

Danger! Gulaam Fatima

Naz Koser offers ideas for growing a Muslim audience for the arts



Danger! Gulaam Fatima, featuring a heroic superwoman in hijab, was the latest production by Ulfah Arts that packed out the theatre at mac (Midland Arts Centre) in Birmingham. This production was storytelling by Muslim women using spoken word, poetry and song. The development of the production was also intended to be an audience development tool which successfully drew in a Muslim audience and could have filled the theatre several times as people were turned away because it was sold out.

There are 1.8 million Muslims in the UK and Ulfah Arts was set up three years ago to explore why their engagement in the arts was so limited. A specialist outreach worker along with special events (such as women-only audiences) have been the combination of approaches used by Ulfah Arts to build relationships with the Muslim community. Specifically, this is done through attending community events and engaging individuals who then reach out to their friends and family. For most events we try to use the

word-of-mouth network to encourage audiences to attend. On some occasions we draw up a list of twenty people we know and allocate them tickets to sell to their friends and family. This way we are always reaching deeper into the community and audiences come because there is trust.

This approach is successful if the product is suitable for the Muslim community. For example, recently I was asked by a theatre if I would consider bringing in a Muslim audience to the pantomime *Aladdin*. They were

under the impression that because it's based in the Middle East and they had a few South Asians in the cast, these were the selling points. However, I would have suggested that in fact the story and the moral values of the story were the selling points, thereby making this a suitable product.

Our work is all about building relationships by going out into the community and understanding our audiences and their reactions. Responding to feedback has been vital but at the same time being aware of the line between the arts and community to ensure both meet at the halfway point – leading to a win-win scenario.

Ulfah Arts believes in giving people choices, as audiences and as artists. For many Muslim communities this choice has been quite rare, mainly because few have known what this choice is. Without artists making work, how does this process begin? It starts with the work.

Our work engages many different Muslim communities from South Asia and the Middle East to Eastern Europe and parts of Africa – both established and newer communities. Sometimes it's the only occasion where these groups come together and realise what they have in common. This is where Ulfah Arts makes its mark. By engaging audiences and developing artists we feel we are truly growing a new audience for the arts. For many who came to see *Danger! Gulaam Fatima*

it was their first experience of spoken word or even being in a theatre. On the night of the performance it felt like there was a huge understanding

that took place on many levels. Pages of quotes such as the ones below give us confidence that we have a recipe that works.

'Tonight I felt I was in the presence of very different individual people and it feels good to share that space and to be part of it.'

'I don't believe in God but found it moving and engaging to listen to the stories and understand other people's faiths.'

The benefits of growing a Muslim audience for the arts can be demonstrated by looking at Islamic finances. British Prime Minister Gordon Brown announced in one of his speeches how he would like to see London as the capital of Islamic finances, with main High Street banks offering products to the Muslim community but also to those who wish to bank more ethically. They have realised the potential of the Muslim market and I feel this market needs to be realised across all sectors. Growing a Muslim audience for the arts would mean greater investment for the arts, larger audience attendance, a better understanding of a community that currently feels ghettoised, helping to dispel stereotypes and inspire a more creative society. ■



Naz Koser

Director
Ulfah Arts

e naz@ulfaharts.co.uk