

UPSTART

Phone Home Evaluation Report

Prepared by Tom Mansfield, March-April 2017

Contents

Introduction	3
Aim 1: Create an excellent piece of theatre telling a range of stories about refugees and migration in Europe.	3
Aim 2: Work on an international scale in order to reflect the scope of the crisis and the varying ways it is perceived in our different countries.	5
Aim 3: Challenge prevailing narratives with regard to refugees and migrants.....	6
Aim 4: Provide a platform for refugees and migrants to share their experiences.	7
Aim 5: Offer refugees and migrants the opportunity to develop their confidence, English skills and wellbeing through participating in performance and writing workshops.....	7
Aim 6: Offer a long-term legacy by training staff and clients of refugee organisations in performance and theatre making.....	8
Aim 7: Expand access to culture through offering 10% of our tickets for free to refugees and migrants via our partner organisations.	9
Aim 8: Provide opportunities for performers from BAME backgrounds, reflecting the participants we are working with.....	9
Aim 9: Expand access to culture by making the project freely available on online platforms, including livestreamed performances.....	9
Aim 10: Develop our practice through working with our international partner artists, sharing skills and techniques for theatre making.	10
Aim 11: Document the process via the project website, providing a free resource for theatremakers, refugee and migrant organisations, and the public.	12
Final thoughts.....	12

Introduction

Overall, we are pleased with the success of Phone Home. However, in a project of this nature and complexity there were inevitably tensions and challenges, as well as lessons learned. Regarding the technical challenges of the piece, the detailed solutions have been published in *Phone Home: A User's Guide to Making and Sharing Digital Collaborative Performance*, which is available as a download on the Upstart and Phone Home websites. This report will deal with eleven aims of the project, as identified in Upstart's Grants for the Arts application for the project in November 2015. The information gathered in this report has been sourced from a combination of post-show discussions, reviews, Twitter, informal conversations with participants and professionals involved in the project. A formal evaluation meeting could not be arranged after the completion of the project for budget and scheduling reasons; however, working on the evaluation process for the Creative Europe funding has enabled a dialogue to take place between and with the European partners. Some of that information is included in this report. This evaluation, however, is Upstart's own report and very much presents our own perspective on the successes, challenges and lessons learned in *Phone Home*.

Aim 1: Create an excellent piece of theatre telling a range of stories about refugees and migration in Europe.

Phone Home, in its finished form, comprised 15 scenes, each of which told a different story about the refugee and migrant experience, and the European response to it. Some scenes, named 'independent' scenes for purposes of the production, took place solely on stage at Shoreditch Town Hall. Others, the 'connected' scenes, took place simultaneously on all three stages, while a third type, the 'broadcast' scenes, were performed in one location with silent action taking place in counterpoint on one or more of the other stages.

The scenes were authored in a broad variety of ways. Some of the independent scenes were devised collaboratively within the rehearsal room in London; others written by our playwright Zodwa Nyoni and rehearsed essentially as pieces of new writing, though with substantial latitude to adjust the texts as the project continued. Others still were written by our colleagues in Munich or Athens, then translated into English. These too were essentially rehearsed as pieces of new writing. The independent scenes dealt with a broad variety of topics: for example, the challenges of finding practical ways to help refugees; the unspoken conflict between a woman about to leave the UK and her British husband; the experiences of a Turkish people smuggler forced to confront the consequences of negligence.

Meanwhile, the connected scenes were all scripted prior to the beginning of rehearsals. Though many of them were redrafted as rehearsals went on, the scripts were all considered as 'fixed' within the rehearsal room – the technical challenges of rehearsing via Skype meant that there was little scope for improvisation or adaptation. The technical problems – slow connection speeds, sound loops leading to echo – were resolved late in the rehearsal process which meant that the opportunity to rehearse the connected scenes in detail was limited. The connected scenes were therefore, frequently, more naturalistic and conservative in form than

had originally been intended. The exception to this was the *Emergency Call* scene, which related the story of a young boy trapped in a truck on the M1 who was able to reach help by phoning a volunteer he had met in a refugee camp. Because this scene was written as a series of telephone calls it was possible to rehearse the UK segments of the scene independently of the Athens and Munich parts; this gave us the opportunity to create a more stylised physical language for the British portion of the scenes, which made it the most successful of the connected scenes from the perspective of the UK creative team and, according to the post-show discussions, audience.

