

COMMUNITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Committee Report

Public

Date of Meeting:

21st November 2002

**Title: THEATRE/ARTS CENTRE REVIEW – PROPOSALS FOR
EXPANDING THE STANWIX ARTS THEATRE PROGRAMME**

Report of: Director of Leisure & Community Development

Report reference: LCD.36/02

Summary:

The report outlines the benefits and difficulties associated with expanding the Stanwix Arts Theatre programme, in the context of aspirations for improved provision contained in the City Vision.

Recommendations:

That members receive the report and take the proposal forward for consideration by the Executive.

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1. Introduction

1.1 This report has been prepared at the request of the Community Overview and Scrutiny

Committee as part of its review of performing arts provision in Carlisle. At its meeting on 10 October 2002, the Committee agreed that the development of a new theatre/arts centre in the city in the near future was unlikely, given the Council's financial situation, the reduced levels of Lottery and other external funding now available, and the lack of an obvious site.

1.2 It was decided therefore to explore the possibility of expanding the current programme of professional drama, dance, music and comedy at Stanwix Arts Theatre. Whilst this may be seen as a short to medium-term measure to improve performing arts provision in the area, it would nevertheless serve to underline the Council's commitment to serving and developing local audiences. This in itself would strengthen Carlisle's case for new facilities should the financial climate improve in the future.

2. Current Management and Operation

2.1 In the 1980s, Cumbria College of Art & Design employed a full-time theatre programmer, supported by a part-time marketing post, and organised its own professional programme. County Council budget savings in 1987-88 (the College was managed by Cumbria County Council until incorporation in 1994) led to the closure of the theatre until 1991, when the City Council's newly appointed Arts Development Officer revived the programme.

2. The City Council has managed and promoted the theatre's programme since then and has developed a close partnership with the college (now known as Cumbria Institute of the Arts). Since the refurbishment of the theatre (funded by the Higher Education Funding Council as part of the redevelopment of the Brampton Road campus), the Stanwix Arts Theatre Steering Group has met on a regular basis to ensure that the college's academic needs are balanced with those of the professional performance programme and external hirers of the venue.

2.3 The refurbishment completed in autumn 2000 reduced the capacity of the auditorium from 290 to 217, but introduced a new flexibility. The bleacher seating can be retracted and replaced, for example, by cabaret-style seating – the recently introduced 'Laughing Gas' comedy club events take advantage of this to great effect. Technical facilities, in terms of lighting and staging, have also been significantly improved.

2.4 On performance days, the college's technical staff provide visiting companies with the necessary assistance, whilst 'front of house' and general stewarding duties are carried out by students who have been trained for the job and who are paid for their work. The college's catering contractor provides a licensed bar in the refectory/theatre foyer.

1. Current programme and budget

The professional programme for the current financial year is as follows:

12/4/02 Compass Theatre Co – Waiting for Godot

13/4/02 Laughing Gas Comedy Club

18/5/02 Laughing Gas Comedy Club

26/5/02 Desert Music – Rajasthan meets Mali (concert)

12/9/02 Laughter & Intrigue – Behind the Scenes of the Archers

14/9/02 Laughing Gas Comedy Club

20/9/02 Rocket Theatre Company – Howie the Rookie

26/9/02 Zygo Theatre – The Tragic Life & Triumphant Death of Julia of Pastrana, the Ugliest Woman in the World

28/9/02 Songwriters in the Round (concert)

4/10/02 Dominic Holland (stand-up comedy)

5/10/02 Quondam Theatre – Doughnuts Like Fanny's

9/10/02 Jaleo Flamenco

26/10/02 Laughing Gas Comedy Club

1/11/02 Théâtre sans Frontières – Le Tour de France (2 performances)

2/11/02 Jacqueline Dankworth & Field of Blue (concert)

3/11/02 Kala Chethena Kathakali Troupe (Indian dance theatre)

23/11/02 Laughing Gas Comedy Club

24/11/02 Jet Theatre – Three Servants

8/12/02 English Roots (concert)

13/12/02 Laughing Gas Comedy Club

23/12/02 Théâtre sans Frontières – Alice

24/12/02 Théâtre sans Frontières – Alice (2 performances)

18/1/03 Laughing Gas Comedy Club

25/1/03 Dark Horse Theatre – The Joy Society

14/2/03 Pop-Up Theatre – Wild Girl, Wild Boy (2 performances)

21/2/03 Laughing Gas Comedy Club

22/2/03 The Ashton Group – Lockerbie 103 (drama)

29/3/03 Chris While & Julie Matthews – Blue Tapestry (concert)

3.2 These 31 performances/events illustrate the broad range of the programme – comedy, music, 20th century classic drama (Waiting for Godot), new writing (Rocket Theatre, Quondam, Ashton Group), experimental theatre (Zygo –a play performed in complete darkness), physical/visual theatre (Jet, Dark Horse) theatre for children (Théâtre sans Frontières, Pop-Up), and dance (Jaleo, Kathakali).

