

Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Relations Committee

Creative Scotland – Regular Funding 2018-21

Written submission from Dogstar

Dogstar is a European touring theatre company based in the Highlands. It began in 1999. In its early years, the company undertook a series of tours across the Highlands & Islands with a series of popular new plays about Highland history and music. The company's work expanded to cover the whole of Scotland and undertook its first tour abroad in 2007. Dogstar is now established as a highly respected producer of new plays. The company's work has been presented internationally at many festivals and theatres. We have a strong and loyal audience in Scotland, an extensive, established touring circuit, excellent co-producing partnerships in Scandinavia and a large pool of highly talented artists ready to work with us. No project-funded theatre company has had more success internationally than Dogstar. In today's theatre landscape, it is very hard to find another company which annually tours as extensively in Scotland as Dogstar does.

Since 2007, we have made four unsuccessful attempts to gain Regular Funding, or Flexible Funding as it was called under the Scottish Arts Council. In 2010, the SAC had a rating system for which our application received top marks in each category, and yet two other theatre companies which didn't do as well as Dogstar by the SAC's own definition were preferred. There then followed the rather chaotic transition to the establishment of Creative Scotland which led to the exclusion of project-funded companies like ours applying for any form of core funding for four years (five in reality). The existing Flexible Funding recipients saw their two-year awards extended for this period. In the application process for the new Regular Funding in 2014, despite the unprecedented international success of our flagship production *The Tailor of Inverness* and the politically powerful impact of our play about the contaminated blood products scandal *Factor 9* (part of which was presented to the Health Committee at the Scottish Parliament), we were turned down again.

Our latest application was turned down in January and we were not even recommended for funding.

The bottom line for me is that the level of public subsidy for the arts in Scotland and the UK is far too low, especially when it is compared to most of our northern European neighbours, where funding levels are usually around 50-100% higher. This is a political choice. Although I think attitudes to the value of the arts in society have shifted positively among the general population, particularly in Scotland, there remains a philistinism at the heart of the British establishment which views artists and our activities as, at best, a luxury and, at worst, a wasteful, even dangerous indulgence. This is not the case in Denmark, Sweden, Iceland, Norway and Germany. Nor in many East European countries which are much poorer than Scotland. Even Ukraine retains an extensive repertory theatre system with large permanent ensembles of actors in all major cities.

So Creative Scotland, who one must assume are enthusiastic supporters of the arts, are in a very difficult position when it comes to deciding who will receive its limited

funds. The system of annual budgeting which the Scottish Government has to cope with is part of a culture of short-termism which detrimentally affects all of its areas of responsibility, including the arts, and we all suffer for it.

Having said that, one can, of course, ask many questions about both the process of Regular Funding and the decisions made. There is no doubt in my mind that CS have moved the goalposts for independent theatre companies by making a decision, after applications were submitted, to shunt nearly all of us out of Regular Funding and into the “Strategic Touring Fund” which, as you’ll know, doesn’t even exist yet. This betrays a degree of callousness, incompetence even. At our meetings about the RFO process with Creative Scotland officers in 2014-15 and just last week, we were told, in so many words, that Regular Funding as it stands isn’t a good fit for a company like ours. To be sure, the elaborate criteria, Creative Scotland’s “Ambitions, Priorities & Connecting Themes”, as articulated in the RFO guidelines and in Creative Scotland’s 10-year plan for 2014-24, demand responses which suit the language, the jargon of the arts administrators who created them. We find ourselves often having to say the same things in numerous ways due to the overlapping nature of these ambitions, priorities and connecting themes. No doubt, this process has been devised with the best intentions, but it often mitigates against plain speaking and clarity. This is part of a culture which suits the arts administrators more than the artists. Perhaps they need to spend less time devising such treatises and more time understanding art.

The fact is, during my professional lifetime, which began in the early 1980s, there has arisen a stand-alone arts administration industry which is self-serving and which, in some ways, exists independently of the art without which it wouldn’t exist. In my view, our priority for art as a society should be the protection and nurturing of the best artists and the encouragement of art for and by all. But what we have achieved is the protection and nurturing of arts administrators and a population of impecunious artists with inadequate and patchy arts education for all. I happen to be quite good at writing grant applications, along with our producer, with a reasonable success rate which just about keeps Dogstar afloat. But most artists aren’t good at this. And yet it is the artists, by and large, who have the deepest understanding of art and its function. Art is not a luxury, it is a necessity. That’s why we have cave paintings. Art is the basis of civilisation.

