



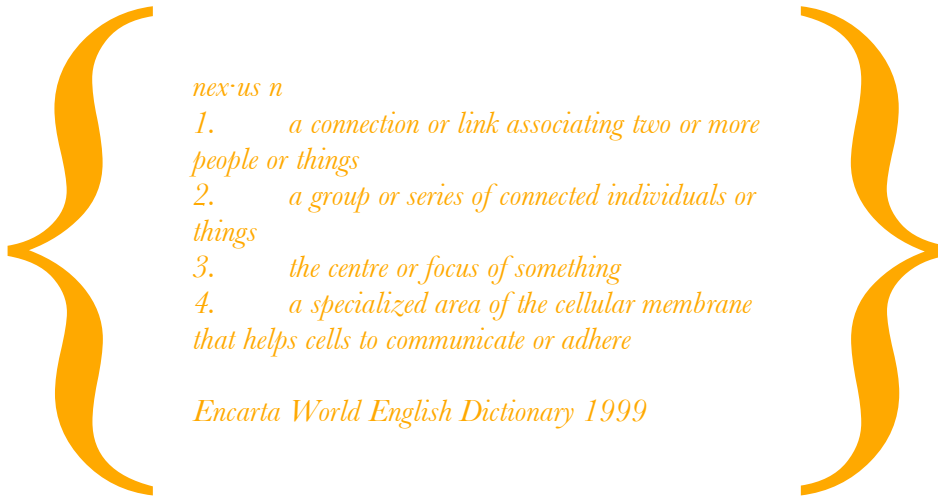
T H E A T R E
B R I S T O L

Strategic Plan 2009 - 2012

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Theatre Bristol's ambition is to make Bristol the nexus for theatre makers and audiences of new work.



nex·us n

1. *a connection or link associating two or more people or things*
2. *a group or series of connected individuals or things*
3. *the centre or focus of something*
4. *a specialized area of the cellular membrane that helps cells to communicate or adhere*

Encarta World English Dictionary 1999

An invitation

We will not achieve our ambition through isolation, but through openness and collaboration. Our role is to encourage, stimulate and support multiplicity and dialogue, sustainability and independent strength, artistic brilliance and managerial robustness, collaboration and cross fertilisation. We would like to invite anyone who has an interest in theatre or Bristol or both to join us on our journey.

Introduction

Theatre Bristol will only exist as long as it is needed. The point at which any development organisation succeeds should be the point at which it withdraws. The challenge that faces Theatre Bristol is to continually evaluate and judge its relevance and potential impact on the community it is in place to develop. Two things follow: (i) that the organisation requires mechanisms and the ability to analyse the context within which it exists, and (ii) that it requires the mechanisms and ability to understand its own role in meeting the need that flows from this analysis. Success depends on both working together towards a common ambition.

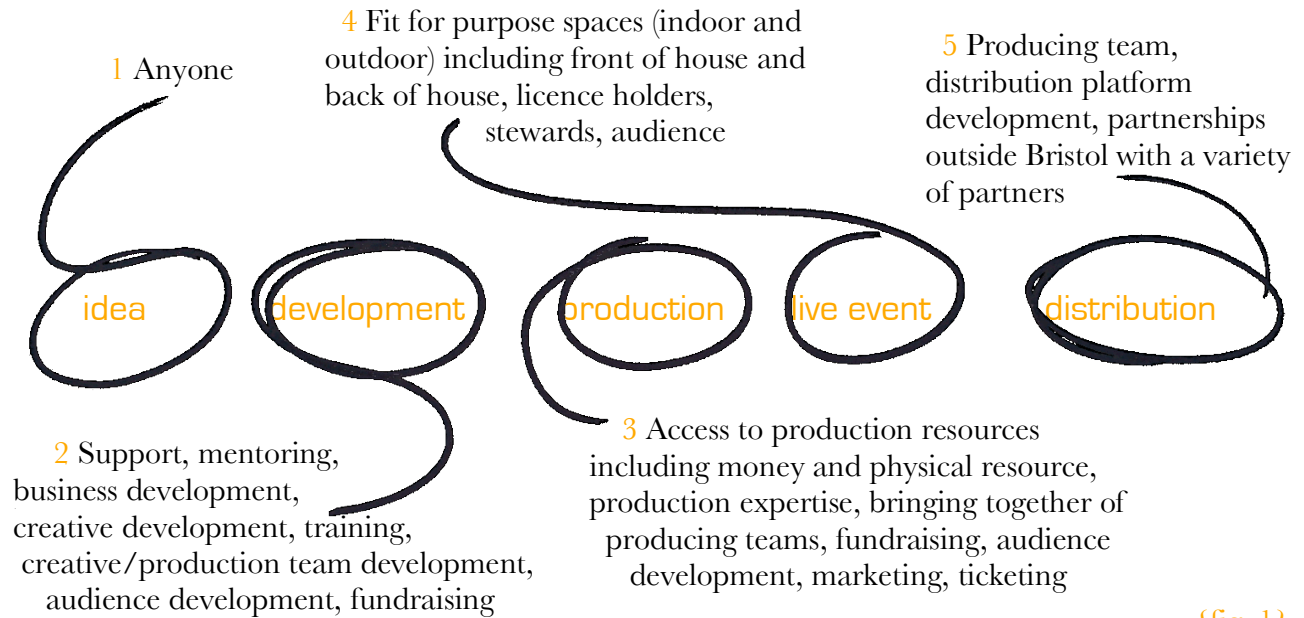
This plan considers the context within which Theatre Bristol operates, the challenges that the context provides and the effect that Theatre Bristol can have on it now and in the future. In doing this it responds to the findings of Theatre Bristol's 2008 paper, *Bristol Live – a performance culture of ambition*.

