

# Arts Alchemy

By Graham Sheffield, Artistic Director, Barbican Centre

**Y**our new editor was quite straightforward. "Enough of this arts preview stuff. Tell us how you do the job, how you make it all happen." I resist the feeling of that poor magician who has just been asked to reveal the secrets of all his tricks (yes, I really do saw the woman in half...like this; and yes the rabbit does get barbecued – they would indeed, with my prestidigital skills) and attempt to work out if there is in fact method to the mysterious world of arts planning.

The word alchemy sprang to mind, but those medieval pioneers of entrepreneurial trickery actually began with base metal. We almost always begin with gold (Shakespeare, Berlioz, Herbie Hancock, whoever) and have to try to make more than the sum of their very considerable parts.

## Time-out schedules

What makes the Barbican, above all other arts centres, so difficult is the range of what we offer. "All the arts under one roof" is the oft quoted mantra. It is not only true, but I have yet to come across another venue anywhere in the world with as comprehensive or extensive a programme.

With our range comes complexity. All the arts plan on different time schedules. The major orchestras think three to four years out. Blockbuster art shows plan on a similar time scale. The big shows in our BITE season certainly need two years in the planning cycle. Dance companies however rarely work more than a year ahead, the RSC plans surprisingly late, our jazz season is rarely confirmed more than six months ahead, and much of our successful "roots" and world music is fast gaining an in-house reputation for almost missing diary deadlines:



*No one to lean on, Graham Sheffield takes full responsibility for directing arts at the Barbican Centre.*

tbc [to be confirmed] is our third resident company. Cinema too works in short term cycles, with film distributors thinking nothing of changing release dates at three weeks' notice. Some of you will have noticed this with the new Graham Greene film *The End of the Affair*.

And literary events, well, you can plan those a week ahead if you want.

## Five-dimensional chess

If all of this sounds like a game of five-dimensional chess – how on earth do you plan a multi-arts festival when half the components will not come to the party until the month before? –



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**Barbican** RESIDENT

that is only part of the story. The Barbican has another secret weapon to make the arts planner's life even more interesting. It's called space management. Our internal economy works only if we make maximum efficient use of our spaces...all of them, down to the pokiest little corner that can be sold off for some reception.

Our concert hall, for example, is the most heavily used in the world, with over 87 per cent of available sessions filled. My European colleagues gasp in amazement when I tell them this. We use this and other spaces for a myriad of commercial activities, high profile AGMs, conferences, exhibitions and seminars.

The income is vital for the continued existence of our arts programme, but with the arts planning constraints I have mentioned above (late confirmations, changes of dates, etc) allied to another set of pressing needs from our commercial colleagues, and you have a logistical bouillabaisse of your worst nightmares.

And there are two vital factors that may sound like plain common sense, but which many institutions manage to overlook: First, hire a great team of programmers. My speciality areas are music and theatre, but even within these there are fields in which, shall we say, I need advice! The arts world is becoming ever more diverse and is changing ever more rapidly. You need more than your own training and experience to keep in touch. I believe we have the best team of any arts centre I know.

**Pompidou tries but Barbidos even better**

Second, you have to get the art forms to talk to each other: this may seem obvious, but... We are in the early stages of preparing a multi-arts project with the American director and polymath Robert Wilson. He came across to the Barbican last autumn for a recce and was astonished to find representatives from music, theatre, cinema, education and the visual arts all sitting around one table. He had, he said, recently done a similar project at Paris's Pompidou Centre, where he had had to go around each art-form in turn

since they never spoke to one another.

Artists are mixing their media more than ever before, but not, it seems, the arts planners, the Barbican being one of a few honourable exceptions. I know for a fact that in Salzburg the planner of the opera season doesn't talk to the planner of the concert season. And neither of them talks to the guy who plans the drama. Crazy!

**Different strokes for different blokes**

Globalisation has become an overused word in this generation. It is supposed to make life easier, since all our tastes and preferences become similar, all our markets and computer systems become compatible. If only this were the case in the arts, we could take a few more days off! Wouldn't it be lovely, the theory goes, if what sold in New York would sell here, what the inhabitants of Sydney go for, you could sell on to the Berliners. Thankfully this is not the case, and despite audiences' expanding tastes, there is still an individuality to each arts market place that sometimes baffles even a hardened cynic like me. A dance company that fills a thousand-seater in Paris for a month will barely half fill the Barbican for three days. A play that receives modest reviews in London will have returns queues fighting for tickets in Brooklyn, New York. It can be infuriating for all of us, but at least it stops us becoming complacent.

And when the planners have done their work, put the last piece into the jigsaw, filled in the last work permit, signed the last contract (sometimes on the night of the event), it isn't, I am happy to say, down to any of the programmers, with their fancy schemes and themes, as to whether the night is a success or not. Without the artists giving 100 per cent and more, we are nowhere. We can provide the framework and the context, we cannot paint the picture.

We start with gold, we finish with gold. Only, we hope, more of it than we predicted in the box office targets, otherwise the finance director (bless him) will be on the phone in the morning. Thank goodness I'm on the early flight to Rio.