

EMPIRE THEATRE ANNUAL REPORT

REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CITY SERVICES

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is an annual update to members of the work ongoing within the Sunderland Empire Theatre and the monitoring systems currently in place to ensure the highest quality of service is achieved within the Theatre.

2.0 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Sunderland Empire Theatre was opened in July 1907 and is now the largest theatre in the region hosting major West End touring shows. The Theatre is now managed by Ambassador Theatre Group Venues (ATGV) on behalf of Sunderland City Council.
- 2.2 ATGV has agreed to manage and operate the Theatre under the terms and conditions of the agreement which was signed by all parties in March 2007. As part of the agreement ATGV report on a regular basis to both Sunderland City Council (Culture and Tourism Section) and to the Sunderland Empire Theatre Trust Limited (which is a limited company established to monitor performance and quality of the Theatre). See appendix I for current Communications Map.
- 2.3 Under the agreement between the parties an agreed maintenance and management fee is paid on an annual basis to ATGV, in which to carry out the necessary functions of the Theatre.

3.0 CURRENT POSITION

3.1 PERFORMANCE 2010/11

- 3.1.1 During the period 1 March 2010 to 31 March 2011 the Empire Theatre has delivered over 253 shows. Performances include a wide ranging programme which is in line with the current management agreement and includes dance, opera, musicals, educational, children's and a Christmas production along with local and community events.

3.1.2 Below is a list of selected performances along with attendance figures for the period March 2010 – March 2011. (For a full programme of annual performances please see Appendix II).

Show	Performances	Paid Admits	Total Admits	% Capacity
BRB Sleeping Beauty	1	5,659	5,905	49.21%
Jimmy Carr	1	1,250	1,284	64.20%
Derren Brown	3	5,023	5,065	84.42%
Dream Boats & Petticoats	8	5,935	6,427	40.17%
Rocky Horror	8	6,373	6,490	40.56%
Hairspray	16	2,4821	25,525	79.76%
John Bishop	1	1,923	1,936	96.80%
Ken Dodd	1	1,679	1,714	85.70%
White Christmas	50	30,633	32,038	32.03%
Sally Morgan	1	1,810	1,816	90.80%
Alexandra Burke	1	1,616	1,698	84.90%
Spamalot	8	5,866	6,795	42.40%
The City Sings*	1	1,254	1,331	66.50%
Calendar Girls	8	1,2678	12,920	76.80%

NB Total Capacity per performance is 2,000 (1,858 seated, 10 wheelchair spaces 132 standing). Complimentary ticket figures are made up group concessions, 2 for 1 offers, press, guests, staff incentives, Trust Members, competition winners and charitable donations. As standing seats are not sold for most events, 100% capacity cannot be reached therefore sell out is reached at approximately 97%.

3.2 FUTURE PRODUCTIONS

- 3.2.1 New shows for the forthcoming autumn 2011 include the return of Calendar Girls, We Will Rock You, Grease and Annie and a new production for Sunderland of Whoopi Goldberg's Sister Act. Birmingham Royal Ballet is also presenting La Fille Mal Gardee.
- 3.2.2 Other major events for 2012 are Dreamboats and Petticoats, Blood Brothers, Chicago, Spamalot and South Pacific. The highlight of the autumn programme for next year is the UK tour of Dirty Dancing, which is already selling extremely well.
- 3.2.3 The Christmas production for this year is the west end's highly successful Legally Blonde, featuring an all star cast including Claire Sweeney, Michael Stark, Dave Willetts and Faye Brookes as Elle.

3.3 EDUCATION AND OUTREACH

3.3.1 ATGV continue to be committed to delivering education as part of their service delivery and their experienced and qualified staff are on hand to deliver this element of their programme. The diverse programme is varied and works to encourage young people to have the opportunity to experience the Theatre and also allows for ATGV to take the Theatre to an outside audience.