Our dominant culture today is ruled by appearance, and Creative Scotland’s processes demand, first and foremost, an understanding of the form of those processes. Content is secondary. Too often, innovation, or novelty is prioritised, that is to say, form is prioritised. There is something of an obsession for the new, another manifestation of the short-termism I mention above. The rather confused state of the world, the blizzard of new technology and the collapse of the old orders and ideologies has left us confused and neurotic. This condition makes it difficult for many in our sector to recognise what is worthwhile and what is not, what is good art and what is not. Unfortunately, although of course this isn’t something Creative Scotland alone can fix, I think it currently simply reflects this state of affairs.

The Regular Funding process is a self-inflicted punishment for Creative Scotland. Far better to have a two-stage process where applicants are invited to submit a brief proposal, say 4-6 pages. This would enable a quick decision-making process with the best of these proposals then selected and asked to elaborate with Business

Plans, budgets etc. Organisations should be invited to make presentations about their proposals during this second stage.

The current process is also far too dependent on the initial assessment by a single officer. Full applications, and the applicant organisations, could be considered by CS, artists and maybe even arts academics and professional and amateur promoters in a more collegiate process. Our own assessment was unsatisfactory for a number of reasons set out below in a letter written following our meeting the CS last week. Our board, producer and I simply don't understand why Dogstar shouldn't be enabled to thrive in the way it could with the stability of core funding, especially when our consistently good record over so many years is considered. Maybe our 7:84-style of touring is considered old hat, maybe it's a Central Belt bias towards the Highlands, maybe we just don't mix in the right circles! But as I said, the bottom line is that Creative Scotland just doesn't have enough money to play with.

I hope you find all this helpful. Thank you to the committee for reading and for undertaking what appears to be a thorough examination.

Letter to Creative Scotland in response to Dogstar's RFO Assessment, 23rd March 2018

Dear Creative Scotland,

CS-1704-23224 Regular Funding

Thank you very much for taking the time to meet us in Inverness on March 15th. I thought it would be useful to summarise the points we made regarding our RFO assessment for the record. Please note that this is a personal response from me, endorsed by our board. In the spirit of openness, I also intend to include this letter in a submission to the CTEER Committee of the Scottish Parliament.

Our overall view is that while our assessment made a number of valid criticisms of our application and Business Plan, we took issue with a number of points and ratings and perceive the decision not to recommend Dogstar for funding to be unjustified and based on a rather subjective opinion which appears to demonstrate quite a limited knowledge of the company's work in the years up to the recent RFO process. Poorer ratings than we believe we deserve were I think due, in part, to perhaps a rather rushed process which did not enable the assessor to fully absorb our application and Business Plan, preventing the kind of cross-referencing which a better knowledge can produce. One tries to make these documents readable by avoiding too much repetition, even though often the questions, themes and ambitions demand that the same things are stated in several different ways. In short, our assessment of the assessment is that it was limited!

A recurring point was made by the assessor that "the success of The Tailor of Inverness...has not been repeated to the same extent", that the quality of our work was judged to be strong "on the success of The Tailor of Inverness". Also, "The priority given to it (The Tailor of Inverness) in the current programme is a concern". This last point was not explained. We always want our productions to extend their life, and our 3-year plan allowed for several remounts. The fact is, the number of Scottish theatre productions which have had success comparable to The Tailor of

Inverness, domestically and internationally during the last ten years can be counted on one hand. Shows like this are very rare. While all of our productions have achieved success in their own ways, with several achieving remounts, it seems that the outstanding success of *The Tailor* has been used as a stick to beat us with! It is unrealistic to expect any project to achieve the extraordinary success of *The Tailor* of Inverness. It makes no sense to us that all of our other work should be compared unfavourably with this production, especially when there is a demonstrably consistent level of delivery and sound management.

We were unhappy for our 'access to artistic and creative experiences' being rated as 'limited', considering the currently almost unrivalled geographical breadth of our work, consistently enabling access in remote communities. There was an assertion in this section that we have 'no plans for reaching new audiences' when we articulated an extensive development of our work with schools and students, and development of our work in Scandinavia and on a larger scale.

Again, our contribution to 'places and quality of life' was judged 'limited', citing 'no measures to stimulate public engagement beyond touring productions and the education programme'. While we could promise to do all manner of things to please Creative Scotland's priorities regarding this Ambition, our touring productions and associated education work are the core activity of the company and what we do best. Clearly, this is not enough for the assessor, and considering Creative Scotland's initial cutting of so many independent theatre companies, despite the promise of the 'Strategic Touring Fund' sometime in the future, it appears it's not enough for Creative Scotland either.

We are deemed 'limited' in your ambition for a 'diverse, skilled and connected leadership'. We didn't really find out why.

But we are 'connected to the world' in a 'strong' way!

