

Equity Storytellers' Network **Cultural Appropriation Policy**

This document has been created by a working party of storytellers who work with traditional tales. We recognise that there are many definitions of storytelling and many definitions of a storyteller.

These notes are particularly relevant if, like us, you work with traditional tales from a range of cultures. However, we hope that storytellers working in other ways will also want to consider these issues.

These notes form an addition to Equity's Policy Document on Cultural Appropriation, adopted as policy in June 2019, and should be read in conjunction with that document.

We believe it is key when considering telling tales from other cultures to respect, to research and to learn from them.

1. As storytellers it is imperative that we do our research when we wish to tell tales from another culture. Best practice demands that we strive to research, respect and learn from that culture.
2. Every culture, and the cultural context of stories within it is both shifting and diverse. A storyteller who is unfamiliar with the culture from which a story comes will not recognise the cultural importance of symbols, language, images or landscapes.
3. We need to consider carefully how we prepare for the telling of a story from a different culture. Each of us will make choices about what to include and what to omit. During this process we must ensure that we both meet our responsibilities to make the story our own and respect the cultural origins of the story. When you have made the story your own, is it still true to and respectful of its cultural origins?
4. In the case of telling tales from ancient cultures, for example, Ancient Egyptian stories, we believe that the principles of research and respect still apply. Seeking out more than one version and reading a variety of background information can only enhance your telling of any story.

Useful questions to ask yourself:

- ❖ Are you taking something from a different cultural group as part of your work?
- ❖ Are you the right person to do this particular piece of work?
- ❖ Why are you telling the story? Is it because of genuine interest in that culture; because you are drawn to the story, or because the story gets a good audience reaction?
- ❖ What does your telling add to the story? What does it take away?
- ❖ What is the source of the material? If from a text, was it written by someone from that culture? Have you read more than one version, to broaden your understanding of the story?
- ❖ If from a telling, do you need permission to tell the story? What can be gained from researching different versions of the story?
- ❖ In the case of a traditional tale, the plot is not copyrighted, but taking another person's version is not appropriate. We recognise the importance of storytellers bringing their own skill and creativity to the tale within the context of the culture.
- ❖ Do you understand the significance of images and motifs to the culture of the tale you have chosen to tell? There are many voices within every culture. Have you done enough research on the tale you are choosing to tell, to help you understand the culture and context from which the tale comes?
- ❖ If you do not know know the cultural significance of the things you are talking about, you may make a mistake which gives a wrong impression of the culture, or even makes nonsense of the story. This must be borne in mind if deciding to change the story to make it your own.
- ❖ How respectful to the culture is your telling of the tale? How would different people from that cultural background feel about it?

Appendix: Example Scenarios

1. A local museum is planning a small exhibition to celebrate a particular festival, for example, Chinese New Year or The Day of the Dead. They ask you to provide stories as part of the event. You might ask yourself if you are the right person to deliver this work and, if you are not of that culture, consider recommending someone who is. You may consider how you can be transparent about your process during the event, so that your interpretation and introduction are respectful to the culture in question. You may want to engage with a member of that culture as part of your preparation.

2. After a performance, a member of the audience gives you feedback that you misrepresented certain cultural aspects of the story. You might consider an apology appropriate. You may consider how you can use this encounter as an opportunity for connection. You may reflect on your preparation process and how you can improve on it.
 3. You are working with another artist whose views about the story and its context are very different from your own. You may need to collaborate to find common ground, while respecting the material.
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Equity Policy on Cultural Appropriation: Issued as Guidance for Members

Introduction and Background

At Equity's 2018 Annual Representative Conference a motion was passed asking that Equity initiates a discussion within Equity including all internal stakeholders such as the equalities and national committees to develop a policy position on cultural appropriation. The motion was put forward by the Variety, Circus and Entertainers Committee as it was noted that performers developing their own work or agencies offering costume character work were potentially causing offence to members of other communities.

In developing a policy and guidelines account is taken of Equity's long-standing opposition to censorship and its commitment to protection of artistic freedom as well as equality of opportunity for all members.

The guidelines set out below are to assist members to, wherever possible, avoid cultural appropriation in their work.

Policy Statement

Equity's primary role is to ensure that its members gain secure, well-paid work across the entertainment industry. Equity supports its members in gaining work which allows for authentic artistic expression, and which avoids any form of discrimination, exploitation or bias. Equity's policy approach is to inform and educate its members across the entertainment sector on the phenomena of cultural appropriation, and how they may actively avoid this.

Equity does not seek to limit the range and type of work members undertake, and the union shall not seek to impose this policy stance on members. Instead, the role of this policy position is to raise awareness, understanding and promote good practice.

