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# What Shall We Do About the Arts?

## Introduction

We need to do something about the arts, because they are undersubsidised, underpatronised, undervalued and underdistributed. I will explain what I mean by these words and although I am concerned with the arts in general, it will not be surprising if I tend mainly to take the theatre as a representative art.

## Undersubsidised?

Most people know that the arts are in financial difficulty *now*, but they do not realise that they have been in difficulty for several years. Not since the glorious sixties, when Jennie Lee became the first Minister for the Arts, has public subsidy been anywhere near enough. Hence in 1978 the *Economist* described government spending on the arts as 'fairly miserly' and the Liberal Party described both the Labour and the Conservative record on the arts as 'rather mean'. In 1978, under Labour, we were spending 50p per head of the population on subsidising theatre, against Sweden's £4 and Germany's £7 a head. I know that those countries are more prosperous than ours, and I do not expect us to equal those subsidies, but surely the discrepancy is far greater than it should be?

In 1978 a distinguished politician, with a deep and knowledgeable sympathy for the arts, put very well the need to do something about them:

'We cannot', he said, 'continue to run the arts on a shoestring much longer, or the shoestring will snap. At present, by dint of scrimping and saving, we can hold our own in the world of international opera, theatre and music; but I doubt if our major national companies will be able to cope with inflation much longer unless the attitude of central government towards the arts undergoes a radical change'.

How right Mr. Norman St. John-Stevás was when he said that a year before the election! And of course, since a Conservative government took over the attitude of central government did undergo a change, though not quite in the direction he was advocating; for the government actually cut the grant to the Arts Council by over a million pounds — the first such cut in the Council's 33 years' history.

I do not make this point in any party-political spirit, still less as a criticism of Mr. St. John-Stevás. I am a servant of the Arts Council, and the duty of Council is to work with whatever government the people elect. Restraint on spending on the arts began under Labour, and I did not hesitate then to emphasise the inadequacy of government funding; so much so that the then Minister asked me to stop it. I cannot stop it, because we in the Arts Council know more about the needs of the arts — the theatres, the opera companies, the orchestras, the community artists, individual writers, composers and painters — than any other people in the country. It is our duty to press on government and the nation the needs of all the

arts, and we alone can do it with full knowledge. True, the distinguished Chairman of the Royal Opera House and the energetic Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company can, and do, claim space and time to press their case in the press and on radio and television. The Directors of the excellent Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent and the splendid Northern Sinfonia in Newcastle, ~~but~~ to name but two of more than 1200 other clients subsidised by the Arts Council, have far less opportunity to press *their* case. So the Arts Council must do it for them. And we say to the government and the nation on behalf of the arts, that the shoestring is now nearer still to snapping and that the arts must have more money spent on them, not less.

I am quite sure that Mr. St. John-Stevás, when he was Minister for Arts, wished to do this, but it seems that the Cabinet would not let him. They took the plausible view that the arts must bear cuts like all other services, such as the education service and the health service. There are two arguments against this. First, as Mr. St. John-Stevás pointed out, the arts were already seriously underfunded. Second, the arts budget is so tiny compared with the education or health budgets, that an increase (in real terms) of £10 million, which would make very little difference in these services where costs are in *thousands of millions*, would transform the arts scene, receiving at present only £70 million. Conversely, any economies that could be made in the arts, like the £1 million lopped off last year's grant, are so tiny that they can make no significant contribution to the national economy, but they do cause grave hardship in the arts world.

Mrs. Thatcher put it exactly right when she assured the Chairman of the Arts Council before the election that a Conservative government would not seek to make 'candle-end' savings in the arts.

The odd thing is that the government, like its predecessor, put millions of pounds into an industry like British Leyland, because it regards it as essential to the well-being of the country. What no government has yet sufficiently realised is that the arts are a more than £150 million industry, which provides employment, draws tourists to spend far more than the government's grant to the arts, and most important of all, makes a contribution to the country's well-being in much more than an economic sense. The arts area is one of the few where Britain is truly Great Britain. We may buy other countries' cars, but they 'buy' our arts.

