



# Audience Research Group – Insight Highlights

23 July 2020

## Introduction

The SOLT/UK Theatre Research Group has gathered evidence of consumer sentiment and behaviour from over 25 authoritative research sources in order to inform the sector's efforts to successfully reopen Theatre in a way which offers audiences confidence to return and incentives to do so. Here we offer a summary of findings and an interpretation of what this means for the theatre sector.

Due to the dynamic nature of the crisis, the frequently changing government guidance and the evolving nature of the public health threat, consumer responses are an indication of their likely future behaviour, but not a guarantee. Indeed, we would expect concerns to decrease over time rather than increase, assuming no second wave of Covid-19.

Special attention has been paid to the data surrounding those outdoor attractions, museums and galleries which are now open, and we are now beginning to see the relationship between stated intentions and actual visitation - the findings are positive.

This briefing is a snapshot of current attitudes - we continue to monitor and update our data on an ongoing basis.

SOLT and UK Theatre would like to give huge thanks to Richard Huntrods for all his hard work on this project. We would also like to thank the whole Audience Research Group for their continuing support, and thank you to those who have contributed valuable research to this document.

We are aiming to update this document every month or so, or whenever significant political announcements or social shifts require us to review the available data.

## Key Take-outs

- Pent up demand for theatre means attendance is likely to exceed pre-crisis levels in the long-term, however, right now the vast majority of theatre audiences put safety first and the sector must too – only 20% say they would return to the Theatre when it opens, whereas a further 50% will consider booking when it is perceived to be safe. Successful marketing communications will put the safe enjoyment of the theatre experience at the heart of all campaign strategies - in social media, on the website homepage, as the lead on emails, in video showing how it works and demonstrating that all staff are committed. Sharing early visitor testimony, reassuring others of a safe and enjoyable experience, is recommended, as is using a sector kite mark such as Visit England's "Good to go"

symbol which is proving successful.

- Theatre audiences' concerns go well beyond crossing the theatre threshold. They have deep reservations about using public transport – the average lead time before taking a train ride is 2.9 months. In the short and medium term journeys are likely to be by foot, bike or private car. A proactive attitude to providing sufficient secure bike parks, cycle and walking routes on websites, parking information and discounts, and partnering with Covid Safe cab companies will all play their part in making a theatre visit possible.
- There is significant pressure on theatre-goer incomes – 46% feel concerned about their finances – severe safety concerns and lifestyle changes which may stick, such as home working – 50% of workers are doing so from home and 70% wish to continue - all suggests that the sector will need to consider price and other incentives to trigger visitation decisions.

### **Theatre Audience Response to Culture During Lockdown**

Theatre closure during lockdown has not dimmed audiences' interest in live performance. 93% of theatre-goers are missing it and 43% of theatre-goers had watched a cultural event online by 6th May, rising to over 65% by the end of June. Audiences say they are looking forward to getting back to theatre and the buzz of the live event ([Indigo After the Interval Wave 1 Survey May 2020](#) and [Act 2 Wave 1 June 2020](#)). Furthermore, 3% more of the UK population have expressed an intention to look for places of cultural interest post-lockdown, as compared to pre-crisis levels ([BVA-BDRC Covid-19 Week 13 Tracker, 23 June](#)). Evidence supporting the idea that culture has grown in importance during lockdown comes from social listening projects where discussion of going to live events ranked second only to visiting pubs and bars ([Kantar – Covid 19 tracker - Re-opening the Doors to Out of Home Entertainment 4 June](#)).

### **Returning to Theatres**

Despite a gloomy national mood - with 61% of the population not expecting general normality to return until the start of 2021 ([BVA-BDRC 8 July](#)), 51% concerned the government is doing a poor job of handling the crisis (YouGov poll for Sky News 26 June), and 37% feeling the easing of lockdown is too fast (YouGov Survey 26 June) - there are signs that people are now starting to plan for the future, and we see anticipated leisure activity lead times dropping quickly in general. We are also seeing levels of stress, happiness and fear returning to normal levels "after" the COVID-19 pandemic, although boredom and frustration remain elevated (YouGov GB Omnibus 2 July).

Booking and lead times are still relatively long. Almost 70% of theatre-goers say they won't be ready to start booking for at least 3 months (Indigo [Act 2 Wave 1 June 2020](#)), and in other sectors average lead times for visits are around 3.8 months, for example for going to a Cinema, Museum or Gallery ([BVA-BDRC Covid-19 Weekly Tracker Wk 16 – 15 July](#)); nonetheless the trend is in the right direction, down from highs of around 6 months.

