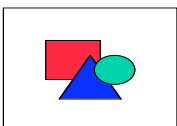


Company Report for
the pilot project of

Mouth Piece

February 2005



Polygon Arts - shaping change

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Summary

In the summer of 2004, Polygon Arts ran the pilot project of *Mouth Piece* with the support of the Arts Council and the Peabody Trust. The project explores, through theatre, issues around language and identity and aims to create a performance that is rooted in the experiences of immigrants to London. In the pilot project, workshops were run over 3 weeks with about 100 participants from four different, immigrant community groups, during which time the company of four actors both researched stories, ideas and images and facilitated participants to explore these themselves through drama games and exercises. This began a dialogue in which elements and phrases of the theatrical language of the performance were created and negotiated and through which the actors and participants could together look into and think about their identities in a multicultural society. The final performance toured to five community venues in North London, reaching around 200 people, the majority of whom were not able to attend other theatre for financial or cultural reasons. It was very apparent that more time could have been spent with the community groups, both in the workshops and the performances, developing their awareness of the subject matter and their experience of using theatre to communicate this awareness. However, the project was very well-received and counted as a success, with several recommendations for a future version.

Aims

- to explore new ways of making theatre and develop its potential as a universal language
- to make ways of finding and reaching new audiences
- to engage directly with the idea that theatre both makes and is made in an ongoing dialogue between audience and performers and that this dialogue both changes and affirms their diverse and shared identities

In detail:

An important distinction is made by many theatre and arts companies working in community contexts between *multicultural* and *intercultural*, the latter being preferred over the former as it describes the creative space *between* diverse groups as opposed to their separate creative spaces. It is in this intercultural frame that the project *Mouth Piece* is perceived, aiming specifically to establish a network of communication that crosses language and cultural boundaries and promoting theatre as the space-between where the language of this communication can be found and developed. It does not seek to meld performance styles or explore existing theatre languages but rather to find its own through a dialogic process and to do so with its audience, so that it carries the sounds of their voices and the codes of their lives. At the same time that its goal is to make an informed, professional theatre, it is also aspiring to engage directly those people with whom it is made. Their involvement should be a liberating and instructive experience for them as well as for the actors, a chance to explore their own stories and to discover connections with others that they can take into their real world. So, the theme of *Mouth Piece* is language and identity – the interchange between them – but it is also an exercise of both of these – creating a new language and (perhaps) with that re-creating identities. As an aesthetic language (and not one that is that suited for use in the street!) it should not compromise or alter existing identities but, (maybe only temporarily – in the theatrical moment), re-locate them in a new, shared ‘intercultural’ space. Moreover, this is space to be inhabited by the actors as well so that they are not outsider-artists with their own message to give but insiders bearing the message, the shaped object of ‘their’ (the participating) community. Their transformation is phrased by the title of the project, in the term *mouthpiece*, which manifests the duality of both the receiving technology of information and the representative person for a group and the movement from one to the other.

Objectives

- to cast a company of four performers, specialising our search in actors who were themselves first or second generation immigrants to the UK and who had experience in devising theatre work. Knowledge of facilitation methods was also regarded as a useful but not essential quality. Auditions were to be in the form of a group workshop-audition, during which participants would direct exercises and devise presentations in groups of varying sizes. To be followed up with one-to-one interviews.
- 4 community groups (out of about 10 that were interested) were identified for participation based on their variety of backgrounds: the Enfield Greek-Cypriot Association, Haringey Chinese Centre (English Learning Class), Shano Kurdish Dance Group, and UK Ethnic Minorities Partnership, Edmonton (English Language School for Teenage Asylum Seekers and Refugees). To offer each group three workshops, over three weeks. Participation to be on a voluntary basis and with no specifications made, but a group of at least ten preferred.
- run workshops with these groups which would facilitate their (theatrical) expression of experiences, feelings, and thoughts about being in the UK as a speaker of another (first) language and harbouring varying ideas of home.
- to rehearse a devised performance rooted in the stories and visual texts generated by the participants during the workshops
- to tour and perform the piece in the same community centres and to others plus one theatre venue
- to establish a dialogue with these audience members to further develop a shared awareness of the issues, feelings and experiences associated with the theme of the project and strengthen their identity as a heterogeneous group
- to further the production and theatrical knowledge of Polygon Arts, expand our personnel, develop their expertise and form a relationship with community groups – a potential source of participants and audience in North London.