We are told that the arts can be adequately funded again when they get the economy right. I would make two comments. First of all, the arts cannot be turned off and on like a production belt. A great theatre, opera or ballet company takes years to build up, to develop a team and develop a style. The same applies to hundreds of smaller, but still important, arts organisations. It takes little time to destroy them, but a long time to revive them. Secondly, the deferment of a fair deal for the arts until the economy is right, ignores the vital



contribution the arts can make to energising society. It cannot too often be recalled that public subsidy for the arts began in the early months of the Second World War, and it began because the government calculated that the arts would stir the spirit of the people.

There was virtually no subsidy before 1939, but the government did not say, 'We must first win the War, and then the arts can be funded'. The arts helped to win the War and they can help us to solve the problems we face today, perhaps even more effectively than in 1939, for then our enemy was an external one, now the 'enemy' is to some extent rooted in our own attitudes. The arts can help to change attitudes, to counter the national depression and lack of confidence in the future, which many foreign visitors now remark on as the new English disease. At the very least, the arts can cheer us all up, though they can do much more than that.

The experience of the War convinced people of all political persuasions of the value of public subsidy for the arts. Today, however, a few voices are raised arguing that the whole idea of arts subsidy is wrong. 'Why should not people pay the full price of whatever arts they wish to enjoy?', they plausibly ask. This argument would be perfectly sound if the arts were purely a matter of pleasure, like drinking and smoking; but as I have said they are much more than that. They contribute to the education, to the civilising of the human race, and provide spiritual nourishment. Why else do we teach the arts at school, take our children to plays, concerts and art galleries? Viewed in one (rather narrow) way, the arts are an educational aid. So why do we spend on them a sum which is rather less than 2% of the education budget? No one, so far as I know, argues that people should pay the full cost of their education; then why should they pay the full economic cost of the arts, which happen to be education in its most enjoyable form? Similarly, it is widely recognised that the arts contribute to our emotional health; indeed the arts are often used as therapy in hospitals. No one suggests that people should have to pay the full economic cost of hospital treatment, so why should they pay the full cost of the arts they all need?

The Minister has told the House that he certainly believes that public funding of the arts must continue; but he added that there can be no further expansion of it, and that we must look to business sponsorship for 'growth' money. I have to say that I know no one in the arts world who believes this can happen. The Royal Opera House has been possibly the most successful arts institution in securing business sponsorship. Yet its Chairman, in the current annual report, emphasises that the Opera House 'depends essentially on public support' (that is, public subsidy), and goes on to say that while they welcome business sponsorship, 'We cannot expect to be able significantly to increase our dependence upon it'. That is even more true for the many less prestigious arts bodies.

We hear a good deal about the need to encourage business support through changes in the tax laws. Mr. Albert Frost is a Director of Marks and Spencer, a company which has a splendid record in discriminating arts sponsorship. He has pointed out that any business that knows the ropes already gets tax relief on its expenditure on the arts. Incidentally, this means that in the end, the government pays for about half of business sponsorship anyway.

My personal view is that the development of the arts in this country should continue to be overwhelmingly the responsibility of government, with the Arts Council as the intermediate body between government and artists. In the past thirty years, this system has been admired (and envied) throughout the world. I believe the future development of the arts is too central a part of life of the nation to become *wholly* a by-product of the advertising and publicity needs of business. Would anyone seriously suggest that the future needs of schools or hospitals must be met in this way?

Any policy which does not see the subsidy of the arts as a prime public duty ignores the fact that the arts have always needed and received subsidy – from the church, from kings and the aristocracy. Now it must come mainly from government. For the arts are a public service, and people need the arts for a full and satisfying life. Talk of the 'quality of life' has become a political cliché, but it does imply an acknowledgement that life is more than livelihood, more even than full employment and good housing, important as they are.

### Underpatronised

If I am right about this, why do I also admit that the arts are underpatronised? Why is it that the so-called 'high' arts are patronised by less than 10% of the population? Doesn't that prove they don't really need the arts as much as I say? A debating reply, but not (I hope) a cheap, debating reply, would be to say that the fact that less than 10% of the population eats wholemeal bread, while the rest live on that tasteless soft white substitute, does not prove that human beings would not thrive better on real bread.