The context within which Theatre Bristol aims to achieve its ambition

The creation of live performance follows a fairly straightforward line of development. It begins with an idea, that idea is developed before progressing to production and then finally arriving at the point at which the art meets the audience in the live event. This live event may then be repeated through distribution. All live performance activity, whether live art or the writing-led play, participation or a west-end musical, drama school or youth theatre, occurs somewhere within this spectrum.

Of course the reality is that it is not at all easy to move from idea through to the live event. Theatre involves making one piece of art collaboratively. If that is not hard enough in itself, the space needed for preparation and presentation often has to be highly technical and fit for purpose and finally the production staff and artistic team need to get the work of art at the right point to meet the right audience at the right time. It is an expensive artform with a significant risk of failure: all the components might not come together in that moment. But... they might, and it is this promise that makes the live event so compelling.

The more fit we can make the entire spectrum (*idea – live event*; fig 1) the more likely it is that we will arrive successfully at the *live event* stage with greater regularity. The more fit *distribution* of the live event is, the more resources there are to feed back to the *idea* stage to enable more risks to be taken.



{fig. 1}

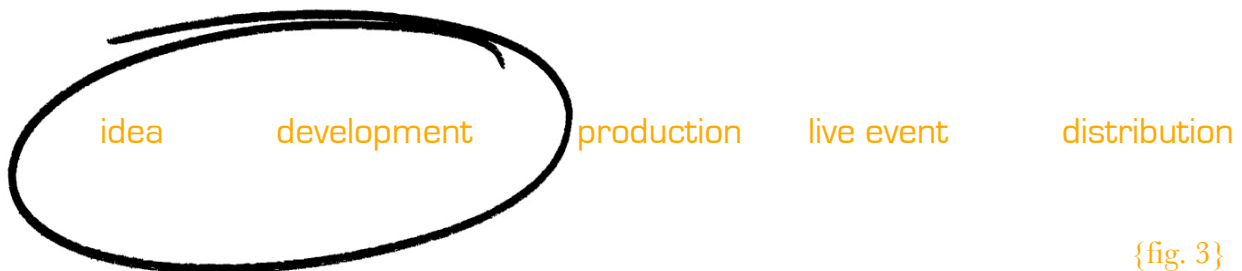
The theatre landscape in Bristol in 2009 is extremely exciting. It is bubbling with new and often surprising opportunities for training, making and experiencing performance. Theatre Bristol's website (which enables users to submit their own information) presents an evolving, growing and rich map of diverse activity; a map of activity that stretches far beyond the current pattern of public investment.

As the major producing resource in the city Bristol Old Vic has historically directed the majority of its resources towards the production of performances on the Theatre Royal stage (fig. 2). Bristol Old Vic's welcome new vision suggests that this narrow approach to origination of work will broaden with the development of new spaces for a variety of performance modes, the programming and origination of a greater diversity of performance products, and development pathways for artists opened up and supported across a range of forms.



{fig. 2}

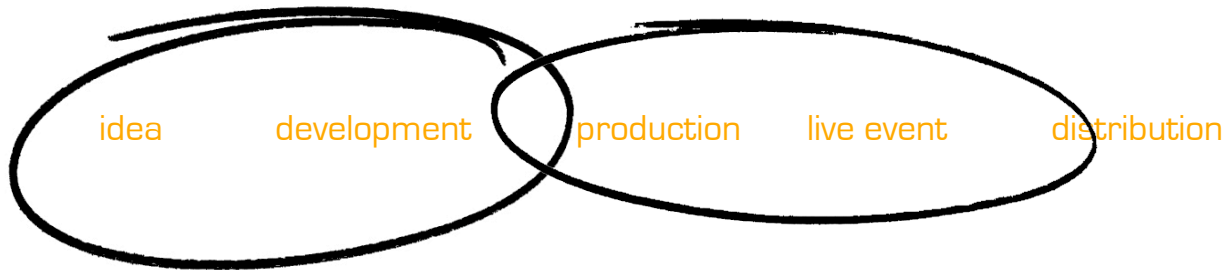
Theatre Bristol has been working at the development end of this structure (fig. 3) and has relied heavily on Arts Council England's Grants for the Arts fund to pay for the progression of projects through to production and live event. Evaluation has shown that the role Theatre Bristol has been playing here has been welcome and important. But Theatre Bristol's ability to achieve its potential impact on the quality of work at the *live event* stage has been limited by lack of access to resources beyond the development stage. Both Arnolfini and Tobacco Factory continue to be invaluable partners for Theatre Bristol on platforming, scratch and programming but these partnerships have limited physical and financial resources to impact significantly on the move from development into production.



