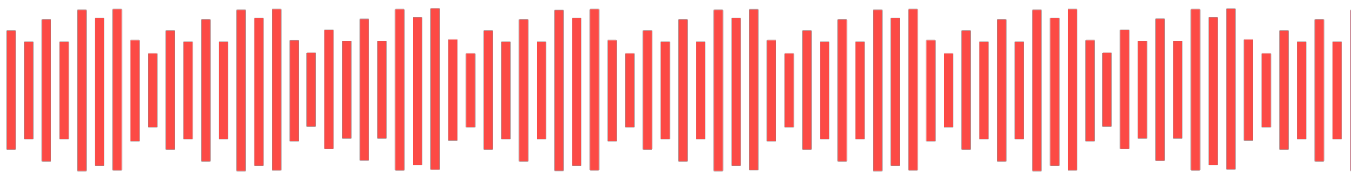


TALKING MOVES



Arts Funding in Crisis with Nicholas Hytner and Tarek Iskander

Bonus Episode

Episode Description:

In this special episode, we talk to two artistic directors about the current funding crisis ravaging our sector.

Back in May, when the Greenwich Dance team was having funding applications repeatedly rejected, we were relieved to see renowned theatre director **Nicholas Hytner's** Guardian article ["The arts in Britain are teetering on the brink. Here's my plan to save them"](#). Here at last someone was talking about the dire situation the arts are in and, just as importantly, offering up with ideas about how to do something about it.

And it turns out someone else had also been thinking constructively about arts funding models. Way back in 2020, **Tarek Iskander**, Artistic Director of Battersea Arts Centre, proposed a National Arts Service, using his experience of working in the NHS as a starting point.

As we begin to see a general election on the horizon and the possibility of a new government starts to feel possible, we invited them both to talk us through their intriguing provocations. We ask at this time, when we are emerging from a pandemic, suffering the effects of a cost of living crisis and dealing with the repercussions of Brexit, how do we inject more funding into the

cracks appearing in the arts? And as we navigate our own precarious funding situation, we ask if not now – when?

Talking Moves is a Greenwich Dance production

Presented by Melanie Precious

Production by Carmel Smith, Lucy White and Melanie Precious

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Melanie Precious:

Hello and welcome to Talking Moves Greenwich Dance's podcast where artists come together to talk about their work and practice, the things that matter and the issues which moves them. I'm Melanie precious and in this special episode, I'm talking with two artistic directors about the current funding crisis ravaging our sector. I'll be really honest things are tough for Greenwich Dance right now, with one funding application after another coming to nothing so back in May, I was relieved to see attention brought to the situation via Sir Nicholas Hytner's Guardian article, the arts in Britain are teetering on the brink. In it he made the observation that the government invested heavily in the cultural recovery fund to help the arts outlive COVID, only to starve them of the support they need to return to health and this resonated with me here at Greenwich Dance as a beneficiary of all three rounds of CRF funding and yet seemingly under the levelling up agenda, unable to access funds now. And at a time when no one with decision making power seem to be doing anything at all here at last was a suggestion about how the arts funding system could be reframed. So I'm delighted to say that Sir Nicholas Hytner, artistic director of the Bridge Theatre is joining us today to talk through his ideas. Hello, Nicholas and welcome.

Nicholas Hytner:

Hello, really pleased to be here.

Melanie Precious:

Meanwhile, someone else had been thinking constructively about arts funding models way back in 2020. Not long into the pandemic Tarek Iskander, artistic director of Battersea Arts Centre proposed a national art service using his experience of working in the NHS as a starting point. It's an interesting and refreshing take on how we could be doing things differently. So welcome, Tarek.

Tarek Iskander:

I'm really delighted to be here. Thanks for the invitation.

Melanie Precious:

Thank you. So what I find so notable is despite the three years between these two proposals, neither of you are simply saying we need to inject more money into the existing funding model. Both of you are presenting some quite radical alternatives. So I wondered if we could talk very briefly about what's broken with the system we have at the moment. Nicholas, shall I start with you?

Nicholas Hytner:

Yeah, sure. Look, the proposal I made at the end of my Guardian piece was one paragraph. And it was a deliberate provocation. And I'm not going to defend it. It was meant to stir things up. It did to a degree, what I was mostly wanting to address was the likelihood that the next government is going to spend no more on the arts than the current government, because they couldn't have been more explicit about how, how little appetite they have for increasing spending across the board. So I was I was most of all trying to point out what the crisis was. And think about ways that more money could come into the arts without at least on the surface, increasing the grant to the Arts Council. And it seems to me that what I was saying a lot of it is undeniable, which is that there's less money, there's a lot less money. And that that started in 2010. When the secretary of state then Jeremy Hunt really pulled back dramatically. It's not increased since then. And meanwhile, the Arts Council has expanded its brief dramatically, meaning that clients are required to do a lot more with a lot less money. I don't think any of that is particularly controversial. You mentioned Melanie, levelling up. Here's my point, really, if the arts are required to be instrumental in the levelling up agenda, and I think this is all good. By the way, I think this is all great. If they're required to be instrumental in education in arts education, if they're required, if they're expected to increase dramatically the participation of people who aren't professional artists, this is all great. But is there a way of getting the relevant government spending departments to acknowledge that? If the levelling up department which has just returned, I think I read £1.9 billion or something to the Treasury because Michael Gove couldn't find a way of spending it, if the levelling up department want the arts to join in with levelling up, then they should pony up, I guess, is what I'm saying. And I don't have strong feelings about how that should be administered. I pointed out that sport, had two funding bodies, one that funded grassroots sport, and one that funded medal winning sport, and I wondered whether there was something to be learned from that. So just to round off this introduction, what I discovered is that a vast inbox of artists who feel very sore and very neglected. Artists and institutions, companies, famous ones to struggling beginners, they kind of issue the howl of anguish into my inbox because they recognise what I was saying. And on the other hand, the Arts Council itself, not unreasonably did not like what I was saying. And a small group of ideologues and academics also didn't really like what I was saying some of it for very good

