

# SCENE

ISSUE 03

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Global Learning  
Through Theatre  
and the Arts



COMMUNITIES

ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

AGENCY

SUSTAINABILITY

SOCIAL JUSTICE

RESPONSIBILITY

ACTION

COLLABORATION

ART

ACTIVISM

EXPERIMENTATION

# Making space for community, onstage and off

# Editor's Note

Helen Abbott,  
Editor



**What connects a folk theatre stage in North India, a rehearsal room in Leeds, a puppetry experiment in Hanoi, and a quiet tatami room in London? At first glance, perhaps very little. Yet as this issue of SCENE unfolds, a shared theme emerges: making space for community onstage and off.**

Our contributors remind us that theatre and the related arts are not only aesthetic practices but living, breathing forces that shape how we see ourselves and one another. From Nautanki's blend of humour, activism, and audience participation, to Tara Theatre's unapologetically political productions, the stage becomes a site where art and social justice cannot be separated. The Campfire Project extends this further, showing how creative expression can become a lifeline for displaced communities worldwide.

Questions of sustainability and responsibility reverberate throughout. The Theatre Green Book asks us to imagine theatre as action. Where every production decision, from set building to energy use, carries weight in a time of environmental crisis. Smoking Apples Theatre's *Three* reflects on the cycles of life and the delicate negotiation of agency, both human and artistic, reminding us that what we create is shaped as much by circumstance as by intention.

And then there are the stories of making. Messy, inventive, surprising, and collaborative. A car that had to be sawn into four pieces for *Grease*. Students transforming Zhuge Liang's memorial text into memes and short films. Puppeteers riding bicycles to bring giants to life. These stories highlight theatre as a place of ingenuity, resilience, and joy.

Throughout all the articles runs a current of experimentation inspired by and grounded in care.

Welcome to this issue of SCENE, I hope you enjoy it and perhaps find new ways of making space for your community, onstage and off.

Warm regards,

*Helen Abbott*

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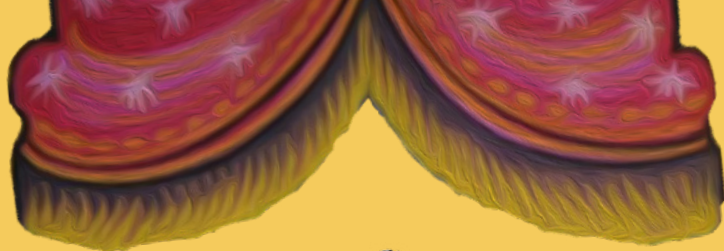
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The



# VIBRANT WORLD of NATANKI

नौटंकी की रोमांचक दुनिया



Nautanki is a vibrant folk theatre tradition from North India, deeply rooted in rural entertainment. Combining storytelling, music, dance, and humour, Nautanki captivates audiences with tales of love, bravery, and social change. Its enduring appeal lies in its ability to reflect both cultural heritage and contemporary societal issues. More than performance, it mirrors society — a living art form balancing tradition and modernity.

By Neha Choksy and Saket Raje

# नौटंकी की रोमांचक दुनिया



## Origins of Nautanki

Nautanki traces its origins to the 16th century, in regions now known as Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Haryana. It is believed to have developed from 'Svang' an earlier form that fused music, dance, and acting. The name Nautanki likely derives from a popular play, *Shehzadi Nautanki*, which left such an impression that it lent its title to this theatre tradition.

Performances were initially staged in village squares and community spaces, making them highly accessible. With minimal props and costumes, performances relied on the performers' charisma and strong narrative. The harmonium, *dholak*, tabla, and *nagara* played a vital role in setting the tempo and enhancing the emotional tone of the performance. Over time, Nautanki expanded to incorporate real-life stories, mythologies, and public-service messages, becoming a community forum for collective education and reflection.



## Themes and Storytelling

Storytelling forms the heart of Nautanki. Its thematic range spans mythological epics, historical sagas, romantic tales, and contemporary concerns. The *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are reinterpreted to reinforce moral values, family ties, and triumph of good over evil. Folk love stories like *Laila-Majnu* and *Heer-Ranjha* explore passion and fate, while stories of historical figures such as Rani Lakshmibai and Maharana Pratap instil cultural pride.

These narratives are designed to resonate emotionally with audiences, drawing them into the story's moral dilemmas and emotional journeys. Using hyperbole and melodrama, Nautanki invites audiences to feel and participate. In recent times, Nautanki has become a voice for modern societal issues — women's empowerment, caste discrimination, domestic violence, labour rights — proving its craft to provoke thought and inspire action, and serving as both artistic expression and civic dialogue.

## Theatrical Foundations

Nautanki draws from classical Indian performance principles, especially the *Natya Shastra*. Movement is expressive and symbolic — broad gestures, exaggerated walks, and choreographed action scenes are essential elements of *angikabhinaya* or expression through the body that conveys emotion as much as dialogue.

Performers rely on *vachikabhinaya* (vocal expression), often shifting between speech and song, and *angikabhinaya*, while also adapting their performance to the mood of the crowd. Spontaneity isn't just encouraged — it's essential. Performers must respond to the audience's mood and reactions. This blend of structure and improvisation keeps Nautanki alive, shifting between script and spontaneity.



Make-up plays a vital role in amplifying expression, especially in open-air venues. Bold eyeliner, vibrant colours, and face paint help convey emotion and archetype from a distance. Traditional Nautanki was performed on portable wooden platforms with minimal staging. Even minimal staging becomes a canvas for imagination — audiences readily accept that a scarf is a river, or that a step forward is a journey through time.



## Production elements

Costumes and make-up in Nautanki are both functional and symbolic. Characters are defined by their attire — heroes in regal kurtas and turbans, heroines in brightly coloured saris or *lehengas*, villains in flamboyant or dark costumes. Colour choices align with the emotions or *rasas* they represent — red for love, white for purity, and black for evil — helping audiences instantly recognise character types and moral alignments.

Lighting and sound now enhance performances without compromising symbolic essence. This adaptability has allowed Nautanki to retain its authenticity while embracing modern tools for storytelling.

Music is the lifeblood of Nautanki. Instruments such as the harmonium, dholak, tabla, and nagara are still used to create rhythm and enhance emotional impact. The nagara, in particular, is often used to mark dramatic entrances and high points. Songs — whether in *doha* (couplets) or *chhand* (metered verse) — are more than interludes; they carry the story forward, adding poetry and depth to the narrative arc.

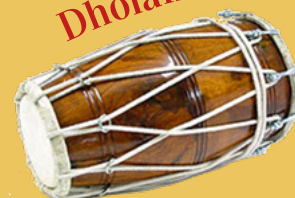
Harmonium



Nagara



Dholak



## Emotional experience: Rasa and bhava

At the core of Nautanki is the evocation of *rasa*, the aesthetic experience or emotional flavour of the performance. Characters are designed to evoke specific *bhavas* (emotions), whether it is love, courage, humour or pathos. The hero (Nayak), heroine (Nayika), villain (Khalnayak), and clown (Vidushak) are constructed to represent emotional archetypes that contribute to the overall emotional journey.

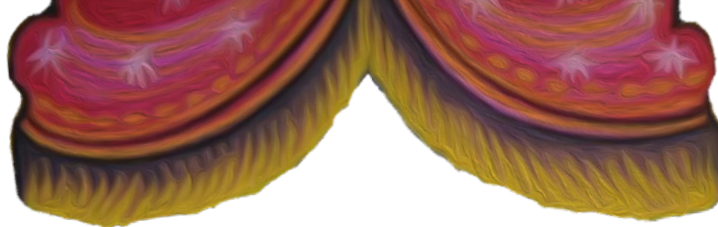
Nautanki weaves together all four forms of *abhinaya* (expression) — *angika* (body), *vachika* (voice), *aharya* (appearance), *sattvika* (inner emotion) — to create a holistic theatrical experience. *Sattvika* *abhinaya*, in particular, allows actors to convey inner emotions through subtle facial changes and breath control. Nautanki succeeds by stirring deep emotion, often resulting in collective catharsis or reflection.

## Character archetypes and actor techniques

Audiences come to Nautanki expecting certain familiar figures. The hero is righteous and brave; the heroine is resilient and emotive. The villain's exaggerated gestures and menacing laugh signal trouble ahead, while the clown — often a master of satire — uses wit and slapstick to bridge the world of the play and the world of the audience. Other characters, like the sage or the courtesan, provide wisdom or intrigue and often serve as catalysts for the plot.

Actors train to master traditional expressions and movements, and to remain adaptable in live performance contexts. The ability to engage an audience directly, sometimes shifting the mood of the scene through spontaneous humour or emotion, is a key skill in Nautanki performance. Actors train through apprenticeships and community mentoring, developing their craft within the cultural context. This keeps Nautanki a living, evolving tradition.





## Interview with theatre practitioner Atul Yadvanshi

Mr Atul Yadvanshi, founder and Artistic Director of Swarg Repertory, is a passionate advocate for Nautanki. His work spans performance, pedagogy, and innovation — reviving Nautanki on national platforms like Bharat Rang Mahotsav, while staying true to its grassroots spirit.

In conversation, Yadvanshi describes Nautanki as *'a living, breathing celebration of culture'*. Citing a *shloka* from the *Natyashastra*, he emphasises that true drama reflects *lok* — the world of everyday life. For him, Nautanki is not *'just folk theatre'* — it is a modern, evolving theatrical form deeply grounded in lived experience, emerging as a vital and dynamic expression of Indian theatre: vibrant, relevant, and continually evolving with the times.

***'Nautanki blends story, music, and audience participation'*** — a living, breathing celebration of culture. Unlike conventional proscenium theatre, where the audience watches passively, Nautanki invites viewers into the action. Making every performance a shared experience where stories, songs, and emotions circulate freely between stage and crowd.

According to Yadvanshi, Nautanki's magic lies in its endless adaptability. Different *gharanas* bring distinct styles — *hathras* with classical *ragas*, *kanpur* with rhythm and humour. ***'Today's performances often fuse these styles'***, he notes, ***'catering to audiences who crave both tradition and contemporary energy'***. This clever blending keeps the art form dynamic and relevant, allowing it to evolve while remaining firmly anchored to its roots.

Social commentary, he says, is intrinsic to Nautanki's power. Productions like *Phoolan Se Phool Tak* reframe the story of the Bandit Queen, using music and satire to spark conversations about gender justice. ***'People began to think even as they laughed'***, he reflects. In Nautanki, entertainment and activism dance together on the same stage.

## Interview link:

▶ [www.youtube.com/@atulyadvanshi6191](https://www.youtube.com/@atulyadvanshi6191)

Improvisation, Yadvanshi explains, is the heartbeat of Nautanki. While actors follow a fixed *rekha* or storyline, they freely weave in *rang* comic episodes, witty proverbs, and spontaneous lines. Performers are trained with a simple yet thrilling five-second rule — insert your improvisation, but return to the script within five seconds. Every show becomes a little different.

Language in Nautanki is another vibrant tool of expression. ***'If you want to make a joke, use Khadi Boli. If it's a love song, use Braj Bhasha. If you need poetry, use Urdu'***, Yadvanshi explains. Even without full understanding, rhythm and emotion bridge the gap. In this way, Nautanki defends linguistic diversity — scripts often include margin notes for dialect fidelity, and native speakers help preserve accuracy.