{fig. 3}

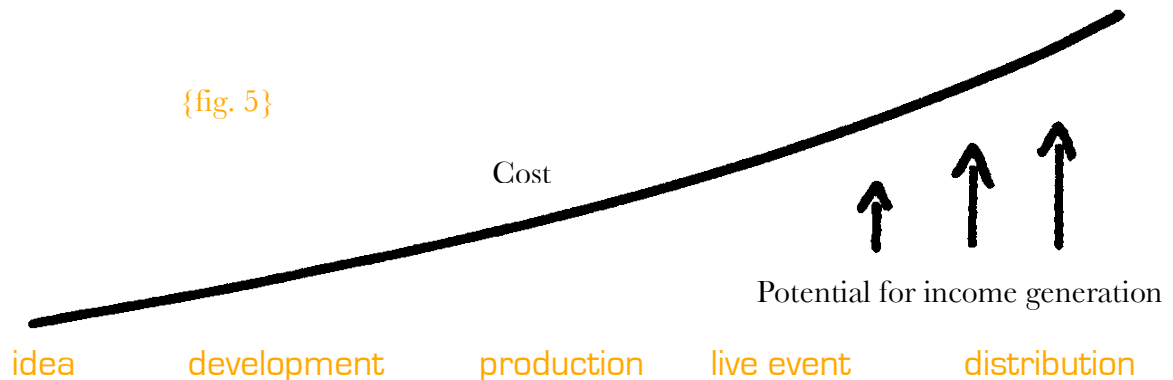
The challenges that the context provides

Bristol Old Vic's structure for delivering its vision is beginning to emerge and, as has been made clear by Bristol Old Vic, Arts Council England and Bristol City Council throughout the process of re-establishing the funding agreement with Bristol Old Vic, it relies on a partnership with the resources that Theatre Bristol brings to the table (fig. 4).



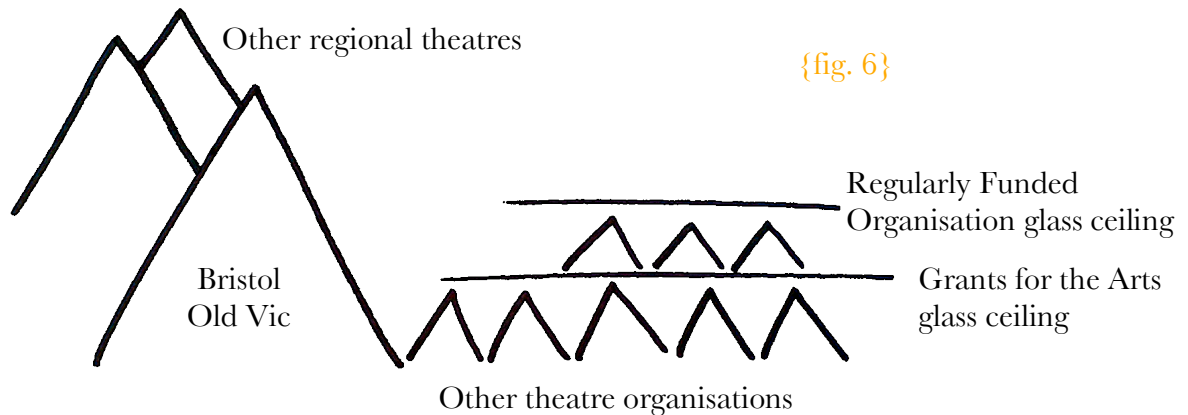
{fig. 4}

Cost rises from left to right (fig. 5) but so does the possibility for income generation. If the model is fit then the high income generation potential on the right could directly support the investment need on the left and add value through association with success.



{fig. 5}

The historic pattern of public investment in performance in Bristol is shown in fig. 6. The Grants for the Arts glass ceiling refers to the fact that Arts Council England South West will not make any more organisations into Regularly Funded Organisations and that, historically, unless the work of those organisations fitted with Bristol Old Vic's artistic meta-vision, none of the production resources that Bristol Old Vic had were directed to the other parts of the industry. This is of particular concern to organisations such as the Tobacco Factory, which requires stable investment at a level that reflects its value to the city, but currently relies on short-term project funding. The Regularly Funded Organisation glass ceiling refers to the fact that in the South West, Regularly Funded Organisations cannot expand through the Grants for the Arts fund (although there have been exceptions to this). Overall growth through the historic public investment structure is limited.



