

FROM THE HILL TO THE SEA

TRANSFORMING THE CULTURAL LIFE OF PORTSMOUTH

Culture matters – the Future of Theatre in Portsmouth Report on Results of Workshop Seminar 18 Apr 2007 7-9pm.

From: Cultural Consortium Executive Group.

To: All Consortium members, seminar attendees, all Councillors, PCC Head of Culture, all PCC Strategic Directors.

Date: 4 June 2007.

1. Introduction

The Cultural Consortium sponsored a seminar on 18 Apr at the City Museum and Records Office on the Future of Theatre in Portsmouth. There were 25 Attendees (list to follow). The seminar was initiated and organised by Jonathan Fost, and facilitated by Peter Wainwright, both volunteer members of the Consortium's Executive Group.

The purpose of the seminar was to create debate, and conversation about the future of theatre in Portsmouth, and from this to create momentum towards tackling some of key issues that are critical to developing theatre.

The Executive Group would like to thank the City Museum and Records Service for providing the venue and refreshments.

2. Process

The seminar was based around five main themes, each of which had its own table. Four of these themes (tables 1 to 4) were devised before the seminar, and one (table 5) was devised during the seminar. Participants sat at one of the five tables, and after every 15 minutes or so, moved to another table of their choice. People could mix between groups, and so there was a great deal of interaction - far more so than if there had been defined sub-groups.

There was a large plain white sheet of paper (4 x A0 sizes taped together) taped to each table. The aim was for the people at each table to write their ideas, thoughts in words and pictures, as they came to mind. Each table had a host, whose job was to welcome the newcomers to the table, explain what had been discussed in the previous round – that way, the new arrivals could build on what had been said.

At the end of the seminar, each table host summarised the evening's discussion, and ideas on post-its were collected from all participants. This table-based technique had the advantage of encouraging maximum participation, without a formal "scribe and flipchart". The technique is based on world-café (see www.world-cafe.com).

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3. Output

A selection of photographs from each table's words/drawings etc is on the website. In this report, we have tried to write up the key messages from the paper sheets, but the real value of the seminar lies in the conversations people experienced, combined with what was written down and drawn on the sheets. Apologies if anything in this report is at odds with the participants' own experience and interpretation. However, there is a table summary, and each of these is based on the verbal summary given by the table host.

Table 1 Theme – “How to unlock the potential of all the city's spaces for rehearsal, performance, storage and workshops?”.

Key points from the sheet:

- “Bottom rung of ladder is missing” – i.e. need cheap and cheerful venues.
- Register and list of potential venues – schools, community centres, pubs, and clubs.
- Pot boiler, bums on seats.
- Register – education and drama workshops.
- Arts centre
- List if licensed venues.
- Accessibility
- Public liability
- Aspirational.
- Messy space (workshop) – dockyard?
- Workshop space storage
- Sharing resources?
- Cost management.
- Business units – rehearsal and storage.
- Pool: resources, wardrobe, workspace
- Arts centre
- Production and rehearsal cost.
- Number of venues – what stops them?
 - Register
 - Not geared to extend
 - Cost
 - In use – timetabled.
 - Not aware of need
 - Technical equipment
 - Technical support
 - Licenses, insurance – citywide policy?
 - Appropriateness of space
 - Access
 - Hire fee.

Summary presentation of Table 1.

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Need a comprehensive list of licensed venues, schools, community centres, pubs, and clubs that can be used for performances. Whether a license is available for performance and, additionally, drink is important

Need a list of venues for rehearsal space:

- Unused business units
- Storage units
- Consider insurance and cost issues.

Tackle how to share resources, as there may be difficulties to overcome. We must make better use of available resources. But who manages these? What about sense of identity?

Consider restrictions and risks.

Overall, a focus on sharing resources.

Table 2 Theme – “How to improve audience attendance?”.

Key points from the sheet:

“The Guide” to be available all week.

Customer service

Sharing resources

Impression of city as a whole – if you live outside the city, how do you find out what’s on here? What is your impression once you’re here?