In some communities, audience participation is literally part of the structure. During rehearsals, senior audience members are handed red flags; if a scene drags, they raise a flag, prompting actors to inject energy or add a comic twist. This playful co-authorship keeps the performance grounded in its social context.

Visually, Nautanki is evolving too. Inspired by Japanese Kabuki, some performers now use bold face paint — white bases, black outlines — to accentuate villainy or mystique. But, as Yadvanshi stresses, ***adaptations are welcome only so long as 'the soul remains Nautanki'***. The heart of the performance must remain rooted in tradition, even as its surface evolves.

Looking ahead, he envisions a ***'phygital'*** future — a fusion of physical presence and digital storytelling. With teaser trailers, virtual reality backdrops, and subtitled performances, Nautanki can now reach younger audiences without losing its roots. ***'It evolves'***, he says, ***'but it never lets go of its beating heart'***.



## Conclusion:

A world theatre tradition that moves us

**Nautanki preserves memory while enabling dialogue, critique, and transformation. In a world of fleeting trends, Nautanki reminds us of the joy of shared storytelling, the strength of community voice, and the enduring power of the stage.**

## Videos for further study

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**Nautanki - A Short Introduction**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OwDYtbVYDS4>
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**Nautanki Culture of Uttar Pradesh** [www.youtube.com/watch?v=p9wx8HaxmG0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p9wx8HaxmG0)
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**NSD 1st Year Students Theatre Music Class - Nautanki**  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=rV9bFVlyI3g](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rV9bFVlyI3g)

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By Gavin Joseph

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# R C H of

A South Asian artist's path to

**TARA X THEATRE**

# G ing

*As a British South Asian man with a love for theatre and the arts, finding my community was something I was in constant search of. Going from organisation to organisation, working across a multitude of different roles, all the work felt like something adjacent to the real thing I wanted and felt strongly about — community and a deep desire to see and work with more people like me onstage and behind the scenes. I remember the moments I was reminded that I wasn't the only one experiencing this feeling — conversations with other brown artists ruminating on our place within the theatre ecology and how lonely it all felt.*

*Ultimately, there was a deep feeling of separation. I would often find solace in other communities who had a shared goal and an unbridled service towards their artistic community. Despite my feelings of joy and happiness at being adjacent to these groups, these feelings would inevitably descend into melancholy as I asked, 'Where is my community?'.*



An internet search for 'British South Asians in theatre' would consequently lead me down a rabbit hole of rich reading material in which a cascade of different figures, names, and organisations would sate my desire to see more people like me in the theatre space. Trawling through this incredible history I found one organisation popping up more than the rest, and thus marked the beginning of my relationship with Tara Theatre.



Born out of the racial tensions of the 1970s, after the death of 17-year-old Gurdip Singh Chaggar, Tara

Theatre rose as a direct response to the treatment of South Asian people in the UK. Its identity was inherently political and radical, with its modus operandi of platforming

South Asian creatives to share stories through a South Asian lens. Since its founding it has been a hallowed place for South Asians to congregate, serving as one of the primary outlets for our creative voice. It was, and continues to be, a place of community, artist development, and thought-provoking work. Its legacy and impact cannot be understated. Speak to any British South Asian creative over the age of 25, and they will have a story about Tara or at least know people who have.

Image: Tara Theatre



It seemed like my little internet search had led me to a place that has been called home by a myriad of brown artists before me who had asked the same questions and dared to tread the same path. My direct engagement with Tara would, however, be delayed by several years and would remain a mystical Shangri-la in the meantime. After pinballing through a series of assisting jobs, associate work, and facilitation, I was offered the chance to direct a show that was about the Indigo revolts — an 1859 peasant uprising in India, where indigo farmers rebelled against British indigo planters. From this opportunity I got the chance to work with people who looked like me, people who shared a love of the arts and desired the same things as I did. The feeling was electric. I had found my tribe and was filled with a renewed sense of optimism, but just as lady luck was inclining her head in my

direction, the contract finished and I was greeted by my old friend unemployment. Days to weeks to months of falling into an endless abyss of uncertainty and anxiety, praying and hoping for something to catch me, and ... it eventually did. A successful application and two successful interviews later, I found myself as the associate director of a company that promised to give me everything I had been searching for. I was now part of a rich tapestry of creatives who were there to uplift and empower South Asian artists and the wider community, and this is when the real work began.

From the outset, it was clear that everyone in the building was centred around the same cause — platforming and developing South Asian artists, fostering community, and developing young emerging global majority artists through the Tara Young Company — and impassioned in their drive to achieve it.

Politics is intimately woven into the fabric of all the work that goes on at Tara Theatre. Nothing can be superfluous, everything needs to be intentional and have a clear message. Whether it is responding to the genocide in Gaza or the dichotomy of political acculturation versus cultural heritage and identity, Tara dares to raise awareness and galvanise change amidst a theatre landscape that often feels politically neutral. There is something extremely gratifying about this; it makes the work more meaningful in my eyes. A Tara Theatre show is unapologetically political and is unrepentant in its pursuit of social justice, and this was most recently reflected by our Young Company show *A Practical Guide on How to Save the World When No One F\*\*\*ing Else Is* — great title, I know.

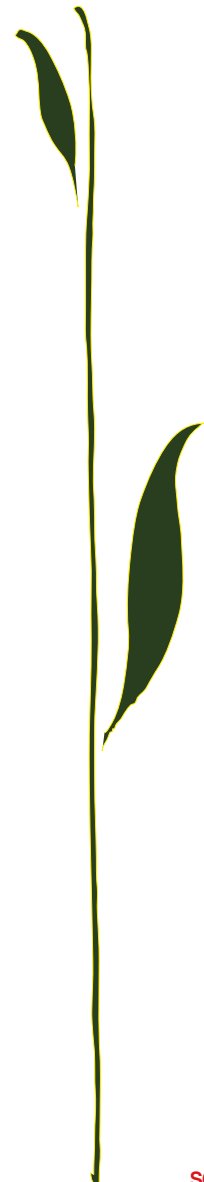
For this show, we started with the weighty provocation of how the climate emergency has disproportionately affected those from the Global South. As a company and ensemble with roots in the Global South, this was a significant question that led to many more. Conversations surrounding climate colonialism, ecoterrorism, and Western apathy were brilliantly held by the Young Company over several weeks. Their valuable insights

were then woven together by our absolute superstar writer, Nicole Latchana, to form the basis of the show. When I joined the devising/rehearsal process during this time I was reminded how much collaboration and empathy are key. Rehearsals and technical rehearsal can often feel like pressure cooker environments, especially when it feels like there's not nearly enough time to get everything done. As someone who is process led, creating a calm, relaxing, and playful environment is the basis of everything I do in the room. I've found that when the process of care and empathy is centred, people become the most creative and collaborative versions of themselves, and the end product will reflect that.

**When I think about the show we ended up with, I'm reminded of why theatre is so powerful when it has a political intention behind it.**

I didn't particularly care strongly about the climate emergency before the show, even though I was the one directing, but through the devising process and working with a group of incredibly talented young people who were passionate about social justice and equity, I found myself caring a whole lot more. And that's the beauty of it — the fact that some stranger can stumble upon a tiny, 100-seat capacity venue in Earlsfield, London to watch a show about the climate emergency and leave with a glint in their eye and a deeper desire to change the world.

My journey with Tara is already proving to be a profound one. I feel grateful to be part of this mission in amplifying and celebrating South Asian art, whilst also highlighting and addressing some of the biggest political issues of our times. As a British South Asian artist, it almost feels like a rite of passage to pass through Tara Theatre's halls. It feels nice to be of service to something bigger than yourself, to aim towards a collective goal that sometimes feels so distant and impossible to reach. All I know is that if I never manage to reach the destination, the journey towards it has at least given me all those things I was searching for.



# Theatre Green Book

By Laura Sedgwick



Images: Flaticon.com

Theatre and live performance hold a unique place in the way they engage with their audience, making us think about the world we live in, and engaging us with our environment and context.

**There is increasingly a call<sup>1</sup> for the cultural and artistic sector to take up the mantle from scientists, to help society explore and imagine how to tackle the most urgent threat faced by humanity – climate and ecological crisis.**

To do this, there are many conversations and resources available on climate playwriting, climate dramaturgy, and ecoscenography, including those created by HighTide<sup>2</sup> and academic Zoë Svendsen, and by Ecostage<sup>3</sup>.

However, if theatre is going to take itself seriously in exploring the climate crisis and humanity's responsibility to nature, it needs to make sure that the work itself impacts as little as possible on the planet. This is the starting point for Theatre Green Book, an international initiative started in the UK providing tools, trackers, guidance, and a shared language for the theatre sector to practically make changes to reduce its resource and energy use. Theatre Green Book guidance is all free to use and has been brought together by the sector, to be used at all scales, and continues to be updated with new toolkits and best practice.

Theatre Green Book guidance is divided into three areas — 'Productions', 'Operations', 'Buildings' — and offers tools for planning and change-making in each area, along with free training webinars, videos on how to get started, and the opportunity for organisations of all sizes to sign up and self-certify their progress. This allows organisations to track their progress through basic, intermediate, and advanced levels, and celebrate milestones and achievements with colleagues, funders, and audiences.

**With 69% of Society of London Theatre/UK Theatre members using Theatre Green Book, real change is starting to happen. Most large, publicly funded UK-based organisations are using it, including the National Theatre, Royal Shakespeare Company, Headlong, the Lowry, National Theatre of Scotland, Chichester Festival Theatre, Opera North, Northern Stage, Royal Ballet and Opera, Young Vic, English National Ballet, and Wales Millennium Centre.**



Internationally, there are already twelve translations (Czech, Danish, Dutch, Finnish, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Spanish, and Swedish) and two further adaptations (for Ireland and the European Theatre Convention). There are

international networks growing all the time, with opportunities for shared learning across countries and joint projects. Whilst Theatre Green Book is

mostly used by the theatre, dance, opera, live performance, and outdoor arts sector, it is also used by cultural organisations of all kinds, especially in the 'Operations' and 'Buildings' areas.

A key element of Theatre Green Book is the recognition that all roles involved in the making of a production, or the running of a venue, have a key part to play. At the production planning stage, a production manager, set builder or technical team is key to deciding what items are bought, what ends up on stage, and how it is disposed of afterwards. But by the build stage, it is often too late to make a truly sustainably responsible show. This is why creative teams are vital, with writers, directors, and designers carefully considering the work they plan to make and using their creativity to find solutions, and producers empowering and supporting them to do so. In a building, the head of facilities or operations might be the one making big decisions around capital projects and energy purchasing, but the front-of-house staff have a key role to play in how audiences experience the venue and are made aware of the brilliant sustainability work being done.

