

**Maggie Foyer**

## **Journalist Seeing Dance**

Brexit is scheduled for March 29, 2019. In the early hours of the morning following the Referendum in 2016, it became clear that the Brexiteers had won and I experienced one of those moments when you desperately want to pause/ rewind/ replay. But this was no computer game, the deed was done, and we live with the fallout, each assessing how this will affect our life.

The front page of the Arts Council England website currently features guidance notes for companies on how to manage the problems generated by Brexit in a range of areas. Nevertheless, for the sustainability of the arts, Brexit per se is not the central issue, rather it is the way the referendum has torn our country apart and unleashed dangerous forces mirrored across Europe. Increasingly we see the political centre shift to the right with backsliding democracies creating room for a rising tide of populism. Some define populism as: 'the voice of uncorrupt, common people against the double dealing of the sophisticated elites.' While this was a popular trope in the Trump election, in the case of Brexit, it seemed that certain elites constructed a voice of 'the people' to serve their own political ends. No doubt there are supporters of the arts on both sides, but since the vote we have consistently been building barriers instead of sharing values and understanding.

The Brexit result was a shock and an anomaly. Agricultural areas, who had benefited the most from EU membership, voted to leave and areas that hardly even saw a black face or heard a foreign language voted to leave saying they wanted to secure our borders and cut immigration. Most worrying is the group whose alienation is so extreme that fascism is seen to be an inviting alternative. Far-right protests in Central London are cashing in on the Brexit uncertainty to cause chaos.

Eric Hobsbawm, a historian who always seemed to have his finger on the pulse believes it is free-market globalisation bringing a surge in inequality that is at the root of the tensions in the 21st century. You may argue with his stated causes, but the inequality is evident. (Hobsbawm, 2007, p.3). Disaffected voters, those made redundant through modernisation, who find mainstream parties unable to offer solutions, turn to the populist leaders who seem to articulate their anxieties, enforce national identity and offer simple solutions. (Ford, 2010, p146).

In the last decade, populist parties in Europe, predominantly far right but not exclusively so, have tripled their support. Hungary's Viktor Orbán and Italy's Matteo Salvini, have had the most success in recent years, but across Europe, populists have gained substantial support in parliaments<sup>1</sup>. Populism has an international reach and reasons to vote populist are varied but on the opposition sides, the term elite surfaces far too often.

Skilled propagandists play fast and loose with terms like populism and elitism and this is where it gets worrying for us in the arts. Most of us don't like the elite label, most of us feel it is not justified but it sticks like glue. For those of us embedded in the arts, in this instance, dance, it's our very existence but for too many the arts are an expendable add-on.

It is difficult to predict what all this means for ballet but it's an expensive art form both in the training environment and in presentation. As governments shift to the right and seek to placate populists, funding for the arts is likely to decrease. When Trump threatened to eliminate the National Endowment for the Arts this had support from conservatives who labelled the N.E.A. as 'welfare for cultural elitists'.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2018/nov/20/revealed-one-in-four-europeans-vote-populist>

Around us the world is changing dramatically. Eric Corijn<sup>2</sup> describes it thus: 'The market economy and finance become global, but democracy, culture and representation remain national.' Arjun Appadurai comes to a similar conclusion describing nation states as vertebrate structures sharing space with an increasingly cellular system where technology and corporate power know no boundaries.<sup>3</sup> It is an uncertain landscape where twitterstorms and 'online witch hunts' hint at a return to the direct democracy of classical antiquity, a modern version of the mob of the ancient city-states.<sup>4</sup>

Within this we are facing a changing social order. A new 'class calculator' overrides the tradition British class system to include modern issues like culture capital and social connections.<sup>5</sup> At the bottom of the pile on this seven-point scale are the Precariat<sup>6</sup>. At around 15% of the population, unstable and underpaid, they lack occupational identity linked with the fact that for the first time in history many people have education above the level of labour they can expect to obtain. The ubiquitous uber driver comes to mind. They score low for economic, social and cultural factors. This group will include both new immigrants and local people fighting for scarce resources as governments continue to ignore appalling economic inequalities.

Brexit has thrown into sharp relief these divisions in society. The substantial group who are left behind as the rich become richer are making their voice heard. Within this group many are those disadvantaged by forms of racism that fuel the economic and academic inequality in our Western society. W.E.B. DuBois noted this way back in 1947 when he petitioned the UN noting that 'a mere ban on discrimination would not redress centuries of devastation'.<sup>7</sup> Others feel they are ignored and put down by those more articulate and successful and they may well be right.

Post Brexit research shows areas of the UK with highest engagement with the arts had a larger proportion of Remain voters<sup>8</sup>. American philosopher Martha Nussbaum has argued the crucial link between cultural engagement and acting as a global citizen in a democratic system. The arts play a role in generating 'spaces for ... reasoned debate, helping to build democracies that are able to overcome fear and suspicion and, ultimately, creating a world that is worth living in'. We know how important the arts are but does our changing world agree?