Table 1: Phone Home Scenes with Connection and Authorship

Scene	Connected/Independent	Authorship
Do It Like Charlize, Part 1	Connected	Greece
Help	Independent	Devised locally in all three countries
Long Distance	Connected	Germany
Every Time You Leave It's Like a Breakup	Broadcast	UK
Calling Centre	Independent	Greece
Leaving Home	Independent	Devised locally in all three countries
Memories of Leaving	Independent	Devised locally – in Germany and Greece this was a continuation of the 'Leaving Home' scene
Trafficker	Independent	Greece
Tips and Tricks for Leaving Europe	Independent	Devised locally in all three countries
The Officer	Broadcast	Germany
Emergency Call	Connected	UK
The Swimmer	Broadcast	Greece
Referendum	Connected	UK
Do It Like Charlize – Part 2	Connected	Greece
I Left	Independent	UK

Phone Home was therefore very successful in terms of dealing with a range of stories about migration and refugees in Europe. Authorship of the scenes was distributed evenly between the teams from London, Athens and Munich, meaning that the writing of the piece captured a broad range of perspectives and information gained from interviews and research.

The multifaceted nature of the piece led to an interesting diversity of response, as gathered both through press/online comments, and through comments in post-performance discussions. One scene which was particularly controversial in London was the two-part 'Do It Like Charlize', which bookended the performance. In this scene, a group of fundraisers are preparing a charity gala to raise money for refugees and migrants. While the characters' intentions are portrayed as honourable, they are also shown as both ignorant of the real needs of the people they purport to be trying to help, and as being highly self-aggrandizing.

This scene, written by the team in Greece, was received very differently in London and Athens. In London, it was brought up in almost all the eight post-show discussions, with audience members telling us it made them feel very uncomfortable; while *British Theatre Guide's* Keith McKenna wrote that his 'unease with the show really emerges with two cynical sketches mocking people's concern for refugees'. However, this scene was received very positively in Greece, and by the several audience members with Greek and Turkish backgrounds who came to see us in London, who had very different responses to the show (for example, 'words aren't enough to describe how incredible the performance was'). Engaging with this difference in the post-show discussions allowed us to see the very different ways in which humanitarian fundraising is viewed in the partner countries. While in the UK it's broadly seen as a positive contribution to helping people in need, in Greece this kind of charitable activity is often considered to be a way for rich and powerful people to burnish their own image without leading to long-term change – an idea which was highly provocative to our British-based audience.

The 'Charlize' scenes, and the response to them, are a compelling example of the way in which *Phone Home* told a broad range of stories about refugees and migration in Europe. They are also a challenge to our idea of 'excellence', since a theatrical gesture that felt powerful and effective to someone in or from Greece had a very different impact to British people watching it in London. It's possible that from the point of view of the British audience, these scenes were not 'excellent'; equally, though, they seem to have been a powerful provocation to thought, especially when paired with the opportunity to engage in discussion after the performance. *Phone Home's* unique model has demonstrated to us that 'excellence', in this context, may mean not only the skill and artistic integrity with which the piece is delivered, but also the power of its gesture to provoke, challenge and promote discussion.

Aim 2: Work on an international scale in order to reflect the scope of the crisis and the varying ways it is perceived in our different countries.

As described above, the two 'Charlize' scenes are a compelling indicator of the varying perceptions of the refugee situation in the different countries. Table 1, above, itemises the broad variety of the fifteen scenes presented. The combination of connected, independent and broadcast scenes was a response to the challenge of creating a piece of theatre that would engage a 'local' audience in London, Munich and Athens, while at the same time affording us opportunities to perform together. It was also a response to the technical difficulties in rehearsing 'connected' scenes: at the beginning of the process, for example, we had intended that 'Calling Centre' would be a connected scene but it became clear early in rehearsals that this would not be possible. After the experience of *Phone Home*, where we are now much clearer on the methodology of creating interconnected performance, future projects of this nature could include substantially more connected scenes. This could also include scenes which could have been devised collaboratively across all three countries rather than written in advance, which would add a new artistic layer to the project's discussion of the situations of refugees and migrants. The fullest possible realisation of the idea of 'interconnected

performance' would be to keep the live link between all three sites permanently engaged throughout the production.

