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Working Group II: The Performing Arts and Communities

Chair: David Thacker

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Summary of Discussion:

The group consisted of one fellow from each of nine countries: China, Croatia, Egypt, Japan, Romania, Singapore, Sweden, UK and Zambia. Adrian Ellis, one of the Faculty Co-Chairs, joined the group which meant that perspectives from the U.S. had a voice in our discussions.

It was pointed out that none of the participants of Session 468 from the USA had elected to be in this group and this led to some discussion about whether or not the U.S. participants considered *The Performing Arts and Communities* to be of particularly great concern. Some members thought that the emphasis of Session 468 was driven by concerns that are very pressing in the U.S. given the impact experienced by American arts institutions of the global recession on box office income, corporate sponsorship and philanthropic donations. Our central focus was to discover whether the global recession is leading to similar challenges in countries that enjoy extremely wide ranging cultural traditions and experience different social and economic pressures. We were concerned to explore whether there is more that unites than divides us.

At the heart of our deliberations was one fundamental question: “what is the purpose of the work that we seek to promote?” Or to put it another way: “what is the responsibility of artists in our communities?”

We initially sought to define “community” but arrived at the conclusion that *community* is best defined by those who work in any particular location. It is the role of the artist to take responsibility for ensuring that cultural and artistic provision most powerfully addresses the needs, hopes, aspirations and priorities of the community s/he seeks to serve. It is for artists, managers and audiences to define for themselves what their community is.

We were able to unite around the proposition that “great art is the highest expression of humanity and represents the height of human aspiration. It enables us to understand the interconnected nature of human experience and to understand that beneath all the different cultures and skin colours we are one humanity.”

Notwithstanding this universality of art, we recognized that some art forms might be alienating to different cultures and that alongside artistic expression must be the parallel pursuit of educating a potential audience to enable people to access art that might otherwise be, for various cultural or social reasons, alienating or forbidding. If art represents the highest expressions of the human spirit it should be made available to as many peoples in our societies as possible.

We recognized that whilst some art forms are powerful and meaningful in some societies they might have less impact in others. For example, the symphony orchestra, might be potent in Western Society, but its unfamiliarity to many people throughout the world might make it culturally irrelevant, however culturally literate potential audiences might be within their own traditions. Similarly, although some African dance might affect a Westerner in the most generalized way s/he might not be able to understand the intricacies of its form and the nuances of its execution.

The group recognized that art should be a collaborative activity involving artists, managers, technicians, administrative and support staff and audiences. However, the group sought to consider whether the role of the chief executive of an arts organisation (whether the senior manager or the senior artists) should be re-conceived. This senior executive should be considered to be the leader of the organisation and his/her leadership role would be fundamental to its success. S/he should inspire or motivate everyone to contribute to the organisation vision and to secure its success. It was forcibly argued that, at the moment, the typical manager's primary concern (particularly in the USA) is to guarantee institutional permanence, whereas it should be to explore ways of connecting artists to communities and to encourage innovation. Typically the priority given to institutional permanence resulted in the subordination of cultural and social goals. Although this might be a perspective that is particularly relevant to the U.S., we agreed that arts leaders in all the communities we represent should seek to give priority to:

- engaging positively with our communities – seeking to discover our communities and understand their priorities as we seek to create work that has greater relevance to our communities - because without greater relevance our legitimacy as managers and artists is open to question;
- creating work which is challenging, inspiring, stimulating and accessible to a wide range of people;
- promoting work based on principles of excellence;
- harnessing the vision of the community;
- protecting arts institutions' ability to take risks;
- introducing new trends which would lead to new cultural movements;
- generating partnerships between universities, state structures, arts organizations and communities;
- developing research and innovation;
- seeking more dynamic mechanisms for participation.

