

HITN minutes of STAFF working group meeting 8 July 2005

Arts in Motion Adventurers Unlimited Ballet West Charioteer Theatre Company Dannsa DogDaze
Dog Star Grey Coast Theatre Company Goode for a Giggle

Highlands and Islands Theatre Network

Mull Theatre Out of Darkness RightLines Plan B Perhilion Roadrunner Skeklers Tartan
Chameleon Tabula Rasa theatre collective@highland Theatre Hebrides Tosg
Zenwing Puppets

**Minutes of the meeting of the working group for STAFF
(Scotland's Theatre Arts Festival and Forum) held on Friday 8th
July 2005 at the offices of Highland 2007, Abertaff House,
Church Street, Inverness at 2.00 to 4.00pm**

Present: Ian Brown (HITN Chair), Dolina MacLennan (HITN Board Member), Matthew Zajac (Dogstar), Cathy Shankland (Arts & Heritage Manager, Highland 2007), Victoria Stuart (Marketing Manager, Eden Court Theatre), Robert Livingston (Director, HI-Arts), Maggie Dunlop (Funding & Liaison Manager, HI-Arts), Muriel Ann Macleod (HITN Development Officer / Theatre Hebrides), Stuart Brownlee (HITN Marketing & Information Co-ordinator / sbworks).

Apologies: Simon MacKenzie (Artistic Director, TOSG), John Tiffany (Associate Director for new work, NToS).

1. Welcome

Ian Brown (Chairman of HITN) welcomed everyone to the meeting and indicated that there had been two nominations received from the invitation to HITN members to take up the single remaining place on the STAFF working group. These were: George Gunn (Artistic Director, Grey Coast Theatre) and Alastair McDonald (Director, TheatreCollective). Following discussion on the criteria for selection it was unanimously agreed by those present that the STAFF working group would benefit particularly from the contribution of George Gunn to its work based on his connection with the origins of the concept and in bringing a wider geographic perspective to the deliberations of the working party. It was agreed by those present to remit this decision to invite George Gunn to take up the remaining place on the STAFF working party to the HITN Board for approval. [An Extraordinary Meeting of the HITN Board members in attendance was held at the close of the STAFF working group meeting to consider and decide on this nomination – for information, the HITN Board met and approved the nomination from the STAFF working group to invite George Gunn onto the STAFF working group] **ACTION: Ian Brown**

2. Background on STAFF (Scotland's Theatre Arts Festival and Forum)

Muriel Ann Macleod outlined the background to the STAFF concept. This is summarised as:

- The Festival has existed as an idea of the Network member companies first, over many meetings
- Originally was just to include 4 member theatre companies, but has now grown to include the whole of Scotland
- Now looking at the Umea model – a biennale/biennial; event with invitations to international companies – collaboration is seen as the way ahead
- It will be the best of Scottish theatre – in Inverness – to include drama, dance, opera, children's theatre, physical theatre, multi-media and writers
- A complementary 'free fringe' might evolve outwith the main programme
- Eden Court very interested, but it also could extend to Stornoway, Shetland and Orkney and other Highland venues
- The Forum will be the 'market place' for exchanges ideas, providing training opportunities and interactive discussion while at the same time promoting Highland work
- Masterclass approach for theatre professionals with invited practitioners of the stature of Peter Brook and Peter Stein, and also practical workshop sessions open to the general public
- HITN Board very enthusiastic
- Members' consultation resulted in 9 responses – 7 positive, 2 negative (Grey Coast felt the festival should be kept to the H & I and theatrecollective felt the plan was too ambitious)
- Not all companies responded but this was not a bad thing – no response indicated a neutral or positive response
- Why not be AMBITIOUS?
- Funding bodies will be approached once a proposal has been finalised and agreed – time of year, venues, etc. SAC are willing to help fund events/activities that open up the industry to the expertise of significant individuals in the field
- There is no Scottish Theatre Festival, nor is there a national festival which takes place in the Highlands & Islands
- STAFF would be significant in Scottish terms as a lasting legacy of Highland 2007
- Don't consult with central belt companies at this stage – they might pinch the idea! Invite them after plan is concrete and there is strong backing from Eden Court, 2007 and NToS

- Need a positive relationship with NToS – the festival needs to be part of NToS and vice versa, with NToS possibly premiering 1 or 2 productions at the Festival (illustrative idea at this stage)
- Need to tie in with other national organisations, e.g. RSC, in order to provide stronger degree of viability and sustainability
- STAFF aims to celebrate what is happening in the Highlands & Islands and feed from and contribute to the wider national and international arenas
- There will need to be adequate travel facilities like Umea – transport to and from performances (e.g. St Magnus, Shetland Folk Festival). Also could use ferries, as in the Uig – Tarbert ferry which provides dinner and entertainment (in summer) during a one & ½ hour journey).

