

Changemakers E-Portfolio: Identifying and investigating an issue.

Introduction

This portfolio will showcase why I think we should have more local theatres and increase funding for struggling theatres, I will prove why this is important and propose a solution I feel would benefit the most people. I will do this through collective primary, and secondary research, summarising my findings, presenting my ideas, and concluding with my discoveries and feedback.

What do I define as local theatre?

From my experience, I would define this as a theatre based in a more rural/close-knit community town, where communities and people would come together to create performances and help fund them.

What's the issue?

Since the tragic epidemic of Covid-19, many theatres in the UK have struggled for many reasons. In early 2022 many theatres were added to the "Theatres at risk register", according to Chris Sharratt from Artsprofessional "More than half the theatres of the register are currently vacant" (2022) this means that these theatres, that are half owned by the local authorities, are out of use, where shows are not being put on. The NHS received support from theatres in Wales, changing Swansea Grand Theatre, Port Talbot's Princess Royal Theatre and Theatr Clwyd into blood donations centres to support high demand, and lower supplies. (Wales Arts Review, 2020) Meaning that our sector had recognised the community's need for support during the pandemic. In the post-pandemic process, the government started by taking the funding away from the theatres first, according to the information I received from Theatre's Trust

Organisations such as Theatres Trust (2023) have seen the issue of theatres struggling through Covid-19 funding and grants that allow private owners and authority owners to rebuild and repair their theatres, they have managed to fund 275 grants through their Theatres Protection Fund, awarding £1.6 million since 2012 (2023). I believe this would be great for local theatres that struggle more than ones in cities and larger towns. Based on research I have found I will form an idea, but this would only be successful by gathering information from others. I will conduct a survey aimed towards a young adult audience, searching for their understanding of local theatre and their opinions of the lack of it.

I got in contact with Theatres Trust via email and asked a few questions to get a better understanding of the theatre's struggles and whether they have had much funding in Wales. Unfortunately, they took a while to respond but I worked around that by researching more about them and have collated that together in various places. They started by noting that "we are not a major funder like an art council" and they give out small grants to "non-profit" theatres for the buildings and not the performance and staff. Just to name a few, they gave out a £13,960 grant to Chapter Arts in Cardiff, for the replacement of theatre flooring, installation of accessible showers and more. This is very important as theatre needs to become more accessible for certain guests and for the actors that are performing on stage. Another great fund they did was a £5,000 grant to Theatr Brycheiniog to purchase equipment to stream more events. All these grants are a great addition to funding non-profit theatres, and they work extremely well and hard with theatres, being resourceful, having great communication, and constant faith in the sector of their profession, but I feel they wouldn't fund the Lyric Theatre in Carmarthen as it isn't a non-profit organisation.

As well as covid, the cost-of-living crisis has affected the theatres, according to thestage.com, "Theatres in Wales are having to spend up to 40% to make productions" (Body, 2022). This is a worrying factor, even though this started in early 2022, the issue is still very prominent and ongoing.

Emily Jupp, a journalist, wrote that when speaking to Front Row on behalf of the Society of London Theatre, they said they were expecting energy costs to rise 50% higher than the previous year. (2022) they also mention how expensive theatres are to run anyway, and with the lack of funding from the government, it is hard to keep putting on shows.

I held a small collective of people in a focus group, all students, who had experience watching and/or performing local theatre. During the session with the students, I expressed my belief that I don't think there is enough local theatre. They first questioned me about what I meant by local theatre and explained that it is purely community-based. Each person then went on and talked about whether they felt like the lack of theatre was a real issue, out of the 6 people, 4 said that they felt there is a lack in both having the theatres available, also having the lack of motivation in going, due to not having something they would want to see. The other two people didn't feel much of an interest in the idea of local theatre. I asked if they would be more interested if the university got more involved with local theatre, and they both said yes.

After holding the focus group with the students, I was curious how I could improve making theatre more known.

Diving more into my research, I have discovered that smaller theatres have significantly less seating compared to larger theatres, I have based my research in Wales.

