



CENTRAL PARTNERSHIPS

TALAWA THEATRE COMPANY

CENTRAL CONTINUES TO IDENTIFY AND EXTEND THE BENEFITS TO SOCIETY AND INDUSTRY OF ITS WORK AS AN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION AND AS A PLACE WHERE PROFESSIONAL AND COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS MEET AND PARTICIPATE IN THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS.

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THE ROYAL CENTRAL SCHOOL OF SPEECH AND DRAMA HAS HAD AN ONGOING AND FLUID RELATIONSHIP WITH TALAWA THEATRE COMPANY FOR A NUMBER OF YEARS. THIS REPORT SEEKS TO DESCRIBE, UNDERSTAND AND REFLECT ON THAT COLLABORATION, EXPLORING WHAT THE RELATIONSHIP ACHIEVES, WHY IT IS SIGNIFICANT FOR BOTH ORGANISATIONS AND WHAT IT CAN OFFER TO THINKING ABOUT COLLABORATIONS MORE GENERALLY.

BACKGROUND

Talawa was founded in 1986 by Yvonne Brewster, Carmen Munroe, Mona Hammond and Inigo Espejel in direct response to the lack of opportunities for creatives from minority ethnic backgrounds within the theatre industry. Now under the tenure of Artistic Director Michael Buffong, it is one of the UK's most successful Black theatre companies and produces a diverse body of exciting work. Alongside its productions, Talawa also supports actors, directors and facilitators through its professional development programmes Talawa Young People's Theatre (TYPT) and Creating Routes. Talawa also nurtures new writers with Talawa Firsts where directors lead development workshops on raw scripts, incorporating readings and feedback sessions. Alongside this, the company also has a thriving Participation and Education Programme, undertaking bespoke work with a number of schools, services and community partners.

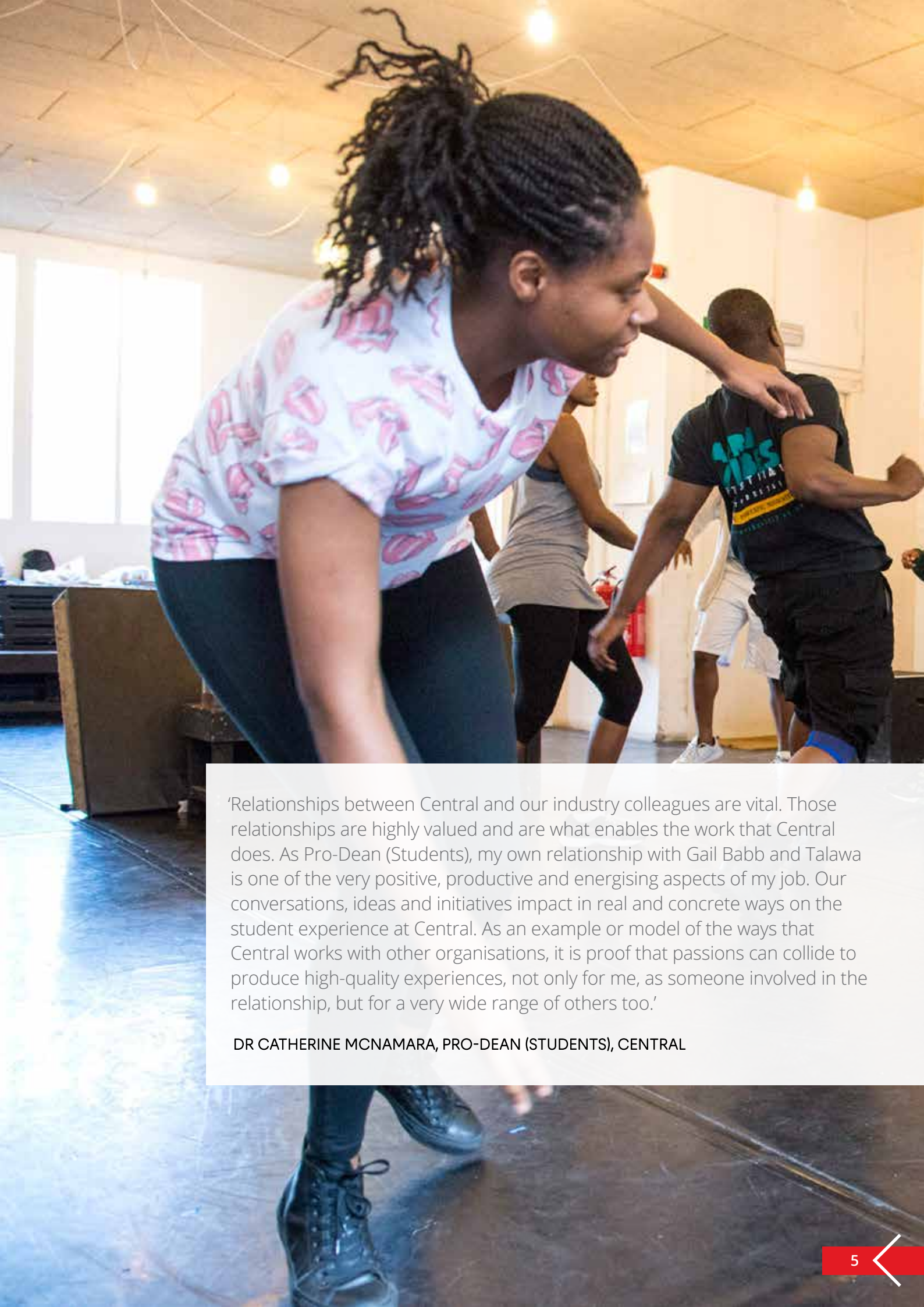
In 2005 Central awarded Yvonne Brewster with a Honorary PhD in recognition of her extensive work in theatre. She is currently a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts. From the foundations built by Brewster and her colleagues, through to the current artistic directorship of Buffong, Talawa continues to be one of Britain's most exciting theatre companies making a valuable and original contribution to the industry.