Equity considers good practice is for our members to be aware of any element of cultural appropriation and be respectful of this. If elements of another culture are used this should be done respectfully and authentically wherever possible.

Equity's approach

- To encourage our members to reflect on the cultural dimensions of their work.
- To ask members to reflect upon whether their work may consciously or unconsciously draw upon or replicate aspects of the culture of ethnic or social groups other than their own.
- To promote the authentic and accurate portrayal of social and ethnic groups.

Cultural Appropriation in the Entertainment Industry

Cultural appropriation is the use of certain elements of another culture without recognition of this, nor any form of participation of the people who belong to that culture. Often a problem is that of members of a majority culture in a defined territory such as the UK appropriating that of a minority culture, and in doing so perpetuating myths and stereotypes.

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In the entertainment industry this may include, for example, wearing costume, make-up or song which is drawn from the culture of a differing ethnic or social group than that of the performer. As such, a key concern is that of financial gain as a result of cultural appropriation, as well as the denial of work to members of minority cultures.

Whilst it may be practically difficult to involve members of the ethnic or social group concerned when developing performance work, the prevalence of cultural appropriation requires that performers, and allied workers, consider whether the source material of their work should be altered, or the originating culture be more consciously acknowledged and celebrated.

Where culture is defined as, *“the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively...the ideas, customs, artefacts and social behaviour of a particular people or society.”*

Source: Oxford English Dictionary (OED)

How to Avoid Cultural Appropriation

All workers in the creative industries can play a positive role by reflecting the source material of their work, and its impact on others. Sometimes a member of a majority culture may not recognise the harm of cultural appropriation until they are made aware of it. This is why Equity is asking its members to reflect on this guidance.

This guidance arises from Equity’s Variety, Circus and Entertainment Committee (VCEC), and is allied to the union’s broader work around authentic, positive portrayal across the entertainment industry.

A key issue of cultural appropriation is around intention. As such, Equity is asking its members to read and reflect upon the following questions:

- Are you taking something from a different cultural group as part of your work?
- Why are you doing this? Is it because of genuine interest in that culture, or is this because you like the way that something looks?
- What is the source of the material? For material items such as artwork, was it made by someone from that culture? What does this item mean to them?
- How respectful is this to the culture? What would someone from that group feel about it?
- Genuine interest in other cultures is to be encouraged and the sharing of ideas, traditions, and material items from other cultures enriches and helps diversify the world. If, however, you have answered yes to the first question it is important that you have checked your intention behind the use of any ideas, traditions and material items. You need to be assured as far as is reasonably practicable that your performance will not cause offence to others, and particularly those who belong to the culture you are drawing from.
- Equity does not seek to ‘police’ this matter, but to contribute towards good practice in authentic portrayal across the sector.

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The Background to this Policy

The background to the development and issuing of this policy statement and guidance note on Cultural Appropriation (CA) stems from a motion (see below) submitted to the Equity's 2018 Annual Representative Conference (ARC) from the Variety, Circus and Entertainment Committee (VCEC). The motion was accepted at the ARC.

The initial stage of implementing the motion was an all-member survey conducted during December 2018. This was followed by a meeting of a dedicated Working Party (see members below) who discussed a draft version of this policy document.

A revised version of the policy document was then consulted upon with Branch Secretaries of Equity's variety branches.

A Final version of the policy document was presented to Equity Council on 18th June 2019. Council agreed on this date to adopt the policy document which was then distributed to all Equity branches and placed on the Equity website. The policy document was publicised via Equity social media. On-going awareness raising of the document rests with the VCEC and Equity staff members. This document is issued solely as guidance for members of Equity and as a document internal to the union.

VCEC ARC Motion

MOTION 3: Variety, Circus and Entertainers Committee (as amended) This ARC requests Council to initiate a discussion within Equity involving all internal stakeholders, including the Minority Ethnic Members Committee, LGBT+ Committee and National Committees, on the issue of cultural appropriation in Variety, Circus and Entertainment to develop an appropriate policy position on this issue. This policy position to be circulated to all our members as guidelines that avoid causing any offence to others. Action: Variety Branch Secretaries will encourage members in their Branches to actively participate in the work to develop an appropriate policy position. The Equality and National Committees will give feedback and input during the development of this work, as appropriate (Louise McMullan/Michael Day).

Working Party Members

- RedSarah
- Norma Dixit
- Emmanuel Kojo
- Ria Lina
- Jess Parkinson
- Missa Blue
- Kelly Burke

Staff: Ian Manborde, Equalities and Diversity Organiser
Michael Day, Variety Organiser, Joint Secretary of the VCEC