

Photo: Johnathan Clover



WebPlay at the Nate Holden Performing Arts Center in Los Angeles

tour the companies, and we plan to offer professional development workshops. I want US artists to exchange ideas with their UK counterparts so that we can begin to grow a

thriving culture of artists who want to create high-quality theatre for young people in the US. We're also looking for UK drama workshop leaders now working in Los Angeles or New York.

Perhaps the most positive sign of our impact is that next year the WebPlay shows will be presented as part of 'UCLA Live'. This is the series that first presented Improbable's 'Shock-Headed Peter' to US audiences, and is by far the hippest performing arts venue in LA. We will be part of their first-ever international theatre festival for children and this will provide massive exposure for the art form. Although there are many differences in working between two countries, there is one crucial similarity we see no matter where we work – that the power of theatre to delight, engage and inspire children is universal. In the long run, that one similarity is the thing that lets us manage all the differences. ⁿ

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Special Feature: Response to McMaster

New ideas on the role and make-up of arts boards could lead to problems, writes **Jodi Myers** in the latest in our special series of responses to the McMaster Report.

Taking risk on board



Jodi Myers

Brian McMaster's 'Supporting Excellence in the Arts' is unusual for the headlines it has attracted and the way in which a number of its recommendations appear to be becoming adopted without sufficient opportunities for the sector to consider their implications. Amongst the sound sense are several problematic recommendations.

The assertion that "we need to create a new, more flexible, more trusting environment where innovation and above all excellence are better rewarded" is welcome, but I started to become concerned when McMaster described boards as "the guardians of innovation and risk taking". While all board members should be introduced at the point of induction to the concept of artistic planning (which involves risk and is a major concern for any board), it has to sit alongside many other key responsibilities. These include managing senior staff, ensuring compliance with a growing raft of legislation, seeking new sources of income, and – since most arts organisations are charities – protecting

the company's assets. A number of us working as arts managers, consultants and trustees believe that charitable status has tended to encourage conservatism. However, assuming the majority of arts organisations will continue to operate as charities, if we are to avoid becoming risk averse yet remain financially viable in an increasingly complex climate, the sector and its funders need a shared understanding of what innovation and risk-taking mean in this context. Alongside McMaster, I read papers on adopting good governance by Graham Devlin and Nicola Thorold commissioned by the Cultural Leadership Programme', which suggest that charitable status should be less restrictive than may be the experience of many of us. These documents are a detailed analysis of what might constitute good practice, but they propose considerable formalising that I find worryingly prescriptive if arts boards are to remain independent and motivated. McMaster's concern about a possible lack of appropriate expertise when making senior appointments is well founded. At present, funders occasionally make suggestions about outside perspectives that could benefit the recruitment process, and it would

be sensible to extend this practice. However, a Knowledge Bank set up and managed by funding bodies, as he recommends, is likely to result in too narrow a list of 'approved' artists and practitioners. As McMaster says, "Artists and practitioners need a board with the expertise to support them artistically," but I don't believe that the only way to "give them the authority to do what is innovative and risky" is to put at least two artists or practitioners² on each board. While artistic experience and understanding are vital for boards of arts organisations, quotas are not the best way to achieve it. Boards must have the flexibility to operate in ways that suit individual companies and their missions. I have sat on boards alongside many artists who have made important and distinctive contributions to the governance of the organisation, but there have been others who had no wish to engage with much of the agenda or regularly absented themselves due to artistic commitments elsewhere. It is also difficult for a charity to employ or commission an artist or practitioner who is a trustee. In the light of the recent withdrawal of Arts Council England



funding to many organisations at short notice, the retention and recruitment of board members, who are expected to make a very considerable time commitment on a voluntary basis, is likely to become even tougher. We need to foster a climate in which more people want to serve as board members and make a contribution to governance which is meaningful and valued – carrots, not sticks, are called for. ⁿ

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¹ www.culturalleadership.org.uk
² McMaster defines a practitioner as "Someone from the cultural ecology, who may not necessarily create art in the same way as an artist. For example, a producer, a curator or an editor".