



IETM REPORT

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LET'S ACT NOW: ON WHAT WE SAY WHEN YOU'RE NOT THERE

Report from the IETM Bucharest Plenary Meeting, 20 - 23 April 2017

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Let's act now: on what we say when you're not there

'Let's act now' was the title of two sessions held in Bucharest, dealing respectively with gender as a political issue, and with diversity and inclusion in the contemporary performing arts sector. The second part of the title, 'On what we say where you're not there', ironically refers to the not commonly talked about aspect of safe spaces for black¹ people to talk openly about their experiences of being 'othered' or being made to stand out in a space where white is the majority; it is also a play on what could, or would, or might be said in an all black setting where 'the roles are reversed'.

Dawn Walton opened the session introducing the work of *Eclipse company* (Sheffield, UK), the leading black touring company in the UK. Eclipse develops programmes that empower black artists, help the connections with mainstream theatre (particularly regional theatres) in the UK, and develop connections in the UK and abroad. Dawn also pointed out that she uses the word 'black' in a political way, referring to all those who are not white.

The session was then moderated by two of the artists participating in Eclipse's Slate programme, finding and promoting black artists across the North of England: **Cheryl Martin** and **Melanie Abrahams**.

The session was intended as a safe space to have an **open conversation about diversity**, while acknowledging that people in the group came from very different standpoints. The discussion was meant to deal with the issue of diversity as ever evolving, acknowledging that majority views often dominate, and that it may be productive to work together towards accepting difference as it evolves and as it exists.

The main aim was to build a feeling of **solidarity** in the room, so as to face our prejudices, share (un)comfortable experiences and good examples.



Moderators:

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Cheryl Martin & Melanie Abrahams - *Eclipse Theatre*, United Kingdom

Personal experiences

To warm up the group, Cheryl proposed a first exercise to imagine (or tell) finding ourselves in a situation in which someone in our family circle makes 'off' remarks, or actually expresses discriminatory or racist views, and how we react. Indeed many of the participants admit that when this happens it's hard to know how to react, and we often keep silent.

Melanie then pointed out how little we know about each other and our multiple identities; when talking about diversity we often focus on particular things (often visible aspects) and ignore the rest of a person's identity, background and story. She suggested that diversity is about being open, learning, not necessarily judging by looking at people but just ask them who

they are. Identity is often imposed on us by others; black people and artists are usually 'told what they are' by others, rather than being asked to define themselves or just talk about their background. Not conforming to expectations can put them at a disadvantage (for instance being rejected in selection processes because they don't look how the panel would expect, or want, black artists they wish to engage to look). Artistic work should reflect a very broad part of ourselves. She invited the participants to keep in mind, in their artistic work and in the connection with audiences, the words of Maya Angelou: **'I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel'**.

1. The word 'black' is used in this report - as it was used in the session - as a political term, encompassing all that is non-white

Work experiences

The group then split into smaller groups for focused discussions on **negative or notable experiences** faced in their or others' professional lives, and the ways that they reacted - whether keeping silent or speaking up. The main points raised were:

- It's important to face **our own prejudices** (sometimes we refuse to see them, just because we belong to a certain minority group ourselves); the lenses we use to see the world. The labels can be external (put on us) or internal. It's important to let groups to choose how they identify themselves, and when they want to be identified with a certain label.

- **Art doesn't need to be defined by your identity.** Black artists feel more pressure to make work that is political, but their work sometimes doesn't have anything to do with their race/ethnicity.

- **Discrimination** goes in many ways and needs to be discussed. For example, what are the stakes and contribution of able-bodied dancers in an integrated company? How to deal with the fact that trans women are excluded from feminist groups?

- When you don't have **institutions** to represent you, you don't exist as an artist. This is how Roma artists in Romania feel, being the only minority in Romania with no cultural institution, no theatre - and yet they are officially the second largest community in the country.

- We need conversations about **everyday racism**. The mild response to racism and provocations are gaslighting: a form of manipulation that seeks to sow seeds of doubt in the members of a group, hoping to make them question their own memory, perception, and sanity.

- **Tokenism:** feeling like you are allowed in a space (in an organisation, a festival, a venue) and doing a certain work because of what you represent - not because of your capability in that work but for the organisation to tick a box. How to negotiate in that situation?

- Also related to tokenism: is a black artist allowed to present his/her work in a venue because of the work, or because of the audience he/she can bring there, because the organisation wants to **capitalise on diversity**?

- By being the only person in an organisation to notice, and voice, a problem with diversity (e.g. that the programme lacks presence of black artists, etc.), that person - often a black artist/professional - becomes an **unofficial diversity officer**, meaning that s/he is not paid for that additional work.

- **Gatekeeping:** we cannot see changes happen when decisions are made by the same people in power. Letting people from minorities take over as curators has proved effective.

- We all speak different languages/use different terms; it's good to take a step back to explain your **language**.

- If someone feels offended by a comment, situation or content, **listen to the offended person's feedback**.

- **Look who's in the room.** Keep the invitation open for others to join. Also consider: do we want to mix the audiences or let different communities use the same venues in different ways?

- Look at **where power lies**, and remember that power shifts. Recognise sliding scales of privilege: class, money, stage of career etc. put us in different situations.

The main challenges to diversity and equality

Summing up, the main challenges for diversity and equality (in the widest definition of the term) includes:

- different and longer **timeframes** (it takes longer to programme diverse work);

- misunderstanding **cultural protocols**;

- rethinking **metrics of success** for diversity programmes;

- **recruiting diversity**;

- questioning the **assumptions** on aesthetics;

- **continuity**;

- making diversity **less intimidating**;

- rethinking **governance**.

To close the session the moderators encouraged participants to pin post-its on a world map, referring to the best practices of diversity (companies, individuals, projects...) that are happening around the world. This is particularly precious for Eclipse and IETM and is a basis to develop connections and conversations further.

Finally, all the participants and IETM members were invited to think what IETM can do and share their thoughts on IETM online forum. And we're all invited to go home to our funders and ask them to support other black (and diverse) artists to join the conversation.

Note: there's a lot of interesting links and suggestions in the page of the session on IETM website, <https://www.ietm.org/en/session/69/lets-act-now-on-what-we-say-when-youre-not-there> - make sure you have a look!