Fuelling Change, S2 | E2

National Service: leading institutions today

[music in the background]

Kate: Hello and welcome to Fuelling Change. This special three-episode series of podcasts was recorded live as a series of conversations on the theme of values and ethics in cultural production. Whilst I was on a visiting fellowship with the Cultural Programme at Oxford University and Hertford College, the podcasts are produced by the Cultural Programme and Fuel

Episode Two: National Service: Leading Institutions Today. With John McGrath, Devyani Saltzman, and Professor Michael Smets. Live from the Old Fire Station.

[music fades]

Thank you to everyone joining us here at the Old Fire Station in Oxford. I'm your host today. I'm Kate McGrath. My pronouns are she, her. I'm a white woman in my mid forties. I'm wearing black jeans, a black shirt, and a kind of vintage jacket.

To introduce myself a little: I'm Artistic Director and Chief Executive of Fuel, which is a producing company I co-founded in 2004. We produce new live performance across the UK and beyond tackling the big questions of our times. I'm also a trustee of several arts organisations and cultural organisations, including the Clore Leadership Programme, ARTCRY, and What Next?

We live in a world full of evolving ethical questions and dilemmas. Our cultural life reflects the society we live in, and arts and culture can create spaces to debate ethics and to explore value systems. Through history it has always been this way, but in the fraught and divided world we live in, how do cultural leaders approach ethical dilemmas? What place do values have in navigating decision making? How do cultural leaders manage conflicts or tensions when they arise? How can vision and values align? In this session, I'm particularly interested in how cultural leaders approach questions of values and ethics within larger institutions.

I invited three brilliant speakers today for an open conversation about these questions, each of whom brings a real range of experience and perspective. Here's how it's going to work. I'm going introduce each of the speakers and then ask them some questions about their specific experience, and ideas around these themes.We'll then move on to a broader questions for all of them and a discussion I hope.

So: John McGrath. I first met John when he was Artistic Director of Contact in Manchester before he went on to be founding Artistic Director of the National Theatre of Wales, where his programme included the much celebrated Passion created with Michael Sheen and the local community in Port Talbot. Ten years ago, John left Wales to take the helm at Manchester International Festival, now Factory International. In all of these differing

contexts, John has been keen to explore how deep community connections can marry with cutting edge artistic practice to imagine future possibilities. He says, our goal in building a new cultural space for Manchester has also always been to open up a place for ideas, for emotions, for understanding, and for imagining the future. And I should say, as far as I know, we're not related despite sharing a surname. Can I ask you to introduce yourself?

John: Thank you, Kate. Yeah, you've, you've made my gag about not being related, so I am John. Pronouns he/him. I am a small, pale skin person with a big nose and short grey hair. And yeah, that's me.

Kate: That's brilliant. Thank you so much. Um, our next guest is Devyani Saltzman, a Canadian writer, curator, and the recently appointed Director of Arts at The Barbican. Previously Devyani was Director of Public Programming at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Director of Literary Arts at the Banff Centre, and a founding Curator at Luminato Festival in Toronto. Devyani has written and spoken extensively about social change and leadership and hosted the podcast of The Culture Shift. And her new book, EXITING: Towards a Future of Work that Serves Us All, comes out with Random House this year. Devyani has a degree in Human Sciences from Oxford University. We recently discovered we went to the same college.Can I ask you to introduce yourself?

Devyani: Thank you for having me. I'm Devyani Saltzman. She her, I'm a mixed race, brown woman in her mid-forties wearing a denim jacket.

Kate: Thank you so much. And last but absolutely not least, Michael Smets, who is Professor of Management at Saïd Business School at University of Oxford. Michael's research focuses on competing strategic demands and inclusive leadership in complex organisational environments. He explores these topics with senior leaders in corporations, museums, professional service firms and educational organisations. He is a co-author of the Museum Leaders' Report, co-sponsored by the National Museum Directors' Council and Teachers on the Oxford Cultural Leaders Programme. Can I ask you to introduce yourself?

Michael: Thank you very much for having me, Kate. Michael Smets, he, him, I'm a middle-aged white man wearing a dark blue suit because we are still in Oxford. So dark blue is the colour.

Kate: Brilliant. Thank you so much. And just to get you all in the room, can I ask you to give a warm welcome to everyone?

[audience claps and makes noise]

Kate: Thank you. John, I'm gonna start with you, for now, so you've led many organisations now including founding the National Theatre of Wales and now running Factory International. I'm interested, would you say your own personal values have shaped those organisations and if so, can you give us any examples of how.

John: I would say that my personal values have contributed to the organisations, but in each case, I went into an organisation where there was an invitation or even a call to a certain kind

of action. So in Wales that was to think about and, explore what a, a national theatre working in the English language might be for, country where that language had been a tool of colonialism and yet was the lingua franca of most of the people in the country. So there was a, a complexity in that case to what the ask was and then. To that you don't bring necessarily your own opinion on those questions, but, a set of ways of exploring. Likewise, when I was at Contact, the question that I was given was, how would you put young people genuinely at the centre of a theatre today?

