

THE ACTIVITIES OF THE BLACK THEATRE FORUM

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The Black Theatre Forum was formed in 1985 as an umbrella organisation of African Caribbean and Asian theatre companies with the aim of stimulating the development of black theatre in Britain, attract wider audiences and to help create the conditions for greater equality of opportunity. For nearly two decades, it represented a dynamic multiracial arena where black theatre aesthetics and politics were creatively explored, pointing to new directions in the production of black performance. As a co-ordinating body of seventeen black theatre companies it also functioned as producer of the Black Theatre Seasons - a festival organised in the West End during the 1980s aimed at de-marginalising black British theatre and move it to central London venues. Within its six seasons, it represented an invaluable showcase for black talents, involved in the production of nineteen plays all written, directed and performed by leading black artists. The nature of the organisation and its wide range of activities performed in the past years, make of the Black Theatre Forum archive an important resource in the study of black theatre in Britain. Apart from the Seasons, the organisation ran numerous workshops and seminars, focusing on new writing, performance techniques and administration. It also ran two major national conferences, of which "Future Histories", held at the South Bank Centre in 1995, attracted over 200 delegates.

The beginning of the Black Theatre Seasons

The first seeds of the organisation were sown in 1983. At this time talks started to take place between Parminder Vir, Ethnic Arts Adviser at the Greater London Council (GLC), and Anton Phillips, a Caribbean actor, director and producer, with the view of putting forward a policy for the development of black theatre to the GLC. Having been one of the main supporters of black theatre companies in London, a strategy was needed to root its achievements and make more resources available for the future. With this view, in 1983 Anton Phillips of Carib Theatre Productions (a company co-founded in 1981 by Phillips and Yvonne Brewster, an actress and director originally from Jamaica and later co-founder of Talawa Theatre Company) put forward an application to the GLC for the production of a season of black plays at the Arts Theatre in the London West End. Recognised by the funding body as "a first step towards establishing black theatre alongside other arts forms in the London art scene", this pioneering season included plays by Steve Carter (USA), Trevor Rhone (Jamaica), Michael Abbensetts (originally from Guyana) and Paulette Randall (UK). The playbill aimed to attract both black audiences and those white theatregoers who were not used to attending performances in fringe venues or community centres - the places where black theatre companies had mostly been performing until then. In particular, Yvonne Brewster's production of Randall's first play, "Fishing", was one of the early attempts to represent black British women's life on stage from a black woman's perspective, revealing, in Nicholas de Jongh's words, "the gulf between black women of two generations, and their angry, despairing submission to men" ("The Guardian", December 9, 1983).

Although attendance at the first season was relatively poor, this was balanced by the enthusiasm shown by the artists involved in the productions, by the transfer of Trevor Rhone's "Two Can Play" to the Theatre Royal Stratford East and the interest expressed by New York producers in taking the play to the USA. This convinced Phillips to prepare for a second season. His idea was to capitalise on the previous success and start lobbying for the acquisition of a building devoted to black theatre.

The establishment of the Black Theatre Forum

Around the same time, the new decentralising strategy for the arts introduced by the Arts Council (ACGB) in March 1984 risked penalising existing black theatre groups by diverting funds to Regional Arts Associations (RAAs) who had less experience in the area of so-called "ethnic arts". To counter this lack of expertise, it became clear that an organisation, which could represent the needs of the sector and liaise with funding institutions, was needed. Therefore in January 1985 Phillips called a meeting at Temba Theatre Company's premises with the representatives of other London-based black theatre companies to formulate a policy and present it for consideration to the GLC Ethnic Arts Sub-committee. Representatives of the following companies attended the meeting, which laid the foundation for the establishment of the Black Theatre Alliance (BTA - as the Forum was initially called):

- * Carib Theatre Productions
- * Talawa Theatre Company
- * Black Theatre Co-operative
- * Tara Arts
- * Temba Theatre Company
- * Staunch Poets and Players
- * Parminder Vir (GLC)