3. The nature and aims of the Festival

The draft paper prepared by Robert Livingston in April 2005, subsequently approved by the Board of Directors of HITN on 12 May 2005, set the scene for the advancement of the proposal. It is now essential to draw on the inspiration of this vision and move towards firming up on the practical details and nature of the proposed festival.

The core aims of the festival are expressed as:

- celebrating theatre in the Highlands & Islands
- placing this into an international context

Ian Brown asked the working group members to voice 'what would be the one thing they would want to see achieved' by such a festival:

(MZ) – What about the need to involve Scottish Theatre leaders? Such as, Gerry Mulgrew, a great talent, still producing work and deserving of more recognition than currently received. Aside from the promotion of Highland Theatre, the festival should strive to assert the quality of 'all Scottish Theatre'.

(VS) – The need for built-in sustainability must be embraced.

(MAMcL) – As a practitioner, would want to see extremely high quality work produced and presented – from the local, national and international arenas. Also, the raising of standards in relation to theatre skills and of marketing of output. A festival that is not afraid of and tackles experimentation as well as celebrating quality of product – to encourage and commit people to want to keep going to see new things.

(MD) – With 'ArtsPlay' hat on – would want to see the involvement of young people and children – opening out the festival to the wider community in an inclusive way, developing and growing future audiences.

(DMcL) – The acceptance of the value and sustainability of an 'annual community play' – citing the 'Pipers of Tomnahurich' - with the aim of inviting acceptance of 'the performance' to counter the 'that's not for us' thinking.

(RL) – Agree with MD/DMcL – citing the St. Magnus Festival, bringing a degree of authenticity and raising the expectations of the community in their involvement for the future. Picking up on (MZ) the need to raise the status of Theatre throughout Scotland as a whole should be a key aim, particularly in encouraging Scotland-wide buy-in to the idea.

(CS) – From a Highland 2007 perspective – the delivery of a truly attractive community event with connections to and from the outside world, leaving a legacy of activity, action and reaction to be built upon in future years.

(SB) – Building the confidence of Highlands & Islands based theatre companies and audiences – act local, reach global.

(IB) – In summary – working group members are in harmony with this, all working together and the concept is beginning to gel. There are 3 major aims emerging, providing us with some focus:

1. Community & Young People (meet their needs through participation in workshops, masterclasses, performances and providing routes into community plays)
2. Nature of the event itself – wonderful, quality, sustainable, memorable, legacy – with links to development and growth for the future
3. Helping to raise awareness and build quality of theatre in Scotland through quality works, strong leadership locally, nationally and internationally, building confidence and self-awareness of the sector

(RL) – Would top and tail what has been said thus far with the need to build in growth from the beginning to ensure longevity, celebrating the many facets of Scottish theatre and achieve sustainability. The central driver being the state of theatre in Scotland. The two factors (need for built-in growth and the state of theatre) are inextricably linked and

underpin the vision/artistic policy of the Festival supported by two fundamental factors:

- need to gain support and participation at both national and community levels
- need to develop and sustain audiences for professional theatre as one of the most important aspects (particularly in the Highlands, but also throughout Scotland generally).

(MAMcL) – By delivering this Festival we are saying for our communities 'we are as entitled as anyone else' to this and the real challenge will be to 'attract' audiences as opposed to 'educating' them. To this end, the setting up of the Festival and engaging with the community needs to go hand-in-hand. Eden Court's contemporary dance workshop/performance model was cited as a good example of this approach.

