

Cut in funding for English National Opera

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The English National Opera (ENO) is to have its Arts Council England (ACE) funding grant slashed by 29 percent. ACE is the body that administers funding to the arts. The ENO will receive £12.4 million next year compared to £17.2 million last year, with a one-off payment of £7.6 million in the transition period while it moves to a “new business model.”

ENO is one of the seven leading opera and ballet companies in England that include the Royal Opera House, the Welsh National Opera, Opera North, the English National Ballet, Birmingham Royal Ballet and the Northern Ballet. The overall cuts for opera and ballet will be 7.3 percent, with the Royal Opera House facing a cut of £800,000.

ENO is being cut despite ACE describing it has having “built an international reputation for daring interpretations of mainstream and contemporary opera, for collaborations with talent across the arts and for its role in nurturing British singers and artists.”

Many renowned and acclaimed arts institutions are also hit this year, including the Southbank Centre, National Theatre and Royal Shakespeare Company. These are three of the biggest recipients in the Arts Council portfolio, and all receive a 3.6 percent cut. The Barbican, home to Europe’s largest multi-arts and conference venue presenting a diverse range of art, music, theatre, dance, film and creative learning events, and the London Symphony Orchestra will receive 20 percent less funding than three years ago.

The Lowry in Salford, Greater Manchester, with its theatres complex and an art gallery dedicated to the painter L.S. Lowry, faces a similar cut in funding of 22 percent.

Some 58 arts organizations will no longer be part of the National Portfolio, i.e., receive funding from ACE. The portfolio has been reduced in total from 696 to 670 organisations, with 42 new entrants. The Orange Tree Theatre in Richmond, London loses all its grant of £1

million, likewise the Leeds Red Ladder Theatre company, which will no longer receive its grant of £162,000.

Other organizations leaving the portfolio include the Theatre Royal in Bury St. Edmunds, the Northumberland-based Theatre Sans Frontieres, the Academy of Ancient Music and the Wordsworth Trust in the Lake District. The latter, which administers museums devoted to the romantic poet William Wordsworth, has lost all its £80,000 funding from ACE. The Trust hosts poetry readings and has a full-time poet in residence, the Birmingham-born writer Zaffar Kunial, one of the publisher Faber’s new poets of 2014.

Over the past four years, central government funding to ACE has been cut by 36 percent. As a proportion of total public spending of £729 billion, a miniscule 0.5 percent now goes to the arts. This compares with defence spending, which claims £44 billion or 6 percent. Local authorities’ spending on the arts fell by 13 percent between 2010 and 2012, due to budget cuts.

While ACE’s overall budget remains relatively stable, with £340 million for 2014-15 and a slight decrease to £339.5 million for 2015-16, a dangerous precedent is being set regarding future funding. According to Stephen Deuchar, former director of Tate Britain and presently director of the Art Fund Charity, “The apparent use of [National] Lottery money to compensate for diminishing government funds sets a dangerous precedent.” £69.6 million of National Lottery money is being spent on the arts compared to £29 million last year. ACE pointed out that without that Lottery income, the National portfolio would have been reduced much more.

Not all art organisations are facing cuts in this budget review. In fact, three-quarters of the National Portfolio have had their funding frozen while some have received an increase, based on their commercial viability and

profitability. For example, the Manchester International Festival has been rewarded with an increase of 50 percent to due to its commercial success.

The decision by ACE to cut funding to such a prestigious organization as the ENO sends a message to all the arts organizations. It follows a “best value investment analysis of the big seven opera and ballet companies, who account for 22 percent of National Portfolio funding.”

Some 48 percent of ENO revenue comes from government funding, while the rest comes from the box office and private donations. According to the Arts Council, ENO “has struggled to reach box office targets and to achieve long term stability.” ENO artistic director John Berry is now working on a new “business plan” involving commercial producers to help stage modern musicals. After a short season at ENO’s home, the Coliseum, the productions will then launch onto the West End. Another plan involves generating money from the bars and cafes at the Coliseum.

Much has been made in the media of the attempt by ACE, in deciding how to allocate the arts budget, to redress the balance between London, which gets the main share of grants, and the other regions of England. In fact there has been only a slight shift in funding since 2008 away from the capital, from 51 percent to 47 percent. Of the 58 arts organisations to lose funding this coming year, 43 are based outside the capital.

The assault on arts funding is being defended by government and the media on the grounds that the cuts involved, and their impact, are not as severe as other areas targeted for austerity. The *Guardian* newspaper, for example, commented, “culture is not facing the devastation that threatens other areas like social care”.

It published the comments of Dave O’Brien, a lecturer in Cultural and Creative Industries at London University, who tried to gloss over the ACE cuts.

Referring to the fact that ACE has to justify every penny it receives for the arts, he said that the moves could help create an “ongoing conversation that reinforces the justifications for state support to the arts”. This could be a success as “Opening up public services in an attempt to empower users and, more controversially, offer choice, has become a core part of Labour, Liberal Democrat and Conservative approaches to government.”

This is why O’Brien fully accepts the pro-business

agenda that there is only so much money available and the arts have to take their fair share of the cuts. He writes, “serious questions have been raised about inequalities associated with its [ACE’s] funding”. Therefore, “In light of this, the major cut to English National Opera (29 percent) and the cuts to the larger London organisations make sense as does the continued trend in the geographical spread of funds.”

Government funding for the arts is being drastically eroded as the capitalist crisis deepens. It is not accidental that present secretary of state for Culture, Media and Sports, Sajid Javid, is an ex-banker. His qualifications for the job include the fact that he was the youngest vice president of the Chase Manhattan Bank, was a managing director at Deutsche Bank’s credit trading, equity convertibles, commodities and private equity businesses in Asia, and previously served as economics secretary and financial secretary to the Treasury.

In Britain, as everywhere, the rich demand that only they have access to the arts. They are hostile to working people having the opportunity to expand their cultural horizons, as it risks exposing the public to a sharpening of its aesthetic and critical faculties.

The trade union Equity has maintained a deafening silence in relation to the latest round of cuts. The response of the Labour Party, fully committed to austerity, came from Shadow Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport Harriet Harman. She called for ACE to devote more from a shrinking arts budget to the regions, thereby fuelling a race to the bottom over who gets the lion’s share of ever dwindling resources.



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