

By Iketina Danso

Broadening audience representation through active participation

Broadening audience representation is often claimed to be a priority by organisations and institutions, with ambiguity around what this means. Without clear definitions, it can be difficult to see if changes in audiences or widened access to decision making within theatre institutions is taking place. Conversations about bringing in a broader diversity of theatre-goers are linked to conversations about diversity in theatre education, production, and audience experience, with concern about topics which have been made visible by mega talents such as Michaela Coel, who has spoken frankly about her experiences of racism and classism. Moreover, controversial initiatives like ‘Black Out Nights’, introduced to theatre as part of the highly acclaimed run of Slave Play at the Noel Coward Theatre, London, have raised the topic of how far we should go to broaden audience reach. Slave Play writer Jeremy O Harris, argues that ‘people have to be radically invited into a space to know that they belong there’.

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Meanwhile, the epic BSL bilingual performance of Anthony and Cleopatra at the Globe Theatre, London set stellar standards for what is possible in terms of broadening audience inclusion and recognising diverse audience needs.

Broadening audiences to be more representative of communities that surround theatre buildings is an intersectional challenge that has the potential to create new and exciting experiences for everyone. It is also an endeavour of organisational, structural and practical change. This move towards change is not optional. In the competition for attention against social media, streaming and other services, theatres and theatre education spaces must do more to reflect the lives of those outside their doors in the development, production, and presentation of storytelling on stage. This requires performance spaces of all sizes to ask, 'who is here, who is absent and what must we do differently so that our work is visible, accessible, and inclusive?'

The Vienna based association Hint Wien (highly intersectional Vienna), has developed a number of programmes together with arts institutions, and has learned lessons that are very relevant to the international theatre scene. Working with the arts education departments of several established arts institutions, Hint Wien developed arts education programmes for the public, aimed at attracting new audiences through highly intersectional and queer centred storytelling. In practice, Hint Wien introduced activities that turned public museum spaces into mutual learning and co-creation spaces. Rather than entering arts and cultural spaces, in order to consume and observe; visitors were actively sharing experiences and stories to contextualise the positioning of the works in their lives. Moreover, Hint Wien remains anchored in intersectional queer community events outside of formal arts and culture organisations through Queer Writers Circle Vienna. This includes performance nights Poetry for Pride during Pride month and 'Poetic Intuition', an international, highly intersectional queer storytelling festival. Both events bring together large public institutions and community organisations for performances, and peer-to-peer learning and creation, as sources of situated knowledge. These interactions centre voices that are often under-represented or marginalised, by inviting them to co-create more inclusive narratives about the

works on display. The result is a significant increase in the diversity of visitors and audiences.

In order to reach broader audiences, it is necessary to continue to build spaces in theatres where co-creation is possible. Especially for those who are new to the theatre experience, and wherever the stories of marginalised groups are told; more spaces must be created to actively contribute to new rules of interaction and redefine and co-create in that space. It also helps to organise group visits by specific identities or specific organisations as seen for *Slave Play*.

Through its arts education work, Hint Wien has found that when it comes to broadening audience representation by growing more diverse and inclusive audiences, it is necessary to integrate activities into arts and culture programming that disturb the assumptions of what that audience looks like, and who holds storytelling expertise. We all have blind spots and so do theatres. The theatre and theatre/drama education sectors must look for ways to build genuine interactions with an increasingly diverse pool of visitors. There is a lot of flexibility in how to approach this challenge. This flexibility is an opportunity to overcome institutionalised blind spots. Strategies should aim to bring in the changing hopes, expectations, and inspirations present in the perspectives of unfamiliar audiences. In the long term, this will reinforce the argument for working with community groups, activists, human rights defenders, and changemakers. Moreover, the reality of limited budgets makes collaborative and interdisciplinary working worth exploring. Organisations would do well to look for ways to share knowhow and resources, in order to ensure that initiatives to broaden audience representation through active participation are adequately resourced.

In broadening audience representation, ticket buyers do not only want to be passive observers. They also want to redefine arts and culture spaces for audiences of the future.

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