

ABTT Show 2020: all in one Zoom

Industry experts discuss a post-COVID reality as part of a virtual seminar programme held in place of the postponed 2020 ABTT Theatre Show. Teodora Lyubomirova reports . . .

[UK] Where there's will, there's a way - or so was demonstrated by the Association of Theatre Technicians (ABTT), who organised a series of topical seminars in the place of the postponed 2020 ABTT Theatre Show.

The disruptive effects of the pandemic on the arts were central to most discussions, but the programme also featured sessions on other critical industry issues, including sustainability and mental health. There was also a look at theatre's past and possible future in *Theatre: Then and Now*, which featured interviews with Sir Alan Ayckbourn and Richard Pilbrow and highlighted the importance of the Stephen Joseph Association (SJA).

Meanwhile, sector-specific sessions, such as *Hair, Make-up and Costume in the Performing Arts* and *Challenging the Status Quo in Sound* offered views on best practice in mitigating the effects of the crisis and returning to work safely, whilst *CAD for Performance* and *Vectorworks* made for satisfying training sessions. Best of all, post-event the ABTT has generously made all seminar resources available not just to its members but to the wider public too - access these via the link at the end of this article.

In the ALD-hosted *Spotlight on Better Conditions & the Future of Lighting*, LD Mark Jonathan hosted a panel comprising Lucy Carter, Stuart Porter, Johanna Town, David Ayrton, Robbie Butler and Rob Halliday. They discussed the implementation of changes to the off-payroll working rules (known as IR35), which look set to come in force from April 2021 (despite campaigns against them) after MPs voted against delaying the controversial reforms earlier this month.

Key concerns for workers are that private companies would avoid hiring contractors, or that contractors would not be able to access the same level of employment benefits as normal employees. The way contracts



⬆ From left, top row: Phil Brown, Gary Wright, Gavin Pell; Middle row: Richard Bunn, Stuart Graham, Stuart Beeby, Mig Burgess; Bottom row: Emma Wilson and Tom Goode

⬅ Top row: Robbie Butler, Mark Jonathan, Lucy Carter; Middle row: Stuart Porter, David Ayrton, Johanna Town; Bottom row: Rob Halliday

are drawn up will also change.

To assist its members in writing contracts, the ALD has issued a sample contract rider for LDs, along with checklists for production electricians, video designers, programmers and lighting technicians. "These are not proforma contracts," explained Carter. "They outline basic and suggestive terms which should be included in a written agreement. Going forward, we would suggest anyone who produces or employs should get something in writing, and we think the new IR35 rules will insist on this anyway. We will ask our members to insist on written memos or letters of agreements and will be publicising this and reaching out to producers and production managers to explain the necessity of this as standard good practice."

Porter and Ayrton highlighted the details contractors may need to include - from working hours, to listing equipment and travel and accommodation requirements. "This practice will

benefit us all in the long run," insisted Porter. Ayrton added: "I think after companies have done this a couple of times, you won't be considered a tricky customer for wanting specific things."

Speaking in more detail on LED lighting, the EcoDesign legislation changes and colour mixing in moving lights, Halliday spotlighted the need for a uniform experience across lighting fixtures and said he was surprised that major gel manufacturers had not yet switched from CMYK to Pantone. To read more about power savings in relation to the adoption of LED lighting in theatre, see his in-depth research on the West End production of *Les Misérables* on pages 64-71 in this issue.

As the higher education sector is forced to adopt alternative learning and examination methods during the crisis, *Technical Training in a New World* discussed the challenges faced by institutions; how viable it is for students to enrol into

university this autumn; and how students may benefit from sticking with their course. Speaking of the latter, Jo Franklin, head of technical theatre arts at the Guildford School of Acting (GSA), said learning in the current environment "can only benefit you in terms of creative problem-solving" and the experience gained now would be valuable for continuing and new students alike. Peter Maccoy of the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama added that positions vacated by professionals who are re-training may open up jobs for "the more passionate graduates".

The panel - which also featured ABTT's Sebastian Barnes, Backstage Academy's Rachel Nicholson, the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland's Ros Maddison and GSA's Mig Burgess - encouraged employers to consider offering placements to students during the downtime, to help them get a foot in the door.

A hotly-anticipated session

was *Raising the Curtain - Working Safe and Healthy post-COVID-19*. Chaired by SOLT head of risk and safety Phil Brown, the panel featured Stuart Graham and Stuart Beeby of Ambassador Theatre Group; Richard Bunn of Arup; Gary Wright of Charcoalblue; Tom Goode of Goode Productions; Gavin Pell of Pirate Crew, and Emma Wilson of the Royal Opera House (ROH).

Beeby, who sits on one of the workgroups informing government on the guidelines set to be issued to the culture sector, confirmed the resumption of the sector is planned across two phases - training, rehearsing and performing, then touring. He added that the guidance will not be prescriptive in order to allow sub-sectors to factor in their specific circumstances.

Detailing the measures the ROH had implemented on site, Wilson spoke about devising a one-way system around the building; installing thermal cameras; working in groups;

and keeping a safe distance from performers. "There's a risk assessment for every activity and then there's a supplemental one for each department," she explained. "They will be shared before people come on-site and followed by a briefing once they are on-site."

Speaking on physically adapting theatres, Wright said: "There is going to be some adaption. But a West End venue is a West End venue - you won't suddenly find more space to add a bigger bar. Whatever changes we need to make to create that safety environment, it needs to be practical and cost-efficient. If you look at China and Hong Kong, for example, you can see today there are stickers on the handrails that says when it was cleaned - that's been a direct impact of the SARS epidemic." He added that venues will be encouraged to make use of their outdoor spaces so that they're better prepared in similar circumstances. Meanwhile, Arup's Richard Bunn said his

firm uses pedestrian modelling to better understand audience flow and determine how venues could be reconfigured.

But social distancing remains the sector's biggest challenge according to the panel, with Beeby stating: "We have to have other measures and need to understand how the virus is moving as opposed to just controlling it through social distancing. Even if the [minimum] distance is down to one metre across our industry in the broadest sense . . . just four percent of our sector could go back and make it work."

As the industry continues to lobby for government intervention, Bunn recapped the mood: "When we succeed in re-opening, it's important that we don't forget the vital role that theatres play in reflecting and representing their communities and that the societal challenges that were there before COVID-19 are still here." ❌

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