



Manifesto for Theatre Equity Members Conference

**Monday 22nd March 2010
Lyric Hammersmith
London**

Towards A Manifesto For Theatre – The Story So Far!

Arising from the last Arts Council funding round in England and the concern over the future of all areas of theatre including Subsidised Repertory and the Independent Theatre Arts, Equity raised concerns about a number of theatres, including Bubble and the Bush in the Independent field and most particularly in Subsidised Repertory the Bristol Old Vic. As a result of this funding to a number of theatres was saved, however a number of companies remained without support.

During this time Equity began to think even more seriously as to how theatre would develop in the future. The Equity meeting in January 2008 at the Young Vic in London showed clearly the degree of member concern at where theatre was at that time and where it might be in the future.

Subsequent events showed that members were right to have concerns across a number of fronts indicated by the difficulties at Bristol, Derby Playhouse, Hackney Empire and illustrated most graphically by the Northcott Theatre in Exeter entering administration in recent weeks.

Actor Weeks and Total Wages

In addition Equity research tracking the employment of actors in subsidised repertory theatre in-house productions between 2002 and 2008 reveals that while funding from Arts Councils in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland grew significantly in that period, employment for actors on the Equity/TMA sub rep contract has plummeted to lower than where it was at the start of the decade.

Equity has expressed serious concern to both the Arts Council England and the Theatrical Management Association, which represents theatre managers, and is planning a major campaign in the run-up to the general election.

Equity Assistant General Secretary Martin Brown commented: "What this research shows is that while Arts Council funding has risen, activity on the Equity/TMA sub rep contract has fallen. We believe this must mean that there has been a fairly serious collapse in in-house production. What we don't know is what has replaced it. Is there less activity over-all? Is there the same amount of activity but in-house production has been replaced by bought-in commercial shows or collaborations with small-scale theatre operation on the ITC contract? We don't know.

"If we are right in our analysis that there is a collapse of in-house production what it marks is a major shift away from the sub rep model of plays in a playhouse produced locally with the local audience in mind, to something else. We fear that less in-house productions could mean a "lack of coherent artistic vision" in regional theatre.

"This may also have a detrimental impact on the West End. The West End relies on sub rep for a significant proportion of its in-coming productions, principally but not exclusively straight plays. If sub rep original production is in decline, what does that mean for the West End into the future?"

In the Independent field there is not the same recording mechanism to establish how salaries and work weeks have progressed. Hundreds of companies, artists, and practitioners operate with different levels of funding and it is not currently known in any depth how this field is affected by cuts or other change in policy.

Because of this situation a number of difficult questions arise as a result of the possible weakening of the demarcation between Subsidised Repertory, Independent Theatre and indeed Commercial Theatre operations.

In Autumn and Winter 2009 Equity officials travelled around the country consulting with members - actors, stage managers and creative team members - on what they want from subsidised theatre. Under the banner of 'Manifesto for Theatre', Equity members have been articulating their vision of a subsidised theatre sector that is artistically strong and that treats the actors, stage managers and creative team members it employs with respect.

Out of the 'Manifesto For Theatre' meetings have emerged six key ideas: bring an end to low wages, increase in-house production, put creatives back at the heart of theatre decision making, cut bureaucracy, increase funding and increase theatre's local focus.

The 'Manifesto for Theatre' Conference on 22 March 2010 will formulate these ideas into a 'Manifesto' which Equity and its members will campaign around in the run up to the General Election.

The graph below shows the rise in Arts Councils' investment and the fall in employment on in-house productions.



Funding increases but employment falls

Manifesto Process

The jewel in the crown of the 'Manifesto for Theatre' thus far was the London open meeting on 23rd November 2009 which filled the Actors' Church in Covent Garden. Samuel West gave the keynote speech address on behalf of the Equity Council and explained very clearly the difficulties faced both in the industrial negotiations and more broadly in terms of current policy towards theatre. Patrick Malahide, Prunella Scales and Malcolm Sinclair amongst many others, contributed to the debate.

A 'Manifesto for Theatre' Working Group has met regularly to review the outcome of meetings. Early in the process the Working Group became interested in understanding more clearly what Equity's research was showing.

