

An AfroReggae Explosion: Reimagining the Value of Quality, Profit, and the Global Market in the Development of Applied Performance

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Abstract

Despite being widely used around the globe for social and political purposes, applied performance still lies on the edge of theatrical practice and scholarship, often largely unacknowledged and struggling to be taken seriously by the general public, major arts institutions, and state agencies. This marginal position restricts applied performance's access to economic backing, hindering its development and ability to reach wider audiences. This paper draws on the example of the Brazilian organisation Grupo Cultural AfroReggae to demonstrate how aiming for high production values, engaging deliberately in the commercial global market, and seeking profit potentially offer applied performance opportunities for development. Without undermining its social and political integrity, AfroReggae has created profitable community-based art work in mainstream venues, generating substantial economic revenue to feed back into its local community. AfroReggae's negotiated, planned, and focused practice offers new possibilities to other applied performance organisations, practitioners, and participants worldwide, demonstrating how local communities can benefit from producing applied theatre in mainstream venues for profit on a global stage.

Applied performance prioritises using 'the process of theatre in the service of social and community change' (Prentki and Preston 9). In *Applied Drama: The Gift of Theatre*, Helen Nicholson foregrounds Judith Ackroyd's argument that applied performance is distinguished from other theatrical practices by its intentionality, its specific aspiration 'to use drama to improve the lives of individuals and create better societies' (2). This common understanding of applied performance is often seen to be in direct opposition to the creation of a product with a high economic value in a commercially driven global market: instead of being for, with or by a community, mainstream performance is understood to be driven by its potential to create profit for producers.

In debates at London's Southbank Centre (SBC) in July 2010,¹ the Theatre Applications Conference held at Central School of Speech and Drama in April 2010, and in publications such as *Research in Drama Education*, applied performance practitioners have emphasised the necessity of raising the status of applied performance in order to sustain the practice and enable it to affect more people. In comparison to the majority of applied performance organisations – which are often small-scale, locally orientated, charitable, and run on vulnerable project-to-project funding – AfroReggae has an ambitious strategic business plan, which entails high profile national and international tours that financially support their local practice. AfroReggae's founder and executive co-ordinator José Junior describes the company as a social organisation that works on 'the logic of quality and profit' (Neate and Platt 53). In its bid for self-sufficiency, AfroReggae's controversial business model is raising the profile of applied performance by bringing it to mainstream stages. AfroReggae's ability to generate revenue enables its practice to have an effect on a larger number of individuals and communities. This paper argues that 'in the service of social and community change,' there is room for some applied performance practice to engage with and exploit the benefits and profits of the global market (Prentki and Preston 9). It will illustrate that creating community-based performance with economic value does not necessarily undermine – and might, indeed, enhance – its social potential.

AfroReggae is based in Brazil but its work in the UK is produced and facilitated by People's Palace Projects (PPP), an arts organisation based at Queen Mary, University of London, in East London. The research for this paper is informed by conversations, debates and interviews with Rachel Sanger, projects manager of

¹ 'The Point of Culture,' 'The Edge of the Future' and 'The Drama of Violence' were three talks held in London in July 2010 as part of the Southbank Centre's *Brazil Festival*.

PPP, and Sylvan Baker, associate director of PPP's Cultural Warriors programme (2009 - 2012), as well as my work with AfroReggae as a production assistant for PPP in July 2010. Initially this paper will outline AfroReggae's approach to local practice and community. I will then illustrate how AfroReggae have embraced the ethics of consumerism and, as stated on its website, developed 'institutional products' to sustain its local practice. AfroReggae's social and political work is integral to these institutional products, or shows, which hold the same high production values as other commercial performance practices, negotiate a global market with large-scale international tours, and thus generate an economic profit. Drawing on *The AfroReggae Explosion Weekend*, which took place in July 2010 at the SBC in London, I will demonstrate the social and political relevance AfroReggae's commercial performances hold for international audiences. I offer AfroReggae as an inspiring model – in which the company's social and political integrity is not compromised – to other community engaged arts organisations worldwide.

