

Annual report 08/09

Executive summary

A successful year artistically, financially and managerially for the theatre. Most significantly:

1. This was the theatre's first full year with a new board, who worked positively and harmoniously for the good of the organisation.
2. The theatre was granted a 25-year rent-free lease by George Ferguson, owner of the building, in recognition of the potential of the new board and staff team.
3. The theatre received significant support from the Arts Council and became a Key Arts Provider for Bristol City Council.

Artistic programme

The theatre had a strong year artistically, characterised by an increased range of programming, the formation of new partnerships and the development of a number of creative and developmental strands:

1. Range of programming
 - a. We increased the quantity and quality of work we programme for **families and young people**, including programming for the first time work that was designed specifically for teenagers. Particularly successful visits came from Stuff and Nonsense (Little Red Hen) and Travelling Light (Shadow Play).
 - b. We strengthened our **comedy** programme, including the programming of a packed season of Edinburgh comedy previews. (This will grow into Bristol's first comedy festival in 09/10.) A notable visit came from Michael McIntyre, who less than one year later was selling out the 20,000 seat O2 stadium.
 - c. We programmed a short season of **dance** work. We did this under the label Bodyworks, which is an initiative that we foresee growing over the next few years.
 - d. We programmed an eclectic range of **music**. There were some excellent performances within the music programme, including an inspiring range of up-and-coming local bands playing alongside Sheelanagig. On reflection, the programme was a little incoherent as a whole and it is envisaged that we will bring in an external curator for any further music programming.
2. New partnerships
 - a. **Mayfest** was temporarily homeless due to events at the Bristol Old Vic. We were the obvious venue for them to turn to and we were delighted to become the central venue for the festival, giving them not only space but some advice and lots of encouragement. We played an important part in the retention of Mayfest and look forward to being an important venue for them for some time. Action Hero's A Western was a triumph and the festival's programme set good foundations for the future.
 - b. We hosted **Bristol Old Vic Theatre School** for the first time. The school produced three shows here this year; A Month in the Country, Emma and Oh, What A Lovely War. All three

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did extremely well with audiences and we were delighted to have them here. We have agreed that they will produce a show annually with us for the next three years.

- c. This year we deliberately programmed a little more local work than hitherto and welcomed young local companies **Fairground, Full Beam Visual Theatre, The Immortal Orchestra** and **Plain Clothes** for the first time (alongside established companies MOE and Myrtle).
3. Commencement and Development of Creative and Developmental strands
 - a. Our 'scratch' night **Prototype**, developed in partnership with Theatre Bristol, had just started out a year ago. It has become one of the most successful scratch nights in the country and we are delighted that BOV has come on board; offering rehearsal space and funding for further development of mutually agreed pieces.
 - b. We ran **Script Space**, a short season of four rehearsed playreadings. The standard of the readings was high and attendances were rather astonishing. We are supporting the full production of one of the plays in September 2009, Peter Kesterton's Glasshouse.

Beyond the above, the three repeated programming items referred to in the business plan all had good years. **Opera Project** brought us a rapturously received Tosca ("*This is a Tosca that must be seen*" – Venue) and **SATF** had a solid year with Julius Caesar and Antony and Cleopatra ("*This production once again reveals Hilton's genius for calling forth new vigour in the Shakespearean canon*" – The Times); probably only this company could sell out those plays for a total of 11 weeks in Bristol. Our **Christmas show** was one of the highlights of the year; Andy Burden directed Toby Farrow's adaptation of A Christmas Carol to unforgettable effect and our greatest ever attendance for one show was recorded (12,986). Metro was half-way there when it reported "*You practically skip out of the theatre. Fabulously festive.*"

Miscellaneous other highlights included a Filter / RSC co-production of Twelfth Night that had over half the audience conga-ing across stage, the magnificently anarchic Slide Show from Slot Machine and the delightfully stylish, chic-horror amalgam of film, music & action that was Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea, from 1927.

Inhouse productions

The theatre produced three productions on its own; Topless Mum, A Christmas Carol and Mimic. In addition, its co-production of The Ugly Duckling (Xmas 07, co-produced with Travelling Light) toured nationally for seven months.

1. Topless Mum

We had produced Topless Mum, a new play by Ron Hutchinson, in summer 07/08 and Nicolas Kent invited the production to the Tricycle Theatre for five weeks in June 08. In addition to this run, we toured to Coventry (Belgrade) and Oxford (Playhouse), as well as playing a week in Bristol. The show received pretty poor reviews in London, and correspondingly poor audiences, although its regional reviews and audiences were (to my mind deservedly) better. The tour was probably the most physically ambitious undertaking the theatre has ever made (12 weeks including rehearsal, 100k budget, well-recognised actor at the head of the cast etc) and although the reviews and audiences in London were chastening the experience as a whole was positive and the achievement was impressive.

