The Indra Congress Newsletter 6

**Introduction**

It is now two years since we embarked on the ambitious journey to establish Indra as an independent network of young people, practitioners, teachers, academics and others who share a belief in the power of theatre and the creative arts to build bridges, encourage inter-cultural dialogue, challenge prejudice and destructive myths.

In a relatively short period of time we have established the Indra Congress as a registered Community Interest Company, held a successful training and planning event at Edge Hill University for the UK and Ireland groups, received an award from the Anna Lindh Foundation to enable our young people in Palestine link with their counterparts in Northern Ireland, begun a process of dialogue with the University of Plymouth with regard to a formal collaboration, explored the *Cooling Conflict* framework with inner city schools in Plymouth and teachers in Cornwall, watched our colleagues in South Africa set up an independent NGO as they move from strength to strength, and we have begun planning and fund raising for the Derry 2013 Congress.

The Derry 2013 Congress provides us with an opportunity to consolidate what we have achieved to date and clarify the purpose and direction of Indra in the years ahead.

**Derry 2013**

Mary Duddy and the First Act Theatre group in Derry are working hard to prepare for the Congress next year. These are difficult economic times and we are going to be pressed hard to raise the resources to get participants to attend, especially from countries such as Sierra Leone and India. (People have commented to me that India claims to be a successful and ambitious economy, why should we offer help there? The answer is that Urvashi Sahni’s young women are subject to extreme caste discrimination and poverty, they need all the help they can get – and the fact that we did get them here last time was life transforming for them.)

At the Edge Hill event the UK groups made a firm commitment to begin fund raising and we welcome ideas and suggestions from our wider network of friends. We have a challenging time ahead to make the Derry Congress successful. These words from Christopher Dillon, a member of the Derry Indra group, may help to motivate us:

*INDRA is the most important and life changing entity in my life. Since I joined the group, my eyes have been opened. I was privileged enough to have attended the first international Congress back in 2010. From the moving stories of the Indian girls, to the raw energy and passion of the Brazilians, it was a singular and unforgettable moment in my life; the shining jewel in my life experiences. I have felt more love and friendship in a week, from someone who doesn't even speak the same language as me, than most people will experience in 10 lifetimes! Anyone under its net would be transformed.*

**Edge Hill 2012**

Edge Hill University kindly hosted an event in August that involved the groups in Bolton, Burnley, Durham, Plymouth and Derry coming together for a week to take part in training workshops and help plan the 2013 Derry event. It was a great opportunity for Mary and the group to listen to the imaginative ideas put forward by their colleagues. Here is a participant from Burnley, Sarah Frielick, talking about the event:

*Hello, Its Sarah from Burnley youth theatre. I thoroughly enjoyed Indra this year, it*

*was my first year of attending an Indra event and I loved every minute of it. The*

*people there made me feel very comfortable and welcome, I definitely want to go to*

*the World Congress in Derry 2013 because I enjoyed it so much. I would love to*

*experience meeting new people from all around the world, and try to help ‘cool conflict’ through drama with people with the same mindset as yourself.*

*The thing I enjoyed the most was when we paired up with someone we had never met before, and told each other a personal story, then we shared these, talked with other groups and created a drama based on one of the stories. This showed us all how dramatic other people’s ’ lives can be. I thought it was a really good activity to do because I learned a lot about other people’s lives and found it very interesting.*

*Thank you for letting me experience my first Indra event, I had a great time.*

Sentiments echoed by Oliver Isherwood, also from Burnley:

*The Indra conference last week was fantastic. I loved literally everything about it, the people, and the cooling conflict workshop. Everything was fantastic. I just wanted to stay there longer. The different activities from the different Indra groups were interesting as to see what games and warm-ups they play. I also loved the cultural sharing event.  Overall the conference was full of learning, laughter and just a generally brilliant time.*

A number of excellent ideas were discussed for the Derry group to consider for the Congress. Following the event Alix Harris, co-ordinator of the Plymouth Voices for Change group, suggested the idea of a ‘buddy system’ in the build up to the event. In Alix’s own words:

*Since the UK groups met up in August I have been doing some thinking about how they could also stay connecting with each other a bit more. I am aware of how busy the groups are but I think that we should encourage our young people to communicate with each other more, as a way of discussing INDRA and the work they are doing which then in turn might evoke new ideas and new thinking. I was thinking of introducing the idea of an INDRA buddy scheme where each young person partners up with another and contacts them weekly/monthly which ever they decide up until the congress in Derry. The reason I suggest this was because when we were in Liverpool I noticed that each of the groups had a few shy members who weren't at the forefront of making friends but by the end of it they had found one of the other shyer members and I feel that if they had the opportunity to chat with someone prior to the Congress it might help those people.*

