

No Boundaries 2014

Interview with Jude Kelly Artistic Director of the Southbank Centre

Question 1

What role should the arts and culture sector have in education?

Over 10 years ago I approached two ministers that were in government, Chris Smith, who was then Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, and David Blunkett who was Secretary of State for Education, and said we absolutely have to bring these two departments together to discuss creativity in schools, not just arts education but creativity wholesale, that we're not really giving our children an opportunity not just to have an academic ladder but to have a creative ladder and unless we do that we're squandering the talent of young people, squandering the opportunity to use the creativity of all subjects and we aren't using the Arts as an ingredient in creativity i.e. not just arts education but the role of Arts in helping unlock subjects of all kinds, from geography through to political science. Out of that came an agreement to form a committee, which I helped form - I asked Ken Robinson if he would chair it - and we created a report called "All our futures" which really was a radical look at how education from nursery straight through to tertiary could use the arts and creativity in a very, very specific, fundamental way changing the way that schools thought and operated. It was a report that was lauded by many and then sort of stuck on a shelf and not really implemented by government because actually it was quite scary in terms of the radical changes it was suggesting. I say that because it isn't new, a conversation about arts education in schools, it isn't new, an idea about creativity in schools, but we have to keep returning to the subject because again and again we're seeing children being failed at school and yet the opportunities that we could bring them are so obvious because when they have those opportunities in other contexts, in arts institutions for example, we can see they suddenly can flourish and contribute enormously to the life that they want to lead, the life of their communities, and the economic potential of this country. So having done so often the conversation with a Secretary of State for Education, or with a Secretary of State for Culture, that goes "shouldn't we be doing more" I gave a TED talk a couple of years ago where I basically said, actually I need to rethink the level of commitment arts organizations are giving to education. We do, at Southbank Centre, all my life I have done lots and lots of work with schools, with colleges, with community groups that brought them into a situation of using our institutions for the purpose of creative education. But I always thought of that as in parallel with school but I've moved beyond that, now I feel that we have to do something radical ourselves.

Question 2

How well do you think the arts and culture sector is represented when education policy is set?

When education policy is being made what I notice is that, depending on, I'll say personal experience of each Secretary of State for Education, they come up with what they think a perfect school program should look like and almost deaf to the pleas of the arts or the sciences or the sports lobbies because they have a memory themselves of what they thought a good education was. So I think this is a frustration not just shared by people who work in the arts but I think always trying to make the Arts a subject which is understood as being not merely for its own sake but being able to be filtered throughout the whole curriculum and life of the school is something which we have found it very difficult to get traction on. So individual schools can have amazing records of academic achievement made so much stronger because of a creative approach and because of an artistic involvement in a whole school life but despite that evidence many schools still feel that they must stick to the national curriculum, they must lower their sights and narrow their horizons and we are failing them because we are not providing for them the ammunition or the circumstances where they can take courage from different experiences.

Question 3

How should we position the arts to make the greatest impact in forming education policy? What (or who) prevents this happening?

We have all the evidence that despite a creative industry that has absolutely flourished over the last twenty-five years we haven't been able to make a dent in the way that formal education views arts and creativity and so therefore I think that we have got to take it on our own shoulders to move forward. Actually you know my experience about progressive activity in society is it doesn't usually happen from government down, it happens from grassroots up so I know that the arts, we have traditionally sort of said, well look we're doing our best, we haven't got any more public funding, do we have to take on this work as well, surely that's what the schools should be doing, but if the schools aren't able to do it and we know it has to be done then, yes, I would say widen our remit. I want the Arts Council to let us widen our remit and I think that arts education, it's not that I'm trying to push away from schools but I can see that the huge problem they have of being able deliver it within government policy. It's not a problem for public schools, we can clearly see that those schools who have real money and therefore the real time that goes with that real money, yes schools like Wellington that have a fantastic arts policy but lucky for them, it's not being replicated around the country, so yes I am saying that institutions like our own should rethink, well, we will rethink anyway.

Question 4

Would it be beneficial for the arts to be in charge of education, in terms of encouraging people into the industry?

I think that when we are concerned about real racial diversity and class diversity in employment in the arts, which we should be, than the more contact we have with

children from all backgrounds, that's definitely going to help and the less that's just in corridors of schools coming in and going out the better. Not that just ... that isn't how we do our work but I think the more immersed we are, with children of all ages, the more they will feel that the property, the agency of the Arts belongs to them. I think it will enrich our lives the more inter-generational work that goes on in society the better, I don't think schools being in gated communities help society feel that children and young people matter to them because apart from your own children we're not meeting children enough they're not part of the hurly-burly of everyday life enough so I think that's an enriching thing. I think that learning is always a two-way thing so the more we are engaged with 6 and 7 year olds' view of the world the swifter the arts themselves will keep thinking about new ideas and changing their models. So it's only going to be to our benefit, it isn't about we'll do this service for young people it's what young people, how they learn, what they learn, why they want to learn. We need to be much closer to that.

Question 5

If the arts were in charge of education, what would it look like?

We would find more ways of the language of mechanical engineering, the language of language, French, Mandarin, Cantonese the language of all the subjects, I think that they would be imbued with new alleys and roads in, because that's what the Arts does, it looks at things in new ways, it finds new ways of exploring things, it turns things upside down in order to come at them from a different approach or angle, and I think that would allow more children to be excited by subjects because there would be more ways of the mind being allowed to explore things. You know, it's a very difficult thing for children to be under the impression there is only one way to learn a subject. Of course, great teachers bring all these things to bear anyway but I think if the Arts ran education it would be a much more vivid landscape. And I'd like to try.