No one lives entirely without art. Most people get their main art experiences from television and the cinema, rather than from the concert halls and the national theatres, from sensational newspapers that dramatise the news, and cheap magazines rather than serious books. A large part of this majority arts diet is the artistic equivalent of sliced white bread and synthetic cream cakes; but a significant part of it is very good. Television and radio offer a remarkable number of good plays, good films, good operas and informative programmes about the arts. Some people argue dismissively that the television experience is not the same as the live performance. Of course it isn't, but it is a damned good substitute for the millions of people who still have precious little opportunity to see the real thing.



### Underdistributed

As a regional man (not, you note, a provincial person) who has enjoyed the delights of the London arts scene since I came to live here five years ago, my enjoyment has often been impaired by a nagging conscience that reminds me that millions of people living north of Watford, or west of Bristol, have very limited access to these joys. We need to spend even more on touring and on preserving the regional theatres to which tours can go. Equally, actors, signers and musicians must be willing to absent themselves from the felicities of living in London (and the attendant perks of television) and take their talents to the major regional centres. 'So distribution should undo excess/And each man have enough'.

I have heard complacent metropolitans argue that if anyone in Leeds or Manchester or Taunton really wants to see the National Theatre or the Royal Opera, they can take a train. I have even heard an arts élitist argue that anyone interested in paintings can easily fly over to Paris for an exhibition. How absurdly unrealistic to assume that more than a few very favoured people have the time and the money to do this! I have lived in Leeds and Manchester, some of my best friends still do, and I know how shamefully false is this attempt to assuage metropolitan guilt.

We must do two things. First, increase the extent to which theatre, ballet and opera are available on television. When I talk to television people about the need to do this, they tell me that the demands of the entertainment trade unions made such relays unduly expensive, and that it is (for example) cheaper to buy a first class television opera from Germany than to do a relay from Covent Garden. If this is a major obstacle, a great deal of effort should be put into removing it. Second, as I have said, we must increasingly spread the best of live art around more by touring – and the Arts Council is spending over five million pounds this year on doing just that. Third, we must encourage the strengthening of good arts organisations in the regions. Manchester has an orchestra and a theatre of truly national standard (the Hallé and the Royal Exchange Theatre). Leeds has its excellent Playhouse, and in the past year has acquired (thanks to the Arts Council) a first-rate opera company, which also tours the area.

Broadcasting, touring, local development, all are necessary to a balanced arts economy, and it would be encouraging if broadcasting, especially television, recognised more of its debt to the live entertainment on which it so largely depends. Penelope Keith, bless her, may be a hot television property now, but she learned her considerable acting skills in the tougher world of the live theatre (so, incidentally, did Morecombe and Wise). Television exploits the best talent from the live arts, and if only in recognition of the principle of re-afforestation, it should do more for the live theatre to ensure future supplies.

We are used to hearing how a television play or an opera is watched by more people than would see it by packing a theatre for five years, and it is indeed an impressive fact. Not quite as impressive as it appears, however; for a televised opera or Shakespeare play still appeals to far fewer people than a popular comedy show. It reaches a nationwide minority which is, of course, pretty sizeable; but it is still a small minority and it concerns me – and has concerned me all my working life in university extramural teaching – that the majority still find the high arts, whether an abstract painting, a symphony, a Shakespeare play or a serious novel, beyond their ken. For example, the worthy councillors of Blackpool recently declined to receive the Royal Shakespeare Company's small-scale tour because it was 'arty-crafty stuff ... catering for a minority interest' (it was, in fact, Chekov and Shakespeare!).

I quote this is not to mock the Blackpool councillors, for they speak for the vast majority of the population. This is something we, who live in the charmed circle of the arts aficionados tend to forget. We go to crowded theatres, concert halls and art galleries. When we meet our friends we discuss with them the arts we have all enjoyed – or hated. We read about them in the posh papers. So we make ourselves a cosy world within the larger world and forget how small a world ours is.

All the research shows that the audience for the serious arts comprises mainly people with higher status and higher education. The common man is uncommon in the arts audience, and this generalisation is not disproved by the claim you often hear: 'I know a bus driver who loves opera'. I have known many such instances in teaching, for example, courses for workers and their wives; but they are not representative instances. There are three reactions to this situation. The first, rarely voiced these days, but still believed, is: 'Why bother? Anyone can borrow books from a public library, anyone can visit a public art gallery. If they choose not to, that's their business'. They could add that it can hardly be poverty that stops people going, since many pop concerts and variety clubs cost more than most symphony concerts, and yet people flock to them (a variety club in Stoke-on-Trent, not one of our more prosperous cities, recently sold out for an appearance by Andy Williams – at £20 a head!).

