

Wednesday 28 November 2018

Bethan Sayed AM  
Chair  
Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee  
National Assembly for Wales  
Cardiff Bay  
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*Deur Bethan*

### National Theatre Wales

Thank you for your letter of 22 November on the above. As you say, the artistic decisions affecting individual arts organisations are matters for the Arts Council, and I'm grateful for your careful approach in this matter.

We're fully engaged in the current discussions. We maintain regular contact with all our Arts Portfolio Wales organisations, but we also have the ability, as in this case, to devote more time if circumstances demand. We also have well-established links with individual artists and part of our role is to be aware of their issues and concerns.

As you'll have seen from correspondence forwarded to you, those issues are complex and capable of different interpretation. I tried to reflect some of this in an article published earlier in the month in "Wales Arts Review". I attach a copy to this letter for your information.

National Theatre Wales' has a particular brief to present innovative and adventurous work that challenges preconception and provokes debate. This can happen with large-scale public events (such as the hugely popular "City of the Unexpected") or with the more local and specific (as "We're Still Here" did in highlighting the impact on a community of changes in the steel industry). This is brave and difficult work which a National Theatre is ideally placed to tackle. And it is our job to try and create the overall environment in which bold, high quality work can flourish.

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Rydym yn croesawu gohebiaeth yn y Gymraeg a'r Saesneg, ni fydd gohebu drwy gyfrwng y Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.  
We welcome correspondences in Welsh and English, corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay.

As a national company, National Theatre Wales carries a weight of expectation that isn't experienced by other theatre producers in Wales. For perfectly sound reasons, everyone will look to National Theatre Wales to be 'their' company. Not every piece of work produced by National Theatre Wales succeeds, but much of it does and is deserving of support. Equally, there are aspects of their work that could be done differently, and we need to listen carefully to the concerns being voiced by writers and actors.

National Theatre Wales currently faces many demands. It will be honest, respectful debate that will help achieve a resolution. You note with concern that matters are being played out so visibly in the public domain. I would agree. This is why we're working with a range of people, including National Theatre Wales, to facilitate what we hope will be a more productive consensus. I have met – and continue to meet – all of those involved. These meetings have been positive and constructive and I sense a real desire to find an enduring solution. That is what we want to achieve.

You asked for information on two matters:

1. Arts Council funding to National Theatre Wales in 2018/19 is £1,606,405.
2. I would be reluctant at this stage to reveal future plans. The company has exciting ideas for next year, and they have a major programme announcement planned for January. As this is a key moment for the company, I wouldn't want to undermine such an important occasion by revealing plans that are, for the moment, under embargo. I hope you understand.

Finally, I would welcome an opportunity to meet with you in person to discuss matters further.

*Yours sincerely,  
Nick*

Nick Capaldi  
Chief Executive

Arts Council of Wales Chief Executive, **Nick Capaldi**, offers a personal reflection on recent criticisms of National Theatre Wales.

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Passionate and robust discussion usually strengthens and enlivens the arts, but recent criticisms of National Theatre Wales (NTW) point to something altogether deeper that requires careful consideration. As a national company, NTW would be the first to accept that scrutiny comes with the territory. Everyone's got an opinion. But the depth of the criticism expressed in an open letter to the National Theatre Chair from some 40 of Wales' most prominent writers clearly hurt. This has been followed by a letter in a similar tone from Welsh actors. These are all people firmly committed to theatre in Wales. So why does NTW seem to be so at odds with the very people who one would normally expect to be amongst the company's closest supporters?

The writers have a clear list of concerns – about NTW's programme choice, type of theatre, connectedness to Wales and what's perceived to be a reluctance to feature Welsh talent. Information provided by NTW has sought to offer a more rounded view of the company's output and the debate continues.

Of course, there will always be two sides to every story. Even so, the basis of the concerns can't be ignored and we need to get to the root cause of those issues that are causing the greatest discontent.

I won't repeat the various arguments here – they've been thoroughly aired elsewhere – but matters came to a head in an open meeting last month in the NTW offices.

I joined NTW board members and staff along with a representative group of writers. Discussion was frank and direct. All participants in that meeting agreed to maintain the confidentiality that the occasion demanded, so it would be inappropriate for me to comment on the detail. This doesn't mean, however, that the Arts Council doesn't have a view on matters overall.

Until now we've kept our counsel. We know that there are those who've questioned why, given the continuing debate, the Arts Council of Wales hasn't spoken out before. Our reasons will seem old fashioned.