In April 2009 this investment structure has not changed. But the will, desire and imperative for Bristol Old Vic to work with the rest of the industry and beyond has. That is not to say that Bristol Old Vic is a mini Arts Council and will grant money. It needs structures that are porous, flexible and adaptable for a diversity of performance forms and audiences. It must work with existing resources to strengthen them, not despite them. Bristol Old Vic's new vision not only recognises this as a responsibility, it also

understands the business argument that it is a means to a productive end for Bristol Old Vic and the city.

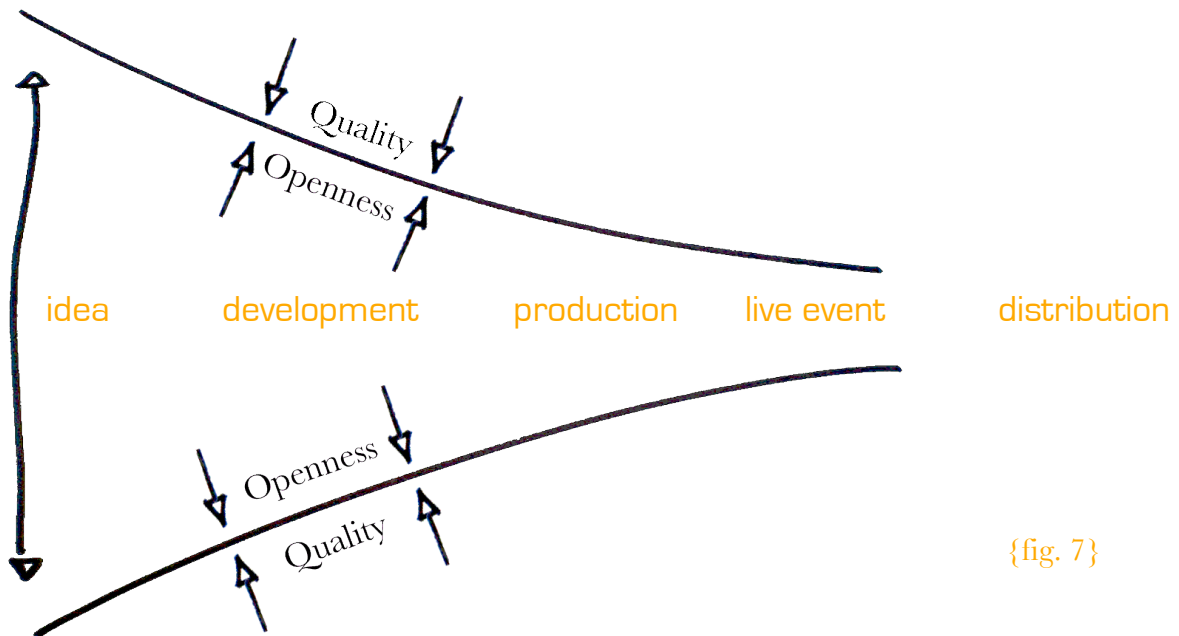
Although the last five years have seen a significant rise in Grants for the Arts funding (that is now falling due to reducing and diverted funds) quality assessment has, in the main, been through written application to the fund. Mechanisms for developing artistic quality within this programme have not been strongly implemented.

Freeing up the pathways from idea to the point at which the art meets the audience and then exploiting the successes through good, thorough distribution needs to be a process led by artistic integrity. It is neither possible nor desirable to invest public money in every idea or company. It is however possible and desirable to give access to the resources available through public investment in a directed and strategic manner driven by artistic integrity. Theatre Bristol's peer network and work with over 125 artists and companies making work in Bristol means that the radar for spotting talent and potential for development is extremely developed. Combining this resource with Bristol Old Vic's resources presents a very healthy proposition. Take away that radar and the proposition is weakened and the mechanisms for achieving the ambition laid out in Bristol Live look much as they did before Theatre Bristol was set up. Take away the resources and the impact on quality is limited.

The imperative is to have live events of the very highest artistic quality. Arriving at the *live event* stage of the model with greater regularity and certainty of quality requires every part of the model to be fit.

If the ambitions within Bristol Live are to be met then a collective responsibility needs to be taken across the theatre community. Theatre Bristol must work together with the other organisations in the city to achieve the ambition. Theatre Bristol's constituency has identified any loss of Theatre Bristol's independence as a threat and it is therefore important to retain this, at least in the medium term. To work with partner organisations Theatre Bristol needs to be strong enough to stand alone and yet understands it will be stronger in partnership.

Theatre Bristol recognises that it operates in a constant tension between quality and openness. Furthermore we recognise that all creative acts exist in this tension. Theatre Bristol has a key role to keep the *idea* end of the model open whilst also ensuring distribution of the very highest quality work, which in turn feeds in new, exciting ideas. This tension needs careful navigation. In a *Darwinian* or traditionally evolutionary model, the market dictates which ideas progress and high quality ideas fall by the wayside unnecessarily. At the other extreme the danger is that a small number of people decide which ideas progress and the market becomes starved of fresh ideas and energies. A more desirable *cultural* model depends on a live and current analysis of the market and subsequent interventions at every stage to ensure the market is flexible, porous and reactive to current need.