*If people are interested in their groups being a part of this then let me know and I will organise putting it into action.*

**The Anna Lindh Foundation (ALF)**

Anna Lindh was a prominent Swedish, Social Democratic politician who was widely tipped to be Swedish prime minister, speculations which were dashed by her brutal assassination in September 2003. The ALF, named after her, was formed in 2005 and seeks to bring people together from across Europe and the Mediterranean region. The ALF encourages mutual respect between cultures and is a network of over 3000 civil society organisations across the region. We are pleased to part of the UK branch of the Foundation and were recently delighted to hear we had been awarded a grant to enable the Indra young people in Northern Ireland engage in a linking project with their peers in Palestine. The aim of our proposal is to encourage the participants to use the language of theatre, music, dance, poetry, art and photography to share their experience of coping with conflict around them, learn from each other and present their shared experiences and ideas to their peers from around the world at the Derry Congress.

**Cooling Conflict**

Over the past year I have been exploring the use of the *Cooling Conflict* framework in inner city primary schools in Plymouth. The model has shown great potential and I am working with a group of Headteachers and their staff who are keen to develop and cascade the process throughout their schools and spill out into their local communities. We have received a grant from Arts Council England to help us achieve this objective. Over the course of the next 18 months we will be working mainly with 5 primary schools in Plymouth and one secondary school. The work will start in the classroom, engage parents and families, the local community and then culminate in a showcase event at the Plymouth Barbican Theatre.

I have also been implementing a process to cascade *Cooling Conflict* throughout a secondary school in Cornwall, Saltash Community College, in which a pilot project in the summer had a significant impact.

**The University of Plymouth**

In a recent newsletter I mentioned that I had been invited by the University of Plymouth to become a Visiting Research Fellow. In addition to this we have been discussing a proposal to base the Indra Congress at the University; a partnership arrangement that would effectively give Indra a home in return for offering students and staff opportunities for placements, research and teaching input.

The University signalled their support by offering to cover Indra’s cash flow during the course of the project with the ALF. Without this support the project would have been unable to continue. We look forward to nurturing this mutually supportive partnership.

**Greece**

Greece has been experiencing severe economic pressure, which at a grassroots level is resulting in anxiety and despair for many. The situation is made worse through the emergence of extreme political groups that capitalise on people’s suffering and incite acts of racial hatred . The Hellenic Theatre/Drama and Education Network (TiE Net-Gr) is a professional association of teachers, arts practitioners and others who promote the practice of, and research in, theatre and the performing arts within education. In November this year they are holding a Conference in Athens, ‘Theatre and Education: bonds of solidarity.’

Questions to be explored at the Conference include:

What role is theatre/drama in education called to play in the context of the global crisis? Can it fruitfully question the current situation and suggest ways of dealing with both smaller and bigger issues in our lives?

How can theatre/drama in education be utilised to confront issues of violence, intercultural and multicultural education, democracy and civil rights?

Which specific programmes and collaborations among the arts can promote collectivity and solidarity?

These questions resonate with the activities of Indra and I am very pleased to have been invited to make a presentation at the Conference. I am particularly grateful to Betty Giannouli and Dave Pammenter in Athens who have generated interest in Indra and we look forward to having a Greek group attend the Derry Congress next year.

**The University of Alberta**

In the world of the arts we live in a bidding culture in which the dominating metaphor is linear, project based. A project has defined objectives, time span and outcomes that can be measured at the close. This is convenient for the ‘gatekeepers’ to funds, such as arts councils, foundations and cultural committees. However, much of our work in the arts and in peacebuilding is more complex, moving forward in spirals, circularity and repetition. For example, after the signing of peace accords there is, in many instances from N.Ireland, Rwanda to the Balkans, evidence of an increase in violence towards women. It may be that after the peace accord a community returns to previous, unresolved patterns of behaviour and attitude; attitudes that ironically may well have been instrumental in causing the conflict in the first place. Formal reconciliation processes may by-pass these deep rooted patterns in a relentless effort to seem to be ‘moving forward.’ Hence vulnerable people within the community feel they have ‘no voice’ and that peace agreements are made by others in big, inaccessible buildings behind closed doors.

It is our responsibility as artists to find ways to give ‘voice’, to persist in challenging rigidity of mind and the status quo. As theologian Walter Brueggemann writes:

‘Every totalitarian regime is frightened of the artist. It is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of the imagination, to keep on conjuring and proposing futures alternative to the single one the king wants to urge as the only thinkable one.’[[1]](#endnote-1)

As arts practitioners we must continually challenge and remind ourselves, ‘who do we really work for?’ The young people and communities we seek to serve, or the gatekeepers through whom we sometimes desperately seek funding for our ‘projects’?

1. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)