



ARTISTIC EVALUATION

This evaluation is intended to represent an objective aesthetic judgement. **Specialist advisors and officers should avoid making judgements based on their own personal tastes and preferences wherever possible.**

Artist/Company: Vanishing Point Theatre Company

Venue: Lyceum Theatre Edinburgh

Title of Event: The Beggar's Opera

Type of Event: Theatre

Date of Visit: 3rd October 2009

Overall Rating:

(Please rate the event overall, taking into account your ratings for each section. Please state the key reasons for your overall ratings – i.e. the particular strengths and weaknesses. If the management of the event affects the overall enjoyment of the event, please comment, but the overall rating should be based on the artistic merit of the event.)

Satisfactory

An energetic, ambitious and contemporary co-production of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* by Vanishing Point Theatre with the Royal Lyceum Theatre and Belgrade Theatre, Coventry in association with the Tramway, Glasgow. Despite a strong, vibrant ensemble cast and creative team directed by Matthew Lenton, text by Nicola McCartney, music by *A Band Called Quinn* and design by Kai Fischer this bold 100 minute production was fundamentally flawed. The primary misunderstanding existed between the music and text - by focusing too much on a bold theatricality the musical narrative of the ballad opera disappeared. Without a musical narrative some of the essential illumination of the action and characters was lost. The production became a jumble of "text and song" which kept the stage action moving in a competitive way between "the theatre" and "the song" and therefore not allowing a more meaningful narrative to emerge. As a result the overall effect was visually bold and entertaining but insubstantial. The production did not offer much new insight or satirical comment on its chosen subject matter.

Name: Sally Hobson
Specialist Advisor

Date: 15th Oct 09

This report has been commissioned by the Scottish Arts Council to evaluate the artistic quality of the production named above. It has been prepared by either a specialist Advisor, or an officer of the Scottish Arts Council, as indicated on the form. The report will be circulated to the organisation which produced the work and to the management of the venue, if the venue is core funded by the Scottish Arts Council.

The report will form evidence for the Artistic Leadership and Public Engagement sections of the Quality Framework and be taken into account in assessing the work of the producing company in relation to future applications for funding to the Scottish Arts Council. It may also be used by the Joint Board to report on the overall performance of its funded organisations.

Evaluators should enter their rating under each section, explaining briefly their reason for the rating with reference to their comments under each section. Ratings should be given in accordance with the following:

Very poor- standard falls well below what is acceptable.

Poor - not well conceived and executed

Satisfactory

Good - well conceived and executed

Very Good – well conceived and executed to a very good standard

Excellent – Inspiring and executed to an exceptionally high standard

1. Artistic Assessment

Please evaluate the artistic quality of the event, with particular reference to the strengths and weaknesses of the following:

Artform	Criteria	Rating	Comments and key reasons for rating
All	<p>Vision and imagination of work</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality of ideas • if you have seen other work of this artist(s)/ company before, please comment on any relevant comparisons 	Good	<p>It is clear that there was an ambitious vision behind this production of a “version” of John Gay’s <i>The Beggars Opera</i>. Film, multimedia, live music and theatre performers was used to create a “re-imagining of the rich, exuberant rollercoaster ride of The Beggar’s Opera” (programme notes) co-produced by several main house producers and directed by Vanishing Point Artistic Director Matthew Lenton. Drawing on ideas from a cyber-space idea of the future, music and song from <i>A Band called Quinn</i> and comic-book animations by Finn Ross that explored (in a two world scenario) the world above the whole event was staged within a set by Kai Fischer. A script by Vanishing Point dramaturg Nicola McCartney and costumes by Eve Lambert, plus a strong and highly experienced cast completed the creative line-up.</p> <p>The final result was disappointing given the high calibre of creative personnel and the financial support. In ballad opera the role of the musical narrative flows through both the ballad and theatre, serving to reveal the subtler aspects of plot and character. Divorced from the tradition of ballad opera and the heritage of this form the production became a vehicle for theatrical boldness without sub-text or musical insight.</p> <p>It was noisy and hard to follow – sound balance was replaced with loudness. The script lacked subtly and irony, removing any lyricism and satire and replacing it with a street vernacular. The actors were adrift shouting through gas masks and were required to use amplification to engage with the “sound world” of the production Their skill was replaced by technology, loudness and brash entertainment. All the elements and creative voices had to compete with each to be heard. There was little directorial integration of the production’s large forces or elements. The final scene was quite absurd, not in the theatrical sense, but almost as a desperate improvised attempt to finish – not a satisfying resolution to the action.</p>
All (if relevant)	<p>Curatorial/ programming vision/ selection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does it fit within the artistic vision of the organisation? • If the event is part of a Festival, please say how it contributes to the overall programme. 	Excellent	<p>An excellent choice for all producing parties. Excellent choice of company, partners and venues. It is not clear from the programme which partner drove the production or how the creative control over the commission was maintained, if it was.</p>

