

Open Clasp Theatre Company Evaluation Report



Project:
A Song to Sing

Play:
The Space Between Us

Installation:
Songlines

April 2012 – April 2013



“Fabulously perceptive writing. This play should challenge and inform anybody who goes to see it”

Executive Summary

'A bird doesn't sing because it has the answer, it sings because it has a song'
Maya Angelou

Background

This report documents the activities, process and findings from the company's most recent project "A Song to Sing" which resulted in the tour of a play entitled *The Space Between Us*. The project was supported by Arts Council England, the Northern Rock Foundation and Newcastle Fund and is in three phases.

"A Song to Sing" captures the experiences of minority communities, and in particular Arabic women, Czech/Roma women and Czech/Roma and Slovak/Roma young women, British Travellers both living on sites and in houses and women who have been refused asylum and are now destitute and in fear of deportation.

During the project, 116 young women and women attended drama workshops and one to one interviews and directly informed the creation of a professional theatre piece *The Space Between Us* which, along with accompanying workshops toured the North East in March and April 2013. The tour reached over 2,500 people in youth and community centres, schools, further education colleges and mainstream venues in the North East, with the aim of creating a safe space for people to discuss issues concerning racism and discrimination, integration and community cohesion and what it means to have a sense of belonging. The Installation created by 40 women from minority communities in phase 3, Songlines, was attended by 225 people over the 10 days it was originally open to the public and now has a continuing life raising awareness of the challenges faced by women in minority communities at events, exhibitions and conferences.

In addition to the venues mentioned above, Open Clasp worked in partnership with Durham University to co-host a regional conference looking at Asylum, Migration and Community, using *The Space Between Us* as catalyst for discussion. A range of speakers presented papers after the performance, with Anna Musgrave from the Refugee Council giving the conference a National Focus, Georgina Fletcher and Susan Mansaray from The Regional Refugee Forum North East, Ron Hogg, the Police and Crime Commissioner for County Durham and Darlington, plus David Arkless Chairman of ArkLight Consulting and The Future Work Consortium provided a global focus.

The Space Between Us

'The North East of England is in the grip of a storm on a biblical scale. Three months of rain fall in one day, roads are closed, rivers are bursting their banks and the region is submerged under water. Blown from four corners of the earth, four women seek sanctuary, security and refuge. However, all is not as it should be and the women find themselves in a battle, not only with the rising tide and with each other, but with humanity itself'.



The Space Between Us, aims to capture the voices of all the women involved in "A Song to Sing". The play is set during the floods and storms that took place during 2012. Four women take refuge in a local church. On this day, and before the rain falls, each of the women are at a turning point in their lives, Cheyanne, a British Traveller, living on a local site, is set to leave her violent partner. Eman an Arabic woman from Syria, locks horns with her husband, over the civil war and her right to recognition and freedom. 15 year old Eyshan, who is Czech/Roma, is in a relationship with a non Roma boy at school, she is discovered by her brother and threats are made to tell her parents. Zeyna is a Muslim lesbian from Nigeria, in England claiming asylum due to her fears of persecution on account of her sexuality. Plans are made and decisions taken, however the rain, floods and evacuation stop the women in their tracks; as they take refuge, and seek sanctuary, they strive to overcome their differences and connect; sharing food, shelter and space. However on the discovery that there is a man staying in the church, and £200 is missing from his wallet, and rising waters, the women are pushed to the very edges of humanity and back. The space between the women is their lack of knowledge or understanding of each other and what bridges this divide is their shared experience of discrimination, humiliation and injustice.

As the story unfolds you learn about a shared reality minority communities have in relation to discrimination, prejudice, humiliation, lack of respect and commonalities of culture and religion. You learn about the asylum system, the fear of deportation and the criminalisation of asylum seekers. The play exposes the oppressive nature of patriarchy and the need for human rights, respect and equality.

Key findings

Having listened to women from minority communities this is what we learnt:

- 1. English** – With the exception of the Travellers we worked with, not being able to speak English was a barrier to integration. With the Czech/Roma women, and in some respects the Arabic women there was a real lack of confidence to practise speaking English, as when first approached the women would say 'my English isn't very good' or 'I can't speak English' when, with encouragement and support the women can speak some English, but are fearful of getting it wrong. Young women from Slovakia and Czech shared their frustration at not being 'allowed' to speak anything other than English at school e.g. two Czech young women can't talk Czech at school. Compare this with English people in other EU countries being told they can't speak English. In addition to this it's clear that there is little to no access to classes and/or opportunities to practise English, and childcare support. Lack of funding for courses and childcare for community organisations is a major issue.
- 2. Discrimination and racism** – All the women spoke about being discriminated against because of their culture or ethnicity or religion or colour of their skin or sexuality. Most of the groups stated that they didn't experience it all the time, but it was something that formed part of their day to day experiences. Travellers experienced discrimination at school, in the street and when attending fairgrounds, pubs, cinemas and when booking hotels for weddings and parties. Arabic women wearing Hijab shared experiences of the children being harassed at school for wearing Hijab, harassment in the street, attacks and experiencing verbal abuse relating to them being terrorists. Czech/Roma women shared experiences of racism in the Czech Republic, where the majority of Roma communities live in Ghettos, are excluded from jobs and housing and schools are segregated. The women shared stories of the National Front coming into their communities and feelings of terror/fear. There was a sense of the women coming from a country where apartheid was in operation. The Czech/Roma and Slovak/Roma young women also shared stories of discrimination in England, not for being 'Gypsy's' but being 'foreign' or Eastern European. Women from African countries, here seeking asylum, shared stories of racism on the bus, in schools and in the shops. (However the focus of the workshops was mainly on the experience of violence within their own countries and the asylum process in this country).
- 3. Integration** – During the workshops, with the exception of the Travellers, groups shared a desire to integrate. The Travellers stated that they didn't want to be discriminated against, but didn't necessarily want to mix, as culturally Travellers keep to themselves. However all groups shared a desire to be understood, and that understanding would contribute to integration, recognition, community cohesion, equality and respect.

4. **Patriarchy** – With all minority groups worked with patriarchy played a huge part in impinging on women’s human rights, in that the major decisions were made by the men in families and communities. We documented a tension between Honour codes and cultural rules, and human rights codes relating to oppressed women’s rights of equality and freedom.
5. **Gender Violence** – In the majority of the groups, women shared experiences of gender violence, citing Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), domestic violence and rape as crimes committed against them and their families.
6. **Division and Unity** – The majority of the groups we worked with indicated that communities understand what divides and unites us and would welcome initiatives to support further the exploration of the space between us, with continued efforts to understand our difference, and to see them as something that is interesting and of value, rather than something that we need to be fearful of and hate.
7. **Humiliation** – It was clear from the workshops, and one to one interviews that all groups had experienced some form of humiliation. Women shared stories of being belittled during interviews when seeking asylum, racial abuse, being stripped of their Hijab and made to walk into a space where men can see a woman’s hair and/body, a traumatic experience due to cultural codes of covering all areas of a woman’s body, including hair when with men, other than husbands and sons. Women have been raped, experienced FGM, detention, been criminalised and live with the constant fear of forced deportation. Communities are forced to migrate, experience poverty, sexual exploitation, homophobia, racism, discrimination and domestic abuse/violence.

‘I am from Somalia and travelled England from Kenya. When I arrive they sent me to Croydon. I sat on a train, and put my bag on the floor in front of me. The people on the train, they started to put their rubbish in my bag, they thought it was a bin. I was ok with this, they didn’t know it was my bag.’

A woman seeking safety and asylum in England

Demonstrating Impact - Mariama's Story

"We were all very emotional. It's not easy but I felt listened to and supported and it took our friendship to another level. It changed our group and made it stronger".

Mariama is 26 years old. She is originally from Senegal and now lives in Middlesbrough. Mariama came into the UK 2 years ago seeking asylum. Her claims for asylum have been refused and so she is destitute and lives with an ongoing fear of deportation. Mariama is a lesbian which is illegal in her country. Sending her back would have very serious consequences for her.

Whilst Mariama describes the people in the community she now lives in as nice people, during her time in the UK she has experienced discrimination, an example being that asylum seekers are generally housed in properties with red doors meaning that you are identified as an asylum seeker by your location. Mariama describes time spent in one of these properties as "more difficult"

When the project started, Mariama was unsure as to what Open Clasp were doing and why the group were playing games (drama icebreakers) however as the workshops began she could understand why the project was happening and felt able to talk openly and say what she needed to say about her experiences. She reported that her self-esteem and confidence both increased over the course of the project as did her sense of belonging. She rated the experience of seeing the play as 9 out of 10 and felt that others could learn from seeing the play and that she also gained insight into the experiences of others, "I didn't know it is not only asylum seekers who have these problems."

"I didn't want to open myself about my experience because when I got here I told the UKBA my situation and they did not believe me. I thought no one would believe me. Listen to me. But we learnt about each other and listened to each other now I do feel I can talk about it."



"We had freedom to share. It changed something in us. The UKBA needs to see this play."

