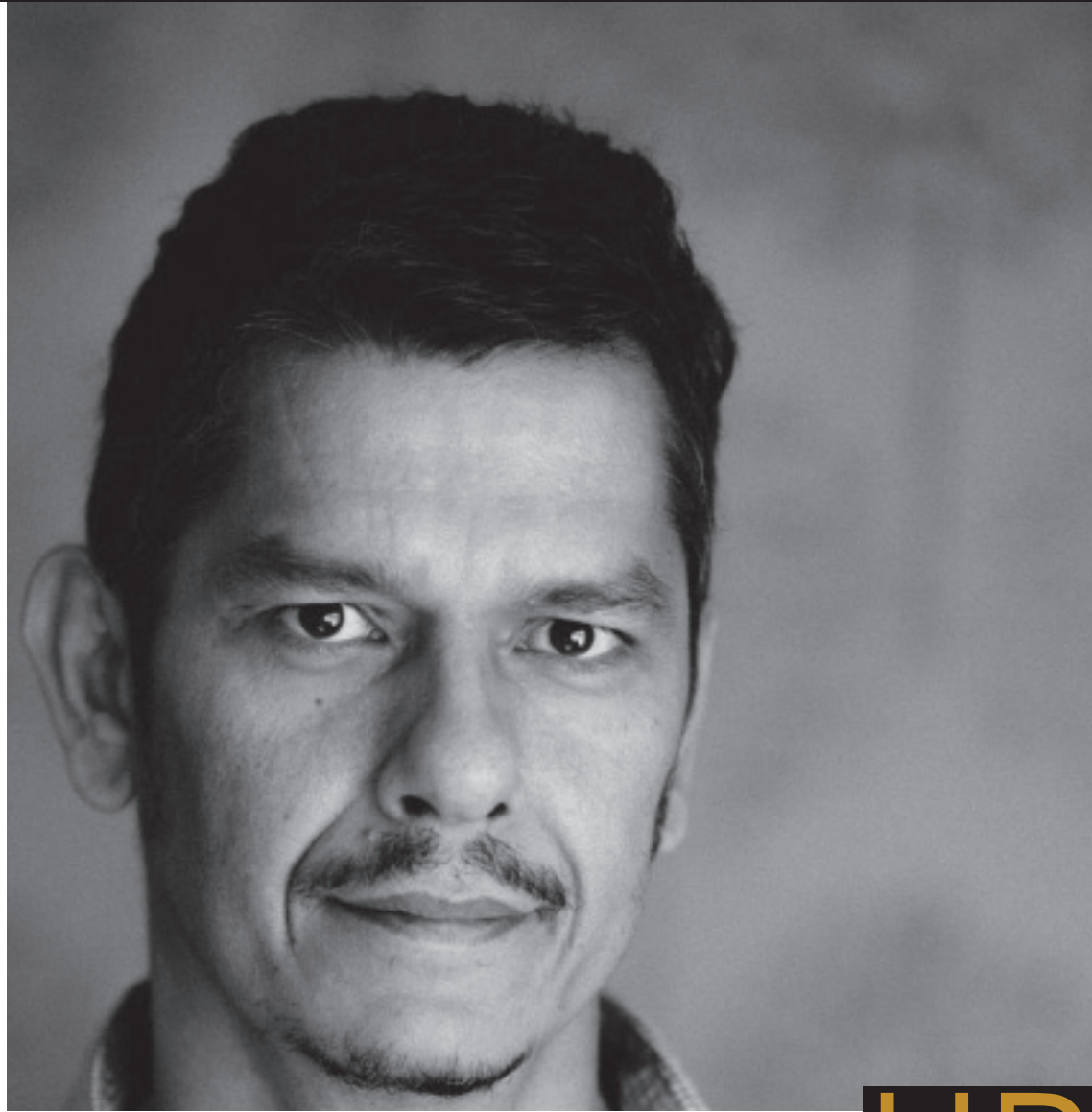


ARTS
& SOCIAL
CHANGE
no.1



DIGGING UP

THE ARTS GARDEN

A Memoir by Hassan Mahmadallie

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My father came to London from Trinidad in 1955. His forefathers had been brought to Trinidad as indentured labourers to work on the sugar plantations following the end of slavery. Newly liberated Africans refused to work for their previous masters, so there was a critical shortage of labour. As was the custom throughout the British Empire – arguably still the case today – people were transported halfway across the world to fill a gap in the labour market. My family, originally from northern India, moved via Calcutta to Trinidad, and my Dad is third-generation Trinidadian. He came to London as a young man, literally off the boat at Plymouth – and settled in Wimbledon. At the time Wimbledon wasn't quite as posh as it is now! Many of the early Indian community lived in that part of South London – Wimbledon, Tooting, that kind of area, or in Balham, where there's an old mosque.