{fig. 7}

Taking note

Through the Bristol Live process, in Open Space meetings and in subsequent independent evaluations of Theatre Bristol's work we have consulted widely on the changing role and value of Theatre Bristol. Throughout that process we have had warm and supportive feedback and heard how valuable Theatre Bristol has been to the theatre community within the city and beyond. But we have also heard the ways in which we need to change. Amongst the many voices and opinions there have been some recurring themes for us to take note of:

- Our legal foundation and governance structure has served us well, given us flexibility and benefited from high levels of trust within the community. We recognise that trust is an extremely valuable foundation on which to build, but we heard clearly that we must become governed, constituted and scrutinised independently from Circomedia, who have hosted us so efficiently and supportively to date.
- We must renew our structure for engaging our community in debate and dialogue around the needs of theatre in Bristol and Theatre Bristol's role in meeting those challenges. Some members of our Steering Group have been engaged with Theatre Bristol and the process that preceded it for 8 years or more. The Steering Group's tireless efforts have been instrumental to our achievements and we trust that all the members will continue to be instrumental into the future through a renewed structure of steerage, which is more open and more accessible to more people.
- The ownership that the theatre community have of Theatre Bristol is both a privilege and an asset. But we heard how we need to work harder to represent the whole ecology of performance in Bristol. Writers, particularly, feel under-supported.
- We heard how the bridges that Theatre Bristol has created between activities are valuable, but that if we are to realise the potential laid out in Bristol Live we must now build bridges through doing: we must work in partnerships as a producer. This point was debated time and again and we will move forward in this area while continuing the debate as we go.

- In becoming more active in pushing performance work through to production we heard the fear that we would become a new monolith. The governance and steering structures that we put in place must mitigate against this if we are to sustain the trust in us and deliver on our ambition.
- We heard that we must be part of and partner with Bristol Old Vic if the ambitions of the Bristol Live process are to be achieved.
- We heard repeatedly that resources do not necessarily lead to excellence but that vision, dynamism and leadership do. We heard that Theatre Bristol has a key ongoing role in facilitating change in the way resources are accessed by artists making and developing work in the city.
- The need to connect Bristol artists nationally and internationally was a common theme. We heard how we needed to step up our advocacy and connective role beyond the city and the region.
- We must continue to hold open space for dialogue and debate and develop the mechanism for legitimising the community's concerns.
- The decision to have a “Coordinator” rather than a “Director” of Theatre Bristol when it was set up sent a clear message that the organisation was not about top-down leadership and decision-making. But this is a two-sided coin and the Coordinator has not had a mandate to speak on behalf of Theatre Bristol, which at times has been disenfranchising. We have heard that, alongside the changes to the legal structure, governance and steering, we need to have the empowered voice of a Director of Theatre Bristol.
- You reminded us that “ambition” doesn't necessarily mean “BIG”. Detailed work that makes every moment worth it for the audience is true ambition. If you want to make the best work you can, to take a risk and be prepared to fail fully, then you have ambition.

Strategic Goals

The effect that Theatre Bristol can have now and in the future

The following goals interrelate wherever possible. Each strengthens the others; all are diminished if one is weak.

1 Production

Making Bristol a brilliant and exciting place to be creating new work.

“A performance culture is bound together by the process of making work in a city. If that work aspires to and achieves excellence (in all its complex forms) then so much the better. The alchemy of performance combines creative imagination with craft skill to transform mundane environments into places of profound experience. Theatre’s ability to reflect and reinforce the narratives which bind communities and cultures together must be specific to place as well as tracing the trajectory of the art form. It absolutely requires the production of more and better work across the city.”

Bristol Live – a performance culture of ambition

Priorities

We must work harder to open up the pathways through to production for Bristol artists and companies. The form that artists choose should not prevent excellent work moving into production. Origination of excellent work in production in Bristol by Bristol artists is a key priority.

As well as sustaining our existing development work we will work in partnership with producing partners to develop opportunities for work to progress beyond early development into production and through to distribution.

We are working with a range of partners including BAC, Dartington and Bristol Old Vic to create opportunities for artists' residencies where creation of new work can be seeded, nurtured, grow and blossom.

We are working with Bristol Old Vic to commission new live performance from Bristol Artists. In 2009/10 we are commissioning 5 Bristol artists, 4 of whom have not made work with Bristol Old Vic before.

We are working with Bristol City Council to commission between 3 new works for outdoor performance to premier at Bristol Do in September 2009.

We will improve our national and international networks so that we are equipped to see production through to distribution. We are working with the British Council to develop a network of producers and artists in SE Europe with whom we plan to exchange artists and work from 2010.

We are committed to working with our partners in Bristol towards establishing more, new, and fitter spaces and contexts for production of new work at all scales.

