

Whose story is this, anyway?

Report from the IETM Valencia Plenary Meeting, 3 – 6 November 2016

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The objective of the session was to discuss the role of diversity, equity and inclusion in the performing arts today. The moderator Jordi Baltà Portolès from the [Agenda 21 for culture](#), the Committee on culture of the world association of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), gave a detailed introduction to the topic. Rather than providing final answers, the session aimed at exploring the key questions and identifying central themes. Together with the previous working sessions on diversity and inclusion, organised by IETM in Bergamo, Budapest and Amsterdam, the discussion laid the ground for IETM's further exploration of the theme. Moreover, the outcomes of the session will be considered for IETM's cultural diversity strategy that is currently in the making.

Today many countries face tensions in the light of migration and the increasing influx of refugees, and there is a growing tendency to return towards more narrow, traditional national cultures. These developments raise a variety of questions on what kind of stories we want to tell on stage, whether it will be the stories of the “winners” in history and whether all parts of our society with respect to gender, ethnicity, age and so forth are represented. Or as Al Heartly and Jocelyn Price wrote in a recent article *“We can't be twenty-first-century Americans if we don't know African American, Latino, Asian, Native, and white histories and narratives. They make up our complicated collective history as citizens, as a nation, and we need to own them.”* (Chay Yew, Victory Gardens Theater, Chicago).

The “popular mainstream” cultures of our countries often exclude the views and experiences of minorities, and the connecting element of the working session was the question in how far programmers, artists and cultural managers could support diversity in their organisations, future collaborations and programming and what factors stimulate or hinder diversity in this context.

Diversity embraces many aspects such as gender, age, physical abilities, ethnicity, social status, religious background, diversity linked to migration processes, among others. The session kept the definition open, framing the topic through **four different rationales** which the moderator presented:

- 1) **Human rights** linked to non-discrimination. The article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) states “everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.”
There are also other international documents such as the [Fribourg Declaration on Cultural Rights](#) (2007), article 4: “Everyone is free to choose to identify or

not to identify with one or several cultural communities, regardless of frontiers, and to modify such a choice.”

According to the Declaration, “the objective of cultural rights is to guarantee that people and communities have an access to culture and can participate in the culture of their choice. They are rights related to language, cultural and artistic production, participation in cultural life, cultural heritage, intellectual property rights, author’s rights, minorities and access to culture, among others.” (source: <http://www.culturalrights.net/en/principal.php?c=1>)

All these elements are very important when we select the stories we want to show on stage.

2) Social arguments

Diversity is integral to our societies – we live in “*postmigrant societies*” (German journalist Mark Terkessidis in “[Four Theses for an Audit of Culture](#)”), where being different is not the exception but the rule. Therefore, we must enable all voices in society to be expressed and heard in public spaces, including the stage; this will make us stronger as a society, allowing social tensions to be visualised and potentially allied.

3) Economic arguments

Economic sustainability of cultural organisations depends partly on their ability to attract as wide and as diverse audiences as possible.

4) Cultural value

The stage is a place where identities can be defined and where new intercultural encounters can take place. Out of diverse ways of expression, new aesthetics and narratives can emerge, and this contributes to enriching our cultural sphere or in the words of the Yugoslav-Dutch theatre scholar and cultural commentator Dragan Klaić: “*The stage has always been a privileged place to assert one’s own cultural values, to shape, nourish and admire identity; but at the same time, the stage has functioned as a convenient vehicle of intercultural exploration, influence and appropriation (...).*”

Diversity can be included at different levels: in the mission of artistic organisations, in the stories they present on stage, in their team, in the audience, in the partnerships and networking, in their governance and decision-making bodies, and also in public support policies for the arts.

Debate

The debate focussed on several key aspects linked to the concept of diversity – first in an open session and then in smaller working groups. One central question was how far diversity should be guaranteed in the **management of cultural organisations** and **who should be in charge** of diversifying the management: a governing board, selected staff, a mission statement or statutes? Are “those who have the privilege of power” the ones that are responsible or is it the wrong question to ask? An interesting quote by Albert Einstein was mentioned in this context: “*If you see something and you don’t say anything about it, then you are guiltier than all the people who didn’t see it.*”

Partnerships can also play an important role in this: we can establish collaborations with interest groups or NGOs representing minorities, or we can decide to work with international companies that already apply the diversity principle.

Brina Stinehelfer from **Per Aspera, Berlin** pointed out that it should not be a question of which venues or festivals make diversity possible, since all venues in principle should be suitable for programmes embracing diversity. The promotion of cultural diversity should be a natural practice without announcing it all the same, as “we should not create the boundaries between your and my stories; it is dangerous because it reinforces the otherness.”

In some countries, **support policies** in this respect are more developed than in others (e.g. providing grants and funding schemes for productions that encourage diversity in the United Kingdom).

Success stories

Some of the participants gave good practice examples from their countries where diversity on stage has worked out successfully.

