

Workforce Review of the UK Offstage Theatre and Performing Arts Sector

Executive Summary

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by

Nordicity and Alistair Smith (editor of *The Stage*)

for

UK Theatre and Society of London Theatre



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Report Commissioners



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Society of London Theatre (SOLT) is an organisation that works with and on behalf of our Members to champion theatre and the performing arts. SOLT delivers a range of services both to assist our members and to promote theatregoing to the widest possible audience.

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Nordicity is an international arts, cultural and creative industries consultancy specialising in strategy, policy, research and evaluation. Nordicity supports public, private and third sector organisations with robust evidence-based decision-making.

Foreword

The Workforce Needs of Theatre and the Performing Arts

We are rightly proud in the UK of our dynamic and world leading theatre industry, and of the success of productions, actors and creative talent around the world.

However, if we want to see our industry continue to thrive in ten or twenty years' time, we need to make sure that we have the right skills in place, and that we are training and developing those working now, and attracting the right diverse mix of people for the future.

As a result, some months ago, UK Theatre and the Society of London Theatre (SOLT) commissioned a major piece of research from Nordicity, working with Alistair Smith, to give us much needed evidence of the current and future training needs of our workforce.

The report affirms what as a sector we have known for some time – there is a need to change the way we value and invest in training and development at every level, from the earliest stages of new careers, to development and actions of our sector's leaders.

We also need to take steps to improve entry and development routes, including careers' advice, so that we see increased diversity across the workforce to improve our talent base, our relevance, and our resilience.

This evidence gives UK Theatre and SOLT a roadmap to work with government and employers, and on behalf of the industry, to address the requirements of the growing workforce.

We will use it as the basis for a workforce development strategy to be taken forward by employers across the industry, working alongside sector bodies such as Creative and Cultural Skills, the National Skills Academy, and the new National College for Creative and Cultural Skills, and bringing in the wealth of talent in other companies from the not for profit and commercial sectors, and drawing from the education and union organisations.

Over the next few months, I will chair a consortium of industry employers with the aim of agreeing this approach that we will then seek to get supported by government and other trust funders, and which we intend to be seed funded by the Theatre Development Trust (SOLT's sister charity). We will announce more details about this in the weeks to come.

As part of this we will review and make changes to UK Theatre's own training programme, such that our existing offer is brought up to date with today's workforce challenges.

Together we have the commitment, knowledge and resources to bring about significant change, and to make sure that in 10 years' time we can talk about the progress we've made to ensure the health of our industry.

Julian Bird, Chief Executive SOLT and UK Theatre



Executive Summary

The Society of London Theatre and UK Theatre commissioned Nordicity and Alistair Smith, editor of *The Stage*, to undertake research and analysis to help inform the development of a workforce strategy for the theatre and performing arts sector.

Methodology

When developing the report, the team undertook an extensive review of existing sources of research, data and evidence. This was followed by an online survey of 550 workers and employers from the offstage theatre and performing arts sector. Information from our survey was both analysed on its own and used to inform more in-depth discussion in three focus groups with 34 stakeholders and one-on-one interviews with 18 key figures from across the sector. Further stakeholder engagement with key groups was undertaken throughout the process with groups including SkillsScene, the UK Theatre board and the SOLT board.

The UK theatre industry

The UK theatre and performing arts industry is a mixed ecosystem of not-for-profit and commercial organisations. Many not-for-profit organisations receive significant levels of public funding.

Box office performance across the UK is strong, with theatres reporting growing revenue that now accounts for more than £1 billion of ticket sales annually. More than 60% of those sales are focussed in London, where much of the workforce is also located and interacts with the sector across the UK.

The offstage workforce – which incorporates a vast range of job roles and skills – regularly moves between not-for-profit to commercial sectors and around the country. In this sense, the industry can be regarded as an ecosystem, with larger organisations in both the commercial and not-for-profit sectors often relying on talent that has been developed in smaller companies. The theatre and performing arts sector also serves as a significant training ground for those who go on to work in the UK's TV and film industries.

Theatre and the performing arts is a key part of the UK's creative industries, which have been identified as a one of five "world leading sectors" that the Government intends to prioritise in a post-Brexit Britain. It is a major tourist draw – especially for visitors to London – and is also recognised as an important factor in the UK's soft power and global recognition abroad. In 2015, there were 642,000 jobs in the UK's cultural sector with 286,000 of those estimated to be in music, performing and the visual arts.

Key findings and challenges identified in the research

Participants of our survey, focus groups and interviews identified many remarkable aspects of an offstage career in theatre and the performing arts, such as the positive and thought-provoking impact that theatre can have on people's lives. There were also a number of consistent challenges identified.

Workforce culture

Our research revealed a workforce that is passionately engaged with the sector and takes huge satisfaction from their work. This extended from senior management level to junior staff and freelance workers alike. However, there were also a series of consistent challenges raised by both workers and employers about the culture of working in theatre and the performing arts in the UK.

- Low pay, which is the primary reason that people said they would leave the sector and appears to prevent the industry from attracting skilled workers from other rival sectors.
- A lack of long-term strategic thinking and capacity building, with organisations often focussed on short-term or project oriented goals (e.g. the next show) at the expense of other longer-term considerations.
- A culture of over-work promoted not only by employers but also peer pressure.
- Freelance workers, which make up a high proportion of workers in the sector, can be treated as an expendable resource rather than one to be developed and nurtured.
- A two-tier workforce in which offstage workers in roles perceived to be 'non-creative', feel undervalued in comparison to their 'creative' colleagues and onstage talent.

