

Coast Festival

Monday 26th March

The bunting goes up at the acta centre, and the bright blue festival staff team t-shirts are popping up everywhere, as last minute preparations are completed in the glorious early spring sunshine. The festival venues are all within walking distance of each other in Bedminster and Southville, south of the river, and the sun encourages everyone outside. An air of anticipation gradually builds throughout the day. Continuous checking online of the Bristol airport arrivals board, confirms that flights from Rotterdam, Poland and Berlin are all on schedule.

As guests begin to arrive through the afternoon, final rehearsals take place for acta's Malcolm X Elders group in St Pauls, and the show from Manchester, *Down with the Dictator*. At the acta centre, old friends meet up again, and new acquaintances begin. As the evening launch event approaches, festival registration opens and the festival film crew & photographer arrive, all serving to increase the excitement for what is to come.

On this first day, the conversations are learning about how and why people are here, and what we are all expecting from the next few days. After dinner, everybody begins to make their way back to the acta centre for the launch event celebratory drinks, and the sun is still shining as all take their seats in the hall. It is quite a squash fitting everyone in. The theatre's bench seating means that groups are encouraged to squeeze up and get to know each other quite quickly.

"I overhear a couple of people next to me talking about their rehearsals and their journey here. Apparently, Expedition Metropolis spent eighteen hours in a van to get here from Berlin."

A "welcome to Bristol" sketch opens the week's performances, with a guide to key Bristolian phrases that visitors to the City may need. Cheers drive.



Next, acta's community choir troupe onto the stage for their first ever public performance.

They receive enthusiastic applause from the audience, who appreciate the immense import of this first performance to each of the choir members.

Photo: acta Get Together community choir open the COAST festival

The evening is crowned with the acta performance of *Tahriib Haajiraad (Crossing Borders)* by Somali women in Bristol. Four elder women, the mothers, and three daughters tell their story. The mothers express nostalgia for life in Somalia, as well as retelling their stories of fleeing from war in Somalia as young women. The daughters tell their story of being born and brought up in Somali families, with Somali culture, in Bristol.



Photo: *Crossing Borders* performed at the acta centre

Tuesday 27th March

Back in the acta hall, 9:30 the next morning, about 25 people gather for the post-show discussion of *Crossing Borders*, including director Neil Beddow and two of the actresses, Fatoum Houssein and Muna Abdi Muhamud. The discussion is facilitated by Eugene van Erven.

We start with the genesis of the show. The women had been inspired by a show at the acta centre in 2010, brought by Somali women working with RWT, Hooyo Maan. At a discussion after this show, Somali audience members asked whether they could create some community theatre in Bristol, and Neil had been delighted to offer acta's help. One of the actresses says that she liked the idea of a show, but not with her in it!



Photo: *Crossing Borders* performed at the acta centre

Somebody asks about the reaction of the Somali community to the performance. The women explain that it was a true story, not "made up," as if questioning the meaning of the word "performance;" explaining that performing in front of people in Somali culture is not a good thing, especially for women. The women discuss further the differences of their culture, and joke about how their daughters were not allowed to wear jeans in the show, as it was not appropriate dress for Somali women. Family is strong in Somali culture, and this remains despite the younger generation's "Somali British" culture. One of the women's phones goes off, and she jokes that it

was her mum checking that she had not been wearing jeans in the show.

We also discuss who the intended audience for the show was. The women explain that the universal intergenerational theme of the show provided an appropriate background to the other important issue of educating Bristol audiences about Somali culture. They articulate the difficulty of feeling like you are in two places at once: 'Our minds are back home, but somehow we have a bag of clothes here...one day I will go back... but we have children here. But if you leave all your children here, what's the point in going back to Somalia?'

The discussion moves on to discuss the community theatre process, and gives Neil an opportunity to say how honoured he had been to work with the group, and how much fun they all had. Most of the play was not scripted as the improvisation in rehearsal was so confident. It was based entirely on personal narrative, came 'straight from the heart', and they felt that a script would get in the way of what was already a fluid process. They were keen to use monologue to describe personal experiences and to enable a direct connection with the audience. The women described that in order to decide what would go into the play, they identified the key themes and relationships that they wanted to show, and then improvised around that. The teenagers had wanted a script, but the older women mainly wanted to improvise. Neil argues the benefits of more natural performances when scripts are not used, and explains how the line about "just getting married" actually only came out last night, completely unscripted, and they had to improvise around it. Neil did most of the ordering of scenes. The cast explained how they performed each other's stories, so that they were one step removed from the raw emotion, and it was easier for them to perform.

