

DIE FIBEL

A Primer for Independent Theatre



PROJECT DESCRIPTION



Editorial



You have a sparkling idea for a theatre project of your own and no clue how to set about it? What does it take to realise a piece or a performance? How to finance your production? What's the best way to advertise and make the press write about you? And what legal regulations do you need to adhere to?

Lower Saxony is big and colourful – the Independent Theatre scene in particular is very lively and diverse. We welcome you to this community! The Association of Independent Theatre in Lower Saxony (*Landesverband Freier Theater in Niedersachsen, LaFT*) and the

Theaterhaus Hildesheim (TH) know their way about the scene and give advice on all matters at hand. Now we have distilled our many years of experience and created ***A Primer for Independent Theatre***, a concrete practical instruction guide in several brochures for Independent Theatre professionals. The Primer offers first steps for newcomers but is also suitable as a definitive update for the advanced.

Good luck from: Martina von Bargaen, Maria Gebhardt, Uta Lorenz, Ulrike Seybold, Carola Streib.
English translation by Mark Roberts.

Signets

We have flagged certain sections in ***A Primer for Independent Theatre*** with pictograms to indicate notes we wished to highlight, definitions, or tips. Aspects you should give special atten-

tion to when creating your project are marked with the pictogram 'attention'. The authors chose simplified icons of the respective sign language words.



Attention



Example



Definition



Note

Gender

A Primer for Independent Theatre was written in gender aware language. After conferring with a diversity consultant at the university of Leipzig, the authors chose a language model that was meant to allow self-recognition to a maximum of readers and to avoid the 'gender-gap'.

Gender



In order to do justice to all gender classifications, readers should be given the opportunity to classify themselves.

Aiming to reach the same goal in the English version of the Primer, the translator consulted a professor at the university of Hildesheim and has attempted to follow her advice.



1. The basics

As soon as a project idea begins to grow in your mind, and you want to start putting it into practice, you should start writing a project description.

This is important for you and your work, because in formulating the description you will see where points are unclear and where you need to be more specific. You will adjust your description to reality again and again during realisation. Even right at the end of the project, when writing the report for the financiers, you should be able to explain, which aspects went as planned, where changes occurred, and why.

In particular, a good project description, together with the cost and financing plan, forms the main part of a grant application you might address to potential financiers.

There is no standardised form for a good project description of an Independent Theatre production. But there are certain elements you should not leave out – and some further hints for better convincing others of your enterprise.

 *The most important point in advance: the application must be appropriate for your project and has to suit you! You have to be fond of your description, and you must be convinced of your writings. This is more important than adjusting to the suspected tastes of others.*

2. The abstract

A project description should always begin with a short and inviting summary of your plan. It should characterise the main aspects in no more than fits on an A4 page.

It helps to reactivate the good old WH-words:

2.1. WHO WILL DO WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, WHY AND FOR WHOM?

You should make particularly clear, what is special about your project. What is the unique feature? You needn't be unique in all WHs, this could easily appear deliberate – but find one or two to put a focus on.

For instance, if you intend to bring theatre to an unusual location, you're emphasising the 'Where?'. If your target audience is unusual, you will be underlining the 'For whom?', and if you will be performing at a jubilee or festivity the 'When?', and so on.

2.2. ELEVATOR PITCH AND AUNTIE ELLI PITCH

In marketing and sales they use a classic exercise, the 'Elevator Pitch'. The idea is this: Someone with a business idea happens to meet a multi-million dollar potential investor in the elevator. Now they have 42 floors (about 60 seconds) to convince the financier of themselves and their idea.

This exercise quickly shows up that you can only convey a few facts within one minute – these had better be the essential ones! And: even a short presentation can bring a specific feeling across and so can an abstract.

Imagine, then, that you're riding an elevator with an important culture patron. What would you tell them about your idea? The keywords that come to mind are a good basis for your abstract.





Another thought experiment is useful for cross-checking, you could call it the 'Auntie Elli Pitch'. You have another 60 seconds and need to explain the idea to someone who has no prior knowledge of the subject. Let us assume an aunt Elli who knows nothing about Independent Theatre. How can you help her get a grasp of what you intend to do, why it is good, and why it should be funded? Even when financiers do know their way about Independent Theatre, the Auntie Elli Pitch helps ground yourself in plain language and the real basics, and to keep your project's peculiarities in mind. You

can always polish your texts with expert knowledge and flashy words later. And of course, you can really find an 'Auntie Elli' and a real 'investor' to give the whole thing a crack and to face yourself with real questions. Shortcomings and fallacies of the project and its description show up better in real conversations.

It is usually wise to write the abstract after you've finished with the rest of the project description. Extract the most important points from the longer text and you will get an even better feeling for your project.

project. You can skillfully include people's education and artistic experience. Give the financiers a lively picture of yourself and your group, and the feeling that they would be cooperating with interesting personalities.



