



# The TOUS study Manchester Royal Exchange



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*Front cover image: The Manchester Royal Exchange building*  
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Collected by Debra Westlake. All stories edited by Philip Brennan, Naomi Joseph, Will Long, and Rowan Padmore.

Note, some details have been changed to protect the identity of storytellers.

## Introduction

The TOUS study (Tailoring cultural Offers with and for diverse older Users of Social prescribing) is aiming to understand how cultural organisations and creative activities or groups can support the well-being of older people (aged 60+) from ethnic minority (or global majority) backgrounds. The researchers are exploring how to 'tailor' or design cultural offers (activities, events, performances, or exhibitions) so they are attractive to different communities living in the United Kingdom.

The study is using a combination of methods - interviews and observations, as well as an approach called the Storytelling Evaluation Method (Storytelling). Storytelling involves collecting stories from people about their experience of being involved in an activity or group, either as a participant, a staff member, or a volunteer. It involves condensing people's stories into two-page summaries (based on their original words). These stories are shared with interested stakeholders to identify key insights and common topics; this means that the stories are analysed in an inclusive, collaborative way.

The TOUS study is working with different cultural organisations - we call these our study sites. This report includes stories from one of these sites. The stories provide useful insights into the benefits older people can experience from cultural activities and some of the issues faced by those providing such support.

*Right: Will Long speaking at the discussion event described in this report*



# 1. I belong here

In the film *Forrest Gump*, Forrest's mum says 'Life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you're gonna get.' And it's true. When I walked through them doors to the taster session for the Elders Company, I never envisaged that I would be accepted, that I would learn so much and have the confidence to share so much.

When I first saw the advertisement, I thought I'd really love to go but I talked myself out of it. I've always been interested in theatre, but I never ever had the courage to come and watch a play. Being mixed race and working class, I always felt it's not for me. There'll be nobody at the theatre that will represent me. So, I just kept away. With the Elders Company, I thought it'll just be all white people, staring at you thinking what's she doing here? Then I spoke with a friend, and she said just give it a try, it's only an introduction. Anyway, I went and yes, I was the only Black person there.

Initially I was very nervous. When I'm in new surroundings and I don't know anybody the way I keep safe is by listening. I don't say anything. But then our director, who is absolutely wonderful, read out this safe space statement. I could feel my body relaxing and I thought yes, this feels okay. We talked about the Elders Company, and I knew I'd really love to be involved.

In my experience as a Black woman many people don't give you the opportunity to shine. You absorb racism from when you're little and you carry it because it's so damaging, it leaves scars. So, this for me was a two-way process. I was allowing myself to be creative in front of predominantly white

people, even though I was scared of not being accepted or my creativity not being good enough. But then somebody sees something in me and thinks yes you do shine. Come and join the family. And here I am.

The creative process is very healing. I used to work predominantly with women, men and children that have been raped or sexually assaulted. I worked in Sierra Leone after the Blood Diamond War had ended, and in Uganda with child soldiers. When I came back, I was totally desensitised. I felt nothing and it was scary. I worked for the NHS, but I was totally drained so I took early retirement. Then I realised I've got to give something back to myself. I've got to embrace whatever creativity is buried in there, it's got to come out. Being here is like nurturing myself. It's a lovely, lovely feeling.

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Since I got accepted into the Elders Company, I've never looked back. My creativity and my passion exuberate, so much so that I got chosen to be in *Romeo and Juliet*. Again, I tried to talk myself out of applying. I told myself there's hardly any Black people in Shakespeare,

except *Othello*! But I thought you can't keep doing this, being silent. You have to be brave and just go for it. So, I did. Part of the audition was a dance scene. I love dancing, I used to teach salsa and merengue. A week later I'd been accepted. I thought my dreams had come true. I loved every minute of it.

In the Elders Company, we're all different. Some things we agree on, some things we don't, but that's okay. It's family, and I feel safe. I'd never talked about my life experiences to anybody, but here I got the opportunity to share and to learn from others as well. It was absolutely wonderful.

My experience here is I don't have to educate anybody. Working in this cast and company, you've got this innate knowing of what it is to be Black. At the same time, people go and educate themselves. When we did *Meet the Maker*, I was in awe of the wig and makeup woman. She'd taken responsibility to learn about Black culture in terms of skin and hair. I would feel completely safe with her. It's lovely.

There was a session with a couple more Black people who had joined the company, and the director said it would be really, really good to have an all-Black play. I thought, you must be joking. Nobody will come to that! But we went to the bar and came up with different ideas, and it became *Dominoes* and *Dahlias*. It's the best show ever. It's so successful. We now have Manchester City Council funding to go around all the libraries and different venues to perform. So, things are changing.

The Royal Exchange's ethos is the safe space statement. They are creating a safe space for diversity and inclusion. They work on it, you can see it and it's not tokenism. If something is said that is derogatory in any way, it's immediately challenged. There's no hush hush and nobody avoiding eye contact. It's openly dealt with and that makes me feel safe. It's given me such confidence, especially being an older Black woman. Like yesterday, after the session, something happened, and I addressed it with authenticity. It felt safe to do that. So, for somebody new coming into the group, that will make them think speaking up is ok.



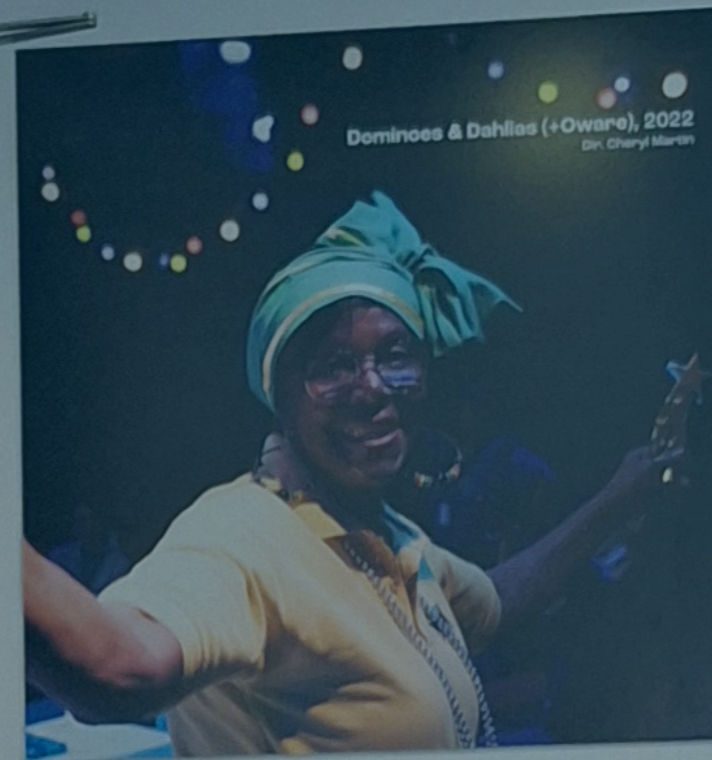
There are things organisations can do to be more inclusive. I always think of it like ingredients for a recipe. We're gonna bake this wonderful cake and we're gonna start with diversity. We're gonna have some inclusion, a mixture of different spices. We're gonna have lots of happiness and laughter. We'll address things when they need to be addressed. People can come and go. If it's not for them at that moment in time, it's fine, they can move on. The important thing is there is a piece of cake for everybody.

But organisations have to advertise what's on offer. A lot of it is word of mouth. Wherever I am in a cafe or at the museum, if I get talking to somebody, I talk about the Royal Exchange. But you've got to think of other ways too. Like with people who can't read or write, how do we get the message across? It's also important how we greet people when they come through the door. Explain what will happen and that they don't have to stay if they don't want to. It's also about sharing experiences. If it was me, I would have liked to have heard an experience like mine. You can never fully understand somebody, but you can empathise with their anxiety of coming into an organisation.

