

Refugees in Ghana Find Their Voice in Hip Hop Culture

BY DANIEL BANKS

During spring semester 2006, a group of seven students and three recent alumni accompanied me on the NYU-in-Ghana Program. These students had all completed at least one year of work with me as part of the Hip Hop Theatre Initiative in the Department of Drama, Tisch School of the Arts. The mission of HHTI is to integrate the rigor of professional theatre training with the performance elements and politics of the youth-driven, grassroots, activist culture of Hip Hop. Students are trained in critical thinking and performance, leading arts workshops in communities, and facilitating dialogue about the social issues pertaining to Hip Hop.

The NYU-in-Ghana program is unique in its high level of student involvement in community-based service learning and volunteer projects. Thanks to a generous grant from the Office of Community Service, as a group we committed ourselves to two in-depth community-based theatre initiatives. Soon after arriving in Ghana, I had the opportunity to visit Buduburam, at the time a UNHCR Refugee camp (which has since been decommissioned). At the Dominion Christian Academy, the only private camp school, as it is off camp property, I met the teacher who advises the Sports and Drama Clubs, Randolph Banks. Struck by the synergy of shared last names and interests, we began to discuss his work and the fact that the Club stopped meeting when two volunteers helping them develop an HIV/AIDS prevention drama piece returned to Europe. He asked if we could help and, before even knowing if funding would be available, I felt compelled to say “yes.” So, a group of five Ghanaian and US students who were taking my course “Hip Hop Theatre, Hip Life, and Community Action” at the University of Ghana, traveled the 90 minutes to and from the camp every Monday for the

remaining seven weeks in our program to work with a core group of 15 high school students. The Drama Club was interested in learning new techniques, so we moved away from the clinical educational skits they had been doing up to that point and participants went back into the camp to interview people who had direct experience with HIV and AIDS, or who had friends who were affected by HIV and AIDS. They then began to craft fictionalized poems, monologues, and scenes based on the people they met and interviewed and the stories they heard. A 30-minute program of this work was presented at the Community Arts Celebration we held on camp at the beginning of May.

My initial visit to the camp was arranged through the in-camp service organization

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Wade Allain-Marcus and Archie Ekong (Undergraduate Drama/NYU-in-Ghana) with students from Buduburam schools.

R.E.S.P.E.C.T. Ghana. This organization was keen to have us work with them. So, on Fridays, another group of six students accompanied me to the camp to lead Hip Hop Theatre workshops. This took the form of an introduction to beatboxing, songs and theatre games (both theirs and ours), and writing exercises that led into a group cipher (improvisational circle) where students had an opportunity to “spit” their poems over a beat with the group riffing and supporting them. There are 10 high schools in the 47,000-occupant camp and the students rarely have an opportunity to work together or resolve rivalries. Each Friday, three members of each high school came together and worked on their skills. On the day of the Arts Celebration, anyone who wanted to come back was invited to do further work on their pieces and perform them that night. One popular hook that turned into a camp song that came out of the workshop was, “Liberian Brother, Liberian Sister, Let’s Come Together to Find a Better Future.” This provided a sung refrain around which participants could tell their individual stories through poetry, rap, and improvised free-speech.

While many of us were inside the blue church that we hired on Fridays, working with the older students, it became necessary to create a simultaneous art and recreation program for the under-12 youth who showed up to watch and beatbox. When the work turned to writing, two other NYU students took these young people outside for drawing, games, singing, and to give this energetic and curious crowd some much needed attention. It was amazing to see this pick-up group start at about 15 members on the first day and, by the last session, arrive approximately 75 strong.

Finally, on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays, many of the NYU and UG students also taught at the Children’s Christian Storehouse after-school arts conservatory in the neighborhood of Dzorwulu. It is an after-school program with 50-75 youth, ages 3-16. The



Professor Daniel Banks helps Liberian refugees in Ghana to express themselves through Hip Hop music and dance.

backgrounds of these youth are surprisingly diverse—from diplomats’ children and children from professional, affluent families to orphans from villages and street children, some of whom are actually housed at the school. This school has a performance group—the Gateway Ambassador—that has performed with Bono, Beyoncé, and Stevie Wonder, as well as for Nelson Mandela. The talent is amazing and we taught singing, dance, writing, art, beatboxing, rhyming...all of which resulted in an end-of-term show, *Kofi’s Story: From Broadway to Accra-way*, written, composed, and designed in a collaboration between the students, the faculty of CCS, and Adam McKinney, another visiting NYU-in-Ghana faculty member, and myself. The OCS grant was also used to hire and design a space large enough to accommodate the audience four times the size of their usual end-of-term turn-out, a necessity generated by local excitement over this project; at the end of April, we played to a sold-out capacity of almost 400 at the Efua T. Sutherland Drama Studio at the University of Ghana, Legon.

Sustainability, methodology, and appropriate lead-time to research and understand cultural differences are real concerns in taking on projects of this

nature. For this reason it was often confusing to find ourselves invited to jump into such demanding projects without warning. But, theorizing about these important responsibilities in a classroom or practicum is very different from having a group say, “please come work with us—now.” In that situation, right there facing peoples’ needs and desires, it seemed too academic to question whether or not to jump in, based on concerns about adequate preparation. When called upon with such passion and desire, we determined that we had to say “yes” unflinchingly and, yet, make sure we were creating an environment of sharing and open participation, rather than an expert-driven model of teaching. As a result of the grant from OCS, we were able, for a short time, to be of service, to listen to people, and to bring “art” and self-expression to areas of struggle. This has profoundly impacted the direction of the HHTI mission and work. In addition, the group of NYU students is currently funding a young woman in her high school studies in Buduburam and we were also able to leave funds for 10 members of the Monday and Friday workshops to participate in a training process to lead further drama workshops in the schools. ■