

Peter Hall (Committee Clerk)
Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee,
Room 344,
Parliament Buildings,
Belfast,
BT4 3XX

We herewith submit a response to the

Committee Inquiry into Inclusion in the Arts of Working Class Communities

On behalf of Belvoir Players Amateur Dramatic Society

Richard Mills MBE	Chairman / Artistic Director
Shane Johnston	Vice Chairman
Chris Darcy	Deputy Artistic Director
Mark McClean	Hon. Secretary
Sheila Patterson	Hon Treasurer



1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The following is a draft response to **‘Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure – Committee Inquiry into Inclusion in the Arts of Working Class Communities’** submitted by the committee of Belvoir Players Amateur Dramatic Society, hereafter referred to as the players. (See Appendix 1) We are in the unique position of submitting a response which covers multiple angles, including an arts organisation, a youth drama school and a community arts venue.
- 1.2 As an organisation we are currently split into 3 sections, Belvoir Players Amateur Dramatic Society, Belvoir Players Theatre Academy, and Belvoir Players Studio Theatre; all 3 strands managed by a single committee.
- 1.3 The players have a membership of some 80+ adults; the Academy has a membership of 250+ spread over 3 age brackets (vis. 5 – 8 year olds; 8 – 12 year olds; and over 12 year olds.); and Belvoir Players Studio Theatre, which includes up to 200 seat performance space, 2 part minor hall, workshop facilities, costume and props store, has an annual footfall in excess of 50,000 visits. Membership of the players and the academy covers age range of 5 – 80 at present.
- 1.4 The players constitution states the area of benefit as Greater Belfast/Castlereagh and surrounding areas. This gives us a large catchment area and our membership is made up from multiple wards in the area of benefit, with a population of over 300,000 people over Greater Belfast and Castlereagh. Membership is taken from areas throughout the area of benefit, with members living in areas including, but not limited to, Belvoir, Shankill, Falls, Ormeau, Cregagh Road, Newtownbreda. Indeed members travel from Newtownards, Saintfield, Lisburn and Carrickfergus in Co Antrim.
- 1.5 In this document we will share with you what we believe to be barriers to the arts alongside a short explanation as to why we believe this to be true. We will then follow this with what we think are examples of good practice which we currently practice across the three strands.
- 1.6 We view participation in the arts to include not just those who participate either onstage or backstage, but also those who pay to view dramatic presentations.

2. BARRIERS TO THE ARTS

- 2.1 Membership costs – A large amount of people perceive membership of an Artistic society to be highly expensive. This is based on costs supplied from professional companies for workshops and membership of youth groups.
- 2.2 Ticket Costs – At major venues ticket prices can run in excess of £40 per ticket, depending on the production. Amateur companies will charge considerably less than this with the result that some people consider the prices to be too low to offer value for money.
- 2.3 Perception of snobbery – In working class areas there is a perception that the arts are for middle and upper classes. A major misconception exists in that people think artists and actors are ‘self appreciative luvvies’.

- 2.4 Lack of confidence – Due to a lot of schools in working class areas not promoting arts in the past, there is a knock on effect that people feel they are unable to take part in artistic endeavours now.
- 2.5 Lack of education – Referring to the issues above, if artistic endeavours were weighted in the same way as sport in schools, there would be a greater appreciation of arts and a willingness to engage with artistic societies and projects.
- 2.6 Lack of funding – This is a major issue in working class areas and one with which we ourselves are familiar. There are a lot of professional theatre companies who will do work in the community, over a period of approx 4-6 weeks, this will be the only access to the arts this community will have, and this will be limited to one group. If funding were to be more accessible, including simplification of the application process, then groups in working class areas could avail of funding. We would also add that, in terms of funding for groups, there should be less emphasis placed on professional or amateur and more on the artistic skills available and how they can benefit the local area.
- 2.7 Lack of incentives to be artistic – There are many programmes out there which could be used to encourage the community into artistic events. This could be through step to employment, youth schemes involving arts, pensioners clubs, etc.
- 2.8 Political – the current political climate means that people find themselves in a position where they do not wish to venture outside their own areas. This has an impact on availability of participants in the arts and could be detrimental to the voluntary arts sector as a whole. Although this would not be the case we believe that it continues to be self-imposed.

