

- \* Charlotte Higgins
- \* The Guardian, Monday 17 April 2006
- \* Article history

The sun is setting behind a cobweb of telephone wires in Chaco Chico, a barrio in the western outskirts of Buenos Aires. A drumbeat breaks out. Three teenagers are pounding away for all they are worth, cymbals yammering over the top. One of the musicians, 16-year-old Gaston Narvaez, has painted an image of Homer Simpson sporting a Cadaver (a Norwegian extreme-metal band) T-shirt on the side of his bombo, or bass drum. The drummers are joined by rows of dancers, whose slow processional steps gradually heat up into athletic floorwork and spiralling, high-kicking leaps: it's breathtaking.

This is the murga, a Uruguayan and Argentinian street-artform that combines dance, protest song, music and intricate costumes. The dance that the 35 or so people are rehearsing now will form the finale of a piece of theatre written, sung, played and performed entirely by them. Most come from Moreno, an economically hard-pressed municipality, where unemployment is at 33%, and whose underachieving schools are the subject of news headlines. This is theatre on the front line: a means of self-expression in a context where few have a voice.

The British Council-funded project has brought together British, Brazilian and Argentinian directors, as well as 35 local participants (ranging in age from 13 to 57, but mostly in their mid-teens), under the auspices of Phakama, an exchange programme set up a decade ago by the London International Festival of Theatre. In its time Phakama has been responsible for projects in India, Africa and Britain - but this is its first incarnation in South America.

When I arrive at Defensores del Chaco, the youth community centre where the project is based, the strains of such an ambitious collaboration are showing. The team of local participants and international facilitators are nearing the end of a process in which every decision, exhaustingly, has been taken collectively. "We certainly make things hard for ourselves," says Andrew Siddall (known as Sid), one of the UK facilitators. "What I could say in three minutes takes an hour to decide."

Linguistically, it's a nightmare: none of the British speak Spanish or Portuguese; hardly any of the Argentinians speak English; the Argentinians and Brazilians can understand each other - sort of. The only person who speaks all three languages is Brazilian-born Fabio Santos, who runs the UK arm of Phakama. As such, he is the conduit for nearly every conversation, and he looks as if he would like to retreat to a darkened room and never speak again.

Even more worryingly, there's a show to put on in four days' time, and pulling together the material that the children have devised seems a long way off. Suddenly the idea of an international bunch of theatre people turning up without a script, designs, sets, lights or any preconceived idea of what they are going to do seems something of a stretch.

There's a conflict between being true to the Phakama process - whereby the children create this show themselves - and the need to deliver a performance that's going to work. Brazilian Lulu Pugliese says: "It's been a difficult day. We did manage to come up with something fantastic. But it was difficult not to shape everything ourselves, not to 'knead the dough', and allow the participants to see what the possibilities were through their eyes, not ours."

If sticking to the process is causing so much heartache, why do it, I ask Sid later. "We all have something to learn," he says. "I may have 20 years' experience of directing, but no experience of this city, this environment. I have huge amounts to gain by hearing others' voices. And for the kids, it encourages a sense of ownership in the final product. The creativity is shared equally."

This is borne out by conversations with the young Argentinian facilitators and participants. For many of them, this is not just a few weeks' diversion, but something much more profound. Seventeen-year-old Jesica Yamila Letonai, for instance, is an extraordinary young woman who - along with friends - has set up a soup kitchen in an abandoned school in her home barrio of Santa Brigida, where, she says matter-of-factly, "there is no electricity, light, gas, phones, transport or hospital". Santa Brigida is an area, she says, where many cartoneros live: a frequent sight in central Buenos Aires since the 2001 economic collapse, these are people who scrape a living collecting rubbish from the streets in handcarts and selling it on to recycling companies.

Letonai and her friends found food by knocking on the doors of houses and shops, walking miles to collect enough to feed the children in her neighbourhood. But she had always been determined that the centre should be more than a soup kitchen. "We do murga, theatre, drawing. We have a health clinic and hold a workshop around work skills for parents."

