

This paper was first delivered at London Metropolitan University in May 2004 as part of a series: *On Location: women, place and representation*. Lucy Richardson is a Senior Lecturer in Performing Arts at the London Metropolitan University and Phakama founder member.

## **PHAKAMA: A PLACE OF REFUGE**

Tony Fegan, Director of Learning for LIFT (London International Festival of Theatre) in a talk about the South African arts project Phakama made this statement:

*Project Phakama challenges notions of what theatre is, where it can happen and, most importantly, who can be involved.*<sup>1</sup>

Firstly in this article I want to describe and contextualize the work we do with Project Phakama and to try and pinpoint exactly what it is that is referred to as ‘the Phakama Process’: (something which even those of us who have been involved for some time find it difficult to describe).

Secondly I want to explore how this process operated most recently when working with young asylum seekers and refugees in London on a project called Strange Familiars.

I hope to argue that Phakama can function both metaphorically and in reality as a place of refuge for those involved with it. I will argue that it represents, a creative place, a social place, a safe place, a performance place and most importantly an imaginative place. A place where art is created, and finally that the art itself becomes a place where diverse aspects of the participants lives, the strange and the familiar, the future, past and present can co-exist.

## **PROJECT PHAKAMA**

**Phakama is the Xhosa word for rise up, lift up, elevate . . . . .**

In 1996 a group of artists from UK, under the auspices of LIFT, travelled to Benoni, Johannesburg, South Africa to work with artists, educators, semi-professional performers and young people. The project aimed to provide training for those working in the community and to create a large scale, site specific performance project. It was here that Phakama was born. The performance, described in South African Daily Star as a

*‘Visually breathtaking theatrical experience’*<sup>2</sup>

had been a great success. However, perhaps more importantly, those involved realized they had been involved in a highly unusual and exciting creative process. Since then Phakama (now a limited company and registered charity in South Africa and London) has provided a structure for many small and large scale performance projects involving artists

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Fegan, Director of Lift Learning, 1996

<sup>2</sup> ‘An exchange of telling stories’ Adrienne Sichel, South African Daily Star, Thursday Sept 5<sup>th</sup> 1996

and participants from 8 different countries and three continents. Phakama operates locally and comes together intermittently on an International level – most recently Fabio Santos (choreographer) and I travelled to Morija in Lesotho to work with 14 artists from 7 different countries and 50 participants from Lesotho. At Phakama’s heart is the bringing together of diverse peoples: young women from Deptford with young women from Cape Town, young people from Lesotho with a choreographer from Mozambique, an actor from Pune with street kids from Bombay, a graphic designer from U.K with asylum seekers from Liberia, a clown from France with a young woman from Somalia.

So Phakama is a network and a support group. Phakama is also a philosophy: of education, creativity and performance. Part of our mission statement reads:

*Project Phakama is committed to the practice of cultural exchange and the celebration of a shared experience by promoting a participant centered and non-hierarchical educational philosophy through the medium of the arts.<sup>3</sup>*

### **Phakama as a place of creativity**

Phakama offers a place/a space which encourages creative exchange. Phakama believes that the place where different cultures meet is often a place of intense creativity.

The wonderful thing about Phakama is that the whole process happens in the moment. There is no individual director as such, there is little forward planning. First a group of people are identified to work on the project. These groups are chosen to ensure a cultural mix to enable creative and cultural exchange. We usually start with a title, which in its invention probably has a theme integral to it, but once we have the title we cease to refer to the theme: some of the titles have been Izimbadada or If I Were in Your Shoes (1997, London) Met’n Sak Onner die Bladd or A Suitcase in My Hand, (1998, Cape Town) Be Yourself,(1999, London) Call Me Not A Woman, (2000, North West Province, South Africa) The Child I Curry, (2003, Lesotho) Strange Familiars.(2003/4, London)

Each individual or group brings to the project a response to the title, which we share. Often the hidden theme is not overtly seen in this response and so we approach the work from a fractured and wide ranging set of ideas. Apart from that, the creative process completely happens within the week/two weeks/three weeks of the project. Inspiration is drawn heavily from the physical space that the project is taking place in, locating responses to the title in a particular environment and exploring individual responses to that environment. So in Morija we explored the mountains which surround the small town. In London we traipsed around the city, (a group of about 50 of us from South Africa and UK), intermittently breaking into song and dance. When we were based at the Horniman Museum in Forest Hill the museum itself, with its cultural, historical, artistic artifacts, became a place to respond to.

