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Best of British

A few years ago the arts department of British Council was in a sorry state, its policies ridiculed and staff morale at an all-time low. Now some key appointments have turned the situation around and promise an artistic renaissance. Simon Tait reports

The British Council's arts programme is back on full throttle with a new director and a bold global strategy that, he hopes, will reinstate the organisation's dulled international reputation and create a unique universal network.

Graham Sheffield succeeding Rebecca Walton as director of arts seems the most logical gambit in chess history, a checkmate for the arts against bureaucracy.

She, an old BC hand, had been drafted in after the debacle of 2007/8 when the council's famed arts operations were to be decimated in favour of 'cultural diplomacy'. Graham Devlin was commissioned to report on the whole mess when the council's chief executive, Martin Davidson, had made a spectacular u-turn following the intervention of the then foreign secretary, and his recommendations were almost wholly acted on.

They included the secondment of a

'specialist advisor' to help her put 'the arts back into the main bloodstream of the organisation', and who more logical than the arts director of the Barbican? It is his, Sheffield's, phrase about returning the arts to the bloodstream from which, implicitly, it had been extracted.

In 2009 Sheffield had very much a full-time job at the Barbican bedding in with the new

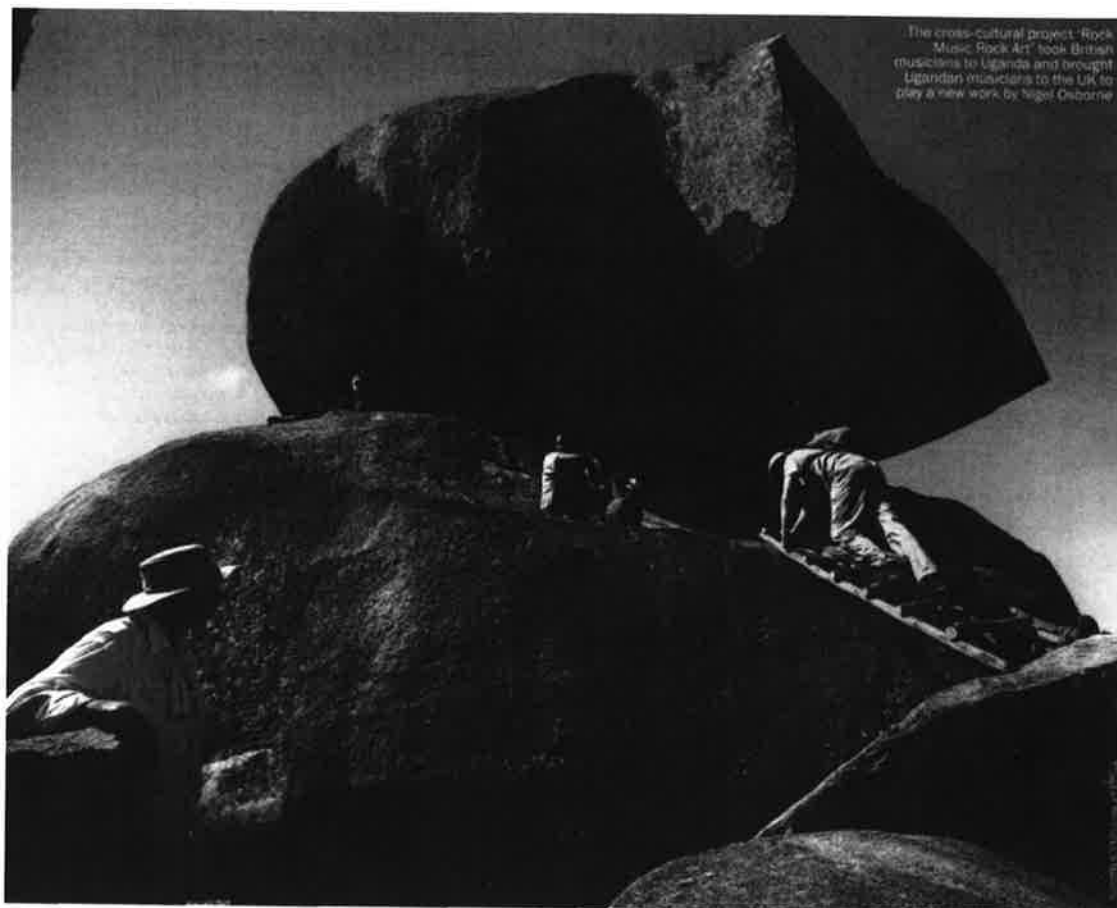
managing director there, Nicholas Kenyon, and steering the City's response to the Olympic challenge, but he accepted Walton's brief with enthusiasm.

