

# A beacon of hope

How theatre is being used as a tool for communication, empowerment and healing for refugees in Malaysia.

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THE two Somalian children, both about five or six years of age, hid amidst the huddle of Somalian women (mainly) and men. As they took tiny surreptitious peeks at this writer and other "strange" people around, more Somalian refugees packed into the living room of the small flat in Gombak in KL. They were there to learn of their rights as displaced citizens so far away from home.

Refugees have a raw deal in many countries. They cannot live safely, move freely, work or attend school.

"Reaching out to the newcomers, I quickly discovered that our traditional presentation format was not appropriate to their level of literacy, leaving most participants staring blankly at the power point slides," said Nazim Bashir, the community outreach coordinator of Asylum Access, at this gathering.

He usually provides informative handouts and conducts a power point presentation to show the refugees their options – focusing on aspects of health, livelihoods, education and general protection.

Asylum Access, a Malaysian-registered NGO and part of the Asylum Access family of organisations, was launched in 2014.

It provides direct legal services for refugees and asylum seekers, Know-Your-Options trainings, and engagement with UNHCR and other stakeholders in Malaysia's refugee rights movement. But it needed to cut through the language barriers in a creative way.

"So we got together with Bond Street Theater of New York and Masakini Theatre Company in Malaysia to use theatre to replace the power point presentation," said Nazim.

In the room full of Somalian refugees, Bond Street Theater's Michael McGuigan and Joanna Sherman stood in front of the "packed" house, showing them how to express themselves through theatre drama.

Bond Street Theater, set up in 1976, creates performances that illustrate important social issues, and use the arts to educate, inspire, and heal in areas of conflict, poverty and post-war rehabilitation. It looked the perfect fit to engage this curious crowd.

With the Masakini actors, McGuigan and Sherman put together a vaudeville-styled scene which combined slapstick comedy gestures to impart valuable "refugee rights" information narrated by Masakini artistic director Sabera Shaik, then translated into Somalian.

Masakini, set up in 2003, connects with the grassroots com-

munity here, through theatre and the teaching of English. With this inspiring Masakini and Bond Street Theater collaboration, there was much laughter and fun to be had. The refugees, most importantly, were also made aware of their rights through the performances, delivered in such an entertaining, memorable and positive way.

This was just one of a few different theatre for refugees gatherings initiated by Asylum Access Malaysia, Masakini and Bond Street Theater.

Sabera is currently rehearsing with Rohingya women refugees and Masakini actors for the Hans Christian Andersen story of *The Shadow*. The show is scheduled to play at Studio Ramli Hassan, Bukit Tunku in Kuala Lumpur from Feb 8-10.

"These women connect emotionally and naturally with the theatre because they have so much to draw from – strife, trauma and displacement," said Sabera.

The Rohingya actors (ages 21 to 38), reveals Sabera, have all been child brides, and all have children of their own.

"They all have their own tragic tales of how they came to be refugees in the first place," she added.

"The realities of life are seen on stage and they have gone through that emotion, physical and mental. The strength of their own human spirit keeps them going. Theatre offers them release, it is a balm for their pain. It rejuvenates them."

Their rehearsals with Masakini members like Stephen Megam, Muaz Naufal, Mei Yee Yap and Nik Haslina Hew recently also included a valuable lesson on "biometrics" conducted by international performing arts lecturer Dr Ralf Rauker.

Biomechanics is a non-realistic, stylised and movement-centred system of actor training.

It was heartwarming to see how theatre through gestures, actions, expressions united the actors and revealed that commonality in all of us – the Malaysian actors, themselves of various races, working so well with four women whose lives have been so different from theirs.

Sherman, the artistic director of Bond Street Theater, concluded: "Once, while working in a refugee camp outside Kosovo, a doctor confided to us: 'We are providing refugees the necessities for human survival (food, medicine, shelter) but you are providing them with food for the soul ... you are restoring their humanity.'"

Masakini presents *The Shadow* at Studio Ramli Hassan, Jalan Tepian Tunku, Bukit Tunku in KL on Feb 8-10. More info: [www.theatreantics.com](http://www.theatreantics.com).



Michael McGuigan of Bond Street Theater with Muaz Naufal from Masakini playing out a theatre skit in front of a group of Rohingya refugees. — Bond Street Theater

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