



Highlands & Islands Audience Development **CONFERENCE NOTES**

**FIONA STURGEON, HEAD OF AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT, SCOTTISH ARTS COUNCIL:
RESPONSE TO THE DAY**

**AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT CONFERENCE
18TH MARCH 2005, INVERNESS**

Firstly, I would like to thank HI~Arts for inviting me here today. Being fairly new in post, it has been wonderful to know that I have such a set of supportive colleagues up here, and that Marcus and the rest of the team have been flying the flag and demonstrating the benefits of Audience Development so effectively. And thanks to all of you for such stimulating discussion today.

Anyway, you've probably seen me creeping in and out of sessions today and wondered what that strange woman from the Arts Council was doing, not sitting still. I've been being something of a sponge today, and have soaked up lots of ideas and thoughts from everyone here. So, I'm just going to list a few:

Is there a single answer?

- Vision not definition.
- Creating work from inside and outside the community.
- Promote your work to families and not 'for children'.
- Audience development is not the discrete responsibility of one person.
- We have primed an audience for development.
- The importance of evaluation.
- Immerse yourself in the art form.
- Professionalism is a state of mind.

I think I might get some t-shirts printed up. I can just see Britney Spears wearing some of these in Heat magazine.

I have prepared a presentation and I'm thankful to say that it chimes rather tunefully with what has been said already today. You've all been concentrating hard, so I'm going to make it as light touch as possible, and tell you about my favourite film.

My favourite film of all time is *It's a Wonderful Life* by Frank Capra. It's a film I never tire of seeing. It's life-affirming, dramatic, and unashamedly sentimental. But I also think there's a lesson in there for those of us who work in Audience Development.

I'm sure all of you know the story, but let me re-cap. James Stewart plays George Bailey, an ordinary guy who has led a relatively undistinguished life. But then he has to make a financial decision that puts the whole town at threat, and his friends and neighbours risk losing their homes to the evil Mr Potter, a self-interested millionaire. Dispirited and desperate, George feels that life has not been worth living. He's about to throw himself from a bridge, on a suitably dreich, atmospheric night, when Clarence, an angel who is working to earn his wings, decides to intervene. Clarence grants George his wish – that he'd never existed – and takes him on a journey to an alternative present. The cosy town of Bedford Falls, is Potterville. It's a brash, unkind place where profit has clearly triumphed over community spirit. George's wife is a lonely spinster, his kids don't exist (obviously), his brother the war hero, has died in a childhood skating accident, because George wasn't there to save him.

Working in Audience Development, I think, can sometimes feel like being George Bailey. In the 15 years or so I spent working for theatre companies here and in England, when the audience had maybe plateau-ed, or it felt like running just to stand still, I would have that tantalising thought – what difference am I really making? And Stuart's vivid picture of an uber non-attender illustrated this perfectly.

Like George, we often lack the information that would allow us to see the bigger picture and our place within it. This can be a real challenge to the confidence. Sometimes, just like George, we think that we must shoulder the responsibility alone, for this 'other' concept, Audience Development, whilst at the same time, the significance of marketing, the cornerstone of Audience Development, is under-estimated, under-resourced, and seen as a cost, rather than an investment, a set of short-term publicity tactics rather than fundamental to achieving artistic, financial or social objectives.

So, getting back to George Bailey for just a moment, what happens to him to resolve his dilemma? And can we learn anything from it?

George gets a reprieve. His tortuous, Scrooge-like journey comes to an end and he's back on the bridge – self-aware, confident and optimistic. He rushes back to the bosom of his family where, lo and behold, the townsfolk have rallied together and paid off Potter. Oh! And Clarence gets his wings. At this point, I'm usually insensible with tears, as is most of the cinema, greeting like bairns.

I'm not claiming it's the equivalent of angelic intervention, but information wields enormous power. Essential, contextual information that gives us the evidence to plan and measure our performance against our very SMART targets. This, in itself, will bring confidence, as will the knowledge – evident in events like this – that we are part of an increasingly assertive, professional, co-operative community. Like Bedford Falls without George, Scotland would be a very bleak cultural environment without us. There's something else that's interesting in George's breakthrough in *It's a Wonderful Life*. We only see it from his perspective, but the fact is that his friends, family and neighbours get that the future of the town is a joint responsibility at exactly the same time as he does. Earlier, Ian de-bunked a bit of the definition of Audience Development and, of course, most of you have that function in the bloodstream of what you do, but moving forward with that, I think we cannot underestimate the powerful partnership that's going on there. It's the virtuous circle between audience, education, marketing and programming. Rather like the PAN Audience Development journey.

At the Scottish Arts Council Drama Forum in Stirling last week, I asked some delegates to describe how Audience Development works in their organisations. One General Manager of a touring company I think expressed it really well when she said that it was the responsibility of the whole organisation, although their marketing officer very clearly led the process.

So, how does all of this relate to the Scottish Arts Council's Audience Development priorities? I'm not going to go through the Audience Development Strategy in detail – you have copies to take away with you in your delegate packs – but I'm just going to highlight a few points in relation to what I've already said.

We're committed, in the Scottish Arts Council, to becoming much more evidence-based, and not just for our own sake, but to be able to provide you with that contextual information you need to do your jobs better. Early in the day here, that need was coming across loud and clear. I will be progressing a couple of research and good practice projects, Audiences Scotland, and Audience Data UK (explained further in the strategy), as well as looking at the audience development needs in Scotland, beyond the Central Belt.

We will continue to invest in the sector – and here is where, as Brian says, I'm going to show you the money. I hope most of you know about the Audience Development Lottery Scheme. The next deadline is 4 April 2005, so in about 2 weeks, with a subsequent deadline in October. This is where you can apply for specific projects or research to develop your audience. Good examples we've heard about today are the Dumfries and Galloway research project, The Booth, some of the audience development work Wee Stories have

been doing. We'll continue to work with Hi~Arts and other agencies throughout the country, and I hope you'll all continue to think about your professional development needs in this area and talk to me about how we can help to support them.

We will reward good practice where we can. With my colleague, Joan Parr, Head of Education, I hope this year to invest in a number of demonstration projects, particularly in the areas of bringing education and marketing closer together and closer to management. We are currently running a pilot scheme in collaboration with the Audience Development agencies based in Edinburgh and Glasgow called Not for the Likes of You. I call it therapy for organisations, but it aims to help organisations broaden their audience by changing the way they operate, and therefore are positioned in the eyes, minds and hearts of their audience, current and potential. We hope to make this more widely available if it proves to be a success, as it has been in England.

Audience Development, being such a broad church, I haven't focussed on the other, crucially important element which is the message. However, I'd like to give the last word to James Stewart, ole George Bailey himself. This is a quotation I came across while doing some research about audiences last year:

NEVER TREAT YOUR AUDIENCE AS CUSTOMERS – ALWAYS AS PARTNERS.

Fiona Sturgeon

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