Coming here has changed my life completely. I never dreamed in a million years that I'd walk through that door with my head held high, knowing I'm safe and accepted. I was in such an unhappy place and here I am excelling. I want to make my mark in the world through my passion for creativity, for theatre. I don't feel afraid anymore or that this isn't for me because of my colour or my class. I feel unstoppable.

This is where my creativity is. This is home. I belong here.

**“Coming here has changed my life completely. I never dreamed in a million years that I'd walk through that door with my head held high, knowing I'm safe and accepted.”**



## 2. A light switched on

I've always been interested in arts and culture, but I never tapped into it. There was one time, when the library was still on the main road, that I met this elderly gentleman who was painting with water colours. He had his table, his paints, and was just painting. I thought, am I in the right place? This is the library. But he said to come over and started teaching me. I did two canvases, and he said I was really good at this. The thing is, I only did that one session. I did two canvases, he gifted them to me, and I said next time I'll bring my own paints and everything. He wrote down which ones to get and his handwriting was beautiful, and I went home really happy. I remember I gave one of the paintings to my mum. And anyway, the next session I went and he wasn't there. He'd passed away. I never did any painting again, it just gutted me. But now, after the film project I've done, I think I'll find a class. I feel more open again.

I heard about the Royal Exchange as I'm in a few women's groups on WhatsApp. I can't remember the title, but it was a workshop for four weeks at the library. There's a cafe there, which is where I met Andy and the other team. They said we're going to make a film, and I thought, oh this is exciting! There was a few of us who attended that first meeting but by the second or third week, there was just myself and another gentleman. We were the only ones who actually completed the full workshop, but I enjoyed every minute of it. I've never done anything like it before.

When coming up with ideas for the film the first thing that came into my head was my parents when they arrived in the UK. So, the film is about their journey. You'll have to see it to find out. As I developed the film, I realised how much work people have to do from script writing, to production, editing, and everything else, just to make a three-minute film! Imagine the effort when people make Bollywood and Nollywood films that are three, four hours long!

This was at a point in my life where I was going through quite a lot, and I knew I needed a distraction. But making the film triggered so many hidden emotions. My mum had passed away ten years ago, but I'd never really grieved properly, because when my mum sadly passed away, my younger sister became very ill a couple of weeks later. She had cancer and we were supporting her. I didn't really acknowledge my feelings until I did the workshop. I was honestly in shock at how much I'd buried inside of me. But Andy and his team were amazing in helping me with that, signposting support, and I felt as if I was in a family - we all looked out for each other.

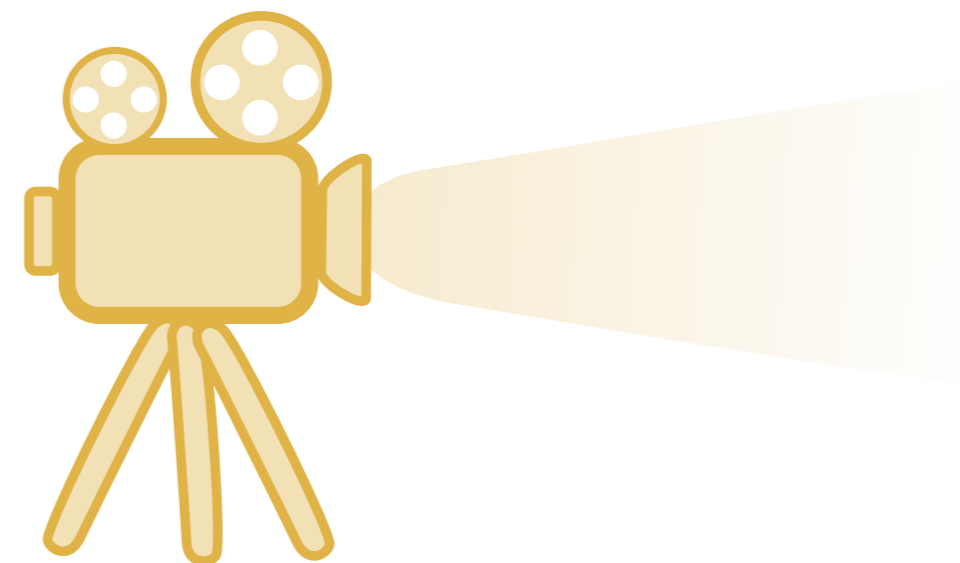
The workshop was an eye opener for me, and by the second session I thought I should have done this a long time ago! But there's certain barriers because of my religion and culture. Our Islam is very important, it's what keeps me going. But sometimes certain responsibilities, or other people's issues, can affect

you. Maybe you're in your community, in front of your family, your children, your husband and you're smiling, you're looking as if you're carrying on, but inside you're just screaming. For others there might be a language barrier, transport, health, or money issues. In the Dream Project I pointed out the women weren't comfortable in a mixed group. They changed to doing the men's session separate and the women and it's worked. It has to be about choice, doesn't it?

As a Muslim woman I have certain barriers and boundaries. For example, if I'm in a mixed group like the film workshop I need my personal space. But it was a respectful and caring environment. I felt safe. My religion and culture were respected. The other participant, who was male, called me a name that means big sister. So that's another sign of respect, and he says he knew my father, my mother. So that was nice, you know. So, we really got on and we supported each other throughout this project. And he's been an immense support, and I was for him as well.

**“Please don't make opportunities like the film project a one off! Try and give us more opportunities to engage in these wonderful projects.”**

The workshop was God's way of putting me there at that certain time. It made me realise that I need to do things for me. All my life, I've done things for others. Not just my own family, but the community. To this day, I still do for others, but I think I lost me a long time ago. I never put me in front, but that particular workshop made me wake up to the fact. I just wanted to give myself a chance, and from that couple of sessions, I started doing other things like going back into arts.





I turned sixty last year, and I think in any culture, once you get to a certain age, you sort of think: that's it, we're only going to go to one place now. So, there's no point doing this or doing that. Let's just stay home. But I tried to tidy up my life when I hit sixty. Going to the workshop, that's when I grew to the place where I am now, where each week I'm thinking, right, this is what I can do, this is what I can't do. Now I do other activities like calligraphy, Dream Project and Odd Theatre.

Odd Theatre is basically how to have fun really in a group setting. We've done some icebreakers and then some games, and I've thoroughly enjoyed it. We're hopefully going to be doing a performance around domestic violence. It highlights how South Asian women are so misunderstood, especially if they've got a language barrier. The performance will be like a court session. Apparently, I'm going to be the solicitor. There'll be interpreters who misinterpret, showing how even one sentence can make or break that case.

***“...it was like a light had switched on in that workshop, and I never really looked back.”***

Please don't make opportunities like the film project a one off! Try and give us more opportunities to engage in these wonderful projects. And don't just engage with the elderly, but the younger people as well! Stuff like this helps challenge me. And being challenged is like waking up the other side of your brain. You find you're still functioning. I'm still capable. I'm going to embrace the change, the fun side, the emotions, even if they're difficult. I want to look after me and enjoy all the blessings that Allah's sent me, because we don't know if we're going to wake up in the morning. I was in such a dark place, but it was like a light had switched on in that workshop, and I never really looked back. It came at the right time.

### 3. Access to art is a human right

I was doing a Master's in theatre directing. After a year on placement, I joined the education team at the Royal Exchange, working with young people and leading some of the daytime programmes, which tended to be adults and often older adults. In 2014, they asked me to pilot an Elders company. In 2018, Elders became a key strand of work, and I went full time as programme lead. Now I'm part time again so that I can be a practising theatre maker. Hopefully that feeds into what I do here. As well as producing and project management, I also work as a director with the company.

