

IETM GLASGOW

04-07 NOVEMBER 2010

:Voices

**IETM PLENARY MEETING GLASGOW
WG 2: Voices of Africa**

Friday 5 November 2010, 12:00 – 13:30

Citizen Theatre

Report by Brina Stinehelfer

“This is not a presentation,” began moderator Michel, “it is a discussion. This discussion is for you, we are only here to facilitate.”

The aim of the discussion was for participants to share their experiences in working in and with Africa and African artists- to learn from, and perhaps be inspired by, the works of others that reach out to this culturally diverse

continent. A continent which, while in fact quite physically close, is still, as we were soon to discover, often difficult to reach.

Michel opened by offering some examples of IETM's involvement in Africa for the past several years- from 2002, IETM worked on a networking project called AFRICONNECTIONS, and satellite meetings in Nairobi, Kenya (2006) and Johannesburg and Durban (2004) showed that “A lot of members were interested in collaborating with Africa.” Thus IETM was instrumental as a member of the Steering Group of two major EU- ACP conferences on culture and development in the ACP, the first (Brussels, 2009) which led to the Declaration of Brussels (see below) and the second (Girona, 2010) which aided the EU 's decision to call for the addition of culture into the UN's Millenium goals

Sabrina Smith-Noble of Visiting Arts (www.visitingarts.org.uk, whose purpose includes strengthening intercultural understanding through the arts.) sat beside Michel at the facilitators table, and agreed “This is mainly an opportunity for you, who are interested in working with Africa, to talk to each other.” She started us off with a slew of questions to generate conversation, including, “How are collaborations or exchanges moving us forward?” “What are the initiatives

in place to aid us?” “How are we adapting to changes in funding and policy?”

First, a little background information about funds, networks, and initiatives in place which support collaborations and exchanges with African countries, which cropped up over the course of our discussion:

-**The ARterial Network** www.arterialnetwork.org is “an informal, dynamic network of individuals, institutions and funding partners working to support the effectiveness and growth of the African arts and culture civil society and to enhance the sustainability of creative industries in Africa.” Scouring through the website’s projects and partners is inspirational, to say the least.

- **BRUSSELS DECLARATION BY ARTISTS, CULTURAL PROFESSIONALS AND ENTREPRENEURS,** (<http://www.culture-dev.eu/www/website.php?rub=documents-colloque&lang=en>) was one of the several results of an initiative by Louis Michel, the then-EU Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid, together with the governments of the ACP countries. An International colloquium, “Culture and Creation as Vectors of Development” took place in April 2009. The objective was to highlight the importance of culture for the identity of people, peace and stability of societies and the economic

development of ACP countries. Subsequently, an Action Plan was created as well as a dedicated site for Culture and Creation as Vectors of Development (http://www.culture-dev.eu/pages/en/en_accueil.php) The initiative also resulted in a substantial new EU “Investing in People” funding programme focusing on the improvement of cultural infrastructures and policies. (<http://bit.ly/caXlyb>)

-**BRUSSELS DECLARATION ON ASYLUM, MIGRATION, AND MOBILITY** http://www.acpsec.org/en/pahd/acp2802506_declaration_migration_e.pdf, is an agreement between the ACP (African, Caribbean, and Pacific Group of States) and the EU (European Union) to work toward common goals concerning ACP and EU relations and collaborations (I also recommend checking out the website of the Secretariat of the ACP <http://www.acpsec.org/> for those interested in initiating projects in that region).

-**The Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development** www.princeclausfund.org “aims at increasing cultural awareness and promoting exchange between culture and development”. They support a variety of project grants, co-productions, collaborations, networks, and partnerships- a must see for those interested in working in Africa

The next hour and a half was filled with personal anecdotes and stories of experiences collaborating, exchanging, or presenting African artists (which included people based in Africa, as well as the local diasporas of African people which are spread all across Europe). And so our conversation began, with a rapid ping-ponging of stories that were as diverse as the lands from which they came.

Samir Bhamra, of Sustain Theater shared his experience of meeting Peter Hayes, a South African director who presented a lesbian theater piece at the Grahamstown National Arts festival. Samir was born in Kenya, but lives in Leicester, where the Black/Asian community have now become the majority, outnumbering the native English population- something that could not be ignored. It is important for him to connect with this diaspora. He stated that they have a plan towards more positive collaborations, but then the all too common question- “Where do we find the funding?”

Jossette Bushell-Mingo shared a story of working with an all deaf village in Africa (her work in Sweden is with Riksteatern, a deaf theater company based there) and witnessing a response of “Why should we bother with Arts and Culture if the rest of the world doesn’t receive us?” I had to wonder for a moment if it was being deaf, or being African that felt most debilitating in this case.

Steve Collins (a guest in the discussion) shared information about the struggle of playwrights in Ghana- there are in fact a great number of them writing new plays in response to current situations in Ghana and greater Africa, yet they remain un-produced on dusty University shelves. Only one Ghanaian playwright is officially published (because he published himself, in China). The blame for this was put on a lack of infrastructure, industry and support in Ghana, which results in the loss of (failure to discover/support) local artists, despite what seems to be a solid University program there, and a large scene of people interested in making work.