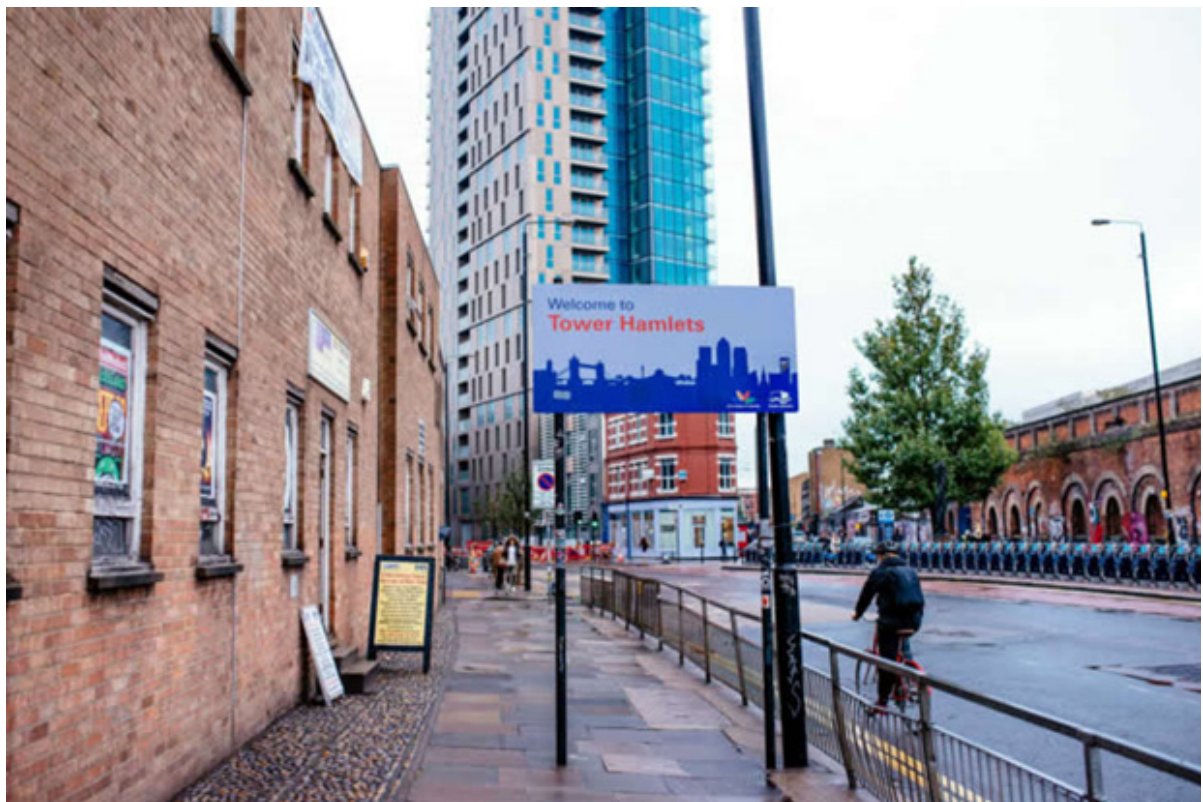


My mother is a white English woman with Greek antecedents. Her great-great-great grandfather was, I think, a Greek refugee from the Turkish-Greek war – the Greek War of Independence. She and my father had a family of twelve. I've got five brothers and six sisters. When I was very young, we moved to a place called Worcester Park, near Kingston and Epsom. It was quite white and genteel and the

only other family on our road that we could connect with was a Roman Catholic family with six kids; all the other houses had two point four kids or whatever the average was at the time. I grew up in the late 1960s and early 1970s with my brothers and sisters. My father worked for the GLC. To be honest, I think he was passed over in his career. He got stuck in the ranks, which was a shame for him because he came to this country to study law and ended up pushing a pen for the GLC. I guess school was quite hard and scary at some points but despite that my parents managed to raise a multicultural family in South London.

Art and Politics

In the 1970s, art and politics were coming closer together, principally because of the rise of the National Front and the response to it, the Anti-Nazi League. And musically, there was Rock against Racism, which was run by the same organisation as the Anti-Nazi League.



When I was a teenager, punk exploded on to the music scene. It was a

revolutionary shift, because the first part of the 1970s was extremely boring in terms of music . . . Stevie Wonder and David Bowie, as far as I was concerned, that was it. Punk was a political movement. It wasn't necessarily a left-wing movement, but it was clearly a political challenge to the status quo. And there was a struggle within punk – a fight which I experienced at first hand on many occasions – about who would dominate. Would it be nihilism/stroke right-wing politics or would it be progressive left-wing politics?

Over that period, the late 1970s, the left won out, and for me that was very significant, because up to that point in time I'd had to put up with the politics of the National Front in my everyday life. While I was growing up I didn't quite understand what was going on, but in our house I'd hear my parents talking about something awful, terrible, evil, there was always a chance that I'd be chased by skinheads, and Enoch Powell was making speeches. The National Front dominated our lives.

By that time, we were living in a white area in South London and it was quite harsh; quite harsh at school, quite harsh in the streets. So when punk came along, that was brilliant. Because I really loved it. I loved The Clash, I loved the reggae influence on punk, the whole gang of bands. I used to go and see bands three times a week. But I guess it didn't really dawn on me exactly what it meant until 1978, when the Rock against Racism gig was held in Victoria Park in East London. I remember the day, starting out, I think it was in Trafalgar Square, and we marched from Trafalgar Square through East London.

We marched along Bethnal Green Road and as we were marching more and more people joined the march; it got bigger and bigger and longer and longer. I remember marching past a pub in Bethnal Green Road, which I think is a Chinese takeaway now, called the Bladebone Pub. It was a really hardcore place, where the murderous National Front thugs used to hang out. I remember marching past them. They were standing outside with their beer bellies and their pints of beer, jeering at the people going by, but I hung around for a bit and you could tell that they were becoming more and more demoralised as more and more and more people passed by. In the end, they went back into the Bladebone and shut the door, and that was significant for me.



When I got to Victoria Park, what I saw was tens and tens of thousands of people. I went there principally for the bands – Tom Robinson, The Clash, X-Ray-Spex, Steel Pulse and various others. But as the park filled up in that bit of East London, with people hanging from the trees to get a view of the stage, I looked around me and what I saw was white faces with black faces amongst them. And I realised that culture is a powerful force and that it had brought all these people together and – this sounds a bit weird – all the young white people who were in Victoria Park that day, every single one of them, gave me a boost. I realised then that, while I had been fighting racism as an individual all through the 1970s, there were actually white people who were also interested in fighting racism. Up to that time I had assumed the opposite.

