

Wanted: whistleblowers in the arts

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The arts do so much on so little, with real ingenuity and resilience. That's why we need to call each other out when dishonesty or bad practices occur

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One of my favourite things about being part of the theatre community is the way we all pull together. We support each other through thick and thin, fight each other's corners and generally help each other out whenever we can. It's a brilliant thing, knowing that you can call for help and someone will always answer. But sometimes, and I must stress that this is the exception rather than the rule, our instinct to protect each other does more harm than good. The unity that signifies our strength is a double-edged sword that occasionally injures the very ecology we all seek to protect.

Whenever two or more theatre people gather, you hear whispers. The whispers cover a lot of ground, from financial malpractice to petty bullying and general incompetence. Of course, not all that I hear might be true, but sometimes multiple stories about the same subject converge and it becomes impossible to dismiss the possibility that at their heart lies a kernel of truth.

There are the stories of sexual harassment, bullying, and dishonesty. There are the organisations that claim ownership over an artist's work in exchange for virtually nothing; the marketing departments that never deliver what they promise; and the funding applications filled with misdirection and sleight of hand. Everybody has a story. But those stories are rarely more than whispered: there are truths universally acknowledged but never fully voiced. And recently I've started to wonder why.

Why don't we call each other out more? Identify the bad apples for the greater good? Imagine: if every money-wasting incompetence or petty dishonesty was called to account, what would the savings amount to?

But the arts industry functions almost entirely through personal networking. It is an industry built on trust. How could we continue to trust each other artistically if everyone we worked with was a potential informer? The industry also relies on personal relationships and recommendation: gaining a reputation for being "challenging" can decimate a career. Any of the people you work with may one day be asked to give you a recommendation, formal or informal. It's understandable that many organisations would be wary of hiring an identified whistleblower for fear of exposing themselves to criticism in future. And while employees technically have some protection from dismissal under whistleblower laws, it's

not that simple in an industry where most people are self-employed and working on a project-by-project basis. Besides, many of the “whispers” are as much to do with laziness, incompetence and bad practice as with anything that might be covered under whistleblower legislation.

Then there’s the added difficulty of who to tell. Arts Council England have neither the resources nor the remit to interrogate every aspect of artistic and business practice. Nonetheless, the culture of self-evaluation within our funding systems doesn’t help. Arts organisations are responsible for reporting their own success or failure to funding bodies and, of course, those reports naturally put a rosy tint on even the direst circumstances. This absence of rigorous and impartial evaluation can lead to systemic failings that skew how we understand the entire ecology: it can make it look as if every organisation is succeeding while audience numbers fall, artists go underpaid, or unpaid, and innovation stalls.

There are those who will take this blog as a call to reduce funding to the arts. It isn’t. This isn’t a condemnation of the industry, but a call to improve what we already do brilliantly and with such resilience and ingenuity on so very little. The arts provide a massive net gain to the UK economy. Properly supported, with a rigorous system of evaluation and accountability, we have the potential to grow the value of our economic, social and cultural contribution exponentially. But in order to do that we need mechanisms to safely identify systemic failure, incompetence and wrongdoing.

Those of us working in the arts are the lucky few; we’re the ones privileged to do what we love every day. When we look the other way to wrongdoing, or accept incompetence and inefficiency as par for the course, we are cheating ourselves and our community. The arts exist to tell society truths about itself, but until we start calling each other to account and facing our own unpleasant truths, we don’t deserve the privilege of being called artists.

So now, over to you - what can we do?

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