3.3.2 Elements of their education programme include:

- Varying show related activities including post-show talks, pre-show family fun events and educational workshops.
- Theatre tours and talks.
- Work experience programme.
- Stage Experience.
- Stand alone projects in partnership with other organisations.

3.3.3 The Stage Experience project is now in its sixth year and continues to be very popular. *Oliver* was produced in August 2010 and was a huge success. Over 200 young people aged 9-25 applied to take part as either a performer or theatre technician which subsequently resulted in a cast of 144 and technical team of 9.

The fee to participate remains fixed from 2009 at £175 (with a £20 discount for siblings) and will also stay at this price for 2011. The fee covers two weeks professional tuition, loan of costume and souvenir T-shirt. Once again, the project aimed to offer funded places and thanks to the contributions from local businesses and individuals, a total of 13 sponsored places were made available. There were four performances of *Oliver* on 5-7 August 2010 and a total of 4,923 attended making it the most successful project, in terms of ticket sales, to date.

The title for 2011 is *Bugsy Malone* and a well-attended launch event was held to announce this in January 2011.

3.3.4 Tours of the theatre continue to be popular, especially with school groups and are charged at £3 per person. For the first time, special 'Christmas Gift Tours' were offered in December 2010 and proved to be extremely popular; selling out completely. These special tours were charged at £7.50 (or £4.50 if purchased with ticket for *White Christmas*) and included backstage access and mulled wine.

3.3.5 The venue continues its involvement with the Heritage Open Day scheme and September 2010 saw the theatre's doors open to the public for the sixth year running. 64 people enjoyed a free tour of the building over the two day period and excellent feedback was received.

3.3.6 Plans are in place for the introduction of a new scheme in 2011 to add to the already popular theatre tours. The project, entitled 'Theatre

Experience' will see a brand new, two hour theatre workshop available to school, youth and drama groups. This will include a full theatre tour including onstage and backstage access followed by a one hour drama session culminating in a performance by the students based on the early history of Sunderland Empire. Theatre Experience sessions will be charged at £5 per person.

3.3.7 March 2011 saw the end of the Arts Council funded 'A Night Less Ordinary' scheme which provided free theatre tickets for young people aged under 26 years. 2,272 individuals benefited from this scheme at Sunderland Empire and feedback suggests that where this provided an initial theatre visit, the young person was much more likely to return to the venue in the future.

3.3.8 The venue is aiming to provide free drama/movement workshops to coincide with shows that have a clear educational link to group bookings of 10 or more. Some very successful 'Ancient Egypt' sessions were held alongside the run of Joseph in February 2011 and plans are in place for a selection of workshops for those groups coming to see Legally Blonde.

3.4 SERVICE QUALITY

3.4.1 As part of the service quality and monitoring of the theatre all complaints and compliments to the theatre are investigated and responded to accordingly. In all cases the appropriate action is taken and if necessary passed on to the appropriate production company for comment. For March 2010 – March 2011 a total number of 103 complaints along with 70 compliments were received to the Theatre. All complaints are attended to on receipt but in some cases certain complaints received are beyond the control of the Theatre and its staff.

Complaints include:

- Behaviour of fellow Patrons
- Temperature in auditorium
- Restricted view seating
- Booking Fees(Ticketmaster)
- Cast Alterations
- Staff Attitude

Compliments include:

- Excellent Customer Service
- The kindness of staff
- General welcome within the venue
- Good practice during first aid situations
- Programming

3.4.2 ATGV continue to receive customer feedback through customer experience questionnaires. The Theatre uses two types of form; one which is carried out by the council and one which ATGV issue to customers selected at random. The council questionnaire looks at the following criteria's and asks questions to ascertain the Theatre's performance within the following areas:

- Performance quality
- Customer Care
- Health and Safety
- Venue Cleanliness

3.4.3 The in-house questionnaire in addition to the above also asks more specific questions to ensure the Theatre staff are maximising sales opportunities from customers. It also enables ATGV to check that staff have a good knowledge of the facilities offered by the venue.

