

Artistic Leadership in Producing Theatres

Presentation to:
'The Artistic Leadership Symposium'
12th November 2008

Hosted by Sheffield Theatres in association
with ACE and the Theatrical Management
Association

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The Brief

- To examine a number of key questions:
- What do we want from the artistic leadership of our producing theatres?
- What is the role of the artistic leader and what skills / mindsets do they need to succeed?
- How do we find, recruit and develop these extraordinary people?
- What should be the structures within which they carry out that role?

The process

- I talked to a range of Artistic Directors, Chairs, and Board members from across the producing theatre sector
- I pushed hard to find points of consensus and difference
- I've tried to fashion some observations and routes forward that will improve the artistic leadership and governance of our theatres *whatever structures* they are currently using or planning to newly deploy

Why does all this matter so much now?

- Because theatre, like all arts forms, must restlessly seek to refashion and reinvent itself
- Because of the very character of artistic leadership itself
- An important reappraisal of its essence and importance is currently taking place as the gun smoke clears post the resource allocation and McMaster

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1. Start with vision not structures

My starting point

- A forward looking judgement shouldn't start by looking backwards at what the sector currently has – and asking what works best already
- Rather – you need to start with the product, the purpose, the mission, of producing theatres
- And then ask – in delivering those visions – are some leadership models, and approaches to artistic leadership, more likely to lead to success than others, and if so why?

The right starting question

- So - we're concerned with what are the best models of artistic leadership in producing theatres
- But of course this is an unanswerable question unless we start by asking what producing theatres in the 21st Century are for?
- And how we judge their success
- And here the landscape is shifting and expectations on producing theatres are sharpening

2. The changing landscape and the role of producing theatres

Role of producing theatres

- To be centres of creativity, collaboration and excellence
- To be '*making places*' – creating work that is diverse, demanding and relevant
- To be open and plural – giving platforms to many voices and attracting diverse audiences and artists
- To be comfortable blurring the boundaries between theatre and other performing arts

Role of producing theatres

- To act as platforms for:
 - talent development
 - innovation
 - and creative ideation
- To be truly responsive to the places, and cultural ecologies, within which they reside

3. What does this mean for Artistic Leadership

What does this mean for artistic leadership?

- If we are placing more value on invention and plurality – it makes artistic leadership more not less important
- It means we have to underscore and support one of the core values of artistic leadership – its unpredictable nature and capacity to surprise

What does this mean for artistic leadership?

- Implies that theatres, and indeed other cultural institutions, require a more collaborative, less directive energy
- Implies that artistic leadership is not about narrowly pursuing a personal vision, but about the opportunity to create ideas and platforms for others too

What does this mean for artistic leadership?

- It implies not less artistic vision or leadership – but a recognition that artistic leadership must work with the grain of an organisation's vision / mission

- What does all this mean specifically for the Artistic Director (AD) role?

4. What are the skills and mindsets required by ADs – whatever the operating structures?

The Artistic Director Role

- Requires ADs to be:
- Originators and impresarios
- Plural
- Open to challenge
- Keen to engage with things they don't understand
- Willing to commission others to help
- Comfortable with a creative producer mindset

The Artistic Director Role

- As interviewees commented:

‘We still need artistic directors to lead – but their job is to creatively deliver the vision / mission of the organisation – not to pursue and act out a narrow validation of a highly personal self-interested artistic vision’

‘Good artistic directors are naturally producers – they understand the key is the production function’

Bristol Old Vic as a live example of this approach

- If you look at the job profile for the Artistic Director position at BOV – they capture this aspiration well:

BOV Artistic Director Job Profile

- ‘The Board is convinced that this appointment must result in the opening of possibilities for the company, rather than the closing of options. This crucial appointment cannot be about one person or one job: the role is to motivate an entire organisation to deliver for its city, giving platforms for many voices and attracting diverse audiences and artists’

A point of reflection for all of you

- Is there enough depth of artistic director talent out there well equipped to play this role – in whatever structure they operate?
- Some of the off the record judgements I received on this question were not comforting – at least not in the short term
- Or maybe the changing role of an AD isn't well enough understood yet to judge

Not enough in the shop window?

- A number of the people I spoke to remarked on how remarkably little public articulation there is about what the role of an AD is - and should be
- We need more public dialogue on this and on the emerging consensus on the role
- My interviewees were very clear on what's required to succeed

Beyond the artistic core

- In addition to the core artistic attributes already described – strong emphasis was placed on the need for ADs to accept the need and responsibility to discharge a wider leadership role – in whatever model they work
- ADs – as the driving creative force inside a producing theatre – should be trying to shape the essence and personality of the place
- As well as caring about its operations and sustainability

The AD 'care about' list

- This means they must care about:
- How to manage the board and secure the right Board members
- The quality of the broader team and staff
- Equal opportunities recruitment
- A professional approach to finding and recruiting the right talent
- Fighting for appropriate levels of salary and skills in their team

The AD 'care about' list

- Finance and operations
- The quality of the customer experience – *'they need to care about the carpets in the foyer as well as the décor on stage'*
- Communicating the vision of the company
- Creating pathways for developing talent, innovation and ideas

