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Graham Jeffery

"In developing the programme, we were faced with a choice; we could either adopt an 'off the shelf' Higher National Diploma in performing arts (there were a number of template qualifications available), or develop our own. For both strategic and philosophical reasons, it made sense to enter into a partnership with a university. University of East London's qualifications meet the nationally agreed criteria. We decided that developing a partnership with the University of East London would help us to develop the infrastructure to support young people's progression into the creative industries in our part of London. Working with UEL also gave the teaching team more freedom to develop a qualification that reflected our philosophy. We conceived the course as an active means of investigating the history and practice of 'community' focussed performing arts practices. There were philosophical and pragmatic reasons for this, to do with the potential employability of our graduates and the preoccupations of our partner arts organisations.

Students would work beyond the boundaries of these buildings, alongside participants drawn from different communities, in schools, community centres, on the streets and in many different sites. The physical journeys that you make across the landscape of the city will, we hope, allow you to explore other cultural and philosophical landscapes, which will develop your creativity and commitment to your work as an artist.

We have designed this course to allow you to encounter a diversity of arts practice and cultural forms. We hope that your performance practice will be challenged as a result of this...You will be encouraged to challenge assumptions about traditional practices in the performing arts. We emphasise communication and collaboration between client groups and community practitioners, with the aim of identifying and realising shared goals. Live projects and performances will enable you to appreciate the necessity of meaningful dialogue."

Nella primavera 2002, lo scrittore Carl Reid "in residence" ha creato *Hair Pieces*, un lavoro teatrale sviluppato a partire da dialoghi con i locali barbieri. Vicino Stratford Circus vi sono numerosi hair salons, quasi tutti condotti da famiglie o giovani che rispecchiano la diversità etnica dell'East End : Afro-Caraibici, Turchi, Polacchi e Croati. Ognuno serve le varie comunità, in competizione per servizi, spazio e business. *Hair Pieces* è stato presentato a Stratford Circus nel 2002, era volto a sviluppare tanto le capacità di performance degli studenti, quanto l'interesse di un pubblico appartenente alle stesse comunità rappresentate dal testo. *Hair Pieces* divenne perciò anche un mezzo per intervenire sulle abitudini di consumo culturale delle comunità locali.

Carl Reid, writer-in-residence

When I was a lad growing up in the North, I was told I would never amount to much. I wanted to be a writer, but people like me were never expected to have those thoughts. I left school in 1981, the year that cities exploded from Brixton to Toxteth. Black youth were in revolt. They could see no future.

I graduated from this course in 2001. The Performing Arts in the Community course. This course is one of the few community arts based courses in the country and was also to be fully inclusive. This course suited me as I could merge my years of working within the community and my love of the arts.

The debate on inclusion, in my opinion, has been going on a long time. I get asked the same question that I was asked way back in the day. Do you feel the cold? Do you comb your hair? Were you born here?

I believe the measure of a country is how people are treated.

Britain is predominately white European, that is a fact. Black people in Britain live in only a few major cities: Bristol, Leeds, London, Nottingham, Birmingham, Leicester, Manchester, and Sheffield.

So with only a few Black people living in a few cities why are the arts being inclusive? Is it important? Are black people included in mainstream white culture, is the majority included in black society?

I went there specifically to learn to write well, which I am happy to say, I did. I was asked then to work on 'Hair Pieces.'

Barber shops and hairdressing salons are a repository of narratives concerned with identity, community and everyday experience. They are also sites in which questions of fashion, beauty, aesthetics, politics, and style play out.

The play was based within the Stratford area of East London which has a noticeable black community.

The characters and the language reflected this. The cast then was a mixture of black, white, and disabled actors. Because these are the people who live within our area.

The audiences were very good and it sold out on the final night. There were also a significant number of black people in the audience. The comments from the black members of the audience to me were extremely positive. Some said they never go to the theatre, but this is something that they would pay money to see. Other comments centred on the language and the reality of the characters: "You get me..Gah lang you ears too bloodclart big...Janice you're a nice girl, but you're too damn false..."

One of the biggest tensions was around identity. I was told at one point that it was very black. As a writer who is black, what would people expect?

My mother left Britain in 1986; my father joined her in 1988; they saw no future for Black people in Britain. If she felt included she would have been around to see *Hair Pieces*.

Andy Cobb, regista del lavoro

We wanted to create a piece of theatre which allow students to investigate and engage with the language and cultures of the local environment, celebrate the artistry, tact, and diplomacy of the hair stylists, and the crucial role of the shops as a 'live archive' of local stories, intergenerational interaction and family and community ties.

Finding the stories for the piece required considerable dialogue and relationship-building with the staff and customers of the salons which was initially undertaken by Carl Reid in other parts of London and then extended locally through the work undertaken by students. Many of the stories reflected the experience of Black British communities living in London but carrying with them traditions of hairdressing and culture from Africa and the Caribbean.

To undertake this work it was essential to find 'authentic' voices. This was achieved through Carl's skill in developing a script and weaving a narrative from raw material gathered by the students. We involved staff from local hair salons in reviewing 'work in progress' and providing feedback. The outreach and community involvement aspects of the project had multiple benefits, with students interviewing and spending time with – even getting free haircuts and massages from – local barbers and hairdressers and, for those students who had joined the programme from elsewhere in the UK, developing a better understanding of the community in which they were located.

The piece aimed to avoid stereotyping through continuous dialogue with the communities, which were being represented; this was assisted by the extreme diversity of experience, age, and ethnicity and experience in the student body

The project develops work and themes already accessed on the previous semester's unit, "Identity, process and performance," in which the ways in which identities are constructed and performed in everyday contexts is examined. Students are required to explore and inquire into their notion of personal identity, and then these notions are further explored and examined within the context of the local communities of East London.

The cultures and stories associated with African-Caribbean barbershops and hairdressing salons in East London, we felt had not been represented sufficiently in the past through the performing arts. We wanted to generate a new audience for our work. We wondered by working with the communities that used these shops we might find that possible audience. Around half the group of students also came from African-Caribbean communities and it was important that their degree level study acknowledged and affirmed some of their own communities' heritage and their own stories. We hoped that the piece we were going to create might have a resonance and interest for students and the wider community. We wanted to see if this community knew about Stratford Circus, felt they had a stake in Stratford Circus, or wanted to come. We wanted to get them involved with the theatre. We wanted our piece to celebrate the craft and skills of the barber and hairdresser.

Reaching out to new audiences is always crucial in the performing arts.

The acting company were set research and development tasks which included establishing contact and dialogue with hairdressing salons and barbershops in the area. This ongoing dialogue was, we considered, essential in helping the company realise the subject matter with sufficient authenticity.

In order to prepare the acting company for taking on roles authentically and with conviction, we required them to make relationships with specific barber shops and hairdressing salons in the area. Students would pair up and visit 'their' barbershop/ hairdresser on a number of occasions, get to know the workers and clients in the establishments, interview key members of the community, observe the specialist skills, and generally imbibe the atmosphere and surroundings.

This was a challenge for some of the members of the group. It took some courage and self assurance to approach these establishments and set up the necessary dialogue. This process exposed the company to direct experiences in the environment in which the play was set, and provided plenty of opportunity to meet some of the characters who would, with some creative elaboration, appear in the script. It provided the chance for the actors to learn develop some of the technical skills in the hair business, and it allowed the actors to research the authentic parlance of the terrain; all these experiences would help to create an authentic and convincing stage life.

We believe that work that represents a community's needs and celebrates a community's achievements comes from these sources and these methodologies. 'Community' as an ideal, requires a commitment to collaboration, exchange and sharing.