

# Planning capital gains

*Jo Caird talks to the Lyric Hammersmith about its ambitious capital project that will see the theatre extend onto the roof of a shopping centre and inspire more young people through its already bustling doors.*

“Before you do a capital project you think, ‘oh, it can’t be that hard.’” When Jessica Hepburn took up the role of Executive Director and Joint Chief Executive of the Lyric Hammersmith six years ago she “inherited the idea” of extending the theatre onto the roof of the shopping centre next door as a means of expanding the organisation’s work with young people. Costing £16.5 million, it is far and away the most significant capital project the west London venue has embarked on since 1979, when the 1895 Frank Matcham playhouse was reconstructed on the site following its demolition to make way for redevelopment of the area.

Hepburn has been amazed at how complex the process has been from the very start of the capital development project. Not only are the Executive and her team developing on a site they do not own – the Lyric has a long lease on its premises but does not own its building – they have had to deal with all the issues surrounding development in a city centre where space is at a premium. Added to this, a year ago the building changed hands, meaning a whole new set of negotiations for the theatre’s senior management team.

Hepburn also describes the complexities surrounding the fact that the Lyric is sustained by a number of different revenue streams, including the Arts Council, Hammersmith and Fulham Council, trusts and foundations, and private donors. “Keeping all those people motivated and believing in the vision has been really challenging,” she says.

Hepburn and I are sitting in the Executive’s corner office on the fifth floor of the theatre, a rather cramped room that overlooks Lyric Square to the east and King Street to the south. With us is Adam Coleman, who joined the team in 2009 to assist with the initial fundraising for the Lyric’s extension plans and now heads up young people’s strategy at the theatre.

The Lyric has had enormous success in recent years, winning Olivier Awards for *Spring Awakening* in 2009 and *Blasted* in 2011, seeing *Ghost Stories* transfer to the West End in 2010 and creating a stir with Simon Stephens’ ambitious trilingual drama *Three Kingdoms* in spring 2012. Yet the theatre’s professional achievements are only half the picture, explains Hepburn: “We are a producing theatre committed to making exciting, extraordinary, contemporary theatre of the highest quality, but our work with children and young people is absolutely integral to our artistic vision. It sits side-by-side and feeds into the professional work that we do on stage. And that’s at every level.”

Coleman leads an extensive programme for children and young people, including the theatre’s youth theatre, the Lyric Young Company, work with the education sector, targeted projects involving vulnerable young people, and schemes seeking to bridge the gap from training to employment in the creative industries. The building, notes Coleman with pride, is “in constant use by young people”, whether that’s



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Jessica Hepburn and Adam Coleman | Photo: Rowan Mead

11 to 19-year-olds doing a Making the Band workshop or young people not in education, training or employment working towards a performance over the theatre’s six-week START programme with the aim of helping them to re-engage with learning.

The capital development project, which Hepburn and her team hope will be completed by spring 2014 (they plan to start work this autumn), will extend the Lyric’s existing facilities for children and young people with the addition of a recording studio and editing suite, dance and drama studios, scenic workshop, cinema, ‘digital playspace’, wardrobe workshop and costume store, practice rooms, green room and props store. It will also allow the Lyric to embrace new partnerships with other arts organisations and organisations working with young people. “Partnership working is a massive plan for the future, which we just don’t have the capacity to do at the moment,” says Hepburn.

She gives the examples of Rambert Dance Company and Albert & Friends Instant Circus, who work with young people at the Lyric to deliver dance and circus skills training. This type of scheme will be extended when the project is complete, and the theatre is in discussions with groups such as Hammersmith and Fulham Action for Disability about taking up residency in the building to provide youth projects in-house, which will hopefully then feed young people into the Lyric’s own programmes.

The initial plan for the capital development project made it sound like a more or less separate entity that would stand alongside the original building to deliver the Lyric’s young people’s programmes. It soon became clear to the team, however, that such an approach failed to capture the ethos that makes the theatre’s youth offering so unique.

“We really realised early on that we weren’t building this ‘teaching theatre’ as it was described in the early days – it



Members of the Lyric Young Company | Photo: Helen Maybanks

*“We treat our project like we’re building our own home.”*

was [that] we were expanding the Lyric. If you ask people what they love about the Lyric, it’s because it doesn’t feel like a school, it doesn’t feel like a youth theatre, it feels grown-up, it feels professional,” explains Hepburn.

When the extension is complete, all the organisation’s activities will be run across the entire building. This will have a positive influence on not just the young people who use the theatre, but on its staff and audiences too. The administrative offices, which are currently squeezed into nooks and crannies throughout the building, several of them encroaching upon sacred front-of-house space, will be consolidated into a semi-open plan area across a foyer from some practice rooms and the digital playspace. The project, Hepburn says, “is about the expansion and development of our work dealing with young people, but it is also crucially about making this a 21st century organisation for the next generation”.

Preparing an organisation for the future, however, is not without its challenges. The world is a very different place than it was when the project was first dreamt up six and a half years ago. Hepburn describes how the first tranche of funding secured for the plan was tied to a proposed new qualification that was promptly scrapped when the coalition came to power. Unperturbed, the team found a way to maintain that money by changing tack and refocusing its efforts on the new government’s agenda.

Coleman believes that the “entrepreneurial spirit” fostered by Hepburn and Sean Holmes, the Lyric’s Artistic Director since 2009, has been integral to the smooth progress of the capital development project through the change of government, economic crisis and the new funding landscape. “We are a responsive organisation and always looking at ‘does this need to shift?’, ‘does this need to change?’ And that dynamic way of working really does flood throughout the organisation. Nothing is static,” he says.

Periodically engaging the young people themselves is a route the team has found helpful in terms of keeping up momentum on the project. “Because the capital project can be very clunky, bringing it back to reality feels really important and whenever we’ve involved young people in

that, that's been a real breath of fresh air," explains Coleman. Surveying users and potential users – whether formally or informally – should be part of any capital development project, but you could argue that it's even more crucial where young people are concerned. Hepburn is aware of the danger here: "Capital projects are run by adults and often people who've been working in the profession for years and years and so often they get it completely wrong about what young people want."

While adaptability and a pragmatic approach are essential to such a process, so too is not losing sight of a project's ultimate aim. Before any planning even begins, says Hepburn, an organisation must have a very clear idea of what it's attempting to achieve and why. It's about "really interrogating internally why you're doing this thing; what it's going to bring to the organisation in the long term. Then when you've really interrogated that, getting the right people around you".

The number of people involved in large-scale projects such as this can be daunting, but it's important to take your time over assembling a strong team. "Building buildings is not

our day job," says Hepburn. "Most of us do it once and never do it again because it's such a challenge and that is a real issue". Helping the Lyric to navigate the many complex relationships that make up the project is Arts Consultant David Beidas. Working as a client representative, or go-between, he smooths the way between professional teams for whom this project is just another job and a theatre team with a high level of emotional investment in the build. Arts organisations, Hepburn believes, are "different from most clients because we treat our project like we're building our own home. That level of involvement, the professional teams say, is unprecedented".

And it's not just at this level of senior management that such attachment is felt to the capital plan. Coleman points out that the project "is owned by the whole building really. It's where the whole organisation is moving towards...We are making this shift together and the programme is evolving as a whole organisation. And that's just because what we do is work with young people. That's what we all do. That is us, the Lyric". ■

The Lyric Hammersmith's recent production *Morning* starred members of the Lyric Young Company | Photo: Marc Brenner

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