

OF HORSES DRAGGED TO WATER...? EXPERIENCES & LESSONS IN DEVELOPING CULTURALLY DIVERSE AUDIENCES

By Olu Alake

At a meeting of senior officers of England's classical music companies a few years ago, one of the comments made me pause for thought. He leaned forward to me and stated in a mix of exasperation and what I presumed to be a genuine plea for understanding, "Our aisles are packed as soon as we announce the shows. There is a waiting list for return tickets every night. Surely, anyone who is not here does not want to be here – so why are you making us do all this cultural diversity nonsense? It is political correctness gone slightly too far, surely?" As a recently appointed Cultural Diversity Officer for the Arts Council, who had just introduced the stipulation that all organisations in receipt of public moneys should produce a cultural diversity action plan, I was of course not likely to agree with him. Yet in his exasperated and seemingly genuine question, I perceived the major challenge for all those who were working on this agenda – how do we understand, articulate and make relevant our efforts for arts and cultural organisations to recognize the benefits of being more engaged with diversity without alienating them?

In the last twenty years especially, there has been a plethora of activity, especially in Western societies with large ethnic minority societies mainly from ex-colonies, seeking to either understand, raise awareness, celebrate and sometimes even respect, the diversity of ethnicities and cultures that have made home in their countries, especially as concentrated in major cities. The arts have been a major platform for engagement with these different communities, to varying levels of success. Usually driven by central government diktats, and couched in the language of community cohesion, social inclusion et al, efforts have been introduced to promote diversity and ensure that proportionate representation of minority populations is seen in and across all facets of society. For arts organisations in the subsidized funding sector, this has resulted in a focus on all areas of strategic and operational activities; from governance to staff, programming to audiences: there is a drive to reflect diversity in all. To this extent, the political imperative for diversity is clear. However, this has not of itself provided a compelling case for 'mainstream' arts and cultural organisations to embrace diversity – *au contraire*, it has had the effect of making many either resist the efforts, or question the credibility and rationale for such activity in the first place.

It does not help that more often than not, certainly in a country like England, - and to varying extents in other multicultural countries of the Global North like Canada, Australia and USA -, the main motivation for the political imperative has been the deemed need to respond to a social problem. For example, unrest in cities in the North

of England in the late 1980s and early '90s resulted in a concentrated effort to engage more positively with minority communities, especially disaffected youths therein. Providing dedicated funding for artists working to engage these communities became widespread – indeed the only funding that seemed to be available for Black and minority ethnic artist in England at one stage seemed to be if they were working on this kind of effort. Consequently, diversity initiatives became synonymous with attempts at social engineering, and artists and arts organisations felt compelled to engage with a process not of their making and for reasons they believed to be far removed from their work. It is no surprise therefore, that there was a kickback against these, and engagement was sporadic and generally non-committal. To compound the matter, these initiatives were invariably short-lived as a result of them not being well-thought out or strategically embedded in genuine efforts to counteract the systemic inequalities which caused the social problematic in the first place.

Audience development has always been seen as a vital area for development of the arts. Developing culturally diverse audiences would then seem to be a very obvious read-across with near seamless points of conflation, yet this has not always been the case. One of the main reasons for this has been the animosity of the deemed imposition of diversity, as mentioned above. There are also other reasons for the lack of engagement or urgency in engaging people from different cultural backgrounds as new audiences by some arts organisations. These can be summarized as a lack of appreciation of the other imperatives that should underpin all diversity initiatives. These are:

1. Demographic: the complexion and human composition of the world is changing. These changes are particularly being felt in our urban conurbations. Cities all over the world are becoming, or have become, multi-lingual/cultural melting pots for people from all over a country or continental region or indeed world to congregate in search of a living, ambition or adventure. Added to this, established populations that have formed long-standing audiences for many arts and cultural organisations are an ageing demographic, and the youth and diversity that need to be cultivated into sustaining audiences needs to be engaged.
2. Legal: in several countries, there are now laws that charge organisations with a duty to promote racial equality and social inclusion.
3. Moral: for many, having an audience that reflects the myriad faces of society is a moral obligation, i.e. it is, for them, just the right thing to do.

4. Business – The bottom line matters. And getting ‘bums on seats’ is a massive part of that bottom line. As a wag once said: “*A dollar bill looks the same regardless of the colour of the hand holding it*”;
5. Artistic – a realization that is gaining ground is the view that the strongest case for diversity in the arts that can be made is simply that diversity makes for better art. The best art has always learnt and borrowed from, been inspired by and based on encounters with the other. It is ironic that in the early 21st century, with globalization making for more peacetime encounters with different ‘Others’, shortsightedness and prejudice are limiting the ability of many organisations to maximize their opportunities to create joy and inspiration for their audiences.