Roswitha Bergmann from the **Netherlands** presented the work of the [Opera Theater Amsterdam \(OTA\)](#), a professional Opera Company. They do not use opera as a narrative, but they use movement in a stylised way, but within the subject of “Whose story is this anyway?”. They always bring people on stage as performers who they would like to say something about, both professionals and amateurs. This method leads to inclusion. In their recent work “The opponents” they brought a group of refugees together with war veterans and right-wing oriented people on stage. Both the audience and the group on stage were extremely diverse. A man from Norway, connected with the right-wing extremist scene, said after watching the play that he “almost had to cry, it was great.” In a very modest way, they managed to bring this man to the theatre and they made him think of refugees and migration from a different perspective. Not only theatres in the diverse neighbourhoods should use this type of methodology, but other theatres and cultural institutions (in the centre) should follow the example.

[Creative Scotland](#) has been working with **artists with disabilities** for the past 10 years, and they are finally reaching a stage where the actors are no longer stamped as disabled. This shows that audiences can change their perceptions if they are confronted with new aesthetics, and that real change is possible beyond political timespans.

Another good practice was set by the [Eclipse Theatre](#) from **Sheffield** (UK). Created in 2003, the Theatre wants to “instigate change that leads to a more diverse and equitable theatrical landscape,” by telling **500 years of black history in the UK**. One of their current projects is Revolution Mix which aims at “provoking major change, tackling inequality and creating a lasting legacy within the UK’s theatrical landscape –

both on stage and off." The Eclipse Theatre will work with 11 partner venues and 15 writers to develop and produce a series of middle scale tours, two small scale tours, two films and a series of short dramas for radio. The project will culminate in 2018 with a yearlong festival created by artists based all over the UK.

Audience Development

Are existing **audiences** representative of the diversity of today's society? Do works on stage which include minorities have an audience?

Someone in the room shared failed attempts at diversifying their audiences and voiced the opinion that certain groups of population, and particularly some ethnic minorities, "are not interested" in theatre. However, several participants insisted that "if you stage quality work and stories that are relevant for people, you will have an audience", or in other words, if there is an interesting offer, people do go to the theatre.

Moreover, the sector is increasingly faced with the **difficulty of reaching out to all age groups**; often very few people under 25 can be found in the audience.

Sonia Carmona Tapia from the [Federation for European Storytelling](#) gave the good example of having worked with and for Sinti and Roma for many years: "You need to find the stories that really matter to the people you are addressing. It is the social role of the arts that we have forgotten. Go back to the basics and tell stories from the heart!"

The Eclipse Theatre in Sheffield also launched a successful **audience development programme**: "You have to meet the audiences, form them and diversify them," Dawn Walton, Eclipse's Director, said. According to her, the goal is attainable and what is really needed is a mindshift and a strong will to achieve the goal. She mentioned the results of their audience survey: when Eclipse (the leading black touring company in the UK, with no own venue) tours a performance, 25 – 30% of the audience are new to the venue, most of the others are "experience-seekers", and 60% of the total bookers go back and book another ticket within 6 months. The data show that combining quality and relevance is crucial to expand and diversify the audience.

Another firmly contested statement made by one of the participants suggested that there is just not enough *high quality work* made by artists with a diverse background.

The Role of IETM

In the final part of the working session, the 25 participants split up into three working groups to exchange further on good practices and discuss what role IETM should play in promoting diversity and inclusiveness of the sector.

One group suggested that IETM could help fundraising to support practitioners from minorities to attend its meetings. It would be desirable to give a voice to professionals from culturally diverse backgrounds, inviting them to speak or moderate sessions.

IETM could conduct a more detailed study providing a snapshot on the state of play of diversity in the performing arts sector in different countries.

IETM has set up a members' focus group on the issues of diversity and inclusion, the first live meeting of which took place during IETM Valencia. The objectives of the focus group are connecting IETM members who are working on the topic in different countries and envisaging how IETM could better support their work.

Conclusions

"The biggest barrier is otherness. If we can stop thinking 'other' and start thinking 'we', we will start to write the story." *Dawn Walton, Eclipse Theatre*

Many relevant aspects of diversity in the performing arts sector were discussed during the working session – management, artists, the audiences and the stories we would like to tell on stage.

The topic will undoubtedly be further discussed in the IETM network in the upcoming months, and inclusion and diversity will be one of the core subjects in the forthcoming IETM meetings.

In the meantime, good practices, results and further ideas on the theme can already be shared through the IETM's digital forum or by contacting **Elena Di Federico**, IETM Project Manager Research and Publications: elena.difederico@ietm.org

Additional resources:

- IETM mapping by Yasmin Fedda, Daniel Gorman and Tory Davidson "[Creation and Displacement: developing new narratives around migration](#)"
- TED talk "[The danger of a single story](#)" by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie
- [The Empty Space: A Look at How Theaters Have Filled Gaps in Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#), by [Al Heartley](#) and [Jocelyn Prince](#)
- Raising awareness on gender issues in Irish theatre through the <http://www.wakingthefeminists.org> movement
- Pep Bruno on the [social role of the story-teller](#)