



**Sam West, Chair of the National Campaign for the Arts' speech to the  
GLA Culture, Sport and Tourism conference,  
Hull, 8<sup>th</sup> March 2018**

Thank you for inviting us to your party, and thank you in particular for holding it in Hull, which knows the joy of a good cultural celebration better than most. I know we're the middle of political confusion and economic vicissitude (the National Audit Office figures, out this morning, show a 41% drop in "arts development and support" since 2010), but it's still right to celebrate. I realise I'm talking to an audience that already understands how art can revitalise a community, as well as how it can treat that tricky condition we call human, but opportunities to pat you on the back must be grasped, so I'm here today to say thank you for being officially brilliant.

Five years ago, as part of a campaign called 50p for Culture, I wrote to the leader of every council in the country about their arts funding. At the time, the average council spent 14p per person per week on culture; our research told us that 70% of people wanted it to be three times that. I got lots of letters back, some saying, in the politest terms, 'go away', and others like that from the Mayor of Doncaster, engaging with the conversation.

"I agree completely with your aims", she said, "but I've lost half of my central government funding in six years. What do you want me to do?"

And round about then, the National Campaign for the Arts had a rethink. I was bored of us playing bad cop – I wanted us to play good cop as well. We still run 50p for Culture, but now alongside it, we have Hearts for the Arts.

As an actor I'm sometimes in a very privileged position: my work can affect people and they can let me know – perhaps by something as simple as being applauded at the end of my day's work, which many people don't experience. I even get letters from people sometimes saying they've enjoyed what I've done – even if it's only playing a love rat on *Mr Selfridge*. We all need to know that our good work is being noticed, so the NCA set up Hearts for the Arts to show our appreciation for people who might not get much applause or fan mail but whose work we love, because it's a vital part of what keeps us human and dignified and delighted.

There are four awards. This year, after 90 nominations from across all four nations, a panel of judges including the comedian Josie Long, the writers Roy Williams and Philip Pullman and the head of the Tate Maria Balshaw, chose the following:

Best Local Authority Arts Initiative: **I.AM.NOT.A.ROBOT, Plymouth City Council**

Best Local Authority Arts Champion - Councillor: **Councillor Cliff Morris, Bolton Council:**

Best Local Authority Arts Champion - Officer: **Lorna Lee, London Borough of Waltham Forest:**

Best Local Authority Arts Project Encouraging Community Cohesion (a horrible title for a great award): **Denbighshire County Council, Lost in Art**

Thank you for allowing us to turn the spotlight on two of the worthy recipients here today, Let me tell you more about them.

**I.AM.NOT.A.ROBOT** was conceived and designed by five young people in care. An immersive art installation of 60 customised interactive robots, each of which represents an individual child in care. Visitors read stories to the robots and donate hugs through interactive window technology; every hour they sing before they go off to sleep.

You can guess why we love this project. We need foster carers. We need to hear the voices of those in care. I.AM.NOT.A.ROBOT encourages the first by listening to the second, in a creative, innovative and fun way. It's a great idea that deserves to be celebrated and spread more widely.

**Waltham Forest** has felt like a great and improving cultural hub for several years now, and much of that feeling is down to Lorna Lee. She believes that art and creativity should be central to planning and regeneration, and lives that belief. Lorna's tireless championing has meant greater investment, more festivals, bigger events and a wider reach among one of the most diverse populations in London. It's wonderful to be able to recognise her dedication today, which has helped make Waltham Forest the first ever London Borough of Culture.

I'm looking forward to applauding those projects as they take to the stage shortly but before then I also wanted to talk about another winner that has particularly struck a chord with me....

**Denbighshire County Council** are our first Welsh winners of this award. We know that dementia and loneliness are increasing problems in a divided and ageing society. **Lost in Art** doesn't just help those with dementia by bringing them together with visiting artists, it also benefits their communities, carers, and families. The link between creativity and mental health and happiness seems obvious to many of us lucky enough to work in the arts. Lost in Art gives that link form and evidence.

And speaking personally as the child of actors, one of whom has dementia, both art and care for older people are very close to my heart.

That's this year's awards. Why do you think you or your council should win one next year? Nominations open in the autumn. If you want to keep in touch

or find out more about this year's other winners, follow us on twitter at @weareforthearts.

Although we're here to celebrate your work, it's right to sound a note of caution. I don't think we can or should see the cutting of arts funding in isolation. More than £130m of money meant for the arts has been removed from the system in the last ten years. When I have to argue for arts spending in tough times, I start with the question "Do you want our children to have this?"

The NCA believes that austerity has widened the gap between rich and poor, and that the cuts in local government spending in education, health, housing, transport and the arts are removing vital infrastructure support for children from deprived backgrounds as well as for isolated older people. Once this infrastructure, built by two post-war generations, is gone, we aren't going to get it back, so we need to fight now. Redistribution of support is essential. Given the worry about Brexit, when do you think is the right time to make that noise? I don't know. Over to you.

I realise you get it. I know you head into work every morning thinking "Allow a venue to close? Not on my watch. You can have my arts budget when you prise it from my cold dead hands." I'm not here to preach to the choir, I'm here to praise them. In extremely trying circumstances we know how much you're doing to keep arts and culture at the centre of your communities. The battles you fight daily in meeting rooms and on the floor of council chambers across the country have a real, transformative effect on people's lives. Please keep fighting them.

The Hearts for the Arts awards are about love, and we make no apology for that. We love you, we love what you're doing and we want you to keep doing it.

Thank you.