3. **WHAT WE DO**

- 3.1 Belvoir Players Studio plays hosts to numerous entertainment works. As well as the many varied productions by Belvoir Players and Belvoir Players Theatre Academy, we also host performances by other popular amateur dramatic societies (i.e. Holywood Players & Clarence Players), concerts by Musical Societies, Professional theatre groups, Theatre in education groups, Variety Shows and Concerts. A full front of house service is provided on a voluntary basis by members of the Players and, more recently, by senior members of the Theatre Academy.
- 3.2 We play host to community organisations, for example, The University of the Third Age (U3A) use the studio during the day for their varied programme of activities, tailored to retired people. Classes offered by U3A include art classes and Pilates. We also accommodate the U3A choir which meets on a weekday evening. We have also previously hosted debutots drama group for under 5's. Another resident group is the Studio Symphony Orchestra, who makes use of the main studio once a week.
- 3.3 We are proud to offer facilities to two regular user groups who specialise in working with people with learning difficulties. We host Babosh who offer weekly drama classes to their members from 10 years of age upwards and Streetwise Community Circus run a school at the studio for two weeks each summer for adults with special needs.

- 3.4 Belvoir Players Theatre Academy currently produces two shows, usually musicals, each year. The members of the Academy join with the adults to take part in the annual pantomime, with senior members of the academy invited to audition for principle roles. We also conduct a two week summer scheme on an annual basis, which culminates in a performance day. In recent years, members of our senior academy have started to take a role in production elements, which have seen them take on roles as producers, directors, musical directors, choreographers, etc. This is on top of the number of members from the theatre academy who have joined our technical team and are now able to offer technical support to external user groups.
- 3.5 We have a fully stocked costume store, which has and continues to grow. This is staffed by a team of volunteers who are able to costume the shows which we produce. Recent years have seen them start to make more of our specialist costumes stock, i.e. two person cow, two person deer, one person giant. We also lend costumes to other groups and organisations, both those using the studio and external groups. At any one time we can costume our own shows and up to 4 external shows, plus various single use costumes, and still have stock in our store. This would not be possible without the talent and dedication of our costume department.
- 3.6 Our workshop, which produces our sets and numerous properties, has continued to grow. Led by our resident stage manager, who is assisted by groups of volunteers and young people on work placement schemes, the workshop has been known to not only build sets for Belvoir shows but to build sets for external theatre companies. They also staff the backstage support areas of our own shows, which can require a large amount of man power, depend on scenic changes. Young people on work placement learn skills which they can carry with them into other lines of work, for example, they will learn skills in joinery, painting, planning and construction. There is also the added benefit that they get to build team work and organisational skills.
- 3.7 Every summer the Belvoir Players tour the province, playing venues in Newcastle, Enniskillen, Newtownabbey, Omagh, Armagh, Cookstown and Portadown. Our summer tour has continued to grow and we are attracting large audience numbers. This is essential to the survival of both the Belvoir Players and the Studio theatre. This is an example of how the three strands of Belvoir come together to support the work of the others.
- 3.8 Currently, the adult section has the ability to mount more than one production. As an example, there is currently a production of 'Hamlet' rehearsing with a cast of 15 people, and we are also rehearsing 'The Auction at Killybuck' which involves a cast of 30 people, and we have members who are currently not involved in either production. This shows the strength and level of commitment from the adult members, some of whom go on to take on production roles. We fully encourage our adult members to take on other roles, for example, there are currently 2 directing the adult shows, with 2 directing the academy summer shows alongside their support network.

4. GOOD PRACTICE AT BELVOIR (See Appendix 2)

- 4.1 Open and inclusive atmosphere – As stated in our constitution membership is open to all. We aim to develop our members, whether in the Academy or

adult sections, through rehearsal process and in house training workshops. We have a dedicated team of technicians, and our resident Stage Manager, who are prepared to train and pass on skills needed to members. We will encourage members to try other things which may be of interest to them, with many production directors having started either onstage or backstage. Recently, our resident choreographers have also been members of our Theatre Academy.