reasons. But there is no doubt that from the evidence of my inbox that there are a lot of artists, a lot of performing arts companies who feel that they're being expected to do things that they don't even feel they're very good at doing. And who would like a renewed focus on the work they do on stage. I completely see that work that involves a degree of community participation can be as exciting and as ambitious as work that doesn't. But I would, I think, probably disagree with the proposal that only if artistic work involves explicit community participation, should it qualify as art? I don't believe that. That's my introduction.

Melanie Precious:

Thank you. Thank you very much. And I love that observation that this was a provocation, because as you say, it certainly did provoke but it made us all think differently. Tarek, what do you think is wrong with the system at the moment?

Tarek Iskander:

Well, I just back you up a bit, Nick, just to say I personally just really appreciated the provocation, regardless where anyone sort of agrees or disagrees with it, because this debate is just not happening enough. And I think you're right to highlight some of the challenges around it. I mean, the couple of things I'd add is at the core of the issue is that I think we all would agree as a no brainer that there isn't enough money being spent on the arts. And I agree with Nick's assessment that it doesn't look likely there's a huge injection of cash coming anytime soon. And we have to be real about that. And that's why the debate about what we can do with what we have is really critical. But I also think that the investigation of why there isn't enough money is still worth having, even at this moment, because one of the observations I'd make is that the amount of money being spent in the arts is so minuscule, relative to many other comparable countries with similar wealth are doing. And I mean, again, just to labour, the NHS comparison, which unfortunately, I'll probably do a lot because that's why I was asked to be here. The entire spending of the Arts Council on the Arts on every art form museums, music, and theatre, dance is less than half of the budget of one hospital in the UK, and the amount of money that's being handed back, as you say from the levelling agenda, there is plenty of money around that could be spent on the house that isn't being spent. And I think there is a question of why and what's related to that. To answer your question directly, Melanie, I think there's some good things happening with the funding spend, I'm always sympathetic to kind of how money is being allocated. But focusing on the subsidised sector. There's definitely an under investment in grassroots infrastructure, I'd call it the amount of work that does the kind of amateur sector supporting people into their first steps into the arts, through education or through other areas. That is completely underfunded relatively, there is a sort of lack of connection to infrastructure investment to the need, or even the population sizes that are kind of around the country. It's not strategic in the way that that money's being spent a lot of it's kind of historic allocations. I'd argue that the funding cycle the way it operates currently with the Arts Council is by far the biggest funder obviously there are other funders, but by far the biggest funder of the

subsidised sector, makes decisions every four or five years for the whole sector, which means things become quite static quite quickly in between those periods where things can't alternate. And I personally think there's a challenge where and Nick you'll know a lot more about the commercial sector than I do. So I don't want to strain the areas, but there is a challenge where funded organisations are increasingly expected to operate in between being a subsidised and a commercial operation, which neither helps the commercial sector, which I personally think should be bigger and should be providing more access to the arts, but the subsidised sector is spread so thinly, that they can't really operate as subsidised organisations either. So the attempt to create as much as possible with as little as possible by encouraging hybridisation, I think is a bit of a strategic mistake, which has a real cost to it. And finally, I think one of the problems is there's a lack of strategic investment in the sector as a whole. For example, where is our workforce plan? Where is our thinking about the pipeline and security of that, again, it's sort of all delegated out either to commercial or subsidised venues, or partners, or companies to all do a little bit. And somehow this will add up to things like a workforce strategy. And I just think it works like that.

Melanie Precious:

All really, really good points. I think from an organisation like us as Greenwich Dance, we lost Arts Council NPO funding back in 2017. And I would argue that there's a two tier system pretty much in place already, you're either in the NPO, or you're out. And if you're out, it's quite a struggle. This sort of idea that there is another funding model that a project funded organisation can simply move to very quickly carrying with it probably a stamp of having lost Arts Council funding, which in itself is something you have to try and shrug off can be really complex. And so that feels to me operating in this subsidised sector, is one of the challenges with the system that we've got at the moment. As well as that kind of feeling of communication and lack of that when you're outside of it, you don't have this relationship manager, there is actually no way that you can be part of a conversation about where or how funding is being spent, which feels really tricky when you're trying to move forward. But I also was really interested in the timeline. I came out with a response to Nicholas's provocation, kind of calling on the sector, really to think about the urgency that we have the fact that we've got potentially a general election on the horizon and that we have to start thinking about doing something now. But when I revisited your article, Tarek in 2020, that's exactly how you ended it. You said the time is now. Today. And I wondered if anyone listened to you then? What was the response you had to that piece?

