

Fueling Diplomacy with (Performing) arts or macarons and tea with RBG

What's your idea of Diplomacy? And of a diplomat? Perhaps you are picturing polite, mostly male, well-educated types in impeccable suits - hopefully busy taking care of urgent, political or consular matters with other diplomats.

That is no longer how it works if it ever did. There is an explosion in the number of ways in which messages and more generally, influence can be pushed and instigated. The diplomatic corps is struggling to keep pace with this change, and here they have a lot to learn from the arts.

After more than 25 years working with the performing arts - mostly theatre, but also contemporary circus, dance and with film, I started working as Sweden's Cultural Counselor to the US in 2015.

My own experiences of Diplomacy were few before entering my post, even though I had collaborated with a few foreign missions when I was programming international shows as artistic director for Stockholms Stadsteater.

As I now return to Sweden after five intense years in Washington DC, the political capital of the world, I do so with a bag full of experiences and new insights that I would like to reflect on with you.

I think we underestimate the role that the arts can play in Diplomacy. As a tool for dialogue and for furthering understanding in society, it is unrivalled. To realise this potential, however, requires that we from the arts, dare to take the space, dare to take risks, to go outside of our community and to claim that we have something important to contribute.

What is the new Diplomacy? → increased focus on relationship building

During more than 200 years, the traditional fields of diplomatic activity have been security, trade and defence (defence= security). But in our rapidly changing landscape, 'People-to-people' exchanges are now at the heart of diplomatic activity with both public

Diplomacy and social media charting new territory. This development has opened up new avenues for artists, producers and companies to work much closer to the foreign missions and different international institutes, such as British Council, Goethe Institute and multilateral institutions and organisations around the world.

Public Diplomacy these days does include working with and through the arts and culture both- to build relations and make new connections: for outreach, attention, trust, impact.

To be able to reach peoples' hearts and minds'. There are fascinating historical examples of how jazz and rock n' roll impacted the breakup of the Soviet Union, to the role of culture in recovering from the conflict in Afghanistan and Cambodia to the role of culture in the Arab Spring and other anti-authoritarian movements around the world.

What is yet to emerge, however, is a more conscious engagement between the artistic and the diplomatic community.

Why is culture a potentially important element in this new Diplomacy?

To quote Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian writer and Nobel Prize winner: "Politics demonizes...culture humanises.."

I will never forget listening to Samantha Power, US former Ambassador to the UN at a White house seminar on LGBTI rights in 2016 when she explained how she had taken 17 UN ambassadors from around the world to Broadway to see FunHome, Alison Bechdel's coming of age story about a young lesbian woman grieving the suicide of her closeted gay father, on the evening before the big global sessions at the UN. She said that spending a couple of hours together with them at the theatre experiencing the performance together would move and influence the next day's discussions so much more than any briefing ever could. The play dramatised the LGBT issue "in a way that UN resolutions and statements never can," she said. It's about imagining oneself. It's about imagining one's child. It's about imagining one's father.

But before I explain what I see as the new meeting point between Diplomacy and arts, let me share some more personal reflections.

Mutuality and reciprocity

In the mission as a cultural attaché, you are a state agent with a mission of promoting the arts and culture of your country of origin. The job portfolio is incredibly varied, spanning from organising literary translations and artistic exchanges to curating and brokering exhibitions and hosting film features among several other functions of the creative spectrum. But I would like to state and underline that the main task is to connect people to people, artists to artists, create working opportunities, exchanges, build networks and inspiration.

The tasks of a cultural attache are depending on local needs and discourses, and are always (if they are to be successful) based on mutual interests and reciprocity. It requires constant listening, asking, being open, flexible and fast. To move when there is momentum, and to go where the energy is!

My work as a cultural counsellor during these five years changed, became increasingly comprehensive geographically and increasingly value-oriented - I found myself working more and closer to policy-oriented issues than, for example, with trade or tourism.

Bit by bit, I found that the most appreciated and applauded initiatives during my years in the US were when we from the Embassy dared focus on deeply complicated issues and dared to also expose ourselves as a country, through the works of independent artists that we presented.

We got a new level of attention, from new audiences, media and stakeholders when we halted the more mainstream nation branding: stopped pretending that Sweden has always done everything right, and when we took away the most glossy promotion, talking about design, meatballs and Abba and instead dared to look into the burning issues of today's global society- migration, gender equality, human rights, freedom of expression, racism, embodied or discussed in and through art. For example, when we helped distribute the film Samiblood by Amanda Kernell, who went straight into the debate about the rights of indigenous peoples who have just been given a new focus in North America. Or when we resented the photo exhibition Were the Children sleep by Magnus Bävman about Syrian children on the run that we showed in the middle of the refugee debate, with an opening a

week later Donald trump's travel ban against Muslim countries. But to do this successfully - it, of course, required working close to the artists - listening and paying respect to their needs, wishes and agendas.

