

CULTURE, TOURISM, EUROPE AND EXTERNAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

INQUIRY ON THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON SCOTLAND'S CULTURE AND TOURISM SECTORS

SUBMISSION FROM PLAYWRIGHTS' STUDIO, SCOTLAND AND THE SCOTTISH SOCIETY OF PLAYWRIGHTS

This submission is based on written testimonials received by freelance playwrights right across Scotland, at different career stages. It follows a Gathering of 100 playwrights held on 12th June 2020 via Zoom. It is a short, condensed version of 75 generous, articulate, knowledgeable and nuanced responses to the place of theatre and playwriting at this time of crisis.

Playwrights' Studio, Scotland is the nation's only arts organisation exclusively dedicated to the long-term support, development and promotion of Scotland's playwrights. We work actively and creatively with playwrights, connecting them with audiences and organisations, for the ultimate enrichment and enjoyment of the people of Scotland and beyond. We engage with playwrights at all stages of their careers – from members of the public writing for pleasure or wellbeing – to Scotland's most experienced professionals.

The Scottish Society of Playwrights (SSP) is a membership organisation representing the interests of professional playwrights in Scotland. The SSP is a collective voice to champion new writing in Scottish theatre. We advocate for the strategic support and development of new work. Founded in 1973, we are proud to have Liz Lochhead as our Honorary President. We are affiliated with the Scottish Trades Union Congress.

Playwriting and playwrights in Scotland

Prior to COVID-19 - and despite the inherent fragility of the theatre ecosystem which this pandemic has so starkly revealed - playwriting in Scotland was flourishing. This was evidenced by its significant domination of the producing repertoire. New plays outstripped productions of traditional plays by more than 3:1. New plays were produced by many different organisations at different scales across the length and breadth of Scotland.

Scotland's reputation internationally as a centre of excellence in playwriting is strong and vibrant. Plays by Scotland's playwrights have been produced in Brazil, Canada, China, India, Ireland, Italy, Jamaica, New Zealand, Norway, Russia, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland, Trinidad, the United States and Zimbabwe, amongst others.

Scotland's playwrights are a group of distinctive, diverse, highly-skilled, influential artists whose work is translated into many different languages and is regularly published. They are entrepreneurial, working in many different roles and settings as well as playwriting. Scotland's playwrights take a leading, public role in 'civic Scotland' with their engagement in wider political discourse.

Playwrights in Scotland are a vital part of the creative industries in the UK that contributes:

- £10.8billion a year to the UK economy¹ (£5billion in Scotland²)
- £2.8billion a year to the Treasury via taxation, and generates a further £23billion a year³

¹ Contribution of the arts and culture industry to the UK economy, Arts Council England, 2019

² Scottish Government website

- 363,700 jobs⁴
- To the entertainment, education, enrichment, health and wellbeing of individuals and communities. 90% of people in Scotland reported that they were culturally engaged in 2018⁵

Theatres play a vital part in the local economy, especially in attracting tourism and other visitors to a particular area, contributing a huge return on investment from public funds. For example, at Pitlochry Festival Theatre, for every public £1 invested, the Theatre returns up to £20.

Fuller evidence of the impact of COVID-19 on the creative industries and theatre as a whole is available in submissions to the Committee from Culture Counts, the Federation of Scottish Theatre and others.

The impact of COVID-19 on playwrights

For playwrights, the impact of COVID-19 was immediate and devastating in terms of finances, careers, health and well-being.

Within the group of playwrights who provided responses, every single one experienced cancelled or postponed commissions and productions. They lost between 80% - 100% of their income from this activity, and other income such as royalties, overnight. This amounts to hundreds of contracts in Scotland, the UK and internationally. One playwright alone lost eight contracts.

Lost or postponed contracts were at different stages. Some were cancelled during performance, rehearsal or very close to both. Others have lost longer-term commitments due to theatres, companies or producers being unable to fulfil obligations due to the impact of COVID-19 on businesses and finances.

From our previous research⁶, we know that playwrights manage 'portfolio' careers and are employed in a variety of other freelance roles within and outwith the arts. In many cases, these jobs or contracts have also been lost.

As well as abrupt and serious financial hardship, this has affected people's ability to move on with their lives and careers. They have been unable to secure accommodation, receive credit, gain employment or seek opportunities to develop new work or skills.

We heard from playwrights that caring commitments, supporting others physically and emotionally, and the lack of, or changes to, childcare or social care is affecting them physically and emotionally, as well as impacting their ability to work. This is particularly affecting women.

Playwrights with disabilities have experienced specific challenges, not least in attitudes towards 'vulnerability,' and exclusion from consultation on the very advances in remote working or communications that they pioneered.

Playwrights and their families have become ill with COVID-19, necessitating long periods of recovery.

