

Amateur dramatics and Covid: 'We keep going against the odds'

Article by Dave Hollander, The Stage published online 11 November 2020

Dave Hollander is deputy production editor for The Stage. He is also a long-standing member of South London Theatre and was deputy chair of the company from 2012 to 2020

IMAGE: The Criterion Theatre in Coventry joining the #LightitInRed campaign

As with their professional counterparts, amateur theatres around the country have been hit hard by Covid, but the pandemic has not curbed their desire to produce work and connect with communities. Amateur theatre-makers tell Dave Hollander how they are staying afloat and harnessing technology in lockdown

Like all theatres around the country, the UK's myriad amateur companies have faced a turbulent year. It's a familiar narrative: from March, the four-month nationwide lockdown put paid to all but online activities, then came a brief summer window when outdoor performances were allowed, followed by socially distanced indoor productions. But just as things started to look up, and the glimmer of lucrative Christmas shows flickered on the horizon, a new lockdown brought the curtains down again.

Sardines, a magazine covering non-professional theatre throughout the UK, has tracked the pandemic's impact on amateur dramatics groups. Editor Paul Johnson says the breadth and variety of the sector is notable: "We estimate there are about 10,000 amateur companies in the UK – everything from groups based in a church hall to companies that hire professional venues."

This is also the perception of Jo Matthews, chair of the Little Theatre Guild, whose more than 100 member societies have control over their own premises. When the lockdown meant the closure of all theatre activity, the LTG quickly moved into action. "From early on we realised we were going to be a hub for information," says Matthews. "We knew our members would be asking questions about when they could reopen and what the rules would be."

Though many of the 2,000 members of the National Operatic and Dramatic Association don't own a building, the situation was similar. Marketing and publishing executive Rob Williams says: "At the beginning, we thought it would last a couple of months. We asked if people were cancelling or deferring their shows, but most are now cancelled."

Sardines' regular surveys suggest about 20% of amateur groups have staged some kind of online or live performance since March. But for the rest, Johnson says: "Until the government decides that distancing can go out of the window, they are not reopening. Members may be keeping in touch socially, but 80% are not doing anything artistically."

Lack of clarity

In the most recent questionnaire, a week before the current lockdown in England, only a fifth of respondents expected things to get back to normal by the spring – 47% thought it would be later in 2021 and 16% did not expect resumption of regular activities until 2022.

But the key finding was that government rules on reopening were impenetrable, especially for amateur groups – nearly half said the guidelines were too complex or "getting more

difficult by the week” and a further 28% felt they could only be interpreted after careful reading.

“We’ve been aware as we’re passing on information from government and industry bodies that it’s not our organisation saying this,” says LTG southern regional secretary Anne Gilmour. “We walk a bit of a tightrope and we’re very keen to get the balance right.”

After receiving no response from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to requests for clarification, NODA’s chief operating officer Dale Freeman sent members an open letter, urging them to share it with the local press: “Amateur theatre plays a significant part in the cultural life of the nation, helping with both physical and mental health, not just for those taking part, but for audiences too.”

Freeman says: “It’s completely ambiguous, to the point where two members of our committee can read the same legislation and come up with a different set of rules.”

DCMS has since confirmed to LTG that amateur theatre is not exempt from the restrictions for the purpose of rehearsals or live-streaming, putting it at odds with advice for professional companies. LTG national liaison officer Eddie Redfern says: “Our theatres are back into full lockdown in England. This is disappointing, as a number of LTG theatres are in the process of rehearsals to perform socially distanced shows within Covid-secure theatres, or rehearsing for live-streaming performances. Some theatres are preparing to present pantomimes and this will effectively knock those on the head. This probably means it will be at least the new year before any of our larger theatres are able to open up.”

LTG public relations officer Kevin Spence is also involved with Doncaster Little Theatre, which has remained closed since March. He says the regional tier system in England made it much harder for some groups to resume performances than others. “It caused a north-south divide among our theatres, as in other areas of life.”

