

PETITIONS COMMITTEE - HIJINX THEATRE'S RESPONSE
TO THE ARTS COUNCIL OF WALES

- 1 As a direct consequence of ACW's investment review Hijinx are the most disadvantaged of the 71 arts organisations that continue to receive revenue funding. No other organisation has seen its revenue funding cut by anything like the 39.5 % that Hijinx has suffered. The budget reduction is in fact £104.5K because the Odyssey project must now be delivered through core revenue funding; previously it was funded via the lottery route. Odyssey is a mixed-ability community group that includes people with learning disabilities working alongside people without as equals.
- 2 To put matters into perspective in the current financial year, the 71 retained organisations will share £25.25million and 56 will receive an additional £3.7 million; 10 will be at standstill and 5 will see a budget reduction. Hijinx are the only producing theatre company to have a reduction. Meanwhile the Arts Council's grants budget has only received a modest 4% cut from the Welsh Government.
- 3 As a direct result of this savage grant cut Hijinx are currently going through a restructuring exercise and this involves making 4 of the total of 7 staff compulsorily redundant by the end of July.
- 4 The recent award of a £50k project grant for the mixed-ability week long Unity Festival is of course very welcome, however it is a **project grant** and must be spent specifically on the Unity Festival, and cannot be used to "top-up" the revenue grant. It will not enable Hijinx to develop a sustainable activity plan for the next 3 years, which all the other retained organisations will be able to do. Neither will it stop the redundancies.
- 5 Hijinx were awarded a £20 K one-off payment to assist the company restructuring and pay statutory redundancy to staff leaving. In my view this would have been public money better spent on creating activity to be enjoyed by people in Wales.
- 6 Hijinx are a unique and groundbreaking Welsh theatre company whose reputation extends far outside Wales and the UK. They are the only company in Wales and only one of a few in the UK that provide opportunities for people with learning difficulties to experience the joys of live theatre and to work in a truly inclusive environment. They recently took a mixed ability group of 13 people to perform at a Festival in Seville to great acclaim.
- 7 In **June 2010** Hijinx were informed that the Arts Council were no longer prepared to fund the community tour and they would meet with the company to discuss indicative figures for planning purposes. In **September** a formal meeting took place when ACW clarified what range of activity they were prepared to fund. Hijinx made the financial case that the 2009 community tour had a net cost of £33K, and the Odyssey project grant was £29,990. If Odyssey was to be delivered from the core revenue grant from April 2011 it would cost virtually the same as a community tour; if Odyssey was to be developed it needed investment. (We had been on cash standstill for 4 years)

Following the meeting Hijinx were invited to submit plans based on **CASH STANDSTILL** – we felt that ACW had understood the financial case, as this was the only indication / guidance we ever had of possible grant level for 2011/12. The Board worked hard to find savings, and plan activity based on standstill. Minor restructuring, changes to job descriptions to reflect activity, and shorter working time were all under discussion. It was therefore a massive shock when we heard on **15th December (via the media)** that the grant for 2011/12 would be £160 K (2010/11 it had been £234,448 plus the project grant for Odyssey of £29,990)

- 8 In the absence of clear planning advice (promised in writing in June 2010 in 2 different documents), we assumed the substance of the September meeting and letters inviting an application based on cash standstill was a realistic indication of grant level, and understandably, did not start significant restructuring . This is even more depressing when you consider the Arts Council had 5 weeks (from Nov 5th - December 15th) to question the activity and financial information submitted and allow Hijinx the opportunity to clarify or respond. Bear in mind that Hijinx received the biggest cut of any retained organisation and so should have been a priority for such a meeting.
- 9 In view of the above (7 & 8), Hijinx have lodged a formal complaint to ACW which is currently on-going.
- 10 The Arts Council recognise that redundancies are essential, they fail to make the connection that with 4 staff out of 7 being made compulsorily redundant it will not be possible to maintain the existing level of activity involving people with learning disabilities, and certainly not develop further. The sad reality is that a reduced programme is inevitable and already a decision has been made not to undertake the usual and much acclaimed Odyssey Christmas production which has involved students from Meadowbank Special School in Cardiff and music students from the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama for many years.
- 11 Perhaps more worrying of all is the reality that the arts Council simply don't understand what inclusive theatre is all about . It clearly sees the community tour and the inclusive work undertaken by Hijinx as separate and distinct. The whole point and thrust of inclusive theatre is **NOT** to draw artificial distinctions between provision for learning and non learning disabled people, but to produce high-quality theatre for everyone. Thankfully society is not like this and neither is Hijinx. The Unity Festival is only one feature of our work with includes learning disabled people. Odyssey provides regular weekly drama sessions along with a range of small “pod” performances for festivals, conferences etc. More recently Hijinx have engaged learning disabled actors to perform alongside professional actors in professional touring productions; the current show, “Old Hands”, employs 2 local actors with Downs syndrome. Are the Arts Council seriously saying these tours should stop? Or that inclusive productions should only perform for learning disabled audiences?
- 12 There seems to be implied criticism that the community tour does not present a strong case for support. There have never been any questions raised before

about the consistency and quality of the productions for the general public in community venues. In fact the Arts Council's own quality monitoring forms rated them "good" or "excellent". No concerns have ever been raised at annual review meetings, which have been overwhelmingly positive.

- 13 Hijinx's predicament is unique amongst the retained organisations and it is both complex and detailed. The devil is in the detail and whilst the Arts Council appear to recognise the contribution made to the arts in Wales by Hijinx this has unfortunately not been backed up by their decisions in respect of the level of revenue grant .
- 14 Along with all other revenue organisations, Hijinx have a one-year funding agreement with ACW, with the expectation that revenue funding will remain at the same level for 3 years, i.e. until 2013/14. Hijinx are asking for this to be reviewed and for an increase in 2012/13 to enable real investment and support of inclusive work.
- 15 Hijinx remain committed to the belief that everyone has something to offer regardless of their ability, and that talent must be nurtured and developed whenever possible, always aiming for the highest standards.