I remember that the second band on stage was Steel Pulse and they came up dressed as the Ku Klux Klan, so what we saw was guys in white robes and pointy hoods coming on to the stage. There were shouts of 'What the ... is the Ku Klux Klan doing on the stage?', and then the hoods came off and, of course, they were all dreads from Birmingham – Steel Pulse, from Birmingham – and the crowd just roared and my heart lifted. They went into one of their signature tunes, 'Ku Klux Klan', a great piece of music and the whole thing just came together. And

of course we had Tom Robinson who headlined. I remember that Tom Robinson was bigger than The Clash at the time. He sang 'Glad to be gay', which is a great anthem, and you could see all these people singing 'Sing if you're glad to be gay, sing if you're happy that way', and that was another thing that became embedded, in a political kind of way, in my consciousness.

So I guess that if there was a single moment when art and politics came together, and I realised – maybe not on a pure, conscious level, but on an unconscious, emotional level – how powerful that could be, this was that moment.

Art and Education

In the period before I joined the Arts Council, I worked in a number of jobs which were to do with art and education. And fighting racism. About five years previously, I had been a journalist on a socialist newspaper, and I covered the Stephen Lawrence enquiry. I went to every single one of the hearings. It was held in offices at the Elephant and Castle and the enquiry also went to different cities in the UK. I covered the Lawrence case very thoroughly. It made an extraordinary impact because I guess, for me, it laid bare what racism really meant, not as an individual act between a racist and a victim, but on the level of the state. That was the true significance of the Lawrence enquiry. It wasn't about the unfortunate kid who was murdered, Stephen Lawrence. It was about the attitude of the state and how it reacted to that particular murder. It was a learning process and through it I discovered a lot about how the state works.

Then I went to work for a local CRE office in Bexley, in Kent. I went there as an arts education officer, going to schools and running arts workshops for the kids around themes like racism, black history, all sorts of things – anything I wanted, really. I used to run a festival in the summer. Councils used to hold anti-racist festivals every year. They are becoming rare these days, but every council, or at least every big council, used to have one. Bexley was an important place because of its proximity to where Stephen Lawrence was murdered and because there was a large British National Party presence there.



I worked for that CRE for a couple of years and then I managed to get a job with Charlton Athletic Football Club. Ever since the Lawrence murder, Charlton Athletic had stepped into the gap and put a lot of resources into community work in all the areas the killers had come from. When I used to visit schools, they'd say 'yeah, this school . . . Jamie Acourt was here, in this school' and every teacher had a story to tell about Jamie Acourt or David Norris or whoever it was who had been suspected of the murder of Stephen Lawrence. So I worked for Charlton Athletic Race Equality (CARE) through a whole series of programmes in schools and in the community, in the area where the murder of Stephen Lawrence had brought a specific problem into focus. Other young black kids had been murdered in that area during the same period.

My contract was coming to an end and I saw that there was a vacancy at the Arts Council, in its diversity unit, in the head office. I was a bit hesitant, because I hadn't worked inside a big institution, a government institution, before, and I understood that I was at least as likely to be subsumed into the institution as I was to be able to effect change within it. And, of course, that is the dynamic; big institutions always try to pull you in. The Stephen Lawrence enquiry taught me a lot about the nature of institutions, the Metropolitan Police in particular, but also more generally.

So I hesitated, thinking 'Oh, I'll go for this job – or shall I?' I had to do a presentation and I was going to be very radical and quote C.L.R. James. A few months back, when I was clearing a drawer, I found my notes for the presentation and I did quote C.L.R. James on colonialism under the British Empire and how it worked. I also listed all the great black theatre makers I knew had existed but who were never mentioned. 'Where are they in the books?' I asked. 'Where are they in the drama schools? There is a problem we have inside the arts in this country', I said, 'there is a problem of attitude' and I went on to say what I felt was wrong with the arts in this country in relation to race equality.

Impatient for Change

I got the job and was actually quite surprised. I guess my message was that I was impatient for change and think Tony and the other people interviewing me picked up on that and decided that I was bolshy enough to survive in the post. And I think you have to be quite bolshy to survive in posts like that *inside* institutions.



What you have to understand is that, in the media aftermath of the Stephen Lawrence enquiry, there was a report. Out of that report came new legislation, the Race Relations (Amendment) Act, which laid down, for the first time in British history that institutions had to lead the way in terms of tackling racism. All institutions that receive public funding have to draw up plans, which are publicly accountable, and they have to implement those plans. And they have to push progress around race equality. Because of the Stephen Lawrence enquiry lots of people, not only black people or people from ethnic minorities or people from other oppressed groups, but people in general, the public in general, suddenly woke up to the fact that there was a deep sickness inside British society, that there was a malaise, a virus if you like, in the fabric of our institutions, and that something really had to be done about it, or we would see more tragedies like Stephen Lawrence. So there was a great push from the public to get something done. I remember this happening in the first years of the New Labour government under Tony Blair, which wanted to be seen to be energetic in pushing forward this agenda.

So there was an impetus to have really fundamental change to institutions and I think Tony, Sue and I, other people in our team and other people working in diversity in the regions, all rode the wave. Now, like all waves, it crashed on the beach, crashed smack into realities, and then, of course, the wave began to subside, didn't it? It began to draw back. We shouldn't be surprised at that, because that's change and reaction to change. That's, you know, the process. But we were a few years into a mission, as it were, to make fundamental changes in terms of the arts and equality in this country and to provide a kind of role model, for people abroad as well, on an international level. And I do believe that we were pushing to be world leaders in terms of equality in the arts. But our wave had crashed on to the beach and begun to ebb, the sand was shifting under our toes and we had to re-assess where we were, what ground we were now standing on.

So we, the team, held a meeting, a one-day conference, just our diversity team from across the country and ourselves. We had a consultant who had drawn up a position paper for us and someone in our research department had written a big paper on the changing demographics in this country. So we had this information, we had a quantity of data, we had a position paper, and we had our own experiences to help us judge whether or not our work still had a foothold.

