



Co-funded by the  
Creative Europe Programme  
of the European Union

# REACT

*Refugee Engagement and integration  
through Community Theatre*

**Guide to implement  
inclusion theatre projects with refugees**

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## Guide to implement inclusion theatre projects with refugees



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# Introduction

**REACT - Refugee Engagement And Integration through Community Theatre** – a project funded by Creative Europe programme - was conceived by **acta**, a community-based theatre working in Bristol, and developed with partners **Rotterdams Wijktheater** and **Centro per lo Sviluppo Creativo Danilo Dolci**, as a response to the growing refugee crisis in 2016. Our aim was to show how it is possible to promote and develop refugee integration at a local level through the use of Community Theatre, a tool which offers the possibility to concretely foster intercultural dialogue, community cohesion and mutual understanding.

For **acta** in the UK, as well as partners in Netherlands and Italy, it was clear that there were real and urgent concerns not only at a global level, but within our own local communities. Fear, mis-information and prejudice had already lead to difficulties

between host and refugee communities, and the partners felt that it was important to do whatever we could to address the issues, using the tools we had to hand – the creation and performance of new theatre to bring together refugees and host communities, to challenge the prejudice, to correct the misinformation, and to find and celebrate the common humanity that all share.

The partners believe that everyone can successfully contribute to community life and this is what the project set out to highlight, promoting the positive impact given by the mixture of different cultural influences, in a vibrant shared atmosphere of appreciation and exchange. From 2016-2018 the three partners developed projects to promote integration between host and ‘guest’ – refugee – communities; all working under the banner of **REACT**, using their own models of Community Theatre.

# What is Community Theatre?

Community Theatre (also known as 'Community-based theatre') is practiced in many different ways across the world. For the purposes of this project the definition of community theatre involves:

- collaboration of non-professional participants and professional theatre facilitators
- creation of original work based on stories generated from communities
- theatre created and performed by non-professional community members
- creating theatre with a social relevance & impact
- diversifying traditional audience for theatre to include under-represented groups

Community Theatre practice centres on the principle that individual life-experiences have a relevance to the rest of society. Methodologies involve

the interaction between trained professional community theatre practitioners – facilitators, writers, directors – and participants who volunteer in their time.

Creative interaction between practitioners and participants involves a process of discussion, deliberation, and theatre techniques such as role-play, improvisation, play-making, character work, narrative, over several months. The resulting performances are given professional technical support to create a high-quality product, and is performed by the participants who created it, giving a direct and natural performance quality not achievable or replicable with professional performers.

Theatre has a particular and unique quality of being able to make a clear and immediate connection between audience and performers; when those

performers are representing a refugee perspective, and presenting life from that specific viewpoint, then the audience has the opportunity to connect directly with that life-experience and have the opportunity to develop and potentially change their preconceptions.

The social impact of this experience goes beyond the end of the theatrical presentation and can greatly add to real change in attitudes between host communities and new arrivals, promoting understanding, appreciation and improving integration and community cohesion.

### About the guide

**T**he aim of this guide is to share the learning of the three partners, and present this information in an accessible format, so that it may be easily read by other organisations interested in using community theatre as a tool for

integration between refugee and host communities. The guide presents information about each partner; history, background, and the methodologies used in the REACT project. An overview is provided on the national refugees' situation in each country involved in the project, to facilitate understanding of the context in which REACT partners have worked. The three models developed are described in depth, with detailed case studies of the three refugee theatre projects, with evaluations from participants, refugee agencies and audiences. The guide is furnished throughout with suggestions and recommendations for all those organizations / agencies / theatres which may wish to implement a similar project in their own context. In addition, we have included a selection of the valuable feedback and inspiring contributions collected by the partners during the organization of 3 public and international events in the REACT lifetime.

# 1. Why REACT?



# Why REACT?

acta's work is concerned with engaging marginalized and socially excluded sections of the community in theatre projects which provide access to the arts and enables people to develop their creativity and tell their stories through a process of co-creating and performing original theatre. Within the city of Bristol there are many people from a range of diverse cultures, and since 2010 acta has been devoting more resources into engaging with these communities through a series of projects; including community performances and events. acta is also an internationally-facing organization and has been involved in four EU-funded projects; for three of these as instigator and coordinator. In 2011-2013 acta coordinated the COAST project, engaging with sister companies in Netherlands, Germany and Poland to explore issue of migration through community theatre.

By 2015 acta was busy with projects with people from migrant and refugee backgrounds in Bristol and making connections with other companies doing similar work in the UK and in Europe. The company was beginning to formulate a strategy to make firmer connections, to develop a network through which to share learning with others and examine practice and ethical considerations of working with migrants and refugees. Discussions were begun with acta's sister company Rotterdams Wijktheater – a long-standing partner in a number of projects – to explore how this could be achieved. In 2015 acta was a partner in MedArt – an Erasmus+ project sharing social theatre methodologies between 8 European countries. Through this project acta met and worked with staff from CSC Danilo Dolci, and discovered a shared interest in making theatre with refugees.



acta was already exploring how it would be possible to make links between these three partners when Creative Europe announced a call for submissions for projects using culture and arts as a means of promoting integration between refugee and host communities. A submission to this call-out was made, and the partnership was given the go-ahead to embark on a two-year journey to test different models of practice, to share learning with each other, and then to identify, engage and share learning with other companies and agencies involved in the same area of work. The REACT project began in Autumn 2016.

REACT set out to:

- 1** Use participatory theatre as a tool to challenge prejudice and misconceptions, developing empathy, and promote intercultural understanding between refugees and host communities;
- 2** Develop personal and transferable skills in refugee participants, making positive improvements - building self confidence and self-esteem, presentation skills, language and communication, new friendships and awareness of host country cultures;
- 3** Promote the positive contribution of refugees to host countries;
- 4** A trans-national project linking European community theatre organisations with other agencies connected to refugees;

**5** Develop innovative approaches to delivering participatory theatre projects with refugees, to involve co-organising partners and wider sector;

**6** Improve practice by sharing the methodologies of co-organising countries and other partners to voluntary and statutory agencies in field of arts, education and refugee support;

**7** Create new high-quality community theatre with participants from refugee communities in different countries, and perform this work to wider communities in which refugees are re-settled;

**8** Create models of good practice which can be replicated at local levels in other European countries;

**9** Disseminate learning from the project in accessible forms to inform and influence new approaches to refugee integration across the European Union.

The **structure** of the project was to be relatively simple:

Year one – each partner would use their own models and methodologies to create new theatre with refugees to perform within their host communities

Year two – partners would share their learning from this process with each other, and with other practitioners and organisations working in arts and refugee settings, in order to inspire the replication of this work in the future, and across Europe.

The methodologies would all use Community Theatre techniques as their starting point.

## What is the Creative Europe Programme?

Creative Europe is the European Commission's framework programme for support to the culture and audiovisual sectors. Following on from the previous Culture Programme and MEDIA programme, Creative Europe, with a budget of €1.46 billion (9% higher than its predecessors), which supports Europe's cultural and creative sectors.

The programme is open to cultural and creative organisations from EU Member States, as well as non-EU countries.

Creative Europe's stated aims are to:

- Help the cultural and creative sectors seize the opportunities of the digital age and globalisation;
- Enable the sectors to reach their economic potential, contributing to sustainable growth, jobs, and social cohesion;
- Give Europe's culture and media sectors access to new international opportunities, markets, and audiences.



To know more about the programme please visit the website:  
[https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/creative-europe/about\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/creative-europe/about_en)

## 2. REACT's Partners



# REACT's Partners

## 2.1 *acta Community Theatre Ltd (UK)*

**a**cta is a Bristol-based socially-engaged theatre company and charity founded in 1985, which engages marginalized people in the creation and performance of their own original theatre. acta engages vulnerable and socially isolated people from all generations and diverse cultures in a creative programme which provides accessible, positive and enjoyable shared experiences, enabling social contact and friendships to develop and flourish. This approach to theatre and arts provides a place where people matter, where their ideas, imaginations, life experiences and contributions are valued. Participants in projects are of the greatest importance; not as passive recipients of a service, but as active, creative partners and drivers of success. Being involved in the creative process

in this way has been proven to have significant impacts on the lives of people involved.

acta works with: isolated older people; vulnerable young people; migrants, refugees and asylum seekers; disabled people; people living in disadvantaged areas.

Since 2012 acta has developed an increasingly strategic role at UK and international levels; exploring and improving practice, raising the profile of community theatre as a vibrant art-form. This has included hosting quarterly seminars to promote, debate and share learning around community theatre, a National Festival of Community Theatre in 2016, and instigating and coordinating international projects with partners from Europe, USA, South Korea.

The company's theatre base in Bristol is uniquely dedicated to community-based theatre, with a core group of seven, with many associate freelance directors and facilitators. We co-create and produce up to 18 different plays each year, attracting thousands of audience members, 70% of which are not regular theatre goers.

acta's work is included in books by Francois Matarasso, Kate Organ (Baring Foundation), Dr Eugene van Erven (ICAF), and Dr Kerrie Schaefer (University of Exeter). acta is acknowledged to be at the forefront of UK and European Community Theatre practice, and the work is regularly studied by Applied Theatre students from UK universities and theatre schools, including Bristol, Exeter, Durham, London (Royal Holloway), Cambridge, East 15.

### acta's working methodology

Since 1985 acta has developed an extensive community theatre practice which is

aimed at engaging people on the margins of society in accessing the arts, creating their own theatre and through this process developing personal skills and emotional well-being. acta projects bring people together to make theatre, sharing ideas and co-creating work, building friendships between different social and cultural groups, leading to improved community cohesion.

The company places great emphasis on the central importance of successful engagement and has developed a range of strategies which aid the company in identifying and engaging marginalized people in arts-based community projects. This includes working closely with partner organisations, both non-profit and statutory which represent targeted groups; providing free access to all workshops; providing 'taster' workshops within existing groups; developing relationships based on equality of status within projects; providing care for participants both within and

outside of workshops.

Artistically, acta's process is based on recognizing and celebrating the importance and value of each individual group member as a creative person. Everyone is involved equally in the creation of the theatre, and workshop activities are designed to be creative, accessible, and enjoyable. acta believes that 'fun' is an important word and aim, and that participants will continue to access workshops only if they are enjoyable. The equal status between acta staff Facilitators and participants is of the greatest importance; the work is created and owned by all involved.

The acta process usually takes place over a six to nine-month period, with groups meeting weekly for two hours. Projects will begin with games, exercises and discussions for the first phase of 6 weeks, then progress to the discussion of subject matter, an 6-8-week

period of sharing of stories, and development of ideas which will then contribute to the creation of the play. Through this phase the play will be developed, with participants using improvisation to create characters, dialogue, situations and scenes. At the end of this phase, a full scenario will be developed, and if necessary, a script will be written. The project then enters the rehearsal phase, with participants working on performance, developing new skills. At this point the technical and design elements of the project will be developed. The final piece is then performed to a community audience.

### Target group

acta's work is targeted at involving people on the margins of society with no access to theatre. The company currently works with: refugees, migrants and asylum seekers, isolated older people, vulnerable young people, people living in areas of high disadvantage.

## 2.2 *Rotterdams Wijktheater (The Netherlands)*

The Rotterdams Wijktheater (Rotterdam Community-based Theatre/RWT) was founded in 1992. It is one of the oldest Community theatre companies in the Netherlands and one of the few that is structurally supported for almost 20 years by the local City Council. RWT is a theatre company that produces theatre for, by, and with people living in local communities in Rotterdam. The main aim of this community arts organization is to develop original theatre that is accessible, appealing and relevant to non-theatre goers. Most of them are living in the underprivileged neighbourhoods of the city. In order to attract new and culturally excluded audiences RWT presents theatre performances that are based on the stories of their own community, dealing with issues that are relevant to those groups. RWT creates 3 to 5 new productions per year. Each

production is presented 10 to 20 times mostly in schools, a wide range of community centers, and occasionally in regular theatre venues. Annually, RWT reaches anywhere between 4,000 and 10,000 spectators from all age groups and cultural backgrounds, of which there are many in cosmopolitan Rotterdam.

Once every two year, the Rotterdams Wijktheater produces large scale site specific theatre production. Therefore, they are based for 18 months in one specific neighbourhood, work closely together with cultural, social and educational organisations in this area. All the people living in this neighbourhood are invited to join the production. Overall 80 to 100 people participate as performer, volunteer behind the scenes or as a guide for the audience. These long term, large scale productions have

a positive effect on the social cohesion of the neighbourhood by: the broadening of people's network, new contacts outside their usual social and cultural context, a better insight and understanding of others, increase of participation in other neighbourhood activities.

The Rotterdams Wijktheater is run by a small professional staff of theatre - and filmmakers, technicians, producers, and outreach workers. Typically, new productions are based on interviews and improvisations, which are subsequently processed into a script that is rehearsed over a six-month period. The resulting play is performed by community members themselves. Sometimes, projects are commissioned by external organizations, like public health agencies. But more often than not, participants themselves come up with themes like fear, loneliness, addiction, violence in public space, intercultural

relations in the community, or tension between parents and teenage children.

The Rotterdams Wijktheater has no permanent company of actors, although some make return appearances. Usually, companies are composed of non-professional actors from the neighbourhood where a particular project is based, written and rehearsed. Participating performers usually have no prior performance experience. In fact, few of them have ever seen live theatre. Everybody can join the company, there are no auditions.

Starting in 2001, RWT has also been responsible for organizing biennial and later triennial international community arts festivals. This event is called International Community Arts Festival (ICAF), which over the years has grown in importance. It is here that ACTA and RWT became acquainted and laid the basis for a long-term relationship, exchange and co-operation.

## RWT's working methodology

The RWT was founded with the mission to make theatre accessible for groups of people (mostly from marginalised communities) who traditionally do not participate in theatre, producing theatre for, by, and with people from these communities. In order to attract new and culturally excluded audiences RWT presents theatre performances that are based on the stories coming from their own community, dealing with issues that are relevant to those groups. Identification of the audience with what they see on stage and who they see on stage is crucial for the way the production is received and perceived.