All the evidence points to the fact that the main barrier is *socio-cultural*. Most working people see the high arts as not for them, and are not surprised when Prince Charles and Princess Margaret appear as champions of opera and ballet. It confirms their view that the arts are indeed for the social élite and definitely 'not for us'. Royal galas may raise money, but I fear they also raise the barriers between the serious arts and the man in the street. They help to give plausibility to statements like the following from a book on *Artists and People* (by Su Braden, 1979) ...



'It must be understood that the so-called cultural heritage which made Europe great – the Bachs and Beethovens, the Shakespeares and Dantes, the Constables and Titians – is no longer communicating anything to the vast majority of Europe's population . . . It is bourgeois culture and therefore only meaningful to that group'.

I largely agree with that statement – up to the last sentence: but I entirely disagree with the conclusions the writer and many others draw. The undeniable fact is that the great bulk of the population is alienated from the serious arts. However, many people active in the arts today who are aware of this are quite happy to reject 'the so-called cultural heritage', and substitute for it a form of art experience tailored to the tastes of those whom politicians tactfully describe as 'ordinary working people'. This can mean providing plays which are 'relevant' to the life, times and work of the intended audience, plays about factories and strikes instead of 'arty' Chekov or Shakespeare. It also means encouraging people to express themselves in various art forms – making their own music, drama, painting or poetry.

Up to a point, this is useful and good. It is when it is seen as a substitute for the rejected 'bourgeois culture' that I strongly disagree. There is a heresy abroad in education, especially in the schools, that 'appreciation' of other people's work is passive and unfruitful, whereas 'participation', doing it yourself, is active, creative and self-fulfilling. The heresy is also endorsed by many community artists. The truth is that valuable as *creative self-expression* is, it does not replace *creative appreciation* (I use the term deliberately) of the great works of art. We need both expression and appreciation.

Protagonists of the 'expression is all' school talk about the importance of process versus product; that is, they are more interested in the process of making art than in the quality of the product. This is to show a profound ignorance of the nature of appreciation, which is also a process – one of response, reflection and study. My own appreciation of Shakespeare's *King Lear* is a process that has been going on for over thirty years. Who would seriously claim that it is more fulfilling to act in an Agatha Christie thriller than to make the considerable effort to respond to a new interpretation of *Lear*? Or more enriching to be a Sunday painter than to make a full and well informed response to Rembrandt? The fact that appreciation is often badly taught does not diminish its value when well taught, and expression can often be sloppily done. We must compare the best in both areas.

#### Undervalued

This brings me to the third response to the undoubted fact that the traditional 'high' arts do not, in the Quaker phrase, 'speak to the condition' of the majority of the public, and consequently are under-valued by them. It is that we should make a far greater effort to interpret the arts through

education for children, young people and adults. You may say that much is already being done. I would reply that I have some idea of what is being done and that it is not nearly enough. For example, most people, especially those in the arts world, when they do think of education, think only of children and schools. They have scarcely begun to realise the vast opportunities in *adult* education, or the fact that mature adults often make better students of the arts than children. Adults bring to, say *Orthello* or *Lear*, an experience of life which even the most precocious child does not have. My own experience of teaching adults and, as a professor of adult education, supervising teaching by many others, leaves me in no doubt of this.

Being preoccupied with adult education, I have in the past tended to assume that children were reasonably well catered for in the arts. I now doubt this very much. For example an inquiry into theatre for young people, which the Arts Council held a year ago, revealed what is to me a profoundly shocking finding. This was that *less than half the children in schools see as much as one play a year*. Is it then surprising that nine out of ten of them grow up with little taste for the theatre?

