

CULTURE, TOURISM, EUROPE AND EXTERNAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

ARTS FUNDING INQUIRY

SUBMISSION FROM DOGSTAR THEATRE COMPANY

Consultations on arts funding have come round a number of times during the 37 years I have worked in the sector. They are usually initiated for good reasons and they usually reveal an awareness that all is not right in this field. Much time and energy is expended, evidence gathered and reports made, sometimes at considerable expense. But over these decades, little has improved for artists and arts organisations. Indeed, things have generally deteriorated, particularly since the advent of the age of 'austerity'.

The introduction of lottery funding in the late '90s was welcomed, by and large, but this has increasingly proved to be a sticking plaster, a fund which has enabled government to reduce its own tax-funded contribution to our arts production and infrastructure. I understand that the current level of Scottish Government funding to Creative Scotland represents 0.2% of its total budget. I'm unaware of current figures for public funding of museums and galleries, and local authority funding for Creative Scotland clients, but I do know that nearly 20 years ago, Equity, the actors' union carried out a campaign entitled 1% for the Arts, calling for government in the UK to raise its total arts funding from what was then 0.6%. At that time most of our neighbours in Western Europe governments were devoting more than 1% of their budgets to the arts.

This is the bottom line for me. We can talk about methods of disbursing money, of decision-making processes, but at the end of the day, if we want to live in a society which truly values the arts and recognises its potential as a powerful civilising force, a crucial vehicle for education and debate, and an increasingly important factor in our economic health, there needs to be a major shift in attitude to enable a doubling of arts funding from the public sector. Some may scoff at this proposal and consider it to be unrealistic, but this is a normal level in some other countries and I think there are increasingly strong arguments from an instrumental point of view for the overall health of our society and therefore for its overall productivity. 1%, after all, is not very much. I welcome the committee's desire to seek out 'international examples of best practice'. For those, I would point you towards Scandinavia and Germany. For example, Vasterbottensteatern, a company I have worked for in Skellefteå, a municipality of 70,000 in northern Sweden, is one of the smallest of Sweden's 16 regional repertory companies. It receives a public subsidy of around £2million per year. This is far more than our biggest rep, the Lyceum, serving a city of 500,000. I understand our National Theatre receives not much more than twice the amount of Vasterbottensteatern.

We need our mentality towards the arts to change, to stop seeing the arts as a luxury, an added extra, and to start seeing the arts as fundamental. I think there may be a greater awareness of this in Scotland than in other parts of UK among politicians. This requires a more central role for the arts, first in the education of our children and following on from there. The adoption of culture as a 'new national outcome' is welcome. This should also occur at local authority level, and I would support provision of arts and arts education becoming a statutory duty.

Arts education should not just be about teaching music, visual art, performance, creative writing etc., it should also be about art criticism. I believe there is quite a poor level of teaching of criticism and critical debate in the UK and this leads to quite a poor level of informed critical understanding and critical debate among many arts professionals and board members, including those who are responsible for high-level decision-making.

I think the Scottish government is sometimes too focussed on projecting a positive image of Scotland rather than on the substance of ensuring we have a healthy arts and creative industries sector.

There has been a drive to increase private sector financial support for the arts since the introduction of 'austerity'. I understand that some of the bigger arts organisations in particular have become more reliant on this. While any increase in private sector funding and any consequent rise in social responsibility by private sector companies and rich individuals is always welcome, it would be a mistake to view this as a permanent, reliable change or source of income. I would also point out that donations and sponsorship from wealthy businesses almost invariably go to large, building-based arts organisations, they don't tend to support small companies. Smaller scale crowdfunding and other fundraising initiatives from individuals can be fruitful, but it is very difficult for small arts organisations, especially those without core or regular funding ie dedicated staff, to sustain such initiatives, so they are often short-lived. There is no substitute for reliable state funding.

With regard to the question of which artists should be funded and how, my statement above regarding improving education in criticism would provide a more solid longer term environment for making such decisions. On a more immediate practical level, peer review, consultation and peer recognition are important, particularly for individual artists. Perhaps an artist who can demonstrate a dedicated early career for, say, a ten year period should qualify for some form of stipend combined with tax breaks provided by the state (I'm an advocate of Universal Basic income !). For companies, and individual artists, perhaps it's worth considering a scheme where a certain number of government/Creative Scotland awards within a specified period eg 6 project grants over a ten-year period, would move that company or individual on to a higher tier where a certain level of guaranteed funding is then awarded over a three- or five- year period. This is certainly an idea which would have benefited my own company, Dogstar, which has existed solely on project grants throughout its 21-

year history, despite unrivalled international success for a project-funded company and despite applying for core funding in each of the last four rounds.