

The Yard Theatre, Freelancer Roundtable

26th May 2020. 10:00-11:30. Zoom

Minutes

In Attendance

Ashleigh Wheeler	AW
Celine Lowenthal	CLo
Cheryl Galacher	CG
Dipo Baruwa-Etti	DBE
Eleanor Dear	ED
Georgia Green	GG
Greg Wohead	GW
Jay Miller	JM
Jess Bernberg	JB
Kellie Grogan	KG (Minutes)
Meg Hodgson	MH
Tobi Kyeremateng	TK

Apologies

Anne Langford	AL
Brian Lobel	BL
Cassie Leon	CLe
Ned Bennett	NB
Seke Chimutengwende	SC

1: Purpose of group

After brief introductions from everyone present, JM starts by saying that this conversation was born out of two things;

1. To add to the conversation about how theatre is coping with the pandemic
 - JM says that when Covid19 forced the closure of theatre venues there was huge panic amongst organisations. With no audience, and no money, there was a lot of internal communication about the survival of our individual theatres. He says it took approximately three weeks for the dust to settle. After this Artistic Director's started to reconnect with each other, thinking about what we could do in this period and what we haven't done to date. They realised that freelancers haven't been fed into conversations with DCMS (The Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, who are informing how much support our sector needs).
 - So this is an opportunity for those currently working at The Yard to hear what freelancers think we should be doing, both as an organisation, and as a sector. The Yard will then use this for ongoing advocacy work. Neil Mendoza is the person leading on identifying what support the sector needs through the DCMS Culture Task Force.
2. A need to identify two people in this group to attend sector wide meetings. These are;
 - A national taskforce, which the Yard signed up to, initiated by Fuel Theatre.
 - Also, for LTC (London Theatre Consortium), which is made up of 12-14 theatres, inc the National Theatre, RC Young Vic, Kiln, Bush, Gate. They are meeting weekly to discuss how our organisations are responding to the crisis and what needs to be fed to the

government. Each theatre is appointing freelancers they work with to attend a meeting Which will possibly become a regular occurrence.

2: How is everyone and your current circumstances? Is there anything that anyone wants to share? Anything that people want to talk about in the first instance?

JB was just about to open a show at a theatre, it didn't make it to previews due to Covid19. She says they were great, they let her know by a phone call, but it was still a difficult time for her as everything was up in the air. She has thought about how to make work at home but as a Lighting Designer it's hard because she needs a building to be able to work. She has been having conversations with directors as part of the JMK award which has been good. She has set up a sustainability group, so feels good about having this in place for when she returns to her work as a Lighting Designer. She is trying to be involved in as many conversations with as many buildings as possible.

CLo says that like JB, everything felt very weird in the beginning, PECS had lots of things cancelled slowly. They decided internally that they wouldn't perform at some venues before announcements were made. PECS have received Arts Council emergency funding, so they have been able to repay some of the lost fees. They are also funding a podcast that they are going to make, which will include conversations with other artists. They are trying to sustain links with their audiences. On a personal level CLo has also been writing. She received a grant from the Arts Council for her personally, so she doesn't have to worry about the financial side of things at the moment.

ED work stopped very abruptly on 16th March, which felt very strange. She has had to rethink what she's doing. ED reflects that it has been nice to have the time to reflect on other possible lines of work. Like JB and CLo she has talked to other people and other stage managers, and has heard such a wide range of different dealings people have had across the sector. Companies she was about to work with were really nice. She has been disappointed to hear about some other peoples experiences. She feels frustration towards the government for this, not our industry. ED is doing another type of work alongside stage management to support herself at the moment.

MH time in lockdown has firstly consisted of everything being cancelled as freelance technician, in her experience very few organisations have done more than send an email. However, some have tried to honor contracts and keep in contact, letting her know what they are trying to do, and where the money is coming from. For technicians a lot of the funding available means that you fall through the cracks, for example technicians are not able to apply for Arts Council emergency funding. Trying to access govt support has also been difficult. She has now been furloughed by The Yard, and so is financially stable for the time being. She notes that other people are still in a precarious situation like she was, not having any time for creative endeavors.

GG has had an experience similar to MH, with projects cancelled in a mixture of personal communication and standard emails. She has received Arts Council money and has got some radio work.

GW had a bit of work cancelled. One was transferred to online. GW notes that the Artistic Director for the online festival was completely amazing. It was up to artists about how to adapt their work for online, GW did a durational online piece. He felt lucky to have a fee in place but also have creative output that didn't feel like a compromise, like a new thing. He got personal Arts Council funding and is okay financially for time being. He has taken time to sit with things. He has thought lots about how livelihood is connected to work, and about rent issues. He feels privileged to be able to think about bigger ideas, and ways of rebuilding. He is less interested in being a part of the industry the way they were.

