

Written evidence submitted by Theatre Centre

The Committee invites written evidence on the impact of Covid-19 on any sectors under the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport's remit (including, but not limited to, culture and the creative industries; civil society; sport; tourism; heritage; publishing, media and journalism; telecoms). In particular, the Committee is interested in finding out:

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

Our context: Theatre Centre is a national touring company funded as an ACE Band 1 NPO to make work with and for children and young people (CYP), working with teachers, schools youth theatres and with communities in a range of settings. Currently offering a programme of online workshops and resources for teachers to use with students and for CYP and families to use independently, also running ImagiNation, a national participation project open to everyone and being used by teachers, youth leaders, homeschooling parents, elders groups, a range of other community led groups and even a school in Mumbai.

As a touring company with strong reserves, we are in a good position right now relative to the majority of the sector, and are able to roll out grass roots projects for children, young people and communities and have engaged with our UK-wide network of schools in delivering lessons plans and whole-class teaching opportunities ("*Theatre Centre have been a godsend*"; "*Thank you so much for giving SO much Theatre Centre. We look forward to getting you all back into our schools.*" **Post-lockdown feedback form Drama teachers**) but our future is very uncertain as we are part of an interconnected ecology whose business and financial models have been devastated.

These are the issues we are already impacted heavily by or have identified as issues that will affect us negatively within the next six months:

- Theatres closing and no current programming; anticipating no future income from touring until Jan 2021 at the very earliest; navigating uncertainly around re-opening in terms of timescale, social distancing impacts; theatre buildings in danger of insolvency.
- Schools being partially closed / open: as well as touring into theatres, we tour into schools and this is a major plan of our income generation. School closures have made it impossible to book an autumn tour; currently scenario planning and navigating complexities of taking a cast into schools across the country; navigating track and trace and the possibility of a second wave; rehearsing and performing a show adhering to social distancing measures; supporting teachers and providing a program of work that is accessible in schools and at home; navigating issues around domestic wifi and IT provision for homeschooling young people (who may have siblings and parents/carers working from home); ensuring

provision and access for marginalised and vulnerable young people, those living in poverty and most at risk.

- Our freelancer workforce has been the most vulnerable throughout this period – they make up 70% of the workforce (including writers, theatre makers, artists, actors, designers, technicians, production managers, stage management, independent producers, marketeers, fundraisers and a wide range of other roles). Theatre Centre has actively ensured that we employed as many freelancers as we can throughout this period, but this is a tiny proportion. There are many freelancers who have lost income, had projects cancelled and are deeply uncertain about the future.
- Smaller organizations are at risk of not being heard in the national conversation around rebuilding the theatre sector, this is made worse where organisations have had to furlough staff teams. Larger organizations with larger resources are able to shout louder but don't necessarily understand the nuances of localised issues.
- The incremental progresses that has been made re access, diversity and inclusion in the sector has instantly been undermined and at further risk as the sector is rebuilt. Vital voices and perspectives are missing from these conversations, particularly as these voices are more likely to have been furloughed (less senior roles in funded and commercial organisations) and / or to be freelance (forced into portfolio careers and not embedded in structures and hierarchies that are being asked to model the future). This includes ethnically diverse representation; the voices of artists and practitioners with disabilities; voices from the LBGTQI+ communities; working class voices and these with less financial and / or educational advantage or privileged; the multiplicity of intersectional perspectives across all of these areas.
- Work and pressure around environmental sustainability has been de-prioritised and in many cases sidelined completely. The climate emergency is no less fundamental than it was pre-Covid and theatre should be embracing the (forced) opportunity to make the radical change necessary to respond.
- New work has all but stopped and artists are paying the price instantly. This does not mean that smaller companies have stopped working, they are often busier than ever as they support the communities they are closest to and who are most in need.
- We are also members of Stage Sight and What Next? Lewisham, residents at The Albany and members the CYP forum. We endorse and amplify the submissions of these organisations.

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

- ACE's postponement of the NPO application process, relaxation on conditions and the extension of current agreements until 2023 was a swift and hugely

welcome response for existing NPOs, though there may be many non-NPOs, including some currently on Elevate funding doing some of the most effective work in diversifying and supporting access, who will find this problematic.

