

Manifesto For Theatre Conference - Lyric Hammersmith, 22 March.

Opening address by Equity Council member Sam West

Ladies and Gentlemen; a call to arms.

Last week it was reported that British law firm Linklaters helped the Lehman Brothers investment bank hide \$50bn worth of debt through shady accounting practices. In the play I'm in at the moment, Enron, the Lehman Brothers are conjoined twins sharing a huge overcoat. It's a very funny scene, and they almost always get a round on their exit. The night of the Linklater revelations they got a round on their entrance as well. The suspicion that the same dodgy numbers were behind both Enron's and Lehman's collapse was made explicit. By a combination of judicious programming and a bit of luck, Enron ran long enough for that night's performance to become a subtle, satirical rapid response to the morning's news. Only theatre can do this. You had to be there.

This is a manifesto for theatre, so we should begin by reminding ourselves why theatre is manifestly worth our attention, our sweat and our time here today. Apologies if this is a familiar list, but it bears repeating.

We have always told stories around the campfire, since there were stories and campfires to tell them around. That need hasn't gone away. Nowadays the light from the campfire is mostly electric, but there can be a thousand people sitting around it. Theatre is communal. It brings us together, in an age when more and more things separate us, or actively drive us apart.

Theatre is live. It's the last great unmediated picture show. In these days of massive entertainment corporations, spun messages and "personalised experiences", theatre isn't packaged or edited for us. We decide where to look. It's ours.

And lastly, and uniquely, theatre can contain every other art form. The work of the poet, the painter, the designer or the video artist can all be part of that larger thing, a piece of theatre. No other art form can do this.

We are here today to ask questions of the theatre as it asks questions of us. What can it do? What should it do? How can it be better? It's too late still to be using that old cliché 'looking forward into the 21st century' – the 21st century is ten percent over and theatre shows no sign of going away. Last year's West End figures were up 2.5% on ticket sales and 3.5% on takings. An increase on ticket sales during a recession? We predicted it would happen (at least, I did). People need the escape. They need the human contact. For God's sake, they need the laughs. But we're not just knee-deep in feelgood comedies: until recently within three blocks of our theatre, mixed in with the musicals, you could find plays by Priestley, Molière, Beckett and Shakespeare plus new work by Douglas Carter Beane, Jez Butterworth and our own Lucy Prebble. That's a pretty good mix. Long may it continue.

We are also here today to make some noise. Governments of any colour are rightly frightened of the ability of performers to make a fuss. We can be very loud, with a size and volume hugely bigger than the amount of subsidy it takes to shut us up. Good. Keep it up. Be proud, be loud, be heard. Let's defend our theatres, defend the working practices that make their work great, and support our Union.

The timing of this conference is excellent. We're about to enter an election campaign and although in places there's precious little to choose between the main parties, the recent National Campaign for the Arts hustings did throw up some differences in Arts manifestos. In particular, the Conservative promise to mix subsidy with corporate and private giving – a thing they've called "philanthrocapitalism". This is a model taken in large part from America, which as we know has almost no state-sponsored art and a well-developed culture of philanthropic patronage. In many ways it works well, if you ignore the odd blip like My Name Is Rachel Corrie offending enough wealthy Jewish backers for the New York run to be cancelled, and orchestras in Cleveland striking for their jobs because there is no more corporate money in their city. Just don't try getting anyone to sponsor your revival of 'Tis Pity She's a Whore.

We have no such culture of patronage in this country, and even if patrons had the money or the will to donate, it would be next to impossible to develop such a culture in the life of one Parliament, which is all I hope the Conservatives get if they win. Patronage has an inherent conservatism at its heart that sits badly with art's main purpose – to ask questions, to challenge, to be a thorn in the side of our established ideas. The risk is that theatres who rely on the backing of corporations or the rich programme work only to please those backers (or worse, don't programme work that they fear might offend them). I would urge an incoming Conservative government to think more than twice before reducing arts subsidy in any way. It works. Leave it alone.

Well, I say it works: of course the present system has its problems - that's why we're here - but it needs defending. At last night's Olivier awards, subsidised theatres, as always, led the way: The Royal Court had 15 nominations, the Donmar was second with ten, and the National Theatre third with nine. Of the 21 nominees for acting awards, only four came from wholly commercial productions. In the other categories it was the same story – commercial work produced only one of the four musical revivals, one of the five directors' nominations, and it goes without saying, none of the new plays. Now awards aren't everything; but these figures tell a simple story: subsidy allows all of us – performers, directors, designers and writers - to do our best work.

