

Project Phakama

Project Phakama doesn't just offer young refugees and asylum seekers arts workshops – It offers them a community to which they can contribute and feel a sense of belonging.

Phakama started out in 1996 as a project of the London International Festival of Theatre (LIFT), working with young people of all backgrounds and building cultural exchanges between the UK and South Africa. It became an independent organisation in 2001 embracing partners from India, Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, Mauritius, Mozambique and more recently Argentina and Brazil. For the past four years, Project Phakama UK has focused mainly in working with young refugees and asylum seekers.

Through its project, *Strange Familiars*, Phakama UK built up a strong working relationship with London-based refugee organisations including the Refugee Council, Southwark Social Services and the Refugee Mental Health Zone, all of whom referred at around 250 young people to its weekend workshops. By early 2007 it was working with a small group of around 12 participants training to becoming Phakama facilitators, aged between 15 and 22, drawn from African countries including Liberia, Sierra Leona, Congo and Nigeria, though the groups have previously included refugees and asylum seekers from Eastern Europe, the Middle East and South East Asia.

The programme offers multidisciplinary arts activities every Saturday, such as music, drama and visual arts, focusing on broad themes which allow participants an opportunity to explore issues such as racism, identity, isolation, as well as to celebrate and share their cultures and just have fun together. Every month the group will share a residential workshop, or if this is not possible, a day where they will mix socially and cook for one another. Public performances form an integral part of the programme as a way of enabling the young people the opportunity to share their work with a wider audience in high profile venues across the city.

The underlying motive behind the work is to help people progress. "It's about personal growth. The arts is at the heart of it, but it is about using a creative process to enable people to find their own pathways," says Phakama Director, Fabio Santos.

A new programme has evolved around this philosophy, Creative Skills for Life, which was initially supported by the Learning and Skills Council and received further support from Awards for All and the Arts Council England. The programme offers accredited skills development for the unaccompanied young refugees, drawing on the creative activities to

develop life-long skills, improve communication and confidence, and contribute to English language learning and teamwork. Participants can work towards Young People's Arts Awards and are involved in public performances and exhibitions to showcase their work, and celebrate their achievements with graduation ceremonies.

Some of the original participants in the project have gone on to develop skills as facilitators and workshop leaders; others have moved on to college and university courses, one even to become a professional footballer.

A shining example of the transformation Phakama has wrought in the lives of its young participants is Osman Bah a 22-year-old from Liberia. At 17, when he was first introduced to Phakama by the Refugee Council, he had lost his entire family and been forced to fight with local rebels as a child soldier. Osman became a trainee workshop facilitator and is now undertaking a year-long training programme to enable him to learn the administrative and coordination skills required to deliver arts projects for other young people.

“The Project Phakama process enabled him to get through a very difficult time in his life, to building up enough skills and confidence to tell his story and to work through some of the issues he was facing,” recalls Santos“. Phakama helped him find his feet. I would not claim that we solved his problems but I think the process that we worked with did help him enormously. The hope is that eventually Osman, or any other young people showing interest and passion, will become a confident leader and take the work forward.”

The social network created around the project is, says Santos, fundamental: “It's a core part of our work. When we started doing work with refugees there was a concern about creating a 'drop-in centre culture.' Drop-in centres may provide food and a place to play games and meet people, but they can also enable young people to become invisible, just through choice, and nobody would even notice. We want to do totally the opposite of that.

“We want our young people to feel that they are important. They cannot just assume the work will happen without them. They get a letter and a phone call saying they are expected to be here at certain times. There is food, but it is not just available, we create it together. We are not doing anyone any favours; we all create something together. The social and familial element is as important as the arts activity. You cannot have one without the other. It creates a sense of belonging and of being part of a community.”

Contact Details:

Project Phakama UK

C/o LIFT

19-10 Sutton Street

London EC1V ODR

Tel: +44 (0) 20 7490 3964

Email: phakama@hotmail.com

Web:

www.liffest.org.uk/learning/project_phakama/about_project_phakama/