

## REPORT ON PHASE 1 SCRIPT DEVELOPMENT

### THE AIM

To bring together five London based writers of different faith or cultural backgrounds to collaborate in the experimental composition of a new play set in Hackney. The play should explore how culture, religion and faith shape our 21 st century perceptions and experience.

### RECRUITMENT

A writer's brief was circulated primarily by email detailing essential skills and interests:

- Have an understanding of your cultural and religious background. You do not have to be practicing this faith and the play will not necessarily be about religion as such.
- A willingness to collaborate by contributing to and learning from the group.
- Have an interest in cultural diversity.
- Be available from May – July for one day a week plus writing time.
- Have one play either produced or read professionally. This could be a recommendation from a script reading service.

And desirable skills & interests:

- A knowledge and interest in Hackney
- Computer literate with email.

Details of how to apply were sent to: The Writer's Guild, Writernet and posted on our website. In addition, theatre organisations interested in diversity were notified. These included Tamasha, Nitro, Talawa, Kali, Yellow Earth, Oval House and Theatre Royal Stratford East. In addition, new writing theatres were contacted which included Royal Court Young writers, Arcola theatre and Soho Theatre. A number of writers known to us were also sent information and encouraged to apply.

We received over 70 enquiries by email and information packs with full details of the project were sent out. Writers were asked to apply with a letter explaining their interest in the project, a c.v. and a scene. Applications could be by post or by email.

Enquires were received from as far a-field as Tasmania.

### SELECTION

44 applications were returned which were then scored using the following criteria: culture and religion, collaborative potential, professional work, submitted scrip and interest in Hackney. 20 writers were selected for the next round.

Two 3 hour workshop sessions were held at Chats palace which aimed to inform us of the writer's potential and which would be enjoyable and beneficial to all the applicants. After introductions from Christopher Preston & Suzanne Gorman, candidates were asked to work in pairs and tell their story to illustrate their cultural or faith background. Each person then introduced their partner and retold their story.

After a short talk about the project and what we were looking for the second exercise was called Accept & Build – storytelling in pairs with a different partner. A story is built up between two people with the object to create the most outrageous story.

“Instant Character” used a stick figure as a starting point. Each writer presented a character followed by a hot seat session with instant answers. Applicants were then asked to write a short scene using this character.

Applicants were then scored on their workshop performance for collaboration, creativity, dramatic technique, culture and religion. To select the final group consideration was given to a gender balance, representation of the major religions and ethnic groups found in Hackney.



The final group was: L to R Suzanne Gorman (Director) Stacy Makishi, Michael McMillan, Samina Baig, Jessica Smerin & Akkas-Al-Ali.

## THE WORKSHOP PROCESS

The first weekly session began with procedures for working together and having agreed a process for this, we discussed faith, culture and religion. This was valuable time spent but put the work plan slightly behind. Session two became entirely about landscape, with a “map” of Hackney and location photographs. The diverse communities found in the boroughs were listed and issues and themes discussed. A designer joined us for session 3 and talked about design in relation to the script and the landscape. Reports back from visits to community groups and religious leaders created ground for characters to develop.

Visits made included: PTA meeting, Simon Marks Jewish Primary School. Laurie Rosenberg, Headmaster, Simon Marks Jewish Primary School. Tina Dobrin, Social Worker, Hackney Bearsted Centre. Rabbi Hershel Gluck, Co chairman Muslim Jewish Forum. Ismail Amaan Co chairman Muslim Jewish Forum. Tali Lowenthal Headmaster, Lubavitz Girls School. Sonia Muscovitch, Acting Head of Centre, Somers Children & Family Centre. Rev. Wall St. Marks Church in Dalston. Hackney Methodist Luncheon Group Hackney Lesbian and Gay Community. Shacklewell Lane Mosque Day-Mer Turkish & Kurdish Community Centre Stamford Hill Muslim Centre Turkish family (friends) Kingsland Basin Hackney Markets – particularly Ridley Road Cinema visit (Turkish Film) Pupil referral unit Mare St.

One exercise which created a legacy for the play was to put the characters in a scene with a historical/religious character, from which several of the scenes in the play originated.

