

## MAYA PRODUCTIONS - BABEL JUNCTION - REPORT

**Figures:** Audience 678, Artists 25, Others 24. Performances 18.

### Introduction

The development of this project from an initial idea between Christopher Preston and Suzanne Gorman has been recorded in a previous report, which can be seen [How Babel Junction was written](#)



### Funding

Production: Grants for the Arts (Arts Council England), Awards for All, Royal Victoria Hall Foundation, The Morel Trust, Travis Perkins (sponsorship)

Education: The Trust for London. Lloyds TSB Foundation

Advertising: Broadway Market, L'eau a la Bouche, The Film Shop, Legends Gymn

### Maya Productions

presents

### *Babel Junction*

by

By Akkas Al-Ali, Michael McMillan, Stacy Makishi and Jessica Smerin

Director: Suzanne Gorman Producer/Dramaturg: Christopher Preston

Designer: Paul Burgess Lighting Design: Crin Claxton Sound Design: Valentin Hoffmann

Movement Director: Jack Murphy. Mentor: Janet Steel. Assistant Director: Abigail Graham

### CAST

Pukalani Crow: Peter Clark

Kerim Ahmet: Taylan Halici

Evelyn Brewster Maureen Hibbert

Chava Tammy Mendelson

Fez Richard Sumitro

Off stage voices, apparitions and dreams are played by the company.

Stage Manager Roshni Savjani

Thanks to: Richard Howard for "Black Madonna"; Samia Masood for the wings. Rebecca Whitehead for the dogs. Becky Brown, Lucy Shilton and Youth Create. Set constructed by Morgan Thomas 332 Hackney Road.

Set up Volunteers: Jono Douglas, Ben Fin, Richard Howard, Ashley Morris, Jo Preston, Simon Sprague, Justin Summers

Bullion Room Technician & Lighting Operator Stuart McKean

ASM Rehearsals Kate Wilson  
ASM Performance Rebecca Whitehead

Wardrobe Supervisor Rhys Tucker

Press Emma Schad

Marketing Bridget Hearne

Additional Marketing Asha Joshi

Photography Christopher Preston



The play runs for approximately 2 hours including a 15 minute interval

Babel Junction was workshopped on the 6 th May 2004 at CLR James Library Hall with: Philip Arditti, Lorna Brown, Peter Clark, Daniel Hope & Becky Wright. The play was subsequently given a public rehearsed reading at the Hommerton Library on 14 October 2004 with the following cast: Kal Aise, Philip Arditi, Rachel Sternberg, Peter Clark, Clara Onymere and directed by Suzanne Gorman.

Our thanks to all who have helped us with this project over the past 2 years: Hoxton Hall, Hampstead Theatre, Soho Theatre, Southwark Playhouse, Arcola Theatre, Rio Cinema, Theatre Royal Stratford East, Theatre Venture, Immediate Theatre, Tricycle Theatre, Mark Hone, Phillip Townsend, Lucy McMenemy, Sandra Colins, Ashmeed Soyhoye, Rabbi Herchel Gluck and family, Anita Kane (Hackney Libraries), Loirien Gichuk, Sara Jane Rawlings, Gary Horsman, David Hugo, Rebecca Pirt, Pete Young (Photochats), Delmozene Morris Ley (for the image of Faith)

Special thanks to Board members Anna Birch, Jo Carter and Anu Kumar for their support.

Extra funding from GFA to support Suzanne enabled us to benefit from Kali Theatre Company Artistic Director, Janet Steel as a mentor and Jack Murphy (National Theatre) as Movement Director.

## Rehearsal

Rehearsals began at St. George's Church Bloomsbury for the first two weeks and moved to Hoxton Hall in Hackney for the final two weeks.

After a very positive read-through, our leading actress fell ill and an understudy had to be called in for three days. Writers were reluctant to come into rehearsals and difficulties over representation of an angel onstage became an issue with the result that Samina Baig withdrew her

name from the programme a week before the first preview.



## Production

To overcome some of the sightline problems in the Bullion Theatre, the set design used rostra to create different playing areas, taking full advantage of the stage width and depth. This enabled the action of the play to flow seamlessly from scene to scene. Characters were able to inhabit their spaces even when the focus was on a different location. A series of flats pasted with black and white photocopies of pictures taken locally were then painted, brilliantly recreating the vibrancy of Ridley Road Market. Set construction was carried out by Morgan Thomas in Hackney Road, providing opportunities for two local carpenters to work overtime. The scale of the design however created a challenge. Francis Scott of Community Network Association came to our rescue and provided a railway arch a low cost to paste and paint the flats. The get in consequently took much longer than anticipated and Hackney Empire agreed to waive extra get in and rehearsal costs. Travis Perkins agreed to sponsor the set by providing all materials at near cost price via the local Dalston Branch.



