

“CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE” ART - DO WE REALLY WANT IT?

“I didn’t enjoy this show because it’s not my culture”. “Didn’t understand - please show productions that use ONLY ENGLISH”. “This production was not appropriate - humour not of ‘black students’ ”.

A number of delegates to this years’ Schools’ Festivals - students and teachers alike - seemed to feel that programme selectors should take better cognisance of participants’ “culture”, and should select material that is culturally “appropriate” - that is, readily accessible and strictly in English. Should programme designers heed this advice - or is there benefit in exposing delegates to material they perceive as “not (culturally) appropriate”, or even incomprehensible?

Interestingly, the same productions that were deemed “inappropriate” were also pronounced “awesome” and “powerful” by other delegates - for their enjoyment value or the power of their message, but also for the insight they afforded into the lives of others. “The Chilli Boy”, a show peopled with ‘Indian’ and ‘white’ characters, produced just such mixed responses when it was seen at the North West Schools’ Festival. Here, many delegates are from rural, predominantly black schools. While a large number of delegates said they could not understand and were “bored”, a few were alerted to the value of what was for them a glimpse into the virtually unknown: “He is teaching us about a culture”; “Education in myself about the life of another people and shows me life is difficult” - such responses showed an understanding and appreciation of this “cross-cultural” experience.

So what makes the difference? What enables those few individuals to cross the boundaries of the “foreign” and gain understanding of something largely new to them? At bottom, perhaps, is an understanding that culture is not an insurmountable barrier that irrevocably divides us. Sure, it makes us act and even think differently, but underneath all of that, we are all human - and that’s quite a momentous thing to have in common!

For many of us, “other cultures” appear to indulge in strange, inexplicable behaviour! Because these actions differ from our own and appear to have no rational explanation, we may unconsciously label them “inappropriate”, “stupid” or “wrong”. It can be a revelation to discover that every culture has a rationale for its apparently “strange” behaviours. For instance, someone who habitually eats with a knife and fork may think that eating with one’s hands is “bad manners” or even “uncivilised”. But for someone of a different culture, the response to cutlery may be something along the lines of “Sies! think of how many people’s mouths those things have been in! At least I know my hands are clean!” No culture’s values or behaviours are “irrational” - they may just be based on a different line of reasoning to our own.

Despite different lines of reasoning, there’s commonality to be discovered amongst all cultures. The universal thread of humanness runs through them all, and they must all deal with the questions of how to survive, how to relate to others, how to communicate effectively, how to express **creativity** - how to live this life. They must all answer the same questions. The difference is simply in the answers. For instance, each person must answer the questions of “Who am I? What makes me significant?” Some cultures would say “I am significant because I am a unique individual”, while others would say “I am significant because I am a part of an intricately-networked community”. The different answers to this question explain why a young American may choose a career based on his personal preferences, while an African may make decisions based on what would be best for his entire extended family.

So how can teachers help their learners get the most out of an arts experience that may be

“culturally stretching” for them? The key may involve opening their eyes to the fact that, because all cultures have things in common, it *is* possible to understand, enjoy, and, best of all, *learn* from something that’s “not of my culture”. One just has to be open and receptive - don’t switch off, in other words. The more you look, listen and absorb, the more you’ll come to understand. Even language isn’t an insurmountable barrier to understanding. Often, the “message” in a theatre production is conveyed via other channels - movement, music, **gesture, mime**, costumes, technical effects, and many more. With its soulful music and eloquent movements, the production *Amajuba* lucidly communicates the pain of growing up in South Africa’s townships, using mostly English and some Tswana. One teacher commented that she felt she “missed so much” because of the language barrier. Her pupil’s insightful response was “But Miss, you didn’t need to understand the words **to get the message!**”

A thrill of insight into another culture is a precious thing. Suddenly the world is a much bigger, richer, more intricate place, with more possibilities. Barriers between one’s self and others seem dissolved and there’s the joy of a shared understanding between you. Art, with its sublime capacity to transcend even language, is a precious tool for attaining this. It cuts to the quick of the fundamental human condition and exposes truths that encircle us all. If we restrict ourselves to the readily accessible and comfortable, and remain mentally closed to the “foreign”, we immunize ourselves against Art’s power to expand our headspace and enrich our world. Let’s continue challenging our learners to open themselves up to Art’s mind-broadening potential.