

The Hip-Hop Shakespeare Company – Akala

‘Akala Presents Hip-Hop Shakespeare’

Overview

Founded by MOBO award-winner Akala in 2009, the Hip-Hop Shakespeare Company is a musical theatre production social enterprise which offers young people a different view of the arts and ultimately of themselves.

Working in a variety of settings including schools, prisons and community venues, engaging in music and literature, they strive to inspire and enable young people to better meet their potential, express themselves and highlight their creative talent. Central to their approach is an exploration of the social, linguistic and cultural parallels between the works of Shakespeare and modern day hip-hop artists.

In this illustrated and interactive lecture, Akala introduced us to the Hip-Hop Shakespeare Company approach. He talked us through some of the linguistic parallels between hip-hop and Shakespeare. He went on to guide us through the roots of hip-hop in West African culture to its flowering in the form we know today. Talking from his personal experience, Akala described how discovering hip-hop had a huge impact on him as a young person and “gave him permission to be intelligent”. Finally, he described how he has gone on to use this approach with young people and the contribution the Hip-Hop Shakespeare Company would like to make to the ongoing debate about education in post-industrial societies.

Introduction

Akala started by saying that he was going to talk about the Hip-Hop Shakespeare Company and also more widely about art, language and literature and the ways in which these impact on our mental health, our wellbeing and our sense of self. He warned us that this was going to be an interactive session with lots of audience participation along the way!

True to his word he started by challenging us with a series of quotes such as: “sleep is the cousin of death”; “maybe it’s hatred I spew, maybe its food for the spirit”. We were asked to vote for each saying whether we thought it came from hip-hop or from Shakespeare - most of the time we were wrong. Akala explained that he has done this exercise with experts all over the world and they usually get it wrong too. Both Shakespeare and hip-hop use language in beautiful, complex ways with layers of metaphor and similar themes.

Perception and imagery can so easily cloud our views about something which otherwise might be useful. This is an important metaphor for society at large. There is a perception that hip-hop is simply pop culture or that it is violent and so people

fail to see that it is poetry, a very expressive form of language and understanding, like the best of Shakespeare. In a similar way, a young person from an inner city estate for example, may be judged by where they are from rather than who they are as an individual.

Iambic pentameter – rhythm, melody and creativity

The rhythm known as ‘iambic pentameter’ – the rhythm of the heart – is used in both Shakespeare and hip-hop, although hip-hop uses 16 bars whereas Shakespeare uses 14. Anyone who writes performance poetry will know that it is difficult to write something which can be spoken slowly over one beat and then speeded up over a faster beat. This special rhythm iambic pentameter makes that possible. Akala invited us not just to take his word for it but to put it to the test. He taught us some lines in rhythm using a call and response form. In a very short time we were performing together a passage from Romeo and Juliet.

As a young man at school Akala loved poetry but he asked how schools can take something as beautiful and musical as Shakespeare (as we had just experienced) and make it so boring? He suggested they forget that it is performance poetry and without the rhythm and the melody it loses something. He said schools are not encouraging people to be creative. Shakespeare played with English and invented words – he had never heard of ‘standard received pronunciation’. Performance poetry is something we humans have always done. It started with us telling our collective stories.

The culture of rap

When it comes to rap there are some interesting double standards in Akala’s opinion. Rap is seen as “bad” and “encouraging violence” because it talks about guns, whereas it seems acceptable for Hollywood to produce adverts and trailers including guns. Akala told us that he was not so concerned about whether or not a piece of rap is violent but what he is interested in is whether it is good poetry.

A total lack of knowledge about the culture that hip-hop has come from and a lot of cultural misunderstandings have led to hip-hop being badly misunderstood. Akala then took us on a whistle stop tour of African history from a different perspective than the usual one. He showed us pictures of walled cities with three storey buildings from the 1600s; Guinness Record breaking great walls; fine metal sculptures; warriors in armour; examples of great wealth; ancient books and the library of Timbuktu. One of these books shows the phases of the moon but was written 200 years before the work of Galileo and Copernicus. These were all examples of things to give us a different take on African history, to begin to correct our misconceptions.

At this time in the 1600s African society was organised into a caste system based on the work that people did. One of these groups was the Griots. These were multi-talented people such as poets, singers, musicians, historians and astrologers in

West African cultures. They undertook long specialised training in singing, speech and musicianship. Understanding this helps us to understand how these cultures went on to flower in the new world. Hip-hop was not born in the 1970s – it is evident in the development of Jazz in the 1930s and in the cultures of Brazil and Jamaica. It has been there ever since people started talking over the rhythm of a drum. It is all this that led to the development in the 1970s of what is now called hip-hop.

'Hip' means "open your eyes" and 'hop' signifies "movement" and together they say intelligent, enlightened movement. This is what hip-hop is. It is these roots, this long cultural tradition which help us to understand why it is not blasphemous to talk about Shakespeare and hip-hop in the same breath. This is why the two relate.

Akala's personal journey

Akala went on to tell us some more about himself. His background was stereotypically "rough". He was brought up by a single mum in London. However, even at this stage he did have some exposure to culture as his step-dad ran the Hackney Empire Theatre (a famous Afro-Caribbean led theatre in the east end of London). Then at around the age of 12 when he was exploring what it meant to be a young man he discovered the 'Wu Tang' clan. This band made it 'cool' to be intelligent and it was suddenly cool to write poetry – the more big words the better. Akala said hip-hop saved his life. When he was feeling alienated from school or was in trouble with his mum he would take solace in the poetry of a Wu Tang record. He would find there a sense of self-worth and discovered that he was intelligent.

Akala suggested that if you are from the rough part of town and never see anyone like you presented as intelligent and if you are consistently presented as a "chav" or a "hoodie", you become alienated which in turn affects your mental health, your feeling of self-worth, the way you carry yourself, and the way you conduct yourself in society.

Akala was lucky enough to be exposed to the reality of rap – the poetry, the intelligence. He shared with us a classic science rap that they all knew at school. This was the overtly intellectual poetry that was popular at the time. Even today GZA, a member of the Wu Tang clan, is working with scientists to make an album about dark matter to teach people about physics.

An alternative approach to education

Akala's experiences led to him co-founding the Hip-Hop Shakespeare Company. He has been all over the world working with supposedly hard to reach and difficult young people in lots of different settings including prisons. What is it about this way of presenting Shakespeare that makes it suddenly become interesting and accessible and something that these young people feel OK being a part of?

Akala suggested that the way knowledge is often presented in society results in people feeling patronised and undermined. It may be associated with discipline which is particularly difficult if you are not getting that at home. If you feel patronised

you reject knowledge and education. However, if knowledge is presented in ways that make you feel loved and included, that it is for you and is relevant then young people will engage. This is what the Hip-Hop Shakespeare Company does. They are not against dissertations and analysis but have a different philosophy. They believe there is a different way of providing education and reaching the same goal.

Akala finished by highlighting that across the world, and particularly in post-industrial societies, there is a discussion going on with a fundamental question – What is education for? We are no longer training the masses for factories so what is the purpose? What are we trying to give people? What kind of human beings are we trying to create? We haven't reached a conclusion yet to this discussion, but Akala and the Hip-Hop Shakespeare Company would simply like to be a small part of the debate.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the speaker and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Glasgow Centre for Population Health.

Summary prepared by the Glasgow Centre for Population Health.