

I am a circus artist and the Artistic Director of Upswing which I founded in 2006. Upswing was created to be a pioneering voice in British Circus, there is still no other BAME-led producing company in the sector. We have worked to creatively promote inclusion across ethnicity, age, gender and ability. We have developed artists but are also attempting to find fresh perspectives in our artistic creations, seeking new stories and presenting them in appealing and accessible ways, often outside of theatres. I have chosen to use circus, an useful visual and physical language, as my primary form.

My starting point for research for QoD was a curiosity about whose stories are being told, who is listening to them and who is in charge of telling them. At the time I applied I was struck by how much of the work for children and young people I saw was reliant on adaptations and existing stories; stories that already had a place in the popular imagination. I understand the business sense of this kind of approach and much of this work is hugely successful, but I wondered if in the use of existing stories what we were missing in allowing new forms of presentation and new performance experiences. Are we missing work that would possibly engage a different kind of audience or that would allow a different kind of creative to come to come forward.

I wanted to consider the identity of the maker and the expectations that creates in terms of the work they are expected to make. I grew up in a community of huge economic and cultural diversity, everyone I knew sat at the intersection of a number of identities, I grew up thinking this kind of complexity was the norm. It has lead me to consider constantly the idea of “universality” and what aspects of my identity are obviously and subtly visible in my work.

In addition I had a question about aesthetic valuation. I wanted to consider how to increase the range of influences and visions in the sector. Aesthetic values of sector gate keepers, whether they are conscious or unconscious, must have an impact in determining the ability of a given artist to access to the training, cultural understanding, means of production and networks necessary to create work.

Cape Town was a brilliant/challenging/emotionally devastating place to consider these questions. South Africa is embraces its diversity symbolically through its title “The rainbow nation” and constitutionally it recognises 11 official languages, however hundreds of years of discrimination cast a long shadow. Cape Town made me consider the subtle shifts and shades of identity and the power dynamics it creates. I remember being dragged into a discussion that I really did not enjoy. The discussion was, “As a Ghanaian who has lived in the UK the majority of my life in a relatively privileged setting, was I more or less ‘African’ than a white Afrikaans speak who had lived all their life in a poor suburb in Johannesburg?”. The discordant dynamics that connected the idea of privilege with a European identity (culturally vs physically) was deeply uncomfortable.

Two major strands of work in the festival were

- 1) work that was clearly drawn from particular cultural identities aiming to enable the audience to experience the joys, problems, history or tradition of that culture or cultural exchange pieces
- 2) work where there was an attempts to amalgamate or find understanding between of different cultures.

I began searching for the power dynamics of cultural aesthetics in the work I was seeing.

In discussion I found instances where programmers/venues/bookers (people with the means to support the development of work) feeling disempowered or unable to discuss work as there was a strong awareness of not having the literacy in a particular cultural style or aesthetic.

Though this awareness was far, far better than applying judgments without sensitivity, it made me aware how urgently we need to include a variety of voices with different literacies in making choices that impact who is able to access resources and opportunities to create work.

In talking about cultural exchange I often thought about music. Music has always been easily exchanged between cultures (I am thinking of forms like Ska, Salsa and grime). I struggled to see the same fluidity of exchange in performance work I saw in Cape Town. It made me consider how music can be consumed and created anywhere and by anyone. It also reminded me of a study that found that a piece of music is able to elicit the same emotions in individuals, regardless of their cultural background. There was something to that about the instinctive and immediate response we have to music, unfiltered by intellectual reflection, that made me reflect on the reasons I primarily work with Circus and physicality.

Another major takeaway from the trip is that there are places where work for children and young people is given far more status and value than I perceive it to be given in the UK. It has left me wondering if the missing voices of diverse artists in the sector is in part because artists who already are at risk of being marginalised did not want to risk being further undervalued.