

2019-20

As a reference point, in 2019-20, before Covid-19, the Marina Theatre Trust:

- Presented 157 live performances (11 more cancelled in March due to Covid-19)
- 210 cinema showings and 45 live theatrical screenings (10 more cancelled due to Covid-19)
- Sold over 67,000 tickets (additional 2,880 tx refunded for cancelled March 2020 shows)
- Sold over 23% of tickets at a concessionary rate
- Welcomed almost 13,000 people to the 2019 pantomime *Snow White* a 42% increase on audience since 2011
- Planned & executed a highly successful Relaxed Performance for *Snow White* in December.
- Programmed & hosted a range of local community groups, totalling 23 performances
- Reached the final year of activity in the Great Places/Making Waves Together scheme to increase local creative output and participation, leading on four projects including monthly Creative Forums; CPD & co-production work with the Seagull Theatre; the playwriting festival 'Untold Tales', and a pop-up performance project in London Road North.
- Formed a local theatres co-working group with plans to mount a second Community Show
- Implemented a new Box Office system, benefitting from a much better system, great technical support & thereby increasing sales by 200% & donations by over 600% in just first month alone
- Created 5,029 community/outreach engagements
 - 2,304 with adults
 - 2,997 with young people (1,885 individuals)
 - 938 extracurricular engagements & 2,059 through schools
- Started Technical Theatre group for introduction to tech theatre skills
- Negotiated a Managed Funds award from Arts Council England with match funding from Suffolk County Council and East Suffolk Council, to enable a further organisational development project in 2019/20, concentrating on:
 - Stronger artistic programme and increased audiences
 - Increase & improve community & outreach work
 - Increase financial sustainability
 - Developing initial ideas for small capital redevelopment project

In March 2020, the Marina Theatre was in a good position, financially, artistically & developmentally. However, the last year has not been what we expected...

2020-21

Like all businesses, but especially theatres, cinemas, cafes, bars & restaurants, the Covid-19 pandemic has laid waste to our profits, our operating model & our staff. We started our contingency planning at a low level at the end of February & were as ready as we could be in mid-March when the government ordered all venues to close.

We cancelled the remaining 11 live shows and 10 films/screenings in March and, after offering either refunds or credits, refunded a total of 2,880 tickets for those shows alone. We worked swiftly to try and move shows later into summer 2020. Little did we know then how long and how far-reaching the

effects of the pandemic would be. Thanks to the government's CJRS, we were able to furlough the majority of our staff quickly. Rather than abandoning our zero-hours/casual staff, many of whom have been with us for many years, we chose to furlough them. On 17 March we furloughed 24 zero/casual staff & 13 contracted staff, enabling the Trust to ensure they had income until the end of August.

In May, the Trust was successful in applying to Arts Council England for just under £35,000 Emergency Response Funding in May. As well as offsetting some of our losses this covered some professional consultancy & staff salaries until September. Alongside cutting operating costs wherever possible, and both rent waiver and management fee advances from our landlord and principal stakeholder Lowestoft Town Council, this kept us alive over the summer.

As the pandemic continued and the government announced cuts in CRJS and associated increases in costs for employers, the Trust began a redundancy consultation with contracted staff. This resulted in a reduction of contracted staff from 21 to just ten, six of which also had their hours reduced. The Trust needed to strike a balance between cutting operating costs when there is no income by shedding staff and keeping enough knowledge/experience to keep going and reopen when it is practical and financially viable to do so.

The Trust had been receiving and seeking donations since the pandemic began. At the end of July a formal Survival Appeal was launched, aiming to raise £100k. We did not expect to raise this much from just public donations and have been delighted by the response.

As the summer went on the Trust cancelled more and more shows, working hard with promoters to reschedule into times that were (then) thought to be 'safe'. Some of these shows have now moved six or seven times! In July we cancelled the autumn shows up until the end of November, bringing the total of cancelled shows/films to over 325, an estimated loss of income of at least £425,000 at that point.

After much discussion with Paul Holman Associates, a decision was jointly made in September to cancel the 2020 pantomime *Cinderella*. Social distancing rules and audience reticence clearly made it unviable. Ticketholders were offered the same price for 2021, an account credit or a refund.

The Trust submitted an application the Arts Council England's Culture Recovery Fund at the start of September and heard in mid-October that it had been successful. The grant was for £309,922 and covered opening the café in October and opening the auditorium for a reduced offering of films and screenings from November. Remaining staff were part-furloughed in September and October, with hours increasing in order to prep for opening. As well as helping keep us afloat and open, the CRF grant also allowed us to continue our business development work with Arts Quarter, begin a thorough HR audit and review our community engagement and participation work with a view to relaunch in 2021.

With public, company, council and trust donations reaching almost £35,000 and donations slowing down as the months passed, as well as ACE CRF funding in place until the end of March, the decision was made to thank all donors and close the Appeal. Donations are still coming in for which we are incredibly grateful as it indicates a real grassroots support for us and a keen desire to see us survive. This appetite was tested when we reopened to the public for the first time since mid-March.

