



EURO
CITIES



Intercultural theatre project in Belfast

Telling stories from different cultures

Belfast city council is supporting a small theatre company with an innovative drama-based project that highlights the experiences of migrants in the city. The 'Arrivals' trilogy, coordinated by Terra Nova Productions, brings actors from different backgrounds on stage to explore what happens when people from Northern Ireland interact with those who were not born and raised there.

Untold stories

The project originated from the recognition that the main theatre stages in Northern Ireland still reflect the dominant cultural narrative: that is to say white, male and heterosexual. In effect, theatre goers in Northern Ireland were not seeing characters reflecting the diversity of Northern Ireland's population. As a young and relatively new theatre company, Terra Nova Productions saw this as an opportunity to broaden Northern Ireland's theatrical offering.

A 2011 census revealed that 11% of the Northern Irish population was foreign born, so why weren't these stories being seen or heard on stage? Terra Nova's artistic director felt that the problem stemmed from a lack of confidence and connections, and after much debate, the Arrivals trilogy was born in 2014.

The trilogy culminates in Arrivals 3D, a truly innovative piece of theatre. Aimed at small audiences of 20-25 people, it is a combination of immersive theatre performance and interactive workshops. The production explores the true story of an intercultural couple, and takes place in the room with the audience rather than on stage. After the performance, the audience is asked to decide what the couple should do next, and a discussion led by an intercultural facilitator invites the audience to consider the consequences of their decisions.



The process definitely pulled me out of my comfort zone. The challenge was being pushed to think on your feet and come up with instant ideas you then share with the group. I was inspired by the participants' courage, honesty and openness in sharing their stories. A reminder that at the heart of all these discussions about interculturalism are real human beings - living, loving, suffering.



participant, Arrivals trilogy

cities in action

April 2016

where: Belfast, UK
what: culture, social affairs
when: 2014+

Leading up to Arrivals 3D, the first part of the trilogy focused on a series of storytelling empowerment workshops engaging community contacts who work with Belfast's new immigrant communities. These workshops allowed Terra Nova to reach out to people who wanted to tell their stories, and in the meantime it put out a call for writers keen to support intercultural theatre. As a result, they hired writers from a mix of backgrounds, including Northern Irish, Hong Kong Chinese, Romanian and British Asian. The writers were asked to work with the actors already cast rather than coming with a preconceived story. This developed into five scripts that formed the basis of a theatre production that toured Northern Ireland.

The second part of the trilogy brought together community members with professional artists to develop stories and scripts. An intercultural steering group was set up to support the project, and provide a small financial contribution and mentoring. This allowed emerging artists to prepare poetry and musical pieces that enhance the theatre performance.

A successful legacy

The project is currently touring Northern Ireland, and has already engaged around 400 people through 90 workshops with intercultural artists. The two theatre performances have attracted around 1,200 audience members, while the third interactive part shows the need to engage the audience fully in the story.

Because of the success of the Arrivals Trilogy, Terra Nova has been granted £95,000 (€120,000) by Belfast City Council and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland to write and stage an intercultural performance of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, which will tour from April 2016. The inspiration for this project will come from the Arrivals Trilogy, and the group hopes to attract around 300 community members.

Reaching out through partners

Terra Nova engaged a wide range of partners to produce the Arrivals trilogy. They include cultural community organisations such as ArtsEkta and African and Caribbean Support Northern Ireland, which contributed learning and expertise on culture and traditions, as well as workshop support. The children's charity Barnardos offered assistance to the project,



including facilitating childcare arrangements to allow people to take part. Other support came from community groups that welcome and support new migrants, and Libraries NI, which provided meeting space, marketing support and research material.

Working with community groups helped Terra Nova to overcome one of the main challenges, which was engaging people from different communities and boosting their confidence. Once a few brave participants were convinced to take part, the group grew mostly through word of mouth.

Other challenges included breaking down barriers to encourage people to tell their stories. The group got around this by trying different methods, including new venues and smaller groups. The workshops were continually tailored based on feedback and they used two or three day masterclasses to engage in greater depth with participants. This resulted in bonding and trust between participants, and helped create lasting friendships.

The project is funded through several channels, including the city council, central government, and a foundation.



You empower people as artists, you grow skills and you get them excited about their creative development. Theatre already creates an imaginary space, one that we all agree to believe is real, so it's comparatively easy for us to make that imaginary space a neutral or new 'third space' where people come together from different cultures.

representative, Terra Nova