Outcomes

Casting

- 🌈 All auditionees were asked to lead an exercise with the whole group and then, working in differently sized groups, prepare short presentations all of which took a different angle on the subject and idea of language and demanded different performance styles.
- 🌈 In the end, the actors were chosen for their physical theatre and group work/ devising experience, meeting the challenge of the theatre creation over the ease of facilitating workshops.

In detail:

30 actors, representing 22 ethnic or national identities, were auditioned for 3 roles. The difficulty, however, of attracting agents to a small-scale, community-based theatre project – all the elements that are in opposition to mainstream, commercial ventures! (despite the offer of a salary at Equity minimum) – made finding the actors a hard task and most had to be approached directly. Interestingly, there was very good feedback from all auditionees, both in terms of the project and, more specifically, in the style of auditioning that brought out a broader range of talents and allowed for a creative input. All participants were asked to lead an exercise with the whole group and then, working in differently sized groups, prepare short presentations all of which took a different angle on language and demanded different performance styles.

Two sessions were held: one at the Drill Hall and one in our rehearsal space in Kings Cross. Initially, it was hoped that actors would speak a language of at least one of our community groups, so that they could take an interpreter's role where necessary. However, using this as a principal criterion had to be weighed up with skill and experience. In the end, the actors were chosen for their physical theatre and group work/ devising experience, meeting the challenge of the theatre creation over the ease of facilitating workshops. Those selected were a Polish actor (Konrad), a Japanese actress (Sachi) and a second generation Indian actress and choreographer (Rajni). The fourth acting member, due to budget restrictions, was the fourth generation immigrant, Jewish director (Joel).

Workshops¹

- 🌈 The initial workshop was designed to be as conducive for non-actors as possible, but still encouraging theatre's sense of play, physical expression, and story-telling.
- 🌈 It was important that the games would build both individual and group confidence.
- 🌈 Each workshop had to be delivered differently, according to each group's needs and interests.

In detail:

Planning for workshops began immediately and was fraught with dangers! Each community group – the final constituents (numbers, age, knowledge of English etc.) of each not fully known at the start of the project – was different to the next. The initial workshop was designed to be as friendly as possible for non-actors, but still encouraging play, physical expression, story-telling and opening up of the senses. Many of the exercises were derived from Boal's *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* but drew on particular versions known to the facilitators. It was important that they would both build individual and group confidence.

We also discovered problems with arranging our full set of workshops. Specific days had been selected in advance for each group according to their availability but in the end they were not always available even at those times. The result was that we managed to deliver two workshops with three of the groups and three with just one – UK Ethnic Minority Partnership. This last met strictly in a regular way as it was a school and the group members remained largely consistent. The Kurdish Arts Group were invited to perform in Bath and thus had to miss our second workshop with them, whilst the other groups had other community events that took precedence. These two last groups also were less consistent as groups and consequently the participants changed distinctly between the two sessions. Workshop numbers ranged from 8 to 35. This made both planning and learning (for both actors and participants) much more difficult. Furthermore, each workshop had to be delivered differently, according to each group's needs and interests.

¹ We have video footage of all the workshops but unfortunately very few stills. Those that are included are from the UK Ethnic Minorities Group and from Shano, Kurdish Dance Group.

- The exercises were first used with the Enfield Greek-Cypriot Association as an introduction to a physical performance style and to allow the participants to describe and discuss aspects of their world in a new and objectifying way.
- There was much playful disagreement about the images that were being built up, especially between female and male, older and younger generations, single and married – and much amusement at the many positions the actors had to take up! – before a consensus was reached.
- One lady, Penny, seemed only to want to talk in Greek to the person next to her, until we asked the interpreter of the group to translate. From this point on, she took an active role in directing the actors, first through the interpreter but then standing up and performing herself.

