



Written evidence submitted by the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) for the DCMS Select Committee Enquiry

Executive Summary

The Royal Shakespeare Company is a critical national asset, front-footed, innovative, globally significant, embedded in the West Midlands with long and effective partnerships serving schools and communities across the country.

The RSC and the UK theatre sector are facing devastating consequences and grave uncertainties as a result of Covid-19. We are grateful for the existing Government support, but the tapering of that support will be impossible to navigate if we cannot restore audience confidence over the same timeframe.

We write not only on our own behalf but with a clear view of the risks and opportunities for the whole sector. Our industry is world- renowned, progressive, entrepreneurial and diverse providing a serious return on modest public investment. UK Theatre Box Office alone is £1.3bn a year. We have been responsive and ingenious in this crisis. If our interconnected sector of talent and distribution are appropriately supported to remain active and effective until theatres can fully reopen, we will be invaluable contributors to the UK's ability to recover locally, nationally and on a world stage.

Our immediate concerns are

- The effect of our prolonged closure on all our audiences and on our home in Stratford-upon-Avon
- The current lack of certainty in planning for re-opening
- The risk of large-scale redundancies and the loss of specialist crafts
- The livelihoods of our world-class, diverse freelance workforce
- The survival of our theatre partners nationwide
- The emotional and educational recovery of young people and communities most impacted by Covid-19

Our longer-term concerns include

- The risks to the quality, scale, innovation and diversity of our output
- The needs of our young people, their well-being and educational outcomes
- The risks to regional success including City of Culture 2021 in Coventry
- The need for innovative mechanisms to retain freelance talent
- The need to protect and develop skills and talents of our diverse nation
- The digital opportunities that must not be missed

THE RSC

The Royal Shakespeare Company is the world's best-known theatre company and the only one of the English national performing arts companies based outside of London. We are one of the largest funded NPO's in the UK, generating economic, social and educational impact in our community in Stratford-upon-Avon, across the West Midlands, and throughout our vast national and international network of artists, audiences and partners.

We have an unmatched relationship with schools nationally due to the quality of our education work and our commitment to providing young people and teachers with the tools to unlock and take ownership of Shakespeare's plays. We have a substantial record of commissioning diverse, ambitious new work including large-scale musicals for families and innovative digital projects, long-standing expertise in transferring work into the commercial West End and significant international reach. The RSC holds a unique position in the global theatre landscape and the cultural life of the country.

The RSC has a clear long-term vision:

For Shakespeare's plays to be enjoyed by a truly diverse audience, representative of the population of the UK and beyond.

To foster a culture which is confident that Shakespeare is relevant and resonant and a society which recognises that we are all richer if everyone has access to great theatre.

Our purpose is to ensure that **Shakespeare is for everyone**, so our mission is:

To inspire and captivate audiences and transform lives through amazing experiences of Shakespeare's plays and of great theatre.

In 2018/19 we staged 28 productions and co-productions selling more than 1.7 million tickets worldwide including over 1 million visits to our Stratford-upon-Avon theatres. Since 2013 we have been producing the canon of Shakespeare's plays without repetition, to critical acclaim. Global stars such as David Tennant and Jane Lapotaire in *Richard II*, Lucian Masmati and Hugh Quarshie in *Othello*, Sir Antony Sher as King Lear and Falstaff, Christopher Ecclestone and Niamh Cusack in *Macbeth* have been joined by new stars including Paapa Essiedu's outstanding *Hamlet*, and Bally Gill and Karen Fishwick as *Romeo and Juliet*. In 2016 Gregory Doran's production of *The Tempest* starring Sir Simon Russell Beale was created in partnership with Intel, showcasing the leading edge of technological innovation in the theatre.

All our work is produced and manufactured on site by specialist staff. We are embedded in Stratford-Upon-Avon and networked across the West Midlands. We work in close collaboration with regional businesses, cultural and higher education institutions and have played a critical role in the development of the programme for Coventry City of Culture in 2021.

