

Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Relations Committee

Creative Scotland – Regular Funding 2018-21

Written submission from Rapture Theatre

Background

Rapture was in the portfolio of Creative Scotland's (CS) Regularly Funded Organisation (RFO) companies from 2015-2018. Prior to this Rapture was funded, on an intermittent basis, through Scottish Arts Council's (SAC) and CS's "Project Funding" programme. Rapture generates other income through fund raising and box office returns.

Rapture is regarded by CS and by venues and audiences as one of Scotland's leading touring theatre companies. Rapture's track record is impressive: the number of performances, per tour, being twice that of the national average and the number of attendees at Rapture shows being 300% higher than the national median average CS funded tour. The above statistics are taken from CS published data.

Rapture's touring productions are critically acclaimed and regularly attract the finest performers, designers and creative personnel. Rapture's pursuit of high standards is key to its philosophy regarding the importance of touring theatre in Scotland. We feel that the theatre experience people have in their local venue should be of high quality, inspirational and leave a lasting impact. Rapture productions are in high demand from venues and theatres in Scotland: in 2017 Rapture productions visited 23 venues across Scotland. This figure is three times the national average for CS funded touring theatre.

A recently published report revealed that only 18% of the workforce in the arts is from a working class origin. Rapture's touring activity taking in key areas with a strong working class demographic play a vital role in nurturing and inspiring future generations of arts workers from working class backgrounds.

Rapture's RFO funding level was, relative to other non-building based companies, modest. However the evidence above clearly shows the tremendous public worth of Rapture's work and Rapture's positive and productive use of public subsidy

Rapture's Relationship with Creative Scotland

Rapture's relationship with CS is positive. We feel that CS, currently, has an appreciation of our work and is generally supportive. We feel that there is much to commend about the current management and staff at CS and we recognise that they work hard and aim to proceed with integrity. We are also appreciative that CS has accepted that there have been shortcomings over 2018-2021 RFO Funding process and have publicly committed to a "root and branch" review.

The Application Form and Guidelines for RFO Funding 2018-2021

The process, in terms of understanding the published guidelines for RFO Funding, was straightforward although time consuming. The RFO Funding application consisted of the creation of a business plan and completion of application form and proposed budget. The completion of our RFO Funding application took our small team over three months to complete. However we understood its importance, given the 3-year financial support/tenure offered.

The Length of RFO Funding Agreements and Tenure

We would recommend lengthening the financial tenure of the RFO Funding agreement from 3 years to 5. Currently a company will only be 18 months into its 3-year RFO Funding agreement, when it has to begin planning its next RFO Funding application. If the RFO Funding agreements were extended to 5 years, it would allow a company to properly initiate and review its current business model, prior to submitting its next RFO Funding Application/ Business Plan.

We would additionally suggest, for newer companies, the creation of a similar model with a shorter tenure of 2-3 years. This would allow CS the option of nurturing new companies and provide CS with the flexibility to respond quickly to identified needs and developments within the sector.

We would recommend that both models have strict monitoring systems, put in place by CS. This would allow CS to highlight any issues during a company's current RFO Funding tenure and in advance of any future RFO Funding application process. 5 year funding agreements could also have "break clauses" as part of its conditions, which would allow CS scope to take immediate action should a company fail in its governance.

We would also recommend the continuation of the Open Project Funding Stream and the Targeted and Strategic Funding Programmes.

Timescales

We felt that the time scale, from the deadline for RFO applications to be submitted to CS on 31st March 2017 to announcements of decisions on 24th January 2018, was far too long. CS communicated, on a regular basis, the reasons for the delay. However, this delay created a great deal of uncertainty and insecurity in our organisation and we believe the sector at large. We would recommend structuring future funding process in such a way to allow a shorter time between application deadline and final decision.

Creative Scotland's "Changing of Goal Posts" during the application process

The main issue of concern for Rapture, in this process, was the introduction of the new CS Touring Fund and its impact on our RFO Funding application.

Rapture's RFO application was considered as "strong" throughout by the CS assessor and Rapture was actually recommended for an increase in its funding of some 20%. Our RFO Funding application was rejected only when CS announced its intention, according to the email we received with our rejection letter on 24th January

2017, to “**fund touring theatre differently in the future**” through the creation of a new Touring Fund. This intention had not been communicated to us previously, at any stage of the process.

CS has informed us that the new Touring Fund is a response to the recently published CS Review of Touring Theatre and Dance in Scotland, which recommends the creation of a separate Touring Fund.

While this is indeed the case, the CS review does **not** recommend the Touring Fund as an alternative to long term RFO Funding. Indeed the CS review upholds “**long term funding support for touring theatre companies**” as a key recommendation; it does not recommend the removal of touring theatre companies from long term RFO funding. There is also, currently, no guarantee from CS that long term funding will be available through the new Touring Fund, a move which would make planning ahead, negotiating with venues and audience development almost impossible, despite the CS review advising the introduction of a Touring Fund to “**allow for better forward planning**”.

