

## Written evidence submitted by the Yvonne Arnaud Theatre

### Written evidence to the DMCS inquiry on the impact of Covid-19 on DCMS sectors submitted by The Yvonne Arnaud Theatre Guildford. June 19<sup>th</sup> 2020

#### 1. About our theatre

- 1.1. The Yvonne Arnaud Theatre in Guildford Surrey, is a regional theatre with a national reach. - Our mission is to produce and present vibrant, outstanding, entertaining drama for the communities of Surrey and the South East. We receive funding from Guildford Borough Council and received £35k in emergency support from the Arts Council England as a non NPO. Built in 1965 by subscription from local people, attendance each year is 128,000. Our annual turnover was 4,2 million in 2019/20.
- 1.2. A change of leadership in 2019 has brought renewed energy and vision to the organisation and a change to the artistic programme. The theatre began a period of transformation, reconnecting with its community and redefining its role as a regional theatre. Mainstage programming is diverse focusing on the quality and relevance of the artistic offer, as we work to broaden the demographic and diversity of our audience. ETT's Two Trains Running, The Lovely Bones, Wise Children and Frantic Assembly now play alongside necessary commercial choices. The theatre makes its own critically acclaimed, financially successful pantomime, with a diverse company playing to 28,000 people each year. Summer 2020 would have been our pilot summer festival, including our own production of Sheila's Island touring nationally, live music by local artists, circus, and visual art exhibitions. A company of 35 creative practitioners were engaged to make the show and festival. We were midway through a restructure of our Creative Learning Programme; expanding our youth work, increasing arts activities for communities we currently under serve and repositioning the Mill Studio as a home for emergent practitioners. Increased provision of Talk Backs, captioned and audio described performances, funded tickets for young people/ schools in areas of social and economic need, hosting community craft and drama groups, all indicate the substantive change of direction for the theatre over the last 15 months

#### 2. What has been the immediate impact of Covid-19 on the sector?

- 2.1. Closure of all venues resulting in catastrophic loss of income and forth coming redundancies across the sector. Our theatre has lost over 1.4 million of income to date since closure and has begun consultation on redundancies across the organisation. Our own productions and tour have been cancelled. We have over 100 casual front of house, catering and technical staff who have been let go, as there is no work for them.
- 2.2. Freelance workers and creative artists facing loss of income and employment. Our theatre has halted production of our tour, resulting in 35 creative practitioners losing employment. If we are unable to produce our pantomime in December another 31 artists and technicians will lose their income.
- 2.3. We are a theatre that is not in receipt of ACE funding and has limited resources for IT and HR. Moving staff to remote working after the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March was not immediately possible and incurred unexpected and unbudgeted costs. Remote working is not sustainable for all functions in the theatre.
- 2.4. All community, youth and participatory work at our theatre has been suspended, as we do not have the resources to cover salaries for those staff without generating box office income. Despite receiving project funding for the work, we fund the core salaries and overheads for the department. We have had to focus on the core operation and are therefore considering

redundancies in this department. We do not have the resources to move this work on line. Cancelling the programmes has affected poorly on the well-being and mental health of those individuals we work with, prevented us fulfilling our role in supporting and engaging with our community, and left some of our participants at risk from poor mental health, social isolation and loneliness.

- 2.5. Across the sector capital programmes have been paused or cancelled. Our own essential refurbishment and capital plans have been paused indefinitely. Fundraising for the project has halted which will be difficult to regain momentum. However, the repair and investment in the fabric of the building are essential for our long-term survival. Our roof will still be leaking after Covid and the requirement to repair it will be more urgent, with less likelihood of raising the money to do so.

### **3. How effectively has the support provided by DCMS, other Government departments and arms-length bodies addressed the sector's needs?**

- 3.1. The CJRS has been a life saver, without it we would have been facing redundancies immediately. It has given us the space to plan for the next phase. However with the scheme closing in October, with no determined re opening date in sight, we will need to begin redundancy consultations again with up to 40 % of our staff. Even picking the NI and pension contributions are a cost that we cannot carry with no foreseeable income stream.
- 3.2. We received £35k in emergency funding from Arts Council England, although welcome, this was a drop in the ocean against our lost income of 1.4 million to date, and our estimated year-end position of a deficit of £400,000.

