

Cultural Commission

An Arches view on the way forward....



No one has ever heard a British Prime Minister present a policy for culture.

In his St Andrews Day speech, Jack McConnell appeared to put culture clearly on the Scottish agenda. He spoke of a desire that the arts should be on a par in civic life with health and education and that everyone should have the same right of access. The implications of such a statement would be enormous if the necessary resources can be invested in Scotland's cultural life – not on a par with health and education but hopefully more than the 0.1% of the national budget currently allocated. Time will tell.

Apart from scale and financial investment there is another factor when comparing culture with other services. Health and Education are provisions that everyone recognises as vital and necessary in a civilised society - the need for arts and culture is not so apparent. Indeed it can be argued that most people in Scotland do have access to culture as participants or spectators and in its most immediate sense, they have

cultural rights – they can go and see a show, visit galleries, libraries and museums, they can get access to creative learning – how to read, how to paint, play an instrument, write a poem. The problem is that most people choose not to exercise that right and the challenge is surely to develop an environment where people are stimulated to engage and where the arts are seen to be relevant to most people's lives.

Few people will attend an opera, Shakespeare play or experimental jazz concert without beforehand becoming conscious to some degree of the worth of these cultural activities. In the first instance this involves a massive shake up of children's education – right from the pre-school level - where they are introduced to creative learning and artistic skill development alongside the most rudimentary of educational pursuits. It's like picking up a foreign language - the younger the child is the more natural it feels.

Devising a new strategy for arts education in school and beyond involves a major re-think amongst educationalists and legislators. However, arts organisations can play a vital part in the process – not only in advising on the way children can experience artistic activity and acquire creative skills but also by making their own direct contributions to school life. For example, The Arches is now in the second year of a 'Burns Supper' project with 90 primary school leavers in West Dunbartonshire which involves drama training, dance, music and professional production support for the final performances of a ten week after school programme. Mind you, for the children to obtain maximum benefit from such a project it would be preferable if it were programmed into the school day rather than be designated an extra-curricular activity.

The Arches also produced a Christmas show last year designed for pre-school and younger primary school children – the piece, *The Little Mermaid*, was a gentle and accessible production using colour, sound and traditional story telling suited for children engaging in their first theatre going experience. It is crucial that such an experience is a fulfilling and indeed a magical one from the point of view of developing long-term interest in the theatre going experience. This is further enhanced by the visit to a public theatre to watch a performance. In recent years, cutbacks have forced the majority of schools to buy in travelling arts productions rather than hire the coaches and so on for school excursions. Arts companies performing in classrooms and school halls should be an essential part of the regular school experience but they can never provide a substitute for the children visiting concert halls, galleries and other dedicated arts venues.

Where an organisation like the Arches has its most significant contribution to make is at the other end – when the young people have left school and when the choice is theirs alone on the exercising of those cultural rights – either as practitioners or spectators or both. There are two distinct elements to encouraging a positive choice – the excitement generated by the arts activity and the stimulating environment where that activity takes place.

The excitement generated by the arts activity cannot be legislated for – it comes down to invention and creative ingenuity. More money doesn't necessarily provide for great artistic work – art is not prescriptive that way. However, the environment whereby artists can be given time to explore and develop can be vastly improved.

How refreshing it would be if the Scottish Executive took the initiative to release artists and arts companies from the ties that currently bind them and enabled them to produce great work unconditionally. This would be a healthy break with British tradition whereby arts funding has not only demanded that arts companies develop a plural funding base, including partnerships with the private sector and a constantly improving box-office performance but also there is a requirement to link the arts activity to other areas of Government policy – educational and community relevance, social inclusion programmes, and so on. A whole variety of arts and culture projects can make an essential contribution to education, community development and social welfare but to insist that each performing company or individual artist must demonstrate such a commitment denigrates cultural activity to being nothing more than an add on. Once an artist feels inhibited about pursuing the self centred egotism which so often produces great art we as a nation will be the poorer for it. Rather, the Scottish Executive should take the opportunity to signal to the international community that Scotland is truly European in its approach to culture and no longer giving as little as can be got away with. This would mean not only a far more realistic funding base but also a variety of other initiatives such as tax relief for artists (as in Ireland), VAT exemption for arts companies, poorly used public buildings given over as arts resources, and, above all, a much greater trust in the integrity of the artistic community.

