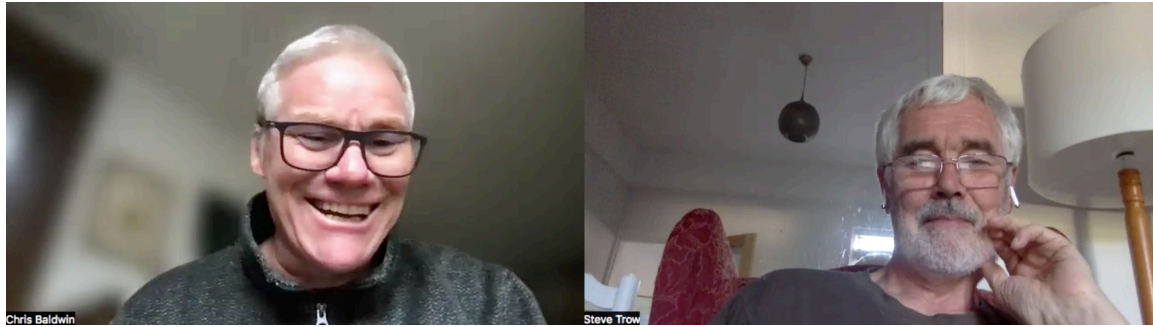


Common Practice

Chris Baldwin and Steve Trow in conversation, with curator of the Jubilee Arts Archive, Brendan Jackson. September 2023.



Chris Baldwin is a performance director, curator and writer, who works internationally. Steve Trow was a founding member of Jubilee Theatre and Community Arts in 1974 in the metropolitan borough of Sandwell. He went on to be an Arts Officer for West Midlands Arts, and in the 2000s was a Sandwell councillor.

Brendan: What's your take on the state of play in cultural realm currently? Where are we heading?

Steve: That's a very hard one to answer. I think at the moment it feels like there have been systemic and unrelenting retrograde steps in terms of cultural policies. It's getting worse and worse really. Our organs of cultural policy and funding, certainly in this country, perhaps internationally as well, are becoming dysfunctional.

In a way, it's a question about where we started, the elements that were important to us were ideas like co-creation and place, and accountability and power. In a lot of those respects now, and for the last 20 years or so, we've had governments whose instincts have been to centralise as much as possible. So all of that interest we had in locality and place and co-creation has been quelled. I think it will be for new people, not us, to say where we go from here. I'm hopeful there will be younger people coming through who will discover a new way forward - on the back of different organising principles around issues like climate change and environmental factors, also cultural identity is still a strong thread.

In our times there was a much wider context of change and more powerful organs of change. From our backgrounds in the working class, that was in

trade unions, tenants and community organisations. A lot of that has been atomised, partly for political reasons and partly as a result of technology.

Brendan: Chris, do you see this atomisation happening on a European level.

Chris: I certainly see the atomisation. I think we have to hold on to our critical faculties and look at why that's been happening. One of the main causes from a UK perspective was an outcome of the miners' strike of 1984-85 when all sorts of community organisational structures from the trade unions down started to be relegated, to being perceived as utterly un-useful or irrelevant in an atomised society. From a European point of view, we should not underestimate the impact of the 2008 economic crisis and the huge wave of insecurity and terror it generated for so many communities and ordinary working people. There was a crisis in forms of social democracy - powerful political forces were saying social democracy was the reason for this crisis not the response to it. That became very clear to me when I was working in more eastern European countries from Poland to Bulgaria, where there was a belief that the free market, after the fall of communism, was going to answer the needs and aspirations of so many people. After 2008 there was a huge disappointment in those initiatives of a more unified Europe and the type of capitalism based on social democratic values.

From a European perspective, and bearing in mind there are multiple 'Europes', there have been a series of great disappointments with the response of governments across the EU, who responded with forms of austerity, and those led very quickly to a recalibration in political policies - cultural policies no exception.

From the perspective of projects I've been involved in over the past 10 years, which have been predominantly various European Capitals of Culture, we have seen, as a response to the fears and angst that was created through the crisis of 2008, a retrenchment into the apparent comfort of national patriotic stories and historical interpretations. Brexit was one manifestation of this - so people have moved away from an emerging consciousness of community-based values, shared ideas, human rights, access to health and pensions on a European scale, and an inflexion towards nationalist, patriotic narratives. I think most of us artists, who engage with communities at all sorts of levels, didn't actually notice this happening. The communities we work with now have a cynicism about any kind of European wide expressions of social solidarity, partly because the really strong and

dominant narratives - whether in Poland, or Bulgaria, or Brexit Britain, in Hungary, Italy, even Malta - are often limited to nationalistic manifestations.

