

## Sadler's Wells Theatre

Alistair Spalding, Chief Executive of Sadler's Wells Theatre, recalled an evening back in the autumn of 2004 when he was sitting in a balcony seat in an empty, unlit theatre, watching a crew dismantle a set following a final performance. Earlier in the day, the board had confirmed Spalding's appointment as head of Sadler's Wells, one of London's most important dance and theatre venues. He said:

*"I was very excited at the opportunity before me. But I also distinctly remember an uneasy feeling. I now had full responsibility for an organisation in turmoil, with no particular artistic direction, at a time of great organisational upheaval...not to mention an uncertain future due to a mounting monthly operating deficit."*

At the same time as Spalding's appointment, Chrissy Sharp, an experienced arts administrator, had been appointed general manager. According to Spalding, "Chrissy and I were nervous, to say the least. ...we had been given the reins of a company in crisis."

### Profit and innovation

Spalding realised that they would have to make the theatre financially sound again, but he also wanted it to regain its reputation for cutting-edge dance. Historically, the theatre had been renowned for modern dance and its large stage had been built specifically for large-scale dance performances, although in recent years it had diversified into other theatrical genres. Spalding decided that he wanted to refocus the theatre's operations solely on dance.

His vision for Sadler's Wells was for the theatre "to play a leading role in the creation of dance, to be innovative and a place where choreographers and performers were given the opportunity to make exciting new work on a large scale". This would mean transforming the theatre from a receiving house, where companies rented theatre space, into a joint producer of innovative work representing a broad range of dance forms. However, this entrepreneurial, risk-taking philosophy, and the investment in co-production that would hopefully reinvigorate Sadler's Wells, would have to be married with realistic audience expectations, sound financial forecasting and marketing models that were in harmony with daily box-office realities. Spalding recalled:

*"To tell you the truth, I wasn't exactly sure at the time precisely how I would manage the balancing act of playing it safe – producing shows that did not involve heavy investment and were likely have robust advance ticket sales – a prerequisite for financial viability – while investing in the co-production of untried, innovative productions, which was a prerequisite for Sadler's Wells to reach its artistic potential. It was an interesting time, to say the least."*

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Freek Vermeulen is Professor of Strategy and Entrepreneurship at London Business School.

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