
Annual Review Report 2009/10

The Riverfront, Newport

Arts Council of Wales
July 2009

About the Annual Review Meeting

Venue:	Arts Council of Wales
Date of meeting:	Friday 26 th June 2009
Present (Riverfront):	Nic Young
Present (Arts Council):	Michael Goode, David Newland
Date of draft report:	10 August 2009
Date of final report:	17 September 2009

1. Programme of activity

Completed in October 2004, The Riverfront in Newport is a striking example of iconic 21st century architecture. It is Newport's only presenting theatre and arts centre, and has two theatre spaces, two visual art galleries, a dance studio, recording studio, three workshop rooms, conference room and a licensed café.

The overall Riverfront 'brand' is split into four sub-brands:

- Presenting Theatre
- Arts Centre
- Community Facility
- Corporate Venue

Its activities comprise of a programme of performances, film screenings, exhibitions, classes and workshops. It has 180 professional performances, 110 film screenings and 550 workshops are directly managed and promoted by The Riverfront every year.

In common with most local authority owned theatres and arts centres, The Riverfront presents a mixed programme of performing arts events by professional companies, as well as a wide range of participatory events, classes and workshops. It also operates a small gallery space.

Since opening, it has established itself as a popular and respected venue for a wide range of performances from comedy and cinema to ballet and classical drama.

It has also developed strong partnerships with a number of key companies including, Independent Ballet Wales, Jasmin Vardimon, Mappa Mundi, CandoCo Dance Company, Rubicon Dance and Sinfonia Cymru, whose work appears at the theatre on a regular basis.

One of the highlights of 2008/09 was the *Osez* dance project, an international collaboration linking seven Canadian dancers and seven from Wales, working with choreographers Karine Ledoyen from Quebec and Sean Tuan John from Wales, to create a new dance piece each day of the week. This was programmed alongside preview performances of James Roberts' *Wardrobe Diaries* in the Studio.

The experimental nature of the events proved very popular with the public and achieved a significant amount of press coverage. This project will be repeated in the autumn of 2009.

The venue has a focus on contemporary dance and physical theatre and has co-produced a number of productions including the seasonal pantomime, Hijinx Theatre's recent production *Miss Brown to You* and *The Wardrobe Diaries* with James Roberts.

The relationship with James Roberts is one that the venue is looking to repeat with other performers and companies. The Riverfront is keen to explore more opportunities to allow development of the work from inception, preview performances and tours of the work to other venues. Providing a platform to new and emerging individuals and companies based in South Wales is one of the key achievements of The Riverfront.

Co-productions and relationships with a number of companies not only gives the theatre a higher profile but also attracts new audiences on a regular basis to see new and challenging work.

The theatre receives *Arts Outside Cardiff* funding to support the artistic programme. During 2008/09 this funding was able to support 33 performances, including some by companies and artists that might not otherwise have come to Wales, and also performances by some key Welsh companies including, Hijinx Theatre Company, Volcano and Swansea City Opera.

The basement gallery has also been used increasingly in the past year, and one of the highlights was *Ghosts in Armour* – a multi-disciplinary exhibition centred on the Whitehead Steelworks in Newport and presented by Punctum Photographic, with support from Corus Steelworks.

2. Artistic leadership

The venue is led by a committed and energetic Theatre & Arts Director who reports to senior management and members of Newport City Council on a regular basis.

He has led on the development of partnerships and the co-production of work which is suitable for The Riverfront audience, as well as benefiting the creative industries in Newport and across Wales.

The theatre's approach to commissioning and co-production is both fresh and exciting and the theatre has put together a good team of people to allow this to happen. With an emphasis on physical theatre, dance and circus it has

developed links with No Fit State Circus, CandoCo Dance Company and Independent Ballet Wales.

The theatre's Director is currently vice Chair of Creu Cymru and has been involved in their dance and drama consortia. In this position he has been actively encouraging the promotion of contemporary dance to venues across Wales and the support for new and emerging dancers and theatre practitioners, as well as pushing forward the current Drama Audiences research.

