

## *Greenwich and Lewisham Young People's Theatre*

Some young refugees have found themselves living in limbo in London - places in schools do not always materialise at the time they arrive in the UK, so they have to wait until one does. Technically, this situation is not supposed to exist, but in reality it does.

Enter Greenwich and Lewisham Young People's Theatre, which has found itself playing the role of an alternative educator and support system until a school place is found, which can take several weeks or months.

Working in partnership with their local authority schools' admissions department, GLYPT have identified young refugees and asylum seekers and provided them with a twice-weekly programme of arts activities. As many of these young people are unaccompanied and have limited social and family networks, this theatre company has been an important support system.

This project, *HeadstArt*, includes drama and general arts activities, development of English language skills, and offers emotional support and informal sharing opportunities. It is delivered by an experienced team of refugee arts workers who have the sensitivity and empathy to help these young people through a tough period of acclimatisation to British life.

"They arrive so lacking in confidence but when they leave they are very animated, they are creating performances, writing and creating poetry and feeling integrated and part of the wider community," says GLYPT Artistic Director, Jeremy James. "It has a huge impact for the young people. It gives them a way into normality. They are meeting young people who have had similar experiences and integrating into mainstream daily activities."

GLYPT is hoping to extend *HeadstArt* by creating evening activities for those young people and their families who have found school places but want to maintain involvement with GLYPT. There are hopes to develop a team of young 'ambassadors' who can mentor other new arrivals and help them settle into what Joseph describes as "the jungle of the urban secondary school" system.

The *HeadstArt* project is one strand of the *Voices* programme at GLYPT, which has been evolving over the past 5 years, with the support of the Baring Foundation and other trusts. The programme has worked with local schools on arts projects to integrate newly arrived young people and raise awareness of such issues as refugees and asylum, racism and discrimination. It has also supported ESOL departments in Schools developing the English of those new arrivals whom sometimes arrive with no or little English.

It has developed a series of short films with schools, one of which - *Safe* - won an award from London Weekend Television. Recently the project was commissioned to create an educational film (KS2) for the Home Office called *Moving Here* looking at new communities in the East of England this project was awarded a 5 star rating by the Home Office.

Voices has also been training its own team of refugee arts facilitators, working with exiled artists to build a team of skilled specialist arts workers who have personal experience of the issues. "We have developed a fantastic team of facilitators who have the experience of using the arts as a means of transcending barriers such as inclusion, or language," says Jeremy James. From this team of exiled artists has sprung a new touring theatre production which is now part of the mainstream work of the company.

"*Voices* is not just a bolt on," says James. "It influences the way the work happens right across the company. It has responded to the needs of refugees and asylum seekers and is constantly evolving to meet their needs." In turn, it has also had an impact on wider social policy, says James: "In partnership with the education authorities we have exposed an area of strategic need and neglect which we are helping to resolve."

*Contacts:*

Jeremy James (Artistic Director) and Emily Hunka (VOICES project Leader)  
Greenwich and Lewisham Young People's Theatre  
Royal laboratory Office  
No 1 Street  
Royal Arsenal  
Woolwich  
London SE18 6ST  
Tel: +44 (0) 20 8854 1316  
Fax: +44 (0) 20 8317 8595  
Email: [postbox@glypt.co.uk](mailto:postbox@glypt.co.uk)  
Web: [www.glypt.co.uk](http://www.glypt.co.uk)