**STAMP Connects - Open Door minutes 29.07.20**

Welcome to STAMP Connects - Open Door 2020. Josie Dale Jones and Jen Tang, both independent theatre artists, chaired the panel.

The panel was made up of:

Beth Watton - Poplar Union

Tom Wright - Kiln Theatre

James Pidgeon - Shoreditch Town Hall

Niamh de Valera - Blue Elephant Theatre

Kaya Stanley-Money - Camden People's Theatre

Nic Connaughton - Pleasance

Our BSL interpreters were Laura and Stacey and close captions were available.

STAMP is an independent network of venues who support artists. All venues contribute to STAMP on a voluntary basis.

The conversation began with framing of the event from Josie.

Josie emphasised that the aim of today was for artists to get a clear picture of where venues are at now. She emphasised that this is a difficult, challenging and messy time. We need to be prepared for some difficult conversations and it could be dispiriting. We just ask that venues are really honest. Knowledge is power and artists and venues need to work together in order to get our amazing industry back on its feet. Venues are in recovery mode and we recognise that you are going to have to take time before you open properly. We know that planning is hard and that our questions are based on theatre pre-covid, so our questions are based on that. We know that theatres don’t know loads either and that we may not know anymore at the end of this.

The panel began with 5 quick fire questions to each venue:

**Beth, tell us about Poplar Union.**

We are an arts and community space - interdisciplinary - theatre dance music and film and community orientated projects. Currently closed and have been since the middle of march. Just now starting to hammer out our plans for the rest of the year having gone online.

**Do you have a date for opening and will it be socially distanced?**

We are looking at October 2020. We’ll be moving into the building before then. It will be socially distanced if Boris says we need to be.

**Do you know what your programme looks like for re-opening?**

We have a couple of things lined up that were pencilled before closure. It isn’t a full season but a few things are in the pipeline.

**How long do you think it will take for your venue to recover from the impact of covid?**

It’s very difficult to say at this point. It will definitely be another year until we know more.

**Aside from uncertainty and money, what is the biggest change and challenge from this period?**

It has proved to be an exciting challenge to work out how we deliver our projects as a digital platform. That has proved to be exciting so we want to sustain it as much as we can, with the staff and resources we have.

**When will you be ready to speak to artists about bringing their work to your venue:**

We are ready, please talk to me about autumn and spring.

**Nick from The Pleasance, tell us about your venue:**

We have 3 spaces in London, and we should have now up in Edinburgh for our fringe programme.

**Do you have a date for opening and will it be socially distanced?**

Late October / beginning November with a phased re-opening. We are looking at having our main space (250 seater) with a restricted capacity, our 80 studio with a capacity of 40. Smallest space probably not viable. We should hopefully welcome artists we have relationships with from the middle of next month.

**Do you know what your programme looks like for re-opening?**

When we re-open we will be looking at moving our spring shows into November/December. 2021 is still a little up in the air.

**How long do you think it will take for your venue to recover from the impact of covid?**

We don’t know until we get to the fringe next year. The fringe makes 80% of our income so it's a massive hit to have lost that this year. We are trying to get London open as soon as possible, but our main focus is on the fringe for 2021.

**Aside from uncertainty and money, what is the biggest change and challenge from this period?**

It’s been difficult with a reduced staff team. We’ve been incredibly blessed with all of the amazing people we have worked with over the past 35 years pulling together and supporting us. A massive thank you to all of those people.

**When will you be ready to speak to artists about bringing their work to your venue:**

Everyone is currently on furlough. We should all be back in November at the latest, and will be ready to hear about pitches then.

**Kaya, tell us about Camden People's Theatre:**

CPT is a small studio theatre in London. We have 1 performance space with a capac of 60 and rehearsal space. We predominantly work with early career artists, and a big programme of community work that has now gone online.

**Do you have a date for opening and will it be socially distanced?**

Nothing is fixed yet. We are hoping to start to open building up for artists very soon in the next few weeks. Opening to the public won’t be until 2021. We can’t make anything viable with social distancing in place. We are shifting into being an artist development space for the next 6 months. If we can, we will put together something short and fun for christmas.

**Do you know what your programme looks like for re-opening?**

We are in touch with all of the artists postponed and muted for autumn. We are planning to do a call out for our spring festival.

