

## Theatre, Dance and a Well-being Economy

A response by Peter Arnott to FST's Wellbeing Economy Event held as part of the Strategy Development activity in September 2020

Mostly when we talk about the theatre these days we are lamenting what seems a long lost past, but every so often we are glimpsing a hoped for future, and that's what I want to talk about here.

That's what Gemma Bone Dodds of the Well Being Economy Alliance Scotland and Stephen Boyd, late of the STUC and now of the Economic Policy Unit for the Scottish Government came into our Zoom Den to talk about. What they provoked, for me, anyway, was the revelation that in many if not most respects, we in the performing arts already ARE the "well being and place based economy." We can do what we do better in terms of participation and reach...of course we can. But we are GOING TO BE integral to ANY deliverable strategy for re-shaping the life of our communities post pandemic, post election. So we'd better saddle up and get organised!

Their presentations and the conversations after also identified what is missing from the present offers from us as a sector and from our funders and governors. We have, at present, dreams and ideas aplenty...BUT we have fought shy, from the top of government downwards from considering how we acquire the agency with which turn aspiration into policy.

Reflecting on these conversations, and on our already having, in the arts, an instinctive and detailed grasp of what "the well-being of place" means in terms of our daily practice as educators and contributors to health and democratic participation as well as entertainers, the overwhelming sense I had at the end of our meeting was of confidence...or what SHOULD be confidence... that if the Scottish Government is looking for expertise as well as instinct for turning hope into reality with a place and time attached, they need look no further than us.

What is good about what we do, what is good about theatre: participation, collectivity, solidarity...are exactly what the well being economy, according to Gemma and Stephen, is all about. We learned from Stephen and Gemma that "the well being economy" is, at bottom, a way of rethinking the delivery of social goods not as a by product of the economy, but as the reason for having an economy at all. And if what we already do IS the well-being economy, we are not in the position of learning a new set of jargon words in order to fill out application forms. We are in the position – or could and should be - of running the table, not begging for scraps from it.

What artists need to do therefore is make an unarguable case (for the use of politicians) that artistic activity is ALREADY bang in the centre of the Place Based Well Being Economy that everyone talks about. We can help cement the many-sided agency to bring it about EVERYWHERE in Scotland.

If cultural production is what makes life worth living...and we if we have learned nothing else in this pandemic we have surely learned that, then artists need no longer view ourselves as "problems"... as boxes to be ticked and costs to be negotiated, but as vital agents of social change absolutely integral to reinventing and reinvigorating Scotland, place by place, community by community.

And in this viral hiatus in the immediate pressure of full scale production, we have the opportunity to use our convalescence to discuss and experiment and then come back better than we went into this crisis. And to persuade the politicians that our feet need to be under the table when the recovery of Scotland is planned and delivered. We already have a set of principles in the already published Cultural Strategy to draw on, as well as many other integrated aspirations in other policy documents already produced. What we need is the agency to tuirn wishes into policy.

A real strategy needs a real mandate for a real agency. The single biggest thing I have taken from all of our conversations so far, and especially the excellent and thoughtful presentations of Gemma and Stephen and the responses thereto, is that it is no one's business but ours in getting that mandate and acquiring that agency. We can be, if we play our cards right, as was suggested during the meeting, "the pilot sector" for the social change that Scotland needs...for the values of inclusion and democracy we all find that we share becoming reality...and not just dreams.

We are artists, it is our nature to dream...but it is also our nature and our experience to get things done and get them on wherever we find ourselves, in whatever economic and social circumstances. Practicality and dreaming are what define our practice from community workshops to the biggest of international stages.

I came away from the conversation with Gemma and Stephen more than ever convinced that our NEXT set of conversations have to be about concrete proposals for the creation of that agency with that mandate...to effect the change we all seem to feel is so nearly in our reach.

ANNEX – some proposals for the FST Strategy statement

What I have learned from the conversation to which I have just responded, and from the other conversations and observations I've made and shared in the last strange and terrible ten months leads me to the following conclusions.

The most robust and most creative responses to the pandemic in the cultural sector have been local. They have been best and strongest in those places and spheres of activity where

- a. a) the networks of joined up decision making have ALREADY been in place prior to the emergency, and ;
- b. b) Where there has ALREADY been a continuity of employment for performers and workshop leaders.

I am thinking in particular that Dundee Rep, because they were ALREADY part of the ten year long (and half way through) Dundee City Recovery Plan, AND had a small, but constantly usable enemble of actors and dancers, have been able to play a strategic role in planning cultural actions as a positive contribution to the emergency, and to the WELL-BEING of the PLACE they find themselves, and of which they are MORE than EVER, a central element. Much the same is true of Birds of Paradise, who because their brief of making work by and for the differently abled has continued online, as they have a continuity of employment of workshop leaders, they have been similarly able to maintain and enhance the reach of the networks of which they, their participants, AND academia and local government...as well as Creative Scotland...are a part.

So the best responses to the emergency of the pandemic and lockdown are based on continuity of NETWORKS and EMPLOYMENT. This HAS to point us where we go next in our thinking about the recovery of the sector in the broader context of the recovery of our local and national economies and communities. We need to look at what ALREADY EXISTS to get these companies and their audiences through the pandemic to learn what our next steps as a sector should be.

I propose that the FST offer to undertake an audit – a report on “Theatre Workers as Community Assets,” region by region, city by city, on behalf of the Scottish Government. That this be done with a view to the establishment or strengthening of local networks of health and education which can in turn foster the concentration of resources in local HUBS of continuous employment and engagement according to the needs of those regions.

We already seem to have a broad consensus, embodied in the Cultural Strategy, of the values of “place based well being” around which a new *National Strategy of Localism* can coalesce.

We need to lobby for a report into the potential for efficient provision that local hubs can deliver, along with the local democratic networking that can deliver the sense of ownership that each community can and should have for its drama workers, who in turn can look to these hubs for a continuity of employment and income. In this report, we can address many of Scotland’s ongoing challenges of inclusion and connectivity with one flexible swoop. These “hubs” can not only deliver a continuity of employment and delivery, they can also facilitate local decision making and participation all the way from going to a boy scout panto to active creative help in running a school or a local care home.

In other words, artists are right now...and perhaps only for a moment... in a unique position to turn the aspirations of the Cultural Strategy into policy. All we need is the involvement and the agency to do it.