

‘The IOC Network mushroomed before we knew what we would eventually become’



From a post-workshop WhatsApp group set up in early December 2019 for informal support, to a 100-plus membership network, **Jacqui Beckford** looks back at the birth of the IOCN

The Collins English Dictionary has named ‘lockdown’ the word of the year for 2020 and what a bizarre dystopian reality the year has been with this worldwide Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent clamour by the pharmaceutical companies to find a vaccine. I have also been dealing with the trauma of six Covid-19-related deaths among the large New York branch of my family. ‘Annus horribilis’ is putting it mildly.

I have been busy through both lockdowns with various projects aside from the Interpreters of Colour Network (IOCN), one of which is seeking to recontextualise the narrative (rather than demand that it be removed) around the statues of slave owner William Beckford that reside in two buildings in the City of London.

For many people who look like me,

another virus has existed for centuries – that of racism, structural and systemic. If only there were a vaccine for this virus, then maybe there would be no need for IOCN. I am fortunate that my white friends and colleagues do not question the validity of how and why IOCN exists because they know and understand me and the wider context. They are true allies. That sadly, has not been the experience of some members of IOCN.

When did I first become aware that this latter virus was actually alive and kicking, despite being born and raised in the UK, that my skin is political and that I was and would continue to be ‘othered’ by some in our society? This question poses a conundrum. Was it when:

▲ aged 11 on a 10-mile ramble in the

countryside near Ramsgate with my Girls Brigade group when I am called, ‘nig-nog’ by a group of local white children?

▲ aged 15 on a skiing trip to Italy with my school, having two adult white strangers (one male and one female) plough their hands through my afro, uninvited?

▲ aged 17 waiting at a bus stop in East Dulwich, London, when a white man in a white van slows down, clears his throat and spits at me?

▲ aged 18 on a romantic stroll through Petts Wood, Orpington, Kent with my (then) boyfriend when a carload of white men shouts obscenities at us ending with, ‘Oi, mate, is it pink inside?’

▲ aged 21 and beyond, job interview – interviewer/prospective employer ‘Oh! You’re Jacqui Beckford? I wasn’t expecting...’ followed by awkward silence?

▲ working for City Literary Institute as a CSW, when I accompany a deaf fashion student on a field trip to France with his cohort. He and I are walking along a Paris street, I am spat at and cursed in the street by an old white woman?

▲ on a BSL protest march in London separated from my young children (they are safely ensconced with a friend in Trafalgar Square). I attempt to cross the road to reach my children and a white

police officer shouts at me that, ‘It’s not possible!’ and proceeds to throw his arms around my neck in a choke hold.

▲ a white male stranger touches my hair in a small lift at the Royal Court Theatre!? This in 2019! I have lost count of how many times the nature of this particular incident has occurred, leaving me angry and feeling vulnerable and discombobulated. I vow it is the last time!

Best to stop there because the list is quite extensive and that is without listing the covert (often referred to as ‘micro’ which they are most certainly not) aggressions.

Having said all of the above, you will be pleased to learn, perhaps, that I will not be unpacking Critical Race Theory in this article (first thought to be coined by Professor Derrick Albert Bell Jr). Nor will I be analysing the CRT debate that was raised in the UK Parliament for the first time in October last year. Instead, I shall try and explain how and why the Interpreters Of Colour Network was established.

Context

Working as an interpreter in the arts has been a mainstay for me. Even while working for RNID/community, BBC and Red Bee Media/TV broadcast/In-Vision and the NHS/mental health, I have continued to develop my performance craft.

My performance journey began many years before becoming a qualified interpreter and even before my first national tour, as an interpreter/performer with Graeae Theatre Company in 1996 with ‘What The Butler Saw’. It was after this tour that I acquired my Equity membership.

Since then, my services have been increasingly sought by theatre-makers and theatre companies specifically seeking a

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The 'Culturally Diverse and Beyond' theatre and performance workshop in December 2019

black sign language interpreter as an integral part of their production. More recently, during 2017-2019, the requests were unprecedented. Much of the work dealt with issues and politics pertaining to that of the African and Asian diaspora, often dealing with trauma.

I had always been aware that there was a very small pool of black and brown interpreters who possessed performance experience, with the relevant cultural schema and language, to draw upon. As the need increased, I felt compelled to explore the possibility of expanding the pool of black and brown SLIs working in this specialist domain.

For many years, I have acted as an informal buddy/mentor to colleagues and vice versa. This has often taken the shape of an impromptu or scheduled telephone conversation, shadowing opportunities in the rehearsal room or at a show, co-working opportunities, observation and feedback, guidance related to fees, facilitating a peer support group and, for some, steering them towards a trained Supervisor. These colleagues were almost exclusively black and brown RSLIs and trainees.

It was from this group of budding colleagues that I first sought interest for an idea I had been ruminating upon for quite some time, to run a workshop investigating possible barriers to my black and brown

colleagues working as performance interpreters. At this juncture, it would be remiss of me not to mention RSLI Marie Pascall, who set up the agency Performance Interpreting. Marie understands the importance of representation and has raised the topic several times over the past couple of years. She is avidly behind the need to develop black and brown performance interpreters.