Thinking on our Feet

Or was it beginning to lose its grip? Were we beginning to go backwards? In that one-day meeting, we decided that we had to reframe our approach, the whole way we argued about the relationship between art and diversity. We couldn't rely on the impetus of the law or on the moral outrage at Stephen Lawrence's murder. We had to think a bit more quickly on our feet and try to reposition ourselves, because if we didn't we would be left high and dry; that was the danger. Even though what we were doing was right, if we didn't have any purchase, either inside the organisation or in the arts world, we would stop and then begin to go backwards.

At that point, I think we said, 'Well, look, we have all these different arguments, we've put all this forward, where do we go now?' Because what you have to understand is this: our first port of call in terms of any argument around art and equality was the Arts Council itself – the people who made up the Arts Council, the organism itself. We had to persuade all those individual people first, before we could go take the argument out to the wider arts sector.

We had to get the Arts Council on board first. It was quite clear that there were forces ranged against what we were doing, and their arguments were beginning to gain ground. One such notion was that the Arts Council's diversity policies were ghettoising black artists, that positive action, not positive discrimination but positive action, acting positively to effect change in the field of diversity and equality, was being undermined by our opponents. Books were being published. People were coming to some of the higher management in the Arts Council and saying 'your diversity team has got the wrong position, your diversity team is increasing segregation'. It is actually hindering integration.

Of course, this was mirrored in society, particularly after the riots in 2001 in the northern cities, in Oldham, Bradford and places like that. Basically, the argument was that Muslims had become segregated, that government policies around diversity and equality had segregated them and that this was bad for the society. It was reflected amongst what I would call anti-progressives or the right

wing inside the arts, who wanted to recover some ground that we had stolen from them, and they put up a sustained argument against our policies. So we had two choices: one was to defend our policies, which we decided after our meeting was not going to work, or we had to be quite quick on our feet and see if we could manoeuvre.



So we decided that what we were going to do was to develop an artistic argument for diversity and equality in the arts. In other words, what we were to say: 'OK, we'll take your point. Maybe our policies do have some negative outcomes.' And, in one sense, I guess it's true, in the sense that we felt there was something not quite right in the arts sector. There were various arguments about how policies should be put into practice and quite clearly, in the case of some arts organisations, what they did was a tick box exercise. This was part of the argument which was used against us, and it couldn't be denied. Some organisations would hire black artists for one week a year, to do a bit of theatre in a studio, so that they could go back to the Arts Council, and say 'Look, we are developing our race and equality scheme'. The same applied in terms of disability: 'Look we've got a disabled artist in, blah, blah, blah . . . we've got a ramp in our building . . .' So clearly, in a minority of arts organisations, that tick box attitude was prevalent, and of course, our critics would say that it was true of the majority. It wasn't the case, but that's what they would argue.

So we would tell them, 'OK, if that's your argument, let's open up another area of debate.' And for us that meant an area of debate where we could out-manoeuvre that group of critics by saying, 'What we are going to have is a debate about art – how it's made, the creative act itself, how change occurs in the arts, how innovation occurs in the arts, how new art movements are coming to be and what the relationship is between art and society'. Because in this country the arts lag behind society as a whole, which is a sad thing to say. In general terms, not in particular instances but in general terms, that is the truth, unfortunately. And the gap doesn't have to be as big as it is at the moment, it could be much smaller.

Parking the Diversity Tanks

So we'd say 'We are going to park our diversity tanks on your arts lawn. Where your lovely manicured, middle-class arts lawn is, we are going to have our dirty big grey tanks of equality and diversity in the arts, and we are going to run over the road and we are going to park on your lawn and we are going to have a debate with you. In artistic terms, that's what we are going to do. That's the impetus behind the creative case for diversity. We are going to be sophisticated, we are going to marshal our arguments, we are going to have historical and contemporary examples, we are going to show how art innovates itself throughout history – look at the American experience in terms of jazz. We are going to have the key argument across all the art forms. We aren't going to allow diversity and equality to be marginalised, to be just something bolted on to the artistic world. We will put diversity and equality right in the middle of the debate, of all the debates, around the arts in this country.'

Obviously, we haven't succeeded fully in doing that, but we've definitely started and I think we've gone quite a long way along that road towards having an artistic debate. And we won't have it in diversity language, we won't have it in equality language, we'll have it in artistic language. We are ready to have that big debate about the nature of art, how it changes and so on and so forth. We are really up for it.

So we threw down the challenge to our critics, but not only to them. If you think about it, beginning to develop aesthetic arguments of that kind was a challenge to us as well, and to the people that we work with. We didn't really have any choice. We could stay still and be increasingly marginalised, or we could make a desperate leap and park our tanks on their lawn. And in retrospect, I think we did the right thing. But it was probably the only thing we could have done, because there was really nowhere else to go.

When we held that meeting, that one-day conference in 2007 we made the strategic decision to try – not aggressively, that would only give offence – to get out of the corner we had been pushed into. First we had to have a conversation inside the Arts Council. Sometimes it's good to develop a conversation outside and feed it back into an institution, but this one had to start in the Arts Council, inside the institution. So we went to all the different forums of the Arts Council to launch our idea.



Now, one of the critiques of our position, maybe from the 'black artists', to use an umbrella term, or the 'disabled artists', and so forth, was that all we were doing was talking to the institutions, the big arts institutions, and where was there a role for them in all this? And I think that maybe, looking at it from their point of view, that's fair enough. If I hadn't known quite what it was that we were developing, I think I might have been worried that maybe Tony and the crew were beginning to abandon the notion of a fight for equality because it was too difficult and the result would be that they – the black artists, the disabled artists and others – would lose some of their purchase on the arts world altogether.

