

## **Theatr Fforwm Cymru**

So many of the solutions for integration of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants are about acquisition of the three Es: English, Education and Employment. Theatr Fforwm Cymru adds a fourth: Emotional wellbeing.

The Welsh company uses participatory and reflective theatre methods – known as Forum Theatre – which are designed to encourage communities and individuals to connect, share stories and find common ground and solutions to the problems they face.

Theatr Fforwm Cymru has been commissioned to help with community input into legislation by the Welsh Assembly Government, and by many Social Services providers across Wales to assist with vulnerable groups, such as mental health service users, elders, homeless people and young offenders.

It started working with refugees and asylum seekers – and also migrant workers, especially the burgeoning local Polish community in South Wales - as part of this process of engagement with socially excluded groups. Early work included a programme four years ago with young male refugees and asylum seekers at a church drop in centre in Newport, South Wales. Since then the work has started branching out to Swansea and the deprived former mining communities in the valleys around Merthyr Tydfil.

More recently Theatr Fforwm Cymru has been providing forum theatre workshops as part of an Action Learning Exchange between refugees and asylum seekers across the UK. It is in discussion with the Welsh Refugee Council about running a series of regional theatre 'agorae', or fora, for refugees and asylum seekers across Wales to air concerns and seek solutions to the problems they face. Discussions are also taking place for the company to work with women asylum seekers in Swansea and for them to present a piece of forum theatre at the Independent Asylum Commission event in May in Cardiff. They are also looking to present some legislative theatre to policy makers and AMs at the launch of the Destitution Campaign being launched in Wales on July 4<sup>th</sup>.

The company's methodology involves developing dramatic scenarios based on real life situations. During workshops the company will seek reflections on and solutions to the issues raised in their performance from the refugee and asylum seeker participants – a process known as legislative theatre. One such piece, The Dawn Raids, explored highly controversial tactics used by immigration officials to remove families and children from the Newport area to deportation centres in England, which has resulted in intense fear and stigmatisation locally.

Co-Founder, Gill Dowsett, tells a moving story of one young Iraqi man from a refugee group in Newport who shared his experience of his father being shot and his mother exiling him and his younger brother to the UK to save them from what she feared would be the same fate. “It moved most people to tears, including the young man himself, but I met him again last year and even four years later he was talking about how important it had been to him to share that story. When someone’s story is in front of you, then you become engaged and that starts connecting to hearts and minds and changing attitudes and behaviour.”

The work, which aims to find solutions to the issues raised, has highly practical outcomes. One of the issues faced by the young Iraqi man in Newport was that, though he spoke Farsi, he found Farsi language leaflets for refugees and asylum seekers unintelligible as he read in a different script. The legislative theatre process challenged an assumption that all those speaking Farsi would be able to read it and led to a change in the information provided to refugees and asylum seekers locally.

But Gill explains that though the visible policy changes may be easier to see, the most significant outcome from the work are the many smaller internal changes that their methodology generates in individuals and communities.

“The most important impact is that we are really good at creating community and a sense of communion between people,” says Gill. “We focus on the emotional realm. Our stories and lives may be different but on the inside we all share the same emotional realm. That is the meeting ground we bring people together on.

“It’s about engaging their inner world and enabling people to develop emotional intelligence to explore: ‘my relationship to me, my relationship to you and my relationship to my community’. There is something very important about witnessing people’s stories. The work has an impact on the inner realm – they may seem like small impacts but they are important to those involved.”

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