DBE - as a playwright he has been able to continue work. He has been approached by two different theatres for theatre work. He has also turned to TV, TV pays better and seems to be booming at the moment. DBE has been furloughed from a part time job, so that has made things better, as he is able to write. He got a bursary at the end of last year to write, which has proved how helpful bursaries are, giving him more time and other avenues to work creatively.

TK had a year long contract so has been furloughed. They have been really great but she's not sure if they'll keep her on at the organisation. She also had work as a freelancer for another organisation for which they got Arts Council emergency funding. Half of the organisations she had freelance work lined up for have committed to still pay, but cash flow difficulty has been real. She has also been trying to move house amongst all this. She's grateful for financial support up to now, but still has a lot of uncertainty past June

AW asked if people had applied for Equity hardship or similar funds. ED said not yet but she is due to apply and will let AW know the outcome. MH applied right before she was furloughed but wasn't successful.

3: Update on The Yard and wider sector

Where The Yard is at

JM explains that for a while The Yard didn't know if they were going to survive. He notes that the Arts Council subsidy is 150,000 which is 10% of The Yards turnover of 1.5 million. Box office sales, bar sales and the income we receive from the hire of our spaces all disappeared. Until the government announced the furlough scheme we didn't know what we were going to do. When that happened we started to stabilise. Our outgoings are relatively small at the moment, rent etc. The Yard met all of its contracts with freelancers and techs and paid freelancers for An unfinished man and so were cash poor for a while. The Yard has got through it by getting funding early from our existing funders. Most funders have been flexible in giving funding up front saying they are flexible with how we spend it. So funding for specific projects has disappeared in order to keep the organisation alive, but it was necessary to do this. The Yard has furloughed 60% of staff.

JM says that from early on, he wanted The Yard to be on the front foot. The Yard wanted to deliver work in the local community, all of our activity with young people went online, and we also set up volunteer groups to deliver food and essentials to local people. In this way, our community centres became networks. No one has been furloughed in the Local team in order to continue this work. The Yard also started thinking about what work to put online, to experiment in how we can collaborate with artists within the current restrictions - this led to a one day festival called YardOnline. For example, it posed very different tech problems, one dress rehearsal had to be abandoned because YouTube kept pulling it down. It turned out to be a successful day, with thousands of visitors, so we are thinking about doing another, though we didn't make money. The Yard paid a few small commissions for it, not loads of money, but enough. AW notes that The Yard applied for funding to do Yard Young Artists and the Yard Online from a central body, from which Bloomberg ended up providing. JM adds that The Yard decided to do the festival before we got this funding, as he finds it to often be the best way round, though risky.

JM says that The Yard has applied for Arts Council money to pay for An unfinished man costs and for other costs that it took to pay freelancers. The Yard is due to hear back about this in June. JM notes that The Yard doesn't know what will happen re:funding after the summer.

Conversations Happening Across the Sector

JM says he isn't on social media but has heard about disquiet from freelancers knowing that conversations are happening but feeling like they don't know the content form and outcomes of them. JM points out that although he hasn't been involved in all of the conversations, he says that most of those conversations have been about advocating for the theatre industry to be bailed out. JM summarised these conversations as follows;

- Between Oliver Dowden (Culture Secretary), and groups of leaders of large institutions, including the Royal Opera House, the National Theatre and the Southbank.
- Regional theatres have also been meeting regularly as a group called "The Big 13." Northern Stage, Bristol Old Vic, The Royal Exchange and Birmingham are among the 13.
- JM has had a lot of group conversations with Artistic Directors. CG has also had some individual conversations with people. JM said that he has had more conversations with Artistic Directors than ever. Plus, every LTC theatre is arranging similar conversations like this, and deciding which kind of freelancers to focus on.

Draft of the document to be sent to DCMS

JM points out that the Government wants to hear in clear terms, and as a sector, what theatres need. It has been drafted over the last 7 days to include what we as a sector need. As it stands at the moment, it is asking for four things;

1. That the furlough scheme continues because if it doesn't loads of theatres won't be able to survive, assuming that they will need to do social distancing until at least the end of the year.
 - JB asks if they are modelling this on individuals or households, JM said that they are acknowledging that some households could come
 - CLo asks when they are asking the furlough scheme to continue until. JM responds that it is until we don't need to social distance
2. For changes to Theatre Tax Relief (TTR) in order to give theatres more cash. TTR is money that theatres can claim back from the government for costs relating to productions.
3. Thirdly, they are asking for government money in the form of a bailout. This would enable theatres to start rehearsals, which are a lot of money upfront for theatres, usually a 6 figure bill. This money would also enable theatres to create work online in the interim, and think innovatively about what we can do.
4. Fourthly, from the Old Vic it's essentially asking for a loan which we would pay back in social good.