To then ask that in a, in a spirit of inquiry, using values that are around collaboration, around trying to share space and, think about, different voices all becomes part of the question. But it isn't necessarily my job to come in and think, say, I think we should, be doing stuff about this because it's important to me. Values is an interesting word, isn't it? Does it relate, does values relate predominantly to the what we do or to the how we do it? I think in so far as it's the how we do it, then yes, you want your values and those of the organisation to be as closely aligned together. But if it's about the what we do, then I think as a leader of an organisation, particularly one where there's a certain public , or a certain mission, your job isn't to, step forward, but to take a step back.

Kate: Great. I love that we've got straight into what does, what does it mean, values, I, I, I'm really interested in just digging in a little bit more to this question of kind of civic leadership in these roles, whether it's Manchester or Wales. If you're running a national theatre, or, a, a new flagship venue for Manchester, with big support from the City Council. Where does the, the narrative of the nation or the narrative of Manchester come into this and, and how, how does that relate to values?

John: Well, first of all, I think there are two very different narratives. So nation functions politically in a very different way to how the city functions. I think for many of us, the, the city is a much more comfortable narrative, we can think of the city as something we can be very proud of. That in some ways is quite unproblematic, to be a proud Scouse, or a proud Mancunian, or even a proud Oxfordian, if that is a word. Um, but the narrative around nation… 'cause of histories of colonialism, because of how nation has functioned is far more complex and it doesn't become less complex because you're doing something nice like theatre.

So I think in, in those two different ways you're thinking differently, but I think what you have to do is ask the question of what the, meaning of the, the cultural activity that you're in can be in relation to those questions. So, I could talk about Manchester, but I won't here very briefly talking about Wales. The, the question of what might, what might theatre be in that moment, in that place? We very specifically asked in starting that company off and, um. In brief, we sort of put forward the thought that there were maybe three ways to think about a National Theatre in that moment. One would be to think of it in terms of history. Does the, the National Theatre in some way links to the, the history? One would be to think of it in terms of identity, that in some way National Theatre is helping to form an identity. What is it to be of, of this nation? And the third one, which is the one that we really led with National Theatre Wales, led down with National Theatre Wales, was to think about, place. And to think, what is it to be in this place together? And that became, for us, the defining drive of National Theatre Wales, which was a company that went on to make work in a vast variety of different places. all across, all, all across Wales and in different ways. But each act of making theatre was a gathering of people in that place and a unique gathering of people in that place

at that time. And the proposition of that company was the nation, could also be that, it could be a gathering of actually a wide ranging and even surprising group of people in a particular place, in a particular moment.

Kate: Brilliant. There's, there's so much I want to pick up on, but I am going to just move on and try and get some other voices in the room and then let's, let's pick up on some of that. So, Devyani, I'm going to come to you. I've framed this talk as being a bit about National Service, and you've very recently moved to the UK, well, relatively recently from Canada. So I'd love to ask you what your first impressions are, of how, if you, if you have any, of how values and ethics are talked about in the UK, and if you perceive any differences in approach from Canada.

Devyani: Yes. I mean, in a very specific instance, the reason I moved from Toronto was because I, I was drawn to a leader who was the CEO who recruited me at the time, from The Barbican, who had specifically created a strategic framework that was values and purpose led. So I actually moved because I had signed up to a set of values that I really believed in, and that was coming out of kind of an organisation that had gone through a lot of challenging change. Post BLM. So, in terms of differences, I was actually very excited at that time, and that was a year plus ago by what the Barbican started to do post 2020.

In terms of rebuilding, I think in terms of differences specifically, I actually find the conversation around values and ethics quite alive here, here we are sitting today and I find that conversation very alive in Canada as well. I think the real difference that's very clear is around the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Indigenous conversation in Canada, which has obviously been happening since 2015 to redress the harms of colonialism and residential schools.

So the TRCs influence in cultural institutions and institutional policy and programming is obviously the largest, kind of difference moving to the UK from Canada. But what's also exciting is the potential to take some of those learnings, the 92 calls for action -I'm not sure how many people here are familiar with the TRC and think about it also in an international, in the UK context. So, excuse me, I'm being a little bit vague if you're not very aware of it, but that is the kind of clearest difference, but I do find the general values and ethics conversation, especially around ethics of sponsorship and human rights codes of framework in cultural programming, vibrant in both places.

Kate: Great, and it would be great to hear a little bit more about that later on. So maybe, maybe we'll come, we'll come back to that if, if people have questions. You, you alluded to the recent history of The Barbican, just to, to give people some context in 2021 before you arrived, The Barbican was accused of being, institutionally racist by current and former staff who collated stories anonymously in a book, containing more than a hundred instances of alleged prejudicial behaviour. The Barbican commissioned an independent investigation and The Barbican Director stood down and the organisation committed to radical transformation of culture and behaviours and you have said since starting at The Barbican that your key to your vision for the next chapter of The Barbican is the potential to create a new type of ethos in public institutions, that is truly in service. Picking up that word service, which was actually in the title for this, this event as well, to their people and public.