In detail:

The first workshop was with the Greek-Cypriot group, whose average age was late 60's and where no-one had any theatrical experience or inclination. The group of 30 or so participants sat in a large circle and we explained (with the help of a translator) why we were there and what we hoped to do. People had come – mainly in couples – out of interest rather than a burning desire to participate and thus, having done some introductory games sitting in the circle, we decided to turn the participants into directors using the facilitators as their cast. One facilitator 'joked' the exercises, encouraging the audience to direct the others into sculpted images of words and places. These words and places were both given by the joker and suggested by the participants and included such examples as Home, Language, Love, Work, Cyprus. There was much playful disagreement about the images that were being built up, especially between female and male, older and younger generations, single and married – and much amusement at the many positions the actor-facilitators had to take up! – before a consensus was reached. The best moments were when members of the participant-directors stood up to show or even perform the image that they wanted depicted. Unlike Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, this exercise was not used to reveal oppressions in everyday life. It was used as an introduction to a physical performance style and to allow the participants to describe and discuss aspects of their world in a new and objectifying way. For the actor-facilitators, it was a physical experience of these things and a first opportunity to discover the language as a means of communication with their audience. It also revealed ways that the participants negotiated voice: in some couples one or the other would speak in English on the behalf of their partner, sometimes because of a shyness in English and sometimes as this was their accepted roles: "I know the language well enough for you not to speak." One lady (Penny) would not speak English in the group, although she did privately after the session. At first, she seemed to only want to talk in Greek to the person next to her, until the joker asked the interpreter of the group to translate. From this point on, the lady took an active role in directing the actor-facilitators, firstly through the interpreter but then by standing up and performing herself. She became the most enthusiastic and supportive member of the group. At the end of this first workshop, one member of the group – a published poet – read out some of his poems in Greek, bringing a new interest to the activity and providing him with an open and interested audience. The workshop ran for about three hours.

- With the teenagers at the UK Ethnic Minorities Partnership, relying on the Image Theatre games and techniques of Augusto Boal worked as an effective starting point but it was more difficult to make transformational changes than anticipated.
- It was possible, however, to set clear tasks for presentation and through these familiar experiences of misunderstanding and miscommunication were explored with more humour and a little less violence
- As a first experience of this kind of work, there was a great deal of good play between the participants that seemed to allow all to be included.

In detail:

The next group we worked with was the UK Ethnic Minority Partnership ESOL class. Unlike the other groups this class consisted of teenagers from several different countries who knew each other a little from school only. They were a very responsive and active group, however, and ready to try something a little different. Ostensibly, the teacher would have liked the sessions to feed directly into English language learning but she did not in fact put any pressure on us to focus on that and was pleased to be able to tell funders about a professional drama activity taking place in the school. The group was the largest of all the groups – around 35 students – and the space that they provided was limited. Between that and the variety of languages being spoken, it was useful to split the group, first in two and then four and to get them to work on presentations of moving tableaux themselves. The idea was developed in the large group but specific scenes were more carefully crafted in the smaller groups. Relying on Boal's Image Theatre games and techniques did work as an effective starting point but it was more difficult to make transformational changes than anticipated. Many of the scenes were violent in content and the tableaux that were built up in the main group tended to be interpreted as scenes of argument and confrontation. This was an important revelation but what became apparent was that without a strong common verbal language it was difficult to reflect on this and work towards change. It was possible, however, to set clear tasks for presentation and through these familiar experiences of misunderstanding and miscommunication were explored with more humour and a little less violence. As a first experience of this kind of work, it was a very creative and engaged experience for everyone. Whilst there are always those who prefer to take a back seat and those who like to take centre stage, there was a great deal of good play between the participants that seemed to allow all to be included. We were pleased, for instance, that Moslem girls were willing to participate even in mixed groups and that performing in front of peers was not an issue for the majority of participants.

- 🌈 With the practiced performers of Shano, the Kurdish dance group, the workshop yielded very different results: especially in the group presentations which tended to be more abstract.
- 🌈 The challenges of this group were therefore very different to the others but they gave us an idea of what we could offer in the next workshop: a mini-performance.

In detail:

This was less of a surprise when we worked next with Shano, the Kurdish Dance Group. Lead by a professional actor, the group were working on a dance performance when we arrived at their space in the Multimedia Centre in Holloway. The centre has a remarkable workshop space with a large raised stage area on which we ran the workshop, and the performance the group were rehearsing – a traditional Kurdish dance with drum accompaniment – was very well choreographed. The group consisted of performers between the ages of 4 and 50! With practised performers, the workshop yielded very different results: especially in the group presentations which tended to be more abstract. To a certain extent, it was harder to discuss and discover issues with this group in the exercises. But in place of that there were some very interesting images and movements that remained open to interpretation and were reflected upon as such. As facilitators, our role became more inclined to artistic direction than setting up the exercises. There was also an increased difficulty in hearing from everybody in the group: there were clearly some stronger voices than others (including the younger children) and for those who spoke less English, contributing to the discussion was more difficult. The challenges of this group were therefore very different to the others but they gave us an idea of what we could offer in the next workshop: a mini-performance.

