

Being moved

During the You Are Here project **Clare Reynolds**, Co-Artistic Director, Restoke, discovers what 'home' means whilst working with people who have moved to Stoke-on-Trent

In early 2016 Restoke embarked on a project to gather and perform stories around migration, culture and belonging by speaking to people who had moved, or been moved, to Stoke-on-Trent. When I was asked to contribute to People Dancing's International Conference in Glasgow this year, I was so happy to reflect on and share what was a seminal project for Restoke. You Are Here took us on an unforgettable journey that developed and consolidated our process of co-creation, and changed the way we make performances.

Our work always begins with conversations. Restoke's first incarnation was a project which took place on and around public benches, where we realised that people's stories and public places were far more interesting than anything we could make up ourselves.

Our projects have spanned themes from the decline of local industry, to homelessness, to ageing. The shows take place in disused buildings of historic or community significance, including a former pottery works, a 200-year-old Methodist chapel and a Victorian swimming baths. Reanimating these iconic sites and filling them once more with people and purpose has been a key part in building

new audiences for our work, attracted by the intrigue of stepping into a usually inaccessible building and what might unfold inside.

Having predominantly worked with people who had grown up in Stoke, or at least lived here for many years, we wanted to find out more about the lives of people who had moved into Stoke, to hear about their journeys, their relationship with the city, and what 'home' means when you have started your journey a long way away.

You Are Here was initiated through a series of events around cultural exchange where we asked people to bring something to share from their culture. These became wonderful and busy events, filled with music, song, dance, traditional dress, food and provocations around culture. It was important for us that, from the start, the participants were identified as experts by experience, and were involved, not just as consultants but as story tellers, collaborators and eventually performers. During this time we also connected with groups that support refugees and asylum seekers. As with each project we undertake, we once more had our eyes opened to the quiet hands who commit their lives to support the most vulnerable >>





Top left: Lucie Labadie. Top middle and main: Cast of You Are Here. Top right: Aida & April Dalton. All photos: Jenny Harper.

people in our city. We began valuable partnerships and relationships here that have extended beyond the lifespan of the project, a wonderful by-product of making work where you live!

From these cultural exchanges we invited people to join us at the venue where we would make our show. The Wedgwood Institute, a grand but now derelict college, was funded by the community of Burslem (one of the six towns which make up Stoke-on-Trent) and built in 1869 to educate pottery workers in the arts and sciences. We spent four days together exploring the various rooms and many hidden surprises the institute offered. We ate together, we laughed and cried, danced, sang and got covered in dust. It quickly became a beautiful partnership.

Restoke's role throughout the project became more like hosts, and less like directors. Aida, from Bosnia, shared with us her wartime diaries and letters, traditional song and Bosnian coffee which she brewed and handed out to audiences during the performance, just as she had in the first cultural exchange. Ayad, a refugee from Iraq who was moved to Stoke and who has a flair for speaking in metaphors, described the sensation of being 'uprooted'. This led our designer April, to transplant a tree into the Wedgwood Institute, forming a centre piece for the room where Ayad would tell his story through movement and his own words. Lucie, a cabaret dancer from France, who fell in love with a 'Stokie' and left family and friends to join him here, performed her story in French, expressing the disorientation of a new language and the environment she found herself in.

We did lose some participants along the way who we would've loved to have remained part of the project. This was for a variety of reasons but largely due to our lack of capacity to keep reconnecting with more hard-to-reach participants once the creative process was in full swing. We will learn from this and ensure we have the time to keep nurturing those relationships that need more attention right up until the final performance. However, every person we met who came and talked, sang and moved with us fed into the narrative and the energy of the final piece.



Robyn Bowie (top) and cast of *You Are Here* (above). Photos: Jenny Harper.

Beatriz, from Venezuela, whose son was born in Stoke-on-Trent, strongly identified herself and her son as 'citizens of the world' early on in the project. Proud of this identity - a feeling echoed by many of the cast - this was woven into the spoken elements of the performance by poet Gabriella. We had 15 people from 15 countries, from Poland to New Caledonia, committed to being part of the performance. This was being created at the time of the EU referendum, then presented in October 2016, in the week when Theresa May stated, "If you believe you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere". When we planned this show, we couldn't have predicted the relevance of *You Are Here* amidst a politically charged few months.

Moving forward, we have taken so many lessons from *You Are Here*. We owe a huge debt of gratitude to the wonderful participants who ultimately took us on this journey together, which we felt privileged to be able to frame and offer to a wider deserving audiences. Continuing on this journey, we intend to push the boundaries of producing work with people, sharing their own experiences, in a way that holds the integrity of the real life stories but dares to imagine ways and places we can weave them into performance.

Our new project, *Man Up*, will engage men in creating a new performance around the themes of masculinity and mental health. This will not only tackle an important issue, but also the imbalance of male to female participants who get involved with our work. After an initial callout we've been overwhelmed by the response with over 100 men getting in touch to express an interest. So it seems the first hurdle of getting men to talk to us might not be quite as difficult as we anticipate. But will they dance with us too? Watch this space...

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