2 Promotion

Experiencing the very best performance work in Bristol

“Promotion is a window into wider cultural worlds. A full spectrum of performance enhances our understanding of the plurality and diversity of human experience. Our ability to respond with tolerance and compassion is proportionately enhanced. Choice is the key. Work is available on the touring circuit across the performing art forms and at all scales. It plays in all kinds of venues to all kinds of audiences. Their level of engagement is the key to a thriving performance economy. Different financial relationships determine how much of the gross box office is retained by the venue and how much by the visiting company.

Historically Arts Council England has concentrated its support on production rather than promotion. It continues to see its primary responsibility in this way – with funding for artists preferred to funding for audiences. Support for the bricks and mortar of a flexible built infrastructure at all scales of activity remains low on the list. The renewed emphasis on “excellence” is likely to reinforce this approach. Bristol currently misses out because of problems with its venue infrastructure linked to the lack of investment in presented programmes. Inappropriate performance infrastructure for a city the size of Bristol remains a significant challenge to promotion in a performance culture of ambition.”

Bristol Live – a performance culture of ambition

Priorities

We are committed to working with our partners in Bristol towards establishing more, new and fitter spaces and contexts for the promotion of live performance work at all scales.

We will continue to work with promoting partners to support and develop programmes that reach out to broad and engaged audiences.

We are committed to supporting Bristol’s growing festival programme including Inbetween Time, Mayfest, Bristol Do and Bristol Puppet Festival.

Our pilot Urban Touring Programme *Lighting the Touchpaper* has finished. Its evaluation threw up some key successes but also taught us some valuable lessons for the future. We will develop this programme and build on its successes. We will work with young promoters across the city to promote work in and for their local communities, and draw on their talents to work in and for our major venues too.

We will nurture young producers from a range of social backgrounds creating new pathways into professional promotion and production. We believe that the producer and the decisions they make about performance work have a key role to play both in influencing which audiences the work reaches and in shaping the audiences' experiences.

We will work harder to embed our work with young producers and promoters within existing infrastructure as well as developing new opportunities for promoting work in other areas of the city.

Bristol Live research showed that audience data across the city is poor at best. We will work with venues across the city towards a clearer understanding of the behaviour of Bristol's audiences. It is a key priority if we are to target our efforts on developing audiences for live performance.

3 Participation

Developing opportunities for Bristolians to take part in excellent performance activity across the city

“ “Active engagement” rather than “passive consumption” remains a recurring theme in government policy as it considers the purpose of public investment in culture. It is reflected in the priorities of the agencies which channel treasury resources via the Department for Culture Media and Sport to the organisations that use them – including Arts Council England. This is not to undermine the power of professional live performance; audiences can be as actively engaged as participants. Indeed the existence of an informed and critical audience is a crucial component of the performance equation. One of the key determinants of good theatre is its ability to bring people to the edge of their seat in response to the inherent risk of the artist in the living moment.

Engagement through participation is something else. The recent emergence of “excellence” adds to rather than replaces the sense that public benefit requires more than the subsidy of “high art” so that ticket prices can be kept lower than market forces might dictate. We need excellent participatory programmes just as much as we need excellent professionally produced and presented work. In this sense participation embraces a range of approaches from youth theatre through community programmes and into amateur practice. A performance culture of ambition must embrace all three.”

Bristol Live – a performance culture of ambition

Priorities

Bristol Live showed that participatory activity was healthy in the city but that provision was not always visible. We will work harder to improve the visibility of access points into existing participatory activity.

We will work with partners in the city to develop and coordinate both the network of participatory services and the ladders of progression from participatory work into professional production.

We will work with our promotion and production partners to improve links between participatory activity and produced and presented professional work.

In 2006 we coordinated a peer network of Young People's Participatory Theatre practitioners but Theatre Bristol staff capacity meant that we could not sustain this. We will re-engage with this need and develop a network that reaches across the city, engaging effectively with all relevant Bristol City Council departments and the Children's Trust.

4 Artists

Making Bristol a home that Creative Professionals are proud of

“The sector depends on the producers, writers, performers, designers, technicians and marketers who routinely pull off the little miracle of performance. They are the life-blood of an industry which provides the narratives which bind our culture with the ties of shared live experience. If the city is to grow, we need them to thrive rather than merely survive.

This is especially true for young creative talent at the start of its working life. We need to understand the barriers experienced by young people. Their access points into the profession must be demystified and simplified. Ladders of progression must be designed and constructed which reflect the reality of professional practice. Only then can the city

fully benefit from the creative skills of young Bristolians from all parts of the city and of those young people who choose Bristol for their undergraduate or postgraduate training. We need to retain more of them within the city by helping them through the first two years of their working lives. The work they make should then proudly be exported as having been “made in Bristol”.

We also need to bring performance professionals of the highest quality to work in the city and to share their experience with both resident creative talent and audiences. This is more than simply hosting companies through presented programmes – though this has its own significance. It requires an understanding that it is the making of work in the city that provides the primary performance driver. The critical debate about what kind of work is best made through what kind of process has energising value – but its impact can only be judged by the quality of the work produced by the artists who make it happen.”