Professionalism

While UK theatre and the performing arts has a global reputation when it comes to the work it creates on stage, one of the key themes to emerge in the research was of a perceived lack of professionalism from both employers and workers when it comes to organisational culture. This perception is heightened among those who have worked in other industries.

A lack of professional attitude and practices contribute to the problems of representation, holding back the workforce from developing their skills, and appear to be contributing to an actual talent drain out of the sector.

- Stagnant organisational culture and leadership sometimes seemingly resistant to drive through change.
- An almost complete absence of CPD (continuous professional development) culture.
- Antiquated attitudes to flexible working, which particularly affects workers (often female workers) with caring responsibilities of all types.
- Old fashioned recruitment practices, including narrow recruitment processes, often using exclusive language (jargon) and unnecessarily prescriptive requirements.
- Use of out-dated systems, software and equipment in back-office roles.
- A lack of good employment practice entering the sector from other industries due to a reluctance to look outside theatre and the performing arts for talent.

Training

While some training providers and schemes were spoken of favourably by those we consulted, there is a general perception that the training landscape (both at pre-career and in-career stages) can be seen as patchy and un-coordinated. There is a perception that for workers and aspiring workers, good practice is often difficult to distinguish from bad.

- Routes into the offstage sector are poorly signposted, with training of varying standards. There is a lack of guidance for potential workers about which training routes will make them 'job-ready'.
- Unpaid routes into the sector are rife and appear to be increasing.
- Careers advice for those looking to enter an offstage career is perceived to be substandard.
- Most of the current training for routes into the sector present high barriers to entry, militating against a more diverse workforce.
- Apprenticeships suffer from a fragmented approach, confused guidance from government and are still a minority pursuit, despite being generally popular with the sector.
- There is a shortage of in-career training (and CPD and retraining) and careers advice options, especially for freelance workers. This appears to be resulting in some loss of talent from the sector.

Skills shortages

Unlike for onstage roles where there is a perceived oversupply of talent, there are very few areas of the offstage workforce where there is generally believed to be an oversupply of skilled workers. In fact, the sector faces a number of perceived skills shortages. These vary across the UK, however there were three areas that stand out above the others.

- A shortage of skilled technical workers, especially outside London.
- A shortage of workers with skills that are transferable to other industries e.g. marketers, accountants.
- A shortage of skilled senior managers outside London.

Representation

The results of our survey, supported by anecdotal feedback in focus groups and interviews, suggest that while there are many positive aspects of the offstage workforce to be celebrated, it currently underrepresents the general public, and therefore a broad talent pool, in a number of ways.

This is a fundamental issue for the sector to address, and one which is by and large shared by the cultural sector as a whole. In order to build a sustainable, resilient and globally competitive workforce for the future it must represent our diverse and changing population. Theatre and the performing arts is likely to struggle in the future if it only reflects the talents and tastes of part of society.

- Low representation of workers from black, ethnic and minority backgrounds.
- Very low representation of disabled workers.
- Over-representation of people from more affluent backgrounds.
- Over-representation of people with undergraduate degree-level education or above.
- Under-representation of people with caring responsibilities.
- It is a generally younger workforce, with some evidence of a drop-out from the sector when workers are aged in their 30s or early 40s.

Exclusion

Despite repeated efforts by the sector to address the problem, certain groups are being excluded from the sector due to current practices and working conditions, resulting in the issues of representation identified above.

- Cost of training and an expectation of high education levels from employers is excluding those who cannot afford to train. This barrier gets imposed upon roles where – upon reflection – a high level of education may be deemed to be unnecessary.
- Unpaid entry routes and low pay levels – especially at the start of careers – mean that applicants from more affluent backgrounds have an unfair advantage of getting a first step on the ladder, this is further exacerbated if they have networks into the sector, and therefore, are more likely to know of these routes and be offered positions.
- The sidelining of the arts in education and poor careers advice threatens to further restrict the possibility of a career in theatre reaching the widest possible group of people.
- The sector has traditionally been and continues to be reluctant to hire people from outside the sector, especially in London, where many perceive it to be a closed 'theatre community'.
- An endemic culture of networking and closed recruitment practices is effective at creating good short-term results, but means that the make-up of the sector is self-perpetuating and exclusive. This culture unintentionally works against piecemeal attempts to improve diversity in the sector.

Next steps

Some very promising work is already underway, led by organisations including SOLT, UK Theatre and Creative and Cultural Skills, and further work is anticipated to address the challenges highlighted in this report. While this report does not extend to formal recommendations, we have made some propositions for further consideration.

These are recorded in full within the body of the report and cover a range of topics. Some are small, impactful steps that could be easily achieved, some will need to take place across a 20-year horizon, some are about advocacy within the sector and influencing government, some require the sector to organise and support itself better, and others require assistance from outside the sector.

It should also be noted that many of the challenges we have identified are not new. There are some challenges that the sector has identified in previous reports – most notably the Creative and Cultural Skills Performing Arts Blueprint in 2010 – but has done little to successfully address.



There is now an urgent and overarching need for a sector-wide strategy that recognises what needs to be done and how it can be implemented.

Much of this will have to be driven by the sector itself. There is also a need for the sector to regularly check on this progress as a baseline to avoid the same challenges identified in this report from being highlighted again in another report in five or 10 years' time.

Nordicity

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