

**All-Party Parliamentary Group for Theatre**  
**Minutes of the meeting**

**Subject:** COVID and Beyond

**Date, time and location:** 09.00- 11.00 on Thursday 16 July, via Zoom

**In Attendance**

Giles Watling MP (Chair)  
Julian Bird, SOLT & UKT  
Mumba Dodwell  
Julia Potts, Ambassador Theatre Group  
Robert Softley- Gale, Birds of Paradise Theatre Company  
Amanda Huxtable, Eclipse Theatre Company  
Lord Bob Kerslake  
Luke Pollard MP |  
Sir Peter Bottomley MP  
Tommy Sheppard MP  
Baroness Sally Hamwee  
Alison Thewliss MP  
Baroness Jane Bonham-Carter  
George Howarth MP  
Rosie Winterton MP  
Tracy Brabin MP  
Nickie Aiken MP  
Maria Balermpa  
Bob Neill MP  
Lord David Willoughby De Broke  
Lord David Ramsbotham  
Baroness Genista McIntosh  
Lord Tim Clement-Jones  
Liz Currie  
Eleanor Lynch  
Fiona Allan, Birmingham Hippodrome and President UK Theatre  
Dafydd Rogers, Theatre Producer  
Jo Crowley, 1927  
Yamin Choudury, Hackney Empire  
Robin Townley, Association of British Theatre Technicians  
Maggie Dunning, Arts Council Wales  
Jude Henderson, Federation of Scottish Theatres  
David Ward, Arts Council England  
Mark Pemberton, Association of British Orchestras  
Hannah Gagen, SOLT & UKT  
Helen Rynne, SOLT & UKT  
Tracey Wooley, SOLT & UKT

## **Introduction and EGM**

- Theatre APPG Secretariat started with how the meeting will work and housekeeping, including that the session was being recorded, captioned and live tweeting would take place with the #TheatreAPPG.
- Giles Watling MP for Clacton and Chair of the Theatre APPG started with introductions and moved straight to Agenda Item three on the list which was to host the EGM to elect two new officers to the Theatre APPG. Brabin MP and Nickie Aiken MP. Sir Peter Bottomley proposed them and Lord Kerslake seconded them.
- UK Theatre and SOLT spoke through the background the session and the questions given to the panel to answer.
- Giles Watling spoke about the 1.57 billion support package for the arts, which has been announced by the government. Giles goes on to those in attendance to provide thoughts and points for an upcoming meeting with Oliver Dowden.

## **What has been asked of government and what still needed from SOLT /UKT perspective**

- Julian Bird referred to the government support package and the huge uncertainty still existing around the government's roadmap. With no stage four date (indoor performances with a socially distanced audience) venues are unable to plan. The crucial date is the one for stage five, around theatres opening in full.
- There will be a devastating impact if Christmas productions do not happen. Both on theatre's finances and business but also in terms of their communities and the people experiencing theatre.
- There is confusion in the sector regarding the way theatre is being treated differently at times in guidance and in re-opening from other sectors.
- Local authorities throughout the country have supported the arts and their local venues, therefore, it is worrying what their funding may look like moving forward.
- From speaking to those within the sector, people are desperate to get back to work, start performing, working in their communities, engaging with younger and senior citizens.
- Julian also spoke about the need to talk around the challenges on diversity and anti-racism.
- There is concern for the freelance community, as many have not had access to either the Job Retention Scheme or the Self-Employed Scheme and are in real financial trouble.
- Growing concerns for the welfare, mental health and financial health of people within the sector.
- Julian referred to the Theatre Artists Fund launched with Netflix and Sam Mendes, which has raised 1.6 million in emergency money for people to buy rent and food.
- There is also a question of how the government money will flow to the rest of the theatre ecology. Arts & Culture are not bringing people into London and we see the effects of that, so the broader economic impact of theatres not being open could become more and more of an issue.

## Questions for Julian

- Lord Bob Kerslake asked at what speed is the money likely to come through? Julian said that SOLT & UKT are pushing government to get this out the door as soon as possible as time is of the essence for many venues.
- Lord Clement-Jones asked in terms of open air performances, what is the position? Are people finding it very difficult or are local councils being relatively open to suggestions?  
Julian responded that we have very few permanent open air theatres in the UK, however we are hearing of pop-up open air performances happening with no planning issues.
- Baroness Sally Hamwee asked firstly, does government understand that it is not helpful to say you can rehearse without confirming a date for stages four and five? Secondly, can Julian say anything further about the trickle down of money to freelancers?  
Julian responded that he does believe the government understands the complexity of the sector and rehearsals. He also said that we have to collectively find a way to support freelancers and self-employed people within the sector.
- Tracy Brabin asked we need that cashflow, where are these people going to find employment when the hospitality sector is also decimated?  
Julian said the money is for this financial year and there will be a comprehensive spending review this autumn. Hopes that SOLT & UKT can work with all of you on the APPG to make a clear case for why arts and culture should be treated well in the CSR for the next few years.
- Jane Bonham-Carter stated there is another very important campaign, in the form of a crash-out from the EU.  
Julian responds that there is a lack of discussion and consultation going on regarding that because of the pandemic, which is a huge concern.

