Does this look like the best way to sell Britain?
By Peter Aspden
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I am introduced to David Green, director-general of the British Council, at a party in Venice. It is not the usual kind of high-society Venetian function - Bellinis, Vivaldi and elegant conversation at dusk. Instead we are in a children's playground just behind the Academia museum. It is nearly midnight, it is stiflingly hot and the massive speakers are pumping out techno, garage and the obligatory homage to the kitsch triumphalism that was 1970s pop.

Occasionally the DJ takes a break and a strange blond man who looks like Austin Powers takes the stage to play some cacophonous saxophone solos. A lithe Japanese woman dances keenly alongside him. Many in the audience are drunk. A woman passes out at the front of the stage and a dreadful rumour passes round that the bar has run out of drink.

It is the first time that Scotland has been invited to have its own show at the Venice Biennale of contemporary art, and it is celebrating in high, some might say typically high, spirits. The British Council has since the 1930s organised Britain's participation in the Biennale, and it prides itself on throwing the best parties.

A Swiss curator tells me that each nation's party at the show is remarkably reflective of its values; thus the French excel at tables groaning with "sculpted fruit", while the Americans "just ask people who they think might give them money". But this is the best party, she says. "It is just like a football match."

So when I am introduced to Green, I want to ask him if this is how the British Council wants the world to think of British culture. That it is loud, sweaty, crude and peopled by boorish inebriates. But, frankly, neither of us can hear a word the other is saying. We make an appointment to meet in London, just as Austin Powers begins another terrible solo.

Crowds of swaying bodies have joined the Japanese woman on stage, and I wonder what anyone taking a quiet stroll round the side streets of the Dorsoduro must be thinking.

In the reception area of the British Council's headquarters just off Trafalgar Square, the contrast couldn't be greater. On a bright primrose-yellow wall, the words "Creating Opportunity Worldwide" give visitors the wholesome message. Round the corner, a video screen is showing a series of random images of what one takes to be Britishness: Stephen Hawking; Thunderbird 2; Penny Lane; an apple; a hedge; a pair of brogues; a bagpipe player; empty deckchairs on a deserted beach. It is impossible not to be seduced into an idle reverie. Is this what we are? Is this all we are?

The British Council was formed by the Foreign Office in 1934 with a set of solid answers to those very questions. Originally founded as a voluntary association with the ingenuous name of the British Committee for Relations with Other Countries, there was a quiet confidence about its mission to promote culture, education, science and technology in the world.

It was a time of fascism, and there was an air of certitude about the presumed benefits of being British, perfectly captured in the righteous colonial air of Olivia Manning's Balkan Trilogy - Manning was herself married to a British Council lecturer in Romania.

Green is the first to admit that times have changed. He is a tall, bearded man, gentle of voice and manner, and would not have looked out of place in the world of Manning's Guy and Harriet Pringle. But it is a different world now. Today, the Council has an estimated turnover of £479m (£164m is a core grant-in-aid from the Foreign Office).

And in these more politically correct times, the Council is not in the business of exporting British values, but seeks instead to "nurture mutually beneficial relationships" between Britain and the 109 countries it deals with. Green says it is important for it to do its job with a "post-imperialist sensibility", and to portray a "warts-and-all Britain that is dynamic, democratic, transparent. Not a glossy version at all. Because people only trust you when you are honest with them."

Culture, he says, is a key part of illustrating those values. To this end, the Council puts on some 2,500 arts events a year to represent UK culture abroad, and collaborates with artists from 100 countries. Its record is impressive. It was the first body to promote Francis Bacon internationally by showing him at the

But what kind of culture to choose? The sheer eclecticism of Britain’s arts scene makes it a dizzying proposition. Green says it would be the easiest thing in the world to fall back on “Heritage UK”- Shakespeare, Merchant-Ivory, classical music recitals, more Shakespeare - but that would not be telling the whole story. “It is important to show that the UK is actually an experimental, creative and occasionally radical culture.”

Thus, an assortment of cutting-edge theatre groups, DJs and conceptual artists - about as far from Guy and Harriet as you can get - find themselves in the unlikely scenario of representing Britain and its culture. “Art for a Dangerous World” is the somewhat melodramatic title of the Council’s arts programme, and quite a list it makes: Morcheeba on tour in China; Vivienne Westwood in Shanghai; Rachel Whiteread in Sao Paulo; a UK hip-hop package in Botswana; physical theatre in Malawi, and so on, and so on.

“Unlike some of our counterparts” - one guesses Green is referring to Germany’s Goethe Institut and France’s Institut Francais - “we make sure we are engaging with something the people [in other countries] want to engage with. We are much more catholic, much more wide-ranging in our approach.” But does all this trendiness not occasionally annoy the sentinels of middle England? Or indeed the Foreign Office, the Council’s chief paymaster? “There is a tension there. There are those who would like us to portray British culture with a greater degree of conservatism. But it is one of our real strengths that we are independent of government.”

