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IT'S TIME FOR POSTIVE ACTION

I'm a second generation Cypriot (Cyprus was part of the British Empire until 1960). Now, half my motherland is in Europe with a Christian Orthodox religion, that's the south zone. The other half, the north zone, is disputed land not recognized by the UN and is occupied by Turkey and a cellular Muslim state.

When I started calling myself a director 20 years ago - the wonderfully supportive Arts Council wanted to give me a grant to be an assistant director in residence. They don't do these anymore but I'd wish they'd bring them back as they are such a good idea. At that time they had a Black Initiative and my placement would be funded under that initiative. I was different enough not to be white. But also not confident enough to be Cypriot.

Then ACE was using the term Afro-Asian for anyone not white. Then we got Afro-Caribbean and Asian, then Black and Asian, then Black and Ethnic Diverse, then Culturally Diverse and now Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic, which is more commonly known as BAME. But because

there is an A missing some people say Black and Minority Ethnic and miss out Asian altogether. There should be two As of course.

Anyway, when we were at the 'Black and Asian' stage, they defined Asian as anything south-east of Turkey. So I was Asian then. Fab!

But looking back it was a mess and I think it's still a mess. I hate BAME. Black Asian and Minority Ethnic. Why does Black get top billing? And isn't there a real difference between South and East Asian? And regarding the Minority Ethnic bit, where I live and work in Stratford E15, the Ethnic is not in the minority.

So I want to now make my first bullet point. For the rest of my 15 minutes I'm going to use the term: PEOPLE OF COLOUR.

In case you don't know the term, it started in the USA to describe any person who is not white. And it was introduced as an alternative and in preference to 'non-white' and minority.

Martin Luther King Jr used the term "citizens of color" in 1963, the phrase in its current meaning did not catch on until the late 1970s. By the late 1980s it was in wide circulation.

In the US, both anti-racist activists and academics appreciate the phrase because it unites racial and ethnic groups under one larger collective promoting a sense of equality, not hierarchy. It also deals

with the fact that in some cases the term 'minority' could imply 'inferiority' and being disenfranchised.

In the context of London, over 40% of the population are not white and it is estimated that in the next ten years half the population under 30 will be mixed race. Therefore being (just) black and a general Asian isn't good enough. I think people of colour has to be the future.

That's my first bit of positive action. I and the theatre I lead, will now use people of colour and not BAME.

I'm going to make a jump now, to politics. When the Labour party introduced all-women shortlists in the 2005 general election, 98 Labour women were returned compared with 17 Conservative women MPs. And on Thursday's election, which I don't want to talk about, 29% of MPs are now women. All-women shortlists 10 years ago have a lot to do with this.

So, what about in the arts? There is positive action springing up all over the place. A good example I think is on US TV where there is a Quota System. This means that an agreed number of roles are given to People of Colour, ensuring programmes reflect the population.

And The Henry Plan.

In 2014 Lenny Henry made a speech at BAFTA calling the British Television industry into account. Statistics showed that between 2006 and 2012 the percentage of people of colour working on and off screen had declined by 30.9%, and stood at just 5.4%.

That speech has woken British Broadcasters.

BBC (Tony Hall, Director General):

- Pledged to increase the number of (BAME) people of colour on-air by more than 40% over the next 3 years and to double the number of senior managers by 2020
- Is implementing of a £1.2M ring-fenced development fund to help fast-track people of colour
- Committed to increasing the number of people of colour on air from 10.4% to 15% over the next 3 years

BSkyB:

- Pledged that at least 20% of significant on screen roles will go to people of colour

ITV (Steve November, Commissioner for Continuing Drama):

- Branded all white casts as “frankly dull” and pledged to adopt the US quota system

For me the most exciting development is **Channel 4's 360° Diversity Charter:**

- Making a £5M investment focusing on people of colour, disability, LGBT, and social mobility

Oona King who is head of diversity at Channel 4 says that previous attempts to improve diversity, including the Creative Diversity Network, had lacked the transparency, accountability, incentives and hard cash needed to succeed. She described the 360° charter as “the mother of all plans...we may have bitten off more than we can chew...but broadcasters could no longer tinker around the edges...is it going to change the world? Yes I think so”.

