

# Training the people behind the scenes

A report on the Arts Council's courses for administrators by ANTHONY McCALL

When the Arts Council's finance director, Anthony Field, joined that august institution in the fifties, the annual grant was well under the million pound mark, or about 100 times less than the current figure. The relative unimportance of subsidy can be judged by the fact that, in those days, administrators were often "part-time actors who came in on Thursday afternoons"—to use his own phrase. He couldn't get any statistical back-up when grant requests were put in, or real details of where and when the money was spent. In the strict sense, the Arts Council was therefore not accountable, as public bodies are meant to be. Quite often, they didn't know exactly where their subsidies were going.

So the then chairman, Arnold Goodman, said yes, fine, let's start a course to train our administrators. And since then it has gone on to become one of the most popular of all courses, with about 220 applications for 20-odd places on the annual diploma-course.

Various educational bodies were invited to start a suitable course and the Polytechnic of Central London was the first to set the ball rolling. Their course later transferred to the City University, London, where John Pick presides as director of Arts Administration studies. His two colleagues are Michael Quine, course leader for the dip course; and Peter Stark, who takes the practical course. John Pick's book, *Arts Administration*, brought out late last year, by the way, makes an excellent introduction to the subject.

The first courses tended towards a general approach, dealing with economics, statistics and so forth. A more specialist outlook was adopted to suit the different areas of arts activity, like accounting, production management, administration. Production management for instance, is now split into three two-day modules: the 1980 course offered 'Buildings', 'Finance' and 'People' as headings. It was enormously successful, too.

Courses vary enormously. They range from piano tuning—yes, piano tuning—for concert purposes (not domestic uprights) to musicians' bursaries. New ones are always being considered. They are investigating the interest in community arts and bookshop managers training. Puppeteering is another specialist field short on professional back-up skills. Other new fields are photography and video—although film is not Arts Coun-

cil territory, since the British Film Institute already runs its own schemes.

Why is there such demand for specialist training, one wonders? At least 20 letters a week arrive at the Arts Council requesting help in entering this field of the arts.



Typical "student" in theatre administration is Ellen Cannes, now using her Arts Council bursary to study stage and costume design with the Contact Theatre in Manchester. Photo by David Chadwick

Accordingly, job-lists go out now on the first Wednesday of every month (over 600 copies in all, 500 by mail and the others to regional arts associations) to help with individual requests.

Judith Strong, the Council's training officer, and Loretta Howells, her assistant training officer, run a very busy department all year round. Their work is not connected with educational training in any way at all, she is quick to explain. The Department of Education and Science would be quick to rap them over the knuckles if it were. It is more like the courses taken at the National Opera School, where you study say, 'stage presence' for the roles of Violetta or Mimi.

Some people come into the Arts Council after ten years work in the theatre who are

still worried when they see a contract or a local authority's fire regulation, she pointed out. Or to give a more common illustration of how specialist courses can help, people tend to pick up a lot of information about their own particular field as their career progresses, without being too aware of their role in the wider context. Indeed, similar or even better systems of working may exist in other organisations, without their knowledge. A box office manager who wanted to move on from his job once he got to the top might not know where to go from there. A course can open his eyes to other possibilities.

Typical 'students' have been in the business for five to six years, in fact. Depending on an individual's experience, he has the choice of how much study time will be spent out on secondment, or on practical work.

The present courses will continue, we have been assured, but the clampdown on money will mean that courses will need to respond closely to demand or need. If they are not well supported, they could be postponed.

Many leading lights have begun on these courses: Paul Findlay, Sir John Tooley's side kick at the Royal Opera House; Welsh National Opera finance director, Nicholas Payne; and in the Arts Council itself, Paul Collins is the assistant finance director; and Pat Abrahams is subsidy officer for the regions and fine art. They "graduated" in the first year, 1967-68. Coming up for 200 people have been through the diploma course, which runs from October to June, like the normal university year. More specialist courses have sent back 'students' to the Old Vic; the 7.84 Theatre Company, Sadler's Wells, Nottingham Playhouse and many more.

The single biggest grant goes to the ABTT for courses tailored to the needs of senior carpenters, lighting designers, period-costume cutters and sound engineers. The main problem with technicians, as the ABTT's Ken Smalley put it, is that, very often, there is more enthusiasm than skill. Hence the need for training.

The Council's overall budget for 1980/81 stands at £338,000 of which £18,000 goes to the National Opera Studio. It funds about 50% of the training; other sources are the SSRC (Social Science Research Council, London) and the Welsh and Scottish Arts Councils.