AfroReggae

In 1993 AfroReggae emerged from Vigário Geral, one of the most violent *favelas* (a Brazilian shanty town) in Rio de Janeiro. The favela is limited in infrastructure and employment opportunities – especially for young black men – except for a corrupt drug trade, which for years has bred violent conflict between police, gangs, and local communities. Since the massacre of twenty-one civilians by police in a drug war in 1993, and in the absence of any state welfare, AfroReggae has sought to use art to enable social change within their local community. Their aims are: 'to offer cultural and artistic background for slum teenagers, to provide opportunity for them to build

their citizenship, keeping them away from drug dealing and irregular work so these teenagers can give a hand to other young people' (AfroReggae, 'We are AfroReggae'). AfroReggae works artistically with many members of the local community, offering professional training, workshops, and performance in a range of disciplines, from circus skills to classical violin. In addition, AfroReggae run many educational programmes in local schools. Acknowledging that not everyone wants to be an artist, AfroReggae also carries out work that is considered more pragmatic: running employment schemes, training individuals for professions such as motor-mechanics and hairdressing, and helping members of their communities enter or re-enter employment. AfroReggae now works in five favelas and boast a twenty-four hour cultural centre, which offers space for workshops, rehearsals and performance, and a safe environment away from the dominant drug factions.

In *Culture Is Our Weapon*, Patrick Neate and Damien Platt explain that 'in the frequent absence of social, educational, employment or familial networks [in the favelas], the [drug] factions are often the closest thing a person can find to a secure, structured environment' (144). For many of AfroReggae's artists, who were initially local participants that engaged with workshops, classes and/or training, the company offers a long-term creative 'family' life as an alternative to a short career in drug trafficking. AfroReggae does not offer a singular workshop and expect participants to change their lives. AfroReggae believes that it must offer a sustainable, competitive and legitimate alternative. As a result many of its artists have been involved with AfroReggae for a long period of time. The company not only provides opportunities for employment, the hope of international success, the prospect of a secure salary, and structural support, but are also a 'gang' that everyone wants to be a part of. AfroReggae has a similar social status to the drug factions, which is visibly indicated

by the designer clothes and trainers that its artists wear. As in the case of the drug factions, the company members' appearance and visibly elevated social status allows AfroReggae to attract and retain participants. Much of AfroReggae's community-focused work is enabled by the income of the company's twelve groups that tour internationally and function like any other commercial performance company.

The Logic of Commercial Value

Like any other popular international group, AfroReggae has produced large-scale concerts, which have sold out renowned venues such as Carnegie Hall in New York (2007), and The Barbican in London (2008). In addition to Banda AfroReggae, there are twelve 'sub'-groups, which include AfroLata, AfroSamba and AfroCirco, which also tour productions worldwide. The company's self-sufficiency on these stages and its ability to make profit and attract fans with the sale of CDs released from its own record label, Mr Bongo, demonstrates AfroReggae's commitment to producing work with a high commercial value. I employ the term 'high commercial value' in relation to the set of production priorities that underpin and facilitate a group's ability to make a profit. These production values include a foolproof, formulaic, well-packaged product that is literally 'on the money,' guaranteeing large audiences, the sale of associated merchandise and a committed fan-base. Profit is prioritised and a system of volatile capitalism and social elitism facilitates this. Thus, this is a controversial approach for a community-focused organisation, which prioritises using 'the process of theatre in the service of social and community change' (Prentki and Preston 9). In a bid to disassociate itself from potentially detrimental profit-driven ethics, applied performance usually situates itself in alternative contexts, for example in schools, prisons, and community halls with participants from different communities, often

defined as minority groups. However, in addition to facilitating community-engaged work in its local environment, AfroReggae manages to produce mainstream artistic practice with high commercial value.

In terms of production value, AfroReggae's main groups are indistinguishable from other mainstream bands, such as The Rolling Stones who they supported on Copacabana Beach, Rio de Janeiro in 2006. Yet the social element of AfroReggae's work is integral to its product: its artists, who are from Vigário Geral, have often been trained and involved with AfroReggae from a young age. Richard Ings acknowledges the risk attached to producing this type of work, stating that it is easy to overlook the fact 'that the professionalism and energy of a show is not the product of a *fame*-style academy [...but] carved out of the most unlikely material' (35). I would add that the concept of producing a 'star' threatens the fundamental aims of a community-orientated project or organisation. However, rather than being paid varying wages depending on their star profile like many commercial artists, all members of AfroReggae's bands receive a basic wage. The profits from the high profile events, rather than elevating the prospects of individuals, are fed back into AfroReggae's local community. In addition, AfroReggae ensures that the same artists rarely lead workshops internationally. It advocates that one member can do the job as well as any other and Sylvan Baker – who has worked extensively with AfroReggae in the UK – confirms this in an interview, maintaining that every member he has met has been briefed with the same degree of knowledge and can speak with the same eloquence about the organisation. This inclusive philosophy not only removes the elitist element of producing superstars, but it also extends real opportunities of travel, performance and cultural exchange to a larger number of the company's members.

