

Banner Theatre

"I thought there were loads more people coming to England and that we took in more than our fair share – I can't believe that the papers lie like that." Such is the typical response received by Banner Theatre Company from young people witnessing its powerful performances addressing racism and immigration.

Building tolerance and understanding has been a key objective for Banner over more than thirty years' work. Its performances, mostly at community and education centres, weave drama and musical episodes together with video interviews and film archive footage to explore issues of the moment. The audience is then invited into a discussion and this is often where Banner has its most prominent impact.

Refugees and asylum has been the dominant issue for Banner since 2002 when the company became aware of problems facing refugees and asylum seekers in Birmingham and the West Midlands.

As a result Banner worked with Iranian asylum seekers and refugees in the Midlands and subsequently Iraqi Kurdish exiles in greater Manchester to develop a production, *Migrant Voices*, which has toured for over 90 performances in the UK and Canada.

Its next production, *Wild Geese*, explored recent issues of immigration through the lens of historical migration, looking at Irish, African, Caribbean and Asian experience after the Second World War and the racism and prejudice they faced over housing or finding jobs, as well as media abuse.

"We wanted to bring it up to date and talk about new arrivals. So a young Iranian lad is telling his story of being an activist against the regime in Iran and being locked in prison by the religious police and fleeing in the back of a lorry. Another sequence is about the Chinese cockle pickers," says Artistic Director, Dave Rogers.

The most recent show, working title *Asylum UK*, part-funded by the European Union, will explore myths and stereotypes about asylum seekers and will go on tour in 2007 with a multi-racial cast including refugees. The Workers Educational Association is supporting popular education classes after each show to explore the issues more thoroughly.

"Refugees and asylum seekers talk all the time about the image English people have of them which is really negative. They always say that our work impacts on their position very powerfully. We are making people think again about the stories they read and hear in some of the newspapers. I think we are having a very important educational role," Rogers explains.

The impact of the work goes beyond the shows, however. Through working with refugees and asylum seekers Banner has become a place for exiles to meet and share experiences. "We organise socials for refugee communities and help them link with one another and mix with host communities. The work gives them a voice – when we do a show they say they feel empowered," says Rogers.

The work has had particular impacts for those involved with this process. "One Zimbabwean woman, who was feeling very isolated before this process started, became involved in interviewing for us. Through that she started working with activists working on behalf of refugees and asylum seekers and has now become a central person in that work," says Rogers.

Another case is Laurent Camara, who was a radio presenter in the Ivory Coast before he came to the UK. When the group met him he was working in Asda. Since joining Banner as a technician he has gained confidence and is now running an African festival.

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