

ARTS AND INTEGRATION: GLASGOW 2000-2009

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BACKGROUND

In 1999 when the UK Government passed the Immigration and Asylum Act 29 it introduced a new policy to disperse asylum seekers across the UK from London and the South East of England. In Scotland, Glasgow City Council was the only local authority to agree to receive asylum seekers and in 2000 thousands began arriving.

Fragment 1: Sitting in my wee flat, watching the announcement on the news, thinking "Glasgow City Council has found something to do with all those flats no one will live in."

They were housed in vulnerable and deprived areas of the city where the local community's only previous experience of asylum seekers was negative reporting in the national press and media. In the first year, there was little or no work carried out with the local communities to prepare them for such a large influx of people into their area, let alone a large population of people they considered a threat and a danger to their way of life. Unsurprisingly, these new arrivals experienced a great deal of racial hostility. Tension reached a climax in August 2001 with the stabbing of the Kurdish asylum seeker, Firsat Yildiz. This prompted two demonstrations, one from the Asylum Seeker community demanding action be taken, and the other from the host community of Sighthill, consisting mostly of youths, seeking to highlight what they claimed was favouritism towards asylum seekers and refugees.¹ The situation further escalated when Iranian asylum seeker, Davoud Rasul Naseri, was stabbed while he was taking rubbish out from his flat in Sighthill, just days after Mr Yildiz was murdered.

Fragment 2: Watching the report on the news

¹ It is a common myth that asylum seekers and refugees come to the UK to claim benefits. People believe that the amount of benefits paid to asylum seekers is greater than that paid to a UK citizen and that they also get a range of other privileges not available to the host community (such as free bus passes). In reality, asylum seekers receive much less than UK citizens and experience a much more punitive benefit system.

feeling helpless. How to help, how to stop this hostility and ignorance?

At this point the Scottish Government began to take action to address the building tensions in these communities and a large amount of funding was made available for projects to support asylum seekers to integrate- into the communities where they were housed.

Funding was distributed through a range of avenues with much of the work being done by small or community-based organisations that had a genuine, vested interest in supporting the asylum seeking community.

Fragment 3: Sitting in the CCA cafe² with Patrick, co-ordinator of Scottish Refugee Week. Him asking me to deliver a project for refugee week. Finally a way to do something.

Projects for Scottish Refugee Week ranged in size, scope and type with a considerable focus on cultural and arts activities such as creative writing, storytelling projects, community choirs, theatre productions, music, and clubs/groups. Projects aimed to engage members of the asylum and host communities in a dialogue to break down barriers and the negative preconceptions held on both sides, fostering greater understanding between the different cultures. These projects were further supported by clear and positive messages of welcome from the Scottish Government who, in contrast to their English counterpart, took a very progressive and pro-asylum stance.³

Fragment 4: Standing in a committee room in the Scottish Parliament discussing with an elected Member of the Scottish Parliament (MSP) ways in which we can keep asylum seekers in Scotland, ways in which we could

² Centre for Contemporary Arts

³ Scotland is a devolved country with its own Government, financial and legal system. However, some areas of governance are still controlled by the British government such as immigration.

let them work, not finding a solution.

They also worked intensively with the press and media to change negative reporting of asylum seekers into positive and informed coverage.

Together, these measures created a sea change in public perception and the actions of the host community, witnessed in the shift from enactments of hatred to mass protest against dawn raids.⁴ Entire local communities began physically obstructing authorities, preventing them from removing asylum seekers from their communities, which had now become the asylum seekers' homes. This caused the Scottish Government to intervene and request the Home Office to stop dawn raids in Scotland.

Fragment 5: Watching the coverage on the news feeling so proud to see local Glaswegians send the uniforms packing. Feeling part of the change.

By 2009 different levels of the government concluded that the integration crisis had been tackled and the introduction of asylum seekers to Glasgow had been successfully managed. Funding was reduced and refocused to encompass integration work with all communities, including the Scottish Black and Ethnic Minorities (BEM) and the new wave of immigrants from the EU countries, especially Eastern European countries. Yet, many have argued that, the introduction of the New Asylum Model, discussed below, presented a new barrier to sustained, meaningful relations between asylum seekers and their host communities.