Aim 3: Challenge prevailing narratives with regard to refugees and migrants.

In his review for *Disclaimer* magazine, Benjamin Cook wrote:

'Phone Home is also under no illusion to its own potency. These performers are self-aware enough to chide themselves for believing a play can change the world and confident enough to gently mock an audience looking for absolution in attending.'

We are more than aware of the inability of theatre, particularly a piece of theatre performed in a studio space across ten performances, to affect long-term change in and of itself. However, we are confident that as a piece of artistic work, *Phone Home* offered a strong challenge to the clichés and received wisdoms surrounding the refugee and migrant situation in Europe. As Cook wrote in his review, one of the key successes of the project was that it dramatized the stories 'not just the child refugees our press reviles, but of those for whom you would not expect to find sympathy, deportation officers trying to contextualise their own actions, or people smugglers and their motivations'. For those people who attended the performance in London, Athens or Munich or who watched it online, who were likely to have sufficient interest in the issues to want to watch a 90-minute piece of theatre about them, these dramaturgical choices offered an opportunity to challenge expectations and, with the Charlyze scenes, potentially to confront one's own self-image.

Alongside the theatre production, Upstart also produced a series of YouTube video interviews with participants from the Write to Life group at Freedom from Torture. These offer insights into the experience of people who've come to the UK as refugees, giving them an opportunity to speak in their own voice. While these interviews do not deal directly with the reasons why interviewees came to the UK, they are a compelling reminder of the human experience of forced migration in a climate increasingly hostile to refugees and migrants. These were shared on Upstart's YouTube channel and Facebook feed, as well as on the *Phone Home* website, in the run-up to the performances of *Phone Home*. They are also available for ongoing dissemination, for example as part of Upstart's participation in the forthcoming More in Common Festival organised by Hope Not Hate.

We do not consider our work in challenging prevailing attitudes with regards to refugees and migrants to be complete with our participation in *Phone Home*. One key element of the project has been the series of relationships built with organisations working directly with refugees and migrants in the UK. These include Counterpoints Arts, Freedom from Torture, Fairbeats Music, Action for Refugees in Lewisham, Love to Learn, Refugee Action Kingston, Birmingham LGBT Centre and Bards Without Borders. Additionally, *Phone Home* was the impetus for our Artistic Director being invited to speak at *Theatre After the Referendum* at Camden People's Theatre,

and to issue the invitation for Improbable's Devoted and Disgruntled event around Brexit. We are now much more personally and artistically invested in issues around refugees, migration and Europe, and have a contact base which will allow us to engage in further projects. For example, we are currently waiting on a funding application to run a combined drama and music project at Love to Learn in Wandsworth, alongside Fairbeats.

Aim 4: Provide a platform for refugees and migrants to share their experiences.

In our initial project plan, we intended that 'the stories of real people, gathered through workshops and interviews, will form the basis for the script'. This proved to be more difficult to achieve than initially expected, for several reasons. Regarding adult participants, we considered it inappropriate to directly question them regarding their reasons for coming to the UK, especially since many of the participants had come to us through Freedom from Torture and had therefore been the victims of trauma. Similarly, given that many of the workshop participants had come to us through Fairbeats and were therefore children, it was inappropriate to question them directly. However, material gathered through workshops and in conversations with these groups was highly informative in terms of the background of the piece, and reinforced the fundamental truth at the heart of *Phone Home*, which is that refugees and migrants are ordinary people with some extraordinary experiences.

