Centre Director’s report on period January 2019 – January 2020. AGM June 2nd 2020

Preamble

OBJECTIVES AND ACTIVITIES.

Sterts is a regional charity providing community arts and education to people from all over the South West. The Charity has this vision statement: The vision for Sterts is as the vibrant, creative centre for live arts in South East Cornwall, self-sufﬁcient, sustainable and integrated with our local communities; Sterts has a proud past and is much loved by people of the surrounding areas. The Trustees have set the following objectives to build on that:

• To enable as many people as possible to experience and be inspired by the arts.

• To build on our community involvement within Sterts.

• To engage with partners both artistic and ﬁnancial to develop the cultural strategy for SE Cornwall.

• To minimise our recourse to public funding and build a sustainable future.

• To collaborate with other innovative networks of arts organisations across South West England.

• To encourage and support creativity and artistic endeavour within our community.

• To provide opportunities for participation, creative expression and learning.

• To encourage young people to develop their artistic capabilities in all aspects of the arts.

• To provide an environment for aspiring performers to grow and develop.

Cornwall’s vibrant and distinctive cultural sector provides an opportunity to regenerate and grow the economy and tackle social issues at a grassroots level. Cornwall’s White Paper for Culture Edition 2 highlights that: “Culture and the creative industries are highly important to Cornwall. Not only are they central to Cornwall’s distinctiveness and they are also of great economic importance as an employment sector and to our tourist offer.” This seeks to build on the Five Goals of the White Paper for Culture 2017-22.

Goal 1: A place of global renown.

Goal 2: A place to inspire.

Goal 3: A place to create.

Goal 4: A place of cultural distinctiveness and sustainability.

Goal 5: A place of growth

The Trustees of Sterts welcome very warmly the opportunity to work with Cornwall Council in addressing the key challenges that face the cultural sector in Cornwall, and this Business Plan has been developed with a view to enabling Sterts to play a constructive part in addressing those challenges.

The Trustees aim is to become ﬁnancially self-sufﬁcient, with minimal recourse to public funding, within five years. However, the Trustees also recognise the vital importance of setting box ofﬁce prices at affordable levels so that economic deprivation is less of a barrier to engaging in the arts and gaining from being involved in the creative opportunities that Sterts is offering. It is important to recognise not only the need for cultural provision in South East Cornwall but also the contribution that cultural activity makes to the local economy.

Our financial priorities for the next five years are to:

* Become entirely operationally self-ﬁnancing and negate the need for external resources to fund our operations.
* Make a small surplus on our operations. This is essential to create reserves sufﬁcient to cover risks and see us through difﬁcult trading times and to expand what we can offer to the community.
* Increase the number of proﬁtable events as well as audience numbers.
* Improve revenues from existing assets such as the bar, studio, or costumes, props etc.
* Access capital funding via grant applications to enable us to upgrade our facilities and thus to reach new areas and groups who can use our facilities.
* Access funding in order to offer substantial discounts to both unemployed and socially excluded groups.
* Increase the number of active Volunteers to help carry out varied duties.
* Maximise the profitability of conference and function business
* Increase our Community Engagement and ﬁnd new ways to use our facilities that can beneﬁt both Sterts and the community it serves.

In setting budgets for the outlying years, we will continue to use the knowledge of “what works” and use prudent assumptions such as:

* Prediction of audience numbers should err on the cautious side as it is difficult to predict how economic and other factors may influence our ultimate income.
* Within our budgets, we will seek to separate operations and maintenance costs from reserves and development funds.
* Finances require us to be risk averse.
* The staging of events and audience volumes can place great demands on Volunteers in carrying out Front of House duties. Increasing the number of active Volunteers is critical to our future development and expansion.
* Our operating model is primarily aimed at self-sufficiency and building appropriate financial reserves for a charity of our size. We will need to seek specific external funding to get both capital premises improvement and large scale new artistic projects under way.

To work towards achieving our vision Trustees will be developing plans for their area of responsibility.

We have only 3 staff members on the payroll. Every other task on site, from selling tickets to running the bar, showing people to their seat and keeping them safe on site, selling ice creams during the interval and cleaning the theatre after a show; is all managed by a band of volunteers. Sterts volunteers donate 15000 hours per annum, an enviable number but also a dependency. 90 events, at least 6 staff, average 4 hours each… that’s 2100, social media team, 6x2 hours per week (1000 hours say). Trustees x 6 meetings x 2 hours. Work days, reception, cleaning…. etc. the list of tasks undertaken by volunteers is very long.

