond the production’s audience. However, the company feels that, while useful for those who could attend, the full 8 hour CLT programme was a significant time commitment, especially for freelance practitioners, and they welcome initiatives for a training package developed specifically for people working in theatre. At least one freelance production team member said that being offered and attending CLT made them realize that the company was serious and committed to ethical change.

It is also worth noting that, as a building-based company, some of Theatre Alibi’s activities fall under the remit of the other two volumes of *The Theatre Green Book*. Emmanuel Hall runs on 100% renewable sources via its energy supplier, as recommended in Volume 2, ***Sustainable Buildings***. And, marketing materials are considered in Volume 3, ***Sustainable Operations***. In order to reach audience members in St Thomas who are not theatre-goers and may not be digital natives, Theatre Alibi needed to use paper-based marketing materials: “We’re literally putting things through everybody’s letterboxes and that can be hugely wasteful.” This led to conversations, informed by their use of the *Green Book*, about how the paper was sourced, what was written on it, and how the company worked with printers.

As can be noted in some of the sections below, it isn’t always easy to separate buildings, operations and production processes when it comes to thinking about sustainability, nor does Theatre Alibi think they should be (except in order to track and measure progress in specific areas).

³ Individuals who were awarded a Carbon Literacy certificate completed a short written submission identifying both individual and group actions that they will undertake and why they are significant.

MATERIALS INVENTORY

The creation of a Materials Inventory is probably the most important of *The Theatre Green Book* recommended activities. It is what determines whether or not a production has met its standard target. The Green Book Materials Inventory template includes separate page tabs for the four categories (Set and Scenery, Props and Furniture, Costumes, and Technical Equipment). On each template, the items used in the production are listed either by weight or by quantity, depending on which is most achievable and appropriate. Theatre Alibi demonstrates that these categories are often blurred. For *River Land*, many items could have been included under either Props and Furniture or else Set and Scenery (which, on their Material Inventory, also included Front of House elements like audience seating. This was because they were converting a church hall into a theatre space).

The *Green Book* includes a pyramid-shaped “Materials Hierarchy”. Its top describes a production in which all materials that aren’t required are “designed out”, and that whatever is absolutely necessary is acquired from a reused or recycled source (locally, if possible, to reduce transport). At the bottom of the pyramid are raw materials which involve carbon and should be avoided. There’s a similar hierarchical process for thinking about what to do with materials and objects after a production closes, expressed from best (reusing it in the theatre or local community) down to the worst (sending to landfill).

Each item on the four Materials Inventory templates is rated using a scale of 1 to 5 according to these principles, both in terms of its source and its destination. An aggregate score is then determined for each, ranging from “Excellent” (1-4) to “Unacceptable” (20-25). For source materials, any item rated from 1 (“Hired/reused from venue or locally”) to 3 (“Repurposed/net zero materials”) is included within the % of materials meeting the “Reused or Recycled” target of the Green Book standard. Similarly, for their Destination, items rated from 1 (“Stored, donated or sold”) through to 3 (“Recycled or repurposed”) are included as meeting Green Book standard targets.

Theatre Alibi found completing the Materials Inventory template to be rather labour intensive and time consuming. As a small-scale company, the Sustainability Champion/Production Manager, Rachael, needed to be hand on during rehearsals. This made it difficult for her to keep up with completing the Inventory in situ. Her solution was to use the production budget sheet to complete the template in retrospect; however, it would have been more productive to adapt the budget sheet at the start of the process.

In filling in the Materials Inventory, Rachael was unhappy with the granularity of the scored ratings of materials, especially as they are impacted by the location of their source. In particular, the meaning of the terms “locally” and “elsewhere” were too vague and open to interpretation.

Rachael set her own criteria so that “local” was defined as anywhere in South West England, although this meant that “elsewhere” could equally encompass London and China. She used the notes section of the spreadsheet to make distinctions between local, UK and international shipping, and is now trying to establish a way to log this more systematically to enable project-by-project comparison in the future.