- 4.2 Low membership costs – We appreciate that as an organisation open to all, we must do all we can to encourage people to become involved. To this end we offer a low yearly membership cost, with a range of options to pay, including monthly standing order options. This also allows people to participate without any long term commitment.
- 4.3 Family membership costs – A large number of our membership, particularly from the Academy, join through referral by immediate family. On occasion this results in families joining together. We fully appreciate that paying full membership for multiple people could render a family unable to join so to counter this we have family membership, meaning that a family will only pay for the first 2 members.
- 4.4 Opportunity for all members – As stated above, we not only develop skills through rehearsals and our own in house training, we also allow members a chance to take on various production aspects. This could range from Directing a show through to assisting in wardrobe or volunteering as part of our front of house support. We affectionately refer to the Studio as the ‘Theatre of Dreams’ as we really do believe that we are only limited by our imagination, and this shows in the many varied roles our members have taken through the years.
- 4.5 Readily available space – While we act as a community facility and offer space to various user groups, we first and foremost have a responsibility to our members. This allows us to accommodate our own rehearsals and workshops. This allows us to assist our members in developing the skills they have and encourage use by the community of the facility as an Arts Venue. We regularly work in conjunction with Castlereagh Borough Council who would use the facility to show movies and host awards events and our annual pantomime attracts large groups from all over Castlereagh and Greater Belfast, ensuring that there is promotion of the Studio as an accessible arts space for all.
- 4.6 In house training supplied through rehearsal/workshop – Again, we have touched on this previously, but the fact that we have developed our own in house team allows us to offer better support when needed. Two of our leading technicians, who joined as members of our Academy, are now training others through both workshops and ‘on the job’ training. We also work in conjunction with Department of Employment and Learning and Armstrong Learning to offer placement opportunities for the long term unemployed. We have had approximately 10 placements through Armstrong Learning in the last 2 year period. These placements would work alongside our Stage Manager to learn skills in backstage aspects of performing. We currently have a Trainee Graphic Designer in place who has stepped outside his required remit to assist with scenic painting at our recent pantomime production. Committee have agreed to give placement workers free membership to the Players.

4.7 Tailored Programme – We are in the great position in that we can afford to tailor our yearly programme to suit our audiences. Over the years we have come to understand what our audiences like to see from us and we are able to work to this in both the Players and the Academy shows. We are also in the unique position that we have strength in our membership to be able to produce other shows to appeal to an audience who would not normally visit the Studio or any of its productions.

5. **POINTS TO NOTE**

5.1 Belvoir Players and Studio Theatre are fully self-sufficient and receive no public financial support for running costs. At the minute this is not a problem but rising costs and reduced ticket sales mean that we anticipate a reduction in our reserves on an annual basis and considerable pressure on voluntary contributions.

5.2 While we do try to recruit talent from within, there are areas which involve paying staff costs i.e. Musical Director, band members, specialist choreographers, and our resident full time stage manager, who takes care of the studio alongside his duties as stage manager. We currently have no support for staffing costs but we attempt to make provisions for these costs in our business plan.

5.3 We currently have an Artistic Director who volunteers his full time to act as administrator in the Studio. We are in the process of attempting to seek funding to enable us to create a paid position of Administrator/manager.

6. **CONCLUSION**

6.1 We have laid out in this response what we believe to be points which could be used to help improve access to dramatic arts, not just from working class areas but from all areas. These are practices which we believe promote the work of our own organisation and we hope that by sharing these we can provide ideas on how performing arts can be supported and shared amongst any and all interested parties in Northern Ireland.

6.2 As these are based on the experiences of Belvoir Players, and the strands of same, we are happy to provide the committee dealing with this consultation with oral evidence of the same. If the committee would like to hear oral evidence our current Artistic Director, Richard Mills MBE, would be happy to meet with representatives at an agreeable time.

APPENDIX 1



Amateur Dramatic Society

CONSTITUTION

1 NAME

The Association shall be called the **BELVOIR PLAYERS AMATEUR DRAMATIC SOCIETY** (hereinafter called "the Society").