This puts even more emphasis on the need for adult education now to remedy the defects and shortcomings of child education. We often hear of the need for education to train the audience of tomorrow. I want to see us helping the potential audience of today. That is why I was delighted to read of a polytechnic's ten-week course of afternoon meetings called 'Enjoying Shakespeare', described as 'A course for those who are usually "turned off" by Shakespeare, but who still have a nagging suspicion that they are missing something'. We need hundreds of such courses throughout the country for those who are turned off by Shakespeare and Dante, Bach and Beethoven, Constable and Titian. Incidentally, what a glorious opportunity the BBC is missing in not building around its television Shakespeare productions a series of programmes designed to turn people on to Shakespeare (its 'Perspectives on Shakespeare' simply preach to the converted). It is a pity that 'popularisation' is a dirty word in so many quarters, when first-class popularisation of the serious arts, and thought about them, is an urgent need if we truly wish to democratise our culture.

Observers of the Arts Council's work (and even the Arts Council itself) have often tended to forget that the Council's Royal Charter requires it not only to make the arts more accessible, but also to 'develop and improve the knowledge, understanding and practice of the arts'. It would be impossible for the Council to become a nationwide arts educator as well as arts subsidiser, but fortunately the Charter also requires it to co-operate with other organisations to achieve the linked, and indeed inseparable, aims of encouraging both access to the arts and understanding of them. That is why in the past two years the Arts Council has begun to



encourage co-operation between the arts providers and education providers at all levels. These are still early days, but already a considerable range of joint activity has been stimulated between arts providers on the one hand, and universities, schools, colleges and adult education on the other. Awareness of the need for this partnership has grown considerably in the past year, despite the fact that financial resources in both arts and education have been diminished. Something can be done without extra expenditure, or by giving to arts and education a higher priority than some existing activities. For example, I hope the course I mentioned on 'Enjoying Shakespeare' will invoke the help of Shakespearean actors and maybe a director. I don't go all the way with Trevor Nunn's claim that through their interpretation of a speech actors can tell us more than Shakespeare scholars can; but I would certainly agree that the two activities are complementary, and it would be as wrong for teachers of drama to ignore the performed interpretation, as it would be for a company like the Royal Shakespeare Company to ignore Shakespearean worship — which we know it certainly does not.

Would that its actors could be given the opportunity to display on television in an even more popular way, the skills and insights they so brilliantly demonstrated on two recent editions of the excellent *South Bank Show*. They could really help to turn people on to Shakespeare. Similar skills are needed in the other arts. We have long had some (but not enough) special concerts to introduce children to classical music. Why don't we have them for adults too? Or why not family concerts where both adults and children can learn together? In my experience many adults who are reluctant to expose themselves to education will happily collaborate in the education of their children — even if it involves a slight risk of education-by-association.

#### In conclusion

I have tried to put my finger on some of the major problems in the arts field and to suggest what might be done about them. The main ones were under-subsidising, which must be remedied in the main by national government, to a lesser extent by local government, and only marginally, but still importantly, by business sponsorship.

The fact that only a minority of the population patronise the arts, I have suggested, results almost entirely from the fact that people literally *do not know what they are missing*; and the prime means of letting them know is education for all ages — education which is life-long and linked to arts experiences in the theatre, the opera house, the concert hall and art gallery. I know very well that one of the fruits of a good education is the capacity for self-education, and that life-long education does not mean that people need to be constant course-attenders; but many people need, at least periodically, the stimulus which a tutor

and fellow students can provide — hence the recent emphasis on 'recurrent education'.

Improved and extended arts education is also the answer in the long run to the fact that the arts are undervalued in our society, not least by local and national politicians; but in the long run we are all dead, and the arts cannot wait much longer for a life-saving injection of more money. Therefore, we need a short-term campaign. By this I mean that instead of merely protesting and demonstrating, the arts world should concentrate more on persuading — largely by exposing more politicians of all kinds much more often to their work *and* by discussing it with them. It won't do to say, as some arrogant arts providers implicitly do, 'If you don't like it, so much the worse for you'.

Politicians, perhaps inevitably, acquire a certain immunity from the effects of protests and demonstrations, even those in which theatrical knights take to the streets; but will they be immune to the power of the arts themselves? Did not Bernard Shaw once say that art was the most powerful educator next to torture? So by all means let the props department keep the rack and thumb-screws ready, but meanwhile let the arts world seek to persuade the politicians by exposing them more often to the full power of their various arts.