

## Summit Views 7

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Dear National Arts Council of South Africa

This weekly column by Mike van Graan, Programme Director for the World Summit on Arts and Culture (Johannesburg, 22-25 September 2009), will raise some of the themes and issues that will be debated at the event. These views are not those of the World Summit organisers but are entirely the views of the Programme Director and are intended to be proactive.

### **On intercultural dialogue...**

More frequently than now-and-then, along come new buzz phrases in international cultural discourse that require not a little unpacking. Just recently, there's been "cultural diversity" and "culture as vectors of development". Now, there's "intercultural dialogue". Each phrase seems to generate its own global industry of conferences, researchers, consultants and bureaucrats creating red-tape-filled fundraising forms. And before one can say "UNESCO", along comes another buzz phrase tsunami!

So, what is this "intercultural dialogue" thing? According to the Sharing Diversity report published by the highly reputable ERICarts Institute in 2008, "Intercultural Dialogue is a process based on an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals, groups and organisations with different cultural backgrounds or mindsets. Among its aims are to develop a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives and practices, to increase participation, to ensure freedom of expression and the ability to make choices, to foster equality and to enhance creative processes." The Report goes on to say that "Intercultural dialogue takes place in an environment where individuals and groups are guaranteed safety and dignity, equality of opportunity and participation, where different views can be voiced openly without fear and where there are 'shared spaces' for cultural exchanges."

Given this definition, it is unlikely that intercultural dialogue took place between the two opposing groups marching in London recently, one generally comprising people of the Muslim faith, and another of people with faith in slogans like "F-off Paki!" Neither is it likely for intercultural dialogue to take place between a US Customs Official and someone with a tell-tale Al Qaeda-like beard. And forget about intercultural dialogue between a Somalian shopkeeper in a South African township and the local thugs who are about to rob and probably shoot him.

All of these situations could do with a little bit of intercultural dialogue, but this is unlikely as "intercultural dialogue takes place where individuals and groups are guaranteed safety and dignity...". Which begs the question, what's the point of intercultural dialogue if it can only happen once conducive conditions have been created? Is it not more important then to spend time, energy and resources on creating such safe conditions? And if these conditions – safety and dignity, equality of opportunity and participation, shared spaces – etc exist, then why bother with intercultural dialogue?

Everyone's happy already ...

And, anyway, are the arts the best way to facilitate such intercultural dialogue? It may be very worthy to commission an opera by a former Afghan prisoner in Guantanamo Bay about his life experience, and then to have it conducted by an American Republican and sung by a Jewish lesbian, but those who matter, those flying planes into buildings or dropping bombs on Palestinian civilians or slaughtering ethnic others with machetes are unlikely to buy tickets to see – and, at a long shot, have their paradigms shifted by - the opera. It is more likely that perpetrators of intercultural violence will find more in common at a performance fusing belly - and pole-dancing.

So, first we had cultural diversity – everyone has the right to practice the culture of their choice, and to do it in the spaces they create. Some would label this neo-apartheid, but no, it's the progressive view that we move away from the potential homogenisation of the multinational media and creative industry companies of some dominant (now shaky) economies, and encourage everyone to be different. Then a few nasty things happen – bombs on busses, the odd embassy being attacked, a train explodes – and we (or rather, those whose comfortable lifestyles are now under threat) begin to say, “Gee, why is this happening to us? We're such good guys! We'd better get to know those 'others' who are doing this, and integrate them into our way of life so that we all live happily ever after. Oh yes, and since it's culture that divides us, let's use intercultural dialogue to build bridges, and what better cultural expression to use to do this, than the arts!”

Now, it's hardly likely that migrant and marginalised communities wake up in the morning and decide that “today, I'm going to have a multicultural experience, and seek to have a relationship with someone from the dominant culture”. It is almost always those from within hegemonic cultural paradigms that initiate cultural exchange, cultural diversity programmes, intercultural dialogue. Which begs the further question: whose interests do these serve? Who provides the resources for such programmes and what are the power relations within such intercultural dialogue? While such dialogue “takes place in an environment where individuals and groups are guaranteed safety and dignity, equality of opportunity and participation, where different views can be voiced openly without fear and where there are ‘shared spaces’ for cultural exchanges,” those on the underside of history, invited to participate in such dialogue, may be forgiven for wondering how long their “freedom of expression” will really be tolerated if it constantly points out the structural inequities in the distribution of resources that make real, sustainable “sharing” and “equality of opportunity” mirages.

In the ‘developing world’, while we are trying to make sense of these buzz phrases (beyond their strategic value as conduits to the resources of the ‘developed world’) and what they mean for us (cultural diversity was the swear word of the divide-and-rule colonialists, and now we are asked to embrace it), the next buzz phrase is upon us, demanding our support and engagement.

Forgive me for asking, but can we perhaps see a little more – real - action in terms of the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of Cultural Diversity, before we are stampeded into signing along the Intercultural Dialogue line?