Under its different system, Scotland has not yet permitted indoor performances, but NODA Scotland regional councillor Stuart McCue-Dick says the rules have been no easier to follow: “All we have been able to do is signpost where to find the guidance and urge members to ensure the safety and well-being of all involved.”

IMAGE: Bard in Byker by the People's Theatre in Newcastle. Photo: Tim Swinton

IMAGE: Roger Bartlett in Building the Wall at the Abbey Theatre in St Albans. Photo: Anne Frizzell



While uncertainty has prevailed since the first lockdown in March, amateur groups everywhere have found innovative ways to keep creative, initially online. As it became clear the pandemic was no brief intermission, NODA put longer-term plans in place. "We launched a national online training system, with videos and live Zoom sessions on subjects from performing to technical to costume, to mask-making," Williams says.

Likewise, McCue-Dick says Scottish members have remained active: "Many have kept in touch with regular events online, organising their own drama, singing and movement workshops for members to take part in, as well as social events such as quizzes or afternoon tea."

The association's conference at Peebles Hydro normally attracts 250 attendees, but this year's online iteration proved very popular, with between 1,000 and 1,500 viewing or taking part over the weekend. "We managed to engage with more of our members than would normally attend our actual conference," McCue-Dick says.

The LTG's Spence says dynamic individuals are a spur for creativity. "We have this membership thing that pros don't have in quite the same way," he adds. "Theatres can't engage with the general public, but members of our organisations have remained active."

Staying connected

Based in a Victorian fire station, South London Theatre normally presents more than 20 shows a year in its 110-seat venue. But it is also home to a thriving community. Chair of SLT's building preservation trust Charlotte Benstead says: "When we went into lockdown it was obvious members would be affected. Twice-nightly Zoom check-ins were up and running within three weeks. These have been especially important to older members nervous about leaving their homes."

SLT's Jennifer Nettles set up a weekly play-reading group, but not simply as a social activity. "The overarching reason was to keep our actors in shape – like a gym," she says. "So when they're able to audition again, it's not like no one has read anything aloud with other people."

Jennifer Corcoran, from Southport Dramatic Club on Merseyside, explains how its members similarly kept in touch through weekly Zoom presentations: "Stalwarts of our club have offered unique insights, and professionals who learned their craft with us have returned to share their gratitude. As our youth members were unable to prepare a show, they devised a socially distanced cabaret evening that members could stream."

Amateur theatres have not just used video-conferencing software for social and educational purposes. Many have also recorded and live-streamed performances, as Karen Thomas, production executive at St Albans' Abbey Theatre, says. In May, the organisation invited its local community to film its contribution to The Corona Monologues. "By June, we had nearly 50 entries, which were posted on our website and judged by our patron, film director Mike Newell."

Tracey Mackenzie, theatre manager at Lincolnshire's Louth Riverhead Theatre, adds: "We commissioned a digital performance, The Heron's Song, by Barmpt Theatre, and our youth summer workshop was delivered on Zoom."

SLT's Benstead was due to direct Jeffrey Bernard Is Unwell in June, but instead produced a rehearsed reading of the show over Zoom. "We played with the format, introduced puppets, costumes, video and music. We attracted an audience of about 40 members, all of whom made donations."

Such was the level of interest among amateur groups for presenting copyrighted works online that licensing companies have shifted their focus. Siân Mayhall-Purvis, marketing officer at Nick Hern Books, says: "We had lots of requests to do shows online, but it was not something we'd ever really dealt with before. So we put together a proposal to the agents who represent our authors, saying: 'These aren't the kind of rights we'd usually manage or grant to amateurs, but how do you feel about it?' Agents and authors have been overwhelmingly positive and encouraging."

'We feared going into hibernation, but amateur theatremakers have so much hustle and enthusiasm' – Siân Mayhall-Purvis, Nick Hern Books

This has been a steep learning curve for everyone involved, Mayhall-Purvis adds: "We've tried to learn about the challenges of putting on shows in this way and offer advice. The amount of creativity and technological learning that these companies are doing is really impressive."

