

A: There are a lot of bad associations and misconceptions about 'brand' and marketing generally. It's simply about ideas.

Q: Some of these bad associations come from lack of integrity. When you say things about yourselves – they'd better be true.

A: Yes, the arts are particularly guilty of using lots of non-words about themselves. For example 'innovation'. This is nonsense. If you use such a word, you should question whether what you are doing is truly innovative. Seminars

***Taking a holistic approach to developing new work and new audiences: Kerry Michael, Theatre Royal Stratford East***

Kerry started by wondering why, in arts organisations, 'the last character we cast is the audience'. He shared his belief that art doesn't really exist without audiences, and that audiences are a vital and dynamic part of the creation of an event.

His presentation focussed on how his venue is trying to address this. Firstly he introduced the Theatre Royal, Stratford East. Joan Littlewood who, he said, put the intelligent working class voice on stage founded the Theatre Royal Stratford East. Philip Hedly continued her legacy by commissioning a lot of black and Asian work. Kerry has succeeded Philip, and is now taking the venue down a more culturally diverse route with work which reflects the extraordinary diversity of the borough:

- It's the most culturally diverse population in the country;
- It has a younger than average population;
- It has a transient population, with many asylum seekers; 115 languages are spoken in local schools;
- And it is the third most deprived borough in the country.

It's a challenging market place but he finds it very exciting. Until recently, the Theatre Royal was always being praised for being a multi-cultural theatre: Kerry believes that in fact they were a uni-cultural theatre. For example, black audiences would come and see black shows, Asian audiences, Asian shows. Only recently have they begun to have some success at addressing this.

Kerry puts part of the success down to his background as a marketer which has left him with a strong belief that the audience always plays a dynamic role in the event, which makes theatre what it is. He maintains that there should be three roles at the top table in

organisations; the programmer/artistic driver; the marketing function; the education role (and not programmer; fund development and finance, which is common in many organisations).

The result of this planning dynamic is that you can be serious about attracting hard to reach audience members not only by targeted marketing, but with specific programming. For example, the Theatre Royal wanted to attract young black people from the borough: they noticed that they would spend £30 on a night at a club, but would not pay £7.50 to come to the theatre. So they put rap musicals on the stage of the theatre and gave the young people something that they did value.

Kerry opened out the subject to debate among the participants. Four main subjects were discussed.

### **Diverse audience retention**

When the Theatre Royal produced the Battle of Green Lanes, a Greek/Cypriot subject, the Theatre Royal were very successful at attracting people from these specific communities, but the following show had a Trinidadian theme. How, asked one participant, can you persuade Greeks/Cypriots to come to such a culturally different show, and if they don't come, how, at a later stage can you reconnect with these previously new audiences? A similar problem was experienced by The Hayward Gallery, where the work force and audience are traditionally 99% white. They programmed an African show to great success but reverted immediately to a show which had 'not for you' stamped over it (metaphorically) losing the new customers who had attended the African exhibition.

Kerry responded that there are 115 languages spoken in schools in his borough, so the Theatre had accepted long ago that they could not give everyone what they wanted.

Kerry made four recommendations on how to deal with this:

- If the work is good quality then there will be some cross over; for example, the Battle of Green Lanes, a highly successful show attracting audiences from the Greek/Cypriot communities, has been responsible for recruiting a number of people who now appear to coming to everything at the Theatre;
- If there is a basic human interest content dealing with human emotions, then it will be relevant to everyone (despite complaints from some white audiences who say that there is nothing for them any more);
- Programme comedy: which appears to have broad appeal whether it is African or Caribbean, or Greek;

- Much can be done with the promotional material (as proved by the Royal Opera House who have managed to design a coherent message that opera is sexy); Theatre Royal always puts a face on their promotional material to help people relate to the human content and so that people know who is welcome;
- Be imaginative with the programming: Theatre Royal programmed an event with Meera Syal with non-Asian subject matter. It attracted Asian audiences, and those interested in the subject matter.

Another suggestion was that youth arts programmes can be helpful in keeping people active and motivated even if they don't think there is anything for them in the programme. Kerry talked about his recent education programme 'new voices' which works with refugees. He sees it as a 'slow burn' way of eventually encouraging people in to the Theatre to see what's on. However, his note of caution was that such work was always project specific and therefore the funding hoops are more difficult to get through as the funding agendas change constantly. His comment was 'we need to learn how to lie better'.

### **Racism and Snobbery**

One participant said that he felt that what distinguished some individuals and organisations who successfully attract diverse audiences is the respect with which they talk about the audiences; as individuals rather than 'punters and bums on seats'. Kerry's response was that the problem was two-fold. Often artists are more interested in the art than the delivery of it, and forget to acknowledge the part that audiences play, but a more important problem was the fact that our industry is snobbish and institutionally racist. It is especially a problem in the arts for us because we are generally middle class, educated and Guardian reading liberals and therefore do not acknowledge that this could be true. Institutional racism can only be addressed when we acknowledge it as a fact.

### **Tension between marketers and artistic directors**

Kerry suggested this tension existed partly because most people leading organisations were 'megalomaniac' and interested in ego and personal legacy. He recommended that the way to play this for a marketer is to provide the evidence the Chief Executive or Artistic Director requires to achieve his or her goals. You may not be credited with the ideas but they might start to value what you can offer.

### **New audiences**

How, asked one participant, can we plan for tomorrow's audiences when, especially in London, the population is so transient. The Theatre Royal is spending time building

networks, so that they can find new people as they arrive, and they are also expanding their youth theatre groups to make sure that as many young people as possible feel that the building is theirs.

He added that the Theatre Royal ushers have a three-hour improvisation session as part of their induction where new recruits are to imagine they are at a party where they don't know anyone. This allows them to be very empathic to new visitors who will feel just as bewildered and lost. Indeed, many new visitors prefer to explore the website first because the real thing is scary and unfamiliar.

A participant added that it is also very useful for staff members (particularly those who work in different buildings or in day-time shifts) to make sure they see audiences (before or after shows) so that they can gauge who is coming, and how they are behaving. A small note of caution was that although it is easy to gauge the bulk of the audience from observation, it is very easy to miss new or more peripheral audience groups: it is also common only to see the part of the audience that looks like oneself.

Kerry was keen to point out that at Theatre Royal they want young audiences not because it is part of the Government agenda, but because it seriously adds value to the art. The young audience changes and improves the 'event', even if they do eat their MacDonald's meals and talk during the show. A participant from the Royal Albert Hall agreed with this and had recently had a similar experience. They programmed Jamie Cullen as part of the London Jazz Festival and scheduled an extra performance for teenagers only: it was a vastly more exciting and enjoyable performance than the one for the 'normal' audience.

Lastly, on this subject, Kerry cited the West Yorkshire Playhouse, who, like the Theatre Royal, programme their non-theatre spaces (such as bars and foyers) with things that people want to see so that people can come in who wouldn't, at the moment, be that interested in walking into a theatre.