Joint marketing

Attracting children who then bring parents

Dark?

Centralised box office system that links to audience development.

Ask BBC for ideas (South Today)

Use audience quotes

Pictures of audience saying “great show” in the programme.

No suits!

Sponsorship – booze.

Advertising, radio, TV, papers – friends and relatives - free sample tasters – shows at schools, shopping centres, street theatre, video clips, internet.

Internet fliers

Posters

Portsmouth City Council website could be better.

Transport – parking – late buses – to where? Audience to event, or event to audience?

Marketing the city is an issue, what impression does city give?

Location – is it safe?

Take theatre to hard to reach audiences/groups.

What stops street – weather – by laws – permission (who do you contact? Are they accessible? A hurdle!)

Attitude of staff

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Data protection issues
 Target audiences
 Organisation
 Good communication
 Audiences to see what?
 What do people want?
 Quality versus enthusiasm.
 Network of AM-DRAM groups
 Catering – alcohol

Summary presentation of Table 2.

Need to improve audience attendance. Share resources, and have centralised box office bookings, centralised advertising, using internet, and email.

Must share audience data.

Improve accessibility of venues.

Get into a “culture of theatre”.

Hold taster events to outreach to people – with a variety of performances and styles.

Table 3 Theme – “What role should drama play in festivals and outdoor events?”.

Key points from the sheet:

Why drama in particular?

Opportunity to access other arts.

We need an arts festival again.

Some things that are reacting to the community can be very scary.

Take theatre to the people – e.g. May Fayre.

Someone catalogue open spaces, and what is or not happening there.

Who pays? Sponsor?, Council?

Fringe?

Tribal culture in the city.

Make a portable outdoor lighting and sound kit available.

Need database of venue and facilities.

Performance rather than just drama. Dance?

Outreach to local children, performance in local areas to suck parents in. e.g.

Buckland – has a good field and free off-street parking.

Action: identify outdoor venue and make product relevant to the area and demographics.

Prestigious vs community and variety.

Annual multi-cultural event and centre it in Elm Grove.

How to engage hard to reach audiences.

Use Guildhall and coordination of event.

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Make it friendly and safe.

Accessibility is not just about transport, but about income, and feeling comfortable.

Schools festival;

Summer school

Guildhall

Party in the Park.

Summary presentation of Table 3.

Encourage people to come to the theatre, by taking theatre/arts to specific sites, and address what's relevant to that area of the particular community and its demographic make up. We need to use all available spaces, and consider a fringe festival.

We need a database of venues.

We need to learn from other communities and from Europe.

Consider logistics for festival.

Need access to a central pool of lighting, sound and other technology.

Lots of discussion around the need to broaden this beyond drama, into dance, and into outdoor arts and performance festivals.

Need a database of what spaces and facilities are available. There needs to be good coordination, and there are issues of who pays.

Arts/drama needs to be more in the community, getting to the harder to reach audiences.

Table 4 Theme – “How to improve the overall experience of audiences?”.

Key points from the sheet:

Venue

Respect -? Risk.

Location safety – Guildhall walk.

Need an alcohol-free place outside – worries over intimidation.

Café culture vs policing a drink culture (not reducing the crime rate)

City plans – Portsmouth City Council

Change culture of City council – no overall view.

Lobby council to take back the culture arena.

Box office

Refreshments

Atmosphere

Parking – park and ride – slip from theatre for free parking. Need visitor's car parking ticket.

New theatre/conference centre.

Wedgwood Rooms

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Rosie wine bar.

Variety of theatre – not on circuit for professionals.

Product must be suited to venue.

Cross sales

- must be able to go to Kings, and advertise New Theatre Royal, and vice versa.
- Promotional ticket sales.
- Publicise cheaper theatre for low-income families.

Value of unrespectable theatre – rogues and vagabonds.

Family orientated venues required.

More clubs and use of South Parade Pier to bring back a softer environment.

Cost of theatre – perhaps altering perceptions of costs?

Moving theatre outside of theatres to different spaces. Push different spaces.

City Centre? Move the cultural arena?

