

Report of the Assistant Director (Lifelong Learning and Culture)

York Mystery Plays 2012

Summary

1. This report updates the Executive on work to develop the biennial production of mystery plays in the city. It recommends that Council funding previously allocated for a production of the Mystery Plays in York Minster be reallocated to a proposed production to be undertaken jointly by York Museums Trust, York Theatre Royal and Riding Lights Theatre Company in 2012.

Background

2. In March 2004, following a report commissioned by the Council, it was informally agreed with partners that the city would encourage and support a two-year rolling programme for the York Mystery Plays commencing in 2006. An ad hoc group, the York Mystery Plays Co-ordinating Committee, was established to facilitate and co-ordinate the various partners in producing their element of the two year cycle of productions.
3. There were three main elements to the committee's plans:
 - The York Guilds mystery plays on wagons to be produced every four years as part of the agreed cycle: These were produced in 2006 and will take place again this year.
 - The York Youth Mysteries: Produced by the Council and partners in 2008.
 - A York Minster Mystery Plays in 2010: 10 years after the highly successful Millennium Mystery plays in the Minster.
4. The York Minster Mystery Plays have not been able to go ahead in 2010 because the organising board have not been able to secure a 6 week period in the Minster, free from capital works, between now and 2015.
5. The Council had made a grant of £75k towards the 2000 Minster production. In November 2005 the Executive agreed in principle to provide £100k to the 2010 York Minster Mystery Plays 2010 (at the rate of £20k a year over five years). York Minster Mystery Plays Board and the Council entered into a service agreement on this basis in July 2006.

Consultation

6. Consultation has been undertaken with all partners through the York Mystery Plays Co-ordinating Committee chaired by the Dean. All parties are in agreement that the Council's resources should be redirected towards a 2012 production. The York Minster Mystery Plays Board have indicated that they will plan a large-scale Minster production within the biennial cycle to mark the completion of the York Minster Revealed project. For the 2012 production the committee suggested that, following their success with the Railway Children, an approach be made to the York Theatre Royal to develop an outdoors production of the Mystery Plays in 2012.

The proposal

7. The York Mystery Plays 2012 Partnership, a collaboration between York Museums Trust, Riding Lights Theatre and York Theatre Royal, is proposing a major community production for August 2012 to be performed in Museum Gardens. The partnership has drawn up an artistic outline and a forecast budget, which includes the £100k previously committed to the 2010 Minster production. Advice from sponsorship experts confirms that the support from the Council is crucial to its production and fundraising ambitions, as this is a pre-requisite for other grant and sponsorship funding from other public and private bodies.
8. The vision is to create a bold, exhilarating piece of story-telling theatre on an operatic scale and to re-invigorate the tradition and the language and make these plays accessible to a modern audience: To stage the biblical stories in a way that resonates with both past and present and appeals to those of religious faith or none. A small number of high-profile actors will make a professional contribution to a large cast of community performers of all ages and backgrounds drawn from our city – The People's Mystery Plays. The aim is to bring an extraordinary and passionate performance out of our community, resourced with the highest aesthetic and production values, to remind us that the ownership of this tradition rests with the people of York.
9. The production will be the centrepiece of a colourful daytime Community Festival of related events and free performances of 'wagon' and other plays in public spaces around the city. This rolling programme of events will increase the attractiveness of a full day out in York but, most significantly, it will hugely increase the opportunities for a wide range of businesses, associations and educational groups from within the York community to collaborate in creating a memorable cultural landmark.
10. Careful consideration has been given to the idea of returning the Plays to the Museum Gardens to stage them against the ruins of St Mary's Abbey. This dramatic setting was used for most of the productions in the modern era (1951-1988) and with the ability these days to provide covered seating for the audience, the Plays can again be experienced in the context that suits them best – in the open air, against a superb backdrop with immediate links to the historical period from which this remarkable cycle of biblical plays grew.

11. In the fourteenth century from sunrise to sunset on Corpus Christi day, the Mystery Plays travelled through the streets of York on wagons, stopping to perform to gathered audiences at various 'stations'. The essential spirit of this will be captured in a wide-ranging festival of performances and events running alongside the performances in the Museum Gardens. This could include a whole variety of street performance, dance, music, film and digital art, special exhibitions and a 'medieval fayre' – all presented in ways that connect with York's Mystery Play heritage.
12. To ensure that by the summer of 2012 many aspects of this venture have been piloted, the partnership plans to instigate a series of stepping-stone activities. including appointing a York Mystery Plays Community Producer during summer 2010 whose job will be to identify and support the creation of up to 24 separate community-based "creative hubs" in York. These "hubs" will take responsibility for engaging a broad range of people to work with the professional core staff on the creation and presentation of the stories in the Mystery Plays.
13. As part of the stepping stones York Theatre Royal and Riding Lights Theatre Company will collaborate on a community production of Anthony Minguella's Two Planks and a Passion, about a community production of the Mystery Plays, on the York Theatre Royal stage in Summer 2011. The aim would be to work with up to 1,000 members of the community throughout the production.
14. The partnership has requested that the Council retains an active interest in the production of the plays in Museum Gardens through a commitment to provide in-kind support through the relevant Council departments and an advisory role on the partnership board.

