

Dickens 2012: Living Cities

Interview with Owen Calvert-Lyons; Creative Learning Manager, Arcola Theatre and Pete Higgin; Enrichment Director, Punchdrunk.

What inspired you to create *The Uncommercial Traveller*?

Pete: It was an idea that originated with Punchdrunk: we were looking to do a piece of participatory theatre based in our immediate community of Hackney and Shoreditch and we were looking for a subject matter / source material that would resonate in that locality – and we kept coming back to and across Dickens in references to the East End of London and thought that that would be a great source material to use in the creation of a community participation project. We then partnered with the Arcola Theatre – we were always interested in working with an older group of participants and it just so happened that the Arcola Theatre is in Hackney and have an older group of people and the Arcola and Punchdrunk have always had a collection based on locality and also in terms of a shared ethos in the way that they approach space and the way they approach participation and make work.

Owen: From our point of view partnering with Punchdrunk on this project was going to be exciting, but for our 60+ theatre company we are always working with them to explore the local community and the link that that has to them personally and how you create art that lets them explore that. So Dickens gave us a really good vehicle of somebody who had explored London and also is one of the voices synonymous with London as a world city and allowed us to work with local participants: for them to explore the city of London but perhaps even within that, the community of Dalston and what it means to them and what that might mean for an audience and to see if we could recreate the feeling of reading a Dickens novel, or in the case of *The Uncommercial Traveller*, a non-fiction piece: whether we could create something which allowed an audience to share that experience.

How is the project going to work overseas – in Pakistan in particular?

Owen: Initially when we built the version of this project that would work internationally we envisioned finding communities within cities across the globe and using a similar model to the one we used in London to find a way of them engaging with their local community with the space in which they live and to begin to tell a story of a 21st Century city with again, that sense of keeping it within the Dickens theme – this idea of what it is to be curious – what it is to walk around the streets and explore somewhere you don't know and to allow your mind to wander. I think what we've built in Karachi is very exciting – it's a slightly different version to that, where we have chosen a building we are interested in and a group of young Pakistani students who are training at the National Academy of Performing Arts (NAPA) which is the only drama school training in Pakistan. We are working with them over the course of a week to develop a production which allows them to explore their relationship to this building which we'll ultimately invite audiences to be curious – to explore that building and to discover the stories within that structure.

Pete: It's important to add that we're going to go through a process with the students in Karachi and what we create could be sound based, could be audio based, but at the same time there might be elements of performance in there which is slightly different to the way we'd planned the project in other cities and it's important to note that the sound journey for our audience for our work in London was a really important way of setting up the piece and we were really excited to explore how the piece could have a reach beyond London and this idea of an audio tour of NAPA in Karachi or of Melbourne or somewhere in Malaysia or Singapore was really exciting. It was a really versatile way of taking the piece out of London and to cities beyond.

Owen: Another important point within that is that we are going to build it in each country in the same manner we built it in the UK, but this is not a London production being taken around the world – in Karachi this will be a production that is very much 'of Karachi' – we'll be working with the students there and facilitating them to develop this production and so in each city it will be completely different, completely unique and it will really belong to that city.

Pete: And importantly it will be participant led which I think from both mine and Owens's points of view in terms of the roles we fulfil in our individual companies is at the heart of the work that we do.

As the project is part of the Dickens 2012 celebrations it's very interesting to see the links between places across the world and Dickens – do you have any thoughts on how Dickens' might work in these different cities and environments?

Owen: I think Pakistan is particularly interesting – Dickens is reportedly more read in India and Pakistan than he is in the UK. While out there a few weeks ago working with students all of them had read Dickens at a very young age – much younger than I think we would tackle it in schools in the UK. So all of them had read some of his novels at age 10, but actually for them it feels like it's part of their heritage – it's something that everybody studies at school, but equally it wasn't something that people were very aware of: when I asked them to give me a quick breakdown of the events with Oliver Twist it didn't bear much resemblance to the original novel! So I think that's really interesting as I think that's something that our audiences will probably share – there is a kind of distant connection to his work and a feeling that it is part of their heritage but at the same time not something that feels very recent to them and so hopefully that will be something that will excite them to explore Dickens as it will feel like something that doesn't come easily or readily to them.

Pete: And the interesting thing as well is that we're interested in the process and we're interested in this non-fiction piece of work called The Uncommercial Traveller which we found out about by exploring our immediate environment in London and because we were looking for inspiration and so we came across Dickens like that and what interested us was the process of thinking that Dickens could have walked these streets and finding out what he found out about the city and about characters and about places and how potentially you can see the links between what he discovered in the East End of London and the characters he creates in his stories. And I think there is a sense there that connect Dickens to what it means to be British – or what it meant to be British or what Britain was as a country at the time of Dickens so I think there is something in walking and in thinking and in discovering and being curious which in a sense created this idea o'f 'Britishness' and Dickens encapsulated that quite well but the idea of discovery and walking and of creating something- that is quite universal so it'll be interesting to see how taking this process to different countries – whether we'll find a sense of the voice of Pakistan or the voice of Melbourne or the voice of Singapore. So actually, for me, the interesting thing is not about exploring Hard Times or Oliver Twist with these cities but actually exploring the way Dickens explored London but in those other cities – taking a process as opposed to a product but then coming up with something which maybe doesn't even sound anything like Dickens but kind of started in London and putting it as a template in different cities and seeing actually what we discover; as again its about asking people to become Dickens in a sense and asking them to repeat this process and see what they find out and in a sense that parallels the idea that Dickens was about discovering and telling hidden stories within his immediate community and I think that will be an exciting parallel which we'll be able to draw upon and explore in these different countries.