Separate and unequal

The Arts Council believes that the restructuring of the arts funding system offers the opportunity to re-examine policy on cultural diversity. Here we invite David Bryan to express his concerns for the future of Black arts

David Bryan is former director of Brixton Village and is currently an independent Arts and Community Development consultant

Although 'Sarafina' was an international success it could not find support from white 'angels'
Photo: Hackney Empire

On a wall in Brixton market is a slogan, "It doesn't matter who you vote for, the government gets in". This sentiment aptly reflects the state of wilful stagnation that exists in institutional attitudes towards Black arts.

Since 1976 when the report *The Arts Britain Ignores* was produced, there has been an acknowledgement of the fact that Black arts was seen by the Arts Council and the RAAs as unworthy of true integration and therefore as a "foreign intrusion into the realm" of real culture and art. In London, where the diversity of cultures is greatest, there was cause for an inquiry into Greater London Arts Association. The Arts Council, to their credit, launched in 1986 the *Ethnic Minority Arts Action Plan*. This was "in recognition of individual artists, organisations and groups, whose creative work had not received the necessary financial support enabling growth and development within the national culture."

What had gone on before was the ad hoc funding of individuals and projects in many, if not most, cases at levels lower than their white counterparts. Special schemes would bring specific assistance to Black arts. When these schemes were examined closely they amounted to employment creation manoeuvres that had minor bearing on artistic product. Invariably, the majority of groups were funded year after year on a project by project basis without clearly defined artistic criteria. White venues programmed Black arts either to meet their interpretation of equal opportunities or in appeasement to their local community. Black art centres became major "political issues" rather than the concern of cultural development.

While white art centres were able to attract funds of six digits, innovative centres such as Brixton Village (now deceased) were offered £15,000. It is not surprising therefore that this catalogue of oppressive mechanisms draws comparison with South Africa's Bantu homeland policy. Throughout the country, each of the 12 and now 10 regions have failed to develop a Black arts development strategy.

In the report *Towards Cultural Diversity* the Arts Council agreed "that by the end of two years a minimum of 4% of its expenditure will be committed to Afro-Caribbean and Asian Arts." Employment and audience targets were addressed separately. Five years later the Arts Council was unable or unwilling to enforce its attempts to move towards greater equality. So embarrassing was this fiasco of a target, that even though the calculation was suspect this minor sum was and has not been attained. Silence now dominates this magnificent failure. As a consolation prize Black artists are offered training to work in a context of perpetual insecurity to a standard that would not make them eligible to work in the white mainstream.

Some of those who were able to break through the barriers of the Bantustans did so by acquiescing to the demands made for Black art groups to do European work. If these now prominent Black groups continue to use their colour but not their culture they will soon become expendable as just another variation of European interpreted work. The rich and distinct differences that make up the culturally diverse society will be locked out and defined by those who have no knowledge of "others" culture. Throughout the ten regions exist a network of white institutions of varying degrees of stature, history and orientation. Art centres that focus on the nurturing and stimulating of Black cultural expression would not make double figures. The Arts Council has acknowledged that Black venues are essential for Black cultural and artistic development, awareness and action succeed in not corresponding.

What motivates the continued enshrinement of a policy of "separate and unequal"? How are the five million or so African, Caribbean and Asian people in Britain to have their artistic and cultural expression integrated into the national fabric? Is it not a tribute to the humanity of Black people that they are willing to pay their taxes over the years for the flourishing of white cultural supremacy?

In a recent contribution by Black art practitioners (those that are left – joke) to the National Arts and Media Strategy Ade Solanke made the following statement : "Skilled, trained Black arts practitioners are repaying Britain's investment in Black art with work that is not just of exemplary artistic quality but which delivers high box office returns from an ever-expanding home and international market. The academies, schools and venues which have been established are a magnet for acolytes of African, Asian and Caribbean arts worldwide. Our nation has led the way, showing how a multicultural society can exploit its diversity both commercially and aesthetically." This is how a review of Black arts might read in the year 2000.

The advent of Black independent cultural entrepreneurs in Afro-Caribbean and Asian communities is a welcome development and in many ways a natural one. But while Black "angels" (investors in arts theatres) can and will take major bold gambles, such as the production of *Sarafina*, they do not have the financial capacity for developing new talent or cultural expression. *Sarafina* was an international success but it could not find support from white "angels" or venues.

In more recent times some venues have discovered the existence of Black audiences and adapted their menu moderately. The not so new enterprise culture has focused on money but not on cultural enlightenment.

There are no discernible signs of the Bantu/regional policy in England changing; there are in reality many "no go" zones that would benefit from joining the real world. ●