Options

15. The principal options are:
 - To agree the reallocation of the sum of £100k to a 2012 production in Museum Gardens to be delivered through the York Mystery Plays 2012 Partnership
 - To retain the £100k and seek alternative proposals for a production in 2012
 - To reclaim the £100k as a budget saving

Analysis

16. Although it would be possible simply to reclaim the £100k there is a significant opportunity presented to us in 2012 by the conjunction of the Yorkshire Gold Year of Festivals leading up to the Olympic Games, the Queen's Diamond Jubilee celebrations, and York 800, our own celebrations of the signing of our city charter. We can use these events to put a clear focus on York as a city of culture. Furthermore, when the Minster staged their Mystery Plays in 2000 'First Stop York' estimated a value of over £1.6m to the local economy at 2000 prices.
17. Any production of the York Cycle of Mystery Plays attracts national and international interest. The Millennium production was a genuinely 'world' event

and there is every reason to expect any 2012 production to retain that status. The Mystery Plays, therefore, as well as being spiritually uplifting and a remarkable community event, have a significant benefit for the local economy, dovetailing with Visit York's objectives and supporting the City of Festivals initiative.

18. The 2000 production levered in over £1m to the city's economy (over and above the production budget). An increased level of benefit would be expected from the 2012 production given that it will be city-wide.
19. The project proposed by The York Mystery Plays Partnership would:
 - Deliver a spectacular production of the York Mystery Play in Museum Gardens as the centerpiece of a 3 week long city wide festival in August 2012
 - Ensure that many residents in local neighbourhood groups, educational groups and business associations get the chance as 'community players' to collaborate in creating a memorable cultural landmark
 - Support a wide range of performances, events and activities running alongside the performances in the Gardens and connected to York's Mystery Play heritage to provide a strong, inclusive festival feel to the city
 - By starting now, allow for a strong grounding in the local community. In their modern reincarnation it has become the tradition that the Plays are performed by a largely voluntary cast but with a professional design, direction and production team. With potentially over 400 local performers involved the earlier that the project commences its detailed planning the more likely a successful outcome is

Corporate Priorities

20. The staging of the 2012 York Mystery Plays would contribute to a number of corporate objectives including strengthening local communities, developing opportunities for residents to experience York as a vibrant and eventful city, supporting an thriving economy and improving opportunities for a healthy, active lifestyle.
21. It would contribute to a range of LAA targets including:
 - % of people who believe people from different backgrounds get on well together in their local area
 - Participation in regular volunteering
 - Environment for a thriving third sector
 - Young people's participation in positive activities
 - Engagement in the arts

Implications

22. **Finance:** The £100k funding already allocated to the Minster Mystery Plays in 2010, which are no longer able to go ahead, will meet the cost to the Council of supporting the 2012 Mystery Plays. That cost will remain unchanged by this report, unless the Council chose to retain the money and allocate it to other

activities or score it as a saving. However, if this were the case then the Council would certainly receive further requests for financial support for a 2012 production of the Mystery plays as part of the two-year cycle. As the £20k budget allocation for 2009/10 has yet to be paid out, the Executive will need to agree a carry forward of this amount to 2010/11.

23. The plays will cost in the region of £1m of which around half will come from box office income. The Partnership will be required to raise the balance. This is broadly the same proportion of investment / funding as was the case in 2000 and as was proposed for the 2010 Minster production.
24. The £100k would be paid out in two tranches of £50k, the first in 2010/11 and the second in 2011/12.
25. **Legal:** The Theatre Royal would be the accountable body within the York Mystery Plays 2012 Partnership. The grant of Council funding to the Theatre Royal for this purpose would be subject to the drawing up of an appropriate service agreement to be approved by the Head of Legal Services.
26. **Equalities:** There is real potential to work within the community element of the York Mystery Plays 2012 partnership proposal to support our equalities agenda of inclusive arts right across the city in neighbourhoods, voluntary groups and communities of interest.
27. The report has no implications relating to:
 - Human Resources
 - Crime and Disorder
 - Information Technology

Risk Management

28. The main risk associated with this proposal is that the partnership is not able to deliver the plays in the gardens due to factors beyond its control e.g. severe weather conditions. In such circumstances the Council's grant may already have been spent on preparatory work and therefore would not be recoverable. Another area of risk would be some other failure in the delivery of the plays which could damage the reputation of the Council and / or open the Council up to liability. These risks will be mitigated as far as is possible by the service agreement which will ensure that:
 - the Council's grant is not expended before a rigorous business plan is in place
 - insurance cover is in place where practicable
 - sound operating procedures are adopted
 - the council has a seat on the partnership board
29. The risk level is medium and will therefore require regular active monitoring by Council officers.

Recommendations

30. The Executive is asked to agree to reallocate the budget available for the 2010 Minster Mystery Plays to the York Mystery Plays 2012 partnership, subject to the drawing up of a satisfactory service agreement, and to approve the carry forward of the £20k 2009/10 budget to 2010/11.

Reason: To ensure 2012 Mysteries Play production that includes the wider community and supports our commitment to a two-year Mystery Plays production cycle.

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Wards Affected:

All

For further information please contact the author of the report

Background Papers: York Minster Mystery Plays 2010 Report to Executive, November 2005