I ask him for an example of the Council being at loggerheads with the Foreign Office; he gives me instead a significant example of the two being in accord: Chris Ofili, this year’s British representative in Venice, decked the entire British pavilion in the pan-African colours of red, black and green, and extended the colour scheme to the three Union flags outside. “I thought there would be a much stronger reaction to that,” confesses Green. “But everyone seemed very relaxed about it.”

And how about that Scottish party in Venice? Was it not all a little “Cool Britannia”, to use a widely discredited term? Green is unfazed, shrugs his shoulders and merely asks me if I knew who the blond fellow playing the saxophone was. “He looked like Elton John,” he says, thus showing himself to be not very cool at all, but not in the slightest bit worried about it.

One of the highlights of this year’s arts programme is in the Slovenian capital Ljubljana, where the Council is sponsoring a brand new exhibition of work by Damien Hirst, Britain’s most notorious visual artist, in the city’s International Centre of Graphic Arts. New shows by Hirst are rare, and this one has particular interest because it is the first exhibition of his drawings.

Nobody is sure if Hirst, who made his reputation slicing cows and pickling sharks, can draw at all. But an impressively large crowd turns up to the opening night at the gallery, to hear several over-long speeches by over-solemn dignitaries. Hirst is skulking in a corner with the dealer Jay Jopling, but he is behaving relatively graciously. In truth, not many in the crowd seem to know who he is.

He gives some interviews in the offices above the main galleries, and I take the chance to ask him why he chose Ljubljana to display his drawings for the first time, hoping perhaps to hear of an unpublicised affinity with Slovenian culture. The truth is more prosaic. “I won an award here a couple of years ago and I never turned up to receive it. So it is guilt, basically.”

There are some characteristically shocking drawings in the gallery - a series of religious themes previewing his forthcoming exhibition in London - but they attract little attention. The consensus among the locals, according to a Slovenian journalist I talk to, is that most of the drawings are not very good. There is little of the frisson one might expect if the occasion had been in London, little of the sense of “connecting people worldwide with creative ideas from the UK” boasted of in the Council’s “A-Z of Arts” leaflet. The opening night reception fizzles out and Hirst is spotted later in the evening going into a McDonald’s, which is engagement with global culture, of a kind.

Despite the bluster, this does not seem a terribly effective dialogue between foreign nationals and British culture. A few days later, at Ofili’s Venetian show, I ask him what it feels like to be an artist representing Britain, and he all but evades the question: “It is a very difficult thing to imagine, to think of the whole of Britain. You can’t really do that - you have to just concentrate on putting on a good exhibition. But it does feel a bit like walking out on to [the turf at] Wembley stadium, which I’ve always thought would be nice.”
I begin to wonder, in the face of such diffidence, whether these noble aspirations of the British Council, in which nation shall speak culture unto nation, are a little bit over-ambitious, or even pretentious. But then I hear about the progress of a small theatre company called Volcano, which is on tour in the Caucasus and has run into a little local difficulty.

Volcano is a Swansea-based company specialising in physical theatre, a type of stagecraft that is not terribly popular in mainstream UK theatres but which has a strong following on the fringe. Its striking production of Shakespeare's sonnets, L.O.V.E., won critical acclaim when it was unveiled 10 years ago and has since toured the world.

This year, the British Council has decided to promote the show in Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia, countries with an apparently strong thirst for contemporary British culture. Courtesy of the British Council, I am due to see the show in the Azeri capital, Baku, but the news from the first leg of the tour in Georgia is not good. L.O.V.E. is a three-hander featuring two men and a woman, who indulge in many permutations of congress in a vicious love triangle which brings out all the darkness of Shakespeare's most rapturous work.

On opening night at the Marjanishvili Theatre, one of the country's most well-respected venues, all was going well until the scene in which the company's two male protagonists share a lingering kiss on stage. There was, say the actors afterwards, a detectable sense of unease, some shifting in seats; and then some catcalls, and jeers. And finally, extraordinarily, the voice of the theatre's director expressing his obvious disapproval of what he had seen on stage, and ordering his own troupe's actors to join him in walking out on the play. The play managed to keep going, despite the disruption. But outside, after the show, a furious argument developed, which ended up in the street. It seems from accounts afterwards that some local religious leaders, with an eye to forthcoming elections, had decided to use the play as a pretext for sermonising on the state of morals in the country.

But the controversy had its consequences: it was immediately made clear to Volcano that it was not required to perform its remaining two shows. "It was a great shock," says Fern Smith, one of the actors. "Ironically, it left us with nothing to do for the next couple of days but look at churches."