Tarek Iskander:

I mean, it was really positive. And I got, again, the intention was to provoke a conversation not to provide actually answers, but at least to put a proposal on the table so people could respond to and I thought the response was really positive at the time, and I had lots of interesting dialogue. But the challenge is that we have a lack of coordinated approach to how we do some

of this channelling. I mean, I think a lot of people in a lot of large organisations, particularly are doing their absolute best to advocate for the sector as a whole to the government and others. I think a lot of that work goes unseen and is really valid. But I guess again, just to labour the metaphor and just provide a provocation at the time I was reflecting Why is why is the NHS so loved? Universally loved, in a sense, even though it has inordinate amount of problems, and anyone who's got expensive of the NHS can experience so many difficulties in it. But why is it so popular? And why is the public so in favour of supporting it financially, despite all the challenges that are happening? And it feels to me that one thing that's really powerful about the NHS is it has a very simple story and a very simple narrative about what the investment is about. And it's about treating people maintaining health, and that being free to everyone to access and the prioritisation be based on need, and on your ability to pay. Now, that doesn't mean there isn't a thriving private health care sector where people do want to pay can access and so on. But it's a very, very simple and egalitarian idea that people sign up to. And I think we totally lack that simple idea in the arts, about what are we actually trying to do? There's always an internal tension that's always ongoing, which is about is it about the art, is it about the intrinsic value of the art is about, you know, is it about education is about something kind of extrinsic to that. I think in a way, those sorts of arguments are slightly a bit of a waste of time. A compelling conversation is what we need to be proposing because we lack that and that to be frank, we lack the leadership, whether it's through some of our larger bodies, organisations, or it's through the lack of the Arts Council leading this conversation means people like Nick, who are in the public eye have to keep throwing ideas out there for people to shoot down or to jump on. But we need a narrative that can be put the government in a sophisticated way that puts us our internal politics aside, that is really clear and people can sign to.

Melanie Precious:

Nicholas made that point earlier about us being stretched so thin, the arts having so much expectation and being forced to do something that as you said, Nicholas, that we might not necessarily feel that we're best place to do. And that seems to be a kind of recurring feeling, doesn't it about us not quite being able to articulate why we're here. And yet, we've created so many arguments for the value of what we offer.

Nicholas Hytner:

I gotta say, I think a tremendous and really clever trick has been played on us. I think there are vast social injustices which seem insoluble. There are a vast gulfs within education within communities within the country itself, the idea that the arts should somehow be expected to play out of a culture wars, not just the culture wars, but the wars over the apparently insoluble injustices which exist in the wider world, that idea has taken root. And I don't think it's doing us any favours. If you can't, for instance, if you can't have access to artists and audiences who have been introduced to the idea that art is for them in schools, it's an absurd proposition that with the arts' tiny budget, we can solve that. We can't buy ourselves a level up. We can be part

of a wider levelling up strategy, and I've no doubt that the current government would say that we are. But as it turns out, levelling up has turned out to be a flash in the pan. It's barely mentioned anymore. It was a device used two or three prime ministers ago, but somehow it got visited on us as indeed, the educational crisis has been visited on us. I think we could start. I don't know, I agree with everything that Tarek said, we could start by saying that we're not responsible. We're not responsible for the injustices that plague our education system that plague our deprived communities. We are enthusiastic about being part of the solution. But if we're part of the solution, then that does need some kind of financial recognition is I think, where I start. And I think agreeing with everything that Tarek said, one thing that became really clear to me from the response I got to my piece is that artists themselves, not just successful artists, not just artists who are blessed with Arts Council funding and Arts Council approval, feel marooned. They feel marooned more than beleaguered, they genuinely feel that they have been left out of all of these conversations. Simply because it's a community of artists I know quite well. Classical musicians who have been hit every which way, by Brexit, by reduced funding, by the apparent lack of enthusiasm for in the last funding round for their art form. They have discovered a talent early in their lives. They've discovered the commitment that they've carried on into their adult lives to their art form they've trained for a long time. And now, they're kind of left feathers to every wind that blows. And I think any discussion about any art forms being elitist or being not as valuable as any other art form? Does risk leaving a out...

