

Cllr Millard: Hello and welcome to Talk Richmond. I'm your host, Jim Millard, and this is Episode 6. As an actor and writer, today's topic is close to my heart. We will be talking about the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the arts sector in the borough. I'm very pleased to be joined by Paul Miller, the Artistic Director at the Orange Tree Theatre in Richmond and Lesley Bossine, the Art Centre Manager at the Landmark Arts Centre in Teddington. Welcome both.

Just for a bit of background, we all know the arts sector is a hugely valuable part of Britain, not just for our economy but for our national cultural life - it's one of our proudest exports to the entire globe. But it's suffered hugely - most workers, for example artists, musicians, directors, technicians, ticket sellers, stage management, and more - had their livelihoods taken away from them over the space of a few hours back in March. The situation is especially serious for the Performing Arts because obviously theatre and other things rely on lots of people coming together and social distancing rules mean that the few venues that have been able to reopen have had to reopen with massively reduced capacity. It's made some significant problems for the sector and there are some very treasured institutions that are under threat, and it's very important for us to talk to them. So, thank you both for joining us today and Lesley looking at the landmark Art Centre first, what were all the immediate concerns when the lock down was announced?

Lesley: Well, I think my immediate concern was how long we would be able to survive without earning any income. Um, I don't know the Orange Tree's position, but we at the Landmark, we are totally self-funding. We rely on people buying tickets coming to our classes. We don't get any Arts Council support or any regular funding. So, I guess that was my first concern and also making sure that we could retain our small team and of course, back in March, nobody really knew if this was going to go on for a few weeks or a few months. I don't know if many of us really thought we would still be in this position now.

Cllr Millard: Absolutely. Absolutely we just didn't know. And Paul, what were some of the immediate actions you had to take at the Orange Tree Theatre?

Paul: Well, very similarly. We are not regularly funded by the Arts Council. And yes, wholly dependent on box office income and income from our supporters. And as you say, it's really strange to think back to six months ago now and think how much we didn't know at the time. Goodness knows we don't know much now. But we immediately set about. I mean, it was a horrific week closing the theatre and that is not something that you know I ran away to join the circus to do - to shut down performances and tell actors to go home. I never, ever want to be in that position again, but we immediately set about making a plan for reopening in September. You know, now we should have been re-opening at the time. We thought, goodness, we're going to have to wait that long. In retrospect, how naive we were. I think it's been perhaps a bit of a lesson for everybody who doesn't work in our business. Actually, how complicated it is, how much planning goes into making live performance events happen, and the lead time for it is so much that you know you need a measure of certainty. It's been a little bit bemusing occasionally when people seem to think that we as theatre artists are all sat around with the sort of dressing up box ready to spring into action at any moment, all we have to do is put on our costumes and we're ready to do Tartuffe or whatever. But it's not like that. You know to mean it costs a lot of money and takes a lot of planning. So that has been one of the most difficult things is the planning and the re planning and then scrapping those plans and re planning. And we you know when the September opening it became clear that wasn't happening. We made a plan for January opening which now again began to look ridiculously optimistic. And now you know we are focusing on probably April / May next year believe it or not, being the first time that we can see it likely that we're back in action in some form.

Lesley: I absolutely agree with that Paul - you can plan for so many things normally in your organization, but the uncertainty - and let's face it, everybody's in the same position - it doesn't matter whether it's the performing arts or people's day-to-day lives, it's so hard to make those decisions. And like you, I think the day we closed, our summer brochure arrived and having had it all printed and I was thinking well this is going straight in the recycling bin, isn't it? But at the time I thought, well, maybe we'd be able to rescue some of it in June, perhaps or July and then, as you say, as the months have gone on and on, I began to think well would be OK, we'll be able to

do something at Christmas, but like you now I'm thinking bookings that we've got with artists in March - Are they really realistic?

Cllr Millard: Absolutely no indeed. Indeed, I mean the financial consequences of having to close your doors and of not being able to put on any performances for a long time for the Landmark and continuingly so for the Orange tree. But Paul coming to first you know what were the immediate financial challenges and how has the Orange Tree managed to survive so far?