Bristol Live – a performance culture of ambition

“Everywhere we go, people think Bristol’s a really good place to make theatre.” *An artist responding to questions about Theatre Bristol’s support for artists in Bristol.*

Priorities

We are very proud of the successes of our Artist Support Programme and it will continue to be a cornerstone of the work that we do. A 2009 independent evaluation found amongst other things that 93% of survey respondents found working with a Theatre Bristol Producer “useful” and 60% found it “very useful”. We have piloted this programme for over 3 years and have evaluated it heavily. As of April 2009 we consider the way we support artists to be core activity for the organisation.

But there are lessons to learn too. One artist said that it was “too good a resource to stumble across”. We will work harder to make the work that we do to support artists more visible and more accessible.

We will continue to support artists and companies across a range of needs from business development to creative feedback.

We will work harder to articulate the key role that this programme plays in developing the quality of work made in Bristol. The “support” is a means to an end and that end is excellent live performance.

Our partnership with Tobacco Factory continues to enable *Prototype – Experiments in Theatre* to engage audiences and give valuable stage time to artists to try out new work.

We will continue our partnership with Arnolfini to deliver successful Live Art platforms for Bristol, regional, national and international artists.

5 Connectivity

Connecting the theatre community locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally.

Theatre’s lifeblood is its collaborative nature, not only in the formation of the art, but in the living moment of the performance itself. But it can exclude too. Too often theatre is perceived as “that thing that happens over there in that building, for other people that aren’t me”.

Theatre will not sustain the intensely democratic digital age unless its porosity is improved – making it easy for people to get in, both as audiences and as practitioners. That is not to say we should be fearful of the digital age shouldering out the live event, rather we should embrace its connective potential to demystify the journey to live performance for both practitioner and audience, and to celebrate its power. Theatre Bristol seeks to encompass and help shape an empowered community of audiences and

practitioners, re-imagining live performance as a common pool rather than being divided by contrived roles and differences.

Not one of our strategic goals could be achieved without adequate knowledge and understanding of the context within which we are working. Theatre Bristol's integrity is built on the knowledge that together its community and its collective intelligence is stronger than if each part were to stand alone. Our very foundations as an organisation are in creating networks and structures that empower others to help themselves, not to fix everything from the top down. Where Theatre Bristol perceives a weakness or gap to be addressed it responds from this foundation.

Priorities

Another cornerstone of our organisation has been our website, the content for which is generated by its users. It receives around 500 visits a day. Along with the Creative Producers it plays a vital bridging role between people, resources, news and events. Driving this site and keeping it alive and thriving is a key priority.

Online networks benefit from face to face exchanges too. We will continue to run one large-scale Open Space meeting every year on a specific, contemporary issue. We are also changing our governance and steering. This will include holding four open invitation evening meetings annually. These meetings will provide our community with the opportunity to come together to talk about what they are doing, hear what Theatre Bristol is doing and discuss what we could or should all be doing but are not.

We will facilitate and support sub sector hubs such as Residence, CAST (Circus and Street Theatre in Bristol) and Puppet Place where there is energy and need to sustain them.

Theatre Bristol is one of eight partners in the regional strategic network Theatre South West, we will continue to work with Theatre South West partners to keep theatre in the South West connected and thriving.

We are committed to developing channels of communication with neighbouring artforms, other creative industry communities and the world of business.

As well as connectivity within Bristol we are committed to improving the connectivity of the wider theatre community. Healthy networks present opportunities for collaboration and exchange that could not occur without them. The England Live network of which www.theatrebristol.net is part is managed and driven by Theatre Bristol. In 2008 we redeveloped our website so that we could duplicate it for a fraction of the cost of the initial investment. This has meant that as well as a new fit for purpose website for Bristol, we have built sites for Cornwall, Gloucestershire, and Wiltshire/Swindon/Bath and North East Somerset. In 2009 we plan to build two more sites in the South West, and in 2010 – 2012 we plan to build sites in other localities in England.

We will improve our international networks. We are working with the British Council to build a network of producing partners in South East Europe. Our partners in Bulgaria, Israel and Serbia are employing Creative Producers based on the Theatre Bristol model and implementing theatre community websites like the England Live sites. We will use this network to bridge between our own growing network in Britain and creative professionals working in theatre in South East Europe with a view to collaborative artistic exchange.



