

Written evidence submitted by Eclipse Theatre Company

Call for Evidence – Impact of Covid-19 on the Theatre Sector.

About Eclipse

A National Portfolio Funded Organisation with Arts Council England, Eclipse Theatre is the leading Black-led touring company in the UK, at the forefront of delivering diverse programming in theatre, film and radio.

One of our main missions is to create new work using the insights and experiences of Black British people of African and Caribbean backgrounds and those of us who are also marginalised for our race.

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

Financial losses for touring companies

Like many other touring companies in the sector, Eclipse has experienced a financial loss due to Covid-19 through our most recent tour. This was a result of a host venue going into administration due to the impact of lockdown and therefore being unable to pay the agreed guarantee and box office income for performances that had already taken place.

Like many of our peers, we have had to rely on our reserves to make up for this shortfall, affecting the financial resilience of the organisation.

Additionally, there has been a complete halt on any future business planning regarding touring and potential financial drawdowns from co-producers. Our business model is reliant on the latter. This has prevented us from planning for and delivering one of the company's major strategic objectives – to tour Black work at the mid-scale around the UK. We have therefore cancelled all touring for the current financial year.

How effectively has the support provided by DCMS, other government departments and arm's length bodies addressed the sector's needs?

CJRS and Arts Council Emergency Support

The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) has been a welcome intervention from government to contribute to the short term financial resilience of both Eclipse and the wider industry. Similarly, the swift support package from Arts Council England to support freelancers has benefitted many of the Black and Asian artists whom Eclipse has worked with – and has allowed them to sustain their presence in the sector.

However – it is abundantly clear that CJRS will need to be extended past October to allow many of our partners to survive the current economic backdrop. Given that the theatre sector will be one of the last to open, we wholeheartedly support industry calls for this to be defined in a bespoke manner to meet our very specific challenges.

If this is not extended, and many theatres stop operating – touring companies will lose a significant number of strategic partnerships, which will have a direct impact on our ability to present Black led work and the wider representation of diverse voices. This will affect employment opportunities for a wide range of freelancers from ethnically diverse backgrounds who are at the core of this work.

Theatre Tax Relief (TTR)

There is a crucial opportunity to further support the sector through changes in Theatre Tax Relief. Eclipse supports the call to increase the TTR rate to 50% for 3 years, and increase the range of expenditure applicable to include running costs, and education and community work, and ensure it can apply to remounting disrupted productions.

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

Black, Asian and ethnically diverse led touring work being viewed as financially risky in post-Covid-19 sector

In a new era of further economic and financial challenges, touring companies presenting diverse led work will be viewed as being even more financially risky to co-produce or host – a belief already held before Covid-19. This will significantly affect the ability of Eclipse to present work of Black artists to diverse communities who are already underrepresented in the sector.

To mitigate this, any government bailout for venues should be presented on the terms and conditions that these funds will actively be used to support the programming of diverse led companies who are reliant on significant co-producing partnerships. In short, government intervention should come with a recurring intention of aiming to protect all the positive changes surrounding diversity over the past few years.

Workforce – redundancies and disproportionate effects on Black, Asian and ethnically diverse staff.

We share industry concerns about workforce – namely the specific effects on Black, Asian and ethnically diverse staff. In the event of large scale redundancies affecting middle management and junior roles, Eclipse fears the decimation of a future generation of diverse leaders.

In addition to the reduction of casual jobs, where a significant representation of the Black, Asian and ethnically diverse staff are represented, we face devastating regression when it comes to representative workforces.

Further reduced local authority support

Due to financial impact of Covid-19 on local authority budgets, we anticipate a further reduction on commitment to culture in local government expenditure. This will result in a lack of inward investment, particularly in the North and Midlands, and therefore significantly reduce opportunity for local diverse communities who already have a historically low arts provision and engagement rate.

We advocate for ring fenced funds to help mitigate these effects and sustain activity in areas outside of London

How might the sector evolve after Covid-19?

Eclipse would advocate for the following provocations to be considered when thinking about how the sector will evolve after Covid-19

- Given the disproportionate infection and death rates amongst Black and Asian communities, how will venues cater towards the very specific and valid behavioural changes amongst these audiences? i.e some may take longer to return to public spaces whilst Covid-19 still exists.
- How will the sector and DCMS prevent this behavioural change from affecting diverse programming and wider community work with these communities?
- How will the sector and DCMS support Black, Asian and ethnically diverse staff in returning to work? We know these communities are disproportionately affected by the virus and will therefore need a bespoke return to work plan – that protects both their health and livelihoods. This should apply to **all** workers – from casual to middle management.

Eclipse Theatre Company, 19 June 2020.