Responses from Freelancers

GW asks if there is any discussion about asking for a continuation of the self employed support scheme. JM says there has been but he doesn't know the result of these conversations. GW wonders if any of the current four requests apply to freelancers? He would love to see something/an acknowledgement of freelance workers in the industry, as it will otherwise be about who can afford to stay in the industry.

DBE asks how effective JM thinks the job retention scheme has been for The Yard because National Theatre staff costs are being cut by 20-30%, which will lead to significant staff redundancies. JM said that the cap of £2500/year has been fine for The Yard as the team mostly earn less than this. JM says that the success of the furlough scheme for The Yard will depend on how much they are asked to contribute going forwards.

CLo asks that if the creation of work in the interim (before buildings can reopen) is a part of the four requests, then does this mean that freelancers will start to be re-employed by theatres? AW adds that the Bloomberg money meant that The Yard could channel out money to freelancers, but she's concerned that without an explicit request for freelancers in the letter, she's worried that theatres

won't commit to paying freelancers and we will lose these workers to other sectors. CLo says that it feels like we're returning to the same model with the current requests in the letter. She asks how can we make freelancers more visible?

ED notes that there seems to be an expectation that technicians and people who work backstage would be able to sort themselves out, as ED is doing herself atm. Her friend normally works in the west end wasn't able to be furloughed or apply for self employment so she slipped through the net. She feels like they shouldn't have to rely on companies to be nice and do the right thing. She feels like she hasn't been successful with any funding because of the nature of the work. JM notes that with Arts Council funding, the precise interpretation of the expectations for organisations to pay freelancers was left to organisations so he can see why that's a challenge. He says that these crises reveal temperaments in organisations. JM says that it would be useful if the government were able to mitigate people's fear more.

MH says that as Arts Council grant support has been unavailable to backstage staff previously, she's worried about the same issues being repeated. She notes that freelance Front of House staff also have similar concerns.

GW adds that it feels important that if and when some of these things happen, it would be good to have continued conversation with freelancers about what happens with the money, about how it unfolds, for the communication not to stop now about who it goes to etc. He suggests JM passes this onto other Artistic Directors to do this too. Feels important to be visibly ethically using the money

JB has had good conversations with architects about how buildings sit within communities. A lot of people are saying how important it is to engage a more diverse community. She suggests that it might be useful to have freelancers and young people on the boards of organisations so that they can feed into how the money is spent. She says it feels like a good opportunity going forward to have others feed into how money is used in organisations

4: How do we further the conversation?

JM says that if you have any thoughts about what The Yard could be doing better and you don't want to talk to him about it, then talk to CG. CG says that she has talked to GW and DBE about The Yards artist development strategy, and it's been really helpful in thinking about what makes great artist development. She says that it would be good to have constructive comments, as she has just joined The Yard, she is a good person to talk to.

JM explains that he is aware of who isn't in this conversation. He asks how do we make this conversation transparent? He has asked this small group of freelancers to feed in order to have a good conversation and come away with tangible things that can affect policy.

JM asks that everyone uses their networks in order to let him know if there's anything else to feed into the conversation. He says that it's important that this group of freelancers tell others when they are due to meet with The Yard, in order for them to be advocates for them.

JM suggests that we have the minutes made public - let JM know if anyone is not okay with this.

5: How the group should work

JM doesn't want to be responsible for this group so says it would be good to have someone else to be responsible for it, someone who has easy access to JM or someone else at TY. He suggests that

the next meeting should be about how to have a structure which will work, to talk about if for example we think having a chair would work.

JM says that The Yard needs one person to attend the LTC meeting. Vicki Mortimer, Theatre Designer for the National Theatre is chairing it. This is to be treated as a one off, then we'll decide whether we send regular people or if it's a rolling group. JM will not be in so he needs someone else to feedback.

For forthcoming meetings ED notes that evenings would be better. JB may have a job in the mornings soon, she will update.

JM finishes by saying that if there's any support The Yard can do for people i.e, reading job applications or funding applications, or listening or advice, then let us know as we're all available.

6: Date of next meeting

The date of the next meeting is Tuesday 2nd June 2020 at 10am. An invite will be sent out to all parties.