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Valentin Hoffmann created an excellent soundscape using a mixture of his own composition and recorded sounds portraying the neighbourhood of Dalston. The Bullion theatre's sound system, however was inadequate and two minidisk systems had to be hired. The lighting design likewise responded creatively to the script and action of the play. Existing equipment in the theatre had to be supplemented by hiring to realise the design. The three designers responded to the script to highlight and support the magical elements of the play.

Suzanne Gorman was meticulous in her direction, often under difficult circumstances. A strong ensemble was forged with the help of Movement Director Jack Bradley and Suzanne found Janet Steel's mentoring excellent with advice and techniques which will prove invaluable in future work. The actors all gave strong performances and were committed to the play maintaining a high morale throughout the run.

### Education & training

A number of training opportunities arose and after an initial approach to drama schools for stage management placements proved unsuccessful, two recommendations emerged. Kathryn Wilson came via Soho Theatre and was able to source props and assist during the rehearsal period. She starts a stage management course at LAMDA in September. This was Rebecca Whitehead's first experience working in theatre. Having experience making puppets, she made an excellent stuffed dog and animated dog's head. She operated this during the show as well as dressing and operating equipment back stage. Rebecca was an invaluable and enthusiastic company member. Abigail Graham was recommended to us via Immediate Theatre, where she works two days a week as a Youth Drama Worker. Abigail learned a lot during her time as assistant director and was very supportive of the play and Suzanne. Other students also gained opportunities: Rhys Tucker – costumes, Samia Masood – construction of angel wings. Both are students from Motley Design School.



Youth theatres in Hackney were given the opportunity to attend the performance. This offer was taken up by Immediate Theatre, Arcola Youth Theatre and Hoxton Hall Youth theatre. In all 40 young people, some of them at risk of exclusion saw the show. More would have attended had the warm sunny evenings not made "hanging out" more attractive.

Schools Visit: Year nine and ten pupils from: Skinners School for girls, Clapton girls College of Technology and Hackney Free School attended a special matinee performance of the play. 120 pupils and teachers attended. Follow up workshops were undertaken with year nine drama pupils at Hackney Free School and playwriting workshops delivered to Homerton College of Technology to 15 gifted and talented boys from year nine and ten.

After show talk: 12 people stayed for the discussion with writers, actors, director and Producer after the show on Sunday 7 th May. Several of the actors admitted to being more challenged than ever before and Maureen Hibbert cited this as a reason for taking the job. There was praise for the writing, in particular the creation of characters and how we avoided stereotypes.

## **Marketing & Press**

Marketing: London Calling 11.5K leaflets – “Contemporary Culture” and “East London Neighbourhood runs”

Impact Arts Marketing : 5k leaflets distributed to churches, Community Centres, Libraries, Councillors, University & 6 th form Colleges, Hospital, writing circles Alternative venues. 200 A3 posters distributed in Dalston.

Hackney Empire entries in 2 season Brochures January and April. Email circulation and A3 and B1 posters displayed prominently outside the theatre complex. Leaflets in main house.

Maya Productions mailouts to: community centres in Camden, Haringey, Waltham Forest; BME organisations in Hackney, New writing theatres and tour venues nationally and London wide. Poster & leaflet distribution in Broadway Market and Mare Street. 3k leaflets distributed house to house in E8. Email newsletter to over 200 addresses including writers and company.

Asha Joshi – leaflets and posters distributed to community organisations, The Stoke Newington Asian Festival, Shoreditch and Stoke Newington.

Soho Theatre inclusion in season brochure, leaflets on display in theatre and an item in their email newsletter.

Other Email newsletters : Arcola Theatre, Hampstead Theatre, Tricycle Theatre, Southwark Playhouse.

Total leaflets printed & distributed 26,000. Total Posters 250. The design of the leaflet/poster was particularly admired

## **PREVIEWS/INTERVIEWS**

Writernet Bulletin Jan/Feb 2006 Article by Christopher Preston on the writing of the play “Collaborative Theatre or Writing by Committee” with image of writers and director.

Stratford and Newham Express - 26 April – East End Life preview

East London Advertiser — preview

Hackney Gazette – 2 nd March. Hair of the dog – story about our search for stuffed dogs and wigs. 27 April – Up the junction - preview and image of writers and director

CEN – preview

Creative Week – preview

Roots email bulletin

Black Britain – interview with Michael Macmillan

Londra Gazeta – interview Taylan Halici and preview

## **WEBSITES**

A Google search of websites “Babel Junction Hackney” brought up 753 results. Many of these are duplications. Below are the main sites.

