

Rose Fenton and Lucy Neal

in conversation with Phoebe Patey-Ferguson

Twenty-five Years of LIFT: Towards a Plurality of Positions

Rose Fenton and Lucy Neal were the Artistic Directors of LIFT – the London International Festival of Theatre – from its conception in 1979 until their joint resignation in 2004. In this interview they discuss with Phoebe Patey-Ferguson the initial motivations and challenges of establishing an international festival in London and how these changed in maintaining the organization over twenty-five years. This conversation took place in London on 15 February and 14 March 2018, and complements the preceding article in this issue of NTQ by Patey-Ferguson, analyzing the socio-political circumstances of its early years.

Key terms: Margaret Thatcher, Ken Livingstone, Greater London Council, arts funding.

Phoebe Patey-Ferguson *You started planning LIFT when you both moved to London after graduating in 1979, the year Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister. By the first Festival in 1981 Britain had seen substantial changes due to Thatcher's policies, including public spending cuts, rises in unemployment, a move towards the privatization of the public sphere, and an expansion of the corporate sector, as well as significant funding cuts to the arts. Did this context influence how and why you established LIFT?*

Rose Fenton I'm not sure how immediately aware we were of those changes and cuts coming into effect. We had just come out of a protected student environment, completely outside the system of arts funding, and we were just beginning to get to know about it.

But we were very aware of rising unemployment and the general atmosphere of the country with Thatcher's slogan 'Put the Great Back into Great Britain' and its accompanying sense of chauvinism and insularity. We were really strongly against the idea that, as a country, we were retreating into this island. Insularity was very much part of Thatcher's rhetoric, which we're now seeing reappear with the Brexit rhetoric.

Lucy Neal We were wearing a kind of armour, which was: 'Is this Festival possible?' At the time we had a lot of people saying, 'I don't want to pour cold water, but have you thought about this, have you thought about that?' We had our own defence mechanism, which was to totally ignore people if what they were saying sounded, frankly, boring, and to follow only the constructive advice.

In this context the idea that Britain had just elected this neoliberal Conservative Prime Minister was just another thing we were going to ignore, another thing we were going to be working against. We were working against the grain, but our grain was this very exciting international theatre festival with these adventurous, exciting people and artists working in it.

We had the miners' strike in 1984, these big stories of resistance and defiance against what Thatcher's regime was doing. Meanwhile we were putting a lot of energy into this new defiant story, which was our story, and we were trying to bring people along with it. Looking back at it over these years, I think it was part of our 'bounce mechanism' not to be put off making something happen for the first time.

Did you find any allies in creating this big story of resistance and defiance?

Fenton Where we found a really strong ally was on the other end of the political spectrum to Thatcher, opposite the Houses of Parliament, in Ken Livingstone and the Greater London Council. Every day, on the south side of the river, they would put up a banner saying how many people were unemployed in this country; it rose up and up and it was a very powerful visual symbol.

It was particularly pertinent given that Thatcher won the election with a very clever and nasty piece of PR by Saatchi and Saatchi using the phrase 'Labour Isn't Working' on a poster with a queue snaking down to the dole office. So Livingstone's riposte was, 'Hey, hold on, Mrs Thatcher, are the Conservatives working?' No! Every day the unemployment figures were going up. We found that we were naturally allied to London, to the GLC, and Red Ken, who said, 'London is a world city and we embrace your ideas,' when Thatcher's government was saying the opposite.

How important was the support from the GLC for LIFT?

Neal The GLC was completely foundational. Ken appointed a man called Tony Banks to head up his arts programme, and Tony was a maverick, enlightened to the diversity of people and voices and cultures in London, and he wanted the GLC's arts policy to absolutely relish that diversity. As Rose has said, our voices were in tune with that. In terms of funding for the Festival, we received money from the GLC year by year in 1981 and 1983; but then 1985 was the last year we got funding from them. Although it was always uncertain in terms of knowing if we knew we would get funding from the GLC, it was foundational in encouraging us to understand that LIFT absolutely had a place in London.

Was this financial support from the GLC its most important role for the development of LIFT?

Fenton It had an impact in so many ways.

