

OPEN MEMBERSHIP MEETING - BLACK THEATRE FORUM
SUNDAY, 16th FEBRUARY, 1986, AT TARA ARTS GROUP

Present: Alby James - Chairperson
Jatinder Verma - Treasurer
Anton Phillips
Raj Patel } British Asian Theatre Company
Dhirendra }

In Attendance: Agnes Meadows - BTF Administrator

Also present were two representatives from HOUNSLOW Arts C-Operative.

Alby opened the meeting, by welcoming everyone, and explaining that a larger open meeting would be organised later on in the Spring, in response to other Black companies wanting to know more about the work of the Forum.

He briefly explained the Forum's background and *raison d'être*. He explained that the Forum was presently being registered as a company limited by guarantee, after which it would have an arm calling itself Black Theatre Alliance Trust Ltd. This arm would be responsible for the education work of the Forum (e.g. the Black Theatre Season, workshops, etc). Companies registration forms were in the process of being completed, and therefore all would hopefully be finalised very quickly.

The representatives from Hounslow Arts Co-Operative gave a run-down of their work, explaining that they were GLC funded, were using a local school as they did not have their own building, and were also supported by LB Hounslow. The Co-operative worked with visual arts and music, although theatre was predominant. They had three productions a year, toured shows, and drew most of their membership from Hounslow.

The meeting turned its attention to the ACOB's plans to increase funding to Black arts projects to 4% of total budget by 1987, with a 2% increase planned for next year - in effect £2.7 million. However, there was much confusion about the Arts Council's definitions, and what was actually meant by development or encouragement money. Many companies would have been devolved to GLA, and information would be available on them from GLA. It was felt that the ACOB's Action Plan was actually little more than a restructuring of its existing clients.

After lengthy discussion, it was felt that the Forum (and individual companies) should pursue more than one strategy, and enter into continuous regular consultation with the Arts Council in relation to the Action Plan. Strategies should be agreed before talks were had with Anthony Everett. Questions like what does 4% of funding really mean, should be asked, and wider representation on various Arts Council panels requested.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The Forum's aims and objectives were discussed, as it had been felt that they were vague and possibly no longer relevant. It was agreed that the basic aim of the Forum, in its campaigning and lobbying role, was to promote Black Theatre in Britain by all possible means.

It was agreed that although in the near future some of the aims and objectives were unobtainable (like the purchase of a theatre for Black theatre in the West End of London), this did not negate them. It was agreed that point (e) should be removed.

The Forum's function had become clearer as it had begun to work, and helping to formulate policy was one very important function. It should also undertake special initiatives, the Black Theatre Season being a very good example of that. However unattainable it might be, the idea of a theatre and also of a marketing agency were still very much a part of the Forum's policy.

It was also felt important to stretch into a programme of key workshops, with international contributions (e.g. LIFT), taking advantage of international artists coming to London, and there should be a link-in with Edinburgh.

There should be more exchange of information, with regular and special meetings, and possibly special forums when visiting artists who had something provocative to say could be given a platform. This would underline the creation of a unique and separate identity for Black Theatre in this country.

It was suggested that the Forum might like to think about a joint production with each company contributing some cash for a production.

Raj Patel asked that the Forum initiate a dialogue with unions with regard to the use of non-union members, as very often small Black companies could not afford to take on Equity members. Anton Phillips suggested that it was not an ideal time to tackle the unions, particularly in the light of the discussions presently being conducted with Equity. He did not feel it was something the Forum could take on board. Jatinder Verma agreed it was a problem that could not be tackled head-on. It was wiser to take a closer look at those agencies already trying to tackle these issues, and work out tactics from there - to determine what was happening in the field, and then decide whether or not it was a matter which the Forum wished to take up.

It was suggested that the Forum should have a joint meeting with ITC and the Theatre Managers Guild to air these issues, and it was agreed that an approach to ITC to get their backing would be worthwhile. The Forum should take positive advantage of white liberal organisations.

It was agreed that an open letter, on the basis of equal opportunities, should be sent to Equity Council.

It was felt that all the rules about using non-professional members in productions applied to the companies at the bottom. No Black Theatre companies could afford the new ITC minimum wage of £152 per week, for example.