Someone draws attention to the scene where the mother speaks Somali and the daughter speaks in English. The suggestion is that presenting the play in two languages helps the performance to come across as more natural. Someone else comments on the 'thankyou' at the end of the monologue, which is not a gesture you would get in traditional theatre, as it is as if you are stepping out of character for a second. Muna explains that she felt a real connection with the audience, which is why she said the "thank you" at the end of her piece. This was a monologue about the war, and she explains how she had never told the story before; having the chance to talk about it with the audience listening, she felt grateful. "The trauma is still there and we've never released it. This then effects how we think about our kids, and we think they have everything they need, and they should be grateful."



Photo: Muna Abdi performs monologue in 'Crossing Borders'

The question was asked as to why there were no male stories represented in this production. The women explained that it is actually rare to have problems with the female teenagers. More often it is the male teenagers who are challenging, but it was important that they did not confront and alienate their community. The choice was made to focus on the story of different generations of Somali women for this first piece of community theatre, but perhaps move on to look at other issues in future. One of the women is a radio presenter on Bristol Community Radio, and she said that they got a lot of phone calls from the men of the community. There was some discussion about the problems faced by young Somali men in Bristol that could be looked at in future projects.

The women said that there is still a barrier that exists in Bristol between the two cultures, and that more should be done to encourage both sides to approach each other. The question arose as to how the Somali community can be encouraged to integrate creatively in Bristol. It was suggested that they could take an educational approach and teach the wider community about their culture. Muna & Fatoum responded positively to suggestions that they should perform in schools, to raise awareness of the differences between cultures. Finally, a comment was made that the women are powerful representatives of their community.

As the morning progresses, the theatre companies from Poland and Holland start to prepare for their evening performances, and those remaining engage in the workshop programme.

'How' Panel Discussion

There are about fifteen people in the discussion about how we create community theatre, and we are introduced to the panel of experts, and begin to try to tease out a methodology; Eugene van Erven chaired the session.

- Cilla Baynes from Community Arts North-West, CAN, said that they have been established for more than 30 years now, and that they use different styles to create their work, including digital art and immersive theatre. A particular cultural group may have a certain topic for creating a piece, so they collaborate with CAN for the process. Cilla says that for them, there is no one specific route into a project because of the broad range of things they do.

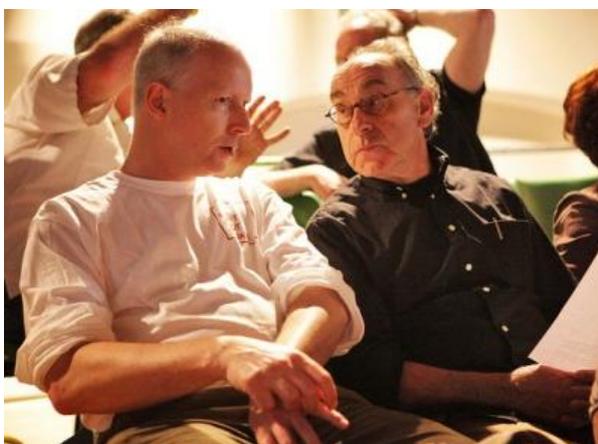


Photo: Philip Parr, Parabola and Peter Van den Hurk, founder, RWT

- Philip, Parabola: the starting point is usually the invitation from whoever wants to work with them. So for example, they recently were invited to do a piece in a London Borough where the council were taking money away from a community centre. They have a researcher who goes in and asks people to tell him stories, and he listens, with no agenda.

- Peter (founder, RWT) began by explaining that they believe community theatre implicates looking for new audiences, and devising from scratch to create original work. He said that many people aren't interested in theatre because it doesn't portray their world, so it is necessary to find out about their world in order to engage them creatively. The Rotterdam group actively go out into their community and say that they are interested in creating theatre with different groups of people. It is sometimes about knocking on the door, other times, he is invited. Quite often it is about people who have not had access to theatre in the past. Community theatre must include the audience's world.