No Diversity without Equality

That's never been our intention. In actual fact, we clearly stated in every forum that the drive for further equality is a prerequisite for anything that happens. The creative case, outlined in the paper 'Beyond cultural diversity', is positive and should not be reinterpreted as a means of doing away with the whole drive for equality. In the world of arts funding you can't have diversity without equality. That's clear to us and we've made it clear to everyone. If, in the future, there is any attempt to downplay equality and just play up the creative case for diversity, then all the people who have been criticising what we've been trying to do will have a fair point.

I think the role of a diversity team – I've always thought this, we all thought it, we all know it to be the case – the role of a diversity team within a big institution is to create points of tension. Institutions are naturally averse to change, so our job is try to draw attention to where change can take place. And the agenda under which change takes place, when you are talking about equality, is a political agenda. I mean, equality is still, after all these years, one of the dominant questions in our society. And maybe it's become more dominant than would have been expected because of the financial crash, with the widening of the gap between the haves and the have-nots, the Occupy movement and all the rebellions against neo-liberalism across the world. Equality is always going to be a political question. So, therefore, the diversity team inside an institution will always be an almost overtly political team. This work is politicised, maybe that's

the way to put it. The work of the diversity team will, inevitably, be politicised, because the questions it is addressing go to the heart of the nature of the society in which we live.

Therefore, if the diversity team wants to effect change, it has to create tension between itself and the bigger institution. In one sense, a diversity team is an agent provocateur, because you go into a big institution, which has its own political agenda, and you want to ruffle the waters of that big institution and get some kind of progressive result out of it.

When we, when I, first came to the Arts Council, there was a consensus in society that we needed change around equality; first of all, race equality and then the disability agenda and so on and so forth. During our second period there, society decided that it had had enough of that agenda, and began to close down on it. Then you got a kind of right-wing agenda beginning to grow up and that right-wing agenda spread across both of the big political parties. This was, inevitably, reflected inside the Arts Council.

When I first joined Tony's unit, there were a couple of projects that we discussed early on. We would have an annual diversity lecture, just for Arts Council folk, and we would launch a platform called 'Arts and Islam'.

Now, at the annual lecture, the first one we organised, I think, the keynote speaker was Paul Gilroy, who's is a cultural studies scholar, I suppose you'd call him a cultural historian, and he gave us a very interesting lecture about the arts and diversity and equality, but he framed it within this notion that he's developed, that Britain is suffering from postcolonial melancholia. Britain – probably we should say the English ruling class – hasn't really got over the fact that it hasn't got any colonies anymore and this gives rise to a feeling of melancholia, of loss, a kind of pessimism, I guess, and a disconnection from the ways – fruitful ways, really – in which society is growing.

Society is already Diverse

One of the things he talked about was artists who resist that melancholia and stress the significance of something new which is just beginning to develop, particularly in our cities. What is developing isn't a kind of hybridisation – we'd always be wary of that term. I don't feel that hybridisation really sums up what's happening. What you've got is different elements coming together. Remember, society is diverse, we don't have to make it diverse. Our job wasn't to diversify the arts in that sense, because the arts have a connection to the world, and our world is diverse, both the natural world and humanity.

There is something unique coming out of British cities within a kind of hip hop framework, which tells a new story about this country using the hip hop idiom. I would say that Estelle was touching on it before she went to America. Remember her first record? It was all about her and her life in a mixed race family. And The Streets too they would tell you this kind of English narrative. For me, it goes back to people like The Kinks – not English in a horrible, nationalistic or patronising way, but a kind of English that came out of the kind of postcolonial experiment that we are all living in.



Paul Gilroy talked about it in terms of 'convivencia', which was the way society was organised under Islamic rule in Spain, in Andalucía, a society structured so that the three faiths, Muslim, Jewish, Christian, worked together. Built into the rules of this society was 'convivencia', the notion of getting along together, and Paul Gilroy was saying that if you look in our cities, you find 'convivencia'.

I always felt that, when people talked about multiculturalism, they looked on it as some kind of state policy. Now, that's wrong, in a very literal sense, because the British state has never ever had a policy of state multiculturalism. The particular period I grew up in taught me that, and I know that's not how the British state regulates race relations. We never had a state policy on multiculturalism, but what we have had is what I would call multiculturalism from below, and let's not limit it just to race. You can talk about it in terms of disability, you can also talk about it in other ways. But the notion of people being at the bottom of society, I see that's what counts on the estate on which I live.

Everyday Acts

Yes, we do have our tensions, as it were, but generally we understand that we are all planted down on this council estate in south-east London and we have to get along. And we need a shared understanding of what we, as a community, have to do if our little community isn't going to blow itself apart. People trade every day, on a minor level – parking the car, resolving disputes with the kids, the woman who's moving in next door coming out of the house wearing a hijab – whatever it is. All these little negotiations that happen at the bottom of society have added up to this unique thing, you know what I think, which you don't have in France, which you don't have in Spain, which you don't necessarily have in Germany, which you certainly don't have in America, which is a very segregated society, a very, very segregated society.

It always makes me laugh when people talk about Britain being a segregated society. When you go right through the south of Chicago, then you know what segregation is really like... my gosh! When I went through the south of Chicago I couldn't believe it, how segregated it was.

But this kind of 'convivencia' is growing, and that's what Paul Gilroy was saying at the lecture which we invited him to give – overlooked by all the policymakers and by most of the people who write about society. Multiculturalism, whatever it might be in the current state of British society, exists at the grassroots, where people are making small everyday acts of negotiation, which add up to a moment of 'convivencia'. Mixed race singers, for example, they are a product of 'convivencia', a common youth culture. We have mixed groups of young kids, which you didn't have in my day; you do now, which shows that progress is possible.

This is something unique and it's coming out of the bottom of society. But has it penetrated the arts? Yeah, actually. But as I said, the arts are certainly lagging behind society in this country at this point in time. And so that notion of 'convivencia', of something special and unique happening in our cities, is, I think, very important.