Artform	Criteria	Rating	Comments and key reasons for rating
All	<p>Success of event against stated aims of project and/or performance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How does it relate to information contained in the programme, the website or other printed material? How well did it communicate the artistic themes? How did the event originate eg from the exhibiting/ producing organisation, from the artist or from commission? <p>Education events – see ¹below for definition</p>	Satisfactory	<p>The production was clunky and unsatisfying. It was clear that this was a re-imagining and an attempt to push Gay's work into the future in both content and form, but at the expense of its foundations.</p> <p><i>A Band called Quinn</i> did not produce music for a ballad opera, but a series of ballad-songs that added nothing to the production of theatre. It all felt a bit disconnected.</p>
All	<p>Performers/tutors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is the expertise of the performers? Where performers are amateur, please reflect this in your comments. How successfully did the performer(s) communicate with and engage the audience? In your view, was an artist as a tutor key to the success of the workshop? 	Good	<p>A strong and experienced cast struggled with gas masks and amplification, both which of unhelpfully distorted their acting abilities. The text that lacked rhythm, pace, theatricality and satire gave them nothing to work with regarding their characters – they were two dimensional. The songs were over-performed. Despite all this the actors looked like they were having fun. Sandy Greison as MacHeath was sexually charismatic and very popular with the audience.</p>
Dance, Theatre	<p>Choreography/Use of choreography</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Was the work original? How was the space used? How many dancers were there and how were they used? How long was the piece? 	Satisfactory	<p>The stage made any movement quite difficult – the sand pit appeared quite hard to walk through but the actors engaged in choreographed tumbles and fights which seemed to work.</p>
Theatre	<p>Script</p> <p>Please comment on this for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> new work second productions classics where the original has been substantially changed 	Satisfactory	<p>The plot moved along in a brisk manner, but characterisations were textually limited. The brashness of the characters seemed to come from actor interpretations rather than a lead from the narrative. Many of the characters talked in a basic local street vernacular. The vocabulary was basic and lacked any of the humour, depth or lyricism of Gay's <i>The Beggar's Opera</i>.</p>
Theatre, Dance	<p>Direction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Was the work well interpreted? Was it well cast? Was it well presented? 	Satisfactory	<p>The direction failed to pull the strong creative elements together, it remained a collection of powerful forces rather than a coherent and cogent theatrical production. A bold and brave attempt.</p>
Dance, Theatre	<p>Use of music</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Did the music/ sound used enhance the production? Is it live or recorded? 	Poor	<p>The music failed to deliver for the production, being pedestrian and badly engineered. <i>A Band called Quinn</i> is considered a strong creative unit from reading the programme notes "<i>Might Quinn be Glasgow's greatest band?</i>", but it lacked the song writing skills/experience to deliver a contemporary ballad opera.</p>

¹ Education is a bridge between artform excellence and increased access and participation, and it is people centred. Providing opportunities for learning and progressing in an artform or using an artform to address other, non-artistic, outcomes are equally valid; in either case a high quality strategic approach is required in order to benefit the participants and the organisation. Delivery can be through workshops, post/pre-show discussions, outreach work, etc aimed at any age group.

Artform	Criteria	Rating	Comments and key reasons for rating
Dance, Theatre	Design <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How were the costumes, set and lighting? • How did it work in the venue? • Was it technically proficient? (eg lighting and sound cues, etc). 	Excellent	A very strong component of the production that created visually stunning effects. Costumes especially were excellent and captured the essence of what the production was striving to deliver – funky, cool, urban and futuristic. This was by far the most coherent and successful of all the elements.
All	Quality of Public Engagement Performing Arts/Education - <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Was the production/event targeted at a particular audience? • Was the production /event appropriate for the audience/participants? • Were you/ engaged/inspired? • Did the audience/ participants appear to be engaged/inspired? • What was their response? • Approximately how many people were there? • Did there appear to be a broad mix of people – age, cultural diversity or disabled? • Are BSL/captioned/audio described performances offered as part of the run/tour/? If so how many? • What activities or supporting materials were available to enhance the experience of the event eg workshops, artist's talks, discussion groups programmes, on line info? • Were these targeted at specific age groups? Education/learning events: In addition, please provide comments on the following (if appropriate): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How was it taught/led eg one to one, group, child centred? • What was the composition of the participant group – age range, gender mix? • Is it strategically linked to the curriculum or national policy areas e.g. Early Years, Community Learning & Development • What learning/skills development took place? • What was the quality of the art produced by the participants? • Did the workshop tutor have a teaching plan for the session and/or project? • How were participants recruited? • Did participants' views and choices help inform the structure and content of the project? 	Satisfactory	On Saturday 3 rd October the Lyceum appeared about one third full. There were several pockets of active engagement from some people in the stalls. The people sitting in the circle were subdued in reaction. A few people left. A Curtain Raiser event was held on 17 th September. Research reveals that the production was popular with young people and some teachers who engaged with the ideas, the songs, MacHeath and the visuals leitmotifs of the futuristic setting.