3.4.4 During the period March 2010 – March 2011 a total of 52 mystery visits were made to various performances at the Theatre. The vast majority of respondents showed high levels of satisfaction with the facilities, service and product offering. When dissatisfaction has been shown, it is often price related.

ATGV will continue to monitor feedback and act accordingly to any suggestions made during the process. Customers are now able to visit the venue website and can communicate with a named staff member to leave their comments. During the next twelve months ATGV will also be communicating with visitors prior to their attendance to the venue by email. Customers who supply their email address will receive a pre visit communication that will give them information regarding their forthcoming visit. It will also invite customers to feedback their experiences to ATGV post attendance.

3.5 DR GILBERT FUND

3.5.1 As part of the legacy left by Dr Gilbert the City Sings event has gone from strength to strength. The aim of the event is to fulfil the wishes of the late Dr Gilbert to encourage the appreciation of music by young people in the city.

3.5.2 The competition consists of two categories – Primary and Open (for tertiary and mixed age secondary groups). The theme for 2011 was based on City Sings USA, with all schools encouraged to introduce one song that had a link to the USA, thus building on the Friendship Agreement with Washington DC.

3.5.3 The winners of each category for 2011 were as follows:

Primary: East Herrington Primary School
Open: St Robert's Secondary School

- 3.5.4 The quality of the performances continues to be of the highest standard and all performers were very well received. The adjudicating panel for the evening, was chaired by the Editor of the Sunderland Echo, Rob Lawson, along with the Mayor of Sunderland, Chairman of the Empire Theatre Trust and Music experts from region.
- 3.5.5 Each choir received a prize fund of £150 from the Dr Gilbert Fund along with £150 from the School Governors Association, with the overall winner, St Robert's, receiving the Dr Gilbert Trophy plus tickets to attend a performance of 'Thriller Live'.

3.6 EMPIRE THEATRE TRUST

- 3.6.1 The formal role of the Empire Theatre Trust as set out in its Memorandum of Association is "to promote, maintain, improve and advance education, particularly by the production of educational plays and the encouragement of the Arts".
- 3.6.2 As part of that role and the monitoring process the Trust has agreed to address a number of priorities in order to improve performance and assist in raising the profile and further promoting the Theatre. These areas include:
- Continued promotion of the Theatre to sponsors/businesses in the city/region
 - Promoting the education programmes devised by ATGV
 - Further development and promotion of the City Sings project in conjunction with Children's Services
- 3.6.3 Members of the Trust continue to work with Officers from City Services and ATGV to ensure the above issues are addressed and delivered.

3.7 BUILDING MAINTENANCE

- 3.7.1 As part of the contract with ATGV a building maintenance budget is in place which allows for the City Council to work in close partnership with ATGV to ensure that this iconic building is maintained and protected for the long term future.
- 3.7.2 During recent months the venue has seen a significant amount of investment being made, both in terms of the council's maintenance fund being utilised and ATG's venue development programme being invested.
- 3.7.2 Recent works include carpet and re-upholstery work throughout the building, repairs to all windows and roofs ensuring the building is completely watertight, electrical and plumbing works. Works are also planned to include a new CCTV system, investment to the Stalls bar area, a new box office ventilation system and new circle bar carpets.

3.8 CHRISTMAS PROGRAMMING

- 3.8.1 Over the last two years the Sunderland Empire has not scheduled a traditional pantomime for the Christmas period. The rationale behind this was based on the fact that the pantomime audience over previous years had been in decline. Regionally all other theatre venues offer pantomime as their traditional performance.
- 3.8.2 Within the ATG portfolio, other venues had offered a large scale West End Production rather than traditional Pantomime. The strategy proved to be successful, and as Sunderland had previously offered Starlight Express over Christmas the decision to move away from pantomime seemed a sensible one. This was confirmed with last years production of White Christmas being one of the Empires best selling shows.
- 3.8.3 This years production at the Theatre has been confirmed as Legally Blonde, which is still playing in London's West End and is anticipated to prove equally popular due to its "feel good" musical factor, which always does very well with the Sunderland audience. ATG feel that the alternative performance is providing choice to their customer base, as within a thirty minute drive customers have the opportunity of at least two professional pantomimes. The decision also allows for local amateur performances to be increased which has been the case at the local Royalty Theatre. As the number one touring venue in the region ATG react to visitor trends and allow for customers to have access to top quality touring products. To date no decision has been made as to the December 2012 offering.