The second project, 'Arts and Islam', started out as an internal series of workshops, because we weren't getting many Muslim artists or artists with a Muslim background coming in for grants. So we had our internal workshops in all the different regions across the Arts Council, telling people, 'this is what British Muslims are, this is the demographic', and then we would get in Muslim artists who talked about their work, and the relationship between their faith and their art and so on and so forth. Our series of internal workshops was well received inside the Arts Council. People couldn't believe the Arts Council was doing something like that, frankly. And what happened as a result was that we got more artists from Muslim backgrounds coming in and applying for state funding for the art they did.

But actually, it turned out to be something a little bit more interesting than that. It turned out to be an exploration of how young Muslim artists were beginning to articulate things they couldn't articulate at any other level in society. They couldn't go into the schools or the colleges, and say what they really thought about 9/11, and the war on terror epoch that we are living through. Through their art they could say all sorts of things that they couldn't say otherwise. But they expressed other things too. I'm thinking of Mohammed Ali (Aerosol Arabic), who combines graffiti with Islamic calligraphy, and what he talks about is the soul of the city. And as young artists are commenting on their lives in the city, on all the lives of all the young people around them in the city, they are beginning to develop an artistic language which is unique, but which is an expression, actually, of that 'convivencia' that is happening in our cities and in our artistic expression.

Change at the Margins

So these two projects which we set in motion certainly taught me something about how the arts develop, about the place of art and its relationship with society, and also about how overlooked a lot of these artists, whom we push to the fringes, really are. That's the real point. These artists have something unique to say, because of the position they are in – a part of society, but also not a part of it. My take on their situation is that they want, in a way, to be part of society but at the same time they understand they are not part of it. And that tension, that dialogue which this situation sets up within their art begins to filter into our society, our modern society in this country, so that they can influence that society in ways which few other people can.



You know, the Southbank Centre, for example, might eventually wake up and get some of these artists there, disabled artists or Muslim artists, whatever it is. But the Southbank Centre doesn't produce these people. The society of the inner cities produces these people, and then, at some point in time, they become visible.

What we were trying to do inside the Arts Council, the priorities we were working with, the kind of projects which we began, our conversations around the creative case for diversity, all led in one direction. We were saying, 'Look, these people

are saying some extraordinary things. Wake up, begin to fund them, don't let twenty years go by before they get on the radar.' We are going to accelerate that process and encourage these people, because they are saying things which we need to hear but are not telling ourselves.

If we are not telling ourselves these things, we need these people to tell us some really fundamental truths about the society in which we live. We need to speed up the process by which these people become visible, and become heard. If we don't, the arts will drift away from society. They'll become a middle-class pursuit, just heritage, just the middle classes talking to themselves around the dinner table, wanting individual acts in theatre, in dance, waving their particular individualist stick at society.

These people are talking about how collectives work, how unity works in collectives, and about their rights and their problems and the ways in which they solve them. That is something which has a great deal of value but which is not valued. What Paul Gilroy was saying was, 'We have to give value to these people'.

What 'Arts and Islam' taught me was that the people who don't get Arts Council funding are, by and large, the people who have something new and different to say. In other words, change doesn't start at the centre, it always starts at the margins.

Class

Our problem with public arts funding is that we fund the centre to the exclusion of the periphery. We fund institutions who think their job is to preserve the status quo. They may not know it but that really is their mission, that is the mission of the National Theatre and the Royal Opera House . Their real mission is to preserve the status quo. In actual fact they find the periphery quite threatening, unless they can haul it in, shave the rough edges off, neutralise what they don't like and make it acceptable to themselves. Meanwhile art, what I would call art, is taking place at the periphery. Our way of funding the arts ignores this. We fund what has a lesser value or no value at all, and give nothing to what is most valuable.

I don't know any period in history when the centre was innovative in terms of the arts. I think that when you talk about different voices in the arts being

heard, there are a whole number of contingencies. The first thing to say is that these voices would find their way through somehow. That's not an argument for not funding them, but people will be always driven to express themselves and they will find ways of doing so. Another factor is whether the wider society is receptive or not to these voices, whether society thinks that what they say is important. And sometimes, most times, society has been nudged into listening. So, for example, when I was growing up, you had the riots, the inner city riots in 1981 and 1985. There were all sorts of opinions and reports about the Brixton riots and about why those black kids were rioting. In fact, it was due to a rise in multiracialism, but the establishment's reaction was, 'Why are these black kids rioting? We've got to do something about it.' I remember it was Michael Heseltine who toured Liverpool and said, 'Oh, we are going to regenerate Liverpool'. What you had, in fact, was the urban black population forcing itself on to the agenda.



Now, out of that came the Black Theatre movement and the Black Theatre cooperative, you know, all those different organisations, The Posse, Talawa Theatre, and their South Asian equivalents as well. All these organisations came out of a space which was opened up by the inner city riots and what they gave, what these companies gave to theatre, and not just theatre, but also the visual arts and dance, was an articulation, the beginning of an articulation from a

different viewpoint of what they thought society was like. And it was the riots that allowed them to do that, that actually opened up a space and allowed them to do it.

The middle classes tend to talk to one another; but the marginalised tend to talk to society as a whole, and the things they have to say are significant to society as a whole, not just to a group. They are trying to tell us something. They are inventing new forms of theatre to be able to tell us something about society. And you know, that's a very important thing to think about when you are talking about values, the value of the art. It's not only an internal conversation.

At the moment, I think the problem we have is really a problem of class. I think that, in my time, the arts have become over-professionalised. You have to have a degree. Why do you have to have a degree to be an actor? Or a director? Directing is a job that you just pick up. You have to have an MA before you can do this, before you can be recognised. Over-professionalisation. And there is a career structure, which is a very middle-class way of organising things, socially, economically and politically as well.

That's the template which now runs through the arts in this country. It wasn't always the case. I mean, look at this place, it was a music hall, all sorts, the dregs of society came to the music hall or were on the stage in the music hall, you know. One of my forebears was a music hall entrepreneur, right? He was just a working man who decided he wanted to go into music hall. Here, where we are sitting now. But now we are living in a very different world, a very professionalised, middle-class world.