Engagement is about how people who aren't professional artists take part with us. Access to art is a human right. There are so many benefits for health, confidence, and a sense of belonging. As a professional arts organisation, it's also about us pushing people to learn about art and theatre making, so that they might be more discerning audiences and maybe come into the industry themselves. With our communities' work, we might be engaging people who don't have a family history of regular theatre going. Hopefully by meeting those people in their space and then welcoming them into our space, they get a sense of belonging and ownership here.

Older people can take part in Elders Mondays. Beyond that, we recruit an Elders company each year. That presents quite a lot of challenges around taking care of people. It's not about producing a big outcome necessarily. It's about their growth as artists and a sense of belonging in the company. Then they become graduates. Some continue to be very

active. Others will dip in and out. Others we don't hear from for ages and then suddenly they reappear. And others just move on to other things.

**“Quite often people will say, where else would I be in this mix of people? It's quite a diverse group...”**

As that pool of graduates grows, there's more people to communicate with. It's sometimes a bit overwhelming. Particularly when you know what it means to people. If they're not as regularly engaged, there could be a sense of responsibility about that. We've been trying to empower people to do their own things so that we can channel new people into that. I've become very aware that some people that were active ten years ago are still around and others I'm seeing less of, and it's because they're older. I suppose I feel like I'm letting those people down by not finding the right engagement for them, but you can only do so much. There's a constant tension between creating opportunities for lots of people and then also properly taking care of individuals. I guess I just remind myself that we're not the health service and we're not social services and we're not people's families. And also, people are adults, and they've got their own resources and resilience as well.

The Dream Project was born out of a recognition that we weren't a very diverse cohort. It was about creating spaces for specific Global Majority communities in the hope of bridging into our main work. My initial concern was that we'd have a Black Elders group and an East Asian Elders group and our usual (mostly white British) group and none of them should ever mix and meet. We were really clear that we want to integrate people in the activity that we already do. And I'd say it is working. I mean, I'm always hungry for bigger and better and quicker change. I don't feel like we're gonna be successful in bridging any South Asian Elders into our regular programme, which is a real shame. There's a challenge to bridge them in, and then there's a challenge to maintain their inclusion. Anecdotally it seems to be working much better for Elders from African and African Caribbean communities. Part of it might be about language. I also wonder whether just generally within society those communities are more integrated. I don't know really. It's also a bit of that chicken and egg, you know, Black Elders coming to Mondays are more likely to see other Black Elders already here.

We focussed our project for South Asian Elders in Rochdale rather than across Greater Manchester. The idea was that they would have sessions here, but they didn't want to do that,

**“It was about creating spaces for specific Global Majority communities...”**

so for the sake of that project it all became Rochdale focussed. I think that meant that they don't have a sense of belonging here. So why would they suddenly start coming to other stuff that we're offering? I understand why that happened, but I think in terms of our aim of being a bridging project, the bridge wasn't built.

The East Asian community is geographically closer to the theatre, so that may help. There are probably also deeper cultural factors, way beyond my understanding, about how different communities view culture and art and theatre and I think stuff around gender as well, and how those communities fit into our structures, which is what they are having to do. On the South Asian project, they didn't want to perform in front of men, so it became a female only event, and then it became a private event. Originally it was gonna be part of the public programme, but then it wasn't. A member's sister apparently said, you know, the people in the room seeing this aren't the ones that need to see it.





Our Elders work is flexible, but we can also be quite demanding, which I don't have a problem with 'cause I think that's about stretching people and raising people up. The show I'm making at the moment has three or four people from the Global Majority in. It's quite an intensive rehearsal period, but I have good relationships with those people and understand their specific circumstances. I was really clear like 'If you need to work, you can come out of rehearsal,' you know, that level of flexibility. The idea with the Dream Project is that they would do a full week but none of them could sign up to that. A lot of the women had caring responsibilities so that impacted how much they could commit.

We try and make the sessions really hospitable. Food is a big part of that but again, how much budget do you want to spend on feeding everybody when it's an arts project? I do get that but I'm also like, 'It'd be good to spend the money on the art!' All our other projects for older people, there's a fee to take part. For the Dream Projects we were really clear that there wouldn't be that barrier. But then some of the participants were like, are we getting paid to do it? I get that as well, paying people for their lived experience in order to get a broader diversity of people in the room. As much as I'd love to run it all for free, no one's going to pay for that.

From the conversations I've had, the safe spaces statement that we read in every Monday session and at the start of other projects is way more significant than I realised. It really comes into play when the space is compromised and how you respond to that. Sometimes I think we've done

that really well and sometimes we've not quite got that right. Like the safe spaces thing is great, but it's just a set of words - it's how we safeguard the safe space.

There's so much complexity around mental health, around life experience, around political consciousness and awareness. Someone might not understand why a word's problematic or use that language and have their own mental health needs that we need to take into account. One of the most challenging groups that we run is the play reading group. We read quite a lot of different material, but it is predominantly a white group and so there can be real challenges around reading plays written by black authors, for example, that might have a lot of black characters who might be using the N word.

Quite often people will say, where else would I be in this mix of people? It's quite a diverse group, from people who've been lawyers and teachers and feel comfortable to talk about Beckett and Kant and whatever, to people who were plumbers and train drivers or have lived experience of homelessness, who maybe aren't as confident in that type of discussion. And for those people to feel comfortable in that environment and not have to change the way they are, I think is great. For some people that anxiety is real, about coming into this environment you don't know with people you don't know, doing an activity that you don't feel you've got a right to do or that you're very good at. The work we do with leaders is very much like - just be present with people and smile

and give them space and, you know, reassure them and check in with them and just make them feel super welcome, 'cause that's how they'll come back.

My relationship with ageing has changed a lot. My own consciousness around ageism has been raised. I've made work in new ways and about new stuff, that's non-text based and about people's lived experience. Actually, it's some of the best work I've made. So, I've grown as an artist. I'm exploring that tension between like what can we imagine and what can just be you on stage telling your story? And then how do we take care of you in that process? Lots of big ethical things to think about. I realised quite early on that as a company and as performers, they were at their strongest when they were being themselves. And it wasn't like there were loads of scripts on the shelf that were, you know, for twenty older people. It's kept me motivated and excited and helped me make some great work.

*Right: Art activity at the Royal Exchange Theatre*



## 4. A part of a whole

I'm a community health development officer. I engage with the community around Rochdale to address health inequalities. I work around prevention of diseases, just to help people to become more cautious about their health and know more about their health concerns.

I became familiar with the Royal Exchange because they contacted me to run one of their projects. I work at a community centre for South Asian people, and we have got a women's and a men's group for over-fifties. When I started, I was bit concerned why they would trust me, but this community centre is basically South Asian people including Kashmiri, Pakistani, Indian and Bengali as well. So, I was speaking their language, and I was the same brown face, and I built that kind of trust relationship. I'm there to make it more interesting for them. I'm there to make it linked to whatever they want to do. I know what they like, and what interests them the most.

Royal Exchange wanted to create a story. They came to our groups and asked people about how they came to the country, how they struggled, how they live their life. They wanted to create one whole story to perform on the stage. So that's how they came to our centre and we collaborated with each other.

**“They feel proud of telling these stories because they struggled a lot.”**

They did one devising session with our men's group and one with the women's group. After that, they tried to bring the sessions together and we provided them the venue. The groups didn't want to do a combined session because they thought that it will involve performance, and the ladies were not confident in being able to perform before men. Because it is a cultural thing that in our culture, especially the old school of thought, men and women they don't feel comfortable when they have to perform something, because one thing you're shy, and second thing they feel the women should not be performing and doing some moves before men.

