


# AFTER WYNDHAM



Key issues in London theatre  
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## ● INTRODUCTION ●

In 1998, the Society of London Theatre published The Wyndham Report, written by Tony Travers of the London School of Economics.

The Wyndham Report examined the economic impact of London's West End theatre on the UK economy, and revealed a billion pound British industry contributing hugely in terms of jobs, tax revenues, balance of payments, and London's image as one of the creative centres of the world.

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This robust economic performance has underpinned the West End in recent years. However, the Report went on to identify some of the major strategic issues facing London theatre today.

If we fail to address these issues, London theatre will almost certainly begin a slow and irreversible decline.

If, however, by our own efforts, and in partnership with government, arts bodies, and strategic authorities we make progress on these issues, the future can be very bright indeed.

The Theatre Capital of the World will thrive.

**This document** reports on work in progress by the Society of London Theatre in four key areas:

- New Writing
- Education
- Theatre Buildings
- Investment

Finally, it outlines the advantages of a unified approach to London – and, indeed, British - theatre on these and other key issues.

## ● NEW WRITING ●

The production of new work lies at the very heart of any successful industry. If the flow dries up, the product line eventually fossilises. In theatre, the encouragement of new work is, in fact, about much more than writers. It involves all aspects of the production process, commissioning procedures, funding levels and programming priorities.

The Society has commissioned a report on the creation of new work from Robert Cogo-Fawcett, independent producer and former Director of the Theatre Royal, Bath. Here are some of his interim findings:

- Less new work is being commissioned, and that almost exclusively by the subsidised sector. Regional theatres can no longer nurture playwrights and help them develop.
- Playwrights are generally writing smaller scale work than was the case twenty years ago. This is directly related to economic strictures – smaller budgets mean smaller plays. The success of the studio theatre movement, particularly in London, has also encouraged intimate, often introspective work which is often unsuitable for larger regional or West End theatres.
- New work is created largely by the subsidised sector, yet it is often most effectively exploited (and often exported) in partnership with the commercial sector. The partnership is therefore vital. Unfortunately, the number of active commercial play producers is disturbingly small, and such collaboration is viewed with suspicion by many in the subsidised sector.
- As costs have risen so the risk for the producer of new work can outweigh the potential return. This is true in both the commercial and subsidised theatre worlds. In the latter, reductions in core funding have led to the short-term, 'safe' programming of revivals, classics and received work. Recent lottery schemes to encourage new work, in particularly the A4E programme, have disguised this underlying trend.
- Today's playwright, writing intimate drama for uncertain returns, can make a relatively easy stylistic transition to television and film, where rewards are often better defined and more lucrative.

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The full report on New Writing will be published early in 2000 and will provide the framework for our efforts to address issues such as those above.



## ● EDUCATION ●

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The continued well-being of theatre is dependent on new generations being enthused by the performing arts. In an age dominated by computer games, by televised sport, by cinema and video, how do we get children to take an interest in theatre, opera and dance?

We can encourage parents and children to attend as a family unit (the Society, for example, organises the highly successful 'Kids Week in the West End'). However, a meaningful and active relationship with the education sector is absolutely imperative if children are to develop a sustained interest in theatre. Exposure to the performing arts while at school – whether as performers, as students or as attendees – is vital, particularly if we are to broaden our audience base beyond 'traditional' theatregoers. The theatre industry is also a microcosm and can provide unique opportunities for exploring vocational skills.

Further, it is proven that the performing arts in schools help develop the creative, flexible thinking that tomorrow's school-leavers are going to need.

Real progress can only be made in partnership with the educational system. In particular, we would urge:

- a new positive partnership with local education authorities.
- full implementation of Professor Ken Robinson's NACCCE Report (All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education) – a landmark publication in this field.
- a review of the catastrophic decline in school theatre trips. Such a review would explore the disastrous impact of Local Management of Schools (with the onus on payment placed divisively on parents) as well as issues such as VAT-reclaim on tickets, and potential support for travel costs.

The Society is currently supporting various initiatives to improve theatre's presence in schools. These include the creation of a new teacher-resource website collating details of all educational programmes offered by SOLT member theatres and producers. We are also working with **The Learning Circuit** towards the creation of a new on-line theatre resource for schools, and are exploring ideas with **Education Extra** – though the current rules governing the New Opportunities Fund would seem to limit severely the viability of theatre industry-led initiatives.



## ● THEATRE BUILDINGS ●

London's Theatreland is a unique inheritance – nowhere else in the world is there such a concentration of major theatres. If Theatreland did not already exist, it could not be created at today's real estate prices.