In the European Capital of Culture projects I have been involved with, five now, the most complex question you can possibly ask is ‘What is the European dimension of these projects?’ People from politicians to the local population literally take a step back. Rarely is there much enthusiasm to engage with that question - let alone find creative solutions to it. The cultural leaders of those projects often do want to engage however; they want to invite artists from other countries – they see the value, they see the importance – but sadly the ‘European dimension’ can have a lot less resonance for local populations and this generates a negative reaction from politicians who are ultimately responsible for delivering the funds for those projects.

So to summarise, we always need to refer to the socio-political context. An European economic crisis or reconfiguration, which was in many respects also global, and which caused multiple social crises, led people withdraw into nationalistic idea of what it means to belong. It’s not a surprise that when we feel frightened we retreat to what we think has worked in the past - namely our nation-states. And there have been and there remains plenty of well-funded populist politicians on the right who saw this as an opportunity and made it work for them.

It’s interesting to see that various cultural organisations across Europe that organise on a collective level are emphasising the concept of the ‘culture of care’ these days - that the arts are a way of promoting the concept of care and looking after one another. That might be a way in which we protect our values and not succumb to nationalist or localised identities that are often based on defining and excluding the other. Elefsina, the European Capital of Culture this year in Greece, just hosted a big conference by Culture Action Europe, dedicated to the concept of culture and care which expands across areas we acknowledge to be important – migrant communities, refugees, homeless people, people struggling significantly because of the economic downturns and because of Covid, and because of the confusion and the fear that the climate crisis is creating for many people.

Many of the city or national narratives and stories which I have been involved in developing with European Capitals of Culture have explored notions of care and empathy. Yet I also see a more narcissistic, inwards looking tendency beginning to appear more often. We want to talk about *our*

history, without trying to understand the nature of the ecosystem of linked histories and cultural manifestations in which we swim. Instead of interdependence we hear the phrase ‘we are the best’. I’m starting to keep a list of how many times I hear ‘world beating’ coming out of the mouths of UK MPs at the moment. It’s very depressing to hear such exceptionalism language. It’s narcissistic in effect and in the past decades it has become a common trope in public discourse and rhetorical conversation in many countries across the world and around Europe: ‘*We’re the greatest*’, ‘*we will be great again*’. There’s not a lot of language of solidarity in there.

Thinking about how the work I do in particular, which I describe as scaled-up community theatre, I ask how does it interact with these issues in the large-scale public sphere? How do we address those concepts of patriotism and nationalism through narratives and what’s being placed in contradiction to these, the narratives of solidarity, narratives of care, of value-driven identities? We have a huge struggle on our hands and I don’t think we should just leave it to a younger generation. I also think they need our solidarity and political understanding, and insights and learning. It’s not time to retreat and say I’ll leave it to them – I’m not suggesting you’re saying that, Steve. I really think we need some collective problem solving here.

Steve: I take that as a quite legitimate rap on the knuckles. When you’re sitting on your own and trying to figure it out you then you can start to get defeatist. But then at other times you think, there are still things to be done. Part of the cultural work that we’ve been involved in and the narratives and the content has been about imagining something better, and the ability to imagine something better is really why we got involved in arts and culture in the first place. It would be great to stick to those values and principles and to encourage them in others who probably have more stamina and are likely to make more of a difference in their lifetimes than I am able to make in mine.

Brendan: And now there’s the reach of social media and influencers, where there’s an opportunity to offer your experience, thoughts, provocations, even platforms like Substack for example.

Chris: There’s an obvious irony in this. 30 years ago I was teaching in a university in the UK and it coincided with the appearance of cheap video cameras; so everyone became, in theory, a potential video or movie maker. It probably did produce hundreds if not thousands of wonderful short documentaries and other art forms and now things like Substack has given the potential for quite well known historians, ones I subscribe to and to

political analysts as well, to gain access to new audiences and also re-monetise their work. You mention the word 'influencers'. Yes, we need to carry on trying to broaden and deepen the debate, and defend that space for democratic and cultural conversation.

Steve: Chris, we've been around long enough to say we know certain things. We can talk about the context in which things can and can't happen, and we can talk about the factors which inhibit change because we've come across them, and we've seen them adopted as policy here and we can talk about nationalism or centralisation or whatever, so there is some obligation to talk about why it hasn't always been like that and it doesn't have to be this way and it can change. We know enough about the current situation to be able to point to some of the places where that could happen. We can talk about where to breach the blockage to the sorts of ideas we talk about, culture and creativity in terms of social and political values.