So how can cultural diplomats work closely together with the performing arts sector?

I want to describe one example of a close co-created collaboration that evolved over three years. The actress and director Josette Bushell- Mingo, expressed a dream and I decided to try to make it real: She wanted to bring together theatre professionals from the African diaspora to share experiences, challenges, best practise and consolation. The multifaceted project emerged in the aftermath of the Riksteatern's (National touring theatre of Sweden) and their production of Lorraine Hansberry's play A Raisin in the Sun. From this point, stakeholders developed a deep and essential dialogue between AfroSwedish, African-American and South African theatre creators (Market Theatre), academics and activists, during World Theater Day 2017 in a beautiful, bold collaboration with Georgetown University. The success and emotional impact of the project was clear and everyone involved was inspired by a continued international dialogue. The Embassy would co- arrange and support workshops on both sides of the Atlantic - which led to the formation of "The National Black Theater of Sweden", now residing of Kulturhuset Stadsteatern in Vällingby, Stockholm. We also supported and co-produced guest performances in Los Angeles at USCB by Bushell-Mingo and her performance Nina - a story about me and Nina Simone in the winter of 2020, just before the Black lives matter movement exploded.

Another incredible (and still underused) potential that the arts can offer to diplomatic work - is the local network that is possible to gain access to through the arts. I was astounded by how important it was for many of the American elite, from business leaders, politicians, entrepreneurs and academics to show themselves as good, responsible, educated citizens by supporting and attending art institutions. In the theatres and galleries - many important people could meet and discuss issues, informally, across the aisle, and meet in an environment that was inspirational and nontoxic - and join each other in a mutual love of the arts. For any Embassy, it is hugely important to have

good connections in the hosting country, to get access, information, formal and informal. And many of the most significant relationships and friends we built in the US was actually through the arts. One example that I am so grateful for was how I got to know the recently passed legendary Supreme court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg (RBG) a little, through visiting the opera. She was often attending the different performances at the Washington National Opera at the Kennedy Center - and once I approached her and started talking to her there in an intermission. It turned out that Sweden had had a significant influence on her life - since she studied law in Lund in the sixties, and it was there she started to call herself a feminist and creating an unprecedented part for fighting for equality and equity. A few weeks later the Ambassador, a few colleges and I were invited to her private chamber at the Supreme Court offered macarons and tea from a silver jug before her trip to Sweden to become an honorary doctor and receive a human rights award. ("It's just like in the film Wild Strawberries by Ingmar Bergman - but I think you call it Smultronstället," she said in Swedish). We were almost pinching ourselves, star-struck.

Of course, the political independence of the cultural attachés is an asset that needs safeguarding. Sweden has a long tradition in encouraging independent artistic expression and is one of the first European countries to introduce a cultural policy bill (in 1974) which not only placed emphasis in respecting artistic freedom but also provided the means to materialise this goal by submitting a decentralised structure to regulate the newly formed policy area, the

Swedish Arts Council. Much like the Swedish Arts Council, which operates at an arm's length distance from the workings of the central government, the cultural attachés/counsellors work at a distance both from the MFA and the Ministry of Culture to retain autonomy and serve the intrinsic interests of the sector. This ability for the cultural councillors to operate freely. It is highly valued, especially by partners in countries where artistic freedom is not for granted like Russia or China.

Share and seed!

So let me urge you to explore to invite the diplomats representing your country abroad much earlier in your international working processes and planning! Invite

them to your meetings abroad, ask the Ambassadors or cultural counsellors to co-host meetings, or to help or support you with arranging expert travels for programmers, artistic directors or funders to come to your country to develop new collaborations, and explore the sector. Ask them for advice on local contacts, encourage them to co-host receptions, networking lunches, or digital meetings. Share and seed your unique network with theirs, and create new ways of knowledge sharing and building long term relations. Use their trust and credibility to strengthen yours.

During my time at the Embassy of Sweden, we invested in creating and exploring new touring circuits, for example in collaboration with the Nordic-American institutions around US., with funding from the Swedish Arts Council and many others. The Royal Ballet, Cullberg Ballet and Cirkus Cirkör are among the more prominent companies we helped. Still, we co-created and co-arranged more than 50 companies/artists of Swedish performing arts to the US, of all genres and expressions, and invited dozens of programmers and directors to Sweden, to make new connections. Many of the US performing tours were focusing on younger audiences, for example, Unga Klara and Marionetteatern, since Children's theatre is such a robust Scandinavian trademark and because there was a great hunger for this expressed by the professional community in the US.

Right now, during this devastating pandemic, where so many of the cultural workers are completely without income, and the effects on the sector will be enormous for the foreseeable future, especially in the performing arts. We need to come together, to intersect with new sectors, make new friends, to survive and to thrive.

With hope, Linda Zachrison

Invited by CAMP to write her reflection during fall 2020.



photo credit: Dan Schwartz