So I, I just really wanted to ask you, where, where you begin, if you can paint a picture almost of maybe your first a hundred days at The Barbican. Not, not asking you to go back and unpick the history of an organisation when you weren't there, but to think about like how you start that mission.

Devyani: Absolutely, and I think it's important to clarify, I'm the Artistic Director and then there's the role of the CEO. So, I'm not coming in and kind of making a grand statement of, of major ethos change from a CEO level or institutional level, I'm making it in terms of kind of in service to our publics through the programming we run, which is the remit I can personally influence. So, obviously I came because that is a, that is a dark chapter of history, but it was the strategic framework that was born out of that, a huge, EDI effort in, in addition to creating an EDI team, a code of ethics, an ethics working group that was born by the previous, the CEO, who recruited me, that, that kind of led to the foundation for a new artistic vision, which we're going to go public about in the next month. And that vision is really related to how we can be responsive to the world and bravely platform artists who are speaking openly about the world we live in. And, um, and not shy away from difficult conversations and actually be artist led in those conversations. The ethos is one of, of bravery, and of platforming multiple voices, especially voices from the global majority who may not have historically have been on those stages. And also putting civic purpose back at the root of the organisation, so not just being a boundary pushing, presenting institution, but really increasing our, increasing our participation, community programmes, education programmes, free offers, and platforming them as, as essential to who we are. Forgive me, I am a little nervous and, and I am not expressing myself as well as I wish, but that ethos shift is one of kind of service to publics through access and voices we don't normally hear from access, both financially and in terms of what we are, what we are, putting forward and creative training for the next generation. So bringing back all our talent labs, our curatorial training programmes, and making that an essential part of the pipeline, especially not to replace, but essentially in a, in a, in an economy and in a go, in a government moment where there are such shifts away from the curriculum. And I don't think the art should be picking up the pieces of government responsibility, but I think in this moment we also need to ensure a generation isn't lost in that creative opportunity and training.

Kate: Thank you and just want to reassure you, you're being incredibly articulate and clear. I did want to ask a little bit about your book as well, if that's all right, Devyani's new book explores pushback against systemic change in our institutions. So, very relevant to what you were just talking about, and, the exiting of diverse leaders from organisations they were invited into, and what new, healthier systems could look like. In the subtext of this, I recognise the labour of the work of change, and how that labour falls disproportionately on leaders from marginalised identities, and the challenge of sustaining the change. What do you think? - and I hesitate to ask you to summarise 'cause you have actually written a whole book about this - but what do you think the cultural sector and indeed, wider society might do to enable these healthier systems that you described? Or what might a starting point be?

Devyani: Yeah, it is obviously something I've been living with for a long time and putting into 300 pages and multiple interviews. But I mean, it's also something I think about every day, even in the current context. It was my one year anniversary at The Barbican, yesterday. I feel what there, there is no easy answer to what can sustain change. I, I just have a very short thing I've been thinking about recently in terms of one's own physical health or the health of leaders of colour. I, I am white passing, but mixed Punjabi and Ukrainian descent as well. I

think a lot of the root of the problem actually maybe has, has to do with our relationship to productivity in cultural creation. And what I'm seeing a lot is [that] we are living in systems that were created as 19th century post-industrial revolution. Ways of working that actually don't allow us time to breathe, take care of our health. I feel slightly fruity saying this, even outlook in the way we use email systems, meeting culture, maybe this only exists in a few places and others have had it right, lead to just repetitive burnout in the workforce. So I just think top line, I'm curious about how we can create systems that actually aren't about doing as much. And how we can create space for workers to have balance in life. When I was recruited by Claire Spencer, the CEO who called me, I negotiated for two weeks with an employment lawyer for IVF leave as a single woman in her mid-forties, and that wasn't a policy in City of London contracting, but that kind of small policy shift that you can leave as somebody who doesn't have a dependent with income, to have a child in midlife and be supported for it. It's, it's a combination of like the little moves and experiments and the move away from a culture of adrenaline fuelled production.When we're an industry that's actually about being able to hopefully dream and think to the way we support our artists too. Hopefully. Again, not the most eloquent, but those are some of the things. What are the little interventions and experiments? What does pacing look like in the workforce, and what structural changes can we actually make to

our week, work week, our work-day, the rhythm of a festival cycle, etcetera, that support a little more humanity.

Kate: Brilliant. Thank you. I can't wait to read the book and, and to hear more. Michael, thank you for joining us, and bringing your expertise to this discussion. When we met, you spoke about the work you'd done on the CEO report for the museum sector, and also teaching on the Oxford Cultural Leaders Programme. And specifically about how leaders, navigate competing strategic demands and express that you felt perhaps the cultural, sector and cultural organisations might have something to teach the corporate community about how to balance those competing demands. I, I'm paraphrasing you, forgive me, but as we aim not only for profit, but also for people and planet or for culture and community, and you've created a model for this. So maybe there's a solution right here in the room. Could you tell us a little bit more about how the model might enable leaders to engage with some of these questions around values, what we do, how we do it?