She brought pragmatism and a listening ear, restored morale to what had been a renowned arts department, reinstated programmes and rebuilt budgets, all of which she had worked on with Sheffield. Together they devised a five-point scheme of showcasing British art, promoting cultural leadership in areas of interest, the development of a creative economy network, building creative capacity and the introduction of a relevant arts element into all of the BC's existing programmes.

Fifteen months ago Walton was promoted to the executive board in the key role of director of partnerships and business development, and at this point, the autumn of 2010, you would think the obvious replacement would be Graham Sheffield.



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The symmetry collapsed, however, because he was no longer here, having left the Barbican to pursue the 'job of a lifetime' building a new cultural quarter in West Kowloon, Hong Kong.

As it happened, miserably for Sheffield at the time but happily for the **British Council** eventually, he found himself caught in a political and bureaucratic firefight in the former British colony, defenceless and unable to manoeuvre his cultural proposals past a battery of special interests and private agendas, and he was forced to resign on medical advice. He arrived back in the UK for Christmas, and found that Rebecca Walton had still not been replaced. Symmetry restored, he started as the British Council's director of arts in May 2011.

'I'm really building on what we started together,' he says modestly. 'Staff morale was not at its greatest, to put it mildly, and she gave people a sense of belonging again, and that was extremely important.'

'We'd lost touch with artists so our specialists disappeared,' he says. 'We're reinstating them. One of the first things I said I wanted to do was to keep things very simple, and make sure we had the right people in the right places.'

To say that Sheffield belongs in the arts is like saying an apple belongs in a fruit bowl. He started as a classical musician, playing piano

and conducting, and his first ambition was to be an opera director. He went to the BBC and by the age of 25 was working on the music output of Radio 3, Radio 4 and the World Service. In 1990 he went to the Southbank Centre as music director, and in 1995 he took on the new post of arts director at the Barbican. A preview of the situation he was to encounter at the British Council, the Barbican was trembling from the effects of a small earthquake when managing director Detta O'Cathain was forced to leave after her commodification programme alienated resident arts organisations and art form heads.

Her successor, John Tusa, and Sheffield, transformed the institution. The Royal Shakespeare Company left and was replaced by the innovative Bite season, a proper art gallery

was carved out of the heart of the brutalist building, the theatre and concert hall were upgraded. Sheffield introduced international festivals and appointed new associate directors and ensembles.

'Each job I've done, somebody has taken me on trust,' he said then. 'Before I went to the BBC I'd never been in a studio before, I'd never worked in a concert hall until I went to the SBC, and here they took a risk on me and theatre.'

How much risk the British Council is taking on with him remains to be seen, but at 59 he is seen as a safe pair of hands, albeit hands that are never still.

He has spent his first six months in post identifying the regions of the world that will best benefit from his attention, and that will best benefit British artists, and identifying the people take on these brand new posts.

'The corporate line is that we're a cultural relations organisation, and the arts clearly has a very big role to play as part of that,' he says. 'End of corporate statement.'

There cannot be a feasible policy that fits every situation, as had been believed: each region has its own history, capability and culture, each will need to be treated differently. So he has appointed six regional cultural leaders, half found internally, half from outside, who Sheffield says are critical in linking what is happening around the world into the specialist teams in London – forensically, not superficially.

