



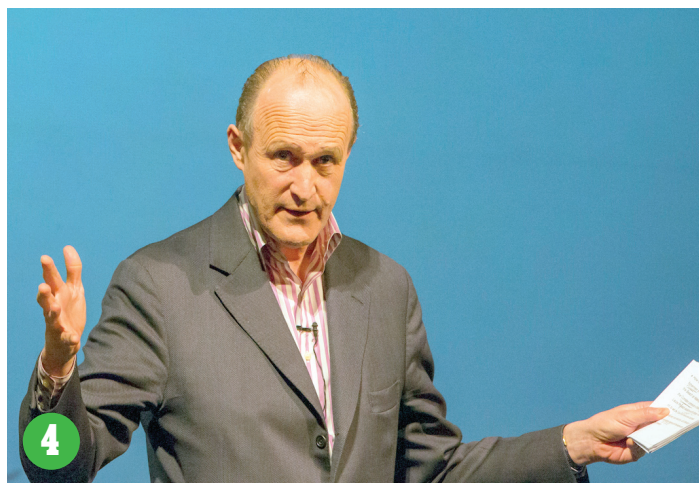
1



2



3



4

1) The interior of the Civic, Stourport-on-Severn, 2) Voluntary Arts chair Peter Stark speaking at the Theatres Trust Conference 2014, 3) Performers outside Cast in Doncaster, 4) Arts Council England chair Peter Bazalgette speaking at the Theatres Trust Conference 2014

Checklist for groups trying to secure theatre buildings

- Put together a focused team with strong governance
- Make sure your objective is clear
- Gather evidence of benefit to the community
- Engage with the community
- Draw up a sustainable business plan
- Explore the potential for partnerships with your local authority, schools and businesses
- Explore new funding opportunities
- Engage with the new localism agenda
- Be ready to educate your local authority on the importance of the arts
- Find local leaders ready to fight your corner
- Consider succession planning

Put theatre at the centre of community

Although difficult to define, everybody has an opinion about what the phrase community theatre means to them. IT was the leading theme of the Theatres Trust Conference 2014, held in Leeds at the end of April. **Jo Caird** reports on the event

Defining community theatre, said Peter Bazalgette, chair of Arts Council England, speaking at the Theatres Trust's eighth annual conference, "is a bit like pinning jelly to a wall".

Anyone seeking a concrete definition for the term will have come away from this event disappointed. Held at the City Varieties Music Hall in Leeds on April 28, under the theme of 'community theatres', even the first session of the day, 'What is a Community Theatre?' yielded very little discussion on the question in its title. But those in search of solid answers will have missed the point – community theatre is a necessarily flexible notion. There are almost as many

models of community theatre in the UK as there are communities.

Over the course of four sessions – 'What is a Community Theatre? Funding Community Theatres, Community Rights and Community Theatres – The Future...' – delegates were introduced to around a dozen organisations that define themselves as community theatres. Funding opportunities and the new localism agenda were touched upon by representatives of the arts council, the Heritage Lottery Fund and the advisory body Locality (see box, right), but the main focus of the day was on sharing experiences of setting up and running community theatres.

Some of the organisations represented, such as the West Yorkshire

Playhouse in Leeds, are receiving venues as well as producing houses, and combine these roles with community engagement through youth theatre, education and outreach work. Others, like the Civic Trust, in Stourport-on-Severn, run arts venues with programmes largely comprising performances by local groups, or non culture-related community events. Also represented were two groups in the process of trying to secure existing buildings for future theatre use – the Clifton Community Arts Centre, outside Telford; and Brampton Little Theatre in Cambridgeshire.

A few key issues came up again and again, in spite of the very different contexts in which these organisations work. Much discussion was had about community theatres' relationships with local authorities, with several speakers bemoaning officials and councillors' reluctance to engage in debate about the value of the arts, and even reporting deliberately obstructive behaviour in some cases.

Philip Thomson from Saltburn Arts, a community organisation based in North Yorkshire, pointed out that it is important to remember that local authorities are not culture experts, so perhaps need a little guiding when it comes to these issues. Bazalgette told delegates of the 80 meetings he

“

Much discussion was had about theatres' relationships with local authorities, with speakers bemoaning councillors' reluctance to engage in debate about the value of the arts

”



5) The auditorium of West Yorkshire Playhouse, Leeds, 6) Brampton Little Theatre, Cambridgeshire, 7) Stephen Williams MP speaking at the Theatres Trust Conference 2014, 8) Saltburn Arts, Saltburn-by-the-Sea

has had with local authorities since taking over at the arts council 15 months ago, to encourage them to support the arts, and how cheered he is that some are upping their arts spend rather than cutting it.

