

## Tobacco Factory Theatres, Bristol



Tobacco Factory Theatres produces and presents excellent art in unique, intimate spaces. It aims to be a cultural flagship for the local community, an innovative social and cultural hub and an inspirational model of urban renewal.

Tobacco Factory Theatres programmed its full season 14 years ago and change has been a constant theme ever since. This year is no exception. Following the closure of its offsite second space earlier this year due to licensing changes the theatre is developing plans for a new second theatre space in the Tobacco Factory itself. And, after 8 years in charge, Director Ali Robertson will be moving on this summer to become Executive Producer at Kneehigh Theatre. Tobacco Factory Theatres is not an organisation that stands still.

The company is based in the iconic Tobacco Factory building complex bought by George Ferguson in 1993 to save it from demolition. The Tobacco Factory is now a hub for the creative industries and the Theatres share the building with cafes, live/work loft apartments and schools for the performing arts and animation.

The company put on its first full programme in 2002, had its first transfer to London two years later and became a charity in 2005. In 2009 a second site – The Brewery – was developed and included a working bakery, a café and a dance studio as well as a 90-seat auditorium. In 2011 it took the momentous decision, partly in response a reduction in the amount of work being made in the city following the closure for refurbishment of Bristol Old Vic in 2007, to become a creator rather than just a presenter of work. The following year the company joined the Arts Council's National Portfolio, a position it retains.

The organisation's mission statement and core beliefs drive and shape everything that it does.

### Our mission

Tobacco Factory Theatres produces and presents excellent art in unique, intimate spaces. It aims to be a cultural flagship for the local community, an innovative social and cultural hub and an inspirational model of urban renewal.

### Core beliefs

1. We started as an experiment and we encourage experimentation.
2. We are ambitious and we encourage ambition: we tell epic stories in small spaces.
3. We seek as wide an audience for our work as possible.



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4. Our diverse programme is our cornerstone but we are a place of creation, development and learning, as well as performance.
5. We never forget that our audience is our reason for existence.

The success of this approach can be seen in the organisation's steady growth during Ali's tenure: audiences have increased from 30,000 to 140,000 and turnover has risen by over 300%. The Theatres now generates 75% of its total annual income of £2.2m from its own trading activities: mainly box office, bar sales, theatre hire and events. Grants, legacies and donations make up the remaining 25% and it receives £60,000 as an Arts Council NPO<sup>1</sup>.

Ali identifies four key changes to the way in which the organisation works.

1. The decision to create their own content rather than just presenting the work of others
2. An ongoing commitment to build and sustain strong audience relationships
3. The value of Catalyst funding in supporting the development of its fundraising activity
4. A willingness to create and refreshing a wider senior management team

What have been some of the lessons from the changes of the past few years?

It is really important to think clearly about who your stakeholders are. Funders can sometimes assume undue importance and it is vital to understand that everyone is an audience member. Do not take your audience for granted.

Recognise that major change will involve lots of difficult situations and stress. It is important to accept this and to think about ways to reduce its impact.

It is necessary to have a staff structure and systems that support your values and your business model.

<sup>1</sup> Source: 2014/15 Statutory Accounts

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To be able to share power in this way the leadership team must have a good range of skills and the time and capacity to think strategically. Budgets and project management must be pushed down the organisational chain and there must be an acceptance that, as part of this process, mistakes will be made.

They should be flexible and support the empowerment and enabling of all of staff. To be able to share power in this way the leadership team must have a good range of skills and the time and capacity to think strategically. Budgets and project management must be pushed down the organisational chain and there must be an acceptance that, as part of this process, mistakes will be made.

Take the opportunity of changes in staffing to re-think the current arrangements and bring in people with new skills and perspectives.

To sum up Ali offers this advice to organisations looking to succeed

Be entrepreneurial ... Be dynamic, flexible and always look for opportunities ... give people their heads and accept that they will make mistakes .... regularly refresh what you are all about and your core values

## Images:

Pg.1 The Tobacco Factory Theatres building

Pg.2 Top: Ali © Simon Withyman

Bottom: Factory Theatre Auditorium in the Round © Farrows Creative

Pg.3 Top: Tobacco Factory café bar

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