Michael: Yes, thank you. And I, and I hope the model helps. I wouldn't pretend that it is the answer, but I was originally drawn to the cultural sector as in, in business schools and in corporations, we're increasingly thinking about moving away from a kind of an, an either or very polarised, singular mode of leadership to something that is more both and or, or paradoxical, where we start to look beyond dilemmas, beyond tensions to see how we can integrate some of these strategic demands, social enterprises are, are a key example of that. And that was the premise with which we started interviewing those museum leaders. And I, I hate to admit it in retrospect, they looked at us fairly blank faced and like, yeah, that's called work. And we've been doing that for a very, very long time and by the way, in the cultural sector, it's not just about balancing culture and commerce, that can common dichotomy at the time, but it is also all about sustaining and supporting our communities, as we've just heard. And so, while the world of business is kind of grappling with… kind of stepping onto the tightrope, if you will, cultural leaders have been spinning plates. For a very, very long time. And that is something that the world of business is currently trying to get to when we think about the triple bottom line, when we think about ESG, all of those kind of three letter

acronyms that the business world is now trying to achieve. And the cultural sector has been practicing this for a really, really long time and so there is a, there are some important lessons to be learned. And so what we encourage cultural leaders to think about or trying to systematise some of the difficulty, the challenge of leading a cultural institution is to think about these kind of three strategic demands of culture, corporation, and community. And even that is very, very simple and you can imagine them as kind of three circles and a Venn diagram.

And what was really fascinating in terms of values and ethics is to speak to those museum directors and, them almost starting the conversation from, "this is where the red lines are". There are certain things that are just not up for grabs. There are certain things that are incompatible. They are in conflict and, and we wouldn't muddle them up. And then there are some of these intersections where you say, well, they are compatible, so we want to do these things, but we would do them in in different spaces. The museum gift-shop is the classic example, you need to generate revenue, you want your exhibition to be free or donation based, but somewhere you generate revenue, but you do that in different spaces. And then there are those activities or those programming points where you get to the kind of the, the placemaking ethos that we heard about earlier where you say, actually this is where these different strategic demands are no longer in competition with each other, but this is actually where they start to fuel each other. So [here's] a wonderful example I heard from a, a cultural leader in, in Scandinavia: they were hosting these kind of knitting clubs, in, in pubs. And it was just to have something for the community to do and come together. But they realised that the most, attractive, the most well attended events were those where they provided a bit of a cultural overlay as kind of, there was a, a story from kind the local community, there was a little bit of folklore, there was a community culture around it, they say, and, and they came up with this ethos of kind of knitting your way into the culture of the place. And it actually took the leaders of this organisation quite a while to understand that what attracted people was not just the community, but being part of something bigger, being part of something cultural. So this is where those kind of three parts kind of started to, to intersect in a much more productive way.

Kate: Brilliant. Fascinating, and again, so many things I'd like to follow up on. I'm interested, it's so useful to have the, the different perspective, and I'm interested in hearing a little a bit of the conversation we had about how to handle questions of, of values and ethics if your work is inherently political. We've talked about this, we touched a little bit on this, but I'm interested in any insight you might have into the differences that might exist between how the corporate sector tackles this versus the charity sector. What happens when, as with many cultural organisations, similarly, your operation spans both?

Michael: I think what we're seeing, a really interesting shift at the moment, is that the space that is given to political values-based, ethics-based conversations in, in different kind of organisations. So, several years ago, there was a big scandal in a way where a corporate leader decreed that political conversations had no place in their organisation and they banned talking politics at work and basically said, if, if you disagree with this, then you can have a severance cheque and, and off you go. And 30% of that organisation's leadership went. And if you think back, for example, to the first Trump administration, the big tech companies were the ones who positioned themselves as the, the havens of inclusivity. Of course there was some self-interest in that because they were very dependent on international tech talent. We saw the travel ban, and I am afraid now we have to see –[I'm referring to] the first travel ban,

because we're just seeing a second one- and so the role of organisations was, as society became more polarised, organisations were becoming more inclusive, making more space for these difficult conversations because business is political these days.

Now, again, in the cultural sector, it's been much more at the, the heart and soul of cultural organisations to facilitate some of these more uncomfortable conversations, and so again, as we're now seeing big corporations falling in line with political pressures, I'm afraid to say that it looks like it's more and more upon the cultural sector to keep those spaces for difficult, courageous conversations open for the rest of society.

