

Crisis in Community Theatre in Derby

We, the undersigned, being the chairs of amateur theatre groups in Derby, ask Derby City Council to take urgent action to help our groups survive a crisis in community theatre in Derby.

Performance venues in Derby are either too expensive to hire, or not available at appropriate times, or both. Most groups have to organise fundraising to cover losses on their main productions. Some Derby-based groups can only stage viable productions out side the city. Our concerns are set out in the attached Key Briefing Document 2007.

The actions we would urge the Council to take, in conjunction with other organisations where necessary, are as follows:

- Reduce hire charges for amateur groups at the Assembly Rooms and Guildhall, or provide grants towards meeting ever-increasing costs

The charges for the Assembly Rooms and Guildhall Theatre are moderated wherever possible to ensure the community organisations can afford access. We have to set against this the fact that these facilities have to operate in a commercial environment and there is a limit to the amount of Council funding which can be supplied as a subsidy.

Both venues have their own limitations and it is important that hirers of the spaces plan their productions using realistic targets for both expenditure and income.

- Apply pressure on Derby Playhouse to make its Main House accessible to amateur groups at reasonable times and at an affordable hire charge. Reasonable times means not just when the theatre is 'dark' in July/August but at appropriate weeks throughout the year

Derby Playhouse Ltd is an independent Trust run by its own Board of Trustees.

The City Council is not allowed under legislation to instruct the Playhouse Board how to run its business.

The City Council is an important funder for Derby Playhouse Ltd and within its funding agreement it is allowed to introduce conditions. In this year's funding agreement there is a condition that the Playhouse must produce its own action plan for support to the Derby Amateur Theatre community. There is a penalty for failure to produce the action plan or for creating an inadequate plan. The requirement is for the Playhouse to improve on its amateur theatre access to its facilities as it stood in 2005/06.

The Derby Playhouse has started work on consultation with the Amateur Dramatic community on this question and a report is expected in the next few weeks.

- Honour its commitment to reconvene the Steering Group on performance spaces in the city to decide on a way to take forward the proposals in the Locum Report jointly commissioned by the Council and Arts Council England

The Locum Report's main recommendation was to strive to achieve a massive investment in the performance spaces in Derby through a lottery bidding opportunity called "Living Landmarks". The bid was submitted but was unsuccessful. Since that time there has been no comparable opportunity for bidding for massive investment.

The Council has indicated that the performance Spaces Steering Group which was created for the Locum Report work is in abeyance until a further opportunity arises.

The Council's pledge remains that the Steering Group will be revived as soon as an opportunity for significant chance is spotted on the horizon.

- Actively pursue ways to ensure that Derby's last remaining traditional theatre building – The Hippodrome in Green Lane – is preserved and brought back into use as a theatre for use by amateur groups and touring professional theatre companies

The Hippodrome Theatre was bought by a developer during 2007.

The developer has made it clear that he wishes to demolish the building for redevelopment on the site.

The City Council is resisting this in every way possible.

The City Council's Built Environment Team is applying pressure to the developer to keep the building in good repair.

The City Council has made it plain repeatedly that it has no capital to invest in this building, but its officers continue to work alongside the Amateur Theatre community in order to broker relationships with funding organisations

Ray Rippingale
12 November 2007

The hire charges in the Guildhall Hall are based on the assumption that all hirers are local charitable or amateur organisations and there is a considerably more expensive rate offered for the few commercial enquires we receive.

The Assembly Room is run on a more commercial basis. There is a reduced rate which we can offer local organisations and charities which equates to 20% off. However this reduced rate is offered at the discretion of the Manager. For example whilst it would certainly be available for a single night hire in July, it is unlikely to be available for a weekly hire in the lucrative autumn season. Hence in this way it is moderate to ensure access and use of the venues by local organisations is balanced against the business unit's need to achieve its considerable income targets.

Peter Ireson
Head of Service
Assembly Rooms and the Guild Theatre
14 November 2007