

# **Evaluation Report: New Vision for SOS.**

## **1.0 Background to Development Year at SOS.**

Show of Strength (SOS) was established in 1986 as a touring company for new writing. The company's theatrical vision was making "theatre that's close enough to touch" with a commitment to:

- new writing and recovering "lost" pieces from classic repertoire
- work which is inspirational, intimate, accessible, non-threatening, eclectic, varied, adventurous and opportunistic
- aspires to high standards of creative excellence
- attracts high profile national practitioners
- attracts new theatre goers to work made in and for the communities of South Bristol
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Since October 2005 our mission statement has been to

- Develop and produce high quality new writing for the theatre
- Create opportunities for writers, actors, directors and other theatre practitioners
- Build new audiences through working in spaces that are accessible and informal
- Develop new and existing partnerships in Bristol and beyond

SOS created the "Hen and Chicken" in 1989 as Bristol's first permanent pub theatre and went on to create a new performance space at the Tobacco Factory in September 1998. Throughout this period SOS produced an annual programmes of productions and rehearsed readings of new work, highlights of which included:

**2002/3 THE WILLS'S GIRLS by Amanda Whittington**

**2001 Full SOLT/TIF Producer's Bursary for Sheila Hannon**

**1995; 2000 premieres new plays by Peter Nichols**

**Two Building A Better Bristol awards**

In March 2004 Show of Strength's (SOS's) funding arrangement with Arts Council England South West (ACESW) came to an end. This was a catalyst behind a decision by the Board of SOS to commission an organisational review which was carried out by Peter Boyden Associates in 2003.

This report provides a review of the period since then and describes how SOS sees itself developing over the next 3 years. Feedback has been sought from key stakeholders including Bristol City Council, Arts Council England South West, Theatre Bristol, Writernet and SOS Board members. Two interviews were held with writers who took part in Waiting, a monologue project run by SOS.

## **2.0 Why a Development Year was needed.**

The key strategic issues facing SOS in 2003 were:

- 1/ A wide breadth of vision that resulted in a perceived lack of artistic identity.
- 2/ The relationship with the Tobacco Factory as a home venue had become problematic and SOS had no control of their own building.
- 3/ Volume of production had decreased over the preceding three years which led to problems sustaining a "critical mass" of visible activity. This was balanced by the great success of THE WILLS'S GIRLS and an established Bristol audience for SOS "branded" work.
- 4/ Limited capacity for sustained education and community programmes.
- 5/ High levels of personal energy and commitment were required to sustain the SOS model as Sheila Hannon was responsible for nurturing projects through the production development process and putting together creative teams for individual productions. A key issue was that SH functioned as a "Creative Producer" rather than "Artistic Director" and was forced to cover too many functions at inappropriate levels of detail
- 6/ Long term planning compromised by lack of resources. SOS had a very fragile financial model with limited year-on-year security. This meant there were very limited resources for company development.

The Peter Boyden review explored the pros and cons of 4 options for the future development of the company which were to:

- Keep things as they are.
- Seek to increase RFO funding
- Support SH directly through "Grants for the Arts" and close SOS
- Support SH and a re-modelled SOS through "Grants for the Arts"

At the end of the review process the Board decided that the only feasible way forward was to pursue Option 4. A funding application was submitted to ACESW for a development year to explore this option. A grant was approved in April 2004.

## **3.0 Main Aims of the Development Year.**

The overall aim of the development year was to assess if SOS could be developed as an innovative production development resource with SH refocused as a Creative Producer. The Board were keen to maintain their commitment to:

- development & production of new writing and new work
- working with national profile practitioners
- generating work for local practitioners
- working artistically in South Bristol.

A Steering Group with a specific brief to manage and evaluate the year's programme of development work was set up. Sheila Hannon had day-to-day responsibility for the project and convened regular meetings with and reports to the Board and the Steering Group. (Appendix 1 gives full listing of Steering Group membership)

The Steering Group agreed a work plan that included exploring the following issues:

- a) Production Development methodology in terms of risk management, range of processes and outcomes and the relationship with income earned from productions.
- b) Partnership frameworks for production development of new work. Meeting with writers (new, emerging and established), directors and producers working with new writing to understand needs and experience of development and examining existing networks for developing new writing regionally and nationally.
- c) Partnership frameworks for production delivery. Explore SOS collaborations and partnerships beyond the city and options for theatre in non-theatre venues. Examine differences and similarities in development and production in the commercial and subsidised theatres, particularly re producer role.
- d) Professional development programme for Sheila Hannon, staff and Board. Define the potential of the role of Creative Producer within the context of the remodelled SOS. Specific issues: Contracts and deal making: Intellectual ownership and copyright: Financial planning and ICT.
- e) How to reinforce artistic development work in South Bristol, by exploring different ways of uncovering the latent talent that exists. Eg partnerships with the City of Bristol College and their campus in Sth Bristol.

#### **4.0 Key Tasks/Activities Of Development Year**

The development year started April 2004. Interviews were held with a wide range of individuals involved in both commercial and subsidised theatre. A full and detailed report of this research phase was produced and is available on request from SOS.