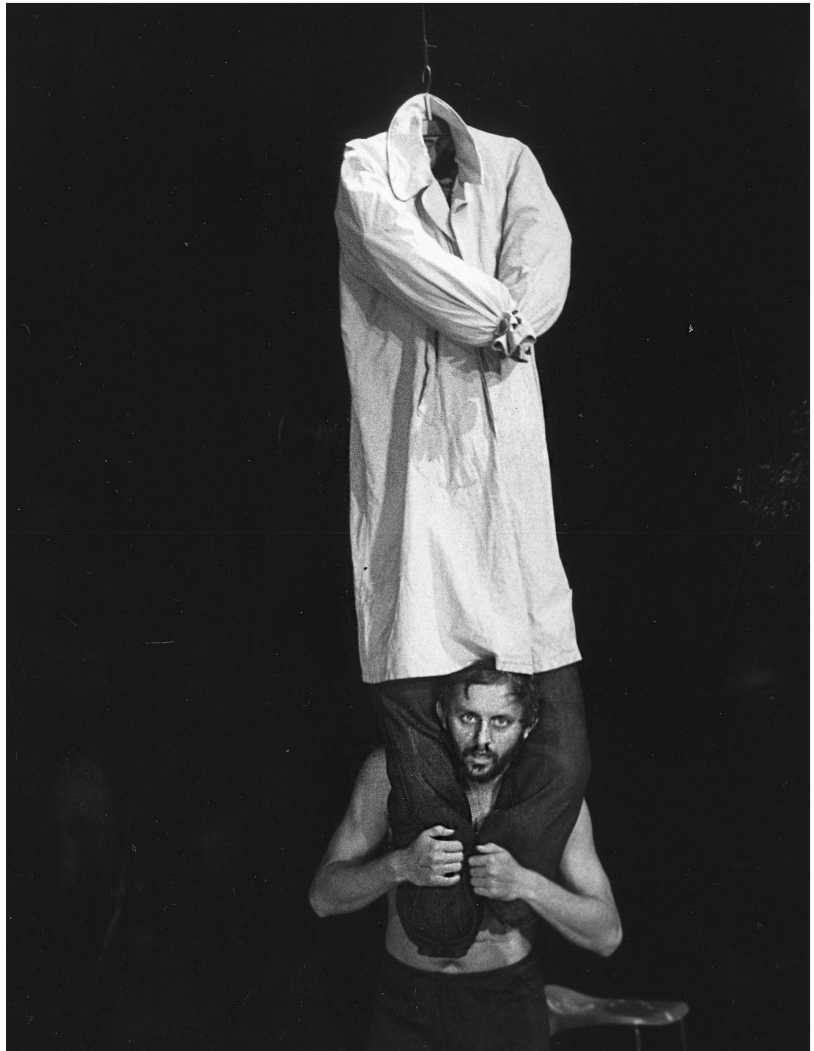
There was a very important historical meeting at the Old Vic in 1981, when Tony Banks gave a callout to the arts community in London, asking them to come and tell him what they wanted from the GLC's arts policies. It was amazing. People came out of the woodwork and not just the institutions – actually the institutions probably weren't there because they were getting lots of money from the Arts Council – but you had Tara Arts, the Black Theatre Co-operative, street theatre performers, women's groups – a whole range of radical voices coming together, asking for what they would like and directly informing policy. Tony Banks and the GLC were saying they wanted the arts to be a voice for London and the stories that are held within this world city.

It was a key moment and, for us, it really informed our thinking about what LIFT as a London-based festival would be; that it was not just about us bringing in the international companies but it was also about how we would engage with this world city and relate voices in London back to the companies we were bringing together.

Neal The meeting at the Old Vic espoused quite an ideal vision, but I remember feeling at the time that that was ordinary, that there was something quite normal about what was being suggested, so that was where we set our own bar. So we said this was the bar: inclusivity, diversity, gay and lesbian rights, Black theatre, and Asian theatre. This is where we start. I think it was extraordinary timing for us that there was that way of looking at London, as it meant that, when we were bringing theatre companies in, we were bringing them to *that* city, the city that we recognized at that meeting.

Fenton I think the other thing that came out as a result about the GLC was a whole range of free events and festivals in parks which had not happened before. So suddenly there was the Battersea Park festival, there were festivals in Brixton and up in Hackney. Free events, music events, anti-racism events, and festivals all supported by the GLC.

Theatr Provisorium's production of *Nie Nam Lecieć Na Wyspy Szczęśliem/It is Not For Us to Fly to the Islands of Happiness*, at the ICA. Photograph: Catherine Shakespeare Lane.