No reason why Portsmouth shouldn't be Brighton.

3rd Floor Arts centre.

Box office, refreshments, atmosphere.

3rd Floor is rubbish as a venue.

Chichester Festival theatre experience.

Summary presentation of Table 4.

Perception is reality. The venue and the journey to it are key to the overall experience. The venue ambience, location and access to a pre theatre meal are important. Regards location, this includes perceptions of safety – e.g. Guildhall Walk at night – people don't feel safe there – it puts some people off.

Regards the journey, there are issues about availability of public transport, and the need to subsidise parking – needs to be cheaper. Parking that is already subsidised, e.g. for the New Theatre Royal and 3rd Floor Arts Centre, there is subsidised parking, but it's difficult to arrange – you should be able to get a parking voucher when you buy the tickets (by post, or before hand).

There should a friendly box office open after the show, and the theatre needs to be available for after-show drinks.

There is an opportunity to develop more of a café culture in Guildhall Walk, but there are concerns about the drink culture in the evening, which detracts from the theatre experience. Furthermore, there are almost no pre-theatre meal facilities near the New Theatre Royal.

The 3rd Floor Arts Centre was criticised for a recent evening show at which there were no refreshments at the interval, as the people running the refreshments had been told of only 4 pre-booked tickets, and had decided to close before the show

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started. In fact, there were over 50 in the audience - all but 4 had got tickets on the door.

There needs to be a culture of cross-selling. Need to consider theatre for low-income families, and what needs to change to make this happen.

Culture – Portsmouth has a lot to offer, but its not always well publicised.

Table 5 Theme – “How can we raise the aspiration for the quality of engagement with theatre both from a passive and participating perspective?”

Key points from the sheet:

Artistic communication and coordination.
 What do audiences really want to see in Portsmouth?
 Public perception linked to pricing.
 Bigger vehicle for discussion.
 Aspiration as expectation?
 Collaboration for production of larger experiences of productions.
 Taster for a different style of festival theatre
 Sustainability
 Range of min-festivals
 Pyramids of opportunity.
 Customer service.
 Idea of a “kitemark” of quality...quality?/quantity?
 Not just a product, but a whole experience. Expectation = parking/getting there, cost, quality, facilities, location.
 Good organisation
 Fringe festivals
 Pyramid of excellence
 Recreational participation, professional
 Amateur vs professional – is amateur lower quality? No.
 Physical obstacles; parking, traffic.
 What is quality?
 Accessibility? ...funding
 Publicity.
 Park and ride ...increase accessibility.
 Image
 Amateur/professional
 Change of perception – how?
 PR/publicity. awareness, more seats, expectation.

Summary presentation of Table 5.

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Lots of discussion around quality, aspiration, and expectation. For example, there is a perception that productions at Chichester festival Theatre are good quality, up market, and professional – partly due to the image of Chichester – but this isn't always the case.

Why are expectations in Portsmouth so low?

The RSC have visited Portsmouth's Mountbatten Centre several times – this is good for raising awareness, but the RSC is not touring this year.

Need to investigate how better to use the media to promote quality, and award-winning things, and put these in a positive light.

Price – is there a link between price and perception of quality? We need to investigate this.

Amateur/professional discussion: there is a perception that amateur is less good than professional theatre, but this isn't so.

To improve people's expectations, you have to address the whole experience, sorting out obstacles such as parking and traffic. E.g. In the Mayflower at Southampton, there is a multi-story car park right next to it, but it can 20 minutes to get out of the car park after the show. With the Kings in Southsea, you can park in Waitrose - there are no queues to exit, but because it's a 5 minute walk to the Kings, there is a perception, compared to the Mayflower, that parking is less convenient. These are the kinds of perceptions that need to be changed.

Once you capture people's imagination, you need to offer a "pyramid of excellence" to encourage their continuing to come to the theatre.

Consider education aspects – "get them in young".

Portsmouth has everything, but it doesn't have the awareness of accessibility.

4. Comments from the floor

Theatres and PCC are mentioned, but there is no mention of use of schools and the University.