They feel proud of telling these stories because they struggled a lot. This is a generation who are now about fifty, who migrated from back home about thirty, forty years ago or even longer than that. Most of them worked in textile industry, an industry that's not easy to work because they had language barrier. They had to work to raise their family, and if they have some siblings back home, they had to send money to them as well. So they didn't think about their education. They just started working straightaway when they came to the country. And in the factories, you know, it's not the language it's the skill. So, they just learned the skill and they didn't try to learn English language. I think that is the thing that left them behind. Other than that, they feel really proud that they struggled in their

life, they struggled to raise the family, they struggled to get the children to study in the universities. Most of them are now pensioners and they are proud of what they did in their life. Sort of like almost showing off – that wasn't a concern to them. They liked the fact they were having that story seen. One of them said that when we see a drama or a film around someone's life story, we want our life stories also to be highlighted, to tell the next generation about how we struggled to get them here.

**“Because when they give an outlet of their emotions and feelings, they feel like they are something; that's why they are asked to tell their story so they feel now they are being involved in something as a part of a whole.”**

It's kind of a catharsis for them, verification of their thoughts or feelings. Because when they give an outlet of their emotions and feelings, they feel like they are something; that's why they are asked to tell their story so they feel now they are being involved in something as a part of a whole. So it gives them motivation.

When they did the story collecting two young ladies asked me to tell my story and at that time, my father had passed away a week ago, and I had my

flight booked. I was just telling them how I came here about two years ago, how I struggled, how I found this job, and then I wanted to go home soon after my visa was done. It's not easy for anybody to leave our home country, leave family, so many sacrifices and sometimes we want somebody to listen to us. We want somebody to pen down our story, how we felt, how we struggled. So, to tell others that, it's not easy, whatever you think that we came to, whatever we are now. It involves so much sacrifice.

Just because our South Asian community is a minority they should not be neglected. So, if we ask them to tell their views, to tell how they feel, they will feel like more inclusive environment around the community. I think because our culture is totally different and they want to keep their roots, they want to keep their culture whatever it is. Some of the modern generations they're trying to mix but still our parents they want the same culture growing up. And also, because our culture is more around Islamic culture, Islamic rules and regulations so things will really impact on people. If you want to attract a Muslim community if you have something religious, then that would really make them interested. Also, if you want to bring them in, just give them something according to their interest, for example, you can say food. They really like Asian food and weddings.

Katrina brought Sadia in and she is from our culture. She could speak Urdu, she could speak in Punjabi, so she was really good with our groups, and she successfully engaged our group members, men and women. To me, it was successful, the struggle was only with the ladies that they were not ready to go where they were doing rehearsals. It's just like transport problem because not all of the ladies would drive. But most of them were interested. I think if we provide them comfortable venue where they don't have to walk much or travel a lot, then I think it will be easier for them, instead of bringing them to somewhere really far away. Or if it is far away we could provide some transport to be there on time. Otherwise, I think it will be a problem for our older generation because not all of them are driving. The younger generation, it's not hard because they could travel on tram, they could travel on their own transport but the older generation, it is.



And the second thing is if we can reimburse their time so that would be kind of motivation and encouragement also within. It's not like they're doing it for nothing, they're doing it for something, they will get something out of it. Because they are giving their time, they're giving their energy, so sometimes they are not ready to do volunteer work.

*Right: Artwork at the Royal Exchange Theatre*



## 5. A safe space

I was brought up in the Presbyterian faith in Jamaica, and I always sing in the choir. I just love singing. And so, from Jamaica to England, participating in the church choirs and so forth. And then I joined the Jamaica Folk Ensemble dating back some forty years. I was involved in a singing group in the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra with the director and writer Cheryl Martin some twenty years ago. She must have kept my number somewhere. In 2021 Cheryl invited me to come and meet some other elders and it just started: we had a safe space, so we were able to speak freely telling our life stories.

Our group was part of the Dream Project at the Royal Exchange. We came on board as a cultural shift, promoting diversity and equality, telling our stories as British ethnic minority ladies with one man in our midst. Forming a play with no name was a very frustrating time; we were not sure how, where, what or when we were going to do this play. Not until a week or so before the performance, that we were able to come up with the name Dominoes and Dahlias (+ Oware).

We started to teach each other the dominoes and Oware games to music while telling our stories. We were unable to see ourselves doing a play or performing in a play. Our one man who had lived in England for forty years and had not been back to Jamaica where he was born, when he returned, he realised that he had ten siblings there which was fantastic to play that out. My talk was about hurricane Ivan, when I was there

so many years ago in 2004, when hurricane Ivan struck. I just express the anxiety that was around the hurricane. The Prime Minister told us to board up our houses, run for shelter and get food and water, and so forth.

**“...I have rushed to get to Elders at the Royal Exchange because I am telling you I was empowered!”**

Pastorman said to repent, baptise and become Christian and hurricane Ivan would pass over you. But my chorus line was 'I am not leaving my house because of so and so, and I am category ten. Pastorman can eat the Bible because I am an old lady, and I am not leaving my house!' I described how I prepared for the hurricane coming, taking photo of my house, looking for my bank book, finding my passport and put them in my thread bag and tying it on my brazier strap, putting on my long boots and tying myself on the house post (cause me na left my house). And then I describe the hurricane coming: the eye of the hurricane, the beautiful different colours, blue, orange, grey, green and yellow. And the sea how it looks like tidal wave, not a tsunami, because this is a category ten hurricane. And the mountains the rain the thunder and the lightening and the rain still a fall.

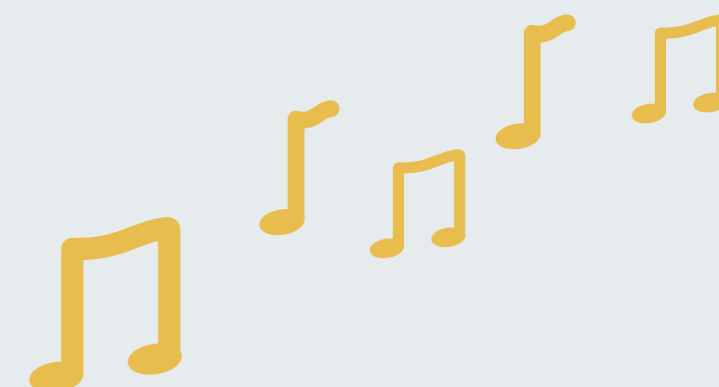
I expressed how the hurricane flattened down the cultivation and stripped the bark from the trees - even the coconut trees. The hurricane had reacted to the European Commission who had wanted the steal the sugar industry from the Jamaican people to cause famine on the nation. It fits in quite nicely because playing the game, we have people cheating, and say, 'You're cheating: you're putting a five to a six.'

We didn't rehearse every week, but we were a dedicated team. We were achieving our potentials without even noticing this. We made all the effort to turn up. We gelled together because we were doing a project which we enjoyed. And if one of us did not have enough lines someone would say 'Well you do that bit.'

Oh, I have rushed to get to Elders at the Royal Exchange because I am telling you I was empowered! It doesn't matter how tired I was when you get here, you are in stitches with laughing. There's always something funny to make you laugh. It was a pleasure becoming an Elder, so many excitements! A self-belonging without knowing it. Apart from the Dominoes and Dahlias, I have sung on my own at the Elders Christmas party a song called 'Christmas a come.' I have also performed in a play called Love and Marriage, which I enjoyed tremendously. The play was based on telling my partner about Viagra. He shouldn't take it a couple hours before we go to the restaurant but when we return home!