### Methodology

Since the start in 1992 the RWT worked for almost 20 years with a very specific methodology, that touches all levels and departments of the organisation:

- Recruitment - productions are made in close collaboration with the participants, who are all members of local communities.
- Improvisation & enhancement - in the first phase participants start getting to know each other by telling their personal stories. In this phase a couple of vital themes and fields of interest are found. Through improvisations the director is able to explore the acting possibilities of the participants.
- Script - based on the material that is collected in the group of participants.
- Rehearsals - the director has to combine and balance all the selected elements in such a way that the emotional and content wise meaning could be communicated the best possible way towards the audience.
- Performances
- Touring - every production is at least presented 10 to 20 times in the neighbourhood centres through the whole city of Rotterdam.
- Audiences - in order to reach these new audiences, the RWT

focuses on three particular areas of interest: performances for adult audiences, youth-oriented performances (with a special focus on the lower vocational education) and performances for day time audiences (women/mothers and elderly people).

- Outreach - Depending on the different audience groups the performances will be planned close to where they live and at a time that suits them best.

## Towards a new way of producing

Due to the crisis and the fast closure of almost 80% neighbourhood centres and lots of welfare organisations that were so crucial as co-operating partners, the RWT had to find new ways of producing and presenting in order to reach the target group of non-theatre goers. For instance: the RWT started making short pieces of 20 to 30 minutes which they could perform during coffee mornings for women in small settings like a living room; or a special smaller version of the productions which were presented in school classes

and all variations between very small, or short pieces, to large scale site-specific productions that were performed 15 times for a large audience coming from all Rotterdam and the region.

## Target Group

Almost 80% of the inhabitants from Rotterdam never goes to theatre. That is quite a shocking number. It is RWT's mission to reach these non-theatre goers. For a small company as the RWT is not possible to reach this 80%, so there is a strong focus on people for whom theatre is – for several reasons – difficult to access. The productions are easy to percept for everybody and nobody is excluded. This is the same for the participants. The RWT does not have auditions, because everybody should have the opportunity to experience theatre.

The RWT strives for production groups that are a mirror of the Rotterdam society, that could be a mix of people living in a specific neighbourhood, a

mix of women of all ages and cultural backgrounds for the women-productions, a mix of youngsters from all ages between 15 to 25, coming from different neighbourhoods and so on. As a result, from this way of working, the RWT automatically involves refugees and asylum seekers, since they too are living in Rotterdam and are part of the Rotterdam society.

### *2.3 Centro per lo Sviluppo Creativo “Danilo Dolci” (Italy)*

**C**entro per lo Sviluppo Creativo “Danilo Dolci” – CSC was founded in 1958 and was born from the experience and work of Danilo Dolci and its collaborators in Sicily.

It is a non-profit association that involves young people and adults, which has successfully operated for more than ten years in the educational sector in collaboration with schools, universities, institutions, associations and social groups

both at local and at international level.

The Centre stemmed from the need of offering the local communities a reality committed to practically solving the local problems, developing a creative space in which fostering awareness and bottom-up planning are the centre of the action, paving the way for a real change.

Since the beginning, the main focus of the Centre was non-violent education practices as well as the development of a methodology: **the Reciprocal Maieutic Approach**, a pedagogical methodology of research and self-analysis useful to develop creativity, communication skills, relational skills, cooperation and active participation.

CSC has successfully operated for more than ten years also at international level developing projects in the field of intercultural education, arts, culture and social integration,

focusing on two main pillars, as its name suggests:

- the Local Development, starting from the needs of the community and paying special attention to the most disadvantaged target groups;
- the Creativity, promoting innovation in education and using new methodologies to empower young and adults.

Its **objective** is to promote the territory development, the intercultural dialogue, working towards a culture of peace and non-violence through education.

Moreover, CSC “Danilo Dolci” can count on a strong network at local level of schools, local immigration centres, local and regional institutions, associations and private companies.

Specifically, the association has a long-lasting experience in projects and initiatives at EU, Euro-Mediterranean and local dimension (Erasmus +, ENPI CBC-MED, Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs, LLP and YiA projects) on the following topics:

- Innovation in education and prevention of ESL (Early School Leaving);
- Social inclusion & active citizenship;
- Empowerment of youth, especially with disadvantaged target group such as migrants and refugees;
- Entrepreneurship and mobility.

## CSC working methodology

Throughout his whole life, Danilo Dolci tried to find out those connections and possible communications in order to release that creativity hidden in each person and he called this research “maieutic”, taking this term from the philosophical structures, and integrating it in a social, educational and civil practice. During his life, Danilo Dolci worked closely to the people and to the disadvantaged and oppressed groups of the western Sicily in order to study the possible ways of change and the potential for a democratic social redemption.

His methodological approach constitutes an important characteristic of the social and educational Danilo Dolci work: rather than spreading ready-made truths, he believes that no real change can abstract from the involvement and the direct participation of the people concerned. As a result, he starts from the belief that in Sicily, as in the rest of the world, the resources for the change are present and should be searched and evoked in the people themselves. In this sense, Danilo Dolci considers the educational and maieutic commitment as a necessary element in order to create a more opened and responsible civil society.

The Reciprocal Maieutic Approach (RMA) is a popular dialectic methodology of research and self-analysis tested by Danilo Dolci starting from the 50s and by the present Centre for the Creative Development within the educational and sociological field nowadays. This approach promotes a sense of responsibility in the

communities and individuals and can be defined as a “collective exploration process that considers individuals’ experience and intuition as a reference point” (Dolci, 1996). The RMA was developed by Danilo Dolci from the concept of Socrates’ maieutic. It derives from the ancient greek “μαιευτικός” that literally stands for the midwife art: each educational act is like giving birth to all the inside potentials of the individual that wants to learn, as a mother wishes her baby is born from her womb. Socrates’ maieutic compares the philosopher to the “midwife of knowledge” that doesn’t fill the student mind with a priori information, but helps him bring his knowledge to light, using the dialogue as a dialectical tool. What makes the difference between these two concepts is the fact that Socrates’ maieutic is unidirectional, whereas Danilo Dolci thinks knowledge can arise from experience and its sharing, and then requires reciprocity in communication.

Danilo Dolci’s RMA, as a result,

is based on the sharing process of answering, exploring and creating. As the name itself recalls, the RMA is a “reciprocal” process between at least two people and it normally develops within a group, with a person that starts asking some questions and other people that search for the answers together and make other close examinations. In an intense dialogue that stands for a new way of education based on increasing individuals’ and group’s creativity, the maieutic process concentrates on the capacity of people potential to discover their vital interests and freely express their own reflections basing both on their experiences and their personal discovers and on the choral verification of the proposals.

The maieutic workshop needs everybody to question and uncover themselves in front of the others, and with the others to start a common research path of analysis, testing and creative co-education.

### Target Group

**C**SC Danilo Dolci’s activities are addressed to all the civil society, involving all young, adult and elderly people (both marginalized and socially integrated) through projects in the educational field carried out in cooperation with schools, universities, institutions, associations and social groups both at local and international level.

### 3. Refugees' national situation: a short overview



# Refugees' national situation: a short overview

In the last years the deep crisis that are afflicting the population of Africa and of the Middle-East and the better life conditions and political stability present in the EU, have encouraged an important increase of the immigration phenomenon in the EU territory.

Between 2014 and 2016 there have been more than 2,6 million accesses in the EU. The migration flows of this period have showed a substantial heterogeneity both in the wide variety of country of origin and in the different causes of the migratory movement.

People come generally from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, but also sub-Saharan Africa (in particular from Eritrea, Nigeria and Gambia). The eastern Mediterranean route and the Central Mediterranean route represent in this sense, the main paths for migration flows to EU (Fondazione ISMU, 2017).

In the following paragraphs national situations related to immigration flows registered in each partner's country are presented, in order to contextualize the methodological approaches implemented in each country.

## *3.1.1 United Kingdom*

The UK is a signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, this defines a refugee and guarantees fair treatment.

People in need of sanctuary have the right to apply for asylum in the UK. Nationally, 90% of asylum seekers came from Asian or African countries in 2016. The top five nationalities for UK asylum applications were Iranian, Pakistani, Iraqi, Afghan and Bangladeshi. The highest number of asylum grants (before any appeal) were awarded to Syrians, followed by Iranians,

Eritreans, Sudanese and Afghans. Those who do claim asylum in the UK are barred from claiming any welfare benefits.

Britain's strict immigration policy is notorious across Europe; recent news coverage of the 'Windrush scandal' has highlighted the 'Hostile Environment' policy created by then Home Secretary Theresa May in 2012. However, this antagonistic approach to asylum-seekers does not prevent the UK from being the third most popular 'destination country' sited by refugees.

In 2017, an estimated 668,600 people sought safety in Europe. Britain received just 26,350 asylum applications, a 14% decrease since the year before. Many of these were rejected, and asylum seekers sent back to their country of origin.

By the end of 2017 more than 14,600 asylum applications had been waiting for longer than six months for an initial decision

on the case, which is an increase from 8,820 compared with the previous year. The total backlog in cases pending a decision totaled 28,787.

Britain is not Europe's top recipient of asylum applications. In 2017, Germany, Italy and France all received at least twice as many asylum applications as the UK. In Germany alone, 199,200 asylum applications were made. Britain received less than 3% of all asylum claims made in the EU during last year.

Britain offers no asylum visa. In fact, there are very few, legal ways for refugees to safely escape their country and claim asylum in another country. People who are seeking asylum make up a tiny proportion of new arrivals in Britain; 26,350 of them were seeking refuge in 2017, although not all people seeking asylum are granted permission to stay in Britain. The top 3 countries of origin of people applying for asylum in Britain in the 2017 were: Iran, Pakistan and Iraq.

## Main challenges for refugee integration

The British asylum system is extremely strict, with just 29% of initial decisions made in 2017 being grants of protection, and appeals made through legal challenges providing more protection than government. One way which refugees could be allowed to travel to the UK safely is through the Mandate scheme, which enables refugees in other countries to join their family members in Britain. However, this route is rarely used by the Government and just 2 people arrived as Mandate Refugees in 2017. Only 390 have arrived since the beginning of the Scheme in 2008.

794 children who arrived in Britain alone were granted asylum in 2017 but are not allowed to bring their parents or siblings to join them in safety. The top country of origin for new applications from unaccompanied children was Sudan, followed by Eritrea.

In 2017, 27,331 people were imprisoned in immigration detention centers; among them many people seeking asylum. 54% were released back into the community. In 2017, 44 children were locked up in immigration detention despite a Government promise in 2010 to end the practice.

At the end of last year 44,850 asylum seekers and their dependents were being supported by the Government (under both section 4 and section 95 support). This figure has risen since 2012 but is still below the figure for end of 2003 when there were 80,123 asylum seekers being supported.

### *3.1.2 The Netherlands*

It is not easy to answer the question about the exact number of refugees living in The Netherlands. This depends on the definition of the term 'refugee' that is used. According to the UN there were 101,744 refugees living in

The Netherlands by the end of 2016. But other figures mention 200.000 to 250.000 refugees living in The Netherlands. Most of them are coming from countries as Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and Somalia.

The last decades there were huge differences in the numbers of asylum seekers from year to year. In 1994 more than 50.000 people applied for asylum and till 2001 the numbers were constantly over 20.000. After 2001 the numbers decreased to an average of 10.000 to 15.000 per year. In 2015 the number of asylum seekers increased significantly to 58.880 with almost 50% of them coming from Syria. Due to the agreement between the EU and Turkey about the Syrian refugees, the number of asylum seekers decreased in 2016 to 31.642.

Up to 2014 there were 4 reasons to give asylum:

A. when you are a refugee and fear for being prosecuted in your homeland because of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, sexuality.

- B. when you cannot return to your home country because of the risk of being foltered, or get an inhumane or humiliating treatment or punishment
- C. humanitarian reasons concerning somebody's personal departure from his or her homeland
- D. humanitarian reasons concerning the overall situation in the homeland

Medio 2014 the humanitarian reasons (c. and d.) were deleted and no longer reason to give a permit to stay. Looking at this development is it pretty clear that the policy in The Netherlands towards refugees and asylum seekers has become more and more strict and limited. Compared to other European countries The Netherlands is with 1,6% of all the asylum seekers in Europe (in 2016) on 9th position regarding the percentage of first asylum applications. This was 3,9% in 2014 and 3,4% in 2015.

Although it is hardly possible to get asylum for humanitarian reasons, the percentage of

positive decisions increased a tiny little bit. Looking at the top 10 of nationalities, asylum applications from Kosovo and Albania were all rejected, and applications from people from Syria (96%), Eritrea (93%), Iraq (58%), Afghanistan (52%), Iran (73%), Somalia (50%) and of Stateless people (91%) were mostly rewarded. Compared to other European countries The Netherlands is with 72,1% positive decisions on second position. Mostly for asylum reasons a. and b.

## Main challenges for refugee integration

Refugees are very motivated to integrate. Yet almost 50% does not pass their exams within the prescript time. Complex rules, bad information, stress and worries about the whereabouts and wellbeing of their family are **huge obstacles**. Heavy sanctions for those who do not pass their exams on time (a fine of € 10.000!), lead to risk avoiding behaviour like postponing their homework

and a deliberate and safe choice for a lower language level. Also, defective information leads to choices of which the refugees cannot foresee the consequences.

These conclusions came from a research by Vluchtelingen Werk Nederland (The Dutch Council for Refugees) described in their 'IntegratieBarometer 2018'. The Dutch integration policy almost seems in practice more an obstacle than a good means of integration.

Refugees realize that language is very important for participation in society, because it helps them to communicate, make contact with Dutch citizens and in finding a job. But they do emphasise that in the process of integration there should be more attention for building a network and social contacts. This would be very helpful for the integration. Refugees that have contact with Dutch citizens learn the language faster and easier.

Vluchtelingenwerk Nederland advises the minister of Social Affairs and Employment to take

more care of the ‘person behind the refugee’ and look at their personal circumstances, use a flexible integration time and use ‘motivation’ instead of ‘mistrust’ as starting point.

### 3.1.3 Italy

In Italy, the phenomenon of migration flows has registered an intensification from 2011 reaching its peak in 2014, year in which irregular entries have reached their maximum value compared to historical data; more than 170.000 (Fondazione ISMU).

Since then the “migrant pressure” has entered inexorably in the Italian political agenda, generating lots of debates and being leading subject of all media.