Arts Council England admits that the wealthiest, better educated and least ethnically diverse section of the population is still the most culturally active. Unfortunately, the current government's education policy is not working to redress this. The removal of all visual and performing art subjects from the English Baccalaureate is a serious setback, one that limits access to those who most need cultural stimulus. The statistics for provision of music in schools is fairly predictable: the higher attaining schools have better provision and take up. However, dance bucks this trend. Dance is almost three times as likely to be delivered as an A-level in schools with average attainment than in top performing institutions, where only 5% offer dance. This indicates dance interest and participation across a broader social mix.<sup>9</sup> There is also the informal dance and music sector, a vibrant sector of DIY music, helped by advanced technology, and street dance with powerful roots in community neighbourhoods.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ietm.org/en/themes/art-in-the-age-of-populism-ietm-brussels-opening-keynote-speech>

<sup>3</sup> Appadurai, (2006) p.4 & p.25

<sup>4</sup> David Runciman, (2018) How Democracy Ends

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-22000973>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/11/precariat-global-class-rise-of-populism/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.blackpast.org/global-african-history/primary-documents-global-african-history/1947-w-e-b-dubois-appeal-world-statement-denial-human-rights-minorities-case-citizens-n/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/news/brexit-voters-more-likely-shun-arts-research-finds>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/news/exclusive-music-level-denied-ever-more-students>

This sector is more ethnically diverse, but also needs financial support to help artists make the leap into the professional world.

David Lammy, former Minister of Culture, and someone who had an excellent education due to a choral scholarship said: 'BAME (Black Asian Minority Ethnic) people are already hugely under-represented across the creative industries, and I am very concerned that in these hard times BAME people will be the last to be hired and the first to be fired. Britain's position as a creative powerhouse and a world-leading hub is built on our huge cultural diversity, a diversity that may be difficult to maintain in a post-Brexit world.'<sup>10</sup>

Within the ballet sphere: onstage, backstage and front of house we still see deficits in ethnic and social diversity. There are sectors missing in the creative workforce and it is daunting to think what talents we may also be missing. Muslims don't feature strongly in the dance world, then a talent like Ahmad Joudeh arrives on the scene and a powerful charismatic dancer like Michaela DePrince turns so many ballet prejudices on their heads. In the dance world we tend to believe that talent will out – as the examples above show – but there must be a contact point and too often this is left to chance encounter. A number of positive projects are making innovative inroads in this area. Writing in Arts Professional, Dave O'Brien suggest ways to counter class discrimination by gaining a greater understanding of class origins thus opening access to the creative industries.<sup>11</sup> The famous London RoundHouse which has just hosted Akram Khan's *Until the Lions*, took a brave step and opened its board to young trustees. This has proved so successful that they have published a guide for other organisations to follow suit.<sup>12</sup>

When so much is 'up in the air' as is the case post-Brexit, it's an unnerving situation but also a time of great possibility. Building on initiatives to boost inclusion and redress the imbalance we can build and sustain future audiences (and funding). We have the opportunity to open our beautiful art to those who are still off our radar.

The complex divisions in society, the huge economic pressures arising from social care needs and climate change will all affect the arts. We need to be aware and prepared for change.

Ballet has proved itself good at survival. It is little short of a miracle that ballet, the darling of the Imperial Court could survive the Russian Revolution to rise again as the jewel in the crown of the Soviet Union. The love that the Russian people had for their art and Stalin's love of *Swan Lake* were undeniably factors, but looking at the shaping of current factions, unless we can encourage a wider section of the population to care about us, we may not again be so fortunate.

Appadurai, A., (2006) *Fear of Small Numbers: An Anthology on the Geography of Anger*, Durham and London, Duke University Press

Ford, R., (2010) 'Who Might vote for the BNP?' in Eatwell, R., and Goodwin, M.J., (eds) *The New Extremism in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Britain*, Routledge, London and New York.

Hobsbawm, E., (2007), *Globalisation, Democracy and Terrorism*, Abacus, London

Runciman, D., (2018) *How Democracy Ends*, UK, Profile Books

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<sup>10</sup><https://www.voice-online.co.uk/article/brexit-what-does-it-mean-arts>

<sup>11</sup>[https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/magazine/article/tackling-class-discrimination?utm\\_source=Weekly-Good-Reads&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_content=nid-209078&utm\\_campaign=20th-December-2018](https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/magazine/article/tackling-class-discrimination?utm_source=Weekly-Good-Reads&utm_medium=email&utm_content=nid-209078&utm_campaign=20th-December-2018)

<sup>12</sup><http://www.culturehive.co.uk/resources/guided-by-young-voices/>