Ultimately, *Phone Home* was created through a variety of means. Some of the scenes were informed directly through conversations which took place around workshops; for example, the *Calling Centre* scene was inspired by a conversation between the writing team and a participant in Athens. Other scenes were based around newspaper articles: such as *Emergency Call*, based on a news report, and *The Officer*, which was based on an interview with a German immigration official. Others, such as *Help*, were borne out of the artists' own experience. The artists' desire to create a compelling and challenging series of scenes for the audience was ultimately, given a higher priority than the direct presentation of the voices of refugees and migrants. The video interviews mentioned above allowed an opportunity to balance this, as did the presentation of Write to Life's own verbatim theatre piece, *Souvenirs*, as part of Upstart's DARE Festival in April 2016. Several of the performers in the UK production of *Phone Home* also had a background involving migration.

Aim 5: Offer refugees and migrants the opportunity to develop their confidence, English skills and wellbeing through participating in performance and writing workshops.

The workshops were one of the most successful elements of the project, with very positive feedback received from participants and partner organisations. The workshops in Birmingham were particularly well documented. These took place from 21st to 24th March at Birmingham Repertory Theatre, and were organised in collaboration with Journey MCC Church and the Birmingham LGBT Centre. All of the participants were asylum seekers and the majority were

from LGBT backgrounds. The participants highlighted both the opportunity to develop their skills in spoken and written English, and more broadly the sense of confidence and wellbeing the workshop series offered:

“As an asylum seeker at this moment we are not given opportunities to show our skills. We are not given opportunities to work. All we do is lay, we stay at home. We just feel hopeless at home. So once these come up, we always want to participate. To show we are not hopeless as society think us. So I’m very motivated and want to go for it anytime. I hope that you people have learned from us that we are not hopeless people, being left in the home, not given responsibilities.”

One key learning outcome of the workshop for us was that, for asylum seekers, an intensive workshop over a period of consecutive days is a more attractive offer than the same amount of time offered as a weekly session. We had hoped to offer a weekly session as a longer-term project for participants, but the participants were less keen on this as a) they are likely to be moved by the Home Office at short notice and b) one of the major attractions of the four-day workshop was the chance to be intensively engaged in an activity. One of the biggest problems facing asylum seekers is that they do not have the right to work; given that they are also likely to have no money, this means that they spend a great deal of time with very little to do. Upstart is keen to organise future projects with adult asylum seekers; we know now that these will need to take place in short, intensive blocks.

For our other participant groups, we were largely in the position of ‘adding value’ to existing workshop offers, by bringing our unique skill set as theatre makers. Our two workshops with Write to Life, for example, offered the group the opportunity to explore monologue writing in addition to their existing experience with writing short stories and poetry. Meanwhile, with the workshops alongside Fairbeats at AFRIL, Love to Learn and RAK, we added playful drama workshop elements to their existing music workshops, which was greatly enjoyed by participants.

Aim 6: Offer a long-term legacy by training staff and clients of refugee organisations in performance and theatre making.

Following the success of the workshops alongside Fairbeats at Action for Refugees in Lewisham, AFRIL invited Tom Mansfield to lead a training session for staff and volunteers in using theatre techniques in the classroom. This focused on word games and image theatre, both of which are useful and appropriate at the Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 level. However, the key legacy of the Fairbeats workshops has proved to be the ongoing relationship with that organisation. While training AFRIL staff and volunteers in drama techniques is both useful and fun, these individuals are already dealing with significant responsibilities in supporting their young people’s learning especially in numeracy and literacy, and have limited time to add in additional theatre making activities. Upstart’s ongoing relationship with Fairbeats will have the potential to offer young people access to

theatre, as well as music, in a way that complements their other, more curriculum-based learning.

Aim 7: Expand access to culture through offering 10% of our tickets for free to refugees and migrants via our partner organisations.

Take up in this area was lower than expected. Our participants from Birmingham were unable to make the journey to London to see the show, while the participants from the Fairbeats workshops were too young for the production to be age-appropriate. Ten people, including staff and clients, from Freedom from Torture attended the production. This represents 2% of the 468 tickets sold for the production, significantly below our target figure. Building relationships with more London-based groups, and/or organising a screening in Birmingham, would have offered more people from refugee backgrounds the chance to attend. Unfortunately, we did not have the capacity to achieve this since invitations were made at the busiest point of the production, immediately prior to opening. In future, we would need to have a staff member with the specific responsibility for reaching out to refugee and migrant groups – for example a Participation Officer.