Kate: Great. Well, with that, I'm going to ask a, couple, two, or three questions to all of you and feel free to answer whichever one's, you feel interested in, but I really just want to follow on first of all from, from that question of, ethics I suppose. So, Michael says it's on us to, to hold the spaces and we are also pretty good at, at having these ethical debates in amongst ourselves about our own practices. So we're, we are right at the moment in the midst of yet another controversy about ethical fundraising in the arts. You touched on fundraising, Devyani, already. The playwright Caryl Churchill, supported by 300 arts professionals, pulled out of a project at Donmar Warehouse, as the project is sponsored by Barclays. Last year, the activist group Bands Boycott Barclays led a music industry boycott, of festivals, including the Great Escape, sponsored by Barclays leading to Barclays suspending sponsorship of all 2024 Live Nation's festivals. At the same time, Maxine Peake and around a thousand others from Culture Workers Against Genocide signed an open letter urging Sadler's Wells to cut ties with Barclays- unsuccessfully.

As Sadler's website states: "Our longstanding partnership with Barclays is an example of remaining non partisan as an organisation, which is the most respectful way we can convene differing artistic voices."

I've butchered that slightly, but it's, that is all there, but in a different order. They say their longstanding partnership with Barclays is an example of bringing together over 25,000 young people to our performances and to engage in high quality dance experiences. Sadler's Wells feels confident that all our funders are selected in full compliance with our values.

The bank says it supported the UK, music and art sector with £112 million over the past 20 years. There was also the very high, profile case of Baillie Gifford, which led to withdrawal of support from a number of literary festivals, and others and our culture secretary Lisa Nandy has called on arts organisations to accept funding from corporate sponsors.

I'm just interested, really, not in specific opinions on any of that, unless you of course want to give them, in which case, great, but where does it all go now? We are under pressure from the culture secretary to say yes as cultural organisations to funding, from corporate sponsors, wherever it comes from, and under pressure from, from artists and pressure campaign groups to say no to that, that funding. How do cultural leaders navigate that, whether you are one or whether you're studying them?

John: Obviously it's not, it's neither easy nor straightforward. Even what might seem like an easy line, don't accept any corporate funding, would mean that you would still be accepting funding from a government whose policies you might disagree with, so that there's, there's

going to be complexity wherever you draw those lines. I also think that, there are more layers to this than the simple, do or don't of accepting funding. So as someone, probably like many people on the panel and in the room, who has at times also been an activist. Your goal as an activist is often first and foremost to raise your issue into the public realm and for people to hear that issue and to think on it more so the, the proposition might be, such and such, shouldn't take funding from such and such, but actually that the activist impulse might be different to that. So one of the things that I think we can do, as organisations and as leaders in organisations is dig in a little bit and say, what are we actually talking about here? And how can we as cultural organisations, as, as you suggested, Michael, provide a space for the most productive version of that to happen. And that might be different to the simple, "I am not doing this and you should not be doing that". I also think we need to look at what are the, the stakes for different people. So for Caryl Churchill, she's got every right to decide where her, what is the context within which her plays should and shouldn't be seen. Her stakes might be very different to an actor who's been employed in that show and needs the money, needs the work, but is also getting pressure to withdraw from it from other people. So there's different plays out of power though and again, I think we could look at, at those complexities and, and ask what, what's really going on here. For some people, reputation is more important than money, and for other people that, that's too luxurious a choice. So I think our role actually isn't to draw a red line here or there, but it's to look at the complexity of each case and say, can we find a, can we open a useful space here? Can we open a space that is going to be generative and maybe healing for the people involved?

Can we allow an issue that people really want to have amplified, some amplification, and some even complexification, if that feels right. And that's our, that's our role as cultural leaders in these complex situations, I think.

Kate: Thank you. Does anyone else want to speak to this?

Michael: If I cast the lens of leadership on this, I think it's a brilliant illustration of, of why leadership and cultural organisations are so challenging, especially at the moment. And the first one is that traditionally we've been known to these societal pressures and demands to be imposed on organisations from the outside, which always gave leaders the, the escape route of just in a way pulling up the drawbridge, and behind closed doors you could probably get on with things as they were. But these days what we see is that much more, these demands for greater equality, greater inclusion, greater cultural sensitivity are driven by the people within the organisation. It will be your staff, it will be your volunteers, it will be your artists who demand that you take a stance. And so these conversations and these difficult conversations become completely inescapable for leaders in these organisations. And that's, I think, really creates this kind of pressure cooker. And secondly, I think it's also a great illustration, for the double-edged nature of values in, in highly value driven or purpose driven organisations, because the reason people join them is because they identify with the values. And if these values are then violated, sold out, they feel particularly disenfranchised. And so while the values can be a great catalyst, a great energiser, a great motivator at the best of times. When they are then being disappointed, the fall is so much deeper and, and the healing work that leaders then need to do, the repair work they need to do is, is so much stronger. So I think that's the, it really highlights the, the additional challenges of leading in these very complex organisations.

Devyani: True. As someone - and I'm sure like John,- who has lived it every day for the last year. I think half the role is less about maybe the programme and more about having these conversations internally with everyone from junior staff up to Board. And it's a very intense experience, and there's some rounds and rounds of conversation around risk and conversations around ethics and values. But I will say this as you, I think in, in a prep question you would ask Kate, what is the line between an individual's values and your values as a leader of an organisation? I will say I, I think that's a little more blurry for me. And I think it's important to admit that, especially as the artistic head, and there is, I think an influence of one's own values on direction, and it's important for me to say that, um. I think we are constantly looking at our code of ethics and it is not a closed document so I think what I could say is there are complex conversations.