BBC London – Mark Shenton

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/london/content/articles/2006/04/03/theatre\\_aprildiary\\_pt2\\_feature.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/london/content/articles/2006/04/03/theatre_aprildiary_pt2_feature.shtml)

<http://www.cida.co.uk/script/details.php?id=3189>

[http://www.cida.co.uk/pages/events/east\\_london\\_cultural\\_calendar\\_101.shtml](http://www.cida.co.uk/pages/events/east_london_cultural_calendar_101.shtml)

[http://www.itzcaribbean.com/babel\\_junction.php](http://www.itzcaribbean.com/babel_junction.php)

<http://www.indielondon.co.uk/Theatre-Review/babel-junction-hackney-empire>

[http://www.clickwalla.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=713&Itemid=43](http://www.clickwalla.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=713&Itemid=43)

[http://www.asiangigs.com/aResults.asp?Type=40#BABEL%20JUNCTION%20\( London \)](http://www.asiangigs.com/aResults.asp?Type=40#BABEL%20JUNCTION%20( London ))

<http://www.redhotcurry.com/calendar/index.html>

[http://www.lbthartsandevents.info/previewlastmail.lasso?mail\\_type=2#item13](http://www.lbthartsandevents.info/previewlastmail.lasso?mail_type=2#item13)

<http://www.realhistories.org.uk/diary.php#BabelJunction>

<http://www.livelistingsmag.com/adults.htm>

<http://theater2.nytimes.com/gst/theater/tdetails.html?id=1125002293532>

[http://www.somethingjewish.co.uk/articles/1837\\_life\\_in\\_hackney.htm](http://www.somethingjewish.co.uk/articles/1837_life_in_hackney.htm)

[www.officiallondontheatre.co.uk/shows/display?contentId=88662](http://www.officiallondontheatre.co.uk/shows/display?contentId=88662)

[www.whatsonstage.com](http://www.whatsonstage.com)

[www.asiansinmedia.org/news/article.php/theatre/1289](http://www.asiansinmedia.org/news/article.php/theatre/1289)

[www.dynamiclisting.com/dl/page.php?page=details&id=L01584373912&PHPS](http://www.dynamiclisting.com/dl/page.php?page=details&id=L01584373912&PHPS)

[www.britinfo.net/theatre/show1987237](http://www.britinfo.net/theatre/show1987237)

[www.hackneyempire.co.uk](http://www.hackneyempire.co.uk)

## **REVIEWS**

Time Out, 3-10 May 2006; Metro, 4 May 2006; Zion One; Asian Gigs; Itz Carriibbean; Black Britain

## **RADIO**

Anita Rani Show, BBC Asian Network - Akkas Al-Ali, 1 May at 11am

Jumoke Fashola, Inspirit Show, BBC London radio - Michael MacMillan, Sunday 22 April at 8.40am

Douglas Williams, Find Your Voice, Haringey City Radio - Maureen Hibbert, Chris Preston, Friday 4 May at 11am

Fringe Roundup, Resonance FM - Recorded extract, chat with Taylan Halici and Peter Clark, Monday 1 May at 8pm

From Emma Schad: "Congratulations on what miracles you performed single handedly- I was really impressed at your all round talents"

## Audience evaluation

Analysis of 117 evaluation forms yielded the following results and conclusions.

Q1 Postcodes: A total of 61 different postcode areas were recorded, mostly from London. So wide ranging were the areas that few conclusions can be reached except that local areas such as E8 (Dalston) provided 16% of the audience, indicating local interest. E8 was also the centre of the posted campaign and door to door leafleting may have had some effect. Second was E5 (Clapton) at 7.7% suggesting a community link with local writer Michael McMillan. N1 (deBeauvoir/Islington) at 5% was third. N16 (Stoke Newington) and E9 (Hackney/Homerton) were disappointing

Q2 How did you find out about the play? 67.5% cited word of mouth. 13% had seen a poster, 10% had read an article or review, saw a season brochure or looked up a web site. This left a meagre 10% having seen a leaflet. While under 2% saw an advert or listened to a radio programme.

These results call into question the value of traditional leafleting as a marketing strategy but also indicates that email and the web is not as effective as supposed in spite of it's economy.

Q3 over 73% had attended a similar event. These people were regular theatre goers and only 13% were new audience to theatre.

Q4 Supporting the high score of "Word of Mouth" in Question 2, the most important reason for attendance was being invited by someone, Supporting the Performers and writers came second. The three lowest scores were Press recommendations(8 th), Professional Involvement (7 th) and Venue support (6 th). Interestingly the least influential reason for attendance was "Living locally" with press recommendation also scoring highly in this area.

