



A response from The Lyric Theatre to the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure Inquiry into the Inclusion in the Arts of Working Class Communities in Northern Ireland

1. An Introduction to the Lyric Theatre

Great theatre has the capacity to touch our lives in extraordinary ways and for over forty five years the Lyric has been an indispensable part of our cultural life. The Lyric is uniquely positioned as the only full-time producing theatre in Northern Ireland. It is the largest employer of professional theatre practitioners in the region and caters for audiences of over 80,000 a year, of which nearly one-third are young people under the age of 25. A further 40,000 people visit the theatre to take part in our creative learning programme, to have lunch or coffee in our cafe, for tours or to attend business events.

Approximately 39% of the Lyric's audience comes from the Greater Belfast area and 61% from the wider region. BT code analysis of the Lyric's audience data demonstrates a real city-wide impact with less than 10% of total bookers from the BT9 neighborhood in which the theatre is located. A programme of national and international touring productions widens the theatre's reach even further.

The Lyric is situated at the intersection of four Super Output areas

- Ballynafeigh 2
- Ballynafeigh 3
- Botanic 5
- Stranmillis 3

Two of these areas, Ballynafeigh 2 and Botanic 5 are in the upper quartile of Super Output Areas when ranked by multiple deprivation (NIRSA)

The Lyric's turnover is approximately £3million, made up from grants, sponsorship and earned income through ticket sales, bar and café trading and merchandising. Its public revenue funding is 33% lower than the average amount granted to similar theatres in the UK and Ireland.

The theatre has supported the development of local talent over many decades and provided a platform for a wide range of local voices, including John Hewitt, Graham Reid, Gary Mitchell, Martin Lynch, Tim Loane, and Marie Jones whose play 'Stones in His Pockets' has become one of Northern Ireland's most successful cultural exports. The Lyric has also been instrumental in the career

development of many of our finest actors and ambassadors, including Liam Neeson, Ciaran Hinds, Adrian Dunbar, Conleth Hill and Dan Gordon.

The Lyric's commitment to widening access to the arts is evident in its proactive engagement with the Social Inclusion Agenda. The Lyric provides professionally-led outreach programmes to help remove barriers to participation in, and enjoyment of, the arts for those in disadvantaged areas of the city. Youth drama classes, festivals, student placements, study guides, and practical workshops are some of the other ways in which thousands of young people get involved with the work of the Lyric each year.

The Lyric provides a forum in which relevant social and political issues can be debated and examined in a context that is both comfortable and secure. Through a carefully chosen programme of plays and related events, the Lyric makes an important contribution to the healing process of a divided society. An example of this is the popular and critically acclaimed production of Marie Jones' *A Night in November* in 2002 which addressed the issue of sectarianism. An extended run to packed houses in Belfast was followed by an international tour and a series of performances in local prisons.

First opened in 1968, the original venue had to close in January 2008 due to the dilapidated state of the building. After a successful fundraising campaign a new award winning £18.1million theatre was opened on 1st May 2011.

Since 2011 it has continued to build upon its established role as a centre of regional excellence and has positioned position itself as an international class theatre company based in Northern Ireland. In the last three years it has staged 10 world premieres, commissioned 14 new plays by local playwrights and staged 5 out-of-state tours including a 5 week run of *Brendan* at the Chelsea in New York in September 2013.

The new building consists of a 396 seat main auditorium, a 120 seat studio theatre, a rehearsal room, extensive riverfront foyers and bar, dressing rooms, technical facilities and office accommodation.

The dedicated education space in the new theatre allows the Lyric to provide significantly enhanced opportunities for children from all areas and social backgrounds to have access to the arts within a safe, supportive, and professionally regulated environment.

Constantly striving for excellence, the Lyric's programme of work is diverse and imaginative in form and content, providing a broad range of theatrical styles including classical, modern, physical, comic, tragic and musical theatre genres.

In its first two years of opening the theatre attracted 259,000 visitors including:-

178,000 attending

882 performances of

108 productions across

2 stages

Recent achievements include plays starring Sir Kenneth Brannagh, Simon Callow, Rob Brydon, Conleth Hill and Adrian Dunbar. Lyric productions have attracted 9 award nominations and the theatre itself was shortlisted for the Stirling Prize for architecture. In 2012 it won the NI Tourism award for outstanding contribution to tourism.