**How long do you think it will take for your venue to recover from the impact of covid?**

I’m more worried about 2021 and the year after. There is a lot of support out there at the moment. Normally I’m fundraising for the next year and year after now, which I can’t do right now. The impact is yet to be seen.

**Aside from uncertainty and money, what is the biggest change and challenge from this period?**

We are down to a team of 1 - 2 people. We now operate as a food hub so the building is being used in an entirely different way. Our biggest challenge has been the deep responsibility we feel for our artists. Every year we work with over 300 people and we miss them terribly.

**When will you be ready to speak to artists about bringing their work to your venue:**

We are ready now but I must caveat that and say we aren’t being great at replying to people quickly due to our reduced staff team. Do get in touch though and we will get back to you. We’ll be doing some call outs for commissions and festivals soon - watch this space.

**James, tell us about Shoreditch Town Hall:**

We are a huge grade 2 listed building on the corner of old street. We have a very wide programme covering theatre, dance, physical theatre and circus. Our venues range from a 40 seater, to an 800.

**Do you have a date for opening and will it be socially distanced?**

We haven’t announced this publicly yet, but we are planning on re-opening on 1st September. We will start with small scale events. We are hoping to do some stuff in the middle october in our largest space with social distancing measures in place.

**Do you know what your programme looks like for re-opening?**

Some of our programme for September we had already planned to do in a socially distanced way. Things we haven’t been able to do in a socially distanced way we have moved to 2021.

We are also planning hyper local work with local partners and local people - they will have a short lead in time and probably be participatory.

**Aside from uncertainty and money, what is the biggest change and challenge from this period?**

The whole team is furloughed. I’ve had the biggest insight into how freelancers work without a team or building.

**How long do you think it will take for your venue to recover from the impact of covid?**

We won’t be getting back to any kind of financial normality until the end of march 2023. We don’t get any funding - we self generate all our income. The economy bouncing back is just as important as the cultural setting.

**When will you be ready to speak to artists about bringing their work to your venue?**

It looks as if we have 4 shows likely to take through to next year. As long as we have these locked down we will be able to consider other programming. I’ll probably be ready to talk to people in mid october - that's when staff come back.

**Niamh, tell us about The Blue Elephant.**

We are a black box 50 seater focusing on early career artists. We do lots of theatre and dance and work on a box office split. We reach out to people around us and do lots of participation work online.

**Do you have a date for opening and will it be socially distanced?**

We are planning on re-opening for rehearsals once we have sorted our ventilation, which is a big issue in our new covid world.

**Do you know what your programme looks like for re-opening?**

We are hoping to have a christmas show. We might show dance films on a reduced capacity - soft start to re-opening. Maybe do a couple of other 1 nighters moved from March.

**How long do you think it will take for your venue to recover from the impact of covid?**

It’s going to be a while before we know. We have taken this time to improve in some areas - working more locally and accessibility. There could be some bonuses from this time.

**Aside from uncertainty and money, what is the biggest change and challenge from this period?**

The way we are currently working. We have 2 ADs and 1 of them is also our participation director and is currently on maternity leave - the work is more weighted towards participation right now because it is really needed. I’m talking to artists less than I was before right now.

**When will you be ready to speak to artists about bringing their work to your venue?**

We are currently talking to people about rescheduling work. We are talking to some new artists as well but so much is happening we are quite slow to come back. Open to talking but we don’t really know what's happening at present.

**Tom, tell us about The Kiln:**

We are a flexible mid scale venue in Brent. We have 300 seat theatre and cinema, restaurant and 3 rehearsal spaces. We were The Tricycle. We focus on voices that are underrepresented, bringing them into the mainstream.

**Do you have a date for opening and will it be socially distanced?**

We are hoping to open the building in Sept. We feel we have a civic duty working with local charities and orgs to see what gaps we can fill. We are also exploring potential performance opportunities that fit within current government guidelines, including small scale shows, readings or possibly promenade performances.

**Do you know what your programme looks like for re-opening?**

There are 3 shows we had announced before the lockdown that we are hoping to bring back when we are able to open properly. There may be other programming announced between but don’t know yet.

**How long do you think it will take for your venue to recover from the impact of covid?**

It’s only been open a year and a half since our capital campaign and reopening so we didn’t enter the pandemic in the strongest position. We are very dependent on what the government allows us to do.

