



The Creative Industry's Newest Trade Union

A BETTER DIRECTION

SDUK is the trade union for stage directors, choreographers and movement directors across the UK. We represent our members interests, and campaign for better rights, working conditions and pay. We aim to provide a sense of community and a unifying network for our members, and we offer support, training and professional development.

Stage Directors UK supports our members to lead

Our members are leaders, both in the rehearsal room and as leaders of theatres and companies. It has never been harder to be a leader in the creative industries. At SDUK we support our members through training and career development partnerships and through our work on best practice employment.

We lobby the industry to better recognise and better support creative leaders.

Stage Directors UK supports our members to create

Our members are working on contracts that no longer represent the reality of creating theatre in the UK. We are lobbying for contracts and pay that better reflect the reality of a directors engagement. We believe that strong contracts, strong rights and fair pay create a more equitable and diverse workforce.

Stage Directors UK supports our members to educate

Our members work across the higher education sector, directing work in drama schools and universities. The crisis that is affecting higher education is damaging to our members, who are seeing their contracts and rights eroded, and in some cases are facing redundancy.

We are lobbying for better funded and stronger higher education, and for better recognition value and remuneration for staff and visiting professionals in drama schools and universities.

Whilst some headway has been made in the past decade, contracts, pay and conditions still do not reflect the reality of a directors engagement. Post pandemic we are also seeing those terms being eroded. We are calling on managers, funders and policy makers to put the creative workforce at the centre of our industry and to show that they are valued.

**Pay us to lead
Pay us to create
Pay us to educate**

Leaders

It has never been harder for creative leaders to balance the demands of running a theatre or a company. Since 2020 there has been an increased shift away from creative leadership of theatres.

SDUK believes in the importance of creative leaders, whether that be the leadership of directors, actors, writers or designers. We believe that a theatre cannot be effectively run by someone who does not have extensive knowledge of the challenges and practicalities of mounting theatre that can only be learnt through hands on experience of creating theatre in a rehearsal room.

SDUK believes in the importance of strong relationships between creative and executive leadership, and an importance for creative leaders to report directly to theatre boards.

SDUK champions a theatre sector with a diverse group of artistic leaders at its heart.

We are calling for better artistic representation in the running of our theatres.

We are calling for:

- 1- A significant proportion of all boards of organisations regularly funded by ACE, ACW and Creative Scotland to include theatre makers.
- 2- A significant proportion of interview panels recruiting new leaders to be made up of theatre makers.
- 3- For ACE, ACW and Creative Scotland to make having creative leadership a requirement of their funding.
- 4- For the industry and individual boards to offer better management, finance and admin training to artists willing to take on leadership roles.
- 5- For all theatres to guarantee that creative leaders will report directly to the board, either in partnership with the executive leadership or not. Executive leadership must not block a direct and open relationship between the artistic director and the board.

Creators

Directors, movement directors, and choreographers all play a vital role in the creation of work for live performance. These roles, alongside writers are often the creative instigators of work.

Over the past decades the way work is created has evolved. It often includes long periods of dramaturgical work for our members, or a series of development workshops. Prep for productions becomes increasingly drawn out with extended casting and design processes.

In addition to extended prep and development periods we are also seeing subsidised theatres extending runs of productions far beyond the traditional 4 weeks that were once common. This increased exploitation of the work results in no additional fee for any of the creative team.

Current contracts do not reflect the actual work of our members, in terms of time, responsibilities and the subsequent exploitation of the work.

The majority of directors working in theatre are working on short term, freelance contracts. In recent years successive governments have made freelance work and self-employment almost impossible to navigate for individuals. A consistent lack of understanding of the realities of freelancers across the UK has resulted in a total lack of support for the freelance workforce. As the theatre is made up of a large freelance workforce, changes to the support freelance workers are given will make a huge impact on the whole industry.

We are calling for:

- 1- Better guidance and protections for our members engaged in early development dramaturgical work and development workshops.
- 2- Contracts and pay that reflect the increased time directors are spending developing work and prepping prior to rehearsals.
- 3- Contracts and pay that reflect the increased length of runs our members work receives in the subsidised sector.
- 4- Better protections from government for freelance workers in the UK, with more effort to embed freelancers into the new deal for working people.

Educators

Many SDUK members work as educators at drama schools, universities and within the creative learning departments of theatres.

With unprecedented pressures being put on the budgets of both theatres and higher education centres many SDUK members have been facing redundancy, or a reduction in the hours they're engaged.

SDUK members who are working as visiting professionals in drama schools are also seeing pressures on budgets resulting in decreased fees, and substandard provision for travel and accommodation expenses. For some institutions freelancer fees have remained flat for over a decade despite inflation.

The consistently shifting HMRC rules around freelance engagement have a particularly detrimental effect on SDUK members working in higher education, who often fall foul of confusing and ever-changing guidance and implementation of new rules by universities who do not fully understand the nature of the work of that freelancer.

We are calling for:

- 1- More protections of specialist higher education performing arts courses, with a proper understanding of their benefits to the workforce of tomorrow.
- 2- An increase in visiting professionals fees in line with inflation.
- 3- Proper expenses to cover all expenses for visiting professionals travelling or relocating for work at a university or drama school.
- 4- Better protections from government for freelance workers in the UK, with more effort to embed freelancers into the new deal for working people.

What next for SDUK?

In 2025 SDUK celebrates its 10th anniversary since it became a membership organisation. It is now an established part of the UK Theatre landscape, whilst it is also the creative industry's newest trade union.

The challenge of receiving this official trade union status should not be underestimated, it is a huge achievement and helps secure SDUK's future.

SDUK wishes to send a huge thank you to the combined efforts of Paul Miller and Thomas Hescott who have each helped the organisation navigate this transition period. In 2025 SDUK will be electing its first General Secretary, and shortly after will elect a new council. The Better Direction manifesto will set the agenda for the newly elected General Secretary and council.

SDUK intends to work with its members, with fellow trade unions and professional bodies to shape the future landscape of UK Theatre. We want to see an industry that puts its creative workforce at the heart of all thinking and all planning. We want the creative workforce to be properly paid for their time and their work, and we want the UK government to better protect and represent freelance workers.