

AAPTLE meeting minutes

28 July 2020, noon, via Zoom, hosted by CITA

Present: Catherine Kodicek (CITA), Nikki Edmonds (CITA), Claire Hartley (CITA), Ali Wade (SMA), Andy (SMA), Anna Fleische (SC), Ian Saunders (ALD), Paule Constable (FMTW), Zoe Milton (ASD), Sadeysa Bailey (Freelance Taskforce), David Evans (PMF), Stuart Beeby (ATG), Owen (SMA), Katrina Lindsay (SC), Max Jones (SBTD), Lucy Carter (ALD), Mandy Ivory Castile (PMF), Jess, Hugh Borthwich, Katie Scott, (SBTD), Kinnetia Isidore (CITA), Robin Townley (ABTT), Emma Hayward (stage build), Vicky Mortimer (FMTW), Cat Silver (SBTD) Rosey Morling (CITA), Rob Bettle (ASD)

Apologies: Johanna Town (ALD), Mark Jonathon (ALD), Cynthia De La Rose (WH&M), Fiona Watt (SBTD), Sam Fellows – (Scenic Artist)

1) Guest Speaker Stuart Beeby Group Operations Director for ATG came to talk to us about his part in various committees for the Culture taskforce

Conversation summary-

Happy for govt to tell the industry the “what” of H&S and return to work but more importantly, happy to have the “why” be left to the industry without Govt being prescriptive.

Palladium trial – rumour has it that it cost £300,000 – it is not affordable by most theatres so although this was a brilliant trial, it is not actually affordable

The idea of being Covid-secure is complex for our industry. The govt guidance is sort of designed for the smaller industries,

On 1 August 2020, the industry is going to be the move to stage 4 of the govt roadmap. The LSO and Palladium were trials that the govt were watching closely, and these trials have been deemed a success so the 1 August is going ahead. Live performances are allowed to an indoor audience with distancing. (1 metre distanced all around people.)

There has been work done to look at side by side audiences – the Palladium did have one tier of the auditorium for side by side – but the rest of the house was 1m distanced, 360 degrees around each person.

Just about to open an installation at the Donmar Warehouse but it is an installation of sound and light, so the licence is for a broadcast or a screening as there is no live performance element.

Also trying to do some live music outside and food and beverage in a distanced way.

Stage 4 has demonstrated that only shows with small overheads will be financially viable as box office is so low.

There is a real question over when will we reach Stage 5, which is increased occupancy for audiences. At the moment higher occupancy does not mean full houses.... but it might make productions a bit more affordable.

When the £1.5billion was announced, Government did talk about the difficulties of Panto however then somewhat in contradiction, the Prime Minister was more positive about there being the possibility of a more normal Christmas. While lots of scientific experimentation is

being done with woodwind and brass instruments the real concern is crowds of people congregating in the West End.

The controlling of the audiences as they queue to enter and after they exit the theatre.

Govt got their fingers burnt with the return to school dates so they are being more careful with the opening of theatres

Can we do Christmas with higher occupancy? Maybe but we would still have a slimmed down everything – possibly no live music – smaller casts etc

In any city centre (including the West End) we need to coordinate the audiences... the sheer congregation of people is the real worry.

Producers need confidence to invest – and at the moment they DO NOT HAVE THAT – so no one is jumping in.

The interruption of a show by a local lockdown is too much of a risk for producers to undertake

Questions

Q – is the task force looking at audiences or at performance?

A- Mostly looking at audiences – however there are multiple working groups who are looking at performance and touring

Q – Is the running of shows being looked at? Who is working on this?

A – Yes that is being looked at – all the working groups plug into the other groups which plug into the government taskforce. The guidance does cover all areas from casting to live performance.

Q – The Palladium demonstrated that we *can* open to distanced audiences BUT it isn't financially viable or emotionally desirable– is the move to open on the 1st being led but the perceived success of the Palladium experience?

A – At every stage, the industry has said that distanced performance will not work. We can all get used to wearing face coverings, but the quality or desirability of those performances is still in questions. However, it is a necessary evil to get to where we need to go to reach stage 5.

Comment ABTT – ALW spoke eloquently at the palladium trial that socially distant theatre WILL NOT WORK – however it was not reported as such – it has been reported as a success

A While ALW is lobbying for Government to give the industry a date for Stage 5 – we must be aware of how the virus is being treated globally. The challenge to many operators is if Stage 5 is April 1st 2021, what can producers do with a limited audience? The economic impact is currently out-weighing the health impact.

Q How come you can be on a plane and not have to distance?

