

Turn again: lessons from the panto sector

The Government is facing two conflicting narratives. First, saving the cultural sector and town centres. Second, heading off a second wave of the virus. These came to the fore in a meeting between culture industry leaders and the DCMS Select Committee today week. The story from the world of theatre reflects and reinforces the challenges of the hospitality industry. A concerted approach is imperative.

Top Cat Lord Lloyd Webber said the key ask was for a re-opening date. He said this had come too late for this year's pantomimes, which represented 80% of the annual income for many regional theatres. He said it takes 8 months to get a musical on, the reality being that if he cannot stage productions in the UK, he would need to look elsewhere. If the theatre industry is lost, the country and its tourism suffers and a million people are out of work.

He stressed that theatre could not operate with social distancing. He explained that for large shows, the investment is such that even at full capacity they could not break even for at least 2 years. He had run Phantom of the Opera to full houses in South Korea during the pandemic and proposed to the Secretary of State and Public Health England a pilot at the London Palladium to show that safe measures could equally be implemented there. These would include contactless ticketing, timed entry, thermal imaging, one way systems, face masks, sitting facing one direction (as in aeroplanes), in-seat service, increased cleaning regimes, air-handling systems and fogging. However, rather than a full capacity test, at the instance of the government, this translated into a social distanced pilot that simply proved that such operation was economically unviable.

He expressed consternation that in terms of social distancing theatres are treated differently from aeroplanes, with the government encouraging the latter but not the former. He had never been given an explanation for the rationale.

Lord Lloyd Webber was critical of aid systems which paid for buildings to stay closed. What was needed were stimulus payments enabling them to re-open safely and put on productions. He emphasised that theatre is crucial to the tourism reputation of the UK and employed a million people, but the industry was now at the point of no return.

Watching it, the parallels with the pub and nightclub industry are plain, with the former open with strict social distancing and the latter not open at all. If nightclubs cannot open at full capacity in the key Christmas period, the impact will be swift, brutal and permanent. Like the theatre industry, they have commissioned scientific work, in their case from the Institute of Occupational Medicine, showing that they can re-open safely using a hierarchy of measures and are begging the government to grasp the nettle.

The simple truth is that while there is a single case of coronavirus in the country, assembling a crowd carries a risk. If the response to the risk is to shut the economy entirely, sector after sector will fold. Therefore, we have to move from risk avoidance to risk control. That has been the government's response in the case of offices, retail and transportation. The question must now become what practical measures are needed to respond to the risk to enable full capacity re-opening. The time to answer this question is right now.

Philip Kolvin QC is a licensing barrister who is working with the nightclub industry on its response to the coronavirus.