We do have ammunition. In your case, there's the European experience, in my case it's very much a picture of what happens in the UK. Right from the word go, to tie this back to the beginnings of Jubilee Arts, then like you I trained in drama. The drama course at Birmingham was very much a practical course, one of the reasons it was the only university I applied to. After three years I finally got in. Victoria Wood and I got into the office and looked at our interview notes and on mine it was written, 'Deserves his chance'. I think if I deserved my chance then, there's a lot more that deserve their chance now. If we can help create those chances, then that's an obligation and a moral responsibility that we have. There are weak points in this country, especially with the prospect of a general election coming up, where it's worth raising some of the issues that we raised back in the 70s.

Back then, it was quite calculated. The term community arts began as a movement really with the Association of Community Artists. We had noticed there were other people around doing the same things as us. We started to organise and to develop the solidarity of joining together to exchange ideas, testing each others' practice against each other in a supportive way. But to be able to do that work you needed access to resources, and that was controlled by the Arts Council. So the fact that we'd come up with the term 'community arts' was sort of fortuitous I think.

In those days the Arts Council had certain fixations; one was that they supported 'the professional arts' and the other that they supported 'art forms'. There was a drama budget, a dance budget and so on, so we

presented them with ‘community arts’, a quasi-art form that they hadn’t noticed which was practiced by paid ‘community artists’. So they set up a community arts panel and for a couple of years in the mid-70s and we managed to breach the barrier and get funded. But as soon as they actually realised what we were doing, they decided to get rid of us and devolve us to the regional arts associations. In those days, clients could say yea or nay to devolution. We in the West Midlands said no - unless you increase the devolved resources. So for a few shekels, we finally decided we’d accept devolution. But it was also the right place to be, and more directly reflected the principle of our local accountability.

Chris, you recently attended a conference about place making and shared a graphic on that. It made me think that ‘place’ has never been an important part of cultural policy before. Certainly not 50 years ago, when it was about preserving the professional status quo, in London mainly. But there had always been an impulse from the bottom up, which is where our practice has always been.

So ‘place’ crystallises it in a way, in the sense that all those early community arts projects, Jubilee included, were very much attached to place, working with local communities on various scales whether with just a neighbourhood or with a whole metropolitan borough. Even those groups that toured around the country - like Welfare State or Cultural Partnerships - were always responsive to the particular sense of place.

In our case, at Jubilee, we working in a borough that had also only just come into being in 1974, that had no sense of itself, made up of six discrete towns that each had very clear local loyalties. But there was a lot of activity going on so we worked with those who were looking to explore and change things into what they imagined they could be - tenants wanting to change their housing conditions or the nature of their neighbourhoods, trades unionists who wanted to defend direct works provision in the area against privatisation, or to combat the sale of council houses, or youth groups who wanted a say on things that were affecting them as young people. The narratives were co-authored with us, with the content being as important as the process, and the content was democratically created jointly with the people whose story it was. That’s why the Jubilee Arts Archive, for example, is so potent now because it tells a story of what was happening in those communities as told by those communities at the time.

If somehow that sort of expressiveness were to be incorporated within policy nationally it would have to be delivered at a local level. The place making graphic that you shared with us, Chris, included a process of citizen participation in European Capitals of Culture, which included delegated powers. It seems to me that the question is not only who makes the art, but who decides these things, what art is created, how is it expressed and what does it have to say? Local arts is the only truly international art form. It happens in every country and every place. Those voices still need to be heard. But it also has to be challenged, so it isn't simply the voice of ultra nationalists or reactionaries. Place and content are not taken into consideration enough in cultural policy. I think policies and funding formulas are ways in which that is suppressed. We need to be able to fight that, both on a local and international level.

Brendan: Steve emphasises the importance of locality and engagement at a local level. Chris, my understanding of the work undertaken in Wrocław European City of Culture in 2016 was that there was a great deal of citizen participation. Could you tell us about that, perhaps the project with the bridges?

Chris: Just to put Wrocław into perspective, the overall cultural budget spent on culture as part of the European Capital of Culture programme spent over five years was around 59 million euros if I am not mistaken. There was a small team of curators, of which I was one - my responsibility was for interdisciplinary performance through which to create large scale events and performances at a city level, trying to engage a city to tell the story of its hugely complicated traumatic 20th century back to itself and to the country and beyond. That was the kind of superlative description.