The West Country's most enterprising theatre. The Times

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2. A Christmas Carol

Our Christmas show was a pretty unalloyed triumph, as reported above. Quite apart from the size of audience and the clutch of glowing reviews, the audience reaction was extraordinary and the glee of the actors and production team throughout the run was infectious. The same director, Andy Burden, was responsible for a superb Alice through the Looking Glass the year before. We have agreed that he will take a break from us and not direct the 09/10 Christmas show as we don't want it to appear to be 'Andy's gig' but we anticipate him directing many more times at the theatre.

3. Mimic

Mimic was a small production written and performed (entirely at a grand piano) by Raymond Scannell and directed by Tom Creed. It played three of the most major Irish festivals (Galway, Kilkenny and Dublin) to acclaim, including Scannell winning Best Actor in Dublin (a prestigious award with an honourable roll-call of previous winners). It was intended that this production play at Bristol and be used as an entree to some London studio theatres but it has been unable to secure London dates on reasonable terms and has been indefinitely postponed.

4. The Ugly Duckling

Travelling Light has been the lead partner for the tour, as we were the lead partner for the original production. The seven-month tour has gone excellently.

Our production portfolio worked well this year, particularly as A Christmas Carol was so successful, and was financially strong (the portfolio showed a profit of £30,500 (excluding core theatre costs)) but the sole-producer model is inherently risky. Had we not bargained hard for advantageous guarantees on Topless Mum the situation would have been rather different, and given the colder financial climate I can't see such guarantees being easy to come by again.

In 2009-10 we should only produce the Christmas show but we should support a number of productions to a greater degree than before; particularly by investing in some shows that have come through our developmental programmes. In the future we envisage ourselves being involved with more productions but not carrying the same level of financial risk as hitherto. We will do this by: co-producing shows with more partners, including venues and production companies; producing or co-producing shows on a range of scales, including the very small; touring work, or assisting work to tour and making small investments into productions that would not otherwise be able to play at the Tobacco Factory

Training and Education

We made significant headway in developing work with schools and colleges, expanded provision of activities for young people, increased the number of opportunities for audience engagement and laid foundations for our work with local theatre practitioners.

1. Schools and colleges

- a. We collaborated with Myrtle Theatre on the delivery of a weeklong project for local primary school South Street.
- b. We threw open the dress rehearsal of our Christmas show to local schools and gave a significant number of free tickets to schools to the show later in the run. Students coming to

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see our Christmas show were given the opportunity of taking part in post-show talks with the cast and production team.

- c. Throughout the year we provided more opportunities for schools and colleges to visit us for tours and talks to find out about who we are and what we do.

2. Young People

- a. So, you want to be an actor? offered older teenagers the chance to spend a week developing performance skills and industry knowledge with experienced theatre professionals.
- b. We added Easter Dayschools for 7-10 year olds to our portfolio of holiday skills-based activities.

Beyond the above, **audiences** benefited from an increased provision of show-related talks and readings, including the successful introduction of Director's Lunchtime Talks to accompany the Shakespeare season and we developed our programme of workshops for **Theatre practitioners** by offering the opportunity for local professionals to work with top national touring companies visiting the Theatre.

Staffing

It was a very stable staffing year. No core staff left and our pool of casual workers was fairly constant. In September we created the new post of development manager and our administrator went from part-time to full-time, adding Training and Education to the portfolio of the position's responsibilities. End of year appraisals were positive across the board.

Financial

We had a year-end surplus of £35,000, against a forecast of £21,500. We are still carrying forward a deficit (of around £15,000) but it has become more manageable. The major reason for our exceeding forecast was exceptional box-office achievement of £678,000; £98,000 over target. (This had a net effect of £51,000 as there was a corresponding increase in fees paid to visiting companies).

We raised £20,000 less in sponsorship and donations than forecast. This is an unsurprising, if worrying, reaction to the current economic climate. However, a significant amount of work has been undertaken to develop a comprehensive fundraising strategy that should start to bear fruit in 2009/10. This will be taken forward by a new development director who takes up her post at the end of June 2009.

The Numbers

We recorded 72,393 ticketed entries to events.

Our average ticket price (including comps) was £9.37.

We gave away 436 complimentary tickets to underprivileged or community groups (value around £4,000).

We hosted an estimated 160 young people from 10 schools and colleges visit for tours and talks.

Our rehearsal room was used for an estimated 5,000 person-sessions. Of these: 1,500 were theatre/performer use; 1,600 were student use and 1,900 were community use.