Tarek Iskander:

Nick, can I pick up on two things you said, which I really agree with? And also just want to pick up on I think we can all agree in this call that we have confidence in the value of art, like I think we all passionately believe that. And we have confidence in both sides of it, we have confidence in the intrinsic value of art and what it means and its importance. And we also have belief, I'm sure in the instrumental value that it does change lives has changed all our lives in different ways. So I think one of the challenges that are put back to us as a sector is we believe that we have a public good, that is worth something to society, but we don't treat it like a public good. We don't advocate for it like a public good. This is why I put a strong ethical stance, but that's why I think we should start with it should be free and available to everyone. And it's those kinds of approaches that we treat it the same way you would treat defence, the same way you would treat education. Education has been semi privatised now as well. So there's it's a complex issue. I'm not getting around that. But we need to start treating our own work as if it has worth and accommodating that and that's the first step I don't think we've done collectively. To pick up your point about artists and freelancers. I do totally, I think it's the best word for it feel marooned. I think it links to a couple of things. One is I think there's a sense well, I think we all agree that we all had a lot of time to reflect and hope that we could really restructure things post pandemic. And for a whole host of reasons that absolutely hasn't happened. If anything, some of the inequities and problems have gotten worse because of the difficult climate in which everyone's working to with good intentions. But we have done nothing to kind of address those problems. So that frustration's there. I think with artists and

freelancers also frustration that there's somehow secret conversations happening that they're not privy to. The truth is there aren't conversations happening most of the time that any of us are privy to. So there's that feeling. But also, there's a real structural thing, again, to kind of labour the comparison, I do feel that artists are the doctors and nurses of our sector, we absolutely need them to at the heart of everything we do. The difference is in a hospital, you need to employ doctors and nurses for every hospital, you know, that you're employing in the arts as a venue. And I think we can argue about whether venues are value. But I do think there is a value in terms of connecting communities and artists and audiences together, you sort of want to rotate the artists you work with in order to run a programme and that sort of intrinsic tension between the solidity of venues and the tension with free I just can't personally come up with a great solution to. But it creates a really unstable environment with the people around whom the entire thing is built. The artists we want to support are in the most insecure position of anyone in this thing. And I wish we could just come up with some proposals to solve that. Again, let's get real. There is no universal basic income coming down the line. So what is it that we can do to change the status quo?

Nicholas Hytner:

I think in the same way, Tarek, I think free art for everybody is also not really coming down the line either. But I would absolutely agree that as part of the wider ecology, there could be there could be art available at little or no cost. I mean, I think a simple declaration that everything should be free, risks undervaluing the extraordinary talents and the extraordinary work and commitment that a lot of artists put into their work. But that's another and maybe even more profound debate. Just going back to what you said Melanie, about what was the response to Tarek piece? What was the response to my piece? Yeah, I did get I did get a response from the government.

Melanie Precious:

I was going to ask you about that. I know. You inflamed lots of people, but actually, more importantly, the people that it really needed to be heard by did they hear you?

Nicholas Hytner:

Government was courteous, interested, listened. I think probably we're at a place now where the current government is aware that it has very limited time to do anything it might want to do and probably DCMS is low down the government's list of priorities as far as acting in the next year and a half is concerned. I think one thing I did pick up was that a such an interesting human phenomenon, they feel hurt and miffed that, in return for their efforts with the Treasury, which I've no doubt are sincere, we're not more grateful. I think we have been pretty grateful. We were grateful for the Cultural Recovery Fund, which was kind of good, not spectacular by European standards. But good. I think we were and I think we took care to say that we

appreciated that. But I guess taking a bird's eye view, a really kind of interesting picture. There are some good people within the government. I mean, it's no good just caricaturing them all as evil Tories and there are some people who are really interested in what we do. What they can't quite get their head around is that they are part they're part of a project which since 2010, has made two catastrophic mistakes. One was austerity and one was Brexit, the referendum and the form of Brexit that was imposed on us after the referendum. It's really hard for those who weren't part of that disastrous project, to identify with those who want to be thanked for rescuing even the smallest thing within the wreckage, and it's kind of quite interesting to watch perfectly sincere, good people struggle, you assume struggle with the fact that they have been at a wider level responsible for so much devastation. It's really hard. So I would say that anything we try to say to them individually or as a sector, it's difficult for even the ones who wants to help to give us any help.

Melanie Precious:

Yeah.

Nicholas Hytner:

Labour? I don't know. I mean, all I'm getting from Labour at the moment I've not had conversations with, ah no untrue. I've had conversations prior to writing the piece with the shadow arts Minister Barbara Keeley, who's terrific, extremely sympathetic. But her message was that anything we can do to impress the value of what we do on the team that will actually be responsible for Labour spending would be much appreciated.

Melanie Precious:

So it's back to us all making our argument for why we're here, then hey, that we've been doing for years. That's interesting. And something I wanted to pick up on with the help of the CRF. As I said, in my introduction, we're a project funded organisation now, we were supported through three rounds of the cultural recovery funding. And that was transformational for us, I think we would probably be facing closure, pre pandemic had it not been for the pandemic. Isn't that crazy? We're here, I think, because of the pandemic. And the difference was that we could apply for core funding, there wasn't an expectation that that funding was going to be used for more projects, more activity, and more art. We could create that, because our core was covered. And we did some really, truly exciting things during the pandemic. We created a podcast, we created a platform for touring ideas rather than people called ArtsUnboxed, we took a show to doorsteps as many people did. And we started thinking about how we could have artists in residence in response to the Freelancers Task Force. And so we were able to really kind of push the envelope as a tiny, small, locally based organisation, simply because we could access support for our core running costs. Now we move to a place where that support is not there, the Arts Council's framework is not set up to support any organisation outside of its

