

# WELCOMING EVERYONE

*Cast Community Ambassadors  
and Theatre as Sanctuary*



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**CAST**

# Reflections On the Role of Theatre Trips in Supporting People Seeking Asylum after Studying the Ambassador Scheme at Cast, Doncaster

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*"Societies benefit from framed rituals which channel potentially unmanageable feelings... this is an ancient solution and a way of acknowledging beyond human control"*  
(Joy Schaverien, Psychoanalyst, 1991).

*"I want to express my deepest gratitude for the unforgettable experience you gifted me that night. The performance went far beyond acting - it was a profound, living poem that stirred every fibre of my being"*  
(Arad, Iranian Asylum Seeker Doncaster, 2025).

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Reflections on the Ambassador programme at Cast in Doncaster have helped me to understand what theatre can contribute to the mental health of the refugee and asylum seeking populations attending performances.

I have used oral accounts from recorded interviews with Mike, (a volunteer Ambassador bringing people to Cast from Doncaster Conversation Club), and illustrations created through collaboration with Mike and Graphic Artist Elodie Ginsbourg, (using Mike's words). In combination with theory from Psychoanalysis, evidence about mental health within the migrant population and accounts from those attending performances, to reflect on the potential of theatre to impact on health outcomes.

Two key benefits have come to light- the potentially therapeutic role of the theatre for individual and group mental health amongst populations who have experienced trauma as part of forced migration, and the role that theatre trips can play in contributing to the success of learning English as a second language.

Warmth, respite and a way to pass the time might have been my first thoughts of what a theatre trip could offer people seeking asylum. Potentially all of these things are true. But as I am now learning the theatre has offered the people making these trips chance to experience a deeper connection as a community gathered through shared experience; a way to process emotion about the past, and a rare opportunity to be present in the moment- all difficult things to achieve in the daily fight for survival.

Bilal, a Sudanese man seeking asylum in Doncaster, wrote down his feelings after attending the dance performance 'Now' by Jasmin Vardimon Company, (a piece exploring issues of migration and the impact of alienation);



*“As an asylum seeker, I found the experience profoundly meaningful. It reminded me that pain and beauty often exist side by side, and that art can communicate across all cultures and backgrounds.*

*I found myself completely drawn in, connecting emotionally to the story being performed on stage. It reminded me that even in silence, we can still be seen and understood. The show sparked something positive in me: a sense of hope, expression, and connection that can be hard to find in daily life when you're in a difficult or uncertain situation.*

*I left the theatre feeling lighter, inspired, and grateful”.*

Connection, emotional processing and being in the moment are important aspects of emotional wellbeing that could potentially contribute to tackling some of the migrant mental health concerns outlined in The Mental Health of Asylum Seekers and Refugees in the UK Report, 2024, (Mental Health Foundation, 2024).

Experiences of poverty, financial insecurity, unemployment, lack of adequate housing, social isolation, loneliness, prejudice, stigma, and discrimination all carry a higher risk of poor mental health [10], and asylum seekers and refugees are at higher risk of experiencing all these inequalities. (Mental Health Foundation, 2024)

We know from Home Office figures that 537 asylum seekers were supported by the local authority in Doncaster in the last quarter of 2024, with 129 of those people living in hotel accommodation. 21 people living in Doncaster have been given refugee status since 2014 (<https://www.migrationyorkshire.org.uk/statistics/refugee-and-asylum-seeker-dashboard>).

In her essay 'The Picture in the Frame' Jungian Psychoanalyst Joy Schaverien uses the historical context of the altar or tabernacle and the scapegoat ritual to provide ancient context for our need to come together in societal groups, reflect and expend collective energy, and how this can help release overwhelming feelings.