Although it says in the *Green Book* Toolkit that “A Materials Inventory is not an accurate tool”, Theatre Alibi sometimes found it difficult to characterise and compare very different materials and items, at very different scales, from different sources and locations. Rachael didn’t always know what level of detail to include, especially when she wanted to document an achievement (such as sourcing something creatively and locally) – even if it represented a relatively small quantity of or unusual materials – since this may make it difficult to compare productions over time.

Despite these challenges, Theatre Alibi believe that making a Materials Inventory helped them to make a more sustainable production. Doing it for the first time meant having to establish a way for the company to consistently measure and record the materials they use. However, this enabled them to provide quantifiable data for their funders and to identify areas for future improvement.



River Land (Theatre Alibi, 2022). Photographer: Steve Tanner.

SETS AND SCENERY

	Source	Destination	Target Met?
	Baseline Target: 50%	Baseline Target: 65%	
By weight	100%	100%	Yes
By quantity	74%	100%	Yes

During the final design meeting, *River Land's* Designer, Ioana Curelea, described the concept as “more like an installation than a set”, full of familiar objects with hidden surprising elements like grass in cupboard doors, and vegetables in suitcases.

Ioana designed the set so that it could predominantly be made from bits of furniture that were either already in the “not precious section” of Theatre Alibi’s storeroom, or sourced locally.

The photo to the right was taken during the build. It shows how the set incorporated various materials made from repurposed and existing items from Theatre Alibi’s store.



This meant that the production team were able to focus more on sourcing a “vibe” than finding a specific look or item. Also, due to the aesthetic of the production, the fact that it wasn’t touring, and the flexibility of a venue that the company managed, furniture and scenic elements didn’t need to be exact sizes or shapes.

River Land's Materials Inventory for set and scenery comprises 10 items measured by weight (four of which are multiples), including a second hand sideboard and a chest of drawers bought locally (45 kg), 2 “chairs on ladder” made of “mixed recycled goods” from stock (45 kg), 3 wooden trees from a local school (15 kg), and a sheet of ethically sourced live carpet moss which was delivered by courier (4 kg). After the show, the moss was donated to Art and Energy, a local collective that makes art in response to the climate emergency.

By quantity, the Materials Inventory includes 246.5 items in 13 lots or rows. The .5 item was a roll of paper from existing stock used during the show’s R&D which was then recycled with general waste. Other items from stock included 7 suitcases. 59 artificial plants were hired locally and returned after the show.

Materials bought new and made of raw materials included metal castors, 7 anti-slip mats from Ikea, a last minute purchase of playgrade bark woodchips, and materials for kick boards. The latter were given to a local hire company; some of the casters have now been reused or else donated to a new show by a local company, Almanac; and the rest went into Theatre Alibi's stock.



River Land model, designed by Ioana Curelea. Photographer: Rachael Duthie.

Seating for the audience was included in the Materials Inventory under Sets and Scenery. 8 rented Stagedex decks were included by weight, and 100 audience chairs (included by quantity) were hired from a local wedding supplier. They were joined together for reasons of health and safety compliance, using a combination of bamboo, lengths of conduit, and plastic pipe that were already available in the company's stockroom. The aluminium legs and bolts required for the deck were hired and returned and not included in the inventory.

Following *Green Book* recommendations to hold meetings with as many team members as possible, Theatre Alibi invited their builder to the initial design meeting (held in lieu of a Green Card meeting). This did not prove productive and cost the company money to pay for his time. In retrospect, they think that this is a practice more suited to larger-scale work where the build processes are led more by the builder than the Production Manager and Designer. For their next production, the Production Manager held a separate meeting with the Designer and Builder to discuss practicalities, which resulted in a more effective use of creative time.

Challenges

The only plastic that could not be repurposed or rehomed at the end of *River Land* was PVC tape, mainly used for mark up. However, the company used far less than for past productions by replacing it with reusable Velcro ties (which needed to be bought new for this show) and paper-based tapes wherever possible.

11 second hand rugs sourced locally were distressed with paint. Despite minimising the damaging effects to the environment by using water-based Bristol Paints (as recommended in the Scenic Art Toolkit of *The Theatre Green Book*), Theatre Alibi subsequently questioned this decision because it meant the future use of the rugs would be limited to theatrical purposes. However, they consider their adaption of a second hand bed with castors to be a potential “theatre gift”, and expect other companies will be keen to borrow it (see the later section of this Case Study on the development of a “South West Sustainability Network”).



