

Dance, Champions and Politics by Gail Brown

The 23rd February brought the National Dance Champions and approximately 60 of the most influential dance and cultural innovators and leaders of this Country together. The Dance Champions have a target of getting 100,000 more people dancing by 2012 and they were enthusiastic, open to discussion and curious as to how they can a) achieve this and b) support the dance sector up to and beyond 2012. This event fell at a curious time as there is much debate in the Cultural Sector at large, whether it is funding the future, supporting new talent or succession planning for creative leaders.

In the first 9 days of March 2010, the National Campaign for the Arts (NCA) has hosted 3 events. The first being *This country can no longer afford to subsidise the arts*. This controversial topic was debated by an audience of over 200 people and panelists Bonnie Greer, playwright and author, Matthew Elliott of the Taxpayers' Alliance, Simon Jenkins of the National Trust and Matthew Taylor from the RSA. The happy conclusion was that subsidised arts were financially viable and it ought to be as part of a mixed economy approach to public subsidy, private investment, philanthropic giving and commercial activity. Bonnie Greer reminded the audience that "61 years ago this Country made a stand and a promise to provide art to its citizens". This is a poignant reminder to ourselves, our politicians and indeed our Dance Champions, particularly today as we stand on the arc of a recession, flanked by the 2010 general election and some of the largest threats to investment in culture and art that the Country has seen for quite some time. Lib Dem MP Don Foster, reminded a recent arts audience that of every "£100 that the government spends in and on this Country 7p of it goes to art and culture". Foster also stated that it would be "economic madness and cultural vandalism to even think about cutting this". The Labour MP Rt Hon Margaret Hodge, Minister for Culture, reminded the same audience that the DCMS art and culture budget is less than the Department of Health under spend. As part of the nalgao/NCF Seminar *Outside In*, Martyn Allyson, National Advisor Culture and Sport for I&DeA noted a credible financial opportunity. Martyn pointed out that "If we attracted just 0.5% of the £145billion spent locally on health, children's services and adult care through (strategic) commissioning we would increase the spend on culture and sport by councils by 22%".

This week at the NCA's *London Art Hustings* Tory MP Ed Vaizey, Shadow Minister for Culture, asked an art and dance audience "what do you want to offer your children and how do we give them that?" The audience and indeed all parties unanimously agreed with the simplest of answers; to reduce the amount of ill fitting and fashionable bolt on cultural offers and schemes, to increase the opportunities for participation in dance, art and creativity, to continue to work towards consistent joined up initiatives and above all to achieve sustained investment. The cultural sector has made the case that it is essential and vital to enrich lives, both creatively and economically. At both the NCA and Dance Champion events, dance leaders motioned that it is imperative that dance continues to be recognised as part of the arts fabric of this Country, as part of the cultural offer.

Dance addresses a variety of key local and national priorities such as health, education, reduction in crime and repeat youth offending. Dance is integral to place making, regeneration and the growth of capital infrastructure as well as creative industries, currently highlighted for example by digital Britain.

There is a wealth of evidence to illustrate where we are spending large amounts of money on continued problem areas. For example within the last year alone Birmingham Total Place findings highlighted that a high contact family costs up to £250,000 per year. Nationally we recognise that the average cost of a young person being held in a youth offending institute is £100,000 per year and the obesity epidemic is costing the Country millions of pounds. An average dance project for young people, in the first instance aimed at addressing one of our many social issues such as social exclusion, high truancy rates, bullying, low academic achievement, isolation and crime as well as encouraging growth in confidence, communication skills, self esteem and empowerment could cost as little as £150 per day (working with between 10-30 participants).

The Rt Hon Margaret Hodge MP, Labour, Minister for Culture has made a plea to Local Authorities and Government for art and culture, asking them to "leave it (culture and art) alone, it's a good infrastructure and it gives a better Britain", further stating that it is important to take risks to find out what works. Dance is and always has been a risk taker. Audiences have doubled over the last 10 years; the South bank alone has a return of £6 for every £1 spent by audience and artistic tourists. For every £1 invested into the British Museum £4.50 is returned and for every £1 ACE invests it achieves a return of £1-£7. Home grown dance and choreographic talent evolves on an annual basis, our numbers are now so vast we have outgrown the spaces needed to provide a home to dancers across the Country; we need Bigger, Better, More. UK is a leader in exporting dance as part of our global cultural and artistic excellence. Dance is part of the fabric of what we promised this Country 61 year ago.

The current picture of dance highlights National and Regional Dance agencies and Youth Dance England are firmly embedding infrastructure for dancers across the generations, Arts Council England is utilising the recent Dance Mapping research and leading a National Arts Debate, Big Dance has embraced a collective approach to National dance delivery working with key organisations such as Foundation for Community Dance, Central Council for Physical Recreation, Dance Champions, Youth Dance England and the National Association of Local Government Arts Officers and Allan Davey, Chief Executive of Arts Council England (ACE) continues to lobby for sustained investment in the arts. Dance UK is leading us by example both in terms of joined up approaches to political lobbying across the world and by embracing new approaches to supporting dance, such as working with the Dance Champions. Together we illustrate a culturally diverse dance UK and now is the time to invest and embrace dance.

It is time to invest in the front line, the engine room, the dancers, the artists, producers, spaces, consistent education across all key stages and succession planning for dance leaders of the future. Art makes a wide contribution to this

Country and we must continue to create a climate for improvement and this climate must include dance. This is the arena that requires champions. If the Dance Champions truly want to help the dance sector then they will be utilising evidence such as the afore mentioned to support dance at both a Local and National level and to bravely debate and convince the Chancellor of the Exchequer that 0.5% of health, children's services and adult care is boldly and unanimously designated to improvement programmes led by and through culture. This Country knows all too well the benefits of taking part in dance and the reasons that it is important. Not least as highlighted by Dance UK that 4.8 million people participate in community dance each year, a total of 10,000 students are in training per year and the dance workforce is 40,000 people. Furthermore dance is the second most popular physical activity for young people after football and the most popular physical activity for girls and there are 50 professional dance companies in the UK producing over 500 productions every year which are enjoyed by over 1 million people

Together Dance Champions and the Dance sector can lead the UK to a healthy, successful, creative and dynamic future by recognising that dance must be held firmly in your palm and the palm of the political party that will next lead this Country up to and beyond 2012.