3. The spreadsheet attached at the end of this report shows actual figures for last year's programme alongside the projected out-turn for this year, and an estimated budget for next year based on additional Council expenditure of £30,000.

1. The case for increased funding

4.1 Additional funding of £10,000 as a result of the Arts Council of England's Drama Review has already enabled us to increase the number of performances from 16 in 2001-02 to 31 in the current year, but this has placed a considerable strain on staff time. The Arts Unit at Tullie House (3 full-time posts and one part-time) will, this year, promote over 100 events, 6 exhibitions, and Brampton Live festival, and there are doubts as to the sustainability of this workload.

2. The investment of an additional £30,000 by the City Council could fund a new post (total cost £25,680 at the top of grade SO1), and provide another £4,320 for programme costs. This would support a programme of at least 40 performances a year.
3. Provision has also been made within the proposed budget for an education programme. This would take the form of workshops led by members of visiting companies with schools, community groups and the college's own students.
4. If a new post were to be funded, the post-holder could be based either at Cumbria Institute of the Arts or at Tullie House, on either establishment's payroll. However, because the box office is at Tullie House and because the Arts Unit's events programme is marketed as a whole, this may well be the best option. The post-holder's responsibilities could also, in this case, extend beyond Stanwix Arts Theatre to include some aspects of Brampton Live festival, releasing time which the Arts Development Manager could use to develop the latter event to its full potential, market the Arts Unit's whole programme more effectively, and fundraise to support new initiatives.

5. Difficulties and other issues

1. With a programme of around 40 performances a year the theatre would still not be operating to capacity, but academic demands on the space are heavy and likely to increase. A schedule for the current academic year is attached, with 'available' time highlighted in yellow and confirmed performance days in green. As can be seen, there are long stretches of time allocated to student productions that cannot be used for professional work. Available dates are not always compatible with touring company schedules, and some are reluctant to perform on Sundays – the only day available throughout May and June.
2. The out-of-town location of Stanwix Arts Theatre has long been recognised as a barrier to attendance. There is also the fact that the theatre is primarily a teaching resource within a college campus rather than a fully fledged public arts venue, and this dual use is always apparent in terms of ambience. 'Proper' theatres or arts centres like Theatre by the Lake, Hexham's Queen's Hall or the Brewery in Kendal have an undeniable advantage in being able to offer their audiences a complete 'night out' with attractive bars and restaurants.
3. However, while Stanwix Arts Theatre remains the only facility in Carlisle capable of presenting a wide range of small to middle-scale performance work, it would be sensible and desirable to make the most of it. People in Carlisle do travel, for example, to Hexham and Keswick, but Theatre by the Lake's figures show that only 3% of bookings over the last year came from postcodes CA1-CA8. It is also interesting to note that when analysing audiences for a show presented in Keswick and Carlisle – Théâtre sans Frontières' Le Tour de France – only 5 of Keswick's 65 bookers were from the Carlisle area. With Stanwix is operating at just over 70% of audience capacity, it is reasonable to anticipate that that audiences would grow if the number and variety of performances were increased and the venue's profile raised by more vigorous marketing.

6. Recommendations

6.1 That members receive the report and take the proposal forward for consideration by the Executive.

**CARLISLE CITY COUNCIL ARTS UNIT BUDGET:
STANWIX ARTS THEATRE 2001-2004**

Expenditure	01-02 Actual	2002-03	2003-04
Salary costs	0	0	25,680
Artists Fees & expenses	16,446	29,090	37,590
Education programme	0	0	2,000
FOH & Technical Staff	2,588	5,700	7,350
Equipment Hire	794	1,150	1,750
Leaflets & posters	597	1,350	1,800
Season brochures	3,000	3,150	3,150
Advertising	667	3,000	4,000
Postage (Direct mail promotions)	3,000	4,000	5,000
Total Expenditure	27,092	47,440	88,320
Income			
Ticket Sales	10,781	25,300	36,000
Northern / North West Arts	8,000	4,000	4,000
Arts Council of England	0	10,000	10,000
Cumbria County Council	2,000	2,000	2,000
Total Income	20,781	41,300	52,000
Net Cost to Carlisle City	6,312	6,140	36,320

Starwix Arts Theatre Booking Schedule Master

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