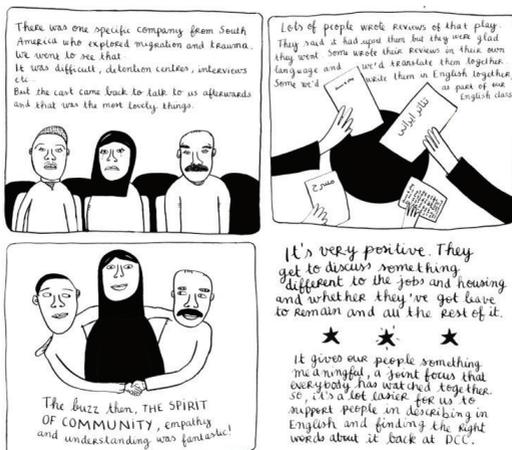
She explains that as the community come together within the church to focus attention on the altar, so we also come together within the frame of the theatre or the gallery with the shared focus of the artwork or the stage. She takes great care to describe how each of these spaces in their structure, environment and social and behavioural codes are different- spaces 'set apart'. Knowing these places are separate to everyday life can enable a feeling of safety in the release of emotion there, keeping it boundaried and held apart from a life, or lives, where there might not be space for releasing such feelings of magnitude.

This is useful for the individual as a process of release or meditative self reflection, but also of huge benefit to communities in developing coherence and for individuals to feel part of their community;

*“Like the temple where the scapegoat ritual is enacted, the theatre, the art gallery and the art therapy session have certain features in common. They all have an inner framed experience, which is dependent on the boundaries of the outer frame to contain the experience within.*

*The collective energy is directed to this one point and the collective gaze is held by the common investment in the altar and the action. The protagonists in the drama are the channel through which the community is purged... It is the pivot, the centre from which potential chaos is channelled into a manageable form and so contained.”* (Schaverien, 1991).

These ideas correspond with Mike’s observations about the benefits of the theatre trips for his community. Here he describes a visit to see ‘Kin’ a physical theatre performance by Gecko, written about the Artistic Director’s family’s experience of forced migration from Yemen. (Illustrated here in illustration 1 by Elodie Ginsbourg using Mikes words).



In Mike’s account we see that as well as the therapeutic benefit of experiencing the show people had a desire to write and to communicate their feelings about what they had seen, as we have seen in Bilal and Arad’s accounts.

The Mental Health of Asylum Seekers and Refugees in the UK Report has a dedicated section for Language Proficiency, due to its impact on feelings of social isolation and their affect on mental health. The report states;

*“Difficulties with speaking and understanding English can affect the formation of social connections, employment, and accessing or engaging with vital services including healthcare, education, and legal advice. The inability to speak English is one of the reasons for feelings of loneliness and isolation amongst asylum seekers and refugees.”* (Mental Health Foundation, 2024).



Mike has been clear that attending the trips has helped to strengthen the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language back at Conversation Club.

He has described the difficulties in motivating large groups and being understood by everyone in the weekly classes, (see illustration 2). But, as we see in the above account, having the shared focus of the play gave context and excitement to both the lesson before, (translating the programme guide about the performance), and to the following lesson where people were keen to review and comment on what they had experienced.



*"The theatre trips give a focus and people are motivated to learn about what they are going to see, and then to come back and review the show and discuss it with their peers". - Mike*

Currently the Ambassador Scheme continues to be successful in bringing people seeking asylum into the theatre. Last week I attended a performance of 'Cinderella Ice cream Seller' with 20 Kurdish women and their children. This success is driven by the skill of Cast's Community Engagement Manager Nic Doyle in selecting Ambassadors with lived experience of gaining health benefits from the theatre and who have connections into communities previously underrepresented at Cast, and by the enthusiasm and dedication of those volunteers.

The learning about benefits for mental health and language through theatre for this specific group could inform development of future programmes at Cast and in other theatres, and help access different funding streams for this work in the future.

However it is important to be mindful when working with people who have experienced trauma of the implications for participant and practitioner wellbeing. The Creative Health Quality Framework recommends practitioners should be trauma informed, (having attended specific training), when supporting people experiencing mental health difficulties.

*"Asylum seekers and refugees are at particular risk of mental health problems. These may develop as a result of their experiences in their countries of origin, during their journeys, or after they arrive in the UK.."* (Mental Health Foundation, 2024).