River Land (Theatre Alibi, 2022). Photographer: Steve Tanner.

PROPS & FURNITURE

	Source	Destination	Target Met?
	Baseline Target: 50%	Baseline Target: 65%	
By weight	98%	100%	Yes
By quantity	91%	100%	Yes

There were two items of props and furniture measured by weight in the *River Land* Materials Inventory. One was a second hand wood and metal bench that weighed 40 kg and the other was a 1 kg sheet of preserved carpet moss. The bench was put outside in Alibi's garden, and is now used by both the company and visiting hirers of the hall. The carpet moss was donated to The Egg at the Theatre Royal Bath, and has been used in 2 productions there so far.

The Materials Inventory accounted for 180 items of props and furniture by quantity, including many of the same or similar items from the same source – for instance, 2 pillows, 4 wooden figures, 6 books, 10 items of crockery from stock, and 80 live plants. There were also a few small items listed in notes that were not included (such as luggage tags).

Most of the props came from the company's own stock (e.g. suitcases and an iPad), or else were acquired second hand through social media, resale websites, and even house clearances (such as a watering can, wooden ladder, kitchenware, and a stuffed animal). For new purchases, Theatre Alibi made a conscious choice not to use the services of Amazon, unlike for their other recent productions.

Of those bought new and made of "virgin or raw materials" (which meant that they were rated most highly – that is, considered the worst – in the Green Book rating system for materials), most were destined for Theatre Alibi's stores following the show; these items included a stainless steel doll's house rule, disposable midi cigar, and basswood and foam for a handheld prop. Because these are likely to be reused or repurposed by the company or locally, only two batteries (which went to recycling facilities) were rated as "Bad" in the Materials Inventory once their source and destination scores were aggregated.

Plastic plants and live oak trees were hired, with the exception of one tree which was gifted to Emmanuel Hall. The living plants bought for the show were sold to the audience following the final performance. This provided an opportunity for further conversation and to raise awareness of sustainability issues and the company's engagement with *The Theatre Green Book*.



River Land (Theatre Alibi, 2022). Photographer: Steve Tanner.

Challenges

Buying as much as possible second hand and locally created some challenges, not least the additional time this often requires. It takes a lot longer to walk around town on a last minute charity shop haul than to search for and buy something online (which can take less than 5 minutes in total). And, when second hand items were purchased online from individuals, rather than companies, sometimes they either weren't sent or received in good time (or at all).

There were also some difficulties accounting formally for cash flow with the finance department when buying things "cash in hand", without receipts, through social media or house clearances.

TECHNICAL EQUIPMENT & FRONT OF HOUSE

	Source	Destination	Target Met?
	Baseline Target: 50%	Baseline Target: 65%	
By weight	100%	100%	Yes
By quantity	97%	100%	Yes

The technical equipment measured by weight for *River Land's* Materials Inventory comprised LED fixtures and D&B speakers. Everything else in this category was measured by quantity; this includes the sound desk, cabling, microphones, additional lanterns, dimmers, cables, a stage sound box, and scaffold tower.

All of the technical equipment for *River Land* was either already owned by Theatre Alibi, or else borrowed or hired. The furthest these items travelled was from Avonmouth (approximately 75 miles away from Exeter), where SLX is based. SLX is a company that provides technology solutions and is Theatre Alibi's most local rental option for MAC Encore Performance LED lights. These were required for most of *River Land's* special FX, which included brief moments of a fire blazing and the impression of water running along the ground; the lanterns supplemented by the use of water projectors, borrowed from a local theatre company in Exeter.



River Land (Theatre Alibi, 2022). Photographer: Steve Tanner.

All technical equipment required for the show's Research & Development period came from Theatre Alibi's existing stock.

Refreshments for audience members during performances were provided via a pop-up bar run by Ebdons. This local independent café sourced everything from South West England, composted all food waste, and had a no-plastics policy. This meant that all the serveware they provided was made of glass, porcelain, and metal. These items were not included in the production's Materials Inventory. Guidelines for Catering and other Front of House activities can be found in the third volume of the *Theatre Green Book*, which focuses on Sustainable Operations.