CONFAB'S CONTRIBUTION

conFAB⁵ is a cross-artform organisation based in

4 When a claim for asylum is failed the asylum seekers benefits are stopped and the entire family is removed to Dungavel Detention Centre. Dawn raids are a practice used by immigration officers [? Right term?] to remove families early in the morning (at dawn). Authorities claim that this is the only time they can guarantee that the entire family will be present in their flat, making it possible to round them all up at the same time.

5 www.confab.org.uk

Glasgow which aims to support writers of all media, from all social, ethnic and economic backgrounds. In 2005 we were approached by the Scottish Refugee Council to deliver a storytelling project for Scottish Refugee Week, an arts-based, week long cultural programme designed to celebrate and welcome asylum seekers and refugees to Scotland but also to break down negative perceptions of asylum seekers.

Fragment 6: Sitting in another community meeting, in another damp, run down church hall, being told again that no one wants to take part in the project. Still early days for integration. Then Rachel from the Village thinks her group will be interested. A small tiny miracle in a hostile place.

The Kitchens Project was a programme of storytelling workshops: two hours a week for eight weeks, with the emphasis on oral history exploring the kitchens and foods of the past and present locale of both the host communities and the refugee/asylum communities. The stories shared, exchanged and developed through the workshops were presented at a celebratory event of food and drink from across the globe.

Fragment 7: Sitting in the audience surrounded by total chaos, young children crying, older children running about, people in amazing costumes trying to tell stories about cakes, people from all over the world – but also a lot from the host community. Never experienced anything like it. Amazing!

The concept of the project was to use food as a prompt to get people sharing their histories, experiences and cultures in an informal and enjoyable way. We partnered with The Village Storytelling Centre, a community-based project situated in the Pollok area of Glasgow, to deliver the workshops. Writer Liam Stewart, who facilitated the sessions, had been working with the Storytelling Centre and the local community for a number of years and the project acted as a way to further develop a programme of

work that had been taking place in the centre. The project was a great success and benefited a great deal from the groundwork that had already been taking place in the local community. Sitting round the table sharing their stories and swapping recipes were not only members of the host community but also people from across the globe who, in their home countries, would be at war with one another. Yet here in Glasgow, horribly and ironically stripped of a great deal of personal freedom, they found themselves, as one participant expressed it, co-prisoners in freedom.

At the end of the Kitchens Project the group approached conFAB to support them in the development of a drama, *The Flats*, that explored their experiences and that of the host community. The drama was developed primarily as an integration project but was also seen very much by the group as a way to campaign for their human rights, raising awareness of the many difficulties experienced by the asylum and host communities due to the UK asylum system.

Fragment 8: Meeting with Ahlam and the others. Such inspiring people - what human beings can endure. Thinking the play will be amazing, such an opportunity to get the messages out there. They have so much to say, we have so much to say. Ahalm: "It is another way, a way for us to get our story out. For people to see what we have experienced. We've done stories and books, now the play. I've always wanted to be acting."

The project was a triumph, rising from a core group of eight participants to thirteen. When the tickets for *The Flats* were released they were sold out within a number of hours.

Fragment 9: Getting the call from the box office to say there were no seats left, not even one for me. Calling Catrin to see if we can increase the capacity.

Liam Stewart worked with the director, Catrin

Evans, and the participants to create the show. The participants also performed the work. We commissioned Paragon Ensemble, a classical music ensemble, to develop music for the show and partnered again with the Village Storytelling Centre where rehearsals were based.

Fragment 10: Meeting Noel from Paragon for the first time on the side of the street. Him picking me up in his car, it's deep winter and it's freezing and I'm wearing a silly woolly hat. Sipping coffee, him agreeing to join the adventure, knowing he will work well with Liam and Catrin.