By the end of May, a collection of characters was emerging and developing and we continued through June discussing possible scenes to be written, reading new scenes and discussing character interactions and journeys. The process of reading and rereading scenes continued until by mid July when we had a rough workshop draft. 5 Actors were cast and we spend a whole day

reading and workshoping the play. We had intended to invite Rabbi Gluck and a board member to an afternoon reading, but decided that the writing was in too rough a state to be shown and our time would be better spent improvising with the actors. The Actors were: Philip Arditto, Lorna Brown, Peter Clark, Daniel Hope & Becky Wright. At a follow up workshop the team assessed the work so far and rewrites and extra scenes assigned. Writers used email to swap scenes and make adjustments to their characters.

Christopher and Suzanne then began the task of editing and paring down the script to make a second draft ready for rehearsal in October. By scheduling two rehearsal days 6 days apart writers were able to make further adjustments and cuts before the second rehearsal day and public rehearsed reading after which a third draft of the play was produced.

We were fortunate to have the use of Homerton Library Hall for both rehearsal and performance which was presented as part of Black History Month.

### **From Director Suzanne Gorman**

Overall I think the project has been a very positive and exciting experience, to have all those diverse and creative people in one room working so well together to produce the play was a pleasure to be part of on both a professional level and a personal one.

Key to the success of the project was in putting the right group of people together, it was good that people had different experiences, ages and also disciplines, for e.g. Stacey's contribution as a performance poet who uses a lot of visual material really did bring something different into the group. The strength of the project lay in us all sharing thoughts, ideas, skills, and faiths in a very positive way and then very clearly channelling this into the play, which I think is a reflection of the process.

The workshop process of working towards the first draft worked pretty well from my perspective. We created balanced workshops that clearly moved the process and ultimately the play on each week. There was a clear process that was flexible enough to respond to the needs and wants of the writers within the schedule.

Getting to know each other happened very quickly and was clearly an important part of the process; a less open group may need to spend more time at the beginning finding out about faiths, and each other.

Developing the characters worked very well and the task of finding a connecting storyline was one of the most challenging aspects of the process as each character could have had their own play. We worked through these challenges pretty well and I think discussion was key to this process. I do think we set up an environment that was receptive to people working and discussing work very openly and this was a positive thing, however, we sometimes got into circular discussions and I think that in future we (leaders) should be a little more aware of when its right to close discussions and move on, rather than carry on but not always get anywhere.

Moving towards creating a coherent and well balanced piece of theatre based on the lives of the five characters is still proving to be quite challenging. I think both a strength and weakness of the play at this stage is its rich characters and storyline.

The first practical workshop with the actors was very important. Hearing the works read by the actors, not the writers really highlighted the strengths and the weaknesses of the draft and their input through improvisation was vital to the development of the next draft. It was important at this stage not to open the reading to the public as the play wasn't at a level for public scrutiny.

I would have liked to have had a few more sessions between the workshop day and the 2nd/3rd drafts. Although I think we worked well emailing writers and us shaping things as they came in, but it would have been good to meet a little bit more frequently as a group.

I did find shaping the play as we did an interesting part of the process, not one that I had initially

expected quite so much of, but it really did make me feel part of the creative process in different way than just being the facilitator. I liked that.

I think doing the second workshop and public reading was also a very vital part of the process. The first day's work really did enable some good edits and exploration of the text. The reading enabled us to hear the text in front of an audience, and also to hear the feedback from the audience and actors. As a practitioner I don't want to create work in a vacuum and so I think all the points where we connected with the community groups, and our potential audience are very important aspects of the process. As a theatre practitioner living and working in Hackney I like to create work that connects with, reflects and explores the community within which I live in. Babel Junction has enabled me to do this and to broaden my understanding of different faiths and cultures.

As a director I have got lots out of the process. First of all I think that just having the opportunity to develop a project that has been buzzing around in my head for years was very important to me because as a freelancer it can be difficult to find the support for projects. I think weaving my initial idea together with Christopher's experience of collaborative writing projects gave Babel Junction a very solid foundation and has enabled me to learn new approaches to creating work that I will use in the future.

I have been able to use and refine my skills as a director of new writing and working with five writers rather than one has meant learning a whole new way of collaborating to create theatre work. I now have established relationships with five writers with whom I can now work with in the future.

As Education and Workshop Officer at Soho Theatre I run courses for young writers to develop playwriting skills. Babel Junction has given me useful tools that I will employ in my work at Soho Theatre.