**Aside from uncertainty and money, what is the biggest change and challenge from this period?**

We’ve reduced down to a very small team. It’s been a good moment to refocus and distill what is important within the org. We are so aware of the current inequalities within the industry - there is no way we can come out of this the same organisation.

**When will you be ready to speak to artists about bringing their work to your venue?**

I’m afraid we aren’t ready to hear from artists yet. We know it's incredibly difficult for artists. We have some great artist professional development opps coming up.

**James can you give us an overview of how many commissions there were in 2018/19 and how 21/22 might compare? In this case commissions means cash funding that ends in performance.**

We usually have 8 commissions a year. Some may take 18 months, some may take 3 - 4 years, or not get to the point of performance. We have some artists who are still under commission, some who are about to, some starting conversations with. A lot of our commissions pot is reliant on the money from event hires, so that is going to have an impact in the future. We could have more commissions available - probably more seed commissions than full, with a shorter lead in time than normal.

**You indicated earlier that October will be when you are ready to speak with artists. What will the form of those conversations be? Do you want to be invited to sharings (if this is possible), will it be pitches? What do you want to hear?**

To date all of Shoreditch town hall’s commissions have been developed in partnership with us. We think we will be more open - working with more artists we don't have relationships with, or artists with shows to go. Invites to work in person if possible or online would be great. We are very open to pitches. We will update our website to show this. It’s worth noting that we work with artists at a turning point / mid career. Work that responds to our spaces will be prioritised - looking for creativity in how work is staged in our spaces.

**Kaya - what is a typical number of productions commissioned in a year for CPT?**

We always have a commissioning pot - it’s small compared to other orgs, but it's there. Scale varies. We have a seed commissioning fund, and then when funding allows we can offer more money, 3 week runs, a lot of support. We commission 20 - 24 artists a year. CPT’s main remit is giving people the space to give it a go. Last year we worked with 200 artists. Pre-covid we did 2 shows a night, 7 days a week. Going forwards our main concern is if we can double bill - this is a financial worry, but also a big concern about how we can support as many artists as possible. We will be announcing a big chunk of commissioning money soon - watch this space.

**Tom - might there be a big shift in the type of work you can commission? Will there be different ways you model commissioning?**

We will always be a political theatre. Most of our work comes from commissioning a writer. Everything going on in the world has reaffirmed our mission to represent under represented artists. Brent is one of the worst affected boroughs in London by coronavirus and we need to represent and support our local community.

We will work with our funders to try and commission more writers in the future, to ensure we keep moving forward. We want to reach more artists, specifically those voices that we are most at risk of losing during these challenging times. We haven’t yet had an open submission system before due to the nature of our programming - we are currently working out how we can provide alternative touch stones for artists. We want to support artists at every point in their career.

**Nick - are there going to be changes to the kind of work you will be programming?**

Yes and no. We don’t commission. We primarily present. We are associate/co- producer for 25 - 30 shows we hope to support next year. We’ve been guilty of programming safe in the past and it doesn’t work. Our audience wants to see the more interesting stuff - we need to lean into that. We are rethinking what a theatre looks like - stripping out the seats, booths etc - nothing off the table - could be really exciting to see how artists respond to that. We are asking how can this be a creative impetus?

**To all of our panelists - will people feel safe coming back to venues? Is anybody consulting with their local communities?**

Beth - we are consulting with our audiences. It is something we do anyway - we have a resident advisory group who we use as a sounding board for our programming. We aren't going to shy away from showing our audience about what we are doing to make the building safe. We are programming events to re-introducing people to the building.

**What would be the best advice you would give to an independent artist?**

Beth - don’t shy away from being bold when you have these conversations with venues. Don’t be afraid to have some level of communication together.

**What do artists need to know about making work safely? We are also being expected to make work differently (outdoor, digital, site specific), which is brilliant but new to lots of artists. Are venues preparing to account for that or upskill artists?**

James - Shoreditch Town Hall is trying to connect artists with other artists who have the expertise. As artists don’t be afraid to get organisations to facilitate new relationships to help upskill you.

