

TYA BURSARY – ASSITEJ INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL

CAPE TOWN, MAY 2017

ARTIST: Louise Katerega (Dance, Dance & Disabled People, Parent of 2 aged 4yrs, 6yrs)

Dates Attended: May 19th 2017 – May 28th

Events Attended: 16 performances of which

- 6 were for Early Years 0-4 (2 shows featured non-White cast members, all directors were White European origin)
- 4 were for Young Children 5-11 (all shows non-White cast members, 3 directors were White European Origin, 1 East Asian)
- 5 were for Older Children 11+ /Adults (4 shows diverse casts, including one cast with disabled performers, 1 had White European performers; 4 directors White European, 1 director Black African)

Focus Days: Theatre For Healing (Guga S'thebe); Dance For Young Audiences; IIAN; Theatre for The Early Years; Steve Ball's Presentation on benefits of attending conferences as CPD

Workshops: Hector Aristizabal (Theatre as Laboratory For Healing); Amelie Mallman (Empathy as An Artistic Tool in theatre and dance for young people); Karolina Zernyte (Theatre of The Senses); Samantha Provenzano & Ally Tufenjika (Retrospective Devising Workshop)

Introduction

I have approached this report in terms of my individual/personal response as an artist (coloured, inevitably, by my experience as a parent) and response to the research question we were asked to carry to Cape Town and to some extent continues to follow me around after: ***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?***

Personal Response

Overall, the Assitej Cape Town experience was hugely positive for me as an individual personally and professionally. In brief, the main 'gains' for me were: -

- Hugely relishing the new experience of lack of pressure to neither perform nor present at an event and yet still feel a powerful reason to consciously engage with people, performance and process there. As I said in re the Britain's hosting of the 2012 Olympics, us artists do not get the call up for our country like athletes do. I appreciate this kind of chance to feel I am representing the UK.
- Discovering a latent enthusiasm for curation: what my current career mentor, Wanjiku Nyachae, has described back to me as doing 'the opposite of a critic'. Watching shows, I automatically found myself matching them to venues and programmers I know in the UK; sometimes seeing their potential to be re-cast with disabled performers or performers of colour I know. This has led my mentor and me into discussion about how this might become an official service I provide to others in future, especially in relation to the Creative Case for Diversity.
- My dance skills – particularly improvisation – are not as far from theatre skills as I thought: expecting to feel out of my depth and uncomfortable in the practical workshops I attended, I was given a welcome confidence boost in the discovery that many tasks given were 'just next door' to those I already know and that I could re-apply old skills effectively in new contexts.
- I valued simply having time away from the pressures of usual work plus domestic life to reflect adequately on performances and experiences – indeed in my current circumstances, I simply cannot afford to see much theatre or pay for any CPD in the UK so it was doubly valuable to me.

One thing that remained on my wish list overall, was for a couple more opportunities for in-depth discussion before and after Cape Town. These, both as the cohort of artists on our own and with TYA.

Never would I swap the entertainment availed (!) by the TYA UK What's App group, nor deny the friendly relations with our TYA individual partners and whole UK group, nor the chance to present at the Quality of Difference symposium day. The tightness of timescale and scope of funding, however, has left me with my sense of our communications as a series of monologues **at** each other rather than deeper dialogue **with** each other; of opportunities for all parties to express, but little chance to hear how that expression was received. And what effect, if any, that had on anyone's thinking or mission to affect change.

Was an opportunity missed to explore more fundamental, subtler issues of equality and diversity at the festival, the seminar day, within TYA that our presence as a **diverse group** of diverse artists might have afforded?

Post-festival, in an email exchange amongst the artists, I expressed the hope that we would continue our relationship with TYA as group; a kind of 'diversity intelligence response unit' or focus group to run things past. Vicky (Adumeme) suggested further that the group should also remain porous, which I also found very attractive. I could imagine the final interview/audition candidates - who I valued meeting as much as I valued my trip away - being a pool to draw from on this. I continue to be nervous around how often the 'single diverse voice' even if at board level, the static piece of mapping, the 'short stay' of diverse voices for one project continues to be used by organisations in pursuit of greater equity. Even as I recognise myself completely in being an artist who has benefited from these!

