

For One Month Only

'Since we are not post modernists we should begin our story from the beginning.' Says Bode. A character in Oladipo Agboluaje's play *For One Night Only* which we toured to rural communities across the England.

I have been working in theatre for 30 years making work initially in the TIE movement of the 80s and latterly for community audiences mainly in village halls. And in all that time I have struggled with the question of whose stories we tell and who stands on our stages. I want to make work for a rural audience. But how do you remain local without becoming parochial? Equally I don't want to feel like I am making exotica. In my early career I worked for a company that mainly toured to rural community centres but once every two years would make a show for urban—generally far more racially mixed - youth audience. The company would try and tour its youth club show to village halls and vice versa but there were few takers. I never knew if this touring pattern was driven by a belief that the funders wanted 'something for all'. But it didn't look like it was working.

Earlier I had made a production of Lisa Evan's *Stamping Shouting and Singing Home* based on the writing of Alice Walker. When our Arts Officer saw the show she asked 'why didn't you tell me this show had a black cast? We should have known'. Presumably she would have wanted to signal that diverse work was being made.

Now I work in the South east. Still making work for village halls but also supporting a range of companies to achieve their own ambitions. And the debate is still there. The villages and market towns of England are predominantly white - Trevor Philips made the point some years ago that he felt there is a 'cultural apartheid' in the countryside – yet we are trying to make theatre for that audience.

I should say I am not alone in thinking about this. Pentabus led a very successful set of short commissions called White Open Spaces and The Theatre Writing Partnership, New Perspectives and Eastern Angles has been working with the National Rural Touring Forum to commission six black writers to develop treatments of ideas for rural audiences that were presented at Decibel. This led to two productions having well received national tours. But I still think that the funding systems well intentioned determination to change the status quo sometimes resulted in schemes and special initiatives rather than a more everyday approach which we should have got to.

Which brings me to Dipo's play. The piece had been commissioned by one of our associate companies, Pursued by a Bear, and toured to studio theatres as one half of a double bill. Yet I felt that there was a production to be made that would play with the informality that village halls offer and, as importantly, revisit an existing good script from an established writer.

I also had a hunch that it would allow us to produce a piece of theatre that wasn't 'the piece for black history month' but a play that said something about how much we have in common. And that what we made would be with this audience in mind. To that end I am indebted to Dipo. He took to the idea of revisiting the script with gusto and completely understood our ambition to make a production that felt less like a play and more like an event.

There were, however, some things that felt new in this production. Partly by luck and partly by design we cast a company of Black African performers. Actors who had grown up and trained in Africa – specifically in Nigeria and South Africa – who were both raised on a tradition of storytelling. I think this made a difference. Not least because one of the actors comes from a rural community and recognised the same characters in our village halls. In marketing the show we didn't mention anything about the make-up of the company. It was just our next show based on an idea about 'friendships and finding ones way in the world'. Although I guess there was a clue in the name of the writer and in the end we did use a picture of the cast for the poster of them laughing and enjoying themselves. We didn't want this to look like an issue play – although it deals with issues. Dipo can be a mischievous writer. One exchange involved a character questioning the other on why he had pretended to be Ghanaian rather than from Nigeria. 'They think all Nigerians are dishonest. Better to lie and later prove them wrong.'

We performed the show 35 times across England and Wales. Audiences enjoyed it as the good play that it is and were left, in the word of one promoter, with 'much food for thought'.

Never the less we were surprised by the casual ignorance of some. On one occasion a well-intentioned lady asked, having welcomed the company into her house and made them a cup of tea, asked "is it because you have fewer layers of skin that you can't swim". Another good heartedly rubbed an actor's arm and commented "oh, it doesn't come off then". I am not making light of these incidents. What struck us was that they were usually said in an attempt to connect. Badly, but well intentioned. It felt born from ignorance rather than racism. And on both occasions the audience member would be gently chided.

The truth is that the audience in village halls is predominantly white (like the repertory theatre audience) But we can remind our audience that we have as much in common with each other and that a young man from, say, rural Nigeria could be closer to a young person growing up in Herefordshire as with someone from Lagos. As Michael de Montaigne far more poetically said 'There is as much difference between us and ourselves as there is between us and others.'

It felt like success that we managed to sell the show as our 'latest show'. And that it will be more every day to make work that connects with but is not necessarily from the community we are playing to. (next year we are making a show about a man who thinks he is an elephant and another set around a dinner table in Iran.)

I saw Dipo yesterday and asked what he was doing. 'Oh, I have been commissioned to write a huge play set on a bus for the National'. I hope they produce it.