

Commedia Sheffield

Commedia Sheffield is a community media organisation that has become a magnet for the participation and integration for local refugees and asylum seekers in Yorkshire.

Its community radio and internet station - Sheffield Live! – broadcasts in as many as 26 languages, reaching out to refugee and migrant communities from Africa, Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Latin America. Its audience has reached thousands of people.

Its community media training centre in the heart of Sheffield has offered exiled media professionals a chance to restart their careers, improve their skills and train others.

For newcomers to community media, training has helped develop their English Language, confidence and team-working skills, and enabled them to meet people with common issues from many cultures as well as the host community.

As Commedia Sheffield's reputation and the cultural diversity of its output has grown, so has the involvement of refugees and asylum seekers, who now amount to a third of the 1,000 users of its community media centre in the heart of Sheffield. Partners include the Northern Refugee Centre as well as asylum support groups in Sheffield and across South Yorkshire.

It runs special broadcasts for Refugee Week and the International Day Against Racism to raise awareness of discrimination and to celebrate diversity. Its programmes have a strong cultural bias and share music, arts, stories, news and opinion from across the world.

Among their success stories is an Iranian exile Ahamad, a musician. When he first came to Commedia he struggled to find the confidence to use a microphone. Now, three years later, he broadcasts an hour-long programme every week in Persian, Arabic and English and has become a freelance trainer.

One exiled media professional who has felt the benefit is Lumko a journalist from the Cameroon. He had found it difficult to get work because of his English language skills and lack of transferable qualifications. Through Commedia he was able to brush up his language skills and gain qualifications recognised in the UK media industry. He broadcasts a weekly native, French and English language programme for the exiled community that reaches around 600 people in Sheffield and has an audience across Yorkshire and – via web broadcasts – nationally.

“The reality is that those people being persecuted are often journalists because they are speaking out against their governments. So it’s not surprising that they are finding their way to us,” says Sangita Basudev, Director of Commedia Sheffield.

“The impact they can have here is massive – we have found a niche and this is something they really want to do. They have the chance to inform others about what is going on at home and broadcast debates and discussions. In this way they can keep their communities, and others, up to date and involved with what’s happening in other parts of the world.”

Commedia Sheffield is using core funding from the Baring Foundation to improve its outreach into refugee communities and expand its arts programming. “You really need the time and resources to invest in these communities and play around with ideas – it allows us to be more experimental,” says Basudev.

It already running a weekly writers’ group that produces plays, poems and monologues. It is developing a new training programme especially for refugees and asylum seekers taking them through the whole process of writing for radio, from initial concept and scriptwriting to production and casting. It is also developing a partnership with local theatre company, Dead Earnest, to work with local refugee groups on writing and acting.

“There are so many talented people out there. It’s just a case of finding them and training them,” says Basudev. “Arts and music is very important to the lives of many refugees and asylum seekers. We are helping to spread the culture of refugee communities and to emphasise what that diversity brings to host communities, and hopefully, by doing so, to break down some of the barriers that exist.”

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