The power of community arts projects to create social change

*Journey of Asylum—Waiting*, a theatrical production by the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC), performed by asylum seekers

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Many asylum seekers who are waiting on a decision from the Australian government on their application for refugee status are living lawfully in the community on the punitive Bridging Visa E. Since 1997 this visa category has prohibited many asylum seekers from working and from gaining access to Medicare. On Bridging Visa E, asylum seekers are also ineligible for federally funded services including Centrelink payments, healthcare, employment programs, settlement services, tertiary education and more. This means that we have an underclass, living in abject poverty, that is completely reliant on the support provided by churches, charities and organisations including the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC). Asylum seekers in this situation are very different from those who are recognised as refugees by the Australian government prior to their arrival in Australia. The latter group comes to Australia via our offshore Refugee and Humanitarian Program and is afforded a suite of services and entitlements upon arrival in the country. The ASRC was founded in response to the dire needs of asylum seekers who do not have access to this essential support.

The ASRC is a human rights and social justice organisation, an independent, registered charity, working with the most vulnerable and at-risk asylum seekers. The ASRC provides a range of direct services to asylum seekers including casework, a human rights law program, aid programs including a foodbank, health and counseling services, employment assistance, English language classes, English home tutoring programs and a social and community development program. The organisation also participates in campaigning and lobbying for law reform.

In March 2010 the social and community development program of ASRC was proud to present the public performance of a longer-term arts project.
For the first time in Australian history, nineteen asylum seekers and refugees came together on the stage, told their stories and voiced the plight of asylum seekers in Australia, in a production called *Journey of Asylum—Waiting*. The production wove the lived experiences of asylum seekers, now residing in Melbourne, into a dynamic and poetic performance. Asylum seekers shared their struggles, uncertainties and realisations as people ‘waiting’ in the immigration process. Experiences of fear, sleeplessness and isolation mixed with dignity, resilience and humor and the hope for a ‘normal life’. In a country like Australia, freedom of speech and self-expression are our democratic rights, but for most asylum seekers such rights are simply a dream they hope will come true. *Journey of Asylum—Waiting* went partway to realising that dream. Six performances at the Bella Union Theatre, Trades Hall Council, Melbourne, were sold out within a few days. The opening night was launched by the Victorian Minister for the Arts, Peter Batchelor, and included a glowing speech from Australian of the year, Patrick McGorry. The production was attended by politicians, ASRC partners, VIPs, artists and the wider community. The ASRC continues to be contacted by interested parties requesting additional performances and tours.

The arts project that culminated in *Journey of Asylum—Waiting* came about for a number of reasons. Firstly, the ASRC had a number of requests from its asylum seeker clients for a drama group. Secondly, ASRC had historically been an organisation focused on legal, welfare and aid provision to meet the basic needs of asylum seekers, using a largely volunteer model. After some years, this focus unwittingly created a welfare dependency model. The centre recognised the need to move away from this culture and toward a culture of empowerment. To that end, ASRC created a position for a Community Cultural Development Co-ordinator who created a number of new programs, including this arts program. Community and Cultural Development was aimed at achieving:

- the empowerment, resilience, independence, self sufficiency and contribution of asylum seekers;
- improved engagement, integration and connection to community and mainstream services;
- the development of skills, knowledge, talents, creativity and strengths of asylum seekers;
- a sense of belonging, connectedness, and community that could counteract the loneliness, social isolation and mental health issues of asylum seekers.

The production involved a diverse group of asylum seekers and refugees—fifteen males and seven females, including both actors and others who contributed voice recordings. The participants came from countries including the Sudan (Northern Sudanese, and Dinka from Southern Sudan and Darfur), Afghanistan (including Pashtuns and Hazara who had been living in Pakistan), Somalia, Turkey (including Armenians and Kurds),
Eritrea, Rwanda, Pakistan, Nepal (Tibetans), Zimbabwe, Sri Lanka, Iraq, Ethiopia and Papua New Guinea. The ages of the asylum seekers ranged from nineteen to 46. The production also involved a number of artists including an artistic director, a musical director, a soundscape artist, a multimedia and set designer, a lighting designer and Australian volunteer actors.

The group met weekly for drama and creative storytelling workshops. The workshops explored the experience of seeking asylum and the emotions and questions involved in that process. Asylum seekers also met individually with the artistic director who digitally recorded their stories and worked one-on-one with individuals on skills development and confidence. The project was based on the ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’, a theatrical form developed by Brazilian director Augusto Boal, intended to be an instrument of concrete social transformation. This form of theatre is meant to be practiced by, about and for the oppressed, to help in their struggle against oppression and in order to transform the society that engenders oppression. The word ‘oppressed’ is used in the sense of those who have lost the right to express their will and those who are reduced to the condition of obedient listeners to a monologue from which they are excluded. Theatre of the Oppressed is used as a tool to fight against class oppression, racism, sexism and all forms of discrimination. It includes a system of games and special techniques that aim to develop in oppressed groups the language of the theatre—an essentially human language.