"In the darker moments in March and April, we thought amateur theatre might go into hibernation, but amateur theatremakers have so much hustle and enthusiasm and it's been great to see that continue against the odds."

When the government announced that outdoor performances with social distancing in place could resume on July 11, some groups sprang into action. Titchfield Festival Theatre in Hampshire is the largest amateur theatre in the UK, producing more than 30 shows a year in its three spaces. Artistic director Kevin Fraser says: "We started rehearsing via Zoom in lockdown and opened an open-air theatre two days after the announcement, with A Chorus Line, then The Merchant of Venice and Macbeth."

IMAGE: The Criterion Theatre's artistic director Anne-marie Greene in its reopening show Queers

IMAGE: South London Theatre's Promenade in West Norwood Cemetery. Photo: Megan Jordan

Becoming Covid-secure

Before the latest lockdown, TFT had managed to put on three socially distanced shows indoors. "Our three venues are all Covid-secure, with patrons and staff thermally checked on entry, sanitising stations, a one-way system and bar app with drinks delivered to your seat," Fraser says. "We have also invested £70,000 in 4K HD cameras and sound-and-vision-mixing facilities for streaming our shows."

Among the many groups staging outdoor shows over the summer, the People's Theatre in Newcastle presented The Bard in Byker in the grounds of a church in Byker Heights. Director Tony Childs says: "A dozen or so actors, including two from our thriving youth theatre, came along to perform monologues or duologues from Shakespeare."

Ilkley Playhouse, being in West Yorkshire, has spent all but a few weeks since March in some form of lockdown, but it managed to put on the Lottery-funded open-air show Bard in the Yard in partnership with the local Jacobean museum. Artistic director Jay Cundell Walker

quotes a young member's experience: "Doing Bard in the Yard during the pandemic meant a lot to me. It is the first Shakespeare I've ever performed. The director was helpful and encouraging, which helped build my confidence."

Louth Riverhead's Mackenzie organised a pop-up festival in the venue's car park with assistant Fran Brindle. "There were 21 performances on a lorry stage, with craft stalls and food vendors," she says. "It was a huge success, which was down to having a wonderful team of volunteers who worked together, managing social distancing, taking temperatures on arrival and ensuring Covid-safety measures were observed."

SLT's first foray into in-person shows since the lockdown was a promenade performance in the nearby West Norwood Cemetery. Director Bryon Fear says: "It was the perfect place because we could monitor how many people were coming in. We presented vignettes with small casts that could rehearse on their own. It was quite cathartic to re-engage with people. We gained a lot of experience from putting on a festival during a pandemic because it made us be more creative."

'The lockdown has allowed us to reflect on a number of issues. I am spearheading a campaign of action' – Criterion Theatre artistic director Anne-marie Greene

At the Abbey Theatre, theatre manager Tina Swain began investigating live-streamed shows in June, then invested in equipment and training. "After two experimental live-streamed performances in September, we launched our innovative hybrid production model in October, with socially distanced in-theatre audiences watching Robert Schenkkan's *Building the Wall* as it was live-streamed to others in their own homes. Friends and relations have logged in from all over the country."

Director Gennie Holmes says the choice of reopening show at Coventry's Criterion Theatre aimed to make a statement: "Our production of *Queers* marked the beginning of an ambitious programme of change, towards more inclusive seasons and a more diverse company."

Though it has since gone on to produce its first live performances, Sutton Coldfield's Highbury Theatre started off screening films rather than staging productions. Chairman Steve Bowyer says: "As restrictions started to ease, we put measures in place to open and show films. Our auditorium only holds 140, but with social-distancing measures in place we can get up to 30 in."

IMAGE: South London Theatre's Bombshells. Photo: Chris Patmore

Securing funding

Most amateur companies have fewer overheads than their professional counterparts, but remaining financially sound is still a key concern. Many groups have engaged in fundraising, while others have applied for funding from government bodies and local authorities. The LTG's Matthews says its committee contacted its members to inform them about local business grants that were available. But she adds: "Thank goodness for the furlough scheme – some of our members employ people, such as a theatre manager or a technician, especially if the venue's available for hire."