Paul: Well, um in common with many, many businesses and certainly theatres, the news of the job retention scheme came as a kind of act of God because that has kept us going because we were able to furlough pretty much all the stuff and that means that that's really been the financial lifeline. There is a paradox, which I'm not sure everybody who's not been directly involved with this kind of thing perhaps understands, which is there is a deal there - if you want to furlough a worker, your stuff, the understanding is that they then must not do anything. You can't do anything if you're furloughed and so we had to decide pretty quickly, and pretty strictly, that we had, yes, a finite amount of cash in the bank. No, no prospect of knowing when we might ever earn anything again, and therefore we had to shut down all activity unless we were absolutely certain that it was going to give us, I'm afraid to talk like a business person, you know, return on the investment, because otherwise it was money down the drain. So that's why we've gone into a kind of deep freeze, really. So we've battened down the hatches and trying to sort of ride out the storm that way.

Cllr Millard: Well, this is the question I'm going to come on to Lesley in a second, but I just want to indulge a lovely moment because it does put me in mind - I can't help - it puts me in mind of Shakespeare's predicament. This happens in Elizabethan times, and it hasn't really, doesn't seem to happen since, that epidemics would hit and forced theatres to close. The remedies, and the ways of surviving are very different, but the danger that people can you know that entire organizations might disappear is very real, and that's again coming back to what is so important that our community really values these venues and these organisations, and it's quite scary to us that they might, you know, if we're not careful, go to the wall and Lesley that

was very much the feeling at first with the Landmark and I wonder where you're at now. Can you talk to us a bit about what your funding experience was?

Lesley: Well, absolutely. I mean, the first thing we did was have a crisis meeting actually before we closed, before we, we took the decision to cancel a fairly major event which lost £20,000 pounds overnight, that decision but we felt we needed to do that. Then we had a crisis meeting and we realized very quickly that although we had what we felt was a fairly robust reserve, that we were going to run out of money by the middle of May. And like Paul, I think we fairly quickly realized that this wasn't going to be over by the end of April and May wasn't very far away. So we set about applying for all sorts of support grants, and like Paul, the furlough has been absolutely essential. I mean, there's no way we would have avoided having to make people redundant if it hadn't been for the furlough, and I would be lying if I said I'm not concerned about it ending on the 31st of October. But for the Landmark, the thing that has saved us has been the public. We launched a fund-raising appeal in April. We thought we might raise a few 1000 pounds. Well, so far the good people of Teddington, Richmond and beyond have donated over 65,000 pounds to the Landmark and that has kept us going. And it's no exaggeration to say that we wouldn't still be here if it wasn't for the public. But over and above the money, the thing that has really given such a huge morale boost to everybody here, the staff, the volunteers, the trustees who have effectively been supporting me as if they were staff since we had to close. The thing that's really bolstered us is we've had so many messages of support. And as you say, Jim, that's just shown how much the local community value the Landmark. I mean, we've even had a donation from a lady who now lives in Ireland who used to live in Teddington, and that really, really humbled us. And it's that moral people cannot underestimate - the cash, of course, is really helpful, and it pays the bills - but just knowing that people are willing you to keep going and to still be there at the end of this is actually it's worth a fortune really is.

Paul: Totally agree - for the Orange Tree, two things really one is our equivalent of the support you received is that we had on sale the whole of our spring and summer season, and a lot of people have bought tickets for the productions, you know, which is fantastic, but we had to set about a big process of Refunding everybody, refunding you know hundreds of thousands of pounds of tickets. Well, all I can say is we were

overwhelmed because around about 3/4 around 75% of tickets were either returned to us as donations or people agree to keep them, or us to keep it as credit for when we reopen.

Cllr Millard: Wow

Paul: So amazing and it's made, financially made the difference, but also it was so moving for all of us actually.

Cllr Millard: yeah.

Paul: And also I really can't let this opportunity go by without saying, You know, having talked about the Arts Council, Richmond Council actually has continued to be really, really supportive, and I think we're very fortunate to work and live in a borough that you know values the arts

Lesley: Absolutely

Paul: not only the people in the borough, but the Council of whatever political hue I must say really strongly supports the arts, and that's really, really valuable.

Lesley: I absolutely agree with that Paul that that does make a difference in the fact that we've been able to talk about concerns and know that the council is supporting us as far as they are able to in terms of - well, giving us an opportunity like today for example, which is lovely, thank you.

Cllr Millard: Remember, you know, there was a big Save the Arts campaign with lots of high profile but all performers, including me, you know I put a photo on Instagram, which I'm sure made absolutely no difference. But you know, in total eventually did actually, and the government did announce a 1.57 billion support package to support the arts. And where is that happening? Are you receiving any of the funding from that?