- The trigger piece used in the second workshop was as much a demonstration of a theatre style that was essentially non-linguistic and ‘physically creative’ as a discussion of themes.
- There were some very touching and informative responses to the performance and there was obviously a clarity in the piece that resonated with all the groups.
- These responses were particularly interesting from the ladies at the Haringey Chinese Centre because here we were working without a translator and with a lower level of English, and yet there was still a strong focus and a strong attempt to share their feelings and their stories, even resorting to physical demonstrations.

In detail:

The second set of workshops revolved around this presentation. Very quickly, prior to the next session, the four actor-facilitators devised a short piece that very simply told the story of an Italian lady ‘on a bad day’ feeling a little lost in London, a little sick, whose visit to the doctor is fraught with misunderstandings and brings back sad memories of the people she had lost and left behind and who ends up in the park communing with the birds! The piece, lasting no more than 5 minutes, was as much a demonstration of a theatre style that was essentially non-linguistic and ‘physically creative’ as a discussion of themes. It was used in the next workshop as a starting point however: the audience were asked what they understood by the presentation, what feelings were brought out by it and if there were any connotations for their own stories. There were some very touching and informative responses from this and there was obviously a clarity in the piece that resonated with all the groups. It helped with the teenagers to create scenes; it inspired the Kurdish dance group to explore this style of theatrical expression; and it brought out some fascinating stories from the Chinese ladies at the Haringey centre. One of these was about buying the wrong size shoes soon after arriving in London and walking around with aching feet. The second was about the difficulty of finding work in London. A third was about husbands who worked away from the family, whose communication was only ever by phone like “astronauts calling from space”. These were to become provocative images for the final piece. which was particularly interesting because here we were working without a translator and with a lower level of English, yet there was a strong focus and a strong attempt to share these stories, even resorting to physical demonstrations. There was much joking about misunderstandings but this was mixed with reflections on the difficulties of integration and settling into a new home.

- In each of the workshops, we felt we had created a sense of trust and a safe place in which to share and explore experiences.
- Participants and facilitators alike would have liked a longer period of workshops, to explore the languages being used and develop the relationships that grew very quickly in that space.

In detail:

This was the first session at the Chinese centre and the last with the Kurdish group and the Greek-Cypriots. Since attendance was entirely voluntary with these groups, the number of participants varied greatly; and, at the same time, because there were so few workshop days, there was not enough of a chance to develop the relationship with those who were really interested. The third workshop session developed the image-making further but fell short of the promise of the first two, largely because the next step would have been promising more than could have been achieved in the time available. The UK Ethnic Minorities Partnership was the most cohesive of the groups and in the final session, we saw some excellent presentations. But we were frustrated by having to leave it at that. In each of the workshops, we felt we had created a sense of trust and a safe place in which to share and explore experiences. These possibilities were very important but could only briefly be enjoyed. Participants and facilitators alike would have liked a longer period of workshops, to explore the languages being used and develop the relationships that grew very quickly in that space. The actor-facilitators played a difficult role of participant-observer (rather like an anthropologist) but we were also responsible for what happened there. As such our attention was drawn in several directions. Finally, with just three weeks left to the performance, our attention turned to devising the final piece.

Rehearsal

- 🌈 We rehearsed for three weeks and created a 35 minute ensemble piece that gave glimpses of the lives and experiences of four characters across several locations.
- 🌈 It was clear, however, that without a prolonged immersion and truly generative dialogue with the groups in the first stage of the project, the rehearsal stage was going to rely a great deal on our own interplay and interpretation as actors.
- 🌈 The frame was set that the piece would be one of journeys within journeys, such that each character would have their own journey but each of these represented a stage along more paradigmatic journeys
- 🌈 Also, one of the aspects of the theme of language and identity that emerged through the workshops was the importance of place and this became a significant theme of the final piece.