In 2015 the number of irregular migrants was slightly fewer than 154,000, due to the EU-Turkey deal that has significantly impacted the fluxes through Balkan route (Banca d’Italia, 2018) moving their higher

concentration in the Greece territory.

In Italy in 2016, the irregular flows have registered even higher values than in 2014, recording more than 181,000 immigrants. According to UNHCR data’s, in July 2016, 93% of people who disembarked in Europe have reached the Italian Regions of Sicily, Calabria, Apulia, Campania and Sardinia.

Despite the decline of arrivals on the Italian coasts of 2017, Italy remains one of the main receiving countries in Europe (Fondazione ISMU, 2018).

The limited number of legal arrivals, the decrease in the number of births from non-Italian residents and the acquisition of Italian citizenship, are all factors which have an impact on the value of the currently registered migrants. It is also demonstrated that Italy is the EU Member State with the highest number of immigrants who acquire citizenship (Banca d’Italia, 2018).

Additional elements which have

an impact on the analysis of this phenomenon are the number of repatriations (indeed in 2016 the value of repatriation was of 5,715 people out of over 32,000 removal orders - a little number when compared with the 50% European average) and of voluntary returns (in 2016 these were only 1,015 compared to 18,000 returns from Poland and 9,000 from Sweden).

It is also relevant to consider the number of not declared departures which leave a blank space in the statistical data, including also the number of those who have reached different countries or who have gone back to country of origin without notice.

## Main challenges for refugee integration

**A**t their arrival, migrants have to firstly proceed with a registration as asylum seekers or economic migrants. In this first step, the lack of cultural mediators can usually have a negative impact

on their understanding of the process they are going through and thus also on their possibility to receive the best service for their immediate integration in the society.

The number of places available within the SPRAR system - Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees-(which offers integrated reception interventions for refugees, international protection applicants and beneficiaries of subsidiary and humanitarian protection), is very limited. Although the massive migration inflows recorded in 2014 has led institutions to implement extraordinary reception measures for the “temporary” accommodation of asylum-seekers, the CAS - Extraordinary Reception Centres - (which should be used as crisis management system offering basic assistance in the first entry moment), migrants can end up staying months or even years in these “temporary” places (Banca d’Italia, 2018). This affects their possibilities to be fully part of the society.

An additional aspect concerns the long-time participation of migrants in the economic and social life of the hosting country. In this sense an important challenge for migrant integration is represented by their possibility to effectively access the national labor market. A difference has to be done between migrants for economical reason (which choose a country based on its occupational prospective) and the asylum seekers who are escaping from dangerous contexts in order to save their life (who in this case do not evaluate as first element the economical and occupational aspects). It is also relevant to examine

which are the regulatory boundaries that can have an impact on the involvement of migrants in the labor market. The limitations coming from the applied legislation have a long-term impact which is difficult to eliminate. This shows the need for more inclusive policies in the labor market in order to allow a real engagement of this people in the society and a real contribution to the hosting country economic life. On this matter, Italy seems to be one of the most permissive countries in terms of access to the labor market for asylum seekers: allowing to work after 60 days from the submission of the application\*.

*\*The data reported in this chapter are taken from:*

#### *UK*

*Refugee Council, available at <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/>  
Bristol City Council (2018), at <https://www.bristol.gov.uk/>*

#### *The Netherlands*

*Data in section 3.2.2 come from the publication 'Vluchtelingen in getallen 2017' by Vluchtelingenwerk Nederland, based on information from IND, COA, CBS, Eurostat, UNHCR, and from the 'IntegratieBarometer 2018' based on a research by the Verwey Jonker Instituut in assignment of Vluchtelingen Werk Nederland (available at [www.vluchtelingenwerk.nl](http://www.vluchtelingenwerk.nl), 2018)*

#### *Italy*

*Data in section 3.2.3 come from the following sources:*

*Ambrosini, M. et al, Fondazione ISMU, Ventriesimo Rapporto sulle migrazioni 2017. (2018). Milano: F. Angeli.*

*Ballatore R. M. et Al., Banca d'Italia, Questioni di Economia e finanze. I rifugiati e i richiedenti asilo in Italia, nel confronto europeo. (2017). [ebook] Available at:*

*[https://www.bancaditalia.it/pubblicazioni/qef/2017-0377/QEF\\_377\\_17.pdf](https://www.bancaditalia.it/pubblicazioni/qef/2017-0377/QEF_377_17.pdf)*

*Frontex, Risk Analysis for 2016 (2018). [ebook] Available at: [https://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Risk\\_Analysis/Annula\\_Risk\\_Analysis\\_2016.pdf](https://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Risk_Analysis/Annula_Risk_Analysis_2016.pdf)*

## 4. REACT – Methodologies and models to integrate refugees through Theatre



# REACT - Methodologies and models to integrate refugees through Theatre

*The following chapter is focused on the three theatre approaches at the basis of the performance of the project. Each of them is structured following the same framework, to facilitate understanding of the different methodologies, target involved and the impact not only on their lives but also at community level. Moreover, after each model's presentation, a specific space is dedicated to common case studies occurred during the implementation of the project. For the future readers these can be useful indications or recommendations in order to reproduce them in other contexts with similar cases.*

<b>Organization</b>	<b>acta Community Theatre Ltd</b>
<b>Country</b>	United Kingdom
<b>Name of the performance &amp; short description</b>	<b>'It's my Life':</b> theatre and language development with women from refugee backgrounds at Hannah More School (year One – 2016-17) <b>'Lost Sheep':</b> young male refugees from Sudan, Eritrea, in partnership with Ashley Housing organisation, providing housing for refugees (Year two – 2017-18) Also 'Dream On', re-rehearsed for inclusion in REACT Festival; Four women and one man from Sudanese, Somali, and Bangladeshi communities



- Target Group** • **“It’s my life”**: 20 Women from refugee backgrounds, aged 23 - 40 (Somali, Bangladeshi, Sudanese, one English woman).



- “Lost sheep”**: 19 Young male refugees newly arrived in the UK, all in their 20’s – (Sudanese, Eritrean, Afghani, Nigerian)



Both groups were single sex, reflecting the projects cultural sensitivity. All participants had English as a second language.

Also, **Dream On**, four women and one man from Sudanese, Somali and Bangladeshi backgrounds.

**Working  
Methodology**

acta has developed a methodology which uses **theatre as a way of encouraging participants to use their creativity and share stories**. The process will take several months, with groups meeting weekly for theatre-based workshops over that period. The material gathered from the workshops will then be used to co-create an original piece of theatre to be performed by the participants within the community. **The aim throughout is to create a process in which participants and facilitators are equal partners, and a final piece of theatre which is co-owned by all engaged in the process.**



This process is divided in 2 main phases:

## Engagement

A period of engagement – lasting for 4-8 weeks - will be undertaken in order **to identify and engage participants** working closely with a partner organisation in contact with potential participants, necessary to encourage them to get involved with the project. A series of ‘taster workshops’ will then be delivered with these participants to demonstrate the accessibility of the process, to develop trust between participants and facilitators and to have fun. These workshops include games, role-play, and improvisation. At this stage, many participants will engage, from which a group of regular participants will be formed.

## Play’s development

In the second phase (lasting at least 10 weeks), discussion, role-play and improvisation are used to explore ideas towards developing a story from which the play can be formed. This will include development of a written script if required. A variety of devising techniques may be used (*e.g. beginning with characters, an issue of concern or topical storyline, physical theatre, verbatim theatre, documentary theatre, stand-up, soap opera, and acta’s ‘Julie Story’ technique - see below*). Through this devising process the play is created. When the detailed scenario or script is finalised, the play will be rehearsed for performance. Throughout this process, the acta workers will remain the same, moving between facilitating play creation, developing scenario, script writing, producing and directing.





### **A working methodology to ensure participants’**

**involvement:** participants face a range of challenges to engagement and performance; complicated lives, family responsibilities, cultural attitudes to theatre, lack of confidence, feeling of exclusion from arts and theatre. Our methodology has been developed to manage these challenges, with the following features:

- **Flexibility** – we have learned to adapt around the complicated lives of our participants, and work with who we have, when we have them
- **Relevance** – working with partners to identify needs and tailoring projects to the need of individuals – be it lack of confidence in using English language, challenging hate crime, celebrating culture
- **Ownership and equality** – ensuring the process is led by the participants involved, creating a framework in which their creativity is stimulated
- **Respect** – valuing participants as the experts in the story they have to tell and respecting what that story is; it is important not to go into the project with a fixed idea of what interests the theatre-makers.
- **Fun** – Enjoyment is central; participants will return and commit to the project if they enjoy the experience, if they laugh together and have fun.

**Main  
timeline of  
performance  
development**

Both **'It's my Life'** and **'Lost Sheep'** were conducted on the same structure.

'It's my life' began in October 2016 and continued with weekly workshops and rehearsals leading to performances in May 2017.

Lost Sheep – the project began with 'tasters' in September 2017, with the group developing during the autumn, and performances in March and April 2018

**Equipment  
& structures  
used**

The plays were both presented at acta's theatre in South Bristol, and used simple sets and props, created by acta's Production Manager and Designer.

**'It's my life'**: a simple set was created, using raised areas to depict four different locations – living room, playgroup, bedroom/study, and central exterior. Theatre lighting was used to focus on action in these. The piece was performed in contemporary dress, designed in most part by the participants.



**Lost Sheep**: a simple set, with two raised areas identified as two neighbouring farms, a central space for exteriors; The set included a specially commissioned painting depicting a Sudanese landscape, and three 3D sheep, which were particularly enjoyed by the audiences. The piece was performed in traditional Sudanese dress.

## Activities organized

### 'It's my life'

For acta's project, acta Associate Director Ingrid Jones and Foundation Drama Worker Tracey Harvey worked in partnership with Hannah More School in Bristol to engage a group of women from a range of nationalities and refugee backgrounds, including Somali, Bangadeshi, and one White British woman.

The initial engagement with the women was to offer a series of drama-based workshops aimed at improving English language and communication, and at this stage the acta staff worked with 23 women over a period of eight weeks in Autumn 2016. These workshops included games, role-play, improvisation and discussion, and were concerned with developing skills in women, but also trust between the participants and the acta facilitators. The aim, above all, was to make the workshops enjoyable to have fun, share stories and laugh together. By the end of this process there was a core group of eight women who became regular attendees.



The acta facilitators then began to use the next phase of the project, January – May 2017, using workshops to encourage the group to raise issues and subjects which were important to them, and then use these as a starting point for improvised scenes, creating situations. After a few weeks, the facilitators worked with the group to develop a storyline and characters based around the improvised scenes, using an acta devising technique called ‘The Julie Story’.

### **The “Julie Story”**

*In this exercise, the whole group are involved in giving ideas about the life of a central character – the ‘Julie’. The Facilitator draws a stick-drawing on a flip chart, and asks the group to name the character, its age, sex, where it lives, who it lives with. The group answers, and all answers are used to gradually build up a story around the character. Then more detailed questions are asked ‘What are they afraid of?’, ‘What makes them happy?’, ‘What are their dreams?’. As the details emerge, the Facilitator helps the group to identify key ‘happenings’ or ‘moments’ in the story which could be scenes in the play. These scenes are put into a rough structure, then this is improvised by the group. This is then the first, rough draft of the play, which will be honed and polished over the following weeks until performance.*

From these sessions a full scenario of scenes was created. It was decided not to write a script for the group, as the written word might have proved a barrier to the group members, all of whom were learning English as a second language.

The play focused on the difficulties of young Somali women settling in Bristol, and the cultural differences to traditional expectations of their Somali parents and grandparents. The play was titled ‘It’s My Life’ and performed twice at the actcentre on 23 & 24 May 2017, watched by 140 people (82% capacity), with over 50% from BME backgrounds, and 68% who identified as ‘not regular theatre-goers’.

Following the performances, an evaluation session took place with the participants at which they watched a film record of their performance; a process which director reported was useful learning for the whole group.

## By Artistic Operators

*'The young men from Ashley Housing didn't mention the word 'refugee' once, not once in all those months of working on the project.' Aqeel Abdulla, acta Foundation Drama Worker*

*'This festival can help people realise that no-one from an ethnic minority is a spokesperson for that minority, but is speaking for themselves, as an individual, with their own experiences and stories'*

*Aqeel Abdulla*



## Lost Sheep

Given that the **'It's my life'** project involved people who had arrived in the UK a few years ago, and were more settled, acta wanted to make some theatre with refugees who had arrived more recently and were finding it difficult to settle into their new country. acta undertook a series of 'taster' workshops in partnership with refugee agencies and voluntary sector organisations in Bristol (eg Borderlands, Refugee Women of Bristol, St Pauls Learning Centre, St Pauls Children's Centre, Ashley Housing Association). From these a number of regular weekly workshops began, with the aim of making theatre for the REACT Festival in March 2018.

*'This story is about living in Sudan, a small country village. I hope the audience will learn about our culture, our background, and how people live in rural villages.'*

*Ali, Lost Sheep performer*

Using the same process as outlined above for **'It's My Life'**, the theatre project was implemented in partnership with Ashley Housing, primarily using theatre as a way of developing confidence and English language, engaging 20 young male refugees from Sudan, Afghanistan, Eritrea. This process was aided by the involvement of Aqeel Abdulla, a Syrian refugee himself, and an Arabic speaker, who was able to translate for participants in the early stages of the project; although he noted, as a measure of the level of their growth in confidence, that by mid-way in the project the participants no longer needed him to translate but were confident enough to communicate in English themselves.

Initial workshops were based around theatre games, and simple improvisations designed to encourage the participants to use and practice their English language skills. The workshops were also designed to be enjoyable, using role-plays, spontaneous and prepared improvisations, performing small scenes in front of each other. At this stage the facilitators were concerned with building a strong relationship of trust with the participants, adopting a friendly and supportive approach which promoted and encouraged cooperation between the participants. At no point in the process did the facilitators ask or encourage the participants to share stories of their journey, or current personal situation in the UK, but created a workshop structure which allowed the group to choose subjects with which they felt comfortable.

