

Artist Report – Assitej Cradle of Creativity 2017 (South Africa)

I, Bhavik Parmar am an Education Officer at Birmingham Repertory Theatre and at the heart of my practice is the belief that every child is creative in extraordinary ways and only requires a spark of opportunity to awaken their talent. I believe too often does parental influence and engagement with the arts, hinder and limit young people's participation within the arts. Before my Artists' Research trip to South Africa I intended to focus on how parental and family involvement in arts projects can be the key to ensure TYA is reflective of the society we live in today. During the trip itself I watched 16 different TYA performances for a range of ages but I was most intrigued by the work for early years and the way in which audience participation was crucial element in this work.

I believed parents would be inspired to push their children to be involved in the arts as they grow up if they understood how powerful seeing a performance and taking part in performance would be. Taking your child to the theatre at different ages of course brings different experiences and it was only during my trip where I realised that one of the impact of *baby theatre*.

Often do we pull faces in front of babies to calm them, to make them laugh, to stop them from crying, to interact with them and very often a baby responds to the simple pulling of faces. If a baby has the ability to react and respond to characters we put on, then theatre is something they can also respond to. During the Cradle Creativity I saw a piece of theatre for babies called 'Sparrow' and the following is a comment from a parent who saw watched the performance with her baby:

"I loved it, this is what the magic of childhood is about, you know they are just so saturated with the same Disney shows and technology, - this is what the magic of childhood is about, I loved how it was about curiosity and music, sounds and movement, my child was entranced"

I believed that through actively taking part in performances with your children you are more likely to see how theatre can entertain, educate and empower. Being born into a traditional Indian family, I was raised with the expectation of becoming a doctor, lawyer, engineer or businessman one day. My parents only saw theatre as a hobby at best, they failed to see how it allows young people to communicate, share ideas, create, build confidence perform and more. They rarely ever saw how powerful going to the theatre or taking part in theatre could be. Therefore I wanted to see how parental participation in theatre affects the understanding of what theatre can offer – especially for aspiring actors in BAME communities.

When can going to the theatre with your child have the most impact? Surely when you're older you are able to have conversations about what you have just watched on stage, but being a parent who actively sees their child non-verbally communicate the journey they are going on is a completely difference experience. Parents during shows I watched commented on how they saw their children interact and behave in ways they had not seen before. Babies were captivated with the use of song, sound, instruments, performance, traditional singing and more. They were just as curious to listen and be attentive to the performance as they were to play with the objects used. I saw the following three shows which all brought very different experiences for babies:

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Sensescapes – An installation for babies Choreographed by Dalija Acin Thelander

Scoop: Kitchen Play for Carers and Babies performed by Magnet Theatre, directed by Koleka Putuma  
Sparrow by Teatre Fot directed by Lise Hovik

While there I had interviews with parents before and after each show. Many of them had never seen baby theatre before. I interviewed a few parents to find out what they thought about the shows many found the shows very experiential for them, commenting about how they felt connected to their children in a new way. Each sensory aspect of performance contributed towards allowing children to be stimulated with emotions and thoughts. I witnessed moments where babies walked around the space and interacted with objects in such a playful manner. The music which was used created an atmosphere where the children felt safe, the moment the lights turned slightly darker or the music changed, the children would stop and turn looking and shouting for their mothers. Performance lets children experience risk, fear, playing, interacting with other children and play.

The performance that most captured my interest was Magnet Theatre's *Scoop*. Using everyday household objects *Scoop* used traditional African folk songs, live music, sounds made using the body and sensory props to take babies through the evening journey of having dinner and going to bed after a long day of playing. Once the performance was over the actors spent time letting children play with all the props that were used in the performance. For me this use of traditional instruments and songs really connected with the parents but also with the babies. Their eyes were fixated on what was going on, the singing was so melodic and set the audience in a peaceful trance. You walked out feeling happy and smiling, and the children loved it. It was the perfect bedtime story.

Seeing these shows made me realise 'Scoop' really connected with its audience because of the value culture and tradition played in their performance. The way to bring in an African audience was to use African music and instruments and stories. If you want to bring in an Indian audience then play traditional Indian music and tell traditional Indian folk stories. From my experience, parents often want to teach their children about their heritage and culture and theatre is a pathway for that.

The performances that most successfully engaged audiences were those that use traditional music and culturally-relevant themes. As an example I had seen many different versions of the play *Animal Farm*, but I had never witnessed an audience that cheered and clapped midway through the performance the way the audience did in South Africa. The themes of the show were deeply relatable to the audience; this is how TYA successfully inspires BAME theatremakers, by showing BAME Theatremakers that their stories have a platform to be performed on.

The downfall of my research during the festival was the lack of diversity in the people I spoke to in terms of theatre background. Majority of my interviewees were people in the theatre industry. They already cared about the theatre experiences that their children or babies had. I currently work as an Education Officer from the Birmingham Repertory Theatre in which I travel to schools, deliver drama projects and direct youth theatre productions. When I returned to the UK, I decided to ask one question to three of my Year 6 classes at Nansen Primary School, which is a school in Alum Rock where majority of the children are from an Islamic faith and of Pakistani heritage. I asked my three classes, totalling just fewer than 90 children, how many of them had visited the theatre with their parents; of which only 8 kids said yes. I believe that the reason for this is because the parents in those communities were like my parents; they don't see the importance of theatre and its value.

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To conclude I'd like to go back to the question of the day: *What do we need to put in place to ensure theatre for children, young people and families is reflective of the society we live in today?*

The society we live in today is rich with families from various backgrounds, if we want our theatre's to be reflective of them, we need to be recruiting staff and actors from those backgrounds to be working on performances and projects that tell stories from those cultures using visual and audial aesthetics that relate to those cultures. I aim create theatre that is continually meaningful to those creating it as well as those it is for. I want to draw on artists from different cultural backgrounds to make sure the performances that I create connect with the communities that I work within.