

Cardboard Citizens

Refugees and asylum seekers who are homeless face a double challenge – with the day-to-day hardship of life on the streets and its attendant problems of mental health, drugs and alcohol misuse, comes twofold social stigma, an uncertain immigration status, the language barrier, as well as any personal trauma they might have experienced in seeking exile. The result can be a deep sense of alienation from mainstream society.

Cardboard Citizens is a professional theatre company for homeless and ex-homeless people which has found itself grappling with these multiple needs as part of its support programme for people on the streets. With support from the Baring Foundation, Cardboard Citizens will engage 500 refugees and asylum seekers in its various different programmes in London each year.

This work was part of an organic growth of the company's work, explains Cardboard Citizens Artistic Director, Adrian Jackson. "Refugees and asylum seekers started appearing in our workshops in about 2000 and we became more aware of their needs. Their issues fit with our political ethos of addressing oppression, but we also feel that working with refugees and asylum seekers and across different cultures really enriches the work that we do."

Cardboard Citizens runs a weekly workshop programme at Crisis Skylight, an east London-based social and cultural centre. It also offers performing arts workshops in hostels, day centres and community centres across London, including centres supporting refugees and asylum seekers.

It tours hostels each year with an interactive 'Forum Theatre' play –at least one of the three plays toured in this slot will feature refugees and asylum seekers. It is developing interactive drama projects – known as Forum for Change - to enable young refugees and asylum seekers aged 14-17 to explore and advocate on issues of concern.

Through its workshops Cardboard Citizens also helps participants develop the skills needed to forge a new life: its workshops offer peer support and offer information on health, education, training and employment opportunities. It is currently ending partnerships with Job Centre Plus, The Learning and Skills Council, at the same time as starting a new partnership with the London Development Agency. Over the last two years, Cardboard Citizens has helped more than 20 participants into employment and another 20 into training or further education. For refugees and asylum seekers it offers an important opportunity for social contact and developing language skills plus, as Jackson puts it, "a sense of being wanted".

A number of participants each year become peer mentors and/or performers workshop leaders – Cardboard Citizens offered some 140 person/weeks' worth of paid employment to homeless and ex-homeless actors in 2005. Some have gone on to appear in its professional co-productions with the Royal Shakespeare Company.

Adrian Jackson senses that one of the most important service Cardboard Citizens offers is: "Providing a surrogate healthy community, a supportive community and a community which has no agenda beyond getting to know people. Where people can mean something."

Among those who have experienced the benefits of this is an Iranian man who started participating in workshops at Skylight some three years ago. From participating in the workshop, then taking a role in various participatory projects, he recently played one of the leads in Cardboard Citizens' production of Timon of Athens. Jackson comments: "A man who was shy and comparatively uncommunicative has visibly rediscovered his confidence and his creativity"

Another success story has been Redley Silva, from Sri Lanka, whose career as a professional writer and performer has flowered since he started participating in the workshops of Cardboard Citizens and others over 10 years ago. "It illustrates the length of engagement which is necessary sometimes to enable people to start to repair the damage done by homelessness or exile," says Jackson. "But once you get people started they are very good at going off and finding other groups and developing their own pathways. That's one of the things we are here for: to help people move on."

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