

DEVELOPING A CULTURALLY DIVERSE AUDIENCE

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Philly Desai reported the findings of a qualitative research project funded by the Arts Council of England which examined ethnic minority attitudes to the arts.

Background

The objective of the research was to understand more about the attitudes to and arts experiences of ethnic minority audiences. The triggers and barriers to attendance were investigated, with a view to identifying audience development strategies. The methodology used was qualitative, involving focus groups.

Definitions of arts

Asked to define the arts, the mainstream art forms were found to be top of mind for these audiences. Various Black, Asian and Chinese arts were also mentioned, although these were not always seen as ‘arts’ – more as ‘cultural and social’ activity. Occasionally activities like night-clubbing, deejaying and dancing to music were also defined as ‘arts’.

Attitudes to mainstream arts

Participants in the research could be classified in three groups in terms of their attitudes to the arts: enthusiasts, experimenters and avoiders. The predominant image held of arts attenders was of white middle/upper-class people aged over 35, intellectual and ‘arty’, speaking in ‘posh accents’ and dressed in dinner jackets, ball gowns or suits. There were reports of negative experiences and expectations – parallels drawn with ‘a Dalmatian with five black spots’, and recollections of feeling ‘why am I seeing this?’ and ‘sitting there miserably’ thinking ‘it’s just a load of noise, innit?’ One person said, ‘I tried to like it, but it is boring’. Factors found to influence attendance included personal recommendation, special occasions and local publicity; and most favoured were events that are relevant, familiar and participatory.

Attitudes to Black, Asian and Chinese Arts

Attitudes to mainstream arts and to Black, Asian and Chinese Arts do not correlate, suggesting that ethnic minority audiences are not alienated from arts *per se*, rather from a particular version of ‘the arts’. There is clear demand for a range of arts activities and a creative energy exists.

Black, Asian and Chinese Arts are seen as providing cultural continuity, and create pride and ownership in the communities. They are felt to relate to ‘our experience’, and provide deeper satisfactions and a safe space for self-criticism.

Community-based events are favoured, including religious and cultural festivals which engender feelings of participation and belonging. Social events, at which the arts are part of a wider social experience and enable active participation, are seen as blurring the line

between performer and audience. Formal arts events are often organised by private promoters. They tend to feature classical artists, film stars or singers, comedians and musicians, and dramas. The younger generation is into British Black/Asian dramas, and Black musical cultures.

Recommendations

There is a need to raise awareness of the mainstream arts, and to shift imagery associated with it. Programming has to be considered, with changes to the product and the context; and opportunities should be created to develop the audience's understanding and allow for interaction. To develop Black, Asian and Chinese Arts, it is important to develop local talent and make links with community organisations. Resources and marketing back-up should be provided, and help given to support mainstream programming as well as develop new product.

George Matheson and Ron McAllister explained how the Hudawi Cultural Centre and Lawrence Batley Theatre have been seeking to break down the barriers that prevent culturally diverse groups attending both venues.

The Hudawi Cultural Centre and Lawrence Batley Theatre have been involved in a partnership which aims to overcome barriers to African Caribbean audiences attending both venues. The two organisations have a shared marketplace. Huddersfield, Leeds, Bradford and Sheffield are all within easy reach, and Black audiences are known to attend a wide range of events, and will travel if they are keen to see the event. The total Black population in a 30-minute drive time is nearly 23,000.

A report into the potential of the venues' marketplace recommended a sub-regional approach to extend the catchment area. It suggested the development of closer relationships between venues and existing attenders to increase loyalty and frequency of attendance and to develop crossover attendance. It also recommended communicating the features of the venues, and communicating a strong promoter identity for the Hudawi, using local Black promoters. Endorsement of the venues and usage by Black attenders should be communicated through visual image and text.

Following these recommendations, the partnership started to experiment with a wide range of promotions, including companies of excellence, issue-based work, comedy and participatory work. The organisations appointed a dedicated marketing assistant for the partnership, and regular meetings of the partnership, involving key community and outreach personnel, were set up. A piece of print capturing the mood of the events and venues was produced; data collection was improved; and regular youth arts workshops were set up.

The joint promotions in the first and second phases for the project produced promising results:

First phase:

Sakoba Dance	144 / 39%
Who Sen' Me	71 / 50%
Othello	1340 / 50%

Second phase:

Russell Peters, supported by Felicity Ethnic and Rudi Lickwood	363 / 87%
Spirit of Carnival project	30 participants + 62 / 35% (box office + invited guests)
In Defence of Jezebel	178 / 52%
Makinde (Tiata Fahodzi)	435 / 54%

Several principles are important for working together in the future. A strategic approach to partnership is key, including an effective Community Outreach strategy and joint programming. We will strengthen regional links, and take a long-term approach to planning, including a three-year funded post. It is essential that we learn from our mistakes, but are not afraid to experiment. And we will build trust in the partnership, by believing it can work.