I know it's a bit cruel but I'll say this; in colonial times, the sons and daughters of the middle classes either went into the church or they went into colonial administration. These days, the sons and daughters of the middle classes colonise the arts. That's the truth of the matter, that's why the arts world still has middle-class values and is still run by the middle class. That's why it has a professional structure. That, in my opinion, is the problem.

In the last, let's say, ten years, there has been change in the arts, there's really been a tightening of the hold the middle classes have on the arts; they are saying 'it's ours, it's ours' and in a recession, as you can imagine, this is their impulse as a class, not just as individuals. As a class, they feel entitled to privilege and they want to draw that privilege closer to them. They haven't got the Church of England anymore and they haven't got the colonial service or the colonial

army or whatever it might be. We don't have an empire anymore, so we can't send the unemployed sons and daughters of the middle classes abroad to find a place, as local rulers, administrators or vicars or missionaries, whatever it might be.

Now they are in the arts, in the creative industries, and they are holding it all very close to themselves. So there is privilege and inequality and you have to be patient, up to a point, if you want to change the status quo. But you must always be shocked by the fact of inequality. You have to be shocked by the notion of privilege, you really have to feel 'that's not right', and at this moment I feel that the way in which art is structured is not right and that the privileged position of the middle classes in the arts is not right.

It's not right that they should exclude working-class people, or the disabled, or women, or LGBT individuals or companies, or black people, whatever it might be. It's not right that they should be excluded from the arts, just because the members of the middle classes are saying, 'It belongs to us, it really belongs to us, it's our inheritance.' Now, I'm a working-class guy, I don't believe in inheritance, I live in a council house, right? But that doesn't mean that I don't have lots of aspirations. Why should I or my brothers and sisters, as it were, be excluded from the arts because there is another group in society that thinks it belongs to them, it's their entitlement? It always makes me laugh to hear them talk: 'Oh, the working class, they think they are entitled to this, that and the other, they are entitled to home care or whatever it might be, working-class people, they are entitled to something, positive action, what's all that about, blah, blah . . .'

Positive action!? Have you looked at the arts, the social profile of the arts, that's not positive action, that's positive discrimination. It's the middle classes holding the arts for themselves, and in a recession, of course, they want to hold it even closer. Because if they let it go, then it'll be lost to them forever. A bit like the empire, once they let that go, it all disappeared in a very short space of time after WWII. I'm impatient, I always get annoyed at some of the arguments that come up. When middle-class people find a way of mangling language to hold on to something they shouldn't be entitled to – and that's the situation we face now – and when you see a range of cuts in the arts, you'll see certain value judgements being made. All sorts of arguments are constructed, as to why those choices are made as opposed to others, but in the end of the day, it's all about middle-class entitlement to a profession in the arts. That's what it comes down to.

And a lot of people see that and know that, and therefore the question arises, what are people going to do about it? Will they just walk away from state subsidy for the arts, because they understand they are not welcome, that there is no

point knocking on that particular door, and go and do things for themselves? I think that might happen. In the 1970s and the 1980s the women's theatre movement that grew up in this country actually said that they didn't want Arts Council funding. At the end of the day, though, a lot of them went back to the Arts Council and got the funding, which allowed the Arts Council to chop them about ten years later.

Communities

What happened to community theatre and theatre in education in this country? Come on, come on, let someone please tell the truth about the state of the arts in this country, about these people who are sitting on jobs in the arts and who are constructing models and ways of working that suit them. Look at the theatre! Theatre does not suit women, particularly women who want to have a family, because women in our society have the burden of childcare. In other words, if a woman wants to have a baby, she has to retreat from her profession. The theatre in this country is all about working until midnight, then you turn up for nine o'clock in the morning, you go on tour for three months a year. And if you don't do that because you decide to have a baby, that means you are not there, your face is not seen.



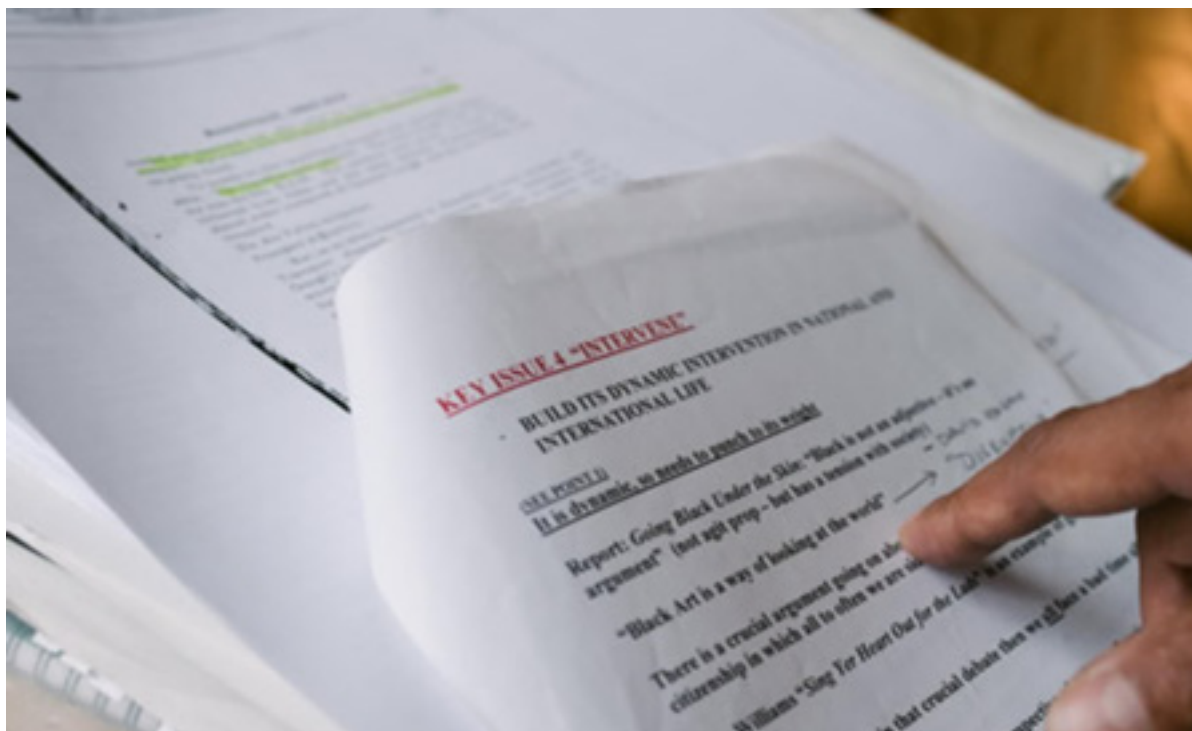
In other words there are structures in place in the arts in this country which suit some people and are designed not to suit others. That's really the bottom line and we should always protest about it. We should say that this is what's happening, and not cloud it with rhetoric about quality, with someone saying 'you are just not good enough this time, wait until next time'. Because there isn't a next time, that's an illusory argument. But you know, people aren't stupid, they'll wake up to that one, won't they?