## Freelancers and Early Career

- Mumba Dodwell spoke about the crisis for freelancers. In the COVID-19 Roots to Recovery, an evidence-based report for the freelance theatre workforce, it said that one in three freelancers have expressed they feel like leaving the industry, which is of deep concern, as 86% of freelancers within the theatre workforce identify as black, Asian and/or coming from a minority ethnic group so it's really paramount that these people have access to the funds. *(N.B Mumba asked that the stat relating to this to this 86% should be: 'Freelancers constitute 86% of all people of colour employed by NPOs' <https://freelancersmaketheatrework.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Routes-To-Recovery.pdf>)*
- Mumba referred to how the impact of COVID-19 has brought about unstable living conditions and homelessness. Graduates and freelancers who were between homes at the outbreak of the pandemic have found themselves in very worrying situations due to their contracts being terminated for the foreseeable future.
- The communities and the intersectionality of these who were affected worse than any other communities were early career theatre makers, D/deaf and disabled theatre workers and people of colour.
- Freelancers want to be at the table, they want to be in the discussions about how the funds are being distributed, and be in the conversations with SOLT, Arts Council and Equity.

- In terms of moving post COVID, and exiting the EU, what freelancers would really like is to express that international collaboration is paramount for the development and progression of British theatre and artists.

### **Questions for Mumba**

- Luke Pollard asked Is there anything that you think we specifically need to do in particular about how we maintain that diversity and the efforts that have been made? Mumba replied that if freelancers are dipping out of the industry for a time, then it is important they are able to join sessions on what is happening and a discussion amongst other creatives, so they can regularly talk about what the future is for them.
- Giles Watling asked You are moving to drama schools to promote diversity, I would have thought you are pushing at an open door. How is it? Mumba said it is challenging, and they only sign up with drama schools really push for ones who really want to make big changes, with the recent events of Black Lives Matter, it has been really interesting to see which ones want to make fundamental and structural changes.
- Julian was asked realistically, how far ahead does a theatre need in terms of planning to re-open a show? Julian replied that productions need anything from three months upwards to get going, the more complex very large ones in the West End maybe up to six months.

### **Organisation View**

- Julia Potts spoke about ATG and how their leadership team's immediate focus was on the protection of jobs and how that has remained a priority. The prolonged nature of this pandemic means that they are having to make difficult decisions about their staff base and operating model.
- Julia said that it is important to share with the panel the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health and well-being of staff. The prolonged uncertainty of the industry's future, personal financial impact, being furloughed or overworked, have had a devastating effect on people's wellbeing. Providing some certainty and a clear plan for the future is paramount.
- Financial support for organisations needed to bridge the gap between the end of the Job Retention Scheme and the time when our theatres are relit. In our sector, this presents the challenge that those with subsidy may be able to save jobs whereas those without may not. Hopefully, all parts of the ecology are given due consideration.
- It is of vital importance to ATG and to the sector as a whole, that producers are able to derive real and practical support.
- It is paramount for many regional theatres that their local authority does not abandon them and that support for culture remains on the agenda.
- Julia said that she hopes that there can be a national marketing and communications campaign which celebrates all that is wonderful in theatres across the country and which gives audiences confidence in coming together once again.

## **Questions for Julia**

- Giles Watling asked as we move towards a point where hopefully we will start getting dates where we can re-open, Julia, what are you going to do or do you have plans ready to go?  
Julia answered that they have plans almost ready to go, members of ATG are part of the taskforces that are looking specifically at this. It is important that it is approached collectively. Buildings will have their own individual challenges, but audiences should trust and feel confident about coming into any spaces. The more consistent we are in our approach the better.
- Alison Thewliss asked Julia if she had any specific conversations with the Scottish Government regarding the announcement and whether or not they are able to make any flexibilities for theatres such as hers?  
Julia replied that two theatre directors in Glasgow and Edinburgh are a part of those conversations at the moment. Not knowing how the money is going to be distributed makes it difficult.