2. Investigate the accessibility of the arts in Northern Ireland to working class communities and to ascertain the key challenges and barriers to the involvement of those communities in the arts;

Whilst it may be the immediate assumption, it is our opinion that ticket prices are not the only barrier to some people attending the theatre. Even in cases where we have offered heavily discounted or free tickets, groups are unable to come or those invited remain unwilling to attend.

In recent years our work with schools has taught us that it is often the cost of transport or the unavailability of staff willing to take on extra-curricular activities that prevent people attending.

Similarly, having spoken to community groups who do not avail of our community ticketing scheme we are repeatedly told that the barrier is not the ticket price but the cost of transport.

In response, we have funded, from our own reserves, the renting of buses to transport people from low income and socially deprived areas to the theatre. Just some of the groups who have benefitted are:-

- Edenbrook Primary School
- New Lodge Arts Group
- Ballynahinch Primary School

In one case study, offering free tickets to local students in the immediate vicinity of the theatre failed to generate any significant uptake of the offer.

In the Social and Economic Impact Study of the Grand Opera House 2004 a survey of the general public found that many people in lower economic groupings did not consider the theatre as something “people like me do”.

The report by the ACNI states “important as a barrier is the sense of live theatre as an activity that is not within some people’s entertainment or social repertoire.”

Often the barriers to theatre are perceived rather than real. For people who have never been to a theatre there may be perceptions of elitism or a fear of the unknown. Simple questions like “What do I wear?” or “Where do I sit?” won’t enter the minds of a regular theatre-goer but for those who are new can create a barrier that might prevent them from attending.

It is our opinion that the inclusion of working class communities in the arts is much more complex and less easily addressed than simply removing economic barriers that exist and at the Lyric we work equally as hard on removing the perceptual barriers.

3. Examine the outreach activity of our arts venues and bodies with respect to how they make a meaningful contribution to social inclusion within working class communities; including the degree to which they can help tackle particular social issues;

The Lyric Theatre operates a range of programmes designed to remove some of the economic barriers to the arts for working class communities.

In the last 3 years we have awarded 4,987 **community ticket scheme** tickets to local community groups. Tickets are priced at just £5, a discount of up to 75% on the full face value. Community groups from across Northern Ireland are invited to apply for tickets and must be a registered charity. Just some of the groups who have benefitted from this programme listed below.

- An Droichead
- Ballynafeigh Community Development Association
- Divis Youth Project
- Donegall Pass Community Forum
- New Lodge Arts
- Sandy Row Community Forum
- Special Olympics Ulster
- The Somme Nursing Home

The Lyric is the largest contributor of tickets to the **Test Drive the Arts** Scheme operated by Audiences NI. Over the last three years we have issued 6,373 tickets at 100% discount to people who have not previously attended an arts event at the Lyric. That equates to almost 18 tickets per day or 40 tickets per week.

We operate a number of smaller programs that make tickets available at a heavily reduced cost or zero value.

These schemes are designed to remove the economic barrier to attending theatre by either providing entry for free or at a cost equivalent or cheaper than a ticket to see a film in a multiplex cinema. They help tackle social isolation and improve mental well-being by providing the beneficiaries with a social inclusive activity during which they exposed to theatre of the highest quality.

Our Creative Learning Department undertakes extensive work across Northern Ireland including areas of social deprivation. Examples include:

- **Theatre School Bursaries** are funded by Belfast Harbour and provide 100% funded places on our Theatre School for children aged 7 to 18.
- **Summer School Bursaries** are funded by Belfast Harbour and provide 100% funded places on our Summer School programme for children aged 7 to 18.

Again, these bursaries are designed to remove the economic barrier to participation, ensuring that anyone can benefit from the training provided by the Lyric, irrespective of background. Beneficiaries

work alongside other paying participants in group activities, making friends, developing confidence and feelings of inclusion.