I was always active in the community. I am an active member of the Afro Caribbean Care Group: an organisation set up like a halfway house to help people in the community suffering from Alzheimer's disease other disabilities can attend. You help them partake in activities like garden, playing cards, dominoes, singing and dancing doing arts and crafts or even taking elderly to the toilet. These people are ethnic minority groups that I am willing to help - also to join their excursion even to Buckingham Palace in 2023. They are in the community and we have to look after them.

Coming here at the Royal Exchange was really inspiring because it enabled me to exchange with colleagues the art of singing based on the Folk Ensemble; dressing up in costumes modelling you are performing without knowing. I didn't even know; I passed the theatre and I came here for lunch and so forth; but I had never really clicked what really goes on in here. Otherwise, I would have been here twenty





years ago. Because the culture of the theatre here is prone to white people not Black people, and I have never been here to a show. I just felt that you have to be educated to come here. You really have to sell this place to the Black population, or people of colour; because we do not know a lot about it. So, it really needs to be reinforced, to publicise and share out in the community.

I have now learned a lot and able to share this in the community. I have come to shows and reading and understanding more about the shows. I am having a better cultural awareness that as a Black woman I can do this. There is no stopping you. The arena is opened. All you need is some support to push you; show you the right direction and you can achieve it and don't let anyone fool you that you are stupid!

I think apart from having a laugh we always act in a safe environment. We are able to say even four-letter words. A safe space knowing that we say something that's happened to you out there knowing that you have support. I was able to bring forward incidents that I was too petrified to go to the police with, in case of backlash. Things that were happening to one of my dear

girlfriends that she had unload on me and I could not, you know, but I had help and support here from the safeguarding team, which was good.

I think coming here has highlighted a lot of skills that I have that I did not know that I possessed. And it makes me very proud, very happy when I get a free ticket to invite one of my colleagues. Introducing them to this arena, that it does exist, and you can come and join it if you want to. Meanwhile to my family, all three hundred of them in Birmingham; I can say this age-friendly newspaper in Manchester, turn the page and you will see me there with a banner saying, 'Come and join the Royal Exchange.' She is doing something in her old age. She can do it. So, I feel happy I have been here and thankful for the organisation (Andy and the team) that is teaching me a lot of things. I think the younger generation, they are more happy for me that I am not at home festering. That I am out there doing things.

Left: Theatre production of *Dominoes & Dahlias (+Oware!)*  
© Joel C Fildes

**“I am having a better cultural awareness that as a Black woman I can do this. There is no stopping you. The arena is opened. All you need is some support...”**



View of seating inside Royal Exchange Theatre © Andrew Brooks

## 6. Keep learning

During Covid we stayed home, because the government was paying furlough. I stopped working and then I was just at home watching telly: watching the Chinese programmes, you know the drama or something. At that time, I joined one of the classes for mostly older women, from the Wai Yin, the Chinese women's group.

One of the tutors is English. She teaches how to draw. Sometimes if our business was not busy - our Chinese takeaway - when my son was around, helping out on the counter, when he's standing there, as I'm sitting nearby, I'll use my pen to spend five minutes drawing his face, like the life sketches. Whether using a pencil or ball pen, it doesn't matter, I just copy and I really like to just draw.

Sometimes you get a message from the Wai Yin WhatsApp group. One day it said, Royal Exchange Theatre needs some people to work on one of the plays. When I was in Hong Kong in middle school, when I was sixteen, we had drama, but at that time I was very shy. Very shy. And I said to myself: 'I'm no good for that.' But as time passed, I changed. I like to talk to people. I like to learn about everything, even now, anything interesting. I can do air-dry clay. The teacher who taught drawing, also teaches air-dry clay. So, I can do a lot more now. I've changed a lot since Covid.

I joined Royal Exchange Theatre myself. I came here. After I divorced, I lived with my eldest son. I told him: 'I want to join the theatre. Can you do the application form?' He said he liked me to join more activities, because

he knows a lot of people develop mental health problems after they retire if they have too much spare time.

He didn't want that for me, because my ex-husband was a gambler. We became poor: we always not enough money. He gambled on football, horses, everything. After seven years of marriage, he even got another woman as well. His sister had a big restaurant and he always said he was a manager there. He always said he was busy and left me to do everything by myself. I looked after all my children. Three children, doing everything. Bring them to school. Each time he came back, he just shouted at me, 'why don't you tidy up the house.' I always keep doing it but he just not satisfied. He criticised me for everything. Everything.

**“Everyone here in the Royal Exchange theatre very good...I make lots of other friends.”**

I had not been inside Royal Exchange Theatre before. My younger son had been a few times to the Bridgewater Hall. Sometimes at Christmas time he brought me to see The Snowman or something. The people at Royal Exchange Theatre are all very friendly. And Andy is so good. Andy is very good. I never done acting. But I like it. I like it! I'm very easy with people. Even in my KFC job, you know I have

been there 6 years. They are mostly Asian. Some are Black. No problem. Sometimes they call me, 'Auntie, Auntie.' I told them I only 34; they laugh! My heart is young.

So, I started learning how to act. A Malaysian girl, she taught us. She's very nice. Everyone here in the Royal Exchange theatre very good. Yeah. I make lots of other friends. Very happy. We are talking some Cantonese-Chinese, but I needed to translate some of it into Mandarin-Chinese and English. I speak three languages. Acting made me more healthy. Inside I feel younger.

I try to start learning everything. Like Wai Yin, they've got another course for the Chinese culture. Also, there is one for drawing in Deansgate. I think it's art association. They are similar like Wai Yin, two different groups. I joined there as well. If they got anything new, when I see it, then I book. I spread wider, have wider interests, do more activities. Doesn't matter for me if it is a Chinese group. Because I work in the KFC already. Before I joined this one, I already get contract with white people. Any kind of people. I don't mind their skin. Even they don't mind my skin as well.

*Right: A production of Four Seasons at the Royal Exchange Theatre © Joel C Fildes*



Lots of people here are from Hong Kong, they got a group for Chinese opera. I'm going there, three or four lessons. My son is counselling therapist. He heard where he works that they want more people to be a cultural ambassador. I joined up for training and I recommended a friend to go as well because I thought: he speaks Mandarin. He speaks it a lot because he came from mainland China. I speak Cantonese from Hong Kong. He speaks Mandarin. I told him: if you want to join, do this course, six lessons, six Mondays, yeah, and we made it. We made it! We are just waiting for the certificate now.

**“This year is ten years anniversary of the Elders...I feel very lucky to be one of their members!”**

I don't want to stay at home. The people said, okay now you retire. I just get the, you know, the pension. But I said, I still want to keep the job because when people are getting older, it is not easy to get a job. I don't want to stop working. First, everything expensive. If I can work, I will try to keep it. Even one or two days. I like the social side as well.

I have been working a long time in our own business. Long time. I live here forty-five years, in UK. I have only been to London three times. Once I've been to France, to Paris, only one weekend, because my brother, my family came over from Singapore. I brought my three children to see him. I got no holidays. No time. Nothing. Nothing.

My English is not too good but I still keep learning. You know if I don't understand a word, then I ask my son. 'What does that mean?' Then he will tell me to ask Alexa: 'What is that word?' Then Alexa translates into Cantonese!

The family support me. They say 'Very good, mum.' Last year I joined the Elders Company. From eighty people, they chose twenty-four people to join their Elders programme. Then when they put on any plays, we have press night, two free tickets. So, I can bring sometimes my friend or sometimes I ask my children, if I want to see it. This year is ten years anniversary of the Elders. I joined their latest production called: Acts of Love. I feel very lucky to be one of their members!

