

DREEm: Digital, Regeneration and Experience Economy modelling Case Study 2

Tracking organisational resilience and post-pandemic strategy

DUN DEE REP

SCOTTISH
DANCE
THEATRE

Overview

Interviewee:

Liam Sinclair, executive director and joint CEO, Dundee Rep and Scottish Dance Theatre

www.dundeerep.co.uk

Two interviews inform this case study. The first interview (July 2021) focused on the measures taken throughout the first Covid-19 lockdown period (March 2020–early 2021) to continue delivering a programme of performance and engagement activity to the Dundee Rep’s audience and the Dundee community. The focus was on the strategic use of digital and online methods to build resilience and inform related activity in the longer term. The second interview (March 2022) sought to understand transferrable key learnings that may inform longer-term sector-wide digital policy.

Project context

At the onset of the pandemic, Dundee Rep (often referred to locally as 'the Rep') made a series of strategic decisions to chart a course through the closure of its physical theatre space and adjust to deliver engagement with local, national and global online audiences and communities.

Central to this were two principles:

- 1) While Dundee Rep holds an extensive archive of digital (video) performances of legacy productions and behind-the-scenes 'making-of' footage, it decided not to respond with a knee-jerk rush to make this material available online (whether for free or monetised), as this content had not originally been intended to be shown in a public context.
- 2) The Rep adopted a considered lean-back approach. The organisation was not immediately prepared to respond to a pivot to digital content development and delivery, and audience demand in this new landscape had yet to be ascertained.

Creative framework

Pre-pandemic, Dundee Rep had undergone an organisational restructure, including the timely creation of a new associate director role to deliver its Engage programme. Jess Thorpe and Tashi Gore, each with a background in autobiography and social engagement in art practice, were appointed to share this new position that served to set a new course across the timeline of the pandemic, stimulating audience engagement and inclusion while the physical theatre was closed to the public.

Thorpe and Gore's way of working creatively with communities added a new dimension to the development of the Engage programme, enabling the Rep to create powerful, layered artworks through mass participation in co-designed activities. Sinclair cites the user-generated music platform HitRecord as a key discussion point during this period.

Case study structure

Three key test-and-learn phases of Dundee Rep's adaptation to delivering digital, online and hybrid content:

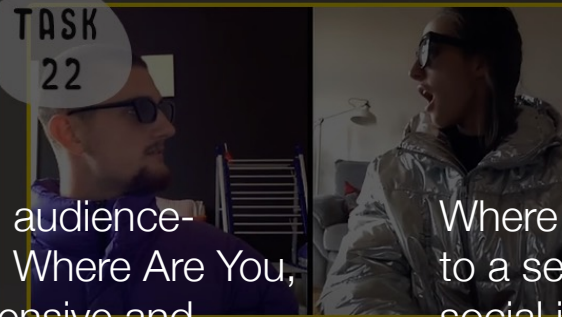
- 1) Where Are You, Dundee? (April–July 2020) generated a new mode of audience participation and content creation as part of the launch of the Rep Studios digital platform.
- 2) Shine On (December 2020) was a tactical response to the postponement of physical attendance at the Rep. The Christmas festival delivered a blend of socially distanced in-person performances, an online digital advent calendar of performances, and a pop-up visual and audio installation in the windows of the theatre to mark the festive season.
- 3) Digital Buzz Festival (22–26 June 2021) pivoted the Rep's longstanding engagement programme to a digital-first delivery strategy, culminating in a week-long programme of live online performances, Q&As and social events.

1) Where Are You, Dundee?

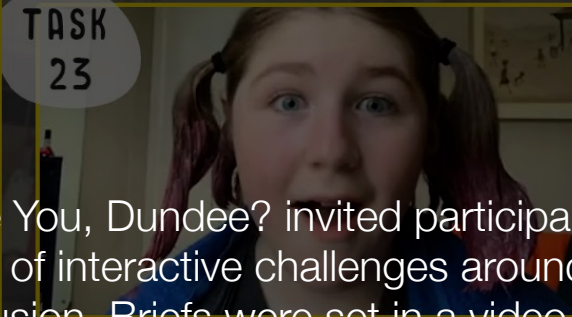
Dundee Rep's first digital venture was to create an audience-participation platform themed around the question Where Are You, Dundee? It was built using a combination of inexpensive and open-source software.

