

**From:** Streatham Theatre [info@streathamtheatre.org.uk]

**Sent:** 22 March 2013 21:33

**Subject:** RE: London Assembly survey of theatres

Dear Sirs,

Thank you for recognising the challenges for small theatres in London.

We at Streatham Theatre Company do not have our own theatre so the survey itself is not appropriate for us. However we welcome the survey, and that you also want to hear from organisations like us. Below we address the key questions for your investigation, identifying key challenges and the potential steps to address them, from our perspective.

But first some **background**.

Streatham Theatre Company is a newly formed 'open access' group focused on the Streatham area. It's open to anyone with any level of theatre experience or none, amateur or professional. Our objectives include providing the opportunity for the community of Streatham to access and experience all aspects of theatre, gaining skills along the way. The group is an unincorporated association, run on a club model with a voluntary committee, but works to professional standards.

Addressing the **investigation issues** (there is some overlap):

### **Public funding**

Most small groups rely on members subscriptions and their contributions to shows; donations; ticket and programme sales; refreshment sales and so on to fund the group overheads and its productions. It's also possible to seek sponsors (in money or in kind) from local organisations and businesses but this can be difficult in these times.

Public funding is difficult to access – the application processes can be daunting and difficult for volunteers due to the time and effort required to complete. Also the criteria and conditions can be difficult for small groups to meet. There needs to be a fast-track/light-weight process.

Groups like us can provide great opportunities for communities to take part in, or see, great theatre productions for comparatively small amounts. A few thousand pounds can go a long way, and a few hundred would also be of help. Perhaps instead of giving large grants to a few organisations, smaller amounts could be given to many, many local groups. I have also heard of tens of thousand pounds being spent on local studies about what the local arts organisations need, when what they could really do with is a fraction of the money spent on the study!

### **Security of tenure**

For groups with premises this can be an issue if the premises are rented or leased. There can be commercial pressures on owners to seek higher commercial rents or to sell the site for development. Costs of maintenance and improvements can also be beyond the means of small groups.

The planning system can help, see Performance and Rehearsal Space below.

### **Rates and Levies**

Business rates and licensing costs can also be a major cost to groups renting or owning. Rate relief for community organisations (who are not necessary charities) should be considered. And the licensing regime and high annual license renewal costs (for what is mainly a simple clerical exercise)

need to be addressed. I understand the licensing requirements are due for a change this year, but there still remains a tendency to complexity and bureaucracy not appropriate to small community groups (but necessary for large drinking establishments).

### **Performance and Rehearsal Space**

For groups without their own premises, they are reliant on the availability of local venues which can be difficult in some areas. Local halls are often not well equipped (or licensed) for performance, and theatre premises can be expensive to hire.

Having access to void spaces in commercial premises would be useful, if licensing and health and safety hurdles can be relatively easily overcome. Some incentive could be provided to encourage owners to make the space available (rate rebates and/or good publicity, tied in with a small theatre brand?).

The loss of theatres or suitable performance space to development needs to be addressed by planning (and in consultation with the Theatres Trust). A group I was previously involved with, used the Shell Centre's large and well equipped basement theatre (designed by Cecil Beaton), which was closed around 1999 and has been empty ever since, pending a major development on the site. This excellent theatre has been lost to London for over 12 years and now looks likely to be demolished.

There have been proposals for inclusion of community and performance space in new developments as section 106 gain – a proposed Streatham development includes such a space in the plans. However these can be compromised spaces, with minimal provision for performance, intended to help with planning approval. There may be insufficient capital investment in the first place, and probably no revenue funding to sustain the space.

### **Marketing and Awareness**

Small groups cannot afford marketing, advertising, mail or poster campaigns, etc. Print costs for flyers and posters can be high with low returns. Rather, they rely on free or low cost channels such as word of mouth, membership newsletters, email, social media and websites, maybe posters in local businesses and community buildings, and local newspapers if they can be persuaded to include something. Much of the audience will be family and friends of the participants, or members of the local community, so these methods can work with those who are aware of the group.

To expand the participation to wider audiences, additional channels to market are needed. A London-wide campaign, perhaps supported by actors who started in community theatres, to increase awareness would be useful – a brand could be useful to bring everyone under an umbrella as long as it's simple to participate. Also asking the bigger theatres (especially publicly funded), London press and media to promote local groups could help.

The Stage, Equity, TMA etc have recently launched MyTheatreMatters but this is primarily aimed at the funding for bigger local theatres, it seems.

I hope the above is of use in your investigation. I would be happy to help further if it would be of use.

Best regards,

David Harvey  
Chairman  
Streatham Theatre Company

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