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Monday 27th September 2004

Dear James Boyle,

Cultural Commission Phase 1 of The Consultation Process

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in the consultation process of the Cultural Commission.

*For the State culture is an obligation
For the People culture is a right
For the Artist culture is a necessity*

This slogan is daubed onto the external wall of the puppet theatre of Teatro Tempo in Guanare, Venezuela – a small town at the foot of the Andes. Teatro Tempo is both a puppet theatre and a puppet centre, founded by professional puppeteer Eduardo di Maurò and is now the home of the Latin American Institute for Puppeteers.

In my capacity as President of the International Federation of Centres for Puppetry Arts, I have been privileged to visit and experience the work of some sixteen similar centres around the world from Venezuela to Moscow. The work of puppeteers acting as friends of the people can be found everywhere where popular culture and people's culture are close to surface of daily life. The issues of legacy, training, education, professional development, access, intercultural connections occur across cultures and national boundaries.

For the last 31 years I have lived and worked in Scotland with the aim of creating a thriving international mask and puppet centre (with a combined theatre, education institute and museum). In 1989 Glasgow City Council granted a long-term lease of 99 years to our charity on the site that has become known as the Scottish Mask & Puppet Centre.

Our aim has been to function as a national development agency for the art of mask and puppet theatre in Scotland, independently providing services which:

- Advocate the art form as an art form in its own right
- Promote and produce work of the highest standard
- Provide resources, documentation and training to render this ancient and popular art form more accessible

- Encourage the use of mask and puppet theatre within a variety of other performance disciplines and contexts
- Create jobs and employment of a sustainable nature

For the past 5 years I have encountered systematic problems in taking our work forward owing to the refusal of the Scottish Arts Council to validate and acknowledge our work and its refusal to form a working partnership with Glasgow City Council from whom we receive annual core funding. This is now seriously impairing our prospects of sustainable growth and development and is sending a signal to other potential funding agents that is at best negative and at worst highly detrimental.

Until 2001 our charity had received some £10,000 per annum of project funds over a continuous eleven year period from the Drama Department (1990-2001). These funds were combined with those of Glasgow City Council to allow us to deliver the following support to continuing professional development within the sector:

- a) Provision of a year-round programme of Saturday Shows *Puppeteers in Scotland* at the Centre to subsidise and promote visiting companies (£3000) from the sector i.e. a professional subsidy allowing us to pay recognised fees and to keep ticket prices low and affordable for children and families. This was an audience development programme.
- b) Provision of a one-week Summer Masterclass (June) for professionals and community artists to develop hands-on skills with an acknowledged master (often from another culture and tradition) to broaden experience and artistic vision of the participants (£3500).
- c) Provision of funds towards one in-house professional production by SMPC of an innovative and creative kind (new work) resulting in such productions as *Alice in Wonderland* (1987), *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1991), *An Eskimo Tale* (1997), *Tales from Guignol* (1997), *Beauty and The Beast* (1998), *The Golden Elephant* (1999), *Shamus of The Birds* (2000), *Don Quixote* (2000) and *Adventures of A Puppet Showman* (2001). This was a research, training and demonstration scheme with direct benefits to new and aspiring performers from the sector.

On the 26th February 2001 the Drama Officer wrote to me as follows:

Regretfully I have to inform you that the Committee decided not to support any of the proposed projects in the coming year. Committee discussed your application at length. Several concerns were raised about the role of the Scottish puppetry and theatre sectors. Members felt that the Centre was not engaging with these sectors as actively as it had perhaps done in the past and that its activities and events were not widely publicised. They also felt that the sector had moved on substantially in recent years and were not convinced that funding for the Centre continued to be the best way of utilising the very limited funds it had available.

On the 25th April our Trust provided a comprehensive 25-page reply to this statement in an Open letter to the Drama Committee which received no reply nor acknowledgement. (A copy of which is being forwarded under separate cover). In 2002 a meeting with Drama Director, David Taylor, resulted in a one-off cheque for £15,000 towards SMPC building overheads; but project funding for continuous professional development was rendered impossible thereafter when the guidelines were redrawn in favour of touring companies and creation of new work.

Since that time our funding has been completely removed and SAC has pursued a policy of core-funding the three-week long Puppet and Animation Festival whose funding has been increased by 130%.

The SAC Draft *Review of The Potential of Puppetry: A Review of The Sector* of 2004 has succeeded in excluding the interests of the homes of puppet theatre in Scotland (Biggar Little Theatre and The Scottish Mask & Puppet Centre) and contains no recommendations for their growth and development. All the specialist recommendations that I made to the author of the report during the consultation process (that has taken more than 2 years) have been completely ignored:

1. To map the sector accurately and fairly. The puppet theatre sector has three areas: building-based organisations, touring companies and festivals.
2. To visit the Biggar Little Theatre to see a dedicated building-based organisation at work and to interview its founders Jill and Ian Purves of the International Purves Puppets.
3. To arrange a meeting with Dr. Matthew Isaac Cohen of the Department of Theatre, Film and Television Studies at the University of Glasgow because of his plans to deliver a new course in Puppet and Object Theatre at graduate and later postgraduate level.
4. To consult the extensive documentation of SMPC on puppet theatre development around the world to examine where Scotland fits into the larger framework (more than 40 documents)

The SAC has shown little political will, understanding or vision in dealing with our organisation. It seems not to know what to do with an organisation that is intercultural and multi-art form and that spans theatre, education and museum functions.

