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# AUDIENCE BEHAVIOURS IN UK THEATRICAL VENUES

Summary findings of a Bectu survey – February 2023

In response to a growing chorus of concern, amplified by recent media coverage of a perceived increase in unsafe behaviours in British theatrical venues, Bectu ran a week-long survey in late February 2023, receiving 1,508 responses, slightly over half of which were from London.

The survey was open to union members and non-members, to ensure that the evidence received reflected wider industry concerns. 56.3% of responses came from non-members.

## A HIGH LEVEL OF CONCERN AMONG THEATRE WORKERS

The most striking result was the response rate itself, which was the highest for a Bectu survey targeted at this sector. The union is cautious not to 'over-survey' members and the questions were primarily designed to elicit useful case studies that illustrate the different issues that have been reported anecdotally.

659 members responded, and we received a further 849 responses from non-members. The most striking evidence is that the scale of the problem is so much larger than any of us anticipated. We knew that there would be a selection bias in responses – the survey was not conducted in collaboration with theatre management and it was promoted primarily using union networks. Over 70% of the responses were from 'customer facing' roles (front of house, box office, stage door, hospitality, etc). It was understood that responses would be dominated by those who had suffered unwelcome experiences (and 88.7% had done so).

For this reason, it was also not surprising that 79.9% of responses told us that they had experienced *"acts of bullying, violence, intimidation, harassment, or abuse of staff."* The big surprise is not the percentage, but the fact that 1,069 different people told us this fact.

- 917 respondents had experienced visitors to their theatre carrying out *"acts of bullying, violence, intimidation, harassment or abuse of other members of the audience."*
- 788 had witnessed visitors *"damaging the venue in acts of vandalism or as a result of intoxication (including urinating, being sick, etc)."*
- 1,222 reported experience of or being witness to *"general disorderly/loud/unsafe/intoxicated/lewd/antisocial behaviour"* from audience members.
- 336 had been in a theatre that experienced *"widespread disorderly behaviour at a particular performance."* 1,075 had experienced smaller incidents involving one or two people, 856 had experienced this on a larger scale involving less than ten people, and 417 had experience of a *"sizeable minority of the audience" behaving in a disorderly way.*

Bectu recently published [research on the skills shortage](#) that is affecting the theatre sector. 679 respondents – 45% of the total – of this latest survey said that poor audience behaviours had made them consider leaving the industry.

## TROUBLE SPOTS

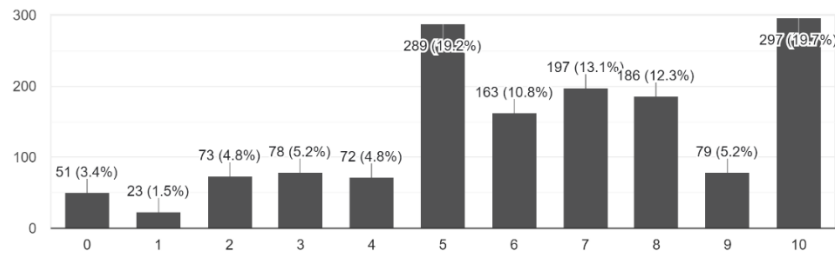
Respondents reported experiences in all kinds of theatrical venues. Problematic behaviour at ballet, opera and classical plays were all mentioned by some respondents. However, these reports were almost eclipsed by concerns about 'juke box' musicals, other musicals and performances by stand-up comedians. 928 respondents reported experiences at juke box musicals and 495 mentioned comedy shows. The survey asked some open

questions about this issue, and while there were many views about it, a significant number of respondents felt that a lot of the norms that have always applied to music venues and comedy shows have moved into a theatrical setting, as these venues are staging more of these kinds of performances.

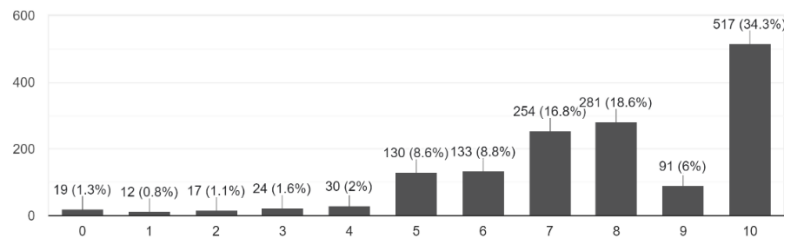
## DETERRENCE AND SAFETY

Respondents were clear that there was a need for better staffing, increased staff training in dealing with issues like these, and increased use of external security. These responses speak for themselves:

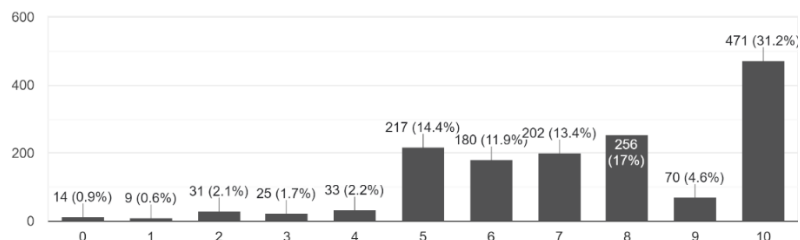
Agree or Disagree: "There is a direct link between difficult audience behaviours and staffing shortages in venues - where there are more staff, we... better at handling difficult audience behaviours."  
1,508 responses



Agree or Disagree: "People working in this sector, in a customer facing role need more training and support in how to deal with difficult audience behaviours."  
1,508 responses



Agree or Disagree: "Venues need to consider using more external security help to deal with difficult audience behaviours."  
1,508 responses



## ALCOHOL SALES

Again, because the survey had respondents with a wide range of experiences (including people who worked in venues that didn't have too many alcohol-related problems) the percentages here are less interesting than the numbers. However, 25.6% were either satisfied or reasonably satisfied with their employer's policies on alcohol, and another 21.2% had no opinion on the matter. The remainder of respondents – a majority – believed that their employers needed to rethink their approach to alcohol sales.