The discussion focuses on the advantages and disadvantages of having a base within a geographical area. Parabola argues that having no base is a distinct advantage, as they have no baggage, and that when a project ends, rather than cutting off all ties, they try to drift away. Cilla focuses on the need for community theatre to work with people who have not had opportunities to get involved in theatre before, and questions the notion of 'hard to reach' communities in the art world, suggesting that actually they would say, 'you're hard to reach.' This leads onto a suggestion that community arts organisations are the gatekeepers of communities, and that mainstream art organisations come to these 'smaller' groups, but the big groups get the funding. Neil argues that we may be the gatekeepers, but we also have a 'duty of care'; if you're working with a particular group, you've got to make sure that they are not exploited. It is all about trust; you can't betray it.

The seminar moved on to discuss the institutionalisation of community arts, and then to look at how we achieve the best balance between process and product, between community and theatre. Neil suggests that he could not imagine saying to a performer 'you can't do that because you're not good enough'.

Neil describes the different acta models for creating plays, from large scale community plays which have large casts and everyone has a part, to smaller groups of people who create pieces suitable for small-scale touring. Cilla (CAN) says she doesn't use the term 'community theatre', as it has connotations of being a lower standard, but explains that it is all theatre. There is some discussion about using professional actors in community theatre, with Neil suggesting that trained actors lose something from the direct storytelling that community participants can offer.

It is important to have clear objectives, honourable intentions and to be a good listener. Peter believes a theatre-maker's role is to look under the surface of a situation and to evoke emotion, so this then carries a risk in the relationship between facilitator and community. But a balance must be achieved.

Expedition Metropolis workshop

The workshop began with the story of the Ex Me show performing at the festival, Zwischenstation, which is about a man who travelled from Cairo to Berlin to seek a better life. Though it is the story of one person, it is told by many people. The play was developed through a workshop in which the themes of migration were explored. The group took us through this workshop process.



Photo: Expedition Metropolis Workshop

In the beginning of their creative process they adapted the story of the man, Said Zahra. All his experiences on his journey from Cairo to Berlin are gathered in a book, an autobiography, with which the company worked to write a script that divides the story into five sections, called stations: the desire, the path, the arrival, the orientation and the in-between.

The company made a public announcement in order to gather people for this project. 18 young people responded to the invitation and got involved in it because of their experiences, interest and attachment to the theme of migration. Thus the story would be told by the 18 young participants, who were also encouraged to make their own personal input.

The workshop focused on one station, the path. Every rehearsal started with a warm up session which consisted of some basic yoga exercises, a productive and helpful way for the participants to prepare their bodies and minds for the following exercises and improvisations.

To increase the concentration and the focus, they work next with rhythms and music, made by using their bodies. The leader of this exercise acts as a conductor. He teaches four basic rhythms and then together with the participants, creates a melody. This helps the group to connect and to work together as a team, developing their sense for music and the ability to concentrate.

The next stage of the workshop is devoted to their imagination and creativity. Having the path as the main theme, the group have to come up with words and ideas related to this notion. One by one, everybody has to say a word which begins with a letter from the word path. For example: **p**artner, **a**nxiety, **t**rain, **h**ome. The words they say will show their vision about the topic and offer potential developments of the theme.

Next, we had to draw the first thing that came into our minds on the notion of 'path'. After that, each of us had to say a word that describes our drawing, and the person in front of us had to pick up the one that matches the description. (Out of 12 people, only three picked up drawings which matched the description given by the author.) We realized once again that words are not as powerful as the images, and each of us perceives a picture in a different way. We are different people with diverse perspectives.

Finally, the participants had to walk within a given structure drawn on the floor. Following those paths, everybody was intersecting and meeting with each other. Each time this happened, the two who met had to talk about the idea they drew. Amazing stories came out of these discussions, as a result of the huge diversity of perspectives, from really firm ideas like, "I saw myself travelling with a boat to a tropical island," to abstract visions of life, "Life is a map with many roads and intersections and you are the one who chooses your own path".

The workshop ended with a fun team-building game. The participants were divided into two groups, each with four chairs. The idea was to get from a point A to a point B without touching the ground, and always be together and have all the chairs. We left the workshop with the thought that enjoying the process and the group you work with are the most important things in a creative process and the key to a successful and memorable project.

Physical Theatre workshop

The group formed a circle, and each person was asked to give their name, where they were from, and something they had seen in Bristol since they'd been there. Each participant was asked to create a small movement attached to that experience. Then each person created a movement and sound for the entire group to repeat. The group were then directed to clump, to scatter, and to experiment with spacial relationship. Participants walked around the space and played with different tempos, stopping, starting, placing a hand on a shoulder and walking with a person, and finally participants would give a small stroke down the back, which would signal the participant to melt to the floor.



