

The role of the writer in the wider community

Keynote address given by Gary McKeone, Director of Literature, Arts Council of England

"Writer in the community" internet searches on google provide an embarrassment of riches if you are a writer working in Ireland or Australia. You will find that Sgript Cymru, the major playwriting development and production company in Wales, is in receipt of a lottery grant that enables it to operate its unique 'Writer in the Community' scheme - albeit in collaboration with the Royal Court Theatre. But what of England?.....

...Let's go back 300 hundred years to Italy. *The New Science* was written in Italian and published in a first edition in 1725. In this work the Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico presents the principles of humanity and gives an account of the stages common to the development of all societies in their historical life. He also shows how all human thought and action is connected to imagination and memory as well as to reason. As Nicola Baldwin and the Wellcome Foundation here today will testify: writing, creativity and science are much closer than C P Snow's Two Cultures would have us believe...

Vico is generally regarded as the founder of the modern philosophy of history. He may also be regarded as the founder of the philosophy of culture and the philosophy of mythology. **Vico's** notion in *The New Science* is that history passes through four phases: theocratic, aristocratic, democratic, and chaotic. The last phase is characterized (like our own) by individualism. Goethe, Marx and Trotsky all quote Vico in their major works. You may also be interested to know that James Joyce based the general structure of *Finnegan's Wake* on *The New Science*,

Vico's theory of universal historical cycles has also been described as a set sequence of three successive Ages and a short fourth regenerative "ricorsi" period of chaos that brings things back to the start of a new cycle (hence the Wakean association of reversal with renewal and **regeneration**).

In an age of gods, even in an age of heroes the shaman was a key figure in society providing intervention between the community and the deities. But at a time where the age of man has given way to the "ricorsi" what role for the writer in the wider community now?

Let us leave Signor Vico and turn to our own government, today....

Social exclusion is a shorthand term for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown.

The Social Exclusion Unit was set up by the Prime Minister to help improve Government action to reduce social exclusion by producing 'joined-up solutions to joined-up problems'.

An action team led by the **Department for Culture, Media and Sport** (DCMS) reported on best practice in using arts to engage people in poor neighbourhoods, particularly those who may feel most excluded, such as disaffected young people and people from ethnic minorities. This is the Policy Action Team - or PAT - 10 Report. And in considering the role of the writer in wider community, it is worth a little of our time in further reflection on what the report sets out.

Key findings indicate that **participation**, and the provision of services to support participation, in arts can help address neighbourhood renewal by improving communities' 'performance' on the four key indicators of **more jobs, less crime, better health** and **improved educational attainment**. There are various distinctive contributions which the arts have to offer to tackling the causes of social exclusion. These can be summarised under the headings of: **growing industries; engaging and strengthening local communities; and an emphasis on people, not buildings or places**.

Key principles which help to exploit the potential of arts in regenerating communities include:

valuing diversity: people have a basic right to explore their own culture and identity in terms and forms which they choose and determine. This diversity should be recognised as a profound strength, and a rich source of ideas and practice which the whole cultural sector may draw upon. The diversity of community activity can often provide breakthroughs which more established and better-funded parts of the sector struggle to find;

embedding local control: one of the major benefits of participating in cultural activity is the opportunity to build local organisational skills and capacity. Community-based arts projects can be managed centrally, but they will tend to have less impact and be less sustainable, as well as finding it harder to secure people's commitment. A model which offers control by those who

are involved, albeit in partnership with funding agencies, local authorities and other stakeholders, is likely to have much deeper impact on those involved and the wider community;

supporting local commitment: the benefits of arts projects are inseparable from the act of participation and engagement. One of the most difficult roles for the State, whether locally or nationally, is to find ways of supporting this type of local cultural activity without interfering with it, and especially without creating dependency. The most effective initiatives are those where local enthusiasm and voluntary commitment can be matched appropriately by the support of local authorities and partners in the voluntary, educational, cultural or business sectors;

promoting equitable partnerships: all community-based arts projects involve partnership of some kind, but the way they are conducted varies widely. The test of fair partnership is whether there is an equitable distribution of risks and benefits among all those involved;

defining common objectives in relation to actual needs: it is essential that projects are undertaken by people and organisations who have shared - or at least not incompatible - objectives, and that they are articulated and understood by those involved. Since these objectives should relate directly to local needs, in many cases this is best done by bringing together all the stakeholders to agree an initiative's objectives jointly;

working flexibly with change: one of the great weaknesses of the arts funding systems is a tendency towards inertia arising from the difficulty of changing existing patterns of support. Once buildings, organisations and staff are in place, they tend to displace as the primary focus of concern the objectives they were intended to meet, or the communities they were intended to serve. At local level, it is vital to retain a degree of flexibility so that new responses can be offered to new situations.

