

The Refugees and the Arts Initiative

Exiled artists get few opportunities to grow and develop their skills, to adapt to working in the UK and make a living from what they do best. When Arts Council England, London, set up the Refugees and the Arts Initiative (RAI) in 1999 it was with the aim of supporting refugee artists to find their feet in the capital.

Now eight years later RAI is an independently constituted organisation based at Theatre Royal Stratford East, in the heart of the Olympic development zone. Over the years it has helped around 500 exiled artists by providing advice and information, and signposting training and employment opportunities.

RAI organises Artists' Exchange Days where artists can showcase new work and develop new skills such as fundraising, media training and seek funding advice. Around 90 artists and other participants attend the Exchange Days – there have been nine such events since RAI's inception.

RAI also aims to profile refugee artists and offer public platforms for their work. It has enjoyed some success with projects enabling Bosnians and Serbs from Srebrenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina who are living in the UK to take a photographic record of their lives ten years after the Srebrenica massacre hit the headlines. They have also worked in partnership with local libraries to organise exhibitions of other photographic works and paintings by exiled artists.

The Baring Foundation is contributing to running costs over three years which will allow RAI to start expanding its work. The Initiative has just undertaken a consultation exercise with refugee artists which is likely to see it playing a sharper role in raising awareness of refugee artists and creating bigger opportunities for their involvement in the mainstream cultural sector.

Mentoring, buddying and residencies are new forms of professional development it is planning to develop in 2007, and there are ambitions to involve artists in more provocative forms of lobbying to ensure their voices are heard.

"There is a need for more strategic lobbying," comments RAI Chair Stella Barnes. "We would like to see funders and policymakers offering more support to refugee artists – there needs to be greater recognition of their work in the major arts institutions and at a public level."

"Having an organisation which is specifically advocating for exiled artists is really important in keeping their issues on the map in the cultural sector

and in opening up debate about where exiled artists fit into the diversity agenda. They do have a role to play and they have much to learn and share with black, Asian and other minority culture artists who have been through similar experiences over the years in gaining recognition in the mainstream.”

Contact Details:

Refugees and the Arts Initiative
c/o Theatre Royal Stratford East
Gerry Raffles Square
Stratford, London E15 1BN
Tel: +44 (0) 20 8534 7374
Email: serafimer@artsinitiative.org.uk
Web: www.artsinitiative.org.uk/