In detail:

Rehearsals began first with collating material from the workshops. Given that our interaction with the groups was so brief – due to budgetary and thus time constrictions – we managed to retrieve a selection of quotes, images, ideas that sketched out some very basic starting points. It was clear, however, that without a prolonged immersion and truly generative dialogue with the groups in the first stage of the project, the rehearsal stage was going to rely a great deal on our own interplay and interpretation. It was decided early on that that the piece would be character led but that we would not just recreate characters from the workshops. Though inspiration from the people and the stories we had heard was obviously integral, the final definition had to come from the actors' own imaginations and from their own experiences as and with immigrants and speakers of other languages. The frame was also set that the piece would be one of journeys within journeys, such that each character would have their own journey but each of these represented a stage along more paradigmatic journeys: for example, of arrival to misunderstanding to integration to separation from the mother-country to return/ memory; or, more simply, from silence to (authentic) voice; from confusion to recognition; from separation to communion; and the search for a safe place. These were ideas that we had not been able to explore fully with the groups but had begun with them; and their creation and input was edited into this frame during the rehearsal process. As is apparent, one of the aspects of the theme of language and identity that emerged through the workshops was the importance of place and this became a significant theme of the final piece. The process experimented with many different stimuli, though there were very few that were textual, and was initially aimed at generating a range of images (many built out of ones from the workshops), movements, scenarios, props/set that could then be placed into a 'script'. We rehearsed for three weeks and created a 35 minute ensemble piece that gave glimpses of the lives and experiences of four characters across several locations. The set was light, consisting of four chairs and two home-made frames that spun and transformed the space into different settings. Due to budget restrictions, recorded, instead of live folk music was used.

Performances

- 🌈 Five performances of *Mouth Piece* were given between the 4th July and 14th July and the average audience size was 40 people.
- 🌈 In every case, mainstream, professional theatre was basically inaccessible to them, either financially or culturally.
- 🌈 An essential feature of the production was that it hid no theatrical trickery but engaged as directly as possible with the imaginative connection between actor and audience.

In detail:

Five performances of *Mouth Piece* were given between the 4th July and 14th July: at Chat's Palace, Hackney; Somerstown Community Centre, Camden; the Camden Chinese Community Centre, Bloomsbury; Artszone, Edmonton; and the Working Mens' College, Camden. Unfortunately, the performance at the Multimedia Centre – the home of Shano – was cancelled because the management of the centre, having initially shown great enthusiasm, suddenly decided that the space was not available to any other companies apart from their own. The other original community spaces were all deemed too small for the performance, which was a drawback in terms of regrouping all the participants for the final show. The Artszone is a space attached to the UK Ethnic Minorities Partnership School, so a majority of the students from that workshop were able to see the performance there. A number of ladies from the Haringey Chinese Centre came to the performance at the Camden Chinese Centre, but at the other venues audiences were new to the project. Still, mainly immigrants, for whom English is a second language, they came from ESOL classes and local community groups. In every case, mainstream, professional theatre was basically inaccessible to them, either financially or culturally. The average audience size was 40 people. Each space was very different to the next – in some cases there was a stage but in others it was a matter of marking out a performance area in the meeting or dining room. An essential feature of the production was that it hid no theatrical trickery but engaged as directly as possible with the imaginative connection between actor and audience. There were no lighting requirements - most performances took place during the day in daylight – but where there were facilities basic lighting states were used. Music was played on equipment each venue provided.

- 🌈 Through opening discussions, we hoped to personalise the performance and allow people in the audience to feel that they were allowed to engage with the actors, not feel constricted by ideas of a fourth wall etc.
- 🌈 The ideal situation would have been that the performance sat in the middle of a workshop session, preceded by games and followed by dramatic presentations by the audience using some of the language of the performance but again we were constricted by time and the particular set-up of the pilot project.
- 🌈 People recognised their own story as represented by the piece and expressed their gratitude at being ‘listened to’ in this way.