Again, after several weeks, a regular group of participants was formed, and this began to work on ideas for a piece of theatre to be performed at the REACT Festival in March 2018. By this point in the project the majority of the group were from Sudan, and for one workshop the facilitators used the idea of proverbs as a starting point for improvisation and story-building. In this workshop the group shared two Sudanese proverbs, and then created scenes based on their meaning. From the ideas and improvisations developed in this session, the group was able to create a whole new play, set in a Sudanese village, entitled 'Lost Sheep'.

The scenario was then developed over a period of 10 weeks, and rehearsed by the group of six, with Aqeel Abdulla taking a part in the performance, in order to support the performers who were all encountering theatre and performing for the first time.

The resulting play told two interwoven, simple stories, which although based on life in the Sudanese village, also reflected many universal issues and concerns; the damage created by jealousy and gossip; the desire for revenge and how that can rebound.

'Lost Sheep' performed three times on 21 March (35 audience), 26 March (80 audience) and 11 April (75 audience). The show was well received by each audience, as people from the white host community connected with the stories at a level of common humanity, with much laughter as the schemes and actions of the characters played out and they became embroiled in the results of their actions.

**Impact on the target and at community level**

**Target Group:**

During the "pre-show" phase, on reflection, the majority of participants reported on their nervousness at the prospect of performing, based on their lack of previous experience. Over 50% of participants expressed excitement at the prospect of performance, and the desire to show the audience what they could achieve.

One participant from 'Lost Sheep', interviewed on film leading up to the performance commented on his concerns about performing, but that he was looking forward to having the opportunity to share stories about the Sudan to British people.

*'The story was more a portrayal – people get an idea of what it's like in those villages – how we sort things there – people's different living experiences'*

After the show, in both projects, the participants were agreed that the experience of creating and performing the play was very positive.

They referred to their growth in confidence generally, and in using English specifically; making friends; sharing their cultural heritage; and addressing their challenges and aspirations.

*'I liked it when Ingrid said could share what thinking with the audience. It was my first time, I felt really enthusiastic, felt I was doing something really good, tried to do my best'*

#### **Community:**

Evaluation with audience members at this community level demonstrated an increase in understanding and empathy with the refugee performers, and a willingness to challenge their own preconceptions.

Audiences in general reported their enjoyment of the plays; an increase in their leaning about the different cultures, and surprise at some aspects; they commented on the themes of hope, aspiration understanding and kindness

Here they are some participants' quotations to the shows:

*'It made me feel warm and happy, so proud for the performers and entertained by their story. Glad we could share it'*

*'I thought it was going to be a bit grim, as it was being performed by refugees, but it wasn't that at all, it was funny and warm. It really made me laugh. And think'*

## Case Studies

**M**any of the individuals involved in the project have demonstrated the positive impact of their involvement during the performance workshops.

One young Sudanese woman

was involved in the development of the **'Dream On'** project and used the play to communicate a strong feminist message to other refugee women to 'follow their dream' to break away from traditional roles for women as mothers and wives and to

make the most of education and employment opportunities. After her involvement her confidence grew to the extent that she gained a place at a Bristol University, joined the Board of Directors at acta, and is interested in learning community theatre skills to take back to Sudan.

A young single parent involved in the **'It's my Life'** project gained employment at acta on a year-long paid training placement, learning how to become a drama worker. She has now set up her own after-school drama project for children.

Several participants involved from the beginning of the process were unable to continue to performance as their confidence and language skills improved so much they were able to gain employment and access educational opportunities.

A common difficulty with workshops was the often-poor attendance and punctuality of participants. As an organisation, acta recognises that participants

often have often difficult and complicated lives allowing to.

It is interesting and worth noting that the new plays developed by acta as part of REACT did not take as their subject matter the 'victimisation' aspect of the refugee experience; the stories were not about difficult journeys and personal tragedies encountered along the way, but instead were plays which celebrated the national culture of the participants, their aspirations and dreams, the challenges of settling in a new country. The audience reaction to all the plays were warm and celebratory; lots of laughter at the situations and characters portrayed, a great deal of learning about the cultural background of the refugee performers, and a real sense of the empathy and 'shared humanity' which the project set out to achieve.

*“We learnt to work together as a team, we would help each other backstage, looking after each other’s props, cueing people when on, helping with lines, supporting each other.”*

*“When the audience come, you feel like you’re doing something good.”*

*“This was the first time a Sudanese woman had got on stage to tell her story. It had never been seen before. I hope that lots of women from my community get the confidence to be involved in creative writing and drama”.*

*acta participants*

<b>Organization</b>	Rotterdams Wijktheater
<b>Country</b>	The Netherlands
<b>Name of the performance &amp; short description</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Short piece – presentation by three young men from Syria, living in the asylum centre in Rotterdam (year one 2016/2017)</li> <li>2. ‘Kom terug’ – production made by 12 refugees and locals, coming from Syria, Guinea, Eritrea, Afghanistan and The Netherlands (year two 2017/2018)</li> </ol>
<b>Target Group</b>	<p>Refugees with a temporarily permit to stay and living in the Netherlands for approximately 2 years, and locals. Participants were male and female, young and old, different cultures and nationalities, enriching the target we worked with.</p> <p>15 people involved – aged 26 – 66 years old – from Syria, Afghanistan, Guinea, Eritrea, The Netherlands.</p>
<b>Working Methodology</b>	<p>Pop-up Theatre is the main methodology which has been used by RWT in the context of REACT project. This methodology has been developed in 2016 in order to stay visible in all parts of Rotterdam and connect to a wider variety of groups in different neighbourhoods. At the same time, it is a method to avoid the drop out of participants during the rehearsals, mostly because it is difficult for them to connect themselves for more than a year to the project. A solution could lay in start working with short interventions leading to a small presentation (first acquaintance with theatre), which step by step could lead to a bigger performance. In this way we could connect people from different neighbourhoods to each other and come to a more diverse group of actors and a diverse audience.</p>



## How Pop-Up theatre has been developed?

The pilot started with two small groups in different parts of Rotterdam. People in both neighbourhoods were invited to come to a theatre meeting. The meeting started with a small performance of the workshop facilitators. During that performance people were invited to share their thoughts, feelings and stories about their town and about what made them feel at home in Rotterdam.

Sometimes a short game was needed to help people to tell their story and participate in this process. At the end of the first meeting they were all asked to join the Pop-Up Theatre which meant: four rehearsals and a small presentation based on their stories for a small neighbourhood audience. The people that did not join the Pop-Up Theatre were finally invited as an audience for the small presentation.

The second group followed the same procedure and also made a presentation of approximately 30 minutes. After the first presentation in their own neighbourhood, both groups were brought together in a mutual presentation where they were each other's audience. Bringing these two groups together created the opportunity to start a dialogue between people with different opinions in places where they normally don't meet. By making cross-overs like this it was possible to create a network of interactions throughout the whole city of Rotterdam. And as a spin off from all these presentations from all these different groups, a new group could be formed as a starting point for a new, larger production with participants from all over town.

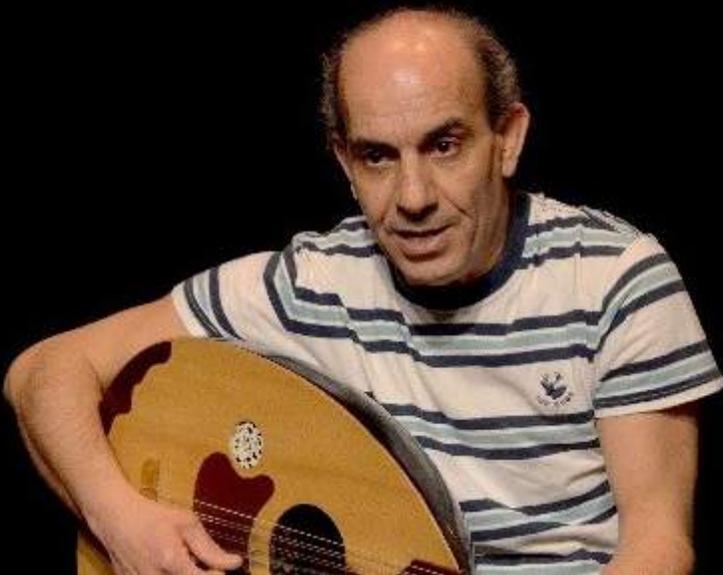
## Pop-up Theatre & REACT

RWT decided to use the Pop-Up Theatre for the REACT project. For several reasons:

1. October 2016 a new asylum centre was about to open in one of the most complex and underprivileged neighbourhoods of Rotterdam, which caused a huge uproar amongst the locals living in that neighbourhood. The Pop-Up Theatre could be a good way of starting a dialogue between the newly arrived refugees and the locals.
2. Since the Pop-Up Theatre concept only took a couple of weeks per group, it was possible to work with the new asylum seekers, from whom it was well known that they only would stay in the asylum centre in Rotterdam for a couple of weeks.

### **About: meeting people and knowing each other on the stage**

*"In Iraq I had a lot of activities, I had many friends and I was often outside. I was lonely here. This stage group took my hand and said, 'come on'. I love you all." Man, Afghanistan who lived in Iraq for quite some time.*



**Main  
timeline of  
performance  
development**

Due to local delays and difficulties in implementing activities related to the reception center, the activities of the first group started on November 2016 and ended in April 2017. Then, a new group for a second project started after summer 2017 and run through June 2018 with a last show on the 7th of June.

**Equipment  
& structures  
used**

The stage design was very simple, with just a few props. On purpose, because the directors wanted **to put the actors in the middle and be the centre of attention**. Most of the participants came to the Netherlands with hardly more than a suitcase with some clothes. All they possessed at that moment was “yourself and/or your family, your name, your language and your memories”. The light was very sober, starting with small flashlights to illustrate that everybody enters this world alone. This scene was followed by a scene in which the actors light themselves while introducing themselves. There were no theatrical costumes, everybody was dressed in their own clothes, to emphasize how they distinguish themselves from the others. There was only a little structure in the colour of the clothes so that there was a good mix of colours on stage instead of uniformity.

And furthermore: suppose it was possible to get visa for everybody and to perform live at the REACT festival in Bristol, in that case a huge stage set would be impossible to transport to the UK.



## Activities organized

The activities which led to the development of the performance had a more complex process which involved mainly 2 groups of people. However, this has brought really interesting results which made RWT achieve the expected goal.

### **A difficult implementation context**

In 2015 the council of Rotterdam decided to plan an asylum seeker centre in the Beverwaard, a neighbourhood build in the eighties of the last century on the outskirts of Rotterdam. There was a lot of resistance from the people living there. There were riots where the police had to intervene, and the mayor showed up on several public meetings to explain the position of the council. As in more places in Holland people were afraid for the unknown, for social disturbance and an unbalance in the number of local residents and newly arrived asylum seekers. Autumn 2016 the asylum seekers centre opened. The RWT saw this situation as an opportunity to start a dialogue and bring the opposite groups together through theatre.

It was not an option to work according to our standard methodology and work with a group for over a year, ending in a performance of almost one hour. It was well known that asylum seekers were moved from one asylum centre to another and that they probably would stay in the asylum centre in de Beverwaard for a couple of weeks, or months. Although the RWT had a lot of experience in making theatre with refugees who mostly lived in the Netherlands for several years, working with newly arrived refugees was new. Because this group constantly moved from one asylum centre to another, the RWT had to work fast for over a short period of time. The Pop-Up Theatre therefore seemed a perfect concept for this group of newcomers.

It was the intention to start with two groups in the asylum centre in Rotterdam Beverwaard and two groups of locals in the Beverwaard close to the asylum centre. Knowing that there had been some resistance in the neighbourhood while the asylum centre was built, we thought this would be a good opportunity to use the Pop-Up Theatre as a starting point for a dialogue between neighbours.

In 2016 most of the asylum seekers were young men and young families coming from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. Most of the people in this centre had a temporary residence permit and were waiting for a house nearby in Rotterdam. This means that most of them would stay for a short period of time in the asylum seekers centre, being in a procedure full of uncertainty. Besides that, they needed to learn the language, tried to get in contact with family in war zones and were constantly adapting to new situations.

### **The start of the project**

The RWT started with meetings in the asylum centre. At the beginning, this was not easy because the direction of the asylum centre was not willing to give the opportunity to work with the people living there. It was necessary to convince them of the integrity and objects of the plans. Finally, it was permitted to have some meetings, most of the time with different people. After these first informal meetings in the asylum centre, the directors invited the participants to come to the RWT theatre close to the asylum centre where they had better circumstances and more opportunities to work with the participants. A group of ten Syrian boys was formed. After a while this group fell apart and only three Syrian boys (not living in the asylum centre anymore) stayed in. With them a presentation was made for the REACT meeting at the International Community Art Festival (ICAF).

It was a frustrating period. Every time there was the feeling to start over again. It forced the directors to think again about their goals and intentions. And also, about the effectiveness of the concept of the Pop-Up Theatre for this purpose.

### **Lessons to be learned and questions to be answered**

Three important questions arose from this first project, which were not answered so far. These questions were crucial to determine the process for the next phase of the project.

If: participatory theatre as a tool to challenge prejudice and misconceptions, develop empathy, and promote intercultural understanding between refugees and host communities then:

1. **What is best moment for refugees to participate in a community theatre project?**  
*Is there a best moment where people can tell their stories in a way they feel the freedom to tell what they want?*
2. **What story will be told and what is the relevance for that moment for that people to tell their story and that audience to listen to that story?**  
*Who is making the story? The actor? The theatre maker? The audience?*
3. **In what theatrical tradition and or format the performance should be made?**  
*The Syrian way of performing differs from the Dutch way of performing. Is it possible or necessary to make a blend and what is the best theatre tradition in which performers, theatre maker and audience feel comfortable?*

The artistic team did not have enough answers for the questions that were raised during the process so far. For the next period they decided to follow a new way to answer these questions and made a new start in making community theatre with refugees. Three lines were developed:

1. the finalization of the community theatre piece (which is the current method explained in this session)
- and, in support of the development of this piece:
2. a video documentary
  3. a research

### **Community Theatre**

Before a new group was started, the directors wanted to know the motivation of refugees for participating in a theatre project. What's in it for them?

From conversations with refugees it became clear that they had a huge need for social contacts in a new city, in a foreign country. In places where they come like the language class, they mainly meet other refugees.

