

## **Clare Leadership Conference, 5 June 2008**

**Leadership: Excellence in the Arts and Culture** was the fifth Clare Leadership Programme annual conference. Held at the Southbank Centre, the audience included Clare Fellows from the first four years of the programme, the newly-selected 2008/9 Fellows, attendees of the Clare Leadership Programme short courses and representatives from across the UK cultural sector.

The broad theme of the conference was an exploration of how cultural leaders might best foster excellence in the arts and culture. The conference opened with two keynote speeches by Sir Brian McMaster, author of the recent McMaster Review *Supporting Excellence in the Arts . From Measurement to Judgement* and Andy Burnham, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport.

In a departure from the format of previous Clare conferences the second part of the morning comprised a series of workshop sessions where conference attendees came together to discuss and resolve five key questions inherent to the debate. These were:

- Can you, and should you, measure excellence?
- What should a peer review process look like?
- What impact will the excellence agenda have on the promotion of diversity in the arts?
- How can artists (rather than just organisations) become involved in the promotion of excellence across the whole sector?
- How can an excellence agenda avoid over-concentration on the large-scale and metropolitan?

The workshops were chaired respectively by John Holden, Head of Culture at Demos; Erica Whyman, 2004/5 Fellow and Chief Executive & Artistic Director of Northern Stage; Doreen Foster, 2005/6 Fellow; Wayne McGregor, Director of Random Dance and Resident Choreographer at the Royal Ballet; and Roy Clare CBE, Chief Executive of Museums, Libraries and Archives Council. The Rt Hon Lord Smith of Finsbury, Director of the Clare Leadership Programme, chaired the conference.

As Lord Smith noted in his opening remarks, virtually everyone now accepts that *access* - opening up the arts to the widest range of people - is a sensible and central objective for arts policy. The challenge now is to ensure that the fostering of excellence takes an equal priority.

### **Excellence in the Arts and Culture**

A key theme for both speakers was that this is a defining moment in the history of the arts in Britain. On the back of a decade of investment and improvement that has delivered a strong, more confident and outward-looking arts sector Excellence is now *the* agenda. The McMaster Review, said Andy Burnham, offers a blueprint and a route map for the next phase and signals clearly that the era of detailed targets and waiting for permission is past . now is the era of freedom and trust.

Brian McMaster congratulated DCMS on commissioning a review that set out *to* examine how a system of public funding can facilitate excellence, innovation and risk-taking. He noted that excellence as a term had become sullied by connotations of elitism; how we had to accept that in many ways the UK arts were very conservative (with the exception of the visual arts and some dance); and that we had lost the constructive essence of what risk is and needs to be in the arts sector.

Brian McMaster expanded on his definition of excellence, considering the value of the arts in two ways. First, he suggested that our engagement with the arts helps us to think about life either as a community experiencing say a piece of theatre, or in an intense solitary experience through perhaps a book or a painting. The deeper the thoughts provoked in us, the better the work of art. Secondly, he proposed that we all look at the same thing but an artist sees a different angle and that by enunciating that it helps us all to see differently.

In acknowledging that the process of assessing art is not easy, Brian McMaster emphasised that it is the constructive mix of both self-assessment and peer group appraisal that is most effective. This was supported by his recent positive experience, which he outlined, of reviewing four major performing arts companies for the Dutch government.

Andy Burnham paid tribute to Lord Smith's leadership as Secretary of State and as Director of the Clore Leadership Programme citing two examples of his great leadership in action. First, the far sightedness ten years ago to understand and champion the then whimsical notion that successful regeneration in the long term is not just about bricks and mortar but about regeneration of the human spirit, hope and aspiration and the part that culture and sport plays in that. Secondly, the vision and determination to reinstate free entrance to national museums and galleries. An act that would rejuvenate cultural life and send a clear signal about the intrinsic value of art. Even when no-one else supported the idea.

From these examples he drew lessons in leadership on the importance of having the courage and confidence to stick by your instincts and trust your own judgement; to have a clear sense of yourself and a clear vision; to be able to listen, learn and reflect; to inspire passion and commitment in others; to have a judiciously selected set of inspired priorities that are well understood and communicated; and to be ready to stick your neck out and take the flak. This kind of leadership was crucial to delivering the vision of the McMaster Review.

Both speakers laid down a challenge to the assembled cultural leaders before them: taking forward the complementary objectives of access and excellence depends crucially on leadership, vision and strength of character. Now is the time for innovation, freedom and risk-taking. As leaders we must be ruthless in carrying through the principles of the McMaster review. To achieve this we must be more entrepreneurial, champion real quality, innovate to be relevant, live outside our comfort zones and above all, keep our nerve.

### **Discussion Groups**

All the groups had lively debates from which the main points were reported back to the plenary session.

The nature of excellence emerged as a key theme. Those present felt that while organisations could be measured, excellence was a quality that should be judged. This indicated a move away from lists, numbers and outputs to a consideration of the whole process including elements such as impact, value, stories and experiences. Excellence was not intrinsic but meant different things to different people. As one delegate commented, Excellence is in the eye of the beholder.

This led to debate about who should judge excellence. It was suggested that excellence should be judged on a range of axes and from many perspectives. There was broad consensus that review by peers was essential. Many felt that the views of artists, the public and young people were largely absent within arts organisations and funders and that we needed to hear these

missing voices more clearly in future.

The role and perspective of artists in relation to excellence was particularly emphasised. Several speakers shared their belief that artists should be empowered within the system on every Board and in open equal dialogue with funders and arts organisations. One vision expounded was that we should distribute artists like seeds into this new world. Others sounded a note of caution. Artists make the work they think needs to be made. Excellence is not their starting point and the unknown is an important space to preserve.

A consensus emerged around the qualities that should be inherent in any Peer Review process which, it was suggested, should have the spirit of an appreciative enquiry. Artists and organisations should be encouraged to identify their own peers who should be selected for their range of perspectives . balancing close experience of a particular practice or diversity with an outside view. It would be important to consider a body of work over time and it would be essential to have a transparent process and minimal bureaucracy. We should aim to embed a culture of peer review and rigorous self-evaluation throughout the sector.

There remained challenges ahead for the arts sector in moving to this new approach. Clarity of purpose . what are we measuring for? . was essential and there were mixed views about how peer review processes might relate to funding decisions. Others raised the need to account for historical inequalities in investment across sectors. We lack a level playing field. Another challenge would be balancing a judgement-led process by cultural agencies with a measurement-led process by local authorities although there was hope that common ground could be found. Most importantly we would need to preserve and encourage innovation, risk and the right to fail in a culture that focused on judging excellence.

Overall, those present strongly welcomed the opportunities afforded by the new era of excellence heralded by Brian McMaster and Andy Burnham. These included the chance to rebuild trust with funders, to engage the wider public in our conversation and above all to focus on the excellence of our work.

We left ready to meet our speakers' exhortations to be ruthless, uncomfortable and bold in our pursuit of excellence!

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