- The Lyric Theatre, Carmarthen: 593 (TheatrauSirGar, 2017a)
- Ffwrnes Theatre, Llanelli: 504 (TheatrauSirGar, 2017b)
- Wales Millennium Centre (Donald Gordon Theatre): 1,897 (Wales Millennium Theatre, 2022)
- Swansea Grand Theatre: 1000 seats (City and County of Swansea, 2022)

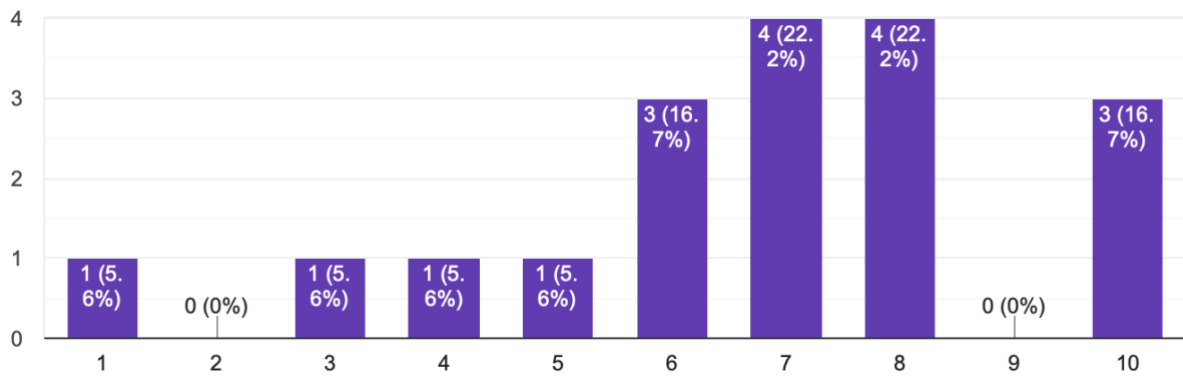
These first two theatres are more local and typically have less seating, a lot of where the problem lies is that these seats are almost never filled up, meaning the theatres would need more advertising, in addition to this, all these theatres have a huge lack in accessibility for the disabled audience. The Swansea Grand Theatre says that they have 10 spaces for wheelchair users in the stalls and 2 in the grand circle... 12 spaces for wheelchair owners out of 1000 seats (1.2%). (Swansea Grand Theatre, 2023) This is a concerningly low number. Of course, having the lack of access stops more and more disabled members of the public from ever wanting to go to the theatre. Typically, these theatres mostly show comedy acts or massive touring performances (depending on which one you go to), and it feels like sometimes there is a lack of variety in this sector.

Findings of my feedback

I made a survey about needing more local theatres and sent it out to a group of 18 young university students based in Carmarthen to gather information to help with my outcome of a solution. (Eriksen, 2023)

One of the most important questions I asked in the survey was "Do you feel local theatre should be more of a priority in government funding? Please state why?" Most of the answers said that they agree, as local theatre brings communities together, this is such an important point.

"The most common answer of why people love theatre so much is the sense of escapism it brings them." (All That Dazzles, 2021) In this entry they talk about the reasons theatre is so important to people, and a lot of it can be related to, one student wrote "Of course, I strongly believe in supportive communities and local theatres is the best way to engage the community, because they bring people together and provide local entertainment." This passionate response underlines the issue of communities falling apart because of having nothing to do or respond to. Another question that will support me in creating a solution was "How much do you enjoy going to your local theatre?" Here were the results.

