

Community Arts North West

Manchester has always been a testing ground for new cultural trends. Now refugee artists may be doing for Manchester in 2006 what Oasis did for the city a decade ago.

There's been an upsurge in the popularity of arts activities involving exiled artists in Greater Manchester. The *Exodus Live* band nights with refugee and migrant musicians sells out to 650 people per night.

A theatre season developed by local refugee artists and writers will take place later this year, and the recent *Exodus Festival* in June (Greater Manchester Refugees' Cultural Festival) attracted over 5000 people, doubling the figures from last year.

Much of this has to do with the arrival of Greater Manchester Refugee Arts Partnership, now branded as *Exodus*. At the core of that group is Community Arts North West (CAN), which organises and manages the programme. Its achievements with refugees and asylum seekers have been recognised in their short-listing for the prestigious Art-06 award by Arts Council England-North West.

CAN have been working with refugee and asylum seeker groups in the city and its suburbs since 2003 to combat exclusion, isolation and racism. As a result of the government dispersal programme, Manchester now hosts more than 6,000 refugees and asylum seekers – more than any other major city apart from London.

"What we've done is put many refugee artists on the map in Greater Manchester. Our programme of work is about developing ways in which the creative refugee communities can be plugged into the Greater Manchester Cultural scene," says Cilla Baynes, Director of Community Arts North West.

Baynes reports a flowering of new and original work created through the programme, which has raised awareness of the issues surrounding refugees and created opportunities for refugees to link into the artistic activities of host communities. "The freshness and new ideas are welcomed by local people. Manchester was created by its migrant communities; this work continues this tradition," Baynes points out.

Work aimed at integrating young people across communities is providing opportunities to break down the isolation that is so much part of the experience of refugees and asylum seekers, and is promoting positive relations.

As part of this process, CAN has recently embarked on the three-year *Urban Music Theatre Project*, which involves Urban and World music, street and African dance, live theatre and digital media. "It will enhance the profile, and highlight the contribution that refugees and migrants have made to the area over centuries, but in a way that helps local people see the opportunities," says Baynes.

Exodus has broadened into a year-round programme of events. As well as the bands nights, *Exodus Sparks* – a new theatre season for refugee artists – has

been developed with five mainstream theatre venues, including the Royal Exchange and Contact Theatre in Manchester and regional venues such as The Octagon in Bolton. At the core of *Exodus Sparks* is a programme of new writing for theatre by refugee artists.

Also running throughout the year is the *Refugee Artists' Training Course* offering the chance to develop skills in theatre, music, dance, digital arts and photography. CAN also offers offering training and facilities for the refugee community through its digital arts lab. Artists such as Theatre Director Alan Amin, who arrived with no filmmaking skills, have benefited from the Digital Lab; Alan now runs the Kurdish Creative Film Centre and is training a group of ten filmmakers.

One outstanding outcome from the CAN programme is *Afrocats*, a theatre group of young African and Caribbean women, also short-listed for the Art 06 Award. A third of the group are unaccompanied refugees and asylum seekers. A further third are accompanied and the rest are young women from the local African and Caribbean community.

"They have great confidence in who they are and they present great role models in this city, for everybody, not just for refugees" says Baynes "Many have come through terrible trauma. As well as being a place where the young women can express and be proud of who they are through dance and theatre, *Afrocats* has also provided a social infrastructure which helps create a sense of belonging, identity and a family."

Contact Details:

Erin McNeaney – *Exodus* Coordinator
Cilla Baynes - Director
Community Arts North West
Green Fish Resource Centre
46-50 Oldham Street
Manchester
M4 1LE
Email: info@can.uk.com
Web: www.can.uk.com