

Critical viewpoint

Reviewers would benefit from sitting where the punters do, says Kate Maltby – it's an eye-opener for those used to front and centre

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How much longer?

Anguish over the trend for very long – or very short – plays misses the point, says David Benedict: it's the pace that matters most

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Theatres urged to do more to protect women's safety

GEORGIA SNOW

Theatre employers are facing growing pressure to increase safety measures for women and other vulnerable people working in the industry, in the wake of renewed concerns over street safety in the UK.

It comes as women working in the sector raise concerns about travelling home late after shows or staying in unfamiliar towns.

Lighting designer Paule Constable and comedian Angela Barnes are among those demanding a shift in attitude towards theatres' duty of care, amid calls for employers to fund evening travel and review accommodation offered to touring casts and crews.

The murders of Sarah Everard and Sabina Nessa have reignited fears about women's safety, with performers arguing that the heightened national conversation about personal safety must also extend to the entertainment industry.

Employers are being urged to consider practical responses such as asking how company members get home after shows, and ensuring that touring digs are safe.

Equity backed the calls, telling The Stage it would like to see theatres review their policies to consider the safe travel of cast and creative team to and from work, including "the management and funding of travel" and provision of accommodation.

Constable revealed she had never been asked how she would be getting home, and said there was "no joined-up thinking" when it came to implementing policy.

She said that as a freelancer she felt she had "no protection whatsoever", either within the rehearsal room and beyond, and that being freelance meant she had to "work out [her] own way round it".

If no public transport is available, alternative transport will often be arranged by employers. However, Constable said she would like theatres to make greater efforts to ensure safe travel home for women and other vulnerable people at all times.

"There are really simple, light-touch ways to do it: encourage people to talk about how they're getting home and see if people can travel together. Everybody's completely terrified of the word 'cost' at the moment, but that's not a reason not to have the conversation," Constable added.

Barnes told The Stage that the fear of being attacked on the way home was "something every female and female-identifying stand-up comedian has dreaded".

In 2018, she led a group of comedians to set up a free taxi scheme for women, trans and non-binary people during the Edinburgh Fringe, founded in response to the rape and murder of Australian comedian Eurydice Dixon in Melbourne after a gig.

"People don't realise that, for many female performers, we have no choice if we want to do the work, and we want to get the same opportunities as our male counterparts. If I said 'no' to every gig where I would have to make my way home alone late at night, I wouldn't have been able to have a career as a stand-up comic," Barnes told The Stage.



'Saoirse Ronan has a radiance and a magnetic grace'
The Tragedy of Macbeth, ★★★★★ review, p15

"Promoters and venues really need to consider how their female performers are getting home. Can somebody walk them to the train station? Can we get them a cab?" she said, expressing concern that bookers could respond by engaging fewer female, female-identifying and non-binary performers to avoid the extra work and cost.

"However you slice it, until venues and promoters have to take some responsibility for the safety of the people they are booking, it is the performer that is disadvantaged," she added.

Equity called on theatres to review their policies on how teams get to and home from work. "This would include considering the management and funding of travel where performances conclude at a time when public transport coverage reduces," it said, adding theatres should also review the provision of accommodation from the perspective of worker safety, in response to longstanding concerns that the unregulated

digs market has led to theatremakers being forced to stay in unsafe accommodation.

Actor Jennifer Greenwood said when it came to finding digs for regional shows, "everyone crosses their fingers that it's going to be okay. Are [theatres] vetting their people properly?"

Greenwood, who sits on Equity's Women's Committee, said "a major shift in the industry's attitude to duty of care towards all members but especially towards women" needed to happen.

"The issue that we have come up against is the feeling that the responsibility or duty of care of the producers ends when you leave the door. They haven't grasped it: they don't think it's their responsibility and it all comes down to money. That's the problem we always come up against: they say they don't have time and they don't have money," she said.

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Lyn Gardner

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