

Cover
A well used and cherished mask from the collection of the National Theatre Nougakudo Tokyo. Robin Don describes a visit to this new home for the famous Japanese Noh plays.

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CAN WE AFFORD PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY?

In our more cynical moments we are given to wonder how much of the national arts budget is devoted to funding the machinery of public accountability and the procedures of democracy. And what is the cost – in salaries, telephones and photocopies – of the protests that theatres make about their inadequate funding? How much of this expenditure is counter-productive? . . . the theatre industry, which exists by communicating the subtle nuances of laughter and tears, seems quite incapable of giving a simple explanation of its own economics.

Although there is, as yet, no formal statement of intent to return theatre to the private sector, there is growing pressure to seek sponsorship from the business community. Indeed public accountability now includes the necessity to be seen to be seeking sponsorship. But what is the public cost of touting for such private money? Again, if salaries, telephones and photocopies are being costed, our cynicism leads us to suspect that they are being costed creatively. We could extend our cynicism to the cost effectiveness of that great sacred cow of the moment – marketing (any theatre seeking public funding favour must be seen to have a marketing department, even if it might be cheaper to have a few more empty seats). But our thought for this CUE is to ponder whether there could be a revival, even an expansion, of the private investor. After all, who would have predicted that the once maligned piece of low-tech, the British telephone, would become the investment darling of its users? Will the taxation reliefs of the Business Expansion Scheme revitalise commercial theatre? Will more theatres be freed from the expensive apparatus of public accountability and the need to conform to the latest fashionable notions of the committees who hold the purse strings? Will more entrepreneurs be freed from the constraints of democracy?

Theatre will always require substantial injections of public money: but is there not a cheaper way to hand it out? Without expensive accountability strings? Perhaps just a simple matter of trusting entrepreneurs until they fail and are sacked.