

## **Appendix C**

**White Rock Theatre**  
**Theatre Directors Report and Annual Review**  
**April 2013**  
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Theatre Director, White Rock Theatre

### **Overview**

- 1.1 The theatre attracted a total of 13,542 paying attenders in the last quarter of the year. This brings the total paid attendances for 2012/13 up to 64,142 representing a 19% increase on the previous year. This is particularly encouraging taking into account the fact that the theatre was completely “dark” for the whole of July and the beginning of August for the refurbishment programme.
- 1.2 From April 2013, the theatre will be collating statistics relating to attenders and participants in the community and non-ticketed elements of the theatres programme. This will provide a much more rounded and useful figure with which to evaluate the theatres positive impact on the community and its importance as a resource for the town of Hastings and the surrounding locale.

### **Programme**

- 2.2 The specific attendance figures for January to March are circulated separately.
- 2.3 The programming strategy for the fourth quarter of this year was to return to a broader entertainment based offer instead of the smaller scale drama series as per the previous year. We maintained one smaller scale production of “A Christmas Carol”, which proved relatively popular with audiences
- 2.4 No cancellations were made in this quarter which is perhaps a reflection of the better levels of attendances. We still believe that there is an audience for small to medium scale drama and we are currently investigating an offer for the same period next year.
- 2.5 The comedian “Mickey Flanagan” sold out within an hour of going on sale. A very late booking of the Easter “panto” “Rapunzel” also proved very popular selling almost 900 tickets within two weeks of going on sale. Productions of “Lets Hang On” and “Think Floyd” were also very popular with audiences and the rest of the professional programme produced respectable attendances.
- 2.6 Members of the Hastings and St Leonards Tourism Association were invited to the theatre as our guests for the performance of “Let’s Hang On”. We were able to present a profile of the remainder of the spring and summer season to the TA and explain the various discount schemes that were available for the guest houses, hotels and their guests which brings about an added value to the Association.

2.7 Hastings Musical Festival was again staged effectively and without incident. Comparison on previous years are detailed below;

	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>Notes</b>
Total number of sessions	40	38	41	+8%
Total attendance sessions	2788	1820	2407	+32%
Total income sessions	£12,844	£10,775	£11,025	+2%
Total individual concerts	8	10	10	
Total attendance concerts	1599 (inc 255 complimentary)	1743 (inc 190 complimentary)	2,314	+32%
Total income concerts	£9,103	£9,046	£18,692	+106%
Combined total attendances	4,387	3,563	4,721	+32%
Combined total income	£21,947	£19,821	£29,717	+49%

2.8 A detailed breakdown of individual session's attendance figures will be circulated at the meeting.

2.9 The vast majority of events within the Festival attracted fewer attendances than the last year. It was only an increase in one of the choir concerts, an increase in the Festival Final concert and the visit by the Royal Philharmonic Concert Orchestra which improved the position both in attendances and income generation.

2.12 April, May and June continue to be busy months in terms of the variety of programme. We have also programmed throughout July and some of August this year, although product availability during these months is not great. Rather than list every event here, the new season's brochure will be available on the 15<sup>th</sup> April and will be distributed at the meeting.

2.13 Both Opera South East and the Hastleons stage productions at the theatre in April and May respectively.

2.14 The rest of the calendar year has been programmed with strong dates and we are waiting to confirm bookings from several top comedians. In line with our programming strategy, we have secured a visit from Nottingham Playhouse with the stage version of the popular TV children's TV series "Grandpa in my Pocket" and with Bill Kenwright Ltd for the weekly run West End musical "Save the Last Dance for Me". We are also negotiating on two major week run productions for the spring of 2014.

- 2.15 The White Rock Theatre is working in partnership with The School Creative Centre in Rye and will be staging their cabaret style, production of “Back in the Room” in the Sussex Hall for a trial three sessions between May and July 2013. This event has outgrown the space at The School Creative Centre and provides an exciting, edgy and new offer for audiences in Hastings.
- 2.16 Following the success of the 2012 Christmas production, we have confirmed our 2013 panto title as “Dick Whittington” with a star name still to be announced. This will be produced by the same creative team as last year. As previously reported, we attracted a huge increase in attendances from schools last year with 29 schools from the area attending. To date this year, we have confirmed 7 large groups and 5 schools generating in excess of 1,400 tickets. This, combined with other sales, places us 75% ahead of the same period last year in terms of advanced sales and is evidence of the impact of our revised marketing strategy and the focus on groups and schools.
- 2.17 HQ Theatres and Hospitality intend to grow the actual number of events staged at the theatre over the next two years maintaining a careful approach to monitoring quality and audience levels.