The main online site build is powered by Walls.io, a social platform service that incorporates a range of safeguarding functionality, including content filtering and moderation tools, to enable participants' content to appear on the site from across a range of existing social media platforms. Additional accessibility features were integrated through a UserWay dashboard that allowed users to control design elements such as text sizing and spacing, as well as enabling a dyslexia-friendly font.

The website build was managed using existing internal technical resources, meaning no outsourcing or additional freelance support was required.

TASK
22LEARN A DANCE
ROUTINE

VIEW AND TAKE PART

TASK
23

HAIRSTYLES!

VIEW AND TAKE PART

Where Are You, Dundee? invited participants to respond to a series of interactive challenges around key themes of social inclusion. Briefs were set in a video format and the audience could choose to share the results of their creative endeavours by uploading direct to the site through their own social platforms, using a custom hashtag, or using more analogue means.

The project ran for approximately 14 weeks and three challenges were set each week, with the Rep also engaging with its network of celebrities to invite and include tasks set by actor Alan Cummings and broadcaster Jackie Bird. Each challenge video was distributed through the Rep's social channels and directed viewers back to the main website, creating a seamless audience funnel to the community participation page.

Where Are You, Dundee? challenge examples

(Click to play)



Challenge set by news broadcaster Jackie Bird



Example of audience response

2) Shine On festival

With ongoing lockdown restrictions and continued uncertainty around the security of an in-person programme of Christmas performances and events, Dundee Rep committed instead to a diverse schedule of hybrid (physical and online) activity over the festive season.

Run as a takeover of the Rep's social channels, Advent offered a series of 24 pre-recorded performances, one released each day in the run-up to Christmas, with work spanning everything from the full range of contemporary dance to pantomime and devised dramaturgy. At the time of writing, the series had 7,600 views on Instagram alone. Benchmarked against the physical venue's 455-seat capacity, the series' viewership equates to more than 15 fully sold-out performances.

In addition to the online activity, the Rep's front of house was turned into a fully realised physical and audio installation led by award-winning designer Karen Tennent. The pop-up extravaganza included a spoken word performance by poet Gary Robertson.

Driving further media coverage, the Rep produced a series of four socially distanced performances delivered as surprise and delight moments for the local community, performed in back gardens and cul-de-sacs across Dundee. This intimate series of engagements garnered significant coverage, including from the BBC, which reported on a performance given to 102-year-old George McPherson, whose neighbours nominated him in recognition of his community spirit.

Shine On performance

(Click to play)



Digital advent calendar of performances



Socially distanced pop-up performances

Shine On installation

Windows was the Rep's installation takeover by award-winning designer Karen Tennent, renowned lighting designer Emma Jones and composer Michael John McCarthy, with the voice of poet Gary Robertson.

(Click to play)



3) Digital Buzz Festival

The Digital Buzz Festival stands as the culmination of the inclusion and education work undertaken by the Rep across the year through its Engage strand. It offers students, amateur performers and the creatively curious an opportunity to translate their learnings from in-person classes into performed works at the Rep supported by a surrounding programme of social events.

With the ongoing restrictions of lockdown impacting upon the usual model of programming, the Rep made the decision to pivot to online delivery, creating the first Digital Buzz Festival.

A structured schedule of performances, Q&As and online social events were delivered across the week. All activities were free for participants and audience members.

The final projects were driven by a significant shift in delivery to incorporate pre-recorded works from participants and the audience. This material was either edited from self-shot footage at home, screen recordings from video conferencing platforms or filmed performances on location in and around Dundee. This mode of delivery also coincided with the increased use of social media platforms such as TikTok during the lockdown period.