The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London offers undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in acting, music theatre, theatre practice, applied theatre, movement, voice, stage management, puppetry, scenography, sound design, theatre design, and dramatherapy, as well as research degrees, short courses, diplomas, summer schools and youth theatre.

There are approximately 1,000 students at Central, 700 of whom are registered on one of the undergraduate degrees, BA (Hons) Acting, BA (Hons) Theatre Practice, and BA (Hons) Drama, Applied Theatre and Education. There are approximately 300 students across 15 postgraduate courses, as well as approximately 40 students registered at any one time for PhD study.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CENTRAL AND TALAWA

Central works with a broad range of industry partners and students benefit from the connections they are afforded as members of the institution. With regard to Central's relationship with Talawa specifically, this seeks to promote a link with a company who identify as 'Britain's primary Black led theatre company' and a company with a dynamic and high quality range of practices and thus enables the students to experience and encounter the company's work when they might not ordinarily do so.



'Relationships between Central and our industry colleagues are vital. Those relationships are highly valued and are what enables the work that Central does. As Pro-Dean (Students), my own relationship with Gail Babb and Talawa is one of the very positive, productive and energising aspects of my job. Our conversations, ideas and initiatives impact in real and concrete ways on the student experience at Central. As an example or model of the ways that Central works with other organisations, it is proof that passions can collide to produce high-quality experiences, not only for me, as someone involved in the relationship, but for a very wide range of others too.'

DR CATHERINE MCNAMARA, PRO-DEAN (STUDENTS), CENTRAL



'Partnership working runs through Talawa: whether we're co-producing shows with venues, supporting new writers with other theatre companies, or collaborating with community groups to run our bespoke projects. So it made perfect sense to us to have a partnership element to TYPT – our programme for emerging theatre-makers – and when the opportunity came to meet with Catherine McNamara, I jumped at it. From our first conversation it was clear that there were multiple avenues we could go down to create new learning opportunities for TYPT participants and Central students. It was – and still is – just a question of how many ideas time and money would allow us to turn into a reality.'

GAIL BABB, PARTICIPATION AND EDUCATION OFFICER, TALAWA THEATRE COMPANY



'The partnership with Central is one that makes sense on so many levels. At Talawa we place artists' development at the heart of our purpose. There are still so many barriers to progressing in this industry, and this partnership feels like it's going some way to addressing these.'

**MICHAEL BUFFONG, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR
TALAWA THEATRE COMPANY**



Initiated by Senior Lecturer in Voice at Central, Claudette Williams, the collaboration between Talawa and Central has grown in its reach and is now a valued partnership. Currently the relationship is linked to various staff and areas of the School's work including the taught degrees and the programme with TYPT, hosted at Central since 2012.

