INTERVIEW WITH
HUGH JENKINS

follow economic developments in the arts they would perhaps do better than they have done. For example, in the mixed economy that we work in at the moment, in the arts we have an effective mixed economy with the gradual increase in the public sector and the gradual erosion of the private sector until at the present time, in most terms, the private sector plays a minority and not a controlling part in the economy of the theatre. This is not true elsewhere. But I have some hope that if it is true that life imitates art, the rest of the economy will in due course follow that pattern and the majority ruling tone will be set by the public sector.

In The Culture Gap you describe a period towards the end of your office when you received a letter from the Arts Council in which the tone had changed and you realised that somehow you weren’t as powerful as you had been and you were being treated differently by people in the corridors of power, you couldn’t gain access to the Prime Minister and so on. What do you think you did to get that kind of cold shoulder treatment?

I think the thing which I tried to do unsuccessfully, which determined the decision, or at least helped to decide, that I was to be dispensed with, or disposed of, was my attempt to introduce a certain amount of democracy into the Arts Council. At this point I moved into trying to take some power away from the Arts establishment, and I think that the Arts establishment determined that they were not going to lose that power. And I don’t think they have lost it. I think the Arts establishment is still very strong.

Can you describe what you consider the Arts establishment to be?

Well, it’s all those good and great and intelligent and sensitive people who believe honestly that this country has an artistic heritage and that public money must support and extend that heritage. They also believe that it is important that this money should be distributed and controlled and handed out by people who understand what they are doing, who are themselves not perhaps involved in the day-to-day hurly burly of the artistic struggle, and who are therefore, by that very fact, able to be objective, judicious, fair, and are able to hand down from above the state’s benefactions, its help for the Arts — without themselves participating in the day-to-day running of the organisation. They believe that once people who are involved in the day-to-day working of the organisation get their hands on the process of distribution of the state’s money, that this would lead to endless wrangles, arguments, disagreements and so forth, and therefore they think it undesirable that the people who are actually involved in the arts on a working basis shall have any representation.

In particular they are opposed very strongly to any of the organisations of the artistic people or the entertainment people, or the trade unions in the entertainment field particularly, or even the managerial associations, having their own voice on the Arts Council. People may be appointed by the Minister who have these interests, this knowledge, this background, but what they don’t want, and this is really the key question, is anyone on the Arts Council who is answerable to anyone else. They don’t want anyone on the Arts Council who would have to go back, for example, to Equity, and say, I did this, that or the other, and who could be recalled or replaced by Equity if they felt that he failed to do his job. When I tried to introduce an elected element into the Arts Council, it was at this point that I incurred the hostility of the artistic establishment.

You have argued that the Arts Council has to be changed, that the structure had been set up to respond to a certain amount of growth in artistic endeavour after the Second World War. You still see the Arts Council as a vital part of the arts scene in this country so apart from the democratisation and greater representation of working artists on the Council, what other changes do you see as necessary?

Well I don’t want to see the Arts Council becoming dirigiste. I think the strength of the Arts Council has been that although it is theoretically concerned almost solely with standards and with quality, and only secondarily concerned with spreading the arts and appreciation of the arts, it hasn’t actually done anything about standards at all. It has
merely concerned itself with encouraging the spread of the arts. To my mind this is right. What has worried me about the developments in the last two years of the Arts Council is the gradual growth of the notion that it should become more selective, must choose, must reduce the number of people that it supports; that it should have the power to say that one thing is okay and that another is not. Although the Arts Council must do a certain amount of that — it’s in the nature of things that it does — the moment it gets into its head the notion that it really determines the direction of artistic activity in the country, then that is the road to disaster and, in my view, the Arts Council has set out on that road.

What developments would you like to see? The Arts Council still does have to choose who to give its money to?

It has to have some theory on which to base its activities. And the theory which it based itself on in the past was called the response theory — the Arts Council did its best to respond to applications which came up to it. It did not at any time say to itself, well now, there ought to be a theatre in such and such a place, so what can we do to encourage the development of a theatre at that point. It waited to see whether Little Puddleton enunciated a notion of wanting a theatre, and then it did its best to respond to that. That, in my view is the right way. The requests should come up. The whole notion of patronage from above is wrong.

Democracy is important, not in itself, but because it reverses the flow of power. At the moment the flow of power in the Arts Council is from the Minister down. He appoints the Council. The Council appoints the Advisory Panels, so that the Council is advised by people that it itself appoints. So that is the flow from the top down. If the Arts Council doesn’t create its own internal democracy, then eventually the Arts Council will become the creature of the state. You will get to the position of state-controlled theatrical and artistic activity, which, in my view, is quite the opposite of what we want. We don’t want to see created in this country our own version of socialist realism — and that is the direction in which we are at present moving, under a Conservative government.

Do you think it is important to devolve power from the Arts Council to regional arts councils?

Yes. It’s a difficult question because when you devolve, you nearly always devolve to people who are quite likely to be less well-informed about the subject than you are yourself; therefore the recipients of state support in the arts are rather apprehensive about this. If you were to ask any of those large regional theatrical companies what they think about the devolution of power from the Arts Council to the regional arts associations, almost all of them would hold up their hands and say no, we prefer the devil we know. Nevertheless it’s a question which must be gone through. It has to be done carefully and gradually, over a period of time. But I think it is very important that regional arts associations shall be established and that local authorities shall play a much larger part than they do at present in arts patronage. And there are some local authorities I wouldn’t trust with a Punch and Judy show. But they must be brought gradually to recognise their responsibilities in this field. Once you start off the ball of municipal emulation, you’re in. It’s a great business. Once one local authority does something, other authorities think, well so can we.