Key Issues:

1. The development of this art form is locked within historical categories, compartmentalisation and a vicious cycle of under-funding that has prevented, and is preventing, its emergence as an art form in its own right.
2. The SAC Performing Arts Committee and its Officers are committed to an exclusive policy until 2007 of ensuring that there will be only one core-funded

organisation within the art form: The Puppet and Animation Festival. In my professional opinion this is an unsustainable position given that PAF organises a 3-week annual festival, lacks a permanent base and staffing and has no year-round presence in the sector. The director of PAF, Simon Hart, was also appointed to sit on the Performing Arts Committee while in receipt of voted funds; yet former SAC Director, Seona Reid, always insisted that I could not represent the puppet sector on the Drama Committee because it would constitute a 'conflict of interest'. Moreover, the same Simon Hart has requested meetings with SMPC to seek my professional advice on international puppet companies and puppet networking in areas where his own knowledge and experience is clearly lacking. The status of the PAF Festival as a national festival is open to question since the range, depth and quality of its programming compared to that of festivals in other parts of the world is very limited. During the March-April PAF Festival puppeteers receive guaranteed bookings and professional fees subsidised by SAC and offer low ticket prices, but the unsubsidised building-based venues like Biggar and SMPC can only afford one and two person companies and have to charge realistic ticket prices in order to survive. SAC behaves in a cavalier manner in sustaining and maintaining this unequal playing field within the sector and providing preferential rates for its core-funded client. SMPC plays to 94% capacity audiences for its Saturday Shows and is often full to overflowing, but because we no longer have our SAC project grant we cannot afford to offer second shows on Saturdays or to extend the programme to include Sunday performances. Our ability to grow this programme, employ more staff and build our audience profile has been severely restricted over the past 5 years because of the loss of SAC support.

3. The SAC Draft Review document marginalizes the interests, history and role of the existing homes or institutional infrastructure for the art form in Scotland – The Biggar Little Theatre and The Scottish Mask and Puppet Centre. The Review Group was constituted to exclude representatives from these organisations and consequently the final report contains no recommendations for their development. Yet both organisations have been in existence for more than 20 years and neither is in receipt of any programming, staffing or core funds from SAC. This situation is explained by the author of the Report as justifiable because 'buildings are not very high on the list of the puppeteers in Scotland.' May one ask when the funding of any professional theatres have ever been put at risk because actors were lobbied and responded by stating that buildings are not very high on their list of funding priorities??? The point here is that the homes of Scottish puppet theatre were not simply constituted to accommodate the interests of the puppeteers but to serve the interests of anyone interested in the art form. Moreover, the same Drama Officer insists that current SAC thinking is to fund buildings in outlying areas and regions, but not within the major cities of Glasgow and Edinburgh where provision is already sufficient. With this strategic priority in place how are we to go forward?
4. SMPC believes that the decision to submerge the field of Puppets, Masks and Performing Objects within Children and Young People's Theatre has led to

the constriction and confinement of the art form and has worked against the development of new work and experimental risk-taking within the profession. The Draft Review is set to propose a development budget of £50,000 per annum for the sector: but with more than 30 small-scale touring companies within the puppet sector alone this is set to be nothing more than a token gesture. The language of Puppets, Masks and Performing Objects is the language of world theatre and forms a central element of avant-garde western theatre from 1896 onwards. Scotland is trailing behind much of Europe and North America in attitudes towards this ancient popular, traditional and innovative art form and the ignorance of officers and committee members within SAC to this reality is both sad and alarming.

This letter is set to sound the alarm bells. In the combined resources of Biggar Little Theatre and The Scottish Mask & Puppet Centre, Scotland has two building-based organisations that are known and respected around the world. Yet its national arts funding agency provides no funding to either body, attempts to demoralise the creative potential of its key advocates (who have given over the life's work and personal financial savings) and omits them from the recommendations of a report dedicated to review the 'potential' of the sector to which they have dedicated their lives and professional careers.

This is a state of affairs that cannot be allowed to continue. Those on the front line who deliver year-round services to the public at these venues are now questioning the competence of SAC functionaries and their acolytes. The first thing that the Commission needs to do is to examine the existing art form categories and provision and to provide funding for those building-based organisations of long-standing with proven track records and year-round programmes. Why has it taken twenty-five years to establish such organisations – because the economic and political climate has been hostile to the very idea of sustainable growth and development? Is it any wonder then that this situation should produce feelings of enormous frustration when those who have the experience and capability to produce the work are marginalised and ignored, while those relatively new and inexperienced in the field are chosen to become the single door port of entry and to be core-funded. At our last meeting in June 2004 the SAC Drama Officer, Angela Hogg, told me that this was the reality and I had just better learn to live with it. Well, I am not prepared to live with it and it is not a reality that either Biggar Little Theatre or SMPC are prepared to accept. This dictat is unjust, unfair and completely unreasonable.