One important aspect of nurturing relationships, such as the one shared with Talawa, was further brought into focus by the research 'BME Student Experiences at Central School of Speech and Drama' (McNamara and Coomber, 2012) which acknowledged the positive and negative experiences of undergraduate students from a range of Black, Asian, Arabic, Chinese and other non-White backgrounds who studied at Central.

Several of the difficulties faced by students, such as visibility, lack of familial support/understanding, being part of a minority in terms of ethnicity, could be explored in some way through the continuing relationship with

Talawa. The relationship between the School and the theatre company and the work they do together can contribute to the work Central does in conjunction with partners to examine and enhance BME students' experiences, and the experiences of all students as they engage in a broad education in the field of drama, theatre and performance.

By engaging in a partnership with a company that identifies itself as a leading voice in Black theatre making, Central can seek to maintain and build upon the conversations that are being held within the institution, the perception and representation of the School within communities, and strengthen links and access for the benefit of both prospective and current students.

The report 'Ethnicity and Degree Attainment' (Broecke & Nicholls, 2007) showed that, even after controlling for the majority of contributory factors, being from a minority ethnic group (except the Other Black, Mixed and Other Groups) was still found to have a statistically significant



and negative effect on degree attainment. Berry & Loke (2010) reported that BME students are 18% less likely to get a First or a 2:1 degree classification' (p.9, McNamara and Coomber, 2012).

The particular context of Central, and the intricacies of attainment and retention within the institution, were explored in further detail in the 2012 report. Through conducting this research, Central has demonstrated to industry partners, other HEIs and prospective students, the seriousness with which the institution is approaching issues surrounding university experience for students from Black, Asian and Other Minority Ethnic backgrounds. Collaboration with Talawa can only hope to further inform and support the students and staff as it continues to make progress on a journey towards enhanced experiences for all students.

A further demonstration of Central's intention to challenge issues surrounding student experience is the focus it receives in the School's Access Agreement 2013-14. The Access Agreement (approved annually by the Office for Fair Access) demonstrates the School's commitment to maintaining its strong tradition and good record of accomplishment in supporting widening participation and fair access.

SIGNIFICANT ELEMENTS OF THE COLLABORATION

TYPT

TYPT is Talawa's programme for emerging theatre-makers engaging both performers and offstage crew. A year-long project involving a series of events and opportunities for participants, it begins with a four-week intensive devising process culminating in a professional production. During this process participants work with a range of practitioners to develop their skills. For instance Claudette Williams, Senior Lecturer in Voice at Central, has worked with Talawa for a number of years and continues to support participants on TYPT to improve their vocal performances. Participants also have visits from industry professionals and receive a range of career advice and support from the team at Talawa. In addition, each year a different visiting professional director leads the project, each bringing their own exciting and definitive perspective to the production.

In 2012 Central committed to hosting the TYPT Intensive for three years. As part of the four-week intensive, Talawa take residency in the School's Embassy Theatre for one week each August benefitting from technical support and the use of the stage and auditorium as a venue which is a high quality performance space in which the participants can experiment.

By its very nature, engaging young BME theatre-makers in a devising process, TYPT productions always make direct

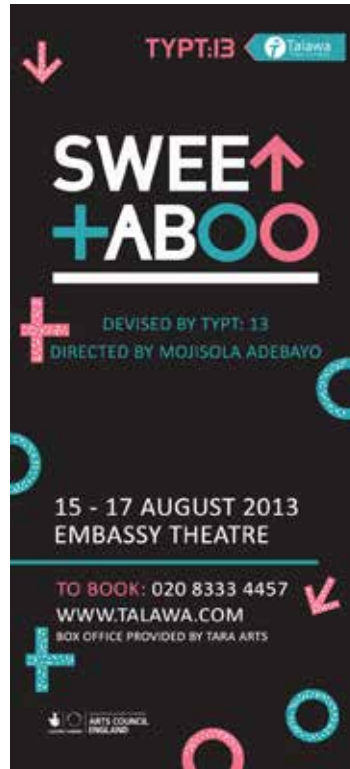
comment on what it is to be young, Black and British, and further they explore where these identities intersect with a range of contemporary issues. Directed by Anthony Ekundayo Lennon the first TYPT production to be hosted at Central was *Enter* which explored 'the profound need of these young people to feel valued, accepted and to have a sense of belonging' (Talawa, 2012) and drew upon elements of poetry, dance and drama. Last year TYPT:13 saw director Mojisola Adebayo bring *Sweet Taboo* to the Embassy Theatre. The piece was a playful examination of taboos surrounding sex, gender and race infused with music and dance. Both productions brought some important conversations into the institution and attracted new audiences for both Central and Talawa. TYPT:14 is directed by Ola Animashawun, Associate Director at the Royal Court Theatre, and a frequent member of the visiting staff at Central.