*Right: A production of Four Seasons at the Royal Exchange Theatre  
© Joel C Fildes*

This is a world that doesn't exist, we made it up.  
But you might recognise the characters in your own world, and in your own life.





## 7. Time for ourselves

One reason we Asian ladies might not go to the theatre, museums, libraries, that sort of thing, is that we don't get much time. And if we do have time, we go to each other's houses and have a cup of tea. But since the show I'm doing is a ladies' only event, ladies enjoy it more. With this project at the Royal Exchange there were over forty ladies who wanted to take part. But when they found out that it's going to be mixed with men they dropped out. I didn't drop out because I felt like they did so much for everyone, and it's not nice to let people down. They changed it to only ladies in the end, and those that dropped out, now they wish they'd joined us!

The project came about after we gathered at a community school where we met Katrina, Parveen and the other people who explained the project. We've been working on it for a few weeks now. All my children they said to me it was good I was going out there and enjoying myself, because it's not in our culture to go out there and present ourselves.

There was only one time where I'd done something like this before. I was going to another centre where they took us to Manchester University Theatre, which we really enjoyed. The ladies were so excited to go because they'd never been out anywhere like that. They loved it. We went to see the live film *Romeo and Juliet*. We discussed our Asian culture, showed them how it was wedding season, and what they do during an engagement. We also acted it on stage. It was beautiful.

This came about because I go to the Let's Talk Centre. It's free of charge,

and the ladies come in there and talk to each other and exercise. The lady that runs it, she helps with relaxation, mental health issues, and there's a doctor who comes sometimes too. It helped me because my husband's not in good health. I was going to go into depression, so I started going to Let's Talk, and those two hours help me forget about the things worrying me. From there they told us to organise all that stuff for the theatre, so we did that, hired a coach, and we all went to Manchester.

**“All my children they said to me it was good I was going out there and enjoying myself, because it's not in our culture to go out there and present ourselves.”**

Because of my husband's health, and the time commitments, I might not continue with the theatre stuff. But I'll definitely continue with Let's Talk. When you're talking to other people you forget about your own stuff. You hear somebody else's problems then you're thinking 'Oh no mine's nothing in comparison.' It's a good thing to share. When you're talking to someone that you can trust, you can let your hair down a little bit, and that takes a little burden off your chest.

I did a project where they wrote some stories for Manchester University Theatre. And in my own time I do knitting and sewing groups which



have helped me mentally. If theatres, museums or libraries want to get more Asian women involved, it's good to get everyone sitting together. Somebody's knitting, somebody's sewing, somebody's doing crochet, they're talking and having a cup of tea and that way they're all having good communication, plus they're doing their work. That used to happen but that stopped because people got too busy. Others aren't confident to go out. It's not like their husbands stop them, but they haven't got that confidence in themselves.

When my husband fell ill, I was up and down. You've got a lot on your mind and you're forgetting things, and it was making me ill. A friend recommended I go to the Let's Talk Centre. I used to cry when I talked to people there. I couldn't keep it in. If anybody wanted to talk to me, I used to start crying and I thought this is not right. But I'm so glad I went to the centre because it helped me a lot.

When I was young, I was very confident, and I worked all my life until my husband got ill. Work gave me

confidence. Some of the ladies who didn't work and didn't go out, they can be quite quiet. Like my sister-in-law, she was very quiet when she came from Pakistan. Even though she was very educated, and she knew how to speak, she was very shy. But now that same lady she's involved with the group, and she's got so confident now and we are so happy about that.

Faith can be another barrier for some ladies getting involved, because we are all Islamic. We don't want to go overboard doing things that our Islam doesn't allow us. So, like I said, we won't go in front of other guys for performing and things like that. That's our barrier. And that's the main issue. But we did the singing and the dancing, that's usually only allowed during the wedding times. And we do have fun. It's not like we don't.

It's been nice getting involved in the Royal Exchange. There are some nerves with the show coming up. And I'll miss the relationships I built with the ladies. We all get along with each other so well and it's nice we have a laugh. Some live nearby, and another lady I see her every Monday at Let's Talk. It's good to get together with ladies of your own culture, because nowadays we don't get enough time for ourselves. It can get so busy in our own household stuff. We need a couple of hours, just for us.

## 8. Everyone is the main character

For twenty years I've been working as a community development worker. Within the organisation we have different sites for different things. One of the sites is projects for older people and mental health.

About seven years ago, someone came to our organisation to ask if it's okay to give us a taster session of drama, theatre. We were a bit cautious, but we were curious too. We've got a Tai Chi group, and they always find a way to do their demonstration. It's really beautiful, it's like performance. After the taster session, they were invited to do a couple of demonstrations.

When the Royal Exchange invited our community to create Four Seasons, I had to do a lot of persuading. If you don't know the culture within a place, you're not confident to walk in. In the past, different organisations would ask why are there no Chinese people coming? But how are you going to go if you don't know everybody, just knock on the door and say, 'I want to come in.' It's very difficult, isn't it? People also don't feel welcome because they don't speak English. They don't know how to ask. With art as well, people don't feel confident if they are not academic, so art becomes something non touchable. With Four Seasons, I said don't worry, I will open the door for you, just come in. I have known many of the participants for many years. I'm really grateful they place their trust in me, so I support them fully. This kind of role is very important for each organisation. If the organisers and the community can coordinate with each other they can form better diversity.

Organisations need to understand that every individual has their differences and therefore needs to be welcoming of them. We always say awareness, awareness, but that doesn't mean you understand and accept. The Royal Exchange has done very well by including our group and letting us speak our own language. We actually had three languages, the English subtitles, Mandarin, and Cantonese, so that everyone could understand.

**“The sessions gave the group space for self-reflection. It's just like drama therapy...so I think it's so powerful and exciting.”**

Initially there were going to be eight rehearsals and then the last week will be every day from 10am till 4pm. It's a long day and a big commitment and I wasn't sure if they could do it. It was a big group and there were a lot of barriers to overcome. Some have mobility problems, some have health conditions, and we had their language skills to consider. But they proved me wrong. They worked very hard, they were really determined, and they enjoyed it. I'm really proud of them.

I did the interpreting at the sessions. My CEO said, 'Make sure you don't do the performance in your professional time.' Thank God for that because to be honest, I

prefer to sit down and watch, rather than do! But I enjoyed seeing them and sometimes I took part in the activities. The sessions gave the group space for self-reflection. It's just like drama therapy and I'm a counsellor, so I think it's so powerful and exciting. For example, when the group was creating the story they straight away came up with what they wanted to say. Maybe this had been something in their head for a long time, but they had no way to express it. Through this training, they realised their talent.

