

SUSTAINED THEATRE – MAKING SPACES PROJECT

UPDATE DECEMBER 2010

Although it may have seemed a bit quiet recently, the Making Spaces project continues to move on. Just to remind ourselves, the concept which had emerged from the Call for Partners process was as follows:

there are four physical hubs located in London, Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds, where Sustained Theatre has a lease on at least one studio/rehearsal space, some offices to be rented out to Sustained Theatre companies and artists and other ancillary spaces (a social space is generally regarded as an important element). Through a local partnership network, other studio/rehearsal spaces are available and skills and expertise can be drawn on. The range of spaces available through the partnership will include one 'clean' space (i.e. fully equipped with lighting and sound rig and capable of accommodating a small invited audience). There is a venue among the range of partners which is capable of programming work which is created in the hub. There are no new buildings.

There is a producer/curator who manages the space and takes a lead role in programming artist development activities for the area served by the hub. Who employs this person is not yet defined and it may be that one person runs two or more hubs. The ST regional hub would take the lead role in managing the relationship with the landlord and overseeing the use of the space and the activities which go on within it and the National Artists Group would maintain an overview of the whole network. The physical hubs would maintain strong links with each other, exchanging ideas, work and information.

In September, the National Artists Team meeting approved in principle a proposal from the Spaces Group to establish a network of spaces comprising physical hubs in London, Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds. Just as the meeting took place, a new proposal emerged from Newcastle (an ambitious project to buy a building of some 1,500m² in the city centre) which it was agreed should be given consideration, and the partner organisation for the Birmingham proposal felt unable to commit themselves and withdrew, so this project was not in a position to move forward. There were some concerns about matters of detail in individual proposals, but the overall framework was felt to be a good basis on which to move forward.

The Spaces Group subsequently met for one final time, having essentially completed their allotted task with the presentation of the outcome of the Call. They endorsed the inclusion of Newcastle, although they identified some key issues which the proposal would need to address, and felt that it made sense both geographically and structurally for Birmingham to be part of the network and urged the West Midlands hub to continue their efforts to find a partner with whom to establish a space. Responsibility for the overview of the network and its development will now pass to the National Artists Team.

With the network approved by the NAT, we then sought to move forward to develop applications to the Arts Council, and found that we could not do so as very little information was forthcoming from the Capital Unit. The guidance eventually issued at the beginning of December is that no applications can be submitted until there is a new

capital programme in place and this will not be until the summer of 2011 at the earliest after Council has approved a new Lottery budget. This will also give the Arts Council the opportunity to ensure that any capital applications fit with the new national portfolio of funded organisations which will be determined in March.

While the delay gives more time for the details of the proposals to be worked out, it is obviously frustrating and is causing some problems for some of the projects who were ready and waiting to crack on with their applications. In the meantime we are trying to pursue our discussion with the Arts Council about the possibility of releasing some development funding to help the projects do the necessary detailed work which will make their applications strong ones and get ourselves into a better position by the time the Arts Council are finally ready to look at our proposals.

So far as the individual projects themselves are concerned, there have been some developments. In Leeds and Manchester, the regional hubs are developing strong dialogues with the partner organisations and in the latter case, beginning to put a business plan together. Newcastle's ambitious project has not found the necessary support, particularly from funders, and they are currently re-visioning their proposal, finding partners to work with on a project they describe as 'small, agile and feisty'. The West Midlands hub have resumed their search and, working closely with the Arts Council regional office and Birmingham City Council, a couple of possible opportunities have emerged which they are pursuing. The London trio are pursuing their individual projects, with Arcola about to open their new building, and also continuing to shape how they will work together.

The projects have met twice as a group to develop the thinking on how they will work together as a network and not as individuals. At the second of these, they endorsed a set of key principles drafted by Oscar Watson as a statement of how they will operate. A copy of this is attached for information. It will be developed by the Spaces Project Group as more detail is worked out.

Although we are not quite where we hoped to be by this point, we have made substantial progress during the year and believe that what we have achieved in assembling the proposals and forming relationships with a wide range of partners offers a real opportunity to strengthen the infrastructure for the Sector and enable its artists to develop.

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