- ACE's emergency package has provided immediate help for freelancers, NPO and non-NPOs that would have otherwise not made it through to September. As a touring company, the real crisis will hit us in autumn this year and spring next as we would normally tour into schools and venues. While our finances are robust right now, if we cannot find a way of getting work into schools and theatres and generate income, we will suffer in Q3 and Q4 of this financial year and beyond. ACE has been listening and that is hugely valued.
- We were not eligible for ACE emergency funds as we didn't need them at the time of the initial response but, as a touring company, we will need support to be available for us down the line.
- While clearly necessary, the 'freezing' of ACE DYCP, Project Grant and other funding programmes will impact heavily on the ecology as organisations outside the NPO will have lost a vital income stream.
- We welcome the support of the furlough scheme as colleagues in other companies have found this support vital for their short-term existence. The whole of the theatre sector is an ecology and what impacts one part of the sector has repercussions across the board in the short, medium and long term.
- The scheme for the self-employed (SEISS) has not been fit for all theatre freelancers and many have 'fallen between the cracks'.

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

- Theatres will close reducing the touring circuit and narrowing those who can make and access the work as artists, participants and audience members.
- Schools will have increased pressure on time, capacity and budgets and, while we can offer work that supports curriculum and classroom learning, it will be hard for schools to buy this in as the emphasis will be on catching up on core subjects.
- The work that will be seen on our stages across the UK may become less diverse, less risky in the effort to make more money, placing more populist shows on stage. While this may help recover from major losses it will take us back many years in terms of diversity of voices and experience that we see on our stages.
- The influence of 'gatekeepers' will increase as their number narrows at the very time of an increased need for the dispersal of power and 'curatorship'.
- With smaller localised organisations reducing capacity or closing altogether, grass roots communities, and especially young people, will have less access to theatre and arts provision. The divide, therefore, between areas of high deprivation and low cultural engagement and areas of low deprivation and high cultural engagement will expand, creating greater inequality. The impact on the

sector will be a less diverse population joining the creative workforce in years to come.

- Financial security of the workforce is already leading to an exodus of talented and committed people who can no longer make a living and have no other options to fall back on that would allow them to continue to self-exploit, leading to a less diverse workforce.
- Progress made to address systemic inequalities in recruitment practices is at risk as smaller teams with reduced resources take more pragmatic approaches to recruitment and retreat to in-accessible practice for recruitment and career development.
- The increased marginalization of disabled artists is a threat and we support the submission made by WeShallNotBeRemoved, including calls for Equality Impact Assessment and upon the DWP to support and protect PIPs, Access to Work and other funding that can support disabled artists and enable them to continue to make work.
- The danger of programming becoming more conservative and risk averse will directly impact the bulk of smaller scale organisations, where innovation (in artistic practice, participation, co-creation, digital engagement, distribution, audience development, and financial, organisation and business models) is often to be found, and on the work on main stages. This in turn will have a negative impact on the diversity of audiences and those who participate in and consume theatre and cultural provision.
- Theatres will look to reduce risk in all strands of programming and may only make or book work that audiences will already know, including adaptations of books or films, and will look for 'known quantities' over quality. Risk adverse programming will mean that companies making more front-footed, engaged work will suffer, as will youth-led, co-created work with youth voice at its heart.
- There are also vulnerabilities for the talent pipeline and threats facing the legion of micro business that support talent development and training, run by freelancers teaching CYP (music, drama, singing, dance). Many of these have responded entrepreneurially by moving their businesses online but they struggle to compete with, and have visibility among, the larger players with brand recognition who are (generously) meeting a demand for creative activity by focusing on streaming content but squeezing out the smaller fish. If they cannot survive the crisis, we could lose a part of the ecology that is completely under the radar but very necessary.
- We support the call for a Cultural Investment Participation Scheme (CIPS). Sam Mendes and the Old Vic are strong advocates, among many others, for the CIPS model of government investment and, as part of the ecology that could benefit from such investment directly or indirectly, we see the value of this approach as part of a package of recovery.