‘The Edge of the Future: Renegotiating Power’ was a debate held at the SBC in July 2010, which discussed the opportunities that art can offer to young people. Jodie Mancell, a past curator for the Koestler Trust – an organisation that states it has ‘been awarding, exhibiting and selling artworks by offenders, detainees and secure patients for 47 years’ – reiterated that the creation of a marketable product can have a positive effect on an individual’s self-esteem. Work that operates outside mainstream production is often narrow in its reach, attracting audiences limited not only in number but also in diversity. Artists, participants and spectators of much applied performance – which is small-scale and locally orientated – are often confined to speaking and performing within the marginalised group they have been identified with. As a result, artists and participants are acknowledged for their origins rather than the work that they produce. During the debate, Jane Caldwell, creative director of Kids Company, noted that ‘the other side of recognition [other than self worth] is having a witness.’ AfroReggae’s artists gain recognition from a local, national, and international audience. AfroReggae are recognised not for the negative conditions in the favela that they come from, but for the positive achievements that they have realised as artists.

Negotiating a Global Market

Applied performance is a term used to encompass a broad set of community performance practices that are predominantly localised: operating in specific places, with specific groups of people and interrogating specific issues. Affective developments for individuals and communities – such as education, social transformation or political empowerment, are prioritised and seen to enable effective social and community change. However, AfroReggae would argue that in order to

realise these changes within its community, affective shifts must be accompanied by an improvement to the community's material reality. Individual economic development is offered by the drug factions; AfroReggae continually compete against this.

It is generally recognised that the competitive global market is intrinsically exploitative. As Doreen Massey explains: 'some are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don't; some are more on the receiving end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it' (3). Massey describes the residents of favelas in Rio as a group who are huge contributors to globalization, illustrating their input to global football and global music but also suggesting that on another level they are imprisoned: never, or hardly ever, able to leave their ghetto (3-4). AfroReggae's negotiation of the global market contributes to the alteration of this relationship. AfroReggae initiates flows of social and economic movement in and out of the favela: not only do certain members of the group travel but also AfroReggae gets a large amount of media coverage which attracts corporate sponsorship to the favela. In generating economic revenue through the brand of AfroReggae, employment opportunities are created and developments in infrastructure, such as banks, instigated. AfroReggae legitimises the favela and secures a degree of autonomy for a community previously imprisoned by globalisation.

Osita Okagbu highlights that 'the main danger with the product-orientated approach [to community performance, is the fact that it is] born out of a consumerist and capitalist ethics – an ethics in which there is always the necessity to differentiate between the producer and the consumer, the have and the have not'(32). For Okagbu, this type of work restricts the empowering effect of applied performance. However, José Junior says: 'I have to carry on in the real world. If I start raising the flag and

saying I don't accept money from the English or the Americans or big business, I'll just be stuck in my ghetto and I won't speak to anyone' (Neate and Platt 153). For Junior, it is the ability to change material realities, through training, prospects and employment, that will make significant changes within the local community (Neate and Platt 153).

During the debate 'The Edge of the Future,' Junior claimed that AfroReggae is selective when it comes to working with other businesses, and prioritises 'corporations with good working practices and a social responsibility.' However, the social responsibility of corporations such as AfroReggae sponsor Santander is often bred out of the benefits it has on profit margins. For example, as Brazil is one of the 'fastest growing' economies of the twenty-first century, it is not surprising that Santander, one of the world's largest banks, wants a stake in a potentially large new consumer base (Wheatley). As a result it could be argued that AfroReggae has 'sold out,' turning its brand into a form of exotica to be exploited by a corporation that prioritises profit over the empowerment of AfroReggae's community.

