

WEST MIDLANDS ARTSDrama Advisory Panel Meeting No. 44ETHNIC DRAMA IN THE WEST MIDLANDS - A Discussion Paper

For discussion by West Midlands Arts Drama Advisory Panel on Tuesday,  
23 October, 1979

1. Introduction

- a) "The Arts Britain Ignores" (see footnote), published in 1976, drew attention to the great quantity, range and quality of arts activity generated by ethnic communities in Britain. However, the report commented that the extent to which these activities are known about or supported outside their own communities is minimal. "Ethnic minority arts are an energetic but struggling sub-culture. On the whole they exist for the communities alone - necessarily, since little encouragement is given them to expand. The problems they face are those of neglect: lack of premises to rehearse, lack of comparable back-up that is afforded to equivalent native British groups, lack of acceptance within the arts structure and lack of exposure. And although the level of activity is high, unless steps are taken it is likely to decline. Increased costs of travelling, transport, premises, costumes, cannot but sap the dedication of groups. Lack of outlets will mean that work is kept at a self-contained amateur level. It is likely to become repetitive and eventually irrelevant. In that way we will have killed off a vigorous growth which has every sign of being able to contribute significantly to the cultural life of society as a whole" ("The Arts Britain Ignores" - p.5)
- b) The Minority Arts Advisory Service was set up in October 1976 and arose largely from the initiative created by Naseem Khan's report. The service aimed to maintain an up to date register of groups and individuals, to advise groups on funding and opportunities to present their work, to undertake research and to promote the case for support of ethnic arts as widely as possible. Early in 1979 Parminder Vir was appointed as regional MAAS co-ordinator for the Midlands and Southern regions. She has undertaken some detailed research into ethnic arts activities in the West Midlands; her research has supplemented and updated a directory of information on ethnic arts groups compiled by Jane Wilson at West Midlands Arts. Parminder's research is continuing in other parts of the large area she is covering but she also finds time to offer advice, assistance and support for groups with which she has made contact in the region.

2. Current Activity

Parminder has identified in the region the following ethnic groups whose primary purpose is to present drama or who involve drama in a wide range of cultural activities:

- a) Black Expression
- b) Tolunka
- c) Indian Workers Association Drama Group
- d) Asian Arts Productions
- e) Toofan
- f) Coventry Asian Youth Drama Group

We do not pretend that the list is comprehensive; these are simply the main groups /



groups with which we have had contact. All the groups are amateur in that no full-time wages are paid. Some groups have a strong social or political commitment and new work reflecting issues of the ethnic communities in Britain features very strongly in the activities of several of the groups.

The very few ethnic drama groups which operate in Britain visit the West Midlands whenever possible. These groups have included Temba, Steel and Skin and Teatro Technis. Other companies have from time to time presented plays with mainly ethnic actors (e.g. Pirate Jenny, Foco Novo). Groups are not always adequately geared to performing at the community venues at which they would make contact with the ethnic audiences for whom the work would have special relevance.

### 3. Identification of Problems

The quotation from Naseem Khan's report identifies the general problems of ethnic arts. A sense of isolation is an important problem in the West Midlands, isolation not only from other communities but also from professional expertise which might help groups to develop their work.

It is much more difficult to justify a rigid distinction between amateur and professional when considering ethnic drama than when looking at other drama activities. By their very nature, ethnic minorities will not usually be large enough to support full-time professional arts activities, particularly on a regional basis. The very committed amateur should be regarded as the equivalent of the professional when considering ethnic arts.

### 4. Assessment

#### a) Procedures

It may be necessary to assess ethnic drama in ways additional to the existing procedure of Drama Advisory Panel members attending performances and visiting projects. Such assessment visits by Panel members will need to increase but we will also need to seek advice from other sources.

#### b) Criteria

Many of the assessment criteria which the Panel already takes into consideration will hold good for consideration of ethnic drama activities. In addition, an acknowledgement of the amateur/professional dilemma should be taken into consideration.

The following guidelines may be helpful in defining the criteria for assessment of any drama activities:

- i) Assessment of performance work should include an evaluation of the following elements:

- Objective
- Content
- Form
- Artistic Language
- Social context
- Effect

In addition, it may also be appropriate to consider some or all of the following questions:

- ii) Does the company or project display financial and administrative competence?
- iii) Has the group succeeded in involving all appropriate funding agencies in support of their work?
- iv) Does the project achieve a reasonable level of non-grant income?

- v) Does the group appear to have a long-term commitment or is the project a viable and self-contained short-term activity?
- vi) Has the group clearly identified its specific aims and objectives and to what extent are members of the group engaged in an evaluation of their work in order to adapt and develop it?
- vii) How does the company seem to relate to the audience, or to the community it serves?

## 5. Policy Issues and Recommendations

The following statements are offered for discussion, together with recommendations for consideration:

### a. Professional Expertise:

Ethnic groups in the region tend to be isolated from the little professional activity and expertise which is available in Britain. Professional expertise could be valuable in the form of workshops or the involvement on a project basis of professional directors and/or writers with ethnic drama groups.

Recommendation 1: West Midlands Arts should encourage and support the linking of professional expertise to ethnic drama groups in the region

### b. Touring:

Touring by the few available professional ethnic groups, and by amateur groups from other parts of the country, needs to be encouraged and developed. West Midlands Arts has always been ready enough to fund such tours and to help co-ordinate and arrange bookings, but a more initiatory approach is now needed.

Recommendation 2: West Midlands Arts should take initiatives in identifying companies and productions which might be invited to visit the region.

Recommendation 3: Circuits of ethnic venues should be developed.

### c. Equipment, Training and Resources:

Ethnic groups often find access to equipment and specialist facilities difficult to arrange. In the long term, a training and resource centre is needed where materials and equipment can be hired (e.g. costumes, lighting, sound equipment) and where workshops can be held for groups throughout the region. Such a resource centre could also provide a base for in-service courses for teachers, youth leaders and community workers. However, more modest short-term measures can assist with some of these problems.

Recommendation 4: West Midlands Arts should offer a small grant towards equipment for use in ethnic drama where such assistance would represent an effective way of helping the work to develop.

### d. Special Projects:

The non-professional nature of the majority of the activity currently going on in the region means that groups tend to plan in detail project by project. Interesting developments may emerge quite quickly and may need support at an early stage. In addition, groups may feel the need to arrange more contact with each other through workshops, conferences or meetings.

Recommendation 5: West Midlands Arts should be ready to respond to and encourage initiatives from existing ethnic drama groups and initiatives in setting up new activities.

Recommendation 6: West Midlands Arts itself should not normally be the organiser of workshops or meetings on special topics but should give every encouragement, including financial assistance if necessary, to ethnic organisations wishing to arrange such activities.

d. Assessment:

Both the criteria for assessment of work and the ways in which assessments are conducted need special consideration.

Recommendation 7: Assessment criteria should include an acknowledgement that rigid distinction between amateur and professional is not appropriate when considering ethnic drama.

Recommendation 8: West Midlands Arts should identify advisors within the ethnic communities who could provide opinions on applications and who could help monitor activities.

Recommendation 9: When considering the over-all membership of the Drama Advisory Panel each year, West Midlands Arts should include members with a knowledge of, and/or involvement in ethnic drama.

Patric Gilchrist  
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October 1979