The project which you're referring to, Brendan, was called 'Mosty' and was the first event in June 2015 and it used a very recognisable methodology to those who have community theatre experience in the UK, which was simply to invite people, associations, organisations, NGOs, even professional artists should they wish, to apply for a grant of either five, ten or fifteen thousand euros, to make some kind of intervention on a bridge in Wrocław on a given date in June.

We had over 80 applications after a very large campaign to get the message across and many 'cultural-surgeries' where we described to people what the project could involve. We then chose some 27 groups and gave them the money in the most non-bureaucratic way we could devise. Then we

allocated each group a mentor or director who were directly responsible to me.

So we worked with everyone from small groups of children to electronic music specialists who wanted to ‘mike-up’ a bridge and bring it to life as a musical instrument. There were also four weekends of specialist workshops where we worked with these groups on event management, how to engage with an audience, as well as helping and feeding back on the work they were producing. Then, on this day in June we closed the 27 biggest bridges in Wrocław and the city stopped in effect, the main transport hubs were affected, and the events took place. About 25,000 people turned up to see these different events and it was the most beautiful weekend. It was raining but full of activity and energy.

Perhaps the thing I was most pleased about, even years later, was all those interconnected stories and narratives we generated; there were literally multiple ways of telling the story of the city. The history of the city is German, Jewish and obviously Polish, and all those routes were celebrated on that day in different forms, with all sorts of languages and all sorts of manifestations of different cultures. It was very much predicated on the idea of co-creation, of co-negotiation using a Paulo Freire approaches to education and culture. And it was still relatively new as a concept in Poland. Obviously there are some examples of this work in Poland, but there was not as big a community theatre movement as there was in the UK in the 60s, 70s, 80s and up to today.

It acted as a steppingstone for the following projects in 2016 - three large-scale events; the opening event, ‘Spirits of Wrocław’ which involved 2,000 citizens in performing and processing, was attended by 180,000 on the streets. There was a summer event and in the winter to close the year, we drew elements of the different work during the year into a performance called ‘Niebo’.

Interestingly, the concept of co-creation has been embedded in every emerging Capital City of Culture. I’m not saying this project was the spur for that but it had an impact. If you read any intelligent bid from a city wanting to host a Capital of Culture, they will describe their work as based upon the principle of co-creation with their citizens. A lot of what happened in the UK in the 60s, 70s and 80s has become standard practice in European Capitals of Culture. To what degree we can debate, but it’s there.

We can also mention another large initiative still in its early years; the EU's New European Bauhaus initiative. If you look at its objectives you see its about bridge building between the arts, science and culture, about the growing digital challenges, and they make the point that debate must be embedded through a co-creation approach. So that's there at the core of the emerging EU cultural policy. They talk about three other important tenets, that their projects must explore and demonstrate their commitment to sustainability, aesthetics and inclusion. These are important statements – and also the achievements of the UK's community theatre, theatre in education and music education initiatives since the 1970's.

At the beginning of the 80s Greater London Council's cultural policy (coordinated by Tony Banks, Chair of their Arts and Recreation Committee); you'll see a lot of that in the new cultural Bauhaus. So I could suggest that many of these concepts regarding the inter-relationship of culture, social development, co-creation, started in the UK in the second half of the 20th century and have since been integrated more widely. If you want me to be academic for a moment, I could go back to Brecht, or to the Pedagogical Missionaries in Spain in 1932-35. By the way, don't be hoodwinked by their title, they were not religious but secularists working in the Republican government before Franco – and they were using precisely what we would recognise as community arts and community theatre methods in rural areas and some urban communities around Spain. More recently this is appearing in EU cultural policy.

Brendan: One observation I would make about the situation in Poland is that, despite the centralisation of control over certain things like the judiciary, over the years there has been a lot of devolution of powers to a city level and city mayors, and perhaps this is a significant contributor to the successes of Wrocław. What do you think?

Chris: I couldn't agree with you more, but I wonder if the recent aggressiveness of state politics is somehow a reaction against the rise of city politics.

The city politics in many areas are relatively progressive, relatively well received and the importance of progressive local mayors is obvious to many people to see these days. The Mayor of Wrocław during that period was coming to the end of his 18-year tenure, and he saw the European Capital of Culture not just as the defining moment in his time but as a catapult for the city to a redefine its future. I remember him saying very clearly, and on

multiple occasions, that Wrocław could no longer depend on being a low wage economy producing cheaper goods for the nearby German market. The city had to improve its indicators on quality of life, cultural and intellectual development, and this could be achieved in part by improving peoples access to co-created culture.