Having said that, there is no contradiction between demanding a much greater level of public investment in Scotland's cultural life and looking to arts organisations to develop far more sophisticated and aggressive approaches to income generation. The Arches was founded and exists

today on the premise of generating substantial commercial income as a means of subsidising its arts programme while at the same time arguing for higher levels of public investment to develop that programme of work. This is just one example of whole range of strategies which should be embraced in exploring the development of creative activity. The Arches would clearly put itself forward as a model for a particular type of operation – using financial ingenuity and enterprise to support an extremely diverse range of artistic work.

The particular elements of the Arches model which should be highlighted and taken on board by cultural policy makers are firstly, the deconstruction of divisions between types of cultural events and secondly the inclusion of a very diverse range of people to watch or participate in those events. This second element is enhanced by staging cultural activity in a building which has a heightened atmosphere and which generates excitement but which is unpretentious at the same time.

It would be a very productive exercise if a decision was made to explore the development of found and unusual spaces in order to house cultural activity. So many cultural buildings in Scotland today are dry and dull in their appearance. The majority of concert halls, theatres, libraries, museums, and arts centres throughout the country deter young people in particular from ever crossing their thresholds. Whether they are Victorian throwbacks full of grotesque finery and fuss or ambitious new builds, there seem to be very few which have approached getting it right for artists or audiences. This is not to present an argument that railway arches are the answer to arts building plans. However, throughout Europe, the most exciting venues are ones converted from something else – a factory, a warehouse, a prison, a church - and which seem to engage in a sense of invention and drama by the very fact that they have been so radically transformed from their intended use. The very existence of such types of venue seems to signify a statement of intent which people want to respond to.

This doesn't mean that only old conversions can work as culture houses . I can think of the Stadtearten in Stockholm - a rather ugly purpose build 20th century building which dominates the central square. However, its sense of informality, its combination of public library, internet café, galleries, seven theatre spaces, and bars and restaurants attracts a massive range of people who seem to feel totally at ease and lack that sense of self-consciousness provoked by walking through the average British arts centre foyer.

The point I would make about the deconstructed found spaces is that their lack of formality can inspire artists to think more laterally about the type of work they produce and audiences to be undaunted by the experience. The Arches has proved that many hundreds of thousands of hitherto culturally disenfranchised young people will come through the doors precisely because the building is not regarded as an arts venue but rather as a place of fun where anything can and usually does happen.

Scotland could be leading the way in producing new models for artistic practice – discovering new art forms and welcoming new audiences to established cultural practice by setting them in an invigorating context. A recent survey discovered that 20% of theatre audiences at the Arches also attend the club nights and a similar proportion visit the music gigs. Year on year that percentage has been growing. Ten years ago the idea of our young clubbers attending a theatre production would have been an anathema.

This all has to do with examining what constitutes creative work. The conventional labels are hopelessly out of date and funding bodies need to be able to respond to the cultural aspirations of young Scottish people today. This is not to say that high art, ('complex' art, as Tessa Jowell delicately phrased it in her recent cultural statement) needs to be dumbed down but rather the activities of a whole new generation of artists must be recognised and supported in a far more substantial way.

Once we get beyond the now ancient classifications of what constitutes cultural activity such as opera, ballet, theatre, and classical concerts, and take on board such genres as club culture, rock, indie, hip hop music, digital and cyberspace technology, new languages for performance, and so on, then the cultural landscape and the number of people exercising their 'cultural rights' looks radically different anyway. Just as the environment where people assemble to enjoy culture is crucial so is the type of event or activity that's on offer.

The points mentioned above are only a few but are ones which the Arches cares passionately about. What is essential for cultural development as a whole is for the Scottish Executive to substantiate the enthusiasm generated by Jack McConnell following his speech. One gesture should be to establish a Minister of Culture where a senior politician is exclusively championing cultural rights and not carrying additional portfolios such as tourism, and sport. At the same time, policy decision-making on the arts should be left to those unaffected by political

influence. That is not to put cultural activity on a pedestal but to recognise that it is not a service like education, transport or health – it is far more subjective than that – rather it is a platform for creativity and provocation which should always be challenging and stimulating but can also be derogatory, combative, perplexing, politically insensitive – and must be allowed to express itself without interference if we are all to be its beneficiaries.

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January 2005