

Arcola Theatre

From an old textile factory in Hackney, East London has emerged an award-winning theatre that has placed the plight of migrants and exiles at the heart of its artistic programme.

Arcola Theatre serves one of the most diverse communities of Britain, where the second-largest Kurdish and Turkish population in the country lives alongside African and Afro-Caribbean communities and old Jewish and Eastern European migrant communities.

It is an area with high levels of deprivation, low levels of educational achievement and social conflict. Arcola has confronted these issues head on with gritty dramas that reflect the challenges of exile and displacement - often reworking classical texts to explore contemporary concerns such as racism, terrorism and teenage angst.

Refugees and asylum seekers are an important audience for its professional productions as well as its community outreach activities: Arcola has a Youth Theatre for people aged 13 to 19, an over 60's drama group, a writers group and 'Identity Theatre' – Britain's first black British drama school.

The Baring Foundation has provided core funding to help develop its unique Turkish/Kurdish drama group – Arcola ala Turka – involving young asylum seekers or children of asylum seekers.

Ala Turka is a racially mixed group of men and women initially launched in 2001 by Arcola Director, Mehmet Ergen. Their early performances proved popular and launched some of the members of the group into professional acting and filmmaking, but without regular funding the group disbanded.

In 2005, a grant of £600 from the local council enabled Arcola to reform Ala Turka with a new group of around 30 young people aged 19 to 25. New members are recruited through the Turkish media, by leafleting housing estates, and by word-of-mouth. The young people participate in twice-weekly sessions, learning all the skills needed to put on a production. They perform twice a year, often to full capacity audiences.

It is giving young Turkish and Kurdish exiles a rare opportunity to develop their arts practice, as well as gain transferable skills such as confidence and communication. Arcola says they have built lasting friendships within the group and it has given young people a chance to explore issues in their lives in a creative way, and become more integrated in British culture.

“They have been able to see themselves as part of a wider community rather than a marginalised minority, while retaining a powerful sense of the positive nature of their cultural and ethnic identity,” says Arcola Assistant General Manager, Michael Harris

Ala Turka participants are also signposted into new education and work opportunities. Arcola runs a scheme helping them into further education and some participants have gone on to join Arcola’s team as actors, bar and box office assistants, one as the resident electrician, another the Front of House Manager. One young actor recently played the lead in a Royal Court production, *Gone Too Far!* written by another Arcola prodigy, Bola Agbaje.

“We are giving them a safe and supportive environment to have a creative experience,” says Michael Harris “It’s already becoming evident that it is bringing together people from different, and sometimes opposing backgrounds. But week by week they socialise and work together and you can see the barriers literally coming down.”

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