### **Community, Education and Young People**

- 3.1 Our new Community and Business Development manager, Nikki Leach, started with us in the middle of February 2013.
- 3.2 Youth Theatre. The youth theatre activities were suspended for the first two months of the last quarter of the year as a result of internal staffing issues. Members were kept informed of progress and we relaunched the youth theatre and restarted in March. Numbers are initially down on previous attendances. However, the first five week term has been very well received. We have a new programme of activities arranged around different times and new tutors. Responses from participants and parents/carers have been very positive and we anticipate reaching a target of 60 participants during the next term which commences on 20<sup>th</sup> April. This is supported by new marketing collateral and targeted initiatives to attract new participants. School assembly visits have also been arranged.
- 3.3 We will be introducing two new initiatives from the autumn term. The first initiative is a “Tiddlers” theatre group for 4 – 7 year olds which will take place on a Saturday morning. The intention here is to provide activity for younger members of the community who have expressed an interest in participating. This will prepare them for advancing onto the main youth theatre group when they reach the age of 8. The other initiative is reported at 3.5
- 3.4 Easter Youth Project – West End Experience  
As previously reported, we trialled a new offer for the youth theatre project this Easter with the above event. This was a series of four one day workshops led by performers from West End shows under the coordination of a creative director. The young people work-shopped the shows content, learning dialogue, songs

and dances from the actual productions which culminated in a live concert at the theatre at the end of the week attended by family and friends. The end result was an amazing experience for the participants and feedback from this event has been extremely positive. We will be staging a similar event next Easter and are considering introducing an additional one in the autumn half term.

#### 3.4 Summer Youth Project – Footloose

Auditions for the summer youth project will take place at the theatre on 14<sup>th</sup> April and the event will take place between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> August with performances between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>. This year's production is more ambitious than previous years with both a large scale set and an orchestra. The title, "Footloose" is age appropriate, popular with audiences and performers and we are anticipating that the participation level this year will be in excess of 100.

#### 3.5 New initiatives

A review of our room usage and community engagement has led to the development of a number of new initiatives which will commence from the autumn season including the following;

1. New Youth Theatre Company. A new company which aimed at 14 – 21 year olds to be held on a Tuesday night. Membership will be by audition and will culminate in full scale productions on a termly basis. This will be in addition to our open access Saturday youth theatre programme
2. Show choir. Open access show choir night aimed at 16 + meeting after the above. The show choir will be available for our own events, local community y groups and concerts.
3. A series of three Theatre Masterclasses in the autumn season and five in the spring season.

The above activity will be paid for.

The theatre is currently seeking to organise a theatre career day for September 2013 utilising the experience within the theatres staff and working in conjunction with several schools and colleges in the area.

Additional initiatives will be reported in the next quarterly review

The Campbell Room is going to be used more proactively over the coming months as a specially reserved area for group bookings for shows. Groups will be able to meet and will be greeted and hosted by a dedicated member of staff and will have their own private bar area. It is anticipated that this service will move into the Sussex Hall once capacity demands. This is being introduced from the end of April in line with our week long run of "Carnaby Street" and will be offered to groups on an invitational basis to start with. This fits in with our revised marketing strategy

#### 3.6 Work experience/placements

12 work experience placements have been hosted during March including students from Robertsbridge Community College and Sussex Downs. Additional work experience placements are scheduled for students from Claverham Community College and St Richards School. In addition, we are also taking on more permanent project based placements for students from Rye Studio School

and the University of Brighton. Our apprenticeship programme is highlighted elsewhere on this report.

- 3.7 Our work experience programme has been entirely reviewed and refreshed this year to give students a more active and rewarding experience. This has been welcomed by local schools.
- 3.8 In addition, we hosted a theatre tour for BTEC Performing Arts students from St Mary's School and College in Bexhill. This was very well received and a free tour programme is now being developed and is actively being offered out to local schools
- 3.9 Theatre non commercial use  
Between January to March and continuing through to July we have regular community use of the Sussex Hall from Active Arts every Thursday and Friday.

Other non commercial activity has been relatively quiet during the last quarter primarily as a result of the theatres vacant post. However, advanced use is looking very positive. Rye Dance School and the concert staged for the benefit of the Hastings Pier Trust were the only non-commercial users of the building other than Active Arts over the last quarter.

However, the next few months have a significant level of non-commercial usage including bookings from the following; St Georges Day Parade, Opera South East, Hastings Freemasons Lodge, Mayor Making, The Hastleons, Laton Ash Dance School, Buckswood School, St Pauls School, Diana Freedman Dance School, The Rotary Club of Hastings, Bexhill College, EF Language Travel and a private charity fundraiser

Both the Theatre Director and the newly appointed Community and Business Development Manager remain active in local business and cultural groups. The theatre now hold regular breakfast networking sessions for the area Chamber of Commerce and is starting to host regular networking sessions for a local Businesswomen's group.