**5. What does this mean for
developing the skills
of Artistic Directors?**

Realistic expectations meeting in the middle

- This does not mean that ADs need to have the business skills of an MBA grad in order to micro-manage the business
- You want ADs to be focusing as much of their time and energy as humanly possible on their core artistic role
- Nor does it mean that producing theatres won't build themselves around a good AD and support them – in terms of balancing out their strengths and weaknesses

Realistic expectations meeting in the middle

- However, it does imply that ADs need to respect, and can't be indifferent to, other management disciplines and activities within the company
- And they need some adequate '*proximate knowledge*'
- To be able to read a balance sheet – if not create one
- To be curious about what it means to lead an organisation in a broader sense

**6. What does all this mean for
how Boards recruit and
support Artistic Directors?**

Boards - more sinner than sinned against

- Boards are often a barrier to creating the right environment for artistic leadership
- Common failing is that they don't define the mission of the organisations they lead clearly enough – and therefore they don't know what type of artistic leadership they want inside their organisations

Boards - more sinner than sinned against

- Therefore often don't recruit the right ADs to deliver that vision
- And all too often hire ADs on their established merits, and then subsequently 'beat them up for being themselves'
- Key here – is that Board need to work out the long term, patient, success criteria against which they're judging the progress and performance of the artistic leadership in their company – and then give them the time and support to succeed

Boards - more sinner than sinned against

- The absence of this kind of framework can be devastating for an individual AD
- Interviewees talked about how 'judgements can shift like crazy' – at one point it can be all about – 'did they produce a good show – did the critics like it'. A month later the stress will be on 'did they get the audiences in'. A month later it will be does ACE like them / support them'
- The potential for destabilisation needs little emphasis

Board and artistic leadership in synch

- Interviewees gave vivid descriptions of what it *should* feel like
- Boards and AD need to be exploring common questions:
- How do we create a theatre that's relevant to our local population
- What risks will we need to take to be innovative within our vision
- What type of theatre does all this require us to be
- What will we not give up – in terms of values / principles
- How will we know when we're winning – when we're delivering on our shared vision

Board and artistic leadership out of synch

- If our building based companies aren't innovating enough
- If they lurch from 'focus' to 'focus' with each change of AD / artistic leadership regime
- If they keep making hires that foster mono-cultural programmes of work
- If they want to minimise risks – but still clamour for excellence
- We've got to synch our Boards better – no doubt this is something we can discuss – remedies? Paid Chairs; better public articulation of their role and role of artistic leadership etc?

**7. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the various established models / structures:
Does clarity and chemistry matter more than clear hierarchies?**

What models are we talking about?

- Quick sucking eggs moment:
 1. AD as CEO
 2. Executive Director (ED) as CEO
 3. ED and AD / broader management team
 - in power sharing model
- So which works best?

Depends on where you sit doesn't it?

- If you ask which is the best model / structure for artistic leadership – a number of things become clear quite quickly
- This is one of those questions where the answer is highly personalised – experience inevitably shapes perception and lived reality
- Everyone, with a fair wind, can make a case for why they should be in charge – funny that

Depends on where you sit doesn't it?

- There are good and bad examples of each model – we can't mount a case on exceptionalism – either positive or negative
- There is a danger that we have become over pre-occupied with the structures – rather than seeking to understand what they're there to support and deliver
- Whatever the structure – there's always a '*creative job share element*' – clarity, co-operation and chemistry will always matter

Does the structure really matter?

- Which begs the question:
- Are we weighing up distinct leadership models which are different – but all *equally serviceable* in producing great outcomes
- This would be an argument that runs – ‘it’s surely the people that matter – not the structures’
- ‘Clever people in a bad structure will out’ if you like

Does the structure really matter?

- Or do different models come so deeply inscribed with implicit trade offs / strengths and weaknesses
- That this allow us to weight and assess them rigorously
- And suggest which model should predominate – given our earlier discussion of the emerging role of producing theatres?

If I use my interviewees as a small public poll?

- On which models works best:
- AD = CEO model is the first choice – on the basis that the AD acts in the ways we have already described
- Supplementary support for power sharing model – AD / ED hired together as partnership of equals – with complementary skills

Why does AD as CEO work?

- You run an organisation ultimately on the same principles as a good piece of theatre – it all adds up
- ‘Sound cues are right; casting right’
- A creative person knows how to inject surprise – go for the unknown
- And training as a theatre director gives you the key skill set to do this – and so provide artistic leadership

Why does AD as CEO work?

- The AD can powerfully influence and shape the whole ethos, atmosphere and attributes of the organisation
- This makes it more likely that the organisation stages the right conversation with other artists
- And so the producing theatre becomes a platform for wider innovation, talent and ideation

Underpinnings of successful AD as CEO

- Model works best when Exec Director and AD are working closely together as a team of two
- But can work equally well when Exec Director is working to an AD in clear lines of demarcation and spheres of influence

What are the vision arguments for ADs being in control?