To conclude, we feel that there was, with the introduction and impact of the Touring Fund, a significant “change in the goal posts “ from CS and this change undermined the RFO Funding application process and negated the extensive work we carried out in submitting our application.

Our recommendation would be for CS to honour and maintain the parameters of funding application guidelines and not to introduce, after the funding deadline, additional, different and contrary criteria.

The Budget for the Creative Scotland Touring Fund

We welcome the introduction, on its own terms, of the Touring Fund, as we understand its intention is to raise the profile of touring in Scotland, a policy we support. We do, however, have a concern about the proposed £2m per annum budget for this fund.

In 2015-2016, CS funded approximately £ 1.7 million worth of touring theatre and dance through its Open Project Funding programme. However, this was enhanced in 2015-2016 by an additional £1.4 million (approximately) of resource allocated to touring theatre through the seven RFO companies: *Visible Fictions, Catherine Wheels, Fire Exit, Mischief Le Bas, Birds of Paradise, Lung Ha and Rapture*. These two figures of £1.7million (from the Open Fund) and £1.4 million (from RFO funding) provided a gross allocation total of £3.1 million. Consequently, the original RFO Funding decisions announced by CS on 24th January actually constituted a reduction in funding for touring theatre, not an increase. What the new proposals meant in effect was that the new Touring Fund would actually result in the £3.1 million allocated in an average year being reduced to £2 million. The figure of £2 million as a budget for the Touring Fund, which was due to replace both the allocation from Open Project Funding and RFO Funding was therefore inadequate from its inception as it actually constituted a significant reduction in the budget for touring theatre, in real terms, of approximately £1.1 million.

The decision made subsequently to reverse the original RFO Funding decisions, for four of the above RFO companies, meant that some money for touring would then be made available within RFO funding. However, even with this change, there is still a reduction in gross allocation, for touring theatre, within the Touring Fund of £300k as the allocation for touring has been reduced from £2.3 million to £2 million, not an increase, as has been suggested.

Furthermore, the above figures do not include the touring dance companies who lost their RFO status and which are also eligible to benefit from the Touring Fund. Including these companies into the total increases the figure of £2.3 million, necessary to maintain current levels of funding, to closer to £3 million, meaning there is now a reduction of at least £1 million on average per annum.

We would suggest, therefore, that the Open Project Fund programme must continue to admit applications for touring theatre and dance projects after the Touring Fund comes on line. This will, potentially, enable the current level of financial resource for touring theatre and dance to remain constant

Reversal of some RFO Funding decisions but not others

We have serious concerns regarding the process behind the CS reversal of the RFO Funding decisions for some of the companies affected by cuts after the CS Emergency Board meeting on 2nd February 2018.

Based on the circumstantial evidence available we have no option but to conclude that the decision to reverse these RFO Funding decisions was brought about by external pressure, negative press coverage and a virulent social media campaign, rather than through CS engaging in a considered internal process, which adhered to a robust strategy.

We base this on the following:

- The press appears to have been informed of the “reversals” **before** some of the companies involved suggesting that communication with the press and press relations were prioritised over the companies. (Typically, RFO Funding decisions on the 24th January were communicated to companies 24 hours **ahead** of publication in the press.)
- We struggle to find it credible, when the initial RFO Funding decision-making process took 9 months to conclude, that an equally considered decision making process could take place in fewer than 9 days.
- CS introduced two new criteria into the process that informed the “reversals”: “theatre for children and young people” and “companies led by and working with people with disabilities”. The two new criteria were not specifically point scored as part of the original RFO Funding assessment process. Therefore CS’s assertion at the recent Parliamentary Hearing, that the companies chosen to receive the “reversals” was based on point scoring from the original RFO Funding assessment process, is not persuasive. Indeed, had such criteria been in place, we would have highlighted the fact that our own company played to approximately 5,000 young people last year, (additionally

providing workshops, discussion forums and feedback and information sessions), making us eligible to meet such criteria had they been in place at the time of our submission.

- We also note that the two new criteria dovetail almost perfectly with the work that the specialties of the companies, which received the “reversals”. It is hard to accept, therefore, that such criteria were not created retrospectively and were, in fact created to justify a premeditated decision to reverse decisions made on specific funding applications.
- The Artistic Directors of Rapture spoke with key CS staff members, on the same day as the CS Emergency Board meeting, and were assured that, as far as the staff was concerned, no “reversals” would be taking place. It seems, therefore, that decisions were made on that day at board level, and, given the lack of staff involvement, we struggle to believe that the process behind the “reversals” was thorough, considered or reflective as has been suggested.