(IB) – Summarised some of the key themes/triggers coming through from the 'round the table' mini-brainstorming discussion, beginning to define the nature of the event. The Festival will be:

- experimental and innovative
- of high quality
- with community reach (covering all aspects, without being all things to all people)
- of lasting value
- national and international in its ambition

(IB) – Undertook to work up the discussions on the aims of the Festival and include a draft set of aims in the minutes of the meeting. **ACTION: Ian Brown.**

STAFF draft aims prepared by Ian Brown:

- 1) to celebrate, share and promote the highest quality theatre in Scotland in a local, national and international context
- 2) to provide a high quality event involving all forms of theatre arts for the communities of and visitors to Scotland
- 3) to reach into the community and, in particular, meet the needs of young people and children
- 4) to raise self-confidence and self-awareness amongst theatre practitioners and audiences by developing in a sustained manner the quality and range of thinking about and experimentation in theatre

Alternative 4th aim proposed by Robert Livingston:

- 4) to provide a space for Scotland's theatre community to learn, debate, innovate and create

(RL) – Undertook to draft out a 'vision' statement for the Festival in the spirit of the discussions, describing the heart of what STAFF is all about (to be no more than 20 words). **ACTION: Robert Livingston.**

STAFF draft vision prepared by Robert Livingston/Ian Brown:

"Celebrating the best of today's theatre; offering a forum to learn, make and debate".

4. Research and selection of the work

On a pragmatic level, the working party is beginning to flesh out the vision and nature of the Festival. It may develop as a Festival and Fringe, with an overall official programme and complementary work (particularly by local companies) acting as a shadow/penumbra of what is in the Festival itself. It is hoped that Eden Court Theatre can be at the heart of the Festival, but that it could also reach out to other venues and communities (such as the Craigmonie Centre, Drumnadrochit; the MacPhail Centre, Ullapool; and venues in Caithness for example). Eden Court Theatre are currently using these and other facilities during the re-furbishment phase of the theatre, so the potential to keep this connection 'live' once the new Eden Court opens is very attractive. Spaces, in effect, can be anywhere that would be appropriate to reach audiences, including outdoors (there is currently a proposal being discussed by HI~Arts, Limelights and Highland 2007, to commission a 1,000 seat big-top with raked seating for the 2005 pantomime, which would be purchased outright and remain as a legacy for future years). Eden Court is not in a position at this point in time to commit definitively to what its position will be in two years time with regards to programming, although either June or September slots would not be ruled out at this stage. It is planned that the new Eden Court will open in early 2007 and as well as the main auditorium, will house a studio theatre (270 seats), 2 cinemas (100 & 86 seats), and 2 education/workshop studios, all providing an attractive balance or resources. There are obviously also partnership opportunities to link with 'Highland Theatre' in Pitlochry, the WYSIWYG Youth Theatre Festival at the MacRobert, Stirling, or the Blas Festival - for example linking with their programmes.

Discussion turned to when and for how long would the Festival be, with comment being made on the difficulty of attracting audiences to Eden Court in June. The timing of Blas (1st week in September?) and the end of the Edinburgh Festival (end of 1st week in September) may well target the 2nd week of September for the start of STAFF as being an optimum time. This would also have the benefit of helping to extend what is traditionally the end of the peak tourist season in the Highlands. In terms of length of the Festival programme, the Umea model was cited as running for 5 days (including a Sunday).

(IB) – Facilitated summary of the discussion thus far:

- Eden Court cinemas/studios could potentially be used for workshops/masterclasses
- 2 major performance spaces – hosting 3 or 4 performances per day
- 5 days would deliver say 20 events (not including matinees)
- If ran Festival for a week, choice of weekend to weekend, or mid-week to mid-week (say Thursday night to Wednesday night with one weekend)
- There may be an argument for the Festival to span a longer time scale to have a more of an impact on public consciousness
- Need to balance this with availability of theatre professionals for longer than a 5 day slot and also with the challenges of answering 'how long would the audience draw be'?
- Recognition that the working group should look at other Festival models for comparator information (e.g. Hay-on-Wye Literature Festival). The example of the original Highland Festival was cited, pairing down from a period covering 3 weekends down to two weeks (with an audience dip in the middle).
- The original idea started with Highland companies embarking on a pathway/pilgrimage to Inverness, setting a trail, say with Skeklers performing from Shetland, to Lyth to Eden Court, or Theatre Hebrides performing from the Western Isles, through Skye to Eden Court. A balance needs to be struck between the perceived need to be Highland wide/tour widely and the need for a tightly programmed Eden Court 'showcase' slot supported by the 'pathway' idea of the Highland based companies performing in their home community and moving off on an 'all roads lead to Inverness' mini-tour. The example of the Highland Festival's ambitions not being realistic nor delivered was cited as a cautionary note. The Aberystwyth 'travel/stay – 5 day maximum' model was cited as an alternative; also the 'Burns and a' that' Festival (10 days).