Photo: Physical theatre workshop delivered by Amy Rose from Bocadalupa

At the end of the workshop, participants broke into groups to "create an entrance" by using just newspaper and sellotape. One group created a large blanket of newspaper that they crawled under and then taped to the floor. Starting slowly and then speeding up, they broke out of the newspaper blanket, like hatching out of an egg. Group two created a chain out of newspaper, held at either end. Then two people ran through it, as if finishing a race. Group three created a small scene in which different ages were represented through the idea of "play."

Down with the Dictator, CAN



Photo: Down with the Dictator performed at the Southville Centre

Down with the Dictator was written by Cameroonian playwright Lydia Besong, who is in England and fighting for asylum at the time of this festival. The play explores themes of political power, corruption and censorship in Africa, and the reasons why many people flee oppressive regimes. The performance presented a story, within the overall vision of raising awareness; using the power of community theatre to enable a story to be heard and seen.

The stage set was simple. Seven actors, seven boxes, and seven stools were the only elements used on stage. The play combined monologue with group scenes. All actors play a variety of roles. Actors either represented those suffering or the political powers behind their suffering.

After this afternoon performance, there was a question and answer session:-

Katherine Rogers (CAN) facilitated the discussion and before the questioning began gave some background information about the play. Community Arts Northwest wanted to produce a play about Cameroon and the political situation there. The production at the COAST festival was the play's second performance after a three month rehearsal period. Its aim was to raise awareness of asylum seekers in Britain. The entire cast was present for response, as well as Lydia Besong.

The play was written and then responded to through improvisation, to build it. The most important thing was to stay true to Lydia's story. The cast was against trying to evoke a response, and preferred to focus on raising awareness. For the company, the play appeared to be an act of vocalising and providing an opportunity to be heard, in stark contrast to the torture involved in silence and the removal of voice.

It was clear from the discussion that many of the audience did not enjoy the play as a theatrical piece. There was some confusion for the audience in following the political scenes, and being able to connect with the stories being told. Others appreciated what an act of courage it was for Lydia to write this piece, and work to have it performed. The question is, how can we tell an intense story and still draw the audience in? There was a discussion about how the piece could be developed, and one of the suggestions from the audience was that the songs and music incorporated into the piece should be expanded, as they were an effective way of communicating to the audience. Other members of the audience advised that the company should remember that some audiences have no

prior knowledge of the issues being tackled, so perhaps the way the story is being told should be made clearer for their benefit. The company responded positively to the feedback they had been given at the festival, for a show that is still in development.

Zhong, Rotterdams Wijktheater

Zhong was originally a site-specific production, performing in the Brewery Theatre for the Coast festival, a few minutes' walk up North Street in the warm evening sunshine.



Photo: Zhong performed at the Tobacco Factory's Brewery Theatre

The performance of Zhong was super slick (even with an actor replaced by a non-Chinese one). It was a very professional performance. Right down to the red glossy booklets/programmes we were given and the three red cards with Chinese script translated into Dutch/English words. There was the Chinese character for eat (chi), hello (ni-hao-ma) and middle (zhong). These three phrases were important because Zhong set the tone for the characters life context. They are in the middle, not Chinese, not quite Dutch. Ni hao ma, because welcome, introduction and connection is so important in Chinese culture. Finally Chi, because food is a huge part of Chinese culture and family ties.

There was a lot of translation going on in this performance, Dutch-English and some Cantonese too. It was seamless. The narrative was very clear. It was fairly traditional dramatic narrative which builds to a crisis followed by resolution. The performance was live and mediated (with video of a crazy Chinese chef preparing food in Cantonese in his kitchen and the girls' parents Skype-ing in from on cruise and a relative's place – including his karaoke room - in the USA). The live and mediated performances (projected onto back wall of space) were extremely well done. At the end of the performance, with the dramatic tension resolved, we were invited to karaoke and spring rolls.