We have an ethics around where we're taking funds from, where we take sponsorship fund. We have an ethics working group that reviews that, but it's also something that can continue to be refined. And I don't know where I am going with this, but I think it's important for me to say: an area that I am interested in increasingly, from this leadership role, that we haven't adopted yet but I think we could consider, is a framework around universal human rights and international law as being added to our code of ethics when we look at what is, what is just, or ethical funding. So, I will just say that, and I don't know what my organisation might think about that, nor do I care in this moment, but I think that code of ethics is a living document and in light of complexity, looking to international human rights and law is essential.

Kate: Thank you. I'm really keen to just ask a little bit more around this topic, but, I suppose I'm thinking now, more specifically about identity and values. So, John in, 2023, I think it was, Factory International became Factory International at Aviva Studios and, that was following a £35 million, if I'm right, naming-rights deal. At the moment, Shakespeare North Playhouse is on the hunt for a naming-rights partner, Oxford University's Cultural Programme, a partner on these events is soon to open a brand new performance venue called the Schwarzman Centre, named after a US Philanthropist, Chief Executive of a private equity firm, Blackstone. After £150 million donation, I believe, in the past, The Sackler Trust, famously donated to cultural organisations, renaming numerous buildings and spaces until the opioid scandal when many of those spaces were renamed. So again, this is about sponsorship, but more specifically - what's in a name? Do names matter to values, and, and how might we navigate those ethical considerations around starting and sustaining partnerships that are so closely linked with identity?

John: The history with Aviva sponsorship in particular… I, I can review and then maybe make a more general thought. So, with Aviva, the, the goal to bring in a naming-rights partner was set by Manchester City Council who were paying for and developing the building, and were trying to make sure it could open and be completed in difficult pandemic cost of living crisis and they came up with the idea, given that within the sports and the music arena area, naming-rights was a usual thing, that it would be a, a reasonable request to ask our arts organisation to think in that space. I agree that it was a reasonable ask, I think it's also got complexities with it because of all of the things we've talked about in terms of what arts and cultural organisations are but the process that we agreed to did include, a very good ,I think, ethical framework, looking at what might be the issues with any particular sponsor where they align with values, certain key things like ensuring that a sponsor understood that they could have no say over content. That there would be a whole series of ways in which there would be a distance between their sponsorship and the work that we might put on in the

space. So, that's where we ended up as an organisation, keeping our name of Factory International, but having a home at this building, I think that, in general, that's worked really well. They've been a good partner, they've never interfered creatively, and a lot of the things that they, as an organisation try to do are, in line. And sometimes I, And sometimes, I think, as you spoke to, Michael, the corporate field can be pushing certain areas, more progressively than the, our arts field does. And I don't think we should get smug in the arts world and assume that we've always got the moral high ground. However, Aviva, like many organisations is a complex organisation with a lot of different businesses in a lot of different places. And so areas do come up that are problematic. We have parameters, what I try and do though is say if an artist or a member of the public has concern about something that they see Aviva doing, what we can do is express that concern at quite a high level in that organisation and say, have you thought about this? What might your plans be going forward? We can't, determine the direction of that company. We can't change a naming red steel that was done between the City Council and the sponsor, but we can use our position to try and open up debate, to try and make space for activism, actually. And to think again in a layered way about how do we share opinions, how do we share a, sense of, justice and value. And how do we, try and open up, spaces and conversations that currently might feel very closed? That's not straightforward, and not everyone would agree with the way that we do it or the way that I do it, but that's the attempt that we're making.

Kate: Great. I don't know if anyone else wants to add anything on that. Okay, widening out a little bit, at a recent conference entitled The Future of Theatre, a panel was entitled Surviving the Financial Cliff. I mean, some of these conversations are happening because of money, right? So, Surviving the Financial Cliff. Great ideas for financing theatre in a time of scarcity. One panellist suggested naming-rights, one talked about lobbying the government around tax reliefs. One talked about raising ticket prices, and one, the only woman and the only artist on the panel, talked about stripping on Only Fans to fund her Edinburgh Festival show. There was, as you would imagine, a mixed reaction to all of these "great ideas". Everyone has their own personal red lines. Devyani you, you touched on, human rights. You touched on how your own values, inevitably, inform your approach to the programming, to the Artistic Director role. What red lines do you have, anyone prepared to share any red lines?

Devyani: I think I alluded to one already, I'm gonna think for a moment about that.