A – The air on a plane is renewed every 3 minutes so it is deemed safer- also the legislation for this is EU legislation and our Govt has no say in this.

Note from ABTT – there is a lot of technical work being done on air flow and air exchange – people at the Palladium are helping with the scientific discussion on this for theatres – it seems to be quite inexpensive which is good news.

Q thinking about stage 4 – insurance is a really important issue – we have been hearing some worrying stories about people being asked to work without insurance and being uncompensated if work is stopped – where is the insurance conversation currently?

A – Commercial liability, public and employee liability all of these types of insurance are fine– if the employer is demonstrating that they are meeting all the guidance and working according to Covid-safe principles then you are going to be solid. The issue for the insurance industry is interruption policies – that is where the show has to be stopped for a local lockdown or because of track and trace which shows that your premises is the common denominator. Cannot answer that as insurers are still looking at it. Lots of conversations are ongoing about this. Liability good, interruption is a question mark.

Q – Do all the various working parties and committees have the people they need to make the right decisions on a safe return to work?

A – tricky question – it is an opinion – the working groups between SOLT and UK Theatre that feeds into the government taskforce had significant representation but some zoom calls had 60 people on them.... So more akin to a town hall meeting rather than a decision-making group. It was a real challenge for people to have an equal say – lots of organisations had people on furlough, so Stuart was invited to be on more committees– there were certain forums that were underrepresented in certain areas. There was a plan that the guidance would go out to a wider circulation to get people’s buy in – but unfortunately the wider consultation didn’t happen, time was against them, so the guidance was sent out when it had not been fully consulted on. – so there is lot’s of buy in for the govt taskforce but not always great communication.

One thing Government won’t do is make exceptions to the guidance. It remains “What” guidance not “How” guidance –

Q Were there any regional voices and freelance voices in those committees and working parties?

A Absolutely Yes to regional voices; couldn’t say on freelance voices.

Q If this is the new norm, lots of venues cannot mothball to April 2021, freelancers work on multiple shows and are in multiple venues – what are freelancers supposed to do to work safely?

A Cohort working and the “bubbles” are challenging and it is going to take a lot of organising. At this moment (28 July), we should be led by track and trace and the fact that any venue that is open is covid-secure. We need to put our faith in track and trace. (Covid-secure tick box you must be signed up to track and trace)

Q Private testing is not feeding into the track and trace

Note from the chat – a worker in a track and trace call centre has not made a single call for track and trace purposes in 2 weeks – it does not seem to be really doing anything.

A That is a fair point, but a week is like a month at the moment and so things are moving all the time. The fact is that for the whole strategy to work, track and trace HAS to work. In terms of private testing, it needs to be overseen by a professional medical person who is plugged in to the track and trace.... This is a question to be asked.

Q There are so many grey areas being talked about in terms of track and trace, what happens if there are local outbreaks, the fact that interruption to service means freelancers will not be paid. The work that is being done to work out Covid-secure working, needs freelancers to feed

into it and equally we need to know that employers are going to work with us. We need to work together to do that work.

A That is key – we are glad to be asked about that – there will be a renewed interest in risk assessments – it should be normalised that people ask about and understand risk assessments

FMTW we need to do that work together – and so far freelancers have been left out of those conversations

Q SMA are having meetings with their members to talk about barriers to production – they are going to come up with some suggestions on how to proceed. There is a hope that their work will feed into the working parties

Chair – there is an action point where we should as a group should be included in the return to work groups?

ABTT – yes – we would be really happy to have freelancers as part of those groups. There is an open and ongoing invitation for groups to submit H&S guidance for Covid-secure working. The industry is very nimble at reacting to things so we should be all submitting our ideas and guidelines for inclusion on ABTT safe return documents which they have pledged to place on the free to the public part of their website

Thanks were given to Stuart Beeby for coming to talk to us.

2) Calling out unethical practice

Scene-change – the current battle ground that the SBTU, Equity Directors and Designers committee are fighting is very much around the perceived business risk and producers trying to shift the financial risk onto freelancers. There are negotiations currently happening about Covid clauses which the Designers and Directors are vehemently pushing back on (Designers being Costume, Set and Lighting) The conversations were stalled when the govt £1.5B money was announced.

SMA – Actors and SM now have Covid clauses in place – they do transfer risk to employees – up to a third of venues weeks can be cancelled with no pay and almost no notice. It is fair to say that the members are not happy about these clauses. Equity has a view in place on when the variations will end, but it does look as if the producers are unwilling to take the financial risks

CITA - The west end SOLT variations are really punitive – we knew that we would be expected to sacrifice some of our wages to help the industry back – but these Covid variations do not really have anything to do with Covid but are an excuse to fundamentally change the terms and conditions of employment. Costume people are deeply unhappy about them.

