

Valuing Culture

Speech by Deborah Bestwick, Director , Oval House Theatre

In the last 10 years the number of full time staff employed to deal with management and administration has more than tripled. During the same period the financial turnover (including inflation) has only doubled and our activities have increased by about a third.

Within my job as Director I used to do all fundraising, while the financial administration and management was carried out comfortably by one person on the one ropey old computer that we possessed. We have now added a General Manager, and Fundraiser and an Admin Assistant.

And what do all these staff DO (in addition to the management of three busy programmes of work), especially now that we have the benefit of networked computers for all staff, and a computerised Box Office (with full IT support, of course). Well, to begin with the dissolution of ILEA and the GLC left Oval House applying to the ALG and 4 different boroughs, 2 of which still offer us service level agreements (Lambeth's is 29 pages long), resulting in a proliferation of annual applications monitoring visits, quarterly returns and various compulsory Conditions of Grant Aid and each with their own idiosyncratic monitoring and reporting requirements, all for a net total reduction in grants. This, and years of cash standstill or minimal inflationary increases (until the Theatre Review Money) from the London Arts Board have obliged us to channel considerable effort into diversifying our income. Economically this is perhaps a more stable and healthy position, but we are now landlords to every available cupboard big enough to house a desk, and issue over 160 contracts and letters of agreements for the hire of space, catering services and even use of our roof for a phone mast, 160 associated invoices and the inevitable cheque-chasing letters. We make about 40 applications (each with complicated cost centred budget) to Trusts and Foundations, each year, follow up grants awarded with yet more reports, undertake accounting gymnastics to cross reference up to 15 different project grants that all contribute to overheads across different departments (Thank You Charity SORP) ... We service an individual donor list of almost 600 with a newsletter, thank you letters and process donations through CAF, Credit Card and Cheques.

Charity SORP, Best Value, QAMS, an obsession with evaluation, (a foundation which has offered us £3k has just demanded, as a condition of the grant, that recipients spend an entire day attending their seminar on evaluation techniques) documentation (which none of the people who demand it ever use) , all invented by people who have a greater capacity for administration than the organisations they

impose it on. Some of these funders do not actually ask what we do, or pay any attention to the quality of the art we support. The ALG believes that no specialist arts officers are required, and actively discourages officers, who recommend grants - or not, from seeing performances by clients! Though they show no interest in what audiences see on stage we are faced with ever more ludicrous demands to monitor and categorise every audience member and participant, right down to How many people from each racial, age and ability bracket come from each individual London Borough. Much of this seems pointless, it isn't the data WE need to inform our marketing or artistic development, and, amidst all this monitoring, does anyone else think that it's strange that we are never asked to account for the Class Background of our audiences...arguably the most relevant discussion in access to and ownership of the arts?

I sometimes feel that going to a performance is exactly like being in the office when I am faced with, say THIS, a 23 question questionnaire, which takes up more space than the information about the dance company I enjoyed so much, but doesn't even touch on my reaction to the content or aesthetic of the artistic event.

And here we have a very serious issue: at the very point that (if the artistic experience was provoking, challenging, or overwhelmed us emotionally, sensually) we are most open to questions of 'what if...', questioning every aspect of what it is to be human and live in our society, we are suddenly asked closed questions, in tick boxes, stifling the spontaneity of our own response. Just at the point that we may be understanding a universal experience with our fellow audience members, we are quickly asked to reduce our identity into categories of someone else's decree: Age 25-34, sex, male, Ethnic Background: Other .

Nowhere does this intrusion cut across the very purpose of the art with more friction than in the matter of race and ethnicity. I can tell you, anecdotally, (but it's close to lunch, and anyway anecdotal is usually a bit more interesting than hard data) that the form monitoring my baby's treatment at an NHS trust hospital offered 3 full-length columns across a full-side of A4 of ethnic and racial tickboxes. As a 21st C cosmopolitan child, a quarter each of French Mauritian Hindu, Tamil Muslim, Yorkshire Romany and Derbyshire Miner, I still had to consign him to the 'OTHER' box, and at that moment felt fleetingly, perhaps irrationally, alienated. At Oval House we are BY LAW, well, all right, not law, but in practice we're less likely to transgress a Condition of Grant Aid from our most substantial funder than to smuggle arms, we are obliged to monitor all users by race, preferably along the CRE model. As this prescriptive tick-box format consigns many of our carnival participants (Trinidadians of Indian racial background) to the OTHER box, we invite people, in an open question, to self define. Even so, in a survey of people who were eloquent in enjoyed sharing their response to the theatre they had seen, 34% declined to give their racial background, while NONE declined to give their age.