After this comment, two people seated in the back of the room shared “We are the product of the University of the Arts (in Ghana)- there is a political history behind the separation of the National Theater and the University.” It became clear that the main issue in Ghana is not a lack of artists, but rather a lack of a structure to support them.

Steve also shared information about an initiative called “Theater for a Change” (whose website is unfortunately unavailable) which works to reduce the infection of HIV/AIDS, as well as a plan to produce plays in the open air, so that the audience consists of passers-by who respond very well, but would probably never bring themselves to a theatre.

Dirk Korell of MOOV'N ACTION, works with hip-hop artists, through a fund for cultural collaboration projects between Germany, France, and "Third" countries.

At this point, the conversation became a bit heated, as several issues were raised which were obviously long thought out and struggled with questions on the theme of African (and other) collaborations "Is it collaboration or colonisation?" Everyone's eyes perked up, then down at the mention of the "c" word. "Turn around how you think about, how you define "cultural development" "Where is the difference between cultural development and financial development- do we just bring poor countries money so that they can live like us? Do we just want to bring them to our aesthetic level? Do they even want us?"

Michel then diplomatically brought this to a gentle halt, asking, "does anyone want to respond?" To my disappointment, the two African attendees (along with everyone else) stayed silent.

Graham Cambell of the African Caribbean Network (a volunteer-run Glasgow based organization) works to get funding for Africans in his local Scotland. "If you see art as colonisation, it will be" he said. He stressed the importance of reaching out to the local diaspora, and using the power of having these people there. He also

brought up the importance of considering how and where funding money is spent "We have to make sure it goes where the people in Africa want it to".

Femi Folorunso of Creative Scotland admitted to being a part of the African Diaspora and suggested "Let people in those places decide what they want to do for themselves". "I come from Nigeria, a land of 280 million people, with 30 million spread all over the world." He questioned why so much of this diaspora movement was not structured or recorded. Switching then to his bureaucratic hat, he stressed the point that culture and education go together, and that there should be some connection made between the diasporas, "not just with the host countries".

A participant from Denmark related that public money is not available to the local diaspora, it can only be used to work on-site in Africa. Then someone from Sweden shared that they progressed greatly in improved EU/African relations and collaborations by using the strength, power, and position of their local diaspora as allies to further their initiatives.

A local director (who introduced himself as "I just work in theatre") was invited in 2004 to visit Africa, and had his own experiences in dealing with realities and claims of so-called cultural colonialism. However, he had nonetheless a wonderful experience with a company called Pada

Panda (who much to this reporter's disappointment, seem to have no website) with whom he felt he had a true exchange, learning from and teaching each other in equal measure, which has now led to the idea of working collaboratively on a project together- a seemingly more organic (although admittedly much more time consuming) way to go about working with African partners than the "get the money and go" practice which I have heard from other experiences.

And what about African work at home? Images Of Africa (Copenhagen) and Afrovibes (UK and Netherlands) are two festivals which present African work, and become great meeting points for African diasporas and guests, and European locals to connect with one another. In fact, a google search for African Festivals in your town will most likely turn up something. So then the question- why aren't African artists more present in our everyday programs, when they are (most everywhere across Europe) present in our daily lives? Why do we need an "African Festival" in order to see African work?

Then attention was called to the time, which had run out, and people started to inconspicuously pull out their very conspicuous oversized IETM Glasgow newspaper programmes, to find out where they needed to run off to next. As usual, a good start, but far too short.

Michel brought attention back into the room "Look at the faces around you," he said, "you might be able to work together" However, much to my disappointment, I did not see some of those faces again, as they were not IETM Members, but guests of Visiting Arts.

As the meeting came to a close and I headed out onto the rainy Glasgow street, I became aware that the entire discussion was had by Europeans who shared their experiences and thoughts on African collaborations and exchanges, their attempts to reach out to, work with, or support the artists and peoples of this large and diverse continent. Indeed, this fit the description of the discussion, but something about it didn't seem to fit with me.

There appeared to be only two people present who were actually from (as in recently, and supposedly still living there) the African continent, and yet only one comment was made from one of them during the entire meeting, although it was littered with questions along the lines of "What's best for *them*?" "What do *they* really want?" "How can we reach *them*?" "Are we offending or abusing *them*?"

I couldn't help but wonder that these questions had somehow become rhetorical. If we are really interested in

listening to African voices, maybe we should find a way to hear them.

It is understandable that at a conference like this, there may not be many members from African countries who have the means to attend- those members based in Europe (who are, of course, always in the majority at meetings) have a much easier and more affordable route to Plenary Meetings. But if our colleagues from further away cannot be there in person, I think that should not prevent us from trying to reach out. Statements about current projects, struggles, accomplishments, hopes, calls for partners, etc. can be made in the form of letters or speeches that could be read by attending members in the meeting. Even video statements would be not impossible to organize and send- and let us not forget about the benefits of Skype, which could provide some of our faraway colleagues who have such means with a seat in the meeting virtually.

If we are serious about creating a more sustainable link with Africa, perhaps the first step would be to work harder to provide a way for their voices (not ours) to be heard.

Of course, it was also my fault for running off to the show I wanted to see, and not staying behind to talk to them.