They hardly have opportunities to meet with local people from Rotterdam. In addition, learning the language is one thing, but having the courage to speak this language is another and of great importance to integrate. Being in groups where you can't practice the new language gives the refugee less possibilities to be in contact with new groups (the research of VluchtelingenWerk Nederland confirms this experience).

Esther de Bruijn with Stefan van Hees took responsibility for this part of the project. She visited several language classes from VluchtelingenWerk Rotterdam and invited the refugee students to join a theatre project. She did not mention that the project was part of larger international project with a focus on refugees. She just wanted them to join theatre, together with other participants coming from the local communities of Rotterdam. These refugees already lived in the Netherlands for 2 years, they had a house, an income and more structure in their lives and were eager to get in touch with Dutch people. The first meetings more than 30 people showed up. Some of them dropped out, but after a couple of weeks a solid group of 12 was formed. A mixed group of male, female, different ages and nationalities, refugees and locals who all wanted to commit themselves for a longer period of time. In this smaller group of participants Esther could create a safe environment where the participants could listen to each other's stories, could do the theatre exercises, the improvisations and – very important – could speak the Dutch language because that was the main language in the rehearsal studio. By choosing a theme as: what is home? all participants could contribute with stories from their own background. Therefore, there was no special focus on any group of participants. In fact: she followed the standard methodology of the RWT, but she also decided to visit each participant at home for a one-to-one interview. That way she got better insight in their personal background. Above all, because she made that effort, the participants felt that they could trust her and told her more about their lives than what they had done in the rehearsals. For some participants this was a change. Because of this in-depth interview, they dared to open up more during the rehearsals in front of the group. They stepped away from the safe and superficial stories toward a true insight in what moves them.

Unfortunately, Esther was not able to finish the rehearsals and use her interviews as basic material for a script and a final presentation. As artistic director Stefan continued the project and he decided – also because for reasons of time – not to use the material Esther had gathered. In two months' time he worked with the group towards a presentation based on theatre exercises, improvisations and movement, combined with small textual contributions.

The material Esther had gathered will be used for an extra production the RWT will make with the REACT group from September till December 2018 and will be performed 5 times around Christmas.

To support this process, 2 other initiatives were taken (which are not included in the theatre approach):

### **Documentary**

Looking at other projects in The Netherlands where refugees are involved in a process of making theatre, director and dramaturge Kees Deenik wondered how they managed the questions that aroused from the first REACT project, and what he could learn from them. By making a documentary about this search for answers to this question, he could place the questions in a larger, national – and probably international - context.

The documentary reflects on the three raised questions. As expected there was no consensus among the interviewee. Special circumstances, different groups and goals made of every contribution a unique story, but it gave some indications and ideas to reflect on one's own situation.

The answers to these questions can be found in the documentary at the RWT website:  
[www.rotterdamswijktheater.nl](http://www.rotterdamswijktheater.nl)

In general, we learned that the refugee wants to meet, set in a new environment, where he is building a new life where a new story is created. Living together requires tuning and affiliation.

The refugee wants to show himself/herself as an individual, get rid of a mark. No longer be a refugee, but a human being. And for the theatre maker: be patient, take your time.

### **Research**

To know more of the background of what factors influence people to participate in a theatre project we did research amongst the new group, through evaluation during all the project lifetime. This has allowed to understand better the target group and to empower the theatre process to be implemented.

The full research report can be found at the RWT website: [www.rotterdamswijktheater.nl](http://www.rotterdamswijktheater.nl)

### **Impact on the target and at community level**

#### **Target:**

*Pre-show:*

Participants were refugees and locals:

The refugees wanted to participate for several reasons. They felt solitude. Some of them had good contact with their neighbours but others didn't, mostly because the neighbours don't speak Dutch either. For most of them the theatre aspect of the activity wasn't the main attraction to join the project. They just wanted to be active in the Netherlands. Besides learning Dutch at school, they wanted to do something, have a hobby and practise the language.

The main reason of the Dutch participants to come to the meeting was to meet refugees. They felt powerless to watch the news about them in the media. One participant also just moved to Rotterdam and another one was very ill for a long period and wanted to participate to experience if she could be active again. She is a creative therapist and was willing to learn more about the methods using in the community arts, and to meet new people.

### *Post show:*

All the participants started to emphasize how grateful they were for the experience. They felt very welcome and happier than in the beginning of the rehearsals, less solitude because they made new friends, real friends, and felt safe to try new things and to make 'mistakes'. In acting/dancing but also in practising the Dutch language. Although they found the time the RWT took for getting to know each other and for the improvisations using body, voice and space too long, they had a lot of fun. They said it was relaxing and fascinating to learn about each other's history and talk about universal values. Both Dutch participants and refugees mentioned how special it was to be so close to each other and look in the eyes when someone tells about his or her life. Some said it felt a bit therapeutic and that it was helping them to dance with the whole group and tell their own story. They have learnt a lot about themselves and about other cultures. (See quotations).

### **Community Level:**

All the presentations in all stages of the project found an audience that was surprised by what they saw. That was both on the theatrical part as on the stories that were told. In the Netherlands the public debate about refugees is dominated by stories of problems, crime and differences. What people saw in the performances were common people with desires that were not that different from the desires of the audience. This was underlined by the performance of the mixed group we had where we had stories from both sides.

Family members of our refugee participants saw their relatives on stage in a way they never had seen them before. They were proud, and it showed them a way to participate in a new environment. Someone said to her sister: "I didn't know that you had courage to expose yourself in this way." Talking on a stage, in a language you are still learning, is like making a leap forward. Language is maybe one of the most difficult parts of becoming a member of a community. The process of this project helped most of the participants to overcome their shyness to communicate and gave them courage to make mistakes and to learn.

The helpfulness of our native speakers, the conversations with the audience and making theatre were the best exercise for their language education.

Recognition is a way to connect to a story. A lot of people said that they recognised the stories as human being to another human being. It is not always the story of the flight, the camps and the hardships that impress most, but the daily life stories of where you come from and how you lived a normal life before there was a war. People said that they started to think how they would react if they had to leave their social life and country for a war and start a new life elsewhere in the world. In the last play, less language was used and more body movement. Not only the participants but also the audience was surprised how much you can tell without words. In this way there is no difference between people in the audience in how they could understand the show regarding to the ability to understand the Dutch language. It made a more universal story where everybody could connect to. The audience reacted to that by starting easily a conversation with the participants after the show about what they had seen and what it meant to them.

## About learning the language through theatre



*“In the beginning I could not talk, everything is difficult. Now I understand more. I was afraid to be laughed at. In Arab countries you are laughed at if you make mistakes in the language. I was afraid to make mistakes, but that is allowed here.”*

*man, Afghanistan*



*"I thought: 'How can you make a play with people who do not speak the language?' Something beautiful has arisen!"*

*woman, the Netherlands*



*"In the beginning I wanted to stop, because I thought I could not do it because of the language. Everyone said I had to stay. Now I am very happy that I have continued. Now my Dutch is better, and I stopped saying sorry all the time."*

*man, Afghanistan*

*"It was cool to dance, drink and really be together and experience without the language being a barrier."*

*woman, The Netherlands*



## Case Studies

As previously explained, the long implementation of the project with the 2 groups of refugees allowed us to meet different stories which highlighted specific features of the learning process in which the refugees were included.

Specifically:

### *First group: how hard to tell a story is!*

The first group started several times. Groups fell apart because people left to another asylum seekers centre or could move to a house. They faced new problems over and over again and did not have any time to participate in a theatre project. Finally, there was a small group of three Syrian boys and they were the starting point for a new group. With this group a small theatre piece was made and presented during the International Community Arts Festival. This presentation ended in a group dance with the audience and was very

well received. The three actors seemed very happy.

After a while director Esther de Bruijn went with them to a special Syrian evening to meet new people and do the presentation they performed during the ICAF. Then, one hour before the presentation, the three boys refused to perform. They felt uncomfortable to do so and said: 'If we do this presentation, people will film us with their telephones, put it on Facebook and people in Syria will see us.' There was a sense of shyness and shame and Esther agreed to cancel the presentation. There it stopped. That evening they just told the audience about REACT and the plans. The boys danced with the audience and in the end, they met a lot of new people. The directors learned that it takes more time to tell your story for an audience of people coming from the same country and that their assumptions of what theatre is not always correspond to the participant's vision.

## *Second group*

**F**or many participants the theater project was a positive experience which they would not have wanted to miss. From interviews with refugees it became clear that they had a huge need for social contacts in this new city. Being a refugee, living in asylum centers, following specific language lessons for refugees, meant that they most of all stay in a social environment of refugees. There is a limited possibility to get to know locals and very often this is also a bit scary and frightening. For their integration in the Dutch society is necessary to learn the language and have the courage and confidence to practice it. This is very difficult when you hardly get in touch with local, native speakers. The temptation to speak your own language in the asylum center is big because you are living amongst a lot of people coming from the same country.

With this information, the RWT decided to start a mixed group

of different nationalities and locals and to offer the refugees the opportunity to talk the Dutch language in an informal situation, without the pressure of any exam or test. This way they would gain the confidence in speaking Dutch. Besides that, there was also the opportunity to share stories and exchange information about their background, dreams, lives. The directors chose to work with a central theme that was interesting for every participant, refugee and local, so that everybody was able to speak about his or her personal connection to this topic. A focus on the 'refugee' was avoided in favor on a focus on 'the human being' and an equal situation for every participant was created.

The theatre project offered all the participants a safe setting in which difficult, unusual, confronting and hard situations passed. Situations in which the participants learned about their own strengths, weaknesses, constantly had to cross their boundaries and were confronted with their own behavior and



that from the others (very often caused by cultural differences), encouraged to be creative in the process towards the presentation. Finally, this all was one big learning process on many levels, for participants and for the directors.

If we look in depth to the specific story of each participant, a couple of them have passed the most important integration and language exams in the Netherlands. They have been

applying for jobs or are waiting for the decision if they could start with a new education. So, they are not sure if they can join the project after the summer for those performances foreseen beyond the project lifetime. Just one man won't join this new production, because of his new job. All the others were very happy to hear that there is a follow up after the summer, because they really wanted to keep in touch.



Looking at more general perspective, of course, RWT can assume that the timing to offer and make them join the theatre project was the right one. The participants with refugee background confirmed that. It is perfect to be able to practice Dutch in a safe environment in a period that they had Dutch language lessons. They also had the desire to build a social network, to get a voluntary job or to have a new hobby. In a next phase of their life, they would have passed their language exams, have no alignment

anymore, and have to work more to pay the bills.

Finally, it is interesting to focus more on the development of the story to be told. The people involved showed more than one example to be highlighted. Which story do they want to tell the audience? Some of the refugees wanted to tell about their lives at home, about the good things (Syrian), or about the bad experiences (Guinee). Sometimes, it's hard for them to play, and as a theatre maker you really have to talk about this with your actors why they want to share it with the audience, and why you chose to do so.

A Dutch participant said,

*"If one of the project goals is integration, why don't we just talk about universal values, like happiness, family, home etc."*

Then: in which tradition do you tell your story?

In the second group there was one participant who had a different view on how to present his life story on stage. He wanted to do it exactly like it happened, almost a literally illustration of how it was, not in an abstract way. It took some time to let him experience the more abstract way of presenting. Once he had done that, he accepted it.



About making theatre:

*“Sometimes making theatre is in simple things. For people with less stage experience, it sometimes seems difficult to let go of realism, to tell exactly how a situation was, instead of getting inspiration and giving that a more abstract form.”*

*woman, The Netherlands*

*“I did not expect the performance to be good, but we got a big applause. That was fantastic”*

*man, Afghanistan*

*“The theatre lessons mean a lot to me, it reflects society. You can make contact with the audience through their eyes and feelings. My goal is that I give information about my country to people through theatre, and I also want to try to play a role. Theatre is important for society. Through the stories of the fellow players I realize, there is a lot of injustice in the world.’*

*man, Syria*

<p><b>Organization</b></p> <p><b>Country</b></p> <p><b>Name of the performance &amp; short description</b></p> <p><b>Target Group</b></p>	<p>Centro per lo Sviluppo Creativo “Danilo Dolci”</p> <p>Italy</p> <p>“Un intervallo (nell’immensità)” – The play is about a story in which reality and metaphor is continuously exchanged, although the register delays more often on the boundary between the grotesque and surreal dimension. In the scene, one after another, bizarre figures appear which interact despite any event. Perhaps they are ghosts of past people, who knows? In any case, they are there to witness an inexorable presence/absence.</p> <p>There is a strange pair of characters welcoming them. One of them is very silent, while the other moves as a jester extravagant.</p> <p>All the actors are stuck between two realities not better defined, as the same condition lived by migrants and asylum seekers hosted in the centers of reception and waiting for a pass to be able to do a simple thing: <b>exist</b>.</p> <p>For the majority of the actors it was the first encounter with the theatrical code - in some cases even with the Italian language - with the difficulties and the chances that arise from working on themselves, on their body movements, on group dynamics. An alternative way of generating inclusion and intercultural dialogue.</p> <p>The initial group was made up of 10 refugees staying in different reception centres, mainly coming from Gambia and belonging to Islamic faith.</p> <p>Some of them were non-accompanied minors or young people who have recently reached the major age. To enrich the group, as agreed with the Coordinator, other components who have been in Italy for a certain period have also been included (one Eritrean, one Mauritian, and one Portuguese).</p> <p>Unfortunately, there was the participation of just one girl; and this is something which has already occurred in other circumstances.</p>
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## **Working Methodology**

For this reason, it has also been useful and important to include two female conductors in order to rebalance the presence of the female gender in the group, a really important factor to achieve the expected result.

After some difficulties with the group, the final group performing the play was composed by 3 refugees, 2 immigrants and one Italian person (2 female and 4 males).

The methodology used has been very simple, a sort of preparatory path for those who are doing theatre for their first time.

The training sequence followed was quite standard and it was composed by:

- Physical exercises for muscular warm-up;
- Team-building games;
- Theatre-specific exercises;
- Improvisations (only in the second phase of the project);
- Film-watching in order to increase their knowledge;
- Text-reading work.

The team of operators was composed as conductors of the show, by the movie-director - psychologist, psychotherapist, author and theatre director - and by assistants – actresses - experts in theatre techniques.