Aim 8: Provide opportunities for performers from BAME backgrounds, reflecting the participants we are working with.

The four performers in *Phone Home* were from a broad range of backgrounds, with three of the four performers having at least one parent born outside the UK. This was essential to reflect the transnational stories being told. It also represents significant progress in increasing the ethnic and national diversity of Upstart's on stage output: our other productions since 2012 have almost exclusively featured actors from 'white British' backgrounds. Additionally, four members of our production team both themselves migrants, or the children of migrants, from non-EU countries: the USA, Zimbabwe and Australia.

Alongside this diversity within the company, we provided performance opportunities for Write to Life and Bards Without Borders as part of DARE Festival in April. Each of these groups was composed of people who had come to the UK as refugees or migrants.

Aim 9: Expand access to culture by making the project freely available on online platforms, including livestreamed performances.

All ten performances of *Phone Home* were livestreamed, along with their post-show discussions. According to our partners Cortex Media, there were 1084 total viewing sessions throughout the course of the run. Additionally, 37 people watched a screening of the live stream at Bradford Cathedral, and 10 people watched a screening at the University of South Wales. This gives us a total of 1,131 viewers for the live streamed performances: more than two and a half times the number of people who watched the production live at Shoreditch Town Hall.

The live stream remains available on request at the Phone Home website: viewers can click through the link and are then invited to email Upstart for a password.

Alongside the live streams, 849 people had engaged with additional project video content by the end of January 2017. This included:

- The trailer for the Shoreditch Town Hall performances (477 views) and online streams (80 views);
- The interviews with Write to Life members (115 views);
- The music video made by Fairbeats for the song 'Home Sweet Home' (130 views);
- Archived video of the live streams (47 views).

The final digital offer will be the documentary film about the making of *Phone Home* by Rebecca Kenyon of Mote of Dust Films. This is being completed at the time of writing this report. In the first instance, this film will be submitted to film festivals, before being live streamed and then posted on the Upstart Theatre YouTube channel and the *Phone Home* website.

Taken together, the digital offer for *Phone Home* has so far reached at least 1,980 people. Expanding our offer using digital technology has been a great success for *Phone Home*, enabling us to massively expand the reach of the project.

Aim 10: Develop our practice through working with our international partner artists, sharing skills and techniques for theatre making.

The relationship with our international partners was one of the most unique elements of *Phone Home*. It was continuously rewarding, sometimes combative, and ultimately creatively fruitful. Conversations with our partners following the completion of the project have mainly revolved around the limited amount of time we had to work together in the same physical space. During the process itself, tensions tended to run high during 'connected' rehearsals. Even when the technology worked smoothly, which was something we could only rely on by end of the rehearsal process, it was challenging for the directors to communicate using microphones which were being worn by the actors! In hindsight, we would have liked to have spent more time with the teams from all three countries working together in the same rehearsal space, or perhaps in three rooms on the same site. This would have allowed us to communicate quickly and efficiently on specific scenes. It would also have allowed us opportunities to create more material collaboratively with the actors from all three countries.

One major challenge throughout the process – emphasised by the difficulties in digital communication – was the difference between the approaches to theatre making across the three teams. Approaches to aesthetics and to creative leadership differed, not only between the three directors, but also within the three companies. While we found in London that there was much to be gained by combining different styles within the team – the Upstart cast's

experience ranged from new writing to physical performance to immersive and interactive theatre – it was much more difficult to overcome these differences within the international group. During our ‘kick-off’ workshop in Athens these differences came to the fore, with the German actors, who come from more of an experimental performance background, questioning the apparently hierarchical nature of the model we had been using to test the interconnected scenes. The differences in style and approach were ultimately contained within the dramaturgy of the project: interconnected scenes tended towards the naturalistic, whereas the independent, devised scenes allowed each of the teams a freer hand to make work in their own way. In the future, spending more time working together in the same space would allow us to gain a greater understanding of one another’s working processes, both through observation and through allowing, for example, the British actors to be directed by the Greek director.

