

Valuing Culture

Speech by Nicholas Hytner, Director, National Theatre

Welcome to the National Theatre Studio. Thank you for joining us here today. I'm enormously grateful to our co-hosts – the National Gallery, Demos and AEA Consulting; and particularly grateful to the Clore Duffield Foundation and the Jerwood Foundation for their generous support.

Here, in the Studio, is where we find out what to do next. Its purpose is to discover the new voices, to explore new forms of theatre, to encourage new theatre-makers, and to develop new shows. In my gut, I know that its purpose is the National Theatre's purpose; but to make such a statement is to beg all sorts of questions. Not least among them is whether gut feeling is an adequate basis for policy making in an arts institution. It is some of those questions that we hope to address today.

It was at the press conference that announced my appointment to the National's directorship that I was made viscerally aware of the poverty of the current discourse about cultural institutions. I wasn't, I think, asked a single question about why we're here, or what the National's for. But there was a hell of a lot of noise made about what our audience looks like. As any fool knows, it's white, it's middle-aged, it's middle-class, and it's a very bad thing indeed. It was getting terrible reviews until recently, worse reviews than any of our shows; but then somebody noticed some kids in the house with studs through their noses, and the reviews looked up.

There are good, practical reasons for worrying about the average age of the audience. Old people get older and die, which is bad for business. But it felt to me that we'd reached a point where we were judging the success of our enterprise by its ability to pull in an Officially Approved Crowd, and that the Crowd had become an end in itself.

To a degree, I suppose, the nature of our audience could indeed be taken to be a barometer of our success. A homogeneous audience is probably the consequence of homogeneous programming. A national theatre should at the very least address what it is that entitles it to call itself national. Its concerns should extend well beyond the predilections of a single group.

So when there are all sorts buzzing around our three theatres, we know at least that we are responding to what Tennessee Williams called "the great, almost screaming need of a great world-wide human effort to know ourselves and each other a great deal better." We know too that a diverse crowd is more likely to challenge us to push forward, to explore new territory, or to rediscover familiar territory in new ways. And we know that we have a responsibility to make our discoveries available and accessible.

But the rhetoric of accessibility and diversity, like the rhetoric of productivity, while it often effectively expresses the justifiable expectations of our patrons, does not reflect the language we speak at least at this theatre when we're wondering what to do next. Clumsily, inarticulately, we really do ask ourselves what's good, what's exciting, what'll challenge people and delight them. At their most nakedly political, we still expect our shows to be well written and well acted. We quite like them to be funny, too; or heart breaking; or both. But while we all love a hit, we won't court one at any price. Our chief concerns are aesthetic.

It is some indication of the place in which we now find ourselves that there's still an element of whisper who dares about admitting to an agenda which puts the aesthetic first. I felt embarrassed, as I first tried to articulate what I thought the National Theatre was for, to say up front that I thought it was more exciting to live in a society that's actively engaged in wondering what's truthful and what's beautiful; that a vibrant society thrives on self-examination; that we want to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature, to see our present in the context of our past, to see the past reinvigorated and the present identified and sometimes invented. I feel sheepish as I say these things now. They sound cheesy. We've lost confidence in our ability to justify our call on the public purse except as relatively minor tools of social and economic policy, and its our problem more than the government's.

This conference is therefore about finding a new way of talking about ourselves, and enlarging our conversation with our patrons. It's a great pleasure to welcome Tessa Jowell, Estelle Morris and their colleagues from the DCMS, whose presence I know is indicative of our mutual desire to move forward and to deepen our understanding of each other.

We recognise that it won't be easy for any government to accommodate the vocabulary of cultural value, as Adrian Ellis puts it in his brilliantly lucid paper. It's hard for all of us. Let us at least try today to get started.