People think that theatre is in the public domain, and schools are "private", but schools are very much in the public domain, and their role in theatre should be considered.

In the limited time for questions arising, it was pointed out that the University has been leading several drama projects which involve students with the local community, including those with special learning needs. This was an example of drama activity that tends to be not

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well publicised, yet makes a significant contribution to culture in the City. The University now has a studio theatre in the Wiltshire Building.

We shouldn't ignore what people are able to do without access to any funding at all. If people want things enough, it can happen without funding, as it will probably then attract funding.

5. Post-it ideas from the end of the seminar:

These are shown in no particular order or grouping:

1. Commit today to a culture of sharing and success-building.
2. Create a collaborative environment between venues and arts organisations to develop long-term goals and targets.
3. Create an environment in which culture can thrive!
4. We have the quality products – the city lets it down. Accessibility, parking, facilities...location, location, location!
5. Improve the total package so visiting a performance in Portsmouth is an enjoyable experience.
6. Build on the existing and developing relations between the University and the community.
7. Network.
8. Think about making theatrical experiences accessible and relevant to your audience.
9. Try to develop a meaningful and practical forum for sharing ideas, problems, and solutions.
10. Identify schools within Portsmouth that are good venues for theatre performance i.e. space outdoors and indoors.
11. Establish a register of small venues and then investigate a mini "fringe" as an experience in 4 venues within 4 community groups.
12. Combine resources and use methods especially Information and Communications Technology (ICT) etc to target audiences.
13. Collaboration (between PCC and all areas of Art in the City).
14. To identify what the community would like and not to "impose" a product.
15. Summary of tonight's discussion to go on Cultural Consortium's website – and with a link to Portsmouth City Councils' website.
16. Produce a vision for Portsmouth.
17. Amateur groups to apply for and secure funding for festival; development e.g. awards for all bid – collaboration and use of external city funding.
18. Organise a mini fringe festival.
19. Create a database of resources (performance spaces).
20. Act.
21. Change culture within Portsmouth.

6. Summary

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The evening produced a vast and diverse mass of ideas. There seems to be several things that need to be done to improve the situation, and many opportunities to seize.

Key and recurring messages that arose are:

Need to consider the overall experience, and address problems concerning transport, parking, facilities (e.g. restaurants) in the immediate area of theatres, and accessibility (in its widest sense including making people feel comfortable).

There should be coordinated advertising, and cross-selling of tickets.

More use needs to be made of a wider and more varied number of performance venues (e.g. schools, pubs), but suited to the type of performance. Thus, there is a pressing need for a database of venues, their facilities and costs.

There should be more effort to reach the harder to reach audiences.

Efforts should be made to alter perceptions about what's on offer, as the offer is much more varied and of higher quality than many people assume.

There was a very strong call for more collaboration and more sharing of resources and ideas - more effective use could be made of existing resources. It seems that PCC's role in facilitating change has much more potential than it currently shows.

Need for some kind of fringe festival.

Need for outdoor festivals that include drama.

The need to continue this discussion, and form a community of people who make to help make the changes needed.

7. Way ahead

The way ahead is that the Exec Group will arrange presentation of the seminar findings to key stakeholders, including PCC members and officers. There may also be a follow up meeting (date tbc), to develop the ideas contained within it, and help people form stronger and more effective collaborations.

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Attendance List

NAME	COMPANY/SOCIETY
Aysegul Epengin	
Charles Burns	
Dave Moore	Rosie's Vineyard
David Cooper	Kings Theatre
Emma Cooper	HumDrum
Ian Pratt	Kings Theatre
Lauren Farnhill	SSA
Maria Pegden	CCADS
Maricar Jagger	UOP
Phelim Rowland	Springfield School
RACHEL CRAY	Rosie's Vineyard
Rebecca Baxter	
Ron Hasker	Kings Theatre
Sandra Miller	
Steve Hatton	Portsmouth College
Stuart Olesker	UOP
SUE EVANS	
Terence Carter	
Terry Ashdown	Portsmouth College