Challenges

River Land's Lighting Designer asked questions during the Orientation session about the pros and cons of acquiring newer LED fixtures, which use less carbon (but may come from further away, in addition to the energy and materials required for their manufacture etc), compared to the use of existing tungsten lighting on site: "I need to get the right fixture for the job, as well as offset my mindfulness about where that fixture comes from in the world, as well as the shelf-life of that fixture." Sustainability consultants for *The Theatre Green Book* worked out that, on balance, it is still better to use LED than traditional lighting in scenarios such as this. However, it was also agreed during the session that: "There are things we can't do anything about and there are things we can... And we need to focus our energy where we can".

Similarly, the company felt they needed to purchase two sheets of gel filter from Lee, which are made of a polyester-based material. These were returned to stock for reuse following the show. The rest of the gel used for the show was from existing stock.

COSTUMES

	Source	Destination	Target Met?
	Baseline Target: 50%	Baseline Target: 65%	
By quantity	73%	100%	Yes

Costumes were measured by quantity of items rather than by weight in *River Land's* Materials Inventory. 73% (34 different items) were purchased second hand from online sources such as Depop and eBay from within the UK, and were delivered by courier or post. These included an “official Fleetwood Mac” t-shirt, a pair of Converse All Stars, and a dark green velvet dress. Two additional items were bought at local charity shops.

The remaining 27% of costumes bought new comprised underwear, lingerie and a few items that could not be sourced in the correct sizes. The majority of these were from local shops, and included a belt, a pair of loafers and a stovepipe hat. The company did buy one pair of shoes from Asos, after purchasing three different pairs second hand, none of which fit the actor.

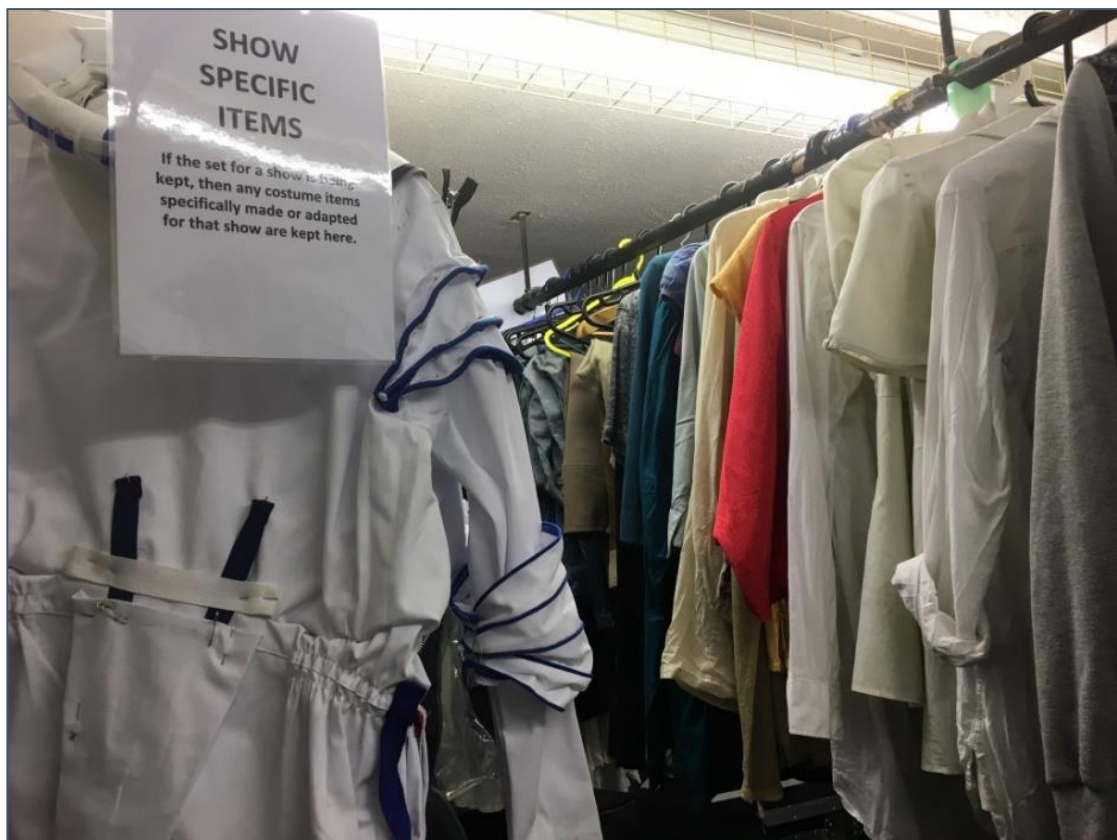
All of the costumes for the show were either resold or returned to stock. Some have already been used in Theatre Alibi's next show. The company were also given the option to purchase their costumes after the run, and all of them took up this offer.