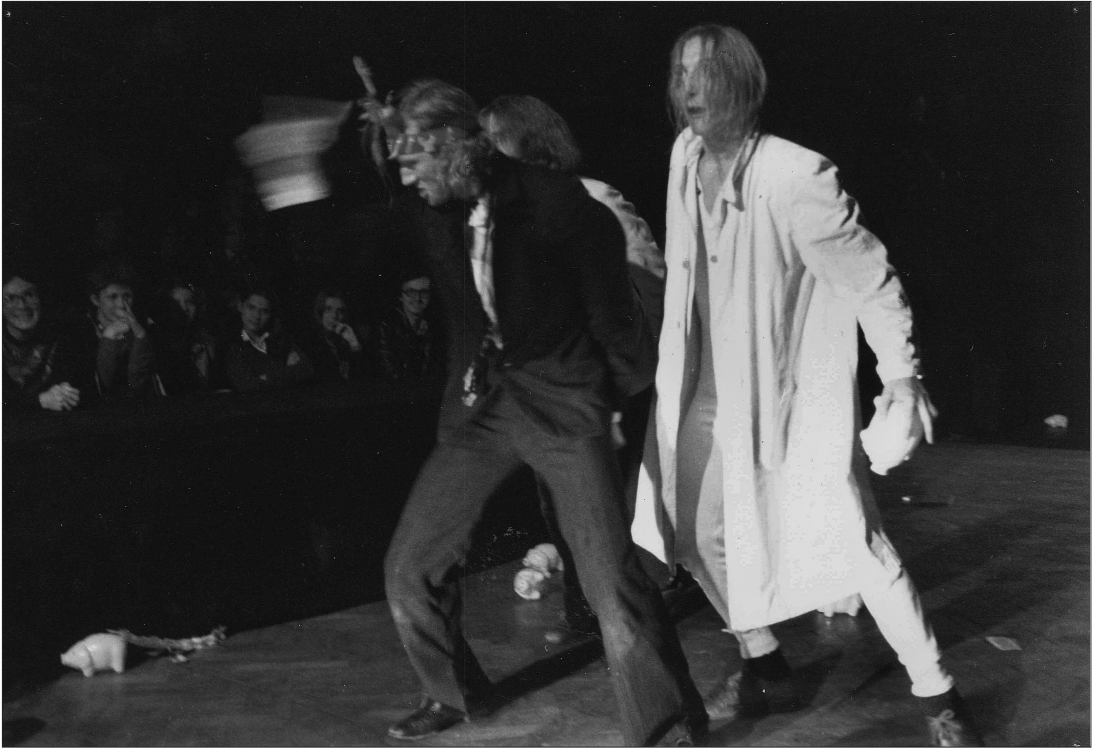


What impact did it have on LIFT when the GLC was abolished in 1986?

Fenton What happened with those events, post-GLC, was that, initially, when we turned up at Islington Council, they would say that they would love to support Cirque Plume from France and they would give us a grant to help towards it and give us the grounds for free. Then the next time we went, they would say that they would love to present them but they're afraid they couldn't give us a grant, but we can have the park for free. And the third time we would go back a few years later they would say yes, they would love to present them, but we would have to pay for all the services.

There was a complete shift in the support available from councils who became increasingly hard-pressed to monetize their public space. With no city governance, there was no over-arching cultural vision for the city, and it was a real shift into a kind of privatization of public space and commercialization of the arts.

Neal After the abolition of the GLC, we used to travel around the world aghast at having to explain to people that London had no representative body; it had no way of representing people who paid their council tax. There was taxation and no representation – in a city like London that was absolutely bonkers.



Theatr Ósmego Dnia Company's production of *Wiecej Niz Jedno Zyciel/Oh, How Nobly We Lived* at the New Half Moon. Photograph: LIFT.

However, after the GLC was abolished, we became quite used to recognizing that LIFT had a really vital role as part of a mosaic of different institutions and organizations and individuals across the city aiming to be bridge-builders, to catalyze relationships between boroughs or this institution and that individual, and so on. I think the story of the Ken Livingstone era, the abolition of the GLC, and what happened in London until 2000, when it was announced that a Greater London Assembly would re-constitute itself with a Mayor, was a sculpting thread that ran through LIFT and had an impact on our operations.

Sometimes those impacts were on ground level. For example, after the abolition of the GLC, every one of the thirty-three boroughs had their own systems, fire regulations, education policies. We literally had to go from borough to borough to borough, and know that, if we were working in a Tory borough such as Wandsworth, it would have different regulations to Camden with its

Labour administration. It was a key thread to our development, for better and for worse.

And how did you fund LIFT without the GLC?

Neal There are two quirky anecdotes about the GLC. One was in 1985, when they were winding their funding up and we heard on the grapevine that they had a women's fund that we could apply to because we were a predominantly female organization. We put this application in, making a claim for all the female artists that we were hosting, but also as our team. And it came back saying 'We'd quite like to give you money but you seem to be quite anti-men' – (*Laughter*). So we quite quickly said, 'No, no! Our production manager is a man!' And that was an early lesson about appealing the funding criteria.