Enron is packing them in at the Noel Coward. It's extending till August, going on a national tour and opens on Broadway with a new cast in a fortnight. But it began in the studio of a small town on the south coast, the Minerva Theatre in Chichester. Allow me to tell you a little about how a modern, flexible repertory theatre can work:

Because our production company, Headlong, is not building based, it has to produce its shows in collaboration with a theatre. In this case, they chose to return to Chichester. Now Chichester IS a building-based theatre, and a very well-run one. It has a large and loyal audience, is well-funded enough to do shows to the highest standards, and is used to transferring them. Headlong's production of Macbeth starring Patrick Stewart began there, went to the West End, and then on to Broadway. Enron is headed the same way.

The combined forces of Chichester, Headlong and the Royal Court managed to fund a five-week rehearsal period, a cast of 14, a repertory system where we frequently were doing fewer than eight shows a week, and sometimes as few as two. We were looked after. We could do our best work. The flexibility and speed that Headlong brought to the scheduling of Enron was also crucial. In October 2008, when the play wasn't quite ready, the financial world collapsed. Headlong decided to bring the show forward and to go into production in six

months' time. But behind this rapid-response-unit success lay a well-funded commissioning theatre company that could afford to develop the play for three years, and perhaps even more importantly, a well-funded repertory theatre with the flexibility, professionalism and nous to put on a technically demanding show, with a cast of 14, to standards which, I firmly believe, could not be bettered anywhere in the world. Don't let them sell us the idea that a Repertory Theatre in every town is old-fashioned or out of touch. A theatre can be the life-blood of its community. Maybe nobody else does it this way; maybe that's why it works so well?

If commercial theatre thinking is allowed to influence the subsidized agenda, the view of short-run shows in regional playhouses as fiscally irresponsible, indulgent, of limited appeal and no commercial viability will grow. We must fight against this, or the collapse will head upwards. The National Theatre, as the nation's showcase, works on a subsidised repertory model. But if the regional repertory system goes, the National will have pressure put upon it to 'live in a more commercial world', just as the free-marketeering of Rupert Murdoch and Sky has infected and weakened the BBC.

And there's a more important principle at stake here. Enron may have had a successful run in the West End, but it couldn't have afforded to start there. It's a show which, while it doesn't exactly kick capitalism in the balls, certainly gives it a long hard stare and it's doubtful whether commercial producers would have taken a punt in the first place.

In preparation for a possible change of government, let us go some way to meeting the Conservatives on their own ground. Let us make the argument entirely an economic one. This is from an article by Jonathan Holmes in the Guardian last month:

The arts in this country are a major financial success story. The income from creative industries generates revenues of around £112.5bn, and they employ more than 1.3 million people, which is 5% of the total employed workforce in the UK. Arts exports contribute around £10.3bn to the balance of trade, and the industries account for over 5% of GDP. The value of the creative industries to UK gross domestic product is, therefore, greater than the contribution of any of our manufacturing industries.

All this is achieved, contrary to mainstream assumptions, with minimum state support. To take just one example of cost efficiency, the whole of UK theatre received £54m in subsidy in 2008. It paid back nearly £75m just in VAT in London alone. That's quite a return. So, think of financial support for the arts not as subsidy, but as investment.

My grandfather was older than me when he first played in London. I haven't been in the West End for 20 years, but I'm thrilled to be back there now and whatever you think of some of the shows on offer, it's right that we should think of it as the Premier League of one branch of our profession. In football, the Premier League sits on top of a vital and well-functioning pyramid of feeder clubs, national organisation and efficient scouting. Where is the equivalent pyramid supporting our West End? Well, it's there, but only just. When a theatre like the Northcott in Exeter goes into administration, a stone of that pyramid is lost. Whether it is a keystone remains to be seen, but Exeter's not much different from Nottingham in the 70s, where Richard Eyre began, or Colchester in the 90s for Michael Grandage, or Northampton in this century for Rupert Goold.

My partner Laura Wade is a playwright. At breakfast last week a text message arrived and she let out a delighted squeak. They'd just put her name, and the name of her play, on the

front of the Royal Court in big red letters (it's called *Posh* and it opens next month – go and see it). Laura was a product of the Royal Court Young Writers' Programme, and to have your name outside the foremost new writing theatre in the world is for her a long-held ambition. Again, let's examine the pyramid:

Laura's Sheffield-born and bred. Daniel Evans, who you'll be hearing from later, has commissioned her to adapt Lewis Carroll's *Alice for the Crucible*, and she's written *Alice* as a local girl confused by the realities of life as a twelve-year-old. Who knows whether that will speak to confused twelve-year-olds in Sheffield? I hope so; there should be somewhere for them to go to hear about people having the same problems as them. The point is, Laura's wanted to write for *The Crucible* since she saw *The Railway Children* there when she was seven. The youth theatre put on her first play in the Studio when she was 18. *The Crucible* has inspired her, nurtured her, and now employed her. Theatres can and must do this. Where is a keen young amateur playwright who lives near Exeter going to go now that the Northcott is closed? Where will the plays that he or she might have written for them be in ten years time? Not in the West End, making money for the Treasury.

