Tickets to Utopia – the new artistic renaissance

IAMA magazine, June 2008

All over the musical world there is concern about the future, over funding cuts, declining audiences, lack of media interest, the proliferation of organisations which seek to profit from the arts in the short-term without desire to sustain them in the long and all manner of other ills. Certainly we are beset by problems but despite this I am optimistic to a degree I have never experienced before because I believe that if collectively we make the right moves we can create a hitherto undreamt of climate for flourishing artistic life.

The determining factor is that we must cast off the shackles of received wisdom, which have trapped us into a cycle of failure, and take a creative approach to the problems we face. We must examine our operating ethos from its very foundations, consider the value we bring to society and, most importantly, remember that our purpose is the generation of spiritual wealth: due to a profound misunderstanding between the world of business and that of the arts we have adopted measures of success – the scale of deficit or subsidy, ticket revenue as a percentage of income etc. – which are ultimately meaningless either in business or artistic terms. The fact that the resulting business model is at odds with the fundamental values we seek to promote has contributed to our marginalisation in society, an error we should endeavour to correct as soon as possible by seeking ways to capitalise on the real value of what we do. In short, we should be developing a business model compatible with the human ideals and emotions the arts represent.

As a starting point I believe we should look to our friends: in life, when we are in trouble, we do not generally approach strangers, the people from whom we seek support are our family and our friends. If we take our lead here, the lesson is clear: we in the arts should help each other – i.e. our family – to move our collective cause forwards and we should call upon our audience, the vast number of people around the world who support our work and objectives – i.e. our friends – to join this crusade. We should end the fashionable obsession for seeking new audiences and instead strengthen the bonds with the one we have; just as good friends bring more friends, so it will be with audiences if we build the mutual interest, reliance and trust which is the fundament of friendship.

Logically one of the keys to achieving this is to cease to demand payment for participation in our events. These are the very mechanism by which we fulfil our mission to share art yet instead of doing so we create barriers to all, most especially to those who are our most loyal supporters. Indeed, we create a situation analogous to the absurdity of demanding money from people you invite to your own home when in fact we should be demonstrating our trust in their desire to help us reach shared goals. The most rational as well as the most philosophically pleasing way both to build on existing relationships and to develop new ones is to separate participation from financial contribution.

This may seem to be merely a cosy theory with no feasible practical application but with our concerts in Watford Town Hall / Colosseum for the last year we have been experimenting with a system of generating audience-based revenue based on the premise of trusting those who support our aims. The results so far have entirely convinced me of the value of a business model compatible with an artistic mission rather than contradictory to it and I believe we have produced a blueprint for artistic and financial development and growth where a traditional operating model provided a blueprint for failure. Whatever some people are saying, the end of our world is far from nigh: we are on the verge of a new Renaissance.

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