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<sup>3</sup> Project Phakama Mission Statement

It is hard to describe a creative process which is so participant centred. I remember first working on a project being terrified. I was used to creatively controlling things, making decisions and authoring the work and here I was being expected to work in a seemingly chaotic democratic situation over which I felt I had little control. The emphasis on forms and images emerging out of an almost random and chaotic collecting of ideas, before being woven together by a group, interests me now. Complexity theory demonstrates that order often emerges from apparently chaotic situations. Phakama works on the basis that you don't design a show but rather a capacity, a structure from which a show can emerge. It is significant that in many African myths the creation is depicted as an on going process, a developing, an unfolding. One in particular describes how the universe evolved out of four elements being woven together to create a new thing. Contemporary African weavers are seen to be symbolically re-enacting this event. The Phakama process resembles the process of weaving.

At the start of each creative process we make a skills wheel. Each individual involved in the project whether they be experienced producer, international artist, social worker or young person new to the arts contributes to the wheel. We all identify at least one thing we can **give** and one which we hope to **gain** from the project. This makes explicit the two way learning process but also encourages individuals to celebrate their skills, value their contributions and feel responsible for the creative work. The final wheel acts as a reminder not only of what skills we are lacking but of what exchange we hope to achieve by the end of the project. As an image it represents the cycle of creativity.

M.Csikszentmihalyi's, essay Implications of a Systems Perspective, has informed my thinking about Phakama's creative processes. In opposition to much writing about creativity he does not see it only as the province of the individual. He explores the cultural and social aspects which affect creativity. He describes the cultural or symbolic aspects as the 'domain' and the social aspect as the 'field.' His argument is that creativity only exists where individuals (psychological), domains (cultural/symbolic) and fields (social) interact. He asserts

*What we call creativity always involves a change in a symbolic system, a change that in turn will affect the thoughts and feelings of the members of the culture. Thus, creativity pre-supposes a community of people who share ways of thinking and acting, who learn from each other and imitate each others actions* <sup>4</sup>

Phakama hopes to establish such a community where creativity can flourish. Much of the work involved in Phakama is about cherishing and developing such a community. (I will go on to talk about how this happens later in the article).

Csikszentmihalyi's argument goes on to suggest that

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<sup>4</sup> M. Csikszentmihalyi 'Implications of a Systems Perspective' *Hand book of Creativity* Robert. J. Sternberg (Ed) p. 316

*'Societies located at the confluence of diverse cultural streams can benefit more easily from that synergy of different ideas that is so important for the creative process.'*<sup>5</sup>

At the centre of Phakama's work is the celebration and sharing of cultures. We work hard to ensure that there is a cultural mix in terms of age, race, language, gender, sexuality etc. When working in this way it is essential to ensure that all voices are heard and all cultures valued equally. In Phakama this process of approval is both democratic and unspoken. We try to ensure that all ideas are given equal approval. None are thrown out at once; all are stored in some form or another. Then ideas are re-visited and elements of them incorporated or lost. Sometimes they are re-visited much later.

Csikszentmihalyi's argues that, from a systems perspective, in order for a creative act to thrive it must be approved by those given power to pronounce it 'creative'. These groups or individuals are collectively designated the '*field*'. Regardless of how creative an individual is, their creativity might not be acknowledged, unless they interact effectively with the '*field*'.

*Changes are not adopted unless they are sanctioned by some group entitled to make decisions as to what should or should not be included in the domain.*<sup>6</sup>

In Phakama there is no individual or small group who are given that power. Indeed in this context the '*field*' includes the entire group. On any Phakama project, the group as a whole decide what is to be kept and what lost, even if the group is over 100 people, as it was in Cape Town. So the power of approval is given to the whole group rather than one particular person.

Thus I believe the Phakama Culture, one which fulfils Csikszentmihalyi's criteria of a *sharing community with diverse cultures* which gives its entire membership the power of approval.