The show conductors have already had different previous experiences of “theater with refugees and migrants”. For this reason, they have played a key role for the city of Palermo, representing a reference point, both as individual operators and as a cultural association (called “Nottodoro”), with regards to the use of artistic language in the social and especially intercultural field.

During many of these meetings there has been also a representative of the Centro per lo Sviluppo Creativo “Danilo Dolci”, who has supervised the implementation of the project activities and the management of the logistical and practical aspects of the training proposal.



For the realization of the final part of the performance, it has been crucial the role of an assistant director, who allows the smooth implementation for the performance's preparation.

The methodology at the basis of the preparation of the performance was supported also by the approach developed by CSC founder - Danilo Dolci - which is called Reciprocal Maieutic Approach (RMA).

RMA method is based on the sharing process of answering, exploring and creating. As the name itself recalls, the RMA is a "reciprocal" process between at least two people and it normally develops within a group, with a person that starts asking some questions and other people that search for the answers together and make other close examinations. In an intense dialogue that stands for a new way of education based on increasing individuals' and group's creativity, the maieutic process focuses on the capacity of people potential to discover their vital interests and freely express their own reflections basing both on their experiences and their personal discovers and on the choral verification of the proposals.

RMA as a methodology has been included in the past in participatory theatre activities in order to develop empathy, promote intercultural understanding as well as strengthen interpersonal relationships between refugees and host communities.





Finally, in order to provide a framework to the learning process, a structure has been given to each workshop, mainly covering three fundamental moments:

- A. **Welcome/Reception:** including activities with specific movements for the muscles to lower tension, running, breathing and relaxation exercises, initial greetings, etc.
- B. The **emphasis** on a lesson of the day which could have been the target to achieve in each day of activity.
- C. **Final part** and closing greetings.



**Main  
timeline of  
performance  
development**

The development of the performance has been structured in the following way:

- Recruitment phase, from December 2016 to March 2017: CSC Danilo Dolci, with the collaboration of its local network and the municipality of Palermo, started to advertise the project to the social operators working on the field, in order to identify possible people interested in participating to the workshops.
- First session rehearsal, from April to July 2017.
- Second Session rehearsal, from September 2017 to January 2018
- Final Performance, on the 29th of January 2018.

## Equipment & structures used

During the workshops, the following equipment was used:

- Floor mattresses for the exercises, especially those ones to relax and breath;
- Sticks for the improvisation activities' and exercises on the control of the body and personal movements;
- Posters and markers, used to better explain and describe actions, motivations and the sequences of exercises and performances to be implemented;
- Laptops and video to show examples of best practices and useful trainings for participants learning activities.

The meetings were held at the Santa Chiara Association's premises. Participants have also used the furniture and tools present at this venue, such as chairs, tables and other basic equipment.

The selected place has proved to be the best and more accurate choice. Indeed, it is usually attended by lots of migrants and Italians of the neighborhoods. This has also increased the opportunities to create cohesion, integration and new connections within the local territory. Additionally, it has assured a wider audience for the plays and for the activities, producing in the meantime a wider impact on the local community, with an interesting exchange of experiences and opinions during all the lifetime of the project.



As previously said, the activities followed a precise timeline. The main steps in which the activities have been organized are the following, here briefly explained:

- A. A series of preliminary meetings between the organization and the show conductors;
- B. The Identification of the participants;
- C. The implementation of the activities of team building, sharing the motivations and the methodologies with the group;
- D. The development and acquisition of the first theatre techniques (building reciprocal trust and cooperation among participants);
- E. The use of “improvisation” as a technique to foster individual and group expression;
- F. The following phase has concerned the work of creation of a set of scenes and so of valuable representations and contents to share with the audience. Participants have rehearsed several times each scene analyzing together which could have been the most interesting situations to be shown to the future audience.
- G. After the selection of a list of scenes, participants have worked together on the finalization of the show and of their performance. There have been multiple rehearsal of the final show, in order to guarantee the best final result.
- H. The final performance.

Even if the development of the learning process of the performance could seem easy, there are diverse activity moments that were crucial for the implementation of the project and that can give main suggestions and hints for the future.



## Practice the stage!

First of all, the importance of the public rehearsal: the organization of specific pre-performances allowed the target group to be prepared and acquire self-confidence and esteem, encouraging them for the future performances. Specifically, after more than two months of practice and full activities (from April till June 2017), the group has been able to show its “in-progress” work during several occasions:

- The 13th of June 2017, during a meeting with representatives of UNICEF, including some members of a similar project with migrants from South Korea.
- The 22nd of June 2017: an open rehearsal has been organized in front of REACT’s partnership, showing the working dynamics. The rehearsal has been widely appreciated by all the staff attending the activities and filmed
- The 24th of June 2017: the group had a short performance in front of an audience of over 2,500 people in the context of the Web Marketing Festival in Rimini (Italy), which has been widely appreciated, receiving an enthusiastic response and big rounds of applaudes.

The above mentioned occasions were fully planned and agreed with all the participants. The main idea was to verify what meant to perform in front of a real audience, in a way to balance and adapt to the emotions caused by the performance experience. In this way, it has been a way to experiment anxiety, fear, embarrassment, the ability to concentrate and manage information on stage.



## The big dropout

Another crucial moment was the big drop out of part of the group.

Between the session of rehearsal from April to June 2017 and the second part of rehearsal from September 2017, part of the group dropped out from the project, right exactly after Rimini performance: the group has decided not to continue with the theatre show, even if the CSC staff and the conductors of the activities had repeatedly explained the nature and characteristics of the project.

According to director of the performances and his team, there could have been numerous possible interpretations for such a decision.

From a sociological point of view the answer could concern their perception of the meaning of being in Europe, feeling alone and lost, exposed to some potential exploitation. From a psychological perspective the question arisen by the conductors was: "What kind of conditions have they experienced, and they still experience, as well as the different logics they applied in the interpretation of community around them?".

From an anthropological perspective instead, the logics could be related to the persistent mindset of colonialism and post-colonialism that they have always been exposed to.

The situation was a not easy one to be solved and at the end only 3 people of the main group decided to continue. This experience has allowed to implement different approaches and solutions to the following activities of the next months, in different aspects of the theatre process:

1. It was identified a certain difficulty in sharing some basic aspects of the trainings and the unwritten rules of theatre - which can involve a rigid discipline, the notion of time, the rule of being together in a class and especially to respect the "golden rule" of being "on time" and follow the time schedules. Regarding this aspect, different possible solutions have been identified:

- A. First of all, to discuss separately with the person who could have more difficulties;
  - B. To create a chat where it is possible to share information about the meetings, pushing people to respect both days and time schedules;
  - C. To simply write on a large billboard the main rules to be respected to be effective during theatre situations;
  - D. To break the lessons when a problem is coming out in order to discuss together on which could be the issue, trying to find collective solutions.
2. About the difficulty to open not only to the others, but also to an unknown audience, overcoming shyness and insecurities; telling others own personal life and experiences; being scared of judgement and of not being appreciated. About all of these aspects, the conductors have identified the following solutions:
- A. The presence of other people (migrants and Italians) who had already experienced a short previous theatrical path of this type, has been very important. Indeed, their willingness to present their stories have helped the others, giving them an important example
  - B. In some cases, it has been asked to play some roles, similar to those they have already lived, in order to face indirectly the most difficult issues and themes;
  - C. Sometimes it was useful to use non-verbal communication, telling concepts through the more metaphorical body language; a mean which can be surely vaguer but at the same time still a powerful and efficient way to communicate and share information that cannot be totally expressed and shared through a detailed verbal description.
3. For what concerns the other kind of difficulties (such as everyone's personal needs, the difficulty in being guided or by a trainer who was a woman, the objective difficulties in working in the Ramadan period, etc.) the following solutions have been identified:

- A. The organization of more specific and efficient days and time in order to meet specific needs. For example, during the Ramadan, the time of the activities was anticipated in order to address participants' needs (since participants did not eat all day long and they were weak and unable to carry on the activities at the end of the day);
  - B. Participants rarely expressed the difficulty in receiving indications on their work from women. In any case, this gender dimension was perceived and faced by setting the frame of the theatre as a special space, where some «guides» others or certain moments of tension were possible and indirectly linked to the improvement of the stage performance.
  - C. As previously said, two women have been added to the group in order to better balance these dynamics, creating more inputs and a richer work environment.
4. Finally, in order to ensure a better commitment compared to the initial group, a written agreement among CSC, the artistic director and the workshop participants has been developed, listing the tasks that each person/organization had to do in order to reach the common objective. This has been really useful since it allowed to plan together the efforts towards a common objective – the performance – clarifying the main intangible and tangible benefits of the participation in the project.



**Impact on the target and at community level**

**Target**

*Pre-show:*

The group which has participated at the beginning of the project has been pretty shy and unsure of their potential as actors, but in any case, they accepted the invitation to be part of such an initiative. Their expectations were to find new ways of expressions, new friends, to learn new interesting ways to know themselves and to use what they have learned for the future. As explained above, they had some difficulties on the attendance of the meetings with the social operators due to working reasons or for other commitments, but one of the main message the artistic directors addressed to them was the respect of the rule and the trust among each other. A big role on the involvement of the refugees has been the community network (most of the people came from Gambia) and the immigrants people who participated in the rehearsal.

*Post-show*

The evaluation after the performance shows the maximum rate in the self-assessment about the self-esteem, communication and other transversal competences they acquired during the process of learning. The performance itself was for them one of the biggest challenge of their learning path since for them it was the first performance in front of a big and unknown public. Moreover, all of them have shown to have developed language skills, by performing in Italian. Finally, they are still in touch and want to continue with theatre in the next future.

*At community level:*

The audience was composed by many immigrants and by people which are normally engaged in the social work environment, but also, by people who work in the field of theatre and in the development of migrants and refugees' social inclusion.

The public has shown big appreciation for the show and the performance of the participants. They have been very long final applauds, but not only this. Many people have waited for the end of the show to give their personal congratulations and feedback to the actors and actresses.

This was not the first time that something like this happened. Indeed, during the previous plays there have been the same positive reactions, an important sign of a successful result of the project's activities. This has also been an indicator of the huge potentialities of the actors involved.

The success of these activities has been also highlighted by the numerous comments, feedbacks and publications occurred in the following weeks through social media and emails. An encouraging sign of the public esteem and appreciation generated by the authentic engagement of participants in these activities.

The success of activities carried out do not end here. Indeed, the experience of REACT, and so the experience of community theatre as an innovative way for migrants and refugees' inclusion, has generated a new interest in this topic.

There have been many requests, for example from the local community, for the implementation of new similar activities and interventions of this type.



## Case Studies

The group has created a strong connection and cohesion, finding in these different phases and exercises, a moment of connection, involvement and sharing, discovering in these leisure moments an absolutely unknown way of staying together in a positive and enthusiastic way. The workshop was initially an important mean of aggregation, reinforcing immediately the desire for integration, collaboration and for the creation of new connections also with the people outside of the group (as it was stated by the participants themselves).

Then it has started to be more a path to creativity, stimulating the imagination of participants. It has

given them the opportunity to take back control over their own body and personal background. In this sense in particular, it has been an occasion to face and evaluate own past without having necessarily to remove it as painful and often characterized by the global negation of the own humanity.

The shared activities and work, improvising on the personal experiences, has given participants the opportunity to bring out their emotions and feelings, too many times without a chance to express them, bringing light to the personal background of memories connected to their home, personal ties, paths, friends left, the stories of those who have succeed in getting there and those who did not make it.



## 5. What did we learn?



# What did we learn?

*In this chapter, each partner has been asked to express what they have learnt during the implementation of the project. As it has been described in the previous chapters, each methodology has followed the needs of the local target, thus making each partner adapt to the situation and adopt the right measures to deal with the specific issues.*

## 5.1 The experience of acta

**A**ccording to acta experience, these are the main lessons learnt during the implementation of the activities:

*Identifying participants* – the REACT project has underlined to acta the importance of working closely with good partner organisations who are already in contact with refugees. In both cases, with Hannah More Primary School, and with Ashley Housing,

there were key members of staff who supported the project throughout, encouraging participants to engage, and, in the case of Ashley Housing, taking part in the drama workshops themselves.

*Deciding the best time to engage refugees* – most refugees who have recently arrived in their new host country have many difficulties to face and calls on their time. They are not in complete control of their lives, and at various times participants in acta projects had to stop participation against their will as they were moved to another city, made to attend English courses or job center meetings, or faced some personal difficulty connected to their refugee status

*Attendance and punctuality* – acta worked with many more participants than those who were able to continue into performance. This non-attendance and lack

of punctuality made it difficult for the acta facilitators to devise and rehearse, as they were never certain who they would have in their workshop, or who would make the final performance. Although this is a particular difficulty, acta accepts it as an unavoidable consequence of choosing to work with people who have challenging lives. However, it did mean that for both projects, the number of participants who made it to performance was much smaller than the total who were involved.

### Suggestions for future projects

acta will be working from September 2018 – July 2019 to create new groups for refugees and migrants, supported by Paul Hamlyn Foundation and Network for Social Change. Following learning from REACT acta is using a new approach to this work, with a series of 4-6 ‘taster’ workshops in September/October 2018 in partnership with a number of different refugee

organisations. From these workshops acta will encourage individual participants who are most interested, to join two new weekly groups which will then work on new performances. This will ensure that there are more performers in the final presentations and will also give participants the opportunity to work with a range of other people.

Following conversations, networking and learning at the REACT Festival, acta is now looking to develop a new European project to continue and develop the work of the REACT project, involving some new partners in a proposed programme to share learning in areas of training, employment opportunities for refugees, and working towards co-productions.