How much do you feel that the limitation of the Minister’s power serves to institutionalise the culture gap? Do you think the Minister of Arts job should be broadened?

Yes. Jenny Lee’s White Paper of 1965 called, in the arts, for generosity, imagination and coherence. There’s been something of the first two, but precious little of the third. Until you get a coherent framework at the top, you will not get people knowing what is happening throughout the whole scene. You can’t know what is happening when you have a situation in which the popular arts, and popular forms of entertainment, are nothing to do with the Arts
Ministry. At the moment, for example, sport comes under, in so far as it comes under anything at all, of all things, the Department of the Environment, with Mr Heseltine at its head. Films are divided into a small group which comes under the Arts Ministry, and a large group which comes under the Department of Trade. Or is it Industry? At any rate it doesn’t matter which. They are both totally unsuitable. Of all things, the Home Office controls television and radio. This is a recipe for disaster. What is miraculous is that under this chaotic situation, we have done as well as we have done. It’s not surprising that we haven’t got a film industry, when the department that is in charge of it, in so far as anyone is, is totally uninterested in the subject. It is necessary to create a new department, bringing together all these responsibilities, under a single Minister, who, if he had a department of that size, would rate Cabinet status.

I suppose that it is only in that way that you would get a political coherence that would defy, in some way, the massive commercial interests that are involved in that area?

Not only that. This is the only way in which you can redistribute finance effectively within the area. The whole condition of the theatre, for example, has always been of the popular supporting the more advanced area. Even an actor/manager in the old days would put on the things that he did easily, which got the crowds in, and then every now and then he’d have a go at something which rather interested him, something different. This is still done in a strange way — television gives a little money to the theatre, in order to try to encourage its seed corn. But if you had a Ministry, the £30m that the Treasury captures from television would go back into the business. At the moment it has to go through the Treasury and then out again through the Arts Council.

In the last two years things have changed radically with the coming of videos. Do you think that with the Tory government and with this new development in leisure industry, the culture gap has widened?

Yes. I think there is something essentially anti-cultural in capitalist society. I’m not quite sure where this comes from, but it does seem that in their endeavours to meet popular taste as it is called, there is a tendency to debase the very tastes that they are seeking to meet. In meeting that taste at the lowest level there is an anti-cultural element, and so I think it might be said that as the mass economy develops there is an almost inevitable tendency for public taste to depreciate rather than to improve. At the moment there is a worrying tendency in that the division between the relatively small group who appreciate what used to be called the fine arts, and the mass of the people, is growing. Unless conscious endeavours are made all the time by a powerful state machine to work in the opposite direction, then I think this gap will widen. I think it has widened.

You played quite an important part in the development of the idea of art being brought closer to the community. What do you think of the GLC’s policy in that respect?

I know what the GLC says its policy is, and as far as what it says, I’ve gone along with it. I think Tony Banks has one quality which I think is very valuable — he is capable of learning from experience. I heard one or two things said at a conference held at the National Film Theatre which I thought were wholly wrong — not by Tony necessarily, but by some people. They were trying to set up the poor arts, the community arts, against the fine arts. This is wrong. There ought to be room in any sane society for the existence of the ‘great’ arts, of opera even, elitist though it is in its present manifestations. This is not a criticism of the art form. It is a criticism of the society within which the art form exists. Most Eastern European countries succeed in getting a reasonable cross-section of the population into their opera houses. The notion that you should stop giving money to the opera, in order to give more to community theatre, is balderdash. If you stop giving that money to opera, it won’t go to community theatre. That money will go out of the arts altogether.

The impression that you get is that most of the money goes to people who seem to live in a different world from ordinary people — over there in the Barbican, in that art world.

You are right, art is essentially a middle class thing, and it doesn’t go much below that. I think I said in the book that I don’t think any manual worker has ever set foot inside the Arts Council building, except to clean it. That is the case, and we need to do something about it. But that, again, is a criticism of our society, rather than of the arts. We need to develop the consciousness, which was there, in the old CEMA days — when the Arts Council sprang from the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts. CEMA went out into the country and took the arts to the people. Sybil Thorndike going to the miners and so forth, orchestras going to play Peterborough Cathedral. People could go for nothing; there was no charge. That motivation has been lost, but it’s been lost throughout society, not only in the arts. Jenny Lee did try, in her arts paper, to encourage the spread of regional arts associations and thought that this would be a means of spreading art to a greater number of people. In fact it didn’t really turn out that way, because the whole development of regional arts associations was mismanaged by the succeeding Conservative Minister. He did one or two good things, to be fair. He put more money into the arts and the Arts Council, and then put more money into the regional arts associations, without making it a condition that that money was matched locally. Consequently the regional arts associations which started off on a fifty fifty basis, between national government and local government, finished up by being 80% national government, 20% local government. But that was a mistake which could have been rectified. But of course, you’ve got to make it possible for local government to put money into the arts, to encourage them to do so.

About ten years ago it seemed that those barriers — where a working class person would feel that a theatre wasn’t their own theatre — were breaking down. There was a convergence of different classes, a mixture of ideas. This shouldn’t be over-estimated but there was a certain movement. What hope do you see for the development of the arts?

In looking forward to the future, one has to assume that there will be no war. Otherwise there is no point in looking forward. What one needs, not only for the development of the arts, but also for other things, is a series of Labour governments. In all kinds of different ways there’s an awakening in the party — they’re even beginning to see the importance of the arts — that’s one of the last things that the party would ever think about at that level. But it’s got to permeate through. It will only come about as part of a general development. So, in the immediate future, it’s important to get the Labour Party to realise that the arts are important, that they are not only a reflection of society, but they do also have an effect on society. It’s also important that more and more people take part in the business of actually performing the arts. That’s important for the health of society.