Our commitment to 'equalities, diversity and inclusion' (EDI) was deemed 'limited', citing the absence of evidence that we had a copy of Creative Scotland's EDI Handbook 'or initiated collaborations with other Scottish-based EDI organisations', despite our clear statement that we were going to receive advice and developmental training from the English-based Access All Areas which has already been the go to organisation for established Scottish disability arts company Lung Ha's.

We were also surprised that our commitment to fair pay was defined as 'limited'. Dogstar has always paid actors and stage managers above Equity minimums and all of the other people who work with the company are paid at industry standards. This clearly demonstrates a strong commitment to fair pay.

The absence of a 'financial risk register' and a 'reserves target' were cited as weaknesses, along with the absence of letters of intent from financial partners. I assume that this led to the assessor judging that potential financial shortfalls would lead to lower fees being paid or a risk to staff payments. While I regret the absence of letters of intent, one only has to look at our record of financial management and fundraising from co-producing partners in Scandinavia, one of whom (Profilteatern) is one of our co-producers for the 2018-21 programme, to see that in this fluid and often uncertain field, Dogstar consistently reaches its financial targets. As it

happens, Profilteatern's financial commitment for the project planned (Let's Inherit The Earth), is now around £42,000 more than the figure stated in our application (£86,000 to £128,000). As with the anticipated income figure from the Royal Lyceum for The Testament of Gideon Mack, we should perhaps have been clearer that these figures represent the cash value of each co-producer's contribution, set construction, wages, marketing etc. and as such, they are not 'overly ambitious', but realistic. See this figure for our 2016 co-production with Mungo Park Theatre of Denmark - £116,165.

At the meeting, you explained your scoring regime, which was unclear on the assessment, with certain categories scored and others not scored.

We were not recommended for funding with the suggestion that somehow Dogstar would be unable to meet the demands of Regular Funding and that we needed to demonstrate a "more consistent contribution to sector and audience development". This perhaps reveals the problem at the heart of this process for Dogstar: Creative Scotland's perception of how one makes a "consistent contribution to sector and audience development" is quite different from ours. The very fact that we carry out the programme we propose is a fundamentally important and constructive way to make these contributions. Regularly touring theatre across Scotland, we develop the sector by giving people jobs and training, we constantly develop and attract new and established audiences and we introduce thousands of young people to theatre and our work in it. Outside of the reps, your initial set of awards in the theatre sector were more focused on support and development bodies, not on artistic producers. To us, this is a very worrying trend which disempowers artists and distances the public from our art by reducing the delivery of productions.

In addition, we should have been clearer about the fact that our proposals would have strengthened our core team. There's an irony in the salary proposed for me being criticised for being too low when it would have represented, along with the additional income I would have received for my creative work on individual projects, a very significant increase for me. I would actually have been paid for all the unpaid work I currently do, and have done for years, to keep the company working ! More fool me perhaps!

Finally, we are confronted with the following confusing and hilariously contradictory statement:

"The programme is considered slim and limited overall....the major concern is that as it will be working with new scripts (a strong point), there is no guarantee that any of the work will achieve its objectives." I am almost speechless at this. One could make such a pointless statement about any of your artistic applicants, new scripts or old ! The whole point of new art, by your own definitions never mind mine, is adventure, experimentation and engagement in the here and now with no certainty of the outcome isn't it ? One could as easily mess up a production of Hamlet or a rendition of Beethoven's 5th as one could a site-specific new work in the Queen Street Station lavvies.

This really makes us ask the questions: was this assessor really qualified to make his/her assessment of Dogstar and, more importantly, does Creative Scotland want healthy touring theatre across the land ? This was our fourth rejection for some form of core funding since 2007. During the years since then, Dogstar has presented 10 productions with around 450 performances. Each of these productions was supported by project grants from Creative Scotland/Scottish Arts Council, with some additional touring occurring without subsidy. That's an average of around 40 performances per year, a lot less than we would have achieved had we been in receipt of core funding. During this period of 11 years, we have submitted around 25 project applications, 10 of which were successful, and 4 regular funding/flexible funding applications, none of which were successful. Numerous applications and appeals to trust funds, a successful Kickstarter crowdfunding campaign and a little business fundraising can be added to this. So much time and energy has been expended on so many rejected applications, when relatively insignificant additional amounts of money guaranteed over the years would have made a huge difference to our output and impact and, dare I say it, to the quality of life of people in Scotland.

A sensible person might ask why we bother. You may well comment that we are more successful at applying than others ! But it doesn't get any easier. For a mature company like ours, with so much support on the ground from venues, promoters and audiences, it really should have by now.

With best wishes.

Yours sincerely,
Matthew Zajac
Artistic Director