

# Written evidence submitted by the Society of British Theatre Designers

## SOCIETY OF BRITISH THEATRE DESIGNERS

### Response to DCMS call for evidence

#### 1. Introduction

The Society of British Theatre Designers (SBTD) is a professional association that advocates for and celebrates the work of freelance performance designers (set and costume design) based in the UK who work regionally, across the four nations, nationally in the larger houses and opera companies, and internationally within theatre buildings and beyond them in a variety of genres at a variety of scales.

We provide support, advice and mentoring to designers at all stages of their careers, and offer an intergenerational community of practice and shared knowledge for designers who mostly exist in isolation from each other.

Through projects including our recent exhibition *Staging Place: UK Design for Performance* and supporting website [www.stagingplaces.co.uk](http://www.stagingplaces.co.uk), we aim to shine a bright light on the diversity of practice throughout the UK that constitute performance design, from pushing the boundaries of the traditional to redefining what a performance space is (a city, a mountain, a shipping container, a warehouse). Through work including *The Value of Design* initiative [www.theatredesign.org.uk/the-value-of-design](http://www.theatredesign.org.uk/the-value-of-design), we highlight the innovative leading role that designers play in strategic thinking and creative problem solving to build enhanced relationships with communities, audiences and spaces.

We are submitting this evidence because we know now that theatres, opera houses and festivals will be among the last industries to return post COVID-19, decimating the possibility of survival for many designers in our sector and decisions that will impact on our lives for a year or more are now being made very rapidly.

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

Theatre designers are almost all freelance - not by choice - but because the flexibility of a freelance workforce in this role is convenient for engagers. The interruption to live performance caused by COVID-19 has meant the postponement or cancellation of all designers' current work and an almost total stop on new work. Whilst income has ceased or been greatly reduced because of this, some of the most significant overheads for designers remain the same (studio rent, running costs of working from home, software licenses, professional memberships, website and marketing costs, and other unclaimable travel and subsistence expenses). Designers have struggled to continue covering these costs so that their businesses remain viable in readiness for work to resume. **For many a net income of £15,000 a year in the subsidised sector represents a successful career.**

Some may find themselves unable or unwilling to return to the profession, a concern reflected by these two designers:

“I am concerned that we will lose many great performance designers due to lack of financial support and that it will make this industry even less accessible going forward.”

“...people are already jumping ship. MANY talented theatre makers won't be coming back to make theatre after this is all over.”

Designers have experienced COVID-19 differently depending which stage of the production they were at when 'lockdown' began. Not all phases of work on a design project require access to the theatre or performance venue, so designers in the development stage of work have been able to continue with some elements of work but have faced challenges trying to do so from home. Childcare responsibilities exacerbated during 'lockdown' by home schooling requirements are further challenged by the need for families to operate digitally from one computer.

Some designers have felt expected to maintain a consistent level of output despite these upheavals, or to spend more working hours in total on a postponed project that since it has been 'stretched' out over a longer period of time.

### **Studio-based practice**

Tasks like model making – a significant part of the designer's job – can mean using glues and solvents, paints including spray paint, soldering and sharp tools, which they would usually want to keep away from their children. Many designers rent workspace to try and achieve some work/life balance in a job that can be all-encompassing and to keep messy and dangerous processes outside of the home but they have been unable to access their studios during COVID-19 for reasons including the closure of buildings (like other workspaces) for safety reasons, because travelling there has not been safe or because they have caring responsibilities that mean they need to stay at home. The inability to access studios represents a significant disruption to work for these designers and these rental costs still need to be covered.

Many designers are still tech 'analogue' due to a lack of investment in the design process over the years by the UK theatre industry. Subsequently, they are ill-equipped for the sudden requirement for remote computer-based working and sustained design development expectations. Even if they have computer equipment at home, they may not have access to expensive CAD software or the training to be able to use it.

### **Team work and career development**

Design is a collaborative role requiring complex communication with a whole team of people in other specialist roles and this has made adapting to remote working through the filter of a computer screen especially difficult. The three-dimensional physical models created so that others can interact with them can now only be viewed remotely on a two-dimensional screen.

### **Career eco systems**

For this year's graduates the devastating impact on them of final year student projects being quite literally abandoned on the day 'lockdown' was announced continues into a graduate career path that was already dysfunctional and broken before COVID-19.

For early-career designers, the delicate ecosystem of freelance assistant designers has been disrupted. These opportunities enable emerging designers to work on a casual basis (short

or long-term) for more established designers, earning a living using their skills whilst learning about the role and making contacts that support them to break into the industry. In the current situation, assistants are unprotected because of the informal way that they are employed. Whilst designers may be able to get some of their contracted fees paid, there is no equivalent protection for assistants. For every contracted designer, there could be one or more assistants now also out of work. There are also assistants who have been in 'lockdown' at separate addresses but unable to work remotely because they have never been able to invest and/or train in any CAD programs and current 3D software.

