

British government's token arts rescue package: A "back-to-work" agenda amid an ongoing catastrophe

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The Johnson government's £1.57 billion (US\$1.98 billion) coronavirus rescue package for the arts, announced this past weekend, is a token and selective effort, aimed at promoting the reopening of businesses while the pandemic rages.

The funding, the first financial recognition of the arts sector since the pandemic began, concentrates on "crown jewel" venues, and its limited local support will not save countless jobs.

Announcing the package, Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden admitted, "Sadly, not everyone is going to be able to survive and not every job is going to be protected and, sadly, I have to be honest with you, of course, we will see further redundancies."

This is an understatement. The limited financial assistance provided is based on the government's propaganda claim that the pandemic is in retreat and, sooner rather than later, theatre, dance and music venues will be able to get back to relying on the revenue from audiences.

In reality, venues are being encouraged to open under unsafe conditions that threaten the health of performers, back- and front-stage employees and audiences. Moreover, in the present conditions, many audience members will not return, and the remaining social distancing measures make it all but impossible to earn a profit. Worse still, no sooner will this reckless policy be implemented, to justify the government's back-to-work drive, than an inevitable spike in cases will mean venues either closing their doors once more or going bankrupt.

The situation for arts bodies has already become desperate. Theatres have gone into administration. Southampton Nuffield has announced its permanent closure.

Waves of redundancies have been announced. Norwich Theatre, which has lost 95 percent of its income, announced a restructuring threatening 113 jobs, more than half its employees. A further 59 employees on zero-hour contracts have been told there is no longer work for them. Manchester's nationally acclaimed Royal Exchange warned

it may lay off up to 65 percent of its permanent staff.

The collapse in booking revenue and refunding cancelled performances had an immediate impact on theatres. Advance ticket sales have collapsed by 92 percent since the onset of the pandemic, and the industry has reportedly lost £330 million with the lockdown.

Producers warned that without support, 70 percent of performing arts companies faced collapse by the end of the year, and more than 1,000 theatres confronted insolvency and permanent closure.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson finally broke the government's silence on the question by declaring that arts and culture "make our country great and are the linchpin of our world-beating and fast-growing creative industries."

The bulk of the package is a £1.15 billion support pot for organisations. Nearly one quarter of this—£270 million—will take the form of loans to be "issued on generous terms." Institutions will have to apply for support money.

Details are not yet clear, but Dowden has said applicants will be asked to prove how they contribute to wider economic growth. Unless there is a Damascene conversion, London's prestige arts venues, considered essential to tourism and beloved of the Tories' own voting constituency, will claim the lion's share. This seems to be the meaning of the reference to "crown jewel" venues.

The next largest component sum of the package confirms that its purpose is not rescuing institutions but legitimising the wider reopening of the economy. The government has dedicated £120 million of capital investment to "restart construction on cultural infrastructure" and for heritage construction projects in England paused because of the pandemic.

The remainder of the money is divided regionally, with £100 million specified for English Heritage and national institutions in England. Money has been allocated to the devolved regional administrations: a paltry £97 million for Scotland, £59 million for Wales, and £33 million for

Northern Ireland.

This is too little, too late to save many jobs. Birmingham Hippodrome had already announced 130 redundancies. The Theatre Royal Plymouth cut its entire artistic team, 100 out of the venue's 350 jobs, issuing a statement that it is closed until further notice. The Theatre Royal Newcastle axed 44 of its 89 staff.

The package is intended to accelerate the reopening of venues. This can only mean endangering public health. Theatre producers had said that they needed venues full to 60 percent of capacity for reopening to be financially viable. Under safe social distancing regulations, some venues were looking at only 12 percent of capacity. The situation is even worse for live music venues, where social distancing of any kind is impossible and audiences must be packed in if there is any hope of making money.

Theatre owners and producers are being driven by commercial considerations to downplay the dangers to the safety of actors, staff, and audiences. Julian Bird, chief executive of the Society of London Theatre/UK Theatre, representing theatre owners and managers, insisted "that with the right safety processes in place, we can get back to full audiences in theatres within months." Andrew Lloyd Webber said he looked forward to "working further with Oliver [Dowden] and the government to get all of Britain's theatres—both large and small—open as soon as possible."

Producers are pushing the government for a time frame to enable reopening. This was their main objection to Dowden's vague five-phase "roadmap" for reopening, announced two weeks ago. Its first two phases—physically distanced rehearsal and training, and physically distanced performance for broadcast and recording—were already possible. Thanks to the latter, some unsubsidised theatres, like the Old Vic, had been able to offer livestreamed performances as a source of income. But this is impossible for most.

Dowden's other phases were: Outdoor performances with an audience and pilot indoor performances with "a limited distance audience"; outdoor and indoor performances with limited distance audience; and all performances with "a fuller audience" indoors. Those pushing hardest for venues to reopen were demanding "no earlier than" dates for these phases. Johnson has now pledged a timetable later this week.

The combined focus on "crown jewel" institutions and the economic impact of the pandemic means a further intensification of the devastation already wrought by decades of funding cuts.

That the rescue package responded to the demands of theatre producers, not artists, is confirmed by its continued omission of any support for self-employed and freelance workers. They were not included in the initial Job Retention

Scheme (JRS) at the end of March, under which the state subsidised 80 percent of the wages of furloughed workers.

Directly employed theatre workers on JRS were at risk anyhow, with Justin Audibert, artistic director at the Unicorn Theatre, warning that the "vital lifeline" of JRS would not prevent closures. Staff at Southampton's Nuffield Theatres were furloughed, but the venue went into administration in May, as did Leicester's Haymarket. Southampton's 86 staff have now been made redundant. The government's subsequent Self-Employed Income Support Scheme (SEISS) still left large numbers of entertainment workers uncovered.

In an area of precarious and irregular employment, many of the most vulnerable have been left entirely without support. When the pandemic began, Equity committed £1 million to its Benevolent Fund for members in dire financial straits. The union reported last month that more than £750,000 of this had already been paid out, and that £1 million "will not be enough to see us through this crisis." Streaming company Netflix has donated £500 million for freelance theatre workers unable to work since March.

That these artists have no place in the rescue package confirms that the arts have no future under capitalism. For the ruling class, the arts are merely a commercial tourist opportunity, a hobby of privilege. The "crown jewel" venues are encouraged as cash cows, while other sectors of the arts are starved of funding and left to die.

But the arts are more than just big-name venues. Large-scale successes are only the most visible part of a network of arts that requires support and maintenance. The rescue package demonstrates that the present social order cannot and will not do this. It also shows a reckless willingness to expose even its favoured artists to the dangers of a virulent pandemic in pursuit of a quick buck.



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