We remain stubbornly attached to the principle of the "arm's length", where funded companies are empowered to pursue their artistic ambitions free from the threat of bureaucratic interference. It would be a sad day indeed if I, or anyone at the Arts Council, started dictating the plays that NTW should choose or the artists it should work with. That isn't to say, of course, that we don't take the closest interest in what's happening. As stewards of public funds we're expected to have an opinion on the way that taxpayers' money is spent and a keen interest in public value. But we start from a position of trust, a recognition of NTW's successes (of which there have been many), and an inclination to believe in the company's ambition to be inclusive and responsive.

In setting out the Arts Council's view, one has to remember that we fought hard to create NTW in the first place. Our inherent support for NTW is a logical reflection of that history. We had felt for some time that a new organisation for English language theatre with an innovative and radical temperament would bring much-needed profile and impetus to the wider development of the theatre sector. And so it proved.

The fillip that NTW gave to theatre in Wales was palpable, and NTW productions such as the Port Talbot “Passion” or “Coriolan/us” in the aircraft hangar at St Athan remain amongst my most memorable experiences in a lifetime of theatre-going. And the timely production of “We’re Still Here” did exactly what NTW is there to do – putting relevant, challenging work at the heart of national events.

An attachment to time and place matters. But the true worth of any arts organisation derives from the creativity that drives its vision and the collaborators who give shape to its work. It’s the creative professionals – the writers, actors, directors, designers – who imbue that work with character, authenticity and relevance. Because it’s the artist, in all disciplines, addressing the world in its hopes and disasters, in its changes and disruption, who reinvents cultural expression appropriate for the times.

This, then, was our founding vision for NTW – cultural expression appropriate for the times. This didn’t mean a national theatre that mimicked some fanciful imitation of 19<sup>th</sup> century state-building. And unencumbered by a building, NTW was free to build partnerships where it wanted, across all parts of Wales.

There’s been much discussion about what a ‘national’ company should be and, indeed at times, whether they’re needed at all. For the record, it’s our view that healthy, vibrant national organisations are important. They matter in and of themselves, but also for what they signify. We might regret that it’s so, but for many people – especially those outside Wales – the reputation of our national organisations is a barometer of the strength and vibrancy of our country’s arts. But as I’ve said before, to be ‘national’ is a privilege, not a right.

It's a designation that brings with it a particular obligation to be an exemplar in every way: creating work of national and international significance, but rooted unequivocally in the country of its birth; showing leadership in developing the arts in Wales; nurturing the partnerships and relationships that will develop new artists; building the arts audiences of the future.

Yes, we want our national organisations to achieve the highest artistic standards. And we want them to succeed, nationally and internationally. But we've also been clear in our advice to the company that it must think carefully about the nature of its umbilical relationship with Wales – the tap-root to that native talent that gives the company at its best its context and character. This, I think, is a large part of what the current debate is about.

So where are we now?

Nothing that I've said here will come as a surprise to NTW – these things have been regularly discussed over the years. We haven't always agreed, but that's fine. It's never good in the arts for relationships to get too cosy. But I respect the energy and commitment that drives the company, and I believe that given time, space and support Artistic Director, Kully Thiarai, will set out a compelling vision that is bold, thoughtful and engaging.

In the meantime, let's hang on to the deeply held conviction from all concerned that the right answers must be found. I sense a genuine desire to find sensible and achievable solutions. This is certainly what the Arts Council wants.

Reflecting on recent events and what I've heard, it seems clear to me that three matters are central to moving forward as we support the company in expressing its core identity and purpose.

First, NTW needs to revisit the question of 'mix' – in the rich range of what it offers it needs to have 'marquee' events that can attract substantial audiences, wherever this work is staged. And it also needs to have shows with strong texts and persuasive narrative arcs, whether newly written or classic texts re-appropriated.

Second, and talking of text, it needs to continue the process that it has started – rebuilding the relationships at its core with those Welsh writers and creative talents who have felt compelled to speak out. Their criticisms might have been trenchantly expressed, but these are serious people who care very deeply about NTW and who want desperately to see the company thrive well into the future.

And third, NTW needs to look carefully at its marketing and the care with which it nurtures and develops audiences. The success of the company's large-scale spectacles such as the Port Talbot "Passion" and "City of the Unexpected" speak for themselves. However (unsurprisingly), not everything has been a winner. A handful of people for a performance, no matter how meaningful the engagement, is difficult to justify. And failures here may simply have derived from having too many small shows to market effectively.

None of this implies a withdrawal from the core and exciting mission of NTW to open up new possibilities about what theatre can be. Neither does it mean a

lessening of the Arts Council's support for the company. But there's more talking to be done.

Trust and confidence need to be mended on all sides. But get it right, and we might soon be able to celebrate afresh what NTW at its best has always been – that most vital of creative forces, enlivening our nation's cultural life through its ability to reveal those dimensions of human experience that inspire and excite us. That has to be a prize worth working for.

Nick Capaldi

12 November 2018