As noted above, barriers are often more complex than pricing and we have embarked on a series of orientation workshops to address the perception, by some, that theatre is not welcoming or something they are naturally inclined to participate in. We recently worked with 15 pupils from **Rostulla Special School** in Jordanstown and residents of a hostel in the Lower Ormeau, hosting a tailored visit to the theatre for them. The visit included meeting with some of our employees, receiving a tour of the theatre and some basic information about what happens during a performance. These programmes allow the participants to become familiar and comfortable in the theatre and demonstrate that they are valued as visitors to the venue and have as much right to visit as anyone else.

We also believe that the best way to deal with perceived barriers is to tackle the problem before the perception is created. Our work within the primary and secondary school sector allows us to introduce children and young people to the idea of participating and attending theatre at an early age.

An example this is our **Pat & Plain** project. Pat & Plain is a series of six plays written by Dan Gordon and commissioned by the Ulster-Scots Agency. The project was delivered as part of the Lyric Theatre's Creative Learning Programme, in association with the Ulster-Scots Agency, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Foras na Gaeilge and National Museums of Northern Ireland.

Over the four years of the project we worked with 1,978 children and 336 staff from 42 primary schools across Northern Ireland. Collectively the schools gave 130 performances to an audience of 13,565. It was streamed live on the internet so the grandparents of "new comers" i.e. children of first generation immigrants, were able to see their grandchildren participate in the production.

Each play was published and continues to be provided free of charge to schools who did not take part in the project, ensuring the project has a life beyond the initial four years.

Our **Lyric Summer School** runs over a 5 week period in July and August. Each year 300 young people work alongside professionals in acting, prop making and scenic design workshops. The programme is sponsored by Belfast Harbour and Lloyds TSB with funding providing bursary places for young people from low income families.

Our **Lyric Theatre School** operates during school term time. In our first two years of operation over 200 people, age 8 and upwards attended the weekly classes. The Theatre School offers accessible creative pathways to children and adults from all backgrounds and abilities. It consists of five different workshop programmes every week for different age groups, from Storytelling Sundays for ages 4 plus to Let Loose the Actor in You for adults aged 18 and above. Thanks to funding from Belfast Harbour we were able to offer free bursary places to people from low income households.

These projects, and many more besides, introduce theatre to people at a young age, before the barriers are created. Whether they return after a short time or a long one, their abiding memory will be of feeling welcomed and included, often central to the activity in which they are participating. Furthermore, their parents and family members who attend performances at the end of the projects see those results in their children and hopefully feel equally as welcome as their children.

Our primary school devised theatre project based upon the **Great Famine** in collaboration with National Museums of Northern Ireland works with 8 schools in areas of multiple deprivation. The project involves 200 pupils working on theatre skills, attending the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, filming their work and all coming together for a screening at Ulster Museum in front of an invited audience of the parents, children and VIPs. Each child will also receive a copy of the DVD.

Much of our work also helps tackle perceptions after they have been developed.

Our project with **Chest, Heart and Stroke** group initiated a drama project and the Lyric creative learning department provided a facilitator and writer to work with participants for 10 consecutive Monday afternoons at the Lyric. The group then attended a performance of *The Seafarer* - for some, their first experience of live theatre.

In the Summer of 2012 a group of sixteen 17-19 year old budding actors from a variety of backgrounds spent three weeks working towards the staging of Sophocle's ancient Greek classic, *Oedipus the King*. The actors were fully supported by our creative, technical and stage management teams. Two performances attracted 220 people.

Our collaboration with **NI Prison Service** involves us working with young males currently housed in Hydebank Wood Young Offenders' Centre. The project is designed to help develop their social skills and contribute to their eventual re-integration into society.

Some of our work involves encouraging young people to consider a career in theatre. Our work with the Creative & Cultural Skills **Creative Choices Programme** has seen over 200 14-16 year olds visit the theatre to receive workshops and presentations about making choices in relation to their future career choices.

Our **Mental Health Project** involved working with 10 young adults current resident in **Beechcroft Residential Unit** at Knockbracken. The 8-week course involved the participants exploring their perception of their treatment followed by workshops with 30 teenagers, exploring their perception of mental health issues.

We have recently worked with residents of the **Fold Housing Association** from Beersbride Road and the Falls Road.