Now, if a mayor is saying that and also has the huge opportunity that a European Capital of Culture can deliver to enact it, then real change and real possibilities can be leveraged. That's what he did, and there are many other good examples of this. Mayors are very important in continental Europe, as they are becoming in the UK, and they have to involve culture at that level in order to deliver what they aim to achieve. There is a role for committed cultural practitioners to make an impact, perhaps less at national level, but ironically at an EU and city level.

Brendan: Steve, you were an elected local politician for some years with Sandwell Council, indeed leader for a short time. How much influence did you have? Were you able to move things forward in the cultural sector?

Steve: No, because I don't think local authorities have been able to retain that role. Over the past ten years of Government cuts, their spending on arts and culture has reduced by half and their cultural responsibilities includes libraries, which is a statutory obligation. They don't have statutory responsibility for the arts, so cuts to the arts are much higher.

The institutions that do control that funding, the national bodies - the Arts Council, Heritage Lottery, Sports England and so on - increasingly treat local authorities, not as partners in the way they used to, but as supplicants. Partnerships used to be really important to Regional Arts Associations, the members of which included both the region's arts organisations and its local authorities.

When Chris was describing the work with European Capitals of Culture, it was part of a bidding process; that's still not an entitlement. It's in the control of those above and you bid for these resources or for these opportunities. All the different incarnations of the way the Arts Council has engaged with arts participaton in England have had scheme names. There was Creative Partnerships, local education and arts consortiums that worked in schools, but you had to bid for it. There is the Creative People and Places scheme which the Arts Council lauded as its principal way to involve the public, the people and communities – that has also been a bidding process, and only certain places got it. It's still controlled from the centre.

There are hints of what could happen if you have a progressive Mayor at a city level or what could happen with the Combined Authorities, which were at least a beginning of devolution. I think we have to keep our eye on what devolution is actually taking place and how to insert a cultural dimension into the thinking. But that is a political issue and you have to target politicians and make the case.

For example, it was Tom Watson (MP for West Bromwich East), when he was Deputy Leader of the Labour Party who was persuaded to insert the commitment to Lottery transparency into Labour's 2019 General Election manifesto. This was transparency about where the National Lottery income is actually raised and therefore where and how much Lottery players in these areas are contributing to the 'Good Causes', including the arts.

Based on currently available data at the time, I had given Tom an analysis for the 41 Parliamentary Constituencies in the West Midlands Combined Authority area. Over the period 2010 to 2017, only 5 of these constituencies had received more funding than they had contributed. Most had received considerably less. In Walsall North, for every £1 lottery players had contributed they got back 11 pence in lottery funding for good causes locally. Even the House of Commons Select Committee, when they had seen similar figures in 2014, had said that lottery players have a justifiable expectation that when they contribute to the good causes "the benefit should be felt within reach of where they live". We need to reinforce devolution, and culture needs to be determined locally. The Arts Council is not fit for purpose anymore. It should never have been made the Lottery distributor as well as the distributor of government grant, it cements central control. That needs to be changed in the long run.

Chris: Coming back to placemaking, we cannot overestimate the importance of that. Despite all the digital revolutions now embedded in our lives, place does still matter enormously; the people around us, our families, our friends, our neighbours and work colleagues, more than anything a specialist or an expert will tell us, influence how we think about an issue. There's a lovely book about how culture affects the climate debate by Amitav Ghosh called *The Great Derangement*; it talks about how people, before they change their habits or opinions, rather than what they hear from a government experts or scientists, will turn to the people they really trust, their partners, their kids, their parents, their close friends or work colleagues. Michael Gove was playing no naïve trick when he said we're sick and tired of experts. He was playing a populist trick. Despite the fact that scientists are

immensely important in all of our lives - they're the people who keep us safe when we take an aeroplane or if we bump into a terrible disease - we do live in localised communities and if we are going to face some of those existential crises coming toward us, climate change, migration, the revolution in AI etc, then as community artists we have to remain focused on that local level, though with a non-local mindset.

Steve: You don't make a place without recognising the differences that co-exist within it and that gives you a lever into wider, more international communities. It comes back to that point about that idea of people imagining something different and working together to create something. By virtue of that diversity you can challenge the narcissism and popularism. When I look back at the Jubilee archive site I remind myself where I was then, where we were then and what was possible and how exciting it was to be part of it all, and I do think that can be recreated somehow.

Further information:

<https://miaaw.net/961/our-cultural-capital-west-midlands-bulgaria/>

<https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/news/labour-proposes-transparency-national-lottery-distribution>

<https://chrisbaldwin.eu/>