

Case Study: UK–Malaysia Cultural Exchange Project

Partners: Soho Theatre, London; Cloudbreak, Kuala Lumpur

Contact: Brian Jones
Cloudbreak Creative Development Centre
P2-2, Plaza Damas, Sri Hartamas
50480 Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia
Website: www.mycloudbreak.com
Tel: +603 6201 7701

Suzanne Gorman
Soho Connect Director
21 Dean Street
London W1D 3NE
United Kingdom
E-mail: suzanne@sohotheatre.com
Website: www.sohotheatre.com
Tel: +44 (0)20 7478 0114

Introduction

Situated in the heart of London's West End, Soho Theatre was founded in 1969, with the mission of producing new plays, encouraging new playwrights and reaching new audiences. The Soho Theatre runs a cultural exchange programme as a part of the work of Soho Connect, the theatre's Community and Education department. This work focuses on introducing different sectors of the community to theatre as an art form, which can inspire and develop self-confidence, sharpen self-expression and spark people's imagination. It helps to cement links with the local community and plays an important role in discovering new writers and developing new audiences.

Cloudbreak is based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and was founded in 2005 to provide creative learning opportunities for young people, communities and partner NGOs. Cloudbreak's work includes weekly theatre workshop programmes, performance projects and creative nature camps - all of which focus on inspiring and supporting participants in developing imaginative and creative ways of thinking and working together.

The current project that Soho Theatre is working on with Cloudbreak is a two-way exchange project between two organisations engaging in the fostering of creative drama-based disciplines for young people. This project aims to encourage young people to connect with and gain a greater understanding of the lives of their peers in other parts of the world.

Activity

This two-way cultural exchange programme will explore the possibility of two groups of up to ten young people aged 18-25 exchanging views, ideas and dreams with a similar group from a differing culture to their own. It takes as its starting point an exploration of London and Kuala Lumpur's physical and cultural landscapes. The young participants from the two cities will be involved in all stages of the planning and development of the exchange in order to take real creative and organisational ownership of the project.

The starting point for the creative elements of the exchange will involve an exploration of the landscapes and mindscapes of Kuala Lumpur and London: through a series of workshops home environments will be looked at, respective cities explored and people engaged. The

cultures, spaces, urban lifestyles, city secrets and personal experiences of these places will be explored. The findings of these creative explorations will be used to fill a box: writings, images, maps, memories and dreams, the stuff of everyday lives, the flotsam and jetsam of our worlds. This is a real box containing traces of lived lives, characters, images, objects, poetry and music.

The arrival of the boxes at their destinations will signal the second stage of the exchange. The contents will provide the focus for a residential weekend. Each group will open their received box and explore its contents. What are these things and why have they been sent? What was behind their choosing? What stories do they contain? Those stories will be told in the participants' own voices, creating stories, songs, images and performance from the findings. E-mails, photos and web logs will be used to share some of the creations, and simply to move forward our continuing dialogue.

The Soho Theatre Group will initially travel for a three-week visit to Malaysia and be based in Kuala Lumpur. The groups will share the work created in response to the boxes in a five-day workshop programme at the Cloudbreak studios. Through a process of getting to know one another, sharing ideas, exchanging skills, learning from and teaching one another the group will begin to create a new collaborative piece of theatre. Rehearsals and then a public sharing of this piece of theatre will take place in the city. Alongside the theatre-making the group will also engage in a programme of other cultural activities, experiencing the life and landscape of Malaysia.

Following on from the visit to Malaysia, the Soho Group will play host to the Cloudbreak group who will then visit England for a period of three weeks over the summer of 2008. Here their shared experience of London and the United Kingdom will be fed into the piece to develop it to its final stage of performance at the Soho Theatre.

Impact

The programme's aim is to bring about the following outcomes:

For the participants

- A deeper understanding of the two host cities, their landscapes, people and cultures.
- A real exchange of cross-cultural theatrical practices (learning from others and teaching).
- A personal broadening of global and cultural horizons.
- A development of a range of personal and social skills (for example, increased confidence and communication skills).
- Development of a wide range of skills in planning and evaluating the exchange.
- An awareness and understanding of what it means to be a global citizen.
- Long-term connections to people in another country.

For Soho Theatre and Cloudbreak and the wider communities of London and Kuala Lumpur

- The development of a working relationship for the organisations that will extend beyond the programme.
- Direct exposure, for the wider community, of contemporary Malaysian and British theatre through the performances.
- An evolution of arts practice in the two cities, as working methods develop within the organisations and are disseminated to other theatre and arts providers through local partnerships.

Key Lessons

- After an exchange process begins, it is important to maintain a sense of momentum in the group. This is most effectively done through face to face meetings and encouraging 'talking' among the members.
- To support a strong sense of connection between the groups from the beginning, participants were encouraged to reach out their minds to one another. Such an imaginative and engaged attitude helped empower, shape and deepen the work and research.
- Exchanges are quite sensitive and fragile things especially in the early days when that initial flurry of desires, dreams and visions begin to take harder forms. To maintain a sense of clarity, it is essential to keep reflecting, keep easy and pull something into focus gradually.