

Ack by letter 18/01/05

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Phase 2

Arts



SCOTLAND'S NEW WRITING THEATRE

19th November 2004

James Boyle
Cultural Commission
Broughton High School
Carrington Road
Edinburgh
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25 NOV 2004

Dear James

Traverse Theatre Submission

I take great pleasure in enclosing our first submission to the commission and we look forward contributing to the next phase of the project

Yours sincerely

Stephen Cotton
Chair

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A RESPONSE TO THE CULTURAL COMMISSION BRIEF FROM THE TRAVERSE THEATRE

The Cultural Commission has invited responses about the future of the cultural sector. The Traverse Theatre welcomes the opportunity to submit our views, prepared by the management of the theatre and endorsed by the Traverse's Board of Directors.

There is a clear need for a cultural strategy that is **national** in design, **long-term** in its vision, and **properly resourced**. We welcome the opportunity to look into the future and identify how our area—theatre—might contribute to the growth of a dynamic cultural sector in Scotland which can embrace the changes ahead.

We have one *caveat*: the Cultural Commission and the Scottish Executive must work harder to dispel the impression, however unfounded, that new commissions, reports and reforms are just so many 'buffers' against the real requirement of better investment in the sector. 

Within the narrower confines of the theatre sector, the central question is 'how to provide a small country such as Scotland with the best possible drama provision'. A clear national strategy for drama could be devised at no cost by any of the major stakeholders, starting with the Scottish Arts Council or whatever supersedes it. This exercise would not be worthwhile without proper resources for implementation. We suggest one particular model below as our contribution to the wider debate.

institutional infrastructure

A problem we face is that the need for a simple, properly-resourced cultural strategy is almost always confused with an appetite for change to the institutional infrastructure. The sector itself remains unconvinced that the Scottish Arts Council needs re-writing, particularly, in the present climate, if there are high costs attached to the creation of a new institution when the arts companies themselves are so severely underfunded. There is unanimity that we must retain the principle of an arms-length funding body; and there is alarm at the very idea that cultural funding might be devolved to local authorities – albeit partly to make them *better* funders – where the ability to articulate a truly national and international vision would, by definition, be compromised. Too much incidental hostility towards the Scottish Arts Council stems from individual grievances we all bear as a result of specific funding decisions, and is better discounted.

It is worth noting that the new Corporate Plan is the first published arts strategy ever to have succeeded in articulating the mutually *inclusive* prerogatives of excellence and accessibility.

cultural rights

A mystique has arisen around the jargon of 'cultural rights': there is nothing new about the notion of cultural entitlement except the coining of the phrase. There is, and has always been, one main challenge: to combine the necessities of a) improving participation in and access to arts/culture with b) attaining excellence principally, though not exclusively, within the professional sector. The SAC Corporate Plan reflects this challenge very clearly.

a theatre model

Of all the northern hemisphere countries we know of, the most impressive model appears to be Sweden, where the Riksteatern organisation in Stockholm has created a win/win scenario: a genuine mix of community stakeholders with excellence of/by practitioners, albeit funded to levels that, to date, we have never dreamed of. A centralised administration combines with a number of artistically autonomous companies, all of which are properly supported and resourced. Meanwhile, fourteen distinct geographical communities choose themselves which 'product' they wish to buy in, i.e. which shows they wish to host for their audiences; and yet the work remains artist-led and famously robust because the communities don't control the artistic processes of the artists/companies. In a Scottish equivalent, the Traverse would be the new-writing wing of the supra-national organisation.

Apart from the incredibly obvious advantages of such large financial support, the structure itself brings the artist and [potential] audiences closer together; most of the work is shown in more than one place so there is much better geographical access to it – in general there is a 'touring' mentality; and local audiences accrue real choice and buying power.

The relative centralisation of strategic planning means that you would probably not get three different productions of *Macbeth* on offer in as many months, as Scotland has seen recently. It must be conceded that not everyone would consider this a good thing.

Needless to say, even if the resources were available, you could not import the self-same system wholesale to Scotland, as the dying man would choke on the rich meal: one immediate difference is that, below a national level, we do not currently organise ourselves in a way in which local communities could make such choices or decisions.

But as the current structure for culture in Scotland is clearly not going to bring in the desired resources, there is no option but to change – and we can all agree that the people of Scotland are entitled to the same quality of work as the people of Sweden.

new writing

We were determined that the Traverse's initial response to the Culture Commission's brief should not be too Traverse-centric, but, within the need for a national theatre strategy, there is clearly a need to rationalise the new writing scene. The Traverse has successfully created a climate of confidence for new playwriting in Scotland over the last decade, and with a new-play-oriented Scottish National Theatre emerging, the sub-sector is extremely healthy. And yet there are some strategic issues which underly the comparative good health: the Traverse is now explicitly funded by the Scottish Arts Council as Scotland's new writing theatre and thus as a national resource; meanwhile the Playwrights Studio has been created, with the Traverse's support, as an independent organisation to support playwrights, and partly as a bid to break the Traverse's perceived monopoly on new writing. If you add the Writers' Factory into the mix, it is easy to see why there are some strategic issues which need resolution.

Scotland in the World

Any re-evaluation of cultural strategy within Scotland must also consider the cultural sector's growing roles as both ambassador to and host of the international community. Foreign interest and admiration for Scottish theatre and particularly new

writing is on an upward curve, and the momentum must be seized upon, supported and maximised by strategic development. Over the last three years alone the Traverse has toured productions and run projects in conjunction with * countries; we are currently working in co-operation with * more. After production our plays go on to have extensive international lives - for example David Harrower's *Knives in Hens* has had, to date, over 30 productions, in 19 countries and 10 languages. Scottish voices, Scottish ideas, Scottish identity seen around the world. As well as being a guest of the world, Scottish theatre also has the annual opportunity to play host to the world's largest international gathering of theatre, an unparalleled opportunity to foster the international links so important to a small nation such as ours. We would strongly urge the Commission to recognise the role and impact of organisations such as the British Council and Visiting Arts on the way work is conceived and executed. The perspective required for this sort of strategic planning is also, we feel, an imperative argument for the national strategy to be truly national, and not devolved to the local authority sector.

We would be happy to expand on any of this if the Commission would find it helpful.

Philip Howard, Artistic Director & Chief Executive
Mike Griffiths, Administrative Director
Stephen Cotton, Chairman of the Board of Directors
Traverse Theatre Scotland
28.10.04