NPO in terms of core costs. We can go to them for projects. But if the project is rejected, then you're left without anything. I think any funder, any new funding model has got to think about whether it's going to create a permanent infrastructure through a regularly funded model and how it's going to help organisations that are smaller and trying to operate in this project based way. Because if they don't have that opportunity to be able to apply for that kind of funding, then they will find them disappearing all over. And that won't help the levelling up agenda, because then all these small pockets of work start to really disappear. And I was intrigued by your national arts service model, Tarek. It talked of a universal vision for arts and culture available to all regardless of ability to pay. I believe, from my interpretation of it, I think you've talked about artists being employed under kind of an umbrella of a national art service. So a standardised employment offer, which would provide some consistency. Is that true? Am I understanding that correctly?

Tarek Iskander:

Yeah, that was my take. And just to back, Nick up, there was no way to make at least the grassroots element free and available methods, much more funds available than there is now because you simply can't pay people properly to kind of make that work, per se. It was a provocation that there may be a system and say the tension between needing a rotating set of artists working in multiple venues, multiple areas and providing some consistency in terms of pay but also in terms of employment standards. I think one of the unspoken things is that employment standards and the way people are employed and treated within organisations varies vastly and is not good in many cases and bring some consistency but also some efficiency. Is there any point that we are constantly recreating things like employment contracts and different ways of working and policies that should be more centralised? I think there are lots of benefits. I'm always accused of being a bit of centraliser, I'm afraid. It is my background. But I think there are huge benefits and also the unspoken efficiencies like one of the things NHS does well is it procures at a huge level because it procures centrally. Imagine if all the theatres in the country could procure together how much more savings would be made that could then be spent on arts and artists. I think there's more that can be done. The one thing I do want to say though, and I think this is critical to what you were saying about core funding though Melanie is, and this is to backup Nick's provocation a little bit is one good thing about the NHS is you always have your grassroots investment, which is primary care, dentists and pharmacists. And then you have your mid scale hospitals and you have your large flagship teaching hospitals and you need a lot fewer teaching hospitals than you do primary care services. I think that's obvious clear in any infrastructure. I don't think the arts infrastructure is different. You need your national theatres and your big organisations but you need a much bigger investment in the sort of grassroots companies and artists working on the ground. But those two are separated in some ways you treat the funding for those separately, because the timelines for those needs to be different the kind of investment that's required the focus on capital. And I feel partly because the budgets are probably so small that everything being put together into project grants or other sorts of NPO funding, where you treat tiny companies in

the same way that you treat the RSC just doesn't make a lot of sense. I think ultimately, now obviously, there's more complexity in terms of how you'd need to manage that you'd need to be a rethink about how that operates. But I do think, and I'm really sympathetic to the Arts Council, worked there for many years, I think it's very easy for people like us on the outside to say this is what they should do. But I do think looking at a different way that we are already all competing so hard for so little, that it doesn't feel like we are in the same pot, I think it's important because we do need our flagship organisations to be doing things that no other organisations could do. But we also need a lot more people on the ground, engaging people for free, I will keep banging that drum, in education and on the ground, to get people through that pipeline. And we have sort of neither at the moment because we're trying to spread to thin.

Melanie Precious:

I mean, an organisation like Greenwich Dance, so much of our work is done for free. And actually, this creates part of the issues that we have in a business model. And it might be why at first, when the pandemic hit, we weren't in as much trouble perhaps as some others because our work doesn't rely on earned income. So earned income didn't suddenly get cut or disappear. But our ability to apply for more funding increased. And so there was this sort of strange moment where we were like, Oh, actually, it wasn't that it wasn't troubling, of course it was. But suddenly, the areas where lots of organisations were being hit in terms of ticket income, that didn't affect us. But what is difficult as we try and rebuild is that we've got an expectation, we serve a community where we tried to remove financial barriers, and so the most we would ever charge for something would be under 10 pounds. But often, it's not even that, in fact, very much inspired by your model at Battersea Arts Centre, we've used a pick your own price where people can elect to choose what they pay for a class or a performance. And if that is free, because they don't have the ability to pay, then they're enabled to do that. But it's very difficult to run that strategy and then have something that's income generating and more commercially driven on the other side, because the marketing and again, given that we're such a small team, three or four people, the marketing drive and messaging of the organisation is going down one channel, and it doesn't readily switch over to the other. And so I think there is a world where free arts can be offered, if organisations like us are empowered to survive alongside the larger organisations like you, and it's about this ecology being supported, isn't it as a whole and how we funnel what we do into what a larger organisation does, which we absolutely can. You know, we're on the ground working with people that have never been to the theatre before older people, younger people. We're doing it to try and bring about changes to their loneliness and isolation, their physical and mental well being placemaking. We're doing it for all those reasons. But there's no reason why we can't then develop that as an audience, those people as an audience for the work that you're putting on at the Bridge, or the work that you're putting on at Battersea Arts Centre. And I recently wrote an application, but actually our NPO application, talking about this, how we would support some of the local venues that are cropping up here in the borough of Greenwich, Woolwich Works being one of them. How using an organisation like us in a really strategic way, as an arm of your audience development,