While it is clear that the CS Board had created a rationale for making “reversals” to its original decision, the timing and the process behind those decisions could not in any way be considered either fair, balanced or robust. We would recommend that CS decisions must reflect the importance of fairness in funding decisions with assessment procedures that are consistently transparent, considered, open, reflective and robust

Moreover, the lack of effective consultation and the resultant CS response which seemed to be a result of pressure rather than strategy, weakens the credibility that CS was acting with fairness and integrity towards all companies.

The importance of Regular Funding to our organisation

Rapture was new to the RFO Funding portfolio in 2015-2018 and therefore has relevant recent experience of the benefits of RFO Funding.

Moving from one-off project funding, which is unreliable and sporadic, to 3 year guaranteed funding allows a company to plan and prioritise strategically, enabling a company to develop, not only artistically, but also in terms of its audience development and business model.

Rapture’s audience development strategy was nurtured as a result of the RFO Funding support. It allowed us to focus on engaging with our audience over a sustained period of time. We were able to advertise one show on the back of the previous one and as a result build the audiences for our work over the period of 2015-2018. In 2014 our touring work played to just over 4000 people, whereas in 2017 Rapture productions played to over 15,000 audience members.

The demand for our education work increased over the period 2015-2018. In 2015 approximately 1,500 school children attended and took part in our education work for our production of “All My Sons”. In 2017 our education work attracted over 5000 school pupils. Rapture also provided residential training and workshops for community theatre participants.

RFO Funding was also pivotal in the removal of financial barriers to attendance of Rapture shows. RFO Funding helped subsidise the cost of entrance fees at local venues, allowing those on low incomes access to quality theatre in their local community. RFO Funding also enabled the provision of free tickets to school children and audience members in disadvantaged areas. Rapture believes that access to culture should not be a “luxury item” and public subsidy has played a key role in Rapture enabling that access.

The financial platform that RFO Funding provides allows companies more time and opportunity to plan their artistic development and to build on that planning over a period of three years. RFO Funding provides artists and companies with thinking time, which enables a greater level of creativity, subsequently enriching the quality of the work and the experience of the audience seeing the work. The appreciation of Rapture’s work over the period 2015-2018 has clearly demonstrated that development with a significant, measurable increase in critical and public reaction to our work.

Rapture produced 5 touring productions over the 2015-2018 period and appointed 70% of personnel to key artistic and performance roles within the company for the first time. This provided new opportunities for artistic development for freelance artists and performers.

Rapture’s Education programme in 2017 provided over 5000 school pupils with the opportunity to develop their understanding of each Rapture play they saw and its various themes. Rapture’s education work is well regarded within the Education Sector.

Over the same period Rapture offered a diverse programme of plays and productions that combined new “takes” on traditional masterpieces, Scottish premieres of modern classics and plays that mixed comedy with topical issues.

RFO Funding also allows a company to develop its business model. From 2015-2018 Rapture developed its Marketing, EDI, Environment, Digital and Fund Raising Strategies. Inclusion in the CS RFO Portfolio also allows companies to attract other funders and sponsorship as CS long-term support is regarded by other potential funders as a strong recommendation for the strength of a company’s governance.

One off “Project Funding” would not have allowed any of the above artistic, audience and financial development to take place. The security of tenure that long term funding brings enabled substantial development in these three key developmental areas

Long term funding for touring theatre is therefore essential to make touring theatre sustainable and, as a company, we cannot stress its importance enough. We have been reassured by CS that long term funding for touring theatre will continue within the new Touring Fund.

The Challenges facing Creative Scotland

Rapture acknowledges that CS has an unenviable task in its allocation of funding and provision of financial support for the Arts.

To wrap up

From 2015-2018 Rapture Theatre enjoyed the support of CS as part of the RFO Funding Portfolio and during that time we found the organisation to be generally helpful and encouraging. We also recognise that shortcomings over the last RFO process are being addressed and that CS is committed to positive change. We also would stress that we feel that an organisation like CS should exist at arms length from the Government, showing leadership in the development of the cultural landscape and implementing funding programmes that are transparent, reflective, thorough, robust and benefit the public. We would reiterate that long term funding was central in the tremendous artistic and audience achievements of Rapture over the last three years and we hope to secure long term funding from CS in the future to continue our work and build on our achievements. Finally we feel it is important to stress that public subsidy is essential to ensure that Scottish people throughout the country and from all walks of life have access to theatre (Rapture's track record in attracting audiences from diverse backgrounds was highlighted in a recent report by *Culture Republic*) . Without such subsidy we would be compelled to raise our ticket prices, excluding those from low income and working class backgrounds whom the recent Government report highlighted as currently losing out on access to culture.