An example of an arts body that came to its own understanding of the need to be more proactively engaged with the difference around it is the case of City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra (CBSO). Based in a city with almost half of the population of minority ethnic origin, yet with an ageing audience of overwhelmingly predominant white patrons, CBSO embarked on a programme of activity to engage with the local Asian population, by engaging the services of A.R.Rahman (the ‘Mozart of Madras’, latterly of Slumdog Millionaire Oscar-winning fame) to be guest composer of a body of work marrying the classical musical traditions of East and West. The body of work that came out of this collaboration was met with rapturous critical and public acclaim – and a new audience of young affluent Asians who have been sustaining patrons of the Orchestra, which has also helped the company attract more funding and corporate sponsorship.

So, beyond fear-motivated lip-service abiding to government funders’ demands, there are real benefits that can be gained from investing time, effort and belief in diversity initiatives. This is not to say that the political imperative has not served any useful benefit – indeed the best use to which the political diktats are put is to serve as a catalyst for the more meaningful engagement and a realization of the benefits diversity can bring.

Yet there is still so much more that can be done - the things that funding and government institutions charged with delivering this agenda can do include to ensure that they are being facilitative rather than directive in their approach; avoid short-termism; have a good understanding of the arts, cultures and audiences that they are seeking to encourage the organisations in their charge to deal with; and to be ready, willing and able to challenge the recalcitrant old- school power bases that dominate the different national arts ecologies across the world.

Indeed, there are also serious questions that arts organisations should be asking themselves as they embark on any audience diversity initiative. These include:

- What realities are being reflected to audiences in the work we are courting?

- Is your approach to marketing and promotion appropriate to your current and potential audience?
- Is there a sense of ownership of your organisation within the local community?
- Are you seen by potential audiences as engaging, welcoming and open?
- Can you build mutually beneficial relationships with other organisations on common issues?
- Do you offer regular opportunities for audiences to experience diverse art?
- Are you as confident talking about your new activities as you are about more familiar ones?

Developing Culturally diverse audiences is vital for the sustainability of arts organisations, and it directly speaks to the level of sustainability that the overall arts sector desires. I have the pleasure of sitting on the board of the UK's foremost African producing theatre, Tiata Fahodzi. As this theatre's work has a predominantly African audience, it recognized the benefits that a more diversified audience would bring. Based in the same borough of London is one of most renowned theatre venues in London, the Almeida, which has a predominantly white middle class audience. In 2008, these two organisations entered into a pilot partnership arrangement where the Almeida hosted a week of new plays developed and directed by Tiata Fahodzi. This resulted in a new audience for both companies, and the partnership has now blossomed into an annual programme of activities to their mutual benefit.

Lessons can be learnt from this and several other similar experiences of successfully developing culturally diverse audiences. The main ones are:

- i. Long-term commitment and leadership from the top – this was discernible in both the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and Tiata Fahodzi/Almeida experiences;
- ii. Integration of the project in overall strategic planning of the organisations involved;
- iii. Research into good practice; clarity of roles of all parties in the partnership;
- iv. Initial skills analysis and mentoring and other support for the relevant staff involved in the development activity.

One thing that cannot be overestimated is the different manifestations of power in any effort to introduce or promote diversity in the arts. Sometimes the patriarchal attitudes that this generates expresses itself in attitudes and presumptions made for and on

behalf of ethnic minorities, rather than with them. In certain places such as areas of Africa, this kind of anomaly is played out against a disempowered majority-ethnic population. (In these instances, it becomes obvious that we are really talking about *minoritised* peoples, as described by Avtar Brah).

Another major point to reflect on is the impact that the quest for a wider audience has on indigenous or minority languages, especially in Africa, where there is a presumption of a *lingua franca* as standard tool of communication. An unintended consequence of such efforts is increasingly being seen to be the minimization and indeed obliteration of traditional languages.

Earlier this year, one of the greatest audience developers of all time passed away. The lessons of Michael Jackson's stellar career is not just one of artistic excellence, or of his tenacity to survive at the top of the music industry for five decades, but more importantly his ability to create work that finds a social, moral, and even political connecting realism to audiences of different ages, from every background and across all continents, and skillfully marketing this. When all is said and done, this is what we are left with: the magic of the artistic endeavor, allowed to find resonance and meaning in an audience.

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