Michael: So I think the interesting part about the, the examples you raised

and, where, I see an important difference between a lot of what we see in the corporate world, and the cultural world, whether it's naming-rights, identities, is that we, we think about these organisations as one. And in the corporate world, you have a global corporation, you have global policies, they're trying to be as uniform and as standardised as possible. Now the fact that in, in cultural organisations you have programming, gives you a lot, and different temporal spaces, actual locational spaces. I use the example of the, the museum cafeteria earlier. But you can do different things at the same time. You can do different things, at different times of the day. And that means that these different values of corporation, culture and community can be put into different relationships, in much more flexible ways, so, coming back to the example of, of the naming-rights, I was struck listening to you that you said, well, it was considered reasonable that cultural organisations should operate the same way as music venues and sports arenas. Like, okay, that, that's an interesting assumption. I'm not saying that I disagree, but drawing those parallels is interesting, but now everything that

happens within this space, is branded in a particular way and and associated with a particular corporate actor. Now you could alternatively think, for example, I recently, walked through the, the underground in London, and I spotted some advertisements for 'Lates'. That's the cool kid's name, in the Natural History Museum, where of course, during the day you can welcome school classes, you welcome the national, international tourist crowd. The main exhibitions are free, you are asked for donations. In the evenings, if you want to enjoy cocktail hour amongst the dinosaurs, they ask for a relatively hefty price tag. Now, all of these different activities are a completely different, assembly of culture, corporation and, and community. It attracts different kind of communities with different business models, and so I think that's where, where the interesting way of thinking is to get around some of these red lines. If you… it's not about having a single red line, but trying to think about where are we willing to take this organisation, our cultural offering with a particular community in return for a certain commercial value. And, and that's how I would start to think about rather than this kind of very monolithic black and white, it's, it's okay, or it's not.

John: I would largely agree with that, and I think that that's where values actually are very important because one of the things that you use to guide you through that complexity is fairly deep understanding of values. I think to go back to Devyani's point, I think where a lot of organisations have really come on start, where they've come up with value statements that sound very nice and everyone can agree are a nice sounding thing, but have not necessarily done the work. And the work is ongoing, and perpetual, so we've never got there, but at least to be doing the work, to try and find out how you would live those values in what you do, and that ranges from, how you behave with each other as staff, through to decisions, like what are reasonable things to ask people to pay for and what not. And where, where might you allow and not allow sponsorship.As I say, in that first case with Aviva. Part of my premise was that this is actually something that the City Council is, as the major funder of this, of, this initiative. This is their decision. This is their [model], the model that they want to follow. Do I have a reasonable, values-based, position that says no to that? I don't, I don't feel that I do. But there might be other areas where we might choose differently, but the weight of both the benefit and the risk is sitting on the side of us as an organisation. So, it would centralise our decision more than say the City Council's in that place. So I think that, that absolutely, it's about complexity. I think that complexity probably does have to be rooted in, really thought through, organisational values. But I, I would add, maybe this is for later on, I think one of the things that we're going to see coming up on top of the attack on diversity, etcetera, is an attack on the idea of organisations having value. So I think that one's coming at us. But for now, I, I think it's a, a really, probably the best ground that we have to stand on.

Devyani: Just, just to add, I, I actually, I sounded kind of ominous in saying I needed a moment, but I just wanted to think, I don't have issue with naming-rights or spaces. I think it just goes back to who and what is being named and how does that align to the code of ethics and your principles around ethical sponsorship and refining that, whether you do along a human-rights and legal framework or, or not. It is so interesting how we, how we come back to kind of process. So what, what is the process of kind of understanding and codifying in some way what the, what the values might be, what the code of ethics is, whatever the different languages that we use in different organisations or contexts. What is the process that we go through to arrive at a decision, when we are in a, in an organisational context? Which might be similar to a process we might go through as an individual, but it might be involving a lot more people. And, conversations, like you say, the work is ongoing. There is not

necessarily a clear right or wrong answer, but there's a process that we go through to arrive at, at a decision which takes into account the specifics.

Kate: Now, I have been hogging the questions, so I'm happy to keep chatting, but I'm really aware that you might have heard things from each other. You might want to ask each other things, you might, you might be wanting to get back to something that was said earlier. So, I just want to, to hand over and ask if any of you are keen to, to pick something up that I haven't asked about or to ask each other in.

John: I had one little thing that I wanted to add as something that, that we do, and then maybe ask Devyani what are the, what are the equivalents for you? So, we do have an Ethics Committee, which is a subcommittee of our Board. So, it has that decision making responsibility, but it as well as having two board members on, it's also got a lawyer, a PR person, an artist, and a young person. Sometimes two young people, so one of the things that we really get in that Ethics Committee, which is reviewing and recommending on something ranging from, a, an issue with a particular artist through to a sponsorship is to actually embed that diversity of approaches and of worldviews in the decision-making structure. So when you've come out the other end of that, and it nearly always reaches consensus, you have at least tried out a range of different viewpoints. So, that's something that we should try and balance with the values.So the values are the things that we all try and align around, but on that Ethics Committee, we actually try and have a diversity of viewpoints around the table. To think about the issue in a, in a multifaceted way. I think those two combinations are, are what we try and work with, but I'd be really keen to hear examples that you might have Devyani, or that you've got from other organisations.

Devyani: I'd also like to know how often that Committee meets?

John: Oh. Daily.