"During my further education at the Finnish Theatre Academy I often suffered from the darkness typical of the Finnish climate. It was at that time that I first had the idea of a performance that would take place almost completely in the dark, requiring only very few singular accents of light. In the years since I have continually been developing Near-Dark-Theatre thereby creating my own niche."

3. Self-characterisation

Part of the project description should be information about the artists and/or the most important people involved. In any case this includes you, the project coordinator (regardless of the part you will play), and everybody in central artistic positions. You needn't name everyone connected to the project, only those whose function will noticeably impact the result.

A tabular CV isn't necessary, though you could attach one if you like. What you want is a lively running text, describing who you are and why you or the artists involved suit the project and vice versa. It's absolutely okay to relay an experience that lead to the project idea. You can even add personal anecdotes if they explain why you and not someone else should undertake this

4. Idea, content and motivation

A detailed account of the content and basic idea of your project is naturally a central part of your project description. Content of Independent Theatre is so diverse and varied that it is difficult to make universal suggestions. But it remains valid that you should keep asking yourself what is special, what is new and relevant for those that will be reading your text. Every now and then you should put yourself in the reader's place and take on their point of view.

If your piece will deal with a more or less well-known topic (e.g. poverty,

middle east conflict, climate change) you needn't write a lengthy essay about that. It would suffice to recapitulate a few current figures, data, and facts and to explain your personal approach to the subject, what you intend to develop, and how you will be working. Similarly, if working from an existing novel or drama, a short summary is enough – it is more important to show what makes your adaptation special, unusual, and exciting. Contrary to common myths you can get public funding for Independent Theatre productions based on classic texts.



But it is required that the production show a distinct approach and take the text to a new level.

If you want to work with a less well known and remote or very local topic, you should naturally elaborate more to get the reader to understand what it's all about. However, an unusual subject alone is not enough – always illustrate the artists' perspective to the matter and how their view is to be transported to the stage.

Continue to ask yourself: 'Why are we doing this production actually?' As soon as you have a conclusive and interesting answer, you can represent your project with confidence. Your relationship with the financiers is not one of examinant and examinee. If all goes well you become partners in realising exciting theatre projects.

5. Aesthetics and theatrical implementation

It may sound obvious, but it is elementary that you remember you are writing an application for a theatre project. Describe what the theatrical elements of your plan are and which aesthetic means you intend to use. Particularly when applying for documentary pieces with extensive research phases, it occurs frequently that while the financiers understand how a large and innovative quantity of material will be gathered on an exciting subject, it remains unclear how and why this will then become a good piece of theatre – rather than a film, a book, or a radio play.

Luckily, 'theatre' has become a very broad term, particularly Independent Theatre. There are possibilities en masse: installative, performative, interdisciplinary... but it is always an artistic heightening and a form of live experience for the recipients. A concrete idea of what it will be needs to be part of your project description.

Independent theatre work is often process-like. When you start rehearsing you often don't know in which direction the piece will develop. This is good and a strong point, from which new and unimagined aspects can eventually grow. Yet, at least a few parameters should be fixed in the project description. Another option is to show up one or two variants without committing to which one you will actually work on during the rehearsal process. In any case this is better than omitting aesthetics and (possible) stage settings completely. Alternatively you could describe how you addressed aesthetic issues in earlier works and what these productions looked like. This is particularly useful advice for young and as yet unknown groups.





6. Target audience and advertising

Yet another aspect of your project description is the naming of your target audience. In addition to describing who you want to address, you should also explain how your project can and will reach these people. Distinguishing target audiences goes further than the classical naming of age groups (e.g. children from four years, young adults). They also depend on your topic and your location. You might aim at residents of a certain township or people that share certain experiences. There is (almost) no such thing as a production that targets everybody to the same

extent – and even if you intend to target very broadly, for instance in a family theatre context, financiers expect concepts and explanations as to how you think you can win the young as well as the old for your project. It is advisable to be precise and not to claim anything you cannot live up to. A classic fairy-tale performance, for instance, might very well entertain parents accompanying their children. Yet, to declare them as your target audience would be simply wrong. On the other hand, parents in this case are the essential target group for advertising.

7. Schedule and progress

Every project description must contain a schedule. For external presentation a list of milestones is usually enough. These might be:

1. Start of research phase
2. Development of piece
3. Job postings for actors

4. Start of rehearsals
5. Premiere
6. Further performances

But certain financiers desire more detailed plans. You should inquire at the respective position.

Make sure your schedule is feasible, and expect unusual and unplanned needs. Time management experts recommend buffers of 30 to 40 percent. Always remember that you are unlikely to be working on only one project at a time. You may be rehearsing for one while doing the accounting for the previous and applying for grants for a following project. And you might face imponderables at any of the phases. An important part of all kinds of resource management, including the cost and financing plan (→ DIE FIBEL | A Primer for Independent Theatre: Cost and Financing Plan), is to distinguish between must-haves and nice-to-haves, that is, elements absolutely necessary for the project to work out as it should, and elements that would improve things but can be omitted if need be.