#### By Refugee Agencies

*‘20 people fed into this project even though only 5 performed, and they all had an input. I have definitely noticed the impact it’s had on people. One participant*

*told me that he wasn't going to come as he was so stressed, but he came out of the performance feeling so relaxed'.*

*Matilda, Project Worker, Ashley Housing*

## 5.2 The experience of Rotterdams Wijktheater

**D**eciding the best time to engage refugees - for participants in a theatre project, it is important that there is some ease and basic trust of what the new life in a new country can be. When people enter the country, they go through an intense period where they have to engage with a lot of rules, formalities and

uncertainty. Beside that, Dutch is a difficult language for them to learn. On the other hand, they are very eager to get in touch with people in the new country. Participating in a theatre project where they are asked for commitment, one must be able to feel free to tell their story. The RWT learned that working in the asylum seekers centre is possible as long as people can come when they like without any pressure on any result. Doing games, telling stories and having fun is the best possibility. It is important to realise the situation of the refugees in relation to the specific phase of their asylum procedure. This is crucial for the possibilities of commitment for a short or a longer period. Knowing the motivation - a



simple but important question should be asked: does a theatre project fit in the refugee's life and what is in it for them? The effect and result of a theatre project depends highly on non-theatrical, more social and practical circumstances of the work. We learned that the motivation of people was strongly influenced by the factor that we worked with a mixed group of refugees and local people. During the process we saw that the safe environment we created gave good ground for rehearsing language, ask for help in any procedure the refugee was in and giving them a family feeling.



Being flexible - the theatre maker can ask himself: does this



participant fit in my traditional concept? The RWT learned that you have to be flexible in concept and adapt quickly to new groups and new situations. People from different cultures have different views on what is theatre and in what way they can be part of it. The community theatre maker can be trapped in his own successful and well-developed format. Being flexible means that a pre-defined plan and result doesn't always work. During this project there were several occasions that the directors had to leave their plan and make new choices of what would be their goals and the end product. Time is hereby a restricting factor. We learned that you must have the courage to take your time and be patient.



A mixed group of participants - when the RWT started over in September 2017, the directors decided to form a mixed group of people. That means that they chose for the meeting of refugees and local people in the rehearsal room. That made the rehearsals maybe more important than the final show. The encounter during rehearsals was for both groups an important experience. It gave all of them the possibility to share experiences and learn from solutions other people found for common problems. Be part of this 'new mixed family' felt especially for the refugees an important step in a new homeland.

## *About life*

*"I have seen again how many important aspects of life are the same for everyone: being together with family, friends, entertaining, discovering, creating, learning"*

*man, The Netherlands*

*"All differences between the group members were no obstacle. They all disappeared. It was about real contact, real stories and genuine interest in each other. Occasionally it was about war abuses, but mostly about universal human feelings such as: loss, fear, powerlessness, desire, loneliness, anger, why questions, craziness, happiness and feeling at home or not."*

*woman, The Netherlands*

*"My attitude towards new Dutch people has changed by doing this."*

*woman, The Netherlands*

*"Yesterday, the performance was so great! The subject has fascinated me for a long time. I thought that the documentary really added something to the whole. It has made me think about how you can handle things that do not work. That man just makes a research project, and then a documentary! And then the performance itself! I thought it was impressive, moving, it had nice movements and it was funny too. The most impressive moment was for me the moment when the lights turned on in the dark, then the apparition*

*of figures from the dark and just telling your name and your birthplace. I think you have found a nice balance between the Dutch form and the foreign form (as far as I know) Just a very ordinary story about how someone missed their apartment in Syria .... moved me emotionally .... Do you continue with this performance, this group? You are a nice warm group of people together ... It would be so pity if it does not continue...."*

*Audience reaction*





**B**y coincidence in the group we had people with a theatrical background. It was not the main reason for them being part of the project, but we learned that it helped with the work in the rehearsal room. We saw that playing together with trained people helped participants to show more of themselves and their background.

*The importance of a 'connector'*  
- we were lucky to have one member of our company who

served as a 'mother' for the group. Her role was connecting the participants and being an educator in helping people to be part of this group. In terms of group dynamics, a lot of things happen in a mixed group like this. Although there was a very active What's App group a lot of things were handled in the personal contact where our 'liaison-mother' had an important educational role.



## Suggestions for future projects

The RWT felt extremely happy to have the experience and opportunity to work with the second group. For the company it is important to keep this group together. And the participants expressed the importance of a follow up for them.

For that reason, the RWT planned a new project with this REACT group. A lot of material was gathered from the interviews director Esther de Bruijn had with every participant, and only a little bit of this material was used in the presentation. The rest of the material is the fundament for a new production that will be performed in December 2018 in a site-specific production, that will be presented throughout the whole cultural center which is the home base of the RWT. In 5 different locations in the cultural center, small groups of audiences will walk from one location to the other. On each spot a short theatre piece of 20 to 25 minutes will be performed. All five pieces together form one performance.





The central theme of the performance will be “Home” or “where is your home”. Because the production will be performed around Christmas, themes like this are very important.

In every location a small snack, related to the actors on that location, will be served to the audience. Not only will the audience see and hear about another culture, but also get a taste of it.

By working in smaller groups (for each piece one specific group) it is easier to plan rehearsals (which is important since the refugee participants all have finished their language classes and passed their exams and are now free to find a job or follow a new education). One a week the whole group will come together to work on a central piece in order to keep the group together as a whole and keep that ‘family’ feeling. This new show

will be performed 5 times for an audience of family, people living in the neighborhood and people living in the asylum center close to the cultural center. Maximum audience of 50 per evening, period 7-14 December 2018.

*“I wanted to get to know refugees. I soon noticed that they are all open and happy people who are not depressed because they have a lot of issues but are enterprising and relaxed. Everyone showed things that touched him or her, because everyone was completely open, we shared happy and sad things. This was very special”*

*woman, the Netherlands*

*“I found it pleasant to come early and drink tea together. Everyone has a busy life, but everyone needs a group where he can be himself, where he can grow in the person he really is. For example, Enayat is someone who did not speak Dutch at all and now he is*



*always asking, because he is curious and wants to learn the language and know things.”*

*woman, The Netherlands*

- should have a mixed gender composition (boys/girls) to mitigate certain difficulties (sometimes it is noted that there is a strong hesitation to be “guided” by a woman – as it was in the case of our workshop).

### 5.3 The experience of CSC Danilo Dolci

The theatrical workshops:

- should have a more diversified group in order to avoid the imbalance of nationality, age, gender, etc. that could lead to the risk of having coalitions formed.
- should be addressed to those who really want to be part of the work, making them understand the importance of being part of a project.

Some economic incentive may be considered, at least once the group begins the rehearsals and prepare for the show. It is not a *sine qua non* condition; however,





- A detailed training agreement with the participants, with conditions, understandings, and implementation methods.
- Provide a “foreign” tutor that would act as a “bridge” between different languages, needs, and misunderstandings.

such request emerged on the occasion of a concurrent local project in which the participants were paid.

It might be useful to take some precautions in order to guarantee a better maintenance of the social context of the work done in the future, such as:

- Individual meeting between the staff and participants.

## Suggestions for future projects

The main suggestions for future projects are the following:

1. Among the suggestions, the most requested is the proposal for some economic incentives for participants. It may be considered, at least once the group begins the



rehearsals and prepare for the show. It is not a “sine qua non condition”, however such demand has emerged in the occasion of a concurrent local project in which the participants were instead paid, creating the question on this specific rewarding aspect.

2. Community theatre, through multiple exercises, is lived as a play and as a moment of leisure, but it has some solid and rigid rules that need to be respected. This is an important concept to start from in order to think about the possibility to propose similar kind of activities for other projects.

Once the theatre rules (for example the respect of the time, of discipline, the need of concentration, the respect of authorities, roles and colleagues, etc.) are assimilated, it is progressively possible to transfer these capacities also in other contexts of the social and professional life of refugees, thinking about a process of growth; or at least

to transfer and to permit a continuity of the participants personal development also in the different contexts which could be proposed for other projects.

### By a participant

*“It is incredible. Today, when we started to play we were very sad and without energies, now we are so happy and enthusiastic. This theatre is really a clinic!” Vikram, a Mauritian boy after a play while he is going back home*

*“This is something that pushes us to think but at the same time to enjoy happy moments...”*

*Saibo a young boy from Senegal”*

*“Now I am a little bit famous; people recognize me also in the street...”*

*another young guy who took part to the performance*



## 6. Events





## Events

*During the project implementation, events gathering stakeholders and people working on the field have been organized in order to activate relations and future collaborations on the same topics of REACT. These events were central to the success of the projects aim of sharing learning, and are documented below.*

### 6.1 acta: REACT Sharing Event – Bristol

***‘They are people, not refugees’ audience member, REACT Festival***

**T**he REACT Sharing Event, or Festival, took place from 26-29th March 2018, and was aimed at sharing

the learning from all three partners in how their projects had engaged refugees and encouraged integration with host communities. Each partner made a presentation about the work they had developed and delivered during the two-year project.

From the beginning of the project the partners had been aware that there might be difficulties in bringing performances from Rotterdam and Palermo, as the refugee performers might have problems in obtaining visas. This possibility was outlined in the original project plan, and both RWT and CSC were aware from the beginning that their contribution to the end event might be restricted to making a presentation about their work with refugees, to include film of the performances they had made. It transpired that there were the difficulties that the partners had predicted, and it was not possible for RWT and CSC to perform at the Festival. However, Rotterdams Wijktheater were able to bring some of their refugee

participants to Bristol, and at the end of their filmed presentation, they involved the whole festival audience in a dance piece.

In addition to the presentations, the four-day programme included **six theatre shows** created and performed by refugee participants. As RWT and CSC were unable to bring their performances, acta invited UK community companies – Glasgow Citizens and CAN Manchester – to bring work they had created with refugees. In both instances, the companies used the opportunity of the invitation to develop new pieces of work to respond directly to the REACT themes of integration and improved understanding. acta also presented their two plays, *Lost Sheep* and *Dream On*.



## By Audience

*'It was a heart-warming show. I am inspired to bring more people to your shows'*

*audience member,  
Lost Sheep*

*'It made me feel warm and happy, so proud for the performers and entertained by their story. Glad we could share it'*

*audience member, Lost Sheep*

*'We learned that problems/relationships between people are so similar regardless of the country and setting they occur in. People are all flawed, but hopefully and mostly forgiving'*

*audience member, Lost sheep*

Reactions to the performances were very positive, with many responses demonstrating direct empathy to the stories told.

*'They are people, not refugees'*

*'I learned much more than I ever knew about the oppression of women in Iran, and how frustrating it must be to have to negotiate the intricacies of a new language and country'*

*audience member, CAN  
performance*

*'This was fantastic! I really want to know more about the stories behind the shows!'*

*'I learned how confusing and disorientating it is to arrive here as a refugee. How when you arrive your journey has only just begun.'*

*Audience member, Glasgow  
Citizens*



*'It made me laugh, it made me think, it touched my heart. Touched, frustrated yet hopeful because they all still had hope'*

*'This was a very engaging, energetic, insightful and well-polished piece that gave voice to the experiences of Iranian women in a British context thus promoting intercultural understanding between the two cultures'*

*Dr Bec Fraser, University of Exeter (reflecting on 'One More Push')*

Performances were followed the day after with question and answer conversations with attendees and theatre-makers from acta, Glasgow Citizens Theatre and CAN Manchester.



## The workshops

In the afternoons were practical workshop opportunities to explore the methodologies of partner organisations **acta** and **CSC**, and invited guests: **Phosphoros Theatre**, **PAN Intercultural Arts**, **Re-write** and **Giselle Vighter**. The workshops gave practitioners, participants and volunteers the opportunity to 'learn through action', experiencing the methodologies, exercises and approaches at first hand, and giving time to discuss and explore the artistic and social motivations behind the different methodological approaches.



## **A. acta (Bristol) and CSC Danilo Dolci (Palermo)**

An overview of how acta makes theatre with refugees, this workshop included theatre games & exercises; workshop planning for specific participants (gender, age, physical skills, language); and an opportunity to ask questions and consider why we use certain techniques. The workshop was led by Ingrid Jones, acta Associate Director, and Maya Khatun, acta Foundation.

Making theatre with refugees in Palermo, led by Martino Lo Cascio, who is a psychologist, psychotherapist, and author & director of award-winning short films, documentaries and theatrical works. He is founder and president of the Cultural Association Nottedoro that has organised the first international festival of lullabies and tries to combine social work and artistic languages, producing numerous theatrical performances with

refugees and migrants. He is also a founder member of the Onlus “Narramondi” that deals with the methodology of fiction in various contexts.



The workshop focused on the physical theatre techniques used by Martino in his work with refugees on the REACT project in Palermo.

## **B. Interactive workshop from Pan Intercultural Arts.**

Members of Pan’s artist team introduced the work, its structure, its challenges and positive outcomes, and then delivered a workshop in which some of the drama exercises which have proved useful were experienced and explained. The aim was to provide inspiration both for theatre-makers interested in adapting their skills to use with refugee groups and for youth workers/social workers interested in bringing artistic work into their current provision. The workshop was enjoyed and found useful by all who attended.



Pan Intercultural Arts has been running arts for refugee projects for 16 years. Its six projects in London, Oxford and Kent, range from groups for Unaccompanied Minor Asylum Seekers, Victims of Torture to Survivors of Trafficking. These programmes use theatre and other performance skills to help participants, many with symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, regain confidence, reconnect with their creativity and start to lead a full life in their new country. When ready, participants work towards sharings and performances, first for friends and careers and often for the general public where the sense of ownership and “giving something back” is of huge importance.

### **C. Giselle Vegter: A therapeutic approach**

The workshop was introduced by acta “warm up games” led by Rosalie Pordes, acta Projects Director and Sara Snook, acta Foundation.

Giselle Vegter explored social roles; how do we perceive one another and how can we relate this to ourselves? How do our different social and cultural roles contribute to the creative encounter? She used a range of drama therapy and forum theatre techniques; a very different approach to others included in the Festival, which challenged participants.

Giselle Vighter is a Dutch theatre-director and dramatherapist, working with refugees and homeless people in Rotterdam. She applies elements of Boals’ Theatre of the Oppressed and Dramatherapy to deliver workshops, performances and installations on issues of identity, conflict and humanity.

[www.hoteleldorado.nl](http://www.hoteleldorado.nl)

### **D. Rewrite; English as a Second Language and making theatre**

Farha Bi, Project Coordinator with Rewrite, led a practical session which outlined the games and exercises used by

the company in their approach to make theatre with young refugees. She explained and demonstrated the ESOL creative methodology.

'I really enjoyed learning their method of how they use drama to improve English. The physical games were very competitive and fun whilst it teaches participants numbers and to be alert. The concentration game with the fingers was bringing the group together. The circle game using the emotions was a fantastic way to encourage classes to express their feelings using the different emotions. They finished off with a still image of emotions. And asked the participants what they enjoyed. Then made a butterfly with their hands and said let it fly away till next session. Loved the session so much.'