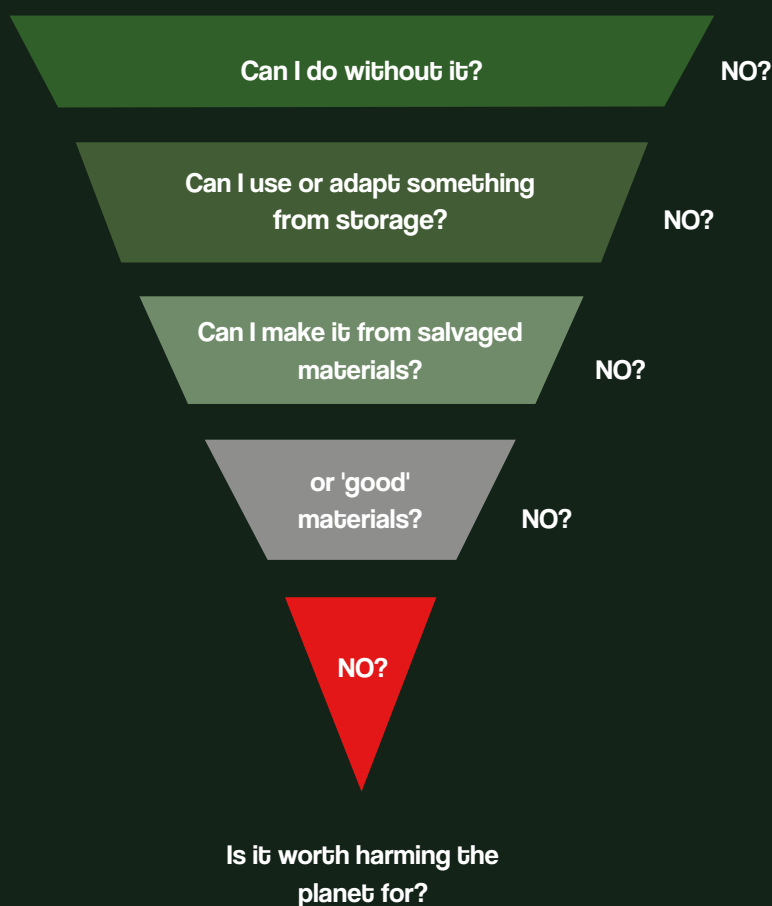
There is a huge sense of momentum and potential. So many theatre-makers are bringing their passion, skills, creativity, and collaboration to the problem of making the industry greener. One of the sector's many strengths is collaboration, both between organisations but especially between its workers. With freelancers making up 70% of the UK theatre sector, they play a critical role moving between organisations, taking their expertise with them. This strength has been vital to the development of Theatre Green Book: larger organisations can share their resources, while smaller organisations and individuals offer nimble and innovative practices.

A myriad of UK-based case studies on the Theatre Green Book website show the work already being done, from Headlong's recent tour of *A Raisin in the Sun*<sup>4</sup> by Lorraine Hansberry, to Oxford Playhouse's work reducing their energy use purely through 'quick wins'<sup>5</sup>.

**The future of theatre is dependent on future audiences, and research shows they want cultural organisations to take a leadership role in tackling climate change. The recent results of the Act Green 2024 survey by Indigo<sup>6</sup> show that audiences really care about the climate crisis, and want to know what the cultural events and venues they attend are doing in the face of it – with 72% saying they think cultural organisations have a responsibility to influence society about the climate emergency.**

There is a powerful idea that ‘all plays are climate plays’. It asks us to begin to see that all stories told on stage, from Shakespeare to stand-up comedy, have elements of how we as humans interact with our environment, and that it’s therefore vital that we carefully consider the stories we tell onstage, but also how we behave, create and produce off-stage. It’s not always an easy process, but progress is already being made, and theatre as a sector will continue to play a key role in how we respond to the climate and ecological crisis.

Visit [www.theatregreenbook.com](http://www.theatregreenbook.com) to find out more about the resources available and to sign up.



<sup>1</sup>See: *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* by Amitav Ghosh; *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* by Naomi Klein; and *Too Hot to Handle?: The Democratic Challenge of Climate Change* by Rebecca Willis

<sup>2</sup>[www.hightide.org.uk/climate-dramaturgy](http://www.hightide.org.uk/climate-dramaturgy)

<sup>3</sup>[www.ecostage.online](http://www.ecostage.online)

<sup>4</sup>[www.theatregreenbook.com/sustainable-productions-case-studies](http://www.theatregreenbook.com/sustainable-productions-case-studies)

<sup>5</sup>[www.theatregreenbook.com/sustainable-buildings-case-studies](http://www.theatregreenbook.com/sustainable-buildings-case-studies)

<sup>6</sup>[www.indigo-ltd.com/resources/act-green-2024-report](http://www.indigo-ltd.com/resources/act-green-2024-report)

Image: Campfire Moldova

# Meeting the challenge of our time

By Jessica Hecht and  
Alexandra Zaslav,  
The Campfire Project

**At The Campfire Project, we believe that implementing culturally responsive, trauma-informed therapeutic arts programmes, with displaced populations, can improve emotional regulation, strengthen self-efficacy, and foster social connection – supporting improved mental health, and more effective and dignified resettlement and integration.**





MORE THAN

117.3

MILLION

people are currently  
forcibly displaced  
around the world.



In addition to lacking basic needs, displaced people face complex trauma from pre-migration experiences, dangerous journeys, and post-migration stressors including cultural displacement, language barriers, economic insecurity, and social isolation. Traditional mental health services often fail to address these multilayered needs due to cultural barriers, stigma, and limited accessibility. Research has identified a need for psychosocial support that meets the cultural and practical preferences of refugees and

asylum seekers, including peer support, group support, and alternative therapeutic interventions. Creative arts therapies offer culturally adaptive approaches to healing that can transcend barriers and honour diverse backgrounds. *'Artistic expression is an indicator of and a contributor to vibrant, resilient and healthy societies. Therefore, investment in the arts means investment in the well-being and social cohesion of both forcibly displaced people and their host communities.'*  
**World Health Organization**

Campfire's programming is developed and co-led by a team of mental health professionals, artists, and creative arts therapists, engaging diverse artistic practices — drama, dance, music, art, writing, and stilt-walking — to empower refugees and asylum seekers to explore their creativity and foster their resilience.



Image: Campfire Moldova

# Our Story

*'We live in a society...where we have decentred our capacity to care for each other in our most difficult times...And we need to start thinking about how we put health back into people's hands.'* Dr. Nisha Sajnani, Director of New York University's Graduate Program in Drama Therapy, Co-Director of the Jameel Arts & Health Lab, and The Campfire Project's Arts Therapy Director

The Campfire Project was initiated on the values of shared humanity and an ethic of action. Founded in 2017 by actress Jessica Hecht, the first team of 'campers' (Campfire volunteers) arrived in Greece in 2017, at the peak of the Syrian refugee crisis. Driven by the urgent need for psychosocial support in refugee spaces, Campfire launched missions to camps serving displaced communities from across the globe. The profound impact of these programmes abroad, combined with the pressing need for support among the rapidly growing newcomer communities in New York City (NYC), launched a new chapter in Campfire's story. In July 2024, Campfire grew from an annual project to a year-round nonprofit servicing both newcomers across NYC and international communities displaced by humanitarian crises.

# What does our programming look like?

**The Campfire Project curates two types of direct service programming.**

## 1) International programming:

Providing forcibly displaced people in global settings with an annual intensive framework of therapeutic arts programming. This includes daily programming for 2–3 weeks, servicing 200–500 participants, and culminating in an experience with the broader community. With each international mission, we partner with a humanitarian aid organisation, as well as local community members already engaging in the humanitarian crisis at hand. We also recognise the importance of longevity for fostering deeper impact, and therefore dedicate time during each mission to training local staff in therapeutic arts approaches and facilitating continued artistic programming in the camps after the culmination of the mission.

## 2) NYC programming:

Therapeutic arts offerings ranging from artistic intensives, to year-long support groups, to in-school programming, servicing NYC-based newcomer communities — refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants — across diverse cultural backgrounds. We partner with local social service organisations to make sure we reach those most in need. We also strive to increase opportunities for integration between new New Yorkers and existing local residents, cultivating greater empathy towards the migration experience.

**In addition to direct service programming, The Campfire Project engages in the following.**

## 3) Research:

Partnering with universities and international bodies, such as the United Nations (UN), to develop and inform research that advances the broader field of arts in humanitarian response.

## 4) Awareness-building:

Curating performances, exhibitions, and screenings that engage the broader community in positive discourse around migration themes.

## 5) Capacity-building:

Providing opportunities for self-care and training in integrating arts-based approaches to individuals who regularly service displaced and newcomer communities (i.e. translators, lawyers, case workers, educators).



Image: Campfire Uganda

# The power of sharing

The Campfire Project culminates all of our programming in a final shared experience — whether it is a full-scale performance or simply sharing a final project, this is an opportunity to ritualise a collective experience of joy and celebration.

The role of a culminating shared experience for participants and community members is to:

CURATE A SYMBOLIC PLATFORM  
FOR COLLECTIVE MEANING-MAKING

CREATE EMBODIED EXPERIENCES  
THAT HELP OBSERVE AND  
TRANSITION CHANGE

## Measuring our impact

From 2017–2025, The Campfire Project led 12 international missions working in refugee camps in Greece, Moldova, and Uganda engaging 1000+ displaced persons from across the Middle East, Africa, and Ukraine. And since 2024, we have engaged 100+ NYC-based asylum seekers (children, youth, and adults from South and Central America, West Africa, and Afghanistan) in 200 hours of therapeutic arts programming.

The Campfire Project also produced multiple artistic initiatives created and performed by our participants, including a public performance (of original writing, music, and dance), a short-film, and recordings of three original songs.

Evaluation data has measured the impact of programming on participants, demonstrating that Campfire programming significantly reduces isolation and cultivates a sense of community for participants, leads to new friendships,