The regions are the Americas, based in Colombia; wider Europe in Istanbul; wider South Asia in Dacca; the Middle East and North Africa in Cairo; Sub-Saharan Africa in Johannesburg; and EU Europe, which is split between

Paris and Bucharest. Joining up the dots, Sheffield calls it, but that includes not only learning the terrain but affirming – or establishing – vital ambassadorial and political contacts. Gregory Nash, founder of The Point at Eastleigh, is bound for Istanbul; Shreela Ghosh, most recently director of the Free Word Centre, goes to Dacca; Steve Stenning, festival producer, heads for Cairo. There are already leaders established



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in Vietnam for East Asia, Beijing for China and New Delhi for India.

'It's very much a mutual agenda now, it's no longer about just sending the RSC to far-flung colonies. Those new positions are really at the start of a new global network,' says Sheffield.

Three years ago Russia was a major headache for the **British Council**, with 15 of their 16 offices closed amid accusations of subversive activities. The attitude towards British culture has thawed dramatically since, and though the offices are still closed, electronic communications have meant there is no hindrance to a startling upgrade of activity, particularly in the visual arts.

The Gagarin statue was unveiled in July outside the British Council's London offices by the Russian ambassador; he also went to the London Book Fair for the first time in five years, where Russia was the focus. There, President Medvedev deliberately mentioned the arts in a communiqué marking David Cameron's visit (Cameron did not), and there are Gormley, Henry Moore and William Blake exhibitions going there in 2012, as well as a Britten centenary project in 2013. It is traditional cultural diplomacy, where the arts take the lead over politics. 'We're not going to change the world single-handed, but it certainly helps to create a space where two countries can talk together in a more civilised way,' Sheffield says.

At home, Graham Devlin's charge that the BC's commitment to the arts community had been weak struck a nerve, and there has been a concentrated effort to engage the sector. 'A lot of my job is rebuilding confidence in the British Council, not only with the big institutions like the Tate and the National Theatre but with young talent too,' Sheffield says. 'We've got to cover the spectrum. The teams are now very heavily engaged in talking to the sector and trying to be partners, and we can be better partners if we've got a strong network abroad'. He is working closely with the UK arts councils, and there will be a stronger BC profile at home, particularly at arts festivals.

The big effort for 2012 is the Dickens

Project, with more than 50 countries taking readings, film showings and performances. 'We don't realise in this country how universal a figure Dickens is,' Sheffield says. 'It's rather taken me by surprise'. The list of those that have asked for Dickens in his bicentenary year goes from Armenia to Zimbabwe, with Germany, Brazil and Vietnam in between.

'They want to benefit from some of our skills and knowledge of the creative cultural economy, and we see ourselves as a kind of managing centre. The UK is one of the strongest providers as well as a mover and shaker in the field, and we're coming up with a more coherent arts story that you will see emerge in 2012.'

BRAKES OFF FOR MUSIC'S GLOBAL JOURNEY

The new regime 'has put the wind back in my sails,' says the British Council's head of music, Cathy Graham. Because the new regional leaders can immerse themselves in their areas, however large, they will be able to create a strategic overview 'so that we can provide exactly what's needed for that region,' she says.

'For instance, classical music is not necessarily the right thing for the young people of Tanzania, more hip-hop and rap, so we are working on that'.

Classical music, though, has the major part to play in every global region, and sometimes the market place is in the UK. A growing partnership with the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival to which producers from abroad are brought has seen the festival itself morph from a receiving event into a producer.

'We have a freedom now that comes with deeper knowledge of the regions, and it means we've been able to take the brakes off. So much is happening, when four years ago everything had almost ground to a halt.'

A major project is the Britten Bicentenary in Moscow in 2013, on which the council is working with a new partner, the Britten Pears Foundation. It will involve high-profile performances, an exhibition, the translation of a biography into Russian, and an online



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project with young composers, Brazilian as well as Russian, which it is hoped will be available worldwide.

'We're learning how to make new partnerships which are not only about money but ideas and experience,' says Cathy Graham. 'We're also creating higher profile in Britain for what we do.'

Just under way is a programme of composer residences in China, with the Performing Right Society for Music Foundation. 