Cultural Rights

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" Small is beautiful" as Schumacher said and for most practising artists the personal is beautiful since the choice to be an artist is an internal and intimate one. The ways in which you are different from another is often where you recognize your creative path. Success may mean a large sphere of influence for an individual artist but the decision to be an artist in the first place more often than not feels like choosing a path and a terrain which is out of the mainstream. This is specially so in contemporary dance where personal invention governs even the grammar of the dance script. Those who want to pursue objective career paths within known systems and trajectories such as exist for medicine, retail ,banking education etc will probably never fathom why anyone would want to be an artist. It certainly marks you out at gatherings of sensible middle class aunts and uncles who when acquainted with your occupation (or lack of it if your project application has not been successful) will pause for a millisecond before saying " how interesting" shooting a sympathetic glance at one's parents at the same time. It is a job , if you can call it anything so pragmatic, where the

primary and sole asset is that notoriously slippery and subjective thing - your imagination.

So it is apt that I begin with the story of one specific artist, typical in many ways of Britain in general and of London in particular, to illuminate my thoughts on cultural rights are worth fighting for.

(Screening of short film extract)

The young man dancing the solo in front is Rashpal, a talented choreographer and briefly a dancer with my company. He danced in a piece that I made in 2007 called Faultline. At the end of the rehearsal period there is always the ritual exchange of cards and presents and Rashpal wrote " you have given me the stability to continue my endeavours in this difficult profession"

The difficulties that he mentions hadn't been always there. His journey from the East End of London as a son of South Asian immigrants with no background in professional arts to become one of the rising stars in dance is a British success story that we can all be proud of. It speaks volumes for the teachers at Newham Sixth form college which he attended and its artistic partner, the East London Dance agency . He was given excellent nurturing and many opportunities to develop his talent and this culminated in his acquiring a degree in dance from one of our most prestigious dance colleges, The London School of Contemporary Dance. His talent was recognised with a choreographic commission and he was then given a platform by an international dance festival to showcase his work. This was the moment that he

had been working towards. A crucial first step is to attract a patron, a venue programmer or producer who needs to be convinced of your saleability and thus launch your career.

He was very excited by the fact that a major player in the dance world came to see his work, He was probably expecting some comment (favourable or otherwise) about his deployment of dancers, choice of music, overall impact of the production- in short the thousand things that choreographers worry about. However what he got was the observation that his work did not seem to bear any relationship to his Indian name, and the question " what do you think is your USP?" the assumption being that renouncing the only viable USP on offer , that is his Indian-ness he was putting himself in a difficult place. I have no doubt that the query was meant to be supportive and helpful.

I shall now leave Rashpal's personal story except to say that this led him to ponder a great deal about his identity and sense of belonging as an artist. He had never thought of his dance making as having racial overtones but here was a market representative connecting the two as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. It also influenced his subsequent choreographic decisions as he struggled to find his voice as a dance maker. He tried to learn a bit about classical Indian dance and incorporate it into his work.
I cannot leave Rashpal's story however without telling you the difficult profession that he spoke of finally overwhelmed him and he sadly took his own life last year at the age of 29.

However I do want to hang onto those issues that he and I spent many hours discussing and unpack them a little. It connects me to one of the questions about cultural rights that we are thinking about today – the right to identify and define our own heritage. If like my young colleague you have a clash of heritages then fighting for that particular right becomes crucial. These comments introduced him to two things that his arts education and training had not prepared him for – the market and his perceived place within it. Where does such an artist belong? To the great Anglo American heritage of western contemporary dance which he had naturally assumed he belonged to by virtue of current location and education? The rural Punjabi culture of his forbears? Or the grand classical heritage of India which is still a very saleable commodity in the West . In reality he belonged to the much more complicated , tension riddled constantly negotiated quicksand culture of a transnational, the kind of person you would meet every day in every city. The kind person who has a contradiction right in the centre of his being .

Yes I may look Indian but I am an inheritor of Martha Graham.

Yes I live in London but I need to know something about the history of dance in India to be a complete individual in Britain.

Where is my place in the great British arts narrative? Probably not in the place where consumers of art expects me to be. So how does one articulate and exercise such important but seemingly elusive cultural rights ?

The right to be complicated /nuanced , difficult to package is surely worth fighting for ? Specially in the arts where the tools of production are our own inner polychrome selves.

So what are we make of the USP of the artist which my friend had obviously not thought about as he went about his work in the rehearsal studio? Was he that typical self-indulgent artist who did not think about his audience or his 5 year business plan? On the contrary he was one of the most committed dance makers that I had encountered.

We often see the arts struggle to make its case for funding either from the private or the public purse. The greater and underlying struggle, however, is the one of value. The typical homily on the arts invariably starts with its civilizing and enduring qualities over the centuries but then with the crunch of rhetorical brakes the arts are then asked to organise themselves and deliver in the same manner as health, education or a corner shop. The innate culture of the arts which comes from individual artists (who are probably more like lone sailors) struggles then to fit itself into systems from elsewhere and which do not capitalise on the very qualities that are unique to the art and the artist. All artists will sign up to the right to excellence, to take risks, to rattle their audience at times but in the absence of strongly asserted and shared values one ends up in the sad situation where even excellence and funding will not save you from a sense of failure.

So today I am standing up for the right for art to be its self , to take off its many masks, however worthy (agent for social change, school teacher, mainstay of the tourist industry- the

list is endless) and to start the process by which our usefulness to society is envisioned, organised and delivered more in sympathy to the ways we work.

If supply led ,not -for -profit artmaking is on its way out then surely we need to attend seriously to the quality and standards of demand. Risk taking , singularity, imagination, entrepreneurship and rattling the audience's expectation does not need be the preserve of the artist alone but should be the hall mark of the very structures that we operate in.