**What do artists need to think about practically?**

Kaya - we are still in the process of reading the very long rehearsal guidance. We are planning on publishing guidance on our website. We would ask companies to have a light touch risk assessment whenever they come in - done in collaboration with us.

James - at the town hall we will be asking every artist to supply a covid-19 risk assessment. We are doing a huge risk assessment for the whole building currently and making an artist template that we will share. We recognise that artists are solo or small teams so we will make sure it is as light touch as possible.

STAMP may offer a free health and safety / risk assessment workshop in September. We’ll keep you posted.

**Questions on the future and venue response to key national movements - i.e. BLM - each organisation will respond**

Jennifer Tang (She/Her) opens the second half of the conversation by naming some of the urgent and pressing matters Josie and herself feel have been demanding our attention. In no particular order, she mentioned the BLM Movement, Green Recovery, We Shall Not Be Removed, Paying Balance and Freelancers protection, Diversity, Representation and Inclusion and specifically the time that it takes to build these into the companies and the work that artists / sector want to make.

**Jennifer asks organisations what thoughts have organisations had in relation to the urgent matters mentioned above and what positive changes have they been making to address them? She also encourages the participants to add their questions to the chat.**

Beth from Poplar Union tells the cohort that they pride themselves in having a diverse and representative programme, but they are aware that their core staff is a whole white team. She added that they do acknowledge that and are looking to confront that. They are looking at particular strands of training for their staff, how they work with their board, continue working on their programming, residencies and how they work with specific groups of people, etc.

Additionally, they’re having conversations around the implementation of these strategies, so they do not make any rushed / box-ticking decisions. They are looking to develop and imbed these strategies long-term and to incorporate them into their fundamental modes of operating.

Nic (Pleasance Theatre) reflects on the dangers of looking at BAME as one big group and box-ticking way of functioning and operating. He adds that there isn’t a white or non-white block. He believes it is important to look below the surface and be more person specific. Rather than focusing on percentages he is interested in looking at individual diversity in a way that is non-tokenistic.

**Jennifer adds that is heartening to hear that the thinking is going beyond tokenism. She asks whether they are considering consulting with black and non-black artists of colour to help develop that thinking?**

Beth encourages direct communication as the best way to make change. She adds that it is important to find a balance between having these conversations and risking shifting the responsibility onto the black and non-black artists of colour. She stresses that the responsibility to change / improve remains with them and not with the artists or audiences.

Nic adds that the artists should be paid to help organisations go on that journey.

**Josie Dale-Jones wonders whether venues will be looking for work ready-to-go and how they will factor in the help artists will need to make changes into their practice too? Will there be time to adapt work that reflects the changes that need to be made?**

Kaya (CPT) thinks it is important to shift thinking away from programming and stop waiting for programming to happen; And at CPT the focus is now on supporting the artists to sustain their practice. She adds that the sector should be taking advantage of the fact that ACE is being flexible and the fact that artists are not relying on venues to get the money they need. She believes this is time for artist development and to think on projects that are not solely focused on the immediate output. She tells the groups that she’s had a lot of 1-to-1 with artists where they discussed how ACE is more likely to finance something that is not relying on a live audience.

**Questions from the audience**

One question from the participants: From Lydia Wharf ***‘ACE DYCP grants are opening in September (?) which might support that idea too Not sure it's September, but it's autumn!!’***

Jennifer, in response to Lydia, says it is great to hear that venues are ready to have conversations with artists. She adds that ACE has reopened the project grants scheme and they’re looking to fund artists and get money to artists now. She says that because artists are driven by output all the time, it is a great opportunity to now be able to spend time thinking on what’s next.

Jennifer says ACE is not interested in personal development over getting projects out to the public. ACE have changed their grant application process and there’s no need to match fund applications for the time being or show audience development strategies. There is money available to support artists developing themselves and their practice.

**Wrap up**

Josie wraps up the conversation by saying that hopefully the session has served the participants and to reiterate that venues and artists need each other to make theatre and that this is the time to imagine new models and to move forward.

Nic adds that nobody is getting rid of theatre and we need to keep talking because the next crazy idea might also be the next greatest idea.

Kaya says that from a STAMP point of view they want the conversation to keep moving and to continue to be here to help artists.

Jennifer reminds the group that the notes will be posted on the STAMP website. They thank the venues and participants for being a part of the session.