That actor weeks and total actor pay dropped in the period is clear, but what does that mean? Certainly it appears that work opportunities on the Subsidised Repertory Contract have reduced but does that mean there are fewer work opportunities overall? How can that be in an environment where there appears to be more money and where a number of employers claim they are producing more, with larger casts and more stage management teams? Certainly in-house production seems to be less popular than it was and co-production more popular.

The Union would like Equity and the TMA to have a much clearer understanding of how things have been developed. Has a new mode of production or a new business model been developing?

In a parallel development, Dr Wallace McDowell of University of Nottingham School of English Studies and Dr Deborah Dean of Industrial Relations Research Unit, University of Warwick, have been preparing a pilot study into the current theatre ecology of subsidised and regional theatre in the UK. It is hoped that this piece of independent research will shed light on some of the central issues facing theatre workers and employers.

As a result of the debate on the economic/industrial issues there came an overwhelming demand from members that Equity should continue with its claim for £400, parity for performers and assistant stage managers, and a significant increase

in touring allowance/subsistence, the Equity Subsidised Repertory Working Party has prepared a fresh claim, endorsed by the Council on 26th January 2010, and served on the Theatrical Management Association (TMA) in early February.

Economic/Industrial Debate: Subsidised Repertory Claim

The claim was crafted from the following principles that were identified from the nationwide meetings. The principles also indicated how the Union should campaign in support of the claim.

- Go for it with the Sub Rep claim
- Consider increasing minimum claim to £500
- Continue to focus on subsistence increases
- Absolutely stick with ASM parity
- Campaign collectively in a way members can participate in but in a manner where they are protected.
- Public awareness campaign:
 - How little minimums are
 - Name & shame
 - Where is the money being spent
- Research into operations of the industry
- Campaign for transparent budgets
- Make sure local authorities play their role in contract compliance

Independent Theatre Contract

The meetings were also interested in considering whether there should be a single theatre contract if Equity failed to make progress on the industrial claim in the Independent Theatre sector. Subsequent to this negotiations with the Independent Theatre Council took a surprising turn for the better with a proposal to achieve a minimum of £400 by 2011. There is no doubt this was a difficult decision for the Independent Theatre Council and its member companies. However they decided to come with Equity a little further on the journey and that is a great credit to them. The Council endorsed this proposal on 26th January 2010. Accordingly looking at a single theatre contract, which was suggested in a number of meetings, has now become much less of a priority in the next period. If Independent Theatres are prepared to work with the Union on low wages to the best of their ability, then the arguments for Independent Theatre continuing to have a separate agreement are stronger.

Political Debate

A number of themes also emerged on the political sides of the debate. That is of course a small 'p' political, as Equity in its rules is non-party political and non-sectarian and lobbies Governments and politicians of all political hues.

- Generally prefer artistic director and programme of work
- Needs to be a fair balance between support staff and stage staff and what's paid to each
- Plays in a playhouse/Arts Centre model debate – it is important to ensure sufficient plays in a playhouse as first priority
- Artistic Director/Executive Producer debate – artistic directors working with General Managers are preferred to Executive Producers.
- Lobby Government/Arts Council/Employers on all points

- Tackle issue of why so many co-productions that can lead to less overall work
- Tackle what appears to be a reduction of in-house production in the reps
- Subsidy should be subsidising the production in particular
- 'Right to be paid properly for the work that you do'
- Identify theatres that are doing it properly and support them
- Do something about the 'tick box culture'
- Keep pushing for performers, SM and creative team on boards
- Keep pushing for performers, SM and creative team in peer assessment processes
- Grassroots campaigning as well as central campaigning
- Look to the future not to the past, the good old days weren't all that great.
- Greater economic benefits analysis is needed
 - England
 - N. Ireland
 - Scotland
 - Wales
- Develop greater worth, value and respect for performers, SM and creative team
- Develop more work opportunities
- Greater levels of overall funding
- Local connections with local performers, SM and creative team

There were some issues that different views were expressed on.

