

Indra Congress Newsletter 13

The Plymouth Congress 2015

Dear Friends of Indra

The challenge

Following the Indra Congress in Derry 2013, Marina Barham, Director of Al Harah Theatre in Beit Jala, Palestine invited us to hold the next 2015 Global Congress in Bethlehem. The slaughter inflicted on Gaza a year ago had a profound impact on people throughout Palestine. Once again Gaza was in ruins and its families and communities living in fear and despair. The tremors reverberated across the region. Marina advised us not to come to Bethlehem and that her capacity to raise resources to host the event was severely impaired. We postponed for a year.

In the meantime we suggested holding an interim Congress in Plymouth. This would enable us to maintain momentum with Indra and not lose the enthusiasm and creative energy generated during the Derry Congress, in 2015. Exchange projects between India and South Africa and other bi-lateral activities had kept this momentum going. The situation also presented us with an opportunity.

Over the years we have developed a pattern for the Indra programme: Young people carry out creative projects in their own communities, which they share through social media. They then may take part in bi-lateral projects and training programmes with other partners. Every couple of years we meet up for a 'live' Congress event in which young people can share their experience, practice and ideas and learn from each other. We hold a parallel symposium for practitioners and academics to reflect on the work within Indra's net. The current situation had raised a challenge: how do we engage with colleagues who are unable to attend in person? For example, young people in Palestine were isolated through war, young people in Sierra Leone were isolated through Ebola. How could we facilitate their participation?

We decided to design a Congress that would use digital technology to bring absent participants into the 'live' space. To raise the resources to do this we had to work fast. The University of Plymouth kindly offered the use of their new theatre space, The House, free of charge for a week. The Paul Hamlyn Foundation responded warmly and gave us a generous grant towards hosting the event. This was matched by an award from Arts Council England (ACE) to engage a talented team of artists to devise and deliver an exciting week of workshops, cultural sharing sessions and rehearsals leading to a public performance on the last night. Plymouth Culture Board and Widening

Participation at the University offered further support and, with contributions from ex-M.P. Colin Breed and the Quakers of Tavistock, we were on our way.



The artists

The team of artists was skilfully led by theatre practitioner Alix Harris and dance artist Jules Laville. Visual artist Maggi Squire provided a calming and richly creative space in which participants pieced together a magical earth painting and other extraordinary and zany artefacts.



Chris Hunt, our digital wizard from i-DAT (Institute for Digital Art and Technology), helped participants link with absent colleagues – Facebook didn't know what had hit it during the week! Jamie Smith brought animation skills into the fray.



Melaine Le Bars manipulated the extensive technical resources of The House to create a wonderfully creative space.



The visa

Once again, the refusal of visas led to disappointment and frustration. One example in particular shows how extreme the position has become. Our dear friend Marina Barham has been working with ARROW/Indra for 12 years. Marina is a highly respected arts administrator in Palestine who travels the world to link with, teach and train others: Marina is profoundly dedicated to Palestine and its people. On this occasion her visa to attend the Indra Congress was denied on the flimsiest of grounds. Such is the prevailing state of paranoia and fear in the UK that such a distinguished professional is humiliated to satisfy the reactionary voices of 'little Englanders', which are given hate inducing

expression in the tabloid press. We felt ashamed and embarrassed. All 6 Nigerian young people due to attend were also denied visas.

The participants

The week provided an avalanche of celebratory energy interspersed with moments of stillness and poignant reflections arising from the diverse presentations. The four young Indian women from the Study Hall Foundation, Lucknow gave a deeply moving performance and presentation showing the barriers they face in their search for justice and the right to be in control of their own lives.



From Maria Papacosta's group in Cyprus we were treated to a series of energetic traditional dances, which reminded us that, even when the world around is full of turmoil, an important function of art is to celebrate, to bring joy and life.

The people of Greece are going through traumatic and uncertain times. However, we were delighted that Iro Potamoussi, who works with the Hellenic Theatre/Drama Education Network, (TENet-Gr) managed to get from Athens to Plymouth. Iro was accompanied by two talented young people, Kostas and Anthea, who presented a short, powerful piece of theatre showing the deep anxiety experienced by their generation and their longing to move beyond a crisis not of their making.