In 2013 we collaborated with other partners to help deliver a project titled *Crimea Square*. The project, led by the **Shankhill Spectrum Centre** involved participants recalling and celebrating the last 100 years of life on the Shankhill Road. As part of the project we provided professional voice and acting tutors, helping the participants prepare for their performances. The project continued with us bringing the cast of 15 to our production of *Brendan at the Chelsea* and *Forget Turkey*. The group have now established their own theatre company.

Attending theatre is much more than just seeing a play. Theatre and the performing arts can have an immense social impact on individuals and communities. For individuals, this may include improved physical and mental well-being, broadening of the mind, increased self-confidence, and greater self-expression and self-advocacy. For communities, the benefits include encouraging recognition of

differences and similarities, challenging preconceived ideas, strengthening identity and breaking down barriers.

Tackling exclusion is not confined to the area of creative learning or subsidised ticketing. In 2013, as part of its celebration of the 400th year of Belfast's City status, the Lyric staged its Tales of the City season. The season included a series of plays written by working class playwrights or about working class communities. Plays like *Mixed Marriage*, *Love Billy* and *Weddins', Weeins and Wakes* told the stories of ordinary people from working class communities in Belfast.

There have been many more productions over the years with similar appeal. Plays like *Dockers* by Martin Lynch, *Pump Girl*, *What the Reindeer Saw* or *A Night in November* and other plays by Marie Jones appeal to working class communities.

Part of the work is in ensuring that programming has a broad appeal and the Lyric has and continues to adhere to that ideal.

4. Identify any examples of good practice in accessibility and outreach work – either within Northern Ireland or elsewhere – which could usefully be replicated by arts venues and bodies here; and

There are some excellent examples of schemes being operated by theatres around the UK designed to remove the economic barriers to audiences. Examples include the National Theatre Travelex Scheme. The scheme, sponsored by Travelex, allows the National Theatre to offer a substantial number of tickets for just £12 compared to the full price of £50.

Some theatres situated in areas of high deprivation offer heavily discounted or free tickets to residents in their immediate vicinity. Examples include the Islington First scheme (Almeida Theatre) and First Fridays Free (Lyric Hammersmith).

There is an increasing popularity across the world of increasing access to audiences by streaming live theatre productions into cinemas. Leading examples include NTLive (National Theatre) and The Met Live (New York Metropolitan Opera). With some investment in technology and additional production costs these events could be rolled out to Northern Ireland, allowing live theatre staged in Belfast to be broadcast directly into the heart of working class communities across Northern Ireland.

We are already in the process of examining how these examples of good practice can be rolled out in Northern Ireland and are happy to examine how we might participate in schemes that operate across the sector rather than on a venue by venue basis.

5. Make recommendations for improvements in policies, delivery mechanisms and collaboration among key stakeholders which will maximise the potential of our arts venues and bodies to address social inclusion issues in both urban and rural working class communities and across communities in Northern Ireland.

Whilst often said, it remains true, that increasing funding will help improve the outputs of arts organisations in tackling social exclusion and improving access for people from all backgrounds. Funding increases allow ticket prices to be kept at an affordable level and supports many of the

projects outlined above. Years of under-funding have left organisations under resourced and over-stretched, achieving great things with little funding. But this cannot be sustained in the long term. We recommend that per capita funding for the arts is increased to bring it into parity with England, Wales, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland

We also recommend that consideration is given to how the transport problems facing schools and community groups can be tackled. The problem is particularly acute for those outside of the Greater Belfast area or in rural working class communities.

We recommend that consideration is given to cross-departmental funding structure where arts organisations such as the Lyric can easily access revenue funding from outside the DCAL budget for activities that provide benefits more closely associated with other departments e.g. education, social development, health etc.

Concluding Comments:

The Lyric welcomes the chance to contribute to the CAL Inquiry however we fear there is the perception that organisations are failing to make the arts accessible for working class communities. We believe through this submission that we have demonstrated that there is a wealth of work being undertaken to make them accessible for everyone. We are committed to continuing our work and, with support, increasing it.

We trust our reply helps demonstrate that and hope the Committee make recommendations to help support us in our efforts.