Following a ten-day training which I was fortunate enough to experience this summer in New York with <http://pisab.org/> on <http://urbanbushwomen.org/bold/summer-leadership-institute/about> , I came to a much deeper and clearer understanding of the new thinking (which comes before the new doing) we might need to put in place to ensure the arts are more reflective of society today. I couldn't do justice to this experience had I a 100-page report, however I highly recommend this or something like it to a group of core influencers in TYA and/or ASSITEJ; to develop a critical mass within the organisation of a wide range of people conversant with the history of the inequalities we have ALL inherited and understanding (and many mis-understandings) of how they conspire to keep things as they are. For me now, it is only from this point – when the 'why?' is deeply understood by a critical mass not just a 'expert' few (and simply being a member of a protected category, I discovered, does not an expert make!) – can the imagining of the 'what' needs to be put in place begin. Only from this point can we check we are *really* as ready as we say we are for a theatre 'more reflective of society', can we begin to have a vision of that theatre and accept we might have to release the ideas of what it might look like and by whose yard-stick it can be measured or said to be valuable...

Research Question

The take I developed on the research question, developed from conversation with my mentors Steve Ball and Vicky Ireland, to carry with me through the festival was: ***What turns one-time theatre attenders into life-long theatre attenders? And by extension, how do we ensure disabled people are included in their number?***

I would say my focus stayed with this and, again, the opportunity afforded by not having to present or perform allowed me to really home in on my experience as an audience member. I felt very conscious, that at this juncture of my life, of drawing on not one but three audience experiences simultaneously: my memories of myself as a child audience member, my experience as an adult professional artist watching other's art, my experience over the past 6 years as a parent with children around the age I was when theatre became part of my life journey.

Broadly, I had some different size 'lightbulb' moments on this question at different points during my festival experience:

1) On the **IIAN day**, where obviously issues of access were very much to the fore (not least for a South African wheelchair-user colleague navigating the venue/day), it crystallised for me how conscious I had become over the week - perhaps as a stranger in a strange land or as a parent/adult projecting myself into the idea of attending theatre for the first time - of not just what happens **during**

any significant experience but **what happens all around it**, the often unspoken, unexamined codes of welcome and preparation beforehand, how the whole experience must resonate with what is familiar, pleasant, relevant in order to invite return at the end. From my notebook:

*“The visit to the theatre starts the moment you receive the information, continues through the practical steps like ease of parking, demeanour of ushers etc. into and out of the show, into the audience member’s reality beyond until the cycle begins again...We must bring all of our creativity to bear on this process and it must be as joined up for the venue and artist as it is for the punter. And we must treat it as creative, as potentially inspiring, innovative, satisfying, a delight...we none of us baulk at the prospect of a play, of rehearsal or tech because the process of putting it all together is arduous. This is simply what we do. The norm. Standard. We only think of providing disabled or any other kind of specialist ‘access’, in relation to our current list of protected characteristics, **compared** with what has so far gone before been the norm til now.... providing access, making effort to make welcome...it must be our new normal to be inclusive. More than that. It must be our new **delight**...”* Useful reference <http://www.efds.co.uk/how-we-help/research/1910-talk-to-me-principles-in-action-november-2014>

2) Coming out of ‘**Sparrow**’ and several other shows, I was conscious **how few young people seemed to be attending the festival**; how despite some exemplary displays of research, meticulousness, and imagination on stage, how pat, conservative and inaccessible for young children the data collection post-performance was – if there was any at all. I wondered whether this was the case at all Assitej events and how present youth voice is in its – and all of our – decision making structures? Surely, we must put in place not just ways (aware of e.g. Arts Council’s efforts in this direction) but HABITS of surveying our young and diverse audiences that are palatable to them if we really seek to **reflect** society in our work?

3) In ‘**Anziesachen**’ – I had a vision of **re-casting disabled artists** into children’s shows to provide role models. I have an idea for how this could be structured and who I might approach for a pilot so and would be keen to develop this as a project – maybe even in partnership with TYA or TYA members?