actually, we can be doing our work for reasons that are relating to social impact. But one of the outcomes of what we do could also be about developing audiences for an art form, we can do both. And that's why I think both of your models really do interest me because I can see ways that they could work, I can see ways where they could even come together and that national art service be that sort of first tier and an elite professional, whatever you might want to call it, as long as those two are working together, as long as there is equality and that infrastructure and the regulation and the strategy built around them knit them together. And there is support for us to collaborate with each other and not be seen as one being underneath the other. So both of your ideas truly excite me really as an organisation that's trying to do its best. Nicholas, there was something that you said in the article that was again in The Guardian last week I think. This was around the 12 culture secretaries in 13 years, and I picked up on something that you said there about how when you were at the National the work that you were doing that was more community focused, that actually you wished you demanded some of that funding to have come from the departments which were benefiting from it be that regeneration be that health, and that really resonated with me. I could really see the sense in that.

Nicholas Hytner:

Yeah, look, I do wish that. So I started the at National in 2003. The education agenda, the commitment to education, the commitment to community, the commitment to access and participation predated me. We doubled down on it. We were obviously extremely enthusiastic and committed to it. At the National which is a big organisation, you're able to have people who are really skilled in those areas, and I by and large, didn't feel qualified to interfere, they were so much better at it than I was. One of the problems now is that a lot of that work is being required of people who really don't have the time or the talent to be as great at it as the people I remember at the National. I do wish that we had cottoned on to the fact that there might have been a case to be made to government for money coming into the arts, from other spending departments. I still think that there maybe, I don't know, I'm, again, just in the business of provocation. There may be mileage in that, in my piece in The Guardian, in my original piece in The Guardian, what I was proposing was that there are two funding streams from which every company in the land could apply simultaneously, if you have a commitment to performance, which runs hand in hand with a commitment to community, education, participation, whatever, there's two funding streams available to you. As I say, I'm totally cool with the idea that that wasn't thought through. It was a paragraph at the end. But what I do know is that there isn't enough money to do everything at the moment. So looking to the future now. Labour, because it's not a provocation to say that Labour will be the next government. How do we get them onside? I think we have to offer them something. I think the language we speak has to be entirely positive. So one good development is a couple of weeks ago, the announcement that they are going to reintroduce arts into the curriculum, that drama, music art is going to be reintroduced into the curriculum. Well, here's an opportunity and the opportunity, is we the arts sector, we who work in the arts want to work with you on this, because how much better is it going to be your renewed commitment to arts in secondary schools, if we're part of it? So can

we have some money for that, please? Now, I want to add really explicitly, that in my ideal world, that money releases money that's currently being spent on education, participation, community, releases it back to the making of art, that doesn't necessarily put that at the top of its agenda. And I totally recognise that a lot of great art does, but a lot of great art doesn't. So I do think it would be a double pronged thing on education, specifically, here's your educational agenda, we're really committed to that we have been actually for 30 years, we want to help let us be part of that. And I don't really have an opinion about how best that funding is administered. But I do think the approach to Labour has to be we can help with education we can help with levelling up, we can help address social injustices, you can help us do that. But at the moment, we can't do all that and do all the things that artists many, many artists burn to do, which is dance, play music, write plays, that's what many people burn to do. And that isn't necessarily to elevate the intrinsic value of art above its instrumental value. But it is to say that a hell of a lot of artists aren't getting the resources now. You talk about your company, Melanie, that they need to make the stuff that they want to make. So my plea would be can we find a common language to start speaking to the next government in a way that will resonate with them, and might unlock some funding, because the one thing I never wanted to do was to get myself in a situation where the provocation I didn't want, let me say, is to provoke people so attached to one way of looking at performing arts, a way that always involves community, always involves participation, that there's a fight about what art is, that's a meaningless fight, that's a totally meaningless fight. Art that involves participation is great, and some art that sits on a stage or a platform and invites appreciation, also great. We shouldn't be at each other's throats.

Tarek Iskander:

Nick, you've been in obviously, as AD of the National Theatre and now the Bridge, you've been in a lot of these kinds of political type conversations more than most people listening to this, certainly more than I have. I think we all agree that a pitch is there to be made, we all agree that it needs to be positive, it needs to be a return on investment that we're offering, and it needs to be something worthwhile, we are also getting the hint and I've heard the same things you've been told explicitly that Labour is very nervous about being seen to be a big spending government, particularly in its first term. We already saw the reaction they got to their proposed spending on green energy and how dangerous that was for them. So I think there's a tactical question there. But I would reiterate, I think the amounts of money we're actually asking for are quite small.

Nicholas Hytner:

I so agree.

Tarek Iskander:

It could be game changing. So it's there to be hard. But the question Nick is, why do we never get to that pitch? Or are people doing in secret that isn't visible or what needs to happen to realise your vision of whatever that collective pitch needs to be so we can get the outcome that we all want?