The delivery and broadcast format proved a positive and inspiring method of producing novel creative works, resulting in many original, significant and poignant pieces. Sinclair references one in particular by a group of students who produced a parody of the *Big Brother*-style reality television format as a means to creatively explore and respond to their personal experiences of lockdown, drawing parallels to being physically limited to a single location while being under a sense of continuous social surveillance.

Rep Studios (April 2021)

The launch of Rep Studios underpinned the wider tactical shift to the digital delivery of content. A dedicated digital initiative, Rep Studios is a space to deliver on-demand and live-streamed work across dance, theatre and music. With an imperative agenda of inclusion, Rep Studios focuses on improving accessibility by tackling barriers such as geography, time and financial limitations.

The Rep also drew upon the multi-levelled pricing structure established by the Almeida Theatre, London, to offer three tiers of pricing for its digitally delivered content, differentiating from the standard in-person ticketing model.

Tickets for a digital live-stream or on-demand performance were priced at £15. A second option was offered at £7.50 for those experiencing cost restrictions. A further monetisation strategy was a Pay It Forward ticket priced at £22.50 (with the cost comprising one full-price ticket plus a reduced-price ticket) for patrons wishing to cover the cost of a ticket for someone with financial constraints.

The success of this diversified pricing structure is evident in the reported revenue split. Approximately 50% of audience members for digital content paid the full price, with roughly 25% of this audience opting for the Pay It Forward tickets. This demonstrates not only the willingness of audiences to support the Rep and the social value of its work during this challenging period but also a sentiment towards enabling wider access to creative experiences.

Rep Studios announcement

(Click to play)



Digital impact 2020–21

(Source: [Annual Review](#))

Total Number of ticketed events **11**

Total Number of original Digital Performance content created **153**

Total Number of views on original Digital Performance content **32,307**

Total Number of participants **499**

Total Number of freelance artists worked with **130**

@ScottishDanceTheatre

@DundeeRep

FACEBOOK

PAGE LIKES	8,772
INCREASED BY	83
POST REACH	510,728
VIDEO MINUTES VIEWED UP 43.1% FROM PREVIOUS YEAR	12.6K
VIDEO VIEWS DOWN 34.8% ON PREVIOUS YEAR	28.7K
VIDEO ENGAGEMENT DOWN 2.64% FROM PREVIOUS YEAR	2.7K



FACEBOOK

PAGE LIKES	17,371
INCREASED BY	274
POST REACH	1,026,481
VIDEO MINUTES VIEWED UP 35.1% FROM PREVIOUS YEAR	49.2K
VIDEO VIEWS UP 10.4% FROM PREVIOUS YEAR	125.6K
VIDEO ENGAGEMENT UP 56.2% FROM PREVIOUS YEAR	7.1K

TWITTER

FOLLOWERS	7,069
INCREASED BY	69
TOTAL IMPRESSIONS	425,000



TWITTER

FOLLOWERS	14,626
INCREASED BY	626
TOTAL IMPRESSIONS	918,400

INSTAGRAM

FOLLOWERS	6,417
INCREASED BY	639



INSTAGRAM

FOLLOWERS	4,723
INCREASED BY	316

WEBSITE

USERS	36,092
NEW USERS	28,853
PAGE VIEWS	160,865



WEBSITE

USERS	54,199
NEW USERS	53,161
PAGE VIEWS	320,363

YOUTUBE

Organic Video Views	3,400
---------------------	--------------



YOUTUBE

Organic Video Views	36,310
---------------------	---------------

Key learnings

The following information provides core observations from across the Rep's portfolio of hybrid digital and physical performance output during the Covid-19 pandemic. This information is drawn from the second interview with Sinclair (March 2022) and with the benefit of nine months' perspective since the first interview.