This process, as you can imagine, is a very complex one (particularly in South Africa where the dynamics of power are bubbling with history and memory). However it is one which we protect avidly. Often we have long protracted meetings where we unpick every aspect of a problem or an idea, sometimes people feel that they have not been listened to and so we have to re-visit something, often there are heated debates and sometimes tears, but my experience is that eventually this democratic process reaps results. This is acknowledged in the evaluation of one young South African Woman, Cynthia Skhosana after the Cape Town project:

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<sup>5</sup> M. Csikszentmihalyi 'Implications of a Systems Perspective' *Hand book of Creativity* Robert. J. Sternberg (Ed) p. 323

<sup>6</sup> M. Csikszentmihalyi 'Implications of a Systems Perspective' *Hand book of Creativity* Robert. J. Sternberg (Ed)

*The work with young people from other South African provinces was fantastic. It was empowering for us all. I have learnt to work with people from different cultures with patience and dignity, because we are not all the same and yet we can share everything.*<sup>7</sup>

### **Phakama is a place which values art and art making:**

Lyn Gardner's review of Be Yourself described it as

*'one of the most moving, exuberant and visually stunning shows seen in London'*<sup>8</sup>

At the centre of all Phakama work is a drive to create good art. All the facilitators are first and foremost artists, and chosen for the variety of skills they possess. Many of them are committed to the project despite very poor payment. I think this is because the creative process can reap such unique results. Always there are wonderful moments of sharing and community and elements of performance which have a character which could not have been created through any other process. I will use a couple of shows to provide examples.

Early on in the process of developing the Strange Familiars show at Stephenson Hall, (working with unaccompanied refugees and asylum seekers in London), one of the participants, in describing her experience of having to leave her own country, said *'My dreams are frozen'*. This idea was recorded both on paper and in the minds of the participants. Later we ran a writing workshop where we wrote about our dreams on postcards. In the final performance a trolley filled with ice and the dream cards was wheeled by two participants who were singing a Portuguese folk song and calling for the audience's dreams. The trolley wasn't designed by the young woman who first said my dreams are frozen, and she was not one of the performers, but her idea and her experience had been made real. It was a very moving moment.

In Cape Town, South Africa, whilst working on A Suitcase in My Hand (with young people from all over South Africa), we visited Robben Island where Mandela had been imprisoned. There, in the stone quarry, is a large pile of stones which had been ritually built by the political prisoners held there. We stood around this pile of stones silently together. It was an image which kept recurring as we worked. Finally in the performance the audience stood around a huge fire surrounded by participants who sang a wonderful African anthem and then one by one gave a stone to an audience member, who was encouraged to place it in a pile by the fire. This ritual took some time but its power was sustained by the memory of that moment by the 'real' stones in Robben Island.

The visit in London to Steven Lawrence's memorial mentioned earlier also found itself in a show: Be Yourself (Tricycle Theatre, 1999). Be Yourself was essentially a performance about London, we – 10 artists, 20 young British people and 20 young South Africans – visited Stephen Lawrence's memorial, which is a plaque on the ground on the spot where he died in Eltham. It took us a long time to get there on several buses and our journey

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<sup>7</sup> Participant evaluation A Suitcase in My Hand, 1998

<sup>8</sup> *Phakama: Be yourself*: Lyn Gardner: The Guardian, July 5<sup>th</sup> 1999.

was accompanied by the call and response song which the South Africans brought with them. When we got to the memorial one of the black British young people told the story of Stephen Lawrence. The young South Africans were amazed. Many of them had not expected to find any examples of racism here in UK, for others it brought back memories of equally atrocious acts of violence in their own lives. Some of the young UK people had never been to Eltham. We stood there for some time until the South Africans spontaneously broke into a South African Mourning song. It was a very moving moment.

The section that dealt with this in the show was particularly charged when Mr Lawrence was in the audience. Lyn Gardner in her Guardian review describes it:

*'At one point after the cast have given their individual responses to the murder of Stephen Lawrence, they come round with bowls of water and offer to wash the audience's hands'.<sup>9</sup>*

At the end of the show one of the South African participants asked Mr Lawrence to join in the final celebratory dance, he politely declined saying he had promised himself he would not dance again until his sons killers had been brought to justice.

Always, because the entire content of the shows has been developed out of the participants experiences, responses, ideas they demonstrate an enormous commitment in their performances and an intensity which they want to share.