In detail:

We began each performance with an opening discussion, sometimes through an interpreter, in which the project was described and a conversation started about the difficulties of not speaking English, the importance of community groups, the journeys that people had been on. It was also an opportunity to introduce some of the linguistic artifices of the performance and prepare the audience for a kind of theatre most were not used to. Through these discussions, we hoped to personalise the performance and allow people in the audience to feel that they were allowed to engage with the actors, not feel constricted by ideas of a fourth wall etc. Again we were constricted by time to really develop a dialogue: the ideal situation would have been that the performance sat in the middle of a workshop session, preceded by games and followed by dramatic presentations by the audience using some of the language of the performance. Despite the lack of in-depth acquaintanceship with the material, when questions and comments were asked for after each performance, there were some very pertinent and moving responses that indicated how much the performance had been readable and how effective it had been in making the kind of connections we had hoped for. People recognised their own story as represented by the piece and expressed their gratitude at being ‘listened to’ in this way. It was this sense of dialogue – in which the audience could hear that we had heard them – that we had hoped for with the performance. The next step was to speak again with this new understanding. Unfortunately, we could not hear from all voices, where there was no translator and audience members were less confident with the English. We did always give time at the end for people to approach us individually however and feedback questionnaires were provided in a number of languages.

Evaluation

Successes

- the project was completed in the seven weeks, reaching around 100 workshop participants and 200 audience, the vast majority of whom were not regular theatre-goers
- the workshops established a safe place where people could engage and get involved with the games, exercises, issues and themes.
- the workshops and the performance each provided a space to begin a dialogue between the theatre company and the participants-audience
- both individual and group identity were strengthened through an unusual event of consciousness-raising taking place in everyday spaces
- the company produced a piece of theatre that was informed by the experiences of the audience

In detail:

A measure of success can be gauged by the reaction to the performance: not only personal reactions of participants but also from group leaders who felt that the occasion – both workshop and performance – had been more than just entertainment and asked for more. It was clear, also, from the workshops that people who had never done any drama before were engaged in the games and were keen to use them as a means for expressing concerns or just to share stories along the theme of language, home and identity. Everyone involved seemed to be and many stated to be strengthened by the experience. For some this was a matter of feeling free to speak out and participate, for others it was about being part of a group and for others still it was a chance to see a new and inspiring style of theatre in an affordable, convenient and understandable place. But as actors and facilitators, there were some important questions that were raised by the project and very apparent recommendations that could be made towards any future *Mouth Piece* project.

Recommendations (based on comments by actors and community leaders)

- working with community groups means that attendance is voluntary and unreliable. To really develop a relationship with participants more time and greater flexibility are both required. Focusing on two groups would be more effective here.
- the workshops functioned well in the context of a school for English language learners and there were expressions of interest from both the Working Men's College and Westminster Kingsway College to establish links with a drama programme. However, the greatest changes were felt in the adult community groups, where theatre has a role to play in letting unheard voices speak.
- it was difficult to gauge how much the participants felt they were gaining from the workshops. Since this was new work for them, the more time spent with a group the closer all those involved can develop the experience into something they can really understand.
- the shortness of time between as well as in the workshops also meant that the flow of creative input was not sufficient. Ideally, workshops would lead to more initiative from the participants who can gain tangible skills in facilitation and performance.
- the organising role of the actor-facilitators during the workshop, whilst initially essential, also compromised how much they could get to know about their subjects. This would also benefit from prolonged time spent with them.
- the rehearsal process was a creative process that wrote the performance from scratch. It is recommended that a future project would create more work in the workshops. Being a negotiation with the participants what the final piece would include, allowing them to act as directors – a very enabling experience as the work with the Greek-Cypriot group revealed.
- still, it is important and effective having the actors perform. This allows for touring the show and reinforces the objective of informing practice within the profession. The process by which the actor takes ownership of the material is carefully scrutinized in this context. In this pilot project, the process felt to us slightly superficial, which again might be overcome by a longer, in-depth workshop period.
- music was not used in the workshops but was included in the final piece. Working with a musician, exploring a diversity of music with the groups would have accessed another level of communication and enriched the final piece.
- for our own benefit, more careful attention to monitoring and recording feedback from all sessions would have improved our present evaluation.
- the effect of performances would have been enhanced by longer time spent with the audience, placing the piece as a stimulus to their action as opposed to relying on a simple question and answer, which often excluded those who are less confident speaking in English. Participation is the best form of feedback communication.
- whilst the project was essentially supported by the project manager, casting another actor instead of the director performing would be preferable.

Feedback

"I have to say that I am very happy to [be] present to the performance that you showed tonight, I hope you continue showing us different way to understand life, experiences thank you."

