

LOWESTOFT TOWN COUNCIL

ANNUAL ASSEMBLY

MARINA THEATRE 2022-3 REPORT

This report must start with stating that it is only thanks to CRF funding from the Arts Council, as well as the continuing financial support from LTC that we remain open today. The Trust & staff wish to take this opportunity to express their grateful thanks to Lowestoft Town Council, and the people of Lowestoft for the support and love for their theatre.

The arts are important to society & regional theatres provide the inspiration & opportunities that encourage, nurture & produce the performers you see in the West End and on your screens, small & large, as well as the technicians & support staff who work hard behind the scenes to make them happen.

The year 2021-22 has been a challenging one for the Marina Theatre. With many ups & downs, it has been something of a nail-biting rollercoaster ride, government guidelines dictating much of our operations. The year began during Lockdown 3, but the Marina reopened to the public in mid-April in the only form it could at that point - an outdoor café! The back loading yard, usually full of lorries unloading scenery, props & instruments, became The Yard: a colourful, sunny & welcoming place for people to meet in the town centre. This was the only café open for drink/eat-in at that point.

The Yard was a hit from the start & many were sad when it had to close at the beginning of September. However, as the reason was the proper resumption of live shows it could not really be regretted.

In mid-May once indoor meeting was allowed, the Marina café indoors reopened, albeit with much reduced capacity. Customers were happy to have the option & the chance to get used to mixing again.

Also in May, we began a small programme of films & screenings. In line with government guidelines, this was with a much-reduced capacity: with social distancing of 2 metres in places the 775-seater Marina auditorium was reduced to a maximum of 140 seats. In reality this was closer to 100 as it depended very much on booking party size. Audiences were small but very happy with the Covid-safety measures in place.

Much to our regret, live shows didn't return (except 2 hardy locally-based companies) over the summer as the much reduced capacity & audience reticence made them unviable in both practical & financial terms.

From the start of September we added in a substantial programme of live performances from comedy to music & drama to magic. Audiences were still considerably smaller, especially as Covid cases rose again as the autumn went on. There were also several shows who had to cancel due to Covid.

Panto did happen in 2021 in the form of *Cinderella* which was truly wonderful & a real boost to the theatre & the town. Sadly as it coincided with the emergence of the Omicron variant ticket sales ground almost to a halt & many tickets had to be refunded as the pandemic raged again.

Despite low numbers, the panto was among only a very few in the country that did not have to close or lose even a single show due to Covid cases in cast or crew. This is testament to the determination & commitment of all involved who mixed only in their bubble & agreed not to go to pubs or restaurants for the duration. The cast, crew & staff may not have had much festive fun, but their dedication gave Lowestoft a full panto at the Marina for the first time in two years.

Unfortunately the Lowestoft Players panto in January fell victim to Covid resulting in a cancellation that saddened everyone involved in the production & the theatre. It was also regrettable that due to

a full programme of rescheduled shows in the spring it could not be presented at the Marina this year.

February & March saw a steady return to a mixed programme of live shows, films & screenings with steadily increasing audiences & a good stream of customers in the Marina Café day & night.

Audience numbers are still lower than we would like, in line with the rest of the industry, but we hope 2022 will see Covid cases & their effects fall & audience numbers rise.

In 2021-22 (July-March), there were 96 live performances, 102 films/screenings.

Our spring live brochure for shows throughout 2022 can be picked up from the theatre or seen online at https://issuu.com/marinatheatre/docs/marina_theatre_brochure_spring_2022_issuu.

Staffing

We began April 2022 with just 10 members of staff, most of whom were on reduced hours. All of us took on numerous new tasks & roles well outside our job descriptions, doing anything & everything it took to stay open. Whatever our official job, we cleared tables, made coffee, learnt film projection, checked tickets, swept floors & manned the box office.

As the year went on staff hours & staff team grew slowly & the new team members have fitted in well adding new blood, skills & experience to the team. We're not up to the size we were but it's all positive. The Marina is lucky in its staff team & they are valued highly by management & Trustees.

Community & Participation

This year saw the restart of community & participation events. ACE funding enabled a root & branch review of outreach strategy & attendance has grown throughout the year. We now run two youth theatre groups, a young company, the 50+ Next Stagers, two choirs, two ukulele groups, a writing group, Marina monkey music for early years & The Music Hour, a dementia-friendly user group.

Towns Investment Fund

The theatre was delighted & grateful to have some capital works included in East Suffolk Council's Towns Investment Fund bid. This has involved a lot of work to prepare the information needed for government approval, but is a very exciting opportunity for the theatre, its audiences and for the town.

The Future...

This year, 2022-3, has a variety programme of live performances, films, screenings & community outreach events, attractive to a wide range of people throughout Lowestoft & the surrounding area. We will continue to build a talented & dedicated team that cares about the theatre & the town.

Work with LTC & ESC on the TIF capital work will ramp up, examining options through feasibility study this summer & investigating additional possible funding sources. In this as in all things, everything we do is for the good of the Marina & the people of Lowestoft.

Emma Butler Smith
Chief Executive

Marina Theatre
April 2022