Director Suzanne Gorman (L) Philip Arditti as Kerim (R)

**Comments on the rehearsed reading:**

**Anna Birch** – Board Member. The reading had a coherent quality that is astonishing since the writing team is made up of five different individuals. The dramaturgical and directorial leadership must have been of a consistent high quality to achieve these results. The content was diverse and contemporary with a selection of magic realism images whose visual impact is very welcome but rarely found in new writing. The potential visual impact and diverse content of Babel Junction is therefore something that is hard won and very much in line with the policy of Maya as a production company.



Rehearsed Reading L to R: Rachel Sternberg, Clara Onyemere, Peter Clark

**Anita Kane** – Principal Librarian Development. Hackney Libraries would like to thank Maya Productions for putting on Babel Junction, a truly innovative and absorbing performance in the Homerton Library Hall, last week as part of our contribution to Black History Month.

Over 65 people came to see the play and take part in a lively discussion with the writers about the themes aired, the process of writing and performing. The evening was a great success, one which I hope will be repeated with future collaborations. Babel Junction was the culmination of a series of workshops to develop the ideas and draft the play and then premiered before a live audience – I think the actors and writers got as much out of the occasion as the audience themselves. Great night out!



Rehearsed Reading: L to R. Kal Aise, Rachel Sternberg & Philip Arditti

**Ashmeed Sohoje** – New writing manager Theatre Royal Stratford East. Really enjoyed Babel Junction and the ambition and theatricality of the show and also as mentioned by the audience at the time the coherent voice of the writing.....

I think to get as far as you got is a real achievement working with 5 writers in the way you did. Really got a sense of the complexity of living in a multi-faith / multi-cultural society such as Dalston. So well done all.

**Christopher Preston – Dramaturg/Producer** 19 November 2004

For me one of the key factors in creating a piece of theatre art is in assembling the right team of practitioners and the time and effort that went into the selection process in this case has paid off. My thanks to Board Member, Jo Carter who suggested selecting the final group through workshop. Suzanne and I were so much more able to discover writers' potential for collaboration and creativity than through individual interviews. Writers got an opportunity to have fun, learn some new skills and work together. This method was also more time effective than if we had interviewed everyone separately and we learnt more about their skills.

I was concerned to include representatives from the major world religions and to reflect those practised in Hackney. I was therefore delighted to be able to include two writers with Islamic backgrounds. All the writers came to the project with very different skills and knowledge. In addition to Stacy Makishi's visual and poetic talents already mentioned, it was good to be able to discover the young Asian male perspective from Akkas; Samina was invaluable for her research, editing skills and commitment to economy while Jessica, also a dedicated researcher was strong on structure. Michael's writing is both prolific and creative offering us a wide choice.

For me a strong structure for collaborative writing is emerging and there are a number of additions I would make in future. More time was needed by the group at the start to get to know each other and we also needed more time to learn about the faiths represented in the group. If we had been able to identify what each writer wanted to say about their faith background more strongly that may have helped us later in the process. My commitment to landscape as a starting point for writing remains firm and the work we did with communities and getting to know Hackney was invaluable. I would definitely devote even more time to character as the diversity and richness of what was on offer made getting to know them a challenge. Once the process of writing scenes began there was a period where ideas were flying around in a bit of a stew. I resisted the temptation to make plot decisions too early as so many ideas were being thrown into the centre that we may well have lost some. Although this was a time when discussions went around in circles and the play refused to emerge I think in the end that worked. I was also very relieved that the writers were happy to rewrite scenes written by others and happy for that to happen to their own work. This was not my experience with the previous collaborative play. The use of email and editing on computer made another huge difference to the process and allowed me and Suzanne to edit and exchange scripts easily. We scheduled an extra session in between the first and second drafts and two sessions could be anticipated in future as well as meetings prior to rehearsal.

Editing the script for me was a great learning experience both as a dramaturg and as a writer as I felt able to influence the continuity of style and economy in the dialogue. I was pleased that the writers appreciated this contribution. Suzanne was a great source of inspiration and made such a valuable contribution to every aspect of the project that I really felt that we made a very strong team.

After the rehearsed reading I was very moved by the encouraging comments from the audience and valued the criticisms. The play is much more spiritual than I had realised just by reading it and I think we have produced a very important piece of work though a unique process, both of which I hope will reach a wider audience.

There is potential for the publication of the play-text to accompany a production along with a fuller account of the process we went through.

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