## Other reasons for attending

Interested in Hackney & culture & Faith. Picture on Poster. Am a writer & thought the project sounded interesting. Visiting from Canada. Living in Hackney – interested in locality/diversity. I love multicultural shift & hate mainstream theatre. Son is the designer, Interested in cultural theme. Interested in fringe theatre & issues surrounding multiculturalism. I temporarily live locally and wanted to see something about the area as a cultural experience. The play – Babel Junction. Subject sounded interesting – local relevance. Looked and sounded interesting. Wanted to support the director. To gain ideas.

## Q5 The Experience

	Advance Information	Box Office Staff	Atmosphere & facilities	Performance & material	Value for money	Access
Excellent or good	43.5%	74%	60%	81%	65%	59%
Average	27%	20%	29%	19%	28%	26%
	11%	6%	10%	7%	8%	7%

Poor or  
V.Poor

## COMMENTS

The performers were brilliant.

I really enjoyed the play. It was stimulation & intelligent.

I really enjoyed the performance. I hope to see & hear more of the performers

I've seen worse in the west End – it is well executed.

Very good performances – touching & real – shame about the promotional side.

Good performances but pity so poorly attended.

Powerful.

Very enjoyable – thank you and well done!

Lively and fascinating mixture of religions etc – I like that fact that it's set in Hackney.

Maureen Hibbert is very good.

A good staging. Writing is strange, but refreshing and unorthodox.

Good play, but took time to get the storyline.

Some very important issues. Enjoyed it/very interesting. Well acted.

Interesting, colourful, excellent idea, very well acted and staged.

Really enjoyable play.

Prefer Empire – Bullion has old seats

Very strange – Good the way the main character goes into different dimensions.

At half time I couldn't work out what was the point trying to be made- maybe it will come together in the 2 nd half – it did!

Full of energy: interesting ideas.

Q6 asked respondents about their cultural activities over the last two years. As expected 86% had been to see a play or drama second was Attending an art Gallery or museum at 78% followed by Film at 71%.

Q7 Ethnicity: White British 34%, Caribbean 18%, Other white 11%, African 7%, Asian 6%, Mixed Race 5%, others 4%, other black 2.5%.

Disappointingly no Turks were identified and only one Kurd, in spite of having a Turkish character in the play. A number of "White Other" respondents identified as Jewish.

Q8 Age: Just under a third was between 25 and 34. A fifth of the audience were in the 35-44 age brackets. These do not include the schools matinee or the youth drama attendees who were not evaluated in this way.

Q9: 10% of the audience identified as disabled. There was no signed performance of the play due to funding unforthcoming.

## **Hackney Empire**

Having developed and set the play in Dalston it was important artistically to present it in a Hackney Venue. The Empire were very supportive in programming Babel Junction in the Bullion theatre, particularly as they do not have regular performances in this space and are constrained by their Board not to make any losses on the venue. The space itself has great potential and full use was made of the stage area. It was however a difficult venue in a number of ways, most of which we knew about in advance. The understanding was that the theatre was limited in its resources and by what was available on site. Drawings and written specifications are not available so, for example, we had no details on the load limit of the grid and the large speakers could not in the end be moved. To present the play with a high standard of lighting and sound, considerable equipment had to be hired which was not entirely anticipated. Added to this is a sightline problem with the raked seating. This is a fantastic space which is worth developing into a mid scale venue. It had the right atmosphere for the play which complemented the setting and set.

The staff were extremely helpful, in particular the Bullion Theatre Technician who operated the lighting for the show. Unfortunately there were no resources for selling programmes which was carried out by Maya Productions.

The Marketing department was particularly supportive, with good poster visibility, season Brochure presence, inclusion in adverts in the Hackney Gazette.

## **Photographic Exhibition**

Christopher Preston's accompanying photographic exhibition "Faith in Hackney" was presented in the Marie Lloyd Bar and the Bullion Theatre Foyer. 22 Frames of Black & white prints depicting churches, mosques, synagogues and other places of worship in Hackney. A Caribbean evening at St. Marks Church Dalston was also depicted.

## **Conclusions**

This was an ambitious project from the start and stretched our capacity to the limit at times. The nature of the play and the writing demanded a mid scale approach, but this was not matched by audience attendance. In particular the failure to attract new local audiences was disappointing. There are many "excuses" ranging from the Bullion Theatre not being known as a new writing venue to the lengthening daylight hours. Although the reviews were reasonably good, and we were "Critic's choice" in The Metro, they were not good enough to encourage theatregoers east. The play itself was problematic and flawed though the company were able to celebrate this aspect and Suzanne Gorman's excellent direction combined with excellent acting and design forged the piece into a complete experience.

It is curious that an artistic response to the large questions facing us today and highlighted daily in the Media should be largely ignored.

The Board of Maya productions believe that this is the sort of work we should be doing and have been full of praise for the production. A symposium is suggested by way of a follow up and evaluation exercise to examine working collaboratively in a multicultural environment.

Christopher Preston

Creative Producer

May 2006