2 OBJECTS

2.1 The Society is established to advance the education of the public in Greater Belfast/Castlereagh and surrounding area (hereinafter called the "area of benefit") in the understanding and appreciation of the Arts by the presentation of theatrical productions and in particular to:

2.1.1 promote and develop the performing arts for the benefit of the public in the area of benefit;

2.1.2 encourage participation in and appreciation for Performing Arts activities by people in the area of benefit;

2.1.3 encourage and stimulate the artistic creativity of people in the area of benefit by the provision of artistic performances, facilities, training, support and opportunities for artistic expression;

2.1.4 present, promote, organise, manage and produce plays of cultural and educational value.

2.2 In furtherance of the above aims but not further or otherwise the Society may:

- 2.2.1 co-ordinate the organisation of rehearsals for and performances of plays in the area of benefit;
- 2.2.2 secure the provision and maintenance of educational and recreational facilities in the area of benefit;
- 2.2.3 recruit, train and employ volunteers with relevant skills, for the furtherance of the above aims;
- 2.2.4 promote and carry out or assist in promoting and carrying out research, surveys and investigations in the area of benefit, provided the useful results are published;
- 2.2.5 co-operate to such extent as may be necessary with statutory authorities and voluntary organisations engaged in the furtherance of the above objects or any of them;
- 2.2.6 raise and accept money by way of grants, donations, bequests, legacies or other lawful method [and give, donate or disburse grants and loans to such related organisations or projects as are by law deemed charitable] PROVIDED that in the exercise thereof the Society shall not engage in any form of permanent non primary-purpose trading;
- 2.2.7 purchase, take or lease or in exchange, hire or otherwise acquire any property and any rights and privileges necessary for the attainment of the said objects;
- 2.2.8 all such other lawful things as are necessary for the attainment of the said objects.

3 MEMBERSHIP

- 3.1 People in the area of benefit without distinction of gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, ethnic origin, nationality, religion or political affiliation, shall be eligible for membership of the Society.
 - 3.1.1 People aged 16 years or over [in the area of benefit] may join the Society as Full Members and shall be entitled to vote at general meetings of the Society. Full Members aged 18 years or over shall be eligible for nomination to the Management Committee;
 - 3.1.2 People under the age of 16 years [in the area of benefit] may join the Society as Associate Members but shall not be entitled to vote until they achieve Full Member status.
 - 3.1.3 Well-wishers or people anywhere who wish to support the Society may join as Patrons. Patrons shall NOT be entitled to vote at general meetings of the Society unless they are also Full Members.
- 3.2 The Committee shall make rules governing the conditions for and rights and privileges of members, and shall make regulations for the admission to and termination of membership PROVIDED THAT any member affected by a proposal to terminate her or his membership shall have the right to state a case against such proposal.

4 MEETINGS

4.1 Annual Meeting

The Annual General Meeting shall be held at such place and time, not being more than 15 months since the previous Annual General Meeting, as the Committee shall decide.

- 4.2 The business of the Annual Meeting shall be:
- 4.2.1 to receive and approve reports on the activities of the past year from members of the Committee;
 - 4.2.2 to receive and approve the audited accounts of the Society;
 - 4.2.3 to appoint auditors;
 - 4.2.4 to elect the Officers and Committee according to such nomination and voting procedure as the Society may from time to time decide;
 - 4.2.5 to deal with resolutions and such other matters, notice of which shall have been given 14 days in advance of the AGM to the Secretary of the Society by the member proposing such resolutions or other matters.
- 4.3 Other Meetings of the Society shall be called General Meetings (or in the case of alteration of the Constitution or dissolution of the Society, Extraordinary General Meetings) and shall be called at not less than 14 days' notice to members.
- 4.4 Extraordinary General Meeting
- The Committee shall have the power to call a General or Extraordinary General Meeting, and shall be bound to do so within 21 days of receiving notice in writing signed by not less than 4 members. The business to be transacted must appear on the agenda, and no other business shall be discussed.

