

## **INTERCULTURALISM Brussels, December 11<sup>th</sup> 2012. NASEEM KHAN**

### Intro

Interculturalism has had an official life since 2005 when UNESCO defined it as “the existence and equitable interaction of diverse cultures and the possibility of generating shared cultural expressions through dialogue and mutual respect.”

A fine aspiration –a vision of harmony and a respectful exchange of views – a tacit acceptance that in the process one might have to surrender something of ones own in order to reach a new evolved understanding, and the readiness to do just that, Or at the very least an agreement, as Raj isar put it when he launched his ‘Cultures and Globalisation’ ‘to disagree agreeably.

Aspirations are fine, but attainment is difficult. For a start the dialogue is not between equals. There are disparities of lifestyle, expectation, histories, forms of expression, different areas of taboo or what is ‘done’ or ‘not one’: not to mention the essential disparities and differences of language, education and income level.

To be frank, it is anyhow hard enough to find harmony between two people of identical background. So why expect intercultural dialogue to be any different? However, if we confined ourselves to the purely realistic, we would never go anywhere at all. There’d be no inventions, explorations, arts at all. We all know that we need to grasp this particular issue: that is an aim broadly recognised as necessary.

The Council of Europe lists three conditions in its introduction to its Intercultural Cities programme, and the very first of these is honesty. It argues that there has been too little public acknowledgment of the problems involved in intercultural policy. (The other two involve things we shall come to later – around governance and competencies.

So to be honest, in the UK we have had a long history of overt policy that has sought to respond to the new fact of new demography – longer than other countries in Europe for various reasons. We have been looking for a prescription or model since my own report, ‘The Arts Britain Ignores’ was published in 1976. Since then the arts Council, local authorities and to a lesser extent central government have made their way through a succession of policy initiatives and strategies. The one thing they have had in common in all their diversity has been a provisional quality – a search for ‘the right way’.

Is there a ‘right way’? Experience suggests not, and logic too. But we can extrapolate a number of guiding principles from the decades of experience, and I intend to offer 5 to you today. These are directed towards cultural institutions rather than national policy-making bodies – to arts centres, regional cultural centres, museums, galleries and so on. But the work on the ground is the bedrock of culture and cultural change, and the nexus between that and the policymakers is both taxing and crucial. I have increasingly come to feel in so many areas – not culture alone - that that ‘in-between’ stage is

most often the problem, and I believe the point – where experience meets policy - at which this working group must be locating itself.

The points that follow are by no means the last word, but I hope that they will stimulate debate and lead on to others.

## 1 Work with commonalities rather than difference

The most successful projects that I know in the cultural sector have been the ones that have worked with the experiences that bind us together – the things we share – rather than those that separate us out. A focus on specificities – however well-intentioned – can backfire spectacularly.

A certain museum in the UK realised their audience was overwhelmingly white in an area where there was a strong Caribbean population. They therefore decided on what they were sure would be a surefire draw – a big exhibition about Nelson Mandela. It certainly attracted takers, but very few African Caribbean. This puzzled them greatly. They were even more taken aback when they took a touring exhibition some months later about the making of “Star Wars”, and the African Caribbean community came out in force.

It is a mistake to assume that everyone is bound in by ethnicity – or by age, ability and so on. Art of quality might take all of these as stepping stones, but it will move on from there and produce something that widens the root condition out, so that people at large can join in, in an act of sharing and empathy. ‘King Lear’ is not a play about the problems of an old man who won’t accept his age. It is a play about the human condition. Rites of passage – love and loss; birth ageing death. All things we share: mysteries. ‘Race is a fine place to start from, ‘said write and cultural commentator Gary Younge, ‘But a lousy place to finish.’

Avoid stereotyping and second-hand expectations. Expect and want your artists to push the envelope. Don’t settle for any less. Give them, on your part, the time, space, rope and chance to do it.

This leads me to Point no 2:

## 2 Be in it for the long haul

Funding is very often an annual affair, and it s hard for most people in the cultural sector to be sure what the world will look like in 5 or 10 years time. What will the imperatives be? Who could have seen ten years ago how digital technology would develop?

As a result short-term initiatives result. But in the case of diversity, there is a sense that a few years or a big push – a Year of Intercultural Dialogue maybe – will fix it. Or the sense that it is only the absence of a specific fund or pot of dedicated money that has stood in the way of the emergence of interculturality. We know this is false.

We cannot keep social factors and cultural ones in separate compartments. They are bound together in a single line. At the one end are prejudice, discrimination and racism. At the other end is a historical bias so deeply engrained that we hardly notice it. It affects language, style, structure. It leads to the tacit assumption that a certain kind of person would run a large cultural institution for instance (usually not women, going by statistics). No-one has set out to achieve this, but the weight of past history and structures and assumptions lead to it.

It raises its head over little incidents. A production by black director was touring to his father's hometown. The elderly man proudly made his way into the foyer to go and book a ticket for his son's show at the box office. The person behind the desk barely looked up, but said curtly, 'The job for a night security guard has been filled...'