We tour large and small-scale Shakespeare productions to our 12 long-standing regional theatre partners with whom we collaborate to engage 1000s of young people and adults in Shakespeare's plays and theatre-making. In the week of writing we worked with Blackpool Grand Theatre to make a film inspired by Henry V's "*Once more into the breach dear friends...*" as community members ventured out of lockdown for the first time. Our large-scale touring productions have twice been co-created with non-professional adults and children across the UK. Our theatre partners are Nottingham Theatre Royal, Marlowe Theatre Canterbury, Blackpool Grand Theatre, Bradford Alhambra, York Theatre Royal, New

Vic Theatre Stoke, Intermission Youth Theatre, Hull Truck, Newcastle Theatre Royal, The Hall for Cornwall, Norwich Theatre Royal, Northern Stage.

The RSC performs regularly at London's Barbican and in the West End including *Matilda The Musical* which has played at the Cambridge Theatre for almost ten years, and travelled across the UK and around the world, winning over 90 international awards and has been seen by more than ten million people.

We transfer productions to New York and Washington and deliver educational partnerships across the US. Following our first major tour of China in 2016 we have developed a rich cultural exchange programme, translating Shakespeare for contemporary audiences for the first time and working with schools across China. When the theatres closed in March, we were mid-way through a UK tour of three Shakespeare productions, one of which was due to tour to the USA, South Korea and Japan.

We have a proud history of developing highly ambitious and timely new work from Peter Flannery's seminal *Our Friends In The North* to the award-winning adaptations of Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up The Bodies*, and most recently Juliet Gilkes Romero's *The Whip*, an acclaimed exposition of the abolition of slavery in the UK. These new plays are uniquely produced in repertory with great and undiscovered Elizabethan, Jacobean and Restoration plays in the Swan Theatre. Our award-winning family productions include the recent adaptation of David Walliams *The Boy in the Dress* by Mark Ravenhill with music by Robbie Williams and Guy Chambers.

We have reached c.550,000 people in over 17 countries with our *Live From Stratford-upon-Avon* cinema releases. We are the first theatre company to stream our Shakespeare productions free into schools across the UK achieving student viewing figures in excess of 460,000 to date.

Each year we transform experiences of Shakespeare's plays for more than 500,000 children and young people aged 3 – 25 and 2000 teachers through a unique hub and spoke network of 261 Associate Schools all of which are in areas of socio-economic challenge stretching across the country from Cornwall to Middlesbrough, and a further 950 schools with whom we work regularly.

The capital investment in our world-class campus over the last ten years totals £140m. The most recent investment was £9.5 m in our unique Costume Workshop which will be completed in September 2020; a transformational facility honouring a long history of craft on our site and providing state-of-the art workspaces for our specialist costume-makers. These are amongst many highly skilled roles at the RSC which are now at risk.

We are proud to be part of a sector which is run efficiently and with serious innovation, usually within small margins. We, in common with many peer organisations, have diversified our business models over the last twenty years, increasing our earned income and the philanthropy that supports our charitable objectives. It is worth noting however that fundraising for the theatre is considerably more challenging outside London. Our donors have been both loyal and generous since the theatres closed, but their support will not be enough.

The RSC has redoubled its commitment to diversity and inclusion over recent years, and we are proud to be representative of all our communities in the work on our stages. Whilst recognising that there is more to do, especially in reflecting on the strength of feeling in the Black Lives Matter movement, we want the Committee to understand the immense value of the diversity of talent we as a sector have nurtured and promoted. We want to ensure that

this crisis does not undo those gains but empowers us to tell the most compelling and most diverse story about our nation as we begin to recover. The full range of communities that make up the regions and nations of the United Kingdom need to see themselves reflected in the work that is made on stages, on screen and explored as part of their school lives.

IMMEDIATE IMPACT OF COVID ON THE SECTOR

The theatre sector lost 90% of its income overnight. Most theatres at the time of writing have no clear sense of when they will be able to reopen safely to the public. All freelance theatre artists, be they actors, directors, writers, designers, composers, musicians, specialist lighting and sound designers, prop-makers, choreographers, fight directors, wig and costume-makers, stage managers or theatre education practitioners, have lost all income this year and face an uncertain future. A small proportion will see some income return if the Film and TV industries recover sooner, but most are theatre specialists and there is a real risk that the many will not be able to weather this crisis and their skills and talents will be lost.

