

Building Creative Partnerships between Business and the Arts

The role of business as an investor in the arts has been growing considerably over the last 15 years. In the UK a progressive trend has led to 27% of the overall budget spent on arts organisations being made up of contributions from the private sector – individuals and businesses. In the Netherlands the climate is similarly ripe for further explorations and connections to be made between public and private sectors, especially when state subsidy for the arts and culture is increasingly questioned and ultimately reducing. The traditional relationship between funder (i.e. historically the government) and recipient is changing rapidly; many organisations have seized the opportunity with great energy, developing innovative creative partnerships where there is often a mutual ownership and responsibility for projects. In turn the private sector has begun to recognise the value of their involvement with the arts and cultural sector, not only using events as marketing tools but also for reaching new target groups, economic regeneration, invaluable market intelligence. This series of seminars illustrates recent innovations from the UK; from friends' schemes and capital campaigns to corporate social responsibility and business/arts forum.

The LIFT Business Arts Forum

The last event in the series took place on Thursday 2 June 2005, and was presented by Julia Rowntree, Founder and former Director of the Forum and Sally Bibb, Forum participant and advisor, Group Sales Director from the Economist Group.

The Forum has been acknowledged within business, public sector and the arts as a trailblazer for facilitating a new form of civic discourse in the context of a major performing arts festival. Sally began the afternoon with her personal experience of the Forum and Julia continued by explaining how it worked.

Sally's story

This was a different session in style and approach to the previous three events in the series. Sally gave her personal view on her individual experience of coming to the Forum, not understanding what she was entering into, and how the experience helped her develop her professional outlook and approach to working with colleagues. She started by saying she's a great believer in conversations, meeting new people, trying new options.



Julia Rowntree

She joined the Economist seven years ago in 1998, and at the time found it a daunting and scary prospect. At the time she wasn't clear on what they wanted her to deliver and so she canvassed coaching and mentoring support amongst other contacts and external colleagues.



Sally Bibb

The name Julia Rowntree and the LIFT Business Arts Forum kept on coming up until eventually she arranged a meeting. Once Julia had talked about the Forum and explained what it was, Sally still didn't understand fully but felt intuitively the was a place to be. Somewhere to raise questions, which might provide a key to some of the challenges she was facing.

The Economist is a group of 6 different businesses with a workforce of approx 1000 people across the world. When Sally started with the organisation it was at a time of change; the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) was aware they needed to be more innovative and creative, but there was a crisis of learning. The organisation was highly successful but ran the risk of becoming arrogant and isolated.

There was a lack of external collaboration and the company risked missing out on future opportunities because of their isolated (albeit market-leading) position. Sally came to the position having completed her Masters degree in organisational change. The premise in this area of business management is based on the provision of solutions; having the right answers. The Forum dealt more in systems thinking and complexities, about asking the fundamental and difficult questions rather than providing the answers.

How do you sell this format of the Forum? To enable sponsorship and participation in the Forum you have to get the executives involved, and this presents a dilemma; conventional persuasion and selling means knowing your return on investment, knowing your outcomes. How do you do that when you don't know the outcomes? You can work on the marketing and sponsorship benefits; great PR for the company by supporting a prestigious festival; Economist readership is 10% of high-end opinion formers and top earners in the business market, LIFT is also high-end market. So you take new stuff (no outcomes, no estimate on return on investment) and put an old comfortable wrapper around it. With the Economist it worked; Sally and four colleagues took part in the Forum.

The legacy of attending the Forum for individuals that took part was more than that of a business course. Instead of looking for what was missing in their professional contexts, the experience of attending the Forum and watching difficult theatre performances meant they learnt to look at things in a different way – what does it mean for me? What does it mean for my work? For Sally it led to more honest conversations with colleagues; they met each other in a different space than in a business context where it was normally only on an intellectual level. She didn't have to go back retrospectively to taking measurements (i.e. what's the return, how efficient, what has been achieved by what measure).