securing sustainability: the development of community-based arts activity has been severely hampered by a lack of sustained commitment and resourcing, whether at local or national levels. This is an argument not just for more money, but more importantly for the development of systems of support for

pursuing quality across the spectrum: community development work is properly seen as part of the task of sustaining high quality in the arts and sport, rather than as a distinct or even opposed activity. Community development work should not be conceived in

terms which stigmatise or condescend to those concerned. The aim is to give everyone the opportunity to develop their talents and broaden their horizons and to strive for best practice in delivering services to enable people to develop their skills. The more that happens, the better for arts across the board;

and connecting with the mainstream: it is essential not to isolate arts community development initiatives, either from the rest of policy in the social inclusion and community development agenda or from mainstream arts development. Sustained success in the cultural realm will be experienced only where initiatives are firmly connected with successful programmes addressing the other causes and symptoms of social exclusion.

One of the **Key recommendations** of the report, with which the The Arts Council of England has been charged is to:

“provide a positive response to the PAT 10 report showing how they will: develop stronger partnerships with other agencies; consider novel funding arrangements for community groups; and involve the voluntary sector”.

So how does this relate to writers?

You will already have heard – or will be hearing - today from a number of organisations - some companies, some support or brokering bodies - about writers working in prisons and probation, healthcare, education, community and regeneration contexts: creating work for old people, young people: work which is culturally diverse in its widest sense.

Focusing creativity on these applied contexts might be one way of saying: that writers working in the performing arts are increasingly - to borrow Brecht’s phrase - “leaving the downtown stages and heading for the neighbourhoods”.

It is obvious from the nature of organisations working in these contexts that they are not producers in the conventionally understood sense. One would no less think of sending a script to an organisation dealing with regeneration, or arts for health, than one would think of sending one to the DCMS or even a burning political play to a House of Commons Select Committee. Matching provision to a market means a middle ground, one where support brokers can operate as change agents and facilitate the move by writers to a widening market of applied contexts.

Exercising professional (and indeed paid) leverage in the neighbourhoods is a valid intervention for the writer working in the performing arts.

Art as service or product is an old debate and its binarism belongs to the dungeons of funding imperatives of yore. Close analysis shows that art as both product *and* tool for change is well suited to the trend of the new and to the processes of social gain and social inclusion that the body politic is constantly re-engineering. The Internet revolution, with (at best) its democratisation of knowledge access and retrieval, has also helped redefine our understanding of community and interaction, of community development as a virtual geography rather than solely a physical one. The objective of employability, supported by suitably accredited training, ultimately depends not so much on the mobility of the writer but on the individual's *will* to be mobile....

Driven by passion for the work, rather than any obligation to tick boxes, this "will" will not be able to rely on literary departments for brokerage towards production, but then nor will writers working in live performance have to abide by the vicissitudes of the repertory and new writing house "directocracies" (if I may expropriate and - in true writerly fashion - reformat the language of Vico).

Might this "will" suggest that the role of the writer in the wider community is the **writer as social entrepreneur**....?

And if so, what might the Arts Funding system do to foster such entrepreneurship? As some of you will no doubt be aware the arts funding system is undergoing significant restructuring and I do not propose to examine the implications here. But The Arts Council of England have stated in "The Bigger Picture", as part of their recent bid for greater investment in the Arts in the forthcoming July Government Spending Round, that one of their 4 priorities is **backing talent and creativity**

This will be done, it says, by

- developing arts professionals in their careers - offering artists more time, more spaces in which to work and opportunities for skills development through:
- programmes to enable the best young talent to develop their skills and work prospects
- increased commissioning funds, bursaries and fellowships to enable established creative artists to develop new work
- awards for mature artists to give them a degree of negotiating power in their relationships with arts organisations

- brokering relationships with artists and host organisations
- increased support to artist-led and artist-centred spaces
- supporting networks and virtual spaces
- pre-professional talent spotting
- and facilitating a range of programmes to develop artists' capacity to work in different contexts, particularly mid-career.

In this world of writer entrepreneurship, resources may not come in nice packages with words like "writer" on them. They are much more likely to be couched in the language of the PAT 10 Report. There are more resources outside the arts funding system to be accessed than within it, and there has never been a better time for this work to expand. The rest is up to you. Good luck!