Classic examples of nice-to-haves are detailed video-documentation and a collection of material as hand-outs to the audience. Make absolutely sure that the elements in the project description and in the cost and financing plan (→ DIE FIBEL | A Primer for Independent Theatre: Cost and Financing Plan) match up.

Give some thought to whether your schedule fits with external factors. Your financiers' respective schedules are particularly interesting since it is them you are asking for grants. What are the application deadlines? When can you expect a decision, how long before actual payment? Is the project allowed to commence before the grant is approved? Is it okay to carry grants over into next year? It is absolutely worthwhile to read up on the financiers' terms before you start.



8. Public relations, project documentation, evaluation

Your advertising strategy and communication channels should also be part of your project description. Possible financiers are interested how you intend to reach your audience and which media you plan to use. After all, these decisions influence public and overall attention for your project and thereby for its supporters. Even if you outsource certain parts of media and public relations, for instance because you're working at a theatre house that assumes such tasks, this belongs in your description. While the usual channels may seem clear, it is still worthwhile to go over the individual media (posters, flyers, press relations, social media, newsletters, culture tips, personal contacts to influencers, etc.) and to consider, which can usefully be fed in what way, and which can be disregarded without loss (→ DIE FIBEL | A Primer for Independent Theatre: Communication).

Defining your goals is always welcome, and helpful for yourself, too. Also, documenting and evaluating them after the project has finished. It can already suffice to name a few figures, like the number of audience members you expect to reach, or the number and type of reports in local newspapers. Many financiers expect a report after project completion and for it to contain these figures. Before the project begins it is sensible to think about how to set about documenting your progress and also who will be doing the work. This is another item in your project overview.

If you intend to try a particularly experimental and innovative format it is advisable to give a higher priority to documentation and evaluation – your project can then be viewed as a pilot project. This might increase the likelihood of your receiving a grant.

9. Application design: structure, scope, language and layout

There are no fixed rules for the length of project descriptions. As long as you mention everything of significance and the text is a good read, (almost) anything goes. Some financiers provide forms that limit the number of characters. Yet you can usually attach an additional free format document.

Where grant application is offered online, you should make use of it. As a rule of thumb, the complete application is between eight and twelve pages in length. These numbers are calculated from the following rough figures, each of which, of course, you can deviate from without degrading your application.



Example:

Page division in a grant application

1 page	Abstract
1–2 pages	Self-characterisation
1–2 pages	Idea, content and motivation
2–3 pages	Aesthetics and theatrical implementation
1/2 page	Target audience and advertising
1 page	Schedule and progress
1/2 page	Public relations, project documentation, evaluation
2 pages	costs and financing plan



You can add further information, like detailed CVs or press releases about former productions, as clearly separated attachments.

Your project description needn't be a typographic masterpiece – but it is necessary to give a few thoughts to design. Many financiers drag hundreds of applications across their desks every year. A reader-friendly text in such a case is more pleasing than an eye-confusing wilderness of characters. A comfortable typeface, not too long paragraphs, and sufficient paragraph spacing together with maybe a few photographs can make just the difference. And remember that many institutions still work with real paper file folders. An ample left margin can make things a lot easier for them. More refined layout is possible but not essential. Only if you already have a corporate identity (logo, writing paper, fontface) it should be visible in your application.

Content is much more important – empty words in a beautiful layout, bearing no relation to the project, will attract attention during your second application at the latest. Leave out any application poetry and buzzword dropping. It may be sensible to know what is currently favoured by culture politics and what the individual focus of a particular financier is. Choose one or two aspects that especially apply to your project. Emphasise these in your description and bring them forward in your wording.



To give a blunt example: A project that makes the history of a certain township accessible to educationally underprivileged residents needn't at the same time demand gender equality, help prevent drug abuse, and invent an unprecedented stage setting.

What applies to layout applies to language analogously: It doesn't have to be art, but clear, lively, and catchy language raises your chances of sticking in memory in a positive way. When in doubt, prefer a personal and colourful style to abstract and nested sentences.

Take time to correct your orthography and hand in your application without spelling mistakes and other slips of the pen. This is a sign of respect towards the financiers and shows them that you will be a conscientious cooperation partner.

10. Last but not least: Ask for advice!

The Association of Independent Theatre in Lower Saxony (*Landesverband Freier Theater in Niedersachsen*) and the Theaterhaus Hildesheim offer assistance with your projects already during the development phase. Ask the

experts to countercheck your applications and get helpful feedback! Direct conversation and one-to-one mentoring will often lead to the result that best suits your project.

All photographs in this brochure are from Independent Theatre productions, photographed by Andreas Hartmann und archived by Theaterhaus Hildesheim.

Cover: Theater Fahrenheit: Da unten
Editorial: Die Wilde Drei: subtil brachiale Literaturmusik
S. 4: Theater Fahrenheit: Da unten
S. 8: Zuckerhut Theaterprodukt: Die Physiker
S. 14: Kompanie Kopfstand: Zwischen Fischen



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