Accessing hard-to-reach communities and engaging everyone – not just those with an existing interest in the arts – was another topic discussed. Kully Thiarai, executive director of Cast, in Doncaster, described how the community’s resistance to the idea of the venue has melted away since its opening in September 2013. Historically, Doncaster has one of the lowest levels of cultural engagement in the UK, yet Cast sold 53,000 tickets in its first six months of operation; on the launch weekend, 6,000 people came through the doors.

Openness and flexibility are crucial to the success of community theatres, speakers and delegates agreed. This is the case when it comes to theatre buildings – Sheena Wrigley, chief executive of West Yorkshire Playhouse, described how the organisation’s capital plans will open up the building to make it into a more attractive and welcoming space for communities to inhabit. But it’s also about the way these organisations function. Many speakers described the work they do outside their theatre buildings, taking

their activities into other venues, into schools, on to the street; it’s bringing people back to the building that is really challenging, most acknowledged.

In his opening address, Peter Stark, chair of Voluntary Arts, likened the debate about theatres and community to that taking place around the creation of the arts council in the 1940s: “The questions are open again,” he said. The conference’s keynote speaker, Stephen Williams MP, parliamentary under secretary of state for communities and local government, was similarly rabble-rousing, predicting the localism agenda will be “revolutionary in terms of democratic empowerment”, and calling on delegates to spread the word about the new opportunities available.

But while Stark describes himself as a “pathological optimist”, he warns that there’s plenty still to do.

New relationships with local government and with the next generation will be critical, and there are important issues to face regarding structural youth unemployment and other social issues. Crucially, something has to be done about what he regards as an “inauthenticity” in the debate at the moment, with people saying one thing in public and another in private. It’s his hope that this conference might start to change all that.

Funding opportunities for community theatres

Heritage Enterprise

The Heritage Lottery Fund launched the Heritage Enterprise programme in April 2013 and has already given around £28 million to 11 projects. Grants of between £100,000 and £5 million are available to community-led groups seeking to bring historic buildings back into use. Funding helps groups meet what’s known as the ‘conservation deficit’, where the cost of bringing a building back into use is greater than the value of the asset after development. Priority is given to listed buildings, those designated ‘at risk’, and those in economically deprived areas. www.hlf.org.uk/enterprise

Community Shares

Groups with a strong community support base might consider issuing a community share offer to raise money for their project. To qualify, a group must be registered as either a co-operative or a community benefit society, but it can then set its own rules as to share prices and minimum investment. Each shareholder becomes a member of the co-operative or society with one vote, regardless of the size of her investment. Shares are non-transferable and the share price is fixed. www.communityshares.org.uk

The Localism Agenda

The Localism Act (2011) introduced a whole host of new rights and powers to allow local

communities in England and Wales to play a part in local development. Those most relevant to community theatre are:

- **Community right to bid**
All councils must now maintain a list of ‘community assets’. Community groups can nominate assets – whether publicly or privately owned – to go on the list. If the nomination is successful, at the point at which the asset is put up for sale, community groups will be given six months to put together bids for it. Although this ‘community right to bid’ pauses the sale, giving groups time to raise money and support, community group do not get first refusal on the purchase (as is the case in Scotland).
- **Neighbourhood plans**
Neighbourhood planning enables communities to establish general planning policies for an area, such as how land should be developed, including cultural amenities. It’s a long process – a neighbourhood plan could be up to two years in the making. But they can yield dividends – areas with a plan will receive 25% of the levy that councils can charge on new developments.
- **Community Asset Transfer**
Community groups can also seek to secure buildings via Community Asset Transfer, which gives local authorities the power to dispose of land and buildings at less than market value where they can demonstrate that doing so will be of benefit to the area. This mechanism pre-dates the Localism Act (2011) but recent years have seen a huge growth in communities taking ownership of assets. Groups interested in CAT must gather evidence of community support and show how the community will benefit.

More information on these and the other rights available under the Localism Act (2011), including on grants available to groups putting together bids, can be found at www.locality.org.uk