Zhong was set in a Chinese restaurant, the kind that we all frequent and with which we are therefore very familiar, with its bare formica tables and chairs, and chopsticks on the table with pots of condiments. Basically the story was about generational change. The immigrant Chinese/Dutch parents and restaurant owner/founders had retired, leaving their daughters in charge. One daughter had taken over the running of the business. Her sister who was studying design at University helped out with some of the day-to-day running of the restaurant (setting tables, restaurant decoration and

serving customers). Another sister was in a touring Chinese acrobatic troupe and was coming home for a visit. There was therefore a slightly festive feeling in the air. At the same time, underneath the veneer of familial celebration, it is slowly revealed that the business is in financial trouble, despite attempts by the caretaker daughter to hide the business's (and, by implication, her) failings. The play explores the relationships of the three girls (first generation Chinese-Dutch) and their Chinese/Cantonese immigrant parents. The daughters are all very different. One is trying to live up to her parent's expectations/legacy by taking over the running of the business. Another is studying at Uni. She has a Dutch boyfriend. The third performs in a touring Chinese cultural troupe. Despite their differences and the different relationships they have to their parents, to their inherited Chinese culture, and to life as Dutch citizens, the meaning and significance of the family restaurant unites them and together the girls find a way to save the business.



Photo: Zhong at the Brewery Theatre

RWT theatre makers wanted to do a performance commemorating 100 years of Chinese immigration/settlement in the international port city of Rotterdam. There was an unheard story, but also, the immigrant generation tend to speak Cantonese Chinese and not Dutch, so there were language issues too. This issue was highlighted in the RWT workshop held outdoors on the green on a beautiful sunny day (see below, on Wednesday). This got somewhere to explaining how RWT went about making *Zhong* and some of the elements in the performance such as the black and white family photographs placed around the restaurant. Also, interestingly, the position of the theatre makers was represented in the character of the boyfriend of one of the sisters, coming in from the outside.

We left the theatre, and the restaurant, with a feeling that we had experienced a brief immersion into Dutch Chinese culture.

Our Dream Journey, Teatr Grodzki



Photo: Our Dream Journey performed by Teatr Grodzki at the acta centre

A completely different show was offered on the same evening, back at the acta centre. Teatr Grodzki showcased the poetical simplicity of puppets, in a play involving no spoken word at all, a visual story about travelling, migrating, the search for a better life and, most of all, about home sickness.

The play was created especially for the festival, taking as a starting point, the main theme of the COAST project, migration. From the Polish perspective, people have dreams to go abroad to work, they travel to the countries they dreamed of and, in the end, find themselves feeling home sick. This simple but powerful story was represented with four human sized puppets taking the parts of the four main characters, each of which was operated by three performers.

Towards the end of the play, the deaf performers performed in sign, the song, "Our Motherland," using white gloves to stand out against the black set. The combination of the simple visual story with the meditative, dream-like music throughout, created perhaps the most powerful performance of the festival.

Wednesday 28th March

Post-show discussions

Our Dream Journey, Teatr Grodzki

Facilitated by Neil Beddow with Director Maria Schejbal and cast

The discussion was translated from English to Polish, and then into Polish sign language.

"It was a pearl of simplicity in the best sense of theatre work." Audience member.

Participants at the seminar learnt that for Teatr Grodzki, visual theatre is the most powerful kind of theatre, although this was the very first time that they had used human sized puppets in this way, and it was also the first time that the performers had all worked together. The puppets became personal creations, their very own character. Everybody admitted how strong their relationship with their puppet had become. Asked if they would prefer to be on stage with the puppets or acting without them, their answer was unanimous that they prefer to work with the puppets, so they are not themselves exposed on stage, but have the opportunity to bring their puppet to life.

Zhong, Rotterdams Wijktheater

The post-show discussion revealed some interesting facts about the history of Chinese immigration to Rotterdam. No wonder RWT wanted to do a show with the Chinese community to commemorate/celebrate/explore this. Apparently, the first group of Chinese immigrants came to Rotterdam port as strikebreakers in 1901. The strikebreakers were based in Katendracht, and they were marooned there by financial crisis. So they, the Chinese men, married Dutch women and produced mixed race children. Then apparently they left before WW2 . There was a second wave of immigration in the 1960s and this was the group that established restaurants and which the show focused on.

We learnt that there is little integration between the Dutch and Chinese communities of Rotterdam. This had been the starting point for the project. The cast explained that RWT worked with young and old members of the Chinese community in Rotterdam to create this show over the period of a year, and discovered that people were far more interested in telling stories about the future, rather than the past; their focus was the next generation. The project soon became an inter-generational one as well as inter-cultural. The resulting show was first performed in Rotterdam last year, and was then reworked especially for the Bristol festival. The play was a mixture of fictional content and personal narrative. Some elements of the story came directly from the cast, some came from the wider community and some things just happened; for example, two members of the original cast went on an impromptu cruise trip before the Bristol show, hence the skype scene from the parents on the cruise ship.