At the RSC we were earning £2.75m a month at the box office with trading and philanthropic income on top of this. Whilst we have retained a low level of private giving, the rest of that income is lost until we can reopen our doors. We had accumulated a cash reserve of £7.6m, in part earned through the successful commercial productions, including *Matilda The Musical* and prudent management of our expenditure in response to consistent reductions in Arts Council England funding over the last ten years.

Our monthly spend must now be managed within our Arts Council grant, which is approximately 25% of our usual income. We have furloughed 700 (more than 90%) members of staff and are claiming £1.1m a month to the end of July from the CJRS. We have had to end over 100 contracts with freelance artists and theatre-makers.

We have three theatres in Stratford-upon-Avon. We made the decision in April to cancel the three summer productions in the Swan Theatre (450 seating capacity), ending 4 years of preparatory work two weeks before they were due to open. We have indefinitely postponed all work in our studio theatre, The Other Place. We cancelled the national and international tours and paused *Matilda the Musical* at the Cambridge Theatre. We have since postponed all planned productions for our Winter 2020 Season until 2021, cancelled a planned large-scale transfer of a musical to the West End and retained one company of actors and stage managers who, for the time being, remain ready to open two Shakespeare productions as soon as we are able. This company are now delivering significant community and education activity online, with plans to move outdoors if that becomes possible. However, we do not currently know if our financial position will allow us to retain them beyond the end of July 2020.

We have looked hard at social distancing, and even with reduced space between people (if the 2m rule were relaxed), the effect on our income would be disastrous. We cannot currently plan to reopen the Royal Shakespeare Theatre until audience confidence is restored or we have access to financial support to meet the gap between the costs of operation, even on a much-reduced model, and 20-30% of our usual box office income.

In making swift decisions to stabilise our position throughout April, including moving staff on to furlough and stopping all essential spend, we nonetheless committed over £3m of our reserves. Without additional support to cover the period before we can generate our usual levels of ticket sales, we are extremely vulnerable. That vulnerability depends on timing. If

starting to welcome audiences to our fully staged productions is not something we can plan for with certainty, and there is no additional support then we will need to reshape the company to operate differently. Therefore, many jobs will be at risk including theatre specialists who will find reemployment near-impossible in a sector-wide crisis and whose skills could be permanently lost. Ultimately, the future of the company will become at risk.

The RSC holds a prominent position in the town of Stratford-upon-Avon, which attracts 2.7m visitors each year, many from overseas, generating £233m for the local economy. The sudden closure of the theatres and uncertainty about when we will recover, combined with the closure and similar vulnerability of our colleagues at *The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust* has had a significant impact on the town and its business community. We want to recommence modest live activity in Stratford to demonstrate our commitment to the town and its visitors, but for now that is not financially possible.

The RSC has been responsive and agile in challenging circumstances, launching the *Royal Shakespeare Community* online, offering direct Homework Help to children, young people and their parents, working in collaboration with *BBC Bitesize*, continuing to work online in communities with our network of partner schools and theatres, targeting those most in need, collaborating on an online *Midsummer Festival* with partners from across the West Midlands and continuing our nationwide programmes of talent development and young Shakespeare Ambassadors with young people from backgrounds currently under-represented in our workforce. We are playing a leading role in the West Midlands Cultural Response Unit set up to actively support and advocate for the sector. Many furloughed staff have voluntarily put their skills to use (e.g our costume staff making PPE and supporting the Town Trust in Stratford to assist the vulnerable).

Beyond the essential freelance workforce mentioned above, without whom we cannot successfully recover, we are also concerned about the effects on theatres and theatre companies nationally. Most particularly the theatres in towns and cities up and down England that play a vital role in the civic life of their communities. Providing creative learning, social cohesion, places of sanctuary and places where people's stories can be told. Many of these theatres are amongst the most vulnerable, because as they do not make their own productions they are not generally Arts Council funded, local authority funding has diminished to almost non-existent in recent years and they rely on box office revenue. The RSC's 12 theatre partners are all exemplars of community place-making and school engagement and it is our deep and unmatched partnerships with them that make us the most truly national of the large subsidised theatres. They all face dire choices in coming weeks and some have had to close their doors for an extended period already, Bradford Alhambra is struggling to deliver its invaluable community engagement work and Newcastle Theatre Royal has had to announce it will not reopen before April to name just two.

