

# Theatre policy



# Introduction

**We will support the development of theatre in order to achieve our ambition of putting the arts at the heart of national life and people at the heart of the arts. This means enabling artists and arts organisations to take creative risks and pursue new opportunities. Our policy summarises the context for theatre and the Arts Council's role. It sets out our vision for theatre and the priorities we have set to help us deliver it.**

**All our arts policies prioritise strengthening and developing the infrastructure for the artform. They identify particular areas of contemporary practice that we want to help develop. They confirm our support for individual artists.**

**Collectively the policies will help us deliver the six areas of our agenda for the arts: taking part in the arts, children and young people, the creative economy, vibrant communities, internationalism and celebrating diversity.**

**We are prepared to make choices – sometimes tough ones – about how we commit our funding to respond to the kind of ambitious thinking and high quality work that will take our priorities forward. We believe they will help us develop a confident, diverse and innovative theatre sector that is valued by and in tune with the communities it serves.**

Front cover:

James Thiérree's *La Viellée des Abysses*  
Produced by Crying Out Loud

Photo: Richard Haughton

# The context for theatre and the role we play

England's theatre is admired throughout the world. In this country, apart from film, theatre performances are the most commonly attended arts events. Twenty-five per cent of adults go to the theatre. They have access to an astonishing variety of theatre, from classical plays and new texts to experimental work, live art and dramatic work with no text at all.

Practitioners can make work for a network of over 50 regional producing theatres, for over 40 theatres in London's West End, and for a unique touring infrastructure of several hundred companies and performance spaces. These include non-traditional venues such as festivals, youth and young people's venues, circus tents, schools and university campuses.



*The Relapse*, curtain call  
at the Royal National Theatre's  
Olivier Theatre

Photo: Mark Wilkinson

Theatre contributes over £2.5 billion a year to the UK's economy. Arts Council England plays an influential role and regularly invests over £100 million in over 230 theatre organisations and individuals, providing the backbone for theatre in this country.

The influence of this public funding is far reaching. The vibrancy of subsidised theatre is critical to the success of commercial theatre and there is a close interrelationship with broadcast media.

Theatre in this country is enjoying a renaissance having faced a crisis at the end of the last century. Many years of underfunding had led to a concentration of resources on buildings and institutions rather than on people and art. Many organisations had become inward looking and territorial. Talent and resources were draining away and it was increasingly hard to take creative risks. Audiences were beginning to decline.

In 2000, Arts Council England published a national policy for theatre and undertook a theatre review that, with the support of government, reversed two decades of underinvestment. By 2003 an additional £25 million a year had begun to revitalise the sector. We now fund a broader range of artistic practice and a new generation of practitioners on a regular basis. Over 25 per cent of the 230 theatre organisations receiving regular funding in 2006 were not funded in 2001. The National Lottery has enabled us to continue to invest in theatre buildings. More project funding is now available to a wider range of theatre artists, and the theatre industry, in partnership with the Arts Council, has worked to combat institutional racism.

Photo: Tim Smith



Theatre is an invigorated industry. The quality of work and morale in the sector has improved. Theatres are more financially secure and better able to plan ahead. More and better employment opportunities are available and employers are taking positive steps to diversify the workforce. The decline in audiences

for subsidised theatre has slowed significantly – and audiences are now increasing. However, the theatre sector remains volatile and the Arts Council must continue to build on the effects of the theatre review, encourage further change and address those areas of weakness that remain.



# Our vision for theatre

Our ambition is to build on the theatre review of 2000 so that a wider range of audiences has access to bold, contemporary and exciting work of the highest quality.

We recognise that if theatre is to continue to evolve and retain its relevance and quality, practitioners need to be skilled, motivated and have access to opportunities for continuing professional development. Theatre organisations need to be confident and outward looking.

We would like to see a more entrepreneurial and innovative culture in which theatre collaborates across the performing arts and connects with the wider creative industries here and abroad. This will involve new partnerships, new ways of working and new patterns of distribution. We will continue to encourage the interaction between the subsidised and commercial sectors. We will regularly review our portfolio of funded organisations to ensure that they have the artistic ambition, leadership and business skills to thrive in the 21st century.

We will work with others to maintain a working environment in theatre that can support creative teams and provide appropriate conditions for artists, technicians and managers.

We want to encourage a better range of high quality work. We will support the development of new forms of contemporary theatre. We will also support disciplines such as circus and street arts, which play a key role in the development of theatre and the skills that connect with other artforms and engage with a wide range of audiences.

Theatre plays a central role in developing living and vibrant communities. We want the making of and engagement with theatre to be at the centre of both metropolitan and rural communities. We want more people to have the opportunity to engage and participate in theatre, to develop and build their creative, technical and communication skills; to engage in debate; and to gain a greater understanding of the world.

The power of theatre comes from creating a live, shared experience. However, technology is creating new opportunities to develop the artform and engage with audiences and participants. We will encourage greater engagement with broadcasting and with digital distribution. We will also strengthen the data and evidence relating to audiences and those who participate in theatre.

We believe that theatre has an extraordinary power to transform the lives of young people. Theatre in England has a long history of creating professional theatre for children and young people. Young people continue to participate in theatre in increasing numbers. If we are to maintain our international reputation in this area, theatre needs to do more to promote and develop the best professional work and individual participation. We want to help raise the profile of professional theatre for children and young people. We will put in place a strategy for young people's participatory theatre and will work with the theatre industry

and individual artists, theatre organisations and partners to promote and develop opportunities in this area.

We want theatre to engage with audiences and artists from a broader, more diverse range of backgrounds. This will ensure that theatre remains contemporary and in touch with our communities. We will build on the work of the Black Regional Initiative in Theatre, and *Whose Theatre...?* the report on the Sustained Theatre consultation. We will put in place a strategy to develop spaces for Black theatre, leadership, cultural debate, archiving and international development, and changes within the Arts Council itself. We will work with mainstream organisations and partners to enable this sector to achieve its ambitions.

*Mother Courage and her Children*  
Original version by Bertolt Brecht,  
translated and adapted by Oladipo  
Adboluaje, Eclipse Theatre

Photo: Robert Day



# Our priorities for theatre 2007–2011

**To support a more confident, diverse and innovative arts sector, which is valued by and in tune with the communities it serves**

- We will fund a portfolio of organisations that are contemporary in their approach and committed to engaging people in their work in new ways. We will continue to review the organisations we fund and prioritise those seeking to implement more sustainable business models and to develop partnerships that give their work greater impact and reach
- We will give particular emphasis to experimental practice and interdisciplinary practice, circus and street arts. We will help develop a sustainable environment in which promoters can develop new work and exploit international opportunities and partnerships
- We will support artists and producers by encouraging opportunities for skills development and international exchange. We will help create the time, space, money and networks that practitioners, including writers, need to develop their practice

**To enable more people to take part in the arts as both audiences and participants**

- We will encourage initiatives such as Sunday opening that enable more people from a wider range of backgrounds to engage with theatre. We will encourage the use of technology to increase access to theatre and support collaborations on new forms of distribution

**To enable more children and young people to take part in the arts**

- We will create greater access to theatre for children and young people. We will build opportunities for participation through our Young People's Participatory Theatre Project. We will advocate the value of professional theatre for children and young people and artists

**To celebrate diversity**

- We will develop greater equality of opportunity for practitioners and audiences from diverse backgrounds. We will continue to work with mainstream theatre organisations to remove institutional barriers. We will take forward the recommendations of *Whose Theatre...?*

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