

Grants for the Arts Case Study

Plenty Productions

Engaging Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) audiences



Photo by Paul Jackson, courtesy of Plenty Productions

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Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

Case Study Introduction

What will I learn and is it relevant to me?

Themes...

- Diversity
- Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) audiences
- Engagement

Learning...

- Engaging Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) audiences
- Involving communities in touring productions
- Developing audiences for touring productions

Relevance...

This case study is relevant to:

- Artists and organisations keen to engage Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) audiences
- Artists and Directors keen to develop community projects into professional touring productions
- Grants for the Arts applicants who want to find out more about funded projects



Published 2016

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Plenty Productions

Snakes and Ladders

Introducing Plenty Productions

Plenty Productions is a Brighton-based community interest company formed in 2006. We deliver arts, media and heritage projects, working in close partnership with communities.

We focus in particular (but not exclusively) on black and minority ethnic (BME) communities, which reflects the background and interests of our directors.

Background to Snakes and Ladders

Snakes and Ladders is a stage play, which grew out of Positive Hair Day* - an oral history project set in a black hairdressers in Brighton.

We had funding from Grants for the Arts in 2011 to work with the community and a director to develop the stories told during Positive Hair Day into a play with rehearsed readings.

The play tells the story of three sisters who are reunited for the first time in five years as one of them prepares to open a salon. As well as retelling some of the stories collected during Positive Hair Day, we incorporated original audio and photos from the tales we uncovered. The performances sold out and the material really resonated with BME audiences.

We wanted to tour the work and Arts Council England suggested that we work with professional actors to take it to the next level. We applied for a second Grants for the Arts project to support a professional tour and accompanying outreach programme.

Touring and outreach

We identified three locations on the tour, which had significant BME communities and low arts engagement, and concentrated our outreach efforts on those areas.

We researched local BME groups and organisations in Croydon, Tottenham and Crawley. Eight weeks ahead of the performances we went and met communities, ran hair stories workshops, recorded audio to incorporate in performances and talked to people about the show.

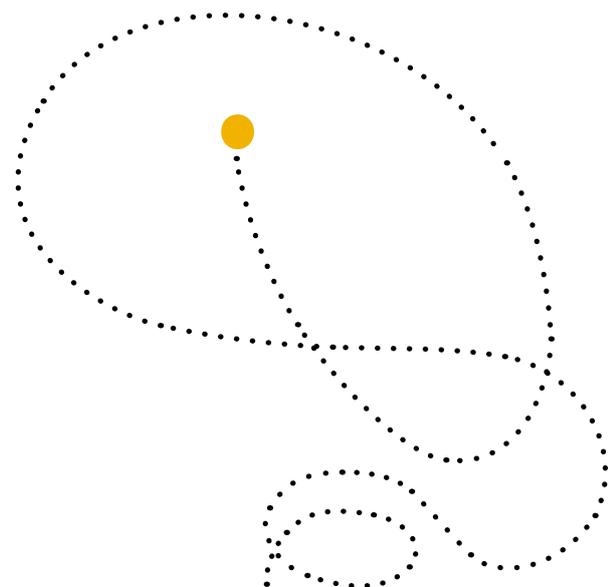
In Croydon we ran writing workshops in a black hairdressers. In Crawley we ended up working with the local library. In Tottenham we found a fantastic community of Caribbean elders who, rather than writing, were keen to tell stories and talk about their heritage.

*About Positive Hair Day

Positive Hair Day was an oral history project set in the basement of a black hairdressers in Brighton.

For people who are black or mixed race, hair is a massive issue. Plenty Productions created the project to capture stories of growing up and being black or mixed race.

The project was about identity and stories were collected and turned into a stage play.



Marketing the tour

It was clear early on that the marketing venues we were doing was not going to be enough to reach our target audience. We were trying to engage an audience that was not necessarily involved in the arts and it was going to take a real effort to get them to the theatre.

We employed a PR Manager for the tour who was an old hand at theatre PR. He secured significant national press and radio coverage, which was really important.

We also turned to black hair bloggers and #NaturalHair on social media to reach audiences for whom the content of the show would really resonate. We invited three black female bloggers to come and review the show and spread the word through their networks.

Results

- 14 performances of Snakes and Ladders in 9 small to mid-scale venues
- 2 sold out performances with a 70% BME audience, including many who had never been to the theatre before
- 99% white audience at Marlowe Theatre and 98% Afro-caribbean audience at Fairfield Hall, demonstrating cross-cultural appeal
- 25 days of outreach, including face-to-face marketing and 12 workshops across Croydon, Tottenham and Crawley
- Stage roles for 4 BME actresses, including BAFTA and Golden Globe nominee Cathy Tyson

Audiences were strongest in those areas where we had invested time in building relationships with communities through outreach work.

Top tips for engaging BME audiences

Don't rely on emails - go out and meet people and build connections.

If you're non-BME, find a BME champion who can connect with your target audience - my colleague and I are both BME so we could connect with the communities and relate to the stories they were sharing.

Subject matter is important - hair is a major issue for black and mixed race people so the play really resonated with BME audiences.

Focus on two or three venues for outreach - concentrating our time in key areas enabled us to make a real impact in those communities.

Be flexible - we planned to deliver the same activity in Tottenham, Crawley and Croydon. The Caribbean elders in Tottenham were far more interested in talking than writing hair stories. Responding to them made the activity far more engaging.

Find a way to give people connection and ownership - incorporating the voices of those who shared their stories during Positive Hair Day and later outreach projects ensured that they felt part of the performance. We also gave those individuals guest tickets to see the show.

Invest in PR - gaining national coverage for the tour was important in developing a wider audience and building the reputation of our company.

Cost

The total cost of the project was £65,000, of which £37,000 came from Arts Council England's Grants for the Arts.

The main areas of expenditure were:

- artist fees
- writer and director
- touring costs
- outreach in Croydon, Tottenham and Crawley