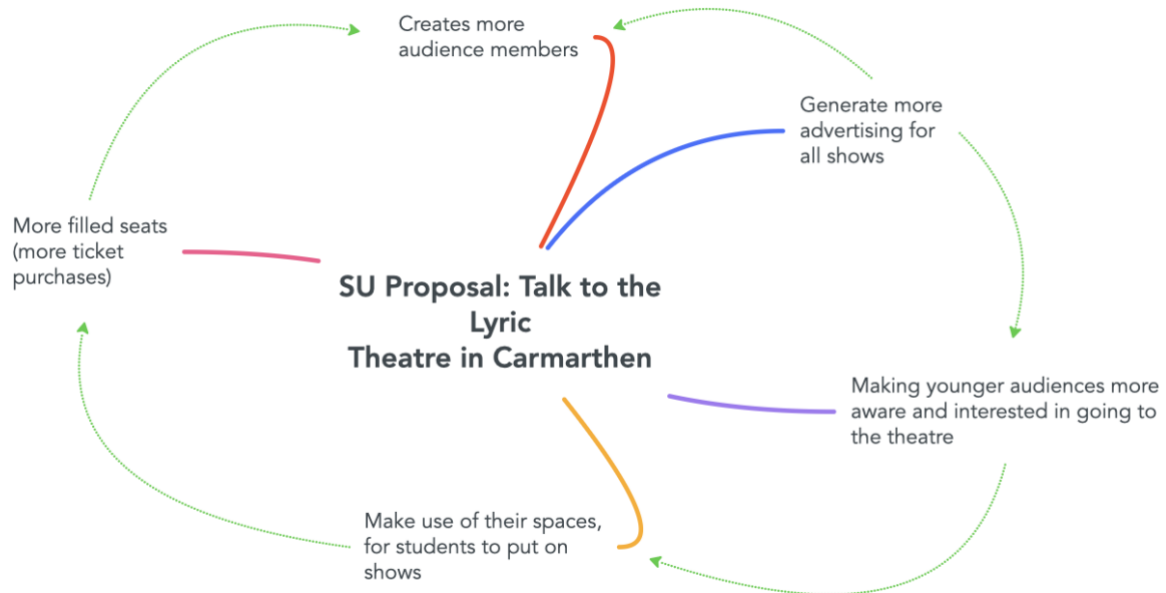


On a scale of 1 best not at all and 10 all the time, the results show to be very different but quite even, over 50% of the students said that they enjoy over a rating of 7. Following this, I conducted a question about how often these students have gone to their local theatre in the past 12 months. Unfortunately, over 60% of them said 1-3 times, and over 25% said 0 times, for me this wasn't a surprise.

Another important question was "Do you feel there is a lack of interest in local theatre?" almost 90% of people said yes, this was amazing to reinforce my idea proposed, and nearly 20% of those people said they feel there is a lack of interest in theatre because "they don't have the time". The survey came with a lot of different answers, including lack of advertising, and the fact people want to see bigger productions because it's "more worth the money", meaning smaller productions at local theatres become overlooked. Interestingly nearly 15% of the people said that they think there is a lack because it costs too much money, but looking at reviews for theatres on google and other suggestive websites, a lot of people think the prices are to a good standard, they are typically advertised and around the average of £10-£25 (Theatrau Sir Gar Carmarthenshire, 2022, pp. 7-26), which in comparison to watching a big production show, is a significant difference.

Proposed solution

I will be following the advice of Theatres Trust in stating that supporting the local theatres is such an important thing to do, especially if you're working in the sector yourself. My idea has a two-part curriculum, the first is a more immediate plan that could be put into effect almost straight away; I feel that I have reached a point in my research where there isn't much more I could do, to progress through making change, so I would attempt to hand it over to my student union. This would involve me showing them a basic plan, which would work like this (created via mindmeister.com (Eriksen, 2023)):



This creates a circle of opportunity in which getting in contact with the Lyric Theatre would help create more advertising and generate more audience members, in addition, it would be useful for both parties to allow UWTSD students to make use of their space to put on shows, allowing more performances to be put on, proving Creative Carmarthen (University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 2023) and the Lyric Theatre to be a more unique, creative and genuine duo. As well as this, the advertising would bring younger audiences to be interested in going to watch local theatre as there are financial strategies that could be put in place to halt the “it’s too expensive” stigma. It could even encourage students to volunteer at the theatre. In the end, all of this would create more ticket purchases for the theatre. I know as a student in a (BA) Acting course, having the opportunity to perform shows inside of the local theatre in front of a public audience would be amazing.

The second part of the idea is long-term and could take 3-12 months to process, it involves creating a proposal to the government about the lack of people going to the theatre in Carmarthenshire, and the importance of it, especially to the students, noting that it would help make a big improvement on the community and bringing people together. A petition will allow more funding for our theatres in Carmarthenshire. According to gov.uk, you need 10,000 signatures to get a response to your issue from Parliament (UK Government, Crown, 2023). With this information, I would send out a petition to the Carmarthenshire area on every social media and website that is possible, using the right advertising, hoping to get people to support me in getting a reply from the government. Approximately 190,000 people live in Carmarthenshire (Office for National Statistics, 2023), it also states on gov.uk that you need 100,000 signatures for the petition to get a debate in parliament, with the number of people in Carmarthenshire this is unlikely, but it’s good to know that with the right people supporting this could be pushed heavily. As well as the petition, I would attempt to arrange a meeting with the local council and obtain their support for needing more local theatre, if this happens then the support of the advertising for the petition becomes drastic.