It was recently pointed out that of the 187 Academy Award nominations given to British actors, writers and directors in the past 30 years, 145 went to individuals whose careers began and were nurtured in the subsidised theatre. Today's fringe theatre produces tomorrow's Oscar winners.

Equity is fighting a strong campaign for a living wage in subsidised repertory, and coupled with the wage demand, a call to investigate the numbers of executive staff in theatres up and down the country. It seems to us, and we can demonstrate in many cases, that while the money available to theatres under this government has gone up and in some ways the arts have never had it so good, less and less of that money is being seen on our stages. You would (and I hope later today, you will) be shocked at how vanishingly small is the percentage of a theatre's total income spent on actors – in some places, as low as 1% (and nowhere as high as 15%). In some places the accumulation of bells and whistles around the production compels me to repeat the old complaint: we administrate theatres in order to do plays, we do not do plays in order to administrate theatres.

The sums involved in all cases are tiny. £25 million of Theatre Review funding wiped out years of under-investment and allowed regional theatres everywhere to plan for the future, building audiences, cast sizes, numbers of productions – in every important category the numbers went up, sometimes sharply. That was in the early years of this decade. Since then we suspect that theatres, like so many other institutions, have been paralysed and pauperised by the creeping mould of over-management. It was certainly true of Sheffield. That's one of the reasons I left.

It's good to compare our industry with the banking industry. I think we compare pretty well – a very high return on investment, good prospects for future growth, and best of all, no huge bonuses. In fact, as I don't need to tell you, nobody's making a fortune. £322 a week for a trained Assistant Stage Manager? A £400 actors' minimum, which your Union fought long and hard for, that in the unthinkable circumstance of avoiding unemployment and working for 52 weeks a year, would still only gross you £20 800, which is, according to the Royal College of Nursing, not enough to live on in London? As I said, the sums involved are tiny. £25 million is one sixty-thousandth of the money spent to bail out the banks. £25 million is about half the cost of one Apache attack helicopter. The army has ordered 67 of them. Why

not make do with 66½? Give us the other half of that helicopter. Give us another £25 million and let us show you what we can do with it. A great deal more for human health and wellbeing, I suggest, than those helicopters will ever do.

David Mitchell in his Observer column on Sunday lamented our living in an age frightened of innovation, and ended:

The effect of defensive, derivative, cowardly decision-making at publishing houses, film studios and broadcasters, of no longer searching for anything new to express, is to reduce the popular art forms, which have the power to convince, move and educate, as well as entertain, to the same cheap bag of attention-grabbing tricks as the adverts that surround them.

It was a great article, but just as interesting were some of the comments below it, one of which was from somebody hired to do workshops on King Lear in schools. Of the students they'd encountered, most had never seen a play, and none could name any other dramatist or had any idea what was going on in King Lear. The RSC has proposed a radical new approach to teaching Shakespeare which consists, it seems, of getting people to stand up in the classroom and walk around saying the words aloud. Well, dur. We know, don't we, that this stuff lives in the mouth. We know, those of us who are lucky enough to work on Shakespeare, how modern he can be, how - in those vile words - 'relevant' and 'accessible' to our own situation (perfectly illustrated by the last comment on David Mitchell's article –

If there be nothing new, but that which is

Hath been before, how are our brains beguiled,

Which, labouring for invention, bear amiss

The second burden of a former child.

which are, as I'm sure I don't need to tell this audience, the first four lines of Shakespeare's Sonnet 59)

Can we imagine a world where those children not only can name a few other dramatists but enjoy wrestling with the difficulties of King Lear and may even have seen a decent touring production (or, God forbid, an in-house one) at their local repertory theatre? A show which they were taken to see by properly paid, non-exhausted teachers, sat in affordable seats, possibly next to people they hadn't met before, and were thrilled and disturbed and yes, confused and troubled by this 400-year-old language being coined anew just for them, live, in that moment?

If we can imagine this, let us build it now, because it makes the world better. That's all I want to say.