4) Speaking to the cast of ‘**Patchwork**’ – I appreciated the **value of mature artists** being targeted to embrace early years work, rather than waiting for them to choose it, and felt this was another method of commissioning amongst diverse artists which could be put in place (with apt Early Years expert support). The contrast to this, was ‘Fingers and Toes, My Body Knows’, where I saw the frustrations for both artists and audience of inexperienced makers tackling early years work without sufficient research, dramaturgy or understanding that little children are not simpler versions of adults, but need, give and receive information in very different and specific ways.

5) Listening to a young artist from the international delegation of emerging artists sponsored to attend to the festival, I wished (a) our TYA artists group could have been consciously linked with this group as I felt we had common ground (b) I was intrigued by a concept a (Black South African) young woman brought up around a kind of ‘**diversity dramaturgy**’ – basically she was asking who, if anyone ever, monitors the agenda/power relations in a show? Should shows be judged not just by how ‘shiny’ (her word) it was i.e. high production values, performance polish, but also whether they are also useful/accurate/debate-shifting when it comes to diversity?

This set me wondering about a couple of shows e.g. the puppet show about Nelson Mandela as a child, which I did not see, but heard discussed by others. This notion of ‘diversity dramaturgy’ set me wondering whether any questions are ever asked about the real-life value of programmers bringing this subject matter to Western Europe? Whilst it’s important to have a role model who **looks** like you, I am not sure **culturally** whether Black European children have much more in common with Nelson Mandela than White European children...how much does programming this in the West play into stereotypes and ‘easy to reach for’ stories about (South) Africa? (This last point was also hotly debated amongst the South African artists I met)

In terms of putting things in place, this again comes back for me to ‘voice’: ensuring diverse voices are heard as a piece of theatre grows and programmers can be informed of whether it is playing into

tropes or stereotypes they may not be aware of. And checking how diverse audiences are receiving the work and providing forums where they can be honest about it.

I had an issue myself, as a person of Mixed Heritage, with a show which, with my adult professional head on, I felt played into a simplistic stereotype of the “tragic mulatto” (mixed heritage people are always destined to be conflicted and suffer due to a confusion of identity/status cf Hollywood film ‘Imitation of Life’) of which the teens cheering it on were probably not aware as I would not have been at that age, although I was lacking in self-esteem due to this stereotype. This stereotype was news to the programmers I discussed it with and they admitted to have never even thought to examine the show through that lens. I did really appreciate, though, feeling safe and having the mandate to voice my opinion as part of the TYA group of diverse artists. ***In no other circumstance have I ever felt free or had a space for debate of this kind with key “gatekeepers”. How, I wonder can we/ create this circumstance again? How open are “gatekeepers” for these potentially challenging conversations?***

6) Finally, emerging from ‘Yao Yao’, I realised how few **parents** I had seen represented in work at the festival and I continue to notice how relatively few artists I come across in the UK making and sometimes programming for young people are parents themselves. Again returning to voice, the most profound realisation I have had as a parent, who has a lifelong relationship with theatre, is how at odds its timings and rhythms can be with those of parenting, how at odds they can be with the current demands of the school curriculum especially homework for older children. I feel **parent voice** could be better harnessed in terms of understanding when and how to programme – (though I mistrust even my own supposedly liberal, informed voice when it comes to being asked about content. That I feel remains mostly a matter for the young people. What grabs my kids often surprises me!)

Conclusion

I cannot finish on ‘Yao Yao’ – a digitally based show which converted this technophobe to the possibility of combining everything that is both up-to-date and eternal for young children - without the most profound realisation of all I went home with from this entire experience: how very much we love our children.

And this has nothing to do with whether we happen to be biological parents. ‘Yao Yao’, writ small, had the same message I saw writ large throughout the entire massive degree of care, effort, imagination, mileage, money that went into the entire festival.

We are (majority) hard wired as humans to care deeply for the delight, the plight, the resilience, the future of our next generations. I was moved to tears by this realisation. I am still. And, in it, I felt great hope that whether the answer to our research question comes sooner or later, that I was in the company of a critical mass of people from all over the world who are open to asking such a question... and unlikely to stop seeking the answers. And in terms of something to motivate my own onward journey, my desire to continue to be proactive in the Creative Case, that is hope enough for me, for now.

Deepest thanks to People Dancing and Spark Arts Festival for additional sponsorship for my trip for £100 and £300 respectively. Though the ACE funding was substantial, having not much other income at the time, I could not have managed it without this extra.