Closing statement

Researching everything in this document was a great process and very interesting to discover how important the arts industry is to many people. If I were to change anything in my process for next time, it would be to contact another company such as Arts Council England (2022), a bigger charitable organisational group dedicated to supporting live theatre and creating worlds on stage. I feel proud of my process and the two simple but effective plans that I have set in place to possibly inspire somebody in the future, may theatre live on!

Bibliography

- All That Dazzles, 2021. *10 Reasons Why Theatre Is So Important*. [Online]
Available at: <https://www.allthatdazzles.co.uk/post/10-reasons-why-theatre-is-so-important#:~:text=THE%20SENSE%20OF%20ESCAPISM&text=The%20arts%20allows%20the%20audience,it%20with%20storytelling%20and%20joy.>
- Arts Council England, 2022. *Our history*. [Online]
Available at: <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/our-organisation/our-history>
- Body, J., 2022. *Theatres in Wales face closure as living costs increase - Arts Council*. [Online]
Available at: <https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/theatres-in-wales-face-closure-as-living-costs-increase--arts-council>
- City and County of Swansea, 2022. *Conference facilities*. [Online]
Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20081218143125/http://www.swansea.gov.uk/index.cfm?articleid=1779>
- Eriksen, J. R., 2023. *Do we need more local theatre? (GAM Module)*. [Online]
Available at: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScy6aubsbXjDrdXWh6-8Q8nmopgkQH7nvSqNjHlflqRaWRYug/viewform?usp=sf_link
- Eriksen, J. R., 2023. *My Maps*. [Online]
Available at: <https://www.mindmeister.com/folders>
- Jupp, E., 2022. *THEATRE VENUES MAY NOT SURVIVE THE COST OF LIVING CRISIS IF GOVERNMENT DOESN'T STEP IN*. [Online]
Available at: <https://www.mobiusindustries.com/news/theatre-venues-may-not-survive-cost-living-crisis/>
- Office for National Statistics, 2023. *Population estimates*. [Online]
Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates>
- Sharratt, C., 2022. *Local authority theatres 'at risk' amid Covid cost pressures*. [Online]
Available at: <https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/news/local-authority-theatres-risk-amid-covid-cost-pressure>
- Swansea Grand Theatre, 2023. *Facilities*. [Online]
Available at: <https://www.swanseagrand.co.uk/Facilities>
- Theatrau Sir Gar Carmarthenshire, 2022. *What's On, Autumn/Winter 2022*. In: Carmarthen: Carmarthenshire County Council, pp. 7-26.
- TheatrauSirGar, 2017a. *Spaces, Lyric Theatre*. [Online]
Available at: <https://www.theatrausirgar.co.uk/en/your-visit/lyric/spaces>

TheatrauSirGar, 2017b. *Spaces*. [Online]

Available at: <https://www.theatrausirgar.co.uk/en/your-visit/ffwrnes/spaces>

TheatrauSirGar, 2017. *What's On*. [Online]

Available at: <https://www.theatrausirgar.co.uk/en/whats-on>

Theatres Trust, 2023. *About us*. [Online]

Available at: <http://www.theatrestrust.org.uk/about-us>

Theatres Trust, 2023. *Grants & Funding*. [Online]

Available at: <http://www.theatrestrust.org.uk/how-we-help/grants-funding>

Theatres Trust, 2023. *Grants & Funding*. [Online]

Available at: <http://www.theatrestrust.org.uk/how-we-help/grants-funding>

UK Government, Crown, 2023. *Petition Parliament and the government*. [Online]

Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/petition-government>

University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 2023. *Creative Carmarthen*. [Online]

Available at: <https://www.uwtsd.ac.uk/creativecarmarthen/>

Wales Arts Review, 2020. *NEWS, PERFORMING ARTS*. [Online]

Available at: <https://www.walesartsreview.org/welsh-theatres-lead-the-way-in-community-support/>

Wales Millennium Theatre, 2022. *Function rooms*. [Online]

Available at:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20071023134401/http://www.wmc.org.uk/index.cfm?UUID=A4D665A5-AAD6-393C-45B96FD2745D3D47>