3.9 ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

- 3.9.1 During the last few years customers disposable income for leisure spending has been for many reduced or for some curtailed. The Sunderland Empire has not been exempt from this trend, with audience numbers down over the previous twelve months. Also the number of producers prepared to take risks by touring product has reduced, which has brought the number of performances at the Theatre down over the previous twelve months.
- 3.9.2 Sunderland Empire patrons have however shown high degrees of support for major product as this presents them with less risk of being disappointed with the shows they attend. This trend was also seen throughout all of ATG's regional theatres. Only Londons West End bucked the lower sales trend, as they showed growth over the same period. However it should be noted that in London the audience make up is very different and is based highly on overseas visitors.
- 3.9.3 ATG are confident that for the coming year they will be able to show a recovery, with ticket sales selling well since June of this year. There is a very varied programme for the remainder of this year and for early

2012m with some major shows appearing over the next twelve months, including Dirty Dancing which is already selling extremely well.

- 3.9.4 The indication that customers are prepared to pre pay for tickets in advance of a twelve month period for a production is highly indicative that confidence is returning for patrons to invest in their leisure time.
- 3.9.5 ATG will continue in its investment in quality productions. It also has a section within the Company that focuses on dynamic pricing to monitor how sales are progressing and alters its prices to achieve best yield. ATG are also moving to a new ticketing system that is better able to track customers and understand their habits, this is in turn is used to aid programming within their venues. ATG have also invested in mosaic profiling that studies thier customers and the catchment areas they serve. This helps to target their customer more effectively and ensure their offering is suitable for the demographic in which they operate. At the Empire, ATG are committed to audience development, with their own Creative Learning Department continually working to develop links within the community. ATG continues to encourage local community productions to use the Empire for their performances, as the theatre is a City Council owned venue, it is therefore important that the local community and theTheatres patrons feel a true ownership to the building.

4.0 CONCLUSIONS

- 4.1 Sunderland Empire Theatre under the management of ATGV continues to provide an excellent service to the people of Sunderland and the wider region. Through the monitoring systems in place it is anticipated that the service will continue to flourish and enable Sunderland Empire to continue to be recognised as one the region's leading Theatre facilities.

5.0 RECOMMENDATION

- 5.1 Members are asked to note the contents of this report and to receive an update on the Empire Theatre on an annual basis.