[audience laughs]

Devyani: No, I, I think, I think that's really interesting. Ours is, mostly from internal, staff and Board, but one of the things that, post 2020, was instigated in the new strategic framework at the Barbican, which was great, was kind of different diversity networks. So the global Majority Diversity network, the Deaf, Disabled community, there's, there's many networks and, and the members of each of those networks sit on the Ethics Committee and they come from all different backgrounds and age ranges, but they're all staff along with two Board members. So that's our structure and it is also, meeting close to daily. I don't know if I answered your question though, John.

John: That was exactly my question. Yeah, I think that that's a really interesting frame as well. We have those qualities and representation groups throughout the staff, but is feeding them into the ethics and decision-making structure actually could be a, a really exciting way again, to, to not start with the conflict that you talked about, Michael, around the, it being a leadership, vs, younger staff issue, that's not the starting point that, that we want. So finding ways to build that diversity of opinions in before it's become the big, symbolic conflict is, is really important.

Devyani: Mm-hmm.

Michael: Just riffing off your earlier comment about process then, then Kate.I love hearing about these more diverse, organisational bodies you have, we hear a lot about the value of kind of shadow boards, youth councils. You say you have young people on the Ethics Committee now. An Ethics Committee is still a fairly formalised and, and ritualised organisational structure. So how do you make sure that those people who are not typically part of these organisational decision making bodies feel comfortable to speak up? And, and how do you encourage them to make their voices heard? Because it's, it's one thing to have those people in the room. It's an entirely different thing to make sure that their voice is part of the conversation. So I mean, this goes back to something we were talking about, before we started, around, structure, and using even legal frameworks. So we were talking about a couple of examples of, of events we've been out that have used legal or tribunal or trial formats to provide structure in which the different voices are automatically heard. And I think so structure can actually be a real friend in there, but then to completely contradict myself and making sure that there are also kind of informal and drop-in forums as well.

So we have, currently two drop-ins at the organisation. One's at what we call Ideas Breakfast, where you can come and talk about ideas largely for the programme, but it would allow other ways through and the others around our strategic plan where anybody who's interested in contributing to the strategic plan at whatever level can come and be part of that process. So I think balancing formality and, and informality allows for different kind of voices, but I think at the heart of a lot of these questions are the balance between freedom, what you might call freedom of expression, open space and safe space. Where people feel that they're encouraged and supported in having a voice, and I think that, that balance between free space and safe space is, is a really important one for us to negotiate both within the organisation and in the communities that we work with.

Kate: Can I, John, can I just pick up on that and, 'cause I, I'm keen to, pick up on, a lot of the, of the sort of Ethics Committee bit of this conversation is, I suppose, about organisational strategies around decision making, and I'm really interested to come back to you Devyani, about the, the programming side of that. We, it, it's really interesting hearing you say that, John, because, at Fuel we talk about, freedom of expression and freedom from harm and the relationship between those things. And broadly speaking, we talk about making sure that the artists that we are commissioning, that we're working with, have freedom of expression to tackle difficult issues, questions, present new ideas, approaches. And that we as producers think about what context needs to hold that work and, what audiences might need in terms of freedom from harm, in, in various different ways in order to kind of meet, meet the work.

I'm just really interested Devyani, as you approach a new programme, which I know you can't talk about because you haven't announced it yet, but in terms of the approaches, to that, it feels like something you've...

Devyani: I don't think that's that kind of mind blowing, and I'd be curious [to know] about how you [looking at John] and Kee Hong, also, approach this, but I think there's definitely was starting with kind of a flattening of the structure, we have obviously, Head of Arts and Participation and six Heads of art forms, all who have a certain level of seniority and weight. And then teams within each department, whether it's music, immersive, visual arts, etc, are very easy. Again, it doesn't necessarily encourage everyone is going to feel comfortable

speaking up. An initial thing we did was just, um, kind of, move away from decision making, living with the Artistic Director and six Heads of art forms, and actually doing, biweekly, cross arts meetings where all our junior Curators, Producers and Programmers were present and able to pitch and discuss works they were interested in before the Heads of Departments or myself voiced areas of interest. So really, I feel my role is more about creating a framework, whether it's a temporal framework of seasons, or we are going to potentially, thematically, this summer, look at the ideas of sound and haptics sound and frequencies and prompts, but actually the ideation of what we're going to programme is going to start with our most junior Producers, Programmers, Curators, then the Heads of, and then a discussion as a whole. So it was a more of a co-creation process in terms of seasonal programming. That, that is not, again, taken into account, maybe discomfort with power relationships in the room, and I acknowledge that. But it was just an early start to move away from what would've been, historically this role making most decisions on large investments to it actually being more of, of a collective, a collective structure.

[music slowly builds up]

Kare: Thank you for joining us for Fuelling Change. This podcast series and live event series was co-produced by the Cultural Programme at Oxford University and Fuel, with support from The Story Museum, the Old Fire Station and Oxford Playhouse. Recorded and edited by Sounds Like a Podcast.