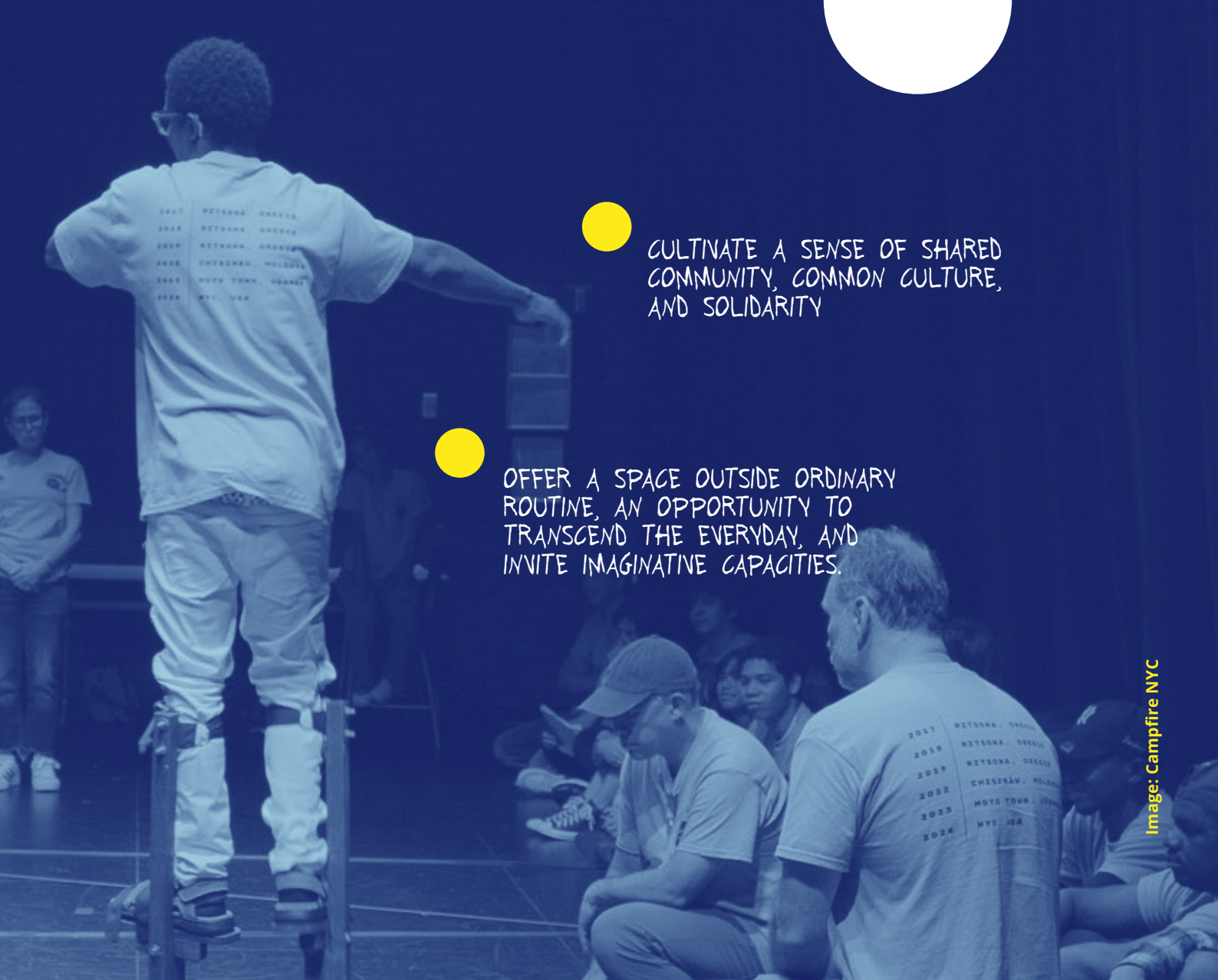


Image: Campfire NYC

CULTIVATE A SENSE OF SHARED COMMUNITY, COMMON CULTURE, AND SOLIDARITY

OFFER A SPACE OUTSIDE ORDINARY ROUTINE, AN OPPORTUNITY TO TRANSCEND THE EVERYDAY, AND INVITE IMAGINATIVE CAPACITIES.

provides needed space to explore creativity, improves mood and supports emotional processing, increases participants' belief that they can succeed in new endeavours, and generates a greater sense of belonging to the NYC community.

*'Being part of The Campfire Project means being part of a family, one that works together, grows together, and uplifts each other. The Campfire Project has given us the support, guidance, and opportunities we need to do*

*what we aspire to. It has accompanied us on our journey, listened to us, and stood by us. Thank you, Campfire Project, for being a source of strength, inspiration, and hope.'*

Cellou, participant in Campfire's support group for asylum seekers from West Africa

# What's next?

The Campfire Project launched its 2025–2026 programming year with two exciting new initiatives.

- NYC artistic intensive engaging displaced young adults from West Africa, and South and Central America, in collaboration with artist and musician, Laurie Anderson
- Collaboration with the UN human rights migration initiative 'Small Wings, Big Impact', including projects in both NYC and Uganda (currently in development)

The past year has been an exceptionally challenging time for displaced communities residing in the USA, full of increasing fear and unknowns. At The Campfire Project we recognise that now, more than ever, is the time to take compassionate action, expand our work, and increase our reach. Reflecting on her migration journey, one of our NYC participants shared with us:

'I'M DOING THIS BECAUSE I WANT A BETTER FUTURE ... WE'VE GOT THE SAME DREAMS AS YOU GUYS. WE ALSO WANT TO HAVE THAT OPPORTUNITY ... DON'T CLOSE YOUR EYES TO THAT BECAUSE WE ARE REAL, AND WE ARE HERE.'

Let us all heed her call, open our eyes wide, and recentre our capacity for care.

If you would like to learn more about The Campfire Project's work you can visit our website at: [www.campfire-project.org/](http://www.campfire-project.org/) or can support our mission by going to: [givebutter.com/campfire-project-inc.](http://givebutter.com/campfire-project-inc.)



# PAPER, TALE, NOTS,

and other noble things

By Madalena Parreira

AS I LIFTED THE 1948 FORD DELUXE CONVERTIBLE, IT HIT ME — THE CAR WOULDN'T FIT THROUGH THE DOOR. I WAS GOING TO HAVE TO CHOP IT UP.



Figure 1 Car prop for *Grease* being painted in sections inside a junior school classroom, United Nations International School (UNIS), New York, 2019



Figure 2 The 1948 Ford Deluxe assembled onstage, UNIS, New York, 2019

I dropped the life-size automobile I built for *Grease* in the middle of a freezing school patio and went back inside to reheat the glue gun. I spent the next few hours cutting through polystyrene in the depths of a New York winter. Later, I would have to face the director and choreographer to explain that the car now existed in four pieces — and could only be assembled live, onstage, in front of the audience, in the middle of a song.

It was a humbling experience, especially considering the months I'd spent planning everything so I could build the car in just one week. I thought to myself, 'A professional would never let this happen'.



Figure 4 Etching and aquatint on copper, 2018

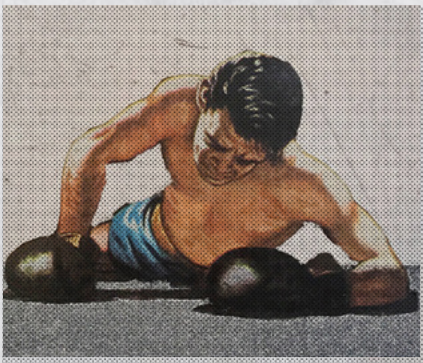


Figure 3 Aquatint and chiné-collé on copper, 2017

WHEN I  
BECAME  
AN INTER-  
NATION-  
AL SCHOOL  
TEACHER, I  
EXPANDED  
INTO NEW  
MEDIA

Many years before this incident, I began my artistic training as a drawing student at an independent art school in Lisbon called Ar.Co (Centro de Arte e Comunicação Visual). I was fortunate to learn from extraordinary teachers in a practice-based teaching environment where, on the one hand, resources were scarce, but on the other, bureaucracy was also minimal. Eventually, I became a printmaker. I completed my studies at Camberwell College in London, on the advice of my printmaking teacher, Bartolomeu Cid dos Santos. At the time, I worked primarily with copper, often on a large scale. Each piece required extensive planning. Copper is an unforgiving semi-precious metal — a mistake on an etching is permanent. It either ruins the work or adds something new to it.

When I became an international school teacher, I expanded into new media — photography, sculpture, ceramics, painting, video editing — to meet the demands of a middle and high school curriculum. I was excited to explore all these new processes. Still, I held on to my identity as a printmaker. I kept a strict divide between my life as an artist and my life as a teacher. In fact, I paused my own creative work for several years to focus solely on teaching.



Figure 7 Gazelle for Lion King, UNIS, New York, 2015

THEATRE SOON  
BECAME THE  
MOST EXCITING  
AND DEMANDING  
PART OF MY  
ARTISTIC LIFE.

My first school theatre project was *His Dark Materials*, based on Philip Pullman's trilogy. The director invited me to create 'daemons' — animals that talk, glow mysteriously, and range in size from insects to bears. I wasn't chosen because of my prior experience; I was simply one of the art teachers who was available. To create these puppets I used polypropylene sheets because of the material's inherent qualities, especially when lit in a certain way — polypropylene can be transparent, metallic, and iridescent. It is hard to glue so I used staples and basic origamic techniques. Later I used the same method to create hundreds of animal props for *The Lion King*.



**Figure 8 Backdrop for Annie, felt cutouts on muslin, St. Julian's, Lisbon, 2025**

Theatre soon became the most exciting and demanding part of my artistic life. Designing sets, props, and costumes is difficult. It requires translating someone else's story, script, and vision into a physical space. And when you're the one who is also building the set, limitations of scale, strength, and budget quickly shape your design choices. These material constraints became the foundation of more creative and compelling work.

The collaborative and interdisciplinary world of school theatre has not only shaped my work, it has gradually and profoundly transformed the way I see it. Teaching, drawing, printing, working on designs and installations, collaborating with other artists, are all part of the same practice, which defies categorisation. I no longer maintain an internal distinction between being an artist and being a teacher.

I have used the experience of building sets as a starting point to teach drawing, printmaking, illustration, mixed media and book arts. I have also incorporated work for the stage into printmaking — in a literal sense — by inking props such as masks or costumes and squashing them through an intaglio press to make a print.



**Figure 20 Rat au Vin - inspired on Blackadder's "Rat au Van" - glazed stoneware, The Hunchback Society, 2023**



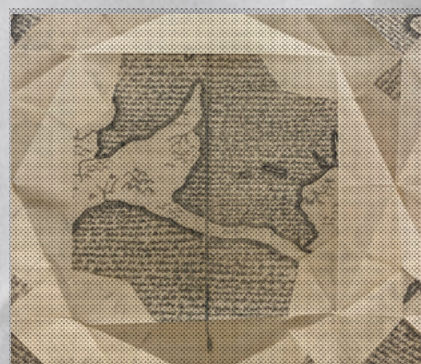
**Figure 14 Collograph made from a small paper dress 2016**

During the pandemic the enforced lockdown left me in a very difficult situation, with no access to the studio, the press or any of the printing equipment. I was back at Ar.Co teaching printmaking and it was impossible to do so online. This serious restriction forced all of us artists/teachers to reinvent ourselves in order to still have something to offer our students. Building model sets in reusable plastic food containers was one of the memorable projects of that time and led to further explorations with origami folds applied to printmaking and collage.

More recently I began a new collective in ceramics — The Hunchback Society — with artist Jorge Nesbitt. We produce works influenced by narrative and storytelling. We are particularly interested in humour or contradiction. Theatre and film are a great source of inspiration for this work.

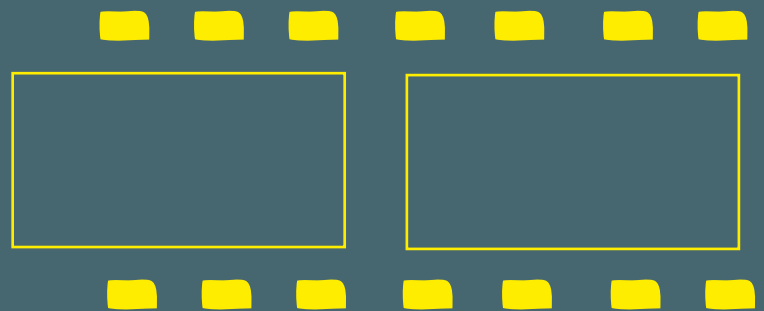
Each new project arises from a desire to make something impossible happen. It can be a community experience, such as a school play or a collective exhibition. Solutions such as folding polypropylene into creatures, transforming mops and toilet brushes into coral reefs, and studying lighting effects with reusable plastic food containers are the result of a game between intention and improvisation.

Just like what happened in *Grease*, back in 2019. The four-part Ford convertible was eventually carried onstage by the actors, its assembly cleverly folded into the musical number with unexpected comedic effect. What began as a design flaw turned into a purposeful scene — made possible by everyone's willingness to adapt and reimagine. It's this spirit of collective problem-solving and reinvention that inspires me most when working in theatre.