We have set out the detail of what Sterts intends to do and how we intend to do it. However, when it comes to securing ﬁnancial and practical support for a venue like ours, there is another dimension which rarely features in funding applications and business plans. This is the “emotional” need that a community has for such an asset. This special place is part of what makes Upton Cross and its wider community somewhere good to live in, good to work in and, perhaps most important of all, somewhere good to grow up. At a time when the development and maintenance of activity-based communities has never been more important, the availability of live theatre, music, dance and other artistic experiences is a resource to be protected and nurtured. Sterts Trustees and other volunteers will do everything they can to ensure this but, at a time when almost all national funding for the arts outside London and large cities is limited there is a need for basic ﬁnancial support to maintain open and affordable access to much-needed community venues like ours. We thank everybody for their support.

Report delivered to the Annual General Meeting on 2nd June 2020 by Peter Woodward. Centre Director. Covering the period January 2019 to January 2020.

I have attended Sterts AGM’s since 2002. There have been argumentative, noisy and rambunctious meetings, there have been packed meetings and half empty meetings. There have been nine occasions when I have stood before the AGM and delivered my report but never in circumstances like this, an online meeting with only 5 other people in the room is a novelty, not a funny one but nevertheless, a new experience.

This time last year we were looking forward to one of the busiest and most exciting seasons for many years, four great in house shows, youth shows, and Arts Council funded new work with a pro-am cast and director of renown.

But, as usual, I jump ahead of myself to the “main course”. The spring, the “starter” of Sterts banquet 2019 saw the One Act Play Finale in its new slot. The success of the competition was making the judging process something of a sprint and we felt that we needed more time to judge which in turn lead to casting and rehearsals being squeezed if it stayed in an autumn slot. The competition is a great success and we are seeing a growing entry including young writers for whom there was a special award in 2019. Our Youth Group SYTC presented a short play evening with two titles, DNA and It Snows. These titles were National Theatre Connections plays from 2018 and the intention was to try them out with a view to an SYTC entry in 2020. NT Connections is a National Theatre competition for older teenagers where they get an opportunity to perform the show at least twice; in their own venue, at the Theatre Royal in Plymouth and a few are invited to perform for a third time at The National Theatre in London. The spring season also saw performances by The Tavonians and the ever popular Warwick & Davey. We held our first beer festival, imaginatively entitled The Taming of the Brew! We were unsure of how much interest there would be, but the event was a great success and enjoyed by many, including a number of locals for whom it was their first visit to Sterts. May half term week also saw the first production from a new group, SYTCJ, a youth group for 7-14 year olds and they staged a spectacular production of Disney’s Aladdin that included a real flying carpet.

However, the spring was also notable for the number of rehearsals and preparatory sessions that we had for our exciting summer season to come. The in-house shows were following the familiar model. The season opened with the black comedy The Woman who Cooked her Husband in the Studio. This was directed by Hatty Elias-Jones, a performing arts lecturer from City College in Plymouth. This studio show was a great success with close to sell out audiences and super feedback. Fantastic Mr Fox was directed by Sam Pomeroy, a Plymouth based professional director and familiar face around Sterts; the music was looked after by Elfyn Jones, new to Sterts but well known locally as a composer, MD and music educator. The show proved particularly popular with our primary schools. The musical was a revue of musical numbers based loosely around the theme of a railway station and entitled West End to Broadway. This was directed by Nathan Pavey who had done such a great job with The History Boys in 2018 and the music was looked after by Sterts stalwart and local music teacher Jane Warwick. The plays were And Then There Were None by Agatha Christie directed by Harry Pearce a teacher from North Cornwall and the comedy was A Bunch of Amateurs by Ian Hislop. This was directed by Oksana Wroath a local theatre practitioner and director who is very familiar to Sterts audiences. Mark Sidey did a splendid job of co-ordinating these in his role as Festival Director. He also performed in two of the shows and directed Aladdin, a busy summer. The whole season was sponsored by Puckator with whom we have a productive and beneficial relationship. We are most grateful to Caroline & Mark Howard for their ongoing support.

By the end of the season Fantastic Mr Fox had achieved target sales figures. However, what was particularly disappointing was that none of the other shows achieved their targets despite being very good productions. We had strong positive feedback from audience members on all of the opening nights but this simply failed to translate into sales. Then There Were None got close to target, -10% but West End to Broadway was 28% down and A Bunch of Amateurs was catastrophically 48% down on estimated sales. Overall, the four in-house shows returned a deficit equivalent to some £3-4000. The visiting shows were better supported and although there was a small drop in profit it was within the 5% plus/minus that is our usual rate although the end of the season tailed off badly for a variety of reasons. The season highlights included new visiting band The Zoots who did really well, tribute band Magic of the BeeGees were very popular and our new departure, film nights was a great success with the singalong The Greatest Showman being a huge hit. Long-standing favourites like Illyria & Miracle did well. Illyria produced a brave re-imagining of the Frankenstein story that became the talking point of the Cornish theatre scene with one venue manager contacting me to warn of extremely adverse audience reactions. It was controversial and there was a little disquiet among the Sterts audience. However, I enjoyed it and I am a firm believer in the power of theatre to challenge as well as entertain so was happy to see this and praised the director for the work. The regular early season festivals are both well established features of our calendar; Bodmin Moor Poetry Festival, split into two for 2019 and Midsummer Dance both featured performers of exceptional quality, both are making Sterts name better known to new audiences.