The annual opportunities for graduates to work in production companies as trainees and assistants have disappeared for this year and they will be competing with graduates in 2021 for the same positions. Many performance design graduates would be making their own, or collaborative work, for festivals and events through the summer months which helps to launch them as freelancers. The entire section of the industry is absent.

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

By the simple fact that designers were mentioned as entitled to apply for Arts Council emergency funding in the current situation, we have seen an upsurge in engagement with this process but this small grant covers a very short time span of financial outgoings.

Nonetheless, many early career designers in particular but not exclusively, didn't qualify for this fund or for the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS) because they do not earn enough from self-employment to be eligible; only started out working for themselves within the past year; the organisations they have worked for are not of sufficient calibre; and/or they have had to supplement meagre design incomes with zero hours PAYE contract work in bars, restaurants etc. In a poll of SBTD members and other theatre designers, 29% had not received any form of government support.

Theatre designers are almost entirely employed on a freelance basis, but some of those eligible for the SEISS saw a reduction in the amount they received because a proportion of their work was through zero hours or fixed term PAYE contracts, so the SEISS calculation was not based on a true representation of their earnings. This includes work for organisations within the sector that, for their own administrative convenience, add freelancers to their payroll for certain short-term roles. In addition designers who have taken a period of maternity leave and received Statutory Maternity Pay during the tax years in question have experienced a further reduction in SEISS payments.

Designers often work for Arts Council and publicly-funded projects and organisations but for many, applying for ACE emergency funding was the first application they had made themselves. Many found the Grantium system and, especially the process of submitting bank details, very difficult to navigate:

“It was my first time applying for funding, so the first time working with the very tricky Grantium portal and also collating and expressing my need for funding at a time where it wasn't quite clear what would happen.”

Designers do not have much, if any, control over the flow of their work. This year's designers and designer-makers have lost seasonal work on festivals, events, outdoor performances and for the tourist industry. Sometimes they are booked only 2-3 months in advance so

found it difficult to prove their loss of earnings and this may have discouraged some from applying for ACE funding. This designer describes why they felt able to apply:

“Unusually, I had been booked for the rest of the year which made it a lot easier to quantify into £ the impact Covid-19 has had on my practice.”

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

The postponement of work will lead to a scarcity of employment throughout next year or longer. This will particularly affect graduates and early career designers trying to find openings into the sector, but also established designers, since it means that the fees they are paid will be spread over a much longer period of time. Some employers have honoured at least the first two installments of fees for work that should have been carried out this year but will now carry on into 2021 or beyond, others have postponed work without any further payment.

A designer’s work on any project is front-weighted as the early stages of the design process are the most time-consuming, so even if a production is cancelled before it reaches the theatre and a designer is paid everything except the final third installment of their fee, they still suffer a loss in relation to the time they have already spent on the work.

A designer describes the cumulative impact of postponed work, and the difficulties of trying to continue working during the ‘lockdown’ period:

“It is important to recognise that postponement still equals loss of income, even if fees are paid in advance. For example, I can complete some work from home [...] but I simply don’t have the space to complete [other] elements. And, on top of this, some essential materials and services are impossible to source at this time. Furthermore, the final install must happen in situ [...]. This has a knock on effect, as the period of time making and installing post-lockdown is time I could be designing and earning money from another project”.

Designers will therefore need to survive on the same income over a much longer period of time. The SEISS has offered relief from this during the current six-month period but fails to address the difficult road ahead for designers. For some, this will be exacerbated because theatres have been closed during a time when they would expect to earn money to see them through less busy times of the year:

“My main worry is that I earn a really high proportion of my income in the busy Spring/Summer season April – September, which tides me over in the dry periods like January/February.”

In addition to financial losses, designers are also facing a challenge to their continued ability to secure work. If the companies they work for are forced to close, then valuable human connections are lost or disrupted, and not working for a period of time means a loss of visibility that would have led to future commissions, as this designer describes:

“In addition to cash losses, this is a significant loss of exposure for projects due to be showcased and likely to result in commissions and artistic development into the remainder of the summer and the coming year.”

Another designer similarly reflects the impact on professional relationships and threat to future work:

“I have spent the years since graduation building a design company [...] We’ve worked all hours to develop skills and forge long lasting collaborations and client relationships. This summer we [...] were set to work on some incredible projects that would grow our portfolio and contacts to hopefully result in future work.”

### **Absorbing significant expenses and costs**

A situation has developed under the current model of theatre making in which designers, whose work is already undervalued and underpaid, are expected to absorb many of the costs of productions themselves. This includes travel and accommodation expenses for long-distance work; variable and unpredictable time commitment; materials, modelmaking expenses and fees for assistants; and the running costs of business overheads such as rent, software and equipment. The impact of COVID-19 will mean that designers are no longer in a position to continue subsidising theatre production in this way, as this designer comments:

“Following the loss of all income at this time, I do not have the resources to support the costs of design work myself. It would be more economic not to work. Even after working in the industry for 35 years, if/when I return to work, I will not be able to subsidise productions in the way that I have done throughout my career.”

