

# DIPLOMACY OF CULTURE: ARTISTS ON THE FRONT LINE

October 2012

I have been asked to share some experience with you including my time as Artistic Director of the Barbican. I want to put that into the context of what is happening in the world – and in particular Europe.

My overarching theme is the Diplomacy of Culture - to take you on a journey around the world including to some difficult and dangerous places.

I want to share my views:

1. On the landscape as I see it, some history and why culture is central to where we go next.
2. On the role of cultural diplomacy seen through the eyes of the British Council.
3. On some examples of how cultural diplomacy is helping the next generation of artists, directors and festival managers to bring their vision to life.

First, the landscape. We are living through changed and fast changing times. That, I am sure, goes without saying.

In less than two years we have seen dramatic changes across the Middle East and North Africa, powered by a drastic need for a new political, social and economic settlement. The rise of big new economies in China, India, Brazil, Mexico and others are fundamentally reshaping the old orders and forcing us to think differently about the character of our global relationships.

And, we are witnessing a turbulent period in the life of the European Union and the Euro to say the very least.

The *second* is material to the first: the numbers.

The global population is growing at a rate of about 6 people per second and yet, certainly in Europe, people are living longer.

Half of the world's 7 billion people are under 25, but the rate of economic growth means the supply of jobs cannot meet the demand.

Here in the European Union, youth unemployment stands at 22%.

Unemployment in the over 50 range in the UK is at its highest rate since 1994. And yet predictions are that by 2060, 40% of people in the job market will be over 55.

Free movement of people, trade and ideas have opened up the world with profound and lasting consequences.

Some of it, in my view, is great. Some of it challenging, a lot of it difficult.

The *third* is relevant to all of this: the internet, social media and a proliferation of new channels demands something different from all of us, particularly big organisations like the British Council.

What does that mean for us all?

We know that culture budgets are coming under pressure and that Governments everywhere have to make very tough and understandably difficult choices. The Arts Council of England had to absorb a 27% cut in its funding following the last Spending Review in the UK.

Inevitably there were winners and losers when it came time to awarding its grants to the arts, including some very high profile instances which many of you will know about.

What became clear is that funding for the arts, its people, its institutions we cherish and love has changed forever - perhaps, for the better.

What is equally clear to the British Council and to me is that where we can, we must align better relationships between the people of the world, with developing the next generation of young artists, directors and leaders with a truly international perspective.

And, on the UK and Europe, no matter how challenging the economics and politics are, what we do can underpin and underwrite the future.

That is not just the British Council's role of course as there are many organisations from Goethe to the French and Italian Institutes who believe this.

I believe that, and I will go onto explain why, when much of what we were certain about, thought we understood and were confident we knew, is stripped away, then culture becomes my certainty.

It is a certainty through which we are able to continue to talk, to build better understanding and trust between each other and to start rebuilding a more equitable, fairer future.

This is something to cherish, something to uphold and something to remember as we look back to where it began for the British Council and what we do, which is my current preoccupation.

The British Council, founded in 1934, was set up as the United Kingdom's cultural relations organisation – to build bridges across the world in terms of understanding and appreciation of the UK, to promote the UK's interests.

One of the means of doing this was through the arts. The arts have always been part of the British Council's cultural relations mission but recently they've been given a much more prominent role.

That's why, after over 35 years in the arts and broadcasting, I decided just over a year ago to take on the job of the British Council's global Director Arts – to use my arts experience in (for me) the new context of the UK's cultural relations and cultural diplomacy agenda.

We were created in an era of social uncertainty and inequality, political extremism and instability, of economic turmoil and recession, of war, of rapid industrial change, of intolerance.

It is obvious that many of the ills of those decades are still all too present and very much alive.

Many of the institutions, cultures and professions which we've held in respect for so long (in the UK and elsewhere) are now critically devalued: the culture of politics, the culture and practice of journalism (the absence of an ethical code, the phone-hacking, the mindless worship of celebrity), the banking and financial services sectors, the issues surrounding our education and examination systems.

You could argue that almost the only “culture” in the UK still strong in its self-belief, its values, its contribution to society, its integrity is “the culture of culture”, that’s to say the arts and creative industries, together with the culture of sport as seen in the achievements of our Olympics and Paralympics.

Today we do cultural relations not “to” people, but “with” people. Our whole purpose – one I have emphasised strongly since my arrival, is one of mutuality, of sharing experience and creativity, of dialogue.

This is the nature of the arts in a global society: artists hungry to share their inspiration, their ideas, audiences eager to see and experience collaborative creativity, work that crosses cultural and artistic boundaries.

This is how we work, at the same time being mindful of our responsibility to support international exposure and opportunity to UK arts and artists.

And, this year we launched a joint three-year programme with the Arts Council England which will support individual artists based in England to work internationally.

The Artists International Development Fund will provide grants of between £1,000 to £5,000 for artists to travel, explore and collaborate internationally while carrying out professional projects.

