

CHANGE THROUGH PARTNERSHIP

Paul Kaynes and Sarah Ogle

Paul Kaynes explained how Birmingham Arts Marketing is working to develop audiences among specific African Caribbean and South Asian communities in Birmingham

Birmingham Arts Marketing (BAM) is an audience development agency, representing a consortium of 34 arts organisations. Its mission is to expand the range and numbers of people attending and participating in the arts in Birmingham, and thus it runs audience development projects which are all encompassing rather than solely marketing focused.

The population of Birmingham shows some distinct differences from the UK averages, with a significantly higher percentage of South Asian residents, and also a higher African Caribbean population. The city has been witnessing a cultural shift in recent years, with the rise of 'Bollywood' and an increase in attendance at mainstream cinema, as well as MegaMela and ArtsFest.

With a view to developing audiences among specific African Caribbean and South Asian communities in Birmingham, and to creating a strong foundation for the establishment of enduring relationships between communities and participating arts organisations, a long-term audience development project called 'Right Up Your Street' has been launched. Funded by the Arts Council of England New Audiences Programme, the project is based on the principle of networking, and has set out to test the effectiveness of network marketing within specific communities.

The process so far has involved the recruitment of 'Ambassadors' to work on behalf of the arts organisations involved in the project with the target communities, and the recruitment of 'panels' from the communities, with whom relationships are being built. The organisations and communities involved include:

- The Drum African Caribbean; New Town residents; students/low waged/unemployed; and local artists
- Fierce Festival South Asian; gay and lesbian
- mac South Asian; Hindu; youth
- The Rep South Asian; wide age range; wide range of professional backgrounds
- SAMPAD Bangladeshi; male; adult
- Symphony Hall African Caribbean; arts workers
- Ikon Gallery South Asian; women; Ladywood residents

The project is ongoing but, so far, initial contacts have been made with specific communities; committed teams from these communities have been created and key decision-makers identified. Various specific developments are taking place: for example, SAMPAD is considering the timing of Bengali drama; Symphony Hall is to showcase

black work from the community to appear in a foyer exhibition; and The Drum has employed its Ambassador and is setting up a system to monitor attenders.

But interestingly, the key achievements overall are internal to the organisations involved, in that an attitudinal shift is taking place. There is training for all involved, leading to organisational change – particularly in the culture of the organisations. BAM has ended up pursuing a very different goal than originally envisaged, having concluded that audience development only happens when real organisational change takes place. For audience development activity to succeed, the conditions need to be right.

Sarah Ogle explained how the culture of The Rep is changing, following its experience of 'Right Up Your Street'.

The Rep is at the forefront of British theatre. It has an impressive creative history of regional, national and international work, and its mission is 'to lead, not follow'. It produces over 20 new productions each year, and is the only venue outside London with a space – The Door – dedicated to new writing.

Birmingham is a culturally diverse city, which is not reflected in The Rep's audiences. When the organisation entered the Stabilisation programme in 1998, a commitment was made to recognise the creative potential of diversity by extending links with communities to develop the audience profile to be more representative of the immediate catchment area. This also reflected a recommendation of the Boyden report, which stated that a theatre should 'aspire to being an active community resource rather than a passive vessel for a minority interest'. In his view 'a strong commitment to cultural diversity in all its forms must remain a major priority'. The Rep recognised the need to change, and had a willingness to change. 'Right Up Your Street' provided the opportunity to change.

A diverse mix of key target communities was identified, although forming a panel with representatives from these communities did pose problems. Nonetheless, at the first meeting of the panel, members of different South Asian communities came to a meeting to discuss South Asian culture and identity, and access to and experience of the arts. The panel was introduced to The Rep and told about its commitment to South Asian work and audiences, before attending a performance in The Door. The partnerships were developed through a backstage tour and a production in the main house. The panel then gave an enlightening evaluation of its experiences.

Following this experience, a South Asian communities development worker started to work with the education and marketing departments in relation to a production of 'The Ramayana'. This is one of the world's oldest stories, which is essentially Hindu, but has resonance for other South Asian communities. The production was to be a world premiere directed by The Rep's associate director, Indhu Rubasingham, and with a multi-cultural cast. The role of the development worker was to act as an adviser, Ambassador and liaison within South Asian communities and relevant departments of The Rep. A second panel was established, which followed a similar format to the one established in 'Right Up Your Street'. The two panels came together, with enthusiasm and commitment for the project, and offered feedback, advice, support and encouragement. There was a sense of partnership.

The process of change has been an interesting one. Firstly, we have come to understand the importance of information and dialogue – of both talking and listening. We have also had to take action, relating to our print, scheduling, front of house, box office and programming. Change has been for all – from box office to boardroom. Everyone has a deeper understanding of ‘equality of opportunity’, and its implications for activities such as casting and other recruitment.

But it doesn’t stop here. There is an ongoing need for change; for talking and listening. We will continue to involve the panels in education and marketing work, and will be touring ‘The Ramayana’ nationally and internationally, offering a resource of good practice.