Maya Khatun,  
acta Foundation Worker

## E. Phosphorus Theatre

Following their performance, Phosphorus Theatre led an interactive workshop with audience members, woven around a discussion about the

play. The workshop was led by three performers, including two refugees, and began by posing questions about certain facts related to asylum and refugees. This exercise uncovered a high level of misinformation about refugees and asylum seekers amongst the participants, with many surprised that the top 5 countries hosting refugees were Turkey, Pakistan, Lebanon, Jordan, Iran. Through a series of theatre exercises and games, the facilitators were able to challenge preconceptions, and disseminate knowledge.

## Conversations

Two seminars took place, where 40 attendees were engaged in deep discussion about key issues in making theatre with refugees. The conversations were chaired by acta's Artistic Director, Neil Beddow, who asked participants to share their own experiences and expertise of working with refugees to answer the questions of how we engage with refugees, and why do we, as practitioners,

work with refugees, and what does this work do for refugee participants and host communities.

The first conversation workshop focused on 'Engagement'; how it is possible to contact and involve refugees in theatre projects. presentations, including short films, were given by Re-write, Historieberatta from Sweden, Catrin Evans (University of Glasgow), PAN Intercultural Arts. Other contributors included international practitioners and theatre companies, students and participants. The conversation created a space to share learning and explore the different methodologies for engagement, opening out the learning from REACT in the wider context of refugee arts, not just drama and theatre, but creative writing (Re-write), animation (Historieberatta) and visual art (Catrin Evans).

The use of drama and theatre in language development as a starting point for engagement was discussed in full, with

examples from acta, Collective Encounters and Rewrite, as to how people engaged with projects in order to improve their English, with theatre creation almost a by-product of that initial aim. Rewrite in particular demonstrated their focus on creative language learning as an engagement strategy with young refugees through schools.



The conversation raised issues around the labels and terminology used when discussing refugees, with many presents wishing to move away from using 'refugee' and 'asylum-seeker' as they had developed negative connotations. Other suggestions were put forward, around the theme that if there is a 'host' community then surely

the new arrivals should be seen as 'guests'.

'Overall, this was an incredibly rich discussion, the students who looked on shared afterwards the value of this in challenging their own process as they come to engage with the industry. It positioned acta in relation to its partners and the wider landscape of community projects both in the UK and EU. It effectively cultivated space for the sharing of practice and opportunities to see similarities and differences in the challenges and models employed. Facilitators appeared to be both learning from one another and offering professional input and advice, as well as giving a shared sense that they are not in it alone.'

Dr Bec Fraser,  
University of Exeter.



The second conversation explored the motivations and reasons why companies make theatre with refugees, chaired by Neil Beddow with short presentations throughout by the three REACT partners, with Amuni Theatre (Palermo), Phosphorus Theatre. There were contributions from participants as well as practitioners, and the discussion explored the artistic content and theatrical style of refugee theatre; the cultural barriers to engagement; issues of ownership and power, and how to strike a balance between shaping work and enabling natural voice.

There was general agreement among those present that it was essential to ensure ownership and total involvement of participants in the process of

## story development and theatre creation.

*'One of the main discussions was around story-telling, and the ethics of encouraging refugee participants to share stories of their traumas of fleeing home, the journey to Europe, and then life in Europe, and then using these stories of trauma in performance. The two opinions offered in this subject were that on one hand sharing trauma offers a platform for participants to share stories that they want to shed light, whereas on the other hand the focus on the victimhood of refugees, although well-intentioned, confirms stereotypical views of refugees and adds to the one-dimensional*

*view of them. This led to another relevant subject, which is that artists find themselves indirectly pressured into focusing on stories about being a refugee in order to get funding to work with refugees. This claim, however, was refuted by others in the conversation who pointed out how this is most likely a limited way of interpreting what it means to work with refugees, as this, on its face value, only means engaging refugee participants, and does not dictate the subject of what this collaboration is going to be about.'*

*Dr Aqeel Abdulla,  
acta Foundation and University  
of Exeter.*



Overall, the two conversations were remarkable for the degree of honesty among the contributors; everyone felt that it was a safe space, and were open in discussing their challenges, problems and failures when seeking to engage and secure commitment from the 'new arrivals' in their own communities.

### Key Issues and points raised during conversations:

- **Engagement** – the importance of identifying the 'right time' for refugees/migrants to become involved; the right time for a project to be instigated.
- **Motivation** - what are the motivations for theatre-makers in wanting to engage with refugees? How should these be judged? Why are refugee and host participants motivated to engage - before and while they are engaging in creating theatre.
- **Ownership** - how do you ensure the joint ownership of the work created? Is that essential? Who determines the story and how it is told?

- **Impact** – how do you measure the individual and social impact of work?
- **Terminology** – what are the words we are using, and what weight/stigma do they carry? Is there a new vocabulary we must determine in order to avoid stereotyping?

### Music and networking

Each day ended with informal conversations and networking in the acta theatre bar. Attendees reported how these opportunities to meet informally and share conversations were an important part of the REACT sharing event, providing opportunities for reflection and observations on what they had seen that day, to share information about their own projects and approaches, and to develop ideas for future projects. The evening sessions were augmented with music from refugee musicians, on Monday and Tuesday evening, and a rock band provided a party atmosphere on the final evening, with refugee participants, partner staff, volunteers,

audience members and host and refugee communities dancing and celebrating together.

The final presentation from CSC took place on Thursday 29th March, and the Festival ended with African music and dancing from Tribe of Doris, Bristol-based Intercultural Arts.



## What we learned from REACT Festival

The REACT sharing event was developed successfully into a Festival-style occasion, presenting a unique opportunity to gather in one place an interesting and experienced group of attendees involved in artistic work with refugees in different contexts

and forms. The richness of this community of learning ensured that many key issues were raised and discussed, and the event was particularly remarked upon by attendees for the frankness of discussion and the culture of honesty which was prevalent throughout the four days.

Those present also commented extensively on the friendliness and approachability of the acta staff and volunteer team, and the warmth of the welcome that was extended, and how this created a positive climate which put attendees at ease and facilitated the depth of exploration and discussion.

In the final analysis, the partners felt that the event was very well-attended and well-received, attracting a wide range of people



from across UK and Europe to share the learning from the two-year REACT project, giving the opportunity to view other theatre made in UK with refugees, take part in practical workshops and conversations, and become more aware of some of the key issues when approaching the work.

*'Well Done! ... As well as helping bring the refugee theatre community together and consolidating practice, it really helped to hear others' views and experiences on some key issues, challenges and successes'*

*John Martin, Artistic Director  
PAN Intercultural Arts.*

*"THANK YOU SO much for everything! It was great, and I am very impressed by your work. Thanks for the plays, dance and interesting discussions'*

*Anusha Caroline Andersson,  
Historieberättarna*

*"Thank you for a brilliant festival. It was so well put together, we were very impressed with how slickly operated the whole event was. The Festival was packed with fascinating and inspiring projects/performances and discussions. We so appreciated*

*your invitation to take part and the group came away feeling very positive from the festival experience – we had such a good time with you in Bristol.*

*Thank you for your generosity, the organisation, the technical support, the food, the entertainment the great chat and of course your company'*

*Elly Goodman,  
Glasgow Citizens Theatre.*



## Attendees

The event was attended by 160 people:

25 REACT partner staff (acta, RWT, CSC), 60 additional practitioners/academics, including 24 REACT invited guests; 16 students; 50 refugees; 20 volunteers; 30 refugee performers.

In addition to this 160, a further 50 people attended for the Phosphoros Theatre performance and workshop. Of these, 30 were refugees living in Bristol; 8 were practitioners from refugee support organisations; 12 were students / academics.



## Partners invited to attend REACT Festival:

- *Glasgow Citizens Theatre, Scotland UK;*
- *CAN Manchester*
- *Phosphoros Theatre, London*
- *Rewrite, London*
- *PAN Intercultural Arts, London*
- *Catrin Evans, University of Glasgow*
- *Anusha Caroline Andersson, Historieberättarna, Stockholm*
- *Giselle Vegter, theatre of the oppressed*
- *Josje Priester, cultural anthropologist and artist.*
- *Martino Lo Cascio, theatre maker*
- *Silvana Oliveri, theatre maker*
- *Chiara Buttitta and Miriam Tazeghdanti: Amuni Theatre, Palermo*

There were also representatives from a range of UK and European theatre organisations, Arts Council England, Paul Hamlyn Foundation, academics, students, local participants and volunteers.



## Performances

### **Dream On**

*acta community theatre*

Miriam's dream is to go to university, but there are many obstacles in her way. Will she be able to overcome these barriers to make her dream a reality?

### **Lost Sheep**

*acta community theatre*

Sheep escaping in a small Sudanese village leads to all sorts of problems.

### **Dear Home Office: Still Pending**

*Phosphoros Theatre*

Phosphoros Theatre's second play is performed by eight refugee young men, telling versions of their own stories of living in the UK.

### **One More Push**

*Fereshteh Mozaffari, CAN Manchester*

Solo performance, a reflection on life in exile and the metamorphosis to a new being.

### **Dancing the Lash**

*Mahboobeh Rajabi, CAN Manchester*

A poignant depiction of a dancer-turned-refugee whose profession is banned in her native Iran.

### **"Where are you really from?"**

*Glasgow Citizens Theatre*

Celebrating the rich and diverse life stories of asylum seekers and refugees living in Glasgow; exploring the movement of people, identity and their hopes and dreams.

## 6.2 International Community Arts Festival (ICAF) - Netherlands

Every three years a temporary, creative world emerges in Rotterdam where one can discover unique community-based art projects and meet its engaged artists who make it their daily job to bridge the distance between worlds and people from all walks of life. At the end of March in 2017 and again in 2020, theatre, dance, music, film and visual arts projects from literally every continent on earth will dock in the port of Rotterdam during the International Community Arts Festival (ICAF). A festival builds around the idea that community art is a worldwide cutting edge and highly relevant arts movement, it is the only one of its kind.

ICAF is a unique festival experience: from large-scale performances to intimate film screenings and meetings with extraordinary artists and their participants. The day program of the festival offers the possibility



of in-depth conversations, inspiration and exchange. The evenings are chock-full with live theater, dance, film and music performances. Morning, afternoon, or evening; Rotterdam opens its doors for five days of participatory art from all over the world.

During the 7th edition of the ICAF, a morning seminar about the REACT project was planned, hosted by the partners of the REACT project. Due to the overwhelming number of registrations for this seminar, the ICAF organisations asked the REACT partners to give a second seminar. Overall both seminars were attended by 130 visitors of the ICAF.

The aim of the seminars was to give a status update of the work in progress of the REACT partners. The seminars started with a short presentation of a group of three Syrian boys. These boys were what was left of the group the RWT started with in the asylum seekers centre in Beverwaard, Rotterdam. It was a presentation with sensory aspects of Syria, their flight and their reception in The Netherlands. Although it was a short presentation, the impact on the audience was great.

After that the partners told about their part of the project and where they were in the process. The discussion focused on individual experiences people had with refugees and questions were asked about problems in group dynamics and getting commitment for a project.

The universal connection music can make was experienced at the end of the seminar where people were invited on the stage to dance all together with the three Syrian actors in the lead.



### 6.3 CSC: Seminar in Palermo

**O**n the context of the 3rd partner meeting of REACT there was the occasion for institutions working in the field to share good practices in:

1. how to best utilize Community Theatre as a vehicle of social inclusion, specifically in relation to
2. how to successfully involve refugees and tackle relevant problems.

REACT (through the sharing of Martino Lo Cascio, CSC's Artistic Director), as well as their own project initiatives (for example project AMUNÌ); and

The seminar has been a successful event which has created crucial synergies both at local and European level on the artistic and inclusion field.



# Conclusion



# Conclusion

This publication is aimed at sharing the work that the three partners undertook over the period September 2016 to July 2018, with the hope that other organisations and practitioners will be inspired to develop similar work in the future. During this time, the three partners were engaged in exploring how community theatre could be used in our different national contexts to improve integration between refugees and their host communities. The project was enriched by the involvement of many people – refugees, practitioners, community members, workers in refugee organisations. The project benefited from the shared learning, experience and wisdom of everyone involved, and the discussions and debates around key issues: ownership, motivation, the meaning of ‘integration’, and who needs to integrate with who, and

ultimately, what can we do together to improve the current climate of misunderstanding, prejudice and fear.

It is interesting, though probably not surprising, that many questions have arisen from the project, and that each partner has continually questioned their process. RWT developed three questions, which are a good starting point for anyone seeking to develop this work in the future:

1. What is best moment for refugees to participate in a community theatre project?
2. What story will be told, who to, and what is the relevance?
3. In what theatrical tradition and or format the performance should be made?

Through the project, with the three partners, and also with the extended partnership of performers, practitioners and

companies, we have determined that the real issues in this work are those of 'ownership' and 'equality'; ensuring that the principle of 'nothing about us, without us' applies throughout all that is undertaken. It is not up to artists and theatre-makers to decide what aspect of the refugee story needs to be told; each person needs to decide for themselves. The REACT project has seen plays created on a wide range of subjects, telling many stories; sadness and longing for homeland, hope and aspirations for a new life, frustrations at barriers created by governments to prevent that new life. However, they are stories predominantly not about the trauma, but about home, arrival in a new place and dreams for future. Not what happened but will happen next.

Certainly, for acta, the work of REACT is not done, but just beginning; in July 2018, as we write this account, the situation for refugees is arguably worsening, rather than improving; government attitudes and policies are hardening

across Europe; populist parties with anti-immigration views are growing in influence; migrants lose their lives at sea every day, and those that are rescued are turned away from previously safe havens. But governments and parties are elected by the people, the communities with whom we work; that is where the change must come, in the hearts and minds of the people who elect the governments. If the REACT initiative can change just a few of those hearts, make some of those minds think differently, then the work must continue, and continue to grow. Already the partners are formulating new projects to continue the work, and more partners have been contacted, involved, inspired to use their creativity and common humanity to begin to make these changes.

**When the world is not how we wish it to be, we must REACT!**

*Neil Beddow – Project  
Coordinator*

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# REACT

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