

FUTURIST TASK GROUP – Questions for Stakeholders June 2010

Nick Thomas

1. Can you tell us a bit about yourself and your experience in the entertainments business, particularly in Scarborough?

My family moved to Scarborough from Bournemouth in 1967 when I was 8 and I have lived there ever since. I saw my first summer season theatre show at The Futurist that year which was 'The Bachelors, Freddie 'Parrot Face' Davies and The Kaye Sisters. Seeing that show drove my ambition for a career in show-business, which I embarked upon at the age of 12, making my own puppets and charging fees to appear at children's parties. In February 1975 when I was 15, with my act, 'The Tommer Puppets' I won the television show 'New Faces', the 'Britain's Got Talent' of its era. I left school before taking my 'O' Levels to embark on a professional career, which took me all over the world in theatre, cabarets, cruise ships and television.

I gave up performing in 1981 and started Nick Thomas Enterprises, (NTE), to promote shows starring Keith Harris & Orville, because I saw his potential as a box office attraction. I presented my first Scarborough summer show at The Royal Opera House in 1982, starring Keith. In 1983 Keith topped the charts with 'Orville's Song', and he remains a popular attraction in our shows to this day. The success of the Royal Opera House show of 1982 lead to NTE producing summer shows not only in Scarborough for many years to come, but at Sandown IOW, Great Yarmouth, Torquay, Skegness, Bournemouth, Weymouth, Llanduduno, Jersey, all the Butlins Centres. We produced summer seasons in Blackpool for 20 years from 1985 until 2005. Our shows at The Grand Theatre and The South Pier Theatre ran for 16 weeks, usually twice nightly, and we also produced concerts and part seasons at The Opera House, and The North Pier Theatre during this period. I took the decision to cease summer season productions in 2005. Public tastes, the lack of 'performance talent' developing through TV, and the visitor demographic & leisure habits had changed so dramatically, the era of 16 weeks 'twice nightly' was over.

Fortunately, as the summer shows declined, pantomime became more popular, and today it is the financial cornerstone of all regional theatres. Qdos Entertainment, (the company was re-named in 1998), is the world's largest producer of pantomimes, with 25 annual productions annually which gross £20,000,000, representing 30% of the company's turnover today. Through its subsidiary HQ Theatres, Qdos' operates 8 regional theatres, at Southend, Westcliff, Dartford, High Wycombe, Hayes, Hastings and Watford. HQ Hospitality is the company's specialist 'in house' operator of restaurants, banqueting rooms, bars and coffee shops in these venues. That company also operates Scarborough's SJT Theatre restaurant & Bars, The Copper Horse restaurant in Seamer and The Tanglewood restaurant in York. Qdos owns three talent agencies based in London, representing an eclectic mix of

star celebrities from The Chuckle Brothers to Paul Merton. Qdos owns TED Group, the Luton based supplier of entertainment, staff, audio visual installations and leisure services to holiday parks throughout the UK and across Europe. Qdos also supplies full scale theatrical productions to US based Celebrity Cruises on four of its vessels. Qdos has its accounts department and corporate Headquarters in Scarborough and it has offices in London. The company has 750 full time employees at 11 sites.

2. Have you seen Lynne Burton and Robert Cogo-Fawcett's presentation?

Yes

3. Do you recognise their description of the theatre market place generally? And in Scarborough?

Yes. I have know Robert for many years, and he has extensive knowledge and a 'hands on' experience of the industry

4. Are there any areas in which you take issue with Lynne and Robert from your experience?

No, it is an accurate narrative.

5. As a businessman working in the sector:

- i) What would you personally see as the challenges of managing the Futurist?

The Futurist has limited commercial potential as a theatre in Scarborough today for these reasons;

- Physical restrictions of the building*
- The lack of capital investment over the past 25 years resulting in its poor condition*
- An over large capacity, given the limitations of shows it can stage.*
- Significant competitor venues within two hours' drive – so difficult to programme.*
- Insufficient annual subsidy to fund programming or marketing*

- ii) Have you visited the Futurist?

I have produced shows there for 25 years and I have been visiting to see shows for 42 years.

- iii) What do you think the Futurist has to offer? How does this compare with other venues in the town?

It the 1970's under the ownership of Robert Luff Holdings, it was known as 'The Showplace of the North', when it produced lavish summer season shows, but the theatre is sadly a 'white elephant' today for all the reasons highlighted in Robert Cogo Fawcett's report.

- iv) How would you approach the challenge of running both the Spa and Futurist together?

It would not be viable to operate both venues effectively.

- v) From your knowledge of the theatres market is there a niche market for a new smaller replacement theatre for the Futurist in addition to the Spa and Stephen Joseph Theatre?

No; because it would almost certainly be impossible to entice 'number one' or even 'number two' touring musicals to Scarborough from 'the circuit', and there would be very little local demand for small musical or dance shows. Drama is already provided by The SJT.

The local audience's appetite is driven by celebrity performers and known 'big title' shows. Drama & dance is not especially popular in city theatres like Bradford Alhambra or Hull New Theatre let alone Scarborough.

There is some proven interest locally in the popular touring musical titles like 'Joseph', but so few will fit into The Futurist. Even with a replacement venue, these shows all play Hull, Darlington, Leeds, Bradford, Newcastle and Sunderland, so with its small population and catchment, Scarborough would not be a favoured by producers as an alternative..

- vi) How has the marketplace changed in the time you have been working in Scarborough? What are the issues now?

It has changed beyond all recognition. Scarborough's entertainment offer was traditionally driven by its summer season from around 1895 when Pierots entertained visitors on the South Beach.

In my life time, television was always the driver of seaside entertainment in Scarborough, starting with The Black & White Minstrels who first appeared live at The Futurist in 1968, as a 'spin off' from the successful BBC television series.

Over the past 25 years, television has gradually stopped creating 'performers' who would be willing or able to play summer season shows in seaside theatres.

The time when we created 'stars' from a few TV appearances who would appeal to children, parents & grandparents has gone. Our 'stars' of two decades ago were Cannon & Ball, Bobby Davro, The Grumbleweeds and their ilk. There have been no replacements. When we had three terrestrial TV channels and

Morecambe & Wise were watched by 27 million viewers. Now, a reality TV show with 9m viewers is hailed a big success.

The most nationally renowned theatrical offer in Scarborough today, is the Stephen Joseph Theatre. Interestingly, the attendance increases markedly during the summer season, and a lot of those people are visiting Scarborough specifically to come to the SJT. It is difficult to get seats for weekends during the peak summer period.

The more traditional summer season offer in Scarborough struggles to support a formulaic and predictable programme of light entertainment spread across two competing venues within a few hundred yards.

The quality of Scarborough's summer season programme it's year round cultural offer, depends on (a) whether the Authority perceives live entertainment as a visitor attraction that benefits the wider economy of Scarborough, and if so, (b) the level of annual subsidy the Authority is able to provide to achieve its goals.

- vii) Does the seasonality of the Scarborough market cause any issues for your business?

Not particularly, as our local restaurant businesses have year round support from locals.

*Nick Thomas
Chairman; Qdos Entertainment Group*