The Theatre Director is now a member of the Executive Committee for the Hastings and St. Leonards Tourism Association and attends the 1066 Marketing Executive Committee on their behalf. He maintains active within the local Cultural Strategy Partnership Group and is part of the group responsible for the Hastings and Bexhill City of Culture 2017 bid group.

### **Business Planning, Marketing and Sales**

- 4.1 The Theatres core Business Plan has been updated for the new financial year. In addition, our marketing and hospitality strategy and detailed action plan has been refreshed and reviewed. These plans focus the detailed work and objectives of all staff in the theatre.
- 4.2 The Theatres Safety Health and Environment (SHE) policy has also been reviewed and rewritten.

- 4.3 The middle of April coincides with the completion of the first year of our Theatre Apprenticeship programme in association with the “Let’s Do Business Group”. This proved to be a successful experience for both the theatre and the young apprentice who worked with us. From the middle of April the theatre will be hosting two new apprenticeships on a hybrid job share basis. One apprentice will work two days per week as a Sales and Business Development apprenticeship and the other will work three days per week as a Marketing and Sales apprenticeship.
- 4.5 The focus on community, business and group engagement and the reallocation of resources to deliver on this which was implemented last year has had a positive effect on both sales and audience development as exemplified in our 19% audience increase and improvement in group sales.
- 4.6 The Friends of the White Rock (membership) scheme has been reviewed and relaunched with several incentives and benefits. Again, this has proved to be a positive move. The theatre now has 100 members (up 80%) and is attracting, on average, 20 new members per month. This gives the theatre a very specific database of more regular users to whom we can target special offers and improve attendances.
- 4.7 The move to improving the number of on-line bookings is working with on line transactions now averaging 39%. Our target is to move towards 50% on line bookings by the end of the financial year.

### **Hospitality**

- 5.1 The free live music programme on a Thursday and Children’s storytelling on a Saturday morning which was introduced last year came to an end in December 2012. This proved not to be cost effective.
- 5.2 However, our Children’s themed party’s initiative (“Be a Singing Star”, “Be an Actor” and etc) has been very successful and we now host regular parties every week. The themes have recently been revived and refreshed and offer an attractive and competitive alternative offer for parents/ carers and families. A review of our room usage and the refreshed and rescheduled Youth Theatre programme has created more availability in the Sussex Hall which has allowed the party space to be more available.
- 5.3 Our “Hospitality” events were much more popular in the back end of last year with our Christmas season party nights selling out and an improved position with regard to our Tea dances. As a result, we have strengthened this element of the theatres programme in 2013/14 with 15 events scheduled and a robust business plan and marketing allocation to promote them and maximise attendance. These events will include Comedy Nights, Tea Dances, 80’s Nights, Ladies Nights, a Quiz night and Christmas parties
- 5.4 The kitchen equipment was refreshed last year with a new Cooker, Range, Fryers and Salamander) and a new “diner” style menu was introduced. This has proved to be very popular with cafeteria usage being considerably higher than with the previous menu offer and an almost complete elimination of any customer complaints from this element of the theatres offer. An integrated approach to

promoting table reservations at point of sale has helped this turnaround and the cafeteria is now very often full prior to every performance.

## **General**

- 6.1 Theatre management have identified several concerns with regard to the capacity of the theatres sound system and have commissioned a report identifying the various issues. This has a serious implication for the theatres ability to stage product and is a significant risk in terms of business continuity. Hastings Borough Council is in the process of commissioning an independent report and it is anticipated that this concern will be attended to as soon as possible.
- 6.2 Both the auditorium and the external refurbishment programme were completed in the last financial year. Hastings Borough Council has raised some concerns relating to a number of areas at roof level which were omitted from the scope of works. Despite their being a mutual agreement to only complete works up to the roof parapet level, HQ Theatres and Hospitality are completing the works to these areas and the work is currently being put out to tender with an intention to complete them by the end of the summer.
- 6.3 The Sussex Hall is due to be repainted this year and the theatre has set aside a period of time in August to complete this. The colour scheme is being changed in order to make the room more attractive to both hirers and in-house use in line with our revised marketing strategy and plans for improving usage.
- 6.4 HQ Theatres and Hospitality will be replacing parts of the carpets in some of the Front of House areas during the summer of 2013. We are also replacing a major on stage lighting bar in May and undertaking works to our heating controls.