Christophe Berthonneau at Bankside - photo: Patricia Crummay

She gained professional courage through meeting curious people; those prepared to ask questions that businesses are not often willing to ask. Translating this back to Sally's own position with the Economist it enabled her to ask;

What will happen if we can't find ways of collaborating?

In an environment where we're expected to be experts in our respective fields, we're normally expected to be providing answers. Sally's role is to be a change agent – to encourage ways of doing things differently.

To do this she had to invent a new job to find some legitimacy to make the new changes and initially this needed to be done 'under the radar' i.e. separate from the power structures. It involved building trust between the Economist businesses to work together, not compete. To move away from solutions-focussed culture, and away from the tick-box attitude, to create a climate of searching and creative collaboration. As someone once said; 'creating the most interesting table in the restaurant'.

After a time of doing this work effectively in her spare time, Sally and the colleague she was working with demonstrated to the CEO the business case of what they were doing; how they were making savings in other areas of the Economist's resources by creating and encouraging a new climate of trust. She now runs a separate department and is initiating change full-time.

The experience of the LIFT Business Arts Forum provided a listening board for Sally and gave her and her colleague the confidence and courage to go further as intermediaries. Without it she wouldn't have had the inspiration, challenge and networks of support in her professional world. So for her the Forum was where change agents can go and get that support.

Julia's context: the structure of the LIFT Business Arts Forum and how it works **Performing Change: the business of theatre in a global age.**

LIFT is the London International Festival of Theatre and was started in 1981 as the inspiration of two young women who saw that there was little to no provision of international theatre in London at the time. At the time they had no idea of what they were getting into, or of how the future development of the festival would present enormous challenges, and if they had, they might not have stuck with it. So in this case, not knowing your outcomes was a great asset! For

the first twenty years until 2001 the festival was a biennial summer event. In 2001 it underwent a radical change and began a series of enquiries into the role of theatre for our times worldwide. To date the festival has worked with 4500 artists and 62 countries.

In 1993 with huge increases in global communications, and international air travel and mobility, the meaning of 'international' was changing fundamentally and London was probably the most culturally diverse city in the world. LIFT became aware that they needed to ensure the authenticity of international productions, following the ethos of the opera and theatre director Peter Sellars who said: "the idea is that one person's voice does not obliterate another person's voice". Following 12 years of running an international theatre festival, buying shows from artists across the world from a global shopping list of theatrical product and showing them to London's public, doesn't make a festival international. Intercultural engagement begins at home.



Hanoi Water Puppets photo: Guy De Lahaye

Under this auspice LIFT began their Learning programme, working with local London communities from diverse cultures, along with international artists on specific projects of joint venture.

For example the little-known community of 18,000 Vietnamese people in Greenwich of which a local community association and 9 local schools took as a starting point the visit of traditional Vietnamese water puppetry to create a public performance to celebrate their presence and voice within the city of London.

Or French pyrotechnic artist Christophe Bertonneau who created a fire project with 120 14 year olds; learning with a public outcome.

Julia Rowntree joined LIFT in 1986 and set-up a sponsorship campaign to engage with businesses. Public subsidy was at a standstill, and you couldn't grow a festival with public income alone. Keeping ticket prices low and access wide was paramount; this was the only way to diversify income.

The dominant model of sponsorship based on marketing benefits applied;

- logo on publicity
- receptions
- press and broadcast media coverage
- tickets to performances
- senior level networking

Levels of sponsorship ranged between GBP 5,000 - 25,000 tied to marketing benefits.

In this climate, LIFT's relations with business evolved in parallel with the artistic programme, and with civic life in London and external events. In 1986 under the Thatcher government, London's local government was abolished; this meant there was no joint civic or public diplomacy as exists in most other major capital cities; only local authorities with no elected mayor or overall London-wide responsibility. By the early 1990s the effects of this were beginning to be felt acutely. When hosting and presenting international productions from across the world, visiting artists would assume that LIFT was 'speaking' for London. In reality however there was no single authority backing LIFT but a patchwork of arts funders, local councils and authorities, trusts and foundations, and businesses.

