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From The Times

March 7, 2007

## Our man at the cultural barricades

**A huge success at the Barbican, Sir John Tusa wasn't even interviewed when he applied to run the BBC**

Andrew Billen

RECOMMEND?

The lives of all great men remind us — or should do — that there is no greatness without humiliation. For Churchill it was his wilderness years; for Clinton, Monica Lewinsky. For Sir John Tusa, who is ending a dozen years running the Barbican Centre with a 25th anniversary universally regarded worth celebrating, it was *Nationwide*.

The BBC's early-evening magazine (b 1969, d 1983) is best remembered for the undue publicity it gave to a skateboarding duck. Although its most famous anchorman was a gruff northcountryman called Michael Barrett, for a while the earnest, cerebral Cambridge historian Tusa was his cohort. "The worst thing I ever did," Sir John recalls, "was having to appear in a sauna wearing just a towel. Somebody had suggested that maybe — it's incredible — maybe I should not have a towel on! Oh, what a disaster!"

He is sitting in his shirtsleeves sipping a cup of tea in his office overlooking a brutalist quarter of the City of London. He was just not cut out for *Nationwide*, I suggest, burying my fond memories of it. "I certainly wasn't," he says, as if to suggest that no one could or should be. "The only mistake I made was to resign without asking for any sort of pay-off. But I was so fed up I just said, 'To hell with this. I'll go back and write about SouthEast Asian politics or something'."

*Nationwide* was, nevertheless, the moment that the nation noticed Tusa. He does not look very different now at 71: he is still bald, of course, and his neat face is healthily tanned. A Czech who emigrated with his family to Britain when he was 3, he recalls in his new book, *Engaged with the Arts*, how he not long ago travelled to the Brno National Theatre and noticed something familiar about the audience: "These were my people — Moravians. I look like them, stocky, square-faced."

When I caught up with him next, presenting *The World Tonight* on Radio 4 in the late 1970s, he seemed preoccupied by the Cold War. "I think that may have been sharpened by a sense of my Czech background," he says. It was an interest he pursued during seven prize-winning years on *Newsnight*, where he played Peter Snow's foil. In 1986 he left to run the BBC World Service for eight years. Afterwards he said that management was "not too difficult": "If you have been a good anything you can do it."

This was before he took over the Barbican. This seemingly unlovable fortress had driven its first managing director, Henry Wrong, to contemplate suicide. His successor, Detta O'Cathain, was the victim of a putsch. We need not here rehearse his problems or her battles, financial (with the Barbican's paymaster, the City of London) and artistic (with its resident companies, the London Symphony Orchestra and the Royal Shakespeare Company). Tusa merely says that when he arrived, after a period presenting the *One O'Clock News* for the BBC, the organisation

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was “resentful, suspicious and sullen”.

“I wasn’t miserable, but it was a very tough first three years. I nearly didn’t renew after them. Quite a lot of persuading went on. Unfortunately, it wasn’t a question of crossing my palm with silver or gold, but I distinctly remember somebody said, ‘Oh do stay. Give us the benefit of the doubt.’ And then suddenly things started to get a bit easier. Various management changes started to work. And, also, the City began to understand what we were doing and decided it was worth cutting us a bit of slack.”

He agrees that after so much success at the BBC, it would have been a blow to his self-esteem to have admitted to failure. “Mind you, my wife pointed out that I threatened to resign on at least two occasions from the World Service!”

At the Barbican he had two bits of luck. One was inheriting its newly appointed artistic director, Graham Sheffield, who had been drafted in as an emergency appointment from the South Bank. The other, as it turned out, was the RSC’s withdrawal from the theatres specifically built for it. Considered a disaster for the Barbican at the time, it turned out to be a liberation. Forced to programme its own stages, the Barbican under the logo BITE (Barbican International Theatre Events), brought theatre of a range and diversity that might not have been seen in London otherwise. This month, for example, brings theatre from Cambodia, Iceland and Japan. In his book, Tusa relates how the Shakespeare-Ibsen crowd deserted. The audience that replaced it was more likely to hail from Hoxton than Kensington. Tusa writes: “There are nights when the crowd in the Barbican is ferociously cool. They indulge in social signals of recognition which completely pass me by.”