The cultural sector is an interdependent network of small and large building-based companies, independent companies and individual artists, sharing talent development, distribution networks, and responsibility for deep and powerful relationships with our communities. If any one element is weakened, the whole is weakened. If additional resource is indeed forthcoming, it must be intent on securing the future of all of us.

The immediate impact on the RSC and the wider sector has not changed since the beginning of lockdown; there is no easing of our collective dilemma. Theatres and individual artists need support to bridge the gap between the end of the CJRS and

SEISS and the point at which our theatres can confidently operate at close to normal levels of box office income and that support must be for the whole sector, not just a happy few.

The **reputational damage to the UK** of the RSC being unable to recover fully, would also, we believe, be significant.

HOW EFFECTIVELY HAS THE SUPPORT PROVIDED BY DCMS, OTHER GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS AND ARMS-LENGTH BODIES ADDRESSED THE SECTOR'S NEEDS?

The **Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS)** has been invaluable in enabling us and many peer organisations to stabilise. The tapering of the scheme from August will prove very challenging as nothing material has changed in our ability to earn income. We cannot open the theatres, and if we could, we cannot yet bank on the substantial audiences we would need to make reopening financially viable. We also need and want to increase our engagement activity with communities nationally and locally and commit to supporting schools through what will be a challenging academic year. So, the tapering adds to increasing costs of delivering that important activity which will rapidly deplete our reserves.

The **Self-Employed Income Support Scheme (SEISS)** has been hugely beneficial in meeting the immediate needs of some of our freelancers. The system is mainly straightforward to use. However, in particular it does not reach four cohorts who will be a great loss to the sector if they cannot survive the crisis: namely

- a) recent graduates who have invested in and been selected for elite training in the performing arts, but had not yet had an opportunity to file a tax return
- b) those who had profits in excess of £50k. The performing arts is a profession with unpredictable income patterns; one good year is no indication of savings or other means to weather a catastrophic year, and these individuals are likely to be highly valued by the industry and yet are facing no prospect of any income or support for the rest of the year
- c) those who took a career break in recent years (for example parental or adoption reasons) and had successfully returned to the profession, only to lose everything.
- d) those who had PAYE employment in the last two years from which they cannot be furloughed because they successfully made the move into the performing arts.

The greatest challenge with SEISS however is that expires in August, two months before the CJRS and likely several months before there is a reasonable expectation of income for any of these skilled individuals. We recognise that keeping the scheme for specific sectors may not be practical, but we urge Government to ensure that there is sufficient funding devolved to arms-length bodies to support this army of talent.

Latest data shows us that 40% of the freelance workforce that the whole arts sector relies on to deliver 70% of its work is looking to move into a different career.

The Arts Council of England emergency funding has been hugely welcome and was deployed swiftly and effectively throughout the sector, with a clear appreciation of which individuals and smaller organisations without regular funding most needed immediate

support. However, it was not enough and for many organisations including the RSC, the real financial cliff edge has not yet been reached but is clearly in sight.

Business loans: the only available Government loan scheme available to a charity of our size is the Coronavirus Large Business Interruption Loan Scheme (CLBILS). We are exploring this and other financing options with our bank. The difficulty for us, is demonstrating that we can pay it back. This is extremely hard to achieve in a charitable organisation operating on small margins, and needing to rebuild reserves, under the current uncertain circumstances around social distancing and audience demand.

We are not eligible for CBILS, we are too large, nor for the COVID-19 Corporate Financing Facility as we are not in a position to issue corporate debt.

WHAT WILL THE LIKELY LONG-TERM IMPACTS OF COVID-19 BE ON THE SECTOR, AND WHAT SUPPORT IS NEEDED TO DEAL WITH THOSE?

The quality, scale and range of our productions is in jeopardy if major restructuring of the Company becomes necessary. As described above, if we lose specialist crafts and skills from both our permanent and freelance workforce, they will be hard if not impossible to replace. We are anxious that in rebuilding audience confidence we do not sacrifice the ingenuity and ambition of our new work, and our commitment to developing new and diverse voices. We also need to be in a position to invest in Research and Development throughout 2021 for planned commercial productions.