Nicholas Hytner:

Well, again, my experience is limited, but I think it helps when we're all singing from the same hymn sheet and I think a lot of it does because just the way government happens. I suspect it's the way it happens everywhere. A lot of it happens in conversations which maybe you don't even realise they're important while you're having them. So it must happen through the Arts Council. The Arts Council is our funding body and is going to be making representations to government and the Arts Council will be I'm quite sure totally committed to getting the best possible result. But it can also happen and does happen in my experience by having conversations, the individual conversations with people who you happen to know. An MP that comes to BAC. A meeting that I might rustle up with the shadow arts Minister, you know, if we can, collectively a risk of repeating myself, offer them something that we think they want to hear, I totally agree with you. It's a tiny amount of money. I also think by the way, that the arts are far more popular than we sometimes in our paranoid way imagine they are even outside people who don't go regularly. The response to the attempt to cut the BBC Singers by the BBC, BBC singers who are at the top of their game and the best in the world at what they do. But a lot of what they do is premieres by composers who don't write music that is gratefully listened to by a vast number of people. But sufficient numbers of people are absolutely passionate about them for the BBC to have had to retract that cut, even high art is a lot more popular than we suspect it is. But going to Labour and saying spend more, given how terrified all politicians are of the response of the popular press, going to them with a pitch: spend more on art, I suspect is going to fall on deaf ears because they're afraid of what the Daily Mail is going to say. But we can work with you to do this stuff that you have already committed to and in so doing, enlarge the general arts pot and enable the Arts Council to start looking at art forms again. I think we can all do that individually.

Tarek Iskander:

But Nick to push you a little bit if it's left to this kind of, which is the way it's always worked. These kinds of individual conversations happen. I totally agree about the Arts Council is doing this advocacy anyway. So but if it's left to those of us who have access to MPs, and having that conversation again, how do we create a message that's consistent? We all agree about much more than we disagree about. But your vision of proposal is slightly different from my vision proposal slightly different from Melanie's and everyone else's and freelancers and artists who, as we say, are completely marooned to use your words, are absolutely not in that conversation to the slightest. So they are never kind of engaged in that. Surely we can do better than rely on that haphazard way of doing this, which hasn't yielded huge results in the past.

Nicholas Hytner:

I think we can, I think we can. But even in COVID I mean, there was a much more concerted and collective effort during COVID. But there were to my certain knowledge, four or five different groups struggling to get through to the centre, all of them doing fantastic work, all of them in touch with each other, all of them doing fantastic work. And some of it I'm going to tell you was, I've got the mobile number of so and so. But during COVID, there was a kind of collection of information along those lines. So we all knew what each other were doing. Yeah, I think that probably could happen. At which point I have to say, I'm now in the commercial sector, which makes me useful to the extent that I'm not talking out of self interest. To our surprise, we did get a big chunk of CRF loan, which we're not going to pay back. But I'm happy to be used as by the way, our other much bigger commercial impresarios than me. One of the best advocates for arts funding, particularly during a Tory administration is Cameron Mackintosh, who will tell them that everything he does everything he contributes to the balance of payments is dependent on a subsidised sector. That's only one small argument for the subsidised sector. Another much better argument, in my view, or much or equally valid argument is that the subsidised sector can provide free performance through Melanie's company and at BAC both both. But Tarek, you're kind of talking about the way the country is run. And that's that makes my head hurt.

Melanie Precious:

It tricky though because I completely understand what both you are saying. But in my response to your article, Nicholas, I said, stop tearing strips off each other. This is the moment that we should be coming together and really telling the government what we want. Let's come together. Let's start at this starting point of a two tier proposal. And let's find out what works. And I made the mistake of saying we should start a working group. And so I had all these people come to me and I'll join it. And I'm like, oh, no, I didn't mean I didn't actually mean me. But who do I mean? Who do we mean? Who is going to tell the decision makers of the future what we want? And if we keep stepping away from our provocations, and I'm going to challenge you both here, because both of you have said this is my provocation. But actually it was just a provocation. It's not necessarily what we want to happen. Well, when are we going to get to something that we do want to happen? When are we going to actually propose something solid that those Labour, if indeed it is Labour, opposition parties can get hold of and say, Okay, we understand what the arts world is calling for now. Let's make that happen. And I take your point that they don't want to be seen as big spenders, although, as you said, Tarek, that well both of you have the proportion that we're spending on arts and culture is so small, and we do have these other places where we could be pulling down some funding from regeneration, public health, etc. But what also of corporate? How do we get how do we increase that spending pot through some of the businesses that are making record profits, you know, what ways can we unlock further funding into this strategy? But if we can't work out what the strategy is, are we

just going to be ignored? When there's a general election of a new government coming in, are they just going to be like those lot can't decide what it is they want? Is that the risk?

Tarek Iskander:

I mean, Nick's much wiser than I am. So I'll give them the last word. Just to offer just a little bit, I guess is, it's always interesting to me, again, I just would say as someone who didn't start in the arts, absolutely fell in love and had his life changed by the arts well into my 30s, actually, is that it seems strange to me that we are so good at putting on art and making great art. But we leave all our creative techniques and things at the table when it comes to this kind of thing. That the reality is what we are trying to do in the next 12 to 18 months is we sort of need to put on a play and the audience is the government, whichever one is elected, and we need them to stand up and applause and give us their money at the end of it. And what we could be really good at is casting a play, putting together the team, designing the show, coming up with a purpose and putting it on and in a weird way doesn't need to be more complicated than that. But it does need some coordination and casting and presentation and the opportunity when that happens. I just wish we could bring some of that creative because we do know how to put on a show but somehow we don't put on a show the way we can we have an opportunity to.

