

## Is Arts Council England Abandoning the Working Classes?

Last week the Arts Council of England (ACE) announced its portfolio of organisations it will be supporting for the next four years. This announcement may have slipped under the radar of many news outlets and politically aware pundits as we reel from headlines of Grenfell and general election fall-out. However, I think what ACE is proposing with this new portfolio is overtly political and contributes to the landscape of divisions in our society and the 'media ready' glossy stories with no substance.

One thing we all learnt from the recent general election was that austerity *is* political. Jeremy Corbyn emerged as a genuine figure with integrity as he set out how our nation is divided between the haves and the have-nots. No longer was it possible to hide behind the austerity banner: we all have to tighten our belts... This was spectacularly demonstrated recently when the government 'found' an extra £1bn to secure support from the DUP in a hung parliament.

The decisions that ACE have made in funding the arts seems to pale into insignificance with the recent tragic fire at Grenfell Tower. No one can be unmoved by this catastrophic loss of innocent lives on such a large scale. And as more evidence emerges of just how that tragedy took place, we learn that political decisions are brought into question.

Across the country, many people seem to be waking up to fact that decisions, wealth and opportunities lie in the hands of the few and not the many; that the gap between the rich and the poor has never been greater; that the poor and vulnerable in our society are not to blame. So in this sense, how any public funding is spent *is* political and deserves scrutiny.

I believe that, despite the current mood of the nation, ACE does not uphold its commitment to "bring great art to *everyone*". It promotes a diversity agenda but consistently ignores the social and economically disadvantaged; it is abandoning the working class.

Of course I am writing this from a very personal viewpoint. My organisation did receive National Portfolio funding from ACE. We received a standstill amount – the same amount as this current year and every year since 2008, equating to a 21% cut in real terms. By the end of the next funding round, my organisation will have been on a standstill grant for 13 years!

'But at least you get some funding' I hear you say. Yes we do, but let's just look at that funding. Heads Together is a community arts organisation that has been working with disadvantaged communities for the past 31 years. Two and a half years ago we opened an arts venue – not in the city centre, but right in the heart of a disadvantaged suburb of the city. We engage over 12,000 people a year in the centre, and deliver extensive training activities for

young people from very challenging backgrounds. And ACE give us £46,600 per year to do this.

To put that in perspective; there were 844 separate awards made by ACE. Our award was 16<sup>th</sup> from the bottom in terms of amounts awarded. Looking at the 93 awards in the Yorkshire region alone, we rank 3<sup>rd</sup> from the bottom, sitting alongside the other community arts organisations in the region – apart from the ones that were completely cut this time!

Why does this all matter in the light of bigger political and human rights issues? It matters because each piece of work that Heads Together does is about narrowing the gap. It's about addressing the inequalities in our society and giving opportunities to poor young people that their middle class peers take for granted. And it's this that is being overlooked by ACE. I'm not even going to go into the difference between how much they support Opera compared to participatory arts. It's apples and oranges and there should be space for all. But when no-one from ACE visits your centre or activities on the estates of Seacroft, but they manage to go to all the high profile events in the city centre; when ACE get excited because arts organisations/events without any substance or political agenda get press coverage or celebrity endorsement; when no quality assessment has been made on your work because it's participatory and not a nice theatre piece that the chattering classes can discuss over wine in a trendy bar; that's when I feel that their so-called 'protected characteristic' of being 'economically disadvantaged' is not taken seriously and the poor in our society are not served.

And in case you are thinking this is just a polemic on our own dismal settlement from ACE, let me refer to Nick Wilson & Jonathan Gross writing in Arts Professional recently. They note that the ACE model to fund organisations to produce 'great art' and then try to force those same organisations to widen participation hasn't worked. Opera North will tell you that they are reaching large numbers of disadvantaged participants. But it's about owning the means of production, not just increasing consumption. The article quotes; "What if cultural policy makers and cultural organisations began to think strategically about ensuring the cultural capability of all – not only opportunities to participate in great art, but the substantive freedom to make, transform and contest versions of culture?"

It is Heads Together's raison d'être to facilitate and empower disadvantaged communities to use creativity to have a voice. This goes beyond audience development to true empowerment – it is cultural democracy. This is why community arts organisations are key to the national portfolio and need to be valued and respected by ACE as such. As Wilson & Gross state – "Now is the time to bring this approach to the heart of cultural policy in the UK."

It is difficult to identify Community Arts organisations in the ACE portfolio from a list of 831 organisations. As has always been the case they get lumped into the Combined Arts category, alongside Manchester International Festival with

an annual award of nearly £10m per year. But where you do find them, they represent the lowest funded organisations and none that I know of have received any kind of increase in funding in this round.

The press release from Darren Henley, Chief Executive of ACE, stated “We’ve focused on ensuring that this is a diverse portfolio that will produce work relevant to the world we live in, as well as supporting fresh talent and artists from many different backgrounds and representing different perspectives.” A strategy to award the majority of NPO organisations a standstill budget in order to enable 183 new organisations to be funded, along with an increase to selected organisations, none of which appear to be rooted in poor communities, is not diversity. Nor is it cultural democracy. It was important for the Chief Executive to make this press statement as ACE recognised their last round of funding resulted in diversity “taking a step backwards in the portfolio, with a decrease in applications from diverse organisations”. And yet, their own strategic priority statement on Diversity published alongside the new round of funding makes NO reference to class or economic disadvantage.

The shocking figure from the Warwick Commission Report is that only 8% of the UK population regularly attend publicly funded culture. Our funding of the arts continues to benefit the few, not the many. It is time to address the imbalance between those arts ‘consumers’ already accessing a range of cultural opportunities (the “metroculturals” in the Arts Council’s Audience Spectrum terminology) and those members of our community who are excluded by class, culture and economic means, patronisingly referred to as “Up Our Street” in the Audience Spectrum; described as “modest in habits and means”.

Maybe it’s time for the arts to be straight about poverty and inequalities in this country. The strategy for the ACE portfolio of funding should be to invest in art that is embedded in communities and created at grass roots level. Art and culture needs to be for the many, not the few.

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