The other was when we were planning the 1987 Festival. The London Borough Grant Scheme was set up to take up the GLC funding so we immediately continued our funding post-GLC. However, at the same time, the Arts Council became aware that

LIFT wasn't necessarily going to get any funding and I think that chimed with their view that we had done three festivals, we were commissioning artists, we were contributing in quite a big way to bringing in international artists that, in their own way, had an impact on what was happening in this country. It was at that point that the Arts Council stepped in and said they wanted to fund us. It was an extraordinary moment where our funding was provided by two new sources, which meant we were able to move towards a permanent organization.

Fenton In fact, we didn't get regular funding until 1991.

Neal Post-GLC, Julia Rowntree was working with us at that time as our development director to raise sponsorship. Julia had this 360-degree sense of the way in which theatre was a way of looking at the world and particularly how different sectors connected. In 1991, recognizing the lack of any representative body in London, we staged 'LIFTing London' in Canary Wharf, which was just beyond a building site. For that event we had voices from housing, the arts, business enterprise, and education.

Looking back, it was a really visionary attempt to present the arts as the place where people could convene to look at things that mattered and to look forward at how London was constituted in terms of where innovation came from. How did innovation take place? How was it seeded? How was it nurtured? And the fact that it was hosted by an arts organization was quite significant.

Fenton It was also about cross-collaboration across sectors. If you had a number of different perspectives coming to bear on the work it could be richer. So how can housing link up with the arts, with innovation and business, at a time when there was no one making those connections across the city, because there was no government for London.

Consciously, we were absolutely against Thatcher and everything she stood for. In our work, we also found that we were slightly against the kind of theatre and arts establish-

ment where there were hierarchies of male directors, with secretaries who were often women, and we were fighting against this entrenched patriarchy. There were so few women directors. And also against this entrenched little-Englander mindset.

Neal I think for me, the seminal moment, was in 1982 with the Falklands war. I remember painting our bedroom, I was staring at the wall and the radio was on. I just remember being so horrified that the country I was born in and the country I lived in had a government that was sending out these massive fleets to warfare. I was shaken to my core.

I don't think that I was particularly politically or environmentally active in my early twenties. I wasn't part of the anti-racism marches, CND marches, or those in support of the miners' strike. All these things were happening and they were part of the political landscape. Now I look back on them and think 'Where were you?' but then I come back and look at what we were doing at LIFT. What we were doing was working with Argentinian artists, through the ANC with South African artists, and with artists in Eastern European countries.

We were absolutely heart and soul dedicated to building the human relationships that create the bonds, the trust, the empathy, the compassion, the affection, the understanding that is the nature of cultural exchange that artists create. When I look back on it, I think – That was your activism, which was about the communal narrative, the shared narrative, the collective, the participatory, the empathic, fostering a world in which people would give and gain from each other.

We have this joke that in the early days, when we were writing letters, when we were building the story of LIFT with our own words, when we were asking people to be patrons and sponsors, we had to write the story up; in one particular letter we managed to come up with the argument that we were preventing a Third World War.

And that's kind of what we were doing. We were having fun showing this celebration of differences and exchanges. So absolutely every single thing that Mrs Thatcher was



Theatr Provisorium Company: workshop.
Photograph: LIFT.

doing felt not just totally contrary to what we were doing, but it was shitting from a height on what we were doing, and so you just had to do it more. You just had to get out and work harder.

Fenton But about preventing the Third World War. When you look at the history of festivals – why were all those festivals set up after the Second World War? So that nations could speak to each other – the Edinburgh Festival, the Avignon Festival. So, in a way, we wrote our first manifesto and our stated aim was to prevent the Third World War. (*Laughs.*) It's not so stupid, is it?

You mentioned the 'little Englander' aspect of Thatcherism. In her election campaign, Thatcher had said 'people are really rather afraid that this country might be swamped by people from a different culture' and had stated the desire to have 'a total end to immigration' in order to protect 'a British Nation with British characteristics'. Were

you aware of a rise in anti-immigration prejudice and racism during the 1980s?

Fenton Did she say that? God, it sounds so familiar, doesn't it?

Neal Every trip I went on was a huge education for me in British history. I went to Panafest in Ghana with a large contingent of Arts Council-funded, predominantly Black British artists. So I found myself in a minority as a white British person with this contingent of arts practitioners to a festival that celebrated the African diaspora. During a trip like that and learning the legacy of British history and British colonialism, it was impossible not to travel and not to gain insight into the patterns and grids of empire and colonialism. It was having your eyes opened all the time. In that process one also learnt that Britain was always a hybrid nation: we're Anglo-Saxon!