Photo: Zhong at the Brewery Theatre

The set for the play included personal photos of the older generation, which came directly from elderly members of the community. The photos were a great communication tool for engaging with the older generation for the first time, who often don't think their stories are important enough to share. This connects to the title of the piece, *Zhong*, which means 'meeting in the middle'. Another key way that the community, young and old, Dutch and Chinese, met in the middle was through karaoke; RWT members described how karaoke brought the sides together during the creative process. Hence the karaoke at the end of the play.

The acta approach workshop

The workshop offered some background about the acta vision to work with different community groups, to use people's personal experiences, and issues that interest them, to develop stories and performances. The company focuses its work on vulnerable groups in society, to provide opportunities to develop confidence and enhance their self-esteem. The process starts with developing the group, and then a storyline is developed. This is developed into improvised scenes that are seldom written. The dialogue used in the show will usually be provided by participants.

The workshop focused on a range of participatory exercises. The first encouraged concentration, and allowed participants to feel each other's presence and to be connected with each other. Then we played a prop game, and after that we did two exercises which focused on the creation of scenes, first based on the word "travel," and then to create a scene at an airport.

The workshop ended with a wide-ranging discussion about the acta approach, which included the importance of working towards a show at the end of the process, and consideration of how acta measures success and the different ways that projects begin.

Malcolm X Elders, *We Have Overcome*, workshop

This show was performed as a work in progress, as part of a workshop, with an opportunity for a short (the show ran over) discussion with cast members after the performance. The theatre was set up with a costume rack, two long benches, and a large colourful collage backdrop of pictures, letters and recipes from the fifties, and the colours of the Jamaican flag.



Photo: Malcolm X Elders perform *We Have Overcome* at the Southville Centre

The women entered dressed in basic blacks and with a floral pattern shawl wrapped around them, each with a flower in their hair. All the women were dancing. The scenes that followed were based on personal narrative and included scenes of the journey to England, the first experiences in England, going to school, and working.

The cast had invited two family friends along to watch the show, who sat in the front row to offer their support, clapping along and engaging with the actors throughout the production. These two women in the front row, along with the performers themselves, all encouraged us to be a part of their journey. The women maintained a rapport with the audience, often interacting directly to tell their story, so that the audience felt it was a very warm performance. People were particularly interested by how much humour had been achieved in the presentation of stories of struggle.

The audience clearly enjoyed the performance. There was a lot of laughing. There were a few glitches with lines, and a few problems cueing up the music and lights when the cast drifted too far away from the script, but this was only to be expected within the workshop format.

Panel discussion workshops – why do we make community theatre, and for who?

The afternoon offered two very wide-ranging and inspiring discussions, and this narrative only seeks to provide a summary of the main themes that emerged.

Neil introduces the panel discussion, emphasising that the whole two year COAST project is about knowledge exchange. The panel includes Hassan Mahamdallie from the Arts Council, Francois Matarasso (FM) from Regular Marvels, and Peter van den Hurk from Rotterdam. Hassan (ACE Diversity), opens the discussion, outlining some of the thinking behind the “creative case for diversity” paper last year, and the importance of community theatre.



Photo: Arts Council Senior Diversity Officer Hassan Mahamdallie opens panel discussion

Francois responds to Hassan's opening remarks, and stresses that culture is a human right. He goes on to question who defines the cultural life of the country, suggesting that there is so much more taking place than that which is recognised by Arts Council and other national bodies. He questions whether community theatre should need this validation from the Arts Council? The discussion quickly turns to issues of funding.

Community theatre has its own history, values and procedures. Diversity is at the heart of the work, because making original theatre from a range of stories, and bringing theatre to new audiences is what community theatre is all about. Despite issues of funding, we agreed that both our audiences and participants deserve the best, and it is for this reason that we all seek to achieve high quality work. This led to a discussion about how we assess the quality of our work, and a proposal that we are ourselves best placed to learn and continually seek to improve what we offer.

After the break, the panel discussion moved on to consider who we make theatre for, and asked whether theatre is audience specific? The group agreed that whilst community theatre may immediately appear to be for a specific audience, we know that the universality of emotion ensures it can reach different communities. There was a suggestion that mainstream theatre can have a much narrower audience than community theatre.