**Figure 19 Map DETAIL**

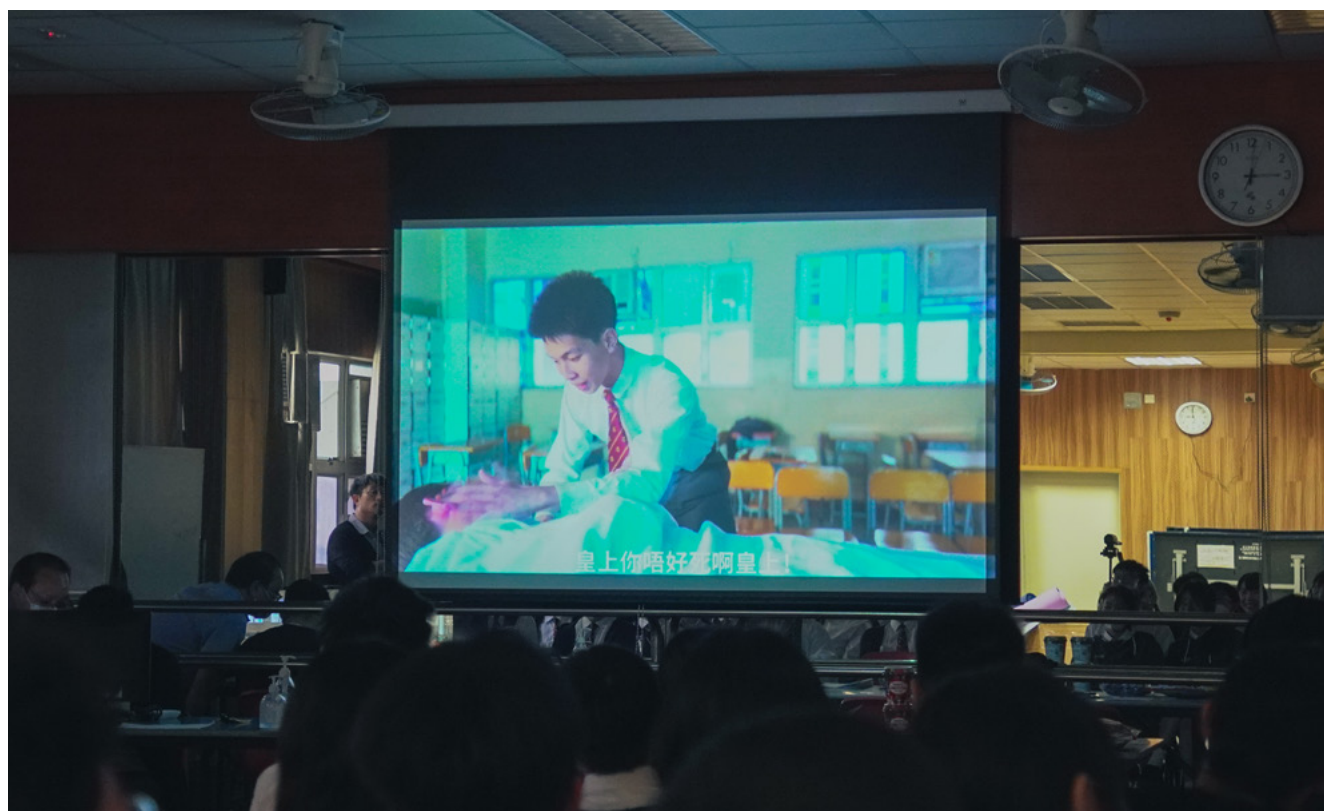
# Film case study



Cross-curricular play:  
Design thinking,  
Chinese history, and  
film-making

By Joshua Wolper

HOW IT CAME  
TO BE



Though I have facilitated countless theatre- and film-based workshops over the past 18 years, the excitement of working with a fresh group with little to no drama or film-making experience continues to excite me. There is something about the unknown – the opportunity to be surprised, the chance to witness growth, and see new creative sparks fly – that fuels my practice. And should the project be interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary in nature? All the more fun.

For a project that would span 2023–2024, I was invited by Hong Kong Polytechnic University's Jockey Club Design Institute for Social Innovation (J.C.DISI) to develop and facilitate a workshop series for 20 local secondary school students. This cohort of 15–18-year-olds would soon embark on their Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) examinations — a notoriously academic curriculum (and a stressful and intense time for students, to say the least).

Hoping to enrich their students' learning experience whilst providing them with a 'leg-up' in their Chinese history examinations, the school and J.C.DISI requested an experiential programme that integrated storytelling and design thinking concepts, and an opportunity for students to explore a specific piece of text from Zhuge Liang's northern expeditions memorial, *Chu Shi Biao*, beyond the context of their classroom, in hopes of deepening their understanding of the text.

What emerged was a multi-week course, where participants would create a piece of live theatre, or short film using mobile devices, culminating in an arts festival celebrating their work for a select group of peers who would get to vote on their favourite films and performances.

# Let them lead: We can guide

Ideally, for workshops of this nature to succeed, the participants, when ready, need to take the lead. To facilitate this, I put in place in the programme design three key elements to help foster confidence, team spirit, and a sense of ownership.

## 1. Collective knowledge

*What types of live performances are there? What forms does the media you consume take? Have you ever performed before? What experience do you have in video production, if any? How would you summarise the historical text we will be exploring?*

After ice-breaking activities and a course introduction, the participants were prompted through a series of facilitated processes to populate answers that would help determine the direction of their pieces, and establish some of the information and skills already available in their group. From the outset, they needed to know that they had within the room more competency than they may have realised. This also helped me assess in which areas we might need to provide additional support.

## 2. Team identity

*Who are we?  
What makes us unique?*

Working in groups of 4–5, the students became their own film or theatre company, created their own brand identity, and began the devising/storyboarding process.

As discussions and brainstorming sessions were underway, some very creative concepts emerged — adapting aspects of the text into memes, developing fake adverts to insert into principal short films, and even creating modern adaptations taking place in 21st-century Hong Kong. The students demonstrated a lot of creativity in the pieces they developed.

## 3. Ownership

*What interests you?  
What skills do you have that would help your group?*

Every participant was required to be active in the production process, as well as make an appearance in the piece. This required them to select their role within their company (director, camera operator, editor, etc). It established early on that this was their project, and their presence and attention were paramount to their group's success.

# Story line


why?

because

→  
穿鞋?  
小心

I provided students with the necessary resources, established foundational knowledge, guided their interest, and assisted them with suggestions to ensure their pieces were achievable within the time frame of the course. The film-making groups (which were the majority) received equipment training and gear packs. Theatre ensembles received training on basic blocking techniques and vocal projection.

Though I monitored the groups' progress, the course was designed to give them autonomy, and encourage them to ask for help whenever they encountered a gap in their knowledge. J.C.DISI also recruited university student interns that I briefed before each session, who supported the groups through their learning journey. But over time, they became more proactive in seeking support from me for things like acting techniques, storytelling structures, and how to direct.



## The value of cross-curricular interventions

As the storyboarding and scriptwriting sessions began, the students' subject teacher (who was present throughout all workshops) became an indispensable resource they needed to call upon for historical consultation. In the context of being in the 'writers room', he was more of a teacher-in-role. Though I am sure the temptation to say, 'haven't we gone over this before?', was there, it became about helping the groups tell a story with accurate information, and to bring depth and context to the characters. It was about exploring who these people were, what their life experiences were, and why this is important to the story being interpreted. This shift in positioning — no longer just a teacher, but a collaborator in storytelling — was a treat to observe. The students began to ask questions they never had to before, which was an important component of the course — to deepen participants' understanding via self-motivated exploration through an experiential framework.



## Feel, try, refine

J.C.DISI's SoInno Design Education initiative endeavours to introduce 'social innovation and design thinking into secondary school education... to nurture students' ability to integrate knowledge from different subjects'. Some key aspects of design thinking, such as empathising (understanding the needs and motivations of parties involved), prototyping (fleshing out ideas and concepts), and testing (trying out ideas) may seem very intuitive and natural for those of us who work in art-making and collaborative storytelling. But not all curriculums or subjects lend themselves so easily to this modality. Leveraging theatre- and film-making allowed the students to creatively approach the subject, text, story, and characters multiple times in the pursuit of refining their pieces, not just to memorise information. This repeated exposure enables information to grow deeper roots within the participants.

### Process, not product

The all-round feedback was very positive. Participants asked if this workshop series would become part of their curriculum, while some of the students who attended the festival asked their teachers if they would also get to take part the following term.

After the course was over, the teacher sent a very kind message: 'My students responded very positively. This class is probably the most memorable one of their high-school career.

My form 5 class had been using Zoom for three years since we started school, due to the pandemic, and only returned to school as normal last year ... this workshop was truly invaluable'.

While it is wonderful for film-makers of all ages to excel and create award-worthy pieces of storytelling, the objective here was never about the quality of the final performances or short films. Although many of the final products were entertaining

and educational, the aim was for the participants to utilise pre-existing and newly acquired knowledge to express something new — to engage with familiar subject matter from a different angle, adapt and articulate it through a different medium with new collaborators to deepen their understanding, to develop trust in themselves and their peers. And, hopefully, have fun in the process.



Team name: Jay hore



門門就是新世界 (過去) walk  
Saw 多人, and then +

take 1

學生跑去洗手間, 對着

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Online learning problems, academic worries, social interaction, and psychological well-being among secondary school students in Hong Kong during the COVID-19 pandemic: the socioeconomic and gender differences  
<https://scholars.cityu.edu.hk/en/publications/online-learning-problems-academic-worries-social-interaction-and->

THE

POWER

OF

By Molly Freeman, Co-Artistic Director of  
Smoking Apples Theatre

AGENCY

AGENCY

## SMOKING APPLES

We started working on our new show *Three* back in 2023 and before you ask, no, it's not unusual for us to take so long to create new work. We often have a lengthy gap between the initial research and development stage, and the phase where we finish and premiere the show. This is partly down to practical things like securing funding and finding key partners, but mostly it's down to letting the creative ideas mature and settle. It's hard to articulate exactly but something happens when we plant the seed and then step away from it and move our attention elsewhere. In philosophy, the law of attraction states that 'the energy of your thoughts manifest your experiences' (Scott, 2024) and I think there is some truth in that. Whilst we step away and creatively turn our attention to other things, our minds are constantly seeking the missing pieces needed to deepen and complete the show that might be dormant or in progress.

Which brings me to the question of agency. In a nutshell, *Three* is about agency. Following the intertwining stories of three neighbours, the show explores the unique relationship between grandparents and grandchildren. A core idea explored is agency and how this, or our perception of this, ebbs and flows through the different cycles of life. Writing and co-directing this show has made me think a lot about my own sense of agency, not just in my life as a whole but also in my creative work. In running my own theatre company, I am really privileged to be able to have agency in that initial seed but it's interesting to think about how much control there is after this stage. At what point does the creative journey start to become influenced or shaped by the in-roads already made mixed with new observations? It seems as though the events and experiences of my life between 2023 and 2025 begin to interweave or have greater resonance with the themes of *Three*, things that are relevant or relative to it have a sharper focus, despite not consciously searching for these connections.

One thing we at Smoking Apples are known for, is our approach to working with complex subject matter, specifically through the medium of puppetry and visual theatre. *Three* is our latest offering, exploring complex familial relationships in different sections of society. Except this time, we are working additionally with mask, something that has been a wild and joyous ride. Both mask and puppetry are used in the show to denote different parts of the life cycle. With puppetry, there is a very literal form of agency, in that they have none. They are entirely at the mercy of the puppeteer, with physical manipulation required.