It is therefore important to be mindful of equipping staff properly to support this group as this work progresses, particularly if their experience of theatre or their writing may release some memories and emotion connected to their past.

*"I feel happy and peaceful now".*

(Zehra, Kurdish Asylum Seeker, Doncaster after watching 'Now').

# MEET MIKE

COMMUNITY AMBASSADOR AT CAST THEATRE



I'm a retired teacher and a volunteer at Doncaster conversation club.

I have a keen sense of justice.



Having worked in Africa for a couple of years, that's the connection to working with asylum seekers.



I want to try and make the world a better place.

I love singing.

I use singing all the time it trains parts of your brain, and if you're trying to learn another language, singing helps massively.



## Doncaster Conversation Club

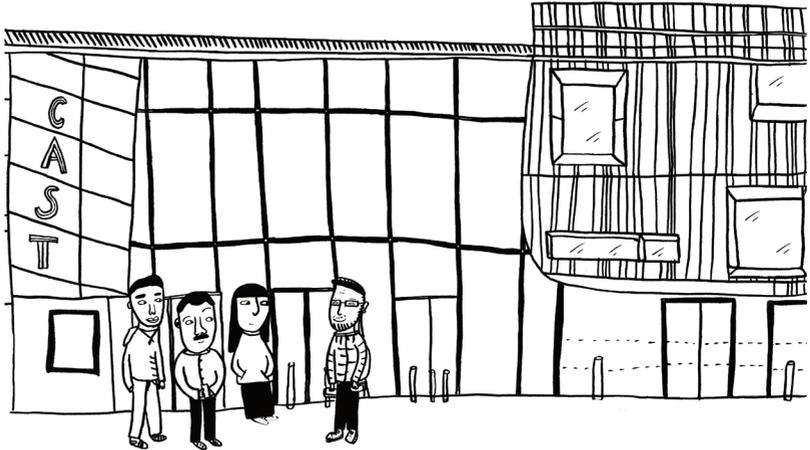
befriends and supports people seeking asylum and new refugees to help them promote their asylum claims, settle into a new life in the U.K. and integrate into Doncaster.



At the conversation club, I've got 12 people around the table with 12 different levels of English, 12 different languages and I'm trying to do something but they haven't got a clue what I'm talking about.

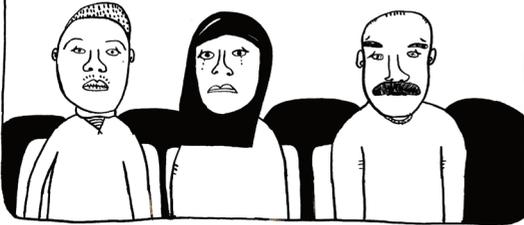


The lesson before the trip, we use the show as a focus. All we've got to go on is the flyer and its description. But we go through the flyer together, painstakingly, line by line.



It could be people's first time in a theatre, especially if they're from Iran, Iraq or Syria - some of the repressive states.

There was one specific company from South America who explored migration and trauma. We went to see that. It was difficult, detention centres, interviews etc... But the cast came back to talk to us afterwards and that was the most lovely things.



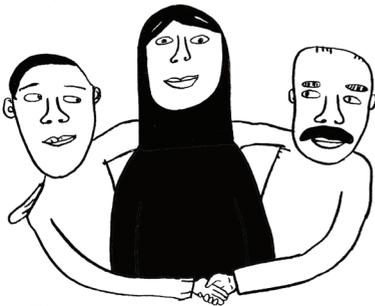
Lots of people wrote reviews of that play. They said it had upset them but they were glad they went. Some wrote their reviews in their own language and we'd translate them together. Some we'd write them in English together, as part of our English class.



It's very positive. They get to discuss something different to the jobs and housing and whether they've got leave to remain and all the rest of it.



It gives our people something meaningful, a joint focus that everybody has watched together. So, it's a lot easier for us to support people in describing in English and finding the right words about it back at DCC.



The buzz then, THE SPIRIT OF COMMUNITY, empathy and understanding was fantastic!