Along with insecure employment and low pay, this is a barrier to racial and class diversity within the sector.

Professional Associations such as SBTU, predominantly staffed by designers volunteering their time, are now facing escalating demands and pressures from the powerful organisations that bind our working conditions via collective agreements with Equity and Bectu to agree temporary COVID revisions to these agreements which put designers in even more precarious positions over a seemingly indefinite time frame as we navigate the return of the sector.

This would mean that 'green lighting' projects would happen in a much shorter time frame and that there is the potential for a project to be cancelled at any stage.

Fees were already historically disproportionately low before the impact of COVID which has significantly contributed to the lack of diversity and inclusivity within the sector.

We are facing an uphill battle to shift a serious and historic imbalance of power and lack of transparency from these organisations in order to protect our members from incurring significant losses due to outlay on materials and assistant costs as well as the cancellation of fees.

Designers have needed to look for secure alternative temporary sources of employment during this time and proposals going forward mean that quitting this employment to return to the career they are trained in carries almost no guarantee of the full fee or even the usual two thirds of the fee now being honoured in the event of cancellation. They are being asked to take significant risks 'in good faith.'

Recent hard won victories in having model box expenses and assistant designer costs covered by managements have to be protected not only for the financial implications for designers but in order to support and protect that next generation of designers coming through who occupy these roles as they build their careers.

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

There is no distinction between designer and artist in ACE's search fields and categorisations at present – we are literally untraceable through the funding system unless we do it ourselves and ask designers to volunteer that information. It is vital that we change this.

Whilst the Arts Council responded to make funding available quickly and this helped designers to overcome loss of work during the spring and summer months, the long-term impact of COVID-19 on live performance has not been taken into account. Theatre faces a different set of challenges and a longer recovery than other art forms.

The SEISS payment is based on a proportion of trading profits, and therefore does not include the portion of a designer's total profits that cover running costs - many or all of which they have to continue paying in order to remain viable and ready to work at full capacity again as soon as possible.

Going forward it is vital that DCMS develops a better and more realistic understanding of these nuances within the theatre sector. What may seem like insignificant sums of money in other white collar professions in this sector are the difference between staying afloat and sinking completely since so many have qualified for no government support whatsoever and fees in normal circumstances are very low.

While ACE emergency fund applications for £ 2,500 were successful, this may be the only source of help a designer has received with all usual sources of design income likely to be unavailable for 6 - 12 months at least.

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

COVID-19 is an opportunity to open up (in a controlled manner) every possible square centimetre of theatre space and rigorously scrutinise and play with its potential for community use, for performance and as co-working space.

Designers are in a unique position to offer their support on this as creative and visual thinkers as opposed to the broader definition of artist or creative practitioner because what they think about always has to translate into something that functions practically. This is a real opportunity to redefine how the Arts Council and other funders approach their civic and creative roles as keyholders to these spaces and how they value and invest in the freelance designer as an experienced visual thinker who can posit creative solutions in response to the restrictions that this road to recovery will encounter.

Now is the time to fully embrace the 'other' work beyond existing Arts Council definitions and to celebrate and recognise that ground up expertise as being the 'proper theatre' at the core of organisations and your communities. It's time to tip old structures on their head.

We need to hard wire the presence of designers into theatre boards so that they become brave and radical new think tanks that include locally embedded designers and visual practitioners as a key part of their profile demographic – NOW IS THE TIME to have this intelligence at the table and for this input to be recognised as consultancy and expertise accordingly.

We have, of course, seen neighbourhoods and communities embrace their own creativity and support for one another in prolific ways, sometimes already strategically supported in that by companies such as Slung Low. We have an opportunity to harness and recognise that now, and build our wayfinding mechanisms to and from theatre buildings working with designers and community-based artists. To do that we need a two-pronged approach of taking work to them but also bringing them to these story houses that theatre buildings can and should become, the difference being that the storytelling begins from the moment they walk out of their front door or look out of their window and within these imposing theatre buildings they may now have a more personalised experience for a shorter period of time as a small group that is carefully marshalled in and out.

For the first time the vast array of freelancers working in theatre – including designers – have been brought together during the COVID-19 emergency. Collectively, they now have a stronger voice to confront inadequacies in their treatment by a sector that relies on them to create the very content by which it is sustained, yet denies them stability, security, decent rates of pay and treats them as expendable commodities. COVID-19 has highlighted very clearly how economically vulnerable and unsustainable the freelance theatre design profession is in the UK. Once this crisis has passed, every possible attempt needs to be made to ensure that freelance designers can have fee protection and fairer terms of employment, and consequently to improve racial and class diversity within the sector.