The mask however, is completely different. Settled onto and blended into the performer, they also do not exist without the physical body but there is something subtly commanding about the mask. It demands your attention, it pulls on your heartstrings, it forces you to lean in. John Wright says, 'On the outside we want to watch you in a mask. In fact we can't take our eyes off you. We're astonished by the transformation' (Nick Hern Books, 2017). Puppetry, in contrast to this, isn't so immediate. There is a negotiation that takes place between the audience where they have to agree to suspend their disbelief, see the puppeteers, and choose to accept them as part of the illusion. Balancing these two forms and exploring different types of agency throughout the narrative has been hugely exciting (and challenging). We are not mask experts by any means but it has been creatively inspiring working with a new medium and being supported by the brilliant Rachael Savage, Artistic Director of the UK's leading mask company, Vamos Theatre.







Image: Smoking Apples

DIAGE  
Central Site



*Three*, as with all of our shows, is about what it means to be human and in this case, what it means to have different kinds of familial bonds, responsibilities, obligations even. Ida, Ralph, and Jaanvi, who live in the same block of flats, are older adults who have the richness of a full life behind them, including the many ups and downs that come with that. Ida's ferocious independence wanes as her memory starts to fade, Ralph is content in his solitude and Jaanvi moves from India to the UK, to support her family. So, why would we want to explore something as complicated as this and how on earth (and why!) do we do it with a non-verbal show featuring puppets and masks with fixed expressions?!

Well, the simple answer is that sometimes, the most complex subjects, thoughts, and ideas are often shared or at least can be shared by exploring the raw, human emotion behind these things. This is what binds us all and whilst the audiences watching our shows may not be experts in motor neurone disease, trawler fishing, nuclear fission or the historical *Kindertransport* (previous work), they can access them through something they can relate to – human action, emotion, and feeling.

Not all of our work is non-verbal but *Three* is and it's mostly because it just doesn't need words for the audience to connect to the emotional journeys of the characters. People have asked whether *Three* is autobiographical and my answer to that is no, not intentionally. However, with the subconscious loss of agency and a kind of osmosis taking place between the show and the encounters that happen whilst the work is dormant, it's hard to say it's also not based on any real-life experiences. The one thing I do hope is that there is a part of *Three* that everyone can connect to. This is also partly why we chose to tell three intertwined stories and not one, as we wanted to reflect the many facets of contemporary British life and family dynamics.

Fundamentally, in any creative process, to me it seems that there are fluctuating moments of agency and this is essential in how the work develops and unfolds. It might be a scary concept that you don't have complete creative control over something that you're making but I also firmly believe that as theatre-makers we have a responsibility to be shaped by the things around us and make work that connects to our audiences.

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**Award-winning Smoking Apples Theatre premiere new show *Three*, exploring grandparents, tea and British Culture**

At the heart of every family lies a story, and at the heart of every house is its kitchen. *Three* invites you into the lives of neighbours, Ida, Jaanvi and Ralph, to share their experiences, uncover their pasts, and learn how to make the best cup of tea.

Ida cherishes her time with her granddaughter Sophie, but as her memories fade, she feels her independence slipping away. Jaanvi shares her heritage with Anika, whose love forces her to face a life-changing decision. Ralph, content in his solitude, meets an unexpected visitor who challenges his loneliness.

From multi-award-winning puppetry company Smoking Apples, *Three* explores the unique relationships between Grandparents and Grandchildren. Using captivating masks, in combination with striking puppetry and mesmerising shadow play, *Three* captures the quiet moments that define us.

[www.smokingapplestheatre.com](http://www.smokingapplestheatre.com)  
Facebook: [www.facebook.com/smokingapplestheatre](https://www.facebook.com/smokingapplestheatre)  
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Image: Smoking Apples | Ali Wright Photography

## Profile: Kayoko Kimura

I run a class called 'Kayono no Kai' in Highgate, North London, where I share the beauty of Japanese classical dance with a diverse group of students. They come from many backgrounds — Japanese, mixed heritage, Asian, European — and range in age from primary school children to adults. Their sincere engagement with the art, shaped by their unique life experiences and perspectives, inspires me every day.

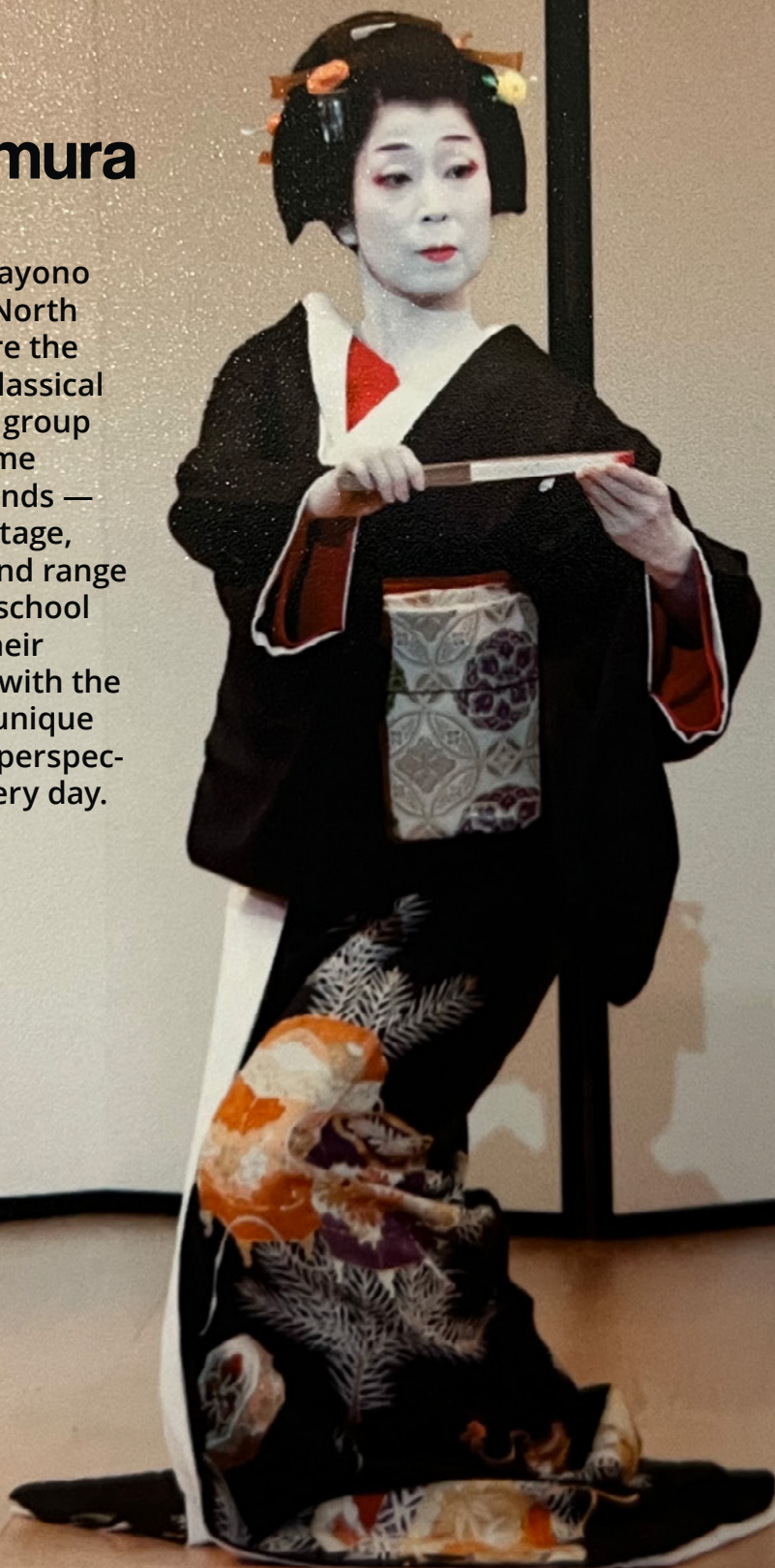
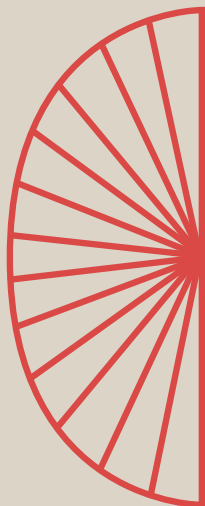


Image: Jiuta Kurokami in Kioi Hall

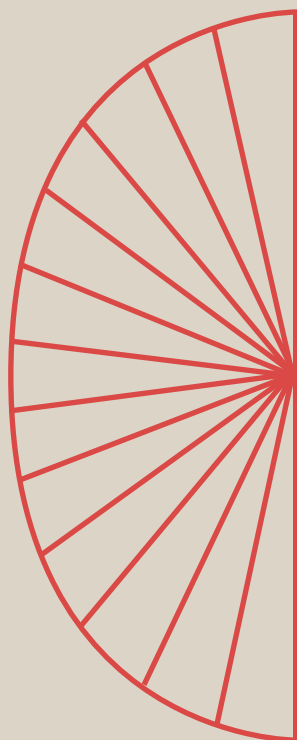


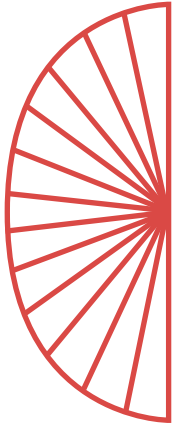
In our lessons, I teach using both Japanese and English. I take care to explain not just how to perform each movement, but why it is performed in that way — what emotions are behind it, what cultural context it carries, and where the aesthetic beauty comes from. Rather than simply mimicking form, I try to share with them the joy of dancing in harmony with sound, timing, and breath.

I first encountered Japanese classical dance in my twenties. Later, work took me to Hong Kong, where I studied for eight years under a teacher of the Wakayagi school. Eventually, I earned the title of natori, a stage name granted after years of disciplined training. Around nine years ago, I relocated to London. After many years of training in the Wakayagi style, I found myself drawn to the stillness and introspective quality of Kamigata-mai, and gradually shifted my focus.



The reason I chose to study Kamigata-mai in the Yoshimura school is because I was deeply moved by a video I saw of Grand Master Yuki Yoshimura, 4th head of Yoshimura school of Kamigata-mai, a living national treasure. His dancing was both delicate and powerful, with a depth and refinement that reminded me of oxidised silver — subtle, subdued, and full of character. Although he passed away in 1998, I searched for a direct disciple of his, and that is how I found my current teacher, Master Chihiro Yoshimura. In the world of Japanese traditional performing arts, this kind of transmission — directly from master to student — is how the art is preserved and passed down through generations. I now continue to study under her guidance, and return regularly to Japan to appear on stage.

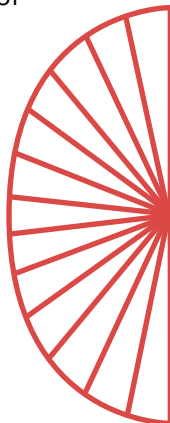




I also collaborate with educational institutions and cultural organisations. I have led workshops at the University of London, introduced Japanese dance on the BBC, and taught for the International Schools Theatre Association (ISTA). These activities give me opportunities to create moments where people can experience Japanese culture through dance.

Teaching Japanese dance in an international environment means more than simply demonstrating movements. It involves communicating the deeper cultural values and meanings behind every gesture. For example, beyond choreography and Japanese etiquette, even the steps involved in putting on a kimono have meaning. In Japan, many things can be taught by example, but abroad, you must explain why something is done, and what it represents.