6.0 APPENDICES

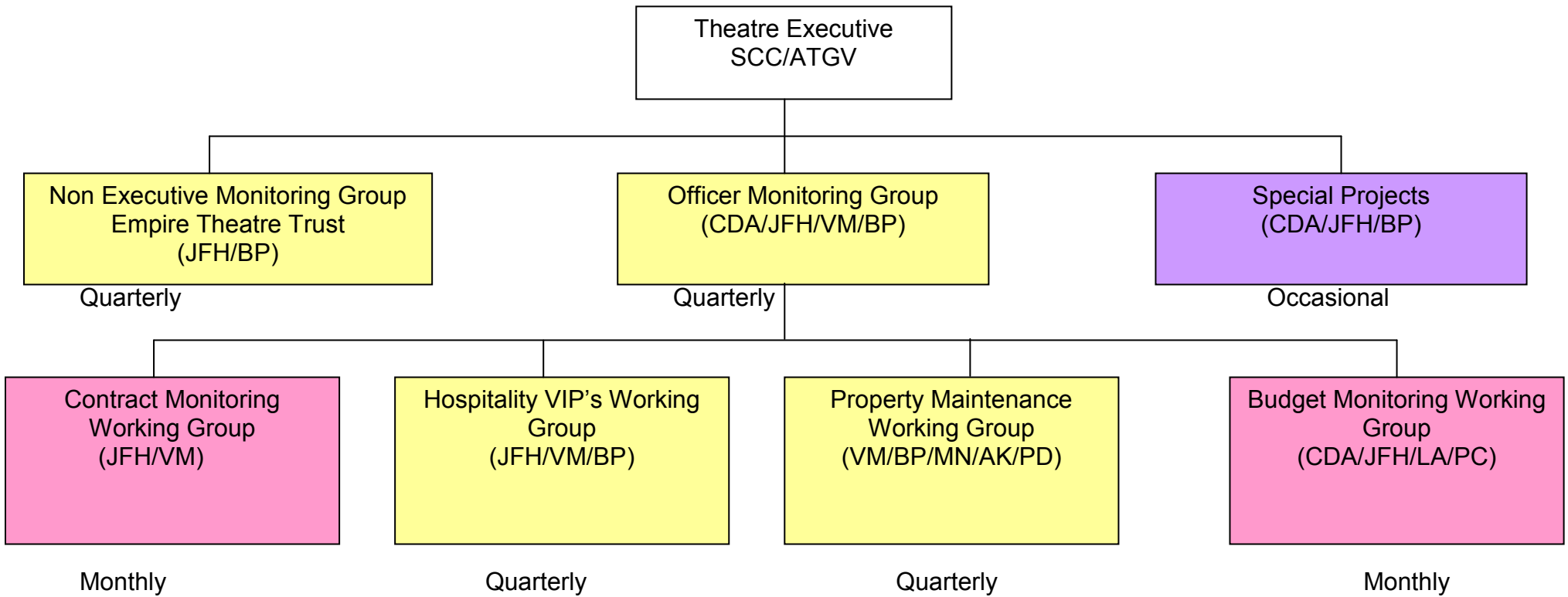
- 6.1 Empire Theatre Communication Map 2010 – Appendix I
Annual Performance List and Figures 2010-2011 – Appendix II

7.0 BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 7.1 Empire Theatre Performance Figures 2010-2011.

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**EMPIRE THEATRE
COMMUNICATIONS MAP**



Key	
Monthly	
Quarterly	
Annually	
Occasional	

CDA	Chris Alexander	Head of Culture and Tourism, City Services
JFH	Jane Hall	Assistant Head of Culture and Tourism
BP	Ben Phillips	General Manager, ATGV
VM	Vicki Medhurst	Cultural Heritage Manager, City Services
LA	Lisa Armstrong	Finance, City Services
PC	Philip Clasper	Management Accountant, City Services
MN	Mark Nicholson	Regional Property Manager - ATGV
AK	Anne Kirk	Building Services, City Services
PD	Paul Davison	Building Surveyor, City Services