Small words or concepts act as barriers or stumbling blocks. Another theatre director very much wanted to diversify his staff, and when a vacancy for a box office manager came up, advertised it locally and waited for non-white applicants. None came. Puzzled he gave the advert to a new young black intern, and said 'Would you apply for that?' 'Oh no...' the man replied. Why not? 'I don't know what it means...' The director explained what a box office manager would do. 'Ah...' said the intern, 'You mean a *ticket seller*... Yes, I'd apply for that!'

Bias exists pretty much everywhere – programmes have had to be set in place to break a pattern – patterns of expectation on both sides: in the UK till recently no black or minority ethnic person at a decision-making level in a museum; no black or ethnic minority lighting stage designer in the theatre; no black ballet dancers.

In order to change patterns – to achieve diversity at every level of governance in an organisation – time is necessary. There can't be a quick fix. We are in it for a generation.

### 3 Don't expect to understand everything

The ideal of intercultural dialogue carries within it the assumption that it will bring total comprehension. The cultural theorist, Professor Homi Bhabha, talked about the need to accept that some areas of experience will always be opaque and mysterious. We all have very specific hinterlands, and they have formed our values and understanding. Cultivate humility. This is not an argument for accepting cultural relativism, simply one for eschewing arrogance.

Intercultural projects need time and humility if they are to do anything more than scratch the surface. In the past we had our fair share of so-called 'Fusion arts'. These mostly involved different disciplines performing side by side, one stopping for the other to 'have their say'. Projects with a profounder aim will recognise that each needs time to learn something of the other's language. I

refer you to a project to develop a chamber opera that is allowing itself two years of co-working before thinking about a final product.

Comedia – with whom I was a Senior Associate for several years – commended, in its study of the Intercultural City, the quality of ‘openness as a prerequisite...while it is not in itself a guarantee of interculturalism, it provides the setting for it to develop.’

#### 4 Don't be afraid of tradition

We are in a bind where ‘multiculturalism;’ is concerned. It is now generally considered to be a force that keeps communities locked up in their ghettos: to impede integration and full active citizenship. I believe this is a misreading.

Quite the opposite, it is possible to argue that cultural diversity actually leads to integration rather than the counter.

‘Nobody comes to this country without baggage,’ said Jatinder Verma, director of the Indian-base theatre group Tara Arts. That baggage is their imagination and the form in which it is expressed.

Salman Rushdie’s ‘Haroun and the Sea of Stories’ – apparently written for children – envisaged a dreadful world in voices were stopped and sticking plaster was placed over people’s mouths. Brian Friel set his play ‘Translations’ in an Ireland colonised by the British in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It featured a group of soldiers given the task of going round the country and systematically rooting out the old Irish names for towns and villages as well as traditional wells and rivers and springs, and replacing them with English names.

Both showed examples of attempts to subdue by removing language and expressiveness. The history of culture as a whole shows that language is the vehicle to change, which maybe why it has so often been considered dangerous. In the case of new communities – cultural languages is a means of communicating. It is the potential link and not the barrier.

Dancer Akram Khan used his traditional Indian classical dance training, in conjunction with his contemporary dance training. He did not jettison it, and one enriched the other. Kassandra – the vibrant women’s choir in Finland – uses the different musical voices of its members to make a new whole.

Tradition cannot be ignored any more than it should be clung to rigidly. ‘Without a strong tap root,’ asked Peter Badejo, African dancer, ‘How can a tree grow healthily?’

The tradition – the diverse and the multicultural – has a role. You might not fully understand it, but its practitioners do and it is part of their conversation with this society.

Give it air, provide a platform: encourage it to dialogue. It is part of the overall wider cultural continuum.

## 5 Build in competencies

The two other conditions cited by the Council of Europe concerned equality and governance: already areas we have touched upon.

There have been many examples of initiatives that have attempted to stimulate integration by placing a selected individual within an organisation with the expectation that he or she will help to bring about change within it. There have been no examples, to my knowledge, where that individual has not felt isolated and disempowered.

Mostly at a low level within the hierarchy, they have had little power but at the same time huge expectations. Artists from the outside from a similar background will believe they can open doors for them: mostly they are unable to do so.

There is now a considerable body of research that established the need to look totally at an organisation from top to bottom – the upper management, the front of house, the board, the catering staff, the exhibitors and the people on stage. Given such an embedded expertise, there would be no chance of an African man being assumed to be after a job as a security guard.

But to achieve that, in its turn, an organisation needs to look outwards – its marketing, for instance. Who is it addressing and how? How is it space experienced by newcomers? A friend a long time ago told me an instructive story – how once a year when a famous horse race is run in the UK, his children insist on his going into a betting shop to place a bet on. This fills him with anxiety. It is not his world or his milieu. It is foreign territory, occupied by people who – unlike him - know the rules. He feels conspicuous, self-conscious and is sure that people are sniggering at his inadequacy. All very useful, he concluded, since it gave him a strong sense of what it is like for people to step out of their comfort zones.

This root-and-branch approach cannot be circumvented. Without it, the institution becomes a no-go area. Its role as a place for intercultural dialogue is a non-starter.

In fact, it contains within it all the other four principles – the need for sharing that goes beyond the superficial or the tokenistic, for humility, for patience and commitment, for inclusiveness and ultimately for a reworked society in micro and social justice. If openness is a prerequisite for interculturalism, then these elements are among the prerequisites for policy formulation, in order to provide the setting for interculturalism,

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