

Jussi Lehtonen & Sari Pöyhönen: Other home as a hybrid community of artistic expression

The very nature of the human mind is intersubjective. Conceiving myself as I is the result of me being conceived by another person as you. And when I think about you, I also think about how you think about me. We read each others' minds. Microsociology talks about *a theory of mind*. This is not an academic theory. It means interpreting the other person's intentions, cognitions and affects. In this theory the mind is always the other person's mind through which we also see ourselves. (Peräkylä 2009, 252–266.)

Over the past few years, as a part of my artistic work, I have been developing the idea of *a hybrid community of artistic expression*. To this ephemeral community I invite people from different social backgrounds to collectively create a joint piece of art, most often a performance with documentary traits. With hybridity I mean making the effort of bringing together people who otherwise would not be in contact with each other, and being open to their stories, situations and conceptions of art (see Bhabha, 1994). In the hybrid community of artistic expression the very basic theatrical exercise is about how to take the other person's position. It is a kind of an identity game of imagining what it is like to be you.

Forming a hybrid community of artistic expression can also be seen as a method of making a documentary theatre performance with a special emphasis on the notion of community. It illuminates the situations of differently marginalized people and makes them more understandable and visible to others within the broader society. In this way putting oneself in the other's position is also an act of civic awareness. It's a kind of an artistic and social experiment of living with the politics of difference as sociologist Stuart Hall (1987) might put it.

My first attempt to build a hybrid community of artistic expression was in the context of a documentary theatre project called *Fear of freedom*, where I invited people with prison background to form a community together with the National Theatre resident artists. We wanted to investigate together why getting out of prison is so difficult. We also wanted to raise discussion about the situations of ex-prisoners and the possibility to start a new life after being sentenced to prison.

Other Home was another example of this kind of a project formulated around the central idea of a hybrid community of artistic expression. This time the community involved participants from three

roughly defined groups of people: 1) professional refugee artists; 2) professional artists with a background in Finland; and 3) amateurs who had participated in a theatre workshop open for refugees and who at this time wanted to join the performance as members of the chorus.

The hybrid community of artistic expression is not a natural community. It is a group of people brought together in the context of a theatre production with the opportunity to tell their stories in a way that couldn't really be done by any other cast. In *Other home* it was the story of the artists with a refugee background and their encounter with the Finnish society and the Finnish-born artists.

Some people, like the Finnish professor in social politics Heikki Lehtonen (1990), argue that the whole notion of community belongs to the premodern era and doesn't really exist in the contemporary society where community is replaced by the structures of a society and based on agreements. This, in his opinion, alienates the modern society from the very idea of a community. In the theatre we, however, tend to highly value the idea, or the ideal, of a community.

For me the basic elements of a community that appeared in the *Other home* project can be illuminated with the help of four classical sociological concepts.

1) *Communitas*.

Other home had elements of something that the anthropologist Victor Turner (1995) calls *communitas*. This is a special sense of equality between subjects of a ritual. *Communitas* is existential and anti-structural by its very nature and functions as a counterforce to the hierarchical side of the society. It represents the power of the oppressed, in this case the voices of the people with a refugee background. In *Other home* the ultimate expression of structure was in the texts of the decisions of the Finnish Migration Service that formed a part of the dramatic plot of the performance.

2) *Liminality*.

Victor Turner (1995), referring to Arnold Van Gennep, talks also about *liminality* that is a basic characteristic for a person or a community in transition. The status of an asylum seeker or a refugee is liminal: non-belonging to the country of origin anymore and non-belonging to the present society yet. Artists are, according to Turner, in a constant state of liminality as they work as agents for a change. In this way many members of the *Other home* community had a double liminal identity: as refugees and as artists. Liminality was

also present in the very basic idea of the *Other home* project, where the participants were putting themselves in the shoes of the others who might represent a completely different cultural, religious or artistic background.

3) Stigma.

One more sociological concept that was crucial to the community of *Other home* is Erving Goffmann's *stigma* (1986). It is a trait in a person or a group of individuals that can be conceived as inferior or "spoiling the identity" in the eyes of the wider society. Belonging in a minority ethnic group or being a refugee is typically a stigma. In the *Other home* community the aim was to show everybody on the stage as full identities and empower them by giving them a chance to talk for themselves. Theatre appeared to be a very powerful tool in fighting against stigmatization.

4) Imagined community.