³ Contribution of the arts and culture industry to the UK economy, Arts Council England, 2019

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ Scottish Household Survey 2018: Annual Report

⁶ A Survey of Scotland's Playwrights 2018/19

Across the playwriting community, there is deep concern for one another and the different ways it has affected people at different stages:

- Long-established careers have stalled.
- Those who were on the cusp of serious opportunities here or internationally have had them removed.
- Playwrights in the early stages of their careers can see no clear future.
- Grassroots artists have been overlooked.
- In the rush to transfer theatrical experiences to digital platforms, hard won rights and agreed fees risk being eroded.
- At a time when **we most need diversity of voices and greater representation of playwrights who have different social backgrounds, ages, genders, races, ethnicities, languages, geographical locations and abilities**, playwrights are fearful that any small progress made will halt completely. The question was asked, “will I be forgotten?”

There is a serious concern about loss of talent, expertise, stories and craft – some of it a lifetime in the making, some of it emerging from our most promising and exciting new talent.

Response of UK and Scottish Government, Creative Scotland

There were concerns that the response, in the early stages of the pandemic, had been slow and indecisive. The Scottish Government’s subsequent response and actions are regarded as being much more positive than the UK Government’s.

It was felt that financial support had been inconsistent and slow in coming. The phrase that came up time and again was, “falling through the cracks.”

For those who received support, it was from a range of different sources – business rates relief, Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS), Universal Credit, Jobseekers Allowance and the Creative Scotland Bridging Bursary. There was one mention of the Scottish Government/local authority Newly Self-employed Hardship Fund but this was at the stage of appeal.

The SEISS caused many difficulties for playwrights. It appeared to work efficiently if people were solely self-employed and had ‘good’ earnings in the three years on which the assessment was made. This was not the majority experience. As we know from our previous research⁷, income from playwriting was already declining prior to COVID-19.

As the Scheme takes average yearly trading profits into consideration, it is not equivalent to the ‘furlough’ scheme for those employed by organisations. Therefore, many playwrights were financially disadvantaged.

The Scheme was particularly unfair on those who had taken maternity leave over the last three years and registered much lower earnings than normal.

As for the many playwrights who are recently self-employed or partly employed through PAYE, they were ineligible so received no support from the Scheme. They are amongst the estimated 3m taxpayers in the UK excluded from SEISS. This is a drastic and unjustifiable situation.

⁷ A Survey of Scotland’s Playwrights 2018/19

Views on support from Creative Scotland were mixed. Playwrights felt that the organisation had moved quickly and been extremely compassionate in the way it had dealt with the crisis. However, the funds available were not adequate to support everyone who needed to access them. Although they are grateful that Creative Scotland is doing its best to promote the Open Fund: Sustaining Creative Development and assist applicants with question and answer sessions, it is felt that the application process is complex and unwieldy. Playwrights feel that they are applying for these funds in competition with producing theatre companies, which is not appropriate. This is dissuading freelance playwrights from applying for the support that they need at this time, as they do not feel they have the expertise to present a case which can be judged on an equal footing.

Playwrights who had written to their MSPs and MPs reported having received replies that concerned them somewhat. For example, some replies seemed to suggest that the Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society's £1million interest-free loan from the Scottish Government and the £149,000 Pivotal Enterprise Resilience Fund Grant was sufficient to rescue and rebuild an industry that contributes £5billion to the Scottish economy.

A new report⁸ projects that the creative sector in the UK will be hit twice as hard as the wider economy in 2020, with a projected Gross Value Added (GVA) shortfall of £29 billion. Scotland is projected to see the largest percentage drop in creative industries GVA (39% / £1.7 billion) and lose 6% of its creative jobs (7,000), owing to a greater use of the furloughing scheme. It is also projected to be amongst the hardest hit once the Job Retention Scheme is withdrawn. The Scottish Government's own economists identified similar issues in April 2020⁹.

We are confident that many elected members, including everyone on this Committee and the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Fair Work and Culture, are acutely aware of the realities and value of the creative industries. It feels essential and urgent to recovery that this understanding is shared widely amongst MPs and MSPs, not least to effectively support constituents, many of whom work in or benefit from the creative industries.

How have playwrights responded?

Despite significant obstacles to productivity and creativity, in practical terms, playwrights have:

- Taken up or created their own opportunities to showcase their work online. It is important to note that this work, as it tends to be considerably shorter than full commissions or productions, went nowhere near to compensating for lost contracts for live theatre.
- Developed new digital skills – often very quickly!
- Focused on their craft, written plays or begun research. Some of this is paid or funded but the majority is unpaid.
- Taught or mentored others and supported their peers.
- Worked hard to keep their creative businesses afloat through innovative approaches and building or sustaining partnerships.
- Navigated funding systems and applied tirelessly for new work opportunities as playwrights and also utilising other skills.

⁸ The Projected Economic Impact of Covid-19 on the UK Creative Industries

⁹ The State of our Economy, Scottish Government, April 2020

- Been involved in campaigning through unions, the media, writing to elected members, contributing to taskforces, committees and working groups discussing and charting possible future strategies for theatre and the arts in general in Scotland

There is an increased sense of community for playwrights based in more remote or rural areas. They have been able to see work digitally, undertake training or meet colleagues in webinars etc. This has been a leveller for many as *everyone* is experiencing meeting digitally, not just those who aren't able to travel to central locations. It is important that this connectivity continues in future (bearing in mind, of course, digital exclusion.)