Liam's in-depth knowledge of the local community and the experience of asylum seekers was invaluable in developing a powerful production that was able to present an authentic representation of the issues. The show premiered during Scottish Refugee Week at a high profile arts venue and was remounted later that year, due to popular demand, for a tour of local schools and community venues. The audience in both cases consisted of representatives from the Scottish Government, policy makers, researchers, local council, voluntary sector, police, local community members, asylum seekers and the general public.

Fragment 11: Being terrified that at any moment any one of the cast could be deported or detained. A very real fear that at any time we could never see each other again. This was not about the show, but about the fact they'd be returned to their deaths.

The Flats provided a range of benefits including breaking down negative preconceptions about asylum seekers – one of the host participant's experiences changed the hostile, racist perspective she had at the start of the show to a position of unmitigated support for the asylum seeking community. The process also helped them with integration, increasing their life skills, such as integration, increasing their life skills, such as language and communication skills and provided

much needed emotional refuge from the daily stress of fearing for 'your life'. One of the most powerful benefits was the chance for social interaction with Scottish residents and the sense of self empowerment that the process offered.

Fragment 12: *In the green room, after the show. Can't believe how much we laugh at each other, with each other. How proud every one is. How high everyone is—despite everything.*

Many of the participants experienced poor mental health brought on by the events that had caused them to seek asylum in the first instance. Their fragile emotional states were then further exacerbated by the uncertainty of their status, the constant fear of detention and ultimately the return to the countries they had fled and thus to almost certain death. The chance to take part in a positive, creative experience once a week where they were welcomed and supported was an invaluable experience not only for the asylum seekers but also for the host participants who were often experiencing parallel issues around poverty, lack of opportunity, violence and rejection by the wider society.

Fragment 13: *At Gatwick airport on my way to Greece for a holiday, getting a call from Ahlam. She has had a tip off that they planned to detain her and her family. Trying to set up and run a pubic campaign in her support from Lesbos.*

Despite the obvious and many layered successes of each step in the production of the project, the participants approached the premier of the show with the highest expectations. Although the show received extensive press coverage and attracted the attention of many high profile Scottish Government and City Council representatives, broke down barriers and fostered greater support across Glasgow for asylum seekers, it did not secure the refugee status of any of the participants or revolutionise the asylum system. The experience of remounting the show later that year was very

different. Although there was still a great deal of enthusiasm, camaraderie and enthusiasm for doing the play, the continued desperation experienced by the group had begun to take its toll.

Fragment 13: *Being elated that they got a standing ovation on the very last night ever of the show. Them not understating why I was so excited.*

Since *The Flats* conFAB has continued to produce work for Scottish Refugee Week every year with projects that range from developing plays with secondary school children around issues of asylum (Common Ground), to the production of recipe books, to live literary events and music performances⁶.

KEY ARTS ORGANISATIONS

During this period of time there were a number of key arts organisations that took a very active role in integration projects. All of the organisations tended to be relatively small and had a strong commitment to community-based work. Street Level Photoworks, an organisation that provides artists and the public with the opportunity to produce and participate in photography and lens-based media, did a range of multi-media based projects, most notably Multi-Story.org. This brought together artists and asylum seekers in creative collaborations involving photography, personal stories, songs and video which documented the new multi-cultural community in the Red Road flats in North Glasgow.

Fragment 14: *Meeting up with arts organisations at a network event. We're all experiencing the same difficulties and challenges. Feels good and bad at the same time.*

Paragon Ensemble worked on a range of projects with many different partners and also developed an

⁶ Common Ground, 2007 devised play with young people, Snap, Rhythum and Ryme, Tron theatre 2008, Heart of the Home, Recipe Book ISBN 0-9547040-7-X 2009, Journey's Home, spoken word and music Tron theatre 2010

ensemble of professional musicians from the asylum seeking community which performed extensively at a range of events and venues.

Glasgow Media Access Centre (GMAC), a film based organisation that supports and develops independent film makers and the community through access to low cost facilities, equipment and high quality training and production opportunities, worked on a range of film projects and have hosted short film festivals highlighting the film work with and of asylum seekers as part of Scottish Refugee Week.