This had important diplomatic implications for the work of the festival and required a kind of lateral thinking in its external relationships. LIFT itself had gone from a small-scale operation in its original approach to a series of seemingly impossible challenges, and was drawing support from across sectors within London; working with local authorities for licensing and permissions, schools & housing associations for participation, public sector for support and leverage, private sector for financial backing etc.

The Lifting London Conference in 1991 set the stage for stories of success in a range of enterprises, from housing, education, culture and business.

It was motivated by:

- civic fragmentation
- low morale
- the need to build different forms of support
- the need for celebration rather than complaint

Support was generated from business, public sector, education and NGOs. Interdependency between sectors was maintained but there was a need for a neutral and common space, beyond the market and the state to imagine responses to issues of common concern. It generated connections and civic conversations across levels of power and working perspective.

In 1994 LIFT's second major crisis hit when Baring's Bank spectacularly collapsed, and with it Baring's relationship with LIFT as responsible philanthropist. At the same time, BT (British Telecom) sponsorship of LIFT's Education Programme failed due to BT's perception of lack of value for money (not enough press coverage). But working with schools on understanding racism through the arts (for example) is not front-page news; the racist attacks that provide contextual evidence of the need for understanding are what make the headlines. Increasing the educational aspiration of young people with company branding is fundamentally a mis-match. It doesn't enable the company to engage in the same sorts of learning. This was in parallel with the ascendancy of market values and the free market ideology under the Thatcher years.

A new form of relationship with business was required, in order to start asking the fundamental questions and go back to first principles. Why do we need theatre to survive? Why does business need to learn from the theatre? Why do we need points of connection in the public realm? Through a series of conversations and connections with advisors and friends from various sources a model began to emerge of seeing culture and cultural activity as the basis of wealth creation, not just about using the tools of art for surface creativity but raising deep questions about how organisations learn.



De La Guarda photo: Gavin Evans

A number of key champions and co-thinkers became involved from the early stages; Charles Handy, broadcaster, journalist and writer; Arie de Geus, ex-head of Group Planning at Shell; Gerard Fairtlough of biotechnology company, Celltech; Brian Eno, musician and producer; John Seely-Brown, Chief Scientist, Xerox Palo Alto Research Centre, and Barbara Heinzen, geographer and expert in social and economic transition.

The first LIFT Business Arts Forum took place in 1995 with an introductory evening at Financial Times. For the Forum to work, it needed to have the commitment from establishment figures, not just the people working in arts and community affairs departments of businesses.

The Forum was backed by the Financial Times (FT). Chairman of the FT, David Bell, and leading business thinker Charles Handy agreed to send out letters of invitation on FT letter-head, which immediately gained a different attention to that of LIFT's on its own.

From the start the Forum needed to be a way for businesses, public and private sector to engage with all the productions in LIFT, including the challenging performances. LIFT couldn't be delivering management development programmes to individual companies, running a festival was enough already.

40 people were involved, intersectoral, intercultural and inter-generational; the business sector, artists, public sector and young people. People were put into small groups with a facilitator and attended at least 4 events together in the festival. This was followed by a Forum session to explore the organising questions:

What did you see?

What did you feel?

What would you do differently in your work as a result?

Motivations for participation in LIFT Forum:

- Sensing strategic change via contemporary performance
- Insight into creative and innovation management
- Personal and leadership development
- Openness, challenging assumptions, cultural sensitivity, the big question
- Lack of job status
- Connection to people you would otherwise never meet

What do people learn?