We are concerned about the growing inequalities of opportunity and educational outcomes for our children and young people as a result of lock down, despite the best efforts of our teacher colleagues who are working tirelessly to narrow those gaps. We work nationally with schools where resources for families are stretched very thin and we are aware that lockdown has stalled learning as well as the social and emotional development of the most disadvantaged children. Teachers report high levels of emotion in those young people returning to school.

We particularly want to raise awareness of the increased risk to mental health for our young people. In a survey conducted by Beatfreaks in May 2020, 65% of young people reported they are worried about their mental health compared with 20% in the general population. This is a live concern for the RSC and many arts organisations because we know how to support schools to deliver creative arts learning which directly benefits social and emotional development and if we can recover as a sector, we can play a significant role in the recovery of children and young people from this crisis. In our *Time To Listen* research with Tate and the University of Nottingham (2018) [Time To Listen | RSC Education | Royal Shakespeare Company](#), 5,000 young people confirmed that arts subjects and experiences have a positive effect on emotional resilience and mental wellbeing as well as on their ability and confidence in critical thinking.

The RSC has been a partner in *Coventry City of Culture* since the origins of the winning bid in 2016. We have been developing a major participatory project in the city, with multiple partners including the faith communities. We are grateful to the *City of Culture Trust* for clear and optimistic leadership in this crisis and we know DCMS are separately in dialogue about adapting plans. We are nervous however that the financial commitments the RSC was intending to make to the programme through this project are now at risk. If we are able to recover confidently, we will be much better placed to make a full contribution to what we

believe is a ground-breaking approach to Cities of Culture, rooted in the communities of Coventry and an essential part of national recovery and celebration in 2021.

The ongoing challenge for theatre artists and other freelance specialists as detailed above needs **innovative support**. In the event that the SEISS is not extended, we would urge that a range of mechanisms are seriously considered, including some form of Universal Basic Income for theatre and performance professionals which could be administered from within the sector. Our colleagues in France have the ground-breaking “Intermittent” scheme, whilst in Germany artists have been told categorically there will be enough support for all freelance professionals. It would be a tremendous and comparatively affordable statement on the world stage to find a mechanism to invest in the diverse and globally admired talent of our workforce. The Arts Council and its funded organisations could support the delivery of such a scheme ensuring that the careers of those most in need and most needed by the sector are sustained.

These months of crisis have exacerbated vulnerabilities in the theatre sector which are reflections of the wider society. Theatre artists and participants in our work who are now most at risk of being excluded from future opportunity include, but are not limited to, disabled people, people of colour, young people, the elderly, and those from low socio-economic backgrounds. The joint challenge for DCMS, ACE and the sector itself will be to deploy whatever resources are available in ways which retain and grow the diversity of our reach and practice, and to hold ourselves accountable for preventing further widening of opportunity gaps. We will need to renew commitments to commissioning new work, find innovative ways to enable safe practice for vulnerable artists and participants, continue to explore digital solutions alongside working live in new circumstances, and commit to sharing resources as widely as possible so that all the talents of the UK are celebrated.

The same awareness and commitment to equity will be required in considering the regions of the UK. Long-term rescue funding, for example in the form of loans, must be available and appropriate to theatres and theatre artists around the country and not inadvertently focussed on a handful of major cities. The RSC started its own talent development programme *Next Generation* in 2017 to rebalance the resources needed for a young person to consider a career in the performing arts in the communities of our partner theatres and we are proud of the young people from diverse backgrounds whose skills and distinctive voices have shone through that programme. We are continuing to explore ways to extend the reach of the considerable transferrable benefits of a classical theatre training to many more young people, but we can only do that if we can secure our own future.

WHAT LESSONS CAN BE LEARNT FROM HOW DCMS, ARMS-LENGTH BODIES AND THE SECTOR HAVE DEALT WITH COVID-19?

We need greater clarity of advice as we ease out of lockdown than we had as we went in. We had no formal notice of the decision to close the theatres which was difficult to manage. However, it is imperative we have that clarity now. We understand how challenging it is to name dates, but what we need is to be properly consulted on how reopening is expected to work, and then to be given reasonable notice of public announcements and a coherent message to the public about their confidence in public gatherings once they are once more permitted.