Scene-change – answering question in the chat – the response from SOLT and UK Theatre to the rejection of the new variations was very hostile. They threatened to withdraw from the agreement

CITA – This is also what we are hearing from costume members about SOLT/BECTU negotiations, that producers and theatre owners will leave the agreement if members do not agree to the punitive variations to their terms and conditions

Scene-change – The frontline is quite tense – question to SMA - what sort of engagement did equity members have in this agreement. What do we need to do as an alliance to put a fire under this?

SMA – The membership did not have much of a say – the level of threat was really high – the existential threat of losing the entire agreement left people feeling very pressured. The variations are a backwards step.

Scene-change – There has been some fight back from actors against the variations for Equity.... How did the variations become agreed when there is such a backlash?

SMA – They doubt that the stage management committee had much to do with the negotiations

Freelance Task Force – Further to scene change provocation – what is our response to these variations. It is the 3rd week we have been talking about these “unethical” new terms and conditions.

It seems that producers and theatre managers are now quite wilfully putting into writing that they are expecting us to subsidise the industry, knowing that we cannot work, knowing that we are on the breadline, they are using Covid and the financial fall out to pit us against each other – what is our response? How do we nail them to the wall in the nicest way possible?? Something has to shift – we are walking backwards into these agreements; we need to bring the conversations into the light. We want to keep working for producers but how do we have a united front about this??

CITA - The only legal framework for collective bargaining and pay negotiations is via a union. We need freelancers to join their union and bring the engagement and energy that they are bringing to FMTW and Scene-change and to these associations and to make it clear that they are not happy with these variations. If these organisations could see the strength of feeling about these variations we might see SOLT /UK Theatre and the other producers etc soften.

FMTW – Is there some work that we could do to present our terms to BECTU and Equity so that they understand what we need to move forward? Especially in terms of us moving forward together. Should we invite BECTU and Equity to ask them what they can do for us?

CITA – It is important to understand that “the union” is the members. All the energy that has created scene change and FMTW – if that energy (and the numbers) were present in members of the union we would be able to do more.

PMA – the challenge is that it costs us money to have a voice with the union that represents us – we have not income at the moment. As Production Managers, we are expected to administer the Green Book but we are not represented in it. There have been a few conversations between Production Managers and BECTU but the members are doubtful of how useful it is. They feel BECTU is a weak union

Scene-change – As a freelancer you have no voice and nobody understands what we do, which is why we created scene-change – we needed to bring our voices together without the filter of people with other agendas – not saying that people shouldn’t join unions, but that those two unions have a lot of work to do. So, we should be working together anyway, we should bring these things into the light. Don’t let the negotiations happen in the dark. We should have some principles that we all agree to – and let those organisations know that we see you! – the brilliance of the non-union groups and this Alliance is that we represent so many people, we should invite the people who are making these decisions to come and talk to us. We aren’t going to join a union and become a drop in their ocean – they have not taken the time to get to know us, so we want them to meet us on our level. We have power among the people we represent – to threaten to leave the SOLT agreement – it is blackmail against our livelihoods.

Freelance taskforce – We should bring people to these meetings – we need to do a count of the people we represent – we need to know the body of numbers – even a quick survey of people to let them know that we represent the people and what we will or won't agree to.

We need them to know that we are together – the producers and theatre managers are working on fear – which is nasty – we need to reframe that conversation. We need to know the people who are officially signed up to our associations and then create a checklist for contracts – to name these things that are not okay – and we should be coming together.

There are also LOTS of theatres who are not part of ANY of these agreements and they need to hear this same conversation. Especially for the new people to the industry, to hear that these conversations are happening.

Summary of actions

To invite Equity to the next meeting – **Andy (SMA) has agreed to do this**

To invite BECTU to the next meeting – **Catherine (CITA) has agreed to do this**

To take an inventory of our membership to provide evidence of the people we represent – **all organisations**

To create a sub-committee to create a list or guidelines of what we need from employers for Covid-safe working but more importantly in the managing of track and trace, the disruption to work and to be part of the committees etc that are working these guidelines out. – **Catherine (CITA) – will action this on Slack**

To create a sub-committee to create ethical principles of working, to reject some of the more punitive variations and to become a united force to counteract terrible contracts and terms and conditions. – **Catherine (CITA) will action this on Slack**