In bid to INCLUDE we find yourselves supporting mechanisms which exclude, stigmatise or just 'other-boxify' ordinary citizens of this country. They are subjected to monitoring and special audience development schemes as if the problem is somehow with them and their recalcitrant stubbornness to buy a ticket. At the launch of decibel last month, the opening speaker, on the subject of the assimilation or integration of and culturally diverse arts practices said he looked forward to the day when he could celebrate the principle "when in Rome do as the Romans do" on the grounds that Rome itself accurately represents the whole of humankind. And yet at Oval House no monitoring has asked us for details of the artistic diversity of our WORK, there has never been any monitoring which links our 50% black audience with the fact that we just happen to include the best new work from a variety of cultural origins within our artistic programming.

And this is where it all needs to begin and end; with the work.

So how can we, cultural theorists, policy makers, politicians and practitioners, offer accountability to the taxpayers and charitable donors who subsidise the arts, and give them what they are actually hoping to pay for, arts events, rather than bulging filing cabinets and offices full of computers.

Firstly, if we can't quite bring ourselves to trust the artist, trust the audience, participant or user. One of the barriers to putting humans on Mars is the psychological effect on the astronaut of the three year journey, and in particular the demoralising effect of not having access to real food. It is rocket science, it seems, to understand that quantifying, and providing nutritionally correct pellets treats the astronaut simply as a digestive system with inputs and outputs, but that real food feeds the human being. NASA have accepted this based on experience (aka Anecdotal Evidence) case-studies and their own common sense, not 'hard data' as to what makes Human beings tick. So, perhaps we could adopt some Rocket Science, and base our belief in the arts on JUDGEMENT rather than statistical proof. Each time we engage with art our response is different, and unique to each human being: that's the whole point. You all know that you have had profound responses, which have somehow given you new perspective on the world you live in, and some of you will have had experiences which have changed your lives, but in different ways and in response to different art. Trust that teachers, young people, audiences, have the same strength of desire and understanding of the role of a particular art in their particular context in the same way that NASA trusts it's astronauts to know what they want to eat.

To embrace this concept, I believe we need to be less squeamish about our championing of the arts as a celebration of our national strength and identity. It might make some of us go all wobbly to think that the Tories might have had a better grasp of this, The French have already been cited and some aspects of their confidence might make some people hear scary voices whispering 'nationalism', but look at the way Robert Lepage is valued and supported by Quebec I have been to his studio, a beautiful building with world-class facilities with pride of place in the old town on the

River, alongside the National Museum and Art Gallery. Much of his work now is produced abroad and never seen in Quebec, but the Quebec provincial government treasure him as ambassador and endow him to work freely on his own terms. We have no problem with this in terms of sport: why do we get all embarrassed and apologetic when we talk of the arts?

Next: lets get a grip on all this bureaucracy which takes up so much time, public money and energy within the practising arts organisations. Most of us are charities and limited companies. We are therefore obliged to spend huge sums on Auditors who approve our accounts to Charity Commission and Companies House standard. We have Boards who are legally responsible and accountable for our financial good practice. Does Oval House really need, therefore, to be closely scrutinised by officers from four other public bodies, all of who are paid for by the taxpayer and some of who don't actually have the expertise to understand what they are looking at? Since accreditation is all the rage, could we perhaps introduce a sort of kite mark, be accredited by one body to a standard accepted by the others in the system? Establish that we are actually a responsible, professional management and then leave us to it for three years.

And then, lets find a way to bring critical appraisal of artists by artists into the push for artistic quality. I do admit, as an embattled practitioner, to a bad case of the defensiveness, and infantilised state which Adrian suggests we may suffer from, and you will rarely see public criticism of one arts organisation by another in public. We do harbour an un-useful 'them and us' dynamic with bodies who have imposed the systems described above. But amongst ourselves you WILL hear perceptive, intelligent, hard hitting constructive criticism, after all the arts community are articulate and not short on opinions. The problem is that it is funders who are responsible for making and breaking subsidy decisions, and most are not and never have been involved in the creative process. In any case, the most useful intervention for Oval House has not been the endless applications and reports on which are grants are based, but our London Arts Appraisal, conducted by a team of people for whom we had artistic respect, and detailed enough to judge our strengths and weaknesses on our terms, against our artistic vision. In fact, I enjoyed (and still enjoy) a most constructive relationship with the body formerly known as London Arts, partly because I was invited to take part as an artist on so many panels and advisory groups. We were listened to, and it felt as if it was a peer- process, we, the practitioners, were stakeholders and true partners in the system. I am very sorry indeed to see panels, almost all of whose members were artists, excised from the streamlined system, and as we work to re-address the definition of quality and the true value of art, lets bring back the artists!

This is the opening of a conversation, and I am confident that we are all committed to pursuing it to an outcome we can be proud of. I am afraid that none of my suggestions so far will actually tell the government the optimum level they need to spend on the arts, but they might be a step towards ensuring that public money is spent on

something THEY value rather than bureaucracy, and that during next ten years Oval House makes NO further addition to admin staff and our only additions are in the creative team, making real work for our citizens, artists, audiences and participants.

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