- 5.1 Except as provided otherwise in this Constitution, the Group shall be managed by a Committee, consisting of a Chairperson, Secretary and Treasurer and not less than 8 members of the Group elected by and from amongst the members present and voting at an Annual General Meeting.
- 5.2 The Committee so constituted shall have power to co-opt further members PROVIDED THAT the number of co-options shall not exceed one-third of the total membership of the Committee.
- 5.3 The Committee shall meet for the conduct of business, as they shall see fit, but in any event shall meet not less than 3 times a year.

6 FUNCTIONS OF THE COMMITTEE

The Committee may among other things:

- 6.1 make such regulations as they consider appropriate for the efficient conduct of the business of the Committee and of the Society;
- 6.2 establish sub-committees, consisting of members of the Society or other persons, and shall determine their terms of reference, membership and duration. All such sub-committees shall make full and prompt reports on their work to the Committee.

7 FINANCE

- 7.1 All income of the Society, wheresoever derived, shall be applied to the charitable purposes of the Society and to no other purpose PROVIDED THAT nothing herein contained shall prevent the payment of reasonable and proper out-of-pocket expenses to members of the Society engaged upon the approved business of the Society.
- 7.2 The financial year of the Society shall run from 1 April to 31 March.

7.3 The Committee shall open a bank account or accounts in the name of the Society and shall specify those members of the Committee (being not less than two members of the Committee) authorised to sign cheques on behalf of the Society.

7.4 The Committee shall authorise the keeping of proper books of account, and shall designate responsibility for the preparation of an annual Statement of Accounts for submission to an Annual General Meeting.

8 ALTERATIONS TO THE CONSTITUTION

Any alteration to this Constitution shall receive the assent of not less than two-thirds of the members of the Society present and voting at an Extraordinary General Meeting called at not less than 14 days' notice to members for that purpose, PROVIDED THAT no alteration shall be approved which would cause the Society to cease to be a charity at law.

9 DISSOLUTION

9.1 If on the grounds of expense or otherwise the Committee shall decide upon the dissolution of the Society, a resolution to dissolve shall be considered by an Extraordinary General Meeting called at not less than 14 days' notice to members for that purpose.

9.2 The Society shall be dissolved only by a majority of two-thirds of members present and voting at such Meeting.

9.3 Following a decision to dissolve, the assets of the Society shall, following satisfaction of all debts and liabilities, be transferred to one or more charitable associations having objects similar or related to those of the Society, as determined by simple majority at such Meetings.

10 INDEMNITY

The Society shall indemnify and keep indemnified every officer, member and volunteer of the Society from and against all claims, demands, actions and proceedings (and all costs and expenses in connection therewith or arising therefrom) made or brought against the Group in connection with its activities, the actions of its officers, members or volunteers, or in connection with its property and equipment EXCEPT THAT this indemnity shall not extend to liabilities arising from wilful and individual fraud, wrongdoing, or wrongful omission on the part of the member sought to be made liable. The Treasurer shall effect a policy of insurance in respect of this indemnity.

This Constitution, which incorporates and supercedes any previous Constitution in the name of Belvoir Players, was adopted at a General Meeting of Belvoir Players Amateur Dramatic Society held at Drumbo Rehearsal Centre on the 28th April 1997.

CHAIRMAN

SECRETARY

DATE

APPENDIX 2

A Potted History of Belvoir Players

Belvoir Players Amateur Dramatic Society was formed in 1968 in answer to a perceived need for some cultural and artistic outlet in the new housing estate that had recently been built in **Belvoir Park**. The residents of this “new community” had arrived from various parts of Belfast and from other areas of the Province. A sense of identity was being created for people from diverse backgrounds and the performances of the players provided a social as well as a cultural and entertainment focus.

With several performances per year the reputation and the expertise of the group grew and developed. Soon the **Belvoir Players** were proving popular with audiences throughout the extensive drama festival circuit that was, and still is, a significant part of the amateur theatre life in Northern Ireland. Summer theatre in **Portrush** and **Enniskillen** together with many performances undertaken in remote parts of the Province enhanced this reputation and acknowledged pursuit of excellence.

Membership of the group became much more widespread and the policy of encouraging association from people of all traditions, religions and cultures became the mainstay of group development. This diversity enriched the work and support for the voluntary efforts was suitably encouraged by successfully attracting audiences wherever we performed.