In his prose, Tusa may favour the odd overtuned sentence but he avoids management jargon. Indeed he includes a scathing ABC of it (A is for assessment, B is for brand). He is particularly scathing about the cult of short-term “objectives”. The Barbican has significantly “better” attendance by minorities than other institutions, yet has never made audience diversity a “target”. His management technique is, he thinks, based more than he realised on what he learnt from his father who had been posted to run the Bata shoe factory in East Tilbury in Essex just before the war. Tusa Sr would walk around the plant and know hundreds of his employees’ names.

Tusa’s complaint against Labour is not that it has let the arts down by funding them inadequately but that it has never agreed with the proposition “art for art’s sake”. Tony Blair has personally shunned all association with the arts: “I’m sure somebody told him that focus groups don’t like it.” Unlike Richard and Judy, Tusa has never been invited to Chequers.

But would David Cameron be any better, I ask, knowing that Tusa has just chaired his first meeting as chairman of the Tories’ new arts “task force”. “I suspect he is canny enough to say, ‘This is what I like, personally, but, looking at the whole of society, you just can’t walk away from the arts.’”

Tusa says his politics are middle-of-the-road, but to the right of most of the arts establishment. Did he love the BBC? “Oh, I still do. I still do. I’ve got BBC through my bones because it’s the place that I really first felt at home.” When he joined as a general trainee in 1960, it proved an ideal berth. Sent away to boarding school at 6, then serving with the Royal Artillery during national service, he found freedom from regimentation at Cambridge University. The BBC’s common room atmosphere extended that freedom intellectually, while imposing the discipline of deadlines. His regret that 32 years later he did not end up running it as Director-General is twofold: one, personal disappointment at not even being interviewed for the post and, two, that John Birt got it. Tusa remains a dogged critic of Birt, even accusing him of “dumbing down”, which is not a charge usually levelled at Birt’s dour brand of analytical journalism.

“Yes, but look at his idea of analysis! It was a sort of analysis by numbers, wasn’t it? It was a formulaic analysis. ‘Here is a programme; this is what it can do: this, then this, and then this.’ Where’s all the journalistic sympathy and creativity and flair? . . . It began the process of saying that intelligence and curiosity don’t matter. Dumbing down can take place in all sorts of ways and that’s certainly one.” His current complaint is at arm-waving presenters who convey information rather than knowledge: Dan Cruickshank, Adam Hart-Davis, Rolf Harris, Bill Oddie. “I see

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them all on the screen and I think, really, what's going on? Why does one have to take serious information, entertaining information and mediate in this frenzied way?" He swears that this is not the envy of a former TV performer (at Cambridge he acted alongside Ian McKellen and Eleanor Bron). After 60, he says, he knew there would be no front-of-camera future for him. If there is, as he writes, "a flight from intelligence", the question is whether the BBC is its perpetrator or its victim. One of his gloomier essays suggests that popular culture now refers to nothing before 1968 and leaves the young with no cultural history. "We may," he says, "have witnessed a huge cultural shift as vast in its way, though in a wholly different direction, as the Renaissance."

He almost certainly overstates his case. I doubt, for example, if his sons, a banker and a defence analyst, are cultural know-nothings. They are the product of his 47-year marriage to the historian Ann Dowson, who has a conversational lightness that her husband sometimes lacks. He worries for their three grandchildren, more over the environment than terrorism.

His successor at the Barbican, Nicholas Kenyon, currently head of the BBC Proms, will have his own problems when he joins. Funding cuts are looming and there is no sign of Arts Council England charging to the rescue. I point out that when he came in, the Barbican had nowhere to go but up. He is leaving it, after recently spending £12 million on refurbishment, with nowhere for it to go but down. "Well, that's one way of putting it. What would I rather have? Oh, I think I'd rather have inherited the present situation."

There might almost have been a fourth act to Tusa's career. He was approached to chair the BBC Trust, the corporation's newfangled protector-cum-watchdog. "What became clear to me was that there are contradictions [in the trust] that are very, very unresolved. . . My wife said, 'I think it's a formula for an early grave.' And I thought, she's absolutely right."

A plush, nonexecutive chairmanship will do him nicely when he leaves the Barbican in August. It would, he says, be vanity to want to do more. But Lady Tusa was right: we cannot, amid this flight from intelligence, this counter-renaissance, afford to lose prematurely one of the great men of high culture. And, besides, think of the humiliation were he to go for the BBC job and not get it.

*Engaged with the Arts* is published by I B Tauris at £19.50

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