We also were forced to grapple with the complex issue of creative control in a multi-authored work. There were six designated ‘writers’ (three dramaturg-playwrights and three directors each contributed material prior to the start of rehearsal) and, in the UK team, all four actors devised part of their own material. While we are very used to dealing with this devising process as a company, it became much more challenging in rehearsing the connected scenes. At times, it was unclear which of the three directors should be taking responsibility for a scene – whether it should be the director whose team originated the scene (e.g. the Greek director for the ‘Charlize’ scenes) or whether each director should take responsibility for the stage in their own country. While communication on these questions was mostly very collaborative, the lack of clarity may have led to some unnecessary compromises being made in the staging of some scenes.

All this said, there was a great deal gained from collaborating with our international partners. We gained inspiration, in particular, from working alongside our German colleagues, who tended to work in a more image-focused way than ourselves; while the playfulness of the Greek team was very engaging. The ‘Referendum’ scene provided a striking example of this difference in approach. The British team took the ‘speaking parts’ in this scene, which is written in the form of a ‘fairy story’. The spoken text was punctuated and underscored by music, played on the stage in Athens. The relationship between the London and Athens stages was therefore very direct. Meanwhile, the German team constructed an image of the entire company eating a meal with their bare hands, using extreme close-ups for the live feed. Watching this sequence on stage in London, therefore, our audience was confronted with a striking combination of images – the Blue Peter style performances of the British actors and the clown-like Greek performances were juxtaposed with something much more visceral in Germany – which spoke strongly to the scene’s subtext. At times like this, the combination of different styles and approaches felt very powerful.

Our relationship with the German production team and artistic directorate was particularly fruitful, and this has led to us for applying for Creative Europe funding to do another project together in 2017-2018. *The Chorus Project* will build on the lessons learned in *Phone Home*, providing substantially more opportunities for us to work together during the developmental

phases, followed by an independent rehearsal process and then a coming-together for the presentation phase.

Going forward, we also feel that this kind of collaborative project would benefit from more co-ordination at the production management level. Rather than have three separate teams attempting to co-ordinate, with the many opportunities for miscommunication this creates, our production manager suggested that a better model might be to have one production manager with overall responsibility for planning and co-ordination, with assistants in all three locations with responsibility for implementation. This would enable a more standardised approach, with, for example, the technical setups for the live stream being the same in all three cities.

Aim 11: Document the process via the project website, providing a free resource for theatremakers, refugee and migrant organisations, and the public.

Throughout the making of *Phone Home*, we documented the process on the website. This included descriptions of workshop processes, articles about challenges and ideas from the directors, writers and producers, and comments on the actors' experiences. The website was also used to publish evaluation documents, such as Upstart's report on the *Nine Lives* live stream from January 2016, and dissemination documents such as *Phone Home: A User's Guide to Making and Sharing Digital Collaborative Performance*, which was published in January 2017. At time of writing, the website has had 5,391 sessions from 3,681 unique users. Given that there were 1,084 views of the live stream, this suggests that up to 2,697 people accessed content from the website without viewing the live stream.

Take up of our digital offer therefore seems to have been a success. Going forward, we believe the quality of our content can still be improved: particularly, we would like to offer more video and interactive content rather than text-based material.

Final thoughts

Overall, we are pleased and proud with the successes of *Phone Home*. Three theatre companies from three very different European theatre cultures came together to produce a timely, resonant and compelling piece of theatre which stretched the boundaries of the medium. We benefited greatly from the opportunity to collaborate with our international partners, and at the same time we established links with organisations who are doing vital work with refugees and migrants here in the UK. *Phone Home's* combination of theatrical experiment and community engagement has established a paradigm for future Upstart projects. Engaging with live streaming has abled us to radically expand the digital offer that we can make with our own productions, and to offer this as a service to other theatre companies. Working on the project has taught us that theatre is still best created through a group of makers working together in the same space; but at the same time, *Phone Home* is a powerful statement about the possibilities of collaboration: between professional artists from different cultures, and between professional and non-professional artists.