We asked open questions about this and the respondents were widely aware of the financial reasons behind a push for increased alcohol sales. Some respondents argued that alcohol wasn't even the main driver behind some of the unwelcome behaviours.

There was widespread recognition from respondents that they worked in the entertainment industry, and attitudes to alcohol should not be overly-dictated by a disruptive minority at the expense of customers who have a reasonable expectation of a relaxed experience with a few drinks. Respondents generally didn't see this as a simple problem that could be solved by a broad clamp-down on sales, and that poorly-designed policies or high pricing would only encourage people to attempt to bring cheap booze in with them or to 'pre-load.'

However, some respondents reported that alcohol was being marketed and sold in some venues much more aggressively than in the past.

*“Alcohol is promoted everywhere in the venue, particularly the discounts offered if people buy a bottle of wine instead of a glass. People are sent pre-visit emails encouraging them to buy drinks in advance that can be delivered to their seats. All staff are aware of their ability to refuse service but sometimes it comes too late and they then have to deal with aggressive behaviour, which puts them off refusing service to people in the future.”*

Others had different experiences. There was widespread concern about door policies in some venues. One respondent said that, in the case of the venue they worked in:

*“Alcohol bought on the property is extremely rarely the issue as bar staff refuse service to anyone showing signs of intoxication, a majority of guests are visibly intoxicated when they walk through the door but management refuse to turn them away, even after they cause issues.”*

Though there was some dissent on this, there was a common theme arguing for more restrictions on drinks being allowed into auditoriums, and even more opposition to 'at seat service' driven by mobile apps. As one respondent put it, this policy:

*“...makes it very difficult for a member of staff to evaluate how drunk someone is and also creates an unsafe environment to challenge or refuse service if they deem that the person is too intoxicated to receive alcohol.*

*Since the 'runner' delivers the goods on their own, usually without a radio to call for assistance, and usually with multiple orders to run at one time, runners are not in a good position to be able to withhold orders when they are in the auditorium.*

*This policy should be looked at. It seems that it has been put in place without much thought for how it's implemented and the repercussions for staff who will have to make decisions about customer intoxication on their own, without back up and after drinks have already been sold on the app.*

*It puts runners delivering orders in an unsafe position where, should they evaluate a situation and feel that a patron is too drunk to receive more alcohol, they will have to handle the abuse, arising often from the embarrassment customers feel at having been refused service, and any harassment that arises.”*

An unwillingness from management to deal with problems was a common theme:

*“...to avoid conflict, some duty managers let patrons into the building even if they can already see that they are intoxicated, and wait for them to cause a large disturbance before anything is done.”*

Many respondents were looking for a rethink of this issue, and while there were mixed views on the need for restrictions, there was widespread support for better:

- door policies that turn away visitors who are obviously intoxicated, and that discourage ‘smuggling’ of drinks into the venue
- communications about house policies relating to when/where alcohol can be bought and consumed
- communications about acceptable behaviour (not just applying to alcohol consumption)
- consistency in the application of house policies (with a number of respondents saying that they were over-ruled by managers when they refused service to people who then went on to cause trouble or become ill on the premises)
- training in how to apply and enforce policies relating to sales and consumption
- staffing, surveillance and the security assistance needed to support enforceable policies that are respected

## WHY NOW?

The survey responses were very clear that the problem was one that was getting worse. Because more than one third of the respondents only commenced working in the theatre sector since the post-pandemic re-opening, many respondents didn’t express a view on this.

For those who did, there was an almost unanimous belief that audience behaviours have declined (many saying there has been a dramatic change), and that incidents are more frequent (again, many saying that this was markedly so).

There is no way of quantifying the opinions on the causes of this change, but there was a widespread perception that the pandemic had resulted in some changes in the way people behaved. It was a common theme, but usually one that was put in a speculative manner. Other common causes were listed as:

- changes in drinks policies
- staff and skills shortages (an issue recently covered by other Bectu research)
- pricing policies – and a perception among audiences that they have paid a lot of money and don’t expect to be limited in any way
- the financial situation theatres find themselves in, resulting in changes of policy and more permissive management attitudes towards customers
- a significant change in staff as many left the industry during the pandemic, and were replaced by newcomers who were less experienced

## CONCLUSION

Bectu is now calling on the management of all theatrical venues in the UK to rethink their approach to audience behaviours in a range of different ways via its [Safer Theatres Charter](#). We are asking every theatrical venue to revisit key policies, rethink and quantify the risks related to them, and then make those policies and risk-assessments a matter of public record. The union is also urging venues to rethink the way they project the experience of visiting a theatre to their customers, and engage with the union in reviewing these communications.

Finally, Bectu is calling for a rethink of staffing policy. We are asking management to engage with the union on:

- the skills shortage that previous research has highlighted
- staff training around key issues such as the management of drinks and door policies
- appropriate investment in security staffing and surveillance measures designed to monitor and deter problems wherever possible, and deal with them appropriately if they happen