**How did asylum seekers benefit?**

Asylum seekers engaged in *Journey of Asylum — Waiting* were always ambivalent about the project. They wanted to be involved yet did not fancy the commitment or responsibility. They had a desire to tell their stories but also a need to be left alone. They could see the therapeutic value of sharing their stories but also feared the reality of doing so. They had a strong urge to ‘go public’ but refused to pander to voyeuristic audiences. At times, asylum seekers felt that supporters of the project were on their side; at other times they felt they were the enemy. In rehearsals they wanted to muck around, yet they were also annoyed if they felt their time was not being well used. Asylum seekers’ involvement in the project was affected by the chaotic nature of their day to day lives—poor mental health, physical illness, family issues, pressure from their ethnic communities, destitution and negative decisions on asylum applications. That they were able to remain in the project over the course of what became an intensive rehearsal schedule is testament to their own determination, to the strength of the bond within the group, and to the commitment of project’s support team.

The project had huge benefits for the asylum seekers and refugees involved. These included:

- empowerment through the development of technical and artistic skills and talents;
• social connectedness, strong friendships and community;
• improved engagement and improved mental health;
• identification of leaders;
• therapeutic benefits flowing from validation of experiences, which related to the opportunity for asylum seekers to re-author their stories and take control of their lives;
• cultural exchange—the group were a diverse and motley crew with vast differences but the shared experience of being an asylum seeker. They learned a lot from each other and enriched each others lives;
• powerful breakthroughs and connections forged with asylum seekers who were members of the audience.

A young Somali asylum seeker performed her story of fleeing Somalia during the war. Lost and terrified in the chaos, her only hope was to ‘follow the sun’. She shared how she managed to escape Somalia with the help of a people smuggler, enduring a scary journey to Australia. She lost her family, and was separated from her loved ones. She is now happy in Australia and has a bright future to look forward to. However, she struggles with tribal conflicts in her community, and with narrow-minded perceptions of her as a young Muslim woman. The arts project encouraged and empowered this young woman to discover who she is; to express herself; and to challenge gendered, cultural and religious stereotypes. She has shown great courage, bravery and determination and wants to tell her story to be a voice for others. Through this process, ASRC identified this young woman as a strong, intelligent, talented, inspirational leader and role model. She expressed her reasons for participating in the project as follows:

Pretty much all my life, I’ve been opposite to many women. I’m now 25 and not married, by choice. They [those in my community] say this is no good. Why? No-one knows—they’re stuck on this idea of culture. Well, I want to change the meaning of the culture. I want to hang on to what’s good in it and change what people can’t handle anymore, the bits that people are doing out of fear—fear of people, not fear of God. That’s why I am here today. For some asylum seekers there are risks attached to being in a project like this—risks that could put their families in danger. I chose to face these kinds of fears, because fear is for God only. I want to be the voice of others who don’t have the same opportunities for free speech or the courage to face these problems. I’ll be the thoughts that go through their minds, the things they only wish and dream they could say. I’ll do this, even though some are suspicious of me to the point where I almost gave up. I realise I have to be here for other women, who are voiceless and somehow depending on me. I’m proud of this project. I’d like to send a message not only to the audience but to all those people who have no idea who asylum seekers are and what seeking asylum is all about.
**I Can’t Go Home—By Freedom You Can Live**

A song performed in *Journey of Asylum—Waiting*
Music by Jethro Woodward, lyrics by the cast of asylum seekers

I can’t go home
I’m not going back.
I don’t know which way I should go
Should I follow the sun?
The deserts are expanding
Be strong, be strong, be strong
One day I will die
I cried I cried I cried till it was dry in my eyes
Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye—I didn’t want it to be goodbye
I’m asking you for truth
Why are you here? Why are you here?
I’m searching for a better life
I’ve been a child of war
We are refugees searching for a better life
We wait, we wait, we wait, just wait
My heart it’s a big pain, my wall is breaking
I have something in my mind—my feeling
It is not just by bread you can live
It is not just by eating
By song you can live, by love you can live, by freedom you can live
A boy who knew nothing about the world
Came to Australia all alone
If not for this
He’d be dead by now
The boy—now a man—is still waiting.
I have something in my mind—my feeling
It is not just by bread you can live
It is not just by eating,
By song you can live, by love you can live, by freedom you can live
We all know the media ain’t doing this right
So everyday we write,
That’s the way we fight.
We all know the media ain’t doing this right,
If we all unite
We’ll make them see the light.
Why why why, tell me why.
We wait, we wait, we wait, just wait
I have something in my mind—my feeling
It is not just by bread you can live
It is not just by eating,
By song you can live, by love you can live, by freedom you can live
By song you can live, by love you can live, by freedom you can live
Despite their disparate backgrounds, the participants and collaborators had many commonalities and formed enriching friendships that cut across gender, culture, religion, class and sexuality. Through this process, asylum seekers and the ASRC learned much about the power of cultural exchange. The project highlighted the power of group work. The artistic director and supporters worked hard to build an environment of trust and safety in the group. Participants shared their intimate life experiences and struggles, as well as enjoying a lot of fun and frivolity together. They formed close friendships and a strong group bond. The project was so empowering for the participants that during the performances and the post-performance period the group felt invincible and that, together, they could achieve anything.

