



Bringing home the bacon

Denmark has an enduring reputation for supporting arts companies and institutions – but is it still justified? **Paul Berger** reports

This has been the decade of cultural expansion in Denmark,' proclaims Leif Lønsmann, head of music at the Danish Broadcasting Corporation. He is not exaggerating. In the past 10 years, Denmark has witnessed an unprecedented boom in new theatre buildings, opera houses and symphony halls. The question is, whether the building spree has come at too high a cost to Denmark's orchestras, theatres and dance companies.

The monuments to Denmark's cultural evolution are everywhere. In the past few years, two new symphony halls have opened in Sønderborg and Aarhus. On the waterfront of Copenhagen, a futuristic, DKK2.5bn (€336m) opera house vies for attention with a DKK900m playhouse, which opened last year. In January, the Danish Symphony Orchestra took to the stage at its new concert hall (Koncerthuset) the centrepiece of a DKK4.7bn complex for the Danish Broadcasting Corporation.

'These buildings leave the country with landmarks for culture to be remembered for centuries,' says Lønsmann. 'I can't think of any decade in the cultural history of Denmark like the last 10 years.'

As construction continues – there are plans for new symphony halls in Denmark's third largest city, Odense, and its fourth largest city, Aalborg – one could be forgiven for thinking that Danish culture is booming. However, away from all the ribbon-cutting ceremonies, performing arts companies are suffering, leaving some to question whether the money could have been better

spent, especially as the cost of building and running some of these institutions has skyrocketed.

The Royal Danish Theatre is at the centre of the debate. The theatre, which presents opera, ballet, classical music and drama, used to be housed under one roof at the Old Stage, built in 1874. But with the additions of the opera house (Operaen) and the Royal Danish Playhouse, it now finds itself spread across three buildings, with the administrative and operating costs that entails. According to Mikkel Harder, chair of the Danish Performing Arts Council, the Royal Danish Theatre swallows up DKK600m per year – about half the country's performing arts budget.

'I think the Royal Theatre should be closed down,' says Tim Rushton, artistic director and choreographer of Danish Dance Theatre (Dansk Danseteater) – a statement that borders on sacrilege in a country loyal to its royal family and institutions. 'Well, maybe not closed,' adds Rushton. 'But I would look at it with extremely critical eyes.'

Danish Dance Theatre, Denmark's largest modern dance theatre, receives an annual DKK8m from the government. It has to raise a further DKK4m from private sponsors. In a country still very much dependent on the state, private sponsorship is scarce, particularly since the recession began. Mogens Jensen, culture spokesman for the opposition Social Democrats, calls Danish Dance Theatre's situation 'a disgrace'. 'Dansk Danseteater is the jewel in the crown of Denmark's modern dance scene,' he states. 'Yet its budget is smaller than a small dance company in Sweden.'

Indeed, it seems ironic that the Danes, the envy of almost every nation in the world in terms of cultural funding, can look to greener pastures elsewhere. Yet Henrik Wenzel Andreassen, director of the Danish Arts Agency's Music Centre, says that levels of music funding in Norway are far more generous than in Denmark. Meanwhile, Palle Granhøj, artistic director of the dance company Granhøj Dans, says that the total budget for modern dance in Denmark is dwarfed by the levels of funding in Sweden.

Which is not to say that Danes do not recognise their own good fortune. Says Granhøj: 'We performed in the United States in March. It was quite a shock for our dancers to find out that almost nobody there is able to make a living out of dancing.'



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compare current funding with historical figures. But she added that the size of the total annual budget for culture in 2009 is approximately the same as in 2008. In that year, total cultural spending was DKK16.2bn, slightly less than two per cent of the annual state budget. According to the Council of Europe/ERICarts, which monitors national cultural policies, the share of the annual state budget spent on Danish culture in 2006 was 3.5 per cent.

An additional factor weighing on Danish arts is a 2007 reorganisation of local government. In that year Denmark's 14 counties were abolished and replaced with five regions. Previously, local cultural responsibility resided in the counties. It has now been

either handed to smaller municipalities or, for the most part, returned to the state.

The first casualty was Denmark's vibrant and very highly regarded network of children's theatres, which saw bookings plummet as their contacts literally disappeared overnight. Regional orchestras suffered too. The Jutland Ensemble (Det Jyske Ensemble) is one of six in the Jutland region that, until recently, shared a DKK30m pot. But last year, general manager Simon Carlander was informed by the Ministry of Culture that, as of 2010, funding would cease.

'Denmark is very hostile to cultural activities right now,' Carlander says. 'We might have the same money as before but because of inflation its value has declined. They have to close us just to be able to keep the others going.'

Denmark has a complex funding structure. Though the Ministry of Culture sets the budget each year, the allocation of funds is decided by the Danish Arts Council and implemented by the Danish Arts Agency. Henrik Wenzel Andreasen, director of the Danish Arts Agency's Music Centre, denied that cuts to the Jutland Ensemble were necessary to keep other orchestras afloat. He says the Arts Council decided to cut the ensemble's funding to concentrate on other projects.