The Shearing Gang was an ambitious new piece of writing that was generously funded by Arts Council England. It was a co-production with Dogwood Productions and featured a core of professional actors and theatre makers with a supporting cast from Sterts. It was particularly ambitious in that it also involved two West Cornwall venues, Penlee Park in Penzance and Trebah Gardens in Falmouth as hosts after it had played at Sterts. With that wonderful quality of hindsight, it is now clear that we were taking on too much with a full summer season and The Shearing Gang as an extra. It was too big to comfortably fit within the Sterts administrative load and the co producer had a very different approach to budgetary restraint. This could have been overcome but unfortunately a series of events conspired to make the project an expensive disappointment. For many of the participants from Sterts it was an exciting and enjoyable experience, regrettably the audience did not agree, and it failed at the Box Office losing many thousands of pounds. It is not appropriate to go into detail here. The Sterts trustees have discussed this at length and lessons have been learned. We were grateful for support from the Sterts acting community many of whom stepped into roles at Falmouth & Penzance and to the wider Sterts community that managed to source props ranging from scrap cars to live sheep.

The autumn 2019 season had two outstanding theatre events among a generally successful Studio season. We had full Studio houses for CAMP theatre play A Woman in Mind and Squashbox theatre sold out with Spooky Tales in half term week and The Christmassy Christmas show in December. The play Bronte from The Tavonians and singer song writer Sarah McQuaid did well. The Christmas Craft Fair goes from strength to strength and we may well need to spread it out in 2020 to accommodate all the stall holders. The two theatre events were the SYTC production of the Madness musical Our House which showed just how good that group of young people really are and No Walls from Plymouth staged Sleeping Beauty, a pantomime… in the theatre… in December and it was a great success.

In the Hall Gallery Helen Skidmore, a local artist, programmed a series of exhibitions in the first part of the year and we are grateful to her for this contribution. After the summer the gallery hosted an interactive exhibition by Molly Tufnell, a local textile artist who spent some time in the gallery creating for visitors to come and see her at work as well as leading creative workshops.

In-house publicity has again been produced by the office team. The brochure was re-styled into early and late summer editions in order for it to remain fresh and new looking. It continues to be a major source of ticket sales despite the growth of a variety of online sources. Ruth Wilkes had completed her tenure on the RIO Cultivator scheme, a funded job creation programme focused on young adults trying to improve their employability and had been employed to run the publicity and online elements of Sterts. She worked tirelessly through the summer and had a major positive impact. She worked with Jodie Ronaldson who was employed through the RIO Cultivator scheme for 6 months to be an administrator for The Shearing Gang and between them they gave Sterts a fresher and more youthful look. Both have now left Sterts although we are keen to employ them as freelance creative contributors should such opportunities arise.

The relationship with Cornwall Council has continued to be fruitful for Sterts. Our Strategic Arts Client status is confirmed until 2022. Last year I was reporting that the council had regretfully reduced Sterts annual grant. On a much happier note I can report that last autumn Cornwall gave Sterts a grant of £15000 for the development of our Box Office using the redundant cricket pavilion from Looe as the basic structure. This was due to start in the autumn but was deferred to spring 2020 because of bad weather.

The administration was being run by Lisa Townsend until the autumn. Lisa decided that she wanted to concentrate on developing her own business and left in November with our very best wishes. We have now recruited Sarah Curley who has experience working with charities in Scotland and has re-located to Cornwall recently. Although retired, Robin Lawrence has continued to look after the IT and his availability to answer panic stricken calls about IT is most welcome. The development of volunteers continues to be a priority, we introduced an online fire training programme last year and that worked well so we will be extending this training strand when we can. Ruth Wilkes was volunteer liaison for most of the year covered in this report and was very effective.

It is the nature of these reports that current events do not get mentioned, I am sure that Covid 19 will feature in next years’ report. Looking through our objectives that are the preamble to this report there is an impact on each of them that we will have to consider. As you may well imagine, the impact on Sterts has been dramatic, we normally like a drama but could have done without this drama. Like the rest of the theatre sector and the rest of the country, we cannot wait to get back to normal.

Finally, as always, there are a number of people named in this report who contribute greatly to Sterts. There are an awful lot more who are un-named and our gratitude and appreciation are due to them all.