Challenges

Costume was one of the only areas in which there were last minute purchases that could not easily be sourced sustainably. These included insoles for second hand shoes and ‘tit tape’.

Using mostly second hand clothes meant the actors didn’t always have identical versions of the same costume. For instance, one character might have two pairs of green dungarees, but they would be different shades of green and slightly different styles. While this wasn’t ideal, the company felt it was worth the compromise. It also fed into a design approach of creating a “vibe” rather than dictating precise requirements; this is an ethos that Theatre Alibi has taken successfully into subsequent productions.



Theatre Alibi's stockroom. Photographer: Siobhan Bauer.

OUTCOMES & REFLECTIONS

Emerging from the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, Theatre Alibi expressed the need to live their values by aligning the making of theatre with its themes, content and social purpose. Publicly committing to *The Theatre Green Book* while making *River Land* not only acted as proxy for this expression, but also pointed to tangible actions and outcomes that enable them to be accountable to themselves, their funders and their audiences.

The company say that *The Theatre Green Book* “absolutely” helped them to make *River Land* a more sustainable production. They attribute this to the way it offers a collective goal, as well as clear, easy-to-follow guidelines that take into account the practicalities of theatre-making and support quantifiable data collection.

Theatre Alibi also believe that the cultural impact of embedding sustainability from the Research and Development stage, with effective communication across the entire creative and production team from the outset, made a real difference. As a smaller company, they were able to cohesively point in the same direction and express a set of shared values, which included everybody who worked with them. In design terms, this meant a “significant mind shift, working with what you find, rather than what you have in your mind to begin with”.

The Theatre Green Book itself recognises that this can be a challenge when “rehearsal is a journey of discovery and change”. It advises to “plan everything possible” and “to balance the drive to avoid last minute change, with the need to retain creative energy”. *River Land*'s Director, Nikki Sved found readjusting to the need to plan ahead “a little bit problematic creatively”, since she would typically honour the creative freedom and flexibility to make last minute changes. To cite an example, the designer had to make decisions about costumes that Nikki would have liked the actors to be more involved in developing through rehearsal. Although she found this stressful, it was not “insurmountable”.

Nikki also found working with the *Green Book* a bit overpowering at times: “There were little moments where I felt like, ‘Okay, I’m being steered just off track here’, and it’s good to be talking about sustainability but I don’t want it to be the only conversation. It’s somehow got to be threaded through everything but not to be the leader.”

***River Land* far exceeded its Green Book Baseline standard targets. In fact, in the categories of Props & Furniture and Technical Equipment & Front of House, it comfortably met the key indicators of Intermediate standard, with at least 75% of materials having had a previous life and 80% likely to be reused or recycled after the show.** In Costumes and Set & Scenery, *River Land* only just missed these Intermediate targets.

One of the key reasons for these results is that Theatre Alibi has its own storage facilities. In terms of disposal, almost all of the materials used in the show are likely to have a future life in one form or another. Despite the incredibly full set, *River Land's* "get out" produced only two bin bags full of rubbish that couldn't be reused or recycled. The large amount of hired kit was returned and what was left mainly went into the company's stock.

Almost all of the production materials that were measured by weight came from reused or recycled sources. Of those measured by quantity, nearly 84% had a previous life, which is significantly above the 50% required for Baseline (and even the 75% for Intermediate).



