



Society of London Theatre and UK Theatre Co-Chief Executive's UK Theatre Conference Speech

Since we gathered together in June last year the SOLT & UK Theatre team have been working hard to deliver with and on behalf of you, our members, across our core areas of audience, advocacy and membership.

Through initiatives like Kids Week and Love Your Local Theatre, we have encouraged more people to visit the theatre despite cost-of-living challenges. We have celebrated the wonderful work you all do and the talent across our sector in both the UK Theatre and the Olivier awards.

SOLT & UK Theatre have lobbied on your behalf for policy change including leading a collective effort to secure a new, permanent rate of Theatre Tax Relief.

And through our membership services we have supported hundreds of members with their risk and sustainability, employment relations, legal and HR queries. Over the last 12 months we have introduced our HR Forums and we will be building on this over the course of the year as we develop our new HR and EDI service.

As a team we have also been getting out to visit more of you, to see and hear directly about the challenges and opportunities within your organisations and your communities. We have personally enjoyed visits to Southampton, Hull, Chichester, Brighton, Birmingham where we met with the Large Regional Producing Theatres, Leicester, Liverpool, Edinburgh, Newcastle Under Lyme where we met the Mid-Scale theatres and we have enjoyed meeting many of our SOLT & UK Theatre members here in London.

What we hear from all of you is a deep passion and belief in the work that you do and pride in the quality of work and the service you provide to your communities, but you also share with us your deep concerns about the future of our world-class theatre sector. From crumbling buildings, to skills shortages, changes with audiences and funding cuts - these are not small challenges. Nor are the challenges of how we take responsibility for protecting the planet and what inclusivity really means in our sector.

Despite these challenges we remain optimistic about the future. This is a sector built on creativity and innovation. In the past five years you have faced the hardest of times, and survived.

Today we come together to discuss, debate and learn. To share challenges and to share ideas. The team from SOLT & UK Theatre are also here to learn and to identify how we take today's conversations forward and continue to support and equip you to tackle all these challenges and more in the year ahead.

There are two approaches to take when faced with the challenges confronting our sector. First, we can work together to change policy - more than ever before we have invested in SOLT & UK Theatre's advocacy work as we focus on creating the external conditions for theatre to thrive. The General Election presents an opportunity to make the case for further investment in our theatre sector and you will have seen our key asks around investment in theatre buildings and ensuring every child goes to the theatre before they leave school. Both of the main parties have identified the Creative Industries as a key growth sector and an essential part of what defines us as a United Kingdom. Our theatre sector is increasingly being recognised for the social, cultural and economic contribution it makes here in the Capital and in towns and cities across our four nations.

Beyond the election, we look forward to engaging with whoever forms the next Government on both of these policy areas and more, not least a review of the Arts Council in England which we expect to happen whoever wins. You all contribute to this area of our work by



responding to surveys, sharing your data and your ideas, engaging with election candidates, MPs and Ministers.

Together, we are building a strong voice for the sector and look forward to seeing what opportunities for change a new Government presents.

You will hopefully have seen the election guide we shared last week which will support you to influence candidates locally. And if you run a venue, please make sure you complete our survey on your capital investment needs that was shared in our newsletter last week. Our Advocacy team have a drop in session at 3.30 this afternoon if you want to talk to them about the election campaign or anything else.

Second, we can change things for ourselves. So many of the ideas needed to change our sector for the better are already here, in this room. We are such an inventive and imaginative industry and time and again, you have used those amazing skills to tackle and solve the toughest problems.

Today we have sessions looking at a range of issues - from touring to tackling skills shortages. We are looking forward to hearing about the innovation already happening in your organisations, hearing new ideas for change.

We're delighted that we will end today with the launch of the latest version of the Theatre Green Book. For both SOLT & UK Theatre sustainability is at the core of our organisations' values and we recognise the climate challenge is a critical issue that demands urgent action. We are proud to be supporters and members of the Steering Group for the Theatre Green Book.

We are stepping up our work in this area both in terms of supporting our members and also getting our own houses in order as organisations. You will notice today that we are using an app in an effort to reduce use of paper; your delegate badges and stickers can be fully recycled and we have a badge bin for you to drop them in on the way out; our lanyards are made of bamboo meaning the manufacturing process produces far less carbon than cotton and they are fully biodegradable.

To ensure that today is a safe space where you can speak freely with one another, all sessions after our keynote will be under Chatham House rules, meaning that while you are free to speak about the content of the session, we ask that you do not attribute individual comments to the person who said them without their permission. When we asked for your feedback last year, you said this aspect of the conference was important to you and we will be asking for your feedback again after today so please do tell us what you think about each aspect of the conference.

Today could not happen without the brilliant SOLT and UK Theatre team, the team here at the South Bank Centre and our wonderful partner sponsors: Hays Macintyre, Spektrix, Tessitura, TickX and Tysers Live in association with Ecclesiastical, as well as Theatre Tokens, who sponsored this morning's breakfast, and Charcoal Blue, who have generously sponsored lunch.

Huge thanks to all of you.

Thank you also to our wonderful team of BSL interpreters and My Clear Text who provide our on-screen captioning.

We will be here all day and we look forward to speaking to as many of you as possible. Please do come and say hello. We hope you leave here today having had constructive discussions, with some new connections and with some practical solutions and ideas that you can take forward in your own organisations. Our Presidents will be closing the



conference later today and we hope you will stay for the drinks and networking session after that.

And so, let's get started. We are absolutely delighted to welcome our keynote speaker Lewis Iwu. Lewis is CEO and founding partner of Purpose Union and he specialises in supporting and advising organisations around social and sustainability issues. He has worked with high profile global brands in multiple sectors and he is bringing his expertise and insights from those other industries to our conference today, in particular he will focus on how theatre can play an active role in terms of how we embrace Diversity Equity and Inclusion and the pivotal role we can play towards positive social change. (Lewis will be with us all day and is keen to learn more about our industry and the challenges we face together)

Please join us in welcoming Lewis to the stage.

Claire Walker & Hannah Essex
Co-Chief Executives
Society of London Theatre & UK Theatre