However, as Reginald de Lima – AfroReggae's coordinator of government partnerships – asserted during the debate: 'what AfroReggae produce people want. Big corporations want. Governments want.' The prolific profile of the AfroReggae brand places the company in a position to negotiate with the global market. As part of their sponsorship deal with Santander, AfroReggae arranged for the first bank to be opened in a favela (Downie). In addition, AfroReggae runs an Employment Project that utilizes its government and corporate sponsors to get members of its local community into legitimate employment. According to AfroReggae's website, after running the project for two years, August 2010 saw a total of 1,125 people employed with formal contracts and labour rights, 685 of them former prisoners or individuals

previously involved with criminality. Through its negotiation of the global market, AfroReggae empowers its community socially, culturally and politically, provides infrastructure, and changes the material reality of the favela environment.

Baz Kershaw argues that ‘in embracing the disciplines of new consumerism the theatre and its performance succumb to the commodification that stifles radicalism’ (23). In embracing consumerist markets it could be argued that AfroReggae has stifled its radical social and political intentions for its performances. Hip-hop provides a simple illustration of the global market’s potential to suffocate revolutionary movements. Hip-hop emerged from New York’s Afro-American community in the 1970s as a radical movement from the ghetto challenging the status quo of the oppressive American establishment. However, this movement was commandeered by the oppressive and dominant political, economic and cultural forces that it opposed. By catering to an expansive audience – in terms of race, age and culture – the global market neutralised hip-hop’s radical origins. Hip-hop’s political nature was replaced with an emphasis on violence, moneymaking and misogyny, which many people today see as the driving force of the genre.

Yet, in *Where You’re At: Notes from the Frontline of a Hip-Hop Planet*, Neate uses AfroReggae as an example of a radical contemporary hip-hop band. Unlike many hip-hop artists who end up on popular TV shows (such as MTV’s *Cribs*) AfroReggae has stayed firmly rooted in the favela, where its members live and work, an environment that continues to fuel its artistic output. At first glance the radical nature of its professional shows might be overlooked; however, the artists, the injustices highlighted in their lyrics, and the community work that the products facilitate ensure the work’s radicalism. Despite Kershaw’s concerns, AfroReggae continues to participate ‘in the most vital cultural, social and political tensions of [its] time,’

(Kershaw 7) remaining innovative and socially and politically progressive, sustaining its radical nature.

The Logic of Quality & Profit

In the UK, funding bodies demand constant justification and evidence, in terms of the success, impact and effect of practice, from the applied performance organisations they support. In fulfilling funder's objectives, it has been argued that theatre practice 'may sometimes subordinate the artistic aspects [...] or even eradicate them altogether' (Jackson 2). In addition to struggling to gain economic backing, cultural organisations in the UK have seen dramatic cuts to limited arts funding. For example, the Arts Council is to be cut by £349.4 million by 2015, which is 29.6% of their current budget (Arts Council England). Junior argues that 'either we [AfroReggae] can work like any other NGO, depending on continued outside funding, or we can create products of high artistic and cultural quality for commercial consumption and develop partnerships with companies, foundations and government for mutual benefit' (Neate and Platt 151). AfroReggae's monetary value internationally is so high that one third of their practice is self-sufficient (Ings 24). For an institutional presentation to potential sponsors, AfroReggae assessed the value of its media coverage in 2009 at approximately sixty-seven million British pounds (AfroReggae, 'Institutional Presentation'). This puts AfroReggae in a strong position to negotiate sponsorship deals on its own terms.

An AfroReggae Explosion

From 23 to 25 July 2010, the SBC, in collaboration with AfroReggae and People's Palace Projects, produced a weekend of events. Nineteen members of AfroReggae,

with the help of some young people, filled the SBC with elements of Brazilian culture for three days. *The AfroReggae Explosion Weekend* was part of the SBC's summer long *Festival Brazil*, which included – to mention but a few – singer songwriter Gilberto Gil, Samba Classes, and the Southbank's own miniature favela, Project Morrinho: all in celebration of Brazil's rich social and cultural heritage. *The AfroReggae Explosion Weekend* illustrates the social and political potential that AfroReggae's main band performances hold not only for the organisation, but for national and international audiences.

AfroReggae manages to secure a local community within its global practice. Its social and political critique manages to span peoples, nations, and cultures. As Junior asserts:

AfroReggae is talking of a war in which thousands of people have suffered [...] we tour the world and we see the same war in many different countries. We represent the favela and always come back here. But [...] we are also truly global. You can say we are a positive effect of globalisation. (Neate 200)

Drawing on Jan Cohen-Cruz, Dan Rebellato argues that 'real community theatre [is] made *in* the community, *by* the community, and *for* the community' (53). *The AfroReggae Explosion Weekend*, even with its high production values, negotiation of the global market, and profitability, can still satisfy specific ideas of 'local' and 'community.'

