

**John Fox** finds that a tidal wave of bureaucracy is drowning the creative spirit and explains why the game is up for him.

# Whose culture?



Welfare State International (WSI) was started in 1968 by a tribe of artists, poets, musicians, pyrotechnicians and engineers: wayward dreamers in search of "entertainment, an alternative and a way of life". Guardians of the unpredictable, trucking around the world creating site-specific celebratory theatre for festivals. Eyes on stalks. Not bums on seats.

We came to understand, though, that such transient spectacle was like busking in airports. Most festivals were random rag-bags of consumer product and when we jet-set jesters flew home, the property developers moved in. The dominant culture claimed economic regeneration but did not understand the inspiration of art in community or its role of replenishing the soul.

The art boutique is self-referencing. We were looking for a culture where more people could actively participate and gain the power to celebrate moments that are wonderful and significant: moments such as building their own houses, naming children, burying the dead, announcing partnerships, marking anniversaries, creating new sacred

spaces and producing whatever theatre, music and jokes are useful in an evolving world society – even a new society in which success is secondary to satisfaction and where a state of creative being is more valuable than a predictable career.

In 1983 we based ourselves in South Cumbria in the no-man's land between Wordsworth, Windscale and Trident submarines. After a seven-year residency in Barrow-in-Furness working with the local community, Barrow now spends millions on art and leisure facilities. Today WSI is based in Ulverston, a small town nine miles from Barrow, which markets itself as THE Festivals town. Our annual

Lantern Parades, Flag Festivals, comedy excursions and street bands have played a major part in economic regeneration. Now there are no empty shops; a decade ago there were 44.

Our track record, courses and publications demonstrate that an applied vernacular art is

possible, with established alternative ceremonies for rites of passage such as funerals, weddings and namings. In Ulverston, Lanternhouse is our £2.2m Lottery funded centre for training celebratory artists and creating meditative sculptural installations and performances. But on April Fool's Day 2006 we are stopping.

After nearly forty years of doing it, WSI will be archived. Lanternhouse will continue with a new creative team. Walking the tightrope of arts

funding between look-at-me celebrity and surrogate social work has become untenable. All our goals of the '60s: access, disability awareness, multigenerational and multicultural participation, have been established; but now such agendas come before the art.

We joined to make spontaneous playful art outside the ghetto – not to work three years ahead in a goal-orientated corporate institution where matched funding and value-added output tick-boxes destroy imaginative excess. Free imagination, the essential organ of communion, is being poisoned. The PAYE vulture descends. Working in the art business becomes a job and not a vocation. Health and safety, child protection, alarm systems, licensing, family friendly badges and employment laws invade with their suffocating culture of inertia and fear. The final straw? The 'hot work' permit for a bonfire in a field. Had we swept the floor and were the overhead sprinklers working?

Lanternhouse is a fabulous architectural creation. It rescued us and has provided us and the people of Ulverston with an extra decade of creative joy. But it's time to fly. I can't face an institution any more. Even my own. After four decades as WSI's Artistic Director I'm going solo. Off to another culture. One of cultural provocation and wild poetry. Where art is indeed 'a way of life'. ■

*John Fox is the Artistic Director and founding member of Welfare State International. He was this year awarded the first Arts Council England, North West award for a Lifetime's Contribution to the Arts. He is the keynote speaker at the Connect & Create Conference: 'Culture me happy!' What is culture and is it good for you? on 19 October. t: 01372 825123; e: info@smartaudiences.co.uk; w: www.smartaudiences.co.uk*

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HERTFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL  
CHILDREN, SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES  
DIVISION



## TENDER OPPORTUNITY

REF: CSFTR05004  
Contract Ref: CSF/06/683

Hertfordshire County Council and District Councils are looking for an individual or organisation interested in setting up and running an inclusive nightclub in Hertfordshire in April 2006. The club will be for disabled and mainstream young people aged 13 -19 years old and will reflect current music and youth culture.

The club night will be for one night only and will take place in an established venue in either East Herts or Broxbourne. We envisage this club night will serve as a taster for the development of future club nights. There is a potential opportunity to develop further club nights/events in partnership with the project working party and young people.

This is a partnership project involving County and District Officers. It is hoped the partnership will grow to include a range of voluntary and statutory organisations. A small Working Party drawn from participating organisations will line manager the contract.

Applications are invited from well-resourced organisations with an established reputation in delivering significant, wide ranging and well-received services to young people.

**Closing Date for receipt of tenders 8th November 2005**  
**Interview with potential providers 1st December 2005**  
**Start of contract 1st January 2006**

All the documents you require are available electronically via [www.hertsdirect.org/contractsandtenders](http://www.hertsdirect.org/contractsandtenders)  
If you are experiencing difficulty in downloading the tender documents, please contact Stuart Sapsford, Commissioning Assistant on 01992 555831.

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or go to  
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