2. Management of Event

Please evaluate the way the event was presented/organised by the organisation and the venue, with reference to the checklist below, including additional comments/observations. Please try to view the venue and the services, and interpretative material as though you had never visited it before eg if you did not know the venue's location, how easy would it be to find your way there, and to find your way around once you had arrived?

Criteria	Comment												
Location and suitability of the venue for the event <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is it easy to find? Is it on a main transport route? Are the spaces clean? What were the sight lines like? How big was it? 	<p>A good venue. Strong FOH and excellent staff. Public areas very clean and well presented to a very high standard.</p> <p>Sightlines in Dress Circle can be a problem.</p>												
Information/ interpretive material at venue— <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are there programmes, posters and displays about the event? Is there information on the venue's website? 	<p>Information about the creative process and notes about John Gay.</p>												
Publicity/ pre-publicity – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What leaflets, posters, websites, did you see the event listed in? What publicity materials are produced? Is it easy to understand? Where can you get the information? Is there Acknowledgement of Scottish Arts Council Funding ²? <p>Please be alert to the publicity available prior to your visit to the event and comment on the company/organisation's website.</p>	<p>Good information on website. Poster in several locations throughout Edinburgh and within the theatre.</p> <p>SAC acknowledged extensively.</p>												
Ease of booking and payment	<p>Very good.</p>												
Timing of the event <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Did the start and finish time seem to be appropriate for the audience? Was the length appropriate? 	<p>Good.</p>												
Signage and signposting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is the entrance clearly marked? Is there clear internal directional signage? Is there Braille signage or signage for audio loops? 	<p>Very clear</p>												
Access and provision for disabled people <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Please insert yes/no in the boxes to reflect what you notice about the venue/event <p>Please add in any additional comments below the table</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How many BSL/captioned/audio 	<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th></th> <th>Yes/No</th> <th></th> <th>Yes/No</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>BSL interpretation</td> <td>?</td> <td>Audio description of performances</td> <td>?</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Captioning</td> <td>No</td> <td>Lift/ramp</td> <td>yes</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>		Yes/No		Yes/No	BSL interpretation	?	Audio description of performances	?	Captioning	No	Lift/ramp	yes
	Yes/No		Yes/No										
BSL interpretation	?	Audio description of performances	?										
Captioning	No	Lift/ramp	yes										

² In press releases, at launches, on all published materials (including leaflets, brochures, programmes, posters, company's website, notices display, exhibition materials, websites and advertising, recordings, publications, video, broadcasts, computer programmes etc.) Where the event is publicised in the programme brochure of another organisation (eg venue, gallery, etc) then SAC acknowledgement should appear against the particular programme entry for this event.

Criteria	Comment			
described performances are there at the venue?	Accessible toilets	Yes	Accessible marketing materials eg website or alternative formats eg large print, Plain English	yes
Customer service <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How was the quality and efficiency of staff (e.g. box office, front of house, bar and/or catering) • If possible, comment on how responsive they were to the needs of disabled customers? 	Good quality service			

3. Organisation's Comments (optional)

This is the organisation's opportunity to respond to points raised within this assessment. Please do not feel obliged to fill this section in. In the spirit of the Quality Framework, we would ask that any comments are self-evaluating, providing an insight as to why, if there is, a major disagreement of response between the organisation and the evaluation, in a constructive way.

This will not alter the rating given by the assessment, but will allow the organisation the opportunity to give their opinion/feedback. The Scottish Arts Council reserves the right to edit comments if they are deemed to be libellous or defamatory.

As the Scottish Arts Council implements the Quality Framework internally, we intend to publish artistic evaluations on organisations that we support regularly on our website. The final artistic evaluation, including the organisation's response will be published on a quarterly basis on our website.

Please keep your response to max 500 words. If we do not hear from you in 15 days, we will assume that you do not want to respond.