Playwrights are an integral part of the theatre ecology so are highly aware of the extreme situation we are in. With great sensitivity, playwrights acknowledge the ripple effect of their lost commissions and productions on the team of salaried and freelance workers who contribute to that play reaching its audience: creative, technical, ticketing, marketing, fundraising, finance, administration, hospitality etc., all of whom are being deprived of work and income.

Playwrights are looking outward – to audiences, participants, “the community around me.” They are deeply concerned about what is needed to regain the confidence of audiences and entice them back to live theatre.

Many playwrights are already engaged in powerful work with younger and older people, vulnerable individuals and ‘harder to reach’ communities. Many are actively engaged in theatres’ outreach work – something which has proved particularly important in the last few months as theatres attempt to maintain a presence in, and engagement with people, in their local areas. Others have developed a practice that centres around climate change and environmental sustainability, or making site-specific, outdoor work. A great number work in educational settings, or have experience in innovative new ways of making and distributing work, maximising the value of intellectual property.

They want to play an active role in the long-term recovery and survival of live theatre, currently, “a medium that doesn't exist.” As well as theatre itself, playwrights have a wealth and breadth of skills, experience and knowledge to contribute to the recovery of society as a whole.

Rona Munro, playwright, and the Chair of Playwrights' Studio, Scotland comments, “there are still opportunities for playwrights. In fact, we are needed. Several venues describe a survival strategy that depends on discovering new ways of working, greater community engagement, different ideas for how to make work outside of buildings. Many of us have experience of this kind of work and all of us know how to tell stories. That's a skill which has rarely been more essential. I think we need to be proactive in offering solutions to venues and companies. With staff furloughed and everyone and everything fighting for financial survival, commissioners may not be able to reach out to us but that doesn't mean we can't offer work to them.”

However, playwrights are adamant that the approach to recovery ‘builds back better,’ to echo [the national campaign for a coronavirus recovery plan](#).

“I hope that this crisis might provide an opportunity to explore different models and structures to ensure that in rebuilding we might also reshape in a way that will make us more inclusive, responsive, innovative, courageous, equitable, accessible and resilient.”

“This is an opportunity to radically address structural inequalities in our institutions and make them more accessible to artists and audiences that are currently shamefully underrepresented. We have to think not just about what government can do for theatre, but

what theatre can do for society at large. The answer to that is lots - on the level of social cohesion, democratic participation, communal wellbeing, critical thinking, creative expression, international connection and, yes, economic recovery....A good start would be institutions, but also funding the grassroots - building a diverse, lively and fiercely engaged culture of companies, artists and audiences.”

What is needed?

- **Access to financial support schemes** for individuals and businesses, particularly those currently excluded from the SEISS, until reopening and recovery is possible. Greater understanding of being freelance in the creative industries and beyond, with pressure placed on Westminster to make the required changes. No one should be falling through the cracks because the system has not adapted to reality.
- **A package of emergency funding** for organisations and individuals. The Federation of Scottish Theatre has suggested, in a letter to the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Fair Work and Culture, a sum of £30million.
- **A Theatre Recovery Task force** representing a co-ordinated approach by everyone representing artists and organisations. It should include: rural as well as urban perspectives, a diversity of people and opinions, consideration of the whole ecology of theatre and how artists could be best deployed in the wider recovery of Scotland post-COVID 19. (We welcome the suggestion already made, by the independent advisory group for Scotland’s economic recovery for a National Arts Force, and the establishment and appointment of several colleagues to the National Partnership for Culture.)
- **A programme of training and investment** in digital technology, business skills and innovation for artists to increase resilience in future. (The establishment of a Digital Growth Fund has also been suggested by the economic recovery advisory group.)
- **Universal Basic Income** trials. This was suggested time and again by playwrights as a way of seriously beginning to address inequality in society in general, and the unpaid labour of so many people in the creative industries attempting to secure small grants or bursaries or being forced to create complex projects in order to have their work supported.

There is an understanding that all of this will need to be underpinned by strong political commitment to the culture of Scotland and the UK. Many felt that we were much more fortunate in Scotland than in the wider UK and have faith that the Scottish Government will continue to support us as a strategic priority.

There were many brave, inventive and fresh ideas proposed by playwrights which envisioned an exciting and equitable future for theatre and Scotland in general. Some of these were beyond the scope of this Inquiry. However, we would be happy to discuss these ideas further with the Committee as we work together to rebuild the future of live performance in Scotland.

Fiona Sturgeon Shea, Creative Director & Chief Executive, Playwrights’ Studio, Scotland

John McCann and Linda Duncan McLaughlin, Co-Chairs, Scottish Society of Playwrights