

Examining New Ways to Fund the Production and Presentation of Theatre

Discussion Document



Preface

The following discussion document sets out ideas which encapsulate, from an Arts Council perspective, some of the challenges facing both the theatre sector and the Council regarding how best to fund theatre production in the future. The purpose of the document is to prompt discussion with and amongst the theatre community, with a view to deriving feedback on these ideas.

The Arts Council wishes to listen to and reflect on the views of the theatre sector prior to deciding how best to proceed, and responses to this document are very welcome, whether provided in person or in writing.

We will be holding a number of facilitated consultation sessions in late June/early July 2009, and we will be issuing invitations to attend these meetings at the end of May.

We also welcome written submissions. Submissions should ideally address the substantive issues outlined in the document (i.e. they should typically engage with the substantive ideas outlined in the document, rather than making the case for the work of a particular individual artist or organisation). Please ensure written submissions are typed, single-spaced on A4 paper on one side, and no longer than 3,000 words. All submissions will be acknowledged and read, but it will not be possible to enter into individual correspondence.

Written submissions should be addressed to either:

Theatre Consultation Feedback

The Arts Council
70 Merrion Square
Dublin 2

Or emailed to:

maeve.whelan@artscouncil.ie

with 'Theatre Consultation Feedback' in the subject line.

Please include a return email address.

NOTE: Closing date for receipt of written submissions is 5.30pm on August 1, 2009.

Introduction

The Arts Council believes that it is now timely to re-examine the current approach to funding the production and presentation of theatre. The available resources are neither sufficient to meet adequately the requirements of those in receipt of funding nor to provide for potential new artists and practitioners.

As part of this examination of theatre funding, the Arts Council wishes to consult with members of the theatre community. This short discussion document, intended to assist in this process, is being circulated to members of the theatre community, and responses to the ideas outlined are most welcome. The Arts Council will invite members of the theatre sector to a number of facilitated meetings to hear their response. Theatre practitioners are also invited to submit their considered responses to the Arts Council in writing (please see Preface above).

Facing a familiar dilemma

It could be argued that the Arts Council is currently trying to do too much with limited resources in terms of how it supports theatre production. To resolve this dilemma, the Arts Council should work with the theatre community to develop an alternative approach to supporting theatre practice which would allow for the holistic development of audiences, practitioners and repertoire. This approach should ideally be focused in the first instance on the work of individual artists, and should take into account the need to develop work for audiences nationally as well as on a local level.

There is a growing concern that the present pattern of Arts Council funding to theatre cannot be sustained indefinitely. The need to address this issue is now a matter of some urgency. Given the reality that the Arts Council's resources have recently reduced, and taking into account the medium-term economic outlook, it is clear that the Arts Council will have less money to support theatre in the future. In these circumstances, it is essential for all involved to consider the most effective means of utilising scarce resources.

Historically, Arts Council policy and procedures have indirectly encouraged emerging theatre artists to form administrative structures around themselves in order to receive funding on an ongoing basis. As a result, the last three decades have witnessed a proliferation in the number of independent, non building-based theatre production companies. The Arts Council has done its best to respond to the growing number of funding requests. However, it could be contended that, as a consequence, insufficient amounts of funding have been offered to too many recipients. Furthermore, despite increases in the overall amount of funding offered in support of theatre production, the use of this funding may be deemed ineffective in some key respects.

This same period has been characterised by a proliferation of regionally located arts centres, built with funding provided via a series of local and national government capital funding schemes. In many cases, the Arts Council responded to the creation of these new buildings by offering funding to support their artistic programmes (and, in some cases, by also contributing towards their core costs). Many of these venues include a well-appointed multi-functional performing arts space. The boards and management of these venues regard providing access to high quality professional theatre as a key component of their remit. However, the increased investment in theatre production and for the programming of local venues has not translated into a corresponding increase in the availability of professional theatre for regional venues. This fundamental

disconnection must be addressed, and maybe a redistribution of how resources are provided for the production and presentation of theatre is required.

The dilemma of ensuring provision of adequate levels of funding to such a large number of independent theatre production companies has troubled the Arts Council and the theatre community for quite some time, albeit the implications of recent economic developments seem set to ensure that this dilemma will be experienced in a particularly acute manner. Back in 1995, the Arts Council conducted the Theatre Review – the largest survey of Irish Theatre ever undertaken. As part of the consultation process, a group of key informants was asked for its view on the proliferation of theatre production companies that had occurred at that point. The reported response was that:

As a result of the generally perceived under-funded nature of the sector, most interviewees were clear-cut in their assertion that rationalisation of the sector is necessary and that it would have long-term beneficial effects. In this regard, rationalisation is seen, essentially, in terms of reducing the number of production companies operating within the country.

Despite this analysis, the number of production companies revenue funded by the Arts Council continued to increase, from 21 in 1995 to 34 in 2009, as set out in the table below:

| Year | 1995 | 2000 | 2005 | 2009 |
|--|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Number of production companies* | 20 | 20 | 28 | 34 |
| Total Allocation** | 3.9m | 8.14m | 15.0m | 15.9m |
| Average Grant | 195,000 | 407,000 | 535,714 | 467,647 |

*Including all companies funded under Revenue funding in 1995, and under RFO, APG and AF in 2009

**Excluding grants for touring, project awards, commissions, and other non-revenue funding

(It can be seen from this table that while the total number of funded companies increased, the total amount of funding rose by a greater proportional amount, increasing the average grant available to theatre production companies. This, however, has not reduced concerns among the majority of theatre companies that they remain under-resourced, especially in light of the reduced overall funding available in 2009. It can also be seen that the average grant fell in 2009 due to reduced overall resources and an ever-growing number of organisations).