**How did the ASRC benefit?**

*Journey of Asylum—Waiting* was a significant learning experience for the ASRC. The project challenged the organisational culture of seeing our clients as vulnerable and traumatised and wrapping them in cotton wool. During rehearsals the director simultaneously pushed and supported asylum seekers to visit dark and difficult places. The supporters often stood by feeling worried and uncomfortable, wanting to protect the participants. As supporters, we came to realise that our own discomfort was driving much of this reaction and that asylum seekers made great therapeutic breakthroughs through the process. In contrast to ‘victims’, the project engaged asylum seekers as strong, resilient, talented and capable individuals. The project removed participants from the context of labels like ‘asylum seeker’, ‘illegal’, ‘queue jumper’ and ‘boat people’. Instead, supporters and audience members encountered the participants as multidimensional people, as talented story tellers, actors and artists.

The profound benefits of the project for participating asylum seekers prompted the ASRC to consider expanding its repertoire of approaches to recovery from trauma and poor mental health. The organisation became deeply aware that arts projects like *Journey of Asylum—Waiting* have great therapeutic value. This awareness filtered through all sectors of the ASRC, not only those concerned directly with social and community development.

Through the project, ASRC recognised the power of the human face and that asylum seekers are the most powerful advocates for social action on the politics of asylum. For many years, ASRC staff and volunteers have been raising community awareness on issues relating to asylum seekers. More often than not, this has involved speaking on behalf of our clients. *Journey of Asylum—Waiting* gave asylum seekers the opportunity to tell their own stories and to speak out in their own words. They inspired audiences to listen with a different ear and this proved to be the most powerful, effective and moving way to transmit a message. The performances received tremendous reviews and feedback:
Local–Global

‘Powerful, riveting, unforgettable’

‘Very moving, inspiring, I’m speechless, you’ve enriched my life immensely’

‘Please keep performing this very important piece of theatre, more Victorians must see it’

‘Thank you so much for sharing true stories that need to be told. I only pray to god people will listen—thank you’

‘I am changed forever’

‘I can no longer sit and do nothing anymore, I want to become involved in the refugee movement’.

The ASRC prides itself on being an organisation that provides holistic support with a multidisciplinary approach to service provision for asylum seekers. Our expertise has always been around working with clients in crisis and crisis response. Journey of Asylum — Waiting enabled the organisation to work on a different level. This is the first time the ASRC has embarked upon a theatre production; in the process, it promoted itself as a unique and innovative organisation. We are proud of the new feather in our cap and the production is opening new doors for the ASRC.

Journey of Asylum — Waiting generated a series of ‘firsts’ for the ASRC. The production:

• told never-before-heard stories of journeys of asylum with a key focus on asylum seekers living in the community;
• documented the stories of asylum seekers as part of Australian history, community and cultural arts history and the history of migration/people movement;
• created cutting edge contemporary theatre;
• celebrated the value and the contribution of asylum seekers to Australian art and cultural diversity.

What next?

There have been many positive flow-on effects for the ASRC:

• the ASRC has been approached by a documentary film company, Community Prophets, to make Journey of Asylum — Waiting into a film;
• one of the participants was approached by a documentary filmmaker who wanted to make a film about her;
• Bella Union Theatre offered their venue for re-use and suggested that we extend our performance season;
• we have been approached by the Human Rights Arts Film Festival to work in partnership and to submit a proposal for the 2011 festival;
• we have developed a proposal for a new theatre project, *Not Just My Story*, which is currently under review for funding;

• we have developed a partnership with the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art which is keen to work with the ASRC on *Not Just My Story*;

• the original project has enabled the work of the ASRC to be documented in Politics and Social Work journals.

*Journey of Asylum — Waiting* was an unforgettable, life changing project. The asylum seekers and the ASRC gained so much from it. We simply must continue to build on the momentum that this project has generated and to increase awareness of the transformative effect of community arts projects. At ASRC, we hold the firm belief that art is an agent of social change and that anything is possible.

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