The performance events took place *in* the community: the SBC, in a prominent spot on the River Thames attracts a community of tourists and passing Londoners every day of the year. The SBC has also built up a local community through free events and outreach educational projects. As all AfroReggae performances were free they attracted a wider range of audience members – from families, to homeless

people, to groups of teenagers looking for fun. This enabled the formation of a diverse community, all with different interests in the ‘Brazilian’ atmosphere *in* which the AfroReggae Weekend took place. *The AfroReggae Explosion* was *for* this diverse community: the SBC provided free workshops, performance and events for anyone who wished to get involved. This event was *by* the community: workshops in dance, circus skills and drumming saw all participants performing. This held particular resonance during the ‘Mass-Jam,’ where AfroReggae members filtered throughout the crowd and the artists, participants, and members of the public came together to play music.

AfroReggae’s UK performances are supported by People’s Palace Projects, who ensure that community-focused practice is prioritised, negotiated and planned to accompany AfroReggae’s international performances. For example, in the UK AfroReggae has run regular workshops with community performance groups such as Tomorrow’s Warriors, Bigga Fish, The Sage Gateshead and Kinetika. During the weekend at the SBC there were collaborative flash-performances by these groups and AfroReggae. Contrary to other professional gigs, which hold a high commercial value, AfroReggae’s main performances were supported artistically *by* the community groups they have worked with in the UK.

AfroReggae’s high profile, commercial performances not only have a positive effect on its artists and their local environments, but are also engaging for the many young people involved in its international workshops, projects or performances. In a discussion I had, rather than emphasising their own social and political development, participants from Kinetika highlighted their artistic success and high profile feats – in terms of awards, carnival performances and previous work with AfroReggae. AfroReggae is a positive role model with street

credibility for the young people they work with worldwide. This street credibility is enhanced by their high commercial value and international success, which puts them on par with famous artists, who may not hold the same degree of positive social and political integrity. Rachel Sanger said she would be surprised if the first three rows of an AfroReggae gig were not filled with young people it had been working with, whichever country it was performing in (Sanger). Supporting this statement, the Clore Ballroom of the Royal Festival Hall was filled with AfroReggae's participants this July. In mainstream venues from which they can often feel excluded, young people reap rewards from 'seeing their teachers on stage, becoming their idols, and giving them a smile,' (Sanger).

Reimagining the Potential of Applied Performance

AfroReggae's approach is not the only way for applied performance to develop its audiences and contribute to long-term outlooks in the globalized world. My intention is not to encourage duplication of its artistic practice: AfroReggae, regardless of being offered millions by a major international funder, refuse to duplicate its work in the next favela, let alone internationally; one community may want capoeira, another the violin (Baker). AfroReggae is a unique company; however, in demonstrating the potential social value of commercialising community practice, I offer AfroReggae's strategic business model as inspiration for applied practitioners worldwide.

This paper has sought to question the common assumption that applied performance must be not-for-profit, locally orientated and small-scale. AfroReggae's practice verifies that if work is 'negotiated, planned and focused according to different contexts and situations' (Nicholson 40), it can be effective, pragmatically and artistically for both a local and a global community. In a keynote address to the

Theatre Applications Conference, Rustom Bharucha said that the field of applied theatre needs ‘new alliances, which will have to be made with those state agencies, government officials and bureaucrats who do not share our language of theatre practice.’ He argued: ‘in our failure to strategise these alliances we run up against walls and retreat into the comforts of fictional oppositionality.’ AfroReggae is not engaged in a fictional or rehearsed revolution, instead it embraces approaches undertaken by commercially orientated performance: ‘AfroReggae will continue because we’re on a road and there’s no turning back. This is a capitalist road and we have to survive. Who knows? Maybe this is a quiet revolution, the revolution of the socialist capitalist movement’ (Neate and Platt 153).

AfroReggae’s approach and ability to produce profit enables a long-term outlook and brings them closer to self-sufficiency: they are being taken seriously, not only by their participants, but also by non-theatre-goers, state agencies, governments and corporations. AfroReggae reimagines the potential of commercial value, profit and the global market in the development of applied performance, putting community-focused performance practice on a global stage under a global spotlight.

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