Ten years later, in 2005, the Arts Council undertook a major consultation process across all artforms in preparation for its new plan, Partnership for the Arts 2006 – 2010. One of the key challenges for theatre emerging from this process was outlined in a position paper on Production Companies that the Arts Council published in 2005:

There is a heavy reliance upon an organisational model characterised by a fixed component (board of directors, artistic director, company manager and administrator) and a flexible component (artists and creative teams engaged on contracts per production). Fixed costs often drain resources unduly, thereby limiting companies' ambition and their capacity to create a viable body of work.

To address this issue in part at least, the same paper suggested the following possible solutions:

- *Recognise, encourage and support new models of making work – including offering incentives for co-productions/residencies/associate companies/increased ensemble membership for particular projects etc.*
- *Provide incentives to companies to pool resources, for example shared administration/rehearsal/storage spaces*

Today, in the latter stages of the period covered by Partnership for the Arts, the Arts Council simply cannot afford to sustain realistic and meaningful levels of financial support to the number of companies currently competing for the diminishing resources, even though many theatre makers still regard the production company as the best option available to them for making professional theatre,. The situation is all the more complex as the Arts Council is mindful of its broader responsibilities for the long-term well-being of a large part of the theatre landscape. As a consequence, it must ensure that its support for 'established' companies is balanced with appropriate levels and types of support in other areas, including: support for new or emerging artists (and other established artists who, for various reasons, may work outside of the production company model); ensuring availability of a broad spectrum of artistically vibrant work; and taking greater account of the impact of funding on the ways in which the needs of disparate theatre audiences are catered for.

It is important to recognise that, as the above references to previous studies illustrate, this problematical issue has been present for some time. While the current economic crisis and the reduction in the Arts Council's own resources have exacerbated the challenges, they have not of themselves been the cause of this dilemma.

Responding with a new strategy

It is essential that the Arts Council now develops a new strategy for responding to these realities. The strategy should be based on the premise that a new way of funding theatre might be imagined that achieves a better balance in support for the sector by:

- offering core funding at realistic and sustainable levels to a reduced number of production companies;
- directing proportionately more support towards independent artists, including new and emerging artists; this type of support may include providing access to shared administrative resources;
- ensuring more work is available for audiences nationally, including via the introduction of an integrated touring policy.

The following propositions describe and examine the issues. However, the ideas are not intended to be either definitive or necessarily comprehensive. It is hoped that they will prove useful in prompting discussion and reflection amongst the theatre community. Artists and theatre practitioners are invited to respond by providing feedback as to what they believe a future strategy should include.

1. As a result of ongoing Arts Council policies, the principal means by which theatre makers currently aspire to build a sustainable career is to place themselves at the centre of their own production company. This is not sustainable, given finite resources and the number of potential theatre makers.
2. The pattern of funding the Arts Council has employed to support professional theatre production has placed too much emphasis on the Production Company as a model. This involves establishing an administrative function for each company and, inevitably, tasks and functions are replicated between companies.
3. The production company can only be an effective model when properly resourced. The Arts Council is unable to provide funding to the level required to adequately resource all of the currently funded companies.
4. With insufficient resources, too few production companies are able to generate the momentum required, to enable them to become more self-sufficient and sustainable i.e. to produce often enough or at a high enough level to develop and sustain significant audiences. Consequently, these companies remain highly dependent on Arts Council funding.
5. A more efficient alternative should cater for the needs of theatre artists by:
 - ensuring that theatre artists can turn to a range of large-scale, well funded organisations and venues (correspondingly, funding to these organisations and venues should be conditional on fulfilling a responsibility to develop and support emerging and mid-career talent);
 - providing access to shared supports to enable artists to make their own work.

6. Although at present the Arts Council provides once off type funding to enable artists and companies wishing to work outside of the production company model, additional measures are required. These might include funding administrative service providers to offer supports, e.g. in the form of physical space, payroll, tax and accountancy expertise, and collective bargaining in terms of marketing, advertising, print and other services. These service providers could facilitate the work of artists, thereby enabling them to concentrate on the creation of work for audiences. While this concept of an administrative support has been referred to as 'Production Hubs', the specific detail of how such administrative support might operate in practice has not yet been defined.
7. Touring should be part of the model for theatre presentation and, in some instances, become the norm rather than the exception. This would serve several purposes: extending the life of productions; maximising the return on initial investment; affording longer employment contracts to freelance artists and providing greater access to theatre for audiences nationally.
8. The most effective way to develop audiences for new work and emerging artists is to offer and market it as part of the programme of already established companies and venues – this is likely to lessen the perceived risk on audiences' part.

The Arts Council will meet with a broad range of theatre practitioners during early summer 2009 with a view to inviting responses to the ideas set out in this discussion document. Theatre practitioners are most welcome to contribute their responses and any other relevant ideas as part of this process, either at the various structured meetings or, should they prefer, via written submissions.

It is anticipated that this feedback will guide the Council in deliberating on how best to proceed. Ultimately, it is envisaged that the Arts Council will adopt a new approach to funding the production and presentation of theatre. The outcomes of this process will be carefully reported back to the theatre community, and to the broader public.