Issues that were generally the subject of multiple opinions

- Ensemble theatre/Show by show contract
- Flagship theatre/Fringe theatre
- Funding for arts sake/Social engineering

Other issues tend not to have had significant attention in the meetings although may have been raised by a few members, including a few members who felt strongly about the question of the national minimum wage. This was strongly focussed on by one member in particular at one of the smaller meetings.

Independent Theatre Arts Committee

The Equity Independent Theatre Arts Committee in its discussions felt very strongly that any consideration of theatre should not simply be looking at building based models as theatre had evolved enormously and now takes a multitude of forms. Frances Rifkin, Chair of the Committee highlighted the following statement from the Committee:

"Look to the future! Equity wants members and we need to recognise the huge range of theatre arts in which current and potential members find work. We should boast about the scope of our work and not try to subsume it all into one structure.

"ITAC fully support the concerns of the union over the amount of money spent on admin in sub rep. The independent theatre sector has grown and developed side-by-side and in collaboration with building-based theatre. We have an extraordinary theatre structure in the UK with the capacity to deliver work to audiences and participants and which meets a broad spectrum of demand.

“This complex mixture of theatre arts is unique, but it is under pressure. Professionals working in the independent sector find work in schools, prisons, theatres, care homes and businesses; with young people, at-risk groups, those with disabilities and audiences who would not traditionally have access to theatre. Work produced includes rural and small-scale tours, TIE productions, site-specific and outdoor touring theatre, workshops, classical repertory and new writing.

“This cornucopia of theatre is a source of innovation and provision for audiences, and provides WORK for our members and potential members.

These companies are structured in a variety of ways, some of which echo the structure of a traditional rep company and some of which do not. We must find ways to support theatre practitioners working in partnerships, collaborations, as freelancers and with members of local communities.

Some issues facing independent theatre are the same, others are different.

- End to low wages; sweatshop wages anywhere on government money are unacceptable
- Creative autonomy for theatre professionals working in a range of structures
- End to theatrical class structure which devalues members working in “non-traditional” fields
- Audiences should have a voice in funding decisions
- Access to theatre should not be restricted to visiting theatre buildings
- Realistic and secure long-term funding for a wide range of companies and individuals
- Realistic and appropriate criteria for evaluation
- Funding balance between training and job creation

Other Discussions

Other discussions within the Union’s Branches, ITAC and other forums led Manifesto for Theatre Working Group members John Gillett and Frances Rifkin to collate a number of ideas from Equity members’ discussions that might make up part of the ‘Manifesto for Theatre’. A paper canvassed these following points.

Paper by John Gillett and Frances Rifkin

“Possible Points For A Theatre Manifesto

1) The performing arts have value in three main ways:

- **Intrinsic creative value to the whole community:** most directly human of Art-forms, living record of our history and civilisation; enlighten, challenge, entertain, provoke change in both participants, audiences, and society; explore human experience in ways factual, non-fiction material cannot - through senses, emotion, will, imagination, as well as mind; enable us to get our bearings in the world: understand self, our relationships, place in society. More of a necessity in current time of crisis - sustenance and support in a changing and difficult world.
- **Social responsibility role:** dealing directly with social/political issues, and relating to specific audiences and participants, their social and cultural identities, aspirations and rights - e.g. TIE, forum theatre, outreach work,

workshops and community projects - embracing participation, diversity, inclusion, social understanding, empowerment and tolerance.

- **Economic:** the creation of benefits to local communities and business and the economy as a whole from initial subsidy/investment - £121m public investment in UK theatre produced £2.6b (2004 - Economic impact study of UK theatre); subsidy feeds the commercial theatre sector.

2) Increase in public funding to compare with the level of that in France and Germany, where the per capita funding level is twice that of the UK, or in Austria where it is four times the UK's (from Canada Council for the Arts figures, 2005). No more cuts due to the Olympics: £2.25b cut from 'good causes', of which £137m from theatre. No reliance on business sector funding: declining since 2002, fell 7% on 2006/7. Total private investment only 13% of total funding for surveyed organisations (Arts and Business, 2009).