We shouldn't abandon the arts to privilege, I do believe that. I've spent most of my working life in the arts in one way or another. Most of the time I was working inside theatre companies, working with young people, and working in inner city and rural communities. For example, I worked in former mining communities in the north of England for a theatre company called Pit Prop – the name tells you a bit about it. For me, particularly, the relationship between the audience and the actor that you have in the performing arts is a seductive force. What it does, I think, is address things that we struggle with as human beings at a deep level. It's not a level you can get even from reading the Guardian, you know? It's a very deep, visceral level.

Why Art Matters

That's also why I'm interested in art as narrative. For example, I'm writing a play about a particular figure in Somali history, a nationalist leader who fought against the British occupation of Somalia for twenty years at the beginning of the twentieth century but was also a very great poet. He was a Muslim radical called Muhammad Abdille Hassan and his poems are fantastic. One reason why he turned to poetry was that he felt there was no other way of communicating his ideas at that particular time. He didn't write letters to people he was trying to get on his side, he wrote them poems, and he said that people would memorise those poems. He understood that poetry was the best way to seize the imagination of the people he wanted to reach and to persuade them, to bring them closer to him.

And that's important. Now I'm tempted by the notion of chaos – chaos can be quite liberating, and I am certainly not someone who is naturally in love with notions of order. But I understand that when everything melts away, it is not necessarily a liberating thing. So, when we have a world which is keeping us under, a world where, for example, refugees are vilified in the way that they are, or disabled people are vilified in the way that they are, then that is the short-term strategy of those in power, setting one group against another. What they're doing is dissolving the bonds between us.



In the world in which we live, where there is so much chaos, where social ties are being strained by globalisation and other things, the arts matter. Art matters because it is a collective experience that reaffirms our common humanity. That's why totalitarian states always want to control the arts. If the arts don't matter, why do they always turn on the poets first?

Paul Foot wrote something very interesting in a fine political biography of Enoch Powell. I think he wrote it in 1965, no, it must have been 1968 or 1969, just after the 'rivers of blood' speech. What Powell was trying to do was break the self-built ties between us, and what Paul Foot said – and I paraphrase – was, 'Once you let the genie of racism out of the bottle, no one can control it'. In the political game, you can take the lid off that bottle and let the genie of racism out.

But once it's out, it's under no one's control. It's not under the control of those in power, that's an illusion that they have. And once you let it out it can lead to all sorts of barbarism. Now, I'm very close to one immigrant community, the Somali community, which is one of the reasons why I'm writing a play about Muhammad Abdille Hassan. And I think, oh my gosh, these people have been here for over twenty years and in all that time no one has ever described them in terms other than 'useless', 'extremists', whatever pejorative framework they choose. They've been here for so long! And if you think about it, it's always the educated people who flee from oppression; the uneducated people are usually left behind. The nomads and the poor are still in Somalia. These are people who are educated, who have a lot of social capital and a lot of education and so on and so forth, yet we treat them like dirt.



What I want to say to British theatre through my little play is, 'You are not putting these people and their lives on the stage. What do you think you are about?' I don't need to be romantic about the Somalis. I don't need to send out a message that we should all love the Somalis. My message is that these people are human beings, who breathe and talk just as we do. Maybe they have something to tell us about the world, because they've experienced extremes as refugees or asylum seekers. I hope I'll never experience what they have, in terms of escaping from their country, being cut off from their country, from their culture. Put them on the stage! Do something to reaffirm our common humanity! Of course the arts count. If the arts didn't count, dictators wouldn't be getting rid of them.

When I was an actor, maybe saying something subversive through my character, I sometimes made a connection with someone in the audience, I could feel a response. That's the power of theatre and, of course, that's replicated in all the different art forms. A society that doesn't have the arts is not a society. A civilisation that doesn't have the arts can't last.

I'm not pessimistic, but I think we have a long, long way to go. We could go much faster, much further down the road. And do you know what we have to do? We have to learn the art of not accumulating power through making a profession of the arts. We have to learn the art of giving it away, or releasing it, or distributing it, or even letting others take it away from us. Let someone take the power from us. That's the most humbling experience; that's what makes us human.

We have to learn that the arts isn't about the accumulation of cultural capital. It's not something you put in the bank. I'd like to see models in which power is distributed horizontally, not accumulated vertically. We haven't even started yet. It's not about giving power to people, just so that they can do their own little thing. You give power away so that people tell you something about the world that you didn't know before.



DIGGING UP THE ARTS GARDEN

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