Theatre Alibi's stock. Photographer: Siobhan Bauer.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, *River Land* did not cost more in materials than previous similar shows, although it certainly cost more in terms of labour. Freelancers often require longer to collaborate on a sustainable production, and therefore require higher fees. Even then, accommodating their availability is not always easy (this was the case with the show's sound designer, although it had relatively minimal impact in relation to sustainability): "It is VERY hard to appoint freelancers early. You're dealing with their schedules, other projects' schedules".

One outcome of the *Green Book* production process, therefore, is that Theatre Alibi is beginning to budget in such a way as to place increasing emphasis on people's time. Other outcomes include:

- The company's storage facility has become the first port of call when collaborating with designers, and it now has sections labelled "recyclable non-precious" and "needs to be kept in one piece".
- They are now "less precious" about re-purposing or lending items that are not required for a production in the near future: "As a company, the *Green Book* has given us permission to be a bit more free and easy with our stuff".
- As a result of Carbon Literacy Training (CLT), Theatre Alibi now only stock oat milk in the communal kitchen.

- In addition to fostering a nascent South West Sustainability Network (discussed below), Rachael Duthie shares the knowledge and expertise she has gained through other platforms (such as, Bristol Old Vic’s South West Regional event, [‘Hello Stranger: South West Sustainable Practice Discussion’](#) on 21 March 2023).

Theatre Alibi remains committed to making increasingly sustainable productions in the future, and is continuing to aim for Baseline Standard for all its productions. Using *The Theatre Green Book* to make *River Land* has given them the confidence to handle the more complex sustainability challenges associated with a more traditional build which requires precise measurements, a necessity when touring. This will also have budget implications since *River Land*’s DIY second hand aesthetic was both sustainable and cost effective. The company wants to consistently and reliably achieve their Baseline targets so they have knowledge and resources established before aiming at Intermediate Standard in three years’ time.

A SOUTH WEST SUSTAINABILITY NETWORK

At the end of the Carbon Literacy Training for the company as part of this Case Study, Theatre Alibi’s Production Manager, Rachael Duthie, pledged to working toward the creation of a Sustainability Network for theatre-makers South West England (and Devon and Cornwall, in particular). This would facilitate new links with other local companies, as well as relevant cross-sector organisations, with the aim of gathering information about and subsequently sharing each other’s stock, storage, and equipment resources. This sharing could take many forms, including selling, hiring, or lending in kind or in exchange for a donation. In addition to sharing materials and resources, which would also be of financial benefit, a network could allow for knowledge exchange and foster collaboration in areas such as recruitment and procurement.

Based on her work with the *Theatre Green Book*, Rachael believes that such a network, or system, needs to be underpinned by three key support structures:

- It must be accessible and welcoming to all who wish to use and share resources, and a special effort must be made not to “gatekeep”.
- It should be self-sustaining, so not held by one person or group, and not be labour intensive (that is, overly concerned with databases, inventories, and large mailing lists that require maintenance).
- It should operate regionally.

Rachael launched this idea as part of the event, [‘Coming Together: Arts & Cultural Networks for Sustainability’](#) held in Plymouth, in September 2022. Here, she emphasised the need for production teams to plan ahead if their goal is to move towards a circular economy.

So, for example, if a company is aware that they have a prop or piece of a set that cannot go into storage at the end of a production, then they could communicate this with members of the network at the end of their final design stage. This would enable another production at an earlier stage in the design process to incorporate it into their own show. Rachael anticipated some potential challenges, including issues concerning artistic ownership, funding, the theatre industry’s tendency to make “last minute changes”, and finding the right platform for the network. This led to a [discussion](#) based on the insights of other speakers who either had formed or are part of similar cross-sector networks.

Working toward the goal of forming such a network, Theatre Alibi and Quirk Theatre co-hosted their first “Sustainability Arts Gathering” at Emmanuel Hall on 10 March 2023. There were 25 people in attendance, representing 16 different organisations involved in arts production across the Exeter area.

This initial meeting included discussions about resource sharing; creating a culture of doing one’s best by being climate conscious; green marketing; striving to be accessible to all; and being mindful that “like for like” reciprocal expectations are not always productive or equitable. It is currently intended that such a gathering will take place every few months with a different host on rotation.



