

Chairman's Report to Annual General Meeting (abridged) 2nd November 2009

Mr Mayor, Ladies and Gentlemen, good evening. I begin my Annual Report by thanking our President the Mayor Councillor Ian McDonald for kindly chairing this evening's Meeting. Councillor McDonald's enthusiasm and support for the arts in the Borough is well-known and I am delighted he is able to be here tonight.

I would also like to thank Peta Cook and the staff at Kingston Museum for allowing us to hold our A.G.M. here in this splendid gallery.

The Kingston Arts Council Executive Committee continues to meet at Kingston University six times a year, with the Kingston Summer Arts Season and Festival of the Voice committees meeting on a similar basis, and I would like to thank the University and Dr Helen Trott for their continued support in granting us the use of their facilities.

This year we have continued to aim for greater diversity within the affiliate body, and on the Executive Committee, and at the last A.G.M. approved a crucial amendment to the constitution allowing more individual affiliates to sit on the Executive. In addition, we continue to press on with plans to widen our affiliate base in *all* areas of the arts in the hope that those skills are then in turn represented on the Executive, offering greater assistance and services in the development of our affiliates, their activities and the organisations that they represent. A large and diverse makeup of Executive members, who *all* make a strong and distinctive contribution, is key to the success and development of Kingston Arts Council, and I hope that 2010 will see a renewed impetus here.

2009 has seen much development for Kingston Arts Council as we work to implement the strategies and other plans contained in our Artistic Policy and Business Plan. At our recent review meeting two months ago, the Grants Department were pleased with the progress that we are making. Securing another three-year grant from the Borough Council was a good achievement but we must work hard to ensure that we carry out our strategic aims to the best of our *collective* ability. That said, we are continuing to improve our profile and services that we offer, and can be proud of our recent achievements and the events and organisations that we have partnered.

During 2009, Kingston Arts Council has supported high-profile events including a very successful Summer Arts Season in July, two Arts Salons, and behind-the-scenes support of a number of other initiatives, as we build up to this year's Festival of the Voice. I am delighted that our partnership with the Summer Arts Season continues to develop, and I look forward to working closely with them as plans for 2010's Arts Season take shape.

The Salons continue to each have a different format and artistic focus, without losing sight of the key concepts of encouraging networking and artistic collaboration across the Borough. The first Salon of 2009, at the CornerHOUSE, saw a superb drama presentation from a youth theatre company featured in the first Kingston International Youth Arts Festival, together with an inspiring speech from local arts practitioner and writer Jon Constant, while the second Salon was recently held at John Lewis, Kingston, featuring local musicians in advance of this year's Festival of the Voice. There will be further Salons in 2010, the first in June, and the second in November. Each Salon will continue to have a different artistic leaning and will showcase the work of a local performing group and venue.

The third Festival of the Voice starts in a few days, and the organising committee have met regularly over the last eighteen months at 2 Exeter Court. It has been a privilege for me to direct both this and the previous Festival in 2007. Building on the successes of the last two Festivals, and learning from the disappointments, this Festival promises like the others to house an exciting and dynamic series of events, packed into a two-week period with lead-up events and workshops starting this weekend. Following on from Government Singing Ambassador Howard Goodall's involvement in 2007's Festival, I am delighted that Mary King, well-known for her work with young singers, on TV shows *Operatunity*, *Musicality*, and for the *BBC Cardiff Singer of the World*, will spearhead the Festival at its formal launch on the 12th November. Festival themes for this year include Children and Young People, Composer Anniversaries and Local Talent. There is a strong educational thread, linking the events with workshops and masterclasses and we see a continuation of the successful Festival Commissions, with some outstanding works to look forward to. We continue to showcase new and varied venues across the Borough, and have tried to build on the levels of commercial sponsorship that we were lucky to attract in 2007. This has proved challenging in the current climate, but we have managed nonetheless to attract some prominent supporters, and I am delighted that John Lewis is our key sponsor this year. We have been able to increase the local professional and amateur talent represented from an already respectable c. 70% in 2007, to around 80% this year, and as with the last Festival, many events are free to all-comers or to under-16s, and audience feedback forms will be available at each event. I look forward to seeing you at one or more of the 24 events taking place.

