

A NOTE TO THE CULTURAL COMMISSION

(This is a personal view and has not been endorsed by the board of Grey Coast Theatre. A more full submission will follow.)

The following is an observation from one who sees the Scottish cultural world from the far north of Scotland and the perspectives and conclusions drawn are the result of this advantage but they are also the result of someone who has worked in professional and community theatre for over twenty years and who has been a professional writer for longer. It should also be noted that these recommendations, if indeed this is what they are, are meant sincerely and offered up to the general debate in the genuine hope that the arts in Scotland can flourish, be sustained and develop. This is particularly relevant to the arts in the north of Scotland which are in a less than robust condition due to many historical reasons and because of a lack of real understanding of the fragile nature of the arts in the north by Scotland's leading arts funders this circumstance is not likely to change. There has been no real, open or honest debate about the real health of the arts in the north of Scotland and instead there are a set of dangerous assumptions which may suit the current political agenda but do not bear too much scrutiny. This is why the work of the Cultural Commission is so welcome because now, when everything is open to change, is the time to speak out honestly, from the heart, so that this change can happen. |

Firstly, I regret to say, the Scottish Arts Council must go, or be changed utterly, because the people on it are incapable of seeing and delivering the vision needed in order to facilitate our cultural ambitions as a nation. The secondary charge is that they have not nurtured or brought on, in any significant way, the potential which lies at the creative heart of Scotland, whether that is in helping to nurture the talent or realise the ambition of companies or individuals, or in translating that aspiration into a significant economic argument to secure that talent and translate it into a national asset.

This is compounded by a Scottish Government which has consistently failed to see cultural activity and the arts as a priority, taking its lead from the SAC, which is an organisation paralysed by its budgets, or if they do express an interest it is in a particularly philistine way that only sees the arts as a tool to implement government policy. Beneath all of this is local government which has a statutory obligation to ensure that cultural provision is "adequate". As no-one will ever qualify what "adequate" is, the budgetary

boundaries which stifle the imagination of the Scottish Arts Council are magnified to a much larger extent, so that the arts are relegated to the margins of attention occupied by floral arrangements and litter bins.

The greater responsibility the Scottish Executive, through the findings of the Cultural Commission, is going to give local authorities (if that is what is planned) in arts delivery is doomed to failure unless two things happen. One is that the personnel within the Education and Culture departments of every local authority in Scotland are genuinely people with knowledge of and an interest in the arts and of what the arts can do for an area, its economy and its self esteem. Secondly, that the Scottish Executive provides the necessary financial resources which will allow local authorities to do this, that they reward them for imaginative initiatives and for the number of cultural producers they nurture and attract to their area. An arts development strategy for each local authority area in Scotland must be in place before any realistic funding can be released into that area. Only then will our cultural infrastructure be safeguarded, begin to bear fruit and allow the Scottish people to create and enjoy their own culture which is both our strength and our opportunity.

All of these concerns come to a confluence when the Scottish Year of Highland Culture in 2007 is brought under any scrutiny. Highland Council, as far as both the arts community and the general public are concerned, have not engaged in any meaningful dialogue so that no-one on the ground has a real idea of what "The Scottish Year of Highland Culture" is and how it affects them. The recent appointment of a "2007" manager may go a distance to alleviate this but the general perception, as far as the north of Scotland is concerned, is one of mystery and ignorance. The recent announcements of £800,000 from Tessa Jowell's culture department in Westminster to the Highland Council towards the run up to 2007 and the £500,000 from the Millennium Lottery Fund's Urban Cultural Programme as compensation for the failed Cultural Capital bid, without any information as to what this money is to be spent on, raises further concerns within the Highland arts community. The thrust of the latter award is "culture-led regeneration" with an onus on infrastructure. Without information from Highland Council the general impression is of a tightly controlled event with a top-down ethos, where the decisions as to what happens are the results of a hidden criteria whose only public manifestation is that 2007 is seen to have been a successful programme of "events" and that whatever kudos there is going as a result of that falls upon the Highland Council and its managers.

This is not an articulation of paranoia but an honest expression of what those who have a lifetime's commitment to the arts in the Highlands make of what we see happening. The lack of an expressed development policy in relation to an arts infrastructure or any indication of a broader sharing of resources also makes many art practitioners' conclude that 2007 will be a missed opportunity. The almost fetishistic insistence that everything must be based in and around Inverness and that a refurbished Eden Court will be the centre of that is evidence enough for many that these expressed worries will be realised.

To counter this tendency for local government managing arts events for the benefit of local government, which to be fair is sometimes not intentional, but too often is the case, there needs to be more imaginative Executive thinking on strategic planning for the arts in Scotland. The last thing I really want to suggest is to set up yet another body but an organisation whose sole remit is to strengthen the arts in the areas of Scotland, geographically, where they are vulnerable is well over due. Placing this vital responsibility within a body such as The Scottish Arts Council has not worked and will never work considering the financial resources and staffing levels they have to work with. Neither will agencies such as Hi - Arts deliver this necessary change because they are too closely linked with the enterprise companies - who have no real cultural remit - and are too often a sop to the Scottish Arts Council so that ticking boxes is seen as arts development.

In places like Caithness and Galloway, for example, strengthening the infrastructure and supporting the artists on the ground would go a long way to improving the quality of life for the people of these areas. It will, inevitably, come down to priorities but if strategic development of the arts is made a priority, either by legislation or an Executive decision, then the knock on effects that this will have in education, in tackling depopulation, in economic regeneration, will become apparent sooner rather than later. I do not think Scotland can afford not to make this investment.

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