Sustainability Arts Gathering, Emmanuel Hall in Exeter, 10 March 2023. Photographer: Nikki Sved

THEATRE ALIBI'S ADVICE FOR OTHER SMALL-SCALE COMPANIES

ON USING *THE THEATRE GREEN BOOK*

Having been there themselves, Theatre Alibi suggest that if you're worried about working towards meeting Baseline Standard for the first time:

Just go for it! Don't aim to pass or fail, just try and learn from what you do. If you don't just attempt it, you'll never make a move forwards.

At the same time, don't underestimate the creative challenge this might present. *River Land's* director, Nikki Sved, reflects that:

You have to think really carefully through those things you feel you need to hold onto and those things that you are just holding onto through security and because you've always done them. You have to be ready to disrupt the familiar and then respond to what that throws up.

Based on the company's positive experience, you might want to organise an Orientation session early in your process, to explain *The Theatre Green Book* to as many people as possible who are involved with the production and company (including Board members, performers, administrators, etc). If possible, this should be run by somebody external to the company with experience of working with the *Green Book*. Consider also including a short Carbon Literacy Training session (1-2 hours) alongside or as part of this session.

The following suggestions relate to more specific *Green Book* guidelines and recommendations:

- Adapt the documentation processes you already use, rather than doing things twice – for instance, complete the Materials Inventory alongside budget spreadsheets.
- Remember that the purpose of a Materials Inventory is to chart your own journey over time. That means making notes and using the types of measurement and scales that work for your company and can be consistently applied and understood.
- Work with your finance department or accountant from the start to ensure that you are able to formally account for spending from “alternative” sources like car boot sales or through swapping and sharing resources.
- Experiment and discover for yourself how the various meetings and stages described in the *Green Book* fit into your own practices and ways of working:

You don't have to do everything as per the structure of the book or using the same terminology. Ask yourself: what is the goal of each stage of the process and what is the best way we can achieve that goal?

- Discuss expectations and how you will be working with the *Green Book* when checking on a freelancer's availability, as well as very clearly in AV checks.
- Don't worry too much if all of the freelance members of your team are available (or even contracted in time) for all of the meetings that they would ideally attend, especially at the start of the production process. Just try to get them up to speed with your expectations and goals as quickly as possible.
- For Theatre Alibi, it made sense for the Sustainability Champion to be the Production Manager as they were best placed to make the Materials Inventory. However, the role of Sustainability Champion could be usefully considered as individual or sets of responsibilities each with a separate Champion, in order to embed them more firmly across all of the company's activities, or else the role holder might change at different stages of the production process.
- If you don't have your own store, contact local companies and organisations that do as soon as possible, as well as those who might be trying to dispose of materials and furniture themselves. (These might not be theatre companies. They could be events producers, schools, craft networks, etc.)



River Land (Theatre Alibi, 2022).
Photographer: Siobhan Bauer

Finally, the company recommends that you should try to approach working within the parameters of *The Theatre Green Book* as you would Health and Safety or budgeting:

Sustainability doesn't have to be something that you're adding on. It's just like any other requirement you need to work around and through. You don't normally cut something out of a show because it isn't safe or fit for budget. Instead, you think about how to achieve it or how to achieve the aim of the idea.

ON MAKING MORE SUSTAINABLE PRODUCTIONS

Based on the experience of making *River Land*, Theatre Alibi has three main pieces of advice for small-scale companies that would like to make more their shows more sustainable (even if you're not ready, or choose not, to use *The Theatre Green Book* more systematically):

- Consider and plan for the reuse of items and materials at the conception, R&D, and design stages of your project.
- Ensure that sustainability is the responsibility of, and owned by, all members of your production and creative team.
- Above everything else, prioritize the making and funding of time in both budgets and schedules, in order to effectively research and source materials and products and to prepare items for reuse (both before and after a show).

These are also the actions that Theatre Alibi are focusing on as the company continues to reduce its environmental impacts.



River Land (Theatre Alibi, 2022). Photographer: Steve Tanner.