As I enter what will, if elected, be my fourth year as Chairman, I am excited about our plans for 2010, which include:

- Adhering to the aims and objectives in our Strategic Policy and Business Plan;
- Continued development of our excellent new website and the exploring of other web media. Web enquiries are proving popular and detailed records of these are being kept;
- Maintaining and developing our relationship with Time and Leisure magazine, and our good relations with the local press;

- The development of the Newsletter, with discussions taking place over the next few meetings about the future of this medium. It may be decided to replace it over time with enhanced web facilities.
- Kingston International Youth Arts Festival – productive discussions continue to take place about our partnership role in 2010’s Festival;
- Planning of the fourth Kingston Festival of the Voice 2011 following the evaluation of this year’s Festival of the Voice;
- Partnering the next Kingston Summer Arts Season as mentioned earlier;
- Hosting the Arts Salons as mentioned earlier;
- Developing our relationship with Kingston Music and Arts Service as we seek to support the national Sing Up! initiative as part of our Strategic Policy;
- Working more closely with the CornerHOUSE One Acts Festival and other drama initiatives within the Borough;
- Adopting PQASSO – the Practical Quality Assurance System for Small Organisations, to ensure that Kingston Arts Council continues to operate effectively and identify areas in need of improvement;
- With our Affiliates, looking at and reviewing the Kingston Arts Council brand, with the possibility of a new logo and more effective and up-to-date design and literature;
- Continuing to explore new performance venues and taking advantage of the new opportunities afforded to neglected venues generated by the refurbishment and closure of Kingston Parish Church;
- Encouraging more crossover between the private and public education sectors, supporting and advising those private schools keen to increase their community outreach and profile;
- Working with Kingston College, Kingston Music and Arts Service, and local live music venues we will look to establish an award to support local up-and-coming student bands, following on from the Festival of the Voice Bands Tribute Night at the Grey Horse later this month.

2008 and ‘09 have seen big changes across the U.K. in financial support for the Arts. Kingston Arts Council is striving to keep on top of this, and to anticipate change, in

addition to honouring the realistic commitments set out in our Artistic Policy and Business Plan.

As we emerge from this recession, there have been and will undoubtedly continue to be local cut-backs; however, I would like to look at this scenario from another angle. Perhaps it is time for reflection from *all* those who work in the arts locally, both professional and amateur. Reflection about the products and experiences they are offering, rather than just resting on their laurels. There is always excellent work in all areas of the arts going on in the Borough, which should be supported and applauded, but some might feel that the arts scene in Kingston is becoming more and more saturated, with barely a day of respite in a calendar which is often cluttered up with much good-willed but sometimes misguided artistic endeavour. Throughout my time as Chair, coupled with over ten years' working as a freelance performer in the Borough, I have seen evidence that a good deal of artistic activity takes place with a lack of prudent and engaged management, with minimal audiences and with unclear long-term objectives and/or outcomes.

The Borough Council's intentions towards the arts in the Borough are admirable and generous, but the artistic and shop-floor expertise is not necessarily to be found in the Guildhall. It can and *should* exist in an organisation such as Kingston Arts Council, where we as a community of practitioners can seek to encourage and support those working in the arts at all levels in the Borough to adapt to change and to help guide them down a path that embraces more effective planning, marketing and audience targeting, more rewarding collaborations with other groups and individuals, and generally better cohesion.

Politically too, Kingston Arts Council's future strategy requires a two-pronged approach, which in part means a more proactive engaging with the main political forces in the Borough as we approach the May elections. Regardless of the outcome of the elections, Kingston Arts Council will remain a non-political organisation, but we must be prepared for the possibility of a shift in Council leadership and/or policy and be ready, not just to be flexible, but to promote our case effectively (under what could ultimately be very different circumstances) for continuing to be a vital cog in the local arts wheel and a crucial part in the delivery of the Borough Council's support for the arts.

[The Chairman went on to thank various members of the Executive.]

I look forward to a positive and proactive 2010, and am pleased to present this, my third Annual Report to the present company.

Benjamin Costello
Chairman