Talent drain poses ‘existential threat’ to theatre – BECTU

GIVERNY MASSO

Skills shortages in onstage roles are worsening, according to research by BECTU, with the union warning the talent drain represents an “existential threat” to theatre.

The survey of 833 workers was carried out between August and September to provide insight into the skills shortage faced by the industry. Respondents spanned onstage roles including marketing, box office, costume, front of house, lighting, sound and stage management, working in West End, regional, touring and fringe theatre.

Its findings follow multiple warnings about the loss of skilled theatre workers to more lucrative roles in television and film, from figures including Olivier-winning designer Vicki Mortimer, lighting designer Paul Constable and theatre unions.

The survey suggests that nearly all theatre workers (96%) know at least one person who has left the industry because of poor conditions and rates of pay, with a fifth (21%) of respondents saying they knew of 10 or more people who have left. An additional 47% know between four and nine people who have left, but whom they believed could have been retained if working conditions and rates of pay had been better.

BECTU’s survey also found that almost all respondents (95%) feel the industry relies on a “show must go on” attitude at the expense of workers’ well-being, while 95% of workers believe employers have unfairly appealed to their goodwill to pressure them into doing work that is beyond their remit.

Other findings in the survey included:
• 60% of respondents said the issue of skills shortages had become “much worse” since 2019.
• When asked the reasons for leaving the industry, the biggest factors were a poor work-life balance (38%), low pay in comparison to other industries (27%) and unsocial hours (25%).
• Other issues cited included lack of career structure (15%), stress at work (16%) and bullying (11%).
• A fifth of respondents said lack of work-life balance and anti-social working hours had become worse since the pandemic.
• Eight in 10 respondents said pay had got worse since the pandemic.
• Three quarters (75%) said stress at work had got worse since the pandemic.
• More than half felt that managers had not listened to concerns about safety.
• Around half said they did not feel appreciated or valued by employers.
• Half did not feel their employer was good at helping people develop their skills to equip them for career progression.

In response to the findings, BECTU said the industry was facing an “existential threat” due to skills shortages and that the survey showed a clear desire from workers to see the industry become more professional in its approach to recruitment, skills development and retention.

Lloyd Webber and Harrison team up to develop musicals

MATTHEW HEMLEY

Andrew Lloyd Webber has announced a partnership with producer Michael Harrison that will see the pair find and develop new musicals and create productions from the composer’s back catalogue.

Called Lloyd Webber Harrison Musicals, or LWH Musicals, the partnership orients a relationship that has already seen Harrison stage Lloyd Webber’s Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat at the London Palladium, owned by the composer.

It is billed as Lloyd Webber’s first significant partnership with a producer since he worked with Cameron Mackintosh, which saw the pair produce shows such as Cats and The Phantom of the Opera in the 1980s.

Lloyd Webber said the new deal meant he could focus on composing.

He added: “I am excited to announce that I am entering into a production partnership with Michael Harrison. Michael is easily one of the world’s leading young theatre producers. Our partnership will build on our relationship, which has already produced Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat at the London Palladium.”

Lloyd Webber added: “On a personal level, I am thrilled. I will now concentrate on composing, knowing that I have a first-rate producer to collaborate with in the future.”

Harrison said he hoped LWH Musicals would become “a major force in producing musical theatre across the world”.

“Andrew has written some of the greatest musicals of all time and I look forward to producing new interpretations of these shows as well as many new musicals and other musicals by writers Andrew and I admire,” he said.

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