"It shows very well what we experience during our daily life."

"It is very nice interested. I enjoyed. I hope this project will be developed soon but you have to improve and try and spend more time."

"How would it look if performed by non-professionals?"

"Not always easy for me as a "native" Englishman to follow – perhaps this shows that because of this I wouldn't really appreciate the difficult situation that people from overseas and very different cultures experience when trying to cope with new situations in which they find themselves."

"It would be good maybe to develop into Forum Theatre in the future??"

"It was very nice and enjoy all the people. Thank all people. Please do again."

"It was great to show the emotions and feelings in your body language. I believe that it will help people to realise that you can communicate without speaking."

"It re-enacts our past and reminds us of our roots."

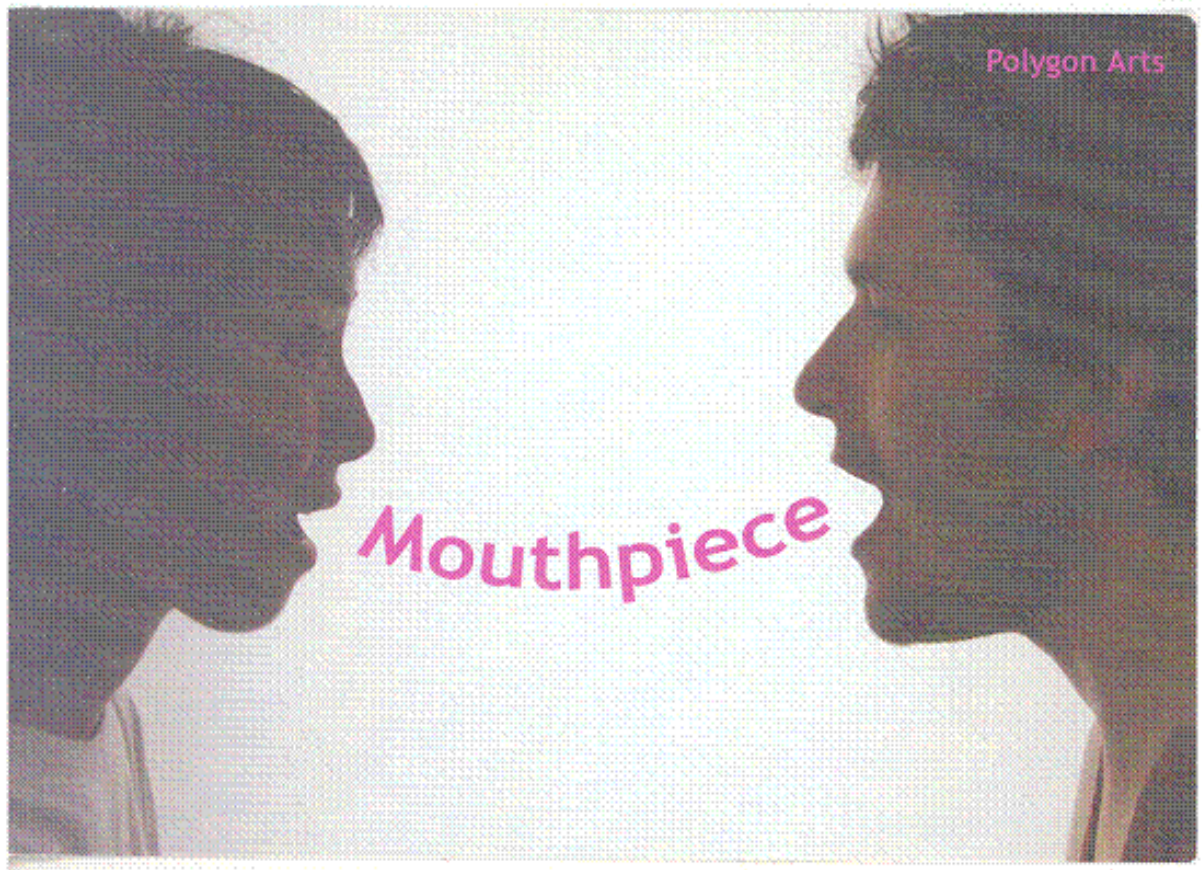
"It would be nice if the different environments could be "depicted " in a more contrasting way."

"I agree with one of the audience, {it} would have been helpful to learn more on the characters' personal history."