### **4. What will the likely long-term impacts of Covid-19 be on the sector, and what support is needed to deal with those?**

- 4.1. The permanent closure of some theatres, some will not be able to survive a long dark period with no income generation without additional financial support.
- 4.2. Loss of audiences, not just from fear of Covid but because habits and patterns have been broken. Less money will be available to spend on entertainment, culture, trips and treats, so we should expect to see this reflected in box office revenue.
- 4.3. Safer and more conservative programming, so you need to support risk and diversity in your funding choices.
- 4.4. Local, community and small town venues, those embedded in their community and possibly reliant on Local authority funding, will be at risk as LA funds are stretched by Covid response.
- 4.5. Commercial touring theatre, on which the majority of venue in the UK rely, will take longest to return to normal. Until producers can tour work without risk of cancelling because of Covid and self-isolation they will not tour. Government needs to underwrite the insurance risk for the producers. This will open up the touring sector again and put work back on the circuit, which will prevent more theatres closing and more jobs being lost. An increase in Theatre Tax Relief increase to 50% and widening the definition of relief to cover running costs would increase production and therefore increase employment opportunities for the sector. It would get theatres open quicker as it reduces their risk.

### **5. What lessons can be learnt from how DCMS, arms-length bodies and the sector have dealt with Covid-19?**

- 5.1. Clearer timely communication and definite decision making was required from the government. The advice not to attend theatre on the 16<sup>th</sup> March, whilst theatres were not directed to close, was damaging and unclear. It resulted in confusion amongst the sector and our audiences and

prevented force majeure clauses being activated. The lack of notice to the sector, before the public was informed, caused confusion, cost money and angered sections of our audience. Consultation with and acting on best advice and counsel from sector bodies such as the League of Producers and SOLT and Theatre UK would be best in the future. Ensure that any committee includes a true cross section of the sector with an emphasis on regions, out of London and experienced cultural leaders and advisors, not famous names.

**6. How might the sector evolve after Covid-19, and how can DCMS support such innovation to deal with future challenges?**

- 6.1. Companies such as ours could produce more of our own work to enable control of the product and reduce risk of receiving touring shows. It will be less risky from Covid to produce our own local work than to have an entirely received season. An increase in Theatre tax relief increase to 50% and widening the definition of relief to cover running costs would increase production and therefore increase employment opportunities for the sector. It would get theatre's open quicker as it reduces risk.
- 6.2. Essential capital projects will need to be adapted to meet the post Covid world, additional time and resources will be needed to adapt projects and current buildings to the new normal. Capital funds are needed to ensure essential works required before Covid can be completed and projects to restore fabric of building and ensure longevity of the buildings that have survived can be undertaken.
- 6.3. Initially returning audiences are likely to be younger as they are less at risk from the virus. So, the programming will be geared towards the younger audiences. However, in our theatre a predominantly elderly audience relies on their theatre going for social interaction, to avoid loneliness and their health and well-being. This sector of the audience must not be forgotten and unserved. They will take time to return but they have the same need and right for culture and arts participation as other generations.
- 6.4. Programming could become safe and conservative as income will drive programme choice, and risks will not be taken. Risk taking and brave programming needs to be rewarded and supported with funds. Again increasing Theatre Tax Relief to 50% and extending it to cover running costs would support risk taking and the creation of work, and bring more of sector back into employment.
- 6.5. For mixed programme houses like the Yvonne Arnaud, who both create and receive work, the availability of high-quality diverse programming is critical to the financial stability of the venue and its ability to serve diverse audiences. Our model is dependant upon high quality, commercial tours to compliment and support the more diverse and risk taking elements of our programme. Without this balance the model does not work. A theatre of our size (586) serving our communities without ACE subsidy, will always need to balance a mixed programme that is both financially sustainable and artistically inspiring. Commercial producers will not tour when the production cannot be insured against Covid. DCMS should consider what support could be given to encourage producers to put work on the circuit again for example underwriting insurance so productions can tour.