
Theatre: achievements, challenges and opportunities

Consultation paper appendix

England's theatre is admired throughout the world. It is known for its astonishing variety, from classical plays and new texts to experimental theatre, live art and dramatic work with no text at all. Traditional forms of theatre exist alongside work created using digital technology. Performers might be as likely to train in circus skills as Shakespearean pentameters. Performances take place on the streets as well as in newly refurbished buildings.

The context in which theatre is created and enjoyed is complex. Theatre subsidised by the public purse (local authorities as well as the Arts Council) exists alongside commercial theatre, which contributes an estimated £2.5 billion a year to the UK economy, and amateur theatre, which is made up of an estimated 5,380 groups and 1.1 million participants. It contributes to the education of our young people and is central to the creative industries, with especially strong links to the film and television industries. Many English artists who started out in Arts Council-funded theatres have become world-renowned through film or television. English theatre productions frequently become international hits or commercially successful films.

At the beginning of the last decade, after many years of low investment, theatre received a £25 million annual increase in Arts Council funding. Our 2009 theatre assessment shows that this led to a more confident and energised theatre sector, and new and refurbished buildings improved conditions and opportunities for artists and audiences. Commentators have celebrated the rise in quality, experimentation and creativity that resulted from the increased funding and there was a 9 per cent growth in performances between 2001/2 and 2006/7. The overall number of people attending theatre remained static during this period, but there were signs in 2009 of a growth in audience numbers across the country. Sustaining this momentum is a major challenge.

Theatre is changing. The traditional canon is constantly revisited with a fresh eye and new writing continues to thrive, with new plays enjoying full houses. Definitions of theatre have been stretched beyond those used a generation ago. Outdoor festivals such as Latitude showcase theatre, and increasingly theatre can be found in unexpected places, such as under railway arches, in docks, on the streets and in disused office buildings. Experiments have begun in digital broadcasting: NT Live reached 50,000 people worldwide with *Phèdre*. There has been an increase in the amount of participatory work among people of all ages and in the number of people volunteering within theatre organisations, and there is more theatre created for children and young people. The encouragement of diversity among artists and audiences is slowly forging change, but there is much still to be done.

The traditional theatre business models are being rethought. Theatres and theatre producers are working more collaboratively, increasing their capacity to make inspiring work and to take it to more people. Partnerships between commercial and subsidised theatre businesses have increased in range and number. Kneehigh's production of *Brief Encounter* was created with the Birmingham Rep, remounted with support from Royal and Derngate in Northampton, presented in the West End and toured by a commercial producer. There is less of a clear distinction between theatres that present work created by others and those that produce their own, and touring companies frequently work in partnership with producing theatres. Experiments with pricing have succeeded in attracting new audiences. The National Theatre's Travelex scheme and the Society of London Theatre's Kids Week and Get Into London Theatre campaigns grow each year.

The future is full of possibilities, but it also demands more from theatre leaders and their programmes than ever before. The regulatory and commercial pressures on theatre organisations continue to increase. It is also imperative that they continue to find new ways to attract and engage people more widely.

Our ambitions for theatre

Goal 1: Talent and artistic excellence are thriving and celebrated

We want to create and maintain the conditions under which our theatre can push creative boundaries, attract audiences and be the best it can – open to international influence and influencing the world, giving the space for writers, directors and theatre-makers to develop and present their art in the best way possible.

We want to support the next generation of theatre leaders, giving them the opportunity and space to develop, learn and challenge. In particular, we want theatre directors to have the opportunity to develop their careers and expertise within theatre organisations, gaining exposure to the whole organisation and not just the rehearsal room.

We want to create the conditions in which talent can flourish, exploring different ways of creating and presenting work and making the most of the diverse cultures to be found within England.

We want a more coherent approach to the identification and development of talent within the theatre industry, building on the excellent programmes that currently exist. Artists and writers need to be able to develop their art and creativity throughout their careers, not just in the early years.

We want to increase the diversity of theatre artists and the work that is produced.

Goal 2: The arts leadership and workforce are diverse and highly skilled

We want to help artists to develop leadership skills and leaders to understand and respect the role of the artist.

We want to introduce guidance to support the governing bodies in appointing and supporting the best leaders for their organisations. We want to ensure that their management structures encourage and support vision.

We want the leaders of our theatres to reflect the diversity of our communities. We want theatre organisations to offer new routes into the sector, available to all those with talent.

We want to build the digital capacity of the theatre sector to create and disseminate work. We want to see the development of new technical and creative skills and new business models, making the best use of technology to excite theatre-makers and audiences.

Goal 3:
More people value and enjoy the arts

We want to inspire more of the population to participate in theatre by encouraging a stronger audience focus from our funded organisations and programmes that are relevant to diverse audiences. We want theatres to share their facilities and activities with the full range of communities and artists that surround them.

We want to work with local authority funding partners to ensure that theatre organisations make the best possible contributions to their local communities.

We want to support the producers of outdoor theatre so that productions are found on street corners and in shopping centres. We want to see more theatre included in festivals, celebrating places, cultures and communities.

We want a new strategic approach to touring, giving new audiences across the country a chance to experience the best live work.

We want to explore the opportunities that digital technologies offer to reach more people. We want there to be regular live broadcasts of performances from around the world.

We want television, radio and web channels to regularly feature theatre stories that encourage a greater understanding of the making of theatre.

Goal 4:
Every child and young person has the opportunity to experience the richness of the arts

We want schools to recognise the benefits of including theatre in their teaching. We want theatre artists, theatre companies, schools and local authorities to work together to create opportunities for children to make, participate in and enjoy theatre.

We want to see a vibrant and strengthened youth performing arts sector, with theatre and circus organisations learning from and sharing with the youth dance and music networks.

Goal 5:
The arts sector is sustainable, resilient and innovative

We want to encourage new ways of working, new business models and new funding relationships, recognising that the ways that theatres and producers work and reach audiences vary. This will include exploring investment in work by commercial producers and the opportunities and risks presented by digital distribution.

We want the theatres we fund to place greater emphasis on sustaining our planet ecologically, by reducing their carbon emissions, working with renewable energy and ensuring touring practices have a minimal impact on climate change.

What next?

Proposed areas of focus, 2011–14

Areas of focus

Supporting

Encourage confidence, risk-taking, experimentation and ambition in theatre organisations:

- encourage collaborations, including international ones
 - support the development of business models that are sustainable and adaptable, with artistic vision at their core
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Goals 1 and 5

Build and diversify audiences:

- improve the distribution of theatre through new approaches to touring
 - undertake further experiments in digital distribution
 - build the quality and range of theatre for children and young people
 - use London 2012 as a platform for reaching new audiences
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Goals 3, 4 and 5

Develop talent within theatre:

- support the training and the personal development of directors, writers and other theatre artists at all stages of their careers
 - encourage a focus on increasing the quality of outdoor arts and street arts
 - focus on the continuing improvement of standards in the training of circus artists
 - diversify the theatre workforce and leadership
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Goals 1 and 2

Build on best practice to encourage environmental sustainability within the arts.

Goal 5