### **Phakama as a performance place**

Phakama, partly out of a necessity which has developed into a philosophy, has always performed in a site specific way, breaking traditional boundaries of what theatre is and refusing to be bound by any particular cultural form. We have performed in warehouses, in two domestic houses on either side of a street, in a children's home, in a garden, in a museum. The diverse and shared cultures of the participants is reflected in the refusal of the art work to be confined by one place in particular or one space.

A review in a British Council paper describes the opening of The Child I Curry (Lesotho 2003):

*Follow the Bird. Follow Your Dreams' chant over 60 Basotho young people. They circle us with paper birds, and then, as a flock, escape through the windows and out into the garden beyond. We follow. And so begins our journey.<sup>10</sup>*

The non-theatre sites bring the art closer to the reality of people's lives and make it more accessible to audiences. Many of the local people who watched The Child I Curry had never been inside a traditional theatre. This is in line with African traditions of performance, where the produce/consumer model of performer/audience relationship is

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<sup>9</sup> *Phakama: Be yourself*: Lyn Gardner: The Guardian, July 5<sup>th</sup> 1999.

<sup>10</sup> *Children's rights take centre stage in Lesotho*: Caroline Calburn and Lucy Richardson in *Connecting British Council: Feb – April 2003*

less apparent. African audiences are rarely quiet and often involved in the performance in some way. The definitions are more blurred. The distance between a Phakama performance and a real life ritual is a small one, as evidenced in this description of part of the very first Phakama performance from the Johannesburg Guardian in July 1999:

*The evening which began at sunset ended in a fire display which illuminated a huge Khosa wedding dance to include all the audience.<sup>11</sup>*

Phakama performances do not really end. Instead the dancing starts and the audience join in and it continues under the stars until everyone decides to go home. Performance merges into party, uniting audience and participants.

### **STRANGE FAMILIARS**

With these central tenets in mind the way in which this network and philosophy has developed in UK is to work with young unaccompanied refugees and asylum seekers from all over the world who have found themselves resident in London. We obtained substantial funding from NIACE (The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education) to set up a two year project. We worked with unaccompanied refugees and asylum seekers from three London Boroughs, and recruiting via the refugee council, the young refugee health zone, and Southwark Social Services. We titled our project Strange Familiars.

Using the Phakama way, Strange Familiars, worked to create large scale site specific performance projects which involved the young refugees and, more recently integrated them with young British born people. We have staged two large scale performances as part of two LIFT festivals in and around the Stephenson Hall which is part of the National Children's Home, and in and around the Horniman Museum in Forest Hill. It is the former which I will focus on in this article. Strange Familiars comprises participants from the age of 13 to 19 who come from different countries such as: Afghanistan, Albania, Angola, Ethiopia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Kosovo, Rwanda, Somalia, Togo, Uganda, Vietnam, and Kenya. And a group of artist facilitators from all disciplines from many parts of the world aged between 20 and 55.

#### **Phakama as a family, a home, a social place**

The project report for Strange Familiars (written by Fabio Santos) tries to describe the present experience of our participants as they arrive at our project:

*Life in London is very volatile and uncertain. They wait for places in schools and access to doctors. Many are in temporary (often inadequate) accommodation and rely on limited financial support from Social Services. In addition, cultural differences, language and poverty are all contributors to alienation, isolation, exclusion and depression. They deal constantly with hostility and racism aggravated by media reports and the inflammatory*

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<sup>11</sup> 'An exchange of telling stories' Adrienne Sichel, South African Daily Star, Thursday Sept 5<sup>th</sup> 1996

*language of the tabloids. Furthermore, as the young people come from many different countries and are living in London alone, they are not part of an existing community structure and their feeling of “belonging” does not exist. Many do not speak good English.*<sup>12</sup>

However, it is important to remember, that their present is only a product of having to deal with their past. Stephanie White (Refugee Council) points to this in a letter she wrote after a Phakama performance:

*I work with young refugees in the first few months after they have arrived in the UK. The young people I know are mostly unaccompanied minors. They are especially vulnerable because they are dealing with trauma and grief associated either with death, or with separation from their families. Any refugee is coping with loss of friends, support networks, culture, landscape and identity.*<sup>13</sup>

In essence they are suffering loss of place, displacement. They are either escaping from or removed from a past which they both want to remember and want to forget. They have arrived in a new place which is at times hostile. They are desperate to find a place where they can belong, to be part of a community. Phakama hopes to provide a place in which they can weave together both experiences and help them to move forward to a new future.