We thank the Secretary of State and his team for listening to the sector and setting up rapid mechanisms for us to report into. It is our perception that the unique interdependence of the

theatre and performing arts was not fully understood and we would hope that this dialogue has made clearer that we are not independent businesses, rather the commercial, not-for-profit, funded and independent theatres and theatre companies and our freelance artists are a network of shared talent and ingenuity and we deliver the economic and social benefits of world-class performance and engagement together. The Arts Council does understand this interdependency and we hope DCMS will recognise the importance of supporting and protecting the whole network going forward.

We also want to ensure that the Learning and Participation work of theatres and arts organisations is understood by DCMS and that recovery plans acknowledge and include that work.

HOW MIGHT THE SECTOR EVOLVE AFTER COVID-19, AND HOW CAN DCMS SUPPORT SUCH INNOVATION TO DEAL WITH FUTURE CHALLENGES?

We are committed to enshrining culturally responsive arts subjects in our curriculum and continuing to advocate for the Arts Premium commitment in the Government's 2019 manifesto. We are working with the *Cultural Learning Alliance* (CLA) and colleagues in schools and theatres nationally to support new thinking about the curriculum and about how to deliver creative arts learning in what will undoubtedly be a blended digital and live learning environment for some time to come. We need DCMS and the DfE to understand:

- a) the urgent need to upskill teachers and theatre professionals to work flexibly across distance learning platforms and face to face teaching
- b) the need to reassess the curriculum into one that reflects the lived experiences and heritage of our student population as we near 10 years since the last wholesale curriculum review.

Young people should play a larger role in the governance of arts organisations. It is striking how many young people have stepped forward in this time to make their voices heard. To ensure we remain a relevant and responsive sector we will need young people to inform our decision making. We would like to hear more from the DCMS Youth Steering Group and hope there can be ways in which that steering group connects out to Youth Boards across the arts sector.

As a result of our ground-breaking experiments in digital stage effects (*The Tempest* in 2016 in partnership with Intel) we are proud to be the Lead partner for the UKRI funded *Audience of the Future Demonstrator* programme for Live Performance. Researching and developing new forms of performance across the arts and culture sector and impacting not only theatre but other art forms such as Festivals, Music, Digital and working collaboratively with research partners to explore the impacts and commercial viability of using immersive technologies and virtual production tools in our work. Led by the RSC, the project involves 15 specialist organisations using their different skills in staging live performance, gaming, technology and research to shape the future of audience experience. Since late 2018 the partners, who are working together for the first time, have been exploring what it means to perform live using technologies such as virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and mixed reality (MR). By sharing their different approaches to storytelling, the collaboration is discovering new ways for real-time immersive performance to be delivered across multiple platforms.

Dealing with the impact of COVID-19 - *The Audience of the Future* consortium is part of the *Boundless Creativity*, a major new campaign created in response to the COVID-19

pandemic. The project will explore and demonstrate the role of innovation, collaboration and participation in shaping cultural experiences in the current pandemic and provide an evidence base for future growth. Led by the AHRC, *Boundless Creativity* will pioneer new ways in which culture can thrive in a digital age by working with the UK's leading arts organisations and creative businesses to create ambitious and ground-breaking projects. The current crisis demands that the industry adapts quickly and pivots towards digital..

This work is all the more urgent now and the sector will need sustained investment in the development of scalable initiatives to meet the needs of an audience that has overnight become dependent on digital access to our work. We foresee many older and otherwise vulnerable audience members needing new tools to engage with us, and we see huge opportunities to engage internationally and with new young audiences if we can move nimbly between platforms. The costs of capturing live theatre and of creating bespoke digital theatre experiences are still prohibitive for many in our sector, so the research and development to bring those costs down and explore new solutions is much needed offerings during lockdown.

There will be a fundamental need nationwide, and of course globally, to find hope and reasons to celebrate as we emerge from this crisis. The theatre is the great crucible of human storytelling and Shakespeare perhaps its greatest exponent. It is our responsibility and our expertise as a sector to bring not only hope but joy, and thoughtful encounters with what we will all have lived through. The RSC and theatres everywhere can be part of a powerful civic, emotional and economic recovery, so long as we are not dealt a fatal blow before that recovery can begin in earnest.