

The Arts Council of England's National Policy for Theatre in England

July 2000

1 The context

Theatre has been a living force in this country for over 500 years, shaping our cultural heritage. It challenges us, it tells us stories about our changing lives and the values that shape them. In a digital age, theatre still has a power that comes from creating a live, shared experience which, at its best, can move, surprise and engage us in a way that is unique.

The National Policy for Theatre in England is written at a time when our theatre is still regarded by many as the best in the world, and yet this is an art form in crisis. The Boyden Report and the Arts Council's own document 'The Next Stage' showed that theatre has been inadequately funded since the mid-80s. The result has been a concentration of resources on buildings and institutions rather than people and art. Many organisations have become inward looking and territorial and there has been a drain on talent and resources resulting in an environment in which it is much harder for artists and managers to take creative risks. Large parts of our theatre have been caught in a downward spiral with less exceptional work being produced. Not surprisingly audiences for some kinds of theatre are falling. In many parts of the country theatre has failed to engage with a broad audience. It has certainly failed to engage adequately with young people and with multi-cultural Britain.

The Arts Council of England believes that theatre should be one of England's most vital art forms. We want to see theatre develop and use its unique power and energy to reach a wider range of contemporary audiences. We want it to have the confidence to make full use of the resources that are now on offer in terms of new talent, new partnerships, and new technology. We want it to be celebrated for its regional distinctiveness alongside its international excellence. And we are prepared to act – as this National Policy makes clear – to create the right climate for artists, producers, writers and audiences to thrive.

Substantial change will be required to create an environment in which theatre will flourish in this new century. Of course we must invest in and support what we do well, but we must also acknowledge and address existing weaknesses. The funding system needs to engage with a greater range of artists and practitioners. The roles and functions of some theatre buildings and organisations may need to change to enable them to take on new partnerships and reach new audiences. We believe that the theatre community and the arts funding bodies are ready to respond to this challenge and work with us to ensure a vital future for theatre in this country.

2 The Arts Council's role

The Arts Council's role is to set national objectives, to maintain an overview of national provision, to act as an advocate and to argue the national case for the funds necessary to achieve those objectives.

The Arts Council's National Policy for Theatre in England will transform and sustain theatre in this country ensuring that a wide range of audiences has access to bold, relevant and exciting work. That transformation requires many players to work together including the theatre community itself; the voluntary sector; the Regional Arts Boards; Local Authorities; the education sector; and the commercial sector.

The National Policy must embrace the theatre sector as a whole and involve a wide range of venues and sources of production, including producing theatres, regional presenting venues, arts centres and other spaces, non building-based subsidised production and touring, other subsidised theatre in London, and the West End and commercial production. It will be supported by the further development of the Arts Council's National Touring Policy.

The Arts Council has led, and will continue to lead, the process of implementing the National Policy for Theatre in England. It has set out a clear process and timetable for that implementation. A commitment to transparency, clarity, continuity and consistency will drive the process and there is a protocol setting out the roles and responsibilities of the different parts of the integrated funding system and the relationship between The National Policy and its regional implementation.

Working with a Theatre Committee it will respond to the creative proposals put forward by the Regional Arts Boards. These proposals will involve the theatre community, practitioners and other funding partners and must show that both the funding system and those working in theatre have a willingness to change and engage with live theatre in its diverse forms, at all scales. Within the objectives of the National Policy it is for the Regional Arts Boards (working in association with Local Authorities) and the theatre community itself to determine how these objectives will be met in different parts of the country in the light of regional circumstances.

The proposals brought to the Arts Council by the Regional Arts Boards must instil a new confidence and excitement in theatre and ensure its place at the heart of our culture. There will be responsibilities for all of us: the Arts Council, Regional Arts Boards and those working in theatre. The theatre community as a whole must show ambitious thinking and new ways of working which ensure that their work is available to as wide a constituency as possible. The funding system must encourage that creative thinking and support the needs of those artists who are committed to delivering it. It must trust those it funds and be clear about why it funds them. The Arts Council is committed to reducing bureaucracy. It will make bold decisions and be prepared to prioritise, committing or withdrawing funds in

response to the levels of ambitious and fresh thinking and the quality of artistic work.

Together we can develop a more flexible theatre network that can sustain and develop the best of the past and encourage the writers, artists and productions of tomorrow.

3 The National Policy for Theatre in England

The aim of the Arts Council's National Policy for Theatre in England is to enable all those involved in theatre to produce high quality work that touches the hearts and engages the minds of a greater number and a wider range of people than is currently the case.

This policy must stand the test of time. It is not about change for change's sake: but it is about cultural change which will require several years to take effect. This National Policy is not just about doing more better, it is also about doing things differently. It is not just about investing more money in theatre. Money alone never produced great art. It is about spending whatever investment we have in new ways.