So in London Theatre where are we? I'm not going to go over the Eclipse Report or the Sustain Work which have been delivered by the Arts Council. Some promises were kept, others forgotten. But both were initiatives that have achieved some important steps. And a lot of good work by people I respect and love have addressed many issues. Especially around entry level access, developing emerging artists and audience development. The Arts Council Library has many a good report gathering dust on how to do all this stuff if people still don't know.

ACE are now talking about the Creative Case. And I suspect I am in a room full of people who make culturally diverse work because for us it's not that it's a funding condition, but because it's the most exciting work out there. And we have been doing so long before ACE's Creative

Case. We are striving for artistic excellence and this is how we think we can do it.

But for some leaders and programmers of our institutions, they may really want to make a difference in this area but are scared they'll get it wrong and then they'll be vilified. Or they can't hear the message through all the talking.

So let me try and pull all this together and I'll do that by focusing on the *Exhibit B* drama and what for me were the key issues.

Firstly, we had a white man doing a show about black people. Has he got permission to tell that story from his point of view? Well I think I know how I feel about that. But the problem was that this work was out in the wilderness, standing alone. There wasn't, and still aren't, enough stories being told by and for people of colour. So culturally diverse work is often ignored or in this case, had to satisfy too many agendas. And so buckled under the pressure.

We need to rebalance those gate keepers and have more producers and directors of colour, who can commission work on their own terms. When we do that, they will in turn employ more writers who will engage more actors who will entice more audiences. And maybe not all, but some, will be of colour.

It's easy to invest in programmes that work with emerging artists. However I do know some black directors who have been labeled 'emerging' for the last 10 years. So those programs have to happen but they have limited success.

And in London there is no reason why you can't colour blind cast till you're blue in the face... there's a joke there somewhere.

The change needs to happen at the top. I know others are also having this conversation. The What Next? movement is looking at this now and I personally know of three large flagship London institutions that have working groups set up to have a good hard look at why they are too white.

The London Theatre Consortium is exploring options to make real change and I am very optimistic about what these 13 London producing theatres can and will do.

So my second piece of Positive Action I'd like to suggest is that every London NPO that receives over £1m of ACE money a year could have a person of colour at executive and senior management level.

Think of a setup where there is an artistic director, executive director - add a deputy artistic director. Or if there is a CEO, an AD and an associate. Or if there is an AD, ED and FD or executive producer. Why

can't we all make the commitment to have one of those positions be filled by a person of colour and find our own way of resourcing that.

ACE can help. It can reintroduce its Assistant and Associate Directors Scheme for People of Colour (which should include Cypriots by the way) and place half a dozen into smaller NPO's across the capital. In just three years' time can you imagine how different the sector will look and feel?

There are a plethora of people of colour who could join organisations as associate directors right this minute, and in time they be more than ready for those top programming and producing jobs, when they become available.

Check out the amazing pool of talent within the group that call themselves the 'Artistic Directors of the Future' if you don't believe me. Their web address is www.adofthefuture.com.

The second issue for me is something I've talked a lot about in the past and it's got me into trouble and that is the lack of critical debate around culturally diverse work. We need more people of colour setting the critical debate. Wouldn't the theatre sector be so much more exciting if there were more people of colour serving as our national critics? Imagine how refreshing that would be for all of us. Digital media is

starting to address that with fresh blogs and new voices. But a lot of those new critical platforms a long way off maturing.

Melvin Dixon is an African-American activist and thinker and he can explain it much better than I can. This is from his essay *White Critic - Black Art*.

“Black Art, by definition, exists primarily for Black people”.

(That’s the same for white work - please keep listening).

“It is an art which combines the social and political pulse of the Black community into an artistic reflection of that emotion, that spirit, that energy.