These explanations often need to be repeated patiently until they are truly understood. It can be a long and demanding process, but when a student finally grasps the meaning and internalises it, the culture becomes part of them. This is one of the most important aspects of my teaching.



There are several styles within Japanese dance, mainly divided into Kabuki Buyo, Kamigata-mai, and Shin Buyo. Kabuki Buyo is based on the choreography and themes of Kabuki theatre. It is characterised by large, bold movements, visual spectacle, and strong theatricality that draws the audience into the performance. While rooted in Kabuki, it is still part of the broader realm of Japanese classical dance, and is performed by women as well as men. Kamigata-mai emerged from Kyoto's courtly traditions and incorporates the aesthetic principles of Noh. It conveys inner emotions such as longing, sorrow, and subtle joy through delicate hand movements, eye focus, and nuanced shifts in body weight. Danced to jiuta shamisen music, it is elegant, refined, and often graceful or light hearted in tone. Because it is performed to jiuta music, it is often referred to as Jiuta-mai. Shin Buyo is a relatively modern form developed after the Meiji period. It incorporates a wide range of music including enka, folk songs, and even pop music. It is expressive, often creative, and contemporary in feel.

Image: Nagauta Asazuma Bune in Hong Kong



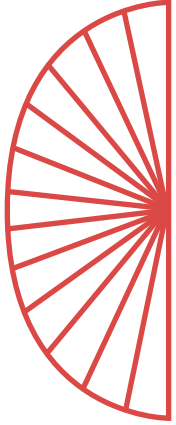
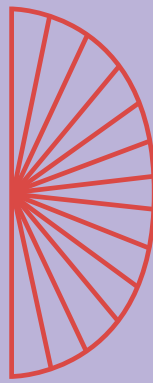


Image: Nagauta Miyako Dori in National Theatre

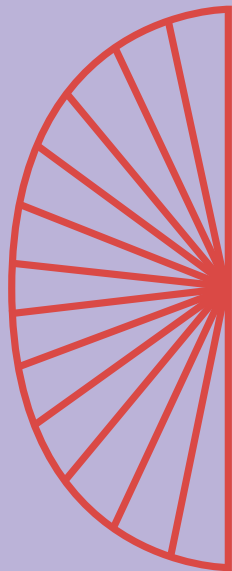
Originally, Kamigata-mai was performed in tatami rooms with only a folding screen and candlelight as stage elements. Its choreography was designed for small, intimate spaces. Even today, it retains this simplicity, with a minimal stage set, preserving the essence of the traditional atmosphere.

*A Kamigata-mai performance will be held at Asia House in London on December 7, 2025. We are honored to welcome Master Yoshimura Chihiro, who will also perform during this event. For ticket inquiries, please contact [kayononokai@gmail.com](mailto:kayononokai@gmail.com).*

Beyond Japanese dance, I also study *utai* (Noh chanting) and *chado* (the way of tea). Interestingly, I encountered both of these traditions while living in the UK. After attending special Noh training at Royal Holloway University in 2018 and 2019, I developed a deep interest in chanting and now take regular online lessons from a teacher at Kamakura Noh Theatre in Japan. At the same time, I began studying chado in London through the Urasenke school and now participate in various cultural events with an international group of fellow practitioners.



Despite differences in form and tools, these three arts — dance, Noh, and tea — share core values: the beauty of simplicity, the importance of timing and breath, and the idea of surrendering the self to the form, rather than projecting ego. Especially in Kamigata-mai, I find something akin to *ningyo joruri* (puppet theatre), where movement arises not from personal will but from somewhere deeper — becoming one with the music and the air of the stage.



More than a decade ago, I was diagnosed with a rare and aggressive form of cancer. I experienced multiple recurrences, and underwent chemotherapy and surgeries. Japanese dance, despite its graceful

appearance,

requires significant physical strength.

Movements are grounded in the core, with a lowered center of gravity, which helped immensely in my post-operative recovery. Above all, I had a strong desire to continue dancing. Perhaps it was the magic of the stage that gave me the will to survive.

Today, I continue to practise and perform with deep gratitude. I do not strive for anything extraordinary, but if the life I have lived quietly seeps into my dancing, that is more than enough.

I plan to return permanently to Japan in 2026. After returning, I hope to continue cultural exchange activities both in Japan and abroad, sharing the rich traditions of Japanese dance with people of all backgrounds.

# Making Musical



By Gus Gowland

Images: Scott Harrison

**Making musicals is a funny old business. As indeed all theatre-making can be. One that is filled with excitement, frustrations, and endless possibilities. My process for writing a show changes with each project, adapting to the specific requirements of the piece and the team. Recently I've been writing a show for the MA Musical Theatre Company students at Leeds Conservatoire, and I've found this process to be particularly fruitful for making new work within an educational environment.**

The challenges of this kind of commission are many. The first aim, and the priority, is the students. I want to ensure that each of them is given plenty to do on stage and is challenged just enough, without exposing them or their inexperience. At the same time, I want everything I make to have a bigger life and so there is half an eye on the future of the project. So, it must be specific but not too specific. It must be challenging but not too challenging. It must be theirs but also mine. See?

**A funny old business!**



We started with nothing. Just a week in a room with the knowledge that in about six months' time there would be a new musical performed in front of a paying audience. There's nothing like a deadline to get the creative juices flowing! The director, the students and I gathered and started talking. Initially we shared things we liked and were inspired by — shows, films, books, art. This grew into sharing stories about ourselves and our lives. Over the course of the week, we got to know each other better and started to see where the common ground lay in our tastes and our outlooks.

It was incredibly exciting for me as a writer to start to see treasure poking out through the mud, and a great reminder that ideas really can come from anywhere.

By the end of the week I had put all of the information we'd created into a few possible show ideas. These were incredibly rough, just a suggestion of a setting, really, and an overriding thought of what the central argument might be. The students made clear what their favourite was and off I went to write it.

We had another week of research and development a couple of months later. This time, I came armed with two songs

(one of which made it into the show and one that did not, alas) and some ideas on characters. We spent the week trying out the material and playing around with it. I was keen to continue learning and allowing the students to influence what we made. So, when we worked through one of the songs and I discovered their ability to pick up tricky harmonies quickly, I knew I could really push them as I wrote the songs, and the music became far more challenging than it might have been otherwise. This is one of the many benefits of being able to workshop ideas throughout the process. Often, we're used to licensing existing shows and so you can just have a typical rehearsal process and put on the show, knowing what you're going to get.



## When you are making something new,

which hasn't had a previous life, you need to take the time to explore the material, and the ideas within, during the process of creation. At least, I believe that's the best way to build the best show.

My writing process differs depending on the show, and the style of music and dialogue required. I often spend a lot of time seeking out tonal inspiration — whether that is other musicals (for example, the way a show uses its ensemble might be very useful to me, or the structure of the score), or films or even paintings — that gives me an insight into the world I am going to create.

I need to immerse myself into the show in order to properly find it. That's how I think of writing — it's an act of excavation, of digging to find what is already there, rather than making something from nothing.

Armed with lots more information about the skill set of the performers and the way they have responded to the material thus far — did they like it, does it feel 'right' to them? — I go off and produce a full draft. Of course, this somewhat reduces the process and makes it sound easy. There is plenty of grappling with ideas, with songs thrown out and scenes cut to shreds, and many sleepless nights as



image: Flaticon.com



Images: Scott Harrison

I try to cohere all the ideas of the previous few months into something resembling a musical. Remembering all the while the aim of the piece is to showcase the students. And also to showcase me a little bit too.

Rehearsals start, and on day one we read through the script. There are laughs, thankfully where I want them, there are a few tears (ditto), and smiles all round. There are some questions too. These pesky students with their insightful questions! But we are all after the same thing — to make something we are proud of — and we will all keep pushing until we get there. Or until the run ends, whichever we reach first (this is art, which is never perfect or finished, so it's usually the latter!).



**I'm writing this as I prepare to watch the first performance with a paying audience. I saw a run a few weeks ago but I haven't yet seen the costumes or the set, nor have I heard the orchestrations. First night will be an adventure. But isn't that always the way?**

*Gosh, I love making musicals.*

# Thổ địa

— A city's spirit remembered

By Linh Valerie Pham

Image: Ngoc and I pictured in ToLo Workshop by Nguyen Phuong





After nearly two years of intensive labour, in April 2023 our large-scale show *Life Puppets* finally premiered at Do Theatre, Nha Trang, Vietnam. It was a massive undertaking — traditional water puppetry blended with contemporary live cinema and motion-capture suits, alongside giant string puppets manipulated by twelve bicycles. The production involved a newly customised theatre, over 30 performers, and a team of co-directors and co-creators, including my husband Ngoc and me. To this day, *Life Puppets* continues to run 4–5 times a week, but by the time it opened, we were ready for our next adventure.

That June, we embarked on a month-long family road trip from Nha Trang to Hanoi. On the road, we collectively pondered what we wanted to do next. The result was the founding of ToLo Puppet Theatre, with three ambitions.



- 1 To create and produce original puppetry and object theatre works**
- 2 To research and archive obscure puppetry practices worldwide**
- 3 To encourage experiments that challenge existing definitions of puppetry**

In August, Ngoc and I sat down to discuss how we would go about making number 1 on our list happen. Having recently finished Bryan Eyler's *Last Days of the Mighty Mekong*, we were preoccupied with the idea of a river's fate. Hà Nội — the city where we grew up — literally translates as 'surrounded by rivers'. These rivers were once the lifeblood and identity of the city, shaping its social and economic structures. Yet today, many have become polluted open sewers, and what remains of their bodies is often regarded as an inconvenience rather than a heritage.

Due to our 15-year age difference, Ngoc still retains memories of a time when the rivers were clean enough to swim in. I, however, only remember them as stagnant black water. So we started there — a vessel of our childhood memories, tainted, and a custodian god, vanishing.

With this core idea, we began assembling a team. The first person we approached was Nguyen Vu Hai, an architect turned urban researcher known for designing walking tours that explore Hanoi's layered histories. Hai, who has spent his life in Hanoi, has a complicated relationship with the city. We invited him to join us as both co-author and performer — his first time performing. He said yes. Next, we invited La Thanh Ha, a children's book author and poet. We knew from the beginning that the project needed some element of storytelling and imagination, and Ha's writing always finds a way to show the gentle, magical side of things. She said yes.

We began with research and field trips. Hai took us to different sites in Hanoi — old temples, banyan trees, hidden alleys. We noticed how often trees and temples were intertwined. Sometimes it was hard to tell where one ended and the other began. We talked about how these places can be 'memory vessels' — landmarks that remind us who we are and where we come from. But these landmarks are disappearing fast. A familiar tree or temple can be replaced by a shopping centre almost overnight. We wanted to find a way to express the unease that comes from watching your sense of 'belonging' shift so quickly.

The project eventually became *Thổ địa*. The term refers to a local earth god or guardian spirit responsible for watching over a piece of land and the people who live there. In our show, the Thổ địa is not an all-powerful figure, but an old man who is confused and overwhelmed by how fast the city transforms.

The show combines two parts. One is a lecture performance, where Hai plays himself, telling stories and sharing research about the city. The other is a puppet adventure set in the future, about a girl searching for the guardian spirit of her disappearing city. Our puppets are carved from wood and hand painted with traditional lacquer techniques, layering colour before sanding down to reveal the texture beneath — a process that felt fitting for a story about what remains hidden under the surface.