Putting the general picture to one side, it is likely that once theatres do reopen, and assuming restricted seat availability due to social distancing, it is quite conceivable that demand will fill available capacity. Notably, 17% of audiences say they would be comfortable to return as soon as theatres open (Indigo [Act 2 Wave 1 June 2020](#)) with a total of 67% saying they would consider visiting the Theatre if they felt sufficient social distancing and hygiene measures were in place – which is a reassuring signpost for the theatre sector.

## Personal Finances and the Impact on Theatre Audiences

Theatre is one of the few sectors which has tended to buck downward economic trends, notably in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008-9. However, with a severe economic depression ahead – the [OECD](#) June report forecasts a decline of 11.5% for the year - it is likely that this will have a negative impact on attendance frequency and ticket yield in some form.

The bald statistics make for painful reading: A recent survey suggested 29% of UK companies expect to decrease the size of their workforce in the next three months ([British Chambers of Commerce Quarterly Recruitment Outlook 16 July](#)); 46% of Britons say they feel concerned for their personal finances over the coming year, a concern shared across social grades with 12% of both ABC1 and C2DE being *very concerned*.

Those aged between 25-49 (54%) are the most concerned for their finances (YouGov GB Omnibus 12 June). People under 30 years old spend the highest proportion of their weekly budget on essentials (58%) and only 19% on goods and services, compared to 43% and 29% for those aged 65-74. Though there are some signs that younger theatre-goers will be more confident about returning to theatre, they are also likely to be the group which will need to cut back most on restricted leisure and entertainment budgets post-lockdown (OECD Economic Outlook: Statistics and Projections 10 June 2020).

On the positive side, some surveys show 47% of the population is feeling 'alright' (or even better off) financially. Despite the pandemic and certainty of a recession – some segments still have the means and the appetite to pay for experiences. This is mainly led by AB social grade groups and 60+ people - a big part of the theatre audience but one which is currently the most cautious about returning to crowded indoor environments ([BVA-BDRC – Covid19 Tracker Week 15](#) – 8 July).

There is mixed evidence on spending intentions in general, with the majority of studies suggesting a reduction. Looking specifically at theatre audiences, 26% (net – taking into account those who will spend more vs those spending less) say they will spend less on theatre, with 46% spending about the same ([Opinium – The Political Report 25 June](#)). AKA's survey at the end of April reflected similar findings. This suggests the sector will require stimulus mechanisms such as value add offers, price incentives or even a government voucher scheme to encourage spending once theatres are permitted a nearer to normal capacity.

## Customer Confidence – Ticketing T&Cs and Safety

Turning to the kinds of safety actions which will give audiences the confidence to return, strictly policed social distancing is at the top of audiences' list of desired measures, along with hand sanitiser availability and well publicised hygiene procedures, underlined by the display of a Covid-safe kite mark. Notably, many people express concerns that other people will not follow guidance appropriately, underlining the need for firm but friendly policing of guidelines by front of house teams.

Audiences also say that an important aspect of building confidence to book is flexible ticketing terms and conditions. Over 44% say that they are more likely to book if they have the freedom to exchange their ticket if they are unable to attend. People also have concerns about the possible need to queue for entry, possible unreserved seating arrangements, and they worry about navigating public transport ([Indigo Act 2 Wave 1 June 2020](#)).

## Getting Audiences There

One of the greatest threats to normalised theatre attendance is the public's concern about getting there. Average lead times before taking a bus or a train are coming down but very slowly; they are currently 2.5 months and 2.9 months respectively, whilst intention to cycle continues to increase ([BVA-BDRC Covid-19 Weekly Tracker Wk 16 – 15 July](#)).

56% of people plan to travel to work by different means in future; 72% plan to avoid using the Tube for all but 'essential' journeys (Addison Lee Survey July 2020). Almost half of city dwellers say they are considering cycling to work ([Cycling Weekly/OnBuy Survey 19 June](#)).

The implication for theatre is that the sector may benefit from offering more secure cycle racks, offering cycling and walking route maps on websites, investing in partnerships with safe taxi companies, offering car parking facilities and campaigning for a zero congestion charge after 6pm.