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Funding and Resources to support English Language Courses -**
Funding, from the state as well as charitable trusts, is needed to support integration as a matter of priority. Organisations need to have the resources to support communities through English courses, as well as create shared activities with English speaking people in order to practise newly learnt skills. These activities need to be supported by crèche facilities. A welcoming and safe space is needed, where people are supported to grow in confidence and self-esteem. Women, who do not have English as their first language, but as their fourth or fifth, enjoy hearing English people trying to speak their language too e.g. Czech and Arabic. This encourages groups to relax and helps demonstrate mutual respect
- 2. Discrimination and Racism –** It is clear that education and knowledge are key to tackling discrimination and racism. During the tour audiences talked about the need for education in schools and through the media. The Equality Act 2010 /Duty makes it an offence to discriminate against those people with protected characteristics, the legality of this law should be made apparent to all organisations providing a public service, and projects like The Space Between Us, organisations such as Show Racism the Red card and ARCH need to be supported to raise awareness in schools and further education colleges. Discrimination of the Roma people in the EU needs to be continually challenged through the European Law on Human Rights. All members of the European Union need to stand united against discrimination of the Roma people, and put pressure on governments to end the discrimination within their countries. Those people who come to the UK to seek asylum should be supported until the claim is proven and/or they are deported. We would urge the government to end the practise of discouraging people seeking asylum in this country through ceasing financial support and accommodation for those people already here who have been refused asylum. Most people claiming asylum don't know which country they are coming too, they are not looking for rich countries but for safety and to be free from persecution. Gypsy/Roma/Traveller community are an ethnic minority and have the right to be protected under the Race Relations /Amendment Act (1976, 2000), this needs to be acted upon in all sections of society. For underpinning information please see the Race Crime and Justice research conducted at Durham University:
<http://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/sass/research/briefings/ResearchBriefing8-RacecrimeandjusticeintheNorthEastRegion.pdf>
- 3. Integration -** As stated already there is a strong desire for integration, equality, recognition and respect. We would support all community projects that can bring people together. Schools need to continue to be active in challenging discrimination and supporting Human Rights, equality and respect. Knowledge is needed to tackle the barriers or prejudice, ignorance and hatred.
- 4. Patriarchy –** An alternative culture norm, one that is based on gender equality should be the goal of society and the wider global community. One that is democratic, equal, with all its citizens having recognition, respect and justice.

5. **Gender Violence** – 'The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women' (CEDAW), adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly, is often described as an international bill of rights for women. Consisting of a preamble and 30 articles, it defines what constitutes discrimination against women and sets up an agenda for national action to end such discrimination. The Convention defines discrimination against women as "...any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field."
6. **Division and Unity** – In order to have unity, you need respect, recognition, equality, fairness, freedom and human rights. We would urge all governments to invest in these assets in order that we have a world where all people are free from oppression and humiliation
7. **Humiliation** – We would urge global and local governments to end the culture of humiliation and honour the human rights of all its citizens, to see the value of a society/world that is based on equality and freedom, respect and recognition. We would urge governments, societies and individuals to visualise a world that is equal, fair and just, and strive to have that as a reality.
8. **Accountability and Responsibility** – It is clear from this project and the research read, that migration, immigration and the need for asylum is a consequence of globalisation. We would urge governments, globally and locally to recognise that the 43 million people displaced are a direct consequence of the actions of governments and business that put profit above the human rights of people. We would urge governments not to view people as human waste, and would urge citizens around the world to fight for social and radical change.
9. **Role of the Arts and Theatre** – The value of the arts is important in listening, translating and sharing the stories, voices and experiences of marginalised people/groups. The Arts help us to think otherwise.

"Blaming poor people or migrants for hardships at the time of economic crisis is not entirely unknown, but it is not intelligent politics in my view". László Andor,

"The reality is that migrants from other EU countries are very beneficial to the UK's economy, notably because they help to address skills shortages and pay more tax and social security contributions per head, and get fewer benefits, than UK workers; that free movement of workers is a key part of the EU's single market; that hundreds of thousands of UK nationals work in other EU countries." László Andor,

Conclusion (by Catrina McHugh, Artistic Director)

The aim of the project was to create a play directly informed by the lived experiences of women from minority communities living in the North East. I have had the honour to work with women who are Czech/Roma, Slovak/ Roma, Travellers, women seeking asylum, those who are refused and experiencing destitution, Arabic women, from Libya, Syria and Kuwait. 116 women from 24 countries, blown from four corners of the earth and living in the North East of England.

Using drama techniques, and one to one interviews, the women shared their stories, views and opinions. Whilst I got to grips with the detail of the women's lives, their journeys and experiences, I also wanted to look at the bigger picture. I wanted to understand why 43 million people are displaced in the world, why one billion women will experience violence. I have to give credit to Prof Maggie O'Neill and her book *Asylum, Migration and Community*. I connected with this book on so many levels, and it gave me the understanding I needed, not only about the why, but also about what we want to achieve for our futures.