PRACTICALITIES

Arts practice does not exist in a vacuum. Art is formed by, informs and responds to the economic, political and policy environment. As such there were a number of key factors that enabled such exciting, varied and creative work that played an essential role as part of the integration process and building a new communities in Glasgow. Firstly, of course, funding was made available to do the work and develop the practice in a range of ways. Key funders, such as Awards for All,⁷ the Local Authority and the Barring Foundation prioritized funding largely at a community level.

Fragment 15: Sitting in the crowded open plan office of SIP⁸ for Pollok. There's a small bit of money from an underspent but I need to get the application in soon. Every little bit helps.

Another fundamental factor in the emergence of this work was the situation of the asylum seekers themselves. A large majority had been in England and/or Scotland for two to five years,⁹ which meant

they had sufficient ~~?~~ good English language skills. Asylum seekers cannot take up paid employment and so have a lot free time. They were under a great deal of stress due to the uncertainty of their futures and sought diversionary activities. A significant majority were also from the educated middle classes in their home countries and were used to being proactive. Additionally, their asylum claim was strengthened if they could prove to the Home Office that they had integrated into and taken an active role in their local communities.

For the host community, initially integration work was supported by those members of the community who welcomed asylum seekers and saw the mix of cultures as a positive addition to their local environments. As the work developed supporters grew beyond this original group and widened through word of mouth and positive example. As the local host community began to understand that their previous conception of asylum seekers as having "it easy" was a misconception, they also understood that in fact there were many parallels between their own negative experience of life and that of the asylum seekers. Sympathy and understanding grew as did involvement in the integration projects.

Lastly, there was a range of community and arts organisations, mostly small scale, which had a personal and political commitment to supporting and welcoming asylum seekers as well as a strong commitment and understanding of the use of community-based arts practice as a tool for social change. All of these factors combined to provide the opportunity and circumstances to generate great art experiences and influence a change in attitudes and social beliefs in Glasgow.

There were, nevertheless, a number of key practical challenges to delivering these arts-based integration projects. The asylum seeker community is incredibly vulnerable and because its members have no financial independence or extended family

years to process.

7 Awards for All is a fund of money from the UK Lottery that supports community-based work.

8 Social Inclusion Partnership (SIP) was the term used to describe an area of the city that was classified as a deprived area and which received funding and support due to this status.

9 The majority of asylum cases are rejected. As a strategy to keep people in the country as long as possible, lawyers would enter into an appeal process that could take many

support, they require a great deal of assistance in terms of transport and childcare. These are often the two greatest costs of a project, after artists' fees. As the number of participants in The Flats project increased so did the number of children requiring a crèche (childcare) place; thirteen participants brought fifteen children of varying ages from new born babies to teenagers. This created a logistical and financial crisis at one point in the project since funding for these costs can be the hardest to secure.

Fragment 16: Not getting the funding we had been waiting for. Devastating. Thinking I had to cancel the entire project. Desperate attempts all day to try and find someone, somewhere, who can give us some money. Saved at the last minute by Louise at the SRC (Scottish Refugee Council). This time a big miracle!

Additionally, the range of religions practiced by the different participants in the project can create challenges in the timing of the project, ensuring it does not clash with anyone's religious practice, celebrations or festivals. Varying English language skills many also require the use of translators.

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Once you have been living in the UK, legally or illegally, for seven years you are able to apply for residency. In 2007, as the majority of asylum seekers in Glasgow reached five to six years of residence in the UK, the British Government began a review of all the failed asylum cases. The majority of these "legacy cases" have now been reviewed and in nearly all cases status has been granted to remain and work in the UK.

Fragment 17: Meeting Ahlam at the Labour Party Conference in Aviemore. There for work. Can't believe she has had her status for two weeks and not told me. What was I to her?

Many people have since moved away from Glasgow. Those people that remain have struggled to find paid employment and have now joined the long lists to be re-housed in permanent accommodations Focus

for them has shifted from being victims of a cruel and inhumane asylum system to finding yet more in common with their neighbours, who have lived in poverty and deprivation for all of their lives, as they try to build a future for themselves in a different yet equally hostile environment.