Success in Drama Festivals spread our reputation beyond these shores. In **1983** we were invited to perform in the **British All-Winners Finals in Newport, Gwent**. In **1986** and again in **1994** we had the honour of representing **Northern Ireland** in the **British One-Act Finals**, on both occasions in **Scotland**, where again many friends were made as in **The Isle of Man** in **1998**. Winning the Ulster Full-Length Play Festival with Frank McGuinness’ *“Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me”* and going on to win the British All-Winners Full-Length Finals in Woking, Surrey in July 2006 marked the acme of Belvoir Players dramatic success. The players were the recipients of a **Civic Reception** in their honour hosted by the Mayor, Aldermen and Councillors of Castlereagh Borough Council to mark their achievement.

In 2000 Belvoir Players opened their new purpose built Rehearsal Studio on Belvoir Drive with support from the **Arts Council of Northern Ireland Lottery Fund** and the **Castlereagh Peace and Reconciliation Partnership Board**. This unique facility provided many opportunities for expansion within the group and provided an innovative performance space within Castlereagh Borough Council area which was recognised by the support that emanated from the **Castlereagh Borough Council**.

Since its opening **Belvoir Players Studio** has hosted numerous performances by both professional and amateur companies and been home to many community based organisations who use the wonderful facilities on offer. Our production, in 1999, of Sam Cree’s **Widows’ Paradise** was invited to appear at the **Lake Worth Theater in Florida, USA** in July 2000 making Belvoir Players a truly International Company.

The opening of the **Belvoir Players Studio** in 2000 offered the players great challenges as well as considerable opportunities. This enterprising group grabbed both with two hands.

Summer tours were extended taking in new theatres in Newcastle, Armagh, Cookstown, Newtownards, Omagh and L'derry. Summers have become very active times for the company but also provide revenue that is so necessary to maintain the fabric and indeed enhance the facilities of the studio.

An exciting development was the expansion of our Youth Academy. Now, with our own facilities, we are able to provide opportunities for more and more young people to participate in the performing arts. The annual pantomime at Christmas, which had traditionally been the performance opportunity was added to by our annual Youth Production in June to mark the anniversary of the opening of the studio. Productions of **Annie; The Wizard of Oz.; Oliver; Bugsy Malone** and **My Fair Lady** followed in succeeding years and in 2006 an entirely youth mounted production, directed by, stage managed and lit by members of the youth group of **Have a Nice Day** was staged in the studio. Productions of hit musicals such as **"Grease"** **"Jesus Christ Superstar"**, **"Les Miserables – Schools version"**, **"Beauty & the Beast"**, **"Calamity Jane"**, **"Evita"** and **"Seussical the Musical"** increased the ambition of the Academy and provided vital experiences to the members. Numbers in the theatre academy have steadily grown during the last 15 years till we now boast a total roll of around 250 children between the age of 5 and 16 years. A large number of junior members remain with the group when they attain 16 years and often become leaders themselves in the Academy.

Many graduates of the Academy have become Performing Arts students at professional training colleges in England and Scotland. Not forgetting their roots, these would-be-professionals returned to the Studio during their summer holidays passing on their newly learnt skills to current members. Recently one of our alumini created and directed a breath-taking production of "Godspell" over two weeks in July.

The Studio Theatre offers the opportunity to promote other theatre events and each year we organise a Spring and Autumn Theatre programme of events. These range from touring professional companies through the Castlereagh One Act Drama Festival to other local amateur societies performing productions that give local audiences a unique opportunity to experience a wide and varied selection of theatre events in a comfortable purpose-built welcoming environment. Other voluntary groups like The Studio Symphony Orchestra, University of the 3rd Age (Belfast Branch) and Babosh Special Drama Group use our facility as their base.

Now approaching our fiftieth anniversary it can be said that Belvoir Players continue to grow and develop. We fully endorse our basic constitutional aim of 'providing opportunities for participation in the performing arts to members of our community regardless of race, religion, colour, class or sexual orientation'. With the unique facility of the studio our future is secure, our membership continues to grow, our experience and expertise develops and all is reflected in our continuing success both in competitions and in our audience support at venues throughout Northern Ireland and beyond.