Richard Anderson's (2006) concept *imagined community* refers originally to the building of national states and construction of national identities. For me it expresses something crucial also in the function of a hybrid community of artistic expression. Every member of the community imagined the community differently. Yet something, before all the will to share stories of the artists with a refugee background, was binding them together. It was a community that had a vision of its inner sameness while also being aware of the phenomena that caused its members to be different. This was part of the community's self-narrated story, which made it a kind of *community shaped by differences*, a concept created by the media researcher David Morley (2000). The theatrical stage is a great place for imagining a community, making a representation of a community and questioning it together with the imagined community formed by the audience(s).

The phenomena of *communitas*, liminality, anti-stigma work and imagined community that emerged in the *Other home* project tell something about the quality of the community it was. But there is of course much more to it. *Other home* was not a natural community and doesn't exist anymore after the last show was performed in February last year. Some of its members might even not want to be in touch with each other for multiple reasons. There were many tensions in the community. Differences in language, culture and gender roles might create them, but also some more specific factors.

The stories and backgrounds of the refugee members of the hybrid community of artistic expression represented different sides of the conflicts in their countries of origin. It was not easy to build a joint performance when there were opposing opinions about the reasons of the conflicts “back there.” The first time the situation really came to a head was when we were preparing a small performance to conclude our spring work period last year in the amateur group for people with a refugee background. One of the members of our community wanted to prepare a scene on a gas attack that had recently been reported to have occurred in Syria. Another member didn’t approve because he felt that the news were false. All of a sudden all the Syrians in the team took a stance either in favor or against the scene. It dawned on us that we’d been working the whole spring in a group whose members represented different sides in the Syrian War: *the government forces* and *the rebels*. They were people whose family members had possibly been killing each other 4000 kilometers away, while they were making theatre in Finland. The group broke up because the most fervent proponents of the opposite viewpoints called it quits. We couldn’t help but respect their decisions. But it is important that representatives of both positions stayed in the group. They found that they could make art together in spite of their differences.

The next time tensions emerged in our team was when Iraqi Kurds declared independence in autumn 2017. Our work day began with heated commentaries and tears, for reasons that I didn’t at first understand. Little by little it became clear that among us were, again, representatives of different sides of a potential civil war: *Iraqi Kurds* and *Iraqi Shia Muslims*. I’d known all along that there were both Sunni and Shia members in our group, but the suspicion between them had not previously become apparent in any notable way. The Kurdish question brought the chasm into view. For a while everybody seemed to be on somebody’s side against some other side.

The reasons why the members of our community had risked their lives, and left their home countries and families, were suddenly embodied in another person in the rehearsals of the *Other home* performance. Another person one was now supposed to be making theatre with. Expose oneself to. Trust in. This was an extremely challenging premise for making art. We were able to get over most of the situations of conflict through discussion. At times the situation was dealt with one-on-one and I got to serve as the mediator.

Different political views were presented not only in the rehearsals, but also in social media (in the Facebook group in Arabic). This made it even more challenging for us responsible for the project to follow up the discussions and disagreements.

In addition to political views, there were yet other differences that caused friction between the members:

- Those who received a refugee status in Finland and those, who were still waiting for the decision or were about to be deported;
- Those who wanted to be vocal in criticizing Finnish asylum policy, and those, who wanted to keep a low profile;
- Those, who learned Finnish quickly, and began to find their place in the Finnish society, and those, whose resettlement process was fairly slow;
- Refugee men in central and refugee women in liminal positions;
- Older and younger generations;
- Professional artists and amateurs;
- Those, who had leading roles in the performance, and those, who were in assisting roles (the chorus).

It can be called a small wonder that the community of *Other home* didn't completely collapse because of all these differences. As I conceive it, the common interest of telling the stories of people with a refugee background was greater than the potential issues of conflict.

Concerning the artistic work done within the community of *Other home*, it could be described as documentary theatre. It told the stories of the individuals involved in the process using their interviews, juridical documents and speeches of politicians as materials for the manuscript. Theatre artist and scholar Jules Odendahl-James (2017) writes how documentary theatre simultaneously questions and shapes the reality. It inverts the margin and the centre and interrogates the structures of authority. This is done by giving space to lesser known and counter-narrative aspects of the reality. Odendahl-James highlights the body-to-body experience in defining what makes documentary theatre such a complicated and dangerous art form.

In *Other home* the most concrete example of a documentary performance was in the physical existence of refugee artists on the stage: their bodies, breathing, voices and movement. *Other home* was also a document of a community: it illuminated an imagined story of the community it considered itself to be. Certain things in the society are best to tell through a community. In the *Other Home* project, a very crucial moment took place when the hybrid community of artistic expression encountered its spectators who temporarily gave their unique input in its already existing hybridity. It was a community looking at a community asking itself what this new community actually is (Koski, 2015). Resonating in each other in a way that, I believe, can promote a positive social change also in a wider sense.

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