## Reopening Communications

Case studies of leading household brands carried out by [Kantar](#) (Tesco, EasyJet, Skyscanner and others) and [BVA-BDRC/Commercial Acceleration](#) (Hilton, Legoland, The AA, Greene King) have shown that successful communications provide positive reassurance and offer peace of mind; they show how retuning to an activity can be easy and enjoyable. Giving warm, welcoming signals and offering hope by reminding consumers of positive associations can help build anticipation and demand. Creative ideas need to avoid clinical associations and build the expectation of a sense of joy. When it comes to customer experiences, studies suggest theatres shouldn't seek a return to the old normal, rather demonstrate what the "next normal" might be like and showing how the Theatre continues to retain key elements of the experience – the buzz of live performance and enjoyable time with friends or family.

The communication theme which is thought to have had most traction in other parts of the leisure sector is booking with confidence. This is often supported by flexible ticketing terms such as free exchange, safety reassurance and utilising official safety kite marks such as Visit England. Evidence that these factors are having a positive impact on visitor confidence was recently published in the [ALVA Recovery Tracker Wave 4 - 17 July](#). Using video to demonstrate the customer venue journey and posting unfiltered customer feedback is also thought to contribute to generating confidence and demand.

## Tourism

In 2019 the UK was ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> out of 20 nations for *interesting and exciting contemporary culture* ([Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index](#)) and international visitors (39 million in 2019, including 19 million to London) and domestic tourists are an important part of UK theatre audiences; with one in six visits from overseas involving a theatre attendance.

Tourism is especially important for London's theatres, where inbound travellers account for 27% of audiences and domestic visitors from outside London accounting for 36% (Ipsos Mori Q1 2020). Sadly, it is estimated that in 2020 global international tourist arrivals could decline between 20-30% ([The United Nations World Tourism Organisation](#)), with Visit Britain currently forecasting a decline of 59% in inbound UK visitors this year, assuming there will be no 2nd wave ([Visit Britain 3 June](#)). Looking to key markets we see severe caution, for example 4 in 10 American travellers remain

lacking in confidence that they can travel safely in the current environment. 42% say they will avoid air travel this year and only 16% say they perceive large city vacations to be safe ([Destination Analysts 12-14 June 2020](#)). On a more positive note, there is increased confidence in domestic travel, with 34% of Brits now confident to take a short break in the UK, up from 23% at the beginning of June ([Visit Britain CV19 Consumer Tracker wk8](#))

### **Lifestyle Changes and the “Theatre Habit”**

Finally, we need to pay regard to possible, and perhaps probable, long-term life-style changes. This area is somewhat speculative at the moment, however, only 6% of the British public want things to go back to how they were before the coronavirus crisis (YouGov GB Omnibus 29 June). Over one-quarter (28%) of adults say they are planning to make big changes in their lives after we have recovered from the coronavirus pandemic. Over 4 in 10 (42%) want to make a change to their work ([ONS Opinion & Lifestyle 26 June](#)), almost half of workers are doing so from home and 68% of those new to home-working want to continue (YouGov GB Omnibus 19 June).

Furthermore, 26% of businesses expect to down-scape their office space. A Halifax survey found two in five people said they had become more aware of climate change during the pandemic, and sited it as a reason for wanting to work from home, perhaps indicating that the current crisis is not the only concern on people’s minds when it comes to considering a return to old habits (Halifax Survey, 9 July 2020).

It seems clear there will be more home working, and localism in general is already visible. London and other big city centres have only seen a return in footfall of less than 30% of pre-lockdown levels, whereas smaller cities and towns are doing better with some approaching normal levels, for example Burnley (91%), Aldershot (89%) and Brighton (56%) ([Centre for Cities 7 July](#)).

The influence of lifestyle changes on theatre attendance is unclear, however, in the short and medium term it creates more uncertainty about the demand for tickets and signals a need to prepare initiatives which communicate to people online and in their locality and motivate trips to theatres in town and city centres.

### **Conclusion**

The outlook in the short and medium term for theatre is bleak, however, there is pent up demand and a strong niche audience who is currently engaging with theatre digitally and keen to visit at the first opportunity. With strong safety measures in place, the activation of clear, welcoming and reassuring communications and efforts to offer safe transport solutions, theatre is likely to be in a strong position to capitalise on growing confidence and increased social need for social and communal activities in the long term. There are however potentially long lasting shifts in lifestyles - perhaps best summed up as localism (home-working, changing transport habits, rural and suburban revival) - which may have long lasting implications and a serious impact on some parts of the theatre sector and drive a need to innovate and adapt.