

news feature

Power to the people

The theatre sector might not be the worst contributor to pollution, but as culture minister Margaret Hodge said at the Theatres Trust's Building Sustainable Theatres conference, it can encourage the public to become more eco-savvy, reports **Lalayn Baluch**



With the government's Climate Change Bill aiming for a 60% reduction in carbon emissions by 2050, the issue of supplying the country's energy needs without harming the planet is a hot topic for all industries, and the Theatres Trust's Building Sustainable Theatres conference this month confirmed that the cultural sector is no exception.

Buildings of all sorts across the country are responsible for 47% of the nation's energy consumption and a host of green legislation that will affect arts venues is being introduced throughout the year.

Since April, theatres have been required to submit a waste management plan when carrying out construction work of more than £300,000. From October, all sites being sold, leased or refurbished will need to provide an Energy Performance Certificate, with a sustainability rating measuring its impact on the environment. Meanwhile, also from the same month, theatres that are 1,000m sq or larger could be forced to display a certificate detailing their power use.

While the creative industries might not be the worst culprit for pollution – in London, performance venues emit 50,000 tonnes of CO₂ out of the city's annual total of 44 million tonnes – legislation and regular warnings about the state of the world's eco-system are forcing the sector to take more notice of the problem.

Speaking at the conference, held at the National Theatre, culture minister Margaret Hodge argued that with a quarter of the UK's adult population attending a show in the last year, theatre is in a unique position to encourage the public to become more eco-savvy. She called on the industry to take a unified stance on green issues and create a "shared sustainable development programme".

"The theatre sector may not be the largest contributor to emissions, relative to other parts of society, but as a creative and innovative industry, I think you have the potential to be the driving force for change. Theatres are well placed to show

audiences what is possible, to set a good example in the way the buildings are run, to show people that living in a lower carbon lifestyle is something they can be energised and inspired by," she added.

Her sentiments were echoed by Ken Livingstone's former climate change advisor Mark Watts, who warned: "We've got to be honest in the assessment of where emissions come from, even when the reality is not particularly palatable, and then have programmes which seriously address the areas where the main emissions are coming from. If you do that, there are likely to be cost savings, particularly at a time of rising energy prices."

This call to action is a reminder of what the industry still needs to do. However, the conference demonstrated that venues of all scales are already moving towards sustainability.

With the ball set rolling by the carbon-neutral aim of north London fringe venue the Arcola Theatre, Theatr Brycheiniog will soon become the first venue in Wales to be powered by solar energy and the Royal Shakespeare Company's £112.8 million redevelopment project will add extensive green improvements to the existing building.

Meanwhile, on July 11, Glyndebourne will receive a final verdict on whether it can install a controversial wind turbine, which has sparked protest from the local community.

If successful, the £800,000, 44-metre high installation will reduce the organisation's carbon footprint by 70% and cut its energy bills by £150,000 annually. It will also lead to a dedicated education programme about green energy for the public.

Not all projects are as radical – Theatre Royal Plymouth has proved that small-scale improvements can make a difference. The site now saves £50,000 annually after carrying out maintenance improvements, such as installing an efficient boiler and switching from halogen to LED bulbs. Meanwhile, the Ambassador Theatre Group aims to cut bills across the organisation by £65,000 through an energy management plan in its 23 venues, install efficient lighting and construct sets from sustainable timber.

"The most off-putting thing is the enormity of the problem and that can easily become the excuse for everyone to go, 'It is just too difficult, we can't do anything'," commented Ruth Mackenzie, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport expert advisor for culture.

"But, actually, all of us can really make a difference. Manchester International Festival has given itself six years to try and become a sustainable festival. One shouldn't be afraid of taking the time to make small differences and of celebrating the little bits that you do."

For more coverage of the conference, www.thestage.co.uk/news



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