

TMA Winter Event Speech – 12 November 2009

Terrific speech from John as ever.

It's a curious thing but ever since my appointment as Chair of ACE was announced people have been coming up to me sympathetically asking whether I'm all right. I always ask them whatever they can possibly mean and the answers tend to range exactly in the territory John has been talking about.

"No one knows what culture is any more.... The money is about to vanish for ever.... Kids don't go to the theatre or concerts, they just muck about on the net.... Politicians think its all an irrelevant extravagance.

I am always amazed. Not that I disagree with any of the above but because it seems so obvious that artistic enjoyment and creativity have never been more universal, more innovative, more easily distributed and exchanged and generally more exciting than they are today and that being at the Arts council in 2009 is an incredible privilege..

Of course the future is a helter skelter ride, with the gradient getting steeper by the day. But compared with the opening up of new horizons, the transformation of the arts from a precious little corner to a sort of human right claimed by everyone, the pleasures of stability and familiarity – much though I value them - pale into secondary importance.

I do not believe that I am in the least unusual in combining a passionate love of the classical canons in literature, theatre, music and dance with a passionate enjoyment of this whizzy age of breathless change in which we live. How wonderfully the old arguments about artistic quality have been invigorated by having to talk about Aristotle and Artichoke in the same breath. Thank God the old snobberies about amateurism in the arts have had a thorough bashing at the hands of kids making electronic magic in their garages.

I do not DO NOT mean that we should abandon the age-old obligation to sort the good from the second rate and to aspire to the good. Just that all the definitions have become wider, newer, more challenging. What a blessed age we live in.

I'm delighted to have the opportunity to talk to the TMA and have great respect for the role you play in championing theatre, supporting theatre managers and - of course - in making sure that we are aware of the issues that need our attention

As we said in our Theatre Assessment, which we published earlier this year, we have been enjoying in a period of extraordinary creativity in English theatre. There has been an increase in energy and quality in recent years that has given us great cause for celebration.

My theatre going has been fairly London bound in the last few months. But what a few months it has been.

Just in the last few weeks I have seen both Enron and The Power of Yes bring the illumination of theatre to the banking crisis. Kwame Kwe Armah's sparkling Seize the Day at the Tricycle had special resonance for me at the moment (the clue is Mayors of London) as well as being brilliantly written and introducing me to a sensational young actor, Aml Ameen. And Mrs Klein keeping Almeida audiences riveted through the toils of psychoanalytical argument by the skill of three great actresses. I tried hard to go to a show at the Curve in Leicester but they finally confessed it was an Abba Tribute band that night so I only got to peek in for 10 minutes.

Great to see how box offices are holding up in recession. I agree with John that escapism may be part of the explanation but it's also the quality and range of what's on offer that should take the credit. People don't spend hard earned cash on live theatre in a recession unless they are really getting something they value.

So far we have helped 18 theatre organisations to weather the recession through our Sustain programme and this will no doubt rise when the full fund is spent. We're also working closely with local authorities all over the country to make sure the arts are given a fair hearing when budgets are set.

Arts Council: A State of Constant Revolution

You will remember what I call the great Hoo Ha of the Christmas 2007 spending decisions. That was a traumatic experience for the Arts Council and for many of its clients. It made everyone ask fundamental questions about the way we did things.

The result has been radical change. Still going on. Today we are an organisation determined to forge a new ethos which is accountable, consultative, open and transparent with a real mandate to champion the arts, strategic view of priorities and at arms length from government.

The arms length principle has been promoted throughout our history by governments on either side of the political spectrum, allowing our work to transcend party politics. I'll say more of this later

You are already seeing the changes the Arts Council are making and there will be more to come in the next few months. I hope you will like them. I hope you will contribute to the shaping of them. They are not pulling things up by the roots but designed to tackle issues our friends and clients have raised with us over many years.

We have just published the results of our latest stakeholder analysis – apparently it has the status of a national statistic no less, and is not to be spun. You tell us we are Strategic, helpful, useful and supportive. You say that we have got better in the last twelve months. You say we are a colleague. Someone even said 'you get the distinct impression if they weren't being paid to do this, they'd do it for nothing'.

That's good – a reflection of our share price if you like. But Alan and I know there is more to do. We are still seen as bureaucratic – we must get less so. We are still seen as untransparent – we need to become more open and honest. Publishing regular data on how you see us is one aspect of that transparency going forward.

We are sorting our own business. We are cutting back spending on our own offices, saving £6.5 million a year in administration costs, so that we can put every possible penny into the work of artists and arts organisations, so those artists, arts professionals and arts organisations will have to share with us some of the Arts Council's traditional mentoring and encouraging role in relation to newer or less established enterprises. We think those are the right priorities.

In terms of openness, early in the New Year we will publish, for extensive consultation, our overall framework for the arts, known as our national strategy for the arts.

Our theatre team's contribution to this strategy has been informed by the Theatre Assessment. I know that many of you contributed to that Assessment, and are continuing to help us as we develop our new approach to touring. We really appreciate your input and are very grateful for the time and expertise that you have been willing to commit.