The £750,000 fund aims to support artists who have carried out little or no work internationally, and is designed to help artists build on their domestic success and develop markets and audiences overseas for their work.

Arts Council England and the British Council are each providing half of the total funding available.

I see this as an extension of my work at the Barbican where we worked closely with artists directly on programme, identifying and developing audiences for their work, as well as encouraging understanding in UK of international work and different cultural approaches.

It is clear to me that internationalism in the arts should be essential for arts planners and artistic directors.

It is true that individuals and organisations may not see themselves as representing a country, but cultural diplomacy and cultural relations are grounded in people-to-people relations. The state is no longer the arbiter of conducting relations with the rest of the world...if indeed it ever was.

However, it is often argued that the history of cultural diplomacy is a long one: I disagree. As we now understand it, I think the history goes back only about as far as the mid 1930’s, when the British Council was set up...and we were way behind many of our European friends in seeing the opportunities of culture within the diplomatic portfolio bag.

In earlier times it was much more about emblems of power, a glorification of state, the church or other religions as they showcased their supremacy, asserting their presence through the arts (magnificent buildings and lavish spectacle), of the exchange of gifts and art as a means of diplomatic rapprochements or trade agreements.

It was not about understanding, it was not about learning, and it was certainly not done in a spirit of humility.

This is a generalisation, but I think a fair one. In the years immediately after WW2, the tone changed certainly in Europe with the arrival of two major festivals of Avignon and Edinburgh and the resurrection of a third: Salzburg.

Each of them beacons, all of them more than a nice to have – everyone now considered a must.

These were cast in the roles of reconciliation, of building trust and mutual understanding through the arts and cultural exchange – very close indeed to the Council's own mission particularly in parts of the world who have undergone rapid transformation over the last two years.

For example, since the spring of 2011 we have responded across the region (from North Africa, through the Levant, to the Gulf) by injecting funding to open up artistic opportunity, free debate and training in particular to young people.

A grant scheme set up for young Egyptian artists to come to the UK, film writing workshops with the Institut Francais and the British Film School in the region: and we are trying to find ways of exporting British skills in technical training (for theatre and dance) as well as for museum and curatorial management, much in demand wherever we go.

When the Gaddafi regime fell in Libya, we worked with the new Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, a visionary and enlightened German called Martin Roth, who understands the purpose and rationale for the British Council better than many British: it happened that he had an exhibition of Street Art in his international touring portfolio...ready to go!

The Libyan version – which showed in both Tripoli and Benghazi - was put together in an amazing six weeks, a fraction of the time usually required for a major exhibition, and featured work by global street art stars such as Banksy and Shepard Fairey, alongside equally billed thrilling examples by Libyan artists.

Successful though these initiatives are, it's important to see this cultural diplomacy – or rather I see it as diplomatic culture (a key distinction, I feel) as part of a long term engagement, certainly by us.

We believe it's in all our interests that Libya moves towards being a stable and prosperous and just society, exploiting its rich cultural heritage and its creatively impatient youth.

That is the value back to the UK, and the world community!

Elsewhere in the region we are working in Iraq – a literary festival in Erbil, a National Youth Orchestra in Baghdad (in partnership with the Scottish authorities) recent work in Edinburgh and London and in culturally restricted Saudi Arabia.

In the Gulf we have found a new way to express mutuality and find a common purpose, to showcase but in a bilateral way.

We played a major role in the Cultural Olympiad, in London's Festival 2012, which ended just a few weeks ago.

We supported UK music collaborations with artists from each of the continents (for example the Colombian Frente Cumbiero jamming with British musicians) in a wild free weekend of music down the Thames.

We were involved in the amazing Unlimited, a festival of disability arts - a very sophisticated sector in the UK

And then of course there's Shakespeare.

Not content with just doing Shakespeare as we know it in the UK, the RSC and the Globe in 2012 masterminded an extraordinary extravaganza of Shakespeare, new productions by the

RSC in partnership with countries overseas, as well as Globe to Globe, a marathon series of some 37 different Shakespeare productions in 37 different languages over six weeks.

This was not only an extraordinary artistic achievement, but something the UK can be proud of in terms of opening up our own culture, our own heritage to multiple interpretation from multiple countries.

Shakespeare is for the world and we helped to bring to London Romeo and Juliet from Iraq, MSND from Russia, Macbeth from Tunisia, Richard 3 from Brazil amongst others.

In Afghanistan we have been working hard on the ground in recent years with major projects in Education (building civil society), English language teaching (particularly through teaching the teachers), cultural leadership for their museums and institutions, and also with the Afghan National Music Institute.

Part of this endeavour is to stimulate Afghan creative expression and to help broaden and improve the image of Afghanistan overseas – changing the narrative, as well as gently but firmly trying to tackle gender issues such as women’s rights.