CHALLENGING A REPUTATION OF ELITISM

'To be honest I thought you lot would be snobs but you're actually not, actually everyone's really friendly.'

TYPT Participant, 2013

One of the objectives of Central's Widening Participation Strategy (2009-2012) was 'To continue to foster a welcoming culture (including reputation) for staff and



students regardless of ethnicity and race, gender, disability, age, sexual orientation, class, belief, religion or nationality.' By welcoming a number of people (participants and their friends/family) into the School, who may have held misconceptions about the nature of the environment and people at Central, the partnership encourages those misconceptions to be challenged.

In his role as director of the first TYPT production hosted at Central, Anthony Ekundayo Lennon had a particularly interesting perspective of the project's new performing space. He shared his experience of the institution from a personal perspective, past and present:

'I also have very personal memories of Central. I completed my school years at Quentin Kynaston Secondary in the mid-1980s and at that time I remember my drama teachers encouraging me to further my acting skills by attending Central - it was just a mile down the road from the school. To be honest though I felt intimidated by the powerful and elitist reputation that, back then, others told me Central had. I did go into the main reception to get an application form, but I didn't fill it in. I have often wondered what might have transpired if I had attended Central as a student. But here I am 30 years later and this year's TYPT cast will be sharing their work on stage there; performing at the Embassy Theatre, Central School of Speech and Drama, an institution that I didn't have the courage to apply to!

Anthony Ekundayo Lennon, 2012

'I could just see myself here, doing this every day.'

TYPT Participant, 2013

One of the most concrete elements of the support offered directly by Central to TYPT participants is the audition voucher that each receives which enables them to attend an audition at no cost to them.

BUILDING TIES

'It's gonna build ties so that more people from multicultural backgrounds will start coming to Central.'

TYPT Participant, 2013

'It's going to break down some barriers because you know Central is quite a predominantly white place, so for the young people that come through TYPT and then have an opportunity to experience somewhere like Central, they might then think "Hey, I wanna come here". And be able to say this is who I am, this is what I do.'

**Havana Wellings-Longmore,
Company Administrator, Talawa**

'I think it's mainly about people who feel it might not be accessible because... I think with these kinds of projects it might help them to think actually maybe I could get into drama school. It helps break down those barriers.'

TYPT Participant, 2013



NEW AUDIENCES

Beyond the participants involved in the project, by Central hosting TYPT new audiences are brought into the School.

'It puts us on the map a bit more with people who might not have taken much notice of us, or might not think of us as particularly diverse in terms of the students we have here. We are entering into people's consciousness in a different way in bringing young people that have not ever been here, bringing in their friends, their families.'

Dr Catherine McNamara, Pro-Dean (Students), Central

As was noted in 'BME Student Experiences at Central School of Speech and Drama' (McNamara & Coomber, 2012), several BME students cited a lack of family support/ understanding as a barrier to pursuing a course at Central and a course in the subject areas of drama, theatre and performance. By engaging with participants' friends and families, and bringing new audiences in through the doors of Central, this project contributes to the School's mission to be open and accessible to diverse communities and help people to see that the theatre and performance industries are thriving.

The project taking residence at Central also gives a slightly different kind of exposure to Talawa, who are prominent in the theatre world but can utilise this relationship with the School as a further link to higher education institutions and the opportunities for networking and

development this association provides. Additionally, it can raise their profile with all students within Central who, as the future practitioners and leaders within the industry, are valuable audiences to engage with.

EVENTS

One particularly significant event that has been made possible by the partnership is described below:

Talking about Blackness in Drama, Theatre and Performance: an evening with Talawa

On 31 January 2013 Gail Babb, Talawa's Participation and Education Officer, and Segun Olaiya, Central BA (Hons) Drama, Applied Theatre and Education graduate, held a conversation about race and ethnicity in relation to the performance industries, including training and education. The evening offered an insight into Talawa's work within the industry and an opportunity to engage in conversations about Blackness in contemporary theatre.