Somebody said recently that the reason

why Britain is so bad at understanding its own history is because so much of it happened abroad. So one would always return home having gained another layer of understanding of the violent histories of British colonialism. And also having to counsel oneself about being proud of aspects of the history of Britain like radical socialism, or protesting, or the suffragettes – that tradition of fighting for social justice.

We became aware that London as a city was host and home to so many governments in exile, whether it was the Polish government in exile or the ANC. London as a city hosted this sort of ferment of possibilities and alternatives, so I think we just felt we were part of that alternative story trying to get out.

Fenton To be very fair, we were learning a huge amount when we started. We had no idea about all this; it sounds fine when we're talking about it now, but the fact the Polish government in exile were here – we stumbled across this as we began to prepare for bringing over a Polish company. You work out where the connections are, and this extraordinary richness, diversity, and internationalism of London becomes apparent.

When we put on the Brazilian show *Macunaíma* in 1981, we had little idea that most probably 50 to 60 per cent of the Lyric Theatre Hammersmith would be filled with the Brazilian community, who just came out. They didn't book in advance, much to the consternation of the Lyric, but turned up as word went around.

Internationalism was, for me, very simple. I spent a lot of my childhood living in a van in Romania, Poland, and I went to school in Greece up a mountain. For me that was a very natural way of being. I was very privileged, though at the time, I thought I was really hard done by, to be honest. But just to have that sense of a world beyond the North Yorkshire moors. I took it for granted this was the way it was when I was a child, but growing up and becoming a teenager and going to university, I was surprised that almost everybody else had a very different attitude to 'abroad'. Whether

this was informed by an innate sense of British superiority, I don't know.

Both of us did languages at university and I think that this reinforced the connections, and the humanity of those connections and relationships, that could be built across cultures; the friendships, the perspectives that could be gained through working in different ways. When you read a great novel, see a great piece of film, or a fantastic piece of theatre, you have also encountered the culture which you feel is really rich and you want to share with your fellow citizens or friends.

In the 1983 brochure you wrote that you believed 'In its way, LIFT can help promote the cause of international understanding and co-operation'. How did these ideas work in practice during the Festival? In particular, did these temporary communities that you created during the Festival open up possibilities for peaceful international co-existence?

Neal I think that, first and foremost, we'd always hoped that the artists would meet each other, and it was probably the hardest thing to realize, often just for financial reasons. Actually keeping everyone here for a month was virtually impossible, but having a Festival club, having dialogues, having people accommodated close to each other, hosting them well, welcoming them, having those small moments where they were celebrated as visitors in London and participants in the Festival, was so important to us. At the core of the Festival we always wanted that spirit of connection and exchange for the artists, hoping it would work with audiences too.

Sometimes certain audiences just started to track an artist, follow them, get to know them, go out with them, make certain friendships, and get to know people better. 'In its way' – it's interesting to think back on how we said 'in its way'. I think there's a sense of humility coming in there: to say we're not quite sure how it's working, but we're pretty damn sure that it does work 'in its way'.

There were some very distinct moments where we understood that what we were doing was of historic significance. I remember being at South Africa House,

when we had a whole contingent of South African artists coming after the 1994 election. We had hosted an artist called Eduardo Pavlovski in 1987, who had an account of being an army general during the oppressive Argentinian regime – but it alluded to the tangle of conflicting stories in Argentina too: and that was after the Falklands war.

Then there were these moments when, as with the Chilean *Death of a Maiden*, we just knew that that play or that show or those artists were just totally putting their finger on something profoundly important that was happening historically, whether it was in Beirut or Beijing or Berlin. I suppose that, by ‘in its way’, we were saying that these theatre artists are giving us space around how things can shift and change, or *must* shift and change, and that grows our understanding and awareness.

If someone was looking back on it now and analyzing it, they might talk about empathy; they might talk about the way theatre creates that space to ‘walk a mile in your shoes’, and that sort of thing. I think it was just instinct that it was a good thing. It wasn’t always easy, we did have moments of real difficulty in the Festival, in the hosting process, and many misunderstandings. We had to work really, really hard to put things right when there was a misunderstanding. So, it wasn’t all glorious happy-clappy harmony. We worked really hard at it and might have got things wrong sometimes.

Fenton I think we got quite a lot of things wrong.

Neal It wasn’t always a walk in the park.

Fenton I’m thinking about an incident with the Sistren Theatre Collective in Jamaica, when we linked up with the London-based West Indian Women’s Association, WIWA, to present them here and we’d got a grant from the GLC for those performances. We were really hard up at that Festival and were scraping our pennies together. WIWA were going to tour them around London and we wanted them to cover some of the cost of the set, which we’d had to build. But they didn’t have any money and they were furious with

us because they said: ‘You got all the money from the GLC to bring them over in the first place. How dare you? They are our heritage, we want to tour them.’

