

Case Study: 'After Mikuyu' performance project

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Introduction

As a developing country, Malawi is culturally isolated; the south-east African nation's performers have very little opportunity to show their work outside the country and very limited access to the work of other performers. There is no theatre school, and no training outside of the drama degree course at the University of Malawi (which is only available to the very wealthy). Few Malawians have access to satellite television, and there is no regular drama shown on the one home-grown TV station.

This project was conceived as a rare opportunity for Malawian artists to learn from the skills and experiences of Western performers, and for UK artists to learn vibrant African performance styles first hand. Together the company developed an exciting cultural mix which they used to present the subject matter: the raw, angry, visceral poetry of Jack Mapanje, who was imprisoned under the brutal regime of the dictator Hastings Kamuzu Banda.

Activity

Six Malawian performers made the trip from Blantyre, in southern Malawi, to London. The performers were from Bilimankhwe Arts' partner in Malawi, Nanzikambe Theatre Arts, which organised contracts and travel arrangements. A grant from the Commonwealth Foundation covered the travel and subsistence costs for the Malawian performers. Oval House Theatre in London supported the project, providing the rehearsal space, performance venue, marketing, publicity, front-of-house and administration. The UK performers and Bilimankhwe Arts personnel and administration costs were covered by an Arts Council grant.

The material used by the company to develop the performance was taken from an anthology of Mr Mapanje's poems, *The Last of the Sweet Bananas* published by Bloodaxe Books. Four poems were selected from different periods of his life; the rehearsal period was spent exploring ways to present the poetry, the personal experience of brutality and the exuberant survival of this extraordinary man.

During the rehearsal period Oval House Theatre decided to use the performance as the gala opening of their Southern Africa Season. The show was sold out more than a week ahead of time,

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and, unusually for a one-off performance, was attended by several reviewers (including World Service radio). Jack Mapanje travelled down from his home in York to introduce the event and speak afterwards at the post-show discussion.

The post-show discussion was extremely well attended - 90 per cent of the sell-out audience returned after the break to discuss the performance and issues raised. The audience was mostly British, although there was a sizeable minority of ex-patriot Malawians from both the business and diplomatic community - including the Malawi High Commissioner, who participated in the discussion.

Impact

The main aims and objectives of the project were to:

- raise awareness of human rights;
- improve understanding and empathy between cultures;
- improve the skills base of performers;
- raise the profile of Nanzikambe as an arts organisation with international links; and
- build a long-term relationship between Bilimankhwe Arts and Oval House Theatre.

The objective of raising awareness of human rights was achieved along with raising the profile of Nanzikambe's Malawian performers by the media interest engendered by the play.

Watipaso Mkandawire from *MalawiTalk* wrote that the play 'gives a strong message - NEVER AGAIN - should we accept to be tamed, to be abused, to be subjected to inhuman conditions, to be taken for granted.'

Carole Woddis wrote in *Rogues & Vagabonds*:

... in an absolutely brilliant interlude the Malawian-British company under Kate Stafford and Dominic Burdess almost casually describe and act out the dimensions of the cell Mapanje was kept in for 3 years, 8 months and 16 days. '1 metre wide' goes one cast member, and two or three others stretch out their arms beyond the 1 metre, then draw their arms in 'by half a metre long'. Someone else sits down, scrunches up their legs into an impossibly hunched position. 'By 1 metre high,' they go on. 'Chained hands to feet'; 'Food placed behind them.' No wonder there were gasps from the audience - how could anyone survive that for one hour, never mind 3 years, 8 months and 16 days? But survive it he did. Mapanje is now living in York, a lecturer in creative writing at the university and judging by his appearance at this performance, scarred now with a limp, but wry of tone and with grace and nobility of spirit undiminished.

The play was also reviewed on BBC World Service radio - in a 5-minute piece Chakuchanya Harawa interviewed audience members, played excerpts and discussed the human rights issues raised by the play.

The audience was a mixture of cultures, as was the performance company. Learning about each other's culture was an essential part of the rehearsal process. The UK performers were surprised at how very different African culture was from their own; they were astonished that the Malawians had never seen an American Western film, for instance, and were deeply impressed by the ease with which the untrained Malawian performers created music with vocal harmonies and complicated percussion. The process was intended to understand the differences between us so that we can also understand our common humanity: at the post-show discussion it was clear that we had achieved this.

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The skills base of the performers, both Malawian and British, was definitely improved. The British performers learned traditional Malawian dance, drumming and singing; the Malawians were trained by Dominic Burdess, an expert in European physical theatre, and learned much from working alongside trained and experienced British theatre professionals. Nanzikambe Theatre Arts has expanded its international theatre experience, and with the support of the Malawi High Commissioner is better placed to gain government backing for its work in Malawi.

The partnership between Bilimankhwe Arts and Oval House Theatre has strengthened, and will continue with Bilimankhwe's next theatre piece planned to premiere at Oval House.

Other, unforeseen benefits of the project came along with the experience of living independently in London. The Malawian performers were provided with a travel pass for the London Underground, which they made full use of, exploring London and travelling further afield whenever the rehearsal schedule permitted.

Lessons

- Cultural artistic exchanges are beneficial both to the visitors and the hosts, expanding everyone's horizons.
- Understanding between cultures is particularly effective in an artistic project where everyone is working towards the success of the project.
- Speaking a common language can sometimes mask the differences in cultural backgrounds and understanding, and exploring this in the context of an artistic endeavour can be very enlightening.