Forum participants share an experience - going to international contemporary theatre productions in different locations in London - and together tease out what they have seen. Everyone sees things differently and thus has their assumptions challenged. This helps foster attitudes of listening, openness and tolerance. It produces a degree of "creative discomfort" where differing views can be heard. It is a place where people can step out of their usual hierarchies and draw inspiration from unfamiliar worlds. Comments participants have made include the following:

"All financial regulations are worth nothing if you don't understand the cultural context in which they are set. LIFT can help sensitise you to just how complicated culture is."

Head of Computer Audit and Security, KPMG

"Now that the power of technology means you can do more or less anything, what is it that I choose to do? LIFT has helped me think differently about creating meaningful technology for 21st century."

John Seely Brown, Chief Scientist, Xerox Palo Alto Research Centre

"I learned that you can achieve something from nothing... and it comes from chaos."

Head of Strategy, De Beers

"I've learned you have to listen to a minority view even if you don't like it."

Senior Manager, major retail chain

"Normally, I spend all my time thinking about delivery. The Forum helped me think about why I direct theatre."

Greg Thompson, theatre director

"Learning, someone once said, is experience understood in tranquillity. LIFT offers that to a fortunate group every year. The goal is to help business people to learn from the arts, in a way that enriches their work, their businesses and in the end their lives."

Charles Handy, Forum Adviser

"Managing innovation is today's business challenge - no better place to learn how to apply it in your business than the LIFT Forum."

Arie de Geus, ex-Head of Group Planning, Shell; Forum Adviser

"Most of our institutions focus on the politics of delivery which provide us with the services we want. LIFT is experimenting with the politics of invention and the skills of agreement needed to survive an unpredictable future."

Barbara Heinzen, geographer, Forum Adviser.

What does LIFT gain?

LIFT charges fees for organisations to take part and awards bursaries for artists to take part. Any excess above costs goes directly to producing more theatre for the public.

Development funds up front GBP	31,000
Big Company X -	15,000
Medium size Company Y -	6,000
Bursaries for artists and arts direction from Arts Council -	10,000
Participants' Fees GBP	23,000
BBC -	2,000
British Council-	2,000
Dept of Health -	2,000
Qualifications and Curriculum Authority -	2,000
Additional grant from national body that encourages sponsorship -	15,000
Total:	54,000

Costs of running the Forum are approximately 24,000, which makes a surplus to LIFT of 30,000. These funds go directly to invest in theatre with no marketing outcomes. This continued alongside the regular marketing sponsorship model, though entirely separate from the Forum which is part of LIFT Learning.

Since the Forum began in 1995, LIFT has learned about the world of organisations, their power and changing responsibilities, the impact and complexities of globalisation, the shifting roles and challenges of policy-makers.

This has enabled both LIFT and participating artists to improve their understanding of the contemporary world and thus perceive their own roles in a new light.

By 2001 international festivals were becoming another consumer experience and LIFT underwent a radical organisational change to become a year-round programme and set up its own Public Enquiry. The LIFT Enquiry 2001- 2006 seeks to challenge contemporary theatre and society by asking the questions;

what is theatre?

who can be involved?

where can it take place?



Feast curated by Clare Patey & Cathy Wren - photo: Tim Mitchell

Through initiatives such as *Feast*, a year long project marking the seasons which created an alternative, fantastical and celebratory school dinner, planned and grown by young people in collaboration with a team of artists, a gardener, and a chef.



photo: Tim Mitchell

LIFT began looking at a new kind of public space, one aesthetically based.

Inventive societies begin on the doorstep; experiment and engagement across generations, cultures, power and expertise.

www.liffest.org.uk

This was the last event in the series. For more information on any of the sessions please contact Rachel Feuchtwang at the British Council; rachel.feuchtwang@britishcouncil.nl. If you would like to stay informed of any future events please email your full postal contact details to information@britishcouncil.nl and request to be put on the database for Crossing Over, our newsletter. Information and details of projects and events can also be found on our website www.britishcouncil.nl