It was a very difficult moment, actually, and I think one that reflected the race issues and structures of inequality in this city, in this country. The fact was that we – as two white middle-class girls – were able to get money from the GLC to do this and they’d been told by the GLC that ‘LIFT has got the money, work with LIFT’. And we were telling them that nobody was paid, we were not paid. Those first Festivals were on a voluntary basis. But of course we were in a position of relative privilege, so I think that was a really tough lesson.

The other thing I wanted to mention was Rustom Bharucha’s question about what our responsibilities were to those artists. We may be inviting them over here where they can speak freely in a free space, but what is our duty of care when they go back? Is there one? If international cultural exchange is an act of solidarity, how do we go beyond just the Festival itself? Or do we have to? And that speaks to all these discussions about the festivalization of our culture.

Moreover, if we’re going to bring a story which really resonates here and makes people understand what is happening in that country – well, perhaps those artists don’t want to tell that story; they want to tell another story from their daily lives. I remember when we first brought *Starbrites* from South Africa, which was just immediately after Apartheid had officially ended and the artists were saying, the director Barney Simon was saying, ‘At last we don’t just have to engage with those issues; we can tell our stories as human beings.’ However, a lot of the critics and the audience were saying, ‘We want to hear about Apartheid! What is it like after Apartheid?’

So we always had to consider whose agendas we were presenting. For whom? And what is our duty of care in a wider context? I think those are really hard questions that festivals should be asking themselves. And we did, but at times we weren’t even aware of what landmines we might

have been standing on. I think probably that was one of the reasons we began the LIFT Enquiry. There were so many questions that doing the Festival had raised which really couldn't be contained in the Festival. It was all spinning out – but that's another story.

Did you make changes to the Festival model in order to address these questions in the years before you began the LIFT Enquiry?

Neal I think an earlier opening was in the early 1990s, when we realized that there was other work that LIFT could be doing between Festivals. It was one thing to research, invite, and create a Festival every two years, but we then became interested in what LIFT represented as a resource for the city – full of ideas and people. We piloted the idea of having a learning programme, an education programme, as we called it then. That found its feet in 1991. In the early 1990s, Tony Fegan came to work with us and from then on LIFT had a whole presence. It was a host to visitors but it also facilitated continuing issues around social equality, creative equality, and access to being art makers.

I think the learning programme became absolutely key for LIFT to keep holding in the air some of these questions to inspire people year round. There was a lot of work that went into connecting individual artists with individual communities and individual interest groups. Through that, LIFT could maintain its energy as a 'learning organization'. We learnt that it was one thing to go stumble trip, stumble trip, stumble trip – tumbling into situations through the purely pragmatic logistics of organizing things, to actually being conscious that what we were doing offered opportunities for everybody to learn, including ourselves.

So, how could we frame that learning? What would be the questions from that learning? How would we value everybody's voice in that learning? I think the learning programme did begin to equalize the role of any single person engaged in the Festival, whether they were a child of six or an artist from Russia aged seventy-three.

There was always an enquiry at the centre of LIFT about what it was to be, to live, now

and in the future.

I suppose when the LIFT Enquiry came around in the 2000s, we said, let's actually frame that now and find the space to do that. Let's find a creative methodology and make that explicit. Even though that wasn't necessarily well thought through, in terms of how it would end, there was definitely something powerful about pressing the button and opening all that up.

I hope we can return to the Enquiry, but just to expand on your experiences with marginalized groups in the capital such as Sistren and WIWA. Did you feel like you had a particular focus on reaching such groups in London? How important or significant was it for you to reach different communities and different areas of London?

Fenton I think a very simple answer to that is that the Festival was as much about London as the world, and we were exploring the city. If you start to think about what London is, then you want to reach people who make up this city. I don't think we ever went, 'Oh, marginalized groups . . .' It was the richness of all the different stories that Londoners had. I think the second thing was when we developed our education programme in 1991, and then when Tony Fegan came in in 1993, it was the sense of LIFT being a resource for a multicultural curriculum that became very important, and which Tony then developed.

Neal I can't remember the specific quote, but it summed up our feeling about the whole thing. It's something like, 'That which is socially peripheral turns out to be symbolically central.'¹ The exception grounds the universal. The story you want to tell will always be the greatest story if it has the greatest diversity of perspectives and voices in it. Therefore, if you're only ever going to be repeating the dominant story, you will never ever open up the under-told stories, the stories that are symbolically central, the stories that have been silenced, the stories that have been oppressed, held back.