Hassan proposed the importance of community theatre in valuing stories that have not been heard.

The group discuss whether the potential audience changes the process of putting the show together; why do people go through a door, how do you get people through a door? Should practitioners feel responsible for providing a good experience? FM argues no, they should not, because it is impossible to control whether the audience has a good experience. But acta and RWT question this, as whether you can control the audience's response or not, they are responsible for getting an audience through the door. The group also discuss the importance of the location of the performance in terms of the potential audience.

The discussion moves back to why we make community theatre. In community theatre, the preparation of a piece is the creative act itself, whereas in mainstream theatre the preparation is for the creative act at the end. Neil explained the process of creating the piece with the Malcolm X

Elders, starting with the intention that the play would be for the African Caribbean community. However the process changed as it became clear that other people would witness the piece, so they tried to make a more general, universally linked story. This is an example of how the knowledge of who will be watching directly affects the development of the piece.

It is an unpredictable process, so how do we make people aware of the risks involved in putting their stories into the playing space? There followed a debate about setting parameters, according to who we are working with and who the show is for. FM argued that this is a form of censorship and overprotection, and that he finds it uncomfortable when you place certain criteria on a group as it lowers us to the labels of 'us and them'. But Neil argued that we have a duty of care to inform people of the risk of being involved in a project. There is a responsibility as a facilitator to ensure that there is a positive process. The facilitator is not a therapist, but the process can be therapeutic, so it is important to provide a safe arena for people to share their personal stories. It is not necessarily the facilitators risk, it is the participants' risk, and it is our responsibility to recognise this.

Perpanata refugee youth theatre workshop



Photo: Perpanata workshop

Perpanata explained that they place heavy emphasis on the physical language of the body as opposed to verbal language, as many of their members do not have English as a first language. In particular, they allow members of the group to facilitate a game in their mother tongue, and they also explained how they try to use everyday objects and materials as props.

To begin with, we played a game that was explained to us in Spanish by a member of Perpanata, Victor. We understood the rules fairly quickly, which demonstrated how successful it can be to talk to each other with gestures. Using materials around us, in this case our shoes, we create a throwing/catching sequence around the circle. This made us focus on the task at hand, and encouraged direct eye contact amongst those present for the workshop. Later in the workshop, we were asked to create a sound using anything available to us in the room, for example the radiator, the window, the floor, the walls etc. and we created a sound orchestra as a group. We took it in turns to 'conduct' the orchestra to create sounds of our choice, varying the volume, deciding who was to play when, and controlling the overall piece that was played.

Outside, we played some trust games. Working in pairs, we each created a sound for our partner to follow with their eyes closed. Perpanata then asked one person to lead the entire group who had their eyes closed. People watched from the outside and commented that it created interesting movement within the group, as the leader would often surprise the blinded group by creating sounds at different times and in different places around the space.

Perpanata then illustrated how they create material with the group. We looked at a scene where someone tries to reach a fixed destination, such as a door, but their way is full of obstacles that are created by the bodies of the other members of the group. The protagonist can find themselves climbing over their peers in order to reach their destination. Perpanata explained that this can open up a discussion of what the destination could represent in real life, and what the obstacles stand for, which then leads into improvisation.

Rotterdams Wijktheater workshop

After getting to know each other a bit through arranging ourselves in a line (no talking!) in terms of height and then age, we moved into partner work which awakened our senses (hearing/listening; touch) and our sense of space and position of bodies in space. We then formed groups and were given a page of Chinese script. At first we had to come up with a group image based on our interpretation of the characters on the page. Each group displayed their image followed by whole group discussion. Second, the text was read by a Cantonese speaker but without intonation – she read it flat. The groups tweaked their image and we went round to look at them and discuss them again. Then the performer read the text with feeling. The groups revised their image and went round to show them and discuss them. Then the story was translated to us in full. It was a child's story about a little mouse and a lion. Some groups had almost got that image.

The workshop was really well organised and executed. The exercises were familiar to any theatre maker but the exploration of working without language or a shared verbal language was interesting. What do you work with when you don't understand the language but are trying to construct a story? How do you create a story when you haven't got shared language but you have images, bodies, space, etc.?

Theatre Grodzki workshop

“It was a creation highway where our imagination started to run freely.”

“A joyful atmosphere filled the room.”



