

Royal Exchange Theatre

Strategic Plan

2023-2028





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About the Theatre

The Royal Exchange Theatre sits at the heart of Manchester's culturally vibrant city centre. We are the North West's largest and only full-time, text based producing theatre - commissioning, creating, and developing original and ambitious theatre in our unique in-the-round space, throughout our building, across the city and beyond. Alongside our work on-stage we create award-winning community engagement programmes that are delivered across the region.

We believe that by experiencing live theatre together or by taking part in our creative programmes, we can provide transformative points of connection and exchange, reminding us all who we are and what we share with the people around us. Being an accessible, world-class theatre and a thriving civic space is central to our vision.

To achieve this, collaboration and partnership is vital, and this is why audiences and communities are at the heart of everything we do. They have inspired us since 1976 and our distinctly democratic space, where actors and audiences enter and exit through the same doors, invites everyone to engage in big ideas, imagine what the future could hold and to lose themselves in powerful storytelling.

Significant Recent Projects

In June 2021 we reopened the Exchange with **BLOODY ELLE: A GIG MUSICAL** - this newly commissioned play, written by Lauryn Redding and directed by Bryony Shanahan, is an uplifting, one-woman show about falling in love for the first time. With rave reviews from critics and the public it has gone on to wow audiences across the country from the Festival Fringe to a West End run in London.

BETTY: A SORT OF MUSICAL was a newly commissioned musical from the creative team of Sarah Frankcom, Maxine Peake and Seiriol Davies. This sold-out Christmas production celebrated the life of Betty Boothroyd and cemented our position to develop new work rooted in the north.

A pioneering community project for Greater Manchester **LOCAL EXCHANGE** sees the theatre take up creative residency across the region. Developing long-lasting and meaningful relationships with communities and delivering a unique, co-created arts festival in our pop-up theatre the Den. We are currently working across five Greater Manchester boroughs, with over 80 local Ambassadors.

untitled f*ck m*ss s**gon play by kimber lee won the International Award at the Bruntwood Prize for Playwriting 2019. This powerful production received its world premiere here in June 2023 directed by Roy Alexander Weise. An important new play that wriggles inside of and explodes lifetimes of repeating Asian stereotypes. Nominated for both a UK Theatre Award and an Evening Standard award the play enjoyed a smash-hit run at the Young Vic in London.

The Bruntwood Prize for Playwriting is our partnership with property company Bruntwood and is Europe's largest playwriting prize. Over almost 20 years it has helped to uncover incredible talent and deliver a wealth of exceptional plays which have been seen across the globe. **BULLRING TECHNO MAKEOUT JAMZ** winner of the 2022 prize by Nathan Queeley-Dennis has had smash-hit runs in both Edinburgh and London and we are delighted to be producing the 2019 winner **SHED: EXPLODED VIEW** by Phoebe Eclair-Powell.





Current context

The Royal Exchange building and theatre space are distinct in both scale and structure. Our spaceship-like theatre sits amidst a vast great hall which is uniquely our front of house and backstage. This unparalleled playing space requires unique content created and made by the theatre's skilled artists and craft teams.

As our theatre has such an unusual structure, co-producing has been uncommon, but in 2023 we saw an unprecedented number of co-producing partners. We will use this year to understand and unlock the potential of working in this way.

We are beginning from a point of significant change. This plan has been written in a complex post-pandemic landscape, a cost-of-living crisis, economic instability, climate change and uncertainty around audience behaviour. Reflections on our own company are necessary and building back an even stronger foundation of ticket revenue is core to the theatre's sustainability.

Recovery from the pandemic is ongoing. With a significantly smaller team than before, work on our organisation, its structure and capacity are vital. We took time throughout the pandemic to understand our audiences better, investing in getting to know their values, motivations and passion for culture. This in turn helps us to shape an ambitious programme, renewing our commitment to showcasing the best live theatre for our audiences across our region and the development of innovative participatory work. We invite our audiences to fall back in love with the Exchange and embrace the positive impact of a rich cultural relationship.

Vision and Mission

Vision

We change the way people see theatre, each other and the world around them.

Mission

We connect, and art is our vehicle.

By experiencing theatre together or taking-part, we provide transformative points of connection and exchange, reminding us who we are and what we share with the people around us. Our role in bringing joy and entertainment to people is critical.

Being an accessible world-class theatre and a thriving civic space is central to our vision. To achieve this, collaboration and partnership is paramount. We will shine a light on what is good in our society and will share stories that question what a better future looks like for all of us.



Strategic Aims

During our extensive business planning process, which included wide consultation with staff, stakeholders and audiences, a set of six key Aims emerged.

1. Exceptional theatre, in a space like no other.

Our reputation for creating world-class theatre stands us apart from other theatres. Our focus is on striving for the best theatrical experiences, made by the best creatives. We have a strong track record for commissioning and producing new work, reimagining classics and breathing new life into established musicals. This approach combined with our unique performance spaces - the module and our mobile space, the Den provides the RET with a truly original offering. We will use established, audience centred tools to understand the impact of our work.