- If the prime thing a society / community wants from an artistic organisation is artistic intervention in that society of community
- And such organisation must be led by an artist

Vision arguments for AD as CEO

- That the other models provide less compelling vision rationales
- ED as CEO brings with it some inscribed limitations:
- The impulse of ED leadership is to ensure predictability and control – of the organisation, delivery, artistic mission
- This stands against the very core value of artistic leadership – which is its unpredictable nature
- So at a fundamental level – if you don't put the AD in prime leadership role – you are disempowering artistic leadership's key value / contribution – it's capacity to surprise

AD as CEO – when it works best

- What this model allows is that even when you have a powerful Exec Director – they frame their role and priorities within the overall artistic vision / purpose of the organisation
- Within this frame – the AD and ED can then – hopefully through productive personal chemistry – sort out exactly what sits in the two boxes – in terms of roles and focus
- It's the rhetorical framework of artistic leadership in which they operate that matters
- Which is why it is not a side issue that the artistic director is chief executive

- What of the so-called creative producer model

Creative producer model

- Some scepticism that this is a model in its own right
- Rather it was described as a mindset – or approach – that increasingly distinguishes the most successful ADs
- CP model doesn't deliver the essence and ethos benefits of an AD as CEO – the danger being that creativity is brought in 'to fill slots' – rather than shaping the way the organisation thinks, feels and works
- Part of the issue here is this model is probably better than a dysfunctional AD as CEO
- But not superior to an AD as CEO with a creative producer mindset – who gets their wider mission / purpose responsibilities

- What about the power sharing model?
- Currently being explored at BOV

The case for shared / distributed power

- The argument here runs that:
- Producing theatres have to balance a wide range of considerations – reputational, cultural, creative, and financial
- And these decisions are inherently difficult to make – all have consequences that are regularly in conflict
- Making those calls requires a plurality of experiences

The case for shared / distributed power

- Given how hard it is to make these decisions – there are disadvantages with both the AD as CEO, or ED as CEO model
- In that for ADs – their closeness to the impact of any decisions – sometimes means they can't take a balanced view
- Similarly – EDs – may be too close to the money

The case for shared / distributed power

- Better to have a united Management Board, glued together by a common mission and broad artistic vision – bringing their collective intelligence to the process
- Difference and dialogue will produce better outcomes

To return to where I started

- Functional structures are a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for successful artistic leadership
- Both the AD as CEO, and shared power models, can be deployed successfully to drive a mission led, artistically ambitious producing theatre
- The mindset of artistic leadership we've described – owned not just by the artistic director but by the Board and others – harnessed to a clear clarity of purpose – is the defining foundation of success

What's also an essential part of the assessment mix?

- And what about other success criteria to assess our models of artistic leadership?
 1. What about diversity and meritocracy
 2. What about succession and continuity

Diversity and Meritocracy

- The current models do not make it easy for new entrants to find a route through
- Small companies / artists – are asking *‘what’s the route in’*
- Dick Penny talks about a T bar structure of opportunity – not a pyramid with clear steps between the levels – with no clear routes up the bar of the T
- And existing ADs too often acting as powerful gatekeepers

Diversity and Meritocracy

- The route through here is surely purpose and mission again – and then focused and determined recruitment and talent development
- If a theatre in Birmingham is trying to be relevant to that city – it is unlikely that the artistic leadership of that theatre can deliver an audience relevant vision without opening up the theatre as a creative platform for a range of voices

Succession and continuity

- Whatever the leadership structure adopted by a producing theatre – any mission led organisation has to think about how to handle succession and continuity
- My interviewees suggested some interesting models / interventions – which we might discuss
- They included the following

Succession and continuity

- ADs should work on fixed term contracts (say 3 to 5 years) after which they have to reapply for their post – and explain how their future artistic vision is going to keep delivering and developing the company's purpose / mission

Succession and continuity

- When an AD leaves a company – the organisation **MUST** immediately get into review – to sense check:
 - Landscape and mission
 - Synch with artistic policy
 - Possible future trajectories
- The rationale being that if they don't do this before hiring a new AD – they are very likely to make the wrong appointment

Succession and continuity

- And in those organisations deploying the AD as CEO model – some transition ground rules were suggested:
- EDs should not be involved directly in the recruitment of the new AD
- EDs should symbolically offer their resignation six months after the new AD has started
- To allow the Board to assess whether the ED and the AD are working together effectively to deliver the mission congruent artistic vision of the new AD

8. Conclusions

Conclusions

- Lots here to discuss – which will no doubt be enriched by the comments of our savvy panel members
- So just a few top line thoughts to close

Reflections / thoughts for discussion

- Assuming this analysis is even two thirds right
- We (and ACE and TMA) should be seeking to build a much clearer public articulation of the role of artistic leadership in our producing theatres
- My analysis suggests that this will be less about distilling and advocating the state of the art in terms of leadership structures – and backing one model

Reflections / thoughts for discussion

- But rather on better articulating, and co-producing, widely shared visions on:
 - The role of our producing theatres
 - How they can best produce talent, innovation and ideas
 - And how to keep expanding the extraordinary possibilities afforded by exemplary artistic leadership

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