

Britain: Arts Council to cut funds to 194 organisations

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The funding body Arts Council England (ACE) has told nearly 200 organisations that their funding will not be renewed beyond March 2008. The news has had an immediate impact, with theatre staff being put on redundancy notices, shows being cancelled, and the future of festivals in doubt.

Three quarters of the affected organisations are based outside London. Some of the biggest names in regional theatre, including Bristol Old Vic and the Derby Playhouse, are to lose their funding.

ACE announced that it was cutting funding to 194 organisations, nearly 1 in 5 of their 990 funded organisations. It has called this its “broadest and bravest” grant revision to date, although critics have referred to it more accurately as a “bloody cull.”

Peter Hewitt, ACE’s Chief Executive, said the “real priority” was “supporting artistic excellence.” The decision to end funding was taken, he said, sometimes “on the grounds of...performance to date and sometimes because we believe the money can be used more effectively elsewhere.” ACE has said the cuts are designed to “concentrate ...funding on organisations of excellence.”

Hewitt has claimed that as a result of these cuts, in three years, “the arts in England will be of even higher quality, and accessible to even more people, than they are now.”

Although these proposals are nominally provisional, with the final decision to be taken at the end of January, ACE has clearly indicated its intent to cut funding to these organisations. The letters notifying them of the loss of funding were received last week, and the organisations have only until the middle of January to appeal.

The National Campaign for the Arts has criticised the timing, pointing out that because of the Christmas holidays, some organisations have only 18 working days to prepare their appeals. Further, organisations can only appeal on the basis of “flawed procedure.” They cannot appeal ACE’s artistic judgement, suggesting that any appeals are not intended to succeed.

In the case of festivals, the timing undermines the prospect of the festival going ahead. Holly Kendrick, director of the National Student Drama Festival (which is to lose its £52,000 grant), called the cuts “unreasonable.” She pointed out that they have commitments three months ahead and now had to find a third of their funding “at impossibly short notice.”

ACE claims that the cuts are necessary so that they can promote organisations with a strong artistic record and that have broadened access to the arts. In practice, the cuts attack access to the arts at the roots, as children’s theatre companies have been particularly badly hit.

London Bubble Theatre Company, which has produced shows in parks and schools for 35 years, is to lose £420,000 of funding. This is

roughly half of its annual income. The company works with 10,000 children and adults each year, 5 percent of whom are visiting the theatre for the first time. Jonathan Petherbridge, London Bubble’s artistic director, said he was “appalled” by the announcement. He said he was “gobsmacked” at Peter Hewitt talking about increasing audience access whilst threatening to cut funds to a company that “leads in terms of increasing artistic engagement and participation.”

The cutting of funding to London Bubble highlights the partiality of the decision making. ACE expressed concerns about the artistic quality of the company. According to Sandy Craig, chair of the company’s board, the reports over the last 18 months had been on about 7 productions of the 30 they produce annually. The reports had not considered any of the company’s educational participatory shows or their Christmas show. ACE’s decision, therefore, was based on “a small part” of the company’s work.

Craig was angry that there was no process of consultation, and that ACE had done no research into the potential financial impact. He attacked the decision as “catastrophic, back-handed and cowardly.”

London Bubble has appointed an insolvency practitioner and “fully envisages” issuing redundancy notices to staff. The company is seeking legal advice, but Craig has stated bluntly that without the funding, “We’ll have to close.”

Norwich Puppet Theatre, one of only two puppet companies for children in England, has been told it will lose all its funding. This amounts to around a third of total funding for this internationally recognised company that was set up in 1980.

North London’s Pop-Up Theatre Company will lose its £194,000 grant, threatening its work with some 15,000 young people each year. Artistic director Michael Dalton pointed out the anomalies between ACE’s purported ambition and these cuts, saying that the company “significantly contributes to theatre for young people—an area that the Arts Council claim is a priority for them.”

For all that ACE claims broadening access is an issue, the cuts indicate that it sees this in very specific and rigid terms. It is not just children’s first exposure to theatre that is under threat. ACE wants to cut the grant to the National Student Drama Festival because it believes theatre training for students should take place within the further and higher education sectors. The Festival’s alumni include artists of the calibre of Pete Postlethwaite, Anthony Sher, Stephen Fry, and Meera Syal.

Other festivals threatened include the Manchester-based lesbian and gay arts festival, Queer Up North. The festival had been planning a collaboration with Antony and the Johnsons for 2008, but this may have to be cancelled. Artistic director Jonathan Best called the timing of the decision “disastrous.”

In such decisions, it is difficult not to be reminded of the Thatcher administration's swingeing attacks on funding for marginal and specialist arts companies. London's Drill Hall was recently described by *The Stage* newspaper as "the country's leading producer of lesbian and gay shows." It is to lose all its funding. On receiving the ACE letter, the venue cancelled its current show, as it is "cheaper not to be open," according to artistic director Julie Parker. Redundancy notices have been issued to all staff, and part-time workers have already been laid off.