He is also organising a comprehensive and exciting programme of cultural and arts events in the run-up to the Ryder Cup in Newport in October 2010. These will take place both in the venue and across the city and will involve a number of community arts organisations in Newport.

3. Public engagement

The venue employs its own Education & Participation Officer (part funded by our Local Authority Investment Programme) who manages the programme of youth dance, youth theatre and educational classes and workshops. This post is seen as a vital link between the venue and the local community, whilst helping to generate audiences for collaborative work and the professional theatre programme.

The gallery space in the theatre is also utilised to showcase the work of various community groups and arts organisations based in the area. The SPARK Project funded by Provident Financial has engaged successfully with young people from schools in deprived areas of Newport, and the work produced has been shown frequently in the gallery space.

The Riverfront is surrounded by 10 community first areas, and the venue allows for works produced by the Arts Development Team to be showcased in the gallery spaces. During 2008/09 work was shown by young people from Bettws and St Julians, as well as rehearsals for Fashion Rocks and First Film projects.

4. Governance, management and finance

The Riverfront is owned and managed by Newport City Council and does not have its own independent board of management. It is part of the Continuing Learning and Leisure Services department of the council, so reports via the normal chief officers and committee systems.

At present, there is a strong commitment from Newport Council to sustaining the levels of support for The Riverfront, although there may be financial pressures in the future.

The Riverfront has its own Finance Manager, monitoring and administrating all aspects of income and expenditure. It is monitored on a monthly basis by the Council's finance team. It is forecast that the venue will break even during this current financial year.

The theatre has been successful in obtaining additional funding from commercial funders including Admiral Insurance for arts-based training for the company and Provident Financial towards the SPARK community arts project. This is an area that could be investigated further as a useful source of alternative funding, especially in the current economic climate.

5. Marketing

The theatre currently undertakes a comprehensive programme of marketing, including seasonal brochures, flyers, posters and e-marketing initiatives.

It was one of the first theatres in Wales to use the social networking site 'Facebook' as a means of informing customers of forthcoming shows and performances, and is a quick and cheap way of contacting the theatre's audience.

After a period of negotiation and planning, the venue has recently re-launched its website to improve the quality and content of the site. This has helped to give it a distinct brand which distinguishes it from the standard local authority websites. This development is to be applauded. It is a lot clearer to read and navigate around the site, and tickets can be directly purchased from the website.

6. Partnerships and relationships

Newport City Council's arts development team are based in The Riverfront, which allows for participatory activity to be generated within the building using the resources of the building, and the professional artists performing at the venue. This dynamic partnership maximises intelligence and interaction with users and audiences across the city.

The theatre staff are active members of Creu Cymru, and regular attenders at consortia meetings. It has also become a partner in their 'dance buddy' scheme, linking Harnisch Lacey Dance Theatre with the venue.

The theatre is a lead partner in CandoCo's *Moving Bodies* project and performances by the company are due to take place in 2009 and 2010. This is a UK wide project and The Riverfront is the only Welsh venue that is part of this scheme. Local dance artist Kylie Ann Smith (who took part in the 'dance shorts' scheme with a performance in the venue), was subsequently nominated as an associate artist on the CandoCo *Moving Bodies* project.

7. Concluding comments

In the five years that The Riverfront Theatre & Arts Centre has been open it has made a significant impact on the artistic and cultural scene in Newport and across Wales.

It has shown that it is capable of achieving a great deal by developing partnerships, collaborations and has now moved into co-producing an increasing amount of work by new and existing companies, as well as individuals.

It has helped to raise the profile and quality of a number of Welsh based companies, through technical, rehearsal and marketing support, which no doubt will increase in future years.

It has developed a comprehensive programme of music, dance and drama performances, with a particular focus on contemporary dance and physical theatre.

It has benefited from continued local authority support and investment, which will help the cultural renaissance and regeneration of the city.