During the writing process my head was spinning with the reality of the women's experience of discrimination; I felt disgust at the asylum system and questioned whether theatre can really change the world. I like a challenge, but this script was the toughest challenge I have faced so far.

The women I was working with share space e.g. school gates, community centres and estates but they don't share lives. I felt it was important to highlight space between communities, how we co-exist but have divisions that separate us from any real connection. I started to write monologues. Using direct address, the characters would talk to the audience. The first draft was set at a community cohesion event, bringing everyone together, sharing food and stories of family, history and culture. I thought this would lead to a cracking play. I wrote about a clumsy white woman asking questions about community cohesion, the Hijab and whether Muslims listen to music (this was me). The idea sounded good, but the first draft wasn't.

The creative team entered the research and development process. We created movement, space and a soundscape but it didn't glue together. I got frustrated at the space between the characters, the fact that I couldn't bridge the divide, and wanted to break free of the reality around me. While pulling my hair out I thought about the floods and evacuations, and suggested to the director that the women seek sanctuary in a local pub, the director said a church. I agreed the church had more potential and the script came to life.

Each of the women are at a turning point in their lives, Cheyanne, a British Traveller living on a local site, is set to leave her violent partner. Eman, an Arabic woman from Syria, locks horns with her husband over the civil war and her right to recognition and freedom. 15 year-old Eyshan, a Czech/Roma whose relationship with a non-Roma boy has been discovered by her brother and threats are made to tell her parents. Zeyna, a Muslim lesbian from Nigeria, refused asylum, destitute and fearing deportation, she's on the run from immigration.

On their arrival at the church nothing is how it should be. There are no lights, signs of the presence of a man, police or immigration officer, and they have no phone signal. As the night passes the women connect through the space that divides them, sharing experiences of discrimination, culture and loss. However on discovery that the man's money has been stolen, the women bounce apart. They battle each other, with Zeyna being top of the hit list. Prejudice and racism from within minority communities is exposed. When Zeyna's sexuality is revealed, Eman cannot hide her disgust and threatens her with the police. Zeyna can't go back to Nigeria, and feels she has no alternative but to take her own life. The flood waters enter the church and the women find themselves in a battle to save Zeyna's life and humanity itself. As the water rises and the lights fade, 15yr-old Eyshan vents her frustration at the rules that govern their lives, she wants a new way, one where women are free, safe and have their basic human rights respected.

It was a challenge for the women to survive this night and for me to write this play. It challenged audiences and changed perspectives when toured in March and April 2013. I believe it was a huge success, and all evidence gathered backs this up.

The Space Between Us is a testament to the strength and courage shown when people are faced with the challenges of inequality, injustice and humiliation and the way that they shared their lives, stories and hopes for the future. The project "A Song to Sing" and the play *The Space Between Us* is for all the displaced people, both men and women who are making history but not of their choosing.

No other theatre company in the North East is doing this sort of work. We ask difficult questions, encourage debate, ask for solidarity and agitate for change.

'The participatory and collaborative way that Open Clasp work with women and communities through inclusion, participation and valuing all voices is testimony to the deeply engaged, transformative potential of theatre and Catrina McHugh's artistic direction. I feel privileged to have worked with Open Clasp'. Professor Maggie O'Neill



Cast from left to right: Joana Geronimo, Jessica Johnson, Seda Yildiz and Ioana Tudor. Photography by Keith Pattison

"Although its roots are deep in this region, Open Clasp's work is far-removed from Geordie theatre. It shows a grass roots radicalism and genuine commitment, coupled with professionalism"

British Theatre Guide 2013



The Space Between Us – the feedback from the tour indicates that this show is an excellent tool to raise awareness of minority communities, and their experiences. This awareness raising will support integration and challenge right wing views that breed hatred and discrimination.

Acknowledgements

Thank You

The "A Song to Sing" project and the play *The Space Between Us* could not have happened without the women who worked with us, letting us into their lives and experiences and creating characters which allowed audiences to understand the realities and challenges they face. The groups who took part are:

- Roma Family Group - Riverside Community Health Project
- Time For Me - Tyneside Women's Health
- Arabic Women's Group - West End Women & Girls Centre
- BME & Gypsy/Roma/Traveller Team – Middlesbrough Council
- Metzbridge Caravan Site
- Women's Group - Open Door North East
- Patchwork Girls
- Culture Exchange – Sure Start Children's Centre East

Thank you to them and those women who took part in one-to-one interviews and shared their stories.

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