## **Disability/We Shall Not Be Removed Campaign**

- Robert Softley-Gale said that for disabled artists, the main concern has been about visibility. Disabled people have been classified as vulnerable during the pandemic, and the visibility of their contribution to society has been significantly reduced. Disabled artists are likely to have to shield for longer and will be the last people back into the rehearsal room and are undoubtedly going to lose out on jobs and opportunities because of this.
- Robert went on to speak about the We Shall Not Be Removed campaign started by himself and around 600 other disabled artists, to advocate for the work of disabled artists and to ensure that their visibility is not reduced as much as it might be otherwise.
- There is a real fear amongst the disabled community of going back to venues without a vaccine for coronavirus. On the upside, digital theatre has made theatre accessible to many disabled people who were excluded before. It is important to recognise, however, that online performances do not give the same experience as real-life theatre.
- The requirement to have been working for a set period of time before lockdown makes funds inaccessible to many disabled people.
- There is the issue of companies having to weigh up protection against the virus with access for disabled for people leading to less inclusion.
- The suspension of the Care Act was seen as important to allow local authorities to respond to the virus, however disabled people are struggling because of this.
- Huge efforts need to be put into promoting equality for the wider society. The leaps forward in terms of equality that were seen in recent decades are in a real danger of being lost. Targeted funding is needed to help disabled artists survive and we need bold moves to ensure that the wider public see disabled members of society as equals once again.

## **Questions for Robert**

Giles Watling asked Robert if when asking for targeted financial support, is he wanting to make sure that the financial support goes to expand digital?

Robert responded saying that during the pandemic we have seen that online access to the arts is possible and we don't want to lose it. However, it should not be an either/or, shouldn't have to make the choice between online theatre and watching live theatre.

### **Embedding Anti-Racism action within the industry**

- Amanda Huxtable said that the industry has had countless opportunities to pay attention to the experiences and the impact of systemic racism, this is one further opportunity to take racism into account and make radical change.
- Amanda asked for our touring theatre companies and audience, are we using the social model of change? And if not, why not?
- Anti-racism work is with us all to a degree, however, the bulk of this responsibility is with white people as it is not the role of every black person to educate or assist white people. Interested in the dismantling of systemic racism and moving forward with this change.
- Anti-racism practice must be embedded in drama schools for all to benefit.
- At a time of crisis our nation has taken the opportunity to re-examine who we are.
- For Britain to be a better, stronger, more international, more caring nation, would seem impossible with the barriers that are arriving at our gates by leaving the EU.

### **Questions for Amanda**

- Giles Watling asked with the closure of Creative Europe, is there another alternative, another way of working that she would consider?  
Amanda answered that they would consider anything that opens them up to the rest of the world.
- Giles responded with embedding anti-racism, how are we as a nation doing in the performing arts sector?  
Amanda replied that it is at surface level and we look forward to getting deeper into the conversation for real change.

### **Questions and Wider Discussion**

- The floor is opened for questions for discussion.
- Jon Morgan said he would like to propose an idea which he referred to as a safe haven mechanism. This would take on temporary leases of those theatres that fall vacant because the operator has gone into liquidation, for probably a maximum of two years, as a way of giving those venues a breathing space, so that when the economy recovers when the sector recovers, they can re-open and they can serve their local communities again.
- Giles Watling responded that a thought he has put to the Minister, is to consider furloughing theatres. Looking at their books over the last two or three seasons, let them open socially distancing and furlough them up to the break-even figure so they can remain in business.

- Justine spoke about not wanting to just get back to where theatres were pre-COVID but thinking about what they want to be and what changes they want to make. The APPG should consider cross-sector communication to think about things like social prescribing. In order to maximise social impact as well as keeping creative output fresh and responsive to audiences.
- Kenny Wax referred to the concept of the government underwriting cancellation insurance for the first few months so producers have the confidence to stage shows. There are fears that the set-up costs will create so much risk for producers and promoters that it will be untenable. A big worry for independent producers especially. Smaller investors may not have the money post COVID.
- DCMS referring to taking measures to minimise risk in rehearsals but saying that it is not possible in amateur theatre. To be considered by UK Theatre.
- Evidence has gone to the Government and DCMS regarding what the risk is in a theatre building and SOLT & UKT will be engaging on that topic.

### **Actions**

- SOLT & UKT to continue to work in the media and with the government to campaign on dates for reopening, clarity on financial aid and the impact of Brexit on International travel.
- Arts Council to focus on how to distribute funding in the most effective way and will try to ensure that any leeway they have over how the money is spent is reflected in their agreement with the organisations which apply for the recovery funds.