3) Theatre as a statutory service (not non-statutory as at present) offered by Local Authorities, and funding increased in real terms - currently arts services are in decline despite rises in Council Tax (NALGAO local authority budget settlement assessment report 2008/9).

4) Performers are the only group without whom theatre cannot take place. Other practitioners - directors, designers, choreographers, stage management, etc - are integrally important for the modern theatre experience. Funding is essentially given to finance theatre. So, theatre funding should go primarily to the creation of theatre productions, and not be siphoned off into excessive administration and marketing. We want to see management records of how they distribute their grants.

5) Practitioners must be properly rewarded for their years of training, commitment, and ability and our wages should increasingly approach the national average wage (currently £577).

6) AC and other funding bodies must insist their clients adopt Equity wages and conditions, and provide funding levels to accommodate this.

7) Regional repertory theatres are an important pillar of UK theatre and must be defended from cuts and closures, while being open to explore new forms of operating and connecting with other theatre companies and practitioners.

8) Ensemble theatre companies should be established in every 'major population centre' (Ensemble Theatre Conference organised by Equity/Directors' Guild, 2004), with practitioners on longer contracts and with a shared vision of working.

9) Recognition of the importance of other and new areas of work - small-scale, forum, TIE, workshops, community - serving valuable social roles and involving increasing numbers of members and non-members, who should be unionised. Adequate proportion of increased overall funding should guarantee development. All areas to be brought onto Equity contract.

10) Companies of proven worth, in whatever area of theatre, to go onto long-term and secure funding (10 years?).

- 11) AC and other funding bodies must be accountable and consult practitioners:
- peer groups, including Equity members, on advisory bodies consulted by funders before funding decisions are taken (OR, perhaps Equity members on AC decision-making bodies).

- clear criteria for funding relating to concrete experience of audiences and communities and not elitist abstractions and target-setting: 'excellence' must relate to effect on audience and society as a whole, whether large or small companies, national or community-based; 'innovation' needs a wider definition not confined to current fads.
- Coherent, comprehensive view of all elements within the whole national picture.

12) Practitioners sitting on each publicly funded theatre management Board (of which 2 should be Equity members?).

13) Benefits for Equity members and student practitioners: free tickets for all funded and commercial theatre company performances: most practitioners can't afford to see work in their own fields. Lower admission prices for all audiences periodically throughout the year. (Great Art for Everyone)."

Six Ideas for Theatre

The Equity Subsidised Repertory Working Party also had a number of concerns although these were mostly on the economic side of the fence given the live industrial issues faced in negotiations however on the political side were concerned that money is spent on the stage rather than on other requirements theatre managers might have for these resources.

The feedback on the political questions was, once the meetings were complete, considered by Equity staff and the Manifesto for Theatre Working Group to develop some initial points to frame the agenda for the Conference.

These points were incorporated an industrial bulletin distributed to casts and stage management in Subsidised Repertory early in 2010. They are:

An End To Low Wages

All funded companies to pay at least industry standard wages.

Increased Production

Arts Councils to set minimum levels for proportion of grant spent on in-house production.

Artistic Leadership

Artistic and creative personnel to be at the heart of theatre decision – making.

Less Bureaucracy

Arts Councils to set maximum levels for proportion of grant spent on administration.

Secure Funding

Government arts funding to increase year-on-year at least in line with inflation.

Local Focus

Local authorities to be given a duty to fund performing arts.
Every major town to have a funded theatre company.

The Conference

These themes have been adopted for the Conference given they were developed directly from the nationwide members' consultation. Therefore the members at the Conference will be discussing an agenda formulated directly from general membership input both from the workplaces and from open meetings.

Members at the Conference will need to discuss and debate how to develop action around these points in a way that will make it more likely that in advancing the economic/industrial and political issues a sense of ownership from the general Equity membership is nurtured and developed that will lead to participation in the campaigns, rather than a perception that 'Equity' is doing something members can observe and critique in a passive way.

The Subsidised Repertory campaign around economic issues and the broader political lobbying campaign will require extensive membership engagement to stand any chance of being successful.

The Manifesto for Theatre Conference is the opportunity to develop this.

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