In order to "test" out new ways of working, drawing on the research detailed in the first phase of the development year, the following productions/projects were delivered.

##### **a) JOINED UP WRITING: WAITING**

JOINED UP WRITING is a regional new writing partnership that started with SOS and The Everyman Theatre, Cheltenham. WAITING, the first project, encouraged people to write a 5 minute monologue on that subject. The Brewhouse Theatre, Taunton and the Northcott Theatre, Exeter then joined.

Aimed at a wide variety of writers, from beginners to more experienced/ established, this was reflected (certainly in Bristol) both in scripts received and those produced. Production at The Southville Centre (a community centre and 'non-theatre' venue) was 11am-6pm over 2 days (weekend) and helped to encourage people who might have excluded themselves from a "writing competition". Taking over a whole building for a weekend allowed time to be "suspended" in a way that would be impossible in a theatre.

The production was extremely successful with around 200 people attending each day. Performances took place all over the building in different areas (including hall, offices, men's loo) with a (free) programme listing performances, times and spaces. The café was open all weekend so audiences could have as many breaks

as they wished between shows. One visitor said it was like the Edinburgh Festival with all the venues in one building.

Feedback from the writers has been especially positive. Key learning points highlighted by them include:

- The publicity for the project was accessible and inclusive. This was very important for the new writers who said they had previously lacked the confidence to apply for "prestigious" or "national" competitions. The fact that it was presented as a local and relatively low-key project was crucial to those who applied.
- The chance to meet other writers interested in a specific literary form was seen as very important. Several of the writers already attended writers groups but felt it was more positive to have a group experience with "like minded" people.
- The experience was a tremendous confidence boost and has led the writers to feel inspired to write more and to "take themselves more seriously".
- The size of the group (20) was felt to be just large enough to be exciting and inspiring but small enough for the writers to feel they were getting individual support from Sheila and Gill.

This pilot project has great potential to be used widely as a model elsewhere and in different ways:

- Travelling Light Theatre Company are interested in collaborating on a version for young people/families in autumn 2007
- The company is developing DIVERSE STORIES, a project for Bristol 2007's Year of Cultural Diversity to mark the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The aim to commission a variety of pieces for performance in a different locations using Bristol's 'Slave Trade Route'.

## **b) WRITING WORKSHOPS**

An AWARDS FOR ALL grant enabled us to run writing workshops for young people (under 25s) at the Southville Centre and all those who took part were encouraged to submit an entry for **WAITING**.

Using a non-traditional theatre venue acted as an excellent trigger for encouraging new writing, particularly by people who had never written before or those who might exclude themselves from a 'writing competition'. The workshops included sessions with professional actors reading work and culminated in live performances at a new South Bristol non-theatre venue: Paintworks. Ultimately two young writers who had never written before had their work professionally produced as part of the main **WAITING** project.

## **c) AN AUDIENCE WITH SARAH GUPPY**

A 50 minute, one woman show about Sarah Guppy, mother of Brunel's colleague Thomas and an engineer in her own right. Funded by Brunel 200 and sponsored by Hitachi with interactive whiteboard to demonstrate 19th century inventions in a 21st century way.

The project worked with City of Bristol College computer design students to recreate Guppy's inventions in 3D which were incorporated into the presentation. The show has been seen in a variety of non-theatre venues including Clifton Hill House; Arnos Manor Hotel; SS Great Britain Maritime Heritage Centre; City of

Bristol College (staff training in innovate whiteboard use); Create Centre Lecture Theatre. Future performances scheduled for SS Great Britain Hayward Saloon; Everyman Theatre Cheltenham Studio; QEH Theatre. It is intended to tour the show for some considerable time and to develop other projects with similar potential. At September 2006 the show has been short listed for a major national award the 'Engineering Media Challenge.'

SOS and City of Bristol College are now planning 2007's project with 3D design students, and will continue to develop links with other non-arts college departments and faculties (eg technical; IT).

#### **d) APPOINTMENT OF ASSOCIATE PRODUCER**

In October 2005 Gill Loats joined as Associate Producer (part time), from a background in local arts (Manager, Hope Centre) and management (Chief Executive, Southville Centre). SOS is benefiting from her considerable experience in a wide variety of areas, particularly IT, finance and budgets and marketing, as well as her own wide range of networks and contacts (her experience at the Southville Centre made working at that venue both possible and a very positive experience for both organisations).

#### **e) NETWORKS & PARTNERSHIPS**

##### **BRUNEL & PARTNERS**

This project developed out of WAITING, and extends the regional partnership (Cheltenham Everyman, Show Of Strength, Northcott Exeter, Theatre Royal Plymouth) focusing on new writing. Partners will commission and, in autumn 2006, produce 10 minute plays about IK Brunel to be performed on railway station platforms across the region. The project is managed by SOS and all the plays/performances will travel to all other partners/stations with all work being seen across the region over a two week period.

##### **OTHER**

In the past year SOS has established and developed links and networks with an extensive range of organisations and individuals, including young Bristol based director Robin Belfield who directed the SOS WAITING project and is helping to develop (and will direct) DIVERSE STORIES for 2007.