- There is the potential for the Highland theatre companies, HITN and promoters through PAN to collaborate on maximising access to the Festival across the region, developing audiences through touring performances, workshops and masterclasses.
- An appropriate 'brand' is required to give a sense of quality and inspiration, 'wanting to attend'.
- The current feeling is that there will be sufficient quality work around to support such a Festival.
- Consider model of Inverness based (a few large productions) covering 45 minute drive time radius, with smaller productions, workshops and masterclass programmes further afield/chunks of the programme to tour – but focus needs to be on Inverness.
- Consider model of 'saltire' approach – a week lead-in with companies performing from the 'edge' to the big 'central' shows in Inverness – this is similar to the 'pathways' model. There is sense in embracing the region and logic to Inverness as a focus (hub and spoke).
- Transport will be a key factor – the 'event bus' – and companies must attract audiences into the Highlands (something that the Highland Festival failed to achieve).
- Need to nurture a 'hungry audience' – aficionados from afar and interested/keen/committed from local communities.
- Must try and tap into the 'Homecoming' market in advance of 2009 – a huge market of between 7 and 10 million in America alone.
- Highland touring companies normally look to tour for between 3 to 6 weeks and could 'work around' the festival, act as ambassadors for the Festival.
- Need at least 6 months lead-in for marketing and to get Festival programme out.
- There was an expressed view that STAFF would ultimately be judged against the benchmark of the Highland Festival.
- The idea of a Festival Fringe was questioned (possibly street theatre not organised by the main Festival), as the main Festival idea is pretty ambitious as it is. The Fringe, if there is one, would develop/promote itself and may build over time.
- The STAFF working party should concentrate on the core, official programme.
- The STAFF working party will need to firm up on whether this idea is a 'goer' in terms of the commitment of the potential creative partners of Eden Court, NToS, Pitlochry Theatre, Theatre Workshop, Traverse, Wee Stories, etc. There needs to be a long-term commitment to make this work and programmed into Eden Court's main programme on an ongoing basis (biennial).

- Perhaps every Festival year, the Festival could also move on to and involve a different Nordic country (e.g. 2007 – Sweden, 2009 – Iceland, 2011 – Finland, etc.).
- Perhaps Festival should also look to involve a UK partner (e.g. Aberystwyth, Belfast, Leeds, York, Northern Arts Touring 'Pride of Place', etc.).
- The overall concept needs to be developed further before engaging with FST and inviting them onto the working party and also approaching SAC and SE (additional investment in theatre/added value of STAFF – post Cultural Commission report). Target this for after the next meeting of the working party (September time?). However, it was felt that it would be appropriate to let Richard Holloway, Chairman, SAC, know now of current thinking, but that the concept is still in development stage and that SAC will be approached when it is appropriate to do so.
ACTION: Ian Brown.

5. Methods of delivery

There are fundamentally two questions at a strategic level:

- Does the STAFF working party become the Board of the Festival as a tri-partite arrangement between HITN, Eden Court Theatre and NToS (get the finance, appoint producer/artistic director and make it happen) acting as a sub-board of HITN (the STAFF working party, using the main constitution of HITN)? or
- Will the Festival remain as a HITN project until after the 1st Festival and subsequently be run by a body other than HITN?

If HITN were to grow this would impact on its administrative structure and the need for further resources. However, HITN and STAFF working together would present a much more sustainable option.

On a practical delivery level, decisions will need to be taken regarding structure (e.g. executive producer and/or artistic director), about how works for the Festival will be selected and on the negotiated arrangements between the Festival and the venues it uses.

Decisions on these aspects must be put to the HITN membership and discussions held with the NToS.

6. AOB

(RL) – Raised the matter of Robert Dawson Scott's 'Critics Awards' being hosted in Inverness in June 2007? If STAFF were to be held in September 2007, then the 'Critics Awards' would be an ideal launch pad (buys the critics into soft marketing of the Festival).

(DMcL) – Asked about the launch of HITN. This will need to wait until the Company Limited by Guarantee is formally established through Companies House.

7. Date, time and place of the next meeting

The next meeting of the STAFF working party is proposed for Wednesday 24th August (subject to the availability of John Tiffany of NToS), with alternate date of Wednesday 17th August as second preference. Proposed time of meeting on either date is 1pm. Venue to be confirmed (possibly Abertaff House if available – **ACTION: Cathy Shankland**).

Contact: Stuart Brownlee, HITN Marketing & Information Co-ordinator:
"Whinhill", The Dal, Balnain, Glenurquhart, Drumnadrochit, Inverness-
shire, IV63 6TJ. T: 01456 476217, M: 07713 632438, E:
info@sbworks.co.uk