One participant, who has since become a trainee facilitator, wrote in an evaluation.

*I thought my life ended and then I found Project Phakama.*<sup>14</sup>

Ironically Phakama UK does not really have a home itself. Temporarily housed in a corner of the LIFT offices it travels around squatting in various places from Stephenson Hall Children’s Home, the Horniman Museum, Dulwich College, London Metropolitan University. But for many of the participants Phakama has become very clearly a place: a place of refuge.

It is often difficult, when describing the work, to know what is the most important and dominant aspect. Sometimes it seems the social aspects of the project take second place to the creative work and the art making. Sometimes the creative work seems to be a bi-product of the much more important outcome. Mostly, and at best, they support and enhance each other. Certainly the pastoral and social needs and benefits of the project have always been central (as they always are when working with disenfranchised people), as Barbara Heinzen writing about Phakama in her book The Power of the Tale points out:

*From the outset there was an assumption that the venture would help young people develop a voice and create responsibility in their communities, and importantly, also help*

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<sup>12</sup> Fabio Santos: Strange Familiars project Report 2004

<sup>13</sup> Stephanie White (Refugee Council): Strange Familiars Evaluation Letter, 2003

<sup>14</sup> Osman Bah : Strange Familiars Evaluation , 2003

*some of those young people forge a route to economic survival in an era when routes to long term employment can be hard to find both in Jo'burg and inner city London.*<sup>15</sup>

Those of us working on the earlier projects were quite clear that getting this aspect right benefited the creative process and ultimately the art we made. Working with this new group of participants, however, highlighted that the pastoral aspect of Phakama is not only vital to the work but also to the participants. As a result the sense of place became much more evident in the art they created.

Phakama for them became a concrete place in which they could be seen both as individuals and as part of a community. Here there were caring adults who were not asking them to fill in forms or provide evidence or documentation. We never asked them why they were here or even where they had come from, rather we waited until they wanted to tell their stories. One boy chose to write down his life story (one which starts with him being kidnapped and forced to be a child soldier in Liberia...) and read it out in performance over and over again for individual audience members. Others gave glimpses into their trauma, sometimes by bringing in a letter which they wanted translated, sometimes indirectly through the art and the stories they told and sometimes, one to one on a particularly upsetting day. Some never told.

Phakama, I suppose differs from other theatre for development whose agenda is often to affect social change. Our emphasis is more on the projects ability to share and to celebrate. Augusto Boal when talking about his work with disenfranchised groups in Brazil describes theatre as a weapon. I suppose we should describe it more as a process or even a party! The participant centred nature of the work allows the young people to choose what they share and how they share. They are encouraged to celebrate their identities rather than to share trauma, to trust their own ideas, value and define their own cultures and identities, not told what they should be. At Phakama we had time for them, were interested in them and wanted them to enjoy themselves.

They began to emerge as the one who could sing or the one who could make things, the one who made us laugh, the good cook, the one with good ideas or the moody one, the opinionated one, or in many cases all of these things. Many chose to look to the future. Their identities were no longer simply as asylum seekers or refugees who had to be dealt with. Stephanie White in her letter goes onto describe Ajoke (a young woman from Togo)

*through Phakama she has learnt self respect and enjoyed the admiration of others which has really helped her turn her life around.*<sup>16</sup>

At the same time however they knew that the project was for refugees and that they were working with people who were familiar with their situation. The project also develops a sense of collective belonging and co-operative action. Highly suited to the Phakama

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<sup>15</sup> B. Heinzen, J. Allan, G.Fairtlough, *The Power of the Tale*, Wiley 2002 p. 170

<sup>16</sup> Stephanie White: Strange Familiars Evaluation Letter, 2003.

process they are at once part of the same cultural groups – all being asylum seekers – and at the same time from many different cultures. Eventually it was all their identities, cultures, and ideas which were woven together to make the shows.

Language is always present as an issue when working with Phakama. Often in one room we have a number of languages and no common language. Language is often considered to be the site of creativity because it is where thought allows ideas to develop. It became clear to us that in order to allow these young people to develop expressively, imaginatively and emotionally we both had to work in media which did not require language and encourage them to use their own languages to express themselves. We relied heavily on visual art, music and dance, but also that we needed to work with translation wherever possible. We began to develop exercises which celebrated our lack of understanding requiring people to communicate with someone they did not understand in various ways – this was often hilarious and liberating. It became important for them to value their own language and their skill in being able to pick up other languages.