Andreasen empathises with the country's musicians; he used to be the general manager of the South Jutland Symphony Orchestra. But rather than seeing the new buildings as a drain, he believes the investment has been a boon for audiences and for orchestras. He says the Aarhus Symphony Orchestra had been lobbying for years before it got its new

Granhøj believes that the modern dance field in Denmark has grown so quickly in the past 10 years that funding has simply failed to keep up with demand. Granhøj Dans, a small avant-garde company, has remained amateur for almost its entire 20-year history. It went professional for the first time last year, thanks to a DKK4m subsidy from the Danish government. But this year its subsidy was cut to DKK2.75m, which means that its four dancers and two musicians will soon be out of a job.

Until recently, being unemployed in Denmark was not such a burden. Actors, dancers and musicians were able to collect benefits between gigs, sometimes rehearsing for free and collecting a wage for performances. All that they had to do was prove that they were seeking work in their chosen field.

But record low unemployment in the first half of the decade convinced the government to make benefits harder to claim. Says Jensen, culture spokesman for the Social Democrats: 'In order to get your benefit you now have to show that you have applied for four full-time jobs a week. But we have very few full-time artistic jobs in Denmark. It's crazy to have to apply for jobs that don't exist.' The result is that many artists have found themselves forced to work as dishwashers, drivers and waiters.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that cultural funding in Denmark has remained flat in recent years. A spokesman for Denmark's Ministry of Culture says that because of budget reforms in 2007, it is difficult to

Clockwise from top left: *Noko*, a 2007 production by the Royal Danish Ballet; Copenhagen-based Trio Con Brio; Concerto Copenhagen; Athelas Sinfonietta; Tim Rushton, artistic director of Danish Dance Theatre



Above left: Louise Midjord's *Othello* from the Royal Danish Ballet's 2008-09 season

Above right: Ars Nova Copenhagen



Photos: Ars Nova courtesy of the ensemble: *Othello* © Per Morten Abrahamson
hall, which has 'brilliant acoustics' and seats about 1,200 people. 'Some orchestras did not have a real concert hall, others have been rehearsing in buildings not suited for music and renting a hall for concerts,' he explains. 'I don't think musical life has suffered.'

It is a sentiment echoed by Claus Skjold Larsen, general manager of the South Jutland Symphony Orchestra. Larsen says that his orchestra's new symphony hall, which opened in Sønderborg in 2007 and which seats 820 people, has been a godsend. Audiences have doubled. And the orchestra has some confidence that its future is more secure now that it has its own purpose-built space. 'What would they do with the building if we were not here?' Larsen says. 'I don't see a real threat right now.'

Denmark has had other reasons to celebrate recently. At the end of July, Copenhagen hosted the World Outgames, an LGBT offshoot of the Gay Games. Though the event is primarily about sport, it had a heavy cultural element. There was an opening show with 18 parties around the city. And Copenhagen invited six cities – Melbourne, Rio, Tel Aviv, Mexico City, Antwerp and Aarhus – to send artists, dancers and musicians to perform.

The games cost DKK50m, of which DKK36m came from public funds. One beneficiary of the games was the inaugural Copenhagen Opera Festival, which made use of a number of stages set up around the city.

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Opera performances were also held in the ruins beneath the Danish parliament and aboard a boat which sailed three times a day. The festival's entire DKK1m budget was supported by private funds.

Anders Beyer, who organised the festival, says it is certainly more difficult to raise money today because of the financial crisis. But he says that cultural institutions are becoming used to fundraising. 'There has been a paradigm shift in the past five years away from being a fairy-tale country with 99 per cent subsidies from the state,' says Beyer, who is also artistic director of Athelas Sinfonietta Copenhagen ensemble. 'Ninety per cent of my time in Athelas is now spent getting sponsors and money for projects and the last 10 per cent is spent dealing with artistic matters.'

That being said, even critics of Denmark's cultural system, like Danish Dance Theatre's Tim Rushton, still prefer Copenhagen to London or New York. Rushton cites Ars Nova ensemble and the Danish period instrument orchestra Concerto Copenhagen as examples of niche performance groups that could only survive in an environment like Denmark, where public funding is still relatively strong. 'In other countries you have a huge demand on the way you are financially supported,' he says.

Furthermore, despite the recession there are signs that Danes are not cutting back on cultural spending. Sales of tickets to movies, theatre and concerts this summer were higher than last year. And Skjold Larsen, of South Jutland Symphony Orchestra, says sales for his orchestra and that of the Copenhagen Philharmonic, continue to rise. Michael Mørch, CEO of Bikuben Foundation, which presents the annual Reumert Awards for theatre, dance and opera, says that public and private money is still flowing.

'Even though we have lost money, we are not cutting back,' says Mørch. 'The Danish government is still very actively supporting all kinds of performing arts and people still love to go to the theatre. I don't see blood on the stage floors in Copenhagen or the rest of Denmark.' ■

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Athelas Sinfonietta Copenhagen

www.kunst.dk

Danish Arts Council

www.kglteater.dk

Royal Danish Theatre