Now this does not occur very often with work promoted by the British Council. Usually the sensitivity of staff in local offices ensures that any challenges thrown up by the performance of a visiting artist or company will be ultimately absorbed, if not wholeheartedly accepted. But it really seems that the Volcano performers found themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time, victims of some manipulative politicking.

So now, suddenly, the trip to Baku - capital of a Muslim country - is a little nerve-racking. A press conference is called before the first performance, and there are hostile questions from journalists who have heard of the events in Georgia and are concerned about the content of the show. The atmosphere is tense, but soothing words from the actors and local British Council staff have the required effect, and the opening performance, at least, will go on at the Azerbaijan State Musical Comedy Theatre.

All three of Volcano's shows in Baku sold out within a week, a testament to the curiosity of a public reared on deeply traditional productions of theatrical classics. So there is a palpable buzz on opening night. The show commences amid whispers, shuffling and mobile phones ringing freely.

After about 20 minutes, it gets to the kiss, the male kiss, which starts as a tentative peck on the lips between actors Paul Davies and James Hewison but develops into something altogether more carnal. There are some gasps in the audience; and then a couple of handclaps, and then some more applause. And then most of the house joins in the applause, as the kiss, reaching Hitchcockian levels of languorous eroticism, goes on and on. It is an extraordinary moment, and a moving one too.

It is rare, as a regular theatre-goer in a western country, to see a taboo aired, broken, stamped on and thrown away in the space of a few lusty seconds.

I join the actors for a late-night supper after the last of three extremely successful performances. They are highly experienced in travelling to difficult places - the first international company to visit Kosovo after the war, the first British troupe to travel to the Falklands after the conflict with Argentina - but they admit that the Georgian experience left them shaken and a little intimidated.
But the day after their opening night in Baku, they found themselves being stopped in the streets by appreciative youngsters and asked for autographs. I say it must be terrific to be a cutting-edge artist when you can feel your art actually cut. Surely performing in Britain sometimes feels a little too safe? "I don't know about that," says Fern Smith. "We have been banned in Worthing."

And this is the point that the British Council seeks to make: that perhaps the most important British value to promote round the world is that it is fine for work to upset people occasionally, whether it be in Sussex or the shores of the Caspian Sea; the important thing is to let it be aired, and to allow a civilised debate to follow it.

When I speak to Baroness Helena Kennedy, the human-rights lawyer who chairs the British Council, about the sheer variety of British culture, about how I once had to review Sense and Sensibility and Trainspotting, two extremes of British cinema - from heritage to heroin - on the very same day, she tells me unprompted that if the Council had to choose one to show overseas, it would be Trainspotting every time. "The Council would just see that as a more interesting and challenging thing to take abroad. It is important for us to push the envelope a little bit."

Kennedy says that the arts are important precisely because "it is one of the most powerful ways ideas move between people". She adds that even when it comes to some of the values Britain does explicitly want to encourage, such as democracy and human rights, there are few better ways of encouraging debate than through the mutual exchange of culture.

"As a human-rights lawyer, I think that talking about the rule of law, and why it matters, and the search for universal legal values, are really crucial things. Law is cultural too. It has a visceral quality, and it has to come out of what people think is right for them, where there is a serious mutuality of interest and nobody is telling anybody else how to do it."

I think about Kennedy's remarks after seeing the positive reaction to L.O.V.E. in Baku, watching this group of mainly young people leave the theatre, having seen something utterly new and ground-breaking on stage - and forever associating it with Britain.

It seems like such an obviously enlightened and subtle way of shaping hearts and minds that I can't understand why nobody else does it. It is, as the latest geo-political lexicon has it, a living demonstration of the exercise of "soft power", the concept devised by Joseph Nye, dean of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, to describe the transmission of values by example, persuasion and advocacy rather than by force.

The morning after Volcano's final show, I ask the British ambassador to Baku, Andrew Tucker, whether paying arts groups to kiss each other on stage was not a more attractive way of spreading western liberal values than by threatening to bomb them if they don't instantly change regimes.

Of course Tucker is far too experienced a diplomat to fall for that one, but he does seem to take the point. What Volcano showed in Azerbaijan, he says, "is that there are different ways of doing things, other ways of expressing familiar themes. And once [as an audience] you start honing those critical qualities, you start to apply the same skills to other areas."

Helena Kennedy recalls the visit made by the National Theatre to Belgrade in 2001 after the war in Yugoslavia. "There were queues of mainly young people round the block, and they kept saying: 'You have sent us your National Theatre just after we have been bombed!'"

They couldn't believe it. But that is why it is so important [for the British Council] to be at arm's length from the government. We are not a propaganda machine. We can't be part of the vagaries of the foreign policy of a particular government. We are at the ground floor level, a symbol that, whatever else happens, we can keep relationships alive."

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