"When I came to London on the beginning was too difficult to communicate not just because my mother tongue is another but because I was afraid to speak wrong. Sometimes I feel stupid because the way they treat me. But is not their fault. I just come to try a new life and I did it. Thank you very much for the good time."

"Sensitive, magical, beautiful. I was crying because I understood so much."

Publicity and Coverage



Polygon Arts presents

Mouthpiece

a play about language and the way we communicate

All performances are FREE:

Sunday 4 July, 7pm
Chats Palace, Hackney Central
☎ 020 8986 6714

Tuesday 6 July, 7pm
Somersetown Community Centre, Camden
☎ 020 7388 6088

Wednesday 7 July, 1pm
Camden Chinese Centre, Euston
☎ 020 7388 8883

Thursday 8 July
Artszone, Edmonton
☎ 020 8803 1046

For information on other free performances, contact Polygon Arts on 020 8889 3244



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Voices of change

Monday, July 12, 2004
Arts Hub

Image courtesy of Polygon Arts.

The idea of drama as a vehicle for social commentary and change is not new but all too often what is being said on the stage can tell, but not live, the message. Performers and audience can very easily escape back to relative anonymity, feeling warm and fuzzy perhaps, but not really having made much of a difference.

In establishing Polygon Arts just over a year ago, two experienced practitioners felt that more could be done to reach an audience that had generally been overlooked and at the same time offer empowerment through social action.

Polygon was founded as a conscious response to living and working in a richly multicultural society. Their prime audience for their first performance piece was those for whom English is not the first language and future projects will also target under-represented audiences. Between them, the artists - Joel Chalfen as Artistic Director and Gabrielle Moss who is Education Director - bring to Polygon not only impressive CVs, but a passion that is starting to be felt in the ethnic communities of London.

Joel and Gabrielle are joined by Richard Lobb as Musical Director and the team recruits freelance staff as needed for education programmes and performances.

The first performance production, *Mouthpiece*, had four successful outings around the city last week. The show, an exploration of language and communication, was developed after a multicultural cast of actors worked with Enfield Cypriot Association; Kurdish performance group *Shano*; Haringey Chinese Centre and students at the Ethnic Minority Partnership UK in Edmonton. It was presented free of charge to audiences, thanks to funding from the Arts Council and Peabody Trust.

The genesis of the show was as response to the *Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Bill (2002)*. *Mouthpiece* explored the social dramas that evolve whenever languages meet and compete. The project aimed to transcend differences and seek a transformative theatrical language that speaks about but also across such barriers.

Audiences loved it. The performers know they are on the right track when they receive comments such as the one that particularly moved Gabrielle. It came from an elderly Chinese lady, who has lived in England for 40 years, but does not speak English. She told the performers through an interpreter at the end of the performance that it had 're-energised her heart' – there was so much that she recognized and was happy to see played out. She said 'it is my story'.

Polygon is all about breaking down barriers. It aims to create dynamic, engaging, spectacular theatre out of the everyday experiences of people by working with, for and between communities. In doing so, prejudice is directly confronted and the process of breaking it down can begin.

Through drama and music, the company also examines how communities define and express themselves.

Beginning at the beginning, Polygon's education programme has seen the development of a comprehensive series of workshops that are taken into schools. They have also been commissioned by the Police's Safer Communities Team to deliver drugs workshops in Primary Schools.

From *Tongue-tied* for the littlies (where the children are introduced to Polig who doesn't speak English and they have to help him find his way home) to *Power of Ten* a five-week residency that explores teenage anti-social behaviour, programmes are geared to curriculum outcomes and are receiving praise from teachers.

Joel has an impressive list of acting and directing credits under his belt, not only on the stage but also in television and film. His studies at Cambridge focused on the relationship between theatre and ritual and he has spent time in Paris training with Jacques Lecoq.

With plenty of experience in developing curriculum and teacher resource packs, and as an educational consultant for a number of theatre companies, Gabrielle has what it takes to make Polygon's work with children a relevant, but fun, learning time. She is already well-credentialed academically, but is now studying for her MA in Drama and Theatre in Education at the Central School of Speech and Drama.

In a short time, Polygon has been able to reach out to the communities of London, 'not representing one in particular, but giving expression to many'. It seems that they *are* making that difference – long may their funding continue.

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