

Far too often the arts world has to focus on the short term and the immediate, which means there is always a danger that we will not get our heads out of the bunker (or the sand, for that matter) long enough to take a good look ahead. The pace of change is accelerating all the time, and by 2020 the world will be a very different place. So how should the arts sector be preparing for what lies ahead? And, more importantly, how can it start to drive change, rather than just react to it?

To answer these questions, arts consultant **Robert Sanderson** has asked several leading cultural commentators to share their views and opinions on the future facing today's arts professionals. This week, **Jodi Myers** reflects on the issues that will be shaping the artistic programme in 14 years from now.

Future programming



Jodi Myers
Consultant

How will what is on the stages of our theatres – by this I mean buildings, both producing and presenting – be different by 2020? Most of us can't think beyond 2012, but given the pace at which technology and society are developing, we should be preparing to engage with some significant changes in the next 14 years.

Come together

At the risk of stating the obvious, theatre offers something you can't get from an iPod, surfing the Internet or watching one of the thousands of channels that will have sprung up by 2020 (and which you will be able to watch at your leisure, not at the time dictated by TV schedulers or dependent on you remembering to set the DVD recorder). If people can watch whatever they want whenever they want, getting them to come to a one-off event at a specific time and place is going to be a challenge.

All this individually tailored watching has much in common with reading – it can be enormously satisfying and stimulating, but it is essentially solitary, and human beings have always been inclined to group activity, coming together in large numbers for celebration or solace. The experience of laughing collectively or being touched by tragedy at a live performance has an intensity and enjoyment that watching on your own, or with a couple of other people, just can't compete with. And I don't mean the screen-in-the-park relaying a live show – that's just TV for a big group. You can't feel the subtleties of the performance and you don't have to concentrate.

Accentuate the positive

We have to find new ways of communicating the excitement of the live event. A positive sense of

anticipation should precede the event, starting long before people enter the theatre – when they get the e-flyer, promotional video, podcast or text message, and book the tickets, for example. The problem is that, while we may not like it, we have to acknowledge that many people are largely risk averse (by no means all – thank goodness some people positively seek the thrill of the new).

But how many times do we promise so much and fail to deliver? On a good day there is nothing quite like a live event – a play, opera, dance/music collaboration, symphony concert – but as an industry we have to recognise that

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good days can be fairly few and far between. Of course, there are always going to be shows that don't succeed in achieving all they set out to do, and they are an essential part of a creative industry that is constantly remaking and stretching itself. On the whole audiences are pretty understanding of brave failures. However, if we want a vibrant theatre scene in 2020, we will need to increase the ratio of events with 'wow-factor' to also-rans.

Beyond the building

We could start by looking at where some inspirational live events are currently taking place, and I'd have to say many of them are not in conventional theatres. Recently I've experienced more exciting theatre in disused swimming pools, gardens and car parks than I have on stages, but conventional venues are able to support more artists and reach more people than unconventional spaces, so collaboration between theatres and those working in non-traditional ways should be a win-win situation. We need to look at who is making that

thrilling work in attics and basements – as well as in small venues and for particular communities – and welcome them into our buildings. However, we will have to be prepared to value the way these artists make work, and not expect them to adapt to the large institution.

Many conventional venues could certainly benefit from being more spatially flexible in order to host this work, but this is often impractical or very expensive. So, while resources are needed for the development of flexible spaces, conventional theatres may have a role in producing and promoting work in unconventional spaces.

Blurring the boundaries

Collaborations across the arts are bound to increase as artists in one field chose to make work with artists from other disciplines – and those running theatres need to facilitate and resource this approach if they are going to realise the most exciting programmes and appeal to the widest audiences. But if we really want to diversify our audiences we are going to have to do much more to reflect culture in a wider sense.

The glorious spontaneity achieved by many contemporary music gigs is worth thinking about. I don't mean people filming the event on their mobiles or wandering in and out throughout the performance, but, where appropriate, I can see drinks being taken into the auditorium or the theatrical equivalent of an audience dancing in response to what they are experiencing. I stress 'where appropriate' as what may work for a contemporary multi-media piece will not necessarily work for Beckett or Balanchine.

By 2020 we should be offering

performance times that reflect the changing nature of a society rapidly moving away from the Monday to Friday, 9 to 5 scenario. UK theatre is still productivity-driven, but by 2020 I anticipate there will be more dark nights, both to prepare complex shows and because there won't be enough good, affordable work out there. That will put even more pressure on foyers to instil excitement when there is nothing on in the auditorium.

Investing in producers

Finally, we've seen presenting venues become commissioners and co-producers in order to influence their programmes and offer audiences quality and choice, but we also need a new generation of producers. These creative entrepreneurs will be individuals with extraordinary vision, imagination, commitment and judgement (both artistic and financial), as well as a talent for fundraising and advocacy. They will work both within arts organisations and independently, and they will be key to developing artists and making and sustaining exciting work that engages diverse audiences who are curious and enthusiastic. These producers will need supporting, nurturing and investing in, as they will be essential to the health of the programmes of our theatres over the next four, fourteen and forty years. ■

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