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# 'Asylum' - theatre for development in Oxford

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### • Introduction

On the outskirts of Oxford is Campsfield Detention Centre which holds people seeking 'Asylum' in Britain. Many locals do not realise that Campsfield exists. 'Asylum' was a Forum Theatre partnership between a small NGO (Oxford Development Education Centre) and an amateur theatre company, financed by an EC grant channelled through Oxfam. Our aim was public education about forced migration and claiming 'Asylum' and hoped to spur audiences into taking action.

### **Making connections, sharing experiences**

The heart of Forum (see Overview) is people's daily experience. We had no direct experience of claiming 'Asylum', so our first hurdle was involving ex-detainees. No-one wanted to risk deportation by being associated with what could be seen as a political protest. We met campaign and welfare groups who support 'Asylum' seekers who put us in touch with ex-detainees.

Ex-detainees did not want to perform, but three people agreed to rehearse with us. Two became very committed to the project. We were a mixed group of about fifteen people: Black and White; aged from thirteen to mid forties; coming from a range of different Asian, West African and European countries and backgrounds.

Apart from the ex-detainees, people knew little about the issues. The communication problems were potentially tremendous. What saved us was Boal's image work. Rather than words we

used physical images. Our bodies symbolised our feelings about freedom and prison. We gently modelled each other to make more complex, silent tableaux, then animated these.

We struggled to understand what being held in Campsfield was like, until the ex-detainees made a series of tableaux taking us through a typical day. Everyone in the group started to make connections with each other. People collected newspaper articles and requested more information; a lawyer came to visit; an ex-prisoner in the group added his experience.

As trust grew we explored the racism bound up in the issues. We began to get a shared understanding of what we were trying to challenge. We realised one key need was to get our audiences to see 'Asylum' seekers as people.

### **Creating a forum theatre performance**

A story evolved of a West African forced to flee after printing political posters who claims 'Asylum' at Heathrow airport and is detained at Campsfield. We wanted to show what he was losing by fleeing. For African participants, song and dance was an inevitable part of this, but Europeans worried about confirming Western prejudices. We quickly learned how vital traditional dance and music was, giving individuals a chance to improvise but binding everyone in a shared understanding of their situation. We realised the forms expressed a kind of community Westerners have largely lost, and we grew more confident.

We combined animated tableaux of village life with protest songs. These techniques took us a long way, but then we hit a block. The 'Asylum' seeker was the central character. We wanted to make more realistic scenes of his

struggle for the audience to join and change. But, the situation was so grave there was little room for action. Most of the audience would not have similar experiences on which they could draw.

Two professionals helped, a Nigerian playwright and a European director. They tightened up the Forum and got us to think again about our audience. We split the performance into two halves, one about the 'Asylum' seeker and one about 'Concerned of Oxford', a person responding to the plight of 'Asylum' seekers. The audience would get a chance to replace 'Concerned'.

We made one scene but felt we needed more. This had to be a fiction grounded in reality if it was going to be a useful educational tool, so we decided to use Invisible Theatre (see Overview) to get the material we needed.

### Using invisible theatre

Three of us visited a local supermarket. One played a newly released 'Asylum' seeker, supported by 'Concerned', the third a prejudiced character. We got a few cheap goods and queued at the checkout. The ex-detainee realised she couldn't buy everything and 'Concerned' offered to lend her money. The third character, also queuing, overheard and protested. They argued as they waited. 'Concerned' said her friend had to flee and couldn't work, the other countered 'she's left her people in the lurch, we can't afford to take in everyone....'. The ex-detainee urged quiet, she didn't want trouble. The scene generated a lot of interest. No-one from the public joined in but a small group gathered and listened intently.

Reactions from other activists were strong and mixed. Some thought it was a wonderful way to give the issues an airing. Others felt furious that people had been manipulated like this. Were we just confirming people's prejudices? For those who took part it was a chance to speak out about something hidden. It did make a good Forum scene in 'Asylum'. One audience intervention had the three characters going for a coffee to discuss the issues.

### Performing 'asylum'

We did six performances of 'Asylum', one as a workshop for educators in Birmingham, one for a Ghanaian and European group in Milton Keynes, the rest public performances in Oxford. Audiences were hard to attract and quite small (between six and thirty) but those who came joined in, stayed talking long after the performance and requested more information. We took publicity from local refugee support groups to all the performances and raised a little money.

I feel that this approach is powerful and worth developing. The ex-detainees found telling their stories surprisingly therapeutic. The theatre company now makes a monthly visit to Campsfield to play drama games with detainees, using techniques that helped us communicate during the project.

### • Conclusion

Development is not just about material or attitudinal change. It should release the power of our hearts and spirits. I think participatory theatre is one of the most powerful tools we have for sharing experiences that might otherwise isolate and divide us.

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