From the UK the Burnley Youth Theatre group presented a short, moving film showing the struggles of young people with their sexual identities and the prejudice and intolerance they face from peers and wider society. Bolton Octagon Theatre Indra group also presented a hilarious film showing the power of humour to help us see serious

issues from different perspectives. The Plymouth young people, from The Plymouth Barbican Theatre's Voices for Change, had rehearsed a strong piece of physical theatre, which showed the anger, frustration and sadness of feeling alienated from the grinding, political machinery that governs their lives. The impact of this vibrant piece was illustrated by the torrent of questions, comments and debate from the audience. The experience touched deep cords with people from diverse contexts. Finally, from Derry's First Act Theatre came a short extract from their ongoing work on the issue of hate crime, an issue of growing concern in a community struggling to emerge from years of mistrust and division, 'you don't come from around here.....'

We had an inspiring presentation from Marcia Pompeo at the University of Santa Caterina, Brazil about Indra's work linking up with the influential Landless Movement, and a short filmed extract from Jerry Adesewo of the Aroja Royal Theatre in Nigeria, which raised ensuing debate on issues around culture, politics and power. We linked up with Indra members of ARROWSA in Durban, South Africa who showed us a short extract from current work and we engaged with colleagues from Al Harah in Palestine who expressed their sadness at not being with us and how much they were looking forward to hosting us at the next Indra Congress in Bethlehem.



It was sadly disappointing when just as contact was made with Alfred Thullah in Freetown, Sierra Leone and in the auditorium we could hear Alfred's voice and see him

on the giant screen, the Skype contact was lost and could not be regained. It was frustrating for us all and especially for Alfred and Ndeamoh in Sierra Leone who had been building up to this moment.

During the week, another group from the Plymouth Babrican Theatre, Arts Force, had organised a special young people's Question Time. The panel would consist of young people from Indra groups around the world and the audience would consist of young people from Plymouth, invited politicians and the public. There were some strong contributions, showing the frustrations of being a young person in today's confusing world but also showing a heart- warming sense of purpose and aspiration.



The co-ordinators

During the week the Indra co-ordinators had a full day seminar to reflect on the values and mission of Indra and how we understood Indra now. We discussed where we wanted to go with Indra and how we were going to get there. We had a Skyped planning meeting with Marina in Beit Jala to discuss the 2016 Congress. Marina and the company of Al Harah will host the event in collaboration with Hala Yamani of Bethlehem University. Mary Lange, accompanied by Miranda Young-Jahangeer from the University of KwaZulu Natal, explained their proposals for the Indra Congress in Durban for 2018.

The final performance



The public performance at the end of the week, which included images, Skype extracts, documentary passages from Palestine and collaborative dance, drama, animation passages was streamed live over You Tube. This organic performance/presentation was a big step forward in Indra's development. On previous occasions such performances had been almost separate from the extraordinary sharing presentations during the week. This time the artists and participants created a holistic piece of work, which threaded through the activities of the week and, using digital technology, allowed the voices of overseas participants to be threaded into the performance.

We made real progress in developing Indra's digital and technical capacity to reach out to people in settings where live participation is challenging. The quality of the technical output was inconsistent and sometimes not of a high quality, but the process was a major step for the organisation. Many, many thanks to all concerned.

The web-site

For some years now we have had a web-site that was no longer fit for purpose. We have now agreed with Urvashi Sahni's Study Hall Digital Foundation that they will re-design a new web-site for us and help to manage it. This is great news and we look forward to launching it shortly and creating a site that is buzzing with activity.

Weaving Indra's Net

'A Personal Journey of Art and Conflict: Weaving Indra's Net' by David Oddie is published by Intellect in August. It provides a history of the emergence of ARROW/Indra over several years, the ideas underpinning the programme, travels and encounters with 'remarkable people' and a 'how to' set of suggestions for workshops. This account is integrated with David's own story with the purpose of showing how the personal is intertwined with the social and the political.

Warning: it's expensive, though copies can be ordered and obtained directly through David at half price!

Bethlehem 2016

This is an ambitious event which will take place in the west Bank, Palestine in July 2015. As usual there will be a series of workshops, training events and performances. There will also be a Symposium to discuss and debate issues arising from the work of Indra and Al Harah in Palestine, which will raise important questions regarding the role of theatre and the arts in settings of conflict and complexity.

Marina Barham is hosting the Congress and we are looking for whatever support and resources we can muster to help make this a very special event of global significance.

We welcome offers of direct support or suggestions with regard to funding bodies, foundations and agencies which may have an interest in backing this unique occasion. We would also be grateful if friends of Indra could please pass this information forward to potentially interested organisations and individuals.

Namaste

David, Tim and Dawn