It's not just a question of including all the voices, but about the real range of the truth and resonance, because truth has to be seen

from many, many sides. Peter Brook said a wonderful thing: 'There's my truth, and there's your truth, and there's *the* truth.' So if you want to get to *the* truth, it's of paramount importance that everybody's voice is there and everybody's voice is heard, and everybody's perspectives seen.

I think particularly in telling stories that related to political histories, we had a growing and maturing understanding of how many voices history silences. So if we were going to return to pre-Pinochet's Chile, or back in time in South Africa, it's in retelling stories that you realize that so many voices have been cut out. I think we were always looking for all those counter-narratives because the counter-narratives carry so much human truth and relevance.

Fenton There was a report by Naseem Khan called 'The Arts Britain Ignores' which was very much at the forefront of our minds at the time when we were beginning to get going, looking at what were the voices in London and how we could give a platform to those voices.² Ultimately, we were very much not there to give more platforms to the mainstream.

Your dedication is evident in your programming throughout those decades. I want to return to think more about your move towards the LIFT Enquiry. After the 1997 election with Tony Blair, and New Labour coming into power, do you think there was a shift in the expectations placed on LIFT? At this time there was an increase in funding available for the arts, there was a proliferation of festivals and international work that you had set the precedent for, and, with that, there were many accusations of an increased instrumentalization of the arts. How did it feel for you in that period?

Fenton There was a potential festivalization of the arts in that period. Everybody was doing festivals and it was kitsched up, and many institutions were bringing work over. We were asking how much deeper could it go, and what more was it than simply showing and an audience watching? We wanted to see how it could be more meaningful and what its place was in society.

So there was definitely this terrific energy as it seemed that every place had a festival.

The second thing that was happening at the end of the 1990s was the GLA coming back. London was about to have an authority again, which hadn't happened since the abolition of the GLC. We saw that as an exciting possibility, that London as a city could have an arts programme again which could engage with the city in all its different sectors.

Neal I think at that time there was real hope among our colleagues like Anna Legard and Tony Feagan. There was a very significant report that Tony Blair's government commissioned about the arts and education, led by Ken Robinson.³ There was a momentary giddiness among those involved in learning, creativity, and education that the Labour Government was about to herald this really different era which would recognize how central creativity was to everybody's learning and education.

It was short-lived. Ken Robinson left the country pretty soon after because he realized that none of his suggestions were going to be picked up or honoured. And there's a quotation in which Blair was really identifying the language that he was using, which showed that the whole movement about how learning and the arts then essentially was about people becoming economically productive and rooted in the market.

The figures prove that Britain has a very strong, successful heft as far as the arts and the economy are concerned. So it was just a bit depressing that the policy lying behind it was about us all becoming productive economic units through our creativity. A lot of it was about intellectual property rights and all that. They were capitalizing on creativity rather than valuing it for its own sake in terms of what it created for people's potential in human terms.

Do you think that was significant in starting to shift your thinking towards doing the LIFT Enquiry, in order to create something that had less of a 'product' outcome? The Festival, as much as it's an amazing experience, can be seen as a fixed thing that was a regular product of the

organization, whereas the LIFT Enquiry had a much less tangible output.

Neal I think it was a genuinely deep line of questioning about theatre and its place and possibilities. We were always very relieved that we had announced the Enquiry and had set our sails to create it before the Iraq War because it seemed to us that what the Iraq War was doing was setting a new era of an absolute binary culture – ‘You’re wrong because I’m right.’ We knew that the Enquiry was about us going back to having the greatest number of voices, which for us is ultimately about justice. We were really coming back to questions about justice. So it was a deep questioning, quite contradictory in being both very creative and also about renewal.

Fenton I was just thinking of referencing an article by Ritsaert Ten Carte, ‘Festivals, Who Needs ‘Em?’⁴ I think we were very aware that the arts had been hitched to so many other agendas – regeneration, education – and that continues. It did seem like the instrumentalization of the arts, and we really wanted to strip that back.

We also felt that the Festival had become part of a system. We were having to produce something every two years. The work with artists in which we were engaged was for them, so why did we have to put everything in one place together, which produced unnecessary pressure? It was time to change. Other people were doing what we had been doing in the previous decades. We asked if the Festival was the right vehicle to explore what we wanted to do.

We wanted to be able to do in-depth work with schools, with teachers, with artists, with our audiences. Also, we were really looking at the question of who is an artist, who can call themselves artists. Everyone can be creative, and we wanted to invite that sense of participation. It was a lot of process – not just putting the finished product on the stage – and we felt that the Festival as a vehicle didn’t allow that. We were much criticized, I have to say – some people thought the Enquiry was very self-indulgent. Do you remember all that, Lucy?