The existence of a collective body was aimed to enhance the chances of making an impact on governmental policies and promoting the creation of an intercultural programme within the Greater London Arts Association (GLAA). For this reason more members were invited to join, including Joseph Marcell (theatre representative on the Roundhouse/Black Art Centre Steering Committee - whose presence was aimed at bringing the Forum up to date with developments at the Roundhouse and attune its artistic policy with that of the Forum), Harmage Kalirai (Asian Theatre Co-operative), Dhirendra (British Asian Theatre Company), Gloria Hamilton (Umoja Theatre Company) and many others over the years, eventually making the Forum the co-ordinating body of seventeen African, Asian and Caribbean theatre companies. Interestingly, among the various issues discussed at these initial meetings, the need to create an archive was raised by the members as a tool to stimulate the renaissance of black theatre in the UK. Their concern in preserving this area of British theatre history long predated the current interest manifested by institutions and cultural organisations.

While BTF was officially established, a separate organisation, Second Season Production was set up by Phillips to administer the core costs of the season, which opened in January 1985 with "Scrape off the Black" by Tunde Ikoli (UK). Directed by Alby James, who shared with Ikoli the experience of being a so-called 'second generation' black Briton, the play dealt with the dilemmas of a young 'mixed race' son and his white Cornish mother within the four walls of a council flat in East London. Farrukh Dhondhy's "Vigilantes" and Earl Lovelace' "The New Hardware Store" completed the programme, aimed at attracting diverse audiences by balancing the need for representing contemporary British life with the 'back home' reality of post-independence Trinidad. Here again, audience figures did not match the positive response from mainstream theatre critics. Regretting the failure of a Friday night performance of "Scrape off the Black" to attract more than the "...30 people, most of them white", the reviewer of the "Sunday Times" (January 13, 1985) suggested that if the play was staged at the Royal Court Upstairs, the Tricycle or the Bush it would have received a better audience response. However, the point of producing black plays in the West End was precisely to stimulate the emergence of new theatre-goers both within white and black communities, while opening the mainstream to black theatre aesthetics. This last point in particular was caught by John Connor who suggested: "the play is also a damn sight more interesting than the normal crop of white living room dramas that infest the West End and bodes well for the rest of the Black Theatre Seasons" ("City Limits", January 18-24, 1985).

Even if box office figures doubled those of the previous season, it was clear that more resources had to be invested in order to build up the awareness of black theatre outside the usual circles and encourage people from minority cultures to go to central London theatres. This could be achieved by producing plays, which were relevant to the communities and interesting for the wider audiences. Therefore the Forum made a point of investing resources in audience development for the production of the third season, whose success would help to raise the profile of the company and attract new funds - an important step in light of the forthcoming closure of its main sponsor, the GLC, in March 1986.

Internal differences and theatre experiments

As the Forum grew and new co-opted members joined, differences of opinions emerged in the definition of the artistic programme and the choice of plays. Added to these were the difficulties encountered in acquiring a theatre building, for which the Roundhouse project, badly affected by the closure of the GLC, was not a possible substitute. The idea of transforming the derelict venue, once the base of Arnold Wesker's Centre 42, into a house of excellence for black arts did not convince the members of the Forum, both from an administrative and artistic point of view. At the same time, an Asian Theatre Forum was set up by Asian companies to look specifically at the concerns of Asian theatre. Taking all these issues into account, the members decided that the main body's purpose would be that of a lobbying organisation, offering 'a political stance of unity' to its various constituents.

More importantly, the Forum would offer them a privileged opportunity to cross over artistic differences and meet various theatre traditions within its unique arena. The experiments in cross-cultural theatre that characterised the 1986 season are evidence of this. The programme included "The Little Clay Cart", by Shudraka, presented by Tara Arts Company and directed by Jatinder Verma, "Rakshasa's Ring", by Visākhadatta, directed by Anton Phillips and "The Pirate Princess", by Barbara Gloudon, presented by Temba Theatre Company and directed by Alby James and Paulette Randall, with the original music of Felix Cross (born in Trinidad and brought up in the UK). While not all of the productions were positively received by audience and critics, they allowed both directors and actors to explore non-European theatre traditions in a creatively conducive atmosphere. Moreover, they paved the way for a new interpretation of intercultural theatre, as produced by artists who had privileged access to theatre histories and techniques originated outside Europe.

