

Diary from St George's: 'Things are in freefall'

In her weekly diary, the chief executive of St George's Bristol charts the efforts to ensure this beloved concert venue survives Covid-19

By Suzanne Rolt

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St George's Suzanne Rolt | CREDIT: St George's Bristol

I spoke too soon when I wrote in last week's diary that the Government's new Covid-19 measures weren't too concerning for the arts sector. In fact things are going back into freefall.

The tightening up of restrictions and the threat of further local and national lockdowns have put paid to the green shoots emerging across our sector, and hatches are once again being well and truly battened down.

Despite all my efforts to minimise outgoings, drum up new business and tap every source of support, I fear St George's will be dead in the water unless it receives substantial support from the £1.57 billion Cultural Recovery Fund.

The outcome is due on Monday and the one thing I do know is that cultural organisations the country over are going to be glued to their computer screens that morning, anxiously awaiting news.

The fund is oversubscribed and not everyone can be a winner.

In the meantime, we are certainly not sitting on our hands. We have spent weeks carefully planning the mechanics of our return to indoor events, and have just put on sale our new series of socially distanced concerts.

Depressingly though, the timing is off and the anticipated rush for tickets has not materialised, a sign of a discernible shift in appetite for live events.

People are wary of social gatherings and the risk of further sudden cancellations. ⁽¹⁾_(SEP)In the wake of the hugely successful Eat Out to Help Out restaurant campaign, there's a new Seat Out to Help Out scheme being mooted across the arts, whereby government matches the value of every ticket sold.

From where I'm sitting right now, it seems to be a very good idea.

The downturn is dispiriting, because it seemed as if we had been getting somewhere, keeping the music playing and seizing every opportunity to fill the diary with events in the lead up to Christmas.

Now though, it's not only audiences who are wary; few businesses will risk putting on commercial events, cutting off at the knees our ability to hire out our spaces to generate income.

This could not have come at a worse time, coinciding with the end of the furlough scheme. The industry has already lost huge swathes of its precious work force and the last thing it needs is to lose those that remain.

Still, there's some good news: St George's recently completed new building has been shortlisted for the RIBA South West Awards 2020, recognising the outstanding design by Patel Taylor Architects.

We're expecting a visit by the jury any day now and set out to ensure the venue and the gardens look their best.

With no money in the bag to employ gardeners and cleaners, our trustees step in to help. They put out a call to friends and family and, overnight, a team of volunteers is assembled to make everything spick-and-span.

It's a reminder of just how much people care about St George's and want it to succeed. Let's hope others agree.

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