
Mechanisms for Impact - Performing Arts and the Refugee Crisis

Introduction

Many nations across the globe are facing an influx of refugees fleeing their homelands due to conflict created by terror, war, persecution and tyrannical governments. The US alone has admitted almost 70,000 refugees per year since 2013. There are many conflicting stories surrounding the impact of refugee influx into developed countries; most of which perpetuate myths not substantiated by data. Furthermore, the needs of refugees are complex and vary tremendously. Developed countries (while responsible for only a fraction of refugee relocations) require broad resources to effectively ensure safe, fair and full integration of persons fleeing conflict.

The response of artists and the artistic community to the refugee crisis has been significant. Arts' ability to be transformative is part of its very DNA. Art is a vehicle for therapy, enterprise, community, protest, commerce and change. Visual arts are often employed as a medium to provide outlets for recent refugees to communicate the horror of conflict to receiving communities - "a picture is worth a thousand words". Alongside visual art and textile nonprofit organizations designed to educate, integrate and communicate there is significant use of the performing arts to provide a vehicle for therapy and change.

I believe that these performing art activities and programs are key to both educating recipient communities to the needs of refugees and to supporting refugees and their families. Using such programs, refugees can redirect fear and anger toward positive outcomes and new relationships within their communities. Additionally, performing arts and creative activities foster not only individual expression but build and generate community among and between participants.

This paper will focus on the use of performing arts as relates to the needs of refugees, the communities they join and the their impact on societal shift. A review of key literature of the topic will provide context before exploring examples best practice to ensure positive outcomes through performing arts. Finally, an example will be presented to highlight, in detail, how one such project can be impactful, for all.

Literature Review

Scope of Performing Arts

Review of current literature highlights the ability of performing arts to engage with refugees, their community and policy-makers to bring about change. While broad and far-reaching, there are three main areas where performing arts are having impact for the better; therapy, integration and change. In order to better understand how performing arts are being utilized, it is appropriate to consider leading, real world examples.

Performing Arts for Therapy

Andrea Cohen's *Asea: A Short Play*, written for the American Theatre special issue on immigration, provides, in a couple of hundred words, a glimpse into the ways transnational theatre troupes are facing the world's refugee crisis. The ability for refugees' stories to be told, either by themselves, or through the voice of actors, is one mechanism of "theatre as therapy" that continues to benefit refugees.

Syria: the Trojan Women, performed by Syrian women, weaves together present-day tragedies of the Syrian conflict and the ancient drama Euripides, which describes how women lose their husbands, families, and homes when the Greeks invade their city. According to Nakib, "the experience was transformative and allowed them to overcome their feelings of helplessness and isolation. It also gave them an opportunity to contextualize their trauma by sharing their stories and spending time with other women who had gone through a similar ordeal." In a similar work by The League of Professional Theatre Women, under the title "My Life as a Refugee," personal writings or videos from refugees will be incorporated into a performance presentation that will take place in New York on World Refugee Day, June 20.

Theatre as therapy is not limited to adults. Treehouse Theatre provides a platform for young refugees to tell their life stories with friends family and local communities. In a recent project, youths "storm stories" were turned into a show in which students reenact their trauma and where the students' families, who are also refugees themselves, are invited to watch. As one teaching artist for the organization summarized: open-heartedness and acceptance and [a] sense of belonging is a major step in [the youths] trauma and recovery."

Performing Arts for Integration

Performing arts projects are incredibly impactful as they provide a voice and manner to communicate that is extrinsic and demands attention. Mixed Blood Theatre in Minneapolis recently undertook a youth summer program where refugee participants were asked to speak to family members and learn a story about their home culture. The stories were converted into theatrical pieces for the youths to perform. The work is part of a larger mission to integrate families in to the local community where 37% of individuals are non-US born and over 50% speak a language other than English. Mixed Blood have also recently received a grant to embark on a project focused on health and storytelling with community partners. These efforts happen in parallel to Mixed Blood's theatrical season, showcasing how a theatre can be more than a place to present plays and work with non-theatre organizations to enrich their communities.

REACT, a collaboration project between three community theatres in the EU, offers refugees the opportunity to use their own creativity, talents, ideas, opinions and imagination to put on an original theatre show. This gives refugees the chance to communicate with their host communities. At the same time it equips them with new skills and competences, ranging from language to local knowledge. The project impact was recently summarized by project coordinator Neil Beddows: "It's hard to hate someone when you've just been listening to their story or laughing at their jokes."

In a further example, Impulse Project aims to create connections between refugees and citizens. Initially started as a theatre workshop entitled *Do Butterflies have Borders*, the project was transformed into a lasting refugee platform that allows refugees to express themselves

creatively and engage with German society.

Performing Arts for Change

Finally, performing arts can be a vehicle for societal change, providing opportunities to modify prejudices and behaviour. Cleveland Public Theatre's production of *American Dreams* included an immersive element where audience members were screened by "agents" on arrival and passed through metal detectors. Show creators deliberately wanted to challenge beliefs and make audience members aware of the steps refugees and immigrants have to go through in the hope that they will become advocates for change.

In a more recent series of projects, two theatre productions took place in Munich tackling the plight of refugees in Germany as a vehicle for social change. *What They Want to Hear* tells the story of Syrian archaeologist Raaed Al Kour who entered Germany following Angela Merkel's controversial decision to open the borders in 2015. Whereas, *Wartesaal* examined the helplessness and frustration experienced by displaced German Jews following Hitler's rise to power. Both works are designed to achieve Artistic Director Matthias Lilienthal's goal to "turn the theater into a forum for creative experimentation, social engagement and political inquiry".

Example of Best Practice - TeAda

There is a growing need for nonprofit organizations to actively seek to engage with refugees and create opportunities for communities to come together for mutual learning and acceptance of change. One such organization, TeAda, is a nomadic theater of color, rooted in the stories of immigrants and refugees. The organization is "committed to healing and honoring the lives of the displaced, exploited and overlooked." TeAda's process starts and ends with conscious listening, community building, and creative courage. Through theater workshops and performances, TeAda offers acts of service that are transformative and impactful.

The success of projects undertaken by TeAda is borne out of the organization's ability to engage all three tenets of performing arts impact described in this paper. The organization engages professionals and therapists to support workshops that allow participants to take a journey of therapy at their own pace. Throughout this process, collaborative learning takes place, creating opportunities of new work to be created and shared with the community. In addition, the organization integrates challenging change mechanisms into performances and takes productions out to schools and the wider community to become the change agents needed to modify perception. TeAda's current production listing ensures relevance to its mission and accessibility to the wider community. While there is scope to expand programming to appeal to a broader audience, the organization has a clear vision and remains laser-focussed on it.

Measurements of Success

As with all organizations, projects or activities designed with a discrete group in mind, we should remain conscious that the action of defining this group can lead to reinforcing stereotypes rather than dispelling them. In the example of TeAda, the organization engages a large constituent and volunteer base, but there was little evidence suggest that the local community overall have a way to connect with participants (and vice-versa) beyond supporting performances through

ticket sales. While community integration for refugees is strong, it's less clear how "native" members of the community can best support the organization year-round. As a key goal of the organization is integration into new communities and societal change, it's imperative to ensure that the avenues for inclusion operate in both directions.

The refugee crisis is of global concern. The ability of the performing arts to react to the crisis has been considerable and, equally, global. Execution of projects aimed at refugees and communities affected vary both in terms of scale and integration. The latter being the biggest challenge. As advocates continue to employ performing arts to solve such crises the impact will only increase. Performing arts as a vehicle for therapy, integration and change with regards to refugees is established and will continue to grow so long as a need exists.

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