At the same time a common experience of migration and cultural diversity, which they shared with London audiences, gave their work a critical angle in tune with the sensibility of the time. The box office success of "The Pirate Princess", which opened at the Arts Theatre on 7 March, is an interesting example, as it gave its co-directors and music composer, all born or raised in the UK, the opportunity to meet Caribbean culture and artistic traditions outside their geographical boundaries and re-invent them in the new cultural context. Written by Barbara Gloudon (from Jamaica), the production added a new British contemporary zest to the well-established tradition of Jamaican pantomime. The fusion of different styles of music from the Caribbean island (including Mento music, Jamaican soul, R & B reggae and other elements from Jamaican folk music) resulted in a unique musical score which contributed to attracting a consistent level of black audiences, some of them coming for the first time to a West End theatre.

Efforts to create a common platform where artists of different cultural backgrounds and artistic visions could debate their views and channel them into their creative work was a pioneering venture that did not happen within a vacuum. On the contrary, its course of action reflected the state of black arts and its position within the British cultural industry. Attempts to be a vehicle for expanding knowledge and professionalism, whilst smoothing over interracial tensions, were counteracted by a wider process of political fragmentation that hit the black theatre movement at the end of 1980s. Therefore, as the members of the Forum struggled to maintain the level of funding previously dispensed to their theatre companies by the GLC, they decided that more resources should be invested outside the production of the Black Theatre Seasons to help strengthening the sector.

Widening perspectives

In conjunction with the production of the 1987 Season (marketed this time as a "Black Theatre Forum Production"), the Forum planned to use the five-year grant from the Greater London Arts Association (GLAA) to expand its activities. A number of workshops, youth theatre projects, seminars and conferences were produced, as some members were particularly interested in bringing the arts closer to the African, Caribbean and Asian communities. At the same time international links started to be forged - in 1991 the Forum produced a gala performance at the Hackney Empire for the Children of Africa charity. Its vocation to be a connector within the black arts world led to the production of a registry of black practitioners for outreach work, together with a number of databases to facilitate the employment of directors, writers and actors. Finally, resources were invested in expanding audiences while plans continued over the years to establish a black theatre centre culminating in Oscar Watson's project proposal for a National Black and Asian Theatre Development Centre in 1996.

With the termination of the Black Theatre Seasons in 1990 and the unsuccessful outcome of Anton Phillips and Malcolm Frederick's fundraising efforts for a theatre building in Brixton, energies started to be directed towards the training of a new generation of actors, directors, producers, marketing officers, administrators and backstage technicians. Writers' workshops were organised every year from 1992 to 1995. In particular, the workshop "Accents and Interpretation" (1995) represented a significant attempt to explore the creative use of Caribbean accents in performance, following on from a number of master classes and voice classes produced in previous years. The "React To" Project, organised to tackle social exclusion and raise drug awareness among young people, was performed at the Tricycle Theatre in 1992, followed a few years later by the "Black Art Action Day" (1996, ICA, London).

During the 1990s a number of conferences were also organised to address both the history and the future of black theatre and art management in the UK. Among them were:

* "Yes! It Can Be Fun: Working in Black Arts Administration/Art Management" (1994)- the conference was particularly successful in giving a number of young people confidence to enter the profession

* "Future Histories" (1995) - the conference, organised at the South Bank Centre in November 1995, represented one of the first attempts to create a platform for academics, theatre practitioners, critics, education workers, consultants and funders to discuss the past, present and future of black theatre in the UK, and develop a strategy for this sector. During the two days a number of performances took place and the first issue of the quarterly magazine "Frontseat" published by the Black Theatre Forum was launched.

Towards the end of the 1990s, the BTF office moved to the Oval House premises in South London. Shortly after this, priorities at the London Arts Board changed, its grant to BTF was cut and funds were allocated for BTF to wind down its activities. As a result, the office closed in 1998 but a part-time co-ordinator was retained. Instead of winding down, the small management committee decided to use the funds remaining to keep the organisation alive and succeeded in gaining funds from the Arts Council of England for a feasibility study for a Black Arts Development Agency. The national study "Connect" was completed in 1998 but the concept of an agency ultimately did not gain the support of the Arts Council, which preferred to invest in a series of targeted projects. While the committee continued to work and advocate for a development agency, their already meagre funds eventually ran out and the activities of BTF officially ended in 2001.