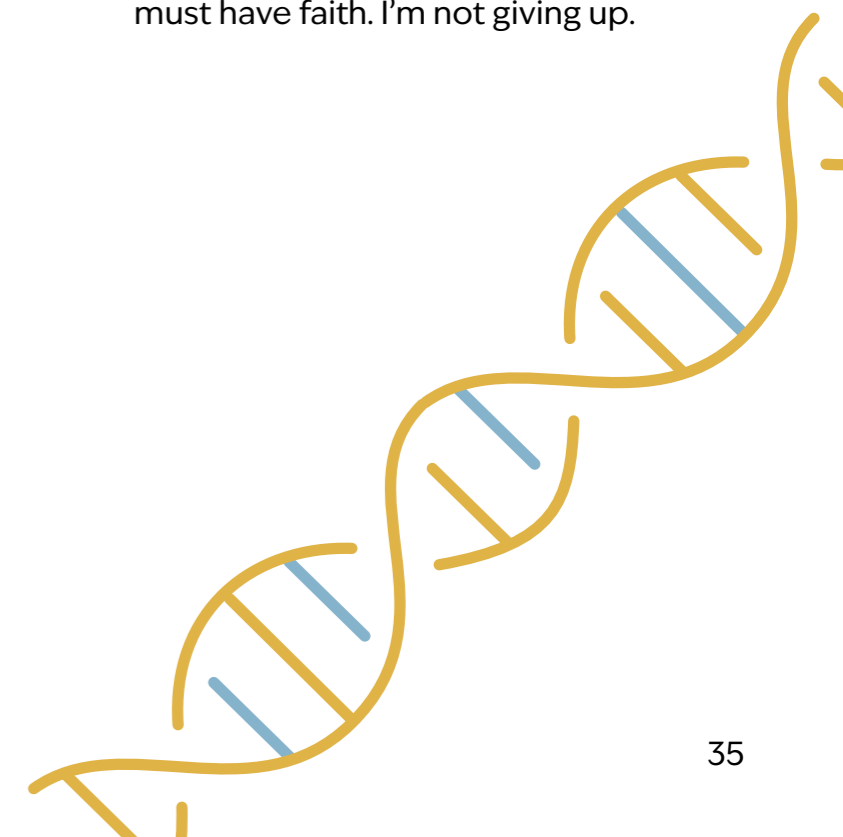
I learned so much from this process. I learned a lot about drama and the process of developing a story. But it's also taught me how to let everyone have their voice. You need to be fair and yes, sometimes we need to compromise but everyone has a chance to say what's on their mind. If you look at the drama people will choose who the main character is. But everyone is the main character, everyone backstage too. The whole show is their creation, the writing, the painting, everything. The facilitator was very good, especially with such a big group. Including everyone is not easy. But the show demonstrated it can be done.

**“...[it] was a small project, but it is progress and progress is like DNA, you can see only a tiny little thing, but you can trace it back.”**

People can do things if they want, if you give them a chance. But for groups to keep coming back you need someone to open the opportunity up and lead them. I would like to create a lot of opportunities in the future, more partnerships with this theatre, do more drama. If the theatre could get some money, then we can have a playwriting course.

There are lots of stories not being heard from the Chinese community. I've been living here forty years now and the community keeps changing. I want the younger generation to know what was going on within this period of time. I think it is very important to preserve history and include Chinese people, like this building has done.

Four Seasons was a small project, but it is progress and progress is like DNA, you can see only a tiny little thing, but you can trace it back. It's not easy building these groups. But it can be done. We must have faith. I'm not giving up.



Welcome to...  
**THE FESTIDALE**  
8<sup>th</sup> - 18<sup>th</sup> Aug 2024  
Pop in and  
say hello!



## 9. They did it for themselves

The Elders project is something they do every year, as part of the FestiDale, to celebrate Rochdale. They wanted to work with elders in the Rochdale South Asian community and try to bring a group of men and women who are over fifty-five together to create some sort of live performance. I knew it was gonna be very difficult because a lot of the South Asian Muslim community see it as taboo to perform. I completely understand that being a Muslim myself.

I like making people feel at ease. I think I get in tune with people quite quickly, so I can kind of get a grasp of what somebody's like in a first meeting. I've been an actor for over twenty-six years, working with the Royal Exchange on and off. I've done a lot of community theatre in Oldham, in Rochdale, in Manchester. I speak Urdu, Punjabi and Patwari fluently. It just makes it easier to engage with the Elders in the community as their command of English was very little, but I could take their stories and then translate them.

It's about being flexible and just really open and respectful. I think had there been a white facilitator, they wouldn't perhaps have understood that, especially in the current climate,

you know. Even I fear for my safety at the moment going out. Creating a safe space is key. It's about how you are, not about what you do or what you put into place. It's about how you speak to the community and if you're on their level and you understand them and if they see you as one of them, then they feel comfortable. It's just about me being friendly, being kind, being open and being one of them, and I'm always a little bit cheeky as well, but in a respectful way, and I think they really like that. But the minute they start seeing that there's a hierarchy system then they kind of get their backs up.

So, it was about making it work in the best possible way for them to have the most fun and enjoy it, but also be comfortable. The gents were a lot older; they were more seventies/eighties. They weren't comfortable with being on stage because throughout their lives, from a religious point of view, it's just not the done thing. And the ladies were either too young or they weren't comfortable. So, we said let's work them separately and have the audio of the gents, because the ladies were more willing to perform. We decided to make two separate things and then create a film.

**“...it was about making it work in the best possible way for them to have the most fun and enjoy it, but also be comfortable.”**

*Left: Advertising board for FestiDale in Rochdale*

It needed to be their voices. They were like, 'Well, write down what you want us to say,' and I said no. I want it to be like you're telling me a story naturally, so it flows. So, we did some video recordings of the ladies and a couple were happy with their videos being used, and then the lady who's the lead, I said perhaps do yours live and she was happy to. I said, whatever we do we'll make everything as easy as possible for you. Then I asked their permission for the men's audio to be played with pictures and video images on the screen, and they were happy about that. We made it a ladies-only audience as well. It was just about making them comfortable for them to work to the best of their ability. I think they've done that. I really do. The piece looks lovely, and it really is their voice. I think it's them.

I didn't want them to have to learn script because one of the ladies doesn't speak any English at all and they were unable to give their time because they have so many things going on at home. There's a lot of family commitments 'cause the older generation, particularly in Rochdale, still live with their in-laws or extended families. So, there's a lot of responsibilities which I appreciate and understand. We had a situation a couple of times where we had rehearsals and then last minute nobody could come to the rehearsal because there's been a funeral, and the whole community will attend the funeral. So then nobody's going to come, and we have to deal with that on the day with no notice 'cause the Muslim community bury straight away.

So, we worked the timetable to suit them, and we had two-hour slots once a week. Today was the tech rehearsal. Tomorrow's the dress. And then they literally come in for their performance and then leave. And we made it so their taxis were booked, they're picked up and they're dropped off just for ease. I think it's made them comfortable, I think they're happy to perform.

**“They're doing something that they've created. It's their words. I think this will be something that they will tell their grandchildren and something that they'll take away because it's what they did for themselves.”**

They're doing something that they've created. It's their words. I think this will be something that they will tell their grandchildren and something that they'll take away because it's what they did for themselves. There's no husbands involved, there were no children involved, it was just them doing it for themselves. Hats off to them because that's a big step to take and, you know, you might get your odd few, that might go on do some more. Most won't. Most don't leave the town, even if they drive. And it's a shame but they will always cherish what they did.

I like to see the change I can make even if it's just one person's life and they've really enjoyed that. I think

the humour keeps them going and I'll always make sure I give individual attention, so everyone feels special. I'll also do something that's unique to them and I think that really puts them at ease. I think it's just something I'm good at doing 'cause I've done it for so long, it's just part of who I am.

Even if my three ladies enjoy themselves and are happy with what they do on Saturday, then that's everything for me. Because I see their lives. Coming from this community, there were aunts who had this very restricted life. Being a mother, being a wife, and they were never themselves. They were never allowed to be that person. When they were born, they were that person and when they grew up they were that person, then as soon as they get married, they just become wife and mother and nothing else after that, and then grandparents and that just carries on. And to see them have something for themselves, it's very, very important to me.

A lot of these communities are isolated, and there's a lot of difference between people who have been educated and not educated. But then you could say that about everybody. In my family, we travelled well, we

did go to the theatre, museums... I suppose 'cause my mum was born and brought up here and she went to grammar school herself it was very different for us. But then my dad's family were also living here, and their parents were both from Pakistan, their kids did nothing. You know they didn't go anywhere; they didn't go on holidays, they didn't go on trips or anything, but that was their life. They didn't know any different. But if you'd said, would you like to go to the museum or an art gallery, I don't think they'd want to. I do think education plays a big part in it.