On 21 October, the café and box office opened to the public. After a slow and worrying first hour,

trade was good, exceeding a month's forecast twice over in just two weeks. Public response to our being open and to our Covid-Safety measures was excellent and we looked forward to beginning a film programme at the start of November. Advance film marketing was widespread and ticket sales were good (for Covid-times).

However, at the end of October UK government announced a second lockdown from 2 November, closing the Café and meaning we didn't get to open for films at all. This was a great disappointment for everyone: staff, Trustees and the public. The Marina remained closed (again) until government announced that Suffolk would be in Tier2 from 2 December.

The Café and Box Office reopened again on 2 December, and screenings and films began well on 3 December. Although playing to smaller audiences than anticipated back in July/August when the operating model was created, the response was good & the theatre remained open for three whole weeks before being closed down again by government order.

The Trust made an application to the Arts Council for Cultural Recovery Funding Round 2. This funding covers only April – June & is designed to subsidise the financial gap between opening with live work in April & the costs involved for visiting companies. Their assumptions were that social distancing would be a thing of the past by July 1st. I think we all know that this is unlikely. With everything that has happened since December, it is hard to know what the outcome will be.

We will not hear the outcome of this funding until probably Easter.

We continue to chase & claim all available funding, including business grants from ESC. Most grant-making bodies have redirected their funds at present but we are keeping our eyes open, using the experience & contacts of our consultant.

While closed for Lockdow3, with the Trust unable to claim CJRS due to Arts Council finding, Marina staff have been busy:

Planning & rescheduling for 2021 & 2022.

Signposting – Although we can't put shows/films on we can point people towards things we think they might like. We've called this strand of work 'Backdrop', and it aims to actively engage & open dialogues, using email, website & social media channels. Public response has been excellent.

Staff development – One of the odd positives of this enforced closure is that staff have time to train & expand their knowledge. They have been doing online training, webinars, seminars etc to help them grow & be able support/sustain the Marina in years to come. These include mental health first aid, accounting, graphic design, google analytics, BSL, UK Hospitality, Food Handling, Personal Alcohol Licence holding to name but a few.

Building maintenance etc – Buildings like to have people in them. Staff are trying to use the time to clean, decorate, mend & make subtle changes that will make the Marina workable in a Covid World.

We have been rigorous in continuing our excellent care of the building & equipment. This includes cleaning the outside of the building & installing harmless but effective seagull deterrent measures; rectifying issues with internal plaster; weekly checks of all areas, including fire alarm, water system; maintenance of tech equipment & redecorating some public areas.

Future Plans

The Trust is in a very different position at the time of writing than it was as we approached year end in early March.

The 2018-23 Business Plan still stands in principle and in ambition, but the Covid-19 pandemic has made the timescale targets redundant. The Trust is again working with Arts Quarter consultants to review the business operating model and the Business plan.

As a community asset in Lowestoft, the Trust feels it is important to be open for the people of the town & surrounding area. Being open enables us to continue and develop dialogue with the local community, test our plans for Covid-safety and reassure our audiences that entertainment is safe as it can be and that the Trust is very much still alive – and even kicking!

Social distancing rules of 1m+/2m reduce our seating capacity from 775 to a mere 146. Booking group size may well reduce that further to 90-100. This means that live shows are not practical or financially for us or for many of our visiting companies. We are moving shows later into 2021 (and even 2022 & 2023) as we are 'confident' of being able to open with something closer to a full capacity sometime in 2021. Most of the promoters we work with are happy to move their shows, showing a reassuring confidence that they believe we have a future.

Obviously, we want to reopen like in the Olden Days (of 2019!) But. We recognise that this isn't possible at the moment. Many theatres & arts organisations have elected just to shut & do nothing until the storm passes & full capacities are again possible. We, however, do not think this is either right or best for us/Lowestoft. Although we want to be welcoming the community into the building to see live shows / participate in face to face activities, if we can't do that we will do whatever we can to be open & providing for Lowestoft.

Films – we know this works & can get an offer ready fast. There are caveats to that, however, as there is not much 'product' out there. Not much new has been made & what has goes straight to streaming. We may have to show 'golden oldies' & will need people to support this as they are more expensive to hire. Yes, they can be watched at home, but it's about Looking After Your Assets For The Future, isn't it?

Café – if we can't show films, we can open the café. We want to extend & expand this as much as we can, still social distancing, but maybe using more spaces, inside & out, front & back. Perhaps a pizza oven, storytelling sessions: we have lots of ideas.

THANK YOU!

Everyone that works for the Trust and all the Trustees would like to thank everyone in and around Lowestoft who has supported the Marina in some way over the last year. It has been an incredibly difficult year – for everyone – and we are delighted we are still here, looking forward into 2021 & beyond. We are doing everything we can to keep the Marina going, adapting to ever-changing circumstances. It's a hard world and one very far removed from the world we all lived in in 2019, but the Trust continues to want the best for the Marina & for Lowestoft.

We look forward to welcoming you all back to the Marina in the coming months.

*Emma Butler Smith
CEO, Marina Theatre
February 2021*