Paul: Well, the situation is that that only it was announced and then applications for it only really opened a couple of weeks ago and the first deadline was a week or two ago and so really I think, with the exception I think of a few music venues that have had some money, I think the bulk of theatre applications have only really just gone in or are going in, so nobody's been in receipt. As far as I understand, no theatre has been in receipt of any of that yet. And I think we're told that there will be decisions in October.

Cllr Millard: I'm very interested to just ask quickly Leslie about what you were able to do once lockdown started to ease, you touched on that quickly, you have been able to do some things?

Lesley: We did manage to run some things online. And then we thought, well, we could actually try a timed entry exhibition and art exhibition, because again, part of our remit is to support individual artists and you touched Jim on all those independent artists, whether their performers or visual artists, who have had all their livelihood taken away from them. So, we felt if we could support the thriving artist, visual artist community in our area, we would try. So, we put on an exhibition. It all worked through timed ticket entry. People came and what was even better, people put their hands in their pocket and they bought works of Art. So, some of that benefit has gone into individual artists and alongside that we thought well, the one great advantage of the Landmark, I guess that's something that we have that Paul doesn't have it the Orange Tree, because we don't have fixed seating in the our main hall, we were able to turn that into two giant classrooms so, where is we can't use our visual art studio and we can't use our other spaces that we would normally use for teaching, we were able to convert the Hall into two socially distanced teaching pods and they've been very well received by people who've come to events.

Cllr Millard: So the next question really is for both of you, how far can you go on the wonderful funding that the community has given you by way of you know, the ticket sales for the Orange Tree and the crowd funding for the Landmark Art Centre, because I think the thing we really want to know as a community, is you know how long can you survive and what do we need to do, you know, to help?

Paul: We think, all things being equal, we should be able to get into the new year. And things have to start changing for the better then, but in the short short term we do have a bit of good news, which is that we've worked out a way of using our rehearsal room and having studied the guidelines, we can reopen our six Youth Theatre groups and that will be happening within a matter of weeks. It's taken a lot of working out to do things in a socially distance way and a Covid secure way, but we're nearly there and we think we're going to be back up and running

Cllr Millard: And what about the Landmark Lesley?

Lesley: For us, having such a huge old building, the winter is in many ways our most expensive time of year because of the heating and various maintenance things that that we have to do in the building. It's a beautiful building, but it's inexpensive building to look after and I think that's something that that we will have to think about quite carefully. We want to keep all our options open and as our chairman Martin keeps saying we're staying positive, but we're not complacent and we just really want to do as much as we can to deliver something. We have applied for some of the cultural recovery fund money on the basis of staying in a state of partial opening. But again, I'm realistic about that. Every theater and Museum and Gallery in the country is going to be after that money. So we just have to see. So we're positive, but not complacent going forward.

Cllr Millard: Well, thank you so much both of you. Finally, do you have anything you'd like to say to your audiences and visitors?

Lesley and Paul: Thank you, thank you thank you. A chorus of thank you's there.

Cllr Millard: How wonderful

Paul: Perhaps we both saying very similar things - just because we are shut or appear to be shut, we haven't gone away and we're not going away and will be back for you as soon as we possibly can.

Lesley: Absolutely I mean this this was is the Landmarks 25th anniversary year. It's not the anniversary year we planned and we are determined to do our best to make sure it's not our last year. So yeah, so thank you to all the community.

Cllr Millard: Absolutely, and will be back will be there with bells on when we're allowed. I'm sure like never before. It's clear from speaking to both Lesley and Paul just how grave the situation is for the arts sector. The nature of our conversation is that we have to choose specific people, but of course they are representative of the entire art sector across the entire Richmond Borough. You know everyone has been affected by Covid and we've got some real serious priorities in our own lives to think about and perhaps sometimes you know, the arts aren't necessarily the most important thing in the front of our minds, but I'm put in mind of a possibly apocryphal quote from Winston Churchill when he was asked to cut arts funding during the World War Two, and he refused because he said, well, what are we fighting for? And I think it's a bit similar now. There's a lot. There's a lot on our minds, but when this is all done and dusted, what we really want is to have these treasured institutions with this wonderful cultural life in our borough still surviving. And if you're able to support the Landmark Art Centre, the Orange Tree or any other arts organizations in the borough, now is the time to do so. Get in touch. Keep an eye on how they're doing. Give them your support.

For further information on the topics discussed, check out the show notes below. If you have any questions, email us on talk@richmond.gov.uk. Please do subscribe and leave a positive review. I'm sure it'll read like a 5 and I'm Jim Millard. Thanks for listening.