Show	Performances	Paid Admits	Total Admits	% Capacity
The City Sings*	1	1227	1291	64.55%
BRB-Sleeping Beauty	6	5659	5905	49.21%
Jimmy Carr	1	1250	1284	64.20%
Essence of Ireland	1	660	715	35.75%
Ricky Tomlinson	1	722	761	38.05%
That'll Be the Day	1	419	438	21.90%
Kathleen Davis-Dance Jam*	1	493	493	24.65%
Caroline Oliver-Dance Magic*	1	446	446	22.30%
ABBA Forever	1	354	422	21.10%
Joe Longthorne	1	521	543	27.15%
When Harry Met Sally	8	930	1950	12.19%
Jim Davidson	1	390	404	20.20%
Derren Brown	3	5023	5065	84.42%
Laughter in the Rain	8	2087	2566	16.04%
Oklahoma	7	3715	3829	27.35%
Dreamboats and Petticoats	8	5935	6427	40.17%
Shameen School of Dance	1	684	684	34.20%
The Ratpack	8	2076	2929	18.31%
Magic of Motown	1	684	750	37.50%
For the Love of Mrs Brown	5	5401	5701	57.01%
Reaching for the Stars*	1	538	548	27.40%
John Hylton	1	311	337	16.85%
Back for Good	1	413	493	24.65%
Variety Club*	1	480	809	40.45%
Horrible Sciences	6	3592	3914	32.62%
Laughter Live(MPJS)	1	12	99	82.50%
Rocky Horror Show	8	6373	6490	40.56%
Derren Brown	1	1766	1776	88.80%
It's Showtime*	1	424	424	21.20%
Sunderland's Schools Dance*	1	1534	1614	80.70%
Everybody Dance*	1	386	414	20.70%
Jake and Elwood	1	291	331	16.55%
Trish and Trina Performers Academy*	1	850	864	43.20%
Mums the Word	3	400	668	11.13%
Kathleen Knox School of Dance*	1	710	836	41.80%
Sandhill View School*	1	39	539	26.95%
Alice in Wonderland*	1	938	1020	25.50%
Fiery Feet*	1	422	422	21.10%
Remember When	1	487	505	25.25%
Oliver!*	4	4646	4929	61.53%
Michael MacIntyre	1	0	1947	97.35%

Hairspray	16	24821	25525	79.76%
Postman Pat	2	867	972	24.30%
Vampires Rock	1	766	835	41.75%
Shakespeare for Kidz	2	871	952	23.80%
How Sweet it is-The Motown Show	1	748	842	42.10%
Sing-a-longa-Sound of Music	1	370	447	22.35%
Laughter Live(MPJS)	1	34	54	43.20%
BRB-Romeo & Juliet	6	5134	5319	44.32%
John Bishop	1	1923	1936	96.80%
Move It, Groove It*	1	455	455	22.75%
Talon	1	416	490	24.50%
ABBA Mania	1	572	607	30.35%
Scrooge	7	7356	7651	54.65%
Reginald D Hunter	1	639	664	33.20%
Roy "Chubby" Brown	1	951	993	49.65%
The Vagina Monologues	1	814	902	45.10%
Laughter Live(MPJS)	1	43	65	52.00%
Ken Dodd	1	1679	1714	85.70%
White Christmas	50	30633	32038	32.03%
Laughter Live(MPJS)	1	73	85	68.00%
One Night of Queen	1	1121	1170	58.50%
Laughter Live(MPJS)	1	100	111	88.80%
Monkwearmouth School Awards*	1	0	1000	50.00%
Circus of Horrors	1	553	610	30.50%
80's Mania	1	694	725	36.00%
Sally Morgan	1	1810	1816	90.80%
Elvis-Live in Concert	1	613	663	33.00%
Big Time American Wrestling	1	370	378	18.90%
Stars on Stage*	1	852	852	42.60%
Joseph	11	7045	7289	33.10%
Laughter Live(MPJS)	1	72	72	57.60%
Alexandra Burke	1	1616	1698	84.90%
Jimmy Carr	1	1700	1702	85.10%
Spamalot	8	5866	6795	42.40%
Swan Lake	2	2926	2982	74.50%
The Chippendales	1	210	306	15.30%
Magic A Kind of ELO	1	258	431	21.50%
Joe Longthorne	1	493	528	26.40%
Laughter Live(MPJS)	1	72	84	67.20%
The City Sings*	1	1254	1331	66.50%
Moscow State Circus	5	1051	1175	11.70%
Bootleg Beatles	1	1173	1231	61.50%
Kathleen Davis School of Dance*	1	444	444	22.20%

Calender Girls	8	12678	12920	76.80%
Totals	253	185424	200441	43.24%

- Local & Community Events
- Musicals
- Plays/Drama
- Comedy
- Ballet/Opera/Dance
- Childrens/Educational/Family
- Concert