This National Policy is designed to enable theatre to fulfil its potential and create a theatre network that is confident and outward looking, able to collaborate both across the performing arts sector and with the wider creative industries. This will involve building on existing achievements, forming new partnerships, in many cases developing new ways of working and new forms of distribution. This is challenging stuff but if the theatre community, Regional Arts Boards and the Arts Council, in partnership with Local Authorities, can rise to the challenge, then together we can create an environment that enables theatre to find new audiences and create new work, thriving on quality and innovation.

The Arts Council's National Policy for Theatre in England is informed by the Council's over-arching strategic priorities:

- New work, experimentation and the individual artist
- New art forms and collaborative ways of working, particularly with new technology
- Diversity and inclusion, particularly in relation to race, disability and economic class
- Children, young people, lifelong learning
- Touring and distribution, including through broadcasting, recording and electronic publishing

4 Eight priorities

The National Policy for Theatre in England is built on eight key priorities. We expect all funded organisations to deliver the first two priorities. The remaining six priorities should inform the thinking of everyone involved in subsidised theatre. However, we do not expect everyone to give them equal priority or delivery. The Arts Council will be looking to the theatre sector as a whole to deliver:

1 A better range of high quality work

Together we must deliver a greater range of high quality live theatre across the country. This work must be across all scales and sectors. We acknowledge that work will be performed in very different contexts but the quality of the work is key, as is its relevance to its audience.

We will invest in artists and arts organisations that show a real commitment to creativity and innovation. Those working in theatre are actively encouraged to develop new talent and respond to new ideas and emerging artistic practice.

2 Attract more people

If we are to achieve a sustainable increase in the numbers of people engaging with theatre as audiences and as participants then theatre has to offer them an experience that is stimulating and engaging.

We expect funded theatre to have audience development at its heart. The interaction between art and audiences and participants has to be central.

The theatre community should continue to build on its work to engage with people who have felt excluded from theatre. Access must be a key priority. Young people are a particular priority. We need to grow and encourage the next generation of audiences and practitioners.

More organisations and buildings should be able to respond to the way people live their lives now, offering an environment that is as attractive as other leisure-related buildings. Theatre buildings need to be clear about their focus and their identity. Where appropriate, they should make people of all ages, social groups and ethnic communities feel at home in them throughout the day.

3 Develop new ways of working

We will invest in organisations that foster a culture of innovation.

We want to see greater collaborative partnerships between different theatre organisations and less territorialism within the theatre community.

Practitioners must embrace a culture of innovation and a wider range of forms and traditions. Theatre needs to engage with a wider range of artists and other partners. Theatre should also connect more proactively with the other creative industries, seeing them as an opportunity not a threat.

We will support theatre initiatives that make imaginative use of existing and new environments. We would like to see work made for a greater range of spaces and places.

The Arts Council will do its part to create stronger links between producing venues, presenting houses, and touring companies to enable greater exploitation of good work and to enable circuits of promoters to receive a more flexible and varied range of theatre.

4 Education

We expect most forms of funded theatre to place education at the heart of their work. Involving young people in theatre is key.

The Arts Council recognises the importance of working with the education sector: with schools, colleges and higher education. We will work with the education sector to influence the role of drama in the curriculum, seeking to maximise teachers' appreciation of the value of theatre as an educational resource and to fund more theatre in educational contexts.

5 Address diversity and inclusion

Theatre must engage with audiences and artists from a broader, more diverse range of backgrounds. It must connect with people who have been excluded, including those living in rural communities.

We expect the theatre community to develop work that speaks to the diverse audiences who make up this country today. This work is a priority for us. We want to see an increase in the workforce from the non-white population; a greater percentage of the audience for all theatre coming from a wider range of backgrounds; and a much more diverse artistic programme across England.

6 Develop the artists and creative managers of the future

Theatre must give talented people flexible and appropriate career opportunities. It must create conditions that ensure talent is nurtured. It

must improve the working environment, sustaining creative teams and providing better pay and conditions for artists, technicians and managers. It must embrace the culture of lifelong learning, ensuring that individuals working in theatre are skilled and motivated.

We must acknowledge and exploit the synergies between the subsidised and commercial sectors and between London and the regions. In particular we must work with other key partners to make it more possible for talented people to work outside London. The Arts Council will support the profession in making the changes necessary for this to happen.

7 An international reputation

We expect the theatre community as a whole to develop work of international quality and bring the best world theatre to England. We will encourage more international collaborations and projects that enhance the international reputation of English theatre.

8 Regional distinctiveness

We will also encourage the unique local voice of theatre that combines quality with the edge that comes from making work in, and for, a particular community. Theatre companies and agencies should provide a meaningful contribution to the life of the community in which they exist.

Further information

You can download a pdf of this document from:
www.artscouncil.org.uk/nextstage/national.html

If you require copies of this document in large print, audio-tape, Braille or any other alternative format, please contact:
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