It was agreed that the open letter should state that Black Theatre companies wanted equal opportunities to create theatre in the manner that was traditional to their ethos, and that it was time Equity started taking on board the issue of equal opportunities. This approach was more likely to win backing from ITC, as it voiced the need of equal opportunities being reflected within Equity, and made the statement that Equity was years behind the times. Having won ITC support, this could then be used as the springboard to lobby for other specific things.

However, it was also agreed that this letter should not be written until the late Spring, when the Forum would be in a positive position to demonstrate that it meant what it said.

MEMBERSHIP

The question of membership was broached, and the question what can the Forum offer to potential members, asked. Alby asked those present to briefly run through what their companies could contribute to the Forum, what they were getting out of it, and what they hoped to get out of it in the future.

Agnes suggested that the role of information exchange should be broadened. She received many enquiries about the companies already being members, and unfortunately did not have any general information on those companies to hand out. Also, many white companies and organisations requested assistance on black directors, actors, technicians, etc., so it was important to keep a central pool of information available to all enquirers.

Raj Patel said that the West End theatre was the most important aspect which could give a stronger voice to Black Theatre in London. A marketing agency would be helpful, and agreed that there should be a resource of an information exchange. A critical circle and exchanges on forms of doing things would also be constructive.

Anton said that the Forum was recognised as something of worth, and that although cohesiveness had not been bad, it could work better with greater cohesiveness. If the Forum gained weight, everyone would benefit

Jatinder said that the Forum was and could be, most valuable in the wider context of funding and policy making, as well as lobbying on behalf of individual issues. This should be taken a stage further, and more policies initiated, so that the Forum would not only be in the passive role. He said that there had been a lot of 'head exchange' during the past year, with members coming together to talk, but very little 'floor exchange', with members exchanging ways of working, etc. This could happen without any of the Forum company members losing their individual identities, and was where the range of special initiatives would come into being.

He said that in a processing role, the Forum should be able to respond very quick to for example, the ACOB's Action Plan and statistically it should be very efficient. He agreed with the principles of an information exchange, but said a structure should be provided in which information could be supplied. Without this ground-work, a marketing agency could not be considered.

Alby said that there was a multiplicity of influences coming to us from the Arts Council, local authorities, institutional and individual racism in this country, that collectively this all contributed to a breakdown of solidarity in Black Theatre in this country. The Forum had been developing and increasing its role with other companies, and the opportunity to come together and share and talk about ways of working, and the way forward, was very important. It provided a support structure to help overcome obstacles, dealing with bad press, and aided better work instead of poor productions. All of this had been good, but could be improved still.

He said he felt the Forum was too small to consider membership from companies only, and was not happy with the representation of individual black actors with other organisations, and therefore urged the Forum to play a more important role for the individual as well as the company.

Jatinder disagreed saying that for the interim membership should be restricted to companies only. With about 25-30 Black Theatre companies operating in London, a small but very effective membership could be initiated. Many of the areas of need that had been identified still needed to be tackled, but procedures needed to be set up, he said. What the Forum could offer to individual members would need to be of a greater scale. He said that he could not see individual members wishing to join a lobby which presently was effectively a funding lobby.

It was agreed that the three main areas of benefit to members were (a) the provision of an information exchange, which could loosely be termed an agency, (b) a programme of special initiatives and (c) major lobbying and policy making input for companies.

With regard to subscription rates, the meeting made no decision as to whether to opt for a flat fee or a percentage of annual turnover.

However, it was agreed that the Administrator and Officers should agree on a subscription rate.

A letter should also go to all Black Theatre Companies in the region, urging them to join the Forum.

It was also agreed that the Forum should undertake to lobby for further training for black administrators and administrators, as training was a prime issue.

Anton suggested that all Black companies putting on performances in a year should consider giving maybe two performances as 'Benefits' for the Forum.

The representatives from HOunslow Arts Co-Operative said that they would report back to the Co-Operative, and then a decision would be made as to whether or not HAC wished to join the Forum. They were uncertain as to what they could contribute to the Forum, and were also uncertain as to the benefit to smaller companies of joining the Forum. They did not know how much of an advantage joint productions would be, and were worried that HAC's identity might be swamped.

There was lively debate on these points, after which the meeting finished.