Photo: Teatr Grodzki workshop

After watching their beautiful performance, which moved us all deeply, we attended the workshop held by Maria Schejbal together with her group of performers. As people came in, they were greeted by the puppets, operated by the puppeteers. They swept the floor, read the palms of participants, and greeted us. The aim of this workshop was to enable participants to discover the joy of making their own puppets using different materials, such as old newspapers, cloth, scissors, tape, string and sticks.

After a demonstration of basic puppet mechanics, participants were left to create their scenes. In just 20 minutes, all groups created amazing puppets with original stories. Some groups created scenes about love using the life sized puppets. Others made puppets out of cloth or newspaper. One participant created a puppet by wrapping the lower parts of his legs with newspaper and then attaching an upper body that he then animated with his hands.

Each group presented their accomplishments: birds, dogs, a fish, dolls and also props together with their stories. It was truly amazing how many ideas and shapes came out of those common materials. Every single one of us got attached to our puppet. We all experienced the joy of giving life to our own creations. Expressing feelings and ideas through the puppet gives you a lot of satisfaction. Moreover, this joy of working with puppets takes us back to the playful, beautiful memories of our childhood.

Workshop from Finland, Strawberry Land/Blueberry Land, facilitated by Sarah Nelson

Sarah provided some background about issues of migration in Finland, proposing that Finnish culture is very introverted, which makes it more difficult for some refugees to integrate, but that community theatre can be used to explore these differences in culture.

The strawberry/blueberry metaphor is used to express the good part of life (strawberry) and the bad (blueberry). Sarah had a series of cards from which she read out elements of Finnish life. She also had two tables, with pictures of strawberries on one, and blueberries on the other. If we were agreeable to an element, we would pick up a strawberry, and if we found it disagreeable, we should pick up a blueberry.

The groups then divided into small groups, and groups became separated by culture, as we would improvise what our culture was. We were asked to create a statue about a good part of our culture, and a statue about something bad. The workshop continued using improvisation to explore elements of Finnish life.

Expedition Metropolis, Zwischenstation – Eine von Vielen (In Between Places - One of Many)

The performance began outside in the garden. A group sat on a bench, and over a period of time began to sway and embrace each other. Finally one by one, the performers broke apart and then encouraged the audience to move indoors and enter the theatre. Once seated, the performers gave a performance that consisted of physical performance, song, and projected imagery.



Photo: Opening scenes from Expedition Metropolis show, In Between Places

The story was that of a young man who leaves Egypt to find a new life in Europe, but was also based on the performers' own personal experiences of migration. It showed the bewilderment of this young man and of all migrants arriving in a new place. The physical performance made use of a lot of yoga movement, dance, gymnastics and mime. The set was particularly exciting; simple, but effective, making fantastic use of a box, a wardrobe on castors, acting as a luggage trunk. Live music was used throughout. There were also digital projections of illusions, which seemed to depict the dreams of the young man. The play presented a fragmented multi-lingual narrative, and although this meant that most people did not always follow and understand some of the lines, it succeeded in depicting the confused state that people find themselves in when they travel to a foreign land.

Thursday 29th March

Post-show discussion.

Someone asks how many languages there were in the play (eleven!).

Questions begin with the genesis of the play. We learn that the process started last November. The Company already had the story, which is by no means an extraordinary story of migration, and sought to expose it on stage. There was a short script, which mainly worked around the five 'stations' of his life. There was a call for people who had personal experiences of migration to take part. One of the actresses explained that she heard about it through her roommate, and that it was free to take part, so she decided to go along. They developed the script within their sessions,

creating something new, based on somebody's individual experience, but making something universal.

Peter says that he needed more of these touching moments to really connect with the story. There is some discussion about how we decide what to include, and what is really necessary to tell? The cast admit that throughout the process they never really thought about the audience that they were attempting to reach, but were focused on the creative process itself.

Kerrie asks whether the distinct aesthetic of the play was something that all the cast felt comfortable with? Did you create it, or was it the artistic direction that was given to you? The cast respond that they are all very different people, speaking different languages, and certainly not from one 'community' at the start. For some, including one who had never done theatre before, it was easy to work in this way. For others, it was harder and involved adapting; at the beginning one actress describes how she felt quite lost.

The group also discussed the soundscapes that were so important throughout, and helped to mesmerise the audience with the telling of a simple universal story of migration.

Closing Remarks

Please see COAST cooperation blog for FM closing remarks.

These were well received by the audience. Hassan adds to FM's comments, emphasising the humility and caring nature of community theatre, before the festival ends with fond farewells.