Melanie Precious:

You're so right, and I think the other thing is we're so good at saying yes, we can do that, as both of us have said yes, we can use arts to deliver against that agenda. Yes, we can help you with education. Yes, we can do this. But we're not always so good at saying what it is we need to make those things happen. We bend over backwards, we fight for scraps. We're not always so good at going, Yes, we can do that. But you've got to stop doing this to us. And one of the things that I think in any new model that we create, and any new play that we write, that's going to help us tell the story of how we need us to be funded. We've got to take away this constant fear of you might be cut in this next round, because I don't see that happening. And I go back to your national art service proposal here. Tarek, I don't see that happening to hospitals and GPs. I don't see that every four years, you know Greenwich loses its hospital, what we see is if Greenwich's hospital isn't doing so well, more money is invested and the leadership is changed, because they don't take away the service from the communities that need that service. However, what happens in the arts, as we've seen play out with ENO is somebody decides that they're not going to fund that anymore. And it's taken away and the jobs are lost, and the communities stop getting access to the service. And I wonder what our work would look like if that fear was taken away. And we were able to be braver set out those parameters about what it is that's needed. So you said you're gonna give Nicolas the last word. Let's give him the last word before we wrap up. Nicholas, what do you think to casting a play to tell the next government what it is that we need?

Nicholas Hytner:

Yeah, so I think then again, COVID is the model. I think we were pretty good. Then I was in on a meeting, Tamara Rojo, I was part of her group. Alas, gone to San Francisco, because she was a great leader and a great advocate. She convened a group. And I think through her board or through the ballet, it was an acquaintance of George Osborne, of all people, who is a great arts enthusiast, but whose signature policy was a disaster for us. And we got advice, our group from George Osborne, in our approach to the Treasury. And it was really interesting to hear him. And, I this is irrespective of whether you agree with or admire him for what he did as a politician and as Chancellor of the Exchequer, but to hear him make the arguments to us, which he thought we would best make to the Treasury during COVID. And they included obvious things like if you don't help this sector, it will disappear. And it will take decades to build it back up again, obviously, a very good argument. He rehearsed to us, for us to rehearse the Treasury stuff that we have all of us been saying, we do sing from the same hymn sheet a lot more than we think we do about the instrumental value of the arts, about the soft power, which Tories are very, very keen on, you know, international pre-eminence. But he did say that one thing that it's always worth bearing in mind is they hate the fuss, and they know, that the arts are really good at making a noise, because they can always get stars in not just movie stars, but they can always get stars who don't mind shoving themselves in the spotlight to make a fuss. So I think if I'm going to have the last word, it is that we should collectively, we can collectively acknowledge that the money is currently not sufficient, that in the end, it all comes down to money. If there was a lot more money as there started to be in the second New Labour government. By the way, we all forget the first New Labour government wasn't great for us, although boy were they doing the thinking. Chris Smith, as Secretary of State was doing the thinking, Tessa Jowell took it on from him and in the second New Labour term, the floodgates opened and it was great, which I was a very fortunate beneficiary of. But even if we don't get it immediately, if we can contribute to the thinking, agree that there's not enough money, agree that one way of getting more money is to acknowledge that we're doing things that other spending departments are implicated in, we can maybe, and I don't know who's going to do this. I really don't. I think it has to be done through the Arts Council in the end, because they're who we've got. And I like you and sympathetic towards them. And I think a lot of the problems that they have go back to 2010, when they were forced to cut themselves, and they lost a lot of great people and a lot of expertise. And I noticed that in one of the reports recently on the NHS, a recommendation was made that more should be spent on management. That's one of our national diseases, but management is somehow administration is somehow a dirty concept. Great management, great administration, great expertise is always going to help. There is that left in the Arts Council, not as much as there was there is that left. A little A little less doctrinaire insistence on their current strategic plan would be nice, but through them and through whatever bodies the subsidise sector, not me wants to create, there's a positive story to be told. And they don't like us. They really don't like us when we're screaming blue murder. So I got to say that it's a useful weapon in our armoury.

Melanie Precious:

And I think that's probably a good place to stop. Thank you again to our guests, Sir Nicholas Hytner, and Tarek Iskander, who have made time for this discussion. And if you would like to share your ideas for a better way to fund the arts, email us at info@greenwichdance.org.uk with funding models in the subject title, and we will collate and share these on our digital stage in the early autumn. Meanwhile, to hear more episodes about subjects moving artists of today, search for Talking Moves wherever you get your podcasts and you'll find our back catalogue of 30 thought provoking conversations. But for today, that's it from us. Thank you so very much both of you.

Nicholas Hytner:

Not at all, thank you really enjoyed that.

Tarek Iskander:

Enjoyed that a lot. Thanks for organising.