We provide year-round shows, educational workshops, training opportunities, museum and collection displays, research and demonstration opportunities, marketing and promotional services to encourage the creative potential of the public and the professional sector. We are the organisations that have always networked with the sector and with the national UK puppetry organisations – The British Puppet and Model Theatre Guild, British UNIMA, Puppeteers UK, The Puppet Centre Trust, the Punch and Judy College and The Punch and Judy Fellowship. We have designed and transformed our buildings as creative spaces to reflect this commitment. If the cultural knowledge and significant resources of the SAC cannot be translated into some modicum of support for year-round programming activities, staffing costs and building overheads (as in other areas of the cultural sector) then something is seriously wrong.

By way of contrast it may be instructive to note that the SAC approach to Puppets, Masks and Performing Objects is not being applied in England. ACE has just awarded our sister organisation, The Puppet Centre Trust, a grant of £73,000 towards a one-year programme of continuing professional development. It also gave a special Lottery Grant to Puppeteers UK of £25,000 in 2003 to set-up its web site and develop its advocacy role. West Midland Arts is giving generous support to PuppetLink while Eastern Arts provides a core grant to Norwich Puppet Theatre and the Little Angel Marionette Theatre in Islington receives regular grant aid from London Borough Council. Only the Scottish Mask & Puppet Centre and Biggar Little Theatre have their building-based operations ignored by their national arts organisation!!!

In the SAC Review on The Potential of Puppetry there was a major opportunity to unite the sector, to overcome the old divisions and to move everybody forwards in the same direction. Instead one organisation is singled out for core-funding and preferential treatment, the touring companies are offered a miniscule development fund and the needs of the year-round building-based organisations are simply omitted.

Conclusion

SAC is moribund. It does not see itself as part of the problem of the way cultural provision is defined and delivered. Therefore it proffers no solution. It is an outdated and unaccountable quango that has become increasingly bureaucratised and elitist. The officers people their committees with friends and associates and funding goes to those whose faces fit. The traditional liberal position of arms-length advocacy and support has given way to officer-dominated interest groups based on cronyism, meritocracy and fashionable posturising. SAC's role as a Lottery distributor should be abolished and transferred into the hands of an elected body.

The solution is a properly elected Ministry of Culture with a fully representative and accountable delegate base. This office should operate in an open and accountable manner commensurate with a democratic people's culture and policy decisions should be transparent and clear. Projects and organisations should be evaluated on the basis of their professional merit with due regard to background, knowledge, skill and experience of those involved. Integrating SAC into the civil service would simply transfer the problems of the quango to government. The strategic vision for the arts in Scotland should clearly separate out the allocation of revenue funding from Lottery distribution.

The reality is not that the reality cannot be changed. In the novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* Marquez presents us with Moscote, the governor of the province, who issues a proclamation that all houses in Macondo town must be painted blue. Unfortunately Ursula has just painted her house white. The SAC want 'potential' that is blue and novice-based. Those of us who have been excluded and under-valued want the white of experience and the heat of cultural democracy. The status quo within the cultural sector requires a radical shake-up and weeding-out so that those of us who do the work receive the means to continue. Otherwise the buildings which contain our legacy and life's work will disappear never to be repeated and the skills, knowledge and experience of a generation will be wiped-out through cultural philistinism. The

SAC administers public funds. It must therefore be rendered publicly accountable and tax payers money must be spent in a wise, just and equitable manner.

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For the People culture is a right
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Thank you for your kind consideration of these comments.

Yours sincerely,

Dr. Malcolm Yates Knight, F.R.S.A.
Professional Puppeteer and Mask-Maker
Executive Director and Founder, Scottish Mask & Puppet Centre
President, The International Federation of Centres for Puppetry Arts

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Ian

From: malcolmyknight@tiscali.co.uk
Sent: 28 September 2004 01:17
To: info
Subject: Puppetry in Scotland[Scanned]



Phase 1 Cultural
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Dear James Boyle,

Please find enclosed my submission on behalf of The Scottish Mask & Puppet Centre to Phase 1 of the work of the Cultural Commission. I will be forwarding hard copy information on company letterhead together with supplementary material later this week.

Good luck with this project which hopefully will bring about some much needed changes and radical solutions in democratising the cultural provision within Scotland. There is a vibrant cultural scene at the moment but there is also much room for improvement.

I look forward to taking part in this process and please do not hesitate to contact me if you think that I may be of further assistance. Perhaps the forthcoming SAC Performing Arts Committee report 'The Potential of Puppetry: A Review of the Sector in Scotland' could be the subject of one of the Commission's meetings in the proposed diary of events?

With best wishes.

Malcolm Yates Knight
Executive Director, Scottish Mask & Puppet Centre

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