At Phakama the work and the social are closely interlinked. One of the key aspects which makes a Phakama project really work is that it is residential. Facilitators and Participants all live together for a period of time between a month and a week to create a piece of work. There is something incredibly levelling about this. Everyone has the same accommodation often actually sleeping in the same room. Everyone has the same journey to work, and the work happens all the time. Social time is spent together. The work starts before breakfast and often continues after lights out in the dorm!

One of the ways in which Phakama helps to make the workshop a place of refuge is food and meal times. This first evolved from a very real need in Africa. Many of the people we were working with (both old and young) there could not afford to take part in the project unless they were fed. Quickly we found that the business of sharing food was very important for the social side of the project and that this in itself fed the creative work: Ntkosa, one of the Cape Town artists said in an evaluation:

*I believe the artistic could not have been successful without this (the social aspect). Living, eating and travelling together meant that young people could not only observe but also experience the cultural diversities amongst each other. They learnt to tolerate and accommodate each other on a more relaxed and natural degree so that it was much easier to work together artistically.*<sup>17</sup>

For Strange Familiars we began a new tradition whereby the participants themselves were involved in the preparation of the food and thus shared cultural differences and celebrated them. To begin with it was the young women who prepared the food. In some cases this was the first time they had showed energy and confidence, something which soon spread to the rest of their work. It gave them status. It wasn't long before the boys wanted to do the cooking! At meal times everyone comes together and chats informally and it is here that much of the bonding and sharing takes place. For many of our participants the knowledge that they will be fed and housed is very securing and demonstrates that the

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<sup>17</sup> Ntokozo Madlala: [A Suitcase in My Hand](#) evaluation, 1998

project understands their situation. Phakama becomes a place where people can share together.

So Phakama is a place of refuge literally for some of the lonely and disenfranchised young refugees associated with it. In this safe environment they began imaginatively to explore and express the actual and emotional journeys they had been on. We hoped that by finding their own artistic voices they would begin to find their identity in this country. A new community structure had been created in their lives. The young people needed courage, enterprise and ability to support each other. And they were finding it in the work they did with us. Sheena MacDonald (broadcaster) reflecting on a performance says:

*(Project Phakama) is essential work in that art is the most effective means of returning individuality to people who have lost everything”<sup>18</sup>*

Phakama has also become a family for the artist/facilitators who are involved. Elaine a middle aged, successful graphic designer writes:

*Phakama has filled so many gaps in my life, and I feel privileged to be part of this growing process.<sup>19</sup>*

And Tiffany, an Australian performer working on the project problematises thus:

*I felt guilt at neglecting my own family when the people I was working with didn't have the luxury of that guilt. On a daily basis I grapple with the unexplainable need to be in the UK away from my family, despite their pressure and desire for me to return to Australia. Would not many of the participants gladly exchange places with me and return to family life in Australia and give up a selfish and responsibility free life, simply grateful for having a family? <sup>20</sup>*

### **Art as a place which can contain multiple identities.**

I suppose, however, what ultimately interests me the most is how this affected the art. How the notion of place was represented there. One young woman said:

*“The art is a place to listen to problems to dream and to make friendships” <sup>21</sup>*

It was this theme which we tried to distill with the title Strange Familiars. A phrase used to describe the experience of people in a new country. Our publicity read:

*“You arrive in a new city. At once it is both strange and familiar. Your life changes beyond recognition – and yet you are still the person you were when you were at home.” <sup>22</sup>*

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<sup>18</sup> Sheena MacDonald (broadcaster), Post Show Discussion 2003

<sup>19</sup> Elaine Partington: Strange Familiars evaluation, 2003

<sup>20</sup> Tiffany Ball: Strange Familiars evaluation, 2003

<sup>21</sup> Participant: Strange Familiars evaluation, 2003

It was this split between past and present combined with the dreams for a better future which seemed to characterise all our work. The art form was able to locate all these split parts in one place to allow them all to co-exist, as indeed they do, of course, in the identity of each of those individuals.

