

Policy Brief

Digital Theatre Transformation: A Case Study and Digital Toolkit for Small to Mid-Scale Theatres in England

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KEY INFO

Research question: what lessons for the sector can be learned from the successful transformation of Creation Theatre from in-person to digital performance?

Policy area or themes

- Places and Communities
- Creative Industries
- Arts & Health and Social Prescribing
- Skills and Training
- Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

Methods: comparative analysis of pre-pandemic and pandemic audience data; survey of 177 audience members; semi-structured interviews with 22 audience members; survey of and semi-structured interviews with 12 Creation Theatre and Big Telly staff

Geographical area: UK-wide (original remit: England)

Research stage: Completed

Summary of the research

During lockdown, many UK theatres stopped employing the freelancers who make up c. 50% of their workforce. This research investigated the lessons learned from the success of Creation Theatre (Oxford) and Big Telly (Northern Ireland), SME companies pivoted to online performance on the Zoom platform in April/May 2020. In doing so, the companies were able to survive, continue to employ freelancers, and extend their audience reach from local to national and international, reaching audiences from 27 countries.

We investigated:

- technological innovation and change to performance practices
- impact of the performance on audience reach and audience wellbeing
- practitioners' working patterns, wellbeing and working conditions
- business model and monetisation of digital performance
- sustainability and accessibility benefits of digital modes of working for SME theatre companies

Policy recommendations

1. **Support local networks linking SME theatre companies with tech companies in the UK's regions:** this will enhance their resilience and ability to innovate (tech collaboration was key to Creation Theatre's success).
2. **Change rules for Emergency Culture Recovery Fund access,** so that companies that still hold money in the bank to cover responsible winding down and paying redundancy costs to staff are eligible for funding.

3. **Support digital and hybrid modes of working, including through Theatre Tax Relief:** Current Theatre Tax Relief rules explicitly make made-for-digital theatre ineligible for support. “This means that any work made with the intention of being digital, embracing the benefits of digital performance and planning for a digital audience is effectively penalised” (Charlie Morley, Creation Theatre)
4. **Resource and clear guidelines on accessibility** are essential to make made-for-digital theatre fully accessible as a norm from the outset. This is because making digital performance fully accessible from the start is a challenge for SMEs: while it is easier to subtitle digital performances when compared to in-person shows, it is costly and complicated to make productions fully accessible through, e.g., the inclusion of live sign-language interpretation.

Key findings

Business model and company administration:

- digital brought significant cost and efficiency savings, with speed of production increasing and faster communication between cast and backstage staff
- Charging per-device for digital tickets, and significantly reducing overheads has allowed the company to continue to employ freelancers during lockdown
- Audiences are willing to engage with and pay for made-for-digital performances, but there was a large amount of variation in terms of what audiences deemed as ‘good value’ (especially between international/US audiences and UK audiences).

Working practices and skills/training needs:

- Working remotely has been mostly positive for company and creative staff with greater flexibility contributing to better work/life balance, increased concentration, productivity and sense of wellbeing
- Performing on a digital platform requires adaptations to working practices, with additional focus on welfare and ethical and equality issues
- Digital has increased opportunities for more diverse casting practices
- Performing on a digital platform requires technical upskilling and equipment upgrades

Sustainability:

- Digital work has reduced the company’s environmental impact: there were carbon savings for hardware (set designs, light, heating) and travel (for both performers and audiences).

Audience development:

- Digital has presented opportunities for audience development both within and beyond the UK’s borders
- Digital has created new professional networks and creative partnerships within the local area

Audience health and wellbeing:

- Audiences reported feeling a sense of community and connection and reduced feelings of isolation thanks to the performance

Further information

The full Digital Theatre Transformation report and Digital Toolkit, which provides detailed practical advice about working with Zoom as well as guidelines for digital working developed with Equity UK, can be downloaded from <https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/repository/handle/10871/123464>

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