A UNIQUE POSITION

There's a lot of nervousness when it comes to talking about race; a lot of fear that we, at Talawa, simply don't have just because of who we are. There are some students that would be more willing to have a conversation with us than their teachers, but hopefully

'The response to that event was really powerful, really strong...students in particular felt compelled to comment on how important that event was for them to be a part of and to attend [and] to be having conversations about race and Blackness and identity within theatre, within higher education.'

DR CATHERINE MCNAMARA
PRO-DEAN (STUDENTS), CENTRAL

one of the things we can do is to open up some of those conversations. If everybody is able to offer their honest opinion and know that it's ok. If we can be brave enough to talk about the issues together; from every side, from every angle then we'll be able to have a real look at the issues around race and ethnicity.' **Gail Babb, Participation and Education Officer, Talawa**

Collaborating with partners who specialise in certain areas vastly enriches the experience that Central can offer students. While students across courses have opportunities to engage with identity politics, particularly race, it has been noted that for some, this is not to the extent that they would like. In connecting with Talawa, the School can go some way to create additional opportunities for students to explore race while also reviewing curriculum content on an ongoing basis.

'It's no secret that Central's a predominantly White institution and that there's not much diversity here so knowing that Talawa's a Black-led theatre company it made me feel even more comfortable. It gave me a forum to discuss and open up about how my experience was at Central.' **Central Student**

There is a perceived lack of Black role models within higher education institutions (NUS, 2011) and Central is attempting to contribute to changing this perception for students attending the School by holding events which celebrate and value strong role models such as alumni and respected industry partners.

Not to discuss race is to ignore it and is to risk damage. Primarily Central recognises its responsibility to students, some of whom hold race as integral to their identity, to provide a space for them to explore these issues further. In addition, the institution acknowledges its own position within race politics within the wider context of the industry, higher education and beyond.

EVENT IMPACT

'I felt that enabled them to sort of get people like me to say what I felt. Because I'd been here a year and I still hadn't said exactly what I felt about [race] but at that event I finally said what I felt.' **Central Student**

Additionally, several students recognised that there was a high attendance from teaching staff and noted how encouraging it was for them to see their tutors at the event, eager to participate in the event and the conversations and make efforts to understand their students' experiences.

SUMMARY

ONE OF THE FOCAL AIMS OF THIS DOCUMENT WAS TO CLARIFY THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RELATIONSHIP SHARED BY THESE TWO ORGANISATIONS. TO OFFER FURTHER CLARITY, THE KEY THEMES OF THE RELATIONSHIP ARE DETAILED BELOW.

- > **An opportunity to learn from one another:** by working with Talawa, Central is able to provide an opportunity for non-BME members of the School to understand more fully a perspective of Black theatre. In terms of Talawa, the TYPT participants are able to work with teachers and technicians from the School and gain an insight into what Central is like as an institution.
- > **A means of representation:** BME students interviewed for this research who attended the Blackness in Theatre Event were hugely positive about what they saw as an important moment in their time at Central. It offered them a forum to openly discuss their experiences of race at the School and also an understanding of the kinds of work that BME professionals within the industry are engaged in. Hosting such a vibrant company of theatre makers as TYPT is a privilege for the School, but beyond that it ensures that BME creatives are being given a platform within Central.
- > **A responsive relationship:** while the intention of this report is to firm up the relationship shared by these two organisations, it is clear that they both enjoy the flexibility of the work they conduct together. It is important that this responsiveness is not lost as it is key to the success of the relationship thus far.
- > **Inclusion:** even in the relatively contained work that the organisations have embarked on together, there are clear signs that it has contributed to a culture of inclusion. This applies to the young BME theatre makers, who have made Central their own over the course of the summer, TYPT programmes and also members of the student body who responded so positively to the Talawa Blackness in Theatre event or who audition for TYPT each year.
- > **New audiences:** hosting TYPT provides an exciting opportunity for the diverse audiences of Central and Talawa to overlap and, for those who are not aware of both organisations, to discover a different element of the theatre world. This will hopefully promote the growth of audiences for both parties.

FUTURE COLLABORATIONS

Both Central and Talawa are keen to build on the relationship that they have established and allow it to form a platform for future collaborations. During the course of the research, several ideas have been presented as potentially fertile areas for development with a number of practical suggestions about how both organisations could develop more practical outputs through further use of existing expertise and resources.

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ROYAL CENTRAL
SCHOOL OF SPEECH & DRAMA

UNIVERSITY OF LONDON



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