Also, later this month, we will be publishing 'Writ Large', our research into new writing, and we will also be publishing our touring strategy, which will address the lack of quality, large scale work and improve our understanding of the commercial realities of touring. Touring is one of our key areas of improvement and our new organisational structure will have people with specific responsibility for touring in each region.

Valuing the contribution of individuals, recognising creative expression so that the boundaries between the 'three spheres' of publicly funded culture,

commercial culture and home-made culture, is inherent in our approach to audience development. This is vitally important to the future sustainability of the arts. We need to work not only harder but more effectively, if we are to achieve the Arts Council's mission of 'Great art for everyone'.

And that is why, early next year, Arts Council England will launch a major engagement programme for the arts that will get more people participating in and attending the arts nationwide. We are in this for the long haul – we recognise that we cannot change behaviours overnight, and so this is a ten year strategic campaign designed to achieve a real and measurable change in behaviour. The game **has** changed, and we'll be announcing detail about how we intend to play our part early in 2010.

We have discovered through A Night Less Ordinary that we can achieve remarkable levels of twittering and blogging as well as more conventional media attention when we all work in partnership, so we're looking forward to the opportunities that this campaign will give us to do more.

One instance of this closer partnership working is our new Artistic Assessors scheme. This is the first stage of the implementation of a peer review and self assessment process that we have worked closely with the sector to develop. We have been delighted by the response and will have 150 assessors in place and working by January 2010, and 300 in total by the end of next year.

Artistic Assessors' reports will feed into the Arts Council's ongoing artistic evaluation of regularly funded organisations. They will provide a richer and broader evidence base to help inform our future funding decisions.

Going Forward: The case for the Arts

In the very near future, we need you to join us in making our case to any future government, whatever colour it is, for continued public investment in the arts. The arts sector has made huge steps forward in recent years, with arts

organisations all over the country developing innovative new business plans to lever in income from other sources. The average Arts Council regularly funded organisation now generates 45 per cent of its income from box office or other commercial activity, 34 per cent from the Arts Council, 11 per cent from other public bodies, and 10 per cent from contributed income.

Public funding is particularly vital to this equation, because it is, in effect, a 'kite mark' of confidence in the intrinsic value of art. Private money likes to follow success: it doesn't like to prop up something that looks vulnerable. The mixed economy means money works hard, and hardworking money is especially missed. So, for every £1 the Arts Council puts in, £2 is brought from elsewhere. Take away our £1 you lose £3. Jobs, local economies, are interlinked with major arts institutions.

We need to encourage new business models, new ways of working, more efficient use of resources and approaches to back office costs. To our clients we may need to say 'We value you, we can't give you as much as we want to, but can we work with you to work with others to make the money go further?'

But the essence of the argument – arts funding matters, it is the bedrock of the creative economy, it links well with the non subsidised sector and WE DON'T COST MUCH ANYWAY should be said again and again. Arts Council spend is less than 0.1% of public spending. It could be more. Why not do what the Dutch are doing, and protect culture spending as being small but big in its effect on the public life and private health of the nation? Why not do as the Norwegians, and have a target to increase spend on culture as a proportion of public spending?

Arms Length

I would like to end with a few words about something John didn't mention but which I think is both topically important and fundamental to our being able to reap the full benefit of the explosion of creative possibilities we have been talking about.

That is the arms length principle by which government, national and local, contributes to the support of artists and the arts through a mechanism that is separate from day to day party politics. It is a principle which was first articulated by Keynes in 1946 and which has served us all, politicians and artists, very well since.

It keeps the arts free of political interference in the content and nature of creative expression. It protects politicians from being held accountable for the occasionally outrageous, offensive or otherwise troublesome work of artists.

It is looked at jealously by Artists in some countries that do not have these arrangements. In the last two weeks alone I have responded to inquiries ranging from the French government to Beijing Television about our arms length system. It is seen as an emblem of good practice all over the world.

I am a democrat and I absolutely believe that elected governments at all levels should have their strategic priorities understood and taken serious account of by the Arts Council. But that is quite different from having the arts run by politicians who have all manner of other important fish to fry and whose primary focus is necessarily elsewhere.

From time to time politicians of all stripes and hues tumble into trying to breach this principle and it is the job of the Arts Council courteously, impartially but adamantly to defend it.

The Minister gave power to the London Mayor to nominate the chair of the London Arts Council, a subcommittee of Arts Council England while the Secretary of State retains the power of final approval.

That legacy has now produced a ridiculous tangle between the Arts Council, a Labour Secretary of State and a Conservative Mayor. I won't go into detail here but just emphasise that this is absolutely not a party issue. It is about

the long term health and good management of the arts and about a principle that has served Britain well for over 60 years.

The present arrangement is a blemish on the arms length principle and one that I hope any government going forwards will look at.

Instead of spending time fending off political squabbles Arts Council England should be focusing on our proper jobs:

the task of becoming a leaner, more flexible, more open body, prepared to defend the role of culture in the tough economic arguments that lie ahead.

The task of offering collaborative, supportive and transformational leadership to a sector that should always be changing, creative, and challenging.

The task of making a reality of Great Art for Everyone.

We live in interesting times – lets thrive in them.