Among LTG members, seven theatres have received money through the Culture Recovery Fund, the biggest recipient being Birmingham's Crescent Theatre, which received £215,000. The Crescent's LTG rep Jackie Blackwood explains its model: "Our hire operation works in harmony with the resident [amateur] theatre company. Not only did we have to reschedule all our own productions, but also all the many hirers who use the theatre."

On applying for the CRF grant, Blackwood adds: "The application process was detailed. It made us consider how we can build on our strengths, develop as a leading arts venue in the West Midlands and become more diverse in our outlook."

Though it hasn't staged live theatre since Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat in January, Cardiff's Rhiwbina Amateur Theatrical Society has secured funding from the Arts Council of Wales for future productions. Chair Dan Collier-Roberts says it will help the wider community: "We had to say what we would use the money for – to pay our fees for the hall we use, even though we're not in it. So it's not just benefiting us: the money's enabling the hall to stay open because it's used by other people."

At Chads Theatre in Cheadle Hulme, Greater Manchester, chairman Steve Pratt points to a combined approach: "Financial support has come from our members who have made interest-free loans. We have received grants totalling £11,600 from Stockport Council and are taking part in the #SaveOurTheatres campaign with the Theatres Trust and Crowdfunder, which has raised nearly £8,000."

Likewise, NODA Scotland's McCue-Dick says members have been able to keep afloat by asking for donations, but also applying for help from the government: "We made our members aware of the Small Business Support Scheme for those who owned club rooms, rehearsal premises or storage facilities. Clubs were able to secure £10,000 or £25,000, depending on the size of the premises."

Not being able to produce theatre has been a blow, but the LTG's Spence says it has allowed theatres to reflect on the bigger picture. "Everybody's had time to take stock," he says. "I'm sure all our member theatres have painted and renovated and got rid of stuff. We've had time to think about policies and initiatives we might not have under normal circumstances."

Noting that Chads was due to celebrate its centenary in 2020, Pratt explains how the building has been spruced up: "A small team of dedicated members have transformed the outside of the theatre. Plants were donated by the public and the end result has been much appreciated by the local community."

But amateur companies are not just making physical changes. The Criterion's artistic director Anne-marie Greene says: "The Covid lockdown has also provided an opportunity for us to reflect on a number of issues, with the wider Black Lives Matter movement providing a particular catalyst. I am spearheading a campaign of action, including an anti-racism reflective statement."

So what does the future hold for the UK's legions of amateur theatremakers? Sardines' Johnson predicts that "once social distancing is no longer a requirement it will go back to business as usual". Meanwhile, Mayhall-Purvis, of Nick Hern Books, believes engaging with digital "is something that both professional and amateur worlds are learning and will continue".

NODA's Williams believes in some ways the pandemic has changed all theatre for the better: "Covid has made theatre more accessible, with the release of the free National Theatre Live and Royal Shakespeare Company productions and Andrew Lloyd Webber's shows on YouTube. But if we're not careful, when theatres do reopen and West End tickets are £70 or £80, there's a danger that people who have become interested will be cut out of it again."

SLT chair Simon Gleisner agrees that live-streaming has been a boon, adding: "Having our own building gives us some degree of control, but in terms of our members, it's about getting that theatre going. People will bend over backwards to make it work."

Membership director Guy Jones adds: "SLT was already on a journey of change following our major refurbishment in 2015-18 – we've become a more structured organisation and employed a building manager. This will make us a more agile theatre that is able to turn on a sixpence to deal with the conditions around us."

NODA Scotland's McCue-Dick remains upbeat about the future for amateur and professional theatre: "Theatre is a passion, but it is also about friendship and community. Keeping in touch online is one thing, but nothing beats the thrill of opening night or the audience applause at the end of a performance. So I believe we will return, but we need to be patient until it is safe to do so."