That is why we helped to initiate this extraordinary production of Shakespeare’s early comedy. We had worked with Roy-e-Sabs in 2005 soon after their founding by the dynamic Corinne Jaber (a director strongly influenced by the legendary Peter Brook).

Then the play was Love’s Labours Lost. When she approached our country director and the Globe with the idea of Comedy of Errors for the Globe to Globe Festival in 2012, everyone was eager to help.

Then on 20<sup>th</sup> August 2011 a round of rehearsals for the show was due to commence in the garden of the British Council compound in Kabul. The day before, suicide bombers attacked the Council in an eight hour gun battle which left 14 people dead and the compound completely destroyed.

Our country director said at the time: “Even the work of cultural and educational relations can arouse hostility in today’s Afghanistan. But the work of the British Council continues, to help the Afghan people strengthen their national security, cultural identity and eventually prosperity.”

Rehearsals were moved to Bangalore in India, and finally the show came to London, before it tours elsewhere in the UK and mainland Europe.

One can only hope they are able to play in Kabul at some point, without suffering threats as the company did back in 2005. This is certainly cultural relations “at the front line” and cultural diplomacy in action.

In cultural relations, in the arts, we can often pre-occupy intellectual space the politicians cannot inhabit...like a kind of cultural John the Baptist, only hopefully without the decapital consequences, here depicted by Caravaggio (sadly not in our art collection!)

That space often takes us into dangerous territory – freedom of expression issues, cultural sensitivities, lobby groups calling for boycotts.

If we are to be a strong, and effective organisation, it’s important to hold robust, well-argued positions on these issues.

But this will inevitably mean some disagreement with us. I am ok with this: we are all as an organisation comfortable with occasionally being uncomfortable! That’s our job.

Take China: in 2012, but in the planning for three years, we are leading a large scale season in China, over 100 events in 17 cities over eight months – UK NOW in China. It’s the largest

season ever of British arts and culture there. There is a British arts event somewhere in China every day between April and the end of November – and it's all underpinned by four major training programmes for arts professionals, in leadership, policy, technical skills and heritage.

You may recall there was a major controversy over the Council's engagement with China over the annual London Book Fair, whose focus this year was on China and with whom we have an annual partnership.

Now the literary world is far more politically active than almost any other sector of the arts: but there was a strong body of opinion within the profession that felt we should not have engaged with China, because of its treatment of certain writers and its attitude to censorship.

We took a very different view: that engagement, even with those with whom you disagree, is important, that having those debates in the open demonstrates to the other side the strength and value of democratic debate.

Isolation in my view is not a real option, and if you look at the totality of growth and progress in our overall arts and culture programme with China (and theirs with us), not even the most ardent sceptic could deny we have made and continue to make progress.

We support engagement, we do not support boycott: and that goes for all our relationships, from Israel to the Palestinian Territories.

The big question for us is, how do we work to find ways of understanding one another as peoples of an increasingly uncertain world without resorting to war and annihilation?

Is it naïve to suppose that, in fifty year's time, we will be conducting world affairs in a much more ordered and civilised way, that by understanding and respecting one another's traditions, that we can achieve a better world harmony.

I'd be naïve if I didn't think there was an element of, well, over-optimism in my view.

But, set against that, what is the alternative? Unimaginable. So let's be optimistic.

I believe that the Arts and Creative Industries are the armies of the future, non-sectarian, non-armed, influential and sustainable catalysts for growth, trust and understanding.

Of course, the role of the artist has changed dramatically over the years:

- in the old days they were in effect "servants" Bach, Haydn, various painters etc
- then they were romantic idealists eg Berlioz,
- then many were used as propagandists in world wars or revolutionaries themselves
- now we have artists as commodities (eg Tracy Emin, Damien Hirst)
- and artists who enjoy a role as society change catalysts alongside their art
- artists can also change institutions and their culture - we implanted some artists within the building in residencies @Barbican, and South Bank and others in UK do the same....embedding artists in festivals and venues for more than just an event or programme does change the culture of an organisation...living and working with them somehow breathes a different kind of life into the people supporting the arts (administrators, HR, marketers)
- How about implanting artists into governments and not only in the culture ministries? There have been examples (Gil, Havel etc) but not nearly enough, but would raise the tone and ambition of our collective politics - if you could find volunteers of course

I am clear – and no doubt you all share this - that international collaboration, partnerships between people from different places and engaging with and in difficult environments gives each of us not only an opportunity to deliver great work or a great festival or give flight to a particular vision – all of that is, of course, incredibly important; it helps people understand each other better, builds trust on foundations of respect, integrity and challenges us to think a little harder about our contribution to the world.

And, my final point is this: it is very easy to be pessimistic today....there are many dark clouds on the horizon.

We all know the numbers...but I want to be an optimist...I am an optimist.

I believe, the British Council believes, that culture, and of course, education are spaces and places where great things can happen; where light can be shone to help us see through the dark.

I hope you, with me, will be an optimist too.

Thank you.

**Graham Sheffield, Director Arts, British Council**