2. We are a sustainable charity that navigates change, balancing ambition and financial responsibility.

Learning from recent history, we need to be an organisation that embraces a changing landscape. Our future relies on our ability to shift and pivot. This responsibility supports our desire to be ambitious. With a healthy, sustainable approach to managing our core business, the opportunity to make bold and ambitious plans becomes greater.

3. We keep our audiences close and open doors for new people to join in.

Our audience analysis demonstrated the importance of maintaining strong connections with loyal audiences, whilst always finding ways to provide new points of connection for new people. We have an important role to play in developing a new audience and making theatre accessible to a wider community of people. By balancing our approach to existing and new audiences, we can build upon the solid foundations of our business whilst ensuring that we are relevant to new theatre goers and makers.

4. We understand our local communities and our civic role, to ensure we have the greatest impact for the people and partners across Greater Manchester.

Our future success is reliant on our ability to be connected and responsive to the needs of people in Greater Manchester. This stretches far beyond a programme of produced work and requires deep and meaningful connections with communities in their own neighbourhoods.

5. We are an organisation that people want to work for and with.

Our existing and future workforce are the single most important asset to our business. Changes in the world have shifted people's expectations of a healthy and vibrant workplace. If we are to be truly representative of Greater Manchester we need to embed equity and inclusion in our recruitment processes and organisation culture, supported by the resource to develop our workforce investing in personal growth and skills development within our organisation.

6. Our environmental responsibility and impact are a consideration in all our decision making.

Our responsibility for carbon reduction is important to our staff, partners, audiences and participants. It has a tangible impact on the operation of our business. We need to take a bespoke approach to environmental responsibility at the RET, one that reflects the organisation and the assets that we hold. We have an important role to play in communicating our actions and advocating for change at a local and national level. Our work in this area is not simply an energy reduction exercise, it is a consideration in our artistic programming, communications and production processes.



The story of the next five years...

With the context of our existing position and in the pursuit of our Strategic Aims, the story of the next five years emerged.

Year 1 – Action Learning **Taking stock.**

We'll deliver our ambitious audience re-engagement plans and commit to growing staff capacity in priority areas. We will set in place creative, collaborative and imaginative artistic planning that not only meets our business needs but transforms the narrative around the Royal Exchange. This will be the first year of a new, organisation-wide Evaluation Framework, which sets out clear metrics for key areas of work and enables us to plot our journey against our objectives.

Year 2 – Implement **Realise our learning.**

We will instigate plans for growth and implement the learning from 2023/24. We'll build on our audience re-engagement, begin growing our staffing capacity, set out longer-term artistic plans, progress our 'big ideas' and become more financially sustainable due to increased income. We will see a step change in terms of scale of work produced.

Year 3 – Grow

This is a year of growth.

We will continue with a strong focus on meeting our audiences' values, motivations and passions. This year we will further grow our organisational capacity in the theatre making crafts and increase the scale of output. Our target is to achieve Box Office income at a level only seen pre-pandemic. We will kick-off plans for 2026, a celebration of our 50th anniversary, with ambitious artistic plans of scale and impact.

Year 4 – Celebrate

Celebrating with the world.

The 50th anniversary of the Royal Exchange Theatre will be a platform to deliver surprising and bold one-off programming to the widest possible audience. It will be a year of unprecedented giving, galvanised by our celebrations as well as plans for our future 'big ideas'. This year will support us in launching new fundraising initiatives and fostering artistic collaborations for the future. During the anniversary year, we will launch the public strand of our large-scale capital plans. It will be a celebration of our future as well as our past.

Year 5 – Onward

Our ambitious future.

This year will see a step change in ambition. Our artistic planning in years 1 to 4 will deliver a programme that demonstrates this. Our staffing capacity will be at a level to be able to resource this. We will build upon the profile achieved and be able to demonstrate our aspirations with the beginning of a large-scale capital programme on the Great Hall.



A note on “Big Ideas”

Key ambitions have emerged through the business planning process they are...

Revitalising the Great Hall - making a vibrant space where anyone can spend time - working, eating, meeting friends or seeing a show.

Reimagining The Studio - reaffirming its role in the Greater Manchester theatre ecology. Building its identity as a space for collaborative talent development, unique participation opportunities and a professional programme.

A workforce for the Future - building an energising workforce development programme focused on engaging residents from Greater Manchester and principles of equity and diversity.

Create a Home for Theatre Making Crafts & Skills - developing a new future for our Swan Street facilities.

Explore strategic Artistic Partnerships - including commercial, co-production and future life opportunities.



Front cover: Betty: A Sort of Musical - image Johan Persson
Back cover: Great Expectations - image Ellie Kurtz



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