



DIRECTORS GUILD OF GREAT BRITAIN

SUBMISSION TO ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND (ACE) ONLINE THEATRE CONSULTATION

Please see www.theatreassessment.org.uk for the details of this assessment scheme.

PART 1: What have been the major developments and changes in theatre? Have they improved or worsened the situation? (150 words max)

Following some years of stabilisation allowing landmark and well-reputed companies to improve output and increase audiences, and cultural diversity to flourish we have entered a period of uncertainty.

Growth in visual/physical theatre has led to a wider definition of the medium and greater willingness to experiment with and transition across live and recorded media.

West End theatre is dominated by musicals and touring harder because of increased costs, reductions in available suitable venues and as a result of major regional theatres collaborating and touring themselves, encouraged by arts councils.

There has been a welcome increase in small-scale companies; their work enriches British theatre and practitioners take their experience into the mainstream. However, increasing numbers of graduates from proliferating university performing arts programmes create pressure on the industry through unrealistic expectations, lower professional standards and competition for funding, audiences and venues; this also encourages an academicisation of young practitioners that narrows diversity, experience and vision.

PART 2: In what ways have relationships between theatre organisations and locally-based companies/artists, and theatre organisations and their local communities, changed? (150 words max)

Whilst regional audiences are perennially resistant to new work, strong local theatre companies still enjoy high levels of audience loyalty. There is a growing, encouraging focus on new works and experimentation but new writing in theatre is not secure; it is vital ACE actively supports the work of local writers.

Commission fees are now too low to support a career in writing for the theatre and talented writers are forced into concentrating on television – and we note that the word “new” applies only to the work and not to the age of the writer.

Audiences for children’s theatre have declined due to a range of factors; foremost being that schools have neither the time nor the budgets to participate whilst major building-based children’s theatres carry large deficits yet cannot raise ticket prices. Children deserve the best that theatre offers and funders must treat work for children as requiring sustained investment.

PART 3: Has there been more engagement with diversity and if so, what effect has this had on theatre and on audiences? (150 words max)

This can be seen from two standpoints: The inclusion and visibility of minority cultures, which has much improved over the last 15 years as part of a cultural shift which is to be welcomed; and a downside, a perception of diversity as something that can be driven and analysed by very crude measures, leading to a culture of “box-ticking” and attempted social engineering – both of which are counterproductive to excellence in the performing arts. The notion of instrumentality in art, of art as an instrument of social instruction, has crept back into our culture – and this was the justification of art under Thatcher. The spiritual and enriching significance of art cannot be easily quantified and must be celebrated and supported.

PART 4: In what ways have audiences and their expectations changed? (150 words max)

Theatre audiences in general and young audiences in particular are more knowledgeable of theatre practice than ever before. As with the revival of cinema audiences in the last 15 years, theatre has seen both a broadening and a deepening of its audience. West End and touring audiences have been good, buoyed up by tourism, and expectations of the quality of work by audiences is high.

There is a larger audience for niche, specialist theatre, especially in scratch performances and large-scale spectacle. Large-scale spectacle, though extremely popular, is intrinsically non-verbal and unsophisticated; a balance needs to be sought to maintain the level of discourse in areas of work where audiences are keen to concentrate on complexity and reap the rewards of doing so.

PART 5: What effect have economic and political changes or any other external interventions had on theatre? (150 words max)

Though the 2008 economic downturn is now having a detrimental impact, over the last 10 years, theatre has enjoyed relative prosperity. Government support has helped stabilise and improve UK theatre, but relative incomes for arts practitioners have fallen in this period. The arts councils themselves have made a significant contribution to the changing nature of the arts, in part by tacit agendas of social engineering and more damagingly by the withdrawal from direct, formal engagement with practitioners as peers and advisors, rather than as merely clients. Though worthwhile, regionalisation has led to arts councils becoming unwilling to support national initiatives and national companies devolved to their care. Furthermore, arts councils' staffs are increasingly at the mercy of their own inexperience and lack of direct practitioner knowledge, forcing them into assessment by quantifiable rather than qualitative measures – regardless of the regular public avowals to the contrary by successive arts ministers.

PART 6: What has been the impact of the Arts Council's Grants for the arts scheme, since it was introduced in 2003? (150 words max)

On the positive side, GFA have seeded many new companies and new works; the down-side has been the use of GFA to replace longer-term funding and to create a “glass ceiling” for GFA recipients. There has been no clear consistency in GFA evaluations and requirements between the regions and there is a growing tendency for companies to be forced into spending their grants looking for further funding. What is required is a stronger and clearer investment path in companies and their projects – and in the light of the current economic climate there is a growing need for the arts councils to provide assistance to clients in finding other funding from Europe, the private sector and the Third Sector.