For her, Phakama offers strong practical benefits. "It will bring a lot of knowledge to our centre, about how to plan and organise an event." She's also interested in the way the project is teaching people to communicate openly. "In my barrio, violence is an issue, not just gun violence, but verbal violence. There's a lack of education, and therefore respect."

One of the trainee UK facilitators, Liberian-born Osman Bah, has also gained more than theatrical skills from Phakama. "With the things I have been through, I didn't have much confidence in communication. But working with drawing, acting, creating, I started to express myself rather than keep things inside."

The "things" that Bah has been through are almost beyond comprehension. When he was 16, he woke early one morning in his hometown in north Liberia to the sound of gunfire - a battle between Charles Taylor's government and rebel forces. He left the house to check that his father, who was setting up the family market stall, was safe. "When I got there my father had been killed. Everything was in chaos. I went home.

"There I found my mother and sister dead, too. I was taken by the soldiers and ordered to carry their loot - TVs, boxes. I spent one year and five months with them. I

fought with them. Then I was captured by Guinean forces. I spent four months in prison."

He eventually managed to trace some Guinean relatives, who smuggled him out in the back of a van to London, where for a time he lived rough in Peckham Rye station. In the future, he would like to go back to Liberia and work with young people, "to help them communicate and share ideas".

Over the next couple of days at Defensores, things go from bad to worse. Rain pounds down incessantly. The show was to have taken place in a garden next to the centre, but rehearsals would create a Glastonbury-esque sea of mud. It is decided to delay the performance by a day and restage it around Defensores.

There is a final burst of activity, and the show is nailed down: it will be a "promenade" performance with six scenes set on different sites, followed by the murga finale. The environment, pollution, the gap between rich and poor, dreams and the imagination are among the subjects that the children have chosen to tackle. Costumes and scenery are finished off - including a giant pachumama (mother earth) and a huge sinister puppet made of rubbish and old drinks bottles that will rise up and threaten to engulf her.

Incredibly, the day of the performance is hot and sunny. There is a sense that everyone involved with the project has changed a little over the past weeks. According to facilitator Debora Landim, director of a children's theatre in Salvador, Brazil: "The core of all this is the people making the art - that is the young people. If they are distant from the words, the theatre, the songs, then it doesn't work." Today, though, it does.

- o Lyn Gardner
- o guardian.co.uk, Monday 5 July 1999 00.00 BST
- o Article history

Phakama: Be Yourself \*\*\*\* Tricycle Theatre

If I tell you that one of the most moving, exuberant and visually stunning shows seen in London is a youth production devised and performed by a group of South African and London teenagers, you will probably be sceptical.

But Be Yourself really is terrific, the kind of evening that ends with you finding yourself joining a conga winding through and out of the theatre. It embraces Stephen Lawrence, and makes connections between the experience of 18-year-olds in South Africa and their counterparts in London. It is like one of the airline maps in which you see lines interconnecting all across the world.

It is also most specifically about the city. Our city. To begin with it looks like a village, with miniature tin foil covered buildings. Suddenly you realise that all the landmarks are there: Canary Wharf winking at you blindly. Then you realise you are seeing the city as if for the first time, through a stranger's eyes, fresh and new-minted, and woven into it the rivers of South Africa as well as the cockney chimes of Maybe it's Because I'm a Londoner: it gives an outsider's and an insider's view of London.

If the content is interesting and sometimes slippery, so too is the form of the piece. At one point, after the cast have given their individual responses to the murder of Stephen Lawrence, they come round with bowls of water and offer to wash the audience's hands. The washing away of guilt? Or a kind of atonement? Pontius Pilot or Mary Magdalene?

The production uses the full height of the auditorium and repeatedly takes the show into the audience: you feel as though you have been thrust into the very heart of the city, into its smells, sounds and sights.

It is an exhilarating and truly remarkable achievement.