

## **Equity's Small Scale Theatre Committee**

The Equity Small Scale Theatre committee (SSTC) is a specialist committee responsible for overseeing on the union's behalf the terms and conditions of work in the Small Scale Theatre (SST) sector. Its primary role is to negotiate with the ITC the Small Scale Theatre Contract for performers and stagemanagers and monitor its use. The Committee is also in touch with members working in this creative, diverse and dynamic theatrical sector through the SST organiser (Ian Bayes) and other Equity officers.



The last 2 years have seen a fruitful collaboration with ITC on the launch of the Fringe Contract and the exploration through cluster groups of the actual contractual needs of our members and ITC companies leading up to the first major revision of the Performers and Stagemanagers contract. This 2007 launch epitomises the affinity so ingrained in the Small Scale Theatre committee and the ITC's history and welcomes a new phase in Equity's relationship with the ITC of greater communication and understanding resulting from this rewritten contract.

Other current projects central to the committee's work are:

- Obtaining union recognition for performers with learning difficulties.
- And an extensive Mapping Exercise of the fields of work encompassed by the term Small Scale Theatre.

## **A brief history of Equity's Small Scale Theatre Committee.**

### **Its roots**



Small Scale Theatre has been around for a long time. It can be traced back to The Workers Theatre Movement of the 1920s and Unity travelling groups in the 1930's. The London based Unity Theatre company were notable for pioneering new dramatic forms, such as company-devised documentary pieces. In the mid 1930's in Manchester, Joan Littlewood, Gerry Raffles and Ewan MacColl formed the Theatre Union. Joan Littlewood, as director pioneered an ensemble approach to their work a legacy still key to many small scale theatre companies today. Many members from the troupe met up and formed the Theatre Workshop company in 1945 and in 1953 they took a lease on a permanent base at the Theatre Royal Stratford East

### **Its conscience**

In the post war period, these, among others, were precursors of the explosion of work that took place in the second half of the 1960s. This was fuelled both by the spirit of political adventure which grew out of opposition to the Vietnam war and by a feeling that mainstream theatre was insufficiently innovative and inclusive. By 1972, there was an increasing number of companies in operation – many though not all of them, young; many either underfunded or not funded at all.

### **Birth of The Fringe**

In 1973 the London Association of Community Theatre Groups, (LACTG) was set up by London based community and political theatre companies. Soon after, it went national and became The Association of Community Theatre Groups (TACT). TACT contained many Equity members who felt strongly that the new field of work should be consolidated both through an increase in the funding base and, equally, through recognition by Equity, the establishment of new contracts and the protection of practitioners in arduous working conditions. The name the practitioners chose for the whole field of work, funded or not, was "Fringe Theatre" or "The Fringe".

### **The ITC**

In the following year, 1974, another large grouping of Fringe practitioners, wishing to set up a wider umbrella than TACT's left wing constitution would permit, formed the ITC, (Independent Theatre Council). Both organisations were very active. A jointly initiated campaign, "A million pounds for the Fringe" produced results and by 1976 when TACT and ITC had hyphenated their names and merged as ITC/TACT to strengthen their position over half a million pounds was allocated by the then Arts Council of Great Britain to Fringe Theatre. A huge increase on what had gone before. By 1978 this had risen to 1.1 million.

This was supported by the large numbers of companies in the movement who elected the ITC/TACT governing committees. Until the end of the 70s, large numbers regularly attended meetings and demonstrations and rallied audience support, ensuring that Fringe Theatre became a powerful presence in British Theatre.

### **People power and the Small Scale Theatre committee**

Equity members working in the Fringe argued for the formation of a specialist committee, the Fringe Committee, now the Small Scale Theatre Committee. It was initiated as an advisory committee in 1975 and took an energetic part in the campaign for funding, more so as most members were also ITC and TACT activists. The committee was finally constituted as the Small Scale and Fringe Committee through an election in 1977. From 1975, Equity members had also agitated for a high level meeting between the Arts Council of Great Britain and Equity. This took place in 1977 and was the first meeting between the two organisations.

There was a lot of prejudice against Fringe Theatre – J.W. Lambert then theatre critic of *The Times* referred to its workers as “talentless, grubby thrusters” - and some established members of the profession were horrified at the thought that such elements should enter the portals of Equity.

Audiences, however, did not agree and by 1977, Fringe touring companies were opening and using large numbers of new venues – both theatre and community-based. A touring grid was in operation; political, community, experimental and children’s theatre went the length and breadth of the UK or served particular communities in a single location. Theatre in Education (TIE) flourished and for many years had its own specialist committee, the TIE Committee. By 1978 the Fringe Committee, supported by ITC/TACT, had formulated basic Fringe Theatre Touring and Venue Contracts and was ready to negotiate them. In the low- or un-subsidised London Fringe, a Code of Practice for terms and conditions was in operation. Equity was recruiting in the field and took in significantly large numbers of new members.



In 1977/8, having taken part in the preparations to set up the ITC as a management body to oversee the contracts, Equity members in ITC/TACT resigned from the organisation and retired to the other side of the table. The first negotiations were a shock to both parties, unaccustomed as they were to facing each other out, they were successful in establishing respectable minimum wages and conditions, which compare favourably with other Equity contracts to the present day.

### **The rocky road**

In the public spending cuts that took place under the Conservative Government from 1979, Small Scale theatre suffered greatly. In the post 1979 period, companies under pressure either became reluctant or unable to work together to achieve their aims. Cutbacks took place and by the end of the 1980s the picture was less bright.

In order to oversee the operation of the contracts, ITC and Equity inaugurated a joint body, the Fringe Commission, to deal with problems and disputes. Negotiations continued. The Venue Contract eventually fell out of use. The relationship was constructive though not without disagreements including a near-strike in the late 1970s. The contract was progressively modified, developed and refined between the two organisations.

Until 1988, the Fringe Committee, worked with voting deputies as an integral component of its structure. It was a forum to which companies brought contractual problems, funding issues and news of cuts that needed to be fought. It also collected information about the field as a whole. In order to enable deputies to attend, the committee met on Sunday afternoons.

As the cutbacks bit deeper negotiations not surprisingly became more difficult. By 1988, the Fringe Committee meetings were less and less attended by deputies – there were fewer companies and the pressure on them was high. Eventually after the 1988 negotiations, the Fringe Committee was disbanded by the Equity Council of the day.

### **A new beginning**

In 1996, subsequent to the election of a new Council, the committee was re-constituted as the Small Scale Theatre Committee and set about exploring the now much-altered field of work. In 1999/2000 the Small Scale Theatre Taskforce investigated the field and took evidence from a number of practitioners, academics and experts. The Report of the Taskforce made a number of recommendations, and held a Conference on 13<sup>th</sup> November 2001 the outcomes of which form the basis for its current work.