#### **f) TRAINING & DEVELOPMENT**

This is ongoing, with some funding from the development year still to be used. Sheila Hannon will complete training on contracts and will be working with an intellectual property lawyer on this. The changes within the company mean a review of the Board will be carried out in 2007- Gill Loats' considerable experience of working with a wide variety of Boards and structures is proving invaluable.

### **5.0 Main Conclusions of the Development Year.**

- a) A re-energised SOS has emerged from the development year. The projects achieved have generated a real sense of excitement within SOS for the potential of a re-focused role in developing and producing new writing in Bristol and the South West focusing on non-theatre spaces.
- b) Key partners value and are supportive of the role SOS can play as a regional resource to develop new writing and to pull a wide range of partners together across the South West. The WAITING pilot proved enormously successful in stimulating new writing in theatres across the

region. SOS came up with the model which was then interpreted differently by each venue.

- c) SOS's Board are fully behind the new vision but also aware of the significant work that needs to be done. In order to move things forward quickly and decisively they appointed Gill Loats as Associate Producer to support Sheila Hannon. Her appointment strengthens SOS's management team, especially in terms of partnership working and financial management.
- d) SOS needs to continue to produce if it is to develop new writing. An essential catalyst for new writing is the prospect of production. Without this the ability to motivate and inspire high quality new writing is limited.
- e) A non-traditional theatre venue can act as an excellent trigger for encouraging new writing, especially by people who have never written before. The contacts and knowledge that SOS have developed over the years means it is uniquely placed to "pull off" complex productions in non-theatre venues with non-theatre partners in the Bristol region.
- f) The SOS recognised "brand" (esp. after THE WILLS'S GIRLS) has strong pulling power in terms of attracting audiences to new writing productions.
- g) The potential for commercial funding has been identified as a result of the development year. (Hitachi and Arnos Manor Hotel both sponsored the SARAH GUPPY project.) Commercial partners only came on board when there was a clearly formulated "package" that they could buy into. SOS needs to do up front work in order to secure corporate sponsorship.
- h) Creating packages of funding with a range of partners has great potential but also exposes SOS to greater risk if one of the partners withdraws. SOS needs more experience and confidence in terms of setting up and managing equal partnerships. Keeping partners on board is time consuming and needs to be reflected in SOS core costs.
- i) The single actor model that evolved from WAITING has the potential to be self-financing and provide some core funding for SOS.
- j) Huge potential exists for SOS to lever in non-arts funding from community/regeneration sources but as with g) above this requires up front work that will need funding.

## **6.0 New Vision for SOS.**

As a result of the organisational year a new vision has emerged for SOS which has strong support across the board:

\* Develop high quality new writing for theatre in the South West which targets established writers but also includes people "off the streets".

\* To produce plays in non-theatre venues to encourage new audiences in the South West for new writing. Eg hotels, community centres, railway stations, schools etc

\* To identify and articulate new models for developing and producing new writing projects that can be replicated by other theatres across the region.

\* Create opportunities for new directors and actors as well as for communities to become involved in writing and producing.

\* Develop and sustain new and long-term partnerships in Bristol and the region, including Theatre Bristol, regional Writernet forum (South West), City of Bristol College, partnerships with regional theatres and producers (eg Cheltenham, Taunton, Bridgwater, Exeter, Plymouth, Hall for Cornwall)

\* Maintain and develop national networks for theatre, particularly those for producers and new writing (eg Open Space Theatre Forums; Producers forums and meetings).

## 7.0 Key Objectives 2006-2009

### Our key targets for the next 3 years are to:

- Create new theatre in non-traditional theatre spaces. Potential partners include the Bristol Slave Trade Route, Bristol Zoological Gardens and Bristol Doors Open Day.
- Develop further the monologue model for projects including **DIVERSE STORIES**, a project for Bristol 2007's Year of Cultural Diversity to mark the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. **Short Sharp Shots**, a writing project for young people in partnership with Travelling Light Young People's Theatre Company. Darwin 200 celebrations in 2009 present an opportunity to launch a new monologue project at Bristol Zoo.
- **'An Audience with Sarah Guppy'** continues to be booked by schools, youth organisations etc and provides a template for future off- the- shelf, cost effective monologues which will enable us to increase our earned income.
- Develop further opportunities for businesses to support new writing and production building on the success of An Audience with Sarah Guppy. This may be through advertising and product endorsement and/or personal enrichment/performance opportunities for employees. SOS is currently developing a partnership with St George's Bristol and a major firm of lawyers to produce '12 Angry Men' with a cast of lawyers and barristers from across the South West.
- Work with the City of Bristol College to devise a project with 3D design students building on the work of An Audience with Sarah Guppy. Develop links with other non-arts college departments and faculties (eg technical; IT).
- Introduce financial planning systems that ensure full cost recovery where possible on SOS projects to enable realistic planning and project development time.
- Work across the South West with existing theatre partners. Identify new partnerships with small and medium scale organisations and venues

- Improve administration systems to include better use of technology and Green ideologies.

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