“As an aesthetic foundation it seeks to step beyond the white Western framework of American art which has enclosed and smothered any previous expression of Blackness”.

He then talks about white critics and says “a *white critic in Black art is only an outsider looking in.*

“He cannot validly assess the artistic merit of the Black experience because, more often than not, the whole ritual is simply beyond his comprehension or concern.

“He is unaware of the various rhythms and pulses within the Black community, or the ideological differences among Black people. He is not in direct communion with the artist, for Black artists speak primarily to Black people, the Black community, and from that spiritual union he is barred by necessity.

“It must be the commitment of the Black critic to effectively analyze the development of the varied Black arts and through a critical eye, focus towards the progress of Black art in all its dimensions”.

Now this was written in 1971 – and some may take issues with the strength of his stance. But I think his central point is valid.

My theatre relishes in creating culturally specific work and I regularly cannot find someone from that culture to review it nationally. Nor are there enough social commentators from these communities with a big enough platform.

Positive action point 3. We need a high powered lobby or think-tank to help fast-track key individuals into a position of journalistic power within the current arts pages AND ALSO to forge new channels.

Arts.Black is an online collective and publication, and they are all about this, but they are based in the USA. They are a platform for art criticism from black perspectives predicated on the belief that art criticism should be an accessible dialogue - a tool through which we question, celebrate

and talk back to the global world of contemporary art. I'm not ignoring the work of Bonnie Greer and Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, but that's not enough. And I wish Kwame Kwei-Armah would come back from the Centre Stage Theatre in Baltimore and get back here to make work and importantly get back on our TV setting the critical debate. He is one of many talents we have lost to the USA.

And finally I want to talk about success. What is success and how do you want to measure it?

A strong business model is key – we are reminded of this often. Sometimes it's the only thing that matters. And if we are *lucky* at least two thirds of our turnover will be box office receipts and fundraised income. Every one of us has to constantly beam messages out that we are a success! For some that means filling our brochures with celebrities or TV and Film stars. And for the rest of us it's about 5 stars reviews but we know, if its culturally diverse work, the odds are against us with that one.

BUT there is also the awards season....

Last year the *Evening Standard* winners included *Hear Lies Love* and *Scottsboro Boys*. Both deserving winners and both imported from the USA. The Olivier Awards last month had no winners who were people of colour. I'm not attacking either of these awards, in my time at Stratford East we've had seven Olivier nominations and won two. But

when people on those stages and in the newspaper before and after the event, talk about celebrating the best in the world and none of those are people of colour yet both are London awards – then something is wrong.

So, to re-cap. We need more producers and directors making the work and more critics talking about the work. And in that I also mean criticizing the work. One of the few positives to come out of *Exhibit B* was that there was a confidence for people to say in public that for them the work wasn't good enough. We have to allow ourselves to have those conversations too.

And my final positive action point. Number 4. We need to celebrate the achievements of culturally diverse work.

Too many intelligent people don't know what great work is going on in this area. So we need to fast-track our celebration. We need our own Statues of Success. And I mean that literally, we need an award. And all the razzmatazz that goes with it. It needs to be regular, sexy and expensive. But made for, and by, people of colour.

At the end of the day the *Evening Standard* awards are good for its business of selling newspapers and the Olivier's, like the Tony's and the Oscars are very exciting trade shows. It's going to take time to achieve more profile in those established circles. And that's assuming some of our artists want to go to those parties in the first place. Let's do what

the music industry has done and come up with our own. A slice of the success of the MOBOs would be a huge achievement. And when the People of Colour Awards become so exciting and sexy and prestigious that they become the mainstream, like the MOBO's have, then maybe, just maybe, the job is – almost? – done.

I think that's my 15 minutes up.

Thank you.

NB: This speech was given by Kerry Michael, Artistic Director of Theatre Royal Stratford East at the D Word Conference hosted at The Unicorn Theatre on 11th May 2015.