Broadly speaking, the observations can be divided across four thematic categories:

- 1) Lasting organisational and creative impact of new digital content
- 2) Improving equality of access and services
- 3) Financial and monetisation implications
- 4) Sectoral evolution to support future resilience

Organisational/creative impact

Sinclair's key points:

- The need to fully consider the differentiation of experience between digital and physical performances, and specifically that the digital experience should not seem secondary or inferior to the live performance.
- Two Rep productions, *This is a Love Story* and *A Christmas Carol* (November–December 2021), are examples of instances where the show directors and the Rep consciously delivered parallel digital viewing options to the physical experiences, which either enhanced or offered a significantly different experience for the audience. Live-stream filming techniques and chat functionality were key features, providing viewers at home with unique creative and social dimensions to their online experience.
- By developing these productions in the form of a hybrid delivery model from the outset, creative and organisational considerations were factored in. By building a parallel experience around *A Christmas Carol*, the Rep was able to future-proof against the uncertainty of lockdown measures across the festive schedule.
- Musical components carry their own specific challenges for future monetisation, given considerations of master and performance rights.
- Thematically and methodologically, the types of works evolving post-pandemic have been influenced by the experience and practicalities of producing artistic works in the context of social-gathering restrictions.

Equality of access

- The impact of the increased availability of online content and programming during the pandemic period has initiated a lasting organisational shift in the way the Rep considers equality of access.
- The Engage programme, in particular, highlighted activities such as the Shine On street performances, and a review of understanding access-related issues more broadly. The disparity of digital access has become particularly evident during the pandemic. Post-pandemic, given the audience reach achieved with work that broke down barriers of physical access, consideration around issues of both physical and mental health pertaining to access and participation is required.
- The Rep's digital programming and shift towards online access serviced its existing audience and patronage. It also demonstrated that digital methods of engagement can expand audience reach internationally, via the creation of a valued digital alternative.

Monetisation

While Rep Studios has made technical progress in terms of delivering content digitally with live-streaming and on-demand services, three considerations must be factored in when planning a future digital content strategy:

- 1) Secondary revenue — the importance of secondary revenue generated around hospitality (F&B) services on site during physical attendance, and how this may be supplemented or hybridised in some form.
- 2) Return on investment (ROI) — digital delivery invariably adds cost to a production, and currently the proportional increase in revenue generated through increased digital access on the whole has yet to make up this cost.
- 3) Funding metrics — given ROI considerations, there may be benefit in a review of expected performance and engagement metrics on the part of funding bodies, i.e. that while digital content may carry a higher acquisition cost per audience member, it does have the potential to generate greater and more inclusive access to creative experiences, which could be better reflected in funding metrics.

Evolving the sector

A long-term digital strategy for arts organisations would benefit from addressing existing challenges that may otherwise impede growth, including:

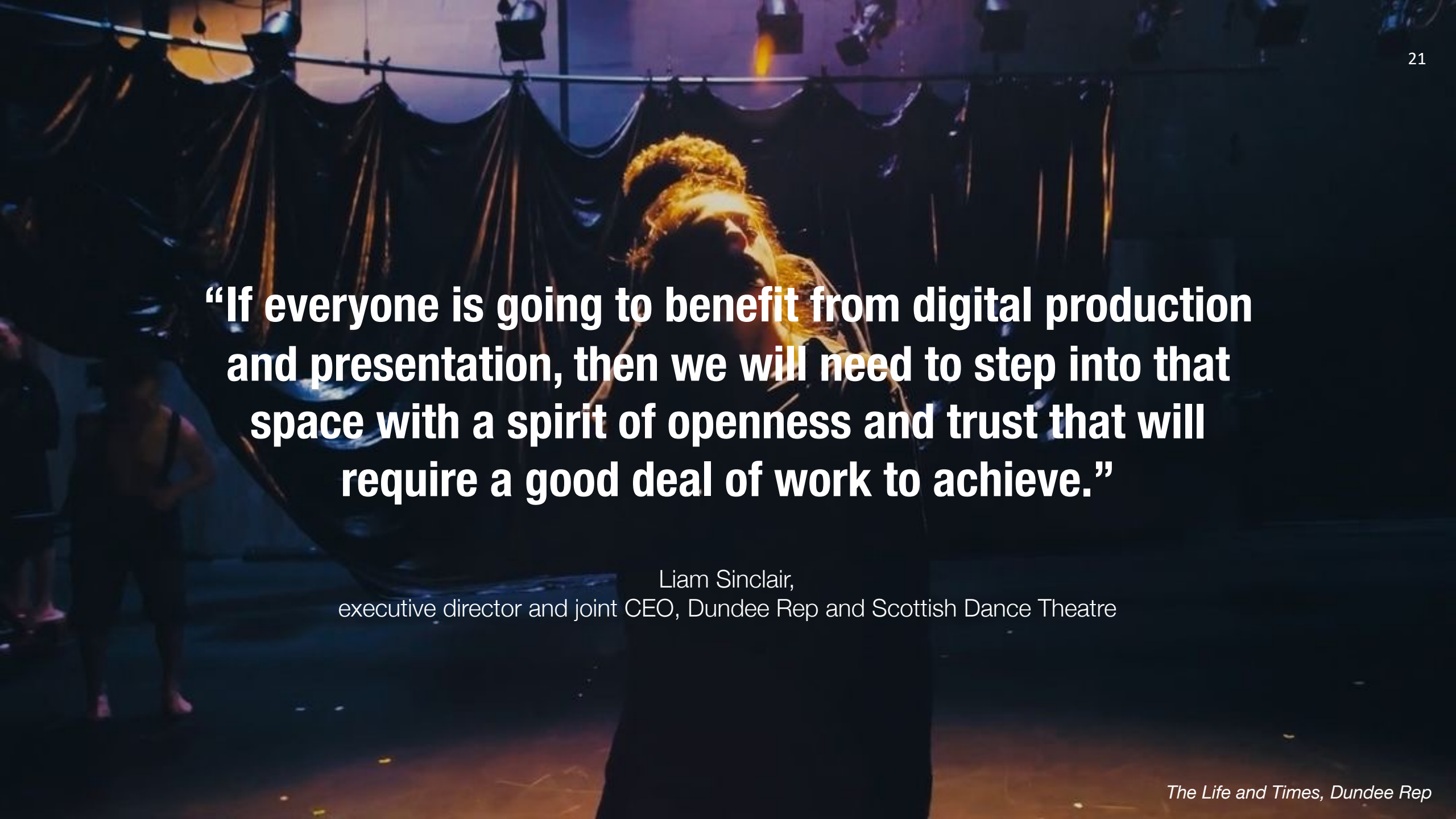
- Review of organisational employment and freelance economy contracts, which relate to secondary or residual payments against works broadcast digitally. The music industry has had to address similar issues during the period of transition towards online music streaming services (e.g. Spotify), and the impact on creatives and performers regarding remuneration for their work.
- Modification of contracts and employment terms, for example to enable ongoing payment for creative work through a robust residuals model.
- Strengthening relationships between organisations and individuals that are building-based, and the freelance communities nationwide, across which there are perceived inequalities in terms of financial security.

Evolving the sector

Ongoing consideration of devolved cultural policy across the regions is resulting in something of a state vs. federal authority challenge whereby the desire and need to unify a nationalised response around remuneration against digital works may butt up against devolved authority autonomy.

Further adding to tension here, Sinclair highlights, is an increased sense of mistrust between building-based arts organisations and freelancers where there appears to be a misperception of an inequality of financial security on the part of the latter in relation to the former. While Sinclair points out that organisations such as the Rep are dependent on the performance and attendance of shows in order to cover production costs, he suggests that there is a notion that organisations such as the Rep have a degree of financial security disproportionate to the freelance economy, thus creating dissonance around a factually inaccurate but persistent narrative.

He argues that tackling this sense of mistrust and creating a more unified tone of solidarity across salaried creative workers and their freelance counterparts will be an essential sectorial mindset shift if issues of contracting and remuneration are to be resolved in a mutually beneficial way.

A person in a dark, textured costume is performing on a stage. The background features black curtains and stage lights. The lighting is dramatic, with a strong light source from the side, creating a silhouette effect on the performer. The overall atmosphere is theatrical and artistic.

“If everyone is going to benefit from digital production and presentation, then we will need to step into that space with a spirit of openness and trust that will require a good deal of work to achieve.”

Liam Sinclair,
executive director and joint CEO, Dundee Rep and Scottish Dance Theatre