In performance illusion allows an audience member to be in a state where their consciousness is split between two worlds: an imaginary one and reality. It enables them to transcend the narrow confines of their personal identity and to participate, imaginatively, in other forms of existence. The work we do with Phakama is also allowing the participant, the performer to do this. One wrote:

*“Art takes me away from this world and into a new one”<sup>23</sup>*

Often, but not always, the new imaginary world had in its essence elements of the real world: past present and future. The characters which the participants created during the course of the two years (either themselves or as puppets, or images) reflected their experience: an old man puppet who lived on the streets of Newham, a magic woman from the sea who longed to return home, a starving but benevolent man who is searching for food and a greedy lady who is larger than life.

Possibly the most interesting and powerful experiences for the audiences at Stephenson Hall was the visit to the bedrooms where we had been staying. These personal spaces, where the students had been sleeping all week had been transformed. The work had developed from a workshop I ran where we explored the idea of bad and good memories and located them through drawing places. Using this material (although not necessarily their own drawing) we asked the participants to re-create them in 3D in the bedrooms. Using very few materials the participants avidly transformed the rooms. Many of the rooms were horrific reminders of the lives these young people have been forced to lead and to escape from: one housed rows of corpses wrapped in swaddling, (‘How do I make a dead body?’ was perhaps one of the more difficult questions anyone has asked me when working on an artistic project); another showed a skeleton hanging from the ceiling; another was the home of a witch doctor sprayed with blood. However many of the rooms were blissful and peaceful. One participant wanted the room completely white, with only the sound of running water. He sat in the room wearing a white robe, reading a white book with a white scarf on. He said it was his room of

*‘quiet, calm and silence, a place where he could study to improve himself, make up for his lost learning and become a genius’<sup>24</sup> ...*

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<sup>22</sup> Strange Familiars, 2003 Publicity

<sup>23</sup> Participant: Strange Familiars evaluation, 2003

<sup>24</sup> Michael Abebe: Strange Familiars evaluation, 2003

These rooms often acted as a site where memories from the past, the present and dreams of the future coincided. By asking them to imagine a place and then by in some way actualizing those images and ideas, they were encouraged to locate them. They often therefore used places from their memories, tried to re-create in some way their past, but they also used objects from the present, found objects from England and more specifically from Stephenson Hall. Hamdia, the young woman from Somalia, transformed her bed into a table and carefully laid a place for each of her family, the family she has left behind. They are not there eating at the table because they are absent in this present. And in their absence they are an even stronger reminder of the past. The table, however, is laid with items from her present, knives and forks and paper napkins. They have now become how she represents meal times. Whilst she talks about the table she describes what they are eating and where it is, but there is also something of a future for her there. The table is grand and peaceful waiting for a new family or new friends to fill it not to replace the old, but to co-exist with them. At once the bedroom is personal space, domestic space, social space and performance space. It is both Somalia and UK. It represents the past, present and future.

Another room in Stephenson Hall housed matchstick City. This evolved from a workshop when everyone built dream homes or shacks out of matchsticks. Tab Neal the artist who ran the workshop describes the process:

*‘it was very simple, but the feedback when everyone had developed their little shacks and the stories that went with them was fantastic. Each person, while absorbed in making had built beautiful, wonderful dreamscapes of calm paradise around their shacks, they were places where animals could shelter, friends could come and stay and flowers could grow.’*<sup>25</sup>

Using very basic materials they had built small dream realities which incorporated their experiences from the past and also encapsulated a dream of the future. Two young women stood in the room with the city during the performance and patiently and specifically described each building and environment, peopling it in their imaginations with their grandmothers and their landscapes. Maybe in some way we had begun to defrost their dreams.

For Elaine, Tab, Tiffany and I, some of the female artists working on the project watching Sabba, Hamdia and Ajoke singing a Somalian love song or amongst the other participants dancing freely and wildly and smiling at their own irony as they sang ‘my old mans a dustman’ said it all. We remembered the day they first arrived at the project nervous and apologetic unable to speak a word of English and hiding beneath a screen of clothing. These young women had gone on a journey which had transformed them.

I think my favourite comment at one of the post show discussions was made by a young audience member, who said:

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<sup>25</sup> Tab Neal: Strange Familiars evaluation, 2003

*If I knew theatre was like this I would have come more often. Can I join your project?*<sup>26</sup>

TOTAL WORD COUNT 6, 038

LUCY RICHARDSON SEPT 2004

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<sup>26</sup> Audience Member: : Strange Familiars, 2003