Parker emphasised that ACE's decisions were not motivated by artistic judgements, as ACE has not discussed the venue's work. Rather, she explained, the cuts were motivated because Drill Hall does not conform to ACE's business model. ACE had expressed concerns about the sustainability of the organisation, which, Parker said, was "an exceptional thing to say" about an organisation that has been running for 30 years.

Parker explained that Drill Hall covers the gap between public funding and income by working with other media organisations to record shows. BBC Radio 4 has long used it as a recording venue. With this income, it has funded a new studio theatre without applying for National Lottery money. ACE, she said, "say it is the wrong sort of fund-raising as it does not come from major trusts and foundations."

An ACE spokeswoman effectively confirmed this, saying that its criticisms of Drill Hall centred on "what we consider to be consistently poor performance in terms of finance and business planning." She said that ACE had "set this out to them in considerable detail." If Drill Hall thinks ACE is wrong, "they can respond to us in as much detail as they want to."

That these cuts signal a change of tack by ACE can be seen in the treatment of regional theatres. Brighton's Komedia is to lose its entire £160,000 grant, even though ACE recently contributed £75,000 to the venue's £1 million renovation. The cut means that the venue would no longer be able to produce theatre and would have to rely on comedy and music gigs. This makes a mockery of ACE's justification for proposing the cut, that Komedia had not encouraged theatre in the region as much as it had hoped.

Local residents have expressed their anger at the possibility of losing a second theatrical venue soon after the closure of the Gardner Arts Centre in nearby Falmer. There has also been anger that Komedia would lose its funding while the Brighton Festival—a commercial venture—will not.

Other regional theatres have similar experiences. Exeter's Northcott Theatre is to lose its £547,000 grant, one third of its annual income. The announcement comes just weeks after the theatre reopened following a £2.1 million refurbishment, to which ACE contributed £640,000. The Northcott is the only producing theatre (a theatre that produces its own shows rather than housing visiting shows) between Plymouth and Bristol. A highlight of the reopening season is the English premiere of Tennessee Williams's *The Notebook of Trigorin* in February.

Other venues to lose funding are the Bristol Old Vic and Derby Playhouse, both theatres with a huge significance in the culture of regional theatre in Britain. The Theatrical Management Association (TMA) has been scathing in its criticism of ACE's handling of regional theatre. The TMA's Richard Pulford expressed bemusement that ACE should have "so recently have trumpeted the role of regional building-based theatre, in terms of its cultural, social and economic impact; and yet in certain parts of the country may now be in the

process of dismantling it."

This is also the attitude of Ivan Cutting, artistic director of the Suffolk-based regional touring company Eastern Angles. He described the cut to its funding as "vindictive," saying it would "strike at the heart" of its work and hinder its touring to "the most far-flung communities of East Anglia."

The TMA has been concerned for some time that ACE does not understand national touring to middle and large-scale venues, or the role of regional theatres. This certainly seems to be borne out in the cutting of funds to Guildford's Yvonne Arnaud Theatre, an important venue for receiving pre- and post-West End tours. The TMA accuses ACE of seeming to have a national strategy for arts development whilst taking decisions that undermine such a strategy.

The actors union Equity was also critical. A spokesman said, "There's no clear picture of any strategy...the process means there is no way that the profession as a whole can understand what the Arts Council is doing."

This ostensible promotion of regional arts whilst attacking them is not confined to theatre. The London Mozart Players, described in a German magazine as "one of the best chamber orchestras in the world," is to lose its funding. The London Mozart Players have done a great deal of work in rural areas, establishing performing residencies that are now under threat.

Its funding is to be redirected into the national organisation Orchestras Live, a move that managing director Antony Lewis-Crosby described as "seriously flawed." He said that the cut would "sweep away quality music from areas that are deprived of it. It is a threat to our existence that we have to consider, and for such an important orchestra, that is very frightening."

The TMA has accused ACE of incompetence. Certainly, there is an element of chaos about ACE reversing its previous funding decisions and claiming artistic judgements as the reason. Nor should the philistinism of this government be underestimated. More than one London correspondent writing on the cuts has drawn attention to the comparative amount being spent on the Olympics, and the cutting of funds to prestigious children's theatre companies hardly heralds a cultural renaissance.

But there is a greater significance to these cuts. The attack on the Drill Hall funding model suggests that the government's economic programme is being pursued with greater vigour across the arts. As economic conditions worsen, these cuts are an indication of wider attacks to come in every sphere. There are prestigious targets here, but they are largely in the sphere of children's theatre, minority performance, and regional theatre. These are somewhat soft targets, unlikely to provoke the furious response on the government's doorstep that cutting funds to one of the London-based national theatre companies would meet. The cuts must be seen as a harbinger of more yet to come.



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