

Cultural Commission: the Response of OurStory Scotland to the Public Consultation

This is a response to the invitation to participate in the public consultation of the Cultural Commission. I am responding on behalf of OurStory Scotland, a recognised Scottish Charity (number SC035729). The purpose of OurStory Scotland is to collect, archive and present the life stories and experiences of the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) community in Scotland. This involves oral history work with all ages, including the older generation, whose stories can reveal the tremendous changes that have occurred in the situation of LGBT people during their lifetime. In addition to collecting stories, materials and artefacts from LGBT lives, we present stories and images from the LGBT community through the arts, in exhibitions and drama.

Our response concerns both aspects of the public consultation: cultural rights and the remit of the Cultural Commission. From the point of view of a community that has experienced discrimination and social exclusion, and moreover has for the most part been invisible, it is particularly important that the right to be represented in a nation's culture should be recognised. The vision of a diverse Scotland affords the opportunity to consider how communities can be represented fully and without stereotyping. Cultural representation of the LGBT community in Scotland has been relatively neglected, and where it has occurred it has been expressed within the stereotyped models of the mainstream. This has meant the effective marginalisation of a significant community in Scottish society, whose cultural rights need to be actively acknowledged.

In terms of the remit of the Cultural Commission, one of the principal areas that needs attention is that of cultural knowledge, as suggested by the question posed by the Commission: How do we develop artistic, cultural and social skills and provide cultural knowledge? For a community to develop in self-confidence, and to be able to participate fully in the social and cultural life of the nation, it is essential for that community to have knowledge of its own cultural heritage and its own history (especially in terms of the untold stories of people's lives), and to be able to express community knowledge and identity through culture and the arts.

To give some specific examples, here is an indication of the work of our own organisation, OurStory Scotland, in working with LGBT people in Scotland. Our inaugural exhibition 'Becoming Visible' (November 2002 – January 2003) generated considerable interest. A wide range of people in the community contributed materials and written testimony for the exhibition, and developed skills in the practical art work involved in mounting a public display. We provided a comments book to collect responses from those who participated as observers, and these comments were transcribed, anonymised and published on the web in order to present a public record of the feedback. Parts of the exhibition can be seen on our website, but it is important to recognise that the website has been constructed voluntarily and with no professional funding: www.ourstoryscotland.org.uk

We developed our oral history and exhibition skills in an international context at the International Lesbian and Gay Association (Europe) conference in Glasgow in October 2003. We presented an exhibition for the conference, and developed the theme of 'In/Out: Crossing Boundaries' that related both to the social boundaries of the LGBT community and the international boundaries relevant to the conference. We also organised a workshop for

delegates, which was well attended and produced a highly informative international exchange of experience and expertise on oral history with the LGBT community. The conference organiser reported highly positive feedback and noted the active stimulation to discussion provided by both the exhibition and the oral history workshop.

Since Spring 2003 we have been working with 7:84 Theatre Company (Scotland) to develop our stories, through individual testimonies and collective reminiscence work, into a dramatic presentation. This is the major Outreach Project of 7:84 Theatre Company for 2004, and the public performances will take place at the Arches Theatre Glasgow in November. The work with 7:84 shows what can be done when a professional theatre company works with volunteers from a vulnerable community that has been marginalised in terms of the arts. This community has often been represented in the arts, but not by and for themselves. The work with 7:84 is providing the opportunity for the community to represent themselves through the arts, and generating the skills and confidence that will have a lasting effect on the participants, and indeed on the wider community through the performances.

An exhibition of the theatre work is planned to be held at the People's Palace in Glasgow. We have also been invited to provide an exhibition of LGBT lives and history for the EU Commission's "Stop Discrimination" display tour bus that will be in Inverness on 19th October.

We hope that the Cultural Commission will recognise the immense value of work that brings together community members (as in OurStory Scotland) and professionals who provide expertise, training, organisation, space and equipment. This constitutes a remarkably cost-effective means of drawing artistic skills from the community and providing relevant and moving artistic experience for the community. Art in the community should have that two way interaction, from community into art and from art into community. This changes lives.

There is however one further area where we feel the Cultural Commission could make a dramatic impact. There needs to be proper investment in a genuinely diverse and accessible set of community archives, that include the oral histories of marginalised communities. This is the kind of thing that is making remarkable progress in London in the British Sound Archive, but which is as yet severely undeveloped in Scotland. This is not for want of good will. The National Museums of Scotland have agreed to take our material as part of the Scottish Life Archive. However, they are severely understaffed, and access to the material will remain theoretical unless and until proper online indexing is facilitated – and not at the expense of proper care of the material stored. People should be able to know what material is available on the diverse communities of Scotland, and how they can access this material. A substantial development here would make an enormous difference to the cultural knowledge of a diverse Scotland.

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