What I have seen and learnt from this community is if it comes to them, they're happy to do it. But if it doesn't, they won't go out of their way. And I think that's a cultural thing. They're not willing to compromise. You have to do all the compromising to get something from them so that's been a real challenge. I think there'll be a certain few who will be open to more and want to explore and I think age plays a big factor in this. I think the older people are, they tend to be less willing to or open to new ideas. And I think for the Elders, I think a big part of it is about bringing it to them. And why not, you know? If they can produce a beautiful piece with just three ladies from the community, obviously something is working.



## 10. Calm and clear

Royal Exchange Theatre is very famous in Manchester. My daughter liked the place very much. During the Covid isolation by government, I can't come down to things. I get very anxious and disappointed, after watching my good friends, or famous people, or relatives pass away, one by one.

When government said, 'Okay, for visiting', we can get some family reunion. My daughter also lives in Manchester, but a bit far - half an hour drive from me. When government allowed us to, we talk, talk, talk, talk. My daughter gets some information about the Royal Exchange Theatre, that the Elders Company wants to get some new members. She said, 'Pap, go to try!'

In China, I do some acting during middle school. Although I like to act very much, I need to find a good job, go get good education, and feed the family. I don't really think acting can do that. So, I give up everything. Now I retire, I still keep writing, and I do Chinese calligraphy and Chinese painting. And so, my daughter said, 'Go, go there, you need something financial, anything, I can support you.'

I said, 'I can try.' So I come to an Open Day. I met Andy and Katrina, and then talk, talk, talk, talk. 'I like acting, I like performance, do some pictures.' Since then, I attend every project with Andy and learn quite a lot about theatre things - not only the stage performance or acting, but also how to design. I design some sets - chairs, coffee tables, figures, made of paper.

Then Andy send me an email. He said, 'I got a Dream Project here, and need some East Asian people to do that.

Are you interested?' I said, 'Wow, it's amazing. Great, of course.' Also, because only in English, I said, 'Andy, I translate into Chinese for you.' And then I translate it, and then send back to Andy. Andy said, 'Wow, this is amazing. It means we can make

**“The impact is very positive for me, through the activities here. I'm more confident to do things, more confident to explore opportunity, to take part in projects. It enhance my mood. I'm happier.”**

more participants.' Then I send it to my social media group, and spread, spread, spread - Wai Yin Society, Craft Club, a Chinese arts centre.

About thirty people joined. Probably due to the language. Because Andy told me we can perform whatever language, it's not limited to English. We can perform in Mandarin or Cantonese, so this is why such a big group is here. I think this is the biggest group in the whole area. So many people! And Wai Yin Society provide us with a meal, Chinese food. So, yum, yum - they like that very much also.

The script for Four Seasons we developed by ourselves. We use three languages: English, Mandarin, and Cantonese. I draw some plans for it, and some flowers. We performed in the studio, and the

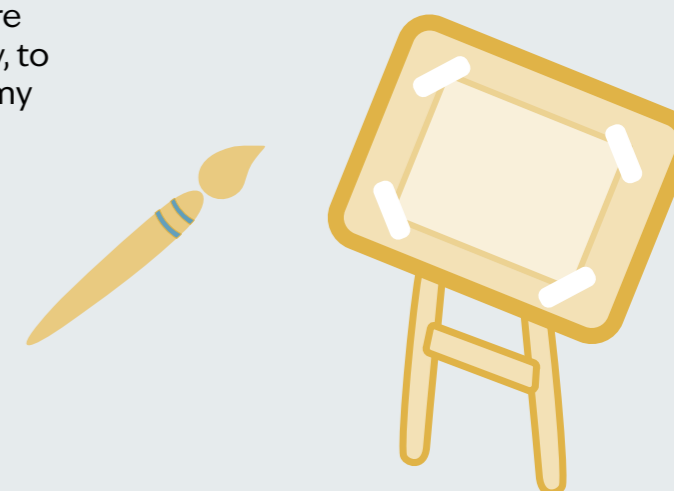
audience liked it. They went, 'Ah, amazing. This is good!' Every time full, maybe about two hundred? My daughter and wife say, 'Wow! Amazing! My dad is doing that.' They were very excited.

When we complete one year in the company, we become graduate, something like that. I'm one of the Elder leaders at this moment. As an Elder leader we can organise sessions here without any payment. So I lead some sessions here, like the Elders Inspire session. The first session I teach them to how to draw the rabbit. Because last year, is the Year of the Rabbit in Chinese. I also explain the rabbit in Chinese culture, the meaning for personality. Make it a bit interesting for them. So I said, 'Rabbit is very gentle, and very friendly to everybody, which one of us was born in year of the rabbit?' I learn some lessons because English culture is different. They also want to learn something from Chinese culture. If I couldn't understand anything, then I asked them. I also asked Andy: 'Why? Why? Why?' Because I want to learn something, yeah. When you're in Rome, you have to do some Roman things too.

The impact is very positive for me, through the activities here. I'm more confident to do things, more confident to explore opportunity, to take part in projects. It enhance my

mood. I'm happier. And travelling from home to here, and here to home, actually, this is not a waste of time. This also make you feel better. When I come from home to the tram station it's ten minutes of walking. And I said, 'No, I want to run!' I need to keep fit. I also do exercise in Tai Chi every day. Before, I'm a bit lazy to do that. But I want to keep my fitness for performing here.

During Covid pandemic, I get anxious at being isolated. I feel hopeless. When I went shopping from Tesco I hit the car in front of me. Only a bit, but this is the only one time for my whole life until now, because I always drive very carefully. Since then, I said, 'No, my mental health not good enough, I need to do something.' So, I come here and my mental health is much improved. Also, physical wellbeing. Stronger, more flexible. Before, my lower back pain. But since I joined here, and I carry on with my Tai Chi and exercises, it's gone. Before, maybe I meet the GP at least twice or three times per year. And now in just under two years I haven't been to visit the GP.



When you focus your attention on some subject, you can forget everything. Make your mind calm and clear. This is in Chinese called 'Zen.' This is one factor. Another factor, because of the painting, you keep your hand and your brain active, the nerves. Another factor is about creativity. If you make something new, this allows your mind to expand. It makes your brain more active and alert. Another factor is you need to exchange your opinion with others. Collaborate. So it's quite a number of factors. I learned something in Buddhism. Keep your mind calm. We don't need to argue or fight for material things. Enough is enough, we don't need too much.

**“If you make something new, this allows your mind to expand. It makes your brain more active and alert.”**

I think maybe my psychology improve very much. My childhood, very sad. My granddad, he took his own life. Because in 1950 or 1949 you know, Chinese Communist Party denounce him and cane him. My granddad pushed my dad away to protect him. And my granddad could not tolerate the hitting and feeling hopeless, and despaired. Since then, I said I want to keep my mental health good. I learn some lessons from bitter experience.

I tell people: 'It's amazing here.' You make friends and learn something, not only from the theatre, but also for daily life.' Because, you know, we are immigrants, not born in the UK and the English is not so good. So, we can learn not only the language, but also learn the culture. They said, 'Wow, we can go to try.' But most of them couldn't come. Why? Because language barrier. Because they couldn't speak or understand in English very much. Definitely, I would encourage them to come here. Come to shows here. And then not only improve your skill, but also improve your mental health.

*Right: Inside the theatre module at the Royal Exchange Theatre*  
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