“The future of British theatre
lies in Bristol”

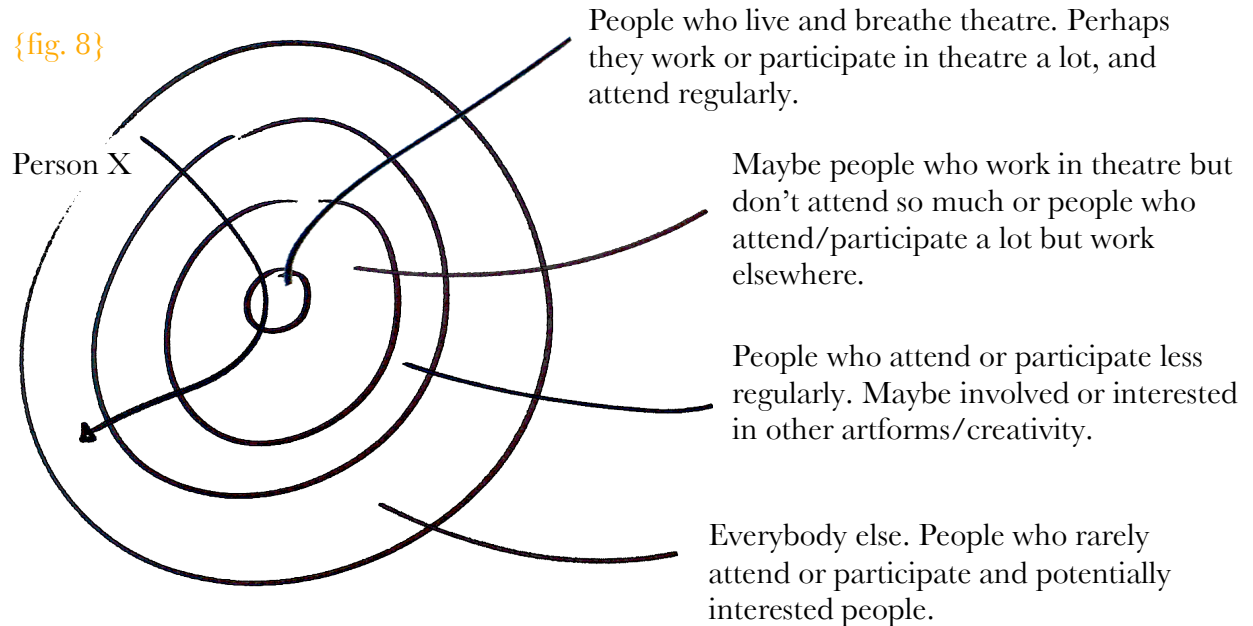
The Guardian

*A headline from Lyn Gardner, writing after
attending a Theatre Bristol meeting in 2008*

The mechanisms we need in place to achieve this

We used to talk about “business to business” and “business to consumer” as two separate processes. We thought of audiences as a separate group to industry professionals. And we were not the only people who thought this. Audience Development Agencies are still core funded by Arts Council England across the country but often with little or no relation to the artists they are marketing. We think that theatre has suffered from this model for too long. Since setting up the website in 2004 we have changed the vocabulary with which we talk about who we are acting on behalf of, who we are talking to and who the beneficiaries are. Now we talk about a community of interest where we consider our constituency to be all those that are interested in Theatre, whether consumers or providers or both (fig. 8)

{fig. 8}



Person X can move in and out of the concentric circles throughout their life. The vital part of this model to highlight is that it excludes no one: everyone is included somewhere within the model. It is a development model that is not about inclusion or exclusion, attendance or non-attendance, professional or non-professional. It is about a level of interest and its fluid change.

We will embrace this concept and become a Community Interest Company. We will have a community interest statement drawn up in dialogue with our community over which our community can hold us to account.

The first step on this journey is to become independent from Circomedia. In April 2009 we became an independent company limited by guarantee: Theatre Bristol Ltd. Our steerage will be taken from four open invitation meetings per year.

In late November 2008 Arts Council England committed to two years of funding from April 2009 to support the delivery of this plan. Bristol City Council has confirmed single year funding from April 2009.

Conclusion

What we have laid out in this document marks an important point in an ongoing journey. It is the result of a collective response to an extraordinary moment in Bristol's long history of producing theatre.

This document provides a point of reflection, focus and vision in Theatre Bristol's ongoing process to develop theatre in the city. We acknowledge the significance of Bristol Old Vic in terms of scale, facilities and the level of public investment it receives, but equally we acknowledge the strength in the multiplicity of high quality activity and positive energy across the city. Our intention is to stimulate a live performance culture of ambition for Bristol as a whole – a culture which sees Theatre Bristol as one building block of opportunity among many. We anticipate a future in which “theatre” is part of a continuum of live performance events embracing drama, music, dance, circus and other disciplines. We presume that audiences and participants will be drawn to work of all kinds in an inter-connected network of dedicated, found and public spaces. Above all our vision is predicated on the notion that for artists, audiences and participants alike, active engagement is better than passive consumption.

Throughout our consultations in 2008 and 2009 the over-riding impression has been of a dedicated group of passionate practitioners standing on the threshold of something exciting – a plural, flexible, porous and diverse theatre sector willing and able to respond collaboratively to the needs of a 21st century creative city.

It is Theatre Bristol's commitment to unlock and drive this potential: to support Bristol as it steps over this threshold.