But are these buildings – in particular, the commercial theatres - compatible with the demands of theatre in the 21st Century, and with growing public expectations of comfort and convenience? The Society has commissioned John Earl, former Director of the Theatres Trust, to write a report on the current state of the West End theatre fabric. Here are some of his initial findings:

- The majority of West End theatres are of 'classic' proscenium, multi-tier format dating from 1871 – 1837. More than 80% are (rightly) listed and protected as being of special architectural or historic interest.
- Many theatres have been storing up repair problems arising from unsatisfactory construction, sometimes exacerbated by neglect and poor maintenance for as long as forty or fifty years.
- Public tolerance of poor conditions (shortage of toilets, cramped bars and foyers, inadequate leg-room, lack of comfort cooling) is becoming strained as comparisons are made with cinemas and the national subsidised theatres.
- In addition, the audience demand is there for more modern theatres (ie not classic proscenium) and a limited programme of rebuilding to this end would enrich the West End.
- Small to medium theatres in particular simply cannot generate the income to fund major building improvements.
- A new dialogue is needed with English Heritage as to the nature of alterations to listed theatres to ensure their survival as working houses.
- Beyond such a dialogue to establish the principles and permissions behind improving Theatreland, lies the major challenge of making it happen. Theatreland is a complex and vulnerable entity which justifies the formulation of special planning and financial policies to ensure its continued well-being as a metropolitan and national asset. In particular, the funding disparity between subsidised and commercial theatre buildings does not reflect the interdependence of the two sectors.

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John Earl's full report, with further recommendations, will be published in the New Year.



## ● INVESTMENT IN COMMERCIAL PRODUCTIONS ●

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The biggest hurdle facing the launch of a new business venture can be raising the initial investment. In the world of theatre, this is especially the case. Potential backers of new shows, who are already contemplating a highly speculative investment, can be discouraged altogether by the complexity and inflexibility of current financial legislation. Producers are hidebound by the associated red tape. In short, the current situation works against new investment, which precludes much innovative new work.

The Society took the opportunity afforded by the drafting of the new Financial Services and Markets Bill to make detailed recommendations to the Treasury and the Joint Committee of the House of Commons

and Lords on the difficulties facing theatre investors, who are in so many respects the business angels the government is seeking to attract to small businesses.

We believe that some significant progress has been made with the publication of the Chancellor's latest proposals to help companies access funding from those with disposable income of between £75K and £100K p.a.

The Society has stressed that theatre investment should be seen in the same light as traditional business investment.

There are signs that such a view will be recognised when the Financial Services and Markets Bill is enacted in the next Parliamentary session.

In drafting its submissions to the Treasury and Joint Committee, the Society was most grateful for the advice of D. Michael Rose of Tarlo Lyons, and Colin Howes of Harbottle and Lewis.



## ● A UNIFIED APPROACH ●

Perhaps the most consistent message which has emerged from the creation of The Wyndham Report, and the current research reported on in this document, is the necessity of a unified approach to the burning issues of British theatre.

Without a knowledge of the interconnection of British theatre, one cannot fully understand its problems and opportunities, and one certainly cannot begin to address them. London's West End commercial theatres are closely linked to London's subsidized theatres. London theatre has a vigorous two-way traffic with regional theatre. This applies both to product (plays, musicals, opera, dance) and personnel – theatre employs a significantly fluid workforce.

Consequently, anything which hurts a particular sector of the industry (e.g. inadequate core funding in the regions, lack of investment in London's theatre stock) hurts the industry as a whole. And progress on some of the issues outlined here (encouraging new work, enhancing theatre's role in schools, simplifying investment in productions) would have national benefits.

In closing, two further issues merit particular mention as benefiting from just such a unified approach.

### **New Technology**

The growth of the internet presents fantastic opportunities for British theatre – a new way of selling tickets, a new way of marketing shows, a new way of communicating within the industry, sharing data and best practice. As with all great opportunities, however, there are great dangers. Prime among these is that we miss the opportunity for a planned, industry-led approach to new technology, that we stumble into a series of piecemeal solutions. Britain leads the world in theatre. Let's get it on-line properly. The Society and its sister organisation the Theatrical Management Association are committed to help make this happen.

### **A Mayor for London**

The whole point of creating a London Mayor is presumably to encourage 'joined up thinking' on the issues which affect the city. London theatre is, of course, a major contributor to the wealth of the city and to its quality of life. The Society looks forward to working with the new Mayor, with the GLA, and with the proposed Cultural Strategy Group for London. We would hope to provide joined up thinking of our own on issues such as those outlined in this document, as well as contributing to debates on such crucial issues for London theatre as transport, crime and the built environment.

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