Neal Yeah, that it was confusing for people and it confused us at the same time. But there were lines of consistency through it and one of them was the simplicity of the question, ‘What is theatre to you?’ which ran through all those different things that we did. I was rather chuffed to hear that at Stonehenge recently they had decided it wasn’t about the final result of putting those stones in place, it was about the ingenious ways they had to come at how they produced it, and it was about celebrating their community.

Fenton It was not the thing itself, it was the process.

Neal It was about how they worked it out, what fun they had, and how many picnics they had along the way! Finding a form for that is not easy when you have to sell it all the way down the line.

You had created LIFT, shaped it, and supported it over more than two decades. You then entered the LIFT Enquiry, but in 2004 you both announced your resignation from the organization. How did you know that this process, this investigation, had come to an end?

Neal We had had four years of the Enquiry and I felt at the end of those four years that I had learnt more about the theatre in those Enquiry events than I had in the twenty years before. I think because there was this feeling that something was at stake. I don’t know where that intense feeling came from. The LIFT Enquiry was so rich in knowing the theatre again inside out – seeing it from all these different people’s perspective, and realizing each one was a truth.

There was also a feeling that theyre was something at stake which was very, very serious. The Iraq War was a real milestone in many ways, politically and internationally. To be doing that to another country when you’re trying to build something which is about people coming together was important. I think renewal is important. I think losing certain things in order to get something new is important. I think the Enquiry did that, even if it had this open-endedness to it.

It was an uncertain time, but we need to

be looking at the future, how we're going to create adaptive societies, who is going to be able to create different forms of leadership through involvement, or leadership as hosting, and other things like that. We wanted to stay with discomfort or uncertainty and bring people into that. It was an uncomfortable time, but it was rich.

Fenton I was thinking of something Tom Morris said: 'You've institutionalized uncertainty!' (*Laughs.*) Which is a double-edged sword. We were always throwing things up in the air and trying something new. We thrived on that, in a way. We were asking the questions, and trying to find the right questions to ask, rather than saying we've got the answers.

I don't know for sure but I certainly felt, after twenty-five years, that in those last five years I was beginning to feel it was time to open the door to other ideas. We worked very collaboratively as a team, which enabled us to continue opening up and experimenting. Even so, by the time we got to the end of that period, I felt that the Enquiry was a bridge to hand over. It was time to bring in another group or set of people into that space.

Neal Alda Terracciano, whom we invited to work as a dramaturg to the Enquiry, to help shape a narrative for it', said, 'You and Rose are the sacrificial lambs of the Enquiry!' (*Laughs.*)

Fenton She also said that with any journey, or enquiry, that people go on – and you look at the *The Golden Bough*, James Frazer and all those sort of epics; you start off somewhere and you come back home eventually, but actually you're in a very different place. And where the Enquiry might end we had no idea, but we knew it would take LIFT into a different place and we were prepared for that. I suppose that's the sacrificial lamb. But it felt right, it felt liberating to throw all these questions up and be open about them, because I think a lot of people want to lead through certainties, which can be quite closed.

Neal And the power! I think that, since I've left LIFT, I've been able to see and reflect on the incredible power that festival directors have. They've got a budget, they've got a taste, they've got a subjective approaches; they can say, 'That, that, that, and I like that.' They can say, 'That's great, and that's good and that's not good.'

Fenton And 'That's not quite good enough!'

Neal One festival director did actually say that to a theatre company after a show.

Fenton and Neal 'Good, good, very good, but not good enough!' (*They both laugh.*)

Fenton This is exactly what he said to the company, after they had travelled in great excitement. Here he was, the great festival director coming, and they all waited afterwards in the bar.

Neal There's a strong power at work there, which is about holding resources that allow you to say, 'We're going to give our budget to *this* but we're not going to give our budget to *that*.' Which goes with the territory of the post, but for us, in that moment, it seemed that we were opening up, even though we were still making choices and decisions. There was definitely a greater plurality of positions.

References

Conducted and transcribed by Phoebe Patey-Ferguson and edited by Maria Shevtsova.

1. 'What is *socially peripheral* is so frequently *symbolically central*', in Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Poetics and Politics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 5.

2. Naseem Khan, *The Arts Britain Ignores: the Arts of Ethnic Minorities in Britain* (London: Community Relations Commission, 1976).

3. National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education, *All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture, and Education* (London: National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education, 1999).

4. Ritsaert Ten Cate, 'Festivals, Who Needs 'Em?', *Theatre Forum*, No. 1 (1992), p. 85–7.