Fragment 18: Meeting Miriam at Rachel's "leaving do." She has had her status a year now and still no work.

In 2009 the British Government introduced the New Asylum Model. The Model is, in many ways, a response to the campaigners' calls for a quicker system and aims to process asylum claims within six months. But there are now also less legal routes to appeal failed claim. The objective is to grant status or return the asylum seeker to their originating country or place them in detention – all within six months. This system severely restricts the opportunity to do arts based practice with new asylum seekers; they often do not have the English language skills, are in a process of adjustment to their new surroundings, and are not yet in an appropriate emotional or practical state to take part in arts projects.

Fragment 19: Full circle. How to contribute?

The success of the integration work, the legacy cases, the introduction of the New Asylum Model and policy changes by Scottish Government have all supported a shift in policy away from integration work targeting asylum seekers to integration work that attempts to support the integration of three very different groups: the resident BEM community, asylum seekers and the new immigrants from the EU countries.¹⁰ In addition, less funding is now available for integration work, irrespective of the way it is aimed at.

Prior to the dispersal of asylum seekers in 2000, Glasgow was a largely ethnically homogenous city. It is now much more vibrant and multi-racial, and by and large all races and backgrounds get along side

¹⁰ Since 2008 Scotland has welcomed approximately 60,000 Polish economic migrants to the country.

by side. Nevertheless, racism remains a significant problem and there are still members of the local communities who believe negative myths about asylum seekers. Yearly discussions continue as to how to reach and engage with these people. Yet the crisis that the dispersal of asylum seekers triggered has been averted and there is significant support and understanding between different faiths, races, backgrounds and communities. However, there has been recent criticism of the integration process: Who is being integrated into whose culture? Is it a two-way interaction or a process of assimilation by the asylum community into mainstream, dominant Scottish culture? Can people with completely different religious, ethnic and cultural backgrounds ever really accept and respect each others difference? Additionally this integration is incredibly localised to Glasgow with much of Scotland remaining ethnically homogenous.

Fragment 19: Paying my respects at the site where a Russian asylum seeker family jumped, in desperation, to their deaths from their high flat at Red Road. Joining the march in their memory. We get taken on a ridiculous route of deserted roads to George Square but there are a lot of us by the time we get to the city centre.

Whilst much remains to be achieved, I believe that the work conFAB has done to date in this area has facilitated a process of enabling people who would otherwise be at war with each to sit, work and play side by side. We have been able to help disperse the fears that lead to hatred and prejudice. Yet this is a tenuous position. A lot of our work has involved people of the Muslim faith and although I am an openly gay woman in every other aspect of my life, and despite the fact I became personally very close to a lot of the people we have worked with, I have never felt able to come out to them.

Fragment 20: Having dinner at Ahlam's flat. They want to know why I'm not married, why I don't have a good man. I tell them marriage isn't for me. I think they will try and match

me up with someone.

This maybe an act of disrespect on my part—I am assuming they would react badly to my sexuality when it might not even be an issue for them. Yet I do not feel secure enough to risk the fragility of the relationship. So, personally, while I understand integration to be possible our expectations of what it can achieve should be realistic. We are not all the same. But as long as we can understand and respect each others differences then we can live and work in harmony beside each other.

A wee while ago I was on a bus with my partner travelling through a deprived area of Glasgow. It was early evening, the bus was busy and sitting near the front was a young, Scottish Muslim woman wearing a hijab. A drunken, older, white Scottish man got on the bus and sat down next to the woman. The whole bus looked on as he tried to engage her in conversation. When she did not respond he reached out and pulled her hijab off her head. The whole bus erupted, in support of the woman. The driver stopped the vehicle and escorted the man off the bus, despite his very vocal and violent protestations. I am not sure if the response of the travellers indicates tolerance, acceptance or respect, and I do not believe that the older man was the only racist on the bus, but it does seem to suggest an understanding—or at least an opening to an understanding—which is a start