Representation

'We make up a diverse population. We are from a wide range of backgrounds. We are hearing, Deaf, straight, gay, lesbian, Codas, and so much more. For interpreters of color in our organization there is a wealth of diversity beyond race.'

The above statement, by African-American SLI Erica West Oyedele, is also true of IOCN.

In issue 114 of *Newsli* (October, 2020), five members of IOCN wrote articles eloquently expressing from different perspectives reasons connected to why representation is so important.

Catalyst for IOCN

In December 2019, I organised and facilitated a 'Culturally Diverse and Beyond' theatre and performance workshop spread over two days in London. I contacted 34 of

my peers; 22 responded to say that they were interested but could not make the dates in question. In the end, the workshop was attended by 11 black and brown colleagues. The two days proved illuminating in many ways. While I do not remember us discussing Frantz Fanon or Barbara Fletchman-Smith, the workshop delved into so much more than theatre and performance. The overriding comment fed back by all participants was the sense of being in a safe space.

Safe Space

Safe space: 'A place or environment in which a person or category of people can feel confident that they will not be exposed to discrimination, criticism, harassment, or any other emotional or physical harm.' (Oxford English Dictionary)

After the workshop, I was asked by some members if it would be possible for me to facilitate a follow-up workshop and this I wished to do while the impetus was there, but I was mindful that I had my own project to focus upon for the forthcoming year and therefore could not commit to a follow-up workshop in 2020. Meanwhile, the cohort agreed that a WhatsApp group should be set up as a safe forum for informal support.

2020 arrived with much aplomb as I began rehearsals for my project, a play called 'Mid Life', that I had co-created with a group of phenomenal women. 'Mid Life' was booked into the Bristol Old Vic and the Barbican for performances in February and March with a view to further bookings elsewhere.

The WhatsApp group proved lively and supportive and by the end of January word of it had begun to reach a few colleagues, some of whom contacted me and other members expressing an interest in joining.

Naturally, they were embraced by the members. The steady trickle of colleagues ensued continually throughout February, March, April and May.

Then, on May 25, George Floyd was murdered and the angst that we, part of the global majority, were feeling was undeniably palpable and the WhatsApp group grew exponentially, gaining traction with the Black Lives Matter movement. How I wished there was a 'Too' added at the end of BLM, as this would certainly help many people understand.

I also reached out to colleagues who I thought might be interested in joining the network. In those early days (I have to pinch myself here because the network is still barely six months old), we lost a couple of members who felt the network didn't serve their purpose either because it was too political or not encompassing enough. The network mushroomed before we knew what we would eventually become. Ground rules had not yet been laid and the WhatsApp group became a place for individual outpouring, which for some was a trigger to leave. Of course, people are welcome to re-join at any time.

The birth of IOCN

At the last count, IOCN has 110 members, a handful of whom are French, one German and an American who lives in the UK. They are all registered with their respective registration bodies.

Members were asking for an opportunity to meet each other and put a face to the names they had seen on WhatsApp. Although my vision for the network was for it to be as horizontal a structure as possible, the organising could only occur if someone took the initiative, so I asked four trusted

colleagues to support me with steering the ship, so to speak. Two of these people had, along with me, toyed with the idea of setting up such a network previously and the other two and I, had been, in the 1990s, members of BASLIN (Black and Asian Sign Language Interpreters – founded by Hetty May Bailey, now retired). IOCN held our inaugural meeting via Zoom on 22 June. This I would say is its official launch date. I made it clear that I was not at the helm and that everyone had a stake in the network. It was at that meeting that we agreed to create a voting system for an official name and logo. Various names and logo designs were submitted, eventually resting on the name IOCN and the logo design as seen on the website.

Initially all members were RSLIs and trainees only but, in a bid to be progressive, the consensus among the network is that students are to be embraced too. Students are welcome to join the WhatsApp group as it proves an invaluable source of learning and sharing our lived and unique experiences within a safe space. There is a second WhatsApp group specifically for work bookings, but this is not open to students. As was expected, October proved to be a very busy month, likewise November as organisations with last-minute funding strive to demonstrate their efforts to represent Black History Month (I believe that Black history is intrinsic to British history and therefore should be all year round, not just October). The website, interpretersofcolour.net is generating plenty of work.

IOCN does not wish to replicate or mimic established sign language interpreter organisations. Our energies will remain focused on our uniqueness. We are not a registration body; members of the network are already registered with NRCPD, and are

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either members of VLP and ASLI or are on their way to becoming registered (to my knowledge, RBSLI is not yet represented in the network). Some are also members of NUBSLI. We are not a homogenous group of people and, as such, have harnessed an invaluable weight in cultural capital that draws upon knowledge of all, if not most, of the 54 Commonwealth countries and beyond. We are not an interpreting agency. Neither are we a political network; however, we acknowledge that the structures within which we live have politicised our skin, so there is no escape from politics.

Perhaps I am a little too optimistic, but I envisage a conference in the forthcoming year; if not, then in 2022 where we can see each other face to face. Watch this space.

Ultimately, IOCN exists for its members to support each other in a safe space, where we can cultivate and share our practice. Also, to address underrepresentation of ‘people of colour’ in the SLI/T profession. This in turn will, we hope, better meet the needs of the wider deaf community. 

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REFERENCE

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