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Culture in 2021: a tough road ahead

The arts can help a damaged nation recover – if they are given the chance to survive

The past 10 months have been cataclysmic for the arts: unimaginable, unprecedented. No other part of the UK economy, with the exception of hospitality, has been so gravely impacted by the pandemic. Soon after the shock of closure last March, the financial consequences for arts organisations began to sink in. Without shows, there was no way to earn. Cultural workers were faced with the personal catastrophe of seeing a year’s employment abruptly cancelled.

The rescue package of £1.57bn for the arts, entertainment and heritage was designed to enable institutions to cling on until this March – though any notion of “normality” by spring

seems fantastical, particularly in the performing arts, and more government help will certainly be necessary. The package also left an unforgivable gap: individuals. The vast majority of cultural workers – artists and composers, actors and makeup artists, technicians and designers – are self-employed. But most have found themselves ineligible for support. These people – the engine house of Britain’s creative brilliance – have been thrown to the wolves.

It is going to be hard. But there are grounds for hope. People long for a world beyond the vaccination programme when they can gather together once more to share stories and witness wonders. The arts have shown again and again that they can inject life into ailing towns and cities: they have immense power to heal. Which is what the nation so desperately needs.

(254 words)