Part of the show was developed during our four-month residency at Treasure Hill Artist Village and the Puppetry Art Center of Taipei. In September 2023, we shared a work-in-progress version of *Thổ địa* with the International Schools Theatre Association (ISTA) audience during Hanoi TAPS. The feedback helped us refine our approach. In October, we premiered the show internationally at Pesta Boneka, an international puppet theatre festival in Indonesia. Later that month, we presented the Vietnamese premiere at the Hanoi Children's Palace during the Hanoi Festival of Creative Design.

In December, we created a relaxed performance version of the show for neurodivergent audiences. Early this year, *Thổ địa* travelled again, this time to the Asia Pacific Activities Conference (APAC) Theatre event hosted by the United Nations International School in Hanoi, and to the Bangkok International Performing Arts Meeting. Later on in 2025, we will take it to the Asian Youth Theatre Festival in Laos.

With each performance, we gather feedback and look for ways to keep improving. The show is still evolving. In every place we share it, people bring their own memories of what it means to belong to a city that is always changing.

When I think back on this process, I see how personal it became. It started as an idea about rivers but grew into something larger — a way to talk about loss, memory, and identity. I don't know if we will ever feel that the show is 'finished'. But maybe that is appropriate; a city is never finished either.

Next year, we hope to bring *Thổ địa* back to Hanoi for a longer run. We want to keep telling this story in the place that inspired it, and to keep asking: What does it mean to stay connected to a place that is always shifting? And what parts of it do we carry with us, no matter how much it changes?





Image: Tho Dia Performance at Hanoi Children's Palace by Evantus Tin Le

# Our Contributors



**Laura Sedgwick** Laura is the Producer for the Theatre Green Book, an initiative to guide the theatre sector to become more environmentally sustainable. She has been working for the organisation since November 2023, and is based in London. Laura's background is in commercial theatre general management, and she is currently the part-time Production Associate for the independent producers Smith & Brant Theatricals. Previously she has been the Associate General Manager for National Theatre Productions, working mostly on UK touring production. She is currently a Trustee of XR theatre company, Produced Moon.



MOLLY

**Molly Freeman** Molly is one of the co-artistic directors of award winning puppetry and visual theatre company, Smoking Apples. She is a director, writer, puppeteer and performer, most recently responsible for writing and directing the company's multiple award winning show, Kinder and writing and co-directing their brand new mask and puppetry show, Three. She trained alongside her fellow co-artistic directors at Rose Bruford College on the European Theatre Arts Course, spending time studying abroad in Prague at DAMU. With a keen interest in movement, Molly is fascinated with the anatomy of the body, both in performer and puppet, and this combined with a captivating story is the type of theatre she both likes to see and make. Molly also freelances as a puppet director/consultant and works as a Lecturer on European Theatre Arts at Rose Bruford College.



**Gavin Joseph** Gavin is a theatre director, actor, and writer based in London. He is deeply interested in absurdist and surrealist work that seeks to challenge our traditional understanding of storytelling. As a British South-Asian creative, Gavin has an affinity toward underrepresented communities and the creatives and respective stories that exist within them. As such he is dedicated to championing and platforming work from artists from marginalised communities.





**Gus Gowland** Gus is a writer, composer and academic. For his first musical - Pieces of String - Gus won The Stage Debut Award for Best Composer/Lyricist, and was nominated for the Writer's Guild of Great Britain Award for Best Musical Theatre Bookwriting. His second musical Mayflies was produced at York Theatre Royal in 2023. Gus is Resident Artist at York Theatre Royal and Composer in Residence at The National Theatre of Scotland. Gus currently leads the MA Musical Theatre courses at Leeds Conservatoire and his first book - Contemporary British Musicals: Out of the Darkness, co-edited with Clare Chandler, came out in February.

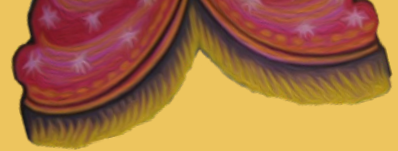


**Joshua Wolper** Josh is a Hong Kong-based multi and inter-disciplinary artist whose work spans theatre, film, photography, and design. He has been creating and delivering workshops and programmes in the performing arts and theatre education space since 2009. From devising to directing to facilitating, Josh is passionate about storytelling, and working with groups of all sizes and ages to have a meaningful and enriching experience. Areas of expertise include Method Acting, integrating multimedia into performances, documentary theatre, devised theatre, applied theatre, and filmmaking. Tangible and intangible cultural heritage, biophilia, nature, and human-interest stories are dominant themes explored in his work.



**Madalena Parreira** Madalena is an artist and teacher based in Lisbon. She is also a former visual arts teacher at St. Julian's School in Portugal and the United Nations International School in New York for middle school, GCSE and IB Visual Arts. Currently directing the printmaking department and co-directing the Illustration and Comics department at Ar.Co (Centro de Arte e Comunicação Visual), Madalena also develops her own practice in the areas of printmaking, ceramics and set-design. Her work can be seen at [www.madalenaparreira.com](http://www.madalenaparreira.com)

**PAPER,  
TALE,  
MOIS,**



### TòLô Puppet Theatre Company

TòLô Puppet Theatre Company is an independent theatre company based in Hanoi, Vietnam. Founded by Linh Valerie Pham and Tran Kim Ngoc in 2023, TòLô's practice centers around all the magical, unexpected and/or grotesque possibilities that puppetry arts and object theatre can offer. Their works have been showcased at Treasure Hill Artist Village, Puppetry Art Center of Taipei, Lize Puppet Arts Colony (Taiwan), Pesta Boneka International Puppetry Festival (Indonesia), Goethe Institut Hanoi (Vietnam) Hanoi Children's Palace (Vietnam), United Nations International School (Vietnam) amongst others. This March, they will present their newest work, Tho Dia, at Bangkok International Performing Arts Meeting (BIPAM).



**Linh Valerie Pham** Linh is an experimental puppetry and theatre artist. She is interested in movement, puppetry, breath, pretty words, ugly words, and all things magical. Her aim as an artist is to tell stories in a way that disrupts and destabilizes order. Her works have been showcased at Treasure Hill Artist Village (Taiwan), Puppetry Art Center of Taipei (Taiwan), Prague City Gallery (Prague), Goethe Institut (Hanoi), A Space (Hanoi), VCCA (Hanoi), The Factory Contemporary Arts Center (HCM City), IFC (Yogyakarta), Brick Theater (New York), and Center for Performance Research (New York), among others. Linh was a resident artist at Rimbun Dahan (Malaysia), Sowing Seeds (India), a fellow of Arts for Good Singapore, as well as one of the commissioned artists at Bien-nale Matter of Art 2022 in Czech Republic. Linh is also the founder and artistic director of Mat Tran Ensemble, a performing arts collective with a focus on inclusive and socially-engaged practices from 2017- 2022.



**Saket Raje** With over 15 years of experience teaching the IB curriculum across PYP, MYP, and DP, my journey is rooted in a deep love for theatre. As the Head of Arts at an international school in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, I take joy in creating spaces where students can explore, take risks, and discover their artistic voice. My experience as an actor and stage director shapes my approach, bringing excitement, collaboration, and creativity into every rehearsal and performance. I also teach Theory of Knowledge, where I enjoy guiding students to think critically and view the world from multiple perspectives. Alongside my teaching, I serve as an IB Examiner, Moderator, Workshop Leader, and CIS Evaluator, sharing my passion for meaningful education with a wider community. Beyond the classroom, I mentor young performers and direct productions, inspiring students to see theatre as a powerful medium for expression, storytelling, and personal growth.



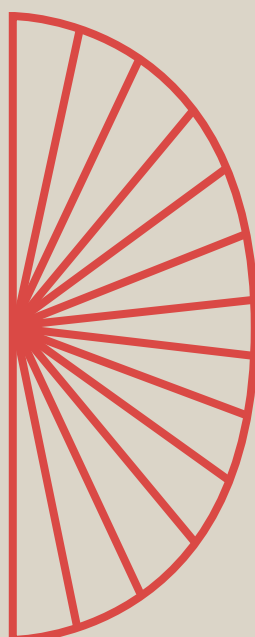


**Neha Choksy** Neha is a university topper, having completed a double bachelor's and a master's degree in Performing Arts (Theatre). A trained Bharatanatyam dancer, she brings a deep sense of discipline and embodied expression to her Theatre practice. With over a decade of experience teaching Theatre to high school and undergraduate students, she currently serves as Head of Performing Arts at an international school in Mumbai, India. An IB DP Theatre Examiner for over 12 years, Neha's artistic interests span immersive Theatre, Grotowski's work, and traditional forms like Nautanki. Neha leads an experimental Theatre company that explores authentic, boundary-pushing work. For Neha, Theatre is a transformative space—one that empowers students to think bravely, collaborate deeply, and express authentically, blending artistic rigour with heart—connecting learning with life.

नौटंकी की रोमांचक दुनिया



**Kayono Kai** performing as Kayono, is a Japanese classical dancer based in the UK. Trained in the Wakayagi school, she received her professional name in 2016 and now studies Kamigata-mai in the Yoshimura school under Master Yoshimura Chihiro. She regularly returns to Japan to perform and further her training. In London, Kayono teaches Japanese classical dance to an international group of students, fostering cross-cultural understanding through the art. As head of "Kayono no Kai," she also promotes cultural exchange through performances, workshops, and lectures, sharing the beauty of Japanese dance with audiences worldwide.



### Campfire project

**Jessica Hecht** Jessica founded The Campfire Project in 2017. Jessica is an acclaimed Tony-nominated stage actress and teaches acting at both Williams College and the HB Playwright's Studio. Broadway credits include Eureka Day (Tony Nomination) and Summer, 1976 (Tony Nomination), The Price, Fiddler on the Roof, The Assembled Parties, Harvey, After the Fall, The Last Night of Ballyhoo, Brighton Beach Memoirs, Julius Caesar, and A View from the Bridge (Tony Nomination). Off-Broadway, she has appeared in King Lear, Stage Kiss, Three Sisters, The Orchard, Letters from Max, and Admissions (Obie Award & Outer Critics Circle Award Nomination). Her recent television appearances include the Netflix series "Special," for which she received an Emmy Award Nomination, and her roles on "Tokyo Vice," "Super Pumped," "The Sinner," "The Loudest Voice," "Dickinson," "The Boys," and "Succession." She is also recognizable to television audiences from her roles in the beloved series "Friends" and "Breaking Bad." She recently completed the film Eleanor the Great directed by Scarlett Johansson.



**Alexandra Zaslav** Alexandra Zaslav serves as Campfire Project's Director of Operations. Alexandra works at the intersection of arts, health, and conflict transformation. Alexandra danced professionally with KAMEA Dance Company before earning her MA in Conflict Resolution and Mediation from Tel Aviv University. Her research and work focused on integrating movement practices into peace-building and dialogue initiatives with Israeli and Palestinian children, women, and community mediators. Alexandra relocated to the US in 2024, where she is completing her certification as a dance/movement therapist, and has turned her attention to therapeutic support for refugee communities in New York City.



# THANK YOU

Editor: Helen Abbott  
Proofreader: Sam Smart  
Design: Alina Neukirch

Cover Image: Figure 16 model of a library inside a tupperware, lit by a cell phone light, 2021, Madalena Parreira

Connection

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Collaboration

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# SCENE

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