**Cast Community Ambassador Programme was initially piloted in 2024. Its aim is to empower Cast's culturally engaged participants to become Community Ambassadors. After its initial success, the project has been funded for a further two years by the UKRI Creative Health Boards Project, which is collaborating in researching the impact and benefits of the programme.**

Through the programme, the Ambassadors create facilitated bridges into their communities that remove barriers to attendance and create a culture of enabling. The programme encourages a kinder, more supported engagement with Cast, looking at first-time attendees. We are currently working with three Ambassadors connected to the Conversation Club, focusing on people with refugee status and people seeking asylum, people from the Global Majority, and people with lived experience of ill health and disability.

## **References:**

Schaverien, J. 'The Picture Within the Frame' in *The Revealing Image; Analytical Art Psychotherapy in Theory and Practice*, 1991, London & New York: Routledge

*The Mental Health of Asylum Seekers and Refugees in the UK Report*, Mental Health Foundation 2024

### **Asylum Seeker Dashboard**

<https://www.migrationyorkshire.org.uk/statistics/refugee-and-asylum-seeker-dashboard>

### **Creative Health Quality Framework**

<https://www.culturehealthandwellbeing.org.uk/resources/creative-health-quality-framework>



**As someone seeking asylum, this evening reminded me of the power of art to connect, heal and inspire.**

The performance expressed meaningful themes and deep human emotions—struggle, hope, resilience, and connection—without the need for words. As an asylum seeker, I found the experience profoundly meaningful. It reminded me that pain and beauty often exist side by side, and that art can communicate across all cultures and backgrounds.

What stood out most was the welcoming atmosphere. Being surrounded by others from diverse communities, all sharing in the experience, helped me feel a sense of belonging. It was more than just entertainment; it was a reminder that people care, and that inclusion and kindness make a real difference in our lives.....

Being invited to events like this means a lot. It's not just about entertainment—it's about feeling included, valued, and part of a wider community....

I found myself completely drawn in, connecting emotionally to the story being performed on stage. It reminded me that even in silence, we can still be seen and understood....

The show sparked something positive in me: a sense of hope, expression, and connection that can be hard to find in daily life when you're in a difficult or uncertain situation.

I left the theatre feeling lighter, inspired, and grateful. It was a beautiful evening that reminded me of the power of art to heal, to unite, and to give voice to those who are often unheard.

**Bilal, member of Doncaster Conversation Club**

## Cast recognises that the right to access the arts and creative experiences as a fundamental human right which has positive impacts on health and wellbeing.

Our programmes are designed to support participants to be their best selves and have the most positive experiences, using access to theatre and creative activities to achieve this. We are absolutely committed to removing barriers to engagement and access to Cast's on and off stage work, and the Community Ambassador programme is a keyway in which we achieve this.

We take great pride in being a Theatre of Sanctuary and it permeates throughout our organisation. We work in close partnership with organisations like Changing Lives and the Conversation Club, and together we have enabled people seeking asylum and people with refugee status to experience the many benefits that engaging with the arts and creativity brings. Whether it is the joy that 30 women and small children from the African diaspora experience when watching Utopia Theatre's family production of 'Anna Hibiscus' Song', or the solace and solidarity that a group of men who are seeking asylum experience by watching 'Now' by Jasmin Vardimon Company, we have observed and felt the positive impact of this work, which Emilie Taylor describes so beautifully in this booklet. We recognise that, by each partner bringing their strengths to the partnership, we have the greatest impact and reach.

Through a co-produced approach, we hope to meet the needs of the individuals involved, making the experience accessible, appropriate, exciting and appealing. Working with partners who have a trusted relationship with the individuals that we wish to engage with means that positive relationship and trust then extend to their experience at Cast: it is held, it is secure, and it is safe.

Our work as part of the Creative Health Boards project, with Emilie Taylor, a Sheffield Hallam University Embedded Researcher, has meant that we can explore and record how to do this effectively, and how this can then connect within a Doncaster-wide approach to reducing health inequalities through creative pathways.

**Sarah Clough**  
Head of Participation  
Cast