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

- When times were good then the government spoke loudly about the economic value of the arts in the UK, about how much money it brought to the economy, how high the conversion rate of investment was and the soft and hard power of UK culture at home and abroad. However, in this moment of crisis and desire to restart the economy the arts have been severely left behind in the conversation. Money is one thing but there has been a lack of public facing lobby from the DCMS.
- The inequality of who is invited to the table or conversation about how the sector will recover highlights the arts industry's inability to serve all. The lesson we must take from Covid-19 is that to create a better sector that is truly able to serve our nation, we must involve those often unheard in the rebuilding planning and process. Diversity and inclusivity improves the art, the cultural offer, and the workforce, and must be central to a post Covid-19 sector.

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

- Government department to work in more integrated ways, particularly across DfE, BICS, DWP, Treasury and DCMS
- A centralised government commitment on the cultural activity each child and young person should have access to before they leave education. It is vital to see a creative education as a pillar of a modern curriculum (c/f Cultural Learning Alliance's submission). By placing cultural experience and access at the heart of the school curriculum, the sector will become a central pillar, rather than a bonus, of how we educate and prepare young people for the 21st century. Our communities will therefore be full of creative citizens who are both makers and consumers of the arts, helping to diversify the sector and provide a resilient customer base.
- The huge demand and take up of cultural activities during lockdown has shown that theatre, arts and culture is the lifeblood of societies, even if the art that is being consumed is not recognized as such at point of consumption – people will instantly see that an NTLive showing is art but they won't necessarily see the huge volume of Netflix box sets through the same lense. Without one, the other can't exist as theatre often provides the training ground and the mainstay employer for artists and technicians who make the more high profile, mass consumption work. London 2012's Opening Ceremony was made by people who trained and started their careers in theatre. Theatre, film and TV share a pool of talent and theatre gives consistent weeks of employment, albeit at vastly lower salaries. Star Wars' John Boyega found his talent at Theatre Peckham's youth

theater; Roy Williams (Death of England at the NT) discovered he was a writer, rather than an actor, with us at Theatre Centre.

- While devastating, this crisis could offer an opportunity to re-think the way we make work, who we make it with, and who for. If a significant proportion of our current audiences are likely to be more risk averse and unwilling to return, even to a socially distanced theatre experience, it gives an opportunity to find ways of reaching new and more diverse audiences that were not attracted by the work or the experiences that were being offered before. The creative industries were the fastest growing sector and there should be every hope that this will be the case again. The sector was and should continue to evolve working practices to attract and retain people from all backgrounds. If the DCMS were able to develop a closer and more strategic relationship with the DfE focusing on the benefits of a creative education, including the development of resilience and transferable work and life skills, as well as increased employability in the sector itself, we could see continued forward momentum towards ensuring equality of opportunity within a diverse and vibrant workforce and talent pool.
- We have seen a real galvanisation of youth theatres and a willingness to embrace the challenges, creating new, distanced and online models in order to respond quickly and effectively to real need. We have certainly been building stronger relationships with youth theatres we already know and making new relationships through being open, offering a range of work, asking and listening to what they need. The CYP sector is demonstrating that it can adapt quickly and innovate, inviting participation in innovative ways - new models we are clearly going to need to learn from and continue into the future. The CYP sector has been leading on making interactions, creating and distributing opportunities for activities rather than focusing on pushing out content (streaming shows).
- A positive might be that as organisations that have been able to continue engagement with their CYP audiences may find increased loyalty and take up of work post Covid-19. This may also be the case for companies and touring companies that have used this time to work with and support teachers, schools, families, youth theatres and young people, which we know has been of huge value in grass roots communities.
- The downside of this is that it is, of necessity, patchy, opportunistic and dependent on organic pushing out of information and messaging, rather than being in any way strategic or systematic in planning and delivery - in these times, it's quick responses to need and capitalising where you gain any traction. Without investment and funding it will be impossible for the CYP sector to hold on to the ground it has covered during the crisis and to continue to reach, serve and work with grass roots communities it has met and engaged with in the digital world.
- The lobbying voice of the CYP sector will always be outgunned by larger organisations unless there is a genuine spirit of collaboration and sharing of platforms. There is a fantastic opportunity for collaboration and partnership, but this requires openness and an organisational humility that doesn't jeopardise the

delicate financial and operational models these smaller organisations already have in place. The work of CYP organisations is exceptionally nuanced and carefully curated; it needs deep understanding of, and long term commitment to, the communities being served and that would call for real investment and parity in collaborative relationships.